

Almost Face To Face



Barefoot Review by Samela Harris.

Stephen House. Bakehouse Theatre. 4 Dec 2019

When Stephen House describes himself as “an old man”, there is a realisation that, indeed, decades have rolled past since the writer/performer first brought his words to the Adelaide stage. His audiences have shared his life story as he wrote and travelled and agonised over his identity, It could sound terribly self-indulgent but the thing is that House is good at what he does and, despite the decidedly and sometimes shockingly seamy side of his path, he has been a stayer with heart and style.

So here he is, back at the Bakehouse looking leathery and wrinkled albeit strong and fit. He is back from an Australia Council literary residency in Ireland whence he tells the tale of Miss Big, a woman so obese she is destined never to leave her tiny upstairs apartment because she cannot fit out the door. Hence she can simply witness from her window the outside world, with drunks and derelicts and passers-by along the city paths of the Liffey, and give sexual favours to gentleman callers who venture upstairs.

She gives extraordinary succour to our writer, becoming his comfort and anchor as he grapples with alcohol and drug withdrawals and self-loathing. House has written an intense depiction of this sweet, sad woman and her predicament and, although he strides alone on a stage adorned only by one white bentwood chair, Miss Big’s little world is so intensely drawn that one can almost see and smell it.

Similarly graphic and immediate are our anti-hero’s accounts of his forays into the outside world of twosomes and wishful threesomes, of ice parties, love, pity, and repulsion. It’s a gritty, gruelling, degenerate world into which House breathes a life both furious and poignant. His stage presence now is confident, practised, and expert. With seaming ease, he leads his audience through darkest landscapes of emotion and depravity on a river of simply wonderful prose. Over and over, one finds oneself pausing to admire a turn of phrase or expression of House’s thought.

This is not a show for prudes or the unworldly. But, with Stephen Dean’s fine lighting and House’s stage skills perhaps at their zenith, it is a powerful piece of theatre.

Samela Harris

When: 4 to 14 Dec

Where: Bakehouse Theatre

Bookings: bakehousetheatre.com