

## Theatre Review

June 05, 2018

### Gypsy

Book by Arthur Laurents  
Music by Jule Styne  
Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim  
Directed by Richard Carroll  
Hayes Theatre

Gypsy Rose Lee was a “sophisticated” strip tease artist and visited Australia in 1954. Although I was only 11, I remember the discussions of my horrified, strict Roman Catholic parents, who were most horrified that some of their church-going friends were actually going to see her. Then in 1962 the movie came out with Natalie Wood playing Gypsy. It turned out to not be about Gypsy Rose Lee but actually the story of her Rose, who is presented as the worst of the ambitious stage mothers.

Strangely, I remember the discussion around the movie mainly being as to whether Ms Wood sang the songs herself. She did. The stage version arrived in Sydney in 1976 and I remember it for Gloria Dawn playing Rose, my friend Lynne Porteous playing one of the strippers, and Pamela Stephenson playing Baby June. Pamela went on to fame on British TV comedy and married Billy Connolly before training as a psychiatrist and becoming famous for this and her books. The musical is often described as being the best musical ever written. It certainly has a great story and a very singable score. And Sondheim wrote the very clever lyrics.

The production at the Hayes Theatre takes a risk by having one of our best actors, Blazey Best, playing the central role of Madam Rose. The role is usually played by a belter, which is someone who sings strongly and loudly. (The original stage Rose was Ethel Merman). While Blazey has played a few musicals she is no belter and here she puts her focus on the character, who is very dark. She runs the risk of the audience hating her but she helps by giving a very nuanced performance.

We find out about Rose in the opening scenes where she steals a trophy from her father after he won't lend her any more money to stage her vaudeville show in which she is pushing her daughter Baby June and her much less talented sister Louise, along with a group of boys. She is the worst of showbiz moms and while she wants the best for her daughter, her means of doing so are quite horrendous. Having had a bad childhood herself, it is easy to understand why she is doing it but not how. She gets a new manager Herbie who loves her but she rejects him and they continue until June runs away with one of the boys, Tulsa, to continue her dream to become an actress. (She does succeed and has a career as June Havoc. This is never explained in the show.)

The focus changes to promoting Louise who cannot replace June but is saved when they get a booking in a burlesque show. Rose overcomes her distaste as Louise morphs into Gypsy Rose Lee, who calls herself an “ecdysiast”, and distances herself from her. The show ends with one of the great show numbers *Rose's Turn*



in which Rose muses on her life and what might have been. Louise has been watching her from the wings of the theatre and they walk off arm in arm.

This is a big show and it does not always work in this production. Some of the songs are lost as, while Ms Best delivers a superb character, her voice does not carry some of the early songs. Her big finales for both acts work because of the character she has developed. Anthony Harkin as Herbie is a revelation. He shows us the hope, the love and the distress as it all falls apart and Rose chooses her daughter's success over him.

Laura Bunting continues to impress as Louise and handles the transition from the gawky talentless child to the "sophisticated" and confident stripper. Mark Hill shines with his big song-and-dance number as Tulsa. The whole company has to work hard as it carries many roles that are needed for this small-scale production to work.

I was slightly disappointed with some of the show and would love to see a full-scale production again but this is still a great show and well worth seeing for the songs and the story. This production is worth seeing for many reasons, particularly the performances.

**Jonathan Pie**  
Sydney Comedy Festival  
Enmore Theatre

It has been many years since I last went to the Enmore Theatre and possibly it will be many more before I enter this hub of the younger generation again. This was a special occasion as it was the opportunity to see the English actor Tom Walker in his persona of Jonathan Pie, the journalist who rants and rants against all forms of the political establishment. He found his fame in 2016 when he posted a three-minute rant against Trump. Like many others I initially thought he was a real character.

