



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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Supporting live theatre in South Australia

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GIRLS & BOYS

State Theatre Company SA

Odeon Theatre
Until 12 March

By Holden Ward

Dennis Kelly's ambiguously named "Girls & Boys" is written as a one woman monologue, and premiered off-Broadway in New York in 2018.

Director Mitchell Butel suggests that Girls & Boys is "a play that may work best when the audience has no prior knowledge of where it is heading". I wholeheartedly agree, particularly as someone who approached the performance with a deliberately ill-informed, yet open mindset. In keeping with Butel's remarks I have chosen to write this review without any content spoilers, so that readers may have the opportunity to experience the full impact of this extraordinary drama.

In many respects, this production of "Girls & Boys" was a bold undertaking. Performing a monologue of almost two hours duration without intermission, whilst delving into the darkest of themes, presents a difficult challenge for actress and audience alike.

As the solo actress, Justine Clarke handled this complexity with aplomb. Over many years, Clarke has proven herself as a versatile performer across all age demographics, being a familiar presence in much loved Australian TV shows, movies and theatre productions. What a delight it was for the Odeon Theatre audience to be treated to Clarke's versatility on stage, showcasing her consummate acting talent through all colours of the emotional spectrum. Additionally, Clarke was able to sustain a convincing Cockney accent throughout the entire performance, with past accent coaching from Jennifer White.

Although "Girls & Boys" was a solo act, clearly all of the production elements came together to enhance Clarke's compelling, sustained performance in a triumph of teamwork. Special mention must be made of Ailsa Paterson's sparse, yet striking set, and the sound and lighting provided by Andrew Howard and Nigel Levings respectively, which subtly underpinned the various mood changes of the unfolding drama.

At a time when the pandemic has hurt the theatre and arts community, it is fantastic to see the State Theatre Company provide opportunities for the emerging talents of Zach Sheriden (Directorial Intern) and Chloe Zodrow (Directorial Observer) in this production.

Kelly's script starts out as funny and engaging, in stark contrast to the rawness of the flawed human condition which emerges as the play progresses. However, the monologue is laced with light and occasionally bawdy humour. Clarke's character draws us into her journey through relatable experiences such as travelling, getting a job, the excitement of a new relationship, having children, taking risks and so on.

The play is written as a story telling monologue, and on this occasion, Butel has directed it to be more of a conversation between the actress and her audience. The fourth wall was broken at appropriate intervals however, at times it felt as though the audience needed more permission to directly engage with Clarke's character. It was as if there was some occasional restraint in cheering punchlines to her humorous anecdotes, possibility out of a need to feel safe, or in some way protect the protagonist? Even the ill-informed in the audience knew innately that something bad was going to happen eventually. The



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audience willingly sat with this discomfort, perhaps at the expense of some laughter, for fear it may have been inappropriate or premature? This is in no way a criticism, but rather an observation about the disturbing subject matter and that any awkwardness or discomfort made it all the more real and compelling.

There is a small risk that the grim reveals of the play may be traumatic or triggering for some. However, Clarke's character reminds us that her experiences did not happen to us and are not happening now. The program book also contains appropriate information about support and counselling options if needed.

This performance of "Girls & Boys" will entertain and disturb. It will confront and shock, but it needs to. However, what is perhaps surprising, is how this intense performance will take you somewhere, allow you to gasp, reflect and learn something new.

At the end of the performance there was a palpable blend of emotion and gratitude within the audience, leading to a sustained standing ovation, which was truly deserved, and served to "complete the conversation" between Clarke's character and her audience.