

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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PoM pOm

by Pamela Allen

Patch Theatre

Odeon Theatre

It is often said that young people deserve the best theatre. And yet, just as often, they end up with the very opposite. Not only have we seen a reduction in the amount of work on offer in all age ranges in the past five years, but, seemingly, there has been a failure of nerve by performing companies desperate to compete with Sony Playstations and the global megaplex. The result has been a kind of theatre of ingratiating, full of brand name slang and back-to-front baseball caps, or worse, a conspiratorial cleverness pitched over the heads of children to the adults sitting up the back.

Even established companies have lost their way. Like Patch Theatre, for instance. In recent times it has been decidedly patchy, you would have to say. And, when even the veterans don't get it right, it is time for concern.

All of which makes *PoM pOm*, an adaptation from the picture books of best-selling New Zealand writer Pamela Allen, such a welcome event. Directed by Dave Brown, it marks his return to Patch as Artistic Director, and it reveals that his instincts for his audience are surer than ever. Using the playful rhymes and sometimes eerie stories from Allen's books, Brown and his collaborators have created a theatre piece with real charm and imagination.

For a start there isn't a multi-media gizmo anywhere to be seen. Just Dean Hills' fetchingly cross-hatched picture frame, elegantly lit by David Green. Then, in a coup of casting, there are performers Paul Blackwell, Eileen Darley and Heather Frahn, along with an array of memorable puppets from Vanessa Ellis. The music -composed by Timothy Sexton and songs by well-known musician Heather Frahn - fits like a glove, especially the hypnotic syncopations of *Who Sank The Boat*, Allen's vastly popular cautionary tale of critical mass.

Paul Blackwell, surely now one of the most assured comic actors anywhere in the country, adds some splendid touches to Mr McGee going to sea, the miserly brother in *Herbert and Harry*, the big brown bear and several of the voices in that sinking boat. Equally, Eileen Darley gives warmly accessible readings of *My Cat Maisie* and *The Pear in the Pear Tree* and is also excellent in the strangely melancholy *Black Dog*.

The richness of talent is evident also in the music. Darley and Blackwell not only sing well, they enthusiastically vamp away on trombones and horns, adding to Heather Frahn's bass and violin. Back with Patch after her stint with *Respectable Shoes* several years back, Frahn's songs are just the ticket - simple, tuneful but never obtrusive on other production elements.

Dave Brown has done well with *PoM pOm*, forging a productive collaboration with the author, Pamela Allen, and putting together a first rate production likely to become a staple in the company's repertoire. By the time the present season concludes, ten thousand four to eight year olds will have seen the show- and that surely, will be only the beginning.