

# Immigrant tale on epic scale

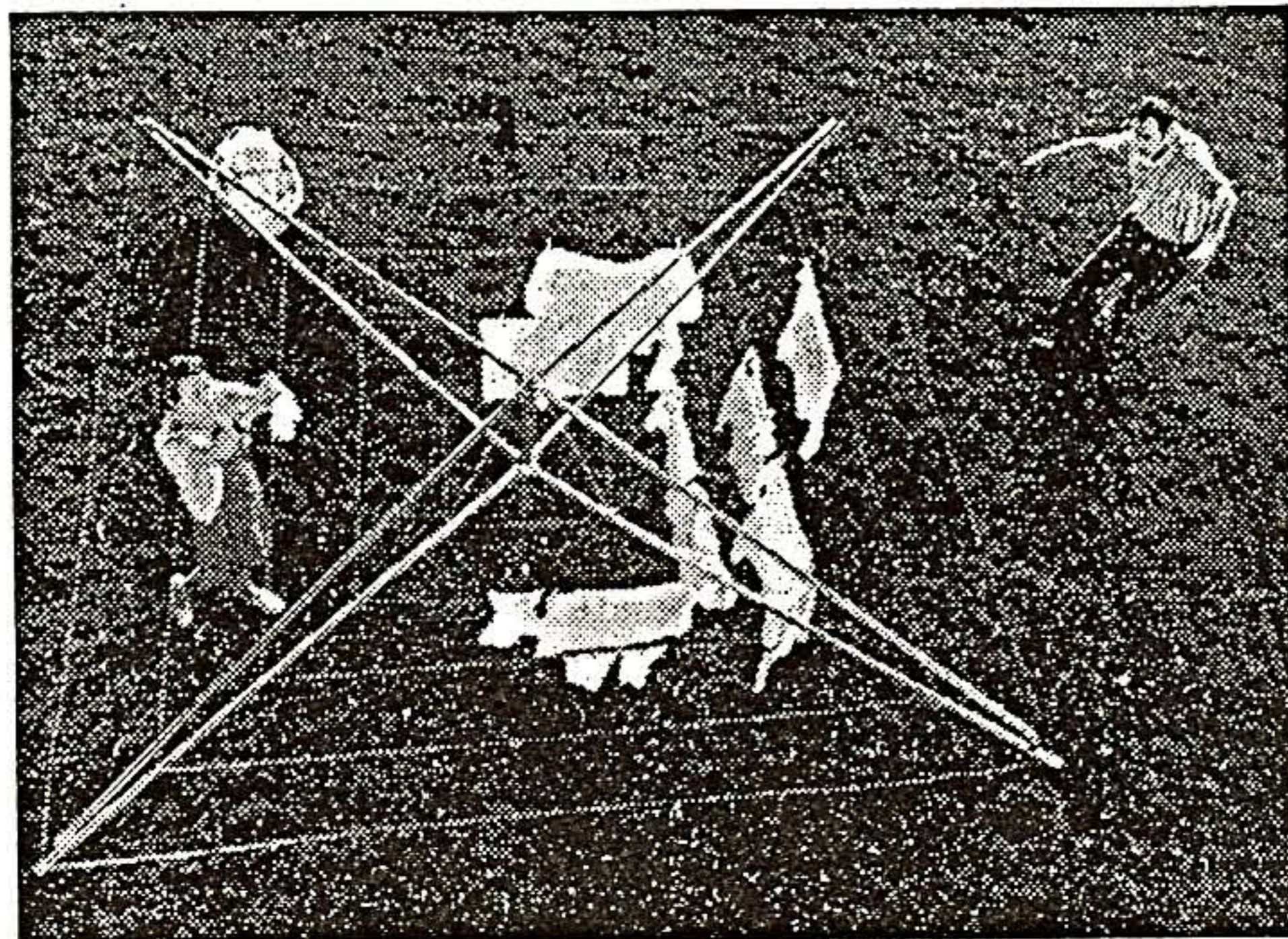
## THEATRE

BY JAMES WAITES

To Traverse Water, Wharf Shed 8,  
Pyrmont, March 15

ONE of the jobs of the critic is to identify talent, especially in those instances where the artist's output is challenging or odd or so new that the general public may feel out of their depth. Constantine Koukias is such a person and seemingly so able to access his imaginative gifts that international recognition is virtually inevitable. What's remarkable is that Koukias can not only compose marvellous music-theatre, he is equally proficient in the skills required to get this work staged.

