



SAMSON

INTERVIEW WITH BRETT BAILEY

You've shown time and again your love for mythological stories. Why choose Samson now?

Brett Bailey: I've always been interested in myths, in those stories from ancient times. They connect us to the primitive in us. Since the dawn of time, it's by telling stories that we've tried to find our place in the world. Several years ago, I directed *medEia*, which led me to the Greek myths. I read Carl Jung about mythology as well as Joseph Campbell, the American expert on myths. That's how I first met the story of Orpheus, then that of the Minotaur, which I adapted for *Sanctuary*. Seeing how the Greeks transposed their sacred texts to turn them into great tragedies, I decided to do something similar with the sacred texts of western civilisation, like the Bible. I read many biblical stories, but kept coming back to the myth of Samson. It's a very powerful story. What also intrigues me in those myths is the moral ambiguity. Many characters follow the laws of God, which gives them strength, but Samson falls. The heroes of the stories I tell are often fallible... When I approach a story, I try to pare everything down to find its core, which I then immerse in my own questions about our modern times. The point is to see how this myth can be anchored in our time and what it brings to the surface. It's hard to build a cohesive narrative with this story because it moves from one action to another, from one nameless character to another, so I wanted to understand who the main protagonists were. I put Samson within the context of my own country under apartheid, but I also imagined him right now, as a jihadist killing scores of people. In this situation, Delilah, a complex character often portrayed as a betrayer, becomes a very brave woman who rises to protect her society. Her people are threatened by this man, so she musters all her courage to stop him. My fascination for Samson came from all that.

Elvis Sibeko, the actor playing Samson, is a dancer and choreographer, but also a *sangoma*, a traditional South African healer and seer. Samson was a nazirite, a biblical character dedicated to God. Did you intend for there to be an echo between those two spiritual figures?

I really tried to understand the reasons for Samson's rage, and I wanted to place that story somewhere between the world of the Bible and the recent colonial model. He's a man who was humiliated on the day of his wedding and, after his wife was taken from him, who was driven out of town. The repressed power of humiliation and anger explode within him into a primal and savage form of violence. It's commensurate with the rage of a people who have been oppressed for centuries. Samson is a deeply archetypal figure, from a spiritual point of view. He embodies fury, becomes its symbol. Since the 1990s, I've worked with Africans living in South Africa and have focused on their spirituality and their folk tales. I've worked a lot with *sangoma*, who use primitive energies to call on the ancestors. They are possessed by the spirits of the elders moving through their bodies. The spirit speaking through actor Elvis Sibeko—himself a *sangoma*, as you said—is that of one of his ancestors, a great warrior from five generations ago. A powerful spirit acts through the body of the actor-dancer. When a *sangoma* dances, he enters a trance, and the spirit takes hold of him to the point that his own personality disappears. I wanted to show the similarities between the archetypal power of Samson's fury and the power of the spirit inhabiting Elvis Sibeko's body.

The play is extremely political, and shows the eternal cycle of violence provoking and reacting to violence. What great subjects of our contemporary history did you want to shine a light on with this ancient story of greed, hatred, and brutality?

I wanted of course to explore themes like migration or xenophobia, or even loss. My previous show, *Sanctuary*, was about the refugee crisis, about their loss of hope, of the connection to their community and country of origin, the loss of their dignity. During the colonial period and after, in developing countries, the land was taken away, resources were plundered, entire peoples were dehumanised. It's a theme I'd already tackled with my *Exhibit B* installation at the Festival d'Avignon in 2013. Today, we see the repercussions of all those violent actions with, for instance, mass migration in Europe. We feel the anger of those people who have been excluded, uprooted, deprived of rights. The phrase "you reap what you sow" sums up the situation pretty well. When you look at the causes of terrorist acts in the United States and all over the world, when you look at how the Rohingya people are treated in Myanmar, or the Uyghurs in China, those are seeds that have been sown and end up exploding. If there is a lesson to learn here, and it might be too late for it already, it's that if we don't treat people and our environment with respect, we will suffer the consequences. I see *Samson* as a devastating story at the end of which he annihilates a system, causing its collapse, just like the World Trade Center towers collapsed. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell describes the hero's journey as a succession of steps on which the hero can get lost, but which lead him to a sort of transcendence, of self-discovery. Here, Samson's story is also that of a man who faces trial after trial to end up in a prison which looks a lot like the one in Guantanamo Bay, and who nonetheless manages to overcome all those obstacles. Samson is the symbol of the strength individuals can use to transcend oppressive systems. I don't know if my theatre can really change anything, it's first and foremost a work of research. I'm tirelessly exploring those themes to understand how humans can survive and find a meaning to their lives in such a state of oppression. Performing *Samson* at the Festival d'Avignon, with the migration and racism we've been experiencing in Europe and in France, can really speak to the audience. It's important to me.

Music and images draw a connection between ancient myths and our modern world. Can you tell us about the creation of the soundtrack, which borrows from both sacred and secular music, and about the videos projected during the show, which borrow in part from medieval aesthetics?

Music is often the starting point of my work. The creation of *Samson* is tied to the music I was listening to at the time, like dubstep or bands like Radiohead. The script is riddled with annotations like "I'm listening to Radiohead's 'Weird Fishes', 5'18, and here's what's happening in the scene," or "listening to this song by UNKLE makes me feel this way." All those musical references and the emotions I felt when listening to them allowed me to find the true direction of the show. Shane Cooper then composed the score which is performed live, to which I added sacred shamanic music and arias from Camille Saint-Saëns's opera *Samson and Delilah*. I'd been wondering what could have enchanted Samson so, and I sensed that it must have been Delilah's voice. I decided to make her a singer. Listening to Saint-Saëns's beautiful aria "Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix" convinced me that it was the power of Delilah's voice that would prevail over Samson's reluctance and lead him to reveal the secret of his strength. On a different but still very personal note, it's a trip to Italy that led to the choice of the images projected during the show. I love church art, so I took a lot of photographs. Those small fortified towns of the medieval period, which drove the construction of Europe, were a big source of inspiration. I designed the images for the background on my computer and Tanya Johnson then took them, cut them up, created collages out of them, painted them, redrew them. We then scanned them and put them together to create the background to the show. Persian miniatures, Christian illuminations, all those illustrations of sacred texts like the Bible, the Quran, or Persian poetic texts, were also great sources of inspiration. The way they are composed is incredible, it's magnificent.

Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz the 7th February 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach