

REVIEWS FOR POBBY AND DINGAN

The Edinburgh Theatre Review

"... a touching story without pretensions... the overall performance is totally engaging"

Helen Cloete

The Scotsman

"... a richly fulfilling experience for everyone"

Joyce MacMillan

The Herald

"A real beaut, in anyone's lingo"

*Five Stars *****

Mary Brennan

Edinburgh Spotlight

"A wonderfully staged performance that resonates with children and adults alike"

*Four Stars *****

Sunday Herald

"Catherine Wheels have created an affecting contemplation on love and loss"

Mark Brown

Edinburgh Theatre Review

Helene Cloete for The Edinburgh Theatre Review

Lightning Ridge is a small mining town deep in the Australian Outback. The residents mostly have opal on the brain, but young Kellyanne is different. She spends her days playing with her imaginary friends, Pobby and Dingan, much to the annoyance of her brother, Ashmol. But when Kellyanne's friends go missing and she becomes gravely ill, Ashmol is determined to find them for her.

Ashmol is the narrator of the story, and he is superbly played by Scott Turnbull. It is a joy to see an adult actor playing a child without cliché or a patronising manner. Ros Sydney and Damien Warren-Smith, who play the parents also perform well, each also taking on various small roles. The fourth cast member is Ashley Smith, who of course plays Kellyanne. She displays excellent focus, and the overall performance is totally engaging.

The play is based on the novel of the same title by Ben Rice. It is a touching story without pretensions, and it is easy to see why it has been popular since its publication. It was also the basis for the 2006 film *Opal Dream*. Rob Evans's adaptation for the stage works very well; the dialogue, the staging and the effects are all well thought-out and works towards the story coming across in all its wonderful subtlety.

The really appealing thing about Pobby and Dingan is that it doesn't treat its audience as idiots, something both the adults and the children watching it seemed to appreciate. Even the setting attests to this. Gill Robertson, who directed this production for Catherine Wheels resisted the modern trend for trying to make a setting 'universal'. This play is very clearly set in Australia, and even people who have not been there, or children with only a vague idea about Australia, get it.

All the elements for great theatre are present, including a fantastic integrated set designed by Karen Tennent. In fact all the technical aspects are spot-on to make this one of the best children's play in recent years. Which is not to say that adults would not enjoy it. Indeed, hardly anyone can avoid being touched by this unassuming story which sends such a clear message without ever being preachy. It deals with all the big topics: Love, death and money, but it does so on a personal level to which anyone can relate.

