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THEATRE

Cost of Living

Taut, clever, thought-provoking theatre

Sydney Theatre Company

by Clare Monagle (/arts-update/author/21240-claremonagle) • ABR Arts (/abr-arts) • 22 July 2024

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Zoe de Plevitz as Jess and Dan Daw as John (photograph by Morgan Roberts)

‘The shit that happens is not to be understood,’ declares the character Eddie Torres in the first line of Martyna Majok’s *Cost of Living*. Eddie, played by a beautifully burly Philip Quast, inaugurates the play with this bald statement of life’s incomprehensibility. Some are born rich and safe; others into abuse and strife. Some

get to inhabit their bodies easily, and stride through life in the blithe pleasure of good health; others experience infirmity and disability and the cruel prejudice afforded to non-normative bodies. Some experience caring and being cared for as a source of security and love; for others, giving and receiving care invites coercion and distress. And try as we might, the unfairness of these myriad inequities seems to defy comprehension; they elude our meaning-making capacities. This is the 'shit' that 'is not to be understood'. What cannot be understood is the cost of living; the cost of its pain, losses, and intimacies.

Eddie, from New Jersey, is an unemployed truck driver, a recovering alcoholic, and a man determined to provide care to his ex-wife Ani. Ani, who became a paraplegic in a car accident, expresses her frustration at her own dependence with spiky wit and fury. Their marriage, while it lasted, seems to have been both loving and fractious. As Ani, Kate Hood rails and cackles with great abandon, revelling in her character's New Jersey accent. Eddie is also dependent, on her vivacity and their shared history. He fumbles devotedly and irrepressibly to look after her, seeking a connection she can no longer afford to reject as she may have done in the past.

 Philip Quast as Eddie and Kate Hood as Ani (photograph by Morgan Roberts)

(/images/Philip_Quast_as_Eddie_and_Kate_Hood_as_Ani_photograph_by_Morgan_Roberts.webp)

Kate Hood as Ani and Philip Quast as Eddie (photograph by Morgan Roberts)

Dan Daw plays John, a wealthy and poised graduate student at Princeton. John, who has cerebral palsy, has advertised for a support worker to aid him in daily tasks such as washing and dressing. Daw's performance manages to convey his character's confident sophistication, while also revealing the psychic cost borne by his physical dependence on paid carers for whom he lacks sensitivity. He hires Jess, a young woman who once graduated from Princeton, but who has neither the polish nor the liquidity of her employer. Jess, living on the poverty line, is a migrant to the United States of uncertain legal status, without a support network of any sort. John and Jess become interdependent, but at the heart of their relationship are acutely mismatched needs. Zoe de Plevitz's Jess – played with tight physicality and a sense of desperation – is a tough nut indeed.

The play consists of inter-cut scenes between each pair. The dialogue is often snappy and ribald, but there are no cheap gags. Ostensibly, the drama plays out in a realist register, but the precise voices given to each character create a poetic cacophony that far transcends kitchen-sink drama. Majok won the Pulitzer Prize in 2018 for *Cost of Living*, and the citation describes the play as '[a]n honest, original work that invites audiences to examine diverse perceptions of privilege and human connection'. While I agree with this to some degree, I think it overstates the work's worthiness at the expense of celebrating its inventive theatricality and its radicality. Or to put it slightly differently, I think *Cost of Living* does indeed invite an examination of privilege, as the citation claims. But it does so because of its lyrical and comedic mastery of vernacular language, alongside its utter refusal to be heart-warming or maudlin in its consideration of disability.

This production – jointly directed by Priscilla Jackman and Dan Daw – is a co-
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production with Queensland Theatre. Jackman and Daw's direction has resulted in a <https://www.australianbookreview.co>
highly economic production, one that enables the script's quality and the actors'
excellence to do the heavy lifting. There are two scenes, both of which involve bathing,
that are breathtakingly intimate in their execution and meaning. The success of these
scenes is a testament to the directors' confidence in their cast's capacities, as well as
their faith in the audience's maturity.

The production design by Michael Scott-Mitchell is relatively sparse. The set is entirely
dislocated from time and place; we could be anywhere. While I appreciated the set's
simplicity in that the language of the play was allowed to soar without distraction, the
stark deracination of the design was at odds with the New Jersey-ness of the play's
speech and location. But this is a minor quibble. Queensland Theatre and the STC
have given us a great gift by performing *Cost of Living* in Australia. The production
offers ninety minutes of the most taut, clever, and thought-provoking theatre that I
have had the privilege to experience as an audience member. *Cost of Living* sits
patiently in the 'shit that happens', offering a poignant and trenchant exploration of the
fragility and necessity of the relationships that we all need to weather the muck.

Cost of Living (Sydney Theatre Company and Queensland Theatre) continues at the
Wharf 1 Theatre until 18 August 2024. Performance attended: 19 July.

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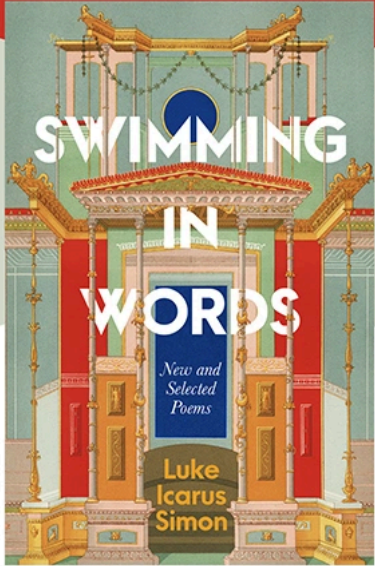
Clare Monagle is a Professor in the Department of History and Archaeology at Macquarie
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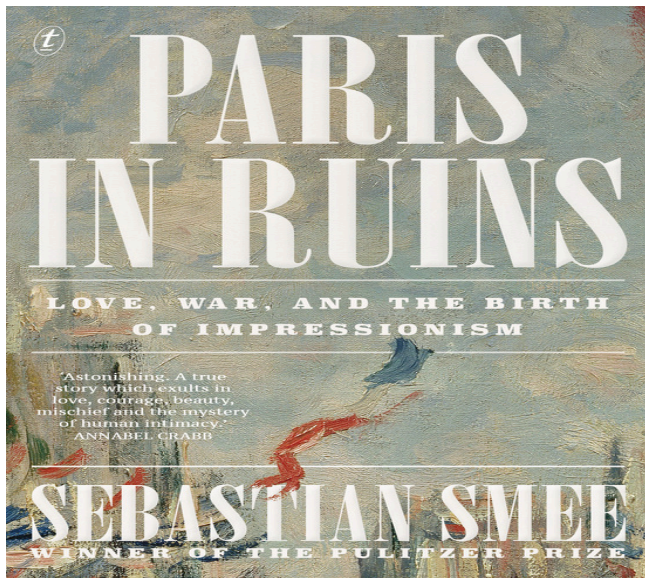
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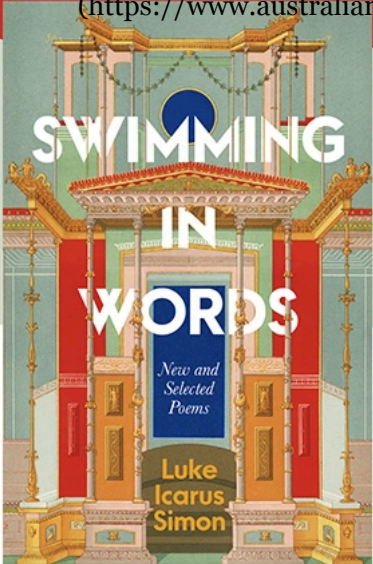
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