

BWW Reviews: THE WEB Finds Intrigue and Devious Happenings on the Internet

October 21

12:10 PM2013

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Reviewed Saturday 19th October 2013

The Bakehouse Theatre Company is presenting **The Web**, by Kate Mulvany, directed by **Yasmin Gurreeboo**, whose debut as director for this company, with **And No More Shall We Part**, was a triumph. This time she has created a gripping, powerful drama involving two teenage boys and a lot of psychological mind play that, ultimately, leads to tragic consequences.

Two boys in school uniform approach each other, smiling broadly, and then one suddenly stabs the other. The injured boy, Travis, is taken to hospital and the other, Fred, goes to the police station and hands himself in. The location is the small, rural, coastal Western Australian town of Chapman, but it could be any isolated community anywhere in Australia, where everybody knows everybody else and their business. The policeman, Sgt Tukovsky, is a friend of the family and he treats Fred kindly whilst trying to ascertain what happened, acting under the belief that the two boys were the best of friends. Fred's mother, Ivy, works as a shelf stacker at the local supermarket, but rushes to the police station as soon as she hears about Fred being questioned.

We are then taken back to in time to when the two sixteen year olds, Fred and Travis, first begin talking to each other. Travis is the outgoing head boy, who excels at everything, while Fred is a loner who is failing every subject. Fred has good reason to be unhappy and withdrawn, having discovered that his mother was having an affair, found his father had hanged himself, possibly because he knew about that affair, and now having seen the family farm neglected and he and his mother reduced to poverty.

Travis offers to help him with a Social Studies assignment, and suggests a possible topic that is sure to earn him exceptionally good marks. Fred accepts, which pleases Ivy immensely, as he is not only likely to pass the subject, but also now has a friend. Travis, though, has a very different hidden agenda.

Although Fred finds many of the people that he encounters on line, recommended and introduced by Travis, to be unacceptable contacts, there is one, Susan, with whom he frequently exchanges emails and to whom he feels a growing attraction. Travis seems to be rather put out that Fred is not in contact with him as much, since Susan came on the scene. She eventually tells Fred that she will be coming to the town, and they arrange to meet, with unfortunate consequences.

The script itself, though, presents problems that make the technical concept of the play rather difficult to accept. The play was written in 2009 and it is hard to believe that, so recently, a boy of sixteen, even in a country town, and attending an agricultural school, has never used a computer, accessed

the internet, used email, or logged into a social network site. Fred does not even have even a basic mobile telephone. It might have worked had it been set much earlier in time, but it would need considerable modification. This, quite likely, reflects Mulvany's own admitted technophobia.

My own experience as a teacher, going back a good decade earlier than this play, found that, although not all students had the latest technology at home, most had something, and every single one was more than competent in its use, skills obtained through access to the up to date equipment at school and, in fact, were required to use electronic technology extensively in assignments. In South Australia, even Social Studies no longer existed back then, as it had already been absorbed into another subject. The whole idea that Fred only exchanges emails with Susan is also hard to swallow, with the existence of so many different ways of chatting to her in real time with either text or audio, and even using video, or even using the mobile phone that he is given to SMS or call her.

Nonetheless, if we ignore all of that, irritating as it might be to those who know and use technology extensively, which would be, I suspect, everybody in the audience on opening night, there is still a strong psychodrama within this play, and that is where it is best to focus the attention.

Michael Lemmer and Andrew Thomas are the chalk and cheese best friends, Fred and Travis, respectively, and Gurreeboo has elicited two excellent performances but, more importantly a complex and constantly changing relationship that always makes sense.

It is a credit to the two young actors, Lemmer and Thomas, that they have picked up on all of this and, in spite of our being able to work out what was going on, even without Travis referring to a series of well documented real life psychological experiments, they maintained a level of tension and held the interest of the audience throughout.

They each created a rich three dimensional character that stood alone, but with that little extra happening between the two actors that enables us to accept that, at first, there could be a genuine friendship between them. Lemmer's Fred is naïve and lacking in social skills, and wary of Travis's initial approach and offer of friendship. Lemmer displays Fred's general disposition and his emotional ups and downs in a superbly measured characterisation as his character is manipulated and exposed to forces with which he is unfamiliar and ill-equipped to handle. We see this confusion and wildly swinging responses to the various stimuli clearly brought out in Lemmer's portrayal.

Thomas presents a characterisation that would, if their friendship were genuine, be complementary to the quite and rather reclusive Fred. His Travis is full of self-confidence, outgoing, but with a hint of superiority, and an unnerving overtone that is revealed, in time, to be callousness, a cold disregard for the feelings of others. Thomas gives us all of this with the right degree of subtlety and detachment that makes his character work.

Nathan Porteus plays Sgt Tukovsky, a small town policeman who, in the face of serious crime, is frustrated by being pushed aside from the investigation by outsiders of greater rank and experience. In his performance we are presented with a man who appears to acknowledge that he has reached, and passed, the peak of his career, but with little in his life beyond his work. He shows us a man with a veneer of competency, capable of the simple day to day routine of a place where nothing much happens, but we also see his inner despondency peek through in this fine characterisation.

Amy Victoria Brooks takes the role of Fred's mother, Ivy, a woman who has seemingly given up on

her own life and exists to care for her family. Books's Ivy carries the weight of the world on her shoulders in a sadly moving interpretation of the role, with an air of desperation coming through as the interrogation of Fred progresses. She still clings to the good times, calling him by his childhood nickname, Freddo, and trying to be a friend as much as a mother. Brooks lets us see below the surface to the fragile, lonely and neglected woman beneath the often over-bright exterior.

Delia Taylor plays Susan, Fred's cyber-friend, presenting everything in Susan's personality that would appeal to Fred, a fun, warm, supportive and considerate correspondent, whose emails he eagerly awaits. She makes him laugh, smile and fall in love, admitting that her feelings towards him are the same. Taylor's Susan is as bright as a button, full of life and energy, and irresistible to the lonely young man.

All of the action takes place on a set, by Manda Webber, with the interrogation room at the police station on one side and a room at the hospital on the other, separated by a gate that admits people to Fred's home, or to the schoolyard. Furniture is wheeled to and fro across the front part of the stage to create different locations, lit by Alexander Ramsay to add to that differentiation of locale. Composer, Daniel Thorpe, created the sound design that completes the picture.

The Bakehouse Theatre Company is used to success, and this is another successful production of which they can well be proud.

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*** Bakehouse Theatre's "The Web" reminds one of both the intriguing movie "The Talented Mr Ripley" and the Film Festival's current hit "One Eyed Girl" which gradually open out to reveal a character who is not all he seems, but by then, the trap is set. This production sucks you in, before flooring you, because Director Yasmin Gurreeboo has coaxed a fine spiralling performance from Andrew Thomas's 'Travis' as he gradually inveigles his way into Michael ('Fred') Lemmer's life. However, some of the best lines belong to Fred's mother Amy Victoria Brooks who adds much contrasting light. Nathan Porteous and Delia Taylor complete a top cast, aided greatly by Peter Green's excellently constructed set. Recommended ! Until November 2nd.**