Cabaret and Comedy

Murray Bramwell's Adelaide Cabaret Festival, cabaret and comedy reviews.

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1980s Reviews

Foote and Mouth

Published: 1987 *Comedy*

A Smile , A Song and a Lump of Wood Anthony Ackroyd and Geoff Kelso. Club Foote.

Adelaide has been treated to some great cabaret lately and Anthony Ackroyd and Geoff Kelso's *A Smile, A Song and a Lump of Wood* is a good indication that Club Foote in particular has been presenting entertainment of a high caliper. After an agreeable meal at Quiet Waters, with which the club has been making regular dinner deals, we walked with Club Footemen, Mark Ascione, Richard Meyman and Richard Moore, the few paces over to Blyth St for the preview of the show. It is a good venue for cabaret - spacious, informal without being ratty, the carpets are soft and drink service to the table is swift and unobtrusive.

Which brings us to Ackroyd, Kelso and their lump of wood. Geoff Kelso is best known for his part in *The Gillies Report* team in its heyday but both he and Ackroyd have been working in live comedy for long enough to have developed plenty of assurance in front of audiences. Their material is funny and the show is smoothly paced.

Arriving on stage with their lump of four by two, they make George Raft, Natalie Wood and Australia Post jokes, all merciful brief, before moving into their Police education unit skit for schools – Cop this Australia, a potted history of the rozzers since they started cracking heads 150 years ago. In a solo spot Ackroyd played a wickedly funny set as Johnny Rotten at the Arkaba Cabaret and Bingo in the year 2005 singing "No Future" (a song that has been very kind to him over the years) while Kelso made noises off announcing chook raffle winners.

Then Kelso played Judas lscariot as a theatrical agent organising a gig for his boy, Jesus Christ, for the Easter weekend - offering him the chance to see his name up in candles and promising to make him the biggest thing to hit Jerusalem since unleavened bread.

The pair complement well - Kelso has a harsh wit which is balanced by Ackroyd's gentler, almost boyish comic style. The material is well balanced over two forty minute sets and Michael Roberts on keyboards has programmed good arrangements for the songs, many of them parodies, in the show.

The final skit is a particular winner - Hamster, Pet of Denmark - a rather nondescript looking ferret on a stick plots his revenge on the court of Elsinore among finger puppets, talking cushions and an array of increasingly unlikely paraphernalia as the tragedy squeaks to its restful silence.

It is a good show and deserves a good season. Club Foote is striding ahead as a first rate cabaret venue and it deserves support or Adelaide will lose another of its brighter ideas. Give it a whirl, it's better than a poke in the funnybone with a lump of wood.

"Foote and Mouth", The Adelaide Review, No.34, January, 1987, p.20.

Ole

Published: 1987-03-01 *Cabaret · Comedy*

The Castanet Club Space Cabaret

When the Castanetsplayed the Fringe last year they lacked lustre. The Little Sisters area at the Living Arts Centre didn't help matters, of course.

Despite the best efforts of the organizers it was a swine of a venue. On their return season to the Space Cabaret, the Castanet Club were quite transformed. They performed virtually the same show with the same jokes and routines but this time it all worked.

Watching the Castanets is like watching weevils. As all eleven of them move on stage at the same time you feel that at least half of them need special diets for hyperactivity. There is a hilarious sense of non-stop hucksterism about them. Even before the show has begun the group move among the crowd like an encyclopedia sales team in the suburbs, hawking Castanets merchandise - records, .assettes, $8 haircuts (some exhibitionist with four South-warks too many on board invariably offers to get shorn) and a variety of daggy memorabilia.

In the words of Cecil B. de Mille the Castanets like to start with an earthquake and work up to a big finish. Led from the front by Lance Norton, Leagues club lizard in mauve velvet flares, the Castanets go through their Archie and Jughead routines with alacrity. The material is good-natured and broad to the point of chaos.

A sampling of the songs might give anidea: a pudgy man who calls himself Elvis Presley (and looks distressingly like him) plays "Love me Tender" through a recorder up his nose, someone actually called Stomping Betty sings "I Like to Watch My Boyfriend Surf", drummer Rodney Cambridge sings a road courtesy song entitled "The Motorist's Friend", Lance deadpans through "The Age of Aquarius" and the classically-trained Doris Crawley sings the peripatetic "I've Been Everywhere" with every name in place.

That, needless to say, is not all. Bowling Man, a primate in pastel shorts is a one person television station and we get Monkey and Pigsy out of lipsynch and testimonials for Dynamo getting the stubborn stains out of the veil of Turin. It's routine stuff but like the whole show, running on such high octane that it works.

The Castanets are versatile musicians and that became even more evident in the second half. Natassja Bassey belted out blues and ballads and even made Kate Bush's giddy "Wuthering Heights" almost bearable. Then, with delicious understatement, the Castanets introduce their alleged road manager, Lana Caruso, an overdressed little butterball who sang the socks off "River Deep, Mountain High" and did "Dream a Little Dream" as a stylish encore.

The showstopper was Maynard F,Sharp Crabbes, a mutant in horn-rimmed glasses and recent graduate of the Johnny Young School of Talent, whose medley of "New York, New York" and "Give My Regards to Broadway" gave a good indication of why the Castanets had to leave Newcastle.

The troops give a great show, they inhabit their stage personalities with cheerful familiarity and look as though they enjoy their work. The crowds couldn't get enough of them. The Castanets really clicked this time round.

"Ole" *The Adelaide Review*, March, 1987, p.21.

Shakespeare, Fo and Fun

Published: 1987-04-01 *Cabaret · Theatre*

Much Ado About Nothing State Theatre Company

Turning the Tables The Red Shed Company

Ra Ra Zoo The Space Cabaret

The State Theatre Company opened their 1987 season with a rousing production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. *Much Ado* is not much done. It is probably ten years since it was last performed in Australia but it is a favourite of director John Gaden and he has long wanted to stage it.

Much Ado poses both difficulties and delights for directors and actors, and co-directors Gaden and Gale Edwards acknowledge this in their production. While not the only Shakespearean comedy with a bewildering plot-line and riddled with word-play, *Much Ado* nevertheless can be confusing and unrewarding. The story of Hero, daughter of Leonato, defamed by Don John and humiliated by Don Pedro has much contrivance to it. Further, like Bertram in *All's Well That Ends Well*, Hero's suitor, Claudio, is a yuppy, unlikeable sort of chap, so it is hard to be pleased at their nuptial reconciliation.

It is the characters of Beatrice and Benedick, slugging it out epithet for epithet, who bring the play to life. The witty badinage between Benedick, erstwhile soldier with a contempt for lovers' folly, and Beatrice, self-possessed, intelligent and yet unworldly, gives a breadth and verve to *Much Ado* which, as Gaden recognises, makes for splendid theatre.

Gaden and Edwards have retained the setting in Messina but have brought the date forward from 1596 to 1890 so that the tension between codes of honour and individual intuition and loyalty are seen in the context of Victorian society on the cusp of fundamental transformation. This gives added pertinence to Beatrice's satiric account of male vanity and links the patriarchal cruelties expressed in the play with their persistent residues in our own time.

But State's production is far from ponderous in its treatment. Rather it errs initially on the side of superficiality, as Acts I and II look uncomfortably like an eisteddfod of coarse acting. We are definitely in Messina, Sicily, not Messina, Stratford on A, so performances and costumes are strongly Italianate with raucous Commedia del Arte embellishments. It is a calculated risk, and on opening night a tendency to turn narrative into hyperactive charade was evident.

But no-one could call this *Much Ado* dreary, and audiences have responded warmly to the energy and openness of Gaden and Edwards' rendering of the text. Ken Wilby and Mark Thompson have designed a three-sided colonnade which permits a large, uncluttered acting area providing opportunity for some refreshingly anti-naturalistic treatment of scenes such as those when Beatrice and Benedick overhear reports of their ardour for each other.

In the leads, William Zappa and Celia de Burgh make Benedick and Beatrice vivid and intelligent. Zappa begins broadly but his Benedick appropriately gains subtlety and complexity as the play progresses. It is a fine performance, not least for Zappa's nimble and lucid diction. Celia de Burgh is an equal match as Beatrice, forthright, fiery but never shrewish, gradually and gracefully learning not to be afraid of loving.

In other roles, Vic Rooney gives a Leonato who is over-reactive but reveals integrity and courage; Peter Crossley keeps Don John in a vice-like grip, and Luciano Martucci does his best to make the impossible Claudio seem possible. Catherine McClements as Hero, the heroine, gives definition and interest as far as the part can permit. Henry Salter's Dogberry is Monty Python in a cocked hat. It is likeable comedy but at times short-circuits Dogberry 's satiric dimension.

Overall, State have put together a production that signals their strength and will consolidate rapport with Adelaide audiences. This Much Ado is visually dashing, amusing and shrewdly streamlined. But in being frothy, State deny us some of the play's gravity. It is good to be accessible but the company doesn't have to stoop to conquer.

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The Red Shed Company, wryly refer to themselves as the RSC! Their production of Sue Townsend's *Bazaar and Rummage* late last year was an unexpected delight when much theatre in Adelaide was predictable or over-reaching itself or both.

RSC's second venture, called Turning the Tables, consists of four analogues for women by Dario Fo and Franca Rame. Whereas the Townsend piece gave the RSC players a chance to gain confidence as an ensemble, performing genial but provocative material, *Turning the Tables* presents a more formidable task. The starkly separate performances highlight the actors' inexperience, and the choice of material , however worthy, amounts to a rather repetitious castigation of sexism.

Antonietta Morgillo began the night with "Waking Up" from *Female Parts*, Fo's warm but acerbic account of a woman run ragged serving the patriarchy both at home and in the factory. Morgillo brought a humorous derision to the part and despite some rattly diction , set an expectation which Alice McHenry 's *Whore in a Madhouse* could not sustain. Similarly, Mary Ann Pitman's *Alice in Wonderlessland* - with the exception of a mordant narration (in several voices) of Alice being lured into blue movies - did not really succeed in focussing the writing. It is no easy task, of course, when Franca Rame is dealing at times in one dimensional diatribe

The most successful piece and, unsurprisingly, far and away the most vividly written, was Rame's *The Mother*, presented by Eileen Darley. This account of the recollections and reactions of the mother of a member of the Red Brigade, is evocative and savagely examines the intrinsic violence and hypocrisy of our institutions. Darley gave a finely shaded performance, yet again showing what quiet intensity she is capable of generating.

RSC has set itself a stern task this time and inevitably, *Turning The Tables* seems more like prentice work. But the company was formed to give new actors a crack at performing material worth thinking about and a chance to develop their abilities. So the players, and directors Cath McKinnon and David Carlin , deserve credit for taking risks. Perhaps in their next production they will calculate them to better effect.

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The Cabaret season in the Festival Centre Space has been a great success. The crowds carne for the calculated malice of the Doug Anthony Allstars and even more for the orchestrated mayhem of the Castanet Club. But nothing prepared us for *Ra Ra Zoo*.

With a combination of circus and theatre, Ra Ra Zoo has by some extraordinary alchemy, made gold out of foolery. This quartet consists of former Circus Oz principals, Stephen Kent and Sue Broadway, as well as Dave Spathaky, a juggler and neo-vaudevillain (sic) from the UK. Deborah Pope replaces *Ra Ra Zoo* regular Sue Bradley for this Australian tour.

We've seen it all before - juggling, mime, trapeze and rope acrobatics, escapology and conjuring have become *de rigeur* in the earnest realm of the 'skills workshop' but Ra Ra Zoo make it new, and bring to it a dark wit and theatrical invention that is exhilarating.

When they climb manacled into suitcases or move through sight gags that make your brain hurt, *Ra Ra Zoo* show an affection for the sources of their routines, and then add a half turn of surreal absurdity of their own. They are trekking across Australia at this very moment, don't miss their magic.

Murray Bramwell

CentreStage Australia, April, 1987, pp. 17-18.

First Person Singular

Published: 1987-05-01 *Comedy · Theatre*

I Hate Mime Chris Willems Price Theatre

Chris Willems says he hates mime but nothing could be further from the truth. What he hates is the fact that white mime has become so refined that it has lost all its nutrients.

I Hate Mime is Willems' third solo show and it follows *Son of Romeo*, his highly successful lip readers' digest of *Romeo and Juliet*. Though unlike Romeo, with its familiar narrative, Willems' new work is a more fractured flicker.

The opening skit is a curious one. Slow to the point of inertia, it is comic and sinister as Willems, wearing a skinny black suit and a loopy pair of red-framed shades, strikes. a series of satiric New Wave poses followed by some disconcertingly obsessive furniture arranging. It is skilful with some of the quirky absurdities of performance art.

Then with some rapid changes in metabolic rate Willems returns to the stage with a life-size photographic portrait of the artist as a young mime which he mockingly surrounds with fingersigns anatomising the elements of the mime person - 'knees that bend', 'body of a greyhound', 'hands that speak' and, most important of all, 'mime boots'.

Willems lets us in on more trade secrets with an extended demonstration of the principles of mime. "People say it is exaggeraged movement," his earnest persona intones, "but is the antithesis of that." The full weight of his theorizing is then enacted as he takes us step by step through the act of vomiting. It is funny but bitter as well - "sincerity is paramount", he insincerely snickers, "you must vomit from the ankles."

Willems is ambivalent about mime but someone who really hates it from the tip of his texta is Patrick Cook. When he was putting the show together, Willems wrote to Cook asking whether he had any cartoons he could use and in reply received a dozen or so eloquently wordless gags of a street mime performer whose craft and sullen art is under siege from pissing dogs, loquacious drunks and other instances of vandalised illusion. Understandably wanting to highlight Cook's work, Willems has a series of sketches which illustrate or elaborate on the cartoons but by interspersing them throughout the show he is perhaps too reverent. The jokes themselves are too laconic to be performed and would have been better concentrated into a single item.

They do, however, provide Willems with an opportunity for a morceau of Marcel bashing. In his "Day in the Life of a (Very) Famous Mime," dressed in the stripy shirt and black tights of the Prince of Whiteness, he mercilessly does the treadmill walking and the Wall - or rather, the Ledge, as he teeters on the abyss of mime's theatrical repetitions.

Willems has made interesting use of film in *I Hate Mime* - with footage prepared in Adelaide by CoMedia, he augments his live performance with film of talking-head knees, and other sight gags, which run a bit long here and there, but work effectively against any brittle sense of minimalism. Stuart Day's skilful music also gives the show a fuller dimension and underlines the fact that *I Hate Mime* is intended to entertain.

Willems' first show was entitled *A Bit of Humour, Bit of Pathos, Bit of Art.*

I Hate Mime could be called A Bit of Whimsy, Bit of Satire, Bit of Art. The best bit of art, for my money, is the lecture from Professor Christopher Herbert Williams on the aetiology and treatment of osteomyelitis. In describing the symptoms and processes, the Professor gets himself quite queasy but the Pythonish comedy shifts neatly to the more reflective perspective of the patient, a small frail boy facing a painful operation and months in traction.

It is inimical to mime to lower the mask and reveal the actor, or his or her direct experience, yet this the wellspring of comedy and Willems' use of autobiography is well-calculated. In fact the show could carry one more piece which is similarly not undercut with defensive ironies. In his fear of self-indulgence Willems resorts too readily to satire and ridicule which can be as self-effacing as the classic mime he is rejecting.

Chris Willems is a talented and intelligent performer and the ingredients in his new show indicate creative new directions for him. While not greater than the sum of its parts, *I Hate Mime* takes great risks, is dangerously original and deserves a look.

"First Person Singular" *The Adelaide Review*, No. 38, May 1987. p.21.

Acting Funny

Published: 1987-11-01 *Comedy · Theatre*

Rowan Atkinson Opera Theatre.

It is often said that what makes comedy tick is timing. And Rowan Atkinson is expert at it. His performance is rehearsed down to the last pucker, the lines scan like iambic pentameters and it all works like a charm.

As part of the highly successful *Not The Nine O'Clock News* team, Atkinson's comedy was distinctively visual and oddly endearing. He can, and has, sparred in more savage comic arenas with the pugnacious Mel Smith and the baleful John Cleese but, as his present solo show indicates, Atkinson himself prefers punchlines in a velvet glove.

It is interesting to wonder what he would do without the Church of England and English public schools. Not only does he rely heavily on them for subject matter but the liturgical diction of the witless cleric and the sarcastic intonations of sadistic schoolmasters are virtually his stock-in-trade.

He opens with a eulogy to a luckless trio -one deaf, one blind and one mute who fail to hear, see and warn each other of an oncoming combine harvester. Jokes about physical impairment are delivered with such starchy gravity that Atkinson is already further down the track before we've realised how close to the prosthetic bone they really are.

Further into the show he is joined by Angus Deayton, an Oxford crony from the rock-satire band, the Heebie Jeebies, who apart from bearing an uncanny resemblance to John Cleese, provides a disciplined foil to Atkinson's more flamboyant physicality. He is particularly memorable as the incredulous parent being informed by a Scottish headmaster that his son has been thrashed to death for taking books from the library before the cards have been removed.

On with a lame jacket and Atkinson is crooning an almost-funny spoof ballad spiked with well-chosen local references. We were then back to the rotten boroughs of the UK with Sir Jonathan Thump, a retread of the blithering Tory, Sir Marcus Browning, from the Live at Belfast album.

The Invisible Man gooses a commuter with neatly choreographed slapstick while Atkinson cleverly extracts optimum laughs from a predictable sketch of a football coach haranguing his team for losing 37-nil at half time.

In an extended silent skit, Atkinson, the inimitable schoolboy, peers and squirms about in endlessly inventive attempts to crib the answers from another candidate in a trig exam. Again, the precision and detail is a delight as is the intricate narrative of an Indian waiter serving a table of insensate soccer hooligans.

In the second half, Atkinson plays a disgruntled nominee for a film award, a ludicrous alien in Dr Who lurex and an excruciating TV presenter shredding paper in what proves to be a calamitous attempt to create origami figures. Dusting off an old favourite Atkinson's Devil reads from his clipboard the various categories of new arrivals- Mormons, bank managers, Americans, atheists. The delivery is impeccable; with refinement Richard Curtis's material has become a perfect sketch.

After an encore consisting of the news in mime, Rowan Atkinson moved into his favourite vocal register with his Roll Call -a tour de force of silly noms- Undermanager, Orifice, Ellsworth-Beast major - frighteningly deadpan and theatrically unerring.

Rowan Atkinson says he won't be doing any one-man shows after this one. Instead he's off to do a season of Chekhov and even, perhaps, the Marlon Brando role in The Tea House of the August Moon!

Atkinson is a comic actor rather than a stage comedian and says, for instance, that he is a great admirer of Barry Humphries and the way he gets inside the skin of his characters. Except that when Atkinson does it he manages to move his face round to the back of his head and keep his epidermis in almost perpetual motion.

With material by Richard Curtis and Ben Elton *(The Young Ones* and *Filthy Rich and Catflap*) Rowan Atkinson has some great lines to get his amazing mandibles around. But that's not the secret. It's the fact that there's very little spit and so much polish which makes him fun to watch.

"Acting Funny" *The Adelaide Review*,No.44, November 1987, np.

Maximus

Published: 1988-03-01 *Comedy · Adelaide Festival*

Circus Oz Rymill Park

Circus Oz were always more fun than a bucket of frogs and their Tenth Anniversary World Tour performances at the Festival must be the best yet.

They have an effortless mix of physical skill, adroit comedy, musical flair and sheer good nature. Tim Coldwell, a founding member of the company, is a genial sight in his baggy suit and size 13 sneakers and straight away the show establishes an · easy rapport with the audience.

A Bicentennial bush colonial opera is offered by a thirteen foot soprano while a work experience girl guide gets in the way. Then after a rapid rearrangement of weaponry other players take up guitars, cellos, saxophones, percussion and Lord knows what else as the first of the high wire acts begins.

With my programme pulled over my face I gleaned what sounded like high-walker Michael Ling doing some nimble work while clowning Coldwell pretended to be stuck half way. Just as well we had been taught early in the evening to do the Gasp of Admiration and Terror.

Circus Oz has two directors - founder Robin Laurie and guest director Emil Work -late of the celebrated People Show and the RSC's *Kiss Me Kate*. Walk's stylish brand of visual comedy is pleasingly evident in the latest show. A deadpan collection of lawnbowlers come out twittering and chatting. As they begin the head they gradually start forming human pyramids which end up with a four-tiered miracle amidst surreal comedy.

The highpole work, learned from Chinese acrobats from Nanjing, is a great display of agility and timing as performers snap their limbs around the pole, climbing and sliding with what can only be called the greatest of ease.

The second half opens with a fire-eating act all set to go. Paraffin everywhere, Happy the circus pyromaniac, assisted by the girl guide in contention for her arsonist's badge, is just about to light the touchpaper of Anni Davey's tutu when the Bicentennial Inspector Smith (Matthew Hughes) turns a fire extinguisher on the whole thing and begins an astonishingly adept trampoline act. Circus Oz wear their skills lightly but they have become highly proficient.

Tim Coldwell as a film noir shamus, with fedora and fag, hangs vertically from the roof thirty feet up. The skit is full of droll moments and upside-down jokes. "I walk out of a lonely efac," he intones closing the cafe door. It's a clever idea, stylishly performed. Then aerialist Theresa Blake did some solo rope work while the Oz orchestra played some of Matthew Fargher's hybrid music. Under red and blue spots (with mesmeric didgeridoo Riffs) Blake swung like a top on the rope. What I managed to see from between my fingers was appallingly skillful.

Circus Oz give a great show -exuberant, hilarious and theatrically confident. The pace never slackens and the closeness to the audience is a delight. This is accessible, committed entertainment proving that you can be popular and still make the customers think.

"Maximus" *The Adelaide Review*, March, 1988. nd.

Tricky

Published: 1988-05-01 *Cabaret · Theatre*

Dizzy Spells Devised by Doug Tremlett and Terry O'Connell Space Cabaret Club

The Legerdemain business has been losing its magic lately. It is either in the hands of TV hucksters with Dickensian eponyms and nylon hair or fading roues covered in dove crap. But now comes the New Wave - Doug Tremlett's *Dizzy Spells*, a vertiginous blend of rock and roll, comedy and classic conjuring.

After five months in Melbourne and beyond, this four-figure show is as neat as a pin and has proven an astute choice for the new post-Festival season of cabaret in the Space.

Tremlett has a distinguished performance history including *Paradise Taxi* and *Fairground Snapz*, both serious successes at The Last Laugh and, like *Dizzy Spells*, co-devised and directed by Terry O'Connell.

It is not to take anything away from Tremlett to say that O'Connell's direction ensures that his talents and those of fellow Prestomaniacs - Gina Riley, Tracey Callander and Nick Carrafa - get the pace, staging and finesse they deserve. Powered by Musical Director, George Worontschak's rock synthesisers, the show switches wittily from comedy magic routines performed by the bizarre Bavarians, Rolf, Eva, Lola and (half- brother) Jurgen, to the sublime conjuring of Tremlett's solo work.

All the traditional routines are represented from sleight-of-hand to elaborate illusions. Tremlett billows open a scarf and eggs start appearing in dexterous succession. Then, in a more comic style, he'll turn a rolled handkerchief into a marvel of perpetual and independent motion. We know somehow it has to be lights or mirrors or strings attached but Tremlett has a gift for keeping us gaping regardless.

When the Prestomaniacs throw on their fezzes it is participation time for the audience as luckless patrons are swept from the safety of their chairs to balance wine glasses on their heads and have claret pumped out of their arms. To top that, a semi-willing head is manoeuvred into a guillotine as the Prestos bicker and bellow with giddy hilarity.

After a looney interlude of Teutonic gibberish, Tremlett and Carrata lure Gina Riley into a cabinet for the old three drawer which-way-did- the-torso-go trick. We still don't know. Similarly, the Houdini mailbag locked in the trunk keeps containing the wrong Presto until finally Doug announces himself from the middle of the audience with a starting pistol.

They do songs too. Not Doug, he's too busy making things appear and disappear, but Tracey Callander sings *I'm Hypnotised* while a giant telephone black mimes itself around the stage and Gina Riley does a medley of lady parodies of Stevie Nicks, Cyndi Lauper, Suzanne Vega and best of all, Diana Ross. Her straight number, *Television Man*, is less successful although Tremlett's accompanying shadow trickery provided yet another visual bijou.

A high point has to be when Tremlett's tipsy tramp is called to the bar to discover glasses whizzing out of control and canisters containing a seemingly infinite number of claret bottles. The slapstick buildup combined with Tremlett's skill makes a standard trick into a stylish theatrical turn.

"Tricky" *The Adelaide Review*, No.51, May, 1988, p.32.

Fragile Eggshell Mind

Published: 1988-10-01 *Comedy*

Flacco Paul Livingstone Club Foote

A heavily padded overcoat walks into the spotlight. Gradually a small pale pate appears above the collar, two piercing eyes sweep the room. A pair of binoculars extends from the lower reaches of the coat and continues the surveillance. Then, although not convinced it is safe to, the inhabitant bursts free of the coat and there, in a black leotard with a Union flag loincloth tied to an animal pelt that looks like it has been peeled off the Hume Highway, stands Flacco, late 20th century existential person-poet, - metaphysician, raconteur and serious paranoid.

He tells us that in bed he daren't roll over for fear of endangering the many tiny species which suck and bite and drink his blood. His room is so damp that instead of sheep he counts slugs. He rolls first one eye, then the other as he traverses the movement of the slug. The very obviousness of the joke makes it paralysingly funny.

Flacco recalls his childhood in Zetland and reproduces "the sweat saturated symphony of sex" which conceived him, by pulling at his face and rattling his wattles in ecstasy. We learn of his mother, the surrealistic home-maker and his Scottish Uncle Ray, who makes him wear the funny skirt with the dead cat on it and whose harsh brogue metamorphoses into a chirruping telephone which Flacco wears, along with countless other apparatus, hanging from his belt.

It is a cruel world, Flacco tells us, and when small boys gathered around him to see who could get most fist into his oesophagus, it was a cruel playground. "I stood trembling in my Bata Scouts," he -remembers. He does impressions. A length of curly hair becomes a moustache... for Dennis Lilley, for John Newcombe, for Mike Gibson and then, just to make a shaggy joke even shaggier, for Sport in General. The asides, sight gags, heaving puns and aphorisms all thread effortlessly as Flacco furiously extemporises, pausing – sometimes endearingly, sometimes querulously - for audiences to catch up.

Flacco first performed in Adelaide during the 1986 Fringe when his alter ego, Paul Livingstone, took time out from Even Orchestra manouevres to introduce him into society. At that time Flacco was a nervy emigre swigging on a baby's bottle of Ribena and announcing "I am a river to my people." He also carried an alarm clock and talked incessantly about cockroaches. Beckett came to-mind, so did Kafka, and Milligan.

With his new material Livingstone is more whimsical and accessible. When Flacco visits Hell it is like a very artful Pee Wee Herman's Inferno. The similarities with Herman are marked but never derivative. Flacco meets Shakespeare in Hell, as well as Rudyard Kipling, Sylvester Stallone and Buddy Holly. Flacco contains multitudes. As Buddy Holly he bursts into a gurgling rendition of Peggy Sue - "That's the way he sounds, Buddy Holly, when he'snot plummeting earthwards in a twin-engined Cessna."

Flacco certainly knows that nothing human or mortal is foreign to the comedian. "I am a flyspeck on the piecrust of humanity," he remarks matter-of-factly, "A gadfly on the corpse of Tragedy." Now that Even Orchestra, with its quirky mix of animated movies and live soundtrack, is no more, the talented Livingstone is out on his own. He has been performing around Sydney mostly, in between writing material and working in film. He has recently been nominated for an AFI Best Supporting Role in Vincent Ward's ***The*** *Navigator*.

Club Foote has again done well in bringing Flacco into our grey lives. He's due back in town early next year. You'd be a fool to yourself if you missed him.

"Fragile Eggshell Mind" *The Adelaide Review*, No.56, October, 1988, pp.26-7.

Cabhooray

Published: 1989 *Cabaret · Comedy*

The Castanet Club Space Cabaret

The Space Cabaret is back on deck for its summer season with the Castanets new show, Santa goes Nude, followed this week by the Melbourne hit *Wogs out of Work*. The Castanets, ambassadors of culture from Newcastle, first wheedled into the hearts of Adelaide a Fringe or two ago but like all celebs they have suffered those heartaches of success that shape any mature performer.

In *Santa Goes Nude*, the Castanets are in more reflective mood - the shallow and imperceptive might even say they are less funny. Certainly there have been line-up changes. T ron Wexler, Elvis Presley, Rodney Cambridge and Maynard F Sharp Crabbes have all left the fold but replacement Terry "Ginger" Vitus shows that less can be more and few will recall more charming instances than his whistling in the theatre.

Much of centrestage has now gone to]ohnny Goodman aka the Master of Sad, whose self-penned ballads, *The Magpie is My Favourite Bird of All*, *My Serenade* and *I'm Not Relationship Shopping Now*, show him to be a deeply unusual person. Bowling Man returns to rub paunches with Goodman for vintage Castanet belly laughs and when he wasn't around someone called Pastor Noel Anderson talked about Christian Boys' Problems, then Richard Nixon himself appeared announcing that he was tanned, rested and ready for '92.

Shirley Purvis and son Damien presided over the wet stubbies contest - surely where audience participation verges on the Theatre of Cruelty. Then the classically trained Medley Sisters, Doris Crawley and Kid Paganini, sang about the fine line between pleasure and pain. Doris sang I've Been Everywhere (yet again) and lounge reptile Lance Norton, more introverted this time around (maybe he's having provisional tax problems) sang the haunting ballad *I Nearly Died When You Broke it Off*.

The Christmas decor was early Miller Anderson and costume, Fletcher Jones and Staff circa 1973. The Castanets were lower voltage this time but kept their promise to be immediately funny, to try very hard and to start on time. They continue to give bad taste a good name.

* * *

Glynn With a Why is Glynn Nicholas's post-Edinburgh one-person show, retreaded for Adelaide and containing some greatest hits. Nicholas used to gather bigger crowds than the Second Coming as a busker in Rundle Mall but the experience seems to have left him somewhere in the middle of the road. His jokes got decidedly reactionary at times and it was hard to tell whether they'd been improvised for the works' pre-Christmas knees-up over at table nine or not. Nicholas is clearly very talented but he is curiously absent from his work. Somehow he manages to keep even his personas at arm's length.

Like his opening piece, the Body Awareness Programme, his Marcel Cliche is a vehicle for his proficiency in mime and movement but when it kept moving to the wrong side of ungenerosity, Glynn with a Why became too querulous for its own good. "If you liked me I'm Glynn Nicholas," he announced at the end, "If you didn't I'm a little fat guy called Daryl Somers." Perhaps that's why I kept looking for Jackie McDonald.

* * *

The Splatto Family Circus presented two shows. The cabaret night was described as risque which, as you know, is French for dangerous, so thinking that that meant lion acts or rabid chihuahuas under stern discipline, I opted for the family show instead.

The Splattos are a second eleven Circus Oz but that's not a problem. Directed by the ubiquitous Robert Draffin, they have played hyperactively to patchy Christmas crowds at the only-partly Living Arts Centre. Big Tim Scully acts as a moving target throughout their ninety minute workout which contains all those brown rice circus skills from tumbling, human pyramids, trapeze, tightwire and conjuring, to fake knife throwing.

High points included Big Tim peeling off his aviator helmet and putting his head in a bucket of water for two minutes, the talented Stephen Sculley (former Tick and Slave Clown) performing a mechanical duck routine with Ralph "Lockjaw" Davis and the suave playing from the entire and versatile Splatto hot latin showband.

Endearing moments were when Peter Brennan's lassoo brought down half the set in an over-inclusive swoop of spontaneity and John Scally (impressive on tenor sax) juggled on valiantly even when his left hemisphere and right hand were clearly not co-operating.

The Splattos finished off with fire-eating and coal juggling. They even torched their own hats. It was a veritable eisteddfod of pyromania and they stepped through the smoke to triumphant applause. By then I'd quite forgotten about lions and chihuahuas.

"Cabhooray" *The Adelaide Review*, No.59, January, 1989, p.26.

Curtains

Published: 1989-02-01 *Comedy*

Wogs Out of Work

Her Majesty's Theatre,

January, 1989.

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

Wogs Out of Work has been putting itself about for nearly four years now. Two separate companies with numerous cast reincarnations have presented more than 1,250 performances to an estimated 650,000 paying customers. Many of those people had never been to theatre in their lives and the bemused actors, most of them playing to their ethnic communities for the first time, expressed pride in the warmth of the response and occasional consternation with the task of performing to an audience oblivious to theatrical protocol.

Created in Melbourne by Simon Palomares, Nick Giannopoulos and Maria Portesi , Wogs Out of Work has been a show business phenomenon. From the comedy cabaret subculture it became a mainstream hit around the country- a show whose moment had arrived, a chip off the old zeitgeist. But topicality has a use-by date and Wogs' has now expired. The time has come to say that its time has gone. Wogs Out of Work is definitely an ex-parrot.

In town for one last spin of the turnstiles, the production is bowing out anyway. It is a pity that it wasn't a fraction sooner- before its vitality became dishevelled and its accessibility, pandering. The show was always on a fine line and in the less than eighteen months since it last played here, the balances have gone.

A lot has happened in that time, most of it on television. Last year, as programmers fumbled desperately for a cure for the dreaded ratings dropsy, laughter proved to be powerful medicine- especially if it was the local variety. The Comedy Company rescued Ten from the attack of the killer game shows and along with Seven's Fast Forward and the Big Gig on Two consolidated an audience for revue comedy of huge proportions.

In order to meet such ravenous demand the cabaret scene openly cannabilised itself. Within twelve weeks there wasn't a trade secret left in comedy, every joke, every visual gag rehearsed and refined over five years had been fed into the cruel maw of television -including the best of Wogs Out of Work. The material for the show, a canny mix of ethnic pride and and populist burlesque, has been recycled as Con the Fruiterer, along with Marike, Roula, Toula, Soula and the Little Gentlemens. Having then been spun out, spun off and generally done to death by series television it reappears in that elephants' graveyard for any good idea, advertising.

With Palomares and Giannopoulos negotiating a second series of Acropolis Now, Wogs Out of Work has been left to circulate like space junk, once state-of-the -art now a superseded model. For the Adelaide season the mix of second generation cast members Roberto Micale and Michael Blair along with originator Maria Portesi was a raggedy one. Director Marc Gracie's shadings have gone since Palomares, Giannopoulos and Mary Coustas first brought the show to the Space early last year. Coarser, politically more ambiguous, the show flounders without a tide of audience adulation.

Ironically Michael Blair's opening monologue as Gordon, street-sweeper and audience barometer is stronger and shrewder than Giannopoulos's and his skit as the Yugoslav busker was the highpoint of the show, taking the outlines of Palomares' writing and extruding accomplished physical comedy into complex absurdist theatre. Micale is less accomplished and battling with weaker material -Spiro the surfer and Anthony Saxon MP, minister for tokenism- he lost his way and ours, reminding us, fatally, that Wogs depends on the same kind of momentum as sketch television.

Maria Portesi's first appearance as Sheryl- cruelly reduced to a caricature of sequins and cretinous, upwardly inflected sentences- is breath-taking but this surreal, non-verbal comedy has not been sufficiently incorporated into the otherwise conventional revue format and ends up richocheting off the walls, like everything else Portesi did all night. Corpsing fellow actors, sending props flying, losing cues, moving manically around the stage, it seemed like theatrical self-mutilation- covert sabotage yearning for full-scale demolition.

It wasn't fun to watch, especially since The Wogs in Space sketch, a film parody depicting a reception band turning to prosciutto addiction, tiresome and over-long the first time round has now become completely unbearable to contemplate. Regrettably, the vignette of Libby, the prattling little schoolgirl on a swing, guilelessly revealing family prejudices- the highpoint of Mary Coustas'work -was deleted altogether, leaving only the dialogue between Blair and Micale as two middle-aged migrant women in a grapefruit-polishing factory, to carry some of the show's previous political edge.

It is not a crime, or a surprise that Wogs Out of Work has dropped its bundle. It doesn't alter its significance or its achievement. All the same it is a pity that its talented creators didn't choose voluntary retirement rather than waiting for retrenchment.

"Community Announcement" The Adelaide Review, No.60, February, 1989, p.27.

Community Announcement

Published: 1989-02-01 *Comedy · Theatre*

Wogs Out of Work Space Cabaret Club, Adelaide Festival Centre

Wogs Out of Work is the brainchild of Nick Giannopoulos, Simon Palomares and Maria Portesi. It began in Melbourne two years ago and has now played in ·most of the state capitals and regional centres. Gordon, the road sweeper ambles amiably through the crowd to begin a wog's-eye-view monologue. The ethnic origin is undifferentiated Mediterranean and the comedy is as broad as the Parthenon. Gordon recalls his encounter at the Mandarin Duck Bistro with his yuppie neighbour Damien. It doesn't always work and the skit runs too long but Nick Giannapoulos and his fellow actors have opened up new territory with ethnic comedy which is a lot more fruitful than Con's in the. Comedy Company.

Simon Palomares introduces us to Anthony Saxon MP who is opening National Brotherhood Week in Springfield. The demographics aren't quite right for Adelaide but we get the message. Palomares also checks out the crowd - any Greeks here tonight? Any Lebanese? Then he makes a racist joke, and a point at the same time. And where are you from? Whyalla. See, Australians also hunt in packs – but not all in the same car.

Mary Coustas is .Poppy, coming through the window after her secret tryst with Gary, an Anglo yob whose main virtue is that he is thirty years younger than the suitors Poppy's anxious mother has lined up in the parlour to audition her as a fiancee. We get, yet another perspective from Giannopoulos and Palomares as two middle-aged women working in a factory, relentlessly polishing grapefruit. One woman is Greek, the other Spanish - "same· thing," they chorus, "same thing", to the delight of the Europeans in the audience. As their conversation rambles from family to husbands to work, the sketch gets edgier and darker. It is well sustained and director Marc Gracie achieves creditable pace and depth.

Similarly; Palomares' bleak portrait of an East European busker. and Mary .. Costas's prattling little schoolgirl, Libby - sitting on her swing recounting unmentionables and guilelessly revealing the prejudices you find in every family- have the sort of substance you associate with Barry Humphries' best stage work. Giannopoulos' Spiro, the Greek kid who wants to be a blonde Skippy· surfer, is a lighter piece and runs out of puff, as does Wogs in Space, an ensemble spoof of the cult m6vie,which deals with the menace of prosciutto addiction in a weddings/parties/anything 60/40 band who wear velveteen tuxes. It runs for more than twenty minutes and while the parody Gnocchi-ing on Heaven's Door goes irrepressibly over the top, it has a tendency to obliterate the more reflective moments of the show.

Wogs Out of Work deserves to be a hit. It is an entertainment which has discovered .its moment, and its market, and not only does it have something to say, it has been saying it to a lot of people who don't usually go much on theatre. It now has a cast change - Roberto Micale, Nick Bufalo and Evdokia Katahanas, have vey capably taken over for what looks like an eight week run at the Thebarton Theatre. The reports are that audiences keep returning with more of their friends and families so it looks like *Wogs out of Work* will be working for quite a while yet.

"Community Announcement", *The Adelaide Review*, No.60, February 1989, p.27.

Not Half Funny

Published: 1989-02-01 *Cabaret · Comedy*

Doug Anthony Allstars Space

The Hot Bagels The Cabbage Brothers Club Foote

The Doug Anthony Allstars have always had a rancid little stage act. Looking like three unsavoury prefects from a dubious boarding school or, maybe, Mormons on glue, the DAA's work on the cusp of bad taste and have a rapport with audiences that borders on harassment.

The group - Tim, Richard and Paul - originally from Canberra, have recently finished a tour of Tasmania. Maybe it was being in that land of contrasts that has finally curdled them. Whatever it is, the Doug Anthony Allstars have been going places so fast, it is hard to tell these days where they are coming from.

They were always big on physical disability jokes and looked to American TV evangelists for their material, but in their recent show, *Limbo Hell Akimbo*, the perilous mix of their comedy isn't funny any more. For one thing, their formula is really starting to show and for another, if you put yourself out there at edge city you can't just be OK, you've got to be good.

When the world became too much with Lenny Bruce he started reading from Supreme Court transcripts, when it does for Spike Milligan he checks into a quiet corner of the clinic. The Doug Anthony's comedy - if it is world-weary and not just complacency and an arts degree - has no ideological centre of gravity. Instead, the three performers seem to be laughing behind their hands at audiences who have paid honest money to see them.

Perhaps the shift to mainstream audiences, like the one in the Space, has meant that the DAA's no longer have the peer group pressure of the Fringe to consider. At any rate, the result is comedy which is lame and vicious - the Irish Moslems have the shiite kicked out of them (yawn), Laurie Anderson has a Superman orgasm and there's a lot of the, now very old, Pythons trick of making absurd conceptual combinations - Neil Diamond and Cartesian logic, and people with names like Elvis Kafka and Trotsky the Baptist. The Dougs ask who has heard of Joe Orton and sing *If I had a Hammer*, then follow with a clunker about Roy Orbison that they say was only to test the room. Well, the room certainly got testy.

We got the usual rubber gloves gags and a medley from *Jesus Christ Superstar* rather like a black mass in the dorm - lots of emission jokes when Judas hangs himself and Benny Hill-level campery with *I Don't Know How to Love Him.* They performed *I Heard it on the Grapevine* just to show they really can sing and (insight of insights) sang Bob Dylan's *Sara* just to show he really can't.

The all-time low point was when the Doug Anthonys began sneering at a "hippie" at the front table for having shoulder-length hair. They not only shouldn't have started but they didn't know where to get off either. I'd say they were very fortunate he didn't shiv all three of them. "This is more fun than Gilligan's lsland," Tim Ferguson wittered during the show. I wouldn't have said so.

Club Foote has been keeping up the good work with a two week season of Melbourne's Hot Bagels and Cabbage Brothers.

The Bagels opened the batting with their now familiar repertoire of rather studied parodies - *PMT, Bikini Triangle, Gino, The Morning After* and so on. They perform them with panache bur theirs is a closely rehearsed act and if they get slightly out of step they don't rally easily.

The Stage personas of Janina, Libby, Anna and Lena, remain clear but a bit freeze-dried and when Libby breaks out with her ode to footy or some unscheduled comic abuse, the effect is often more tentative than it should be.

The high-points still work though - *What's Love Got to Do With It*: "Love's just a secondary infection/ it's a disease and there is no protection", Anna's version of Piaf's *Je ne regrette rien* (sung with Libby's accompanying translation, which includes lines like 'Kill all the baby seals') and the S&M anthem, *Rawhide*.

The Hot Bagels found new fans and revived old ones with fresh songs like *Criminal Justice* and the purple-to-blue Mills and Boon saga of Crystal and the Burnside Mechanic. They also took time to promote their namesakes at theBagel Boys' shop in Goodwood.

And then there was Cabbage. The brothers Patrick, Louie, Richard and Paul crooned their way through the Twenties and Thirties songs they know and love - *Accentuate the Positive*, *TipToe Through the Tulips*, *Old Shep*, *I've Got You Under My Skin, Temptation*, *Your Cheating Heart*, *Jealousy* and *That Old Black Magic*.

In among it, one went berserk with a gun, another with a duck, Louie practised voodoo on Richard and Patrick totally lost control of the Casio. They worked their way through a relaxed, stylish and winningly funny first set. "Remember the more you drink, the funnier we get," they announced at the break and then performed a second half that would have been hilarious on rainwater. The Cabbage Brothers continue to be musically suave and fun to watch.

The final number with the Hot Bagels - *You Are a Child of the Universe*, (with the very deadpan Paul Cabbage reciting lines from the · Desiderata) and a stomping version of *Hit the Road Jack* - brought the show to a great finish. A good night's work from eight persons named Moe.

"Not Half Funny" *The Adelaide Review*, No.60, February, 1989, p.27.

Underdone

Published: 1989-04-01 *Cabaret*

Sod ‘Em and Tomorrow Pat Wilson and Adrian Barnes Lion Theatre

Pat Wilson and Adrian Barnes have a heap of music and stage credits between them. Not only has Pat Wilson performed and recorded her own songs but she is in demand as a musical director and voice and piano teacher. English born, Adrian Barnes has clocked up extensive flying hours in musicals in London’s West End and with the English National Opera and, since becoming resident in Australia, has done a stint with the VSO in Pirates of Penzance and as principal understudy for the national tour of *Seven Little Australians*.

So it should come as no surprise to either of them if the first night of their two-person show, *Sod ‘Em and Tomorrow* is described as underdeveloped and under-rehearsed. Much of the content is promising, some of it excellent, but neither Hugh Halliday’s direction nor Wilson and Barnes’s performances succeed in hammering the show into any kind of unity.

The uncertainty of the stage personae and an equivocation towards the material makes it unclear whether Pat Wilson and Adrian Barnes want to be a late Eighties Dawn and Bobby, or take the urine out of such an idea. In fact, as is bound to be the case with yuppie satire, they are trying·to do both at the same time, so it is often hard to tell which side of the offense they are on. As a consequence, continuity founders and with it, the performers’ confidence.

The songs are vintage Pat Wilson. They lampoon and linger over designer labels, designer drugs, relationships, salvation, the manners of the workplace, safe sex and safe food. Items like *Hey Let’s Relate* and *Stirling on a Sunday* come from the earlier Unarmed Wombat set but remain wickedly apt, while ringins by Dillie Keane- *I’m Giving up Jogging* and *Radiating Love* (would you still hold my hand if the skin wasn’t there) graft in well with the new material - some Barnes/ Wilson collaborations and others of separate composition.

Highlights include the shopping list of multinational transgression in Sin the Supermarket, the New Age clarity of Crystal and the timing of Management Men. The best of Pat Wilson’s work has the end-stopped wit of a Tom Lehrer or an Ogden Nash with echoes of Grenfell and’ Flanders and Swann while Barnes’s pastiche hits the mark with the Gilbertian model of a modern Palestinian and the (Jalousie) *Monogamy*.

But with 26 songs, many of them requiring asphyxiating degrees of articulation, Pat Wilson and Adrian Barnes have created a marathon that has them gasping in the home straight. *Sod ‘Em and Tomorrow* could do with a thorough ·nip and tuck - the Equal Opportunity Rag and the lumpy Bicentenary Blues should both get the heave and others need shortening and sharpening. It also needs better integration and pacing.

Like their tea towel terrorists at the opening of Act II, Wilson and Barnes rely too much on a scattergun approach. They owe it to their best material to narrow their sights and make decisions about which targets are really worth hitting.

“Underdone” *The Adelaide Review*, No.62, April 1989, p.24.

Catch a Falling Spy

Published: 1989-05-01 *Comedy*

James Bond Cliffhanger The Space, Adelaide Festival Centre.

Britain's Cliffhanger Theatre Company's *James Bond* may not be everybody's idea of a universal export but will tickle those who like their comedy somewhere between the Goodies and the Spanish Inquisition. Although, unlike the more pugnacious forms of manic English humour, *James Bond* is low-key, whimsical and gets curiouser and curiouser.

The four Cliffhangers give Ian Fleming's imperturbable Bond a right old filleting. Pete McCarthy has the familiar tux and grooming but his baretta has a droop to its barrel and he is developing Doubts. Why does. Moneypenny keep chugging off to get files which nobody asked for? Has Q really developed a salad dressing you can use as a speedboat and why does M only ever say "Sort it out, do a bit of wind-surfing and shag a few foreigners"?

Besides, James Bond has met Janice a single parent in a share house and is ready to hand in his double-0 licence to become a creche co-ordinator and play group leader. But he is not adjusting easily to civilian life. On his first day he kills fifteen children and puts them in a skiff. And there are the machinations of yet another Evil Genius, this time with the mysterious Church of Mush. As they say, there is one reborn every minute and it looks for a while there as though James is going to be one of them.

From the opening credits – in screen silhouette in the legendary style of the Saltzman and Broccoli films, James Bond is a succession of quiet drolleries which are satirically sharp and engagingly performed. McCarthy's numbskull Bond doesn't miss a beat nor do Tony Haase as M, Robin Driscoll as Q and Rebecca Stevens as Janice, Moneypenny and the fatale Svetlana.

Car chases and submarine dives are presented in hilariously minute detail and the familiar bars of John Barry's theme are sepulchrally chanted by the characters who provide gulps, plomps, whizzes, twangs, doyngs and pings for everything from underwater fight scenes to darts contests. Cliffhanger find comic pleasure in everything from silly walks to delusions of imperial grandeur. They don't push the material and only ad-lib sparingly (and so to great effect) but all the while they keep laying slow fuses which implode with daggy unpredictability.

