

# [Festival Freak](#)

One man's attempt to drink as much as possible from the Festivalian Cups of Art.

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## Archive for the '2010 - Adelaide Festival of the Arts' Category

### [\[2010117\] The Sound and the Fury](#)

Saturday, February 5th, 2011

The Sound and the Fury

[Elevator Repair Service](#) @ Dunstan Playhouse

6:00pm, Sun 14 Mar 2010

I slump into my seat. "This is it," I think, "my final show." I'm tired, but I'm here – all I have to do is remain cogniscent for another two-and-a-half hours.

That was much, much easier said than done.

I read the playbill while waiting for the performance to start – and I realise that I'm in trouble. Representing the opening chapter of [William Faulkner's book](#), *The Sound and the Fury* is seen from the point of view of Benjy Compson – a childlike, mentally-retarded 33-year-old who cannot communicate through speech, and who is unable to differentiate between past and present events; they're all jumbled up in his mind. The chapter – and in this case, the play – is a quagmire of chronologically-mixed memories triggered by one present-day event, as the Compson family (Benjy is the youngest of four children) and their periphery (their neighbours, hired help, and miscellaneous other characters) are laid bare by Benjy's time-insensitive interpretation.

Now – my brain just about popped a gasket just writing that.

So I'm sitting in the darkened Playhouse, trying to follow the progression of the play... it's too much. I'm utterly confused, and sleep has a vice-like grip on my eyelids. I give in, letting myself have a quick doze; when I open my eyes again, my head is clearer... but I'm still none-the-wiser.

There's a lot of fourth-wall breaking going on; actors would deliver their lines, then turn to the audience and reference their character: "...Quentin said." Initially, I thought this was merely stylistically amusing; soon, however, I realise that it is absolutely essential. Because, as Benjy's memories flit from present to multiple pasts, so too do the actors flit from character to character; at one stage, Benjy and his Father walk offstage to the left, and immediate back onstage from the right, with different actors in a different time, years earlier.

And that, my friends, is a massive headfuck.

The flipside is that, when you manage to string one, two, or even five minutes of comprehension together, it's a massively satisfying experience. That's one of the things that I really like in a production: the concession by the artist to let the audience figure it out for themselves. Sure, that may be a bit too much work for some people (and I, for one, wished that I had at least read the book before seeing this show), but the payoff – as an audience member – is immense.

Massive kudos to the cast, too, capably bouncing between characters and accents in what must have been an insanely difficult play to direct. Their manner was wonderful when a large table, almost the centrepiece of the stage, fell to pieces in the middle of the performance; they carried on regardless until one realised that they would not be able to perform a later movement, then they quietly excused themselves and took a ten minute break while stagehands fixed the problem. The cast returned to the stage without fanfare, the lights dropped, and *bang* – back into the action.

*The Sound and the Fury* was, in a way, both the best and worst show with which to end my 2010 Festival Freakdom. It was possibly the most intense show I saw all month, delivered at a time when I was least able to comprehend it properly. But the bits I did glean were oh-so-good.

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## [\[2010114\] Mahler 8: Symphony of a Thousand](#)

Friday, February 4th, 2011

Mahler 8: Symphony of a Thousand

[Adelaide Symphony Orchestra](#) (cond. [Arvo Volmer](#)) and the Adelaide Festival Chorus @ Adelaide Entertainment Centre

8:00pm, Sat 13 Mar 2010

(Be warned: this one's going to be a bit sentimental. And, if the sentimentality works for you, then you'll hate the ending.)

My Dad... well, he's getting on a bit. And, whilst I didn't really felt like I got on that well with him when I was a kid, I'm cherishing the stuff that we share now – even if it's an argument over the validity of modern music (or, as he likes to call it, “howler monkeys”) or political inclinations (he's paid his taxes, so he's conservative now). And, back in 2009, I noticed that the [State Opera Company](#) were putting on a production of [The Flying Dutchman](#) – so I bought us tickets and insisted he come down from our familial home in the Mid-North to attend.

Now – my Dad is a proud Australian... but he emigrated from Germany in his early twenties. And, as a German, he has some fundamental passion for Wagner in his blood – it runs deeper than anything I could possibly fathom. It almost appears to be a blind loyalty at times; Dad used to make the pilgrimage to Adelaide any time [The Ring](#) was on with one of his old German friends (now, sadly, passed away), and they would drink deeply from each cycle of *The Ring* and recharge their – I don't know, their German-ness? – whether it be a “good” production or “bad”. I remember talking to Dad after one particular production, where he lamented that an angst-ridden river of blood was presented using a single red handkerchief fluttering to the stage floor... he loved the story (as always), gleaned his dose of Wagner from it, but hated the show.

