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Congolese Macbeth packs mighty punch

MACBETH

Brisbane Festival

Venue: Playhouse Theatre, QPAC, until Saturday

Reviewed: September 15

Reviewer: Gillian Willis

KNIFE-EDGED, raw and uncompromising, *Macbeth*, Congo style, packs a hefty punch. Resetting Shakespearean classics and high-art opera is a familiar practice, no surprises there.

But the jostling themes of ruthless ambition, murder and corruption in Shakespeare's original *Macbeth* are excellent foils for this thrilling remake and its themes of cruel exploitation and injustice.

Theatrical justification for the bold shift from Scottish shores to Africa is explained by how a troupe of Congolese refugees discover a stash of thespian memorabilia, including sheet music, costumes and recordings of Verdi's opera *Macbeth*.

In South African director Brett Bailey's hands, Dunsinane becomes the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa, the three witches are socio-pathic, money-hungry tricksters and the Macbeth clan, warlords.

Bailey's theatre company, Third World Bunfight, champions the oppressed and draws back the curtains on grim and ignored horrific scenarios in postcolonial Africa.

Shakespeare's plot is taken to a troubled land of steamy heat and the greed of multinational companies that compete for the Congo's rich resources and regularly usurp each other's supremacy.

Under each new regime, the men, women and child workers, labouring in appalling conditions, are

terrorised and repressed through rape and ritualistic violence.

Replacing the traditional western orchestra with a 12-piece "No

Borders Orchestra" (NBO) from the Balkans is a shock to the ear for a moment or two. Rewardingly positioned on stage, the band channels Belgian composer Fabrizio Cassal's reimagined and recomposed Verdian score with real drive and sensitivity.

Commanded by conductor Premil Petrovic, the NBO inhabits a winning chameleonic voice that shimmers, shivers and screams and sounds scratchy, soupy, massively gloriously mean or achingly sad. Cassal's score artfully straddles the line between originality and Verdian signature and African and the west's musical traditions.

As the story unfolds and reaches climactic tragedy, Verdi's lush

Romantic language asserts itself to great effect. A chorus of seven contributes five star, a cappella harmonies and steps in and out of incidental roles with well-honed precision. Their stylised moves, choreographed by Natalie Fisher, are ironic echoes of Motown.

Nobulumkon Mngxekeza, as Lady Macbeth, and Owen Metsileng, as Macbeth, are mesmerising.

Mngxekeza's powerful voice is magisterial and astonishingly flexible, buttery and smouldering. Deep and resonant in her lower range, it soars, glows and even purrs when the moment requires it.

Metsileng was also stunning and admirably projected Macbeth's tortured thinking that flickers

between inconsolable remorse and self-protective, violent rage. His golden voice travels the length and breadth of the Playhouse one minute and then suddenly retreats into a feathery, soft-as-a-whisper tone in the next.

Otto Maldi sang with distinction in the less-fleshed-out role of Banco. Altogether a trio that well and truly nailed their arias.

Don't miss this. It's different, exciting, moving and marvellously coherent, with a comical touch: Macbeth's crown is a red boxing glove. It's chilling too, at times, and, above all, the kind of unforgettable, courageous theatre where time ceases to matter because what's happening on stage is too riveting.



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