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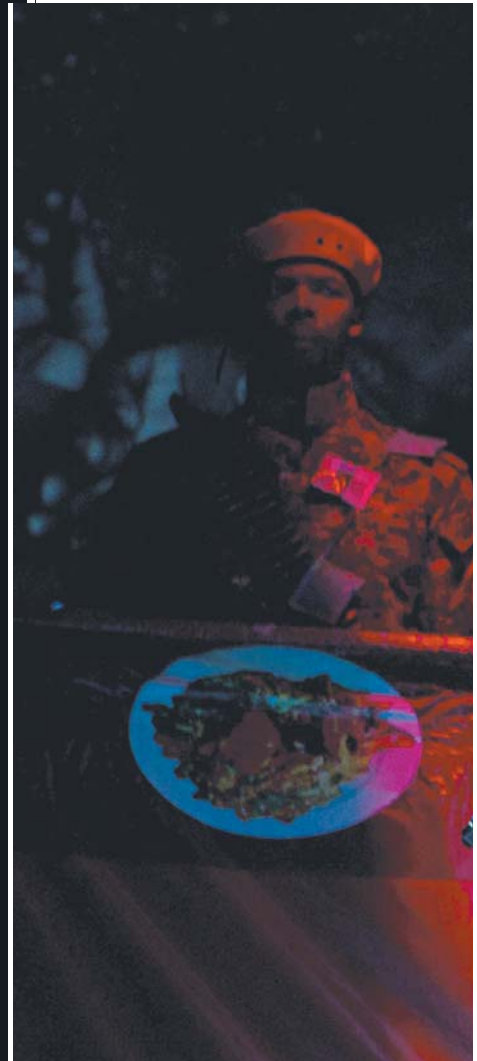
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OUT OF AFRICA

Brilliant South African theatre director Brett Bailey has taken Verdi's Opera Macbeth and done something extraordinary with it, transporting it to the troubled Congo, writes **Phil Brown**





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No opera buff would think of setting Verdi's *Macbeth* in the Congo. Would they? Which is fine because, as it happens, Brett Bailey is no opera buff.

The acclaimed South African theatre director and his avant-garde company, Third World Bunfight, are unhindered by the baggage of opera tradition and have turned a Scottish tragedy into a contemporary African one in their production of the opera *Macbeth*, which comes to the Playhouse, QPAC, from September 15 as part of the Brisbane Festival.

This unlikely appropriation caught the eye of Brisbane Festival director David Berthold, who was interested in African themes as a meaty subtext for this year's festival.

This is a stripped-back version of the Verdi's opera, which was first staged in 1847, and it may appeal to audiences all the more because it won't go on all night, having been cut to about 100 minutes. There is another thing that will distinguish it from traditional opera, Bailey cheekily suggests.

"That is, you can understand it," Bailey tells me over the phone from his home in Cape Town.

"I find most opera plots ridiculous. Even if the music is brilliant, music itself isn't enough for me because I come from a theatre background. So naturally enough I have approached this opera in a theatrical way. My immediate impulse was that it was too long so I've slashed it.

"Operas were written for a different era when attention spans were longer. With that in mind, I've been brutal with some of my cutting, so what we've ended up with is an opera unlike so many others in that it that moves pretty quickly. It's different to Verdi's opera and Shakespeare's play."

This may be some sort of revenge for having Shakespeare shoved down his throat as a youngster. Bailey's vengeance involves taking a story originally set in Scotland in the 11th century and transporting it by theatrical time machine to the troubled Democratic Republic of Congo. *Macbeth* is a story of greed, tyranny and remorse, which makes it a perfect fit for what is happening in the Congo today, Bailey says.

His re-creation is the story of a group of Congolese refugees who stumble upon a trunk filled with sheet music, costumes and gramophone recordings of Verdi's *Macbeth*. This theatrical paraphernalia is the catalyst for a dramatic retelling of Shakespeare's tale, with the *Macbeths* as war-

lords, the three witches as doublecrossing businessmen from the corrupt Hexagon Mining Corporation and Dunsinane as the Great Lakes of Central Africa where there were rages over access

to mineral resources.