Anyway...

*The Flying Dutchman* was a delight. Of course, Dad grumped about the use of lasers and such (which I thought was quite clever), but he was genuinely moved by it. As I shuffled him into a cab to head back to our friend's place where he was staying, he was genuinely red-eyed... and thankful. It was a really moving moment, I thought, which we celebrated by saying nothing.

Moving on...

The Festival's flagship production of *Mahler 8* was pre-announced very early; some months before the Festival Programme was released, if I recall correctly. There had been a few little hints of things prior to the announcement – Friends of the Festival were invited to dress in black and attend a publicity photo-shoot involving Paul Grabowsky and the ASO much earlier in 2009 (I'm way down the back, somewhere in the middle). Tickets went on sale very early for *Mahler 8*; I, of course, chose to leave my ticket purchases until the last possible moment. So, I rang Dad: "Dad – the Festival is doing some Mahler with the ASO. It's performed once in a blue moon. Make plans to come to Adelaide."

We wound up getting B-Reserve tickets – it was the best I could manage at such late notice. Way up high on the right-hand side. We got there in plenty of time – with his arthritis and artificial hip, I wanted to take things slowly, not put any pressure on him. Programme in hand, we get to our seats... and the view is tremendous. The "stage" is massive, supporting not only the ASO (and the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra) but also the Festival Chorus, which numbered a lazy *four hundred*. Give or take.

And when conductor Arvo Volmer briskly took to his podium (to appreciative applause, naturally) and lifted his baton, there was a slight pause... and then a wall of noise.

The chorus, alone, created a formidable soundwave; the orchestras merely provided texture beneath. It was, truly, a spectacular moment for the ears... even Dad, with his dodgy hearing, felt it.

As for the rest of *Mahler 8*... well, I don't know what to say. I remember looking from my perch upon the sea of people performing this *music*, and not knowing what to think. I was undoubtedly tired; I sat back and closed my eyes and let the sound wash over me and tried to figure out how to comprehend it, how to understand it, but soon realised that I couldn't. So I just opened my ears and my head and tried to absorb it. And then, when it was over, I – along with the rest of the Entertainment Centre – applauded long and hard.

The pace picked up a bit as we left – there was a chance I could make a 9:30pm show in town. We scooted as quickly as Dad could hobble to the defined pickup point, and my brother arrived on cue for the first time I can remember. We tried to talk about the performance as he drove, but both Dad and I struggled to get any meaningful words out... and the few times we *did* get on a roll, my nephew interrupted to talk about Pokémon.

As I jumped out of the car and ran to my next show, I knew there was a squillion-and-one things I wanted to talk to Dad about... but they had to wait until the next week, for our usual catch-up phone call. But it wasn't quite the same; I couldn't see the happiness in his eyes.

But I could hear it in his voice.

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## [\[2010106\] Good Morning Mister Gershwin](#)

Monday, January 31st, 2011

## Good Morning Mister Gershwin

[Compagnie Montalvo-Hervieu](#) @ Festival Theatre

8:00pm, Thu 11 Mar 2010

There's oodles of empty seats in the stalls at Festival Theatre; but I'm buoyed by the massive video screen at the back of the stage. "Warning – this performance contains nudity" it proclaims.

Blimey, I thought. French dance, Gershwin tunes, *and* nudity? Jackpot.

And, as *Good Morning Mister Gershwin* begins, you pretty quickly realise *why* that warning was there; because the opening couple of minutes consisted of video of the dancers swimming in the buff. There's the odd plastic smile there, too, but it comes across as anything *but* sexy. Peaceful, maybe.

And then the live performance begins – and initially it's fantastic. It's hitting all the right notes for me – very dynamic, limbs seeming being flung around with abandon, but a remarkable level of control being used. It's colourful and exciting...

...but something's not quite right. There seems to be a real distance between the movement and the music; sure, there may be a really well-performed robot dance on display, but there's seemingly no connection to Gershwin's jaunty tune that burbles along behind it. And, for the most part, the video screen was used as a distracting background; but then there was a fifteen minute piece focussed on the civil rights movement. Was that a video of Rodney King being beaten in the background?

Contrast that with the brilliantly funny gargling skit. Or the larger lass with the éclair and pink ball. Again – there's some magnificent flexibility and balance and strength on display by the men in the Compagnie, and the short blonde woman was an amazing singer. And the tap bits were pretty slick, too. But the vast discrepancies in mood, coupled with the musical selections that, at times, seemed to *heighten* the contrast, just made this a frustrating experience.

