

REVIEWS FOR *LIVE AT SIX*

by Dean Hewison and Leon Wadham
Produced by SHOW PONY

THEATREVIEW.ORG.NZ

A THRILLER IN THE MAKING AND BREAKING OF NEWS

Reviewed by John Smythe, 14 Apr 2012

A loose page in the programme asks us to imagine we are at the NZ Media Awards after party when we arrive. A celebrity is out of control and her behaviour is captured on camera. If you have your smart phone with you, you too may grab on-the-spot 'footage' and send it to liveatsix@gmail.com . . .

This is one of the key updates from the 2009 *Bats/Stab* premiere of this grippingly innovative play. Way back then, such participation through technology was unthinkable. Some characters have been dropped (e.g. the security guard who did a clandestine deal for the money), others have been added, some casting has changed, others remain intact and the script has tightened.

It all amounts to better ways of achieving the same outcome, which is to make us take the nature of TV news with a huge grain of the proverbial, especially when it comes to stories about celebrities, and especially when it is one of their own.

Here the hot 'news' is TVNZ news reader Jane Kenyon's fall from grace at the aforementioned awards, with Jessica Robinson reprising the role of the vulnerable star bounced about in the firmament of ratings-driven media. The issue for state-owned TVNZ is what will independent and fully commercial TV3 do with the story and how best might they handle it themselves.

Ingeniously the ever-changing and escalating story – played out in Dan Williams' splendid set design – is integrated from the get-go with the actual news of the day, in projections of the Stuff web page (courtesy production sponsor The Dominion Post) and in the 'coming up' previews of the news at six. (Let's hope no major catastrophes occur during the season to throw the line-up out of wack.)

Receiving the input and editing it live on stage are Eli Kent as TV One news editor Sam Sweeney, and Barnaby Fredric as TV3's Fraser Higginson. Talented actors as well as highly skilled digital editors, they both bring a scarily authentic amorality to their characters' wheelings and dealings, as they negotiate in real time with their minefields of digital technology.*

Phil Vaughan moves into the role of old school TVNZ news man Tim McGregor, attempting to maintain some level of compassion for Jane as the wheels of dirty-dealing intrigue grind on.

TVNZ's PR trouble-shooter is now Karen Adams, played with cold-blooded precision by Donogh Rees. And that side of the equation is completed by Lucinda Hare, delightfully sketching in stand-in news reader Tania Nelson.

Over at 3, Michelle Amas reprises her formidable turn as the ruthless news producer Sue Austin, while Tim Spite brings entertaining detail to the rather creepy news anchor Gordon Millar (played by Phil Vaughan in 2009).

Nick Dunbar commands our empathy as the conflicted TV3 news reporter Derek Fontaine as his personal ethics (of lack of them) come up against his professional ethics (ditto). And as an unwitting pawn in the game, Tai Blades Skypes in an amusing performance as Fraser's girlfriend Nicole, whose smart phone is crucial to the ever-more dastardly plots.

Other roles, pre-recorded but often made to seem live, are played by Phil Grieve (who was the PR man in 2009), Jude Gibson, Lyndee-Jane Rutherford and Matt Chamberlain.

It all builds to the six o'clock deadline with nail-biting drama and a powerful twist in the climax that leaves us, like the characters, with plenty to chew on.

Director Conrad Newport has wrangled a top-rating cast and crew to deliver Leon Wadham and Dean Hewison's remarkable play in a production that, for all its technology and dynamic interactivity, never loses sight of the human story. A great strength of the script is the depth of the characters.

A thriller in the making and breaking of news, it is a not-to-be-missed show that heralds the welcome return of Downstage to the Wellington Theatre scene: a perfect example of their mission to further develop ground-breaking work to its full potential.

***Scoop:** On opening night Fredric's Fraser had to restore sound to a clip he had outrageously edited, giving us all – along with the characters huddled over the console – a visceral taste of the tensions involved. What the audience was not privy to, however, was the way he dealt with the possibility that sound would also fail on the all-important climactic news broadcast. My sources tell me he alerted the AV/Interactive Operator Hamish Guthrey – also confronting a herculean task each night – by email, attaching the audio file for him to insert into his sound cue when he (Fredric) hit 'play' on the edited video. Thus the new 'went to air' without a hitch!

THE DOMINION POST

YOUTUBE, TV NEWS MAKE FINE THEATRE

Reviewed by Ewen Coleman, 16 Apr 2012

The vagaries of the internet are at the heart of yet another play opening this week, Cuba Creative's *Live At Six* at Downstage Theatre. YouTube is the culprit this time; displaying pictures to the world of TVNZ news reader and "mother of the nation" Jane Kenyon (Jessica Robinson) falling on her face in a drunken stupor at a media awards after-show party.

