

The best of the best

Suzanne Spinner on the Keene-Taylor project

This season of 6 short works in 2 programs brings together the best of The Keene-Taylor project, a collaboration between playwright Daniel Keene and director Ariette Taylor. Since November 1997 in 6 seasons at various venues—The Trades Hall, La Mama and the Brotherhood of St Lawrence Warehouse—KTP have presented 16 short pieces, mostly monologues, and 2 full length works, often played to small audiences but invariably to universal critical acclaim, with 2 of the actors, Greg Stone and newcomer Dan Spielman, being nominated for Green Room Awards. In their own words, “what began as an experiment, has become a commitment” and even without having seen the previous seasons I am prepared to affirm that these are the best of the best.

Each piece works on its own but in sequence each program indirectly forms a discontinuous narrative. The same characters don't actually recur but represent possibilities of being, witness to previous lives, or even the same character grown older, and each program has clear though subtle threads of imagery and concerns.

Shared between *Kaddish*, *The Violin* and *The Rain* there is a recurrent sense of loss, of things misplaced, left behind to speak of what has happened. It begins with the plastic bags of a dead woman's things that her husband feels burdened with. He wants to toss them off the pier but instead throws them over somebody's fence. It ends with all the rooms full of possessions belonging to Jews who were transported. The girl now an old woman who was given to look after the possessions, and has done so ever since, sorts and resorts them, sieving for meaning and understanding. In between, there is the family made to board a train, not the same train but maybe the same train, and the

violin that represents everything that is precious, fragile and human. There is an accumulation of objects and one sees that, at death, all that is left is a few things in a plastic bag or a suitcase and the knowledge that music was made and lives lived and lost.

The works in program 2 were all first staged in the warehouse of the BSL full of discarded furniture and the set recreates that clutter in *The Malthouse* making a connection between the legacy of things. In these 3 plays everyone is living or trying to amongst other people's cast-offs. Meanwhile death or annihilation, from loneliness and the difficulty of living alone, outside and on the margins of society, is snapping at their heels.

If the world of things was more about Europe and possibly the past (though events in Kosovo made it dreadfully current) this world of aloneness is more recognisably Australian now and just beyond our comfortable security-grilled front door. Keene's characters are the people that most of us don't know, the homeless, the desperately unemployed, the boy facing aggravated rape charges. When we see them we shun them, afraid of contact and the infection of chaos and despair.

We don't want to know, in the way that, if I had read about the rape case in the newspaper, my attention, my sympathy, my empathy would have been entirely with the woman. That would have been the story, the issue. In, *Untitled Monologue*, Keene takes up where we have not so much left off, as left out, bringing us into the heart, mind and body of the attacker and makes us see there is another victim for whom we as a society are just as answerable. He does not try to justify or explain away what the boy has

done, just allows us to understand what had led to that night in the carpark. None of what we are privileged to hear, the boy's letters to his father, will most probably ever form part of his statement to the police, so no one will ever know what else they really need to know. The boy himself would not think any of it mattered, it was just the condition of his life, and only we and God knew the aloneness at the centre that led him there.

In *A Glass of Twilight*, a man pays another man for sex. To need not to be alone so much that intimacy must be paid for, to have nothing to trade but your body is awful and tragic but this is not. Once the deal is made, it is transforming, it is love and we are allowed to see it as love in the words and gestures of these men, and in the ghostly exquisite pair of older men, ballroom dancers immaculately dressed in tails who perform a dance of love and death, a dance of the rarity of touch.

In *Night, A Wall, Two Men* a similarly transcendent motif is there from the beginning and seems incongruous. A boy, an ordinary boy with a blessed voice walks through the piece from time to time singing Latin plainsong, but as the lives and the relationship between the 2 homeless men is revealed in all its sadness and fury, all its absurdity and all its rancour—and we have laughed with them at things that they and we should cry about—it's right that the song is heard soaring above and around. It seems to say they have been heard, if only in heaven, or some better place, or failing that, by a middle class theatre audience, who might leave not quite as complacent as they entered.

This is a very full theatrical experience, a unity of means and meanings, fine writing matched by fine direction and fine performances from all of the casts. Yes, I'd agree entirely with the nominations of Greg Stone and Dan Spielman but add Malcolm Robertson to the list. There is an assuredness about these pieces that is rare in new



Patricia Kennedy, *The Rain*

Zoe Burton

Australian work. It is wonderful to see theatre that has had enough time with the right people, to settle and keep on finding itself anew.

If I was to carp I would say Keene could cut some of the false endings from *A Night*. It seems to reach a natural ending but is then prolonged in ways that stand out markedly as derivative of other writers—it loses its individual voice and starts to seem Godot-ish and Monk O'Neill-ish, and this is quite a shock because while it might be said to traverse their joint territory, you don't even think of Beckett or Hibberd till this lapse at the end. But really I don't want to carp, I just want it to be perfect.

Keene/Taylor Project: The Best of Seasons 1-6; writer Daniel Keene, director Ariette Taylor; Program 1: Kaddish, Robin Cuming; The Violin, Anni Finsterer, Paul English & Chloe Armstrong; The Rain, Patricia Kennedy; Program 2: A Glass of Twilight, Paul English, Greg Stone; Untitled Monologue, Dan Spielman; Night, A Wall, Two Men, Greg Stone, Malcolm Robertson, The Malthouse, May 4, 15