

The Sydney Morning Herald

SE Arts
HD **From small screen to big stage**
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WC 571 words
PD 12 September 2014
SN The Sydney Morning Herald
SC SMHH
ED First
PG 34
LA English
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Sue Smith pens a love story in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, writes Linda Morris.

Nine years ago, after a painful experience in television drama, screenwriter Sue Smith, walked away "in a huff".

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"I said I'm not going to do this thing any more, I'm going to write for the theatre, and managed to get a play on in a little co-op production. I had such a joyous experience with that ... and I discovered that in fact, although you can't make a living as a stage writer, the theatre is much more inclusive of the writer than writing for the screen."

The shabby treatment of *The Cooks* - axed after one series - led to a new bow to Smith's storytelling abilities that has led to the premiere of *Kryptonite* at the Sydney Theatre Company (STC).

A co-production with the State Theatre Company of South Australia, *Kryptonite* charts the inherently suspicious relationship between Australia and China through the love story of Dylan, an Australian university student from Sydney and Lian, a shy Chinese doctoral candidate from Beijing.

It follows the couple from their first meeting at a Sydney university in 1989, the year of Tiananmen Square massacre, and over the next 25 years as both rise in their respective fields of politics and big business.

"Kryptonite is the single thing that could undo Superman so the play is all about what is the weakness, the thing, that can undo us," says Smith, who wrote *Kryptonite* during a residency at the STC supported by Playwriting Australia.

"What the play tries to do is use the personal as a metaphor for larger cultural and political questions. It is a story of cultural bewilderment and an attempt by two people to love each other through this morass."

Clive Palmer recently fed the paranoia that Smith describes in *Kryptonite* when he called the Chinese government "mongrels" who shot their own people. Smith is gobsmacked at the tenor of Palmer's comments.

"We've had the Chinese in this country since before the Gold Rush and they've contributed a huge amount to this country, they still do, but there is this fear that is happening in white Australia essentially," she says.

To create the character of Lian, Smith spent many days quizzing her Chinese-Australian sister-in-law, Lijun Liu, about her history and family.

Smith is grateful she has made the leap from screenwriting to stage drama. Screenwriters don't always get the respect theatre gives its dramatists, she says. "What tends to happen when you write

for film and telly is you kind of hand over the script and everyone says, 'Thanks very much, off you go now'."

Theatre, she thinks, is more daring and accommodating of creators' preoccupations. Where there is big money at **stake** - in television and film - there is a tendency to creeping populism to reach a larger audience. Playwriting is a scarier proposition than film and or television, says Smith, who last Friday received a \$15,000 Australia Writers' Foundation fellowship to encourage further work for the stage.

"For the stage you are only limited by the capacity of your own imagination. "Writing for the stage is about understanding you are writing for an engagement between actor and audience and story."

Kryptonite is at Wharf 1 Theatre until October 18.

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AN Document SMHH000020140911ea9c0002k