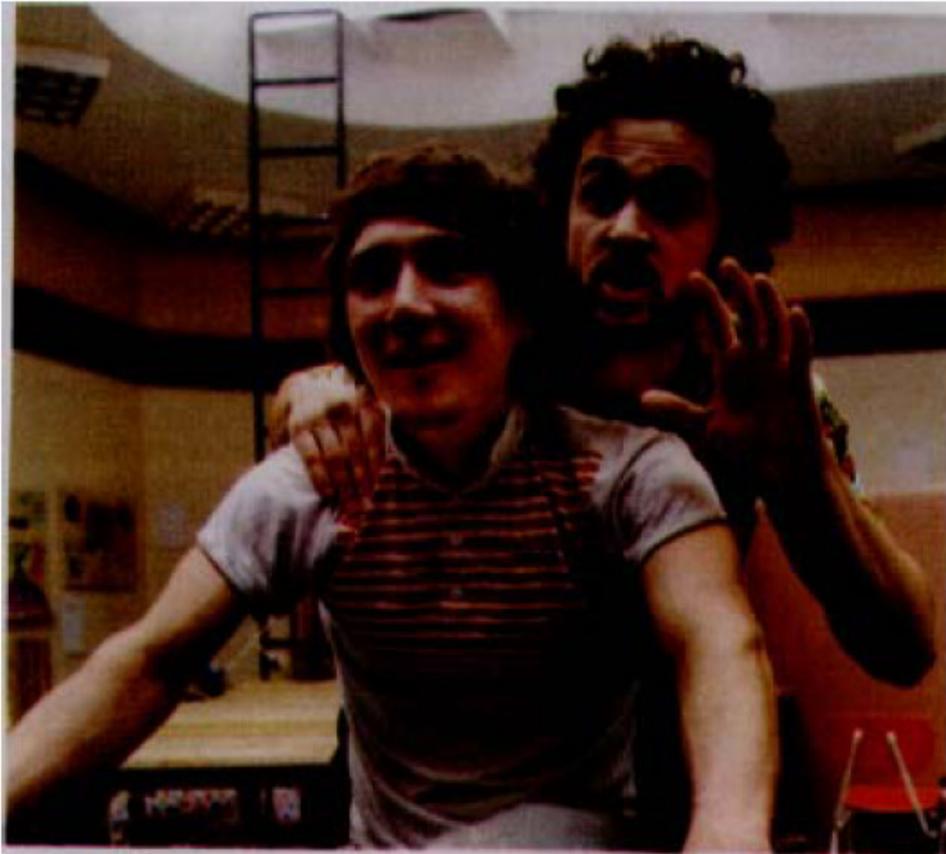
Joyce MacMillan for The Scotsman

Over at the Traverse this week, meanwhile, the much-admired Catherine Wheels company – one of Scotland's top theatre groups for children – are continuing their current tour of Pobby and Dingan, a new stage version by Rob Evans of the award-winning children's story by Australian-based writer Ben Rice. Set in the remote outback mining town of Lightning Ridge, this 80-minute show tells the story of young Ashmol Williamson, his sister Kellyanne, and her two imaginary friends, Pobby and Dingan, who go missing one day, causing Kellyanne to take to her bed with what seems like a broken heart.

Pobby and Dingan is a strange story, which resolutely refuses to follow a classic sentimental pattern. Ashmol's quest is successful, yet he loses his prize; everyone in town behaves as if Pobby and Dingan are real, yet only a few believe in the right kind of way. Yet what emerges from Gill Robertson's beautiful production – which marshals music (by David Paul Jones), puppetry, and all the visual resources of theatre, to evoke the physical and social landscape of Lightning Ridge, and to tell this complex story, with a cast of just four – is a really moving meditation on the power of imagination to conjure what is not conventionally real, and to recreate what has gone.

There's some fine acting here, from Scott Turnbull, Ashley Smith, Damien Warren-Smith and Ros Sydney. If the show's concerns are perhaps a shade too deep for younger children, it's a richly fulfilling experience for everyone over seven or eight, and for adult audiences, too.

<http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/features/Theatre-reviews-DinnerladiesPobby-and-DinganHeaven.6121543.jp>



ADAPTATION

POBBY AND DINGAN

Brunton Theatre, Musselburgh, Thu 25–Sat 27 Feb; Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, Wed 3–Sat 6 Mar then touring

Imaginary friendships are a part of life for many children and, just like real ones, they come with no guarantees. When Kellyanne Williamson, a young girl living in the Australian outback, loses her invisible pals in *Pobby and Dingan*, life is never the same again.

Published in 2000, Ben Rice's novella won the Somerset Maugham Award and was later made into the film *Opal Dream*. Now, children's theatre company Catherine Wheels has got its hands on the tale, with Rob Evans adapting Rice's text for the stage. Right from the start, Evans was impressed with the material he had to work with.

'I thought the book was both exciting and emotional,' he says. 'It has great characters and structure, and works on lots of different levels. All four members of the family go through a journey, which gives the story a richness.' The show is narrated by Ashmol, a 12-year-old boy annoyed by his younger sister's persistent playing with two friends nobody else can see. When Pobby and Dingan go missing, however, Kellyanne becomes ill and Ashmol sets out to find them in a bid to make his sister well again.

A tale of family, love and hope, *Pobby and Dingan* also deals with that most sensitive of issues – death. Aimed at ages 8+, inevitably adults and children will respond to the storyline in different ways, but Evans hopes it will lead to some interesting post-show discussions between friends and families.

