Theatre Review:

Who's Afraid of the Working Class?—the Melbourne Workers Theatre

Stories from behind the statistics

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The Melbourne Workers Theatre's award-winning production— *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?*—recently played at the Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney. The play was first performed at the Victorian Trades Hall Council in May 1998. Founded in 1987, Melbourne Workers Theatre performs original plays dealing with the life and times of working people.

Who's Afraid of the Working Class?, which consists of four separate but interweaving stories— *Suit* written by Christos Tsiolkas , *Money* by Patricia Cornelius , *Dreamtown* by Melissa Reeves and *Trash* by Andrew Bovell—is a professional and at times profoundly moving portrait of working class life in Australia in the 1990s.

The first half of the play is dark and bleak; the second provides some glimpses of the human spirit. The play's characters, who often speak directly to the audience, are sometimes cruel and destructive, deeply bitter about the situation they face; at other moments, kind and tender with a deep sense of humanity, even in the most alienated of situations.

Suit comprises four vignettes and begins with a monologue by Daniel, an unemployed youth from the Melbourne working class suburb of Dandenong. In an angry and confrontational dialogue, Daniel lashes out at his father for having taken him to a protest rally against the Liberal government, in the state of Victoria. Daniel tells the audience how he loves and even has sexual fantasies about Jeff Kennett, the state premier and Liberal Party leader responsible for the impoverishment of Daniel's family and tens of thousands of others throughout Victoria.

The rest of *Suit* is about a young Aboriginal salesman who debases and abuses a white prostitute, only to be similarly demeaned by one of his own customers. He is adrift, unable to relate to his Aboriginal culture and traditions and struggling to hold onto his job.

Money is the story of a family breakup. The father is out of work, the son is a thief, and the mother is secretly nursing a dying man for extra cash. When the money to pay the mortgage goes missing, they clash, each blaming the other for their problems. At war with each other, they lead separate lives with little hope of any resolution or reconciliation.

Dreamtown is about two migrant girls from the Melbourne suburb of Coburg who try shoplifting disguised as wealthy private school students. Apprehended, the comedy of the situation turns tragic when they are hauled before the police and accused of a far more serious offence.

Trash is a tale of two children—Tracey, who is mentally retarded, and Orton—who have run away from home. Sharing the same mother but different fathers, the children have been abused all their lives and are desperately searching for love and affection. The solace they eventually find together is not enough to protect them from the final tragedy. Reduced to sleeping in a charity clothing bin, the candle they use for warmth and light causes a fire and they are burnt to death. Their mother's bitter and remorseful monologue, filled with her love for the children, was one of the more extraordinary moments in the play and a powerful indictment of a system that produces such tragedies. In a symbolic final act of protection, she refuses to allow the authorities to separate the children's bodies for burial.

My response to *Who's Afraid of the Working Class* was mixed. The play is interesting, compassionate and at times

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very compelling. It presents an accurate picture of the brutal reality confronting the most socially oppressed and marginalised sections of the working class: characters that move the audience, situations readily understood and identified with.

The direction is confident and the action carefully paced so that the audience is drawn into the play. The acting was of a high standard—clean and unpretentious—with the blunt language accurately expressing the feelings and emotions of those whose lives have been reduced to a constant daily struggle for survival.

These strengths, however, should not be allowed to obscure some of the play's weaknesses. While the authors examine the decline in the political and social consciousness of the working class, they rarely get beyond a description of symptoms, with the characters generally portrayed as powerless or passive victims.

The play occasionally uses radio news reports of union struggles, picket line clashes or unemployment figures as a device to provide context. These broadcasts fail to move, or produce any comment from the characters.

The program notes declare that the play's characters "don't struggle politically, heroically, or resistively, but badly, personally and in anguish". This raises an interesting contradiction. Having created these individuals, the authors appear frustrated that the characters regard trade union struggles or picket lines as futile. To the extent that they do not explore or examine this question, the audience is left with an unfinished, even one-sided picture. The characters, although able to move the audience, are incomplete and at times appear caricatured, or slightly unreal.

According to the program notes, the growing number of socially alienated and oppressed people is connected to the decline in membership of the trade unions. The notes state: "The characters in *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?* would not have been recognised as Australians ten years ago—but today they are too readily recognised as representing a growing number of our society, those who have been abandoned by unionism, or those who have abandoned it, at their own cost."

It is not clear whether the play's authors, or those involved in Melbourne Workers Theatre, have thought very deeply about this statement, which implies that if workers remained in the trade unions they would be more politically conscious and have fewer social problems. "Yes, we know the unions have betrayed workers struggles, but the workers are their own enemies because they won't get involved," is the constant refrain of the union leadership and those who believe that the trade unions offer the only framework of struggle. The real truth is that workers have left the unions precisely because these organisations have proven themselves incapable of defending the basic needs and social rights of working people. This is not investigated on any level within the play.

The artistic success or failure of *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?* is obviously not determined by whether it includes political exposures or an alternative program, but whether the play transcends common truths to explore reality on a deeper level.

The interplay of political ideas and artistic presentation is always difficult, and requires a great degree of creative investigation. It is evident, however, that Melbourne Workers Theatre's long association with the trade union bureaucracy has had a limiting effect. Definite boundaries inherent to this relationship, whether visible or not to those involved in the production, are restricting the production of more profound and psychologically engaging artistic work.

The strength of *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?* is that it has provided a picture and voice to the most isolated and oppressed in society. Its weaknesses are bound up with a failure to go beyond the more obvious surface depictions of its characters. The question now is, where will the company and the writers go from here? Will they simply repeat themselves, replicating the same harsh realities or will they begin exploring more complex social and psychological questions and thereby provide their audiences with a more complete and artistically satisfying picture? If they continue in the same vein of *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?*, then what was dynamic about this performance will become stale, as they increasingly lose hope and become trapped in their own weariness.

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