



PICTURE: KEN MALLEY

Vasso Kalamaras, centre, with director Boris Radmilovich and The Bread Trap cast members Vivienne Garrett and Marta Kaczmarek.

Stubbed out lives

FORTY years ago the now forgotten Manjimup tobacco industry collapsed when the major cigarette manufacturers looked overseas for cheaper leaf.

It was an early example of globalisation but it left a feeling of disappointment and bitterness among the 250 or so families that relied on the industry for their livelihood.

There was no government compensation or protection and no hand-outs to help the workers move on to other industries.

Among those displaced by the economic crisis was Vasso Kalamaras and her husband Leon, who had been part of an extended Greek family that had worked the tobacco farms of Manjimup since the 1930s.

Kalamaras had spent the first 10 years of marriage at Manjimup from the early 50s, working hard among the migrant families that made up this sector of the South-West community.

She was so embittered by what was seen as the betrayal of the farmers by the tobacco industry that she sat down and wrote her play, *The Bread Trap*.

The backdrop was the collapse of tobacco but Kalamaras — who had always been an enthusiastic writer while growing up in Athens — was determined to write a play about the survival, resilience and the sense of community that emerges from the migrant experience.

In creating her characters she was expressing the hopes and fears of migrant families who had come to a new country to re-establish their lives.

Kalamaras originally wrote *The Bread*

Trap in Greek and it was to be 20 years before it was performed. That opportunity came during a Greek theatre festival in Melbourne in 1981 when the play won first prize.

Another 20 years have passed — and *The Bread Trap* finally comes to the Playhouse Theatre from July 13 in an English version produced by a group of WA actors in association with Black Swan.

Kalamaras has become an award-winning writer since those early days in Manjimup, but she is clearly excited that her play will at last be seen by Perth audiences.

Neither has it undergone much revision since it was first written, and time seems to have hardly softened her own sense of betrayal at what happened to the Manjimup tobacco families, who included Italians, Yugoslavs and other ethnic groups as well as the Greeks.

"I wrote it in anger because I wanted to say how badly I felt about the experiences of that period," she says.

"Everyone felt depressed and humiliated when the tobacco company Rothmans refused to buy any of our crop," she says.

"They had decided it could be bought more cheaply from Rhodesia, or by setting up tobacco farms on the eastern coast of Australia."

There was a further humiliation for the tobacco farmers when they had to bear the expense of having their unsold crops burnt under the eyes of customs officials in Perth.

Kalamaras says the title *The Bread Trap* is symbolic of workers who come to a new

country to put bread on the plate for their children.

But when their dreams are shattered they feel trapped — they can no longer go back to their own country and their future in the new country is uncertain.

In Kalamaras' case the family moved to Perth where her husband trained as an art teacher and spent the next 30 years as a lecturer in sculpture at the Claremont School of Art. Vasso continued her own career as a writer while teaching modern Greek at Perth TAFE.

Her plays, prose and poems have been published in Greece and Australia and in 1990 her Fremantle Arts Centre Press collection of stories, *The Same Light*, won the WA Premier's Award for fiction.

The Bread Trap is being directed by Balkan actor-director Boris Radmilovich, who says the play has a wonderful Chekhovian feel for the sense of change and the dynamics of family relationships.

"There is the richness of family experience and the sense of pride that comes from never willing to accept defeat; in that sense it is very like Chekhov."

The Bread Trap features Vivienne Garrett and Polish-born actor Marta Kaczmarek as farming neighbours, with George Shevtzov, Travis Cotton, Dawn Yates and Nick Yaksich.

It runs from July 13 to 28 at the Playhouse Theatre.

Ron Banks