'Whether you're a child or an adult, it's scary to think about death,' he says. 'But life goes on, and you can make the best of things or you can not talk about it – and I'd much rather it was spoken about. You want to leave young people with questions, rather than hand them a wrapped up piece of theatre.'
(Kelly Apter)

Herald Scotland

Tuesday 2 March 2010

Pobby and Dingan, Brunton Theatre, Musselburgh

Mary Brennan

Published on 1 Mar 2010

The sharp intake of breath at the end was from the little girl.

Her mum, like many of the adults in the audience, was blinking back tears. Surely, after everything young Ashmol had done for his kid sister – and frankly the requests concerning her imaginary friends had been increasingly fantastical and downright embarrassing for Ashmol – she would get better... wouldn't she?

But there's a gritty, uncompromising edge to Pobby and Dingan that refuses to sugar-coat the gut-wrenching moment when a 12-year-old Aussie boy leaves his childhood behind – loses gung-ho naiveté, perhaps, but acquires something truly enriching: an understanding that hope, love, family bonds, and the kindness of strangers are more valuable than the opals mined in Lightning Ridge.

It's quite a learning curve for Ashmol. And for the 8+ age group that this vividly staged, astutely-nuanced Catherine Wheels production – directed by Gill Robertson, designed by Karen Tennant, soundscore by David Paul Jones – has in its sights. But as Ashmol himself says at the start, his story is a good one, and Rob Evans's adaptation of the original book (by Ben Rice) has a feisty energy that honours that claim.

Scott Turnbull's adolescent Ashmol has a rough and tumble charm, a forthright honesty, that swiftly draws you into the family turmoils that, unlike Pobby and Dingan, are all too real.

The rest of the cast – Ashley Smith, Ros Sydney and Damien Warren-Smith – ensure that Lightning Ridge's collection of opal-dreaming oddballs spark Ashmol's adventure with dashes of daft humour, scary hostility and ultimately an uplifting spirit of community in times of loss and heartbreak.

A real beaut, in anyone's lingo.

Star rating: ****

REVIEW – Pobby & Dingan at The Traverse Theatre



[Leave a comment](#)



Ashley Smith & Scott Turnbull as Kellyanne & Ashmol

The power of imagination, childhood innocence and the closeness of family relationships are all themes explored by **Pobby & Dingan**, a play by the Catherine Wheels children's theatre company.

After a short run at their base of operations at The Brunton Theatre last week, the opening night of Rob Evans' adaptation of Ben Rice's story at the Traverse last night was a poignant, funny and uplifting delight.

Ashmol (keenly portrayed by Scott Turnbull) lives in the Australian outback with his mother & father and his sister Kellyanne (a wide eyed and fragile Ashley Smith). When Pobby & Dingan, Kellyanne's imaginary friends, go missing, Ashmol is at first delighted, believing his sister to be a 'loon' for clinging on to such childish things. When she gets sick and begins wasting away however, Ashmol takes it upon himself to find his sister's companions in a desperate attempt to make her recover. He sets about enlisting the help of the motley residents of Lightning Ridge as he tries to track down the creatures nobody can see except Kellyanne.

The four-strong cast bring the family & locals of Lightning Ridge to life. Damien Warren-Smith is particularly enjoyable as the father, his swaggering opal miner bravado shot through with moments of love and tenderness for his family. Ros Sydney plays the stoic 'Pom' mother, but the pair truly excel when portraying the characters of the town: whether it's the eccentric shopowner Mrs Griswald or the rough and ready miners playing pool in the town's ramshackle bar. These performances give the play most of its humorous moments and Warren-Smith and Sydney display some excellent characterisation and timing in these roles, obviously enjoying themselves as they do so. The simple but inventive set is also well-used, portraying the family home one moment, and the

scary darkness of an opal mine shaft the next.

