

The Little Dog Laughed: The Ensemble Theatre

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This is a great GREAT show! Stylishly and sharply directed, sensitively and lovingly acted and beautifully designed. It would be an enormous shame for any theatre lover in Sydney to miss this very special event.

Set in contemporary Hollywood and New York, this is on the surface a story about glitz and selling out to the illusory Hollywood dream. But Douglas Carter Beane's script has levels of subtlety, and in the end it is really about love and lost love, and most importantly of all, the concept that those who have suffered are much more likely to resist selling out than those who have not.

A special plaudit has to go to Andrew Doyle for drawing out the subtle nuances. But an even greater plaudit goes to him for having the courage and the humility to direct a play as a director should direct. It is a director's job to spend his or her time drawing out the characters, working with the actors to maximise their talent and their approach to the role, and making sure the 'choreography', the angles and the timing are just right.

This Doyle does with aplomb, and in so doing he avoids the temptation of many Sydney directors in the Neil Armfield mould who swamp the play with what I call the 'handstands and fireworks' style of direction, shamelessly playing with the gullible and the uninitiated, in an attempt to be hailed as 'clever'. This nonsense has been going on for a long time. As a Moscow critic said of Stanislavsky's direction of the premiere of Chekov's *Cherry Orchard* in 1904: "The director must be a genius, because he has so much business going on, I can't concentrate on the actors".

Most of the Ensemble's regular directors don't engage in this nonsense. And Doyle certainly doesn't. He eschews those obvious pyrotechnics and as a result gives his actors breathing space, indeed shows them how to 'breath' their parts. I congratulate him on his achievement.

This real directing leads to real acting: a love of one's character, a belief in one's character, a 'listening' to the other characters, all of which results in quite captivating and tight ensemble work. Alexa Ashton, Lindsay Farris, Alexandra Fowler and James Millar did not miss a beat. Doyle has freed them to give of themselves and they have taken the opportunity and given in spades.

And all this was done amidst some fabulous design ideas from Anna Ilic. The set was not only highly appropriate but quite arresting. It would do it an injustice to try to describe it. Better to go and see.

Finally warmest congratulations to the Ensemble Theatre for risking a provocative and controversial play that on first blush would not necessarily appeal to their traditional audience base, or at least as this writer conceives it. If this signals a move towards broader programming options, I can only respectfully applaud it and encourage more of it.

***The Little Dog Laughed* is showing at The Ensemble Theatre at Kirribilli in Sydney until 15 August 2009. Bookings on (02) 9929 0644 or at www.ensemble.com.au**

Victor Kline

Victor Kline started his working life as Sydney's youngest barrister. He is now Editor of the Federal Court Reports, and an award winning playwright, director and actor who has worked extensively in theatre in Sydney and off Broadway in New York. He is also author of the novel 'Rough Justice'.

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