Macbeth has been adapted from Verdi's original score by Belgian composer Fabrizio Cassol and is performed by a 12-piece onstage chamber orchestra – the spirited trans-Balkan No Borders Orchestra, conducted by Premil Petrovic with 10 rich-voiced South African singers and captivating lighting design by Felice Ross.

Brisbane Festival artistic director David Berthold says he has lost count of how many times he has seen various versions of *Macbeth*.

"But when I saw Brett's version, I saw the story afresh and I knew it had to be seen in Brisbane," Berthold says. "Its theatrical mastery, musical energy and striking wit are all at the service of shedding light on to issues that are too complex for the media."

The Congo may seem a world away to us but for Bailey, the shadow of the conflict there falls as far as distant Cape Town where there are thousands of Congolese refugees living as an under-

class, having been displaced from their homeland. Those Congolese refugees inspired him to make a Scottish tragedy into an African one, albeit one that has tinges of wit and even humour.

"The story remains essentially *Macbeth* but it is told by the refugees," Bailey says. "It looks at the consequences of the conflict in Congo. In this version of *Macbeth*, we enter the charred conflict that has torn apart the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo since the mid-1990s.

"More people have died in this strife than in any other since World War II and yet it makes barely a blip on the radar of the global media.

"Millions of people are displaced. Militia with ethnic and national affiliations fragment and realign themselves.

"Warlords arise and gather thugs and child soldiers around them and terrorise civilians."

Bailey wanted to do something about this and what he can do is make art.

He has developed the opera over several years and it has toured internationally to great acclaim.

Singer Nobulumko Mngxekeza, who plays Lady *Macbeth*, describes Bailey's creation as "a rollercoaster ride".

"You have to be focused at all times to keep up with Brett's vision," Mngxekeza says. "One moment you're happy, the next you're sad and there are moments that are uplifting and others that are depressing. But it's important that the story is told. People don't know what's happening in Africa and this story is tragic because it really is happening."

Mngxekeza has performed in *Carmen*, *Porgy*



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and *Bess* and *Nabucco*, among other operas and says she is thrilled to be coming to Australia in this one although, she confesses to knowing as much about us as we know about the Congo.

“I will have to do some googling before I get there so I know what to expect,” she says.

Owen Metsileng, who plays Commander Macbeth, the despotic war lord (there’s a hint of Idi Amin about this tyrant too) has more of a clue. He performed in Melbourne in 2012 and says he is looking forward to coming back to Australia in *Macbeth*. In a way he’s surprised to find himself in this role.

“Actually, I never expected to do *Macbeth* in my life,” Metsileng says. “It’s a privilege though and I’m happy to be doing this because I think it is

good for us to be doing this so people know what’s going on in Africa.”

Metsileng, a lyric baritone, says working with Bailey has been refreshing because “he works differently than most opera directors”.

“He is more theatrical,” Metsileng says, “You have to know your story when you are working with Brett and we are telling an important story.

“We really want people to know about our continent. But we don’t want to lecture them or bore them with an opera that is too long and that’s why Brett is such an intelligent director. If they start to get bored, the opera is finished so making it shorter is a very smart move.”

SEE IT

MACBETH

Where: Playhouse, QPAC

When: September 15-19

Cost: \$50-\$65

More info: brisbanefestival.com.au

OPERAS WERE WRITTEN
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BUT WE DON'T WANT TO LECTURE
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OWEN METSILENG

**SOMETHING WICKED
THIS WAY COMES:**
(Clockwise from main)
Owen Metsileng as
Commander Macbeth; the
three witches dressed as
doublecrossing
businessmen; Otto
Maidi as Banquo; and
Nobulumko
Mngxekeza as Lady
Macbeth, with
Metsileng.



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