

MAVIS GOES TO TIMOR



KATHERINE THOMSON, ANGELA CHAPLIN
& KAVISHA MAZZELLA

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Mavis Goes to Timor

by Katherine Thomson,
Angela Chaplin and Kavisha Mazzella

Playbox and Ten Days on the Island present
the deckchair theatre production

*'Don't miss this story
under the stars'*
The West Australian



MAVIS
Goes to Timor

BACKGROUND NOTES

Playbox at The Malthouse 113 Sturt Street Southbank Victoria 3006

Administration (03) 9685 5100 Box Office (03) 9685 5111 Facsimile (03) 9685 5112 Email admin@playbox.com.au Website www.playbox.com.au

Playbox Theatre Company Limited ABN 58 006 885 463



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by Katherine Thomson, Angela Chaplin
and Kavisha Mazzella

A co-production with *deckchair theatre*

Background Notes

Playbox Education has prepared these Background Notes to assist students in their study of the play. They are not a document that provides a definitive statement about 'Mavis Goes to Timor'. At Playbox we very much see the need for students to respond to theatre in order to address the demands of the VCE Drama curriculum, *but* we also want students to discuss their own experiences and understanding of the theatrical event that is 'Mavis'. We hope that students will voice their own opinions about the play; its style, its characters, its story, its stagecraft, the themes and ideas that they believe a contemporary Australian play such as this one explores, and to discuss its relevance to their lives and to their future.

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Meg Upton, Margaret Steven
and Kelly Clifford
Education Officers,
Playbox Theatre Company
113 Sturt Street,
Southbank 3006

Phone: 9685 5165
Fax: 9685 5112
education@playbox.com.au
www.playbox.com.au

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INTERVIEW WITH KATHERINE THOMSON, CO-WRITER OF *MAVIS GOES TO TIMOR*

Katherine, how did the idea of turning Mavis' story into a play come about?

David Gerrand, the General Manager of *deckchair theatre* in Western Australia, phoned me one day when I was in the middle of a script meeting for something else. "How'd you like to go to East Timor?" he asked. When he mentioned Mavis, I knew exactly what he was talking about, because I had been very moved by the documentary about her. Indeed, I was so moved (sobbing on the sofa actually) that immediately afterwards I phoned SBS to pass on my congratulations to the director. The SBS operator who answered the phone was crying as well! I then called Angela [another of the playwrights] to tell her to watch it as she's on WA time. She says I didn't; I'm sure she's right.

At the time David called I was flat out with a couple of writing assignments, and had no idea how we would find the time to do this, let alone go to East Timor. It transpired we – Angela Chaplin, Kavisha Mazzella and I - all had about ten days free in a few months time, so we decided to seize the opportunity. The decision to work with Angela on the structure of the play was also an important factor in my finding the time to write it – this meant that I could shortcut the time one spends alone as a writer trying to 'break the back' of the structure of the play. Having someone to bounce off in those early stages worked very well in this case.

To what extent were the 'real' Mavis and Elwyn (Mavis' daughter) involved in the creation of the play?

Before I came on board, Angela had visited Mavis and interviewed her at length. This was important to me: I'd worked on a play previously where the woman whose life was the subject of the piece got very cold feet, and this nearly jeopardised the project. Angela had found Mavis a delight, and knew I would as well. Firstly though, I met Elwyn, in Dili. When we all arrived, Elwyn was away for the first few days, which gave us a chance to find our feet a bit. When she arrived back in Dili she was extremely generous with her time. We travelled with her as she visited the clothing co-operatives that she'd set up, we ate together in the evenings, and she even gave me her diaries to read, so that I could get a picture of the challenges she'd faced in getting these co-operatives off the ground. Sometimes we'd sit down formally and interview her, sometimes we'd just drive around and keep the tape running. Without Elwyn we wouldn't have met the women who worked in the co-operatives, whose very painful stories help make up the Mariana side of the story in *Mavis Goes to Timor*.

A week after we returned to Australia (not easy for Angela – Ansett collapsed and she had to fly via Singapore!) Angela and I met up and

went to Yarrowonga where Mavis lives. We rented an apartment in which we could work, and spent the days transcribing the tapes, discussing how the story would go, meeting Mavis in the afternoons or for dinner.

What other research was involved in writing the play?

Of course I read everything I could get my hand on that had been written about East Timor. In particular John Birmingham's *Appeasing Jakarta* for the 'Quarterly Essay' and John Martinkus' *A Dirty Little War*. Unlike some of my colleagues I had not been actively involved in East Timorese issues. Some people I know have been working closely with the East Timorese communities in Australia since 1975. In Dili, in the new Xanana Gusmao Reading Room (set up by the Kirsty Sword Foundation) I also sat in a room full of people and viewed a number of Australian documentaries, including Carmela Baranowsky's excellent piece, *Scenes from an Occupation*.

At what point in the writing process did you decide to involve the choir in the play?

This was discussed right from the beginning, I believe.

How did the idea of setting the play out doors come about?

Angela had the 'event' nature of the piece in mind from the beginning as well. The play was written with this in mind. I think I needed convincing that it would work, that the actors wouldn't be 'lost' and that dialogue would still be as important as song. Angela had done a similar show the previous year so I was very much encouraged by the success of that and her reassurance that the audience wouldn't miss anything by it being performed outdoors. Of course some of my favourite theatrical experiences have been in the outdoors; *Mahabarata* went from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m and was riveting.

Were there any particular themes you were hoping to highlight in the play/production?

How do people who have lived under a repressive regime adapt when that regime is removed? What scars are left on the community and on individuals? What is the best way to help people who, like those in East Timor, are starting from ground zero? What is the nature of the complex relationship between those facilitating aid and those who are receiving it?

How would you describe the style of the play?

I never know how to answer this – I suppose it is *heightened naturalism* really. Mavis *is* in a living room, there *is* a sewing co-op but there is a *suspension of disbelief* in terms of location and transitions. We can be in a taxi just by an actor dangling their legs over the edge of the playing space. All of these techniques are usual practice in contemporary

theatre. I suppose I am (unfashionably?) interested in narrative, in telling a good story, and that is really the basis for the decisions I make in terms of the play.

Would you talk about the collaborative process of writing 'Mavis Goes to Timor' with Angela Chaplin and Kavisha Mazzella?

Kavisha and I had only one night cross-over in Dili. She had to get to a job, and I'd had to finish one before I could arrive. I knew Kavisha had been running around playing music and listening to music and that we were going to get some beautiful sounds. My memory is that when we returned she gave Angela an idea of the sort of songs she would write – some specific subject areas, some general – and that the content and style of these songs tightened up during the next few months.

Angela and I spent the week in Yarrowonga transcribing tapes as I said, pulling out the areas of interest, and the events we might use in the story. Fortunately we were on a lake so we could go out and rest our eyes for a while! We each had our computers, and a printer and so could read the transcripts if there were interviews at which one of us had not been present. You have to remember that Angela and I have worked together on three new plays, and on one other, so we have a shorthand and we know each other's tastes.

I have a way of working that I'm rather fond of that involves focussing firstly on the characters' journeys from start to finish. We spent a lot of time discussing how important Elwyn was to the story we wanted to tell. We'd both come to realise this while we were in East Timor and more so since we'd returned home. We also discussed how important it was to have an East Timorese woman on stage, and while we weren't sure if we could find an actor we decided not to let that stop us. We ended the week with a clear idea of Mavis' journey, and of Elwyn's journey. The Mariana character we were still unsure of.

