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Independent arts commentary by Alison Croggon

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Friday, October 14, 2011

## Melbourne Festival review: Whiteley's Incredible Blue, Foley

*La beauté*, "Beauty is difficult, Yeats" said Aubrey Beardsley when Yeats asked why he drew horrors or at least not Burne-Jones and Beardsley knew he was dying and had to make his hit quickly

Hence no more B-J in his product.

So very difficult, Yeats, beauty so difficult.

- Ezra Pound, *Cantos*

I left *Whiteley's Incredible Blue* last night with Pound's verse circling around my head. Barry Dickins's new play, subtitled "an hallucination", is almost an essay on the proposition of the difficulty and necessity of beauty, through the medium of the *enfant terrible* of Australian art, Brett Whiteley.



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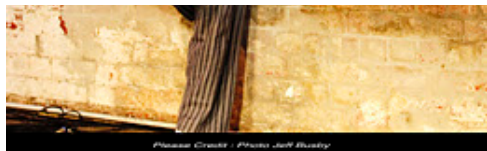
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Whiteley is a compelling figure: part artist, part charlatan, myth-maker extraordinaire, he died of a heroin overdose in 1992, aged only 53, in a country motel. So much of his work is trashy product for the cannibalistic art market that at once made and destroyed him, and yet his sublime gift for colour and line gave us some of our most iconic paintings. Dickins, however, isn't interested in moralising, nor in biography. What he has created instead is a poetic riff that recreates Whiteley's restless imaginative excesses, a theatrical meditation on art, beauty and self-destruction.

The title not only recalls Whiteley's fondness for the colour ultramarine blue, but colloquially suggests Whiteley's argument ("blue") with life itself. It's probably Dickins's best play, and certainly a play only he could have written: here his Dylan Thomas-esque ear for rhythm and colour is given full rein, looping and relooping in an avalanche of imagery. These flights are grounded by an earthy self-awareness, a deprecating humour that pricks the impulse towards romanticising the artist, seeking instead to make luminous the sensual passion that informed his paintings. The blur of the sentimental is always a danger in a work like this, and this play never goes there.

The conceit is simple. Brett Whiteley's soul is in purgatory, trapped in the squalid motel room in which he died. He is played with a startling verisimilitude by Neil Pigot, who with the addition of a curly wig looks almost exactly like him, but it's clear from the opening moments that this isn't intended to be a realistic representation. Pigot plays him as a clumsy dancer, half child, half cynic, regretful and regretless, looking back at the failures of a passionate life from the dispassion of death, a collision of quicksilver and human flesh borne down by the gravity of mortality. It's a bravura performance, exact and compelling, which drills into the observation that might be Whiteley's epitaph: "I'm not good. I'm a good artist."

Julian Meyrick's production is carefully designed to frame and amplify the text. The set is simple: a wide stage, featuring only a messy double bed that recalls Tracy Ermin's squalid autobiographical *My Bed*, a side table loaded with pills, a radio on the floor. To one side is the band (Pietro Fine, Robert George and Robert Calvert). The art is suggested visually by the barest of cues - a mobile of birds in flight to the right of the stage and a few projected graphics. The paintings are principally invoked through music, Whiteley's line echoed in the soaring notes of a saxophone.

Hallucinatory stage directions are read in voice-over by Richard Bligh, Keonie Dodd and Daniela Farinacci, sometimes overlapping each other, punctuating the various movements of the monologue with vivid, oneiric *mise en scenes*. This is a reality created almost entirely through Dickins's words.

I wished that the acoustics at Fortyfive Downstairs were less muddy, as the music sometimes overwhelms the text. And

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occasionally Meyrick's directorial eye slackens: Pigot's physicalisations - playful dance, jumping on the bed - can tip over into the merely silly. When Pigot's gestures, however odd they are, unite with the extremities of the text, it creates a potent expressiveness, but this is not unfaltering. It made me think of the sort of precise physicalisations Anita Hegh created in Peter Evans's production of **The Yellow Wallpaper**: the performance language here is not as sharp. But these are quibbles. This is a sound production of a challenging and complex text, from a writer who should not be forgotten.



It felt serendipitous that I should see *Foley* on the same day as *Whiteley's Incredible Blue*: it was a day for Australian icons. Gary Foley, Aboriginal activist, uncompromising anarchist and unrepentant larrikin, is a living repository of a fascinating and shamefully little-known aspect of Australian history: the battle for self-determination and land rights for Aboriginal people. Rachel Maza Long's production is basically a lecture tarted up with a cardboard set that recalls a television talk show, with four screens showing various media - photographs, graphics, television footage. It's plain, unpretentious theatre, and absolutely riveting.

