

## Eternity - still a captivating word

Members will be interested to learn of the transition to film of the opera of *The Eternity Man*. This short film (just over an hour) is directed by Julien Temple, responsible for many music videos and productions and films, but perhaps most well-known for his documentary style story of the infamous group the Sex Pistols, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (now a piece of documentary history).

"The Eternity Man", Arthur Stace, is of course much more well-known to most Australians, especially after the 1999 New Year Eve fireworks in which the word Eternity appeared on the Sydney Harbour Bridge to usher in the year 2000. For nearly thirty five years, Arthur Stace chalked this word in beautiful copperplate script on the streets of Sydney. Stace had prayed for change following the witness and ministry of T.C. Hammond at St Barnabas' Broadway during 1932, and later in the same year, heard John Ridley preach on Eternity at Burton Street Tabernacle. Stace heard Ridley shout (he was a loud preacher apparently); "I wish I could shout ETERNITY through the streets of Sydney. Stace left his life of drinking, indolence and shame to become a modest and frugal Christian, spending several hours each morning (from around 5 am) simply writing the word Eternity, as well as being a street (and van) preacher. He shunned personal attention or recognition for his work, even though he had been revealed as the Eternity Man some ten years before his death in 1967.

The biblical verses that are considered to be foundations for his writing are:

"He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end." (*Ecclesiastes 3: 11, New King James Version*) and, For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:

" I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones." (*Isaiah 57: 15, New King James Version*)

This film is based on a very modern opera by composer Jonathan Mills and poet Dorothy Porter (the libretto), Being a modern opera, this will probably partly determine whether you like this production or not. When the opera premiered in London in 2003, it received some of the most scathing and wittily diabolical reviews I have ever seen, though the reaction in 2005 in Sydney was more positive. Overall, as a film, I found it interesting in parts, but a little boring, perhaps mainly to do with its failure to establish a critical point of reference, so that Arthur becomes a figure one cares about, rather than someone we observe.

The film version of course stands by itself, and one can see the clever use of lighting, narrative structure, and visual techniques (background images showing different eras), is well able to show the Sydney of Arthur Stace, albeit in a dream like and dark and even damp way (it reminded me of a high camp version of the film *Bladerunner* in its look). While Arthur is the star, the city of Sydney itself features and looms large, a clever way of demonstrating its dominant role in Arthur's life and mission.

The portrayal of Arthur Stace by baritone Grant Doyle is certainly striking, and his singing is an excellent fit with the non-operatic acting. Personality and popular singer Crista Hughes plays the other main character, Arthur's sister Myrtle. Myrtle operated a brothel (all the siblings were fairly notorious), and by all accounts lived a bohemian driven addicted life. The contrast of Arthur with Myrtle is vivid, and the Christian viewer will understand the power of change from a true conversion, but I did wonder if there is not a subtle theme in the film which presents her as the most interesting character because she was not a boring wowser!

I was at the Sydney premiere and found the question and answer session after the film very illuminating. Dorothy Porter referred to Arthur as a wowser – I guess a popular perception of someone who has become converted and takes on a role to win people away from the lifestyles of drinking and womanising. Dorothy Porter also revealed some of the orientation of the film by a reference to her perception of the fundamentalism of then, comparing it with today (referring to the Jensen brothers in Anglican Sydney) – also revealing the continued failure of many liberally minded people to understand the difference between conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism, particularly evangelicalism influenced by the English tradition. While some scenes are not for children (there are some vaudeville and peep show style penny arcade references), within the context of the film, they reveal the person Arthur and his sister were, and how the sordid life he led, caught and kept him beholden until his profound conversion.

I had a particular interest in seeing the film as the pivotal scene, namely Arthur's learning of the word ETERNITY was filmed at ACC member church Newtown Mission in their church hall, because it still had the basic look of a 1930s style meeting hall. It is always interesting to see a place you know done up well. This scene itself is partly exaggerated farce, similar to the film *Moulin Rouge*, though strong impressions are provided by the minister (Preacher) played, and sung, by Stuart Neilson-Kemp, and the word Eternity is still ringing in my mind from his rendition.

St Barnabas' Broadway burnt down in May 2006 (a new church will be built), and Burton Street Tabernacle, while renovated, closed in 1996. The City of Sydney bought the building in 2004, and has directed its restoration and refurbishment for cultural and community use, highlighting its significant historical role in the story of Arthur Stace. If people want a more straight forward account of Arthur's life, the well produced Lawrence Johnston documentary (1994) *Eternity*, features many people who knew Arthur and were well able to comment on his background and provide a clearer account of his gospel conversion. (Some now deceased). Interestingly, from my viewpoint, it was the 1994 documentary, while critically received also drew many mutterings and comments when points of Christian conviction or doctrine were proclaimed. Some of the audience can sometimes be more intolerant than what one would think.

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