

THIEF!

Reviewed by Angela Trolove , 5th November 2021, Dunedin

The house lights fade. Kelly Hocking lets herself into the theatre through the side door. This isn't so easy – she's carrying boxes and a takeaway coffee. She stops, and there's an enjoyable moment of mutual suspicion between she and the audience before she breaks the ice: "Oh, I forgot. People always arrive early to garage sales." With that, she mounts the picket fenced stage; and the artificial turf, the makeshift tables piled with boxes, and the shiny bum bag she wears over her dungarees all falls into place for the audience. Through this whole performance, we are guided fittingly – only as much as we need, and no more. This is great; it means Hocking trusts us to keep up.

And we need to keep up, because this is a coming of age story. Here is Hocking aged six. She's wearing a bunny costume for an Easter parade, and she builds the joke as though she's terrified: "I'm meeting my [step]brother for the first time... and I'm dressed as a bunny." But with the punch line, and a big laugh, we remember she's six. "Cool!" Then she's ten, then thirteen, and so on, navigating whether or not to lose faith in this stepbrother, her hero, Ben, as it becomes apparent he's on the wrong side of the law. Her dilemma engages us. Will he rehabilitate? Or will she see through him?

Before Hocking states each age clearly—or lisps it, with braces—"I'm a teenager now," and marks time with lyrically relevant 90's anthems in all their splendour. Although exaggerated to make the audience laugh, the gusto with which these anthems are sung belies a developed voice. Hocking mimics the timbre of Britney Spears, Timbaland and others with uncanny ability. Presently, we learn she studied performance after high school. These songs are a highlight, especially for audience members of Hocking's era. As is nineties' miscellanea: a Baby-G watch, Bart Simpson impersonations, and the 'as seen on tv' appliances at this garage sale.

Ellie Swann cues lighting appropriately. She blues the stage for flashbacks to in-store dabbling into theft. Otherwise, the stage is lit a warm yellow because this is comedy and Hocking's memories are optimistic. Other times, the audience groans and shudders at a case of thrush being dismissed as 'an illusion'. On reflection, most of the content of this play is tough, but it doesn't come across this way because of Hocking's gift for physical theatre. Her sound effect for a shop's alarm, her connection with the audience, and her childlike inhibition in swirling a pair of shiny red pompoms relaxes us.

In the final scene, her significant other describes her as quirky and charming. He loves that she wears her heart on her sleeve. He's onto something. It's great to see such a mature and comfortable actor pioneering autobiographical theatre with an open, vivid, and watertight script. Initially developed as part of the inaugural Ōtepoti Theatre Lab Playwrights Programme, *Thief!* is Hocking's debut play.

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By Kelly Hocking

Directed by Emily Duncan

5/6th November 2021

New Athenaeum Theatre, Dunedin