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SVETLANA IN SLINGBACKS

BY VALENTINA LEVKOWICZ

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Background Notes

Contents: Page:

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INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT: Valentina Levkowicz

Val, to what degree is* Svetlana in Slingbacks *an autobiographical piece?

It's purely autobiographical. I wrote it simply because I wanted to tell the story of a certain section of my childhood. Basically, what I did was, I just went through everything I could remember, anything that came to mind and I wrote it down. It's all just memory. Bar a couple of little things, it's everything that I remember happening at that time, condensed into an hour and a half.

Did you have to make some choices about which memories to include and which to leave out when you were structuring the piece?

No, at first I wrote down everything that I could remember, all the scenes about my mum and dad and sister and friends - just anything that came to mind. I didn't censor it at all. This was a long time, ago around 1989. Then I workshopped the play with actors and after that, I started to cull the scenes that weren't very interesting. You can always tell, when you see actors perform a piece, what's good and what's not; what is going to be theatrical and what isn't. I'm only interested in what is going to be theatrical on stage, with a lot of action .

So I did the workshop with the actors, but I still had a huge mess of stuff. When I met with a dramaturg and a director, they said to me, "You must put this all into a storyline". So I put it into the storyline of a few days in the life of Svetlana, and crammed in everything I could.

The play is based on what I remembered, because my sister and everybody else who is in the play would have a completely different memory. They might say: "That didn't happen that way", or "I can't remember that" or "That's a load of rubbish, what are you talking about?" Everybody's memory differs to a certain extent, but I put in what was true for me. There are memories of things that I used to fantasise about, things I used to dream about, stuff I used to watch on TV, and those things sometimes get mingled with the reality. But for me, it's all true.

My sister is the only person in the family who has seen the play, and she said "Yeah, that's what happened to Mum" and "I never knew you felt like that about it all". She has a very different memory of course, but at the same time, it's sort of similar. I just think everybody has a different perspective on things.

You know, the reality was probably much more banal, more ordinary than what is in the play. But what the play did was, it enabled me to give my own impressions of what happened.

You were quite young when these things happened weren't you, so the memories are about how those events impacted on you as a child, and the particular way that a child will read and understand things.

That's right. Children just seem to cope; they go on assimilating all this stuff and they just handle it. I guess that's what I wanted to show in the play: how in this family where terrible things have happened to people, this kid just handles it.

What prompted you to write the play?

I first wrote and workshopped the play in 1989, because it was bothering me. What happened to my family caused me a lot of grief through my life, a lot of terrible sadness. I thought, I've got to turn this into something more positive. You can go to psychiatrists forever, or you can just suppress it all. I thought, this is bothering me and at the same time I'm in the theatre - gee, some of this would make good theatre! I hoped other people might understand it or share with it, because it is quite universal.

It was in my subconscious. There are some things that you don't consciously think about. I did the workshop in '89 and it was fantastic. I had all the actors there and we workshopped the play and I had huge masses of script. Then after it al finished, I just felt dreadful for months. I had to put the play in a cupboard, and I didn't look at it again because what that does is, it makes you go back there again. It's like some sort of horrible hypnotherapy session where you relive your past. So I put it away and it was only in 1998 that I gingerly took it out again, because someone I knew wanted scripts for her company (Vitalstatistix Women's Theatre in Adelaide). I thought, I'm going to give this a go, so I just sent the script as it was, and the company picked it up. Then I thought, I don't know if I want to do this because it will become real again, but in the end I let it go. I think it was a sort of compulsion. It was something I just had to tell for my own well being or something. It was as simple as that. But it did take along time to get there.

In recent times there have been a number of one-person plays with people telling there own personal stories on stage, but there are not very many autobiographical plays with larger casts, where the playwright steps outside the story and hands it over to others to tell. Was this a deliberate choice for you?

I think writing a play with a larger cast is harder to do. I could have written a one-woman show where I just stand and tell the story, but I find that too simple. And I didn't want to be in the play; I wasn't interested in that. I couldn't do all the dream stuff and all the fantasy stuff. I wanted to create a whole sort of "world" with all that stuff in it and I couldn't do that by myself. I've seen one-person shows where people tell their stories, and they're great, but that's not what my play is about.

What has the experience been like for you, of observing your own life being portrayed on stage?

I found it very hard. I couldn't say I enjoyed any of it, particularly because the actors are all so good at portraying what happened. It brought it all back home a bit too much.

I still find it very tough to look at. I can't separate myself from it.

Has writing the play ultimately been helpful for you?

Yes, because a lot of people have come up to me after the performance and said "I had a very similar situation"or "My family was just like that". There have been a lot of women coming up to me and telling me that they were really pleased - there was someone else around who had gone through a terrible time just like they had, but the play was presented in such a humorous and enjoyable way that it made it easier for them. They're so pleased about it, and that's what makes it worthwhile.

Mum died a long time ago and I wanted to bring her back in a positive way. For me, that was more important than anything I wanted to do for myself, because what happened to her was really bad, and her memory is so distant now. I thought, we're going to give this woman a go. We'll let her act on stage and have a really good time for two hours. Her story will be published in the text of the play, and that's like a witness to her life. It's just one of those things I had to do - to bring her back in a positive way. I know she had us kids and that's positive, but I just needed to make her live again. I think that for me, that's what life's about. I think we should do things like that, I think it's really important. I'm glad that I was in the theatre, because if I hadn't been, we would've just had a sad memory of this person who was terribly unwell and who died. I think if you can bring someone back somehow, that's a really neat thing to do. A memorial. Because you see, I didn't really know her. And now I feel like I know her, even though it's all in my imagination.

The balance of humour and tragedy is a very strong feature of* Svetlana. *Were you aware of juggling these elements when writing the play, or did they both emerge naturally in telling the story?

I never thought about any of that. I always think - you just tell the story and whatever happens, happens. I never thought - this scene will be funny or that one won't be. I tend to see things in a theatrical, black, comic sort of way. The thing is, in life you do stupid things. At the time it seems terribly serious, when you're having an argument with someone or whatever, but when you think about it, it can also be very funny with everyone screaming and carrying on.

I think the two go hand in hand. If Dad hit me with the strap or something, it was terrible at the time, but now when I look at it, it strikes me as silly at the same time, with him chasing me around the house. Physical abuse is not hilarious - I'm not saying that at all. I just like showing that people still do ordinary and crazy things while the most terrible things are happening all around them.

I think especially for kids and teenagers, it's very important that they're still playing and seeing funny things and doing ordinary stuff when they are living with parents who are in disillusioned marriages. It's a coping mechanism, I guess.

Without comedy or theatricality, I think the play would just be terribly boring, because I'm not Eugene O'Neill. There are some writers who can write sad plays brilliantly but I'm not comparing this play with them. This is a simple piece; it's sort of naïve. It's bald, there are no literary illusions, there's no trying to be clever; it's just in your face.

Svetlana *is very evocative in its depiction of a particular era. Can you talk a bit about this?*

The era was really strong for me; I remember 'the look'. My sister was the fashion plate and she used to have girlfriends who were into fashion and knew what 'the latest' was, clothes-wise and music-wise. The radio was always on, the 45s were always playing. I knew every song on the radio backwards, all the pop songs and pop groups, all the television shows that we used to watch. That was our escape and it was a big part of the world that we lived in. Mixed up with this European angst, we were still trying to live this Aussie way of life with its music and so on. All those references to the 60s just came out naturally because that was the era when I was a child and these happened to me.

I think you could set the play in another time and the central story would still be the same. You just change those specific references. It's nice when people who are over 40 can relate to all that 60s stuff, but a lot of the 16 and 17 year olds in the audience don't relate to any of that, and they still get the play. The 60s references are just sort of 'dressing'; they help to give the play a feeling or an atmosphere. That was the atmosphere I remembered; it was very strong for me.

