

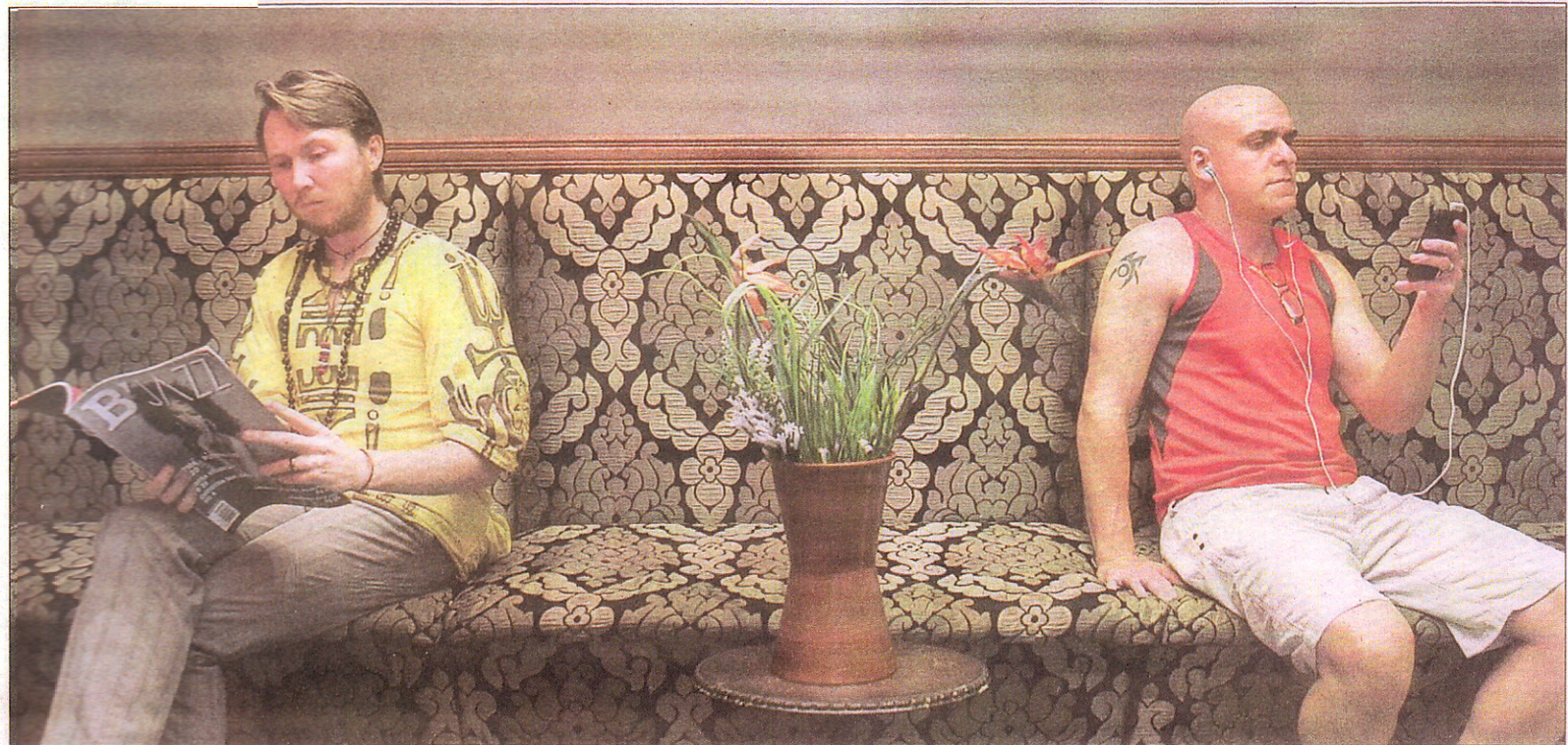
**I**F LOVE is blind, marriage is like having a stroke." In Danny DeVito's 1989 comedy, *The War of the Roses*, we are introduced to a lawyer (also played by DeVito) with a dark and farcical tale to tell. It involves two of his clients, Oliver and Barbara Rose (Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner), who were once happy, then got involved in a nasty and violent divorce, and were never happy again.

