

Theatre notes: Independent theatre reviews

Friday, June 24, 2011

Review: Moth, The Joy of Text

Last Wednesday, Lally Katz's *A Golem Story* and Robert Reid's *The Joy of Text* premiered at the Malthouse and the MTC. The same week, the Malthouse opened its remount of Declan Greene's 2010 hit, *Moth*. Meanwhile at the MTC, Joanna Murray-Smith's **The Gift** is running at the MTC's Sumner Theatre, and tonight Ian Wilding's new play *The Water Carriers* opens at the Lawler Studio. At the moment, Melbourne's main stage theatres are exclusively devoted to new Australian work.



Has this ever happened before? If it has, I missed it. For this reason, and not without a certain astonishment, it's worth sticking a small, patriotic and ironically tasteful flag in June 2011 and admiring the view from the hill. Well done, MTC and Malthouse: despite all the commercial wisdoms that mitigate against producing contemporary Australian plays, together you've curated a mini-showcase of new writing, flung a spotlight on it, and put it out there.

Last week's openings are noteworthy: they're all well worth seeing, and they're all very different from one another. (Discussion of *A Golem Story* will follow in a separate post, because it started going on, and on...) Katz, Reid and Greene all grew up in Melbourne's independent theatre scene: Katz developed most of her early work with Chris Kohn and Stuck Pigs Squealing, while Reid had, and Greene has, their own companies, respectively Theatre in Decay and Sisters Grimm.

It's a point worth noting: these playwrights learned how to do it just as Shakespeare did, by writing plays, finding collaborators and putting them on. They put them on in carparks (and sometimes in cars), in tiny alternative venues, under the umbrella perhaps of institutions such as Theatre Works or the Melbourne Fringe or the Store Room, sometimes with money, often with no funding at all. They didn't ask permission, and they created audiences.

Moth, a co-production by Malthouse and Arena Theatre, is unquestionably the pick of the bunch. This is exquisite theatre: in my view one of the most accomplished new plays of the past few years,

here given a superbly restrained and devastatingly powerful production by Chris Kohn. This is a remount of last year's sell-out production, and **what I said the first time round still holds**: it's a play notable for its needle-sharp accuracy, its sure theatricality and its unforgiving emotional honesty.

Its conceit - a retelling by two friends, Claryssa (Sarah Ogden) and Sebastian (Thomas Conroy) of a traumatic incidence of schoolyard persecution and subsequent breakdown - is both ingenious and cleverly maintained, but its heart-cracking power exists in our understanding that this retelling is impossible: reality, it tells us, is different from what we hope.

As enactment, *Moth* has a sense of the un-illusioned redemption Allen Ginsberg grasps in **Kaddish**, his great poem of mourning for his mentally ill mother Naomi: "Work of the merciful Lord of poetry, / that causes the broken grass to be green, or the rock to break in grass - the Sun to be constant to Earth - sun of all sunflowers and days on bright iron bridges..." Suspended in the force of this impossible longing, the tragedy of madness - in all its horror, obscene comedy and abjection - opens as an unhealed wound. The truth of that unhealedness is the only redemption there is: it's the ferocity of the desire that things be otherwise that most tellingly reveals its pain.

This production demonstrates the value of remounting work. The premiere was hugely impressive: this time round, with a new cast member replacing Dylan Young, I was struck by the beautiful detailing of Ogden and Conroy's performances: every moment thought through and articulated, every gesture accurate. Each aspect of the design - Jethro Woodward's soundscape, Jonathan Oxlade's set, Rachel Burke's lighting - unobtrusively strokes in texture and contrast. I don't remember the script well enough to know how it's changed, but its fragmentations seemed sharper to me, the comedy more telling, the action more lucid. Small, but perfectly formed.



The Joy of Text, on at the Fairfax, is another kettle of sardines altogether. Robert Reid has clearly considered a major problem of contemporary art: how do you deal with complex ideas and simultaneously find a wide audience? "It is not enough to simply preach to the converted," he says in a program note. "If it is not kept open and accessible to us all, cultural discussion risks becoming obsessively self-referential and irrelevant to all but a narrow band of self-elected cultural elites." Quite.

Reid's solution is to take a popular generic form and remodel it to his own ends: in this case, farce. *The Joy of Text* is a satire on language and authority, and examines how language, far from being a vehicle for truth, creates its own destabilising realities. Here traditional reason and authority grapple with irrationality and inauthenticity. It's no accident that it's set in a school, where authority and anarchy regularly meet and attempt to discipline each other: nor that the play's title spins off a famous 1970s sex manual.

