

# THEATRE REVIEW: The Woman with Dog's Eyes

By **Victor Kline, Arts Hub**

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Fans of Louis Nowra will no doubt be delighted to find that the Phoenix Theatre Company has revived *The Woman With Dog Eyes*.

When they go to see it they will find a physical environment elegantly and appropriately designed by Murray Grellis and beautifully and appropriately lit by Larry Kelly, who is quickly gaining a reputation in Sydney for his subtle and effective lighting states.

They will also enjoy strong charismatic and character honest performances from Don Ferguson and Wendy Nash.

This is the story of Malcolm Boyce (Chris Clark), self made millionaire developer, who takes his wife Penny (Nash) back to their honeymoon hotel in the Blue Mountains, for an elaborate celebration of their 40th wedding anniversary.

They are joined there by their three sons, Luke (Leon Richardson), Todd (Craig Purdon) and the eldest Keith (Ferguson). Luke and Keith work for the company. Todd is the black sheep.

This play is a challenge, and it shows great courage on the part of director Jennie Bazell that she was willing to take it on. It is, in my opinion, not one of Nowra's best. This may be because it was commissioned in 2004, by the then director of the Griffin Theatre, as part of a Nowra trilogy, perhaps for pragmatic reasons.

Be that as it may, the play requires very subtle direction with minute attention to character complexity (often through the non verbal), or it is at risk of sliding into melodrama, or worse still a rant fest showcase of five weak and nasty people without redeeming feature.

Bazell, herself a very accomplished and experienced actor, is nonetheless a novice director (she has solo directed only one other play), and I feel that despite her very best efforts, she has let the play slip away from her.

To begin with the sight lines are confused and often do not conform to need. The characters are moved about the stage constantly, unnecessarily and without motivation, leaving the actors often looking confused and uncomfortable.

At one point, for example, Ferguson is required to deliver a significant monologue, which he does with great verbal and emotional skill, but he is put in such difficult positions and moved about in such an uncomfortable way that the edge is taken off his performance and the audience's suspension of disbelief is at risk.

Nor is there enough attention to the physicality of the characters. Malcolm is supposed to be a tough boss developer, but Bazell allows him to stand with hands on hips in a way that is almost

effeminate. When a tense duologue is in progress the other characters are often allowed to slide comfortably into armchairs as though disengaged and just waiting for their next line.

Significantly too, the characters aren't allowed enough complexity or humanity. For example, Malcolm tends to rant and yell too often, too soon, leaving his character arc nowhere to go. He is shown as just plain awful, and that is not true.

Nowra's writing may be difficult to reconcile at times, but it does reveal a man who has gone to a lot of trouble to arrange a beautiful event for his wife, who can cry, who can sing *Some Enchanted Evening* to her, and, who, despite a good lashing of insensitivity, is at least capable of being charming.

There is a moment when Malcolm asks middle son Todd why he didn't bring his girlfriend to the celebration. Todd replies that it is because Malcolm would try to drive a wedge between them by humiliating him and charming the girlfriend.

So there is the hint. Malcolm may be ruthless, but he needs also to be charming, and this is something Bazell never allows us to see in the portrayal she directs from Clark.

The programme notes give it away. We are told that Clark is enjoying playing a character that is 'unlikeable, unpleasant and totally unsympathetic'. But that is not what Nowra intended, and it is not real. It has no place in theatre, which ought to try to find something of value, or at least of interest, in every character.

Despite all of this, I saw glimpses that tell me Bazell may just have the ability to become as fine a director as she is an actor. It will require a more careful selection of vehicle, a more thorough casting process, perhaps a longer rehearsal period, and a much more ruthless and uncompromising look at character analysis, movement and detail.

***The Woman With Dog's Eyes*, plays at the Zenith Theatre, Railway Street Chatswood in Sydney from 18 October to 1 November, Wednesdays to Saturdays at 8 pm and Sunday at 5pm.**

**For bookings call MCA Ticketing - 1300306776 or visit [www.phoenixtheatre.com.au](http://www.phoenixtheatre.com.au)**