

By Christian Baines

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Speaking in Tongues: Sydney's Language

Those arguing the case for Australian film often cite Ray Lawrence's *Lantana* as one of the country's finest efforts, and it's easy to see why. A sweeping, multi-pronged narrative of four couples linked tenuously by various breaches of trust, it brought Andrew Bovell's play *Speaking in Tongues* to the screen in a vivid hybrid of mystery and relationship drama set within suburban Sydney.

Two couples share the stage, each in a nondescript hotel room, unknowingly about to enjoy a little illicit partner swapping. Peter and Sonja refuse to go through with it, while Leon and Jane suffer no such attack of conscience. The scene feels awkward, as the two pairings spout the same simple, clichéd lines we've heard in a million infidelity dramas before. But it sets up a familiarity to be tossed aside the moment each of the four arrives home. It frees Bovell to subvert tiresome expectations and give each character's dilemma the time and exploration it deserves. The play doesn't consume itself with the offence, but instead uses it to illustrate a bigger picture.

The Company Theatre brings a minimal, yet lush production to the Berkeley Street Theatre. A major strength is its cold sense of disconnection and paranoia. Characters switch between narration and dialogue that rarely sees them in close proximity, highlighting their often self-imposed isolation. The four-hand cast does a wonderful job across a variety of roles, and the contrasts are sharp and palpable, each character bringing a unique and compelling presence to the stage. Only Helene Joy's Jane feels a little overpowered by the personalities surrounding her, a problem that's quickly swept away once Joy transforms into vampish opportunist, Sarah.

Speaking in Tongues delivers that often promised, but too rarely accomplished, theatrical treat of subverting archetype to become something far richer and darker, conjuring a narrative that – far from tripping over its own lofty ambition – rides through a riveting two acts and leaves us wanting to know what happens next.

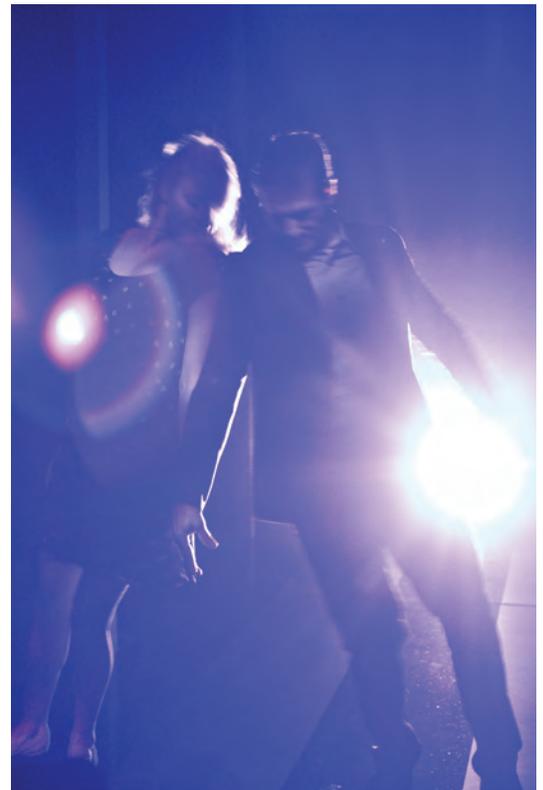


Photo by Shaun Benson