

ENERGEX BRISBANE FESTIVAL

03 SEPTEMBER – 02 OCTOBER 2004



SANDAKAN THRENODY

Venue Suncorp Theatre
Dates Thurs 16 Sept – Sat 18 Sept
Time 7.30pm

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This festival is an initiative of the Queensland Government and
Brisbane City Council through Major Brisbane Festivals Pty Ltd

A Message from Artistic Director of ENERGEX Brisbane Festival, Tony Gould AM DUniv



I believe that festivals must seek to create opportunities for tolerance and engagement, as they reflect the arts from around the world as well as at home.

We must always provide entertainment for the community, but we have a responsibility to challenge and inspire that same community in many other ways, too.

The arts have become a true measure of humanity, with artistic achievement providing a significant contribution to our stock of human creation and knowledge. There are proven relationships between creative-activity and a productive society. In fact, the greatest civilizations the world has known have placed enormous emphasis on the arts in all their forms.

I've a belief that arts festivals exist for the public good and I have tried to ensure that this philosophy is reflected in ENERGEX Brisbane Festival 2004.

Tony Gould AM DUniv

Artistic Director
ENERGEX Brisbane Festival

ENERGEX Brisbane Festival in association with Melbourne International Arts Festival and The Singapore Arts Festival presents TheatreWorks' (Singapore)

SANDAKAN THRENODY



Director	Ong Keng Sen
Composer	Jonathan Mills
Set Designer	Justin Hill
Lighting Designer/Video Artist	Margie Medlin
Collaborators/Performers	Matthew Crosby, Tim Harvey, Lok Meng Chue, Gojo Masanosuke, Rizman Putra, Kota Yamazaki
Producer	Tay Tong
Consultant/Initial Researcher	Lou Weis
Collaborating Video Artist	Choy Ka Fai
Associate Director	Lok Meng Chue
Soundscape Designers	Steve Adam & Jonathan Mills
Narrative	Ong Keng Sen
Choreography/Text	Matthew Crosby, Tim Harvey, Lok Meng Chue, Gojo Masanosuke, Rizman Putra, Kota Yamazaki
Body Installations	Rizman Putra
Cameras	Choy Ka Fai & Margie Medlin
Recorded Voice (Poem)	Dr Frank Mills
Illustrations	Melvin Chee, :Phunk Studio

Ong Keng Sen on *Sandakan Threnody*

How did it all come about?

Jonathan Mills, the composer, and I first talked about Sandakan in July 2001. We had met socially in Melbourne and we exchanged notes about what we were doing. I told him that I was directing a play about the Second World War and he said that he was also doing something about World War II. Jonathan told me that his father was very lucky to have been transferred out of Sandakan, as the whole POW camp was wiped out (2,000 men). There were only six survivors and they survived because they escaped. Jonathan was writing a new orchestral piece to be performed in Adelaide. I didn't hear about it again until he came by Singapore in the beginning of 2002. He asked if I was interested to direct *Sandakan Threnody*, to translate the 30-minute orchestral piece into a theatre piece. I was intrigued by it and this began the two-year process of searching for funds and looking for festivals to commission it. Ching Lee (from the National Arts Council, Singapore) and Robyn Archer (from Melbourne International Arts Festival) were very open to it from the beginning and we then had to find other Australian partners.

The play deals with the themes of war – why the fascination with war-themed pieces?

My work in the last decade has been concerned about giving voice to the voiceless, to those who have hitherto been unheard. After the War, there has been an obliteration of what happened in Sandakan. Some writers have called it a conspiracy of silence. I tend to see it as several conspiracies of silence, both in Australia and Japan, which have obscured stories of trauma and dignity. So I would like to float these human stories to the surface. And we can see from the stories of the US army in Iraq how power can be abused; societies are still going to war, still fuelling the very human fear of 'the other'. Racial and cultural prejudice is still rife today, waiting to be manipulated by politicians and governments. There is an interesting Australian documentary – *This is Japan* – made during the War, about how the Japanese were allegedly trained to hate from when they were young. Ironically, the documentary also taught Australians to hate the Japanese. I find this material endlessly potent. I know how one can be sucked into it as I can recognise it in the human condition – including myself. So as long as there is war, these pieces are still relevant, to discuss the darkness in our souls.

The body transparent...

