



Weekend Herald  
Saturday 14/02/2015

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# There will be blood

Verdi's *Macbeth* has been reworked and placed in today's troubled Congo. **William Dart** talks to its creator

**T**here was some grumbling when the Auckland Arts Festival put opera to the side in 2013. Two years before, it hosted a zesty production of Handel's *Xerxes*, made possible because the dates coincided with NBR NZ Opera's own Auckland season.

Verdi's *Macbeth* may be on the festival menu next month, but not in a version you are likely to catch at La Scala any time soon.

Instead, this *macbEth* is a radical reworking of the original opera by South African director Brett Bailey, a man described as "the whiz-kid of transformed drama"

and the "bad boy of the South African theatre scene".

Last year, a London production of *macbEth* drew rave reviews. *The Telegraph* praised "the power and originality of this astonishing appropriation of Verdi's *Macbeth*", its reviewer coming away "chilled and thrilled, but also awed by the way in which Shakespearian creativity inspired Verdi, who has in turn inspired Brett Bailey".

Over a crackly line, Bailey tells me how he grew up at a time when his country was scarred by apartheid and how "living in white suburbia, you didn't see the other side at all".

"The regime had the media and the education system in its claws and it was like living in a fish tank. Nevertheless, you might not be able to see the ocean, but you somehow knew it was there."

As a theatre student he found the emphasis on "well-made plays, by the likes of Pinter or Stoppard" limiting, but postgraduate studies in Amsterdam were "much more focused on conceptual and performance art. Figures like Marina Abramovic were icons."

Today, back in South Africa, he heads a company called Third World Bunfight. This snappy moniker was inspired by sitting in a



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small-town taxi rank one day and seeing around him a mix of bustling minibuses, huge billboards for cellphone companies and goats headed for ritual slaughter.

“It was a crazy collision of cultures,” he explains, “and that’s what fascinates me about the country in which I live, and infests or infects my aesthetic. The way that different world views, cultures and ideologies collide and get hybridised in Africa.”

Bailey’s *macbEth* transfers the action from Shakespeare’s and Verdi’s Scotland to the Congo.

“There’s a battle that’s been raging there for 21 years in the wake of the Rwandan genocide,” he points out. “A million refugees

moved into the Congo and destabilised the region completely. It’s one of the most mineral-rich areas in the world and there are militia controlling the mines, supported by multinational corporations.”

He talks of five-and-a-half million people killed in that region during this time, the largest number of deaths during a conflict since World War II.

“But it’s not on our radar,” he sighs.

Though he berates global media for giving this tragedy so little coverage, he makes it the subject and setting for his particular brand of opera. Bailey’s three witches, delivering their trios centre-stage with guns and camouflage uniforms, are “the representatives of a fictional company called Hexagon”; “hex” both in Dutch and German signifies a witch.

“In the original play, you often wonder who the witches are. Are they something repressed or latent in *macbEth*’s psyche, or maybe external forces? Here, they stand for a group of multinationals out to destabilise society. There’s nothing supernatural about them,” he laughs grimly. “The only voodoo going on is big business.”

These ensembles are among countless coups de theatre in Bailey’s *macbEth* and, though the musical notes are by Verdi, everything had to be “stripped right down. I went for the score with hammer and tongs, and moved the music around to where I

wanted it”.

Belgian composer Fabrizio Cassol was responsible for the reassembly work, arranging it for 10 singers and 12 instrumentalists. The score was initially workshopped and recorded in 2013 as a basis for the present theatrical treatment.

“Some pieces just stuck in my throat,” he confesses. “But Fabrizio said, ‘Just wait and listen.’ I learnt so much from allowing some things to grow inside me.”

You will still hear Lady Macbeth’s edgy Brindisi, magnificently sung by Nobulumko Mngxekeza, but Bailey admits, “There is some stuff in the original opera that I really don’t like.”

He singles out “the bombastic music when Malcolm decides he is going to go out and fight Macbeth”, along with “the piece at the end, crowning the new king, celebrating glory and victory. I just couldn’t abide the pomposity.”

A year ago, Bailey delivered a moving address for World Theatre Day, in which he laid out his artistic philosophy and vision, captured on YouTube, with stills from his various productions.

“Wherever there is human society, the irrepressible spirit of performance manifests,” he sets off. “Under trees in tiny villages and on high-tech stages in global metropolises. In school halls and in fields and in temples; in slums, in urban plazas, community centres and inner city basements, people are drawn together to commune in the ephemeral theatrical worlds that we create to express our human complexity, our diversity and our vulnerability in living flesh and breath and voice.”

Next month, Aotea Centre will be privileged to share this man’s vision.

### Auckland Arts Festival

**What:** *macbEth*

**Where and when:** Aotea Centre, March 11 and 12, 14 and 15 at 8pm



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**Owen  
Metsileng as  
Macbeth  
(above), and  
(left) with  
Nobulumko  
Mngxekeza as  
Lady Macbeth.**  
Pictures / Nicky  
Newman