

# REVIEWS

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## Selkie

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**NERIDA DICKINSON**

Delicate blend of myth, modern relationship dynamics and dance creates a compelling theatrical experience.



*Image: Selkie; photo by Callum Sims courtesy [blueroom](http://http://blueroom.org.au/events/selkie/)*

The myth of the selkie inspires Finn O'Branagáin's subtle script, sympathetically directed by Joe Lui in this work from Renegade Productions. Rónnad the Selkie emerges from the sea in her seal skin. She casts the fur aside to enjoy the sensation of the sun and the stillness of the beach, and opens her eyes to find it gone. By losing her skin she also loses her way home to her life beneath the waves and she gratefully accepts the towel offered by the kind man nearby. Séan the Human promises to help find the skin, and offers her shelter in the meantime.

Ella Hetherington and Paul Grabovac play the roles of the stranded selkie and the smitten young man. The course of their relationship is marked by a steady series of misunderstandings, conflicts, small surrenders and compromises that see Rónnad's sense of self, independence and hopes for freedom all gradually ratcheted back and whittled away.

Their interactions are mirrored by the physical displays of Yilin Kong and Kynan Hughes, dance movements depicting unspoken threats, fears, frustration and anger. While Grabovac's Séan plays the clown, makes plaintive requests and reassures Hetherington's land-bound selkie, Hughes' Séan struts, strikes triumphant poses and entraps Kong's portrayal of Rónnad's inner beast. Mirrored movements tie the two roles together, Kong and Hetherington synchronising provocative taunts and Grabovac matching Hughes' measured progress, step for step.

Subtle dialogue matches Laura Boynes' sympathetic choreography, the interplay of the relationship between the two parts being depicted as complex, dynamic combinations of words, feelings, aggressions and desires. The steady change in the relative positions within the couple drives the performance, director Lui keeps the various elements harmonised and at the right levels to maintain tension.

Lui's lighting and sound designs are integral to the performance, creating space and carving moments for dance movements to be fully realised. The simple raised central dais is delicately carved like an oversized lino cut featuring Cherish Marrington's intricate, eldritch designs.

Marrington's costume design is striking: the flannel shirts of the actors delivering a timeless everyday quality. In contrast the lost seal skin is a lush confection of fur and silken sinews. Hughes is dressed in loose black garments that allow him freedom of movement while emphasising the physical menace of his presence.

Kong's costuming keeps catching the attention. Her full body suit is splattered with the oil and blood from the removal of the seal skin, exposed ribs visible as she writhes about the space, her hands transformed into the remnants of clawed flippers, fur patches bursting from her shoulders and other details glimpsed in passing as her compulsive movements push her around the theatre.

A love story of sorts, the traditional valuing of the couple bond questioned in the face of conflict, surrender, betrayal and isolation, instead celebrating the freedom of individual identity and agency. *Selkie* raises questions that linger.

### ***Selkie***

**Rating: 4 stars out of 5 stars**

**Presented by The Blue Room Theatre and Renegade Productions**

**Written by Finn O'Branagáin**

**Directed by Joe Lui**

**Set & Costume Design: Cherish Marrington**

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### Selkie | Renegade Productions

Written by Cicely Binford

Sunday, 17 April 2016 18:07



Photos – Callum Sims

From the watery depths of the sea, a seal emerges, sheds its skin, and becomes a beautiful human woman. This woman takes up a life with a man who has found her on the beach; they fall in love and face struggles, but she has lost her seal skin and can't return to her former life in the sea without it. Will she be able to overcome the loss of her identity and remain with the man? Will the man who loves her be able to keep her?

Playwright Finn O'Branagáin and director Joe Lui bring the myth of the Selkie to The Blue Room in a modern retelling with contemporary dancers, Yilin Kong and Kynan Hughes, and contemporary characters played by Ella Hetherington and Paul Grabovac. This formidable team of artists explore the ideas of love and possession,

identity and dispossession, exoticism and conformity.

