Don’t You Want Me Baby?
WAAPA 2nd Year Acting presents a new play by Hilary Bell

On paper, Hilary Bell’s new play about the social fallout and human cost of the mining boom in the Pilbarra sounds as dry and dusty as the arid landscape in which it is set.

Both Bell and director Andrew Lewis claim that the piece explores, ‘a multitude of complex moral questions’ that emerge from Australia’s dependence upon the mining industry. It was quite a relief to discover that it was far more entertaining than the publicity suggests.

Staged in the dynamic and intimate Roundhouse Theatre, Nathan Weyers (set design) and Matthew Hampton (lighting) create a flexible space with ascending steps painted to depict the parched, red-ochre interior landscape. Industrial scaffolding towers above, lit with eerie red spotlights and a rear projection screen allows pictures to confirm various settings. Puffs of dry ice hint at the smoky industry of a 24-hour-a-day operation.

The piece is structured as a steady stream of vignettes showing a frustratingly brief snapshot of each character’s personal dilemma. Some of the issues are rather clumsily spelt out, the arrogant youth earning $150k a year throws his cash around in a city bar and argues with the barman (a student on an acting course) about money versus passion as a motivator for life and work. Liz, who did gender studies at University is horrified to find herself working in a ‘skimpy’ bar to pay off a debt she owes to a drug dealer. Director Andrew Lewis and the ensemble cast did well to make us care about so many of these sketchy one-dimensional characters, hampered by the lack of emotional depth to be found in them. Some character and story arcs are followed through with brief embellishment and Bell contrives to weave these narratives together in a way that suggests interconnectedness and serendipity but doesn’t quite manage to convince.

What lifts the patchy writing is the use of musical interludes in a style reminiscent of Dennis Potter. Musical director Drew Livingston (also part of the live accompaniment with drummer Garo Tanzi) uses a handful of pop songs to add emphasis to the action, Human League’s ‘Don’t You Want Me, Baby’ was a recurring motif throughout. Choreography is energetic and robust courtesy of three cast members.

The fly in-fly out nature of the mining industry is worth some dramatic analysis alone and Bell has explored those issues as well as touching briefly, if a little simplistically, on the pros and cons of the environmental impacts of the mining industry. The message seems to be clear, that there is a price to pay for the high standard of living we enjoy and sacrifices must be made to maintain that lifestyle. ‘What are you prepared to give up?’

Posted by Ali Taulbut at 7:07 AM

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