

Two Sisters and a Piano Review

by Peter Green: Radio 3MBS (Broadcast 27 March 2009)

I had a busy and very rewarding Saturday and Sunday night going to two independent companies, one well established, and the other, new. Just when I thought my observation that new independent companies were springing up around Melbourne like “truffles on a Tuscan hillside after rain” could be safely packed away, I was forced to resurrect it for yet another new company.

The Shift Theatre, founded by Helen Hopkins and Carolyn Bock staging the Australian premiere of a Cuban play *Two Sisters and a Piano* in a space, (new to me) *The Dog Theatre* at 42A Albert St Footscray.

Let me declare an interest. I have worked with Helen Hopkins in the past and have always admired her work, but having said this, let me also say that Helen and Carolyn, in this production show an insight and grasp of character that exceed their extensive experience on stage and screen. They are utterly convincing as the sisters Maria and Sophia enduring house arrest and surveillance in Havana, as a consequence of writer Maria’s manifesto demanding reforms, national debates and free elections in Cuba.

This play considered Cuban exiled playwright, Nilo Cruz’s best was written in 1998 and based on the imprisonment, public assault and humiliation by government assisted vigilante groups and house arrest of Maria Elena Cruz Varela in 1991 for exactly the protest that the character Maria has made in the play.

Locked away from human contact other than the brutal inspections and interrogations by the military, the sister have only each other and a badly decaying piano as company and their memories of happier times in the house. This until two males; other than the usual tormentors, enter the house; a piano tuner Victor Manuel, delightfully brought to bumbling and engaging life by Chris Bunworth and Lieutenant Portuondo played with initial frosty reserve by Lee Mason.

Sophia the pianist warms immediately to the piano tuner, finding comfort in his affability and ready response to her. Lt. Portuondo arrives unannounced, with a satchel full of Maria’s husband’s intercepted letters. A relationship develops that takes nearly the whole play until it explodes into the most passionate love scene, clothed, I have seen on stage for some time. Maria’s confession that he has awakened a need in her reduces Alejandro (for that is the Lt.’s name) from semi-official visitor/spy to the tormented, he loves her he confesses. The power in the relationship has shifted but ultimately he reverts to brutal type; removing, as a last act of spite the piano and leaving just the two sisters.

Don’t delay – Go West dear theatre goers and have yourselves a great theatrical evening!!