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Composer: Ross Harris
Libretto: Vincent O'Sullivan

FREE PROGRAMME

POST-SHOW TALK: THURSDAY 10 MARCH

CO-PRODUCED BY:



NEW ZEALAND FESTIVAL  **NZOPERA**

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BRASS POPPIES

MERCURY THEATRE

TUESDAY 10 MARCH — SATURDAY 12 MARCH,

8:00 PM

1 HOUR 10 MINUTES WITH NO INTERVAL

Nau mai haere mai ki Te Ahurei Toi O Tāmaki Makaurau. Welcome to Auckland Arts Festival. We are delighted to host you.

The Festival moves through moments in history and reflects on the impact they have on our world. It moves across cultures and into places where there are no borders. It shows us human beings coming together through music, performance and art.

We are delighted to present this major new chamber opera and offer our thanks to the artists whose vision, hard work and passion made it happen. Congratulations Ross, Vincent, Jonathan, Hamish and the entire team. And thank you to our commissioning partners, New Zealand Opera and the New Zealand Festival.

Have a fabulous Festival.

Ngā mihi mahana—the Festival Team



ROSS HARRIS – THE COMPOSER’S VIEW

Brass Poppies is a chamber opera that reflects the tragedy of war by focusing on the disastrous Gallipoli campaign and the fate of the Wellington Regiment at Chunuk Bair.

Because the disaster of that battle is beyond communication, *Brass Poppies* draws a broader picture, with soldiers at the front and the women at home always present on stage. While the work expresses the physical and emotional trauma of war, it is sometimes grotesquely humorous and absurd, but mostly it is a lament; a lament for lost and damaged lives.

VINCENT O'SULLIVAN – THE LIBRETTIST'S VIEW

I never quite know what is meant by that phrase “ordinary men and women”, as if there were another variety possible. In the face of a century's vast history of loss and love, destruction and friendship, erasure and memory, it's hard to see how there is anything much else worth taking seriously.

The heroism of war, if one speaks of such a thing, is in the detail of what people will do to preserve what to them is “ordinary”. An ordinary community, then, in the worst part of its experience — that is what Ross and I hoped to portray in this version of one of New Zealand's most celebrated stories. And although New Zealanders from all parts of the country were involved in it, the story of Chunuk Bair seems very much a Wellington one. It was as the commanding officer of the Wellington Battalion that William Malone led the fruitless attack on the highest point of Gallipoli, took it, defended it for a few hours, and died there with over 700 of his men. It was what history likes to exhibit as an extraordinary event, which means where ordinary men performed as they never expected they would need to do.

An opera, of course, is a long way from being history. As with most opera, *Brass Poppies* is where possible emotions are explored, rather than definite events accurately described. Here are the lives of women and men from one small place, who were there before, and hope to be there after, war was declared on their behalf — in this case, the modest Aro Valley suburb and its people, what they are thrown into, and must try to survive. For it is always a local community that experiences war, and so women and men are on stage together throughout the various scenes. In a sense, there is no such thing as a war that does not bomb Cuba St, or where men from one Lambton Quay are not instructed to bomb another. Just as there is probably no war where patriotism does not at some point become caricature, and irreverence a saving vestige of sanity. ‘Peace’, if such a concept has much purchase at the end of the performance, means a very simple thing — the desire to have again what you happily had before, although that is what war primarily prevents. Which is why the best thing that might be said about it is that this is an ordinary story.

Image Credit:

Artist Stephen Mulqueen's brass poppies made from spent bullet casings, inspiration for the opera's title.



A NOTE FROM DIRECTOR JONATHAN ALVER

A mere 100 years has passed since the dreadful tragedy of Chunuk Bair where so many New Zealanders were killed but, despite photographic and filmic evidence, we have little real understanding of the experience for those soldiers and their families.

They are characters locked away in a dusty sepia world, people of another time with a sense of duty, manners and conventions different from our own. We can recognise the awful loss of life, but we have no real sense of how that felt. We can look at the photographs of World War I, listen to the stories told by those who survived, but more often than not the history we are told is written and approved through official channels, the details massaged to highlight glory and heroism to make the calamity more palatable and reflect a greater good.