Born in Sydney, Koukias has made his creative presence felt from a base in Hobart after graduating from the Tasmanian School of Music in 1985. His company, IHOS Opera - Experimental Music Theatre Troupe, also features major creative input from Werner Ihlenfeld (production director), Ann Wulff (designer and visual director) and



Caroline Kirk and Darrell Holmes in *To Traverse Water* ... an extraordinary example of cutting-edge music theatre. Photograph by JAMES ALCOCK.

Christos Linou (choreographer), among others.

Koukias first brought his company to Sydney in 1992 for a season of *Days and Nights with Christ*, a study of schizophrenia in contemporary opera form. This

was set across 100 metres of space in a disused warehouse in Pyrmont. It was a fabulous debut. This time Koukias returns to an adjacent warehouse with a new work, *To Traverse Water*, this time about the migrant experi-

ence of a young Greek woman. While the work unravels a little towards the end and does not quite achieve the emotional reach of *Days and Nights*, it is still an extraordinary example of cutting-edge music theatre.

Koukias should probably be first recognised as a composer. In this instance the long sweeps of sound, founded in traditional Greek folk and religious music, are everything we no longer expect of contemporary music - a profound spiritual quality, lyrical, emotional, entrancing.

At the same time it's high-tech in the combination of live sound (even Uilleann Pipes) with pre-recorded tape. Electric violin, harmonium, percussion and trombone feature.

If that's not enough, Koukias has the managerial skills to pull together a vast team of diverse talents of high order and with them create truly epic stagings.

Ann Wulff's contribution in this area must be noted. From the roof hang a half-dozen fishing boats, mechanised oars sweeping the air, a potent image holding this story of human transport together. At every level, the

aesthetics are pushed as high as they can in an audacious statement of contempt for what normally passes for the art of theatre in this country.

It would be wrong to suggest Koukias has reached his zenith. In fact, it's only fair to him to see the huge works we have already seen as impressive beginnings. Some may find fault in this or that, in creative overexertion, or momentary loss of control of the large staging elements. But that would be to niggle. Koukias and his team are already producing what is as compelling and original as it is vast in scale.

No review of an opera of this standard should be allowed to close without mention of the performers. Nina Paleologos is eloquent in her playing of the young woman, Despina, desperate not to leave Greece and - for all the joyful Aussie barbecuing - stuck in a desperate marriage when she gets here. The role of Despina's mother is sung by soprano Penelope Bruce, her father by bass Yiannis Fraggos, her friend by contralto Rachel Wenona Guy, the village priest by tenor Donald Bate. In Australia,

Despina shares her backyard, a great stretch of lawn and inevitable Hill's Hoist, with mezzo sopranos Caroline Kirk (Antigone) and Melinda Risby (Filio), with vocalist Mishline Jammal (Agathi). There are children's roles as well, including a boy soprano, played alternate nights by Buster Dixon and Kerry Andre Palavacino.

Personally, the trance-like music was the highlight of the night. That is perhaps just as well for an event billed as contemporary opera. What's exciting is to experience such good music so innovatively and powerfully staged.

If this review tempts you to go along and see for yourself, that's the point. But be warned: finding Wharf Shed 8, Pyrmont (at the end of Foreshore Road) is no easy matter. Fifteen minutes should be added to planned travelling time to account for finding yourself in the dead-end of the delivery area of the Novotel or perhaps sailing over the wrong section of the freeway into Glebe or unwittingly back into the city.