

**'BUT THERE HAVE BEEN TOO MANY TEARS.
EVERY TEAR THAT FALLS IS A SERPENT'S TOOTH.'**

Citizens

Writing about war is a moral and ethical imperative for playwright Daniel Keene. "To me, it seems more urgent than ever to write about violence, to confront it in whatever way possible," he says. Conflict is the quiet core of *The Serpent's Teeth*, a double bill of two new plays by the Melbourne playwright, to be performed by the STC Actors Company in April and May this year. The two one-act plays, *Citizens* and *Soldiers*, portray the cost of war for people leading otherwise ordinary lives.

During the thirty years in which he has written for the theatre, the emotional resonance of Daniel Keene's work has earned his plays critical praise and sell-out seasons in Australia, the United States and Europe. In the past decade, Daniel has established himself as one of Europe's most acclaimed contemporary playwrights, and it is there—particularly France and Germany—that his work is predominantly performed. Many of his plays have been translated into French. Daniel is pleased that his work is about to reach a main stage in Australia with the performance of *The Serpent's Teeth*.

The first of the plays, *Citizens*, is set against the backdrop of an unidentified war in an unnamed country. The war zone of *Citizens* is no panorama of mapped terrain and incursions. Here, instead, are the lives of citizens of this country and their immediate concerns: the desire for a garden; a gift of an umbrella; the need to care for a sedated dog.

"I am concerned primarily with the cost of conflict, the cost paid by ordinary people who are simply trying to get on with their lives. What is the cost of the endurance that these characters must learn? Is there a beauty to be found in their endurance?" says Daniel.

Directed by Pamela Rabe in her STC directing debut, *Citizens* finds difficulty and beauty in the lives of its characters. Conflict is, throughout, an unseen force that acts upon the characters, shifting the possibilities of their days. We meet characters who, faced with this erosion of choices, pick out ways to continue on. With a script that is at once spare and lyric, *Citizens* portrays conflict on a very human scale.

The second play in the double bill, *Soldiers*, was specially commissioned for the STC Actors Company as a companion piece to

Citizens. It will be directed by Tim Maddock, who collaborated previously with Daniel on the play *The Architect's Walk*, dealing with the life of Albert Speer, which was received with great acclaim at the Adelaide Festival in 1988.

Soldiers brings the concerns of *Citizens* closer to home. "That's how, literally, the idea for *Soldiers* occurred to me," says Daniel, "A play about a homecoming." The homecoming is of men killed in a distant war. The play introduces us to those who mourn their friends, lovers and relatives, many of them strangers to each other—as they gather in an air force hangar and wait for the bodies of the men to arrive. For the characters in *Soldiers*, until the news of death's definite and brutal intrusion, war had been a distant theatre.

Here in this hangar, we see a man put his hands on his knees and sit staring at them, perfectly still. For some, memories surface like accusations. For others, there is the question of what shape life could take after the loss.

"It is labour that matters, the shaping out of emptiness the necessary presence of your death." *Soldiers*

It is here that *Soldiers* finds its emotional common ground with *Citizens*. What the characters of both works experience at times is the inarticulate nature of sorrow; moments when expression falters and fails.

"...I burn in the suspended nightmare of his loss, not yet able to scream, nor weep nor curse." *Soldiers*

Daniel's characters are not philosophers or artists: "They are not articulate in any normal sense of the word," he says.

— Well, you never knew my grandfather.
— No, I didn't.
— He said things better than I can. *Citizens*

"What is common amongst most of them is their inability to express themselves ... they are not always unable to say what they mean, what they feel, what they know. Most of them, at some point, find a way to fashion from what language is at their disposal an utterance that comes close to expressing the reality of their lives. They are all trying to carry light in a basket, they are all trying to fit

an infinity of pain into a thimble."

The characters in *The Serpent's Teeth* arrive on-stage without biography or identity. "The characters in my plays are mostly people without privilege, who have no 'position', who have no power," Daniel says. "I choose to create characters like this because I want them to bring nothing with them, to have no biography, to be nothing to begin with. I want to create characters about whom there is little the audience can assume."

"I want the characters in my plays to live moment by moment in front of our eyes—They can do nothing else," says Daniel. "I want my characters to bring their souls to the surface of their skin. I want them to be painfully real."

In this way, Daniel Keene's pared-back plots place language—and the limits of language—at the centre of the plays. He strives, he explains, to "make the strongest possible utterance with the least amount of words". The dialogue is constructed as if with stark, clean bones, leaving only the poetry of what is essential. In this way, the plays *Citizens* and *Soldiers* are like small, urgent packages of compressed feeling.

Both *Citizens* and *Soldiers* pose disquieting questions about war—questions as to responsibility and rationale. These questions remain unanswered. What *The Serpent's Teeth* does is to show that the real tragedy of war, in all the violence of its scale, is after all its impact on specific and precious lives.

JO LENNAN

THE SERPENT'S TEETH
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