

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Let's start with *Gulpilil*. A project initiated by Festival director Stephen Page and Belvoir Company B director Neil Armfield, this theatre monologue featuring one of Australia's most distinguished screen actors was the subject of much speculation. There was talk that the rehearsals weren't going well, that they were taking place in a cave in the Blue Mountains, that David Gulpilil was finding it all too much and had gone back to his home in Ramingining in Arnhem Land. Even Page conceded, with his trademark candour, that he was worried that this Festival commission might not happen.

Perhaps it was the fragility of circumstances that contributed to this production being such an exceptional event. Certainly, David Gulpilil is an extraordinary artist and his life encompasses the very best and the most appalling aspects of this country. As he says himself - "I was born with two legs and those legs stand in two different worlds" - and in just over two hours, seated by his campfire on the Dunstan Playhouse stage, he describes what it is to be a Marwu man, a crocodile hunter with traditional harpoons and woomera, and an Aboriginal living in reduced circumstances on tribal land.

"Do you like my house? he asks, as a slide is projected on the canvas backdrop on the stage. It is his humpy, a ramshackle hut of corrugated iron. We are not sure we do like it, and Gulpilil is playing us along. "I'll sell it to you," he jokes raucously, "twenty bucks."

I was prepared for his charisma but not the exuberance and generosity of David Gulpilil's stage presence. As a dancer he has inexplicable grace and his skills seem almost magical - especially when he morphs into animal totems of kangaroo and crocodile. Writer Reg Cribb and director Neil Armfield have given the production shape without constricting the kind of spontaneity that it needs to keep fresh and a little unexpected. Apparently running times have varied as Gulpilil has warmed to the very new experience of being his own subject. This is about me, he repeats emphatically.

And it is an unvarnished story - full of incident about the making of *Walk-about*, attending the premiere in London and visiting Buckingham Palace, as well as of the difficulties he has faced with grog and, for drink driving, a prison sentence also. What is so moving about *Gulpilil*, the stage work -

and Gulpilil, the man - is the exemplary way that he has risen above bitterness and anger. His strength is in his character, his prodigious gifts and his remarkable resilience.

Another success for Stephen Page has been the inclusion of Windmill Performing Arts' production, *Riverland*. Like *Gulpilil*, it is a work with indigenous themes that brings audiences - in this case young people in particular - close to its subject in positive and constructive ways. Written by Scott Rankin and directed by Wesley Enoch, *Riverland* uses inspiration from the paintings of Ian W. Abdulla, depicting memories of his childhood spent along the banks of the Murray between Winkie and Berri.

Capturing the expansive brilliant blues and poetically comic details of Abdulla's paintings, designer Richard Roberts creates a practical decor which can tell the story of two urban kids, Luke and Milly, on a reluctant camping holiday alongside a ghostly tale of a forebear who perished in the 1956 flood. Luke Carroll and Ursula Yovich are excellent in the leads and the combination of Matt Scott's warm lighting and Stuart Day's gentle songs makes *Riverland*, not only a fresh take on questions of identity, but a work of real charm as well.

Two of the works in the international theatre program have come on from the Edinburgh Fringe. *12 Angry Men* proves, all over again, what a bullet proof script Reginald Rose wrote for American television back in 1954. Set entirely in a jury room, it remains a durable piece both dramatically and in its concerns. Perhaps fifty years later the times are rather similar. Rose addresses a society paranoid with suspicion and division from the McCarthy scourge and individuals losing sight of what it means to be a citizen.

Director Guy Masterton brought together a group of comedians to perform this revival, although for the most part that idea is lost on Australian audiences since few, if any, are recognisable. It would be a different matter if we were seeing Messrs Clarke, Dawe, McDermott, Quantock, Jimeoin and so on. You'd have to say that a bunch of comedians look like a jury - all shapes and sizes. Unfortunately the performances are equally uneven, not helped by some glitches with the radio mikes.

Owen O'Neill is a steady presence as the dissenting Juror 8, Phil Nichol unnerving as the racist Juror 10 and Australian ring-in Cliff Ellen shows the discretion of the elders as Juror 9. But while the ensemble delivers robustly, it is the play which is the triumph. Still as deftly paced and neatly

crafted as ever, it makes most current script writing look like a capital crime.

