

## BROADWAY WORLD REVIEW

By Barry Lenny

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English playwright, **Dennis Kelly's**, award winning play, **Orphans**, brings together three very unpleasant people for two hours of mostly unfinished sentences, in what has been described as a psychological thriller. Helen and Danny are married and live in minimally furnished modern quarters, isolated from the darkness and horrors of the outside world, where violent youth gangs roam at night and life is cheap. Their quiet meal, celebrating her pregnancy with their second child, is interrupted by the arrival of her younger brother, Liam, obviously disturbed and rambling somewhat incoherently. He is covered in blood, that he explains was from a badly injured victim of a vicious attack, whom he held to comfort him.

Random, extreme violence is nothing new on estates in England, gang violence is common, as is racial conflict, and even Kelly himself has suffered, once being attacked for knocking over somebody's ice cream, and then being mugged a few months later. Transferring it to Australia might obviate the need for accents, which so often fails, but it doesn't gel as well in the Adelaide psyche as it would in the United Kingdom. It also needs some rewriting to reset it here as, for example, we speak of "youths", not of "lads".

Helen and Liam were orphaned in a fire and spent time in care. They are now both damaged people, he more so, and she is overly protective towards him. Danny seems to go along with her demands on him, for a quiet life. Liam is inherently violent and, in spite of his claims to the contrary, excessively racist. He is, in short, a psychopath and a pathological liar. Helen appears to be very close to Liam, incestuously close, perhaps, but there is something in the past that sheds another light on their relationship. She is demanding and manipulative, willing to go to any lengths to pressure Danny into protecting Liam, and he weakens time after time, getting deeper into the consequences of the events of that night and the next day. By the time their five year old son, Shane, is woken and gets out of bed, their relationships have changed irrevocably.

There elements that are predictable, and eventually confirmed as expected, and there are others that are hinted at, in both the actions and in the text, that seem predictable, but are left implied, not confirmed; just left hanging for the audience to draw their own conclusions. All in all, a little editing would not have hurt as it was rather long and had a few slow spots. It all came down to the performances, though, which were made more uncomfortable due to the close proximity of the audience to the stage in the intimacy of the Bakehouse Theatre.

The Bluefruit Productions set, designed by director, Shona Benson, is a raised square stage, the two rear sides having walls of bubble wrap, a gap in the corner between these two walls being the sole access to the room that they create. A settee and a table and chairs complete the picture inside. Outside the desolation is indicated by rubble and rubbish, implying a city in decay. The production is lit by Alexander Ramsay with sound by Sean Ormsby, and often disturbingly discordant music, composed by Callie Wood.

Shona Benson has found three fine young actors for this production and has ensured that the tension is maintained, rising occasionally to a crescendo, echoed by the music. She manages to overcome the shortcomings in the script with her strong direction, that pulls no punches.

Anna Cheney is the domineering Helen, and **Charles Mayer** is her subservient husband, Danny. Cheney makes her character cold and calculating, seemingly not particularly upset about her brother's gradually elaborating story beyond her desire to protect him, snapping out her dialogue and dominating both of the men. Against her powerful performance, Mayer has much less dialogue, often left to observe the interaction between the siblings, leaving him with the difficult task of reacting to the escalation of Liam's revelations largely non-verbally. His angry outburst near the end of the play is all the more powerful because of his calm acceptance of events and Helen's expectations in the earlier stages.

Sam Calleja plays Liam, an angry young man without a cause, in a complex and disturbing performance. His characterisation is of a man whose sanity is on a knife edge, right from the beginning interrupting his explanation for arriving badly bloodstained, in order to comment calmly on the food and wine that Helen and Danny were about to consume, then instantly reverting to his agitated state, his physicality sometime matching his words, and at other times in complete contradiction. He throws us into an unfamiliar space with this juxtaposition. Calleja maintains that state of uncertainty throughout, leaving both the other characters and the audience on edge, wondering what he will say or do next.

Bluefruit Productions is a relatively new company but they show considerable potential, so catch this show and follow their future progress.