There is a scene (Scene 2) that we have made about the transparent body. As the POWs marched on these death marches, they slowly wasted away on the mountain ranges of Mount Kinabalu. They walked 260 km in 17 to 28 days depending on their physical condition. Half to two-thirds of the men died in this manner. We were discussing how, as they marched, they began to defy their bodies in a strange way. As they dragged their bodies through the jungle, many of them were crawling like animals through the thick tropical jungle. They lost the ability to even stand, due to lack of food and the terrible terrain. They became in a strange way 'immortal'. Their physical bodies collapsed but, ironically, I think they were able to 'lift off' spiritually. It is always about how they find immense strength in the worst circumstances.

What or who is a hero?

Bill Moxham – one of the six survivors who came back with post-traumatic stress syndrome and killed himself in 1961? Captain Yamamoto – who was executed at the war crimes trials of Borneo and who said that he would take sole responsibility for what happened? The locals who died, but are not commemorated either in Koya-san, Japan, nor in Sandakan War Memorial Park?

Beauty and darkness

There are also the kabuki scenes in the performance. A male dancer impersonates a woman – the *onnagata* role. This is a symbolic role, of an old woman ravaged by memory: time flashes back into a past life where there is the joy of love and the tragedy of death. The woman is finally transformed into a bird, a symbol of hope for humanity. The kabuki presence is like a gold thread through the tapestry of war and pain. I am interested in the flip side of brutality and violence: beauty. The inspiration for these scenes came when I saw the 2,000 photographs of the POWs who died at Sandakan at the Canberra War Memorial. Some of them were just young boys but all of them were stunning, godlike in their smiles, invincible on the day of their enlistment. The beauty of these boys and the beauty of Japanese aesthetics are juxtaposed in the kabuki scenes, to tell about the waste of war, about the incredible darkness which erupted in Sandakan.

A suspended time and space

I have been fascinated with projecting the play beyond 1945. Two performers play out a scene at the end, which is suspended in time and space. Their antics are watched over by a Hairy Midget, who has danced a duet with the bird of hope, and a Narrator who is now a witness. I call this scene 'the future' – what happens after the War, perhaps when the 'last' Australian meets the 'last' Japanese? They are like the tragic clowns of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* – waiting for war wounds to finally be laid to rest. For perhaps we are still infected by the invisible virus of hatred and fear: the cultural war is still embedded within us, the legacies of the past continue. Ultimately there are three different journeys, which are being woven onstage: the live action, the music and the video. It is my role to pull these three strands together.

Is Sandakan Threnody different from your previous works?

Yes, as it is the first time that the many cultures in my work have significance in an immediate social, political context. I think it is no longer possible to talk about war through one culture. *Sandakan Threnody* is positioned at the crossroads of Japan, Australia and Borneo/Singapore/South-East Asia – the site of the War. It is not a typically patriotic piece. It talks about the descendants, both real (Sue Moxham, Tetsuya Yamamoto, Tim Harvey, Jonathan Mills) and metaphorical, of the War. Working with Tim to trace the past as he remembers his grandfather, a POW at Changi, brought home many immediacies, as did our Labuan-Sandakan-Ranau journey. On that journey, we traced the death-march route which is now a four-hour expressway ride on a bus. We managed to track down four local survivors who are all in their seventies now. Their stories were dignified, confusing and sobering – including the most shocking one, of some starving Japanese soldiers who hung up a white POW and slowly sliced his flesh off to be cooked while he was still alive. This story has now ended up in local mythology. All in all, I feel I have a concrete responsibility towards the past and the future through working with collaborators from many cultures, and I wonder: is it possible to transcend cultural bigotry, which leads to war?

Ong Keng Sen
Director



Creative Team

Ong Keng Sen

Ong Keng Sen actively contributes to the evolution of an Asian identity and aesthetic for contemporary performance. His juxtaposition of different art forms and cultural styles has helped him to create a trademark epic style which has attracted acclaim in Asia, Europe, the USA and Australia. He is also known for 'docu-performances' that explore Asia's diversity and relationship with the world. He is the first Singaporean to receive both the Young Artist Award (1992) and the Cultural Medallion Award (2003) for Singapore.

Jonathan Mills

Jonathan Mills studied composition with Peter Sculthorpe and piano with Lidia Arcuri in Italy. He was Artistic Director of Melbourne Festival (2000 and 2001) and the Brisbane Music Biennial (1995 and 1997). His chamber opera, *The Eternity Man*, was co-commissioned by Almeida Opera and the Aldeburgh Festival, and received a Genesis Prize for Opera. Future projects include a double concerto for piano and violin, a co-commission for Duo Sol with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra and the London Sinfonietta. He is Director of Victoria's Alfred Deakin Lectures.

Matthew Crosby

A graduate of NIDA, Matthew Crosby received a Japan Foundation Fellowship to study Japanese theatre in 1995, and in 2000 received an Asialink scholarship. He has since worked extensively in Japan. In the past ten years he has concentrated mainly on theatre, with numerous credits to his name.

