

A Doll's House by Polly Stenham directed by Iona Anderson
Stagecraft Theatre, Gryphon Theatre, 22 Ghuznee Street, Wellington until 16 April 2011
Reviewed by Ewen Coleman, 13 April 2011

Dysfunctional families appear to be in vogue at the moment as subject matter for plays but few can be as dysfunctional as that of Martha and Hugh and their children in Polly Stenham's play *That Face*. Hugh (John Chalmers) has decided to opt out of this well-to-do middle class family and is now living in Hong Kong with a new wife. He has put his rebellious daughter Mia (Annabel Harris) into a posh boarding school, pays for his son Henry (Dan Connolly) to attend art school and checks his pill popping alcoholic wife Martha (Petra Donnison) into a clinic. But then late one night in the boarding school dorm Mia and her friend Izzy (Melissa Phillips) over do it with an initiation ceremony on their classmate Alice (Julia McEnteer) and Mia is suspended. This causes Hugh to return home only to find that not only is Mia in trouble but Henry has dropped out of art school to care for Martha who is worse than ever and that the two have developed what looks like an unhealthy relationship. When Hugh tries to sort things out each family member has their own agenda to keep things the way they are, thus causing friction and furore of unprecedented intensity.

Written when the playwright was only 19 years old, *That Face* is a raw and powerful piece of writing that won numerous awards when first seen at the Royal Court Theatre in 2007. The youthfulness of the writing however shows in various contradictions and inconsistencies through the play; Mia appears to have a maturity of comprehension way beyond her years (she is only 15!), why is Izzy so freaked out at what they have done to Alice yet when they visit Alice in hospital she couldn't care less, and why does Martha appear to continually "live" in her son's bedroom? And while the over written, drawn out final scene tends to dissipate the play's climax it is certainly a theatrical masterpiece in that it provides a rare opportunity for director and cast to bring a piece of character driven, emotionally charged theatre to the stage.

And that is just what Iona Anderson has done with her excellent and meticulously directed production. No detail is left undone, from the innovatively-designed set with its bedroom centre stage on which Martha, the central character, reigns and which allows the many other scenes to play out around it, to the endless array of props. The lighting also is creatively subtle and expertly defines each playing area with innovative colouring. And the cast, without exception, give 100% performances, the opening scene of the girls and their initiation ceremony is one of the most engaging seen on stage in a long time. The mother Martha goes through a whole roller coaster of emotions, from being self-indulgent and self-pitying to rage and then being sensually provocative, all the while spaced out on drugs and alcohol. And for the most part Petra Dennison rises to the challenge as she lolls around on her son's bed in a dirty negligee trying to be a good "mummy" all the while knowing she has failed miserably. Henry the son also exhibits a whole range of emotions as he tries to make Martha face up to the realities of the situation, knowing she needs help but not wanting Hugh to commit her as it will expose his own inadequacies. Dan Connolly shows a real depth of character in his portrayal of all these emotions, his vulnerability at the end particularly poignant and moving, his prostrate body whimpering on the floor a lasting memory long after the house lights are up. Annabel Harris plays the difficult role of Mia with confidence, irritating in the extreme yet vulnerable when necessary. John Chalmers Hugh, especially in the restaurant scene, is played with just the right amount of bewilderment though lack of appropriate dialogue and the constricted set make for some awkward moments in the final scene. Particular mention must also be made of the small but crucial role of Izzy, brilliantly played by Melissa Phillips, making this a great production of a gutsy modern play.

