

FORMS AND CONTRADICTIONS

Arena Theatre, Panacea, devised by Rosemary Myers & Bruce Gladwin, director Rosemary Myers, writers Julianne O'Brien & David Carlin, The Former Police Garage, Russell Street, Oct 16 - Nov 1; Stolen, devised by Jane Harrison, director Wesley Enoch, Playbox, The Malthouse, Oct 21 - Nov 30; Leah Purcell, Box the Pony, devised by

Scott Rankin, director Sean Mee, The George Fairfax Studio, Victorian Arts Centre Oct 20 - 24; Red, devised by Lucy Taylor, Rachel Spiers, Mark Shannon, director Rachel Spiers, Red Fish Theatre Company, The George Fairfax Studio, Victorian Arts Centre, Oct 28 - 31

Panacea promised and offered much—a thoughtful and well written script of ideas and issues and fully articulated characters to carry them, original and exciting live music/soundscape, taut and pacy direction, good multimedia design and an excellent ensemble of performers. It had it all but I couldn't help going away concerned that it had evaded the real issue. It was all very clear about the horrendous effects of performance enhancing drugs in sport and in particular their effects on young still developing bodies, but it confined that critique to Eastern Bloc countries and in the second half it was savagely satirical about the marketing of the Sports Celebrity in Australia today (viz the remaking of Lucy Tyler-Sharman—"High Voltage Cyclist Peddles New Image"). Largely these issues were the soft targets and they were demolished, but there was another major issue caught up amongst it all, designer drugs and recreational drug use amongst young people; on that it was strangely silent. All I could deduce was that it feared alienating its intended audience. I was disturbed by what was implicitly endorsed rather than pleased at what was exposed and knocked down. By employing all the resources of, and utilising the aesthetics of techno, it ignored any other way of being contemporary; the form endorsed the content it was claiming to critique. It was all a rave and the baddies were the East Germans and Big Business, so let's party on!

Jeff Busby

Bruce Gladwin & Genevieve Morris in *Arena Theatre's Panacea*

The premiere of *Stolen* and the first Melbourne performances of Leah Purcell's *Box the Pony* and Deborah Cheetham's *White Baptist Abba Fan* provided an opportunity to compare and contrast contemporary Indigenous theatre. *Stolen* has had a phenomenal success at the box office, testimony to the interest in the issue it tackles. Despite the emotional and social potency of the issue I found it diffusely sentimental and oddly unaffectioning. The script and many of the performances lacked specificity and depth; perhaps *Stolen* tried to cover too many stories to get deeply into any one of them. It felt like it had been written to satisfy a committee, to represent ideas and interests rather than embody them and it lacked the writer's individual take on the issue. The design and direction were stylish, sophisticated and seamless; they created an almost impenetrable surface concealing a hollowness of meaning and contact. The effect of *Stolen* was more in terms of the knowledge one brought to it than the insights and emotional experience one got from it. The testimonies in the Report on the Stolen Generation have moved all Australians who have read them, yet *Stolen* did not move me as I expected it could.

A work like Leah Purcell's *Box the Pony* is absolutely a piece of theatre made by an actor with a writer and a director. It is Purcell's story but with the collaboration of writer Scott Rankin and director Sean Mee they have made art, powerful theatre from her life in a complex and confronting tour de force. Purcell's performance is so exceptional in its physical grace, the wit and

timing of her transformation from one character to another, the virtuosity of her acting, it is difficult to imagine the show without her. Yet, *Box the Pony* could be done and done well by say Deborah Mailman or Ningali Lawford, which testifies to its power as a dramatic monologue, separate from its undeniable power as a one woman show. Purcell is an extraordinary actor, utterly in command of herself and her performance at every moment. I found a comment in one review which referred to her as a "phenomenal mimic" quite offensive in its devaluation of her craft as an actor. It was by turns hilarious, tragic, deeply spiritual without ever being precious, serious but never earnest, and fantastically complex in its articulation of the pushes and pulls of growing up as a young Aboriginal woman. It sparkles with the veracity of lived and reflected-on experience. I can't wait to see more of her—she could do anything; she already has.

Red was first seen at the *Melbourne Fringe* last year, where it was awarded "best original new work" before touring to the Adelaide Fringe this year. I wish I had seen the original version to capture the raw talent of young performer Lucy Taylor rather than noticing the flimsiness and banality of the ideas. It was one of those works that deserved to be in and win the Fringe award but was done a disservice by transferring to the mainstream. It's become overblown and over inflated and can't sustain the context it was placed in at The Fairfax. Lucy Taylor's performance is as wonderful as no doubt it first was, but it is so heavily buttressed by so much else that is superfluous—indifferent slides, a whole gaggle of musicians and a couple of unnecessary male performers. It is short and runs out of heat because it tries to carry so much else. To have left it with Taylor, a soundtrack and just the superb lighting and costuming would have been enough. Unfortunately what was fresh and exciting now seems arch and overworked, losing its wit and playfulness. Some things are better left, to free the creators to move on to new work.

Suzanne Spinner