

Living Arts Canberra

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REVIEW – by Barbie Robinson and Richard Scherer

A Chorus of Women – *The People's Passion*

Written by Glenda Cloughley

Musical direction by Johanna McBride

Centre for Christianity and Culture, Canberra

28 and 30 June 2019

The discipline of history has undergone a decided shift in recent years with a well-spring of grassroots storytelling pushing traditional history books aside. This is part of a world-wide movement towards truth telling. Our Aboriginal people have started to reclaim the story of Australia from the 18th century white male colonists who wrote their victors' stories in books which formed the basis for school curricula through to the modern era.

In the same way, Glenda Cloughley and A Chorus of Women tell a different story of the European wars of the 20th century from that which has dominated public and education discourse for 100 years or more.

Very few children leave primary school in Australia without learning the ANZAC story and governments of all colours have now elevated the celebration of ANZAC Day to a quasi-religious event. Far fewer, we hazard to guess, will know anything of the women's peace movements of 1915, of the story of the International Congress of Women and its conference in The Hague in 1915, nor of the work of Eglantyne Jebb, founder of the Save the Children Fund.

In creating an ongoing work focused on the women's movements for peace, Glenda Cloughley invites us to consider an alternative world view, one of harmony and the nurture of life. The 2019 iteration of Cloughley's work also gives a nod to the

contemporary people's movements for climate change and in support of world wide movements of refugees due to conflict and war.

This is a monumental undertaking and the collaborative nature of A Chorus of Women is part of the story. There is a strong sense for audience of the cohesion of a group which has worked over time with a single purpose.

Musically challenging, *The People's Passion* requires of its Greek chorus high levels of choral skill. *The People's Passion* is a history lesson, the spoken elements delivered by talented actor Miriam Pickard, the lyrical song story delivered in turns by the Chorus and a small number of professional voices in AJ America, Jenny Sawer and Julia Wee. Further balance to the sound comes from the sweet youthful voices of the Luminescence children's choir, directed by AJ America. A small and highly effective orchestra provides much more than background for the choral work, delivering atmosphere in drum rolls and the plaintive human voice call of the cellos.

This is a work based in academic research but it is very much designed for audience. Both the printed program and the scrolling of lyrics on the large screen provide context and content guidance for listeners, without which we would not always clearly discern the lyrics.

Above all, the passion of this performance piece shines through. It is a story of the passion of women to foster harmony across warring nations, of young people to be heard against the politics of power. The audience is thoroughly engaged in this struggle, in the pain and yearning of generations of women and their desire to make their words bring change.

At the opening performance of the 2019 Passion, audience members were visibly moved, with tears shed and a spontaneous willingness to join in the Chorus's heartfelt finale evocation of peace for coming generations.

We hope that this fine Canberra voice will find its way to other venues across Australia, taking its place in the new histories we are now telling and respecting.

Barbie Robinson and Richard Scherer attended The People's Passion on Friday 28 June 2019 as guests of A Chorus of Women.