

COSI – Louise Nowra

THEMES

MADNESS (SANITY VS INSANITY)

Madness is a huge underlying theme in COSI. Nowra intentionally blurs the lines between sanity and insanity in an attempt for the audience to decide who are the real mad people, those in the asylum or those in the war. Nowra aims to challenge the idea of madness that people hold, make them think, aware that madness is no psychological construct and does not discriminate. However Nowra although he does not explicitly define that the patients are mad, nonetheless he relinquishes the point that they definitely are.

The madness of the outside world is explicitly obvious in the Vietnamese war. The government is continuing in a war that it is losing, something that is deemed madness by the likes of Nick and Lucy and as such they organise the moratorium. However the methods that would be employed by Nick are mad themselves, the use of violence as Nick reveals “barricades and bombs, why not?”. Continuing on the idea of war, the idea of soldiers represented by props of toy soldiers exacerbates the madness of the government; these are actual people whose lives are being gambled with in a futile war. Furthermore the idea that love is not important anymore is something that seems inconceivable to those in the asylum. They feel that love is what makes worth living, particularly as Roy sees love in the form of music and without music love would not be worth living. However this is in stark contrast to the idea of Nick and Lucy, the idea of Lewis doing a play about love in this day and age, the day of free love and orgies is mad, particularly considering the lives of others elsewhere. Again the idea that love and sex does not mean much anymore seems mad to those such as Roy, Henry, Cherry and Ruth, the traditional conservative approach that they hold, mad from the perception of opposing ideas, considering the time and social context.

Nowra fails to clearly define what is madness in an attempt to challenge the social stigma surrounding mental illness. This is evident as Lewis mistakes Roy for the social worker and Lewis is mistaken as a patient, the differences between people do not dignify madness, it is not stereotypical. Nowra reveals that madness could be deemed just an extremity of behaviour, whereas those that are mad, could be brilliant, were brilliant, “they have thought extreme thoughts”, and can actually aid an individual as Zac creates a band and Ruth becomes a time and motion expert. “A madman is someone who arrives at a fancy dress party in the emperor’s new clothes”.

However Nowra does not fail to recognise the madness of the patients, it is evident through their actions and dialogue. Seen straight away as Roy broke in because he did not want to be late, Ruth’s obsession and inability to deal with tangible details, such as the coffee in the play, something that would be deemed mad to nearly everyone. Also the way in which Henry’s paralysed arm switches is eccentric in nature.

LOVE/FIDELITY/INFIDELITY

Love is extremely important in COSI, it is a conflict and stark example of the differences in cultural and social values, whilst some such as Nick and Lucy view love as not as important nowadays, embracing the idea of free love, others such as Henry and Cherry still believe in the traditional and conservative approach of

fidelity. Nowra aims to challenge the preconceptions that are held about love, key example being that of Doug, he puts the question right out there “So you’re a poofter?”, “Was she a virgin?”, ideas that may not normally be openly talked about. Nick, Lucy, Doug, Zac and initially Lewis (maybe Julie), believe in free love, that people should not be tied down “you can always find loneliness in a marriage but never solitude” and “Lucy hates talk about love, she thinks its icky”. However this is juxtaposed to the views of Henry, Roy, Cherry and Ruth, they hold dear the idea of love and fidelity, annoyed at the idea that women will always cheat, against men’s “double standards”.

Cosi Fan Tutte explicitly reveals the idea of love in COSI, the play within a play allows the audience to see that the idea of infidelity of women has existed for generations, Nowra acknowledges that although the concept of love has evolved over time, there still exists remnants of the old ways, that women’s fidelity is condemned, whereas for males it is condoned.

“Women’s constancy is like the Arabian phoenix, everyone swears it exists yet no one has seen it”.

For Lucy and Nick they are assured of their places in the world, they have foregone love for political rhetoric

REALITY

Something that Ruth in particular, this is a concept that Nowra seems to toy with in order to make the reader think and become more consciously aware of, which is the more real situation, that of the outside world with the chaos of the Vietnam war and free love or is it the humane asylum full of mentally ill. Ruth a patient in the asylum however seems to be the biggest character that struggles with the misconception of reality and illusion “I can handle something being an illusion or reality, but not at the same time”. Ruth’s fixation with the tangible elements such as the coffee during the play and how many steps she should take during her acting reveals her inability to comprehend, reflective of her mental condition and also of society.