Three weeks later Angela emailed me an outline based on the work above, with some dialogue and scenes that explained how she thought it might go. Again, it was very much in shorthand which was fine as I could guess what she meant. At this point Mariana's story was still not really integrated but that was OK and part of my job for the next stage. Also, by this stage, if not earlier, we had an idea of what the set might be like.

The other important factor in the development of the play is that we knew by about this time that we had Annie Phelan to play the role of Mavis. I have often written plays with Annie in mind even if she isn't eventually cast in them, and had most recently written *Something in the Air* (for ABC television), including the episode for which she won an AFI Award. It is a wonderful privilege to be able to write for an actor of the calibre of Annie Phelan, and it affected how I wrote Mavis. "Annie will do that beautifully", was a phrase often running through my head. But Annie actually took this job without reading the play, which did rather add to the pressure. By

the way, I broke my vow of never writing a new play that was already programmed for production. Here it was November, the play was due on in February and there is nothing more terrifying than the prospect that you just might let everyone down.

Despite this, it took me a long time to sit down to work on the play. I believe I missed the deadline and had to extend by a fortnight. Frankly, I found the material so sad and confronting that I would do anything to avoid having to immerse myself in it. Needless to say this is exactly the degree of emotion one wants to bring to one's writing. I later understood that Kavisha was experiencing the same set of emotions and difficulty in approaching the material. We knew there'd be a happy ending of sorts, but getting there wasn't entirely joyful!

I wrote a draft and sent it to Angela. Just to give you an idea of how vulnerable writers are when they submit material, I was in a meeting at the Australian Writers' Guild on some industrial issue, and saw on my mobile that it was Angela. I took the call, heard the words, "I love it!" and promptly burst into tears of relief. Honestly! Anyway, while Angela did indeed like much of it, we did have the challenge of only three performers and a cast of unseen characters. I'd used a technique (again not rocket science) whereby characters sort of play the people they were speaking to. Angela directed me to change this, and in the next draft to have them speak to imaginary people. I'm sure there were plenty of other changes suggested for this next draft, but that was the main one I recall. By the next stage some of the lyrics were integrated into the text, and with more emails back and forth we ended up with a text with which we could start rehearsal. It was wonderful to meet Kerry-Ella (who plays the role of Elwyn) and Cidalia (who plays the role of Marianna). Each seemed perfect for their roles, and it was particularly heartening to me that Cidalia approved of our approach to the East Timor story, given her long history as an activist for East Timor.

The rehearsal process was standard – I sat in and made changes each day, which I'd type up at night and present to the actors for incorporation next time they worked on that particular scene. It's a very delicate stage – the director is seeking to establish a trustful and respectful rehearsal room, and the writer has to be part of that. So I speak when spoken to – sometimes if an actor asks, "Why does she say this?" they don't need the writer to pipe up with the answer or an offer to change it, they need to discover this for themselves. Angela and I would confer on the text in breaks or in designated meetings. Towards the end of the rehearsal process fewer changes were made, but often when you get an audience in (in this case the *deckchair* staff who came in to see some final runs) you get a new perspective and can see what could be clarified. Similarly we were changing small things with each audience at previews, giving focus to a scene, or clarifying something confusing. There is an amazing amount that can be cut from a play - if you've got fine actors they need far fewer words than one ever imagines.

Again, because Angela and I have worked together previously, she'd find time after her notes to the actors for notes from me about the production (when she'd give notes about the text).

Happily, the opening night in Perth was a triumph, and particularly so because Mavis herself was there. She received a resounding ovation from the audience and performers and, to our great delight, she liked what we'd done.

INTERVIEW WITH ANGELA CHAPLIN, DIRECTOR AND CO-WRITER OF *MAVIS GOES TO TIMOR*

Angela, how did the idea of turning Mavis' story into a play come about?

I watched a wonderful documentary of the same name made by Steve Westh and decided immediately to write to Mavis and ask her if we could make a documentary. Coincidentally, at the same time Katherine was watching the same documentary on the other side of the country

At what point in the writing process did you decide to involve the choir in the play?

It came very early in the writing process after discussions with Kavisha Mazzella. Kavisha and I have worked together on many different projects including the original production of *Emma! Celebrazione*, a production that very successfully incorporated a choir. Also, the choral tradition of East Timor made it an obvious choice

How did the idea of setting the play out doors come about?

deckchair has produced several outdoor productions with great success. The climate in Perth is really conducive to outdoor theatre and we really wanted to use the shipping containers. So much of East Timor depends on shipping containers. They receive goods from them, they are used to make buildings and the charity of others is contained in them.

Were there any particular themes you were hoping to highlight in the play/production?

The importance of *justice* is the key concept that I hope people will receive from the play. Australia's debt to East Timor is another.

Would you talk about the collaborative process of writing 'Mavis Goes to Timor' with Katherine Thomson and Kavisha Mazzella?

Initially I travelled to Yarrowonga and visited Mavis, interviewing her and recording these interviews. I then sent Katherine copies of these tapes. The three of us then travelled to East Timor and researched the play together. Katherine and I then travelled to Yarrowonga and talked to Mavis again. During this week-long period in Yarrowonga, Katherine and I mapped out a structure for the play and journeys for the characters. I then wrote a very rough first draft and forwarded it to Katherine who then wrote a very detailed second draft. As we wrote, we wrote titles of songs – very much in the tradition of Brecht. Kavisha received each draft as we produced it and wrote the songs as we wrote. We provided each other with feed back and Katherine wrote the final draft. The script was further developed in rehearsals

How did the roles of playwright and director overlap for you?

It's always very curious to write and direct. You have to be very careful that you do not try to direct the piece in your head as you go. It is always much better to write the play as it should be written and then solve the directing problems on the floor. The up side is that I know the text intimately before I begin rehearsals and know exactly what the writer is intending to communicate!

How has the outdoor setting affected the performance style of the piece?

On the positive side I think being outdoors experiencing performance is always very exciting. In this case the actors wear radio microphones so that the more intimate moments can be heard. The performances do however have to be bigger both vocally and physically than they would be inside a theatre.

Can you talk about the incorporation of video footage in the production.

The video element was very important to me because we experience situations like the destruction of East Timor via our televisions. I wanted to contrast that with the very human element of actors

Were you involved at all in the design process?

Yes I am always involved in the design process of everything I direct. I knew that I wanted the set to be made from shipping containers with as few additional features as possible. The video imagery of course is another essential element of the design concept.

Has the production had to alter at all for touring purposes?

Yes we are not able to perform outside for most of the tour so we have had to come up with a touring *theatre* version of the set. Also the choir will not be touring with us. However, some communities are rehearsing their own choirs and they will join us for the performances in their towns.

INTERVIEW WITH KAVISHA MAZZELLA, CO-WRITER AND MUSICAL DIRECTOR OF *MAVIS GOES TO TIMOR*

Kavisha, how did the roles of co-writer and musical director of 'Mavis Goes to Timor' overlap for you?

To me it all became one thing. I had some ideas that I wrote into the songs. Luckily for me I had a freedom to pursue how those ideas could be interpreted by the musicians and choir because I also had the role of Musical Director

Would you talk about the role/function of the music and the choir in the play?

When I went to East Timor I heard music every where...people love singing and playing. There was a little boy at the back of a restaurant who had made a rough guitar out of a packing case and he had strung it up with fishing line...he wanted a guitar so badly. Everywhere I went people stared at my guitar longingly and even at the Airport, the Dili Airport Officials gently put it on the conveyor belt like it was my grandma! So music is important to the people and people who write and sing are really treated with respect! There was no doubt about bringing in music to express the deep feelings of the people in the play.

