

# Nightshift: alienating and exciting

**FIVE O'CLOCK SHADOW:** Nightshift, Back Theatre, Pram Factory.

*Nightshift* consists of five actors and two directors — Lindzee Smith and Richard Murphet — who have come together to present a season of contemporary European and American theatre pieces by writers whose work we rarely see here.

The *Nightshift* season is described as a work in progress with short working sessions aiming towards swift hard edged performances. While, indubitably, there was a feeling of raw energy about the evening, many things suffered from being under rehearsed and consequently were soft around the edges and a bit blundering.

There are four pieces. *Killer's Head* by Sam Sheperd a tricky last minute monologue, spoken by a convicted killer from the chair. The stark Calvary setting and the voice coming from behind blindfolded eyes is a powerful image in itself, but unfortunately neither the writing nor the acting ever matched the power of the initial impression.

The second piece, *Michi's Blood* by new German writer, Franz Xavier Kroetz is a horrifying picture of social, psychological and linguistic deprivation that can exist within a sexual relationship. Carole Porter and Shuvus played the couple with chilling accuracy and the formal chamber music direction and design by Smith and Murphet forced attention back to the unspoken levels of the horror in the situation.

*The Local Stigmatic* by Heathcote Williams was the third play and like his *AC/DC* it comments on the pervasiveness of media imagery, however unlike *AC/DC* it is modest, subtle and well-written.

Its main interest is in the relationship between the two characters played by Greg Pickhaver and Phil Motherwell who are forever redefining the distances and dependences between themselves through a self contained mythology they create.

The final play, *Cowboy Mouth* by Sam Sheperd and Patti Smith was finally the least satisfying although it had some good moments. The inherent drama and black humor gets lost when the cultish and now rather hackneyed (*Hair to Trash*) symbology is laid on with a trowel.

*Nightshift* is worth seeing — it's dark and butch and often alienating but its genuinely interesting and often exciting. The direction is fresh and hopefully will be continued.

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by SUZANNE SPUNNER

**WHILE THE BILLY BOILS:** Grant Street

Leonard Teale is one of those archetypal Australian actors, like Chips Rafferty and Jack Thompson, who become nationalist icons in their lifetimes and so it seems right that he should be playing a national monument like Henry Lawson.

Teale devised the show himself by imagining what would have happened if Henry Lawson had been persuaded to do a one man presentation of his own works. So *While The Billy Boils* includes some of the best short stories of bush life, humorous poetry, thundering political verse and brief easy chat about his life and times.

The production mirrors the strengths and weaknesses of Lawson's writing. The first half deals with Lawson's earlier better prose writing and the high point is the telling of 'The Loaded Dog' — surely Lawson's finest comic yarn.

In the second half, the highlights are the Dickensian pathos of 'Arvie Aspenall's Alarm Clock' and the irreverent mirth of 'How the Union Buries Its Dead'.

Poems like 'The Captain of the Push' and 'Faces in the Street' and 'The Men Who Made Australia' are suited to the declamatory mode, whereas Lawson's attempt to create a softer, more intimate and personal voice in his verse produces assertive, embarrassing rhetoric, the flavor of which Teale unwisely chose to reproduce in his performance.

Teale makes no pretentious and misplaced attempts to interpret Lawson's motives or probe his psyche, but he does more than justice to the liveliness, humor and perspicacity of Lawson's writing.

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**BASTRACTION:** La Mama.

Over the last four years Lloyd Jones has done a number of performance events at La Mama, and were they half as interesting as *Bastraction*, they would have been worth seeing.

*Bastraction* is an enacted meditation on the threefold relationship between the artist, the canvas and the audience — or as it was described by the writer/artist "canvassing a response".

In a number of carefully choreographed stages, the canvas is constructed, the living models

introduced and posed after which they disappear behind the canvas, the artist then reintroduces them into the surface of the painting by literally bringing them through it.