Look – this was *very* entertaining... for the first fifty minutes. Once the videos of heaving oceans and civil rights protests and boat people appeared, the dance itself slowed to a torpor. And that's a massive shame, because the opening promised so much goodness.

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## [\[2010101\] Flight](#)

Saturday, January 29th, 2011

### Flight

[Australian String Quartet](#) @ Adelaide Town Hall

7:00pm, Wed 10 Mar 2010

Now – you know I love me some strings. Sure, I prefer the deeper, sadder tones of the cello and viola, but if I'm flipping through the Festival Guide and I see "String Quartet", then I'm there.

The fact that the ASQ are – frankly – pretty hot doesn't hurt, either.

But first, there was an opportunity for a pre-show talk with the composer of one of the pieces the ASQ was to play. Paul Stanhope (who, curiously, doesn't actually play any string instruments) talked about his *String Quartet no.1*, a revised version of which formed the centrepiece of *Flight*. It certainly was interesting listening to the Australian composer speak of a piece of music that I hadn't heard yet; written after the last Federal election, his intention was to demonstrate the conflict of rhetoric with the opening, before quickening the pace for a blues-infected optimistic ending... with a description like that, my appetite was well-and-truly whet.

There was a short break between the pre-gig talk and the ASQ's arrival; the forty of us who turned up for the chat had to evacuate before returning to long queues. Annoying, but understandable. And as I took my allocated seat waaaaay back in Row P, it appeared that the only two empty seats I could see were either side of me... which was nice.

The first movement of the Haydn opening bracket was... well, delightful. Sweet and lush. The girls swayed as they played; a lovely sight. The rest of Haydn's *The Bird*, unfortunately, was a snoozefest... literally. I drop off to sleep, waking up with one of those disorienting, dizzying nods. In fact, it may have been the mobile phone that rang at the end of the piece amidst the applause that woke me up – a bad start by the audience.

Moving onto Stanhope's *String Quartet no.1*, however... well, this was The Bomb, as the kids used to say. I loved this. There's lots of percussive plucking throughout, but particularly the first and last movements, and the word that springs to mind is "angular". *Sonata*, at times, appeared to be an atonal mess, but the momentary confusion was paid off with ordered sequences rising out of the chaos to bring a smile to the face; the way those sequences appeared made it almost appear phasic in nature. *Lullaby* feels a little more "traditional" for a string quartet, slower paced with mellow tones. The punchy *Dance* rounds out the piece, and it's fantastic – there's periods of intense hacking, fits where the quartet are all plucking at the same time, and it's just a full-blooded delight. I live for stuff like this – it's distinctive and challenging and *awesome*, and they sign off Stanhope's work with a flourish.

After an interval, the Quartet are joined by Lucinda Collins on piano for a bit of Brahms – *Piano Quintet in f minor op.34* – which was lovely and all... but, being perfectly honest, after the surge to the end of Stanhope's *Dance* I was spent. After that, the Brahms – perhaps undeservedly – felt like filler.

The sounds and visuals of live experience were fantastic; Anne Horton watching fellow violinist Sophie Rowell with laser-like intensity, with the great strings of Sally Boud and Rachel Johnston (on viola and cello, respectively) blissing me out as only the deeper strings can. But I somehow wish that I could have just experienced that first pre-interval slab by itself; that's not to say that the Brahms piece was *bad*, it's just that it was a let-down after the Stanhope's glorious suite.

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## [\[2010079\] The Walworth Farce](#)

Sunday, January 16th, 2011

The Walworth Farce

[Druid Theatre Company](#) @ Her Majesty's Theatre

2:00pm, Sat 6 Mar 2010

Blimey.

The first thing that struck me about *The Walworth Farce* was the meticulous set. We're looking at a cutaway of a house interior – nothing startling there – but the attention to detail is amazing; it exudes the sadness of a worn squalor.

The second thing that struck me was the realisation that, five minutes into the play, I had barely understood a single word that was being said.

I think that Australians like to feel an affinity for the Irish; that there's a mutual admiration and respect between the peoples of our countries. But I'll be damned if it didn't take me *way* too long to pick up the accents, especially of Dinny (Michael Glenn Murphy) and Sean (Tadhg Murphy), though that process was no doubt hindered by the constant flitting between characters, adopting exaggerated intonations to differentiate the characters, whilst donning simple costumes to create the visual distinction.

Which was *very* much appreciated, because until I started picking up the dialogue, I didn't have the faintest clue what was going on.

The first Act is all setup: we meet the various characters (there's a play-within-a-play going on here, as the three male cast members tell a farcical story leveraging brain surgery, familial hijinks, infidelity, and crass 70's-era sitcom exposition), but we're also shown what may be the "present", involving the courting of local checkout chick Hayley. It's all very curious and funny and loud – Dinny owns the stage with volume – but there's a decidedly sinister twist at the end of the Act.

