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Theatre review: Chewing Gum Dreams, Clubhouse Theatre, Townsville

A solo show that traverses the life of a black teenager teetering on the edge of adulthood.

8 Nov 2023

Trevor Keeling



THEATRE

Faduma Ali as Tracey Gordon in 'Chewing Gum Dreams'. Photo: Sonia Warrell.

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This is a production that achieves on so many levels. While the play itself has a story to tell, the behind-the-scenes tales are perhaps even more interesting.

We have what can only be described as a triumphant performance by a young actor who is a recent immigrant from Somalia, but *Chewing Gum Dreams* also speaks to the partnership with a regionally-based theatre and the results of its remarkable training program.

Faduma Ali was a reserved young teenager when she first started getting involved in Townsville's TheatreINQ in 2015. She appeared in numerous productions in small roles and auditioned for the company's Bridge Project, a model that develops emerging professionals and prepares regional talent for highly competitive tertiary education. After completing her studies at QUT (Queensland University of Technology), she returned to Townsville to appear in a one-person show that was modelled specifically for her.



Directing with infinite sensitivity and accustomed skill, Terri Brabon has brought a multilayered performance out of Ali as Tracey Gordon, a 14-year-old black schoolgirl in urban Britain, in a play that was created in 2012 by actor/playwright Michaela Coel. A non-stop hour-long monologue, *Chewing Gum Dreams* began as a drama school graduation project and went on to be staged in London's West End and at the National Theatre before being adapted into an award-winning TV sitcom *Chewing Gum* (2015-2017).

Ali carries us through this hour-long journey and proves the point that it takes hard work and dedication to be successful in this craft. It is not simply a case of having talent or appearing on a TV show to achieve instant gratification and fleeting fame. This is what Brabon drums into all her students who go through the Bridge Project, and Ali is a classic example of this.

Chewing Gum Dreams may be irreverent and challenging, but it also has a sense of mischief as we explore the life of this teenager teetering on the brink of adulthood. For her it is not the case of a single dramatic incident that causes her to "grow up", but a series of crazy and ordinary things that combine to explore themes of racism, classism, sex, teenage pregnancy and sexual assault, among many others.

We may be at Tracey's local bus stop, her classroom, her bedroom or even taking a trip to the chemist for the morning-after pill, but she has to navigate these issues with no discernible moral compass, belief system or sense of self. How does she fit into the world? In one of the play's most poignant and telling moments, she says, 'I ain't smart enough to be someone - I'm just smart enough to know I'm no one.'

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But who is this girl? She may be vulnerable. She may be developing into a woman, but in her world it is easy to tease and be nonchalantly cruel. She may be streetwise, but she is also naïve, and in her world foul language is the normal way of speaking and sex has no mystique – it is simply a bodily function.

With these challenges, Ali delivers a powerhouse performance. An engaging and unusual performer, she conveys Tracey's confusion and, while we may laugh at (or with) some of her naivety, ultimately there is insight into her life as she reels unsuspectingly from childhood into adulthood.

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This is far more than simply an acting accomplishment for Ali. It is a production that confirms Brabon and TheatreiNQ's long-term investment in the acting craft, the individual actor and the wider industry.

***Chewing Gum Dreams* by Micaela Coel**

A TheatreiNQ production

Directed by Terri Brabon

Set/Tour Manager/Construction: Brendan O'Connor

Sound Design/Costume: Terri Brabon

Lighting/Stage Manager: Daniel Lobley

Cast: Faduma Ali

Tickets: \$32- \$40

***Chewing Gum Dreams* will be performed at Clubhouse Theatre in Townsville until 11 November before touring to JUTE Theatre, Bulmba-Ja Arts Centre in Cairns 15-18 November and Yeppoon Little Theatre on 22 November and Perseverance Street Theatre Company in Gympie on 24-25 November.**



Trevor Keeling

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 the world-renowned Indigenous Mornington Island Dancers. He has worked in urban, regional and remote environments in Australia and has a particular focus on regional arts and the connection to community.