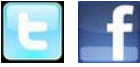


QUESTION: Have we entered an age of anti-comedy where things are deemed to be funny simply because they're not? Please discuss in relation to Chris Lilley's *Angry Boys*.



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Dorge Swallow, Annabelle Stephenson, Faysall Bazzi & Julia Billington. All images: © Thomas Gillman.



POSTED: 14 MAY 2011

I Only Came to Use the Phone, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez |
 Directed by Netta Yashchin

[Darlinghurst Theatre Company](#) | Darlinghurst Theatre, Potts Point, Sydney | Until 29 May

One of the most interesting things about this play is that, in a sense, it is not really a play at all. It isn't just based on Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story of the same name; it uses his text in its entirety.

Hence all the characters become narrators — not just David Hansen, who's officially given that role, among others, in the program — and the amount of actual dialogue they deliver is quite limited.

It could quite easily have just a dramatized book reading, but in the strong, skilful hands of director Netta Yashchin it becomes a dramatic powerhouse — confronting, edgy, provocative, disturbing, at times very funny and, above all, incredibly scary.

I Only Came to Use the Phone is the stuff of nightmares. Marquez may have set his tale in Franco's Spain and may well have been alluding to the general's headline authoritarianism, but at ground level it could have happened anywhere to just about anyone.

Maria (Julia Billingham) is a young, beautiful actress with a somewhat colourful past in the love department.

Her rented car has broken down at night on a country road in teeming rain. She's due to help her husband Saturno the Magician (Dorje Swallow) with his performance and desperately wants to contact him about her plight.

The only help comes from a passing bus driver, who offers to drop her in the next village where there'll be a phone. But alas, Maria falls asleep, only to wake up at the bus's ultimate destination — an asylum, where she's presumed to be just another of the unfortunate, sedated women being delivered for institutionalized care.

Her first contact with the Night Matron (wonderfully played by Netta Yashchin herself) won't be the only time Maria utters "But I only came to use the phone," and as her pleas become more desperate, so too her behaviour appears more insane.

Stephenson's Maria is absolutely convincing as she languishes in a hell she accidentally stumbled into and can't get of.

Even when, after more than a year, she grabs a chance access to a phone and rings Saturno, her past catches up with her. Saturno had presumed long ago that Maria had abandoned him for another and tells her to get lost in no uncertain language.

When he does turn up, Saturno, too, is convinced of Maria's madness.

Apart from Stephenson, all other five actors play multiple roles and carry them off with praiseworthy aplomb — Hansen as director of the asylum; Yashchin also as a police officer; Julia Billingham in a variety of roles, including surely one of the most sensual on-stage imitations of a cat.

Special mention must be made of the handily built Fayssal Bazzi, who came in as a last-minute substitute as Herculina, the cruelest and toughest nurse of them all — darkly menacing, yet splendidly amusing as well.

Marquez is a great writer and this production is certainly worthy of his name. You'd be mad to miss it!

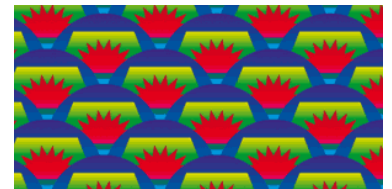
A word of warning, however. Be prepared for what many patrons thought was excessive use of the smoke generator.



David Hansen & Annabelle Stephenson.



Annabelle Stephenson & Dorge Swallow.



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