

## THEATRE

### Imposed culture

NOW at Sydney's Nimrod Upstairs theatre (until June 27) is an interesting exercise in the politicisation of an audience with Willibordus Surendra Rendra's Australian premiere performance of *The Struggle Of The Naga Tribe*, directed by Chris Johnson.

The works of this Indonesian playwright, poet, actor, essayist and director of his own workshop theatre in Jogjakarta are banned in his own country.

Rendra was jailed without trial for five months in 1978 and has faced continual harassment from the authorities since his release. It is a triumph for theatre that his play is welcome here.

It opens with a splendid theatrical bang in the centre of a village marketplace: noisy, carnival atmosphere prevailing, Brechtian style setting, tribal bicycle rider (Annie Byron), beautifully batik-ed peasants, Carole Skinner as the *dalang* (traditionally the puppet operator and storyteller in Indonesian puppet plays), a Greek chorus of machines and a one-man Indonesian band (Tony Strachan) providing a delicate array of eastern instrumental sounds.

The cast is kept on its toes, doubling and tripling up on their parts, beautifully choreographed by Judith Anderson.

Sinister Queen (Cathy Downes, who doubles later as space cadet style journalist) rules the mythical Kingdom of Astinam with a cruel and talon-like finger.

She is the black widow scorpion spider web of eastern superstition spreading darkness, death, pain with every stretch of her vestigial *wayang kulit* puppet limbs.

This Thatcher of grass huts and rice paddies pops her society into self-flushing toilet, air-conditioned, copper-mining technological cargo cult colonisation as easily as she dons her newly-acquired symbol of progress — rhinestone sunglasses.

These are presented to her by Mr Joe (Brandon Burke), a jittery, glittery tap dancer from the West in a star spangled top hat and matching suit. He jitterbugs the way to progress, playing a glass bead game Uncle Sam-style, pied-piper-ing them with dollar bills, chocolates, little toy tanks, white elephant hospitals, missiles and neat four-year plans dictated by a gun, with no questions as part of the contract.

"We're possessed Your Majesty," says the Minister of Spiritual Affairs and Mining. "We're high on development."

The play leaves audience expectations stretched to the limit. Cultural complexities are challenged. City and village cultures are on a direct collision course, not just in the play but in the mind of the audience.

Rendra sets it up right from the start. To dismiss this play as too simplistic is to fall straight into his cultural bourgeois trap.

The transplant from village to sophisticated Surry Hills, Sydney, is an uneasy one, but then how easily does Wagner transplant to the Sydney Opera House without a little help from its friends?

Rendra is writing about imposed culture as portrayed by the Queen in her dressing scene when she assumes the layered look of aristocracy, coming to a climax with her \$2 million ring. "This is truly art," breathes the Queen with mystical awe.

The play shows how the Naga culture is related to day-to-day living. It's their valley, their ancestors' burial grounds, their sacred sites, and the work they do in their fields every day.

As the copper plutocrats move in, the Minister for Mines (Annie Byron double, *sans* bicycle) comes up with a familiar compromise. Perhaps, she suggests, they could just whack it all into a museum — then presumably everyone could go and get some culture instead of it just being there.

This is another paradigm for Rendra's cultural "them and us" syndrome. We "go" to the theatre and we "see" them.

There are many parallels in this play and not just for black Australians. Future generations of poor white trash will also be interested in plays like this after the multinationals have done over our sacred and/or mining sites.

Rendra culturally confuses his audiences. Are we the Queen or are we the Naga Tribe? To what extent are we a cultural Third World preyed upon by the colonial cultural carpetbagery of Britain and the USA.

In the process of upgrading sacred sites to casinos, this lively and satirical play sweeps away all theatre preconceptions.

Coldly critical audiences can feel threatened, may seek protection behind self-induced boredom or bristle with academic lines of defence such as "too simplistic", "too one-sided" or "would go better on a campus or somewhere."

This is the point, or one of them, of this play.

"It has the feel of a village popular theatre or street theatre," says director Chris Johnson. "It's simple and energetic. It was originally presented at the Jakarta Sports Stadium to 8,000 people at a time. The stage was surrounded by armed guards because they were worried the crowds would be incited to riot."



W. S. Rendra . . . sweeping away the preconceptions.

Police were absent at Nimrod but the event feeling was there. The highly-theatrical, larger-than-Brechtian life images were as confronting as a Gucci-garbed bystander being handed the football at an Aussie Rules match.

The play is also the product of a unique process. It was written in a group mode.

Rendra and his company discussed issues which the play could look at. Sometimes this involved going to a village and discussing attitudes with the people. At various stages Rendra would stop the villagers talking, get up and improvise. The villagers would correct the details.

"It was a village-based process," says Johnson. "It follows a *wayang kulit* structure.

"The story is always the same — two opposing families battling for supremacy. In this case Rendra pits the Naga tribe against the Queen along with her followers and manipulators.

"However," Johnson points out, "there is a slight deviation from this strict adherence to tradition. In *wayang kulit* puppet stories you always know who's going to win — the good. Rendra stops short of this."

Cathy Downes doubles as a journalist in this production. Nervous, uptight, news-damaged neurons displaying dysfunctions, she has the best of intentions and contrasts sharply with the grace and ease of Naga tribespeople, emphasising the cultural differences between the play and its audience.

This is a play to be seen by everyone concerned with Australian theatre losing its culture before it loses its cringe.

— BERWYN LEWIS