

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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The Pitchfork Disney

by Philip Ridley

4 Bux Progressive Arts
The Chapel
Theatre 62

The Pitchfork Disney first played in 1990 and heralded a wave of what might be called punk theatre. In works such as *Shopping and Fucking* and *Disco Pigs* - both of which have performed in Adelaide - and films such as *Naked, Praise* and *Trainspotting*, the best minds of a generation drew their subject from a vaguely futuristic underclass of alienated, sexually dysfunctional and highly chemicalised young people. They are Thatcher's mutants, the bastard children of the Third Way.

There have been a number of Australian writers exploring similar material - Daniel Keene and Reg Cribb, for instance and local playwrights Stephen House and Josh Tyler. Now, more than ten years on, even though the social issues depicted are still rampant, the genre itself is close to exhaustion and captive to cliché.

All good reasons to stage a text which expresses these themes at their sharpest and most disturbing - and *The Pitchfork Disney* does just that. Set in a dim, squalid room in London's East End the play introduces us to Presley and Haley Stray, twin brother and sister in their late twenties but actually regressed to childhood. Like a feral Hansel and Gretel, they are orphans whose parents have vanished under mysterious circumstances leaving them to fend for themselves. With their door heavily bolted they sit around playing mind games and guzzling chocolate. Hysterically they conjure up scary stories only to succumb to paranoid fears of their own making. As one epigraph to the play reads: "Extreme Terror gives us back the gestures of childhood."

It is Presley who occasionally ventures outside - to get provisions, including lashings of fruit and nut. He is also curious about a young man he can see from the window. He is puking in the gutter and on impulse he invites him into the flat. With that things threaten to escalate, as Cosmo, rent boy and public house variety entertainer, joins the waifs and Strays for some psychic vandalism of his own. Ridley's world is like Pinter on

methamphetamine. There are the same claustrophobic fears of closed rooms and unwelcome knockings on the door. There is the same uncertainty as to who is friend and who is deadly foe.

4 Bux director Ross Ganf does very well with this production. No stranger to such material, he previously staged a highly admired version of *You'll Have Had Your Hole* by Irvine Welsh as well as Josh Tyler's *Swallow Me* for last year's Fringe. Here he takes the tiny dimensions of Theatre 62's Chapel and creates a grim, burnt out set with scungy armchairs and a kitchen sink that would terrify even Arnold Wesker. With technical support from Peter Neilsen, Ganf creates a decor that is both familiar in its domesticity and repulsive in its depravity.

As Presley and Haley, Craig Behenna and Ksenja Logos in grimy black clothes with accessory cold sores, romp about like disinhibited kittens, repeating stories and games of hide and seek that, we imagine, they play incessantly. Behenna in Doc Martins and with heavy mascara, and the equally dishevelled Logos bring a pathos and weariness to the characters as they dip ever further back into arcadian memories of childhood, driving in the Austin A40, when the world, and their family, was still intact. Logos, with her girlish laugh, part squeal, part gurgle, brings a perilously flirtatious aspect to Haley, while Behenna, as the more grown up Presley, is painfully revealed in his unworldliness. His story, of the Pitchfork Disney, a bogeyman who skewers children and leaves a tiny Mickey Mouse on their corpses, is strongly delivered and adeptly primes our expectations for what might yet unfold.

Ninian Donald is startling as Cosmo Disney, outrageous in his red spangled jacket and using his dancier skill to physically menace the inquisitive Presley. Ganf allows his actors a bold amount of movement in such a confined stage area - and the set-up for the appearance of Pitch, imposingly played by Maris Caune, is a theatrical coup.

The Pitchfork Disney is a world of trauma and cheap thrills, damaged souls and a culture saturated with dissociated sensation. It submerges us in the very fascinations that the play is an indictment of. This makes Ridley both a moralist and an acute observer of the anxieties and apprehensions of his peers. His play is perceptive, artfully written and a model of the genre. I hear that 4 Bux struggled for attendances for their short season and they are thinking of shooting through to Melbourne to work with Red Stitch

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Theatre in St Kilda. I hope this is only hearsay, because this excellent production is a tribute to the resources of the actors and Ross Ganf, who has again shown real flair as a director and a very good radar for a likely script. Adelaide can ill afford to lose talent like this.