Were there any particular themes you were wanting to highlight in the telling of your story?

I think mainly I wanted to highlight what has happened to people, especially women, when they have become mentally ill, over the years. I wanted to show the huge differences in the changes in psychiatric assistance.

Mum basically only had nervous breakdowns. You can survive a nervous breakdown today very easily, but then, you didn't - you got taken to hospital and very serious things were done to you, especially if you were a woman. Mum was very vocal, she didn't shut up. She argued the point all the time. She wasn't just a happy housewife and you didn't behave like that in those times. She was seen as just a neurotic migrant housewife who should be made to be quiet. The idea was that if she towed the line, then she wasn't sick any more. I wanted to show how bad it was then. It's still pretty bad but at least you get a little bit more of a chance these days.

I also wanted to show how the two girls in the play wanted to escape what happened to their mum, and to escape the influence of their heavy father figure - they wanted to be free of all that. I didn't do it consciously though. The only conscious thing I really wanted to tell was about Mum and what happened to her. I always think that when you tell a story, you just tell the story and it's up to everybody else to think about what the themes are. I think mainly about how things are going to be theatrical. I leave it to everybody else to interpret how they see the play; one person will think it's about something, and another will think it's about something else. I don't worry about that. It's hard enough getting the actual story to make sense!

Do you think there may be a number of people in the audience who will relate to the experiences of the migrant family?

Yes, there is all that stuff in the play. But even if you're not from a migrant family you will relate to it somewhere along the line - you will remember getting picked on for something whether it was being too fat, or you didn't wear the right clothes, or you studied too hard. You'll remember how that felt. The play does trigger all those sorts of things. For me families are just universal. You'll find something to relate to, even if you didn't have big dramatic things happening in your family.

How would you describe the style of the play?

Because I'm an actor and I've been acting a long time, I like a big, physical sort of style. When I go to see a play, I like to see things that are highly dramatic and highly visual and theatrical. I really like a lot of action-based stuff. So, with Svetlana, all I did was think - how do I fit all these things into the story and make it as interesting as I can? I wanted to include dreams in it; I wanted fantasy characters, like the space guys on TV who come to life. I thought - why can't those things happen? I can do that if I want to. If the father sees his dead brother, he can come back as Dean Martin in a cabaret outfit - why not? I just let my imagination go.

This is a memory piece, so it gave me carte blanche to say - it's my memory, it's in my head, so I can put in anything that I like. I'm not coming from a literary background at all, I come for a theatre background. So I had to approach writing the play from a visual perspective. I had to see it all in pictures, like on television in my head. I drew this play before I wrote it, then I captioned it. There's as much action as possible and not too much talk; maybe because I have a lack of confidence in that area, I pushed the visual side.

There have been three or four different productions of* Svetlana in Slingbacks *across Australia. Have the productions varied very much in their interpretation of the text?

Basically it's a pretty strong piece and it dictates to a certain extent how it should be performed. The actors and director don't dictate to the play, the play dictates to the production because, really, it's set like a rock. All the productions have been different; they've all had different approaches but, basically, each has had the same feeling and I've been very pleased with that. Some of the sets and some of the ideas have surprised me, but the play itself does not alter. The actual essence of the piece has stayed the same throughout. It's still about the same family.

Some of the actors say 'This is weird!', and they want to discuss it because they think the play is a bit chaotic or anarchic stylistically and structurally. But I just say, that's they way it is, that's the way it was. When you say, it's not 'naturalistic' to you, it is to me. That was the naturalism of my childhood. It was that big. As I have gotten older, my life has become a lot more 'naturalistic', but back then my life had a nightmare style to it.

So all the productions have had different set, they've had different costumes, they've tried to incorporate the 60s things - some with more success with others. The production in Queensland was quite way-out, but it was terrific, I thought. The one in Adelaide was much more naturalistically done, while this one in Melbourne is much bigger, more cartoon-like. There's another production coming up in Sydney and I don't know what they'll do with that and I really don't mind.

Have you been involved at all in the rehearsal process with any of the productions?

No. I say to the directors that unless they have a problem, or want their questions answered, I will have nothing to do with it. There's nothing worse than the writer lingering in the background - you've got to give it away. I'm not precious about it, and I think that's got a lot to do with being an actor - it belongs to the actors and the director now, let them do what they want with it.

Do you see playwrights in Australia as having a particular role to play in society?

Yes, I do - and that is basically reflecting what's going on here in this country, I hope. For me, playwrights should tell stories about their country and what's going on politically and socially. I'm into parochial theatre, because the parochial to me is the universal. The more parochial and more specific a play is about a certain suburb or particular thing that happened to a particular person, the more universal it is. That's not to say that there's not room for theatre about big ideas - I think that's absolutely necessary as well. I just wish there would be more Australian plays performed by mainstream companies - there's not enough of that happening.

My main thing is theatre that is simply about telling stories. I think it's a great way of sharing things with other people.

What would you like the audience to be thinking about as they leave the theatre having seen* Svetlana in Slingbacks*?

I would like people to be walking out and saying, 'Gee, I enjoyed that!' or 'Gee, that was weird!' or 'I haven't seen anything like that before, I didn't think that was what I was going to see tonight'. I don't want people to be coming out thinking 'Ho, hum'. They can think anything they like, whether they liked it or hated it; I prefer them to think 'That stank!' rather than 'It was just pretty ordinary'.

I think *Svetlana* will just make you think about families, and it will trigger things that happened to you.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR: Peter Houghton

***Peter, as a director, what were your impressions when you first read* Svetlana In Slingbacks?**

I was very impressed by the structure and I thought Val had succeeded in creating a very comic, but heartfelt piece about her own life. I think the character of Svetlana is virtually autobiographical in many ways. I thought it was very courageous of the writer to set that story down, but more than that I thought she did a good job of moving past herself as well. A lot of writers who write autobiographical material can tend to dwell in the personal tragedy too heavily and are not able to see the humorous side. Val didn't fall into that trap. She brought a real theatricality to the piece, which made it much more interesting than an autobiographical story would normally be.

Other first impressions ...I loved the characters. I thought they were all extremely well drawn, possibly because they are based on real people. If there is a "baddie" in the play, I suppose you could look at it as being Svetlana's father, but Val succeeds in making him very rounded, giving him lots of foibles and flaws, but you still kind of love him at the end. He becomes a really perplexing character. I like theatre like that where you don't necessarily walk out with any complete ideas or totally solid philosophies, but you are challenged by what you see and realise that life is complex. I suppose one of the reasons why I am in theatre as an art form is that it does not often draw simplistic conclusions; it is a kind of argument for complexity. I thought Val succeeded with that, particularly with her father's character.

The children are probably a bit closer to her own sort of experience. The older girl, Sonya, is very adventurous and wants to get out of the house; she is very ambitious for herself in life. Financially, she wants not to have to live at the back of a deli any more; she wants to get on and live the 'Australian Dream'. She is very angry and passionate, and she is going through the teen period which is difficult for anyone anyway.

Young Svetlana is more naïve and more trapped within the family's drama. She lives their drama more completely, and she's not totally aware of what's going on, because she is a child.

Luda is quite a beautiful portrait, I think, of a person who is suffering from a mental illness which was not understood at the time, and which is only partially understood even now. A lot of people really engage with the play almost entirely on that level, as a piece about mental illness and how people deal with it or don't deal with it.

For all those reasons, I was impressed with the play: because it had a great deal of depth, but also a great deal of humour - the kind of play that I like.

Did you need to do any research for your direction of the play?

I was lucky enough to have quite a bit to do with the writer, so if I had a question, I usually asked her. I had a look through her family album and that kind of thing. Val obviously had a lot of material on all the people in the play.

