

ARTICLES ON HIFA OPENING SHOWS BY BRETT BAILEY

ZIMBABWE: THE MUSICAL

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South African theatre director, Brett Bailey, sets a cat amongst the pigeons on a Harare stage.

Early April, and the blood of Morgan Tsvangirai and his pals in the MDC is still damp on the floors of Zimbabwean police cells. Inflation is about to leap to 2300%. But Harare doesn't let on. Shops are busy. Taxies, buses and cars clog the streets. Well-manicured suburban gardens flourish in dizzying hues behind electric wires. And an arts festival is about to happen.

I've come to Zimbabwe with the screams of South African media headlines ringing in my ears: violence, starvation, catastrophe. I'm on guard from the moment I step off the plane. But the strangest thing is that unless you look carefully everything seems okay. It's all very quiet. People sigh softly about things, but they don't hiss.

I'm here to spend three weeks putting together the opening show for the Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA): a miraculous annual flowering of culture in an otherwise desert terrain. The brainchild of Zimbabwean-raised and London-based festival director, Manuel Bagorro, HIFA is now in its eighth year. Manuel and his sister, Maria Wilson, somehow beg and conjure money and acts from all over the world and, together with a devoted and enterprising team, change the climate of Harare for a week.

My theatre company, Third World Bunfight, brought a play IPI ZOMBI? to the first HIFA in 1999, and ever since Manuel has been trying to coax me back. I returned last year to direct the opening gig.

Every year the HIFA team comes up with a theme for the festival. In 2006 it was "Seventh Heaven", and the opening event was to be a gospel-themed celebration. I was allotted an 80-voice Rhema Church choir as the musical centrepiece of the show and was driven to distraction by their perceptions of Satan lurking behind any theatrical mask or within every pelvic thrust of a traditional dance step.

This year the theme is "It's Show Time": "a time to show the entirely unexpected feats of creative heroism" in response to the volatile Zimbabwean situation, waxes Manuel.

Yes, well, that's lovely, I feel, but there is a lot of other stuff that is crying out to be shown too. Stuff like tyranny, and the silencing of dissenting voices. Homophobia, brutality and a pulverized economy. A big show with an audience of around 6 000 people on an outdoor stage in the centre of Harare is too good an opportunity to waste. I feel I have a moral responsibility as an artist working within such a context to make something that reflects more than just the ability of the human spirit to transcend adversity. Some feet have to be stomped too.

My mission: to find a way to fuse the brazen joy of showbiz with a heavy dose of political commentary and a flare of optimism.

And not get anyone detained in the process.

"I hope you've got a big plane to get us all out of here," says my musical director, Bernie Bismark, every couple of days.

Our first band rehearsal takes place at her sprawling home in leafy suburbs at 11am one morning. The power went down across the city a few hours before, and we loll around in the hope that it will return to rekindle silent keyboards and guitar amps. Screams from next-door draw us to the road. Children are clutching their mouths. A bleeding neighbour with a nastily sliced face tells of thugs that have broken into her house and assaulted her. Bernie's maid meanwhile has locked the remote controlled security gate on the driveway and vanished with the key, so we spend the next 40 minutes waiting in the road. The gate has fallen victim to the booming trade in stolen gate motors, so the remote is of no use to us. Welcome to Harare.

During the following weeks our rehearsals will be plagued by power cuts. Before every meeting frantic phone calls are made to find out which part of town has power and to organise a generator if needs be. More than once a generator is borrowed, fuel is sourced and a delayed rehearsal is about to begin when the power kicks in again. Everyone laughs. I scowl and get wrinkles. On TV a major bank offers loyal customers a monthly prize: a powerful generator and a steel security cage to house it in.

My brainwave to hold the disparate themes of the show together is to have a ruthless tyrant of an MC: "He will threaten the audience and have performers dragged on stage to sing at gunpoint," I enthuse, showing sketches of bodies littering the stage. Manuel gets a tight smile: "It sounds fabulous," he says and flashes an alarmed glance at Sue Powell, my irreplaceable production manager.

The vibe in Harare has changed. Last year I was blown away by the zeal of the artists I worked with: in spite of shortages and hardships and the isolation from the international community they were eager to work for even a pittance, to try new things, to be inspired. Now there is an air of apathy. The community halls are quiet. Often performers arrive very late for rehearsals or don't turn up at all. The slog to make ends meet – the toil of just getting by – has worn people out. There is no nightlife to speak of. Everything is simply too expensive.

