

Give and Take, Perth Now

Thursday, 14 June 2007

Last Updated Saturday, 16 June 2007

NGAPARTJI Ngapartji is a piece of theatre that not only entertains, but informs the audience of a hidden part of Australian history.

Vicki Brett, STM February 26, 2007 10:00pm

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Big hART

Playhouse Theatre

Season runs until March 2

It's not often theatre relies on the audience giving anything more than applause back to the performers. But if you can give your attention, to Ngapartji Ngapartji (meaning 'you give me something, I give you something') you will take an intimate inspiration for reconciliation.

The lessons begin early in this Big hART production, with Pitjantjatjara elder Lorna Wilson teaching us the kindergarten song of Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes in the famous Western Desert language. It was a little too long before lead performer Trevor Jamieson took us where we needed to go – through his family's history.

At the height of the Cold War, Prime Minister Menzies gave Britain permission to test atomic bombs in outback Australia. Jamieson's family was fenced out of their sacred land where the British exploded hundreds of deadly bombs with total disregard for human life, creating terrible Aboriginal suffering from radiation and social dislocation.

This is the untold story. We're taught about the stolen generation, alcoholism and soothing the dying pillow. What is not taught in schools, is the eerie red cloud that consumed South Australia, as far as Adelaide, causing cancer and sickness in whoever fell in its path – mostly Western Desert Aborigines and the troops on site.

This sickening, yet fascinating story uncovers how two distant worlds are closely and irrevocably linked by man's powerful and devastating invention.

Unfortunately, Ngapartji Ngapartji failed to engross; the 2-hour running time was crying for an intermission and no substitute, including a Winnie the Pooh tale could cure the restless audience. However the informative production still managed to connect because of its balance between contemporary theatre and traditional Aboriginal storytelling. The ever-present elders watched over Jamieson's charismatic performance – half in Pitjantjatjara, half in English – making the audience feel like part of the family.

Although Jamieson was the constant, charming bridge between audience and elders, Big hART chose to use multicultural actors to drive their globally interlinking story home. Dance and circus trained Japanese performer Tomoko Yamasaki was a stand out with her writhing interpretation of the nuclear effect on Hiroshima and the subsequent chain reaction.

Greek broadcaster Lex Marinos was powerful as the booming voice of the white man – British, Australian, brutes and sympathisers alike. However singer Saira Luther, who is of Indian descent, was drastically underused both in the story of the Afghans, and in song.

With a simple set – consisting of an upward curving piece of land for actors to climb, lots of seating and scattered bone-like pottery – it is the storytelling shining through and hitting home. With help from film footage of conversations with his family, Jamieson's final chapter closes on a personal note. His troubled brother, who is mysterious in the background throughout, is revealed showing the human cost of Maralinga. With Jangala Jamieson, a strong, muscular man, breaking into tears during the final song, it is crystal clear how this devastation and displacement truly affects the Aboriginal people.

Jamieson explains their connection with the land in simple terms. His personal story shows how it was undermined, and worse, how their lives were tossed into the red cloud with such little regard. Ngapartji Ngapartji received a standing ovation, which it deserved for a powerful story uniting audience and performer, regardless of any storytelling flaws.