

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Womadelaide 2004

Botanic Park

This year was going to be a testing one for Womadelaide. It was the beginning of annual stagings of the event and the first time, since inception in 1992, that it had been re-incorporated into the Adelaide Festival. Some of us predicted that this might be a bumpy change and we were quite wrong. Attendance figures show that Womad this year has been the best ever with figures of 70,077, up by several thousand on 2003 and around six thousand from 2001.

It is certain proof of the durability of the event and the loyalty of its crowds. It is also tribute to the immutable rituals that have been established and the painstaking way they have been maintained. It is said that some 80% of ticket purchasers have been to previous Womads. With such a high rate of recidivism must also go a very strong vote of approval.

There is a very conspicuous Info booth on site at Womad and I noticed it had very short queues. The reason is that people know the drill. Where so much else in our lives is tinkered with and changed, often for the worse, the landscape and protocols of Womad are kept intact.

The continuing availability of Botanic Park remains a boon - green and cool when the rest of the city is parched, its expanse and its ample shade make Womad a continuous picnic. Then the layout itself remains the same. Stage One is where it was last time as are the other five - even if the Dell continues to suffer sound bleeds from the adjacent venues. The catering outlets, the stalls selling clothes and paraphernalia and the CD tent are all present and correct, and then over there are the toilets in a line along Plane Tree Drive with, as someone has already chided the organisers, not enough disabled facilities.

The secret of Womad's success is that with initial subsidies from the Festival it established high production values that it has been able to maintain. The numbers attending are strong but they are not overwhelming to the site and the level of passenger comfort means that the mood is mellow and living is easy. The sound quality at the stages is excellent - again Dave Arbon and his team have done well - and with a more sedate audience

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demographic many do not feel any great compulsion to crowd the front rows, preferring to spread out among the trees for what is often a better earful even if the view is somewhat distant.

The music program in 2004 has also been a strong one. From the ceremony of the Kaurna welcome from the Paitya Dancers to the final set from Yousou N'Dour Womadelaide this year seemed to show a stronger than usual affirmation for traditional culture. There is also a tension in the program between innovation and popular style and esoteric and regionally specific work. In the former category we have had, in recent times, well-known Australian acts like The Cruel Sea and Paul Kelly, as well as international hip-hop, rap and electronica - Fun-Da- Mental, the Afro-Celt Sound System, Los de Abajo all come to mind.

But, for me, those moments that we savour as Womad memories - in past years supplied by the likes of violinist L Subramaniam, duduk player Djivan Gasparyan and the tango stylings of Cesar Strosio - are often the quieter, lyrical ones. In 2004 such indelible sounds came from tabla player Wakir Hussain, a legend with cross-over jazz musicians such as John McLaughlin and Jan Garbarek and equally at home with Indian drum masters and sarangi player Sultan Khan. Their recital at Stage Two on Friday night was at the Nusrat hour - that point late in the night when the crowd is particularly focused in on music that is often unfamiliar but powerfully affecting. No-one who heard Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan performing at one o'clock in the morning will forget that experience.

A different traditional sound is Eliza Carthy singing from her recent *Anglicana* release. She has a cheery stage presence to match her gift for melancholy as she performs *As I Walked Out One Evening* and *10,000 Miles*. Her three man band provide a nimble but subtle frame for McCarthy's evocative fiddle playing and her bell-like singing. Other women singers at Womad also excelled this time - Algerian Souad Massi has a fine voice even if her repertoire is more reflective of her Parisian base and Greek singer Savina Yannatou is a most interesting performer with songs ranging from the Greek Islands, Lebanon, Sardinia, Bulgaria and Provence. Accompanied by a gifted band, Yannatou displayed amazing vocal skill and sensitivity to her diverse repertoire. She remains one of the undervalued acts this time - have a listen to her CD *Terra Nostra*, beautifully recorded by the prestigious ECM label.

The workshops provided new insights yet again - Egyptian Australian musician Joseph Tawadros gave an oud recital under the Moreton Bay figs on Sunday afternoon and livewire Algerian singer Hamid Baroud coached a group of audience volunteers in an improvised performance which revealed that the best musicians are often the most generous teachers also.

Womadelaide promises variety and nuance and this year delivered with Abdullah Ibrahim and his trio bringing modernist piano jazz to the event for the first time. The low volume levels muted his performance on the Saturday night but not the Sunday - overall, longtime and new fans were well pleased. Tinariwen from Mali must rate as the strangest act - dressed in Tuareg robes and playing riffs fascinatingly close to Bo Diddley, they also contributed to Wakir Hussain's All Star Jam which, thanks to the subtlety of Hussain and Sultan Khan's musicianship, turned an uncertainty into a highlight.

And this year's headliner really was a headliner. Youssou N'Dour who astonished crowds in 1992 did so again this year. With his sprightly band, Super Etoile de Dakar, this brilliant Senegalese singer and composer brought together the proceedings to make the final night one of the strongest in a long time. Youssou N'Dour makes exciting music which is also full of shading and lyricism. The traditional talking drum is equally valued to the electric instruments and the range of songs encompasses not only the top 10 hit *Seven Seconds* but the traditional strains of *Li Ma Weesu* from the new album *Nothing's in Vain* and, from 1999's *Joko, Liggeey, Beykat* and his anthem, *New Africa*.

With his haunting vocal range and his commanding presence Youssou N'Dour not only bestrides the stage like a prince, he is an eloquent spokesman for change. It is fitting that he should strike the last notes of the evening. Walking through the park, past the hypnotic fire installations of La Compagnie Carabosse, while he finishes his final encore, you could not wish for any more.