His 90-minute show was an absolute joy having the large audience, roaring with laughter. He easily attacks himself and had done his homework about Australia, giving Turnbull, Shorten and Barnaby Joyce all a serve. But his main target is ourselves and our addiction to social media. At different times during the show you could hear his targets being hit. It is probably best summed up by my friend Jenny, who sent me this text after the show: "I enjoyed the show very much. He really takes a pin to the balloon of self-righteous and shallow outrage that has been enabled and supported by social media (the medium being the message, I guess). Good on him for calling out bigotry, and in a clever and incisive way. No sauce needed on this pie!"

*The Children* by Lucy Kirkwood is very different from her previous play *Chimerica*. *The Children* has only three characters whereas *Chimerica* had a very large cast. *Chimerica* looked at America/China relations through the prism of the Tiananmen Square massacres whereas *The Children* looks at the effects of climate change and how it is affecting our planet and particularly our children. This is played out by three characters who worked at a nuclear plant before it is destroyed by a tsunami. Twenty years have passed and one of the characters catches up with the other couple who have been living off the land and slowly we learn over 24 hours about the past and how they will try to go back to the plant. Amazing performances from Sarah Peirse, Pamela Rabe and William Zappa and the direction of Sarah Goodes for this Sydney Theatre Company production helps this play of words and ideas seem easy while dealing with big ideas. One of my friends thought it was the best play she had ever seen while another writer friend thought it was trite. I argued back that being trite was the point. These scientists were living very ordinary lives but it was they who caused the problem and it is they who could possibly save the world for their children.

Sarah Goodes also directed *The Sugar House* at Belvoir written by Alana Valentine. Valentine has written *Parramatta Girls*, *Run Rabbit Run*, *Ladies Day* and the recent *Barbara and The Camp Dogs*, which she wrote with Ursula Yovich. Here they have collected a top drawer cast of Kris McQuade, Sacha Horler, Sheridan Harbridge as mother, daughter and grand-daughter with Josh McConville, Nikki Shiels and Lex Marinos making up the cast. *The Sugar House* refers to the sugar refinery, which is about to be refurbished as modern units and uses this change as a metaphor for the lives of this family over the years. I found the first act contained way too much as the writer tried to include too many sub-plots, but I loved the second act as it brought the different pieces into focus. Great performances all round but I felt the great Sacha Horler's role was underwritten. But not withstanding this it is well worth seeing.

Meanwhile, at the Wharf Theatre the Sydney Theatre Company is presenting *Still Point Turning: The Catherine McGregor Story* directed and written by Priscilla Jackman, based on interviews with Catherine McGregor. This is another triumph for the company. I have to admit not wanting to see the play as I have little time for Ms McGregor's political positions. Her recent reaction to the Safe Schools project was good when she announced that she had changed her position after discussions with a transgender member of the cast. But I cannot forgive her for the damage caused by her previous position on the program. While I strongly disagree with her politics I have to admit to having great admiration for what she has been through. She was a soldier who loved cricket and who realises after being happily married for many years that he (Malcolm) had to deal with

the gender dysphoria he was facing. The play opens when he is about to have gender reassignment surgery and the story of that journey to becoming Cate unfolds in this excellent production. I cannot even begin to imagine how difficult the life journey is for any transgender person. Heather Mitchell gives yet another extraordinary performance to the point that we really believed we were witnessing Catherine's story unfold. It is a clever production that caused my companion to ask me to change my mind about Ms McGregor. I learnt more about the transition of a transgender person but while my admiration has increased my feeling towards her remains the same.

The Sydney Dance Company has shown yet again just how amazing it is with great technique and strength. They display these abilities in *ab [intra]*, which translates as "from within". I sat in awe as I watched the company entrance me and the full house for 70 minutes to music from Nick Wales (a Federation connection, Jack Colwell assisted him) with lighting by Damien Cooper and choreographed by Rafael Bonachela. It was magic.

A reminder to book for the National Theatre (London) production of *The Curious Incident of The Dog in the Night-Time*, playing next month.

**Frank Barnes** is retired and feeling sad that when he sees *Blackie Blackie Brown* at Wharf 2 it will be the last show he sees in the Wharf's current incarnation as it is about to be refurbished