

The fast-paced plot, the hurling of cruel yet witty barbs and clever mixture of political and social commentary ensured that *The Narcissist* was a hit during its first run in Brisbane. It sold out, was extended, and now Stephen has been given the task of writing a sequel for La Boite's 2009 season. Before that, the show completes a return season in Brisbane before heading down to Sydney Theatre Company for a season at the Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre.

"I'm not making any major changes for the return season – we are just updating it." Stephen says. "It was a Howard era commentary and it is a Rudd era commentary now! I was interested in the way the ALP was so actively courting the Christian vote in the last election – a lot of the politics in the play became even more relevant than I'd predicted! It felt like one of those plays that struck a chord with contemporary culture and fulfilled a need that even I wasn't necessarily aware of. I'm hoping it will transfer equally well to Sydney."

According to Stephen, *The Narcissist* was a "happy marriage" between style and content. His first full-length comedy, the theatrical form of the play allowed him to investigate contemporary political and social concerns from a unique and entertaining perspective.

"My background is in political revue. I did university sketch revues and then political cabarets in Darwin for about five years. The sketch-based, topical, satirical, political, sharp-edged material was where I cut my teeth in theatre, so *The Narcissist* was a chance to stitch together all that history, that technique and that background together as a well-made, full-length play."

Stephen admits that a lot of the issues in the play bubbled up from personal anger and what he was "cross about". "I wanted to make it as muscular as possible," states Stephen. "If you head into farce and social satire, you should make it as scathing and as acute and acerbic as it can be. The political targets in the play, those were instinctively the targets that popped up."

Despite the heavy political bent of the play, Stephen was surprised to discover that it was the social and pop cultural issues that many audience members embraced. Xavier and his best friend, Bronwyn challenge each other to a duel – the winner being the first to nab a man by New Year's Eve. Although loath to admit it, both are heading into middle age and despite their successful careers lead an unashamedly single lifestyle. While Xavier's flatmate auditions for the *Big Brother* house, the game goes into overdrive, with devastatingly hilarious consequences. Along with the situational humour, it seems Stephen touched a nerve with the thirty and forty-somethings in the audience.

"We are so invested in the self that we have forgotten how to connect," explains Stephen. "Xavier then attempts to turn this into a virtue but is that really what he wants? How much of what these characters say about themselves do they, or we, believe? Are they really as disinterested in intimacy as they say they are or are they actually fearful of intimate engagement?"

"Still being a single at a certain age really hit home for people," says Stephen. "We don't see a lot of this stuff on Australian stages or Australian television. Most of the inspiration for *The Narcissist* in terms of content or form was either American or British – those sharp-edged sitcoms, like *Frasier* and *Will and Grace* and even *Absolutely Fabulous*."

"I think Robyn Nevin saw some of these social issues would be distinctly appealing to a Sydney audience – the new Brisbane urban middle class has a lot of cultural values in common with Sydney. I'm a Darwin boy and sometimes being the slight outsider gives you a more objective view of a city," muses Stephen.

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STEPHEN CARLETON

The process of creating *The Narcissist* with director and dramaturg Ian Lawson was a "very happy and harmonious one". With a long standing professional relationship between the two, Stephen says Ian "got the play immediately" and advised him to stop making the acerbic character of Xavier "nice" and embrace his prickly and self-serving nature.

"I'm always great with topics, themes, characters and dialogue but it takes me a little bit longer to get plot," he admits. "Ian is very good at shaping plot and gave the play its specifically theatrical devices. I am very interested in dramaturgy at the moment - I can't imagine writing a play without a dramaturg."

"I've become a better informed playwright. I used to operate very instinctually. I would pick a topic or politics that I was interested in and the form would just somehow emerge out the writing. I have learnt to think in advance much more clearly and make those dramaturgical decisions from the get go. I

have discovered dramaturgy essentially!" Stephen exclaims, like one having had an epiphany. "With each play I'm trying to take myself where I never gone before as a writer. How can I scare myself? How can I frighten myself out of my comfort zone?"

Stephen's next work, after finishing the sequel to *The Narcissist*, certainly sounds challenging. A "futuristic piece" it follows the development of the 'culture wars' debate twenty years into the future. Having written a gothic melodrama, a social satire and now a work of speculative fiction, its clear Stephen has eclectic theatrical tastes. However, as one might expect, he admits a love of language and the written word.

"I am interested in language as revenge at the moment! I feel like language and the word became unfashionable in the late nineties and early naughties and although I like work that challenges form, I'm not sure what the point of it was. I think we ignore the written and spoken word at our peril at the moment. Even as we constantly strive to find new forms – I'm not for a moment advocating we shouldn't constantly evolve and rattle sabres and cages - I think there is an urgency to embrace language."

Stephen's a playwright who puts his money where his mouth is. Amongst the contemporary political issues, the probing social satire and the cast of enticing characters, language steals the show. The dangerously withering one-liners are Stephen's greatest weapon, winning over audiences night after night.

LAURA SCRIVANO

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