

# Don't read Australian history, make it!

THEATRE

SUZANNE SPUNNER

**BACK TO BOURKE STREET: The Last Laugh, Smith St, Collingwood.**

*Back to Bourke Street* began as a supper show in The Back Theatre of the Pram Factory with Evelyn Krape, Claire Dobbin and Tony Taylor with Libby Drake on piano.

The move to Collingwood, the addition of Sue Ingleton and Rob Meldrum and the inclusion of many new songs has been all for the good albeit with the attendant losses endemic to moving from an intimate raggedy venue with a few painted flats to a larger space and a specially designed split level set by the underground Kenneth Rowell, Peter Corrigan.

*Back to Bourke Street* is a cold collation (smorgasbord) of musical nostalgia, but unlike *The Twenties* and *All That Jazz*, for most of the audience it is an exposure to hitherto unknown and undreamt of material.

Like so many aspects of Australian popular culture the songs of the last 60 years have been unsung and ignored.

Given that they decided not to include local folk songs or popular songs of British or American origin, the cast who collected the material for the show had considerable problems.

The resulting repertoire of well over 40 songs — ample evidence of both their determined sleuthing and a varied and sophisticated indigenous cultural form.

Songs were unearthed in private collections, state libraries and archives and the Australian Music Centre. For many songs the sheet music had been lost and so they had to be transcribed from recordings.

The historical spectrum of the show is from Federation and a charming panegyric "Where the Golden Wattle Grows"

extolling the beauty of our native flora over the fading claims of England's rose to the glorious deeds of Smithy and Bradman.

I was saddened to see that a song from the original show, "Miss Australia We Love You" which cautioned our gals to return from their prize winning overseas cruises has been dropped from the program.

The period includes two world wars and the songs range from real rabble rousers like "V for Victory" and "A Call to Arms", sentimental wringers like "A Brown Slouch Hat" to the throwaway pathos of "The Night You Went Away".

The only song with an overtly political message was the lively toe-tapper, "Banish the Budget blues," a send up of the hard times resulting from Scullin's strictures which not only put taxes on hats and fags but also on "the little things that only a married man knows".

Each offering, however slight in itself, speaks volumes about the wit and invention of our songsters — whether it is the crazy cooee rhymes of "Moo-Noo-loo" and Loo from Woolloomooloo" or the naive borrowed sophistication of "On the Manly Boat" or "Big Bridge (Sydney) Blues".

Everything about the show is so taut, pacy and thoroughly professional it is a delight to watch and the long period of preparation that has gone into this show has paid dividends.

No aspect of the performance has been left unpolished — the set, the costumes, the choreography, the rapid fire one liners that mark the transition from one number to the next, and even die hard Poor theatre puritans should be happy to see some poor actors get a deserved and more than even break.



*Soapbox — brilliantly conceived but underdone.*

There are no stars in *Back To Bourke Street* just an evenly matched galaxy.

Since so many people think that those of us who feast with our eyes are without oral discrimination I won't comment on the food, save to say none of us suffered as a result of it, and for a show as good as this you'd happily go without.

\* \* \*

**SMACK IN THE DAKS: The Soapbox Circus and music by Matchbox; front Theatre, Pram Factory.**

*Smack In The Daks* is the first large scale scripted inside the theatre performance by the Soapbox Circus and Matchbox. It is described as an 'undone panto. Underdone may have been a more apt epithet.

The problem is one of dislocated form and content/ words and action/ pantomime, circus or play-with the net result neither fish nor fowl and the wrong feet in both camps.

The good things are the brilliantly conceived and painted set by Bob Daly and Chips Mackinoly which transforms the whole of the Front Theatre into an Australian toyland in primary colors and the performances of some of the actors.

Alan Robertson is passing fair as a con merchant with *Sentimental Bloke* overtones and Robin

Laurie is a convincing boy cowering under the voluminous aprons of Jon Hawkes.

But the pleasantest surprise of all was the emergence of Helen Sky as an upstage actress of promise. She was also the only person in the whole show who was able to stylize her acting to suggest the pantomime element.

The script is exceeding wordy and while acute and witty in many parts is hamstrung by the format of a circus/pantomime with pretensions to physical stylistics (which the performers in any case lack).

The gap between what was said and what was shown became insupportable. Similarly, while the set was in itself a beauty, it resulted in an elongated and virtually unplayable acting area which failed to produce any natural focuses and made for an awful lot of awkwardness.

Matchbox are a competent but not specially exciting band at the best of times and in this they suffered from badly balanced sound such that their lyrics were inaudible.

They also shouldn't be allowed more than a few feet away from their instruments and if that were the case what are they doing any way because only one song as far as I could work out bore any relation to this show?

*TMT's cultural round-up Critique* this week makes a takeover bid for the centre spread. Read why theatre critic, Sue Spinner gives a thumbs up to *Back to Bourke St* at the Last Laugh, but gives thumbs down to the Pram Factory's new show *Smackinthedacks*.