

YOUR NATIONAL
CULTURE GUIDE

NOW SHOWING

Loro (MA 15+)

Loro, an Italian word meaning "they", is a film about a mega-wealthy businessman and serial womaniser who becomes the leader of his country. It's a wildly irreverent portrait of perhaps Europe's most contentious politician of recent years, Silvio Berlusconi (played by Toni Servillo), Italy's richest man and four times the country's prime minister. Director Paolo Sorrentino is clearly no fan of SB and it's no understatement to describe his new film as a full-frontal attack on the politician and the depths to which he has reduced the Italian nation. *Loro* is a caustic and bitter film and, even in this international version, is not always accessible for non-Italians who haven't lived through the Berlusconi years. Fortunately Sorrentino is an exceptional director and Servillo is a most remarkable actor; these two major talents have created a film of considerable impact, even if this time their subject remains frustratingly elusive.

DAVID STRATTON ★★☆☆☆

Holmes & Watson (M)

Starring John C. Reilly as John Watson and Will Ferrell (pictured below) as Sherlock Holmes, *Holmes & Watson* is written and directed by filmmaker Etan Cohen, who is best known for writing *Tropic Thunder* (2008). It's London, 1881, and Watson has just returned from the war in Afghanistan and is suicidal. Holmes is the world's greatest detective, as we are reminded by cleverly used newspaper headlines. They meet in unusual but fortuitous circumstances, in Holmes's vegetable patch. And who is the world's greatest criminal? Elementary: Professor James Moriarty (Ralph Fiennes). He's in court on murder charges. Unfortunately for the prosecution and Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard (Rob Brydon), all the witnesses have died, recently, unexpectedly and suddenly. Can Holmes save the day? Well, sort of, in a Holmesian manner that keeps the plot ticking along. For my



money, this is a laugh-out-loud film ideal for a relaxing Friday night.

STEPHEN ROMEI ★★☆☆☆

QUEENSLAND

EXHIBITION

Physical Video

Australian video works from the 1970s to the present explore the body's ability to confront conventions and investigate history, identity and culture. Works from the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art are presented, and featured artists include James Oram, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba and Pilar Mata Dupont. Cairns Art Gallery, 40 Abbott Street, Cairns City, Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm; Sat, 10am-5pm; Sun, 10am-2pm. Free entry. Inquiries: (07) 4046 4800 or online. Until February 3.

VICTORIA

STAGE

Peter Pan Goes Wrong

The Cornley Polytechnic Drama Society presents the Olivier award-nominated play *Peter Pan Goes Wrong* at the Arts Centre Melbourne. JM Barrie's classic fairytale *Peter Pan* has been reimagined with comedic disasters, including technical problems and cast conflict. Arts Centre Melbourne, Playhouse, 100 St Kilda Road. Tonight, 7pm. Tickets: \$90.90-\$109.90. Inquiries: 1300 182 183 or online. Until January 27.



NSW

STAGE

In the Heights

With music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda (*Hamilton*), *In the Heights* is a snapshot of the Hispanic-American community in the Washington Heights neighbourhood of New York City. Luke Joslin directs a cast that includes Stevie Lopez (above). Part of Sydney Festival. Sydney Opera House, Concert Hall, Bennelong Point. Tonight, 7pm; tomorrow and Sun, 2pm and 7pm. Tickets: \$49-\$139. Bookings: (02) 9250 7111 or online. Duration: 2hr 20min, including 20min interval.

TASMANIA

STAGE

The Wind in the Willows

Les Winspear has adapted Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Staged in the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens, this story follows Ratty, Badger, Mr Toad and Mole as they navigate themes of loyalty and friendship. Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens, Lower Domain Road, Hobart. Today, 11am; tomorrow, 2pm and 5pm; Sun, 2pm. Tickets: \$12-\$25. Bookings: (03) 6146 3300 or online. Duration: 1hr 30 min, no interval.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

EXHIBITION

Love from Damascus: The Art of Devotion in Islam

Manuscripts, ceramics, paintings, silverware and textiles from India, the Middle East and Indonesia are exhibited to illustrate devotion embodied through the arts of Islam. Art Gallery of South Australia, Gallery 19b, North Terrace, Adelaide. Daily 10am-5pm. Free entry. Inquiries: (08) 8207 7000 or online. Until April 30.

NORTHERN TERRITORY

EXHIBITION

Emergence — Recent Acquisitions

Australian works acquired by the Araluen Arts Centre during the past three years by its director Mark Crees and curator Stephen Williamson are now on display. Araluen Arts Centre, 61 Larapinta Drive, Araluen. Daily, 10am-4pm. Tickets: \$6-\$8. Inquiries: (08) 8951 1120 or online. Until February 27.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

STAGE

Manwatching

A male actor reads, having never seen the script before, one woman's thoughts concerning her heterosexual desires. With a new actor each performance, *Manwatching* is a comedic work presented by Summer Nights, the Royal Court, Izzy McDonald and Gavin Roach. State Theatre Centre of Western Australia, Rehearsal Room 1, 174-176 William Street, Perth. Tonight and tomorrow, 7.45pm. Tickets: \$27. Bookings: (08) 6212 9292 or online. Until January 26. Duration: 75min.

