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REVIEW: The House of Dreaming

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Elio and Eva went into The House of Dreaming with their eyes wide open and came out 30 minutes later with wide-open eyes. They were two of the children who stood on the ceiling, climbed through the clock and sailed through the storm in Chris Kohn's indoor adventure made just for them.

Along their way, in the labyrinthine house built inside the ABC's studio in East Perth by Melbourne's Arena Theatre Company, they got to laugh, wonder, change colour and even get a little frightened. When they entered the house, they carried with them a little symbol - Elio's was a chess king and Eva's a rabbit, while the big kid with them (me) had a wizard's peaked hat. Throughout the house we came across glowing discs upon which we placed our symbols, setting in motion Halcyon MacLoud's story of an abandoned house and the man and woman who lived there.

As the story unfolded, we moved through the house; first to a goodnight-storied bedroom, then, on hands and knees, through the bedhead and down a tiny, secret passage to a map room, a clock room, a pantry (or, rather, three pantries - one right way up, one upside down and one on its side) a mysterious room where a magician told us of the wreck of the woman's ship in a storm and back, eventually, to the same bedroom in which we started. Except it wasn't.

We were guided by calls on old bakelite phones (Elio, a very modern boy, had trouble working out which end was which on the receiver), orobotic and video images, and light glowing through walls and doors. The kids' interest was captured as much by these signals, and by the different ways we moved from room to room, as it was by the story, which became secondary to the sensory experiences they were having. Certainly, when I listened to them telling their parents what they had seen and done after we emerged, it was those things, rather than the tale they had been told, that they recounted.

Kohn has assembled an impressive team of technicians to bring his house to life. Matthew Gardiner's orobotics (a combination of origami and robotics that respond to motion and touch) are startling features of Danielle Brustman's pop-up book design, and its lighting (by Richard Vabre) and Jethro Woodward's music and sound effects are of the high standard kids deserve.

Immersive installations are becoming a regular feature at festivals. Last year's Oruculos and Proximity were festival season highlights and La Marea drew thousands to Rokeby Road a fortnight ago. It's good to see the same experience being created for children, especially when it's as stimulating as this strange, dreaming house.

The House of Dreaming runs until Saturday at 10am-12.30pm and 4pm-6pm.