Hetherington plays Rónnád the Selkie, who we meet just after she has shed her seal skin (which is missing) and is in dialogue with Séan the Human who has brought her to his home to live. They discuss finding her missing skin and also creating a life together, going through the joys and struggles of coupling. Rónnád isn't adjusting easily to the human world, and Séan begins to grow impatient with her odd behaviour and protestations.

While Grabovac and Hetherington exchange dialogue situated mainly on a central circular dais, Kong and Hughes play out a parallel relationship through movement and dance, in orbit around the dais. Their relationship isn't an exact replica of Rónnád and Séan's, but the two couples often mirror each other, creating a net of intersecting moments. Kong and Hughes seem to represent the anima and animus that drives the behaviour and emotion of Rónnád and Séan. They also embody the origin myth through their wordless interaction.

O'Branagáin's adaptation strays from any romanticism that might be found in other works on the same myth, bringing it squarely into a postmodern, feminist context. Lui's subtle direction allows O'Branagáin's text and Laura Boynes' choreography to come to the fore, and one of the unique draws of this production is its dual storytelling.

Also of particular importance in Selkie is the design partnering of set and costume designer Cherish Marrington with Joe Lui's lighting and sound design. The two previously teamed up for Renegade's Letters Home, and the same artistic sympathy is evidenced in both productions.

Marrington's Selkie costume is not only visually striking, but it also does what good design should, which is to reveal another layer of the story. It illustrates the wild, untamed nature of the seal as well as the vulnerable nature of the human. The dais she's designed and painstakingly built references the Gaelic origins of the story through the symbols on its surface, but also the lacquered furnishings found in Chinese furnishings. This may point to another pathway of interpretation for those who wish to let their minds explore.

In fact, this production leaves a lot of doors open for us to contemplate the many facets of the work and the Selkie myth. The power of a myth lies in its pliability and its resonance with those parts of ourselves that seek to draw universal, cross-cultural, intertemporal connections. The team have already drawn several connections for us with Selkie, but they've also given us the invitation to draw many more for ourselves.

Renegade Productions presents  
SELKIE  
by Finn O'Branagáin

Directed by Joe Lui

Venue: The Blue Room Theatre | 53 James Street, Northbridge  
Dates: 12 – 30 April 2016  
Tickets: \$18 – \$28  
Bookings: 9227 7005 | [blueroom.org.au](http://blueroom.org.au)

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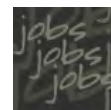
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## REVIEW: Selkie @ The Blue Room Theatre

APRIL 18, 2016 □ Posted in REVIEWS, THEATRE, UNCATEGORIZED □ Tagged BLUE ROOM THEATRE, FINN O'BRANAGAIN, JOE LUI, SELKIE



Words by: Mandy Moe Pwint Tu

Selkie, produced by the Blue Room Theatre and Renegade Productions, is an honest-to-god representation of an old Irish legend. I say honest-to-god because even vague familiarity of the selkie tale may lead to expectations of a love story between a mythical creature and a mortal, a magical story with the possibility a happily ever after. But Finn O'Branagain's Selkie fearlessly delves into the depths of this eerily tragic tale, where the line between monsters and men is finer than one would have imagined.

Directed by Joe Lui and written by Finn O’Branaagain, Selkie follows the story of Ronnad the Selkie, played by the delightful Ella Hetherington. Ronnad finds herself stranded on land, having lost her sealskin. She is found by Sean, a mortal man, played by Paul Grabovac, who takes her under his wing. The play follows their story as they fall in love, and Ronnad tries to adjust to life on shore. But adjusting isn’t easy: she finds herself alienated by the rest of the people around her; she can’t swim as well as she used to; and she is stifled by her life with Sean. All Ronnad wants to do is to find her sealskin and go home.

Selkie is a love letter to feminism. It is a tale of a woman trapped in a toxic relationship, where love itself becomes a means of imprisonment. It is a very real portrayal of domestic oppression; of men stripping women of their identity, fearing that they will learn to be independent, because they are afraid of being left behind. As the show progresses, Sean’s behaviour towards Ronnad becomes more aggressive and abusive – going so far as to forbid her from visiting the beach because she always comes home sad. Ronnad expresses her desire to leave, consciously and subconsciously (I’ll get to this), but every time, Sean stands in her way.

