

**Bailey brings signature sardonic humour to Verdi's 'Macbeth'**

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Stretching the translations to its limit, Brett Bailey removes the frills of Verdi's opera without taking from its beauty.



Director Brett Bailey has been on a 12-year journey with composer Verdi’s *Macbeth,* ever since first airing it with opera students in 2002 and then directing a large-scale production at Spier in 2007 for Cape Town Opera. Though again set in Africa, this time very specifically in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, his new staging is a radically different interpretation that hardly retains anything of the previous version.

For starters, it has been re-orchestrated and rearranged by Belgian composer Fabrizio Cassol for just 10 singers and a chamber ensemble of 12 musicians (five strings, five wind, two percussion), under the more than competent baton of Berlin-based Serbian conductor Premil Petrovic. Besides being Belgian, Cassol has a connection to central Africa that extends back to his musical collaborations with the Aka Pygmy in 1991.

Verdi has already pared down Shakespeare’s giant canvas to focus almost exclusively on the Macbeths and witches –  retaining Banquo halfway into Act Two. Macduff and the other parts are therefore all easily and seamlessly absorbed by the ensemble. As Verdi intended, Bailey keeps Lady Macbeth as the fulcrum.

Bailey has further stripped away, cutting the opera – one of the few operas that even vaguely interest him – to 100 minutes. He has removed all the frills, ballet and the prettiness, though without damaging the beauty.

Most of the action takes place on a small stage within the stage, with projections boxed by black drapes. The design is characteristically Bailey, deliberately self-aware in the deconstructionist style. The irony is that the more Spartan his opera, the more powerful and poignant the effect.

His dramatic conceit is a troupe of refugee-performers, L’enfer c’est les autres, from the conflict zones of the Eastern Congo who have discovered an old trunk with musical scores, costumes, and props – remnants from an amateur company that had performed Verdi’s opera in Goma town hall in the 1930s during the colonial period. 75 years later, Bailey asks us to imagine how the troupe tell the story of the plight of their country – the story of an Africa torn to shreds, a place where ethnic warlords, neighbouring states and multinational companies have truly, in Shakespeare’s words, “murder’d sleep”.

**No sumptuous gowns, costumes**
In making the work, Bailey has said he imagined Verdi’s masterpiece as a “19th century architectural monolith – like a colonial cathedral – lost in the forests of Central Africa; a memento of a prior era, now crumbling, shot full of bullet holes, sprayed with graffiti, collapsing under the weight of vines”. No sumptuous gowns and costumes for this opera cast; this is something altogether more visceral. They will end the evening barefoot; the divas carrying their own props, even helping with scene changes. The cast give themselves to their acting in a way one seldom sees in opera, and this critic hasn’t seen since Patrice Chéreau’s production of Janácek’s *From the House of the Dead*.

Bailey’s work has always been inspired by how anything from religions to material goods infiltrate Africa and are then modified and appropriated by Africans, and what is exciting and groundbreaking about this *Macbeth* is that Bailey has not simply dressed up the opera, giving it an African setting or theme, but he has gone way beyond that. He has begun a process of appropriation and cultural transposition.

Bailey’s irreverence for the art form will have purists clucking and the European opera establishment unhinged. It is unlikely to be seen at La Scala anytime soon, but it reminds one of the kind of audaciousness Europe grew to love from cult director Christoph Schlingensief. Back in the day, critics and public were none too happy with the way Verdi flouted the aesthetic codes of the time with Macbeth either.

Take Bailey’s subtitles; the opera is sung in the original Italian, but Bailey’s translations are often more a gloss than a rendering of Piave’s libretto into contemporary speech. We have “motherfucker” for Macduff, and phrases such as “I get it” and “hey, babe”. The Italian, “Va!”, becomes “fuck off [demon]”.

Bailey also stretches the translations to their very limit to make it tell the story he wants. With the death of the king, the great choral number calling on God to avenge the outrage *“le tue fiamme discendano”* [let your avenging fire fall] becomes “burn the killer alive”. Bailey excludes any hope of divine intervention or mercy for the God-forsaken Congo.

**Distressing juxtaposition**
The opera opens gently, not with the brassy overture we’re accustomed to. We are told of a shattered country filled with orphans, a country that is nothing more than a mass grave for its people.