What would they who died tell us?

Many operas have a true historical setting, and some of those are based on real-life characters, but opera was not created to teach us history. Instead, the exquisite conjunction of music, stage and voice brings characters to life, connecting us directly to the human condition, to the hearts of the personalities before us, allowing us to share their thoughts and feelings.

In *Brass Poppies*, Ross and Vincent have reflected on one of the darkest days in New Zealand history, but not to simply commemorate the tragic events. They have put flesh on the dry bones of some of the real and imagined personalities involved, literally giving them a voice to share snapshots of their experiences with us, telling us how it might have felt and inviting us to put ourselves in their shoes.

In staging this opera, while using some original photographic images, I am keen to break away from sepia and to bring those characters and the world around them into full colour. The Wellington the soldiers left was as colourful and beautiful as it is now and the land where they died was also full of colour. Indeed, the approach to the peak of Chunuk Bair was made along Rhododendron Spur!

Hopefully, *Brass Poppies* will bring back to life for a short time, in full colour, those whose lives were touched by these events, inviting us to share their experiences and feelings and to heed their warnings to never tolerate another Great War.



CREDITS

CREATIVES

Composer

Ross Harris

Librettist

Vincent O'Sullivan

Director

Jonathan Alver

Music Director

Hamish McKeich

AV Design

Jon Baxter

Lighting Design

Jason Morphet

Costuming

Elizabeth Whiting

Choreographer

Maaka Pepene

Stage Manager

Kate Middleton-Olliver

Production Manager

Steve Crowcroft

Repetiteur

David Kelly



Image Credit: Alexander Turnbull Library (Ref: 1/4-058131-F).

CAST

William Malone

Captain of the Wellington Regiment

James Egglestone

Mrs. Malone

Sarah Court

Tommo

Soldier - Family Man

Robert Tucker

NZ Opera Freemasons Resident Artist

Mary, the wife of Tommo

Doubles as Luck

Anna Leese

Billy

Soldier - Innocent, Idealist

Jonathan Evers

Joyce

Young Woman - Flighty, 'Easy'

Madison Nonoa

NZ Opera Dame Malvina Major Emerging Artist

Fred

Soldier - Wry, Skeptical

Wade Kernot

Lucy

Slightly Older Woman

Mary Newman-Pound

Turk

Doubles as The Patriot

Andrew Glover

Dancer

Ben Mitchell

Taniora Motutere

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STROMA NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE

Cor Anglais

Bede Hanley

Cornet

Matthew Stein

Clarinet

James Fry

Bassoon

Ben Hoadley

Double Bass

Evgueny Lanchtchikov

Violin

Andrew Beer

Percussion

Sam Rich

Acoustic Guitar

Dylan Lardelli

Dumbek

Eric Renick

Accordion

Tatiana Lanchtchikova

CREATIVES BIOGRAPHIES



COMPOSER – ROSS HARRIS

Arts laureate Ross Harris is one of New Zealand's leading composers. He has written more than 200 compositions, including opera, symphonic music, chamber music, klezmer

and electronic music, and has won the prestigious SOUNZ Contemporary Award more times than any other New Zealand composer. Ross received a QSM in 1985 for his opera *Waituhi* with libretto by Witi Ihimaera and the CANZ Citation for Services to New Zealand Music in 1990. His major works include six string quartets, six symphonies, a violin concerto (premiered by Anthony Marwood in 2010) and a cello concerto (premiered by Li-Wei Qin in 2012). His collaborations with poet Vincent O'Sullivan have included two operas, a symphony, three song cycles and *Requiem for the Fallen*, premiered at the 2014 New Zealand Festival, and performed at the Auckland Arts Festival in 2015.