TRANSFORMATION

Throughout COSI, it is the story of transformation, journey, transfiguration, ideological overhaul through the challenges of working with those with mental illness, challenging Lewis’ ideas on many characteristics in a variety of different ways. Lewis is however not the only character that changes, but COSI is generally the story of the changes of Nowra’s protagonist through experiences. Some of the other characters that could be said to go through change could be Zac, Henry whereas the rest are rather set in their ways as far as their values go.

Henry’s transformation is relatively evident, particularly when Henry at the start of the play is compared to Henry at the end. Initially he is nervous, shy and apprehensive speaking with a stutter. However a turning point appears to be when Nick arrives and the discussion about the Vietnam war begins, this is a deep seated value that Henry holds dear, namely as his father was a soldier and represents the turning point with Henry as afterwards he seems to have more of an input into the direction that the play is going, the choice to use Australian costumes is back by him. Secondly during the second act, Henry sings the Italian chorus out loud, despite the fact that he doesn’t have to, revealing his growth in confidence.

Furthermore more personal information about Henry is revealed as he reveals his

opinions on love and fidelity, describing how his wife was a temptress. Another key moment could be when Henry's 'paralysed arm' changes, this signifies the change in Henry, his aptitude to life seems to have being re-ignited, he does not think only of failure. However in the end Henry dies, this can be attributed to the fact that the techniques employed by mental institutes are barbaric and do not help anyone. Zac seems to change, purely on the basis of his medical treatment, his ideas and values on love remain the same, the new age ideas of 'make love not war man'. As Zac is taken off the medication, the world seems much brighter and he can think clearer, reminiscent of his seeming ingenious with the creation of the backdrop and the way in which it can be transposed. Furthermore the way in which Zac moves on to be in the band 'The psychotic Wagner's'.

Ultimately COSI though is the story of how Lewis the protagonist changes and transforms over the working with those in the mental asylum. Initially Lewis' driving motivation, his reason to do the play is only for money, and he is extremely anxious, especially when confronted with the patients and the dilapidated theatre. Lewis lacks the knowing and ability to direct the patients, he is unable to deal with Roy's forcefulness, Ruth's ideas on reality, Doug's confronting nature and an incapability to bring Henry out of his shell, ironic though as Lewis is the director and should be directing the play. Lewis also seems to be subordinate to Nick and Lucy, will not stand up to them, as is evident as Nick seems to walk all over Lewis, only wanting Lewis for help with the moratorium. Lewis seems to be dominated by Nick and Lewis and as such seems to be expressing their ideals instead of his own, choosing a play by Brecht as it is "a play that's relevant"

When the theatre is lit on fire and Justin comes in to end the production and Lewis sides with the patients, this reveals that he is slowly coming to see them not for their problems, stigma of society but as people. Furthermore Lewis ideas on love and fidelity are challenged by the patients, Roy deems Lewis' outlook on love mad "What planet are you from?", whereas Doug employs a crude dialogue aimed to shock the reader and Lewis equally to gain simple responses about where his allegiances lie. Julie is also critical in Lewis understanding of love and emotion, Lewis is about being faithful in a relationship, yet he is a hypocrite as he cheats on Lucy, sharing a kiss with Julie, furthermore her ideal of love being madness challenges Lewis to discover what love and sex mean to him. When the Vietnam war arises, it is revealed here that Lewis has different views to those of Nick and Lucy, he does not support the Viet Cong, and his relationships with the patients are exemplified, here with Henry as he will not allow him to leave, revealing that Lewis now sees the patients as being more than just an illness. Further example is when Lewis takes part in the pretend shock therapy; this shows that he has an understanding of the things that the patients go through and can sympathise with them. However the key moments that reveals the change that Lewis has gone through can be seen when Lewis is at his house and Lucy arrives, their heated discussion is critical as it reveals how Lewis has gained confidence and his views are no longer the same as those as Lucy, she believes in free love whereas Lewis does not, "I have sex with him and sleep with you" (Madness). Lucy makes a pivotal point though that it is working with the patients and on COSI that has changed Lewis, "we use to talk about important things, now all you can talk about is reactionary drivel like Cosi Fan Tutte". Lewis' decision to go to the asylum to work on the play, instead of going to the moratorium reveals how his priorities have changed, key transformation. Meanwhile when Nick comes around asking why Lewis was absent from the moratorium, it is here that Lewis severs his ties to his old values, the way in which he punches Nick, he is no longer subordinate to them, he has his own thoughts and ideas about what is important and now follows them.

