



Paul Capsis (left) and Ash Flanders in Sisters Grimm's hit, *Calpurnia Descending*.



# WHERE THE ART TAKES YOU

From backyards and car parks to conventional theatres, fringe favourites **Sisters Grimm** are disrupting the stage!

**MENTION SISTERS GRIMM** and the idea of folklore and fairytales probably spring to mind. But the Melbourne theatre duo who go by this name are far removed from bedtime stories. The Sisters Grimm exist, instead, on the theatrical fringe.

The term 'fringe theatre' developed in the 1940s at the Edinburgh International Festival when a few small theatre groups staged productions on the physical fringes of the city theatre district.

Small, experimental theatre had always existed but the term fringe now meant it began to gain recognition in its pure, unabashed, unconventional form.

Sisters Grimm exemplify this in the Australian theatre scene. Their productions are camp, satirical, melodramatic, pathos-filled, political, trashy and gay. They also happen to be hilariously entertaining. *The Australian's* John McCallum has described them simply as "genius".

Who exactly are the Sisters Grimm? They are Ballarat Arts Academy graduate Ash Flanders and writer Declan Greene, who first met in 2005 when working on a show at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival. They didn't hit it off straight away, but the two met up again a year later and it was then that their creative partnership ignited.

Flanders and Greene's shows have included a drag queen version of *Flowers In The Attic* to the *Gone With The Wind*-inspired *Summertime In The Garden Of Eden*, which included sister drag queen characters whose maid was played by a goliwog puppet. Farcical but poignant. Out there.

Sisters Grimm explore hot-button themes such as racism, violence and homoeroticism and they rally against stereotyping and assumptions. As such, the staging of their shows is an event, taking place in unconventional pop-up venues such as private homes, backyard sheds and underground car parks.

One production, *Little Mercy*, explored the classic "evil child" genre with a 70-year-old playing an 8-year-old. *The Sovereign Wife* examined the Aussie pioneer, with great campiness. Their *La Traviata* turned Verdi's opera on its head with an uncomfortably long scene of physical humiliation for the lead actress, and a third act that turned the audience themselves into a group therapy session. While not exactly Antonin Artaud's Theatre Of Cruelty, Sisters Grimm are not for the faint-hearted theatregoer.

For *Calpurnia Descending*, the Sisters teamed up with star of stage and cabaret Paul Capsis to tell the story of an ageing and reclusive diva living in New York, encapsulating all the diva melodrama of Bette Davis, Joan Crawford and Gloria Swanson. The production played at Melbourne's Malthouse Theatre and the Sydney Theatre Company – not bad for a group whose roots began, literally, in the backyard.

With a core objective "to make theatre accessible, enjoyable and

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provocative in the same style as stand-up comedy”, the Sisters have taken their productions from makeshift venues to boutique theatres, main stages and beyond, attracting accolades, standing ovations and often sell-out seasons along the way.

Stanislavski once said, "Love art in yourself, and not yourself in art." Perhaps that's the moral of the Sisters Grimm tale.

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