

SMH 7/10/82
Festival contribution
a painful recollection

THEATRE

By **BERWYN LEWIS**

Women and Arts Festival
Enid Higgins, a monologue by Gwenda Helsham
From the book *The Last Resort* (Penguin)
Troupe Theatre Company, Adelaide
Nimrod Downstairs theatre,
Director: Robin Boord
October 7, 15, 16, 17.

NOTHING That's Nothing is a one woman monologue about Enid Higgins. And who is Enid Higgins?

She lived in Sydney's inner-suburbs of Glebe, Balmain and Ultimo all her life and her story was told to the women at the Marrickville Women's Refuge and chosen by the editors of the book *The Last Resort*.

It is performed by Gwenda Helsham of Troupe, a Theatre company from South Australia.

Enid, earnest, practical and swathed in a patchwork quilt, tells her story, a painful recollection of her relationship with her abortion-ridden mother right through to her maturity and ultimate jail sentence.

She makes it clear that life is not so much an accident but more of a neglected opportunity for abortion.

"Yer have to help yar mother," she says, repeatedly. "She's havin another baby."

Beneath the naked light bulb the naked truth is revealed. The burden of being an old child, responsible for the care of the other, younger children. Enid's problem is she's "a bit on the intelligent side."

In her cardigan and frock she looks like every woman you've ever seen, down and out in supermarkets, bus shelters and parks.

Suddenly this short piece of 45 minutes reveals how they get there. It's women's stuff.

Women outnumber men by at least 75 per cent in the audience and yet women are thoroughly denigrated by Enid's verbal catharsis.

According to her contemporaries, women are there purely for the benefit of men, to have children. And they oblige. Unwanted kids are no deterrent.

If this is women's theatre, what hope is there? It remorselessly perpetuates the horror and negativity of the submissive, unthinking, inflexible, disadvantaged woman.

It makes you wonder why women didn't develop the simple reflex of saying "No" to their demanding procreative partners.

This is a departure into the past where happiness is a new frock consisting of a few yards of crepe

and a night out is threepence in your pocket. And if you're 15 and you're not home by 8.30 pm you can expect a thrashing.

All very nostalgic. But informing? No. Entertaining? No. Unfortunately Enid's endless prattling, without a space or a breath, becomes incredibly morbid.

She covers everything without adding an ounce of drama or excitement.

The horrors of cheap child labour at home and at the workplace, and the possibility of marriage as the only way out, are not new. And later, as a result of her labours, Enid, fortunately, strains herself and is rendered "useless."

Her insides "were no use to no one."

This is totally reactionary in terms of explorative women's themes. One wonders why it was fossed up for *The Women and Arts Festival*.

It reveals nothing and sheds no new light on the plight of women. Neither does it offer any new insights.

It is the same old carping and whingeing told by an old gossip. And just because she's old are we supposed to give her incredible mileage and permit her to waste our time?

She is full of verbal cliches like "interfered with" and "knocked down." Her values are the epitome of unrelenting feminicide catering to the dumb, naive side of the biologically self-incarcerating aspect of all women.

Perfect happiness equates with a totally unremarkable passage of years. But, when the Yanks and the war arrived, she became the prey.

Suddenly her intelligence is shown flickering to slow and calculating life. She's smart enough to secure herself fur coats, marriage proposals and the month-long pay packets of the Americans fresh off ships looking for someone to take dancing.

We're supposed to be sorry for her because beneath that grit she can't have kids as a result of what doctors did to her when she "strained herself."

Eventually she reaches the peak of her career, a sly grog shop. Exploitation upon exploitation.

Is this really an example of Australian drama? Or is it just oversimplistic, naturalistic and untheatrical self-indulgence?

The endless pregnancies become boring and despite the sense of classic Australian laconic humour, Gwenda Helsham's delivery is not only a monotone but also monotonous.

It's basically a perpetual cycle of women getting bashed and getting pregnant. God help them.