

Writing

Mark Fedotych is dying and his wife, Marusia is to be forcefully repatriated. Mark and his Marusia are refugees. The war they fled has neared its end. They spend its final, brutal days in a camp somewhere in Central Europe. Freedom is near, but remains elusive. So begins *Ausländer und Staatenlose*.

Through the course of the project, I had felt its development had in some way been the opera itself. It had grown around me, grown with me and will probably continue to do so for years to come. I was to experience the geographical origins of my family and feel its resonance within me - a journey that began in 1994 when I made my first visit to Prague.

I had not known it at the time, but the writing had begun there. *God's Tears Europa*, which I initially thought of as an addition to *Black Harlequin*, was directly influenced by Prague; its recent liberation from the Soviet Union, the emerging tourist economy and the scream of raw history I could feel and hear from every stone this city was built on.

I wrote *God's Tears Europa* in two stages, all within a couple of days whilst sampling the local wine at Valentin Café, central Prague.

*I uphold the world
I raise my fists
I turn the key
I fight for you
I die for you
I long for you
God's tears Europa*

*Take the weight, the weight
I know no pain
I take the pain
You open the doors
fill our streets
with glassy eyes
with glassy hearts
looks as though they're here to stay
I take the weight
Hose me down
I shine for you
God's tears Europa*

*I uphold the world
I raise my fists
I turn the key
I fight for you
I die for you
I long for you
God's tears Europa*

*Still the pain
I face the world
know me, know me, know me, know me*



*Forget me not
Forsake me not
Carve me out
I stand by you
Carve me up
I stand by you
Would I leave
God's tears will fall, Europa.*

Something about the drama on Prague's streets intrigued me. Throughout the city, particularly the older areas, you will find countless statues, many which gesture to each other atop buildings. These unsung stone heroes and heroines seem to labour under their sandstone burden, while saints raise their fists to the world. It's as if their world goes unnoticed. I had found myself drawn to them, befriending and confiding in them.



I was reminded of the silent, patient and resigned manner of the ancient statues I had seen in the National Museum of Cambodia (1994). They were in stark contrast to those in Prague which appear active and integrated into the world around them. The Cambodian's were silent, engaged in a deeper, more far-away quest. The Czech's reach out to the world, greet it, take its weight effortlessly, do battle and offer beauty to its citizens. The Cambodians have left the struggle, seeking peace for an awakening that seemed a long time coming.

During that first trip, I met the stage designer, Daniel Dvorak¹, who was managing the artists agency, MozART Praha. He was also working on non-traditional opera, most notably Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in the National Theatre of Marionettes. Dvorak was clearly interested in exploring new works and we discussed collaborating on a Prague production of *Black Harlequin*.

The innovative writer/director, Robert Wilson² was in Berlin that year opening a new work written in part by Tom Waits³ and William S. Burroughs⁴. *Black Rider*⁵ was based on a German folk tale. It had elements of the *Black Harlequin* and strong European roots. It was brash, passionate and a significant marker in *Ausländer's* embryonic roots. I came across posters for its opening throughout Prague. Pieces that I had not been aware of at the time were only just starting to fall together. I was dealing with a kind of collage, but it would be at least another six months before I really knew what I was doing.

I left Prague, promising to return with *Harlequin* in tow, not realising that I would be back in three years to write a new and challenging work. *Black Harlequin's* costume was put into storage and a web site would archive its achievements. *Ausländer und Staatenlose* would emerge and my life would never be the same again.

By the end of 1994 I was down my networking activities and embraced the world I had left behind: theatre, music, independent media. It was around that time that I was to come into contact with Associate Professor John Bird who invited me to participate in the first Masters and Ph.D. program undertaken by the Centre for Animation and Interactive Media (AIM), Department of Visual Communication, RMIT University. I had also met AIM graduates David Cox, Kim Bounds and John Power and with whom I would collaborate on numerous projects.