I get paid a per diem of Z\$ 100 000. When I first get to Zim that's worth about R30 a day at the black market rate, and about R20 by the time I leave four weeks later. It doesn't go very far: at the Spar Liquifruit costs the equivalent of R24 a litre and 750g of Kellogs cornflakes goes for R100: Z\$ 250 000. A university lecturer earns around Z\$ 700 000 a month, so not much Kellogs is being consumed in those households I'll warrant.

The Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe has imposed a daily withdrawal limit of Z\$ 1 million (R400), and the HIFA office is going blue in the face trying to put together a festival under these conditions. Bank queues are hours long affairs. It's clear I'm not going to get my per diems any time soon. A series of circuitous phone calls leads me to an out of the way pharmacy where I'm given a couple of bricks of cash. It comes in denominations of Z\$10 000: about R4. At the supermarket each teller has a counting machine that counts the notes in a whirr of flickering paper. A man patrols the tills filling a sack with the overflowing notes. When I leave Zimbabwe I take a thick wad of cash home with me to use as props in future plays about men who throttle their people in order to cling to power.

I work on the MC's script at night:

"Zimbabwean People, International Guests, It's Show Time here in Zimbabwe at HIFA 2007.

I'm your leader this evening and I will tolerate no opposition.

I want you to get down tonight and then I want you to lift your spirits higher than the Inflation.

Whether you come from Mashonaland or Matabeleland.

Whether you come from friendly countries or from subversive neo-imperialist nations...

Put aside your differences or we'll beat them out of you."

Finding an actor to play the role is not easy. I'm looking for a solid, charismatic, older man with a malicious twinkle in his eyes. I run the idea past a couple of candidates and their smiles quickly fade: "You are leaving the country when the show's over," they say, "we are staying."

Accounts of disappearances, concentration camps, beatings and torture are whispered to me in the sanctuary of cars waiting in long petrol queues. But only after a good deal of questioning about life here, now. Generally people do not talk.

With choreographers from Timbuka Dance Company I design a scene in which a gang of black suited and sunglassesed dancers, The Secret Police, struts aggressively to a Shona rendition of Santana's "Oye Como Va". They threaten the audience with red painted pick handles. Two women singers dressed in rags are hauled on stage with pistols held to their heads. They sing an Ndebele interpretation of The Rolling Stones' "I can't get no satisfaction" while a throng of protesting hip hoppers dances in tattered hand-me-downs. At the end of the song, as the guitars scream, The Secret Police burst on to stage and massacre them with their pick handles.

The musicians take these shenanigans in with wide eyes. Bernie is getting the hang of it though: "It is important to do this. Nobody else is saying these things here."

Not entirely true: at the National Gallery a series of provocative works by several artists points a severe finger at corruption, mismanagement and the broken promises of liberation. Poets on the Spoken Word Festival spit out their frustrations.

Ordinary people express their despair in other ways: the ranks of the Apostolic Church have swelled ten-fold. On weekends great pilgrimages of white-gowned devotees flock to the meadows and hills to pray. Times are tough. "In Zimbabwe," a musician tells me, "you're either Apostolic or Alcoholic."

We've brought together a wide assortment of performers to showcase the talents of the country at the opening: three octogenarian swing singers – The Cool Crooners – from Bulawayo, and a trio of elderly Harare rockers, The Mbare Trio. Ballroom dancers and long legged string-bean white showgirls from the National Ballet. Masked Makishi tribal dancers and a capoeira dance group. My troupe is up from Cape Town with our show, "House of the Holy Afro", starring drag diva Odidi Mfenyana in red stilettos and too-short hot pants.

Then there's the Chinese. Chris Wong is described in the program hype as "the Robbie Williams of China", a superstar who has sold millions of schmaltzy records to teary Chinese housewives. The Chinese embassy has brought Chris, a TV documentary team and thirty tour operators to Zim. They hope to open up the Zimbabwean tourist industry to the Far East. On stage we lump sultry Chris together with The Red Pennant, a troupe of delightful Chinese youths who overwhelm with their colourful exuberance and delicate choreography. Their dragons prance relentlessly to crashing music above the heads of assembled dignitaries at the HIFA launch brunch. On ZTV Mugabe rants on about his new "Look East Policy". Zimbabweans had better be getting used to these dragons.

At a loose end one Saturday evening I attend the Mr Mashonaland body builder contest: a four hour affair during which gallons of dark, oiled muscles bulge and twist on stage. Three days later at an audition in the Pro-Fitness Gym I select six of these men to play the Spirits of Hope. They rehearse in tight underwear beneath towering bamboo in Harare Gardens. I sweat. Labourers erecting the stage stare.