As with Ilbjerri's **Jack Charles Versus The Crown**, this is an exercise in autobiographical theatre. Gary Foley presents himself in his "native habitat" as an Aboriginal historian, which is a room scattered with archive boxes. Late in life, he tells us, he became a creature he despised, an academic (spit), graduating with honours in history from Melbourne University (spit), and now can be observed in his rooms at Victoria University. From here, he tells us the story of his life, which - as Foley was part of some of its most important events - is also an introduction to the wider history of black struggle in Australia.

It's a warts and all presentation, and often hilarious. It opens with a video of the young Foley on the lawns of Parliament House, being buttonholed by a disapproving matron in a twinset. At first he attempts to explain the aims of the protest, but soon he loses patience and roundly abuses her. When Foley himself, sans beard and long hair, 61 years old, steps onto the stage, he tells us that

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this angry young man is dead. "Now I'm a grumpy old man," he says.

Foley's often controversial life is full of colourful anecdote. He was one of the founders of the Aboriginal Embassy on the lawn of Parliament House in Canberra, a member of Black Power, which started the first free legal and medical services for Aboriginals (or anyone) in Australia, and even co-designed the Aboriginal flag. Importantly, he is also an actor. Indigenous theatre has been from its beginning a political theatre, the most consciously political we have; it's here that the very European notion of theatre as social revolution exists as a living thing.

Foley was a member of Sydney's Black Theatre, founded under Bob Maza at the Nimrod, and was in the cast of the ground-breaking 1972 political revue *Basically Black*. This is a legendary production, and one of the highlights of *Foley* is a short showing of some of the sketches filmed by the ABC for a pilot. The series was never made, presumably because it was considered "too political". On the evidence of those few minutes, *Basically Black* is the funniest tv show that was never made. You can only sigh for what could have been.

He outlines the history of Aboriginal activism against the background of the notorious White Australia policy and the wider international Civil Rights movement. This history reaches back to Federation, and forward as Foley traces his own involvement in the protests of the 1970s and the various governmental betrayals of the Aboriginal quest for Land Rights (it finishes by making the point that Native Title is an entirely different question to Land Rights).

*Foley* highlighted the shameful fact that I know much more about the US Civil Rights movement than I do about the history of Indigenous activism here. Even so, I had no idea that the early 20th century boxer Jack Johnson - in his time the most famous black person on the planet - was a prominent activist, or of his far-reaching influence on Indigenous politics here. This history is not only necessary; it's fascinating. If nothing else, that these stories remain largely untold demonstrates how colonial Australian culture remains.

And you'll seldom be taught history as entertainingly as in this show. Invigoratingly irreverent, driven by an unflinching lifelong passion for justice, it makes absorbing theatre. As the *Age* said of Foley himself: "If his ego is epic, as his opponents allege, so is his story." Foley's the one to tell it, and you'd be mad to miss it.

**Pictures: Top: Neil Pigot as Brett Whiteley. Photo: Jeff Busby. Bottom, Gary Foley as Gary Foley.**

***Whiteley's Incredible Blue* by Barry Dickins, directed by Julian Meyrick. Designed by Meredith Rogers, lighting by Kerry Saxby. Performed by Neil Pigot, with musicians Robert Calvert, Robert George, Pietro Fine. Melbourne Festival, fortyfivedownstairs, until October 23.**

***Foley*, written, performed and co-devised by Gary Foley, directed by Rachael Maza Long. Co-devised by Jon Hawkes,**

co-written by Tony Birch. Audio and lighting by Danny Pettingill, costume and design by Emily Barrie. Ilbijerri Theatre, Melbourne Festival. Fairfax Studio, Victorian Arts Centre, until October 15.

Posted by Alison Croggon at **8:58 AM Full post** [Digglit!](#) | [Del.icio.us](#)

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1 COMMENTS:

***Cameron Woodhead said...***

At the risk of playing to the gallery of people who think we're the David and Margaret of the Melbourne theatre scene ... Whiteley's Incredible Blue "almost an essay on the proposition of the difficulty and necessity of beauty"?

I have to disagree with you there, Alison.

More after my review appears in tomorrow's Age...

**4:06 PM, October 14, 2011**

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