My Masters project was initially part design, part technical, part coordination. It became a personal odyssey that is reflected in the writing process documented in my journals and emails. These have been pieced together, along with stories, poems and photos, that represent a travelogue of impressions, expressions, enquires and of course, inspirations.

The project took off early 1995 when a colleague of mine, Persian playwright and author Ma'mma'd Aidani, drew my attention to the yet-to-be translated stories authored by my Grandmother (Oma), Elena Garton. They were stored with family artefacts I had borrowed from my Mother. Here, Ma'mma'd was to say, is the opera.

I was already digging through this priceless cache of photos, passports and other official documents, each a story in themselves. I wanted to write about political refugees, but I did not have a strong enough narrative to piece my ideas together with. But here, literally in front of me, could be the words I

¹ Daniel Dvorak, at the time of writing, is Director of the Prague State Opera.

² [online] <http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/library/bibliographies/wilson.htm> [Accessed July 2000].

³ [online] <http://www.officialtomwaits.com/> [Accessed July 2000].

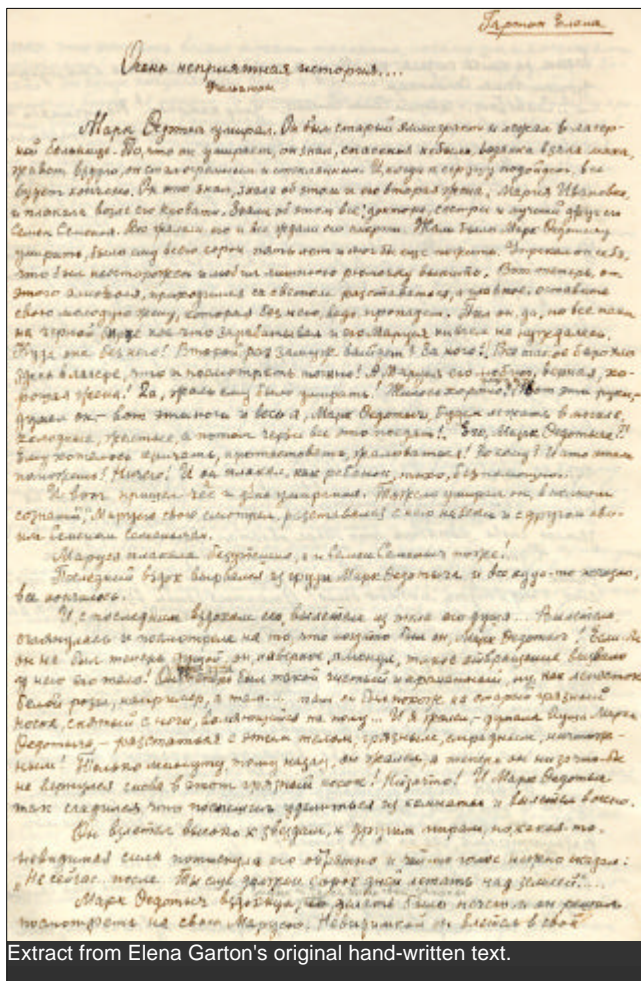
⁴ [online] <http://www.bigtable.com/> [Accessed July 2000].

⁵ [online] http://www.eff.org/pub/Misc/Publications/Misc/William_S_Burroughs/black_rider.burroughs [Accessed July 2000].

had been looking for. I had already found the title of the project from Oma's Identity Card, issued 14 May 1947. It took Ma'mma'd, himself a political refugee and victim of torture, to alert me to the literary past of my family.

My family had migrated from Europe in 1950. They brought with them stories of their tumultuous experiences. Some of which we thought may have been buried in Oma's writing. Ma'mma'd suggested that if I was to do nothing with this material, I would be robbing my culture of access to her stories. I quickly set about to write the libretto for *Ausländer und Staatenlose*, but not before I could have this work translated. No one really knew what Elena had written. For all I knew, there may have been nothing of worth in these beautifully hand-written pages.