LIBRETTIST – VINCENT O'SULLIVAN

Vincent O'Sullivan has published widely as a short-story writer, novelist, playwright, poet and editor. He has won numerous prizes, including the 2006 Prime

Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in Poetry, and is a former New Zealand Poet Laureate. *Brass Poppies* is Vincent's 11th collaboration with Ross Harris. His *Selected Poems* was published last year, and a new poetry collection, *And So It Is*, appears this month.

Image Credits:

Ross Harris. Photo: Gareth Watkins.

Vincent O'Sullivan. Photo: Peter McIntosh/Otago Daily Times.

Group portrait of an unidentified soldier, an unidentified woman and an unidentified girl [inscribed Henderson], 1914-1919, Wellington, by Berry & Co. Purchased 1998 With New Zealand Lottery Grants Board Funds. Te Papa [B.046481].



DIRECTOR – JONATHAN ALVER

After graduating in vocal studies (baritone) from the UK's Royal Northern College of Music, Jonathan turned his attention to directing, and he has been directing

and producing operatic, theatrical and screen work in New Zealand, Europe and the USA for over 25 years. In the late 1990s, Jonathan became General Director of Opera New Zealand (subsequently New Zealand Opera), where among other productions he directed *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Macbeth*, which were subsequently sold to Los Angeles Opera and Minnesota Opera respectively, with Jonathan invited to the USA to direct them. Between 2002 and 2012, Jonathan moved away from opera to commercial theatre and television. The London West End production of *Jailhouse Rock — The Musical* ran for a year. Since 2012, Jonathan has returned his focus to the stage, becoming Artistic Director of the National Youth Theatre Company. He is also Director of the New Zealand Opera School. Freelance projects include the Opening Ceremony of the ICC Cricket World Cup and directing Ross Harris and Vincent O'Sullivan's *Requiem for the Fallen*.



MUSIC DIRECTOR – HAMISH McKEICH

Since studying with Valery Gergiev and Professor Ilya Musin, New Zealand-born conductor Hamish McKeich has forged an impressive international career alongside a passionate loyalty for developing the repertoire of contemporary and experimental music. He has established an acclaimed partnership with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and served as the Orchestra's Associate Conductor from 2002-2006. He performs and records continually with them to this day. Working regularly in Europe, Australia and with New Zealand's major orchestras, Hamish has given more than 90 world premieres of new works and is also chief conductor of the contemporary ensembles Stroma and 175East. In 2012, Hamish was awarded a Douglas Lilburn Trust citation for services to New Zealand music.

AV DESIGN – JON BAXTER

"There is nothing more satisfying than bringing fresh ideas and telling stories to audiences through innovative means," says Jon Baxter. "Cameras, computers, screens or physical installations are all wonderful means of expression I love equally. This passion has led me into the worlds of TV commercials, films, live events and art. I am excited by the possibilities that are continually unfolding as technology paves the way for new forms of communication."

LIGHTING DESIGN – JASON MORPHETT

Over the last 30 years, Jason Morphet has toured and designed all over the world with shows as diverse as *The Chemical Brothers* in New York, *Holiday on Ice* throughout Europe, CA Awards Show at the Pyramids in Egypt and Royal Galas at the Ritz Hotel in London in the presence of Her Royal Highness the Queen. In 2003, he immigrated to New Zealand and began work on the Royal New Zealand Ballet's *Romeo and Juliet*. After eight years with the RNZB, he moved over to work with New Zealand Opera, starting with *La Boheme*. Currently he is dividing his time

between the NZO and his design company, Three Seven Design Ltd.

COSTUMING – ELIZABETH WHITING

Elizabeth Whiting has designed costumes for New Zealand Opera, Auckland Theatre Company, Silo Theatre, Court Theatre, the Royal New Zealand Ballet, Black Grace and many other leading New Zealand theatre and dance companies as well as for many productions at the Auckland Arts Festival. Her NZO credits include *Faust*, *Carmen*, *La Boheme*, *Falstaff*, *Barber of Seville*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Così fan Tutte*. Elizabeth has designed the costumes for The World of Wearable Art core show in Wellington 2011-2015. In 2010 she won the Chapman Tripp Costume Design Award for Auckland Arts Festival Commission *The Arrival* (Red Leap). She represented New Zealand at the Prague Design Quadrennial in 2003 with her costumes for *Falstaff*, and again in 2007 with a team of designers who created the exhibition *Blow*.

