

t h e a t r e n o t e s

Independent arts commentary by Alison Croggon

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Fringe: A Black Joy, Yuri Wells, In the Absence of Sunlight

In the interests of organisation, Ms TN has been tidying her desk. This bland, anodyne phrase cannot begin to comprehend the dimensions of the task. It's like the fifth labour of Hercules (Augean Stables, Cleaning Of), only instead of incontinent cows, I have constant incoming drifts of press releases, programs, drafts, invoices, notebooks, permission requests, bills, receipts, postcards, lists, chocolate wrappers, magazines and books, books, books - phalanxes of them diving in like migratory flocks of starlings, and taking up disordered residence anywhere there's a spare centimetre.

I have often thought my desk is a reflection of my state of mind, and this tells you more than you, gentle reader, need to know. But having reached the point where annihilation by domestic avalanche was more probable than not, I girded my loins, sinews, teeth and anything else that needed girding, and now my study appears to be the habitation of a marginally sane and reasonably organised woman. Appearances may deceive, certainly, but it's nice to have the surface at least, even if it's undermined by a faintly hysterical loquacity.



And now at last I can begin to speak, if briefly, of last week's fringedwelling, which has been sidelined not only by the Labour of the Desk but by my upcoming departure from these sea-girt shores next Monday. I saw three shows last week, making five in all out of a

possible menu of around 400 acts, which is pretty wimpy compared to **some others**. On the upside, I enjoyed all of them. And if the Fringe is conceived as a showcase for the energies throbbing beneath Melbourne's sedate skin, I reckon it's filling its brief nicely. Perhaps what I found most interesting about these shows is that there are all, crucially, works of imagination. It's about time imagination came back.

A Black Joy is one of two Declan Greene plays on at the Fringe. The other, **Home Economics**, is running at the Store Room until Saturday, so if you missed the first, I recommend the second, sight unseen. I wasn't especially enamoured of Greene's **Rage Boy**, which I saw in 2007 in a production directed, like this one, by Susie Dee; but two years is a long time in an artist's life, and Greene's been working hard. Now his quality is clear and unambiguous. He's a dark, explosive talent, a playwright who channels the anxieties of 21st century living into a tunnel of comedic nightmare that is as grotesque and pitiless as Bosch.

The conceit of this play is that the characters are all celebrities - John Candy (Tom Considine), Diane Keaton (Anne Browning), Bette Davis (Carole Patullo), Joseph Cotten (Chris Bunsworth), Dakota Fanning (Miriam Glaser), Corey Haim (Ash Flanders) and Megan Twycross playing a character who looks suspiciously like Paris Hilton. They are addressed, all through the play, by their full names, which is a device that gets weirder through repetition. As the author says in the program, the play emerged from a documentary about the fetish called "Feeding", where one partner overfeeds the morbidly obese other in a perverse co-dependency. The centre of *A Black Joy's* action is John Candy lying beneath his enormous stomach, being fed baked beans by Bette Davis.

This morbid dysfunction sets the cue for the action in the play - the plot, as such, includes Diane Keaton neurotically pumping iron so she won't be raped by her lesbian house cleaner; Keaton's husband Senator Joseph Cotten imprisoning Paris Hilton and feeding her the liver of her murdered daughter, Dakota Fanning; and Corey Haim's romance with Dakota Fanning and the Neo-Nazis. It could be simply a schlock-fest, but Greene's frankly beautiful writing - which ranges from spikily hilarious dialogue to extraordinarily lyric monologues - and Dee's focused and unafraid production makes it something else altogether.

Each time I've contemplated this play, I find myself thinking about mediaeval or Renaissance art - yes, Bosch, because it's enacting a kind of hell; but the celebrity "characters" also recall the stock characters of Commedia dell'arte or even Punch and Judy, obscene and grotesquely exaggerated types who refract our human foibles. It's maybe not so odd - Bosch and the vulgar theatre emerged from another age haunted by apocalyptic fantasy, a world as unstable and strange as ours. It's a comedy for a contemporary apocalypse, underpinned by millennial fears - climate change, mass species extinction - in which the idea of the self is emptied out by celebrity-fuelled consumerism, in which appetite devours itself.

The production is done in the round, with Candy's prone body - swollen under a huge sheet with horrifically rotting feet poking out the end - the centrepiece around which the action revolves. The

performances tackle the extremity of the text with relish, excavating at once the cruel comedy and strange pathos of the text. They're all good, but I particularly enjoyed Carole Patullo's Bette Davis, Tom Considine's John Candy and Anne Browning's hyper-neurotic Diane Keaton. Really something.

From the large to the small: **Yuri Wells** is a one-man show (with added musician) written and performed by Benedict Hardie, and co-devised and directed by Anne-Louise Sarks. It's a change of direction for Hayloft, whom we last saw creating mayhem among the commentariat with their huge and ambitious production **3XSisters**, for which Hardie directed a third of Chekhov's play. Maybe it's not so much a change of direction as of scale: in its conception it's as ambitious as anything this company has done.