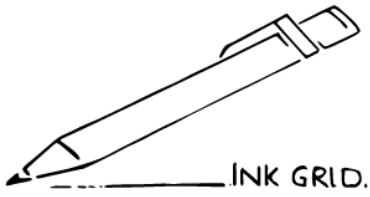
The cast comprises of four performers and is choreographed by Laura Boynes: two actors (Hetherington and Grabovac) and two dancers, Yilin Kong and Kynan Hughes. The actors deliver dialogue; they set the scene, and serve primarily to move the plot forward. The dancers set the tone for the play; they are reflections of the two characters: they represent a subconscious that elevates the play to a much higher level of power and intensity. Kong portrays Ronnad’s wilder, truer selkie self; she is at once stronger and yet more vulnerable than Ronnad’s conscious self lets on; and Hughes depicts a darker side of Sean, more menacing and more devious than Sean himself believes he is. Together, the four of them are commanding and captivating in their performances.

The set, designed by Cherish Marrington, is as simple as it is magnificent, comprising of a round platform of what looked like Gaelic design. The audience is seated in a square along the walls; the platform and consequently the show itself, is the centerpiece, as well it should be. Strings of what I assume were either paper or plastic hung from the beams, giving the set an eerie, underwater cave feel. The lights would go out in transition from scene to scene, enveloping the whole space in darkness; blue and amber spotlights decided which character was in focus at different times throughout the play. The fact that the actors were able to move, and know exactly where they were going and where they were supposed to be when the lights came back on was admirable. If it had been me, I’d probably have tripped over something and ruined the entire performance.

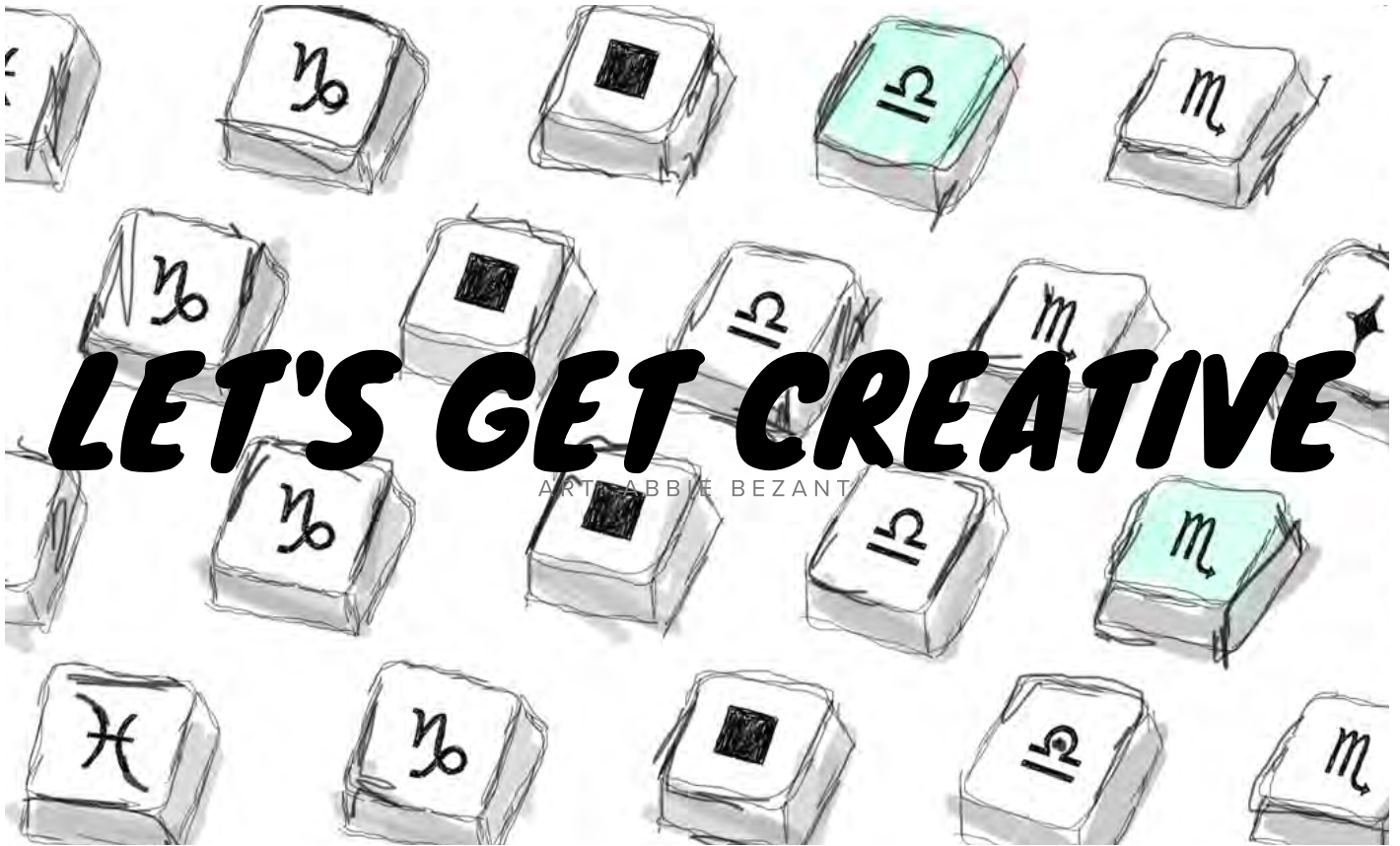
From its mystical beginning, to its suspenseful build, and exalting climax, Selkie keeps you in awe of its storytelling. Joe Lui and Finn O’Branaagain takes this typical fish-out-of-water story and turns it over its head. It becomes, instead, the journey of a woman seeking freedom and salvation; and in finding courage, finds the release she is looking for.

