

## **On Pearls and Swine in Harare – Brett Bailey**

*(This article, scheduled to run in the Mail & Guardian on 13 May 2011 was canned by the writer when tensions around the Opening Show reached boiling point in Harare...)*

Thursday 28 April, 17h30: I've just received an SMS from Manuel Bagorro, director of HIFA (Harare International Festival of the Arts). He's been taken downtown to Harare Central Police Station. The reason: official unhappiness with the content of the performance that I made to open the Festival two nights ago.

I flew out of Harare at lunch today after an anxious few hours erasing references about the Mugabe regime from my notebooks, and expecting to be asked to 'step this way' by uniformed men at the airport. I feel sick that Manuel is taking the rap for my work.

News started circulating last night that details of the show – performed in Harare Gardens in the centre of town before several thousand people – had gone right to the top of the country. The President's Office, the C.I.O. (Central Intelligence Organisation) and the Police are stirring. In the Festival bar Manuel hit the red wine hard: 'It's all very unpleasant, but I loved the show.'

HIFA is in its 12<sup>th</sup> year now. For a week the Festival makes an annual splash of colour that animates the otherwise monochrome cultural climate. Zimbabweans flock to the events to hang out together, to attend music, poetry and theatre, and to forget.

Since 2006 I have created five of the Festival's opening shows. In order to make the gig accessible to its broad, diverse audience I always give it a populist slant, featuring a range of pop songs performed by a band, a choir and singers. I also work with local dancers, actors and poets. But beneath the veneer of entertainment I make straight for the jugular, depicting the trauma of this society and striking out at the villains.

In casting about for a theme for the show, the Marange blood diamonds were the obvious hook. While still in South Africa I did a good deal of reading on the net to get a sense of the terrain. I was caught by a line in a speech by MDC Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Roy Bennett: Zim is being run by 'a blood-thirsty coterie of gangsters'.

Political analyst, Dr Alex T. Magaisa, thickened the plot: 'The behaviour exhibited is typical of the conduct of gangsters after making a "score". They have no interest whatsoever in developing anything beyond their personal luxuries... Instead of ploughing [in] resources to explore, create and develop systems and products to give the country a

competitive edge, the under-developed middle class simply pursues the path of negation and decadence, as it tries to compete with the Western middle class.'

I decided on 'Bling' for the title of the show, but later changed it to the more nuanced 'TREA\$URE'. As I wrote in the blurb for the Festival programme: 'There are those for who the richness of this country is measured in humanity, the collective wealth and the wellbeing of the nation. And then there are those for who richness is all about possessions and status and power. It must be collected at any cost, and to hell with the consequences...'

Roy Bennett says it another way: 'Will investors clamber over the bodies of our people in a bid to get-rich-quick or will they be patient, supporting truly sustainable development that will bring a win-win for the nation and those who seek a profit?'

There has been a noticeable shift in Harareans since I was last here two years ago. 2008 was bleak – the economy was cataclysmic, shops were empty and state brutality was rampant. But in 2009 there was lustre in people's eyes and lightness in their step. The future looked bright with the new unity government, laden supermarket shelves and the stability of the economy brought about by the switch to the US dollar.

That spring has now passed. This year the tone is apathetic, complacent, resigned... Appointments are continually missed, commitments are neglected and sloppiness abounds. Dancers and singers rock up for rehearsals at their leisure. My hairline recedes.

Potholes have widened in the city's streets for years – people have grown accustomed to them and skirt them; they are merely a feature of the urban topography. 'A pothole full of water is less dangerous than one without water,' runs a local joke, 'because you know it has a bottom'. I feel that people's psyches are potholed too now.

First interview: Muchadeyi Masunda, Mayor of Harare and director or chairman of at least thirteen companies, including Anglo American Corporation Zimbabwe, Zimplats and Old Mutual. I meet him at 5pm in his office in Town House, at the confluence of streets overflowing with anarchic traffic. We sit in red leather armchairs in the long reception room decorated with a jumble sale clutter of bric-a-brac.

Old Mutual has come in for a hammering recently. According to Bennett, they 'have benefited from the daylight robbery of mining rights and from massacres by the army and air force of Zimbabwe.' (Helicopter gunships strafed informal miners in the Marange diamond

fields a couple of years ago, clearing the decks for the Generals to move in.) The company is also a major shareholder in Zimpapers, publisher of ZANU-PF's mouthpiece, The Herald.

I start off badly by quoting Dr Magaisa: 'The acquisition and flaunting of luxury by what is largely no more than a sophisticated class of privileged gangsters, preying on a dying economy and calling it a celebration of success... must surely be a damning reflection on the state of morals, common decency and values of [Zimbabwean] society.'