I did a little bit of research on the era. The play is set in the mid-sixties, so it is heavily influenced by the space race and by the Russian sputnik programme; being Eastern European people, they followed all that with great interest. Svetlana fantasises constantly about spaceships and Martians and being rescued by some sort of intergalactic being. So I did a little bit of research about all that, but nothing too detailed. I was just interested in what was actually happening politically in the world at that time. It was the height of the Cold War, which coloured the way that people in Australia dealt with Eastern European migrants - they were viewed with deep suspicion. Australia at the time was a very conservative place, slightly behind the times. It was just getting onto the first wave of rock and roll and all that sort of thing, which had a huge impact on the sound track of the play. We also did a bit of research on what people were wearing and the sort of 'hip' scene at the time.

I suppose it is pretty unusual for a director to have access to a playwright who is writing about her own life...

Val commented a lot on the production afterwards and gave me quite a bit of feedback about it, but prior to the production, she did not really say much at all about how she wanted it to be done. That is to her credit, as some playwrights will be quite particular about the reading of their plays.

I think Val still lives the play in many ways, so she was interested to see how I interpreted it. It must have been quite a perverse experience for her to see somebody coming in and interpreting her own family life. I think she found it quite interesting to know how I arrived at those decisions, because she is not the kind of playwright who has a totally worked out view of how the play should be produced. She is very open like that. This play has been done a few times around Australia now and they have all been completely different productions. Val has spoken to the directors of all of them quite a lot, but never really told them how to do it. That was exciting too, trying to work out how to tackle the play.

You have made some very strong stylistic choices in your direction. Could you talk about those?

One of the guiding forces in my direction was that the play was written from the point of view of a twelve-year-old. Virtually every scene I interpreted from her point of view, so things are a little bit larger than we would normally experience them as adults. Some things are a bit more grotesque. Things don't necessarily make a huge degree of linear sense; the production sometimes collapses into play and games and things. There is one scene when Svetlana and Sonya go to the beach where it just reverts to a kind of childish beach fight with people showing off and running around. I really wanted to capture that energy of children when they get outside and into the sun and they start running around - that real frantic freneticism. That is really directed from the point of view of a twelve-year-old's wide eyes.

Cartoons and stuff like that were also important. I wanted a 2-D feeling about the production. You're dealing with characters like Zorgon, who is a guy from another planet. He feels very much like a cartoon creation or something that Svetlana has seen on television, so I wanted those scenes to be in the tradition of a film like *Creature from the Black Lagoon* - kind of like sixties Cold War alien movies with very vibrant colours and strong characterisations. There was something cheap and fake about those early sci -fi films, and I wanted to capture those qualities with Zorgon!

I suppose the set was a little bit of a compromise when we did the play for the first time (in 2001) because it was part of a repertory season with other plays. But in many ways, that helped focus the show because we could only have what we really needed; things such as those bright laminated furnishings and the pink fluffy bedhead and those things became quite important. A full production in a stand-alone situation could have become quite fussy and detailed in trying to be historically accurate, and in many ways I think that would have worked against the play. So I was glad in hindsight that our production had had those restrictions placed on it, because it helped us find things that we may not have in another scenario.

The musical style was obviously influenced by the period, but I felt like that music should be relevant for each scene, rather than having any kind of overall score. Each scene should have its own place and its own integrity, so that the play becomes a really weird collection of feelings and impressions from that time. In some ways the play is a kind of time capsule of the 1960s with its strangeness and its heightened moments, heavily punctuated with lots of peaks and troughs and all the strange exaggerations of the period.

When I saw the production last year, I was struck by the fact that it worked so well on that cartoon-like level, but it was also absolutely truthful to the tragedy of the piece. Did you work consciously to achieve that balance in your direction?

I think I've always felt that if you're trying to present a play that has a really deep emotional base - which this play does, because it's concerned with a family that tears itself apart over a mental illness which is not understood - you almost have to start with the opposite of that. I find that people, unless they slump into a permanent depression, will always try to put a positive spin on things. It's human nature to try and find something positive, whether its humour, or escape into movies or whatever their particular outlet might be. I felt that the best way to capture the deep sadness of this play was essentially to emphasis the comedy. Then when that is bubbling along and everything is going well, you subtract the comedy and then you really feel the absence of it. You find yourself in a much deeper trough than you would have found yourself in if the play had been evenly sad all along. I suppose it's similar to the way a conductor might deal with the orchestration of a musical piece. I wanted the play to be incredibly buoyant at the beginning, so that when you land in Luda's mental breakdown at the end, it really does feel very quiet and still and empty.

The theme of the outsider, the exile or the migrant has often been explored in Australian works of art. They are part of the legacy of the way this country has

developed. There is often also a real sense of disconnection, a lack of belonging that for me is a very important aspect of this play. These people are dislocated and they don't really have the social networks that we might enjoy if we have been here longer. They don't really know how to break into the culture and so they can end up becoming introverted. This can be very destructive when there is no real acceptance from the community.

For that reason, given the sort of stuff that has been going on with the boat people at the moment, and the political push to stop people coming here to Australia and not trying to understand the immigration experience. I thought it was valuable timing-wise to be producing a play which is really all about that migrant experience and which shows that these people are human and deserve understanding.

Were there any particular themes or ideas you were trying to highlight in your production of* Svetlana*?

I covered a bit of that in the last answer, but I think that sense of the outsider is probably the main one. There has been quite a lot of stuff on television recently about the mental health of people in the Woomera Detention Centre, and it seems that one of the first casualties in situations like that is people's sanity. I feel that very strongly with Val's play - whether or not the mother had a predisposition to schizophrenia or whatever - it was certainly not helped by the absolute isolation of living in the outer Adelaide suburbs in the 1960's. Luda is this urbane woman from a city in Europe who has grown up with cafes within arms reach, with people to talk to and music to listen to and political events to discuss, and then she finds herself in this isolated dustbowl suburb. She is a fish out of water, and because in the 60's women didn't really get involved in business, she also finds herself an outsider to her husband's business interests as well. She can't even become a part of caring for the family in any practical way, so she becomes disenfranchised in every way really. For me, that's the most potent theme.

But in some ways, my job was to camouflage that as much as possible so that it doesn't completely dominate the evening in a predictable way, but that it comes out now and the and hits you during the comic moments, so you're thinking "Oh my god, I'm laughing at this tragedy." My job in a way is to actually make the audience feel the guilt and embarrassment of being part of the "normal" community laughing at the "funny" family. You take them through the experience of being amused, but also feeling the Fretlov family's pain as well.

This is your second season of your production of* Svetlana*. Are there any advantages in being able to direct a show for a second time?

Yes, hopefully we have enough time in rehearsal to be able to make some corrections to what we did in the first production. I find in theatre that as rehearsal periods get shorter and shorter, your productions are often the result of kind of desperate and last minute decisions that had to happen

because you just needed to get the show on. Then when you work on a production for a second time, you are able to see it more clearly because it's not so much about saving the day, it's more about taking the play to a new level.

Svetlana was first produced as part of a repertory season, so audiences came to it with the expectation that it was really a part of something larger. This time, it's got its own slot, so I'm aware that expectations might be a little higher. I want to even out as many things as I can technically with the show, particularly lighting and sound things and anything that was clunky or a stop-gap measure to cover up something that I didn't feel was really working. I feel like I do have the time now to sort that stuff out.

I've also got the added interesting situation this time of having a new actor coming into the play, because one of the original actors wasn't available for this season. This is always a really interesting process, because you are working with someone who has never been inside the production before (though in this case the actor does know the play very well). The new actor gets knocked around by the timing of the other actors, and they get frustrated because they know the scene really well and now there's a new person in it, so there's that kind of tension going on initially. But having a new cast member usually always benefits both parties, because the people who had done it before have to re-question why they made certain decisions, and the new person gets a more accelerated understanding of the play.

