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Review

The Queen's Nanny (Ensemble Theatre)

From Melanie Tait comes a tartly funny version of the story of a woman who gave her all to The Firm.

Ensemble Theatre, Kirribilli, Sydney
 Reviewed on 10 September, 2024
 by [Jason Blake](#) on 12 September, 2024

Like 19

Based on the true story of Marion Crawford, nanny to the royal princesses Elizabeth and Margaret, Melanie Tait's tartly funny three-hander explores ideas of colonisation – not of land or peoples, in this case, but of one woman's life and hopes.

Crawford's story has been told before – novelised by Tessa Arlen in *In Royal Service to the Queen* and also in a Channel 4 documentary made some 20 years ago – but *The Queen's Nanny* is, as far as I can tell, the first time it has been taken to the stage. Tait's tartly funny and inventive version might not please the most ardent monarchists, but she's written it with skill and a winning wit.



Emma Palmer, Elizabeth Blackmore and Matthew Backer in *The Queen's Nanny*. Photo © Phil Erbacher

Introduced via an Australian journalist writing for a British tabloid, Marion is “a lonely old Scottish lady in an endless purgatory of tea-parties no-one shows up to.” Flashing back to 1931, Tait (*The Appleton Ladies' Potato Race*; *A Broadcast Coup* – both staged here at the Ensemble) shows us how her situation came to be, and who her missing tea-party guest is.

In her early 20s, Marion (played here by Elizabeth Blackmore), is on the brink of a career as a child psychologist. All that is put on temporary hold when she accepts an offer to act as governess to the two daughters of the Duke and Duchess of York – the future King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

“Crawfie” as she became known, quickly bonded with the two girls and, even more importantly, earned the trust of the Duchess. It's her powers of persuasion that turn Marion's short engagement into a family-adjacent role that spans the tumultuous 1930s (including the abdication of Edward VIII, which elevated the Duke and Duchess to the throne), the rise of Hitler, World War II and Crawford's controversial retirement – one in which she becomes a bestselling author and *persona non grata*. Then, as now, you cross *The Firm* at your peril.

Priscilla Jackman, who helmed the STC hit *RBG: Of Many, One*, directs a crisp, sharply paced staging. Michael Hankin's stylishly minimal set allows for quick shifts and seamless transitions. The devastation of war is economically captured in a shower of paper and a shaken-up doll's house. Lighting (Morgan Moroney) and sound/music (James Peter Brown) are first-rate.

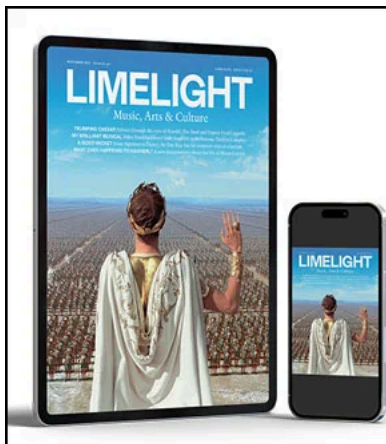


Matthew Backer and Elizabeth Blackmore in *The Queen's Nanny*. Photo © Phil Erbacher

Likewise the acting, with Emma Palmer very funny as the boozy future Queen Mother (“I’m mad for fun!” she chortles, by way of introduction). Blackmore occupies the centre flawlessly as the determined, forward-thinking and ultimately tragic Marion. Matthew Backer excels in several lightly sketched supporting characters: the stammering King; a go-getting American publisher; Marion’s seemingly charming lover who competes against the Royals for her attention, and even the young Princess Elizabeth.

I hope Tait is pitching *The Queen's Nanny* to British theatres. The Old Dart needs to see it.

The Queen's Nanny plays at Ensemble Theatre, Kirribilli [until 12 October](#).



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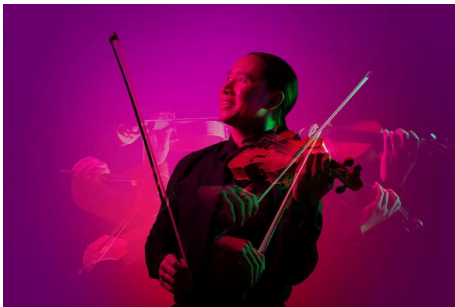


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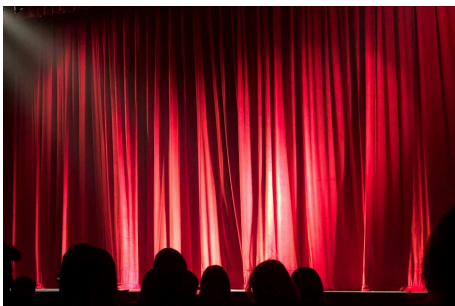


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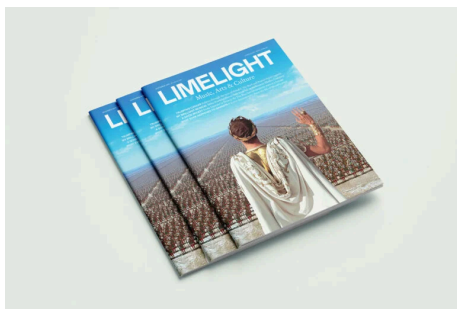


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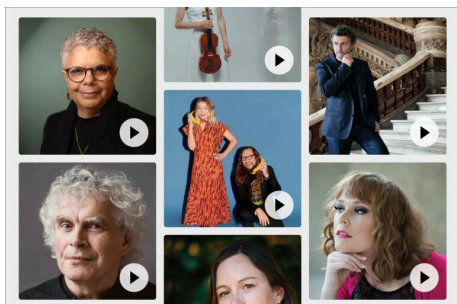


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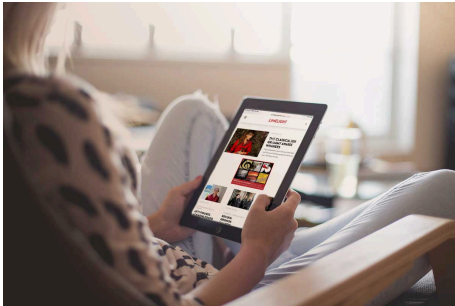


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