

## GREEK-AUSTRALIAN ODYSSEYS IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD

By Dr Maria Shevtsova

### **Days and Nights with Christ and To Traverse Water** by IHOS Opera, Australia

IHOS Opera ('Ihos' means 'sound' in Greek) was founded in 1990 by composer Constantine Koukias and Werner Ihlenfeld in Hobart where they staged **Days and Nights With Christ**, Koukias' first operatic piece. American visual artist Ann Wulff joined them for the work's presentation at the Festival of Sydney in 1992. **To Traverse Water** was mounted in 1992 at the Abel Tasman Festival in Hobart. The work was then performed in 1995 in an enormous disused wharf at the Greek Festival of Sydney, where it was bought instantly for the 1995 Melbourne Festival. **MIKROVION, Small Life**, an epic opera on AIDS, was sung in concert in one of Hobart's main wharves in 1994. It is now being prepared for a full stage version.

The site of performance is crucial to IHOS operas in that they are conceived for immense spaces. In other words, performing site and space, performance form - musical and theatrical - and performative process - instrumental, choral, visual and of movement - are totally interdependent. The large scale of the whole makes it hard to repeat beyond a set number of performances blocked together. This is why IHOS works slot in so well into the structures of festivals, which, indeed, is where they have been mostly performed to date. Furthermore, they also need the financial structures peculiar to festivals, which allow for 'one-off' extravaganzas here and there (when budgets are not concentrated on several expensive shows for the prestige and profile of the festival in question.) And, apart from these factors, IHOS operas have a ceremonial aura about them, which is enhanced by the pilgrimage spectators have to make to see them. This is a continuation of the sacred journeys, the journeys of devotion, established way back in the nineteen sixties and seventies. Think of Robert Wilson drawing audiences to Shiraz, or of Ariane Mnouchkine creating something of a shrine at the Cartoucherie de Vincennes in Paris.

Or take Peter Brook at Persepolis, or in stone quarries outside Avignon, and, for that matter, outside Perth and Adelaide when his company performed in Australia.

For all their ceremonial atmosphere, though, operas by Koukias are rooted in his profane experiences as an Australian-born son of Greek immigrants to Australia. It is not that Koukias wishes to present 'the immigrant experience' to a country increasingly aware of its multicultural population and of the issues of ethnic and cultural difference, injustice and exclusion involved in any multicultural situation today. He aims for something far more straightforward, which is a group of vocal and visual images inspired by autobiographical moments, but that he lets free. In their release through the various forms they adopt in his operas, these autobiographical sources take on not so much an impersonal or even 'universal' significance as a collective one, the particular actions performed acquiring a wider, general frame of reference. This is true even of **Days and Nights with Christ**, which has intensely personal meaning for the composer since its principal character, a schizophrenic, is modelled on Koukias' schizophrenic brother. It is all the more true of **To Traverse Water** which concerns a young Greek woman's departure for Australia and her settlement there. Her tale is loosely based on that of Koukias' mother. Direct reference is made to his mother at the end of the show when a slide picture of her appears, along with a tape of her voice intoning an old village song. Spectators are not told who this aging woman is. But then they do not really need to know since she is an archetype and her story so like the story of countless women of non-English speaking background coming to Australia.

**Days and Nights with Christ** is for four solo singers, who sing in Greek, and a dancer - Christ - whose movements, although choreographed, are not obviously 'dancey'. A battery of musicians, electro-acoustic instruments, winds and brass stand on a podium close to the audience. Placed in this way, they enter the circuit of energy binding spectators and performers. The spectators are seated in tiers opposite each other, mirroring each other, as the Christ figure between and below them mirrors them all.

Despite the seemingly endless space which the production as a whole occupies, the work generates an extraordinary degree of intimacy - due in large part to the way emotion is deeply internalised in it, this introversion working very subtly on the spectators' feelings and perceptions. Christ, too, turns the agony of

He is a modern Everyone, infinitely alone and infinitely vulnerable as he choreographs deliberate, almost hypnotic, dance-like movements whose rhythms do not always harmonise with the music. Christos Linou, who performs the piece (his homonym giving a wry twist to the name of the work), is made small as he crosses the huge empty space around him.

Or else he comes back to his normal size when he crouches and slides in hundreds of dead leaves on the floor near the spectators, or when, towards the close of the performance, he is bathed by his mother who sings a refrain rather like a Greek Orthodox chant. Her voice and gestures are charged with pain and compassion. By this stage her refrain has become the signature of the composition.

