

MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

Singing their country back

MUSIC
DIRTSONG

The Black Arm Band, State Theatre, Arts Centre, October 23

Jessica Nicholas Reviewer

I FELT the first tears pricking my eyes less than 10 minutes into *dirtsong*. Lou Bennett was singing the show's title song in her native Yorta Yorta, accompanied by the voices of four other indigenous women. Behind them, on the giant screen that served as a backdrop, bare feet slowly pounded the earth and kicked up soft clouds of dust. The effect was ritualistic and deeply moving, creating a potent metaphor for the life force that springs directly from the soil.

Even before the music began, it was abundantly clear that *dirtsong* was much more than a concert. From darkness, a single pool of glowing light emerged as Bunna Lawrie (in traditional body paint) parted a mound of red dirt. It was as though he were uncovering something sacred to share with us, in a spirit of generosity and trust.

Archie Roach was the first singer to arrive, his vibrato-laden



Mark Atkins, didgeridoo, at the dress rehearsal for *dirtsong*.

voice awakening an eagle that hovered in the sky behind him. He sang (in English and Bundjalung) with eyes closed, fists clenched at his heart. We could all recognise the profound significance of this event — for Roach, his fellow performers, and perhaps for us too.

Kutcha Edwards offered another highlight with an aching heartfelt song expressing the loss — and retrieval — of

his cultural and familial ties. Paul Kelly cut a stark, defiant figure as he sang *This Land is Mine*, while Jimmy Barnes lent his rough-hewn vocals to an eel-hunting song (in Peek Whurrong language) with rousing support from Edwards, Shane Howard and electric guitarist Lee Morgan.

Every aspect of Steven Richardson's production is imaginatively conceived and seamlessly

integrated. The songs — performed in 13 indigenous languages — are buoyed by the superb musical arrangements, which in turn are energised by the ravishing images on screen. The staging is strikingly effective, each featured singer walking from the back of the stage as if treading an ancient path.

The 16-piece band remains ensconced in shadows, but its presence is keenly felt as the

players conjure up subtly atmospheric drones, lush orchestral scores or powerfully insistent rhythms where the entire band pulses like the heartbeat of the land.

It is language, though, that illuminates the core (and primary purpose) of *dirtsong*. This masterful evocation of the spirit of country was inspired by the words of Alexis Wright, whose poetic text occasionally appears on screen.

Sometimes the phrases seem mystical and majestic. "I am country. Listen to me!" The words seem to echo through the vibrations of Mark Atkins's didgeridoo. At other times, the text is more pointed: "It is a crying shame to see the country like this", underlining the sentiment of singer Emma Donovan's plaintive lament.

Many of the indigenous artists were singing in their ancestral language for the first time. You could see the emotion in their faces, hear it in their voices, and feel their hearts opening — and ours, too — as they reconnected with their language, and the sense of identity and belonging that comes with it.