

AUSTRALIAN Stage

Demens | Pie in the Sky Productions

Written by Danu Poyner

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Thought-provoking stories about mental health are a well-established tradition in the dramatic world. While some of these stories are not much more than formulaic storytelling with a bit of extra pathos and some cloying life lessons thrown in, the best offer a sensitive, if challenging, view into an often unfamiliar world and question where the walls really ought to be, both in our institutions and in our minds.

Demens, happily, falls in the latter category. In its barest sense it is simply the stories of four individuals and how they see the world. All are damaged. But not broken. Strength and vulnerability, we are shown, are two sides of the same coin.

It is refreshing to see a play with such well-developed characters, and if Demens simply introduced us to each one by one and let us separately absorb their subtleties, it would have been a worthwhile evening. But it is the clever way these characters interact and the effect they have on each other that make Amedeo Astorino's play stick in the mind. The action is all set inside an institution, but the story travels far and wide as we learn about the life of each character and what has made them who they are.

As in any well-crafted story about mental health, we wonder many times who the crazy one really is, but that's not the notion Demens is predominantly preoccupied with. Through its series of vignettes it manages to achieve a rare thing - seeing the world through another person's eyes - and life is never quite the same once you've experienced that. If there is a central focus it is to question the way we narrate ourselves and others.

To give away much more would be to ruin the effect.

Despite the convincing characterisation and clever writing, the play would fall flat without engaging and believable performances. Thankfully, careful casting and thoughtful direction has ensured Astorino's script is in good hands. Nicholas Barker-Pendree as Gabriel, who we meet first, makes full use of a piercing stare and is decidedly creepy throughout. Sarah Bollenberg as Valerie has a handle on her character's chirpy, feisty and unpredictable nature. Her character is the most reflective but also the most unstable, and some of the best dialogue arises from this tension - with the careful but teetering balance of a tightrope artist she negotiates her way through each

situation. Glen Hancox as Allan is delightfully exuberant and is the object of much empathy from the audience as circumstances line up against him and occasionally force his hand. Playful, trusting but intense, Hancox brings this character, and thus the play itself, to life. Ian Rooney as the slightly mysterious Osmond brings dramatic weight to a smaller but still significant role, upon which the others hinge in many ways. His presence is often unseen but always felt.

In the end, the play returns to where it began but things are not as they were and nothing is quite what you had expected. In the cosy oasis in Footscray that is The Dog Theatre, *demens* is a raw, powerful and slightly unsettling experience. It is indie theatre at its best.

The Dog Theatre and Pie in the Sky Productions present
demens by Amedeo Astorino

Directed by Bruce Langdon

Venue: The Dog Theatre, 42a Albert Street, Footscray

Dates: Thu 4 - Sat 20 March, 2010

Times: Wed to Sat 8pm & Sun 5pm

Duration: Approx. 80 mins.

Tickets: \$25 full/\$20 conc/\$15 preview/\$15 groups (10+)

Bookings: www.trybooking.com/dco | (03) 9689 2566