

**MIAF 2008 Website: Latest Issue
Reader Review: The Black Arm
Band, *Hidden Republic***

Firstly: a black armband is traditionally a symbol of mourning that crosses many cultures.

Secondly: The Black Arm Band project has taken its namesake from a term coined from our 'academic' history wars and describes a view of history that focuses on the dispossession and genocide of our (Australia's) Indigenous population.

Thirdly, finally, and more importantly: this concert, *Hidden Republic*, by The Black Arm Band collective was undeniably 'deadly'.



The concert subverts the term, not by denying the tragedy and the mourning - but by transforming and transmuting it into an act of artistic resilience that in this performance seamlessly accelerated into a reconciliatory overdrive.

This concert made me question the division between low art and high art. It made me think about the necessity and the brilliance of our popular culture. It is amazing how a simple concert such as this got me thinking about so much. It also made me angry about the Great Australian Cringe. There was no place for it in *Hidden Republic*, so aptly titled.

Too often our cultural riches seem to always lie hidden under the ground, not only because they are taken for granted, but also because I believe that most of the time our artistic prospectors are not looking in the right places to extract their gold and diamonds. But this time the prospectors did hit gold. Eureka! And all the time it was right under their feet.

Hidden Republic confirmed my belief in the richness of Australian culture and the talent it possesses. Throughout the year I go to gigs in all sorts of places: dingy pubs, small bars, community centres and folk festivals. I get to see and hear some amazing talent. This very same talent was showcased at the State Theatre with the production values they deserve. The spirited playing of the musicians and the arrangements were great. The sound was great, as was the lighting, the direction, the song selections, the concept, the design and the choreography. As for the singers and the songs, they weren't just great, they are among our finest and they were DEADLY.

The performing personnel was huge: around 65 singers and musicians on stage. The 20 singers, supported by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, a jazz ensemble and a recorder player, glittered like valuable gems. Clichés such as 'it is difficult to single any one out' are totally irrelevant in this instance. The problem is: how can a reviewer begin to appraise each of the 20 singers and their songs without needing space for at least another 2000 words?

Here I must make one small exception.

The concert was interspersed with the poem 'Song of Hope' by Oodgeroo. Jimmy Little's profound and gentle reading of the poem combined with his charismatic presence was moving and simply beautiful, imbuing the whole experience with a cathartic wisdom that only the heart can comprehend.

Yes, the context of our historic shame and the movement for reconciliation was one powerful player in this show. But it was only one among many others. Ultimately, the talents of the singers and their songs took their rightful place in the limelight and inspired us all.

*To our father's fathers
The Pain and Sorrow;
To our children's children
The glad tomorrow*

Review by Irine Vela
Photo: John Sones