

'Low-Fat' tale has resonance

MY LOW-FAT, ALMOST ITALIAN WEDDING. Written by Paul Slabolepzy. Directed by Roy Sargeant, with Graham Hopkins, Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi, Anthea Thompson, Hannah Borthwick, Mark Elderkin, James Cairns and Murray Steyn. Set design Alfred Rietman. At the Artscape Arena until January 4. **TRACEY SAUNDERS** reviews

UNLIKE the title and the wedding cake in this play, there is nothing lean about either the script or the cast of the final offering in the ninth *Artscape Spring Drama Season*. Anything penned by Paul Slabolepzy is bound to be dense and satisfying, and this is no exception.

The prolific writer of more than 30 plays including the much acclaimed *Saturday Night at the Palace*, *Pale Natives* and *Return of Elvis du Pisanie* was approached by Roy Sargeant to write for the Artscape New Writing Programme.

Slabolepzy dusted off the script, which was previously directed by Lara Foot and had a brief run at the *National Arts Festival*, and reworked it for this season. As with Slabolepzy's earlier plays, his skill lies in his impeccable ear for dialogue and the authenticity of his characters.

Added to this production is his personal experience as the son of an immigrant settled in South Africa. Set in the heady days of 1994 when South Africans were intoxicated with freedom and democracy and the newly found identity of "rainbow nation" reverberated with many, the story unfolds in a trattoria in Hilbrow. For many years Hilbrow was considered the cosmopolitan centre of Gauteng, and the smorgasbord of restaurants was just one aspect of this.

Salvatore, the owner of one of these establishments, has arranged for his daughter to marry Giorgio, who will carry on his legacy and ensure the economic viability of his business. As the title suggests, the status of the wedding is uncertain and the bride's physical indisposition turns out to be slightly more than just the usual pre-wedding jitters. The tale of both the trattoria and the wedding are interwoven and the side stories of a shady security business and the bride's band ensure that there is no shortage of action on stage.

The production brings together highly experienced and established actors Hopkins and Mkhwanazi



TOPICAL: Hannah Borthwick and Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi in *My Low-Fat, Almost Italian Wedding*.

with relative newcomers Elderkin, Borthwick and Cairns. The seasoned Mkhwanazi plays the role of the waiter, Alpheus, and is torn between Salvatore (Hopkins) and the mother of the bride, Victoria (Thompson) as they both have very different ideas of how the wedding should be celebrated.

Frequent changing of tablecloths and the almost impossible task of keeping the platters on the buffet replenished are but two of the taxing tasks he is expected to perform. His dream of owning the trattoria and converting it to a restaurant better suited to the changing demographics of the area

is initially met with distrust and disdain by the beleaguered and debt-ridden Salvatore.

Hopkins portrays the elderly Italian with a balance of humour and pathos. Thompson's comedic skills have been displayed in the many *Cracks* productions she has participated in, and she brings them to bear in the role of Salvatore's wife.

Cairns is ideally suited as the bumbling uncle of the bride-to-be (or not) and his character has some of the finer one-liners. Elderkin shows that he handles comedic roles with his usual finesse. Although it is difficult to imagine him as a gangster, his shiny suit does much to

authenticate his character.

Entertainment value aside, the play allows us to appreciate the many changes in South Africa by looking back without any guile. It would be simple to view this as a story about a failed wedding, but such is Slabolepzy's genius that the metaphors of change and our natural inclination to avoid it at any cost are skilfully woven into the script.

Given the current tendency of the country to interrogate the past and critically examine a future without Mandela, the play offers a surprising lens through which to review how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

The set has been created with a keen eye for detail and the design is intricate, with entrances and exits set in such a way to maximise the farce-like quality of the production.

While the time portrayed on the stage may have passed by, the essence of the script remains topical; the nebulous affair of immigrants with their adopted countries, black empowerment and the harsh economic reality of entrepreneurship. *My Low-Fat, Almost Italian Wedding* is a fine way to laugh out the old year or bring in the new one.

● To book, call Artscape Dial-a-Seat at 021 421 7695, or Computicket at 0861 915 800.