

## 'Seasoned with Spice'

John McCallum – The Australian

January 11 2017



The season of the title is that of the mutton birds, when they return from their annual migration to Alaska (Alaska!), nest on the islands of Bass Strait and the birders come to harvest them, something that they have been doing for tens of thousands of years.

The play is set on Big Dog Island where the Duncan family has been coming for generations to celebrate the millennia old cultural practice and to reunite with people who have also migrated, returned annually and survived.

Nathan Maynard's play has an ebullience and a warmth about it that is utterly endearing, despite a certain clunkiness in some of the revelations. It's full of happy vulgarity, good gags and storytelling and above all, a cast of crazy characters whom you cannot help liking. Isaac Drandic's production has some rough moments and some creakingly staged scenes but in the end, largely thanks to the actors, it is also very appealing.

The Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre stage seems a bit too large and distant for this show, but Richard Robert's design which puts an important small kitchen setting in a corner, also manages to evoke the sweeping ocean horizon and the vast sky into which the birds take off and fly on their 30,000km journey.

Then there are the performers. Lisa Maza is the gloriously obscene Auntie Marlene, a wonderful hard-living women with a rhetorical stream of invective that is shocking and exhilarating. Kelton Pell and Tammy Anderson, as the patriarch and matriarch, still have a youthful passion for each other

that makes you wonder why they bother with the kids. Nazaree Dickerson, as their daughter Lou, and Luke Carroll, as their son, are all quite capable of holding their own in the invective stakes, but like all of them, they also have some tender moments in all the family mayhem, especially when they are interacting with Lou's son Clay (James Slee). Clay is supposed to be being initiated into the tradition of birding but is at first at least, more interested in a pretty girl in the next camp.

Trevor Jamieson plays two characters, both outsiders as far as the family is concerned, and both abject and very funny.

Sydney festival director Wesley Enoch once said, many years ago, that he was tired of people having double standards when they approached indigenous work, judging it more leniently because it was Aboriginal. Here there is some contrivance in the comedy and in the emotional revelations, but the energy and exuberance of these performers are nevertheless outstanding.