

FIRE FIRE JOONBA

I was excited to see the production of FIRE FIRE BURNING BRIGHT as I had seen the earlier manifestations at the Art Award and at 24 HR Art for the opening of Two Laws One Big Spirit. In the form it was then the Joonba was powerful and moving but essentially mysterious and mystifying to an outside audience.

The massacre which was the impetus for its creation was not represented and there was no way of knowing the context in which it happened and the events preceding it without recourse to extensive notes.

This new touring version FIRE FIRE is a genuine and successful attempt to reconcile the different narrative demands of Western theatre and Aboriginal ceremony, without traducing the history that it tells.

It has been made in the same generous spirit with the desire to impart knowledge and foster understanding that the group had in bringing out the original Joonba.

Given that other Aboriginal theatre productions that it might be compared with BRAN NUE DAE or the Jack Davis plays like THE DREAMERS all adopt a thoroughly European theatre style and mode of performance, it is an ambitious task to retain the form of the original and sit it within a European style back story.

It is this back story I wish to address, in it we see the White people- the station owner/manager, his chief stockman, and the police who put the culprits in jail and later walk them back chained together. All these parts are taken by the Aboriginal performers wearing white face paint, in a reverse minstrel show. This device releases and frees the “performers “ to vent their fury and as “whitemen” they hurl abuse and invective at the “blacks”.

This process returns us to the roots of theatre as a cathartic communal process. It forces the white audience watching to bear the level of racial hatred these people experienced at the hands of the whites.

It also gives the performers (whom it must be remembered are not actors assigned an arbitrary role but the descendents of the indigenous people portrayed in the story) the opportunity to re-experience events and revisit memories which until now have been too painful to be out in the open.

Now they are the masters of the events, not the victims; and being called “a bloody black bastard” can be registered and laughed at. It is no mere artistic conceit but a buried fact; the performers are not actors but people for whom the story is not just a story but part of their history.

To represent the events is actually to re- present, revisit and rework the pain of the past and this makes FIRE FIRE a compelling and unique piece of theatre .

I know the country where the story comes from but for audiences at Festivals and the like we have to assume they do not, so the video material is effective in portraying place which is integral to meaning in the story. It also worked wonderfully in the acted out sequences such as fleeing from and turning back to watch the fire as the spirits climb higher and higher.

I liked the way that the addition of recorded music and the voice over narration and video projection enhanced the audiences understanding and filled in what might otherwise have been longuers in a production with untrained performers. I think it was important that the voice over didn't come until the final sequence as it essential that the singing is given primacy.

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