Religious allusions like these are echoed elsewhere, notably by an upside down Christ made tiny by the expanse of space between the spectators and the far end of the wharf. The inverted Christ, who also recalls the hanged man of the Tarot - and he appears to music from the Orthodox Easter liturgy - is made tinier still by the mountain of several tonnes of salt on which his cross stands. The effect is searing, as are in their different ways the gigantic blocks of ice at the extreme opposite end of the salt mountain, the installation made from children's chairs drawn up and down on pulleys, the robot-well that continually pours water out of buckets, and the piles of eggs that make an ethereal sculpture and somehow refer to the eggs of the resurrection of Easter. Large as they are, these constructions seem like markers on the horizon and only assume their real dimensions when spectators walk around them after the show.

There is no unambiguous conclusion, however, to this time spent with a figure who combines sex and gender and is male and female in one. His-her personal alienation becomes, throughout the course of the performance, a metaphor not only for metaphysical or spiritual isolation, but for collective social and cultural displacement. A sign appears at the end of the performance suggesting that healing may be possible for the multiple wounds that are suffered by all those whom this vulnerable Christ metonymically represents. The sign comes in the form of a stupendous angel who is blown in, at the far end of the wharf where the salt mountain stands, by a machine making wind on the docks. The angel trails a huge, white parachute billowing behind her. As the doors of the wharf are noisily opened one by one, the sky and the seagulls outside are open to view: outside and inside space are joined. The angel comes closer and closer - a splendid soprano called Penelope Bruce - and gives Christ a small key which may, or may not, open some door to salvation.

This theme, the theme of a search for liberation from the suffering engendered by alienation, displacement and exclusion, of whatever type they may be, returns, although not in quite such a tragic vein, in **To Traverse Water**, which Koukias essentially staged as well as composed. (It reappears in darker mode, as far as can be ascertained from its concert version, in **MIKROVION, Small Life**.)

The audacious beauty of **To Traverse Water** comes from its perfect blend of music, operatic singing and folk song, drama, dance, light sculpture, art installations and film, the whole creating a hybrid genre, a unique piece of performance theatre that defies standard artistic labels.

Let us keep, though, the 'Opera' part of IHOS' name on the understanding that we are talking about a new kind of opera rather than a traditional form of it, and that this new opera, in its process of mixing and merging, is breaking the boundaries between all forms. Perhaps the most appropriate reference for illuminating what IHOS and Koukias achieve in **Days and Nights**, but especially in **To Traverse Water**, is none other than Robert Wilson, the wizard of hybrid genres if ever there was one.\*

The opera's narrative is presented in a simple, montage structure. Part One is set in Greece, Part Two in Australia. Despina, the heroine of the story, and her parents, friend Galani, a young boy and a Greek Orthodox priest move slowly in and out of the shadows and among several large white rocks etching out a barren landscape. Despina learns that she has been promised in marriage to a young Greek immigrant in Australia. Part One ends with a highly stylised, minimalist dance in slow motion. This is Despina's journey, hand in hand with Galani, towards a mysterious destination suggested superbly, psychodelically, by patterns of light moulding movement and space, by masses of water that begin to flow over the floor, and by the 'ballet of the boats', as this segment is entitled. The lights by Jan Wawrzynszak go from blue to gold

It is a stupendous sight. Meanwhile, the instrumentalists play full blast, filling the entire wharf with sound as Despina and Galani's silhouettes diminish and then vanish altogether in a sudden black out.

Part Two opens with familiar, all-Australian icons that clamour for immediate recognition - and get it, judging by the audience's laughter. There is a Hills hoist (a square, large metal contraption for hanging clothes), a backyard lawn, a barbecue, a white outdoor table and chairs, a concrete footpath that the married Despina hoses down, and a lawn mower, start-up rope, and smoke, and all.

The spectators, who sit for the Greek section at one end of the gigantic wharf, come in, after the interval, to the extreme opposite side, their physical displacement echoing the passage of time and the change of place anticipated by the action before the interval. Moreover, the break for the audience is a symbolic break referring to Despina's cut with her familial, geographic and cultural ties. In other words, the audience, traverses water with her and re-enacts, with her, the great mythical journeys of antiquity, the odysseys that are a process of both internal and external discovery.

Yet the double division occurring in unison, in the narrative and in space-time, does not indicate a clear-cut separation between the past and the present, or the 'old' and the 'new' worlds. The whole of Part Two is interspersed with visual or vocal signs recalling Despina's father or mother, or the boy who hopped on the rocks in Greece, or the priest with his cross and incense. It also gives sharp flashes of the nineteen fifties/early sixties in which the section is situated, such as the rattling train rides Despina and her husband Tasos took to work and the factory machines whose super-size turning wheels and pistons kick and bang. These images are projected in black and white on to the side wall of the building, or on to the screen that drops down momentarily for cinematic purposes. Or else pictures are shot on to the white sheets that Despina and her Greek-Australian women friends hang up on the hoist and take down again - a gendered division of labour laconically perceived. Apart from their narrative function and the details of social history that they provide, the flashes back across Despina's years in Australia are pieces of her memory of herself and of who she has become.