CHOREOGRAPHER – MAAKA PEPENE

Maaka Pepene has been performing for over two decades with New Zealand companies such as Atamira Dance Company, Touch Compass and Black Grace. He has choreographed, directed and performed for theatre, film and television in Taiwan, Australia, the USA and throughout Aotearoa. His choreographic works include *The Whale Rider* stage production and *The Māori Merchant of Venice*. Maaka's debut full-length work *Memoirs of Active Service* was named the New Zealand Listener's Best New Work by an Emerging Choreographer in 2006, and Maaka was listed as an outstanding performer in the Best Male Dancer 2007 category. His most recent full-length work for Atamira Dance Company, *Te Houhi – The People and the Land are One*, was described as "wonderfully crafted, intelligent, heartfelt, and completely engrossing" by *Theatreview*.

CAST BIOGRAPHIES

TENOR – JAMES EGGLESTONE

Dual Helpmann Award-winning James Egglestone is one of Australia's finest tenors. He is a graduate of both the Victorian College of the Arts and the Melba Conservatorium of Music and a recipient of the 2004 Johnston Bequest and the 2004 Belcanto Scholarship — enabling him to study in Italy and The Netherlands respectively. He has already built up an impressive list of credits with many national and international performing companies, including for the Belcanto Festival in The Netherlands, Elvino in *La Sonnambula* and Don Carissimo in *La Dirindina*; for Melbourne Opera, Tamino in *The Magic Flute*, Nadir in *The Pearl Fishers*, Almaviva in *The Barber of Seville* and Rodolfo in *La Boheme*; for State Opera of South Australia, Laurie in *Little Women*, Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* and Nadir in *The Pearl Fishers*; for West Australian Opera, Nadir, Almaviva, Ismaele in *Nabucco* and Pluto in *Orpheus in the Underworld*; and for Victorian Opera, Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*, Ferrando in *Così Fan Tutte* and Peter Quint in *The Turn of the Screw*. For Opera Australia, he appeared as Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. On the concert platform, James has sung the tenor solos in Haydn's *Creation*, Bach's *St John Passion* and Cantatas Nos 21 and 137, and Beethoven's *Symphony No 9* for the Sydney Symphony under Vladimir Ashkenazy. In 2015, James sang Pinkerton in *Madama Butterfly* for Opera Australia and the title role in *Faust* for State Opera of South Australia.

MEZZO SOPRANO – SARAH COURT

Sarah Court holds music degrees from the University of Otago and the University of Waikato, as well as having completed postgraduate study at the Prague Conservatorium in the Czech Republic. She is a recipient of the Dame Sister Mary Leo Scholarship and a former Emerging

Artist with New Zealand Opera. Solo engagements include performances with Auckland Choral, Auckland Philharmonia, Christchurch Symphony Orchestra and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. This year, Sarah will be making her Sydney Opera House debut, as alto soloist in the Chorus Oz performance of *Israel in Egypt* with Sydney Philharmonia Choirs.

BARITONE – ROBERT TUCKER

Robert Tucker was born in Australia but raised in Dunedin, and holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Otago. He became an Emerging Performer at the Australian Opera Studio in Perth in 2005 and is a current New Zealand Opera Freemasons Resident Artist. As well as Australian Opera Studio and New Zealand Opera, he has sung roles for English Chamber Opera, Scottish Opera, IFAC Opera Japan, Opera Otago and Days Bay Opera.



Image Credit: Courtesy of Richard Stowers Collection.

