

# Requiem for the working class

Suzanne Spinner sees new work from the Melbourne Workers Theatre and Playbox, and a performance event directed by Yoni Prior

Against the background of the Docks Strike, some recent theatre in Melbourne offered a timely exploration of the marginalisation, displacement and thwarted potential for transformation within what we used to call the working class.

The Melbourne Workers Theatre staged *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?* in the faded 19th century glory of The Trades Hall and notwithstanding its title, the only thing agit prop about it was the raucous celebration in the next door wet canteen as the MUA and its friends celebrated another legal stay of execution. Director Julian Meyrick developed the project over a year with 4 playwrights—Andrew Bovell, Patricia Cornelius, Melissa Reeves, Christos Tsiolkas and composer Irine Vela—each responding to the question: “Who are the working class?”

*Who's Afraid of the Working Class?* comes up with the answer that it's the working class that is most afraid of identifying itself in terms of class interest, preferring the aspirations and trappings of the global consumer fast running out of credit, the leitmotif of the piece being expressed through the wearing of business suits and Nike shoes, while others are left to sleep and die among discarded clothing in Brotherhood of St Laurence bins. Work as such is a foreign country to almost all the characters—apart from policing and prostitution, everyone else has lost their jobs or never had one.

Presented as a deftly intercut series of scenes, the individual works form one discontinuous narrative of pity and anger and occasional moments of wit and resilience. The show itself is very cool and 90s, sophisticated confronting theatre, full of rage and free of polemic to the point of being anarchic. It portrays Victoria under Kennett as a place without hope, and much false consciousness. The scene is set in the opening monologue by Christos Tsiolkas delivered by a young man who is contemptuous of his father's working class dreams and romantic belief in unionism, and fantasises being fucked by our leader himself, turned on by the power of a real man in a suit, a man who, as he says, doesn't give a fuck about us! I found this piece the most disturbing—if there can be no revolution without general copulation, then this shows there can be general copulation sans revolution.

Tsiolkas' other reveries on the suit presented a young Aboriginal man, played by Glenn Shea in an impressive performance, constantly being shown that wearing a suit wasn't going to fool anyone into treating him like an equal, despite Noel Pearson's great success in following his own father's advice about wearing a white shirt and a dark suit in all his dealings with whitefellers.

In *Dreamtown* Melissa Reeves gave us 2 Italian girls from Coburg, played by Maria Theodorakis and Daniela Farinacci, on a glorious shoplifting spree in the city. The first



*Who's Afraid of the Working Class?*

Viv Méhes

time we meet them in the dressing room of a flash store they are a pair of brilliant and sparkling outlaws performing transgression with relish. Later at the police station they start to unravel but hold on for the final moment in which they assert their selfhood despite the odds; their cry of 'I am something' is heart wrenching. I thought the power of their denouement was diluted by the set piece interlude with the crazy cop and the Nike trainers, as theatrical and funny as it was. There was so much going for these girls, so much vitality and imagination, I wished for a chance to see them acting on the larger canvas of a longer self contained piece. I wanted to meet their mothers, their brothers and their boyfriends and all the other chicks at school.

In Andrew Bovell's *Trash* the situation is so grim and unrelieved, and so much a textbook case of abuse and neglect, it gets caught inevitably in Dickensian pathos. It is only when the brother and sister play a grim game of where would you rather be—'on the street' comes out trumps given the reality of the shelter afforded by Mum entailing one or other of her abusive partners—that *Trash* achieves an intense and frightening particularity. Leaving them sleeping in the Brotherhood bin as vulnerable as babes in the wood, we cut to the mother, played by Eugenia Fragos, who recognises her part in the sorry tale but is incapable of taking any responsibility, and significantly the monologue moves imperceptibly from an active present tense to an increasingly passive past tense.

