Appeared in - The Australian

Scenes From an Execution

by Howard Barker

State Theatre Company of South Australia
Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre.
Until 19 October. Tickets $ 42. Conc. $ 37. CLUB26 $16.50
Bookings: BASS 131 246

The execution referred to in Howard Barker’s play, written for radio in 1983 and first fully staged in 1989, is not a death, but the creation of a painting. But the painting is about death, the slaughter in the Battle of Lepanto, fought between the Venetians and the Ottoman Turks in 1571. The naval battle was a big day for Venice, asserting the supremacy of the Venetian mercantile empire against the Turkish invasion.

It was, however, at a cost. It is estimated that, in one day, twenty five thousand Turks, and eight thousand Italians were killed, a further sixteen thousand savagely wounded. The painter Galactia has been commissioned by Urgentino, the Doge of Venice, to record the glorious victory for posterity. But she can paint only death and suffering, a great waterfall of flesh, and her patrons seek to punish her for her temerity.

State Theatre Artistic Director, Rosalba Clemente features as Galactia, a role tailor-made for her robust talents. She stares down cardinals, dukes, admirals, even rival painters - including her lover, the weak-willed Carpeta. But the play is more than an account of the hero artist and director Kim Durban, in allowing Clemente her bravura opportunities, diminishes some of Barker’s nuanced argument. Galactia is not some kind of brush wielding Lara Croft, her strength is also egotism, her self-belief makes her callous to both her daughter and her lover.

Strong counter performances are needed and the somewhat uneven cast is often no match for Clemente. Peter Docker’s Carpeta is a useful, if at times overly abject, foil, Margot Fenley is strongly drawn as the critic Rivera, Andrew Martin’s Cardinal is haughtily impressive, as is Geoff Revell as the arrogant Suffici while Michael Habib provides some leery comic relief. As the Doge, Rob Meldrum works a fine line between urbanity and flippancy but, importantly, he vividly represents Barker’s view that those in power can also be perceptive and articulate, and the relationship between the artist and the State is, and always was, a complex one.
Hugh Colman’s large set, dour black columns and Venetian arches serving as palace, studio and dungeon, is unsparingly lit by Mark Shelton, while the costumes, with the exception of Galactia’s brown and creamy peasant cheesecloth, are what you might call Star Trek Medici.

The State Theatre Company has given us a chance to see a rarely performed text which is rich both in language and in perspective and Kim Durban’s production tellingly captures the debate between painter and patron, even if other layers of implication are less well served.