

## Theatre Review

April 10, 2019

Theatre is so diverse, as demonstrated by the shows I have seen recently: a musical *Spamalot*, a satire *How to Rule The World* and *Every Brilliant Thing*, which is difficult to describe.

***Every Brilliant Thing***, at Belvoir, started life in England in 2013, written by Duncan Macmillan and performed by Jonny Donahoe, who also contributed to the writing. For me this was a perfect Belvoir show. It was different, it was a serious show about depression while being very funny and it has the best audience involvement; clever but non-threatening.

The theatre has been reconfigured so the show is played in the round with the house lights on for the entire time. Before it starts, the only performer, Kate Mulvany, wanders through the audience handing out pieces of paper. She asks me to read 1166 and 1167 and explains that when she calls that number, I was to put up my hand and read out the lines on the paper.



Wow, at last I get to perform at Belvoir. Suddenly she is onstage and telling us about herself and, as she does, uses props that she gathers from the audience. A gent in the front row provides a sweater that becomes her pet dog, a young boy in front of me provides a piece of chocolate, two women find books while the audience commence calling out their script when she calls their number.

The notes are all part of her story, her mother's depression and how she taught her to keep a list of brilliant things in her life. Simple things like ice cream and water fights. The audience contributes with their lines and also play characters, her father, her counsellor at school, her boyfriend and her dentist.

Her choices at my performance were excellent with a few of the actors going over the top, but she soon pulled them into line. A show about depression should not be this warm and funny but in the excellent hands of director Kate Champion and Mulvany, it is moving and very funny. It is hard to believe this is a performance as you quickly start believing that this story is actually Mulvany's despite knowing it is not.

I sat watching and getting nervous about my lines: 1166 "Christopher Walken's voice" and 1167 "Christopher Walken's hair". Once they were delivered I relaxed and watched as the story grew and she is also diagnosed with depression.

Mulvany controls the audience to make this an extraordinary experience. Steve Rodgers, who co-directed this production, will be playing the role at Riverside for five performances only from 3 April.

This is brilliant life-affirming theatre. There was one moment when reality collided as Mulvany was running around the theatre high-fiving everyone and seemed exhausted. Many members of the audience were aware of Kate's background and expressed concern but, of course, she was acting.

The Hayes Theatre continues to present great musical theatre with another One Eyed Man Production of Monty Python's **Spamalot** with book and lyrics by Eric Idle and music by John Du Prez and Eric Idle. It's a new musical (lovingly) ripped off from the motion picture *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*. If you are a Monty Python lover (I am), you will be in heaven, if not I would advise you to stay away but you will be missing one of the most excitingly brilliant and funny shows.

It's another with audience participation, this time very different from the play aforementioned. This time it is done with almost no resistance as most, if not all, are only too happy to sing along with the cast particularly "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life". Some of the scenes are known so well that they join in, particularly the scene with the French soldier on the ramparts and the knight who won't die despite losing all his appendages.

This is the same production company that did the enormous hit *Calamity Jane* and the director Richard Carroll and choreographer Cameron Mitchell use many of the same ideas that worked so well in that show. I have seen the original production twice, firstly in Toronto Canada and then in Melbourne. It closed early in Melbourne. I thought it was because there were too many "big" shows playing there at the one time; it might also be that Monty Python does not appeal to everyone. The TV series is currently showing on SBS Viceland and I was shocked to realise that it was first broadcast in 1969. I still watch and love it for its silliness.

This production is staged in a tiny space with the audience on three sides. As you know, it is a very silly story as King Arthur gathers his knights and goes on his quest for the Holy Grail, which eventually becomes the quest to be in a Broadway musical. Arthur's trusty servant Patsy is there with his coconuts providing the galloping horse sounds and the Lady of the Lake joins with Sir Galahad to sing "The Song that goes like This", a great satire on Andrew Lloyd Webber. In the second act, having not been seen for some time the Lady appears angrily to ask, "Whatever Happened to My Part?" In this production, she is cast as a cabaret performer with a jazz bent and plays that to the hilt. In the other productions, the role has been filled by a coloratura with equally stunning effects.

All aspects of the production are terrific and the cast are amazing, giving so much. I only have two quibbles. Firstly there is no rundown of songs in the program and I dislike being told to stand in the lead-up to the finale. It is done legitimately, in that we are witnessing a wedding (they did the same in *Calamity*). It means we are not given a choice about a standing ovation. I would have given one but I want that choice. I know these are small problems, but?

**How to Rule the World** from the Sydney Theatre Company is a play by the Aboriginal commentator and writer Nakkiah Lui. I am a big fan of Ms Lui and I love her fearless attacks when she appears on panels. Her plays have been very successful and I was hoping this would join the list but it did not quite get there. It is a great idea: An Indigenous Australian, Asian and an Islander walk into a bar and come up with an idea to find a non-political person to become a politician. They do, but after a while the dupe becomes their own person and falls into the traps of politics and corruption. A brilliant idea but it becomes a curate's egg. Some of it is screamingly funny but some of it is tedious and cringe worthy.

One of the big problems with Australian theatre is that we don't have the luxury of plays having out-of-town tryouts so that they are workshopped and rewritten during rehearsals. I disliked the setup as it was a bit like a lecture on racism. It took until Act 2 for the play to really take off. I don't think Nakkiah Lui should act in her own plays. I felt she held it back. But the performances were generally good with the ever-reliable Hamish Michael as the "politician" giving a remarkable performance. A bit disappointing but still worth catching.

If you did not get to see *Once in Royal David's City* by Michael Gow at Belvoir you now have another chance at the New Theatre.

And *Harry Potter and The Cursed Child* will cost you a fortune as it will only show in Melbourne but it is a superb piece of theatre.

**Frank Barnes** is retired and looking forward to *American Psycho ... The Musical* at the Hayes