

Radiance: A Review

By Matthew Clifford

In 1991, when Rhoda Roberts and Lydia Miller went looking for a playwright to help redefine the role of Aboriginal women in theatre, they sought out the well-renowned non-indigenous playwright Louis Nowra. They asked for a theatrical effort that would showcase the emotional and intellectual depth of Aboriginal women and stand in stark contrast from the racial profiling of Aboriginals in theatre as drunkards or victims of abuse. Now, almost 25 years later, Leah Purcell's revival of Belvoir's original *Radiance* is an elegant, moving, and striking effort that unites by not just showcasing Indigenous issues, but by exposing the pain and struggles of the human experience; in particular the way we deal with the ghosts from our past.

Through the story of three distant half-sisters returning to their family home for their mother's funeral, the play explores the effect of a fraught upbringing on one's identity. Mae (Shari Sebbens) is a sullen figure blinded by resentment and insecurity, whose anger stems from being left alone to tend to her difficult and dying mother. Cressy (Leah Purcell) is a successful Opera singer who has moved to London as a coping mechanism, whilst Nona (Miranda Tapsell) is a quixotic, sexualised and insouciant spirit who appears apathetic to the opinions of others. The sister's only bond is the dark wraith of their childhood, and Nowra's emphasis on these contrasting characterisations is the driving force behind the tension in the play, highlighted beautifully by Purcell's direction of her actors.

Purcell cleverly emphasises the character's reliance on their imaginations to reconstruct their childhood identities, suggesting that all that these sisters can helplessly clasp onto for any essence of family are lies, unsubstantiated hopes, and white washed memories. But it is when the sisters seek a fiery reprisal for their broken past that Purcell's production gains true power and might. Truths are exposed and Purcell demonstrates that the revealing of secrets and the resultant acceptance is the only way that the disconnected sisters can enter adulthood, and rekindle the only family they have left; each other.

Purcell highlights the disjointed lives of the sisters by placing them apart, rarely touching or sharing the same part of the stage. When Cressy reveals her true relationship with her father, peering out across the mudflats, forcibly fixated on the billowing wind and waves, she stands alone, not daring to turn back and face her siblings. Toward the end of the play Purcell cleverly subverts these early directorial choices. The sisters stand as one, the flames of their childhood home illuminating their faces as they put the past behind them; Purcell's final image suggesting that familial connections are the true pathway to forgiveness.

Purcell is blessed to have some of Australia's most promising young actors on board. Tapsell brilliantly captures the youthful energy that defines the character of Nona. Sebben's bottled resentment for her siblings in the first act is highly confronting and moving, despite her reinvention for the second act not being quite sufficient to overcome her character's previous indignation and to fully embrace Purcell's vision of forgiveness and reconciliation. If there was one quibble, however, Purcell's role as both a director and actor has made her performance self-conscious and sometimes one-dimensional. Whilst Sebbens and Tapsell become truly lost in their roles, we never forget that Purcell, the director, is hiding behind the face of Mae throughout the production.

Dale Ferguson's set design for *Radiance* is brave and ultimately successful. Nowra shows his interest in the natural world as the holder and releaser of suffering through the symbolically powerful setting of the Queensland mud flats that brings the sisters back to their childhood milieu. Ferguson separates the stage into two halves with one for each act, with the back half dominated by the splintered, wooden verandah of a family home, whilst the front of the stage is crafted beautifully as the cold, shallow rock pools of the Queensland mud flats. The distance between the audience and the actors in the first act serves to remind the audience of the ignorance and desensitisation we have towards the pain and livelihood of others. Ferguson breaks down this distance barrier in the second act, allowing the characters to spill onto the rock pools, creating a more intimate atmosphere as the play dramatically unfolds.

Ferguson's costume design is relatively simple but appropriately so. Whilst Mae's conservatism is represented through her longer, more traditional dress, Nona's idealism and youth is conveyed through her more provocative outfits. Damien Cooper's lighting

design stylishly captures the transition between night and day, mimicking the sun's movement and bolstering the production's close relationship with the natural world, and providing symbolic depth to the production by following the sister's journey from emotional darkness to a sense of light and renewed hope.

It is hard to imagine that Nowra's original could have had more depth and pain than is uncovered in this production. Through the emotional ordeals, hurts, adversities and surprising humour of these women, the audience feels the complexity, substance and depth we all share with them. From the outset, this production was never meant to be inherently Indigenous, and speaks to many cultures and backgrounds. It instills a sense of invigoration about the human experience and shows the unstoppable powers of those who wish to overcome, place their pasts behind them, and rise to become greater. It is in this way that *Radiance* emits its true light.