

WHAT'S A POOR BOY TO DO?

Being a hard core fan of Tim Finn is paying off for Matt Cameron



Matt Cameron's criminal career was brief yet successful. In 1982, a young lad of twelve, he stole a tape from a record store. "I don't remember if I went in with the intent to steal or if it was just an impulse," he says. The album, though, he clearly remembers: Split Enz's

Time and Tide, a seminal album by New Zealand's famous musical export. Now that the statute of limitations has long placed him beyond the reach of the juvenile courts, Cameron can reflect on the crime: "At least I showed good taste, if not high moral standards."

Twenty-seven years later, Matt Cameron gets a chance to more than compensate Split Enz singer and songwriter Tim Finn for the loss of royalties incurred by his delinquency when their collaboration, *Poor Boy*, a play with songs, opens at Sydney Theatre in July. The passion for the music stayed with him through the intervening years, through Finn's days with Split Enz and Crowded House and throughout his long solo career. "So it feels almost predestined that my obsessive fandom has amounted to this unbelievable outcome."

A mutual friend, film and television producer Lydia Livingstone, knowing Matt was a fan, recommended him when Finn began talking about the possibility of a theatre project. "Secretly, I was at first reluctant," Matt admits, "because I had him up on a pedestal, and I worried whether working closely bring that crashing down. Now it seems ridiculous that I would have hesitated. It seems so obvious to me now that you couldn't write a play using somebody's music without a really deep knowledge of that music."

Being a fan made it a much swifter process. I feel that if I hadn't been so familiar with Tim's music, I would have needed a year just immersing myself in all his back catalogue to pull it off. In a sense, I have been researching this play for twenty-seven years."

A successful writer for television and film, Matt Cameron returns to the stage with *Poor Boy*, his first play since *Hinterland* for Melbourne Theatre Company in 2004. The break was intentional, at least initially; he had written a few plays one after the other and felt on he was getting on "a playwriting treadmill". "Playwriting is pure territory for me," he says. "I didn't want to seem as if I was churning through them. Plays take so much work to write and stage. So many resources are invested by the theatre company, and audiences pay a decent dollar to see them. For me writing a play for a paying audience, I need to have something meaningful and deeply felt I want to say or explore." He admits, however, that after five years away from theatre he got the feeling that he wasn't missed at all. "It was if I'd broken up with theatre and was waiting for it to beg me to come back: of course, it never did. Hubris, really."

And then Tim Finn called. Finn brought to the initial discussion an idea from something he'd read about children claiming knowledge of past lives. Matt brought a strong sense that the story should be about family, and should somehow include sea and space as symbolic elements, since these are common motifs in Finn's songs. From such basic elements, the first draft developed quite quickly. "On one level, the process was very instinctive and subconscious. I knew that there were certain songs of Tim's that had to be in it. The show had to be called *Poor Boy*, for instance, and that song had to be in the show."



Poor Boy marks a change of style for Matt Cameron. This is not one of his absurdist fables with their wordplay and visual puns, such as *Ruby Moon*, *Tear from a Glass Eye* or *Man the Balloon*. "When I began, I probably thought the play was a departure for me," he says, "but now I'm further down the track, I see how it fits in with my other work. I felt family and primal bonds were integral to Tim's songs, and I have also dealt with those relationships in my plays. I just dealt with them on a more abstract level. And I felt that to use his songs I would need to ground it more in realism, to be sure they could emanate seamlessly out of the dialogue. I have actually used songs before in my work. I would often write lyrics, and music would be added in production, so *Poor Boy* is not a departure even in that respect. I have always loved music in plays. I like the power of music to unlock something mysteriously deep within performer and audience."

"I was saying to someone the other day that I sometimes feel as if I write the same play over and over, just changing the title and character names. This play is no different, really. It is just me up to my sad, old tricks. But this time, at least the audience are going to leave the theatre humming these glorious songs."

Paul Galloway

Sydney Theatre Company, Melbourne Theatre Company and Qantas by arrangement with Poor Boy Enterprises Pty Ltd and Llegup Pty Ltd present *Poor Boy* playing from 6 July at Sydney Theatre.