

## Down The Lawson Track

A Celebration in Song, Music, Poem and Stories of the Great Australian Poet and Writer Henry Lawson (1867-1922)

*Down The Lawson Track* is an engaging presentation of music, song and the spoken word that was devised by Martyn Wyndham-Read to celebrate the work of the great Australian poet and writer Henry Lawson. It catches and holds the attention of the audience by winding into a continuous performance several themed threads of songs, poems and stories drawn from Lawson's acute observations of life in the Outback.

Lawson's many writings were published in Australia over the forty-year period centred on 1900. Although the conditions and circumstances that faced the working man and woman in the Outback at that time were unrelentingly harsh, his tales are full of gentle humour and affection. They are inspiring as often as they are sad and, whether as poetry or prose, were written in a very approachable style. Martyn has selected with great care from this wealth of material to assemble a well balanced show that more than justifies its description as a Celebration.

In order to ensure that the threads do not break or become too entangled, we are guided through the show by a narrator. Shirley Collins introduces each piece and applies her gentle authority with perfect timing to ensure that the flow is not interrupted by applause when spoken word segues into song or tune. Lawson's stories are read with great skill by Pip Barnes, whose energetic delivery and credible accent are perfectly suited to the task. He has worked with Shirley in a similar way in several other projects, including *America Over The Water*, and their comfortable partnership adds much to the enjoyment of *Down The Lawson Track*.

So far as I am aware, Lawson was not a musician; yet the show contains a great deal of music. Many singers have written tunes for his poems, Martyn among them. The setting for *Reedy River*, which closes the first half, was made by Chris Kempster who introduced Martyn to Lawson's work more than forty years ago. Of the other twelve songs, five were given tunes by Martyn and four use tunes described as traditional.

Although the show is fronted by Shirley and Pip, the musical accompaniment and occasional interludes provided by No Man's Band add the essential component that binds all together. Iris Bishop (concertina and accordion) Gary Holder (bass) and Jackie Oates (fiddle) use their prodigious talents to help shape the mood as the threads of humour, despair and tedium intertwine. As might be expected, Martyn sings most of the songs himself, demonstrating acute sensitivity and respect for the theme of each poem. Consequently, it came as quite a surprise when Pip sang *The Good Old Concertina* when I first saw the show at Cheltenham Folk Festival in February 2008. He's a fine actor and reader of prose and poetry, but his singing then was, to my ear, a little hesitant. When I saw the show again in December, in more intimate surroundings at Haddenham, I was struck by how much his confidence and intonation had developed. His spirited rendition suited to perfection the light-hearted story that preceded it.

I have no hesitation in recommending *Down The Lawson Track*. It is a pleasing, entertaining and thought-provoking show appearing equally at home on a big stage or in a smaller venue.

Jack Crawford