WORLD OF THEATRE

Theatre: world in microcosm

By ANN NUGENT

ALL the world's a stage and for the duration of a play all the stage is a little world. What happens in that world, the points of view that are put across, the situations that are portrayed are as large as life.

The power of live theatre to engage audiences in immediate and intense ways has been used for many purposes throughout the ages. In the middle ages, the church used the cycles of mystery plays to reinforce religious belief and to maintain its position in the medieval world order. In this century, the Stalin's doctrine of "socialist realism" enshrined communist ideology as a central tenet of artistic expression.

The Bath House, currently being performed at TAU Theatre, Braddon, is a burlesque by the Russian playwright Mayakovsky of the restrictions imposed by the Soviet bureaucrats of the 1920s on the arts.

The Australian Council has established an Arts and Working Life Project in an attempt to bring theatre to the people. The idea is that the performing arts should be relevant to the audiences, and make sense of their life experiences.

The visit to Australia of the Philippine Education Theatre Association demonstrated how cultural workers in the Philippines have used theatre to contribute to the revolution. The PETA performances, all devised at the community level, showed the suffering and struggle of the Filipino workers in very dramatic and challenging ways.

Deep Bells Ring, a musical documentary of the life and times of Paul Robeson, funded by the Australia Council's Art and Working Life Project and the Building Workers Industrial Union was seen recently in Canberra. In my review of that production I alluded to the danger of using the theatre as a temple for the veneration of "political" saints, the cult of hagiography.

My concern was not so much political as artistic, because without some light and shade, some dialectic, some tension, no matter how polished the theatrical performance, the production will pall.

Paul Robeson had strong socialist sympathies and in my review I said he had been "branded a communist" by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. A correspondent to the editor of *The Canberra Times* has written that Paul Robeson was not "branded a communist", indeed, he was proud to be called a communist. This is a political point, however, my search through four biographical references indicate that although Paul Robeson refused to sign an affidavit stating that he was not a member of the Communist Party, neither did he assert that he was a member of the party.

In 1946, when called before a committee of the California State Legislature, Robeson had testified that he had never been a member of the Communist Party but after that experience he refused to answer such questions on principle. He did not disguise the fact that he was sympathetic to communist ideals, a different proposition from being a communist.

After his refusal to sign the affidavit, Robeson's United States passport was withdrawn by the State Department in 1952 and his annual income is reputed to have dropped from $104,000 in 1947 to $2000 a year in the early 1950s.

State of Defence, produced by the Melbourne Workers Theatre with assistance from the BWIU is another Arts and Working Life Project. The production is coming to Canberra early in October with performances at work sites and Gorman House. I saw *State of Defence* at the Community Theatre Conference in Brisbane earlier this year.

The production is concerned with the industrial importance of unions. It's a forthright, unequivocal and hard-hitting piece of theatre and takes a clear political stance. Unlike *Deep Bells Ring*, it is not into sentiment. *State of Defence* shows enough struggle and conflicting interests to succeed as entertainment.

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In the end, theatre must be entertaining otherwise audiences will stay away. If, on the other hand, productions are mindlessly entertaining and ignore important social and political issues, then they will collapse internally. It's the performers, writers, producers and directors who walk the razor's edge between entertainment and substance in theatre.

Canberra is fortunate in having several smaller theatre companies who continue to take risks for the benefit and entertainment of their audiences. Splinters, one little known such group, has taken its latest production to the Fringe of the Spoleto Festival. Its new show, *Cry Stinking Fish*, is being presented at the old Seamen's Mission, Port Melbourne.

A new play, *The Greek Conspiracy*, by Graeme Brosnan, looks at the 1978 raid by Commonwealth police against Australians and their doctors "for crimes they did not commit". The play is attempting to attract public debate about those events.

The Greek Conspiracy opens at The Rocks Theatre, Sydney, on Friday, October 15, for a five-week season. Bookings, telephone 6604086.

The Bath House was first performed in Moscow in 1930. Official disapproval of his work drove the playwright Mayakovsky to suicide in the same year. *The Bath House* is playing at the TAU Theatre, Mort Street, Braddon, Tuesdays to Saturdays at 8pm. Bookings, 480911.

The drama students of Erindale College are presenting *Cabaret* at the Erindale Theatre, on October 7 to 10, at 8pm. Inquiries, 321211.