

Isango Ensemble /
Young Vic

A MAN OF GOOD HOPE

March
7-24 2019
ARTS FESTIVAL
AUCKLAND

14-18 March • ASB Waterfront Theatre

Synopsis

Asad is a young Somalian refugee with a painful past, a brilliant head for business and miraculously good luck. After years in a refugee camp, then learning to hustle on the streets of Ethiopia, he sets off for the promised land of South Africa. But dreams and reality are very different. Once he has arrived in the townships, his adventures really begin.

Writer's note

I had little idea that I would write a book about Asad Abdullahi when I met him. I had in mind a very different project, one that would take in many times, people and places. I imagined that Asad would occupy 10, perhaps 20 pages of the work.

It was at our second meeting, I think, that the book I actually wrote was conceived. Asad and I were walking through the Company's Garden, one of Cape Town's oldest and loveliest public spaces, when Asad picked up a twig, snapped it open and smelt it. I will never forget the expression that came over him – the surprise, the wistfulness, the knowledge that what he was experiencing would soon disappear. The fragrance had transported him more than two decades back in time. He was six or seven years old in a madrassa in Mogadishu, Somalia copying out the Koran line by line. The smell of the twig had reminded him of the narcotic sap of the agreeeg tree he had used to bind ink; he was reliving a forgotten high. I felt a whim rising. A man who can break a twig and take me with him to another world, I thought, is a man about whom I ought to write a book.

When I met him Asad was hustling for a living. He'd leave his shack on the outskirts of Cape Town in the early mornings, hang out in the Somali section of Mitchell's Plain township and ask the traders and

businessmen he met there if they needed a delivery to be made. A man living that sort of life hardly had the time a writer demanded. And so I bought his time. I capitalised the business he wanted to start: selling cigarettes, mobile phone airtime and frozen chickens from his shack. It cost me less than £400. In exchange, I acquired a subject sufficiently sedentary to interview for weeks and months at a time.

I will not say that the book wrote itself. Nor would I be so presumptuous as to think that Asad had a hand in writing it. Nonetheless, something of his grace and his skill were transferred to me, making the writing of the book possible. But under what strange conditions this transference took place. I was a white man in a good car and Asad was convinced that my presence in his shantytown home would attract men with guns. He refused to meet in his shack where he would have no forewarning of an attack. Instead he insisted that we talk in my car; there he had a 360-degree view and could see trouble coming. And so that is where we sat day in and day out for nearly a year.

When the first draft of the manuscript was written I asked him to read it. He refused. The story of his past was simply too sad, he said. I redoubled my efforts to get him to look at it, but he only dug in his heels.

He simply would not. I was disconcerted. By the time I was done writing I had retraced most of his steps through the Horn of Africa, had found long-lost relatives of his in various parts of the world, and had discovered something of the lost genealogy of his family. Between my forensic interest in his history and his refusal to read about it was a chasm that made me immensely uneasy.

It took a long while for me to settle upon an explanation. Taking in his past as a narrative unspooling through time was simply unhelpful to him, I believe. More than that, it was destructive. To have this perennially rejected boy, forever kicked around like a stone, installed in his imagination, was to rob himself of the wherewithal to live in the present. Better to see his past in flashes, to keep in his mind particular moments: moments of mystical feeling, of love, of the desire for revenge, moments when he was the one who decided what would happen next. Deep in our culture is the belief that unearthing memory is therapeutic. I think that Asad has taught me otherwise. He gave me the material to assemble a story about his personal history. But the story is not for him; it is for others.

Jonny Steinberg
Writer of the book,
A Man of Good Hope

ISANGO
ENSEMBLE

Young Vic
It's a big world in here

2hrs 30mins inc. interval (25mins)

IMAGES: KEITH PATTISON

WITH SUPPORT FROM
GOLD PATRONS BILL & FRANCES BELL

Based on the book by Jonny Steinberg
Directed by Mark Dornford-May
Music direction by Mandisi Dyantyi

A Young Vic and Isango Ensemble Production
Co-produced by The Royal Opera, Repons, BAM and Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg

Cast

Conductor / Jonny
Mandisi Dyantyi

Asad as a boy / Musharaf
Siphosethu Hintsho
Phielo Asakhe Makitle

Asad’s mother
Zanele Gracious Mbatha

Yindy / Sadicya
Zoleka Mpotsha

Asad as a young man
Thandolwethu Mzembe

Yindy’s mother
Siyanda Ncobo

Yindy’s father
Philani Xhaga

Tube
Melikhaya Edward Ntshuntshe

Rooda
Zamile Christopher Gantana

Orange seller
Zimkhitha Mathomane

Asad as a man
Ayanda Siyabonga Tikolo

Wedding guest
Masixole Mgugunyeka

Foosiya
Cikizwa Rolomana

Kaafi
Sonwabo George Ntshata

Kaafi’s wife
Nonkululeko Nkwinti

Madoda
Sinethemba Mdena

Abdi
Thobile Jim Dyasi

Old woman
Nombongo Wendy Fatyi

English teacher
and Foosiya’s friend
Nolubabalo Mdayi

Assistant shopkeeper
Masakana Cecil Sotayisi

Death and Desk Clerk
Nontsusa Louw

Production

Artistic Director
Mark Dornford-May

Music Director
Mandisi Dyantyi

Music Director
Pauline Malefane

Choreographer
Lungelo Ngamlana

Lighting Designer
Manuel Manim

Lighting re-design by
Sue Grey-Gardner

Writer of the book,
A Man of Good Hope
Jonny Steinberg

Producer
Claire Bejanin

Technical

Production Manager
John Page

Company Manager
Maris Sharp

Stage Management
Sandile Mgugunyeka

Stage Management
Valencia Mgugunyeka

PRESENTED BY
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The Festival reflects our contemporary, cosmopolitan city with its many communities. It challenges artists and audiences to be bold and take a risk. Through the work of artists of Aotearoa and across the world, we aim to inspire, provoke and entertain the people of Auckland Tāmaki Makaurau and our many visitors.

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