As relentlessly daft as the spycatchers themselves, *James Bond*, like the Fleming novels, ends with a series of revelations and deflations which are too silly for words. But, all in all, the show is a jolly wheeze and a crafty piece of work. When he rounds up the Master Fiends with his love child Judy strapped on him in a Mothercraft papoose, you know one old cold warrior won't be the same again, James has broken from bondage.

"Catch a Falling Spy" (James Bond) *The Adelaide Review*, No. 63, May 1989, pp.24-5.

Friendly Fo

Published: 1989-05-30 *Comedy*

Mistero Bufo

Lenny Kovner

Lion Theatre

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

Mistero Bufo, as Lenny Kovner drily informs us, does not translate as Mister Boofhead. The Mysteries are medieval stories taken from the Bible and Apochrypha, as well as from the lives of the saintly , the bold and the not-so-beautiful. Presented in what began as eisteddfods of community theatre, presided over by a watchful clergy, they grew to become travelling popular entertainment on a scale to rival the Church itself.

Jesters, jongleurs, buffoons and clowns have always been prepared to claim satiric licence despite such major disincentives to freedom of speech as hanging and burning. Mistero Bufo celebrates their courageous refusal to be impressed by the corruption and excess of prelates and princes.

That the Mysteries are still a matter of interest for audiences has been amply proven by Dario Fo, the Italian actor, playwright and activist, who assembled this show and performed it to millions, often to crowds of twenty thousand at a time. Fo, with his wife Franca Rame, has entertained and inspired audiences in Europe since the early 1950's. Their work became less genial after 1968 when in Italy, as elsewhere, the secret armies of the State began to tread the streets with riot shields. Fo's Can't Pay, Won't Pay and the hugely successful Accidental Death of an Anarchist, articulated the views of a politically conscious populace, with a strong mix of satire and hard truth. Fo and Rame became heroes of progressive culture with a reputation for making engrossing , accessible theatre.

Lenny Kovner has translated and adapted Mistero Bufo for Australian audiences, and, equal parts Dario Fo and Rodney Rude, it works well. Kovner , who grew up in Australia, has worked extensively in the UK and Europe. His Mistero Bufo has toured widely and it is a crying shame that this return season to Adelaide has not been better attended.

He may be performing Mysteries but there is nothing mystifying about Kovner's presentation. In a long welcoming prologue he outlines, among many other things, the varieties of popular theatre in the Middle Ages from the macabre xcitement of public burnings to the religious festivals introduced to celebrate Corpus Christi. Kovner is engaging and smartly to the point - if Pope Gregory was the Steven Spielberg of his time, he explains, then Augustine was his Clint Eastwood.

Always receptive to his audience, Kovner like Fo, the master, demolishes the sanctity not only of religious affectation but of the proscenium also. Performed without props, costume, make-up or lighting changes, his theatre is almost alarmingly free of illusion, but when he moves into the first sketch, a miracle play about a blind man and a cripple healed by Christ during the Passion, he is entirely in dramatic command.

Moving adroitly between the powermongers of the Middle Ages, Gregory and Boniface and the Pinochets and telephone salesmen of today, Lenny Kovner threads together narratives of dissent and endurance. There is droll satisfaction in seeing the preposterous vanity of Boniface VIII - poncing about in his mitre and cloak, terrorizing altar boys -met by the simple egalitarianism of the risen Christ. Boniface explains that Peter had decreed that there would be a pope, the first of a succession of leaders- what, he looks incredulously to Christ, you didn't say that at all! You don't have to live walking distance from the Vatican to find that funny.

Another story describes the ordeals of a man, who, like Job, is pushed beyond his patience trying to claim and maintain ownership of his land. Finally, having lost his wife and family, he is ready to hang from the rafters. Rescued from the brink by Christ in disguise he is given the gift of theatre. He becomes a street clown, an activist. The story, from Sicily, has a harsh comfort and a tough wit- like the final piece, an eight voice account of the raising of Lazarus.

With Mistero Bufo Lenny Kovner has taken on a daunting task with memorable and often hilarious results. Fo has warned that the middle classes enjoy satire like alka seltzer and this is something of a problem for Kovner too. He conspires with an audience that he also distrusts- but never as much as the Bonifaces and the Bonds. So he renders accordingly and his message is well-judged, disconcerting and direct, reminding us that there is no better giantkiller than comic ridicule.

Commissioned for The Adelaide Review but not published. 1989 ?

Prince Speaks out on Radio

Published: 1989-05-30 *Comedy*

At last the full truth can be told. In a two part programme starting tonight (Saturday, August 26) at 6.30 on ABC Radio National (5CL 729) Prince Belligerent, arguably the least known medieval nonentity since Monty Python's Sir Notappearinginthisfilm, will be given his historical due.

For reasons which still remain clouded in mystery, the task of presenting Belligerent's extraordinary story has been entrusted to ABC National's Comedy Unit in Melbourne. Working from a script by Kevin Nemeth (this is his third radio work for the ABC) producer Bryan Dawe has spared no expense to ensure that only the best coconut shells are used to create the sound of horses' hooves.

In describing the programme Dawe says, "It is about romance, torture, corruption and it's not even set in Queensland."

Prince Belligerent is a so virtuous he makes Galahad look like a juvenile delinquent .His parents, King Ignorant and Queen Demean, on the other hand, are surprisingly unpleasant. But no-one is as truly repulsive as the villain in cow-horns, Eric the Mauve.

"Belligerent is a play in the Shakespearian-Chekhovian style with Viking overtones," explains Dawe. By that he means there are more mortal woundings than Titus Andronicus and it is more Norwegian than The Cherry Orchard.

Recorded live before a flabbergasted studio audience in Melbourne last month, Prince Belligerent stars Francis Bell in the lead, with Rhona McLeod as Iron Lady Demean, Ross Williams as Eric, Denise Scott as Dementia, Margo Knight as Lady Prudence and Colin Betroni as Abbot Costello.

Recorded with galloping noises and Viking mumblings of uncanny clarity and authenticity Prince Belligerent is essential listening for anyone who wants to hear history in the making.

Murray Bramwell

Risible

Published: 1989-06-01 *Comedy*

A Complete Dagg John Clarke Susan Haynes/ Allen and Unwin RRP $14.95

A series of interviews has begun appearing on Nine's *A Current Affair* in the last five minutes of their Friday edition. Paul Keating, Andrew Peacock, Margaret Thatcher and Dan Quayle all appear on TV frequently but never before has anyone noticed their uncanny resemblance to John Clarke. They look and talk like him, they even share his profound belief in the reductio ad absurdum, but, at the same time, they have never been more themselves.

Take Dan Quayle for instance. Ever since he made his first public appearances as the United States' least sentient Vice-President there has been great sport in presenting him as a witless dolt. Held in place by marionette wires and shrewdly questioned by straight-person Bryan Dawe, Clarke's Quayle apparently can't remember the name of Australia's PM. This is not because he is stupid, however, but because such details are simply unimportant. Asked what he had said to Bob Hawke about the US wheat markets, Quayle replies breezily that he told him to go to buggery. In four minutes John Clarke had isolated the true meaning of the Vice-Presidential visit better than the entire national media apparatus - Dan Quayle had come on behalf of his great nation to tell Australia to go to buggery.

This is what Barry Humphries is referring to in his introduction to John Clarke's latest miscellany, *A Complete Dagg*, when, likening him to Michael Leunig, he calls him "a great Oceanian artist." "Fortunately for John Clarke," Humphries observes, "he can always be dismissed by his victims as a harmless wog, an amusing ratbag and an anodyne parodist. If he told us what he sees and what he knows about Australian society in any other but his jester's guise he would long ago, have met with a very nasty accident."

In New Zealand parlance (at least as I recall it) "a bit of a dag(g)" loosely translates as "a bit of a laugh." *A Complete Dagg*, not surprisingly, is something rather more total than that. In his previous collections, *The Fred Dagg Tapes* and *Daggshead Revisited*, Clarke published a great many of the short editorial radio spots which tested and finally corroded the mettle of ABC political courage. There are legendary stories that Ian Sinclair had greatly disliked hearing jokes about his father's posthumous handwriting and that this had had some bearing on the fact that, soon after, Mr Clarke's contract with the fearlessly independent National Broadcaster fell behind the filing cabinet.

All that political bearbaiting on radio and then, on TV with The Gilles Report, was some years ago. The cover of *A Complete Dagg* proudly announces "All persons connected with the publication of this book wish to express their respect and admiration for the government and all public figures currently living in Australia." Which .is just as well because one could be forgiven for thinking that time has only given more ·menace and point to Clarke's mighty pen.

The first section - Australia: A User's Guide, turns attention to such phenomena as the Australia Post awareness campaign~ "They have filletted the competition to the point where, I believe I am right in saying, in some areas the Post Office is now the only Post Office still operating as a Post Office." - and Telecom - "We ran a visually very satisfying campaign some time ago explaining to people what a telephone is. (In effect, a telephone is a thing that rings in the mountains of southern Europe, and the ringing stops if you pick it up and cry into it.)" There are also savage whimsies on banking, the stock exchange, the New Right and the golf of politics. Elsewhere there are transcripts of those interviews with Hawke, Joh and Charles HRH as well as a section on the politics of golf.

Sport has always amused Clarke. His fascination with its arcana and grandiose commentary led to his creation of Farnarkeling and the exploits of that farnarkeler nonpareil, Dave Sorenson, star of gonad, grommet and whiffenwhacker. Sorenson is back, as are Clarke's splendid accounts of domestic chaos when the Federated Under Tens combine with the Massed Fives to harass management with a log of claims relating to ice cream.

Readers of *The Eye* may have wondered about the provenance of Damon's Beat. Now the full story can be told. The flawlessly Runyonesque adventures of Little Bob, Excitable Greiner, Choo Choo Hill, Landslide Howard, Complete Dawkins and the Ipswich Kid, garnished with drawings by Jenny Coopes, are gathered for posterity in this Dagg completeness.

John Clarke's work has grown richer and tougher and this collection is some of the proof of that. There are plenty of funny people about but few have the relentless intelligence and unstudied elegance that Clarke has. This book is full of slow fuses, suave spleen and reminders that the body politic needs someone as seriously funny as John Clarke to announce when it is giving odour.

"Risible" The Adelaide Review, No.64, June, 1989, p.28.

1990s Reviews

Adelaide Fringe

Published: 1990-03-01 *Comedy · Adelaide Fringe*

Found Objects

Lion Theatre

Until March 11.

4 Stars. “Definitely take the plunge- endearingly funny.”

Found Objects are the unrivalled exponents of wet comedy and in their latest show, Plunge, these three stooges remind us what it’s like to be nerds at the beach. What’s more, they sing- “My Grandmother is a Fuddy Duddy” and their dolphin tribute “We Are the Hippies of the Sea” accompanied on guitar , trombone and pan pipes.

They are also big on props- foam bike helmets, novelty sandcastles, metal detectors and other triumphs of stage illusion. In the tradition of Funny Stories and Tick Where Applicable, this group traffic in dingbat gags and shaggy routines . Clever, modest and endearingly funny - Found Objects are worth discovering.

Murray Bramwell

(Early version of comedy act - Lano and Woodley)

The Advertiser, March 1990

Fringe Comedy

Published: 1990-04-01 *Comedy · Adelaide Fringe*

Murray Bramwell

There is something likeably democratic about the Fringe's published programme. In alphabetic order under general headings, it is the great leveller- events are listed with sublime even-handedness. The good, the bad and the ugly are all equal in the sight of the Fringe creators.

The only trouble is that this doesn't make it easy for the poor punter looking for a winner or even something each way.Add to that the absence of a comprehensive box office at Fringe Centre and confusion is a short step from apathy. There were enough troubles at peak times - like work lunch-times and early evenings- getting BASS bookings for anything at all, Fringe or Festival, so it would hardly be surprising if the fine young Fringe cannibals used to making on- the -spot choices either bought an on-the-spot ticket for Little Sisters or decided to take a walk.

The cabaret and theatre programme both indicated a changing pattern. The Little Sisters programme was packaged from Melbourne and the shift was to the television- tested and burlesque. The Fringe, scene of the Cabbage Brothers, Tick Where Applicable, Funny Stories, Even Orchestra and the pre-Big Gig Doug Anthony's now seems to be in a time lag from Tuesday Night Live. The sudden popularity of Australian comedy on TV is double-edged - it raises recognition exponentially it also demolishes subtlety and decimates six month's material in a single night.

The biggest draws at Little Sisters were The Dougs, the Bachelors from Prague and Swinging Sidewalks -all staples for Melbourne variety TV. Gerry Connolly showed his intelligence as a mimic actor but he was rather shaky live. The Great Big Opera led by counter-tenor Jon Jackson with the Spectoral synthesiser sound of Greg Riddell and Allan Walker introduced high calibre camp while co-billed comic Rachel Berger worked sub-Harmer territory. Mention should be made again of Paul Livingstone's Flacco -Eat Carpet credit squeezer and monologist without peer. He first amazed the Fringe in 1986 and these days he is appearing on the Big Gig. The Doug Anthony's made a smart move getting him on their bill for Edinburgh and then- after a late scratching by Gerry Sadowitz- Adelaide also.

My comedy favourites were Found Objects who dispense wet gags with silly props and avoid the tired hydrophobics that the Doug Anthony Allstars now dispense to a whole new audience . For me, nothing quite touched the slow-moving weirdness of the Slave Clowns of the Third Reich from the 1988 Fringe. But this is no place for misty nostalgia.

The theatre programme, seemed thinner this time with fewer inter-state shows braving the Malthusian conditions for Fringe performance. The Rag and Bone company, former VCA students drew attention with their Bluebeard , while the Bastinado company from Sydney holed up at the Balcony for three shows. I saw only the Picasso work Desire Caught by the Tail, a play famous for its author, which was nevertheless strong and engaging theatre. It made you a bit wistful for the extravagant theatrics of Nigel Kellaway's Sydney Front.

Some local groups worked more traditional material -the Celtic Circle could probably have done a three week season of their Under Milk Wood and Flinders University Drama Centre students played to full houses for their J.M.Synge one-acters at the Red Shed. I'm sorry to have missed are the Aboriginal Cultural Institute's Up the Ladder, new works by Vitalstatistix and Darrelyn Gunzburg and interstate visitors Handspan and Entr'acte.

One local show reflected the tenacity of theatre-making. Put together from their own funds Suna Productions' Salome and Acts of Contortion played about a dozen performances at the New Century. Written by local writer Jenny Boult with additional material from Kathy Acker, Acts of Contortion told a story not unlike that of Wedekind's Lulu. Director Doug Leonard took a dash of Weimar and a lashing of Fassbinder to tell the story of Zilla the headless woman. The paper gave it a stinko review devoid of specifics. It was rough theatre, with artless performances but it deserved better.

The irony for this year was that the Festival's Archaos was the star Fringe attraction and the best show in the Fringe belonged in the main festival. The Attis Theatre from Athens gave only one performance of Euripides Bacchae as part of Glendi. Using Artaudian and traditional quasi-yogic techniques the five actors under the direction of Theodoros Terzopoulos went for the savage heart of the most disturbing work in the classical repertoire.

Performed entirely in Greek with deft physicality and extraordinary mental concentration this Bacchae brought us closer to the dionysian paradox than most tunic and olive branch re-creations ever could. The Attis Company who have worked with the Berliner Ensemble and toured extensively in Europe and North America, played unheralded in the Scott Theatre. If you hadn't looked between Antebodies and Bastinado in the Fringe programme you would have missed them.

With the doors finally closing on the Living Arts Centre there are more questions than ever on the future of the Fringe. As the festival continues to programme its own fringe the official Fringe starts to look like a poor relation, offering much the same but with a grungy ambience and uncertain value for money .

If we were really in a recession and not a time of beautiful numbers, the Fringe might be seen as a bad risk for performer and customer alike. It is not hard to imagine a future where the crowds come in for the cabaret head-liners and then buzz off back to the Fezbah for brandy crustas. Everyone expects the Fringe to be out on the edge but no-one wants it to become marginal. In the past decade the Fringe has achieved a great deal but left to grow unchecked and unconsidered it could well be swamped by its own endeavour.

"Fringe" The Adelaide Review, No.75, April, 1990, p.21.

Talk About Laugh

Published: 1990-05-30 *Comedy*

Billy Connolly

Festival Theatre

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

Despite disconcerting colour pix in TV Week recently revealing that Billy Connolly had sheared off his hair and beard for a filum, his familiar trademarks were mostly back for his return Australian tour. All the same, he was still a bit dubious about the reduction in fungus- I look like a fucking social worker, he roared and then off he went for two and a half hours of rumination, digression and comic microscopy.

Not only does Billy Connolly see the world in a grain of sand but he finds every speck of it hilarious as well. There is no division for him between things that are funny and things that are not -anything can get a serve and mercilessly at that, but the effect is always to confirm and embrace never merely to deride.

It was Terence who said I am a man and reckon nothing human alien to me. The same is marvellously true of Connolly. He is busting to tell you how daft we are and to catch us at our covert worst - farting inopportunely in public, gaping into blown handkerchiefs, pretending to be more in command or accomplished than we ever are. But he is always first to confess, to declare his own unmentionables with a laugh so ferocious that he single-handedly alters the Scottish stereotype.

Billy Connolly makes the business of telling stories look so easy you would swear any fool could do it. He has a rhythm, punctuated- he will tell you himself- with the copulatory expletive, which turns ordinary speech into something almost like blank verse. And he has a narrative technique which has him hauling six main plotlines at fifteen or twenty minute intervals. He never falters, stammers, forgets the point, doubts the joke or misreads the audience. In short, he doesn't miss a beat.

For subject matter anything will do - the new backdrop, a series of giant photos of Connolly taken at various angles and sliced into cubist strips gets some ironic attention, so does someone in the third row trying to duck out for a quick slash. He always has something topical and local -the state of the Town Hall organ, people in Perth telling you how far away they live, the `talking blazers' at the Commonwealth Games, the pilot's strike -`Do yew really want ta fly with e disappointed pilot ?'

But it his native Scottish Isles and his native Scottish childhood that provide the richest vein- and like other comedians, John Clarke included, he finds a sweetness and truth in recollection that is like comic balm. This time a peroration on the Australian Iron Man and the Games led to the cold waters of the Scottish coast and memories, frozen in time, of the beaches of his youth. Like Aberdeen- Scots Gaelic for `hyperthermia'- and the maroon woolly bathers with the belt and pocket that when you'd braved the brine, filled with water and dragged you under permanently. Connolly the reluctant aquanaut describes his father calling him a Big Jessie as stood in the Arctic Sea (the Scottish Tourist Board cunningly renamed it the North Sea) with the waves a shudder away from his scrotum.

It's a very strange word scrotum he will suddenly muse- and repeating it ad nauseum becomes ad absurdum. Like a child weighing words and rolling them over, Connolly reveals how perilously our meanings hinge on the silliest sounds.

And despite the fact that he is really as nice as pie, Billy Connolly will recall his days as a hard man in the Clyde shipyards, when he used to drink like a drain and polish the bottom of his shortbread lunch tin and shine it in people's eyes on the double-decker bus home. The drunk jokes have a touch of the reformer these days as Connolly describes having once had two memories and then paces up and down the stage demonstrating how inebriates pretend to be sober, tripping and glaring back at the carpet as if it was somehow its fault. The very idea has him in paroxysms. There are very few comics who can get away with laughing at their own jokes.

There are even fewer who can make a fart funny. Having restrained his sphincter jokes for two hours he presented his set piece on the varieties of farts, producing arias of similitude that left an audience of well-socialised citizens insensible with laughter. Suddenly looking at his watch to find it was already eleven Connolly then took another half hour to talk about Scottish tea rooms and the Duchess Argyle's recipe for pheasant.

The word Chaucerian seems to describe Connolly. Somehow he manages steer right round the seaside postcard nudge- nudge wink- wink school of tiresome innuendo without relinquishing the chance to discover how impossibly comic we and our uncontrollable orifices really are. He can take any audience to common ground without becoming featureless in the process. He has a fierce accent and is obsessionally regional but if you are in his audience, wherever that might be,you are included. No-one gets thrown to the piranhas to make everyone else feel good. There is something extraordinary about Billy Connolly's artistry- in a world full of shit and spite, it is a kind of benediction.

"Talk About Laugh" The Adelaide Review, No.73, Festival edition, 1990, p.32.

One of a Kind

Published: 1990-10-01 *Comedy*

An Evening With

Peter Ustinov

Festival Theatre

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

Peter Ustinov may not quite be a polymath but he'll do until one comes along. His accomplishments are extraordinary. In addition to his work as an actor he has distinguished himself as a director in theatre and opera , as a playwright, travel writer and autobiographer. He can speak a dozen languages and has been honoured with Academy Awards, Emmys, Grammys, a chaise in the French Academy and, recently, a knighthood.

A life of such digression makes him a splendid conversationalist. In fact his one person show suits him better than almost anything else. Watching his movies you often get the impression that he found his acting roles tedious. He himself acknowledged his Nero in *Quo Vadis* is Roman ham, in *Viva Max* he is surprisingly undistinguished, even his Poirot is stodgy. It is as if he finds the demands of a single role uninteresting and, given the lines he often has to deliver, unrewarding.

But alone on stage for two and half hours, his own scenarist and cast of thousands, Ustinov is a very different proposition. A few galumphing bars of Peter and the Wolf and there he is, apart from a touch of self parody in the burgundy velvet jacket he is inscrutably deadpan. Thank you for the warmth of your welcome he says , assuming the voice of one his favourite victims, the unctuous television presenter . Other comedians mock the vocabulary of caring and sharing but Ustinov is toxic. When he utters words they stop buzzing and fall to the floor.

Narrating events in the life of someone closely resembling

the author, Ustinov's is an unreliable memoir, a comic bildungsroman which begins in utero in Leningrad and leads to London-" I travelled with my parents as extra weight." He describes his miraculous birth and the acquisition of language. His first word, he tells us, was Oxo, indicating a family preoccupation with beef products. When his mother first travelled by train to London she thought every station on the line was called Bovril.

Then comes formal education. An exclusive London prep school first, of which his earliest recollection is seeing a portrait of Christ leading a boy scout by the hand. Put it down to my foreign extraction, he sighs with exquisite irony, but I was pretty sceptical from the beginning. Grammar schooling at Westminster is despatched with a string of anecdotes about a headmaster with a mouth like a cathedral and a droll description of the son of Von Ribbentrop on schoolboy army manoeuvres. Later when Ustinov takes up the subject of his time in the military he rolls gentle little grenades everywhere. Army rituals, toothless NCO's and blithering generals of no particular distinction all get a swathe of derision.

His tales of the theatre are even more fun. At drama school he was lukewarm about American Method techniques." We all had to select an animal as a kind a persona, he recalls, one young South African woman was a springbok, I was a salamander, I had a relatively restful term." There it all is. The slight raising of the eyebrow, the languid descending curve of the ironic phrase. No one can match Ustinov in delivering a line.

Or for precision in mimicry. He screws his face into a pusillanimous prune and he is Charles Laughton, a peering glance is Alec Guinness, pursed lips epitomise Gielguid, a faintly mincy blinking of the eyes and a half-turn and he is not only Olivier, but Olivier on a jittery horse in Spartacus. American film moguls fascinate Ustinov as do the rich roccoco flourishes of American speech. He glories in them - whether from the mouths of motorcycle cops, brain-damaged Presidents, or directors like Mervyn LeRoy whose Bronx adenoids are perfectly recreated giving a note to Ustinov during filming - "The way I see Nero. This is the kind of guy plays with himself, nights."

An Evening with Peter Ustinov includes material familiar to devotees of his TV special, An Audience with same. Set pieces such as his impression of his mother meeting Queen Mary at Covent Garden, conducted entirely in subverbal regal wittering, only gain from repetition as do Ustinov's brilliant musical parodies of German lieder, flamenco,neopolitan folk song, or anything else that comes to the attention of his laser wit.

What distinguishes Ustinov is not only his genuine ease with an audience but the clarity and precision he brings to the stage. We do not conspire with him against easy targets, it is not an exercise in comic platitude. Plenty of performers are comic and as many are charming but very few combine them with such intelligence.

"One of a Kind" The Adelaide Review, No.80, September, 1990, p.27-8. Reprinted The Sydney Review, October, 1990, p.20.

The Confidential Clarke

Published: 1990-12-01 *Comedy*

Great Interviews of the Twentieth Century

John Clarke

Susan Haynes/Allen and Unwin.

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

It is rumoured that while ratings for Channel Nine's A Current Affair sit steadily in the high thirties, for the last five minutes on a Friday they clear forty. The reason is John Clarke, who, with henchperson Bryan Dawe, has perfected the political interview to such an extent that not even politicians need to be present. Speaking for the PM, Premiers, Cabinet Ministers, Bank Czars and other assorted Party Machinists, Clarke understands what it is like to suffer their pain. He knows what drives them, he has a prescient knowledge of their darkest hopes and highest fears. They would be the first say that it is as though he somehow gets under their skin.

If hell is other people then John Clarke has been a hell of a comedian for some time. He started doing these interviews for the ABC three or four years ago- Maggie Thatcher, Meryl Streep, Prince Charles, all answering freely and frankly, all absolutely identifiable, and yet communicating in the cleanly enunciated baritone of a New Zealander who's had his ickscent mercifully strined. Amongst the facsimiles created by Max Gillies, Gerry Connolly and the other spitting imagists, Clarke's approach is unique. None of your wigs, vocal mimicry, ear pulling, don't-you-worry-about-thats. He is interested in what Aristotle used to call hamartia- the old fatal flaw.

Except that even that gets a satiric tweaking - if a PM, for example, happens to be as vain as a chook with six wattles, he will make him a paragon of modesty. If a Treasurer is in the habit of suavely ignoring economic indicators that would worry even the Weimar Republic, Clarke has him confessing that's it is all out of control and he hasn't been feeling well for weeks.

While much Australian comedy is suffering from conceptual elephantiasis at present, John Clarke has been creating perfect miniatures. He has always worked well within strict guidelines. When he began writing his Fred Dagg editorials for ABC radio, he created a form something akin to the prose sonnet. He wrote one

a day for three years and, preserved in the Dagg documents, they read as freshly as they sounded at the time. The ABC must feel very proud that for a time they dispensed with his services when individuals in the Fraser ministry got windy.

Great Interviews of the Twentieth Century gathers Clarke's work for Channel Nine over the past two years and interestingly, despite the political conservatism of A Current Affair, Clarke and Dawe seem to have had a free hand to sink their teeth into. The conventions of the television interview are scrupulously observed- elaborate courtesy ("Thank you for joining us") combined with belligerent disbelief, lost-in-space studio decor, ethereal lighting and serious clipboards.

The subjects these days are Important Men, usually elected beyond explanation and often, beyond comprehension as well. Paul Keating has forgotten what the J curve is about, John Dawkins explains why tertiary students pay for their education twice, John Button negotiates to cancel the Friday movie to give him time to explain his fix for Australian industry. John Howard talks about party unity, Andrew Peacock meets a large white rabbit with a fob watch and Sir Robert Sparkes talks about the future. State premiers, Alan Bond and John Cain comment about finance and someone called Nobby Clark talks about interest rates.

Bob Hawke gives straight answers. Will interest rates go to seventeen percent ? Answer- "I was unfaithful to my wife, Yes ... It wasn't just my own wife, either. I was unfaithful to a lot of other people's wives too." And his fitness after his little prostate op ? "I'm a danger to shipping."

International visitors also get a look in . Dan Quayle universally presented by the media as a walking blooper of no consequence describes his contribution on behalf of the American trade policy makers. When Bob Hawke indicated the impact on Australian wheat sales - he told him to go to buggery. And the New Zealanders on ANZUS ? Quayle explains that they won't come to the table, they have a place at the table but they won't come. And if they did ? "I'd tell them to go to buggery."

You have to get up quite early in the morning to write as well as Clarke does. There are plenty of jokes here but each interview has a larger point to it, attempting something a bit more fundamental than a caricature of silver hair or a five o'clock shadow. Public figures are probably secretly grateful for their big noses and thick eyebrows because then the cartoonists and comedians can have field day. It's when people like John Clarke and Bryan Dawe come along and start looking into their black little hearts and their devious little minds that things begin to change.

"The Confidential Clarke" The Adelaide Review, No.83, December, 1990, p.34.

Sandy Through the Hour Glass

Published: 1991-03-01 *Cabaret*

The Life and Death of Sandy Stone

Barry Humphries

Her Majesty's Theatre, February, 1991.

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

Barry Humphries once described Sandy Stone as a decent, humdrum little old man. It remains an apt assessment. Drab, suburban, habitual, Sandy epitomised the prosaic domestication of the Anglo-Australian male. When Barry Humphries held a mirror up to nature it was the obsessive, sexless, life of Sandy Stone which appeared in the glass not the gangly, heroic fiction of Chips Rafferty. When Ava Gardner said in 1958, during the making of *On the Beach*, that Melbourne was the ideal location for a film about the end of the world, she might have been talking about a visit to 36 Gallipoli Crescent, Glen Iris, home of Beryl and Alexander Stone.

Sandy Stone is one of that distinguished collection of twentieth century non-entities which includes Eliot's Prufrock and Phillip Larkin's Mr Bleaney. His droning cadences belong to the experiments of Gertrude Stein and other prose minimalists. His vacuous life is a cheerier version of Watt or Krapp, or the boarding house codgers at Harold Pinter's birthday party. Barry Humphries knows all this but it is his gift that he can take an existential stereotype and return him to the vaudeville revue where Beckett and others found him in the first place.

With The *Life and Death of Sandy Stone,* Humphries has for the first time given his most downbeat character a show of his own. In the past Sandy popped up, or more precisely-since he invariably played the scene of his demise- popped off, somewhere on the agenda between Neil Singleton and Lance Boyle. More recently he has been overshadowed by the vulpine Edna and the effusive Les Paterson. Until now, the Sandy Stone set piece was the adagio movement (to use his creator's term) within a larger, more turbulent construction.

I can only say that Sandy Stone's shuffle to centre stage is a welcome event and proof to anyone left doubting the idea that Barry Humphries bridges perfectly the territory between the theatre and burlesque. He is a consummate writer and performer whose precision and detail continue to place him at the forefront of Australian theatre. No one can work an audience with his effortless timing, nor write lines that insinuate with such comic complexity.

The Life and Death of Sandy Stone is a deliberate museum piece especially the first half. The opening monologue is note-perfect from 1958 -"I went to the RSL the other night and had a very nice night's entertainment..." Sandy's curious blend of euphemism, officialese and suppressed innuendo charts his suburban odyssey, shaped by tedium, obligation and bleak resignation. Sandy's life is full of tribulation-such as where to park vehicle and what to do about the curried egg on the axminster. But it is also not without epiphany, captured in Humphries'mock-poetic line -"By the time I got home it was that blowy, the Herald was all over the front lawn." Sandy in dusty aspic.

When he first described the Wild Life in the Suburbs of the 1950's , Barry Humphries, dadaist, aesthete and cultural terrorist, was annotating Robin Boyd. Here were the Australian Uglies in their habitat - complacent, Anglophile, oblivious to the European upheavals which had brought new migrants and old cultures to Melbourne. Here were Edna and Sandy living in such tiny universes they wouldn't know if their arses were on fire. For audiences now , the writing flickers with nostalgia. The times they depict may have been anaesthetised but at least no-one felt pain. Without such knowledge what blissful ignorance. When Sandy glories in the Astor radio and sits peacefully in the dark listening to the bakelite cooling down, audiences secretly envy him. He is the apotheosis of the couch potato.

From his armchair Humphries navigates the known world of Sandy Stone. With a litany of brand-names and torpid cliches, he hints at the nearly three decades of social change which have passed him by. If not a black joke, it is a very grey one. Humphries understands exactly the equivocal Australian reaction because increasingly he shares it. This is not so much a shift in his politics (he always voted tory anarchy as far as I can see) as due to the fact that when he started, Edna and Sandy were portraits by the artist as a young man. Now he is their contemporary the comedy has become more intricate.

Sandy, as we are told after interval, is now a shade on the dead side. I am deceased he announces, adding drily - with the resultant consequence that there has been a considerable change in my life-style. The joke, of course, is that he is more lively as a phantom in his own soap opera than he ever was when actually inhabiting the Jason Recliner. Although there are none of the sorties into the

crowd which distinguish Edna there is more conspiratorial audience address. Sandy is more searching , about the wife, Beryl, her interloping paramour, and about life in the Foodarama and the Repat. Sandy has a good old recherche about the temps perdu, and the people as well- Nurse Younghusband and her young husband, the Nettletons , the shadowy Valmai Clissold and the likes of Returned Men, Les Bullock and Pat Hennessy.

Whether describing the inert chemistry of the crumpet or apostrophising paper lanterns as tomatoes, Sandy is a remarkable comic creation -a filigreed miniature in contrast to the vehement vulgarity of the rest of the Humphries bestiary. The Life and Death of Sandy Stone summarises thirty-odd years of a way of life that is plainly presented as a joke and yet we are edgily reminded that its assumptions continue to seep into our political, social and imaginative lives. As Sandy says of the air raid shelters in Melbourne backyards during wartime - people think nothing happened in those days, when in point of fact, it nearly did.

"Sandy Through the Hour Glass" The Adelaide Review, No.86, March, 1991. p.34.

Funny Money

Published: 1991-12-01 *Comedy*

A Royal Commission into the Australian Economy

by John Clarke and Ross Stevenson

Space Cabaret

Susan Haynes/Allen and Unwin

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

John Clarke and Ross Stevenson conducted their first Royal Commission during the Melbourne Comedy Festival back in 1988 and it quickly became the hit show of the season. So when they set up a new inquisition- this time into the Australian Economy- it was certain to attract interest. All the same, it was a bold move for Sydney's Belvoir St Theatre to use it to open their card for 1991 and in so doing, present a piece of theatre that actually looks out the window.

Despite the energy and invention of comedy in this country very little of it jumps the fence into theatre. With A Royal Commission a very fortunate miscegenation has taken place resulting in a production which has an originality that, like much of John Clarke's work, is largely taken for granted. Erle Stanley Gardner had always understood the essentially dramatic nature of legal process but it took John Clarke and a lawyer like Ross Stevenson to see royal commissions not only as acts of public lamentation and oil wells for QCs but more fundamentally, as very perfect vehicles for sketch comedy. Think about it- you take an idiosyncratic commissioner free to say from the bench what he or she likes and then you subpoena all the most distinguished public liars in the country and make them tell the truth for a change. It's hard to imagine anything funnier, or more sublime.

Mind you, the Adelaide sittings of the Commission into the Economy taking place in the Space Cabaret are hard pushed to compete with our very own investigation into the death of the State Bank Tooth Fairy, but they do bring a national perspective to the pitifully provincial.

The Judge, Dame Victoria Markets, aka Marg Downey, presides over the Commission in order to find out why, in the authors' Ciceronian words, Australia has hit the wall somewhat in the financial department. In calling for the swab and seeking a ruling from the stewards, Malcolm Turnbull QC, in the guise of Craig Ashley, asks the sticky questions while Sir William Gunn, Alan Bond, Bill Kelty, R.J. Hawke and the Honorable Member for Blacktown, variously played by Sue Ingleton, Gerry Connolly and Magda Szubanski, reluctantly elaborate. An assortment of Treasury officials appear- Messrs Cardigan, Waistcoat and Trouser- as do a currency trader from a major bank- James Ballieu, aged nine- and somebody called Pete Hungerford.

The format is in many ways an expansion of the Clarke-Dawe interviews - straight feed lines unrelentingly dissecting the prevarications of public figures. The circular logic of the wool subsidy, the failure of the Accord, the adventurism of the stock market - I'm not a businessman your airship, says Alan Bond, I'm an entrepreneur- are all examined with chilling precision. What makes the show so strong is that the writers are unafraid to lay their ground with straight information before they deliver a satiric haymaker.

The performers, a combination of those from the Sydney and Melbourne shows, pay various respect to the text. Ashley and Downey, and to a large extent, Sue Ingleton, splendidly keep the pace and shape of the cross-examination as does Tracey Harvey , priceless as the clerk of the court. At times, though, Gerry Connolly and Magda Szubanski busk it too vigorously with the visual gags. It's not that they're out of place but the verbal finessing gets lost when Connolly blows Kelty's explanation of the Accord and Szubanski, even with prompting, is unable to remember Nobby Clark's five benefits of deregulation. I suppose, come to think of it, that's been a problem for all of us. Certainly, both comedians bring plenty of dash to a show which can handle both egghead satire and burlesque.

In a year the impact of A Royal Commission into the Australian Economy has only increased. With very little suturing it remains a timely account - despite what might happen, or has happened, to Paul Keating or anyone else said to be in charge. In fact, performed in Adelaide, the show has a simultaneity with Life Itself that leaves you feeling like you are laughing at your own funeral. Nobody is let off the hook despite the show's splendidly conspiratorial conclusion. This is marvellously tough satire. I wouldn't be surprised if the next thing Clarke and Stevenson suggest is that we eat Irish babies.

A Royal Commission into the Australian Economy returns in January for an extended run - bite your lip and buy a ticket. Otherwise, read the book. Parental guidance recommended.

The Adelaide Review, No.95/6. December, 1991, p.38.

Missing Persons

Published: 1992-07-01 *Comedy*

I, CONnolly

Gerry Connolly Space

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

The title of Gerry Connolly's latest one person show is indicative of the performer himself. The literate pun has the same chill of cautious pre-meditation and self consciousness that characterises this and Connolly's other live work. Shielded by television post-production or confined in the careful structure of something like Clarke and Stevenson's Royal Commission, Connolly's gifted impersonations have a steely presence. In his own show he seems to lack that last little skerrick of rocket fuel that the ego requires to undertake the monstrous task of cross dressing, political impudence and royal travesty.

There is something opaque about Connolly's satire which you never feel about that other shy chameleon Max Gillies. Not only does Gillies know what he thinks but his satire is (or was) also propelled by the bile of Patrick Cook and the historical irony of the historically ironic Don Watson. Connolly's Thatcher, Hawke and Bjelke-Petersen are adrift from their very real social actions leaving you wondering whether he thinks their main fault is vulgarity. They seem like the comic creations of a tory or, more likely, one indifferent to politics itself. This is not a matter of political correctness, it is a question of clarity of purpose. Politics for Gerry Connolly seems to be Commedia Dell Arte or a pre-determined theory of humours.

For this reason the frosty first night crowd gently resisted being herded about by a pushy Margaret Thatcher whose stage reality was unclear. In the subtitle, Icons and My Part in their Demise, Connolly acknowledges that his subjects no longer rule the roost- but that doesn't mean they are merely comical relics. Collectively they wrought a fair amount of havoc and left legacies worth comment.

Directed by Sue Ingleton, I COnnolly has an engaging theatricality with Connolly preparing make-up and costume changes on stage. The links the comedian provides are disarming- I wouldn't be here if I'd concentrated at school, he smiles disarmingly, contradicting the proposition with details of his Christian Brothers education, two years at the sem and a B.Mus from the con. He isn't blowing his bags, in fact it is interesting - and it does help to explain a certain reserve, a sense of qualm in the task.

That Gerry Connolly is a skilled burlesque performer is evident when he puts on his hat and delivers vintage Bjelke-Petersen gibberish. Mentally and morally aphasic it is still Connolly's strongest creation. His Keating as a Blacktown apostate, appropriating the language of doctrine and the pulpit of politics, is a coolly sardonic conceit whose truth may still be growing on us. Like much of Connolly's work there are not a lot of obvious laughs, something I'm not clear is deliberate or not. The key seems to be disdain rather than anything very raucous.

Other Labour icons get a serve as well - Gough, in a genial exercise in collective voice mimickry and R.J. Hawke as Liberace, a broad brush with the PM's new life as a television non-event. It gave Connolly an oroton jacket and a round at the piano but ran longer than its legs could carry.

As did the second royal half. After being snubbed by those well-known patriots, Botham and Gooch, and with the flag kerfuffle flapping around us , Connolly finds himself in a vortex of monarchist feeling. It is a paradox of course that those in the mall who want to biff him with their handbags won't come near his show while those who do buy tickets may be alarmed to find his account of the royals benign to the point of endearing.

Reading from a 1953 Royal Tour and showing us his Charles and Di pop-up book, Connolly indicated a bemusement at the House of Windsor but nothing much beyond that. Ears first, Connolly as Charles took a turn on the cello and then while the sound system played a variation on the Holy Order of Divorce sketch, kitted up as ER herself. The long skit, based on those documentaries of the Queen at home, again suggested a whimsical penchant for non-humour, almost wilfully ambling, deliberately inconsequential. It is engaging for a while but you suddenly feel Gerry Connolly's all dressed up with nowhere to go.

With some flourishes from Chopin, Connolly brought his quietly eccentric show to a close. Smoothly managed, with assistance from designer Ray Wilson as his dresser, I CONnolly is a showcase of accomplishment which is unreasonably unsatisfying - neither full of herniating gusto or smart, lethal satire. Gerry Connolly's talents deserve more acknowledgement than this, but maybe we need more from him as well.

The Adelaide Review, July, 1992.

Icon Tactics

Published: 1993-09-01 *Comedy · Theatre*

Look at Me When I'm Talking to You Barry Humphries Her Majesty's

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

Edna Everage may want our eye contact but it is her unmistakable voice that greets us first in Look at Me When I'm Talking to You. With bridesmaid Madge providing sign translation on a large video screen Edna gives some guidelines for live theatre. We have not been given remote control units because they will not work- this is not television, the actors on the stage are real. For best results look towards the curtain area at the far end.

We happily watched the curtain area for more than three hours while Humphries premiered his latest show, proving yet again that he is a burlesque entertainer without rival. The newness of the material is evident and Humphries' rafts of words do not always seamlessly connect. But as he said, this is not television. It is an indication of his pre-eminence as a performer that the occasional first night hesitations come as a surprise. We expect nothing less than perfection because Barry Humphries so often supplies it.

Sir Les Patterson opened the proceedings. In his Sydney 2000 track suit he is on a fitness bender. He's dry at last - toasting his successful battle against the turps with a glass of chardonnay. Sir Les has made many contributions to political and diplomatic life but his most distinguished to date is as Australia's Number One Olympic Undercover Bagman. We didn't think Sydney won on merit did we ? Sir Les has always been the hardest of Humphries' characters to hack. The satire is rarely convincing, what truth it had has faded. It is no wonder that he can't save the world. His Aristophanic trousers are the world's oldest willy joke, the racism rankles and his mouthwatering diction soon palls. But his boasting, grossness and avuncular good humour are still engaging. When he asks- are you with me ? Well you sort of are.

Daryl Dalkeith is new. Fresh out of the slammer, he is the victim of a relentless vendetta against the entrepreneur. He is a visionary - like mates Skase and Bond, crucified for his beliefs. He deserves help from Amnesty International. Daryl's back for lunch but the table is empty, the photos with Bondy and Hawke have been taken down, the service is decidedly cool. It is curious to see Humphries play a character closer to his own physical likeness and tapping material closer to the moment. But with John Clarke we get this kind of political comment microseconds after the event, sometimes even microseconds before. Humphries' character writing is smart but safely generic. It is not just Daryl who's been away too long.

Steaming to the front of the stage in his deco armchair comes the shade of Sandy Stone. The codger from Gallipoli Crescent is the ghost of Ashworld, Glen Iris's brand new, Asian owned twenty four hour supermarket. Sandy is the man for whom things almost happened. His early monologues are comic masterpieces, Humphries' brilliant evocations of the juiceless Australian suburbanite- living and partly living, the Melbourne version of Krapp's last tape. Sandy's litanies of brand names, his adumbrations of a life of habit have been transformed with time. Pungent satire of a stifling present has become purple nostalgia for a temps decidedly perdu.

Sandy remembers and remembers. Shops where they knew your name and on which shelf the stock was. Shopkeepers snapping parcel string with their fingers, wattle painted on the butcher's window. Commerce has changed. Businesses close, their windows painted white - like the milky eyes of a dying pet, says Sandy with poignant relish.

The writing in the Sandy segment is Humphries' most assured. Valda Clissold's encounter with the caring professions, widow Beryl's happy new life as a grief and loss counsellor. How did we manage before grief counsellors ? Sandy muses, I suppose we had to fall back on people we knew. It is canny writing but as in More Please, Humphries' Sandy-like memoirs, Melbourne of the forties and fifties is a kind of Arnotts paradise. The city Ava Gardner once described as the right place to make a film about the end of the world, has become the inspiration for moral rearmament. Barry Humphries, dadaist nemesis to Glen Iris is now its fondest Boswell.

Barry Humphries once said that Edna Everage looks out over her audience with the eyes of Patrick White. When the lights went up on the audience after intermission a palpable terror gripped the front rows. I was already jumpy. My ticket in row F had been double booked. Was this some hideous Humphries portent. Others around me thought so. Several public notables relocated well clear of the piercing range of Edna. I'm what, these days, they call an icon she shrieks as she takes the stage, beading the audience like a hawk in a mouse plague.

Edna Everage is Humphries' most rapidly mutating creation. As the montage of video images heralding her arrival remind us, Edna has long ceased to be a single social construct. Instead she is the vortex for all Humphries' miscreant energy. Edna gathers personae, fads and buzzwords like lint. Her current breathless revelation: she was abused by her mother. She is also on the IVF program. And of course ER would like Edna to rid her of her turbulent republic.

Her ubiquity on television only serves to make Edna more astonishing on stage. Last time I saw her perform live was in 1973. She was wearing denim and smirking about people going to Mary Martins to buy Hermann Hesse. Twenty years on she is more unspeakably gaudy, veteran of transnational media and working crowds with greater zeal than ever. Penny and Helen are summoned on stage to sort a ton and half of Norm's clothing while Edna rang an unsuspecting babysitter. Humphries' detractors have hammered him for Edna's antics, her postcode snobbery and humiliation of sisterhood. Not so In Look at Me While I'm Talking to You. Edna is almost benign, improvises brilliantly and a hostess you'd be glad to tremble for.

Humphries has created so much for others to build on it is hardly surprising that he is now often upstaged. He is, after all, old enough to be Edna's brother. But at the curtain area of Her Majesty's Barry Humphries passed his own acid test. He is still a nice night's entertainment. I wanted to press rewind and see it all again.

The Adelaide Review, November, 1993.

Adelaide - Fence

Published: 1994-06-30 *Comedy · Theatre*

Fence by Colin Lane, Frank Wood and Neill Gladwin

Performed by Lano and Woodley Director: Neil Gladwin Lighting Co-ordinator: Charlie Murray Stage Manager: Dan Jonsson Lion Theatre. June 14, 1994.

In the popular TV comedy show, Fast Forward, there was a recurrent skit about the WhizzBang Theatre Company. They were a TIE group bringing worthy, didactic theatre to schools. Short on talent, subtlety, and anything remotely resembling humour, the Whizzbangs represent all that captive adolescent audiences most dread.

When Neill Gladwin took over Magpie, the young people's wing of State Theatre, he promised some new approaches in his program- and a shift away from Whizzbang theatre. He could not have done better than Lano and Woodley. Formerly of the deadpan, weirdo comedy duo Los Trios Ringbarkus, Gladwin has a good eye for new comedy. He began the collaboration with Colin Lane and Frank Wood (aka Lano and Woodley) in 1993. They had been part of the successful comic trio Found Objects and now were trying out as a double act. Guided by Gladwin, who directed and edited their material with them, they developed a show which did excellent business at the 1993 Melbourne Comedy Festival and then again in this year's Adelaide Fringe.

Fence is a re-working of the Melbourne show- guaranteed 45% new jokes, skites the publicity- but the throughlines remain the same. The premise is that Lano and Woodley are two unworldly virgins desperately trying to be more urbane than they are. It comes as no surprise to learn that school audiences took them to heart when the show toured to various metropolitan high schools in Adelaide and then a country round to Ceduna. Fence is a tender work about friendship, rivalry, and the pressures of telling people you've done it all when you manifestly haven't.

Lano and Woodley are a funny pair- part Laurel and Hardy, part Ren and Stimpy. Woodley is thin and anxious and given to hilarious swoons of self doubt, Lano is a mass of hearty over-compensation. When Woodley gets out his guitar to sing Sonia, with the crashingly immortal lines -I picked on ya because I had a crush on ya, Sonia, it is Lano who appears in the background with harmonies extruded so hysterically that they overtake the song.