Also, I felt that because Australia has a history with East Timor it would be great to involve as many people as we could, so a community choir was an ideal way – besides, the more the merrier and the after show parties are always more fun! The songs create a very strong emotion for the actors and audience to ride with. The songs are like a wave that they “surf” on if you like and to me songs and music belong to the “inner dialogue of the show. Being Musical Director I could fine tune that mood by directing the choir to sing loudly or softly at a given point, to create the right mood for the actors - to support what the scenes mean and to work together with the Director in crystallizing that vision.

What process was involved in selecting the songs and music to include in the play? What types of themes or ideas were you hoping to highlight?

For me the process is very much intuitive.

Besides composing original songs, I really wanted to include some songs that were traditional or were familiar to the people in East Timor so that when the East Timorese people came to the show, they could identify and recognise them and feel included and acknowledged. Also, they sound so amazing that we *HAD* to have them in the show.

As for the songs I wrote, they were indicated by Angela in the first draft of the script. The way we work is, for example, Angela will write in the margin “mattress making song” or “song about complacency” and then,

from reading the script I get a feeling from the mood. Is it happy? Is it sad? Is it a solo number or a choir song? I feel it out...I write it and play it to her and if she gives a "Yes" for it, it goes ahead. Sometimes you write something and everyone likes it at the time but you rehearse further into the show and it doesn't feel quite right so you go back and do a re-write. Or cut it out completely!

Highlighted through the songs are the emotional and spiritual journeys of the characters. The following themes are explored:

- Our complacency and at what we risk to lose as fellow human beings, as a nation. This is heard in the opening number "Sleep Sleep"
- The acknowledgement of our shared history with Timor and Elwyn's dawning of her realisation that she has to stand and do something. This is in 'Angry Love's Name'.
- The acknowledgement of the suffering of East Timorese families and the praising of the strength of the women of East Timor. This is highlighted in 'Timor Women'.
- 'Black Cloth' is a grieving and healing song for the dead from the widow's point of view.
- 'Morning in Dili' expresses hope in the new day.
- 'Mattresses' suggests that we can do something and make a difference.
- 'Ohelele!' us a traditional song that expresses all out celebration and joy.

What impact did the outdoor staging have on the musical aspects of the production?

It always feels different to be outdoors doing a show. I think it helps to put the audience *in* the story really well, feel a part of it so they don't feel they are sitting in a theatre anymore...they can disappear into the story. And the set looks to me like the Dili Waterfront so that is very evocative and helps the music enormously! Of course, being outside creates a huge amount of variables for the sound. Noise from traffic, rock'n'roll bands from a pub near by, cockatoos! You name it, we've had it. But somehow the atmosphere created by the set and the lights can work wonders when you have a full moon or a night full of stars ...they create a great mood... it's always a risk...but it mostly pays off! And it always inspires the musicians to play better!

Would you talk about your collaborative process in writing the play with Katherine and Angela?

Well the first thing I would say is that there is great trust and respect between the three of us. We all have different artistry and all enjoy and respect each other's work. I love collaboration for the fact that you create so much more by having the support of the other artists. I love the surprise factor in seeing songs that begin on the page become a living breathing moment on the stage. It's quite a miracle to make something seem natural. The conditions have to be right and that's what Angela and Katherine do...they create the right conditions for the songs to live in.

We get on well and also have a sense of humour about things so when things get tense we can work it out. I think there is a great positive attitude and a love and desire to create good art and have fun with it. So we can send emails with lyrics and ideas to each other and get feed back and feel we can talk freely with each other... it's a great freedom we have that means that I love working with them and then we get a lovely show at the end!

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL BETTS, SET DESIGNER FOR *MAVIS GOES TO TIMOR*

Michael, what initially attracted you to design the play 'Mavis Goes to Timor'?

'Mavis Goes to Timor' is the kind of work that appeals immediately on a humanitarian level. Like so many other Australians, I must admit to not being fully aware of the East Timor crisis until long after the event. 'Mavis' really brought that home to me. Her story angered and shamed me but at the same time gave me the opportunity to contribute to the East Timorese cause, if only in the smallest way.

The setting of the play is described as being 'outdoors, under the trees and stars'. What impact did the outdoor setting have on your design concept?

If there is such a thing as a play intended for outdoors, 'Mavis' is it. The exposed elements of an outdoor setting suited the ambience of the devastated East Timorese landscape perfectly.

How important is the design in relation to establishing place and time?

The design for 'Mavis' needed to do two things. Firstly, it needed to transport us to another place. It was very important to me that the set did not look like it was in Australia. Secondly, it needed to convey a sense of devastation, of post apocalyptic calmness, that something bad had happened here.

Would you talk about the shipping containers. How do they function and what do they represent in the play?

The use of the shipping containers was ideal for 'Mavis' as firstly, on a basic level, they would represent the actual containers that Mavis used to freight sewing equipment to East Timor. That is, they could be used as a prop. Secondly, the interiors could be used to indicate separate interior locations without disturbing the third element, that this place was a landscape left with no standing buildings, only shipping containers in their place.

Video image is used extensively in the play. Would you talk about the function and role of video in 'Mavis Goes to Timor'.

The video images created by Nancy Jones not only created another dimension to the play but from a set design point of view, soften the look of the set immensely. The translucent moving images contrast beautifully with the solid immobility of the containers.

How would you describe the 'style' of the set?

The set itself, I would describe as *abstract realism* - that is, the building blocks of the set are real shipping containers. There is nothing theatrical or creative about them but the way in which they have been arranged and lit, they then become symbolically abstract of something else.

Would you talk about your collaboration with the writers/director of the play in relation to the design process.

The initial idea to use shipping containers in the play came from the Director, Angela Chaplin, who had just come back from East Timor along with the other writers. They had told me how amazed they were at the number of abandoned containers they saw practically everywhere they went. It immediately became obvious that we were going to need lots of shipping containers - 24 in the original production!

Was the play originally designed as a touring production? If not, what sort of adaptations have you had to make to accommodate the tour?

Although the original production was a site-specific design, we all knew that there was the possibility that the show may tour. It wasn't until all the costs of moving 24 containers around was finally calculated that we realised, this set wasn't going anywhere! So, apart from the Playbox production, which has 8 real containers, the rest of the tour will have a set made of fake containers closely resembling the original set, which can be dismantled, transported and reassembled like any other touring set.

INTERVIEW WITH MAND MARKEY, COSTUME DESIGNER FOR *MAVIS GOES TO TIMOR*

What type of research did you need to conduct in order to design the costumes for 'Mavis Goes to Timor'?

Always I research as much as possible into any performance. With 'Mavis' the need for this was obvious. I primarily used texts, the internet and many discussions with East Timorese people as well as many conversations with Angela Chaplin as she had visited East Timor and is the Artistic Director of the performance, so consequently, she was always in conversation with me in regards to final decisions on the designs. Also, Steve Westh's documentary helped me immensely in choosing the clothing for the character of Mavis and her family.

How would you describe the style of the costumes?

The style of the costumes for the choir depict those that are worn by traditional and contemporary East Timorese people. There is a variety of clothing worn by the choir within our production and I hoped that they would represent what East Timorese people would wear in their 'daily' lives. This rather eclectic mix includes articles such as jeans, shirts, frocks, tee shirts etc and traditional, very beautiful East Timorese tais - a most remarkable cloth worn like a sarong by women, under the arms, and worn similarly to a Scottish kilt by the men.

