

Maxine Mellor's Mystery Project

State Library of Queensland and the Queensland Theatre Company

Director Joseph Mitchell
Designer Samantha Paxton
Composer Tony Brumpton
Performers Nelle Lee and Kathryn Marquet

Maxine Mellor's Mystery Project is an endearing web of childhood intrigue that delivers theatrical fun for children and adults alike. This eerie and comic murder mystery aimed at 9–12 year olds is a co-production by Queensland Theatre Company and The State Library of Queensland. The play follows the imaginative adventures of two girls, Agatha and Elspeth, whose worlds and times collide in a quiet room of a modern library. Together they investigate through a series of playful explorations and relived stories the mystery of the death of Elspeth that occurred over 100 years ago.

The show cleverly blends the conventions of the mystery genre with the entertaining theatrical devices inherent in the styles and traditions of theatre for children. The audience watch on as the analytical Agatha and clownish Elspeth tell cartoon-like stories to themselves and to the audience. During their larger than life investigation of flashback re-enactments they impersonate surly and surprising suspects, swap back and forth between characters, discover magical objects, uncover clues from hiding places within the set and overcome fears and foes.

Award winning playwright Maxine Mellor—who is known for more adult scripts with titles such as *Boy Slaughter*, *Little Hitler's Ode to an Austrian Bentwood* and *Magda's Fascination With Wax Cats*—stretches her talent further with this latest project and creatively meets the challenges of devising a play for young audiences. She skilfully deals with the potentially difficult and sensitive themes of death and murder by introducing the ghost of Elspeth as a non-threatening, fun-seeking character.

Essentially Elspeth's character is that of a dead child searching for the identity of her killer, which is a really creepy concept by any mystery or horror genre standard. By setting up the 'dead child' character as playful, the young audience are able to trust and follow the ghost through her journey of solving her own murder mystery. The children connect with the character because she is their age and humorous. They know her as playful before they know her as dead. Death then strangely but affectively takes on a softer edge, making it a less intense concept for younger audiences. The eventual explanation for Elspeth's death is left mysterious and elusive in the form of a soft suggestion of how she possibly met her demise. There is something pleasing about this though as it encourages the audience to make up their own mind.

The play is intellectually stimulating and challenging for the age demographic, as it is text heavy at times, but there are some key aspects of writing and performance that keep the

audience engaged in the story for the whole 50 minutes. One aspect is that Mellor has a nicely crafted recurring joke for Agatha's character, where she checks in with herself on a recording device by updating her current mood status during the investigation. This lets the audience know exactly how the character's feeling. Agatha records information about the case on a device that she uses to record facts about bugs that she finds. This 'stopping to check in' action acts as a reference point for the audience that is utilised at different stages throughout the show; it also helps to anchor and guide the story. Without this and the quizzing between the characters on the meaning of new information, the audience could get quite lost in the excitement of character swapping, impersonations and storytelling.

Director Joseph Mitchell makes good use of theatrical staging, most memorably by having the two actresses perform a story on the top of the set as a talking horse and rider. The clever execution of shifting characters,

times and realities, performed by Nelle Lee as Agatha and Kathryn Marquet as Elspeth, is the most notable aspect of the production. Both have a great sense of comic timing and an engaging stage presence, utilising their bodies, voices and facial expressions with skill and ease in their performances, as they move in and out of the small-scale bookshelf set.

The stark contrast in costumes between Agatha's bright colours and Elspeth's darks and greys complement the performances and work well in opposition symbolising the living and the dead and the present and the past. This and a light coloured bookshelf against a black minimalist stage form the main design concept of Samantha Paxton, who adds texture to the plastic reality of Mellor's library, that is bent and shaped by the characters imaginations. Composer Tony Brumpton is affective too in creating an eerie start and finish sound that seems to conjure and dispel the ghost of Elspeth to and from the library in the form of a magic book that acts as a gateway between the present and the past.

Current mood while viewing: Curious and intrigued. Current mood whilst writing: Thoughtful and reflective. ★

Thomas Jamieson is a playwright, poet and improvisational performer. He has a Bachelor of Theatre Arts from the University of Southern Queensland and when he is not writing or hiking around the Brisbane landscape he is working in Queensland hospitals as Captain Starlight for the Starlight Children's Foundation.

