

MACBETH PROGRAMME – Spier Arts Summer Season 2007

Director's note:

Shakespeare's Macbeth, located in a tribal society characterised by violent coups d'etat, tenacious political leaders, rebel insurgencies, and a belief system rich in soothsayers and bewitchings, lends itself superbly to an African setting.

I've found myself fascinated by the witches this time around: searching for a form for them that we can relate to in an era in which evil has receded from the realm of spirits to reside within the murky caves of the human psyche.

Our local news media report case after case of unfathomable violence in South Africa: 'What motivates such cruelty?' We hold our breaths and activate alarms as the mortar that binds our society is washed away.

A common theme in African tradition is the threat to civilization by the Wilderness: a dark force forever out to invade, to destabilise, to reclaim territory wrested from it by human endeavour. Ancestors and gods are plied with gifts to protect against agents that slink from the forests to corrupt the minds, bodies and souls of good citizens and destroy the fragile order.

Understanding this helps to make sense of the strange beings we meet at the beginning of the drama waiting to sow in two honourable, unwary men the prophetic seeds that will ultimately bring their kingdom crashing down.

Macbeth premiered in Florence on 14 March 1847: exactly 160 years ago. Verdi revised the opera for Paris in 1865. Given free rein by Angelo Gobatto in 2001 I took a sharp pair of scissors to this latter version, snipping out chunks of the work which I felt were unnecessary to the plot. In general I find operas over-long – monumental constructions of a slower age: I wanted a fast-paced 90 minute piece without an interval. With this in mind Peter Louis van Dijk adapted the score and included African musical influences. I directed students of the University of Cape Town Opera School in this version of Macbeth in 2001 (Artscape) and again in 2002

(Pretoria State Theatre). Simphiwe Qavane, who played Macbeth so strikingly in those productions, has sadly since joined the great chorus in the sky.

B.Bailey