

# Justice done to Phar Lap's myth

*Phar Lap - It's Cingalese for Lightning Y'Know: Front Theatre. Pram Factory, Till April 24.*

On Friday night amid an assorted bevy of supporters, theatre critics, turf writers and ex-jockeys the A.P.G. held the Melbourne premiere of *Phar Lap - It's Cingalese For Lightning Y'Know* by local outside and untried writer Stephen Mastare.

The production was fresh from a three-week trial run at the Perth Festival and reaped the benefits of this additional rehearsal period.

Many of last year's productions in particular, *The Overcoat* and *Dudders*, might have had better muscle tone and staying power if they had been put through their paces off Drummond St beforehand.

*Phar Lap* sees the maturation of the talents of the writer Stephen Mastare, the director, Paul Hampton, and leading actor, Phil Motherwell; all of whom in the past have only exhibited flashes of their potential.

The action of the play covers five years, from 1928 when Phar Lap was purchased at the Trentham sales until his premature



**THEATRE**

by SUZANNE SPUNNER

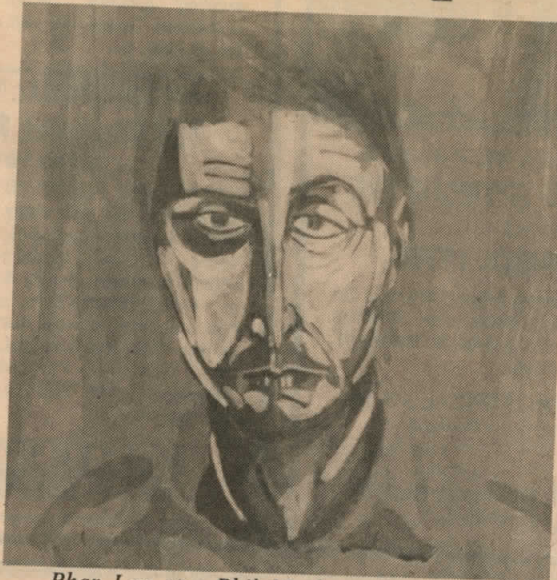
death in America in 1932. It centres on the lives of the big red one's trainer, Hughie Telford and owner David Davis.

Divided into six events covering the major races in Phar Lap's career, the play is tight, pacy, funny and save for the final act never flags.

It is in the best A.P.G. tradition and has the same sort of rollicking entertainment appeal as *Marvellous Melbourne*.

*Phar Lap* never bogs down in tendentious social comment; the class critique is concretely embodied in the relationship between Telford and Davis.

As Telford, Phil Motherwell gives easily the most outstanding performance in the play and the best in his career (although his portrayal of the paranoid in Bert Deling's film *Pure S* is a close second).



*Phar Lap star Phil Motherwell as seen by Geoff Lowe.*

He was ably assisted by Wilfred Last as Davis, who resists the temptation to play this capitalist shark as a racist stereo-type. Instead, he is the home-grown variety and more believable for it.

Claire Dobbin as Telford's wife, Noreen, finally has a real Australian woman she can get her acting teeth into.

Hughie and Noreen's

relationship is nicely understated as are many things in the play; particularly the mythical quality of Phar Lap and his attraction for the Australian collective imagination.

This is why the final scene which takes place decades after Phar Lap's death and shows the final demise of Hughie Telford seems overstated and contrived.

The natural place to end was in the previous scene with the devastating news of Phar Lap's death.

The tragedy need not have been spelt out.

Paul Hampton's direction is precise and imaginative, and he deploys his actors at all points of the beautiful, illusionist set designed by Micki Allen and Carole Porter.

On it the audience become race-goers sprawling on the grassy outer or sitting in serried rows in the stands.

Throughout the play, horses are created by the mimic ability of the actors and we only see Phar Lap in back projected slides, which means the stature of the myth is never diminished.

Stephen Mastare has created a good Australian play with wide appeal, not great, but thoroughly entertaining and this production does it justice.

A note to an old administrator, now out to pasture: I enjoyed and found much to commend in this play despite your laughable - if they weren't so serious - stand-over tactics.