3 October 2003

Murray Bramwell’s Reviews

Appeared in - The Australian

drowning in my ocean of You
by Fiona Sprott

State Theatre Company
Adelaide, Queen’s Theatre
until 18 October. Bookings at BASS 131 246
Tickets $16.50 - $42

Being at the end of a pier is not the same as being at the end of your tether, but it is very close. In Fiona Sprott’s drowning in my ocean of You, her characters, known generically as Heroine and Hero, Mother and Handsome Man, dart back and forth not only in time but in emotional register also. The settings are indistinct - one marker is the music of Mario Lanza, another is the neurotic courtship protocol of something resembling the present.

That we don’t quite know is unimportant. Rather, Sprott is exploring the shaping forces in family - not just of our own parents, but their formative experiences also. For the Heroine and her Mother there is the perpetual disappointment of a feckless man - a drunken husband and emotionally unreliable father. This amplifies the mother’s own childhood trauma of family sexual abuse and spins her into a Blanche Dubois world of red dancing frocks and romantic tenors. “Your Mother is fragile,” the doctor tells the Heroine, still yet a child, “she needs you.”

Director Chris Drummond ably guides a strong cast through the many nuances and fragments of Sprott’s script. Like her previous Jezebel monologues, with such cascading titles as Often I Find That I Am Naked and Partly It’s About Love... Partly It’s About Hate, her influences here are as much from Seinfeld as Strindberg - and drowning in my ocean of You, for all its dark implication, is skittish both in form and tone.

Designer Robert Cousins exploits the jaded elegance of the Queen’s Theatre to good effect. Adding a wooden stage, some twinkly starlights and an ironic proscenium red curtain he uses the peeling white walls to frame a single bed, a restaurant table and an imagined pier. Composer Stuart Day sparingly supplies piano improvisations while Stephen Sheehan, the Handsome Man, admirably serves as MC and Dennis Potter crooner.
This is risky territory but the performances are so well judged that such studied theatricality only enhances Colleen Cross’s truthful study of the reluctant Heroine. Rory Walker is excellent as the persistent Hero, incompetently serenading her on the pier the very night her mother has died. Jacqy Phillips is also memorable as the Mother whose life spirit has faded into sadness. Once again Fiona Sprott, with excellent script development from Drummond and State’s On Site Laboratory, has written a gratifying romantic comedy. But before that Hero can be lowered onstage from a smiling half-moon, singing The Very Thought of You, we have to visit some very troubled musings as well.