

Sky is the limit for a youthful sense of play and a magical dream

October 26, 2012

Reviewed by Cameron Woodhead



The House of Dreaming. Photo: Penny Stephens

Reviewer rating:

THE HOUSE OF DREAMING

★★★

Arena Theatre Company

MTC, until October 27

HOW HIGH THE SKY

★★★☆

Polyglot Theatre

Arts Centre, until October 28

THEATRE for children is something Australia does well, but it often isn't reviewed with any rigour as art.



A baby interacts with balloons during a performance of *How High the Sky*. Photo: Joseph Feil
 Generally, the critic takes a child along if one can be found, and churns out a bright description of what happened and the children's response to it. Standard practice is to end with some variation of: "Well, the kids seemed to love it."

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That approach seems especially inadequate with two featured performances of children's theatre at the Melbourne Festival. Both use innovative techniques to break new creative ground in the area. Both raise complex questions about audience, and even the purpose of theatre itself.

The first, Polyglot Theatre's *How High the Sky*, is a participatory visual theatre event for babies and parents. It's an intriguing idea, fraught with challenges. How do you make theatre for babies, given their limited cognitive and sensory ability? And how exactly were the artists going to prevent the show from descending into a hell-cave of squalling infants?

I roped my sister and 10-month-old niece into taking part while the rest of the family looked on. We needn't have worried. Polyglot has constructed an unusual, provocative and impossibly cute performance, packed with clever solutions to the practical obstacles it faces.

It begins with mothers and babies filing into a soft, dimly lit playpen, arranging themselves on the floor amid several abstract balloon structures. An electronic lullaby insinuates itself. The genius of David Franzke's sound design makes itself felt almost immediately. The playpen is miked, and as soon as a baby shrieks, the sound is picked up, modulated into something bearable, and looped into a reverberate echo that briefly becomes part of the ambient music.

Three performers (Penny Baron, Michelle Heaven, David Wells) enter and start to play with the balloons. The structures fuse and separate, whirling through the air like organic molecules or the distribution of stars in a galaxy. You can see in them what you like, although in context, the scene is strongly suggestive of embryonic development.

Balloons of all sizes soon crowd the stage as the physical theatre progresses, creating shadowy visions that take us from atmospheric heights to the bottom of the sea. To an adult onlooker, it's a beautiful and slightly spooky voyage into questions of life and its place in the universe, drawing inspiration from the interconnected patterns of the large and the small. Of the participants, the babies seemed much more relaxed about it all than the mothers. One scene had a baby boy kicking his legs wildly, as if willing them to work. Several infants gurgled happily as they played with the balloons, and at one point my niece grabbed and started chewing on a note dropped on the floor. (Good to see a bit of postmodern performance art creeping in there.)

Most of the joy in the production comes from observing individual variations in the unscripted interaction between baby and parent.

As visual theatre though, it has a couple of weaknesses. The lighting design is too faint and boring, especially initially, and you wish someone would throw more money at Anna Tregloan's design. It'd be worth it. This is a unique experience with potential to reach a larger audience.

NEXT up, it was my five-year-old nephew's turn to go adventuring through Arena Theatre's *The House of Dreaming*. It's a high-tech interactive maze,

based on the idea of an abandoned house that falls asleep and starts to dream.

Dressing up in a cape and hat as one of three figures - a king, a wizard and a rabbit - groups of three enter the house to find all manner of wonders: hidden passages, magic mirrors, upside-down rooms, photographs that move, Hogwart's-style; a woman who knows all the house's secrets, and a man with a magic box.

The most technically innovative part of the show is Matthew Gardiner's "oribotics", which fuse robotics and origami to create moving "dream flowers".

House of Dreaming doesn't have a strong enough narrative to fully engage adults, but Arena Theatre is vastly experienced and knows its audience better than I do. The installation's interactivity - its showcase of digital, multimedia and other novel technologies - clothes the skeletal story in wonder, and it does strike me as perfectly pitched to a five-year-old's attention span. And, yep, the kids seemed to love it.

Both works are eligible for The Age Critics Award for best new major Australian work premiering at this year's Melbourne Festival. The winner will be announced tonight.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/sky-is-the-limit-for-a-youthful-sense-of-play-and-a-magical-dream-20121025-287y4.html#ixzz2ANdJRCAu>