

LIMELIGHT

From Darkness (La Boite Theatre Company, Brisbane Festival)

Steven Oliver's new play about family grief and human connection balances heartbreak and humour beautifully.

Roundhouse Theatre, Brisbane

Reviewed by *Elise Lawrence* on September 13, 2019

From Darkness explores family politics, the loss of a loved one, and the powerful force of human connection as we navigate these things. Co-produced by La Boite and Brisbane Festival, the world premiere of this darkly funny new work, written by Steven Oliver, is not only a compelling portrait of one family's pain and their struggle to remain connected through grief, but a commentary on personal and cultural connectedness, the stigmatisation of suicide, and the importance of caring for those left behind.

It is the anniversary of Vinnie's death, and the family has gathered for dinner. In the past year his mother Abigail has taken to drinking herself numb, and his father Eric has pushed down the pain to live in denial. Twin brother Preston stays locked in his room, visited by spirits as he sleeps, and little sister Akira retreats into the online world, glued to her phone. Nanna Lou, brash and bold, copes best by talking...and talking...and talking. There is a spiritual force present in the house as well, and each of them are desperate to connect with it in their own way. Preston's connection to the spirits serves as a catalyst for the rest of the family to begin the long path to healing, not only from the shattering effects of grief but from the disconnect it has created between them all.

Directed by Isaac Drandic in his La Boite debut, with cultural consultancy by Colleen Wall, *From Darkness* strikes an impeccable balance of comedy and tragedy, walking the fine line between heartbreak and hilarity with absolute surety. To pack a 70-minute work with so much emotion, humour, and food for thought without overwhelming the audience is a credit to Oliver as a writer, as well as to the cast and creative team. The family dynamic, from fights to jibes to oversharing and awkward conversations, was established quickly and naturally, and each character was fully realised, rendering the work a recognisable snapshot of a loud, hilarious, painful, messy family in the aftermath of loss. Oliver's crisp, nimble writing and Drandic's deft touch take the work across highs and lows, moving from shouting to silence, and making the audience laugh even as some of us were still wiping away tears.

Beautiful projections designed by Keith Deverell, lighting design by Ben Hughes, and sound design and composition by Guy Webster transported audiences from Preston's bedroom to the spiritual realm he accessed in his dreams. Set design by Kevin O'Brien and costuming designed by Nathalie Ryner brought authenticity to the characters and their environment, drawing the audience into the kitchen and living room of the home as well as to Preston's bedroom, set apart from the other areas and allowing for more intimate conversations between characters. The work was peppered with conversations between Preston and individual members of the family, some seeming to take place in the spiritual plane and others in person, while Preston himself was often an absent character, listening from his room as arguments and accusations built and burst outside.

Outstanding casting elevated this performance to the next level. Roxanne McDonald was dynamic, and kept audiences giggling with her no-holds-barred observations and criticism as fiery, irreverent Nanna Lou. Colin Smith moved many audience members to tears with his portrayal of Eric, a grieving father unable to articulate his pain, and Lisa Maza displayed versatility as Abigail, bringing fierceness and vulnerability to her characterisation in equal measure. Walking the line between the family home and the spirit world, Benjin Maza brought a grounded energy and gravitas to the stage as Preston, and Ebony McGuire embodied a complex range of emotions as teenage Akira, from surliness and insecurity to defiance and conviction, with a strong underlying maturity. Despite a few fumbled lines throughout, the raw emotion that each actor brought to the stage was utterly compelling.

From Darkness is perfectly crafted and beautifully self-contained. Without loose ends, unanswered questions, or extraneous characters, the audience is left to sit with the full force of the emotion in this work. This touching, memorable play is endearing, and will no doubt also be enduring as it wrestles with the eternal themes of grief, family, and human connection in a way that is funny, thoughtful, and deeply empathetic.