

Theater Reviews

Arts In **LA**

Holding the Man

Australian Theatre Company at Matrix Theatre

Reviewed by Neal Weaver



Nate Jones and Adam J. Yeend

Photo by Suzanne Strong

The newly formed Australian Theatre Company was launched April 23 (Shakespeare's birthday) by producers Nick Hardcastle and Nate Jones, with the intention of creating opportunities for Australian actors, directors, and writers living in LA, and introducing the work of Australian writers to American audiences. (The company is quick to add that non-Australians will also be welcome.)

For its first production, it has chosen *Holding the Man* , based on the nonfiction memoir by Timothy Conigrave, deftly adapted for the stage by Tommy Murphy. The piece achieved great success at home, racking up substantial runs in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane, before moving on to London's West End.

Tim (Nate Jones) is the play's central character. He's an eager-beaver gay boy, who knows exactly what he wants, even though he's only in prep school. And what he wants is the captain of his school's football team, John Caleo (Adam J. Yeend), with whom he's secretly in love. He thinks he doesn't stand a chance with John, fears rejection, and virtually goes into shock when he discovers that John reciprocates his feelings.

John seems to have no doubts about his sexual orientation—though the same can't be said of his parents, who are appalled and enraged. They do everything they can to separate the boys, including threatening to sue Tim's parents over their son's "corrupting" John. But their attempts only strengthen the boys' bond. So begins a lyrical 15-year love affair, which will survive almost everything life can throw at it.

And that's just the first act. Thus far, the play seems slightly farcical, fast-moving, and very funny, much of the comedy stemming from sharp satire of gay folkways down under—which don't seem to be that different from those in the US. (The largely gay opening-night audience reacted with hearty laughter of recognition.) But in Act 2, the piece turns darker, as the specter of AIDS raises its ugly head.

John is essentially monogamous, but Tim wants to play around. He persuades a reluctant John to agree to a "trial separation." And Tim makes maximum use of his new freedom. When the two finally decide it's time to take a test, both men are HIV positive, and Tim must face the strong probability that he has passed the disease on to John, who's developing AIDS. And at that time AIDS could not be checked.

In real life, Conigrave also succumbed to AIDS, but clung to life long enough to finish his anguished memoir, and died in a hospice shortly after it was completed. That's not included in the play but the theatre program includes photos of the real-life Tim and John, adding to the poignancy of the occasion.

The piece is very much an actor-driven ensemble work, with a mere handful of actors—all Australian—playing scores of characters. In addition to the splendidly able Jones and Yeend is an ensemble of four actors—Cameron Daddo, Luke O’Sullivan, Adrienne Smith, and Roxane Wilson—who, with dazzling virtuosity, play some 40-odd roles.

American director Larry Moss has given the piece a stunningly sensitive, athletic production, on a nearly bare stage. He makes startling use of the transformative power of wigs, and employs wonderful puppets, made by Alex “Jurgen” Ferguson. The other designers—John Iacovelli (set), Jeremy Pivnick (lighting), Shon LeBlanc (costumes), and Cricket S. Myers (sound), tactfully retreat into the background, putting the focus where it belongs: on the actors.

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May 10-June 29. 7657 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood. Thu-Sat 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time 2 hours and 50 minutes, including intermission. \$34.99. (323) 960-7735.

www.holdingtheman.us

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