

W.E.S.T. A Community Theatre Model

By Suzanne Spinner

At the recent Dixon/Hamer ballyhoo affair — the International Community Education Conference held in the tatty splendour of The Southern Cross Hotel, WEST Community Theatre were one of the participating arts groups. Of the theatre groups who participated they were the only group who took the brief of the Conference seriously.

In addition to performances of their most recent production — a rock musical for schoolkids in the Western region called *Riff Raff*, they held a workshop session on Community Theatre which was attended by delegates to the conference. At the workshop they presented an account of how they devised *Riff Raff* with some thirty year ten students at Buckley Park High School, they then went on to put forward a model for generating scripts and performances with groups within the community using their work on *Riff Raff* as a case study. WEST's aim was to create a relevant, entertaining rock musical for fifteen year olds in Essendon. The production was to be of, by, from and about those kids, the only decision that the group had taken prior to meeting with the kids was that it was to incorporate rock music.

In the second part of the workshop Jan McDonald and Phil Sumner generalised from the *Riff Raff* scripting/research process and put forward a model for script generation that could be applied to any group in the community. They came up with a seven point plan:

1. Contact the group the script is to be about and approach them with an idea making no secrets about the project. In the case of *Riff Raff* the entire year ten at Buckley Park High School were briefed and of the ninety kids who participated in these three sessions, thirty elected themselves to work on it in detail.

2. Wipe your own slate clean, leave behind your own preconceptions about the group. Even though many stereotypes turn out to be true it is important to discover them afresh and for the people involved to come to them unaided. The development of the group's own awareness at this stage is even more important than any theatre product that may result, otherwise you run the risk of exploiting the group. At this stage it was important that WEST stated its own values as adults and outsiders.

3. Gather ideas and impressions and jot down lines and situations that come up, and observe the patterns of interaction. Regard your scripting task at this stage as one of steeping yourselves in the atmosphere. Your job is to expose and tease out the issues, from these the eventual themes of the show will come. After each workshop with the group review in detail what has happened outside amongst yourselves.

4. You are now in a position to make decisions about the theme; the framework or skeleton on which to hang the events; and the style. Jan McDonald

stressed that it was important to make these decisions in that order. The content or theme has to be the most important thing and then the framework and style will organise themselves as a result. She stressed that you shouldn't make arbitrary decisions too early on, and that you must resist the panic feeling about what, if anything will eventually emerge.

In the case of *Riff Raff* the theme was what it is to be fifteen and living in Essendon. The framework became a rock dance that each of the characters were going to and the problems they encountered getting there. The style was to be impressionistic with a documentary feel but would use allegory as well — the dance wouldn't be a real dance but a game led by a games master who in some way controlled the kids lives. As the concentration span of the kids is relatively short, a decision was made to work on units and to move quickly between them making a series of short, virtually self-contained, segments.

5. Translate all these decisions onto large sheets of butcher's paper, work on the floor and on the walls, not off



Riff Raff by WEST

desks and the typewriter. Use these pieces of paper like pieces of a jigsaw, rearrange them, get a visual, tactile sense of the structure. Make them into flow charts and put them on the walls, stick up photos, drawings, plans, objects etc — don't be afraid to move them about — but always keep everything in front of you.

In the case of *Riff Raff* these charts were divided into three main headings — parents, peers and relationships. Then more material was classified and added to each section — fragments of interviews, phrases the kids had said, segments were taken from the video and written out and stuck on the wall together with things that the kids had written themselves. Everything you have collected must be put up — it can easily be rejected later. At this stage Jan and Phil were able to keep going back to the kids and ask them to write out scenes along the lines suggested by the charts.

6. Then one writer takes a section at a time and moulds it into a script. As each section is worked upon individually it is brought back to the group as a whole and the writing and ideas clarified and refined. In the case

of *Riff Raff* Jan and Phil were the joint writers and for the main part of this scripting process they worked apart from Ian and Linda who later acted in the final show.

7. Immediately type up what you have written — it then becomes a script. Stick these pages up — for every foolscap page you've got two and a half minutes of your show. By putting up all the typewritten pages you will know at a glance how much of your play is there and what you haven't covered. By the end of this process you will have a first draft, but you will very likely be faced with one major problem — the ending. It is at this point that the writers must draw some conclusions which are their own as a result of their reflection on the group they have been working with, and these conclusions are not always things that the group can or will come up with themselves.