Of course the YouTube clip finds its way back to TVNZ who go into damage mode to save their image, if not that of Kenyon herself. However the approach News Editor Tim McGregor (Phil Vaughan), who is an old school news reporter with a few journalistic scruples still remaining, decides to take is diametrically opposed by PR Consultant Karen Adams (Donogh Rees) while in the editing suite, news editor Sam Sweeney (Eli Kent) has his own agenda on what he wants to do with the story.

Meanwhile over the road TV3 also gets to see the YouTube clip and so of course go all out to discredit their rival's prime asset. News Editor Sue Austin (Michele Amas) is determined to go to any length to break the news, while News Reporter Derek Fontaine (Nick Dunbar) is increasingly doubtful at the ethics of their approach. TV Anchor Man Gordon Miller (Tim Spite) is not helping by getting in the way and making unhelpful wisecracks while their news editor Fraser Higginson (Barnaby Fredric) works away furiously trying to pull the story together.

And so the race is on to see who can break the news first. How this is done and what the outcome is becomes as intriguing as it is unusual and brings the play to a wonderful climax.

Added to this is the actual real time editing that goes on, the actual party is a simulated affair before the start of the show where the party guests are the audience which the two accomplished editors, Kent and Fredric have to edit during the course of the play. But while technology plays a major part in the success of this production it is the fast paced and tightly coordinated performances of the actors that director Conrad Newport has brought to the production that makes the play work. On a wonderfully designed multi-functional set designed by Dan Williams, the production moves from scene to scene with slick precision as the tension mounts.

While the old adage of getting the news at any cost maybe somewhat clichéd the actors in this production create real and believable characters that takes them and ultimately the play, beyond the ordinary to make it a fascinating piece of theatre not to be missed.

CAPITAL TIMES

DREAM MEDIA ROLES

Reviewed by Lynn Freeman, 18 Apr 2012

This previous 2009 Bats STAB commissioned satire that turns the tables on the media, has been updated for 2012 and it's striking how technology has surged ahead in just a few years. Smartphone users even get to contribute to the production during the pre play set up in the bar. Digital editing happens during the course of the play, and even with an opening night hiccup, it's damn clever and wonderfully ambitious.

The scenario hasn't changed. TV news presenter Jane Kenyon (Jessica Robinson) collapses, seemingly either drugged or drunk, at the Media Awards ceremony and is captured on film. The rival TV channel is out for blood and ruthlessly and gleefully exploits the situation – or are they justified in highlighting a celebrity meltdown? When the other channel can't shut down the story, they are in full-on damage control mode. The top dogs at both stations don't care about the truth, it's all about ratings. Ethics go out the window. This will make you question what you see on the news and that's all to the good.

It's a big cast and they are all terrific. Writers Leon Wadham and Dean Hewison have given most of them dream roles and some brilliant one liners, and director Conrad Newport makes the most of the script, his casts' skills, the audio visuals and the multi-level stage.

WORDONTHESTREET.CO.NZ

LIVE AT SIX

Reviewed by Jarrod Baker, 18 April 2012

At most theatre shows, you get asked to turn your cellphone off. Live at Six, on the other hand, specifically asks punters to leave their mobiles on (albeit on silent) – and in fact to make use of them during the course of the performance.

The show effectively starts in the Downstage Bar, before you enter the auditorium. The audience is asked to pretend that they're attending the Qantas Media Awards, and to video (using their smartphones) anything unusual they might witness. The resulting footage can be submitted by email to become part of the night's show.

This conceit means that every performance of Live at Six is different – personalised to the audience attending it. It also necessitates a fairly unusual piece of casting, in that two of the actors on stage throughout the play are also required to be actual video editors. During the show, they're tasked with stitching the night's footage together with material from other sources to create a news bulletin – live. It's really quite impressive (and it's kind of understandable that it doesn't always run completely smoothly).

Live at Six is a biting, profane and hilarious satire on the news production process; it tells an all-too-believable tale of the media's role in creating the news, rather than merely reporting it. The “found footage” element of the show is key in creating a sense of the urgency of the news cycle, and in demonstrating how editing can be used to make the same piece of footage tell different stories.

Initially commissioned for the 2009 STAB season at BATS, Live at Six has been updated to incorporate new technology and to suit its new, larger venue. Not having seen the original, I can't comment on what has changed – but I reckon expecting that a significant proportion of the audience might be able to shoot and email video on the night would have seemed more than a little ludicrous 3 years ago. Now that smartphones (and social media) are seemingly omnipresent, however, it all seems perfectly natural, and only adds to the believability of the story.

Thoroughly enjoyable (and infinitely preferable to watching the actual news).