

Opinion | ‘Sisters of ‘78’ at Theatre Aquarius ignites audience with powerful strike drama

Hamilton playwright's union story earns standing ovation.

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Madison Hayes-Crook and Cara Hunter star in “Sisters of ‘78” at Theatre Aquarius.

Lvon Smith



By **Jeff Mahoney** Spectator Reporter

Jeff Mahoney is a former reporter and columnist at The Hamilton Spectator.

In “Sisters of ‘78,” Kristen Da Silva’s fictionalization — on now at Theatre Aquarius — of the real 1978 strike at Fleck Manufacturing in Centralia, Ont., we can almost feel the cold.

We can almost feel the pain of having to hold it in until the rigidly appointed bathroom break in the dreary, unsafe, badly heated automotive wiring factory where Maeve gets a job.

The old, clunky green presses, at which we see a group of women work under terrible conditions for little money, are arrayed like a regiment of one-armed bandits in a casino of hopelessness, abuse and servitude.



The original company of “Sisters of ‘78” at Blyth Festival. The show is now on at Theatre Aquarius.

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The pull sticks at the sides of the machines lower the presses, and the presses, without the safety harnesses they’re supposed to have, often cause bloody injuries.

Maeve, played with an evolving richness by Madison Hayes-Crook, takes the job because her daughter Janie (in a lovely turn by Goldie Garratt) is in school now and her husband Andrew (Aiden Altow) is away for almost a year training to be an RCMP officer.

Maeve needs to bring in extra money and she also wants to expand her life beyond the walls of the house where she lives, not only with Janie but with Andrew’s Irish mother Margaret (the excellent Cara Hunter).

The kitchen of the house comprises a kind of cornered-off sidebar to the factory in Sean Mulcahy’s very effective overall set.

Maeve, on the job at the factory, quickly finds herself immersed in the personal and workplace dynamics of her co-workers, with whom she bonds.

Hovering over their shifts together is Lumpy, played with a puffed-up smarminess by Geoffrey Pounsett in perfect Herb Tarlek plaid pants and mismatched tie — yes, it is truly 1978 (as the judiciously used song snatches also remind us).

Lumpy is the factory manager and embodies the women’s bankruptcy of options. He enforces draconian, unsafe rules and work practices, and his behaviour borders on harassment.

As the play progresses and as the plight of the women worsens, a groundswell begins to develop, slowly but insistently, toward forming a union with Joyce (Alyssa LeClair, in a nice mix of funny, fiery and tentative) taking the lead.

Maeve, with circumstances at home altering around her, finds her sense of self and her identity as a worker and a social being, beyond the home, being illuminated by circumstances and deepened by new connections and responsibilities.

As all this is going on, the action is punctuated by calls home from Maeve’s husband Andrew. Altow brings to the role of Andrew a kind of almost outsized villainy at the start, subjecting Maeve to petty humiliations. This behaviour, as he re-emerges from the police training, becomes menacing to an almost expressionistic degree, by intention.

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It is a tribute to his handling of the character that by the late stages of the second act the audience was actually booing and jeering him, so involved had they become.

And this is true of the production in general. It is involving.

It starts out formulaically enough, with stock predictability and characterization, but then it gathers an energy — almost like a musical without music — that is more dimensional than what the first act prepares us for. And this is chiefly thanks to Mary Francis Moore’s patient, forceful directing and Hayes-Crook’s acting, her teasing out of Maeve’s totality.



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Much as they jeered at Andrew, by the late second act, the audience was vociferously cheering on the women during the climactic scenes. The standing ovation at the end was rousing and, well, cathartic.

That makes sense and also encourages. Because I don’t know if there is any single more important business for theatre to do right now, even if it is too late, in our billionaire-run world of disappearing human agency, than to vivify the drama and needfulness of collective action.

“Sisters of ‘78,” written powerfully once some of the initial bugs are worked out, by Hamilton’s own Da Silva, truly does that business. It is a promising, necessary and at times electrifyingly forceful start to Theatre Aquarius’s new season.

Other strong performances include Kait Post as Angie, Kirstyn Russelle as Natalie, Shaina Silver-Baird as Laurie and Gloria Garratt as Christine.