

# Playing with fire and water

■ Opera, art and theatre collide in a new work that (almost) defies description. Shirley Apthorp explains

**A**N enormous lawn, complete with Hill's Hoist and sprinklers, is the last thing you'd expect to find in a cavernous waterfront warehouse.

Add to this an arc of mechanised rowing boats suspended on electronic winches in the gloom overhead, an apparatus, made of spinning wheels and orbs, spitting fire and steam, and the haunting echoes of a Greek Orthodox chant and you have the makings of an IHOS production.

Increasingly bizarre images compete with one another in the conversation as composer Constantine Koukias and designer Ann Wulff discuss their next project.

It is about water, Wulff says, and the migrant experience in Australia — the way the journey becomes the dominant mythology in the life of the migrant. And about cultural alienation.

She gestures expansively, gazing with lively intensity at a point somewhere above my head.

Koukias, 27, has unearthed a venerable-looking tome from beneath a pile of manuscript paper and interrupts Wulff to read out a passage on Byzantine music and ancient Greek cosmology. Pythagoras, who invented the principles of harmony, thought the stars and planets made a kind of celestial music as they moved through the skies.

Caught up in the idea, he is soon enthusiastically describing the way his music will combine with the set to reflect these concepts. Somewhere between the rings of fire, the amplified trombone, the Greek folk songs, the circular time frame and the electric violin, I lose the thread and have to take him back several paces.

"It's actually about the human journey," Wulff begins patiently and the intricate duet of explanation is in full flow again.

Even in the prosaic setting of Koukias's cluttered inner-city flat in Hobart, the magic of this animated storytelling soon begins to work. The half-empty coffee cups and yellowing postcards fade into the visions that the two conjure up.

**P**LATO'S blending of opposites, a concept related to Pythagoras's harmonic principles, is reflected in the union of ancient and modern in *To Traverse Water*, the work they are talking about. It's a mammoth production which opens in Hobart early next month. It could equally well be a metaphor for the way the two work together.

"We started off knowing that we wanted to work with water," Wulff says. "We began talking about it and looking through classical Greek dictionaries on the word."

Koukias takes up the story. "There are 17 different words for water in classical Greek — if it's running, if it's still, if it's falling, if it's frozen, and there is one word — Ugroporew — which means to traverse water."

"As soon as I saw that," Wulff says, "I realised that it was the perfect metaphor for migration."

Wulff, now in her 30s, moved to Australia from the United States seven years ago and Koukias was born in Aus-

tralia to Greek parents, so the subject is dear to both of them.

"Being a migrant is living between two cultures. You always have two worlds juxtaposed. Your journey becomes the central story of your life and that's what is interesting, because every migrant has their own story that they tell," Wulff says.

"Essentially, you stop one life and begin another one."

Wulff is small, wiry and sharp, and gives the impression of holding within her vast reserves of high-tensile energy. She answers questions with rigorous precision, the lilting edge of her American accent belying the needle-point focus of her sentences.

Koukias, his dark features contrasting strongly with Wulff's blonde delicacy, is the embodiment of warm amiability. Perpetually optimistic, he delivers his apocalyptic visions in gentle, conversational tones, much as one might recount a visit to an elderly aunt.

"The rings of fire are symbolic of a marriage ceremony. In the Greek Orthodox Church you have a crowning ceremony, with wreaths, so we'll be using hoops of fire," he says.

"It's a ritual linked with a central performer. The world will move from something quite mundane to something quite fantasy-like, and objects will transform. Maybe the Hill's Hoist is going to spit flames as well."

**T**OGETHER, the two form the creative mind of IHOS, the company which created quite a stir earlier this year at the Festival of Sydney with its multi-media production *Days and Nights With Christ*, a sensory exploration of the world of schizophrenia.

Critical opinion veered from ecstatic praise to vitriolic invective. When it is suggested to Koukias that his work is controversial, he demurs.

"I think it's the same with anything. Some people might like an oil painting of the 18th century by an Italian painter and some people couldn't be bothered. That's art. I think it's better than getting no response, or a lukewarm one."

The near-capacity audiences drawn by the Sydney performances and the enthusiastic response of many leading arts figures were elating for IHOS, they agree. Not only was this the company's first big production, it was also the first show by a Tasmanian-based company to appear in the Festival of Sydney.

Plans are under way for a European tour of *Days and Nights With Christ* in late 1993, alongside a mainland season for *To Traverse Water* and the development of two more works.

The dreams of this company are as vast as the warehouse spaces in which they perform and it is tempting to respond with scepticism. After all, Koukias is only in his 20s and how many people of any age can successfully combine dance, voice, recorded and live music, visual installation, lighting, art and theatre in an original way?

But whatever the odds, IHOS (a Greek word meaning sound) has already proved itself capable of turning its dreams into reality and portraying the inner landscape with unnerving effect.

The couple's determination to use