So if you could take just one memory into the afterlife, to the exclusion of all others, what would it be? You have sixty minutes to decide and if you don't you are doomed to remain in limbo. That is the premise of *100* created by Diene Petterie and Christopher Heimann for theimaginarybody from the UK.

With its single setting and a framework of five stories the appeal of *100* is its simplicity and the directness of its performances. Pip Donaghy is the Guide, prompting the others like a game show host. In fact, it is the riddling nature of the piece that provides the hook. Many have picked *100* as their Festival highlight but while concise and smoothly presented, it is a lightweight work which hinges on a parlour game idea. And with its white rehearsal costumes and conspicuous use of bamboo poles as improvisation props, even though its subject is the afterlife, *100* is also rather dated.

CanStage's *The Overcoat*, created by Morris Panych and Wendy Gorling, is a mainstage spectacular with smart lighting from Alan Brodie and a cinematic design by Ken McDonald. With its modernist browns, big props of factory machinery and its regimented ensemble movement (set to the cracking pace of Shostakovich waltzes and ballet works) *The Overcoat* tells the familiar story of the individual reduced to an unvalued cipher. But for all its tragedy it is oddly unaffecting. And in arbitrarily tacking on the ending of Nikolai Gogol's other famous story, *The Diary of a Madman*, Panych and Gorling replace the strength of the original ending - the man's triumphant revenge for his stolen overcoat - with the defeatist and psychologically baffling conclusion in an asylum.

Festivals are inevitably the time for works of confrontation and controversy but this year's items proved more irritating than illuminating. Forced Entertainment's *First Night* is very much a concept piece. A cast posing as an incompetent variety act breaks all the rules of performance by interrogating the audience instead of pleasing them, withholding from them rather than providing gratification.

Forget that we have seen its like before and consider how it might work for a hundred minutes. It works for ten - if you're lucky. Then, if the performances - stage psychics, dance routines, bigot comedy - are without merit, we start to look for other redeeming elements. Unfortunately *First*

Night is bound up by a single idea which is really non-negotiable as the performers indicated at the first of a heckler. It is brave to be unpopular but not to be so unintelligent. But for the long monologue telling us to put aside the cares and traumas of the world while copiously listing them, *First Night* is a conceit that rests on a vanity.

I Bought a Spade at Ikea to Dig My Own Grave from Spanish company Teatro di Carniceri is a more boisterous kettle of half frozen lasagne. Funny at times, deeply grotesque at others, it is surprisingly low key in its presentation. It works best when more personally focused - the account of a series of dysfunctional Christmas Days for instance. When it gets more rhetorical, as it does with lists of corporate brands and mock abuse of Mandela and Gandhi - the anarchy becomes tedious. The best image is still those credit cards wedged into foreheads and cheeks that stared so disturbingly from the pages of the Festival program.

State Theatre's contribution to the 2004 Festival is *Night Letters*, based on the novel by Robert Dessaix and adapted to the stage by Susan Rogers and Chris Drummond. It has been a long time in the On Site Laboratory and despite extensive workshopping I think it is misconceived. Set in Sydney and Venice Dessaix's idiosyncratic novel is part memoir, part travelogue, part reverie about characters from the Venetian past. The central narrative about Robert, a man who, on discovering he has an incurable illness, leaves his partner to travel whimsically where his inclination takes him, is vivid and engaging - particularly with a strong lead from Humphrey Bower and an excellent performance by Paul Blackwell as the professor.

The parallel stories of the courtesan Camilla and the free-spirited Baroness Antoinette are far less engaging and take up too much exposition. The result is a work that is overlong and often tiresomely over-acted. Designer Robert Cousins does well with the piazza design, lit like an oil painting by Geoff Cobham but director Chris Drummond has problems with the depth of the Queen's Theatre stage and the actors labour to project. *Night Letters* has much to admire but is not a success. It has been writ large rather than turned into the chamber work that most suits Dessaix's achievement.