

YOU KNOW you've walked into the Roaring Twenties when Gene Austin's emblematic ditty, *Ain't She Sweet*, greets you while entering the theatre. A time of gin, jazz and flappers, this period gave birth to the modern woman; one who drank, danced, smoked and engaged in critical thought. A flaunter of social norms, she also drove, cut her hair, voted and challenged conservative sexual conventions.

Based on the short stories of Dorothy Parker, *A Certain Lady* pays tribute to one of the Jazz Age's most witty and influential voices. As a writer, satirist, New Yorker contributor and founding member of the (in)famous Algonquin Round Table, no one had their finger on the pulse of social foibles quite like her.

As with many great writers, her profound words were often rooted deeply in personal experiences; an aspect that authentically resonates through to every aspect of this engaging production.

Directed by Greg Karvellas, *A Certain Lady* (a reference to

I am woman, hear me roar...

Parker's poem) stars a bright-eyed and effervescent Emily Child as the American literary icon. Consisting of a series of interior monologues, each scene is based on one of Parker's short stories. They are cleverly separated by silent movie intertitles announcing their names. Together, they provide, as the blurb states, an un-sentimental, painfully funny and unromantic look at romance, taxi rides and disobedient garters.

"Please, God, let him telephone me now. Dear God, let him call me now. I won't ask anything else of You, truly I won't," a desperate Child prays in *A Telephone Call*. Arrestingly depicting an infatuated woman alternating between stages of obsession, frustration and anger, her performance provides insightful commentary into the gender politics of romance. The emotional costs we ultimately pay for surrendering to these rituals are vividly and heart-breakingly conveyed via Child's



Emily Child in *A Certain Lady*.

PICTURE: DANIEL MANNERS

evocative facial expressions.

While this scene (split in two and bookending the production) takes place nearly a century ago, what strikes one is how little the situation has changed since then. Replace Parker's telephone with Facebook or WhatsApp messaging, for instance, and you'll still find yourself in a world where the social norm requires a man to make the first move romantically.

"It would be so easy to telephone him. Maybe he'd like it," Child briefly surmises at one point before succumbing once again to her own insecurities.

In the next episode we find the actress wedged in-between two lacklustre suitors during a dinner party. Reduced to having four-word conversations about the quality of the soup or whether or not they both like fish, *But the One on the Right* sees its protagonist turn to the audience as a means of escapism.

Under the stellar direction of Karvellas (*Champ, The Frontiersmen*), Child is absolutely delightful to watch as she wickedly voices her discontentment to the audience. "Wait, he's saying something! Words are simply pouring out of him. He's asking me if I'm fond of potatoes," she relates sarcastically. "No, I don't like potatoes. There, I've done it! I've differed from him. It's our first quarrel. He's fallen into a moody

silence. Silly boy, have I pricked your bubble?"

Matters take a turn for the melodramatic in *Sentiment*, involving its character taking a taxi ride through New York. It was originally published in Harper's Bazaar. The passenger mishears her driver saying the name of the street they are in and mistakenly thinks it is the one she used to live in with a former partner.

The final two stories performed are *The Garter*, dealing with an untimely wardrobe malfunction while our heroine is out attending a social event, as well as *The Waltz*, in which she is forced to keep her ladylike composure during a dance that sees her clumsy partner repeatedly kick her shin.

A Certain Lady is an enjoyable contemporary production that pays homage to a great creative mind. Often ironic and self-aware, stepping into Parker's witty world is a giddy trip highly recommended.

A Certain Lady runs at the Alexander Upstairs Theatre, Cape Town, until March 1. See www.facebook.com/alexanderbarct or www.alexanderbar.co.za.