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Author, author! Tobsha takes centre stage

Tobsha Learner, a former sculptor, has the unusual ability to produce plays with an extra dimension. John Larkin reports.

TOBSHA Learner's time has come. Six of her works are currently being performed within one year, the latest in Melbourne last night, confirming her place centre stage as Australia's rising young playwright.

Last night saw the premiere at Play-box of her latest work, 'Wolf', while 'Mistress' opens as part of The Age Melbourne Comedy Festival, at Ant-hill, on Tuesday.

She will have another new play, 'Miracle', produced in Adelaide in August, which will complete the run of her work which began with 'Witch-play' at the Edinburgh Festival last August, then opened at The Griffin Theatre in Sydney in November.

It was followed by 'S.N.A.G.' (Sensitive New Age Guy), which premiered at this year's Sydney Festival, and had a sold-out season, and has had the town talking about her ever since.

'Wolf', described as a contemporary fable, explores what the author calls "the combusive landscape between the 'Australian' female and male.

"It is the story of the ageing Lothario who is terrified of intimacy. For all conquestal behavior, I have tried to create an empathetic wolf that reflects aspects of the sensualist in all of us, men and women. I hope the play will provoke, challenge and query."

It is certain to do that, reaching right into the very sensitive subject of sexuality, with a deep underpinning of the Jungian unconscious, and the masks we wear and the ritual in the acting out of myths.

It also has an edge of humor, which Learner likes to bring in as a strong sense of self parody. "I realised that comedy can be very powerful in reaching people, and yet leaving them



Tobsha Learner: encountered a few wolves in her time. Picture: MARIO BORG

with questions, and recognition of vulnerability." She also draws on intuition, and her ability, as a former sculptor, to look at plays as a type of construction of three dimensions rather than two.

"Also, the emotions are epic, which you don't often see on the Australian stage, the confrontation. In one scene it can go from comedy to intense tragedy. I grew up in an emotional and

confrontational family, and the emotional pathos is natural."

She is renowned for writing male characterisation. Ironically, her need is to learn to strengthen her female characters.

"I believe people can change themselves, and although the terrible tragedy of Daniel the wolf doesn't change, I guess 'Wolf' is holding up an example of what does happen if you don't.

"Every woman will recognise these characters, and every man will, too.

"I detest the kind of naturalism on the Australian stage which confirms the status quo, be it the machismo bushman, or your Double Bay socialite.

"I like to think that good theatre should operate as a kind of catalyst, and also as social commentary. That's why I'm interested in theatre that steps beyond the real, that has magic and a kind of heightened realism."

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'Wolf' features the return to the Melbourne stage of John Diedrich, and is directed by the award-winning Kim Durban.

Having all these shows staged in such a short time is quite an achievement in a precarious craft, where having just one of your plays put on every couple of years is an accomplishment. In fact, in Learner's case, it comes after years of careful hard work.

A look at her 33-year-old life shows how well she has built her blocks as foundations for the volatile world of creativity.

Born in Cambridge, England, she belonged to a family where there was plenty of fire. "I came from three generations of divorced women." She grew up with music and myths and theatre and had written her first opera when she was nine.

She is highly experienced and qualified for one so young, having spent seven years in Melbourne and six in Sydney, where she presently lives. She has studied at such places as the Victorian College of the Arts and NIDA was founding member of a new theatre company, performed on stage herself, has written for radio and film as well as the stage, has had short stories published, and managed to do a lot of personal as well as professional living, and draw on this for much of her material.

She spoke with great clarity and earnestness. You could feel her strength, which, together with her beauty, her Polish/Jewish background, her intensity, her concern for life, love of the theatre, and rate of writing make her quite a force.

She let it be known, without any fuss in her voice which can make even the matter of fact sound tremulous, that she had encountered a few wolves in her time. And she has perhaps glimpsed a few impulses within herself?

"I do understand people who are distracted by sensuality. I have an empathy for sensualists."

Is there a commonality about all her works? "I think there are definite themes that run through: one is examination of sexuality, others are superstition, fear and spirituality; and there is also the examination of the migrant who's been through very epic experiences off-shore, and now find themselves in the bland landscape of Australian suburbia.

"There is also the idea, too, of people searching for a home, cultural, spiritual and emotional."

As she headed off once more across the landscape, she seemed like an old soul who had been on the road a long time already.

'Wolf' is on at the Beckett Theatre, Malthouse, until 25 April.