

[KIMISIS – Falling
Asleep - Hobart](#)



Written by Josephine Giles

Presented by: IHOS
Venue: Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart

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Variously described as a boutique opera or a gallery style installation work, *KIMISIS – Falling Asleep* is an exciting example of contemporary practice in classical music theatre. Satisfying the common definition of opera with its central role of an operatic soprano, it more accurately represents the original Italian meaning of “opera” as “work”, coming together with the Greek word for sound: “ihos”.



Written by IHOS Composer and Artistic Director Constantine Koukias for soprano, electric trombone and Pilates Trapeze, *KIMISIS – Falling Asleep* is a beautiful and intensely moving work.

It celebrates the Great Feast of the Eastern Orthodox Church commemorating the Dormition: the "falling asleep", or death and assumption into Heaven, of Mary, the mother of Christ. Sung in Ecclesiastical Greek, the text is a compressed twenty minute version of the traditional three and a half hour liturgy.

KIMISIS touches its audience on many levels. Drawing on traditions of the Church, and with its contemplation of death and transcendence, the ritual speaks directly to those raised within a religious belief system. For the less devout, *KIMISIS* can be appreciated as a non-literal contemporary, secular work of art – with the sometimes disparate cultural references of text, music and design playing in the imagination long after viewing.

The event begins as the audience (limited to 32) is led by stages into a specially constructed theatre space. In a small ante-room, Koukias introduces the elements of the piece. A short description of the meaning of the ritual is especially useful for those who have a limited knowledge of Christian theology; and he generously explains the inspiration behind some of the more conceptual elements of his design (realised by the team of innovative Tasmanian architects Elvio Brianese and Peta Heffernan from Liminal Spaces).



On entering the main space, each audience member is given a lighted candle and seated in individual timber cubicles. The cubicles, which form a square around the small stage, are based on Panopticon Design, a system which inspired many 18th and 19th century prisons, including the infamous Port Arthur Penal Colony in Tasmania, Australia. Enforced isolation of inmates was intended to reform prisoners through solitary prayer and reflection - apparently resulting in many of the prisoners going mad.

In this context the cubicles serve to isolate each in the audience from their immediate neighbour, encouraging a sense of participation, on a practical and personal level, in the ritual that follows.

Centre stage is the Pilates Trapeze - Mary's bed, or tomb. A strange contraption of ropes and pulleys, it reminded me of a bed in an orthopaedic hospital ward, but exists here to satisfy the composer's exploration of the use of the breath. A huge gust of wind and deep breaths, incense and bells, precede loud electronic sounds; then a majestic electric trombone (Donald Bate), announces the opening of the gates of Heaven.

From the bed on the Pilates Trapeze a woman's voice is heard - her repose conveys a sense of peaceful surrender. In duet with the trombone, her song, drawing on Byzantine and Christian Arabic traditions, is at once familiar and new. Koukias's subtle extrapolations on liturgical chant lift the music to the realm of joyful transcendence, as the soprano is similarly lifted in her sleep on her Assumption to heaven.

The composition is far from static: through the stages of Ascension, clever use is made of digital delay sampling, where the singer in effect takes charge of the call and response; culminating in an intense electronic music sequence composed by DJ Dameza, accompanied by overwhelming strobe lighting, designed by Jason James. The lighting - though challenging for the audience - effectively illustrates an ecstatic, altered state of consciousness as the singer transcends her mortal self.

For the Hobart season, three sopranos alternated in the starring role. I was privileged to see two performances - the first with Sarah Jones, then Rebecca Hilder.

Reprising the role she created at the 2010 MONA-FOMA in Hobart, Jones's comfortable familiarity with the piece is evident; and her warm, evenly textured voice contributes to the supremely meditative, transcendent quality of her performance.

Hilder (who will be sharing the role with Irene Sarrinikolaou in Darwin), though replicating the same music and moves as Jones, tells another story. Her dramatically coloured voice and passionate, expressive physicality - qualities perhaps more identifiably "Greek" - reach out, dynamically engaging the audience.

Neither interpretation is better or worse than the other: it is testament to the strength of the piece that there is room for each soprano to effectively claim the role as her own.

KIMISIS is a very short work, considerably shorter than most high-brow theatre pieces, but its scale in no way diminishes its validity or power. As a reviewer who has sat through too many, too long operas, it is a relief to encounter a creator who not only has something to say, but is able to do so succinctly. The short form also means a number of shows can be scheduled in one day, at a price that ordinary punters - and artists - can afford.

With its innovative design, sophisticated use of amplification, digital sampling, and club inspired lighting

effects IHOS's KIMISIS firmly shows the way forward for an art form looking for ways to communicate to new audiences.

Bookings: <http://www.showclix.com/event/kimisis>

Future Seasons:

Brown's Mart Theatre, Darwin (as part of the Darwin Arts Festival) August 25 – 28, 2011.

USA tour from February 2012, venues/dates to be confirmed.

A new large-scale operatic work by Constantine Koukias and IHOS will premiere at MONA – FOMA, Hobart, in January, 2012

Photos by Lucia Rossi