

Oppenheimer



Of all the myriad traditions of theatre across the Eurasian continent, Japanese Noh seems at the furthest remove from, shall we say, European theatre since Shakespeare. It uses a minimum of text, an orchestra consisting of three drums and a flute, the main characters are masked, and every aspect of text, music and action is intensely stylised. It also seems,

especially at first, staggeringly slow.

Yet in the hands of the great writers of Noh, beginning in the fourteenth century with Zeami, and among whom **Allan Marett** can take his place, it is a theatrical vehicle for amazing concentration of energy. The spare nature of each of its parts results in a transparency between the many levels of operation with which it is involved, such that, without the need for thought but as a result of sheer theatre, it has a direct and visceral effect on the audience. These levels often concern the relationship of the contingent world with the transcendental, and as such the form has traditionally been imbued with, and favoured by, Zen Buddhism.

Allan Marett's play overlays the story of the making of the atomic bomb by Robert Oppenheimer during the second world war with an old Zen story. In this story *Hakujo*, and priest, is asked whether a fully enlightened man falls under the laws of cause and effect, and mistakenly answers no. For this mistake he is condemned to 500 lives as a fox. Just as the Zen realisation of emptiness can dazzle, blind, the person reaching it, so spectacular intellectual achievements can dazzle their proponents into thinking they are above the consequences of their insights, as Oppenheimer is portrayed in this play. Such achievements verge on the magical, and it is with this tool that a third layer emerges in this play – the story of Faust. Traditional Japanese Noh abounds in quotations, and **Marett** references both Marlowe's and Goethe's version of the Faust myth. Marlowe is unambiguous in its ending – *Faust* "must be damned perpetually"; but

Goethe is more ambiguous – “Er ist gerichtet – ist gerettet” (he is condemned – is saved) – in a way which feeds into the possibility of redemption that becomes the crux of the drama in *Oppenheimer*.

The performance in the Music Workshop at the Conservatorium involved a team of actors and musicians at the highest level of Noh performance in Japan, Australia, and the USA. The result was spell-binding. **David Crandall**, as the *waki*, or traveller who usually sets the drama in motion in Noh, embodied the dark heaviness of heart that characterises those in existential crises, crucial to underlining the seriousness of the issues at stake. **John Oglevee**, as *Oppenheimer*, showed the process of his transformation with masterful, deeply sophisticated shades of movement on stage. The third actor, who was also the director of the production, **Akira Matsui**, was immensely commanding as *Fudo Myo-o*, the being (if you were Hindu you would call him a god) who “consumes fire with fire”, as T S Elliot put it, writing around the time of the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima.

All the actors sing, or speak in something akin to *Sprechgesang*, and the musical side of the drama is amplified by a chorus, and the instrumental ensemble of three drummers plus the *Nokan*, a small transverse flute. **Narumi Takazawa** played the *Nokan* thrillingly and with an unerring sense of timing in the silences with which the piece abounds. The chorus, of in this case nine singers, at times comment, but more usually continue the actors’ lines, as though the actor was still singing. This process, different from though comparable with a chorus in Greek tragedy, in a way generalises the very extreme emotions portrayed by the actors, involving the audience willy-nilly in the disturbing psychological issues being dramatized.

It might be thought that in such a stylised form there is little room for *coups de theatre*, but there were several spine-chilling moments in this production master-minded by **Akira Matsui**. One of the most important things about Noh is the masks, and the masks for *Oppenheimer* and *Fudo* were made by one of the leading masters in the field, **Hideta Kitazawa**. They were jaw-droppingly effective. Likewise the costumes in Noh are not just decorative, as for example in Western opera, but are integral to the stage energy, and the appearance in the second act of *Fudo Myo-o* was made arrestingly alarming by the flame-like

costume. In the entr'acte, or *Ai-kyogen*, a brother and sister come to the scene to dance for their father, who was killed when the bomb dropped. **Gary Watson**, dressed in a morning suit, was impeccably controlled as the continually grieving son. This control made the increasing abandon of **Yoke Chin's** dancing, with a fox-mask, even more unexpected. In the context of all the taut sparseness her dancing was able to express something about the awfulness of all those fox lives that couldn't have been done any other way.

The cross-cultural significance of this production was underscored in a speech preceding the performance by the Japanese Consul-General, Mr Masato Takaoka, as a sign of the transformation of Japanese-Australian relations since Hiroshima. As both a result and an instrument of the process of healing and reconciliation, ***Oppenheimer*** is enormously significant. It is a unique cultural product, massively difficult to achieve, and it is to the credit of the whole dedicated team of those involved in the *Oppenheimer* project that **Allan Marett's** amazingly insightful work has been so well realised.

Sydney Conservatorium of Music

Oppenheimer

by Allan Marett | music Richard Emmert

Choreographer & Director Akira Matsui

Venue: Sydney Conservatorium of Music

Dates: 30 September and 1 October, 2015

Tickets: \$65 – \$45

Bookings: www.classikon.com