

REVIEWS OF ORFEUS AT THE SA NATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL JULY 2007

ORFEUS, by Brett Bailey, was first previewed at the Spier Arts Summer Season (Cape Town), in 2006, and was completely rewritten and reworked for the South African National Arts Festival in 2007.

Below are 4 press reviews from that festival:

CUE review by Anton Kruger

Orfeus - journey into Hell

BRETT Bailey's *Orfeus* left me feeling drained. I was completely transported, swept away, overcome. When we arrived at the first camp, a huddled group of 50 frozen people, the circle we sat around seemed small. Everything was in miniature: a diminutive statue of Orpheus was handled by a sangoma; the changing seasons became transformations of dried plants in pots. But as the gorgeous, red-eyed narrator began to weave the lyric of the grand romance between Orpheus and Eurydice, as she whispered her tale of the beginnings of music, slowly the whole wide world surrounding us was drawn into the circle – the rock face of the quarry behind, the sky, the stars.

After the consummation of their love, after Eurydice has been swept away, we follow a new narrator into Hades, the underworld. This consists of four installations; incarnations of a hell one realises one has long been harbouring in one's psyche – the smell of tyres burning; chained up children in a sweat-shop concentration camp making sports shoes; an old white man with Alzheimer's who has forgotten that he's a man. These are scenes of desolation and despair fusing the many living hells of our world with primal imagery; the suffering of the world above as below. There is also humour amidst this horror, and the lord of the underworld is a colonialist in his Safari hat, surrounded by used boxes of Aid to Africa, tapping away on his Mac.

In 2003, in an interview with Rolf Solberg, Bailey said that his works tend to be: "about cultural collisions between the west and Africa, spiritual collisions" and that his themes are "about dreams, about mixing dreams with the supernatural and the natural world ... things that invade from that side, and people that move between the two realms" (*South African Theatre in the Melting Pot: 284*).

In this astonishing rendition of the birth of tragedy, an open secret is breached. This is a secret in which we are complicit, a furtive knowledge of the horror we hide from ourselves and each other, the story of the suffering of the world.

As our narrator warns us as at the start – "This is a story about hidden things ... silent things ... things that bleed in the dust." What is perhaps most chilling of all, is the strange beauty revealed within that suffering.

BUSINESSDAY

Open-air Orfeus is near flawless

CARRIED by the human imagination for over 3000 years,” writes Brett Bailey in his author-director notes for Third World Bunfight’s production of Orfeus at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, the myth of Orpheus has become “as smooth as a river pebble”. What he presumably means is that — while beautiful, even perfect, in its simplicity — it is compact of meaning, a complex story ground down to an archetypal essence.

Orpheus is the original poet figure: a musician whose songs charmed the natural world and moved gods and mortals alike to lyrical heights. He ventured into the Underworld to retrieve his wife, Eurydice, when she died from a snakebite; after meeting the souls of some of those suffering eternal punishment in the afterlife, he was granted permission by Hades, king of the Underworld, to take Eurydice back to Earth. But he faltered at the last moment, forgetting Hades’ injunction not to look behind him, and Eurydice was lost to him forever.

In another episode of classical mythology, he was torn limb from limb by the frenzied worshippers of Bacchus (god of wine), an image that has long stood for the suffering that artists endure at the hands of society — and, in countries such as SA, could also represent the dire state of arts funding.

The myth is undoubtedly a powerful one, and Bailey’s rendering of it is spectacularly evocative. A different version of Orfeus premiered at Spier last year, but in its current location (an abandoned quarry on the outskirts of Grahamstown) it really is a site-specific performance to beat all site-specific performances.

The audience is led by storyteller Jane Rademeyer through a few hundred metres of veld to a desolate spot. Buffeted by the elements, we sit around a blazing fire, watching Andile Bonde perform the role of ritual guide while Rademeyer introduces the narrative in haunting cadences.

Bailey has built the production around the musical talents of Bebe Lueki, who composed the songs in Orfeus and who, as Orpheus, communicates only through song.

After Eurydice (Nondumiso Zweni) has died, the audience is invited to follow the impish Abey Xakwe, playing the “Frog”, or guide, to the Underworld. We pass through a barricade of car tyres and the crosses of a crumbling cemetery, entering the kingdom of Hades through a cupboard curtained by white uniforms on coat hangers.

