Standing Tall in Different Worlds

Murray Bramwell’s Reviews

Appeared in - The Australian

Gulpilil
by David Gulpilil and Reg Cribb

Adelaide Festival and Belvoir Street Theatre
Dunstan Playhouse
Adelaide Festival Centre
11 March.
Bookings - BASS 131 246
Tickets $35 - $45
Until 14 March
Belvoir Street Company B, Sydney
7 - 24 October
Tickets $29 - $43

We have seen him as The Aborigine, as Fingerbone and as the Tracker, but never like this. I’m David Gulpilil, he exclaims, pointing his thumb towards his sleek, lean torso, this is about me. In an event that has been a long time coming, one of Australia’s most accomplished and best known film actors, not to mention dancer and Marwu tribal elder from Ramingining in central Arnhem Land, is telling us about the life of David Gulpilil.

“My two legs stand in different worlds” he declares, and his one man show, co-written with Reg Cribb and directed with assured simplicity by Neil Armfield, celebrates and delves these contrasts. Framing his narrative with a riveting account of a night out on the river - “I am the real Crocodile Hunter and I feed my family too” he says with a wry smile, Gulpilil, over two hours, also tells us about his encounters with the crocodiles of the European world.

With exuberance, dignity and wit, and demonstrating his extraordinary talents as an actor, songman and dancer, he discusses the finer points of harpoons and woomeras. Then, in the first of a series of sudden shifts - not only in time but in tone - the brown calico backdrop to his campfire set becomes a screen for images of his humpy. Do you like my house? he asks with all the charm of a riddler. Do we say yes? - when no-one in the audience would live there in a fit - or no, confirming the fact that no-one else, not least the artist Gulpilil, should be either.

These moments of confrontation are adroitly managed. The point is made but not laboured. Gulpilil mercurially navigates many moods and perspectives - some with the aid of props, including an evening suit into which he periodically steps to recall (with shrewdly selected newsreel and...
film excerpts) his life as a celebrity - at the premiere of Walkabout in Lon-
don, at Cannes, and later at the AFI where he was honoured (belatedly, he
reminded us) for his role in The Tracker.

Gulpilil talks with candour and almost unnerving directness about his
problems with grog and his imprisonment for drink-driving. “In my land I
feel safe”, he says, “but in your’s I feel that tap on the shoulder and it’s
hard to say no.”

Stephen Page’s idea to invite Gulpilil to the Adelaide Festival was an in-
spired one and this production is a triumph for the actor and his collabora-
tors. David Gulpilil’s courage and generosity are as great as his gifts as a
performer. Anyone who is fortunate enough to see this exceptional work
of theatre will never forget it.

David Gulpilil is a very well-known Australian. His appearances in films
such as Walkabout, The Last Wave, Storm Boy, Crocodile Dundee and,
more recently, Rabbit-Proof Fence and The Tracker have confirmed his
reputation as one our most outstanding actors. He is also a celebrated tra-
ditional dancer who has represented Australia all over the world.

Out of the spotlight, though, his life has been very different. As a Marwu
man from Ramingining in central Arnhem Land, he practises the tradi-
tions of his people, hunting crocodile and living close to the land. The life
is fulfilling but it has also been arduous and, over the years, Gulpilil him-
self has experienced poverty, alcohol problems, depression and imprison-
ment.

Much has happened in his fifty years, but until he was approached by
Stephen Page and Neil Armfield he had never thought of telling his story
on the stage. It has been a hard process by all accounts. Gulpilil reads no
English and collaborators Armfield and playwright Reg Cribb don’t speak
Mandalpingu. And the confrontation with past pain has been such that
the actor left rehearsals to return home.