It is now ten years since Brad Fraser's audacious play was first performed in his hometown in Edmonton, Alberta. But time has been good to this stylishly constructed account of the young and the restless. With almost instinctive flair Fraser captures the nerve and pulse of his characters, locating them very precisely in a provincial city and, in the process, creating a work which transfers vividly to the many countries in which it has now played.

David McMillan is a former TV actor who has returned from his fifteen minutes of fame in Toronto to work as a waiter. It is here he meets Kane, a young man unsure of his own sexuality and attracted to David's openly gay lifestyle. David shares an apartment with Candy who works as a book reviewer. Her life is burdened with personal neurosis and alternating entanglements with Robert, a barman on leave from his marriage, and Jerri, an intense young teacher she meets at the gym. There is also Bernie, David's childhood friend, who keeps turning up drunk and suspiciously covered in blood, and Benita, a sex worker with clairvoyant powers and a good eye for a murky aura.

Love and Human Remains, as the play was retitled in Fraser's own film adaptation, is a canny blend of soapie, crime thriller and young singles sitcom. These are the hooks which give the narrative its impetus and the characterisations their clarity and zip. But for all its TV trappings Fraser's play is distinctively theatrical, subverting its own naturalism with layers of soliloquy, confessions on answering machines, and something quite close to the chorus in verse drama.
In State Theatre's mainstage version, director Rosalba Clemente and designer Robert Kemp highlight the alienation of these under-thirtysomethings by locating them as if in separate capsules within an abstracted three storey apartment facade. The action takes place with such minimal props that you wonder whether just a little furniture might have helped things along. Instead, it is Geoff Cobham's shadowy lighting, with long inquisitive spots and disturbing film noir side sprays, which defines the stage picture.

The performances are uniformly good. Mitchell Butel does well as David, managing the shift from flippant one-liners in act one to painful self-recognition later in the play when he confronts the true nature of his relationship with Bernie and the possibility of genuine intimacy with Kane. Colleen Cross is edgy and vulnerable as Candy, Nathan Page is a memorable, if slightly elderly, Kane, while Steve Greig's Robert and Kate Roberts's Jerri both have an interesting hint of menace. Marcello Russo is spooky as Benita, with her urban myths and second sight, and Syd Brisbane, in the difficult role as Bernie, energetically juggles the sinister contradictions that define his character.

This production introduces a confronting text to a general audience and State is to be commended for that. But the huge Playhouse stage, and the removal of some of the front seats to accommodate the lighting, poses difficulties for Rosalba Clemente. This play works best in a confined space where the disembodied choruses, the intimations and creepy implications can unfold like one of Benita's weird stories. But as audience we are kept at quite some distance and, while the set emphatically signals the isolation and estrangement of the characters, it is at a cost to the fluidity and complexity of their interaction.

By contrast, Griffin Theatre's touring production of Andrew Bovell's Speaking in Tongues is well suited to the Space. An artful work for four actors, this new Australian play makes an interesting companion piece to Brad Fraser's Love and Human Remains. Both explore problematic aspects of relationship, both have crime fiction and film noir influences and both are looking to extend the possibilities of stage language.

Bovell's play is based around a version of six degrees of separation. A man meets a woman in a bar and they embark on an affair unaware that their partners are doing the same. Speaking in Tongues deals in the most extreme
form of coincidence, it is like karma, or relentless fate. So, the one person
to whom Leon discloses his affair with Jane, is of course going to be her
husband and the one woman Jane meets in the bar will be Leon's wife
Sonja. In Act Two the therapist, Valerie is counselling Sarah, unaware that
she is her husband's mistress. When she goes missing in bushland, it is
Nick, Jane's neighbour, who is implicated and Leon is the police
investigator.

With its scarlet panels and Sam Spade venetian blinds the set by designers
Liane Wilcher and Nicola McIntosh -with lighting by Nigel Levings-
strongly enhances the intrigue and deceptions in the action. And director
Ros Horin creates a careful symmetry for the performances- in the opening
scene, for instance where the players repeat the same lines for two parallel
assignations. It is tricky stuff and when the actors speak in unison Bovell
runs the risk of things becoming too mannered for their own good.

But the performers carry the devices well and Bovell's intrepid
investigation into the nature of marriage, the dynamics of betrayal and the
possibility of trust ensures that it is engaging theatre. Heather Bolton is
excellent as the exasperated Sonya and again as the conflicted Valerie.
Merfyn Owen creates a suitably uneasy jokiness with the part of Leon and
an interesting ambiguity as Nick. Robert Meldrum capitalises on several
unsympathetic roles- as the irritable Pete and as John, too far stepped in
guilt to take control of his life. Margaret Mills plays Jane - breaking out of
her routines even at the risk of havoc - and is especially good as Sarah,
emotionally opaque and wary of commitment.

Griffin's production, supported by Performing Lines, has given us a
welcome chance to see more of this company's work. Andrew Bovell's play
examines aspects of relationship which are usually either avoided or
treated with flippancy. His intertwining narratives and dramatic
repetitions are creditable strategies for delving the secrets, lies, crimes and
misdemeanours that darken many a suburban heart.