

Damian Callinan in "The Lost WW1 Diary"

Review by David Grybowski for Barefoot review



The Lost WWI Diary. Independent Artists. The Bakehouse Theatre. 6 Mar 2015

Damian Callinan was unknown to me and I have to admit that in my Fringe binge, I completely misjudged what this show would be like. Being a bit of a war buff, I was simply attracted to the uniform and title. How shallow is that! So I expected a serious and sad account of war horror built on the eponymous diary.

Damian is a masterful comedian with a swag of solo shows, TV and radio appearances, as well as a former career as an educator in English and drama. In this show, Damian uses his prodigious comedic capacity to link his general Australian war service interests with photo portraits of - at the time of writing - unidentified family members in uniform, and the aforementioned diary.

The first fifteen seconds of the show actually were what I expected, but that was a feint. Damian establishes we are in the present and after a magnificent circumnavigation that ties together the genesis of the narrative, he turns back the clock to 1914 and enlistment. Paddy Callinan, like Forrest Gump, is centre stage at Australia's big shows of the war, among them the ANZAC Day landing and Pozieres. The diaries reveal the larrikin spirit the WWI diggers are now famous for - pulling stunts, brothel browsing, and irreverence for authority - but eventually we get to the shooting. Damian creates Paddy and his mates, Stanza, Bluey, Mocka, Pirate, and Depot, with crystal clear clarity and separation. You feel you could have a conversation with these guys, which in fact, sometimes occurs with the front couple of rows.

If I had to go to war, I could only hope it would be with someone like Damian. He has a prodigious comedy tool kit utilising anachronism, metaphors, surrealism, post-modernism, set-ups, shelving, irony, local references, comic gestures, you name it. In a blink he can arouse pathos but soon lets you off with another crack. Or was it Paddy and his mates I wanted to be part of?

This is an exceptionally well written, well-conceived tale, born of remembrance, wonder and longing, and delivered with aplomb. A joy from start to finish.

David Grybowski

When: 2 to 14 Mar

Where: The Bakehouse Hotel

Bookings: adelaidefringe.com.au