And, in the interval, I sat there trying to make sense of it all.

My first note was that *The Walworth Farce* was great Fringe theatre – but hang on, this was under the Festival umbrella, with \$60 tickets. Hmmm. Then I recalled that it had been picked up after a successful Edinburgh Fringe run, and was in the midst of a worldwide tour... the Druid Theatre Company, based in Ireland, is pretty highly regarded.

And then I told myself to stop thinking about the labels, to stop thinking about the categories, and just focus on the matter at hand. Which was, frankly, confusing... in a satisfying and absorbing way.

The second Act starts. There's a big reveal about a murder. There's some astonishing acting by (the gorgeously dark-skinned) Mercy Ojelade as her Hayley character displays naïve innocence, morphing into sheer wide-eyed terror. Dinny forces her to adopt the role of his wife, Maureen – and the moment when he holds her down, painting her face white, is absolutely brutal – you could have heard a pin drip, except for her soft whimpering. And then the killings... again, shocking, bold, blunt. Sean, left alone onstage, painting his own face black as he tries to act out his *own* play, the stories forming around him.

Fuck-a-doodle-doo.

What an ending. What a jaw-droppingly good ending. What a great piece of work.

I had a good long muse about *The Walworth Farce* on my way to the next show. Something in my head kept telling me it was a brilliant piece of challenging, deconstructionist theatre; an interesting idea, another part of my head replied, and it decided to check the director's notes to see if they could confirm or deny the deconstruction theory. So I read the notes, and this line catches my eye: "I have to say, honestly, I haven't a clue what is going on, other than I love the play immediately."

Hey – if it's good enough for the director, it's good enough for me. After the initial comprehension problems subsided, this became a marvellous piece of theatre, utterly compelling in every regard.

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## [\[2010072\] Man Covets Bird](#)

Friday, January 14th, 2011

Man Covets Bird

[Slingsby](#) @ Space Theatre

7:00pm, Thu 4 Mar 2010

Slingsby's logo carries a little by-line, a motto: "journey in wonder". That's a perfectly apt description for *Man Covets Bird*; it's a beautifully produced meandering little coming-of-age tale from the point of view of a man leaving home, entering the big wide world, who seemingly forms a co-dependent relationship with a small bird. A friendship develops, emotional turmoil besets the Man, and...

Look – plot is not *Man Covets Bird*'s strong point. Where it excels – *really* excels – is in production values. Direction is impeccable; the live music quiet and divine. The set, whilst simple enough, has an air of elegance about it, and there are park benches scattered about the audience... and a lawn has been bedded into The Space for us to sit on. Real grass.

Nathan O'Keefe's Man is likeable enough: a bit naïve, maybe, but his simple and optimistic view towards life is inoffensive. But the whole production wallows in such a deep pool of melancholy that it feels like it should be seen through a sepia-tinted lens in soft focus. It's an awfully gentle, twee production that feels like it's pitched as a feel-good message-based play for schoolkids... but the production values suggest much more than that.

"Journey in wonder," eh? Well, the journey was there, and it certainly was a delightful – if not wondrous – feast for the senses. But the lingering memory from this piece was the smell of the fresh grass in the air... that's something you don't get every Festival.

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## [\[2010070\] Le Grand Macabre](#)

Wednesday, January 12th, 2011

Le Grand Macabre

[Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie](#) / [English National Opera](#) / [Gran Teatre de Liceu](#) / [Teatro dell'Opera](#) @ Festival Theatre

7:00pm, Wed 3 Mar 2010

I don't reckon I'm going to write much about [Le Grand Macabre](#), because (a) it's an opera, and I always flounder with opera, and (2) much has been written about it elsewhere.

So let's focus on the emotional response:

Holy shit. What a spectacle!

The performance starts with a short film, projected onto the stage curtain; we're witness to the last struggling seconds of a young woman's life, and as she reaches out in anguish to the camera the curtain rises to reveal the *massive* setpiece of the woman (Claudia), completely supplanting the image from the movie. It's an amazing transition, and the blank features of Claudia are constantly used as projection surfaces throughout the performance (the bones were fantastic as the set rotated), as well as providing much of the landscape for the production itself. At various stages of the performance, singers appear as twinkles in Claudia's eyes; characters wave from her nipples.

The first two scenes are a feast for the eyes. The projections of flames and stars onto Claudia, her eyes turning to watch Amanda and Amando copulate onstage (my first thought being that my Dad would *hate* this brazen sexuality in an opera). Claudia's tongue lolling about the stage, a piece of the furniture. The ASO doing their bit with the score, the State Opera Chorus supporting the principals well.

