

Review: GRATIANO at The Bakehouse Studio Theatre

Review By Lisa Lanzi

A stunning, recorded, solo jazz trumpet serenades us after blackout then Gratiano (Ross Ericson) appears, beer in hand and beguiles us with 60 minutes of flowing, beautifully written prose. We sit in the smaller venue at one of Adelaide's established theatre hubs, The Bakehouse, and, well it is Fringe, so one never knows quite how the quality will be. The presenting company, England's Grist to the Mill Productions, are currently touring a number of plays that, given the success of *Gratiano*, you should definitely seek out this year. They are in residence at The Bakehouse for another week or so.

Ericson performs this one person play, one of the most difficult theatrical forms to present well, and is also the writer. Direction by Michelle Yim is streamlined and allows the language and excellent characterisation to shine. Using words and phrases from Shakespeare's works intertwined with his own, Ericson's writing is a revelation. Rhythmic, spare yet evocative and passionate, the story unfolds by switching back and forth between Gratiano's drunken memories (long after the events of *The Merchant of Venice*) and his presence in a police interview room with unseen detective (Mr Vicario) and gormless offsider.

A minor character in the original, Gratiano here is the star. Bitter, regretful ("things I've done, things I've said") reminiscing about lost love and a less than salubrious life trajectory he weaves the stories of the characters from his past with how they have played out in this re-imagined setting post WWII in Mussolini's Fascist Italy. For instance, Bassanio has forged a career in politics until he is found dead and the police now suspect Gratiano. In the scenes within the interview room, Ericson's character rages and reveals facts about all the possible reasons various characters may have for ridding the world of Bassanio, and why not: "You wouldn't charge a man for shooting a rabid dog". Gratiano also baits the officers in his bravado: "Are you married?... you have the 1000 yard stare (associated only with) wedlock and combat". There are some hilarious, laugh out loud lines, some associated with *The Merchant of Venice* like Antonio being "shipped off to the Island of Pooftas" and others more revealing of Ericson's prodigious wit and political savvy.

There are so many excellent parts to this production, including the writing. However, Ericson is also a brilliant actor and invests Gratiano with great nuance. In essence this character is a boorish Cockney with hidden depth. Equally at home chanting at a football stadium and ranting in the pub, this man possesses deep sadness and, it is revealed, has learnt to diverge from his earlier savage racism, mostly directed at Shylock. Toward the end of the work, Gratiano becomes a

spokesperson for humanity raging at the inhumanity of war, the Jewish holocaust and more. It may be a small stretch for us to believe the original seething character of Gratiano could morph so remarkably but such is the power of Ericson's portrayal and the genius of the writing. Indeed, we are witnessing the power of theatre here to call to account humanity for the utter global mess we have instituted with war, genocide, corporate greed, political control and dispassion. Gratiano points out that "there is no justice; just us" and that so many of us take issue with the perceived 'other': Jews and Gentiles, Black and White, White and ... everybody.

One other very fine thing about this play and this actor, and in tune with one of my complaints about contemporary acting and actors: Ross Ericson has superb vocal ability. His diction and clear sound is so welcome. Too many actors are complacent about voice quality and the subtleties of technique so that characterization suffers and audiences simply cannot hear. Many actors are too influenced by cinema acting which is fine if you are shooting a film, just completely unsuited to the stage.

I am very glad I saw this production and implore audiences to support the smaller producers at Fringe time. There is so much to see around this time of year in Adelaide and many shows are funded and marketed internationally with more dollars than some of the smaller groups will ever see. Please spread your audience going among various levels of the Fringe. Fringe Festivals are meant to be about work that is new and experimental and under-funded. Be generous and adventurous.