

THE SEASON REVIEW (SYDNEY FESTIVAL, DRAMA THEATRE, OPERA HOUSE)

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By Ben Neutze

Nathan Maynard's warm and thoughtful new play *The Season* rings with the truth of real life. Set on Big Dog Island in the Bass Strait, the action takes place during "the Season", which sees the Duncan family gather from wherever they are in the world and harvest mutton-bird nests.

It's an annual ritual for the Indigenous people of this area, which stretches back for as long as ... well, as long as anybody knows. And each year is eventful — relationships start, relationships end, some lives even begin.

This particular season is proving to be a rather big one: the patriarch Ben (Kelton Pell) and matriarch Stella (Tammy Anderson) are hoping to bring in a huge haul of mutton-birds, but are aware that their idyllic seasons together might soon be drawing to an end. Ben is hellbent on defeating his arch rival Neil Watson (Trevor Jamieson) by harvesting the most birds to fill an order from a fancy restaurant.

Their 30-year-old daughter Lou (Nazaree Dickerson) has returned to the island for the first time in many seasons, and she's brought her teenage son Clay (James Slee) along with her to harvest his first ever mutton-bird. Meanwhile a newly minted ranger (Trevor Jamieson) is sticking his nose into the Duncan's business and clashing with Ben and Stella's headstrong son Ritchie (Luke Carroll).

Then there's Auntie Marlene (Lisa Maza), who proves to be more of a sexual being than most of her family knows and has a secret she's kept over many seasons.

Maynard has crafted a fine and often very funny family drama, celebrating a wonderful tradition and the Tasmanian Aboriginal culture that's endured despite all the odds. The plotting is very neat as the various narrative threads come together, even if the dramatic shape of the play can sometimes feel a little flat.

There are plenty of parallels between the lives of the birds, which have an annual migration of 30,000 kilometres, but return to breed in the same burrow every year, and the lives of the people who call Big Dog Island their spiritual home.

Isaac Drandic directs an all-Indigenous ensemble, who manage to find that loving, if often uncomfortable, dynamic of a family living in close quarters. The whole cast is wonderful, but it's the women who get the best jokes, and Lisa Maza, Nazaree Dickerson and Tammy Anderson make the absolute most of them.

Although Drandic's staging is wonderful — his use of space is very intelligent, helping to define the relationships, conjure up images of the island, and mirror the movements of the birds in subtle ways — some of the rhythms of the dialogue don't quite feel as precise as they should for this kind of comedy. But that could just be a matter of the relatively short premiere season, which opened after just one preview.

The Season ends up as both a meditation on culture and the nature of life itself, as birds and humans alike come and go, and pass down their histories to their offspring. It's quietly moving and surprisingly uplifting.