

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

The life and death of Victor Jara — by an Australian

GUY Morrison, brother of Alistair Morrison (alias Professor Afferbeck Lauder, creator of *Strine*), relative of *The Times* correspondent George Ernest (Peking) Morrison, became obsessed with the Chilean folk singer and poet Victor Jara one Sunday morning five years ago.

The former Fleet Street journalist and features editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald* was listening to an ABC radio report from Chile. "They played a song. It was so gripping, so full of compassion, it reached in and grabbed me by the heart," recalled Morrison.

Victor Jara had been a supporter of the Allende Government. And he was a marked man at the time of the coup in 1973. He was arrested, marched through the streets to the infamous stadium of Santiago, locked up with 5,000 people and tortured for three days and nights. He was then shot dead, aged 35.

Born of landless Chilean peasants, Jara's "crime" was that his songs were "weapons". They inspired hundreds of thousands of Chileans to protest in hope for an escape from oppression and poverty.

"With his music and songs Jara wanted to open the hearts of the people, make them see their condition and see the world with new eyes," Morrison said. "He spoke to factory workers, miners and peas-

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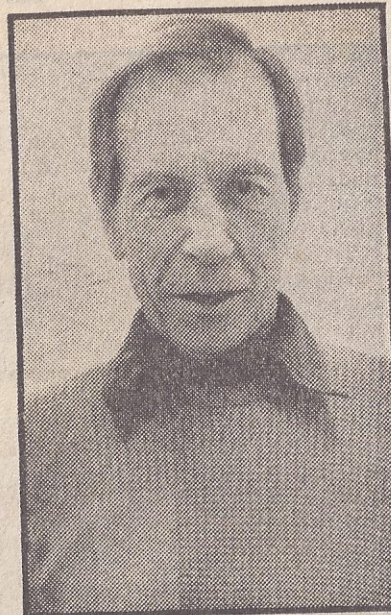
By BERWYN LEWIS

ants. He turned his back on a promising career as the darling of the international theatre circuit. He put his talent where his conscience was and put his art at the service of the people to whom he belonged."

Today, the 11th anniversary of Jara's death, Morrison's play *Jara!* premieres at the Performance Space in Redfern. It will be run for the rest of this month.

Listening to Morrison describe the course of events leading to Jara's death is like living a re-run of the American movie *Missing*, which focuses on North American involvement in the coup against the Allende Government.

The morning sun filters through the window above Morrison's desk. This Paddington terrace with its leaf-scattered, overgrown garden is a long way from Chile, but Guy evokes the brutality and horror of the coup which haunted him, finally driving him to find an outlet and write *Jara!* A litany of terrible events ensued: the Carabinero (the national paramilitary police) spraying the streets of shanty towns with machine-gun bullets, targeting factories, mowing



Guy Morrison ... "I had to write something to get it out of my system."

down and killing workers and activists who were Allende supporters.

"This is not in the play," Morrison said. "Victor's death is described but it is too momentous to portray.

"The military realised they couldn't murder all the 5,000 people in the stadium so they brought in 30

at a time. They stood them in front of a wall and with a machine-gun they shot three, missed three, shot three and missed three.

"I have spoken to a friend of Victor's who was spared. They stood three metres apart.

"If you tell the story of Victor's life, you tell the story of what happened in Chile. I had to write something to get it out of my system."

To research the play, Morrison taught himself basic Spanish, listened to recordings of Jara's music and songs and read everything he could find, including *Victor, An Unfinished Song* by his English widow, Joan Jara, who has since returned to England where she lives with her two daughters, Amanda and Manuela.

Performed by Odds & Ends, a new collective of professional actors, dancers, singers, designers and technicians, *Jara!* is directed by Nigel Rice. The cast, with an average age of 24, includes a Filipino, Chileans, Japanese, New Zealanders and Australians.

Jara's music and songs, tap-dance routines and dramatic cameos illustrating events in his life weave through Morrison's play. The dialogue is in English and the songs are in Spanish with English introductory lines. "They just don't translate or sound so marvellous in English," Morrison said.