

The Family by Jill Shearer directed by Leigh Cain
Stagecraft Theatre, The Gryphon, 22 Ghuznee Street until 3 July
Reviewed by Ewen Coleman

Few plays in recent times have had such a dramatic opening as Jill Shearer's *The Family*, Stagecraft Theatre's current production at the Gryphon Theatre. A torch singer and a cellist each give accomplished but haunting renditions of well-known tunes that engage the audience's immediate attention and foreshadow the consequences of corruption that are at the heart of the play. And while the NZ police force has not suffered from corruption within its ranks to the extent of Australia, especially that of the NSW police, the themes running through Australian playwright Shearer's play will still resonate with an NZ audience. Yet Shearer's picture of what affect corruption – and its counterpart honesty – can have goes much wider than just a group of police. As shown by Shearer not only are the individuals and their work environment, a family in itself, affected but also the individuals' families and the wider family community.

The police force in question is in Brisbane and the time is 1989. A young, progressive and highly intelligent policewoman Sarah (Gabrielle Stewart) has become seconded to the Internal Investigations Unit unbeknown to her father Frank (Tom Rainbird) – also a policeman, mother Barbara (Ruth Sarratt) or her sister Emma (Natalie Hunt). In the course of her work, when interviewing an old informant Charlie (Jack Pierce) she discovers that 35 years previously there was a cover up over the death of a prostitute Ann (Kerryn Donovan) in which her father is implicated. The dilemma she then finds herself is whether to move on and ignore what she has found as her husband Alan (Shane Boulton) advises or to continue to expose the cover up and in the process open up years of sublimated guilt and misery.

The back-story as to what is actually going on when the play opens is never made clear, compounded by the inaudibility of some of the actors in the opening scene. But once the play, and the production, focuses itself on the actual cover up and the implications of this on those around Sarah unfold the actors, under Leigh Cain's direction lift their game and the tension mounts to its ultimate but unexpected climax. Gabrielle Stewart portrays the dilemma she finds herself in well, on the one hand having to deal with her policeman husband, on the other her policeman father. As the parents, Ruth Sarratt as Barbara the mother and Tom Rainbird as Frank the father conveyed the slow disintegration of their marriage with integrity and honesty. The bedroom scene when Frank is visited by the vision of Ann the prostitute is both moving and heartfelt and one of the high points of the production. Jack Pierce's performance as Charlie the informant is also played well, the eloquence through his drunkenness well controlled. And although the multipurpose set could have made more imaginative use of the theatre space – the Stevensons' house in particular caused repeated linear movement from the actors – it was nevertheless imaginatively lit and allowed the numerous scenes to flow freely one to the other. The music chosen, Zoltan Kodaly's Sonata for Cello, was also used most effectively, adding to the atmosphere of an engaging and thought-provoking production.