Obviously, I hope the play will work better because it will be a smoother production. Often it doesn't feel like that to me though - I've seen it so many times I just see the flaws more and more!

My main direction throughout the entire first season and rehearsal period was "Keep going fast!" Basically, I felt that the fast pace was a real key to this production: it needed to go at a breakneck speed to keep ahead of the audience. It also needed to have an incredible freneticism about it, which was driven by the young people in the play. Sometimes I felt however, that that happened to the detriment of certain emotional "landings", as I call them, in the second half of the play that got a bit buried in the pace of the show. So I'd like to sit down this time with the actors and even before we start rehearsal, to identify what those moments are and what they mean in terms of the play as a whole. Then we need to work on them so that the audience are really aware of those moments.

Christina Smith designed this piece, and she's a really interactive kind of designer, which is good. Every designer is completely different. Some will present you with a completed concept, and others will have virtually no idea until they've started talking with you and they'll kind of bounce more off your ideas. Christina's way of working is a pretty happy medium of those two things. She has got strong ideas of her own about period and place and so on. She's one of the best, I think, in terms of identifying a particular period and of finding the differences between characters within that period. I know virtually nothing about fashion, so when I look at a period like the 60's, I can't tell the difference between a dag and a cool person!

Christina also has a good sense of the "theatricality" of theatre. She knows that you don't really have to go for great detail in the set or costumes because the audience is going to be twenty metres away. She understands that what you are trying to create is an overall impression, the "painting" of the play if you like.

Christina is also very actor friendly. She works with the actors in terms of costumes, looking at things that might be difficult for them. She makes sure that they have their costumes as soon as possible so they can work with them and make them a part of what they are doing.

So my involvement in the design process has been to kind of vomit out all of my ideas as early as I can, so that Christina has a good handle on what my take on the production is going to be. In this instance, I mentioned words like "cartoon," "big", "colourful", "broad" and "grotesque" to give her an idea of the scale she could work within. She also knew roughly where I wanted certain spaces, such as the kitchen, to go on the stage. That was pretty much all I did actually, and then Christina came back and presented the first drawings with the design shapes and angles that she was interested in working with.

The design process usually starts with a general sense of the scale and the size and the style of the piece, and then from there it develops more particularly with each character and each scene.

CHRISTINA SMITH – Designer of 'Svetlana in Slingbacks'

Christina as a designer, what were your first impressions and reactions to the script of 'Svetlana in Slingbacks'?

My first impressions of *Svetlana in Slingbacks (Svetlana*) were actually quite different to the impressions that I would normally get when reading a script. This was purely because *Svetlana in Slingbacks,* in its original season, was part of a program called 'Inside 01' which consisted of six separate plays being performed in repertory style on the same stage. I was aware of this when I was reading the script, so when I read *Svetlana* I always had every other script in my mind. So it was quite strange. Usually when I read a script I try to read it straight through, then jot down initial thoughts, put them away, and actually treat it as quite an artistic process. But when *Svetlana* was designed it was very much in terms of more practical or technical reasons - how does *Svetlana* relate to elements of, let's say, *Public Dancing* or *Ancient Emnity* (two other plays in the 'Inside 01' season). I was looking for elements in common with other shows, thinking, 'Do I need to build a house as a set? Do I need to give it a more open space?' This last concept was what ended up happening.

So it's not how you would normally have treated a script?

If I'd just received *Svetlana* on its own it would be a very different design and I would have had the luxury of a single script. But that is the nature of 'Inside' seasons – rapid fire! Often design is a matter of time restraints as well. I may be thinking 'Oh, there are two months till this is due in and I've got to find a way to incorporate all six plays!" I had to accomplish things very quickly so I was never really able to have one single play in my mind. Anything to do with one particular play such as changing a prop or the bit of a set, I always had to have the other five plays in mind.

The play includes a number of 60s references and specific costumes and plots that relate to that era, how did you go about researching and finding those items?

Researching – again that was kind of tricky due to the restraints of 'Inside 01' because it was with so many texts and such a short time. I had to become quite a time -management person. I actually had two period plays out of six yet they were not in the same period. In terms of costumes I actually did use a couple of sources. I use the internet quite regularly and do key word searches in terms of finding images. There are some search engines on the internet where you can just search for images or even image bank sites which hold only images. I can put in terms or dates like 1960, see what comes up or perhaps beehive and see what comes up. I've used that quite often with researching particular costume periods.

The other thing I often do is go to somewhere like the State Library and look at newspaper or magazines of the time and getting copies of those. With a play like *Svetlana,* the first thing I often do when researching a particular period, is refresh my memory and go to a general costume book and just go, 'Yes that's the silhouette!' However, I often find that they're not so useful, particularly for Australian period shows because often in a costume history or fashion history, they're concerned with high fashion of the time, and they're not looking at what would've been worn in Adelaide in 1960. So I'm very conscious of looking at *Women's Weeklies* or newspaper advertisements which are often good and advertisements for Myer or similar stores. These are fantastic things to look at because it's what the every day person would've been wearing. That's why I actually try and collect catalogues at the moment, so that maybe in 30 years time I can look back and know what everyday people were wearing in 1990.

So - it's fairly important to be specific to Australia and to what the average people would have worn. This applies to set items or prop items as well. I actually borrowed a book of photography from *The West Australian* newspaper which was great. The photographs taken from *The West Australian* during the 50s and 60s were wonderful. You might see children or people on farms -it was a real cross section and very valuable to look at what every day people were doing.

Did you encounter any difficulties in designing for 'Svetlana in Slingbacks'?

I'm having one at the moment in the design for the remount actually. Most of the set we've been able to get back because we own it, but there is one particular set of chairs that I loved and I borrowed from a friend who no longer has the chairs. They were a set of four 1950s kitchen chairs and I'm finding it really hard to find a set of four kitchen chairs in good enough condition to be used for theatre. They've got to be stood on, thrown around and I want them just as a set of chairs without the table and within the budget. Finding certain period items can be quite hard, and you often have to go to speciality stores, specialty retro stores in particular. Unfortunately these can be quite expensive.

Most of the other period items for *Svetlana* have been found but the one thing we never found was a 1960s beer can. Then they were a different size and shape to what we know today. Actually I found one but I wasn't allowed to use it. That's often the thing - when you actually find something it often belongs to a collector and, of course, they don't want things used because they know how roughly theatre props and furniture get treated.

Is the authenticity in a period design important to you?

To a point. I can certainly get very drawn into the search for authenticity but often it's actually got to be what's more practical for the scene that is being performed. In relation to the beer can, this became a point of contention because in a particular scene, Sonya wouldn't have given her father, Boris, a

can of beer, she would've given him a longneck and a glass and poured it for him. It had to be a very quick moment, so we had to search for a can. This was a compromise with authenticity. The can works to get the business of the scene over and done with whereas having an authentic prop in this instance would make the business take too long. In the end you've got to serve the play and then can pick what elements you want to be authentic. In costuming in *Svetlana* it is quite far from authentic, but it tells the story and that's what we really want to do.

You briefly mentioned before, that 'Svetlana' was originally designed as part of 'Inside 01' and this affected its design. What aspects of design did the repertory style of the 'Inside 01' season directly affect?

The main impact on the set design was the lack of direct references to the period. With 'Inside 01' and with the current double bill (with *Post Felicity)* there is still a need for a flexible set. 'Inside 01' was a big wall which was hinged and changed configuration. In the current 2002 production of the double bill the configuration doesn't change - there's still a basic set. The set for *Svetlana* in both seasons has been quite neutral. 'Inside 01' was white and the 2002 season is going to be black. We will bring in elements that relate specifically to *Svetlana* but these all elements have to be brought in and hung within the turnaround for the show. We're actually quite limited as to what we can do because we've got approximately 20 minutes to do it in.