'I hope that you're not implicating me in that, Brett,' Mayor Masunda huffs archly, and from then on he's on guard, dodging any pointed questions with diplomatic dexterity.

Generally he's seen as the right man to get the potholes of Harare filled. He became Mayor, he says, because he's fed up with the decay here. 'My children are economic refugees. Not only my own children but Zimbabwe's children. I want them all back.'

How will the necessary change come about? 'People need to wake up and smell the coffee, Brett, they need to get rid of their sense of entitlement. They need to stop thinking that someone else is going to save them. They need to start making things right themselves.'

Dr Simba Makoni, who ran as an independent presidential candidate against Mugabe in 2008, agrees. But he sees the pervasive sense of entitlement as the orchestrated result of cunning state strategy. 'ZANU-PF has completely changed the character of Zimbabweans,' he sighs. The people have been made utterly dependent on government, emptied of initiative and filled with hopelessness, told again and again how *el Presidente* will solve their problems.

Makoni gives the example of a ZANU-PF MP in the run up to the 2008 elections, when sugar was more precious than gold. There sat the minister on a stool in a hall with a huge sack between his thighs, doling out a tin mug full of sugar to hundreds of potential voters in a queue that wrapped around the block: 'This is from your President'.

I like Makoni. He is open, humble, intelligent. His shabby office has faded beige Marley tiles on the floor, photos of his kids on the wall, and no security guard. He sits with his right leg thrown over arm of his chair.

ZANU is out to defang the MDC, he says, and 'Morgan' is getting very comfortable. He mentions a telling sticking point in recent negotiations between the two parties: Tsvangerai insisting that his motorcade should be as long as Mugabe's...

What will precipitate change? 'Ah the tipping point', he smiles. He's expected it time and again, but to his surprise it hasn't yet occurred.

He escorts me down a flight of stairs and sees me to the exit of the building himself. 'Maybe there's somebody waiting in the wings to lead us out of this,' he muses. 'Like a Mandela?' I ask. 'There could be,' he says with twinkling eyes, and I get a flash of insight into his personal fantasy. He'd get my vote.

Spar is everywhere, every couple of kilometres. Where general dealers struggled two years ago, now there's Spar. Shelves are stacked high with pricey South African products.

These are signs of confidence, says human rights activist Tony Reeler, but the veneer of glitter and civic mindedness obscures giant shadows. There's been no change in people power, he laments. Spar has practically wiped out the informal sector that arose with the crash of the Zim dollar. MDC ministers are continually arrested, intimidation and torture continue, and foreign corporations are threatened with indigenisation.

Mugabe makes a song and dance about the international sanctions but actually he needs them, says Reeler. They are great for election rhetoric. Without them he wouldn't be able to justify indigenisation: ZANU's policy of divide and conquer. And his outrage over the sanctions carries weight in SADC countries, bolstering the image he's cultivated of the lone old crusader against neo-colonialism.

I spend two weeks researching in Harare, and lining up musicians, singers and dancers. Then Cape Town choreographer Natalie Fisher arrives to work alongside me. We've got two hair-tearing weeks to put the show together.

Peter Godwin, in his recent book on Zimbabwe 2008, 'The Fear', devotes a chapter to 'Dreamland', the HIFA opening performance I made in that year. It's enlightening to see the production through his eyes, within his narrative of atrocities and sorrows. I realize that these performances are unique and special: they are the only forum where thousands of Zimbabweans can gather to collectively share the griefs, horrors and hopes of their situation. And it's all packaged with finesse and music and lights.

'TREA\$URE' begins at 19h30 on Tuesday 26 April. The towering palm trees of Harare Gardens throw dark silhouettes against the sky. The show opens with a local diva singing Shirley Bassey's 'Diamonds are Forever'. The stage is alive with hundreds of fairy lights blinking from

mounds of rubble and garbage. Then 12 little kids from the Eastleigh Orphanage (which the State no longer funds) totter out and scrape huge plastic diamonds from the rubble.

A gold-faced General stumbles onto stage in a spotlight, falls to his knees, raises his arms in prayer, and breaks into a soulful rendition of Bruno Mars' hit: 'I wanna be a billionaire so frigging bad, buy all of the things I never had...' He's joined by a politician, a businessman and a bishop - the cabal of villains that I call 'The Pigs'.

An inflatable toy boeing sweeps in and three Chinese stereotypes with black manes, chalk white faces and Mikado lips arrive on stage in a puff of smoke. They sing Prince's 'Diamonds and Pearls', hand out bushels of bank notes and vast washing machines to the prancing Pigs, and round up the orphans to collect their diamonds in Spar shopping baskets.

To the rock-a-billy thumps of 'Money (That's what I want)', the Pigs caper around stage flaunting a cardboard cut out Mercedes SUV, and then everything spills over into glittering bling opulence in a rendition of Madonna's 'Material Girl' a la Marilyn Monroe.

