

Theatre reviews

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The Wharf Review

UNR-DACT-D

By Jonathan Biggins, Drew Forsythe and Phillip Scott

Sydney Theatre Company
Ros Packer

Theatre After 20 years it has been announced that *The Wharf Review*, which has become an institution of Sydney theatre, will finish next year after its 20th production. While it will be a great loss to our theatre calendar, it is something to celebrate. Very few stage shows get a second outing, let alone 20.

Its origin was in a very small pub in Woolloomooloo, the Tilbury. It was a show called *Three Men and a Baby Grand*, and yes I saw it and every review since. The three writers have stayed with the show for the whole time but have not always performed, usually because of other commitments.

It now tours. Phil Scott missed last year after retiring from the show but was thankfully back this year as a writer and next year they will all return for the finale with Mandy Bishop, who has appeared in quite a few of the productions. Some have suggested that satire is getting harder as our leaders create it themselves.

I suspect they are finishing because after 20 years it is time to go. All three have so much talent they are rarely out of work.

The tradition for the audience over the years has been to leave each show saying, "That was the best ever," but last year's wasn't and I suspect Mr Scott's input was missed. But this year it was really back in form.

Add Helen Dallimore, Simon Burke and musician Andrew Worboys (who have all appeared before) and Lena Cruz, and you have a top team of brilliant performers.

With a simple but brilliant set and top lighting added to the mix (a long way from the origins) who could believe that the little show on that tiny stage at The Tilbury moved to the second theatre at The Wharf eventually to the main Wharf Theatre and now in the large Sydney Theatre and it all works.

There are so many highlights:

- an opening spot about diversity later skewered in a sketch featuring Kim Jong Un
- Leigh Sales interviewing Ita Buttrose and Bronwyn Bishop with a crossover to Laura Tingle (all played by Dallimore)
- the "Cell Block Tango" (from Chicago) with prisoners Julian Assange (Burke) and George Pell (Forsyth)



- Burke, again, as Boris and our PM
- a beautiful, scathing sketch about Aung Sun Suu Kyi (Cruz)
- Dallimore as Trump and Kristina Keneally
- Burke as a scarily accurate Alan Jones
- Forsyth as Liza Minelli and Pauline Hanson.

This is so brilliant; it is a masterclass on impersonation. His knees do some of the acting for him. Knees have been important over the years as seen by the Democrats and Bob Brown.

It will be sad to say goodbye next year and I will be buying tickets as soon as they become available. I have no doubt that as we leave the audience will be saying, as they did this year, 'That was the best one yet'.

Fangirls

Book, music and lyrics by Yve Blake
Directed by Paige Rattray
Belvoir Upstairs

Talk about overachieving, Yve Blake also plays the central character in the play. It is a musical that has emerged from the ATYP (Australian Theatre for Young People) and is about a group of 14-year-old schoolgirl BFFs (best friends forever). It deals with their angsts and their rebellion against their parents and sometimes each other. They are all fans of superstar Harry, played by the terrific Aydan. When they discover he is coming to Australia they know they have to see him but can only get two tickets. This leads to a series of absurd actions by Edna (Blake).

The use of video is excellent along with a fine score, although none of the songs are particularly memorable. Despite this, they were delivered with great singing chops by the fine cast.

It probably needs some more dramaturgy and a few cuts but it is in fine form for an early production. It is very well directed by Paige Rattray and the cast capture perfectly the language, both oral and physical, of the 14-year-olds.

I was not surprised to see a few non-returns after interval, I could feel the person beside me bristle and she did not return. But they were few and the rest of us had a great time.

And there were some bonuses. James Majoos plays a queer character with no one commenting on it. He was just simply there and Sharon Millerchip (whom I adore) played the mother, making the trope interesting. She also played one of the girls in various scenes and showed she is a high kicker still.

Thanks Belvoir for staging this very interesting and enjoyable show, I now know some of the young slang that I never previously understood.

I also caught Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* by the Sydney Theatre Company. Here he plays with plays within plays while dealing with love and infidelity in as good a production as you will see. The Hayes Theatre continues its aim of producing plays that we would probably not see, with *Caroline or Change* written by Tony Kushner and music by Jeanine Tesori. This is a beautiful and challenging story (somewhat autobiographical) of a maid in a Jewish household. It was an excellent production directed by Mitchell Butel.

"When the moon is in the seventh house and Jupiter aligns with Mars. Then peace will guide the planet and love will steer the stars. This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius."

Wow, I really was excited to hear those opening lyrics to *Hair* some 50 years after it was first staged in Sydney after a battle to get rid of absurd censorship laws. I saw the original six times and still love the music. This was a great staging and the mainly older audience packed the Opera House Concert Hall bopping along as we remembered the hope we had for a peaceful future. Fifty years on the show is still great but the hope for peace is further away.

Frank Barnes is retired and happy