

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Australian

The Return

Theatre Company Nottle
Eclipse, FringeHUB, level four, Adelaide University.
Until 13 March.

Can't Stand Up for Falling Down

Aquarius Productions
Cinema, FringeHUB, Adelaide University.
Until 14 March.

X Ray

by Chris Tugwell
Directed by Geoff Crowhurst.
Mongrel Productions
AIT Arts (Acting Studio) 39 Light Square

With an estimated crowd of one hundred thousand cheering the opening night parade, a lively buzz at Rundle Park's Garden of Earthly Delights, and, by yesterday, a gross of \$2.9m and 163,000 in ticket sales, the Adelaide Fringe is a conspicuous success. Boisterous doppelganger to the Festival, the Fringe is second only to Edinburgh, and like its counterpart, not only continues to thrive, but is presumed by many to be the Festival itself.

With a huge program of some 450 events, however, the Fringe runs the risk of swamping everything including itself. Life for the Fringe performer is a Darwinian struggle - not so much of the fittest, but of the loudest, the luckiest and the already familiar. It is an irony that the Fringe is considered to be the radical alternative when, for most ticket buyers, it is really the safe bet. The queues are especially long outside comedy venues and - for performers such as the slow fuse comedian Dave Hughes, Lano and Woodley with their hair-raising new show *The Island* and the endearingly daft English comic Daniel Kitson (all heading to the Melbourne Comedy Festival later this month) - that popularity is well-deserved.

But it is obvious that the ninety or so theatre events in the Fringe are doing it harder, especially after the first week when the Festival itself, including three days of *Womad*, begins to cast its shadow. Valiant companies from as far away as Seattle, Edmonton and Seoul have come to perform and after venue fees, insurance, publicity and the like, the box office from audiences of thirty or fewer is hardly going to cover costs.

It hasn't helped that some of the international productions have not lived up to the hyperbole of reviewers from the Edinburgh dailies. The Blue Orphan, a chamber musical from Canadian company Catalyst, for example, is almost ludicrously ghastly. On the other hand, while notably derivative of recent European physical theatre, *The Return*, loosely based on poem by Brecht, from South Korea's Theatre Company Nettle and directed by Won Young Oh, has an intriguing presence which supersedes those ubiquitous images of trilby hats, overcoats and battered suitcases.

Memorable work has also come from closer at hand. From Melbourne, Aquarius Productions' *Can't Stand Up For Falling Down* is a Fringe high-point with a strong text from Richard Cameron and well-judged performances from Nicola Leona, Sharyn Oppy and Bernadette Schwerdt. A grimly convincing account of domestic violence and gender abuse, the three monologues, astutely directed by Jess Kingsford, interweave and build with disturbing impact.

Adelaide company Mongrel Productions has found an equally timely subject with *X-Ray*, Chris Tugwell's powerfully factual and understated account of David Hicks' internment at Guantanamo Bay. Locked down in his infamous 2.4 metre cage with 24 hour light and sound, we see Hicks (Nathan O'Keefe), eating Frootloops for breakfast and led manacled to the latrine by his unquestioning guard (James Edwards). Terry Hicks and his lawyer attended the matinee - reminding us that perhaps the real subject of the drama, as distinct from the case, is not the foolhardy boy but the devoted and courageous father.