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Gem frees tales of family

The West Australian

Monday, 28 May 2018 4:34PM



Clare Testoni devised Tale of Tales. Picture: David Cox Media



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The Tale of Tales

4.5 stars

Blue Room

REVIEW DAVID ZAMPATTI

Tale of Tales is a small, brilliant gem of storytelling and a breakout achievement for its deviser and performer Clare Testoni.

Testoni's previous work, including *The Beast and the Bride* and *West of the Moon*, has explored her interest in fairytales, but any concern that her imagination and talents are confined to and by them is quickly dispelled in *Tale of Tales*.

She uses the fairytales collected by Giambattista Basile in the 17th century (which include the earliest known versions of Rapunzel and Cinderella) as a jumping off point for a wider, deeper story of four generations of her own family, the rise of fascism in Italy and the resistance to it, the flight of many Italians to Australia and their fate here.

It's a passionate statement against fear and prejudice, and especially the practice of internment that is often its consequence. The parallels to the same practices in our own times are clearly and powerfully made.

It's also the true love story of her great-grandparents, Sante and Antoinetta, and their strange, sad parting and estrangement. Their story is paired with Basile's *The Princess Who Couldn't Laugh or Cry*, *The Crystal Tunnel*, *The Dragon and the Flea* and others.

The narrative technique gives Basile's stories new life and meaning – it's a lesson in the purpose and power of fairytales as well as a wonderful device for the telling of her own story.

Testoni is a shadow puppeteer, and she takes her craft to a new level. Working alongside the excellent actor Paul Grabovac, shining torches on tiny cut-out figures on tables, she throws silhouettes of people and places – villages and cities, internment camps – on to the white-papered walls of the stage.

The images have a magical three-dimensionality and move with an almost cinematic quality. They are interspersed with family photos and archival material, some very shocking, of Mussolini's Italy and internment camps.

Tale of Tales is an honest show, and a heartfelt one; as Basile says in *The Sun, the Moon and Talia*, "a story left untold is destined to repeat itself".

It's a good thing, then, that Clare Testoni has told hers – and that she's done it so very well.

Tale of Tales is on until June 9.

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