SOPRANO – ANNA LEESE

Anna Leese completed a Bachelor of Music degree with First Class Honours at the University of Otago. She is recipient of an impressive number of Australasian awards and prizes, and also represented New Zealand in the Cardiff Singer of the World competition. Since graduating from London's RCM Benjamin Britten International Opera School, Anna has performed at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, as Tamiri (*Il Re Pastore*), Musetta (*La Boheme*), Micaela (*Carmen*), First Lady (*Die Zauberflöte*) and Echo (*Ariadne auf Naxos*). Other roles have included Musetta with the Canadian Opera Company and at the Royal Albert Hall; Antonia (*Les Contes d'Hoffmann*) for Opera Köln; Tatyana (*Eugene Onegin*) for Flanders Opera; and Biancifiore (*Francesca di Rimini*), Suzel (*L'amico Fritz*) and Tatyana for Opera Holland Park. In New Zealand, Anna has performed Ilia (*Idomeneo*), Cleopatra (*Giulio Cesare*), Tatyana, Majenka (*The Bartered Bride*) and Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*). She made her debut at the 2006 BBC Proms in an all-Mozart programme with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and Sir Roger Norrington, and has appeared in a number of opera gala concerts with José Carreras. Further concert engagements have included Mahler's 2nd Symphony with Bernard Haitink and Beethoven's 9th Symphony in Madrid with Carlo Rizzi. Anna's recordings include Elgar's *The Apostles* in Canterbury Cathedral with the Canterbury Choral Society and a debut recital disc for EMI with Graham Johnson.

BARITONE – JONATHAN EYERS

Jonathan is a Sir Edmund Hillary Scholar at The University of Waikato, where he has just completed his Bachelor of Music, majoring in Performance Voice, and will be studying towards his Honours in 2016 with Dame Malvina Major. He is currently Bass Leader of the New Zealand Youth Choir and has performed numerous times with Voices New Zealand Chamber Choir. In 2015 and 2016, he has been a member

of the New Zealand Opera Chorus. At the recent New Zealand Aria Competitions, Jonathan placed first in nine Under 21 classes, winning the Kowhai Award, the Most Promising Competitor Under 21, and the Mike Steiner Junior Award. He was also awarded the John Bond Award for the Most Promising Competitor in the Open Section, as well as the New Zealand Opera School scholarship to attend the school in January 2016. Jonathan has also performed numerous times as a soloist with many choirs in Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Hawke's Bay and Auckland.

SOPRANO – MADISON NONOA

Hamilton-born and of Samoan and European descent, Madison Nonoa has a Diploma in French and German and a Postgraduate Diploma in Classical Voice, specialising in Opera Studies under the tutelage of Dame Malvina Major. She holds a Bachelor of Music with First Class Honours (University of Auckland) and an ABRSM Voice Diploma, and was recipient of the Dame Malvina Major Sir Howard Morrison Scholarship and Dame Malvina Major Arts Excellence Award (2014, Dame Malvina Major Foundation), Beatrice Webster Prize for Excellence (2015, New Zealand Singing School) and Te Puia Regional Prize (First Place, 2015, Waiariki Institute of Technology New Zealand Aria). Madison was the youngest semi-finalist and was awarded the RNZ Listener's Choice award in the Lexus Song Quest (2014). Her roles include Parea in *Star Navigator* (New Zealand Opera), Livia in *L'italiana in Londra* (Auckland Opera Studio), and Manon in *Portrait of Manon* and Laetitia in *The Old Maid and the Thief* (Auckland Opera Factory). Madison has been selected as a 2016 Dame Malvina Major Emerging Artist with New Zealand Opera.

BASS – WADE KERNOT

Wade Kernot performed with New Zealand Opera and in many concert performances with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and Auckland

