

## Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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### **Third World Blues**

by David Williamson

State Theatre Company  
The Playhouse

For an artist to return to a finished work and then revise it, is rarely a simple matter. Plenty of painters, as X-ray evidence indicates, have added and concealed brushwork. A recent retrospective of Jeffrey Smart's canvases gave the artist an opportunity to alter and "improve" one he hadn't seen for a while - much to the horror of the private owner who insisted that the amendments be removed forthwith. W.H. Auden liked to tinker with already published poems from one edition to the next, and many an editor has claimed to offer a more authentic version of a text than that of its first publication.

So when, in 1997, David Williamson went back to his 1972 script *Jugglers Three* and reworked it, he again raised interesting questions about the creative process. In negotiation with Sydney Theatre Company director Wayne Harrison, Williamson not only overhauled the text of *Jugglers Three* he even re-instated its original, somewhat cryptic title, *Third World Blues*. In this new version, he wrote in a published introduction: "I have tried to be more balanced and honest in the characterisation and have attempted to do my homework about the effects of Vietnam on young soldiers."

In wanting to retain the vigour and pungency of the original and yet give more dimension to its themes Williamson has put himself at odds with his text. As he says himself, he wrote the play initially in a "white heat of rage about the Vietnam war". In hindsight he regrets the glib representation of Australian soldiers who served, many of them conscripts, in South East Asia. We are, now, all too belatedly aware of the trauma experienced by veterans both in combat and returning to civilian life. But we can't - and shouldn't - forget, that Vietnam was a cruel and unjust war and the large numbers who opposed it were morally reasonable to do so.

In *Third World Blues*, David Williamson has shifted his raucous comedy of Carlton manners in the early 1970s off its satiric axis. In so carefully privileging the character of Neville, the returning soldier, he stacks the

deck against the rest of the cast. It is almost as though we have two plays under one roof. One gives a vivid and serious account of the horrors of combat and the subsequent alienation returning home, the other is a cartoon of bourgeois civilian life where everyone is bogus and self-serving and their values are seen as trivial and hypocritical.

In State Theatre Company's production in the Playhouse, director Catherine Fitzgerald has extended these battle lines even further. Dean Hills' decor is less a period reconstruction than a grubby *Young Ones* set with Seventies trinkets from the Lower Depths. The scunginess is misplaced, these characters may be bohemian but they are comfortably middle class. The costume choices are also problematic - as they are bound to be. The browns, oranges, rustic styles and extreme flares of the period are, at best, an ironic look these days and the performers must work hard against a caricatured effect.

It is a curious fact that Graham, the returning soldier in his fatigues and digger haircut looks less part of the seventies than of present day utilitarianism, where cargo styles and buzz cuts have a distinctly army surplus aspect to them. As Graham, Justin Moore gives us a most assured performance. He captures both the disdain and the anxiety of his character and, re-armed with Williamson's strong dialogue, he really has the wind in his sails. As Neville, the feckless lothario who leaves his pregnant wife to take up with Graham's wife Keren, Steve Greig has his work cut out for him. His behaviour would be caddish enough if Graham had been away working at Roxby Downs, let alone Vietnam - and not just the "Club Med" version of the original text - now, a fully realised very un-funny Vietnam experience.

In Catherine Fitzgerald's production the central combat is a no contest. Greig, a most engaging comic actor, gives us a Neville who is all flicks of unfashionable hair and agitated discomfort. Apart from the personal flaws in the character not much in the text gives him a serious case to argue either - even though he is supposed to speak for a moratorium movement which mobilised hundreds of thousands of people. Perhaps sensing this, Greig makes very little claim for Neville with the effect that the audience is ready from the first scene to give him not only a tarring but a white feather as well.

In other roles Michaela Cantwell, as the pregnant Elizabeth, astutely balances the scorn she must pour on her prat of a husband with the fact that in the comic resolution she takes him back when things start to fall apart. As Keren, Holly Myers is not well cast. Her performance lacks range and conviction - not helped by the fact that it is hard to see what attracted her to Neville in the first place. Patrick Duggin plays Jamie, an enigmatic character Williamson uses to raise other notions about loyalty and masculinity, and in a cameo in Act Two the director uses the ever-inventive Paul Blackwell to make mitigating farce of a corrupt cop.

But it is Justin Moore's performance which dominates, particularly in the scenes with Rory Walker as his army cobbler Dennis. Walker is excellent, stoked on amphetamines he mirrors Graham's experience in a higher octave in a performance and sub-plot which is both hilarious and affecting.

*Third World Blues* is, as Catherine Fitzgerald recognises, a satiric comedy with lashings of farce. There are many fast and funny lines and the capacity audiences are having a very good time. My only concern is that there seem to be some serious questions being raised in this play and some history is being re-written after the fact. If that's the case I'm left wondering why some characters have been given bazookas while others are armed with water pistols.