I could have left during the interval, having got my money's worth of razzle-dazzle. Instead, I opted to read the synopsis.

Ah, *that* is what was going on! Suitably enlightened, I looked forward to the second half.

And it was *completely* bizarre. Absolutely batshit insane.

Claudia rotates so we can watch characters enter and leave the stage through her anus. Her buttocks are removed to reveal her intestines; the Security Guards for Prince Go-Go(!) are portrayed as pieces of poo. A nightclub scene occurs amidst the intestines, and a Thriller-esque group dance segment coalesces from seemingly nothing. There's some brilliant comic relief in Prince Go-Go's advisors, Venus is amazing, Nekrotzar the drunk devil is brilliant...

...See, this is why I didn't want to write about *Le Grand Macabre*, because I'm reading back what I've written above, and none of it makes *any* sense... and *I was there*. I can only imagine how nonsensical it must appear to those completely lacking any context!

Regardless, it's fair to say that *Le Grand Macabre* was an awesome spectacle. Was it good opera? I've no idea; but it sounded alright, and the sights were *amazing*.

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## [\[2010067\] The Life and Death of King John](#)

Tuesday, January 11th, 2011

The Life and Death of King John

[The Eleventh Hour](#) @ Queen's Theatre

8:00pm, Tue 2 Mar 2010

There's an odd collection of people waiting outside Queen's Theatre when I arrive; the prim-and-proper elderly Friends of the Festival, resplendent in their theatre-going best, milled uncomfortably with the younger crowd, then squeezed uncomfortably into the hard plastic seats on the temporary scaffolding of the theatre. Just as I walk in, I bump into Guy Masterson spruiking for his shows at Higher Ground; "they're more for this audience," he said, gesticulating toward the Friends, "because it's *quality* theatre. They just don't know about it; they don't want to take the risk," he lamented.



He pointedly reminded me that I hadn't yet seen any of his shows – a shameful oversight, I was forced to admit – and then I wandered into Queen's.

Now – I love Queen's Theatre. It's a fantastically coarse space that sets my imagination alight; almost any production benefits from its wonderful ambience. And, in the case of *The Life and Death of King John*, the staging is brilliantly done; the rough-hewn walls of the Theatre are used to frame the barn in which the play-within-a-play pans out.

Set in the hours before the Armistice that ended the First World War, we're privy to a small group of soldiers taking shelter from hostilities in a barn. To help distract their Captain from his injuries, they perform his favourite play – Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John* – improvising costumes and making concessions to the script as they go. It's a somewhat contrived conceit, but forgivable; it allows *The Eleventh Hour* to juxtapose the relationships within the factions of WWI against The Bard's work.

Shakespeare's work carries on as the noise of war surrounds the soldiers, and Acts are interspersed with characters emotional outbursts – sparring with each other in the tension of their situation, desperately trying to contact their command, or fussing over the Captain. As the play comes to a close, so does the War, leading to a wonderfully poignant exeunt.

Rarely performed in Australia, *King John* suffered significant cuts due to the lack of actors afforded by the meta-play; but, given the length of the original (and the fact that this production still weighed in at nearly three hours), that was fair enough. The performances are all great – though Michaela Cantwell's accent proved both endearing and annoying – but the real standout here is the direction of Anne Thompson; the performance feels wonderfully self-aware and confident, and ends at *just* the right time in *just* the right way.

Two quality Shakespeares in the same year? bloody brilliant, I reckon.

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## [\[2010063\] Shanghai Beauty](#)

Sunday, January 9th, 2011

Shanghai Beauty

Jin Xing Dance Theatre Shanghai @ Dunstan Playhouse

7:00pm, Mon 1 Mar 2010

My extremely slack planning this year saw me purchasing most of my tickets extremely late; after giving the Festival Guide a thorough read, I was desperate to go to this particular session of *Shanghai Beauty* because of the scheduled talk to be held by Jin Xing after the performance.

Much has been written elsewhere about Jin Xing – born of Korean immigrants in China, his ability in dance saw him enlisted in the People's Liberation Army Song & Dance Academy (where he rose through the ranks to attain the rank of Colonel by age 17). Having served scholarships in the US, he returned to China and, at age 27, he undertook three sex reassignment operations... this fact, alone, would have made the above-mentioned talk worthwhile (after all, how often do you get to hear discussion of the creative process within conservative China from a transgender lauded dancer?)

As usual, the fact that I go to most of these performances alone paid off; I managed to get the very last

seat available for the performance. And then I learnt that the after-show talk was cancelled.

Bugger.

