

Red Sky Morning: breakdown ends in breakthrough and communication



Julie Wood and Steve Sheehan reveal personal anguish. Picture: Heath Britton

They say a red sky morning is a shepherd's warning but nobody warned the Bakehouse Theatre that it would be deluged by stormwater last Thursday and that State Theatre's (appropriately named) Umbrella Project would have its first two previews washed out.

But providentially, nothing deterred an impressive opening night that brought Tom Holloway's 2008 play for dissonant voices, vividly and poignantly to life.

Red Sky Morning is a triple monologue transcribed to the page in separate, parallel, scrolling columns. There are three characters — a father, mother and their teenage daughter — and they live lives of quiet, hermetically sealed desperation.

The setting is perhaps regional Australia or an undefined outer suburb. The characters don't have names. But Holloway's people are anything but generic; their idiosyncrasies and life difficulties have a disturbing particularity to them.

Director Sarah Dunn has brought this excellent production together with painstaking care.

Essentially the three actors stand and deliver their increasingly anguished personal revelations, but the gathering complexity and urgency of Holloway's text requires ever more intricate threading and overlapping. Dunn adeptly creates a choral modulation that allows the characters to gradually overlap and begin to break down the emotional silos to which they have retreated.

Using the confines of the Bakehouse stage to intensifying effect, designer Michelle Maddog Delaney locates the action on three dining chairs on a polished parquet floor, but the perimeter of the set is a smoking ruin of burnt-out black embers, heat-stressed tin and charred wood. It is domestic blitzkrieg lit tenderly with painterly pastels by Alexander Ramsay. Composer Belinda Gehlert also provides texture and warmth with her settings for piano and strings that aptly underscore the events without melodramatic intrusion.

The three actors develop and propel the storylines with memorable clarity and impact.

As the father, Stephen Sheehan opens the revelation with a tentative, blokey cadence; it is understated and pitch perfect as Holloway's disarming text lightly unfurls the tensions with a mix of humour and wry self-effacement.

Similarly Julie Wood, as the emotionally adrift mother, slyly confesses to flatulence in one - moment then escalates to anguished self-reproach and sensual deprivation in the next. Her unfolding disclosures about her secret alcoholism also carry intensifying significance.

As the estranged teenage daughter, Rachel Burke is also compelling. While her mother - disappears into a fog of lager and her father retreats into violent and self-harming fantasy, the adolescent spins misplaced delusions about her teacher and alienates herself from old - familiar friends.

It is a measure of the flair of Holloway's ambitious but concise text that the father's accelerating crisis brings the three monologues into crucial reconnection. With breakdown comes breakthrough, and the very small beginnings of restored communication.

With *Red Sky Morning*, Dunn and her team have revived a work that, in 70 short minutes, uncovers matters often held dangerously close to the Australian heart.

Red Sky Morning. By Tom Holloway. State Theatre Company of South Australia. Tickets: \$20-\$35. Bookings: 131246 or online. Duration 70 mins, no interval. Until September 30.

Review by Murray Bramwell – The Australian.