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Holding the Man Finds its Way into L.A.'s Heart

Written by Jenny Platt

The Australian Theatre Company (ATC) has made its Los Angeles debut with the country's beloved production of *Holding the Man* at the Matrix Theatre - and from the reaction of the audience on opening night, ATC is here to stay.



Nate Jones and Luke O'Sullivan

Photo by Suzanne Strong

Holding the Man is the gripping true story of writer, actor and activist Timothy Conigrave, a gay man who came of age in Melbourne in the 1970s. While watching the lunar landing with a friend during his youth, Tim realizes he is a "poofter," and though years later his friend Juliet makes her affections for him painfully clear, Tim only has eyes for men - one man in particular: John Caleo. Captain of the football team, John is tall, masculine and fit, but his sexuality is in question. A dinner party kissing game soon reveals the athlete's true feelings - and thus a remarkable love story is born.

The beginning of Tim and John's relationship is filled with awkwardness, hiding, innocence and wonder. Wide-eyed, the boys enter their first gay bar wearing matching paisley shirts and find the stereotypical "regulars" of this world shaking their booties on the dance floor - there is no shortage of feather boas, leather vests and sock "enhancements." The play flits chaotically through their years, both together and apart, detailing the agony of unsupportive parents, the growing pains of first love, and the unadulterated heartbreak of being diagnosed with HIV. With a hilarious first act and a crushing second, ATC will tug at your heartstrings and take your emotions on a wild ride.

Holding the Man was adapted for the stage by Tommy Murphy from Timothy Conigrave's best-selling memoir of the same name - a reminder that the events really happened, that the players and the lives they touched were (and in some cases, still are) living, breathing souls, which adds an extra element of drama to an already intense production.

Not surprisingly, this debut production of ATC in L.A. features an all-Australian cast. As Tim, Nate Jones is wildly energetic, almost manic in his interpretation of the young man's ever-changing emotions. While some might find his expressions and movements overplayed for the small theater space, I found his enthusiasm not only enjoyable but necessary to give gravity to a script that is almost half narration. Jones is thus forced to build intensity, often without any other actors to play off of, solely with his voice and embodiment of the character, and he does this very well.

As John, Adam J. Yeend is the unlikely puppy dog. At first sight, John seems strong, full of testosterone and unaffected. But as soon as John realizes his crush on Tim, Yeend magically transforms his blinkers into passionate doe eyes until cartoon hearts practically pop out of them. John is madly in love with Tim and it is physically apparent, not just dialogue-driven. When his goofy 70s wig finally comes off, Yeend is almost unrecognizable, his performance deceptively exhausting. It is clear he has become one with the man he portrays and is able to communicate a range of emotions with just his eyes - an impressive feat.

While the focus of the production is, of course, on Jones and Yeend, the play would be nothing without Cameron Daddo, Luke O'Sullivan, Adrienne Smith and Roxane Wilson. These four own at least seven gender-bending roles apiece, transforming swiftly through the help of costumes, hats and wigs to become the parents, friends, drag queens and drama queens that so powerfully impact Tim and John's lives. Without them, the play would have no life, and certainly no laughter. Keeping the cast intimate was a brilliant and symbolic choice - although the real Tim and John touched and were touched by so many lives, in the grand scheme of things, their world was very small, and I think that's part of the message.



Cameron Daddo, Adam J. Yeend, Nate Jones, Luke O'Sullivan, Roxane Wilson
Photo by Suzanne Strong

Although its role in the play is oddly limited to just a few scenes, the puppetry is poignant at beginning and end. The life-size AIDS patient that moves in tune with actor Daddo is strangely believable, and makes a statement about what happens to our bodies as we deteriorate and lay on our death beds. The final ten minutes of the performance are so agonizingly painful, so real, that, in addition to one character's fighting last breaths, you'll hear a cacophony of sniffles and stifled sobs coming from all directions of the audience. And if that's not enough warning, allow me to spell it out for you: criers, beware. You will absolutely need Kleenex for this performance.

Please note: this mature production is not meant for children. Though there is no nudity, there are sexual pantomimes and adult situations. Use your best judgment in choosing theater mates and keep your mind open for a contemporary love story that is as real as they come and will deeply affect gay and straight audiences alike. As this is an Australian play, there are a lot of colloquialisms in the script, which the Australian Theatre Company has generously defined in their program - so take a look before the lights fade to black, and enjoy!



Roxane Wilson, Adrienne Smith, Nate Jones, Adam J. Yeend
Photo by Suzanne Strong

Holding the Man is scheduled to run Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 pm and Sundays at 3 pm through June 29th at The Matrix Theatre, 7657 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles 90046. General admission is \$34.99. To buy tickets, or for more information, contact (323) 960-7735 or visit www.holdingtheman.us

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