

Actress Sigrid Thornton delivers her reading from Homer's *Odyssey*. PHOTO: VICKI KYRITSIS

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What an amazing time we have had in Melbourne.

A few weeks ago, the University of Melbourne staged its 'Classical Civilization' quiz as part of its innovative Being Human Festival, a celebration of the ancient origins of the study of the humanities.

And last weekend saw the first complete performance of Homer's epic poem – *The Odyssey*.

This performance of Homer was a real treat for all lovers of Classical civilisation.

I've read Homer in translation many times – both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – and marveled at the power of the words and complexity of emotion and feeling contained in both these universal stories.

Yet, I have never before experienced them as they were meant to be experienced – read aloud and in the open.

A big thank you to Melbourne's Stork Theatre for putting on this public reading event, continuing their efforts in bringing great works of literature to audiences since 1983 – supported by Melbourne's Ithacan Philanthropic Society and many other individual lovers of Classical performance.

It was a beautiful warm summer's day in Melbourne's MPavillion across the road from the National Gallery of Victoria. And as the rosy fingers of morning spread across the Queen Victoria Gardens so began the reading of Homers epic tale of wandering and homecoming.

The readers stood in the lovely new performance space, surrounded by the lush trees of the gardens, with the sun's rays stream-

ing through the leaves – and with an imperceptibly replenishing crowd of perhaps two hundred or more.

The readings brought together people of all ages, captivated by this unique performance. I even spied national treasure Barry Jones and present day muse Dave Graney in the attentive audience, highlighting the relevance of Homer across the generations.

Lying beneath the shade of the trees, with the moving words – heavy with meaning – of the various readers floating through the space, was a truly magical experience. The readings encompassed the whole *Odyssey*, all twenty-four books, from the new translation by Professor Emily Watson, a world premiere event. The readers included Magda Szubanski, Max Gillies, Jack Charles, Denis Moore, Neil Pigot, Peter Craven, Caroline Lee, Kate Kendell, Rod Mullinar

and Sigrid Thornton – as well as our own Dimitris Michalopoulos, the Consul General of the Hellenic Republic – and many more.

My fellow Argonaut, my brother Michael, also a Classics and Homer lover, was taken by the theatrical presentation of Denis Moore who made the ancient tale come alive, transporting listeners to a time and place long lost in the mists of time.

Neil Pigot encapsulated both the old and the new and brought forth much mirth by cunningly weaving his very Melbourne need for coffee into Homer's prose.

I myself was particularly taken by the reading by Sigrid Thornton. How appropriate that the actor from Sea Change was reading the story of another famous wanderer.

The words took me back to the day a few years ago when I stood gazing at Ithaca from across the sea. Hearing Homer being read aloud, ef-

fectively in an amphitheatre, brought to mind the thought that this is how these epics should be experienced, with great readers, enthralling their listeners.

And fortunately, I was able to complete the experience with some fine wine and figs, as many would have done a millennium ago.

A few weeks previously, I was fortunate to attend the Classical Civilisation quiz at the University of Melbourne. It is many years since I studied the topic at Monash University, reading the history and literature of Classical Greece and Rome, having already studied Ancient History at Prahran High School.

Over 100 people attended the quiz, which was not so much a competition, as providing an opportunity to revisit previous formal studies or informal readings as well as to learn more about Classical heritage in a fun setting. Questions were asked on

topics ranging from Bronze Age Greece, through Alexander and the Hellenistic era, the Roman Republic and Empire, covering literature and history.

It was not without humour, with a series of questions drawn from Monty Python's *Life of Brian* as well as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Who can forget the list of what have the Romans ever done for us or the scene where the Roman legionnaire insists on correcting the Latin graffiti on the walls of Jerusalem? Hilarious stuff.

One of the most unexpected questions was what was the name of the heavy metal band who wrote songs on the theme of Alexander the Great? The answer is Iron Maiden. And I have since discovered that this has actually been the subject of serious academic study. You learn something every day.

While our team put in a creditable performance, it

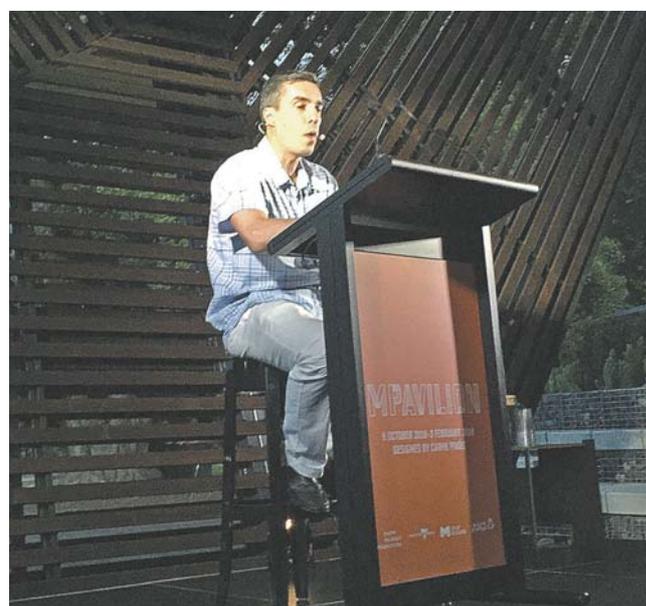
was our team name that won us an award – 'Jason and the Lagernauts, we drink Golden ale and Fleece the opposition' – the combined creation of team members Alex Dobes and my brother Michael – our irreverent allusion to the famed Hellenic captain and his sailors who crossed the Aegean to Lemnos on their way to Colchis in search of that fleece.

I can highly recommend all interested to participate in future quizzes, hopefully an annual event.

For me both these events taken together were a reminder of the inestimable debt we owe to our Classical forebears, to their ingenuity and invention, to their creative writing capturing the conflicting emotions and experiences of life, all sowing the seeds from which so much of modern civilization has grown.

I congratulate the organisers and performers of both of these events. Wouldn't it be great if these were part of an annual calendar of Classical themed events, combining exhibitions, celebrations of classical cuisine and performances, bringing together our local thriving Greek and Italian communities, our great universities, libraries and museums – not to say performers and chefs. Surely such a festival is not beyond Australia's premier Hellenic city.

Jim Claven is a historian, freelance writer and Secretary of the Lemnos Gallipoli Commemorative Committee. For more about the Stork Theatre, including its performances and their Homer Literary Tour: Following in the Footsteps of Odysseus go to their website - <http://www.storktheatre.com.au/> Images



Melbourne writer Peter Craven delivers his reading. PHOTO: JIM CLAVEN



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