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The Political Hearts Of Children | subtluance

Written by [lloyd bradford \(brad\) syke](#)
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The Political Hearts Of Children is the latest from a tiny gem of a production company (**subtluance**) I've come to hold in the highest regard. They've come good, time and again, to the point where one can, increasingly, rely on a good outcome, at the very least. This is better than good. Not quite great, but heading in the right direction.

Above all, it's the process that's fascinating here. It might well be a world first. There are seven performers involved in what are mostly monologues. These are based on the actors' very own stories, from childhood. Talk about ownership! But, with one exception, rather than have the actors tell said stories in their own words, seven playwrights were invited to take the stories on-board and script them, with the actors that own them relating them on stage. It's the sort of thing, it seems to me, that could've gone horribly awry and ended in tears. At least a couple of

the yarns did end in tears, but for all the right reasons. It takes brave theatrical souls to take this level of risk. Even more impressive is that director **Paul Gilchrist** and producer **Daniela Giorgi** do it with such humility. If you ask me, they're model theatre-makers in that they squander no time trying to look like model theatre-makers. No affectations. No expensive spectacle frames. No pretensions. They just bloody well get on with it. Nor, on this occasion, can too much be made of the courage of the actors, who were challenged to open up and share their oldest, most deep-seated fears and exultations, which 'their' writers then had the quite profound responsibility to handle with, well, kid gloves, in order to respect the depth and value of their subjects' experiences.

As an objective, **Giorgi** and **Gilchrist** (hereinafter known as G-G) 'wanted to explore the ongoing and vital dialogue between adulthood and childhood'. It's a potent and poignant area for interrogation: there could hardly be anything more influential on our behaviour, of formative in terms of our personalities, than the experiences of our early lives, surely. There's theatre which, at least obliquely, sets out to achieve similar things, whether comedically or dramatically. (The revival I've just seen of Elizabeth Coleman's *It's My Party*, for example, which consummately fails.) But I don't believe I've ever seen anything that takes it head-on.

Victoria Haralabidou is a writer whose full-length play (by sheer serendipity, as far as I know) is at TAP Gallery Theatre Upstairs, while *Political Hearts* plays below. She has written an indelible chapter in **Kathryn Schuback's** life, in which **Schuback** came very close to drowning. In a flash of directorial genius, **Gilchrist** has chosen to use this episode as one of two threads (one comical, one tragical), to tie all these short pieces together. It's the only was such a jigsaw would have any chance of hanging together.

In **Schuback's** story, as reconstructed by **Haralabidou**, there are two *Kathryns*: as she is; and as she was. Kathryn now seeks to reassure Kathryn the younger; caress her. The elder quickly sketches out the scene, etched vividly in memory. Hot sand. Foam, floaty around her waist. We're right there with her, out of our depth and comfort zone. **Schuback** excitedly relates her story; it's the kind of adrenalized hyper-excitement that teeters on outright anxiety. We've a crystal-clear sense of her skinny, non-aquatic self, struggling to keep her head above water in the sea's overpowering vastness. We can see it. And feel it. Clipped, picture-this phrases and **Schuback's** relentlessly rapid-fire delivery, with eyes straight ahead, staring intently at rolling, bluey-grey waves takes us right to the beach; the stinging sand between our toes, the sun blazing down.

Almost before we know it, we've moved into **Mark Dessaix's** world, as described by **Katie Pollock**. What began as 'salad days haze' of picnics, family and swimming on Sunday exploded, volcanically, when his best friend turned on him, becoming his worst enemy. Early highschool became a minefield of bullying. And there were more bombs yet to go off. **Pollock** compares **Dessaix's** emotional wounds to cataclysmic natural disasters, creating a kind of violent poetry, as in this example. 'I was watching the Wizard of Oz on TV and I heard the car pull up. I heard them fighting inside the car, over the television, from inside the house. And it wasn't a small house. This was right at the moment Dorothy gets sucked inside the tornado.' She contrasts this starkly with the place in which he finds peace and refuge. 'On weekends I'd escape to the quiet solace of grandad's house and help him in the garden. Weed some beds. Or mend a wall. Burn up twigs on a winter afternoon. Just so we could stand by the fire and share a cup of tea. As I drank in the magic of him.' Like much of the finest prose, it's imbued with a poetic cadence: the gentle rhythm of a wave nibbling at the shore, lapping soporifically; then, crashing and crushing thunderously. **Dessaix** delivers, by turns, with intensity and fragility. By chance, or design, it could hardly better complement **Schuback's** piece: both portray children going under, but bobbing back up, buoyed by a strength they probably didn't even know they had, until they had to use it.