*Civil Parting* is a vicious and deliciously biting comedy that sees a similar soon-to-be divorced couple waiting together in a Cape Town attorney's reception. Written by Nicholas Spagnoletti, the play also touches on gay relationships, the humiliation that comes with a break-up, as well as the maintaining of one's composure at all cost.

After getting married in 2006 (following South Africa's Civil Union Act coming into force) opera composer Glenn (Shaun Acker) and his doctor-husband Jean-Pierre (Pieter Bosch Botha) now unfortunately find themselves unable to shake the notorious seven-year itch. A divorce is on the cards. However, seeing as they are both professional and upstanding members of the gay community, they've agreed to resolve matters quickly and amicably.

But that was before they knew the lawyer was going to be late. When his secretary suddenly also has to leave the office, the former lovers are left unsupervised in each other's company, a scenario that quickly turns from harmonious to disastrous. Old wounds are ripped open and new insults are hurled across the room with increasing ferocity, placing the civility of their paring in great jeopardy.

Directed by Zanne Solomon (*TheatreSports*, *The Unexpected Man*) the production also touches frankly on several prominent issues prevalent in the gay community. These include open relationships (in which sexual contact with third parties are allowed as long as both partners stay emotionally faithful to each other), smartphone apps such as Grindr and Growlr (al-



Shaun Acker as Glenn, and Pieter Bosch Botha as Jean-Pierre in *Civil Parting*.

PICTURE: JESSE KRAMER

## Deliciously BITING COMEDY

Steyn du Toit reviews Nicholas Spagnoletti's *Civil Parting*

lowing users to find potential casual sex partners close to them via the phone's GPS function), as well as prejudice based on physical appearance often displayed within the gay community itself.

It would be inaccurate, however, to categorise this as a "gay" play. *Civil Parting* will appeal to anyone who knows what the deterioration of a relationship feels like, and who had to learn the hard way that euphoria and heartbreak can both be

sides of the same coin.

The show's actors are dedicated, versatile (pun intended), and a joy to watch. Dressed in floral pants, an avocado-green tweed jacket, black scarf, and pointy brown shoes, Acker (*Get Kraken*, *The Unexpected Man*) as the camp Glenn is able to convey a range of emotions by furiously paging a magazine or by subtly flicking his GHD-straightened hair. His composition of a Boer war opera (accompanied by lots of "la la

la, boer boer boer, na na na, skiet skiet skiet" vocal efforts) also makes for one of the show's many successful running-gags.

By contrast, Botha (*Fully Committed*) is much more reserved as the butch Jean-Pierre. His references of growing up in a conservative Afrikaans family, coupled with his ability to do "manly" things such as rock climbing and mountain biking with straight friends, adds additional layers to the already complicated relationship dynamics.

Solomon is a budding director with a very promising hand. While *Civil Parting* is predominantly a comedy consisting of rapid and deliciously bitchy one-liners, she also takes great care to highlight several unexpected moments of vulnerability. Not only does this evoke a lot of empathy for Glenn and Jean-Pierre's situation, but it also brings truth to the saying that, when a couple starts keeping score, there's no winning, only degrees of losing.

It is this universality that makes

Spagnoletti such a gifted writer. His previous play *London Road* (depicting the unlikely friendship between two women from different cultural backgrounds) deservedly won the Olive Schreiner Prize as well as numerous other awards. It also performed to standing ovations in Scotland last month, earning actress Robyn Scott the Best Actress award at the recent Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

*Civil Parting* is of the same stock and breaks down several barriers in order to demonstrate that, when it comes to relationships, we all fight, suffer and bleed in the same way.

It also argues that, if for no other reason, legalising civil partnerships worldwide is about allowing people from all sexualities to (legally) pull the institution of marriage through their derrières.

● *Civil Parting* runs at the Alexander Upstairs Theatre, Cape Town, until September 18. See [www.facebook.com/alexanderbarct](http://www.facebook.com/alexanderbarct) or [www.alexanderbar.co.za](http://www.alexanderbar.co.za).