The canvas is painted and when the final surface has been finished, the living canvas begins to apparently bleed, excrete and otherwise dribble paint from its animated surface. In the final moments the picture destroys the surface.

This all happens live on stage, as well as on color video, while disembodied music and sound counterpoint the visual imagery and the action is punctuated by a ritual dance in which the dancer appears to enter into congress with the canvas.

All in all *Bastractions* was an exciting piece of post object theatre, tightly focused, witty and in the best sense provocative. It was an intelligent, transparent and thoroughly effective storming of the boundaries between art and theatre.

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**STEPHANY/THE ABDICATION:** La Mama.

Kris Hemensley is a local poet and playwright who has been presenting plays at La Mama since 1967. Actor/director Malcolm Robertson has been collaborating with him since *The Blind* produced in 1967.

*Stephany*, which was first produced at La Mama in 1968, is a schizoid monologue by an old man left out of the everyday, engaged world caught up in the accumulated debris of memory.

He barricades himself in his junk shop to carry out his annual audit, makes an inventory of the traumas and events of his life; remembers the war and the now-lost childhood friends. From the outside come the attempted incursions of his creditors, noisy neighbors and demanding customers.

*Stephany* is not readily accessible since its language is fragmented and dissociated and achieves its effects through layering of meaning and the atmosphere of claustrophobia it creates. As Mr Stephany, Malcolm Robertson was a precise image of the self repressed by the self - and showed tremendous power restrained.

*The Abdication* is more ambitious than *Stephany* and more uneven. It is a revelation of human exploitation in which a form of social satire is cast in a mytho-poetic frame work. The affinities with Genet are strong, though Hemensley is witty as well.

The central character is the queen, a Duke of Bedford in drag, who is flogged to the rapacious public by his attendants/salesmen. A promotor comes along who can out huckster them all and a game of profitable humiliations begins

with the queen as victim.

While *The Abdication* offers some penetrating insights, much of it is obscurantist and the violence and grossness of the last part seemed gratuitous to me.

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**THE LAUGHING BANTAM/THE FITZROY YANKEE:** La Mama.

These two new short plays by Phil Motherwell should be seen in the context of *Nightshift* since many of the same actors are involved, and despite the local setting, the sub-cultural ambience is the same as Heathcote Williams' *Soho* and Sam Sheperd's *California*.

*The Laughing Bantam* concerns the late night confrontation between recently released ex con called the Laughing Bantam (Gary Waddell), and his comrade in crime, Big John (Shuvus) and their cringing local pusher and his cypher of a girlfriend.

Motherwell's affection for the intrinsic charm and humor of the male desperado is particularly apparent in the creation of the bantam and to a lesser extent in Big John.

Their addled ways are lovingly drawn by Motherwell and colored in by Waddell and Shuvus.

Waddell's speedy, keyed-up, jerky marionette style and Shuvus' wooden, laconic Gary Cooper junkie have become the obligatory modes of the Gore Street style. Their transparency is a semiologist's dream.

The play had some good moments but the energy got lost along the way until the final scene when it was clear that no one knew how to end it.

*The Fitzroy Yankee* had sharper writing, tighter characterisation, and focussed direction going for it. It was only marred by an inexperienced actor whose voice came and went at crucial moments. The garbling and loss of lines is a critical defect in a one man monologue. So all I can really say is that it seemed good.

It deals with a local small time crim born and bred in Fitzroy talking about his life and times in and out of jail.

The evocation of the bar at The Perseverance Hotel and the derivation of the term Fitzroy Yankee were among many of the superbly written vignettes within the monologue. I only regret missing so much of the rest.

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**BAAL:** Sept 15 - Oct 2. Back Theatre.

Beginning this Thursday in the Back Theatre of the Pram Factory is Theatre Projects' *Baal*, directed by James McCaughey.

*Baal* is Brecht's first play which he wrote at the age of 19 and revised many times until 1956. *Baal* has rarely been performed anywhere and most certainly never in Melbourne.