

AN INTRODUCTION BY BRETT BAILEY

Low intensity ethnic and territorial tensions were ignited in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, when around a million Hutu refugees together with the perpetrators of the genocide fled across the border into the D.R.C. and destabilized the region. The subsequent wars and on-going violence have seen the deaths of around 5.4 million people – the largest number in conflict since World War 2. 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 terrorize civilians. Rape and sex-slavery are epidemic.

One of the prime causes of the continuing crisis is the extreme mineral wealth of the region. Rival militia battle each other for control of the mines. They force local men, women and children to work the mines at gunpoint. They tax them daily, leaving them barely enough to survive on. When a new militia group takes control of a mine, it massacres, maims, and rapes to assert its power. Orphaned children are conscripted into the mines or the armies. The taxes that are collected are used to sustain operations, and to buy arms and supplies.

This system is sustained by local and neighbouring government officials, and by multinationals that draw the minerals out of the region, and make huge profits out of the various stages of production of electronic and industrial goods, and jewellery. They pour cash into the conflict zone, and have been known to facilitate the transfer of arms and ammunition to militia.

The first impulse to make this work arose from a desire to locate MACBETH within an African context. I am fascinated with how stuff (religions, philosophies, cultural modes and material goods) is washed up or dumped on the shores of Africa and is appropriated, infiltrated, modified and put to new uses.

I wanted to take Verdi's opera of witchcraft, tyranny and the will for power, and treat it in the same way: to appropriate it, infiltrate it, modify it. I imagined the opera as a nineteenth century architectural monolith – like a colonial cathedral – lost in the forests or grasslands of Central Africa; a memento of a prior era, now crumbling, shot full of bullet holes, sprayed with graffiti, collapsing under the weight of vines.

Themes that recur in my works are the hidden atrocities committed in Africa by rapacious colonial powers; the ruthless exploitation of the resources of the 'developing world' by multi-nationals; the forgotten 'underworld' in which millions of people toil in misery to supply goods and raw materials for the markets of the rich world; and the instability fuelled in these countries by expedient 'Super Powers'.

As a South African artist who has travelled and worked in many African countries, these themes are very close to home.

I have been aware of the catastrophe in the Eastern Congo for many years now: its scale and its complexity. It is striking to me that so few people outside of the region even know about it: because it smoulders in a dark patch somewhere in Central Africa (rather than in the Middle East for instance), it is almost invisible.

For MACBETH I created a troupe of refugee-performers from the conflict zones of the Eastern Congo. They had discovered an old trunk of paraphernalia (musical

scores, costumes, etc.) from an amateur company that had performed Verdi's opera in the region during the colonial period: a fascinating link between the present situation and the horrors that were perpetrated in the name of profit by the Belgian administration.

The troupe used the material that they found in the trunk to tell the story of the plight of their country today. Like the tens of thousands of Africans who flock to Europe every year in small boats or on planes, but who are seen as problematic, nameless statistics, these performers have a desperate story to tell. They are emissaries from the Great Lakes region, come to put their story firmly on the world stage.

I commissioned acclaimed Belgian composer and musician, Fabrizio Cassol, to rearrange Verdi's score for a small ensemble.