

LAST

Reviewer David Kary

The famous Spanish playwright Federico Garcia Lorca is quoted as saying, 'A play is a poem standing up'.

Accomplished writer and performer Helen O'Leary's new one woman play LAST is an extended, free association poem/rap/ open and free discourse with the audience about life, death, the universe....She is such a warm, affable, self effacing presence, that the audience on opening night just lapped it up.

There are many shifts in gear... We see her jogging, determined to keep her fitness and her figure..then we see her mourning the loss of a close friend who has committed suicide- going through the

mental processes...why didn't her friend tell her that she was so desperate....we

see her talking about her coping

strategies...how it's all one step at a time, moving forward, one step at a time....

The props are minimal. They include... A chair...a bell...candle...a piece of clothing...shoes...whatever she can run with...Also adding atmosphere is a

backdrop of a series of Buck

Buckingham's photographs projected

against the back wall..including a stunning forest shot with perfect light.

My highlight....when from the ceiling a

swing, of all things, drops down, Helen jumps on it, and starts swinging, sharing

with the audience her list of the things that give her joy...make her

happy...renew her love of life...A damn fine list it is too!



THE SYDNEY FRINGE

In December last year, a woman walked into the sea naked and took her own life. She was a close friend of performer Helen O'Leary. *Last* is O'Leary's tribute to her friend, based on the premise that if today was your last day, how would you make it? *Last* is part celebration, part mourning. Having interviewed Helen for the [blog](#) and read the promotional materials about the show, I confess I was expecting the show to be sadder than it was. Don't get me wrong, it was sad in parts – heartbreaking, even – but overall, I found the show uplifting, and I loved it. It is not a portrait of grief but a celebration of life, of living. O'Leary clearly adores life – there is a whole section of the show devoted to the things she loves about living, including but not limited to washing dishes by hand, buses being a little bit late, and pulling men's chest hairs – but there are portions of the

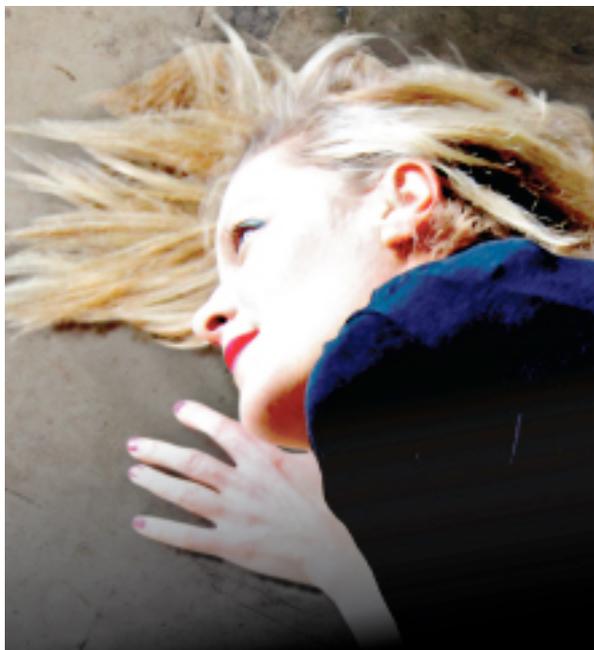
show devoted to trying to understand death, to comprehend why someone could be so sad that they could commit suicide when life, in all its ordinariness, is so wonderful. It is happiness tinged with sadness: understanding, perhaps, that without grief, joy is not possible, mourning loss and celebrating living all the same.

I think it is almost easier to look at *Last* as poetry more than anything else. The show is lyrically beautiful, the language evocative, melodic, and rich. The jumps between the sections of the show are a little hard to reconcile at times: it is very much an episodic piece, and while the breaks between episodes are clear, it is still hard to swiftly adjust your mindset. Once you do, however, *Last* is a beautiful show. It depends heavily on the charisma of writer/performer Helen

O'Leary, who delivers absolutely. She has boundless energy on stage, commanding the audience whether she is running around, swinging from the ceiling, or standing still. One cannot help but watch her. She is the kind of performer it is impossible to find boring: she cultivates a personal relationship with her audience that is quite remarkable. I really enjoyed *Last*. It is a style of theatre that many (me included!) might find unfamiliar, but it is absolutely rewarding. Helen O'Leary delivers a captivating performance in a show that is hilarious and heartbreaking by turns. Touching, poetic, and well worth your time. One of the Fringe's treasures: I highly recommend you get along and see it.

THE SYDNEY FRINGE - BLOG INTERVIEW

If today was your last, how would you make it?



At the end of last year, award-winning performer Helen O'Leary suffered the surprising and shocking loss of a friend. This inspired her to create *Last*, a new piece of theatre that reflects on love, loss, and what it means to live until your last day. She spoke to Fringe blogger Jodi about her show.

