

New wigs on the block

THE Priscilla Bandwagon has departed leaving a sad trail of sequins and glitter across the suburbs, but on Friday nights at around midnight the future of drag theatre can be glimpsed in Melbourne's South Yarra. New Wigs On The Block is a drag show with a difference. A madcap camp extravaganza that leaves the audience with no escape to comfortable assumptions about life, death, celebrity and sex. The New Wigs show throws out a challenge to dabblers in multimedia and flies in the face of good taste and politically correct culture with outrageous comedy sketches that mock all our sacred cows.

The inventor of all this madness - actor, director, writer, and producer - is Skye Brooks. Skye studied acting for a while with Sydney's Actor's Centre and Ensemble Theatre before moving to Melbourne and finding a receptive audience for his own style of inventive and irreverent theatre. In a sense the Marshall McLuhan adage that the medium is the message is at last finding a home at 3 Faces nightclub in Melbourne. The confining stage, and the fusion of audience and actors turns the usual concept of performance art in upon itself and the nightclub surrounds and audience become as much a part of the New Wigs theatrical experience, as any of the spectacle that is created on stage. Because of the nature of the 3 Faces nightclub, with its openly gay and lesbian patrons, it's not unusual to find more elaborate costumes, more frenetic dancing or more studied "attitude" in the audience than on the stage. Pressed into this crowd of style makers and urban legends, with the onslaught of the New Wigs overture, and the visual avalanche of Skye Brooks' opening video collage, the eye is easily led from image to image, melding audience and performers into a single cultural statement. After the show, after the explosion of light, colour and image from the stage performance has set a new mood in the crowd - the excitement steps up a notch or two, and the inherent posturing and role playing within the social setting of the nightclub is given new validity and a wry sense of self-deprecating humour.

New Wigs On The Block is a completely enveloping experience. The shows combine slapstick comedy set against sophisticated dialogue pillaged from hundreds of cultural references. Carefully rehearsed techno dance routines explode under whirling and spinning light shows,

and drop down video screens form a backdrop of tightly edited video footage. The first thing you notice as show time draws near is the empty space that has been created by the imposing security staff who clear the dance floor of dedicated dancing clubbers. After the rhythm and excitement of the clubland dance ritual, the empty dance floor forms a vacuum which the audience quickly fills with expectation. A video screen drops from the ceiling and a stage is born. The audience surrounds the performance space, defining its boundaries and pressing forward as if trying to claim more of the stage as its own. A thundering overture begins and a video montage of horror film footage announces the arrival of the New Wigs performers; Skye Brooks, Michelle Tozer, Loco Minx and Caresse. Strutting onto stage and dancing confidently, the "Bad Girls" of the opening song mesmerise the audience with popular images of society's strong but "bad" women, such as the Sharon Stone character from the film "Basic Instinct". Kathy Bates from "Misery" turns into Lindy Chamberlain from "Evil Angels" and you find yourself on a rollercoaster ride of video images and characterisations designed with visual impact and shock value to the forefront.

This is culture jamming with the best of them. If you blink you will miss any one of a hundred cult references to concept and images that have shaped popular culture. The multilayered soundtrack projects more subliminal influences upon the audience and the message is very clear. Our ideas of fashion and role play are being decided more and more by the avalanche of images and role models placed before us by television advertising, soap operas and the Hollywood machine.

The strength of Skye Brooks and the New Wigs performers is that they project a fan's appreciation of the archetypes they mimic, while still being able to suggest a subtle irony in their portrayals. The performers seem aware that so many of their characters have been transposed and transformed by the media to suit new cultural projections. Just as the war-damaged and socially inadequate John Rambo in David Morel's book "First Blood" was transformed into Sylvester Stallone's "Rambo" by a Nixon-Reagan Hollywood, so our modern pop icons are being re-invented constantly to suit our retrospective imaginations. The New

Wigs performances remind us, often uncomfortably, that we ignore the cruelty and pathos of the human condition when we worship and project our newest celebrities and idols as role models to follow.

To describe this multimedia extravaganza as just another drag show is to miss the point completely. Marjorie Garber in her book "Vested Interests" describes the cross-dresser as the standard bearer for culture. The construction of sexual appearance and the role of the symbolic in destroying stifling realities is no more apparent than with New Wigs on the Block. The homage paid to the goddesses of the silver screen is underplayed with an ironic mocking of the culture that places such frail beings in such larger than life roles. To see the New Wigs plaintive Marilyn Monroe tribute set against the Elton John song "Candle in the Wind" places the cannibalistic nature of nineties fashion and idolatry in true perspective.

There is an element of the theatre of the absurd in these shows with their frightening parodies of Hollywood icons and the sometimes audience alienating actions of the stage characters. Joan Crawford's abuse of her daughter Christina was heightened to a point that ridiculed the final legacy of the "Mommie Dearest" film. Skye Brooks seems to instinctively appreciate the black humour of one of the great stars of Hollywood being torn down by the system that invented her. Set against jump cut video footage of Faye Dunaway's wild eyed portrayal of Joan Crawford striking Christina in an endless video loop of blows, the actors on stage mimic Dunaway's performance with perfect timing. The sketch goes on a little too long for audience comfort, but is finely designed to leave lingering questions about a medium that consumes its own.

The New Wigs show doesn't hesitate in poking fun at the reverence with which society approaches social issues such as feminism, parenthood, gender roles and child abuse. Whether its a strip teasing science fiction Barbarella being lowered from the 3 Faces ceiling, or a sweetly innocent Mary Poppins throwing Mrs Doubtfire off stage to the sounds of "I Am Woman", New Wigs On The Block is shaking the foundations of drag theatre. Priscilla, the bus has left, and the rocket has arrived.

John Mathews