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Running on Empty

Murray Bramwell’s Reviews

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Sweet Road
by Debra Oswald

State Theatre South Australia
and Playbox

Space

Life, as everyone from your aromatherapist to your personal trainer will tell you, is a journey. We are all out there, pounding away on the four lane black top. That is, when we are not cruising the information superhighway or moping about the road not taken. In popular culture the open vista has beckoned everyone from Jack Kerouac to Toad of Toad Hall, Hopper and Fonda to Thelma and Louise. In every second Australian film for the past twenty five years someone has cranked up the HJ and headed off through the bulldust. They have travelled with estranged parents, psychopaths, country singers and wind-jammering transvestites. Mel Gibson tried it three times, Harvey Keitel less successfully once. Motoring the wide brown land- essential, of course, if you want to get from A to B, let alone Perth or Darwin- has become one of the well-worn tropes of Australian narrative.

Which brings us to Debra Oswald’s Sweet Road, a gridlock of stories of flight and arrival, of lives stalled and then, strike me lucky, set in motion again by the RAA of fate and the jumper leads of destiny.

Jo, ferrying a cake for her husband Brents’ fortieth birthday, stops at the traffic lights only to see him, in his vehicle, puckering lips with her best friend Shelley. She turns the car around and decides to take Brent’s credit card on the ride of its life. She also picks up the hitch-hiker Yasmin, hot-footing it to the New South Wales coast to find her boyfriend. Other pilgrims include Andy and Carla, with the kids, Blake and Nicolle leaving Coober Pedy for a New Start and Frank, a widower on a melancholy caravan holiday, who discovers the zen of canoeing. Then there’s Michael, grieving the death of his son in a traffic accident, travelling alone, delivering fizzy drinks to roadhouses in the back of beyond.

The program describes Sweet Road as an hilarious, cracker Aussie tale and director Aubrey Mellor brings a broad brush to match. Designer Kathryn Sproul, responsible for many stylish productions, opts here for oddly abstracted back projections of aerial photographs and snippets of road maps while the logistics of the driving are managed by the use of cutaway
dodgem, sand-buggy car-thingies powered by black-clad people movers and a pretty hefty front suspension of disbelief.

Sweet Road is, as its name suggests, a good-natured yarn about ordinary people trying to get along. It has an easy manner and a determinedly lovable eccentricity. These are the comic foibles of Seachange and all those other Clochemerles of Sunday night television. Which is part of the problem. Sweet Road, for all its wacky incident and zany characterisation, always seems headed for very familiar destinations.

You have a sense that the actors feel a need to give everything plenty of throttle in case it loses momentum. Victoria Eagger as Jo, starts out with a likeably brittle comedy but then has too few opportunities for variation. Don Barker keeps Frank, the lonely codger on a more even keel but his canoe ride to Valhalla, hazily lit behind Sproul’s gauze screen is a hokey directorial decision beyond salvage. Similarly, the usually excellent Michaela Cantwell as Carla is relentlessly grating and an unhelpfully crass exhibit from the bumper book of Western Suburbs stereotypes.

Steve Greig has considerably more success with the hypermanic Andy, a fonder portrait and a more complex one, but he too is thwarted by over-writing and under-direction. Elizabeth Friels is perky as Yasmin and too good to be true as the lady cop while Peter Docker is varyingingly successful in his various duties as the mechanic and Curtis the knife-wielding bogan. As Michael, the wandering drinks samaritan, Dominique Sweeney is disappointingly miscast. His performance is listless and wooden and the love scene with Eagger, already low on credibility is emotionally catatonic.

Sweet Road is a play which hopes to run on a charm that it doesn’t quite have and ideas of personal quest that are wearily familiar. Aubrey Mellor has tried to find energy in a boisterous vernacular and Kathryn Sproul uses a stylised staging to distract us from the essentially cinematic naturalism of the text. But in doing so both only amplify the problem. Debra Oswald’s play may have a good heart but it is theatrically feeble and, by the end of the evening, her long and winding road has led us everywhere but to our door.

Coming Up in October


27 October. The Dandy Warhols. Governor Hindmarsh.