The witches appear as three white-masked men in suits with pith helmets and mining hard hats, wizards from the world of multinational corporate global finance. While they mime to a Powerpoint presentation on investment opportunities, ostensibly to develop Africa’s potential, the words of these witches are sung by three terrified, captured, village women, menaced by a militiaman who cues each to sing their turn by holding a machete to their throats. Having the victims sing the witches words under duress, another indignity, is a brilliant theatrical device by Bailey, and it has a complex emotional effect.

Macbeth (Owen Metsileng) and Banquo (Otto Maidi) are each given a box of goodies with camouflage clothes and guns, the start of their transformation to militarised rule. Within minutes, a woman is abducted and raped off stage. In an extremely distressing juxtaposition, she crawls back to the chorus below the rostrum while Macbeth and Banquo discuss the witches’ prophesy, indifferent to her plight.

A projected slide gives the fictional background and names the female chorus members – one born of rape, another displaced, a refugee, and a previously conscripted child soldier.

Bailey’s characteristic sardonic humour has Lady Macbeth (Nobulumko Mngxekeza) make her first appearance as the owner of a laundrette. As in the Spier production, she receives an SMS (projected on the back screen) from Macbeth telling her of the witches and their prophecy – *“WTF!!? C U Later”*.

Mngxekeza is chilling as Lady M, and she handles the aria *“Vieni! t’Affretta!”* and its cabaletta with aplomb. She sits, hardly moving, inscrutable, reminding one of Bailey’s other matron, Medea, but this time Bailey has Verdi’s magnificently scored psychological arc to tell the story, and lying behind that Shakespeare.

She is dreaming of shoes and glitter. Bailey’s mise-en-scène is precise, from the chequered floor of the rostrum to the patterns on Lady Macbeth’s dress to the fabric-like graphic projections on the backdrop.

**Bailey pulls tricks**
Macbeth arrives, wearing a red beret, an unmistakeable reference to Julius Malema’s Economic Freedom Fighters. When he later speaks of the murdered king as being like a father, one can only think of the acrimonious volte-face between Malema and his erstwhile mentor President Jacob Zuma, an act of patricide that is destined to be repeated on Banquo.

The unconventional, part-duet, part-arioso *“Fatal mia donna!”* between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth sung in half-voice that describes the murder of the king shows both performers at their dramatic best. Lady Macbeth, tough as nails, disrobes Macbeth from his blood-splattered camouflage.

Reporting on his mobile phone about the subsequent night that tore the world apart, it’s a treat to hear Maidi sing *“Oh quale orrenda notte!”* with his rich, expressive voice. For the resounding finale to Act One, with Lady Macbeth and Macbeth joining the chorus in their nightgowns, the small ensemble mount considerable vocal force and Petrovic coaxes from the chamber orchestra a startlingly big sound.

Then Bailey pulls another trick: the hymn at the funeral of the king is supplanted by a scratchy, tinny, archival recording of Verdi’s opera, while we watch Macbeth receiving briefcases full of cash and Prada bags. He now puts on a red hat in the shape of a giant fist; signalling all the hubris and lunacy of Africa’s big men.

A lonely, sorrowful violin accompanies projected photographs from Marcus Bleasdale and Cedric Gerbehaye’s reportage on the Congo. Cassol has given the violin an almost mournful klezmer quality. The final image is of a small child digging for gold in a giant open cast pit mine in Watsa – a vision of hell on earth.

There are no intervals and Act Two begins at once with Macbeth and a now bejewelled Lady Macbeth dressed in camouflage and animal print on a sofa. While he flips through TV channels and she reads magazines, they decide to kill Banquo.

**Macbeths go bling**
In scarlet red boots under a mirror ball, Mngxekeza sings *“La luce langue”*, another great showcase for her vocal range, drawing applause every night she performed it.

The four murderers in red berets enter with machetes and shrill whistles, do a toyi-toyi to *“Sparve il sol, la note or regni”*, which Cassol has given percussive, African instrumentation and drumming. Its tuneful, playfulness makes it all the more sinister.

In the face of the hoodlums, Maidi delivers Banquo’s foreboding aria *“Come dal ciel precipita”* while dancing. Natalie Fisher’s simple but highly effective choreography unmistakeably references President Jacob Zuma’s well-known dancing moves.

