

THE BOOK OF DUCKS

A DUCK CALLED LOU: WRITERS' NOTE

With a bit of luck

A duck

Will come into your life.

– Michael Leunig, 'A Little Duck'

Melbourne for me has always seemed to be about three things – trams (or *Malcolm*), Leunig cartoons, and Helen Garner novels – and I wanted to try and find a way to put a few of them on stage together. "The Book of Ducks" is a love letter to Melbourne, a city I've fallen in love with, and grown to call home over the past two years. With its spirit of seriousness and silliness, Melbourne is the perfect setting for a twenty-first century fairy tale, with all that magic and potential lingering in its laneways and backyards.

"The Book of Ducks" is also a response to Guillermo del Toro's 'The Shape of Water.' Constrained within its period setting, del Toro's story still treats those who are different as 'Other,' something monstrous. I wanted to see what it might look like if the idea of 'the other' – that gloriously transgressive staple of fairy tales – manifested itself in the suburbs of Melbourne, the stomping ground for everything different.

One question I've been asked a lot is 'why a duck?' Ducks feature strongly in fairy tales and folk tales as forces for 'wisdom, joy and innocence,' as Michael Leunig knows. Taking a feather of inspiration from Leunig's duck and its mythological ancestors, my duck – and, I suppose, the play – becomes a symbol of hope and optimism. In much the same way that Melbourne looks its best when it is glistening wet with rain, this duck arrives when the characters most need a gentle tug on their hand to remind them not to lose sight of the things that matter.

A brand new fairy tale for Melbourne, "The Book of Ducks" is for everyone who never got to be the main characters in the old ones. Embracing the queer dramaturgy inherent in fairy tales, it is perhaps a pointer in the direction of onwards for this moment in time. A play about lightness and darkness (and, I suppose, duckness); about love and trust, reality versus expectations. It is a story about friends, and sisters; new starts and unexpected visitors; blackandwhite films and dancing; every tiny brilliant detail in life. About embracing the duck inside all of us.

ON DUCKS

While audiences might be more familiar with the duck as a key component of Michael Leunig's body of work, the duck is by no means Leunig's own creation. It is a potent symbol and visual motif in mythology and fairy tales across the world.

In 'The Problem of Evil in Fairytales,' Marie-Louise von Franz writes that the duck is "able to move in all three realms [land, water, sky] and is [a symbol] of the soul... It is a germinal principle of consciousness, wholly devoted to the service of the unconscious... [bringing] forth a new and wider field of consciousness."

Leunig echoed this in a [1992 interview with Helen Garner](#), saying ducks are "a symbol of transcendence... They can do what we cannot. They can go on water, into the air and on the land – but they have an angelic quality too. They're white – and they have wings." Interviewed by Andrew Denton on *Enough Rope* in 2006, Leunig continued, "I thought everybody would understand what a duck is about, and it's just there is the duck... I didn't invent the duck, I just like to draw the duck... It brings out what's in you, [your] inner duck is awakened..."

GS

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