But the relationship between Ashmol and Kellyanne is at the play's core, and both Turnbull and Smith manage to convince as children; Turnbull, whose character also narrates the play, is particularly effective as

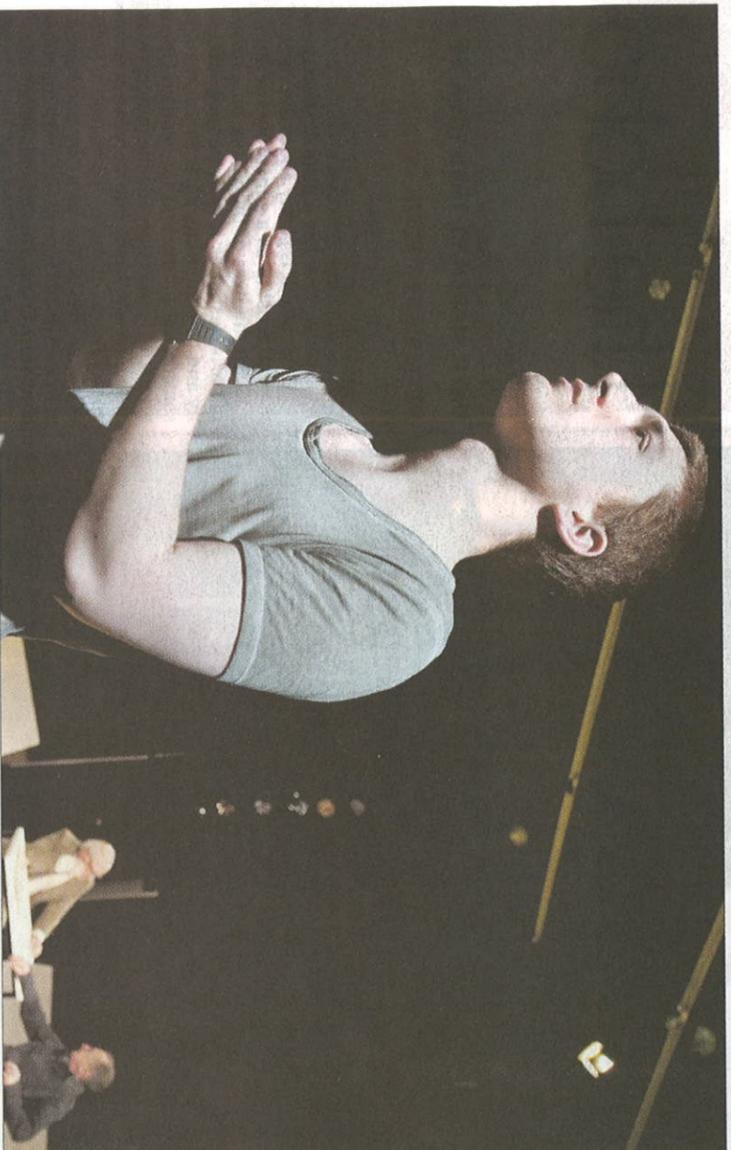
Ashmol, his performance displaying adolescent awkwardness and frustration as he swings from exasperation at his sister to driven desperation. Smith also captures Kellyanne's innocence, seeming to physically shrink onstage as her illness takes hold.



Pobby & Dingan

Pobby & Dingan is a modern-day fable about the loss of childhood and the recognition of what matters most. Catherine Wheels take this tale and add layers of poignant magic and emotion in a wonderfully staged performance that resonates with children and adults alike. Indeed, one of its most impressive feats was keeping the mostly youthful audience at the Traverse in spellbound silence throughout, as they were transported to Lightning Ridge and the potential of the power of imagination and hope.

