

'HER NAME WAS LOLA'
CRITICAL RESPONSE BY MEGAN SPENCER



Her Name Was Lola was a theatrical meditation on/contemplation of the 'character' of Lola Montez, the Goldfield's most renowned historical stripper. Or 'showgirl' as the women behind this production prefer to call her.

Lola was not only infamous, she's now officially famous. When you hear her name revered on ABC Radio's middle class chat fest *The Conversation Hour* – a program not wont to celebrating the lives of showgirls too often – you know someone has crossed over from 'infamy' into 'fame'.

Which in a sense is what 'Her Name Was Lola' was all about; the idea was to use the character of Lola as a 'conduit' into exploring female fame with 'theatre' the vehicle for doing so.

Unsurprisingly it was a full house the night we crammed into the Castlemaine Town Hall backstage, to see the first of 2 performances, coordinated/directed by Katerina Kokkinos- Kennedy and performed by Melanie Jame Walsh. In the line outside prior to the show, members of the audience were overheard talking about 'Lola' from *The Conversation Hour* they'd heard that week. Lola had come full circle.

Lola's story was broken into 'episodes', nine in all, that took us from dressing room to backstage, then (briefly), to stage.

The first we had to listen to; an 'overheard' conversation also, of how a modern day potty-mouthed, rebellious young 'Lola' might have fought her disapproving, ne'er-do-well mother, to be the performer she wanted. To take on the daring persona of a burlesque performer in a world addicted to an insatiable thirst – not so much for sex (anymore); rather to infamy. Or 'celebrity'. Lola wanted to compete, and 'make it' come hell or high water. Her mother was competing against her – or so it sounded..

The next 'episode' saw Lola duly 'assembled' with help from audience members, who dressed Lola as she stood blinking silently into a mirror, naked, blonde, then step by step transformed into the persona of a mysterious Spanish dark-haired dancer/ entertainer. A pianist tinkled the soundtrack, adding gravity to her/the construction. Lola 'became' with a strange kind of Irish accent, no doubt the one she had back there in history, as she spider-danced her way across the 18th Century pubs of the Goldfields. She eventually sang Iggy Pop's 'The Passenger' – it was a rousing pub-ditty and we were all to sing along.

I got goosebumps. The anticipation created was palpable.

The audience participation continued backstage as Lola morphed into an Elisabeth Gilbert-type 'New Age' spokesperson-cum-channel, whose aim it was for us – all of us – to connect with the 'spirit of the dancer', and to assist Lola to exorcise her German lover Ludwig from her poor broken heart. It was an unashamed piss-take on today's best-seller self-actualising culture, of which Elisabeth Gilbert has become an unwitting leader. Using sock puppets.

Interspersed in the episodes were 'rousing renditions' of contemporary songs, used to tell Lola's story of love, loss and betrayal. A plaintive rendition of 'I Hope I Never' by Split Enz to evoke Lola's loss of royal Bavarian lover, King Ludwig I, from her life; Iggy Pop's aforementioned 'The Passenger' in the green room; Leonard Cohen's 'Dance Me To The End of Love' to wind down the show, and notably the centrepiece, 'Her Name Was Lola' by Barry Manilow – used in one of the final episodes.

Our 'actress' playing Lola/Elisabeth, suddenly breaks character, ascends a staircase and argues with an imaginary director about how most authentically to portray Lola Montez, the showgirl we are all so interested in, while singing several versions. And getting it 'wrong', over and over.

Suffice to say the show was ambitious and operated on a number of levels and meta-levels - with audience participation integral to its text. It was realised from a week of rehearsals and construction in Castlemaine, under the Seedpod banner.

Katarina's performance was sometimes intrepid, but for the most part confident. As the show progressed she became further in control of what, in less-deft hands, could have become a mess. It was clear she loved cabaret, loved to sing, to perform, and loved the *idea* of Lola...

At times it felt like she was a little afraid of the audience – there was no need; we were more afraid of her and where she might take us! Perhaps she was afraid of what she had created...This ambitious monster that not only took in an historic figure but a contemporary contemplation – female fame and what it means now. Big questions.

Melanie's presence was comforting; she brought with her such a gentle, generous energy, one that helped guide us around 'loose cannon' Lola, and a show could have become unwieldy (but didn't). Perhaps the worst you could say about it was that some parts felt less finished than others.

The highlights for me, a fan of burlesque and of stories of rebellious women with taboo stories, were the 'episodes' that went quiet; that took us to the 'bosom' of Lola and revealed something of the frail human behind the chaos, the 'showgirl', and the heartbreak.

When Lola was first 'assembled' in the dressing room, it was moving and graceful. The audience found it so also; you could have heard a pin drop. We were in awe and

grateful of such intimacy. And being allowed to watch how a dramatic persona is constructed backstage – it's a rare/rarefied occurrence, 'in situ'.

When the director came, and took us all one by one, by the hand for a private audience with Lola, as she sang 'Dance Me To The End of Love', over and over, after her 'meltdown'.. It was lovely. Overwhelming. Emotional. And a gift.

The pre-ending was very 'Berlin', very 'Marlene', and again, very moving/overwhelming, to be allowed such intimacy with a performer who'd put herself through such a lot *for us*.

The finale was equally as inclusive and graceful; we all got to be revealed from behind the big curtain on the main stage, linking our hands with Lola/Actress, strangers and friends, up in that rarified space that most of us never set foot upon.

We took a bow en masse, under spotlights and over foot-lights, in full glare of the public gaze, all of us implicated within the show to an imaginary audience who may have seen Lola up there in that very same spot, a hundred+ years ago..

It was like time-travelling in someone else's shoes.

That's what I enjoyed most; going back in time with Lola. Contemplating in those quieter moments, how it might have been for her... Constructing this risque character in a time that was much tougher than now for women to express themselves in such way. (After all, we live in a time that not only celebrates 'raunch culture' but expects/encourages it.) How difficult must it have been for her? How brave/foolhardy must she have been as a person?

I wanted more of this quiet poetry and less of the post-modern meta-inquiry about fame and artifice and theatre. The stillness was where the show was most powerful.

Suffice to say, *Her Name Was Lola* was often beguiling and contains much promise. I look forward to seeing how the quieter, more introspective 'episodes' are expanded into the broader text, to sustain a deeper exploration into the 'within' of Lola Montez, as it does the 'without'.