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Speaking in Tongues: words, stories and characters overlap



Two cheers for Australia! Or cheers to two Australians.

Andrew Bovell is the hot Aussie playwright of the moment. Many Canadian theatregoers made his acquaintance last year when the Shaw Festival brilliantly presented his searing family epic *When the Rain Stops Falling*.

Toronto's Company Theatre is now resurrecting one of Bovell's earlier plays, 1996's *Speaking in Tongues*, and while it's not quite as satisfying, it has many of the same enjoyable qualities: plotting that provokes genuine suspense, an almost religious reveling in coincidence, and an original overlapping form.

Among the actors bringing *Speaking in Tongues* to life is our second awesome Antipodean: Perth-raised, Toronto-based actress Helene Joy, familiar from her starring TV roles on *Murdoch Mysteries* and *Durham County*.

While she has a history of performing live down under, this marks her Canadian stage debut. Doubling up as a wife and a mistress, she is magnetic in both roles, projecting a charming fragility in the first and an almost sociopathic sexiness in the second.

Speaking in Tongues opens with two adulterous one-night stands unfolding at once, in separate places. Peter (Richard Clarkin) and Sonja (Yanna McIntosh), and Leon (Jonathan Goad) and Jane (Joy), have picked one another up at a bar and retired to hotel rooms.

These two trysts – one is aborted; the other is consummated – take place in the same scenic space, and much of the dialogue between the couples is synchronized.

As it turns out, the symmetry between these two sets of cheaters runs even deeper – Peter is married to Jane, while Leon is husband to Sonja. Indeed, even their post-affair confrontations run along similar lines – with the dramatic (and ultimately comic) implication that marital infidelity is an old script, unconsciously memorized.

But Bovell has something more in mind than exposing cheating as banal and bourgeois. Fair warning: It's difficult to explain exactly what happens next in *Speaking in Tongues* without ruining some of the pleasure of the unexpected, musical way in which the play progresses.

The two adulterers who followed through – Leon and Jane – eventually try to win back their spouses, and how they go about it is by telling stories of what they've learned during their separations. Both have been strongly affected by upsetting encounters with strangers or near-strangers, as well as reports of disappearing women.

In Leon's parable, a man's fiancée, who vanished on a trip to America, reappears on a bus a decade later. In Jane's story, a family-man neighbour is suspected of foul play in the disappearance of a local woman on a quiet, rural road. Both of their tales are linked by the imagery of abandoned shoes and bashed-in faces.

Then comes *Speaking in Tongues*' final twist. The quartet of actors, who have hitherto played the two couples, bring the characters from these seemingly far-fetched fables to life in scenes that overlap.

In the early part of the play, director Philip Riccio's production easily creates the necessary comedy, while in the closing section he has no trouble conjuring a sense of mystic dread.

Where Riccio stumbles, however, is in successfully driving his actors across the bridge between these two worlds. The reconciliation scenes come across as missing necessary subtext and are not helped by off-putting, bright lighting by John Thompson. Intermission arrives accompanied by an unpleasant sense of confusion.

In the acting department, the two women navigate the surprise shift in characters best. McIntosh is chilling, transformed from a woman "at the height of her powers, but not her beauty" to a troubled therapist. There's a soft, rounded quality to both Goad's and Clarkin's performances, but that clashes mildly with the material.

Is it buying into stereotypes to suggest that Canadian women have more in common with Australian women than Canadian men do with Australian men?