Still, it was with great anticipation that I took my lucky seat... on the Balcony, Row D5. Christ, it's almost nose-bleed territory up there; I'll certainly see any bald spots, I mused while waiting for the show to start.

And, to be quite honest (and demonstrably ignorant, complete with broad stereotypes), *Shanghai Beauty* was everything I expected. The dance was choreographed in an almost regimented manner, with the troupe (nine women, five men) parting to allow the lead dancers' solo pieces in an almost reverent manner. The high-energy parts of the performance were fantastic, swinging arms and spinning bodies generating real excitement; but these very modern segments were also blended with more sedate and considered (presumably) traditional pieces, which failed to engage me as much. Sure, the precision of movement on display was exemplary, but it just lacked impact; then again, maybe that was just my physical remoteness from the performers.

Jin Xing herself only appeared at the very end of the event, though there were projected video pieces interspersed throughout the rest of the performance that showed her preparation – her makeup, the assisted application of her livery. And what an appearance it was; wrapped in an incredibly elaborate and colourful costume (in stark contrast to the drab and perfunctory garb of her troupe), she almost acted as a gravitational centre for the rest of the piece, a gentle milling in the background as she lit the stage up with colour and grace. But her physical contribution was all too brief, and the performance was over just when it felt like it was just starting; and that's a bit of a shame, really, because I get the feeling that the memorable highlights of *Shanghai Beauty* were but a snippet of the potential of this group.

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## [\[2010060\] En Masse](#)

Monday, January 3rd, 2011

En Masse

[Arts House](#) @ Space Theatre

7:00pm, Sun 28 Feb 2010

Walking from the Odeon in Norwood back to the Festival Centre certainly was interesting; first I had to negotiate the wobbling crowd on the Parade for the Food and Wine Festival, got inadvertently smacked in the face by an overly-enthusiastic rubbish collector, bumped into Lili La Scala (who told me to pull my blogging finger out – oops), and had a chat with someone whilst queuing for *En Masse*: “I saw you at [Dr Brown](#) the other night,” he said. “Oh?” I asked, trying to recollect where I'd seen this chap before, “were you on the door there?”

“No,” he said, “I remember seeing you onstage.”

That made me smile.

As the doors opened, we weren't exactly *let* in, more *corralled*. Staff quite pointedly guided punters into the Space, eerily low-lit and murky. There's a large circle of very flat... well, “chairs” gives the wrong idea; the intent is to have the audience essentially laying down, head slightly elevated, to observe a

projection screen that lay above the centre of the circle. We remove our shoes and settle in; the performance starts, and the ambient lights slowly drop their already timid intensity as the projection screen slowly changes from black to mostly black, swirling organic shapes gradually becoming visible.

For five minutes I struggle against the quiet, organo-synthetic soundscapes that waft through the air; but I've been burning too many candles, and sleep deprivation has caught up with me. The soft noises, the gentle lulling light, all conspire to send me to the deepest, most restful sleep I've had in a fortnight. It was divine.

When I awoke, the Space was completely, inkily, black. I prop myself up to see if the performance had actually finished and I was alone here; I vaguely make out the shapes of my neighbours, lying restfully, and wonder if they're asleep too. Through the darkness, a hint of movement: the sole human in the performance, Genevieve Lacey, slowly moves around the circle, playing various wind instruments (two flutes, maybe? I don't really know) and making a few vocal effects. The projection screens, meanwhile, display images of birds flying, grouping, splitting... flocking.

Lacey slinks back into the darkness, the screens ease back into darkness, and the house lights – ever-so-gently – come up.

That's it. That's the entire show. People sit up, some with a look of confusion and bewilderment on their faces; others rub their eyes. Still others remain still on the floor, and partners gently nudge them awake with a shy look of shame. We file outside.

I check my watch – I must have only slept for ten minutes in that performance, but I felt remarkably refreshed. And that, unfortunately, was the highlight of *En Masse* for me; sure, it had all the hallmarks of a singular vision, carefully crafted... but in the end, it failed to engage me artistically, encouraging me only to switch off my brain and rest.

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## [\[2010059\] Vs Macbeth](#)

Monday, January 3rd, 2011

Vs Macbeth

[The Border Project](#) & [Sydney Theatre Company](#) @ Odeon Theatre

2:00pm, Sun 28 Feb 2010

Here's an easy way to get me interested in a bit of theatre: make it Shakespeare. Better still, make it *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, and I'll be first in line for a ticket. So when I'm leafing through the Festival Guide, see "Macbeth", and then notice the faux warning at the bottom of the page – "Occupational Health and Safety nightmare" – well, I'm there.

