

Blog

THEATRE

I Only Came To Use The Phone

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Tuesday 10 May, 2011 15:27:51



The theatre adaptation of a Gabriel Garcia Marquez short story takes the audience to a realm far darker and more frightening than in many of his novels, writes Jenny Blain.

True to the master's penchant for the bizarre and the surreal, the 'magical' is infused with the macabre in Netta Yashchin's transplantation of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story *I Only Came to Use The Phone* to the stage. Losing nothing of the master's hypnotic intensity, Yashchin places Marquez in a realm more dark and scary than I recall finding in his novels.

In her directorship of the Darlinghurst Theatre Company production Yashchin has been faithful to Marquez by retaining his third-person narrative word for word. *I Only Came To Use The Phone* (from *Strange Pilgrims*, 1992) is no bedtime story. It's a chilling psychological thriller which plays out at many levels including nightmare, Gothic fable and the worst of the Grimm brothers. Its location is ambiguous – psychiatric ward or insane asylum? – but its wider setting is clearly that of Franco-era Spain. Beneath Marquez's mandatory whimsy therefore (and there's no denying the hallmark comic exuberance Yashchin succeeds in capturing here) lies a deep undercurrent: a powerful political statement about oppression, victimhood, exile and betrayal. A statement that can be broadened to include the triumph of institutionalised paranoia over the creative imagination. And then there's the paradox of the crazy perpetrators of a corrupt system in charge of the innocent and vulnerable. It's a big package for a short story, one that Yashchin and her cast handle with skill, sensitivity and flair.

It's a simple enough tale: a hitchhike turns into a hijack after a young Mexican music-hall performer's car breaks down as she drives to Barcelona to keep an appointment as assistant to her magician husband. Desperate to reach him by phone, she accepts a lift in a decrepit bus whose passengers are a dubious group of 'nuns' sporting beards and shrouded in blankets. It's an intimation of what is to come:

incarceration in a grimly shabby underground bunker, more dungeon than the mental health clinic it purports to be. Not entirely aware of her predicament, and conscientious to a fault, Maria (Annabelle Stephenson) keeps pleading for a phone to ring her husband Saturno (Dorje Swallow) and is constantly thwarted by the vaguely sinister Sanatorium Director (David Hansen). When finally she makes contact she is only able to hear his angry curse of 'whore!' before he hangs up.

The Latino-American Saturno is a man quick to condemn. With absolutely no evidence, he prefers to imagine Maria has run off with someone else – after all, she does have a history. He does however visit the sanatorium once Maria pays the price for the delivery of her message: a predatory sexual demand from Yashchin's terrifying ogress of a Night Matron. But rather than speak to Maria, Saturno is taken in by the wily Director's 'spin' – a man whose job it is to recruit fodder for the system – and leaves without seeing her. It's a shattering moment, a failure of human decency, loyalty and trust. A moment surpassed only by the last image of Maria as she sits heartbroken and powerless, her only comfort that of cigarettes and a smooching cat with its head in her lap (Julia Billington sporting a magnificent Cheshire grin). Already an exile, and appearing to have lost her will, the previously spirited Maria is desolate, a woman in exile from the self. It's an emotionally compelling performance.

The gifted cast of six (including Yashchin) showcase their versatility as they spread themselves across 36 entertaining roles. As inmates of the asylum they combine resignation with the lavishly weird: Fayssal Bazzi for instance as Herculina the body-builder nurse given to camp displays of muscle-flexing more titillating than menacing. And then there's Billington who is not only a believable cat but who is able to morph from character to character with a chameleon-like ease. Her range of expression is extraordinary. Noteworthy too is Damian Wright's flamenco guitar, beguiling as a sweet/sad mood-setter. Altogether it's a company that exudes vitality and enthusiasm.

Yashchin has said in an interview that she likes work she can 'bend and torture'.

In 2008 she won an award at the Adelaide Fringe Festival for her first staging of *I Only Came To Use The Phone*. She currently hopes to take it overseas.

I Only Came To Use The Phone is at the Darlinghurst Theatre, Sydney, until 29 May, 2011.