Suddenly everything goes dark. Two soldiers escort a tottering old figure wrapped in a tiger skin blanket onto a tiered platform centre stage. He sits as still as a pagan icon while South African band Bright Blue's 80's hit, 'Weeping', is sung. The song was written about P.W. Botha, but is good for any tyrant: 'I knew a man who lived in fear, it was big, it was angry, it was growing near. Behind his house, a secret place, was the shadow of the demon he could never face...'

A crowd of working class men, women and children are driven on stage by the soldiers and forced to sit before the shrine, raising their clenched fists in a monotonous enactment of the rallies that tens of thousands are forced to attend. One by one they crawl to the shrouded figure who majestically hands them each a slice of bread.

From the outset I've given the cast a sort of socialist-humanitarian spin on the dramatics. I don't want them to get into any trouble. The performance is about rampant consumerism and economic inequality, I tell them. Nothing political at all, okay?

A family of refugee farm workers crosses the stage laden with baggage and slumps amongst the debris to perform Ladysmith Black Mambazo's 'Homeless': 'Many dead tonight, it could be you...'

To the opening strains of UB40's 'King' a group of protesters is toy-toying with placards showing broken chains held above their heads. A

couple of months ago around 40 people were arrested here, held for days and allegedly tortured for watching a film about the unrest in Egypt. On stage the soldiers beat the protesters down, lock two of them in tiny jail cells, and drag a third man offstage. Video projection shows him being beaten to death with staves.

'King' was written as a homage to Martin Luther King Jr, but I've altered the lyrics: 'King, where are your people now? Chained and pacified. Tried in vain to live their lives, and for that they died.'

As the haunting chords of Pink Floyd's 'Shine on you crazy diamond' ring out, the soldiers dump the body of the beaten man at the feet of the King in his tiger blanket. He rises slowly and plunges his hands into the entrails of the corpse, ripping bleeding diamonds from the guts. The gathered crowd flees, regroups and then rushes him, driving the soldiers off stage, knocking the King to the ground, and reclaiming their fallen comrade.

Zimbabwean superstar singer Chiwoniso Maraire, with a voice of honey and gravel, sears into song: 'Remember when you were young, you shone like the sun, shine on you crazy diamond. Now there's a look in your eyes like black holes in the sky, shine on you crazy diamond...'

Slowly she turns to the hunched figure and aims a stinging verse of Gloria Gaynor at him: 'Go, walk out the door, don't turn around now, cause you're not welcome anymore!' She snatches his bag of diamonds as he shuffles past her. The cast gathers in a wall behind her as the old man stumbles off the front of the stage and staggers through the thousands of stunned spectators seated on the lawn. 'Weren't you the one who tried to hurt me? Do you think I'd lay down and die? Oh no not I, I will survive...'

The show winds down with a beautiful rendition of U2's 'Peace on Earth' ('They're reading names out over the radio. All the folks the rest of us won't get to know: Sean and Julia, Chipo and Tawanda. Their lives are bigger than any big idea'). The little orphans distribute diamonds to cast and spectators, candles are lit, the body is shrouded and carried off, and the audience weeps.

Then there are fireworks and dancing while a diva in a pink domestic worker's uniform belts out Vicky Sampson's cheesy-sweet 'My Afrikan Dream.'

The audience is on its feet, rapturous, gob-smacked. 'You'd better catch the next plane out of here,' I'm warned over and over.

The boyfriend of one of the performers, who is busy making his fortune in a diamond deal, knows several members of the C.I.O. He's seen a number of them in the crowd tonight. He overhears two of them speaking: 'How can they get away with this?' 'Just let these gay gangsters do their things.'

But news of the show does indeed reach the grand sties where the chief pigs wallow, and they're snorting and frothing in their bloodstained bling. This gay gangster is pretty relieved when he touches down safely on South African soil.

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*As it happens, although there was a lot of anxiety in the HIFA festival office, and I had to cancel the publication of this piece in the Mail and Guardian, but no blood was shed.*

*The following weekend the state newspaper published this beneath a pic of the show:*

*"The opening night act was unnecessarily provocative and antagonised the establishment, thereby creating an unpleasant environment for practitioners working here earning a living. They have to negotiate the muddied waters and bruised egos while Brett Bailey carries on with his life – well until this time next year. At the same time, if I produced something that ridicules the English monarch and took it to the Royal Albert Hall, without a doubt they would arrest me. Zimbabwean authorities must be commended for showing remarkable tolerance by neither stopping the performance on the night nor arresting anyone on the night. An interview of four people the next day is not an arrest, let's not delude each other."*

*Let that be a warning to anyone who has thoughts of taunting the Queen...*

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