STRUCTURES/CONVENTIONS

As COSI is a play it has a theatrical side and as such the dramatic techniques must be included. According to my teacher there are some main ones such as sound, lighting, props, dialogue, gestures, costumes and structure.

Structure of COSI is that of a chronological order, linear plot. All the action mainly revolves around the burnt out theatre potentially showing that the patients are hidden away from society and not allowed to mingle with the affairs of the outside world, obvious as they lack understanding of the Vietnamese war. Furthermore the only interaction that they have with the outside world is when Lewis arrives, the lighting enters the darkness, Lewis brings the transistor radio and paper etc. Moreover the idea of a play within a play allows the juxtaposition of social values, the parallels of the time such as the themes of fidelity allow comparisons to be drawn up. The language is different, the music is different but the idea of love is the same.

The lighting of COSI can be linked to the meaning of values Nowra deems important. Initially the theatre is dark and Nick, Lucy and Lewis panic looking for a light switch, the darkness metaphoric for the uncertainty surrounding mental illness and the world of the asylum, society lacks understanding and is fumbling around in the dark with its treatments. Furthermore when the darkness is pierced by the Light this can be seen as the outside world piercing into the asylum. During the play when the lights go out though, the bit where Lewis kisses Julie, the darkness represents chaos, madness descends in the dark, Lewis cheats on Lucy, forgoing infidelity, Zac molests Ruth, the idea of free love and Cherry is desperate, further revealing her personality.

The sound of COSI is generally limited, but the music of Cosi Fan Tutte (libretto) is seen as sickly sweet, revealing the differences in the eras. Whereas the music of the 1970's is hectic, Ruth singing Wild thing, a description of how Nowra viewed the era. Zac's insistence to use the music by Wagner in COSI, the two styles are incongruous, do not belong together.

The costumes (not really good evidence as subjective) generally reflected the nature of the patients, Roy a manic depressive who is really energetic wears bright and colourful shirts, reflective of his eccentric and outgoing manner and idiosyncrasies. Meanwhile Henry wears professional clothes, neatly done up revealing his sense of properness and duty, something that is similar to Ruth, she is exceptionally neat, nothing out of place, she has OCD.

There are many different props that are used in COSI, the theatre at the start symbolises how those in asylums are hidden away, lack of attention paid to them is very minimal shown by the condition of the building. However the approach to them is obvious in the way that Justin says "Coat of paint and it'll be right", very flippant. Furthermore the heavy door could be describing the way that the patients are to be hidden away, unable to escape into society. Other props include Henry's

toy soldiers, they symbolise the Vietnam war and conscription. Australian government viewed nations men as toy soldiers, pawns on a larger scale and as such was deemed mad by the public, deemed outdated, something that Henry and his views are in comparison to that of the rest of people, views of love especially. The transistor radio that Lewis brings in could be shown as a part of the outside world entering the asylum, and the shock therapy equipment obvious for the treatment of the patients during the 70's. The cherry chocolate liquor that Cherry gives Lewis seems to be her proclamation of love for him, a symbol of the love that she feels for him. The flick knife that cherry has as well could also reveal the chaos and dangerous that actually exists in an asylum, ironic as Justin says that there'll "be no carving knife against the throat", further revealing the lack of knowledge of what happens.

The gestures that are used are generally exaggerated in order to fully implore that they patients themselves are mad, or, when Henry tackles Nick, that these are pivotal moments in the plot. Zac's seeming disconnection (slow movements) with the world reveals the effect of "treatment".

Meanwhile the dialogue of the patients is very important, it reveals their personalities and other information. The language that is used is representative of the new times, particularly when the juxtaposition of the libretto and music of 'wild thing' are compared, as well as the language that is used by Roy, someone who holds old fashioned ideals, it is long and flowery sentences, that create imagery. Whereas the language used by majority of the others, particularly Doug is short and crude, revealing Doug's nature and challenge of values held by others, something that Nowra aims to do by aiming to offend the audience potentially. The language used is Australian vernacular, the colloquialism potentially to offend the audience or so they can relate to it.

