

SATURN'S RETURN

TWENTY-NINE YEARS AFTER TOMMY MURPHY'S BIRTH, THE PLANET SATURN IS ABOUT TO COMPLETE ITS ORBIT OF THE SUN AND RETURN TO THE PRECISE PLACE IT OCCUPIED AT THE TIME THE PLAYWRIGHT WAS BORN. TOMMY TACKLES THIS ASTROLOGICAL PHENOMENON IN THE THIRD WHARF 2LOUD PLAY FOR 2008, SATURN'S RETURN

Astrologers believe that saturn's return symbolises the turmoil that heralds true adulthood. Sceptics may be more familiar with the dilemmas of friends and family who, on the cusp of their 30th birthday, struggle to decide what sort of life they want to live. This time of upheaval is the subject of *Saturn's Return*, the latest play by Tommy, the multi award winning young writer of *Holding the Man* and *Strangers in Between*.

When Tommy's sister told him he was on the brink of a saturn's return, the term struck him as dramatic - "a metaphor for the exogenous forces in life". The playwright believes the last years of your twenties is the time where we confront the tough questions. "You do some shedding and ask some painful questions. You hope to emerge from it without impacting on those you love, but that might be impossible."

It's impossible for Zara, the twenty-eight year old heroine of *Saturn's Return*. Deeply in love with her long-term partner the prospect of mortgages, marriage and babies makes her restless and uneasy.

"The play begins on familiar and topical ground a couple locking things in and staring at the face of forever together", Tommy says. "But this comedy ends somewhere more imaginative than that. The worries escalate to a crisis of identity. The escalation is in Zara's hands as she courageously investigates her restlessness and the validity of every aspect of her life. She asks "what more can I do?" I admire her for that".

In a recent column on the phenomenon of saturn's return Lisa Pryor said the current crop of late twenty somethings were "experience junkies, terrified of making a choice and locking things in, driven by the fear that we might miss out on something".

Tommy suggests that "the call to maturity might be more severe for this generation as it emerges from its prolonged adolescence." In Zara's case Tommy says the initial "crisis of

choice' is "revealed to be a crisis of values, a crisis of responsibility". "Zara needs to live her life fully. She needs to make a contribution. She needs to know that every stone has been upturned".

Saturn's Return revives the successful writer/director partnership between Tommy and David Berthold, the former Resident Director of STC, Artistic Director of Griffith Theatre Company and the director of Tommy's other plays, *Holding the Man* and *Strangers in Between*.

After 10 years of collaboration, Tommy still feels "blessed to work with David. I know his strengths and tastes but generally we aim to stretch and surprise each other. I clumsily create a lot of problems on the page and he finds these beautiful artistic solutions to them. Sometimes it's hard to trace who owns what idea and where it came from". Tommy thinks this is a good thing. Likewise, is a relief to enter the rehearsal room where "everyone else takes over".

"The actors take particular responsibility for their character's journey. They do so with a focus that the playwright might find difficult. They test the impulses and shifts in that character. The advice has been to let Zara spin out."

For Tommy, who was drawn to writing theatre "because it was dangerous", theatre itself is a spinout. A decade after his mother typed up his first play, *For God, Queen and Country*, the adrenalinrush is still there.

"There's an exhilarating thrill in hearing the immediate judgement of your work. Theatre allows us to discuss and even laugh at things that are unmentionable in most forums". The only person to win the NSW Premier's Literary Award for Best Play two years running, Tommy doesn't want to dwell on accolades ("it's not my style").

Instead, he prefers to focus "on what's not working and what needs to be improved". Quote a line of a draft of *Saturn's Return* to him and Tommy's inner editor emerges - "Too thematic."

"You are aware of the shortcomings of your work and your need to get it right the next time. I'll never get it right with a perfect play but I am proud that I like to try."

His motivation is simple: interaction with the audience. "As a playwright, I know that my audiences are smarter than me and that collectively they've seen a lot more theatre than I have. It's a tough gig but I hope they recognise something new in this work and that it provokes fresh thought."

FRANCES SIMMONS

SATURN'S RETURN PLAYS FROM 15 AUGUST IN WHARF 2. FOR BOOKINGS PHONE (02) 9250 1777 OR WHARF2LOUD.COM



TOMMY MURPHY AND DAVID BERTHOLD



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