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## Review: Smokescreen by Christopher Samuel Carroll is chilling

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Damon Baudin, left, and Christopher Samuel Carroll in Smokescreen. Picture: Cathy Breen

**Smokescreen.** Written and directed by Christopher Samuel Carroll. Barewitness Theatre Co. February 2-5. The Q, Queanbeyan Performing Arts Centre. Bookings <https://theq.net.au>

Christopher Samuel Carroll's *Smokescreen* is a chilling two-hander that debates the state of the modern world from the perspectives of 1977. Two American executives meet at a business lounge at an airport. The younger, Brad (Damon Baudin), is in tobacco; the older, Glenn (Carroll), is in oil. There's an initial air of the mentor and potential boss from Glenn but he's also sounding out Brad in this meeting between flights to see what he's got.

Brad is a smart young dresser. The older Glenn is more tweedy and wears a waistcoat. The air is dense with the smoke from Glenn's cigarettes. Brad ironically doesn't smoke what he sells.

It gradually becomes clear that Glenn is aware of the dangers of oil and the threat of oncoming climate change. He has daughters and fears the future for them but cannot stop smoking. If he's looking to Brad for help, he can forget it. Brad is coolly immoral and utterly logical about smoking, tobacco, oil and how the world works and wags. And about the mechanics of addiction to tobacco, to oil, to the comforts of civilisation.

There's an air of theological debate about all of this. I was reminded somehow of C S Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* and the ways in which a hollow man (or devil) can reveal that there is no moral substance within. The piece increasingly contrasts Glenn's awareness of the trap he is in with Brad's runs of logic is devoid of any true compassion.

As a play it's inclined to be wordy and could perhaps use more tightening but it will repay audience focus. Spare lighting from Antony Hateley supports a setting of heavy, old-fashioned board room furniture. Very occasionally the sound of a departing or landing plane reminds about the uses of fossil fuel and the implications of past times when smoking was allowed as we flew.

And as the (hopefully non-carcinogenic) smoke fills the stage it reminds us of the useless safeguards of the smoking and non-smoking divisions in a closed cabin on those old flights. It's a blistering image for the failure to get at the causes of environmental disaster.

Strong tension and excellent performances from both Baudin and Carroll make this piece worth seeing. Carroll as Glenn has a genial authority undercut increasingly by what the tobacco is doing to him and by his fears for his family. The sustained bouts of smoker's cough are wonderfully done. Those who grew up with smokers will be reminded all too precisely.

Baudin brings out the worst in Brad by underplaying and by stressing the character's cool acceptance of logic and manipulation. Carroll's Glenn seems to have much more self-knowledge but it is increasingly challenged and finally threatened.

*Smokescreen* is a thought-provoking and welcome start to The Q's 2022 drama programming. It's the job of the arts to challenge and confront especially in difficult times. This is a power struggle played out under the flight paths. The stakes are the survival of the planet. And that, sitting in the dark in a masked audience, with the planes greatly curtailed, seems darkly appropriate.

# Carroll's script smoulders behind the 'Smokescreen'

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Damon Baudin, left, and Christopher Samuel Carroll in "Smokescreen". Photo: Cathy Breen

*Theatre / "Smokescreen". Written and directed by Christopher Samuel Carroll. At The Q until February 5. Reviewed by **JOE WOODWARD**.*

**CHRISTOPHER** Samuel Carroll has become strongly associated with highly intelligent theatre and this work lives up to that reputation.

In this production, Carroll joins Damon Baudin on stage in a detailed interplay of ideas concerning the role of public relations and marketing in social manipulation.

The propaganda work of Edward Bernays is referenced in relation to the ways in which opinion can be swayed in less obvious forms. Two characters from the carbon-related and smoking industries have a dialectical argument concerning strategies for continuing their very negative participation in promoting their industries.

This dialectical theatre is incisive and challenging. It demands an inquisitive and engaged audience who follow the irritating and canny arguments being put forward by the ad men.

The play, in some ways, considers a more incisive and finely tuned view to that seen in the movie “Don’t Look Up”; except it details the underpinning manipulations that give rise to the absurdities seen in the movie.

Carroll’s text is sharp and very direct. There is argument, proposition, counter-argument and doubt being countered by smug certainties. The work demands a very high level of vocal dexterity and mastery of language.

Baudin’s extraordinary grasp of the material makes his propositions seem so logical yet damaging. Carroll’s portrayal of doubt and vulnerability provides a counter to the antagonistic certainty of Baudin.

The scope of the issues in the play places demands on the audience to consider what is being held up for scrutiny. The subtle physical nuances within the production’s blocking and each character’s demeanour suggests a sense of inevitability that makes rational opposition very difficult.

An oddity of the work is the setting of the time period. While not stated, it appears to be set in the late ’70s gauging by the costumes and references to World War II and the Cuban Missile Crisis. We are left to ponder how the results of the arguments have played out over the following 40 or so years. This is left for the audience.

“Smokescreen” is a most engaging and thought-provoking work performed by highly skilled actors with clarity. It is a work that should be seen widely and that might easily be toured for national audiences. Perhaps a discussion paper might follow detailing some of the research and observations included in the play’s content.