From its opening scene, in which the acting head master Steve (Peter Houghton) and English teacher Diane (Louise Silverson) have an argument about syntax, it's clear that we are in a parallel reality close to, but by no means identical with, our own. For one thing, people speak in perfect sentences, like Samuel Johnson. I've never been a teacher, but somehow I doubt that most of the staff-room conversation concerns itself with the finer points of grammar, debating favourite authorities. They're mighty creaky ones too - Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926) and Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* (1918) - which place the arguing teachers in a fustian, outmoded matrix of authority, of certainty shored up by textual jurisdiction about correct modes of behaviour.

This mode of authority meets its nemesis in the persons of a bright student, Danny (James Bell), and an ambitious young teacher, Ami (Helen Christinson), both of whom represent different models of inauthenticity. Danny appears first in an argument with Ami, where he is heatedly accusing her of humiliating him in front of the class. Asked to deliver an essay on satire, his assignment consists of a copy-and-paste of the Wikipedia entry on Jonathan Swift. Ami is not impressed by his argument that his essay is a performance of satire itself ("We are all Lilliputians!") and Danny retires, hurt and vengeful.

Meanwhile, Ami's identity is called into question when Diane decides to put *The Illusion of Consent* - a book written by a 16-year-old schoolgirl which details her alleged affair with a teacher - on the school syllabus. Ami is fiercely against it, claiming that the book is a fiction by a girl seeking attention, and pointing out that the publication of the book led to the teacher's suicide. When Steve casually gives the book to Danny to read, Danny (in an unlikely feat of textual scholarship) deduces that the book's author is Ami herself. And then, pursuing his performative method of learning, he re-enacts scenes from the book with various teachers, spreading chaos and confusion.

Farce, the most self-conscious of theatrical modes, is in fact the perfect form for a satire of language - it is all about confused identity, self-destructing authority and sexual shenanigans. Joe Orton took farce to a logical conclusion, becoming, as the critic CW Bigsby said, a "crucial embodiment of the post modernist impulse": "by means of farce he gives expression to the conviction of a dislocated self, of a reified experience, of a brittle and contingent language". Here Reid takes that post modernist impulse and makes it explicit.

Marx's famous dictum about history repeating itself, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce", is not wholly inappropriate here: the first time the teacher shoots himself, the second time the

teachers, as a result of the first event, find themselves lost in a maze of bureaucracy, definitions of "appropriate behaviour" and uncertainty.

Reid's play is an often brilliant, and very funny, enactment of all these ideas: the first act steps through a minefield of uncertainty with a deft theatrical wit. The second act, in which all these energies reach their various climaxes, collides with an impulse hostile to the suspensions of farce and somehow collapses under its own weight.

Behind this is a desire that these characters be relatable, that we identify with them and feel sympathy with them: a laudable desire for human emotion to emerge from these alienating language games. Characters in farce provoke interest and hilarity for different reasons: because they are absurd, because the unremitting logic of their behaviour inexorably leads them into chaos. Act Two changes gear into something more akin to naturalism (with the odd reference to tragedy), and Reid hasn't quite managed the marriage of these opposing impulses in his text or, I suspect, in his ideas. It feels grafted in, rather than an evolution from the premises of the first act.

For all that, it's a very enjoyable production. Aidan Fennessy's direction straddles, somewhat uncomfortably, the contradictions of the text, approaching it primarily as farce; the actors deal with the stage business very well, but then are left with the difficulty of creating empathic characters out of these brittle theatrical constructions. Houghton as the morose acting head master, both panic stricken by his temporary authority and longing for its status, manages this best of all the cast, although I liked Louise Siverson's astringent Diane. And Andrew Bailey's multilevel institutional set places the action gloriously in a mundane, utterly recognisable present which, fascinatingly, works best of all in the dislocations of the first act.

Pictures: top: Sarah Ogden and Dylan Young in *Moth*; bottom, James Bell and Peter Houghton in *Joy of Text*. Photo: Jeff Busby

***Moth*, by Declan Greene, directed by Chris Kohn. Designed by Jonathan Oxlade, lighting design by Rachel Burke, video design by Domenico Bartolo, composition and sound design Jethro Woodward. With Thomas Conroy and Sarah Ogden. Malthouse Theatre and Arena Theatre Company, Beckett Theatre at the Malthouse, until June 25.**

***The Joy of Text* by Robert Reid, directed by Aidan Fennessy. Sets and costumes by Andrew Bailey, lighting design by Matt Scott, composition by David Franzke. With James Bell, Helen Christinson, Peter Houghton and Louise Siverson. Melbourne Theatre Company @ the Fairfax Studio, until July 23.**