

The Football Diaries

Written and Performed by Ahilan Ratnamohan

Director: Lee Wilson

Produced by Urban Theatre Projects- Australia (www.urbantheatre.com.au)

Theatre: The Market Theatre

This production will be performed for the public from the 8th to 10th July 2010

Reviewed by: Adam J. Levin

It is unfortunate that *The Football Diaries* will be having only three public performances in Johannesburg. Even more unfortunate is that it is being performed at the very end of the world cup season. Throughout this season, the “official” football stage production has been *The Boys in the Photograph*, an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical that uses football as a backdrop for an exploration of the social and political issues of Ireland in the 60’s-70’s period. As good as the production may be, it is not one that is formulated to actively appeal to both theatergoers and soccer enthusiasts. The genius of *Football Diaries*, in this respect, is that it is a production which is able to engage with both these audience groups. It is a show that is purely about football and, yet, you do not need to know anything about the game to enjoy it.

Devised and performed by Ahilan Ratnamohan, a young Australian/ Sri-Lankan football player, *The Football Diaries* ambitiously fuses together a sport/ dance form of physical theatre with realist monologue as it details the rise of Ratnamohan within the sporting world and the conflicts that emerge as he discovers the ugly side of the dream he is pursuing. The production is based on Ratnamohan’s own journal writings, making it an intensely personal production for the performer.

Before considering Ratnamohan’s performance, it is necessary to mention the production’s aesthetics which are able to function as characters/ performers in their own right. Firstly, the stage floor is covered in white, creating an impressive illusion of a sporting field for the audience. This allows them to be more than just spectators as they become intrinsically involved in the game that is being performed on stage and, essentially, experience Ratnamohan’s world just as he experiences it. The presence of the side stage lights enhances this experience, allowing the audience to gain a further understanding of the tension between skill and celebrity that comes with the territory of being a professional football player. Even more impressive, however, is the presence of a video screen as a backdrop which complements and parallels Ratnamohan’s

narrative. When Ratnamohan refers to specific football matches where his influences are at their best (or worst), his speech is accompanied by a video clip from the match on the screen, further enhancing the audience's understanding of his perceptions on a visual level. This is especially effective in a scene where Ratnamohan refers to a subtle racist exchange between a football coach and one his players. The visual reference of this on screen enforces the devastating subtext of this exchange, as well as its impact on Ratnamohan's identity as a football player.

It would be easy for this clever use of aesthetics to overshadow Ratnamohan's own performance, yet he rises to the challenge with aplomb. This is a performance which requires far more than your usual one-man show performance. Ratnamohan is required to take on the role of both actor and sportsman, demonstrating both the dynamic energy of a stage performer and the strength, agility and skill of a football player. The primarily physical scenes where Ratnamohan is required to imitate the moves he uses during a football match are excellent as they convey the excitement, intensity and physical prowess that is demonstrated on the sports field. If anything, the only criticism is that these scenes, at times, go on for slightly too long, detracting from the wonderfully entertaining manner in which Ratnamohan delivers his monologue to the audience. This delivery is, of course, the most important aspect of the production as it is the vocal dynamics of Ratnamohan's performance that provide the greatest centre from which his engagement with the audience develops. In this regard, Ratnamohan is an endearing, witty and insightful performer whose raw honesty adds certain sincerity to his interaction with the audience. In one scene, he does a particularly effective job of breaking the fourth wall as he moves into the audience, commenting on them as if they are his opponents. The audience's laughter which emerges from this scene is testament to the effectiveness of Ratnamohan's playfulness as an actor and provides a nice balance for the more serious aspects of the verbal and physical scenes. Overall, Ratnamohan delivers an accomplished performance which makes this production compelling to watch at all times.

The Football Diaries is an exceptional and original piece of theatre that will appeal to audiences of all demographics. If you are looking for a show that can "talk" sport as effectively as it "talks" theatre, this production is especially for you.