



ONLY WHORES AND ACTORS

A NEW PLAY DELVES INTO THE COSMETIC INDUSTRY AND LIFE OF AUSTRALIA'S FIRST TRUE BUSINESS TYCOON – HELENA RUBINSTEIN!



made her name in regional Australia. Having migrated from Poland in 1902 to the Victorian town of Coleraine, she produced and sold her face cream to many eager Australian women. With the basic ingredient being lanolin, and in a country full of sheep, it was the perfect time and place to build a multi-million-dollar empire.

For Amanda Muggleton, playing Rubinstein is a challenge, given that her character is a famous real-life person.

“As an actor, playing someone who actually existed is a greater challenge than usual,” says Muggleton. “There’ll be plenty of people who will remember Helena Rubinstein and some who may have met her, and they’ll all have opinions. You want to do the person you’re playing justice, but to also tell the truth.

“I was very surprised at how tough and domineering she was. She was fearless, brutally honest and mean financially. But, she had to be in what was then a man’s world. That’s how she became one of Australia’s first millionaires.”

Information on Rubinstein’s personal life was hard to research but Muggleton eventually tracked down a distant source.

“While in London I had a cup of tea with the niece of ‘Irish’. It was invaluable for my development as she had met Rubinstein on several occasions and had many private photos and anecdotes to share. Rubinstein had a strong accent, which is also a challenge, and was rather plump so I wear a padded costume which is quite hot. Thank goodness it’s winter here!”

The play charts Rubenstein’s story from her humble beginnings to the height of her international success. Director Nicole Buffoni (*A History Of Falling Things*) brings the three actors together with great bitchy humour. Yet there is tenderness – we learn that Patrick is closetted and lonely, and that Rubenstein mourns a lost child.

“The play’s topic is so fascinating and the make-up wars are still going on today,” says Muggleton. “To think she was one of the pioneers of this multi-billion-dollar industry at a time when only whores and actors wore make-up!”

EVA PERON, Gypsy Rose Lee, Fanny Brice and Maria von Trapp are examples of women whose stories were larger than life and suited the exaggerated theatricality of a stage adaptation.

Helena Rubinstein is another such figure with Patti LuPone currently playing the famed cosmetician on Broadway in *War Paint*, a musical highlighting the rivalry between herself and fellow cosmetic giant, Elizabeth Arden. But there’s another production, currently playing in Sydney, called *Lip Service*. Starring Amanda Muggleton (*Shirley Valentine*, TV’s *Prisoner*) as Rubinstein, with Tim Draxl (*A Place To Call Home*) as her personal assistant and confidante Patrick ‘Irish’ O’Higgins.

The story focuses on the threat Rubenstein’s business faced against her rivals Revlon and Elizabeth Arden (played by Linden Wilkinson of *Packed To The Rafters*), but a greater focus falls on her relationship with assistant Patrick who draws out her more vulnerable and sensitive side.

Written by John Misto (*The Shoe-Horn Sonata*), this new Australian play opened in April at London’s Park Theatre under the title *Madame Rubinstein* (due to a similar and conflicting show name), with Miriam Margolyes in the title role.

Apparently the two great rivals never met in real life, but Misto imagines what feuds might have passed between them if they had, and whether there was any sense of sisterhood.

What many don’t realise is that Helena Rubinstein originally founded her business and

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(TOP) AMANDA MUGGLETON AND TIM DRAXL AS RUBINSTEIN AND HER PA, PATRICK IN *LIP SERVICE*.

(ABOVE RIGHT) MIRIAM MARGOLYES IN THE LONDON PRODUCTION OF THE SAME PLAY, RE-NAMED *MADAM RUBINSTEIN*.

MORE: *Lip Service* is playing at The Ensemble Theatre, Kirribilli 17 August to 27 September. For more: ensemble.com.au