

An Interview with Brett Bailey about ORFEUS, by Rolf Hemke

RH

In a number of plays, like Orfeus, medEia and Macbeth, you like to transform ancient and European myths and plays in an (contemporary) African setting. Why?

BB

I am attracted to stories that have a strong mythic, archetypal core; ancient stories that inspire the feelings of mystery and wonder we feel in the presence of any artefact from a distant time. These stories put us in touch with the consciousness of people who lived close to the root of our civilizations. They travel to us across the ages like the light of stars thousands of light years away.

The post-colonial, socio-political landscape of Africa is the world I live in and the world that fascinates me. The flotsam and jetsam of the West – religions, ideologies, consumerables – are forever washing up on Africa's shores, fusing with other elements both foreign and African, hybridising, morphing, being transformed, redefined, turned inside out. These ancient stories I work with are undergoing a similar process.

RH

What is the reason you have chosen to have Orfeus being performed outdoors, like in a quarry or in a vineyard?

BB

I'm not really a 'theatre person': I don't particularly like being in theatres. I find the experience clinical, sanitized: sitting in comfortable seats passively watching something 'over there' on the stage. For film-viewing such a seating arrangement is satisfying for me: I can be drawn in and utterly engaged. But somehow not for live performance, it is never enough. My most riveting experiences of live performance have been in rituals or ceremonies, where the 'audience' is a part of what is happening and where the action plays out all around; where the venue, rather than being a neutral human parking lot, has texture and meaning integral to the performance. I like to create works that take people physically out of comfort zones, where their senses become heightened, where they are taking a physical as well as an emotional/intellectual/spiritual journey.

RH

The role of Orfeus is performed by the Congolese musician and singer Bebe Lueki. In other plays you worked with Ugandans, Zimbabweans and other Africans. What makes it so interesting to work with other African artists?

BB

Well, Africa has a huge wealth of diverse cultural languages and forms. I reckon artists all over the world enjoy working with fellow artists from other countries, don't they? I mean Dutch artists enjoy working with Belgians, Germans... It's part of what we do. I also work with Dutch, English, Far Eastern artists.

The Orpheus myth tells of a poet-musician who came from a distant country bringing to the Greeks an art form they had never encountered before: one that brought harmony to the world. South Africa is living in restless times, blighted by violent xenophobia. One factor in choosing Bebe to play Orfeus, apart from the haunting beauty of his voice, was to

acknowledge the enrichment that foreign Africans bring into our society. Tragically, like so many African immigrants in South Africa recently, Orpheus was killed by a mob.

RH

Your theatre production House of the Holy Afro is something completely different. It is a very camp, almost kitschy late night club show with singers, musicians and a DJ, but very well received internationally. Were you tired of the more drama like theatre? Or is it a next step towards opera ?

BB

I had already directed opera (Verdi's Macbeth) when I made 'Afro', so no, I would not say it was a move in that direction. 'Afro' was commissioned for a South African festival in Bern, Switzerland. I was asked to make a nightclub show. I'm not really a nightclub kind of guy. I was in Amsterdam at the time and so I visited a couple of clubs to get ideas. In one club two gorgeous blonde women were sitting on barstools singing while a DJ mixed backing tracks on his Mac. The idea that sprang from this was to put together a cast of black South African singer-dancers and have them perform African traditional, gospel and pop songs with a DJ, and to decorate it all with an outrageous fusion of African design and fashion and kitsch pop. It has been fun, but I wouldn't say it's an avenue I'll pursue very far.

RH

Can you tell us why you have started your own company (Third World Bunfight) in 1998 ?

BB

1996, not 1998. Why? Third World Bunfight is the brand name under which I produce the big scale Africa-focus theatrical works I make. There is not a troupe of performers or artists, just a large pool of artists that I draw from for various pieces.

RH

You are often referred as provocative, controversial, being the enfant terrible and the wild child of the new South Africa theatre-makers. Can you explain?

BB

Hmm. My work made quite a splash on the South African theatre scene in the late '90s. This was soon after the fall of apartheid and its ethos of separation, and I brought a heady mix of township performance, rural animist ritual and spirituality, pop and postmodernism to the stage, working with politically sensitive material and boisterously herding a whole bunch of 'sacred cows' into the same camp. My work is seldom commercial in nature and often deals uncompromisingly with social sore points, so I have gained a certain reputation.

RH

You once mentioned that the South African official tourism marketers still promote your country with lions and traditional Zulu's. However, young theatremakers as yourself and Paul Grootboom show a different South Africa. Can you comment on that?

BB

There are these big commercial success stories – Umoja, African Footprint etc. They tour the world with saccharine, foot-stomping versions of South Africa. Just curio entertainment really, with no other pretensions. I stay far away from them...

Am I a 'young theatre-maker'? I am 41 years old, and have been making theatre for 15 years. Paul and I, like many other South African theatre-makers, deal with the more gritty reality of life, but at home we would not be put in the same category of artists. Paul's work tends to focus on the complexities of life in the townships of Johannesburg. My work is more myth-orientated and looks at the often-explosive interactions between First and Third Worlds. As in any country there's a whole range of theatre-makers working with different material, some superficial, some didactic, some provocative.

RH

As far as I understood, you grew up in Cape Town in a predominantly white atmosphere. You graduated at the University of Cape Town in 1991. Can you inform us how South African theatre and theatre making have changed after Apartheid collapsed?

BB

That's quite a big question. I don't attend much theatre. I don't think I'm really qualified to tackle it.

RH

You have been trained – amongst others – at DasArts in Amsterdam in 2000 and graduated in 2004. Can you tell us some of your experiences whilst being here then?

BB

DasArts was a wonderful privilege. Ritsaert ten Cate, the director, had such a clear and beautiful vision. He gave many young artists from around the world the opportunity to come together in a laboratory, to experiment and dig deeply into interesting material. On a block that dealt with food and performance we worked in restaurants, abattoirs, monasteries, with food artists, wine tasters, academics. Incredibly enriching. It has taken me several years to realize how much I learned there.