

The Inconvenience of Wings

 By [Terry Levin](#)

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Following rave reviews at the 2016 Grahamstown Festival, *The Inconvenience of Wings*, a play by acclaimed South African playwright and director Lara Foot, is on at the The Baxter Theatre until mid August.

With its 16+ age restriction, my son who had turned 17 the previous day was in the clear to be entertained by the daunting themes of addiction and mental illness wrapped in a disclaimer of nudity and language.

Inspired by a short short by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, about an old man with enormous wings, the storyline of the play evolves backwards, starting when the characters - recognisable by their dialogue as middle class politically liberal and astute, Johannesburg intellectuals circa South Africa 1985 - have reached rock bottom in their battles for sanity, sobriety and functional family lives. The “wing” of the title may be said to have been used metaphorically by the author, as a poignant means of emphasising the futility of the characters’ attempts to rise above their situations.



Image by Oscar O Ryan

The drama of despair

In a nutshell, the timeline of the drama unfolds backwards towards 1961, charting the descent of the protagonist Sarah, channeled and embodied by actress Jennifer Steyn, into her full gamut of emotional extremes - from the elated mania to the hopelessness, self-loathing, delusion, depression and despair - that nowadays are diagnosed as bi-polar disorder.

Offsetting these themes of mental instability are Sarah's husband Paul, also brilliantly portrayed by Andrew Buckland and family friend and psychiatrist, Professor James, played by the captivating Mncedisi Shabangu, showing how the pair cannot help being affected by their two decades of trying to find cures, coping mechanisms and comfort that might return the magnetic and manipulative Sarah back to "normality".

The subject matter of not being able to control moods, of compulsive behaviour, of the devastating effects on loved ones and family, frequently move both cast and audience to tears, as if one might recognise aspects of oneself lurking in the shadows.

This is perhaps why the play fulfils its promise as "a piece that no serious theatre love should miss" as quoted by Cape Talk Radio's John Maytham.

Complex conditions

In the best theatrical style, the experience makes the audience feel simultaneously a sense of discomfort, a sense of catharsis and a sense of wonder, evoked not least by the mastery of the playwright's insights and words and the ability of three actors on a stage to convincingly portray such complex mental conditions.

Together the choreography and the set, crafted by Patrick Curtis and lit by Mannie Manim, artfully allow the the characters to fully inhabit their drama and engage the audience.

The play's nudity may be debatably gratuitous, but it does succeed in amplifying the rawness of the subject matter. There is also a little bit of love, light, laughter and poetry, which all ultimately allow the audience to face up to the reality that there is a far broader spectrum of human emotions behind closed doors, than the current pervasiveness of emoji emoticons and happy face Facebook status updates would have us admit.

Terry Levin attended opening night of The Inconvenience of Wings at the Baxter Golden Arrow Studio on 14 July. The show runs until 13 August at 7.30pm nightly with Saturday matinees at 2.30pm. There is an age restriction of 16.

Booking is through Computicket on 0861 915 8000, online at www.computicket.com or at any Shoprite Checkers outlet. For corporate, block or school bookings, charities and fundraisers, contact Sharon Ward on 021 680 3962/ sharon.ward@uct.ac.za or Carmen Kearns on 021 680 3993/ carmen.kearns@uct.ac.za.

You can read more about The Inconvenience of Wings and the cast at <http://www.baxter.co.za/shows/the-inconvenience-of-wings/>

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