

24.10.01

Dear Joan,

Well, the show's on the road and the first performance is under our belts. I think it went down really well, the audience were very responsive and there were a lot of smiles through the tears at curtain call.

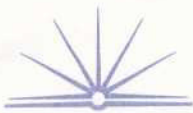
I don't think I've told you very much about the play. It is, as you know, about women incarcerated in Sumatra in Japanese prisoner of war camps in World War Two, but it is not set in that time, it is set in the present. A documentary-maker, Rick, is making a radio documentary in the style of interviews with survivors of the camps.

My character, Sheila, was an ^{English} teenager living with her parents in Singapore when the Japanese invaded. She was put on board ship, heading for home, when the whole convoy was attacked by Japanese aircraft, and she found herself floating



alone in the sea, singing that incredibly patriotic and stirring song "Jerusalem" (it always brings me out in goosebumps when I hear that song) to keep her morale up. This is where she meets the other ^{women} characters in the play, an Australian from Chetwood called Bridie. They are picked up by a Japanese ship and incarcerated on Sumatra, later moved on to a camp called Belau.

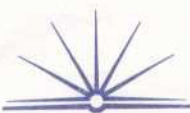
So that sets the scene for you, the play alternates between scenes in the recording hall and in the motel where the women are staying. The recording hall has slides projected from time to time, real photos of scenes from the war - quite sobering stuff. You'd like the way John (the play was written by John Misto, he's a solicitor actually but the theatre world is better for his foray into writing) has incorporated music into the scenes, mostly as the scene ends a relevant song plays, like "We'll meet again" and "Danny Boy" - really emotive music. The women had started up a choir, led by an Englishwoman Miss Drysbrough, and as Bridie and Sheila discuss this, "Bolero" starts to play, softly at first but swelling as the scene moves ahead, it gives the ~~scene~~ ^{performance} such a sense of power



and hope, it is very effective. There are quite a lot of similarities with the film "Paradise Road", have you seen that?

Sheila is a wonderful part to play. She is aloof at first, although Bridie is obviously overjoyed to see her. As the play progresses the whole range of emotions come across, from playful recollections of Bridie's sewing a rusty pin into one of the most hated guards, "Lipstick Larry" (he beat women who wore lipstick) 's kilt. Good stage effects there. The women are enjoying the memory of the prank while the sound effects ~~let us know~~ make us aware of the punishment meted out to Bridie. There is a lot of quite subtle skill in these effects, I've been most impressed.

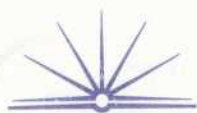
There is a bone of contention between the two women regarding those who sold themselves to the Japanese for food. My Sheila feels they were justified as they did it to feed their children, the rigidly catholic Bridie condemns them, saying "I wouldn't do that for anyone". Now, as the stage directions tell us, "this is a shattering remark for Sheila". You see it turns out that she in fact did



just that, sold herself to hipsticker Larry of all people, to get quinine to save Bridie's life. When in a moment of anger she tells ~~Sheila~~ ^{Bridie}, she says "I thought you'd have done the same for me. But I was wrong, though, wasn't I?" That is such a powerful moment. Bridie's silence is an answer enough. Later she says "You should have let me die" and I say "Perhaps I should have". As you can see, to lots of strong confrontational moments.

I do so wish you could get out of that bed and come and see the play. Terry Patchett says he's going to make a video of one of the performances next week, so I will send you a copy as soon as I can get hold of one.

Oh yes - I'd better explain the title. Bridie was given a shoe-horn by her father. She used it to tap Sheila on the head when they were floating in the sea, to keep her awake so she wouldn't drown (she didn't have a lifejacket.) When the choir started up, Sheila was a voice as she had learned music, Bridie brandished the shoe-horn as a metronome. At Belau they used the shoe-horn as a spade when they were forced to dig graves for their friends. Sheila tried to barter it for quinine, before she



realised the only thing she had to buster was herself. Eventually she returns it to Bridie at the end of their stay in the motel, (and they dance the Blue Danube, I've quite enjoyed the dancing, I haven't waltzed for years, I must do it more often.)

The Sonata part is from the camp, when too many people died or were sick and the choir finished, Sheila had the bright idea of sonatas, which use two instruments .. namely, Sheila & Bridie. And the shoe-horn, naturally.

Well, I must be off, time to get Jim's dinner. He's delighted that the last words of the play accuse me of being a whinging pom. He calls me that now at every opportunity. The ammunition we give our spouses!

My dear, I hope to be up to see you soon. The play runs for three weeks but might well be extended, I will let you know.

I am thinking of you, as always,

love

Jarah.