Philharmonia Orchestra, and held a principal position with the Australian Opera Studio, before he pursued further studies at the National Opera Studio in London and attended the Solti/Te Kanawa Accademia di Bel Canto and the Verbier Festival Opera Studio. Wade was awarded the 2008 Patricia Pratt Scholarship in Music Performance, and was a semi-finalist representing New Zealand in both the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World and the Neue Stimmen, in Germany, as well as a runner-up in the Lexus Song Quest. From 2010-2015 Wade held a fulltime principal position at Theater St Gallen. Other engagements have included the bass role in Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* for the Hessisches Staatstheater in Wiesbaden, Germany; the bass roles in the IFANZ/Opera de Lyon season of a Kurt Weill double bill; Colline (*La Boheme*), Figaro (*The Marriage of Figaro*), Marchese (*La Traviata*) and Sciarra (*Tosca*) for New Zealand Opera; and Ferrando (*Il Trovatore*), Speaker (*The Magic Flute*) and Zuniga (*Carmen*) for Southern Opera. Wade's other 2016 engagements include the title role in *The Marriage of Figaro* for an Opera Australia tour, Arthur in *The Riders* for West Australian Opera and Sarastro in *The Magic Flute* for New Zealand Opera.

ALTO – MARY NEWMAN-POUND

After enjoying lead roles in productions for New Zealand Opera and Mercury Opera and singing throughout New Zealand, Mary Newman-Pound, with an Arts Council grant and competition prize monies, left for London, from where she sang in the chorus at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden; a premiere of a Mexican opera at Italy's Spoleto Festival; recitals at three Edinburgh Fringe Festivals; for two Archbishops of Canterbury in their own Lambeth Palace; and in the musical *Sweeney Todd* with prisoners at Wormwood Scrubs. Now home, Mary is enjoying music making with New Zealand Opera and orchestras and choirs around the country.

TENOR – ANDREW GLOVER

Andrew Glover, now living in Brussels after a successful period in London, was born in New Zealand and studied drama, dance and singing at the Unitec School of Performing and Screen Arts. He made his operatic debut in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* with New Zealand Opera, with whom he has since sung many roles. As a recipient of the Dame Malvina Major Emerging Artist Award, he continued his studies at the Australian Opera Studio, graduating with Dux and Honours. Andrew has a busy concert diary giving recitals, performing with ensembles and in oratorio. He has sung with the Tokyo New Philharmonic Orchestra, City of Cardiff Symphony Orchestra, New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, Perth Orchestra, Tonbridge Philharmonic Orchestra, Auckland Chamber Orchestra and the Little Baroque Company, has performed music by Stephen Sondheim in an award-winning concert for the ABC, and has appeared in operas for English Touring Opera, Opera Holland Park, Opera North and Garsington Opera. Andrew was recently called to step in at the last minute at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, making his debut as Beppe in *Pagliacci*.

DANCER – BENJAMIN MITCHELL

Benjamin Mitchell began dancing in his hometown of Whangarei in 2011, and was accepted into Unitec's Bachelor of Performing and Screen Arts Contemporary Dance programme in 2013. During his time at Unitec, he worked with a variety of teachers, including Michael Parmenter, Katie Burton and Paul Young. He also performed in choreographies by Maria Dabrowska, Sarah Foster-Sproull and Ross McCormack. In December, Benjamin performed in Malia Johnston's *The Art of Colour* as part of Auckland Live.

DANCER – TANIORA RANGI MOTUTERE

Taniora Rangi Motutere graduated from Unitec with a Bachelor of Performing and Screen Arts, majoring in Contemporary Dance. He was choreographer and dancer for the *Out of the Box* show (Nelson Arts Festival, Tempo Dance Festival) and is a two-time silver medallist as a choreographer and performer for Identity Dance Company at the Hip Hop International World Championship 2013-14. In December, Taniora performed in Malia Johnston's *The Art of Colour* as part of Auckland Live.

STROMA NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE

Founded in 2000 by Michael Morris, Hamish McKeich and Bridget Douglas, Stroma is New Zealand's largest and most flexible chamber ensemble, formed of professional musicians many of whom are principal players with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. Focusing on music written in the last 100 years, Stroma performs regularly with a repertoire of fresh, cutting-edge compositions, including new works by New Zealand composers. Guest performers have included such world-renowned musicians as Roberto Fabbricani, Nicholas Isherwood, Richard Nunns, Madeleine Pierard, Lars Mlekusch, the Duo Stump-Linshalm, Simon Docking, Adam Page, Richard Haynes, Warren Maxwell and Pedro Carneiro.

