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Touching display of sisters' final acts of love

By Cameron Woodhead
November 24, 2019 – 2.25pm

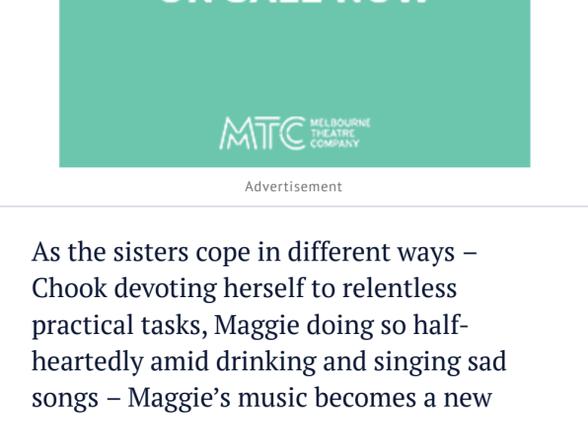
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THEATRE

TAKING THE WATERS ★★★★★
Lemony S Puppet Theatre and Darebin Arts Speakeasy, Northcote Town Hall, Until November 30

Anyone who has experienced the drawn-out death of a loved one or the stark and often gruelling realities of end-of-life care will identify immediately with the scenario in *Taking The Waters*.

Fusing acting, live music and several kinds of puppetry, the show offers a plangent, distilled and unvarnished portrayal of two sisters nursing their dying sibling. It leaves you a bit in awe of the emotional authenticity that puppetry – an art so reliant on barely disguised artifice – can achieve in portraying deeply human truths.



Susannah Espie, Fiona Macleod and Tamara Rewse in *Taking the Waters*. JEFF BUSBY

Chook (Fiona MacLeod) is the organised, dutiful sister who has put her life on hold to care for Duck (a puppet constructed and operated by Tamara Rewse) as she dies at home. The arrival of her other sister Maggie (Suzannah Espie), a chaotic musician, causes low-key antagonism.

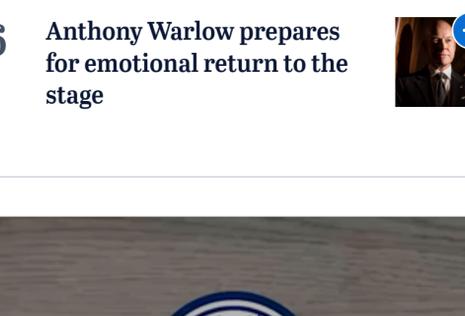
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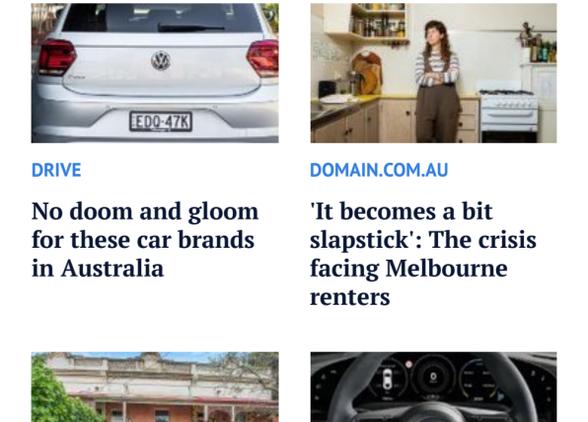
As the sisters cope in different ways – Chook devoting herself to relentless practical tasks, Maggie doing so half-heartedly amid drinking and singing sad songs – Maggie's music becomes a new source of comfort for Duck, whose suffering cannot be assuaged by medicine, despite the attentions of a palliative care nurse (Rewse).

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MacLeod gives an aching, finely etched study of grief sublimated into action, laying bare the exigencies and rigours of being thrust in the role of full-time carer. Opposite her, Espie's slovenly muso chafes against the grim atmosphere, unrelenting tedium, and constant stream of donated lasagne. She gives voice to unspoken emotion, breaking into songs of lament with mournful clarity.



The Lemony S Puppet Theatre. JEFF BUSBY

Most scenes with the dying Duck are handled through elaborate Japanese shadow puppetry by Kyoko Imazu, which artfully captures tranquil moments with the sisters gathered around the sickbed, as well as surreal and frightening sequences representing Duck's hallucinations, medical crises and ultimately death throes.

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Taking The Waters is a moving, resonant and beautifully crafted show from Lemony S Puppet Theatre and a credit to the ambition and skill of this boutique local company.

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