

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Australian

An Evening With Queen Victoria

By Prunella Scales

Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre.

1 - 3 November.

Melbourne - The Arts Centre, Fairfax Studio

6 -7 November, 2004

Geelong - Ford Theatre

9 November, 2004

Cairns - Civic Theatre

23 -24 November, 2004

Townsville - Civic Theatre

25 November, 2004

Rockhampton - Pilbeam Theatre

26 November, 2004

Canberra - The Playhouse

29 30 November, 2004

Albury - Performing Arts centre

1 December, 2004

Brisbane - Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University

3 - 4 December, 2004

Gold Coast - Arts Centre

5 December, 2004

Hobart - Theatre Royal

7 - 8 December

Launceston - Princess Theatre

9 December, 2004

Sydney - Sydney Theatre

11 - 12 December, 2004

Perth - Regal Theatre

14 - 15 December, 2004

Imagine being called, at the age of eighteen, to take the throne of England in its most dynamic period of mercantile and intellectual development. Victoria, daughter of the Saxe-Coburgs, reigned for the greater part of the nineteenth century, sixty four years of public life - privately recorded in diaries, letters and other memoirs which give a fascinating glimpse of a monarch often (and mistakenly) regarded as being as strict and prim as the period she gave her name to.

Well-known English actor Prunella Scales makes a welcome return to Australia with *An Evening with Queen Victoria*, a programme of readings and music which highlights both the complexity and disarming directness of

their subject. The excerpts, dating from childhood to the day before her death, capture the determination and candour of a young woman learning to rule the Empire, the waves and everything in between. "I am rather short for the Queen," she gripes, elsewhere describing her temperament as "often overdone," "vexed" and "fervent".

This is all too evident when she falls for, and courts, her cousin Albert with whom she shared more than twenty years of marriage and nine children. She notes, unsentimentally, the ugliness of several of them, especially Bertie, a bear of very little brain who later became Edward VII. "But what are children compared to a husband" she exclaims of Albert, on whom she doted and whose death she mourned, almost pathologically, for more than a decade.

Devised and directed by Katrina Hendrey, this depiction of Victoria is subtle and engaging. The diminutive Prunella Scales, in an understated and unfussy performance, presents a woman with a whim of iron, and more than a little irony. Victoria's journals, often thought to be somewhat dull, are infused with a droll self-awareness which unfolds without undue prompting from Ms Scales. The music - the young Queen's favourite quadrilles, selections from Beethoven, Schumann, and works written by Albert himself - is performed with distinction by the pianist Richard Burnett and the tenor Ian Partridge. Also well-judged is the use of Tennyson's In Memoriam and, from *The Gondoliers*, W. S. Gilbert on *The Working Monarch*.

With only simple period decor and a touch of electric gaslight, the success of this Evening rests with the intelligence and nuance of Prunella Scales' convincing presentation, restless in adolescence, smitten in marriage, weary with grief, and capturing quiet humour and Victorian non-amusement. Here is a royal audience even republicans can enjoy.