

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PORTRAIT

Simple sketches of a time, place

DEAD YELLOW SANDS. Written and performed by Graham Weir. Directed by Bo Petersen. At Alexander Upstairs until Saturday. **TRACEY SAUNDERS** reviews

GRAHAM WEIR is an interesting man with an interesting life and has encountered many interesting people. All of this is a prerequisite for this autobiographical portrait of a performer who has been involved in theatre for 35 years.

His name will be familiar to followers of the popular acapella ensemble Not the Midnight Mass, who were regular performers and celebrated their 21 birthday at the Theatre on the Bay in 2008.

Although Weir's vocal talent is slipped in occasionally it is his theatrical talents that are the focus of this piece. He is the only man on stage and yet he believably conjures many more characters. His introductory portrait, of the East Rand in Gauteng, at a time when the dead yellow sands blew from the mine dumps and spread over surrounding suburbia as stifling as the dry air of the Highveld, sketches the mood.

Much has changed since then. The mine dumps have been reclaimed and the spectacle of a dolphin show in a shopping centre car park would not be tolerated. Weir's imagery is simple and it is in the simplicity that he so accurately sketches both the time and the place.

With the skill of a master painter it takes a few brush strokes to paint the night skyline of Joburg at its heyday when the Carlton Centre and Ponte were still considered architectural marvels.

His recollections about the replica of one of Jan van Riebeck's ships the Dromedaris, which found a final resting place at Santarama Miniland in Wemmer Pan brought a flood of memories of school outings rushing back. Born in Benoni, which is of Hebrew origin and means "son of my sorrows" to Scottish immigrants, Weir began his theatrical career when he joined the Performing Arts Council of Transvaal in 1981. He doesn't recount much of his early days, but suffice to establish his presence before he calls in the clowns.

As with the Sondheim song, *Send*

With the skill of a master painter it takes a few brush strokes to paint Joburg's skyline

in the *Clowns*, one realises that they are already there. One by one each character reveals their hopes, fears and dreams and while they are individual vignettes they are simultaneously facets of Weir himself. There is a saturation of melancholy, a grieving for a time gone by, of a life that was slower, deeper and more meaningful than the technologically obsessed, consumption driven rat race that we seem to all get caught up in.

His sketch of an aging drag queen will bring to mind the many divas and doyennes who strutted about the Skyline and Butterfly club in the Hillbrow of yesteryear.

As he reminisces there is a reminder of the value of friendship and how treasuring them is a luxury we would do well to afford. While he follows the fortune of the female impersonator down on her luck it is evident that old age is not something to be taken lightly and for some it is certainly anything but the "golden years". His bleak portrait doesn't seek sympathy, but the understanding of the characters is so meaningful that it evokes a deep empathy. He is not overtly sentimental, but nostalgia for the man and a time that was is evident.

In one of the final scenes we gaze upon the final days of a man in a hospital room. The tender and poignant unravelling of a person as their final breath slips away is drawn from more than an acting technique. This is a very personal and real encounter and the honesty of the moment is caught in the room in the final gasping breath.

Using his acrobatic vocal talents Weir is able to mimic the slow hum and click of the respirator and just like that we are in a hospital ward redolent with antiseptic.

As vibrantly and colourfully as he draws the exciting life of an abseiling cleaner, he sketches the hazy memories of an aging man in light grey. Each portrait is drawn with care, and although they are made manifest each time through a darkening of the stage, vestiges of them remain throughout the series of monologues. At the end one feels as if you should respectfully bid each soul good bye.

Petersen seems to have directed each character as if dealing with a far larger cast, such is the transformation between each one. Lighting design by Guy de Lancey and Jon Keevy is exceptional and cannily assists in the transformation of his facial features. As each light mounted on an empty music stand either fades or brightens it draws a different version of his face.

Finally he appears to almost wash away with the greyish pallor which will be familiar to anyone who has sat alongside a death bed.

Dead Yellow Sands is one of those unusual theatrical experiences which allow you access to someone's thoughts and feelings.



MELANCHOLY: Graham Weir tells tales of places that once were and people he once knew in *Dead Yellow Sands*.

The voyeuristic quality feels uncomfortable at times as if you are intruding in a very private space. Weir opens that space without reservation. With his lilting voice capable of a broad range of accents, but ulti-

mately most comfortable in a slight Scottish accent, he invites you in. And once seated you are held in a penetrating gaze, his and those whose lives he shares with you.

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