

PERTH INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

THEATRE REVIEW: *Nostalgia*

By [Patricia Johnson](#) Arts Hub | Tuesday, February 17, 2009

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For me and most of the audience at its Friday night premiere, this was our first experience of jan-jan opera – and it was amazing. The Ishinha theatre company, under the direction of its founder, Yukichi Matsumoto, presented the two hour spectacle of its latest work *Nostalgia*, at the opening of the Perth Festival. The story of *Nostalgia* is that of an epic journey by Japanese immigrant workers to South America, which began in 1908. It begins on the ship *Kasato-maru* which is carrying the first Japanese migrants to Brazil.

The protagonist, a Japanese boy called Noichi, falls in love with Ann, an immigrant girl from Portugal whom he meets in Brazil. They grow up and one night Noichi discovers Ann being raped by a rich farm owner. Noichi kills the man; then in fear he takes Ann and their best friend Chikino and flees, to wander through the cities of South America. Ann gives birth to a son, but this does not halt their journey. Through two world wars and several revolutions they wander, until the three become separated from each other.

There is immense scope for heightened drama in this scenario. The stage, with a huge projection screen at the back is roughly the size of three standard size stages and easily accommodates the magnificently imposing sets necessary for some of the larger set-pieces. The staging of the rape and murder scene against a background of burning sugarcane fields viewed through the many paned windows of the farmers' home is terrific. The confusion and disorder of the moment are wonderfully conveyed through the intelligent use of lighting, and innovative stage management of this huge area. The original music by prominent Japanese musician Kazuhisa Uchihashi swells and

grows, in this and in other scenes, to a magical crescendo. Uchihashi has composed music for theatre, dance and film and has worked with Ishinha for 20 years.

Jan-jan opera takes its name from the jan-jan area of Osaka, a vibrant working class district. Rather than speaking in traditional Japanese, the performers use the dialect and intonation used in this part of Osaka. But *Nostalgia* features little conventional dialogue; rather it uses a rhythmical language of chant and movement inspired by the pulse of modern life. A huge cast of 35 performers portrays with impeccable harmony this intricate relationship between sound and movement through long extended scenes, punctuated by moments of action.

The whole epic journey is highly choreographed; right down to the flexing of a finger the coordination is incredibly precise. To quote Matsumoto, ‘One may think that this use of dialect may make the performance more difficult to understand, but on the contrary, by using language more as music than as dry text, the core expression comes through more clearly to Japanese and non Japanese speakers alike. In essence, we have created a new kind of opera using “Osaka Rap”, which has the living, vibrant sound that is true to the pulse of modern urban life.’

Like other Post war Japanese theatre *Nostalgia* uses complex play-within-a-play sequences, moving rapidly back and forth in time, and intermingling reality with fantasy. The dramatic structure is fragmented but held together by the music and the story of Noichi and Anne the common thread that runs through the stories. If you enjoy spectacle, this contemporary slice of Japanese theatre will thrill you with its immense size, its depth of dramatic story-telling and its fresh presentation.

Nostalgia

Perth International Arts Festival

Perth Convention Centre

13 – 21 Feb 7.30pm