

If Looks Could Kill

Atta-Girl Theatre

As the audience filters into the intimate La Mama space, attention is immediately arrested by a human sculpture. Five women stare with an intensity that might be fatal — 'If looks could kill'.



Pre-performance ambiance 'sets a theme' for *If Looks Could Kill*. In a carefully selected array of undergarments, five women pose before the audience, on a set dominated by mirrors. Our gaze is challenged: "What are you staring at?" asks one especially curvaceous object.

We have been neatly directed to the 'red-light district' in St. Kilda where five women will gradually reveal themselves. Clues to their personalities lie with their dress: distinctive clothes another a 'St. Kilda stereotype' which they represent.

Five very different characters connect in this cosmopolitan community because each inhabits an apartment in the same block. Through their stories we remark a shared awareness of the male — always looking.

In a stylized sequence the women stare into hand-held mirrors. The lusty male gaze strips their bodies; their curiosity is caught by 'the look' which repulses them. As they stare at their own reflection the object, however, is different: they seek confirmation and self-image.

Characters, grown from interviews with women in St. Kilda, are mostly well-defined and suggest skilful writing by Metilee Moss. Astral (superbly acted by Margaret Dobson) is the most appealing both in character and characterisation. She is a provocatively stylish 'aging' punk who spends her dole on dope and almost allows herself to be mothered by Ruth. Ruth is older and more conservative — her character (like her apartment) is a source of stability, yet her calm lifestyle belies the strong statement it represents. A Polish Jew, Ruth, has here rejected the conditioned coupling which marries her cultural community. Nance, a flamboyant theatrical 'has been', is a stereotyped (or truly) poor actress who yearns for the glads of showbiz. Sheila is a data-processor and, tired of filing the St. Kilda Council's transactions, she aspires to own a computer — bought from the pure profit of prostitution. Liz, still glowing from the burnt sun of Central Australia, is a writer who calls herself a teacher to fob off unwelcome visitors.

We watch the action and ourselves

directly or in mirrors. Clever staging allows each character her own 'space' - this simple device adds much to our picture of how she lives. Astral has a TV on her bed. Ruth sits in an upright armchair. Nance's interior is decorated with a kitch lantern and a crazy shawl. Liz lives by candlelight and Sheila walks suggestively up and down stairs. All collect in Ruth's tidy flat, although it is small and dark.

The production is fluid: naturalistic snippets coalesce with stylized sequences. A tap-dance, a strip-tease, a train-ride, a cake-shop fixation, and a beautiful day at the beach are interspersed with scenes inside the apartment block. Staging clichés, for example a closely-knit group swaying with the motion of a train, are compensated by an energetic and often highly inventive use of space and object. Music, too, is an interesting mix of showbiz melody, Michael Jackson's SFC, didgeridoo and St. Kilda 'gunge'.

Some sequences are particularly memorable. A half-naked Astral wades in a bucket, Ruth and Nance dress for the beach, Liz carries and phantasises about a brain of sand and Sheila holds a neat pile of towels; slowly, through stylized movement and freeze, a day at the beach unfolds. In another sequence, building dramatic tension culminates in a climactic representation of each character's individual nightmare — their collective 'horror' revolves around Sheila's rape; some of the extremely powerful potential of this scene is lost in obvious and drawn-out effects. The final movement of the play is orchestrated with a novel device: the verdict is declared in symphonic beating of suitcases.

Although at times links are tenuous and development laboured or less than fully-etched, the themes of the play are presented with humour and sensitivity. Interaction with men, past and present, is generally most ably explored. Two 'issues' are handled with a rare delicacy: Sheila's quarter-of-fact decision to earn money from prostitution meets a mixed reaction from the others — as do Liz's daemonic sexual preferences.

Five women alone, of varying ages and interests, stand by one another and, although they frequently fail to listen, share stories. The perspective is itself a powerful statement about women — especially those who populate a pulsating 'beach' like St. Kilda.

Billed as a St. Kilda soap, *If Looks Could Kill* captures something of the vibrant spirit of a 'red-light district' which blocks out the sun to substitute its energy. Even Liz eventually agrees that the song is part of the inestimable beauty of sunrise in St. Kilda — just when the developers are replacing this 'beachview suburb'. Liz offers the final comment. She leaves true to St. Kilda fashion, wearing dark glasses — to protect her from that piercing glare.

Suzanne Oib

If Looks Could Kill by Her Lee New
Director and Designer: Lynne Elia
Lighting: Andrea O'Brien
Sound: Peter Panter
Cast: Margaret Dobson, Martin Gonzalez,
Orinda Harrison, Sue McClelland,
Dunilly O'Neill
Veronica Roma
Dates: 6-24 July