

Theatre review: The Guid Sisters/Lyceum Theatre (****)

Germaine Lauzon has won a million Green Shield stamps: they're sitting in three huge boxes cluttering up her kitchen. With them, she'll be able to transform her pokey home into a paradise by purchasing the entire contents of the Green Shield catalogue – but first she's got to stick all the stamps into savings books.

It's a Herculean task, and to achieve it she enlists the help of a raucous rabble of 15 friends, neighbours and family members. Over the course of a breathless and eventful evening full of argument, banter and revelations, grievances bubble to the surface, ghosts from the past make a sudden reappearance, and bonds of family or friendship are broken and reforged.

The 1968 play *Les belles-soeurs* by Canadian writer Michel Tremblay broke new ground in its use of the Quebecois French dialect *joual*, and its translation into broad Glaswegian as *The Guid Sisters* by Martin Bowman and Bill Findlay in 1989 made it an instant hit with Scottish audiences at its initial Glasgow run.

This new revival of the Scots version from Canadian director Serge Denoncourt, a co-production between the Lyceum and the National Theatre of Scotland, is big, bold and brash, full of bright colours, wicked banter, and larger-than-life performances from its 15-strong all-female cast.

Yet despite the frenzy and bluster of its surface, which raise shocked gasps and many a guffaw from the audience, dig a little deeper and some universal themes emerge – poverty, religion, community, discrimination, and the complexities of female sisterhood. Tremblay's structure and pacing might seem a little clumsy, and at more than two and a half hours rather

long, but it's the raw energy and vivid power of his language that makes the show so gripping. And those qualities are helped on their way by Denoncourt's startling imagining of the work, which switches with ease between grubby naturalism and striking expressionism.

Kathryn Howden is a juggernaut of energy as the central Germaine, sweeping aside all who stand in her way, and Karen Dunbar fizzles as her sister Rose, never short of an acid put-down. Molly Innes gives an unforgettable performance, finely balanced between hilarity and desperation, as the apparently saintly Thérèse who takes out her frustrations on her wheelchair-bound mother (a resilient Romana Abercromby).

Despite the show's cutting wit and abundant energy, though, by the end of the long evening there's a sense of questions and issues having been raised but not answered. Each woman gets to step out of the action and tell her own story, but by the end these seem very much a series of vignettes rather than gelling together with an overarching purpose. The final scene's *coup de théâtre* is visually stunning, but after the preceding bickering and conflict, the women's closing hymn to sisterhood sounds something of a false note.