



Capturing vulnerable spirits: Playwright Melissa Reeves. Picture: NORM OORLOFF

Unleashing inner demons

WHAT began as an unusual fascination turned into a work of art for Melbourne playwright Melissa Reeves.

She was compelled to read everything she could find on the case of Joan Vollmer who died after a backyard exorcism in 1993.

But when she decided to write a play loosely based on the crime, her approach changed.

"When I first started writing it I read a lot about exorcisms in the US where there have been a lot of deaths and bizarre stories," Reeves says.

"I found it ludicrous in some ways but my first stabs at the play made the characters too removed from us and too fundamental. Over successive drafts I tried to make them closer to us and show that we all have the capacity for blindness and cruelty.

"To make these people grotesque clowns was not the way to go. So, it became a very sad story about delusion and there is a sympathy for how this could happen."

The play, *Furious Mattress*, then became a story about a husband and wife living in the country during a heatwave. The husband is convinced

Releasing society's dark spirits is a sensitive task, discovers CATHERINE LAMBERT

his wife is possessed by evil spirits and calls on two friends to help him release her soul. They are convinced they have done the right thing.

The very nature of exorcism lends itself to theatre. They used to be held in front of an audience as a type of

secret. I'm certainly not religious but that doesn't mean I haven't been attracted to it in the past and understood its allure."

Reeves is a diverse playwright whose work was last seen at the Malthouse with *The Spook*, a political spy tale. She looks for the political hooks in stories and sees the wider social issues involved in this work about people who believe they are helping, but cause horror and tragedy.

"There are elements in the story that talk to us about what a woman should be and in a way the play is a portrait of these characters' marriage," she says. "This woman does not fit into the social parameters and is not how she should be and she's made to suffer cruelly for it."

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entertainment. The theatrical possibilities were not lost on Reeves.

"It was an amazing thing to write a play about because incredible things are meant to happen, so I could see it all visually while I was writing it," she says.

"And I could also relate to it on a certain level. In my teenage years I was seduced by religion and found a meaning in it. Religion was something big and grand, like a fascinating

***Furious Mattress* is at the Malthouse Theatre from February 24 to March 13.**

Bookings: 9685 5111.