

THEATRE

Even the old sink

Anything goes, fortunately, under the festival umbrella

By Brian Hoad

Even though some have been getting rather cross about the unconventional and unpredictability of it all, this year's Festival of Sydney has included a healthy dose of "performance art", an umbrella term for "anything goes" and a warning you should leave your preconceptions and prejudices at home. All those strange happenings on the fringe over the past 20 years have already done much to change the face of mainstream drama, opera and dance. But performance art, like change, is an endless process.

Unusual environments have always been a favourite with such experimentalists – fortunately so, for Sydney is well endowed with old wharfs and warehouses. IHOS, an experimental music theatre troupe from Hobart, has found a beauty: Wharf 9, one of 18 spacious berths at Pyrmont across Darling Harbour from the city. Where the ragged backside of Sydney confronts the glittering plastic-wrapped towers of affluence seems as good a setting as any for a study in schizophrenia – *Days and Nights With Christ*, an "opera" by Constantine Koukias.

It is not, as the festival emphasises, a religious work. Essentially, it is Koukias' moving tribute to his brother's struggle with the disease. Concepts of day and night tend to merge in the scrambled mind of the schizophrenic. Christ complexes are common.

An essential element in this performance is the cathedral-like spaciousness of the wharf. Koukias uses it to explore his theme in the form of a somewhat paganised Greek Orthodox ritual. Much of his music derives from Byzantine chant, supplemented by some nerve-jangling soundscapes on tape. A gnomic text is declaimed and sung in Greek. A few cryptic surtitles also help to guide the way. A companion with a Greek background proves useful.

The great space is littered with symbolic icons – a wall of glittering green ice at one end and, a couple of hundred metres away, a mountain of salt. There is a huge arrangement of (Greek Easter) eggs. A weird machine keeps a collection of school chairs bobbing up and down in the air while beside it stands a sad little child's chair in a wooden cage. Sawn-off gas cylinders serves as haphazard bells.

The audience is bunched within this vast, strange, dark space on two sets of bleachers fronting a large area of dead leaves which serves as Gethsemane for this "Christ's" torment and agony as well as the Golgotha of his crucifixion and the tomb of his resurrection. A small band of instrumentalists is nearby.

Singers and actors move freely through this space, sometimes at a great distance, sometimes close by – a boy, a couple of mother figures, an ivy-clad St George wielding basil, the royal herb of Greece. An angel arrives from heaven by parachute to offer consolation.

But it is the Christ figure, played with great eloquence and power by dancer Christos Linou, which rivets the attention from beginning to end. Here is an extraordinary portrait of anguish and agony, a beautiful yet pitifully broken man painfully struggling through lonely space. The final scene as Linou, now naked, struggles slowly on all fours towards his mother in the far distance becomes a truly moving vision of "unaccommodated man... a poor, bare, forked animal". As his mother clothes him, the huge doors of the warehouse slide open and she helps him slowly stagger out of his nightmare into the night. It is an unforgettable experience for the open-hearted.

More cheerful, if equally fascinating, an example of performance art may be sampled in the somewhat more conventional surroundings of the Seymour Centre. That is all that is conventional about *Stomp*, a production by Britain's Yes/No People – six likely lads and an un-

likely lass in ragged shorts and working boots whipping up a storm of post-industrial fun among the rubbish dumps of economic rationalism.

They are essentially a band of street buskers who improvise music on whatever is at hand – dustbin lids, oil drums, brooms, matchboxes, cigarette lighters, plastic bags, keys, even the kitchen sink.

With unflagging energy, brilliant imagination and much stomping of boots, they beat up complex rhythmic ensembles reminiscent of the dance styles of Spain or the Caribbean or Brazil. They have a laid-back line in street-wise humour, too – a cough, sniff, card-playing ensemble gradually turns into a chimpanzees' tea-party. The audience couldn't get enough of this cheeky, ingenious post-modern corroboree which cocks such a cheerful snook at hard times. Eventually, however, they were "knackered" and retreated to the Dirty Duck across the road to get themselves drunk. ■

OPERA

Passion in its prime

A triumphant return for both composer and conductor

By Brian Hoad

Sir Charles Mackerras is at last down in the pit at the Sydney Opera House whipping up a nerve-tingling account of *Jenufa*, one of the extraordinary operas of the Czech composer Leos Janáček. Mackerras first discovered the then neglected music of this most idiosyncratic of 20th-century composers soon after leaving Sydney in 1947 to study in Prague. He has been promoting it around the world since.

When Mackerras the established conductor first returned to Australia in 1971, he brought his Czech enthusiasm with him and amazed audiences with the pantheistic power and glory of Janáček's "Glagolitic Mass".

The Australian Opera introduced Janáček to its audiences for the first time with *Jenufa* in 1974. That same year, the Adelaide



Eilene Hannan (left) and Lone Koppel in the AO's *Jenufa*