Fence is full of visual gags, trick props, looney tunes jokes, audience stoogery and silly mime. Woodley does press-ups with his tongue and Lano in order to impress his imaginary lover Jenny performs a wickedly satiric `modern contemporary dance piece.'The show gets even more unhinged when Woodley steals Lano's fantasy girl. When Lano whimpers about it Woodley replies-` next time you have an imaginary girlfriend why don't you get one that loves you a bit better.'

It is this kind of tenuous humour that Los Trios used to thread themselves so memorably around and Lano and Woodley have just as much invention. Their improvisation is a delight, their timing and sense of the audience highly inventive. Neil Gladwin has done a fine thing putting such quality talent in front of young audiences and for reminding them that the brightest of our new comedy is indeed part of current theatre. Too often cabaret and stand-up has been enjoyed but overlooked as ephemera. Fence, with its crisp direction and endearingly original performances is as fresh as it is funny. Magpie has successfully widened its brief and in doing so set a brisk pace for itself.

Financial Review, June 30, 1994

Two Persons Singular

Published: 1996-04-01 *Comedy*

The Corridor of Uncertainty

Flacco and Sandman Arts Theatre 10 March

In the profusion of performed comedy in Australia there are few acts as exquisitely theatrical as Paul Livingston's Flacco. For about ten years this fragile eggshell mind has amazed both himself and his audience with his metaphysical delvings and his literary peregrinations. As he says himself, he wants to be put out of his mystery. But it is Flacco's lot to become curiouser and curiouser- and weirder and weirder. He has moved from club to stage to screen. He has jumped channels. He has worked with the Doug Anthony Allstars and Andrew Denton, he has pondered aloud with Bruce Petty. And now he is in the corridor of uncertainty alongside one of nature's truer paranoids, the quivering voice of unreason, Stephen Abbott's altered ego, Sandman.

Listeners to Triple J know that it must follow, as the night the day, that in their regular morning spots Flacco and Sandman will observe, pronounce, confess and generally editorialise about matters large and infinitesimal. The station's enormous growth in popularity has now brought these comparatively esoteric persons to a wide, and younger, audience.

After reading his news-from-Adelaide letter from behind the ancient red curtain of the Arts Theatre, Sandman comes blinking into the light. Formerly of Newcastle's famed Castanet Club, Stephen Abbott has, with Sandman, perfected the lugubrious delivery. His slow moving pontifications suggest a young Sandy Stone but the focus of the neurosis is the narrow nineties. I choose to start the show now, he announces, and his nerdy signature sets the crowd off. I have a fear of failure, rejection and success, he confides, so whatever you say I won't be happy. Standing motionless at the microphone he reels off his enervated philosophy. I don't like puppies he whimpers, I don't like anything with a future. My favourite thing is seeing people miss out on something they really want.

Abbott playfully mocks his own stagecraft. He hilariously demonstrates how to make a move from the microphone to the music stand seem interesting. He makes pteradactyl noises to break the monotony and suggests they would be helpful in job interviews. He reads ponderous wisdom from the music stand while the theme from Twin Peaks wells up like a smoke machine. He plays his guitar and sings songs with uncertain metre. And for his finale he is joined by Flacco, who in addition to his usual bizarre costume is wearing a metallic apron which he plays with drum brushes. The comic effect is nicely held -each performer intent on maintaining poise. But as we hope, Abbott is corpsed by Livingston's relentless deadpan. Vladimir gives in again to Estragon, Ollie loses out to Stan - in order for both to win.

For his set in the second half, Flacco appears in a broad hat and heavy fur coat, the lonely saxophone accompaniment parodies even the parodies of film noir. But as ever Livingston's detail and timing give freshness to the character in his many guises. Flacco is no longer introduced as a pale pate inching uncertainly through the top of a trench coat- but all these associations of his alien gentleness abide nonetheless. Flacco,in later career, is more flamboyant, more raucous even. He can make quite a noise when he thinks about how much he likes meat. This flyspeck on the piecrust of humanity is not beyond the ribald either. My body is celibate, he observes, but my mind is completely fucked.

Dressed in trademark black tights with various pelts and paraphenalia hanging from his belt Flacco is also vaguely Elizabethan in his flounced shirt with collar brooch. His hair is sprouting like turrets, or antennae, and a long strand coils like a question mark on his expansive forehead. Flacco is an extraordinary being and it is Livingston's gift that he can inhabit the gothic, the fin de siecle and the danceclub with equal aplomb. The comedy is superbly visual- eyeball gymnastics, an entire repertoire of lip pursings. It is also wonderfully verbal- suggestive of Joyce and Beckett but on closer inspection eluding scrutiny altogether.

A packed house of mainly young fans is spellbound by the minimal staging and the focused performances, the prosc arch jokes, the curtain gags. It is a reminder, if we needed one, that our theatre at present is being hugely invigorated by cabaret and comedy. Like Lano and Woodley, Flacco and Sandman are finding a wide and appreciative audience who not only recognise the precision and intelligence of their theatrical comedy, they are delighting in it.

The Australian, April 15, 1996.

Comedy and Come Out

Published: 1999-03-01 *Comedy · Other Festivals*

Murray Bramwell

There may not be a Fringe this year but there is still going to be some Autumn comedy. The Big Laugh festival organised by the Adelaide Festival Centre is bringing back some familiar faces and more than a few toothy smiles.

Running for a couple of weeks is The Complete Works of Shakespeare. All thirty seven plays in ninety seven minutes. Compiled by Adam Long, Daniel Singer and Jess Winfield, originally known as the Reduced Theatre Company, this show, which has toured the known world, returns to Adelaide in a production directed by John Saunders and features Glynn Nicholas, Russell Fletcher and Sean O'Shea.

Individual stand-up favourites appearing at The Big Laugh include Judith Lucy, back performing The Show for one night only in the Optima Playhouse, and Fringe cult comedians the Scared Little Weird Guys, also for just one gig in the Playhouse. Sue-Ann Post, who manages brilliantly to put surreal comic spin on some fairly unfunny subject matter, plays three nights in the Space. Also, not to be missed, is Hung Le, whose gentle comedy captured many last year when he performed here. His new show is called Noodle Frontity.

Greg Fleet who has been a regular in Adelaide over the past five years with shows such as Thai Die , Ten Years in a Long-Sleeved Shirt and Underwater World , has a new number called Scary which explores horror, terror, Hitchcock and Stephen King. You may never shower again.

Also in the Space is veteran prankster Rod Quantock, who has popped up on Good News Week , and elsewhere, and is a guaranteed good night whenever he has two or three gathered in his name. The season also includes Wil Anderson and Tripod, Merrick and Rosso, a line-up of local funnypersons- and eight nights of Scottish git, Billy Connolly. But guess what ? He's already sold out.

After a few name changes and some alarming turnover in personnel, Come Out 99 is back with a reduced program but an ever more vital role to play. With the demise of Magpie Theatre and other companies who made visiting schools part of their charter, Come Out is an important, maybe the only, opportunity for young people to experience live performance.

Running over ten days. Come Out will engage students and littlies around South Australia in activities which include music, theatre, storytelling, scripting, painting and dance. There is also ArtsMADD, a vigorous program of creative work in schools.

After the opening parade on Friday March 19 there is a full card of events. The Flying Fruit Fly Circus has a show at Her Majesty's entitled Impact , directed by Kim Walker. Multitalented performer Linsey Pollak has a new work for three to eight year olds called Playpen which opens up a crazy world of music and digital technology. Spare Parts Puppets, from WA, will present a version of Tim Winton's The Bugalugs Bum Thief in the Scott Theatre and, at the same venue, Heaps Good Productions are Dancing With Leaves.

A highlight of Come Out promises to be respected local company, Patch Theatre's Visible Darkness. A collaboration between choreographer Jonathan Taylor and former Handspan wizard and now Patch AD, Ken Evans, Visible Darkness features Sarah Manthey, Aiden Munn, Billie-Joe Cook and the Outrageous youth dance ensemble. They will perform in the Optima Playhouse from 18-22 March. Also on my list to see is The Stones from Zeal Theatre in Victoria. Written and performed by Tom Lycos and Stefo Nantsou this gritty piece examines the behaviour and motives of two boys throwing stones off a freeway overpass.

The Adelaide Review, March 1999.

The Eyes of Patrick White

Published: 1999-05-01 *Comedy*

Remember You're Out Barry Humphries

Her Majesty's

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

The heavy red curtain rises on Her Majesty's elderly stage, the auditorium is flooded with digitally-operated blue light and, through the blinding haze, Barry Humphries clambers out of a camphor glory box. It is an extravagant entrance for the shy, retiring Mr Humphries, a comic artist who prefers to communicate through proxies and intermediaries. But for his new show, Remember You're Out, he is making an exception. Perhaps emboldened by the success of his autobiography, More Please, he is more prepared to step forward and be noticed.

In his stage dressing gown Humphries recalls the history of the camphor, keeper of his mother's bridal regalia, fur stoles and eventually, stage dress-ups for Barry and his siblings. These are the drapes and brocades he hid behind, pretending he was on the wireless. Here is the sailor suit he wore as a little chap in the 1940's, innocently warbling Purcell as Nips and Shepherds Come Away. Tonight Barry Humphries is, as he once put it, looking back retrospectively.

And there is much to recall. From out of the box comes a little woollen cone, maize coloured actually, to use Humphries' legendary precision with the colour chart. The actor places it over his familiar flop of hair and he becomes Mrs Everage circa 1955. Joined by accompanist Andrew Ross, Edna in prototype is offering to open her doors at 36 Humoreske Street, Moonie Ponds, to billet athletes to the Melbourne Olympics. The script, reprinted in the program, sparkles with Humphries' faultless ear for genteel slang and contemporary colours, fabrics and brands. There is chenille and axminster, duck-egg blue and genoa. With a mix of Malaprop and Mapp and the turn of a beautifully parsed inanity, Mrs Everage manages to put a moist sponge finger right on the button.

Of all Humphries' characters he maintains most affection for Sandy Stone. Based, he tells us, on his parents' neighbour Mr Whittle, he has a voice like footsteps on dead gum leaves. Applying his make up beside the piano, Humphries steps out of a cloud of talc in the grey wig and - uniform of a man in no hurry- dressing gown and slippers of Sandy Stone, late of 36 Gallipoli Crescent, Glen Iris. And by this stage, also late of this world. Sandy has been gathered, and his robust wife Beryl, remarried and rewidowed, has moved to the Sunshine Coast to further her business interests, running a Dreamtime Cultural Centre and Snack Bar. Sandy, circumscribed as he is by the garden sprinkler and the logistics of parking the vehicle, is not the figure of fun he once was. Time has turned satire into something close to nostalgia. Certainly, as his creator comes nearer to matching Sandy in age, he is gentler about the consolations of the suburban idyll and instead turns his barbs towards the booster philistinism of neo-classic Tuscan town houses.

A fanfare of themes for Channel Nine sport programs, announces sporting identity Murray Buzzacott, only to be interrupted by a business class traveller just in from Switzerland. With his rumpled suit and built up shoes, his sozzler's nose and snaggle teeth, it is Sir Les Patterson, Humphries as the lord of misrule, complete with sly protestations of innocence and Aristophanic phallus flapping down his trouser leg. Sir Les has been talking with the IOC about those allegations of consorting with "Mormon hornbags" in Salt Lake. He is embattled and beleaguered, of course, but good enough to take out time to talk with the ladies and tell the gents some blue.

After interval, in a further blaze of James McKenzie's lighting, the artist formerly known as Dame Edna makes her entrance. By now Mr Humphries has been completely usurped. Edna, the omnivorous sociopath is on the prowl. Humphries once said, in an interview, that she looks out at audiences with the eyes of Patrick White- and tonight is no exception. She is full of love for us she reminds us. But she is also inquisitive, we are her demographic, her socio-economic ethno-gendered spectrum. We are not so much her audience, she says, as her focus group. Anyone got a tattoo ? In no time flat, Pam in row C is describing her Japanese symbol and her tortoise, and Jo and Nancy are describing their living rooms in Black Forest and Linden Park.

Humphries works off the audience with ferocious aplomb. Ian and his wife Vicky are served a meal onstage, Sia and Harry are honoured with Edna's psychic prediction. It is fun for ten minutes but Edna spins it out to thirty and the banter, always verging on the cruel, depends increasingly on the kindness -and forebearance- of strangers, all of them middle-aged women to whom Edna offers toxic sisterhood and Barry Humphries his weary derision. Having completed his torments by dressing his audience victims in preposterous costume, they get their Nivea, Haighs chocs and marching orders.

But benediction comes - both for Edna and us- with the gladdie ritual. There can be no stranger sight in all of show business than a gladiolus wielding audience saluting a cross-dressed comedian with the fervour of a congregation. Perhaps having made us sit in trepidation for so long, it is with gratitude we now so willingly stand and tremble. Whatever is the case, Barry Humphries, forty six years into his remarkable career in burlesque, is a performer without equal. As he peers impertinently into our lives, he does so with the attention to detail of a painter and the ear for language of a poet . With the lyricism of Betjeman and Brack, perhaps, or- come to think of it- the eyes of Patrick White.

"The eyes of Patrick White" The Adelaide Review, No.188, May, 1999, p.34.

2000s Reviews

Cabaret in May

Published: 2001-06-01 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2001

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

The recent Adelaide Cabaret Festival has been a curious event. Or at least it has come into being for some rather curious reasons. In part, it is a reaction to last year's Fringe. Certainly there were those close to the Fringe who thought that the popular comedy acts around the Rundle Street epicentre had swamped everything else - particularly those theatre companies, some of them international, who struggled to break even with high overheads and a fragile box office. The Cabaret Festival is aiming- somewhat quixotically surely ? - to shift the focus away from Melbourne tele-comics and morning radio humour. An exercise in cultural engineering you might say.

Then, there is the fact that the Adelaide Festival Centre has been having a lean season. Dark much of the time - and, do we think, out of pocket after the summer musicals ?- it was timely for Arts minister Diana Laidlaw to prime the pump with half a million dollars to go and buy some programming.

The result has been a mixed menu of middle of the road favourites, jazzy morning melodies, an outing for the ASO, a few choice items from here and there and a fair amount of the sort of popular comedy which we saw at the last Adelaide Fringe. Some shows went wild - the Sing-Along-Sound-of-Music for starters- and, with modest box office targets and a built-in subsidy , performers such as Ross Skiffington, James Morrison, Julie Anthony and Judi Connelli were going to do well also.

Looking through the program, though, you could be forgiven for wondering what actually constitutes cabaret, and certainly what might be some new directions for a form that is, almost by definition, regularly in need of some pepping up. I am sorry I missed Yumi Umiumare -Tokyo Das SHOKU Girl - she sounds like a paradigm shift, or at least a shift in an adventurous direction in a festival that opted for the smooth, if not the downright sedate.

Although sedate is hardly the word for Ciao Mamma Ciao from Doppio Para//elo. Intended as a light hearted exploration of the relationship between Italian men and their mothers, it is unfortunately leaden in both concept and execution. Director Teresa Crea, in seeking to disguise the film script origins of Frank Morello's text, throws in every possible theatrical gambit. Since there are debts to German cabaret, Jason Sweeney, as the MC gets to do some Joel Grey stuff with lots of fishnet and flouncing. It bears no relation to anything else on stage but it 's as though everyone concerned realises that the main event is unendurable and any arbitrary breaks for songs, or whatever else, are better than nothing.

The tangled plot of manipulative mothers, of Pino and Paolo and Jake and the wayward and much maligned Daniela, is overheated and overacted. The bawdiness becomes merely coarse and the point of it all gets lost. It is a relief at one juncture when things come to a temporary halt and we are coerced into several choruses of Volare. James Coulter's set, in cartoon black, white and red, is stylish and the multimedia elements are smartly managed but I was ready to say ciao to Mamma well before the ninety minute mark.

For a bit of organised chaos we never have to look further than Frank Wood and Colin Lane, otherwise known as Lano and Woodley. Their newest show Bruiser, gives licence not only for some daft old shadow-boxing but it has the dynamic duo doubling for two more actors that Frank has forgotten to hire. The physical pratfalls, the daggy routines, the long gormless stares, the vocal hysterics - they are all there as large and awful as life itself. Frank still wears his Dunlop Volleys and Col his tight-under-the arms check jacket. They are immutables of desperate clowning - Ollie and Stan, Didi and Gogo - and the audience loves them as much as ever.

Cabaret West, it seems, is the Fringe the Cabaret Festival had to have. Working out of the , Minkebar, the new Laughing Gas club on Hindley Street and Caos Café, have been a bunch of musicians, drag artistes and funny persons. The Lion Theatre also has had a posse of international comics - some Irish jokers, Ben and Arn as the pseudo-Gallics, Didier and Jean-Francois, Geordie standup merchant Ross Noble and Californian Arj Barker.

Ross Noble is a lugubrious bloke with a shock of curly hair, dead pan eyelids and a knack for veering off the point and returning to ground zero with languid ease. He works almost entirely from what's in the room, low-key stuff gently cajoled from the audience which he turns into the comedy version of balloon animals and tosses back. It's fun to watch such a confident performer and his routine is also refreshingly short on the usual emphatic expletives.

Arj Barker is a flashier character. Arriving on stage wrapped in an inexplicably funny blanket Barker parades his glam rocker tunic and flares. He has worked the Australian circuit for a number of highly successful seasons so his material effortlessly incorporates footy, media and politics. He sings the praises of factory outlets. The clothing is only the slightest bit imperfect he enthuses - like having a pocket for a collar - and then torturously attempts to pull out his car keys from the small of his back. He's a smart cookie with a laconic intelligence that lifts the audience even as he amuses us.

Stand-up is a ferociously difficult task for a performer and Noble and Barker are actors working the stage with only their instincts for improvisation and their considerable wit. Also seizing the moment at the Minkebar in Crippen Lane are fourth year students from the Flinders University Drama Centre working a friendly crowd with some very promising original material. The show is called Sit on My Fence and Tell Me That You're Ugly - a farrago of skits and monologues including Eva Lewkovicz, close to the bone as the New Age postfeminist, pierced and inscribed Vaginah, Caleb Lewis as a marvellously sinister clown-faced fireman let loose in a safety information program and Amber McMahon, weirdly hilarious as the serial fainter, the Monkey Woman and the whirling dervish expert with no expertise.

The Adelaide Cabaret Festival has achieved a number of objectives. It has created activity at a low point in the entertainment calendar and it has attracted appreciative audiences including many of those self-funded retirees we hear so much about these days. It also appears that there is money in the pot for another festival in two years time. That's good too. Maybe the organisers can use the extra lead time to plan some more intrepid material and look further afield. They might also get some advice on the subject of cabaret from Robyn Archer whose homage to Le Chat Noir, based around songs by French cabaret legend Aristide Bruant, was as entertaining as it was marvellously informative.

"Cabaret in May" The Adelaide Review, No.213, June, 2001, p.40.

Adelaide Theatre

Published: 2002-02-16 *Comedy · Adelaide Fringe*

15 February, 2002. Murray Bramwell

Partly It's About Love...Partly It's About Massacre by Fiona Sprott. Savage Wit and Vitalstatistix. The Bakehouse, Adelaide. Until 16 March. Tickets $18, $12 . Bookings FringeTIX (08) 8201 4567

Jezebel is back, not so much with a vengeance - although first-degree butter knife wounds are involved here - but with a story to tell about her heart, her hormones and the deep ambivalence of commitment. Jezebel is the creation of writer Fiona Sprott and actor Jacqueline Linke, these days known as Savage Wit, who took Often I Find When I am Naked, the first instalment of their continuing chronicle of a single thirty-something, to the Edinburgh Fringe, New York and London's West End. That was back around1999 when Jacqueline Linke picked up Best Actress Award at the Fringe and the show captured broken and twisted hearts wherever it played.

Partly its About Love is an even stronger text than its predecessor. There are still the clear connections to the fast one-liners of such spritzy comedies of neurotic urban interface as Seinfeld and Sex in the City, but here Sprott is confident in more than getting the laughs. Jezebel has become a more ferocious and complicated character than when she was so often naked. Now the desperation cuts deeper, the mood swings are more painful. There is plenty about love, but massacre might just tear it apart.

It is Jezebel's wedding and she, like the whole of the Bakehouse stage, is in scarlet. She is also carrying the blood-stained shirt of her betrothed Park Ranger, she can only rarely bring herself to call him by his name. It all started over the butter, about his constantly leaving the lid off... and the toast crumbs, and the worm farm. Why would he do that ? He isn't pressing charges, she tells us, which is nice.

Jacqueline Linke's Jezebel is splendidly poised between brittle comedy and the kind of anguished hyper-selfconsciousness that afflicts not just the young and the restless. Sprott's text is a dark meditation, especially on Valentine's Day, on the tyrannies of romance, the conspicuous consummation of the bourgeois wedding and the fragility of the everyday self. Linke is carried on the wings of a text, always strong, at times brilliant, Fiona Sprott now has an ear for dialogue as strong as her nose for the zeitgeist.

Vitalstatistix have taken their charter to promote new work for women playwrights into a new heartland. And they have added production values - from Khristina Totos' steadying direction and Ian Moorhead's deft on-stage keyboard soundscape to Sue Grey Gardner's sumptuously simple lighting. Regan Hay's smartly animated text projections also demonstrate that multimedia can contribute something more than just well-meaning powerpoint.

Partly It's About Love... is undoubtedly a hit of a 2002 Adelaide Fringe that has not yet begun. But, if Jezebel will pardon my French, she has the legs to take this comedy of neo-manners anywhere she wants it to go.

The Australian, February 16, 2002.

Rocky Horror and a Pack of Droll Models

Published: 2002-06-10 *Cabaret*

10 June, 2002 ADELAIDE Cabaret

Murray Bramwell

Sleepless Beauty Christa Hughes , Imogen Kelly, Ruby May Fox, Minx Contortionista. Michael Lira, Neill Duncan and Svetlana Bunic The Space, Adelaide Festival Centre until 9 June, 2002 The Studio, Sydney Opera House 12 - 22 June.

The Rat Pack Paul McDermott, Mikey Robbins and Sandman with the Club Luna Band Festival Theatre Adelaide Festival Centre June 8.

It may look like the blitz outside, but in every available performance space inside the Adelaide Festival Centre the joint is jumping. The major removal of the concrete crust that used to be the Centre's Plaza is still continuing but that hasn't deterred the second Adelaide Cabaret Festival with its seventeen day program featuring more than seventy different shows.

First up is Sleepless Beauty, a rocky horror featuring Christa Hughes, lead singer of indie band Machine Gun Fellatio. In this garish fairytale, the besieged blonde is insomniac and there isn't a prince in sight. The subtext , which is about as subtle as a bayonet through the seat of your chair, is the tyranny of body image and the depravity of the beauty industry. Not exactly hot news, but with her witty vocals and deadpan comedy Christa Hughes, in a size eight satin two-piece, gives the show plenty of helium.

Serenaded by retro-radio excerpts and the woozy tunes of an accordion, electronics and rhythm band, Hughes' Beauty swoons, squirms and submits, as she is surgically sculpted and ideologically oppressed. Meanwhile Imogen Kelly, in a pink wig and silvery second skin, shins up a red curtain for gymnastic rope tricks, Minx Contortionista, in dayglo and black, does minxy contortions and Ruby May Fox performs a wonderfully un-co fan dance. It still needs some narrative surgery and quite a lot more self-irony, but with its guignol manner and its mood swing band, this Sleepless Beauty is not only a hoot, it is trying to give the cabaret form a wake up call as well.

The Rat Pack might have trouble recognising themselves in the form of Paul McDermott, Mikey Robbins and Sandman but the Adelaide audience is in raptures anyway. The concept is tuxedos and martinis served to the front row, but the chaotic trio puts paid to all that. McDermott appears first, winding up the crowd like a mongoose with a jesuit education. Success on television has not meant he has forgotten the Doug Anthony days, even if he is crooning Fly Me to the Moon.

Mikey Robbins is the other good news for the week. Infinitely affable, scabrous towards McDermott and a roly model to all the XXL's in the world, he is a fat man with self-esteem. And then, appearing in a suit that someone refers to as penis pink, Sandman makes us all grateful for whatever social skills we already have. He is in top form. I am alive and fresh, he beams, and we believe him. He strums electric guitar while Mikey plays snare drum on a newspaper sticking like a sporran out of trousers. Later Robbins plays Love me Tender on a recorder in his right nostril. The man redefines versatility. McDermott sings like an angel at least three times, including a medley which includes I'm Going on Osama Holiday. Sinatra's Rat Pack couldn't hold a filter tip to these drolly native marsupials.

"Rocky Horror and a Pack of Droll Models" The Australian, June 10, 2002, p.15.

Cabaret Season

Published: 2002-07-01 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2002 Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

Despite the fact that the weather has been wintry and the Festival plaza still looks like the Blitz - the decrustation process apparently taking forever - the Centre itself hasn't looked so busy since... the last Adelaide Cabaret Festival.

As we don't need reminding, the Centre was not the focus for much of this year's Adelaide Festival and, otherwise, usage has been sporadic. So, with sixteen nights of programming - in the Space, the Festival Theatre, the Dunstan Playhouse, the Foyer, the Banquet Room, and even the Theatre stage - the joint has been jumping. Reports from the box office have been chirpy and plenty of events have been completely booked.

The audiences are, you might say, somewhat mature in years. Maybe they all the people who held back from the Festival in March, or maybe a program of accessible, often nostalgic, musical entertainment has finally smoked out those fifty-somethings and self-funded retirees who are an increasingly dominant part of this city's demographic. Whatever the reason, the grey punters came out in their enthusiastic numbers, spent at the bars and food outlets, and shook a tail feather or two with - among many others - Dennis Olsen, Jimmy Little, Combo Fiasco, and various simulacra of Peggy Lee, Edith Piaf, Lotte Lenya, and Dionne Warwick.

The opening weekend, however,is pitched at the younger crowd. Particularly with The Rat Pack, a feral vehicle for Good News Week favourites Paul McDermott, Mikey Robins and Sandman. McDermott comes on first, baiting the crowd with his usual ferocity. He's like a ferret with a Jesuit education and the perfect foil to the affable Mikey Robins. They are supposed to be standing round in tuxedos, mixing martinis and serving them to the front row but that idea goes out the window as they get straight into the fat and skinny jokes. They almost duet on The Lady is a Tramp but all semblance of order is lost when Sandman enters the fray, defying the dress code in a suit described by someone as penis pink.

The Rat Pack bears no relation to anyone connected to Oceans 11 but McDermott sneers, and sings sweetly, Robins plays Love Me Tender on a recorder up his nostril and Sandman fills his stomach with air and boofheads across the stage as Harry Highpants, Larry Lowpants and the Totally Red Cowboy. For an encore they appear in radiation suits and sing a medley including We're all Going on Osama Holiday. They sold out two shows and could have played for a week.

Sleepless Beauty is a new show featuring Machine Gun Fellatio singer Christa Hughes and a group of associates including Minx Contortionista, Ruby May Fox and Imogen Kelly. The concept is of the tyranny of body image and the cult of beauty. Not a new notion exactly and there is some irony that the show strongly features the perfect lineaments not only of Ms Hughes but her three alter egos as well. As Beauty stares into her mirror and battles insomnia and a variety of mindbending states, Ms Fox performs a wacky fan dance, Ms Contortionista, in black and dayglo, folds herself in half and Ms Kelly swings gymnastically on a curtain. Beauty contests take a thumping and cosmetic surgery also gets the knife. The satire is laboured and the show needs some fixing yet Hughes herself has plenty of wit and energy, and the band - Michael Lira, Neill Duncan and Svetlana Bunic - with a mix of electrics, percussion and accordion provides Sleeping Beauty with invention and pace.

No cabaret festival looking for a crooner need go further than Jimmy Little whose tribute to Nat King Cole is a very likable smoothie. Backed by the usual suspects - including his manager and drummer Buzz Bidstrup, Chris Bailey on bass and Richard Mellick on keyboards- Jimmy Little covers the classics- Paper Moon, Autumn Leaves, Around the World and Mona Lisa. His voice is not up to Nat's velvety best but then whose would be ? Cole's formidable career is all the more remarkable for its brevity- he was dead by the age of 48 having sold 15 million records. He faced frequent racial discrimination and was even beaten up when on tour in Alabama.

Jimmy Little has promised to tell us a bit about Nat King Cole, but, it turns out, he is too busy singing the songs instead. The band gets into the groove with some added vibraharp and the rhythm section is nicely damped down for Twilight Time, Unforgettable and, of course, Stardust. For an encore Jimmy adds his own astronomic Under the Milky Way and dials, once more again, that telephone to glory. It is a mellow set from a charming performer.

English singer Kate Dimbleby has two shows in the festival. The Making of Peggy Lee is her tribute to the astute performer and song writer who worked with Benny Goodman, successfully sued Walt Disney and raised temperatures around the world with Fever. Dimbleby, in a blonde wig, tells us the Miss Peggy story through each twist and turn of a fifty year career, but it is all a bit laboured. She is not comfortable in character and the show is trapped inside the theatrical artificiality of Lucy Powell's leaden script. Dimbleby sings well the r'n'b of Hallelujah I Love you So and the classic The Lady is a Tramp. Fever also sounds good, the bemused band - a piano trio led by Julian Hinton- rising to the occasion. But the show is low on energy and leaves us wondering - of the remarkable life of Peggy Lee - is that all there is, is that all there is ?

Music to Watch Boys By promised interesting repertoire but again proved Ms Dimbleby can sing but she can't carry a show. There is less structure but the frequent comments about men behaving badly are neither witty or all that convincing. And again the band looks bored and the singer unsure whether she's having fun with them or at their expense. There are fine moments - not the Elvis Presley stuff, unworthy of the King, but the excellent reading of Elvis Costello's I Want You, also Randy Newman's Political Science and Tom Waits' Swordfishtrombones. But they don't add up to a show and an opportunity to update the cabaret format with more contemporary material is lost.

It takes Robyn Archer to remind us - with her New York Gig, accompanied by pianist Paul Grabowski - just what cabaret is and can be. Archer is not only a consummate performer, she presents her material with a splendid mix of enthusiasm and erudition. From the opener, What Keeps Mankind Alive from Brecht and Weill's Threepenny Opera through to the Bilbao Song for the second encore, Robyn Archer effortlessly holds her audience. She has a natural manner, which is most refreshing after two weeks of Piaffing and Peggying, and she gives us cabaret music in the present tense, not in some badly staged demimonde of scarlet and gauloise affectation.

Archer is simply the best Brecht interpreter around - as the Barbara Song and the Cannon Song amply illustrate. She can navigate the intricacies of Eisler's melodies, can sing French café songs and, when she needs more, she also loves to yodel. Grabowsky has a particularly nice touch with the jazzier material and These Are The Days , their tribute to September 11 - performed at BAM in New York just a few days after the event - is a highpoint.

The Adelaide Review, No. 226, July, 2002.

Adelaide Cabaret

Published: 2003-06-16 *Cabaret*

16/17 June, 2003 Murray Bramwell

All Het Up Banquet Room Adelaide Festival Centre until 14 June

Hymne a Piaf Caroline Nim Space Theatre Adelaide Festival Centre until 15 June

The Adelaide Cabaret Festival still has a week to go and the newly refitted Festival Centre is jumping - as well it might hosting 400 artists and 152 performances over just seventeen nights. With a program including crooners, comics, smooth jazz exponents, a mind reader, even a techno-haka group, the Festival Centre hasn't been such a hub of activity since... the last Cabaret Festival.

Among the recent highlights is All Het Up, a bijou musical composed by Fiona Horn and John Horn wittily assisted in book and lyrics by Guy Rundle. The subject is the often-visited subject of singles life and the excruciations of love, lust and courtship. Stylishly directed by Wayne Hope and driven by performers Jane Badler, Fiona Thorn, Colin Lane and Jeremy Stanford, with commentary and trumpet from Patrick Cronin, All Het Up, as its quaintly archaic title suggests, is nicely offbeat and refreshingly understated.

From the opening song, with its built-in mobile phone warning, to vignettes of urban encounter in bars, restaturants, footy matches and under the percale, All Het Up reminds us of the unforgiving etiquette of bourgeois romance. Rundle and the Thorns have a keen ear for buzzwords and the cliches of the interior life - as when one character sings that, despite Dr Phil and her other gurus, in the face of her new lover she is - self-helpless. Attractively local in its references and judicious in its cruelty, All Het Up is clever, elegantly presented and a reminder that sex in the city is a funny business.

Parisian singer Caroline Nim returns to the Cabaret Festival with Hymne a Piaf, a tribute to Edith Piaf, the urchin chanteuse who re-defined Paris and was the transAtlantic hit of the late 1940s. Piaf, so distinctive in her vocal style and her tragic vulnerability, is in many ways a difficult focus for a solo performer. Caroline Nim wisely avoids any attempt at impersonation - especially since she is somewhat taller than a sparrow and has plenty of talent of her own to offer.

Accompanied by Sean Hargreaves on keyboards and bassist Jerome Davies, Nin surveys Piaf's best known songs - Les Amants du Jour, La Vie en Rose and Mon Dieu with extended - perhaps, too much so- introductions and biographical background for L'Accordioniste and Milord. By providing useful English translations Caroline Nim reminds us how much better Piaf sounds in French. With her strong and accomplished vocals Caroline Nim serves her subject well - Edith Piaf, I am sure, would have no regrets. Scarlet Stories, Caroline Nim's second show with material by Weill, Jacques Brel and others opens this week.

"The funny business of sex in the city" The Australian, June 16, 2003, p.7.

Repressed Memory

Published: 2003-07-01 *Comedy*

Back to My Roots and Other Suckers Barry Humphries Her Majesty's

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

Barry Humphries is not only back to his roots but also quite a few of his old tricks. Playing to full houses for a short season at Her Majesty's, Humphries has rounded up the usual suspects for our delectation and occasional panic. These now include somebody called Barry Humphries. Not the Barry Humphries I shouldn't think, but a simulacrum who, last time around, appeared from a camphor box full of Proustian prompts, and this time introduces a Dunnathon - old Super8 - and almost suppurating - home movies of Glen Iris in 1949. Alf Dunn, Humphries would have us believe, was a neighbour of his family and his films chronicle, in long Warhol-esque wide-shot, primary school sports days, social gatherings, even the end of year party. That's me as a rather young Father Christmas, Humphries informs us, and we are inclined to believe him.

Back to the roots for Humphries, and much of his audience, means back to suburban memory- of brand names, street names and the sounds and mnemonic smells of Times Past. These times, when they constituted the Present for Barry Humphries as a young and impatient bohemian, signified a stultifying world of trivia and small-minded gentility. It was the world of his parents and part of the dreary trade-off for post-war prosperity. Here was the original version of Relaxed and Comfortable - Edna, Sandy and the Herald waiting on the front lawn.

But there are also others who drag the past resolutely into the future. Take Sir Les Patterson for instance. Although most of us would rather not. This drunken, priapic praiser of his own past is the cultural attache for Misrule and a friend to the Arts, if he is to be taken on his own account. Les is Humphries' most dangerous creation. His cheerful bigotry is more a part of Humphries' satiric strategy than convivial comedy but quite a few in the audience nevertheless take his cue to chortle heartlessly at easy targets. It is disconcerting to hear such unreconstructed hilarity but, as Les would be the first to tell you, comedy alas is not a precision tool.

Barry Humphries regularly likes to have a swipe or two at the corporate types, as he describes them. Last time it was an IOC hanger-on . This time Owen Steele is a bland, self-serving CEO tiptoeing through a general meeting of peeved shareholders. It is a point well made but Humphries has no particular intensity for his subject and there is less of the usual heat-seeking ruthlessness in it all.

The Sandy Stone soliloquy at the end of the first half is, by contrast, his most theatrical. Sandy is swept out in a spray of white light and fog - his throne a Genoa velvet armchair piled on a stack of hard rubbish waiting on the ghostly median strip at Gallipoli Crescent for the looters in utes to come by. Sandy is long dead now but his wraith meditates in a slightly bewildered way about the passing of what once was. His widow Beryl has done her dough on HIH shares and life in Surfers is not looking so good for her after all. Also, the site of Sandy's house, having already made way for a supermarket, is now being cleared again for a series of Tuscan style town houses. Sandy ruminates on the increasing rarity of the fourteen essential oils in Rexona soap and the availability of the Incontinence Helpline. Sandy is Humphries' most dreamy character whose dithery otherworldliness seems to capture more - of both his creator and the ageing audience - each time he is wheeled out for a nice night's entertainment.

The appearance of Dame Edna, however, is the real centre of Humphries' show. Flanked by the Ednaettes, she offers sizzling burlesque. The front rows cower and Edna surveys her quarry like a hawk looking for fieldmice. I don't pick on people, she whinnies triumphantly, I empower them. This time she empowers a sampling of women - one a public servant, whose occupation raises compulsive laughter for an audience increasingly hysterical and likely to sacrifice members of their own family to escape or desperately mollify the rampaging Edna. A young couple are dragged on stage while Edna endeavours to salvage what she presumes to be their wrecked marriage. The bride's father is also brought on for additional humiliation.

Edna then assembles the luckless draftees to perform excerpts of volume two of her autobiography, and like the good sports people are in impossible situations, they neither attempt to be funnier than permitted nor run screaming to an exit which is probably the sane thing to do. Having despatched her cast, Edna muses yet again upon her celebrity and her underachieving family. It is familiar territory but Humphries has, as ever, a keen eye for the latest bogusness and an ear for the most recently excruciating jargon.

Then, as tradition requires, Dame Edna sings a song, dances a jig and slings as many gladiolus plumes as she can to the furthest corners of the theatre. This is her benediction and her final fling as theatrical dominatrix. You adore me - and I quite like you, she crows superciliously and, one suspects, a little more of Mr Humphries appears from behind the mask. He is, however, an extraordinary presence.

There are few performers anywhere who can single-handedly animate a stage the way Barry Humphries can. And Edna, in particular, is a force of nature. She may not have come back to her roots - neither she nor Barry Humphries have the slightest interest in, or notion of, contemporary Australia - but she knows the art of the pinch and the punch and the Chinese burn. Which must mean we are her other suckers - queueing up in the best tradition of comedy to be railed against and humiliated, and then to be handed a gladiolus, this mad version of a vertical garland, as consolation for our tears.

"Repressed Memory" The Adelaide Review, No.238, July, 2003, p.20.

Comedy Notes

Published: 2004-03-01 *Comedy · Adelaide Fringe*

Adelaide Fringe March 2004

Murray Bramwell

There is nothing like a visit to a psychic to give your brain a tweak and that is exactly what Michael Santos is here to do. Or maybe he will just do your head in. With Sidekick Bernard and not-very-subtle audience plant, Raymond, Santos (aka David Sant) is the Mindbender, reaching into the audience to tell us - Raymond's radio mike permitting - our names, addresses and our deepest thoughts. It is hilariously cheesy with mime gags, palm readings, lounge music and big jewellery.

However, when Michael accidentally crosses over in a heart-stopping stunt gone horribly wrong, he is guided back by angels and for a short time now has... real powers. He can guess words taken at random from books, do card tricks - is this guy for real ? In the end he can't even stay in his chair despite his handcuffs. Peepolykus have a great little show under the Umbrella Revolution. And don't forget to look out for the bit about Bonko, the gypsy bear.

Dave Hughes' career might be High Voltage with his TV, radio and live appearances but thankfully his stand-up persona is still the same laconic, socially disreputable slacker from Warnoombool who first played the Fringe as an unknown comic six years ago.

Hughes lays out his jokes like penny bangers with long fuses. He has a soporific drawl and a querulous manner - what's that all about ? he intones conspiratorially. The heat, water restrictions, Lleyton, Adelaide as a city, Guy Sebastian, collecting trolleys for Coles, his new found celebrity, girls. Standard stuff apparently, but Hughes makes seamless comedy with his endearing scepticism and his underdog intelligence. No wonder an extra show has been added on 6 March. His comedy is a sure thing.

Commissioned by The Adelaide Review but not published

Long cool drink from Brels' well

Published: 2004-06-15 *Cabaret*

13 June Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2004 Cabaret

Murray Bramwell

The Songs of Jacques Brel Mich en Scene

Space Theatre, Adelaide Festival Centre. 11 June Until 17 June. Bookings BASS 131 246 Tickets $ 34 - $ 40

Farewell Concert Combo Fiasco

Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre. 11 June.

With 26 performances of its two week program already sold out, the Adelaide Cabaret Festival is bringing a winter boost to the often dark Festival Centre. The opening weekend alone has some 11,000 punters in every nook and cranny of the building, eagerly grooving on musical styles from smooth soul, hip Cuban, and retro Broadway to contemporary Australian and French boulevard ballads.

Performing in Australia for the first time is the excellent Mich en Scene, a cool young Belgian quartet whose deft and understated readings of chansonnier, Jacques Brel bring freshness to an oeuvre that has been variously looted in the forty or so years since Brel first enchanted his Paris audiences. Led by stylish singer Micheline Van Hautem, Mich en Scene give us Brel Unplugged with Frederick Caelen nimble on accordion and minimalist piano, bassist Bob Wisselink and Frank de Klerk on Spanish guitar.

It is a well judged program - Les Marquises, fluently phrased by Van Hautem to just a garnish of bass and accordion, and the tender La Chanson des Vieux Amants, capturing the pathos of the song without sentiment. And the big guns of the canon are here - Mathilde, Ne Me Quitte Pas, sung in the Shuman translation, and the gamy Amsterdam. But the highlight is the encore, Voir un Ami Pleurer, sung without microphone with the group serenading us from the edge of the stage. It is what Brel should be and often isn't - subtle, intelligent, and completely captivating. Mich en Scene also have a second show next weekend, Madame, a tribute to Sarah Vaughan, Piaf and Dietrich. Don't miss them, they're brel-liant.

After eleven years, local favourites Combo Fiasco are calling it a day with two farewell nights of highlights from their wide range of music theatre and Broadway favourites. Fiasco in name only, they are a slick outfit, with smooth harmony and hair trigger timing. The trio, Shaun Murphy, Tony McGill and Charmaine McClements, joined in the second half by the Cat Scratch Orchestra, belt out a mix of standards, parodies and novelties. All expertly delivered, some work better than others - McClements' excruciating pitch in I'm on the Stage is a hoot, as is McGill's The Contempt Beneath my Feet. There are contributions also from Harry Warren, Peter Allen, Fats Waller - and Sweet Georgia Brown. The Combo begins with Sentimental Journey, so where else to finish but Over the Rainbow ? Thanks for all the fiasco.

"Long cool drink from Brels' well" The Australian , June 15, 2004, p.14.

Cabaret Funnies

Published: 2004-07-01 *Cabaret*

Kit and The Widow Banquet Room

Peter Berner 'Live' Dunstan Playhouse

Greg Fleet Radioville : Population 1 Dunstan Playhouse

Murray Bramwell

I can understand why baritone Kit Hesketh-Harvey is Kit, but why is pianist Richard Sisson the Widow ? These and other questions are not answered in the duo's song and satire show but with its sleek, fast-paced tux-and-tails camp, you don't even think to ask. No cow is too sacred, no area too no-go for these purveyors of delectable derision. We get the Cuban treatment with Guantanamo Bay, where the rules are so last week, while for Presidents Blair and Bush, the 'truth' goes marching on.

Percy Grainger gets a lashing in his English country garden and Edith Piaf some gallic sauce - they are soft targets perhaps, but the dash of their lyrics and the virtuosity of rhyme is often startling. Gays in the clergy receive some back-handed support with a scathing musical setting of the wisdom of Leviticus, then it is back to cooking with Nighella and her bon appe-tits.

Kit and the Widow are smutty and smart, topical and very tight. Sex toys, laptops, Joan Rivers' plastic surgery are all fair game, as is The Leopard, a straight song about Hesketh-Harvey's native Malawi. And, after eviscerating Steve Irwin with new lyrics to I Will Survive, Wit and the Kiddo have us community singing a curry house menu to a chorus from Turandot. It is one crowded hour.

The Cabaret Festival has programmed a range of Australian stand-ups from the Fringe circuit. Some, such as Flacco and Sandman, Mary G and Lano and Woodley are inconveniently after our deadline but familiar faces Peter Berner and Greg Fleet have paraded their rumpled wares.

I have been following Greg Fleet's particular brand of comic confession since his Thai Die days and marvel at his willingness to accentuate the uncomfortable, His Radioville show examines another rich vein, if one may so tasteless. But Fleety's first night is pretty ragged. The idea is great - a journey to the lower depths of commercial radio and an exploration of its verbal thuggery. However, the show rambles, the frame narrative at the Pearly Gates is wordy and some of the absurdist loops wear thin. But that's Greg Fleet, you take the lumps with the laughs - and he does have a great voice for radio.

Peter Berner is a much more careful operator but his show is a surprise. After his TV work I expected much more party political topicality but while he deals with the general paranoia of 9/11 and the Terror, his approach is idiosyncratic and obsessionally detailed. Many comics have done airline humour - the safety warnings, the seat belt requirements and so on - but Berner macabrely and systematically does them to death. It is clever and his persona is often interestingly unsympathetic.

"Purveyors of delectable derision" The Adelaide Review No. 250, July, 2004, p.30.

The Power of Two

Published: 2005-04-01 *Comedy*

The Pleasure of Their Company

Shaun Micallef and Glynn Nicholas

The Arts Theatre

Murray Bramwell

There have been plenty of comedy double acts in recent times - HG and Roy, John Clarke and Bryan Dawe, Mick Molloy and Tony Martin, to name just a few. But, on first glance, Glynn Nicholas and Shaun Micallef seem an unlikely combination. For a start, Nicholas has forged a very successful career as a solo comic with a memorable range of signature characters and impressive physical skills. Shaun Micallef, on the other hand, has for some time featured in television - in sketch comedy, the sitcom *Welcher and Welcher* and with a Tonight Show whose demise, many thought, had more to do with ratings panic than any lack of merit.

For two such high profile comics, with quite divergent careers, to collaborate may come as a surprise but, if *The Pleasure of Their Company* is any indication, the idea is an inspired one. Co-written by the performers, it has Nicholas and Micallef each doing what they do best, as well as combining for some quite outstanding sketch material. From the opening minutes it is clear that each is playing to his strengths - Nicholas providing an understated. almost straight, role while Micallef creates the comic turbulence. It is Nicholas, dapper in his tux, who is ready to start the show while Micallef blows in, late for his cue and apparently bewildered in front of an audience which he then turns on with almost Cleese-like disdain.

After a ferocious parody of *Blowin in the Wind*, with Nicholas on guitar and Micallef on eyebrows, the latter returns for a solo turn as the English actor Nigel String. Like the best of Micallef's comedy, it takes his matinee good looks and mellifluous voice and unravels into patent absurdity as he introduces a prompt who is not in the wings after all, a childhood devotion to Black Beauty, recollections of Mae West and a demonstration of his prowess in "the Scottish play" - as one of the trees in Burnham Wood.

It is witty stuff which is neatly matched by Nicholas in his mischievous alias Pate Biscuit. For many, the satiric connection is now lost\` but like Peter Sellers' Aunty Rotter, she has become an archetype. With her whim of iron, Ms Biscuit, in black wig and floral dress, has the audience on its feet doing contorted pilates exercises, while the very fetching accompanist, Ms Carrie Barr, is forced to perform with her head in a bag to minimise any rivalry with the star. Another Nicholas favourite, Sergeant Smith - the not very long arm but very large girth, of the law - is hilariously reprised (complete with his trademark "-ings") and reprimanded by Micallef as a starchy senior officer

Glynn Nicholas's flair for working a crowd is evident in several extended mime improvs - one where he plays waiter to a young woman from the audience and another where he directs, using only kazoo noises, three more "volunteers" in an imaginary flea circus. It is deft comedy, cool and carefully nuanced. As are two of the wittiest sketches - when Lou Gehrig goes to the doctor to discover he has his own disease and the Peter Cook and Dudley Moore-style dialogue of the elderly pensioner father (played with shameless pathos by Nicholas) being berated by his well-to-do lawyer son (Micallef at his swinish best)

After a seemingly endless succession of dishevelled, hit-and-miss, stand-up merchants, the carefully crafted theatrics and often brilliant scripting of *The Pleasure of Their Company* is a welcome departure for Australian comedy. It is rare to see two performers work so well for combined comic effect - when Micallef appears as the preposterous Milo singing, Quazimodo-like, choruses of *Something Stupid*, Nicholas is the unflappable foil, as he is in the barbershop mime where Micalleff causes even more thespian mayhem.

This show has, so far, only played Adelaide and Perth. It deserves a much wider audience and I hope it finds it. Not only would they, like us, greatly enjoy the pleasure of their company, they would see that Glynn Nicholas and Shaun Micallef seem to be having an excellent time themselves.

