Review: A Good Bloke and other events at Artstate Bathurst

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Artstate Bathurst highlights included a rehearsed reading of an in-development script and a concert by the NSW Regional Youth Orchestra.

NSW Regional Youth Orchestra. Photo credit: Katelyn Jane Dunn.

This year was Bathurst’s turn to host Artstate – a four-year Regional Arts NSW project that showcases the skills of creative practitioners working regionally in the fields of music, filmmaking, the visual arts and theatre. One of the themes for this year’s event explored a ‘sense of place’ and how it is integral to regional identity and community. Indeed, the opening ceremony, curated by Becky Russell and staged at Bathurst’s monumental Courthouse Courtyard, evoked the ancient and continuing Indigenous connection to place, with elders performing a purifying smoking ceremony. Recognising the land’s original custodians set a very inclusive tone to the proceedings.

Many of the program’s performances and activities provided audiences with a great deal of pleasure and entertainment, including the whimsical Sculpture Walk in Machattie Park, Smith & Jones’s sensational music in the same location, as well as the program’s finale where the Regional Youth Orchestra wowed us with an extraordinary performance of Tchaikovsky’s difficult Symphony No. 5. There was also an important...
level of gravity preserved in a festival that not only celebrates excellence in the regional arts but also recognises the importance of aesthetics in supporting the culture of regional communities.

One program standout that fosters community wellbeing and awareness is Adam Deusien's and Isabel Fox's play script, *A Good Bloke*. Loosely adapted from Euripides's *Medea*, Deusien and Fox turn the table on this ancient myth about a mother who commits infanticide, by re-imagining the crime through the eyes of a father who executes his children to avenge what he believes is his wife's sexual betrayal. Fox and Deusien know from experience how regional communities can be traumatised by domestic violence. The tragedy of the 2015 murder of a Bathurst sales consultant by her partner, who then turned the gun on himself, was a powerful motivating factor in the three-year planning and development of their script.

Deusien, a successful director and playwright and Artstate's Program Director, and Fox, an accomplished journalist, teacher, academic and Charles Sturt University's Student Initiatives coordinator, undertook a great deal of research into domestic violence as part of their development process, including how it is reported in the news. Their findings revealed that men who murder their partners and children tend to meticulously plan their crimes, which goes against prevailing media representations that frame such violence as spur-of-the-moment outbursts. *A Good Bloke* therefore seeks to demystify a number of misconceptions in order to foster a deeper understanding of this tragic phenomenon.

*A Good Bloke* was performed as a play reading by four accomplished local actors: Emma Paterson, Gareth Thomson, Mitch Lourigan and Kay Nankervis. The reading foregrounded the many dimensions of domestic violence including the troubling manner in which it has been reported. Interspersed amongst the voices of a husband and wife — Medea and Jason — are verbatim media reports that apologise, even normalise vicious partner crime: ‘He was battling depression ... He wasn't an articulate man. He was very quiet, a hard, good farm worker’. Contributing to this reportage are other voices that echo other familiar and unsettling attitudes: ‘Nice family, you know ... Used to see him at the pub ... he's a good man,’ ‘Yeah. A good man.’ The disturbing repetition of ‘a good man’ is compounded by a news report that identifies the perpetrator as ‘an all-round good bloke’. It seems that Deusien and Fox are channelling Mark Antony’s famed speech in *Julius Caesar*, where his sarcastic insistence that Brutus is an ‘honourable man’ whips the crowd up into a vengeful frenzy.

*A Good Bloke* is a work-in-progress script that encourages important conversations around the urgent issue of domestic violence. The fact that every week in Australia a woman dies at the hands of a current or former partner means that domestic violence should be on the radar of our politicians, but it seems that for now we have to rely on the ethical compass of our writers and artists to put this issue at the forefront of our conversations. *A Good Bloke* has the makings of an exceptional play that already powerfully resonates as a spoken script.

4 stars: ★★★★★

*A Good Bloke*  
**Script:** Adam Deusien and Isabel Fox  
**Medea:** Emma Paterson  
**Jason:** Gareth Thomson  
**Woman/Creon/News Voice/Chorus:** Kay Nankervis
A Good Bloke was performed as a play reading at Bathurst's Walshaw Hall on November 3rd, 2018.

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What the stars mean?

- Five stars: Exceptional, unforgettable, a must see
- Four and a half stars: Excellent, definitely worth seeing
- Four stars: Accomplished and engrossing but not the best of its kind
- Three and a half stars: Good, clever, well made, but not brilliant
- Three stars: Solid, enjoyable, but unremarkable or flawed
- Two and half stars: Neither good nor bad, just adequate
- Two stars: Not without its moments, but ultimately unsuccessful
- One star: Awful, to be avoided
- Zero stars: Genuinely dreadful, bad on every level

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Suzie Gibson is a Senior Lecturer in English at Charles Sturt University.