

Theatre review: Red Sky Morning

'Red Sky Morning', the remarkable work of award-winning playwright Tom Holloway, is a dark, intense study of the hidden malaise at the heart of an ordinary Australian family.



Rachel Burke, Julie Wood and Stephen Sheehan in Red Sky Morning. Photo: Heath Britton

The play – being presented at the Bakehouse Theatre under the State Theatre Company's State Umbrella program – spans one day in the life of a Man (Stephen Sheehan), Woman (Julie Wood) and Girl (Rachel Burke), who describe their activities in three semi-simultaneous monologues.

The stories come together and draw apart in a complex pattern of overlapping speech that highlights their separate yet intricately interwoven despairs. The Woman drinks to numb the monotony of her daily life and avoid her husband's depression. The Man struggles to maintain a façade of jovial normality, denying his depression and his wife's addiction. The daughter escapes both by entering into a fantasy world that revolves around her English teacher.

Seemingly small incidents accumulate greater significance as tension builds and the play moves towards its disastrous climax. The woman farting in bed, for example, is amusing initially but becomes almost poignant in the way it creates a barrier of embarrassment between husband and wife. It later metamorphoses into a symbol of the woman's drinking – an all-pervading stink that can't be hidden but must be ignored.



Natural speech patterns and jumbled thought processes are immaculately represented in the script's pauses and stuttering uncertainties. These also enable a post-modern questioning of identity and truth that often leads the audience up narrative blind alleys. ("No... no... that's not me... I would never..." "No... wait... is that what happened?... Did I...?")

The complexity of the interwoven monologues means the director must "conduct" the actors almost as if they were musicians, their voices rising or falling away as one or another's story takes precedence. Sarah Dunn performs this task well and has the characters moving forwards and back within their own section of the stage, which enhances the text and emphasises the mutual isolation of the characters.

Sheehan is excellent as the Man, deftly conveying the inner turmoil of a person trying to mask his depression with an affable insistence that life is good. Wood also gives a strong performance as the Woman, particularly in the tricky earlier scenes where humour and pathos are present in equal measure.

Perhaps most impressive is Burke as the Girl. Although her jittery awkwardness is a little overplayed, she is engaging and heartbreaking in her portrayal of teenage angst. Her repeated singing of the *Home and Away* theme tune draws attention to the gritty realism on stage; no cheesy soap-opera gloss here, this is the tooth and nail of internal struggle.

Profoundly well-written and ably produced, *Red Sky Morning* is an emotionally challenging but highly rewarding play that showcases the possibilities of theatrical narrative.