



Magical: Ann Wulff's stage design

THE word opera simply means "work", and what a piece of work we have with IHOS Opera's *To Traverse Water*.

Imagine a gargantuan industrial shed, perhaps 100m long, maybe more. The girded roof soars at least 20m above. Pulsating sounds echo around the space; figures appear and disappear through the gloom, singing of separation and loss; from time to time a fire flares up, reminding one of ancient rites.

Indeed, *To Traverse Water* is rather like a ceremony, one that is devastating in its restraint, simplicity and gravity. A Greek woman reluctantly accepts that she must leave home and cross the ocean to Australia, and she does so.

That's the extent of the narrative, and it's one achingly familiar to many, many people who came to this country from Greece and elsewhere, leaving behind family and culture for an unknown land.

IHOS gets right to the heart of the matter in a spare but resonant production that uses singing, the spoken word, music (live and recorded), drama, movement, art, light, the resources of technology and, above all, vast tracts of space, to insinuate itself into the mind and soul. It demands your surrender,

TO TRAVERSE WATER

IHOS Opera. Composer-artistic director: Constantine Kouklas. Production director: Werner Ihlenfeld. Design: Ann Wulff. Choreography: Christos Linou. Music director: Imogen Lidgett. With a cast of 15 singers-actors and six musicians. Wharf Shed 8, Pyrmont, for the Greek Festival of Sydney.

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and deserves it.

The first part is located in Greece, for which the audience is seated at one end of the shed. For the second part, in Australia, the audience is taken to the other end, where the bare rocks of Hellas give way to a Hills Hoist and a bleak square of lawn. These are emptinesses of a very different kind, the first filled with the spirits of the Greek past, the second inhabited by "spirits of the hoist" who may or may not be benign.

The simplicity is, of course, deceptive. This is an extremely sophisticated production devised and performed with an audacious and exhilarating disregard for what might be considered the "rules" of drama.

It must be seen to be believed, for example, how a director could place two performers in semi-light more than 50m away from their audience and know that they will hold it.

To Traverse Water draws gracefully on Greek myth and music, giving a compelling sense of emotions and connections that run very deep and have been shaped by centuries. There is less satisfaction in the Australian section, perhaps because the arid suburban life so marvellously evoked is just that — arid and unforgiving.

Ann Wulff's design is full of magic and mystery: rowing boats hang upside down from the roof and perform their own little ballet; a chest is full of fire, from which candles are lit; the defining journey across water is indeed made through water. Best of all, everything works in service of the piece rather than for show.

All the performers, too, create a whole, with ravishing singing matched by intensely honest acting.

Getting to the venue is a journey in itself (it's just near the Maritime Museum) but worth it. Dress warmly and take a cushion.

By the way, it's all sung in Greek. It doesn't matter one bit.