

Satellite of love

Romance and history collide over the airwaves.

By Ruby Boukabou

Theories of human relativity: Melissa Madden Gray in *Cosmonaut*



Flying over Russia en route to Berlin early in 2004, Australian singer, dancer and actor Melissa Madden Gray was struck by a strangely conflicting feeling. She was reading the libretto and listening to a recording of the music for *Cosmonaut*, a chamber opera about a Russian spaceman floating high above the Earth during the Cold War who communicates telepathically with a passionate young mathematician in suburban Australia.

Placed, as she was, at 30,000ft, between the two protagonists of the opera, made her feel lucidly detached. "The piece is about a lonely cosmonaut viewing world history from afar, as well as making it," Gray tells *limelight* on the phone from South Africa, where she is rehearsing for her debut at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris. "The noises of the plane, the concept of space, globalism, the land below me [all] made me homesick, Australian and global all at once. It seemed symbolic."

Cosmonaut was written by Tony MacGregor, with music by Melbourne composer David Chesworth and features saxophone, percussion and guitar. It

Gray and Grant Smith as the cosmonaut. *The Age* described it as the festival's "finest" production.

Now, non-Melbournians will have the opportunity to hear the opera when a recording of it made at the ABC Studios at Southbank in Melbourne, in November, is broadcast on Classic FM this month.

Madden Gray plays Angela, an amateur mathematician and suburban recluse, who is deeply affected by the happenings in the world: the fall of communism, riots, violence, natural disasters. "She is obsessed with history and numbers, voices of the dead and the potential of sound waves to bridge impossible distances, both ideologically and literally," says Madden Gray. "She is scientific yet also idealistic in her outlook – she has an almost obstinate romanticism. Her accidental radio contact with a Russian cosmonaut stranded in space gives her a passion and opportunity to really grapple with existence. She can be proactive in her response to the plight of the world – she is determined she can cut a window to the stars and save him ... It is only a matter of finding the right equation."

Madden Gray enjoyed the

of the theatricality, vision and emotion of the staged work to the recording. I love working with David. He allowed all sorts of improvisation as we worked on Angela's experimentation with sound and sound waves."

"I like working with performers who help me complete the work," says Chesworth. "The character of Angela doesn't have a lot of spoken recitative, so I wasn't after a conventional operatic performer. Melissa was able to give me a lot of stage and physical presence.

"She has incredible vocal range. She can give quite a conventional vocal delivery, but then she has this huge repertoire of squeaks, growls and screams. We were able to incorporate these into the soundscape of the work. A lot of it has electronic sounds and that sort of thing. I play with ambiguity, not only of meaning, but also of sound, so in some cases you are not sure what is being produced, whether it's live or electronic. She was able to cross over all these boundaries and move across all these sound worlds in a way that few vocalists can."

This is going to be a big year for Madden Gray. A graduate of the Western Australian Academy

Sydney, London and Amsterdam. She has an Australia Council Dance residency in Paris. She makes her debut this year at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris with Robyn Orlin's company in a solo work directed by Orlin, which uses tango as a starting point. She will also work for the Franklin Furnace Fund For Performance Art in New York in May and then go on to perform a duet to jazz-era songs with modern Chinese dancer Jin Xing in Shanghai. If that's not enough, Madden Gray is creating a piece about the "science" of love for the Time-Based Art Festival in Portland, United States, and will also develop Australian composer Max Lyandvert's music theatre piece *Close Your Little Eyes*, which made its premiere during the 2003 Sydney Festival.

What is the difference between a good and a great performer for Madden Gray? "Passion, charisma as well as craft, a sense of realness and humanity, whatever the context. I learn a lot from every piece I do – there just aren't enough hours in the day, days in the year! There is still so much to explore. I am having an amazing journey."