



By Radha Bharadwaj. The Bakehouse Theatre, Adelaide. November 27-30, 2013.

Growing Grin Productions' Australian premiere of Radha Bharadwaj's play, *Closet Land* is very well done, especially when one considers this is a young company staging a difficult psychological thriller that would be challenging for even the most experienced professionals to produce.

Closet Land is based on Bharadwaj's 1991 cult-classic film of the same name and is described by the author as celebrating imagination. In truth, it graphically demonstrates that what happens to us in childhood impacts us deeply and the way in which we deal with those experiences can affect our adult existence, either imprisoning us or setting us free.

Author of a number of children's stories such as 'The Friendly Rooster' and 'The Bird with the Broken Wing', the female protagonist lives in a world of fantasy. Just as in Alice's Wonderland, her life has been one full of dream-like characters. However, it is a bogeyman that comes to haunt her. The author's latest story, 'Closet Land', is brought to the attention of the government, whereupon she is imprisoned and interrogated.

On a clinically simple set, the place and characters are obscure. People's names are not obvious. It gives a chilling credibility to the protagonist, played by Melissa Rayner. This young woman could be anyone from anywhere.

Rayner's predominant experience has been in visual art rather than acting and this is her first leading role. Even so, she is very believable as the children's author, but I would like to see more light and shade in her delivery. For example, her reaction to a sudden, shocking and intimate assault by her interrogator could have greater impact if it were more visceral and raw than she currently allows it to be. Having said that, this is generally a good performance from an inexperienced actor. Rayner portrays the character's inner strength well.

Benjamin Orchard is excellent as the interrogator, including in the guises the character uses to confuse the children's author. He is chillingly deliberate and devious as he amps up the physical and psychological torture in order to force his prisoner to sign a confession.

Both actors are probably slightly younger than the playwright intended, but each performer manages the characterisation admirably, in particular Orchard.

In her directorial debut, Olivia Jane Parker uses the space well and keeps the action tight.

The stark set, by Greg and Sharee Spence and Melissa Rayner, is effective in designating the 'interrogation room' environment.

Stephen Dean's lighting design is competent, but lights need to come up more quickly after some scene changes.

There is very good use of film, courtesy of Subconscious Studios.

Artists Heather Mill and Jan Burns contribute well to the multi-media production. The foyer of The Bakehouse includes a display of paintings depicting the covers of the children's books described in the play.

This production is graphic and includes language, content and scenes that may confront some people, however it is a thought-provoking and well-staged piece of theatre that deserves to fill the Bakehouse Theatre.

Lesley Reed

Painting: 'The Friendly Rooster' by Heather Mill

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