

## [Review: Another Lament, Starchaser, CIRCA](#)

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Over the past couple of years, Chamber Made Opera, under the direction of David Young, has been investigating domestic space as a means for creating contemporary opera, quite literally producing operas in people's houses. The results have often been stunning: Daniel Schlusser's [Ophelia Doesn't Live Here Any More](#), or Madeleine Flynn and Tim Humphrey's beautifully situated [Dwelling Structure](#). I missed *Another Lament* on its first outing, when it was performed in a house in Malvern, but fortunately for me, Malthouse Theatre remounted it.



*Another Lament* at Malthouse Theatre

*Another Lament* is a collaboration with Rawcus, a company which works with performers with disabilities, that draws on the songs of Purcell. Emily Barrie's set recreates in astonishing detail a wood-panelled Malvern house, complete with all



its chilly Edwardian formality: there's sliding doors that open on a huge hallway, a piano, a huge chocolate cake on an occasional table surrounded by china cups and saucers. There are even sofas in the auditorium, to reinforce the illusion of being in a house.

Director Kate Sulan uses physical performance and the crafty articulations of Jethro Woodward's sound design to create a series of tableaux that manifest something like the repressed subconscious memories and desires of the house. The performance centres on the singer and double bass player Ida Duelund Hansen, who is riveting from the moment she opens her mouth. Baroque music has often been used as a means of illuminating the quotidian - I'm thinking here of Ranters' devastatingly elegant [Holiday](#), or even Pina Bausch's *Café Müller*. The purity of its lyricism works every time to generate a poignancy that seems to flower from the very centre of the mundane, rather than as decoration.

Here we see fragmented narratives of alienation, expectation, disappointment, murderous resentment: someone constantly knocks on the door, but no one lets him in; performers shiver in the chill of the hallway, or regard each other distantly on a couch, or fall stricken to the ground. The piano is never played; the huge, tempting chocolate cake is never touched. Within this frozen emotional thwartedness the pure lyrics of Purcell, accompanied by the minimal pluckings and percussion of a double bass, exist like hauntings, the expression of hidden longings and sadnesses. Beautiful and potent, and for all the material comforts of the middle class home that it recreates, very bleak.

Last Saturday afternoon, I found myself in the Fairfax Studio with a bunch of children, waiting for Arena Theatre's production of Lally Katz's **Starchaser**. The auditorium rustled with an anticipation that reminded me why I keep coming to the theatre. I still feel it every time the lights go down before a show, before even the most disappointing performance: *Something is about to happen. It's going to happen now, right in front of me*, a sense that the doors of possibility are about to open. Maybe there's something childish about it, but some of my most grown up experiences have begun this way.



There seems to have been some confusion about the recommended age group for *Starchaser*. The teacher's notes suggest it's for 4-7 year olds, while the Arts Centre recommends 8-12. The distinction is crucial, as both age groups have quite different demands and capacities, and I'd say it's definitely the latter. In the children's book trade, 8-12 is considered particularly tricky to write for: well past picture books, but not quite young adult. But the clue to writing for young people of any age is not to patronise them: young people might not have the experience to frame their perceptions, but it doesn't mean that experience is any less profound or complex or painful. *Starchaser's* mixture of absurd fairytale and emotional truthfulness hits the mark with beautiful accuracy.

The play is basically Lally Katz meets (or collides with) Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. It begins with Catta (Anne Louise Sarkis) celebrating her thirteenth birthday, which is the saddest day of her life. Her parents have been killed, and she is refusing to cry because it would mean that they really are dead. She makes a wish on her birthday cake, and her toy lion comes to life and tells her that she can save them: she is a starchaser, and if she travels across the cosmos and saves a dying star, she can change what has happened. Her bed turns into a space ship (think steampunk Playschool) and she travels from planet to planet, meeting a series of different characters.