You now have a script which is pretty well there and you can begin working on it with the actors, once rehearsals begin the physical actions and stage directions to flesh it out will follow and have to be added. After outlining this procedure Phil, Linda

and Jan discussed the consequences of *Riff Raff* and working in this way with a particular group in the community.

For these kids *Riff Raff* broke a cycle of expectations — they did things their teachers never thought they could do, they took on responsibility for the material in the show and in so doing took on responsibility for their own lives. WEST helped them break a cycle of low expectations, but Jan stressed that WEST's moral responsibility to these kids is a serious one, there has to be the possibility for them to do more — WEST must help them start up a Youth Theatre in the region. If WEST doesn't follow up in this way, then they should never have released those expectations in the first place.

Finally WEST said that the community theatre model for group generated scripts was an important and viable way of coming up with Australian material and even more importantly it would be material that the audience it is intended for, can relate to. Moreover such scripts can be adapted to other media — film, video and so open up material to a much wider audience.

Riff Raff in the WEST

W.E.S.T. Community Theatre is a full-time professional community theatre operating in Essendon and the Western region.

The company's home is The Band Hall, off Band Hall Alley in Moonee Ponds, which was formerly the rehearsal room for the Essendon City Band; their basic aim is to provide Essendon and the Western region with original entertaining theatre in a variety of venues.

W.E.S.T. produces shows in the places people work and meet; devising and performing entertainments for schools, pubs and clubs, community festivals and shopping centres and W.E.S.T. clowns are a regular feature of concerts and festivals in the region.

There are four full-time actor-director-writer members of the company — Jan McDonald, Phil Sumner, Linda Waters and Ian Shrives. They are all graduates of the Victorian College of the Arts and live in the region.

So far this year they have devised a show for primary school children, **Mooney Looney Time** which has toured Essendon pre-schools, a pub show, **The Golden Follies**, which was a music hall style piece set in the roaring days on the goldfields and a football show, **The Players**, which has played to the packed and sweaty changing rooms of the Essendon and District league clubs.

In September the W.E.S.T. Film and Video unit begins shooting **Just An Ordinary Life**, a film adaption by Sydney

What's it like to be 15 and live in Essendon in the late 70s? SUE SPUNNER meets some kids who wrote a rock musical about it.

director Jane Oehr of **Roma**, a play first produced by W.E.S.T. in 1977.

And later in the year, a specially devised pre-Christmas show, **The Essendon Show**, written by Jan McDonald, Phil Sumner and Peter Oysten, Dean of Drama at the VCA, will hit the Essendon Civic Theatre.

However, it is their current production, **Riff Raff**, which is the proper subject of this piece. **Riff Raff**, described as a disco-musical, is W.E.S.T.'s high school project for this year. During August it has played to packed and enthusiastic crowds of high school students in the Western region.

Riff Raff was written by Jan McDonald and Phil Sumner in conjunction with 30 year ten students at Buckley Park High School.

When W.E.S.T. first came to the school and offered a video workshop option to any year ten students who were interested, many of the kids who joined up, are now frank enough to admit that they saw it as a bit of 'a bludge' and a way of getting out of hated sport, but they soon became involved when they realised that W.E.S.T. meant what they said and that the project was their's — a chance to devise a piece of theatre for themselves and other students about their lives and their problems. For **Riff Raff**, through theatre and rock

music, presents the experiences of the kids who wrote it — what it is like to be 15 and live in Essendon in the late 70s.

Local musicians, The Men At Work Band, provide the pounding rock that carries the show. **Riff Raff** has been W.E.S.T.'s most extensive project to date and the company temporarily expanded to include 10 more actors, musicians and technical people. This considerable expansion has enabled **Riff Raff** to be staged in a zappy, technically complex and fully professional manner which would not have been possible without the added assistance of a Schools Commission Innovations grant.

The action of **Riff Raff** is organised around four teenagers — Rosa, Julie, Mick and Doogs — all sharply drawn individuals each with their own particular problems and conflicts. The fifth character Spinner, played by Phil Sumner looking like a campy wizard, is a composite authority figure cum master of ceremonies who at different times during the production plays the parents, teachers, cops and bottle shop attendants and would-be employers who constrict and control the kids' lives. At another level, Spinner represents the temptations of the adult world which the kids see "as offering and enticing with one hand and withholding and thwarting with the other".

