

1001 tales from grief's lonely road

The legendary Persian queen Scheherazade is an artist's inspiration, writes **Alexa Moses**.

THERE are many ways to mourn the dead. Until the 17th century, French queens wrapped themselves in *deuil blanc*, or "white mourning" clothes. Jewish family members sit *shiv'ah* for a week. Hindus compress their grief into 13 days to honour departed souls.

For the Sydney performance artist Barbara Campbell, mourning her husband has become a ritual artwork she's measuring over 1001 consecutive nights. Last month she hit the midpoint of her ambitious project, which she began on June 21 last year.

"For a long time I didn't think it was worth living, but I knew I had to," Campbell says. "This project gets me up in the morning and puts me to bed at night."

The *1001 nights* project started in 2002. In late March that year, Campbell's husband, the sculptor Neil Roberts, left their Queanbeyan studio on his customary morning walk. When their kelpie, Siddha, ran onto the railway track, Roberts went to rescue the dog and both were struck by a train.

"I'd seen him at breakfast," Campbell says. "He'd gone away, I came back at 5 o'clock and he wasn't there. I knew he was off on errands and I thought, 'Any minute now he'll finish the errands and come home.'"

But he didn't. Campbell found herself a widow "needing a survival strategy". The artist, who has props from her performances displayed at the National Gallery of Australia and New York's Museum of Modern Art, dredged up an idea she'd been toying with about the character Scheherazade. She was the virgin bride of the bloodthirsty King Shahryar, who killed his wives every morning as vengeance for his first wife's infidelity.

As a survival plan, Scheherazade told engrossing stories night after night and the king let her live.

Like Scheherazade, Campbell decided to use narration to sustain herself day after day.

Each morning, Campbell reads the newspapers and chooses a quote from an article about the Middle

East. She turns the quote into a watercolour sketch that she posts online. By 3pm, one of a group of 60 writers responds with a piece of text of up to 1001 words, which Campbell turns into a performance work streamed live on her website at sunset. Each performance is a one-time-only event and is not recorded.

"I want those performances to disappear," she says. "It's a challenge to the audience to be present at the time I'm performing."

The next morning she wakes up and begins the cycle again.

Campbell also carries a physical reminder of her grief. She has 1001 sequentially numbered silver studs for her tongue piercing. She changes the studs daily so that the numbers are a count of the performances, which each begin with her displaying her tongue and the numbered stud for the camera.

The artist says she's nervous about what she'll do on night 1002, on March 18, 2008. Until then, she's picking her own unusual path through grief.

"I do feel privileged that I have the ability to create a way through something," Campbell says. "I don't have to rely on nothing at all, or other methods like drugs or alcohol. I don't think it's a therapy everyone could use, but I couldn't have thought of a better way to take care of myself."

1001.net.au/main/index.shtml



Privileged ...
Barbara Campbell.

Photo:
Quentin Jones