



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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LE GATEAU CHOCOLAT - BLACK

Adelaide Cabaret Festival

Dunstan Playhouse

Until 24 June

Review by John Wells

The Playhouse stage is in murky shadow. A buzzing shaft of light hits the stage. Le Gateau Chocolat steps into the spotlight and, as he does, the disco lights spin and Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance With Somebody" belts out. Le Gateau Chocolat steps back into the darkness and the music snaps off. Hesitatingly, he moves again into the light. He silently sings as the music throbs and the coloured lights swirl. The recorded music stops. Le Gateau Chocolat keeps singing the song, accompanied by sparse piano, slowly and with direct solemnity. The throwaway poppy tune is transformed into a plaintive wish for connection and a sad expression of crushing loneliness. This is a beautiful moment of perfect stagecraft in this subtle and contemplative show.

"Black" is a personal and autobiographical reflection of the fat, black and gay performer's troubled progress from wide-eyed Nigerian kid to cabaret star. His story is told with an eclectic song mix (not often do you see Wagner and Whitney on the same set list), an animated cartoon of his childhood self, "Little Black", and recorded observations. Le Gateau Chocolat's beautiful, resonant and burnished baritone is at the centre of the production. Especially arresting are "Strange Fruit", Purcell's "When I am Laid in Earth" and a delicately moving "Black is the Colour of My True Love's Hair". The sombre mood is leavened by some funny touches, but this is largely a melancholy show.

The great success of this production is the sense of restraint. Director Ed Burnside has crafted a perfectly-timed and cleverly-structured show that allows the audience to join the dots, rather than an over-emoted, over-shared confessional. Le Gateau Chocolat reveals glimpses of very black moments: isolation, cruelty, and sexual abuse. There is gentle exploration and an honest acceptance that the darkness is never far away. The lack of a triumphant and transcendent climax underscores the truth of depression; this honesty and personal candour are forlornly satisfying.