

LAST DECEMBER THE ARMIDALE COMMUNITY TRANSPORTED an 80 voice adult choir, 44 voice children's choir, 56 piece orchestra, a group of about two dozen dancers and jugglers (including indigenous dancers), several actors, a support crew of 35, and about 100 friends and family members to perform the ecological chorale *The Plague and the Moonflower* as one of the main events at the Woodford Folk Festival. The event is a story of great community altruism and enthusiasm and showed the depth of talent in a regional centre and how this talent was applauded and recognised at the national level.

The performance was hailed by the Festival Director Bill Horitz who said *Plague and the Moonflower* was "my highlight of the 520 events this year at Woodford and will take its place in my top memories of my 18 years as Director of the festival".

Armidale is a regional city in northern NSW. It boasts a strong tradition of the arts, being the Third City of the Arts, and supports and nurtures a strong music and theatre culture. Two years ago local medical practitioner (and part-time French horn player and conductor) Bruce Menzies heard the superb music of *The Plague and the Moonflower* by English composer Richard Harvey and the artist Ralph Steadman.

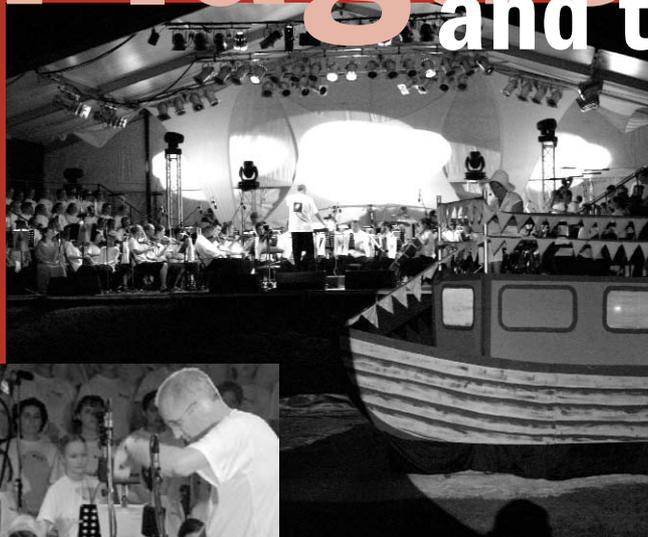
The Plague and the Moonflower is a work for choir, solo guitar and orchestra. It explores the dark side of humanity through the character of Plague. Its theme is the struggle for the survival of our planet in the face of apathy, pollution and greed. It is, however, celebratory when Plague is transformed through his encounter with the Moonflower, and through his transformation pledges to provide a future for the child (and hence future generations). It is the discovery of the rare Moonflower by the botanical artist Margaret Mee that provides the inspirational aspects of the work. The Moonflower is a rare epiphytic cactus that grows in the Amazon rainforest. It only flowers under a full moon, emitting a beautiful perfume while it flowers, but within a few hours it is gone.

The chorale had never before been performed outside Britain. When Bruce Menzies put together the production team and 170 performers and crew to perform the work in Armidale in 2002 it was considered as "possibly the most significant musical/ theatrical event of Armidale's past two decades" (Bill Driscoll, *Armidale Express*, 1 November 2002, p.8). The original Armidale production added strong theatrical elements, projected images, dancers, jugglers and acrobats and these elements were greatly expanded upon for the Woodford production. The incorporation of the didgeridoo into the

orchestra and the cleansing and farewell ritual performed by indigenous dancers provided the work with special significance for an Australian audience.

Soon after the original Armidale production Bruce found himself at the Woodford Folk Festival and felt *The Plague* would go over well there. His informal approach was quickly followed with a formal submission which was accepted. The production team was expanded and this time the cast grew to about 250 people. The production had to be redesigned for performance in the Woodford amphitheatre, major props and theatrical elements had to be built, costumes redesigned and made for the entire cast and crew, and an efficient organisation established to administer and organise the transport and campsite accommodation of about 400 people. To add to the complexity another performance was held in Armidale before transporting the production to Woodford.

Plague and the



Top: Fran Curtis as botanical artist, Margaret Mee who inspired the chorale.
Left: Bruce Menzies conducting in Woodford.
Photos: Jim Vicars

"I was one of the many thousands in the audience participating in a standing ovation for a performance of international standing. Yet most people in the audience would be unaware of the huge task of putting together such a huge production that would intimidate most national concert hall producers let alone the incredible organization it would have taken to get the 400 people

May

10 – 16 May

 *Big Feet Little Feet* A showcase of short dance works by movement performance artists around the Northern Rivers area. **BYRON BAY.** Contact Emma Tel 02 6622 3279 Email emma@norpa.org.au

14 May

 Australia Youth Orchestra String Quartet Concert and development program for young musicians. Novatel Hotel, **COFFS HARBOUR.** Contact Alison Harbert, AYO, Tel 1300 668 500 Website www.ayo.com.au/index.cfm?page=340

16 – 20 May

 Selected works from the Watters collection and a celebration of the talent and generosity of Max Watters. **MUSWELLBROOK** Regional Art Centre Tel 6549 3880 Email artscentre@muswellbrook.nsw.gov.au

17 – 23 May

 Sydney Writers' Festival Featuring a series of interviews, panel discussions, debates, readings, workshops and special events. Across **SYDNEY.** Tel 02 9252 7729 Email admin@swf.org.au Website www.swf.org.au

mobilized in Armidale, bussed to Woodford, queue for six days of rehearsals then two performances. They simply cheered the outstanding art." (Bill Horitz, 14 January 2004).