While drawing on the familiar American genre that began with **West Side Story** and continues unabated, and with little narrative innovation to the present day **Grease** and **Saturday Night Fever**, **Riff Raff** is nevertheless uniquely local and particular in its reference. It is acutely perceptive because it has been written from the inside of the experiences of its intended audience, rather than by outsiders exploiting that experience.

With a minimal set and the band placed centre stage, **Riff Raff** moves along at an electric pace as we encounter the interwoven lives of the four characters.

Rosa is the romantic, bespectacled girl with the over-protective Italian mother who insists that she be chaperoned to the local rock dance which is the culmination of **Riff Raff**. Even to her best friend Julie, Rosa is an unmitigated dag.

Julie, on the other hand, is everything Rosa would like to be but isn't allowed and doesn't care — she is the cool cat, the sophisticated rebel who at the end of **Riff Raff** is the only one of her peer group who has not been enticed into compromises with the adult world by Spinner who functions as a latter day Pied Piper.

When theatre has the liveliness, commitment and genuinely popular appeal that **Riff Raff** has, and in addition has been directly shaped from the experiences of the people who produced it, it cannot but be a successful theatre event and a valid and important community activity.

COMMUNITY THEATRE

NOT SAYING OTHER PEOPLE'S WORDS: The Role of the Victorian College of the Arts in developing community theatre in Victoria. By Suzanne Spinner.

In May this year the Victorian College of The Arts (VCA) was incorporated under its own act of Parliament. During the debate which preceded the passing of the bill extensive reference was made to the role of the college in setting up community theatres in Victoria. In supporting the bill, Labor MP, Mr. Cathie said:

There have been solid achievements by the VCA and some of these achievements have been created because of a new and promising development; as a group of students go through the college, they then proceed to develop regional theatre throughout Victoria... One only has to look at the history of the performing arts companies that have gone to Burwood, Moonee Ponds, and to the River Murray. They were able to write their own theatre, and they have played to football clubs, schools, mothers' clubs, housewives and other organisations. That is a promising development, because it means that the large expenditure on the arts is enabling the arts to reach a wider section of the community.

Hansard 7 April, 1981.

The three groups referred to are WEST centred in the north western suburbs of Essendon and Moonee Ponds, the Murray River Performing Group (MRPG) based in Albury/Wodonga and Theatreworks based in Burwood and serving Melbourne's eastern suburbs. Each group was formed by graduates from the VCA.

The Drama School of the VCA took in its first students in 1976 and they graduated in 1978. In 1979 WEST and MRPG were established, while Theatreworks comprises 1980 gradu-

ates and was established this year. All three groups had worked in the various regions in the final year of their course, researching the community in which they intended working, devising and performing shows while still students.



MRPG's Fruit Fly Circus

Not all VCA drama students see community theatre as their vocation, however, for those that do the College provides a unique opportunity to develop the necessary skills. Many students already interested in community theatre choose to come to the College for this reason, whilst others discover the area during their course.

The originator and architect of this development is the Dean of the Drama School, Peter Oyston. Oyston is a

Melbourne born actor and director who had set up a regional theatre group in the UK before he returned to Australia to take up the appointment at the College. He related how he became interested in developing community theatre.

"I was the director of a touring company in the UK. After a hard day's work in a town which had no theatre, some of the company and myself walked into a local pub and a friendly old man behind the bar said, 'Eh, where did ye come from?' and the actor said 'From London', and he said 'We're putting on some plays for your community'. And the man said 'Oh, you're one of them that tarts up 'is face and says other people's words are ye?'.

"That was a big shock. The next day we had a company meeting and decided that even though idealistically we were taking theatre to the people, our idealism was misplaced. We decided to not be people who 'tart up their faces and say other people's words', but to be people who say the words of the people we're communicating to and with and for. That meant starting a community theatre; that we had to start writing in a place which people could recognise, and on the presentation of that writing in a theatre form, could say 'Ah, that's about us, and not just us in general but that's about my grandfather or me, or my grandmother.'

"The premise of the work is that culture must be connected to our everyday life; the incidents and issues that really exist in our lives. It must be a celebration of those issues and a way in which the things which are really important to us can be laughed at, can be dreamed through and expressed so that we can actually cope and in so doing not smother our lives. This

From page 13.

of Western region life that the company believes it is ultimately contributing to the broader sense of our identity as Australians."

While MRPG sees themselves as "a bridge between two communities (Albury/Wodonga), between individuals, between imagination and creative expression, between the old — our heritage — and the new — developing a community vision." Theatreworks talks of being "a mirror whereby people's lives are elucidated and the forces and influences on them clarified, and the possibilities for change seen."

