

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in – The Adelaide Review

Adelaide Cabaret Festival

The recent Adelaide Cabaret Festival has been a curious event. Or at least it has come into being for some rather curious reasons. In part, it is a reaction to last year's Fringe. Certainly there were those close to the Fringe who thought that the popular comedy acts around the Rundle Street epicentre had swamped everything else - particularly those theatre companies, some of them international, who struggled to break even with high overheads and a fragile box office. The Cabaret Festival is aiming - somewhat quixotically surely ? - to shift the focus away from Melbourne tele-comics and morning radio humour. An exercise in cultural engineering you might say.

Then, there is the fact that the Adelaide Festival Centre has been having a lean season. Dark much of the time - and, do we think, out of pocket after the summer musicals ?- it was timely for Arts minister Diana Laidlaw to prime the pump with half a million dollars to go and buy some programming.

The result has been a mixed menu of middle of the road favourites, jazzy morning melodies, an outing for the ASO, a few choice items from here and there and a fair amount of the sort of popular comedy which we saw at the last Adelaide Fringe. Some shows went wild - the Sing-Along-Sound-of-Music for starters- and, with modest box office targets and a built-in subsidy , performers such as Ross Skiffington, James Morrison, Julie Anthony and Judi Connelli were going to do well also.

Looking through the program, though, you could be forgiven for wondering what actually constitutes cabaret, and certainly what might be some new directions for a form that is, almost by definition, regularly in need of some pepping up. I am sorry I missed Yumi Umiumare -Tokyo Das SHOKU Girl - she sounds like a paradigm shift, or at least a shift in an adventurous direction in a festival that opted for the smooth, if not the downright sedate.

Although sedate is hardly the word for *Ciao Mamma Ciao* from Doppio Para//elo. Intended as a light hearted exploration of the relationship between Italian men and their mothers, it is unfortunately laden in both concept and execution. Director Teresa Crea, in seeking to disguise the film script origins of Frank Morello's text, throws in every possible theatrical gambit. Since there are debts to German cabaret, Jason Sweeney, as the MC gets to do some Joel Grey stuff with lots of fishnet and flouncing. It bears no relation to anything else on stage but it's as though everyone concerned realises that the main event is unendurable and any arbitrary breaks for songs, or whatever else, are better than nothing.

The tangled plot of manipulative mothers, of Pino and Paolo and Jake and the wayward and much maligned Daniela, is overheated and overacted. The bawdiness becomes merely coarse and the point of it all gets lost. It is a relief at one juncture when things come to a temporary halt and we are coerced into several choruses of *Volare*. James Coulter's set, in cartoon black, white and red, is stylish and the multimedia elements are smartly managed but I was ready to say ciao to Mamma well before the ninety minute mark.

For a bit of organised chaos we never have to look further than Frank Wood and Colin Lane, otherwise known as Lano and Woodley. Their newest show *Bruiser*, gives licence not only for some daft old shadow-boxing but it has the dynamic duo doubling for two more actors that Frank has forgotten to hire. The physical pratfalls, the daggy routines, the long gormless stares, the vocal hysterics - they are all there as large and awful as life itself. Frank still wears his Dunlop Volleys and Col his tight-under-the-arms check jacket. They are immutables of desperate clowning - Ollie and Stan, Didi and Gogo - and the audience loves them as much as ever.

Cabaret West, it seems, is the Fringe the Cabaret Festival had to have. Working out of the , Minkebar, the new Laughing Gas club on Hindley Street and Caos Café, have been a bunch of musicians, drag artistes and funny persons. The Lion Theatre also has had a posse of international comics - some Irish jokers, Ben and Arn as the pseudo-Gallics, Didier and Jean-Francois, Geordie standup merchant Ross Noble and Californian Arj Barker.

Ross Noble is a lugubrious bloke with a shock of curly hair, dead pan eyelids and a knack for veering off the point and returning to ground zero with languid ease. He works almost entirely from what's in the room, low-key stuff gently cajoled from the audience which he turns into the comedy version of balloon animals and tosses back. It's fun to watch such a confident performer and his routine is also refreshingly short on the usual emphatic expletives.

Arj Barker is a flashier character. Arriving on stage wrapped in an inexplicably funny blanket Barker parades his glam rocker tunic and flares. He has worked the Australian circuit for a number of highly successful seasons so his material effortlessly incorporates footy, media and politics. He sings the praises of factory outlets. The clothing is only the slightest bit imperfect he enthuses - like having a pocket for a collar - and then torturously attempts to pull out his car keys from the small of his back. He's a smart cookie with a laconic intelligence that lifts the audience even as he amuses us.

Stand-up is a ferociously difficult task for a performer and Noble and Barker are actors working the stage with only their instincts for improvisation and their considerable wit. Also seizing the moment at the Minkebar in Crippen Lane are fourth year students from the Flinders University Drama Centre working a friendly crowd with some very promising original material. The show is called *Sit on My Fence and Tell Me That You're Ugly* - a farrago of skits and monologues including Eva Lewkovicz, close to the bone as the New Age postfeminist, pierced and inscribed Vaginah, Caleb Lewis as a marvellously sinister clown-faced fireman let loose in a safety information program and Amber McMahon, weirdly hilarious as the serial fainter, the Monkey Woman and the whirling dervish expert with no expertise.

The Adelaide Cabaret Festival has achieved a number of objectives. It has created activity at a low point in the entertainment calendar and it has attracted appreciative audiences including many of those self-funded retirees we hear so much about these days. It also appears that there is money in the pot for another festival in two years time. That's good too. Maybe the organisers can use the extra lead time to plan some more intrepid material and look further afield. They might also get some advice on the subject of cabaret from Robyn Archer whose homage to *Le Chat Noir*, based around songs by French cabaret legend Aristide Bruant, was as entertaining as it was marvellously informative.

