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Mankind's dark side exposed

By Chris Boyd

Caravan, by Black Hole Theatre

Directed by: Nancy Black

Where and when: Dante's, cnr Gertrude and Napier streets, Fitzroy, until June 29

Reviewer: Chris Boyd

THERE's something about the scale of this show and the design of the ugly and all-too-human puppets that allows us to see mankind for what it is: the sum of its bodily functions and animal urges. The show begins with a tiny wood-and-wire mutt spraying its territory. It lifts its leg in time to the sound of a creaking hinge. Then come the humans: a stripper, a strong man and a spiv dealer who peddles miracle cures. We watch their little acts of seduction and sex, of posturing bravado, petty cruelty and violence with a god-like dispassion. The dolls are as grotesque as their actions, as ugly as the dead souls they hide within. First we watch with curiosity. Then admiration. Then awe. The plot is little more than a meaningless and randomly violent sequence of collisions and transactions. Just like life. We try to impose some kind of order -- a trajectory -- on it. And fail. But still we watch, rapt.

The company modestly describes its ``effects" as ``low tech". An overhead projector, for example, is used to show lantern slides. But the imagination and vision shown in the use of those effects is incalculable. Awesome.

This is not just a clever, adults-only puppet show, though it uses every trick in the pop-up picture-book. It's a dark parable about the greedy, violent, venal animal that man is, in a godless world.

Nasty, brutish and short as it is, Caravan is exceptionally fine.

Every single element -- from models and props through to the astonishingly evocative sound design and original music -- slots in tightly to make a detailed and utterly engrossing whole. A magical whole. Don't miss it.