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A Number

★★★★★ 10 Aug 2011-04 Sep 2011, Northcote, Theatre

Hill's brisk direction serves the elegant craft of the piece well

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First published on 19 Aug 2011. Updated on 5 Sep 2011.

This event has finished

Deftly realised by director Catherine Hill and Northcote's Winterfall Theatre, Caryl Churchill's *A Number* serves as a cautionary tale for any widower-parent ever tempted to cryogenically preserve a cell sample from their only child as a contingency against the unlikely event that they stuff up the parenting so badly that, all things considered, starting over from genetic scratch with a new clone of said child starts to seem like a good idea. The take home from this play: this is not a good idea.

Salter, played with an anguished kind of reserve by Phil Roberts, is just such a widower-parent. Forty years ago, he made a series of terrible mistakes that resulted in him putting his natural-born son up for adoption. After sorting his life out, he had a scientist create a clone of his lost child, resolving to "get it right" the second time around. Without his knowledge, the scientist then made twenty more clones using the son's genetic material.

Justin Hosking plays three characters: Bernard Two, the clone who thought he was Salter's natural-born son, temperamentally mild, but utterly disorientated by the news that he is a clone; Bernard One, the original son, mentally scarred by his abandonment; and Michael, a subsequent clone and blithe family man who had, until recently, been oblivious of his connection with Salter.

While the ostensible topic here is cloning, this is not so much a play about the ethics of scientific experimentation as a reflection on perceptions of self-identity.

Hosking gives thoughtful attention to the element of difference in each of his genetically identical characters. His careful distinctions not only frame the play's foray into the nurture versus nature debate, but also its more interesting investigation of the *significance* of identity, particularly as this relates to the question of moral responsibility.

Churchill is like a persistent metaphysical challenge to contemporary Anglophone playwriting. She is a seemingly inexhaustible font of formal artistic innovation, but innovation that is always applied to subjects of emphatically *political* importance. In describing Salter's yearning for redemption, this work subtly takes up that political burden, becoming a

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powerful analogy for themes of historical guilt in a socio-cultural context.

Hill's brisk direction serves the elegant craft of the piece well. When I entered the theatre and saw the faded domestic interior set by Nick Casey, I feared that the full potential of the text might become dulled in an arrangement too specifically naturalistic. While a domestic sort of father-and-son relationship is at the heart of this play, there are so many other levels at which Churchill's writing can resonate: one can't set a definitive pitch. But in the compelling rush of their variously modulated emotions, as discovery piles on discovery, Roberts and Hosking skilfully suggest, through their mastery of Churchill's fractured dialogue, the profound array of connections latent in this work.

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Words by Andrew Fuhrmann | [Follow @TimeOutMel](#)

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A Number details

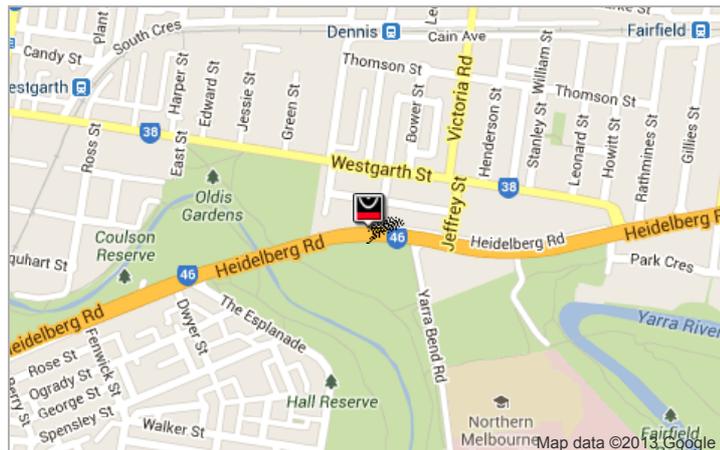
The Theatre Husk

Address
161a Heidelberg Rd
Northcote 3070
Transport
Nearby Stations: Clifton Hill; Westgarth; Dennis

Price from \$16.00 to \$32.00
Date 10 Aug 2011-04 Sep 2011
Open Thu-Sat 8pm; Sun 6.30pm
Director: Catherine Hill
Cast: Phil Roberts and Justin Hosking

[The Theatre Husk details](#)
[Northcote area guide](#)

The Theatre Husk map



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500m - Pretend you are Mr Kingsley and Emma as you glide along the river in...

Penny Farthing Espresso

1458m - There is no shortage of small trendy cafes in Northcote, but Penny Farthing...

Two by Two

1551m - The latest venue to set up shop on High Street, Northcote is Two by Two.



Chowhound

★★★★☆
1551m - There's been another changing of the kitchen guard at Chowhound. The once...



Estelle Bar & Kitchen

★★★★☆
1584m - It's been all about mod-Asian, hot dogs, and sommeliers wearing trucker...



Mojo's Weird Pizza

1767m - A copious amount of variety and toppings to your heart's desire, Mojo's...

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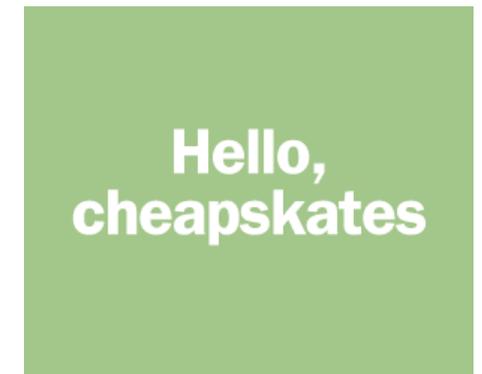
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