

Spurned love's revenge

THE STORY of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife must be one of the earliest stories of woman chases man and loses.

Joseph lost his tunic in the tussle. It will be recollected, her love changed to hate, and she exacted revenge.

Margot Hilton, a Londoner who has spent the last five years in Australia, but is shortly to return to England, calls her first play Potiphar's Wife. It is now on at Sydney's Nimrod Downstairs Theatre, the longest of a program of the three pieces written for a single voice. The others are Samuel Beckett's Not I and Alex Buzo's Vicki Madison Clocks Out.

Helen Morse appears in Not I and Vicki Madison, and Julie McGregor in Potiphar's Wife.

The stage monologue must be one of the most difficult things to sustain in theatre. The drama is created within one personage, one role, however many ghosts are called up, and there is never the variety of a second voice, the interest of exchange.

Ken Horler, as director, has circumvented a measure

THEATRE

KEITH THOMAS

of the difficulty by his choice of three separate pieces. Each is about individual women, each in a particular state of extremity.

Beckett's Speaking Mouth in Not I treads a bleak line of phrases of perception and non-perception in a denial of being that appears to flow from a denial of love to a child.

Vicki Madison is a crisp and funny ace reporter from the Daily Globe, but her ego is thinner than the nylons and, crackling with alliterative headlines, she cracks up in the middle of a nightmare or a scoop on the outbreak of World War II.

Helen Morse manages the dialect and the dreamland like a native.

Buzo, who gives his sign as Leo and his star as Natalie Wood in the program notes, is plainly strong into Gotham City glitter and, you could say, gets a lot of fun out of taking this tilt at Brenda Starr.

Third on the program, Potiphar's Wife is an exciting first play, a work of glittering promise in the Jewish line of the original.

Margot Hilton has a capacity to put words together of a high calibre, her text flows with images which have clarity, wit, and resonances of a literary kind, but all to the point of creating her protagonist, a Potiphar's wife of today, a women's liberator, with a baby, abandoned by her lover.

The "wife" fulminates against the sisters who have stolen her man, attempts to entertain her new friends, turn herself on with a new man, laments and denies her child, waits for the telephone call.

The talk is searing, picturesquely vernacular, self-consciously honest.

"Now what garment of allure shall I bedeck meself with this fair fair night of carving knives? Something tres femme perhaps . . . No. One must not at any time seen to have made an EFFORT."

"So see me pull the diurnal boiler suit from out of the dirty laundry basket, sniff, sniff. It's not too bad at all, quite fragrant in fact . . ."

Julie McGregor sustains very well indeed what is quite an extensive part and brings it home safely to the conclusion where Potiphar's wife's revenge and happiness is the child, which is hers alone, the two in place of the three.

suits the fundamentalist theme of the film.

If only unions performed always in a way to justify the ideals which underlie their formation.

—P. P. McGUINNESS

THEATRE

Trapped by conditioning

POTIPHAR'S Wife + 2 is a set of three one-act plays for solo actresses, directed by Ken Horler at Nimrod Downstairs. Of the three, Not I by Samuel Beckett, Vicki Madison Clocks Out by Alex Buzo and Potiphar's Wife by Margot Hilton, the last is by far the most interesting and entertaining.

In Not I, the stage is as black as Beckett's view of life, save for a small oval of light in which are revealed Helen Morse's exquisitely formed nostrils and mouth, and a generous quantity of her chin.

She speaks, fluently and urgently, displaying an admirable set of teeth. Since nothing else in the auditorium is visible, this close scrutiny is unavoidable: it is audience.

The rather rambling philosophy that emanates from the Mouth, as the character is called in the program, reflects a discovery familiar to all who have spent time in a dentist's chair: that between the womb



Julie McGregor in Potiphar's Wife

and the grave, there is plenty of time for suffering and barely time to scream.

Helen Morse's articulation is as impeccable as her teeth, her emotional range and control of pace are impressive and the dramatic image is not without power. It is something of a virtuoso performance. As theatre, it is raw and uncompromising but disappointingly hollow.

A lack of humanity is apparent; Beckett does not seem to care enough about his character, for all the vocal calisthenics, to flesh out the human being behind the Mouth. Theatre is too close to the life force to succeed in so abstract an endeavour.

Vicki Madison Clocks Out is equally unrewarding, a piece of surrealist silliness that scores a few easy hits on large targets and ends by cheating the audience completely, making the sketchy plot turn on something we have seen to be untrue. The character is of passing interest (quickly passing) and the script is arty, crafty and quite inconsequential.

Helen Morse, as Vicki Madison, is a Lois Lane caricature. For no apparent reason, the play is set in New York in 1939. An onslaught of satirical

barbs is aimed at sensationalist journalism that is sadly familiar 40 years on.

The alliterative headlines are as witty as one would expect from Buzo, but I am sure they would be more effective milled over in a private reading than fired at top speed from the stage.

Potiphar's Wife, the third play, depicts a different type of woman, a woman of this age and this society, seeking strength and independence but trapped by traditional role-playing and conditioning. Julie McGregor gives a performance of considerable versatility and understanding.

The major achievement of the play is to enunciate something approaching an honest, outspoken female sexuality, with redeeming elements of self-parody. It is a little too long; the scene with the psychiatrist adds nothing and might well have been cut.

But there is no denying Margot Hilton's wickedly perceptive observation. In particular, the scene where the woman muses wryly on her failure to seduce an eight-foot dummy on the goat-skin rug has the richness of intelligence farce.

—MICHAEL LE MOIGNAN

'AUSTRALIAN: Friday 10th Nov 1979'