

A look at our intolerant heart

THEATRE

Unaustralia

By Reg Cribb

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Review: Karen Marais

We all know that green and gold, Uncle Tobys, vegemite, thongs, beach flags, surfboards, vanilla slice and VB signify a uniquely "Australian" culture. But how deep does this culture go? How many layers can it accommodate? How do these iconic symbols link with our past?

The grotesque scenario of human carnage at Gallipoli and the attempted dislodging of the Turks from their trenches resonate deeply in the Australian psyche. The battle for liberation and justice on a different terrain draws automatic comparison with the famously ubiquitous Australian beaches associated with leisure, freedom, tolerance, safety and fun.

In 1915, Australian troops were fighting on another beach on another continent, with other nationalities and for other imperialistic powers. In Unaustralia, the new play by Reg Cribb (Last Cab to Darwin and 2005 film Last Train to Freo), the contemporary battleground is still the beach. But it is much more xenophobically "our" beach and the players "our" people.

The pacy, engaging and, at times, hilarious script exposes a conflict that raises issues related to racial tensions, nationalism, political duplicity, media disinformation and the problem of Australian identity formation.

The play centres on a critical incident: the eruption of racially motivated violence in Sydney's beachfront suburb of Cronulla. The world has drawn in on itself, and, according to Cribb, Australia is forced to "look deep into its dark, intolerant heart". The beach comes to typify racial territorial boundaries, the iconic representation of Australians' belief that "we are young and free" and inhabit a land "girt by sea".

The problem is that this locale may be the exclusive preserve of certain groups who, in the play, reiterate

the words, "our beach" and "my beach". The play forces us to ask the question: Was this a manifestation of deep-rooted Australian nationalism or a "demonstration we were forced to have"?

Through a mixture of dark realism and farce, the play delves into this essential dilemma and captures an uneasiness underpinning Australia's sense of self.

Cribb's courageous, individual voice confronts, shocks and entertains us, while the WAAPA cast deliver skilful performances that effectively capture the casual, nonchalant, politically naive fundamentalism of Australian youth and the painful sense of isolation, marginalisation and anger of groups identified as "others".

The play offers a comment on how easily disaffected youth can become the targets of manipulation and become peddlers of hate, yet Cribb intelligently shies away from simplistic polemics about race and nationalism.

Lighting, staging and costume work to excellent effect. The audience is constantly asked the question: "What does the view look like to you?"

The simple set design with three wheelee bins (variously used as refuse bins, surfboards, a car or the broken window of a fish and chip shop), the map of Australia on the stage floor and an awning easily transmute into different locations enhanced through projected images.

Ian Kanik's costume design carefully relays the racial and cultural divides through colour (even one of the homeless ladies wears green and gold socks, the "Lebo" lads wear colours of their national flag and fragments of red anticipate the impending mindless violence).

Director Andrew Lewis heightens our involvement by scattering the cast among the audience to be interviewed by a television current affairs host.

The entire cast must be commended for their outstanding collaborative handling of Cribb's irreverent, powerful play. The universality of its issues is a testimony to the strength of the writing.

Unaustralia ends on Thursday.
