



Unlikely success, on the whole

Miracle in Brisbane

Brisbane Festival. Performance Space, Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts, October 1-3.

ONE of the appealing aspects of the Brisbane Festival is the spirited programming that steers clear of the comfortable in favour of the challenging. Composer Giorgio Battistelli reworked for an Australian context his opera *Miracle a Milano*, which juggles universal themes of oppression, but those expecting traditional operatic fare were in for a surprise.

The mainly indigenous cast is led by Deborah Mailman, who convincingly realises the character Ruby, and the Italian actor Nicola Raffone, who plays Ruby's husband Angelo. They do not sweep the narrative along by showy singing. Instead, despair and outrage is registered — as their daughter is taken by the authorities and the land plundered by mining moguls — through mime, body slaps, clapping and wild, vocal abstraction.

In another deviation from convention, the Canticum Choir's purpose was not to serve as a chorus but to provide instrumental colour of a precisely but treacherously orchestrated, floating dissonance. If the Canticum looked ill at ease, it was not without cause.

One of the invigorating twists in this hybrid performance was the percussive commentary created by actors drumming on assorted oil cans or clattering spears, or through the syncopated thud of wet cloths slapped down hard in sequences of stylised washing. These visible and rhythmical contributions intermingling with the music at large added spice to this thought-provoking production directed by Rhoda Roberts.

The cast's visceral expression and dance are not so much accompanied by the Queensland Orchestra as extended and intensified when the ensemble alternately simmers or flares into strident bursts when mirroring emotion. It is as if the musical force is another character that screams in solidarity, advancing and retreating in menacing, theatrical waves. This extroversion and sensitivity to the climactic peaks was achieved by the savvy conductor Luca Pfaff's skill in marshalling the resources that included live electronics artist Davide Tiso, the South Brisbane Federal Brass Band, a lone accordion and didgeridoo.

There were compelling solos, from Djakapurra Munyarrayan's haunting lines to Casey Donovan as Mary-Curly May, whose singing had a spellbinding quality. It was disconcerting that the space for such a large troupe was so restricted, but this also enabled a supportive intimacy that made it easier to forgive the untidy moments, relish the inspiration and be stirred by injustice.

The innovation here was not Battistelli's language, which now sounds neo-experimental and familiar, or in the performance's familiar stereotypical themes, but stemmed from the democratisation and merging of disparate disciplines into one artistic outcome.

Gillian Wills