

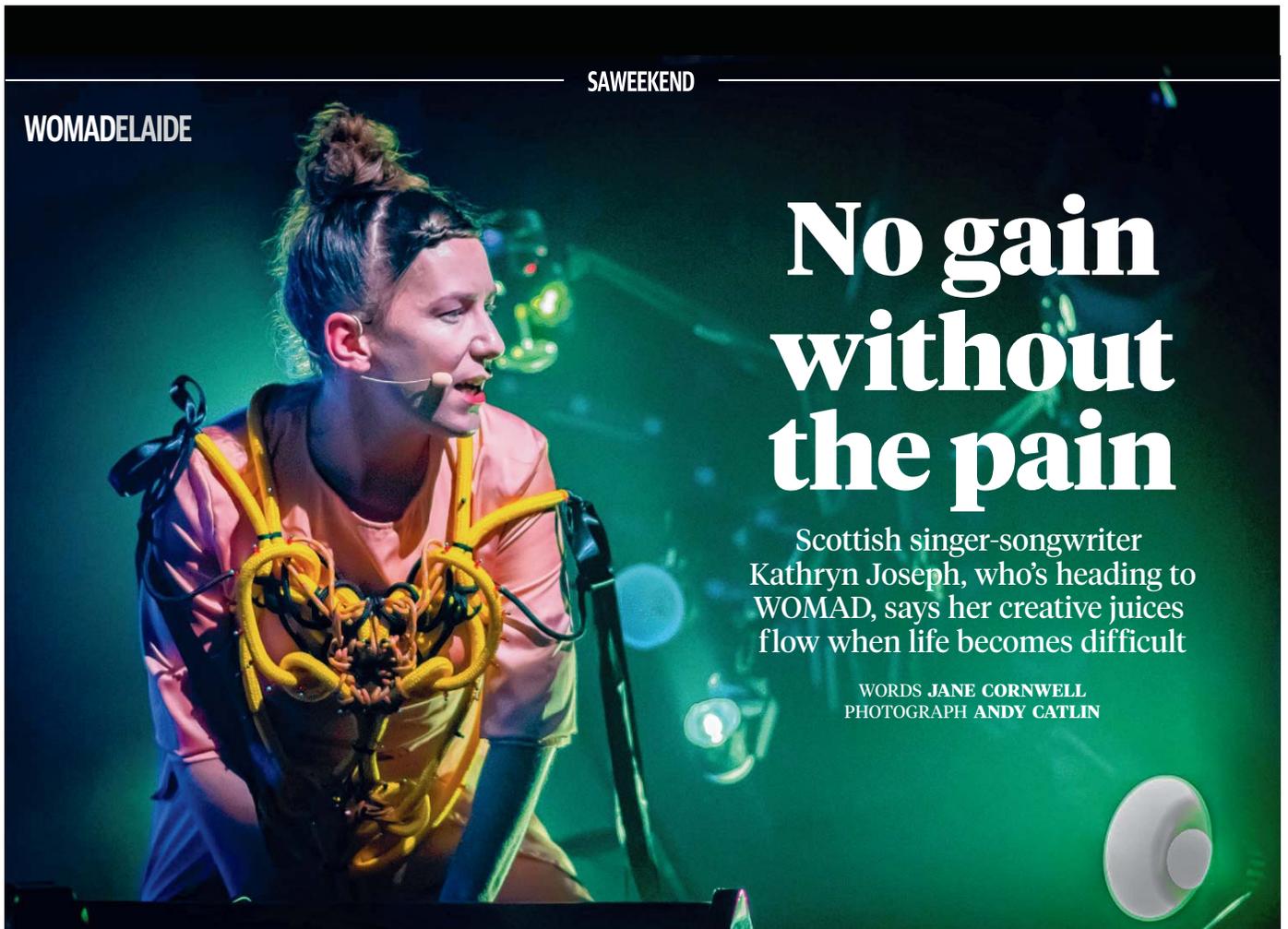


29 FEB, 2020

No gain without the pain

Adelaide Advertiser, Adelaide

Page 1 of 2



WOMADELAIDE

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No gain without the pain

Scottish singer-songwriter Kathryn Joseph, who's heading to WOMAD, says her creative juices flow when life becomes difficult

WORDS JANE CORNWELL
PHOTOGRAPH ANDY CATLIN

The songs of Kathryn Joseph are intimate, fragile and bracingly frank. So perhaps it is no wonder that she wears armour when she sings them. Seated at a piano organ on a stage customised with animal skulls, freestanding shards of mirror and mechanical claws that hold items including a glass of red wine, she gazes piercingly, unwaveringly at her audience. "Tell my lover it's not over until we drown," she intones, her fluttery soprano laced with heartache and anger.

Shy and self-effacing offstage, the feted Scottish singer-songwriter says she feels like a warrior woman when she is performing. Much of this is thanks to the magnificent outfit in which Joseph is encased, a dress-cum-trouser suit fashioned from swathes of dusty pink fabric and a corset made from a bright yellow rib cage of ropes as sturdy as life jacket safety lines.

