

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Australian

The Overcoat

Based on stories by Nikolai Gogol
Created by Morris Panych and Wendy Gorling
CanStage
Adelaide Festival Theatre
until 6 March.

Riverland

by Scot Rankin
Based on paintings by Ian W. Abdulla
Windmill Performing Arts
The Space
Adelaide Festival Centre
until 7 March

The eyes have it for theatre at the Adelaide Festival. Toronto's CanStage even opens its accomplished performance of Gogol's sardonic story with projected titles - just like the movies. Without a word of dialogue, and splendidly designed and lit by Ken McDonald and Alan Brodie, the twenty two performers present a physical theatre piece reminiscent of Meyerhold's *The Government Inspector* and, with its giant props of machines and nib pens, Chaplin's *Modern Times*.

Animated, and sometimes over-propelled, by dance and piano works by Shostakovich, we see a meek clerk (played with dignity and comic angularity by Peter Anderson) experience momentary happiness in his handsomely tailored overcoat before finding his life in worse tatters than ever.

The pace and loneliness of early modern life is captured with scenes of frenetic streetcars and the hostile drudgery of offices and sewing rooms, but the imperatives of the production's spectacle keep us, for the most part, at an emotional remove from the Man's predicament, especially with the grafting of another Gogol story, *Diary of a Madman*, on the conclusion. Despite the wit of exchanging a coat for a straitjacket, I would have preferred Gogol's original ghostly ending - with its touch of triumphal revenge - to the complacent pessimism of CanStage's virtuosic, exacting but, ultimately, dramatically unsatisfactory parable.

Anyone familiar with the vibrant colours and evocative details of Ngarindjeri man, Ian W. Abdulla's paintings will be especially drawn to Windmill's new work, *Riverland*. Directed by the talented Wesley Enoch, with bold designs from Richard Roberts, this play for young audiences

brings three generations of one family to a stretch along the Murray River - between Winkie and Berri - that has been the home and singular inspiration for Abdulla.

Teenagers Luke and Milly (two more well-judged performances from Luke Carroll and Ursula Yovich) are reluctant visitors to their family lands, they'd rather be home with their friends and PlayStations. Even their Nana would rather watch Bert Newton, while their mother, an Aboriginal cultural consultant, has brought her laptop and chardonnay.

Scott Rankin's script is ambitiously satiric at times but the central story of a young man lost in the flood of 1956 and Richard Roberts' use of the deep blues and broad vistas of Abdulla's paintings, enhanced by Matt Scott's buttery lighting and songs by Stuart Day, gives this work a simple strength. Wesley Enoch's warmly managed production, with its gossiping pelicans and heartfelt themes, reminds us that it is our loss if we think there is anything naïve about naïve art. Riverland will be seen at the Brisbane Festival in September and the Perth Festival next year.