Selkie is running at the Blue Room Theatre until the 30th of April. Do yourself a favour and go see it.

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## Selkie [Theatre Review]

April 21, 2016

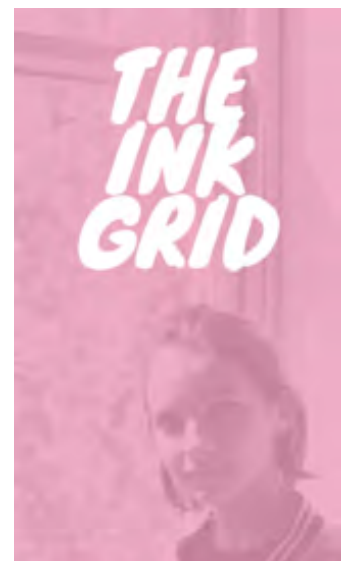
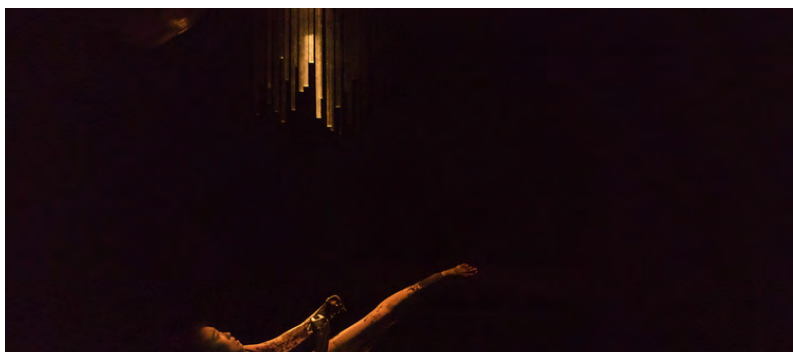




PHOTO: CAMERON ETCHELLS

Words: Hannah Nissen

**'Selkie'** is a contemporary reworking of a traditional Gaelic folk tale, originally based around romantic notions of the sea and its mythical inhabitants. Playwright **Finn O'Branagain's** portrayal, (playing now at the Blue Room Theatre) explores a modern relationship plagued with the reminders of disparity and is a fitting analogy for the push pull nature of subsuming modern culture.