"The Power of Two Funny Men" The Adelaide Review, No. 265, April 1, 2005, p.19.

Top drawer program

Published: 2005-06-13 *Cabaret*

12 June Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2005

Cabaret

Murray Bramwell

I Protest! Robyn Archer, Paul Grabowsky and the Agitators Space Theatre, Adelaide Festival Centre. 10 June

Paul Kelly A-Z 10 June Space Theatre Until 15 June. Bookings BASS 131 246 Tickets $ 42 - $ 50

Australia's Leading Ladies Festival Theatre, Adelaide Festival Centre. 11 June.

It must be a portent that Adelaide's drought broke the same day that the fifth Cabaret Festival opened. It is clear that this annual fixture brings a much-needed boost to the Festival Centre's winter trading. With 22 performances of its two week program already sold out, the Adelaide Cabaret Festival is bringing enthusiastic audiences in from their lounge rooms for a lively program of song, dance, retro and comedy. And, while there is a broad mix, it is evident that the fifty-plus age group is very well represented. The Cabaret Festival has definitely captured the grey - no, make that - the silver dollar.

Frequent collaborators Robyn Archer and Paul Grabowsky are among the openers with I Protest! - a fistful of songs by Bert Brecht and Bob Dylan along with several compositions of their own. After a hesitant reading of Dylan's Chimes of Freedom, Archer, with the Agitators, a six-piece outfit including cello, horns and accordion, hits her excellent stride with Brecht's All of Us or None, Grabowsky and the band moving through Hans Eisler's musical gear changes with alacrity.

Quoting current wealth statistics from BRW, Archer reminds us of the timeliness of Song of the Moldau and takes up a megaphone for The Death of Dialectic, her own talkback to Talkback. Dirt, her ode to smear and spin, fits like a glove to Grabowsky's swing-blues tune. The Dylan settings are more variable - Times They Are a-Changing is sung more in sorrow than certainty and Bob Dylan's Dream, is over-decorated in Grabowsky's intricate arrangement. Masters of War with its locomotive rhythm is a highpoint but also a melancholy reminder, with Adelaide's recent defence contracts, that the themes of I Protest! are still blowin' in the wind.

Paul Kelly's great bands, from the Dots to the Boon Companions, have always served his music, but his solo show, A-Z, is the first in years to showcase his splendid lyrics. Over five nights and ninety nine songs, Kelly is giving audiences a rare chance to hear the sweep and intricacy of his work. On Friday he just made it to D - but the ABC of Paul Kelly is enough to demonstrate that he is one of the country's leading poets with an eye for detail that rivals Bruce Dawe and a gift for balladry that is as memorable, for his generation, as Paterson and Slim Dusty.

With simple, often rudimentary, guitar Kelly dips into his tucker bag - the domestic portrait of Before the Old Man Died, the frank eroticism of Blush, the tall tale of Bradman and - its unsettling lyric set to a peerless tune - Careless. Adelaide plays first in the alphabet and the encores feature the snazzy Curly Red and Deeper Water. But, for me, the highlight is his perfect kodachrome of the Boxing Day Test - Behind the Bowler's Arm. Paul Kelly's week at the Cabaret Festival is already a highlight.

Australia's Leading Ladies reminds us of the depth in the batting in our music theatre. Any one of these extraordinary talents is a star performer but combined they are a supergroup. Supported by the nimble Adelaide Art Orchestra this survey of Broadway shows ancient and postmodern, is engagingly narrated by Toni Lamond and full of delights and blue notes. There are so many wonders here - Judi Connelli's Some People from Gypsy , Rhonda Burchmore dancing Ziegfeld and Shaking the Blues Away, Marina Prior and Sharon Millerchip's duet from West Side Story, Geraldine Turner as Nancy in Oliver, Anne Wood singing Abba and Lamond herself reminding us, as the next fortnight surely will, that there is No Business like Show Business.

"Top drawer program" The Australian, June 13, 2005, p.16.

Cabaret Funnies - Fond and Furious

Published: 2005-07-08 *Cabaret*

iBob Bob Downe

We Don't have Husbands The Kransky Sisters

The Big Con Max Gillies and Eddie Perfect

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2005 Festival Centre

Murray Bramwell

The Adelaide Cabaret Festival, in part, arose from the need to separate from the avalanche of stand-up comedy that dominates the Fringe. However, there has been no shortage of funny business in the Festival Centre recently in a program that has included the CNNNN jokers, Sandman and Flacco, Wil Anderson - and Bob Downe.

Even after twenty one years, it seems, you can't keep an irrepressible man down. Bob Downe, the acrylic and polyester alter ego of Mark Trevorrow, has - you might say - come of age. But he hasn't quite arrived either because he belongs in a long and hilarious line of repressed entertainers, those, like Norman Gunston, whose vaulting ambitious outweigh their talents, and whose geek-detectors are permanently switched off.

Brilliantly sending up the iPod craze (and ever going back to the future that is the seventies) Bob's promo photo sports an oversize white beatbox complete with earmuff headphones. On stage he is elegant in neckerchief, navy blazer and houndstooth checks. A model of fine grooming, Mr Downe's hair is so perfect it is hard to believe it is real. As for his fabulous vocals, bringing alive such classics as I Can't Take My Eyes off You, Something Stupid and Love is in the Air, he uncannily conjures up the big cheeses of the 1970s - Manilow, Tony Orlando and John Paul Young. He even holds his own with a real karaoke star, Australian Idol finalist Emelia Rusciano who plays Barbra to his Neil for You Don't Bring Me Flowers.

Bob shows his family photo albums and shares memories of his 21 year show biz career while adoring fans singalong to their favourites. Bob does interviews, receives video tributes from Rove, Bert and Kerri-Anne, repeatedly demonstrates his convulsive dance moves and introduces a kind of crooning that might be called tooth singing. It is a performance that must be seen to be believed, Mr Downe has made recycling into an art form.

Much like the Kransky Sisters from Esk in Queensland who have also brought a special kind of music to the Cabaret Festival. With their matching black hair and spotted blouses, Mourne, Eva and Arva (aka Annie Lee, Christine Johnston and Michele Watt) unpack a shopping trolley full of instruments - tuba, reed organ, guitar and - a sight for the eyes - a carpenter's saw and bow. The sisters bring rich anecdotes from Esk, of its many retail amenities and the newsagent magazines they like to read.

As they play an eclectic range of songs - We Don't Need No Education, Pretty Woman, Nutbush City Limits and others - we glimpse life's disappointments for the Kranskys, especially for Arva, all but ostracised by her half-sisters, although Eva noticeably perked up when Neil, a guest from the audience, joined the trio to play the triangle. They have an admirably demure manner, these sisters, and a deadpan approach to their music and humour that has the audience in almost continuous, if subdued, mirth.

The Big Con, the newest show from Max Gillies, writer Guy Rundle, and performer Eddie Perfect is a very different cup of teehee. Reminding us that satire without the balm of playful comedy can sometimes be an abrasive experience, Gillies and Perfect deliver a double-barrelled report from their CIA - the Centre for Independent Analysis. Primed by Eddie Perfect at the piano, belting out the show's theme song, we turn to a sequence of Gillies targets. Alan Jones opens the batting and gets a belting, Bob Carr appears by video link - Roman in pose and classical in erudition, David Flint and Arnold the Governator also follow. Eddie comes out punching with a song on gay marriage that is as graphic as it is witty while Gillies returns as Rupert Murdoch in Chinese mode, the revisionist historian Keith Windschuttle and a globally challenged Alexander Downer.

To its credit the somewhat elderly audience does not, at the interval, take to its collective bath chair and escape. Instead, Max does Bush and Blair, and Eddie a song sardonically titled You are so September 10. The refugee issue is seriously lampooned by Gillies as a ghoulishly mottled Phillip Ruddock and Amanda Vanstone, sprawled on the piano singing about Amandatory Detention. Guy Rundle's text is both withering and funny, Gillies' delivery and versatility as virtuosic as ever. And Eddie Perfect is a revelation - like Joe Jackson playing Tom Lehrer with a slap of Brett Easton Ellis thrown in. Max Gillies presents an acerbic portrait of the PM, but Perfect, blithely warbling a song called John Howard's Bitches, ratchets up the danger and confrontation even further. Gillies has done a brave thing teaming up with Angry Eddie, but he also knows that satire can never set up its tent where there is no chance of a storm.

"Cabaret Funnies – Fond and Furious" The Adelaide Review, No.272, July 8, 2005, p.23.

Cabaret Festival 2006

Published: 2006-06-19 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival Adelaide Festival Centre Until June 24.

Here's to the Ladies Christine Andreas Festival Centre Stage June 13.

Camille La Fille du Cirque Space June 13.

Waterloo Sunset Barb Jungr Banquet Room June 14.

Keating ! Casey Bennetto and the Drowsy Drivers Space June 15

Tina C in Manifesto Christopher Green Banquet Room June 14. Tickets : $25- $30 Bookings BASS 131 246 Until June 24.

Murray Bramwell

It's wintertime and the living is easy. The Adelaide Cabaret Festival heads into its final week and, despite some frosty June nights, is full of beans. Houses are packed and there is plenty on offer. Once again, the festival has attracted the lucrative grey dollar as early boomers and perky retirees revisit the lounge grooves of the late fifties and sixties, alongside some new and subversive inroads on the genre. This cabaret event is more a twilight than a late night affair, with shows starting early and most over by ten thirty, but this only seems to ensure that, in its sixth year, the festival has found its formula just as it has found its audience.

Among the pleasures in recent days, is Here's to the Ladies, a bouquet of Broadway favourites presented by US soprano Christine Andreas. Accompanied suavely on piano by her husband, the composer Martin Silvestri, Andreas, in excellent voice, opens with a flawless reading of Fly Me to the Moon - and it is all up from there. Songs from the great – Merman, Gertrude Lawrence, Streisand, Helen Morgan – are included. But it is the bell-like voice of Julie Andrews, which Christine Andreas's much resembles, that is most prominent. When she gets to My Fair Lady, the appreciative audience could have listened, if not danced, all night.

There is always a creative tension in the Cabaret Festival between the virtuoso Broadway stylists and grungy neo-Weimar acts like Camille. Part-French, part Irish, she is a gamey mix of bar-room Brel and the Pogues. In harridan scarlet and black, Camille, with a five piece band and a bottle of Yalumba, opens with Nick Cave's sardonic God is in the House. Jacques Brel's Amsterdam and Song for Old Lovers get some tough love, but Cave's The Mercy Seat is the electrifying highlight as Camille moves from song to song like an open razor.

Barb Jungr is another excellent chanteuse whose second show, Waterloo Sunset, follows the first weekend's Bob Dylan tribute set. With songs by Leon Russell, Elvis Costello, the Everly Brothers and, of course, the inestimable Ray Davies, it is still the Barb Dylan songs which stand out – most notably the slow ballad deconstruction of Like a Rolling Stone. Matthew Carey, at the piano, tags her inventive vocals with apparent ease as Jungr, with wit and intelligence, maps out some very original territory of her own.

Also a lady of the cabaret is Tina C (that's for Tennessee, yo'all) the very altered ego of UK scriptwriter and character performer, Christopher Green, who has waxed and blushed to prepare Tina for her "anti-anti American tour". This is a three flag circus of patriotic country music as Tina, in her camouflage mini skirt and Stetson, sings from her latest album, Scars and Stripes. I can smell the love in the room Adell-aide, she purrs, as she sets us straight – and very right – on Irack and much else. It is a one joke show with some familiar targets, but with her long legs and red, white and,often, blue satire, Tina carries it confrontingly in her stride.

Another colossus under scrutiny is "the Man, the ruler of the land", the Placido Domingo of nineties politics – Keating ! In one fast hour, writer and director, Casey Bennetto and his band, the Drowsy Drivers, re-tell the rise and demise of Paul Keating (a needle-sharp Mike McLeish) as he meets his rivals – Hawke, Newson, Howard – and the ticking clocks of his impatient ambition. The music, spanning reggae, rap, soul and torch ballad, is far from drowsy and the lyrics – sharp, funny and for many, dreaming of a different light on the hill, unexpectedly poignant. Keating! as the publicity spiel reminds us, is a beautiful (and very inventive) set of numbers.

The Australian, June 19, 2006.

Cabaret Funnies with a Cutting Edge

Published: 2006-06-30 *Cabaret*

Tina C in Manifesto Christopher Green

Double Exposure Marty Murphy and Flacco

Keating ! Casey Bennetto and the Drowsy Drivers Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2006 Festival Centre

Murray Bramwell

There have been many snazzy ladies in the Cabaret Festival but none quite like Tina C. She is the leggy creation of the surprisingly leggy Christopher Green, a UK actor and comedy scriptwriter who has waxed and wigged and put a ten gallon hat on the newest ultra-patriotic queen of country music. Tina C, (that's short for Tennessee) sings from her newest CD, Scars and Stripes, and her mission, with her "anti-anti-American" goodwill tour, is to be a poster girl for democracy. There are some familiar targets here and it is essentially a one-joke show. But it is a good joke and a timely one. After a rap version of Waltzing Matilda, and a Hendrix-like Advance Australia Fair, Tina sets us very right on misunderstood US foreign policy – especially I-rack - and confides her star spangled plan to run for President. Tina is red, white, very blue, funny - and a credit to her home town of Open Throat Holler.

The funny stuff in the festival has been well-chosen. Double Exposure, a revival of a Sydney show from 2004, brings the other-worldly talents of Marty Murphy and Paul J. Livingston, aka Flacco, in a double feature of fastidiously prepared, low-key amusement to tickle hitherto unexplored parts of the frontal lobe. Murphy's Happy and Clean is a meticulously told shaggy turkey story about how he became a B-grade movie director. He does the many voices, he captures some old style Sydney dialect and, most of all, keeps his nerve with comedy that is as fragile as it is diverting.

Flacco is, of course, the master of this eggshell humour and has refined it over more than twenty years. His deadpan makes everyone else look hyperactive and his timing is nano-second perfect. In his striped frock coat, and with his single strand comb-forward, he presents his alabaster pate ("I'm not bald, I'm deciduous") for general scrutiny. Who knows what goes on inside his intricate mind but for the rest of us Flacco is intent on Releasing the Imbecile Within.

It is a brilliant way of satirizing everything from multi-mediocre personalities to the cult of Ikea. His wordplay is as fevered as ever, as he describes his semiopathy (inability to comprehend signs), does ludicrous Alfred Hitchcock impersonations and occasionally, as he puts it, goes below the plimsoll line of comedy, only to remind us how bankrupt so much effing and blinding stand-up is, compared to Flacco's gem-like flame.

Keating! - the musical, has been one of the true highlights of the festival season. Delivered in one crowded hour of reggae, rap, soul and power ballad, Casey Bennetto and the Drowsy Drivers re-chart the comet-like trajectory of the Placido Domingo of Nineties politics. Keating! is witty in its inferences and compact in it chronology. All the big moments are recalled – the Kirribilli agreement with Bob, the debate with Hewson, the incrementally creeping progress of Howard, the Kernot-Evans affair, the final isolation of the Medici One. Bennetto's lyrics are funny but also tinged with admiration and a sense of what might have been. The band is crisp and energetic and Mike McLeish is slim-hipped and razor sharp as Keating. Bennetto plays the serial rivals with vaudeville verve, but for his eponymous hero he allows a kind of grandeur - and one more chance to imagine a different light on the hill.

"From Tina C to Special K" The Adelaide Review, No.295, June 30, 2006, p.16.

Outside the Square

Published: 2007-06-19 *Cabaret*

Gyan and Leunig: Billy the Rabbit Dunstan Playhouse June 10.

Point Blank Dave Graney JB Room June 13

Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word Tina C and Auriel Andrew Banquet Room June 14

Shane Warne: The Musical by Eddie Perfect Dunstan Playhouse June 17.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2007 Adelaide Festival Centre

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

It is wintertime and the living is again easy at the re-activated Festival Centre. Despite the nippy nights, devotees of the cabaret form - and its various mutations and look-alikes - are filling, not only the Playhouse and Space, but all the Centre's nooks, crannies, foyers, stages and JB rooms that have been turned over to performance. Again, director Julia Holt has assembled a diverse program – to meet the tastes of the older audiences who so conspicuously and enthusiastically attend, as well to signal the new directions and old iconoclasm that the term cabaret also encompasses.

There have been murmurings in the recent past that the festival has become too much of a broad church and that this comedy, or that contemporary music performance, is beyond the Weimar or New York pale. But the tendency to err on the inclusive has proven not only human but on occasions, divine. Take the Sunday afternoon performance by Issa (formerly known as Jane Siberry) for example.

Or, on the first weekend of the festival, another first-name-only singer – Gyan, whose show Billy the Rabbit, based on the poems, prayers and ditties of Michael Leunig proved to be an unexpected delight. Unexpected, in that Leunig, for all his recent political ferocity, has a whimsicality which can be mistaken for fey. The wrong collaborator could well have tilted that delicate balance. Instead the robust, melodic versatility of Gyan, and a very capable band of musicians, makes for a lively mix.

While Gyan and her associates - including well-known violinist Cleis Pearce, Simon Greaves on guitar and James Cruickshank (on just about everything) -perform, the artist draws his inimitable, tendril figures of hope and melancholy on a sketchpad projected on to a large screen. The effect is almost inexplicably magical as Leunig, a skilled public presenter, paces his drawings in easy harmony with Gyan's nicely chosen texts – of The Shadow Minister for Joy, Summer Palace, Precious Vote, Owed to Autumn and, of course, bedecked in actual leaves and flowers, Billy, the late lamented rabbit.

Also outside the square, but in a very different way, is Dave Graney. Formerly a Moodist, a Coral Snake and briefly a King of Pop, Graney, with collaborator and sweetheart, Clare Moore and nifty pianist Mark Fitzgibbon presents, in the tiny confines of the JB Room, Point Blank, an intimate performance without the aid of smoke, mirrors or electric wires, which is a foppish mile from the Lee Marvin inspired title. It is however, very identifiably the Dave Graney Show, complete with Lt Colonel Cavalry and Aristocratic Jive. Armed only with a plastic cutlass and occasionally a plastic figurine, Graney in his jauntily angled brimmed hat and signature jumpsuit, is at once pirate king, hipster and parochial kid from the border, weaving the elements of irony and cool that have forged his eccentric and heroic career. Some of it doesn't work – My Schtick Weighs a Ton – while others - I Held the Cool Breeze and The Devil Drives - are one of a kind.

Last time Tina C (the blonde and ditzy country gal from Open Throat Holler, Tennessee) visited us, she was on an "anti-anti-American" crusade. She was running for President and we all had a good laugh at Yankee folly. This time, the talented UK performer, Christopher Green, has turned his ten-gallon bimbo back on us. Tina wants to know about race relations in Australia - the history and truth of first contact, the Stolen Generation, and the blood on our map. Dressed in dot-painted hot pants she announces solemnly that she acknowledges that she is on Joel Garner land. Then the diminutive Arunda woman, Auriel Andrew, stands up to put a few things straight and joins the show to sing Brownskin Baby.

Tina hits some raw nerves and asks some awkward questions with both a gentle humour and a persistence which is invigorating and timely. When she sings the Tracy Chapman song, Baby Can I Hold You – "Sorry is all that you can't say " -satire transmutes into a different kind of restorative comedy. Tina C may not have much in that wiggy little brain of hers, but she has heard of the word sorry.

Eddie Perfect has visited us twice before, once with Max Gillies, and then his own show, Drink Pepsi, Bitch. This time the Cabaret Festival has given a first ever tryout to Perfect's latest project – Shane Warne: The Musical (The Workshop) – and it is an over-the-fence hit. The songs are fast and funny, but this well-wrought musical doesn't set out to make of fool of Warnie, rather it is about Australian sport, the media, and the phenomenon of fame itself. It celebrates Warne's extraordinary on-field spin and then the spin he put himself him with cricket authorities and his long suffering wife Simone (plaintively sung by Rosemarie Harris). Eddie Perfect sings the part of Shane with clever wit ("What an SM-mess I'm In") and surprisingly memorable torch ballads ("Dancing with the Stars") The band, led by Will Poskitt is great, the singers exceptional. If this version is only a round in the nets, it will be a winner when its fully match fit.

"Curly deliveries sure to trap" The Australian, June 19, 2007, p.12.

Fifty Years Young

Published: 2007-07-06 *Comedy*

Back with a Vengeance Barry Humphries

Her Majesty June 29. Until July 7, 2007

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

Barry Humphries is celebrating fifty years as a music hall artiste. In 1957 Mrs Everage from Moonie Ponds first peered around the door with her beady eyes and imperious curiosity to say hello. She really was a housewife then, with dull straight hair and a drab cloth coat, but she knew aqua from duck-egg blue and of course, her prudery and pretensions have only magnified over the decades. Barry Humphries' now monstrous megastar strides the globe in a blizzard of self-serving celebrity and she is back, at Her Majesty's, with a vengeance.

For Edna it is the same vengeance as always – to be the biggest star, to have the glitziest outfit ("Jane Lomax Smith will copy this frock," she shrieks in a twirl of titanium lame') and to have the coolest entourage. The Edna-Tones, doubling as personal trainers, pilates instructors and personal security, display their well-toned pecs and rumps while Dame Edna makes a complete spectacle of herself.

The opening number, staged in her New York penthouse, gives way to archive footage of the Dame while Barry Humphries' other incarnation Les Patterson prepares to take the stage. If Edna comes from Forties variety, Les is straight out of Aristophanes. With his jackass teeth spraying saliva on the front rows and his donkey-schlong prominent in his trouser line, he is the antic fool of all vulgarity, bluer than any duck, and, tonight, ready to bone his way to the top of Channel Nine. Les is replete from a feed at Hog's Breath and a round with his personal assistant. I'm fuller than a Macquarie Banker's wallet, he announces, I'm sweating like a glass blower's arse.

Les has been having visitations – from the ghost of Kerry Packer. He's worried the changes at Nine aren't working – "Eddie McGuire wouldn't know a tram was up him till the bell rang." Sir Les, man of the world and connoisseur of the consular trough is now also needed in the board room. He is brilliantly revolting, startlingly crass – as once Humphries satirized Australian primness, now he makes fun of our sophistication. Les is as embarassing as phone-camera footage of a union rep, as unwelcome as a trouser cough at a Hillsong service.

Sandy Stone returns to close the first half. A welcome adagio to the frenetic movements of Dame Edna and Les, the ghost of Glen Iris slumps into the genoa velvet club lounge. A shade beneath the shade, he brings us up to speed on the progress of his widow, Beryl. She has fallen on hard times since the death of her second beau Clarrie Lockwood. The tidy sum he left her for her days at Tudor Mews have been swindled by Rhonda from Mumbai and Beryl is now in a federally-funded facility, surrounded by indifferent young "operatives" in iPods, sinking further into the twilight zone.

It is the grimmest view yet on Sandy's world and even the nostalgia for brand names and the relaxed and comfortable fifties has been truncated. As Sandy talks about the Japs and Abos, Humphries dangles the bait towards the audience which, when it bites, reminds us that humour is amoral and the true comedian is no-one's friend.

Act Two is all Edna, and Humphries' energy and invention remains a marvel. Edna rattles through her current exploits, skiting and name-dropping. I am comfortable in my own skin, she whinnies, as she tells us that the Queen has a lovely sense of humour which doesn't show on the coins.

The inevitable occurs as Edna prowls the audience like a hawk looking for field mice. I'm not picking on you, I am empowering you, she crows, while interrogating Patricia about her house at Victor and Cecily about her unit in Glenelg. Humphries wickedly exploits the postcode snobbery as Edna derides the responses even as the show depends on the participation. An interesting reversal occurs with the compatible DNA matching of David and Lorraine whose marriage is being arranged onstage. When Edna asks why he is amused, David matter of factly informs her that he is gay – to the deafening cheer of the audience. It is a brilliant turning point in the dynamics of the comedy and a reminder that honesty can never be ridiculed.

After the hilarious gospel spoof – "What will be My Legacy ?" - Edna begins firing gladioli into the crowd, up to the paupers in the circle and into the front rows. As trembling gladdies are raised – "wave that glad, grab life by the stalk" - Edna celebrates her wonderfully mad, priapic ritual of benediction and renewal. This is the spirit of comedy at its oldest and best. When, after locking Edna in her dressing room, Barry Humphries himself returns in tux and black hat to take the final ovation, it is thrilling. He makes half a century's art look so easy we almost forget how extraordinary he is.

"Fifty years young" The Adelaide Review, No.320, July 6, 2007, p.19.

Shouldn’t give up his night job

Published: 2008-03-17 *Comedy · Adelaide Fringe*

Adelaide Fringe 2008 Comedy Rove McManus

Thebarton Theatre, Adelaide March 15. Melbourne Comedy Festival Melbourne Town Hall April 10-12. Tickets $39.90 – $ 44.50.

On stage for Rove McManus’s stand-up gig at the Thebarton Theatre is a giant picture of a goldfish in a bowl. The fish has large Disney eyes and extruding from its tail, in streaming black calligraphy comes Rove’s famous name. It is a joke very much at his own expense and it is a likeable one. Rove McManus, star of the fishbowl of television, winner of Logies and a household word, someone who has his name in lights, now has his name in fish poo.

It is part of his gags to riches legend that McManus’s day job was in stand-up before his remarkable rise to network television and, once again, Rove has taken to the boards for a national comedy tour undertaken in stages across the year. He last performed live in 2005 and most recently at the Melbourne Comedy Festival in 2000.

In his opening gig in the last weekend of the Adelaide Fringe he is looking trim and relaxed as the crowd greets him with squeals and phone cameras. This is Rove actually live – out of the fishbowl and joking about his logo. He points out that the fish had to excrete his name backwards – ‘e’ first. It’s a smart joke about having to see the whole concept before you start.

Which is something he may need to do for his show as well. There is something strangely innocent about his approach to his comedy, as if he can ignore his celebrity and make lame jokes like the old days. He is topical with the Adelaide heatwave, there are ruminations about MySpace and FaceBook and when he needs to strike a change, inexplicably, two extras run on stage for a strobing Benny Hill chase.

But there is a reticence in the comedy and an evident need to please and not challenge. Whereas many Australian comics are derisory of the media, his television jokes are tentative and bland, using the easy name-checks of an insider unwilling to bite the hand. The jokes about the Pope’s makeover and the George Bush bloopers are fun but the material dwindles and surprises are few. There is no doubting Rove’s charm, modesty and warmth and the crowd roared at his baby bump rap. But this show isn’t playing to his strengths any more. Others can do stand up but, fishbowl or not, no one can match him at his night job.

Murray Bramwell

“Shouldn’t give up his night job” The Australian , March 17, 2008, p.16.

Cabhooray

Published: 2008-07-01 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival Adelaide Festival Centre. June 6 – 14.

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

Trimmed from twelve working days to seven, the Adelaide Cabaret Festival this year has been a bonsai affair but it has packed in plenty of events of interest and quality all the same. The fretful fortunes of last year's International Guitar Festival have forced economies in many areas of the Centre's operations. Nevertheless, it seems tough that the Cabaret Festival, which over its short eight years has made strong connections with artists and audiences alike, should have to take such unkind cuts in scale and programming.

Innovations such as the staging of new music theatre works – remember Maltby and Shire's Taking Flight (now launched on the commercial stage) and last year's Shane Warne The Musical ? – had the flick this time. But the program retained its successful mix of cabaret, ancient (or should we say, classic) and modern, with a likeable amount of the zany also.

Foremost among the latter was The Burlesque Hour making a welcome return. Led by the startling Moira Finucane, whose sinister coffee waitress routine and white-dress-red-soup slurp-tease are classics of their kind, the line-up also saw exotic turns from former Vitals director Maude Davey and the sometimes bearded Azaria Universe.

For family matinees, self-styled Unusualist Raymond Crowe delightfully mixed old style stage magic (reminiscent of his Adelaide mentor Gene Raymond) along with his U-Tube favourite - shadow hand silhouettes of Louis Armstrong's Wonderful World. With his frizzy hair and frisky stage movement, Crowe blends downbeat Chaplin comedy with skilled illusionism and amiable audience schtick.

On the topical satire front, Revue Sans Frontieres – featuring Jonathan Biggins, Drew Forsythe and Phil Scott - were on song and on target. Pitch-perfect Biggins was Keating to the life and, with blonde wig, narrow-framed specs and strategically pursed lips, Phil Scott showed Kevin Rudd really could be a micro-managing scout master.

Among a music program featuring evergreens such as Lorna Luft and Rhonda Burchmore were contemporary moderns such as Don Walker, Kev Carmody and, bringing their own brand of spritz and klezmer, Monsieur Camembert. Led by vocalist and narrator Yaron Hallis, their tribute to Leonard Cohen was a festival highlight. With a shrewd selection of songs, readings and snippets of His Master's Voice, it stretched from Famous Blue Raincoat to Everybody Knows. Also featuring guest vocals from Deborah Conway (First We Take Manhattan) and the amazing Ngaiire (diminutive Australian Idol winner and showstopper with Bird on a Wire) Monsieur Camembert proved to be quite the big cheese.

And while talking about dancing to the end of love (if we were) Fiona Scott-Norman's fiendishly named The Needle and the Damage Done provided an hilarious and sometimes disconcerting array of LP kitsch and vinyl atrocity from John Laws to the Shaggs - with no slimy stone unturned in between. She is a dry wit, Fiona, and a journal of record all of her own.

"Cabhooray" The Adelaide Review, No.341, July, 2008, p.31.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2009

Published: 2009-06-08 *Cabaret*

Variety Gala June 5. Bernadette Peters June 6 Festival Theatre, Adelaide Festival Centre. Bookings BASS 131 246. Cabaret Festival until June 20.

This year sees the Adelaide Cabaret Festival putting on the Ritz. In his gold lame jacket Artistic Director, David Campbell is looking anything but shy as he and his co-producer wife, Lisa Campbell step out on the Adelaide Festival Centre's opening night red carpet. Now it's time to see whether his program is going to cut a rug as well.

The opening night Variety Gala is a good place to sample the fortnight's fare and, with seventeen acts all giving us a taste on a toothpick, some familiar trends emerge. There are plenty of dames – from Argentina, the excellent Barbara Luna; from Hernando's Hideaway, the versatile Ali McGregor; and from New York, the legendary Julie Wilson, commanding the stage as she has since 1938.

There are also some blokes who'd like to be dames – Steven Brinberg's uncanny Barbra providing a new notion of The Way We Were, Trevor Ashley (with help from Virginia Gay) giving us Marilyn and Jane from Little Rock and Nick Christou, via Frances Faye, showing us just how to shimmy like his Sister Kate. Compere Julia Morris provided the very funny links, Bob Downe put on a slouch hat for some outrageous World War Bob and Phil Scott exhumed Liberace for dazzling keyboard versions of There's a Place For Us. Meanwhile, new talents Sheridan Harbridge, Hayden Tee and, top of the bill, Hugh Sheridan, all proved that there definitely was a place for them as well.

Also making a surprise appearance at the Gala was music theatre star Bernadette Peters, whose Saturday night show was a brilliant reminder that, in a festival of showbiz channeling and tribute acts, she is a true Broadway original. From her opening belter, Let Me Entertain You, she did just that.

Capably supported by the Adelaide Art Orchestra under the direction of her musical director, Marvin Laird, Miss Peters showed her virtuosity across every page of the Great American Songbook and on to its most accomplished appendices. From Rodgers and Hammerstein came (an enchanting) Some Enchanted Evening and There's Nothing Like a Dame, from Carousel came When I Marry Mr Snow, from Disney, When You Wish Upon a Star and, from the public domain, a haunting version of Shenandoah, accompanied by John Hastwell on harmonica .

But it was her tribute to Stephen Sondheim which won the night. As one of his great interpreters, she went into the woods for No-one is Alone and Children Will Listen, into the park with George for Move On – and also sang selections from Company, Sweeney Todd and Gypsy. Her stage presence was a delight, her performance splendid. For an encore she sang I Honestly Love You – and we honestly did.

Murray Bramwell

The Australian, June 8, 2009.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival

Published: 2009-06-20 *Cabaret*

Generation Why Hayden Tee Dunstan Playhouse June 10. Magpie Blues Ursula Yovich The Space June 17. Adelaide Festival Centre. Bookings BASS 131 246. Cabaret Festival until June 20.

It perhaps comes as no surprise that a show called Generation Why ? raises more questions than it answers. Now in his late 20s, talented singer Hayden Tee is contemplating his Saturn Return, that point in the astrological cycle when thresholds are crossed and life choices are consolidated. For Mr Tee everything is connected - his life history (and those of his antecedents in small town northern New Zealand) and a world century of war, pestilence, technological revolution, MTV and Pacman.

At times earnest, often convoluted, Tee illustrates his place in the cycles of the cosmos with murky back-projections of family snapshots and NZ Tourism promos. In among this, ably accompanied by pianist and arranger, Nigel Ubrihien, he sings his heart out with such 80s anthems as In the Air Tonight, Spandau Ballet's Through the Barricades and a mawkish Christopher Cross/Enya medley of Sailing and Orinoco Flow. Other items include 99 Red Luft Balloons, a hip-hop ode to booty in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan, and an African arrangement of Don't Dream its Over.

There is something endearingly artless about Tee's provincial kiwi memoir but, when he goes into a stage persona, things get really interesting. Inhabiting John Hinckley from Sondheim's Assassins, he delivers a chilling performance of Unworthy of Your Love and demonstrates why Hayden Tee is such a hot property in music theatre. It's a world away from Maungaturoto.

Ursula Yovich's Magpie Blues is also a personal work – of growing up in Darwin with an Aboriginal mother from Arnhem Land and a father born in Serbia. As she puts it – she's a Serborigine. It is a story infused with sadness, love, separation and dislocated cultural identity. Like the magpie, she is neither black nor white, disconnected from both her "skin" ties and a Europe she has never seen.

A premiere production for the Cabaret Festival, it is undercooked. Yovich has an ambitious amount of script and she lost her thread a number of times. The presentation also seems emotionally raw. The material is close to her heart and tears are often near the surface. For the performer's sake, this show has some steadying to do.

But, for Ursula Yovich, music is her great joy and she sings everything from Fields of Gold and Let it Be to Tina Turner and Aretha Franklin. Her range is impressive – Bocelli after Caruso, the Theme from Monkey, some haunting originals and (with excellent support from the band and MD Peter Casey) a telling rendition of Over the Rainbow.

Murray Bramwell

The Australian, 20 June, 2009.

This review contains an error which was pointed out by Hayden Tee's agent. It was not Hinckley's song from Assassins which he sang – and I expected himn to sing from the build-up - but instead Creep by Radiohead. My mistake and my apology to Mr Tee.

Cabaret Nights

Published: 2009-07-01 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2009 June 5 -20. Adelaide Festival Centre.

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

Now in its ninth go-round, the Adelaide Festival is well into its groove. Even from its first years discernible patterns emerged that continue to identify it and secure its success. Significantly, it has found – and kept- a consistently older audience who bring their bountiful grey dollar and their generous enthusiasm to a festival which has more than its share of retro and nostalgic programming. There is increasing appeal for young audiences, too, but it has yet to rival the conspicuous loyalty of their elders.

The box office this time has been brisk, with around 50,000 tickets sold and many shows selling out– although comparisons to last year are a little misplaced, given that enforced economies (after the Guitar Festival twanged its purse strings) meant a truncated seven day festival in 2008 compared to the full twelve this year. Nonetheless, it is heartening to see punters turning up in the winter cold and every nook in the Festival Centre being put to use. The venues work well – from the Banquet Room to the Festival Centre Stage, the table settings and improved catering options all contributing to a convivial evening out.

At the Variety Gala Performance , zany MC, Julia Morris, quipped that festival director David Campbell had rung up all his friends and in no time got himself a program. It rather looks like that's what happened, but there are notable threads to be found all the same – established cabaret acts , new young talents and a range of singers not usually associated with the cabaret format.

The festival has had some excellent headliners in recent years – Michael Feinstein and Rhonda Burchmore come to mind – but Bernadette Peters was a real coup. With so many performers dependent on cloning, channeling and homage of one kind or another, to see a Broadway original of Miss Peters' calibre is a rare experience. Her concert of show favourites was exhilarating - from Rodgers and Hammerstein oldies like (the enchanting) Some Enchanted Evening to the generous serving of Sondheim, including works and roles she famously originated – Dot in Sunday in the Park with George and the Witch from Into the Woods.

Also first rate was Robyn Archer's new show, Que Reste –t'il ? a French lesson in cabaret from Aristide Bruante through to Jacques Brel and Serge Gainsbourg. Entertaining, informative and full of verve, Archer (ably accompanied by Michael Morley and a five piece band) sang the satire in English and the frisson in French, even adding an hilarious list of random French phrases in lieu of the lyrics to Edith Piaf's Je ne Regrette Rien. Relaxed and in fine voice, Robyn Archer showed us that cabaret is a meal best served spicy.

All syncopation and batting eyelashes, the delightful Janet Klein, supported by her musically brisk Parlour Boys, sang popular songs from the 1920s and 1930s in a twilight show on the Festival Stage. Full of beans and with an expert's ear for the songs of the gramophone era she performed a kind of jitterbug kabuki as she warbled through Hello Bluebird, Liberty or Love and Jenny Does that Lowdown Thing. She even found a local novelty from the period – Is he an Aussie ?

Campbell has invited a range of newcomers this festival. Hayden Tee, a talented young singer from New Zealand, introduced us to Generation Why? but only confused us with an odd mix of memoir and world history. He sang various 80s songs – the best of which was Spandau Ballet's Through the Barricades. Much more focused was Ursula Yovich's moving, sometimes painful, account of growing up in the Northern Territory with a mother from Arnhem Land and a Serbian father. She sang beautifully with a range from chirpy girl pop to Let it Be and a pensive version of Over the Rainbow.

The Cabaret Festival has featured some interesting names from the Australian music scene – Mick Harvey, Dave Graney and Clare Moore, and Don Walker. This time, Tex Perkins, with the white-clad Ladyboyz, sank the musical boot into schlock from the recent past, exhuming cosmically awful songs from Dr Hook, Eric Carmen, and Wings. An especially excruciating number was Jon English's Hollywood Seven.

Also having fun were Dad and Dave – David Campbell and his famous rock pater, Jimmy Barnes, joined by sister Mahalia Barnes, for a fine set featuring standards like Night and Day and songs from Mahalia Jackson, Nina Simone and Peter Allen. Campbell showed his stuff with Tenterfield Saddler and Around the World, Jimmy dug deep for In the Upper Room and Mavis Staples' Wade in the Water and Mahalia stole the show with Midnight Train to Georgia.

Now, we wonder, what names does David Campbell have in his little black book for next year ?

The Adelaide Review, July, 2009.

2010s Reviews

Campbell’s Cabaret ends with a bang

Published: 2010-06-26 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2010 until June 26.

Stephen Schwartz and Friends June 23.

Newley Discovered Hugh Sheridan June 24

Caroline O’Connor: A Musical Life June 26

Dunstan Playhouse Adelaide Festival Centre.

The tenth Adelaide Cabaret Festival has closed on some high notes and some big numbers. In his second year as Artistic Director David Campbell has further boosted the reputation and the reach of this highly successful winter solstice event. With record attendances and sell-out shows, it has not only captured the lucrative silver dollar of the older crowd, keen to hear the hallowed tunes of the Great American Songbook and the vibrant melodies of pre-Beatle pop, but a younger, smart set drawn to the kind of neo-retro Broadway style embodied by Campbell himself.

Last year saw some extraordinary performers – most memorably New York luminary, Bernadette Peters. Someone last year wittily observed that David Campbell had got out his little black book and phoned everyone he knew. Well, apparently not, because there were still plenty more surprises for this year.

Notable among them was the performance, for one night only, by the American composer and lyricist Stephen Schwartz, whose extraordinary success on Broadway spans from *God-spell* and *Pippin* in the early 70s to the mega-hit *Wicked* which has irresistibly cast its spell, especially over young audiences, since it first appeared in 2003. An amiable and modest man on stage, he played *Chanson* from *The Baker’s Wife* and explained the genesis of *The Wizard and I* while young women squealed at the very mention of *Wicked*.

His Q and A with David Campbell proved fascinating and he looked on warmly while a range of talents, including David Harris, US singer Michael Rose and West End star Carrie Rawlings, performed his impressively crafted and beguiling works. Among many highlights were Harris’s *Corner of the Sky* from *Pippin*, and Broadway favourite Liz Calloway – *Defying Gravity* in every way imaginable.

There can be few women performers in this country who can match the versatile Caroline O’Connor. Her musical life has taken her from Adelaide’s northern suburbs to the top of the international music theatre tree. Her set was a charming mix of droll comedy and dazzling performance - *Roxanne, Cool, De-Lovely* and *All that Jazz*. Her band was great –Daniel Edmonds on piano, husband Barrie Shaw on reeds. And the renditions of Garland and Piaf were over the rainbow.

Among the many bright young neo-retro stylists at the festival, Hugh Sheridan is surely the brightest. Well known from TV’s *Packed to the Rafters,* he is an extraordinary live performer. His portrait of raffish UK singer /composer, Anthony Newley is deft, poignant, witty and splendidly sung. While Dean Bryant ably directed the musicians, Sheridan showcased the songs as if newly minted. One from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* – (*I’ve Got a) Golden Ticket* - could be referring to Hugh Sheridan himself.

Murray Bramwell

“Campbell’s Cabaret ends with a bang” The Australian, June 28, p.17.

Your table’s waiting : laid-back legends put festival on a high

Published: 2011-06-29 *Cabaret*

June 25, 2011

Cabaret Festival 2011 Adelaide Festival Centre until June 25.

Batt on a Hot Tin Roof Bryan Batt Festival Theatre Stage June 24. The Basement, Sydney June 30. Bookings : ??

Jimmy Webb Dunstan Playhouse June 25.

Michael Feinstein Festival Theatre June 25.

After three weeks the 11th Adelaide Cabaret Festival has ended with plenty to sing about. And in their third , and final, year as directors, David and Lisa Campbell have increased interest, even on last year’s record, with estimated attendances this time of 95,000 with 35 performances sold out. David Campbell has proven a beacon to performers and composers, especially from the US, many of them known to him – headliners like Bernadette Peters, Natalie Cole and amazingly, on stage introducing his songs with singers form New York and London, Wicked creator Stephen Schwartz.

This year saw legends Olivia Newton-John and Broadway singer and dancer, Chita Rivera, the original Anita from West Side Story, in her late seventies and still spellbinding with songs from Sweet Charity, Cabaret and Kiss of the Spider Woman. Also, songwriter Jimmy Webb, who was barely twenty when he began writing hits for Glen Campbell, Johnny Rivers and the Fifth Dimension.

Alone at the piano Webb reminisced about his meetings with remarkable men (and women) with vivid accounts of Waylon Jennings, Judy Collins, Richard Harris and “Mr Sinatra”. He is an accomplished raconteur - funny, outspoken, and still in some wonderment at his accomplishments and good fortune. He told stories about being in County Cork with hell-raiser Richard Harris and driving up to Mullholland Drive in his battered VW beetle for an audience with Sinatra. From the many songs he could have chosen – he chose well : The Moon’s a Harsh Mistress, Galveston and, of course, we finished with the cake out in the rain and the majestic chords of MacArthur Park.

David Campbell has brought his own signatures to the festival – especially that neo-retro sharpness and precision that characterizes current New York cabaret style. Bryan Batt, known to TV’s Mad Men fans as insouciant art director Salvatore Romano, delivered an excellent show (splendidly accompanied by pianist Michael Lavine). Batt on a Hot Tin Roof is in part based on shows presented in his native New Orleans after the Katrina disaster.

Batt is a marvelous performer: witty, smart and most engaging. He told lively stories of his Southern Belle mother, sang familiar songs from Steve Goodman, Petula Clark, Cole Porter and Bacharach, and new work - Pete Mills’ Way Ahead of my Time (The Caveman Song) and William Finn’s Infinite Joy. The highlight was a funny but poignant letter from a young lesbian fan for whom he sang I am What I am from La Cage aux Folles.

There could have been no better closing show for the festival than Michael Feinstein’s Sings Sinatra. With the 17 piece Adelaide Art Orchestra in hot form behind him, Feinstein was at his virtuosic best with a fresh, vivacious take on the Great American Songbook. Luck be a Lady, All the Way, a Gershwin medley, naturally - the show was dazzling from start to its New York, New York finish. The Cabaret festival is on a high.

Murray Bramwell

”Your table’s waiting : laid-back legends put festival on a high” The Australian, June 27, 2011, p.16

Cabaret Festival 2012

Published: 2012-06-19 *Cabaret*

June 17, 2012

Cabaret Festival 2012 Adelaide Festival Centre until June 23.

Zoe Keating Artspace June 9.

Misfit Kim Smith Artspace June 10. Chapel off Chapel, Melbourne June 22-24 Slide, Sydney, July 12.

Love-Song-Circus Circa & Katie Noonan Dunstan Playhouse June 13.

What exactly is cabaret these days – café settings , intimate solo shows, songs by Weill or Brel or Cole Porter ? This year, Adelaide's 12th Cabaret Festival has broken all box office estimates with a program by artistic director Kate Ceberano, using even more elastic criteria than usual. It has worked a treat, though, and audiences have packed out performances from headliners Miss Saigon star Lea Salonga, Broadway Wicked cast principal Eden Espinosa and, guesting in James Gavin's rather bookish tribute to Lena Horne, the splendid Supreme, Mary Wilson.

But in quieter, stranger spaces other performers have also been waiting to intrigue us. Canadian musician Zoe Keating lives in the Californian Redwoods and she drapes around her cello like a lanky forest sprite, peeling off riffs and melodies, figures and drones which are looped and processed into a richly vibrant layered performance. The technical complexity is effortlessly understated as she thrums, taps, scrapes and plucks, creating mood compositions entitled Escape Artist, Optimist, and, something she never is- Lost.

In a premiere performance, acrobatic troupe Circa join forces with singer composer Katie Noonan for Love-Song-Circus, a captivating chamber work of songs about the trials of Australian convict women. While three women acrobats perform intrepid moves on aerial silks and gymnastic blocks, Katie Noonan sings her lambently tender songs of privation and injustice.

Accompanied peerlessly by the Tulipwood String Quartet, bassist Zoe Hauptmann and guitarist and banjo player Benjamin Hauptmann, with arrangements by Steve Newcomb, Noonan's songs give life to the courage and stoicism of young women - with names like Esther, Jane and Mary - otherwise lost as mere mentions in prison records and colonial archives. The link between the song cycle and the Circa performances is somewhat tenuous and at times more laboured than invigorating. But this is an accessible, highly accomplished new composition which deserves wide attention.

Kim Smith first played the Cabaret Festival in 2010 and, now re-located in New York, he has returned to the Artspace with Misfit, a stylish, grimly amusing little show which fits the genre like a strangler's glove. Insinuating himself around the tiny stage with a series of waspishly camp asides, Smith, accompanied on piano by the imperturbable Amanda Hodder, forensically deconstructs Cher's Bang Bang to a death knell drumbeat and similarly extrudes the Supremes' You Keep Me Hanging On.

He also knows his way around cabaret ancient and modern as he navigates from a lascivious version of What Shall I do with a Drunken Sailor straight into Brecht's Surabaya Johnny - hissing the lyrics :"Take that damned pipe out of your mouth, you rat" with the grinning rictus of Peter Sellers' Dr Strangelove. Misfit is neo-retro cabaret at its mordant best.

Murray Bramwell

"Live-wire acts when cabaret comes to town" The Australian, June 19, 2012. p.17.

A Night in Bohemia

Published: 2013-04-24 *Comedy · Theatre*

Homage to Uncertainty Emma Beech

The Giovanni Experiment Hew Parham

La Boheme April 20

The Adelaide Festival and Fringe programs have long been an embarrassment of riches. There are only so many places you can be at 8 pm on a Tuesday, or 7 pm on a Thursday and, with so many events scheduled, inevitably there are clashes and missed opportunities – especially when the enthusiastic buzz begins about particular shows and, alas, bookings and commitments have already been locked in.

So the chance to see return performances, especially of the calibre of Saturday night's double feature at the excellent La Boheme, is not to be missed - again. Both Hew Parham and Emma Beach are well known Adelaide performers – Parham from the Weimar Room days through to his recent incarnations as Sherminaar the pirate, Schmoo the clown and his current hypermanic creation Giovanni. Emma Beech, recently seen (or almost-seen) as Fatima, the wearily patient translator for Stephen Sheehan's indescribable Stevl Shefn, developed her current show especially for the Fringe season.

