

Speaking in Tongues is challenging, dynamic, and will make you proud of Toronto theatre



Photo by Shaun Benson

When I started writing for Mooney on Theatre a few years ago, I had no idea of the diversity or energy present in the Toronto theatre scene. I went to big box productions every year or so, and the occasional Fringe play. But this week alone, I've seen four plays, and on average I see a production every week. I now consider myself a bit of a theatre buff. (I'm certainly not buff in any other sense!)

Thursday night's show, The Company Theatre/Canadian Stage's *Speaking in Tongues* reminds me what makes me proud of Toronto theatre. It's challenging, dynamic and slick. The staging is clever, the acting superb, and in the lobby afterwards, the audience was stirred to discuss the subject matter with perfect strangers.

Australian Andrew Bovell's contemporary script and the powerhouse quartet of actors upped the ante on what a theatre experience should be. And a few days later, I am still thinking about it. *Speaking in Tongues* is a commentary on modern relationships – a story in two acts which questions how couples define love and the consequences of forgiveness. The synopsis beautifully captures the essence of the play, but it's the enactment under director Philip Riccio that leaves the lasting impression.

Dividing the stage into linear quadrants over a striped floor, Riccio displays Bovell's moving writing with elegance while navigating the in-between space where fidelity and commitment run parallel but diverge in moments of self-doubt and fear. He uses focused lighting to show connections/separations between couples, an interesting tactic which highlights how theoretical (rather than actual) our divisions can be in matters of the heart.

Speaking in Tongues begins in a hotel room as two couples negotiate the tantalizing pull of cheating on

one other. They awkwardly admit their mutual desire for something new while conceding love and admiration for their loved ones at home.

"It was an accident," we hear all four exclaim. "This wasn't something I planned. I love my wife/husband."

The first act centres on the result of this one night, and how the relationships bend or break under the pressure of self-doubt, fear, and neglect. The second act begins with the same four actors expanding their roles to flesh out characters in the broader community. The plot switches from process to progression and suddenly we have an intense story to follow.

The beauty in Bovell's writing is how he uses line delivery to show the importance of each moment in time. Some scenes feature actors speaking their lines in unison, showing the universal cliché of excuses and worry, but also succinctly catching the essence of the experience for the audience without needing to see each characters' identical experience. Other scenes, by contrast, use line repetition to illustrate how different contexts can influence meaning. The overall experience is haunting and fresh.

Each actor plays at least two characters, but it was Helene Joy's incredible personification from one act to another which left a lasting impression. Yanna McIntosh was strong and stable throughout, and Jonathan Goad and Richard Clarkin swapped roles as aggressor/passive observer with similar fervour.

Unlike the biblical reference in the title, *Speaking in Tongues* isn't a religious tale, but is rooted in a contemporary, applicable morality.