

Sydney Festival Review: *The Season* is a terrific yarn (until 15 January)

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JANUARY 13, 2017 / EMILY SAINT-SMITH



First-time playwright, **Nathan Maynard**, has created a real gem in *The Season*, premiering as part of the 2017 Sydney Festival. It's a great yarn, full of laughter and pride in a culture that has been in the shadows for too long.

The Season follows fictional family, the Duncans, on their annual pilgrimage to Dog Island for the mutton bird season. Ben and Stella Duncan are joined by their children Ritchie and Lou (returning to the island for the first time in many years), Stella's sister Auntie Marlene, and Lou's teenage son, Clay. Through the harvest, we learn what brings this family together, what could tear them apart, and how, through it all, there is always laughter.

Mutton-birding is not exactly a pleasant activity to watch, but director, **Isaac Drandic**, and designer, **Richard Roberts**, have handled the play's central

activity with deft and considerate hands. The birds are represented by knotted pieces of grey cotton, meaning the actors can literally go through the motions of capturing, killing and cleaning the birds without offending a sensitive, city-dwelling audience unaccustomed to such brutal practices. That said, this is probably not a show to take your vegan friends to!



Working together with lighting designer, **Rachel Burke**, Roberts has captured the wild personality of Dog Island. The action takes place on primarily on a centrally set canvas slope, a simulation of the sand-dunes where the mutton birds make their homes. Hanging above the slope is a grey flat onto which are projected ghostly clouds and an array of light dots that can be interpreted many ways, perhaps as a sky full of stars, a painting in the traditional Aboriginal style, or even a reflection of the birds in their burrows below. In the negative space between these two lines is the 'shed', a place for deeper, darker thoughts. Finally, a small kitchen has been established downstage right; a place to reset each day.

Occupying the stage is a fantastic, all-Indigenous cast, led by **Kelton Pell** as Ben Duncan, the head of the family. Pell is relaxed and at home on the stage and his performance sits in the realm of cinematic realism. As his grandson, Clay, **James Sleeis** excellent. He has a strong sense of comic timing, as well as the ability to draw the audience in through his quiet

energy. Accomplished performer, **Lisa Maza**, owns the role of Auntie Marlene, showing us just how to deliver a yarn. The other standout cast member is **Trevor Jamieson**. In the dual roles of Neil Watson and Senior Ranger Richard Hadgeman, Jamieson is hysterical. He uses his body to great effect, generating laughs primarily through the manipulation of his limbs and torso. This is partly because his face is hidden behind a ginormous grey beard but also because physical comedy is clearly one of his strengths.



All the cast deliver Maynard's words with authenticity, clearly revelling in the jokes. You get the impression rehearsals for this show were immensely fun. Maynard writes like he speaks – with candour and joy and a genuine pride in his culture. His dialogue is raw and real, dotted with its fair share of profanities and crude insults. But in the context of the characters and their place in the world these words feel genuine; this is how a family like the Duncan's would really speak to each other. The result is a rollicking comedy with serious heart.

A proud birder himself, Maynard does not shy away from the issues that impact on Indigenous Tasmanians. Government institutions determined to preserve the environment and a requirement to prove one's Aboriginality are among the challenges faced by the Duncans, who through it all remain

staunchly true to their culture and the lessons of their mob. As Maynard explains, stories are how traditions and cultural identities are passed down to the next generations; as a white Australian, I can only wish for such a strong connection to my ancestors.

Promotional material for *The Season* highlights that its all-Indigenous combination of writer, director and cast is something of a theatrical unicorn. If *The Season* is the result of such an amalgamation, there should be more shows like this on our stages.

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The Season, a Tasmania Performs production, is running at the Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre until 15th January. For tickets, visit the Sydney Festival [website](#).

The reviewer attended the performance on Thursday 12th January.

Photo credit Simon Pynt