

The Australian
Edition 1MON 06 MAR 2000, Page 022
Drama afloat on a sea of destiny
By * MURRAY BRAMWELL

Music theatre

Mizumachi

Ishinha. Written and directed by Yukichi Matsumoto. Music and sound by Kazuhisa Uchihashi and Kazuyuki Matsamura. Torrens Parade Ground, Adelaide.

MIZUMACHI is the water city, a floating shanty town in the emerging industrial city of Osaka in 1905. Here, poor rural migrants come from the southern islands of Ryukyu to find work, eking out a living along the canals, pilfering iron and collecting junk. Orphaned and alone, Nao meets Takeru when he rescues her sister Kana from drowning in the canal.

But like the inhabitants of Coke town in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, or figures in L.S. Lowry's industrial landscapes, the characters are dwarfed by the enormity of the machine culture around them. In a specially constructed outdoor venue in Adelaide's centrally located Torrens Parade Ground, **Ishinha**'s director Yukichi Matsumoto and designer Yuji Hayashida have created a performance space more like a movie soundstage than a theatre. It is vast.

Mizumachi presents us with a complete world of shanties, house boats, foundries and spinning mills. And there is water everywhere -- a canal one minute, an entire stage flooded the next. There is, however, an energy and buoyancy to the lives of these new Osakans. It is like a Chinese opera from the Cultural Revolution, driven by pulsing techno beats, garnished in live performance by composer and musician Kazuhisa Uchihashi.

The 41-strong cast moves in mass choreography accompanied by chants and counting, their repetitions a mix of constructivist movement Meyerhold would have been proud of, and perky dance routines from girl pop bands such as Shonen Knife. Which is to say that Mizumachi is a richly tangled mix of contemporary performance and music styles.

When there is individual dialogue, we are desperately diving into our synopses for help. When there are big production numbers -- entitled *The Furnace*, *The Spinning Factory* and *Typhoon* -- we are in the grip of elements of music, design, movement that are universally operatic.

Adelaide is the lucky first to witness this extraordinary production -- undoubtedly, a festival high-water mark.