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Worthy of a 'House Full' sign

Forget bleak Scottish moors, forbidding castles and cackling crones; Brett Bailey's *Macbeth*, one of the Auckland Arts Festival's topline imports, immerses us in the volatile brutalities of African politics.

Belgian composer Fabrizio Cassol has brilliantly pruned and re-focused Verdi's original opera. You can thrill to Nobulumko Mngxekeza's Lady Macbeth, firing full-power coloratura in her drinking song or wracked with guilt in the later sleepwalking scene, but empty heroics have gone and the avenging Macduff reduced to a mute messenger of vengeance.

The dramatic action takes place on a central stage, flanked by a small but vibrant chorus and a 12-piece band, creating a mood of hip, cross-cultural cabaret. We can be proud of this 12-piece ensemble, mostly drawn from the ranks of Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra.

Conductor Premil Petrovic guides the players from Palm Court Orchestra to bubbling Afro-minimalism, all tinged with an air of significant deconstruction.

Dramatically, *Macbeth* is the equivalent of a book that you can't put down; a runaway



Owen Metsileng's Macbeth is forceful.

Otto Maida's *Banquo* is so good you wish he had been spared the assassin's sword.

wagon in a diamond mine.

The evening starts with Verdi's mournful fourth act chorus significantly translated as "Shattered country". The scene is set for the "witches" of the manipulative multinational company HEXAGON, whose recurring appearances, inventively choreographed and sung, provide a connecting thread throughout.

Baritone Owen Metsileng's Macbeth, alongside Mngxekeza, is forceful as the flawed anti-hero, even

Auckland Arts Festival

What: Macbeth
Where: Aotea Centre
Reviewer: William Dart

drawing our sympathy in his final, shortened *Pieta rispetto*. Otto Maida's *Banquo* is so good you wish he had been spared the assassin's sword.

Visually, Bailey tracks this descent into a Congolese heart of darkness with an eye for its ironies. We meet Lady Macbeth at the Laundrette, and chuckle at the Macbeths celebrating power in camouflage wear, leopard skins and bling, with the glittering approbation of a mirror ball.

A central screen, behind the action, gives out still images, backgrounds and the occasional animation. Keep your eye on the surtitles, too, as Bailey's "translations" are amusingly peppered with expletives you wouldn't find in a Covent Garden production.

Macbeth's provocative stir-up of opera and theatre is not to be missed, and one hopes that its two weekend performances see the "House Full" sign out in Aotea Square.