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MARLIN THEATRE REVIEW (SOUTHBANK THEATRE, MELBOURNE)

BY [RAYMOND GILL](#)

The set is the star of this children's production by Arena Theatre Company at the Melbourne Theatre Company's intimate Lawler studio . Coils of shipping rope in aquamarine colours cover the surfaces of what appears to be shipping salvage yard in Marg Horwell's evocative and functional set. A tired and tattered tarp conceals what looks like a small motor boat –and in the second half of the 65 minute play it's this old tinny with its dodgy engine that animates both the set and the story. Damien Millar's play is about Billy Grogan (Ashlea Pyke), a young girl from up north whose fisherman dad went looking for a marlin two years

ago and didn't return. Her mum has disappeared to find herself, so now Billy is living with her widower grandpa (Christopher Bunworth), and is at a new school run by an unsympathetic nun (Jacob Williams).

Billy's only fun is the solo bike ride to school and telling tall tales about how she and her dad like to go adventuring for marlin.

Pyke (an adult actor) delivers the kid's talent for fantasy and gift for the Queensland vernacular with a child-like over-enthusiasm mixed with pre-teen, eye-rolling whatever attitude. She speaks straight to the audience or banters with her affectionate but no-nonsense grandpa (nicely played straight down the line by Bunworth). Williams plays incidental roles, but for most of the play is the expert puppeteer operating the elusive, silvery marlin that dips in and out of the story.

Despite the comedy inherent in the script and played to in the performances, Christian Leavesley's direction emphasises Marlin's melancholy subject of a child refusing to accept a parent's death — a melancholia added to by Jethro Woodward's sound design and Wang Zheng-Ting's delicate music.

The trio of ten year olds I was with quietly chuckled at some of the funnier lines but became engrossed when Billy and grandpa finally rip the tarp off the old boat and set off to free a marlin tangled in some rope.

That's when everything that can go wrong, satisfyingly does go wrong — including some excellent man overboard action.

The production sings as the foam machine turns the entire set into a wild sea, Rachel Burke's lighting brings down the wrath of god from the skies, and Horwell's cleverly designed little boat rides up and down the swirling, sudsy waves. Billy, grandpa and the boat finally weather the storm as Billy faces reality and learns that her father might be lost, but will always be with her.