

WHEN THE RAIN STOPS FALLING – A REVIEW by Glyn Davies

***When The Rain Stops Falling* – a play written by Andrew Bovell and performed by THEATREiNQ, 3-4 August 2012 at JUTE Theatre, Centre of Contemporary Arts, Abbott St, Cairns**

“Absolutely brilliant” are the words most apposite for the remarkable performance of this remarkable play that brought the JUTE audience to its feet with a standing ovation on a clear moonlit night in Cairns last Friday. Not a drop of rain in sight.

Andrew Bovell scarcely needs an introduction, having firmly established himself in both theatre and film as the successful writer of *Strictly Ballroom* and *Lantana* (for the cinema) and (among his other plays) *Holy Day*, performed at the Rondo in 2006. In some circles, Bovell is seen as the natural inheritor of David Williamson as chief chronicler in theatre and film of the Australian ethos. Be that as it may, this play has achieved an international reputation, having been performed on both sides of the Atlantic and many times in Australia by our major state theatre companies. To see it done here in Cairns and done so well by a North Queensland theatre company is an unexpected privilege.

When The Rain Stops Falling spans four generations and two continents, moving from a cramped 1950s London flat to the windswept Coorong in South Australia and right into the heart of Australia at Uluru, to end in Alice Springs in the year 2039. Even there, the rain continues to fall. Over the best part of a century, climate change has wrought near disaster everywhere. Fish are thought to be extinct, and a relentlessly dismal outcome seems to pervade all human endeavour. The Victorian critic John Ruskin coined the term, “pathetic fallacy”, used in drama when human emotions and acts seem to be echoed in Nature — as when, for instance, King Lear’s incipient madness is echoed in the storm raging all round him on the “blasted heath”. In this play, the incessant rain, a portent of ecological disturbance, is the echo produced by the betrayals, and grossly inhumane acts of some of its central characters. Seven people across the generations spanning the years 1959 – 2039 confront the mysteries of their past, seeking to hide, understand or finally explain recurring patterns of loss and abandonment, secrecy and shame. In the end – but only after all that time – there is resolution and redemption.

In some ways, the play has its own echoes, of *Lear*, for instance as I have just indicated, but also of Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts* in which the sins of the father echo down the generations to follow. Ibsen presents his story in the naturalistic theatrical mode that he pioneered in the early years of the last century. The past is revealed slowly, as layers of pretence are peeled away like the skin of an onion. The fourth wall convention is solidly adhered to, and the audience become onlookers rather than participants in the drama.

Bovell takes a very different approach, using, for instance, the *verfremdung* (or *alienation*) effects of Brechtian Epic Theatre. His characters directly address the audience at times; older and younger versions of the same characters enter the same room, even though they belong in different time frames; the stage can represent, without scene changes, a great variety of locations – the windswept sands of the Coorong, the dizzy heights of Uluru and the same poky London flat in 1959 and 1988. Leitmotifs abound — fish soup, family sayings about the rain in Bangladesh, repeated dialogue and repeated events such as cleaning and repainting — these underscore the nature vs. nurture theme of the play and show how parents remain with their children even after the former have passed on. Music composed by Kerry Muzzey accompanies the action, as in a film, and helps guide the emotional responses of the audience. None of this is naturalistic – and yet the overall effect is one of

heightened significance. Theatre, as Director Terri Brabon claims, can manage such wizardry more easily than any other narrative medium.

Given such a complex script, a lesser company than THEATREiNQ might well have produced a puzzled if not bewildered audience response. That was never the case. Their team work is superb, two of the actors doubling roles very convincingly. Brendan O’Connor’s set is simple, allowing completely fluid movement between the various locales of the script, while his lighting plot is equally effective. Director, Terri Brabon has a firm grasp of the shifting time frames, the recurring themes, and the need to position actors in such a way as to underscore moments of pathos and passion.

To have done this whilst also taking on the role of Elizabeth Law (the younger) is evidence of extraordinary ability. Elizabeth is one of the two women (the other is Gabrielle York) around whom the play revolves. Both appear in the play as their younger and older selves. Terri’s younger Elizabeth runs the gamut of emotions from tenderness towards her husband, Henry, to downright revulsion. A big ask, but Terri brings it off with panache. The elder Elizabeth is much less sympathetic. Withdrawn and distraught, Beth Honeycombe plays this role with ram-rod stiffness coupled with a clipped English accent that is chilling to listen to. (Occasionally, though, it is too clipped for clarity). The younger Gabrielle York, mentioned above, is a casual Aussie waitress when we first meet her, serving in a tourist roadhouse on the Coorong. She is innocent and child-like, but troubled by events in her life that she cannot understand. When she meets Elizabeth and Henry’s English son, Gabriel, she is taken by his foreignness, and his obvious sincerity, yet hesitates to marry him and go off to the big smoke, knowing that it will lead nowhere. Madeleine Dyer captures these qualities well in an endearing performance, while Daniel Mulvihill as Gabriel is the perfect foil for his mother and his future wife in two very different expressions of his tormented personality. Daniel also appears later as Andrew, the youngest and most assured member of the family, the one who brings redemption.

Lisa Edmond as the older Gabrielle has a much less attractive personality than her younger self. She has made a mistake in returning to the Coorong after her first marriage ended tragically. She has married Joe Ryan out of a need for companionship and security. Lisa’s mood swings, her distress and her blinding cruelty towards her second husband make her role one of unrelieved gloom. Lisa plays it very well. We may not like her, but we do understand. Her husband, Joe, is a very different kettle of fish. (Sorry, didn’t mean to raise that topic again!). Joe is your average decent bloke, an outsider to the family, an in-law. Yet, he too has to bear some of the brunt of the sins of the father. Brian Edmond plays Joe as a decent, sympathetic husband whilst also managing to convey a sense of bewildered despair.

The last word must go to the virtuoso performance of Brendan O’Connor as Henry Law and as his grandson Gabriel York. We’ve seen Brendan before at JUTE in *Summaris* and earlier in *Grace*. He is a remarkably versatile actor. He engages the audience immediately the play begins with his opening monologue about fish falling from the sky, his estranged son coming to see him and his father’s weird prophecy about the ending of the world. He introduces many of the leitmotifs of the play. And soon after, he reprises them as his grandfather of eighty years earlier, with a vastly different personality and accent. I could have watched Brendan in these two roles twice over and would have done so had it not been for a prior engagement on its second and final night in Cairns. Come to think of it, that sums up the entire production. You want to see it again – and again. That’s how good it is.

Glyn Davies
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