



Bobcats do the rock 'n' rile

Donna Jackson, left, and Mark Seymour devised *We Built This City* with a cast of building workers.

PICTURE: EDDIE JIM

After 150 years of industrial protection, workers stage a musical and theatrical celebration of work, writes **Robin Usher**.

THE West Gate bridge dominates the skyline at Spotswood's Scienceworks museum.

"You have to be inspired by it," says Donna Jackson, writer and director of the Melbourne Theatre Workers' production, *We Built This City*.

"You can't help being affected by the nearness of death," she says, referring to the 1970 disaster that killed 35 workers.

Jackson has used the skills and experiences of the city's building workers in devising a show to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the introduction of the eight-hour day.

Former singer for the band Hunters and Collectors, Mark Seymour, who has written the music for the show and performs in it, says the disaster had a profound impact on Australian working conditions.

His song, *Westgate*, about the bridge collapse is one of seven he wrote for the production, which also includes 23 other pieces of

music ranging from ballads to "primal industrial rock", according to Seymour, who has been rehearsing the show's rock band since November last year.

At rehearsals, he says, the sound level has reached 110 decibels.

"It was one of the most powerful things I've ever heard. It was just ridiculous," he says.

"It's certainly got grunt," Jackson says, adding that the sound has to be muscular enough to accompany an industrial crane and three "dancing" skid-steer loaders (or Bobcats) on the Scienceworks oval.

The show includes the 40-strong Trades Hall choir, the workers' band, a soundtrack of industrial percussion, and a cast of 45 construction workers.

As part of the show, industrial equipment such as angle grinders will be in use, paving will be laid and a five-and-a-half-metre-high scaffold constructed.

"You could call it circus, or theatre entertainment or you

could call it work," Jackson says.

The Victorian Museum has made Scienceworks available for the performances, which will start in the foyer before moving on to the oval and then down into the coal bunker and engine room in the pumping station.

Jackson, who founded the Women's Circus in 1991 and developed the *Beaut Utes* installation for the 2002 Melbourne Festival, staged a commemoration for the West Gate collapse at the memorial park under the bridge on the 20th anniversary in 1990.

"I realised then that to get the trust of the workers I would have to earn it," she says. "After attending a BLF picket line, some of the older men started to talk about the collapse."

She was surprised to learn that the survivors had received no counselling and their memories were still raw.

"Some of them spent seven days trying to dig out the bodies of their workmates. Some of the men could only be recognised by their boots."

She used her awareness of the building industry to find people interested in taking part in the show, visiting building sites — including the Southern Cross Station — and making video

films of Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union officials talking about their working lives and value systems.

She then showed the films to other workers so they could consider taking part.

Seymour drove around Melbourne with an acoustic guitar, playing *Westgate* to workers.

"It is a community project," Jackson says. "They can't make it by themselves so we have to combine theatre and building skills."

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DONNA JACKSON, writer-director

She says the project inevitably carries a political message, with the introduction of the new industrial-relations laws.

"Given the people who are in the show, it is fair to assume they are not attracted to John Howard's IR laws," Jackson says.

But she adds that it's necessary to balance politics with entertainment.

And she had to drop one of the videos she had made, which stated there had not been a death in the industry for more than a

year, after building worker Christos Binos, 58, was fatally crushed by a concrete slab at Pakenham last month.

Under the new IR laws, colleagues were then docked four hours' pay for stopping work for 15 minutes to collect money for his family.

"We explore people's political beliefs and show how union campaigns have transformed the industry by making it so much safer," she says.

"But we like to be provocative and stir things up a bit. It's rough, good humoured and gritty on a big scale."

The show also demonstrates how much pride the workers have in the city shaped by their skills.

"The men are proud that it was union green bans that saved the Regent Theatre (from demolition) even though they gained nothing from it as individuals," Jackson says.

At the end of the show, the audience is invited for "a beer and a chat" in the museum's cafe, whose walls will be hung with workers' photographs of the tent-like roof at Southern Cross Station and the West Gate bridge.

We Built This City is at Scienceworks in Spotswood from April 26-29 and May 3-6 at 8pm. Book on 9639 0096.