

# Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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*Weary*

by Alan Hopgood

Dunstan Playhouse

13 April

Sir Edward "Weary" Dunlop waited more than forty years before he turned the scattered notes of his wartime diaries into publishable form. Recorded in dreadful circumstances while he was a prisoner of the Japanese, first in camps in Java and then along the Burma-Thailand Railway, they now stand as one of the most remarkable documents of World War II. As senior medical officer he recorded with scrupulous precision the details of life, and death, for Australians in the most notoriously cruel prison camps in South East Asia. He also, in the process, revealed much about himself, his integrity and ingenuity, and that of many of the men under his command.

In *Weary*, playwright Alan Hopgood has astutely recognised the intrinsic drama of Dunlop's own narrative and in so doing, served his subject well. Instead of elaborate reconstructions of events he uses just three characters - Dunlop as an older man (played by Ronald Falk), Dunlop at the time of the events (Neil Pigot) and a third (David Trendinnick) to play, as he says himself, the Unknown Soldier, no-one in particular and everyone in general. He also performs an assortment of Japanese guards and prisoner patients.

Designer Shaun Gurton has created a raised wooden deck surrounded by rattan screens for the flashbacks to the prison and, at centre stage, a bureau desk from which the older Dunlop reflects, not only on past events, but on his younger self. Taking his cue from the text, director Roger Hodgman has kept the production admirably understated - Matt Scott's lighting is evocative but discreet and David Bridie's score, initially somewhat portentous, is also restrained. As the older Weary, the estimable Ronald Falk captures his matter-of-fact modesty and a spirit surprisingly unembittered, while Neil Pigot's portrayal of the younger man - only in his mid-thirties, yet called upon to lead his men, uphold his oaths as a doctor and his dignity as a human being - is also well-judged. David Trendinnick shows his versatility and avoids stereotype in a variety of accents and character sketches.

What is so compelling about this production is the sheer impact of the unfolding story. Here is this rather formal man - prosaically nicknamed Weary from a laboured pun on Dunlop tyres - standing up for men so ill with cholera and gangrenous ulcers they can barely move, let alone build a railway. It is Dunlop and his associates who contrive saline drips to cleanse open wounds, who manage amputations under appalling conditions and then design prosthetics to get the men ambulant again. It is Dunlop who fights also for the dignity and self-respect of men whose very sense of humanity is in peril.

In crisply elegant prose Dunlop's diaries bear vivid witness not only to practical ingenuity but the life of the intellect and imagination. Soldiers taught each to read and write. One, a talented actor named A.C. "Tinkle" Bell, performs subversive speeches from Julius Caesar (and later, cuts his own throat rather than broadcast radio propaganda for the Japanese.) Dunlop and his men published a newspaper, performed concerts, and ran piggy-back "horse" races. On one of several occasions when Dunlop faced summary execution he recited aloud Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*.

It is stirring stuff - part Biggles, part Lives of the Saints, but it also represents what was considered the ordinary decency of ordinary men. Edward Dunlop embodied these values and reported their expression in those around him; Alan Hopgood's text and the carefully measured performances of these actors have brought them convincingly to life. *Weary* is a fine tribute to sustained courage in unendurable conditions and, at a time when Gallipoli is in danger of becoming a theme park, and the realities of warfare are clouded in jingoism, Edward Dunlop's truthful witness to events and extraordinary capacity to forgive his enemies, is a welcome corrective.