Tim Harvey

Tim Harvey earned a BA in Dance and Drama at Deakin University. He has worked as a performer, teacher and choreographer in Melbourne and regional Victoria. Apart from performing with Danceworks, BalletLab and Shelley Lasica's Plan Protean project, he also creates his own works and facilitates movement workshops in schools.

Lok Meng Chue

Lok Meng Chue has been involved in nearly all of TheatreWorks' productions, both locally and overseas, as a performer, director, stage/production manager and workshop coordinator and administrator. She is currently an Associate Artistic Director with the company.

Gojo Masanosuke

A leading dancer/choreographer of the Gojo school of Japanese dance, Gojo is one of Japan's most celebrated 'onnagatas' (female impersonators), earning high praise for his dramatic expressiveness in a wide range of classical roles. He also engages actively in the creation and the performance of new works.

Rizman Putra

Rizman Putra is the co-founder of multidisciplinary art collective, Kill Your Television (KYTV). As well as performing, he works on collages, installations and drawings as the primary force behind his performances. He is also a singer/songwriter for Singapore indie-rock band, Tiramisu.

Kota Yamazaki

Celebrated Japanese dancer, Kota Yamazaki, is best known for devising choreography combining the essence of the Japanese avant-garde *butoh*, classical ballet and American modern dance. His work explores new forms of human relationships and community. His last choreography was with the Senegalese company, Jant-bi.

Justin Hill

Scenographer and architect, Justin Hill, is a board director of TheatreWorks. He studied architecture at the University of Adelaide and has since worked extensively in opera, musical theatre, and drama in both Asia and Australia. A founding member of TheatreWorks, he has designed more than 20 productions for the company.

Margie Medlin

Margie Medlin studied Visual Arts in Sydney, lighting design at Yale School of Drama, and Scenography and Advanced Computer Applications for Theatre Design in London. She holds an MA in Interior Design from RMIT Melbourne. In addition to her work for theatre she is a film and video installation artist, exploring the interrelations of dance and the moving image.

Choy Ka Fai

Choy Ka Fai graduated from LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts with a Diploma in Fine Arts, and works with video installation, short films and theatrical performances. Video is a point of collaboration in producing interdisciplinary works with visual artists, dancers and musicians. He is a core member of KYTV.

Steve Adam

Steve (Stelios) Adam studied composition and computer music at La Trobe University, Melbourne. His electro-acoustic works have been broadcast in Australia and performed in Europe, North America and Asia. He has taught sound, composition and technology at various institutions in Australia and in 1995 established the new programs and technical facilities in composition and music technology at Monash University, where he is a PhD candidate.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra is Australia's largest and busiest orchestra. Many of the world's finest artists have appeared with it, including George Szell, Sir Thomas Beecham, Otto Klemperer, Igor Stravinsky, Lorin Maazel and Charles Dutoit. Highlights this year include Verdi's Requiem with the Chorus of the Rome Opera, the return of violinists Salvatore Accardo and Vadim Repin, and a complete cycle of Sibelius symphonies conducted by Vladimir Ashkenazy.

Richard Gill Conductor

Artistic Director of the Sydney Symphony's Education Program, Richard Gill is also Artistic Director of OzOpera, Artistic Director and Chief Conductor of the Canberra Symphony Orchestra and Adviser for the Musica Viva in Schools program. An internationally respected music educator specialising in opera, musical theatre, vocal and choral training, he is recognised globally for his work in developing and creating opportunities for young musicians.

Jamie Allen Tenor

Jamie Allen joined the Opera Australia Chorus in 1994 and in 1998 became a member of the company's Young Artists' Development Program. He won numerous awards in the Australian Singing Competition and in 1999 he was awarded the Rémy Martin Scholarship. He has since appeared with Opera Australia in a number of roles, and also has extensive experience on the concert platform.

Cantillation

Chorusmaster, Paul Stanhope

Vocal ensemble, Cantillation, was formed in 2001 by Antony Walker and Alison Johnston. Its performances have included Adams's *Harmonium*, Sofia Gubaidulina's *Now Always Snow* with the Sydney Symphony and Mahler's Symphony No. 8 with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Its recordings include Fauré's *Requiem*, Orff's *Carmina burana* and Händel's *Messiah*.

