

Edge of reality

REVIEW

theatre

The Black Sequin Dress

Where and when:
Playbox, until April 6.

By TOM WRIGHT

THIS is a strong and sophisticated piece of theatre which was first seen at the Adelaide Festival a fortnight ago and now moves assuredly to the Malthouse.



Surreal: Margaret Mills, pictured with Greg Stone, is one of four women in the lead role

Indeed, it is one of the richest and most contemplative performances seen in the Merlyn Theatre for some time, and one that further demonstrates director and playwright Jenny Kemp's abilities to work well with a gifted and creative team.

On the surface *The Black Sequin Dress* is simply a meditation on a single event in the life of a woman, that of slipping over while visiting a nightclub.

Four actors play this central character, sometimes representing different aspects of her personality, on other occasions working as a chorus of the self, commenting as if distant observers on deeply internalised events.

The moment of tumbling and the psychic paraphernalia accompanying it are explored through images and conversations that are at times surreal, witty and wise.

Rather than a linear narrative the audience sees this one small instance turned inside out, so the voices, odd remembered moments, sexual tensions, thwarted desires and fears are all laid bare.

The play takes on a beautiful mood of half-waking, where words such as “secure”, “pleasure” and “terror” become unfamiliar and spawn peculiar associations. The actors travel and arrive (literally) on a train of thought and wander seamlessly from the landscape into the mindscape and back again.

This production achieves that rare quality of exploring the realm of the subconscious without, ever falling into whimsy or deliberate obtuseness.

The set, by Jacqueline Everitt and lighting by Ben Cobham provide an austere site of creative journeying. We could be witnessing the nightclub of the incident in question, but it often moves simply into the world of the underground tunnel, or an unfamiliar space where personal demons are met.

Red exit lights glow invitingly and the sparkles from the sequin dresses cast watery light on the metallic walls.

The performers have grasped a style that is physically disciplined and expressive, leaving no room for indulgence and keeping the pace streamlined, even melodic.

Margaret Mills and Mary Sitarenos, in particular, capture the disconnected feeling of the Paul Delvaux paintings that inspired the piece. Both turn in brilliant performances laced with irony and intensity.

The joy of this production lies in its capacity to go beyond the mere telling of a story, and make the theatre a place where the irrational and distorted side of our culture can find expression.

By the end of *The Black Sequin Dress* questions about the knowledge of the self and the capacity of words to express the utter complexity of feelings are exposed. It plays like a poem or cyclical song.

It draws attention to that deep well of thought and memory that we all carry.