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Tiptoe by Michael Beresford at JUTE - review by Glyn Davies

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Eve power user Joined: 26 Mar 2005 Posts: 220 Location: FNQ Australia	Posted: Mon Jul 07, 2008 6:54 pm Post subject: Tiptoe by Michael Beresford at JUTE - review by Glyn Davies

Tiptoe

written by Michael Beresford
directed by David Fenton

at JUTE Theatre at COCA, 96 Abbott St, Cairns
4–19 July, 6:30 pm (Tue, Wed), 8:00 pm, (Thu – Sat).

review by Glyn Davies commissioned by Arts Nexus

Memory is both elusive and deceptive. In that sense, at least, Henry Ford was right when he said, "History is more or less bunk". Michael Beresford's *Tiptoe* is all about history and memory, tapping into the rich vein of narrative that still lies hidden under the surface in the mining towns of North Queensland. The play is Beresford's riposte to those who, like our former Prime Minister, would have us reshape the past nearer to the heart's desire. Its plot centres on the repressed secret of three spirited old biddies whose memories of the gold-rush days in Charters Towers, the town they playfully call "Charlie's Trousers", encompass their childhood encounters with a couple of eccentric, disreputable bag ladies known as Annie Bags and Tiptoe Jen. The sisters' hard-won piece of mind and their desire to bury the past is suddenly threatened by the arrival of an inquisitive young artist, Emma Lee, who has been commissioned to create a public work of art for the town's centenary celebrations. Emma Lee quickly digs up the fact that Annie Bags was her grandmother and Tiptoe Jen her aunt.

"Facts don't lie" says Emma Lee. "Truth today is like trying to find nuggets of gold in Charters Towers. But they are there. And I am going to find them."

What she needs to find out is what happened to Tiptoe Jen. So does the audience.

In a brilliant melange of allusion, symbolism, suspense, and atmospherics – all intensely theatrical – Beresford re-imagines a Charters Towers legend in the Australian Gothic style that is becoming quite popular. Think, for instance, of *Holy Day* and *Constance Drinkwater*, both presented in Cairns over the past couple of years. This play outdoes them both in its complexity and its presentation on stage. It has more than a touch of melodrama and the supernatural, laced with violent action and poetic imagery; there are overtones of Edgar Allen Poe, of *Waiting for Godot*, and of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Rarely has a stage set been so symbolic and so right for the play as Dominic Hooper's multiple acting area set for *Tiptoe*. It is a study in contrasts. Up left in a mezzanine area is the sparse interior of the miner's cottage where the elder sister, Winsome, holds her regular canasta game, a device for keeping her sisters under her thumb. Beneath that is a cellar, full of musty books and secrets of the past. Winsome is an archivist and guards them ferociously. Down left is the perfect contrast, a cluttered drawing-room full of bric-a-brac and kitsch. This is Dot's domain and is absolutely in keeping with her skittish character. Finally, at stage right there is a ramp and a scrim that shows the interior of another miner's cottage when lit from the front, but which reveals a brilliant red flame tree outside when lit from behind. This is where Ruby lives above a cellar that has been filled in with sand ages ago. It originally belonged to the sisters' father, Pop Bradley, whose jewel collection is still buried under the floorboards along with who-knows-what else.

Of the three sisters, Winsome (Carol Burns) is the most presentable, prim, and proper, just as a former schoolmarm should be. Her diction is precise and clipped, her demeanour "just so". Burns presents a fine study in prejudice and repression. Dot (Susan Prince) is just the opposite. Randy and skittish, she allows her secrets and her property to be stolen, almost without demur, leading Emma-Lee to exactly the right hiding places. Suellen Maunder as Ruby presents the most remarkable character-study of all. Old age has crept up on her more cruelly than on the others, turning her into a clownish child-woman who wears calf-length cotton dresses teamed with an old cardigan. It has destroyed everything but her memories and her child-like delight in things like jewels and secrets – and skipping games. To compete with three such seasoned and smart performers as these might seem impossible, but Kylee McDowall with her youthful tenaciousness competes very well as Emma-Lee. She is manipulative and determined to find the truth, cleverly picking out the weakness of each sister and playing upon it to achieve her ends. Physically right, her actions are also symbolically right. And so, with her, the play comes to its awful conclusion

The soundscapes of the play match the action perfectly and, as in melodrama, dictate the responses of the audience. Legend has it the Charters Towers was born in lightning and thunder, and the sound and lighting plots of this play replicate the birth. Amelia Pereboom must have been on her toes all through the performance, just keeping track of the magic lantern slides alone, let alone the scrim, and the lighting required for three different locales.

Tiptoe is a complex play. Holding all of its elements together in such a way as to have them coalesce into an effective production that gives full expression to the playwright's vision must have been a very demanding task.

David Fenton has fulfilled it admirably. To illustrate the point, consider Fenton's description of the setting he envisaged:

"The world must be dirty, unstable, hidden, and cluttered with secrets. The people must be threadbare and part of the world, as if they have come up out of the ground, out of the dirt – as if they live just above the precipice of the mineshafts. They are all just keeping their heads above the secrets."

Fenton's analytical ability, his experience, and his daring are all on show in this remarkable production. If Charlie's Trousers is "a world where history haunts the present", as Fenton says, then what can we learn from that now? That is the inescapable question of the play.

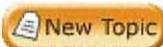
This play is intriguing, and essential viewing.

Glyn Davies

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