

## The Girls in Grey

**La Mama Explorations: 14 November 2010**

Review by Peter Green (3MBS 103.5 FM)

For most Australians the images from the First World War are largely filled with males, soldiers marching, relaxing in billets behind the front line, in the trench, wounded on stretchers or sometimes a party of gassed men pathetically lined up arm on the shoulder of the man in front with bandaged eyes or slumped in the mud of Flanders, dead. This ignores the truth for 2,139 Australians who served overseas, of whom 25 died. These were **The Girls in Grey** of the Australian Army Nursing Service Reserve, and those recruited from the civilian nursing profession.

Well I did some steep learning on Sunday night at *La Mama*, sitting spellbound in a quiet and very attentive first night audience at **The Girls in Grey** while Helen Hopkins and Carolyn Bock co-founders of **The Shift Theatre** (plus Olivia Connolly and Lee Mason) transported us years and several continents away from Melbourne to Egypt and Lemnos and finally the Western Front, to the experiences of some of those nurses who served right up the line as far as Casualty Clearing Stations, close to the range of heavy artillery, far too close for comfort.

**Nurse Kelly's diary recalls:**

***"The noise was terrific and the concussion so great I was thrown to the ground and had no idea where the damage was. I flew through the chest and abdo(minal) wards and called out 'are you alright boys?' 'don't bother about us' was the general reply."***

Helen and Carolyn have written, from records, a most effective and affecting script, moving through the vernacular to the poetic but always keeping its subjects in the foreground; service through mud and blood, dealing with horrendous wounds and somehow coping as they watched those they could not save slowly die.

**All this with bustling hospital urgency, sharp interaction physically and vocally the three sisters (actually one's a matron) antiphonal as a choir each taking the lead as recounting individual wants.**

**ALICE** *Sands whipping up a storm  
Something is brewing*

**GRACE** *The lighthorse  
Have tethered all the horses,  
They've been dismounted  
And will go to the peninsula as infantry.  
Something is amiss*

**ALICE** *Something is not right*

**ELSIE** *Rumours of a bloody blunder*  
**GRACE** *We set 1400 beds set in 4 days*

**ELSIE** *For so many*

**GRACE** *And then they start to come in*

The menacing sky of a sandstorm in Egypt, a premonition made flesh as the wounded start arriving from Gallipoli.

**SOLDIER** *Will she marry me still Sister do you think...  
Without me arm here, to hold her  
Without one of me eyes?*

Lee Mason takes the roles of sweetheart, husband and brother to the three women, as well as officer and anonymous soldier; at one point underscoring the horror of gross wounds by rolling across the stage for treatment. There are lighter moments in the performance but even then the levity is tinged with melancholy remembrance, as brief joy for others, touches a character personally;

**ALICE** **December 25, 1916:**

*“Against all expectations we manage to give our boys a marvellous Christmas... a dinner of turkey, ham, plum pudding, raisins and bon-bons... after dinner... they all lie down and sleep with a peace on their faces... As I watch them... I think of one particular face and wish I could share just one minute of this day with him.”*

*The Girls in Grey* (even in development) is terrific - in all senses of the word. With bold and focussed performances from the cast it's more than simply history. Dramatic both in events portrayed, script, and in Karen Martin's driving direction; it dwells at times, as it must, but never flags and I shall be on the lookout for its next incarnation, as I advise you to be – it's not entertainment but it's riveting theatre.

I leave the last words to Matron Grace in a letter to a friend in Melbourne:

*“They say that this one is from Spain, and it's a damn dog of a thing! Haven't been able to shake it. Doubt I'll be home love. You must not fret, my dearest friend. I will be at rest in such fine company. Perhaps one day you will pay me a visit. All my love, Grace”*