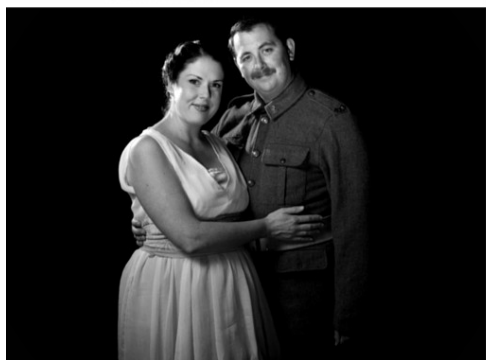


Image Credit: Top Left - Mary Newman Pound as Lucy and Wade Kernot as Fred.

Top Right - Maidson Nonoa as Joyce and Jonathan Evers as Billy.

Bottom Left - Anna Leese as Mary and Robert Tucker as Tommo.

Bottom Right - Sarah Court as Mrs. Malone and James Egglestone as Colonel William Malone. Photo: John Baxter.

THE ABIDING PARTNERSHIP – ROD BISS

Life for a librettist is full of surprises. Ross Harris's Second Symphony ends with the singer actually walking off-stage before the end and singing her last lines unseen. In the same symphony, there's a point where it sounds as though a brass band is marching down the street.

Harris laughs. "For sure, there's no indication in the words that these things might happen." But Vincent O'Sullivan loves the unexpected. "I go off and do my bit, give it to him, and when I hear the music I'm always pleased, surprised and, yes, startled sometimes at what he has done with it."

They are a great creative team; to hear their compliments about each other makes it sound like a productive relationship made in heaven. They've written 11 pieces together since 2002, symphonies, operas, song cycles, and there is a 12th work already planned for symphony orchestra, chorus and soloists. The details of this prestigious commission are still embargoed but I'm told it is based on the pioneering work of Sir Harold Gillies on face reconstruction in World War I.

How did Harris's and O'Sullivan's partnership get under way? Both were at Victoria University of Wellington, although in different departments. "I didn't really know Vincent," says Harris. "He seemed quite daunting, in another realm, but apparently he was interested in working with opera and I was as well." O'Sullivan recalls it was Peter Walls, professor of music at the time (and now chief executive of Chamber Music New Zealand), who introduced them to each other in the staff club.

O'Sullivan had no "burning desire" to write a libretto but was intrigued by the form, in particular by Boito's *Otello* libretto for Verdi, "one of the really great bits of theatrical writing". O'Sullivan quickly backs away from any musical expertise or knowledge. "I'm not musically gifted in any way," he says, "and it's probably better when working with a musician if you don't know too much! Luckily, we just happened to get on as people. We share interests in books and politics and things like this. What we do often comes out of casual conversations."

Harris tells of one of these conversations when he suggested *Rasputin* as their first possible operatic idea. "One detail that particularly clicked with him was that when *Rasputin* was invited to the Yusupov Palace where they were going to poison him they had to pretend there was a party going on so they played a recording of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* on an Edison phonograph in another room."

O'Sullivan remembers the same discussion. "This just struck me as such a marvellously theatrical moment, so we said let's have a go at it. We both very naively went into it, because I don't think now there's a chance in Hell of it being done in New Zealand."

But although that opera, *Black Ice*, still waits to be performed, it confirmed for Harris and O'Sullivan how compatible their imaginations were. O'Sullivan describes the way they now have of working together: "There's a conversation, it strikes us that something or other might be worth having a go at, and then I go and write a number of things. What I try and do is knowingly to write more than he'll need so he can, you know, toss stuff away and make a selection." Harris admits a lot of what he gets from O'Sullivan never gets set. "He's been very happy about that. Occasionally, I've taken something out and he's said, 'You know you're absolutely right, that was something that really was redundant.' In that way, he's been very sympathetic to my choices."