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The music for *Sandakan Threnody* was performed by Jamie Allen (tenor), Cantillation (Chorusmaster, Paul Stanhope) and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra conducted by Richard Gill, with Riley Lee (shakuhachi) and Wang Zheng-Ting (sheng). Produced by Steve Adam, Jonathan Mills, Russell Stapleton and Jane Ulman. Orchestral recording produced by Owen Chambers. Additional recordings produced by James Atkins, Jonathan Mills and Russell Stapleton. Recorded in April and May 2004 at the Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House, and ABC Studios Australia, Ultimo and Southbank.

Sandakan Threnody was inspired by a work for tenor, choir and orchestra of the same name by Jonathan Mills.

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Acknowledgments

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Video archive footages courtesy of: Film Australia Ltd; Film World and Cinesound Movietone Productions; Imperial War Museum, London. Photo archive courtesy of Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

Jonathan Mills on *Sandakan Threnody*



'It is the destiny of the artist not to serve those who make history, but to serve those who are victims.' – Albert Camus

The composer writes: *Sandakan Threnody* is dedicated to the memory of Captain L C Matthews, GC, MC, executed at Kuching Prisoner-of-War Camp, 2 March 1944.

That the events surrounding the appalling treatment of Australian and British troops held prisoners-of-war in Sandakan and Ranau, North Borneo between 1942 and 1945 have been brought to light is largely due to the efforts of six Australian soldiers who escaped the marches from Sandakan to Ranau and lived to tell the tale.

Those who survived this dreadful ordeal were Keith Botterill, Dick Braithwaite, Owen Campbell, Bill Moxham, Nelson Short and Bill Sticpewich. None of these men are alive today. My father, Dr Frank Mills, was also incarcerated in Sandakan and Kuching as a prisoner-of-war during that period. *Sandakan Threnody* is also written as a tribute to his experiences in North Borneo.

Commissioned by the Centenary of Federation, South Australia Committee and at the suggestion of Robyn Archer, on the occasion of the return by the Australian Army of the Torrens Parade Grounds to the people of South Australia, *Sandakan Threnody* has been revised for performances by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and now, a theatrical version directed by Ong Keng Sen, of TheatreWorks Singapore.

In its original form, the music comprises three movements. Whilst not specifically programmatic, each movement refers to a different aspect of the Sandakan story, and functions as a musical archetype. One movement is an instrumental overture, albeit one with references to both the subtle timbres of traditional Japanese music, such as gagaku, and the diverse, almost incongruous, often aggressive timbres of contemporary orchestral percussion. It is the shortest movement and its relative brevity is a comment on the brutality and shattering abruptness of war.

Another movement is a march that undergoes a series of disintegrating and occasionally defiant permutations. It is scored for solo tenor, chorus and orchestra. It uses two texts, Psalm 130 and a fragment of a poem by Anna Akhmatova. The core rhythmic motif of this movement is based on a morse code transcription of the words *'De profundis clamavi ad te Domine'* ('Out of the depths do I cry unto Thee, O Lord').

It draws a connection between a 'dead' language, Latin, and a 'dead' technology, morse code, to express the tragic dimensions of a 'death' march.

Yet another movement is a lullaby. It is a setting of a highly lyrical poem by Randolph Stow for solo tenor and orchestra. The imagery of the poem is evocative of a quintessential Australian landscape, offering the possibility of repose and the hope of renewal.

Following the performances of the complete orchestral version of *Sandakan Threnody* by Jamie Allen, Cantillation, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Richard Gill in late April of this year, the work was recorded in its entirety and in a large number of short fragments. These fragments, particularly, have formed the basis of an entirely new version of the music for the theatre production of *Sandakan Threnody*.

Working with the sound designer and electro-acoustic composer, Steve Adam, we have devised a series of elaborate 'soundscapes' which treat the orchestral material in various ways: enlarging, compressing, bending and breaking apart the inner fabric of the original material in a process akin to musical archaeology. From movement to movement, the sound score changes its role – sometimes supporting the dramaturgy and at other times propelling the stage action itself. The process has been quite challenging and revealing.

The title of the work derives from the Greek word, *threnos*, which means grieving, but with an explicit emphasis on a public act of grieving. In contrast to the cathartic wisdom of ancient Greece, Australia seems to have a problem with public expressions of grief. For us, grief is a very private matter, with the result that tragedies like Sandakan are too often unknown, unobserved and unlamented.

It has not been my intention in writing *Sandakan Threnody* to make accusations. No culture or country has a monopoly on righteousness. The rituals of many cultures rely on the representation of a transforming journey, a pilgrimage or a path to enlightenment. By contrast, the marches from Sandakan to Ranau had no purpose and provided no enlightenment.

Jonathan Mills
Composer

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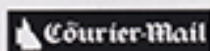
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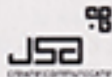
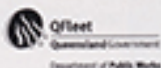


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