Atomic Oz Unravels

In October Atomic Oz will be exploding onto the streets of Brisbane with their unique fusion of street theatre and anti-nuclear activism. Their story began in Western Australia in 2000 when the Community Anti-Nuclear Network created and staged Atomic Oz to unfold the history of Australia's involvement in the global nuclear industry. After a year of incubation Atomic Oz was reformulated, rewritten and revised by original scriptwriter Scott Ludlam for a three-month national tour. The company visited Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, and Canberra, performing at festivals, universities and school campuses, and prominent public spaces. The inspiration group left Perth on the 1st of September to perform in the lead up to this years federal election. After a successful stint in Adelaide the troupe recently moved on to Melbourne and this will perform on the 14th October at the West End Street Festival.

Played out on a giant map of Australia, the show travels from 1947 to 2001 in a circus sideshow of military, industry and Frank Ministerial figures doing battle with the assistance of the Public Relations side and their pet monstrosity 'the Friendly Atom'. This 45 minute show packed with comedy, song, dance routines and pyrotechnics, is about celebrating our community's desire for the 21st century to be nuclear free.

Audiences will time-travel from the British bomb testing at Maralinga and the Monte Bello Islands, the establishment of the research reactor at Sydney's Lucas Heights, through the uranium mining boom times and the Jabiru blockade, to the arrival of the international waste dump masterminds - Pangaea. Atomic Oz is the all singing, all juggling, very funny history of Australian nukes, dads, grandparents, students, indigenous groups and unionists standing up and saying NO to a future contaminated by nuclear waste.

The show answers these questions: How did we come to be Atomic Australia? Could things have been even worse today if there had been people protesting along the way? (The answer to this one is a resounding YES! by the way.) Now with a Federal election in view, it's time once more to make serious decisions about the future of our country and raise our voices, pens and barricades once again. Australia is poised at a nuclear crossroads.

Paul Hood, of Shenton Park, tour co-organiser and performer, said "The government supports the genocidal nuclear industry in Australia, so it is up to our community to stop this madness. Nuclear issues have not been prominent despite strong community opposition to uranium mining and nuclear waste dumps. In fact, the politicians are ignoring popular opinion, pushing ahead with more mines, maintaining our heavy involvement in the US National Missile Defence System and recently commissioning a new nuclear reactor."

He continued, "Only participatory democracy will end the political hypocrisy and this play will inspire and ignite the community action, making the nuclear issue prominent in electorates across the country."

A benefit gig at the Gobba Hotel (Friday the 12th October) involving local bands and a film night at the Paddington Worker's Club (Thursday the 11th October), screening the documentary film "Fight for Country" (Rockhopper Productions) and others, will be held while the troupe are in town.

Local groups in West End like ENUFF, Friends of the Earth, CHOOG Action Network and the Grass Roots Centre are lending their support to Atomic Oz. The group is to be billeted out to households around West End for the duration of the tour. Brisbane co-ordinators are seeking local participants to aid in staging this national event. Musicians, actors, circus performers, billets, props and publicity are required as Atomic Oz is brought to fruition. Any suggestions and offers of help with the above performances and benefit gig should be directed toward the Brisbane co-ordinators Chris (Ph: 3720 8208) or Lorra (Ph: 3359 7196)

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Check out the website at http://www.votenuclearfree.org/atomicoz/ and keep your eyes peeled for posters advertising dates and venues.

Margaret Roadnight to play at West End Street Festival
Margaret's returning from Paris soon and will play at the Festival on Stage (opposite The Vault and Cafe Tempo). Who's to say if they'll continue her more intimate concerts at Emma's Bookshop on Sunday, October 28th

The atmosphere is dark, repressive, religious: votary candles; the scroll and firework of the heads of a collection of violets and cellophane throwing sheets borne on poles. Then the beat of the police; the smell of frying bacon; random cracks of sound punctuating the otherwise somnolent mood of the deliberately protracted prologue.

This is the haunting - a regime of poltergeist activities which occurred in real life (including the phantom smell of cooking bacon) to a friend of the performers, Elliot Dalglish. The classical concert instruments downstage become a brooding background to Lorca's "The House of Bernada Alba", evoking an aura of early Polanski rather than The Exorcist, Peter Strab or rather than Stephen King. These instruments listen. The voluptuous glumness of polished wood begins to eke out more complex definitions of grandeur, pride, and persecution.

Behind the scrim, there is the dimly seen presence of two concert performers (John Rodgers and Erikki Valhime) who talk to each other. (The sizzling bacon, etc.?) The smell of the burning, etc. (Is it in hell?) and read aloud from manuals of instruction for violinists. This litany of instructions inexplicably builds up a picture (along the lines of Beckett or Peter Handke) of classical concert performers as victims of the bourgeois cultural regime that lionises them; and concert-going itself as an absurd ritual of bourgeois power.

The message is reinforced by side projections of an 'antique' violin, Janova Hetlitz, juxtaposed with the self-consciously 'populist' image of Vanessa May playing her violin in a white bathing suit. Despite the latter attempt to popularise classical music, the indescribably powerful iconic status of the classical string instrument renders it utterly risible.

How can these instruments be cleansed for contemporary expression - present a clean state - express a complete cleansing of all previous ideas?

This is the second act of the piece: an act of class war, according to Erikki Valhime. A ritual enactment of class war perhaps, because it is also diabolically funny. Funny as hell, in fact.

The two works record exorcisms not in a frenetic silent film comedy style as they 'liberate' a few cacophony of sounds from their "possessed" instruments, until finally the wailing of lost souls dies away into silence, and the instruments are literally 'laid to rest'.

As the lights come up in the auditorium, the performers declarate that the instruments are now 'safe' to be handled (and innocently played) by the untrained members of the audience. The audience's relationship to the classical concert has been deconstructed, all barriers are down, and in a carnivalesque turnabout, what once was sacred has become profane, or domesticated. 'Is it music?' I hear the philistines cry again.

For all its riotous playing with such Barathan notions of intertextuality, does, can, this project succeed in and of itself? Of course not. But such destruction and silencing of violence and terror, as Martin Buzcko has pointed out elsewhere - is perhaps the last resort in a world bereft of actual political change, a world where we are exhorted by Beckett to "fail again, fail better."

A funny and bitter parable of our times that deserves to be festivalised.

Doug Leonard