The torments of Prometheus, Tantalus and Sisyphus are devastatingly transmuted into a contemporary idiom. There is the Broken Man, stretched on a rack, bound by wires, being tortured with bolts of electricity; clever lighting casts the enormous shadow of his crucified form onto a nearby rockface.

There is the Forgotten Man — both forgotten by others and having forgotten his own identity — standing near-naked in a pool of water (and, given the icy wind leaving even warmly clad audience members shivering, this must count as one of the bravest performances at the festival).

There are the Shoemakers, young children chained together in a sweatshop, imprisoned behind barbed wire while a speaker overhead screams out fascist speeches.

As Xakwe encourages the audience to “Shine your torches on them!”, we are drawn into an uncomfortable voyeur-like complicity (a discomfort heightened by the knowledge that these children come from the local township, where their living conditions are probably not much better).

Finally, at the centre of Hades, we meet the King of the Underworld — a rascally cameo by Nicholas Ellenbogen — who parades his bevy of female Merchandise before sending the doomed couple on their way.

Bailey and his Third World Bunfight team have, of course, already established a reputation for their “Africanised” versions of western myths and works of literature; this approach is open to criticism because it expounds an essentialist view of Africa as a primal place where the supernatural (superstitious?) elements of ancient Greece or pre-modern Europe, long since lost to the secular west, remain.

Nevertheless, critics will be hard-pressed to find fault with *Orfeus*. It is truly invigorating theatre, conceptually original and well executed. Strong performances match the incomparable open-air setting, while Lueki’s music is combined with well-crafted text to produce an unsettling atmosphere for a play that is, at once, a cry of despair and an affirmation of faith.

MAIL & GUARDIAN review by Brent Meersman

Ritual theatre alive in Brett Bailey's *Orfeus*

Director Brett Bailey’s *Orfeus* is in many ways a departure from previous works he has staged at the Festival, the ‘plays of miracle and wonder’ such as *IPI ZOMBI?* and *The Prophet*.

Bailey is familiar to festival audiences for incorporating ceremony and sacrament within his productions. These works were aggressive – about fire, blood and bone. Bailey broke down our defences with drums, screams, knives and broken glass. Possessed, we as audience, joined in with his Bacchae. One left his theatre charged up by the adrenalin of the experience, renewed through catharsis, liberated by the irrational. And although his work has always been ground breaking, the plays were classic in structure with a dramatic plot that builds towards an apocalyptic climax.

In *Orfeus*, Bailey searches out softer tissue, our vulnerabilities, the marrow in our bones, the chasms in our souls. He uses not our fears but our sympathies for the blind, the forgotten, the broken and the voiceless in order to torture us.

Ritual of Theatre

Bailey’s success is his ability to make even the most jaundiced of theatre-goers reaffirm their belief in the ancient ritual of theatre. Like his *medEia*, this is a site-specific work. The audience, made to walk in silence for at least ten-minutes before the production, find themselves given over to the realm of the imagination.

Staged in an old quarry, we engage with nature and the beauty of the landscape – the craggy face of the surrounding cliffs, the trees outlined against the rock look like fossil ferns, and two giant eagle owls – perfectly choreographed – swoop over us,

one with a dead mouse hanging from its beak.

Bailey has reworked his original production staged at Spier in the Western Cape last year. He has stripped away the speaking parts and the dramatic monologues. Instead, Jane Rademeyer reads us the story from a music stand. Seated in a ritual circle, surrounding a fire, it is remarkable how much more effective this is than character acting. We respond directly to the myth and the archetype of the story. I have never experienced story telling as successful as this. The words act like subtitles as we watch the story played out before us.

Bailey has universalised his themes this time. There are references to Africa, but this is far away from an African version of the myth. There is no tin-pot African dictator king as in the Spier version.

Orfeus (Bebe Lueki), with gold paint streaking his face, dressed in white broderie anglais, has a messianic quality. He plays the guitar softly, melodic, singing gently in Lingala. An audience member starts to twist and turn, apparently possessed. She emerges as Eurydice, stripping of her clothes until she too is in pure white. The music builds, but not the mad drumming of Bailey's iMUMBO JUMBO, this is song-full, harmonious, yet as stirring.

