

Review - The Sunday Age

16 December 2007

Show of the week John Bailey

***Apples and Ladders*. Until Dec 22.
La Mama at the Carlton Courthouse,
349 Drummond St. \$20/\$10.
Tel. 9347 6142. ★★★☆**

Lemony S's *Apples and Ladders* has already seen several incarnations in the past year or so, but in its current season at the Carlton Courthouse it seems to have found a natural home. A finely wrought puppet work that begs intimate engagement, the courthouse allows its audience to witness every carefully played out nod, sigh or touch. It's a tiny triumph that rewards close attention.

The work plays out two interlocking dramas — one of an elderly couple whose romance hasn't faded with the passing of time, the other that of a washed-out drag queen fallen into alcoholic destitution. Hovering around the fringes of this trio is a bloody, skeletal creature who could represent death, loneliness, self-doubt or temptation — it's never quite clear, but this ambiguity adds greater shading to the piece. The tale is ultimately one of connection, of reaching out to a fellow human being despite one's own troubles,

and its conclusion is a surprisingly affecting one.

Puppeteers Sarah Kriegler and Jacob Williams are themselves part of the show — rather than attempting to hide their presence behind the little people they hold, they're visible contributors to the piece. Kriegler especially responds to the narrative twists with almost unconscious expressions of concern and surprise, as if she is as much audience member as performer. The soundtrack by British cabaret band the Tiger Lillies also adds to the work immeasurably, offering textured tunes of world-weary lament and gravel-voiced abandon.

In every way, this is a small — though not minor — gem. Its miniature aspect makes it hard to apply grandiose superlatives. It's pretty, not beautiful; sad, not tragic. But it's in that understated aspect, its delicacy and gentleness, that *Apples and Ladders* makes its impact. It doesn't attempt to confront or dazzle, but quietly makes its way into its audience's heart. And it would take a hard heart not to offer some special affection towards these little creations.