

## Theatre Review

February 27, 2018

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To stand or not to stand. That is the question.

A standing ovation during a curtain call is generally considered the ultimate accolade to a show and its cast. Well that was until Broadway, and later West End, producers decided that they would manipulate audiences into forced ovations by finishing musicals with mega-mixes and thus already having the audiences on their feet.

It costs a lot to visit New York to see a play. Travel, accommodation and theatre tickets amount to a small fortune, so it is important that the audience feels they have got their reward. One thing you will notice at a big Broadway musical is that the audience feels free to simply walk in and out at will. These are not usual theatre goers and the same applies in London. You might notice the same here with the big shows.



I will stand if the show is extraordinary or if the lead actor has given us something special. *Mother* written by Daniel Keene specially for Noni Hazelhurst, which played at Belvoir to sold out houses, is one such show. I am not always a Noni fan as I find she is sometimes stilted in performance but in this she totally inhabits the role of the homeless woman and gives us a beautifully real and nuanced performance. I was only too happy to join the rest of the audience in a standing ovation. It was almost spoiled by the over enthusiastic man who tried to force us to our feet.

Likewise *My Name is Jimi* with Jimi Bani and his family also at Belvoir. In a delightful and simple piece of theatre we learn a lot in a short space of time about Islander people. I was ashamed of my lack of knowledge and felt a tear come to my eyes as I stood to applaud this wonderful story of our Torres Strait Islander neighbours. The ovation here was not for the show as a play but for the story.

Belvoir continued its commitment to telling our Indigenous stories Downstairs with Ghenoa Gela's *My Urrwai* (My Story). Ghenoa tells us her very personal and often funny story as an Islander. She wants to explain how there is a difference between Islanders and Aboriginal people. I never really knew the difference, to my shame, and now I do know a little. While there was no standing ovation at the end of this it was still a great experience directed well by Rachael Maza.

Another brilliant piece from Belvoir was *Barbara and The Camp Dogs* by Ursula Yovich and Alana Valentine. This was a journey of depth taken by Barbara (Ursula Yovich) assisted by her sister (Elaine Crombie) into the their past and present lives. Assisted by a strong band and singer Troy Brady this is one of my favourite shows from the past 12 months. It was tough, it was funny, it was informative, well written and performed and simply great. We were on our feet as soon as the lights went down.

We are currently in the "festival" season with the Sydney Festival just finished and the Mardi Gras Festival just starting. Festivals create opportunities to present shows that could not otherwise be presented because

of prohibitive costs. Among the shows this year was *Barber Shop Chronicles* from the National Theatre in London. In barber shops across the world, but mainly London, we watch as the culture of the men getting together to discuss their lives is a masterwork of theatre. Moving, funny and totally enjoyable, this was one of many highlights and another standing ovation, as was *Manhattan's Wooster Group's The Town Hall Affair*. This was a very special event as it reproduced on stage a meeting held in New York at the height of the feminism debate. The meeting, which included participants such as Germaine Greer and Norman Mailer, plays out in front of a film of the meeting with the participants sometimes lip-synching the lines. After the curtain calls, audience members around me sat and talked for at least 10 minutes until we were asked to leave.

*Tree of Codes* was a dance, lighting, design event that I did not stand for. But many others did. I found the dancing good but most of the rest uninspiring. It reminded me of when I saw Ken Russell's *The Devils* at The Metro in Kings Cross in the early '70s. It was a film that was banned and censored worldwide. I saw it with my best friend who had been raised in a secular family whereas I had been raised a very strict catholic, which I had by then discarded for atheism. We both loved the movie but when we discussed it later we realised we had actually seen two totally different movies. It was a lesson I would carry with me as I worked in theatre over the years. So I can only suspect those who stood saw a very different show.

A much better show of dance for me was the Sydney Dance Company giving its dancers a chance to choreograph. Each year this opportunity is presented at Carriageworks under the title New Breed. This year was their best yet and deserved an ovation.

*Darlinghurst Nights* at The Hayes Theatre was a beautiful presentation of the musical based on Kenneth Slessor's book. *Nassim*, which I saw in Melbourne is a clever and funny theatre piece, which has a different actor presenting each night. I saw Benjamin Law. This is about language and family, wonderful. *Riot* was a circus/cabaret show from Ireland that was part of the Sydney Festival and featured Panti Bliss the drag queen who led the "Yes" campaign in Ireland. Emmet Kirwan is an actor/street poet who delivers some of the best political poetry I have heard. Then there were the Irish dancers and acrobats. Great fun, as was *Belvoir Ha Ha*, which for the third year Belvoir gave some stand-up comics a main stage experience. They have previously had Hannah Gadsby and Tom Ballard and this time it was three women, Anne Edmonds, Mel Buttle and Cal Wilson. Thanks Belvoir, again.

Then there was *Muriel's Wedding*. I was on my feet so quickly for the sheer joy that we had just seen a great home-made musical. It was simply great. Great music (as well as keeping ABBA intact), great set and great performances by all. My favourite moment was when mum Betty Heslop got to sing her song. It showed how a stage musical can show really simply all about someone with a song. The show rightly booked out and will have new life next year with a big commercial run at the Lyric Theatre. It will be even better then.

The other big show I saw that did not deserve a standing ovation from me was *Dream Lover* with David Campbell as Bobby Darren. As a concert this was wonderful. As a musical it was crap. So I remained firm in my seat. I would give Campbell an ovation any time as he is a class act. But the groundlings sure gave it a big stand.

*Frank Barnes is retired and living in Paradise. He recommends you purchase your tickets now for The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time and guarantees you will give it a standing ovation. As you will The Book of Mormon.*