**Ella Hetherington** plays Rónnad, a helpless fish-out-of-water creature who is found washed up on the shore one night, covered in slime, searching for her lost seal skin, which shed to reveal the form of a beautiful women. But without her natural skin, she won't be able to return back home.

She is rescued by Sean (**Paul Grabovac**), a lonesome fisherman who takes her in and tries to heal her very evident wounds as she assimilates to the troubling world around her. The two impart a dual narration of both the event and those that follow. **Yilin Kong** and **Kynan Hughes** - whose interpretive movement embodies the core differences within the relationship - move throughout the space in a raw, intimate fashion.

Focusing on the Selkie's very metaphorical inability to feel comfortable without her own skin- the play centralises on the delicate creatures beauty and fragility, suggesting a woman's beauty can act almost as a skin itself, that must be shed before any deeper realisations can be drawn. But in terms of the themes advertised I believe there were some standout points to consider.





The decision to keep **Grabovac**'s character a complex, gentle, and likeable character added to the final impact. The fact that Selkie was pitched as a piece about love, cultural exploitation, and domestic oppression led me to believe angry stereotyping would ensue. Sean's archetype of the "21st century man" who just wants someone to care for allowed a feminist revelry about beauty being held up and idolised in our society without actually needing a bad guy.



PHOTO: CAMERON ETCHELLS

I also believe Sean's character aids in the understanding of a man's perception of beauty and how notions of manhood are enough to shadow the practicality of the relationship. Resonant to both men and women, and the pressures we mount on our instinctive stereotypes. It enforces the doomed nature of a relationship birthed from loneliness and curiosity, the wading tide of reality, washing back and forth, stepping away and revealing glistening moments of Michael Jackson tracks and Hitchhikers guide analogies, only to be washed over by the turbulent crash of reality.

The costume and set design by **Cherrish Marrington** was great. Specifically dancer **Yilin Kong's** mad max looking leotard. The black stained gloves and 3D gills enveloping her tiny frame created such contrast between her and **Hughes**, allowing light and dark to

interweave into a ceaselessly graceful struggle. **Kong** also gave a striking performance as we see her twitch and suffocate out of water, with **Hetherington's** perfectly timed and piercing gasps.

With a pertinent set of a central circular dais in the room, embroidered with Gaelic patterns with chairs situated like that in a circus act. The space complimented director **Joe Lui's** simplistic and organic lighting and sound design, with relaxing scapes of sandbanks broken up by the building crescendos of white noise.



PHOTO: CAMERON ETHELLS

Selkie explores a relationship with two unsatisfied creatures, searching for whatever it is they are missing in each other. It explores that comfort that numbs us and shields us from pushing ourselves, that stumps our passion, our fire.

*Selkie runs until April 30 at The Blue Room Theatre,*

*Northbridge. Tickets available [here](#).*

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David Zampatti - The West Australian on April 19, 2016, 3:17 pm



Ella Hetherington, Paul Grabovac and Yilin Kong in Selkie at the Blue Room. Picture: Cameron Etchells