Originally, I wanted to create a non-narrative opera, one that drew its content from historical events related in particular to the cultural dislocation that comes with being a political refugee. I wanted these events to be placed within a non-linear time-frame. The story could be anywhere, any time. I discovered that to have a true non-narrative, non-linear approach, I would need to start with a narrative before I could break it apart.



Extract from Elena Garton's original hand-written text.

OMA: Ausländer und Staatenlose is based on a short story Oma wrote somewhere between the 40s and early 50s. Originally, the project was to be derived from notes, plays and other stories she had written, but when we had some of them translated⁶ it was clear that *A Very Unpleasant Story*⁷ was by far the most appropriate point of reference to represent the themes of the opera.

Oma's texts were translated by Elena Leonoff, who was the founder of *Webgrrls Melbourne*⁸. It was an exciting process. Most of Oma's stories and plays, some with songs written in Italian, were of the boy meets girl variety. *A Very Unpleasant Story* stood out from the rest. It's part science fiction, part drama, part political. My partner, Justina Curtis and I, couldn't believe what we had found. Justina was a consistent support throughout the project, very much an integral part to its realisation. It was through her that I met Elena.

Elena discovered a metaphorical piece with bizarre references to Russian Orthodox religion, the atomic bomb, the unmistakable power of commerce, and Martians! Here was a ready-made story that would underpin the concepts I had wanted to work with including the text I

had already written. I had a collaborator who, despite having passed away when I was 11, was very much alive.

I undertook to re-write Elena's piece, breaking it down into individual acts which would form the narrative, *Forever Ausländer*⁹. This was largely written from February to March 1997 during the MA Research Tour I had conducted in the Czech Republic and Austria. This second trip to Europe ratified the project, having spent most of the time delving into it conceptually and philosophically. The Journal

⁶ Translated from Old Russian to English by Elena Leonoff.

⁷ Garton, E (N.D.) *A Very Unpleasant Story*, in possession of the authors family.

⁸ [online] <http://www.webgrrls.com/melbourne/> [Accessed July 2000].

⁹ Garton, A 1997, *Forever Ausländer* (1997).

provides a detailed expose of the project's conceptual development, as well as the synchronous events that helped to pull the more difficult components together.

The libretto drew from my own family history, Russian Orthodox practice¹⁰ and the experiences and people I had encountered throughout my travels in Southeast Asia, Indochina, Brazil and Europe¹¹. In some way, it was to help me piece together parts of my own life, giving it a sense of place despite being first generation Australian (see App 4, Sources).



Elena Garton, May 1947.

I ended up with four narratives: Elena's original story, my adaptation, my mother's interpretation of the events Elena had tried to depict (taken from recorded interviews), and the narration scripted in the libretto. I would have them collide simultaneously creating non-narrative events at the points where the stories would intersect. *Ausländer Micro*, contains the adapted text and libretto weaving over each other and separated into individual scenes.

The first act, *Between Staatenlose*, blends Oma's story and some aspects of my Father's experiences. He spent the period towards the end of WWII in a concentration camp in Spittal an der Drau, where my mother was born.

Aspects of his story coincide with research conducted by historian, Nikolai Tolstoy, who wrote about the "...forced repatriation, after the German surrender in early May 1945, of about 45,000 anti-communist Russians, and about 30,000 Yugoslavs, whose crime was to have considered Stalin a worse tyrant than Hitler and joined forces with the Germans against Stalin's Red Army."¹² My Father survived the repatriation and managed to stay in Spittal. We believe the only thing that saved him was that he cooked for his British jailers and could muster enough English to get by. A remarkable article appeared in the June 2, 1990 edition of the *Good Weekend*¹³, describing almost in the same detail, the events that caused my Father to be brought to Spittal and eventually stay and marry my Mother there.

Act Two, *The Message*, is pretty much true to Oma's story, however I do draw references from my Father's story as well as more recent situations witnessed in the refugee camps in West Timor. This is the irony of this opera – the stories that I drew inspiration from are no different to those of the ongoing struggles in present times. From East Timor to Serbia, from West Papua to the Solomon Islands innocent people are caught in the cross-fire as the power plays unwind through the complex layers of racism, religion and globalisation.



