

Here are 2 reviews of Opening shows: 'Out of Darkness' (2009) and 'TREASURE' (2010)

Hifa's Opening Show an Artistic Masterpiece

Rosie Mitchell, THE STANDARD, Harare, 2 May 2009

The African Sun Main Stage enclosure was as full as it could possibly be. Hifa 2009's opening show, "Out of Darkness: A Rite of Passage" actually sold out!

My enthusiasm not to miss this much anticipated annual extravaganza was shared by every other HIFAphile it seemed and I was grateful to have booked very early, for many were disappointed

After Brett Bailey's masterpiece "Dreamland" in 2008, this was an absolute must-see. Brett was back, and once again the miracle of Hifa and the miracle of an ambitious spectacle of a show that barely gets rehearsed, its cast only assembled in the same city a couple of days before its billing, was almost upon us.

We were ready for it, and excited!

The unseasonably balmy night air was electric with anticipation, perhaps more so than ever before in Hifa's ten-year history, a history in tandem with ten dark and troubled years. As the show's name implied, the corner had been turned, at last.

Yet, in a true demonstration of art imitating life, this massive audience would soon see an accurate reflection of our hesitant, tentative, muted response to that turning, as we peek, cautious, still wary and a little afraid, not quite able to trust, around that corner, daring to hope, yet wearied and worn down and suspicious as only the experiences of this past decade could make us.

This huge and diverse audience began gathering as early as an hour and a half before the show, people scrambling to secure a patch of ground with a good view of the spectacle to come.

An hour before lift off, and the area was already jam-packed. Excitement was tangible, and as drums to stage left began a slow, haunting beat, reflecting the anticipation hanging in the air, it built further.

Our first Hifa in what we dare to hope is a new era, a new dawn, but it's not what exactly we expected, is it? There's no dancing in the streets, no jubilation, no ecstatic outpourings of joyful release -- not yet, anyway.

We've waited so long for some change that we can't quite believe it has actually come, because it's slower than we wanted, there are still hardships, it's far from perfect, it's going to take time, and there are still patches of darkness in our land -- greed, corruption, the abuse of power.

There was, after all, no magic wand, and it remains in our own hands, as it always did, to drive our country forward through the maze, transforming the pain and suffering and deprivation into justice and truth and trust.

As this most unusual show began, to roars of appreciation, it soon became clear that yes, art was truly reflecting life. For this show, signifying the changes upon us, the long slow march into the long hoped-for, long-awaited new era, was understated in exactly the same way as our response to recent developments surely are.

Whilst I know that some were disappointed by this understatement, hoping for a grander extravaganza of a show, its symbolism, metaphors and deliberate contradictions were not lost on most, and entirely reflected back to us, our own hesitancy, our own distrust.

It was simply magnificent. It was moving, emotionally wrenching even painful, yet the hope was there too. But not an all-out, jubilant, extravagant hope.

More the tentative embryo of hope, but hope nonetheless -- much as we are feeling it in our day to day lives.

This show was as accurate a portrayal of the process we are living as one could possibly have aimed to achieve, with all the ugliness we have seen paradoxically juxtaposed with great beauty.

But the fear and the fire and the guns remain

Thembe Sachikonye, NEWS DAY, Harare, 28 April 2011

Ah the joy of the arts, the magic of theatre! Yes, I am at the opening night of the Harare Festival of the Arts (Hifa) 2011.

This year I am not in a VIP marquee, sipping drinks from faraway places and nibbling on delicate snacks with unpronounceable names.

No, I am in the thick of things, centre front, blanket on the ground, cooler box, kids, commotion and all.

This would be making me feel decidedly middle-aged if it weren't for the fact that I am right up there in the dust with the fun folk, the photographers, the fans and the fanatics.

Seating arrangements cannot detract from the exuberance created by the exquisite experience of witnessing something utterly magnificent.

Watching this performance, cleverly titled Treasure. I suddenly understand what makes war correspondents keep on doing what they do:

It's the honour of bearing witness. American novelist Wally Lamb says of the writing workshops he runs for prison inmates: "My most valuable function at

the prison may have more to do with bearing witness than teaching writing skills.”

On this night we bear witness to another spectacular opening night of Hifa and once again I ask myself the question:

“How do they get away with it? Just how on earth do they get away with it?” And frankly, why do they take the risk? Skilfully employing satire, parody, and laugh-out-loud good humour, artistic director Brett Bailey has lived up to his reputation for creating shows that are at once explosive and stimulating.

Pushing the boundaries between thought-provoking and just plain provocative, this show has set tongues wagging all over the city this week. In a good way, I think.

But of course, art is about more than just filling seats with paid-for bums. It’s about more than the feel-good factor you get from exercising your clapping, whistling and ululating skills to appreciate another’s gifts.

The job of art goes beyond merely entertaining, to serving a vital social, political and cultural function.

Peter Sellars, director of the Los Angeles Festival articulates this brilliantly when he says: “There is no meaning, either in art or in society, without participation.

What sparks engagement is something that speaks to you personally. The purpose of art is to find a way to wake people up who are going through their lives sleepwalking and say, ‘Stop it. You can’t walk past this. This is your life’.” (Stanford University News Service).

This is the very sentiment echoed by Hifa’s Manuel Bagorro:

“Engagement is all about communication, involvement, awareness and empowerment; it is about hearing each other speak. The theme this year is an invitation to ‘give a damn’; to engage our own hearts and minds; to engage those closest to us . . . If the light of creative thinking could shine into all the dark and self-seeking aspects of life in Zimbabwe . . .”

In the entire show what moved me the most was the performance to an old favourite song Weeping, which I first discovered years ago on a Soweto String Quartet album.

Written by Dan Heymann, during the mid-1980s the song was a protest against being drafted into the army of South Africa’s apartheid government.

Fast forward thirty years and a little further north. How is it possible that the haunting melody and reproachful lyrics could still be relevant to us today? And yet they are.

I knew a man who lived in fear
It was huge, it was angry,
It was drawing near.

Behind his house a secret place
Was the shadow of the demon
He could never face.

He built a wall of steel and flame
And men with guns to keep it tame
Then standing back he made it plain
That the nightmare would never ever rise again
But the fear and the fire and the guns remain.

(Chorus:)

It doesn't matter now it's over anyhow
He tells the world that it's sleeping
But as the night came round
I heard its lonely sound
It wasn't roaring, it was weeping
It wasn't roaring, it was weeping.

And then one day the neighbours came
They were curious to know about the smoke and flame

They stood around outside the wall
But of course there was nothing to be heard at all
"My friends," he said, "We've reached our goal
The threat is under firm control
As long as peace and order reign
I'll be damned if I can see a reason to explain
Why the fear and the fire and the guns remain."

Watching the rapt attention of the crowd around us, my daughter asks: "But mommy what does this have to do with the treasure?" Poor child, I think she was expecting pirates and Easter eggs. "It's all about the treasure inside you." I tell her. She is even more bewildered.

Like all great theatre the opening show ends on a high and hopeful note.

"All I hear is my heartbeat, beating like a drum, beating with confusion. All I hear are the voices, telling me to go, but I could never run. Coz in my African dream, there's a new tomorrow. In my African dream, there's a dream that we can follow . . ."

Coming off the grand finale, these are the words we the people are mouthing as we shuffle out of the main stage and back to the realities of our real lives, leaving, with a bitter-sweet sigh the magic and magnificence of great theatre behind us.

The question remaining is: Are we now engaged? And if so, how will our engagement manifest to actualise the African dream for each of us; and for one another?