Most of the clothing worn by the choir has been 'broken down' to depict possibly the availability of clothing in their country at the present time. The main casts' costumes were decided primarily from information obtained from Angela Chaplin with her visits with Mavis and Steve Westh's documentary.

What role do the costumes play in the overall 'look' of the play?

The costumes are there to assist in the 'total look' of the performance. I would hope that they assist the performers to formulate their characters, and to allow the audience to recognize various characters.

Would you talk about your collaboration with the set designer in relation to the process of designing the costumes.

I believe it is always essential to collaborate with all designers on a production. This includes set and lighting and, of course collaborating with the writer(s) and director. I also feel it is important to discuss with the performers their feelings about their costumes. It is essential to always collaborate with all involved. Collaborating is being able to talk openly about your ideas with one another and therefore help all concerned visualise what you see, what you are thinking.

**INTERVIEW WITH CIDALIA PIRES, ACTOR AND DANCER
in *MAVIS GOES TO TIMOR***

Cidalia, would you please explain your role in the production of 'Mavis Goes to Timor'.

Well, my role in the production is that of playing the character of Marianna, a young East Timorese woman who is a Commander in East Timor during the struggle against the Indonesian occupation. So, I play a Commander as well as a single mother. Marianna gives birth to a child during her time in the mountains whilst fighting the Indonesians. Of course she can't bring the child up in that type of situation, so she leaves the baby with her family who are where the safe areas are. This situation is usual with East Timorese families – aunties, uncles, brothers, sisters – any member who can possibly take the baby. All family members do this. When they take a child it is their's. It is very traditional in East Timor to be able to give your baby to someone and they will take care of it. Marianna gives her baby to her Auntie and goes back up to the hills to fight.

When independence was achieved and the referendum was announced, of course everyone was scattered everywhere. At the time of the referendum the Indonesian army was ordered not to fight the East Timorese, but still Marianna can't have her baby with her during this time. Unfortunately, Marianna's child passes away and she never sees the baby again. So, my role is the story of a woman who is fighter and a mother who has a child and loses that child. It is this story that is explored throughout the play.

As an East Timorese woman how do you personally respond to this story?

Personally I could never get to the stage where Marianna is. I would never know how she suffered under the Indonesian occupation but, because her love for her country and her hope is so enormous, I relate strongly to her character. The fact that we both love our country so much and we want to tell a story that is in both of us. Marianna is there to tell the journalists about East Timor, I am here to tell the audience what has happened in East Timor during the 25 years of occupation by the Indonesians.

People don't often understand what war does to you – not in Australia unfortunately. But this is a time for Australians to understand how war affects people – mothers, children, grandmothers. It seems to be that women, in general, seem to be affected the most by war because they are the ones who end up surviving. I am a survivor myself. I see it as so but not so much as compared to those East Timorese living in East Timor. Compared to them I have been fortunate.

Do you think that the play is an accurate portrayal of the circumstances in East Timor?

Yes, it has points that are very accurate. Our culture is portrayed very accurately. In the play you see East Timorese, not as fighters, but how we interact with each other, how we respect the elders in our community. This is how East Timorese people act in their daily life. In the play deckchair has portrayed this well for the audience. It is not to do with the fact that Mavis is a white woman and a foreigner. It has to do with the fact that she is an older woman and this is important in the East Timorese culture. Angela, Katherine and Kavisha and the people at deckchair made sure that things were portrayed correctly in the script and in the play so that we wouldn't offend East Timorese people and not make it seem that the Australians were heroes. Mavis Taylor is a hero to many East Timorese, but that isn't the point of the story. The story is to show the audience that Mavis went to help but it wasn't all 'peaches and cream'. She found that people don't necessarily trust one another, that people don't trust her or her daughter as foreigners who are coming in to help. It is a wonderful gesture but you have to earn that trust and you see this explored within the play.

Music and dance is important within the play. How important is music and dance to you as an East Timorese woman?

To the culture of the East Timorese, dance and music are very important because they are part of our daily life. When we work in harvesting, we sing and we dance while we are working – it is part of our lives. During the occupation by Indonesia, all the singing and dancing was about the struggle, it was a form of demonstration. During this time they would talk about the rice that they have harvested but also the struggle they have gone through. The struggle will never be forgotten in our songs and our dances. While the dances will continue to be traditional, the songs will tell the stories of the struggle.

While living in Australia, the singing and dancing was my culture. It was my resistance. That was the only means I had to resist the Indonesian occupation, the only way I could explore and embrace my culture. To embrace it was to resist – to say, "No, we are different and we will show you how different we are". That was my purpose as an East Timorese brought up in Australia. Yes, I was a lucky one but there was a reason for me to be lucky and a reason for me to talk about it to everybody. I may not seem to be suffering but you don't see that. I was suffering – not physically, but emotionally because my family was still in East Timor and they were the ones who were suffering. That was the purpose of dancing and that was the reason why I had to dance. I was brought up with dance, not just to enjoy dancing which I do, but to tell a story. The story became more important than the act of dancing.

Cidalia, did you collaborate with Angela, Katherine and Kavisha on this production?

At certain times, yes I did. At certain times they would ask me if something was alright to do. They were very socially aware of how important the East Timorese story was because the East Timorese would be looking at the play. It was important that the story was historically and culturally correct and to do that they would have to consult with the East Timorese and I seemed to be the one at the time. But I really didn't have to be a resource, they did their own research, they saw it with their own eyes. In the end they didn't have to use me much, they saw it.

As the character of Marianna, do you feel that you are the 'flag bearer' for the East Timorese? Are they all embodied in your character of Marianna or are you only telling one person's story?

There is only one person's story but yes, I feel that I am representing all people of East Timor, whether they are women or men or children. I am representing them and I have to get my story right but I have to get my character's beliefs across and in doing so, get across what my people went through. So, I feel that within my character I am representing the East Timorese.

How effective do you feel the use of stagecraft elements are in conveying the story of East Timor? The music, the song, the shipping containers?

They are very effective. The audience gets to hear the stories through the songs and for many East Timorese that is how they listen to stories, through song. The songs that Kavisha has written are heart-breaking but that's part of the story. It is wonderful to have such a talented song writer and singer to go to a country and not just assume they know how things are but to actually understand how things are. The music is just beautiful and it encompasses traditional East Timorese music including "Ohelele!" That is an uplifting song and when it ends there is hope. In terms of the shipping containers, when I was in East Timor I saw heaps of containers. People were sometimes living in these containers because there were no houses and they represent a real connection between East Timor and Australia.

This story could have been told in a number of ways. Why do you feel it is told so powerfully through the medium of theatre?

Because the theatre is where people want to be entertained, it's where everybody wants to go and have a look and see how things are, to see and hear stories. Theatre can be comedy, drama, anything but it is really powerful if you can tell a good story, like the story of Mavis. A story such as Mavis's is about hope. But I think that theatre is also about education, about events that have happened and events that could possibly happen. Theatre allows an audience to listen and they do listen in the theatre. It is the strongest form of art and of demonstration.

What forms does theatre take in East Timor?

East Timor does not have professional theatre companies as we do in Australia because the circumstances have not allowed it to be so. But the East Timorese know that theatre is the form by which we can educate people, show people our culture and tell our stories.

