

Bakehouse Theatre Company. Bakehouse Theatre. 8 Jul 2017

Stepping into the Bakehouse Theatre, the senses are surprised by the subtle and wonderful fragrance of ginger and lemongrass. Good heavens, the cramped little Chinese restaurant kitchen set is near-as-dammit, a functioning kitchen complete with fresh herbs and tossed noodles.

But there is not an Asian face to be seen in its busy staff of five.

This is a play in which all the rules are bent. It is not a case of blind casting. Playwright Roland Schimmelpfennig intended Caucasian actors to play the parts: Asians, Europeans, and even anthropomorphic insects.

It is a wild ride of drama skills.

Consequently, it is a short and intense play with narrative and character threads weaving all over the place. Central is the kitchen of the Golden Dragon, a Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese restaurant with a huge menu. The cooks go like the hammers, calling out the ingredients while working over woks and loading take-away containers. Above the restaurant live two air hostesses who come in to eat after a long flight home. Also in the building lives the owner of a convenience store in a clutter of stockpiled goods, an older couple on an emotional downward spiral and a young couple dealing with an unexpected pregnancy.

The primary storyline takes place in the kitchen wherein the newest worker is a young illegal immigrant in agony with toothache. His pain is shared with the audience through the grating volume and intensity of his howling and yowling. Oh, is it so strident. The audience gets the message. The busy kitchen staff does, too, since they can't hush him. The illegality of the poor lad denies him rights to formal treatment, so the cooks take it upon themselves to identify the tooth and, eventually, extract it, all the while keeping the furious cooking and serving going on around him. It is painfully funny. The force of the improvised extraction by spanner throws tooth high into the air. The world waits in dread. Yes, into the wok it goes. But the cook flicks it out and it flies again. Oh, no! It plops into the hot soup being carried out to one of the beautiful air hostesses.

Her response to it is surprising. But so are most elements of this intriguing little play. The beautiful blonde hostess has an older lover who calls her Barbie Doll. She seems fine with this. Meanwhile, further dramas play out between the other characters in the building. They are vignettes of real life and yet one must suspend disbelief. The building is a hothouse not only of humble humanity but of insects. Like allegorical creatures from *Monkey Magic*, there also lives an ant with her bountiful stockpile of stored food and a beautiful cricket who has no provisions because she has frittered away her life singing. She begs the ant to share. The ant enslaves her and humiliates her in a downward spiral of unthinkable cruelty.

These two creatures pop in and out of the action with their own episodic narrative. They are beautifully rendered simply with chopstick props as antennae.

Indeed, the presentation and performances of this quirky theatrical experience are uniformly good - as one may expect under Joh Hartog's direction. Jo Pugh, Brendan Cooney, Mark Healy, Clare Mansfield and Robbie Greenwell complete the able and versatile cast, darting seamlessly from role to role.

Tech and lighting are good, but if there is a star in the show, it is Tammy Boden's sweaty and claustrophobic little kitchen set with its wafts of food fragrance.

The audience emerges from the theatre, heads spinning with ways in which to interpret what they have seen.

Like a fine Chinese meal, there are many interesting ingredients and, left to digest them for a while, one realises that it has been surprisingly satisfying. So long as one does not worry about the tooth, it leaves a rather pleasant taste in the mouth.

Samela Harris