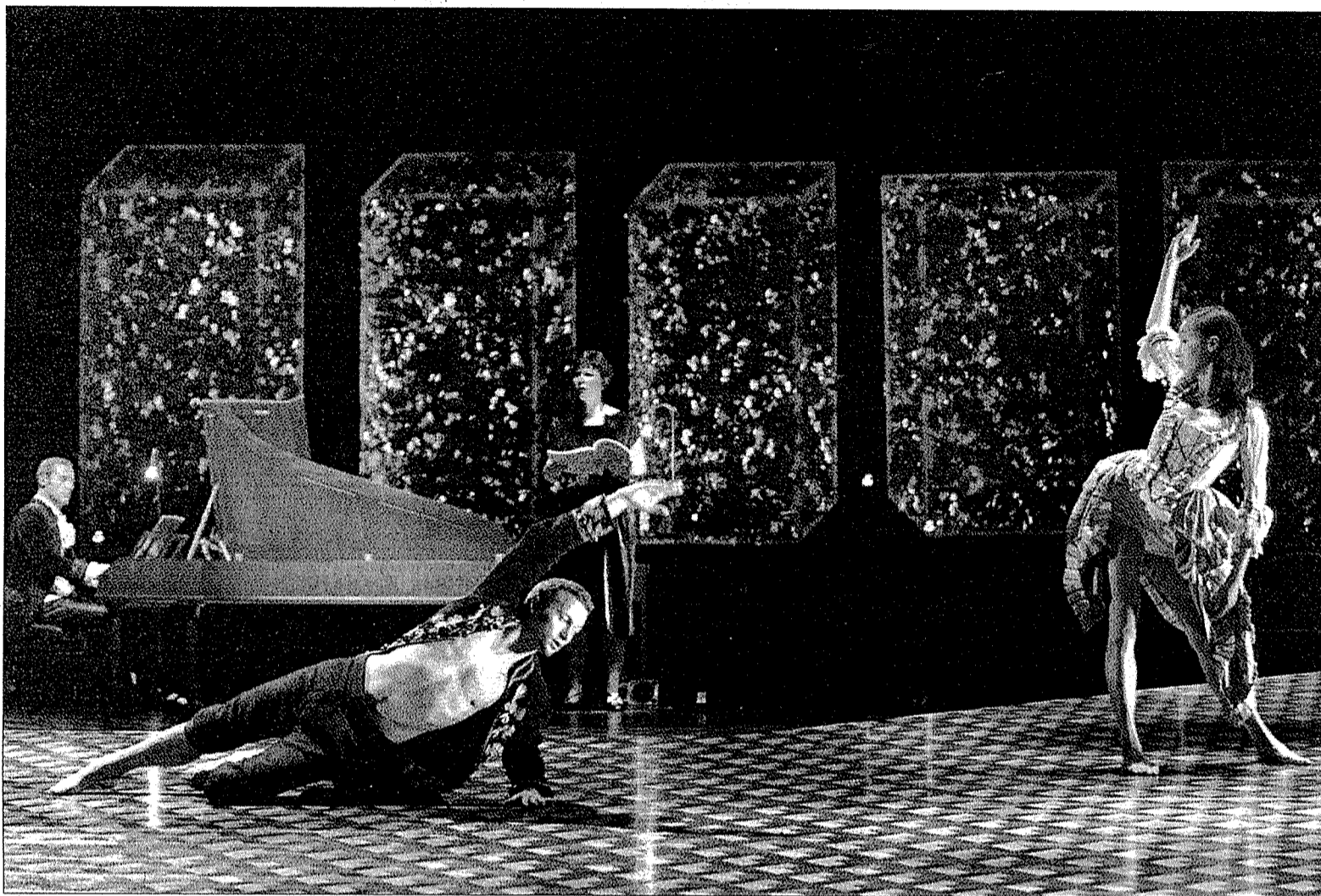


Arts



Clockwise from left: *Mozart Concert Arias*; *Provenance*; *Once*; and *Winterreise*. PICTURES: ANGELA WYLIE; MIAF



Straining to be heard

Age critics look back at 18 days of Robyn Archer's third and final Melbourne International Arts Festival, which celebrated "voice". As with her previous festivals, 2004 clashed artforms — this time with mixed results.

'THE AGE'
OPERA 25 OCT 04
JOHN SLAVIN

It seems appropriate for a festival dedicated to a celebration of the voice that Robyn Archer's third and last should conclude with Schoenberg's mighty homage to Wagner, *Gurrelieder* (see review page 9), which requires an expanded orchestra, six soloists and four choruses. But how has the festival interpreted that subtitle "the voice"? Fast and loose.