At present we are more involved in our cultural theatre rather than formal theatre. This is the way we tell our stories through our songs, music and dance – our Tebes. This is a form of dancing and singing with a group of about 30 people who all sing and dance together in a circle, holding hands – it is a ‘made’ event, spontaneous. That is our form of theatre at present but there are small groups of people in East Timor who are slowly working towards a more formal style of theatre. You need to remember that East Timor was very isolated for a long time and has not necessarily embraced more Western styles of theatre. East Timorese know and embrace their cultural theatre and that was their resistance.

Do you feel that a play such as ‘Mavis Goes to Timor’ could be performed in East Timor?”

I have thought about that a lot and have thought, “Would it or would it not be accepted?”. I think it would because it is a woman’s story and in East Timor most women are not noticed or acknowledged. However, seeing a woman of 86 years old like Mavis Taylor achieve this and seeing Marianna may give a lot of women there a lot of hope – that this is about strength, that holding a gun is not to be ashamed of, to behave like a man is not bad. It was the struggle that meant that people such as Marianna needed to hold that gun because they wanted to but more importantly because they had to. I think it would give women hope because they were raped, they were abused and they took it all and suffered.

The women of East Timor have got such stories! My representation of Marianna is their story but it is just one story and you can imagine the rest. This play gave me strength as a woman and there will be women out there who will need that encouragement and that strength. It is like a message – “Hey, you survived and this is your story”.

What would you like audiences to be thinking when they leave the performance?

Well there is a lot. The fact that wherever there is suffering, whether it is in East Timor or West Papua, people go through the same thing. For me it is important that everybody needs to be socially aware of humanity across the world, not just their immediate surroundings, not just their country, but their universe. As people we are all the same – we should not be treated any differently. Perhaps if things were different...in an ideal world...but we should not forget others. Don’t say, “That’s their country, that’s their problem”, because it is everyone’s problem. You can’t just sit there and watch someone die or suffer. I would like the audience to be thinking about that human connection, about universal humanity.

MAVIS GOES TO TIMOR

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

1. What does Katherine Thomson see as being a major influence in relation to the writing of the play? What ideas have influenced your own ensemble performance work?
2. Katherine Thomson talks about the characters' *journeys*.
 - (a) Select a character and outline their journey within the play
 - (b) What does this particular character discover about themselves within the story of the play?
3. "If you've got fine actors they need far fewer words than one imagines". What do you think Katherine Thomson means by this?
4. Director, Angela Chaplin, says "It's always very curious to write and direct". What do you think she may mean by this?
What sort of tension could exist if the same person was to both write and direct?
5. Compare the script with the play in performance. Comment on two aspects that have been directed differently from what the script suggests. Suggest reasons why these differences may have occurred.
6. Kavisha Mazzella, the Musical Director of the play, creates two quite evocative images when she talks about the songs as being 'like a wave that they [the audience] surf on' and being the 'inner dialogue' to the play.
 - (a) What do you think she means by each of these statements?
 - (b) What examples can you recall from the play that you feel could illustrate Kavisha's images?
7. Kavisha Mazzella says, "I love the surprise factor in seeing songs on the page become a living breathing moment on the stage".
How did you respond to the music and song in the play?
8. All the writers refer to the challenges and joys of writing for an outdoor production. They use terms such as; 'mood', 'atmosphere', 'relevance', 'transporting to another place'.
 - (a) Discuss the strengths and limitations of the choice to stage *Mavis Goes to Timor* outdoors.
 - (b) If you have seen the indoor version, discuss its strengths and limitations.
9. From your reading of the interviews, what do you understand is meant by the term 'collaboration'?
10. The designer, Michael Betts, says the set 'needed to convey a sense of devastation, of post apocalyptic calmness, that something bad had happened here'.
 - (a) To what extent do you believe these ideas are realised by the overall set design?
 - (b) In particular, what is the significance of the shipping containers in *Mavis Goes to Timor* (consider both their practical and symbolic/representational roles)

11. Discuss the use of video images in the production. How would you describe their function as:
 - (a) a stagecraft element?
 - (b) as a narrative device?
12. How do the costumes help to define the characters? Give examples.
13. How does the character of Marianna function within the play?
14. Cidalia Pires talks about 'struggle' and 'resistance' in relation to herself, her character and her people. In what ways does the play expose the struggle and resistance of the East Timorese?
15. Cidalia talks about the function and power of theatre and makes three very clear statements, that theatre is:
 - "the strongest form of art and of demonstration".
 - "theatre allows an audience to listen"
 - "theatre is also about education".Discuss these three statements. Is theatre about these things? What else is the medium of theatre about? How would you relate these ideas to your own ensemble work?
17. Select a character in the play and discuss how effectively the actor developed that character through the use of *expressive skills*.
18. *Heightened realism* (Katherine Thomson) and *abstract realism* (Michael Betts) are two terms used to describe the **style** of *Mavis Goes to Timor*. What aspects of the production are:
 - (a) abstract
 - (b) heightened
 - (c) realisticHow effectively are these styles blended and brought together to make the final product?
19. How would you apply the term *non-naturalistic* to *Mavis Goes to Timor*?
20. The creative team discusses a range of **themes** they were hoping to highlight in *Mavis Goes to Timor*.
 - (a) List these and others that you feel were explored in the production.
 - (b) Discuss how the narrative structure of the play assisted in highlighting these themes
 - (c) Discuss how the stagecraft elements assisted in highlighting these themes.

Timor angel, and a global hero

By Suzanne Carbone

March 23 2002

In 1999, Mavis Taylor began sending aid parcels to East Timor. Mrs Taylor, 87, a retired dressmaker and haberdasher, has since spent more than \$100,000 sending 119 tonnes of donated household goods to the people of this newly independent nation.

In the back yard of her Yarrawonga home, Mrs Taylor has a six-metre shipping container - her 15th destined for Timor. For the past year, she has held a weekly mini-market in her home, selling lace, ribbons, fabric and bric-a-brac to raise money for her mission.

Mrs Taylor is the mother of nine children. After visiting East Timor two years ago she was inspired to establish 23 sewing cooperatives, which provide jobs for men and women in the war-torn country.

In recognition of her extraordinary work, Mrs Taylor has been chosen as one of four "Global Faces" of the United Nations' Second World Assembly on Ageing, to be held in Madrid from April 8 to 12. Her face smiles from a specially designed assembly poster on 130 billboards in Madrid.

Mrs Taylor was to be the star of the assembly - but on Wednesday she must undergo surgery for bowel cancer. "When the doctor told me I said, 'Oh heavens. I'm too busy to be sick. I can't fit it in.' "

Mrs Taylor's cluttered home - the headquarters of the Mavis Taylor East Timor Fund - is filled with bags of clothes, toys, household items and rolls of fabric. There is a cash register on the kitchen bench.

Mrs Taylor has sent everything to East Timor, including the kitchen sink. "People have donated every single thing you could think of," she says. "Really good kitchen sinks."

She has lost count of the money she has poured into the venture. "I've spent every cent I've made and I've never kept account of it purposely because I didn't want to."

Mrs Taylor caught the attention of the UN after she featured in a documentary that last year won a United Nations Association of Australia Media Peace Award. The Mavis Goes To Timor episode of the documentary series Grey Voyagers featured Mrs Taylor's first overseas trip to East Timor in June, 2000, with her daughter Elwyn, 58, and granddaughter Anita, 29.

It was, she says, a wonderful honour, to be chosen as a Global Face by the UN.

