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The Blue Angel Hotel

Written by lloyd bradford (brad) syke Thursday, 22 November 2012 17:09



Left - Jacqui Livingston

Something about the aesthetic or emotional landscape of *The Blue Angel Hotel* reminds me of *Come Back To The Five-And-Dime*, *Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean*, a determinedly arthouse film directed by Robert Altman, from 1982. It's apropos of nothing. It just struck me while I was viewing the play. The two, on paper, could hardly be more remote or removed from each other. I mean, one's set in small-town Texas; the other, who knows where. In one, a gaggle of women are disciples of James Dean. In the other, a number of women are addicted to the idea of liberating themselves, by liberating men languishing in gaol, whom they think they love. Both groups of women are obsessed with, if not possessed by, fantasies and alternative realities of delusional proportions. They operate in parallel universes, but rarely in this one. This may be worrying for any clinical psychologists in the audience, but amateur philosophers may well be uplifted by the sense of underlying, childlike hope and optimism that affords innocence, or naivety. Despite the geographical, cultural and narrative dissonance between these two plays, they meet at the point where hopes, dreamland fantasies run hard up against reality.

Not even steel bars can contain, or corrupt, innocence, or naivety; a quality also popularly known, perhaps, as love. At least, that's what we'd prefer to believe, I expect. But speak to anyone whose done any real time in gaol and you'll know how absurd it is to cling to any such poetical notions. On the one hand, it's as if we still cling to the idea

of an incorruptible garden of Eden (despite the fact the legend tells us we sullied it). But does this help us get through our lives, or hinder our progress and growth?

In a socially and philosophically wide-ranging enquiry, **Katie Pollock** probes this and other ideas in *The Blue Angel Hotel*, directed robustly by **Aarne Neeme**.

**Neeme** knows something about steel bars and the men behind him. Forty years ago, he was involved with the Resurgent Group, a coalition of prisoners who, with outside assistance, wrote and performed plays about life on the inside. The Resurgent Group produced some notable outcomes, not least in the form of prisoner-playwright Jim McNeil, whose work was performed around the country. On that basis, perhaps the outlook of prison psychologist, **Vic (Jacqui Livingston)**, isn't so far out of the ballpark, after all. She believes fervently in the capacity for one to reform and redeem themselves; even if, in one particular case, her judgement is tainted by attraction.

The Blue Angel Hotel is really little more than an informal guesthouse, run by middle-aged (and then some) **Grace**, who's waiting, with bated breath, for the return of her husband **Harry** who, in truth, was released from prison three years earlier and barely seen since. She prefers to believe, however, that he's just gone out for cigarettes and keeps his slippers waiting by the door. He doesn't even like slippers, but that's the way she wants it. She seems oblivious, albeit by deliberation, to any wrongdoings for which **Harry** might've been responsible.

There are others who'd like to step into **Harry's** slippers. A apparently monosyllabic Japanese tourist, **Hiro**, lobs on **Grace's** doorstep and, without question, suspicion or hesitation (despite her nose manner) she takes him in and affords him every courtesy, almost as if he were the long lost son she never had.

Almost pointlessly (as the attractions go nowhere), both **Vic** and **Angel** take a shine to him as well. He turns out to be not at all what he seems, so perhaps **Pollock** is suggesting some genetic explanation for fatal attractions between women who want to love and be loved and the men who use them.

**Ray** is anxious to fill **Harry's** shoes, too. He's had a thing for **Grace** for years. Ever since she hopped aboard his bus (which he drives back and forth from the big smoke on the pretext of ferrying the relatives and lovers of inmates, but which trip he actually makes to see her) and they chatted with ease. He's been playing along with **Grace's** pretence of **Harry's** imminent return for too long and he's fed up. He tries to divert and refocus her attention with the gift of a bonsai ('it's a process, Ray, not a tree'), but it only serves to intensify her detachment. Yet, there is something in

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Something In The Way She Moves

Grace which betrays an awareness of what is, as against what might be. It seems she actively chooses denial, preferring to remain trapped by the prospect of Harry's return, a victim of her ideation. It's a tribute to Ballantyne's finely calibrated performance that this is discernible. Of course, in many and varied ways, practically all of us are, to a lesser or greater extent, like Grace, ignoring Mandela's counsel that 'God wants us to live large'. The mind is ready, willing and able, at all times, to provide a microcosmic environment in which we can operate safely and comfortably, isolated from the actual and the factual. In this sense, one of Pollock's observations may be that it's not only this cast that's acting; all the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players.

The bonsai proves an elegant and powerful metaphor for the ways in which we stunt our own development, whether through physical or psychological incarceration.

The power of love to redeem seems like a dubious proposition, if only because, in the case of these women, their determination comes too late for the objects of their affection, who've learned that to love is to be vulnerable and that to be vulnerable can be self-destructive. So, better to destroy than be destroyed. This seems to go to Pollock's contention that 'bad' people are made, not born; meaning evil can't be extant in and of itself. That she opens up the question of original sin so deftly and contextually is one of the great strengths of the work.

Pollock's musings and meditations via narrative also deal with the primacy of desire and its capacity to obliterate all semblance of pretensions to rationalism and a 'civilised' mind. For these women, their lust (not merely sexual, but that which seeks and satisfies emotional longings) renders morality, rationality and all else secondary. Vic's objectivity, for example, is utterly compromised by her fascination with her client; a man who has, evidently, been shown to have murdered at least one woman, possibly another and who has apparently attempted to do same to Angel. Yet Vic's alliance with her client remains almost invincible, despite her knowledge of these things.

There are also questions raised about predestination. If we're bad, can we become good? Or are all our futures a foregone, carved-in-stone, mapped out conclusion? This, of course, leads to even bigger enquiries. The biggest. Is there a God? A Devil? Did God create us, or we Her?

Not everything about The Blue Angel Hotel is completely cohesive. Some of the more surreal scenes seem to be somewhat superfluous and indulgent, if colourful and compelling. Unless Pollock is again making a more general point: that it's all surreal, our entire individual and collective experience. The dialogue doesn't always seem as resolved or incisive as it might be. But it succeeds admirably nonetheless, both on the level of being a thoroughly engaging play while one is in the theatre and after one leaves, when its broader purpose comes more into view and clearer focus.

Gael Ballantyne is excellent as Grace and solid performances prevail from Bill Conn, as Ray, Takaya Honda, as Hiro, Livingston and Eloise Snape, as Angel; (though, it must be said, more than one of the actors had their fumbles, not something one expects so deep into the season).

Between them, Pollock, Neeme and the cast have produced a play with real urge and momentum. It might even become the torque of the town.

Peter Fray in association with Tamarama Rock Surfers Theatre Company presents **The Blue Angel Hotel** by Katie Pollock

Directed by Aarne Neeme

Venue: The Old Fitzroy Theatre, Woolloomooloo,

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