
As an avid fan of Craig Silvey’s *Jasper Jones,* I was sceptical when I heard that it was to be adapted for the stage by Perth’s Barking Gecko Theatre Company, who in the past had been famed for their family-oriented productions. However, by exploring and amplifying the novel’s theme of fear, this adaptation by Australian playwright Kate Mulvany met my one, crucial expectation: that it do something new with the novel whilst remaining as faithful as possible to the original source material. While not ‘slavish’ in their adaptation, Mulvany and director John Sheedy have almost perfectly captured the familiarity and spirit of a complex novel that Silvey himself described as an equal parts ‘coming-of-age, regional mystery novel, stuffed inside a nervous little love story, garnished with family drama and adolescent escapism and anguish’.

From the play’s opening scene, Charlie Bucktin’s (James Beck) fright at Jasper Jones’ (Shaka Cook) arrival at his window one fateful summer’s night in 1965 becomes a seed from which the play’s central theme of fear grows to become a persistent and multifarious presence on stage. Much like the original text, each character has a fear that acts as the catalyst for a number of the narrative’s sub-plots. The struggle of each individual to ‘get brave’ in the face of their personal fears becomes a recurring motif throughout the play, which explores, in a way Silvey’s novel could not express, how these fears are borne out of a widespread fear of difference.

Sheedy and set designer Michael Scott-Mitchell’s minimalist staging of Mulvany’s script plays a crucial part in amplifying this aspect of the narrative. The looming blue outline of Jasper’s tree is a continual, ethereal backdrop, laser-cut into the wall and lit with blue light to dwarf the stage and dominate the play’s events. The performances of the cast – Beck, Cook, Elizabeth Blackmore (Laura/Eliza), Hoa Xuande (Jeffrey Lu), Humphrey Bower (Mad Jack Lionel/Trent/Mr Bucktin) and Alex Jones (Mrs Bucktin) – also played a considerable role in the impact of the material; Jones, in particular, made Mrs. Bucktin a much more pitiable character than her literary counterpart. Throughout the play, the cast also operate as stage crew, drawing and redrawing the boundaries of different settings with a luminous blue-sand, including Jasper’s waterhole and Jeffrey’s cricket pitch. By incorporating this act into the play, Sheedy not only enhances the fear experienced by the characters that are forced to live in the town, but also captures the emotional insularity of Corrigan. With this added visual, it is much clearer in this adaptation that these

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characters are directly complicit in the creation of Corrigan’s narrow-minded atmosphere; they are overwhelmed by their fears not only because they are simply unable to express themselves in the town, but also because they do not ‘get brave’ and express themselves. It is this dialectical relationship between fears and this setting, embodied by the blue sand visual and simplistic staging, that makes Corrigan on stage a commanding presence in its own right - a highly claustrophobic town in which an unspoken sense of fear and stagnation is visibly palpable, and ultimately insurmountable without considerable sacrifice by those trapped in its confines.

To find flaws in this production seems almost petty given the enormity of adapting *Jasper Jones* for the stage. In the end, it was a fresh and thought-provoking adaptation that more than allayed my earlier uncertainties. Indeed, *Jasper Jones* lived up to my core expectation so well that it may be the play’s biggest flaw. Silvey’s novel was deliberately ambiguous on the issue of racism; part of the novel’s beauty was that it described life in 1960s country Australia and allowed its audience to contextualise it. As Silvey has described:

>The mid-sixties were supposed to be that watershed moment where Australia truly grew up. But one of the reasons that the period is so easily identifiable and recognisable in the book is because, well, maybe we really didn’t. Maybe we just learned to be adult, rather than to really come of age.4

What history tells us was a watershed decade of social change, in which the White Australia Policy was dismantled and multicultural Australia was born, does not correlate with the events of *Jasper Jones*. Derogatory phrases are used, acts of discrimination against Jasper and Jeffrey are described and rallied against by Charlie, but it is never explicitly labeled as racist or any variation thereof, partly because such attitudes are contextually accurate, but also because Silvey wants to remind his audience how familiar this status quo is to the present. As evidenced by the continued struggle of Indigenous Australians to be formally recognised in the Constitution and recent, questionable changes to Australia’s immigration policies, what historian Jon Stratton has described as ‘everyday racism’5 continues to permeate ‘the dominant institutional order and the social relations of everyday life’6 because race and racialised preferences, like those displayed by the residents of Corrigan, remain the ‘core structuring mechanisms of Australian culture’.7 I do not know how it would be possible to make this link between past and present more explicit to the audience without considerable changes to the narrative, but it does seem like an opportunity to make a strong statement was missed, particularly when silence and fear in the face of discrimination is the root of the play’s central theme.

However, by following its source material so closely, the absence of such labels in the play can also be viewed as a continuation of Silvey’s original statement,

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4 Silvey in Reading Group Guide, 3.
6 *ibid*.
7 *ibid*.
a reflection of everyday racism rather than a consequence, and the subtlety and simplicity of Mulvany’s script is a credit to her abilities as a writer. It just seems, in what will hopefully be the first of many productions of Mulvany’s *Jasper Jones*, that Barking Gecko may have just missed their own opportunity to ‘get brave’ and make *Jasper Jones* truly their own.

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