Bare
by Toa Fraser
Madeleine Sami and Ian Hughes

Space

Bare is an odd title for a stage work as richly arrayed as this. It is certainly unadorned - a two hander for actors who perform with minimal lighting and two chairs. But its language, narrative complexity and emotional energy mark this suite of twenty four monologues as impressive. I find myself going back to productions such as the South African play Woza Albert for comparison. Its assurance is certainly equal to the best of Daniel Keene and last year’s surprise hit, the Melbourne Workers’ Theatre’s Who’s Afraid of the Working Class?

At twenty five, Auckland based playwright Toa Fraser has, in two years, leapt straight into the top of the league. After successful seasons in New Zealand, Bare has toured to the UK and now Australia. A newer work, simply entitled No.2, a solo work also performed by Madeleine Sami, has had a successful run at the Edinburgh Fringe and has now been listed for Robyn Archer’s Tasmanian festival, Ten Days on the Island.

Fraser, who describes himself as “half-English and half-Fijian, has said of Bare- “It is intended as a celebration of language, and most particularly the English language as it exists in New Zealand.” Now, we read this sort of statement all the time; claims about the richness of street language and the ever-changing patois of youth subcultures. And then on stage and television this invariably results in phoney, self conscious stereotypes appropriating awful, not-quite-current slang. What is so impressive about Bare is Fraser’s ear for cadence and rhythm and the generous transparency of his presentation.

In Bare are all the banalities- and many of the epiphanies- of modern life. After all, radio jocks in Auckland sound no different from those in any other city. The jangled hip-hop slang of the young Polynesian woman, Serina forms a montage with the graffitist Smokie, and with the expatriate American, the trainee manageress in Burger King, the University of
Auckland Anthropology lecturer and eight or nine other crisply distinct portraits. At the centre of this vortex of voices are Venus, a young gym chick, and Dave, the lugubrious megaplex usher. They are urban isolates. Venus, focused on the perfection of her abs and quads, has made less of a temple and more a cathedral of her body. Dave, feckless yet perceptive, turns his Burger King interview into an aria about brainless consumption and the fundamental differences between Jean-Claude van Damme’s *Double Team* and *The English Patient*.

But unlike much current comedy and satire which is superciliously dismissive of the ubiquities of commercial culture, Toa Fraser recognises that, for his characters, this is the raw material for ambitiously poetic and complex self-exploration. There is humour in the rag bag of language and mass-cult reference in *Bare* but the playwright is no tourist to the lower depths. Instead he gives swiftly drawn characterisations which are an actor’s dream.

Director Michael Quy has stayed judiciously close to Michael Robinson’s original staging which highlights, often with single spots, the actors separately and in duet. This is theatre in an empty space and, guided by Fraser’s astonishingly sure-footed writing, the performers make a thousand images bloom.

As Venus, Madeleine Sami, gives us a detailed vignette of a young woman whose ambitions are confined entirely within the limits of her own skin. When she is sought out by her old Fijian grandfather, a proud man who reads Shakespeare only to discover the Lear-like tragedy of his own dispersed kingdom, she is strengthened, not by crunchies and bench presses, but by the possibility of a sense of heritage and kin. In a confident range of characterisations, from parking inspector and academic pedant to the “Rich Pisshead Too-Much-Smoking-Croaky-Voice lady”, Sami never misses a beat. Ian Hughes is equally accomplished - as the sceptical Dave, and Troy the inquisitive neighbour, and as the kid whose father is beaten by Fijians and who later becomes friends with a boy from the same family.

*Bare* covers a lot of ground but with a suave subtlety. If one were to say that it is a work about identity and cultural heritage, the effects of globalisation, racism and reconciliation, the fetish of the body and the anomie of everyday life, eyes would roll at the sheer earnestness of it all.
Instead Toa Fraser has created a chorus of voices which remind us that, Baroness Thatcher to the contrary, there is such a thing as society. When Serina dials in to the radio station with greeting messages to an upward inflecting, ever-unfurling list of friends and boyfriends, mates, relatives and dangerous acquaintances, the DJ finally gets to ask what is her song. Her answer, as unexpected as it is poignant, is - that was my song.

The Adelaide season for *Bare* was all too short and disappointingly attended but those who were fortunate enough to see Toa Fraser’s splendid drama will have no doubt it is a rare achievement. And, with their intelligence and versatility, Madeleine Sami and Ian Hughes have reminded us that current theatre can be- and is - more supple than we are sometimes led to believe.