Certainly if I was doing *Svetlana* on its own the set would have quite a lot of references to a suburban house. The floor paint would be very, very different, much more lino based and probably quite colourful. The wall treatment might be a little bit different and the layout might be a little bit different. The basic set itself would have more of a *Svetlana* feel through it rather than just a black space that we bring things into. However, due to the set having to serve two plays there have been very practical constraints to the design.

Peter Houghton's direction is quite cartoon-like. How did that affect your design choices if at all?

I need to keep referring back to 'Inside 01' here because there was always a huge time constraint in relation to the design process. In a stand alone show I would read the text and study it. I would meet with the director and talk about it. I'd go away, probably do a rough model, go back and talk to the director again, bring what we took out of that meeting, go back again, fiddle with the model some more, go back and do it again. With 'Inside O1' I had to deal with five different directors and the design for *Svetlana* came about, I think, simply due to the director's availability within the process. With some of the other shows in that season the directors had more of a say in the layout. When I went to Peter (Peter Houghton, the director) with the design, I said I think this is what you're going to have to have, which is really very, very different from what I would normally do. I would probably never present a director with a model, before going through some sort of process with him. So it was just the unfortunate thing and there were a lot of compromises made with original design for *Svetlana*. In the end it became a white, quite open space.

From there the director and I discussed how to work on top of that design and this is where the hanging elements came in. How can we bring *Svetlana* into this white space which is really not *Svetlana?* So, we took it to that place. Once rehearsals started I guess I didn't know quite how far Peter was going to take it and I think perhaps he didn't know either. I remember when I saw my first rehearsal. Peter was running the first half of the play and I remember standing up, walking straight to wardrobe and saying, 'Hold it! Hold everything!' From that point on I was 'upping' everything. Every rehearsal I looked at I'd go back to what was being created - furniture being painted, costumes being made - and say, 'Could we just elevate the colour a bit? It was fun trying to keep up with what was happening in the rehearsal room. I hadn't really anticipated Peter taking the play to such a heightened state. The play isn't realism, not at all really, and I'd been working more towards the realism.

Because the design for *Svetlana* happened later in the season I was able to adjust it or heighten it as it progressed, particularly with Ludmilla's costumes. These tended to get bolder and bigger as the rehearsal went on. There's room in the *Svetlana* design I think for it to really go off the scale in terms of craziness. In the remount there is very little of the elements that went on top of the set that are actually changing. The main change in the design is the basic set. Again, the rehearsal period is quite short and I don't want to completely send the actors off the wall by giving them huge changes –'By the way, you're going to be wearing this and you're going to be using that'. We've kept the same blocking and we want the same elements. We know they work and so it's going to work both artistically and practically.

You said before it's not* realism, *how would you describe the style of the design?

It's strange; style's the last word I would use to describe anything in *Svetlana. Svetlana* is the most unstylish piece I've probably done. I guess it's in between a heightened reality and a very stylised design. There is certainly a basis in reality but it's actually a bit more up on the scale. It's quite bold, it's quite loud, particularly now that it's a black space as well, all the elements stand out. There's these hot spots of colour so each set element is fairly carefully considered and has been looked at in terms of style and colour and it's...yes, quite stylised.

Did you or have you had any input into the rehearsal process?

Unfortunately with the first season of *Svetlana*, sitting in rehearsal meant that I wasn't out looking for props for other shows and I needed to be. So that wasn't so good. Luckily stage management kept me in the loop. I would get 20 pieces of paper a day in my pigeon hole with rehearsal notes which were saying the director's got a question about this or question about that and I'd often try and find Peter, or I'd get as much information out of the actors in the fittings. I'd quiz them and I'd say, 'Listen now, what's really going on in this scene?" I found it quite distressing having to do fittings on costumes that were quite practical but not knowing the context that they were in. It's actually

a really hard way to design. With the costumes for instance, like Zorgon's costume, until I actually saw I think a run of it and saw what he was doing I had not idea. So I had to do a few quite late changes after seeing a run. In this particular season I'd like to be more involved in the rehearsal process.

My main involvement in the process will be working closely with one of the actors in particular, James Brennan. The role for him has changed quite significantly from the original season because he's also playing a couple of other characters, characters that were played by Tom Healy who featured in the original production. These extra characters don't sound bad on paper. However, when you actually look at it, the reason why Tom played those characters is because they are such hard doubling roles to do.

In the new production it means that James is playing four or five different characters and he's got quite a few difficult costume changes - probably under 30 seconds to do a complete change and then back into what he changed out of! I have to make sure that the costumes that he's wearing aid him as much as possible and serve the show as much as possible and stay true to the original *Svetlana.* I mean there are going to be some significant changes in the costumes he's wearing simply because they're going to have to be quite layered. So there's going to be quite a bit of fiddling and that's going to come out of watching him in rehearsal and making sure that where he exits and where he enters can allow for him to do the change, and it's a hard set to do a change in. There's no quick change areas to do costume changes in, so I will be spending a bit of time with him and that's probably going to be the main bit of the rehearsal process for me.

Does your role as designer mean that you have to work closely with the lighting and sound designers?

At present I need to urgently speak to the lighting designer! I would normally try and speak to the lighting designer as soon as possible within the time that the design was realised. When the design was delivered I actually said, 'Well here's the design, however, there are some elements that are going to have to be modified because they're not going to work with Daniel's lighting!' (Daniel Zika – lighting designer). There are certain widths and heights of things; we need to have furniture come in from one point, actors coming from another point and probably a lighting boom at another point. Something's going to have to give and I think it'll be a shifting around of elements of the set. But that's okay. That's what we do early in the bump in process, that's why I'm often there, and I'll try and be there during parts of Daniel's lighting rig bump in as well just so we can come to a happy compromise with where we need to tweak elements.

There are certain elements in this set which have been put in for Daniel as well; elements such as gauzes that don't work on their own. So I need to make sure that we're on the same wavelength. Daniel might think it's a really crappy idea so we need to kind of talk about that; specifically with *Svetlana* because of all the 'hanging practicals'.

In the original season it was both Daniel and I who were deciding the location for those and hopefully that will happen again. So we'll both pinpoint where certain hangings should go because that's as much him as it is me. It's now a black-grey set which is different from the original design, and now Daniel can do a rig which is specific to *Svetlana* so I'm looking forward to that and I'm anticipating looking quite different lighting wise. It's quite exciting actually.

In terms of sound design honestly, none at all. I probably rarely have contact with a sound designer. It's a bit different when I'm designing dance - you're in pretty close contact with the composer then. In theatre I'm usually finished by the time the sound comes about. However, I particularly like the way that David Franzske (sound designer) works. He does a lot of his work during the rehearsal period and I wish I could work that way. It seems like a lot of his design is generated from what's happening in the rehearsal and he's very active within it. Usually my elements have already occurred before his have actually begun so in terms of collaborating there is very little. However, there is actually such an integrated sound design with *Svetlana* and I was able to hear quite a bit of it during rehearsal. I was quite influenced by his work in terms style. I was often very influenced by what I was hearing of the sound design, the television references, and the more comic references that were coming out of the sound. I was trying to keep up with them in a sense, creating a more 'day glow' image, quite blocky and bright in terms of colour.