Homage to Uncertainty is a quietly droll examination of the way things happen – or more accurately, don't happen. Emma Beech describes how she has been taking been stock of her life - starting by having a look at what she actually does all day. Reminded by a friend that lawyers have to account for every seven minutes of the working day, Beech applies the same method and concludes she is putting a lot in and not getting much back.

Then, she turns her research to the larger world - watching the unsuspecting people of Adelaide for a four week intensive : in cafes, on street corners, hospital waiting rooms, even late at night in the Pancake Kitchen. It seems we don't do much a lot of the time either. According to the Beech Report we spend endless time on our phones, followed by eating, drinking and a great deal of waiting. We touch our noses, pull our earlobes and absently-mindedly faff about. This Homage is a meandering event, and in Beech's bemused narrative the digressions are always engaging. But soon the apparently random observations s gather intensity. We hear about her brother, Matt and his friend Bonging Banjo; the former working long hours as a young corporate executive in Sydney while his old friend, Bonging, is bobbing along in IT, working on an online merchandising idea on the side. Beech delivers the story like a well-set trap – and snap comes the punchline. Matt learns that Banjo's internet startup has sold for $140 million and he has walked away with 40 of them.

In the next turn of her wheel of fortune Beech talks about her father- and the paralysing effects of his recent nervous breakdown. Skilfully, Beech has steered us from mildly unsettling whimsy to a challenging set of questions about the aspirations and values of our society generally and of her peers and family in particular. It is perceptive, assured and original writing and Emma Beech presents it with comic lightness and unexpected impact.

"I think that's it" she says, unceremoniously closing the proceedings- leaving us with plenty of to mull over - and a sure sense that Emma Beech is a singular talent. It is no surprise that Homage to Uncertainty won the Fringe's Tour Ready award, supported by the Melbourne Fringe. It has a certain future.

Hew Parham's Giovanni is the Italian waiter's Italian waiter- a caricature, a stereotype, a familiar, and, like all good comic creations - a mirror of our own delusions, irritations, insecurities and fleeting joys. In a series of mimes and monologues, tightly directly by Craig Behenna, Parham displays his range both as a physical and verbal comedian.

Choreographed to a thrillingly loud symphonic accompaniment – Mendelsohn's theme for A Midsummer Night's Dream is it ? – Giovanni opens with an extended flourish – obsessively preparing, first his tables setting and then his own culinary grooming. Splendidly in sync with each chord, bow stroke, fanfare and crashing cymbal of the music, Giovanni breaks eggs, whisks, grates cheese and, as the skit extends effortlessly into absurdity, he scrape shaves with table cream, smears his hair with olive oil and perfumes his armpits with parmesan.

When he addresses the audience, and of course, berates two late-comers, Parhams's cod Italian speech comes trippingly off the tongue – as he implores for interconnecione and rapporio and most all - amore. Giovanni the romantic exhorts us to kiss our neighbour "on the face". He is unperturbed by our reticence – "I can wait – my mama taught me about slow food, some of her dishes have been cooking since 1979. Now I want slow amore." Giovanni introduces himself, stretching his neck, jerking his head about in quick movements like a Dario Fo rooster. He is dressed in classic attire : bow tie, waistcoat, white apron, hair slicked and pencil moustache completing the identikit. He is well trained in the waiter's art – first year: moustache grooming, second year: anal retentive table setting, third year: interactione with the ladies incorporating aphrodisione but blended always with nostalgio.

A highpoint is his rococo recitation of the daily specials, delivered with the speed and glottal virtuosity of a Missouri auctioneer . And, of course, after the lengthy explanation - the customer orders steak. Parham has added new material- with his apron turned into a head scarf he conjures Giovanni's mama – a woman who sounds like an Italian version of a Monty Python pepperpot (a Terry Jones one) but we are told has a heart as tender as osso bucco.

It is not all in Italo-babble though. In a documentary narrative Giovanni reminisces in clipped BBC English – I always wanted to be an Italian waiter he confides- my first word was macchiato. He remembers his early days as a San Pellegrino boy playing football for the North Plympton Puttanescas and his first job in Munno Para at a restaurant called La Gonorrhoea.

Giovanni's main satiric targets are elsewhere, however – directed at the mass marketing of denatured fast food. We glimpse this as he melodramatically discards his traditional attire and replaces it with a monogrammed polo shirt. O Sole Mio Ltd – specialising in 70 pastas and sauces, the Nessum Doorstep, and other bogus McMonstrosioses. Giovanni's Experiment now has me channelling Italiosities, but not nearly as well. Don't miss Giovanni when he is next serving tables, Hew Parham's clever clown has a heart as soft and sweet as Tiramisu.

Murray Bramwell

The Barefoot Review, April 24, 2013.

Stockport to Memphis

Published: 2013-06-11 *Cabaret · Music*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2013

Stockport to Memphis Barb Jungr (with Simon Wallace) Dunstan Playhouse June 9.

Barb Jungr's latest Cabaret Festival show, Stockport to Memphis, is also the title of her latest (eighteenth !) record album and features a mix of contemporary classics and her own compositions. It is a Look Back in Jungr, perhaps.

The daughter of European émigré parents, Jungr was born in Rochdale in Lancashire and grew up in Stockport, a town ten miles south of Manchester. In a varied and successful career she has made it from busking in London's Portobello Road to alternative theatre and the Edinburgh Fringe to her present eminence as a chanteuse on the cabaret club circuit.

Some of her more recent success has resulted from Every Grain of Sand, her 2002 tribute album of Bob Dylan songs. She has since followed that with Just Like a Woman, a Nina Simone tribute from 2008, and in 2011 another Dylan compilation - Man in the Long Black Coat.

On stage at the Dunstan Playhouse, Barb Jungr, dressed in Bohemian black, opens proceedings with a snappy version of Leonard Cohen's Everybody Knows. It is not as fast-paced as her jittery Gala version from a couple of nights before, but it is still too brisk for its own good. Cohen's own recent versions have been perfect studies in the understated sardonic and Jungr's over-enunciated, broadly gesticulated reading, while lively, leaves little of the world-weary wit in this very timely song.

Following with two recent compositions of her own – Sunset to Break Your Heart and Till My Broken Heart Begins to Mend – both expertly phrased and soulfully sung, Jungr reveals what is inevitably going to be an unresolved divide between her own capable, but less memorable, song-making and the startling renditions of well-known material she is also showcasing. It is immediately evident with her near- perfect reading of Joni Mitchell's River, a version that finds hidden depths even its writer never knew existed. Musical Director, Simon Wallace's peerless piano phrasing and Jungr's assured vocals make this a highlight of the set.

Other revelations follow in quick succession. The melancholy gospel tinges of Hank Williams' Lost in the River also display Jungr and Wallace's expert control of nuance and mood. Then, after a funny reminiscence of the spotty, feral young mods of her teen years, Jungr takes Rod Argent's Zombies hit, She's Not There and with a shift in gender perspective, re-engineers it into the upbeat, but mordantly reflective, *He*'s Not There.

Taking Neil Young's well-known, much loved, Old Man and turning it into a hymn to acceptance is yet another revelation in this dream set-list. Then, Tom Waits's apocalyptic Way Down in the Hole (theme song for The Wire) is deconstructed into a slow blues, garnished with another of Jungr's splendid harmonica solos. When, finally, we get a Dylan song, it too is a surprise. Lay Lady Lay, Bob's ultimate seduction song, is no longer - as Jungr observes - a macho conquest, but a song of experience hard-won ; the singer in command and the pianist in perfect unison.

From Stockport to Memphis, a belter written by Jungr, not only charts her progress as a transatlantic ballad and blues diva, but closes the set. Again it falls short of the excellence of the cover versions – so it is only fitting that the encore goes to a Sam Cooke classic : Change is Gonna Come. It is a powerful anthem of hope, peerlessly delivered by both Jungr and Wallace. And yes, many things in this world need to change, but not Barb Jungr's gift for breathing new life into the music and poetry of late 20th century popular song.

Murray Bramwell

Published online in The Barefoot Review, June 11, 2013.

Original and diverse artists find new levels

Published: 2013-06-17 *Cabaret*

Cabaret Festival 2013 Adelaide Festival Centre Bookings at BASS 131 246 until June 22.

Bernadette Robinson In Concert Dunstan Playhouse June 15.

RRAMP Christine Johnston, Lisa O'Neill, Peter Nelson Space Theatre June 12.

This year, Adelaide's 13th Cabaret Festival coincides with the 40th anniversary of the Festival Centre and the place is buzzing. Kate Ceberano's program is diverse – too diverse, cabaret purists might say - but, for a second year running, she has hit the mark. The festival reached box office target at the beginning of week two and, yet again, in Adelaide's coldest and darkest month, people of all ages and musical inclinations are going out to shows.

After an opening weekend featuring the rocket energy of Kristen Chenoweth and the distinctive phrasings of Barb Jungr, others have followed : the smoky, laid-back Cassandra Wilson with her brilliant quintet ; Cameron Goodall and Quincy Grant's salty, poignant, 1970s sea shanty cycle, *You, Me and the Bloody Sea*; and the Gen-Y pop-punk satire of UK duo, Bourgeois and Maurice.

Bernadette Robinson has returned to the festival with an excellent new show. Drawing partly from the portraits of celebrated women singers featured in her widely acclaimed *Songs for Nobodies*, she has added new material in a concert setting.

The tributes range from Judy Garland and Patsy Cline to Billie Holiday, Maria Callas and Edith Piaf and are astonishingly convincing – not because they are near-perfect mimicry, but because Robinson, ably accompanied by pianist Paul Noonan, captures so much of the feeling and style of each.

The signature numbers are splendidly presented: Garland's *Over the Rainbow, I Go to Pieces* for Patsy Cline, *Strange Fruit* for Billie Holiday and *Non Je Ne Regrette Rien* in a perhaps over-*oeuf*ed channeling of Edith Piaf. Other songs also feature – a knock-out version of Burt Bacharach's *Anyone Who had a Heart*, a tribute to Maria Callas with an aria from *Tosca* and, for sheer fun, and further evidence of her vocal gifts - *I Could have Danced all Night* as imagined by Barbra Streisand, Dolly Parton and Shirley Bassey. In her multiplicity, Bernadette Robinson is a singular talent.

Taking cabaret to a completely different level is *RRAMP*, an intriguing, meticulously managed work from theatre innovator Christine Johnston. She calls herself the Collector, her associates - percussionist Lisa O'Neill and electronica wiz Peter Nelson - are the Archivist and the Electrocrat.

Looking like a cross between Morticia Addams and Mrs Danvers with an electric guitar, Johnston in clipped speech narrates her anecdotes, observations, and gently deadpan absurdities. Beautifully illustrated with animations by Ahmarnya Price, there are tales of gallant love between chooks, her collection of tax receipts and of the vicissitudes of time, age and love. RRAMP is not just passing strange, it is touchingly familiar.

Murray Bramwell

"Original and diverse artists find new levels", The Australian, June 18, 2013, p.13.

Cabaret Central

Published: 2013-06-17 *Cabaret · Music*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2013

Cabaret Central

Que Reste-T'Il Robyn Archer with Michael Morley and George Butrumlis Adelaide Festival Theatre Stage. June 15.

Just when we were wondering what cabaret is any more, along comes Robyn Archer to give us a splendid master class. Archer has long been recognised internationally as one of the foremost interpreters of the music of the German Weimar period - most especially the works of Bertolt Brecht and his musical henchmen , Kurt Weill, Hanns Eisler and Paul Dessau. But with her current show Que Reste-T'Il we are taken to the very origins of cabaret.

They began in Paris in the 1880s – nightclubs where patrons sat at tables, drank, and watched variety acts calculated to unsettle sensibilities, excite enthusiasms and generally frighten the horses. At the epicentre of this activity was Le Chat Noir (The Black Cat), opened in Mont-martre in 1881 by the impresario Rodolphe Salis and frequented by the leading musicians, poets, painters, exhibitionists and culture jammers of the day.

Robyn Archer opens the set with a prose manifesto – a panegyric to "The Street", where there is life, energy, crime and colour. This is the cabaret of grit and struggle; not Romantic Paris, as Archer observes, but a place of contrasting realities. And so, after opening with Aristide Bruant's signature song, Le Chat Noir, things switch to less agreeable matters. After a parodically sung liturgical intro from pianist and collaborator Michael Morley, Archer bursts full-throated into There's the Cholera, a grim reminder of the dangers of urban epidemic in Europe of that time. Red City highlights the proletarian point of view and another acerbic song from Bruant, It Takes Cash, wryly says it all.

Archer and Morley have discovered and spicily translated a variety of pungent, roistering songs from the French archive. The Song of the Rag and Bone Man has Archer in great, droll, gusto as with Coin ! Coin !Coin ! – that's Quack, Quack Quack to you – and as the singer lists the faults of journalists, stockbrokers and politicians, she soon had the whole audience joining in with the mocking refrain.

As Archer moves from the fin de siecle to the 20th century she adds the Dadaists and Surrealists to her list of prose readings – Andre Breton and Picabia feature, as do their lively diatribes against solemnity, self-importance and conformity. Ah, how beastly are the bourgeois ?

The mood shifts, though, with Plaisir d'Amour – Archer shrewdly exchanging the vinegar for wine. Cole Porter's (You know Paris) But You Don't Know Paree fits nicely, and reminding us that Paris in the 1930s was not just about Piaf , Archer sings Pluie, a song by the Parisian cabaret chanteuse Marie-Louise Damien, better known as Damia. Once asked what was the secret of her marvellous voice, Damia is said to have replied –"Three packs of Gitanes a day."

But it wouldn't be a French cabaret show without Edith Piaf, and Archer opens with L'Accordioniste, the perfect cue for an excellent solo from accordionist George Butrumlis. Where others perhaps interpret the fragility of Piaf, Robyn Archer reminds us that Edith was a tough little sparrow who made good use of middle registers and gutturals to add some punch.

Satirist Leo Ferre is well-represented with two songs, in lively translation by Michael Morley – Le Piano du Pauvre, complete with topical references to Lang Lang, and, in another swipe at the mealy-mouthed bourgeois, Monsieur William. Jacques Brel is celebrated both in the form of a poem by Patrick McGuinness and Robyn Archer's compelling, dizzily accelerating version of Carousel. It is one of many vocal highpoints – and reminders of her extraordinary expressiveness and range.

The set is a hugely entertaining mix of satire, melody, and fun – a medley of French kitsch, starting with Windmills of Your Mind and on to The Singing Nun's Dominique, is followed by Serge Gainsbourg's Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde, sung by Michael Morley who is having such a good time there should be a law against it. Archer's curtain song is also a winner - Charles Trenet's Que Reste T'Il- What Remains (of our Love) ?

We may not be able to answer that question, but what remains of this terrific show are the encores. First, a parody to the tune of Je Ne Regrette Rien, consisting of every familiar French word or phrase – from RSVP to Maitre d' to ménage a trois (you get the idea) - all sung in mournful deadpan to mischievous effect. There's no way to top that, but Robyn Archer manages it, with the entire audience roaring through more verses of Alouette than you would have thought possible. Je te plumerai la tete ? Que Reste T'Il ? Any more of that, and all that remained would be feathers.

Murray Bramwell

Published online at The Barefoot Review, June 20, 2013.

Modern Family

Published: 2013-06-20 *Cabaret · Music*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2013 Martha Wainwright Dunstan Playhouse June 20.

What was it Tolstoy said about families? That all happy families are the same but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Not that the Wainwright -McGarrigle family was all that unhappy. Rather, they made unhappiness a favourite subject in their prolific and very memorable songs .

The McGarrigle Sisters – Anna and Kate – wrote plangent songs about hearts like wheels, and dancers with bruised knees. Similarly, over dozens of albums, Loudon Wainwright mapped both his heart and his family in songs – celebrating his infant son Rufus (Rufus is a Tit Man) recalling altercations with his young daughter Martha (Hitting You) among numerous other wry and disturbing confessionals about his anger, disappointment and remorse for the end of his marriage to Kate, and the deteriorating family relationships that followed.

It was keeping up the family tradition then, when Rufus Wainwright's star was rising that he praised his mother and denigrated his absent father, and Martha took it one further, on her self-titled first album, with her famously plaintive diatribe to Loudon – Bloody Mother Fucking Asshole.

Time has passed and hatchets have been buried and Rufus and Martha have not just become successful in their right but are as celebrated as their parents- perhaps, even more so. Also, much has changed for the family – most particularly the death, from cancer, of Kate McGarrigle in January 2010. Raised in Montreal by their mother, both Rufus and Martha were devoted to Kate, inspired and encouraged by her music, and devastated by her untimely passing.

Not long after Kate's death, Rufus spoke at length about his relationship with her in a film documentary charting his career and music including his then current opera project, aptly named Prima Donna. Now, three years later, in far more modest mode, Martha Wainwright is touring a new CD – Come to Mama, in part, a tribute to Kate, also a reflection on her relationship with husband Brad Albetta and their son Arcangelo.

Martha Wainwright's Cabaret Festival set at the Dunstan Playhouse is a reminder of how brilliant, volatile, appealing and irritating she can be – often all at the same time. The opener is This Life, from her first album - " This life is boring, this life right now is snoring, that's alright , that's OK... " Dressed in polka dots and yellow shoes, she threads herself into her restless lament, tossing her blonded bouffant hair, jerking her arms, bending her left leg in what seems like involuntary spasm. The bass thrums, the drum pulses, the vocal is softly robotic – Laurie Anderson style, like the bridge change later – then her voice soars into agitated repetitions: "there's a song, a song, a song in my head" – and it is classic Martha.

The new material predominates. With its jaunty tempo, 4 Black Sheep belies its dark theme of youthful risk-taking– and the synth effects and vocal reverb (as elsewhere in the set) obscure the lyrics. But the singer is gathering momentum. Can You Believe It adds girl-pop chords (check Blondie and Chryssie Hynde) and Some People, with more woozy keyboards and a deathwatch drumbeat is a mournful night ballad – "I don't mind the rain on my head."

The excellent All Your Clothes, with its simple acoustic arrangement showcases Martha Wainwright at her best. The first of the tribute songs to her mother, it gently captures the need to find traces of a departed soul – in memory, in objects such as garments and, for Kate, in music. A little known song from the McGarrigle repertoire (about to be released on a CD named Oddities) My Mother is the Ocean Free also features Wainwright at her vocal best with harmonies from bassist (and husband) Brad Albetta.

Mixing things around again with Jesus and Mary from her second album, Wainwright drily remarks on the fact that her show so far has been short of cabaret numbers. Remedying this are two songs from her Piaf record - Sans Fusils, Ni Souliers, a Paris. After a lengthy, light-hearted intro and translation, she launches into an excellent, if histrionic, L'Accordioniste. Recently I wrote that Bernadette Robinson had over-oeufed the same song, but in her zeal Wainwright not only over-eggs she near scrambles it. At times her music is the sound of one hand wringing, and it is a pity because she has real power and presence and doesn't need to vamp it. Her other Piaf selection, Soudain une Velle, by welcome contrast, is a sudden glimpse of a subtler musical landscape.

The highlight of the night, and Martha Wainwright makes sure that it is the case, is a song written by Kate McGarrigle only a few months before her death. Proserpina is the centrepiece of the new album and it also for Wainwright's set. The song recalls the myth of Persephone and the origin of the four seasons, most especially the return from the death of winter to the rebirth of spring. It is a marvellous song, beautifully rendered with acoustic guitar and a simple, bell-like Kate McGarrigle vocal.

It was quite the place to draw a close, but - encores being what they necessarily are - Martha comes back for her signature diva song, Stormy Weather. Again, it is snazzily sung and enthusiastically received- but, for me, accompanied with so much writhing, hair tossing, face rubbing and general meteorological voguing, it diminishes a great blues song - and once again proves that, to touch the true heart, simple is best.

Murray Bramwell

Published online at The Barefoot Review, June 22, 2013.

Variety adds spice to Ceberano's cabaret life

Published: 2014-06-08 *Cabaret*

Variety Gala Performance Festival Theatre June 6.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2014 Adelaide Festival Centre Bookings BASS 131 246; adelaidecabaretfestival.com.au until June 21.

In a flurry of feathers, finery and red carpet the 14th Adelaide Cabaret Festival has opened with its usual first night event, the Variety Gala Performance, but, outgoing Artistic Director, Kate Ceberano insists, “it’s not the usual suspects.”

Perhaps that is a nod towards those who wonder what exactly “cabaret” is these days. Is it Weimar cafes ? The Black Cat club in Montmartre? Or is it tribute shows, veteran performers revisiting the fans, and young actors showing their triple threat ? The answer, looking at Ceberano’s eclectic program, is all of the above.

Stepping from the ropes of her (slightly wacky) Famous Boxing Tent stage set, the vivacious Kate Ceberano crooned swan song verses from *My Way* as she both opened the Gala and bade adieu to her third and final festival.

With thirteen acts to introduce, MC Todd McKenney, mixing charm and comic smarm, kept proceedings brisk. French chanteuse and Le Lido regular, Caroline Nin joined Australian-born Moulin Rouge and Lido performer, Shay Stafford for song and high kicks and Nin, a cabaret festival favourite, added a Piaf classic.

For a little Brecht and Weill, flamboyant Dutch singer Sven Ratzke sang a lumpy version of *Alabama Song* and Australian talent, Kim Smith, now resident in New York, launched *Pirate Jenny* – peerlessly, down to the last sinister whisper.

Many hit the pop catalogue – the versatile Ali McGregor, making cabaret with kids this time, bounced among some under-sevens singing Beyonce’s *Single Ladie*s. Lizzie Moore channeled the mysterious Minogue sister, Erin, with INXS’s *Never Tear Us Apart,* and Adelaide singer Carla Lippis sang a knockout big ballad version of Cher’s *Bang Bang*. Stylish vocal quartet, Swing on This – Michael Falzon, Matt Lee, Luke Kennedy and Ben Mingay - gave a new dawn, maybe even a new life, to Michael Buble’s *Feeling Good*.

The headliner, sixties and seventies singer-songwriter, Melanie Safka seemed flustered, almost accidentally finding a brand new key, as she sang her hit *Lay Down (Candles in the Wind*) but she steadied as she led the gala performers in an unlikely cabaret finale – *Give Peace a Chance.*

The Adelaide Art Orchestra, under the baton of Matthew Carey, were outstanding, and director Andy Packer brought together a great show on a tight schedule.

But it was Rhonda Burchmore, glorious in her red sequined tunic and hot pants – “I’ve put on my Barbie legs for you Adders !” – who trumped the night with her non-twerking mashup featuring Miley Cyrus’s *Wrecking Ball*. No sooner had she finished and she was presented with the Festival’s second Cabaret Icon award - to the delight of the audience and fellow performers.

Murray Bramwell

“Variety adds spice to Ceberano’s cabaret life”, The Australian, June 9, 2014, p.16

Outstanding Capsis makes Little Bird fly

Published: 2014-06-11 *Cabaret · Theatre*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival Music Theatre

Little Bird by Nicki Bloom Songs and Music by Cameron Goodall and Quentin Grant State Theatre Company, in association with the Adelaide Festival Centre Her Majesty's Theatre. June 10. Tickets $ 30 - $ 67 Bookings : BASS 131 246 or adelaidecabaretfestival.com Duration 1 hour 15 minutes (no interval) Until June 22.

"Little Bird, we'll love you, whoever you are." It is the declaration of unconditional love all parents make for their children . But in Nicki Bloom's intriguingly woven musical story – part changeling ballad, part cautionary tale, part dream play – nothing is quite as it seems, and no-one is quite who they think they are.

Little Bird, commissioned by Adelaide Cabaret Festival director Kate Ceberano specifically to feature the singular (and multiple) talents of performer Paul Capsis, marks another new and creative direction for State Theatre - and it is an undoubted festival highlight.

Director Geordie Brookman has taken Bloom's spare, crisply poetic text and, with an excellent creative team, produced a work which is pleasing to both eye and ear.

Designer Geoff Cobham, using a simple box set, then an open stage, sculpts the action with soft white spotlights and carefully judged effects – a forest of thin, fairytale trees rises out of nowhere, a miniature house beckons with Tiffany glass colours, and a series of descending red-lit frames signify an urban skyline. His lighting design associate, Chris Petrides provides striking, textured projections and Ailsa Paterson's shape-shifting costumes, in black, silver and white, maintain the boldly monochrome effect.

The incidental music by Quentin Grant is some of his best stage composition to date. His gently trickling piano lines, echoes of Michael Nyman and Philip Glass perhaps, are aptly augmented by Belinda Gehlert's distinctive violin, accompanied by Dylan Woolcock on guitar and Harley Gray and Jonathan Sickerdick on bass and percussion.

Co-written by Grant and Cameron Goodall, the nine songs which feature throughout are - in the case of the opening *Lullaby* and *For So Long*- delectably melodic; splendidly match Bloom's folk ballad lyrics, as in *The Girl Said to the Wind*; and, when needed, deliver Nick Cave heft - like show-stopper, *The Woodcutter Song*.

But it is the embodiment of all these elements in Paul Capsis's outstanding performance which makes *Little Bird* fly. From the moment his narrative begins, Capsis commands the stage, building the strangeness of the story, inhabiting its familiar emotion.

His mercurial capacity in *Lullaby* to sing the father, then the mother, and later the child, is key to the theme of Little Bird's search for identity. When he takes a wife, Capsis enacts the courtship, when Little Bird lives as a woman with Rocky, the axe-wielding, cross-dressing woodcutter, Capsis unfurls his mass of curls and struts the street.

His extravagance is part of his legend, but here it is Capsis's restraint and precision, matching the lyric understatement of Nicki Bloom's engaging, sometimes elusive text, that makes *Little Bird* the Faberge egg it is.

Murray Bramwell

"Outstanding Capsis makes Little Bird fly", The Australian, June 12, 2014, p.15.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2014

Published: 2014-06-16 *Cabaret*

Freedman Does Nilsson Tim Freedman Dunstan Playhouse June 12.

Waiting For My Real Life Colin Hay Dunstan Playhouse June 13.

Murray Bramwell

The Harry Nilsson story is as paradoxical as it is sad. He had great success; but his biggest hits were covers of other writers' songs. He was a brilliant vocalist, but never performed live. His first album was ignored by everyone - except John Lennon and Paul McCartney. He had an eight album contract with RCA Records and was paid $3 million not to make the last three.

Tim Freedman, the other famous Whitlam, "does" Nilsson for the Adelaide Cabaret Festival- and he honours a great musician in the doing. Dressed in the signature Schmilsson tweed cap and sporting mutton chop sideburns, Freedman channels Harry, Brooklyn accent and all. Seated at the Playhouse Steinway, he opens with *Everybody's Talkin'*, written by Fred Neil and theme song of the hit film *Midnight Cowboy*. The first of his string of cover hits, it is still Nilsson's most famous.

But more intriguing is *1941*, autobiographical to the point of pain –"Well in 1941 a happy father had a son/ And by 1944 the father walked right out the door"; repeated in the final verse, where the dates are now 1961 and 1964 , and the father leaving is now Nilsson himself.

Freedman narrates the Nilsson story – and the legend. How he divided time between working as a computer analyst in a bank and writing and recording demos such as *Cuddly Toy* – a "nasty song wrapped in sugar" and a hit for the Monkees.

And his creative collaborations with musicians like Randy Newman, at that point a little-known, but much admired, composer. Nilsson recorded *Simon Smith and the Amazing Dancing Bear* for his 1969 album *Harry* and then followed in 1970 with *Nilsson Sings Newman*, a whole LP of Newman songs, with the same mix of wordplay, irony and satiric deadpan which characterised Nilsson's own musical style. Freedman delivers a memorable version of *Living Without You* from that collection.

Perhaps it is Freedman's account of Nilsson's connections with The Beatles which piques our interest in particular. Dating back to 1967 and *Pandemonium Shadow Show* (featuring *She's Leaving Home* and a virtuoso pastiche of Beatle sounds with *You Can't Do That*) Nilsson became the Fabs' favourite interpreter. Nilsson met up with them when he went to the UK – about the time that John met Yoko. He and Lennon became close pals, later for a time he played (as coincidentally, did Colin Hay) with Ringo Starr's All Starr Band (and Ringo even paid to have his teeth fixed!)

But it was around 1974 when the Lennon / Nilsson antics became notorious in Los Angeles. Their Lost Weekend lasted for eighteen months and cost Nilsson his reputation and his health. Freedman uses Lennon's raw Plastic Ono lament, *Isolation* as a litmus for that time. Nilsson's huge success with *Nilsson Schmilsson* is now evaporating, his refusal to perform live, and tendency to self-sabotage conspire towards his increasingly lonely decline.

Tim Freedman's narrative is unsparing in describing how a great career is careening downwards, but the songs ever remind us what a clever musical spark Nilsson was. From the perky metronome of *Gotta Get Up* to *The Puppy Song*, from *One* (is the loneliest number) to *Without You*, the sheer verve and yearning of his melody and the sweetness of his vocals are here splendidly interpreted by Freedman. Nilsson has been done, with a little touch of Schmeedman in the night.

With *Waiting for my Real Life*, Colin Hay is here to tell his story for himself. It is June and Friday 13th - an auspicious date in more ways than one. Forty seven years ago to the day, in 1967, Colin Hay aged fourteen, arrived in Melbourne with his family – emigrating from Kilwinning in Scotland.

On stage in "Mr Dunstan's Playhouse", dressed in a raffish red tartan jacket, his receding hair still spiked in punkish tufts, Hay is immediately engaging as, setting up a likeable riff on his acoustic guitar, he begins to bind his storytelling spell. With his tangy Scots accent he talks about his early experiences in Australia and his formative influences- first in his father's music supplies shop in Scotland, then as he begins to build a reputation as composer and front man for Men at Work, one of this country's most rapidly successful international acts.

Drawing from his eleven solo albums and the meteoric three recorded with Men at Work between 1981 and 1985, Hay, in grainy good voice sings the title song from *Wayfaring Sons* ("Don't go out in the night") then a slower tempo, almost ballad version of *Who Can it Be Now ?* and his laid-back homage to the beach life – *Beautiful World*.

Of course, his waggish humour and sardonic take on the world steers his commentary from tales of a friend being chased by a shark as prelude to *Beautiful World* to self-deprecating anecdotes of mistaken celebrity. Those "didn't you used to be ...?" encounters : In that band that recorded *YMCA* ? In the Flock of Seagulls ? The group that sang *Turning Japanese*?

There are dozens of stories and they are fun to hear - the Aussie Scots outsider at the Grammys , momentarily meeting Little Richard, then later as a soloist, getting to know Zach Braff, the creator of the TV series *Scrubs* - in which Hay (an occasional film and TV actor) appeared several times - and director of the movie *Garden State*, with its highly successful soundtrack which included Hay's song *I Just Don't Think I'll Ever Get Over You*.

Needless to say *Down Under* is a mine of jokes and reminiscences – although the bitter "Kookaburra sings" copyright infringement case is not among them. "*We*wrote this song," is his only comment, "whatever you might have read." He has stories about performing at the Sydney 2000 Olympics, of playing solo in Brazil, where he has a strong following, of an international tour he had to cancel and all he had left was a box of t-shirts with his name misspelled – Colin Hat.

This was the first time I had seen Colin Hay play live, although his reputation as a raconteur has long preceded him. And it's all true. He is a troubadour and storyteller who draws in an audience and conspires with them with wit and surprising candour. Hay talks about his battle with alcohol and how fellow heavy drinkers don't want to take it seriously, he also talks fondly and reflectively about his parents and sings *There's Water Over You* as a tribute to his father.

From his 1994 album *Topanga*, he sings *Waiting For My Real Life Begin*, "Any minute now, my ship is coming in," a meditation about expectations which he links to the strange phenomenon of rapid success and its equally rapid evaporation. It is hard-won wisdom and genially expressed. Colin Hay has found his real forte as a travelling singer holding an audience in the palm of his hand. Closing this excellent show, accompanied on his Gryphon 12 string, he sings *A Simple Song* - and makes a very special talent look easy.

The Barefoot Review online June 17, 2014.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival: From Kate With Love

Published: 2014-06-23 *Cabaret*

Daily Review

Adelaide Cabaret Festival: From Kate With Love

21 June, 2014 Adelaide Cabaret Festival June 6 – 21

With the Winter Solstice comes the end of the 2014 Adelaide Cabaret Festival. Now in its fifteenth year the festival has proven a staunch success and a boost for the Adelaide Festival Centre in a usually dark month. Using every speck of space in the venue, this year's Cabaret Festival featured some 470 artists in more than 60 shows, 35 of them sold out. 2014 also marks the third and final festival for Artistic Director Kate Ceberano whose vivacious presence has energised the event.

Opening with the now-familiar Variety Gala, the range and calibre of the program was there to be seen. Appropriately it was Ceberano, in stylish frock and feathery millinery who opened the proceedings with a light-hearted version of *My Way*. Also on the Gala bill was Melody Beck with a medley from *King and I, My Fair Lady* and *West Side Story*, all songs "voiced" in the film versions, not by Deborah Kerr, Audrey Hepburn or Natalie Wood, but by unsung performer Marni Nixon, celebrated in Beck's one woman show *Unseen*.

Others featured in the Gala included French chanteuse Caroline Nin with an unregretable version of Edith Piaf's *Je Ne Regrette Rien*, versatile singer Ali McGregor's take on Louis Prima's *Sing, Sing, Sing* and Beyonce's *Single Ladies*, and high profile musical performers Rachael Beck and Michael Cormick with *Sun and Moon*, the duet from *Miss Saigon.*

But it was the towering presence of Rhonda Burchmore, all legs, pizzazz and red sequins, which captured the Gala audience, especially when, after her swinging version of Miley Cyrus's *Wrecking Ball*, she was awarded the second of the Cabaret Festival's Cabaret Icon awards. (Reg Livermore was last year's inaugural winner)

The very talented Kim Smith, born in Taralgon, Victoria, now resident in New York, made a welcome biennial return to the festival with his new show *Nova Noir*, a mix of electro-pop (his own composition, *Radio*) and renditions of Weimar classics such as his opener, *Pirate Jenny* - Bertolt Brecht's lyrics sung with reptilian intensity and expertly phrased to the last vengeful breath. Dressed in the sort of outfit Helmut Berger might have worn in a Visconti film, Smith sardonically banters with the audience. It is a fusion of wit and campy self-parody – funny and adroitly understated.

He sings classic American material – Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit* and a haunting version of George Gershwin's *Summertime*. In his macabre persona he adds Peter Allen's *Dixie* and Toto Coelo's *Dracula's Tango* (Dracula-la-la – I'm a Sucker for Your Love). With his MD, Benjamin Ickies at the piano, and band members Brett Stafford, guitar, Alana Dawes on bass and Enrico Morena on drums, he deconstructs and extrudes (in Vanilla Fudge grand manner) Sonny and Cher's *Bang Bang* and the Supremes' *You Keep Me Hanging On*.

Kim Smith expertly delivers pastiche, parody and the real thing. He even quotes, for no apparent reason, from Brecht and Weill's *Surabaya Johnny* - cryptically, and with a Peter Lorre flourish – "take that damned pipe out of your mouth, you rat." *Nova Noir* is terrific neo-retro cabaret and we look forward to Kim Smith's even more triumphant return in 2016.

State Theatre of South Australia's contribution to this year's program was a new work, commissioned by Kate Ceberano and written specifically for cabaret favourite Paul Capsis. With text by Nicki Bloom and music and songs by Quentin Grant and Cameron Goodall, *Little Bird* is an undoubted highlight of the festival.

In good folktale tradition a couple yearn to have a child and, prefigured by a falling feather, the mother's wish is granted and a baby known only as Little Bird, arrives. Nicki Bloom's sparse, lyrical text is part fairy story, part changeling ballad as it takes Little Bird beyond the family nest to life in the wider world; first as a married man and then, in a gender morphing shift, to live as a woman with a woodcutter named Rocky.

Little Bird is a picaresque of identity and self-discovery, magically designed and lit by Geoff Cobham, with evocative piano lines from Quentin Grant, enhanced by Belinda Gehlert on violin with added guitar and percussion. Mix in the winsome, melodic songs by Grant and Cameron Goodall and all that is needed is Paul Capsis for things to take off.

Commissioned for Capsis by Kate Ceberano, *Little Bird* displays him at his most versatile and subtly detailed. He narrates this strange transformative story with hypnotic flair and inhabits the stage memorably. Let us hope that *Little Bird* will migrate to other venues beyond this Adelaide season.

There were tribute shows aplenty in the Cabaret Festival – Cecilia Low presented funk queen Betty Davis, Elise McCann rediscovered Lucille Ball, Ruth Rogers-White explored the work of Nina Simone, Blake Bowden sang the hits of Mario Lanza. And former Whitlams lead singer, Tim Freedman, reminded us of the brilliance of Harry Nilsson. A paradox of American song writing, Nilsson achieved success but refused to perform live, he wrote hits, but is best remembered for his versions of other people's songs.

In a well-paced narrative, Freedman channels Harry's Brooklyn whine and gives the concert Nilsson never would, or could have. The singer is represented with songs ranging from Fred Neil's *Everybody's Talkin'*, best selling theme song from *Midnight Cowboy,* to more sharply personal material like *1941*, a song about absent fathers, including Nilsson himself.

There are anecdotes of the talented and famous – including Nilsson close drinking pal, John Lennon. From the time of his first covers of Beatles songs, the Fabs anointed him their favourite interpreter, his pitch perfect voice and complex self-harmonies unrivalled in recorded music of that time. Nilsson and Lennon drunkenly prowled the LA club scene in the mid-1970s and for a short time it wrecked Nilsson's voice and, for a longer time, his health and his career. Freedman's version of Lennon's Plastic Ono lament, *Isolation* captures the pain of that time.

Another collaborator and influence was Randy Newman, largely unknown when Nilsson recorded *Simon Smith and His Amazing Dancing Bear* as a single and then devoted a whole album – *Nilsson sings Newman* - with a splendid showcase of songs including *Living Without You, Cowboy* and *I'll Be Home*.

But as things were spiralling down in Nilsson life, the songs speak for themselves - bright, tuneful, wittily shaped, they are masterpieces of pop – and with albums like *Nilsson Schmilsson* they sold in their millions. *Gotta Get Up, Without You, Together* and *The Puppy Song* - Nilsson wrote and sang them all. Freedman's artful, splendidly presented tribute also gently reminds us that *One* is the loneliest number.

"I have been here in Australia with Cher, and Tom Jones, and Dionne Warwick – and now I'm back as Darlene Love." So the pop diva with more than fifty years in the music business introduced herself on the closing night of the Cabaret Festival. Her profile raised again by *20 Feet From Stardom*, Morgan Neville's 2013 Oscar-winning documentary about unheralded back-up singers, Darlene Love exuberantly reminded us of the string of hit songs and singers she has collaborated with, and in the notorious case of The Crystals, substituted for.

A key vocalist for Phil Spector's Philles label, Love and her group the Blossoms were the actual voices of the Crystals – for their monster 1962 hit*, He's A Rebel* , and its follow-up, *He's Sure the Boy I Love*. Darlene Love also recalls the many artists she sang back-up with – Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra and Marvin Gaye. Included in her set are Marvin Gaye songs – *Ain't it Peculiar, Ain't No Mountain High Enough,* and, a highlight of the set - *What's Going On*.

Given excellent support by the Adelaide Art Orchestra and with her own back-up singers led by her duettist, Milton Van, Darlene Love sang songs she had adorned at some or other – *Da Doo Ron Ron, Killing Me Softly, A Fine Fine Boy*. And with her resounding, crowd-pleasing finale – *He's A Rebel* and *River Deep, Mountain High*, she briefly moved twenty feet closer to the stardom that should have been hers in 1962.

The Raah Project – singer, lyricist, hip hop performer and beats arranger, Ryan Ritchie and violinist and orchestral arranger, Tamil Rogeon – are a tag team of musical explorers who like to work with live orchestras. Fortunately for them the Adelaide Art Orchestra supplied the precision and finesse that these two , sometimes indulgent, performers thrive on. Producing music which crosses Impressionist classical, Mingus style jazz, Chill, Hip Hop and Pop, the Raah Project create lush, lingering sounds with Ritchie crooning songs like *Teardrop* and, from their 2010 debut album *Score*, the haunting ballad *All of Your Things.*

Guest vocalists Kylie Auldist, lead singer for The Bamboos, and cabaret and music theatre star, iOta added to the riches with *Trick of the Light* and *Covered Up in Stars* and Kate Ceberano, onstage for the last time at her festival sang *Wild is the Wind.*

In this incarnation Raah Project lived up to their high ambition in blending orchestral arrangements with improvised vocals. Sometimes Ritchie's hipster antics rankle, but his Hip Hop spontaneity and his smooth pop delivery, augmented by Rogeon's dervish violin and artfully chosen orchestral borrowings, make for delectable listening. The final song, Joy Division's *Love Will Tear Us Apart* was a sublime closer and, somehow apt, as Kate Ceberano sang her adieu.

Murray Bramwell

Daily Review online June 23, 2014.

Boisterous gala ushers in festival without rules

Published: 2015-06-08 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2015

Variety Gala Performance Festival Theatre June 5.

Peter and Jack Teddy Tahu Rhodes, The Idea of North Greta Bradman with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra June 7.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2015 Adelaide Festival Centre Bookings BASS 131 246; adelaidecabaretfestival.com.au until June 20.

The Adelaide Cabaret Festival mid-winter revels have begun. Now in its 15th year, it is currently in the mischievous care of that Lord of Misrule, Barry Humphries.

Soon after he was appointed, he impishly suggested that, for his event, the F-word would be banished, creating just the kind of panicked outrage that has warmed his Dadaist prankster heart for more than 60 years. “There are no rules” is this year’s festival slogan, and no one has been more of a cultural jaywalker than Mr Humphries.

Sampling 15 items from festival program, the Variety Gala was boisterous fun. From the arrival of host Meow Meow, with Barry Humphries on her arm, singing *Willkommen* to the Kabarett, to the final number, *What My Public Means to Me,* featuring gladioli-bearing megastar, Dame Edna, the audience was buzzing.

Humphries was greeted with warmth and enthusiasm, and in return he has gathered artists highlighting Adelaide’s own contribution to international cabaret and comedy. These include Michael Griffiths singing *You’re the Top* from his Cole Porter show, live wire Reuben Kaye, Daniel Koek singing *Gesthemene* from *Jesus Christ Superstar* and Adam Hills proposing that *Advanced Australia Fair* works better to the tune of *Working Class Man.*

The Tap Pack tapped, David Gauci gave a Topol variation with *If I Were a Leading Man* and Christa Hughes delivered AC/DC’s *Back in Black* from her terrific tribute show, *Oz Rockin’ the Ladies Lounge.*

Meow Meow not only ensured the success of the night but her excellent new show, *His Master’s Voice,* featuring Weimar cabaret songs by Brecht, Weill, Hollaender, Spoliansky and others, was also an early highlight.

The Art Orchestra, under the baton of Vanessa Scammell, was again first rate. Briskly directed by Andy Packer and stylishly designed by Wendy Todd, the Gala was a very nice night’s entertainment.

Peter and Jack, a tribute to the extraordinary achievements of early 20th century singer/composers Peter Dawson and Jack O’Hagan, is a project keenly developed by Humphries with director and co-writer, Rodney Fisher. Dawson’s career, from Adelaide to the world concert stage, like that of Jack O’Hagan, composer of more than 600 songs, including numerous Australian classics, is both legendary and shamefully forgotten.

But, with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra in splendid form, Vanessa Scammell again conducting, and outstanding performances from baritone Teddy Tahu Rhodes, soprano Greta Bradman and vocal acrobats, The Idea of North, Peter and Jack are handsomely celebrated.

Narrated by a beaming Barry Humphries, dressed in a velvet smoking jacket, we were treated to a fascinating history, driven by the new technology of gramophone and radio, and the songs which captured an era.

Jack O’Hagan’s *Along the Road to Gundagai*, made even more famous by the *Dad and Dave* radio show, his hero songs about Kingsford Smith, Amy Johnson and *Our Don Bradman,* and his musical *Flame of Desire* (stunningly rendered in the duet by Bradman and Rhodes) all featured.

As did Dawson’s greatest hits - *In a Persian Market*, *Waiata Poi*, *On the Road to Mandalay*, and, in a rousing encore from Teddy Tahu Rhodes, *The Floral Dance*. *Peter and Jack* is not nostalgia, it is a revelation.

Murray Bramwell

Published in edited form as “Boisterous gala ushers in festival without rules” The Australian, June 9, 2015, p.14.

Nights of laughter leave festival on a firm footing

Published: 2015-06-23 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2015 Adelaide Festival Centre

Steve Sheehan's Tristan and Isolde with Norma Knight Festival Theatre Rehearsal Room June 16

Naughty or Nice Ray Jessel The Space June 20

Love Songs for Sir Les Barry Humphries and Guests Festival Theatre June 20.

The Adelaide Cabaret Festival has closed shop and it is all smiles in the counting house. With 45 sold-out shows, and the best box office numbers in its 15 year history, the festival is stronger and more confident than ever.

Steve Sheehan's *Tristan and Isolde*, performed in the catacombs below the Festival Theatre, is an eccentric treasure. Accompanied by soprano Norma Knight, with random guest appearances by Arapahoe, the miniature horse, Sheehan delivers a series of quietly deadpan musical pranks. *Liebestod*, Wagner's famous tragic aria from *Tristan,* is sung in a bogus English translation worthy of Monty Python.

Carting his electric keyboard around the cramped backstage set, Sheehan plays excerpts from Liszt, Chopin, Satie and Bach, while telling non-sequitur jokes. Ms Knight, rising suddenly from the depths of the sofa, Jim Beam bottle in hand, bursts into arias from Puccini and Wagner, while Arapahoe makes another clip-clopping entrance. It is splendidly poised absurdist comedy and Sheehan walks a fine line between nonsense and wistful dreaminess.

Veteran lyricist, composer and comedy writer Ray Jessel had a celebrated sixty year career in music theatre and television, then he became a social media sensation after appearing on *America's Got Talent*. His ditty *What She's Got (The Penis Song)* went viral and, at 85, he is most bemused.

His show *Naughty or Nice* showcases bittersweet songs such as *Whatever Happened to Melody* (written with partner, Cynthia Thompson*)* along with sharp, funny, snappily-rhymed satires like *I'm a Genius* (riffing off the fact that he has a frizzy corona of Einstein hair) *Identity Theft* and the wickedly heretical send-up, *That Old Kurt Weill Song*. Ray Jessel is a jewel.

Barry Humphries opened the festival with a Gala cameo as Dame Edna and concluded ingloriously with Sir Les Patterson. As times change, Les is more unreconstructed than ever, anarchically reminding the Cabaret-Festival-with-no -rules that satire is nobody's friend. The air is blue with jokes and, surrounded by the Les-ettes, he salivates his way through *Help Me Make it Through the Night* and *Release Me*.

Among his associates, Ali McGregor performed a marvelous version of *The Man I Love*, The SongBirds sang close harmonies, Trevor Ashley channelled Shirley Bassey and Lady Rizo sang a torch song for the times, *I Google You*. Again, under Vanessa Scammell, the Adelaide Art Orchestra excelled.

Humphries has described his time as artistic director as "one of the most joyous experiences of my professional life." Certainly, the audience response to him has been rapturous. For the 2016 and 2017 festivals, new co-directors have been announced - Ali McGregor and Eddie Perfect. Both are brimming with talent and already familiar to festival fans. For cabaret in Adelaide, everything old is new again.

Murray Bramwell

"Nights of laughter leave festival on a firm footing", The Australian, June 23, 2015, p.15.

Postscript. On July 17, 2015, Ray Jessel died of natural causes at his home in Studio City, California.

Haunting melodies

Published: 2016-01-11 *Cabaret · Theatre*

Ghost : The Musical Book and lyrics by Bruce Joel Rubin Music and lyrics by Dave Stewart and Glen Ballard Based on the Paramount Pictures film written by Bruce Joel Rubin Ambassador Theatre Group Asia Pacific, GWB Entertainment and Adelaide Festival Centre in association with Colin Ingram, Hello Entertainment and Paramount Pictures.

Festival Theatre, Adelaide Festival Centre. January 9. Tickets: $ 64.90 - $ 129.90 Bookings : BASS 131246 or bass.net.au Until January 31. Duration: 2 hours 45 minutes including interval. National dates: Regent Theatre, Melbourne from February 5, 2016. Theatre Royal Sydney from March 18, 2016. Crown, Perth from May 21, 2016.

