

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Adelaide Fringe

Things were always going to go well for the Fringe this year. Everything, from the logo launch of that underdog-looking little bambi to the setting up of its ambitious on-line ticketing, had an assurance and energy about it. This not only came from director Katrina Sedgwick, CEO Jodie Glass and an army of workers and volunteers but was evident in the vibrant response from an Adelaide crowd looking for something more edifying, and certainly more entertaining, than the previous six months of divisive politics, and national and international trauma.

People were ready to have fun and grab the last of the summer we almost didn't have. And the venues worked better this year. The use of the Adelaide Uni Union and Cloisters area created a central and coherent group of performance spaces which included Union Hall and the Scott Theatre, and existing catering facilities were handy as well. Then, the carnival atmosphere at Rundle Park, with the circus adrenaline of the Lunar Tent and the Edwardian charm of the Spiegel tent, made the whole of the East End again the buzzy place to be.

The numbers are in for 2002 and The Fringe has cleaned up. 180,000 tickets sold through FringeTix, nearly 70,000 more than in 2000 and almost double the income to artists compared with last time. It has been a very good season. This is hardly surprising when we consider the grotesquely shortened and patchy program offered by the Festival. The Fringe is unlikely to have so much fortunate wind in its sails again.

But the organisers were also a match for the challenge of increased numbers - there were relatively few reports of glitches with tickets, the security was everywhere well managed, especially on Clipsal night when some clashes of clientele might have been a possibility, and the murmurings of unhappy artists have been virtually non-existent. The Fringe's Maria Foundas also maintained excellent publicity communication throughout the season with email bulletins daily and cordial media dealings.

The program, as I have noted before, had a solid core of the tried and true. The comedy was very much the usual whatsinames - Lano and Woodley,

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Scared Weird Little Guys, Three Canadians, Adam Hills and Judith Lucy. But judging by the queues along Angas Street and the huddled masses around the Nova there was no shortage of takers for any of the funnies. Certainly Greg Fleet was in good fettle with *Better off Dead (Dad)*, an unsettling but amusing serve on his absent father and Rod Quantock, back with his whiteboard, his genial scepticism and the lessons of history, apologised for the ferocity of his show's title- *Scum Nation*. He had to come up with a name for the Fringe's October deadline he said, adding slyly that he hadn't realised how contented we would all be feeling by March.

There were some late scratchings - Arj Barker didn't show, nor did we find out anything about Growing Up Brady from Barry Williams. But Otis Lee Crenshaw, the jailbird alias of American comic Rich Hall, made a welcome return. Even though his material is showing signs of recidivism, he is still a master comic. He works mercurially off the crowd - he understands Australian audiences well - and the sheer intelligence of his satire is always exhilarating.

There was a ton of theatre. Some fine local productions such as Brink's *Killer Joe* and Bluetongue Theatre's *Wit* offered return seasons. Fresh Track productions literally did so with a new venture from recent Flinders University drama graduates, *The Return*, a tightly scripted set of chinese boxes about a group of people on a late night Fremantle train ride, came from new writer Reg Cribb. Directed by Geordie Brookman and featuring strong performances from Alistair Scott-Young, Melanie Vallejo and Caleb Lewis, the play has interesting ironies and reversals - and perhaps one falling veil too many. But Cribb is a confident new writer and this production may yet get a greenlight for a season in Seattle.

Another new local work which hit the mark is Budgie Lung's production of Josh Tyler's *Swallow Me*, a zany study of an agoraphobic golfer invaded by a series of visible relatives and invisible friends. The membrane between reality and coked-out delusion is very thin as Rory Walker as Greg, brings a manic comedy to Tyler's take on the brainclutter of contemporary life - indicated by the bewildering bank of TV screens in Louise Dunn's browned over design. Director Ross Ganf has successfully captured the mix of serious reflection and hypercomedy which is, recent emergent playwright award winner, Josh Tyler's droll territory.

Regular visitors to the Fringe are Seattle's Theatre Simple. This year they brought *Strindberg in Paris* and *52 Pick Up*, the latter a diverting two hander played by Llysa Holland and Andrew Litzky. The performers enter and strew the stage with a pack of cards each linked to a short script - ranging in duration from seconds to several minutes - thus randomly sequencing a narrative of relationship issues, snoring, first time sex, psychics and cranberry juice. Written by Rita Bozi and TKJ Dawe, *52 Pick Up* is a deal of wit and closely observed detail ably presented by Holland and Litzky with brisk direction from K Brian Neel who also had two much-praised Fringe shows of his own - *Double Climax* and the sci-fi solo *The 42nd Floor*. I missed them both and they are at the top of this year's regret list.

The raft of international productions brought in by Arts Projects Australia gave the Fringe plenty of lift - the aerialists of Les Arts Sauts certainly, but also fabrik and DO Theatre's *Hopeless Games* and Theatre O's *Three Dark Tales*. Saxophonist Jan Garbarek and choral group, the Hilliard Ensemble played a splendid set of material not just, as advertised, from their 1994 *Officium* collaboration but also from the more airy and varied *Mnemosyne* CD which was released on the ECM label several years ago. It was the delight it promised to be.

With the shortened Festival run, the final week of the Fringe was all box office gravy. It also had events likely to catch those hankering for the world elsewhere. New York performance artist, Karen Finley's *Shut Up and Love Me* provided her trademark shock not seen here since 1994. This time round Finley has mellowed, there is less of the stridency that pierced some of her earlier shows and more gusto and comedy instead. She is now a mother and in her late forties and her observations on sex and relationships, while still confrontational enough to have the audience squirming, have a more Chaucerian bawdiness.

Occasionally sprawled on a coquettishly scarlet chaise longue, she navigates through a succession of anecdotes, beat poems and striptease displays that burlesque the very idea of burlesque. Her finale is a naked romp in honey, poured by several willing volunteers, while she recites scabrous pastiches of Eeyore and Winnie the Pooh. It is vintage avant garde - and some would say that it is very old chapeau. But the predominantly young audience was quite agog seeing a bit of old-fashioned feminist transgression and Karen Finley is still finding new ways of getting beneath the skin.

For those hoping to hear some trippingly spoken Shakespeare sixties starlet, Susannah York offers only a lot of actorly display and a few stumbles. Her show, *The Love's of Shakespeare's Women* is an appealing collection of speeches - from Viola, Hermia and Cleopatra, several sonnets including, predictably, *Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds*, and such likely ladies as Juliet and Lady Macbeth. Ms York is often ill-at-ease, lacking fluency in the links and performing the lines with an efficient but unilluminating elocution. You would have thought that the revolution in making Shakespeare's language sound like meaningful sentences had never happened.

Also in the last week were two shows at the Festival Centre. *Leitmotiv* from the French Canadian company Les Deux Mondes has spectacular lighting and screen projections from Yves Dube with a booming synth score by Michel Robidoux. Mezzo soprano Noella Huet was unable to sing on the night I attended and the company worked valiantly to re-work the performance with pre-recorded material. The story of Rosa (Huet) and her lover Pierre and the daughter abandoned in the turbulence of wartime is visually dazzling but rarely touches the emotions.

Bette Bourne as Quentin Crisp, the *Resident Alien*, is, by contrast, most engaging. Tim Fountain's text is amusing and lightly judged but the portrait of the naked civil servant, the fearlessly singular Crisp, turning ninety, still openly homosexual and living on his wits in America is a memorable essay on the courage of originality and the integrity of not just saying who you are, but being who you are.