

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Australian

My Life, My Love

by Pat Rix

Tutti Ensemble Holdfast Choir

State Theatre Company of South Australia

with State Opera.

Norwood Concert Hall, Adelaide

Until 10 March.

My Life, My Love is a joint venture between State Theatre, State Opera and the Holdfast Choir. Just the sort of companies you might expect to be involved in an Adelaide Festival. Except that the 2002 program, assembled by Peter Sellars and his associates, has set out to derail expectations. The focus, this time, is local not international, the emphasis on community not individual virtuosity. Those usually without social and political power have been brought to centre stage and given a voice - and the effect is both unsettling and liberating, for performers and audiences alike.

So, it is not surprising that the Holdfast Choir is no ordinary choir, but an extraordinary group of more than seventy performers, three quarters of whom have some kind of physical or intellectual disability. Founded in 1997 by Pat Rix and Anne Thoday, the choir sets no barriers to participation, but there are no limits to expectation either.

My Life My Love is a project Rix began first with the choir, then took to State Theatre director and dramaturg, Rosalba Clemente to develop from a concert work into a full music theatre production, telling a story of star-crossed lovers and set between 1926 and the present, in Holdfast Bay, a stretch of city beach just north of Glenelg in Adelaide.

Framed by a dialogue between Pearl, an old woman (Barbara West) and the grand-daughter (Romy Loo) she never knew, *My Life, My Love* is a series of flashbacks of the young Pearl falling in love with Ronny (Lawrence Clifford) a young indigenous boy. He has no family, so she creates a fantastic story about his Island Girl mother and aviator father. Her own situation is much less romantic, a drunken father and a defeated mother, and times in the Depression are hard for everyone. Pearl and Ronny grow into adults and there is the prospect of marriage, but for a letter never delivered.

My Life, My Love is a melodramatic tale that would make even Dickens blush but, lifted by the enthusiasm of the performers, it subverts much of its own earnestness. From State Opera, Jennifer Kneale, as young Pearl, and Brian Gilbertson, as the pilot, bring flair to Pat Rix's very hummable score and from State Theatre, Mark Shelton conjures some delectable lighting for Cath Cantlon's set, a jetty and a series of tiered platforms for the choir and orchestra who, swathed in green and grey, sing not only with full voice but full hearts as well.

It is a great ensemble achievement. But I must, nonetheless, mention Barbro Spry for her zany show-stopping solo as the Owl, and the perfect timing from Joel Hartgen in the chiming of the clock. They are moments of true theatre.