In our production we tried to clearly paint the major theme of the work - that of the need to transform modern industrial humanity through the direct encounter with the natural environment and an experience of art. As a result of this encounter we wanted people to reflect on how we might create a more environmentally sustainable future for our children. We therefore tried to minimise the environmental impact of the project itself. We did this in the building process by using mainly recycled or reused materials.

The major prop for the production (the Plague Demon) was made by a team of about 30 people tying over 3,000 plastic shopping bags together (constituting only about 10 hours consumption of plastic shopping bags for Armidale!). Where new materials were used (such as in the construction of several choir risers) we built equipment that would have a useful life of many years. Most participants were transported to Woodford by bus, saving the



One of the wonderful experiences for some choir members, as their superb singing bounced off the Woodford hills, was singing across the orchestra to their own children. The culture and social capital building aspects of the production will resonate for many years in our town. ■

Plague and the Moonflower credits:
 Director: Fran Curtis; Musical Director: Bruce Menzies; Children's Choir Director: Cathy Welsford; original Choreographer Tania Gammage; Indigenous Choreographer: Shannon Smith; Technical Coordinators: Nick and Lissa Monk; Designer and Event Coordinator: David Curtis. Soloists: classical guitar: Stephen Tafra; violin: Errol Russell; treble voice : Jesse tevenson; soprano: Leanne Roobol and Kristin Teece; didgeridoo: Duan Pittman. Additional music by The Gypsy Hot Club.



Narrator: Chris Ross-Smith; Plague Demon: Waine Grafton; Margaret Mee: Fran Curtis; the child: Caitlin Grafton (the child). Tour Manager: Pam Menzies; Publicists: Catherine Fenning, Neil Horton, Barbara Albury and Jim Vicars; Administrators: Garry Slocombe, Jane Horton and Greg Polson; Stage Managers: Pat Bradley and Dave Steller; Tour website: Felix Burkhard; Transport of instruments organised by Terry Million.

The production drew the support from many businesses and organisations in Armidale, including Edwards Bus Company who donated five buses for the tour, Armidale TAFE students who built choir risers for 140 singers and a 6 x 6 metre moon, and Copernican Entertainment Services which helped with sound and lighting. Funding was donated by Armidale Dumaresq Council, Land and Water Australia as well as from the festival itself, but the tour had to do a considerable amount of additional fundraising to make the transporting of 400 Armidalians possible.

For more information about The Plague and the Moonflower and this production see www.moonflower.org.au

Top: The Moonflower blooms. Dancers, choirs and orchestra from the Armidale Moonflower Tour stage the finale of the ecological chorale, Woodford Folk Festival.

Bottom: Stephen Tafra plays solo classical guitar, also at Woodford.

Photos: Jim Vicars



Moonflower

by DAVID CURTIS

need for over 50 cars. We tried to put the work into an Australian context by projecting the beautiful landscape and environmental photographs of Richard Woldendorp and Leo Meier, mixed with the extraordinarily powerful images of Ralph Steadman.

The production drew most of its cast from the Armidale Symphony Orchestra, the Armidale Musical Society, the Armidale Sing NSW children's choir, the Body Moves Dance group and the Nyardi Cultural Experience dance group. Many people who had grown up in Armidale and were now at conservatoria in the capital cities or who had professional careers in music, returned especially to be part of the production.

This production brought our community together to sing, to dance, to play and to reflect on our relationship with the natural environment. For many of us it was a life-changing experience. The important message from the production from the point of view of regional arts is that an extraordinary depth of talent exists in regional New South Wales. Developing the skills within Armidale so that we could mount such an extraordinary production has taken many years, with the tireless work of devoted music and performance teachers and several musical and performance groups. Several music teachers played in the production, playing beside former and present pupils.

May

21 May

 Musica Viva: Karin Schaupp Guitar recital. **COFFS HARBOUR.** Contact Elissa Campbell, Musica Viva Australia Tel 02 8394 6666

21 – 22 May

 *Songs to Illuminate the Dark* Musical melodrama that was a hit at the 2003 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. **IPAC WOLLONGONG** Tel 02 4226 3366 Email merrigong@ipac.org.au Website www.ipac.org.au

26 May – 27 June

 *The State of Art: Peace* Celebrating 100 years of regional galleries in NSW and featuring differing interpretations of the theme of 'peace'. **GRAFTON** Regional Gallery Tel 9948 3391 Email Katherine.roberts@manly.nsw.gov.au Website www.manly.nsw.gov.au

27 May – 27 June

 Taree City Festival *Icons* Exhibition Painting and sculpture of iconic people and places from the Manning and beyond. Manning Regional Gallery, **TAREE.** Contact Sue Mitchell Tel 02 6592 5455 Website <http://www.gtcc.nsw.gov.au/>