Within their particular regions the groups see themselves as catalysts, leaveners and integrators of the community who can create a circular relationship between people in the community who are both their audience and the source of material, and the theatre which is created from this audience and performed for that audience. The responsibility of the groups as creative artists is to ensure that the work that they produce in this way is excellent. As Jan MacDonald of WEST puts it "People give you their all; their lives are your sources. If the work you produce from it is not excellent in the eyes of your audience then they cannot help but see it as a reflection of the quality of their lives."

means that the key people in a community theatre are the writers, the directors and the researchers — the people that will search out the old stories that have almost been forgotten — gone like water into sand — and bring them back to life so people can celebrate their continuity.

"This is especially important in Australia; we have a history of extraordinary events that have just been barely remembered. If we as Australians are going to celebrate our culture, then community theatre should be given absolute and utter priority, in policy terms by all the funding bodies. I can see no intellectual reason — except for people stuck in historical moulds — why community theatre shouldn't be the most exciting cultural force in Australia throughout the eighties and nineties."

The way in which these ideals are articulated in the three groups varies in details but concurs in its three-pronged approach — theatre of, with and for the community. The range of each group's activities serves a spectrum of community needs. Theatre from the community means the

creation of theatre from the raw material of the lives of people living in the community. Thus WEST created *Roma*, a one-woman show about the experience of being a housewife in Essendon from the writings of local women about their lives; *Riff Raff* a rock musical for teenagers was written by members of the group from material generated in workshops with fourth form students from a nearby high school; while *The Players*, a men-only show about football, was created from research collected in the changing rooms of the Essendon and district league.

Similarly MRPG developed a theatre restaurant piece, *The River Boat Show* about the golden age of the river trade on the Murray; and *On The Outside* was written in conjunction with members of the Educational Programme for Unemployed Youth and was described as a theatrical vocation guidance kit. *Love Of My Life* came from research and work with staff and patients at the Albury Base Hospital and it explored the experience of the elderly in institutional care.

Theatreworks' *Dee Jay View*, a rock anthology, combined extensive social history research with an examination of the lives of eight people who were teenagers in the fifties; and their coming production, *The Middle Of The Road Show* is a comedy musical about the Eastern suburbs car culture.

The raw material for all these productions came from the community and the theatre which resulted was performed for the community. In general none of the groups utilises existing scripts or draws material from outside their communities, however to say that they work regionally and specifically is not to say that their work is parochial. Rather they work from the inside out to encompass wider issues in Australian society.

WEST's Artistic Policy describes this process: "It is through concentrating on portraying the specifics

Continued on Page 56.

*Interview with Peter Oyston conducted by Martin Foot as part of the research for a forthcoming Australia Council CAPER on Community Theatre.

The Mill Community Theatre

Deakin University's main campus is situated at Wearn Ponds some distance from Geelong. However, the university has also leased and refurbished an old woollen mill on the banks of the Barwon River.

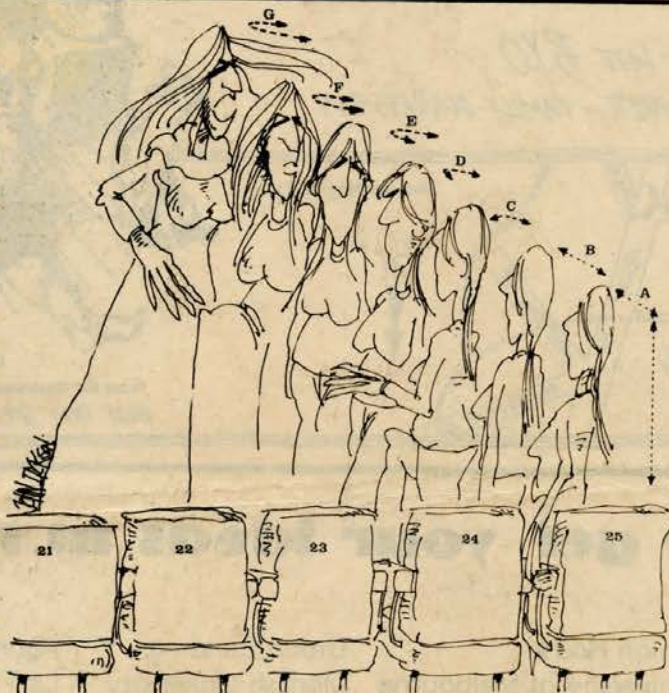
The former Returned Soldiers and Sailors Woollen Mill, or The Mill as it has always affectionately been known by local residents, now houses the Art and Design and Drama Schools of the university. It is also the home of the Mill Community Theatre. The Mill opened last year with a group originated production, *The Wool Game*, about the woollen industry in Geelong. The Mill Community Theatre supports a professional group of five theatre workers and the company is directed by James McCaughey, senior lecturer in Drama Studies at Deakin.

