

SIDETRACK THEATRE: 'The Possibilities' is a collection of 10 short plays, or a play in 10 short scenes, which contemplates the darker side of human nature through representations of war, violence and sexuality, and, fundamentally, the tension between morality and choice.



The Possibilities is a collection of 10 short plays, or a play in 10 short scenes, which contemplates the darker side of human nature through representations of war, violence and sexuality, and, fundamentally, the tension between morality and choice (antitheses, one might argue, if morality is seen apart from ethics as an unexamined, imposed code of behaviour). In 'The Weaver's Ecstasy at the Discovery of New Colour', a ball of wool is accidentally soaked in a soldier's blood, which becomes a reason for spilling it, as absurd as any other. In 'The Dumb Woman's Ecstasy', a professional torturer seeking lodging at an inn makes an eloquent and disturbingly convincing argument for the value of cruelty, and its potential to uncover truth and, potentially, even love... Barker's writing is striking in every sense of the word. It has a exquisitely lyrical quality, its ideas woven in blood-soaked threads, and it assaults its audience as both a spectacle and a challenge to our lazy certainties. This is not an 'easy' play by any means. By the same token, it represents a significant challenge for any company attempting to realise it, and the results in this production are somewhat mixed. Given the fragmented nature of the material, an underlying sense of cohesion is crucial, but lacking at times, and perhaps exacerbated by the decision to use four directors, rather than one. This likewise results in some mixed performances, though each member of the cast shines in particular roles, and all are clearly fine actors. Jonathan Brand, for example, while slightly flat as an officer in 'Reasons for the Fall of Emperors', is compelling as the torturer in 'The Dumb Woman's

Ecstasy' and positively Richard Burton-esque in his furious intensity as a doomed husband in both 'Kiss My Hands' and 'Not Him'. Ray Chong Nee deserves special mention for his charismatic portrayal of both a fatalistic bookseller and a philosophical, (curiously likeable) military tyrant, as does Jane E Seymour, who shines in a variety of supporting roles. More often than not, she is the glue that allows the other performances to stick. Another challenge for this production is the Sidetrack Theatre itself. At times, sitting in the second row, it was a struggle to catch what was being said, and such a confronting play in any case seems better suited to a smaller, potentially claustrophobic setting (the Old Fitz and Griffin Theatres come to mind). Aircraft noise is also an issue, or could have been, however this is largely overcome by the cast reacting to each interruption, glancing at the sky as if some distant echo of our reality was bleeding, ghostlike, into theirs. It's an inspired solution that turns a potential liability into an asset, and very much in keeping with the themes and preoccupations of the play. Martin Kinnane's lighting and Russell Goldsmith's sound designs are also significant assets, but for mine the real stand-out from a production point of view would have to be Chloe Greaves' costume design. Her make-up around the actors' brows particularly lend them a grotesque, slightly simian quality, and their grey, asymmetrical outfits perfectly embody the spirit of Barker's text. If I was putting together a production team, her name would be at the top of the list. *The Possibilities* is uneven, to be sure, but it will evolve over its run and there's a lot to like in this production. As it grows with each performance, so too I think it lends itself to repeat viewings, so don't be too surprised if you chance to meet some hairy, hapless-looking fellow one night at the Sidetrack. ***The Possibilities* By Howard Barker Venue: Sidetrack Theatre, Addison Street, Marrickville Season: 7 to 28 August**