Use of Black Humour, satire and irony as comical aspects in the play. On a superficial level they maintain interest in the play, but they allow Nowra to present his own views and challenge those of others, ideas that normally may not be talked about or ideas that are debatable. Black humour is evident in Doug's story of burning cats, Cherry's story of fetching ducks in her mouth, running through lakes. Irony can be seen as Roy says that the music is all in his head, a preconception of the 1970's that mental illness was all in one's head. How Lewis is initially hesitant and not the leader that he is meant to be when he is the director, reveals his lack of independence, particularly from the views of Nick and Lucy, where working with the patients challenges these concepts.

Fire can be seen in COSI, the way in which the theatre is damaged, may reflected the people that are involved there, they are damaged in some way. However fire is symbolically seen as representing change, rebirth through flames, fire clears things, reveals. Yet fire is also chaotic, seen as the patients and Lewis are stressed when the fire begins. Meanwhile water can be seen as cleansing, symbolic of growth, harmony.

Also at the end of the play, Lewis's soliloquy/epilogue which lists the fates of the characters, reveals how everything works out. Henry eventually dies, Roy moves from asylum to asylum and Doug remains, shows how the treatments don't aid the patients, how the lives of Nick and Lucy pan out.

CONTEXT

COSI is set during the 1970's in Melbourne, Australia.

Written by the prolific writer Louise Nowra, I say that this is a semi-autobiographical (my interpretation) piece of drama. Nowra seems to have a connection to the play, on more than one level, firstly both his grandmothers were deemed mad and in asylums, and secondly Nowra himself worked in an asylum and conducted a play with the patients, and here he is writing about this. Furthermore COSI may in fact be Nowra's attempt to challenge society's views upon many things, mainly mental illness, employing black humour, irony and satire, and the conventions of theatre in order to pass his message across.

The 1970's were a time of great social change, against the backdrop of the Vietnamese War, where Australia and America etc. were fighting the communists, character Henry is this perception that the war is for the good. However the nation was divided over the war, obvious in the way that Nick and Lucy and initially Lewis are against the war, also the moratorium that Nick is organising. During the Vietnam War, there was conscription, something that may be seen in the toy soldiers that Henry plays with. During this time there were many protests against the war, Nick and Lucy evidently embody this and as such they sent aid to the Viet Cong, Australia's enemies. Mutually Assured Destruction M.A.D was also around during this time period, the loom of nuclear war. Parallels of madness of the war and of the madness in the asylum.

During this time there were also great feminism movements, a key example the Women's Liberation movement. Females became more prominent in their roles, were not so subordinate to males as they once were. This can be readily seen in Lucy, she is the symbolic representation of the new age women. Also the gestures and forcefulness of Cherry in the asylum such as "eat it" prompt the idea that women had a new social stance.

The ideas of love had also changed. Instead of the traditional and conservative approach of people to sex and relationships. The 70's saw the eruption of free love, an era of lots of sex and orgies, which ultimately culminated in a great number of STD's. This approach is something that majority of the characters seem to have embraced, Nick, Lucy, Doug, Zac and to some degree Lewis (Julie?). The ideal of fidelity (faithfulness) in a relationship seemed to have of been all but lost, apart from some such as Roy, Henry, Cherry and Ruth. These are the people that still believe that women are faithful, despite being shown differently in *Così fan tutte* and the actions of certain characters, namely Julie and Lucy.

The social values had also changed, love was not deemed so important nowadays, something that Lewis makes point of and is subsequently quashed by Roy. Love and other values have given way to the new ideal of social and international values, the welfare of others, seen when Lucy is like “Do you think the starving masses give a fuck about love?” or “maybe after bread, shelter, equality. . .comes love”. Peace seems to be given more importance in life.

Mental illness during the 1970’s also seems to be not so important and as a result there seems to be a very big lack of knowledge and understanding of the concept. The theatre in which the play is performed is dilapidated and burnt out, metaphorically symbolising societies treatment and level of interest in those with mental illness, they are locked away, hidden behind a “heavy door” from the rest of what society deems “normal and sane”. Furthermore the techniques and treatments that the asylum’s use are not good, on a simpletons level. The treatments themselves are barbaric and crude in nature, seeming to cause more damage or pain than as being actual treatments. Drugs, lobotomy, Mesmer magnet and shock therapy was all applied. Furthermore the character Justin the social worker seems to embody societies perception of mental illness, he seems to be disconnected from the patients, (doesn’t know who Julie is) and seems to be more interested in his own plight than that of the treatments for the patients. Also Julie who has drug problems is put into an asylum, not mental just a crack head.

