

Brett Bailey Interview – MACBETH – March 2014

You have already staged Macbeth several times. What prompted this new version?

Previously I'd worked with a local opera company, which was quite conservative and commercially orientated. There were restrictions on what I could do. I wanted to do MACBETH in my own way. And I wanted to make the piece smaller – as you know, the music has been adapted – to make a small, compact ensemble opera, so that I wouldn't have to work with a heavy company and a huge orchestra. Stephanie Carp, Director of the Vienna Festival, was very keen to present it and motivated me to go for it for 2014.

How did you work with the original material? Did you cut out anything?

Yes, but each time I have worked on this opera I have made cuts. I've produced the opera twice before, but with a large orchestra. We made it with about 45 musicians last time, and now it's down to 12 musicians. I've chopped out all areas that I felt were unnecessary. I also moved some of the scenes about. For instance, at the beginning of Act III, there is the chorus of refugees, "Patria Oppressa". I've created this device in which a group of refugees tells the story of MACBETH, and so I've used this "Patria Oppressa" chorus as a framing device. It's taken out of Act III and it now opens and closes the opera. It also comes up in various permutations, leaking between the scenes throughout the opera.

Can you tell us a bit more on this device?

A group of refugee performers has fled the conflict in the villages of the North Kivu Province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They settle in the regional capital, Goma. There are tens of thousands of refugees in camps here, most of them from the surrounding countryside and villages. So the group of performers takes up residence in the town hall in Goma and finds a trunk of props and costumes, librettos, old recordings of Macbeth... Sifting through this material, they realize it has coincidences with their own history. They use the material to tell their own story, the situation in their own country.

What are these correspondences?

In both MACBETH and the DRC, we have a country in a state of warfare. Militia leaders arise, battle for control, turn upon each other, and are vanquished. In Shakespeare's drama we see a militia leader who – together with his wife – is consumed by ambition. In a fit of weakness he kills his king and seizes power. When his rule becomes threatened he turns to absolute violence.

The Congo conflict is the playfield of so many different military groups, armies and factions. Many of them have come originally from – or are sponsored by – the neighbouring states of Rwanda and Uganda. Others have arisen locally. And of course the Congolese National Defence Force is also up to its hilt in plunder and violence. Factions continually realign and turn upon one another, leaders are killed, some end up in the International Criminal Court in The Hague...

In MACBETH, a coven of witches further destabilizes the situation. You'll remember that the two generals, Macbeth and Banquo, are returning from battle when they meet the witches, who sow the seeds of corruption in Macbeth's mind.

I was intrigued with where those witches come from, who are they, what is their agenda...? Within the Congo conflict, who are those who have kept the fires of war smouldering? I fixed my gaze on the multinational corporations who vie for access to the resources in the Congo, and who will do anything to get their hands on them. The Eastern part of the Congo is one of the richest mineral regions in the world. Within the conflict situation here, in which millions – really millions – of men, women and children have been murdered, maimed, raped, enslaved, displaced over the past 15 years, multinational corporations have funded the brutal militia that have committed these atrocities, so that they can get access to the minerals they need for their profits. The representatives of one of these corporations are my witches in MACBETH.

In the end of the original Macbeth, there's a return to normal, the order is restored. How did you deal with that ending?

I cut those scenes off! I'm not one for closure. Especially within the Congo, it's just not going to happen. There's just no end to this cycle of despair. Every time one militia is defeated, another arises – the snake has many heads. The Shakespeare play ends with Macbeth dying and Malcolm, the son of the assassinated King Duncan, being crowned. My opera ends with Macbeth's body on stage, and the witches hovering in the background, waiting for the next Macbeth to come along.

How did you work with actors and musicians?

We haven't started the rehearsals yet... Our rehearsal period is very short, so I have to be very clear about what I want. The first step is to help the performers to understand the language that they must sing in: nineteenth century Italian! Together with the *repetiteur* I'm doing coaching rehearsals with the performers, whose first language is isiXhosa, and who are second-language English speakers. We have to translate the opera from Italian into English – a literal translation – and then into isiXhosa. There are all these filters: it has to go through two languages in order for the performers to get a grasp on what they are singing about. From there, we'll go into the psychology and interpretation and so on.

