

## 24th August 2006 Opera Australia: Batavia by Richard Mills and Peter Goldsworthy

***Batavia* by Richard Mills. Libretto by Peter Goldsworthy. Directed by Lindy Hume. Opera Australia. State Theatre, Melbourne, May 11, 2001. Currently at the Sydney Opera House. Season ends August 31.**

In response to [recent chatter and Peter McCallum's review of the 2006 Sydney season \[http://chrisboyd.blogspot.com/2006/08/peter-mccallum-needs-to-get-out-more.html\]](#), here's a review from the archives...

Opera is the last of the theatre arts that aims to paint the biggest of pictures; a medium which habitually tackles humanity's elemental themes: love and death, sex and drugs... and that's just *Tristan and Isolde*. Judging from his article in the Australian Financial Review prior to the premiere of *Batavia* in 2001, Richard Mills is one of opera's True Believers. He knows that it is the ideal medium for a face-off between good and evil.



[\[http://photos1.blogger.com/blogger/7502/970/1600/Batavia\\_Image.jpg\]](http://photos1.blogger.com/blogger/7502/970/1600/Batavia_Image.jpg) But his new opera *Batavia*, as it stands, is anything but the contest between good and evil he claims to have created. It's not even a contest between order and anarchy.

Mills opposes action and inaction. The 'good' commander Francisco Pelsaert loses control because he fails to act. First he is conciliatory with his blasphemous underling, then he is sick with malaria when crunch time comes. The 'evil' undermerchant Jeronimus Cornelisz gains control through decisive and mutinous action.

For *Batavia* to work, dramatically, there has to be a chafing between the two combatants. But Pelsaert and Cornelisz are crucially out-of-phase with one another. The 'good' man has weak beliefs, untested and habitual. The 'evil' man has rational and strongly-held philosophies. The 'good' man has the lazy authority of Church and State. The 'evil' man has the sinewy and potent logic of a free-thinker. They hardly tread the same boards.

But even this potentially rich vein (blind faith versus secular logic) remains unmined. And undermined. Had Mills and his librettist built upon the Cornelisz' 'carpe diem' rationalism, and portrayed his reign of terror after the shipwreck as ideology gone mad, then *Batavia* might have spoken to us all.

Bizarrely, any hint of the actual historical triumph of good over evil in the shipwreck story has been discreetly edited out. Mills and librettist Peter Goldsworthy present the single-father provost Wiebbe Hayes as saintly, but ineffectual. History tells us that the provost not only found water for his children and charges, he battled and finally captured Cornelisz before Pelsaert returned to pass judgement.

Hayes' steadfastness and honour is the telling difference between him and the ship's preacher, who becomes a collaborator in Cornelisz' murderous regime. But Mills and Goldsworthy allow us to believe that the preacher's god forsook him for no good reason. This is a rigged fight. How can we possibly be involved by it, let alone learn from it? The answer, of course, is musically, which is where Bruce Martin (Pelsaert) and Michael Lewis (Cornelisz) come in. The battle of the bass-baritones is a much squarer fight.

Mills gives Martin an ambling, apparently directionless, chromatic line in the *Billy Budd*-styled prelude. He sings an attractive but world-weary melody that degrades into something random, perhaps arbitrary. But always rich. Lewis is lean and hungry, the snake in the dry grass. His vocal line is charismatic, but rarely as alluring as it should be.

The music of *Batavia* is strident and eclectic, with excellent use made of brass (trombones and trumpets moved around the auditorium) and a baroque string trio with bass lute. Mills creates an impressive 3D effect and a real sense of waves crashing underneath us. With so much fire in his belly, it's a pity that the composer's timing is so off. Crescendos are late or quite detached from the action. The scene switches early in the second act are anything but seamless. When menace is required to clinch a dramatic point, on-stage, it is rarely provided.

Neither Mills nor director Lindy Hume give us any insight into the situation Batavia passenger Lucretia Jansz finds herself in. Jansz -- beautiful, wealthy and faithful to her husband in Java -- is brutalised and defiled (reputedly smeared with her own excrement) by Cornelisz and the crew while her maid Zwaantie goes gleefully feral. What happens to the two women in this production, however, is entirely unconvincing. And that is one of the major defects in Hume's ungainly and faint-hearted production.

Yes, Hume is lumbered with an opera conceived and delivered without dramaturgical midwifery, but she singularly fails to give her singers a through-line and her audience a sensible narrative. In the absence of a credible dramatic framework and clear direction, individual performers revert to their preferred and largely incompatible acting tricks. Thus John Bolton-Wood wrings his hands in his big (and otherwise dignified) third act "losing my religion" number while Barry Ryan moons around nobly.

Singing, on the whole is excellent, though Anke Hoppner has too wide a vibrato and too little palate as Lucretia.



David Freeman, one of the world's leading opera directors, was originally lined up to direct this premiere production, but the dramatic assistance he might've provided would have arrived a year or two too late.

**This review first appeared in the Financial Review of May 19-20, 2001.**

Posted 24th August 2006 by [Chris Boyd](#)

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