

THE AGE June 1988

by Helen Thomson

'ENGAGING TRIBUTE TO AUSSIE KIDS'

It is nearly 100 years since Ethel Turner's much-loved children's novel was published; seeing how perfectly it fits itself to the musical mode, the only wonder is that it took so long to come into being as a musical.

It has taken the Bicentennial year to produce this warm and affecting celebration of children who were different because they were Australian, where the heavy constraints of Victorian respectability looked a little irrelevant.

Turner won the hearts of her child readers because she sanctioned the rebel, the incorrigibly naughty child – and a girl at that.

In the tomboy Judy can be found those characteristics of Australian girlhood, the vitality and daring that mirrored the cockiness of a colonial country undergoing its own difficult adolescence.

IDEALISATION

That Turner conveniently killed off Judy before she had actually to face the problems of adulthood might seem like an easy way out but, on the other hand, it provided a surge of real emotion that has assured her of a permanent place in the affections of her readers.

The danger that threatens a stage production, without the controlling authorial voice, is an excess of sentimentality. After all, the only villain in the piece, the irascible martinet Captain Woolcot, is reformed in the end, a Victorian father who finally learns the value of love and the unique freedom of the Australian childhood.

If nostalgia, idealisation of the past as well as family life, sentiment and child actors are not to your taste, this is not the show for you. On the other hand, *Seven Little Australians* is pretty to look at and listen to, fresh, funny style and perfect family entertainment. And there are at least two scenes where you'll need a handkerchief.

John O'May as Captain Woolcot (he also directs this production) is really too engaging to be a convincing disciplinarian, but he does convey something of the character's underlying need to be loved.

Alyce Platt is perfect as his young wife Esther, sympathetic and winning. Melissa Bickerton is also well cast as Judy, hoydenish and affectionate, handling the comedy as skillfully as her tragic moments.

Judith McGrath's superb comic skills are put to wonderfully effective use in the small roles of Martha and Miss Jolly. The other children are headed by a winsome Michelle Pettigrove as Meg and the group sing, dance and act in a pleasantly unpretentious style. The little general (played by Rebecca Mitchell) stole several scenes just by virtue of perfect naturalness.

There were some problems with sound levels and the orchestra was sometimes over-loud, but

composer David Reeves' songs, full of familiar echoes yet sounding suitably traditional, were on the whole well served by the singers.

This show could be seen as an antidote to *Star Wars* or *Rambo* – not only non-violent but thoroughly Australian. In fact, if you like Vegemite, you're going to love *Seven Little Australians*, it's Melbourne opening timed perfectly for the school holidays.