Così fan tutte – famous play by Mozart. Basically about how true love can be tested and how it is proven that women are not into fidelity. Basically there is these two soldiers Guglielmo and Ferrando, Guglielmo’s partner was Fiordiligi and Ferrando’s was Dorabella. Both the guys think that their partners love them so much and so after the instance of a bet, proposed by an old man, Don Alfonso, the two pretend to go off to war. However they don’t and instead come back as two other soldiers and try to get with each other’s partner, but this doesn’t work, even though their maid Despina tells them to do so. Next the soldiers pretend that Fiordiligi and Guglielmo died in the war and as a result the disguised soldiers then get with each other’s partner. In the end it is then revealed about the ploy and that women are never faithful.

QUOTES/DIALOGUE

“ “ = quote

[]=dialogue

LOVE/FREE LOVE/SEX

“Love is not so important nowadays” – Lewis on Love

“And you want to remain true to your lovers. It’s an old fashioned concept” – Nick on Love

“love is hallucinating without drugs” – Julie on Love

“I have sex with him and sleep with you” – Madness about love

“only mad people in this day and age would do a play about love and infidelity” – Nick

“After bread, shelter, equality, health. . maybe comes love. Do you think the starving masses give a fuck about love?”

“You do this old fashioned opera – this is the era of free love and orgies”

“Love is the last gasp of bourgeois romanticism’

“most women fight hard to keep men out of their pants”

“It’s only a fling. It doesn’t mean anything”

“It’s only sex”

“every audience takes Despina to their bosom”

“women like to pretend they don’t play about”

“without love the world wouldn’t mean much”

MADNESS/ILLUSION

“but its an easy language. Ask any Italian”

“barricades and bombs” why not?”

“i can handle something being an illusion or reality, but not at the same time”

“you’re dealing with a mad audience you know”

VIETNAM WAR

“thousands of Vietnamese are being killed by American troops”

“traitor”

“Australia is in a war against communists and you. . .you stab my father in the back”

“Not only are they nuts, but they’re right wing nuts”

“It is a war with meaning. It is to stop communism”

“How to understand how capitalism exploits the working class is important. How to stop the war in Vietnam is important”

1,2,3,4 We don’t want your fuckin’ war. Radicalise the nation

“lets make love not war man”

MENTAL ILLNESS

“Coat of paint and it’ll be fine”

“And when you want a lobotomy, you jsut can’t get it” – black comedy

“they don’t know how to deal with drug users. He called it a crutch, i said it was a rocket to the moon”

“I think his lithium needs to be upped”

“Do it yourself lobotomy”

“funny farm”

“a Mesmer magnet never helped anyone. It was a fraud”

“There’s no such thing as divine madness. Madness is madness”

“A lower dosage. It’s amazing how much more bright the world seems

“They are normal people who have done extraordinary things, thought extraordinary thoughts”

He’s doped to the eyeballs. He’ll be fine”

[Sotto Voice]

[Looking at his watch]

[drug fog of Zac’s brain]

“This does not look good for me”

“What’s this about Vietnam?”

TRANSFORMATION

“Burnt wood and mould. Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”
 [Lewis is out of his depth with Ruth]
 [Unable to believe he is caught up in this]
 [Hesitantly]
 [flummoxed]

MISC.

[Waiting for some direction from Lewis]
 [Looking at Lewis as if he’s mad]
 [Lewis is beaten]
 “Roy you’re hurting the floor”

VOCAB.

Madness – absurdity, craziness, insanity, delirium, lunacy, mania

Transformation – self discovery, journey, trial, crusade, alteration, metamorphosis, adaption

IDEAS FOR COSI

Lewis says, „love is not so important nowadays.“ What does the play show us about Nowra’s opinion on this topic?	
Lewis: „They’re mad. Its madness...” The humour in Cosi comes mainly from Nowra’s mockery of the mentally ill. Do you agree?	
Nowra’s play is set in a „burnt out theatre”. Discuss the importance of setting and imagery in conveying Nowra’s ideas in Cosi.	
How does Nowra use the opera Cosi Fan Tutte to explore the play’s main ideas?	
It’s not the patients but Lewis who comes out of his shell. Do you agree?	
The comic irony of Nowra’s play is that other patients in the asylum are „saner” than the normal characters. Discuss	

ESSAY THAT I WROTE FOR SAC

<http://vce.atarnotes.com/home/index.php?step=notes&action=feedback&id=645>