

Centre. There, however, the similarities end. It is doubtful whether these plays addressed the same audience; indeed, they were arguing from opposite premises. Densem takes a local, historical figure and makes of his life a welcoming musical comedy, whereas McKenzie plugs into an historical aesthetic (European modernism) and generates an alienating satire.

Bicky is elegantly structured. The collection of Bickerton's ashes from the railway station and their delivery to the college board by staunch supporter M.P. Ted Howard punctuates the episodic retelling of Bickerton's life. The format is revue-like with plenty of one liners and cameo role portrayals. In some instances there are indications of inexperience in dramatic construction; for example, the device of performing a sung lecture on Bickerton's ludicrous theory of partial impact is used twice. While they serve somewhat different purposes (the first illustrates the entanglement of the professor's personal relationships) and both are to a certain extent successful, it is nevertheless repetitious. And some of the characters weren't completely assimilated into the texture of the play, perhaps especially Ettie Rout, whose speech to the New Zealand soldiers in Britain seemed gratuitous (though not unentertaining).

But such shortcomings were easily compensated for by the excellence of the musical numbers. Densem's strength clearly lies in this area (predictably enough) and their strength, variety, sophistication and effervescence meant that these qualities of the performance remained afterwards.

The Mortal Pleasure of Wanda Lust was a very much more pretentious effort. Wanda, a scientist, sits at a console which operates the suicide machine, in which sits Endal, and enables her to witness past events from her lover's imagination as conveyed through Endal's present imagination. Unfortunately, it means that an audience also has to witness this sordid display, which, in essence, is nothing more than the regurgitation of the half-digested cultural detritus of the century.

That the script was so impoverished was a shame, since the set, and particularly Evan Webb's suicide machine, was very good indeed (in contrast to Tony Gedde's *Bicky* set, which had things clattering on and off at each scene change). Unfortunately, the excellence evident in this area failed to dilute the feeling at the end of the performance that a confidence trick had failed to come off.

So, two local plays: what of their future? It might seem that a musical with such immediately local reference could be of no interest elsewhere. But it's also true that the intense inspection of the local and individual experience is of interest everywhere. *Bicky* doesn't achieve this — yet. However its strengths seem to me worth preserving. They need to be accommodated in a play that is much more tightly structured and that draws the social parallels between past and present much more clearly.

On the other hand a play that draws on a *lingua franca* of cultural reference should be accessible to all. But *Wanda Lust* has

probably ceased its journey: I see no reason why it should ever be mounted again. ■

Simon Garrett

LOVE OFF THE SHELF
Music by Philip Norman, Lyrics by A.K. Grant, Book by Roger Hall
Fortune Theatre, Dunedin.

The New Zealand musical cannot be said to have a long and glorious history — indeed it barely has a history at all — and currently the team of Hall, Grant and Norman, whose first collaboration was *Footrot Flats* (the musical), pretty much have the field to themselves. With *Love Off the Shelf* they have created a musical comedy that is unashamedly lightweight — and also distinctly old-fashioned. More because of its creators' preferences, I would guess, than from necessity *Love Off the Shelf* is a show that depends on the co-ordinated efforts of its cast, rather than on holograms or lasers. With its jaunty, artful songs and the pace of a fast-moving revue, it recalls a show like *Salad Days* rather than *Time, Chess* or the other portentous, high-tech monsters of the current British stage-musical 'renaissance'.

John (Barry Dorking) is a biographer working on a life of a deservedly obscure pre-Raphaelite poet. Assisting him is his secretary, Mary (Helen McGowan). Yoked together on this project, with little enthusiasm for it or each other, the two independently conceive the idea of funding their higher literary ambitions (he wants to be a novelist, she a poet) by writing romances for True Love Publishers. Aided by tipsheets sent by the publishers, which inform them of the various conventions and proprieties they must observe — 'It must be made clear that marriage will be the eventual outcome' — they set to work. At once appropriately stereotyped characters materialize, quarreling with their creators about how they should look, and how their stories should develop. Eventually, by ingenious means, John's and Mary's separate plots becomes mixed up with each other and with the text of the biography. In the end, of course, everything is resolved with multiple marriages.

The affectionate spoofing of stock characters that the audience can easily recognise is skilfully done — Hall and Grant are expert cliché processors — while the endless plotting, which calls for frequent changes of setting as the would-be authors change their minds, or their characters raise objections, gives the show a pleasing busy-ness and buoyancy. Campbell Thomas's production was full of sight gags, some of them in the script, but many more added during rehearsals. The visual aspects of the show tended to overshadow the verbal humour, at times making it seem rather perfunctory or half-baked. But the production was packed so generously with comic ideas that it didn't matter that some of them fell flat, or were lost in the rush.

The strong and balanced cast assembled by the Fortune seized the opportunity provided by their stereotyped roles to overact with unselfconscious gusto. Barry Dorking

BICKY
by John Densem
Court Theatre, Christchurch.
THE MORTAL PLEASURE OF
WANDA LUST
by Stuart McKenzie
Free Theatre, Christchurch.

These two plays are evidently very different but coincidences of time and place make them an interesting pair to treat together. John Densem has written about Professor Bickerton, a long-time resident of Victorian Christchurch who established a reputation as an eccentric socialist, inventor and academic. Stuart McKenzie has been seduced by the possibilities of a name encountered in a Christchurch telephone book and has written a play that explores the relationship between Wanda and Endal Lust.

Both of these men are Christchurch writers. Both plays were first mounted about the same time in theatres at the Arts