

NIGEL JAMIESON'S

GALLIPOLI

"Of all the bastards of places,
this is the greatest bastard in the world."

AUSTRALIAN SOLDIER, 1915.

DERIVING FROM THE GREEK CALLIPOLIS FOR "BEAUTIFUL CITY", GALLIPOLI IS A NAME THAT HAS COME TO STAND FOR THE SPIRIT OF THE ANZACS AND OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATION. THE LEGENDARY FIRST WORLD WAR BATTLE OF THAT NAME IS ONE OF THE "MYTHS THROUGH WHICH WE... DEFINE OURSELVES," SAYS PLAYWRIGHT AND DIRECTOR NIGEL JAMIESON.

Nigel is the acclaimed creator of the extraordinary new production *Gallipoli*, which harnesses the combined energies of the STC Actors Company amongst a mass cast of forty to bring the epic story to the stage. The rest of the cast is drawn from the graduating students of the National Institute of Dramatic Art, which Nigel sees as fitting. After all, he observes, "They're young... It's a young man's story."

Nigel's re-telling of the story is both epic and intimate. Set against the Gallipoli cliffs, notoriously "steep and rocky and fierce", the intimate dialogue of the play is "largely taken from the kids who were there in the mud" at Gallipoli. High-octane choreography, layered with projections of visual imagery and reportage, serves to suggest the shock and awe felt by those at the front.

"Movement and the visual is my principle," says Nigel, encapsulating the approach that earned his most recent play, *Honour Bound*—a portrayal of David Hicks' detention at Guantanamo—a swag of awards, and seasons in Vienna, Amsterdam and London. The recipient of the Australian Federation Medal and the Sydney Myer Award for his significant contribution to Australian arts, Jamieson's other recent works include the 2004 play *In Our Name*, which told the story of an Iraqi family held for five years in Australian detention centres, and *All Of Me*, a play about family dynamics.

Gallipoli is a production of a scale and power that perhaps could only have been achieved by Nigel himself. He has made a career, in tandem with his works for theatre, as a maestro of the momentous, large-scale performance. Over the past decade, Nigel has worked as artistic director of numerous sporting and cultural ceremonies of significance, among them the ceremonies for the Sydney Olympics, the

Melbourne Commonwealth Games and the 2008 European City of Culture in Liverpool. His various other creations have included a circus village on London's South Bank, a production of *Macbeth* staged in a Balinese village, and an epic production at Angkor Wat featuring Jose Carreras, 800 dancers and 400 Buddhist monks.

"I fell in love with an Australian 15 years ago", says Nigel, who grew up in the United Kingdom and established his career in the London theatre world. Since then, he has made Australia his home and the base for his far-flung projects. The love affair has extended to quintessentially Australian folklore and culture. As the creator of the "Tin Symphony" for the Sydney Olympic Opening Ceremony, Nigel conjured up the likes of Captain Cook and Ned Kelly and, with his Lawn Mower Ballet, the mythic suburbia of the fifties. For the Federation centenary, he co-directed a collaboration of some 4,000 indigenous artists and performers outside Alice Springs.

Nigel felt "very honoured" to have had the opportunity, through his work, to project Australian identity to the world. "I think remembrance and ceremony are really important parts of our culture," he says, "but I suppose I just think it's very important we keep a very clear eye on what we're remembering."

Nigel's works for the theatre, like *Honour Bound* and *In Our Name*, have offered a kind of counterpoint to his spectacular ceremonies; the reverse side of the celebrated image.

"Myths can become like a burden to us if we don't constantly re-explore them and turn them over... sift through them," says Nigel. This is precisely the approach that he has taken with *Gallipoli*.

Nigel's interest in exploring Gallipoli was in part prompted by Australia's current military activities abroad. He sees parallels between mistakes made at Gallipoli and more recent events, as those in command overestimate the technological "shock and awe" factor and underestimate "the way people will fight for their own homeland".

"I was really keen to spend a period of my life really digging into [Gallipoli] in some depth." Nigel spent months immersed in the minutiae of the battle and the broader wartime milieu. "The more I've worked on it," he says, "the more passionate I have been about its value as a story to tell."

In many respects, the history of Gallipoli lends itself to tragedy. The Dardanelles, separating Gallipoli from Asia Minor, featured in Greek myth as the waters that bore Leander to his beloved Hero and ultimately took the lovers' lives. The city of Gallipoli itself endured many a battle between empires, long before the twentieth century began. And, of course, the Allied landing in 1915, and the ensuing campaign in which the Allies' losses were five times the Turkish dead, was a tragedy of unprecedented misery.

On the day that *Currents* speaks to Nigel, he has only recently returned from a trip to Turkey, where he stayed in a tiny village on the Gallipoli peninsula. Reflecting on the experience of visiting the many small cemeteries scattered over the peninsula, Nigel says, "I just felt waves of sadness... People didn't just die—they lived and died in such utterly appalling circumstances... No latrines and no water. Flies everywhere. Trenches made of—" Jamieson pauses, "—Of bodies."

"People talk about those people making a wonderful sacrifice, but I think if you look at what happened in Gallipoli, you might argue that they were sacrificed, which is different."

Nigel was deeply impressed by the way that the Turkish people have commemorated the campaign. "On the big Atatürk memorial, it says, 'Mothers of the world, whether it's a Johnny or Mehmet, your son is lying on our ground. We will remember them, honour them always as if they're our own children'," Nigel recalls.