

ACT - Ich bin Faust

by Daramalan Theatre Company. Written and directed by Joe Woodward.
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Realism never really took off in German theatres. While Ibsen and Chekhov's plays, based on lived reality, revolutionised the nineteenth century stage, the German dramatists, Strindberg for example, preferred their characters to personify intra-psychic archetypes. Memory and hallucination were important elements in expressionist drama. This theatre of the mind was also informed by Freud's exploration of the unconscious and especially Jung's study of archetypes from ancient mythology.

Stage realism is now challenged by film and television which is best placed to convey photographic reality. Live performance that explores alternatives to realism has the potential to provide a more meaningful theatre experience in a "mediatised" culture.

Daramalan Theatre Company's *Ich Bin Faust* is a most worthy production within this theatrical trajectory. Daramalan Theatre Company was formed in 1998 at Daramalan College, a Catholic co-educational school in Canberra. The company benefits from the experience of Director, Joe Woodward whose professional theatre credits include his work as an actor with La Boite Theatre Company, Brisbane and Artistic Director of Jigsaw Theatre Company, Canberra. In Canberra, he also established, with musician David Bates, the theatre company, Pie in the Sky.

Ich Bin Faust concerns a group of students in the transition years from their final year of school into adulthood. The play opens with a cast party after their performance of

Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, based on the German legend of a scholar who sells his soul to the devil, Mephistopheles, in exchange for knowledge and pleasure. Throughout the narrative of *Ich Bin Faust*, the young characters relate their life directions and associated ideals to the Faust legend. This premise provides the basis for a varied and necessarily complex examination of Western beliefs including love, coupling, reproduction, education and careerism.

The cast convincingly inhabited not only their roles but also the play's discourse. This demonstrates both the strength of the actors and the effectiveness of Woodward's extensive rehearsal process which included an extended stay at Caloola Farm. An interim workshop performance of the production in June this year also assisted the development of the performance. This "laboratory" approach benefited the public season of the production.

The staging of *Ich Bin Faust* at the Canberra Theatre Centre not only enables the Daramalan Theatre Company to fulfill its aim of providing a professional theatre structure to their performances. It also renders their work accessible to audience members who are external to the associated school community.

Moreover, the choice of the Courtyard Studio supported the application of the three sided acting area. The fourth side provided the screen for Jo Howard's digital imagery. Such imagery complemented the live performances with poignant sub-text. However, the attempted blend of two dimensional imagery with three dimensional actors may be seen as a reminder of Swiss designer Adolphe Appia's rejection of two dimensional theatre sets in the early twentieth century. This is not to say that there is no place for digital imagery in live performance but that successful integration may result when alternatives to compartmentalised cinematic projection are explored.

The theatre is the right place to critique the effect of globalisation on certain cultures. Woodward's thoughtful and timely critique of anti-Muslim sentiment was cleverly juxtaposed with a refreshing account of Western liberal humanism as selfish fundamentalism. However, there is a fine line between Jungian archetypes and cultural stereotypes. The unconscious may not be politically correct in its creation of dream imagery but neither do these symbols hold meaning in the absence of material culture. Admittedly then, it is a challenge to identify appropriate performance aesthetics for the translation of this paradox. Specifically, the challenge for the Western cast members of *Ich Bin Faust* lay in their attempt to empathetically portray Muslim characters without succumbing to the contemporary cultural equivalent of a black-faced routine.

Indian theatre scholar, Rustom Bharucha's insightful critique of Peter Brook's production of *The Mahabharata* and Edward Said's analysis of Western theatre's simplistic representations of Egyptian culture demonstrates that it is not enough for Western theatre to merely empathise with other cultures. There is a challenge, too, to ensure that the accompanying portrayals reveal a commitment to rigorous intercultural performance practice. Members of the ensemble occasionally, through direct address, reminded the audience that their characters were mere constructions. This artful meta-narrative was convincing and provided apt punctuation to their response to classical texts. This attentive convention within the script could have been extended to underline the intercultural challenges in representing non-Western cultures.

The cast and crew well-deserved the audience's sincere applause. *Ich Bin Faust* was courageous and convincing. While dominant educational policy appears to emphasise a quantifiable return to basics, it is pleasing to know that Daramalan College cultivates a theatre company that questions mainstream culture and traditional performance aesthetics. The creative process of *Ich Bin Faust* also models a valuable methodology for responses to canonical texts.

I enthusiastically await Daramalan Theatre Company's next production.

Credits

Ich Bin Faust

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Daramalan Theatre Company

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Canberra Theatre Centre Courtyard Studio



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