

Psychologically Dangerous Territory

September 22

9:44 AM 2015

[Print Article](#) [Email Link](#)

by Barry Lenny



Reviewed by Barry Lenny, Saturday 19th September 2015

The cosily intimate Bakehouse Theatre is a very busy venue, with another production opening as soon as the previous one has ended, as well as being a regular venue for performances during the Adelaide Fringe. It is also the home to its own Bakehouse Theatre Company, which includes regular productions featuring students and graduates of the Flinders University drama course, under the direction of Joh Hartog, and the Unseen Theatre Company, which specialises in dramatisations of the works of **Terry Pratchett**, directed by Pamela Munt, who received Pratchett's blessing to write her own adaptations of his Discworld novels.

It is the former group that opened this weekend with **The Audition**, written a decade ago by the then nineteen year old Irish playwright, **James Johnson**, with Hartog directing Krystal Brock and Clare Mansfield as Stella, a director holding auditions, and Lauren, a hopeful actress. Lauren has seen an advertisement and believes that she is auditioning for the role of Ophelia in a production of Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Lauren arrives expecting to be auditioned in a conventional way, presenting a prepared monologue and reading sections of dialogue from the script against another actor or the director,

and being questioned on her concept of the character, the play and so on. She does not expect to be completely ignored by Stella, who sits silently, writing without looking up. Eventually, eliciting no response, Lauren announces that her monologue is one that she has written herself, and launches into it, her appalling performance giving the audience a few laughs as she illuminates every word with exaggerated arm and hand movements and gestures.

Ironically, this is what we get from Krystal Brock's Stella, a continual set of poses and expressive hands, and we later discover that she was rejected at the only audition that she ever attended. We are left wondering, though, whether this was intended to be Stella, inventing a character and playing out her role as a director, or Brock delivering lines and moves, what we in the business refer to as 'capital A Acting', all of the external attributes without the internal engagement with the character.

Stella soon begins to wander far from the expected norms of an audition, turning into a sadistic, psychopathic control freak, with a penchant for mind games, with Lauren as her target. Condensed into almost an hour, we see their interactions over a full day. Students of drama expect to be challenged during their training, a system ridiculed in the song *Nothing*, sung by the Hispanic character Diana Morales in the musical, **A Chorus Line**, about being berated by a teacher of method acting. Stella begins with what might have seemed to Lauren to be along these lines, until she gets out of hand. Her name, in fact, could even be a passing shot at **Stella Adler**, the famous acting teacher who studied with Stanislavski.

Lauren has her whole future invested in getting the part of Ophelia, and becoming a professional actress. Every time that she feels that she has had enough and goes to leave, Stella pulls her back by playing on that strong desire, suggesting that Lauren would be giving up on her dreams and clearly didn't really want the role. It works, no matter how much Stella denigrates and humiliates her. Lauren comes back for more, even insisting on continuing the following day, which we see condensed into just over a half an hour in the second act. Exactly what Stella's motives and objectives are never becomes clear, leaving us wondering whether, in fact, she is a director, and whether or not there really is a play being cast.

As psychodramas go this one seems to cover a wide range of topics from incest/child abuse, to drugs, alcohol, violence, suicide by Russian roulette, OCD and, perhaps, it all becomes too much. The script lacks a degree of light and shade and any shock value soon becomes a case of more of the same, probably reflecting the youth and inexperience of the writer. **Harold Pinter**, the master of this genre, he was not.

That said, there is still plenty to interest an audience, whether it be within the script itself, the performances, or in recognising and analysing the influences of the works of **Eric Berne**, founder of Transactional Analysis, or Richard Bandler and John Grinder, who developed Neuro-Linguistic Programming. Stella is a Svengali figure, her power of will over Lauren like that of a Rasputin, brainwashing the naïve young actress into accepting that she must abandon all sense of self, to become like an empty vessel that Stella can fill. Their relationship borders on Messianic. Stella insists that she become a puppet in order to be an actress, even to the point of being given a new personality, and a new name to go with it. This play is all about that process, and Stella's unethical use of psychological tools to achieve her aim.

What is left to ponder is exactly what her aim is, and why she doing this. The brief appearance of Zoë Dibb, whose character has no name, seems to momentarily provide some answers, but brings up a lot more questions at the same time, leaving the audience to ponder upon later.

Hartog's set is a bare stage littered with a few bits of paraphernalia and a ladder at the back, with a chair in a large space for the person auditioning, and a desk and chair for the director, a power play in itself, behind which Stella can distance herself from the actress. Stephen Dean's lighting design subtly emphasises the changing levels of tensions as their relationships develop. The music of **Dave Brubeck**, with his use of less conventional time signatures, seems appropriate, too.

Krystal Brock and Clare Mansfield play out this scenario, the power balance shifting to and fro, but always ending up in Stella's favour, even when Lauren believes that she is winning and getting closer to what she wants, the role of Ophelia under a director that she is being convinced will make her a star. It is a love hate relationship for Lauren, overwhelmed by the charismatic will of Stella.

Take some time out to see this production and watch these two performers as they take their characters into dark places, mentally sparring, each with their own agenda and much of the time at cross purposes. This is not your average production.

Photo by Michael Errey