The Macbeths have now gone completely bling. He is in a gold suit; she in hot pants. They bump and twerk, somehow managing to be both sensual and utterly vulgar, under a crystal chandelier while the murderers dine at a counter of Asian food.

Mngxekeza gives another superb aria with her rendition of Lady Macbeth’s unnerving, yet playful *“Brindisi si colmi il calice”*, “fill the cup to the brim” with “choice wine”, which in Bailey’s subtitles becomes “French champagne”.

The apparition of Banquo’s ghost is as a grim black and write projection, a press photograph of a corpse, face visible, contorted in the agony of death. Both singers handle the complicated duet *“Che ti scosta, o re mio sposo”* that follows superbly, with Macbeth falling apart from guilt as Lady Macbeth tries to keep the festivities going.

**Macbeth’s paranoia**
Macbeth returns to the witches, communing with them not through a cauldron but a laptop. The words are again sung by the captive women, while the besuited wizards in their pith helmets present a sort of mining indaba exhorting the world to invest in dollar-opportunity Africa. They haul diamonds and gold out of Chinese woven plastic bags, weighing the nuggets on scales and adding up the proceeds, while discarding the occasional dead baby which also come out of the bag.

But Macbeth’s paranoia, fear and isolation have no end. A sense of impending doom is struck by Cassol’s eerie chords.

As if coming to the rescue, Lady Macbeth reappears, now in a vest, styled as a military bush commander, AK47 on her hip, dead babies strewn at her feet. We recognise the darkness in her sunglasses from our own history of butchery and civil strife in South Africa.

The ensemble weep for the massacre of the innocents (in Shakespeare, Macduff’s children); only here, in Bailey’s production, we feel the slaughter is on a vast scale. Each member of the rest of the ensemble, joined by Maidi, sits in a square of light, like gaping graves, weeping as they neatly, lovingly fold into sacred parcels the empty clothes of toddlers and small children.

Even Lady Macbeth will succumb. Mngxekeza pulls off Verdi’s complicated sleepwalking scene with a noteworthy interpretation of *“Una macchia è qui tutor”*, yet another opportunity to showcase her formidable vocal range.

When the Lady dies, Metsileng sings Macbeth’s aria *“Pietà, rispetto, armore”* “devotion, honour, love” with beautiful modulation, cradling her pieta style. He is stripped down to his underwear now, and despite everything he has done, it is a testament to Metsileng’s performance that we feel for this trapped despot; through him we feel the utter, tragic futility, the senseless waste of his butchery all for the sake of baubles and greed and power, for if it could not even benefit the man who did it all, but ruined him instead, how much more senseless.

**The avenging Macduff**
The avenging Macduff comes in the form of one of the women from the ensemble now dressed in a military hat and jacket and brandishing a panga. When Macbeth declares he cannot be killed by any “man born of woman”, Macduff replies, “I was not born; they cut me from my mother’s belly”, which in the context of the Congo takes on a completely different and appalling meaning from Shakespeare’s intended Caesarean birth.

The work has throughout been beautifully lit by Felice Ross, best known for her work with the gruelling Polish director Krzysztof Warlikowski, but now the stage is only dimly lit; the last ten minutes performed almost in darkness.

Macbeth expires on stage, beneath the graphic of a corporate logo, realising the calamitous consequence of listening to the wizards.

We return to the opening chorus, and a photograph taken by Gerbehaye in north Kivu of three refugee children on a hillside, the real, undeniable legacy of a shattered country.

Even though Bailey puts much of the blame for fuelling the conflict on multinational capitalism, some will say that the production once again feeds stereotypes of Afro-pessimism. But the catastrophe in Eastern Congo is of such a scale, it is frankly churlish to speak in such academic terms. Between five and seven million people have died in the last 20 years, dwarfing all other conflicts in the world, and yet it hardly features in the news.

**Macbeth now travels to Brussels, Rotterdam, Vienna, Montpellier, Braunschweig, London, Lisbon, Gerona, Tarbes, Toulouse, Strasbourg, Paris and Douiax AND AUCKLAND!**

*Brent Meersman serves in an advisory capacity on the board of Third World Bunfight and receives no financial benefits.*