

THE ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Two women artists inspire a play of contagious joy

THEATRE

Not Still Lives
By Suzanne Spinner
Home Cooking Theatre Company from Melbourne
Downstairs Nimrod Theatre
October 12, 13 and 14
Directed and designed by Barbara Ciszewska
Margaret Preston... Meredith Rogers
Thea Proctor... Andrea Lemon

By **BERWYN LEWIS**

"I WASN'T interested in female heroines who are martyred or neurotic. Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor went on with their work and their lives, in no sense were they victims," said playwright and theatre critic, Suzanne Spinner, about her play.

The two artists, Preston and Proctor, are credited with being the most powerful forces in introducing modernism to Australia. This play focuses on their most prolific years, 1920 to 1930, when they produced paintings and woodcuts.

This production approaches their work with a light-hearted non-chalance, a self-assured breeziness and a contagious joy. Sometimes

Meredith Rogers (Margaret Preston) and Andrea Lemon (Thea Proctor) are human squeegees, or clay modelling wheels, they tap-dance, skip, tango, yoga and waltz through art facts of life and aphorisms. It is inspiring, engaging and encouraging because it speaks to all artists, especially women.

The two performers' agility and energy is applied to all aspects of their creativity and the two characters' typing, tape measuring, pacing, scribbling, throwing open the door of the theatre and shouting their frustration. They tip the scales in favour of the pure genius and courage of women gambling with their creativity. They sustain each other's optimism despite setbacks such as when Proctor's art education is cut short for her brother's and when she is called "hussy" because she sits too close to nude models in class.

Rubber gloves, collapsible clothes hanging contraptions, pegs and sheets of plastic are deployed as expressions of their work. They mutter and exclaim at encrustations of clothes pegs which represent eucalypt branches or definitive statements on the correlations between mathematics, music and colour.

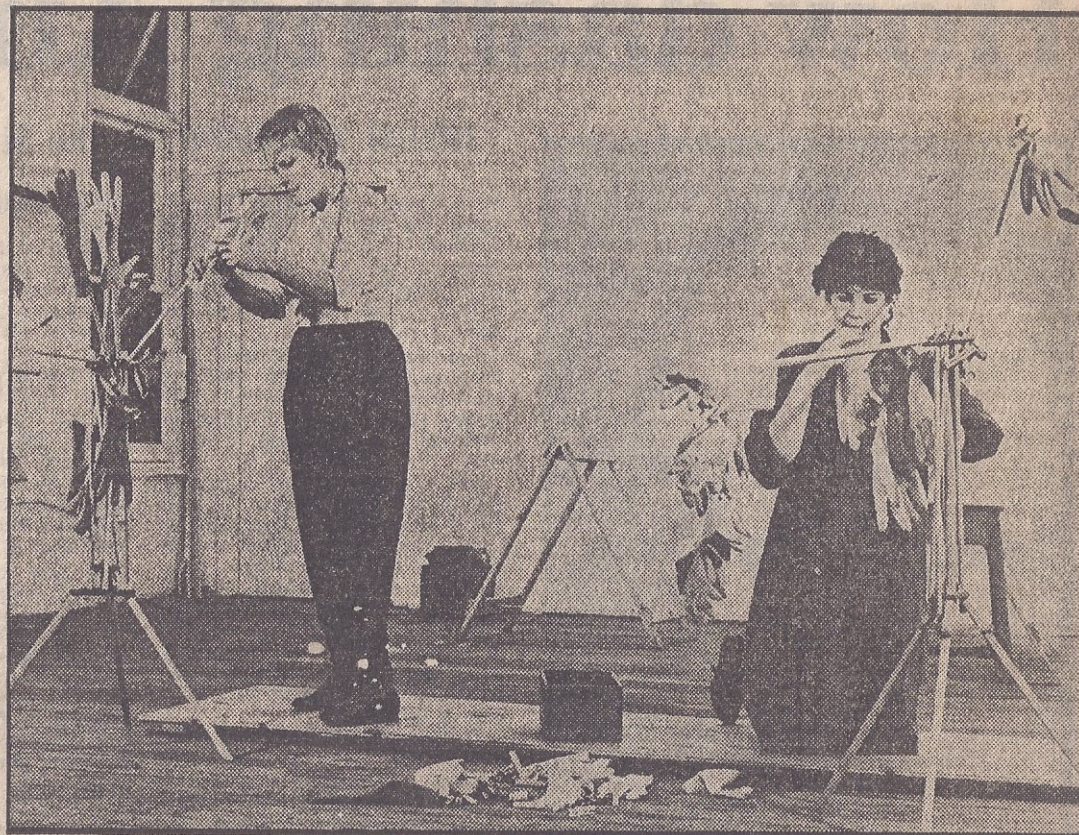
This play is beautifully laced with rich language, subtle wit and wry

observations on husbands, children, independence, beauty, talent, love and friendship. The women share secrets which are usually withheld from or censored out of women's art dialogue and this is what makes this play a jewel in The Women and Arts Festival offerings.

With its images of Sydney's "Meccano set bridge," "turretted houses in Mosman" and art openings attended by George Street bohemians and north shore matrons it kindles a connection between women of the past and present. Over tea and cakes, Preston and Proctor discuss colour and texture in food and relate it to their work. This is followed by a hilarious video token cooking show when a bizarre Preston confronts a late 20th century food blender and reduces its contents to non-descript sludge. Art or gastronomic statement?

The play has its dark side. It portrays the artist in defence, a warrior sheltering behind her palette shield. With superb choreography it suggests interesting mother/daughter bonds and severances and it traces the matriliney of beauty, talent and the intelligent feminine soul.

An excellent, explorative and strangely moving theatre piece.



Andrea Lemon (left) as Thea Proctor and Meredith Rogers as Margaret Preston in *Not Still Lives*, on at Nimrod Downstairs theatre.