

# Koukias: 'twixt Christ and Christo

A counter-tenor wearing a nappy, suspended over a salt mountain, a wall of ice and 75 dozen eggs: PETER COCHRANE finds all this and more in the Festival of Sydney presentation of *Days and Nights with Christ*.

**A**VANT-GARDE theatre from Tasmania sounds like a contradiction in terms — until you meet Constantine Koukias, the Hobart-based composer of *Days and Nights with Christ*.

*Christ* opened last night in a disused MSB wharf (No 9) at Darling Harbour. It's an unusual venue; but then, so is the production, which is a Festival of Sydney presentation.

The set, which covers the entire length of the warehouse, is bookended by a 40-tonne mound of salt and interactive installations.

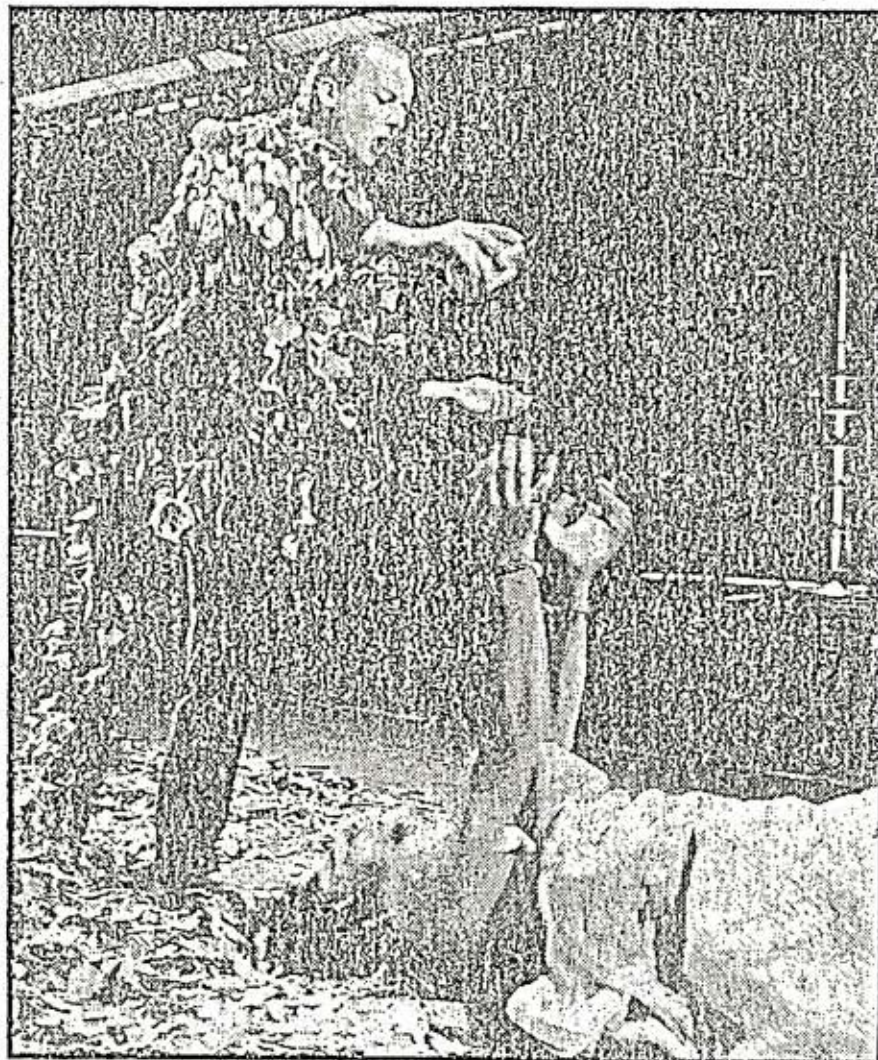
In between are a wall of ice 2.4 metres high (which will have to be replaced every two days); a small stage rimmed with percussion instruments — and inexplicably, a frying-pan — trays of fresh eggs, 75 dozen in all; a modern version of a Benjamin Franklin invention, the verillon, which is made up of 600 glasses (the Symphony Wine brand, no less); and a bed of yellowed leaves, which separates the two facing bleacher stands.

The eggs, incidentally, are dropped on to the floor by white-clad "spectres" who climb two extension ladders to a gantry overhead.

Other design components include a line of men's suits hanging from the roof and seven dangling blue gas cylinders.

A visual and aural assault on the audience is threatened. There are five minutes of abnormal heartbeats, and seven minutes of electrified sea-shell sounds during a mutilation scene.

There's a counter-tenor, wearing a nappy, suspended over the salt mountain; there's a naked Christ-like figure who crawls towards an artificial water fall, where after a drenching, he dresses himself in a suit appliqued with baby clothes.



The priestly Peter Garran dressed in a suit threaded with ivy creepers ("Con insists on authentic props").

Picture by DEAN SEWELL

The counter-tenor, Sydneysider Peter Garran, appears in the finale dressed in a suit threaded with ivy creepers ("Con insists on authentic props — real ice, real salt, real ivy," his publicist explained).

"The Festival of Sydney was offered a total of five new Australian operas, but none of the others came close to this work," music program manager Bruce

Applebaum claimed this week. "It is an extraordinary mix of art forms and music styles."

*Days and Nights* is not a religious work, as the festival is at pains to point out, but an exploration of the schizophrenic condition.

Koukias was inspired to create this sprawling work by a friend, and sufferer, who, when asked to describe his torment,

replied with a question: what happens when day and night come together?

"I decided to use that as the title of the work, the reference to Christ coming from the fact that a lot of male schizophrenics identify themselves with the Messiah."

Discussions with his friend produced 90 per cent of the imagery used in *Days and Nights*.

It premiered at Hobart's Salamacca Festival 15 months ago, and played to full houses. It comes to Sydney with added elements, and improvements in the lighting. The Sydney venue, according to Koukias, is "a lot more beautiful, acoustically".

It's basically a dance narrative, featuring Melbourne's Christos Linou, but employs ensemble/solo arias throughout. Koukias said that hearing

“A lot of male schizophrenics identify with the Messiah.”

his mother sing an old Greek song redolent with Eastern influences was the musical spark for this work.

The Sydney production of *Christ — Mark II*, according to Koukias — includes two projection screens to help the audience understand a text written entirely in Greek, parts of it abstract, parts drawn from Byzantine liturgy, and parts inspired by Jewish rabbis.

"If a conservative city such as Hobart, with its small migrant population, can cope with *Days and Nights*, then I am looking forward to the public's reaction in a place the size and ethnic mix of Sydney."

Koukias's latest project, *Orpheus*, will be set in an amphitheatre-like quarry 10 minutes' drive outside Hobart. Next is *O'Mati* ("The Eye"), a "huge work" in two parts staged under the Tasman Bridge; the audience will be required to view the performance on-shore from private small craft and ferries.