



# SAMSON

## INTERVIEW WITH BRETT BAILEY

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

**Brett Bailey:** I've been interested in myths since I was a child. My paternal grandmother was a spirit medium: she interpreted my dreams, gave accounts of past lives, and recounted ancient myths to me as a boy. The writings of theorists like Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and James Hillman, who find strong connections between myths and dreams, make a lot of sense to me. Myths give us access to some of the vast riches beyond the limited, time-bound constructions of consciousness. And like ancient relics, they connect us to the imaginations and cosmologies of our ancestors, and to the primal aspects of ourselves. Since the dawn of time, it's by telling stories that we've tried to find our place in the world.

My own introduction to working with classical myth was in setting Oscar van Woensel's adaptation of *Medea* within a colonial landscape. I have subsequently created a ritualistic piece about Orpheus, and have interpreted the myth of the minotaur within the context of the labyrinthine search for security of refugees in the EU.

Looking for a new work to make in 2017, I reflected on how the Greek tragedians extrapolated stories from their sacred myths and harnessed them to speak to contemporary issues. I trawled the bible for material, eventually settling on the tale of Samson. I seldom know why I am drawn to dramatize a particular story: something vibrates on a subconscious level, and then I am at mercy of the story. Grappling to find the resonance of the myth of Samson within our moment of history, to understand what it wants to say through me, was a long and tough journey.

In high school we used to do science experiments in which we immersed strands of wire into solutions of various salts, and brilliant crystals would form on the wires. My approach to working with myth is similar: I try to strip the story down to its skeletal essence, and then immerse it within a 'saturated solution' made up of the geopolitical material that fascinates me; my thoughts and fantasies; and music, images and ritualistic energies. Then I shape and polish what arises, and the meanings begin to reveal themselves.

So, why choose Samson now? Well, actually I feel that Samson chose me now, because the time was right for it to rise to the surface. Samson is a blood-drenched tale set in a period of oppression and cruelty. But beyond the violence and the heroics of the myth, I find a great deal of sadness in the story. A central theme of the work that I have made is loss: of home, of self, of faith, of so much fragile beauty to the blind forces of avarice. My poetic interpretation brings the tale crashing into the 21st century, and orders it within the concerns I have around migration, bigotry, colonialism, and oppressive capitalist policies. It draws on my fascination with shamanism, ritual, the repressed and the non-rational.

**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 am less interested in the biblical character of Samson than in the relevance of the story now, in this moment: that the mythical Samson was a Nazirite dedicated to the Hebrew god is simply historical surface detail to me. I am more concerned with what he represents: the archetypal rage that rises up and detonates in response to years of oppression and humiliation. That is what is at the heart of the myth.

The impulses and referents for my creative works lie much more in ritual and ceremony than in theatre. The work that I created requires the performer who plays Samson to have an explosive spiritual energy that he can access and work with. I felt that the best way to manifest this intense energy –to bring it 'into the room' in performance– was through dance. Shiva dances the destruction of the universe. The dancer who played the role in the first iteration I made of *Samson* did not have that profound spiritual connection to work with, and as a result the entire piece for me was a failure: the centre was weak and the whole work was out of balance.

Elvis is a *sangoma* – a healer within a northern Mozambican tradition, who channels ancestral spirits. The spirit that works through him is a powerful chief and *sangoma* from five generations back, who was murdered by ethnic enemies. When this spirit animates – or possesses – Elvis' body, Elvis himself is no longer psychically present. Together Elvis and I developed a process of rehearsal in which this spirit came to the fore, and in a sense choreographed the dances that Elvis performs on stage. Imbedded within the work there are percussive rhythms and a ritualistic line, which are orchestrated to liberate extraordinary explosive energies. The piece operates on levels well beyond those of conventional narrative and psychological motivation.

**The play is extremely political, and shows the eternal cycle of 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?**

The work deals with issues such as colonial dispossession, neo-colonial plundering of resources, mass-migration, racism and xenophobia, radicalisation and terrorism. These are themes that recur in works of mine such as my take on Verdi's *Macbeth* (set in the Democratic Republic of Congo), *medEia*, *Sanctuary* (a meditation on the limbo in which refugees are locked), and *Exhibit B* (which appeared at the Festival d'Avignon in 2013). When you consider the causes of terror acts in the United States, in the EU, in the Middle East and in so many African states; when you look at how the Rohingya people are treated in Myanmar, the Uighurs in China, Arab people by Western invaders in their own countries, and black South Africans by white colonials in my own country... The phrase "we reap what we sow" springs to mind. Governments and people continue to treat those they consider 'other' with disrespect and brutality, and sooner or later devastating explosions are the outcome.

**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 a key that I use to unlock my creative process. At the time that I was researching and writing *Samson*, I was listening to electronica and dubstep musicians like Burial and Kode 9, and bands like Radiohead and UNKLE. I referenced these when giving direction to Shane Cooper, the composer of the score: 'listen to how the drums kick in Radiohead's "*Weird Fishes*" at 3:41' or: 'pick up the disturbed emotion of Biosphere's "*2nd Field*".' *Samson*, the hero, is finally brought to his knees by Delilah, after he has wreaked havoc on her society. My intuition was that an exquisite voice would be the most effective way to seduce him, and that the performer playing Delilah should be a singer. Discovering Camille Saint-Saëns's gorgeous aria "*Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix*" from his 19th century opera, *Samson and Delilah*, was a revelation. I work very visually: the images I create are as important for conveying meaning – if not more so – than the text. A trip to Sicily in 2018 inspired the aesthetic of sections of the work: the small fortified towns of the medieval period depicted in church frescoes, captured something of the fortress-mentality that characterises the response to immigration in the EU today. Persian miniatures and Christian illuminations were also great sources of inspiration. I designed images for the projected backdrops on my computer. A close friend, artist Tanya Johnson, then interpreted the visual elements in pen and paint. These were scanned and collaged digitally to make the final images.

Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz in February 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach