

THEATRE REVIEW: Tender, SBW Stables Theatre, Sydney

By **Victor Kline, Arts Hub**

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All good theatre is made of teamwork, the seamless co-operation of text, direction and acting. This is a very good production and a very good example of that co-operation.

Playwright Nicki Bloom offers an interesting, dark and incredibly sad piece of writing, the sadness of which is cleverly heightened by the use of flashbacks to happier times.

Her central character Sarah has gone to the Gardens with husband Michael late at night. Something terrible has happened there which takes away her memory, destroys her peace of mind and that of Michael and Michael's parents Yvonne and Patrick. Out of the same circumstances and the same tragedy, each of the characters finds their own particular hell.

Bloom's structure, her change of pace and her use of Caryl Churchill style overlapping dialogue will not allow the audience to become complacent. We know we will never find the answer to the cause of the tragedy, but we also know that along the way we will find out a lot more about these people.

The play overall is fast and tight. There is only one scene between Michael and Yvonne where Michael tells his mother how much he loves Sarah, that could be shorter. It needs to be there so Michael can get his mother's endorsement of his love for Sarah, but it labours a little what we have already learnt from much tighter dialogue and the director's clever non-verbal character enhancements.

But this is a quibble, a very minor glitch in an otherwise entrancing script.

Director Geordie Brookman understands the text and enhances it. He brings a simple, elegant, non-intrusive style, that draws the right emotion and level of emotion from the actors at the right time.

His use of inter-scene and underscore music and sound is powerful and evocative, and his use of lighting to shift the mood between rapidly changing scenes is apposite.

He gets the physicality and the angles just right and uses the unique space of The Stables Theatre to great advantage. It is a space that has undone directors in the past. But Brookman makes it a comfortable vehicle for a terrible and uncomfortable scenario.

The play ends with a piece of directorial virtuosity using one breath and a flickering light. It is so subtle it will pass straight into the unconscious minds of the audiences to heighten and highlight the poignancy of the final scene between Sarah and Michael delivered in the presence of Yvonne and Patrick whom the director has sitting as silent and impotent witnesses. It is a clever and integrated closing.

The acting is beautiful. Darren Weller as Michael, Kate Box as Sarah, Pip Miller as Patrick and Heather Mitchell as Yvonne pick up on the teamwork of writer and director with selfless, focused performances that create a poignant almost tearing ensemble piece.

But if there is a first amongst equals, it was for me the performance of Pip Miller as Patrick. His closing monologue is a very difficult piece to deliver. It is the one point in the play where a lesser actor could make the writer look melodramatic. But here, like everywhere else in his performance, Miller gives us a relaxed, balanced and understated performance that is for me quite flawless.

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'.