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THEATRE

Selkie

By Finn O'Branagain

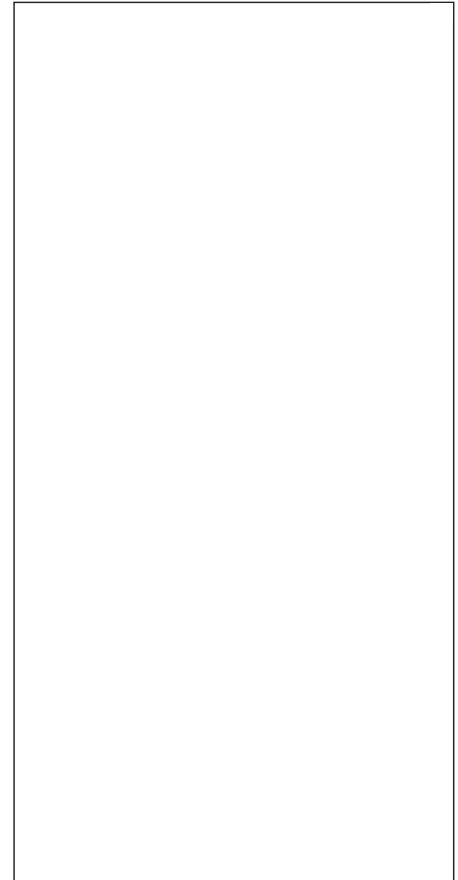
3.5 stars

The Blue Room

Review DAVID ZAMPATTI

The legend of the selkies, seal-like creatures who shed their skins to live on dry land among humans, is part of the folklore of the islands and coasts of the remote North Atlantic.

It's easy to see why playwright Finn O'Branagain, whose interest in legend and myth



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was manifest in last year's The Epic, would be drawn to the selkie, and its no surprise that Joe Lui should leap at the chance to direct the result. They are a formidable team and Selkie is a provocative and disquieting work.

The key to the legend is the power of the selkie's discarded sea-skin. If a man finds and keeps it, the female must stay with the man.

But the sea will always call, and if she can retrieve her skin she will escape back into the water.

O'Branagain and Lui are alive to the allegorical possibilities of the story.

The entrapment of women by physical, economic, legal or emotional means, even by love, is an open wound in society. Selkie, in many ways, tells their story.

The duality of the play's meaning is matched by its telling; two actors, Ella Hetherington and Paul Grabovac play the selkie Ronnad and her husband/captor Sean, while two dancers, Yilin Kong and Kynan Hughes, are their elementary natures.

The actors and dancers play in parallel, sometimes working completely apart, sometimes almost touching. Hetherington's intensity is mirrored by Kong's shuddering, tremulous movement; Grabovac's cruel stolidity is echoed by Hughes' unyielding physical strength.

The work of Lui, the choreographer Laura Boynes, and the cast, is most impressive here. Lui's lighting and sound design (is there no end to this man's talent?) is densely atmospheric and accurate.

It's impossible to take your eyes from Kong. Her aching, compelling performance is exposed by an extraordinary costume, in equal part beautiful and horrific, designed by Cherish Marrington.

Selkie delivers much but it has more to give. The story might have both more complexity and clarity (at 45 minutes, it has the time to deliver both) and, for all its quality, the design could use more depth and intricacy.

Even as it stands, though, Selkie is a noteworthy start to a Blue Room season of increasing importance to Perth theatre.

Selkie runs until April 30.

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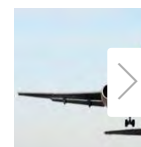
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## REVIEWS

## 'Selkie' reviewed by Gordon the Optom

by Gordon The Optom / April 20, 2016

'Selkie' is a creepy legend, based on the Gaelic mythological seal-like creature, 'The Selkie'. A Selkie can shed its skin and live on land for very short periods. This beautifully written, confrontational tale comes from the pen of Finn O'Branagáin, whose work had huge success in Perth last year.

The 70-minute performances of this Renegade / Harriet Roberts co-production can be seen in the main theatre of the Blue Room, James Street, Northbridge commencing at 7.00 pm each evening until Saturday 30th April.

*There is a single row of chairs around this 'in the round' set.*

*The set, designed by Cherish Marrington, comprises a 3-metre, circular platform, raised about 15 cms off the floor. It is patterned with old Gaelic symbols; this is seaside shack of the fisherman. Stage managed by Meabh Walton.*

*White gauze is draped towards the centre of the ceiling. Thin strips of polythene hang from the roof, and with the clever lighting (designer, Joe Lui) the overall effect is of realistic icicles and snow - very appropriate for the north of Scotland. The lighting temperature changed with the mood of the script.*

*The lights rise to show a creature (Cherish Marrington also designed the costumes), with fur on its shoulders, long clawed fingers and a thin skin that showed the bone structure and blood vessels beneath. It is a Selkie (Yilin Kong). She is slithering and undulating her way around the beach, stalked by a fisherman (Kynan Hughes) who is carrying a towel. He is trying to wrap and protect the creature that is shivering and distressed.*

