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Review: The Window Outside at Northcote Town Hall

By Samuel Barson

In 2017, the Andrews government passed the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act. Despite the varied opinions on this legislation, there was no doubt that the passing of it was going to affect the lives (and deaths) of many Victorians going forward in ground-breaking ways.

In 2019, Wise Owl Theatre have produced a stunning piece of theatre, *The Window Outside*, that analyses the influence end-of-life choices can have on those who are in their final stages of life, as well as (and perhaps even more so) on their loved ones.

Belinda Lopez's writing takes audiences on a rollercoaster of laughs, tears, frustration and conflict. Her approach and detail in telling the story of Frank, Evelyn, Sharon and Miranda is undeniably human, completely appropriate for the deeply human themes being dealt with throughout the performance.

Bringing Lopez's writing to life are four clearly sensitive and thoughtful actors. Ian Rooney plays Frank, the father of the family who has experienced a stroke and is now wheelchair bound. Rooney displays magnificent physical control, remaining completely still yet evoking so much character at the same time. Some of the most memorable moments in the play come when Rooney slips back into a younger, pre-stroke Frank and converses with his wife Evelyn with cheek and charm. Particularly touching are the dance sequences between the two of them, shortly lived however before Frank returns to the reality of his wheelchair constraints. Carrie Moczynski is endearing as Frank's wife Evelyn and helps bring to fruition some of the play's lighter, more comedic moments. It's important to note that the way Lopez has comically written in Evelyn's experiences with impending dementia is done cleverly and respectfully.

Antonia Mochan plays Miranda, the daughter who has returned from her stylish and arty life in New York to come face to face with her parent's situation. Mochan is gorgeous in this role and balances an interesting emotional predicament of wanting to be there for her parents but also acknowledging her new life remains on the other side of the world. The clear standout in this cast is Julie-Anna Evans, who portrays the conflicted, frustrated Sharon, the daughter who has been there for her parent's care day in and day out. Evans' use of voice and physicality to portray Sharon's deep frustration was superb, and you were left hanging off every word. Once she started talking you didn't want her to stop.

The design elements of the production were simple, productive and for the most part engaging. Jason Bovaird's lighting design was beautiful, proving especially useful in the more intimate moments between characters ie. The spotlight on Frank and Evelyn as they danced made you feel as if you were on the dance-floor with them. Director Liz Connors' doubled as the set designer, and whilst the simplicity of the set allowed for the actors to take focus, you couldn't help but wish there was more of an effort to make the space seem more homely or cosy, seeing it was a family drama after all.

The simplicity and subtlety of Connors' direction however, proved wonders. Watching the actors perform gave you the sense that they had been given limitless freedom in their movements which helped bring to light the reality of the piece. Even if this wasn't the case, the important part is that you felt like this was a real family. Connors' also clearly understood the power of these themes and did nothing to overshadow this and did a beautiful job in just allowing the dialogue and themes speak for themselves. The biggest success a director can achieve for a play such as this one.

Audiences leave this play reflecting, considering and deeply moved. Do yourself a favour by coming to watch this play and make yourself aware of the end-of-life choice conflicts and arguments currently facing many human beings.

The Window Outside is currently playing as part of the Victorian Seniors Festival until 6th October at Northcote Town Hall, before embarking on tours to Geelong and West Gippsland.

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