

# Revealing us to ourselves

## AUSTRALIA MAJESTIC

by Suzanne Spinner

*Australia Majestic* by Roger Pulvers. Hoopla, Playbox Upstairs, Melbourne, Vic. Opened February 28, 1980. Director, Malcolm Robertson; costume and design, Steve Nolan; choreography, Wendy Robertson; stage management, Tessie Hill.

The doctor, Jacqueline Kelleher; Klaus, Robin Cuming, Herman John Arnold, Bill, Gene Van Dam; Rick Frank, William Gluth.  
(Professional)

Questions of war, exile and national identity are never far below the surface of Roger Pulvers' work, perhaps because for this American born Australian playwright they have constituted the problematic in his own life. In his most recent play *Australia Majestic* the setting is the Second World War and a hotel in Victoria which has been transformed into a US army hospital.

When he chooses to, Pulvers can write naturalistically with great felicity, however this ability is an artful guise and must be closely watched for naturalism is rarely his intended effect. Thus in *Australia Majestic*, the confrontation between the two American soldiers, the Australian orderly and the German internee couple, while it has considerable ramifications in terms of the individual characters and their motivations, it is ultimately a confrontation between national types and ideologies. However it is precisely because we believe in the clashes at a personal level, that we accept and understand the symbolic transformations.

The transition from the particular to the general works best when the individual sinews are strongest. Thus Herman the Australian orderly and Klaus, the German, because they are so finely drawn as individuals are most able to bear the weight of the generalisations they ultimately embody; whereas the Americans and the German doctor were shadowy as individuals because they were overdetermined at the outset and tended therefore to dissolve under the same weight of generalisation.

This problem was exacerbated because John Arnold as Herman and Robin Cuming as Klaus gave the clearest and most subtle performances, but equally it was not simply a matter of the increasingly less comfortable performances by William Gluth, Gene Van Dam and Jacqueline Kelleher - they were only registering and compounding the confusion of the writing. The director, Malcolm Robertson was

faced with the task of restraining Gluth's and Kelleher's performances so that the play was not swamped with significance too soon, but the tension that resulted disrupted the surface and cut against our ability to comprehend and attend to the other level at the centre of the work.

By comparison John Arnold's performance was stunningly understated; as Herman he was laconic and naively impressionable to the point of convincing us that natural innocence and a certain sort of stupidity went hand in hand. In the second half when he returns from the little war-time action that he has seen, we realise just how malleable and culpable his ignorance was, and in the final stages of the play we see him transformed from embryonic fascist to fascist in embryo and just beginning to assert his new found and dangerous selfhood. The transformation from the local dope to the incipient demagogue is so terrifying, because we feel we have colluded in the endorsement of his earlier Austral innocence. Equally important is the realisation that the

Americans cannot be blamed as the corruptors of our youth; they were merely the catalysts of the change.

A further problem for me arose out of the staging; the Upstairs Playbox space was too small and claustrophobic, it cramped the largeness of the issues and made more obvious and disturbing the discomfort of Gluth and Kelleher's performances. On a larger stage and played in the round the short fragmented scenes and the constant exits and entrances could have been effected more smoothly because the action would have been freed from what in this production was, conventionally naturalistic staging.

Comparing *Australia Majestic* to Romeril's *Dudders* which also dealt with the wartime domestic invasion of Australia by American servicemen, Pulvers makes it abundantly clear that the issue is a lot more complex than silk stockings and chewing gum. Perhaps because he has a less vested interest in believing in our innocence Pulvers is able to reveal us to ourselves most sharply.



John Arnold as Herman in Hoopla's *Australia Majestic* Photo: Jeff Busby