

Morrissey dancing a Latin beat

Mexrrissey takes a British institution and gives his songs a Mexican feel

JANE CORNWELL

It's the Day of the Dead in Mexico, and down in Tobacco Dock, a vast warehouse space in Wapping, East London, they're celebrating. Thousands of hipsters working a look best described as cadaver-in-Victorian-dress — skeleton face paint, neon flower headbands, dusty top hats and tails — are enjoying a weekend fiesta of Latin American-themed food, art and music. The year 2015 was the Year of Mexico in Britain; fittingly, the most starry act on the bill is Mexrrissey: seven musicians from some of Mexico's finest bands reinventing, in Spanish, with Latin arrangements, the songs of particularly British singer Morrissey.

The former Smiths frontman-turned-solo artist has long been a cult obsession south of the border. "Nothing the world holds could match the love waiting for me in Mexico City," wrote Morrissey, now 56, in his 2013 *Autobiography*. Moz-loving Latinos tease their hair into quiffs, have his lyrics tattooed on their arms, and graffiti his image everywhere from Pasadena in Los Angeles to Juarez in Chihuahua. Tribute acts are too many to mention, but Mexrrissey is a cut above. Whatever you do, don't call them a covers band.

"I would hate to do anything cliched and touristy," says band-leader Camilo Lara, 38, a Mexico City-based electronic DJ and producer who co-founded Mexrrissey in late 2014 with multi-instrumentalist Sergio Mendoza of Tex-Mex rockers Calxico. "I guess we started off as a bit of a joke; I'd been asked to remix [Morrissey's song] *Someone Is Squeezing My Skull* and realised there were so many connections between Morrissey and traditional Mexican music.

"We were only going to do one show," he continues, sitting on a couch wearing jeans, leopard print trainers and a T-shirt that reads "Taco is Murder" (a variation on Morrissey's infamous anti-meat eating stance). "But bringing electronic and Latin elements like mariachi, ranchera and cha cha

cha to these songs gave them another perspective. His songs are strong; they stand up to reinterpretation." A grin. "Like the works of Shakespeare."

"Reactions ranged from laughter to jumping to wild dancing to screams and tears," wrote the Observer.com of Mexrrissey's only New York gig in May last year. A recent show in Manchester, Morrissey's birthplace, drew a standing ovation, with a sold-out crowd yelling the lyrics back at Mexrrissey in English.

Lara smiles from underneath his large Amish-style hat. "If you're a Morrissey fan it's like a guessing game," says this former EMI label boss, whose long-standing cutting-edge electronic music project, Mexican Institute of Sound, has involved remixes for the likes of Placebo and the Beastie Boys and seen his music featured on TV shows including *Californication* and *Ugly Betty*. He counts off highlights from Mexrrissey's set list on his fingers.

"*Girlfriend in a Coma* is usually a sad song, but we make it happy; 'Mi novia esta en coma/I know/I know/Es muy serio/cha cha cha,'" he recites. "*Everyday is Like Sunday* is completely a mariachi song; they have the same structure, and the synth line is totally replaceable with a trumpet. We recently did a cumbia version of *Bigmouth Strikes Again* in a stadium in Argentina and everyone went wild. Those first moments of playing a song are always amazing, watching people's faces as they connect and work out what it is. They'll catch on to the choruses and sing along in Spanish, but it's no different to the way Mexicans respond to Morrissey; many don't speak English but they'll still sing the lyrics, the sounds. They just love the way the music makes them feel."

So what is it about the compositions of a sexually ambiguous, dour but flamboyant Englishman (with Irish roots) that chime so strongly with (mainly middle class) Mexicans? Growing up in



Mexrrissey ("I guess we started off as a bit of a joke"), above, with their inspiration, Britain's Morrissey, below

Mexico City in the 80s, the son of human rights activists and intellectuals, Lara's first memory of Morrissey was hearing The Smiths' *The Queen Is Dead* blasting through his elder brother's bedroom door. "We didn't have the NME or Q to tell us who to listen to. We went for bands you could easily hear about. You either liked The Cure or The Smiths. I just fell for Morrissey's voice."

