

Gender on agenda in sexy show

SILENCE

Downstairs Theatre, Seymour Theatre Centre. Until May 28. Tickets \$28/\$22, Tuesdays pay what you can. Bookings 9699 3444. Critic's rating: **7/10**

TERRIFIED that his nation is under threat from a heathen race and convinced he's on a mission from God, a megalomaniacal leader launches a shock-and-awe military campaign, with the aim of completely annihilating his enemies.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? But in Moira Buffini's feminist satire *Silence*, which freely mixes comedy and tragedy, love and war, and geopolitics and gender politics, the action takes place more than 1000 years ago, framed by the ferocious tit-for-tat raids between Saxons and Vikings.

The apocalyptic millennial fears of Buffini's characters aren't so different from our own Y2K worries, except that their superstitions are religious, not the technological nightmare of computers failing en masse and planes falling from the sky. And with war and death all around, it's probably no surprise that sex is



MACHO BRUISER: Paul Tassone in *Silence*.

Picture: HEIDRUN LOHR

much on the minds of an oddball quintet – an adolescent lord and his haughty French wife, her maid, a macho bruiser and a very excitable priest – who are on the run from the vengeful English king.

With its various hetero and homo couplings, and Shakespearean-style cross-dressing (in Jo Lewis's wacky and saucy costumes), the kernel of *Silence* is gender panic. Can these medieval women, with their anachronistically contem-

porary attitudes, take control of their lives on their own terms, or will they have to disguise themselves, either literally or figuratively, as men? Yes, it's a feminist play, but with laughs instead of the earnestness that description might suggest.

Tanya Denny's spirited and sexy production includes an impressively assured Sydney debut from Sophie Cleary in the role of the foot-stamping French princess.