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by Leonard Radic

'THE WINNING WAYS OF LITTLE AUSTRALIANS'

After 'Manning Clark's History of Australia' bit the dust earlier this year, it seemed unlikely that we would see another big home-grown musical for many a long day. No backer would be prepared to take the risk.

But James Hardie Industries have given the lie to that. This being the company's centenary year, as well as the nation's Bicentenary, they decided to pour a cool \$1 million into a musical based on Ethel Turner's evergreen tale, 'Seven Little Australians'. It was an odd gesture, but a noble one as well. Industry should do that kind of thing more often.

As for the musical itself, it is, as one might expect, a comfortable family-style show: warmhearted, sentimental and ever so wholesome. It is pitched at the level of the average general-public audience, and should do wonders for the coach trade.

What it is not is bold or revolutionary. David Reeves's music is bright, conventional and homogenised, with echoes at times of other musicals including 'Annie', 'The Sound of Music', and, in the Yarrahappini scene, 'Oklahoma'. The book and lyrics follow a familiar pattern too, except that the story ends on a tragic note, which is something no self-respecting American musical does.

Feminist scholars have looked at Ethel Turner's 1894 best-seller with a fresh eye recently, seeing subtleties in the relationships which few of the book's young readers would probably have suspected were there. But you won't find much evidence of that approach here.

Eschewing complexity, the joint authors, Peter Yeldham and John Palmer, present their audience with a simple, straightforward story of seven unruly Australian children, "surprisingly youthful" mother and their stern, unsympathetic, military father who is brought to see the error of his tyrannical ways.

Captain Woolcot, an impoverished army captain with "noisy children and a very quiet income", is the psychological centre of the piece. He can be charming when he chooses; but he can also be unreasonable and cruel, as Judy, the liveliest and the least tameable of his children, discovers when she is sent off to boarding school in the Blue Mountains as punishment for a minor misdemeanor.

John O'May, who plays the captain (as well as directing the show), does so with just the right mix of sternness and humanity. In the first act, he is cast firmly in the role of villain. But Judy's refusal to knuckle down and learn the social graces finally wins him over. He is not such a rotter after all.

His young wife (Alyce Platt), I found, a rather colourless character. The colourlessness is partly in the writing, though on opening night it was not helped in this instance by a problem which plagued the whole show: erratic sound levels which meant that while the men's voices came over mostly loud and strong – John O'May's especially – the women's voices, and those of the younger children, could barely be heard.

This was certainly not the case with Melissa Bickerton's lively and engaging Judy. This was an excellent piece of casting. The piece puts her firmly at the centre of the action – a position which

she exploited to great and winning effect, particularly when resisting the efforts of both her father and the Miss Burton School for Girls to make an English-style lady of her.

The children are irresistible as stage children always are. (Remember 'Annie', and 'The Sound of Music'?) Michelle Pettigrove as Meg, Murray Golding as the first-night Bunty and Beven Addinsall as Pip acquit themselves well enough. But it was Rebecca Mitchell as the blonde-haired Little General, the most junior member of the family, who stole the show from them.

The production is slick and colourful, making good use of Kenneth Rowell's bushland back-drops and cut-out sets. Unfortunately, the impact of the words and lyrics was often dulled on opening night by an over-loud orchestra and under-powered singers. When these problems are overcome, James Hardie and the other backers should have a genuine crowd-please on their hands.