In the ideal world where we all had adequate resources and could have very long rehearsal times, the ideal collaboration would be a very long rehearsal period; one where I didn't have to produce a design until I'd actually seen a few weeks of rehearsal. So therefore, the set and costume, lighting and sound and I guess the direction, the whole piece could evolve from the same starting point. I think that would be a wonderful way to work. However, as a designer, I'm pre-empting a lot of decisions that are yet to be managed by the director and by the actors and it can be quite a hard way to work. So I have to get this design together and then, with involvement within the rehearsal room, I figure out how to accommodate the work that the actors and director are doing. That's often where design changes and tweaks are happening.

Is design a blending of an artistic and practical process for you?

I must admit that the 'blending' has taken a while to develop because when you are trained or when go to school to study, in the first couple of years of the training, you're working in a box. You act as a sole designer and you're doing theoretical shows because there's no one else - there isn't a director, or actors, or a lighting designer you're working with. It's 'This is *my* concept of Midsummer Night's Dream'. Then as soon as you do your first show, which is often within the institution, it's like, 'Oh hang on a minute! Who are you? You're a lighting designer and you have an impact on my design!' Then you realise very quickly you've got to grab this person from the very beginning and work with them. I think the best designs come out of an early collaboration. Certainly the better work that I've done comes out of being able to talk often and freely to every other creative in the process. Unfortunately, due to financial and time constraints it doesn't always happen.

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES BRENNAN, ACTOR - A QUESTION OF MULTIPLE ROLES

James, you are required to play several characters in Svetlana in Slingbacks, who characters do you actually play?

I play six characters in all - Ray, Bruno, Ziggy Pischynski, Zenyk, Zorgon and Man in Black.

Ray's a little kid. I never worked out his exact age; it kept changing, but he's in primary school and he's an Anglo. Bruno's in his mid-twenties and has an ethnic background. I decided he was Lebanese because I grew up with a lot of Lebanese kids. Ziggy Pischynski I have no idea how old he is but he's a fat, vaguely thirty-something guy with a Russian background – he generally has to be really disgusting.

The character of Zenyk is a weird one. He's actually a dream for one of the characters (Ludmilla) in the play so I never built up any perimetres around him. He's a crooner from Las Vegas and he is Boris's brother (and Sveta's uncle). He's a great one to play because he can change all the time. Zorgon is an alien 572 years old – just kidding! He's the Master of the Universe. The Man in Black or Dark Man is someone who Ludmilla (Sveta's mother) keeps seeing but its unclear whether he is an hallucination or is really there. He is quiet and emotionless, and passes through now and then, scaring the hell out of Ludmilla. No one else sees him.

So the characters are pretty diverse in terms of age, nationalities, whether or not they're real or fantasy characters?

Yes, they are. I think that when you're doing multiple roles like this, you have a tendency to play them to extremes because you want to make a clear distinction between characters. Which is a great thing to do anyway, whatever character you are doing – to go as far as you can to one place and see what that embodies.

As an actor, how do you establish each of these characters on stage and what sort of vocal and physical skills are you drawing on to portray the characters very differently?

Well, I think each character is driven by a very specific energy. These energies are dictated by the style - in this case comedy. When I work on trying to establish a character I randomly work with a number of different thoughts and energies. That means that I sort of hover or move around until it feels right, playing with stupid voices and movement until something arises that's funny.

A lot of these particular characters came from mucking around in rehearsal, because I have quite a few stupid voices up my sleeve and I like to go really

far with them physically because there is a chance to. When you're doing these sorts of roles you're not really hard on yourself to make them very convincing or emotionally evocative. It's great! You give yourself permission to be a fool on stage which is very handy.

Do you feel that you have to be accurate with the accents for each of the characters?

When I'm in the middle of it I'm having a lot of fun and accuracy's the last thing I want to think about. But when I do really think about it, accents are so idiosyncratic to a particular person. Weird accents that might sit outside the traditional Russian are far more interesting to me than trying to nail a Russian accent really well. As I said before, other aspects of the character will decide certain things – the energy of the character dictates things like accent. It's not like you can grab all the physical and vocal things and then draw them into the energy. It's the energy of the character that decides those things.

So if I've found the energy that I want and I know what the character's like, I picture them, feel them, in order to get into that character before I go on stage. I might put my body in the position in which they stand or walk which for these characters is quite full on. I might stick my chest out, stick my bum out or jump up and down a bit before I walk on stage and that's all I need to do. [Actually if I'd heard that when I was learning how to act I would have been stuffed] At drama school there was always so much you learnt about getting into character but sometimes, it's just as simple as that.

Often these character changes are very quick too, aren't they? You're taking into account costume changes, and you don't have time to mentally prepare so its just a physical thing for you – you find how they stand and that takes you into the next character. Is this true?

Absolutely. I mean I don't like to mentally prepare anyway. I find that mental preparation can pluck everything out. You can lose all contact with the space and other actors which is essentially the main priority on stage. So, if you come out and you're not mentally prepared but you're physically 'available' you can always catch up. If you're mentally prepared but not physically 'available' you'll be struggling.

You have to be in that character's skin I suppose, so by physicalising that's a way of entering as that person. Would you agree?

Yes, but often through repetition you don't have to do that much. So if you come in, in that character's costume, knowing that that's who you are, the more you can forget about trying to be that person, the better. For example I could say, 'I know I'm Bruno now and I'm going to walk on and I'm responding as Bruno to this other person'.

I guess when I say repetition I mean performance repetition. I'm going to be doing this play for about four weeks. Last year I did it for a week and at the

end you never think about getting into character. By the last night you go, 'Here, I walk on now with this costume on and, BANG! something happens'.

What difficulties are there in playing so many roles in one show?

I actually find it more amusing and exciting playing more than one role. I don't believe there are any difficulties. They're more challenges really. There's a lot of things I have to work out how to do such as getting changed in time. That can be pretty funny, especially if I stuff it up! But that's part of being involved in that show. The audience knows that there's stuff going on that they can't see behind stage and that connects me with the audience. The audience understands that I'm going through all these crazy costume changes and putting on stuff to make my hair look different.

I've done a show before where I had to play lots of different characters, and I found I put myself through less stress and worry when I have lots of characters because you keep changing and you haven't got time to think too much. Also, you keep refreshing your state, you come on and you're new again which is what you'd like to do, or hypothetically what I'd like to do, so, in a way multiple characters are a really big help – they're aids rather than difficulties.

James, when you talked before about finding 'the energy' for each character, does this mean you sort of 're-energize' every time you come on stage?

Yes, absolutely.

You haven't ever walked on in Zorgon's boots when you're supposed to be Bruno?

No! Usually someone's helping me change and I haven't done that before. I think I'll look forward to that moment, making the audience wonder what the hell is really going on!

You have costume changes to assist you with the character changes but do you feel that you could play all those roles without any kind of costume change?

If I was in a production that was intended to present that sort of world and there was that convention, absolutely. But in this piece, *Svetlana in Slingbacks*, we're not talking naturalism here at all. The costumes and the set are 'art'. Basically the play sets up an apparently real world so that the crazy dream stuff that comes out is quite surprising. I mean, if we did this show wearing 'blacks' with a funny moustache and silly hair for different characters it would lose a lot of the humour.

It depends entirely on the conventions you set up. I could do it in 'blacks' that would be fine because of the physicality and voices of my particular characters. But for the other characters they would look quite silly.

Yes, as you say, it's not that kind of play and so much of the humour and life is in the costumes. They're a big part of the play. But in terms of just the characters, are you saying that you could still play those characters just relying on voice and physicality?

Yes, and I think if that were the case I would push myself into a position where I would have to be much more specific about the choices I made with the physicality and voices. In theatre like that, which is sometimes called 'poor theatre', the focus is absolutely on the body and the voice to convey these things. I think I'm lucky I've got costumes!