How do you approach the scenography? What kind of visuals did you want for the piece?

I've spent some time in Kinshasa, the capital of Congo, and a lot of time in Uganda, the neighboring country. I love the design from the area, the shop signage, the commercial, consumer product imagery, textile designs etc. I draw a lot on these. Because I have this device of a group of naïve refugees from rural Congo, I'm working with this sort of naïve aesthetic. It's quite a highly designed piece. In the scenography I make use of large projections of fabric designs, manipulated to make them relevant to the story I'm telling. I also use the extraordinary, haunting photographs of two European photographers – Marcus Bleasdale and Cedric Gerbehay – who spent a lot of time in the Congo capturing the conflict situation.

One tricky element that I have yet to find a way to integrate is the orchestra. The entire orchestra is on stage, and they are white musicians – the No Borders Orchestra – from former Yugoslavian countries. My performers are black South Africans playing Congolese refugees playing the characters of MACBETH. I have to find a conceptual framework to hold those disparate elements together.

Initially my wish was to have a group of black South Africans playing on stage, but there are many black classical musicians in South Africa yet. And it's also very costly to fly a whole orchestra to Europe from South Africa. The "No Borders Orchestra" is a very high calibre orchestra, the conductor knows the musicians very well, and to work with them makes financial sense. There are so few resources for funding cultural enterprises today that one often has to make choices determined by budget rather than conceptual integrity.

How did you work with the composer Fabrizio Cassol?

I looked for somebody who had worked with theatrical musical – be it opera or dance or whatever – I wanted somebody who was both a composer and a musician, and I wanted somebody who had had some access to African music. People like that aren't too common! And Fabrizio does have that mix. He spent a lot of time in the Congo, and has worked with artists like Luc Bondy and Alain Platel. He started a group called Aka Moon, which is based on music that he recorded with the Pigmies when he was in the Congo.

I wanted him to bring an African feeling to MACBETH, but he found that very difficult. He feels African music is completely different in terms of the rhythm and structure. But the African texture does filter in in some places. Fabrizio is an incredibly sensitive musician, he's attuned to the psychology of music. He speaks a lot of "vibrations". You can really see how he makes the strings work in the orchestra: we got a very small string section, 5 string instruments out of a total of 12 musicians, and these strings are hovering like insects all the time, buzzing and whispering, it's really extraordinary. He brings a real mystique into the music.

I didn't want the heaviness of Verdi. I'm not interested in the purity of opera. I listen to pop music more than I listen to classical music. If I have a television remote control in my hand, I change the channels all the time. I am in awe at the beauty of Verdi's work, but I don't want to work with the heavy architecture of a 19th century opera. I want something that moves quickly, where the music is changing constantly, where the story is constantly shifting.

How did you deal with the specific rhythm of the opera, combining music and theatrical action?

I don't like action very much on stage. My staging is quite still. I don't like illustrative drama really. There is a story here - MACBETH – that I'm having to tell, I'm aware of that. But my recent work has been very much in the mode of installations and *tableaux vivants*: in *Exhibit B* for instance. In many ways I feel more like an installation maker now than a theater maker, I see the scenes as installations in a way. My MACBETH is a series of stills that tell a story. Staging a sword fight is something I can't even contemplate.

What is your situation as an artist today in South Africa? And of South African artists in general?

It's really hard in South Africa, there's not much money around. There are art festivals but often you have to raise the money to present it yourself. There are very few producing theaters, most theaters simply present works. There is very little state or private money in the arts. South African artists were quite dependent for a long time on contributions from foreign donors or associations but the funds of a lot of these institutions have dried up with the global financial downturn. That sort of money isn't around anymore. It means that there is a lot of more commercial work, because people really have to fill the theatre seats. And there's an artistic conservatism that goes with that. There are still

high quality works coming out of the country and there is still interesting stuff happening on the fringes, but it's not the bustling alive world of ten years ago when there was much more money around.

With the passing of Nelson Mandela, do you feel a new chapter in South African history is opening?

Nelson Mandela's passing was a milestone, an emotional touchstone, but I don't think it's going to change much in the country. We've got elections in May, it's the first time what we call the "free born" will be voting: the children that were born since the 1994 change of regime. So this is an election that has potential for change in it.

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