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**realtime 121**

**contents** Choose... ▾

search:  **Go!**

[← back](#)

### Identity loss, metaphysics and bad democracy

Keith Gallasch: Perplex, Fight Night, Parramatta Girls, ClubSingularity



Tim Walter, Andrea Demetriades, Glenn Hazeldine, Rebecca Massey, Perplex, Sydney Theatre Company  
photo Lisa Tomasetti

Step back from the comedy of German playwright Marius von Mayenburg's *Perplex* and you see it for what it is: a nightmare of the age of identity theft. But it's one where you don't have to have your cards stolen or your phone or computer hacked. It just happens. And you have another identity foisted on you.

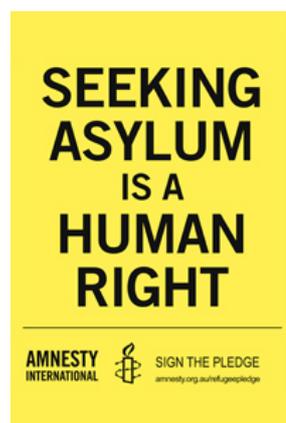
#### STC, *Perplex*

In *Perplex* you come home from a holiday to the friends who have been looking after your apartment, they treat you like intruders and force you out. There are subsequent displacements, increasingly bizarre: unwelcome new roles assumed, sins inherited, sudden adulteries and big ideas (in the shower a man comes up with the Theory of Evolution, only to be disabused of his too late discovery by his erstwhile wife). There's a child who grows quickly into a Nazi; man-on-man sex (to the surprise of both parties) at a wild Viking dress-up party with a woman who has turned into a volcano.

And so it goes until the work's larger mutation into a meta-theatrical and metaphysical confection when one character demands to know, "Who cast me?" The subsequent postmodern game playing (the director has abandoned the show and the set is pulled down around the actors) is a tad too familiar ("Are you doing a monologue? We said we wouldn't do any more monologues"), although it has its moments, including the sudden appearance of a nutty (God is dead) Nietzsche at the window. He is inadvertently shoved and falls: "We have killed him!" one of the characters cries and the knowing audience laughs as the certainties—social, sexual, political, metaphysical and theatrical—of middle class life fall away.

*Perplex* is fun if not metaphysically particularly convincing or consistently funny. On opening night the performance was initially strained, over-emphatic instead of convincing us of the realism that would soon be ruptured. However, once underway performers Andrea Demetriades, Glenn Hazeldine, Rebecca Massey and Tim Walter excelled in their comic dexterity in Sarah Giles' brisk, quick-witted production. *Perplex* doesn't match the depth and reach of Marius von Mayenburg's *Fireface*, *Moving Target*, *The Ugly One* and *Eldorado*, although the number of productions of *Perplex* across Europe suggest he's hit a nerve with a work that evokes the instability of dreams and the terrors of erased and imposed identities. It's good to have seen it here.

#### STC, *Fight Night*



ABC TV's Q&A angers me. I can rarely sit through it. It's raison d'être, giving citizens the opportunity to have "your say" is a nonsense. Questions remain partly or not answered at all or are deflected to an inappropriate panellist by a mediator who cannot stop himself from repeating and interpreting the question and editorialising. Rarely is any argument sustained. Outrageously, in subsequent advertising Q&A exploited the recent onstage student protest it failed to respond to. Jones' retort, before subsiding into bewildered silence on the night, was that old standby: "You're not doing your cause any good."

Fight Night (a collaboration between Adelaide's The Border Project and Belgium's Ontroerend Goed for the Adelaide Festival and STC) irritates me too, as soon as "your voice," the audience's, is invoked by another smug host (at least he's being ironic, if tiresomely so). Shortly, he has us on the path to choosing a winner from a group of candidates in a protracted, shallow process that barely justifies itself by being thinly satirical and occasionally funny—or very funny for pockets of the audience. The 'choices' are all too quickly revealed not to be choices at all—the point being that we vote for mere appearances and with rapidly diminishing information with which to judge. What's new?

It's presumed our voting will tell us something about ourselves. We have in our hands iPod-like devices that record our votes, which will determine who leaves the contest, as in reality TV shows. When the show veers into the surreal or the obscene its potential is revealed, but even here choice is a joke—there are only obscenities to choose from. Cynical fun, but not revealing. Predictably the candidates manipulate each other and us, compromise, shift ground, change the rules and in a coup, depose our host, causing a revolt where we are asked to vote as one for a winner to be our leader or to leave the theatre. Some 20 of us do. The process is rigged. The show's a fiction but we can't conscientiously stay. If the message is that we voted shallowly, well of course we did, the options were far too thin to provoke self-awareness, of any sense of our identity in a democracy.

