

Catching up with Shakespeare

Is there such a thing as a female play, a female way of writing? During rehearsals for a season of plays by and about Australian women, **BERWYN LEWIS** asks the cast and directors: what's the difference?

IF SHAKESPEARE, or Aristotle, had been a woman would drama be an equally satisfying experience? Would plays have been more about conflict resolution rather than conflict, would stages be littered with baby toys and washing powder, instead of swords and blood capsules?

No-one knows because women's plays historically have not had a fair run, and those that do often lack the benefit of professional productions and a showcase.

Belvoir Street Theatre redresses the situation a little with a season of new plays, *Three Stories High*, written and directed by Australian women: *Julia's Song* by Jennifer Compton, *Koori Love* by Cathy Craigie and *Painted Woman* by Sue Woolfe.

Three Stories High is a convergence of major talents and cross-genre experience: for example, there is the award-winning film producer and director, Monica Pellizzari, making her debut in the theatre to direct Compton's *Julia's Song*; the novelist Sue Woolfe, who has adapted a section of her acclaimed novel, *Painted Woman*, for the stage; Lynette Curran, best known as an actor, is directing it; and there is the appearance of Anne Louise Lambert, best known as a film actor, performing the monologue, *Julia's Song*.

At an early stage of development, the works take advantage of this diverse experience and the process has proved that women playwrights, who deserve equal billing with their male counterparts, have much to say and gain as they strut their stuff on the boards.

From the earliest stages of rehearsal the women connected strongly with the plays' subject matter. They felt it reflected their own stories, articulated their experiences and expressed the integrity and nature of female communication.

However, as directors, the women were at first uneasy about being assertive, giving orders, making creative decisions and handling action-conflict — all male-driven, dramatic conventions.

For instance, while rehearsing Woolfe's *Painted Woman*, Curran had to say to herself, "I'm the director here, I'm in control."

"It's hard taking that responsibility. There's a different energy working with women."

Curran believes the bottom line of her responsibility is to the playwright: "As an actor I think we're here because of the script, but so often it's disregarded. That annoys me. The writer is the person we're serving."

Annie Byron, who plays Molly in *Painted Woman*, and who has had much experience in the theatre as an actor, discovered that there was "more openness" in the rehearsal process.

"People haven't been defensive; anyone can make a suggestion, poke, prod or inquire. I feel more secure about throwing in my twopence worth. It's very supportive."

Likening Woolfe's text to a "treasure of additional information", she says, "Sue's writing is incredibly dense, rich and apt. David Williamson once said that when he wrote scenes between women he realised men don't know what women talk about. Sue knows."



Women at Belvoir Street Theatre ... left to right, Kathryn Fisher, Monica Pellizzari, Anne Louise Lambert, Lynette Curran and Annie Byron.

Woolfe's play centres on a woman's creative and personal emergence. "It's about female energy and how women give over their power without even knowing their doing it," says Byron. Another play, Cathy Craigie's *Koori Love*, a section of a larger work, opened old wounds for its director, Kathryn Fisher.

Raised on an Aboriginal settlement at Cherbourg, in Queensland, until she was in her early 20s, she was luckier than many Aborigines who, as children, were stolen from their families by government officials under the inhumane policy aimed at disintegrating Aboriginal culture by splitting families.

"One of the characters in the play,

Wayne, has been taken away from his mother at three years of age and brought up in a boys' home. This contrasts with another character, Roz, who is brought up with her family. The characters misinterpret each other's struggles leading to a clash of cultures between materialist values and the preservation of the family," says Fisher.

With its humour, fun, sex-role struggles and tensions between mates and friends, Fisher believes *Koori Love* will connect with most people.

"It's not just a play for Murriss [Queensland Aborigines]. It shows how friends can help share the pain and give each other strength.

That, and love, keep us together," she says.

Emerging from rehearsal with a basket of baby clothes Anne Louise Lambert admits she finds performing *Julia's Song* exhausting and exhilarating. Abandoned, alone on stage, the character she plays has nothing but nappy-wash formula, toys and squalling children to support her disintegrating reality. It is a domestic nightmare.

Best known for her outstanding performance in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Draughtman's Contract*, Lambert, the mother of two-year-old Harry, finds the play's theme drives home a fatal recipe for the destruction of a woman's poetic, imaginative forces.

"It says a lot about every woman's experience of motherhood. It's a test of survival," says Lambert who believes balancing parenthood and career is not such a pressing issue for men. Men "tend to compartmentalise feelings", she says. "As a mother you throw yourself into it; you can't divide your feelings."

Pellizzari identifies the play's strength as "giving the voice to the mother".

"I've never heard it dealt with before except in a distorted way. But you don't have to be a mother to relate to the theme of thwarted potential. I confront it every day in my work, relationships and heritage.

"This play scares me ... We've grown up with an idea of how drama should be presented but women's writing is often not like that. It's a fascinating challenge because it's not predictable."

Lambert says that the issue of fertility "is a battle. There's the urge to be a mother struggling against the urge to go travelling, go for your career, then there's an abandonment, a delicious surrender to the seduction, you celebrate the other instead of suppressing it. The play rings true about this experience. In the play I feel like I'm facing an audience across a kitchen table and I can spot the mothers. Their involvement is so strong."

And will these works appeal to the other half of the population?

"Every story has something to say to people. It's different for women but men will decide what it says to them," says Byron.

"We're dealing with archetypal, cathartic truths," says Curran.