Twenty five years after it became the surprise hit of 1990 - grossing $500 million and earning Oscars for writer Bruce Joel Rubin and comedian Whoopi Goldberg - *Ghost* is now a musical. The book has been lightly updated by Rubin and a bunch of likeable songs have been added from UK pop legend and former Eurythmic, Dave Stewart and prodigious writer, and Jagged Little Pill producer, Glen Ballard.

It is still the same odd mix of small-scale romance tragedy and low comedy. Molly Jensen and Sam Wheat have just set up a love nest in their Brooklyn loft and he is murdered in a street mugging. Sam goes to the bogus psychic, Oda May Brown who discovers she really is a spiritual medium and helps our ethereal hero save Molly from the clutches of Carl Bruner, Sam's Wall Street colleague and friend-gone-bad who is killing his pals to cover–up industrial scale money laundering.

Director Matthew Warchus presides over a stylish production which mashes together poignant melodrama with snazzy special effects. With a top-rate creative team including grainy urban images from video and projection designer Jon Driscoll, eye-popping colour from lighting wiz Hugh Vanstone, optical tricks from illusionist Paul Kieve and enveloping soundscapes from Bobby Aitken, *Ghost* is not only amazing to the eye and ear, but keeps a human pulse as well.

Australian fans of the excellent leads, Jemma Rix and Rob Mills, will be delighted to know there is life after *Wicked*. They have real rapport as Molly and Sam, crooning in duets such as the opener *Here Right Now* and *Three Little Words*. Mills delivers a wry version of the righteous classic, *Unchained Melody* and Rix breaks hearts with the gentle pop lyricism of *With You* and *Nothing Stops Another Day*.

As Carl, Alex Rathgeber, plausibly underplays the villain, especially as the first big production number *More*, shrewdly establishes the motivating greed-is-good New York banking culture as a trap for all young number-crunchers. Making Whoopi as the table rapping Oda Mae Brown, near-namesake Wendy Mae Brown, mostly navigates the dated stereotypes of her character - and delivers a show-stopping turn with the Aretha-like, *I'm Outta Here* .

Led by Dave Skelton, the seven piece band is in top form, and the ensemble is crisply drilled for Ashley Wallen's choreography. The subway train scenes- and David Denis's hip-hop Subway Ghost routine – are highlights, as are all the expertly integrated visual effects. Sam walks through walls, objects move of their own volition, poltergeists go bump and gravity is stubbornly defied. *Ghost* is an engaging phantom opera and its theatrics are out of this world.

Murray Bramwell

"Haunting melodies", The Australian, January 11, 2016, p.12.

Four of the Best of the Adelaide Fringe ...So Far

Published: 2016-02-18 *Cabaret · Adelaide Fringe*

The Adelaide Fringe gets ever bigger and more successful. This year an estimated sixty-six thousand citizens turned out for last week's opening parade marking the beginning of the month long Fringe season. On the same day a record 10,000 tickets were sold. With more than 1100 events and 5000 artists, it is the second largest (and second oldest) Fringe after the legendary Edinburgh fixture.

The venues spread around the Adelaide CBD have all been packed. At Rundle Park, Rymill Park and adjacent precincts in Adelaide's East End, The Garden of Unearthly Delights and Gluttony have attracted punters in ever greater numbers, while The Royal Croquet Club, back for a third time, is hooping it up at Victoria Square. Here are some of their top performances.

Torte E Mort (Ukiyo, Royal Croquet Club, 8 pm until Feb 21. Four Stars.)

"I don't do Burlesque" bellows Marie Antoinette aka Anye Anastasia in the deliciously witty *Torte E Morte*. She may not do burlesque but, peeling off her gloves with her teeth and levering herself out of her 18th century French frock and corset seems suspiciously like it.

Marie-Antoinette is back from the French Revolution of 1789 to put the record straight and rehabilitate her reputation at the same time. "There are so many ways to lose your head," she croons in a blizzard of puns, accompanying herself on electric keyboard while a baleful lady-in-waiting holds the mic and musical associate (and occasional hooded executioner) Bec Matthews provides the drums, kazoos, whistles and other aural garnishes.

"I never said let them eat cake," Marie-A protests, "it'll go straight to your hips." But her comeback performance is not having too much success – her options hardly befit a celeb. She becomes a ghost, then a she-Devil in horns and kinky red satin ("there's a Sexpo in Hell") and finally a talking head singing "I Ain't Got No-body." The idea is droll guignol and the execution is terrific. *Torte E Mort* - I've been dying to say this - takes the cake.

Sam Halmarack and the Miserablites (The Parlour, Croquet Club, 7.30. Until Feb 21. Four Stars)

What happens when you're lead singer and the band doesn't turn up ? That's the problem for UK performer Sam Halmarack, guiding light for his band The Miserablites. He is left alone in his headband and zip-up satin jacket like an Echo without The Bunnymen. Fortunately he has a rehearsal DVD to show us -complete with lyrics, vocal charts, and key changes.

Drawing us closer to the stage like moths to the smoke machine, Sam recruits new members for the band. A young woman is picking out notes on an elderly Roland keyboard, another needs no encouragement to set up behind the drum kit. Sam is musical director, while his DVD shows us his rehearsal room (full of his mum's un-ironed washing) and he glosses his often deeply personal lyrics. I am not a has-been he explains because *I Never Was Been.* A particularly hectic tirade is, he reminds us, ironically entitled *This Is Romance.*

This show is a neat little parcel of deadpan wit. To the land of Norman Gunston, such sustained gormlessness is a welcome visitor. *We Will Never Give Up*, Sam Halmarack sings above our choral refrain- and he doesn't . Nor does his shrewdly fond send-up of 90's electro-pop. It has the crowd calling itself back for an encore.

The Pianist (The Panama Club, Croquet Club, 6 pm. Until Feb 28. Five Stars)

There is no more strict decorum than that of piano recital. To be serious, dignified, self possessed : these are essential elements – and in *The Pianist*, Thomas Monckton knows this well. It is unfortunate, then, that it takes him six minutes to even find his way through the curtains to come on stage. And then there is the forgotten sheet music, and the chandelier that is right in his way when he approaches the ever-elusive keyboard. And the lid that won't open, and the leg ...

With perfect timing, Monckton's gangly musician, battles with the multiple - and multiplying - adversities which beset him. This excellent, silent slapstick, is cued down to the nanosecond and brimming with visual gags. His sorties into the audience- to remonstrate with the lighting desk operator, or to find a functioning chair – are further thwarted by the fact that he requires someone from the crowd to load him, in ungainly fashion, back on to the podium.

This is splendid physical comedy. Monckton's sustained invention , his rubbery contortions, and his capacity for self-inflicted excruciations remind us of Roadrunner's Coyote. *The Pianist* is classical Looney Tunes.

Fag/Stag (Ukiyo, The Croquet Club, 6.30. Until Feb 28. (Four and a Half Stars)

Fag/Stag is about Jimmy and Corgan, old friends who have much in common. For instance, they both fell in love with, and parted company with, Tamara, who is now getting married to some bloke neither of them like. There were very different reasons for their break-ups though. Jimmy discovered that he really was gay and girls, not even Tamara, could not be for him. And Corgan, cocooned in privilege and parental hand-outs, just couldn't commit and retreated back into his laddish distractions. Now they both have to get suited up for a milestone occasion which challenges them to think about their own thirty-something lives. Slumped in front of their never-ending game of Donkey Kong, both bemoan the fact they can't move to the next level.

Fag/Stag written and performed in alternating monologues by Jeffrey Jay Fowler (Jimmy) and Chris Isaacs (Corgan) is about much more than the divide between gay and straight friends, although it is a shrewd and articulate study of Australian masculinities. It is also provides wider perspectives : on the quiet desperation behind Tinder and Grindr, on self-image anxiety, and suppressed anger and violence.

Funny, satiric, and stylishly written *Fag/Stag* is both entertaining and unsettling in its candour. Both characters reveal the kind of unhappiness and uncertainty few young men willingly admit. Never indulging in mawkishness, *Fag/Stag* is revelatory – and very prepared to take Donkey Kong to a higher level.

Daily Review, February 18, 2016

Far from a Weimar museum, cabaret undergoes a youthful makeover

Published: 2016-06-12 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival

Variety Gala Performance Festival Theatre, Adelaide Festival Centre June 10.

It's that time again. Defying the mid-June wintry blast, the Adelaide Festival Centre opens every door and available performance space for thirteen nights of the best of burlesque, Broadway, music theatre and punk satire. Now in its sixteenth year the Adelaide Cabaret Festival has consolidated a reputation that has attracted legends and innovators from Europe, the UK and the Big Apple itself.

On the Festival Theatre stage to introduce excerpts from their 2016 program in the Variety Gala Performance are artistic co-conspirators Ali McGregor and Eddie Perfect. Jumping two generations from Barry Humphries' Edna-fest last year, McGregor and Perfect bring a flair and brash energy that makes clear that cabaret is not a museum in Weimar and is being very capably re-fashioned – as set designer Wendy Todd illustrates with all manner of cultural glitter and detritus - by young Australians.

First on the bill, after the directors' intro and spruik, is the deadpan Frank Woodley, (guided onstage by Hew Parham's amusingly dithery technician Rudi) singing a strange little song about a boy with an enormous head; Maeve Marsden and Libby Wood followed, belting barrelhouse blues from their show Mother's Ruin: A Cabaret About Gin.

Rhonda Burchmore in a face-covering wig with a giant black bow, raised the roof with a wicked version of Sia's YouTube hit, Chandelier. In flesh coloured tights and a platinum wig, her Twins co-star Trevor Ashley provided the hilarious ingénue choreography.

UK culture-jammer Miss Behave, and her unpredictable assistant Harriet, led the audience in iPhone games and other manic competition, while Otto and Astrid, aka Die Roten Punke, mugged their way through Drink Drink Drink. Andrew Strano sang a disturbingly comic tribute to his identical twin sister, Tripod sampled an item from their show with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, and Cabaret Festival favourite, English singer Barb Jungr sang a jazzy rendering of Things have Changed from her Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen tribute show, Hard Rain.

Robyn Archer, accompanied by Michael Morley and George Butrumlis, reminded us that she is the gold standard for Brecht and Weill with her brilliantly delivered Bilbao Song, and it seemed utterly fitting, that no sooner had she finished, Ali and Eddie presented her with the festival's Icon Award for 2016. Other highlights included Bobby Fox's splendid Frankie Valli tribute, Stay and US chanteuse, Amy G's fetchingly attired singing chicken.

McGregor and Perfect, accompanied by the young Cabaret Class of 2016 and the excellent house band, Vanessa Scammell and the Scammers, closed the night with Old Friends from Sondheim's Merrily We Roll Along. With the full cast finale the two directors beamed with evident pleasure at the rapturous applause. This is proving an excellent baton change, and the Gala, ably directed by Andy Packer, a boisterous new beginning.

The Cabaret Festival runs until June 25. Bookings at BASS 131 246 or bass.net.au

"Far from a Weimar museum, cabaret undergoes a youthful makeover", The Australian, June 13, 2016, p.16.

Breath of Heaven

Published: 2016-06-20 *Cabaret · Music*

Lisa Fischer and Grand Baton Dunstan Playhouse Adelaide Festival Centre June 18.

Murray Bramwell

Lisa Fischer has performed on the biggest stages in the world. She played to more than 500,000 people in Rio, and to sold-out stadiums from London to Berlin, the US to Australia. Since 1989 – along with keyboard player Chuck Leavell and bassist Darryl Jones – Fischer has been an indispensible part of The Rolling Stones touring band. Stones fans will never forget her show-stopping solo at the Adelaide Oval, reprising Merry Clayton's legendary vocal riff in Gimme Shelter – and making it indelibly her own. Fischer was also a long time singer for Luther Vandross and accompanied Tina Turner and Sting.

We now know much more about Lisa Fischer – along with Merry Clayton, Darlene Love , Claudia Lennear and other rock vocalists – from Morgan Neville's 2014 Oscar–winning documentary, 20 Feet from Stardom, a memorable, and provocative exploration of the role (and plight) of back-up singers who stand near the spotlight but never quite in it.

Lisa Fischer has always had a solo career – her first album, So Intense, was released back in 1991 - but it has had its interruptions. Scheduled to play last year's Cabaret Festival, she then cancelled because of Stones concert commitments. At last, in 2016, Adelaide audiences have the chance to see her - centre stage in all her brilliance.

And surely there is no better time. Touring with soul-psychedelic trio, Grand Baton, Fischer is undoubtedly at a career high point, with a cabaret scale show which is breathtaking in its intimacy and technical flair.

The Saturday night set in the Dunstan Playhouse begins with greetings and introductions. As the stage fills with a purple haze of downspots, Fischer makes immediate connection with the audience and identifies the band – Aidan Carroll on bass, drummer Thierry Arpino and musical director and multi-instrumentalist J.C. Maillard. Then she begins vocalising – humming, trilling, entwining her voice with Maillard's acoustic guitar as they begin a ten minute exploration of Amy Grant's Breath of Heaven (Mary's Song). "I have travelled many moonless nights / I am waiting in that silent prayer. " It has both a gospel gravity and a spiralling ethereal questioning as Fischer reveals both her strength and fragility.

Using dual microphones – one for reverb and echo effects, the other for her soaring multi-octave vocal excursions, - Fischer is a marvel of expression and control. From bell-like soprano to sultry contralto, it is claimed she spans a range from A2 to G6.

From drummer Arpino's intro, using timpani mallets, and Carroll's driving upright bass, Fischer leads into Eric Bibb's blues classic, Don't Ever Let Nobody Drag Your Spirit Down. J-C Maillard takes up his SazBass (an eight stringed electroacoustic instrument based on the Turkish baglama) to add some tasty syncopation as Fischer's mercurial vocals redefine the blues for the 21st century.

Several mash-ups follow – Freedom, and Railroad Earth's Bird in a House - featuring great drumming and Maillard, fleet-fingered on guitar and Rhodes keyboard. Then, the band goes full throttle into Led Zeppelin's Rock and Roll. Fischer is in full belter mode and Maillard reaches for his fuzz pedal for some jazzy Hendrixisms - before segue-ing into Fischer's own Grammy-winning soul ballad, How Can I Ease the Pain.

With her long association with Jagger and Richards, it is hardly surprising that Lisa Fischer has become an inventive interpreter of their songs. Miss You, Jagger's pouty lament from Some Girls, is expertly extruded by Fischer into a performance that begins with a catchy groove from the band, bass and drum rippling, guitar riffing, and Maillard adding some Daft Punk beatboxing. Fischer's majestic voice then soars once again, as the four musicians carry us through eleven minutes of jazz-rock virtuosity.

"I was born in a crossfire hurricane" drawls Fischer as the band sashay into Jumping Jack Flash, Thierry Arpino's crisp drumming etching the beat with Carroll's rich bass and Maillard playing his SazBass like an electric oud and adding multilayered dervish Qawwali vocals, as Jack becomes a very different kind of gas, gas, gas. Fischer glides and twirls as a song, thumped out on concert stages for forty years, transforms into a modal earth dance, an ecstatic celebration with a high priestess of song officiating.

The set closes with : "The lights are on/you're not home". You might as well face it – it's Robert Palmer's Addicted to Love. From a sweet, insinuating intro Fischer's powerful vocal climbs again – stronger than Tina, more majestic than Adele. The trio -Maillard in full Fender whine, the rhythm section rock solid and increasingly urgent - carries her through surge after surge, wave after wave of rock and roll electricity.

And for an encore – beginning with Fischer's sweet crooning over a trickling acoustic guitar : "Childhood living is easy to do / The things you wanted I bought them for you / Graceless lady you know who I am / You know I can't let you slip through my hands " Wild Horses. This time without Mick's faux twang and nasal whine, but deconstructed and reassembled as a soul aria that envelopes us in sound and feeling; too lucid to be called bewitching, too open-hearted to be mesmerising.

Lisa Fischer is a superb artist and Grand Baton are perfect collaborators. The audience was on its feet for the final curtain . We all knew we had seen and heard something exceptional - and splendid. Wild horses couldn't drag us away.

The Barefoot Review, June 20, 2016.

The Best of the Adelaide Fringe(So Far) # 2

Published: 2017-03-02 *Comedy · Adelaide Fringe*

Daily Review More Adelaide Fringe

Murray Bramwell

Fauna Ukiyo, Royal Croquet Club February 26. FOUR stars

The creatures in *Fauna* have come from a variety of circus habitats. Matt Basquet has a background in martial arts and acro/movement. Imogen Huzel, also from the UK but based in Stockholm, has links with the Belgian Poive Rose company; Finnish trapeze artiste, Enni Maria Lymi works with NoFit State Circus; and the married duo - Rhiannon Cave-Walker (a member of Gravity & Other Myths) and her partner, Daniel Cave-Walker, hail from Byron Bay and Bristol respectively.

This impressive quintet has joined forces for their premiere venture at the Royal Croquet Club, in collaboration with percussive guitarist Geordie Little, from Adelaide, now currently based in Berlin.

"Switch off your devices and switch on your cerebrals " the show announces as all five glide in slow motion unison bathed in pastel light. A statement about *Fauna* being a place of discovery disintegrates into deliberate gibberish as the performers break off into a series of impressive routines – handstands, splits, flips, duet cartwheels, precarious workouts on hand balancing stands and dynamic trapeze stunts.

Fauna are a highly-skilled troupe and on stage with them, Geordie Little's nimble guitar accompaniment, along with a range of FX pedals, loops and other phase effects completes the virtuosic spectacle.

As the company undertakes a succession of dazzling acrobatics, some of it akin to dance choreography, various animal personas are presented. Pecking orders are established, males lock horns in rivalry, mateship rituals are played out and predators and foragers challenge the status quo.

But this is where the ambition of the narrative is perhaps not equal to the technical excellence of the piece. In parts where expressive acting is required the work becomes self-conscious and awkwardly solemn when playful humour would better serve.

We are told, by voiceover, belatedly in the performance, that *Fauna* is exploring instinctual, primal animal behaviours. But, like the abandoned introduction, it seems ponderous and insufficient commentary. *Fauna* either needs more dramaturgy or none at all. The company's physical gifts are splendid enough - especially the group set pieces which conclude the performance. Maybe the best way to describe our inner mammal is to lighten up a little.

I Am Somebody Sirqus Alfon Ukiyo, Royal Croquet Club February 26. FOUR stars

An image of an antiquated computer appears on a large screen: the words read : Sirqus Alfon, with a dot matrix message inviting us to use our phones throughout the performance and post videos on social media with the Sirqus hashtag. Everything here is public domain. The show is called *I am Somebody* and its exuberant intention is to make everyone part of the entertainment.

Presented by an endearingly hyper-manic trio of musical pranksters - Babham, Emilio, and Ejve (a.k.a. Martin Ostman and Erik Rosales, from Sweden, plus Norwegian Henrik Strindberg) - this is circus with an S, pumped with techno pop, performed against back-projections of vintage Nintendo games from the pixellated 80s, and featuring delightfully inventive audience interaction.

Dressed in pastel military tunics, they look like clowns from a banana republic. With name patches on their lapels and 1950s soda fountain caps they take up instruments – megaphone, electric bass and a baby drum kit - and caper like a boy band. It is clever and fast and fun.

They simulate a boxing fight inside giant computer graphics from Nintendo's KO or something similar, they spray webs of lasers through the crowd and perform air drum solos in perfect sync with the well-drilled soundtrack.

Babham has the crowd singing *I am Somebody*- like an anthem at a revival meeting. It is satiric. But when he puts his phone on a selfie stick and films the crowd and the images instantly spring up on the big screen, it makes participation feel like a nice idea.

Later, he takes us through a number of disconnected gestures, including miming the bowing action on a violin, and films it all. We are distracted by a funny old Three Stooges clown act with a stolen banana, and then in quick succession, a rapid edit with added sound effects and zany music turns the random video footage of the audience into an orchestral celebration and a memento of a night at the retro-cyber circus.

Sirqus Alfon are brimming with low tech/ high tech bright ideas. The green lasers plucked like instrument strings create a lyrical effect and the daffy Olympic acrobatics, simulated by the trio lying on the floor and their moves projected vertically on to the screen, is low comedy so inviting that members of the audience jumped up and had a shot at it too. In this show, being a big screen somebody is irresistible. .

Hannah Gadsby: Nanette The Factory, The Garden of Unearthly Delights February 24. FOUR stars

Hannah Gadsby has called her latest show: *Nanette*. As she says, she needed a title and that's what came up. But there's more to it than that. Gadsby recalls going into an un-named café in an unidentified small town in regional Australia and the sign on the counter read ; "Today's barista is Nanette. " Nanette, she recalls had a kind face- the kind of face you could chop wood on. The encounter was fleeting, unfriendly, and dismissive. And took Gadsby back to her early life growing up as an often ostracised outsider, as a young unfeminine-looking lesbian woman, in North West Tasmania.

Gadsby's narrative is a stream of very cogent consciousness. She has an effortlessly comic gift and the laughs come readily. But here also there is a persistent and often disturbing thread of sadness which is never far from the surface. She makes it clear that she is not finding her usual humorous groove. I hate comedy, she says flatly, it's a joke. Laughter is not the best medicine . She'd recommend penicillin.

Recent events have some bearing on her perspective, she notes. Like when she wrote an uncharacteristically forthright Facebook post condemning the idea of the Australian plebiscite to determine legislation on same-sex marriage. Being hostage to the Nanettes of the world made her gloomy- and angry - and the viral impact of her on-line comments unexpectedly drew her into a different kind of public prominence. Including being invited to write an op-ed column for The New York Times.

Buoyed by her late grandmother's favourite expression – "It's all part of the soup. It's too late to take out the onions now ", Hannah Gadsby broods on the way she used jokes to deflect the pain of coming out as a homosexual woman, and to repress and reframe and deep and abiding abuses and traumas in her teens and early twenties. She realises she does want to take the onions out of the soup - and is close to tears as she does so.

Encouraged by a strongly supportive audience, Hannah Gadsby is taking the comedy format into personal/political territory that is beyond jokes and deals with a very different kind of punch line. It seems to have its own disturbing momentum, but is also articulate and skilfully managed. She is testing boundaries and, at times, steps over them, at some risk to herself . But Gadsby is lighting up dark and nasty corners and exorcising those demons of covert, unpunished sexual abuse that are very much in the public mind in Australia at the present time.

Despite the gravity of some of the subject matter, Hannah Gadsby also memorably steers her way through the kind of droll, witty material that only she can deliver. And Nanette does come back at the end. Go and see this brave, socially incisive and mordantly funny show - and find out for yourself what happens next.

"The Best of the Adelaide Fringe(So Far) # 2", *Daily Review*, March 2, 2017.

Smorgasbord of tasty bites from a perky and intriguing festival menu

Published: 2017-06-16 *Cabaret*

Variety Gala Performance Her Majesty's Theatre June 9. Adelaide Cabaret Festival Until June 24. Bookings : bass.net.au or 131 246

The Adelaide Cabaret Festival is not its usual self this year. The world at the Festival Centre has been turned upside down by demolition and reconstruction on every side. There has been a strategic retreat to Her Majesty's Theatre (especially since the *Matilda* season has taken over the Festival Theatre) but with a new, more snug, location for the Wintergarden, and the addition of the Magic Mirrors spiegeltent, life is still a cabaret and the program as perky and intriguing as ever.

Heralded by the gluteus maximus techno burlesque of the *Briefs* male troupe - fluttering peacock quill fans along with their tailfeathers - the festival co-directors, Ali McGregor and Eddie Perfect, greet the opening Variety Gala audience, spruiking a second year of cabaret programming. "Within the rubble and chaos" Perfect beams, "there are gems".

Including his opening duet with McGregor – an alleged out-take from his yet to be completed musical, *Beetlejuice* which he described as "the opening song for a musical about death." For something more familiar, the *Three Mikados*- David Collins, Amy G, and the hilariously self-important Colin Lane - provide a Gilbert and Sullivan excerpt, *I am so Proud*, as cleverly funny as it is vocally precise.

Over its seventeen years the Cabaret Festival has showcased outstanding international talents and this year, in the first weekend alone, we saw a splendidly minimal pop-jazz set from guitarist Bill Frisell (featuring vocalist Petra Haden), the vocal theatrics of Grammy winner Dianne Reeves, and the impish, confessional, outlandish Alan Cumming singing his Sappy Songs. Equally, it has presented new works to keep building the repertoire.

Vigil, written by Steve Vizard with music by Joe Chindamo, is an ambitious new festival commission, a musical monologue about a prodigal daughter returning to Australia and her dying mother. It features the impressive Christie Whelan-Browne who, for the Gala, selected one of *Vigil*'s highlight songs - *Pretty Little Thing,* a poignant cameo of regret and expectations unfulfilled.

For some comic gender-bending, New York drag king Murray Hill (aka Buzzbee Gallagher) with a pencil moustache and a Groucho delivery, hits the stage running, mercilessly lampooning and delighting the front rows. "You're thinking: Is he a man ? Is he a woman ?" the portly Hill challenges. "The answer is : No." Sydney club veteran Carlotta equally rules the stage, celebrating fifty years as *Queen of the Cross* with a wickedly re-written version of Sondheim's *Follies* classic, *I'm Still Here*.

Perfect and McGregor return for solos – his, the touchingly pensive, *Quiet* from *Matilda*, her's the spiralling *Carousel* from next weekend's Jacques Brel tribute. UK duo Michael Roulston and Sarah-Louise Young sing one of their *Songs for Lovers (and Other Idiots)*, Naomi Price delivers a commanding version of *Eleanor Rigby* from her show *Lady Beatle* and Michael Griffiths locomotions his way through a medley from his *Songs of Kylie*.

The Variety Gala is always a welcome feature of the opening weekend, showcasing the range of performers, ably supported by musical director, Michael Tyack, and the resident cabaret orchestra, introducing the Class of Cabaret choir and- with a mashup finale of Hi NRG pop and Gorillaz' "Feel Good Inc"- setting the pace for sixteen days of cabaret spritz.

"Smorgasbord of tasty bites from a perky and intriguing festival menu", *The Australian*, June 16, 2017, p.16

Jacques Brel is alive and well and visiting Adelaide

Published: 2017-06-19 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2017

Brel – The Immortal Troubadour Dunstan Playhouse Adelaide Festival Centre June 18.

It is nearly forty years since Belgian-born, French singer songwriter Jacques Brel left the world. But as this tribute gala, devised by Adelaide Cabaret Festival co-director Ali McGregor attests, he is an immortal troubadour and the more time passes, the better his songs sound. It is currently apt to note his influence on David Bowie and Leonard Cohen, but his songs have been interpreted (and mauled) by singers as disparate as Sinatra, Nina Simone, Judy Collins, Shirley Bassey, Scott Walker, John Denver and Rod McKuen.

Brel himself sold millions of albums and appeared in ten movies. With his gaunt face, soulful eyes and punk romantic demeanour, he embodied the whole pop existentialist gamut from Piaf and Jean Paul Belmondo to Serge Gainsbourg and Johnny Halliday. Even now, he connects French New Wave with the New Romanticism and the latest hipster chic. Watching the moody black-and-white video footage which opens Ali McGregor's production - Brel hunched over a cigarette, grinning boyishly, reflecting solemnly, calling out stupidity wherever he see it. We are reminded that he is still the thinking person's croissante.

La Valse a Mille Temps, the crazy carousel song, vibrantly delivered in English translation by McGregor, sets the pace for the evening. With Musical Director Charly Zastrou at the piano, the band (bass, drums, violin, saxophone and reeds) conjures the swirling rhythms as they gather pace - full tilt, a mile a minute, for Jacques Brel's signature tune, The Waltz with a Thousand Beats.

"If I could be for just one hour … " - the words of Brel's *Jackie (La Chanson de Jacky*) a Walter Mitty fantasy of being a charismatic singer. It is performed by cabaret vocalist, Dusty Limits, but the phrasing is tricky and Mort Shuman's translation sounds clunky these days. In his later, more assured, contribution *Le Moribund* (The Dying Man) Dusty Limits hits the mark with Brel's melancholy ballad of farewell.

Les Bourgeois, Brel's excoriating serve against middle class complacency, is given exhilarating intensity in Michaela Burger's stunning version, snarling the French cadences as she prowls the stage. Similarly Johanna Allen's pensive reading of *La Chanson Des Vieux Amants,* with Charly Zastriu excellent on piano, is a highlight of the evening.

Also capturing Brel's more contemplative mood (and his own premonition of early death perhaps) is *The Old Folks (Les Vieux*) a study of ageing while the clock ticks. The terrific Kim David Smith, in Clark Kent glasses (well away from his mercurial Morphium Kabarett persona) is admirably restrained, navigating Brel's phrasing and insistent metronomes with perfect timing.

More problematic perhaps, is the contribution from the prodigiously talented, hyper-manic Meow Meow. Her first item is the blackly matter-of-fact *Au Suivant*, Brel's vignette of a young virgin soldier lining up – " In the portable brothel of an army on campaign/ Au suivant, au suivant,/ Next one, next one…"

Quite appropriately, in Meow Meow's interpretation, this loveless ritual is told as much from the sex worker's wretched perspective, as the disillusioned young man. It is a grimly comic song about the travesty of love. It cannot be melodramatic. But it also can't be too flip, and in this instance, Meow Meow lets the slapstick take over.

With her later number – Brel's most famous signature perhaps – *Ne Me Quitte Pas (If You Go Away*) – Meow really goes over the top. It is like a pitch invasion or a photo-bombing in black fright wig. The house lights come up and she recruits three members of the audience to drape themselves around her, serving as a microphone holder, a human plinth, and generally providing surrogate audience discomfort – all while Meow demolishes any semblance of nuance from the ballad.

It becomes parody, of course, and yes, that's funny and would be fine in Meow Meow's own show where she can - and brilliantly does – shape the moods and contrasts over a variety of songs.

But this Brel vehicle is not robust enough to easily contain quite such a level of gate-crashing focus plunder. *Brel - The Immortal Troubadour* does all the things the Adelaide Cabaret Festival does well – it's a one-off performance, with excellent production details, and natty décor from designer Kathryn Sproul. It is an impromptu gathering of festival artists, a tad under-rehearsed, flying by their wits and providing something special and unique.

To round off what has been an interestingly crowded Brel hour, festival co-director Eddie Perfect appears - rasping the grimy, demi-monde lyrics of *Amsterdam*. Ali McGregor concludes, with *If We Only Have Love*; the composer at his least cynical and most hopeful.

"Jacques Brel is alive and well and visiting Adelaide." Daily Review, June 22, 2017.

The Sound of Falling Stars

Published: 2017-06-24 *Cabaret · Theatre · Music*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival Murray Bramwell Forever Young

The Sound of Falling Stars Cameron Goodall with George Butrumlis and Enio Pozzebon Written and directed by Robyn Archer. Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre. June 21. Four Stars

"Things they do look awful c-c-old" sang The Who, talking about their generation, "I hope I die before I get old." But the bittersweet legend of an early death long preceded 1965. Take your pick – you might start with Goethe's 1774 *sturm und drang* best-seller *The Sorrows of Young Werther;* or that Marvellous Boy, Thomas Chatterton, dead at seventeen; John Keats expiring from tuberculosis at 26; or Percy Shelley drowned at 29. The list is long and the mythologising is relentless.

It is no wonder that the 20th century perpetuation of this gemlike memorial flame - in Hollywood films and pop music - is even more intense. Death cults and the mass media were made for each other. Nowadays, the smartphone has taken recreational grieving to an altogether new level.

In *The Sound of Falling Stars*, a journey up the stairway to Rock and Roll Heaven, writer and director Robyn Archer delves the music, medical records and motivations of those celebrated singers who died before their time. This is not a new idea and the project is sometimes unwieldy, but it has a set-list to die for and a true star performer in Cameron Goodall to bring it all to life.

Beginning with those immortals from the 1950s, Elvis Presley and Hank Williams, crooning *Are You Lonesome Tonight ? Your Cheating Heart* and the blood-chilling *Angel of Death*, Goodall is in full command of his daunting task – to morph, channel, impersonate and interpret his way through a list of some of the finest vocalists ever recorded. And he gives it a very good shake.

The chronology has some surprises including vocal ones. He delivers a rich operatic tenor for *O Sole Mio,* introducing the short life in the fast lane for pop Caruso, Mario Lanza . Archer rewrites *Drink, Drink, Drink* to include "Drink, Diet, more Drink" to indicate his overeating, crash dieting, alcohol problems and eventual heart attack at 38. Also showcasing his vocal range is *Beyond the Sea*, the Bobby Darin (infarction at 37) hit, along with *Splish Splash* which also topped the charts

Death by aviation features, of course. Mercifully we don't get *American Pie,* but Goodall takes his hat off to Buddy Holly (*Rave On/Be Bop a Lula*) The Big Bopper, and the seventeen year old Hispanic heart-throb, Richie Valens with a vibrant version of *La Bomba*, splendidly supported, including with back-up vocals, from the band – George Butrumlis on accordion and Enio Pozzebon on keyboards.

From pop to soul – and gospel- the melancholy list turns to Otis Redding and the ill-fated Sam Cooke. Again, Goodall's renderings of (*Sittin' on)The Dock of the Bay* and *Try a Little Tenderness* are terrific and we want more than just snippets of Cooke's *Cupid* and the immortal classic *You Send Me*.

The end of the 60s decade is well-represented, of course, since the casualty list was unusually high – and especially shocking when Hendrix, Janis Joplin (who is unmentioned here) and Jim Morrison died within months of each other. The Jim Morrison cameo is vocally compelling – including *Light My Fire* and *People are Strange*- but the impersonation, as with some others, verges on caricature and undermines - not the solemnity, that is not the issue – but the credibility of the musical tributes.

There are a number of highlights in this very high calibre production. Goodall's version of John Lennon's *Mother,* brilliantly captures its primal anguish, and the uncanny replication of both Buckleys, *pere* and *fils,* Tim and Jeff, with *Hong Kong Bar, Song to the Siren* and The Smiths cover, *I Know it's Over,* is outstanding.

The singer-songwriter acoustic material works well every time. The band creates a surprisingly big sound when required (despite the absence of bass and percussion) and creates atenderness with, for example, the Nick Drake material. Goodall is an excellent guitarist – 12 string for the Buckleys and intricate finger-picking for Drake's introspective minstrelsy on *Fly* and *Way to Blue*. Elliot Smith also gets a deserved inclusion with *Waltz #2* but didn't need the chest stabbing gestures – that seemed, shall we say, heartless.

It is a great buzz to see a brand new show that exceeds even the high expectations that Robyn Archer and these superb musicians merit but there are elements that are still not yet resolved. It refers to more than thirty singers in its catalogue of the deceased and the asides on Sal Mineo, Michael Hutchence, Marc Hunter and others become hasty and flippant. Better to dwell longer on fewer and sing these classic ballads and blues in their full thrall.

Also, it may add 'edge' to have a frame narrative from Sid Vicious but his thoughts on either music or the fragility of existence are not memorable. Sid was named Vicious after his ferret and he was a pathetic lost soul not a Romantic halcyon - so Archer's commentary on the rock and roll death wish is not well located.

Far better is the actual conclusion to this night in the tower of song, Kurt Cobain's enigmatically brilliant *Smells Like Teen Spirit.* "With the lights out, it's less dangerous/Here we are now/ entertain us/ I feel stupid and contagious/Here we are now/entertain us."

Amazingly, Cameron Goodall still has enough in the tank to make this an extraordinary finale – triumphant, vehement and deeply wounded. It speaks for all the evening's stars now fallen – sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground.

We will be hearing more of *The Sound of Falling Stars*. It will not be dying young, that's for sure.

Daily Review, June 24, 2017.

Songs of Love and Revolution

Published: 2017-06-25 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival

Songs of Love and Revolution Closing Variety Gala Her Majesty's Theatre June 24.

The Adelaide Cabaret Festival always begins, and concludes, with a Variety Gala. It has been a feature of the event since it began seventeen years ago and it highlights one of the Festival's most endearing aspects - which is that, temporarily at least, it creates a community of artists.

This is much remarked upon by internationals and out-of-towners. It is a very hospitable festival, they say, and it gathers its performers close. Even New Yorkers remark that they feel part of something unusually busy and vibrant. For once, cabaret is not some marginal activity in out of the way venues. It has critical mass – and everyone has a good time.

The closing event, *Songs of Love and Revolution* captures that sense of collective endeavour. Artists pitch in with items, most often drawn from their solo shows and everyone sings their socks off. These are one-off shows, not much prep, but anchored by the excellent house band (this time under the direction of Mark Ferguson). They are adroitly organised (this year by director Zac Tyler) and the audience is primed to have a good time.

Proceedings begin with Ali McGregor and Cameron Goodall announcing that *The Revolution Will Not be Televised.* Gil Scott-Heron's mordant lyrics have been updated for even greater topicality. Eddie Perfect, co-director of the festival with McGregor, joins the fray and a medley emerges – *Sunday Bloody Sunday, Beds are Burning and Children of the Revolution.*

One third of Tripod, Simon Hall takes the stage with a memorable version of *Going to a Town*, Rufus Wainwright's prophetic depiction of all things Trump- "I am going to a town that has already been burnt down/ I am going to a place that has already been disgraced/ I'm gonna see some folks who have already been let down/ I'm so tired of America."

For some laughs Peter and Bambi Heaven (Asher Treleaven and Gypsy Wood) husband and wife 70s retro-kitsch magic and dance act hilariously unravel into a bump and grind version of *Abracadabra* "want to reach out and grab ya" which would leave the Steve Miller Band wondering what they had unleashed. Also offering some sexual revolution are Strange Bedfellows (aka Kanen Breen and Jacqueline Dark) and their punk-burlesque homage to auto-erotic dexterity. It is all in the name of Jesus but the take-home message is "the clitoris is the devil's doorbell."

The Cyrens- Amanda Harrison, Chelsea Renton-Gibb and Melissa Laughton - sang *It's Not Where You Start* from their show dedicated to the songs of Cy Coleman, the neophyte Class of Cabaret 2017 presented The Beatles' two bob each way *Revolution* and, just for something neither about love or revolution, Eddie Perfect sang *I Gotta Get Out of this House*, ghost-written, you might say, for his forth-coming musical *Beetlejuice.*

New York singer and musical polymath, Michael Feinstein, whose own show *Sinatra and Friends* had wowed audiences on Friday, lit up the stage again with Alan and Marilyn Bergman's song from the 1978 musical *Ballroom - Fifty Percent*, updated and poignantly transformed to reference same-sex marriage and its resistance.

In what seemed like a mega version of *The Voice*, the big vocals followed one after another – the fabulously pregnant Catherine Alcorn sang from her show *Cathartic,* Ali McGregor nearly peeled the plaster off Her Majesty's elderly ceiling with a near-excessive version of the INXS hit *Never Tear Us Apart* and Cameron Goodall repeated his terrific performance from the festival hit, *The Sound of Falling Stars,* with a splendid return to Sam Cooke's soul anthem *A Change is Gonna Come.*

Reuben Kaye, whose wittily named solo show, *Journey to the Centre of Attention* drew strong praise, literally dazzled the audience as he entered from a door at the back of the stage bathed in stage fog and backlit by a stack of blinding headlights. *I am Going to Break into You Heart* he roars*,* like a glam Nosferatu. Iggy Pop would have been very pleased.

American singer Lady Rizo, who featured her suckling child in her show *Multiplied*, describes herself as being on a "continual apology tour" referring to current political events in Washington. Being part of the Cabaret Festival she describes as "just what the doctor ordered" and bursts into *Song of Freedom* as a way, perhaps, of reclaiming the First Amendment.

The closing Variety Gala is also an opportunity for speeches, thanks and presentations. The Cabaret Festival Icon award which has been awarded since 2013 (previous recipients are Reg Livermore, Rhonda Burchmore, Frank Ford and Robyn Archer). In 2017 it was given to Debra Byrne, who due to a medical emergency could not attend. She was making an excellent recovery, Ali McGregor reassured us and Vika Bull graciously accepted on her behalf.

In other news, it was announced that Eddie Perfect was standing down as co-director to move to New York to work not only on his *Beetlejuice* musical, but another on *King Kong* as well. He and Ali McGregor have delivered two excellent festivals. They inherited an event in good order and invigorated and rejuvenated it as well. It is very pleasing that Ali McGregor will continue as sole Artistic Director. She has been an excellent leader both from the stage and behind the scenes. Perfect will continue to participate in the commissioning aspect of the festival, a welcome patronage for encouraging new Australian music theatre.

For the finale, Eddy Perfect led the troops with another of his new songs. It was entitled *The Light*. Whether it promised revolution is unclear, but like the Adelaide Cabaret Festival itself, it provided a beacon. And, judging from the audience response to the Variety Gala (and to the sixteen days of festivities) there was plenty of love in the room as well.

FOUR stars

Daily Review, June 26, 2017.

Old chums come help Ali party

Published: 2018-06-11 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival Variety Gala Festival Theatre. June 8. Until June 23. Bookings : adelaidecabaretfestival.com.au or 131 246.

After parlaying the last two Adelaide Cabaret Festivals with co-conspirator Eddie Perfect, Artistic Director, Ali McGregor has 2018 all to herself. Her festival theme is "Eyes Open" and the diverse program brings 53 acts and more than 300 performers together for 16 days of eye and ear-popping cabaret.

For the Variety Gala opening, the recently re-opened Festival Theatre foyer was buzzing with red carpet plumage display and conspicuous anticipation. Directed by Zac Tyler, with musical direction from Michael Tyack and the outstanding house band, the Gala showcases new discoveries and familiar faces.

After a welcome to Country (which included a *Haere Mai* from the Modern Maori Quartet) Ali McGregor, also issued her cabaret *willkommen*. McGregor is a vivacious host whose enthusiasm for her task is warmly received.

Opening the bill is Todd McKenney (in town for *Bosom Buddies*, a duet show with Nancye Hayes) singing the mawkish favourite, *Delta Dawn,* with vocal help from the young interns, Class of Cabaret. Opera singer Antoinette Halloran delivers some pitch perfect coloratura burlesque with an excerpt from her solo show, *Taking it Up the Octave*- highlights from Verdi's *Rigoletto* with libretto taken verbatim from *50 Shades of Grey*.

The irresistible Modern Maori Quartet supply smooth harmonies and a reminder of old-style Polynesian variety showbands with a medley of wartime favourites complete with haka inflections. Local favourite Matt Gilbertson returns as Hans, in spangled sailor suit, singing the *Theme from the Love Boat*, and erstwhile Adelaide pop idol, Mark Holden, dressed in his circus ringmaster coat, charmed us with Vanessa Amorosi's *Shine*.

From Port Arthur, Texas, just like rock legend Janis Joplin, Amber Martin performed *Maybe* from her *Janis* tribute show, while fellow American, Christina Bianco sang *Life is a Cabaret*, comprehensively channelling Liza with a Z, Streisand, Bernadette Peters and Celine Dion. Her show is called *Me, Myself and Everyone Else.*

Nancye Hayes also delighted the crowd with Liza Minnelli's *My Own Best Friend*. Another highlight was a raucously funny version of John Farnham's *Touch of Paradise,* from Em Rusciano's *Difficult Woman*, a new festival commission.

Ali McGregor sang an intriguing, vocally athletic item from her *Yma Sumac*, *1950s Peruvian Songbird* show, as well as presenting the Cabaret Festival Icon award. This year's recipient was David Bates, the owner and operator of The Famous Spiegeltent. Built in 1920 and revived in 1995, it has provided a celebrated venue for cabaret performances (neo and retro) everywhere from Adelaide to Edinburgh.

The ubiquitous McGregor also performed *I am Woman* (mashed-up with Beyonce) before ushering in Captain Frodo and the Glorious Misfits for a zany Gala finale – CeCe Peniston's 1991 dance hit, *Fina*

Published in slightly abridged form as : "Old chums come help Ali party" *The Australian*, June 11, 2018,13."

Songs for Those Who've Come Across the Seas

Published: 2018-06-22 *Cabaret · Theatre*

Created by Cameron Goodall, Quincy Grant, Andy Packer, with Gareth Chin. Slingsby. Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre. Adelaide Cabaret Festival. June 20.

This captivating song cycle, from Adelaide based theatre company Slingsby, begins with a children's book given to a boy by his grandmother. It is called *An Island in Time* and it is the factual story of geological land formation from volcanic upheaval through, by natural selection, to the establishment of flora and fauna, habitat and ecological diversity.

Performed by five on-stage musicians, *Songs for Those Who've Come Across the Seas* is dedicated not to recent human settlement but a process of millions of years. First the molten lava cools, then comes the first grass seed, the detritus of driftwood and gradually birds, animals, and a proliferation of plant species. Those who have come across the seas are essential lifeforms brought by wind and current, by accident and by design.

Slingsby director Andy Packer has, once again, shown his admirable knack for getting all his production ducks in a row. He has gathered together an impressively creative group of artists and fashioned a splendidly balanced production. Many of these collaborators have featured before with Slingsby/Packer projects (including on the recent Helpmann award nominee *Emil and the Detectives*) and here again they have blended to memorable effect.

Firstly, the music. The songs and score, composed by Cameron Goodall and Quincy Grant, with contributions from Gareth Chin Satomi Ohnishi and Leah Flanagan incorporate an immediately appealing range of styles and genres. The opening sequence – crashing seas, bursting volcanoes, the establishment of a new landmass – is heralded by rich washes of prog-rock synths from Quincy Grant, supported by cascades of drumming and percussion from the versatile Satomi Ohnishi. Leah Flanagan follows with the plaintive *Come to Me* – the island's call to new inhabitants – and then joins in sweet harmonies with Cam Goodall for *The Whispering Grasses*.

The arrangements are rich and varied. Grant features on keyboards and saxophone, Gareth Chin on accordion and piano, Goodall on electric, acoustic and 12 string guitars. All at various times use amplified ukeleles for extra effects. Over more than a dozen original songs, the narrative gathers detail and texture. *The Driftwood* is performed in upbeat bluegrass style with Goodall on banjo and he and in Flanagan in close harmony. Leah Flanagan also soars vocally with the *Wandering Albatross* while Goodall describes the lonely fate of *The Adolescent Seal* with poignant effect.

For *The Burrowing Bird*, the musicians shift to a jaunty jug band syncopation, Ohnishi on cowbell and other percussion and *The Dung Beetle*, with Goodall on solo piano, has an almost Flanders and Swann whimsy to it. All kinds of echoes can be found, each piquing our attention and enjoyment – shades of Nick Cave and Kurt Weill in the Apex Predator song , *Tooth and Claw,* for instance, and the Brel-like cadence in Flanagan's lovely lament for the unlucky ones, *Those Who Did Not Make it Here*.

And the lyrics are witty, reflective and often trenchantly sharp – not least in the final couplet of *Tooth and Claw*- "We only live to see tomorrow/ Through some other creature's sorrow." There are many songs which stand out – and with these musicians they are presented at their melodic best. *Seven Petal Flowers* – a duet between Leah Flanagan and Cam Goodall, who also features on 12 string guitar - has an air of wistful Celtic ballad, a reverie soon broken by the mayhem of the following song *The People*, a caustic reminder of the various stages of grief caused by invasive, plundering settlement.

This production is also visually delightful. Designer Ailsa Paterson has used clusters of hanging drapes on which Thom Buchanan's vibrant artwork is projected. His water colour sketches of landscape, seals, birds and the constantly roiling sea are kept in fascinating animation by Visual Systems Engineer Freddy Komp, Motion Graphics Designer Beck Bogert and Technical Designer Chris Petridis. The lighting from Geoff Cobham (newly appointed Artistic Director for Patch Theatre) is especially delectable and effortlessly complements the scenic experience.

Two performances are not enough for this excellent production which has arrived fully formed and ready to tour. *Songs For Those Who've Come Across the Seas* is accessible to all ages and speaks urgently to our sense of stewardship of the environment, not with fearful hectoring, but by celebrating the marvels of our biosphere.

Four and a Half Stars.

Commissioned for Daily Review.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival - Patti LuPone

Published: 2018-06-23 *Cabaret · Theatre · Music*

Patti LuPone with Joseph Thalken Festival Theatre, Adelaide Festival Centre June 21.

Murray Bramwell

One of the many things to like about the Adelaide Cabaret Festival is that, not only is its program filled with new and intriguing performers, it is also a showcase for capital "S" Stars. There have been many over its 17 year history, including such Broadway luminaries as Bernadette Peters, Michael Feinstein, Mandy Patinkin, Stephen Schwartz, and the *Wicked* stars Kristin Chenoweth and Idina Menzel . This year it is Patti LuPone.