THEATRE REVIEWS **BY MARK BROWN**



Duncan Anderson plays Alan Strang in Equus at Dundee Rep and, below, Ashley Smith in Pobby and Dingan

Shock value of animal worship

**EQUUS
DUNDEE REP
UNTIL MARCH 20**

**POBBY AND DINGAN
BRUNTON THEATRE, MUSSELBURGH
RUN ENDED
TOURING UNTIL APRIL 1**

**2-DIMENSIONAL LIFE OF HER
CCA, GLASGOW
RUN ENDED**

It is only two years since Thea Sharrock's much-hyped West End production of Peter Shaffer's 1973 play **Equus** landed in Scotland (Alfie Allen, younger brother of Lily, appearing – shock! horror! – naked on stages in Glasgow and Edinburgh). With that nicely executed presentation still fresh in the memories of at least some of her audience, one has to admire the courage of Dundee Rep associate director Jemima Levick in reviving the drama so soon.

Presented in a purpose-built theatre-in-the-round, this staging of the story of young Alan Strang's religio-sexual obsession with horses is not best served by Alex Lowde's garish white set (which represents, one assumes, the supposed antiseptic environment of the psychiatric institution to which Strang is sent after he blinds a number of horses). Yet, despite the tacky, distracting plasticity of the design, Levick succeeds in creating some truly compelling moments of theatre.

The most interesting aspect of the drama is its clash between the lack of emotional, sensual and sexual fulfilment in the life of psychiatrist Martin Dysart (a clever and engaging performance from Robert Paterson) and what he identifies as Strang's "worship". It is in this sense that Strang's

obsession is more than mere anguished dysfunction (rather than nudity or the horror of the young man's crime) that is the drama's real, resonating shock.

In attempting to express something of the sexualised god that is, for Strang, Equus (which is, of course, Latin for horse), Levick's presentation comes into its own. There's nothing new in her representing the animals through the bodies of well-toned male actors wearing horse-head masks, but the director – with superb assistance from lighting designer Colin Grenfell and sound designer Philip Pinsky – uses both the shape of the theatre space and the physicality of her actors to create memorable set pieces. These moments evoke a sensual and psychological power that is simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying.

The great disappointment of Shaffer's play is that, despite its potentially brilliant approach toward a sense of spiritual and sexual lack in modern society, it is hobbled by some truly heavy-handed writing. The opposition between Strang's parents – a humourless, atheist, socialist father and an indulgent, religious, school-teacher mother – has all the subtlety of a rampaning hippopotamus. Likewise Dysart's revelations of the biological and sexual details of his own dead marriage.

Levick draws mainly impressive performances from her 13-strong cast, with young Duncan Anderson excellent as the distressed Strang and Angela Hardie compelling as the self-confident stable hand Jill Mason. One cannot help but feel, however, that no matter how inventive the production, Shaffer's script simply does not live up to its promise.

By curious coincidence, Catherine Wheels theatre company's latest touring show, **Pobby And Dingan** (which is recommended for children aged eight and over),

is also focused on the psychological power of fantasy. The duo of the title are figments of little Australian girl Kelyanne Williams' imagination: her response, it seems, to the strange life of Lightning Ridge, the small rural community to which her father has relocated the family in order that he can seek a fortune digging for opal.

The play is a humorous and touching portrait of a family, and of both the niggling conflicts and the strong, instinctive love between Kelyanne (Ashley Smith) and her brother Ashmol (Scott Turnbull). When Kelyanne discovers that Pobby and Dingan are missing, Damien Warren-Smith (who plays father) and Ros Sydney (mother) appear as the town's series of deliciously cartoonish characters while Ashmol (played with tremendously engaging energy by Turnbull, a really promising young actor) attempts to mobilise the community to find them.

Once again, Catherine Wheels has created an affecting contemplation on love and loss that will stay in the memories of its young audience.

Now in its 10th year, the New Territories festival of live art and contemporary dance (which combines the longer-running New Moves festival and the National Review Of Live Art), kicked off on Tuesday with Australian artist Fleur Elise Noble's technically ambitious **2-Dimensional Life Of Her**.

Comprised mainly of projected, recorded images (of Noble and a series of marriages) on to a cleverly complex set, the piece is a quirky, charming triumph of form over content.

Noble's minimal live intervention in the space is unlikely to be the high point of a festival that presents work by such acclaimed artists as Forced Entertainment and Neil Bartlett: www.newmoves.co.uk has the full programme.

