

Pool brings talent to the surface

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Dion Mills and Melissa Chambers star in Mark Ravenhill's *Pool (No Water)* .
Photo: *Roger Cummins*

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IT CREATED the kind of stir most young playwrights can only dream about but relatively little has been heard here of British playwright, Mark Ravenhill, since his global hit, *Shopping and F---ing*, more than a decade ago.

He tapped into the Zeitgeist of the late 20th century with such lines as, "The first few words of the Bible are 'Get the money first'." Now Melbourne's pioneering theatre company, Red Stitch, is presenting a production of a two-year-old play, *Pool (No Water)*, that Ravenhill wrote for London physical movement company, Frantic Assembly.

Longtime Red Stitch member, Dion Mills, who pushed for the work to be included in the current season, says it was the quality of the script, rather than the style of the original London show, that most appealed.

Guest director Simon Stone, founder of another independent theatre company, the Hayloft Project, will stage it as a straight drama. The play deals with the response of four artist friends when a famous colleague has a horrific accident.

They have gathered at her luxurious new home and as she lies in a coma, they begin to consider using her suffering as the basis for their next work of art.

"It deals with hypocrisy and professional jealousy arising out of a friendship," Mills says. "We've had fierce debates about this play because it deals with people like us and so is very confronting."

He quotes a line in the play about the characters "taking a wrong turn into art" and finding themselves in a cul de sac. "It reads as a thriller that has a very surprising ending."

The issue of fame and money is relevant to Red Stitch, which has achieved the former without the latter since it formed in 2002. Despite critical acclaim, the company has failed to win regular, substantial funding from Arts Victoria, so actors perform for little financial reward.

Mills, who joined the company in 2003, says it is this precarious financial position that makes the selection of each new season such a fraught process.

"We are a broad church with differing tastes and outlooks on life," he says. "Because we are taking part in each show at a personal cost, it becomes very important what we choose to do. It has to matter to justify what we must give to each show."

The latest development for the company is an invitation from the Australia Council to apply for triennial funding. "We just have to wait to see how it goes," Mills says.

"I think the arts bureaucrats struggle to explain our existence. After all, we came about through our own initiative, not because anyone asked us to exist."

He points out that Red Stitch has enriched Melbourne's theatre culture by introducing audiences to playwrights whose work they would otherwise have had few opportunities to know, including British playwrights Jez Butterworth and Martin Crimp, and the American, Neil LaBute.

Guest actor Melissa Chambers, who performed in last year's Melbourne Theatre Company production of *The Mad Woman of Chaillot*, predicts that Red Stitch's 10th birthday in 2011 will shock the funding bodies, because so much has been achieved with so little help.

"There is not enough awareness that Red Stitch actors are not being paid," she says.

Chambers, 26, says that for actors of her generation the company is part of Melbourne's incredibly vibrant independent theatre scene that also includes Hayloft, Black Lung and Stuck Pigs Squealing.

She will visit New York this year thanks to the Ian Potter cultural fund and the American-Australian Association's Dame Joan Sutherland Fund.

"I'm thrilled that my time there will coincide with the presidential election," she says. "But I've always wanted to go to New York because the city seems to share a tradition with Melbourne of small companies performing in found spaces such as warehouses and shopfronts."

Pool (No Water) until July 5 at Red Stitch Theatre, rear 2 Chapel Street, St Kilda East. Book on redstitch.net or 9533 8083.