



WINGS OF DESIRE

Kaarin Fairfax in *The Swan* ... "a love triangle with four characters".

Picture: GREG ADAMS

NOT many directors are offered their own selection of play, least of all directors with only one main-stage production to their credit. Usually the play is chosen, then the director, then the actors. Yet executive producer Chris Westwood made the director's first-choice offer her golden rule when assembling State Theatre's 1994 season. If the directors have the passion, Ms Westwood reasoned, they'll do a better job. With producer's right of veto, of course. One director proposed a 22-hander. It didn't happen. Around this time last year, Ms Westwood had seen the Sydney Theatre Company production of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, the first major venture by the young director Melissa Bruce. Here was a talent, she decided, a director to watch out for in the future.

She contacted Melissa. Any ideas for a play of her choice to direct? *Did she have any ideas!* As it happened, some months earlier, Melissa had found *The Swan*, by Elizabeth Egloff, in *New American Theatre* magazine, which publishes a script a month. It was an offer she couldn't refuse. "Here was a play that was screaming to be done," Melissa says, "dying to be lifted off the page, dying to live. It was the only play I was really

■ THE DIRECTOR OF THE SWAN, MELISSA BRUCE, TALKS TO LANCE CAMPBELL ABOUT HER HIDDEN PASSION FOR A CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PLAY.

longing to do." She had already spoken to the playwright by phone in the United States when State Theatre called. Melissa sent around the play. "It was one of the few scripts I've read where I couldn't stop turning the pages," Ms Westwood says, and she has read her share. She applied for the rights next day and *The Swan*, already a success in New York, San Francisco, Rome and Stockholm, has its Australian premiere at The Space on Thursday.

For Melissa Bruce, for four years an affiliate, then associate, director at the Sydney Theatre Company, the opportunity is "an absolute gift. *The Swan* has the theatrical potential to inspire everyone involved in the process — lighting, sets, performers, stage management. It's the chance to explore the limits of the theatre medium in a highly individualistic way".

"The play combines domesticity and fantasy, dream and reality, poetry and fiction, absurdity and truth," she says. That should keep the company busy but what's in it for the audience? "Love. There's

a lot in the media that's not about love. It's just a breath of fresh air to concentrate on a piece of work that captures the essence of love," she says. "It's not didactic. It allows the audience to interpret whatever it wants, yet it relates on some level to everybody. The play's total unpredictability has been part of its success. *The Swan* is also very funny, very wicked and totally ambiguous. I'd call it a big, cheeky, sexy secret."

Ambiguity and secrecy seem to be the watchwords for *The Swan*, and State Theatre's lead-up to it. The play's story involves a lonely nurse in a house on the Great Plains of Nebraska, her decent but dull milkman husband, and the swan that enters their lives. That's only three characters. There are four actors in the cast: Kaarin Fairfax, David Field, Anthony Wong and Australian Dance Theatre's Xiao-Xiong Zhang. How come? We'll just have to wait and see, says Melissa. "It's a love triangle with four characters. But those characters are adorable. You'd want to take them home and

put them on the mantelpiece. The challenge has been in casting the perfect bizarre love triangle with highly individual performers and determining the quality necessary to portray an extraordinary bird," she says. "How do we embody this bird?" Plus how to combine 19 scenes in the one act, how to find the balance between absurdism and realism, how not to overstate the ambiguity with too much personal interpretation.

How all that indeed. The ambiguity of *The Swan* is one of the reasons Melissa has been in regular contact with Elizabeth Egloff. "We've spoken on the phone about a dozen times. Elizabeth has been very supportive and inspiring. She has helped with comment on the play's ambiguity. We've been pretty much on the same track all the way. Most of our communications have been mainly confirming connections, such as the American Great Plains and our knowledge here of the wide open spaces of Australia," she says.

The director has no qualms about a new American play in an

Adelaide theatre. Child of a Melbourne family with a passion for the arts, Melissa went to London for two years as a stage manager "to earn a living in the theatre at the same time as learning all its roles, with my aim always to direct". The offer of a 12-month stage management contract with the Royal Shakespeare Company forced her hand: if she didn't leave now, she would never make the leap from technician to artist, so she returned to Australia, Sydney and the NIDA directors' course.

But while in London, she was exposed to "the constant influx of international inspiration. Sometimes I feel sad that we don't have many cultural comparisons in Australia," Melissa says. "Here we have to wait for festivals. I think it's up to us to challenge our own limits. It's very important to invite contemporary international work and not just do the classics or Australian productions. *The Swan* fits that category of international inspiration perfectly." Nevertheless she believes Australian theatre is moving forward, even if that movement, until recently, has been slow. "People are beginning to take more risks by letting go of naturalism," she says.

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Again *The Swan* fits a category, this time of forward movement. Directing such a play, says Melissa, is like organising a dinner party, inviting people to create experiences for other people. "It can be lonely, because you're the one person that by necessity has to keep the overall vision," she says. "There are days when I wish I could be maybe in a bank, or selling hamburgers, but there is a passion for theatre I can't deny. There is very little security in this job, very little money, no guarantee of future work, no guarantee the audience will appreciate every production. What's left after a show finishes anyway? Only a couple of reviews by people you've never seen before, and the programs. And the memories. Hopefully the memories are a gift to someone."

Yet, like *The Swan*, it's her choice. A choice Melissa Bruce feels driven to because, for her, there was never going to be any other choice.