

# Hotel Obsino: inner-city poverty and despair

Richard Phillips  
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*Hotel Obsino*, written and directed by Adam Broinowski, was staged at this year's Melbourne Fringe Festival, an alternative annual arts festival held for three weeks in late September.

The festival was first established in 1983 and is now one of the largest of its kind in the world, attracting over 3,000 drama, comedy, dance, circus, puppetry, music, performance art and cabaret writers and actors. With more than 260 separate shows, the festival is a valuable opportunity for young writers and performers to experiment and launch new work—some of it whimsical and light-weight, some of it serious and confronting.

*Hotel Obsino*, which falls into the latter category, is an 80-minute play about a disparate group of deeply-disturbed and all but homeless people living in an inner city hotel. It was performed at the La Mama Theatre, a long-time centre of Australian experimental theatre.

Broinowski, a former member of the Tokyo-based Gekidan Kaitaisha or Theatre of Deconstruction, wrote his first draft of the play in 1999, after staying at the Harold Hotham Hotel in Melbourne. The hotel was once a popular drinking spot for construction and waterfront workers before it became a cheap accommodation rooming-house for backpackers and the homeless. It is not far from the Melbourne Casino, Australia's largest gambling centre, and an obvious reminder of growing social inequality in the city.

*Hotel Obsino* has little plot or narrative and begins with Noah, a sort of everyman type, wandering into the bleak building in search of cheap long-term accommodation. He appears to have come from a sheltered middle class background and is regarded as an oddity at first by the residents, most of whom have serious mental health and/or substance abuse problems.

The residents include Raja, the hotel's Indian receptionist; a prostitute known as Miss Jones; a twitchy 17-year-old Macedonian petty thief called

Gold; Doug, a born-again Christian; Dave, a tattooed young skinhead and heroin addict who has served time for bank robbery; Noodles, a young Aboriginal man, who wants to make a native title claim on the hotel; and two older immigrants—Felix from Malta and Flavio from Italy.

Felix and Flavio are alcoholics and have a range of sexual hang-ups, no doubt a product of their religious upbringing. Felix denounces the government for its failure to provide him with any assistance for his chronic health problems—"It never gives me anything and I work[ed] for this country for 16 years".

Much of the dialogue takes the form of semi-hallucinatory comments by the residents who observe compulsive rituals and cling to a range of delusional beliefs about their place in the world. Suspicious, paranoid and often belligerent, their interaction tends to fuel more nightmarish behaviour and further substance abuse.

Dave is addicted to heroin and moves rapidly from intelligent comment to murderous threats, and back again. He is infatuated with cross-dressing and white supremacism, and claims to have been a police informer and to have sold his own blood to junkies. Having absorbed the racist filth of right-wing talk-show hosts, he advances various political conspiracy theories. Dave befriends Noah, but after discovering that he keeps a diary, accuses him of working for the police, threatens to kill him and then jokes about it while contemplating his own suicide.

Broinowski is a skilled observer of everyday speech and his dramatisation of the deranged and self-destructive behaviour of the residents is intelligent and convincing. Performances by Dylan Lloyd, as Dave, and Brendan Bacon, as Gold, are strong and contain chilling and poetic moments along with elements of absurdist comedy.

The play has a couple of hallucinatory sequences,

where silent figures in stylised animal masks appear. To a large extent these scenes are unnecessary, because the desperate atmosphere pervading the hotel and the residents' paranoiac confusion is already bizarre and haunting enough.

In *Hotel Obsino*'s program notes Broinowski refers to the "courage and hard-bitten humour [of the residents] in undignified conditions". He points out that their "complex and contradictory views are necessary to understand" and show "how the dominant ones in our society perpetuate ignorance."

These observations are no doubt true, but the play is only partially successful in conveying and dramatically elevating them beyond a series of intelligently observed but loosely connected vignettes. Its lack of plot development is a limiting factor, as is the under-development of several characters. The prostitute Miss Jones, for example, who claims to have been a former Miss Australia, and Eva, another female character who is probably suffering from agoraphobia, only appear for a few moments and with little real purpose. No attempt is made to give them any depth.

Likewise Noah, despite being on stage for the entire production, is bland and rather one-dimensional; little more than a blank wall against which the residents bounce their confused ideas.

At one point during the play Noah declares: "I thought religion was for the lost. But now the sky's water, the wind is fire, the earth's a sun and heaven is death. There are too many ways beyond reason." The delivery is intense and poetic but what does it mean? Is *Hotel Obsino* suggesting that there are no answers for humanity or the plight facing the hotel residents?

Nor is it entirely clear whether the play is exploring this nightmarish world in order to expose and satirise existing social relations or simply a dramatic examination of disturbed and self-destructive personalities. Whatever the case, there is little context. In fact, apart from one or two references to the outside world, the hotel appears walled off from the rest of society—which could suggest to some audiences that the demons haunting its residents are self-generated and not a social product.

*Hotel Obsino* concludes on a rather flat note, with Noah simply leaving. There is no real sign that he understands the reasons for the dark and nightmarish existence inside the hotel. It is not clear whether Nina

Simone's song "Feeling Good", which is played at the end and refers to a "new dawn" and a "new day," is meant to be ironic, but it strikes a false tone.

The imposition of a "socially-relevant" conclusion is obviously not the answer, but neither is the current ending, which tends to induce a mood of passive resignation. It could be interpreted by some as 'confirmation' that there is no society, only individuals, isolated and adrift in a sea of confusion.

Broinowski is rightly concerned and alarmed about the plight of the homeless and the mentally ill and has decisively demarcated himself from mainstream Australian theatre, which studiously ignores these important social issues. His empathy with those teetering on the edge of sanity, who are angry about their fate, is an important starting point and another encouraging sign that a layer of local writers and artists is becoming interested in tackling difficult and complex political and social problems.

Further artistic development in this direction will emerge with a more profound recognition that the plight of society's most marginalised layers is the result of the capitalist profit system, a social order that values individuals to the extent that they can be exploited for profit. And an understanding that the physically and psychologically destructive influence of the system is not just confined to the most oppressed, but to everyone.



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