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Enjoyable approach to a marlin rescue mission

THEATRE

Marlin
By Damien Millar.
Arena Theatre Company
and MTC.
Southbank Theatre, The
Lawler, Melbourne,
September 26.

ESTABLISHED in the late 1960s as Children's Arena Theatre, Arena has been a significant player in Melbourne's theatre scene since Rosemary Myers took the reins 20 years ago. Myers sought to engage young audiences head-on. Her brand of theatre was specifically designed for screenagers. Tired old TIE (Theatre in Education) was replaced by Myers' trademark Anthro POP and led to the company's internationally successful multimedia trilogy: *Autopsy*, *Mass* and *Panacea*.

The theatre created by her successor Chris Kohn between 2007 and 2012 was comparatively lo-tech but thematically dark and radically imaginative. Kohn redefined what theatre for young people could be. For a start, that TYP tag was no longer a liability or, indeed, in any way limiting. Good theatre is good theatre, whether it's about school bullying or mental illness or murdering your lover.

Christian Leavesley is an interesting choice as successor to Kohn and Myers. *Marlin*, Leavesley's first major work as Arena artistic director, is an enjoyable and refined piece. From page to stage, the production values are exemplary. Sound and lighting design, puppetry, dramaturgy and acting are all first rate. Marg Horwell's set is a delightful

battlement of coloured nets and rope, with a boat smack in the middle.

Thematically, *Marlin* is unadventurous — as perhaps befits a piece intended for audiences as young as eight. It's an *Old Man and the Sea* yarn about Tommy Grogan and his granddaughter Billy. Instead of hunting a marlin, which Hemingway's old salt Santiago does, Tommy and Billy are on a quest to return one to the deep after it has been snagged in a net.

Billy (Ashlea Pyke) has lost her dad at sea and her grieving mother has abandoned her to go home to Burpengary. She's being cared for by her grandad Tommy (Chris Bunworth), who shows her an easy and believable forbearance.

When it comes to pets, Billy is pretty much jinxed. One after another, her pets have died in suspicious circumstances, from Exploding Budgie and Cactus Canary to, most recently, Ron Tortoise. The snagged marlin — a "silver-sworded warrior of the deep" — gives the Grogans an opportunity to reverse the trend. Deep Ship is the name of Tommy's tiny boat. And that's pretty much what Tommy and Billy find themselves in — without an outboard (or an emergency radio beacon) — after a night on the reef.

Pyke and Bunworth bring scads of personality to their respective roles; they're a joy to watch. And puppeteer Jacob Williams is wonderfully droll as the bearded Sister Michael.

CHRIS BOYD

Tickets: \$25. Bookings: (03) 8688 0800 or online. Duration: 70min, no interval. Until October 11.