

THEATRE REVIEW: Rabbit

By **Victor Kline, Arts Hub**

Friday, November 28, 2008

This is the first play by English playwright Nina Raine. It was selected for the 2008 season at the Sydney Theatre Company by former Artistic Director Robyn Nevin, at the behest of the director Brendan Cowell. It has been re-set in Australia.

It is part of a current stream of English plays by playwrights, post Patrick Marber, who believe theatre is at its most 'honest' when it simply depicts careless, non-spiritual, unloving people doing and saying abominable things to one another.

The play is set in a bar where Bella is celebrating her 29th birthday party with four friends who are unknown to one another. Meanwhile her father is in hospital with cancer and may die at any moment. The father, played by Geoff Morrell, makes regular appearances 'in the mind' of Bella.

The first Act consists of a string of cruel interchanges amongst the characters. Some are funny. Most are not. The author, in her programme notes (presumably written for the English production) says: "what people don't realise, reading the script, is that the lines are never played as hard as they are written".

But I think Cowell plays them pretty hard, and perhaps this is a risk the playwright should have anticipated and guarded against by writing them 'less hard'. In any event, the result, be it purely authorial, or partly directorial, is five unlikeable and lost characters whose several relationships invoke no empathy and whose problems come across as little more than a morass of sophomoric cliches.

In Act 2 the characters soften a little, but in a maudlin, self-conscious way, because, as Raine has her character Sandy say "you need light and you need dark".

I was impressed by the angles, levels and pacing employed by Cowell, and although perhaps he could have teased out a little more humanity from the characters, by and large there was not much he could do to salvage the script.

Plaudits to the actors, especially Alison Bell, Geoff Morell and Toby Schmitz, who all employed the very best comic and dramatic timing and whose energetic performances were all the more admirable in view of the paucity of material they had to work with.

I am confident that under the stewardship of new Artistic Directors Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton, when it is decided that a precious spot in the season of our flagship theatre company is not to be devoted to an Australian playwright, it will at least be given to a foreign work of quality and maturity.

Rabbit plays at the Sydney Theatre Company, Wharf 1, Hickson Road, Walsh Bay in Sydney, from 27 November 2008 to 11 January 2009. Bookings (02) 9250 1777.