On opening night, at the emotional climax of the show, caked in white clay, they emerge slowly in formation down a staircase and gather the fallen bodies of the murdered hip hop dancers. They bear them away as local stars huddle on a platform to sing a medley of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song", "Tomorrow" (from Annie) and Tracey Chapman's "Talking 'bout a Revolution". These are brave performers, aware of the risk they are taking. The audience weeps.

Earlier in the show, after a series of '60s swing numbers, the MC informs the audience that a family of white farmers has just been detained at the airport: "They were heading for Nigeria to share their skills in the agricultural sector. We've persuaded them to come and sing you a farewell song." To the strains of "Old MacDonald had a Farm" a bedraggled clutch of whities is herded on stage carrying their chickens and luggage. (I had wanted the farmer to have a sheep on a leash, but our exhaustive efforts to source livestock were in vain. All known sheep, it seems, were butchered by war veterans on the farms of milk and honey.) The farmer's wife and kids crouch amongst their possessions under the watchful eye of The Secret Police. The barefoot, weathered looking farmer takes the microphone from the MC and sings "Mack the Knife" to him: "Oh the shark has big white teeth dear, and he keeps them pearly white..."

South Africans and Zimbabweans get together to groove with Brenda Fassie's "Weekend Special". The Cool Crooners appear in wheel chairs, swathed in bandages to sing a lament about locusts leaving farms ravaged. Rastafarians blast out Bob Marley's "Could you be loved": "Don't let them fool you, or even try to school you..."

Backed by a 14-piece band and a bevy of elegantly clad backing vocalists, the MC (eventually played by soap opera star Stephen Chigorimbo), takes the mic again:

"Many of our visitors were worried to come to Harare: they sent e-mails to their embassies: 'We see scary pictures on the TV: is it safe?' Tonight, my friends, everybody is safe I promise you. Stay in your seats. Clap in the right places. Laugh when you're told to. Write complimentary reviews in the newspapers. None of you will come to any harm..."

The following day the state funded Herald newspaper reports on only the innocence in the show: "In a way the performances showed music from its cradle to the present [demonstrating] that art is diverse, beautiful, delightful, uplifting and, above all, outrageous." It praises The Cool Crooners for bringing back "the happy township years when, despite colonial oppression and discrimination, people found ways of putting smiles on their faces."

Along with 6000 people in the audience The Times of London sees another side altogether. Referring to the massacre scene it says, "the act was a violent, shocking *danse macabre* that re-enacted the killings and savage assaults by Mugabe's security agents on opposition activists... that began on March 11. From the back of the audience came shouts of 'March 11, March 11'. In Zimbabwe's violently repressive

atmosphere it was a highly risky act for the producers of HIFA to stage before a dangerous, intolerant regime.”

For artists to remain silent in the face of such regimes is, I believe, a much more risky act.

DREAMLAND

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‘I dreamed that there was war. I raised my son in my arms to cover him and protect him from all these cockroaches. People being torn to death, dying and being shot at.’
“Twister”, 30 years old, poet

It’s 19h30, Tuesday 29 April 2008, four weeks since the Zimbabwean election results were due. On an outdoor stage in Harare Gardens around 8000 people have gathered to attend Dreamland, the opening event of the Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA).

80 musicians, singers and dancers wearing striped pyjamas are sprawled ‘asleep’ upon the stage. Then a giant king in a white leatherette military suit and wearing an outsize bulbous red mask drags a cello down the ramp. As he tunes his strings a storyteller recounts how once long ago, in a beautiful country far from here, this king stole the songs from his people and bewitched them into a deep sleep.

We watch as two Darth Vader helmeted ‘hyenas’ in military uniforms use the distinctive plastic ballot bins of the recent elections to club the songs out of a choir, and to silence another with a gift of a cardboard cut-out tractor. The crowd goes very silent, many already have tears in their eyes.

Then the king breaks into a booze-soaked rendition of ‘What a Wonderful World’.

‘Within three minutes of the beginning I told my friend “we are going to be beaten now”’, a spectator tells me afterwards, ‘we wondered which way to run.’