Camp in Spittal, 1945 (SMH, June 1990).

¹⁰ Listsova, O 1996, The holy image makers, *Russian Life*, v39 n12 pg22.

¹¹ Garton, A 1994, *LOG: onroad impressions, confessions and observations*, [online] <http://toysatellite.org/news/onroad/agarton/> [Accessed July 2000].

¹² Gill, A 1990, The Final Secret, *Good Weekend*, Sydney Morning Herald, June 2, pg33.

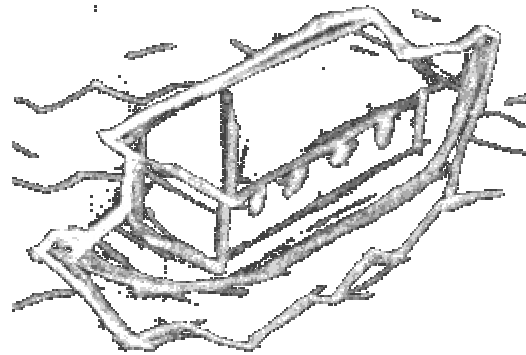
¹³ Gill, A 1990, The Final Secret, *Good Weekend*, Sydney Morning Herald, June 2, pg33.

Act Three, *The Message is a Lie*, explores the notion of freedom, what it is and what it means to someone who seeks it out despite the political violence they may have to live through. It is also very much of corporate information flows, the one to many media tools that cultivate mass consumers of entertainment and news.



Act Four, *Freiheit Revealed*, was the hardest to write. I did not want to follow too closely the way Oma's story ended. It was not until a chance meeting with an elderly Vietnamese woman that this act was completed. I met her in a second hand clothing store on Smith Street, Melbourne. She was minding the store for her son. We got to talk about her life in Australia. She told me how she had got there as one of the many people who travelled by boat to escape the violence post the Vietnam War.

She told me how she lost a couple of grand-children at the hands of Vietnamese police, who were known to stop refugee boats and apparently sink them rather than have them towed back to the main-land. She had also explained that on some occasions children who were born on these boats were often thrown into the ocean to spare them from hunger or worse.



Screaming text

You get a lot of attention when you scream. It can feel good too. Over the years I have enjoyed watching and listening to homeless eccentrics wailing, yelling and abusing passersby, traffic and phantom creatures that only they see. I don't know if they influenced my singing and spoken word style, but I found some of them perhaps freer than many of us could ever be.

In 1994 I formed a choir to perform the emerging libretto, as well as experiment with vocal techniques I had developed for my own solo performances. These, I had considered, would be more powerful when re-produced by multiple voices arranged to make the most of the nuances and extreme tangents my work could take.



Justina Curtis

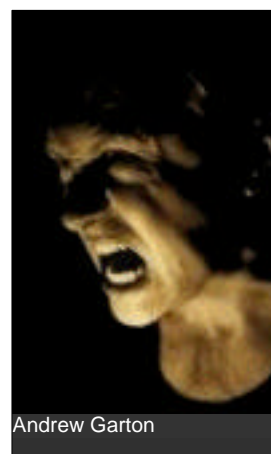
Fierce Throat was first heard as an impromptu choir made up of ten male performers from the Brisbane based Debauch Theatre Company. We performed *Gods Tears Europa* at *Trance Plant*, a two-week multi-performance art installation held in a disused power station in Brisbane, Queensland, August 1994. We had two rehearsals and performed the piece once a night for just under a week. I had each member of the choir force words out at full volume, pushing as much air behind each word as could be mustered. We stood as still as we possible could enabling the volume and intensity of our voices to carry the full force of the piece. It was like an army of boxers trained to punch holes into air. I no longer had to shout alone. *Fierce Throat*, a screaming choir was born.



