

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Back to My Roots and Other Suckers

Barry Humphries
Her Majesty's

Barry Humphries is not only back to his roots but also quite a few of his old tricks. Playing to full houses for a short season at Her Majesty's, Humphries has rounded up the usual suspects for our delectation and occasional panic. These now include somebody called Barry Humphries. Not *the* Barry Humphries I shouldn't think, but a simulacrum who, last time around, appeared from a camphor box full of Proustian prompts, and this time introduces a Dunnathon - old Super8 - and almost suppurating - home movies of Glen Iris in 1949. Alf Dunn, Humphries would have us believe, was a neighbour of his family and his films chronicle, in long Warhol-esque wide-shot, primary school sports days, social gatherings, even the end of year party. That's me as a rather young Father Christmas, Humphries informs us, and we are inclined to believe him.

Back to the roots for Humphries, and much of his audience, means back to suburban memory- of brand names, street names and the sounds and mnemonic smells of Times Past. These times, when they constituted the Present for Barry Humphries as a young and impatient bohemian, signified a stultifying world of trivia and small-minded gentility. It was the world of his parents and part of the dreary trade-off for post-war prosperity. Here was the original version of Relaxed and Comfortable - Edna, Sandy and the Herald waiting on the front lawn.

But there are also others who drag the past resolutely into the future. Take Sir Les Patterson for instance. Although most of us would rather not. This drunken, priapic praiser of his own past is the cultural attache for Misrule and a friend to the Arts, if he is to be taken on his own account. Les is Humphries' most dangerous creation. His cheerful bigotry is more a part of Humphries' satiric strategy than convivial comedy but quite a few in the audience nevertheless take his cue to chortle heartlessly at easy targets. It is disconcerting to hear such unreconstructed hilarity but, as Les would be the first to tell you, comedy alas is not a precision tool.

Barry Humphries regularly likes to have a swipe or two at the corporate types, as he describes them. Last time it was an IOC hanger-on . This time

Owen Steele is a bland, self-serving CEO tiptoeing through a general meeting of peeved shareholders. It is a point well made but Humphries has no particular intensity for his subject and there is less of the usual heat-seeking ruthlessness in it all.

The Sandy Stone soliloquy at the end of the first half is, by contrast, his most theatrical. Sandy is swept out in a spray of white light and fog - his throne a Genoa velvet armchair piled on a stack of hard rubbish waiting on the ghostly median strip at Gallipoli Crescent for the looters in utes to come by. Sandy is long dead now but his wraith meditates in a slightly bewildered way about the passing of what once was. His widow Beryl has done her dough on HHH shares and life in Surfers is not looking so good for her after all. Also, the site of Sandy's house, having already made way for a supermarket, is now being cleared again for a series of Tuscan style town houses. Sandy ruminates on the increasing rarity of the fourteen essential oils in Rexona soap and the availability of the Incontinence Helpline. Sandy is Humphries' most dreamy character whose dithery otherworldliness seems to capture more - of both his creator and the ageing audience - each time he is wheeled out for a nice night's entertainment.

The appearance of Dame Edna, however, is the real centre of Humphries' show. Flanked by the Ednaettes, she offers sizzling burlesque. The front rows cower and Edna surveys her quarry like a hawk looking for fieldmice. I don't pick on people, she whinnies triumphantly, I empower them. This time she empowers a sampling of women - one a public servant, whose occupation raises compulsive laughter for an audience increasingly hysterical and likely to sacrifice members of their own family to escape or desperately mollify the rampaging Edna. A young couple are dragged on stage while Edna endeavours to salvage what she presumes to be their wrecked marriage. The bride's father is also brought on for additional humiliation.

Edna then assembles the luckless draftees to perform excerpts of volume two of her autobiography, and like the good sports people are in impossible situations, they neither attempt to be funnier than permitted nor run screaming to an exit which is probably the sane thing to do. Having despatched her cast, Edna muses yet again upon her celebrity and her underachieving family. It is familiar territory but Humphries has, as ever, a keen eye for the latest bogusness and an ear for the most recently excruciating jargon.

Then, as tradition requires, Dame Edna sings a song, dances a jig and slings as many gladiolus plumes as she can to the furthest corners of the theatre. This is her benediction and her final fling as theatrical dominatrix. You adore me - and I quite like you, she crows superciliously and, one suspects, a little more of Mr Humphries appears from behind the mask. He is, however, an extraordinary presence.

There are few performers anywhere who can single-handedly animate a stage the way Barry Humphries can. And Edna, in particular, is a force of nature. She may not have come back to her roots - neither she nor Barry Humphries have the slightest interest in, or notion of, contemporary Australia - but she knows the art of the pinch and the punch and the Chinese burn. Which must mean we are her other suckers - queueing up in the best tradition of comedy to be railed against and humiliated, and then to be handed a gladiolus, this mad version of a vertical garland, as consolation for our tears.