Patricia Cornelius' *Money* was more disparate in style and uneven in effect with echoes of Pinter in her first scene about a squabbling family in debt. Another seemed like Beckett married with

social realism. Reeves' monologue *Leon* which directly addressed the effects of the new Workcover legislation was a tight and finely detailed piece realised by David Adamson with all the pain and damaged dignity of a man who can no longer do the job he made himself to be.

The shifting narratives are held in a sad threnody orchestrated on cello and bass by Vela; indeed a Requiem for the Working Class. The strength of the music is to unify the piece and give rhythm to 18 scenes and some 20 characters played so well by the 6 performers. Meyrick's direction is taut and well judged and encompasses the considerable invisible dramaturgy that has made a whole from all these parts. He finds the points of connection to insert the links, creating the discontinuous narrative thread which culminates in the tragic incineration of the brother and sister found locked in each other's arms. Ultimately the strength of the work as a whole depends on this connection, to dramatise the interconnectedness of the urban milieu—what is sensational rumour for some is the tragedy of someone else's children.

Tobsha Lerner's *Miracles* at Playbox is set in a run down supermarket in the inner urban area and focuses on Immaculata Santini, the ignored and despised illiterate Italian cashier to whom God speaks via her cash register. In it class politics are subsumed under the rubric of magic realism, miracles happen, people are healed by the touch of the cashier's deft and caring fingers, and the boss makes profits from it all.

Lerner's characters have a cartoon simplicity to them and the form is doggedly representational, lacking depth and resonance and devoid of subtext. As an audience you need to be moved by the miracles, but apart from

the smoke and mirrors it all just seems very, very silly—cash registers and a tuna that talks is it. There is no reality to the supermarket, nor to the place, Flemington, nor to Italian culture or to any of the other ethnic subcultures it glances over. If this is magic realism, the realism is slight and ill-observed and the magic is gullible silliness.

The most egregious gratuitousness was the Aboriginal character Pearlie who's there to provide New Age Dreamtime homilies and it would seem to make the play seem like it was written now when Aboriginal experience is on the cultural agenda; otherwise you could have thought it was written decades ago.

The saving grace was the credible performance of Laura Lattuada, infused with so much passion and vulnerability that it was at odds with the cheap laughs and banal sweetness of the resolution. The play denied Immaculata the space to dance with any conviction.

The real question in my mind was how and why this play was selected from the 300 Australian works submitted annually to Playbox. Director Kate Cherry has shown she has the capacity to tackle work with more meat.

Meanwhile at Theatreworks, *If These Walls* presented a series of provocations and responses to the changing demographics questioning the social cost of gentrification and urban redevelopment as the suburb of St Kilda becomes prime real estate. *If These Walls* was a project which culminated in a weekend of performances, events and installations created by students from the Media and Arts Department at Deakin University under the artistic direction of Yoni Prior. It was rough, poor theatre working on the strength of conviction and intervention, community theatre that went out and theatricalised the forces that are changing that particular community.

The central focus of the weekend was a participatory board game, “Developer of The Century”, a local Monopoly come Hypothetical where the participants were some of the actual players—town planners, heritage consultants and the Mayor of St Kilda himself. However in the event, as in reality, they are the bit players. The real players—the Developers and the State Planning Minister—declined to participate and so their parts were fictionalised. It was all about making utterly transparent the extent to which the community is locked out while a charade of democracy and consultation is played out. Indeed the booming, overbearing voice of The Planning Minister like an unseen god or the Wizard of Oz hiding behind the curtains, stole the show as he does in real life.

*Miracles*, director Kate Cherry, writer Tobsha Lerner, Playbox, Melbourne, April 24 - May 16. *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?*, director Julian Meyrick, writers Andrew Bovell, Patricia Cornelius, Melissa Reeves, Christos Tsiolkas, Melbourne Workers Theatre, Melbourne, May 1 - 23. *If These Walls*, director Yoni Prior, Theatreworks, students from the Media and Arts Dept of Deakin University, May 9 - 10