

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Closer

Patrick Marber

State Theatre

Space

Playwright Patrick Marber has described *Closer* as Noel Coward for the Nineties. It is an astute and useful, if not entirely modest, remark identifying the shrewd blend of wit and acerbic social observation that marks it as a comedy of manners. Because, beneath the spray of its contemporary realist profanity, *Closer* has a highly wrought and elegant structure.

Set in London, Marber's play follows the lives of four characters. Anna is a photographer, Alice is a stripper, Larry is a dermatologist and Dan, a journalist, writes obituaries. Their occupations are meaningful but not definitive. Even though Anna's subjects are human unhappiness and urban ugliness. Alice, younger than the others, dances with aliases. Larry's interest in the world is often only skin deep and Dan prefers dead certainties.

But none of them can know what accidents, coincidences and contrivances contribute to their four degrees of separation. Dan meets Alice when she is slightly hurt in an accident. Larry is the doctor on duty in casualty. When Dan writes a book based on the picaresque adventures of Alice he is photographed by Anna who meets Larry in a rendezvous set up as a chat room prank by Dan.

In *Closer* there are few pipes and timbrels but there's plenty of mad pursuit. Everybody gets to lead and then to follow. Everybody gets a chance to win and everybody loses. Dan, living with Alice, now wants Anna who takes Larry but turns to Dan. Larry and Alice become allies and lovers until those who spurn them want them back. The key words are - apparently- truth and honesty, but often enough infidelity and confession triggers only more recrimination and revenge. *Closer* often proves to be an ironic title. These people know how to get inside each other's heads- particularly the men behaving badly- but intimacy is another matter.

In this production for State Theatre, director Benedict Andrews brings a stylish intelligence to Marber's text. Justin Kurzel's design for the Space is a study in restraint. It has a kind of Docklands chic with its buffed concrete and cool fluoro. One wall represents the murky engraved tablets of Postman's Park, a 19th century memorial to uncommon bravery by common people. The other serves as a gallery wall, a computer screen for virtual sex, a scarlet scene in a restaurant and an apartment in a whiter shade of chill.

Mark Pennington's lighting bathes the stage exposing the players every move while the music, by Max Lyandvert, alternates between pulsing bass and drum samples and a vibrant, Balanescu-like string quartet. It is the most successful stage composition Lyandvert has yet done for State-integrated, evocative and never distracting, it serves the play splendidly.

The cast is evenly accomplished and Andrews has drawn intrepid performances from all. Leeanna Walsman's Alice is both ingenue and worldly. We see her defined by those she chooses to love and feel keenly the irony- as we do many times in the play- that when she is most truthful, about her real name for instance, she is least believed. Walsman's performance is lucid and touching. We recognise the aptness that she has taken the name of Alice Ayers, a nineteenth century heroine who dies to save the lives of three children.

As Anna and Dan, Rhondda Findleton and Paul English give poised readings of two people orderly enough to program their own chaos. Findleton's Anna is understated and adroit while English, as Dan, has an almost Dickensian sense of moral gormlessness. Syd Brisbane's Larry, the upwardly mobile London doctor, is volatile and vulnerable, canny and unwitting. The strip club scene with Alice, the apartment confrontation with Anna and the dust-up with Dan in the surgery are critical moments which Brisbane brings into strong focus. This performance is among his best yet.

The State season has been a very mixed one this year. Buoyed up by visiting productions, the local work has often been underdone and tentative. This time we have the fortuitous combination of a strong, articulate text, Andrews' confident direction, well-managed music and design, and penetrating performances. And it has considerably lifted

State's game. If this isn't the company's best shot for 1999, it will be very close.