Speaking in Tongues

By Sarah Jilani
Saturday 12 February 2011

Venue: Drama Barn
Running Until: 13th February
Written By: Andrew Bovell
Directed By: Catherine Bennett
Produced By: Lily Marriage
Rating: ***

In Week 5, Speaking in Tongues brings to the Drama Barn a tension in the air that is tangible, an atmosphere that is intimate and a tale that is guilt-ridden. Australian writer Andrew Bovell’s 1996 play is about marriages crumbling, betrayals surfacing and characters that are both dysfunctional yet sympathetic. Containing intricate duologues and demanding not a little of the audience’s patience and attention, this is a play that is difficult to stage effectively; however, the Barn’s production has many commendable aspects to it.

The opposites attract theory seems to break down with our opening quartet of characters - the confident and outspoken Sonja, who is about to cheat on her husband with hot-headed Pete, and Pete’s meek wife Jane, about to sleep with Sonja’s husband, even-tempered policeman Leon. It takes a moment for the audience to adjust to the mirroring of their situations through the use of interwoven dialogue; a daring venture which must have taken much practice to perform and was generally successful in producing the desired effect. However, it unfortunately resulted in some unnatural pauses or tonal flatness in actors who were otherwise brilliant but momentarily distracted by trying to maintain that simultaneity. Nevertheless, it was great to see this rather more exciting style attempted – arguably, it is better to venture into something new and not get it perfect, rather than polish the repetitive.

That sense of parallelism and duality was well maintained throughout the chance meeting of Pete and Leon, where George Viner and Ziggy Heath’s bar-side conversation flowed with great dynamism, and the meeting of Sonja and Jane, where Rosie Brear and Lauren Oliver’s margarita-fueled exchange provided well-delivered insights into both of their characters. When the couples returned to their spouses and told
them two interrelated stories, the acting continued to be of a very high calibre, yet the fact that we as an audience hadn’t yet met the people being talked about made it problematic to follow – this was tied up well in the second half though, where betrayal, paranoia and longing were once again present.

The marital problems of the characters, who are all in some way clogged with dissatisfaction, guilt, restlessness and a desperate need to revalidate their relationships, is a subject that is more often than not heavily dialogue-centric, slow and demoralising. One couldn’t help but be more interested in the way things were being said rather than what was said – on that account, though, the play delivered. A welcome change in mood was present with Valerie’s mysterious disappearance and the heated argument between therapist and patient. The minimalist stage design and simple lighting drew attention to the acting, with Ellie McAlpine’s commitment-phobic Sarah and Adam Massingberd-Mundy’s defensive Nick being roles that unexpectedly but deservedly stole the second half.

*Speaking in Tongues*, although exploring subject matter that is new neither to the Barn nor to the general theatre-goer, is nevertheless a taut wire of varied character dynamics, bare essentials of staging and solid acting; well worth your time.

*Click here to see the trailer for Speaking in Tongues*

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2 comments

Hmm

If it’s “well worth” my time, then why is it only three stars? It seems nothing this term can quite break through the three-star barrier...

Sarah

I was very much torn between 3 and 4 stars on this one because, as I pointed out above, there was much that was highly commendable. However, a compromise is sometimes necessary in order to acknowledge the aspects that may not have been of the same standard. As with any artistic endeavor it is highly difficult to judge these plays on a scale as linear as the star system – hence why a full review is written each time to accompany the star rating. I would advise you not to oversimplify the issue to “why is everything 3 stars” – it would be a discredit to those who worked on the play to imply the number of stars is the only part of a review that determines if it’s well worth your time.
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