*Back in the house, a young girl, Rónnadh (Ella Hetherington) is waking up. Immediately she starts searching for something that she has lost, but she is interrupted by the fisherman (Paul Grabovac) who found her lying on the beach after a storm.*

*The lonely fisherman took her to his home and is now trying to get some strength back into her frail body. It is a long time since he has enjoyed company in his house. He tries her with various foods, but she has a penchant for fish.*

*This is a sad tale of deep love and affections that appears doomed from the start, but can adoration overcome the problems?*

O'Branagáin's tale was first released to the Curtin Uni theatre students about 6 months ago, allowing the author to see how the script worked on stage. Playwright, Finn, has made small changes to the dialogue for this presentation.

At the Hayman Theatre in Curtin, it was beautifully performed as a simple tale. Now, the much-admired director of this show, Joe Lui, has further developed the story, giving it a clever, second dimension; this is a flashback that looks at what happened weeks earlier, whilst the main story is being enacted centre stage. The result is skilful and intriguing, but possibly a little too ingenious and complex (?).

As with all of Joe Lui's plays, the soundscape includes specially composed music coupled with complex sound effects. This show ranges from thunderous storms to soft - almost inaudible - sensitive melodies.

Talented choreographer, Laura Boynes, has been given a wonderful pair of gifted dancer to direct. Kynan and Yilin seem to float across the stage as though they were frolicking in the ocean. Yilin gave a heart pulling performance as she lay exposed to the elements twitching on the beach, you could feel her suffering. Ella and Paul, who have had numerous acting nominations over the years, added greatly to the depth of this unusual tale.

An exceptional show of movement, love and deceit.

BLUE ROOM   CHERISH MARRINGTON   ELLA HETHERINGTON   FINN O'BRANAGÁIN   JOE LUI   KYNAN HUGHES  
LAURA BOYNES   MEABH WALTON   PAUL GRABOVAC   THE BLUE ROOM THEATRE   YILIN KONG

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#### Gordon The Optom

Gordon is widely recognised as one of the most prolific theatre reviewers in Perth. He patrons all kinds of live theatre productions, from professional to amateur, and has probably been to more opening nights than The Queen

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## NEWS

### Selkie (4 stars) (<http://www.theaustraliatimes.com/selkie-4-stars/>)

Posted on April 17, 2016



(<http://www.theaustraliatimes.com/selkie-4-stars/>)

Every time I head into Perth's Blue Room Theatre, I am surprised. It's a rare show that has a conventional seating plan, and Selkie is no different. This time, the rows of seats line all four walls, creating an arena for the main action. An ornate round stage graces the centre and then – blackout.

A dancer in a strange seal-like costume, stripped to the muscle and bone lays, cutting a tortured figure on the floor.

Blackout.

A woman in a checked shirt and denim cutoffs sits, hugging her knees, mirroring the dancer on the floor.

Blackout.

Two men join the two women. One, a dancer, offers a towel as a silent olive branch to the crumpled figure on the ground. The other, offers his hand to the sitting woman.

So begins Selkie.

It's a bold piece about the displacement of culture, adapting, fitting in (or not), oppression in relationships, control, fear, and self-identity. And that's just the subtext. The main story centres on the mythical Gaelic creature – the selkie – which exists as a seal in water, and can shed their sealskin to assume human form on land.

The idea for the play came to playwright Finn O'Brannigain after re-visiting the stories of her

childhood. "The idea of a strange woman from the ocean living amongst fishermen seemed magical and romantic when I was younger, but when re-reading with an adult lens, critical engagement, and the growing discussion of domestic abuse, this fantastical faerie-creature that was captured and kept now appeared to be a metaphor for keeping foreign and exoticised women captive as wives."

The actors perform their tension-filled dialogue alongside the silent dancers performing a tete-a-tete with each other that borders on physical violence and repression at times. This is a powerful technique as one feels they are witnessing the violent inner struggle of the actor's psyches.

