

Australiana revalued

Louisa
Back Theatre
Pram Factory. 8.30pm
until May 19.

Last year students at Footscray Institute devised a show about the life and times of Louisa Lawson, Henry Lawson's mother.

Farley Kelly, who is working on a biography of Louisa Lawson, provided the historical data and Dindy Vaughan Mc-Conchie wrote the music and the show was called 'Louisa' or 'the hardest business man I ever met/the bastard from the bush's mother'.

Since then Louisa has been performed in schools and community centres and has just begun a short season in the Back Theatre at the Pram Factory.

In the hour long show we see Louisa Lawson, nee Albury, from her girlhood serving in her father's store on the NSW goldfields and dreaming of a singing career, her marriage to the shy diffident miner, Peter Larsen; her championing of female suffrage through the 'Dawn' the weekly paper she started, until her death in 1920 in the Gladesville Asylum.

With the aid of music and slides her story is told in a series of short scenes

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intercut with the image of Louisa old and alone in virtual banishment bitterly commenting on her earlier life.

Strong, brave and hard as nails, Louisa's life was nevertheless dominated by patriarchal values incarnated first in her father and later her husband and finally and ironically by the galling success of her wayward, talented son.

She was constantly on the attack fighting the male values of her society and constantly being pushed to the outer and her final days are a vindication of her supposed, but in fact quite justified, paranoia.

The strengths of "Louisa" are in the middle and later scenes: in the offices of the 'Dawn' - published, printed, written and edited by and for women and in the fight for women's suffrage.

The core of the play is the image of old Louisa - her final intelligible ravings, while Henry weaves drunkenly in and out of these scenes, acidly commenting on 'The Chieftiness'.

My only regret about the show is its brevity; what it tells us about this

remarkable, persecuted women tantalises the appetite for a deeper understanding of the personal forces which drove her and the not inconsiderable

social forces which defeated her.

Perhaps if we could understand more of why the enlightening reign of the 'Dawn' ended with her

demise we would have a better insight into the waning of early feminism.

A professional cast could have sharpened the images more but it would be hard to match the energy and commitment of this group.



May Week at The Pram
(Up until May 6)

By Saturday night and after attending only four of the six evenings I was stonkered — it was marathon culture second only to the film festival.

The opportunity to see so much was stimulating to the point of saturation, but the tight programming precluded reflection and participation. The idea of rehearsed readings is a good one, however it would have been better if discussions with the director and cast had followed the readings, such discussion could have focussed on the content and the possible modes of realisation of the works.

This would have opened up and politicised the whole theatre process and been more in keeping with the presumed intentions of the week.

Perhaps some such discussions happened at the seminar on Saturday afternoon on art and politics * I don't know, as I was unable to attend it — but even so that was too late after the event, spontaneous responses at the time could have generated a genuine engagement.

This would have been a legitimate enterprise and would have crossed the credibility gap that many people felt.



Julie Dawson as old Louisa Lawson at Gladesville Mental Asylum in 1922.

In TMT of 10/5/78 we inadvertently re-ran Suzanne Spinner's review of *The Perfect Strangers/ The Christian Brothers*. We apologise to folks at the Playbox and Hoopla — not to mention Ms Spinner — for any pain caused.

This week we look at the Pram's Workshop on Art and Politics which ran as May Week (May 1-6) and the current *Louisa* — a play about Henry Lawson's mum.

Had it not been for the loony Saturday night side-show we might easily have come away thinking that art and politics equalled unremitting bleakness and self-laceration.

Of the readings I saw, Brecht's *Days Of The Commune* with a cast even after pruning of some twenty five people had a raw vitality and excitement often lacking in more polished productions, that would repay the effort of further performances in a similar rough vein. Whereas Trevor Griffiths superb encounter between Antonio Gramsci and a Russian party cadre, *Occupations* deserves a full scale illusionist theatrical production to fully bring out the class and personal/political tensions of the plot.

Phil Motherwell's *Dreamers of The Absolute* needs a lot more work in the area of plot and clarification of intentions if it is to become a riveting piece of theatre, at the moment it is hamstrung by a bourgeois naturalistic form which it handles ineptly.

I shall save my comments on the Fassbinder play *Pre-Paradise Sorry Now*, except to say that it raises the question of how do you show fascism - as a member of the audience or cast - without falling prey to it?

Some of the highlights of Saturday night were Bob Daly's one man show with a wry vengeance, the intense poetry performances of Phi (?) in particular his Fitzroy poems, Eric Beach's spare attentive craftings which must work as well on the page as in

performance and Barry McDonald's portraits of young punks and delinquents.

The evening ended thankfully on a note of anarchic hilarity with *The IUD Show* or the ideologically unsound, deviationist show in which a well-known IUD narrowly escaped death from falling scenery, but averting real drama the show went bravely on.

Understanding Henry Lawson

THE BASTARD FROM THE BUSH AND OTHER HEROES: MTC, Russell St.

Henry Lawson is currently in the throes of a revival in which both the work and the man are being examined in two one person shows.

Len Teale's *While The Billy Boils* finished at Grant Street at almost the same time as Robin Ramsay's *The Bastard From the Bush* began at Russell Street.

Teale's production was clearly the result of thorough research and careful thought. Teale had both a rationale and a reason for presenting Lawson which enabled his focus to be clear and pointed. Teale set out to be Lawson himself giving a public performance of his



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work at a particular time in his life.

His knowledge of Lawson is so certain that he could propose a possible week in Lawson's life when such a thing was feasible. Having established a place, a time and a reason he selected his material to be both entertaining and advance an understanding of Lawson's life.

By contrast, Robin Ramsay and Rodney Fisher's production flounders without focus, reason, time, place or protagonist. Robin Ram-

say endeavours none too successfully to be both Henry Lawson and every character he wrote about.

This works well so long as the author's viewpoint and his characters' are unambiguously aligned but in stories where the persona is split you have to take sides and choose the particular character at the expense of Lawson and vice versa.

This means that the things that work in *The Bastard from the Bush* do so in an isolated and fragmented way. Ramsay is at his best telling the story of the charitable shearer, the Giraffe or of the selector's wife, Mrs Spicer, in 'Past Carin' and 'Water Them Geraniums'.

But the main fault with *The Bastard from the Bush* 'Water Them Geraniums'. socio-political realities of

Lawson's life and leaves him as an entertaining story teller rather than as that brand of Australian nationalist which abounded from the 1890s and combined socialism, republicanism, anti-imperialism, racism and chauvinism.

In the entire evening at Russell Street the only political reference was to Eureka in 'His Father's Mate' and that was an event Lawson hadn't experienced but only wrote about second hand with conscious nostalgia.

There was no sense of the grinding poverty that led him to Sydney into militant polemical writing nor any allusion to his concern for his fellows.

In all it was an emasculated and uncontroversial Lawson that Ramsay presented.