Edited by

Sophia Morrison
Full reviews of new films will appear in *The Weekend Australian* on Saturday

Send event information to listings@theaustralian.com.au

SYDNEY FESTIVAL

Echoes from a fractured world



JIM SPELLMAN/WIREIMAGE

A scene from Schaubuhne and Complicite's *Beware of Pity*, left; actor and director Simon McBurney, inset above, and in *The Encounter*, below

GIANMARCO BRESADOLA

Complicite's Simon McBurney explains why Stefan Zweig's *Beware of Pity* resonates powerfully in our troubled times

JANE CORNWELL



The winter sun is setting over London, going down in a technicolour blaze that feels especially spectacular when witnessed from the roof of the Camden warehouse home owned by director and actor Simon McBurney, who has ushered me up a slim spiral staircase and out into the crisp evening air for the view. In the distance, across Dickensian tiles and period-style new builds, loom landmarks including London Bridge and the 95-storey Shard.

Closer, a church bell rests inside a gothic tower. A Victorian dome marks the site of an old cattle market. Somewhere down the hill in Marylebone, a kilometre or two away, is the service flat in which Viennese-Jewish author Stefan Zweig lived while finishing *Beware of Pity*, his only full-length novel, back in 1939.

"I fall in love with London all over again every time I am up here," says McBurney, 61, straight-backed in jeans, cap and baggy T-shirt, hugging himself against the cold. "It is amazing what you see when you look."

"Look and you will see" might well be a mantra for *Complicite*, the British company McBurney co-founded in 1983 with two fellow graduates of the Jacques Lecoq physical theatre school in Paris. As sole artistic director he continues to mastermind shows that combine physical brio with intellectual daring and technological know-how. *Complicite*'s wide-ranging and invariably acclaimed repertoire has underscored the company's reputation as one of the best experimental outfits in the world. The company regularly goes on tour and its popularity means *Complicite* hasn't visited Australia as often as McBurney would like.

This month *Beware of Pity*, a collaboration with the Schaubuhne theatre of Berlin, plays the Sydney Festival, the first *Complicite*-engendered ensemble work to grace our shores since *A Disap-*

pearing *Number*, a play about mathematics that wowed Sydney in 2008. (*The Encounter*, a one-man show about an American photographer in the remote Amazonian jungle, was performed by McBurney in London in 2016 and featured actor Richard Katz on its 2017 Australian tour.)

"I have a strong attachment to your continent, and so many Australian friends, artists and actors I admire. I am filming in New York with one of them now," says McBurney, briefly home from playing Rupert Murdoch opposite Russell Crowe as disgraced former Fox News executive Roger Ailes in a forthcoming Showtime series. McBurney is a recognisable face from his supporting roles in big-budget films such as *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and *Mission Impossible*:

Rogue Nation. Sun duly set, we've resumed our seats at a long table in the converted factory McBurney shares with his wife, concert pianist Cassie Yukawa, and their three children.

On a wall hangs a crosshatch painting of a kangaroo, bought during his regular visits to Australia (he dated Australian actress Jacqueline McKenzie in the early 2000s). Jostling for space in bookshelves are tomes by novelist Patrick White and Robert Mulvaney, the archeologist and Aboriginal rights activist who studied under McBurney's American archeologist father. Also one of three children, McBurney grew up in leafy Cambridge, singing around a piano played by his mother, a secretary, and improvising plays in the family living room. He studied

English literature at Cambridge University before decamping to Paris and Lecoq. Theatre was always McBurney's calling; as a director he has worked with Al Pacino, Katie Holmes, the English National Opera. "I'm interested in what holds together the human community," he muses, musing being his wont.

"The drive to form a village, a fresh gathering of human souls, is deeply unconscious but it is there. We might think we are just going to the theatre but the truth is a play unifies us through the act of common imagination, through seeing ourselves reflected in a greater or lesser degree onstage."

It was with all this in mind that McBurney decided to adapt *Beware of Pity*, a novel of betrayal and obsession he happened on in

2015 while scouring a bookshop for work by Joseph Roth, Zweig's critically esteemed contemporary.

Intending but a cursory glance, McBurney was absorbed by the story of a young cavalry officer who breaks the heart of the lame daughter of a wealthy aristocrat, and through what he believes is compassion is dragged into a tragic dead-end. Forced to live with his guilt, he comes to view his fractured life with rare clarity as a metaphor for society at large. Disaster, he realises, is approaching.