Selkie is not for the faint-hearted, it's stomach-churningly good theatre that highlights the dangers of othering and capturing the 'exotic.'

When: 12th – 30th April 2016 (7pm)

Where: The Blue Room Theatre, PERTH

Tickets: \$18 – \$28

Info: Duration 50 minutes; Q & A session Wednesday 20th April; Suitable 15+

Link: <http://blueroom.org.au/events/selkie/> (<http://blueroom.org.au/events/selkie/>)

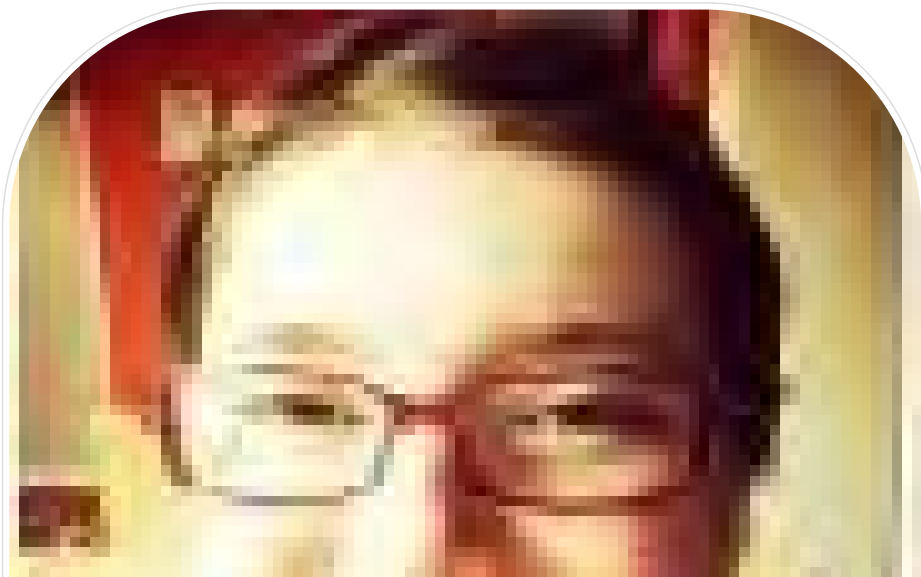
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#### ABOUT LAURA MONEY ([HTTP://WWW.THEAUSTRALIATIMES.COM/PROFILE/LAURA-MONEY](http://www.theaustraliatimes.com/profile/laura-money))

Is an avid theatre goer, reader, art gallery guide and museum enthusiast. She enjoys all aspects of theatre, from the deep and meaningful to the whimsical and kitsch. As lover of all things in the world of humanities, she is very proud of the vibrant art scene in Perth. It truly is an exciting place to be!

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# Possessive love is no myth

**Selkie**  
Renegade Productions  
Blue Room Theatre  
Closes April 30

**REVIEW: SARAH MCNEILL**

**Playwright** Finn O'Branagáin and director Joe Lui have created a fascinating multi-layered retelling of an ancient Celtic myth.

Ella Hetherington's wild and beautiful Rónnád is desperate to find the seal skin she has lost. Without it, she is a land-locked human unable to return to the sea as her real self, a graceful seal.

Sean (Paul Grabovac)

has been watching Rónnád on the beach, he loves her uniqueness and her different way of thinking. He hates the sea, and he wants her to stay a human.

This simple fable takes on a harsh contemporary

twist about identity and differences, love and possession.

As Rónnád and Sean's relationship grows and falters, their story is mirrored by contemporary dancers Yilin Kong and

Kynan Hughes. Yilin, in a striking skin-tight costume (designer Cherish Marrington), is as lithe as a seal, playful and feisty as Kynan doggedly pursues. Orbiting around the central dais, they are a perfect, silent counterpoint to the humans as they spiral into discontent.

Joe Lui's strong direction and impressive sound and lighting design helps craft Finn's metaphor of domestic oppression into an intelligent, visceral and well-executed piece that both engages and challenges.



■ Ella Hetherington as Rónnád the Human.

REVIEW: POST