Exorcism death spurs playwright to explore the dark places blind belief can take us

Casting out a tragedy

Theatre | Anika Priest

ON a sweltering hot summer's day in rural Victoria in January 1993, a pig farmer and members of a breakaway Lutheran sect conducted a backyard exorcism on his wife. After pinning her to a mattress for three days, the amateur exorcists called in a reputed "expert" - a tall, 22-year-old assistant greenkeeper at the Ringwood Municipal Golf Club. Joan Vollmer died of a cardiac arrest when pressure was applied to her neck as they tried to force the evil spirits from her body. The resulting sensational trial left the nation astounded: and now the tale finds its way onto the stage in Famous Mattress, written by Meliss Reeves, co-writer of Who's Afraid of the Working Class and award-winning film Blessed. "It's a fascinating ghoulish story," said the Thornbury writer between a break in rehearsals. "And I didn't think about it as a play at the time. I was just reading it with everybody else, going 'wow'."

"Then a few years ago when I started writing I thought that would actually make a really interesting play, it touched a lot of issues. There's something about the whole idea of exorcism which is very dramatic. It's a very ancient sort of performance ritual in a funny sort of way."

Three of the exorcists were charged with manslaughter, although Ralph Vollmer's prison sentence was suspended.

However, any unsolved Mystery fans won't find the gory facts in this play - Reeves' interpretation is theatrical, drawing into the ordinariness of human tragedy and the propensity for the most horrific acts to co-exist with our humanity.

"It's certainly not a documentary-type play, it's not trying to be true to the events," she said. "I've allowed myself to leap away from the story to tell my own version of it."

"There's a sadness and ordinariness of the story next to those amazing supernatural elements. It's like a grand drama but in the end not a grand drama. It's quite a familiar story as well, almost like a love story gone wrong is how I've interpreted it."

Joan Vollmer had reportedly been diagnosed as schizophrenic several years earlier and according to a friend finally cracked under the strain of her husband's religious mania and paranoia.

But the play doesn't go into details of mental illness or religious fundamentalism.

"It's a nice access into a draft of it I thought: we all pray to believing in something," Reeves said.

"To such an extent or we're telling stories about something and we end up accepting something so that it affects our behaviour and the way we behave it becomes inhumanly or cruelly or savagely to point of someone's death, and yet misleading ourselves into thinking we're behaving in the best of fashions."

"I think that's the most fascinating irony."

While the story obviously lends itself to horror, with some secret trickery which promises to "push the very limits of stagecraft into a place we thought?" Famous Mattress also offers some humour.

"I think there's different aspects to the story: the gap between what they believe and act is actually going on seems to lend itself to humour, as well absolute pathos," she said.

"I hope both of those things are in there."

Reeves said moving from writing for an ensemble cast to a four-hander had been quite a challenge. "I think it's a different sort of craft in a way, a small cast, but I really enjoyed that aspect of it," she said.

Famous Mattress opens on Friday (February 19) and runs until March 13 at the Malthouse Theatre, 113 Sturt St, Southbank. Bookings at malthousetheatre.com.au.