

Kaput, Strut & Fret and Tom Flanagan – review

@vanbadham

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Sydney festival: Circus Ronaldo tent

Kaput: Tom Flanagan's mix of silent slapstick and acrobatics takes its inspiration from Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Photograph: SYC Studios/Sean Young

Kaput is a loving live tribute to the slapstick comedy of the silent movie era, created and performed by renowned Australian circus performer and Tom Tom Club veteran, Tom Flanagan.

Flanagan's Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin influence is a proud one – the show is nearly entirely performed without Flanagan speaking, and springs conceptually from that simple premise perfected by his two antecedents: put a likeable man in a hapless predicament and witness his struggle to regain situational control.

In Kaput, the likeable man is an eager young silent movie projectionist whose uncomplicated goal of showing a film on a screen is frustrated by a glitch in his temperamental projector. The combination of a heart of gold and very poor spatial reasoning leads Flanagan's character into increasingly desperate attempts to repair his equipment so as not to deny his audience the film that's been advertised.

Chaos, of course, ensues – a flat-capped Flanagan struggles with ladders, trestle tables, various pieces of dysfunctional machinery and a growing pile of stage debris, accompanied only a keyboardist contributing cheesy muzak as an ironic musical commentary to the disaster as it unfolds. Flanagan's signature leaps and tumbles are present, but it's tricks like a set of twists with an exploding roll of sticky tape that show him to be both an exceptional talent and a unique one.

With only one or two pieces of stage furniture modified for Flanagan's use, Kaput is essentially found-object clowning – with the vacuum cleaner a favourite star.

It's very funny and by the time the panicking clown starts recruiting audience members to help him unravel the mess of his own creation, the performer/audience relationship is so warm that the recruits require little encouragement from Flanagan to leap into his chaotic fray.

It could be argued that Flanagan's medium here is not physical clowning so much as it is loveability, as it's his well-meaning zeal that is the true protagonist of his clownish narrative, initiating the events that cumulate into a thorough trashing of the stage. It's also what allows Flanagan to get away with some genuinely adult gags while children are present; this is a show classed as family entertainment not because it is dumbed-down,

but because it speaks to different demographics simultaneously. Genuine fun for all the family: highly recommended.

• Kaput plays until January 19. Tickets \$20

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