

## Spirited folk a call to arms

John Slavin, Reviewer  
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### MUSIC REVIEW

#### MURUNDAK

**The Black Arm Band,**

**Hamer Hall, October 27, 28. Running time: 75 minutes**

If the Melbourne International Arts Festival began with a whimper it ended with a big bang.

Up on stage at Hamer Hall on Friday night were some of the greatest performers this country can presently boast of, members of what is described as black folk protest, a phenomenon as significant to the national cultural life as Aboriginal art. The title of the concert "murundak" means "alive", but I prefer the translation "living now".

Presenter Rachel Maza described the music the performers were about to sing as equivalent to that which came out of the American civil rights movement but I think that, in spite of a shared orientation towards political struggle, this galaxy of stars and styles was like listening to a gathering of Baez, Dylan, Judy Collins, Eric Clapton and Odetta.

To complicate the simile, singers including Shane Howard, Kev Carmody, Joe Geia, Liz Cavanagh, Kutcha Edwards, Archie Roach, Stephen Pigram and Ruby Hunter were backed by an 11-piece band under the direction of Aaron Choulai as loud and brassy as Stan Kenton's '40s ensemble.

Sometimes this largesse of sound worked against the effectiveness of the pain and protest in the lyrics. It was ensemble work that provoked over-amplification, while soloists such as Joe Geia, resplendent in the colours of the Aboriginal flag, sang *Yil Lull* brilliantly. No sound was ever sweeter than Shellie Morris' yearning version of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, accompanied by Broome maestro Stephen Pigram.

There were familiar classics like Yothu Yindi's *Treaty* but some songs needed to be placed for a non-black audience. Good background notes by Sian Prior were in the program but on stage there were no names, introductions or explanations of the songs' background.

Behind the performers, director Steven Richardson and his visual director Natasha Gadd projected film clips and stills that poignantly illustrated the major moments of the Aboriginal civil rights struggle. Many songs recalled nostalgia for lost homelands. At this level the concert fulfilled its company's name, Black Arm Band, and was a call for black-white solidarity in the struggle for justice.

Paul Kelly came on to offer support for *From Little Things Big Things Grow*, written by Kev Carmody, but perhaps the outstanding moment of a memorable night was didgeridoo player Mark Atkins' knock-out improvisation evoking the spirit of the land.

# Prizes and party make for fitting end to arts festival

By **GABRIELLA COSLOVICH**  
SENIOR ARTS WRITER

THEY don't just breed cowboys in Texas — they raise some damn fine theatre directors, too.

None more so than the visionary Robert Wilson, who took *The Age* critics' prize at the Melbourne International Arts Festival on Saturday night for his three-hour spectacular *I La Galigo*, inspired by the epic Indonesian poem *Sureq Galigo*.

*The Age* critics were also compelled to make a further commendation — for Melbourne dancer Ros Warby's intense solo-work, *Monumental*. The honour vindicated artistic director Kristy Edmunds' decision to include her partner, Warby, in the festival program, despite the inevitable grumblings that such a choice would spark.

The festival began three weeks ago with a disturbingly relevant theatre production of George Orwell's *1984* by US theatre group The Actors' Gang, and ended on Saturday night with a euphoric concert of contemporary indigenous music that saw an outstanding cast take to the stage of Hamer Hall.

Performers came together for the finale — among them were Ruby Hunter, Archie Roach, Kev Carmody, Paul Kelly, Shane Howard, didgeridoo master Mark Atkins and the magnetic George Rurrumbu, who strutted the stage like a manic cross between Mick Jagger and Jimi Hendrix, dressed in a pure rock outfit of '70s flares, vest and scarf, in the colours of the Aboriginal flag.

The Black Arm Band concert — two years in the making and celebrating 30 years of contemporary indigenous music — was

a spectacular, moving end to the festival and sent an unmistakable political message.

"Wasn't it a triumph?" asked a croaky-voiced Edmunds, who partied into the wee small hours of Sunday morning to celebrate the close of her second festival.

Audiences gave the Black Arm Band a standing ovation on Saturday night — cheering as concert MC Rachael Maza joked about the support band who failed to show up, the so-called White Blindfold Band, whose members included Keith Windschuttle, Andrew Bolt and Geoffrey Blainey. "Audiences received (the band) so well that you know that something healed, it just did," Edmunds said.

The festival has yet to compile its box office takings, but an extra 3000 tickets were sold this year, partly due to Edmunds' policy of cutting ticket prices by about 20 per cent.

Among the criticisms of this year's festival was that it was too American in its focus (Edmunds hails from Portland, Oregon) and that was too anti-mainstream.

But Edmunds stood by her decision to bring several American groups here, saying it was important that Australian audiences were given a different perspective on the US.

She also defended her eclectic programming. "I will . . . keep standing beside artists who have a lot of integrity," she said. "People can respond how they need to respond to the work, my job is to make sure it's there."

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