But then I notice that The Border Project are involved, and I hesitate a little. I really didn't enjoy [Trouble on Planet Earth](#) a couple of years ago; while I certainly appreciated the concept and presentation, it wound up disappointing me no end. Countering that hesitation, though, was the presence of a Sunday matinee; thus, I would up wandering down The Parade towards the Odeon on a warm and sunny day, perfect for the teeming thousands gathered for the Norwood Food and Wine Festival.

And you know how I feel about crowds.

Still, after elbowing my way through the crowd, after consuming some sub-standard salt-and-pepper squid, and after bumping into an old family friend in the foyer, I took my seat in the dimly lit theatre. The stage was sparse, the air felt heavy and slightly foggy. And, as the play starts, it is evident that this is very much a modern production; the Witches are portrayed as lecherous friends (the gaudy bearded witch was ace), Fleance is a dummy, and Cameron Goodall's Macbeth is casually dressed in jeans and a shirt. The live guitar lends a mysterious, murky ambience to proceedings; pre-recorded bass beats can be felt through the seats.

But what also becomes evident is that this is very much a meta-production. It's not simply focussed on The Bard's play; The Border Project have taken the [superstitions](#) that have surrounded (and [tragedies](#) that have befallen) The Scottish Play and made them a fundamental part of the production. Events that have affected other productions are reproduced here; fires start onstage, actors trip and fall, large beams fall from above, light fittings crash onto the stage. A ladder is leant against the back wall, actors wander underneath it and receive glares from their colleagues. There's even a large square painted onstage that everyone tries to avoid stepping into, sometimes to exaggerated comic effect.

But these elements are superfluous, gimmicks, that periodically appear... they're amusing diversions, and a delightful nod to the history of the play. They add little more than comic relief... The Bard's work manages just fine by himself. Having said that, they don't distract from the production... but add to the flavour of the performance.

The bulk of the delight for me, however, lay in the aforementioned modernity of the production. The plentiful murders in the script are enacted by a firing squad of paintball-riflemen, after a transparent mesh screen drops from the roof to protect the audience from stray pellets and splatters. The bright yellow splatters that accompany the shootings are sobering; the massacre of Macduff's family almost disturbing. Then there are the amplified whispers of the assassins, the visit to the Witches played entirely in the dark (with the audience enlightened via the use of night-vision cameras displayed on TV screens either side of the stage). And there's even a form of audience participation: the screens warned "Please prepare to play Chinese Whispers," and play Chinese Whispers we did, rumours rippling down the rows of the audience.

Performances were all fine, and the production was *superb* – this really was an enjoyable show, though perhaps not one for the traditionalists. But more joy was to come for me; after the show, there was a chat between [Anthony Steel](#) and director Sam Haren (as well as *King John*'s Anne Thompson and William Henderson). Haren confirmed that *Vs Macbeth* was centred on the mythology of the curse surrounding the play, but also mentioned that some of the accidents (most noticeably the case where one of the actors became entangled in the safety net) were indeed legitimate accidents! The two big takeaways for me, though, were the use of colours for blood (yellow for the paintball assassinations, red for the dagger scene), and the fact that the "accidents" were inserted when an interruption was required... most notably, where content was cut due to production concerns (or a lack of actors).

In short: this was great, and made retrospectively greater by the Q&A session.

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## [\[2010056\] Julia Zemiro's Comfort Zone \(featuring Megan Washington\)](#)

Thursday, December 30th, 2010

Julia Zemiro's Comfort Zone (featuring Megan Washington)

[Julia Zemiro](#) & [Megan Washington](#) @ The Famous Spiegeltent

7:00pm, Sat 27 Feb 2010

To say that [I was blown away by Megan Washington last year](#) would be an understatement; it was a thrilling performance, the thought of which still raises the hairs on the back of my neck when I think about it now. So when I saw the scheduling for *Julia Zemiro's Comfort Zone* included Ms Washington, I was booking tickets at BASS quicker than you scream “ohmygodohmygodohmygod” like a giddy schoolgirl.

Of course, the Festival claimed the use of the Spiegeltent this year, principally for use as a venue for this show – but also to act as the meeting place après-Festival; a poorly-managed excuse for an Artist's Bar that left many Friends grumbling. And, when looking at my ticket for this performance, I was startled to see the phrase “Seating Not Guaranteed” prominently displayed – scary, given the Spiegeltent's ability to squeeze oodles of people into poor vantage-points. But the joy of going to these shows solo is, of course, the ease with which one can find a single seat; so I managed to squeeze into a fairly good position in the third row, close enough to see the beads of sweat onstage on this sweltering night.

