

## Murray Bramwell's Reviews

*Appeared in - The Adelaide Review*

*A Lie of the Mind*

by Sam Shepard

Brink Productions

Space

The second and final Brink production for the year is also an American play. Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* makes an interesting pair with the company's co-production with State Theatre back in June. That was *Killer Joe*, Tracy Letts' grim trailer park tragicomedy of love, and death, for sale. Both plays are set in the poor white margins, one in Texas, the other Montana. Both are about life at the bottom of the barrel.

But Shepard's work, clearly an influence on younger writers like Letts, differs in still celebrating the struggle to understand, even in extremis, the things that make us who we are. And what we do. Jake is a tearaway man who has never quite stopped being a mother's shame and when he rings his brother Frankie it is a familiar crisis. In a jealous rage he has beaten his wife Beth again, and again he believes he has killed her. He's not far wrong. Brain injured and broken, Beth is recovering in hospital watched over by her brother Mike. Both Jake and Beth are retrieved back to family. For Jake, it is semi-deranged retreat to his sister Sally and his dour mother Lorraine who still treats him like the crazy little boy he has always been to her. For Beth, it is back to the two-bit mule ranch to her severe father Baylor and Meg, her down-trodden mother.

*A Lie of the Mind* is about these two families floundering with yet another fuck-up, parents in weary denial, while the dutiful sons Mike and Frankie try to find honourable resolution. For Mike it is to avenge his sister by forcing Jake into abject apology. For Frankie it is to make the trip to find Beth and report to his brother that she is still alright. In this process each of the characters is forced by the circumstances of Jake and Beth into awareness, however inarticulate, of the truth of their lives as opposed to the lies of the mind.

Director Tim Maddock has a daunting task with this large and emotionally loaded text. His design is suitably sparse - a hospital bed, a battered

lounge for Baylor's living room and a single bed for Jake's boyhood room. Above the action are variously suspended wooden beams and giant model aeroplanes from World War II while the stage floor, covered in light coloured PVC, is a canvas for the accumulating gore of hunting and fighting. There are occasional circular projections - an eye, a groaning mouth and a crescent moon for instance. None of them quite fits or enhances the generally realist presentation. On the other hand Geoff Cobham's shadowy, fractured lighting ably assists the many shifts in narrative.

There are excellent performances. Jed Kurzel has the angst and energy for Jake, infantile and self-absorbed, cruel and violent, sensitive and remorseful. A large reach is required and he finds it. Rebecca Havey's Beth is also strong - especially in those moments when she confronts, like some kind of childish psychic, the workings of her own and other minds. David Mealor's performance as Frankie is an anchoring strength, a kind of straight man to the grotesques around him. William Allert memorably charts the deterioration in Mike and Nick Hope finds real intensity in the emotionally desiccated Baylor.

Ingird Hearne has a less clear task with the hazily written Sally while Colleen Cross and Michaela Cantwell, two very able actors, do not manage the task of playing double their age as the mothers Lorraine and Meg. These are central roles and pivotal to Shepard's themes of nature and nurture, gender and identity and, in casting too young, Maddock has placed a strain on the balances of the production.

*A Lie of the Mind* is a complex play - and sometimes a rambling one. Running three hours it is a saga of conflicting wills and contested history. With his zany, menacing dialogue and black comic incident Shepard's play is absorbing, with its slowly unfurling revelations of self-recognition, it is powerfully poetic. Brink Productions have captured much of this, creditably without attempting American accents to do so. Tim Maddock and the performers have here taken on one of their most ambitious projects for a long while and they have left us with much on our minds.