

Arts

Bell shines in updated romp

THEATRE

THE MISER



Bell Shakespeare Playhouse,
Sydney Opera House

Reviewed by **JOYCE MORGAN**

He is a man so mean he'd steal flies from a blind spider. John Bell's miser is stingy of spirit, filthy of nose-picking habit and ocker in tone.

This is Bell's first appearance with the company that carries his name since he stepped aside as founding artistic director in 2015.

He has returned as miser Harpagon, a classic role in which Bell's formidable comic skills and impeccable timing are centre stage. It is a production in which Molière has been given an utterly Australian makeover.

The Miser was first performed in 1668 when Louis XIV was on the throne and the French Revolution still a century away.

This *Miser* is set not in a world of aristocratic privilege but the flashy milieu of the nouveau riche. Harpagon's daughter Elise (Harriet Gordon-Anderson) and son Cleante (Damien Strouthos) are bogans in search of bucks.

When Harpagon appears, in braces and slippers with a voice like a buzz-saw, he seems more a man who has pulled himself up by the bootstraps than one to the manor born.

Bell's hard-scrabble Harpagon hints at a reason for his meanness – he hasn't grown up around money and is determined to hold on to the pile he has amassed.

The tale revolves around the efforts of Harpagon's two children to marry their secret, penniless loves and separate the old skinflint from the money he guards.

Harpagon has other plans. He wants his children married off to rich geriatrics. And he has, unwittingly, set his sights on his son's young love Mariane – topping



John Bell stars as the avaricious Harpagon in this Australian rendition of Molière's classic satire.

his meanness with a layer of vanity. Add to that conniving servants – including a gender-swapped Valere with whom Elise is in love (or lust) – and the stage is set for misunderstandings, manoeuvrings and mayhem.

There are some delightful comic scenes, not least as Harpagon transforms to impress Mariane. He is as flash as a rat with a gold tooth (or a gold lame jacket).

Much of the strength of the production lies in Justin Fleming's witty new translation. He has taken a 17th-century French script and translated it into a contemporary Australian vernacular.

Fleming, who has previously adapted four other Molière plays

for the company, has introduced rhymes that deliver pace – and laughs – without feeling forced. (Although Molière wrote many plays in rhyming couplets, *The Miser* was not so penned.)

Yet some visual throat clearing at the beginning and the repeated and pointless manoeuvring of a chaise longue mean director Peter Evans' production never entirely hits home. The presentation of the children as self-centred brats makes it hard to see what their loves see in them.

There are some fine performances in supporting roles. As servant Valere – an aristocrat-in-disguise – Jessica Tovey is, pardon the pun, a class act.

Michelle Doake as brash

marriage broker Frosine and Sean O'Shea as servant La Fleche, who arranges a loan with conditions that might inspire a banking royal commission, are a treat.

Designer Anna Tregloan's set with gold-washed walls, and colourful costumes (particularly the shoes) create a new-money world, while period wigs nod to the play's French roots.

But the night belongs to Bell. Unlike those other literary skinflints, Charles Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge or George Eliot's Silas Marner, Harpagon learns nothing from his actions. Left alone with just his money for company, you almost feel sorry for the miserly old bugger.