

Laser Beak Man - Review

by Richard Watts for ArtsHub, 19 September 2017

Superhero stories are big business. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has grossed almost US \$5 billion globally to date, and while DC Comics have struggled – with the exception of this year’s triumphant *Wonder Woman* – to gain an equivalent foothold at the cinema, their small screen success (with programs such as *Arrow*, *The Flash*, *Supergirl* and *Legends of Tomorrow*) is considerable.

Little wonder then, that the home grown tale of an unusual superhero should be ripe for theatrical adaptation.

Brisbane artist Tim Sharp sees the world uniquely. When his autism was diagnosed at three years of age, a doctor advised his mother ‘That the best thing to do was put him away and forget about him.’ Instead, Sharp’s mother Judy used art therapy to help her son communicate. He created the character of Laser Beak Man when he was 11; today the character has a life of its own, having starred in a popular animated television series and now a La Boite and Dead Puppet Society co-production at Brisbane Festival.

It’s not the first time a theatre company has attempted to bring Sharp’s work to the stage; Back to Back, Malthouse and STC had previously planned an adaptation, though by the time the production – renamed *Super Discount* – reached the stage in 2013, all references to Sharp’s work and intellectual property had been removed.

Here, the work is undeniably Sharp’s. His unique aesthetic informs the production visually, while his spirit informs the drama which unfolds on and off the stage.

Friends since childhood, Beaky, Emily and Peter fall out as adults when Peter’s scientific experiments lead to the creation of crystals which could power the world. Instead of being used for good, the crystals are seized by the greedy mayor of Power City. Transformed by the crystals’ energy, Beaky becomes Laser Beak Man, but also the Mayor’s pawn; she threatens to deny him access to the crystals’ power unless he serves her bidding.

Peter and Emily, meanwhile, are banished. They return years later, bent on revenge and setting the scene for a deliciously realised showdown between good and evil.

The production initially unfolds on a small, raised stage but takes on new, projected life in a thrilling *coup de théâtre* that floods the theatre with colour. The international team of puppeteers are visible at all times, their expressive faces and physicality adding extra life to the puppets they manipulate, while additional props facilitate the production’s expansion into the furthest reaches of the theatre.

Multiple puppets of different size allow for sudden, thrilling shifts of scale, while the imaginative story ranges everywhere from beneath the earth to outer space. A rollicking live rock-pop score performed by local band Ball Park Music accompanies every twist and turn of the action.

At times the production's political references are almost stridently unsubtle, such as the straw-thatched Mayor's ambition to build a wall about the city to keep out undesirables. Jokes about blackmail and dual citizenship are more effective, while meta-theatrical elements emerge as the story unfolds, with one character reflecting, 'I think we might all be puppets.'

Occasional aspects of the narrative are distracting or clichéd – the death of a sidekick late in the piece recalls the familiar and tired ['black dude dies first' trope](#), for instance, while two women fighting for Laser Beak Man's affections and abusing each other as 'bimbos' only to be told they can 'both be bimbos' rankles slightly. And at one and a half hours the story lags slightly; some trimming and condensing of the narrative would undoubtedly improve the production.

While superhero movies often focus on fight scenes and special effects, what makes *Laser Beak Man* so special – so super, if you will – is its focus on truly heroic traits: self-sacrifice, compassion, friendship and kindness. As a result, despite some minor flaws, the production packs a moving, irresistible and celebratory punch.

3 ½ stars out of 5

About the author

Richard Watts is ArtsHub's Performing Arts Editor and Team Leader, Editorial; he also presents the weekly program *SmartArts* on community radio station Three Triple R.

The founder of the Emerging Writers' Festival, Richard currently serves on the board of literary journal *Going Down Swinging* and on the Committee of Management for La Mama Theatre. He is a former member of the Green Room Awards Independent Theatre panel, a life member of the Melbourne Queer Film Festival, and in 2017 was awarded the status of Melbourne Fringe Festival Living Legend.