The actors do a fine job, constantly adjusting to audience whims with a mix of scripted declarations and quick-witted improvisation, and the two vote-counters at computers keep the stats rolling. Certainly in their conservatism the audience on this night remained true to the sad state of our nation. As for the work's title, the boxing ring set and capes worn by the five performers at the outset, the mike hanging from above and the bow-tied MC give limited life to the boxing match metaphor which was neither adequately sustained nor at all revelatory.

### **Parramatta Girls**

A reunion of former inmates of the Parramatta Girls Home (1887-1973) provides a straightforward formula for recollection, denial, power play and revelation, simple and complex, in a new production at Riverside Theatre of Alana Valentine's Parramatta Girls (2007). Despite passages of blunt exposition, awkward scene transitions and episodes of laboured dialogue the play delineates the lives of some intriguing individuals, victims of an antiquated and often physically and sexually abusive system of punishment—in some cases simply for being an Aboriginal child.

Long after their incarceration is over, the women are still haunted by its legacy—some ashamedly admit to hitting their own children, others recall nightmarish incidents—and by the ghost of the young Maree who died in custody. She is the link between the reunion and re-lived moments from the past. Other wounds are psychosomatic; Valentine uses the condition to suggest the potential for social and psychological healing. At the beginning of the play, Judi (Anni Byron) hides an elbow wound that hasn't healed in decades—initially the result of endless floor scrubbing in the Girls Home. At the conclusion, after much denial in the face of accusations, she admits she had sexual relations with the institution's director and thus enjoyed certain privileges. Now she finds her wound has healed; she can apologise to her fellow inmates and also acknowledge the existence of the 'Dungeon' and the institution's other dark punishments she had refuted.

Other prisoners had first been wounded by their families, by class, race or psychological problems, their suffering cruelly exacerbated by incarceration and their sense of difference making for uncomfortable lives in prison—the middle class Lynette (Vanessa Dowling) sits to the side for much of the first of the two acts, sadly probing a life split-in-half. Valentine's characters are sharply delineated if to varying degrees,



each expressing pain, anger and joy vividly conveyed by Byron, Downing, Anni Finsterer, Sandy Gore, Sharni McDermott, Christine Anu, Tessa Rose and Holly Austin (as the ghost of Maree, who, pregnant to a guard was kicked in the stomach by him; she then suicided).

The horrors visited on these women (based in part on those Valentine met while researching for the play) were many: beatings, the removal from their mothers of babies born in prison and humiliations—Maree forced to wear a bedpan as punishment for bedwetting. More complex was the pain they inflicted on each other and the mutilations of their own bodies. Although the ending of Parramatta Girls is briefly upbeat, some of the women have pride in their subsequent achievements (including helping shut down the Home), some are still recovering, some forgiving, but the play makes it clear that to develop and sustain a sense of identity in such circumstances of constraint, humiliation and enduring self-doubt is a near impossible task: "We didn't get out with our dignity intact," says one. (For more on the Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Memory Project see <http://www.pffpmemoryproject.org/>)

### **EMD (exposed to moral danger)**

Projected onto the stage floor of Parramatta Girls, below designer Tobiyah Stone Feller's evocation of the semi-ruined Girls Home, are the letters ILWA, standing for "I Love, Worship and Adore." These affirmations addressed by the inmates to each other can be found carved into the walls and doors in the actual building, 20 minutes walk from the Riverside Theatres.

The site exhibition EMD (exposed to moral danger) evokes the lives of the inmates by means documentary and impressionist with video interview (Lily Hibberd speaking with former inmate and writer Christina Green), sound, painting, installation and sculpture throughout the building. Among works by Bonney Djuric the projected eyes of an abusive director of the institution greet you at the top of the stairs; opposite is a decaying room in which long paper dresses sway like ghosts; and further along two perspex screens conjure now disappeared 'segregation rooms'—or solitary confinement cells. In a small room downstairs, in three Broken Spirit linocuts by Jeannie Gypsy Hayes, small ghosts dance behind bars and nearby Elizabeth Day's I Love Worship and Adore fills a large room with the letters ILWA. She has worked outside casting ILWA writ large in plaster on hessian and brought the sculpture inside complete with earth and freshly growing grass. The work dramatically turns a small, ambiguous act of defiance into a memorial of growth and hope. Along with archival photographs, these works evoke something of the lives and identities lost to cruel institutionalisation.



