

SCENESTR.

Straight White Men @ La Boite Theatre Review

by Kate Byrne, 02 August 2016



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'Straight White Men' by La Boite and SA State Theatre Company is undoubtedly a comedy: a situational comedy where the jokes are exaggerated and behaviour concentrated to the laugh track our reactions supply.

However it's not just that the characters are larger than life in this sitcom: they exist in a parallel universe where the small, Asian, bisexual female stagehand is altogether in command of a cast of four mature straight white men.

The stagehand business is just a wrapper, a Brechtian device built into the performance, to point out that these guys aren't real. After all, three grown brothers at home for Christmas, reverting to childhood taunts and tomfoolery, is standard believable material. It's (sitcom) amusing and does serve to build the personalities and relationships between the brothers as the play progresses.



Image © Kate Pardey

The first sign that all is not as it might seem is when the two brothers find a game they remember from their childhood. Out comes 'Privilege' a modified version of Monopoly that gives ample room for wit as they argue over whether the thimble gives the same unrecognised housework bonus as the iron and get rewarded for being downtrodden in Community Chest.

Young Jean Lee has created a brilliant juxtaposition of humour and discomfort, blatant advantage and complex constraint. She set out to go beyond her comfort zone, to explore identity-politics for the group she felt least inclined to, and ended up posing questions to us all about our relationship to privilege - our own and other people's. Moreover she makes it palatable, with characters that are flawed but likeable in differing ways (and to differing extents.) And the laughter? Yep, you're embarrassed on a few counts.

The cast works very well together to build the shifting sands of this male family world. Chris Pitman is excellent as the classic alpha-male who finally lets his doubts creep out when he sees his eldest brother in crisis. Lucas Stibbard gives a strong performance as the softer brother, trying to play his part for good in the world, supported by and extolling talking and therapy. Hugh Parker is convincing in the difficult role of Matt: the brilliant, enigmatic elder brother going nowhere with his life. Whether this is on purpose or not, his brothers cannot agree, so he is observed, interpreted and prodded as they try to resolve his (and their own) distress. Roger Newcombe as their father provides a solid counterpoint to their machinations, unsure why making the most of and being true to yourself is so difficult for this generation.

What happens when we are aware of our privilege and its unfairness? What's the effect of feeling that you don't have the right, when others confer it or expect it of you? Can you earn the right and should you try? La Boite hits the funny bones and sore points with this production.

