

USA INTERVIEWS

What was the initial inspiration for Macbeth + Opera Version + DRC? Do you remember where you were when you first thought, let's do this?

I've made versions of Verdi's Macbeth three times. Each very differently. First in 2001, then 2007, then this one – in 2014.

I was never drawn to Shakespeare's Macbeth. I'm not a text theatre director, and Shakespeare certainly doesn't rock my world.

Opera was the starting point: I was commissioned in 2001 to direct an opera set in Africa for the Cape Town Opera School. I was not an opera animal at all. Didn't know the stuff. Spent days paging through an encyclopedia of opera plots. Found the stories generously ludicrous.

I settled on Macbeth because I'd studied the play in high school and the themes of witchcraft and tyranny were ones I had dealt with extensively in recent works I'd made: they were something to hold onto within the unknown world of opera.

My first two attempts at the piece were 'African' in a loose, stylistic way: they were not focused on the DRC, or on any specific occurrence in Africa.

My research into the horrors of the war in the eastern DRC began in 2008, when a xenophobic crisis ripped through South Africa. Tens of thousands of Congolese immigrants and refugees were in fear of their lives.

During research into the atrocities committed in what was the Congo Free State under the Belgian colonial administration for another of my works – Exhibit B – I became aware of the continuum of brutal exploitation and plunder that has blighted the region from then until now. Millions of lives no more than collateral damage in a ruthless quest for power and profit. Brutality on which the consumer world is dependent.

I wanted to shine a light on this 'invisible' nightmare, and I wanted to remake Macbeth: the two dovetailed.

What attracted you to doing an opera? As such a demanding discipline, there is certain rigidity to the form. What did the form/discipline allow you to give expression to that a version of the play, for instance, could not?

The 'rigidity' of the form wasn't really an issue. I went at it with a sharp machete: chopping out sections of the opera, juggling scenes and musical pieces, editing it into the piece I wanted to make. Opera can be a very stuffy form, I was not interested in making a stuffy work.

I would never have directed Macbeth the play: text theatre doesn't interest me.

The music and the singing voice carry the emotions, the meaning and the drama in opera. It's a very firm foundation from which to work. For me music like this conjures up images and emotions: it allows me to 'paint' a series of scenes to tell the story. It is very liberating.

MacBeth may be the earliest (known) dramatic portrayal of the thug who rises to power. Between Shakespeare and Verdi, what makes "high art" an effective medium in which to

investigate brutality?

Beats me.

How did you develop the visuals for MacBeth? And what was important to you in how the projected visuals, the lead performers and their set, the chorus and even the on-stage orchestra all play off of each other?

I spent months composing the visuals, referencing visual arts and design from Central Africa, and images of regional war and political power, for inspiration. I spend hours and hours trawling through images on the net.

When I composed the dramaturgical, psychological and visual flow of the opera, I envisaged the entire stage picture, so the Macbeth story and the much larger story of what has been happening in the eastern DRC are conveyed in a sequence of 'stage frames'.

I collected hundreds of pictures online, and cropped and pasted these to design the opera, 'frame by frame'. I designed projected backdrops, costumes, lighting colors etc. to work together to convey meaning and atmosphere. The work is as much a piece of visual art as it is dramatic or operatic.

Below are a couple of photoshop cut-and-paste stage designs for Macbeth.





What kind of conversations did you have with the arranger as he trimmed and arranged the opera. What were the creative concerns/aims?

Fabrizio Cassol, who adapted and rearranged Verdi's opera, is a Belgian composer and a jazz musician with extensive experience in theatre and in African music. He was the perfect fit for Macebth.

I gave him an edited down version of the opera, in which I had moved scenes around and edited others out completely. Verdi wrote the opera for about 65 musicians and 45 singers. I limited Fabrizio to 12 musicians and 10 singers.

I asked him to envisage Verdi's original score as a monolithic mid-19th century cathedral, erected in the Congolese forests during the colonial era. Since then it has been abandoned; jungle has grown into it; the window are shattered; it has been shot up in wars, and squatted by generations of villagers and refugees... what does it look/sound like now?

Why do you think Macbeth has been such fertile ground for so many artists in theater, film, and other disciplines? Why do we keep coming back to this play? Why did you want to do so?

Macbeth is a very intimate look at the two protagonists' very different relationships to political power: acquiring, retaining and coping with it. Of course Machiavellian power matches are forever playing out around us. We are fascinated by them, and all too often the victims of them. We want to understand what drives such tyrants, what

goes on in their minds... with a schadenfreude steeped in the illusion that the universe has some sort of underlying karmic pattern, we revel in their sticky fates: if only it always ended like that... I was drawn to Macbeth by the account of these games, and by the added interest of the intrusion of the supernatural (or whatever one takes the witches to represent) into the mundane world.

In the reinterpretation of this classic work, did you feel a sense of responsibility to the original work and narrative? How did you approach this while creating a production with contemporary relevance?

At first my intention was to give the widest impression of the conflict in the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo through the opera, but that was not at all possible. I felt like I was trying to squeeze the ugly sister's foot into a very tiny glass slipper. I resolved to simply set the tale within the conflict, and to allow historical and contemporary allusions to

Where does the name of your opera company, Third World Bunfight, come from?

From sitting in a crazy taxi rank in a crazy fucken third world rural town in south africa 20 years ago, watching all the goings on: the clash of different worldviews and aesthetics and traditions and values, and thinking, this bunfight is exactly what I want to capture in my work.

What is your artistic philosophy?

To make work that is uncompromising, artistically astounding, that reveals what lies behind the veneers of 'civilization', and challenges the hegemonies of the world order.

How did Premil Petrovic become involve as conductor and how has Verdi's music reworked?

I invited Premil to conduct after a long search for a conductor, upon the recommendation of a well-placed friend in the EU opera world: I was looking for someone very accomplished, with playful flair, and who did not regard opera as something sacred that should not be messed with. I edited the opera, discarding some scenes and shifting others around. Fabrizio Cassol rearranged the score for 12 musicians and 10 singers and gave it a sharp contemporary edge, while retaining the Verdi.

You've been touring since 2014 around the world. What has the reception been to the opera?

Extremely positive: for the quality of singing and music, for the design and concept, for the transposition into a politically-loaded contemporary African context.

Any particular performance that stands out?

Maybe Vienna, where we worried that conservative opera audiences would turn up their snouts at the work: we received lengthy standing ovations.

How do you feel about debuting the opera in the United States?

Looking forward to it. I hope that Connecticut theatre and opera people are willing to take the risk to look into a very different world, guided by the power of Shakespeare's drama and Verdi's music.