

Theatre Review

February 19, 2019

Welcome back dear theatre-loving friends, and everyone else. Hope you all had a great break and are looking forward to 2019, at least in theatre.

Last year finished well with some terrific productions. Sydney Dance Company presented their annual **New Breed**, works by members of the company. Three were excellent and there was the added bonus of seeing the exquisite installations of Nick Cave.

Belvoir finished the year with August Strindberg's **The Dance of Death**. I have to admit to never liking this play but with direction by Judy Davis, with Pamela Rabe and Colin Friels dancing around their victim Toby Schmitz, it certainly worked better than the productions I have seen previously. It was the first time I realised that this was what had informed Edward Albee for his masterpiece **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf**.

Meanwhile, the Sydney Theatre Company staged the very difficult **A Cheery Soul** by Patrick White. I must admit to an ambivalence about this play but this production in which Kip Williams directs with his usual flair, using cameras to film and comment on the play, was the first time I found the story and intent clear. The performance by Sarah Peirse pushed it along and helped the audience love to hate her.



While I found **The Wharf Revue 2018 Deja Revue** disappointing, it still had some exquisitely laugh-out-loud moments. The Paul Keating sequence with Jonathan Biggins left me in tears, Drew Forsythe's Pauline Hanson had me squirming in my seat. And while there were many more brilliant moments (eg the stripping of the set to introduce Gladys), I felt the show lacked the edge it has always had.

Initially I thought it could be that politics has now become its own sad comedy but then I thought that it was the writing. It was inconsistent and did not sustain. Phil Scott who has been a third cog in the wheel since it started all those years ago had left after last year's show and it was his sharp writing that was missing. I was pleased to hear he is rejoining as a writer this year but disappointed for us that he will not be performing. He is doing other things and good luck to him.

Hayes Theatre finished a very successful year with one of its biggest hits ever, Andrew Lloyd Webber's **Aspects of Love**. Terrible story about white male privilege disguised in a story of bohemia, and the usual ALW music, with one theme reoccurring throughout the show, was somehow extremely enjoyable with a great production and brilliant cast. Hayes has another big year ahead with **Spamalot** being the one I am most looking forward to.

This year has started well, with the Sydney Festival producing some big shows. Festivals are important, as they help theatre companies stage productions that are beyond their budgets. They also import shows that we would otherwise be unable to see.

Because I had my annual trip to the tennis in Melbourne I missed a few of the big ones but I did see **Pigalle** in

the Magic Mirrors Spiegel tent in Hyde Park. While it was not the best of these circus/cabaret shows it was still very enjoyable with Marcia Hines and iOTA (who starred in the original Festival Spiegel tent show **Smoke and Mirrors**) kicking it along. Meanwhile, The Hungry Mile was hosting **Home**, commissioned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music and quite a few other companies.

When you enter the theatre, the stage is empty and then starts with a single actor outlining some plastic and a wooden skeleton of a building. There are no words but some surprises and illusions as a house is constructed in front of us. More actors join in as different areas and elements are added.

The best part of this section is the timing and humour as stairways and a kitchen, bathroom (with toilet), bedroom, office and living room are added. As this section ends we gradually realise that this may be one house but it is occupied by at least three different families. Again illusion is used to great effect as is comedy with one scene in the bathroom as the characters take showers (yes, naked) and use the toilet creates some very funny moments.

But then again the show takes another turn as members of the audience are invited personally to join a party starting in the house. As more and more audience members get involved, we see them give birth, get married and die and eventually move out and the house is deconstructed. The only words are a few songs that relate to what is happening on stage. The audience members return to their seats and after 100 minutes it finishes. I loved it.

Belvoir also took advantage of the Festival to stage **Counting and Cracking**. Like **Cloudstreet**, which they staged in a warehouse in what is now Barangaroo, this brilliant Australian story is staged away from the Belvoir Theatre and in the Sydney Town Hall.

A theatre has been constructed within the main auditorium. On entering, you are given a dinner box of a superb Sri Lankan lamb curry and then you move into the theatre which is a very simple stage surrounded on three sides with a trio of musicians in a loft.

The story is of a Sri Lankan refugee family. The mother lives in Pendle and her son in Bondi, so he is closer to uni. He also has an Aboriginal girlfriend, which provides a scene where they discuss how they are both out of their familiar circumstances.

Over three acts we move back and forth in time as we learn the history of the Civil War and how that leads to people becoming refugees. It was a history I thought I knew. I didn't, but after almost four engrossing hours I knew a lot more.

Writer S. Shakthidharan has been attempting to get his story told for many years. How lucky he was to link his company Co-Curious with Belvoir and artistic director Eamon Flack to eventually stage this important masterpiece with 19 performers. I rarely cry but as this show ended I wept as I leapt to my feet for a standing ovation.

I spoke to the author after the show to congratulate him and told him how much I hoped the play would have another life. It is off soon to the Adelaide Festival but let's hope it has another chance sometime so more people get the opportunity to see a different story of our modern history.

Frank Barnes is retired and wishes to pay tribute to David Milliss with whom he taught at Cabramatta High in the late '60s and later spent many years working with at the New Theatre providing progressive ideas.

PS. I also saw *Harry Potter and The Cursed Child* in Melbourne and loved it. I will write a little about it in the next journal but I am restricted by a pledge to "keep the secrets".