

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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The Last Acre

by Sean Riley

Oddbodies Theatre Company
The Bakehouse

We know, and absolutely don't want to know, how a single action, a single impulse can change everything. This is what we mean by a life-or-death moment, that split second, as we call it, when something irrevocable occurs and it can't be changed back. This is the moment that can't be believed even when it is re-lived repeatedly, the moment that is still true when you wake up the next day. It is when we know our lives are never going to be the same again.

The Last Acre is about such an event. Robbie is celebrating his seventeenth birthday. He lives in Tasmania where his mother Lorraine and her widowed sister Betty run a farm. His step-father Darryl is a visual artist from Hobart and Robbie has ambitions to light out for even further territories. New York would be good. His older friend Annie, who runs a café in a nearby small town where Robbie works as a waiter and hopes to play some jazz saxophone, comes from there.

Their friendship is close and Annie encourages Robbie to follow his interests in music and literature. The innocence of the relationship has a welcome simplicity for the emotionally weary woman and so she is taken aback when Robbie, bold with birthday champagne, declares his love for her. Her rebuff has immediate and drastic consequences as the boy wildly, drunkenly heads for the barn and, watched by his uncomprehending family, jumps from the roof.

Oddbodies director Sean Riley describes in his program notes how he met regularly with the three women performers- Kerry Reid who plays Annie, Kim Liotta (Betty) and Nikki Fort (Lorraine) - to develop ideas for a play about the dynamics of family. As characterisations crystallised so did the situation and central crisis of the play and *The Last Acre* is the very memorable result.

With a simply stylised set from Dean Hills, a verandah deck, the unfinished frame of a farm house and a wall of hay bales (lit by the ever-discerning Sue Grey-Gardner), Sean Riley has used the confines of *The Bakehouse* to create a work that is courageously imagined and affectingly performed. The scenes zigzag in time between Robbie's two birthdays - his seventeenth when he tries to take his life and his eighteenth where, now confined to a wheelchair and in the constant care of his parents and aunt, he is planning to refuse essential kidney surgery and end, not only his own misery, but the increasingly wretched lives of those around him.

This is ambitious material and like all the most poignant human experiences it hovers on the very brink of melodrama. Indeed, in the opening scene there is some awkwardness in establishing the relationship between Annie and Robbie - and, despite a conscientious performance by Kerry Reid, the character of Annie is not really clearly captured. But there is much else that does work well in both text and production.

As Robbie, Carl Nilsson-Polias is important to the success of the production and in the wheelchair scenes especially, he uses the vulnerability of his slight frame to highlight the overpowering influence he has on the lives around him. Kim Liotta's Betty risks caricature at times but she brings energy and broad comedy to some of the play's most conflicted moments and, in the scene where Robbie confides his wish to be allowed to die, Liotta is more than able to meet its measure. Nic Hurcombe is aptly cast as Darryl, using his considerable stage presence to magnify not only the character's fondness for a boy he has loved as a younger brother but the helplessness he feels in the face of Robbie's predicament.

Nikki Fort's performance as Lorraine is outstanding. She captures the anger and determined pragmatism of a mother intent on making the best of things even when she is actually making them worse. Her dialogue, especially the sisters scene with Kim Liotta, is some of the best you'll find in an Australian play. It is tough and funny and combative and fearful, and performed with poise and understanding that is exceptional. It is a credit to Sean Riley and the ensemble that the synergy between text and performance is so full of nuance.

It is the hardest thing in the world to write a good play and *The Last Acre* is a good play which has been brought to the stage by a dedicated and very able company. As a study of family it conjures contradictions and

complex intimacies vividly and unsentimentally, as a portrait of a family paralysed, both actually and metaphorically, it is able to show resolution and some hope without being simplistic.

This is what the theatre can do when it takes us into imagined lives which might, in some way, be our own. I hope that this play will have a bright future and yet it might not have ever been staged at all. It was only thanks to an ArtsSA grant that the season could be mounted. If Mr Foley has his way, with his proposed 5% cut to the Arts budget, such a grant would be most unlikely - and this illuminating play would never have seen the light of day.