

Review: The Ajoona Guest House at The Bakehouse Theatre

Review By Lisa Lanzi



Combine the spare stage of the Bakehouse Theatre's intimate Studio space with remarkable, original and deeply evocative writing, a fine actor and an accomplished director - and that pure, unfettered simplicity is all you need to be transported, immersed and entertained. Such is the glory of exceptional theatre.

Stephen House is a much awarded and commissioned writer with around twenty plays in his catalogue. His words emerge to touch audiences through the genres of poetry, plays and monologues. One such monologue, *Johnny Chico*, has toured Spain for two years with more performances to come. *The Ajoona Guest House* was drafted during an Asialink Residency in India several years ago and is the last in a trilogy of stand-alone monologues, each based in a different city. The first, *Appalling*

Behaviour, was written and set in Paris. *Almost Face to Face*, the second, was written in and embraces Dublin as the setting. Both of these were performed across Australia by House to great acclaim.

With *The Ajoona Guest House*, there is a sharing of perceptive and moving tales about characters who dwell in or near a seedy, back-lane hotel in New Delhi : dedicated travellers who adore India and partake of all the adventures on offer, a young beggar deliberately scarred so their begging will be more 'successful', café owners, long-term inhabitants of The Ajoona, and the narrator's own journey amidst the chaos, colour and wonder, and sometimes the edge of danger. Fine writing for stage does not need to persuade or inform intellectually or factually, but it will impact audiences emotionally and shift perceptions. Here, House's considered writing is elevated to the poetic, occasionally in a stream-of-consciousness rhythm, and effortlessly shifts us into another reality as we eagerly attend the narrative for the next revelation, the next encounter or surprise twist. In the programme he writes that his monologues may or may not be autobiographical, and there is a tinge of the 'everyman' in the on stage protagonist so that anyone might picture themselves in those shoes. However, that humble traveller also dares to go where many of us would not.

As an actor, Stephen House has attracted outstanding attention over many years including a Green Room Award nomination for Best Independent Performer. He is a world traveller, a self-confessed edge-dweller and deep thinker, and as a performer House commands the stage with strength and intensity tempered by generosity and modesty. This actor is always totally immersed in the moment and the tale so that his audience is led easily into other realms. House also transforms into characters other than the protagonist with believability and reverence through vocal shifts and altered physicality and perhaps a scrap of fabric entwined just so. Younger actors should be taking notes, just saying!

Rosalba Clemente, fresh from directing the fabulous State Theatre production of Jonathan Spector's *Eureka Day* has worked with House to perfect the delivery of this monologue. Lines between actorly interpretation and directorial intent are impossible to distinguish but it is clear that the two talents have lovingly crafted this delightful work in tandem with mutual respect and attention to detail. Well-thought-out movement about the stage space, differing facings, vocal and emotional light and shade, and well-chosen physical levels (seated, standing, crouching, leaning) all contribute to the impact of the whole which has a heightened theatrical feel but is free of any forced artifice. An evocative soundscape by Alain Valodze and subtle lighting by Stephen Dean adds emotional depth to the work. I have to admit to loving the use of side lighting too: often used in dance production, this addition was perfect for The Ajoona Guest House.

This one hour theatrical gem deserves to be seen by many. It is poignant, reflective, revealing and captivating. There is a riveting journey to be had for an audience while you are safely cradled by the virtuosic performer and director. And dear gods of the theatre and funding bodies, may there be more writing of this quality gracing Australian stages in future.