

A REVIEW: GERTRUDE STEIN AND A COMPANION

Samantha Gray

A little history:

The play details the life-long companionship and profound love between two very different women, Gertrude Stein, and her companion, Alice B. Toklas. Allies in their strengths and weaknesses, we witness their buffering each other through life in Paris in the early 1900's. Gertrude Stein was ultimately known for her modern, wayward prose, and the charismatic rhythms of her writing are reflected delicately in the playwright's text.

The Grit:

Gertrude was alive in Shirley Johnston. Sassy as all hell, yet vulnerable (as only pioneering artists and change-makers can be), and settling Stein's guffawing laugh into her pit of being, she found a rare balance of quick wit, and robust melancholy.

Self-deprecating, candid, conscious, yet helpless when it suited her, Johnston bared Stein's every edge.

Portraying Stein's loyal and devoted companion, Alice, Lynita Crofford was refined, elegant, hilarious and heartbreaking. Moving seamlessly from coy and flustered youth, to a physically wasted, yet still feisty Alice at 90, I walked her journey of deep love and deeper grief with her, step by impeccable step.

Both Johnston and Crofford were entirely singular in character (distinct and mesmerizingly so) yet enmeshed in a pointed, finessed and tender intimacy that cannot be manufactured.

The two doyens of the South African Stage were magnificent and flawless. A triumph, really.

Last, and certainly not least, a tribute to the virtuoso that is Chris Weare... what skill to harness and empower two blinding lights to burn and dance so equally on one small, very intimate stage.

Through this poignant portrait of rare, raw and experiential love, I know that if I had met Stein, I'd have loved her. And through Alice's steadfast, yet anguished commitment to keeping her Gertrude alive even in death, I, too, mourned her loss.

Do go see it. It's a performance masterclass.

GERTRUDE STEIN AND A COMPANION plays at the Alexander Theatre until Saturday 30th of June. <https://alexanderbar.co.za/show/getrudesteinandacompanion/>