

Pearls of the stage

Theatre Sian Prior

SIX years ago, Melbourne playwright John Romeril and Japanese puppeteer Noriko Nishimoto began the process of turning a ripping yarn about pearl-fishing in Broome into a work for theatre. Based on a short story by Xavier Herbert, *Miss Tanaka* tells of a multicultural community in the late 1930s in which the divers lived and died by their labor under the sea.

Wealthy Jewish Englishman Charles Mott (Jeremy Stanford) arrives in Broome to take over his father's pearl shell company, and becomes employer and friend to Kazuhiko Tanaka (Bradley Byquar), a young man of Japanese and islander descent. Kazuhiko's father, Mr Tanaka (Tam Phan), gambles on — and loses — three years of his son's working life, and drastic measures are called for to avoid this slavery.

Enter Miss Kitso Tanaka (Bradley Byquar again), the Japanese cousin who becomes the focus of everyone's amorous intentions.

Miss Tanaka has been coproduced by Playbox Theatre and Handspan Visual Theatre. The result is a production incorporating puppetry, live drumming, video, music and dance. Under the direction of Handspan's David Bell, two puppeteers create moments of visual magic, conjuring up the azure sea from shiny metallic paper, and moonlight from mirrors.

Bradley Byquar is the star of the show, bringing a calm dignity to his dual roles. As Miss

Tanaka, the fictional cousin, he captures the gentle girlishness of a young Japanese woman. As Kazuhiko, he engages our sympathy for this frustrated but ultimately dutiful son.

Miss Tanaka is billed as a comedy, and the cross-dressing character of Kitso Tanaka provides moments of hilarity. Often though, the comedy is labored, weighed down by the logistical requirements of the puppetry.

The play's abrupt happy ending jars with our knowledge that World War II is just around the corner, with all of its racist madness, and none of these characters could possibly remain unaffected by it.

Miss Tanaka is a hybrid production about a hybrid Australian community. Like the pearl-fishers themselves, the

creative team has taken risks in this labor of love. However, the "tightly sprung tale" by Xavier Herbert that first attracted John Romeril has become a theatrical melange which entertains, but ultimately fails to satisfy us.

Miss Tanaka is at the CUB Malthouse, 113 Sturt St, Southbank, until March 10 (special performance March 8, signed by VicDeaf). Rating: *1/2**

One of the most surprising facts about this latest MTC production of Harold Pinter's play *Betrayal* is that it represents Sigrid Thornton's stage debut. Theatre observers noted the canny (or opportunistic) casting of the *SeaChange* star in an MTC season full of TV personalities. After all those years on screen, how would she fare without the adoring eye of the camera?

Let's deal with this topic up front. Yes, Sigrid Thornton is just as luminescent on stage as she is on TV, and the casting call was a good one. As Emma, the woman who has a long affair with her husband's best friend, Thornton is sexy, naïve and yet ruthless in her determination to "have her cake and eat it too". All of which sounds rather like *SeaChange*'s Laura, doesn't it?

Betrayal is ostensibly a play about marital infidelity. Emma is seduced by her husband's best man Jerry (Richard Piper), and they spend seven years meeting as lovers in a rented flat. Eventually, husband Robert (Martin Jacobs) finds out, and when the play opens, the affair has been over for two years and Emma and Robert's marriage is on the rocks. We learn about

this history in reverse chronology, so that by the end of the play the affair is just about to begin.

The betrayals, however, go much deeper than this affair. Layer upon layer of deception is built up between these three people. The one relationship that may survive this moral mess is the men's friendship — and perhaps this is the one which mattered most to Jerry and Robert all along.

Pinter's influence on 20th century theatre is such that the term "Pinteresque" has become a useful shorthand for a style of writing. The dialogue is deceptively banal, the pauses frequent, and the subject matter often irritatingly circular. All of this allows for the rare moments of strong passion to stand out in stark relief.

Kate Cherry's confident hand is evident in the direction, which never drags in spite of those pauses. Martin Jacobs is utterly convincing as the suave, misogynistic husband Robert who happily confesses to giving his wife a good bashing now and then. Richard Piper's Jerry is always likeable, even when he's taking his cuckolded best friend to lunch.

Anna Borghesi's open set design adapts neatly into café, flat, hotel and home. The hard, shiny surfaces match the shallowness of these people's lives. Special mention must go to the composer Ian McDonald, whose staccato music punctuates each scene.

Betrayal is at the Fairfax studio, Victorian Arts Centre, 100 St Kilda Road, Melbourne until April 12. Rating: ****



Sigrid Thornton: stage debut.