

## Spanish nightmare comes to life

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Animated ... Dorje Swallow and Annabelle Stephenson. Photo: Thomas Gilman

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Genre: [Theatre](#)

### I Only Came to Use the Phone

**Darlinghurst Theatre, May 3 until May 29**

WRITTEN as a short story by the Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *I Only Came to Use the Phone* was published in 1992 in an anthology of stories, *Strange Pilgrims*. All touched on exile, dislocation and the strangeness of life as a foreigner.

We meet Maria, a Mexican living in Spain, who is marooned on a highway. Her car has broken down. Desperate to call her husband in Barcelona - a magician with whom this former music hall singer works - she hitches a ride on a decrepit bus and is swept into a nightmarish corner of the Spanish mental health system (Marquez's none-too-subtle swipe at the Franco regime and its arbitrary powers of imprisonment).

While she struggles to prove her identity and sanity to a disbelieving staff, her husband, whose magic act has gone to pot without her, assumes she has done a bunk (again) with another man.

It's a suspenseful yarn with an underlying note of wry romantic humour, and it is these facets of the story, rather than Marquez's political/ideological commentary, that the director Netta Yashchin's stage adaptation illuminates.

Setting it in a poetically distressed space of crumbling plaster and peeling wallpaper (designed by Charlotte Lane and lit by Rachel Smith), Yashchin has developed an open and playful piece in which her ensemble - with the exception of the actors playing Maria and her husband - adopt multiple roles: mental patients, nurses, bored French tourists, children and domestic pets.

Annabelle Stephenson is believably agitated as Maria and Dorje Swallow is charming as Saturno, her easily swayed husband. Julia Billington and David Hansen contribute cameos and Fayssal Bazzi, stepping into the show with a week to prepare, is memorable as Herculina, the asylum's murderously strong nurse. Yashchin gifts herself with a fruity turn as a sexually predatory night matron. Guitarist Damian Wright provides sensitive accompaniment.

Perhaps it doesn't quite come alive as drama - Yashchin retains the third-person narrative - but it is an attractive and compact animation of the tale.

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