

Composer tackles nation's dark past



Jeremy Rose: a young man with a social purpose... PHOTO CREDIT SESHANKA SAMARAJIWA

MUSIC

Jeremy Rose and The Earshift Orchestra

Riverside Theatres, Parramatta, Sydney

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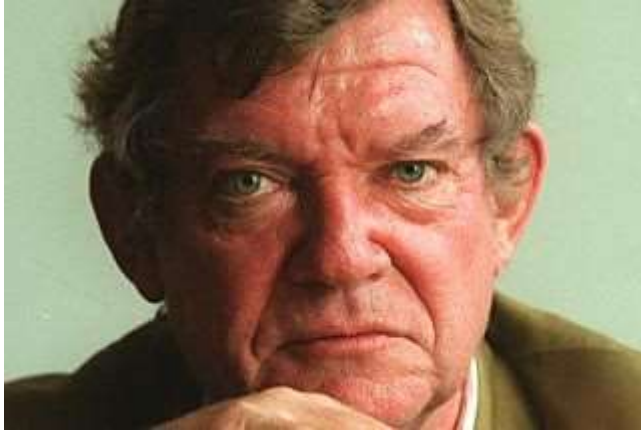
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ERIC MYERS

Novelist Peter Carey once said that Robert Hughes, in his monumental book *The Fatal Shore*, “grasped the cruelty of Australia’s birth and shoved it in our face”. Hughes’s words, read at Riverside Theatres last Sunday, were a harrowing experience.

In the premiere of his oratorio *Iron In The Blood* Jeremy Rose selected those excerpts for maximum impact. A brilliant Sydney jazz composer and instrumentalist, he is at 34 a young man with a social purpose. Opening the concert with an acknowledgement of country – in this case, the Darug people – was a salutary reminder of one of the work’s major themes: the destruction of

Aboriginal society. Another theme was the dystopian nightmare of the convict experience, whereby an unexplored continent was converted into a jail.



Robert Hughes: he grasped the cruelty of Australia's birth and shoved it in our face...

Rose was questioned recently by a broadcaster who doubted that jazz was capable of exploring Hughes's dark themes. The composer was forthright. As the establishment of a penal colony in Australia involved much improvisation on the part of the settlers, why not deploy a form of music where the central concern is improvisation? That's jazz.



Jeremy Rose: a powerful 70-minute work, well able to match the scale of Hughes's thesis...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIANJAZZ.NET...

Using an orthodox 17-piece big band, with himself as conductor and occasional soloist, narrators Michael Cullen and Patrick Dickson, and visuals, Rose demonstrated that his powerful 70-minute work was well able to match the scale of Hughes's thesis.

In most places the music reflected Hughes's luxuriant prose. There were glimpses of Australiana throughout. In the early movements, for example, there was a fascinating representation of the mixture of curiosity and trepidation in the minds of the local Aborigines who saw the ships of the First Fleet sail into what was to become Sydney Harbour.

The Aborigines' sense of foreboding – they had never before been invaded – is palpable in the music.

Hughes's terminology was compelling. The transportation of English criminals – initially 750, but totalling 160,000 by 1850 - was a failed experiment, as crime in England was not deterred. The convict era, marked by brutality and cruelty, was exacerbated by starvation, exhaustion, and a sense of abandonment. It foreshadowed the 20th century gulag.



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A stellar line-up of handpicked musicians, including four Melburnians, presented this extraordinary music, reminiscent of comparable American works such as Max Roach's *Freedom Now Suite*, and Wynton Marsalis's *Blood In The Fields*. Excellent solos were heard, but this was primarily an occasion, owing to Rose's compositional abilities, to celebrate the jazz orchestra itself as the instrument of choice.