Her show, *Don't Monkey with Broadway*, is a survey of a stage career that begins in the 1960s and spans to the present. She has won two Grammies, two Tony awards, and the hearts and minds of audiences everywhere. The enthusiastic reception she received from a fully-primed Adelaide Cabaret Festival audience is no exception.

And it is *Don't Monkey with Broadway* which opens the proceedings, the old standard sardonically peppered with updated references to Brooklyn hipsters and other observations LuPone has to make of the 42nd Street "Walk of Shame". But her reminiscences are upbeat and the show is a celebration of her extraordinary roles in both Broadway musicals and contemporary theatre.

From one of her earliest gig, cast as Rosie in *Bye Bye Birdie*, LuPone sings *A Lot of Livin' to Do* ; from *South Pacific* she selects *Happy Talk* and, recalling her unworldliness about the storyline of *Sweet Charity,* she performs a hilariously gormless version of *Big Spender*. LuPone is an engaging raconteur and her commentary bristles with her love of performance - especially new and innovative material. After her deftly phrased version of *Easy to be Hard*, she retells her fascination with the Sixties hit musical, *Hair*.

She also has had a continuing association with composer Stephen Schwartz, now legendary with the success of *Wicked*, but whose earlier projects, like *The Baker's Wife* and (Studs Terkel's) *Working,* struggled to find audiences then, but now have cult followings. From the former, LuPone sang *Meadowlark*, a song she has made famous, and from *Working* she performed (brilliantly) a short monologue from a process worker describing her numbingly repetitive factory conditions, followed by *Millworker*, a song written for the show by James Taylor.

There is also plenty of the Great American Songbook. *I Could Write a Book* from Rodgers and Hart, a droll reading of *I Cain't Say No* from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma* and *Some People* from *Gypsy* all feature. And to finish the first set, from *Evita*, a role LuPone created for Broadway, of course - *Don't Cry for Me Argentina*.

To open the second half Patti LuPone warmly welcomes excellent local vocalists Gospo Collective to share a bracket of goodies including *Trouble* from *The Music Man*, *Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat* from *Guys and Dolls* and Cole Porter's *Blow Gabriel Blow*. Then for a bonus, LuPone leads them through a dreamy version of *Sleepy Man,* from *The Robber Bridegroom*, a musical in which she performed when part of John Houseman's Acting Company in the early 1970s.

In this effortlessly managed program, Patti LuPone makes her favourites instantly our own. Especially when it's a pin sharp medley from *West Side Story* – conjuring the urgency of *Something's Coming* and wittily singing both sides of Maria and Anita's duet, *A Boy Like That*. Then, in one of many stand-out moments, she turns *Somewhere* into a heartfelt lament, a timeless song made especially timely by the day's news about the plight of migrant children on the Mexican border.

And it wouldn't be a show without Sondheim. Expert interpreter of so many styles Patti LuPone excels with the psychologically insightful social milieu of Stephen Sondheim's chamber musicals. The phrasing and feeling she extracts from his songs, splendidly accompanied by pianist Joseph Thalkin, is exceptional. The choices are also intriguing and satisfying : *Another Hundred People* and *Being Alive* from Company, the title song from *Anyone Can Whistle* and *Not While I'm Around* from *Sweeney Todd*.

The curtain closer is another bouquet to the Great White Way, *Give My Regards to Broadway*. But the justifiably enraptured audience is having none of it. For encores LuPone delivers another superb, witty interpretation – of *The Ladies Who Lunch,* and brings back The Class of Cabaret, and turns off the mics as they croon Bill Evans' wryly tender *Some Other Time*. And then, a last word from this star soloist – *A Hundred Years from Today*. Patti LuPone really is one for the ages.

Five Stars. Commissioned for Daily Review.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival - Winter Soulstice

Published: 2018-06-25 *Cabaret · Music*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival Daily Review

Winter Soulstice Closing Gala. Festival Theatre, Adelaide Festival Centre June 23.

Murray Bramwell

The Adelaide Cabaret Festival has its rituals and the Opening and Closing Galas are among the audience favourites. The last night of the festival falls as near as damn-it to the shortest day and out-going Artistic Director, Ali McGregor has not only wanted to put some soul in Solstice, but plenty of heart as well. "This is my last night," she beams, "and I'm making myself at home. Sitting on my chaise longue beside my open fire."

Opening the proceedings with a perky version of the Rosemary Clooney hit, *Come On–A My House*, McGregor plays MC and host to a procession of performers. Irish comedian Eddie Bannon adds a little mischievous help as her tipsy butler, serving the guests from his deco drinks trolley.

It is a strong line-up. Adelaide performer Johanna Allen delivers an irresistible version of Avicii's *Addicted to You*, McGregor returns for a duet with vocalist and trumpeter Eric Santucci and some *Old Black Magic,* followed by more legerdemain from Andriano Cappeletta, singing a Stevie Wonder song from the key of life, *If It's Magic.*

Louise Fitzhardinge, like Eric Santucci and others in the Gala, is part of the festival's Space to Create week-long residency mentorship program. Supplying people in the front rows with flags from European nations, she instructed them to raise them at intervals while she sang *It's a Wonderful World*, switching as required from English to French, German and sign language. It is a fun idea and a reminder Quel monde merveilleux it is.

Michaela Burger sang *Tall Poppy*, from *A Migrant's Son*, her solo show charting her Greek father and his family's journey to an adopted home in Australia from the 1930s to the present. It is a story of the challenges faced making new lives in an often racist community, but the song eloquently captures his indomitable spirit.

In a lighter vein, Jason Kravitz mingles in the front stalls getting someone to read a text message from their phone. This becomes the catalyst for an improvised jazz song, sketched out by the excellent house band (led by musical director Mark Ferguson) as Kravits launches into *Hey Sweets I'll See You Soon.*

US singer Amber Martin also has some fun in a fright wig playing Nashville singer Reba McIntyre performing her famous weepie *Does He Love You*, in duet with Michelle Brasier. It is a send-up but the vocals also capture country pop at its histrionic best.

With this program, Ali McGregor makes sure women hold up more than half the sky with Jessie Lloyd, Candice Lloyd, Jessica Hitchcock and Deline Briscoe from the Mission Songs Project singing *Yil Lull,* South Sudanese singer-songwriter, Ajak Kwai, and zany performer Sheridan Harbridge making an unexpected appearance. There is also a Suffragette medley prefaced by a wryly delivered call to action from Joanne Hartstone, as legendary South Australian emancipator Muriel Matters, an excerpt from her excellent solo show *That Daring Australian Girl.*

Tommy Bradson, whose *Nosferatutu or Bleeding at the Ballet* (directed by Sheridan Harbridge) was a final weekend favourite, capered on stage like a firecracker in an orange suit and, still kitted out in her *Queen Kong (in Outer Space)* costume, Yana Alana aka Sarah Ward gave a bizarrely discrepant, but nonetheless show-stopping, reading of Joni Mitchell's *Woodstock*.

Another fascinating American performer at the festival was John Cameron Mitchell, co-creator of the cult musical and film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. In true Tonight Show fashion he joined Ali McGregor on the chaise longue as they sang a threaded duet – Mitchell singing the 1929 cheer-up song *Happy Days Are Here Again* while McGregor interleaved Judy Garland's signature *Get Happy !*

For the finale, Ali McGregor reprised a mash-up which had been tried at last year's festival but this time was a triumph. The Mission Project singers, accompanied by digeridoo players Jamie Goldsmith and Harley Hall, sang Yothu Yindi's *Treaty* while Glam Rock Starman conduit, Sven Ratzke sang *Let's Dance* in his best Bowie croon.

Like David Mallet's famous video clip, filmed in a pub in outback Australia in 1983, the performance telegraphed a number of cogent meanings simultaneously. It was a fine note to finish on. Putting on her red shoes, Ali McGregor's Gala, like her 2018 festival, has been good for both heart and soul.

Four Stars.

Daily Review, June 25, 2018.

Vivid and brave portrayal of tragic diva's fall

Published: 2019-06-05 *Cabaret · Theatre*

End of the Rainbow by Peter Quilter State Theatre Company South Australia in association with the Adelaide Cabaret Festival. Royalty Theatre, Angas Street. June 4. Tickets: $32- $67. Bookings 131 246 or online Duration 2 hours (including interval) Until June 16.

In about two weeks, June 22 will mark 50 years since the death of Judy Garland in Belgravia, London, aged 47. Her legend (and its miseries) epitomises Golden Hollywood stardom. With a career beginning at the age of two, at 17 cast as the fabled Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (among a string of MGM hits), then later fame in television and on the concert stage, Judy Garland's star has only magnified over time.

But so has our awareness of the venality and cruelty of producers, film studios and the succession of husbands and hucksters who exploited her to her last barbiturated breath.

Peter Quilter's *End of the Rainbow*, first performed in Sydney in 2005, charts the final months of Garland's life, focusing on her disastrous five week season, performing at London's Talk of the Town - organised by Mickey Deans, her fifth and last husband.

In State Theatre's production, director Elena Carapetis has the task of managing the often conflicting elements of Quilter's sometimes clunky text. *End of the Rainbow* is a tribute, showcasing Garland's undeniable musical genius, but it is also an abject melodrama which risks tilting tragedy into cliché.

Ailsa Paterson has spruced up the Royalty Theatre proscenium with a design consisting of four receding deco-style picture frames (smartly lit by Mark Pennington) taking us from Judy's public stage, to the chesterfield interior of a London hotel, and finally the chintzy curtain revealing the excellent five-piece stage band, ably led by Musical Director, Carol Young.

As the brash American, Mickey Deans, in 60's suedes and sideburns, Nic English, is convincing, both as the confident young paramour seeking to rescue the star from her addictions and salvage her career, and yet another in a line of commercial vampires.

Stephen Sheehan's poignantly restrained Anthony Chapman, her devoted (and long-suffering) English accompanist, speaks for many closeted gay men of the time when he says to Judy that she saved his life. Eddie Morrison provides several cameos, including a bewildered radio interviewer, and also plays bass in the band.

But it is Helen Dallimore who brings gold to the *End of the Rainbow*, and with the voice which launched Glinda in the West End *Wicked,* she captures Garland's distinctive speech patterns and breathes new life into Judy standards like *The Man Who Got Away* and *Come Rain or Come Shine*. Sometimes Quilter's dialogue is overwrought and it plays shrill, but Dallimore's portrait of Garland is vivid and brave, and when she sings, trouble melts like lemon drops.

"Vivid and brave portrayal of tragic diva's fall" *The Australian*, June 6, 2019, p.15.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2019

Published: 2019-06-08 *Cabaret · Music*

Opening night sets brisk and bold tone for cabaret festival The House is Live Thebarton Theatre, Adelaide. June 6. Cabaret Festival bookings BASS 131 246 or adelaidecabaretfestival.com.au Festival runs until June 22.

The house is not just live, it is buzzing. Now in its 19th iteration, the opening night gala is always a spritzy start to the Adelaide Cabaret Festival and, this year, newly-appointed artistic director, and event MC, Julia Zemiro makes sure her first event sets the pace for the next two weeks.

After the welcome to Country (and Kaurna man, Karl Telfer reminding us that "Life is a cabaret") Zemiro and State Theatre newbie AD, Mitchell Butel team up for a witty duet of Cole Porter's *Did You Evah (Swell Party)* with lyrics tweaked for local content. Zemiro is a match for Butel's droll delivery and the audience enjoys welcoming the new face of the festival.

The running list is brisk and bold. The zany Reuben Kaye sets a high bar for extravagance in a scarlet sequined tux with lapels encrusted with what look like boiled lollies. Singing *Look at Me* he makes sure we do. With eyelashes like huntsman spiders and three metres of tangerine boa, he motors through a Brecht/Weill medley that sounds like this morning's news.

Alma Zygier continues the pace with charmingly retro versions of *A Tisket, A Tasket* associated chiefly with Ella Fitzgerald, and the Judy Garland signature, *The Trolley Song.* Triple J presenter, Nkechi Anele weaves among the dancers singing *I Get Lonely* and then an energised version *of A Change is Gonna Come*. Zemiro reminds us that current pop and hip-hop idioms are welcome in her House of Cabaret with Anele and spoken word artist, Omar Musa, rapping *Assimilate*.

For something completely different, UK performance troupe, The Swell Mob invade the stalls like a swarm of Fagin's pick-pockets and morph into a steampunk zombie apocalypse before disappearing backstage.

The excellent Queenie van de Zandt delivers a wistful *Candyland* and, for those who wonder whether the definition of cabaret has completely jumped the leash, includes *Being Alive* from Sondheim's *Company*.

Other highlights include Paul Capsis's peak Weimar channeling of Billie Holiday's *I Cover the Waterfront*, and Maude Davey's engagingly satiric feathered showgirl belting out *Am I ever Gonna See Your Face Again* ? - complete with vernacular audience call and response.

Top of the bill is the 2019 Cabaret Festival Icon winner, the brilliantly sharp Meow Meow, who puts down her statuette and sings Spoliansky's *Ich Bin Ein Vamp* (assisted by six uneasy conscripts from the audience) *Hotel Amour,* and, joined by Capsis, the medley *Get Happy/ Happy Days*. The eight piece house band is first rate, guided by Daniel Edmonds on piano, with overall direction by Craig Ilott.

The evening closes on a pensive note with a vigil beacon lit in memory of longtime Cabaret Festival godfather, Frank Ford. Meow Meow sings Patti Griffin's *Be Careful* as the house lights dim.

"Opening night sets brisk and bold tone for cabaret festival"

The Australian, June 10, 2019, p.13.

Lisa Fischer with Grand Baton

Published: 2019-06-10 *Cabaret · Music*

Dunstan Playhouse Adelaide Cabaret Festival June 8.

Murray Bramwell

The extraordinary Lisa Fischer and her terrific band Grand Baton have returned to the Adelaide Cabaret Festival after a three year absence and, once again, they are a triumph.

Lisa Fischer's career is an intriguing one. For thirty years she has been an indispensible, but unheralded, vocalist in The Rolling Stones touring band. In the spotlight for her thrilling solo in *Gimme Shelter* but in the shadows for the rest of the show, she has played to audiences of up to half a million people, most of whom wouldn't know her name.

Those who have seen Morgan Nevile's 2014 Oscar winning documentary *20 Feet from Stardom*, about the experiences and tribulations of back-up singers such as Darlene Love, Merry Clayton, and Claudia Lennear, who made significant contributions to recorded music for little more than gig economy reward, will recognise Lisa Fischer as a key contributor not only to the Stones, but Luther Vandross and Sting.

So to see Fischer perform as the major star she undoubtedly is, in the intimate confines of the Dunstan Playhouse is a rare treat. Taking the stage to a warm welcome (led by the many who have seen her before and wouldn't miss this for quids) she immediately connects, greeting the audience and introducing her New York-based band, Grand Baton, a psychedelic-soul-jazz unit featuring Aidan Carroll on bass, drummer Thierry Arpino and musical director and multi-instrumentalist J.C.Maillard.

Fischer begins humming and vocalising while Arpino lays a catchy percussive rhythm with timpani mallets, joined by Carroll's deep thrumming bass. The vocal improv starts to form words- "You're lights are on, but you're not home/ Your mind is not your own/ Your heart sweats/ your body shakes/ Another is what it takes… " It swaggers but is gathering intensity, Fischer weaves the vocals between two microphones – one for reverb and echo effects, the other for her soaring multi-octave excursions.

Another verse and she hits the chorus "You know you're gonna have to face it, *you're addicted to love*. As she hits the last phrase J.C. Maillard opens the throttle on his electric guitar, peeling off rich raunchy fuzz chords John Scofield would be pleased to own.

Addicted to Love, Robert Palmer's 1986 signature dance hit, cruises for eight or nine minutes as Fischer, draped in majestic off the shoulder silk draws up her skirts to sashay with the band as they revel in their irresistibly nimble groove.

Also a skilful raconteur, Fischer recalls her grandmother telling her that she was part Cherokee and recently deciding to have a DNA test to identify her ethnic heritage. She was astonished to find Cameroon, Sub-Saharan, Indian, a slice of British but no American. That was the lead-in to a reflection on the fluidity of population and migration. And - "We come from the land of ice and snow/From the midnight sun, where the hot springs flow.." Led Zeppelin's *Immigrant Song*- linked in enticing mash-up with *Fragile* from the Sting album *Nothing Like the Sun.*

It unfolds into a splendid sonic raga with Fischer's keening reverb vocals, the unerring rhythm section and J.C. Maillard, his face a curtain of thin dreadlocks, weaving keyboards, mesmeric oud-like melodies from his custom built SazBass (an eight string elecro-acoustic instrument modelled on the Turkish baglama) as well as multilayered Sufi Qawwali vocals. He is a fascinating musician to watch in action.

A jazzy, spacy reading of another Sting/Police classic follows – *Message in a Bottle*, gradually coming into recognition as the band entwine with Fischer's vocals. She is a marvel of expression and control. Her voice spans from bell-like soprano to sultry contralto. It is said that she has a vocal range from A2 to G6.

Reflecting on her teenage parents (sixteen and seventeen when she was born) and her mother's tribulations in love, Fischer interprets yet another intriguing contemporary composition – *Blues in the Night* by Katie Melua - with a downbeat melancholy theme of abandonment. "A man is a two-face,/A worrisome thing who'll leave to sing/The blues in the night." Carroll is now on acoustic bass, Arpino is using brushes and J.C. a melodic acoustic blues guitar.

This unadorned lament then segues into Ane Brun's setting of *Laid in Earth* from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* highlighting the pellucid operatic quality of Lisa Fischer's virtuosic soprano. It is a spell-binding experience and it is inexplicable that recordings of these superb live performances have never been released.

Fischer's versatility is evident yet again with a jazz medley of *Heart and Soul* and the Peggy Lee standard, *Fever.* The band is at its supple best and Fischer moves around the front tables of the audience , working her double mics and serenading some rather bashful "silver foxes" in the matinee crowd. J.C. plays a flawless flamenco solo before switching to another excursion on the SazBass.

It is a splendid close to the set, but luckily there is more. The encore announces itself with those famous lines Lisa Fischer would have heard so many times 20 feet from the spotlight. "I was born in crossfire hurricane/ And I howled at the maw in the drivin' rain/ But it's all right now, in fact it's a gas / But its all right I'm … *Jumping Jack Flash."* The Rolling Stones*, Beggar's Banquet,* 1968.

Like the re-inventions by Robert Plant and his Shape Shifters, Fischer, J.C. and the others have given this rock classic a Moorish makeover. The Stones rhythms are large as life but Fischer's vocal inventions and J.C.'s Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan chanting (expertly blended with vocal embellishment from the sound desk) turns a familiar oldie into a dervish-like spin with the music of the spheres. The majestic Lisa Fischer and Grand Baton are a joy to behold and musically out of this world. You'd have to say they're a gas, gas, gas.

The Barefoot Review, June 10, 2019.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2019 - Philip Quast Uncut

Published: 2019-06-13 *Cabaret · Music*

Philip Quast with Anne-Maree McDonald at the piano Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre. June 10. One show only.

There are few Australian music theatre performers as celebrated as Philip Quast, and none more modest about their accomplishments. So in this, the only performance of the world premiere of his one-person show, he seems almost startled to find he has to talk about himself. At no time in his delightful 70 minute excursion does he mention that he has won more Olivier Awards for Best Actor in a Musical than any other performer, nor that he defined the role of Javert in *Les Miserables* for all time.

Instead he comes on stage at the Dunstan Playhouse in Adelaide rather like he has been ambushed in *This is Your Life.* He is caught in a genuine moment of nostalgic return. "I began my career on this stage," he says with a catch of emotion, "in 1980 with the State Theatre Company." It releases a Proustian recollection – not just of *temps perdu*, but *personnes perdues* – of co-performers such as the late Monica Maughan having a fag with her vocal warm up for *A Hard God,* of Nick Enright, also departed, and his play *On the Wallaby*, and the mischievous, and very much still with us, Teddy Hodgeman pranking covertly between the actors on stage during *The Three Sisters*.

The memories are fond and funny. Recalling one of his first roles – as Adam in *The Wakefield Mystery Plays*, Quast describes being required to be naked for the scene with Eve in the Garden of Eden. A few days later he received his first fan letter, from a woman commending his performance but noting that it was highly unlikely Adam would have been circumcised. And that, Quast merrily explains, is why his show is ironically titled *Uncut*.

His selection of songs is disarmingly eclectic. Opening with a childhood favourite *The Gypsy Rover*, Quast's effortless, warm baritone has the audience rapt from the first line. With two Danny Kaye classics he shows he can match the master for fluency and comic emphasis with *The King's New Clothes* ("The King is in the altogether/ He's altogether as naked as the day he was born") and the more wry *I Like Old People Don't You ?*

To his father, who was a turkey farmer in Tamworth, he dedicates the tender ballad, *In My Father's Hands*.

Philip Quast's international reputation rests on many accomplishments, not least his association with the works of Stephen Sondheim. Again, the singer talks about his friendship with Sondheim with matter-of-fact understatement, barely lingering on the fact that Quast was an enduring Seurat in *Sunday in the Park with George*, a regular in *Sweeney Todd* with Bryn Terfel, and reprised the role of Benjamin Stone in the recent, much-praised National Theatre revival of *Follies*.

Of the latter, he did confide that Peter Brook visited him after the show and called the production the best he'd seen in London in twenty years. Superbly accompanied by the excellent Anne-Maree McDonald, Quast sang Ben's song from *Follies - The Road I Didn't Take*, one of many highlights of the recital.

Talking about Sondheim led to a discussion about capturing the cadence of speech in song lyrics and Sondheim's own declared mentors, Rodgers and Hammerstein. Quast, a master performer in *South Pacific* sang a velvet-rich version of *Some Enchanted Evening,* followed by the bittersweet Charles Aznavour composition, *Happy Anniversary*.

In an unexpected break in proceedings, the ebullient Quast called for the house lights up and bounded down into the stalls to demand an audience participation rendering of *The Wiggerly-Woo Song* to mark the 17 years Quast, in unforgetable partnership with Noni Hazelhurst, presented *Play School*, the ABC's most enduringly watched program. Numbers of Gen X-ers not only sang and performed the arcane actions, but were visibly moved to be returning to their inner wigger.

In a final cluster of songs, it is to the heavens that Quast goes for inspiration. *Lucky Old Sun,* made famous by Louis Armstrong and Ray Charles among others, then leads to the stars. A memorable reading of Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars* and then, the Schonberg/Boublil/Kretzner composition from *Les Miserables – Stars* to which Philip Quast commandingly brings his full Javert, the role he made legend in every city he performed. And made audiences rise to their feet, as again here in Adelaide.

For a more pensive encore to this splendid afternoon soiree, he chose the song for all actors, *I Was Here,* from Flaherty and Ahrens' *The Glorious Ones*. And to round things off, what would this celebrated maestro of the music theatre choose ? Another chorus of *Wiggerly-Woo*. What else ?

Four and Half Stars.

Daily Review, June 13, 2019.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2019

Published: 2019-06-25 *Cabaret · Music*

Ruthie Henshall The Famous Spiegeltent June 22.

In the final weekend of the 2019 Cabaret Festival, West End music theatre star, Ruthie Henshall, brings a vibrant solo show covering the impressive range of her thirty year career.

At the microphone in The Famous Spiegeltent, Henshall is the down-to-earth Londoner, veteran of the music stage from *Cats* and *A Chorus Line* to *Billy Elliot*, but there is also a glimpse of something more fragile, emotions near the surface, which gives her performances a wistful, reflective edge.

Her set opens with *Beautiful*, title tune of the Carole King tribute musical, followed by " I can't really explain it/ I haven't got the words" from Elton John's *Electricity,* one of the high voltage songs from *Billy Elliot*. Henshall talks about her emerging career – beginning as a dancer and moving to the chorus. As she makes endearingly evident, she never wanted to do anything but sing.

There is a Stephen Sondheim anecdote : when she dried during a performance of the tribute show, *Putting it Together*- with Sondheim himself in the audience. And follows with a fine version of *Ladies Who Lunch*, but not quite a match for Patti LuPone at the Cabaret Festival last year.

She talks about her private life, her daughters and the unhappiness of her divorce. From the musical, *Dear Evan Hansen,* she chooses *So Big/So Small* to illustrate a child's view of family separation. From her role as Nancy Sykes in *Oliver* she moves into even darker territory with Lionel Bart's problematic portrait of an abused wife, *As Long as He Needs Me*.

It is then time for a shift of mood and the talented (and much lamented) English comedi-enne,Victoria Wood, is a rich source. Henshall is brilliant with latter-day Music Hall and Wood's exuberantly witty *Barry and Freda* (as Freda friskily propositions her sexually reticent husband) showcases her pace and flair for musical comedy.

The talents of songwriters John Kander and Fred Ebb are explored with the plaintive Liza Minnelli classic, *Sorry I Asked*, another highlight of the set, and then a medley from their 1975 hit musical *Chicago*. Ruthie Henshall owns *Chicago*.

As she says, Henshall has played Roxie and Velma on both sides of the Atlantic, and then Matron Mama Morton in the West End. Her powerhouse medley of *My Own Best Friend/ Nowadays/ Razzle Dazzle* and *All that Jazz*, accompanied by the excellent Paul Schofield on piano, is a reminder of what a knockout set of tunes *Chicago* still is.

I don't know who composed the poem, *The Siren Song*, but Henshall's recitation of this comic account of a young woman making lascivious platform announcements over the railway station public address system, is another glimpse of the singer's penchant for vaudeville bawdy.

"This is Woking" she says with breathy microphone reverb "When I say Woking, Woking , Woking/ It is thoroughly provoking to the men that travel out from Platform 2." The double entendre multiplies and the joke extrudes, but Henshall's deadpan delivery is great fun. As she says, they/we are "victims of my golden voice."

And Henshall's golden voice finally settles on *I Dreamed a Dream*, Fantine's show-stopping song from *Les Miserables*. The singer has performed the role many times in her career and notes drily that she also gathered viral YouTube clicks as her version slipstreamed behind Susan Boyle. Henshall pushes the song to its operatic limits as Schofield, at the piano, gathers chords like huge bunches of arum lilies. The full Spiegeltent happily rises for an ovation.

Ruthie Henshall closes with a pensive reading of *In My Life*, the Lennon/McCartney gem from the Beatles' *Rubber Soul*. "Though I know I will never lose affection/ For people and things that went before…" It is a fitting conclusion to Henshall's tender, funny, and very likeable musical memoir.

2020s Reviews

Theatre review : The Gospel According to Paul

Published: 2021-04-21 *Comedy · Theatre*

In ninety engaging minutes, writer and performer, Jonathan Biggins' *Gospel* brings us, not just a fascinating study of Paul Keating but an account of a transformative time in Australian political history.

Murray Bramwell

You might say, that for satirist Jonathan Biggins, Paul Keating has been his bread and butter for a long time. As part of the Sydney Theatre Company's Wharf Revue, along with Phillip Scott, Drew Forsythe and a select group of associates, Biggins has made an art form of topical sketch comedy for more than twenty years. Keating loomed large and often in the Revue, as he does in political life, long after his departure from parliament in 1996.

But in this multi-faceted stage monologue, Biggins has given depth and dimension to his study of Keating. He has brought his subject from skit to theatre, from sketch to a much fuller portrait. Wryly describing his *Gospel* as "the first three-dimensional, unauthorised autobiography written by someone else" Biggins inhabits, impersonates, and embodies his subject with startling authority.

It starts lightly with some stage banter. Arriving with a fanfare from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (and echoing Barry Humphries) Biggins has Keating engaging in some postcode sneering as he briefly quizzes the front row audience – three random locations: Carrickalinga, Maylands and Myponga almost speak for themselves. But, of course, Biggins is working all of the Keating stereotypes – his haughtiness, impatience with trivia, his unwillingness to suffer fools or endear himself.

It is when he dims the stage light and switches on the slide projector that the narrative begins to develop and gather focus. Keating's early life, the influence of his mother and grandmother, his father's shift from tradesman to manufacturer (then the crisis of his death from heart attack when Keating was only eleven) is related with precision and feeling. There are still plenty of witty laughs but Biggins is bringing a playwright's ambition to his subject and draws us into his world.

From the age of ten, Keating is letterboxing for the Labor Party and getting more involved in political activity. Biggins describes the dapper young man, already immersed in classical music, leaving school at fifteen to work for the Electricity Board. We are reminded that Keating managed a pop group, The Ramrods, and guided them to a record contract with EMI. He was ready to take them to London but they lacked his belief.

Instead he turns his attention to political manoeuvring, sparring with the left factions, angling for pre-selection –eventually – in the federal seat of Blaxland. Elected in opposition in 1969, he is then returned to the Whitlam government in 1972. As a junior MP he studies the game closely. Mentored earlier by political legend, Jack Lang, Keating befriends parliamentary officials to better understand the intricacies of influence and power. He is like David Copperfield (with more than a dash of the Artful Dodger) rising in the parliamentary world during a momentous time.

The Whitlam government makes history and is demolished by the same turn of the wheel . Keating watches and learns , and in 1983 he and Bob Hawke forge one of the most successful political partnerships in our history. Biggins unfurls Keating's career with gathering interest and precision. We find the details engrossing. It is just the way Keating himself engaged the electorate in his narrative of economic and social improvement.

Director Aarne Neeme has deftly guided Jonathan Biggins through this excellent venture. Mark Thompson's set (subtly lit by Verity Hampson) aptly captures the Keating aesthetic – a French clock, 18th century portraits of Napoleon (and is that Robespierre ?), the gilded chair, the dark sumptuous bureau, and the classical columns, all hover between parody and the trappings of a connoisseur. Keating shows us his Brughet pocket watch. He likes nice things. The interesting thing is he wants all of us to have them too.

Jonathan Biggins performance is remarkable and unerring. What begins as a stock impersonation becomes much more. Despite bearing little resemblance to Keating, he mimics gestures and idiosyncracies to great effect.

Using his height as Keating does, Biggins moves with the edgy purpose of a matador, one hand on his hip, the other rhetorically demolishing a political adversary. The Blacktown accent is there, clipped, sneeringly cadenced, witheringly considered, wickedly aphoristic – all part of the Keating armoury. But then there is also the stillness and authority of the Redfern speech.

The Gospel According to Paul brings good news and not just to the disciples. It is witty, often hilarious, occasionally excoriatingly funny – all of the rapier badinage that we associate with Keating. But there's more. More than just verbal steak knives. It is a study of the art and purpose of leadership and a reminder of a notion of government that wants to be the best for its people. Jonathan Biggins is using recent past history to shine a light on the tawdry present – with its deception and spin, its shabby cronyism, and mediocre lack of purpose.

The Gospel According to Paul is on at the Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre until May 1.

InDaily InReview Wednesday April 21, 2021.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival: The Variety Gala

Published: 2021-06-12 *Cabaret · Music*

The opening night Variety Gala is a good chance to scratch and sniff the Cabaret Festival program. Raucously hosted by Hans, Adelaide's own wunderkind, this year's event is more off the leash than usual.

Written by Murray Bramwell

It's that time again, the wintry middle of June and the Festival Centre opens up its venues (plus The Famous Spiegeltent) for fifteen nights of music, comedy and dysfunctional frolic. The Variety Gala, an institution since the festival began, not only lines up samples from various shows, it gives the punters a chance to tizzy up and strut the red carpet themselves.

After Isaac Hannam's stunning didgeridoo solo and Welcome to Country, we get a second *Willkommen*, this time from the incoming Artistic Director, Alan Cumming, enticing us with Joel Grey's impish opening to *Cabaret*. It is a disarming introduction and the audience warms instantly. He says nice things about the reputation of the festival and the way South Australia values its artists. But I'm not the MC, he adds in his Scottish brogue– and in whirls Matt Gilbertson, aka Hans, viral star of *America's Got Talent*, to, more or less, get things rolling.

With a scalloped satin curtain, saturated with iridescent lighting along the back and a fully stocked bar with drinks at the centre, the stage features Musical Director, Mark Simeon Ferguson at the Steinway, surrounded by his excellent seven piece band. Seated downstage at groups of tables on each side are the performers waiting to step up.

"Liza Minnelli" gets a Bronx accent for her version of *On Broadway* concocted by the versatile Trevor Ashley, who skilfully mixes parody and pastiche- as he does later when he returns with Grizabella's *Memories* from *Cats*. Magician James Galea sings "Are All Magicians Gay ? " from his show *Poof* ! *Secrets of a Magician* and on the video screen performs his amazing card trick (with 10 million YouTube clicks) 673 King Street.

Torch singer, Mama Alto delivers a smoky version of *Round Midnight* and a less convincing *First Time Ever I Saw Your Face,* while the deadpan Dutch singer Jan van de Stool, from Woy Woy NSW, sings *Let it Go* from *Frozen*, while also impressively channelling a wicked version of *Defying Gravity*. Comedian Steph Tisdell riffed on white guilt, but foundered on a singing improv with audience input, and the Sisters of Invention, part of Tutti Arts, sang their special girl pop - " Birds of a Feather, we stick together" from their not to be missed show, *You Ready For This ?*

H.M. The Queen arrives to open the Festival courtesy of Gerry Connolly, in white frock and tiara. She peels off her COVID mask before reading her speech. "I can't talk properly," she said, "wearing my late husband's jockstrap." It is a droll turn. "I was lucky to get into this country since I'm not a cricket team."

Local singer Michael Griffiths turned the Eurythmics' *Thorn in My Side* into a singalong, with a terrific sax solo from the band and Brendan Maclean from *L'Hotel* sang *People I've Been Sad* from French heartbreak pop band Christine and the Queens.

After getting over his surprise at being awarded the Cabaret Icon Award, Paul Capsis took Amy to the Winehouse with a knock-out version of *Back to Black*. His ponderous reading of John Lennon's *Imagine* near the end of the show was less successful. New York singer, Amber Martin arrived directly from performing her show *Bathtime Bette* and sang the Midler standard, *Friends,* and a new song, *Bermuda*.

Highlights included Tim Minchin's spellbinding performance, barefoot at the piano, of *I'll Take Lonely Tonight*, an excellent song peerlessly interpreted, and the excellent Meow Meow – on Zoom in Melbourne and in synch with Ferguson and the band – presented Laurie Anderson's updated Hansel and Gretel, *The Dream Before*. Spiegeltent regulars Bob Down and Anne "Willsy" Wills, decked out in gold spangled leisure wear, singing the Everly Brothers' *Walk Right Back,* also struck a chord.

This year's Gala was a crowd pleaser but more ramshackle than some. No doubt, with more rehearsal, director Mitchell Butel could have ensured a better pace and rhythm to what was a long and uneven night. Hans loomed large in his Tyrol hat and preposterously sparkly outfits, lost track of his MC duties at times, but endeared himself to the home town crowd. When it was time for the finale – *Will I Ever See Your Face Again ?* the famous riposte that followed the Angels wherever they played was as true as ever. No Way. F-Off. Go Home. Another Gala done and fairy dusted.

InDaily InReview. 12 June, 2021.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival: Mostly Marlene – Kim David Smith

Published: 2021-06-26 *Cabaret · Music*

This accomplished set may be mostly Marlene Dietrich – with mashings of Kylie and Madonna - but it is all Kim David Smith at his mercurial best.

Written by Murray Bramwell

Kim David Smith has been performing at the Adelaide Cabaret Festival for more than ten years. Back when he was still Kim Smith, he brought shows such as *Misfit* and *Morphium Kabarett* featuring his shape-shifting gremlin mix of nova pop, reptilian camp and - when he switched into persona as "Pirate Jenny" and "Surabaya Johnny" - a very creditable version of Weimar revival.

Back this time with *Mostly Marlene*, a tribute to screen legend and post war cabaret performer, Marlene Dietrich, Smith has softened some of the witty sneer and smarm of his punk antics to more vulnerable readings of Dietrich's mixed bag of torch songs and satire.

Dressed in top hat, white tie and leather tails he proceeds through the audience in the Space Theatre to the strains of "Falling in Love Again". He wryly notes that this show, which first played in March 2, 2020 at Club Cumming (the Cabaret Festival's AD, Alan Cumming's nightspot in New York) had barely opened when the city was shut down in the first wave of COVID. Everything stopped, he recalls, for eighteen months. Until now – and he marvels at the sight of a live audience, not a virtual one, sharing a performance in real time. And this time around Kim David Smith is more reflective, more openly candid, and looking to delve the rueful world-weary experience of Dietrich's songs.

Not that there is any shortage of spark to the brisk realism of Friedrich Hollaender's "Black Market" – 'Powdered milk for bikes/Souls for Lucky Strikes/ Got some brokendown ideals ? Like wedding rings ?". Or Dietrich's "Jonny, wenn du Geburtstaghast ?" a raunchy ballad of carpe diem which segues into the urgent refrain from Madonna's "Erotic" – "Put your hands all over my body".

Hollaender features again with "Look Me Over Closely" – "Tell me what you find/ But don't be over-anxious/I'm not the marrying kind." Dietrich, whose life spanned the 20th century, proves to be a free-spirited gender-fluid model for this one. Smith calls her a Bisexual Queen. He has fun with Spoliansky's "Ich bin ein Vamp" and the 80's hit from Toto Coelo- "Dracula's Tango" – "Dracula la la – I'm a Sucker for Your Love" with fabulously thundering chords from Amanda Hodder – Smith's longtime accompanist, who is again exemplary in her phrasing and precision, and central to the success of the performance.

The selections highlight Dietrich's range of material. Such as "The Boys in the Back Room" the boisterous theme from *Destry Rides Again*- the movie western in which she not only starred but also made a hit for Loesser and Hollaender. And we can't forget "Lilli Marleen", the haunting wartime favourite for both Allied and German troops, sung here as unadorned lament.

Smith concludes strongly with "a song about nice things we can't have " – Hollaender's "Illusions " interwoven with Kylie's "I Should Be So Lucky" in German (along with delicious piano trills from Hodder) From there Smith and Holler power into more vintage Minogue with a knock-out "Fire. Fire. Fire." version of "All The Lovers ".

A reprise of the Dietrich signature "Falling in Love Again" follows, also in German, and the finale is "The Singer", the Liza with a Z favourite, with just enough Minnelli histrionics to finish on a high note. In this performance Smith demonstrates he can mix it with the very best. *Mostly Marlene* has been a Cabaret Festival highlight.

InDaily June 26, 2021.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival: Thank you, Alan, it was a good time

Published: 2021-06-27 *Cabaret · Music*

Alan Cumming is Not Acting His Age Adelaide Festival Theatre.

June 26. Duration : 1 hr 20 mins.

It is the final night of the Adelaide Cabaret Festival and Alan Cumming bounds on to the stage in a slim-fitting grey suit jacket and black tie, matching grey shorts and black and white Converse sneakers. “I feel twitchy and bitchy and manic”, he sings, “Calm and collected and choking with panic /But alive, but alive, but alive.”

The song is from the 1970 musical *Applause* and first performed by Lauren Bacall. Here it is blended (in an evening of lively mash-ups) with *Sing Happy!,* the Liza Minnelli favourite about happy endings and robins in spring, and no need of singing about stormy weather.

The songs are key to the evening’s message – that Alan Cumming is not acting his age, and that’s not necessarily a bad idea. After all, this ageing (and yes, dying) thing awaits each one of us, so why not *carpe* some *diem* while we can. Cumming is a droll advocate for his case and in a series of disarming asides he mixes confessional memoir with gossip, gently hedonistic polemic and a dash of Scottish nationalism.

With his rolling Highland brogue he recalls good times at his East Village venue, Club Cumming in New York City, only just re-opened after eighteen months of COVID, and replicated (to sold out audiences) in Adelaide as part of his program as artistic director of the Cabaret Festival.

Acting your age. Growing up. Mutton dressed as lamb ? What do these phrases mean, he asks. I *like* wearing shorts he demurs, despite being ridiculed for wearing them for a celebrity occasion. Age appropriateness, he contests, needs to be a more fluid concept, and besides, who has time to waste on the inevitable ?

He muses on the deaths of three close friends – Sean Connery, Florence Henderson from the Brady Bunch show, and his beloved dog, Honey. In his irresistible way he makes the telling poignant, funny and quirkily transcendent.

The songs link to these unfurling themes. Lieber and Stoller’s *Is That All There Is ?,* the Peggy Lee standard, concludes with a trumpet and cello excerpt from Schubert, expertly performed by Josh Chenoweth and Rachel Johnston. This is followed by *Everything* from *A Star is Born* and, among others linked to childhood memory, Adele’s *When We Were Young* – “You still look like a movie/ you still look like a song / When we were young.”

Cumming has a fearless approach to repertoire as he moves seamlessly to a heartfelt version of *How Far I’ll Go* from *Moana* mashed with *Part of Your World*, from *The Little Mermaid*. “Where else would you hear a Disney Princess medley from a 56 year old man ?” he asks with a triumphant smile.

He is often called elfin and puckish but he rejects any notion he is Peter Pan. He boisterously sings his own composition, *Don’t Go to The Plastic Surgeon* and freely confides his woes with scrotal ageing and what his dermatologist calls the old man’s barnacle on his back.

There is no shortage of highlights – *Love and Love Alone* from *The Visit* and, another medley: *When Did We Come to This ?* from *The Wild Party* and from *Cabaret*, *Maybe This Time*. Then there is more Liza with a Z as he belts out *It Was a Good Time*. Cumming’s excellent band – trumpeter Josh Chenoweth, cellist Rachel Johnston, drummer Chris Neale - ably led throughout by MD Henry Kopersik at the piano, turns it into the best time.

Alan Cumming, for this, and the Cabaret Festival in the middle of the COVID winter –thank you. As the song goes - It *was* the best time. It was a party, just to be near you.

“Thank you, Alan, it was a good time”, *The Australian*, June 29, 2021, p.12.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival: Moments in the Woods - Songs and Stories of Sondheim

Published: 2022-06-24 *Cabaret*

This splendid tribute to Stephen Sondheim not only exuberantly showcases the best of his songs, but affectionately recalls his close links with Australian music theatre.

Murray Bramwell

Almost single-handedly, Stephen Sondheim transformed the stage musical in the 20th century and over his 91 years on earth he led the charge well into the 21st also. Sondheim's invention, his flair, his brilliance as a lyricist, his gift for melody, extended the boundaries and ambition of music theatre. Whoever thought that the genre of the American musical could encompass mid-life crisis, urban anomie, the creation of a pointillist painting or the history of Presidential assassinations ?

Well, not everyone thought so, as it turned out. Many of his projects were panned and repelled on first performance, only to return to later success and praise. Time has revised and enhanced his reputation and his work has been performed by the most talented and versatile music theatre artists in the US and Europe, as well as here in Australia.

Moments in the Woods, an Adelaide Cabaret Festival project proposed by producer, Alex Sinclair, brings together five outstanding exponents of the art of Sondheim and the result is an undeniable Festival highlight. Director Mitchell Butel, who also performs and acts as MC, has astutely programmed a suite of songs, interspersed with personal reminiscence, which reminds us not only of the great interest shown in the composer's works in this country but of Sondheim's close links here, visiting to attend productions and forming close ties with our leading singers, some of whom went on to Broadway and West End productions.

The singers – Josie Lane, Queenie Van de Zandt, Philip Quast and Geraldine Turner (the latter two, Butel referred to in an interview as "the High Priest and Priestess of Sondheim") – all assemble on stage informally seated like panellists as Butel describes the evening's intentions. It is relaxed and immensely good-humoured.

And when they begin with *Old Friends* from *Merrily We Roll Along*, things really begin to hum. With MD Josh van Konkelenberg at piano (stepping in at short notice when MD and arranger Daryl Wallis became ill) and the excellent four piece band of Alana Dawes (bass), John McDermott (drums), Christina Guala and Vashti Tyrell (woodwinds) things are rolling merrily.

In no time we are *Into the Woods,* Sondheim and Lapine's adaptation of Grimm fairy tales with added adult concepts. Josie Lane is Little Red Ridinghood with her song of experience, *I Know Things Now,* followed by a stunning reading by Queenie van de Zandt of the witchy, *Last Midnight*. Butel describes it well as an 11 o'clock number at 7.45 !

The pace and intensity is thrilling as the singers hit their stride. The clowns are sent in early with a torchy version of the signature favourite from the amazing Geraldine Turner (the first singer anywhere to record an album of Sondheim material).

Sondheim's masterpiece *Sunday in the Park with George* is represented, first by Josie Lane as Dot, and then - as the dot painter, George Seurat- Philip Quast (who premiered the role in London's West End) finishes the hat, his velvety baritone effortlessly navigating Sondheim's deftly clipped lyrics about the social isolation of the artist.

The selections are both assured and unexpected in the sequencing. Butel is promoted from chorus Shark 27 to sing *Something's Coming* from *West Side Story* and van de Zantz and Turner return for knockout versions of *Who's That Woman ?* and *I'm Still Here* from *Follies*.

The mischievously mashed-up medley of duets – darting from *George* and *Into the Woods* and *Follies* back to the pastry guignol of *Sweeney Todd* is a delicious test for the afficionados in the audience to identify.

The second Act brings a shift of mood. Josh van Konkelenberg alone at the piano for Josie Lane's lyrical *There Won't be Trumpets* and van de Zandt's lingering *Not a Day Goes By*, while Butel adds the tender *Not While I'm Around* from *Sweeney Todd*. Philip Quast duets with Butel for the deadpan serenade, *Lovely,* from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* before his solo, from *Follies*, the wistful mid-life meditation on doors not opened and paths not travelled -*The Road You Didn't Take*.

There is also time out for reminiscences which enrich the celebration of the songs by making the composer vivid and personable. Quast recalls conversations in the dressing room when Sondheim called ostensibly to give notes, Turner describes her first meeting when she was a young singer which, like Quast's led to life-long connection. Butel remembers his fanboy meeting with the great man in Melbourne and proudly showed us a framed letter. Others also spoke affectionately of Sondheim's letters and attentiveness.

In a program of showstoppers Geraldine Turner stops the show with her drolly acerbic rendition of *The Ladies Who Lunch*, Mitchell Butel shines with *Being Alive,* also from *Company,* and Philip Quast sings *Fear No More* (with a melody that echoes *The Skye Boat Song*) as a preface to the cast reflecting on the composer's death only seven months ago.

We have, over two hours, spent many memorable moments in Sondheim's Woods – that lantana territory where our minds wander and wonder, ponder and regret, and imagine what might have been. It has been an evening of all those gnarly, conflicted, often darkly funny, grown-up themes it seems it was the very purpose of musicals to simplify and ignore - until Stephen Sondheim came and wised us up to ourselves.

It is unthinkable that this show should have only one performance. I hope plans are already underway for it to be re-staged sometime very soon.

Comedy Theatre: Mono

Published: 2023-02-01 *Comedy · Theatre*

Three goes very amiably into one in *Mono*, a suite of gently comic monologues divided up and performed by some of Australia's favourite funny people, past and present.

In what he calls a 'Brand New Classic Comedy ' and 'A three-person one-man show ' *Mono* writer and director Angus FitzSimons has a fairly clear demographic in mind and it is not the Wil Anderson/Hannah Gadsby/ Kirsty Webeck crowd. Like his other show (with a published book tie-in) the semiotically titled, *Senior Moments*, *Mono* is pitched to an older audience - retirees and other elders, and their not inconsiderable grey dollars.

It harks to the comedy of the recent past – the solo theatrical shows of Joyce Grenfell and Alan Bennett in the UK and the home-grown Australian character monologues of Barry Humphries and others over the past fifty years. It has a target and, if the warm reception of the opening night audience in the Dunstan Playhouse is any indication, it hits the bullseye.

FitzSimons has recruited some outstanding performers for his project. Max Gillies virtually invented the theatrical comic monologue in the Australian theatre. From his classic version of Jack Hibberd's *A Stretch of the Imagination* and Barry Oakley's *Scanlon* to his brilliant political satires of the *Gillies Report* and *Gillies Republic* for ABC -TV and the lesser-known, but no less brilliant, stage cameos in shows like *Squirts* and other ventures (fuelled by writers as various as Patrick Cook, Don Watson and Guy Rundle) Gillies is among the all-time Australian comic greats, as his recent celebration on *Australian Story* attests.

Legendary in another way, John Wood has, in a long stage and screen career, brought us the portraits of Sugar Renfrey in the TV classic *Power Without Glory* through to the much-loved Tom Croydon in *Blue Heelers* for which he won the coveted Gold Logie.

And finally, replacing the brilliant Noeline Brown who featured in an earlier iteration of this show, Emily Taheny comes to the theatre stage after a brilliant ten years with Shaun Micallef's satirically priceless *Mad as Hell* where she excelled in a variety of roles which, as the program notes drily remind us - "personally created at least two imaginary Federal MPs that are now sitting in Parliament"

All three bring much to what is a mixed bag of nine monologues. The stage format is minimal – a back lit screen and a stage empty except for a lectern /podium/ pulpit with two microphones.

