

## ***REVIEW: SubUrban Exchange*** *Christos Tsiolkas*

*SubUrban Exchange*, a collaboration between the Anti-Racism Action Band, the Massive Hip Hop Choir and Melbourne Youth Music, is one of the most joyous and astonishing experiences I have ever had in theatre. The best collaborations are a kind of magic, where the totality is greater than the sum of its parts. And in this instance the sums that make up this work are pretty damn terrific.

Both A.R.A.B and the Massive Hip Hop Choir involve young people who love and are enmeshed in the thrilling, exuberant hybrids of rap, hip-hop and rhythm and blues that are part of the collective soundtrack of our globalised multi-ethnic and multi-identity world. But befitting a group of singers and musicians who's shared heritage roams across five continents, this love of the new and the popular is crossed with a deep respect and acknowledgement of roots and tradition. This is where our joy in the audience arises from: when cutting-edge and incisive rap lyrics are grafted onto traditional call and responses from the South Pacific; or the melodies and percussion of an Anatolian past are heard underneath the plaintive singing of the choir, or accompany the raucous pride of the raps when a young MC takes centre stage.

The joy is there too in the almost frighteningly accomplished and beautiful playing of the youth orchestra. I had never heard Astor Piazzolla's composition, *Tango Ballet*, before seeing it performed by MYM during *SubUrban Exchange*. This exquisite, melancholy piece caused rapturous applause to spontaneously explode from us in the audience throughout the performance. Again, this was joy: where the false boundaries between theatre and music, between classical and popular expressions are exposed, and what matters is the experience of celebration.

That was part of the astonishment I experienced, realising how long it had been since I felt a sense of celebration in a theatrical space.

The demonisation of that word, multiculturalism, has been so embedded in our politics for close to two decades that it *is* wondrous to be reminded of the possibilities and excitement of multi-racial, multi-identity work. *SubUrban Exchange* looks and sounds and *feels* different to the majority of work I see on the Australian stage. I was listening to voices, looking at faces, watching bodies mastering instruments and thinking, I didn't know these worlds existed, I didn't know these possibilities were here, in my city. That's joy, that's astonishment.

The final part of *SubUrban Exchange*, composed by Irine Vela, is sublime. Again, boundaries shift and expectations are transformed and surpassed. I was listening, at the edge of my seat, thinking that this is indeed how the world sounds: hybrid, modernist and ancient, popular and classical. It is a terrific work and the performers did it great justice.

We came out from the Recital Hall into the environs of the Melbourne arts precinct. All of us felt like dancing, all of us in the audience were still caught in rapture. I looked around, at the whitebread posters of the MTC, shook my head at the brochures advertising the limpid, spent canonical works of traditional theatre. I had just been overwhelmed, I had just experienced joy and astonishment. I didn't want to be reminded of how conservative our arts industry is. *SubUrban Exchange* shows us that there is fertile and innovative possibilities for art and music and theatre in Australia. It shows us that to be truly transformed by art we seriously do need to look outside the square.