

Astute and intriguing insight into the life of a female pollie

MP by Alana Valentine. Directed by Caroline Stacey

Street One, The Street Theatre, until October 15

Reviewer: **Peter Wilkins**

'Sometimes craziness is what you have to do to get things done,' Opposition MP Ava Turner (Geraldine Turner) tells new adviser, Nadia Ravenburger (Leah Baulch). Premiering before a responsive Canberra audience, Alana Valentine's commissioned play *MP* flings open wide the window on the often perplexing and contradictory world of federal politics.

Drawing on interviews with federal and state politicians, journalists and public servants, Valentine has created an intriguing insight into the life of a female politician, struggling to stay true to the noble ideals of office while manoeuvring a delicate and often devious path



Geraldine Turner, as an opposition MP in *MP*. Photo: Karleen Minney.

through the myriad machinations of democratic process. Valentine lends an authentic ring to the circuitous paths of parliamentary

procedure, but *MP* is far more than a mere analysis of a robust and often turbulent democracy.

MP is the work of an accomplished dramatist, an astute and empathetic observer of the human condition, and it is the human condition that lends *MP* its theatrical validity.

Turner's struggle to achieve justice for constituents Gary Robbins (Stephen Barker) and his distraught wife Laura (Andrea Close), following the rape and subsequent suicide of their disabled daughter in an aged care nursing home is juxtaposed with the harsh dilemma of her own predicament – dealing with the existence of her institutionalised and disabled child, Clifford (a powerfully sensitive and honest performance by Soren Jensen).

The two worlds of carefully researched political reality and imaginative theatricality intersect in a witty, insightful and moving

amalgam of political pragmatism and personal experience. It makes for a riveting, thought-provoking and highly illuminating night at the theatre.

Director Caroline Stacey takes a clear-sighted approach to a minimalist staging of the work, allowing the performances of her professional troupe of actors to fully realise Valentine's cry for compassion in the face of political process.

Turner's performance as a female opposition backbencher, struggling through the agony of personal conflict to achieve political potency and social justice, is monumental. She is supported by a versatile cast of highly accomplished actors.

Baulch plays the newcomer with a finely balanced blend of wide-eyed naivety and opportunistic ambition. Barker assumes two roles; as the distraught father of the dead paraplegic daughter

and as Turner's understanding and supportive partner. Close effectively moves between her five roles as mother, journalist, senior public servant, waitress and a destitute, evicted single parent, sketching each role with conviction.

Jensen excels as Clifford and Drew, the loyal, politically savvy and manipulative adviser to the shadow attorney-general. It is a credit to Valentine's writing, Stacey's direction and the cast's talents that multiple casting never succumbs to superficiality.

At a time of political sawing, *MP* reminds us of the inherent strength of our democracy and offers a timely plea for tolerance, compassion and resolve to uphold the democratic principles of office. As for parallels, that is best left to an audience to determine for themselves. *MP* is not to be missed.