

## theatre notes

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Tuesday, May 25, 2010

Review: *Moth*, *The Ugly One*, *Hole in the Wall*

As readers will know, last week Ms TN suffered a knock-out blow in her long-running war with the Dreaded Lurgy, putting her on the benches. There she has been grinding her teeth and annoying her neighbours, like the nameless anti-hero of *Notes From Underground*. In the interests of social amity, it's probably time I got my personae under control and started work again. So here, on tottering feet, we go.

If another person writes another op-ed complaining that Australian theatre is dying, beset by aesthetic crises and apathetic audiences, I will simply point them to Melbourne, May 2010, and have done with it. I can't remember a time when our theatre culture conspired so successfully to demonstrate that it's well and truly alive: and it's been happening at every level. At the MTC, *Richard III* is packing them out and *The Ugly One* has scheduled late performances; you can't get a ticket to *Moth* at the Malthouse for love nor money and *The Threepenny Opera*, in previews later this week, is officially sold out. Beyond the main stages, indie companies are posting "full" signs all over town.



What's going on? A lot of very interesting theatre, for one thing, boosted by the **Next Wave Festival**, which continues until the end of the month. And also a lot of word of mouth. Many shows are selling out without the benefit of a single review. So much for the much-vaunted power of crrrrritics! What counts for much more is the excited report of a friend or acquaintance: that is, the impact of the work itself. This also demonstrates very clearly the idiocy of the idea that the success of one aspect of the theatre culture comes at the expense of others. It suggests something altogether more interesting: that vitality breeds vitality, and that theatre companies ignore their interdependence with the rest of the culture at their own peril.

Out of all this richness, reports of which have reached even my subterranean ears, I've been able to see very little. What I did see gives some indication of the quality of work that is not only expected but is delivered in this city. Following are some notes on what I've seen:

**Moth**

At a distressingly young age, Declan Greene has carved out a reputation in Melbourne's independent scene with a **series of plays** demonstrating a black wit, iron nerve and a considerable lyrical gift. What's notable is the restlessness of his work: he's a playwright whose work is distinctive but never predictable. And he's learning fast. *Moth* represents yet another startling evolution: it was not at all what his previous work led me to expect, and yet is an absolutely logical progression.

It's a powerful examination of mental illness, especially in relation to young people. Greene's two 15-year-old protagonists are Claryssa (Sarah Ogden), a wiccan emo, and Sebastian (Dylan Young), all-round oddball, who are both rejects in the merciless pecking order of high school. They are compelling portrayals of adolescents - self-centred, mocking, vulnerable and funny - who are traumatically alienated from the social lives around them. A horrific, if horribly familiar, instance of bullying unlatches Sebastian's already uncertain sense of reality, and his sense of self splinters into delusion. He has an apocalyptic vision of St Sebastian, embodied as a moth he keeps in a jar, and sets off on a mission to find the saved. Meanwhile Claryssa, as traumatised by Sebastian by the bullying episode, sinks into paralysing depression and is unable to help her friend.

Perhaps the strongest aspect of this script is how unsentimentally and accurately it represents not only the speech and attitudes of teen subculture (I had a 15-year-old with me who affirmed its authenticity) but the subjective experience of mental breakdown. The story is told through enactments by Ogden and Young, shifting between times and different subjective states in ways which recall the narrative of the cult film *Donnie Darko*, and Greene exploits to the full his capacity to soar from vernacular speech into pure poetry.

Chris Kohn directs *Moth* on a stage bare of everything except what looks like three lengths of underfelt, cascading from backstage to the floor, that define three different theatrical areas. Kohn's direction is absolutely simple and absolutely lucid, directing so good it's almost invisible. Jonathan Oxlade's design, Rachel Burke's lighting and Jethro Woodward's music conspire to focus the action on stage to diamond precision. Ogden and Young are remarkable, giving passionate, minutely disciplined performances that wind up to a shattering climax. What begins as a comic picture of two teen misfits ends up as a piece of theatre with the catastrophic power of tragedy. The long, devastated silence that preceded the applause was its proper tribute.