



# Adelaide Theatre Guide

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Supporting live theatre in South Australia

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## THE FLINT STREET NATIVITY

### Red Phoenix Theatre

Holden Street Theatres

Until 17 November 2018

Review by Sarah Westgarth

When it comes to Christmas, there are two types of people: those who eagerly wait for the minute it's acceptable to start blasting carols, and those who put their fingers in their ears and insist they won't listen until at least December. I fall into the latter category, having been known to see the lights and wreaths being displayed and crying, 'But it's only September!' At this point in the year, with the arrival of the city pageant and Secret Santa names being drawn, it cannot be denied that 'tis the season. Of course, another herald of the upcoming festivities is the children's nativity play. Performed in schools, churches, and community groups across the world, acting out the story of the birth of Jesus is practically a rite of passage. Based on experiences teachers he knows, Tim Firth (writer of 'Calendar Girls' and 'Kinky Boots') penned 'The Flint Street Nativity' as an ode to this tradition. While the end of the school year sets the stage, the play is not really about Christmas; instead, it's about children, and the ways they absorb the world around them and try to understand it. The main characters are students at Flint Street Primary School on the day of their Christmas concert, and are all played by adults. This concept is not a unique one, but it's used to great effect here, as a lot of the conversations the children have are clearly influenced by what they have seen of the grownup world. Not much of it is good, but the chaos that unfolds is ripe for laughs.

For majority of the play, the children are the only characters we see, with their teacher a silent presence indicated by formidable lighting. The rest of the interactions are between the assorted cast of the Flint Street Nativity, which includes Mary (Lyn Wilson) played by the class's golden child, a sour Gabriel (Tracey Walker) who is after the lead role, a King Herod (Brendan Cooney) who has been forced to double as Joseph at the last minute, and a Wise Man with a lisp (Nick Fagan) who has the unfortunate task of saying 'frankincense.' On the surface, this is a light-hearted romp, taking joy in the silly things children say and do. Beneath that though, there is more to it. We see the girls take turns not speaking to each other, cowing to a hierarchy they don't fully understand, and the boys drawn into the irresistible lure of a dare. The complex social politics that are already establishing patterns for their later lives is clearly seen. In their conversations, the reality of the kind of home each of them lives in is slowly revealed. As they repeat phrases they have heard their parents say with little knowledge of the meaning behind them, or act in a way that indicates the kind of behaviour that gets them attention, the audience is reminded of the vulnerability of the very young. They were sponges who absorb everything, both positive and negative. Each role is played with charm and enthusiasm by the entire ensemble, with not a weak spot among them. The entire cast tackles the show with gusto, and even the naughtiest of the children is performed sympathetically. Director Michael Eustice has done a brilliant job recreating the primary school world which should be instantly familiar to many of us, but especially those who work with kids. The humour of the script is used to full effect, with a special mention to the sound design, also by Eustice, which provides some of the most hysterical moments in the show.

The nativity play premise is almost inconsequential; it provides the backdrop for the characters to play in, and it works a treat. While the children are all ostensibly working on the same show, each one is motivated by different things: the Innkeeper (Derek Crawford) wants to win Mary's affections, the Star (Brant Eustice) wants to make sure the play is astronomically accurate according to his Uncle Ted who works for NASA, and the Narrator (Tim Williams) just wants to make his father proud. There's a rogue



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stick insect, a parental rivalry, and various unrequited crushes. We see both the disastrous performance, and the shenanigans backstage that are the cause of it all with hilarious results. It's all played a treat by the cast, with their physicality and adorable facial expressions particularly on point. There are so many nice little touches, like the Star playing the second innkeeper mouthing Mary's lines along when she speaks to him and the Narrator's adorable anxious squirming as things go wrong. A real highlight is Herod's tendency to begin playing 'Millionaire Hot Seat' whenever he has a chance; it's exactly the kind of detailed childlike behaviour that rings so true, and is played beautifully by Cooney. The laughs are well balanced with the darker moments, as it becomes clear the pressure these children feel to conform to the expectations pressed upon them by the adults in their lives.

The secret lives of the characters is further expanded in the musical numbers; throughout the show, each character—sometimes as a solo, sometimes as a duet—sings along to a well-known Christmas carol with words of their own. Herod describes a home where he is being raised by television, the Innkeeper laments that his house always smells of beer, and one of the Wise Men (Cheryl Douglas) recalls her mother's adventures at bingo. Majority of the actors are not natural singers, but this only adds to the charm of it. We are forced to see the adult world through the eyes of the innocent, and while it's very funny, there's a dull sadness lurking beneath. Eustice keeps the balance well though, with nothing feeling too heavy or too flippant.

This is not a production without flaws. While the original script is set in Britain, it's been adapted to pepper it with local references; however, since some of the British elements still remain, the location isn't always clear. Not all the jokes land, and some moments feel mean-spirited, especially at the expense of the child from the Special Ed unit. (Though he's having such a good time playing the Donkey that it never gets ugly, and he's a joy to watch.) All of this is forgivable—it's unfortunately the ending of the play where things really take a dip. In an admittedly interesting idea, the final scene takes place after the show with the actors now playing the parents of their main characters. It's a novel concept, only Firth doesn't really seem to know what to do with it. The scene adds very little, only confirming what we'd already learned from the children. If anything, it takes away from the rest of the show, seeing fleshed out in full what we'd been suspecting, with far less nuance than had been previously depicted. There's one nice moment between Mary's mother and the Narrator's father, but ultimately it just causes the show to drag on longer than it should as all the wonderful, sparkling energy created by the children quickly dissipates.

"The Flint Street Nativity" isn't a play that has anything particularly new or original to say, but it doesn't have to. The reminder of the vulnerability of children is always important, as is the ability to have a familiar and joyous laugh at their antics. A delightful little show performed by some of Adelaide's finest actors and lovingly directed, it's the perfect start to the holiday season. It melted this Grinch's heart, at least.