Sensual delight

Bailey's other achievement is the succession of different sensory textures we experience. There are scents and smells of herbs, a mix of natural and stage lighting, sounds of real birds and recorded birdsongs. We trample in mud; we climb over stones. Everything we experience has been textured, the landscape reworked.

We are lead on a journey through Hades. Bailey has created several installations to represent hell. James Webb's hidden soundscapes, hum and drone. At the gates to the underworld, we are met by a grotesque stench of actual rotting flesh, and huge bones, femurs, litter the ground. Black smoke from burning tyres fills the air.

The installations are deeply upsetting. *The Forgotten Man* (John Cartwright), emaciated, dressed in a loincloth, stands in an icy cold pool of water amongst giant boulders, empty tins floating around him. A barbed wire encampment, a sort of laogai, with an electric fence, buzzing threateningly. Small children are seated, chains around their necks, fastened to a metal pole supporting a loudspeaker blaring in constant repetition, a few distorted phrases from one of his Hitler's rabid speeches. The children are sewing soles on a pile of cheap shoes.

Orfeus appears each time, and sings his haunting, plaintive refrain, "Eurydice! Eurydice....!" A refrain that perseverates in our thoughts long after the play is finished.

The King of the Underworld (played by Nicholas Ellenbogen) wearing a pith helmet, and tapping away on a laptop, is the image of the calculating indifference and greed. Around him is the detritus of corruption in the developing world – used syringes litter the floor, behind him boxes of United Nations food aid and four masked sex slaves, like blow up dolls, tied to chairs. He allows Orfeus to take Eurydice back to earthly paradise.

We return to the storytelling circle with Orfeus. But Eurydice has been lost, for Orfeus looked back. The sense of loss is so strong that numerous members of the audience are in tears at this point. As Rademeyer tells us, "This is a story of falling, down, down, down."

This time we leave the 'theatre' our senses heightened and reinvigorated, listening to the night-time sounds of the fields, taking in the stars with renewed enthusiasm. Something inside us has been unlocked.

THE STAR review by Adrienne Sichel

Falling Hard for Orfeus

'Mind the cliff,' warned our guide, The Frog, as we teetered on a rocky outcrop viewing The Forgotten Man trapped in time in a rocky pool of icy water doubling as the invisible pool of tears.

Third World Bunfight's (TWB) sensory site-specific safaris may be well stage-managed, but director Brett Bailey demands that his audiences make the physical effort as his eclectic vistas push the viewers over precipices of perception.

The Grahamstown version of Bailey's Orfeus, which was totally sold out by the time it began its seven performances on the Main festival on Monday night, is set in a granite quarry off the Rhodes University campus.

This location, starker and more contained than the Spier wine estate where this production first surfaced last year, is the perfect setting for Bailey's conception of the Greek myth to embrace "the lost souls on the continent".

The flotsam and jetsam of histories (world, Africa and theatre) collude in a series of carefully manicured scenes. Long animal bones (looking human) scattered on the burnt ground we walk on, past towers of skin-singeing flames emitted by piles of burning tyres, crunch up images of genocide.

In Orfeus, à la Grahamstown, TWB's anarchic energy is channelled into a more refined calculated approach in an intrusive landscape. A different time, a different space, an altered cast. The actor storytellers, steeped in ritual and deeply focused movement, re-enact a timeless tale of human frailty. Or, as the new narrator Jane Rademeyer puts it: this is a story of falling in love, falling in tune, falling apart and falling down.

When Orfeus, Congolese actor-musician Bebe Lueki, performs, he truly does sing, "the songs of our ancient hearts". The performances cannot be separated from the design. Who but Brett Bailey could meld tinsel and animal skulls together as in the scene where the white capitalist devil, surrounded by the detritus of technology, rules deafened prostitutes, including Eurydice (Nondumiso Zweni). Seed pods are transformed into clitorises.

Since making his mark at this festival with Ipi Zombi, Bailey has garnered a faithful local following which, because of the attendance of many American theatre academics and students (on their way to a theatre conference in Stellenbosch), is about to be extended. Considerably.