"There are thousands and thousands of people doing absolutely marvellous things anywhere."

Mrs Taylor was born in Richmond and moved to Yarrawonga at 16. She married

Lloyd Taylor and had nine children. She has 27 grandchildren, 28 great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandchild.

She is modest about her efforts but others are more forthcoming. Lisa Clarke from the Yarrawonga newsagency tells how Mrs Taylor massaged her mother's feet every day for 18 months after her mother had suffered a stroke. "She's one of those gems in life," she said.

Mrs Taylor became interested in the plight of East Timor following the death of five Australian journalists there in 1975. In 1999 she began sending parcels and collecting donated goods, inspired to recycle after seeing the rubbish in people's bins. "We are a throwaway age, which is sad, really."

Her visit two years ago affected her profoundly. "It was just so devastating. I knew it was bad but somehow I never expected it to get to me quite the way it did. You wonder how men who would be uncles, brothers and fathers could slaughter little children and women in a church. I stood there where the blood ran . . .

"I know a few people have been over there and come back thinking it's a lost cause. But it isn't a lost cause. Every single little thing makes a difference."

Her daughter, Elwyn, has remained in East Timor to coordinate the sewing cooperatives.

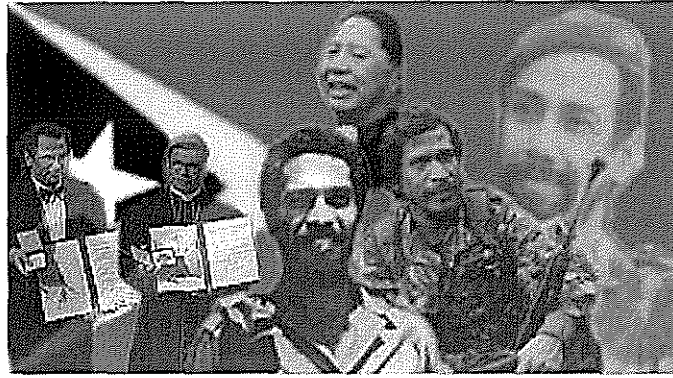
It was after her trip to East Timor, on her 7am power walks to work, that Mrs Taylor started losing her breath and was found to be short of blood. She was later diagnosed with bowel cancer.

She is not so much worried about her operation as she is about getting back on her feet in order to establish a credit union in East Timor.

Doctors say she needs six weeks to get well but she thinks three will be enough.

This story was found at:

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/03/22/1016793343532.html>



A Short history of East Timor

by AVCAT

East Timor was once the farthest of the Portuguese colonies, it lies in the longitude of 123°E and latitude of 9°S. Australia is less than 600km south of East Timor, where such proximity allows many East Timorese from the eastern highlands, eg. Baucau and Lospalos, to be able see the evening lights emanating from northern Australia, possibly from a light house. While towards the southern hemisphere is occupied by Australia, the northern is occupied by the Republic of Indonesia with its 200,000,000 citizens and its 13,000 islands. Further north lies other countries like the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, China and Japan and you name the rest. Sometimes I tend to think that if Indonesia were a huge land mass instead of a composition of islands, then the island of Timor would be the land bridge that connects Australia and Asia, just like Sinai to Africa and Asia.

East Timor is mostly mountainous with plains occupying the the shore lines. The height of the mountains in the chain of the island of Timor averages at 2500m above sea level. Although the total area of East Timor (excluding West Timor) is only around 18,900km², the highest mountain peaks at 3000m . East Timor also possesses a great diversity of culture, there are more than 30 dialects spoken in East Timor, with Tetum as the main dialect. (Many people tend to treat the distinct languages of East Timor as "dialects", I think they are wrong because if such is true, then Portuguese or Spanish are not languages. They are part of dialects spoken in southern Europe). Another important point about these "dialects" languages is that they are very different from one another, two people speaking with different East Timorese languages cannot understand each other, for instance of Lospalos (Fataloco) and Bobonaro (Bunak)

The territory of East Timor is comprised of the former Portuguese Timor: the eastern half of the island of Timor, the enclave of Oecusse inside West Timor (Indonesian Timor), the island of Atauro, about 20km north of Dili and the islet of Jaco at the eastern tip of Timor.



«East Timor pre 1975»



The United Nations General Assembly placed East Timor on the international agenda in 1960, when it added the territory to its list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. At that time, East Timor was administered by Portugal. Fourteen years later, in 1974, Portugal sought to establish a provisional government and a popular assembly that would determine the status of East Timor. Civil war broke out between those who favored independence and those who advocated integration with Indonesia. Unable to control the situation, Portugal withdrew. Indonesia intervened militarily and integrated East Timor as its 27th province in 1976. The United Nations never recognized this integration, and both the Security Council and the General Assembly called for Indonesia's withdrawal.

Beginning in 1982, at the request of the General Assembly, successive Secretaries-General held regular talks with Indonesia and Portugal aimed at resolving the status of the territory. In June 1998, Indonesia proposed a limited autonomy for East Timor within Indonesia. In light of this proposal, the talks made rapid progress and resulted in a set of agreements between Indonesia and Portugal, signed in New York on 5 May 1999. The two Governments entrusted the Secretary-General with organizing and conducting a "popular consultation" in order to ascertain whether the East Timorese people accepted or rejected a special autonomy for East Timor within the unitary Republic of Indonesia.

To carry out the consultation, the Security Council, by resolution 1246 (1999), authorized the establishment of **the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET)** on 11 June 1999. The 5 May agreements stipulated that, after the vote, UNAMET would oversee a transition period pending implementation of the decision of the East Timorese people.

Despite an extremely tight timetable, a high level of tension, and the Territory's mountainous terrain, poor roads and difficult communications, UNAMET registered 451,792 potential voters among the population of just over 800,000 in East Timor and abroad. On voting day, 30 August 1999, some 98 per cent of registered voters went to the polls deciding by a margin of 94,388 (21.5 per cent) to 344,580 (78.5 per cent) to reject the proposed autonomy and begin a process of transition towards independence.

Following the announcement of the result, pro-integration militias, at times with the support of elements of the Indonesian security forces, launched a campaign of violence, looting and arson throughout the entire territory. The Indonesian authorities did not respond effectively to the violence, despite clear commitments made under the 5 May agreements. Many East Timorese were killed and as many as 500,000 were displaced from their homes, about half leaving the territory, in some cases by force. UNAMET undertook a partial evacuation of both its international and local staff, including their immediate families, to Australia. A small team of UNAMET staff remained in the UN Headquarters in Dili to ensure the safety of non-UN staff who had sought refuge there.

The Secretary-General and the Security Council undertook strenuous diplomatic efforts to halt the violence, pressing Indonesia to meet its responsibility to maintain security and order in the territory. A Security Council mission visited Jakarta and Dili, and the Secretary-General worked to rally support among Governments for a multinational force authorized by the Security Council to bring the situation under control. As the Council mission concluded its visit to Jakarta on 12 September 1999, the Government of Indonesia agreed to accept the offer of assistance from the international community. The Security Council then authorized the multinational force (INTERFET) under a unified command structure headed by a Member State (Australia) to restore peace and security in East Timor, to protect and support UNAMET in carrying out its tasks and, within force capabilities, to facilitate humanitarian assistance operations.

In the meantime, organizations of the United Nations system began a large-scale emergency humanitarian relief effort, including airdrops of food, aid convoys and the provision of shelter and basic services. Relief workers and supplies were deployed incrementally as the security situation improved. At the same time, increasing attention was paid to the voluntary repatriation of some 250,000 East Timorese from West Timor and other areas in Indonesia and the region. To finance the relief effort, a Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for US\$199 million was launched on 27 October 1999.