Tasos, for his part, fiddles with the lawn mower or the barbecue. Towards the end of the show he stacks crates of apples (a possible joke, since Tasmania is the apple state of Australia!) His unexpected fit of violent rage abruptly changes the mood of the scene, highlighting through its mixture of anger and resignation the feeling of emptiness that haunts the entire performance, and lingers on, despite the numerous funny, often surrealistic bits of collage that make up Part Two. For all its mod cons (relative to the fifties, of course), the Australia captured by the production is not a new, but an old land. The cry of the sea gulls linking Despina's departure from Greece to her arrival in Australia is counter-pointed by the voices, rhythms and sounds that could well belong to the indigenous peoples who lived in the country long before any white settlement. One ancient land meets another.

The sense of antiquity is conveyed, above all, through the music and lyrics - through how pagan-like wailing, Greek folksongs from time immemorial, Byzantine chant and fragments from Greek Orthodox liturgy connect to each other.

Texts from the Old and New Testaments and the I Ching are sung in Greek, although phrases are translated into English in the surtitles which, because they are at eye level, are not so much surtitles as an integral component of the artistic organisation of the whole. But the ancient world of sound, which is also revived through a set of Uilleann Pipes, blends in with the contemporary world of electronically-treated acoustic instruments, harmonium and percussion, and a electric violin played stunningly. All of it put together sustains a work that strongly resembles a ritual.

The ritualistic tone is set in the opening scenes through how water is poured from jugs and fire wheels spit and fizzle; through how candles are lit and held, and a trunk opened suddenly, letting out burning flames, like spirits from Pandora's box. It is there, too, in the dignified, deliberate Greek dance steps made by Despina's father. These are steps she and Tasos will repeat in Part Two. Ritual and magic are always evoked by the lighting, whose extraordinary colors, some of which merge into mist, make of **To Traverse Water** an enigmatic landscape and seascape, and also other-world, all in one. No spectator who has seen

Despina's odysseys from Greece to Australia and in Australia as a Greek are culturally specific. Nevertheless, give or take significant variations on immigration as a historical phenomenon, Despina's relocation is a cameo of the experiences of the various ethnic communities who migrated to Australia in the nineteen forties and fifties. Koukias is well aware of the common points between these different groups.

Just the same, what makes his opera like no other performance work to which the term 'multicultural' might be applicable in Australia today, is its being an artistic genre like no other, a genre that, by stripping away all sorts of formal conventions - as well as aesthetic expectations on the part of spectators - undermines social and cultural clichés and gives a fresh, clear view of immigrant realities.

Koukias' work comes out of - in fact, could only come out of - a society conscious of and accepting its ethnically plural composition, even if this consciousness and acceptance are a mere twenty and some years old. Its power lies, however, in how it manages to avoid the stock-in-trade of multiculturalism as fostered officially by such funding bodies as the Australia Council (i.e. the national policy-making and funding organisation for the Arts and where, in my view, 'ethnicity', tends to be equated with folklore, exoticism and, inevitably, with revamped 'orientalism').

'Multiculturalism' meaning formal recognition of the democratic rights of non-Anglo/Celtic groups is certainly a necessity, and a far cry from the barbaric discrimination and stigmatisation of all such groups, most of them working-class or lower middle-class, that had occurred systematically, even institutionally through government and similar bodies, until as late as the nineteen seventies. Unfortunately, some of the class-and-race inequality and condescension of earlier years has survived in the more humanitarian outlook holding sway today: it is evident, for example, in the way the term 'ethnic' applies in everyday language, let alone in official discourse, to all non-Anglo/Celtic peoples and never to those of Anglo/Celtic origin. Koukias' work has side-swiped the negatives hanging on to multiculturalism as a societal fact, as well as to multicultural policy at the governmental level whose forays into quick-fix pragmatism serve some one else's political expediency but end up by damaging the very groups who are supposed to be empowered by it.

By the same token, it contravenes the view of theatre artists who identify multiculturalism exclusively with oral history and 'real-life' situations and lock it into slice-of-life naturalism or sentimentalism, both of which, albeit unintentionally, reinforce the 'folklorico' or other-as-outsider (quaint when not threatening) value system that vitiates the positives of multiculturalism.

\* On the subject of Wilson and hybrid genres, as I understand this concept, see my 'Isabelle Huppert Becomes Orlando' (which is accompanied by my interview with Huppert who plays the solo title role) in *New York TheatreForum* 6 (1995), p.69 -75.