

Rock art rage

THEATRE

Swine River
By David Milroy
Aboriginal Theatre,
WAAPA
Enright Studio
Reviewer:
Stephen Bevis

Swine River, David Milroy's outpouring of anger about the destruction of Pilbara rock art, is agitprop theatre with a capital A.

While much of the performance was devoted to battering the audience with a big message stick, there were some genuinely moving moments and this is testament to Rick Brayford's direction of his young Aboriginal theatre class at the WA Academy of Performing Arts.

This short play started as a six-page draft less than two months ago as Milroy sought to vent his frustration about the destruction of rock art on the Burrup and the decision by Arts and Aboriginal Affairs Minister Sheila McHale to allow a railway line through the Abydos Woodstock Reserve.

That draft has been worked up into a performance through workshops involving Milroy, Bradford and the students. The final result was not entirely

satisfying but it clearly worked as a cathartic megaphone for an angry artist and provided a vital development tool for the students.

The play begins with an executioner and his young trainee debating the protocols of dispatching an Aboriginal man, Yarri Snow, who is to be terminated from a mining tenement as sanctioned under law in the State of Mining circa 2018.

When the execution goes wrong, the action transfers to a courtroom, in which questions of heritage, culture, progress and power are thrashed out. Through some twists of sophistry —

and the appearance of a 10,000-year-old thylacine — the drama comes to a brutal ending at the original tenement. Though their characters are largely ciphers for Milroy, the cast give uniformly strong, confident performances.

Milroy's play is a bleak, sometimes absurdist look at the way ancient heritage and contemporary cultural concerns can be ultimately weighed up as a bagatelle against the "morphine drip" of economic progress. "Iron ore dreaming is the only dreaming allowed," the prosecutor says.

By all accounts, Brayford's course at WAAPA has helped turned some young people's lives around. Although the script of Swine River, which ended its short run on Thursday, needs more work, it deserves the chance to find a wider audience in the hope that some policymakers can be turned around as well.



Sheldon Covich,
standing, and
Fred Nunn in
Swine River.