Taheny opens as the Head Mistress addressing the assembly at St Gabardine's girls college. It has echoes of Joyce Grenfell and Victoria Wood as Taheny attempts to manage outbreaks of suppressed giggling at various double entendres and attempts at decorum. Elsewhere her vignettes of Dr Asher Boyd, the Mindfulness teacher reciting gnomic platitudes and as the disgruntled and tipsy Mother of the Bride, are crisply and hilariously delivered.

Wood follows with his cheerfully woeful bush poet Lachlan McGorr, in black singlet and flannel shirt, reciting rhyme-clattering odes to toasters and Blue Heeler dogs and pillaging the cadences of Banjo Paterson. Later he returns as a Sotheby's auctioneer selling off a dubious list of exhibits from the 15th Lord of Montmorency's crumbling estate. His highpoint is as the police sergeant giving court evidence, in amusingly prosaic detail, of his pursuit of a fugitive calling himself Donald Duck. Its gently comic twists made it an audience favourite.

Max Gillies' *Old Person's Guide to the Orchestra* has him waving his baton as various orchestral riffs appear and vanish while a voiceover earnestly explains what amount to a series of musical jokes. In among it, Gillies is at his classic best - mute and deadpan (as he is, later, in the less successful Modern Art lampoon)

The highlight is his sermon- delivered in Gillies's trademark slow exacting manner, making the humour linger, savouring the absurdity and the satiric hypocrisy. His comedy is his own but the intimations of Alec Guinness and Alistair Sim, and, in his physicality, even Buster Keaton, are irresistible.

Mono continues at the Dunstan Playhouse at 7.30 pm until February 5.

Published *InDaily* February 2, 2023.

Fringe Review: The King of Taking

Published: 2023-02-20 *Comedy · Adelaide Fringe · Theatre*

Five Stars

Rubber-limbed and deadpan, New Zealand mime wizard Thom Monckton makes an hilarious return as the selfish King whose only subject is himself.

Written by Murray Bramwell

He has played the Adelaide Festival as *The Artist* and, back in 2016, the much-lamented Croquet Club as *The Pianist.* Now, the inimitable Thom Monckton is *The King of Taking*. A preposterous figure in none-too splendid isolation, he is the Mr Bean of hopeless monarchs, and delivers a slapstick routine that draws gasps of smirking pleasure.

Monckton's comedy is painstaking and cleverly extruded to its very limits. Who can forget him taking six long minutes just to get through the stage curtains in *The Pianist* ? And then a multitude of further tribulations to reach the keyboard.

In *The King of Taking* there is an open empty stage with a long curtain at stage left. At centre is a high narrow throne with Gothic trimmings and red velvet. The publicity promises plenty of velvet and the rolls of carpet stacked around the throne do not disappoint. Two red wall lights and a candelabra complete the décor.

There is a large lump covered in drapery on the floor in front of the throne and it starts to wriggle and move across the stage and behind the curtain. This is yet another protracted arrival. Trumpet fanfares repeat and re-set over and over as the mystery figure flails behind the curtain. Eventually he glides in from stage left like a low-slung motorboat. It is surreal, comical and the perfect visual gag.

Rising to his full lanky height he is dressed in a skinny, baggy, white

onesie, and drags an elaborate particoloured velvet robe trailing jester's ribbons. Around his neck he wears a clown's ruffle, on his head a yellow paper crown. The king, complete with ginger beard and an un-majestic agitation, has arrived.

Getting on to his high throne is another matter and at one point he disappears head first, with only his feet showing - like in a classic Tex Avery cartoon. The timing and the mute consternation, mixed with smug self-importance, is delicious to watch. It's hard to know which is funnier – the predictability or the surprise.

The king imperiously calls for his courtiers. There are three ropes available possibly to summon them. One is a bell, another a blackout light switch, the third could be anything. He doesn't speak except to summon. Jonathan, he calls in fifty shades of forlorn urgency as he tries to have a red carpet rolled out, or a trumpet fanfare, or a single splash of cymbal. Edward, Abigail and Philip are also called, with varying success, to serve this once and feckless king.

For fifty minutes the complications multiply and the sight gags, sudden death pratfalls, and the slings and arrows of sudden misfortune bring continuous fun. Thom Monckton has a rare and inventive gift for witty clowning. This royal show is definitely for the taking.

The King of Taking is playing at The Studio, Holden Street Theatres until March 5.

Note: Patrons are invited to bring this greedy King a small wrapped gift to share in the improvised fun.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival: Edge of Reality: Elvis Presley Songbook

Published: 2023-06-15 *Cabaret · Music*

In *Edge of Reality*, bandleader Paul Grabowsky, and Oz music luminaries Joe Camilleri and Deb Conway brilliantly rescue Elvis from impersonators and cartoon legend and celebrate his considerable musical legacy.

Written by Murray Bramwell

It is 46 years since Elvis Presley died, aged 42. It will soon be fifty. At the time his ardent followers were inconsolable. He was the first god of Rock'n'Roll, transforming the very notion of popular music. He looked like a cross between a pouting Grecian marble and an androgynous Pre-Raphaelite wraith. He wore mascara. He was so sexy he couldn't be filmed below the waist. He sent the Bible Belt into a frenzy of disapproval.

But Presley's career rose exponentially and then fell cruelly, almost, it seemed, buffoonishly to earth. The legend deteriorated into scandal and snark. Fat Elvis. The disgrace of Graceland. Only the true believers stayed true. Then the music industry got really organised. Run by cleverer sharks, not vaudeville hucksters like Presley's manager, the bogus Colonel Tom Parker. Other music came along. Beatles, Prog, Punk … and Elvis and his extraordinary presence and achievement was lost to indifference or sniggering gossip.

It was not before time that Baz Luhrmann's recent over-reaching, but terrific, biopic reminded us of the greatness and originality that was Elvis. It helped that, in Austin Butler, Baz found an actor with charisma – even if it was still only a fraction of what EP had in his prime.

So *Edge of Reality* (a project driven by Paul Grabowsky and featuring singers Deborah Conway and Joe Camilleri) has done a very fine thing taking Elvis out of the hands of the Impersonators, with their quiffs and high collars, and re-introducing us to Presley the musician, the vocal stylist, the operatic showman, and conduit of irresistible musical intimacy.

With a splendid seven-piece band and Grabowsky running the show from the keyboard this is a "re-imagining" of Presley's extensive and interestingly diverse repertoire. This is not a Greatest Hits show, although many favourites are in there. Nor is it the standard showband. The arrangements are intriguing, the musicians all first rate.

Heralded by a solo flute-like instrument (was it a duduk that reeds-person Mirko Guerrini was playing ?) Deborah Conway opens the proceedings with a lesser-known song- *Burning Love* (1972). Dressed in a white trouser suit with long scarf, she reminds us of the strength of her range and vocal presence.

It is followed by the only direct reference to Presley – a quote, perhaps from one of the late career Las Vegas season shows, where he is ruminating on the cruelty of the media speculations about his health and private life. It sits in the air for the remainder of the evening. The persecution and mortification of Presley, the silent ogling, and the lack of recognition of his legacy. Conway continues with *Hound Dog* from 1956. It works differently when sung by a woman – first Big Mama Thornton, now Deborah Conway. Gender changes the trajectory of the lyrics.

The excellent Joe Camilleri enters for an upbeat version of *Mystery Train.* Presley's first recorded release on Sun Records in 1953. It swings fast, with less of the eerie phantom tone of the original, not that sense of portent that inspired Greil Marcus to use the title for his 1974 history of American music, featuring an essay, entitled "Presliad" identifying Elvis as one of its central pillars. Instead, it has a New Orleans festive mood, Grabowsky relishing his solo.

Camilleri sings a slow ballad, *True Love Travels on a Gravel Road*, Conway sings the *Hound Dog* B-side *Don't Be Cruel* . Conway's reading of *Love Me Tender* does full credit to the 1956 Presley classic and in duet Camilleri is in perfect accord. He follows with a highlight of his own – the title song for the show, *Edge of Reality*. Preceded by a dazzling sax duet with Guerrini, Camilleri turns this obscure song into a highlight with Fem Belling contributing on electric violin.

That's All Right – the Arthur Crudup song, that Presley recorded for Sun with Scotty Moore and Bill Black, is turned from a country blues to a full Kansas City big band number. Grabowsky stretching the syncopations to twanging point, Craig Fernanis added tasty electric guitar, Phillip Rex commanding on bass, and Eugene Ball bugling on trumpet.

As the program builds, so do the Big Hits and Presley signatures. Camilleri delivers a rousing *In The Ghetto* from 1969 – Presley's only nod to the protest pop of the period and Conway matches *Love Me Tender* with a powerful rendering of *Unchained Melody* that Presley famously sang for the first time just months before his death.

Suspicious Minds – also now welded to the Presley myth - has the vocalists alternating and merging with effortless connection. And, how to end ?

Viva Las Vegas of course - from the 1964 film, but also a reminder of the King's legendary season in Nevada. The musicians add more solos, including Craig Beard on the vibraphone and Darren Farrugia on drums (replacing Niko Schauble at less than a day's notice.) He first joined the band at the sound check.

Edge of Reality is a festival highlight and Paul Grabowsky has created a show that deserves more touring time. We are seeing and hearing familiar material made enticingly new. It is boldly re-arranged with no pelvic moves or vocal mimicry - but Elvis is definitely in the building.

Edge of Reality plays one more show in the Dunstan Theatre, Adelaide Festival Centre on Thursday June 16 at 7.30.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival: Robyn Archer - An Australian Songbook.

Published: 2023-06-19 *Cabaret · Music*

Assembling an intriguing selection of Australian songs and sources, including some doozies of her own, Robyn Archer and her versatile trio return to the Cabaret Festival in fine form.

Written by Murray Bramwell

Robyn Archer is a highlight in any festival. And her appearances at the Adelaide Cabaret Festival always remind us what the best, of that rubbery term 'cabaret', actually looks and sounds like. With her musical prowess, her exuberant erudition, and her keen wit, she is unique. As a tireless advocate for emancipation and social justice she is the real deal.

Archer is an authority on the much-celebrated German Weimar period of music between the World Wars. Over her career she has researched, produced, and performed material from Broadway to Berlin, Paris and the UK. She has also drawn and gained stature from collaborations with music and theatre scholars John Willett and Michael Morley. Her 2013 Cabaret Festival show *Que Rest-t'll*, featuring Morley at the keyboard, was a French affair. *Mother Archer's Cabaret for Dark Times*, delayed by Covid-19, appeared in 2021 to shed light on, and sometimes, makes light of, the parlous political and pandemical woes that we still inhabit.

So when Archer turns her hand to compiling an Australian Songbook it is definitely not going to be a Greatest Hits of the Bleeding Obvious. She always has an eye and ear for forgotten gems, quirky anomalies, transgressive ditties and deliberately suppressed voices.

Throughout the show her running commentary gives plenty of credit where it's due. Her list is not holier than Slim Dusty or Peter Allen, Chisel or the Oils, Ruby and Archie, The Waifs or Men at Work, who are all named and saluted along with a multitude of other musicians, especially women. But, all the same, she isn't going to be singing "Khe Sanh" or "Down Under".

Opening with the wryly satirical "I am not nor will I ever be"(a song from 1988) she nails her doubloon to the mast. She is not, nor will ever be – Crocodile Dundee, or Barry McKenzie-ee, or, for that matter, Dr Germaine Greer. Then, slipping into some phrases from "Bound for South Australia" she declares her heritage. English migrant parents, family home in Broad-view, Port Adelaide. And by way of introducing the excellent band : guitarist and banjo player Cameron Goodall is of Celtic heritage, the forebears of ace accordionist, George Butrumlis, are Greek, and keyboard player, Enio Pozzebon is Italian.

Moving to a rousing First Nations song, Yothu Yindi's "Macassan Crew" (from their *Garma* album) reminds us that the Trepang fisherman from Sulawesi visited these shores long before the European invasion. Archer follows with a haunting reading of a Dja Dja Wurrung song about a birthing tree,"Jaara Nyilamum" written by Yorta Yorta woman, Lou Bennett and arranged by Iain Grandage.

For a thumping version of Goanna Band's "Solid Rock" Cam Goodall takes the lead vocal and the band gets in the groove. But Archer then moves away from familiar fare with a poem by Rev John Garvie (published in 1829, under his pseudonym Anambaba) "Plains of Emu". Songs celebrating the natural landscape feature but there are sinister undertones. "Song of the Standard Lamp" refers to a gallows tree, and the title "Dark Cloud" (with music by Andrew Ford) tells us much.

When the focus moves to the fleshpots of the early days of Sydney's Kings Cross and Darlinghurst with "Palmer Street Blues" and Kenneth Slessor's "Choker's Lane" the band is in full blues swing, Goodall on electric guitar and Pozzebon rolling barrelhouse piano chords, but the mood is still menacing and grim. As a coda, Archer's musical setting of Michael Dransfield's poem "Outback" (from her 1978 *The Wild Girl at Heart* album) reminds us of the ravages and plunder of Australian resources – "like mined and gutted countries anywhere." It concludes : "Our leaders betray us, sell our heritage, /what remains is not worth stealing,/ and so becomes an Army weapons-range."

It isn't really an Archer event until she has a good yodel. Reminiscing on her mother's love of Country and Western music, she leads into the bucolic "Murray Moon", Goodall strum-ming banjo, syncopations on the piano and Butrumlis, suave on accordion. Joy McKean's "Gymkhana Yodel" takes us on an ambitious four part glottal quivering harmony - ending in triumph for all concerned.

Robyn Archer's own compositions conclude the first half. Dating back to her early days as a performer in the late 60s early 70s the titles tell all. Her not-so secret women's business, she calls them – "The Backyard Abortion Waltz", "The Menstruation Blues" and The (m-m-m) Menopause Blues."

There is a surge of recognition and celebration from many in the audience. This is the Archer who broke boundaries and taboos way back then. The equal to Greer, Anne Summers and so many other progressive Australian women.

After interval the foot is still on, well, the throat. A song she wrote 25 years ago and it is more current than ever. "The Boys" (co-written with Cathie Travers) speaks to the current toxic behaviour in Canberra as if it were composed this week. Kate Miller Heidke's "The Facebook Song" adds another dimension to the role of anti-social media.

Perhaps the highlight on this urgent theme is "Not Now Not Ever", the Julia Gillard parlia-mentary speech against misogyny. With a choral setting by Rob Davidson, the lines of the speech are repeated in modal form. Led by Cam Goodall, the band harmonises behind Archer's quietly iterated declaration. These are familiar lines, now made more compelling and strangely new. There are somehow echoes of Laurie Anderson. It is an inspired rendering.

Robyn Archer's songbook contains multitudes. From Dorothy Hewitt's "Weevils in the Flour" and Archer and Paul Grabowsky's melodic but scathing "These are the Days" to lampoons of Menzies, Hawke and a song from *Keating the Musical*. The Archer classic "Insect on the Windscreen of my Heart" gets a welcome go, and then, for an encore, there's a mashup number taken from 31 Oz songs with placename references. Many are from Queensland, but finally Adelaide gets a namecheck.

The crowd cheers and is soon on its toes. We always claim Robyn Archer back from wherever she's been. On the day of her second and final show, June 18, she celebrated her 75th birthday. And supported by her lock-step, stylish band, she has never sounded better.

InDaily InReview June 19, 2023.

Adelaide Cabaret Festival - The 2024 Variety Gala

Published: 2024-06-08 *Cabaret*

Presided over by exuberant Artistic Director, Virginia Gay, this year's Variety Gala - featuring an array of amazing women (and also some excellent blokes) - is one of the briskest and best we have seen for a while.

Written by Murray Bramwell

It's that time again. A week into June, just when winter starts to bite, and the Adelaide Cabaret Festival convenes for the 24th year. And, as old as the festival itself, is the Variety Gala. They are a chance to sample the program, a glimpse of the weeks ahead. For many it is an occasion for a night out, for others some serious plumage display, and for everyone a celebration of that elusively defined thing called Cabaret .

After Isaac Hannam's quietly eloquent Welcome to Country, the curtain rises on Kathryn Sproul's elegantly minimal décor – quilted curtains at the back of the stage lit in purples and blues and, suspended above, a dozen or so mid-century orange globes. Downstage left is a large bathtub from which tumbles, in a full-length grey gown, the Person of Ceremonies, current Artistic Director, Virginia Gay.

She is announcer, narrator, but also chief spruiker of the event. Gay first performed at the Cabaret Festival fifteen years ago and she is both advocate and devotee. Her pride and respect for the accomplishments and expanding reputation of the June get-together borders on hyperbole even for the local cheer squad. But it is deeply felt and generously sincere and offers a welcome morale boost to a host of performing artists still recovering from a devastating loss of momentum during Covid.

Gay plays to local sentiment with a lively rendition of "Adelaide" – Ben Folds's wryly parochial paeon, rather than the sardonic Paul Kelly one.

To follow is Fascinating Aida, the UK trio of droll women satirists celebrating forty years of musical barbs and lampoonery. "Prisoner of Gender" has them chirpily venturing into the choppy waters of transsexual transformation but they tunefully manoeuvre into a hymn for inclusivity and *viva la difference* to conclude.

The house band, lamentably unintroduced but outstanding all night, lights up with saxophones and horns for Bert LaBonte's dazzling version of Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get it On". He captures that sweet, grainy high tenor in one of many highlights of the evening.

Also excellent is Gillian Cosgriff with "Presents" an impishly preceptive send-up of the increasingly lackadaisical approach to gift-giving. The crisp, clever lyrics will attract many to check out her show, "Actually, Good", which plays until Sunday.

Graduate, and now mentor, from the festival's Class of Cabaret, Millicent Sarre featured with a belting version of "I Can Cook Too" from Lenny Bernstein's "On the Town", and Jess Hitchcock delivered a scintillating reading of "Suspended in Time" from "Xanadu" – part of the Olivia Newton John tribute, "Hopelessly Devoted" which has one performance with the ASO on June 15.

From the UK, the deadpan, zany musical duo, Flo & Joan come close to stealing the night. Their plaintive folksong rendering of "Lady in the Woods", complete with tender harmonies and recorder interludes, is a hilarious melange of alliterative innuendo that gathers with alarming comic speed. Flo & Joan -one in earnest horn-rimmed specs with embroidered roses on her jacket, the other looking like a chorus member from "Pippin"- are surely one of the hot tickets of the festival.

In a line-up that has a welcome predominance of extraordinary women, the men nonetheless make their mark. Like Mark Nadler for instance, whose "I Love a Piano" is a thunderingly funny (and brilliant) musical mash-up of Fats Waller, Scott Joplin, Glenn Miller , Mozart and Liberace. Nadler hammers the klavier with hilarious virtuosity, while managing not to sit on his suit tails and beaming imperiously at the audience. The Stein-Yamaha, as he calls it, will not only need tuning it might need a chiropractor – especially after Gabbi Bolt and Matthew Predny's four-handed keyboard blitzkrieg from "Murder for Two" later in Act 2.

Reuben Kaye, a longstanding Cabaret Festival and Fringe Person of Outrage did not disappoint with "I Want Ya" from his show "The End". With his reptilian wit, immaculate timing, and comic insouciance, Kaye delivers both queer comedy and challenging satire, attributes Virgina Gay alluded to as she awarded the genuinely startled Kaye the well-deserved Cabaret Icon Award for 2024.

The program, astutely paced and briskly directed by Mitchell Butel, closes on a series of high notes. Cassie Hamilton is a rising talent with her splendidly sung and proudly affirming "Falling in Love with Someone" from her comic odyssey "A Transgender Woman on the Internet, Crying".

Rhonda Burchmore, celebrating 42 years in the business, spoke both poignantly and pragmatically about the life of the jobbing stage performer before launching into a terrific version of "They Just Keep Moving the Line" and Virginia Gay put on the Travolta leather jacket and mixed it with Christie Whelan Browne for a wiggly and Greasy workout of "You're the One That I Want. "

This has been one of the better Galas in a while. Gay works hard and winningly to keep the pace going, even if sometimes the superlatives get the better of her enthusiasm. Musical Director, Shanon Whitelock and the band don't miss a beat, and Mahalia Barnes's closer- a soaring rendering of "River Deep, Mountain High"- with a chorus of ooh-ah singers - augurs very well for the weeks to come.

The Adelaide Cabaret Festival runs until June 22.

Hopelessly Devoted - A Celebration of Olivia Newton John

Published: 2024-06-16 *Cabaret · Music*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival

Hopelessly Devoted- A Celebration of Olivia Newton John

With Adelaide Symphony Orchestra.

With four outstanding singers and the ASO at its expansive best, this celebration of an Australian music legend is a Cabaret Festival highlight.

Written by Murray Bramwell

The more time passes, the more extraordinary are the accomplishments of Olivia Newton John. Forty six years ago, *Grease* became the highest grossing movie musical ever, and the soundtrack still breaks all records. In 1981 "Physical" topped the Billboard charts for ten weeks straight. Helen Reddy encouraged the ambitious and talented Olivia to try her luck in the US - and crikey, did they hear her roar.

Not only did she sell more than 100 million albums (something infinitely more tangible than the mayfly life of Spotify clicks) this quintessentially Australian artist has created a music legacy that defined the 1980s in all its careless energy and pop pleasure. Her string of singles hits (many of them composed by Australian production wizard John Farrar) have become instantly evocative classics.

"Hopelessly Devoted" the brainchild of Mark Sutcliffe (also responsible for stage tributes to Streisand, George Michael and David Bowie) has matched gifted vocalists with State orchestras in Melbourne, Brisbane, and now Adelaide with great success. Ably abetted by arranger and film composer, Nicholas Buc, Sutcliffe has created classy, crisply managed productions that are very suitable centrepieces for events such as the Adelaide Cabaret Festival.

Under the capable baton of the stylish Jessica Gethin, the ASO opens with the "Oliviature" a brief but impressive orchestral mashup of ONJ faves reminding us of the enticing hooks and melodies of her songbook, but also how key the orchestra (and the four piece band) is to the success of the production.

"Dare to Dream" follows, introducing the four vocalists of the evening – Jess Hitchcock, Georgina Hopson, Christie Whelan Browne and David Campbell. They mix and match, as they do for the entire show, with an ease and good-natured camaraderie that is not only appealing but mirrors the down to earth lack of egotism for which Newton-John was renowned.

Tottie Goldsmith, Olivia's niece and also a singer in her own right (she featured in 80s girl band, The Chantoozies) provides irregular MC duties, in part to share her memories and affection for her famous aunt but also as goodwill ambassador for the Olivia Newton-John Cancer and Wellness Centre which opened in Melbourne in 2012. Its mission being to incorporate procedures and alternative therapies which Olivia found invaluable in her own, often arduous, treatment.

Goldsmith introduces Jess Hitchcock to sing the murder ballad "Banks of the Ohio" which, like the later quartet version of "Take Me Home Country Roads", harks from Olivia's early highly successful country pop phase. Hitchcock, who has splendid range and timbre, is a standout singer. Her performance of *Xanadu*'s "Suspended in Time" was a spellbinding moment in the Variety Gala and again, here in its context, it is a showstopper.

But each of the singers have their moments of excellence. Music theatre specialist, Georgina Hopson delivers a plaintive "Please Mr Please", and a wryly forthright reading of "Make a Move on Me ". Christie Whelan Browne's powerfully conjured "Magic", with the orchestra in full surge and a spicy guitar solo from Sam Leske, also takes us straight back to exotic *Xanadu,* as does "Suddenly".

And, to close Act One, in pink lycra, headband and matching wrist accessories, Whelan Browne mordantly wiggles and star jumps through the pop masterpiece, "Physical". She sings it brilliantly and totally looks the part, but at the same time, it is in ironic quotation marks. Whelan Brown and her fellow singers, decked out in Adidas trackies, gently allow us a smile back at 1981.

The full orchestral arrangement is interesting also, replacing the heavy Eighties metallic synths, splash drumming and squealing guitars with a different but equally appealing vibrancy.

Fourth vocalist, David Campbell is the perfect complement to the trio of women. He shares a a fine duet of "I Will be Right Here" with Jess Hitchcock and his understated reading of Peter Allen's "I Honestly Love You" is a highlight. As is his Act Two opener - Eric Carmen's "Boats Against the Current", introduced by Nicholas Buc's extended orchestral intro and haunting coda. It is a delight to have Campbell, one of the Festival's finest former Artistic Directors, and clearly a generous and collegial performer, back in town.

The program is nicely sequenced, never losing fluency and showcasing Newton-John songs at their best. Hitchcock is terrific with both "Soul Kiss" and the slow ballad, "Sam" (another Farrar composition, with Don Black and Shadows gun guitarist, Hank Marvin). Christie Whelan Browne strikes more gold with 'A Little More Love' and the palpitating "Heart Attack".

Georgina Hopson's final solo, the titular "Hopelessly Devoted" is pitch perfect and Jessica Gethin's orchestra splendidly envelops the vocal.

For encores it has to be the greasy masterpiece duet "You're the One That I Love" – Campbell in Danny leather jacket and Christie Whelan Brown, Olivia to the life, in black tights and rhinestone belt.

And to close, "Xanadu" sung by the whole cast. "A million lights are dancing and there you are, a shooting star" That was Olivia Newton-John, and this production honours her memory. Not hopelessly, but triumphantly, devoted.

Hopelessly Devoted was performed once only on June 15 at the Adelaide Festival Theatre.

Patti LuPone: A Life in Notes

Published: 2024-06-19 *Cabaret*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival

Patti LuPone: A Life in Notes

Patti LuPone comes back to Adelaide to perform a program of memorable songs and show us what timeless cabaret looks and sounds like.

Written by Murray Bramwell

She's back. Better than ever. New York singer Patti LuPone returns to the Cabaret Festival with a crisp new show featuring songs that made her name as a Broadway star ,as well as other personal favourites that inspired and shaped her progress. You could say they mean the world to her.

In 2010 she published a memoir of a career in music and theatre which began in the late 1960s and has continued for more than fifty years. As she wryly observes, it has even kept on going since 2010. So it is time for another memoir , a musical one of songs heard and remembered. She calls the show *A Life in Notes* and, as she describes it herself, it is one of high notes, low notes, love notes and (sometimes) wrong notes.

As she takes to the stage at the Festival Theatre, Patti LuPone is given a rapturous welcome. It was big when she last played here in 2018, but this time the full house is in full roar. The décor is minimal and elegant, a grand piano with a bowl of red roses, a backdrop of pastel lighting, and her outstanding band of two.

Musical Director, the brilliant Joseph Thalken is back again at the keyboard and, over to stage left, is a cluster of instruments and mics. This is the string section, guitars, mandolin and violin, all performed by the equally accomplished Brad Phillips. LuPone, stylish as ever in her black suit, opens with "Song For You". It is the first of many interesting choices. Written by Leon Russell, Ray Charles and Willie Nelson, it is a reflective ballad, tinged with weary regret – "I've been so many places …I've acted out my life in stages /with ten thousand people watching." But there are no traces of Leon, Ray and Willie here. As with every song performed, LuPone's vocal is unequivocally hers.

The mood and tempo swiftly shifts to Rosemary Clooney's "Come On-A my House" and the first of Patti's memories of temps perdu. Northport High School in Long Island New York is an important part of her early musical education and remains a continuing connection (in fact she used the current Northport choir as back-up in her live recorded set, *Don't Monkey with Broadway*).

She recalls the intensity of late fifties teenage emotions, crushes on Disney heart-throbs like Tommy Kirk, or the later, more sultry, vibes of Troy Donahue. The Jamies 1958 hit "Summer-time, Summertime", with doo-wop harmonies from the boys in the band, captures the angst of early Sixties pop. Mark Dinning's "Teen Angel" – Romeo and Juliet in a car wreck – is perfectly evoked, as is "Town without Pity "with LuPone out-doing Gene Pitney in the aching operatic, high register lamentation department.

But there is nothing strictly chronological about the setlist. It is instead an emotional timeline – so the tortured Mark Blitzstein's "I Wish it So" and Eartha Kitt's "Lilac Wine" fit right in with the theme of late teen heartbreak.

The selections are intriguing – the rapid fire Broadway lyrics of Jule Styne's "Some People", the feminist reflection on Burt Bacharach's often flippantly performed "Alfie", and a more-in-anger-than-in-sorrow take on Judy Garland's "The Man That Got Away," renders the well-known much less comfortably familiar. That also goes for the Act One closer - Mary Hopkin's "Those Were the Days" in a more elegiac key.

The strong second half - LuPone is back in a silvery gown - is also notable for the freshness of the arrangements. The standard, "On Broadway" is performed with piano and a vamping mandolin, "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" freed from orchestral histrionics by a mournful Spanish guitar.

It took a while, but when LuPone swivels back from the piano with a martini glass in her hand, it is time for Stephen Sondheim. And, of course , it is the acerbic "Ladies Who Lunch" from *Company,* sung by Joanne, a role reprised by LuPone in 2022, earning her a third Tony Award.

Conceived and flawlessly directed by Scott Wittman, *A Life in Notes*, not only showcases LuPone's brilliance as a performer but illuminates the song selections. The medley of songs about time, beginning with Cole Porter's "Every Time We Say Goodbye" re-framed as a 1980s AIDS lament, morphing into "I Didn't Know what Time it Was" by Lorenz Hart and concluding with a terrific version of Cyndi Lauper's "Time after Time", is not only intuitive but gives each song exponential effect.

This ledger of musical memories also includes Bob Dylan. He has briefly had a Frank Sinatra phase himself, but only Patti Lupone can extrude real feeling from the rather hackneyed "Make You feel My Love". And, "Forever Young" was begging for inclusion, even if it runs perilously close to becoming a Boomer singalong.

Lennon and McCartney's lambent ballad" In My Life" made an apt encore with LuPone again showing how she can magnify the emotion and implication of lyrics without excess. Another captivating moment in this splendid masterclass in cabaret was "Stars", the wistful Janis Ian song. "Stars, they come and go/ They come fast or slow/They go like the last light…".

That may be true, but Patti LuPone is still burning brighter than ever.

Patti LuPone – A Life in Notes was performed once only on June 20 at the Festival Theatre. The Adelaide Cabaret Festival continues until June 22.

Adelaide Festival: Hedwig and the Angry Inch

Published: 2025-02-26 *Cabaret · Adelaide Festival · Music*

Hedwig and the Angry Inch

Text by John Cameron Mitchell

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Trask

The Queens Theatre, Adelaide.

February 26, 2025

Murray Bramwell

Since we are talking about a punk rock musical, why not start with Plato's *Symposium ?*

"Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature. Each of us, then, is a 'matching half' of a human whole...and each of us is always seeking the half that matches him." [/them]

In his outstanding music theatre work, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* playwright John Cameron Mitchell takes a sharply witty view of the duality in us all.

It is described, in detail, in his equally accomplished musical collaborator, Stephen Trask's song "Origin of Love" which proposes a time when "Folks roamed the earth/ Like big rolling kegs ./They had two sets of arms./They had two sets of legs"

They also had two faces and one giant head . And they knew nothing of love. It was before the Origin of Love - when Thor and Zeus and Osiris and the mighty hand of Jove all joined to sunder these composites and they became forever more- "lonely two-legged creatures."

This is the fabulously ludicrous mythic justification with which the lonely young boy Hansel, besieged in communist East Berlin, becomes Hedwig- his infamous, prowling, heartsick, altered ego.

Since its Off-Broadway inception in 1998, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, has, like *The Rocky Horror Show,* confronted the tyrannies of gender, and its binary imperatives, with defiance and a kind of raucous joy. When other Hedwig productions were cancelled in 2020 by purist agitators - for failing to meet stringent casting requirements - this latest outing boldly demonstrates that 2025 needs Hedwig's mutinous courage more than ever.

In the ancient shell of The Queens Theatre, co-directors Shane Anthony and Dino Dimitriadis have created rough theatre with style and flair. Jeremy Allen's set, (bathed in lighting wizard, Geoff Cobham's artfully grungy sprays and strobes) consists of a compact, circular steel performance stage, with a staircase at the back leading to a large mysterious door. .

A silvery, ruffled, tubular fabric creation hangs above the action like a giant lampshade – ready to be lowered over the band for quieter Hedwig reveries, or scrunched up into itself for the big show tune occasions.

The excellent band is already installed, dressed in Nicol & Ford's extravagantly distressed and patched denim, and building the expectation with slashing guitar and keyboard rock.

It is Hedwig time. Sporting a blonde Heidi wig rolled into two big bunches and a long pigtail, also in denim, fishnet, and platinum cowboy boots, is the star and engine of the show, Seann Miley Moore comes out roaring-

"Tear Me Down".

The transgressive challenges the actual Berlin Wall and the metaphor of bourgeois disapproval. Moore's Hedwig means business. "There isn't much difference between a bridge and a wall/ Without me right in the middle babe/you would be nothing at all"

The songs are great. *Rolling Stone* magazine wrote at the time- here was a rock musical with actual rock music. Nothing lights the touchpaper like "Angry Inch" narrating the ghastly events of a gender transition operation going horribly wrong. Hence the song's title – the tiny grim, fleshly reminder of so much lost and so little gained. Crowd favourite, Moore is not alone in bringing this weird, ambitious, crazy-brave and heroic story of resistance into the light.

As Hedwig's devoted, but despised, paramour Yitzhak, Adam Noviello is a thin, desperate, introverted foil to the petulant extravagance of Moore, with a vocal range and presence that lifts the music literally to another level.

Crucial also to the success of this production is the band . Versatile guitarist Glenn Moorhouse, bassist Felicity Freeman, Jarrad Payne on drums – all under the exacting direction of Victoria Falconer on keyboards, and momentarily, a quivering theremin.

Hedwig's narrative aaarrk, from bad to worse to even worser, is contrasted with the success and glory gathered by their protégé Tommy Gnosis – plagiarist and traitor to their universe of two. While Hedwig and The Inch are playing two-bit dives, the mysterious door is momentarily opened in a blizzard of stage haze to reveal Tommy playing Hedwig's compositions to stadium crowds.

Seann Miley Moore has a large task capturing the many elements of this ambitious, thematically complex stage work. The East Berlin satire is perhaps too esoteric for present audiences and Moore's German accent is not brisk enough for the political wit.

But armed with Stephen Trask's brilliantly varied songs – from the melancholy of "Wig in A Box", the country lilt of "Sugar Daddy", and the alienated numbness of "Wicked Little Town", Moore, Noviello and the lock-step band, have the audience entranced, energised and agog for every angry and exalted inch of Hedwig's tour of the lower depths.

See it before it leaves town. It is a 27 year queer classic.

Presented by GWB Entertainment. Andrew Henry Presents & Adelaide Festival, Hedwig and the Angry Inch is playing at The Queen's Theatre until March 15.

Ursula Yovich Sings Nina Simone

Published: 2026-06-06 *Cabaret · Music*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival

Banquet Room

Aided and abetted by an excellent band, Ursula Yovich not only showcases the work of a musical legend, she artfully brings the lessons of the songs closer to home.

Written by Murray Bramwell

The more time passes, the more amazing is Nina Simone. Her musical gifts as both composer and performer are extraordinary and unique. Her legacy has been clouded in recent times with the preoccupation with the mental distress in her later years. The Netflix documentary *What Happened, Miss Simone ?* may have graphically reported on her decline, but it could not conceal her genius and commanding presence.

In 1970, Nina Simone confided to a New York audience how tiring performing had become - and that she hoped that night's live recording (released as *Black Gold*) would be something people could still listen to when she was gone.

And what remarkable treasures those albums now are, especially the concerts when her precision and gift for improvising across genres and styles is so apparent. Apart from her own brilliant compositions, there are the covers – Broadway tunes, spirituals, blues standards, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, George Harrison and Burt Bacharach songs– all transmuted into Nina Simone originals.

In her captivating Cabaret Festival tribute, Ursula Yovich fondly recalls, as a youngster in Darwin, watching Simone video clips on *Rage*. That admiration has grown into a profound sense of kinship, an affiliation with this singer, and her willingness to bear witness. "It is the artists' duty ," says Yovich, "to reflect the times." And she applauds Nina Simone as an artist, an activist, and "The High Priestess of Soul"

After an extended and outstanding career as both actor and singer, Yovich has in some ways echoed Simone's own. Identified for exceptional talent she enrolled in theatre and music classes when very young. And her impressive bio includes more than 50 stage productions, including her own compositions, one person shows, high profile Australian films and TV, and multiple Helpmann and other prestigious awards- including, as of last Thursday night the Adelaide Gala Cabaret Icon award.

As soon as Ursula Yovich and her terrific four piece band take to the stage, the packed house in the Banquet Room is ready to roll. The show opens with 'Sinnerman', the diminutive Yovich filling the air with her powerful contralto, 'Sinnerman where are you going to run to ?' She doesn't mimic Simone but is clearly a match for the repertoire.

Her vocal is urgent and in lock-step with the roiling piano and the snap sharp snare drum. The repetitions -call and response of "Power"- set a revival mood, but also syncopated hand-clapping and piano rhythms remind us that Nina Simone hearkened to such jazz stylings as Dave Brubeck's 'Unsquare Dance'.

In immediate contrast comes 'Black is the Colour of My True Love's Hair', Simone's variation on the widely revived Scottish ballad. With only piano accompaniment from Daniel Pilner, Yovich effortlessly captures the tenderness of the Highland original - but also the celebration of Black identity.

In the first of a number personal commentaries on the material chosen, she recalls first hearing the song and feeling she could at last cast off the crushing connotations of Black as "ugly and evil and dark." It remains quietly implicit in this version, however, unlike the variation Nina Simone also recorded which proudly asserted- "Black is her body/ so firm and so bold/ Black is beauty/Her soul is gold."

The pairing of Jacques Brel's 'Ne Me Quitte Pas' with Gershwin's 'I Loves You Porgy' which follows is not so much a mash-up as a sublime pairing of two compositions brought delectably to life. Ursula Yovich's effortlessly phrased vocal captures not only the pensive Brel, but the gently mournful lilt and swing of Gershwin.

An almost reggae beat for 'Don't Let Me be Misunderstood' brings a tempo change and the band get into stride. Musical director and bass player Adam Ventoura adds chorus vocals, and guitarist Daniel March contributes tasty flourishes also. The song's title leads Yovich to reflect on the alienation and indifference of misunderstanding.

Throughout the performance, in the manner of Nina Simone, she reflects on the chaos and cruelty of the larger world and also within our own borders. By saying the quiet stuff out loud, she bears witness to racial injustices - not with generalities, but the names of First Nations men and women who have suffered and died with no consequence for the perpetrators.

This leads into the most confronting song in the setlist. 'Strange Fruit' a graphic depiction of two racist lynchings (written by Abel Meeropol and made famous by Billie Holliday and Nina Simone) opens with slow-march dirge chords on piano - and Ursula Yovich's penetrating vocal. "Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees/ Pastoral scenes from the gallant South." It is, and should be, a grim pause in the proceedings.

Lovich and her excellent band then swing into Simone's portraits of discrimination and defiance 'Four Women' and the upbeat hymn from the hippie musical, *Hair* 'Ain't Got No/I Got Life' followed by Nina Simone's most celebrated anthem (co-written by Weldon Irvine) 'To be Young, Gifted and Black', which took its title from a phrase coined by the African American playwright, Lorraine Hansberry. It could also describe the accomplishments of Ursula Yovich herself.

'Stars'- Janis Ian's musing on celebrity and self-worth, has the line "Truth tellers don't fade" leading Yovich to celebrate and lament the tribulations of people such as Nelson Mandela and Charlie Perkins, among others. This segues into a concern for artists in a hostile world, and, in her own case as an actor, immersed in performances depicting and protesting dire human predicaments that are no more resolved now than ever. "Truth doesn't protect you," she observes. "It can isolate you instead."

Never letting the occasion to become fretful, however, Ursula Yovich and the band turn to another of Nina Simone's rallying calls for revolution – 'Everything Must Change' –"nothing remains the same". It is musically exhilarating, the players all lifting Yovich's soaring vocal – Daniel Pilner on the ivories, Daniel March turning out tasty guitar riffs, Fabian Hevia on drums, closely matching Adam Ventoura on bass. These players can turn on a dime.

The final number is Nina Simone's open question, about liberty and freedom from persecution, 'I Wish I Knew How it Feels to be Free.' For many of us in the audience it is probably not a statement we properly comprehend. Certainly not in the way that Ursula Yovich does. It has been her gift to the festival not only to engage generously, but to memorably conjure up the amazing music of a pioneer whose day is still ahead of us.

Ursula Yovich Sings Nina Simone plays one more performance in the Banquet Room, Saturday June 6 at 7pm.

Published InDaily June 6, 2026

Monsieur Camembert: Cohen Noir

Published: 2026-06-20 *Cabaret · Music*

Adelaide Cabaret Festival

In another Cabaret Festival highlight, the excellent Monsieur Camembert celebrate the unique appeal of Leonard Cohen, and display their own musical flair in the telling.

Written by Murray Bramwell

"Ring the bells that still can ring/Forget your perfect offering/There's a crack in everything / that's how the light gets in."

The poetic lines from Leonard Cohen's 'Anthem' reverberate for the many admirers who have accumulated since he first swapped poetry for the Tower of Song with his debut album in 1967.

But in 2004, things had seriously cracked for Cohen himself. It was discovered that his manager, Kelley Lynch, had not only totally looted his life savings, but had sold off his publishing rights and artist royalties. Years of gruelling, largely futile, legal conflict were to follow.

In 2008, however, a whole lot of light shone in for fans everywhere. Cohen embarked on a series of world tours, not only hugely restoring his finances, but, at age 74, re-igniting his musical creativity.

Many in Adelaide will recall his Leconfield winery concert in January 2009 (I still have the ticket) and his return fixture at Thebarton the following year. Dapper in his suit and fedora, surrounded by a band of mostly Canadian talent, Leonard charmed and soothed and amused and captured audiences.

He also paved the way for more septuagenarian (now eighty something) legends to take up travelling minstrelsy, playing to the old crowd but also the new one. He may have been a sportsman and a shepherd (and a lazy bastard living in a suit) but he had created his own Renaissance.

Apart from live concert releases, Cohen recorded more albums – the marvellous *Old Ideas* and *Popular Problems*, the aptly named *You Want it Darker* (released just three weeks before his death in November 2016) and the posthumous *Thanks for the Dance* released in 2019.

Looking around, and over-hearing, the sell-out crowd at the Dunstan Theatre eagerly awaiting Cabaret Festival headliners Monsieur Camembert, it is evident that this is a chance to renew connection with Cohen's music and persona – and also, perhaps, the precious and vivid memory of those peerless concerts earlier this century.

Monsieur Camembert's number one cheese and co-founder, Yaron Hallis, calls this latest version of their Leonard shows (which began way back in 2007}, *Cohen Noir*. And, perhaps with more light than shade, it is a splendidly fashioned immersion in the life, works, and wry wisdom, of a remarkable poet musician.

With more years span than Brel or Gainsbourg, and more immediacy than Dylan, Leonard Cohen has described life in the seventh age, evoking memoranda from past lives, bringing old ideas and popular problems. As well as dance music with one foot in the grave. Or, maybe - eternity.

The first voice of the night we hear is Leonard Cohen himself. One of many fragments spread at intervals throughout the performance. Intriguing excerpts from interviews, speculations, confessions, aphorisms, jokes, and self-deprecations.

Sitting on a bar stool in a striped cap and a Leonard Cohen merch T-shirt under his jacket, leader, MC, vocalist and owlish narrator Yaron Hallis begins to croon – "*If* you want a lover …" The ten piece band saunters and swings, does the ragtime slowly. It is 'I'm Your Man' – one of many of Cohen's slyly raffish musical masks, and a perfect opener for the set.

With "Where is my Gypsy Wife tonight ?" Hallis shifts the mood to Cohen dread – of rejection, and uncertainty. "This is the darkness. This is the Flood". Matthew Ottignon provides mournful bass clarinet and Susie Bishop steps forward with a simmering violin solo.

In addition to Hallis's well-judged, gruff low-key, Leonard vocals (which are never impersonations) *Cohen Noir* features four guest vocalists. Lyn Bowtell's melodically expansive reading of 'Bird on a Wire' lifts the musical stakes and reminds us that the focus is not only on Cohen's poetic lyrics, but the pleasure of his tunes. Bowtell unleashes her range with memorable effect.

Another early highlight follows. 'Who by Fire', the composition love child of Cohen and Janis Ian, opens with bowed bass from Mark Harris and more sublime piano from Daniel Pilner (who was also terrific in the band for Ursula Yovich's Nina Simone tribute at the festival two weeks ago.) The singer is Timothy James Bowen. Bearded, with steel framed glasses, in denim and a Stetson hat, he captures in his keening vocal the very flame of one of Cohen's great songs.

Then it is Susie Bishop's turn to shine. Ushered in with Pilner's trickling piano she sings –"It's four in the morning …" Famous Blue Raincoat – famously covered by Jennifer Warnes and others - is made Bishop's own. The band gradually joins – drums, a soaring sax solo on perfect cue – and then the curt, epistolary ending, "Sincerely, L. Cohen. "

The fourth singer, Diana Rouvas brings further vocal variation with a jazzy take on abject Leonard's 'Light as a Breeze'. Her agility and gospel inflections and phrasing nicely working the impish ironies between words and music.

The band returns with a breakneck jive take on 'Jazz Police' from the 1988 *I'm Your Man* album. They are a well-oiled unit, moving the focus among the players Charlie Meadows on jaunty guitar, a bass solo and scat attack from Mark Harris, and concluding with a saxophone seizure from Matthew Ottignon.

A set of Cohen songs has a multitude to select from and Monsieur Camembert choose well. Guided by pattering brushstrokes from Cameron Reid, strings and basslines, Timothy James Bown strums the opening lines of 'So Long Marianne'- later to be joined with a dazzling violin solo from Ben Adler . Susie Bishop's 'Joan of Arc' is a haunting slow blues with call and response from Yaron Hallis which rises, without excess, to operatic crescendo.

And the trio of Bowtell, Rouvas and Bowen doowop and sashay through 'Memories' another boisterous glimpse of Cohen's view of courtship as the comedy of desperation.

For the final section of the two hour show, the fifty person Adelaide choir, Born on Monday (led by Ella and Anthony Pak-Poy) fill the stage to add majestic voice for a succession of Leonard Big Ones.

Lyn Bowtell's reading of 'If it Be Your Will' is a lovely opener especially with the addition of a Mongolian throat singing interlude from band member Bukhu.

And of course, with fifty extra voices on hand there's going to be 'Hallelujah', Cohen's most covered song and, in the process – after Jeff Buckley, k.d.lang, John Cale, Willie Nelson, the execrable Rufus Wainwright, and every second contestant for *The Voice* – has lost some of its subtlety and satiric Cohen edge.

It is now unassailably "anthemic", but tonight, astutely shared by Bowtell, Rouvas, Bowen and Bishop, and the harmonic full strength choir, it is reflective rather than bombastic - and an undoubted crowd favourite.

As is 'Everybody Knows'. If ever a song spoke to the times, it is this paeon to outrage and profound disappointment, posing as cynicism. We sang the repeated mantra with some exhilaration. Everybody Knows. We see you.

The music is upbeat samba. Meadows sprightly Django on guitar, more scat from Harris, klezmer violin from Bishop. And a singalong, clap-along ending.

"A song is an anchor thrown into a foaming sea" Another Leonard observation comes from the disembodied ether. Present in another form. Time for 'Anthem'. Ring the bells that still can ring, that crack in everything, the light let in.

Diana Rouvas sings it beautifully, the choir surges, and we cut away to Bukhu again. His throat singing singing is indescribably compelling, as is his solo on the ancient horsehair fiddle. The segue to Matthew Ottignon's saxophone effortlessly lets even more music in.

So, there is nothing left but to Dance to the End of Love, which Monsieur Camembert, amiably and capably led by Yaron Hallis, proceed to do. It is the place to depart. Cohen in his late concerts made much of it, as he did 'Anthem'.

It is another Leonard paradox. Very near the end, Yaron Hallis tells us, Cohen declared himself ready for death. A little later he corrected himself, saying maybe he was exaggerating. Whatever, he mused – "You'll be hearing from me, Baby." We certainly did tonight.

Cohen Noir, presented by Monsieur Camembert, has one more performance at the Dunstan Theatre on April 20 at 7.45 pm.

Published in InDaily InReview June 20, 2026,