The company's work is community-oriented — Saturday morning classes are held for local children; a weekly group activity is run at the nearby spastic centre; programs have also been undertaken with unemployed kids and women at the Corio Leisure Time Centre.

But perhaps the most successful of the group's community activities is the regular Thursday Mill Night which brings some 70 people to The Mill for an evening of group theatre games and workshops interleaved with performances by the actors and visiting theatre companies.

In addition, the company stages a professional season each year — last year the group staged *Pere Ubu* and *Trojan Women*, and this year they have just completed a three week season of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* which played to packed houses. In order to mount this large production, the company joined forces with other actors in the community, including staff and students from Deakin and local schools to make a cast of 14 people taking the 60 parts in the play. The full-time actors made an initial exploration of

Triple-R theatre critic SUZANNE SPUNNER begins a new series on campus drama. Deakin University is first up and Melbourne University follows next month.



the text over a number of weekends, then the whole cast worked together throughout the May vacation.

The production evolved out of a series of experiments with space. Being a flexible theatre, with a two large performing areas and no fixed stage area, the Mill offers various possibilities for the relationship between actors and audience. The production was an innovative one, both in its exploration of theatre space and in its fresh and clear sighted interpretation of what is now an established part of the Brechtian canon.

Director, James McCaughey, says about the production: "The thing that is exciting us the most is how the play happens in this space. The Mill is located in two former rooms of the RS&S mill. These rooms are marvellous, but they are also very strong.

They assert what they were first made for, and so, to do any play in those spaces means that you have to come to terms with those spaces — you can't set up a little theatre in one corner. *The Chalk Circle* begins with the question of who possesses the valley after the war. To introduce the audience to this question, we ask them to question how they occupy the space".

McCaughey explains that this tussle would be cast in the form of a confrontation between pro- and anti-supermarket developers and related to a current issue of topical interest in Geelong, namely the proposed Target complex in the suburb of Morlane.

"We are setting up a frame that mediates between the audiences' lives and the strange things they are going to see on stage. It should be seen in the

light of game and also of taking very seriously the large gap that stands between most of the people in our society and the things that take place in our theatre under the name of plays."

In the production, the five scenes of the play and the prologue take place in three different spaces and the audience was shunted between these areas by the singers, Meredith Rogers, who in this production didn't actually sing but acted as a Master of Ceremonies cum street demonstration organiser.

The play was in marked contrast to the MTC production some years ago. This one was notable for its genuinely rough and bawdy humor and freedom from sentimental peasant stereotypes; it showed ordinary people as strong and touch minded as well as frail and vain.

This Grusha (Barbara Cisweska) was a truly proletarian character — there was nothing inately mother-earth about her, she took responsibility for the child because she was a fair and responsible person and the child could not defend itself.

Similarly, the part of the wily judge Azdark, whose story takes up the second half of the play, was taken as seriously as it was made entertaining. Unlike the earlier portrayal by Frank Thring who made Azdark into a Falstaffian buffoon, Tom Conside in a stunning performance bought out the Shakespearean fool element.

The production was a testimony to Brecht's own dictum: "You don't just see things in the theatre, you share an experience."

SUZANNE SPUNNER's *Out* on a Limb theatre program can be heard 7.30pm Tuesdays on Triple-R. She reviews and interviews on the alternative theatre front. On the first Tuesday of the month in the same timeslot, ROBIN PRENTICE presents *Stage Call*, a look at Mainstream theatre in Melbourne.

WAYS TO SHEAR A SHEEP

Community theatre at the mill

Regional and community theatre is taking many varied forms as it grows in quantity and importance. We look at the development of two very different regional theatre companies...

