

Moving saga kicks up dust

Alison Croggon | *December 01, 2008*

Article from: [The Australian](#)

Dust By Donna Jackson. Hubcap Productions. Williamstown Town Hall, Melbourne, November 28.

THE phrase "community theatre" is liable to conjure images of earnest amateur thespians giving demonstrations in coarse acting.

But this can be misleading.

Community-based companies are responsible for some of our most vital political theatre. In the hands of companies like Alice Springs-based Big hArt - which created *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, a work that looked at the impact of the Maralinga nuclear tests on the Pitjantjatjara people - it becomes a powerful conduit for the concerns of specific communities.

This is work that's neither earnest nor polemic, but rather a reminder that theatre is the most human of artforms. In Melbourne, Donna Jackson, founder of Footscray's Women's Circus, has been making exemplary community theatre for years. Recently she's been working with trade unions. Her spectacular show *We Built This City* was a site-specific work created with with former Hunters and Collectors frontman Mark Seymour and featured, among other things, a surreal ballet of bulldozers.

Their latest collaboration is *Dust*, an exploration of the grim history of the Australian asbestos industry. Again a site-specific work, it was made originally for the Mechanics' Institute in Ballarat and remounted in the beautiful Victorian space of Williamstown Town Hall, in Melbourne's west. It demonstrates Jackson's talent for accessing the energies of diverse community groups. The show is backed by the Asbestos Diseases Society and its 60-voice choir includes singers from the Victorian Trade Union Choir, local songsters Willin Wimmin and the Ballarat Arts Academy ensemble.

The show is in two halves. In the first, the audience saunters around the huge space of the town hall visiting acts - short plays, a magician, visual installations - in booths on either side, set up as in a fair. The second is a more conventional musical, in which stories glimpsed in the booths are expanded through song. Its major mode is comedy: James Hardie is represented, for instance, by a corporate woman (Laura Lattuada) who is having problems with her shonky hairdresser before an important address to shareholders.

What binds the show together is Jackson's sharp satirical eye and the driving guitar of Seymour. His songs have the rock 'n' roll power and lyricism of Bruce Springsteen, and pack a huge emotional punch.

Without a trace of earnestness, but plenty of anger and grief, *Dust* relates the corporate scandal and individual tragedy of the history of asbestos manufacturing. It's straight-up, moving and enormously entertaining.

Community theatre at its very best.