

Underground Opera
at Jenolan Caves



IHOS

BASED HOBART

FOUNDED 1990

WHAT THEY DO GREEK-AUSTRALIAN HYBRIDS

The last thing composer Constantine Koukias had ever planned to do was run an opera company. IHOS, his Hobart-based enterprise, was formed out of necessity. *Days and Nights with Christ*, a very personal opera about Koukias's schizophrenic brother, was picked up by the Sydney Festival in 1990 and a company was needed to stage the show. So Koukias created one. This year, IHOS turns 21.

Koukias's vision is to create new hybrid opera for today's audience. "To explore the human condition," he says. IHOS achieves this through original music that engages with new media and site-specific spaces. Koukias's formal composition training mashed with an orthodox Greek upbringing generates an experimental and rather exotic brand of opera – both multicultural and multilingual.

The company has staged six large-scale operas composed by Koukias, including *To*

Traverse Water (1992) and *Telsa – Lighting in his Hand* (2003). The latest venture is *The Barbarians*, sung in Modern Greek to an audience seated in the round. A chamber ensemble supports five singers who perform on a stage covered in pebbles and salt. It will tour Australia in 2013.

While Koukias craves diversity in Hobart's arts scene, being the only opera company has its perks. His shows are well attended, and they are supported by alt-arts museum MONA, featuring at its annual festivals.

Despite the benefits of his market monopoly, Koukias wishes there was more contemporary opera around. "We live in very conservative times with a great fear of exploration," he says. "The main opera houses have done very little to give a voice to Australian works and artists. There has been a lot of talk, but there still is very little support for emerging artists in this field."

***The Barbarians* tours mainland Australia in 2013. For more information, go to www.ihosopera.com**

IOpera

BASED MELBOURNE

FOUNDED 2008

WHAT THEY DO OPERATIC ARCHAEOLOGY

An opera written by an Auschwitz prisoner during captivity about a mythical ancient Greek city, performed by six young Australians, could serve as a working definition of "fringe art". IOpera is a company dedicated to shining a light on forgotten works such as *The Emperor of Atlantis* by Jewish holocaust victim Viktor Ullmann. For its director Peter Tregear, the thrill of staging unfamiliar or "unjustly neglected" works is what it's all about. "It's like bringing forward a ghost. It can be incredibly moving," he says.

Tregear started IOpera in 2008 with author and director Gert Reifarth in response to a lacuna of performances of obscure works. "We had a desire to create a space in the operatic firmament for a more innovative approach to the artform," says Tregear. IOpera makes its mix even more unexpected through its choice of unorthodox spaces around Melbourne.



"In a sense, what we're doing is a piece of musical archaeology to remind us of that history and, in a sense, recapture it."

Check out iOpera's production of *Membra Jesu Nostri* by Dietrich Buxtehude in Melbourne, October 9 – 12. www.iopera.com.au

La Prima

BASED MELBOURNE

FOUNDED 2008

WHAT THEY DO TRAD OPERA IN STRANGE VENUES

Upon returning to Australia from the UK, soprano Alison Rae-Jones recognised a huge gap in opera employment opportunities. In London, hundreds of small touring or niche companies created work for many professional singers when they were between major-company contracts. In Melbourne, it was a big show or nothing. "When I was a

"WE DID A SURVEY... AND 80 PER CENT OF THE AUDIENCE HADN'T SEEN AN OPERA BEFORE"

young singer, you were working doing roles with the major companies," she says. "There were no other opportunities." So Jones decided to create the opportunities herself. She started her own company, La Prima, a bespoke corporate entertainment opera outfit employing opera singers living in Melbourne.

After a few years on the corporate circuit, La Prima started giving public performances, touring outer-metro, regional and remote theatres around Victoria. La Prima performances were reaching audiences previously unexposed to opera. "In Frankston we did a show and a 90-year-old woman came up to us after and said, 'I've never been to the opera in my life, but that's the best fun I've had at any theatre'," says Jones, who loves the thrill of a satisfied audience. "Seeing this response, you see the effect it has on people and how much people enjoy it."

This got her thinking about performing opera in non-traditional venues. Opera in the Laneway is La Prima's current project, which takes place in Guildford Lane Gallery in Melbourne. It's all about getting opera into unexpected venues, like bars and galleries, and accessing untapped audiences. "We did a survey at one of the laneway performances and 80 per cent of the audience had not been to the

opera before," says Jones. "You can live your whole life in Australia without experiencing live classical music." Jones is hoping to change this. "I don't want to be evangelical about opera," she says, "but it is an amazing experience to have an opera singer right next to you in a small venue."

Catch La Prima's next performance at the Geelong Performing Arts Centre on November 14 and 15. www.laprima.com.au

Pinchgut

BASED SYDNEY

FOUNDED 2002

WHAT THEY DO BAROQUE & CLASSICAL OPERAS

Everyone's heard a concert of Antonio Vivaldi's instrumental works, or Haydn's symphonies, but how many Australians have heard these composer's operas performed live? Not many. And this is a situation Pinchgut Opera, an independent Sydney outfit focussed on neglected Baroque and Classical works, is keen to change.

Started in 2002 by a bunch of musicians and administrators, Pinchgut "brings to life little known and under-appreciated operas," says its co-artistic director, Erin Helyard. Past productions include Charpentier's *David & Jonathan*, Haydn's *L'anima del filosofo* and most recently Vivaldi's *Griselda*, which broke the company's box-office records.

Having studied harpsichord at the Sydney Conservatorium and fortepiano in Montreal, Helyard is a proponent of historically-informed performance. "[Co-founder] Antony Walker and I really spent a lot of time on our last Haydn opera, investigating and being inspired by the surprisingly Romantic vocal



iOpera's
Erwin und Elmire

Tregear locates "secret" venues, using new technologies like amplification and digital projection to transform any space into an opera theatre. "Young people are intimidated by the mainstream opera venues. The brass and velvet of the State Theatre – how 'un-hip' is that?"

The philosophy of normalising opera is continued through a policy of singing in English. "We get opera to the people, rather than getting people to the opera," he says.

Like many purveyors of eccentric art, Tregear battles with attendance issues. He says there is an attitude about opera in Australia that needs revising. "General culture does not think opera is a contemporary artform." But, he says, opera is no more "heritage art" than is Shakespeare. Rather than belonging to the past, opera connects the past with the present. A case in point is *The Emperor of Atlantis*, which, Tregear says, carries an important historical message. "We want to say to the people who come, this is a culture that we all lost. It was a tragedy for world culture."