

# Night Writes

## Sydney theatre reviews

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## Queenslander & Albumen | Theatre Travels

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IMAGE BY KIPP LEE

It's the first week of No:Intermission, a new short theatre festival celebrating Australian work presented by Theatre Travels. The two opening pieces for the festival cover the murky interconnection of share houses and the sinister overlapping of photography and blood.

In an old, creaky Queenslander during a torrential downpour, a group of housemates face the truth of their lives right before destruction. Adam (Rowan Brunt) has left his parents to reconnect with an old friend (Megan Hunter) and begin a new adventure. That friend is struggling to find meaning in her dead-end job while similarly struggling to understand a mysteriously absent housemate Lucy (Laneikka Denne). Then there's the couple of the group Mercedes (Iyrah Tzanis) and Sam (Chloe Brisk), who have hit an insurmountable disagreement around what love means.

Jammed together in one house, each character gets a glimpse of the others' realities, usually through fights, which piece together the tension of the home that they describe as not even a real house. On the night of a house party, the typical Queensland rains threaten the very foundations of the building and the thin threads holding the housemates together.

Tremayne Gordon's short play uses the devastation of flooding in Queensland as the starting point for exploring connection and resilience. The writing strives for poetic lyricism in to-audience recitations and repetitions which provide the majority of the structuring for the narrative. However, over less than forty minutes, his characters discuss the true meaning of love, self-doubt, failure, and death in the various personal dramas and dilemmas they each bring to the shared living room such that no topic is afforded the appropriate attention. In particular, Adam's presence in the house is prop-like as he becomes a sponge for the housemates' trauma and complaints without revealing any of his own motivations for moving to Brisbane. As a loose sketch, there is enough to maintain interest in the narrative but there is little in the script strong enough to handle the weight of the real-life tragedies of the floods in 2010 and 2011.

Rosie Niven's direction finds flexible humour in the drunken dance party where Adam turns Armstrong in a moonwalk with a twist. Here the production shines as a simple story about unlikely friends and the comfort to be found in careful vulnerability. Hunter in her characterisation of the precise and overbearing housemate is well articulated and stands out as natural and easy on stage. Similarly, Denne lends Lucy a subtle authenticity too often crowded out by the tropes of a troubled young woman.

Speaking of troubled women, the central figure of the second play, *Albumen*, is a vague and complicated ex-artist working in data entry and steadily losing touch with life's meaning. Through blood donation, Jessa (Lali Gill) is able to find stability and purpose without the sinister draining presence of her old art teacher Danielle (Katie Lees). The psychological thriller meets love story Mishka Lavigne has written entwines the worlds of photography and haematology with their shared protein albumen.

When Jessa begins a relationship with her blood donation nurse Lucas (Aaresh Madon), the new attention alters her perspective on her past as a visual artist and her twisted relationship with Danielle. The more Jessa pushes Lucas's gaze away, the more difficult it becomes to ignore her fatigue, disinterest, and general unhappiness with her life. Gill is compelling in her flat emotionality broken by brief glimpses into turmoil and desire. She spars well against Madon's sweet and sappy desperation for more. Together the two are genuine in their depiction of new

romance and the many things lovers are willing to forgive.

On the other hand, Lees as the blunt photographer and artist extraordinaire, is overblown and caricatured in her pomposity and pride. She strides across the stage, lecturing the audience about art and her work in particular, demonstrating an arrogance not backed up by the nuance of power and reverence. The relationship between teacher and student, photographer and model, is a complicated one driven by control and imbalances of power, but it's difficult to see what draws Jessa to Danielle, even so many years after leaving art school, as the true nature of their ties are shrouded in mystery and an unarticulated history.

Lavigne's script builds suspense in non-chronology, bouncing backwards and forwards across Jessa's life and slowly unravelling the plot points leading to her current limbo. The connection between blood and photography is a unique and strongly rendered one in this production, however, the lengthy script and circling narrative dilute the regular return to blood donation into an insubstantial point to build Jessa's entire characterisation. Throughout the second half, the production loses momentum as fewer and fewer truths are revealed about the characters, especially Jessa, and audience interest begins to waver without added depth.

The overall tone of *Albumen* with Niven and Carly Fisher's direction is simultaneously tight and unfocused, asking the audience to grasp for Jessa's hazy past for more understanding. At times, the pacing of the production seemed unclear with long silences intermixed with near instant transitions between Danielle's monologues of the couple canoodling. Set in a series of stark white rooms and alternating bright hospital lighting with the deep red of the photographer's dark room creates an affective atmosphere for an unsettlingly threatening psychological suspense.

The two plays opening No:Intermission capture the goal of the festival to showcase new and emerging Australian theatre-makers with an opportunity to explore unusual and experimental stories.

*Queenslander* is running from July 24th – 28th while *Albumen* is running from July 25th – 28th at Chippen St Theatre as part of No:Intermission

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