

Triumph of imagination

THEATRE
Plainsong
By David Britton
Black Swan Theatre
University of WA
Review: Geoff Gibbs

AUSTRALIA has sometimes been criticised as a country in search of its culture. Black Swan Theatre's promenade production of *Plainsong* is a big step towards that goal.

David Britton has written a stimulating theatre celebration of mankind's monumental struggle with fear in the quest for faith.

His source is the Medieval Mystery Plays, from which he has taken the 11 stories he believes are most relevant to an Australian audience.

His success in *Plainsong* is in part due to the fact that he has maintained the rhythm and structure of the original texts while skilfully capturing the larrikin nature of Australian humour and the physical gutsiness we so admire in our own theatre.

Counterpointed against *Plainsong's* vista — from creation to resurrection — is the story of the anguish of a contemporary seminarian who has to tame his nature to accept the rule of St Benedict: "Listen with the ear of your heart."

Mathew Edgerton and Boris Radmilovich sensitively but passionately explore the gap of faith between the young monk and his abbot, this episodic conflict sharply illuminating the trials endured by the heroic biblical characters that dominate the tales drawn from Old and New Testaments.

The gestation of this ambitious theatre event involved close collaboration with the Benedictine community at New Norcia and the considerable resources of the WA Academy of Performing Arts.

Plainsong, under a different title, had its "out of town tryout" with an academy cast in New Norcia late last year.

Andrew Ross directed that first workshop and has used a number of the Academy's graduates in the current production.

Vast in vision, boundless in energy and innovation, *Plainsong* is wondrously impregnated with indelible theatrical imagery and is utterly entertaining — all achieved with a mere four-week final rehearsal period.

Ross wisely selected a young and multi-skilled cast, 10 specialist technicians and the assistance of two of Australia's most eminent physical theatre exponents in skadada's Jon Burt and Katie Lavers.

Rohan Nichol is an authoritative, ruggedly handsome and compassionate God (who looks like he just completed the Diet Coke



Sharyn Oppy: touching as the Virgin and most effective in a number of other roles.

ad); Trevor Jamieson is a charming Adam whose dance and comedic skills are well showcased in this production; Fiona Choi's Eve is witty and sensual and her interaction with Lucifer in Eden is electric ("a good snake is hard to find"); Jacob Allan is commanding as the jackeroo Abel, hilarious as Mak in the not-to-be missed interval show and compelling as Jesus.

Michael Angus is effective as a disarming subservient Noah to a dominant Mrs Noah, engagingly danced and sung by Katie Wilkins.

The Ark cabaret show (in the undercroft of Winthrop Hall), drawing heavily on Bob Fosse and Chicago, is alone worth the price of admission.

The Virgin, isolated on a lofty swing, was

touchingly realised by Sharyn Oppy, who also shone in a number of juvenile roles in the production. She has an honesty and innocence in her work which was most effective.

But acting honours in a talented cast go to Jonathan Turner whose Lucifer/Satan was a masterly creation of oily charm, sinewy movement and vocal range that enriched every word he uttered.

This fusion of talent and script has produced a theatre event of which the Perth International Arts Festival can be proud.

The cloisters of Winthrop Hall and its pastoral surroundings are maximised by Ross as the backdrop for this production, most effectively lit by Duncan Ord.

It is only in the last scene that the sharpness of the production flags — but to find a final coda in an evening of several triumphs would be difficult. Ross no doubt will review the finale and vocal range its impact during the play's run.

Throughout, Ross plunders our literary and visual recall as he creates vibrant images of popular religious art, images of war, recent musicals and television's intrusion into the most graphic of world events. (The live TV coverage of the crucifixion is at once ordinary and appalling.)

The cast of 14 respond to Ross' imaginative direction and to the splendidly appropriate, tuneful and diverse original music composed and performed by Iain Grandage.

The emotional range of the liturgical chants used by the monks is balanced by some wonderful music hall, cabaret and neo-operatic material that showcases the range and wit of Taryn Fiebig's strong soprano voice.

From the opening peal of tubular bells to the monastic meal of bread, water and olive oil, the capacity crowd was expertly and confidently placed in the care of a remarkable group of players, musicians and technicians.

Crowd control was shamelessly built into the production so that it sometimes came as a surprise that we were on the move again.

And as we moved, a kaleidoscope of images and scenes confronted us, challenging us to question and reflect on what we had just seen and to fear what we were about to encounter.

To list the ingenious features of this production would rob future audiences of its effect. I can only urge you to see this remarkable achievement — and PIAF should be active in encouraging other festivals to stage it.

● **Plainsong runs until February 26.**