Valerie Berry, Phillip Mills, ClubSingularity, Theatre Kantanka  
photo Heidrun Löhr

### **Theatre Kantanka, ClubSingularity**

Members of a social club dedicated to matters cosmological gather for a final meeting in which they keep their distance from each other, bicker over scientific ideas to do with the Big Bang and Singularity theories and execute an agenda of performance routines for their mutual entertainment—or, more likely, egotistic self-expression. Each has a guise—one is a 'star,' a Marilyn Monroe imitator (Valerie Berry) who precisely reproduces the scene from *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) in which the character's dress is forced up by ventilation from the New York underground rail system. Another would-be star is the club's dictatorial Chairman (Arky Michael) who is prone to breaking into impassioned song with a bad Italian accent. Another star of a kind is a pretend Astronaut (Phillip Mills), aglow in his bubble helmet, while the fourth member has cast herself as a sexy brunette Alien (Kym Vercoe) and, as such aptly

unpredictable, begrudgingly performs dramatically with that staple of sci-fi movie music, a theremin. The final member presents herself as catwalk star—a fashion Model (Katia Molino) with very firm scientific ideas, an array of sparkling outfits and a bouquet of songs. A barman-cum-musician (Paul Prestipino) serves drinks and a soundtrack of quakes, cosmological soundscapes and live electric guitar and other accompaniments.

The design, like the members' performances, is calculatedly 'amateur,' capturing the DIY naivety of the club—paper lanterns hang like planets about a high wall of golden glowing fairy lights—but hints at something more profound.

The Chairman speaks of his fascination with the heavens as a child, "I grabbed a star—it tasted so sweet." Moments of whimsy and spacey dreaminess alternate with jokiness and home grown spectacle. As the astronaut gently swings a lamp, like a planet, around the head of an increasingly panicky Monroe ("160 heart beats per minute"), the Model's gentle lyrics about loneliness reflect on "thinking of your private parts." These are lonely people, the Chair longs for "another world to find love in," the Astronaut seeks someone to "boost my rocket." These desires escalate into a near orgasmic eruption of explosions and all-encompassing vibrations. Little micro-dramas play out as well. The Alien pops on an ET-type mask and dances erotically before the Astronaut but attraction-repulsion forces play out—drawing him repeatedly to and from Monroe; the Alien tears off her mask and weeps. Her 'routine' has not succeeded. The Model explains that Dark Matter is holding the cosmos together but that "repulsion is everywhere."

The meeting progresses: a competition offers the winner an Armageddon survival suit or a bottle of tequila, the Model sings that "the Earth is round but the universe is flat" and hosts a quiz. The Alien gets all the answers wrong but defiantly defends String Theory and the right to speculate. She withdraws, weaving cats' cradles before erupting into an immolating rant wreathed in smoke.

A huge quake precludes the meeting's "last dance"—not that they take to the floor. Instead they lean into their little bar tables, hands circling the tops, then reaching up and out and vibrating into a near lift-off into space. In the following calm, comforting words are spoken about our lives as "sharing a common ancestor [carbon]," as "just a spark or an incident," or "a prelude to a new adventure." Slowly, the club members exit through the wall of light: "We have loved the stars too much to be afraid of them."

We now know why this meeting has been announced as the club's last. But this death wish provokes as many questions as it answers. Is their final act, like their other performances, just a routine, or simply metaphorical—they would if they could defeat their loneliness by merging with the stars. Not recommended for serious sci-fi fans but for those who enjoy contemplating the big questions at a safely whimsical distance it's fun. If these humans can't identify with each other they at least can with the stars. ClubSingularity is diverting, if not hilarious, structurally somewhat flat, if lifted by moments of enjoyably tacky spectacle and cartoony characterisations performed with verve by the cast. ClubSingularity is a reminder of how in everyday life—and not just in poetry and drama—we employ metaphor and analogy to help explain our lives, reducing big ideas to fit simple emotional needs, accruing a sense of identity—of oneness with oneself, possibly others and, yes please, the cosmos,

Sydney Theatre Company, Perplex, writer Marius von Mayenburg, director Sarah Giles, Wharf 1, STC, 20 March-13 April; STC, The Border Project and Ontroerend Goed, Fight Night, Wharf 2, 22 March-13 April; Riverside Productions, Parramatta Girls, writer Alana Valentine, director Tanya Goldberg, Parramatta Riverside, 3-17 May; Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Memory Project, EMD, curators Alana Valentine, Lily Hibberd, Michael K Chin, 12-18 May; Theatre Kantanka, ClubSingularity, director Carlos Gomes, lighting Mirabelle Wouters, presenters Performance Space, National Art School; Cell Block Theatre, Sydney, 21-24 May

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