

Orphans



By Denis Kelly. Bluefruit Theatre. The Bakehouse Theatre, Adelaide. November 7-23, 2013

Fledgling professional company Bluefruit Theatre has set a high bar with only its second production. Its interpretation of Denis Kelly's psychological thriller *Orphans* is superb.

In researching the personality profiles behind the story, the director and cast met with some of Adelaide's leading psychiatrists and psychologists. This meticulous attention to detail has delivered devastatingly true-to-life characters, portrayed by sublime acting.

Helen and husband Danny are having a few hours alone without their small son. They are about to eat dinner when Helen's brother Liam arrives, covered in someone else's blood. Clearly strung out and psychotic, Liam tells an evolving story about what has happened. As this story takes place, so the lives of the people in the room begin to unravel.



As Liam, Sam Calleja embodies the chilling, barely suppressed rage of a young man scarred by tragedy and by unsuccessful foster parenting. Calleja maintains this menacing, psychotic energy throughout the 2-hour production. When he ran to Helen and Danny's six-year-old son after the boy arrived home I instinctively wanted to scoop the boy up, to remove him from his uncle's presence. Calleja's performance is simply brilliant.

Anna Cheney's Helen is superbly acted. Cheney skillfully portrays a woman who has finally found stability but who can't escape her youth. Helen's regression into the manipulative and excuse-making behaviours she used in the past is devastatingly real.

Charles Mayer is very fine as Danny. He presents a calm and centred man; one who, unlike his wife and her brother, has never experienced the hard side of life. But Helen and Danny's past reaches out to him, too, and on this night he is changed forever. Mayer's subtle, nuanced portrayal of a man only now realising the realities of his marriage is excellent.

Bluefruit Theatre founder Shona Benson directs the play skillfully, ensuring the action lets up only in the dreamlike transitional sequences. Benson has realised these sequences are necessary for the audience to take a breath, such is the tension.

On a simple set surrounded by discarded television sets and other unwanted items, the audience sees how easily people can become detritus, too, depending on how luck and choices treat them. At the end of the play, the smiling, innocent face of Danny and Helen's son devastatingly underlines that Liam was probably once just like him, as yet unscarred by life.

This is a memorable and brilliant production.

Lesley Reed

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