

**Bailey rocks Grahamstown divide  
Robyn Sassen – CUE ON LINE**

Driving through the streets of Grahamstown, after seeing *Blood Diamonds*, you will see the people from your car: the people down the length of High Street, packing up their unsold goods, preparing themselves for the night, plastic bags sheltering them from the elements, uncertainty colouring what tomorrow might bring, a fire punctuating the evening.

Of course these are real people, not that different from those in the tableaux that inform Brett Bailey's newest work.

The difference ostensibly lies in their lack of direct exploitation, but could it really be?

Blood Diamonds is a piece about manipulation and exploitation.

It uses manipulation and exploitation as its primary tools.

Like Bailey's earlier work in this city, this is a site-specific installation, and rests contextually on the history of the city, and the massive divide and bloody fault-lines which separate the obscenely wealthy from the obscenely poor, in this country in general, but Grahamstown in particular.

More than this, Blood Diamonds operates like a prism: its central narrative core is conceptually simple; it is articulated in a way that brings back these truisms to you with a freshness that redefines them and forces you to navigate dark places, not knowing what comes next.

**Manipulation game**

As you enter the station, the tone is cast. This beautiful, foreboding structure, built in the 1870s with its high ceilings and Victorian detail, remains an utterly potent choice of venue. It's about arriving and departing, and knowing that once you have arrived, you will definitely depart, but you cannot be sure exactly when or why. You get led by the hand by a small child, whose shivering you can feel through your palm, and there are moments where you feel that he and you are the only people in existence. And of course, as is Bailey's wont, it's also a work about power; while the cast of 70 is clearly manipulated, so are you, in the audience. You're manipulated to sit in the waiting room of the train-station, waiting for your number to be called.

You're manipulated into weeping at tableaux which contain live people referred to as part of "found objects" – a jibe at conventions of contemporary art making; you're manipulated into stumbling through a cemetery, unable to negotiate with the seemingly burnt or desecrated

tombstones because you're focused on remaining upright and following the gentle commands of the hand of a young child.

### **Shifts equilibrium**

We're given to understand that these people draw from the homeless of the city, but there is nothing to prove the validity of this, or to contradict it. There is no verbal communication in the piece. In fact, there are several imprecations to be silent, and once the ordeal of being in the work is set in motion, you are plunged into voluntary silence because your balance and confidence feel threatened.

European opera and urban street songs filter and flow through the work, some of it from the people in the tableaux; Sibongile Khumalo's voice radiates subliminally through the work. At its closure, you find yourself back in the security of the festival, the electric lights of the city on the other side of the cemetery comfortingly lighting your car and the rest of the world. But it doesn't end there. Like no other this year, this brilliant piece forges a shift in your emotional equilibrium and touches your understanding of others and of the social flaws in a Festival of this nature.

## **Bailey explores Grahamstown 'fault line'** **Jessica Blase from CUE ON LINE**

*Terminal/Blood Diamonds*, Brett Bailey's new, haunting attempt to shed light on the elephant in the corner of our national psyche was exhibited at this year's National Art's Festival. It explores the racial divide in Grahamstown. The glaring segregation that seems to be deemed more acceptable because it's English speaking white people that are living above the breadline, the fine-dining upper crust.

This exhibition can easily be used, and was probably meant to be used, as a metaphor for the festival. Middle class whities swarm the streets willing to pay top dollar to be entertained. Students call mommy, crying for more cash, on the second day of festival. The air in one part of Grahamstown is thick with this sort of privilege while the rest of the town tries to see how they can exploit the fest to put food on their table.

You enter the abandoned Grahamstown train station Terminal, get given a playing card, and are told to wait. "No talking", the woman handing out the cards barks. When your number and suit are called out, you are ushered from the waiting room to the unknown. Once on the platform, a black child comes and takes your hand. You walk around the platform observing the installations.

Hmmm. Installations. Do you still call them that when they are real people? Fruit sellers in cages. Domestic workers with stockings over their heads rendering them faceless. People rummaging through a pile of trash in the hopes of finding something worth eating or selling.

We are lead into a graveyard. This is for some reason not nearly as haunting as the abandoned train terminal with its apartheid era signs still fastened to the walls. All the while you're not allowed to talk. My child looks scandalised when he sneezes and I say, "Bless you". When we get to the end my child bids farewell in Xhosa and leaves. A lump begins to rise in my throat and I'm scarily close to tears. My white guilt suddenly at the front of my mind and pounding in my heart.

Why is the world so fucked up? And why, when there are so many people trying to make it better, does it feel like it's getting worse. After the exhibition, Grahamstown is a different, less friendly place. You resent being able to afford cappuccinos. The shows feel like frivolous self indulgence. As a member of the privileged society, festival time is thoroughly enjoyable. On the other hand the National Arts Festival is necessary. Careers are made here. People are given opportunities that they would never otherwise have.

It's such good art because it causes you to interrogate the rest of the festival and question the validity and the import of the cultural expression. Does our art address our problems or is it just frivolity in the face of oppression? And while you're rushing from show to gig to show, frustrated that you don't have time to eat, Bailey's exhibition functions as a voice for the voiceless. A stark reminder that just around the corner there are people who don't have food to eat.

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As the wind whips through the long tunnel, you can almost hear the whistle of a train long past. Barbed wire lies bundled on the platform and groupings of crushed glass shimmer in the morning rays. The space is quiet, somewhat eerie in its desertion. It speaks of a loss, a divide, of an often forgotten colonial past. Although it has been closed for only a few months, Grahamstown Station feels as if it has been abandoned for years. This evocative setting is the venue for Brett Bailey's new production, *Blood Diamonds*.

The performance involves three installations, requiring the viewer to walk for 15 to 20 minutes during the show. It is a set of images which, he says, "speak for themselves" about the divide between the Grahamstown rich and poor, and the history of this small town.

### **A local ensemble**

The large cast of 70 all hail from Grahamstown: Bailey says he found his cast members "off the streets" and in local schools.

"What I am doing this year is new and different. But this is what is great about the Festival, you are free to experiment," says Bailey, rolling and quickly lighting his second cigarette.

“The smell doesn’t bother you, I hope?” he asks. “Not at all,” I say, as the vanilla aromas seem to calm the mood.

Everything about Bailey – his thoughts, his movements, his work – seems intense. He describes the performance as linked to a trend in the international market, known as promenade theatre, where the audience is asked to move from place to place within the performance.

Bailey’s plays, often seen as provocative by the media and viewers, are exactly how he likes them to be.

“I aim to evoke a response,” he says, smirking.

What should audience expect, or not expect, from *Blood Diamonds*? I do not know if I will be granted an answer. After all, how do you begin to describe what someone should expect from a Brett Bailey production?

Yet, after a slight pause, and a long drag on his rolled cigarette, he answers with a distant look in his eye: “Expect to journey into the dark parts of our society.”

Somehow I think this isn’t going to be just any journey, but rather a captivating, and emotional whirlwind.