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Review

## Cost of Living (Sydney Theatre Company & Queensland Theatre)

Martyna Majok's Pulitzer Prize-winning play is a compelling story about the human need for love, care and dignity.

Wharf 1 Theatre, Sydney Theatre Company, Walsh Bay, Sydney

Reviewed on 20 July, 2024

by *Vaanie Krishnan* on 23 July, 2024

Like 3

For Sydney-siders, the term “cost of living” is usually followed by the word “crisis”. Such is life in one of the world’s most expensive cities.

In Martyna Majok’s *Cost of Living*, the struggle to make ends meet is just one of the ways that the concept is explored. “Cost” here also refers to the price many people must pay to participate in the world, to live a contributing life.

Premiering in Boston in 2016 and on Broadway in 2022, this Pulitzer Prize-winning play follows two parallel stories, each between two characters living in present-day New Jersey, USA.

Jess (Zoe De Plevitz), a Princeton graduate who already works several bar jobs at night is hired as a carer by John (Dan Daw), a wealthy PhD candidate with cerebral palsy. In parallel, we meet Eddie (Philip Quast), a truck driver who lost his license after driving drunk, and his estranged wife Ani (Kate Hood), who acquired a

disability after an un-related car accident and now requires round-the-clock care.

With plenty of humour and no pity in sight, *Majok* weaves a compelling story about the human need for love, care, safety and above all, dignity. *Majok*'s dialogue is witty, thoughtful, and insightful in its exploration of those living with disability and their carers. Each two-hander navigates the nuances of caring relationships and the ways in which the individualism of our capitalist system is in direct tension with the human need for connection, a need that transcends ability.



Zoe De Plevitz and Dan Daw in *Cost of Living*. Photo © Morgan Roberts

This staging of *Cost of Living* is a landmark production for Australia as it is the first mainstage production in the country to have a 50/50 ratio of disabled to non-disabled actors on stage, with almost the same ratio represented behind the scenes.

This representation is also reflected in the directorial collaboration between Priscilla Jackman ([RBG: Of Many, One](#); [White Pearl](#)) and dancer, performance artist and artistic director Dan Daw.

Three of the four actors make their Sydney Theatre Company debut here but their performance credits are extensive. Daw's performance as John is vulnerable and personal, many of his scenes are so raw it can feel as if you are intruding on a private moment. He delivers immaculate comedic timing and imbues the character with a loveable charisma. His chemistry with De Plevitz is lived-in and the collaboration from the rehearsal room is visible on stage; she gives dignity and strength to the struggle with poverty.

Hood brings a joyful wit to the acquired paraplegic Ani and the chemistry with Quast resembles that of an old, bickering married couple that knows how to push each other's buttons.



Kate Hood and Philip Quast in *Cost of Living*. Photo © Morgan Roberts

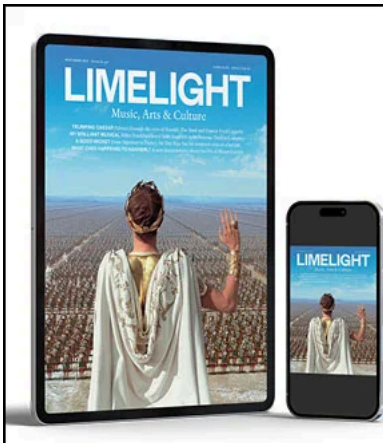
Designer Michael Scott-Mitchell has created a minimalist, accessible stage at the Wharf Theatre which uses several moving screens to transition between scenes. The simplicity of the set does well to transition audiences to realistic intimate living and bathroom spaces but struggles to capture the hustle of a busy New Jersey bar where the play begins. Majok's script jumps from the present day in the first scene to a series of flashbacks. The set doesn't change between time jumps which makes the structure of Majok's script hard to follow (it doesn't become clear until the play's last scene).

The minimalism of the set design, however, does work to centre the performances of these four remarkable actors. They are complemented by a thematic, travelling score by Guy Webster that integrates modern classics like *Just the Two of Us* by Bill Withers with more transitory, classical, and electronic elevator music for the scene changes.

Good theatre helps us to explore and understand perspectives we may not otherwise, and *Cost of Living* does this with a gentle hand and a chorus of laughter. The specificity of Majok's characters makes this story universal and relatable for a wide range of audiences.

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*Cost of Living* plays at the Wharf 1 Theatre [until 18 August](#).



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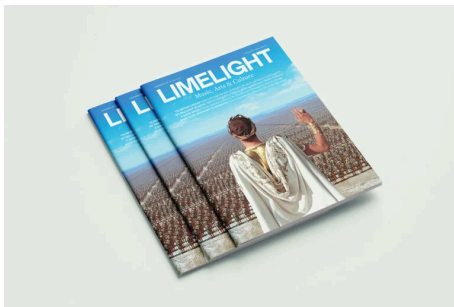


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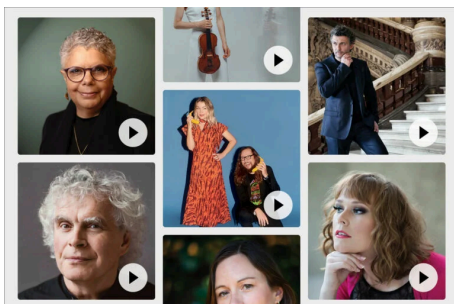


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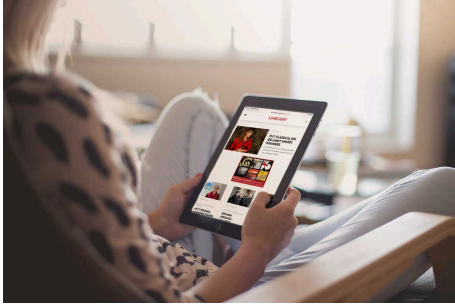


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