‘I dreamed that a girl drowned at the swimming competition. The coach said ‘forget about her’ and the swimming pool filled with blood.’
Priska, 13 years old, orphan

I’ve spent the past three weeks here putting Dreamland together. I wrote the beginning some time ago, and imagined that by the time I arrived in Zimbabwe I would know the ending: either the sleeping cast would awake and sweep the king away with the power of its voice, or the king would still be droning his monotonous dirge. But I walked into a narrative with no end in sight: the State of Limbo. The jubilation of just a few days earlier, when it looked like the MDC had cleaned up the elections, was over and a frustrated gloom defined the mood of Harareans. Within a short while this had settled into an angry depression.

There were the usual frustrations of bread cues, food shortages, escalating prices, and water and power cuts, but added to this was a sense of utter powerlessness, of having been cheated out of hope. I have spent the last two Aprils here making the opening shows for this festival, but never have things been so tough. The cell phone lines are constantly jammed: it can take up to an hour to get through, and several hours for an sms to arrive. Finding transport to rehearsals can be impossible. But

more than this, people expend so much energy merely in holding their lives together that there is little surplus for anything else. Finding the enthusiasm to create a dynamic piece of musical theatre is difficult for those whose expectation of profound change has just been snuffed, who awake every morning from dreams of fear and anxiety.

'There was a maze in the living room. Tanks and bombs and those vine things that when you touch them your hands start bleeding until you can see your bones on your hands.'

Nyaradzo, 10 years old, schoolboy

Suburban Harare feels like the still centre of a violent vortex. I lunch at a restaurant shaded by gracious old jacarandas. Journalists sit at quiet tables, their laptops tuned into Zimbabwe Online (ZOL). Stories are coming in of torture and beatings. Trucks full of hyped-up uniformed militia spiral out across dirt roads to thrash obedience into fed-up peasants. A Chinese tanker packed with weapons slowly circles 2000 kms to the south.

"For several weeks now Zimbabweans have had nothing to cling onto," I tell the performers of Dreamland – school kids, dancers, poets, musos – "we have a platform in the city centre to raise our voices. We may not be able to change the situation, but we can give a voice to what people are feeling; we can give people some hope to take them through the next few days."

HIFA, a miracle of an arts festival, like one of those desert flowers that appears briefly after rain, is nine years old. Headed by artistic director Manuel Bagorro and run by a passionate and courageous team of Zimbabweans, the festival somehow manages to bring together an extraordinary range of troupes and performers from across the world: opera singers from the UK, Mexican buffoons, dancers from Indonesia, the USA and Belgium, theatrical troupes from South Africa, Canada and Germany, pop stars from Spain, Uganda, Cote d'Ivoire... It's one of the most exciting festivals in Africa and beats any South African festival for style and diversity.

Andrew Buckland, up with the TRC drama 'Truth in Translation', plays the King of Dreamland. The white suit he wears is fittingly the costume worn by Idi Amin in my play BIG DADA.

As the King hauls his cello offstage the narrator tells that in the barren time of this story there were some songs that the King could not reach: "these were the people's most precious songs, the songs that they sang in their dreams". The performers awaken and a series of local stars lead the choir and musicians in a number of big rousing anthems: Toni Childs' 'What you gonna do, Zimbabwe?', the Cranberries' anti-war song 'Zombie', and 'Zimbabwe' – the liberation song written by Bob Marley in 1980: "So soon we'll find out who are the real revolutionaries. And I don't want my people to be tricked by mercenaries. We gonna fight... fighting for our rights."

Swiss funding agency Pro-Helvetia sponsored two South Africans to help me create Dreamland: choreographer Sbonakaliso Ndaba and drama therapist Paula Kingwell. Paula's task was to collect the dreams of Zimbabweans. She held dream workshops with Aids orphans, evicted farmers, torture victims, members of the gay and lesbian society, and market vendors. Almost every dream in her harvest is drenched in anxiety and horror. Only an occasional glimpse of hope. Bytes of the dreams are projected onstage throughout Dreamland revealing the tortured inner landscape of the nation.

'I had this animal and it had died. It was a prime beast. It had gone into a riverbed and died there. I used to sneak back and cut bits of biltong off it. It didn't rot but it got progressively finished. Until there were just bones.'

Ben, 55 years old, evicted farmer

Five days before the show, after several rehearsals, I receive an sms from my narrator at 6.00 in the morning: "I'm pulling out of Dreamland. My family has strongly expressed fears that piece is not politically safe. I'm a soft target as a British employee and my wife with an independent newspaper. She was detained b4 and I'm diabetic."

