

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Salt

by Peta Murray

State Theatre Company
The Space

The State Theatre slogan for 2003 promises to spice up our lives. In fact the culinary metaphor already applies. For their final production this year the company has chosen *Salt*, a work by Peta Murray about mothers, daughters, and food, food and more food.

This play has enjoyed seasons around the country, originating at Playbox in Melbourne, after which it has been served in WA, Queensland and in Sydney, featuring a performance from the late Ruth Cracknell. Its ubiquity is not surprising - in many ways it is a work designed to appeal to those stalwart subscribers, women in their later years, who are the backbone of our subsidised state companies.

Salt is about Laurel, a lively free-spirited woman, just turning seventy. She has set fire to her kitchen and the causes are not at all clear. Meg, her dutiful daughter is concerned that this is a sign that her mother can no longer live independently and moves her into her house - and her kitchen. The enforced contact is full of friction and old grievances are rehashed as each jostles to assert her own view of a shared history. The terrain is the kitchen bench where Laurel, ever pragmatic about food can't see why the cook's best friend should not be the tin opener. Meg, on the other hand, is a serious foodie who shares an affinity with her maternal grandmother's aromatic recipe books and is perplexed at her mother's studied indifference towards the gastronomic arts.

Catherine Fitzgerald's production in the Space has plenty to admire. The set, appealingly assembled by Gaele Mellis, consists of five live lemon trees, acquired interstate by the assiduous Peter Kelly, and lusciously lit by Mark Shelton. Across the front of the acting area is a kitchen bench complete with hot plates and cupboards filled with enticingly illuminated jars of preserves. It all looks good enough to eat - and serves well for Barbara West as Laurel and Eileen Darley's Meg to heat their tomato soup and prepare their eggplant ratatouille respectively. As The Man, William

Allert delivers produce and announces catalogues of condiments. He also plays Meg's erstwhile Spanish lover.

A narrative in five helpings, as the playwright describes the divisions in the play, *Salt* is, however, overlong and way too fruity. Call me a peasant but this earnest panegyric to the tomato and the field mushroom all gets somewhat de trop. After Fulton and David, Alexander, Oliver and Nigella this seems like something we have seen prepared earlier. The slabs of food history, the chemistry of toxicity, the alliterative A to Z of herbs and spices - irritatingly over-enunciated by the zealous Mr Allert - smack of fine writing and too much sauce.

Both Barbara West and Eileen Darley are well cast, finding whatever warmth and nuance they can in their roles. But Peta Murray's text too often offers only fidgetty decoration and an archness of tone. The recriminations between mother daughter lose their poignancy and become merely whiny and self-indulgent, the revelations of ancient wrongs are contrived and emotionally manipulative. The title alludes to the fact that too much of a good thing can kill you, or at the very least, make you sick. Maybe there is a lesson here. This production has much potential charm but when a script has such a surfeit of ingredients, the result is, inevitably, indigestion.

Coming Up in December

5 December. Michael Franti and Victor Martinez and the Martinez Brothers. Governor Hindmarsh.

6 December. You am I . Heaven II

11 December. Bondi Cigars. Governor Hindmarsh.

12 December. Jon Spencer Blues Explosion. Governor Hindmarsh.