Benito Di Fonzo authors **Stephen Wilkinson's** tale of high adventure, hunting skins. **Di Fonzo** also has a way with rhythm and **Wilkinson** runs and leaps around the small stage and beyond, becoming a boy all over again, ADHDed

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beyond belief, despite a paucity of Ovaltine. 'I'll sleep in tomorrow's clothes tonight. Time is precious when you're hunting skink. At first ray of currawong light that bursts through the curtain, my eyes will flick wide. Adrenaline pumping aurally through me like the wheeze of a fat kid doing P.E. A lesser skink-hunter would stop for Weetbix and Ovaltine, but I'm out that back door at dawn.' In this pair's hands, the right found stick becomes a lightning-rod, a magic wand, a skink-taming implement that doubles as a kind of sword, worthy of a samurai, invaluable for repelling swooping magpies seeking the same quarry. This is the other thread of which I spoke, which **Gilchrist** deploys to keep us alert and relieve mounting tension. This twosome is further testament to **Gilchrist's** intuitive house in teaming writers and directors: is it only Ovaltine that turbocharges them?

Didem Caia has penned for **Kelly Robinson** and breaks with monologue, involving other actors. **Robinson**, too, takes us to a cold, wet, blue, place. **Dessaix** joins in, as a sibling, epitomising a noisy, annoying, attention-seeking kid. Kim Jun II in short pants. Embedded in the fun, games and wild imaginings of childhood is a dark, creepy memory, masquerading mundanely as just another part of growing-up. A man with crooked teeth, hairy fingers and peppermint breath. **Robinson** is on a boat, sailing right into a storm. Clouds gather, as she feels herself to be weird. Pursued. Haunted. And hunted. **Caia** takes a more oblique route, such that anyone who's ever felt like they're on the edge, the outer, the windowsill, can identify. In the telling, it's not quite as tenacious as the other tales.

Carla Nirella performs **Kimberley Lipschus'** script. **Wilkinson** joins in and takes the wheel, as they drive down, one supposes, a country road, on a fine day. They play I spy. It's a slightly awkward way in to **Nirella's** rose-coloured evocative recollections of her Nana and Nonno, who built a life from an arranged marriage: sowing the seeds; growing and nurturing the plants. But **Carla**, driving in reverse, is heading towards disappointment; nostalgia must give way to the way of things. Everything returns to the soil. It's a deeply appealing story that's bursting with fond regard for grandparents; their simpler lives and devotions; their humility and loyalty. It's not so much a yearning for particular people, as particular values we may've set aside, while we update Facebook and check our email.

Alison Rooke cloaks **Rosanna Easton's** anecdote in the pretty mysteries of allegory. **Easton** has ear to the ground, listening intently to the last thing a child wants to hear. Unless there was collusion taking place, one of the most striking features in this anthology of short plays is the synchrony of naturalistic tropes. Here, again, there is mention of the volcanic and the aquatic. **Easton's** performance is spellbinding; her voice, a musical instrument of exquisite, seasoned timbre, belying her youth. With it, she plays **Rooke's** melody, a tune she knows only too well. She becomes a resilient orchid, blooming in bone-chilling conditions, devouring Maori myths and toasted cheese sandwiches. Her tears fall like dew. Yours may too.

James Balian is the odd one out, writing and performing his own script. It's a shame to break the mould, especially as, while warmly engaging, **Balian's** performative skills aren't quite in the same league as his cohorts. Early sixties Baghdad might seem remote, but marbles, lawns, chooks, grandparents and gardens aren't so far removed. Happily, however, for we who grew up in a luckier country, tanks, soldiers and are. Sometimes, a child's life is like one long trip to the dentist. At least until one finds the anaesthetic relief of emigration to a country like Australia. **Balian's** a good storyteller, but his script, notwithstanding the dramatic scenes he depicts, somehow lacks drama. Or perhaps it just seemed a little ragged, because of the extraordinary company of writers, actors, producer and director he's been keeping, of late.

No sets or light to speak of. Just a handful of chairs that are used creatively as props. Stark white walls. Seven scripts. Seven actors. Who needs 'big' theatre, when 'little' theatre can be so blindingly brilliant?

subtlunance presents

The Political Hearts of Children

Written by James Balian, Didem Caia, Benito Di Fonzo, Victoria Haralabidou, Kimberley Lipschus, Katie Pollock and Alison Rooke

Directed by Paul Gilchrist

Venue: TAP Gallery | 45 Burton St., Darlinghurst

Dates: 11 – 21 April, 2013

Tickets: \$25 – \$20

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