

Branching out works wonders

THEATRE

An Oak Tree
By Tim Crouch
Perth Theatre Company
Downstairs at the Maj
Review: Ali Taulbut

In 2003, UK playwright Tim Crouch decided to write a play. He had no idea what it was about but it was going to be called An Oak Tree. It now existed. Crouch termed this "Self Mastery Through Conscious Autosuggestion".

The conceit of the piece is that there are two actors, one of whom, Luke Hewitt, has learnt and rehearsed the play as normal. Hewitt did a great job in this odd role-within-a-role; part performer, part manipulator. The second actor is different each night (guests include Tim Minchin, Kav Temperley and Dixie Marshall) and has no idea about the play or the role before they step on to the stage. Hewitt plays a failing hypnotist, who three months earlier has accidentally caused the death of a young girl named Clare. The second actor on opening night was Michael Loney as Clare's

grieving father who has gone to the hypnotist for closure.

The narrative is pretty compact and it's mostly told to the audience upfront so there are few surprises. As one man tries to reconcile his guilt at killing a child and the other struggles to accept the death of his daughter, it becomes a fascinating process of thwarted expectations and emotional revelation. There is no improvisation from the second actor. Through a combination of script pages, instructions via earphones and verbatim prompting from Hewitt, Michael Loney, who played Andy, is manipulated through the text and around the stage by Hewitt — as himself or as the hypnotist — sometimes it's not clear, but it all serves to intensify the theme.

With a format that screams gimmick, director Lawrie Cullen-Tait wisely keeps the direction simple and distraction-free, allowing the audience enough space to ponder the implications of both the form and content as the narrative unfolds gently and builds to an emotional and heartfelt conclusion.

Subtle evocations of place, time and state of mind are achieved through clever sound and lighting designs from Mat Cheetham and Trent Sidgeest respectively.

It's very hard to critique a performance that is as spontaneous as Michael Loney's and in turn, the character of Andy is inextricably tied to each of the second actor's personal style and tone on the night. I suspect it will happen that some moments will feel a little flat and others will attain that delightful, fleeting theatre magic. For his part, Loney brought a quiet intensity to the character that was dignified and frequently moving.

An Oak Tree is a fun and thought-provoking exploration of the power of suggestion and a genuinely nerve-racking experience for the audience and each mystery "second actor". I would love to see a film collage of all the guest actors' special moments when it's all over.

**An Oak Tree runs until December 5.
Book at BOCS.**