

The female condition

DOODY FROM HERE TO MATERNITY MOTHBALLS

by Suzanne Spinner

Doody: The Stripper's Progress. Concept and entire

show devised by Doody. Produced by Doody and Paul Madigan. The Universal Theatre, Melbourne Vic. Opened April 23, 1981.

Costumes, Margaret Beverley and Jenny Bannister; Choreography, Jacqui Carroll, Margaret Lascia and Bob Thornycroft; Lighting, Derek Watkins. (Professional)

From Here to Maternity. Concept and entire show devised by Sue Ingleton. The Banana Lounge, The Comedy Cafe, Melbourne, Vic. Opened May 12, 1981. Cast: Bill Rawlings, the pregnant man. Sue Ingleton. (Professional)

Mothballs by Jack Hibberd, Independent Production, Universal Theatre, Melbourne, Vic. Opened May 28, 1981.

Director, Ros Horin; Designer, Trina Parker; Lighting, Paul Hampton; Stage Manager, Ruth Considine; "Ashley" made by Laurel Frank. Cast: Jocasta Vaudeville Smith, Evelyn Krape. (Professional)

While Melbourne can no longer boast a Women's Theatre Group, these three one-woman shows attest to the legacy of the original WTG in the style of performance, content and method of origination; in fact Sue Ingleton and Evelyn Krape worked with the WTG during the early seventies.

The Stripper's Progress and *From Here to Maternity* were devised by the performers and could be described as autobiographical theatre. However each performer had created a theatrical objective correlative which detached and commented upon their acutely vulnerable sexual states. In their own way both performances were courageous statements which transgressed theatrical conventions and social taboos.

In *The Stripper's Progress*, Doody used classic Brechtian alienation devices combined with elements of contemporary performance art to create a gutsy and challenging piece that was funny and deeply moving. *The Stripper's Progress* pivoted on the dislocation of context and expectation, the first shift meant that a mixed audience was watching a striptease artist in a theatre.

Each of the four dance sequences in the show culminated in a full strip and was punctuated by slides and a voice-over commentary by Doody describing and analysing the events, attitudes and intentions of the dances. The four dances she performed constituted a dialectical critique of her work over ten years beginning with the *Space Odyssey 2001/Zarathustra* inspired "The Cape 1970", subtitled "The Striptease"; it was followed by "The Mask 1977", "The Escape" which parodied conventional stripping. Her face and hair were masked and she dressed from head to foot in an elaborate costume with exposed her breasts, buttocks and vagina, thus the strip consisted in revealing the "unimportant parts" — the arms, legs and face.

The third piece, "The Scarf 1978" represented an escape into expressive movement and was inspired by her

admiration for the life and art of Isadora Duncan; subtitled "The Dance" it was pre-eminently her plea to be taken to seriously as a dancer. The show ended with "The Fan 1979" expressing the frustration and anger of being without a form and a space in which to do her work and be herself. The statement of the final piece articulated the double edge of the show's subtitle, "A Parade to No Man's Land".

Sue Ingleton's *From Here To Maternity* used the comic device of role reversal to distance the visceral reality of her pregnancy and in so doing that supremely individual experience was universalised and made accessible to an audience. Like *The Stripper's Progress*, *From Here to Maternity* also relied on dislocation — the shock of seeing a pregnant woman performing in a theatre would have been enough, let alone performing before a late night boozy cabaret audience. Ingleton's alter-ego Bill Rawlings, was an average to sexist, working class bloke who finds himself pregnant. He then took us through a series of funny things that happened to him on the way to his first internal examination by a female gynecologist and his encounters with that unflappable organisation, The Nursing Mother's Association.

Indeed the redoubtable Bill, looking like a benevolent Oliver Hardy, conducts a Cook's tour of the rites de passage of maternity and even enlists an audience member to assist at a simulated Le Boyer birth (his brother was that French movie actor with the soothing voice!). Ingleton's performance was a superb, comic, Chaplinesque tour de force and reached its apogee in the consumption of an apparently inedible concoction of Sara Lee raspberry shortcake topped with cream and green gherkins.

From Here To Maternity was a brilliantly executed piece that delivered its feminist salvos as carefully aimed custard pies.

At first Jack Hibberd's *Mothballs* seems to create a similar dislocation in the figure of Jocasta Vaudeville Smith, a woman who desecrates both the coffin and the memory of her dead husband, Ashley, through her spirited refusal to behave in the manner fitting.

Mothballs is described as a comic panegyric and the woman's name is intended to connote three types of women and three corresponding theatrical styles of mourning — Greek tragic, vaudevillean and Austral ordinary. Certainly we receive a liberal dose of the latter two, but ultimately those forms overwhelm the play in a welter of vulgar and increasingly obvious jokes so that the possibility of Jocasta expressing any real grief or pain let alone of Grecian dimensions is cancelled. For the first fifteen minutes her furious

patter of associative, alliterative jokes on jokes was quite funny and Evelyn Krape's performance under Ros Horin's direction was subtle and suggested that deeper and perhaps more desperate things were being held at bay the comedy.

However from the moment she opened the coffin and leapt in for a final necrophilial consummation any potential for the glimpse of a tragic underside was gone, the monologue lost impetus and direction and became wordy and predictable. Obviously it could still have been an excursion into pure absurdism but unfortunately it simply did not have enough ideas underpinning it. We were left with a sense of verbal french polishing and no furniture beneath.

Krape's performance similarly deteriorated into the gestures and mannerisms she has used in other plays — particularly her memorable portrayal of Hibberd's Melba. It felt as if both the writer and the performer were not stretching themselves, nor venturing into new areas but relying on the successful formulae of their past.