If I put myself in the position of having to use what you call 'non-naturalistic' techniques in my acting, I would say that when you're changing characters really quickly it's great to create extreme vocal and physical changes as I talked about before. But I think that often really beautiful and special moments in theatre come when all the effects are gone and it is just you. So, when you're working with these conventions [of non-naturalism] find a way of having that strong physicality but then allow moments of just you talking, maybe to another character or revealing something or being still.

When I let my really big physicality drop for a second, not be gone, but let my presence be more simple, then some good stuff can come through. Cheap laughs can only go for so long.

So perhaps some moments of truth are important. Something that comes through that is 'felt' rather than 'shown'?

It can be so simple. Often people think that acting can be really tricky but it can just be two characters looking at each other for a moment. It can be such a strong thing. Once you get rid of all the 'effects' that the actors put on the characters, there's suddenly two amazing histories staring at each other in the face.

As an actor it's always surprising. The night's I feel the worst are sometimes the nights when the best stuff pops out of me and drives me. It simply isn't fun if you have to go out there and do this 'prepared' act where people laugh at your jokes at the same point every night. It's the same when you're making new stuff as well. No matter how well you know it, it's good to go out there and for an 'unknown' to explode somewhere.

SVETLANA IN SLINGBACKS

Focus and Analysis Questions

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1. The playwright, Val Levkowicz, says of her autobiographical play, *Svetlana in Slingbacks* that she hopes 'everyone will find something to relate to':
   a. Do you agree?
   b. Are there any scenes in the play that you particularly relate to?
   c. Do you think it is important for audience members to be able to 'relate to' the plays that they see?

2. Val talks about *Svetlana* as a 'memory piece', with fragments of dream, fantasy and popular culture:
   How do these elements contribute to the non-naturalistic style of the play?

3. Director, Peter Houghton says that 'the best way to capture the deep sadness of this play was essentially to emphasise the comedy'.
   a. Do you believe the production achieves a balance between comedy and tragedy?
   b. What were some of the most memorable comic and tragic moments in the play for you?
   c. What stylistic devices were used to heighten those moments?

4. Peter Houghton talks about one of the guiding forces in his direction being the fact that the play is written from the point of view of a 12 year old girl.
   a. How has this directorial choice impacted on the style of the play?
   b. What are some examples of scenes that most particularly reveal the child's point of view?

5. Designing 'Svetlana'

   a. In her interview, Christina Smith states that what is designed should 'serve the play'. What do you think she means by this?
   b. Christina describes her design as having a 'heightened sense of reality'.
      What do you think she means by this and what elements of the design do you feel particularly create that sense?
   c. Because the play is being performed on a shared set, the director and designer have made particular choices about set and prop items used in the production. As a result certain props have taken on great significance and meaning.
      Discuss how certain properties and set items worked in this manner.

6. Use of Expressive Skills

a. James Brennan, who plays six characters in the play, says of them: 'You have a tendency to play them to extremes because you want to make a clear distinction between characters'.
Was this 'extremity' reflected in his portrayal of certain characters? Give examples.
b. In what way/s did the actors' use of expressive skills contribute to the play to:
- give the play *meaning*?
- enhance the *style* of the play?

7. The Style of the Play

a. Is *Svetlana* a purely non-naturalistic play or does it contain moments of naturalism?
b. Can you identify moments of both styles?

8. Themes in the Play

a. What would you consider to be the major themes in the play?
b. How did the use of:-
- expressive skills
- stagecraft elements
help highlight the themes?

8. Theatrical Conventions and Dramatic Elements

(a) How were the following *theatrical conventions* used in the play?
- pathos
- satire
- caricature
- comedy
- stillness and silence?

(b) How were the following *dramatic elements* used in the play?
- mood
- climax
- contrast
- conflict
- sound
- symbol?

'SVETLANA IN SLINGBACKS' - RESOURCES

WANT TO KNOW MORE????

The following web sites may help set the play in an historical, social and political context for you!

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Seriously dysfunctional but a hoot

Theatre

Svetlana in Slingbacks, by Valentina Levkowicz, Directed by Peter Houghton,
Playbox Theatre,
until June 16, and on July 5 and 12

Review **Helen Thomson**

THIS SECOND part of Playbox's Inside 01 program of new works is full of energy and fun, but with some dark threads that make it more than just a romp. Writer Valentina Levkowicz examines the migrant experience in an original way, consigning pain and angst to a subtextual presence while foregrounding the comic absurdity of half-Russian, half-Australian lives of the 1960s.

The Fretlovs are a seriously dysfunctional family, but how could they be otherwise given their pasts. Boris still doesn't know why he alone survived a wartime massacre of Jews, and Ludmilla was abandoned, pregnant, then rescued by Boris only to find herself exiled in a strange new land.

Their daughters, Sonya and Svetlana, in turn have to survive a household governed by madness and rages, feeling neither Russian nor wholly Australian. The bright, pop-dominated world of the 1960s promises freedom to Sonya, while Svetlana, fittingly in the decade of space infatuation, creates a fantasy of a rescue by aliens.

There is no happy ending for them, either, yet director Peter Houghton and cast, Brian Lipson, Margaret Cameron, James Brennan, Sarah Norris and Miria Kostiuk, provide a wonderful comic bounce to the play, making us see the funny side of these lives.

Particularly emphasised is the irresistibly funny contrast between Russian angst, its brooding past, and Australia's cheerful ignorance that life could consist of anything more than beach and pub.

There is almost a comic-book style at times, tempered by Cameron's fine depiction, as Ludmilla, of sad, mental illness and Lipson giving Boris a wry, ironic sense of being, doomed to make the wrong life choices even when chance offers deliverance. Kostiuk, as Svetlana, registers all the painful absurdities of a life lived between the turmoil of a foreign home — the vagaries of a mentally ill mother and a trapped father — and the banal expectations of Australian schoolmates. Norris gives Sonya a brittle vivacity that propels her out of her migrant predicament into the risks of promiscuity. Brennan is hilarious in a series of roles that capitalise on his physical acting abilities in particular.

Playbox Theatre's investment in the development of an ensemble of actors for this Inside 01 project is repaid here, as it was in last year's program of new work. It suggests Australia's lack of a repertory system is a serious loss to actor-training.

Wonderful comic balance: Margaret Cameron, standing, and Miria Kostiuk.
Picture: RACHEL ROBERTS

'The Age'
June, 2001

Theatre
Steven Carroll

A slingback, in case you don't know, is a style of woman's shoe — a fashion item and not the sort of thing you'd expect an insecure, tubby 12-year-old to be getting about in. The shoes have a walk-on part in Valentina Levkowicz's *Svetlana in Slingbacks*, the latest production in Playbox's Inside 01 season.

This 90-minute one-act play, inventively directed by Peter Houghton, is a highly stylised production with a surreal, often cartoon-like feel.

Set in Adelaide in the 1960s, it tells the story of a Russian emigre family. Boris Fretlov (Brian Lipson), a shopkeeper in his late 30s, tells us in rhyming couplets at the beginning of the play that he deserted Stalin's army in the winter of 1942.

His wife Ludmilla (Margaret Cameron), also in her late 30s, is tormented by the past, in and out of psychiatric homes and pencilled in for a lobotomy. The 12-year-old Svetlana (Miria Kostiuk) is teased at school, frets for her mother and fears her father. Her half-sister Sonya (Sarah Norris) goes to university, dates mechanic Bruno (James Brennan) and is preparing to fly the dispiriting nest of the family home.

A mysterious man in black (Tom Healey) wanders in and out of the action and a particularly sleazy business associate of Boris called cultures are the major themes running through the play, which is seen largely through the eyes of Svetlana. While her immediate world falls apart around her, she takes solace in the other-worldliness of the stars and TV science fiction.

