

## Theatre reviews

March 06, 2020

### The Campaign

By Campion Decent

Directed by Kim Hardwick

White Box Theatre at the Seymour Centre

Back in the 1960s, we of the counterculture were sure our activism was going to change the world and that “peace” was on the horizon. Little did we realise there was going to be push-back and we would have to fight some battles over and over. One of the battles that started early in the 1970s was gay law reform. Decriminalisation of male homosexuality was gazetted in NSW in 1984, but Tasmania remained the only state with draconian laws still in place until 1 May, 1997.

*The Campaign*, written by Campion Decent, tells the story of how Rodney Croome and his then partner Nick Toonan started a movement in 1988 to change the law. South Australia was the first state to change, led by Premier Don Dunstan, after the murder of an academic in 1975. In Hobart, the pair set up a stall in the famous Salamanca Markets. One woman complained and the police moved in.



For weeks many were arrested if they stepped over a line, today represented by a yellow line at the markets. At this time the support for reform was at 31 per cent and a long, hard-fought battle started. The campaign continued with some of the vilest homophobia directed at activists of all ages and ideologies.

The arrests continued and support slowly increased until Nick Toonan took a case to the United Nations. They won the case and the government of the day had to move to reform. By this stage the community was coming onside and by the time the law changed support for it was 87 per cent. They also ended up with the strongest laws in the country.

The play is a verbatim-style telling of the history; five actors playing multiple characters tell the story directly to the audience.

It is a credit to the company, directed by Kim Hardwick, that it still plays like a thriller even though we know the outcome. Having been a gay activist, I was well aware of the story and I was even involved in a very small part of it, but I had no idea of most of what happened.

I saw *The Campaign* when it was on as part of the Mardi Gras. My only concern was that the audience was full of “older” people like myself. This story needs to be seen by younger people who are unaware of this and other battles for reform that were only won by activism. (Climate Change anyone?)

Awareness arose during the fight for same-sex marriage but I suspect they are not aware that all could easily be undone, and sooner than they might think. The Religious Discrimination Act is around the corner. We need

theatre, and other media, to tell us these stories.

### **Jesus Wants Me For A Sunbeam**

By Peter Goldsworthy, adapted by Steve Rodgers

Directed by Darren Yap

Belvoir Upstairs

While I was watching this interesting play I was completely drawn into the story of this happy family who suffer a tragedy. We know from the beginning there will be a bad ending but the story is told in reverse. The production is superbly directed by Darren Yap, eliciting totally natural performances from Matthew Whittet and Emma Jackson as the parents, Liam Nunan as their son Ben, Grace Truman as daughter Wol (a very impressive performance), the always great Valerie Bader as grandma and the oncologist Dr Eve and Mark Lee as Grandpa and the priest. They take us on the journey the family travels particularly from when they discover their beloved Wol has terminal leukaemia. It is the final decision made by the parents that causes the controversial ending to the show and at the time I was both confronted and angry. But within minutes of leaving the theatre I decided that the basic premise of the story is flawed. I am writing this the day after the horrific murders of the three children and their mother in Queensland and felt a much better and sensible story would be to look at domestic violence and why so many men think it is their right to control women.

### **The Deep Blue Sea**

By Terence Rattigan

Directed by Paige Rattray

Sydney Theatre Company

First staged in London in 1952 by gay playwright Rattigan, it is well worth reviving as it recognises the plight of its female protagonist Hester Collyer (Marta Dusseldorp), which was rarely dealt with at the time. It opens with her being discovered after a failed suicide attempt and follows her throughout that day when we meet her ex-husband, her current de facto, the disbarred doctor, the kind landlady and the young happily married couple who live upstairs.

These are played by Matt Day, Fayssal Bazzi, Paul Capsis, Vanessa Downing, Contessa Treffone and Brandon McClelland respectively. I loved the design by David Fleischer, which allowed us into Hester's space from different perspectives. I feel I would have preferred to see the play done in a fully traditional way, but it is still well worth seeing.

The musical *Come From Away* is coming to Sydney in August at the State Theatre. I saw it in Melbourne a few weeks ago where it has had a record breaking run. It is a different 9/11 story set in a place called Gander in Newfoundland and what happened there on the 11th of September and the following days. It is fun and joyous and I guarantee you will come out smiling. Highly recommended.

I want to quickly mention the shows I saw in December, starting with the brilliant *Douglas* from Hannah Gadsby, *Anthem* by the writers who gave us *The Curse of The Working Class* 10 years ago, *Packer and Son* at Belvoir, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* at Sydney Theatre Company, the whacky *HMS Pinafore* at Hayes and the screamingly funny and insane Trevor Ashley's *The Lyin' Queen*. What a theatrical feast!

**Frank Barnes** is retired and still an activist