Following the outbreak of violence, the Indonesian Armed Forces and police began a drawdown from the territory,

eventually leaving completely. Indonesian administrative officials also left. On 28 September, Indonesia and Portugal, at a meeting with the United Nations, reiterated their agreement for the transfer of authority in East Timor to the United Nations. They also agreed that ad hoc measures were required to fill the gap created by the early departure of the Indonesian civil authorities. UNAMET re-established its headquarters in Dili on 28 September and immediately began efforts to restore the mission's logistical capacity and redeploy UNAMET personnel as conditions allowed.

On 19 October 1999, the Indonesian People's Consultative Assembly formally recognized the result of the consultation. Shortly thereafter, on 25 October, the United Nations Security Council, by resolution 1272 (1999), established the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) as an integrated, multidimensional peacekeeping operation fully responsible for the administration of East Timor during its transition to independence.

Resolution 1272 mandated UNTAET to provide security and maintain law and order throughout the territory of East Timor; to establish an effective administration; to assist in the development of civil and social services; to ensure the coordination and delivery of humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation of humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation and development assistance; to support capacity-building for self-government; and to assist in the establishment of conditions for sustainable development.

UNTAET consisted of a governance and public administration component, a civilian police component of up to 1,640 civilian police and an armed United Nations peacekeeping force, of equivalent size to INTERFET. In addition, humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation components were incorporated within the structures of the Transitional Administration. To finance the transitional activities of the Transitional Administration, a donors' meeting on East Timor, convened in Tokyo in December 1999, pledged more than US\$520 million.

Soon after, the Transitional Administrator, in consultation with East Timorese political leadership, established the National Consultative Council (NCC), a political body consisting of 11 East Timorese and four UNTAET members, to oversee the decision-making process during the transition period leading to independence. The NCC was consulted on and consented to a series of urgent regulations required to establish effective administration in the Territory. These included: setting up a legal system, re-establishing a judiciary, setting an official currency, creating border controls, taxation, and creating a first consolidated budget for East Timor.

In February 2000, marking the complete deployment of UNTAET, command of military operations was transferred from INTERFET to the United Nations Peacekeeping Force. UNTAET also began a process of reorganizing itself to resemble more closely the future government of East Timor and to increase the direct participation of the East Timorese. Eight portfolios were created: internal administration, infrastructure, economic affairs, social affairs, finance, justice, police and emergency services, and political affairs. The first four were headed by East Timorese and the other four by senior UNTAET officials. The process of transformation and institution building would later lead to the establishment, in August 2000, of the East Timor Transitional Administration (ETTA) headed by the Transitional Administrator.

Meanwhile, during the first six months of 2000, more than 167,000 refugees returned from Indonesia, primarily from West Timor, with an estimated 85,000 to 120,000 remaining in camps in West Timor. However, in September, a series of armed attacks against United Nations troops and East Timorese people along the border and in refugee camps in West Timor led UNTAET to declare western zones to be "high threat" areas. Following the murder of three United Nations staff members in Atambua, West Timor, by armed militias on 6 September 2000, humanitarian relief efforts in the region were suspended.

The United Nations Security Council responded to the deteriorating security situation by adopting resolution 1319 on 8 September 2000. The resolution called on the Government of Indonesia to take immediate steps, in fulfillment of its responsibilities, to disarm and disband militia immediately, restore law and order in the affected areas in West Timor, ensure safety and security in the refugee camps and for humanitarian workers, and prevent cross-border incursions into East Timor.

In addition to the planned expansion of the East Timor Police Service, on 12 September 2000, the Transitional Cabinet approved the creation of an East Timor Defence Force consisting of 1,500 troops drawn from the ranks of the former East Timorese pro-independence guerilla force FALINTIL and supplemented by a reserve of equal

number.

Running parallel to efforts towards maintaining peace and security in East Timor were measures aimed at developing a functioning judicial and legal system. An East Timorese Prosecutor General's Office and a Defender Service; 3 District Courts; a Court of Appeals, and prisons in Dili and two other locations were established in the course of 2000.

In October 2000, a National Council (NC) was established to replace and expand on the former National Consultative Council (NCC) as the nucleus of a future assembly. It comprised 36 members from East Timorese civil society - businesses, political parties, NGOs, and the territory's 13 districts. East Timorese were appointed to five of nine cabinet portfolios.

A regulation concerning the election of the Constituent Assembly, scheduled for 30 August, was promulgated on 16 March 2001 that formed the basis for the preparation of the electoral roll. On the same day civil registration of all residents began and by 23 June 737,811 people had registered.

Meanwhile, efforts to create a means for sustainable development and secure economic growth in East Timor proceeded. A milestone in these efforts was reached on 3 July 2001, when representatives of the Transitional Administration and Australia initialed the Timor Sea Arrangement, a document that would govern petroleum operations in the Timor Sea.

On 30 August 2001, two years after the Popular Consultation, more than 91 per cent of East Timor's eligible voters went to the polls again; this time to elect an 88-member Constituent Assembly tasked with writing and adopting a new Constitution and establishing the framework for future elections and a transition to full independence.

Shortly thereafter, 24 members of the new all-East Timorese Council of Ministers of the Second Transitional Government were sworn into office. The new Council replaced the Transitional Cabinet created in 2000. The Constituent Assembly and a new East Timorese Government were to govern East Timor during the remaining transitional period before its independence as a democratic and sovereign State.

East Timor's Constituent Assembly signed into force the Territory's first Constitution on 22 March 2002 and following presidential elections on 14 April, Xanana Gusmao was appointed president-elect of East Timor. With both these preconditions for a hand-over of power met the Constituent Assembly will transform itself into the country's parliament on 20 May 2002.

The United Nations will continue to maintain a presence in East Timor throughout the post-independence period to ensure the security and stability of the nascent State. A successor mission, to be known as The United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISSET), will adopt a milestone-based approach towards its gradual withdrawal from the Territory and will support the East Timorese authorities in the areas of stability, democracy and justice, internal security and law enforcement and external security and border control.

Produced by the Department of Public Information, May 2002

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Joyous journey

perth
international
arts festival
The West Australian
Official newspaper

Theatre

Mavis Goes to Timor

By Catherine Thompson

Deckchair Theatre

Fremantle Arts Centre gardens

Review: Geoff Gibbs

THE tragedy of East Timor and the courageous odyssey of an Aussie octogenarian to the country are wonderfully integrated by director Angela Chaplin in her joyous production.

Those who were thrilled by the South African production of *The Mysteries* last week will be similarly enthralled.

Chaplin and playwright Katherine Thompson have created a musical inspired by the SBS television documentary about an irrepressible senior citizen from rural Victoria who was outraged that so little was being done to ease the pain of East Timor.

The haberdashery proprietor, who had never been overseas (she confesses to a trip to Tasmania), embarked on a relentless quest to bring some value and respect to the lives of women brutalised in a violent political upheaval.

As the Timorese were our allies in World War II, Mavis determined that ordinary people could achieve more than politicians.

The play focuses on three exceptional women — the perennial public conscience of Mavis played with passion, brittle objectivity and matronly warmth by Anne Phelan; the tense but devoted daughter Elwyn, a strong, unsentimental and compelling characterisation from Kerry-Ella McAullay; and a searing and disturbing performance from Cidalia Pires as the valiant and heroic woman of Timor.

