

# Theatre review – Picnic At Hanging Rock: Royal Lyceum Theatre\*\*\*\*\*

☒ Take a disparate cohort of Edwardian Melbourne corseted teenage school girls. Theirs is to be a Valentine's Day picnic treat to a beauty-spot called Hanging Rock – what could possibly go wrong? Apart from the poisonous snake. There are always snakes inside the gates of Eden.

Something happened, something or someone caused the unresolved disappearance of three girls and a mathematics obsessed teacher.

Sun-lit hauntings in a Gothic, Oz Noir *Dream-Time* sets the scene for this potently poetic, enigmatic psycho-drama. No hanging about – visiting Australian Theatres, Malthouse/Black Swan certainly know how to rock the boat.

Five actors in ensemble play many parts, each embrace and consummate those characters with shivering conviction. In severe, razor pleated uniform skirts the students of Mrs Appleyard's exclusive, and increasingly profitable, College for young ladies, behave as would have been expected. This is a gluttonous claustrophobia of gentile Edwardian ex-pat patrician snobbery and afternoon tiffin ennui.

That is, until the Botticelli angelic and universally adored Miranda wanders off with her acolytes beyond the boundaries of strict permission in to the brooding, distorted haunts of Hanging Rock. It literally consumes them. They disappear, never to be found, but for Edith, vapid giddy Edith who can't remember anything. Time is for ever out of joint. Time escapes their command like a desperate fist grasping droplets of mercury. Designer, Zoë Atkinson's angular compressed, wood-panelled set compels the eye to focus on Mrs. Appleyard's

subsequent descent in to vindictive, suspected, murderous mania. Sip by cognac suppurating sip she eviscerates the pathetic Sara, guilty for being just that and an orphan too.

With this UK premiere, Director, Matthew Lutton, has unleashed Tom Wright's adaptation of Joan Lindsay's novel with an authentic, snarling economy of polite and prim, petticoat savaged menace.

The 3 o'clock in the morning like tooth-ache niggling need and want to solve this mystery never escapes you – and you will not escape it.

As compelling, visceral and insistent as that wasp in your otherwise perfect picnic jam pot. Unmissable.