Morrissey's dark humour and heart-on-sleeve confessions dovetail, he says, with genres such as mariachi and ranchera, which tackle similar themes. As does the Mexican psyche. "We're a melodramatic country," says Lara. "We love tension and irony. Morrissey's music is similar to a telenovela (Latin American soap opera); he writes about the underdog, people who never win. Mexicans are like that. We've never won a World Cup. In competitions we're always coming third or fourth."

The irony inherent in stereo-

typical ultra-macho Latin men singing along, tearing at their chests and weeping over beautiful songs such as *The Boy With the Thorn In His Side* (or if you like, *El Chico de L'Espina Clavada*) is lost on Lara either. He mentions



the Mexican superstar Juan Gabriel, the country's very own Elton John: "It's funny that one of our most important icons is also someone who plays with his sexuality."

Arranging Morrissey's music wasn't an easy task. Sergio Mendoza, who isn't here today, has previously said that melodies had to be sacrificed and several meanings left out.

"Morrissey has a thing about fitting a lot of words into a small space," says Lara.

"In Spanish we use more words than English so that was OK. But translating stuff into Mexican slang was problematic." Not always: the "bomb" in Ask became "labamba". But how to convey a lyric about Reggie Kray, the East End gangster name-checked in *Last of the Famous International Playboys*? Few in Mexico knew of him. "We used the name of a famous Mexican drug cartel boss, Rafael Caro Quintero, instead," says Lara happily.

Finally, what of the man him-

self? Has Morrissey ever witnessed the force that is Mexrrissey? Has Lara ever shaken the man's hand?

"I don't think he's seen us," he says. "But he's been very supportive, writing about us on his website, giving us permission to record Spanish versions of the songs for our album coming out in the new year. I like to think he's flattered and interested in what we are doing."

"I nearly met him once. I was in LA doing another project and he was there at the same time; someone said they could get me a meeting. His manager sent me a long questionnaire with about 20 questions covering what the meeting was about, topics I couldn't mention. I filled in three pages," he says, "then I got a message saying, 'Morrissey is very busy and won't be able to squeeze you in.'"

"I was glad, in a way. There's that thing about never meeting your idols." Lara pauses, smiles. "But of course, if he ever wanted to appear on the show, he'd be very welcome."



FIONA MORRISON

Jukuja Dolly Snell receiving her national art award

Loved storyteller's art was 'just filled with joy'

AMOS AIKMAN
NORTHERN CORRESPONDENT

Octogenarian and spindly as a desert oak, she was nonetheless at the peak of her career.

Arriving in Darwin to collect the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award last year, Jukuja Dolly Snell insisted on buying a new outfit first.

Socks may have hung loose around her ankles and weak legs confined her to a wheelchair, but she looked resplendent in a perfect *Driving Miss Daisy* hat, thinking always about the tradition and culture she represented.

Jukuja died peacefully at an aged care facility in the West Australian town of Fitzroy Crossing on December 30.

Dorothy Snell, Jukuja's daughter, recalls when her mother and father (the famous artist and lawman Nyiripirri Spider Snell) used to gather meat like wildcat and sand goanna.

"She used to take me to get pujuul, all the sand goanna; you have to dig down, down, down to get pujuul," Dorothy Snell says. "They used to leave us by the river (at Kurungal or Christmas Creek) and we would get the fire ready. These two would come back with all the food and they would cook it before we took it back to camp."

"I miss her, but her spirit always comes here to the house, not bringing humbug or trouble for us, just quietly. We relax to her and we just go to sleep."

Japeth Rangie, Jukuja's grandson, says his grandmother used to cry when she saw him: "This is how much she missed me. I felt sad and loved. I used to look back to her and always stayed with her for holidays."

Born in about 1933 at a remote waterhole known as Kurtal in the Great Sandy Desert, Jukuja started painting late in life in the mid-1980s. A founding member of both organisations, from 1991 she painted at Karrayili Adult Education Centre and Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency in Fitzroy Crossing.

Jukuja was among a group of Great Sandy Desert artists responsible for the production of the iconic *Ngurrra II* native title canvas in 1997. But her first show was not until 2014, at Outstation Gallery in Darwin.

"There was this amazing thing about her, about this woman from the depths of the desert who was painting in such an extraordinary, contemporary way," Outstation's director Matt Ward remembers.

