

A full house of confessions

Suzanne Spinner joins the audience for Playworks at La Mama

Generous Confessions was a one-day seminar with rehearsed readings of short commissioned works presented by Playworks, the National Centre for Women Performance Writers, at La Mama as an umbrella event of The Melbourne Writers Festival. It was significant because it put resources and focus on Melbourne writers (like any national organisation based in Sydney, Playworks is sometimes accused of being Sydneycentric) and it also added a dimension to the Melbourne Writers Festival which is singularly lacking—a space to consider performance writing.

Under the direction of Melanie Beddie, six writers—Margaret Cameron, Sue Giles, Sara Hardy, Johann McIntyre, Tee O'Neill and Karen Corbett—were each asked to write a five-minute piece which addressed the meaning for them of “theatricality”. Playworks’ Director Clare Grant admitted that this was “an enormous brief”. At the writers’ disposal were a group of excellent and generous performers—Peter Houghton,

Alice McCreddie, Margaret Mills, Ian Scott and Maria Theodorakis—all well-versed in making an hour or two on a script look like a week of rehearsal.

At the conclusion of what turned out to be quite lengthy performances, discussion was generously mediated by Maude Davey. The works, however, were a mixed bag with only two writers, Sara Hardy and Margaret Cameron—significantly, both experienced writer-performers and highly literate in the exploration of theatre form—filling the “enormous brief”.

After the performances, manifestos on the future of working in live performance were presented by performer-academic Yoni Prior, writer-director Patricia Cornelius and director-writer Kate Cherry.

Among her many provocative and thoughtful comments Yoni Prior said:

“I am as consoled as anyone by a nice play...with consistent characters, beginning, middle and end points, pithy dialogue and neat composition. But don't tell me they bear anything but superficial resemblance

to existence and please present me with some options”.

The beginnings of such well-made plays were in the pieces by Johann McIntyre (*The Miracle of Birth*) and Tee O'Neil (*The Bush at Night*)—not “nice” because they looked at pretty ghastly male characters, however their form was essentially naturalism or realism, and both felt to me that they might just as well be realised as film or television scripts.

Patricia Cornelius, again amongst much more, talked about the primacy of the actor, the mesmerising presence, the body-voice connection. The actor as meta-subject was highlighted in Sue Giles’ *A Very Short Play* which animated the censuring, interior voice of the performer. However, in staying within the confines of the device without employing it to interrogate the content, the work became a solipsistic exercise, promising more than it could deliver.

Kate Cherry argued that the place of theatre now was once again to take up social and political protest, to provoke debate about contemporary issues. There

was an element of protest in Karen Corbett’s untitled confessional but it rambled over a plethora of issues and was not redeemed by the revelation of the Koori connection at the end.

Only in Margaret Cameron’s *The Night* and Sara Hardy’s *Oddly Lunchbox* did I sense some of the “options” that Yoni Prior asked for. The theatricality of these pieces was contained in the animation of the live presence of the performer making things happen in the actual space of the theatre over time: a woman leaves the theatre part way through a performance; a length of elastic stretches between three people and reverberates across a chain of relationships.

La Mama was the ideal venue for these confessions, its cramped intimacy creating camaraderie. We were all in together, some 60 of us—writers, performers, speakers and audience all facing each other, and we left with some of Sara Hardy’s “words that feed her”, a desire for “faith, hope, love—and the greatest of these, Full House!”.

Papers given at the Generous Confessions seminar will be published in the Playworks newsletter beginning with Yoni Prior in the December 97 issue. Information: Playworks, Tel 02-92648414 Fax 02-92648449