Play Review

Recovering histories of joy and sorrow in The Career Highlights of the MAMU

The Career Highlights of the MAMU was written by Trevor Jameson and Scott Rankin, directed by Andrew Ross of Black Swan Theatre and performed at the 2002 Adelaide Festival and the Octagon Theatre at the University of Western Australia in May/June 2002. It then toured to the regional centres in Western Australia, Mandurah, Margaret River and Esperance. This review is in response to a performance of The Career Highlights of the MAMU at the Octagon Theatre on May 28, 2002. For further information see Cane, S. Pila Nguru: the Spinifex people, Fremantle Art Centre Press, 2002.

The Career Highlights of the MAMU documents the history of the Spinifex people of Western Australia who were displaced from their lands in the 1950s as a result of the nuclear testing at Maralinga, South Australia. There were seven nuclear tests at Maralinga in 1956 and 1957. Although many of the people had been scattered to make way for the testing some people were left behind and many suffered devastating illnesses as a result of the nuclear testing. The Spinifex people received some compensation from the 1985/6 Maralinga Royal Commission and they used this money to build a road north back to their homeland of Tjuntjuntjara, 700km east of Kalgoorlie in the Great Victoria Desert. In 1988 they achieved Native Title over 55,000 square kilometres of land around Tjuntjuntjara where they reside today. The performance provides an oral history of both the sad and triumphant stories of the Spinifex people, it is 'a journey of personal discovery, the unity of family and friends, finding strength through suffering and going home'.

The performance is innovative and engaging and it stands as an important Australian historical, social and cultural document that weaves together stories of struggle, loss, survival, and triumph. The production charts the lives of the Spinifex people and their experience of nuclear testing, the scattering of community and the achievement of Native Title (or the rightful return of their land). The stories told result in a performance that gives voice to alternative histories, and in the process provides spectators with some insight into a period of Australian history that is often forgotten or ignored.

In terms of its form the production combines oral history and docu-performance rather than traditional theatrical devices, with its use of video footage, live filming, storytelling, rock numbers, dance and song. As spectators, we are invited to occupy a position of closeness to the performers and to the stories being told. The mood of the piece shifts between joy and despair, not resting on any one emotion for long, instead presenting a collage of stories that map the importance of country, belonging and community to the Spinifex people of The Great Victoria Desert.

The production draws attention to the destruction wreaked by the Atomic bomb tests at Maralinga in the 1950s, highlighting the very real impact these tests had on the community, through heartfelt stories of the realisation that something was

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1 The Career Highlights of the MAMU, Programme Notes.
wrong when the Mamu or evil spirit (radiation cloud) began quietly to envelop the land. Video footage, projected onto the back wall of the performance space, documents the stories of the community and their response to this 'evil shadow'. In a moving discussion we watch the screen and listen to two of the women talking about the long search for missing family, the illnesses and the terrible thirst that engulfed them as a result of the tests. We listen as the performers Asako Izawa and Trevor Jamieson sit at the front of the stage and recount stories and facts about the testing and the impact of the tests on the community. Asako Izawa tells us that two rangers were employed to move people from a land area twice the size of Japan. This statement has a profound impact on the spectators and elicits an audible gasp of horror. The sheer devastation this testing unleashed on the community and their landscape begins to become apparent to us. Yet this production does not aim solely to shock. Although the stories of the partial destruction of the community as a consequence of the Maralinga testing are made painfully apparent, we are also involved in a story of recovery, healing and a 'journey towards reconciliation'.

This is a shared experience where the ability of the community to survive and grow is clear. The performance is a powerful oral history that incorporates moments of pathos as well as humour and fun. The complexity of the community and their culture is echoed in the use of a performance style and techniques that push the boundaries of the form and engage spectators in a politically inflected yet hope-filled experience.

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