



## **TOUCH WOOD**

### **INSPACE IHOS Laboratory and IceBreaker Arts Projects**

Space Theatre

Until November 12

Review by Stephanie Johnson

Conducting experiments is a risky business. They can fail. They can explode in your face. The hypothesis may be bright but will it prove anything?

"Touch Wood" is a clever premise for experimental theatre but the play is discordant and fails to connect, except with a few sparks now and then. Director Juha Vanhakartano has focused on the subject of "fear". Fear is a cold, prickly topic. This is a cold, prickly play.

The set is impressive, mostly stark black and white modernism reminiscent of the work of Dutch artist M C Escher, reflecting individuals who are lost in the black and white world of their own fears and obsessions. It is an apt arena for the various quirky and neurotic characters. The black and white section of the stage is also a lovely contrast to the beautifully designed modernistic forest that lights up occasionally in the background.

The music, composed by Claudio Pompili and conducted by Timothy Sexton, is stirring and a refreshing relief from the discordant personalities of the main six characters – Apologizer, Caretaker, Prayer Lady, Hypochondriac, Horoscope Woman and Cleaning Lady.

This is abstract theatre that explores neuroses that develop in an atmosphere devoid of spiritual and artistic riches. "Touch Wood" may appeal to the intellect but it is unlikely to be an emotionally comfortable experience.

Rachel Guy makes the most of her role as horoscope woman, drawing humour with her facial expressions and body movements as she listens to absurd astrology predictions. Matthew Dewey is also delightfully comic as the clockwork-like compulsive caretaker, but the other characters seem to lack the right ingredients to create any real chemistry.

Characters enter and leave the stage via a curious "inne" and "ut" gateway and their antics seem to alienate rather than endear, but then perhaps this is the nature of fear? Occasionally this strange piece of theatre embraces some poetry as hooded monks slide slowly across a green-lit forest to the strains of Tibetan monk-like music. These brief scenes are a welcome relief, uplifting and reminding us of the power of ritual. Does religion free us from fear or impose fear on us?

The iNSPACE program is an ideal laboratory for this contemporary theatre, but this experiment is not for the faint-hearted. It is quirky, unconventional and incomprehensible theatre that may appeal to anyone who enjoys an intellectual challenge and on-the-edge theatre.