"Zweig was writing about pre-second world war Austria, from which he fled to live as a refugee, appalled at the rise of nationalism and fascism in Europe, by a set of circumstances that would change our world forever," McBurney points out. He pauses, his gaze steady. "Today there is also a sense of impending disaster, but just as in Zweig's time there are people who say this is scaremongering, or who will deny it or avoid talking about it. What drew me to the book was its contemporary resonance — a mistake that sets off events that spiral out of control."

"Some small tweet on a mobile phone can engulf us in ways we never imagined."

McBurney had to argue the case for *Beware of Pity* with Thomas Ostermeier, artistic director of the radically minded Schaubuhne, whose *Hamlet* featured in the 2010 Sydney Festival. For Ostermeier, as for many Europeans, Zweig was too clichéd, too mass market. But having sourced drama everywhere from the surreal fiction of Japan's Haruki Murakami to that of Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov, and with White's *The Tree of Man* on his wish list ("If I was going to adapt one great Australian novel it would be this one"), McBurney highlighted the presence of Zweig, a friend of Sigmund Freud, and his fascination for the way our unconscious drives rule our "rational" choices.

The novel Ostermeier knew as

Ungehduld des Herzens (Impatience of the Heart) was stripped back and developed in workshops with the German cast. The production is delivered in German with English surtitles on a stage bare but for some tables and multipurpose props: a glass cabinet becomes a train carriage, then a display case through which we see military pomp, a pool of blood. There are video projections, pounding soundscapes, montages relevant to the present.

"This young man imagines he's making choices but realises he is infected with the prejudice of his national consciousness, which changes according to what is socially appropriate, and from generation to generation."

"For example, Brexit has shown us that the United Kingdom isn't united; it's a quondam anyway. Great Britain isn't so great. There is no such thing as Germany, or Britain, Australia" — who will deny it or avoid talking about it. What drew me to the book was its contemporary resonance — a mistake that sets off events that spiral out of control."

A sigh. "This infects the way we react, whether it's rejecting people coming in as we were there first, or rejecting people who are already there because of their colour, gender or sexual orientation. These impulses are common to the rise of what we call the nation-state."

All our lives, then, are narratives tied to our unconscious relationship with the world.

"What Zweig is saying is that we have to beware of things that we think are so-called right and wrong," McBurney says as the lights of London twinkle through the window behind him.

"To rise above and look is imperative, if we are to see a situation as it truly is."

Beware of Pity is at Sydney's Roslyn Packer Theatre as part of the Sydney Festival from January 23 to 27.

Audience does time as improv experiment in justice plays out

THEATRE

The Chat
By JR Brennan and David Woods. Sydney Festival. Carriageworks, January 16.

JOHN MCCALLUM

This piece is the result of workshops conducted with a group of ex-offenders. It claims to be confronting the issues surrounding the rehabilitation of prisoners who have been through the criminal justice system.

The premise is that it is set in the future and that an alarming way of deciding parole decisions has been devised, called Transpersonalisation, or TP. In this process the parolee plays the parole officer and the parole officer plays the parolee, and a decision is made by a watching parole board.

The theatrical set-up is that, after a lengthy warm-up and some idle chat between co-creators JR Brennan's and David Woods's characters about their next case (a pedophile), the interview is improvised between Woods and one of the ex-offenders.

On opening night this was Les Wiggins. Woods supposedly



PRUDENCE UPTON

Arthur Bolkas and David Woods in *The Chat*

doesn't know each night what the role-playing parole officer will say is the offence. The parole board is played by three members of the

audience and the rest of the audience is consulted at the end. Wiggins managed to endear himself so much that there was unanimous

agreement that his character should be set free, but there was a final twist.

All this sounds much more interesting than it was in performance. The growing sense of discomfort — as Woods, who is a good actor, played being difficult, trying to take over the interview and quizzing Wiggins about his character's ambitions and hopes for the future — clearly was intended. TP is presented as a sinisterly manipulative procedure for deciding whether an offender who has served his minimum and exhibited good behaviour should be allowed to go free.

This discomfort was exacerbated by the fact the ex-offenders are, to some extent at least, improvising. I don't know what the workshop procedure was and Brennan is a former parole officer so I guess he knew what he was doing, but I spent part of the show

wondering what was made up and what was real.

Not intended, presumably, was the tedium of watching the whole thing. This was a performance that took its time. There were some laughs, all of them supplied by Wiggins, and some video, including at one point a magnificent accelerating series of tattooed faces, but the show needed a bit of dramaturgy.

There is a strange rich guys' space at one end of the traverse stage and at the other end a colour-changing cube in which the interview takes place.

One of the nicest things about it was the way the ex-offender performers greeted us and showed us to our seats. That was when the real chat happened.

Tickets: \$36-\$41. Bookings 1300 856 876 or online. Duration: 90min, no interval. Until Sunday.