

In dazzling style

GIVE THE SHADOW A RUN

By Suzanne Spinner

Give The Shadow A Run: APG, Front Theatre, Pram Factory, Melbourne. Opened October 18.

The Fitzroy Yank by Phil Motherwell, director, Wilfred Last

The Yank, James Shuvus.

The Laughing Bantam by Phil Motherwell, director, Judy McHenry

Toby, Wilfred Last, Jean, Judy McHenry, Big John, James Shuvus, The Bantam, Bill Wilson

The Surgeon's Arms by Phil Motherwell, director, Wilfred Last.

Doc Holiday, Barry Dickins; Merle, Judy McHenry; Jim Faurground, James Shuvus; Mr Bastard, Bill Wilson.

The Rotten Teeth Show by Barry Dickins, director, Barry Dickins

Barrie Dickhead, Barry Dickins; Dr BA Armpit, Ross Dixon.

The Horror Of The Suburban Nature Strip by Barry Dickins, director, Barry Dickins.

Bag Tot, Judy McHenry, Mag Tot, Marilyn O'Donnell.

Design, Carole Porter and Barry Dickins. (Professional)

Whatever misgivings one might have about some of the productions staged at the Pram Factory this year, it can certainly be said that the two best productions this year Stephen Sewell's *Traitors* and this production, *Give The Shadow A Run* have been also the best Australian work staged in Melbourne this year. And ironically this production and *Traitors* resoundingly puts paid to any idea that these new writers are in the shadow of the old guard — Williamson, Hibberd, Romeril and Oakley. Indeed the title of the season is apt, Motherwell and Dickins given a run emerge in dazzling style.

Of the five plays only *The Surgeon's Arms* has not been previously performed last year at La Mama or the Pram Factory. However this production has been the first opportunity to see Motherwell and Dickins' work staged in tandem. Despite the great diversity in style of the two writers and the deployment of three

directors, Wilfred Last, Judy McHenry and Dickins himself there was a remarkable cohesiveness about the evening arising out of this distinguished collaborative exercise by writers, directors and actors.

The ambit of the five plays is resolutely local and Melbournian from Dickins' West Preston suburban fantasies to the Motherwell's petty criminal back streets of Fitzroy. While all five plays have contemporary settings, they are imbued with a nostalgic yearning for lost innocence and resonate with implicit references to the boyhoods of the writers.

Motherwell's three works could be read as episodes from the one narrative and there is a strong sense that all the characters speak the same language and know the same ropes. They attest to Motherwell's fascination with the male desperado whom he invests with considerable charm, self-deprecatory wit, mythic larrikin excess and a simmering aptitude for violence. *The Fitzroy Yank* is a claustrophobic, nerved monologue described as a "prison fantasy". In a

consciousness is punctuated with angry snatches of Blues and Rock songs which dissipate the otherwise tight focus of the monologue.

In *The Laughing Bantam* a cringing trendified local pusher and his cypher of a girl friend are confronted by a gentle giant criminal acquaintance Big John and his recently released buddy, The Laughing Bantam. Finding that the weak pusher will give him dope gratis the Bantam decides to try him out and demands the rights to the pusher's girlfriend for the night. The encounter is tense and electric with the possibility of violence until Big John intervenes. James Shuvus as Big John the laconically dopey Gary Cooper character provided an hilariously funny counterpoint to the speedy, edginess of the dancing, shadow boxing bantam played by Bill Wilson. *The Surgeon's Arms* begins with very funny closely observed naturalism which is increasingly broken up by childhood flashbacks. However these stylistic transitions confuse the narrative and leave the action hanging making the finale flat and awkward.



James Shuvus as *The Fitzroy Yank* at the APG. Photo: Ruth Maddison.

Pentridge cell a locally bred, small-time crim paces out his time talking about his life, in and out of goal. As the Yank, James Shuvus was like a pent up steel cat alternatively snarling and laughing derisively at himself and the audience. The play was set on a high platform stage, bare except for an abstract back projected slides, and it effectively defined the audience as unwilling voyeurs. Within the Yank's monologue there are a couple of superbly evocative vignettes — a loving description of the bar in the Perseverance hotel; descriptions of a childhood of selling *Heralds* in the pubs; drinking under age and escaping into the fairytale world of Luna Park. The Yank's stream of

By contrast Barry Dickin's world in *The Rotten Teeth Show* and *The Horror Of the Suburban Nature Strip* is peopled by gentle eccentrics with a sharp line in the studied insult. In *Rotten Teeth* Dickins turns what must have been a private nightmare — the loss of his teeth — into a public hilarity. The licensed sadist — the dentist — with the wire cutters and the grappling hook tells us with some relish that the modern extraction is quick, painful and bloody expensive and that he does know what it's like to suffer — "I'm only inhuman because it's popular". In *Rotten Teeth* Dickins plays the consummate victim whether in the dentist's chair or the witness box and Ross Dixon plays his gleeful tormentor firstly as the dentist and then the lawyer who prosecutes the now-gummy patient for non payment of the dentist's bill. The play is anarchic and uproariously funny — full of asides and apparently spontaneous ad libs, however it can, and did on opening night, loom dangerously out of control into areas of essentially private jokiness. And given Dickins' propensity for up-staging the actors need to be evenly matched if all the jokes are to be properly milked and in this production Ross Dixon was no match for the whip sharp, superb timing of Barry Dickins.

In *The Horror Of The Suburban Nature Strip* Marilyn O'Donnell and Judy McHenry play the two decrepit sincere sisters Mag and Bag who share their twilight years in a less than blissful arrangement trading devastating insults with each other — "You lobotomised Malle fowl — you Liberal..." and vying with each other for the dubious honour of

being the budgie for a day. In between endless cups of tea they swing at dizzying heights above the audience wearing a cardboard beak and preening themselves in the mirror attached to the budgie's swing.

Of the five plays Motherwell's *Laughing Bantam* and Dickins' *Horror Of The Suburban Nature Strip* are the most fully realised pieces; and they surpass the best short works by any of the previously mentioned writers from whose shadow they have recently emerged. And while the performances were in the main even, James Shuvus as Big John in *The Laughing Bantam* and Judy McHenry as Bag Tot in *The Horror Of The Suburban Nature Strip* stand out. *Give The Shadow A Run* proves beyond doubt, contrary to Jack Hibberd's gloomy view that Australian theatre has not lapsed into Nullaborean boredom but is alive and kicking.