



arts Diana Simmonds



Staying true: Sculptor and playwright Tobsha Learner says her piece Fidelity is very Australian

Picture: Frank Viola

Paying homage to the art of fidelity

Tobsha Learner is an unusual playwright in that she trained as a sculptor. But talking to her and thinking about her work, this makes sense — for Learner crafts and chisels her characters and ideas out of a whole, rather than putting bits together.

"I'm deductive, rather than adding on," Learner says.

"The tenacity of marble-carving teaches you a lot about patience, which I think you need as a writer.

"And sculpture helps you relate to the space between characters and spatial tension — which you absolutely need, and must understand, on a stage."

Learner knows a thing or two about spatial tension. As of next week, she will have two plays running simultaneously in Sydney: *Homage*, at the Stables, and *Fidelity*, at the Old Fitzroy.

"You wouldn't know they're by the same writer," she smiles.

"*Homage* is my fourth one-hander, and very much a work in progress. It's an exploration of the bawdy, and it's about a very articulate, 10-foot penis, and ultimately redemptive!"

Fidelity — produced by Sydney's successful and dynamic fringe company, Tamarama Rock Surfers — is another world altogether.

"*Fidelity* follows another line, more like *Glass Mermaid*, which Playbox did in Melbourne," Learner says.

"*Fidelity* is a very Australian piece. It's about fidelity to one's nature and country, as well as on personal levels, and it's coming out of the way the colony evolved.

"It was a very long time before patriotism was something that could be considered by Australians, and we still have difficulty with it — for very good reasons.

"And what we don't deal with is ownership of Australia's intelligentsia. Despite how Australians insist on portraying themselves, we have a very sophisticated intellectual life and discourse."

Learner is Australian by choice — an interesting and profound part of being a writer who portrays the society she lives in.

"It's ridiculous," she says. "I've fallen in love, and it's a 30-year love story. We come from different ends of London — different classes, too — and it's taken us three times around the world to finally ..."

It means that, not for the first time, Learner is going to be an Australian arts commuter — six months in Rozelle and six months in Ladbrooke Grove.

"It's going to be interesting and difficult," she smiles.

"We have to nurture our indigenous culture — and by that, I mean Australian culture."

"But you can't develop a profession when there's no money in it. For me, playwriting is a cultural hobby; I make my living from prose and a bit of screenwriting.

"I'm considered a success, but I have to juggle at least six things at once. And I'm not unusual."

What makes it worthwhile for a writer such as Learner — who can say, without false or irritating modesty, of her new work, "It's an ambitious play" — is that Sydney now has a dynamic fringe-theatre culture.

"It's so important," she says. "It used to be Melbourne, but now I see it happening in Sydney, and it's vital for all of us."

She's right — and *Fidelity*, which could be thumbnail-sketched as starting off almost comfortably Williamson and turning disconcertingly into Ibsen, is part of that vitality.

Fidelity, Old Fitzroy, July 3-31, phone 9294 4296.

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