Yuri Wells is a beautiful piece of theatre, created with deeply thought artfulness and craft. It begins as the audience enters the small, curtained space, with Hardie and musician Stuart Bowden doing a kind of pre-show warm-up, greeting audience members, playing the odd song and passing a toy xylophone around for people to cautiously plink. It's all very relaxed, and with lots of meta-theatrical friendliness. Once it's time to begin, Hardie tells us he's starting the show. So far, so avant garde familiar. Then Bowden sits down among the audience, and Hardie removes all the props from the stage, leaving it totally bare. (The props all gain their significance in the subsequent monologue, but by then we must imagine them).

Hardie tells us that he is playing Yuri Wells, an aged care nurse who, it is rapidly clear, has problems relating to women. And then comes a miraculous and unexpected transition, from an actor playing an actor, with the expected nods to the audience, to an actor becoming Yuri Wells, lonely and possibly homicidal human being. The power of this transition is in the words as much in Hardie's strangely unsettling performance: he takes techniques more at home in contemporary lyric poetry and applies them to theatre, creating an allusive, rich language that is subtle and full of ambiguity, while still remaining emotionally lucid. The writing is theatrical in the best way, and turns on a dime. *Yuri Wells* is, in the end, a portrayal of human loneliness; but its power comes from its being a portrait of a particular person's loneliness, and all the more desolate and complex for that.

The show is unsettling, disturbing and surprisingly gentle, all at once. But perhaps its greatest invitation - and reinvention - is into the world of imagination, ours and the actor's. I thought this show utterly enchanting, in the proper sense of the word: "to subject to a magical influence, to bewitch", "to delight". Remembering of course that spells have their darker side.

Finally, I saw **In the Absence of Sunlight**, a one-on-one show that began at the Town Hall pub in Erroll St, North Melbourne, as an assignation in a bar with a stranger. I confess that, given its set-up, I was expecting something like the controversial hit of the Edinburgh Fringe, **Ontoerend Goed's Internal**: something that turned the intimacy of theatre into a disturbing collision between fantasy and reality. It turned out not to be that at all. Or if it turned out to be something like that, it was not in the way I expected.

When you arrive at the right table, there is a card under the

"reserved" sign that says: *I need to ask you something*. The performer, Tamara Searle, turns up and there's a stilted conversation, the kind that happens between strangers who are meeting for a reason only one of them understands. She talks about where she lives, about John the barman, her room upstairs. She talks about how she has seen me in the street (and I almost say, but I never hang out around here, but don't). Then I'm invited upstairs, to a room that opens out on a balcony. She pours some elderflower cordial, she tells me she has been ill, she takes me out on the balcony and we blow bubbles.

By this time it's clear that the invitation of this show is to be part of the fiction. I am the woman that she has observed obsessively during her illness, unknowingly seen in all my intimate moments. And I guess how you might respond to this show would depend on how you feel about entering a fictional self. It's something I do all the time, one way or another, so once I understood this, I found myself playing this woman. After all, I might have lived on my own across the road from the pub. I might have been observed in my solitude. I might have something to forgive a woman I have never seen in my life.

I thought it a delicate and brave performance, only half shielded by its fiction. Oddly, the more I became my fictional character, the less chatty I became: the more prepared to be silent, to watch Tamara to see what she would do or say next. It was strangely liberating, just as sitting in the dark of the theatre is liberating. Perhaps one of the fascinations of art is the chance not to be yourself, or to escape the carapace of imposed selves into other aspects of who you are. I don't know how useful it is to know that this theatre piece is an adaptation, or perhaps more strictly speaking a kind of coda, to **Marjorie Barnard's** lyrical short story about illness and recovery, *The Persimmon Tree*. It gives it an added depth, I guess; but I'm not sure that it matters.

Picture: Benedict Hardie in *Yuri Wells*. Photo: Lachlan Woods

***A Black Joy* by Declan Greene, directed by Susie Dee. Design by Emily Barrie, lighting by Katie Sfetkidis, audiovisual by Nicholas Verso, sound design by Ben Bourke. With Anne Browning, Chris Bunsworth, Tom Considine, Ash Flanders, Miriam Glaser, Carole Patullo, Megan Twycross and Alastair Watts on cello. Fortyfive Downstairs, Melbourne Fringe Festival, until October 4, closed.**

***Yuri Wells*, written, co-devised and performed by Benedict Hardie, co-devised and directed by Anne-Louise Sarks, music and performance by Stuart Bowden. The Hayloft Project, Melbourne Fringe Festival, North Melbourne Town Hall, until October 10.**

***In the Absence of Sunlight*, devised by Katerina Kokkinos-Kennedy, Dayna Morrissey, Danny Pettingill, Ivanka Sokol, Xan Colman, performed by Tamara Searle. A is for Atlas, Melbourne Fringe Festival, until October 11. [Bookings here.](#)**

Alison Croggon