In the former Returned Soldiers and Sailors Woollen and Worsted Mill on the banks of the Barwon River in Geelong, community theatre has found an original home and style. The Mill, as it is affectionately known to local residents, now houses the Art and Design and Drama School of Deakin University, and a full time professional theatre company under the directorship of James McCaughey,



The Mill Company's *The Burning of Bentley's Hotel*. Photo: Ian Fox

Deakin's Senior Lecturer in Drama.

The Mill Community Theatre is a group of eight actors and community theatre workers who support a diverse range of theatre activities. The company's work is community oriented — Saturday morning classes for children, workshops for the handicapped, the aged, and unemployed kids; programmes for women at the Corio Leisure Centre, classes for drama teachers, drama workshops for HSC students and schools performances. In addition the company also gives shelter and support to a TIE team, The Woolly Jumpers.

But perhaps the most successful of the group's community activities are the regular Thursday Mill Nights which draw some seventy people to the Mill each week for an evening of participatory theatre games and workshops interleaved with performances and showings of work in progress by the Company, and performances by

visiting artists and companies.

Since The Mill Community Theatre opened in 1978, the Company has staged at least two professional seasons each year. These fall into two categories, plays of interest to the community; *Trojan Women*, *Ubu*, *The Tennis Play* by Company writer William Henderson, and various Brecht productions, *The Chalk Circle* and *The Exception and the Rule*; and plays created for the community from the history of Geelong.

It is this cycle of Geelong history plays which could be said to be the signature of the Company's unique and innovatory theatrical style. The first of these and their inaugural production was *The Wool Game*. It was a group devised, participatory documentary theatre piece based on the history of the Victorian Woollen and Cloth Manufacturing Company's Mill from 1865 till 1922, and was written from research by Phillip Gardner on the company's records.

Like many theatres created out of refurbished industrial sites the spatial quality and ambience of The Mill is very special. The conversion of the space into a theatre involved putting in lighting, heating and lining the ceiling, but there is no stage and only minimal flexible seating. The result is that the integrity of the space has been retained. For company director, James McCaughey, "It is important that when people come to the Mill they don't say 'This is a theatre'. Instead they'll say, 'Isn't this interesting, I wonder what will happen here'. This is an interesting space with a rich history. We want to respect that."

The Wool Game set the tone for future Mill productions. When the audience entered they were issued with tickets making them share-holders in the mill and they participated in an unruly meeting between the company's directors in Scotland over the decision to establish a woollen mill in

Geelong. Later they moved to the back space to inspect a weaving machine which had arrived on the docks and been found to be too big to fit into the new mill and then they joined company hands to save the mill when the banks of the Barwon burst in a freak flood. At interval they joined the workers in their annual picnic.

The Company's second production, *The Burning of Bentley's Hotel* was similarly devised, and was based on the relationship of Geelong to Ballarat during the goldrushes of the 1850s. It also marked the beginning of a fruitful co-operation between the Company and Weston Bate, Professor of Australian Studies at Deakin, as his book *Ballarat, The Lucky City* formed the basis of the research for the play which



Phillip Gardner and Ian Campbell in the Mill Co's Clyde Company Station.

covered the events leading up to the Eureka Stockade. In *The Burning of Bentley's Hotel* the audience was first outfitted with the necessary equipment and supplies for the journey to the goldfields by various enterprising purveyors in the foyer, and then taken by perilous bullock dray to the diggings located in the theatre. Once there some of them even discovered gold on the spot where they were sitting and later fought as vigorously as their fellow miners to evade the licence hunts.

