

Africa's Orfeus in Hanover's Underworld

On the opening night of Hanover's Theaterformen festival, South African director and playwright Brett Bailey carries his audience off to the Underworld – the place where, according to classical mythology, Orfeus lost his wife Eurydike and found song. Somewhere in Hanover.

By Robert von Lucius

The audience are taken in a blackened out bus from Hanover's Schauspiel theatre to an unknown destination for the Theaterformen festival's opening night performance. The venue is a secret and not to be revealed by Brett Bailey, internationally renowned young star of South African theatre. But it's definitely outside; weatherproof clothing has been advised.

Half an hour later, the bus arrives at the grounds of a run-down former army barracks. Broken window panes, overgrown paths - even Hanover's mayor doesn't recognize this location. The audience is seated on straw bales around a camp-fire, and so the story begins as the air is filled with the strains of the enchanting and beguiling singing of Orfeus (played by Congolese Bebe Lueki). He is searching for his wife Eurydice, who on the night of their marriage, has been kidnapped by a snake and is now in the realm of the dead.

The storyteller then leads the audience on a journey through the Underworld; Hades is imagined in the grimy barracks' passage-ways and tunnels - behind a shack caged children, who are being forced to sew sports shoes, are staring blankly, and past a man who lies prostrate, forgotten and apathetic. Finally, in front of a massive and eerie façade - a four-storey power station with its side wall ripped open - the King of the Underworld appears, naturally he is a white man.

Bailey's South Africa is depicted as a broken society characterized by violence, but also as a place where music began – a home to doubt and failure, brutality, decay, and profound feelings. His thought-provoking work that transfers the classical to Africa comes in the wake of the achievements of the *Handspring Puppet Company* and points to a coveted South African theatre. Like Bailey's *Third World Bunfight* troupe, the *Handspring Puppet Company* are also based in Cape Town. Both have been internationally acclaimed for their works which are insistent as well as hypnotic. The *Handspring Puppet Company* and puppet maker Adrian Kohler have just won six Tony Awards for "War Horse", a show which has been sold out for three years in London and is now on Broadway. Bailey's plays can only be seen for rather brief periods at festivals such as during Hanover's Theaterformen, one of Germany's most important theatre festivals which boasts 20 International productions, from as far afield as Japan, Iran, and Norway, with two debut performances, thirteen German debut premiers and twelve performance venues.

The decision to open the Theaterformen festival with a South African play indicates that the country's theatre scene is as relevant now as it was since Athol Fugard began setting international stages alight all those years ago.

Bailey uses powerful images to reveal what is otherwise often unseen or hard for us to look at. At the 2010 Theaterformen festival in Braunschweig, Bailey's *Exhibit A: Deutsch Südwestafrika* was an exhibition, where he had shown Africans positioned in display cases, being stared at in a human zoo. He is currently working on two pieces, one of which is another exhibition dealing with France's and Belgium's colonial past in the Congo, as well as a musical entitled "Apartheid".

Bailey has previously focussed on colonialism: at the „Ex-© alle Fotos: Rhodes School of Photojournalism/Festival Theaterformenhibit A“, his contribution featured the genocide committed by German colonialists in German South West Africa.

Brett Bailey shot to fame with „iMumbo Jumbo“, soon after he formed his troupe of players fifteen years ago, and it was obvious from the outset that he knew how to provoke and challenge his audience. Combining satire, cabaret and impressive stage designs, Bailey continues to draw attention to his performance and to issues close to his heart, striving to cast a light on stories and current situations – ongoing racism, the deportation of foreigners, xenophobia, humiliation and child labour. He creates images that stay with you long after the show is over – like his version of the King of the Underworld, a pith helmet wearing Orfeus, tapping away at his computer, surrounded by UN aid parcels.