

Sydney Morning Herald Arts Review, July 25, 2006

A stage adaptation of an Australian novel is one of the highlights of an adventurous Brisbane Festival. Bryce Hallett reports.

THERE have been a number of half-hearted and thwarted attempts to translate David Malouf's coming-of-age novel *Johnno* to the stage and screen over the years. Finally the odyssey depicting Brisbane in the 1940s and '50s has surfaced in the city where it is set as a focal point of Lyndon Terracini's eclectic, music-oriented Brisbane Festival.

Adapted for the stage by Stephen Edwards, *Johnno* is a co-production of Britain's Derby Playhouse and La Boite Theatre Company in Brisbane. It is one of the few transformations of a celebrated Australian novel to reach the stage (*Cloudstreet* and *The Aunt's Story* are others) and though it needs finetuning, the production is deft, magical and transporting. *Johnno* will tour to Derby in Britain next year. Moves are afoot to bring it to Sydney.

With its elegant, watery set and costumes by Dan Potra, Elena Kats-Chernin's arresting score - played live by five musicians - and beautiful lighting by John Rayment, the work evokes images reminiscent of Meryl Tankard's playful dance pieces and the dreamscape style and reverie of Jim Sharman's version of *Death in Venice*.

The story of the inwardly questing Dante (Sean Mee) and his outwardly searching, larking and disaffected friend Johnno (Paul Denny) lacks the psychological detail needed to illuminate the nature of their relationship but there are so many good things about *Johnno* that it's easy to be won over. It's dance-like expressiveness, forceful music and Denny's charismatic portrayal of Johnno and his escape from a culturally impoverished, "sprawlingly unlovely" Brisbane to the supposed exoticism and enchantment of Europe makes it memorable and exciting.

The adaptation is stimulated by Malouf's novel but not so rigidly tethered to it that it doesn't achieve flights of fancy and moments of truth on its own theatrical terms. Fundamentally, it shifts a large part of the focus from the narrator, Dante, to the boyish, conflicted and searching-for-love protagonist. The entire production is played in water and images projected onto a swirling silk sail add enormously to the dreamlike journey and an abiding sense of myths vanishing into space and time.