

Remedial Quantock and Dickins

THEATRE

SUZANNE SPUNNER

Whimsy or Hell on Blood Island: Foibles Theatre Restaurant. Two Fairly Imposing Comedies: Back Theatre, Pram Factory.

From the evidence of these two shows oral anxiety must be a source of profound inspiration for the comic imagination.

At Foibles Rod Quantock warms the audience up with the comment that the place has all the atmosphere of a dental appointment while at the Pram, Barry Dickins in the first of his very imposing comedies, *The Rotten Teeth Show* spends half his time in a dentist chair facing a maniac with a pair of bolt cutters reminding him: 'This is the Melbourne Dental Clinic, not Londonderry'. Both shows are a welcome reminder that comedy is still possible without sexism, prurience or nastiness, in fact that it is still possible to laugh ...

Quantock, Mary Keneally, Steve Blackburn and Geoff Brooks finally live up to the promise of their previous shows in a feast of mirth and concentrated brilliance.

Quantock begins with a refined version of his boy from Moreland monologue explaining how he became a comedian — his early successes at the inter-school idiot comps, where he came second to a boy from Scotch; coaching the assembled and befuddled diners in audience techniques, and coaxing the irascibles with such gems as 'I like your coat, a lot of vinyls must have died for it!'

Mary Keneally sings 'Falling in Love Again' and Geoff Brooks valiantly tries to explain Medibank while a group of nuns



Marilyn O'Donnell and Cleve Murray-Smith being imposing in a Barry Dickins farce at the Pram Factory.

terrorise the city in hotted up GTs — 'Headed down Bourke Street, flying like a comet, twenty Hare Krishnas landed on the bonnet — Come on flock, let's rock'.

The second half is World War Two goonery with Keneally doing Vera Lynne — 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkley Square' and 'The White Cliffs of Dover'. Brooks is an RAF

flying ace and Blackburn his faithful batman. Keneally metamorphosed into a lisping Red Cross nurse persuades the boys to take her on a mission — she thinks they should fly to Tahiti and the sun. They reply: No Germany and

the Hun. So they decide to compromise and bomb Queensland instead.

At The Pram, Barry Dickins' Very Imposing Comedies are just that ... In *Rotten Teeth* he turns what must have been a private nightmare into public hilarity. The licensed sadist with the wire cutters and grappling hook tells us that 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'.

Dickins is the only gummy writer he knows, sustaining life by dipping pieces of highly questionable wholemeal bread into Bonox.

In *Rotten Teeth*, Dickins is the perpetual victim whether in the dentist chair or the witness stand and Ross Dixon his

gleeful tormenter as dentist or lawyer. For those of us who at six monthly intervals subject ourselves to this, the most ritualistic form of willed self abuse — extraction and extortion, the show is a timely warning, for those that already know, an affirmation of well-founded anxiety.

The second of the imposing comedies has Marilyn O'Donnell and Cleve Murray-Smith as two decrepit sisters, Mag and Bag sharing their twilight years in a less than blissful arrangement. They trade devastating insults with each other — 'You lobotomised Mallee fowl — you Liberal — vying with each other to be the budgie for a day and swing at dizzying heights above the audience preening themselves.

They dream of cruises in far off places: 'Are you bored — need a break and can't afford Indonesia, then try Niddrie: it's as near to you as an Elizabeth Street tram'.

And equally I say to you, if the Blackforest cake in Acland Street has lost its piquancy and you've had your fill of Hungarofilm realism, then forget the Film Festival and try a remedial dose of Quantock and Dickins.

Loneliness of the long distance joker

LONELY LENNY LOWER

by Suzanne Spinner

Barry Dickins' best plays — *The Bridal Suite*, *Death of Minnie* and *Lonely Lenny Lower* — are about people joking and railing their way to death; they all take place on that last long night of the soul. The imminence of death is the device for the flash forward/back recollection of a life misspent — but they are no recollections in



Denis Moore as Lonely Lenny Lower.

tranquility. All are monodramas and one character left alone on the stage under a bare electric globe that finally sputters out, could well be the *leitmotif* of Dickins' work.

Seeing *Lonely Lenny Lower* as the final part of the trilogy of lost souls that began with Vera in *Bridal Suite* is to see a writer who has finally exorcised a demon of self-obsession. It is as if Vera and Minnie were rehearsals for the final act — the death of the joker, par excellence. For in Lenny Waldermar Lower, the Sydney journalist and humourist who made his name during the Depression working for the Packer conglomerate, Consolidated Press, Dickins has found an image of himself; the crucified comic, the professional jester, the man paid to make the people laugh and forget, the man who can't make himself laugh.

Vera and Minnie told their jokes and played their tricks for themselves — Lower's jokes are for us, but in the end there is no solace for the jokester.

Dickins' empathetic, almost symbiotic, relationship with Lower is the source of the play's great strengths and its weaknesses. While Dickins makes no pretence of objectivity about Lower, at another level he has made within it a remarkably objective

and scarifying self-portrait. However, the tension between the portrait and the self-portrait is not as fully and as stringently realised as it could have been had a director other than the author tackled the work. Certainly Dickins, an erratic director at the best of times, has never been more disciplined, but ultimately it's not enough. An outsider could have cut closer to the bone; Dickins aims for the heart and the play lurches into sentimentality. To an extent this tendency is reined in by Denis Moore's fine and fierce performance in a piece of virtuoso acting.

The design and direction was grounded in naturalism and although that surface was seen to fracture under pressure from the uglier realities in Lower's life, it tended to absorb the nicer side of Lower and wash over the audience. What was needed was a form and appearance, at once more resistant, and brittle; the contradictions of Lower's life and work should have crazed and broken the surface of the play. The bar Lower propped himself against was too cosy and too picturesque a backdrop. Ultimately that the play and Lenny Lower's life raises are too important to slide off us; they ought to grate and irritate. Some of the best moments in the play are the most extreme and surreal: Lower's macabre and brutal dance on the bar top with his crutches impotently stabbing the air.

Given the material, the direction needs to work rigorously against the sentiment — the audience needs to be constantly pulled up and made aware of the cost of our laughter. The play invites an abrupt cross-cut Brechtian style. The writing works by fractured dissociation, the story that never quite finishes, that breaks off as it gets closer to the pain; that starts again by deflection and camouflage, that tosses out jokes like a smoke screen. The narrative twists and turns like the Balinese coffin bearers who must never take a straight path to the cremation ground in case the evil spirits follow.

Dickins similarly holds out the possibility of us getting close to Lower, the man behind the quips and bizarre persona, but the truth lies in the twists and turns, the political contradictions, the personal failures, the booze, the illnesses and the ability despite all, to produce passable copy throughout his life. In fact if the play is seen as a requiem for Lower and a reinstatement of a folk hero ultimately what it does is show that Lower's most complete and richest self-expression was in the writing. Indeed seeing the play not only inspires you to read the work but demands that you do.

Lonely Lenny Lower by Barry Dickins. Playbox Theatre, Playbox Upstairs, Melbourne Vic. Opened February 10, 1982.
Director, Barry Dickins; Designer, Sandra Matlock; Lighting Design, Robert Gebert.
Cast: Lenny Lower, Dennis Moore.
(Professional)