The format of the *Comfort Zone* seemed to be that of a live chat show; opening with a slideshow of family photos, the ever-delightful Zemiro had a bit of a chat about her French upbringing and childhood before introducing Washington, sporting a pair of red pumps, black pants, and a Lou Reed t-shirt (“from the year I was born,” Washington boasted as Zemiro pulled a face of mock disgust). And what followed was a very informal, friendly interview, which occasionally descended into gigglingly girlish gossip (and – let's be clear, here – that was a Good Thing).

Zemiro prompted Washington through her early childhood in Papua New Guinea, through family moves to Brisbane to settling herself into Melbourne; they delved into the minutiae of her day-to-day life, and her wider likes (showtunes and Tim Finn – “The Silver Fox”) and dislikes (Andie MacDowell). Interspersed with the questions, Washington teamed up with the [RocKwiz](#) Orkestra to perform a handful of songs of import to her, with Megan singing and playing keys and (surprisingly, for me at least) guitar. However, Rufus Wainwright's *Chocolate Milk* and Crowded House's *Chocolate Milk* failed to yield a cocoa-laden third, though Washington's breakthrough *Clementine* got a bit of an airing – which was nice.

Part of the *Comfort Zone*'s schtick was to get Zemiro's roster of guests to choose one of three songs offered each night, and then spend some time with the Orkestra jamming for a couple of minutes, before presenting their “final” version of the song. And, after Washington chose Bob Marley's seminal *Redemption Song*, her interactions with the Orkestra as they thrashed out ideas were absolutely priceless; as someone who appreciates music, but knows little of the creation thereof, it was a bloody brilliant experience watching the song evolve with their back-and-forth banter. And the final rendition... wow.

I must admit to being a bit sceptical when I saw the double-page spread for *Comfort Zone*; I thought it seemed a bit too frivolous, a bit too... un-arty. Not right for the Festival, anyway. But Zemiro proved to be a charming, sensitive, and funny host, with Megan Washington a stunning subject... and the music on offer was just fantastic. I loved this show, and only wished I could have squeezed in more visits to the *Zone* throughout the Festival.

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[\[2010049\] Untrained](#)

Monday, December 6th, 2010

Untrained

[Lucy Guerin Inc](#) @ Adelaide Centre for the Arts

7:00pm, Thu 25 Feb 2010

It's great to be back at ACA for this, my first Festival show of 2010. After all, it's a fabulous space, with the steeply inclined bank of seating offering everyone a great view (though the rows are a little too close together, leading to the constant fear that you're kneeling the person in front of you). Still, from my lofty position, I could see *everything*.

The premise behind *Untrained* is simple, and very intriguing: four dancers, two professionally trained in dance and two visual artists, exploring their artforms. And, as the four men walk across the stage, pausing briefly in a square set in the centre as a form of introduction, it doesn't take long to differentiate the Trained from the Untrained dancers; the professionals seem to carry their bodies much more carefully, more smoothly, yet with a sense of comfort, ease... there's a tangible freedom in their movements. The Untrained are stiffer, and appear more self-conscious. Of course, the real giveaway is when they walk into the square and lift their shirts; the Trained are *ripped*, with the Untrained... well, flabby. A giggle emanates from the audience, but it's cautious and somewhat embarrassed.

And so begins a series of... well, exercises. Short little vignettes of movement, of art, usually sequentially performed: trained, untrained, trained, untrained. And the dancing bits are both funny and poignant; the Trained leap about with ease, hold their balance effortlessly. The Untrained struggle to get height on their leaps, to maintain their balance, to reach those stretches. And the audience giggles continue, but they're becoming a little less wary.

It's soon apparent that the performance isn't purely focussed on poking fun at the Untrained dancers; the quartet gather in a group and sketch each other, build simple paper models. The tables have turned; the Trained visual artists are now producing the polished works, with the Untrained dancers are only capable of less subtle affairs. But it's fascinating to see them work, talking each other through the construction of their paper models, before moving on to singing, acting out well-known movie scenes, and returning to dance.

*Untrained* was a lot of fun; there were sections that were bloody hilarious (usually when the Trained took the piss out of the Untrained), and every attempt is made to make sure that no individual is used as the butt of all jokes; everyone appears to get their time to shine, everyone appears amusingly untalented at something. And that's the great thing about *Untrained* – this could have been biased heavily towards the dancers: there's certainly a lot of laughs at the visual artist's expense, and the dancers seem a lot better at their sketching than the other way around. But it was incredibly easy for the audience to not only be amused by the Untrained's attempts, but also to celebrate them; there were a lot of laughs, but a lot of clapping and cheering too. A lot of *heart*.

And that tells me that the balance in *Untrained* was spot-on.

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