"When I step inside it I feel safe," says Joseph, 45, who begins each show in blue-tinted darkness, in half-light shed by crooked lamps, to the sound of rumbling waves. "I thought I'd be out of my comfort zone. But it has been the opposite."

Part theatre, part gig, *From When I Wake* is a collaboration between Joseph and Glasgow-based multi-art form production company Cryptic. The latter's bold experimentalism – which here includes the costume design of "body architect" Markéta Kratochvílová – has taken Joseph into an otherworldly realm befitting lyrics rich with imagery and illusion, and songs-cum-incantations that turn Joseph's own heartbreak and misery into something truthful and beautiful.

A UK tour saw *From When I Wake* showered in five-star reviews. "Joseph soars in a perfect evocation of her rare and precious

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This will make me better, though it's making me feel worse right now



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Page 2 of 2

art,” declared *The Herald*. *The List* insisted: “There is no one like Joseph in the contemporary music scene. She is a unique artist whose music continues to cast spells, even on the uninitiated.”

Soon Joseph will be weaving her magic at WOMADelaide, delivering tunes named things like *And It Will Lick You Clean* and *Mouths Full of Blood* while staring at her refracted reflection, at those gathered at the bijou Moreton Bay Stage. The songs are lifted from her current second album, 2018’s *From When I Wake the Want Is*, a work that had *Clash Magazine* calling it “possibly the best album we’ll hear all year” – and the follow-up to her astounding 2015 debut *Bones You Have Thrown Me and Blood I’ve Spilled*.

The dark, mournful beauty of that tyro release – which addressed failed relationships and the death of her baby son – bagged Joseph the 2015 Scottish Album of the Year award, beating the likes of Belle and Sebastian, and Paolo Nutini, and thrusting the Highlands-raised introvert into a spotlight she didn’t – still doesn’t – think she deserved. She’d made the album for herself, Joseph told the journalists who compared her to Kate Bush, PJ Harvey, Joanna Newsom and every other left-field female singer-songwriter of pure voice and fierce mind.

“I still struggle with impostor syndrome,” she says, sitting on a couch in the Glasgow home she shares with her daughter Eva, 8, and her partner, Eva’s father Kenny Oram. “I’ve been writing songs since I was 18 but it was something I did on the side. I didn’t have the self-belief to perform them.”

The eldest of three sisters, Joseph – then Kathryn Sawyer – grew up in a small village

outside Inverness, reading books, revelling in nature, rebelling against her piano teacher.

“I just wanted to be outdoors,” says the woman who sings lines like “You bring me dead birds and then you go” (*The Bird*). “Then, when I was about 14, I watched (coming-of-age film) *Anne of Green Gables* and suddenly became obsessed with human beings and love.”

She resumed playing piano while at university in Aberdeen but dropped out of studies to be a waitress. Her first gig at an open-mic night left her friends open mouthed. Her best mate made it their mission to get Joseph a record deal, posting her demo tape out to a long list of labels until she was offered a deal by Sanctuary

Records, then the largest independent in the UK.

“I was 23, and it seemed like a dream.” A shrug. “I turned them down. I had no manager, no one to advise me. I didn’t want to give my songs away.”

For the next 12 years she kept writing and playing, mainly for herself. Then in 2010 her son Joseph was born prematurely and died. The songs on *Bones You Have Thrown Me* were a response to that loss and his

name subsequently became her stage alias. “I created something from the pain, used it to make something wonderful,” she says.

Her collaborator and producer was Marcus Mackay, owner of Hit the Fan Records and, serendipitously, her next-door neighbour in Glasgow, to where Oram and Joseph, pregnant again, had moved.

Mackay’s splashes of percussion and electronic textures elevated her sound and her confidence.

“When I’m playing it’s the only time I’m not thinking about how I look or what people are thinking of me, especially when it’s playing with Marcus,” says Joseph, whose sudden success saw her supporting the likes of The Cure, Neko Case and Low, and strained her relationship with Oram.

When their daughter Eva was two they split, which Joseph found tricky to handle. Grieving and bereft, she wrote song after song. Songs that told of primal love and desire, of blood and bone, snow on mountains and witches burning in the woods.

“Having my heart broken again was one of those weirdly handy times for a creative,” she says. “A strange mix of ‘This will make me better, though it’s making me feel worse right now’. I don’t tend to write when I’m happy. Though I did write a song last week, which was reassuring.”

Joseph is in a good place now, with her music, her life, and with Oram (they weren’t apart for very long).

“My poor boyfriend,” she says, laughing. “I get on stage and tell the whole world how I feel about everything, how I begged him to love me again. But ultimately, it’s a performance. I’m up there, in my costume, telling the truth.”

**March 7 at 9.30pm, March 9 at 8.30pm,
Moreton Bay Stage, womadelaide.com.au**