

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Victoria is delicate and humorous

By GRANT KERR
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REVIEW

It takes a person with exceptional strength of character, mind and body to tackle the thorny issues of illness, dementia and death.

It's a high-wire act that could see a lesser artist plunge to earth, squashing a few horrified spectators upon impact.

But Dulcinea Langfelder is an artist — and an extraordinary one at that. She works without a net, and not only succeeds with her delicate balance of pathos and humour, but she manages to pull the majority of her audience up there with her, into the wondrous world of *Victoria*.

Victoria, the title character of Langfelder's performance piece — for it can hardly be called a play in the traditional sense — is a 90-year-old woman who has little left in life. Her mind is gone, her cat is dead and it appears she has no family or friends left to comfort her. But she does have her whimsical imagination, which takes her out of the hospital, where she is dying, and onto the theatre stage where she has an audience, friends and admirers. This simple, yet brilliantly effective technique is a central theme throughout the one-and-a-half hour performance. While it's clear the old woman is in an advanced stage of Alzheimer's, her fantasies are very real.

And although her grumpy orderly, played with an understated grace by Eric Gingras, tries to dissuade her flights of fancy, the Friday night Imperial crowd of about 500 knows she is right.

Although *Victoria* is imprisoned by her eroded state of mind and her wheelchair, it is the orderly who is the one truly in captivity. He stalks the stage muttering miserably about his job, about the messes he has to clean up and his own woeful existence.

While he carps and barks, *Victoria* asks him repeatedly, "What are you singing?" All the world is a stage to her and Langfelder plays it beautifully.

Based on an idea by fellow Mont-realer, Charles Fariola, Langfelder developed a character and performance that goes far beyond a normal play. First of all, there is no plot to speak of, but rather a series of scenes that take the audience into different compartments of *Victoria*'s brain and her past life. The use of soundtrack, lighting, shadow projections and white hospital curtains, which make up the entirety of the stage set-up, accomplish this superbly. Drawing the curtains a certain way takes the audience into a different part of *Victoria*'s dream world. The stage is bare except for the tracks of curtains, which extend from floor to ceiling and clack with that telltale hospital sound.

Ana Cappelluto's set and lighting design, Yves Labelle's shadow videos, Jimmy Lakatos's staging of the videos and Christian Calon's soundtrack all worked wonders in transporting the audience into another dimension. *Victoria* would not work as splendidly as it does without their input.

Those shadows are *Victoria*'s friends and confidants but also represent her fantasies, fears and passions. With a bit of video magic, the shadows of *Victoria* and her orderly move independently of their masters, revealing thoughts and feelings one would think would be long-since buried in a woman so frail.

This is *Victoria*'s greatest strength, both as a woman and as a performance piece. Never once is the audience played for a sucker. We expect to feel sorry for her but we end up loving her.

How can anyone resist "tea and cookies," even if they are just juice and hospital pills, which *Victoria* serves to the audience herself.

"I wonder if I am going to have enough for everyone," she said, much to the amusement of the 500-strong crowd.

Things disappear when *Victoria* is around; not only pills and juice but



CYLLA VON TEENHAW

Dulcinea Langfelder plays *Victoria* — a 90-year-old woman who has little left in life — in a performance at the Imperial Theatre on Friday evening.

also her orderly's glasses and his shoes, which she uses for a stunning tap routine.

Langfelder plumbs all her talents to give this dying woman life. She uses her singing, her dancing, her mime and her choreography to great effect. At one point she dances with Gingras and her wheelchair, which becomes an extension of her own body, twisting her tiny but powerful form around the device.

Unfortunately, the unorthodox nature of *Victoria* didn't sit well with everyone. At least seven people walked out before the performance's end, although there was nothing

shocking, profane or base about it.

It was a beautifully told, magnificently performed tour-de-force by a woman who should rightfully be known from coast to coast. Those who saw *Victoria* won't ever forget her. And the next time Dulcinea Langfelder comes up with a piece of theatre, the Imperial should most certainly bring her back.

Victoria was part of the Imperial Theatre's professional series. Although a risky undertaking, my hope is that the Imperial will continue to challenge audiences with works of this nature, that go far beyond mere entertainment. ■