

The Gift of the Furies Experience

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by

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I wonder if, like me, there are many others who carry an enduring ache for the earth as we live with the prospect of climate change. Sitting just beneath the surface, yet sinking deep, this ache is too much to look at all the time. No words to speak it all - all the love for children and Earth - and grief for what might happen to precious life.

Where is there a place to mourn the silent disappearance of species, the salinization of a sweet creek, barren, dusty paddocks, the imminent migrations of island populations?

I sat in the true-pitched choral harmonies of the premiere performance of *The Gifts of the Furies* in the Great Hall at ANU on Sunday 29 March, and felt my ache being taken up, drawn out, given shape and sound; an articulation fuller than words. The aeolian tones of the storyteller's melody carried my sorrowful anxiety for the future along into more specific emotions expressed through the music and dramatic movements of this new imagining of an ancient story, *The Oresteia*. It tells what happens when power and hubris set the 'mortal law of cities and people' above the 'immortal law of earth and sky.'

Glenda Cloughley has written a most profound musical work which defies genre classification. She refers to it as a story-song, which aligns it somewhat with the mode of indigenous traditions (and their purpose in the maintenance of proper societal affiliations and relations between people and earth). Around Cloughley's unifying role as the self-accompanied storyteller, are gathered choral songs, solos, small vocal ensembles and instrumental dynamics. A narrator calls the key movements of the work, while the 'citizens' chorus' sing their concerned commentary into the present time double of the drama. Specific entities such as Gaia, The Furies, Lord Reason and Ethos, are realized in idiomatic portrayals through choreography and costume. These powerful presences have been keenly visualized by Madeleine Blackwell.

Cloughley's guitar and voice have a continuing, integrative purpose. As a counterpoint to this, the texture and character of carefully selected instruments – piano, violin, cello, dulcimer, base dulcimer and percussion, animate the emotional shifts of the story.

In the program, Cloughley acknowledges the numerous professional artists who perform the work without fee "because of their commitment to community art-making and their belief in the need for urgent change in our social climate."

The two premiere performances of *The Gifts of the Furies* on the Sunday and Monday nights, in which A Chorus of Women were joined by Wayfarers Canberra, were almost sold out. A Chorus of Women has risen in Canberra, as a phenomenon of our times and its place - a city state at the centre of Australian democracy. 'Our times' constitute an increasingly politically savvy and educated population impatient with spin and hubris who are longing for wisdom from decision-makers. And A Chorus of Women has

become known for their synthesis of this emotionally intelligent citizens' voice that speaks through original music and theatre into the concerns of our age. Wayfarers, led by Canberra's musical genius and inspirational creative spirit, Judith Clingan AM, added sweet young voices and rich male tones to the warm Chorus sound. Clingan was also joint Musical Director with Johanna McBride, and they were assisted by another Chorus woman of diverse musical talents, Meg Rigby.

McBride, whom Cloughley acknowledges as the creative midwife to her opus, is a consummate pianist in her own right. But it is McBride's intuitive musical fluency that elicits such a vitalized sound from the singers under her direction. Her own ringing mezzo voice working with the confident soaring soprano of Clingan and the rich alto of Cloughley make for some ecstatic moments in the performance.

The work of A Chorus of Women is famously collaborative, but *The Gifts of the Furies* is Cloughley's heart-child which A Chorus of Women with Wayfarers, have enabled to find its form. Cloughley is an Analytical Psychologist, and significantly, one whose natural intelligence and compassion looks to cultural psyche as well as that of the individual. This leaning encouraged her efforts to understand the workings of wisdom in *The Oresteia*. Her composer's notes in the program quote Jung, *The most we can do is dream the myth onwards and give it modern dress. And whatever explanation or interpretation does to it, we do to our own souls as well, with corresponding results for our own well being*. Her analytical experience verifies the truth of this and moves her to bring it into being through her own creativity.

The Gifts of the Furies is an eighty minute story-song inspired by a Greek myth; a Western dreaming story written by Aeschylus in Athens in 458 BC. As Jung anticipates, this ancient work finds its relevance in our times. Originating at the beginnings of democracy, it is a wisdom story for cities to mind the balance of laws - of society and Nature. As a portal for the story in Australia's city state, Cloughley enlists the spirit of the statue of Ethos, by Tom Bass, which stands outside the Legislative Assembly in Civic Square in Canberra. Ethos, being as she is, an image of civilized wisdom like her sister, Athena, in the *Oresteia*, holds the responsibility in *The Gifts of the Furies*, of assisting the citizens towards some necessary consciousness – of dreaming the story on.

