

# Total theatre in a vast cargo shed

Aboard the ships of the First Fleet travelled an entity more powerful than the wretched souls who were to create the Australian nation.

A whole culture was to be transplanted to a continent believed to be devoid of one and, for more than a century, a version of England's green and pleasant land was to be found in this far-flung outpost of Empire. Modern Australia is very different, thanks largely to the cultural variety which has accompanied vast waves of immigration.

We are certainly the richer

## hobart

TO TRAVERSE WATER  
(Constantine Koukias)  
In modern Greek  
IHOS Opera

Narrator ..... Donald Bate  
Despina ..... Nina Paleologos  
Mother ..... Irene Slad  
Spirits of the Hoist ..... Penelope Bruce,  
Debra Pidgeon, Donna Salter  
Boy ..... Tim Eland  
Artistic Director ..... Constantine Koukias  
Visual Director ..... Ann Wulff  
Dramaturg ..... Julio Wyszowski  
Princes Wharf Shed No 1, Hobart  
Thursday, November 5

for it but few of us, unless we are immigrants, think of the emotional price of multiculturalism. Constantine Koukias' remarkable opera *To Traverse Water* explores this cost in an astonishing and unforgettable way.

A vast cargo shed on Hobart's waterfront — through which many immigrants may themselves have arrived in Australia — was the venue for this striking production.

Koukias is obviously at ease with scale, and every part of the enormous shed was used. Part 1, set in Greece, has the audience seated at the Battery Point end of the shed; symbolically Part 2, set in Australia, required the audience to emigrate to the City end. Radio microphones and amplifiers supplementing the power of the voices, and complex cinematography projecting images of distance. This is a total theatrical experience.

The work relies heavily on imagery for its effect. The element which binds the loosely articulated scenes together is water. The work begins with the young woman, Despina, filling an urn with water, till it overflows. Rowing boats suspended from the roof symbolise passage over the water, their oars moving as if pulled by phantom oarsmen, while flickering floor projection and smoky mist generation complete the image.

Despina's suburban backyard — luxuriant with 400 square meters of turf and complete with barbecue and Hill's Hoist — depends on water, and she wastes no time in hosing down her patio. Her daughter is entranced by the Spirits of the Hoist but she breaks the spell by washing her daughter's hands and face before placing the mark of the cross on her forehead.

A row of beer casks explode into a mist, and a mobile windpump clanks its way around the shed. As the opera ends a beautiful fountain display

engulfs her lawn. As obvious as these images are, they highlight the elemental barrier between Despina's old and new cultures, and thus contribute to her emotional turmoil.

Koukias' score is a blend of pre-recorded noises — I particularly liked the sounds of the forest birds in Part 2 — with simple and repetitive melodies inspired by the Byzantine chant of the Greek Orthodox liturgy. The words combine ancient and modern Greek writings, Biblical passages, Greek folksongs and fragments from Divine Liturgy, mortared together by fiery and penetrating music which makes much use of percussion, electric violin, harmonium and Uilleann Pipery.

The subtle lighting plot changes one's focus from the front of the arena to some massive part of the set in the distance, from a whitewashed wall to a pyrotechnic device producing a shower of golden raindrops. Computer graphics and scanned images project phrases from the lyrics or show enormous cogs dependent and depending on one another for their harmony of action. The visual effects are stunning.

In contemporary music of this sort it is sometimes difficult for the human voice to compete with the electronic wizardry going on all around, but I felt that Koukias had been very careful with his singers. Their simple melodies and symphonic harmonies contrast sharply with moments of cacophony, adding meaning to a flow of events which at times seemed out of human control.

Donald Bate as the Narrator led the audience through the experience with calm authority. Irene Slad's Mother of Despina was sweetly sung, though without the anguish which I felt the music demanded. Penelope Bruce, Debra Pidgeon and Donna Salter's Spirits of the Hoist were nicely realistic, and gave the action a homely touch. Tim Eland's boy soprano was touchingly poignant, reminding Despina of reality. Despina, a non-singing part, was movingly portrayed by Nina Paleologos.

*To Traverse Water* is a strong and absorbing piece of total theatre which will make all native-born Australians consider the plight of the immigrant and the tension which underpins our national multiculturalism. It further enhances the reputation of IHOS opera.

— MICHAEL STODDART