

Cameron Woodhead

The Age – Saturday August 7, 2010

Ambitious delusions of grandeur.

THEATRE

MADELEINE ****

**By Jenny Kemp, Black Sequin Productions,
North Melbourne Arts House, until August 8
Cameron Woodhead**

The second in a trilogy from Jenny Kemp, *Madeleine* explores mental illness. The first, *Kitten*, was a visually sumptuous melodrama of grief and bipolar disorder.

Madness is always risky terrain for theatre, but *Madeleine*, generates a complex poetry that hovers above bathos, immersing the audience in an empathic and bold ode to psychosis.

It should be said that schizophrenia is never mentioned. It doesn't need to be, it's so convincingly shown. Maddy (Nikki Shiels) is a 19-year-old who has begun to experience the world differently, and the narrative moulds itself around the deranged contours of her mind. Domestic scenes, such as Maddy's birthday party, can devolve into bizarre hallucinations, with her family transforming into members of an Arthurian court. A voice speaks to Maddy, compelling her to recreate the Garden of Eden; other religious delusions follow.

The play doesn't skimp on the fear and confusion her condition inflicts on her parents (Margaret Mills and Ian Scott) and sister (Natasha Herbert). The distress of the outsiders looking in, holds in counterpoint the methodical illogicality of Maddy's world, and serves to complicate the drama.

Madeleine is ambitious theatre. Trying to understand schizophrenia, much less invent a theatrical language that expresses it with such subtle clarity, is a challenge. Kemp has succeeded wonderfully. The performances are beautiful and frightening, drawing on the tradition of the dream play.

And Ben Cobham's set and lighting are brilliant.