

What do you add to the play by setting it to music in an opera?

Richard Mills – I hope the answer to that isn't 45 minutes – the thing for me was it was an opportunity to write a first opera and the thing is that you just generally at this stage of your career do what you're asked to do but the interesting thing for me is that opera deals with the unspoken, it deals with the drama of the passions of the spiritual drama behind the words, it is about how people feel and about translating those feelings into music because if words could do all of that there would be no need for music. So in that sense, it presented a unique challenge to a composer and a librettist, in finding the inarticulate Australian heart and to put it into musical speech.

I think what happened is I went a bit gung-ho at it at the time initially I thought, how can I reduce this by 4/5 and then see what's left and I did that and then I showed Ray Lawler the drafts and I slowly learnt, really really learnt about the play and learnt that I knew really very little, a lot less than I thought I did. It was a matter of bringing the emotional stuff back, what Richard is saying, about the music and the music how it brings to life unspoken interior life, especially the emotional side of things and one of the things that really strikes me now looking back is that this is the 50s, these are people, robust people, that, of course, this is about seven months of sex and I think certainly the music brings those interesting passions to life these things that are sort of off-stage in the play.

What's it like bringing back and revisiting a work that was composed over 25 years ago back to life?

It's a little bit weird – I had a look at it a few months ago and then put off re-learning it until I had to spend two weeks in quarantine here. It's not as bad as I thought it was. I think there are some things at old age you can repent, but you can't undo them, there are some things in it that I guess if I was doing it today I would do very differently but back then I just went about the business of making it work and working with Peter to get the structure as right as we could.

Well, you know I suppose who said I am a better part of all that I have met

That's all that I would say

It's a quarter of a century that it's wonderful cause I mean it had the two outings and they tend to disappear of course. What I was thinking similar to Richard, when I have floated the idea and I have always thought that the music was brilliant and I thought the libretto was the first one I wrote, and in memory, I had sort of diminished it, you know when you sort of forget about something for some years, you know a book, you haven't read it and it's changed somehow unconsciously but then I went to Richard's 70th last year at the Melbourne recital centre and they had the orchestra on stage and as part of that they played two of the big ensembles I was just blown away again at the music so I went and had a look at the libretto and I thought, yeah, that's not too bad. But the music and ensembles I heard last year made me think about how I really would like to hear that whole thing again.

What's it like writing for the Australian vernacular?

Richard I think sort of invented in some ways, singing of Australian strine I think particularly with Emma that was something that really impressed me.

It's the craft of understatement, the opera slips in a very kind of deliquescent way between reality and real-time and what you call meditative time, time outside the normal flux of daytime so that when you have the big ensembles like the duets, the trios, the big broken doll ensemble, the party ensemble, you're not in real-time anymore and that's an operatic convention, you're outside time looking into people's souls, and that's the way the form works – the trick was to find and I think Peter found it very well a translation of the text into a believable vernacular rhythm and those are set very plainly by the composer without artifice so that they mimic the rhythms of ordinary speech

The thing about the libretto is that everyone has a stake in that play. I remember, for instance, I had just done the first draft and I took it around to a friend and he said "you better have that line, that of Emma's when she's sitting in the gutter and someone comes out and says, what are you doing here and she says, what do you think, you know, getting a sea breeze from the gutter?" and that hadn't been in my first draft you have to also, it's a sacred text, you know it's a tremendous responsibility and I didn't take it very seriously, but by that 17th draft, and with Richards help and with Ray, I think it had more in it than it deemed needed to be in it.

I think the thing about it is that this has been such a dark time for the performing arts industry and it's so wonderful we can actually be in a rehearsal room, I mean, you have to pinch yourself to realise, you know, it's getting back to business as usual and that people actually can come to a theatre and it's wonderful that they're actually doing it to see a work that's about us, an Australian work so that's a double felicity.