

STATE OF PLAY

Written by Craig Hugmore

B Sharp's recent launch of their 2007 season has once again given hope to theatregoers terrified of hearing the words 'David Williamson', 'star-studded cast' and 'revolve' used in the same sentence ever again. If you are keen to add to your experience of the artist-driven indie underbelly of theatre in Sydney read on!

A significant contributor to the alternative theatre scene, B Sharp's Downstairs Theatre Director Lyn Wallis has selected six new Australian plays, 1 Pulitzer Prize winner and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* to comprise their ninth season.

I asked Lyn what she considered made a great play?

"A great play for me is one that incorporates fascinating subject matter with a robust (muscular or inventive) form. Plays that explore a microcosm, which ultimately expands into something that is psychologically or philosophically huge are thrilling. I always look for playwrights that have a unique voice and make full use of the theatrical form".

And the obvious question, why program *Merchant* – the first Shakespeare ever included in a B Sharp season?

"Tanya Goldberg has been knocking this idea around for a while. It's a complex and difficult piece and her approach to it will be contemporary in the best sense of the word, i.e. not about fashion, but about the relevance of the play's ideas. If an artist responds really strongly to a work and has a fresh, interesting and personal take on it, it's hard to resist whether it's a classic or new work. Shakespeare is rarely seen in such an intimate setting, and I believe that this, together with the indie sensibility and Tanya's intelligence will make it a unique and 'must see' production".

Similarly, director Nicholas Papademetriou had a strong reaction to *Anna in the Tropics*, the first play in the season.

"My initial response was one that seems to be shared by most people who read the play - emotionally full, magical images, theatrical poetry and a simple story but full of rich images, themes and issues. Over and above everything else, however, it is so THEATRICAL. For me, the experience of the theatre is that it should be theatrical, even if it is a contemporary play. Otherwise, why not just see a movie?" asks Nicholas.

Set in 1929 in the steamy west coast of Florida, *Anna* deals with the human cost of industrialisation by spotlighting on a group of essentially uneducated Cuban-American workers in a cigar factory. An unstoppable chain of events is set in motion that forces the characters to re-examine their lives and their outlooks on the world when their new lector (who breaks up the day's monotony by reading books and poetry aloud), reads to them from Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

Nicholas discovered the play by searching theatre related websites and online newspapers, something he does often in the hope of finding plays that give voice to ethnic stories. He hit pay dirt with *Anna*, a Pulitzer Prize winning play written by a Cuban with a cast that were all from non-Anglo backgrounds.

"I doubt if there will be a show this year in Sydney, that will feature an entire cast of actors who are not Anglo", says Nicholas. "And I am talking more in theatre terms and not specific community companies or other forms. There have been at least 10 shows last year in Sydney that were either foreign texts or set in countries on non-Anglo origin that feature few or no actors of non-Anglo background. *Anna* has a hot cast and will be a really theatrical night in the theatre".

Geordie Brookman, director of *Tender* the second play in the season, says his initial response to Nicki Bloom's award winning first play was one of pure excitement. "Here was a play that was brave enough to play with form and style while still containing elements of razor sharp naturalism and incredibly well formed characters," says Geordie.

I asked Lyn, Nicholas and Geordie what they thought independent theatre offered its audiences that mainstream theatre doesn't. All agreed that without the independent theatre sector audiences would rarely, if ever, experience such diversity.

Lyn: If the indie scene disappeared, we'd suddenly know what it was like to have to eat the theatrical equivalent of 'meat and three veg' every day with no relief!

Nicholas: Indeed, *Anna* was not picked by any main company in Australia despite its huge success in major cities around the world and its prize winning kudos.

Geordie: Indie theatre gives audiences the chance to see work that they normally wouldn't and the excitement of watching artists operating right at the edge, flying by the seat of their financial pants, which oddly enough often brings out the best work! The B Sharp season is a great example, the calibre of artists involved is equal to many main stage companies and the season also includes some of the best new Australian and international plays going around.

Final thoughts on the current state of independent theatre in Sydney and around the country? Hopes for the future of indie theatre in Oz?

Geordie: I think it is relatively healthy although it would be good to see more opportunities for not only artists from the independent scene to cross over to the main stage but the work itself as well.

My central hope for the Australian indie scene as a whole is to see the lack of crossover between states improve. Again, providing funding incentives for independent work to tour is the best way to do this. Australia lacks a strong second tier touring network which means that work often dies after a single short season. Initiatives like Critical Stages and companies like Performing Lines are keeping the dream alive.

I think the next big thing for Sydney is to develop a viable fringe festival following Melbourne's example of starting small and then growing it to the point where it can become independent of the Sydney Festival. A strong Sydney Fringe Festival would mean the creation of a fringe festival network in Australia where it would be possible for small companies to take work from Brisbane to Melbourne to Sydney to Adelaide on a continuous circuit.

Nicholas: Sadly the irony of indie theatre is that it manages to come up with amazing results despite working - for the most part - with no or little funding or support. Take *Anna* for example, the B Sharp input is so supportive, as is that of some generous sponsors, but basically we are putting on a show that will be high enough standard to stand comparison next to any major state company production, yet we will have been compelled to do it with a couple of thousand dollars.

So my hope for indie theatre is that it will be recognised in a major way by both the public and government sectors and we can all stop working for nothing! Ideally, a fully funded independent theatre venue (note: NOT COMPANY) would be the ideal - a complex where several different size theatres are available for independent theatre groups to present works but with assistance.

Lyn: The indie scene is experiencing its strongest mix of experienced and developing artists ever. Great actors etc. who would normally never work the indie scene are doing it this year because the material they have to work with is so strong. It's revitalising for senior artists and a great learning experience for recent graduates etc. It's providing the sorts of opportunities afforded by the regional circuit of the eighties and nineties.

My one hope, my big wish, is for the Theatre Santa to bring the scene some money. It's at its height creatively, but I predict that it will start to wane if there isn't some significant financial investment in the sector. It's not only vital for these artists, but for the future of the industry.

***Anna in the Tropics* (THEATRONgroup) 19 April to 13 May**

***Tender (Yes Now Yes)* 16 May to 3 June**
Downstairs at Belvoir St. Theatre
www.belvoir.com.au