

# Theatre's rising star

Chris Herden interviews the winner of the state's top performance award

**M**elanie Zanetti can now count herself among Brisbane's acting elite after bagging a Matilda Award (recognised as Queensland's premier performing arts accolade) for her outstanding performance as Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion*.

Not bad for a former All Hallows schoolgirl who graduated from the University of Southern Queensland just four years ago and has had a steady stream of work in Brisbane's top theatre companies ever since.

In 2010, Zanetti joined the Queensland Theatre Company as an emerging artist

and those early glimpses of her dramatic flair quickly caught the attention of the Matilda judges. Last year she picked up four nominations and took home the prize for best female actor in a supporting role for her performance in QTC's *The Little Dog Laughed*. But it was her undeniable stage presence and dazzling onstage transformation, both physically and vocally, as Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* last November that really got audiences talking.

In addition to the top Matilda gong awarded to the year's outstanding performer for his or her collective work, Zanetti's convincing portrayal in *Pygmalion* as the "sniveling guttersnipe" who successfully masquerades as a regal duchess also earned her the award for Best Female Actor in a Leading Role.

"I think it's really easy to fall in love with Eliza because even when she is a flower girl in the gutter, she is an incredibly strong person. She works very hard, is strong willed and is a very caring person as well," says Zanetti.

She could be just as easily describing herself. Leticia Caceres, co-creative director of the Melbourne theatre company RealTV, has worked with Zanetti both in Melbourne and in Brisbane for the recent World Theatre Festival and describes her as an exceptional talent. "She's visionary, brave, gutsy and ballsy. I admire her tenacity and hunger for her craft. She sinks her teeth into a role and works her butt off to give it all she's got. I collaborated with her on *War Crimes*, a piece about war, violence and girl gangs; a tough piece of writing that was both emotionally and physically harrowing. Zanetti ate it up. She



Melanie Zanetti in her controversial poster

was fierce. She definitely punches above her weight," Caceres says.

In her next leading role for QTC (*Romeo and Juliet* at QPAC Playhouse from 21 April), Zanetti plays a lover not a fighter in an interpretation which will draw upon all the youthful zest that she can muster. Director Jennifer Flowers (an inductee into the Matilda's Hall of Fame), has brought in a contemporary choreographer to devise a very physical adaptation.

"We're not going to be in pantaloons, put it that way," Zanetti laughs. "None of the cast

is wearing shoes because we have to move so much and it is going to be very high energy."

Last month, Zanetti found herself in the midst of a stormy issue when a QTC poster publicising *Romeo and Juliet* was pulled by the Advertising Standards Bureau which ruled that the image showing Zanetti nestled in the arms of her Romeo was a highly sexualised advertisement suggesting paedophilia.

"Bizarre and hilarious are the words I would use," says Zanetti, clearly bewildered as she tries to make sense of the controversy. "When we were doing the shoot, that sort of thing never came into it and then seeing this image which created such a stir, it was kind of bizarre as I don't see myself like that. I mean, I'm 27 in a few weeks time and so I guess I don't see myself as 13 and pre-pubescent as some people described it. I can only take it as a compliment as looking young is quite a blessing in this industry."

The petite starlet is tight-lipped when it comes to divulging information about the call-back auditions she has coming up in Sydney but contends she is a bit of a gypsy at the moment, regularly travelling interstate from her home base at The Gap.

"I've always loved story-telling but never intended to do acting when I left school - I thought it was for really beautiful or stupid people. My parents actually sat me down, which is the reverse of what usually happens, and said 'we think you should really give this a go because you're great and you'll regret it if you don't'."

Fortunately Zanetti heeded that sound advice and she is now a star in the making.



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