

SE Arts  
HD **Boom and dust bring apocalypse to the west**  
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Suzie Miller's play places Perth at the centre of a cataclysm

PERTH and apocalyptic events seem to **merge** in the minds of certain creative types, even those who claim to love Australia's most geographically isolated capital city. Take *These Final Hours*, the end-of-the-world movie thriller that met with rapturous applause in Cannes a few weeks ago (and is due for release next month).

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In director Zak Hilditch's film, an antihero saves a young girl on their last day on earth. Hilditch has described the film as his "apocalyptic love letter to Perth".

And now comes *Dust*, a theatrical doomsday story also set in Perth. Commissioned by Black Swan State Theatre **Company**, Suzie Miller's play explores the notion that a cataclysmic event can change the world in a split second and, with it, our life prospects.

A great **wind** completely enfolds Perth in a mantle of malevolent red dust. People fear that any exposure to it could prove deadly, and this panicked message spreads fast.

Stopped in their tracks are two strangers stranded in an airport lounge, a **mining** supervisor and his teenage stepdaughter; young lovers in a hotel suite; and a bride-to-be watching her white wedding plans disintegrate.

The apocalyptic setting has its upside: there's nothing like the end of the world to focus the mind.

"It's about the connectedness and moments of clarity when you clasp hold of what's important to you," explains Miller, a globetrotting Perth-born playwright who returns periodically to her home town. "Like in the twin towers attack, people become a lot more generous and open and prepared to engage in conversation when catastrophe rolls in." The dust storm doubles as a visual reminder of the economic context of Perth's wealth. "It is a city surrounded by a vast landscape, close to the enormity of the **mining** sector. When you live in that shadow, you are vulnerable to both the boom and the bust.

"You also become keenly aware of the responsibilities to the environment." With such an inconveniently invisible foe, Miller's script is fiendishly tricky to stage. In 32 scenes lasting 90 tense minutes, the characters battle an enveloping cloud. A design team of four has worked on the visual and acoustic imagery, and a series of onstage effects require the actors to double as backstage assistants.

"The set design amounts to another character," says director Emily McLean, "and we think we've found visually strong ways of depicting it." One of the characters, played by Kelton Pell, star of the ABC television series *The Gods of Wheat Street*, is a mine manager called in to work at a time when his vulnerable stepdaughter should not be left alone. "Fly-in, fly-out workers are a rich area to be mined, metaphorically speaking at least," observes Miller. "The men talk about what is lost every time they fly out to work. It has an effect on families." *Dust* — whose commissioning was funded by **mining** giant Rio Tinto — is Black Swan's next offering in a line of commissions of new Australian plays, which most recently featured Aidan Fennessy's thriller *The House on the Lake*. Black Swan's artistic director Kate Cherry describes Miller's play as "energetic, witty and insightful".

Dust is just the latest in a long line of scripts penned by the prolific Miller during stints living in Sydney, London, Perth and Toronto — sometimes with two high school children and husband in tow. She was writer-in-residence at Sydney's Griffin Theatre in 2012 and at the National Theatre of Scotland last year. She has been mentored by Edward Albee and Robert Lepage, and twice been attached to the National Theatre in London.

"I go where the work is," she explains simply. "I tell Australian stories but I'm always in conversation with directors globally.

"If you wait for the work to come to you, you get bitter. And I have had lucky breaks." Miller says she feels at home writing about topical issues. "We've shied away from political theatre in more recent times. Recently a group of us talked about how stage adaptations and humour are the most popular forms of theatre. Yet we were politically active for a really long time, and I feel the tide is turning again." Miller has won numerous awards for the 20-odd plays she has written. She won the 2008 Kit Denton Fellowship for writing with courage, was twice shortlisted for an Australian Writers Guild AWGIE Award and the Griffin Award, and won the 2008 New York Fringe Festival award for outstanding playwriting. She won an AWGIE last year for her radio play Cross Sections.

Now in Sydney, where the family is based, she's working on Over-exposed, a piece on interrogation, with Humphrey Bower and choreographer-dancer Danielle Micich. Other plays with future billing are June, written for the Australian Theatre for Young People, and The Secret Project, a site-specific show with Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts students back in Perth.

Theatre for young people has become a successful pursuit and keeps luring her back to Perth. She is writing the last in a trilogy of plays (the second, Driving into Walls, was staged at the Sydney Opera House last year) for Perth's Barking Gecko Theatre Company. "I spend so much time in grey London that when I return to Perth there is always a visceral quiver of being close to nature, to land, to space, to something that is uniquely Australian — heat and trees, water, sky and space that exposes something real and authentic," Miller says.

"And every time I come back, there's something new: the railway station has changed, or there's a new state theatre. It's like watching a child grow.

"Sydney and Melbourne seem to be a bit economically repressed, and all the London people I deal with are talking more about Perth than Sydney." She senses that Perth is being viewed as a tantalising stop on an itinerary of touring possibilities, a kind of cultural Silk Road from London to Singapore, through Perth and on to China.

Such thinking may be premature, she concedes, but it signifies that Perth is seen as having matured into a cultural outpost of note. "If I were running a company here, I'd be over in Europe talking about our proximity to China. And everyone in Europe asks me about indigenous art, and this state has a strong living presence." And just to exonerate Perth from being typecast as Apocalypse City, Miller admits she drew inspiration for Dust from the biggest dust storm in 70 years that blanketed three east coast cities in September 2009, spreading from Brisbane to Sydney and Canberra.

Residents were advised to remain indoors as dust levels in the air reached dangerous levels.

And the cloud's origin? Not the mining province in the west but the deserts around Lake Eyre in South Australia. Dust opens on July 2, with previews from tomorrow, and runs until July 13.

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