

Sept/Oct. 1988

THE STATES

about the experiences of women and families during and after Cyclone Tracy. In 1987 they staged a season of three short plays by British and Australian writers and for the first time worked with a director, from outside the group.

Their 1988 production has been *Masterpieces* by British feminist and playwright Sara Daniels, directed by Tess Pauling who is well known for her work here as a performer with the Darwin Theatre Group; but *Masterpieces* marked her debut as a director.

Sara Daniels' controversial play was first staged in Manchester and London in 1983. The play examines the relationship between pornography (hard and soft core) and sexual aggression (from mere misogyny to outright violence). Daniels wrote the play as an outraged response to the release of the first Snuff movies in England. These movies originated in America in the mid 1970s and in them, the actors, usually female are mutilated and murdered in front of the camera as the climax of the 'action'!

WOW's interest in staging this very British play in Darwin in 1988 was a similarly outraged response to local circumstances. Unlike most other Australian states, in the Northern Territory the distribution and sale of pornographic material is virtually unrestricted and Prawn and Porn Shows are a feature of local life. Earlier this year an episode of *Woman Today* - a weekly five-minute program on commercial television produced by Darwin women and focusing on women's issues - was prevented from even being filmed by order of the Chief Minister's Department because it proposed to ask the strippers how they felt about their work and the men that watch them.

Media and police attitudes to a recent spate of rapes in Darwin by a rapist dubbed Mr Stinky have also outraged feminists and the public alike because of the extraordinary terms in which the man has been described. Police leading the investigation have been reported (without comment) as saying, "He's not violent. He talks to his victims...Essentially he is a housebreaker...We believe this man intended to rob the flat and discovered the woman and ergo he raped her, she was there afterall, in her own bed, asleep and clearly asking for it..."

Amidst this climate, *Masterpieces* was the correct vehicle for hitting home some hard truths. The play explicitly confronts the issues in its examination of the thin line between the men that do and the men that have not yet, committed crimes against women. The play's milieu is the comfortable plausible middle-class, teachers and social workers, small businessmen, people who have dinner parties where the men tell misogynist jokes and the women pretend not to hear or laugh uncomfortably. Until one day one of the compliant wives turns and attacks.

The play is all about the way the soft edges become hardened and a nice middle-class woman becomes politicised and commits "an unprovoked random act of violence against an innocent man".

The bare stage was dominated by a

large monotone jigsaw painting of Goya-like reclining nude. At the opening scene all the relevant erogenous parts were missing but the play progressed the pieces were inserted, the picture filled in. In the foreground simple white paint modern furniture and plausible ordinary people.

Tess Pauling's direction like Judy Swift's set was clear, focused and uncluttered, no monsters and viragos. We were invited to observe a chain of events, an unravelling of inevitable action: an uninflected repetition of the circumstances and motives leading to the crime, which we were judge as jury and without the intervention of a persuasive barrister.

Pauling coped with the generosities and the long monologues. Daniels gives the characters by leaving them simple, stark and unrelieved in full light.

Among the cast of six, Aqua Robins, Kay Brown and Jon Tippett stood out. Robins' performance as Yvonne - a teacher terrorised by the women's hating attitudes of the boys in her class who read girlie magazines under their desks; and also Hilary, a single mother working, on the game was a fine delineated portrait of the two sides of the coin. Funny, tough, generous and beautifully observed, she moved effortlessly and pointedly between the two characters and the only adhesions that linked the characters were clearly intended by the director.

Kay Brown's performance as the positively mad and menopausal Jennifer was a tour-de-force of bitter true comic acting, and a necessary foil to the male pomposity that surrounded her. Jon Tippett's Trevor, the aimless husband of the difficult woman (called) was a subtle study in underplaying.

The play culminated in the murder of an unknown man on a railway station and for this Pauling used the narrow upper balcony of the theatre and some sharp, stark lighting changes to maximum dramatic effect with minimal means.

In *Masterpieces* the unambiguous imparting of the message is all; and the production did that, leaving the audience open-mouthed and wide with horror at the final monologue describing the snuff movie.

My only misgivings lie with the play itself. It is at times too wordy and over-explanatory; and I believe the enterprise of translating the English setting to Australia was only a partial success - as it is with so many British plays. Why? Because class was a primary subtext and the apparent Australian equivalents don't quite match the depth and intensity of English social demarcations.

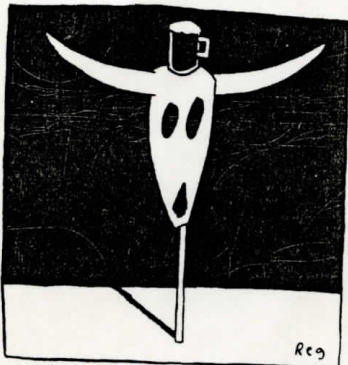
Suzanne Spunner

Masterpieces by Sara Daniels

Director: Tessa Pauling
Designer: Jude Swift
Costumes: Christine Baxter
Lighting: Tom Lewis

Cast: Alacoque McMenamin, Aqua Robins, Kay Brown, Jon Tippett, Matthew Keeley, Alistair Wyvill

Venue: Browns Mart Theatre
Dates: 17 June - 25 June



NORTHERN TERRITORY

Masterpieces

Wow

WOW, the Darwin based women's Theatre Group was formed in 1985, and every year since they have staged a major production. WOW is an amateur, community-based company committed to developing women's theatre skills and to tackling feminist issues in their work.

Their first two productions were group-devised cabaret shows. In 1986 they worked with playwright Doreen Clarke and created, *An Ill Wind*, a play