

## ***Black Faggot***

**By Victor Rodger**

**The Court Theatre, 17 May – 14 June 2025**

### **Review by Robyn Peers**

*Black Faggot* is a gem of a play. A diamond, finely cut, clear and sparkly with the ability to cut deeply.

I first saw *Black Faggot* over ten years ago, when Rodgers wrote it in response to the Destiny Church's protests against the Marriage Equality Bill. I don't remember a lot of the details, but I certainly recall being entertained and more importantly being deeply moved.

This iteration of the play is timely, as Brian Tamaki has again turned his venomous attention towards the gay community. As the opening production in the Wakefield Family Front Room, it marries well with *The End of the Golden Weather*. Both showcase New Zealand writing and both reflect on society in the past, with implications still very relevant to the world we live in today.

*Black Faggot* tells the story of James, a young gay, Samoan man as he comes to terms with his sexuality. It is interspersed with scenes demonstrating why he is so reluctant to come out to his family, his church and his friends. An "undercover brother" he walks a tightrope, balancing carefully, trying not to fall.

As we first see James with his dad on a Destiny Church rally, we know his road is going to be tough; try as he might he cannot "pray the gay away." The role religion has had in discriminating against the homosexual community is headlined.

James, his lover, and the large number of other roles are played expertly by Gideon T. Smith and Jake Tupu. Body language, vocal cues, lighting and sound allow us to follow the seamless transformation from one character to another. Tupu exudes confidence, he is comfortable in his skin while Smith garners compassion from the audience as James journeys reluctantly towards acceptance of himself.

With audience on three sides and in the gallery above the actors worked adroitly to ensure that all viewers were fully connected to their stories.

*Black Faggot* is hilarious but also provocative. It is explicit, there is plenty of simulated sex, filthy language, and a raft of putdowns of the gay community. So much of it, however, is thought provoking and profoundly moving. Sentences such as "My Dad beat me back into the closet for thirty years" have huge impact.

Director Anapela Polata'ivao has worked skillfully with all aspects of this play. Language, movement, music, comedy and pathos combine to enhance our sympathy with the characters and Rodger's message "be honest with yourself" is kept in the foreground. The design elements while simple, enhance the narrative.

The theatre, a black rectangle, is small, the audience close to the performers, the space designed to be flexible. For *Black Faggot* the playing space has been defined by a black lacquered reflective floor with a huge frangipani flower hanging upstage. Chris Reddington, the designer, has created so much with just these few elements. The flower is at once Polynesia, God, fragility, scent, an orifice and above all colour. Lighting designer Giles Tanner has also used this simple design to its fullest.

The Wakefield Family Front Room is the space Christchurch has been missing since the demise of Court 2. It is small, intimate, and will allow for a range of plays, avantgarde, innovative and experimental, which The Court Theatre has been missing, it is these plays which will satisfy the experienced theatregoer and will build a new audience. *Black Faggot* is a perfect vehicle for this initiative.