At one end of the scale is the popularist *Yodel Mass* in the sanctuary of St Paul's Cathedral. At the other end is the lone figure of choreographer, Anna Teresa De Keersmaecker, improvising a homage to 1960s icon Joan Baez called *Once*.

Call me unpostmodern, but too often access to the performing voice in this festival has been cluttered or, as in this case, tenuous. I don't think De Keersmaecker's self-involved dancing had much to do with Baez or the spirit of the '60s.

Nor did her company, Rosas, have much to do with Mozart in *Mozart/Concert Arias*. Her dancers appeared to be the most expensive aerobics class in town, almost completely overwhelming the arias sung by three fine Mozart

interpreters. Often events optimistically advertised as opera were no such thing.

Too often the human voice was marginalised by dance. Interpretative singing as in *Mozart/Concert Arias* and William Kentridge's *The Return of Ulysses* was cluttered by trendy mixed media.

A beautiful artist such as Romana Basso singing Penelope in *Ulysses* was restrained in her contact with her audience by having to direct her expressive interpretation at a very inexpensive puppet.

For me, the best moments of the festival occurred when the voice was given a simple space from which to communicate. *Winterreise* would have been dull without Simon Keenlyside's moving interpretation of Schubert. Mikel Rouse created a complex chamber opera overlaying his own voice electronically in *Failing Kansas*, while David Hare brilliantly demonstrated in *Via Dolorosa* how the speaking voice can communicate.

Janet Cardiff's installation at ACCA, *Forty-Part Motet*, is a lovely homage to the solo voice embedded in the collective.

On the edges and not in the big productions, this festival fulfilled its promise to give the arts a voice.

DANCE
HILARY CRAMPTON

Dance was a low priority this year. The two major dance events were set to Mozart arias and Schubert lieder.

In Anna Teresa de Keersmaecker's *Mozart/Concert Arias* dance was clearly the priority, although the singers were drawn into the actions in limited ways — a flirtatious glance, a caress of a passing dancer. While the words told of love and loss, the tone was flippant and the dance only seemed to connect with the singers occasionally. Movement was idiosyncratic with gimmicky actions that bore little relevance.

When movement ideas ran out, the dancers resorted to circular runs delivered with a presentational flourish. While the singers were first rate, the music was the loser.

Why then did *Winterreise* prove so moving, given the minimalist approach adopted by choreographer Trisha Brown? Perhaps it was because there was respect for the music, the intention of the composer and the positioning of the singer, Simon Keenlyside, as the protagonist, with dance shadowing his journey — allowing the audience to build the links between accompaniment, action and song. These two works are enough to provoke questions

about theatre and how the elements can contribute to or detract from the coherence of a performance.

Fractured, eclectic post-modernism has its own relevance to the kaleidoscopic rush of our everyday lives, but sometimes we go to the theatre to find coherence. Movement was an element in many festival performances.

Sometimes it deserved greater prominence, as in *The Call* where it could have carried the intent of Martin Flanagan's book more powerfully.

In David Chesworth's *Cosmonaut* it served merely as filler, contributing little to the unbearably limited content.



MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

THE AGE IS A FESTIVAL SPONSOR

THEATRE
HELEN THOMSON

This festival of the "voice" had its fair share of theatre, but none that had an overwhelming impact.

Two eagerly awaited return visits — from Ronnie Burkett and his marionettes and Robert Lepage and his Ex Machina company — proved to be less exciting than was anticipated.

This is not to suggest that Burkett's *Provenance* and Lepage's *The Busker's Opera* were not fine productions, but that their subjects were perhaps less compelling than the earlier work seen here.

The sophisticated multimedia take on globalisation's effects on First and Third worlds, *Alladeen*, was thoroughly pleasing, demonstrating, as did *The Busker's Opera*, how expensive stage technology expands artists' imaginations.

Offstage, high up in the flats of Fitzroy's Atherton Gardens public housing estate, a rather curious inclusion in the festival program proved to be enormously popular.

Outside In took groups of people to visit flats occupied by some of the many cultural groups who have moved there since 1960. Their stories, and that of the estate itself, were heartening and optimistic, a

potent rebuke to harsh policies concerning asylum seekers.

The Belgian production *uBung*, by Josse De Pauw, was another experimental multi-media work based on an interesting idea — child actors playing out an adult drama shown on film behind them. But in practice it failed to develop very far beyond its original contrasts.

In the end, the best theatrical offering had not a hint of technological whizz-bangery, no scenery, no action, and not even a professional actor — David Hare's *Via Dolorosa* was the stand-out production. Here was drama reduced to its most basic form, that of a man up on stage simply speaking to his audience, but its dramatic impact, its urgent subject, its sheer humanity and intelligence, were superb.

Music round-up PAGE 9

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