This fast-paced show has its poignant moments, as well as being wacky and entertaining, but it never hits any dramatic heights and has little in the way of lingering resonance. It's a pleasant, sometimes bittersweet piece of young adult theatre.

Given the short rehearsal time, the ensemble performance is excellent. Lipson proves once again that he's a class act, Kostiuk does a lively Svetlana and Cameron offers a fine portrayal of the sad, unstable mother.

SVETLANA IN SLINGBACKS

Written by Valentina Levkowicz
Directed by Peter Houghton

12 June - 14 July 2001
The Malthouse
113 Sturt Street, Southbank
Bookings on (03) 9685 5111
For more details, see Playbox's Inside 01 site

Svetlana Fretlov (**Miria Kostiuk**) is an inveterate snoop, and the twelve-year-old focal character of ***Svetlana in Slingbacks***. Through the school telescope she studies the night sky for extra-terrestrial activity. She also watches with semi-detached bemusement the adults in her life.

Her stern Russian father Boris (**Brian Lipson**) works long hours in his Adelaide grocery shop and her mentally unstable mother Ludmilla (**Margaret Cameron**) is periodically confined to hospital. She has an older half-sister, Sonia (**Sarah Norris**), whose liberated uni student ways and sharp tongue cause perpetual friction in the household. The only ones who understand Svetlana are her schoolfriend Ray (**James Brennan**) and Zorgon (**Tom Healy**), the alien who inhabits her robust fantasy life.

Disappointment is a strong current running beneath the play, and though ***Svetlana in Slingbacks*** is funny in explosive bursts, it is a melancholy piece. Boris and Ludmilla find that Australia is not the land of opportunity they envisioned, nor was it their first choice - they missed the boat to America. Ludmilla's breakdown is in part fuelled by the crushing of her spirit in the stifling conformity of her marriage and her surroundings: "I should be grateful...for this?" she muses bitterly.

Boris is worn out by his battles with his sick wife and disobedient children. Each member of the Fretlov family has a fantasy refuge to which they periodically escape - Boris to communion with his dead brother, Ludmilla to her paranoid delusions, Sonia to a romanticised reunion with her real father and Svetlana to Alpha Gammadon, home planet of her alien chum.

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The pace is then upped, like a film run a little faster than normal (though this is taken to self-indulgent extremes for Healy's appearance as the alien). Houghton makes his fine cast aim for a point between character and cartoon, and for the most part it comes off. Given her centrality to the narrative, Svetlana could have been played with a little more depth and less comic schtick, but it's a small quibble.

Houghton doesn't neglect the drama in favour of scoring laughs however, and pulls the exaggeration back for Cameron's wrenching scenes as Ludmilla. Her performance is masterful - full but not excessive, and ultimately heartbreaking. The shifting of gears from scene to scene is augmented by **David Franzke**'s sound design, mixing novelty tunes (complete with hiss and crackle) and sci-fi background noise.

Sixties Adelaide through the eyes of a precocious child, as rendered by playwright **Valentina Levkowicz**, is a disconcerting blend of banal and surreal. Playbox's production of ***Svetlana in Slingbacks*** expertly captures this sense of time, place and personal experience.

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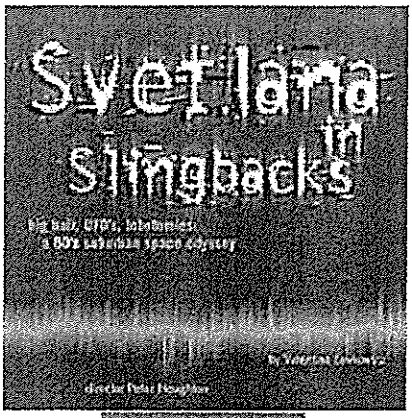

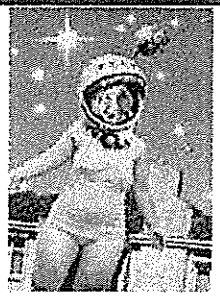

Svetlana in Slingbacks

by Valentina Levkowicz

director Peter Houghton

big hair, ufo's, lobotomies: a 60's suburban space odyssey

Nazdarovaya! Borscht, Vodka and Sauerkraut go head on with Meat Pies, Beach Parties and Barbeques

A vivid look back to the cold-war sixties when the gleam of Sputnik was the only link with home for this ebullient family of Russian émigrés. This splendid tragi-comedy shows the effects of huge cultural change upon hopes and expectations.

Boris Fretlov struggles to set up shop in the western suburbs; his wife Ludmilla dreams of romantic fiction and lives an everyday nightmare. Sonya is a defiant teenager determined to enjoy freedom in her new-found country, while 12 yr old Svetlana escapes from the pressures of her family into an imaginative universe of stars and spaceships.

'..rich and multi-layered, often terribly funny, just as frequently sad and moving.' Adelaide Sunday Mail

CAST: James Brennan, Margaret Cameron, Tom Healey, Miria Kostiuk, Brian Lipson, Sarah Norris.

SEASON OPENS June 13

LINKS

PUBLIC DANCING / BANG
KNOWLEDGE AND MELANCHOLY / 7 DAYS OF SILENCE
ANCIENT ENMITY

INSIDE O1 HOME

PLAYBOX HOME

SVETLANA IN SLINGBACKS

Focus and Analysis Questions

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1. The playwright, Val Levkowicz, says of her autobiographical play, *Svetlana in Slingbacks* that she hopes 'everyone will find something to relate to':
   a. Do you agree?
   b. Are there any scenes in the play that you particularly relate to?
   c. Do you think it is important for audience members to be able to 'relate to' the plays that they see?

2. Val talks about *Svetlana* as a 'memory piece', with fragments of dream, fantasy and popular culture:
   How do these elements contribute to the non-naturalistic style of the play?

3. Director, Peter Houghton says that 'the best way to capture the deep sadness of this play was essentially to emphasise the comedy'.
   a. Do you believe the production achieves a balance between comedy and tragedy?
   b. What were some of the most memorable comic and tragic moments in the play for you?
   c. What stylistic devices were used to heighten those moments?

4. Peter Houghton talks about one of the guiding forces in his direction being the fact that the play is written from the point of view of a 12 year old girl.
   a. How has this directorial choice impacted on the style of the play?
   b. What are some examples of scenes that most particularly reveal the child's point of view?

5. Designing 'Svetlana'

   a. In her interview, Christina Smith states that what is designed should 'serve the play'. What do you think she means by this?
   b. Christina describes her design as having a 'heightened sense of reality'.
      What do you think she means by this and what elements of the design do you feel particularly create that sense?
   c. Because the play is being performed on a shared set, the director and designer have made particular choices about set and prop items used in the production. As a result certain props have taken on great significance and meaning.
      Discuss how certain properties and set items worked in this manner.

6. Use of Expressive Skills

a. James Brennan, who plays six characters in the play, says of them: 'You have a tendency to play them to extremes because you want to make a clear distinction between characters'.
Was this 'extremity' reflected in his portrayal of certain characters? Give examples.
b. In what way/s did the actors' use of expressive skills contribute to the play to:
- give the play *meaning*?
- enhance the *style* of the play?

7. The Style of the Play

a. Is *Svetlana* a purely non-naturalistic play or does it contain moments of naturalism?
b. Can you identify moments of both styles?

8. Themes in the Play

a. What would you consider to be the major themes in the play?
b. How did the use of:-
- expressive skills
- stagecraft elements
help highlight the themes?

8. Theatrical Conventions and Dramatic Elements

(a) How were the following *theatrical conventions* used in the play?
- pathos
- satire
- caricature
- comedy
- stillness and silence?

(b) How were the following *dramatic elements* used in the play?
- mood
- climax
- contrast
- conflict
- sound
- symbol?

'SVETLANA IN SLINGBACKS' - RESOURCES

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