

THEATRE REVIEW: Gay Conversion School Drop-out

By **Victor Kline, Arts Hub**

Monday, November 17, 2008

Anthony Menchetti is as much a story teller as a comedian. That's not to say he isn't funny, very funny at times. But it is his ability to spin a yarn that impressed me.

And the story he tells is a simple one (not). His born again evangelical Christian mother and his equally devoted hard line Catholic father are troubled that their son is gay. Their solution is to send him to Gay Conversion School.

Menchetti is at pains to tell us that his story is a true one, and I'm sure it is. For one thing it is much too strange to be fiction. Besides, he tells it with such poignancy, oscillating between making us laugh and making us gasp with horror, that it is hard to believe it could be anything but lived experience.

I won't tell any of the details because they should be heard in the order Menchetti presents them, with the accompanying songs and graphics. But I will say that it felt like this journey through madness he experienced as a teenage boy must have been something that badly needed a catharsis, which undoubtedly the stage show was initially designed to provide.

It did its job, because there is no sense of bitterness or self indulgence, only of someone who clearly endured a lot but was able to turn it into something touching, where the characters (both from his family and from the school) are real and believable despite their most unusual takes on life.

Clearly too Menchetti has been able to use this show as a route to understanding and compassion. We leave the theatre not only feeling that we know the crazy protagonists, but that we actually like them. This for me was a fine achievement to observe.

But above all, as I said in the beginning, I loved his story telling ability. And it got me wondering why more writers and performers don't just go back to basics and tell the stories of their lives, verbally, in public, to whomsoever will listen. We have come so far from the gathering around the village well or the camp fire where the bard simply told it as it was, told what he or she had done that day or that year.

We have invented poetry and theatre and novels and short stories and film and television. Comedians give us bits of their lives, and writers conceal chunks of it in their 'fiction'. There are associations of storytellers (strangely enough know as 'tellers') who tell us other peoples' stories (often with goblins and a moral). But who actually just tells us their story?

Anthony Menchetti's poignant and unaffected style might be a template for a return to something simple and lovely. He is to be congratulated for a fine, balanced, compassionate, funny and touching piece of work.

Gay Conversion School Drop-out

Fusebox Theatre @ The Factory,

105 Victoria Rd Enmore in Sydney.

Running from 13-30 November @ 9pm.

Bookings phone 9550 3666 or www.factorytheatre.com.au