

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Australian

House Among the Stars

by Michel Tremblay.

State Theatre Company of South Australia

The Playhouse. Until 12 May.

State Theatre's newest production, *House Among the Stars*, from prolific French Canadian writer Michel Tremblay, is set in a log cabin in rural Quebec—"at the beginning of a beautiful evening in July." In fact, it is set in three Julys- one in 1910, one in 1950 and a third, forty years on, in 1990. Three generations come to this place in Duhamel, among pines, overlooking a lake. Victoire, Josaphat and their son Gabriel are the first owners but Victoire is leaving for Montreal to marry a man who can provide for her children - the now grown Albertine and her brother Edouard who we see, returning in 1950, trying to patch their differences. Then comes their nephew Jean-Marc, perhaps speaking for the playwright himself, who has quit his university post to find solitude and reflect on the past, accompanied, at least for a time, by his gay lover Mathieu and his son Sebastien.

Tremblay's text, written in Joual, a working class French Canadian dialect and translated by John van Burek, is a lyrical reverie of the delights and confusions of childhood and the turbulence and solace of family. With no variation of setting and a minimum of action, director Rosalba Clemente and designer Robert Cousins have their share of theatrical challenges. Cousins' decor dispenses with the cabin altogether, instead creating a raked rectangular decking which is set among tall white birches, warmly lit by Mark Sheldon. The emphasis is on character and the poignance of memory and Clemente guides a strong cast to focused and generally un-sentimental performances.

House Among the Stars, as its title suggests, is a dreamy work, garnished with Quebec lumberjack folklore and filled with eccentric character detail. There is plenty here for the actors- Anthony Weigh, burdened somewhat by his storytelling duties, as Josaphat, Elizabeth Falkland's Victoire, torn between romance and pragmatism, and Carmelina Di Guglielmo as Albertine, trapped in fear and disgust at the campy extravagance of her brother Edouard, played with comic intelligence by Michael Habib. Carmel Johnson has a quiet dignity as La Grosse Femme while Geoff Revell and Socra-

tis Otto find pleasing understatement as Jean-Marc and Mathieu, and Michael Finney does well as eighty years' worth of small boys.

State Theatre has succeeded with a work which, despite its soft edges and easy resolutions, has gentle charm and poetic accomplishment. The Franche accents take us perilously close to Pepe le Pew at times, and the text runs probably twenty minutes too long, but this production, from its lambent overture by composer Natalie Williams to the final tableau of the three generations, soft-focus warts and all, has given us a memorable glimpse, the first on an Australian mainstage, of the work of one of Canada's best known playwrights.