

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Come Out 2003

Australian Festival for Young People

Come Out has been reappearing every two years since 1974 which my add-ups tell me is just short of thirty years. This is an extraordinary achievement and a tribute to the continuing commitment of artists, administrators, teachers and funding agencies in establishing and maintaining, not just a festival for young people, but a focus and a forum for the presentation and preservation of youth arts.

In a contracting arts universe, festivals such as Come Out are important for several reasons. For a start, they offer school students an opportunity to see quality work in art forms including theatre. Over the past few weeks many young people will have experienced their first taste of live theatre and the impact that has on them will determine whether they seek out more or exempt themselves in future. With fewer productions touring to schools, young people have less chance to see live performance than ten and twenty years ago. The continuation of Come Out is helping to offset this situation and, of course, the festival itself is also the occasion for commissions and the revival of recent work.

The 2003 Come Out program, compiled by Artistic Director Sally Chance, has stronger and more varied theatre offerings than we have seen in some time. This is, in part, because of the presence of two works from the freshly established and well-supported Windmill Productions - under the capable stewardship of Cate Fowler, now a leading figure both nationally and on the international children's theatre circuit. It is also because the vexed area of repertoire for adolescents has been well served with presentations from Fresh Track Productions and emerging local company Budgie Lung.

Coinciding with the twentieth anniversary of the Ash Wednesday tragedy, *Bushfire*, a new work commissioned by the Festival Centre Trust, is based on two books by Marguerite Hann Syme, whose own family lost everything in the fires. Directed by Alyson Brown, the cast of four - Michael Finney and Amber McMahon as two young children, and Justin Moore and Astrid Pill as their frazzled parents - present a family under stress, caught on the day of the emergency in different parts of town. With spirited comedy and sharp detail the actors capture the often fractious aspects of domestic interaction. Finney and McMahon move readily

between the intensities of imaginative play and the anxieties of isolation while Moore and Pill present a realistic account of a marriage under pressure.

Dean Hills' design works well with a spacious acting area spread with sand and gum leaves surrounded on all sides with white sheeting on which are projected lighting designer Geoff Cobham's startling conflagrations. Alyson Brown has clearly given the actors a free hand to develop the action - and although at times it seems to dissolve into a series of impro exercises, *Bushfire* has an energy, a hilarity and a sense of imminent danger that is comprehensible to a young audience.

A World of Paper, Windmill Productions' joint venture with Japanese company, Theatre Kazenoko Kansai, is a delightful work for three to eight year olds. Devised and directed by former Handspan legend Peter Wilson and elegantly designed in almost luminous whiteness by Yabuta Hirotsugu, *A World of Paper* features the highly expressive Keiko Maruyama as a young child surrounded by a succession of animal characters - birds, a horse, an emu, squirrel and so on. She has water adventures, is caught in a storm and while playing in her folding cardboard house has to battle a fire as well.

With original music from Hidehiko Fukui spanning styles from melodic synth pop to traditional forms, this production is beautifully moved and simply imagined. The young audience is transfixed as the performance concludes with the return of the child's mother, heralded by a startling and exhilarating change in visual style.

At the Odeon Theatre Patch Theatre is staging *Keep Ya Hair On*, adaptations of three books by Gillian Rubenstein performed by musicians Mel Watson, Sam Lohs and Catherine Oates - all members of well known Adelaide band, Fruit. Children and their parents, through workshops, are invited to participate as extras in the telling of these nutty, wordy story poems. Digital artist Ian Moorhead is on hand for video projections of the performance as it unfolds - so everybody gets to be in their own movie while Mel Watson and her associates energetically tell Sharon to keep her hair on and sing the praises of Prue Theroux, the cool librarian.

Director Dave Brown has opted for a informal do-it yourself appearance, reinforced by designer Gaelle Mellis' maze of mikes and spaghetti cords. It is like being in a TV studio with the kids as producers. A lively idea but perhaps sometimes more fun to be in than to watch - and in a somewhat easy resort to kid culture fads, it relies more on the familiarity of Bob the Builder than the original music from the Fruit band.

Two productions geared for the middle to upper high school audience are Budgie Lung's *Eager to Breathe* and Fresh Track Productions' *The Return*. Written by Fiona Sprott, directed by Simone Avramidis and featuring four young actors including William Hall and Deanna Smart, *Eager to Breathe* is a courageously frank account of teenage sexuality seen from the perspective of the Eager Boy, the Body Girl, the Gay Boy and the Anxious Girl. Despite some hackneyed choreography and variable acting, *Eager to Breathe* is believable and direct and, at the schools session I attended, after initial resistance drew strong recognition and applause from a formidable posse of year nine boys.

Fresh Track's production of *The Return* by WA playwright, Reg Cribb won Best in Fringe in 2002 and makes a welcome comeback in Come Out this year. Directed by Geordie Brookman with music by recent Womad performer Liam Gerner, the play is set in a suburban train travelling from Perth to Freo. Prowling the carriage are Steve (Alistair Scott-Young) and his off-sider Trev (Roman Vaculik) just out of jail and full of dangerous energy. When Lisa (Melanie Vallejo) enters they have a first target, when an older woman Maureen (Irene Tunis) intervenes she gets the treatment as, finally, does the non-interventionist Writer (Caleb Lewis).

The Return is fast paced and swings disturbingly from black humour to menace. The performers handle the shifts skilfully and Scott-Young as the central figure has a physicality and intelligence which demands attention. *The Return* is both a psychological and class study and a thriller with twists of plot that almost challenge credulity. But the momentum of the writing carries the day, as does the excellent ensemble performance. I can think of few productions better suited to Come Out audiences, especially those who think theatre is kids' stuff.

Brundibar from Windmill Productions is also a highlight of the Festival. First performed sixty years ago, *Brundibar* is a children's opera composed by Hans Krasa while he was interned at the notorious Terezin Nazi

concentration camp. It was performed over fifty times by children in the camp and tells of a brother and sister needing to buy milk for their sick mother but with no money to pay for it. When they see Brundibar the organ grinder making money busking they try singing to earn some themselves. But they are sent packing by the beastly Brundibar and it is only with the help of a sparrow, a cat, a dog and a whole bunch of other children that they can overpower their rival and make their voices heard.

With the combined resources of the ASO, State Opera and the Mitcham Primary School Choir, director Nigel Jamieson, designer Dan Potra and Musical Director Richard Gill have brought together a work which has wonderful musical and visual appeal. Dan Potra's inventive pictorial cut-outs and the focus and liveliness of the young players bring this innocent tale to life. We cheer on the determined children, we deride the bullying Brundibar (played with fiendish relish by Rory Walker, in spiked helmet and with a giant red pepper of a nose) and rejoice with the children when they sing Tyrants will never win when we live as one.

The production, of course, is framed with the bleak irony that neither the composer nor most of the children left Terezin alive - although on first night we are introduced to Mr Jerry Rind, a child survivor of the camp, as an honoured guest of the production. The pathos of the circumstances of *Brundibar* is well judged by Nigel Jamieson and his decision to remind audiences of children in Australian detention centres is not drawing too long a bow. That terrible things happen when good people do nothing has never been more true than in our own country right now.