

Political theatre doesn't get much better than this

By **Cameron Woodhead**

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THEATRE

The Audition ★★★★★½

Outer Urban Projects and La Mama Theatre
Until November 24

Performance as a metaphor for life – theatrum mundi, or the theatre of the world – has a long history stretching back to the ancient Greeks. “All the world’s a stage,” as Shakespeare put it, “all the men and women merely players.”

The Audition refines and refocuses the idea to explore suggestive connections between actors and asylum seekers in contemporary Australia.





Mary Siteranos in *The Audition*. DARREN GILL

It gathers a group of accomplished stage writers (Patricia Cornelius, Melissa Reeves and Christos Tsiolkas among them) to compose a powerful suite of stories that exposes, and juxtaposes, privilege and prejudice in both the theatre industry and in the determination of claims for refugee status.

The most immediate point of comparison is *Anthem* at this year's Melbourne International Arts Festival, which involved some of the same playwrights. Where that work could struggle to crystallise into an aesthetic whole, Irine Vela seamlessly directs *The Audition* to create electrifying theatre.

It begins with a charged monologue in which an actor (Mary Siteranos) auditions for the role of Olive in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. She won't get the part – she isn't "white" enough.

The unfairness is laid at our feet by the staggering histrionic display Siteranos offers: a paean to the art of acting, a sensitive piece of theatre criticism that imagines Olive from the inside out, and slivers of the riveting performance our stages will be denied by implicitly racist casting.



Peter Paltos and Sahra Davoudi switch from director and actor to immigration official and asylum seeker, with eerie similarities in the power dynamic. DARREN GILL

From there, the work shimmers, mirage-like, between asylum seekers claiming protection and actors preparing to audition, with cognate politics and piercing resonances.

An ironic gulf yawns under sequences between an Iranian actor (Sahra Davoudi) auditioning for the role of Hecuba from Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, and an

Australian theatre director (Peter Paltos) with a (gendered and stereotyped) vision of what a victim is.



Vahideh Eisaei in *The Audition*. DARREN GILL

When the same actors transform into asylum seeker and immigration official, questions of authenticity in performance, and the politics that feed into imagination, come with much higher stakes.

Paltos' sardonic portrayal of the well-meaning official whose unconscious biases affect his judgment maintains a precarious balance of sympathy. Davoudi's migrant bride flirts – seductively and unnervingly – between fakery and fear of persecution. She's coached by her lawyer, echoing the director/actor dynamic.

A plaintive yearning for freedom in monologue, physical theatre and song (Milad Norouzi) rises to meet Sitarenos' opening lament, with the Iranian kanun (Vahideh Eisaei) on haunting accompaniment.

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