

THE LONDON STAGE

MELBOURNE – SEVEN LITTLE AUSTRALIANS

by Raymond Stanley

Ethel Turner's classic novel *Seven Little Australians*, published in 1894, filmed in 1939, and made into a ten-part TV min-series in 1973, has now been turned into a stage musical, financed to the tune of \$1 million by James Hardie Industries, the Australian wine-making company.

Following the general lines of the novel, the musical features the military Captain Woolcot, who tries hard to discipline his unruly seven children, and his much younger second wife, Esther. Episodically it recounts the mischievous doings of the children, led by the tomboyish Judy, who is sent to boarding school, runs away, becomes ill and of course is forgiven. There is however, a tragic ending to it all.

With no out of town facilities for 'doctoring', the show opened cold, but already seems in fairly good shape, and, after a certain amount of re-working, with strengthening of some performances, should prove a milestone on the Australian 'theatre scene'. At the moment the lead characters seem somewhat undeveloped.

Writing is in the capable hands of Peter Yeldham; together with the scripter of many Aussie animated films, John Palmer. It is directed by John O'May who also plays the Captain, and who scores on both accounts. The Esther of Alyce Platt is pleasing, but the real hit of the show is newcomer Melissa Bickerton as Judy, who is obviously going places. Needless to say the smallest child of the group is an absolute scene-stealer.

This is old-fashioned fare, with no involved technology or blasting amplification in sight, but likely to have much appeal to family audiences, providing comedy, sentiment, and simple entertainment: Sometimes it is reminiscent of *The Sound of Music* and *Annie* – fortunately not nearly as smaltzy – and even *Oklahoma!* - with a barn dance. David Reeves' music is catchy and charming, Pamela French has choreographed some boisterous show-stopping numbers, and Kenneth Rowell's bush back-drops, together with cut-out sets, back projections and costumes, are attractive and authentic.

Australian plays, films, TV programmes and entertainers have all been seen overseas, but so far never a musical. But in almost 30 years of theatregoing Down Under, this reviewer has never seen a local musical with more potential for overseas production.