In O'Sullivan's generous view, "A librettist is there to serve the musician. It's not really an equal partnership. You are there to help something bigger than yourself and that's your role. So I'm always completely open if he doesn't like something or says, 'Could we have a bit more of this or a bit less of that.' You know, I think that's what my job is." The words a writer provides are "only the scaffolding until the musician deals with it", he says. It doesn't have to be great poetry? In fact, maybe it's better if it isn't? "Yeah, there are some marvellous songs with lousy words!". But Harris is more positive. "One of the great things about working with Vincent is he will throw stuff to me I would never have dreamt of and that is incredibly stimulating. I have to find solutions."

After *Black Ice*, their next collaboration was the *Second Symphony* (2006) and then in 2008 *The Floating Bride*, *The Crimson Village*, a song cycle that is a response by both composer and writer to the paintings and stained glass of Marc Chagall, an interest they shared.

Then came another song cycle, *The Abiding Tides* (2010), eight interconnected settings of O'Sullivan poems that explore the way the sea affects all our lives. Wellingtonians are particularly aware of the sea — they know from first-hand experience how wild it can be, how beautiful and how cruel — so in a sense both O'Sullivan and Harris were writing about a familiar environment. But it was, again, a news item that sparked O'Sullivan's sympathy when he read of a boat packed with illegal immigrants that sank north of Australia.

Brass Poppies was next, a return to the same subject as the *Second Symphony*: war and the horror of it. "That's right," says Harris. "The thing about this piece is it's clearly anti-war and it's a very human statement about the issues that involve people at home and in the battle. Our work has always been like that." O'Sullivan agrees. "We are both very sceptical of flag waving and all that sort of thing. Our interest in war is clearly in the human rather than political aspect of it. That's why we are so insistent women are on stage all the way through *Brass Poppies* — so it's always about home and away at the same time. It is also deliberately a very simple story because the simplicity of it emphasises both the depth and the gravity of the thing." Asked if it really is an opera, Harris admits to "frustration with quite a lot of opera". *Brass Poppies* is a quick moving piece, "more Stephen Sondheim or Kurt Weill than Grand Opera, but yes, definitely an opera".

Requiem for the Fallen was written after *Brass Poppies* but achieved more immediate performances, first as part of the New Zealand Festival in 2014, followed by performances in Dunedin and at Auckland Arts Festival. It is a tightly focused, dignified score that honours the memory of soldiers who died in World War I. Poetry by O'Sullivan, which carries many homespun New Zealand references, is woven through the Latin of the Requiem Mass, while Horomona Horo's taongo pūoro emphasises this is a work uniquely of New Zealand, with a built-in New Zealand sound. Jonathan Alver, who is also director of *Brass Poppies*, added a dramatic level that referred back in time to both Gallipoli and to the truly ancient battlefields of Europe.

The Sixth Symphony, called *Last Letters*, which will be performed by the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra later this year, also has words by O'Sullivan sparked by a news item. "The letters are from women who are either mothers or daughters lamenting the loss of the mother or daughter," says Harris. "Each separate movement is just one person to another. One of them is a true event and that's the hanging of an Iranian woman who was raped by a policeman. She murders the policeman and gets hanged for that crime. It was in the news and Vincent read about it a year or so ago. The key was the daughter wrote to the mother saying, 'I want to leave my body, my body parts, to surgeons so others may live', and that's the basis of the first movement and the other three poems and movements are on similar subjects."

"It's dark", says O'Sullivan, "but it's a very, very contemporary and deeply human sort of story and I suppose that's what we are trying to express, both in the words and then in the music."

It's the unfailing directness of that expression that makes Harris's and O'Sullivan's work together so significant.

Rod Biss was named Reviewer of the Year in the 2009 New Zealand Qantas Media Awards for his work in *New Zealand Opera News* and his reviewing for the *New Zealand Listener* was Highly Commended in the Canon Media Awards of 2014. With Robert Hoskins, he is currently editing the complete collected piano music of Douglas Lilburn for Promethean Editions Ltd.



Image Credit: Ross Harris and Vincent O'Sullivan. Photo: Gareth Watkins and Bruce Connew.

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