

# Murray Bramwell's Reviews

*Appeared in - The Adelaide Review*

*2002 Adelaide Festival, Previewed by Murray Bramwell*

The call came late on Friday afternoon for the briefing at noon on Sunday 6 January. The much-awaited revamp of the Adelaide Festival program had finally taken place, less than two months from the Opening Ceremony. It is a sunny day outside but our tiny media contingent of not more than a dozen people is led, in somewhat clandestine fashion, through the dressing room catacombs to the stage of the Playhouse which has been blacked and draped in heavy curtains. With the just-printed - and not-yet-to-be-perused ! - orange Festival programs set out before us, we are seated formally at tables arranged in a square under lights. This is for the benefit of the TV camera people, I realise, but it is a sombre setting and if I weren't afraid of courting ill-luck in a theatre, I might have asked whether this was, in fact, the set for the Scottish play, and if a spiky-haired and bearded Californian Banquo was likely to appear, dagger-like, before us ?

The greeting from the organisers is most cordial, of course, but energies are low. The presentation is brisk and there is a sense of keeping to time, although, frankly, there is not a lot to get through. This is not like the Robyn Archer marathon at Charlicks or the Kosky hype from the Hills hoists.

No sooner has Artistic Director, Sue Nattrass got things moving and she is handballing the presentation to Karl Telfer, one of five Associate Directors present - of the ten listed in the Program's staff list. It is his task, with his sister Waiata, to take us through the Kaurua Palti Meyunna, the Opening Ceremony featuring Indigenous people from around Australia and South Australia, as well as representatives from Aotearoa New Zealand, the Zulu Nation of South Africa, Gyuto Monks from Tibet and the Zuni people from New Mexico. It sounds like it will be a majestic event, proceeding from the four outlying squares into Tandanyungga (Victoria Square) for a Spirit Fire ceremony and a dreaming named for an esteemed Kaurua ancestor, Tjil-bruke.

Other events, collectively entitled Home/Lands follow over eight more nights, each with a theme such as Holding Your Ground, Carrying Country, Inheritance, Cross Connections and Resilience. Reminiscence, it turns out, is a free outdoor screening of Storm Boy, Heaven is Here is the ASO under the stars with the Adelaide Chamber Singers and the Philharmonia Chorus performing, under the baton of Richard Mills, a new work, Star Chant by Ross Edwards. Take Me Home is a closing concert of country

music which is scarily short on line-up details - so far listed are Seaman Dan from the Torres Strait, the Drowners from Mt Barker and Todd Williams from outback NSW. Country fans may need more blandishments than this.

Sue Nattrass passes the task to other Associates - Amanada McDonald Crowley discusses media and digital arts initiatives such as UK unit, Mongrel who have been working with Aboriginal schools in SA. The program of new films, Shedding Light which includes Rolf de Heer's *The Tracker*, Tony Ayres' *Walking on Water* and the now-titled *Australian Rules*, based on Phillip Gwynne's novel *Deadly, Unna ?* is also outlined. Lynette Wallworth, another Associate, introduces *Intertwine*, the program of weaving exhibitions and workshops and Gay Bilson discusses *Nourish*, her innovative Queen Elizabeth Hospital program, as well as *The Edible Library*, a presentation by Spanish culinary librarian Alicia Rios.

It is abundantly clear that, in Sue Nattrass's words, the vision for the 2002 Festival was started by Peter Sellars and was being carried through by the Associates. The fundamentals remain - a program strongly focused on notions of indigenous and geographical identity, one that celebrates the local against the international, and privileges the broad community as opposed to culturally specialist minorities. It is still the Sellars concept but there is no Sellars to provide the narrative, the *spiel*, the dazzling effervescence which will not only glue all this string and balsa together but actually make it fly. The Associates have been left an unenviable task and deserve as much support and reassurance as possible.

Ms Nattrass presents herself graciously - but at arm's length. She carries the title of Artistic Director but her demeanour is more like that of an appointed administrator for a grounded airline. She announces additions to the program - eighteen more events than previously. The first is the confirmation of *El Nino* with film direction by Peter Sellars. It is unclear how much opera, and how much oratorio we will get for a price not much less than *Writing to Vermeer*. I hope it doesn't turn out to be *El Nino*- the karaoke Director's Cut. As for Sellars' likely return - Sue Nattrass says Peter is hopeful. We won't hold our breath on that one.

Much of the newly announced repertoire is singular. Literally. Solo shows abound. It may not be the sound of one hand clapping but it is mostly one hand performing. Brenda Wong Aoki unravels cross cultural San Franciscan ancestry in *Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend*, BJ Ward does *Stand-up Opera*, Patrick Dickson channels David Hare in *Via Dolorosa* and, scripted by the

talented Guy Rundle, Max Gillies channels just about everybody in his sit down banquet of impersonation and impertinence.

In dance, Ros Warby performs Solos, in Delirium, Helen Herbertson is joined by collaborator Trevor Patrick. And the new big ticket item - New York legend, Barbara Cook's Mostly Sondheim, with accompanist Wally Harper, plays two shows in the Festival Theatre. It is big on appeal but the asking price is a reminder of the currency woes for festival programmers shopping in the northern hemisphere.

Looking at the line-up it is disconcertingly ironic to see one show called Skin and another Bone. In fact, though, while it is still must be said this Adelaide Festival is disappointing in scale and conceptual quality that does not mean there will not be many marvellous and unexpected experiences. I am looking forward to the Home/Lands events - although the limited ten day span means that the additional nightly listings are now in competition with those already scheduled. Train Dancing from Red Dust Theatre in Alice Springs promises raw new work, Black Swan's The Career Highlights of Mamu brings together the considerable talents of Scott Rankin, Trevor Jamieson, Andrew Ross and others and MAU Dance's Bone Flute directed by Lemi Ponifasio comes highly recommended and will, with other contributions from Aotearoa New Zealand, enrich trans-Tasman connections at a significant time for both countries.

Other treasures include the return of the gifted photographer and master of understatement, William Yang, and Brian Lipson's account of Victorian eccentric Francis Galton, A Large Attendance in the Antechamber. US hip-hop exponents Chosen will pick up threads in the Cross-Connections program and for those who like to go where the wild roses grow, Nick Cave, Blixa and the other bad seeds will play two nights at Thebarton.

Adelaide artists will benefit from a profusion of residencies, community programs are sprouting around town and especially at the Parks, there are a heap of free exhibitions including the those of the work of Gordon Bennett on 9-11 and the exquisite painting of Ian Abdulla, and I haven't yet mentioned Writers Week, with the likes of Jim Crace, Patricia Grace, Swedish crime writer Henning Mankell, Michael Ondaatje, Jane Urquhart and many more.

I have had plenty to say about the prospects for this festival but it doesn't mean I don't value its objectives or that I don't have great hopes for its

success. It is thirty years to the month since I first came to Adelaide and those balmy March nights are among my first impressions on arrival. I remember the 1972 Festival when Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti shared their fee with a group of Indulkana songmen in the Town Hall and Scott Hicks was there tape-recording the entire proceedings. The whole city, it seemed, was given over to festivity, and peaceful, tolerant and inquisitive community. That, for me, then and now, was at the very centre of what Don Dunstan and others had imagined for South Australians. Not just some of us, but all of us.