

A reminder of how we all begin

The Small Poppies Company B, Belvoir Street, Sydney Until February 20

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In these harsh times when the legal and democratic rights of children, and even the notion of childhood, are under attack on all sides, *The Small Poppies* is a breath of fresh air. A delightful two-act play about starting school, it is a wonderful reminder of all those things that are peculiar to and precious about childhood. Through this play we are constantly reminded that children are not mini-adults, but that they cognise the world in a very special way.

Having adults, and in this case well-known actors, perform as children in *The Small Poppies* is not simply a comic device. It compels the audience to grapple with the real emotional and psychological differences between childhood and adult life. Through them we rediscover the world from the innocent and exciting perspective of young children.

The Small Poppies revolves around the life of Clint (Geoffrey Rush), a boy who has just turned five and is preparing for his first day of school. At this stage in Clint's life his thinking is simple in form, limited in scope and largely governed by his peculiar view of the world. Just as physical maturation takes place over many years, so does a child's ability to process and manipulate complex ideas and emotions. As Clint has very little experience with emotions, he derives a certain amount of comfort in living at the extremes; exuberance and intensity come naturally, subtle shadings do not. Things are either good or bad, he either likes people or he hates them.

The play begins with Clint getting ready for his birthday party. His best friend breaks the news to him that her family is moving and that she will not be going to his school. This is devastating news for Clint. Not only did he regard his best friend as a comfort against

the unknown, but more strategically he hoped she would be an ally against that which he most feared, Shane, a five-year-old with attitude!

The first act ends with the parents saying goodbye to their children while the teacher, Mrs. Walsh, calls them into the classroom. In the final moment of the act Clint is left alone on the stage. He looks into the audience, then back at the classroom as he hears Mrs. Walsh call, then back again at the audience. His bottom lip starts to quiver and then he cries, "Mummy". It is a delightful moment.

The second act concentrates on Clint and the other children in his class overcoming all the obstacles that starting school presents, in particular making friends. For all the five children in the classroom, it is their first year of school and they all have their own crises and traumas. When Mrs. Walsh, the teacher, tells the children that "this is where you are going to be for the next year" their silence speaks volumes.

Deborah Mailman (who starred in *Radiance*, a recent Australian film) plays the part of Lep, a Cambodian refugee who has only just come to Australia. Her situation is very difficult. Her mother is dead and Lep has been traumatised by the experience of the war and the loss of her mother. She has an older sister who cares for her like a mother, but in the classroom she is alone, unable to speak English and afraid of many of her classmates.

Rebecca Massy plays the part of Thuan, a Vietnamese student, who is much more confident than Lep and tries to help and support her in the classroom and the schoolyard.

Max Cullen is Theo, a little Greek boy, preoccupied with crocodiles. He is the most lovable little boy,

enthusiastic to the point of driving his teacher crazy. He interrupts her constantly to say that his father has a Magna V8 car, or that he adores football player Tony Lockett. Cullen accurately captures the spirit of an eager child repeatedly making inappropriate remarks. Not stupid, just very naïve and with no understanding of adult social values.

Cullen is marvelous in this part. His list of credits include numerous Australian TV and film appearances, as well as stage performances in *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Cloudstreet* and many others. He obviously delighted in playing Theo. The amusing program notes explain: "At age 5 Max attended Lawson Primary School where he excelled in playing with plasticine and drawing. These disciplines have laid the foundation for his career as an artist."

Arky Michael is the dreaded Shane, a little boy who acts tough with the kids, but likes to keep on the good side of his teacher. It is refreshing to see that Shane is not presented as a typical one-dimensional bully but was played more like a boy who is trying to work out what are the acceptable limits in his relations with others.

Julie Forsyth as Mrs. Walsh is well cast. A typical kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Walsh loves children, is acutely attuned to her students' needs and concerned for their wellbeing. Forsyth gives a lovely wacky flavour to this character that makes her Mrs. Walsh that more much likeable.

Rush played the role of Clint with great sensitivity and it was interesting to see him on stage playing the role of a five-year-old. There was no sense of him being grandiose about his 1997 Academy Award Oscar for his performance in *Shine*. Indeed, his commitment to this production is in keeping with his view that the most important issue for him as an actor is script and challenging roles, not commercial sureties.

This impressive cast also plays the role of the parents, headmaster and sister of Lep with such skillful characterisations that it is often hard to tell they are doubling up.

David Holman, the author, and Rush began working together on the piece over 15 years ago when Rush was working with Magpie Theatre, a company of actors based in South Australia. Holman and Rush spent many weeks observing and gathering stories in primary schools. Holman then developed the play using the

wealth of material they had collected.

Holman started writing in the 1970s. He has written a number of plays, operas and films, including *Drink the Mercury* (1973), *A Christmas Carol* (1975), *No Pasaran* (1977), *The Disappeared* (1979), *Peacemaker* (1980), *ABC* (1981), *No Worries* (1984), *One in a Million* (1987), *Solomon and the Big Cat* (1988), *Whale* (1989) and *O.U.T. Spells Out* (1996).

It is not often that such a topic—the first day of school—is tackled. Director Neil Armfield chose *The Small Poppies* as the Belvoir Street Theatre's contribution to the Sydney Festival 2000 because he saw it as an antidote to much of the rhetoric associated with this year's festival. As he explains in the program notes:

"At this time of increasingly hyped cultural distraction attached to that great marketing opportunity called 'The Millennium', we offer this play as a gesture of friendship, as a way of reminding ourselves of how we begin."

Small Poppies is mostly playful and fun-loving, just like the characters it depicts. This is directly attributable to the goodwill with which the author, director and actors approach it. By the end of the play the audience has journeyed through the rich emotional landscape of children as they take those elementary steps toward adulthood, an experience full of many challenges and a few pitfalls as well. This is something that all but the most cynical and hard-hearted could relate to with joy, and perhaps some tears. It is well worth seeing and you can definitely take the children.



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