

INTERVIEW – THE CAKE MAN – Tuesday 5 November 2013

Stephen Curtis, designer of set and costumes for The Cake Man speaks to Belvoir's Cathy Hunt about the process of creating the design for this production.

How did you and the director come up with such a radical approach to staging the start of the play?

Kyle knew from the very beginning that he would like to take a strong hand to the beginning of the play. Our very first discussion was around experimenting with different approaches to presenting the first contact story, and part of my role as designer was to keep encouraging Kyle with that experiment and to keep finding ways of strengthening and clarifying his vision. Kyle decided that he wanted to use dolls as part of the storytelling, as a device to distance it from any historical fact. He wanted it to become a fantasy, in a way. I showed Kyle perhaps a dozen different references on how we could realise those dolls. One of the references was a Ken doll (as in Barbie and Ken), which I suggested to Kyle that we paint black to represent the Aboriginal warrior.... so we were treading on potentially very contentious ground. I suggested it in the spirit of 'oh, well why not? What would it mean if...?'

Bringing a post-colonial perspective?

Yes, exactly. We explored a really wide range of possibilities... at the other extreme there was a doll that was based on an object in the Australian Museum, an Aboriginal toy which is basically a stick that is bound in a very beautiful way with natural grasses. So we were really looking at quite diverse possibilities for what these dolls could be.

What time period is the production set? Now or in 1975?

It's set in 1975 ... mid-70s. It's never really specifically stated. The reason that we did that is because all of the stories that are told within the play - the central story of the Cake Man that Ruby shares with Pumpkinhead, the stories of first contact, the Aboriginal myths – those three levels of storytelling happen within our past. I thought, and Kyle agreed with me, that the atmosphere of a past time could actually work to connect the three levels of storytelling within the play.

So setting it within a specific past helps to join them together?

Yes. To an audience now the 70s is not necessarily a specific period, it is a slightly romanticised, generalised past, and it was that version of the 70s that I was interested in. There are no costume or other design signifiers that scream: this is 1974! But it's quite a faithful 'soft' interpretation of the 70s.

Brilliant. And one of the things that really struck me when I read the script is that central story of the Cake Man bringing the gifts to the children, so I just wondered how that kind of idea that kind of idea of abundance, and the underlying religious and mythic imagery, how you used those two things in the design?

Well, essentially through symbolism – two symbols in particular. Part of the set design is a pattern of marks – white lines that very simply mark out the performance space, and the storytelling happens within that space. I talked with Kyle about the possibility of using one of those white lines to suggest a spear – to visually conjure the image of Mr Peterson, the cruel neighbour, being literally speared through the heart, at the time he has a heart attack in Ruby's house, so that we visually connect his moment of realisation with the moment in Pumpkinhead's mythic Cake Man story where the Cake Man is speared.

Where his eyes get put out?

Yes, the spearing in the story that Pumpkinhead narrates is the event that makes the Cake Man see what really needs to happen. So I suggested to Kyle this quite brazen symbolic image, as a way of testing what the range of possibilities of our production might be. I offered that very early on as a way of starting to evolve what the style might be, and Kyle liked it and it became a central part of the production. And the other symbol is the box of groceries that Mr Peterson brings to the family. I worked with our tiny production team in Perth to make every item in that box as colourful and jewel-like as possible, so we see it as almost a fantasy, a humble treasure trove of bounty.



James Slee & Irma Woods in *The Cake Man*. Photo: Heidrun Löhr

What was it like designing for a production happening both in Perth and at Belvoir in Sydney?

Both the Perth and Belvoir spaces are thrust spaces, so the audience are sitting on three sides in both venues, but Belvoir Downstairs is much, much smaller. A lot of my work during rehearsals was encouraging Kyle to take things away. Often when a cast and a director get together, particularly in the early stages of rehearsal, they say, 'oh, we need this, we need that,' and things get added and added and added. So my role as the designer was partly to interrogate them on whether that item was really necessary. Could the use of that object be combined with another object, so that we could eliminate one thing?

And gradually that dual-purpose thinking became quite intrinsic in the production. So for example, Mr Peterson's coal bin in his backyard – the bin that Pumpkinhead steals the coal from – is also the bread bin at the mission. We found ways of writing extra meaning into the multiple uses of some of the objects. But I'm sure when the cast get here to Belvoir there will

be another weeding process. We might take some other things away, because they literally won't all fit in the tiny Downstairs Theatre.

And did you research or refer to the history of the first productions of this play?

No, I didn't actually. It would be very, very extraordinary for me to research a previous production of a play I am designing. Some designers do, and I wouldn't ever argue that they shouldn't.... but I don't, because I like to discover the play for myself.

Sweet William gets to Redfern?

He does, and that's crucial to the play.

And does the set change to reflect that shift in location?

It's all played out in the same space. ... Pumpkinhead holds a flashing light over his head to indicate the arrival of the police. There is a small costume change for Luke too that links to the beginning of the play where he's addressing us as if it's present time. He has a slightly more contemporised version of his costume - by putting on a red tracksuit top.

So as if he is speaking to us now?

Yes, it's not explicitly stated, but we feel he could be someone that we might see in our own world, today.

And is there anything else that you think students or teachers might be interested in finding out about the design of this production?

Something I always like to do as a designer is to find ways to visually link characters, and in this production the three members of the Aboriginal family; that's Pumpkinhead, Ruby and Sweet William, are linked by colour – by red and yellow, and by much stronger colours than we see in the other, non-Indigenous characters who wear much more neutral, tertiary colours. I wouldn't expect audiences to be consciously aware of those choices but perhaps they will feel that those three people belong together by linking them with colour in that way.

Great, I'll tell them to look out for that.

Another particular problem that arose that we needed to find a solution to was the fire that Ruby is cooking on. I've done a number of productions with real fire in them, and it's always a wonderful thing to have a real fire burning on stage. Particularly with Indigenous culture – fire tends to be the thing around which a story is told. We went through a long period of exploration where we tried different ways to have a real fire on stage that would be fuelled by the coals that Pumpkinhead brings home... but the more Kyle and I worked together on the production, the more unnecessary that became. It just felt like we would be tying the production to a very particular kind of realism that we were actually trying to steer away from. Ultimately it simply became a question of 'how do we get hot water there on stage for Ruby to make tea?' A number of solutions were explored and we eventually worked out together that Ruby just used a thermos of boiling water that she pours into her billy and the tea is made with that.

So it's really just finding the simplest possible way of working out how to tell the story – when you need the design to provide storytelling detail, or when can that storytelling detail just be imagined by the audience.

Thanks so much, Stephen.