

# THE GOOD SON REVIEW (BAKEHOUSE THEATRE, ADELAIDE)

BY BEN BROOKER – DAILY REVIEW



Famously, Melbourne contains the largest population of Greek Australians outside of Athens, but the diaspora is spread far and wide. Elena Carapetis — more familiar to local audiences as a regular actor for the State Theatre Company of SA than as a playwright — has set her debut play in Adelaide's Torrensville. Like Melbourne, the western suburb became home to a sizeable Greek community during the wave of mass migration that followed the Second World War.

*The Good Son*, the events of which unfold, as in Greek Tragedy, in a single location in real time with no extra narrative strands (the three unities), centres on the relationship — a nominal marriage, in fact — between Frank (Renato Musolino) and his mother Meda (Eugenia Fragos). Frank is too old to still be living at home and is drifting, repressed and unhappy, towards 40. He's a barman ('it's an honest living', he demurs early in the play when we can't yet see the seed of truth in this statement). Meda, divorced and bitter, is a problem gambler. She relies on Frank both financially and psychologically ('what's the difference between a Greek mother and a pit bull?' the joke goes. 'A pit bull eventually lets you go').

Frank has a girlfriend, Ana (Adriana Bonaccorso), and an Italian one at that. Ana has stayed the night, and much of the farce-like comedy that dominates the play's opening minutes (no doors are slammed but there are plenty of titillating near-misses as Frank surreptitiously prepares coffee for two) is predicated on our — justified, of course — fear that Meda and Ana will meet, and clash like water and electricity when they do.

The fun, however, is decisively undercut by the play's sole piece of symbolism: a bloody cut of lamb that Meda dumps on the dining table. In the '1988 time capsule' that is Manda Webber's ultra-realistic set — cosily hideous wallpaper, a floral sofa bedecked with doilies — the lamb is a grotesque irruption that foreshadows the further, violent infiltration of Meda's superficial domestic idyll.

It is the arrival of the charismatic though unctuous Jimmy (Demitios Sirilas) — the ‘bad son’ to Frank’s ‘good’ — that unpicks the final thread of the fraught tapestry that is Meda and Frank’s seemingly permanently interweaved lives. Jimmy is a link to an underworld that Frank knows intimately but is desperate to disassociate himself from. The macho camaraderie between the two men, somewhat forced to begin with, is dropped altogether when Frank begins to suspect that Jimmy and Meda may be tied together by more than just the strong bonds of family and fraternity that inhere in Greek society. The dramatic temperature is further raised when our expectations of Meda and Ana’s inevitable meeting aren’t quite met; yes, they can’t stand the sight of each other, but it is not only (as if it wouldn’t be enough!) Meda’s arch possessiveness that makes the sparks fly.

To say too much more of the plot of *The Good Son* would be to undo too much of Carapetis’ good work. That’s to say that while the drama doesn’t depend for its effect on surprising us with twists — the richly verisimilar writing and carefully opaque characterisations ensure that it doesn’t have to — it is a carefully layered play that, correctly, resists our attempts to peer down into its lower strata as we move more deeply through it. Its vivid depiction of a Greek Australian working class milieu brings to mind the work of Christos Tsiolkas, the playwright and novelist who has said that, in contrast to the contemporary Muslim Australian experience, ‘being Greek is just another variety of being Australian’. It’s a sentiment, I imagine, that Carapetis would share; her theme here is not racism or multiculturalism but addiction — emotional and pathological — and its corrosive effects on the social, and especially familial, body.

If there’s one chink in *The Good Son*’s mechanics it lies in its brevity. At only one hour and ten minutes long, the play’s moments of highest dramatic potential — such as Ana’s monologue, which feels both overwritten and like a luxury a play as concertina-ed as this can ill afford — don’t always feel adequately set up. The reason, I suspect, that we don’t see more plays written that take place in real time is that they place unusual demands on both playwright and audience — as Andrew Tidmarsh notes in *Genre*, blaming our ‘current cinematic and dramatic tastes’: ‘we seem unused to the stories we watch happening in real time’.

For the playwright, meanwhile, great skill is required to sustain the story and to maintain the organic procession of action. It’s a credit to Carapetis that she has not only attempted but largely succeeded in meeting both of these challenges. Corey McMahon’s sympathetic direction, and outstanding performances by Musolino, who has never been better, and Fragos — never less than brittle and human despite Meda’s almost monstrous bile — are a gift to what is already an audacious and deeply impressive debut by a playwright who clearly has much to offer.

*The Good Son*, presented by the Other Ones, is at the Bakehouse Theatre, Adelaide, until 25 April.  
Main image: Renato Musolino and Adriana Bonaccorso as Frank and Ana.