"Her paintings were just filled with joy."

Jukuja's work is held in public and private collections including the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of NSW and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

Together with her husband, she maintained active involvement in ceremonies emanating from her birthplace at Kurtal.

The pair starred alongside Tom Lawford in the recently released film *Putupirri and the Rainmakers*, about Lawford's journey to escape a troubled urban life and reconnect with his culture.

"She was happy, happy for everything: for talking, telling stories, funny jokes and singing," says Japeth's sister Rosetta Rangie. "She made us laugh. She liked talking in language, in Walmajarri and Wangkatjunga. She had too many languages: Jaru, Nardi, Kukuja, too many."

Towards the end of her life she began to fear for the continuation of her culture, lamenting in *Putupirri* the film: "Old people finished ... Old people are going to pass away. Whole lot."

A close friend of many years thinks differently. "Her singing was redolent of her passion for Kurtal, with her voice audible above all others," the friend says. "She sang as her grandsons danced, just as she and Spider had taught them."

"They will continue to dance with great reverence and skill to the memory of her voice, ever encouraging and vital."

Worlds collide and wilderness rules in revival of a genuine classic

THEATRE
The Golden Age
By Louis Nowra. Sydney
Theatre Company,
Wharf 1. January 19

JOHN McCALLUM

"Nowt more outcastin'" — says Ayre in this splendidly huge, almost operatic, play. No more exile. It is hard, in Louis Nowra's consummate piece of storytelling, to say exactly who is outcast and who belongs, but in the theatre we

are swept away by the scale of the narrative and by the interplay between the lives of individuals and the times in which they live. This is an Australian classic.

The play was first produced in 1985 but none of the issues it raises have gone away. It is a love story, an epic about war and a powerful allegory of the settlement of Australia. It poses challenging questions about the interactions between "civilisation" and the "natural" world.

Two young men — friends but from different classes — visit the

stately home of one of them in Hobart and go hiking in the wilderness. There they encounter a degraded group of white people who have been isolated in the bush for 80 years and have developed their own culture, a mishmash of convict memories, resonances of the horrors of Georgian England from which the convicts were exiled and smatterings of a theatrical culture, because one of the tribe's founders was an old actor.

At Ayre's request ("Nowt more outcastin'") they bring the tribe back to "civilisation" in Hobart, on

the brink of the World War II, where the group is interned in an asylum because the government believes their decayed state will fuel support for Nazi ideology. What happens there is the subject of the second half of the play.

There are no easy answers to the questions about exile and belonging. The Europeans are out of place in the wilds of Tasmania, the horrors of the war are out of place in their classical world, the tribe is out of place in the New Norfolk asylum. The scientific devotion of one of the characters

(Dr Archer, played superbly by Robert Menzies) becomes obsessive as he studies them. Ayre, the dignified queen of her tribe, becomes equally obsessive trying to hold her people together and ensure the survival of their culture. Nowra has invented a language for the group, which Sarah Peirse, in a wonderful performance, speaks like a native.

The love story is between Francis, the working-class young man, and Betsheb, the young woman of the tribe. They are played with a brilliant tough energy and tender-

ness by Brendon McClelland and Rariwuy Hick. The casting in Kip Williams's obviously loving production — well designed by David Fleischer, Damien Cooper and Max Lyandvert — is perhaps colour-blind, perhaps colour-significant. Even in the casting everyone seems a bit out of place.

The moving ending is marvelously ambivalent.

Tickets: \$75-\$94. Bookings: (02) 9250 1777 or online. Duration: 3 hrs, including interval. Until February 20.



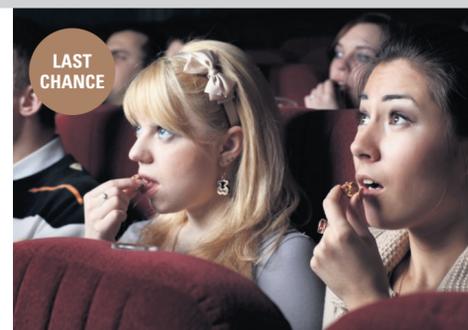
Rariwuy Hick (Betsheb) and Brandon McClelland (Francis)

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