The third production *The Clyde*

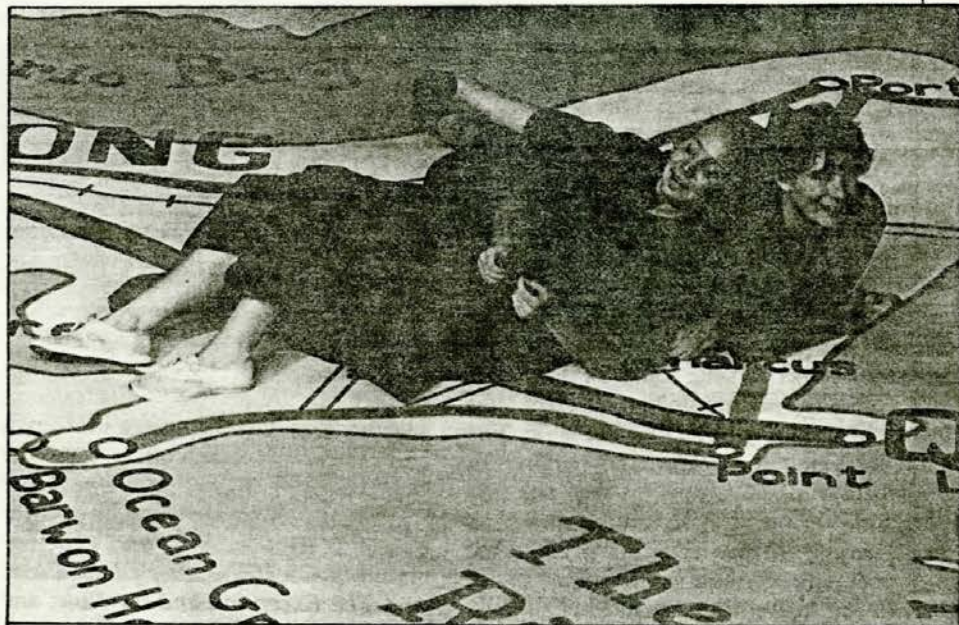
SPOTLIGHT

Company Station arose when Weston Bate drew the Company's attention to the voluminous records and papers of The Clyde Company, a Scottish-Tasmanian syndicate formed to take out a lease on land in the Moorabool Valley. By the time the audience entered and were seated on overflowing wool bales generously lent by local pastoralists, they had already viewed various active tableaux depicting aspects of the Clyde Company's decision to settle the district.

The Company's most recent production, staged in February this year, was a significant departure from its predecessors. It was the first of the cycle to be staged outside The Mill and in fact was the opening production of the Blakiston Theatre at the new Geelong Performing Arts Centre. Like its immediate predecessor it is based on The Clyde Company Papers but for the first time written by one writer. The Company commissioned *Ladies of Fortune* from Melbourne playwright Colin Ryan, author of *The Spalding Family Album*. His brief was to create a play from the diary of Miss Ann Drysdale, which was among the Clyde Company Press.

Miss Drysdale, together with her partner Miss Caroline Newcombe, took out a lease on a sheep run at Boronggoop in 1840. The diaries form the backbone of the play to which Ryan added imaginary incidents and characters; however a playwright would need to go far to find better characters than these redoubtable women. Miss Drysdale was going on fifty when she made the perilous journey from Scotland to the colonies where she faced the vicissitudes of heat, bushfires, blacks and scepticism of other settlers. Her partner Miss Newcomb was some twenty years younger and had already been to Australia for some time working as John Batman's governess in Tasmania. Their task and the trials they encountered were no different from those of other settlers; what makes them different and therefore dramatically interesting was the fact that they were single women in a world dominated by men.

Like the previous Mill productions the excitement lies as much in the inventive transformational style or direction as it does in the uniqueness of



Karen Paton and Meredith Rogers in the Mill Company's recent production, *Ladies of Fortune*.

the material. Using simple costumes and no set save a beautiful painted floorcloth depicting a map of the Geelong region, the ten actors and the composer Felix Maher create boldly a panoply of sound textures, from baaing sheep to crackling bushfires and a corresponding range of physical images from vast dinner tables to punting skiffs and horse drawn carriages. The result is a highly evocative form of theatre which challenges the imagination and sharpens the senses as each new event or scene is transformed before you into the next without the distractions of set and prop changes.

The structure of the play is simple and follows chronologically the lives of the women, however the addition of two parallel female characters, Mrs Lackland (Margaret Rickards) and her niece, Lucy (Rosalind Hill) provide high comic relief in their twittery femininity, to the staunch and dour Miss Drysdale and her Wesleyan partner. Between them the six men play some twenty male characters — seamen, squatters, miners, shepherds and doctors of medicine and religion. It is therefore not surprising that, with the exception of Paul Chapple's portrayal of the squatter, Mr Armstrong, the acting honours go to the four women and particularly to Meredith Rogers and Karen Paton in the leading roles. The scenes between them of comradely endeavour and

sisterly affection have a delicately observed and heroic quality. My only misgiving about the production was the ending — it seemed structurally and aesthetically dissatisfying that a play about two strong and interesting women should end with a weak and uninteresting man, particularly as the contrasts it alluded to had already been well canvassed in the body of the play.

**MILL
THEATRE
FORTHCOMING
PRODUCTION**

April 1 — 11 The Woman
Who Died For
Her Husband by
Euripedes and The
Bear by Chekhov

May 11 — 23 Don Quixote

August A new play
at the Mill