

Theatre review

March 23, 2018

Black is the New White

By Nakkiah Lui

Directed by Paige Rattray

Roslyn Packer Theatre

Sydney Theatre Company

It is Christmas, always a good time to set a play about a family. Charlotte Gibson (Shari Sebbens) is staying with her fiancé Francis Smith (Tom Stokes) in her parents' home while they are away. This would generally not be an unusual situation except she is Aboriginal and he is white.

They are both from well-off families, which sets the stage for the chaos that is to come. She is a lawyer and he plays modern classical music on his cello and lives off his family trust. As each family member arrives we learn that Charlotte's father Ray (Tony Briggs) is both a famous former boxer and politician who relentlessly claims to be Australia's Martin Luther King but seems to spend his time now on Twitter fighting his former opponent in parliament Denison Smith (Geoff Morrell) much to the frustration of his long-suffering wife Joan (Melodie Reynolds-Diarra). Joan is the real rock in the family and the writer of Ray's speeches.

Already you can see the complexities and thankfully there is a narrator (Luke Carroll) who leads us through these and introduces us to the rest of this family. There is other daughter Rose Jones (Miranda Tapsell) who has made it big as a fashion designer in New York, and her husband, former leading Aboriginal footballer Sonny (Anthony Taufa) who wants to give it all up to become a missionary.

We become aware of tensions between Charlotte and Francis as they turn the black/white debate on its head and when Ray and Joan suddenly arrive home they meet Francis in all his naked glory. Charlotte and Rose have differences, as all siblings do. Charlotte has decisions to make about her, and Francis' future. Then Francis' parents arrive and, of course, they are Ray's nemesis Denison and his wife Marie (Vanessa Downing).

This is the set-up for one of the funniest and clever shows we have seen in a long time. The writer, who is a regular contributor to *Black Comedy*, wrote and performed in *This Heaven*, downstairs at Belvoir, a very dark story about riots in Mt Druitt. I loved it and this play is so far from that. This is about middle-class Aboriginal people. In the program, Lui says she wanted to write a play about successful Aboriginal people, and not only has she succeeded but also I believe she has written one of the best Australian plays in a long time.

While this is a very funny romantic comedy, it is also very deep with how it deals with differences and social issues. Not many plays that deal with issues of race and class manage to include nudity and a major food fight. The underlying discussions about racial differences are there from the beginning to the very end with a great gag about a treaty.



The Sydney Theatre Company was right to pick this play for its 1917 season and add it to this year's season in a much bigger venue. The transfer worked well with only one cast change. The direction is perfect as is the cast, the set, the lighting and the music. I enjoyed it even more than the first time, as did the rest of the audience. I give a word of praise for the stage crew who have the arduous job of cleaning up after that food fight. I see this play being discussed in schools in the not too distant future, and I see many more successful plays from Nakkiah Lui.

Lethal Indifference

By Anna Barnes

Directed by Jessica Arthur

Sydney Theatre Company

Wharf 1

The performance by Emily Barclay is probably the best example of minimalist acting I have seen. She plays a woman who goes along with a friend to a court hearing about the murder of an Indian woman by her taxi-driver husband. This is the launch pad for a discussion of family violence or, as it is called in NSW, domestic violence. For 90 minutes she sits in her bedroom and casually talks, almost to herself, about Reema and Ajay and that sad and confronting story allows her to discuss the realities and horrors of domestic violence in Australia (It is called family violence in Victoria).

This is an engrossing play with so much information it could be overwhelming but luckily the writer and performer allow us many moments of humour. Adding to this is the actor's advanced pregnancy, which is never mentioned but is placed both beautifully and cleverly into the performance. It is a wonderful beginning to the Sydney Theatre Company's year.

Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival

Various theatres

When most people think of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras they mean the parade. The parade is the grand finale of a two-week festival that includes hundreds of performances including theatre, music, arts, dance, comedy, sport and generally, fun. I was unable to be in or at the parade but I did involve myself in some theatre.

The Seymour Theatre staged Tommy Murphy's *Strangers In Between*, which was a very early play of his written before *Holding the Man*. While its age shows, making some of the construct and dialogue somewhat creaky, it is good to see how far we have come even in the past 10 years. It was worth seeing for two main reasons: to see our past; and the wonderful performance by Simon Burke as the ageing queen Peter.

New Theatre has been producing plays for Mardi Gras for decades and this year they have had full houses with *F..king Men* by Joe DiPietro. It is based on the German play *Die Reigen* by Arthur Schnitzler and probably better remembered by people of a certain age (mine) from the French film *La Ronde* (*Love's Roundabout*). There are 10 actors and each scene has two actors with one moving on to the next person until we return to the beginning. This version deals very openly with issues facing gay men today. Characters include a hustler, a man married to a man, another married to a woman, a couple in an open relationship and at least one with HIV. It was very funny, confronting and good fun.

The Hayes Theatre continues to present brilliant musical theatre. *The View Upstairs* was a hit Off Broadway. In this production, brilliantly directed by Shaun Rennie, we once again see the depth of talent of our actors and performers as they tell the little-known story of a fire in a gay club in New Orleans in 1973. There has never been an arrest even though 32 people died in the fire and three of the victims have never been named as it is thought their families refused to claim them because of their hatred of gay people. The show takes us from the present into the club, The Upstairs Lounge, on the night before the fire. Superbly acted and sung, it is a reminder of what life was like then, how far we have come and a warning of how it can still be. Think of the Pulse nightclub in Orlando where 49 were killed on June 12, 2016.

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Choir teamed up with The Glamaphones from Wellington, New Zealand, for a night of "Harmony". As always, it was fun but this time the Sydney choir opened with a song sung in language by Gurrumul. While our cousins from across the ditch always sing in their Indigenous language, we are not as good so this was wonderful. *Now is The Hour* took me back to my childhood and *Dancing Queen* had all of us joining in. Such great fun.

Frank Barnes is retired and has been an activist for gay and lesbian people and HIV/AIDS for more than 50 years. He loves The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Festival, as each event provides a safe space for our GLBTIQ community.