



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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Supporting live theatre in South Australia

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THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY

Brink Productions and Adelaide Guitar Festival

Space Theatre

Until 24 July

Review by John Wells

How can a loving God allow unbearable tragedy to happen? In Peru, an ancient Inca bridge collapses, sending five people to their deaths. How is this terrible disaster reconcilable with a caring God who listens to the prayers of the faithful? This eternal spiritual question is at the heart of Thornton Wilder's 1928 novel, which has been dramatically re-imagined by Brink Productions.

South Australian playwright Phillip Kavanagh has adapted Wilder's book by removing the religious tension, and setting the tragedy in secular terms. Kavanagh's themes are the unknown inter-weaving of lives, the element of chance, the ever-present possibility of disaster, and the under-current importance of love in all its forms. His script is contemporary, with subtle allusions to the pandemic we are all living through. The closing lines (of Wilder's book and of the play) fall gravely and imposingly: "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning". This production articulates the messy and conflicting ways we show love. Love can be adoration, jealousy, seduction, devotion, or care.

There are many strong points in this largely successful show. Chris Drummond's direction is clear and assured. With many elements at play here – an untried adaptation of a classic novel, a suite of characters played by one actor, furiously strumming virtuoso guitarists and heightened melodrama – there is a real chance it could all end up as an incoherent scramble. It doesn't: the production is entertaining and enjoyable.

The novel's action has been distilled into one commanding central character, the famous actress "The Perichole", around whom all the other characters swirl, randomly inter-connected. In this monologue, all of the doomed characters are given voice through their interactions with the Perichole.

Casting Paul Capsis as the Perichole is a provocative choice. It is a demanding role – a lengthy monologue with a cast of distinct inter-dependent characters. The element of drag is both arresting and curious. The gender change creates a distance – an external gaze – to the action of the play, emphasising the theatricality of the piece. It also means we lose the potential for an immediate emotional depth that a female performer might bring. We don't strongly identify with any of the characters Capsis embodies. Capsis' creation is more an observer than a participant.

On stage with Capsis are guitarists Slava Grigoryan and Manus Noble. (Grigoryan and his brother Leonard are the musical directors.) They provide a constant musical atmosphere (so much more than a soundtrack) which beautifully enhances the action. The musical choices – ranging from a commanding 'No Puede Ser', to 'Ave Maria', to an almost amusing 'Chandelier' by Sia – hit the correct emotional pitch of the play. The music is a shining success in this production.

There is a disconcerting duality to Paul Capsis' performance. In his best moments, he is engaging, playful and compelling. He shifts with effortless dexterity between the characters, but the audience is never confused about the narrative. He is vocally expressive and handles the dramatic changes with flair and warmth. He sings with precision and emotional punch. Capsis has the wonderful ability to connect



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intimately with an audience; his intimacy can make you feel as if he is speaking only to you. He can be captivating, beguiling and heart-breaking. He embraces the sense of tragic sadness and desperation at the heart of the play.

But it appears Capsis has simply not learned his lines. He carries a script with him for almost all of the show. This bound book has been incorporated into the action as a prop (with a suggestion that his character is narrating, which gels with the themes in the play), but his uncertainty with the text is distracting. Too often he reads from the script, or glances down at an inopportune moment, undermining his relationship with the audience and breaking the theatrical spell.