Review: Håmlet – A New Australian Play (Bondi Feast)

posted in Theatre by Suzy Wrong

Venue: Bondi Pavilion Theatre (Bondi NSW), Jul 24 – 25, 2018
Playwright: Antoinette Barboutis
Director: Victor Kalka
Cast: Antoinette Barbouttis, Matt Castley, Philip D'Ambrosio, Amanda Maple-Brown, Linda Nicholls-Gidley, Gemma Scoble, Alexandra Stamell, Alana Stewart
Theatre review

Shakespeare can be considered the foundation of how we do theatre in the West, and is hence the master we study and seek to emulate. He, of course, is not the only male of our species who has shaped and dominated an art form, that had for many centuries disallowed participation by women. Even today, there remains only one female working as Artistic Director at a Sydney main stage theatre company.

Antoinette Barbouttis' *Håmlet – A New Australian Play* is a radical exercise of deconstruction, of Shakespeare and therefore of the very notion of how we do theatre, under deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. In tandem are personal expressions about the aftermath of sexual assaults. Ophelia is killed off by Shakespeare, but Barbouttis endeavours to work her way out of the wilderness. Both projects, to dismantle theatre and to recover from rape, are fraught and highly complicated, resulting in a show that feels unequivocally avant garde.

The play is concerned with identifying and rejecting existing mechanisms, in hope of locating something progressive. The artist succeeds gloriously in tearing apart what might be considered "the establishment", but it is uncertain what is installed in its place. It is likely that the newness of what is achieved, escapes labelling, but it is undeniable, that what we find accompanying the strangeness of the experience, is an alarming quotient of pain and sorrow.

It is a work of comedy, extremely caustic in tone, and subversive to the core. Director Victor Kalka brings to fruition Barbouttis' ideas, whilst crucially retaining a pervasive rawness that beautifully represents the spirit of *Håmlet*. The show is at its best when it is at its least polished; unnerving and confusing, it disturbs us in the moment, and leaves us frazzled after, quite possibly in a masochistically satisfying way. Not all will be able to piece together every bizarre fragment, but its control over our visceral responses is clearly very powerful.
Barbouttis is a formidable presence, edgy, with a quiet aggression that translates irresistibly on stage. Her wanton disregard of the fourth wall requires that her audience is self-aware, and therefore reflective, of how we are implicated in its ideas. She is determined to not let any of us sit back and get away with creating distance between her world and ours. Linda Nicholls-Gidley and Amanda Maple-Brown are more conventional in performance style, both delivering memorable scenes in their embrace of a wild vision. Four other players, all in black and interjecting at opportune occasions, function as a modern chorus of sorts, bringing energy to the stage when the air of depression becomes unbearable.

Håmlet – A New Australian Play is extraordinary, in what it wants to say, and how it wants to say it. Its artistic integrity is unparalleled, and the way it sticks to its guns, moves us in ways that are unpredictable, and confounding. Some are likely to find it a difficult work to enjoy, or chastise it for being insufficiently entertaining, but the uniqueness of its approach, and the staunchness of its convictions, feel singularly rare and profoundly valuable. We need to react against a way of life that seems determined to keep us parochial, narrow-minded and fearful. Art of this calibre is the inspiration that can help set us free.

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