

LE PETIT PRINCE

by Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Melbourne French Theatre

Directed by Karen Berger

Reviewed by Barry O'Neill - 29 November 2007

The book *Le Petit Prince* (The Little Prince) has been translated into 160 languages and has sold over 50 million copies worldwide. It is often referred to as a children's book but this was not necessarily the author's intent. In essence it is his observations of what he believed to be the essential truths in life; however his use of *Le Petit Prince* as a questioner of 'grown up' habits and beliefs gives the story a young child's uncomplicated view of the world. In addition the narrative moves in weird and wonderful ways, using allegories and concepts that perhaps only a child could accept. This is the beauty and stunning simplicity of the story.

Director Karen Berger also adapted this production, which effectively kept both adults and the many children in attendance amused and enthralled. Designer Tiresa Ballard ignored the generous performance space available at The Open Stage (University of Melbourne) and offered a 4 meter square area in which the whole performance took place.

A sculpted sandy coloured carpet (4x4) together with two cardboard representations of sand dunes (or perhaps *Le Prince's* active volcanoes?), plus a 2 x 2 backdrop of changeable cloth designs, provided the basic set. Not only did actors change behind this small backdrop but all props were housed there and brought on or removed as required.

This was not minimalist; it was essentially a reflection of the childlike innocence of the story. Who cares that I might have picked fault at a hesitant change of backdrops, or lack of synchronization between props and effects? – the youngsters wouldn't have cared one iota. Lighting by Adam Griekelis and Gemma Moody added to the changing moods, particularly one amazing vignette when the puppet sun rose and set within 5 seconds but the lighting represented the whole 24 hours.

In the pivotal role of *Le Prince*, Sarah Blard was delightful. Childish persistence on questions that must be answered ("what do you mean by 'tamed'"), delightful chuckles at idiocies that amuse, puzzled reflections on the stupidity of 'grown ups' – all emotions were beautifully portrayed with ease and confidence.

Christopher Le Tellier was also warm and empathetic in his dual roles of *The Pilot* and *The Fox*. Both of these characters are pivotal to the writer's message and Christopher's interpretations added total authenticity to a surreal story.

Fleur Dean played *A Rose*, *A Planet*, *A Serpent*, *A Businesswoman*, and *A Lamplighter* – needless to say her *Rose* was captivating, but she was equally at ease with the other characters. *A Serpent* came and went like 'the baddy' in a pantomime – you see the snake but not the person.

The final cast member, who also seemed to be on-stage manager, props arranger and backdrop changer was David Adamson who played *A King*, *A Vain Man*, *A Drunkard* (who was drinking because he is ashamed – yes, of drinking) and *A Geographer*. His characterisations convincingly complemented the overall presentation.

Perhaps I should have mentioned that the play was presented 60% in French (with English surtitles on a screen at the back of the set for us single language plebs) and the rest in English. All actors were fluently bi-lingual. Add that to your CV.

As usual the hospitality and warmth of Melbourne French Theatre was on display and an enthusiastic Anglo/French audience obviously enjoyed the show. I would however question the value of a 70 minute performance at \$27 per head, not including refreshments or a gold coin donation program.

I apologise that I have not provided a comprehensive synopsis – grown ups might be too skeptical. You will have to read the book.



Melbourne French Theatre's "Le Petit Prince"