Chaplin very successfully integrates all the elements with subtlety and power to generate what I believe will be the hit of the festival.

Lighting by Mark Howett is dramatic, subtle and seductive and extends the action beyond the confines of the outdoor stage into the trees and up to the stars.

Clever and pertinent use of video



Anne Phelan as Mavis Taylor in Deckchair's *Mavis Goes to Timor*.

footage wisely never competes with the actors but provides a visual wash projected on to the ribbed walls of the dramatic sea containers that create the ingenious set design by Michael Betts.

The text illuminates the clash of ideologies, the frustration of dealing with insensitive local and international bureaucracies and the overwhelming optimism and quest for survival of the Timorese.

The play is structured as a series of monologues and apostrophes which are poignant but unsentimental, and often amusingly delivered.

However, its most compelling moments come from the drama generated between the characters. Phelan, McAullay and Pires work superbly together and never fail to capitalise on the dramatic opportunities in the text.

In this play about — and possibly for — women, the presence of men is only imagined. However, the tension and drama sought by the writer may have

been even more effective had a universal male been added to mouth the unspoken responses to which the women so strongly react.

The production is backed by an effective musical duo led by composer and lyricist Kavisha Mazzella, who sensitively underscores the valour and the humour of the indefatigable trio on stage.

Her compositions range from the heartbreaking *Women Don't Cry* to the amusing *Mattress Song*, a rousing finale of *Everything's Gonna be Alright* and the Aussie bush ballad *Yarrowonga*.

While the acting is universally strong the singing is also exceptional. Phelan has a vibrant, dramatic contralto voice and her duets with the vocally secure and musically adept McAullay are a highlight of this totally satisfying show.

A big ethnic community choir adds further charm and energy to Mavis's journey.

You'll be sorry if you miss this story under the stars.

Celebration of survival

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An elderly woman's heroic response to the recent plight of the East Timorese people is now the focus of a new play, writes **Carolyn Webb**.

One night in January 2001, playwright Katherine Thomson did something she rarely does. A workaholic, at 8pm on a weekday she would normally be writing at her desk. Instead, she was sitting on her sofa, in her house in Sydney's Darlinghurst, engrossed in an SBS documentary.

The doco, *Mavis Goes to Timor*, told how an 86-year-old haberdasher from Yarrowonga, Mavis Taylor, spent \$100,000 sending two shipping containers of donated goods, fabric and machinery to East Timor, then went there to set up sewing cooperatives.

Unbeknown to Thomson, her long-time collaborator Angela Chaplin, who is the artistic director of Fremantle's Deckchair Theatre Company, had also watched the documentary and was affected by it.

So, when a few months later Deckchair general manager David Gerrand asked Thomson to co-write a play that Chaplin was working on about Taylor, Thomson didn't hesitate.

Their play, *Mavis Goes to Timor*, with musician-activist Kavisha Mazzella as the third writer and musical director, opens in Melbourne on February 10 and is directed by Angela Chaplin. It stars Anne Phelan as Mavis, Kerry-Ella McAullay as Mavis' daughter, Elwyn, and Cidalia Pires as Marianna, an East Timorese woman who helps Mavis set up her sewing co-ops. The play premiered in the open outside Fremantle Arts Centre on February 7, 2002, and its month-long season sold out.

Taylor's clarity on the East Timor situation was what most impressed Thomson.

"She said, 'How could people do this to each other? How can the Indonesian soldiers sleep at



Mavis Taylor, pictured in the Sidney Myer Courtyard yesterday, is the real-life heroine of *Mavis Goes to Timor*, a television documentary and a play. PICTURE: PERRY STEPHENS

night having pillaged, having done this?'"

She admires Taylor's bravery. "She'd never been out of the country. East Timor, then and now, is a difficult place to be.

"She said, 'I'll go, and sleep in a shipping container'. She was 86, she had bad health, and I don't think she was prepared for the level of destruction that she witnessed, and it was distressing. The heat is tough. And it's tough to get from one place to another, to arrange meetings, find a car. And to get the containers off the wharves.

"It was three months of meetings, negotiations and feelings that she had failed. And then the joy and delight when they succeeded."

In September, 2001, Thomson, Chaplin and Mazzella

spent 10 days in East Timor, where they spoke to East Timorese women in the clothing co-ops in Dili.

Thomson says: "It was extremely sad. Probably the fear had gone by the time we were there, but there was a sense of sadness. A degree of optimism, but I think by then the struggle had set in. There were refugees filtering back from West Timor and, so, you'd often see people with bags and things, looking quite lost, on the street.

"And there was a lot of work being done on housing, but everything was still burnt out. The destruction from the TNI (Indonesian National Army) was obvious."

On their return to Australia, Thomson and Chaplin spent a week with Taylor in Yarrowonga.

"Finding answers to questions we had, things that didn't make chronological sense".

She'd never been out of the country. East Timor, then and now, is a difficult place to be. She said, 'I'll go, and sleep in a shipping container'.

KATHERINE THOMSON

"She was amazing. She was still collecting items to send to East Timor. Her doctor had made her put a sign on the door, saying, 'No visitors between 2pm and 4pm', because she had to rest.

"She was incredibly helpful with our research. No question was too difficult or too sensitive. And, in that time, Angela

and I structured some of the story. Angela already knew that she wanted an outdoor performance piece. She knew that we'd probably use a shipping container set, that we'd have a choir, so it would feel like an 'event'."

Thomson says the trips galvanised the writers' commitment to telling the story accurately.

"Once you look people in the eye, once people sit down with you, and tell you stories of incredible intimacy — and, talking about the East Timorese women, incredible pain, and they don't know you, but they trust you, because you've said you're a writer and you will use the material to share with others, share with Australians so this never happens again —

you'd better do a good job. And you'd better honour that commitment to them."

Thomson chose Phelan (*Something in the Air, Prisoner*) for the role of Mavis because "she's one of the best actresses in the country". "Almost everything I've written, in her age group, I always write with her in mind. She's got incredible warmth, an incredible heart."

Phelan bears no physical resemblance to Taylor: the former is stocky where Taylor is bird-like. But Thomson says that, after seeing the Fremantle show, Taylor's daughter, Elwyn, said that Phelan had captured her personality in being "very perceptive, very tenacious, very determined, quick-witted, and very wise, with a lovely wise overview about the pattern of life".

As well as being a story in itself, Thomson says Taylor's journey is an entry point for Australian audiences into the personal toll of the Indonesian occupation.

Through her we learn of Marianna's struggle as a former guerrilla leader and single mother, but Thomson sees *Mavis Goes to Timor* as a joyous play. "To me, it is a celebration of survival, and resilience, and the capacity to find joy in the darkness," Thomson says.

"And horrible things are talked about, but, ultimately, it's about joy. I mean, these people survived what was apparently, per capita, the largest act of genocide in the 20th century."

The day after we spoke, Thomson was due to leave for East Timor again, to research a TV mini series, *Answered by Fire*, produced by a consortium, including the ABC and Canada's CBC networks and to be co-written by a Canadian, Barbara Samuels. The series tells the story of East Timor, before and after the 1999 independence vote, through the eyes of Australian and Canadian peacekeepers.

Mavis Goes to Timor, presented by Playbox, Deckchair Theatre and Ten Days on the Island, is on at the Sidney Myer Courtyard, between GUB Mallhouse and ACCA, Southbank, from February 10 to March 1.