

Review: Brilliant Traces at The Bakehouse Theatre, Adelaide

By Lisa Lanzi – Theatre Travels

Brilliant Traces is by Cindy Lou Johnson (1989) and was first performed by New York's prestigious Circle Repertory Company. The title arises from the poem *Individuation* by Avah Pevlor Johnson : "... *Let my scars leave brilliant traces...*" and here, trapped in the world of this play, reside two profoundly scared souls, one running from life, the other hiding from it.

As the audience enters the intimate Bakehouse Theatre, stepping carefully to avoid realistic 'snowdrifts', we are met with an impressive open-fronted wood cabin set designed and constructed by director Joh Hartog. A wood stove complete with smoking chimney, rustic dilapidated furniture and few comforts give the air of a fairytale realm (think Snow White, Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, Baba Yaga - minus the chicken legs). The startling opening situates us firmly in the present day though and the cabin still presents a refuge for the female character.

Two of Adelaide's finest take the lead in this production. Krystal Brock is *Rosannah DeLuce* and Brendan Cooney portrays *Henry Harry*. Both actors command the stage and sport mostly convincing American accents. The win for this production lies in their remarkable chemistry as they immerse themselves in their demanding roles, commit totally to the unfolding story and support each other with intelligence and generosity. Both are on stage for the entire play running a gamut of emotions and physicality that demands spell and presence, not to mention stamina.

The role of Rosannah is both a challenge and a gift for an actor but fortunately, Ms Brock is eminently capable. At first, this character prattles on and on with a kooky, stream of consciousness monologue that engenders laughter from the audience and suggests that we may be in for a more comedic adventure. She roams about the cabin, helping herself to whisky, food and warmth, one moment completely lucid and practical, the next relating how she felt a compulsion to speed faster than the car she was driving and how "the pain is in my DNA or my aorta; I'm not sure".

Subsequently, this character reveals layers of existential pain and uncertainty and parts of her back story, so that her trajectory within this world is less predictable. Somehow Rosannah exists between two realities where she can function at a base level but is emotionally unstable, "in the clutches of a narrow perspective" and simply uncertain of her future.

Equally, Mr Cooney displays tremendous command of the fragile but complex Henry who is placed in a mad situation when a stranger in a wedding dress destroys his isolation in need of assistance. The breadth of this character is huge: a man in hiding and in denial, a generally good person who is plunged into a situation and forced to confront what he would rather not. There are moments of humour, desperation, grief and tenderness, all performed with a nuanced and utterly believable clarity.

The script is complex and wordy with a distinctly North American flavour and includes metaphors around the idea of not quite residing in your own bodily reality. There are many images of pain, both real and imagined - the 'brilliant traces' of Harry's many emotional scars as we come to know his history plus Rosannah's recent bouts of sadness, doubt and anger that threaten to propel her out of her body toward death. The rapid-fire, imagery-laden and sometimes circular banter between the two characters is compelling ranging from amusing to practical to various heightened, poetic exchanges. As each character unveils a little more of their story, the other is impelled to their own reveal and the 'dance' continues with more and more urgency.

The play/cabin exists in Alaska, during a catastrophic blizzard (white out) but Rosannah drove, trance-like, from baking Arizona. Two extremes, both life-threatening and isolating, take hold of the characters and spotlight their different stories but similarly wounded psyches.

Lighting and sound design by Stephen Dean is simple but elegant and indeed all the production values are of a high standard. The soundscape in particular creates many moods: the whistling, roaring, low-level but ever-present snowstorm is at times intrusive, isolating and prudently unsettling while at others offers an almost comforting embrace and is a striking background accompaniment to the dialogue.

Joh Hartog directs this extraordinary work with subtlety and precision. Travelling through comedy toward tragedy with a whimsical, sometimes otherworldly layer developing from the characters' enigmatic outpourings, there is also sexual tension to be managed. A male and a female are totally isolated in time and space whilst negotiating power, basic needs and deep emotions. Hartog chooses a more challenging path by focussing on the personalities, their individual journeys and parallels, plus the absurdity of the situation. Far more successful in my opinion than allowing a more predictable sexual aspect to dominate. This is not to detract from the moments of possible danger and doubt where either Rosannah or Henry could be other than what they are.

There are many tiers of reality to ponder within this play and at times, I found myself questioning who or what was actually real, what could be truth or imagination.

Go to see this play and support the extraordinary local talent Adelaide is blessed with. This is truly a first-rate offering and deserves an audience.

Image Supplied

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