

THURSDAY'S CHILDREN CHOIR VISITS EAST TIMOR: August 2009
Presentation by Therese Virtue,
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It's now more than three months since I arrived home from Timor Leste. I find it hard to imagine that the time has flown so quickly. Sometimes it's as if the trip to East Timor never happened, and sometimes it's there in my recollection in a way that renders all subsequent experiences a rather dull grey by comparison.

I facilitate a couple of community choirs and have done for many years now. When Thursday's Children celebrated their 10th Birthday, in 2003, they opened an account for an East Timorese project as a marker of the momentous milestone they'd passed. The impulse came out of a conversation with Abel Guterres, an old friend of mine, and the Consul General for the very new nation of Timor Leste. He spoke of his vision of a national music gathering where students from primary schools across the nation brought their own regional music, song and dance. Inspired, the choir decided they could have a tiny part in helping to realise this project.

We began a fundraising program that included benefit concerts, raffles, the choir even raffled themselves once, - available to sing at your chosen event...- and they busked at the Collingwood Children's Farm on Farmers' Market Days. It took us ages, and quite a deal of research, to decide exactly where our money should go, but eventually we made the decision in 2008 and donated \$5000 to the Tekee Media project which has collected and recorded indigenous music from across the tiny island nation. We also gave a gift of \$500 to a recently trained music teacher who was returning to Timor Leste, and we have made purchases such as these Tais which have become the choir's uniform now.

In 2006, the choir made plans and bought tickets, to visit East Timor. By great good fortune, we had at that stage been joined by Jane Crouch whose most recent job for Intrepid Travel had been to establish some tourist routes on the island! You can be lucky! But you can be unlucky too, and what happened next became referred to as "the Crisis" trouble between disaffected military and Government, and the legacy of a brutal 25 year occupation erupted in violence in Dili, the capital. Foreigners were brought home, locals were displaced, there was looting and burning and Thursday's Children cashed in their tickets and went to Inverloch for a weekend of lamentation.

It took us three years to regroup, arrange leave from jobs and family commitments, but in August this year we were on our way! From Darwin, the flight to Dili is a short trip. The plane crosses the island and then sweeps round over the sea to come in to land just outside the capital. The view of East Timor was my first surprise, an endless series of mountain ridges jutting up out of the sea. More surprises when we landed, many of the officials were wearing face masks, they were afraid we would bring in swine flu. A wave of mixed emotions overwhelmed me as we stepped out of the plane and onto Timorese soil.

At last we were here, it had been a goal for so long and now we'd made it, cause enough for tears, but as well, I finally had time, to wonder what on earth I was doing here with this bunch of middle aged white Australians, and a collection of songs from a range of cultures (which we'd chosen really carefully, and worked very hard for this gig) but which, nonetheless, we sang with our Australian accents, and we were a community choir, unauditioned, not perfect.....

What on earth were we doing here, anticipating that people would want to listen to us?

There wasn't much time for contemplation! The indefatigable Jane had developed a tour for us that compared with any rock band! Eleven gigs in ten days, no sympathy for the weary! I neglected to say that flights to East Timor only seem to leave Darwin airport in the small hours, Our first gig that same afternoon was performed to an audience of staff and expatriots at CAVR, the Timorese Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation. Pat Walsh, another old friend from Melbourne has worked at CAVR for the last 10 years. When he saw me he said "Hello Therese what are you doing here?" Encapsulating perfectly what I had been thinking...."I have to ask myself that ,Pat I replied!"

We sang outdoors, under shade, to a small but very appreciative audience. As one member of the choir said, "*we came to rest our songs here*". Our set included *Amen Siakudiumisa*, one of the many beautiful songs from the South African repertoire, given additional meaning for us all forever now, because of that performance. That song had been sung at the investiture of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in Johannesburg, and Desmond Tutu had headed up the world's first Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in South Africa after the abolition of apartheid. It was a perfect start to our tour.

There followed an amazing ten days, every gig was different, every one was extraordinarily memorable. For me, on reflection they fell into two distinct patterns. Most were fairly informal. We sang for and with people who were delighted to see us, who enjoyed the novelty of our songs, who were grateful that we'd come to visit and puncture their isolation. My anxiety about the inappropriateness of our repertoire was dispelled when Christine, who spoke Tetum and has a long history of engagement with East Timor said to me, "they are grateful that we've brought these songs it makes them feel connected with the rest of the world!" I don't think we'd anticipated that.