JM: Tell me a bit about the show you have in the Sydney Fringe festival this year. HO: the catalyst was when a friend of mine walked into the sea naked last December & took her own life.

I questioned my mortality & a seed of an idea for *Last* was born - '*...if today was your last ...how would you make it ?*'

JM: This is clearly an intensely personal work for you. Was creating this work a very difficult experience for you? a cathartic experience? both? HO: No not

difficult to create new work it was a joy to dive in to something new actually. Last year my show *My Paris* could not have been more personal

One of the themes was a terminal illness 3 of my siblings had so from an unusually early age i have had death as part of my experience. **JM: What do you hope your audience will take away from your show?** HO: my life is not special the content of any given day

of it is as ordinary as anyone's else's & it is this very ordinariness i am attempting to treasure myself & to translate in the show to the audience.

sometimes we have preparation death is close [as my siblings & my family did] but oftentimes we don't get any heads up. been reading a lot about cancer / palliative care patients and 5 common themes are - they wish they had been more prepared, lived the life they wanted to live, let themselves be happy, not worked so hard & expressed their feelings.

JM: If you had to describe your show in three words, what would they be?

HO: MUST SEE MAGIC.

JM: Tell me a bit about the creative development of the work. When you decided you wanted to create this piece of theatre, how did you go about it?

HO: After *My Paris* I dove straight into *God's Ear* @ The Reginald Seymour Centre. i relish language & it was such a word play piece & helped me disengage from my particular experience & take the language more out into an everyman everyday moment to moment experience. + i was hungry to write new material again.

JM: Describe the process of creating the work for me. What's your writing process?

HO: Mirka Mora is a mentor as soon as she wakes she picks up the brush & heads to the easel. I am a distance runner & one of the reasons i love road running is that i can put my runners on & head out on a run whenever the urge takes me. As *Last* is a self generated project it's exactly the same effortless ease as with running in that i can dive in & create whenever i like. This is a lucky dip industry of sorts you never know what you are going to get or when & that is exciting. The great thing about my self devised work is i never wait for someone to offer me something i always have my own hand in.

In practical terms especially when script writing, i keep a pen & piece of paper with me wherever i go: just like i keep runners in the boot of my car or my suitcase when i am away from home. makes it easy. I take the written words off the page in rehearsals on the floor and refine them 'in action'.

JM: Tell me a bit about the creative team you have on board. Who is who and what do they do?

HO: Buck Buckingham – graphic artist & screen writer. I am so lucky to have him on board he is very visual he thinks & works in pictures & offers me a great counter balance to the written word & my body in action with his visual art. He is currently working on a number of graphic novels & my audience is very lucky indeed to see his art work as part of *Last*. Fiona Ferguson – she is a photographer & has provided all the incredible marketing graphic design for Posters Fliers etc. Again a great visual eye runs her own graphic arts company Sleepish.

Kerri Glasscock & Gareth Boylan – Directors of 505 provide the incredible space & precious time to develop new work. Kerri – Marketing aid etc but most importantly she provides a nurturing & nourishing environment for established Artists [& new players] hungry to work . With Kerri the door is open & we stay active & vital & able experiment in front of a live paying audience.

Gaz – is a Director himself so understands the process of new work getting up. He acts as my Technical/Lighting Supervisor & gets how actors dialogue so when it comes time for me to BUMP IN / Tech he is a great leveller/ outside eye & luckily we speak a similar language artistically. Augusta Supple - Not specifically involved but is a Director in her own right, multi talented arts worker & a great sounding board for me as I prepare new work.

JM: What kind of theatre especially appeals to you? Do you have any major theatrical inspirations that you draw on when you create work (in general, or this work in particular)?

Little work that gets a bigger life so many examples - *Keating the Musical* started as a small Melbourne Cabaret & ended up with standing room only in the York Theatre Seymour - a 788 capacity venue. It was a HUGE success story. Personal stories of truth & honesty that are courageous & so brave - *Unspoken* Rebecca Clarke Dir: Wayne Blair [Sapphires] Large scale shows I treasure too - I have played big shows in big

venues and they are so so fun to be in and to watch I am lucky to have worked on many including - *Julius Caesar* @ Queensland Theatre Company alongside Robyn Nevin Directed by Simon Phillips = WOW ! Circus /cabaret/ comedy/Musicals - *SMOKE & MIRRORS* – Iota his lyrics are masterful what a showman & what a show Big Circus spectacular! This is rolling around my head from him now - 'I'm not afraid to die but it's your death honey that I think about' **JM: Are there any shows in the Fringe festival you're particularly excited about seeing?**

HO: Matt Cameron's *Footprints on Water* – I have been a fan of his work for a very long time. I don't know if he is involved in the is production directly but his name on any project is a BIG PLUS !