

## Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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### Adelaide Fringe

The Fringe is in full swing for 2002. Even before the Friday night Opening Parade, which attracts a crowd upwards of fifty thousand, plenty of venues are well under way. At The Garden of Unearthly Delights in Rundle Park East, the Amazing Lunar Tent has already opened for circus biz while the Spiegeltent, which made its first appearance in Australia in Adelaide several Fringes ago, has again opened its elegant Edwardian doors for a full tilt menu which continues until the last knock on March 17.

As thousands pack the streets around Rundle Street and Frome Road for the parade, there is a sense that the Fringe is having a particularly good run. Uncertainties around the Festival have probably helped, of course, and the fact that there has not been a lot to cheer about over the past six months. But under Katrina Sedgwick's direction, this year's Fringe has a more than usual zest to it. Certainly the all-comers procession mirrors the youthful energy that is the Fringe at its best.

With a dress code of bubblewrap, alfoil and plastic, you could say transparency is the keynote for the parade. Gigantic apparitions from land and sea, many with illuminated eyes and innards delight the crowd lining the route. Spiders, seahorses, dolphins, even a huge mother figure for the Parks Health Service, are chaotically interspersed with spruiking artists, pitching their shows and craning for maximum exposure. Oxfam is represented, as is Greenpeace and there is warm applause for Amnesty International. It is a broad old church at the Fringe, there is even a protest against one of the major sponsors.

The Fringe has set itself up in various places over the years - in the olden days it was the Lion factory precinct, then various Rundle Street car parks were the go. Now Adelaide University is a major host - with the Union building and adjacent Cloisters set up with a caravanserai of food and drink vendors. You can get excellent coffee, a wide range of proteins and lounge about on the lawn like everybody else.

The Fringe festival program is vast - they are saying 381 registered events across 208 venues - and the competition for audiences is murderous, as usual. The riches - and undoubtedly a fair number of disappointments -

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are spread across circus, film, visual arts, cabaret, comedy and theatre, and the international brigade is strong again this time. But, as always, there is also the pleasure of just strolling around the inner city or sitting at a sidewalk table watching the action. We've been having some balmy nights at long last, and the city hasn't looked this perky since... well, the last Fringe and Festival.

One show which has been up and doing earlier than most is the co-production between Savage Wit and Vitalstatistix National Women's Theatre, *Partly It's About Love...Partly It's About Massacre*. Written by Fiona Sprott and featuring Jacqueline Linke, it continues the exploits of Jezebel, the mood-swinging single first introduced in *Often I Find That I am Naked*, which premiered at the 1998 Adelaide Festival and went on to seasons in London New York and awards at the Edinburgh Festival.

This time Jezebel is working the butterknife-edge of commitment and homicide. Her lover, Matthew, mostly referred to as her Park Ranger, is a very suitable prospect except when it comes to sharing space, pegging wet washing, toast crumbs and, his mother. The nuptials are upset when push comes to lunge and the Betrothed is hospitalised with first degree wounds from the kitchen cutlery. He's not pressing charges, muses Jezebel, which is nice. Linke's performance is even more assured than in *Naked* and Sprott's text has, this time, jumped the fence from hip urban TV sitcom to a zone of ambivalence which is not only blackly comic but disturbingly truthful to the anxieties of the self in everyday combat.

Director Khristina Totos and a talented team including composer Ian Moorhead, multimedia designer Regan Hay and lighting designer Sue Grey-Gardiner, has provided production values which are not only enough to take Jezebel well above the ruck at the Fringe, but, no doubt, to tour again to Edinburgh and beyond.

First in at the Spiegel tent is UK comic Bill Bailey who has also just turned up as a sidekick in a new Channel 2 comedy called *Black Books*. Bailey is a funny fellow, even though, as he reminds us, he doesn't do jokes. We never quite get to hear what happened to the three blokes who went into a pub, but we do get to think about the theological inconsistencies of insurance policies and the deeper philosophical implications of Uncertainty.

He has a bluff West Country manner and a nice line in dry irony. He can also find his way around guitar and keyboards, treating us to some some lethal parodies of Billy Bragg and Chris de Burgh and, until the hard disk went wobbly, some loopy samples of George Dubya on terrorism. In a Fringe where the usual suspects are particularly usual, Bill Bailey is one in a fresh line of sad bastards.

*The Heart of the Journey*, at the Hub Cinema, with a commendation for the United Nations Media Peace Awards promised much. This collaboration between Lucy Dann, an Aboriginal woman from Broome and Mayu Kanamori, a photo documentarist, charts Lucy's search for her Japanese father, a pearl diver who lived briefly in Australia before moving back to a small fishing town in Japan. It is a fascinating story of bi-cultural identity and Lucy Dann is an appealing and courageous woman. But we rarely get to the Heart of this Journey. There is little to place the story in its larger social context, and a great deal of New Age-y music and artful snaps of airports, sunsets and sharp focus fishing ropes. It is a reminder that the line between the resonantly particular and the obscurely personal can be very fine.

At Tandanya, Junction Theatre is premiering a work by Adelaide based writer Jared Thomas. *Love Land and Money* is ambitious in its reach. It traces the parallel lives of Bunda and his cousin Jack. Bunda (Michael Harris) has trained as a lawyer to negotiate land rights for the forthcoming Darwin railway. Jack (Jodus Madrid) living with Suzie (Jacqueline Cook), a white Australian, works for the railways, trying to make his own way without using his Aboriginality as identity or for gain in employment, as indicated in his relationship with the cheerful racist, Bill (Patrick Frost). Bunda's partner Warrika (Rose Turner) is a social worker, taken for granted while the larger demands of his work prevail. Narrating their stories is Wilka, the dingo spirit played with comic gusto by Robert Wuldi.

As the title suggests Jared Thomas explores the conflicts between the personal and the communal, between the pressures of work and life within family. Bunda's mission is laced with egotism, something not lost on Warrika. Jack's individualist approach is indicative of the times, but with it comes alienation.

Director Geoff Crowhurst, with designer Kathryn Sproul, has used simple staging - a circle of red earth with brightly coloured painted hangings depicting, Wilka tells us, the ancient trade routes of the desert peoples. The excellent music, for electric and acoustic guitar, is played live by composer Grayson Rotumah. *Love Land and Money* has a likeable currency in its themes and its concern with such issues as uranium mining and nuclear waste dumps. There is a confidence in Thomas's work that is fresh and insightful. The performances are variable but engaging nonetheless, and Robert Wuldi again reminds us what a strong stage actor he has become.

Another work which examines the relationship of the individual to culture is Jamaican American, Michael Phillip Edwards' *Runt*, a monodrama about his relationship with his father. It is brave work which confronts the depth of his hatred for his father's influence - "I choose against you" he repeatedly asserts. A self made man who left Jamaica to earn his fortune in the United States, Edwards Senior, as described by his son, is a man of implacable will and in his way, a man of honour. He is also a charismatic womaniser, a bully, and in fear of the runt weakness he detects in his own son. For his part Thomas has his father's obstinacy. He goads and defies his father, secure in the fact that he is loved by him, however brutally.

Actor Wilson Bell gives a most accomplished rendering of the father/ son relationship, capturing both the ferocity and the tenderness of a bond which is tempered by the drive, first to rise above poverty, and then to succeed as a black American in the land of apparently infinite opportunity. *Runt* is an excellent piece of writing and Wilson Bell's performance has made it one of the highpoints of the Fringe so far.