Many of the songs proved to be exactly the right choice. When I introduced *Tagi Hina*, a song from Samoan big band *Te Vaka*, that is basically a lament by women as their menfolk are taken into slavery, I heard murmurs of assent ripple through the women in the room. When we sang the Tanzanian pop song from the 40's, about a man who can't afford the bride price for his angel, *Malaika*, the audience laughed and nodded, and some of them who remembered it from when Miriam Makeba made it a hit, sang along. That was the song groups asked us to teach them, and then improved on our harmonies, effortlessly.

The other style of gig was rather more challenging and a bit disconcerting. On two occasions, we were presented to large, open air evening gatherings of local townfolk, in Baucau and in Lospalos. Our presence made an opportunity for a community gathering. We sang in company with local performers, and on each occasion when we began our slightly solemn renditions of our unaccompanied foreign songs, the audience began to laugh. We soldiered on, and as we later discussed, people didn't leave, though they did continue to find us disconcertingly amusing! I think that they really wondered what we were up to. No band, not even a guitar, and songs in no languages they'd ever heard before, oh except our token song in Brazilian Portuguese. We were pretty sure with that one that they thought our Australian accents were funny!

We reflected hard on these two performances, the language differences making it impossible really to interpret the cultural differences. I think, and I believe that the choir also recognised, that the responses were interested and curious and therefore amused, not as confronting as we were tempted to interpret them. If I ask myself what are the most abiding memories, then for me one performance blitzes all the others. In the little town of Aileu, a small band played indigenous songs and sang. The youngest members must have only been about ten, and they were great, energetic, capable intense. Also performing with us at that gig was a local

choir, largely women exquisitely clad for the occasion in a formal style using the traditional woven tais.

At the beginning of the evening, we were welcomed into the building by the district Administrator, with him were two women who draped tais over our necks, and formally kissed us. With many speeches, we were welcomed and the first ensemble played. Then we were taken to eat a wonderful feast set out for us all, local traditional food, cakes, and an opportunity to meet and chat with the local people, through translators mainly. Back into the performance space where we sang. Every song generated a response from the audience. Murmurs of recognition, clapping, some joining in. Then more speeches and then a set from the choir from Aileu. About 25 women and 3 men, the group was directed by a male conductor, but it the most exciting thing about their performance was the song they had written themselves, about the role of women in East Timor. The very fact of that song was an exciting indicator of a new recognition of their importance in the larger scheme of the new nation.

There were more speeches, I was getting pretty practised at making them too by this stage, and at this concert I also had the extraordinary pleasure and privilege of teaching the singers one of our songs, and hearing them sing *Malaika*, with additional and improved harmonies, and their beautiful, powerful voices joining ours. Above all though, this gig stands out, for me at least above pretty nearly any one I've ever done, because of the final compliment we received. It's worth remembering that the East Timorese population is severely skewed. 50 percent is under 15, and all the older women colour their hair deep black!

Translations at this concert were done by a brilliant young American nun who laughed as she translated for us: "*Although you are as old as our mothers, and your hair is white, you sing like angels, like 15 year olds!*" And you, the speaker had addressed the local choir, "*sing like 12 year olds!*" Nothing could top that!

There were more gigs, finishing up at the coolest night spot in Dili, a little venue strongly reminiscent of some of the Northcote and Brunswick shop front venues, we sang mostly to expats who shouted for more and told us afterwards that we all looked very tired! The rock band schedule was catching up with us! We come home exultant, and delighted, enormously moved, sorry that the rest of the choir hadn't been able to join us, and hopeful that we might go again. We're raising money and we'll make another donation soon, and we have a collection of our own songs that is full of a new significance for us and wonderful memories. In addition, we have new song that was taught to us there initially by a school group, polished up by our driver Manuel who borrowed a guitar and made us get it right and we sang it at Aileu with the choir!

As choir member John said, "*We didn't go to dig a well!*" We just took our songs and we were astonished and delighted by the way they became our mode of communication, even in circumstances where there was no common language! We were humbled by the generosity, the charm and the grace of the hospitality we received everywhere we went.

**Read more about the group's adventure in *Trad and Now* magazine, October 2009
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