The story is set in the dysfunctional royal house of the city-state of Argos. Murderous crimes against mothers and children are responded to with horror and rage, not by the law of the state but by the furious spirits of Earth, alerting the audience to the generative double sources of life. So as the story unfolds the audience is asked to carry this poetic metaphor of women and Earth and to hear the crimes of the human story also as crimes against the Earth.

This is helped along by opportunities for the audience to participate as concerned citizens by singing with the Chorus, led by the Cantor and guided by a synopsis of the story in the program.

The women sing, *Is the Queen's rage the Fury of Earth?*
And the men sing, *Is the King's death the Fate of mankind?*

The narrative rolls on its inexorable path through the portents of doom in the Furies oracle, “Black dread will bloom in heart’s red blood till green songs grow in the gaze of love” until Ethos brings the protagonists to trial. The matricidal son - defended by Lord Reason - and The Furious Spirits of Earth each present their case to the citizens.

Here the Narrator reminds us that the presence of gods in the court (the ancient Furies of Earth and the younger gods - Lord Reason and Ethos) means “it’s more a trial of Laws than persons”. It’s the embodiment of the conflicting laws in the separate characters of the gods that enables us to make a much clearer distinction between Laws and to see them each as potential ‘Bodies of Law’.

Before white people came to Australia there were no cities. Everyone lived in direct relation to the land. Wongi elder, Josie Wowolla Boyle, says that Tjukurrpa is Natural Law.¹ This is why Yothu Yindi can sing in *Treaty*, “The planting of the Union Jack never changed our Law at all.” We are only just realizing that the consequences of actions need to be envisioned deep into time and into a network of implications. This might be the reason old Aboriginal law-men deliberate for so long when asked to authorize disturbances to country. This understanding of the inviolability of the Laws of Nature is the teaching of the original drama and Cloughley recognizes its relevance for our times as we face climate change.

Although this awareness about Natural Law is vital to the future orientation of law and governance, I think we were longing for even more from this work when we took our seats in the Great Hall. I for one was glad of the little vision of hope in the old Furies curse, “.....until the green songs grow in the gaze of love”.

Does this story-song offer any insight about what it is that will enable the mass attitudinal shift that will drive the wisest and speediest action to avoid catastrophic climate change?

When Lord Reason has presented the case for the matricidal son and the Furies have presented theirs amid constant threats to blight the Earth if the decision goes against them, the citizens’ vote in this ‘trial of Laws’ is tied. Ethos casts the deciding vote. After such horrific crimes, our instincts go perhaps towards blame and punishment, so what happens next is somewhat unexpected and feels at first, unsatisfactory. Ethos votes in favor of the young Prince and sends him home to Argos – admittedly a saner young man with the model of Athenian democracy and Ethos’ wisdom to guide his kingship.

But surely the Earth is doomed.

Ethos now turns to the raging Furies, and with dignity and respect, begins her persuasion.....She tells them she will never tire of telling them their gifts.

*If you heard the voice of the people’s love
Would you open the doors of your kindly heart?*

¹ In conversation with Josie Wowolla Boyle, Perth WA, 7 May 2009.

*Receive their longing? Trust their promise?
Would you plant the Songs of Life in their souls?*

There is something about singing that opens the heart and this story-song has activated an emotional telos that runs from a sense of doom towards its longing for wisdom. And the audience can hardly wait to sing their promise with the chorus. You wouldn't believe how good this felt – to sing my citizen's voice into this archetypal healing track.

*We love our children.
We will care for the land.
Please come and dwell in our most sacred places. Your loving gaze is our source
We are held by the songs in your beautiful eyes
Sweet golden eyes, sweet olive eyes
Sweet and terrible mystery of Life
You see us, we sing back our love.*

And the Furies turn their Kindly Face towards the people.

The wisdom of Ethos lies in her love for her people and the Earth. Her justice transcends crime and punishment, and attends to what will best restore people and Earth to their right relationship.

As with our own climate change circumstances, it is our loving gaze upon this dear Earth and the absolute realization that “out of (her) treasures come children and fruit” that will enable us to transcend the dynamics of self interest and instead to work in comity with each other in restorative action.

The Gifts of the Furies is Glenda Cloughley's own wise and compassionate gift of cultural therapy against the dilemmas of our time. It now needs to do its work amongst us all.

Bronwyn Goss is an artist who writes about art and the creative process. She is a lover of the Earth.

Bronwyn is a West Australian who lived in Canberra from 1998 to 2004 and during that time participated in many performances by A Chorus of Women. Since 2004 she has lived in Perth and remains engaged with Chorus endeavors, joining them in performance when she can. She was delighted to be in the audience for the Gifts of the Furies on March 29, 2009.