*Starchaser* seems like the other side of the story that's told in [Return to Earth](#), which was performed late last year for the Melbourne Theatre Company, and which recounts the effects of traumatic alienation. Yet Arena's version, for all its nonsensical characters and playfulness, packs the emotional punch that the production of *Return to Earth* so signally missed.

The various encounters are consciously absurd, inviting the audience to enjoy their artifice. The top flight design team - Jonathan Oxlade on set design, Jethro Woodard on sound and Richard Vabre on lighting - together manifest the poetic of Katz's fantastic transitions, and the cast generates some glorious clowning that balances the pathos and comedy of the narrative. I thought there were a couple of minor longueurs when the narrative could have been shaved a little, but for the most part it held its audience enthralled.



What holds it all together is the poetic freedom of Katz's writing and, most importantly of all, the lucidity of its emotional metaphor. This is a story about learning how to deal with trauma: Catta's refusal to face her parent's deaths, and her retreat to the past, means that she misses the present altogether. It's a simple fable, and what counts in such stories is emotional clarity. It's delivered here with no sense of weight: Christian Leavesley's delightful production scrupulously observes the feeling in the text, without bludgeoning its audience. I was surprised to find myself wiping away tears at the end. Luckily, I wasn't alone.





*CIRCA*. Photo: Justin Nicholas

**CIRCA** at Malthouse Theatre has been a very popular show, and for good reason: the performers are extraordinary. It's a series of acts which edge acrobatics towards contemporary dance and theatre. As in much contemporary circus, there are the familiar circus acts - the hula hoop (a witty highlight), the trapeze, the contortionist, even some cockney body percussion, here given a theatrical spin. The costumes are absolutely plain, the stage and lighting minimal and bare: *CIRCA* focuses almost severely on the capacities of the human body. And these bodies are pure, electric spectacle.

However, it falls short as theatre or even as dance, both of which are artforms which are about more than the indrawn breath of amazement. Over the years I've seen several shows that successfully bridge circus and theatre. Albury family act Acrobat's **Propaganda**, Teatro Sunil's lyrical **Donka: A Letter to Chekhov**, or, more recently, James Thiérree's **Raoul**, show how circus can use the familiar tropes and lift them towards the making of theatrical meaning. *CIRCA* falls between several stools: it's not quite dance, although it reaches towards it, and it's not quite theatre, although sometimes it almost looks like it.

Director Yaron Lifschitz has paid careful attention to each act, but the show's structure as a whole seems loose and baggy, which created a few moments where my attention wandered. The crude sound design - overloud recorded music with, until the audience started clapping between the acts, some brutal transitional silences - reinforces this sense: one act stopped, another began, with little sense of attention to what happened in between, or to how each act built cumulatively towards making a whole work. There are moments in some of the ensemble acts which arrestingly approach the power of dance, but this sense is undermined by a focus on acrobatic feat rather than expressiveness. For me it remained a promising idea, not quite realised.

***Another Lament*, with music by Henry Purcell, directed by Kate Sulan, performed by Rawcus. Design Emily Barrie, Sound design by Jethro Woodward, lighting design by Richard Vabre. Composition and musical performance, Ida Duelund Hansen (Voice, Double Bass). Opera XS, Chamber**



**Made Opera, Rawcus. Beckett Theatre, until June 11.**

***Starchaser* by Lally Katz, directed by Christian Leavesley. Design by Jonathan Oxlade, lighting by Richard Vabre, sound design by Jethro Woodward, With Jessica Clarke, Anne-Louise Sarks, Phil McInnes and Jamieson Caldwell. Aren Theatre and Arts Centre Melbourne, Fairfax Theatre. Closed.**

***CIRCA*, created by Yaron Lifschitz and the Circa Ensemble, directed by Yaron Lifschitz. With Nathan Boyle, Jessica Connell, Daniel Crisp, Jarred Dewey, Todd Kilby, Alice Muntz and Brittannie Portelli. Malthouse Theatre and Circa, Merlyn Theatre. Closed.**