Photos of a man on BBC World, his back pocked with pink blotches: tortured with burning plastic for listening to the Voice of America. According to a doctor friend of mine, people are beaten so badly with metal bars that the tissue of their buttocks is destroyed. It has to be gouged away and replaced with grafts from their limbs.

On stage the singer of Lucky Dube's hit 'One People, Different Colours' is murdered by the baton-wielding Hyenas, and to the opening strains of Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' the King of Dreamland is prancing on the boards to deliver a disco version of "I never can say goodbye". National Gallery curator Heeten Bhagat's pop art video sequence of Operation Murambatsvina shows bulldozers ploughing into township houses in day-glo colours behind him.

Walls in Harare are still plastered with election posters four weeks after the event. Morgan and Simba beam at passers-by. Uncle Bob looks out over our right shoulder, his face sour, his fist raised: "Our land. Our sovereignty." Whenever I'm introduced as a South African people sneer about "No Crisis Mbeki": 'Listen, if you're going to hold me accountable for the idiosyncrasies of my president, I'll hold you accountable for yours,' I retort. But I shudder with shame every time I watch his grizzled face emitting smug drivel on the various DSTV news channels that Harareans huddle around hopefully, despondently every night.

"In the dry valleys of Dreamland" intones my replacement storyteller, "the silent choirs sang their songs: The battered men in forgotten jails. The broken women on foreign soils. Families resting in unmarked graves. The hungry, the lost and the landless. And their songs rose like thunderclouds over the land."

Ten children – ages 5-10 years – clutch their teddy bears and line up at front of stage to sing "Somewhere over the Rainbow". The Hyenas appear behind them and smother them one by one with red bags till only one little girl remains singing: "If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow why, oh why can't I?"

'I was pushing a wheelbarrow with a dead body in it. I was being followed by soldiers. I started to dig a hole. It was so deep I couldn't see the bottom. The ground started to crumble into the hole. Suddenly a branch appeared. I grabbed it.'

Rutendo, 24 years old, insurance broker

German counter-tenor, Daniel Lager, sings Andrew Lloyd Webber's haunting 'Pie Jesu' as the projection screen fills with a pair of blood-soaked hands juxtaposed with horrific footage from Rwanda and the DRC, made for my African adaptation of Verdi's Macbeth.

And then the mood changes. Zimbabwean star Chiwonisa Maraire takes the stage with mbira keys whirling and the dancers of Tumbuka Dance Company flying around

her: “My spirit cries out against the injustices committed upon my people... in this world we continue to seek answers from the lying leaders, and in this world we live for food and food alone.”

Thomas Mapfumo’s chimurenga song ‘Mhondoro’ follows this: a call for power to the ancestral spirits of Zimbabwe, while flames leap on screen. Protest slam poets Outspoken and Comrade Fatso entreat the audience to “rise Zimbabwe rise!”

But Zimbabweans are another kind of people to South Africans, and though they weep and raise their fists, they are slow to stand, even to dance. “We are too dignified to fight,” a storyteller tells me. Bev Wheeler, who initiated healing circles for torture victims, reckons Zimbabweans are cowed into quietness. “Hundreds of thousands have been tortured,” she says. “You only need to beat two or three families in a village, rape the women and abduct the men, and the village will be terrified.”

‘I dreamed a talking snake came from under my bed. He took me to the underworld of snakes and showed me the cruel things that humans are doing. He said the king of the snakes was dying.’

Lisa, 13 years old, orphan

The final number in Dreamland is John Lennon’s “Imagine”, lead by Chiwonisa surrounded by children with candles. A galaxy of candle flames and glowing cell phones is held aloft in the audience before fireworks light the sky, and the musicians, choir and dancers slump down into sleep again on stage, still under the narcotic spell of their tyrant king.

For the rest of the festival the audience is wide-eyed about the show. “It had to be said,” is the most common response. Festival director Manuel and I have human rights lawyers numbers on our cells, just in case. Goons from the CIO are always prowling around looking for a diversion.

By the weekend Harare feels like a changed city: thousands of Zimbabweans have been moved by beauty, music and theatre. They have risen up and danced to Freshly Ground, Oliver Mutukudzi and others. They have been reminded that beyond their bleakness more colourful realities do exist. The otherwise ubiquitous talk of ‘the situation’ has faded like a bad dream, if only for a few moments.

‘My house was being blown by fire and then there was nothing. I was crying “Oh! We are buried! We have nothing! Where will we stay?” Later I became a bird and I saw there was blue water all around.’

Deborah, 42 years old, torture survivor