

ENGLISH: *COSI*

Cosi is really a tragedy, not a comedy

Louis Nowra's play "Cosi" has dark undercurrents that it explores which is juxtaposed to humor; the two complementing each other and utilised to accentuate, critique, and lighten some of the darker themes of madness, violence and despair. The audience is able to develop pathos and understanding for the characters Nowra presents; what may seem as comedic to them may seem tragic to the viewers. Perhaps the biggest tragedy throughout the play is the affect relationships can have on individuals, and how bad relationships can compromise one's integrity. In addition, the actual play within the play questions the theme of fidelity and to an extension love. Because *Cosi* is a comedy with themes of love, it leaves the implication that love itself is comedic in value – this is seen as a tragedy to most viewers. Ultimately, Nowra's satirical play *Cosi* is a mesh between humor and sorrow.

Beneath the veneer of exuberance and superficiality, Nowra evokes pathos for his characters. The humor within the play is designed to throw relief upon more somber themes, and to emphasize the disparity in understanding that exists between people. Characters that show gaps in understanding or emotional sympathy are usually the sources of greatest wit. Doug is constantly told to "go burn a cat"; this remark if taken out of context could be considered unethical and inhumane. However this phrase is used by cast members when Doug appears to be acting out of line, often as a snappy comeback by characters such as Cherry when told she is "fat". The juxtaposition of this sensitive comment with the amusing context assists Nowra in highlighting the underlying issue – Doug's pyromania. Doug's fondest memories of his mother include his "ego suffering a severe battering". Although his confronting recount is punctuated with comical observations such as "there's no such thing as grace under pressure for burning a cat", the audience is able to bypass his façade and see him for what he truly is: a sad, mistreated child. Likewise, Roy's childhood is nothing short of disappointing. He constantly hovers between "aiming for the stars" and moments of despair: "I had a dream". This dual personality of his clearly shows his attempt to mask a tragic life beneath a comedic personality. It is not until late in the play that the audience learns that Roy's feigned childhood of "the music of the spheres" is fiction; in reality he was an orphan who "moved in and out of institutions". His constructed reality helps him endure the bleak and pained perception of the world he harbors, which allows the audience to pity and empathise his character. In contrast, Cherry is a nymphomaniac who is constantly seen trying to win Lewis' heart. Her unrequited love extends to her "force feed[ing]" Lewis with sandwiches – these scenes often ensuing in hilarity. However, her efforts to woo her "lover-boy" never come to fruition. Her desperate attempts hide her desire to feel loved; perhaps to fill in the void left by her uncaring father who asked her to "fetch dead ducks in her mouth". For the characters in *Cosi*, life has been a constant uphill battle, and in order to survive they feel as if they must mask their insecurities with an often comical façade.

Love is a prominent theme throughout the play, albeit portrayed fairly negatively. The absence of love in the lives of the inmates is one of the play's greatest tragedies. The most pain is caused in individuals' lives by fractures in relationships, and this is where Nowra is able to develop the crux of his pathos. Ruth is controlling and obsessive, her tendencies to organise the world are a by-product of her relationship with her past boyfriend. It was him who "locked [her] up in a cupboard", and by doing so, instilled fear and distrust into her mindset. This negative view on men is contrasted with Henry's past experiences. Although he had a mother who "loved him even when his father died", his wife was unfaithful to him. This prompts him to believe that "whether women can stay faithful is a tragedy" and her departure leaves him in his fragile state. Aforementioned, Roy's lack of love makes him strive to feel loved. This is why his behavior fluctuates between wanting to have "everyone look at [him]", to downright depressed: "I'm down". His constant childhood desertion and "moving between foster homes" explains his fear of rejection and need for attention – whether it is positive or negative. He is bitter about love, having never experienced it: "why do people always let me down?"

Roy truly encapsulates the notion that love- more specifically the lack of it – can lead to tragic circumstances within individuals.

The play within the play, *Così fan tutte* explores love in a comically tragic fashion. The title itself, “*Così fan tutte*” when translated from Italian means “thus all women are like that”. This is hinting that all women are fickle, and should not be trusted- such a stark view is more tragic than comedic. Don Alfonso’s proposition of dressing his men as communist soldiers in hopes of proving himself is a comedic twist; however it also implies that love itself is weak. The fact that the women do fall for the men, ultimately betraying their lovers, demonstrates that women are indeed untrustworthy, and that love is often disparaging. However, the Opera resolves with the lovers righting their wrongs, proving that it is a comedy laced with dark undertones.

An initial viewing of the play is likely to incite the audience to view *Così* as a comedy. However, a second and more thorough analysis reveals that *Così* is in fact more tragic than comedic. Though the audience may laugh at the characters, we also feel for them, longing for them to transcend the misery and flaws that hinder them. However, these sanguine hopes are written off at the play’s conclusion. Rather than promising a happy ending, Lewis’ final soliloquy to the audience informs them that the lives of the mental patients are never happy or long. Truly, *Così* is a tragic play with comedic intervals.