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Review: DNA, TheatreiNQ (QLD)

A play with many layers, delivered with punch by a talented young cast.



Image: Chrissy Maguire.

What would you do if you were still at school and an incident of bullying occurred in which someone died? This is the question that is posed in *DNA*, the latest production from Townsville's TheatreiNQ.

This dark contemporary play – laced with humour – examines what happens when a group of teenagers accidentally kill one of their classmates, and try to cover it up. Ultimately, it is quite disturbing on many levels and dependent on background and upbringing; successive generations will probably have a different response to the themes of fear, responsibility, bullying and how this reflects on social structures (or lack of them).

Artistic director Terri Brabon attacks every piece she does with verve and individuality, and the sheer diversity of style and presentation of each work is astounding. I have seen this theatre company develop over the past eight years and her innate instincts and sense of theatre is impeccable. While each production has an individual shape, each receives the benefit of her creativity, taste and discipline.


This time her efforts are devoted to something that is very close to The Bridge Project, an innovative TheatreiNQ training program which Brabon devised some years ago. This program fosters Townsville's young theatre talent by preparing them for life in the industry by providing them with a level of training and performance that teaches them skills and the essential discipline that the profession requires. Usually, these young performers take part in the array of productions throughout the year which sees Brabon combine professional actors with community actors and trainees. This production, however, is entirely composed of trainee actors.

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The physical and vocal work, technical expertise, stagecraft and of course the response to Brabon's positive direction in this play was of a standard that made it difficult to believe that these were indeed performers in training. Over the past few years, alumni of this training program have successfully won places in NIDA and WAAPA.

Now known primarily as the co-writer of *Matilda the Musical*, playwright Dennis Kelly wrote *DNA* in 2007 for Britain's National Youth Theatre, and the play provided Brabon with a fine example of a current way to engage actors and audience as well as provide a biting commentary on contemporary teenage life.

As with all TheatreiNQ productions, the production moved at an exhausting – and exhaustive – pace. The first entrance of the cast saw them with heads bowed in reverence to the 'Almighty Mobile Phone', ironically a source of communication which cuts off all other forms of communication. Brabon cleverly uses the mobile phone as a theatrical device.

It is essentially an ensemble piece highlighted with individual performances.

In the pivotal role of the garrulous Leah, Elyse Phelan was particularly outstanding. This fine young performer showed stage presence, a sense of comic timing, stage instincts and ability way beyond her years.

In contrast, Jacob McCarthy's gave an almost chilling performance as the silent, clever, quasi-sociopath who plans the play's elaborate lies.

Rita Neale gave a commanding performance as the bully Joanne, while Faduma Ali and Kelly Pronk showed considerable development in their respective roles. In the difficult role of Brian (the only character who has a really emotional response to the incident), Byron Howells managed to sustain the histrionics effectively.

Laura Pastega, Victoria Fowler and Emma Benson all gave strong supporting performances with interesting human touches.

This was a perfect play choice for this training program, and a fine example of the investment TheatreiNQ is making in the future of theatre.

Rating: 4 stars ★★★★★

[DNA \(http://www.theatreinq.com/html/productions/past-productions/2019/2019-DNA.html\)](http://www.theatreinq.com/html/productions/past-productions/2019/2019-DNA.html)

By Dennis Kelly

A TheatreiNQ production

Directed by Terri Brabon

Stage Manager and Lighting Design: Heath Roberts

Assistant Stage Manager: Xara Holmes

Set Design and Construction: Brendan O'Connor

Costumes: Kathy Brabon

Cast: Faduma Ali, Kelly Pronk, Elyse Phelan, Jacob McCarthy, Rita Neale, Laura Pastega (alt Gemma Shield), Victoria Fowler (alt. Megan Heferen), Harlee Timms, Emma Benson, Byron Howells and Jano Garcia.

8-18 May 2019

TheatreiNQ, 50 Allen Street, South Townsville, QLD

Tickets \$20-\$30

5 Defunding the sector's R&D arm sounds a warning note for the future

TREVOR KEELING

Saturday 11 May, 2019

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trevor Keeling has been involved in the arts and creative industries for 40 years in Australia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. He has been an actor, theatre director, journalist and critic, publisher, broadcaster, music festival director, event manager and arts administrator.

Since coming to Australia in 1991, he appeared in numerous productions in Adelaide, and was Festival Director of the Glenelg Jazz Festival for six years. He was General Manager of Dancenorth in Townsville (2005-2006 and 2011-2014) and for three years was CEO of Mirndiyan Gunana Aboriginal Corporation, which included managing