

PHOTOGRAPH • Anthony Weate

Hope and healing

Love, loss and laughter inspire promising playwright

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From a young age, Julia-Rose Lewis has understood the healing power of laughter. The young playwright was just nine years old when her father, Simon, died suddenly from a suspected heart attack while surfing on the Sunshine Coast. Soon after, she lost her beloved grandmother Rose, and just recently, her mother, Maria, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

"Through all of this tragedy in my life, I've discovered that it can be healing to laugh," Julia-Rose says. "I've learnt that the juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy interests me as a writer."

Now 26, the West End resident has drawn on these life experiences for her debut play, *Samson*, which premieres at La Boite Theatre this month. Rising star Ashleigh Cummings (*Puberty Blues*) plays Essie, one of three friends struggling to come to terms with the accidental death of their close friend Samson.

"Ashleigh is so stunning ... and having such smart, intuitive and generous actors like her involved from the start makes a difference," Julia-Rose says.

Set in a small fictional Queensland town, *Samson* explores how assumptions about loyalty, love and life are tested when a new kid arrives in town and upsets the fragile equilibrium.

"I started writing the play because I had this 17-year-old female character who kept appearing (in my head) and demanding to tell more of her story," says Julia-Rose. "This character, Essie, wouldn't leave me alone. She's pretty feisty and spirited."

"The play is about these four young people trying to figure out the experience of their first death: how you see life and how you understand grief, and seeing your own place in the world."

Julia-Rose, who splits her time between Brisbane and Sydney, where she's studying for a masters degree at NIDA, worked with young people from all over the state in her former role as youth program co-ordinator at the Queensland Theatre Company.

In 2012, she took a gamble and left the job she loved at QTC to focus on her writing. The following year, she received a playwriting residency at La Boite. She credits her "fabulous" high-school drama teacher, Linda Statham, with encouraging her while a student at Stuartholme School, Toowong.

Julia-Rose also takes inspiration from her mother, who gained a law degree following her husband's death.

"My mum is super-creative, but through painting, and it's only recently that I've realised it was from Dad that I got this writing thing because I found bits of poetry he wrote," says Julia-Rose, who is also co-writing a show scheduled for Brisbane Powerhouse in January.

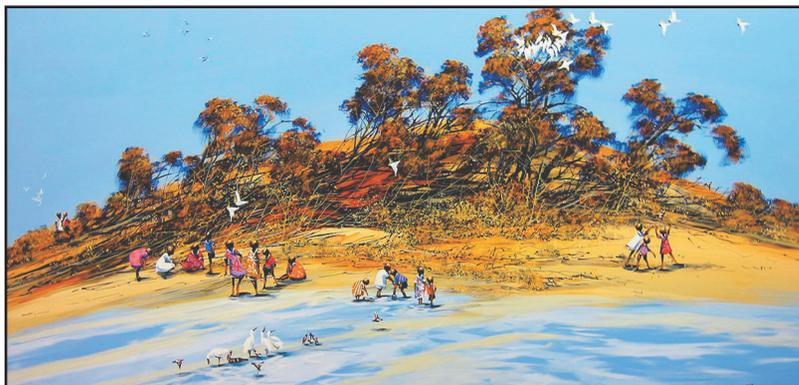
"I like it when people say, 'I think your dad would be really proud of you'. That means so much."

SAMSON, Apr 17-May 2, \$35-\$59, Roundhouse Theatre, Musk Ave, Kelvin Grove, ph: 3007 8600. laboite.com.au

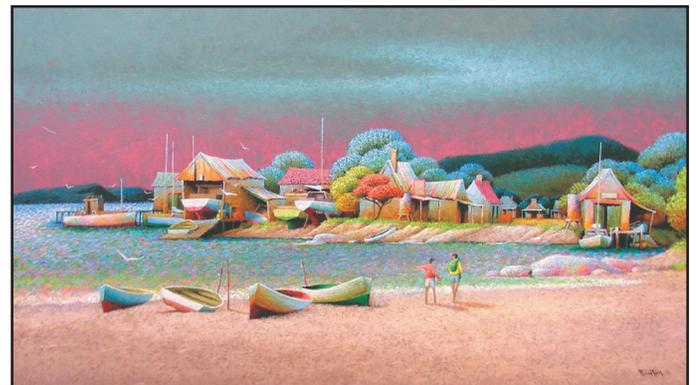
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