

SUNDAY AGE

JUNE 15, 2003

Caravan

Rarely has there been a puppet femme more fatale than Miss Cherry, the character at the centre of Caravan. She takes drugs, she performs striptease at the Devil's Lair nightclub in a Satan suit (and what she does with the devil tail of that suit is nobody's business), she's awful mean, and yet (of course) puppet guys are drawn like moths to her flame. Not that the guys are angels, either; they deal drugs and pop each other off with careless abandon. They drink, they fight, they cuss. Paul Newcombe and Nancy Black's script for this "bloody pulp fiction" is set in all the classic places: the seedy dive, the carnival caravan, the garbage-filled alley. All are suggested with miniature sets and atmospheric lighting that give the production an unmistakable film-noir look. The puppets themselves are moved by means of little handles, and the puppeteers (Rod Primrose, Vanessa Ellis, Rinske Ginsberg and Paul Newcombe) are part of the show, although they seem almost to disappear as the lurid action of the play develops. But at least part of the attraction of Caravan comes from watching them at work. The manipulation of the little figures is a complex art, worth seeing for itself. Other effects are achieved by means of projections and shadow play (one of the sex scenes is reminiscent of Austin Powers), and there is suitably moody music by Ben Grant. Caravan also has some funny moments, mostly to do with animals, particularly the dogs and cat, but the whole show is fun, working off a familiar set of noir stories and characters, but giving them a contemporary twist. It would be heartless to say that some of the performances are wooden.

Bill Perrett