

Circus in the ascendancy

Suzanne Spinner in awe of the Women's Circus' *Pope Joan*

The Women's Circus began in Melbourne in 1991, the brainchild of Donna Jackson, and was renowned as much for its wit and spectacle as its manifest feminist social agenda. In 1997, Sarah Cathcart was appointed artistic director and *Pope Joan* is her first full scale production. Jackson by all accounts was a hard act to follow but Cathcart has stepped out boldly and led the Womens' Circus into new territory.

Cathcart made her reputation as an innovative performer/creator of solo shows, so it is interesting to see how she deals with the mass, and there are masses of women. The circus inducted 40 new members this year and there were more than 50 including musicians on stage in *Pope Joan*, and as many again offstage.

The story of *Pope Joan*, possibly the first and certainly the only woman pope, is interwoven with the stories of Joan of Arc and numerous witches in an Herstory interleaved with first person stories from women in the circus about their own experiences of nuns, in schools and convents. There is no dialogue, only an intercutting of live monologues in which individual stories become part of a larger framework. The emphasis is on the movement sequences performed by the group and, from time to time, an individual performer briefly becomes a particular character.

It mixes the grandly mythical and historic with the ordinary and suburban trials of girlhood under the influence of powerful and intriguing women. And you are as often reminded of Madeline and the girls in two straight lines, or the whimsical linocuts of Eric Thake, as you are of the Salem witch hunts.

In *Pope Joan*, Cathcart was interested in "exploring physical composition—combining circus skills with an understanding of space, rhythm, form, performance skills and dramatic content", and she collaborated with choreographer Beth Shelton and with Anni Davey and Christina Branton to create the aerial element.

Shelton is an accomplished choreographer and one of the things she is particularly brilliant at doing is getting large numbers of people moving in interesting ways in big arenas, without your even being aware that it's choreography. It all seems to happen so naturally as one sequence flows seamlessly into another, but it's always changing and it's always perfectly judged, it just looks serendipitous.

The aerial work is what makes it circus, and it so easily crosses over into dance with ropes and trapezes. Some beautiful things were done with slack ropes and the women who were all garbed as nuns and you saw it as ringing and pealing church bells. Later things got tighter and tauter and the ropes became slip knots and nooses as the witches were strung up by their naked feet and swung there in front of us, like animals, live game hung to season after the hunt, and we were the villagers who'd come to watch the show.

However the *pièce de resistance* was, fittingly, the sequence depicting the ascendancy of *Pope Joan* herself. She rose on the backs of all those humble, nameless, undifferentiated women from whom she came. She literally walked all over them, as they prostrated themselves before her. A long line of women is stretched diagonally across the space. She begins her procession, walking on their flattened backs, but as she goes further they rise up and

her progress across their backs is made harder but she goes on until finally they turn their backs on her and she has to climb up and over them, one by one. Each step she takes is more careful, more measured, more decisive, more definite, and more dangerous for everyone.

Pope Joan had a wonderful quality of light and space, a spare, poetic and meditative aesthetic. The strength of the actual space, the Old Police Garage in Russell Street, was asserted and felt. It utilised a large rectangle with the audience on one side, looking down from a wide, low rake. You felt as if you were looking onto a vast walled courtyard or a medieval town

square with a campanile in the distance.

The lighting design by Eterpi Soropos was exquisitely simple and utterly powerful with a sense of sharp European sunlight painting deep, long shadows. The music under the direction of Kim Baston combined polyphonic harmonies of hymns and Latin chants with contemporary pops in a rich and vibrant blend of massed voices and an underscore played on an eclectic range of instruments.

The audience response was amazing—I did not go to the opening but on what I presumed was an average night in the second week, it was packed to the rafters and at the end they stamped and whistled like a footy crowd in the bleachers. Clearly the message is getting out; everyone wants to see ordinary women doing extraordinary things.

Women's Circus, Pope Joan, Old Police Garage, Russell Street, Melbourne, November 20 - December 6