

FESTIVALS, SYDNEY FRINGE FESTIVAL 2014, THEATRE

# THE SEASON @ THE DRAMA THEATRE, SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE

JANUARY 12, 2017 JUDITH GREENAWAY LEAVE A COMMENT

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Very early on in *THE SEASON*, daughter Lou thinks out loud that she might take herself diving to get a fresh fish dinner. It makes sense; 3 generations of Duncans are gathered on this small island in the Bass Strait for the annual Muttonbird harvest. But the whole family around the rickety table is suddenly still then turn slowly to look at her. There's a pause until unexpectedly, the Duncans, and us, burst into gales of laughter at Lou's expense. We the audience don't know Lou, we just met her but we have been enveloped by this family and we think whatever is going on is hilarious too.

In a nutshell, or more appropriately a nest, that is the brilliance of *THE SEASON*. We love these people. And we love them from the beginning.

After the seven cast appear from the shadows onstage reaching towards the spirit of the birds which come each year to these traditional lands, we meet Ben and Stella Duncan. Long married but still lovers, their hopes for this season are tinged with some undefined worry but it won't stop them from enjoying every moment of having the family together for the birding season.

And what a family? Funny, silly, wry, self-deprecating, loving and warm.

Ben (Kelton Pell) is a fierce patriarch but challenged by the next generation and their need to change the world around them. Stella (Tammy Anderson) is an all seeing Mum. She often sits in the kitchen just observing events around her. Their children are Lou (Nazaree Dickerson), who lives away from the family's Tasmanian bosom in Melbourne with her son Clay (James Slee). Their son is Richie (Luke Carroll) and it is he who seems most constrained by the old man's way of doing things, his anger at the government regulations creeping in on their traditions very evident. Even when the agent is one of their own. Senior Ranger Richard (Trevor Jamieson) knows the rule book by heart.

And then there is Stella's sister, Marlene (Lisa Maza) who is boisterous and loud with a wonderful line in non-swearing expletive adjectives. Honest, skilled writing by **Nathan Maynard** has created a text which reaches over the footlights to embrace an audience and bring them into his world. There is a lovely clip of him talking about his own heritage of THE SEASON on the Sydney Festival Website and he puts it quite simply. "It's a big blackfella gathering... that is why we go birding." For me, sitting in the dark watching, the generosity of his creations was an absorbing, welcoming and familial discussion of much more than race. It's rich with gender politics, issues of big agriculture, inter-generational dynamics, historical grudge holding.

The written word of this play, out of context, could look awfully clichéd. "Bless his cotton socks; I wonder what the poor people are doing? Shut your piehole." One of the great strengths of the text is that the vernacular is so well represented. It's us, it's how we talk, it's how we communicate, the repetition of known phrases which represent something easy and comforting. But Maynard's script does not shy away from those times when communication fails. In face of power imbalance it degenerates to stilted guffawing and overly physical handshakes.

Actually there is an enjoyably surprising amount of physical comedy, music, and dancing here which the stellar ensemble, and you can't put a cigarette paper between them despite some opening night nerves on display, handle it all with aplomb. Directed with a sure hand by **Isaac Drandic**, they are funny and wise. There is an incredibly sweet scene, where Lou speaks to her son about sex, which is witty and tender until it turns on a single word to be darkly and deadly important.

Physically, it's a deceptively simple set which reminded me so much of growing up in rural Queensland: kero lamps; caravan stove; well used milkcrates; even a "one for his knob" cribbage board for those long dark nights. I swear I could smell that burlap as they were flicking it around.

The lighting is subtle and gently enriches the work. The superb use of amber for the storyteller as he speaks of the ghost of the past while his eager listeners are slightly diffused in steel is masterful. As are the occasional use of dots which appear on the half cyc to reflect on the nests imbedded in the raked midstage. The concept for the birding, nests and landscape is evocative and Drandic makes dramatic and expressive use of the upstage darkness.

The music and sound effects are equally in concert, from children playing in the rookery to what my father called 'lost loves and dying horses' songs. The women plucking the birds sequence is supported by dense, tribal, percussive, workmanlike ritual sounds smoothly blending into beach and sky soundscapes.

Like any family there are secrets that the Duncans hold close to their heart and like any culture there are historical and present sorrows and losses. Maynard doesn't gloss over it, he just takes the piss out of them and it's hilarious. This family does have secrets and not all are revealed by the time Clay becomes a man but this clan will hold together because we feel the love and pride. And because their open heartedness has invited us to join them for an inspirational night at the theatre.

THE SEASON is playing the Drama Theatre, Sydney until 15th January, 2017.