

## Murray Bramwell's Reviews

*Appeared in - The Australian*

### **Night Letters**

by writer Susan Rogers and director Chris Drummond  
inspired by the novel by Robert Dessaix  
State Theatre Company of South Australia  
The Queen's Theatre, Adelaide

Robert, the central figure in State Theatre's Festival production, *Night Letters*, is described as an Australian wrapped up in language. That very aptly describes not only author Robert Dessaix but his aromatic, idiosyncratic novel - part fictional autobiography, part esoteric travelogue, part romantic storytelling, and all self-conscious literary display.

In taking up this work for the stage, writer Susan Rogers and director Chris Drummond were always going to have a steep task. I was going to say - they were going to have their work cut out for them. But that is the problem, they have not cut enough. *Night Letters* runs long - with intervals, almost four hours - but far more problematically, loses impact. Deference to the text has meant that the writers, and we the audience, are often lost in the lacunae.

The peeling elegance of designer Robert Cousins's Venetian cloisters are a perfect fit in the seedy grandeur of the Queen's Theatre, especially with Geoff Cobham's warm and painterly lighting. This is a handsome production, well served with original music from Zoe Barry and Quentin Grant and the opening image of Robert at his writing desk is a promising one.

The central story of an author diagnosed with an incurable illness, leaving his partner to travel serendipitously in Europe, is engaging and convincing. It is the pursuit of the parallel narratives - of the doomed Renaissance courtesan Camilla (Paula Arundell) and the very Victorian undoing of the sexual adventuress Antoinetta, (an artful Alison Whyte) - that occupy too much attention and topple the production.

As Robert, Humphrey Bower, anchors the work and captures convincingly both the flight from self and the Dantesque pilgrimage from purgatory to the paradise of acceptance. Paul Blackwell is excellent as the Professor, shamed and defeated in his pursuit of youthful eros, and Richard Gyoerffy is creepy as the amoral Emilio. Too often, though, the under-directed performances are marred by excess, and attempts to add theatricality - in the

ludicrous pantomime of the brooch story and the antics of the magician - are misplaced.

This production has been a long time in the making and numerous workshops and revisions have coarsened the intimacy and the filigree elements of Dessaix's work. They have been put through a megaphone - as the stage is apt to do, amplifying when we most want sparing nuance. I am pleased to have seen this gallant production but Rogers and Drummond have turned Night Letters into a meandering epic instead of an intriguing miniature.