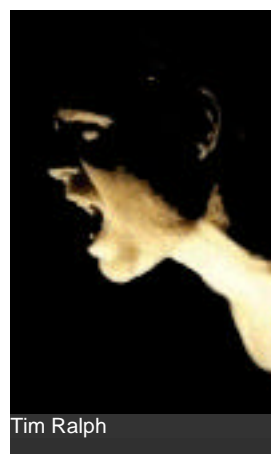
Joe Stojic

When I moved to Melbourne the choir went through several incarnations. The first Melbourne iteration of *Fierce Throat* debuted at *Where are the Silences*, September 1994, alongside Persian poet, Ma'mma'd Aidani, Fitzroy Gallery, Melbourne.

The choir settled into a kind of vocal quartet, each member bringing their own personal intensity into the mix. *Fierce Throat* members included Justina Curtis, Tim Ralph, Joe Stojic and myself.



Andrew Garton



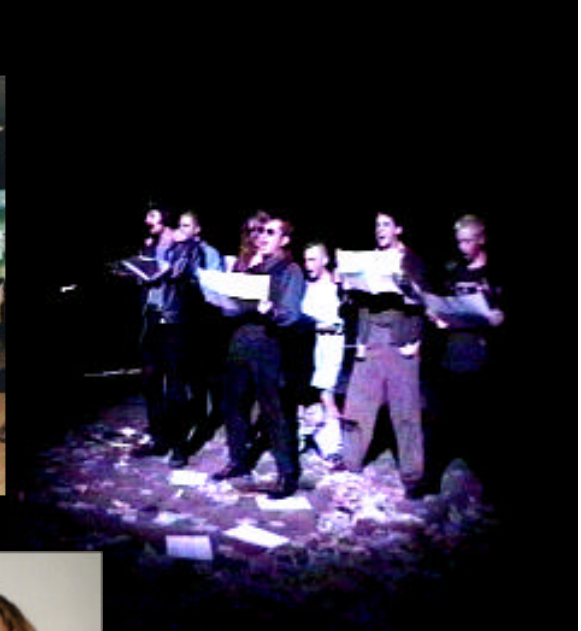
Tim Ralph

The technique I was developing for performing my pieces required rigorous preparation, rehearsal and concentration. *Fierce Throat* members need not know how to sing, nor how to sustain a melody. All I required of them was passion and patience. The rest they would learn through rehearsals.

Care had to be taken. I would have them do breathing and vocal exercises to ensure that extreme levels of volume would not tax their throat. The idea was to focus on the delivery of text, using volume sparingly, by controlling the way air was passed through the throat. The idea was to create as much power during whispered passages as those that required shouting. Air was important, both to control projection and protect the throat from damage.

Apart from vocal techniques, it was important for the choir to perform to a generative underscore. This required of the performers to both listen and concentrate on each other's timing. Given the uncertain directions the underscore would take, the delivery of the libretto had to be no less intense, no less precise. The uncertainty between underscore and performed libretto became a necessary tool to sustain focus and adrenaline during a performance.

Early 1996 saw *Fierce Throat* at *Odd* (Melbourne University Student Union), then *Formication* in Fitzroy, Melbourne. The choir performed extracts from *Ausländer* at the opening of the 1997 *Melbourne Fringe Festival* (Budinski Theatre). Other Fringe performances included *Exstatic* (Glitch), and *CyberFringe*, held at Melbourne's Southbank one sunny Sunday afternoon. In 1998 we recorded one song from *Ausländer*, components of which were used in *Ausländer Micro*.



TOP Fierce Throat, TrancePlant, Brisbane, Qld, 1994.

LEFT Fierce Throat, Fitzroy Gallery, Melbourne, Vic, 1994.

TOP LEFT Fierce Throat, Southbank, Melbourne Fringe Festival, 1996.

It is said that within a decade, English could become the common language of Europe. If language is lost, what then will become of cultural history? Our sense of place will no longer be bound by soil, but by the culture of commerce, the culture of inequality. Displacement will become common-place, language will become a single universal code for exchange with little, or no regard for the physical, mental and cultural condition of people who would crawl, walk and die doomed to forever being *Ausländer und Staatenlose*.