



Trials of the passionate spectator

FESTIVAL THEATRE

Australia Vs South Africa
 Barking Gecko Theatre Company
 Subiaco Arts Centre
 Review: Pier Leach

Competitive international sport — that hotbed for nationalism and uncontrollable surges of testosterone — is at the centre of Tom Lycos and Stefo Nantsou's boisterous, funny and thought-provoking play for young people and their families.

It is not the game that comes under the spotlight, but the high spirits and hot-blooded passion it evokes among spectators; emotions that often spark acts of sheer silliness and sometimes reveal uglier undercurrents of ignorance and prejudice.

It's a theme that goes back to the Romans, yet still finds its way into international headlines on a regular basis — just weeks ago it was the players in international cricket who ignited a racism-fuelled row.

Lycos and Nantsou, whose Zeal Theatre brought us their superb play *The Stones* in 2003, have created another energetic, intelligent

production (originally commissioned by the Sydney Theatre Company) that addresses a relevant topic for teenagers while playfully illustrating just how much fun theatre can be.

Again Lycos teams up actors Craig Williams and Sam Longley (who performed the two-hander *The Stones*), this time with South African actors Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson.

Making excellent use of the raked seating in the Subiaco Arts Centre's main auditorium, the first part of the play has the audience doubling as spectators at a stadium Test match (of what sport is never revealed) between Australia and South Africa. Mkhwane and Pearson are there to support the South Africans with flags flying and an atmosphere-enhancing (but banned) trumpet to egg on the crowd.

After a couple of run-ins with security (Longley making the authoritative most of his towering physique), Mkhwane's over-excited fan plays a silly, harmless prank involving the Australian team's mascot and gets them both booted out of the stadium.

Dejected, the pair make their way



to a local pub to watch the game, where they soon find themselves at odds with two goofy, knucklehead Australian supporters (Longley and Williams) and before long they all wind up in the back of a paddy wagon.

Tightly directed and economically staged with just bench seats for props, the play is a superb platform for the quartet of talented comic actors. Each takes on several roles in addition to their sport-fan character, shifting at lightning speed been security guards, cops and radio sports commentators.

In one of the most comic and

brilliantly executed scenes Longley and Mkhwane flip between playing their main characters and Lebanese and Sudanese taxi drivers respectively, while Williams and Pearson alternate between their main characters and crouching down in the taxi to provide sound effects.

Like he did in *The Stones*, Lycos (a former *Circus Oz* performer) has the cast generate a humorous range of sound effects in a very physical, brisk piece of theatre and the performers each take the considerable challenge in their stride. By the time their competitiveness comes to head in the

lock-up as Pearson and Williams strip off their clothes in the name of winning, their hold on the audience is akin to the deciding moments of a game.

Throughout, though, Lycos and Nantsou's script underscores how something as harmless as a sports match can bring out the worst in people and reveal some broader prejudices.

They've also got an apt little twist at the end that puts the focus on a culture obsessed with fame and that colour-blind commodity — cash. Don't miss it.



Push and shove: Clockwise from left, Craig Williams, Ellis Pearson, Sam Longley and Bheki Mkhwane. Picture: James Rogers