

## ENGLISH: *COSI*

**“The process of reproducing Mozart’s opera *Cosi* is cathartic for every character.” Agree or disagree.**

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When Lewis Riley agrees to direct a performance in a mental institution, his endeavour to create “... a world that was as far removed from [the] depressing asylum as possible” initiates a journey permeated by illusion, humour and self-discovery. Having recently left university, Lewis is evidently in search of financial security and social validation in a time of great political radicalism; however, his experience pushes him outside the boundaries of the normal world, and even prompts questioning of the existence of such margins. While Lewis’ cathartic experience can be described as a product of his exposure to an explosive blend of personalities, many patients of the asylum also undergo their own transformations. Although, Louis Nowra’s exploration of Aristotelian emotional cleansing ultimately asks his audience to accept the characters for who they are, rather than demand that they conform to perceived notions of ‘normality’.

Lewis enters the play as a greatly uncertain and overwhelmed student whose fragmented tertiary education could not have prepared him for the extraordinary individuals that he encounters. He initiates the task with passivity, and political views derived from those of his radical friends; “[His girlfriend, Lucy] hates [Lewis] doing an opera about love and fidelity while thousands ... are ... killed”. Lewis is vanquished by the complexity of the project: he is unable to stop pyromaniac Doug from lighting fires, nor address Ruth’s irrational and contradictory concerns about stage props. However, he is psychologically liberated in the confrontation where he sides with the stuttering Henry; willingly exposing himself to ideological conflict, the prospect of creating an unbridgeable abyss with his closest friend, Nick, and the utter terrifying nature of the mentally unstable. Lucy challenges, “Working with these people has changed [Lewis]”; and while he may lose touch with the outside world of communism scares, Lewis’ kiss in the dark of the theatre marks his complete acceptance into the world of the asylum. When the lights in the dilapidated auditorium are initially located, a hesitant, unobtrusive student is defenceless against the unknown and all its invasiveness. However, at the final curtain call, the audience beholds a level-headed, compassionate young man, with a repertoire of expertise in responding to a myriad of circumstances, as well as a new appreciation of self-worth. Ultimately, it is only through leaving the security of his familiar world that is Lewis able to find comfort in his own identity.

The patients of the asylum have an opportunity to experience a similar release of emotional tension through the production of *Cosi Fan Tutte*. Suffering neglect as a child, Roy’s contagiously enthusiastic obsession with an opera holding the supposed ability to “... keep the world in harmony” is an attempt to escape his incessantly mundane and wounding reality. However, his unrealistically high expectations of a modest cast leave him susceptible to disappointment. When the night of the performance arrives, Roy’s anticipation of creating something that transcends his own limitations becomes paralyzing; and in risking his creation by spontaneously fainting on stage, Roy’s personal journey is highlighted through his emerged concern for the interest of the ensemble. While it may be argued that Roy’s catharsis is symptomatically transitional – he never is able to leave the asylum – the metatextual realisation, “happy is the man who calmly takes life as he finds it”, which is expressed at the disclosure of his fabricated childhood, is undeniably refreshing. Similarly, Ruth – traumatised from a history of abuse – has trouble differentiating between illusion and reality, confessing: “I can handle something being an illusion or real, but not at the same time”. Literal-minded and submissive, initially, she can only exist comfortably in methodical, calculated steps. However, Ruth is also able to find a solace in the production of *Cosi Fan Tutte*; allowing her to leave the institution and become an expert in time and motion. As none of the patients are ever labelled with a psychological diagnosis, this suggests that they are more than their mental angst; just as Lewis argues, “no one is a success or failure”, these characters substantiate the claim that catharsis is not an exclusive experience.

Conversely, not every character is able to find emancipation through the reproduction of Mozart's opera. While, to Roy and Ruth, the asylum is a sanctuary in which they can escape reality, fellow patient Julie feels confined by the institution. A deeply melancholic addict who has been committed by her parents, Julie resents the mental institution and its staff who, "... don't know how to deal with drug users". Residing in an establishment where "...there's always a light on in the corridor", the darkness of the theatre allows Julie to temporarily immerse herself in a world in which what is usually visible can no longer be seen; and what is generally believed no longer needs to be accepted. At the conclusion of the play, Julie realises that she is in need of stability. In her case, this involves leaving the asylum and returning to her girlfriend. Tragically, however, this decision exposes her to hedonistic temptation, and facilitates her descent. Likewise, the destructive nature of the asylum's most violent resident, Doug, cannot be curbed by the production. Vulgar and aggressive, the image of the smouldered theatre conjured in Lewis' concluding monologue indicates that Doug's outcome is neither positive nor redemptive. However, while neither of these characters emerge transformed, Julie does learn not to run from herself and her addiction, but rather, to look towards others, and Doug lives by a universal – yet admittedly dangerous – mantra, "try and try again". The audience naturally gravitates towards the humanity and fallibility of these individuals; learning, just as Lewis does, to accept them in their amplexity.

In conclusion, Louis Nowra's *Cosi* is a play about the creation of an illusion; endorsing the view that imagination can be both liberating and empowering. Through their respective journeys, Lewis is welcomed into a world where he is free to think outside the proscribed boundaries of the 1970s, while Roy and Ruth learn to define themselves beyond their mental distress. In contrast, patients such as Julie and Doug are never able to rise above their compulsive traits; however, Nowra presents a critique on our judgemental culture which questions the criteria with which we measure one's validity.