

News, Analysis and Comment

REVIEW: Murundak, Sydney Festival

by **Rebecca Clarke**
Arts Hub
Thursday, January 24, 2008



It's not every night that Jimmy Little welcomes you into his extended family. Last night Jimmy and a group of Australia's most talented singers and story-tellers did just that, literally, through words spoken... and figuratively, through their every nuance of gesture and presence.

murundak is a special show, an occurrence even... an event.

On the way in to the concert hall I heard an aboriginal bloke say "I reckon there might be a bit of a gathering tonight" (or words to that effect) and I was immediately aware that *murundak* was going to be different to your standard concert at the Opera House.

The set-up was standard... Seats for the eleven piece orchestra, scattered microphones for the seventeen aboriginal singers who'd come before us throughout the night and a giant screen for rolling historic footage.

As a white Australian I thought I was a little bit aware of the Aboriginal activism that started in the 70s but it wasn't until coming face-to-face with those images from the heart of the community and the clashes that I really felt that history as someone's reality.

I was lucky enough to be sitting in a row with a lady a few seats down who provided film commentary in a side-whisper to her son, "That's Charlie Perkins"...and many, many names that I couldn't quite hear or recognise, but wished I could.

Later on I heard that lady sniffle as I sniffled when Kutcha Edwards, one of the stolen generation, brought out photos of his mum and dad, putting them upright behind him as he sang *Is This What We Deserve?* for his cousins in the audience. This was the softest moment of the concert, ironic coming from a man with a presence as big as a mountain. From that point on the sadness sort of snuck into me and remained as a tender thing throughout the night.

Predominantly the artists, including the aforementioned Jimmy Little and Archie Roach, Ruby Hunter, Emma Donovan, Lou Bennett and Ursula Yovich (to name just a few), seemed resolute, fierce inside, celebratory and hopeful. The mixture of faces, from the stalwarts to the newer artists was such an exciting, essential part of the evening.

When they all eventually got on stage together to sing Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly's classic *From Little Things Big Things Grow* it was a magic moment - as if the song was rising out from a two hundred person choir, supported, of course, by the lady a few seats down from me. The mastery and the polish of those special moments took the evening to another level.

I suddenly understood Artistic Director Steven Richardson in his program notes where he said, "The genesis for *murundak* grew from a belief that contemporary Indigenous music captures an elusive, essential heart of Australia." There was something elusive being captured in the space - a kind of long-buried identity - a meeting of country and contemporary, old and new, a caring way, a family way, an up-front-ness, deep pain, big humour, humbleness... spaciousness.

For instance... picture this... the whole team have walked off to upstanding applause for their energetic rendition of *Treaty*, the audience are calling out for an encore and Ursula Yovich enters to sing *Over the Rainbow* with singer and muso Stephen Pigram, in a little floppy hat, plucking his ukulele behind her. Ursula is radiating hope right to the back of the concert hall, pure and strong, and behind her on the screen a little aboriginal boy is looking down the barrel of the camera. He's got a cap on sideways to the right. He looks at us, cheeky. He waits... then he turns his cap to the left... and the room erupts with gentle laughter. Ursula's voice floats atop. It's simple and it's good.

The singers and songwriters of the Black Arm Band (the 'singing version' of Bangarra Dance Theatre) performed murundak only two nights at the Opera House as part of the 2008 Sydney Festival, but my hope (and the hope, I assume, of the cheering, stomping, whistling audience) is that they continue to grow and garner support as leading lights for our country and culture.



© 2008 Arts Hub Holdings P/L ABN 68 118 852 181