

Drums and Digging in Kinshasa

The Congo is a desolate country, but its artists are hugely versatile and creative – a visit to the Connexion Kin Theatre Festival

At times Kinshasa is actually portrayed in such a surreal way as can be seen in the photographs by Kiripi Katembo (above).

The scene below [PHOTO:ERIC DE MILDT] shows the dancer and choreographer Faustin Linyekula in his new piece “Drums and Digging” currently playing at Theaterformen in Hamover.

By Christine Dössel

The small cultural centre in Kinshasa - Les Béjarts - has certainly never so far seen so many international guests as it did on this sunny June day. Passengers climb aboard clapped-out mini buses, part of the local street scene since time immemorial, and are dropped off in Bandal, an area teeming with people and cars - traffic jams were invented here! - all set against a background of market stalls, piles of rubble, puddles, murky sewage pipes running like a small rivers over the untarred surfaces of the streets. These passengers are the theatregoers who have come from every corner of the globe to join in the Festival atmosphere. They've travelled all the way from Rio de Janeiro, Ramallah, Brussels and New York, from Lisbon, Warsaw and Zurich, from Germany as well as from France, Poland, Cambodia and Slovenia, not to mention African visitors from Nairobi, Johannesburg and Cape Town. They're there to compare notes and share something of their experiences and know-how with each other. And not just that, but also to represent the theatres and places they hail from.

This ambitious project is called “Shared Spaces“ - and has been set up to establish a worldwide informal cultural network between North and South. Its aim is to remain in permanent dialogue, strengthen and concentrate contacts, create common platforms, make it possible to put on productions and co-productions and promote the exchange of these shows. This morning in the courtyard of the very small cultural centre of Les Béjarts, we're attending the opening session of this project in the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, set in earth which is dusty earth but which also has an enormous sense of creative - but no financial - resources. Connexion Kin takes place during the ten-day Festival. Now in its fifth year, it was started in Kinshasa by Jan Goossens and his Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwbourg (KVS), the Royal Flemish Theatre in Brussels.

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That so many international artists as well as theatre directors and trustees could make the journey is ultimately thanks to the Federal Culture Foundation which supports - to the tune of €192,000 - “Shared Spaces” of this “totally exemplary Project” as part of the Theaterformen Festival in Hanover. For, as Hortensia Völker, the Artistic Director of the Federal Cultural Foundation, says, “There is now no way of passing Africa by for anyone with a desire to approach cultural developments in a global perspective.”

Theaterformen on the other hand, alternating between Braunschweig and Hanover – this year it's in Hanover –, has a major foothold in the 5th Connexion Kin Festival even to the extent of being a partner, because the German event itself has a main Kinshasa focal point in the programme. The title of this is “Kinshasa Connection” – not just any old trite, hackneyed theme on some corner of Africa, currently the “in” thing at many Festivals, but a concentrated variety of artistic forms ranging from theatre, film and music both in and around Kinshasa as well as in other locations throughout the Congo - this multi-faceted, contradictory country in the heart of Africa so shamefully abandoned by its government.

So at the moment three African productions can be seen in Hanover. These have been co-produced by Theaterformen and were previously put on by the Connexion Kin Festival. “Drums and Digging“, the new piece by Faustin Linyekula, perhaps the best known Congolese stage artist (in July he's also appearing at the Avig-

non Festival; “La fin de la légende”, a wild, theatrical performer-based research project involving the burying of legends with extracts of texts by Heiner Müller and Sarah Kane, staged by Dieudonné Niangouna who was born in 1976 in the Congolese city of Brazzaville. He is himself a writer and usually builds the explosive power of language into his pieces, as already suggested by the very name of his company - Les Bruits de la Rue, Street Noises. This year he’s the first black African artist - an “artiste associé” - in Avignon.

And then thirdly there’s “In case of fire, run for the elevator“, an ironic comedy based on the theme of eating and diets by Boyzie Cekwana. Although he doesn’t actually come from the Congo, but from South Africa, he’s a close friend of Faustin Linyekula and his works are regularly featured at the Connexion Kin Festival.

Notwithstanding “Heart of Darkness”, Kinshasa is extremely lively, even if not all that well lit!

A fourth co-production, Brett Bailey’s “Macbeth”, after the opera by Giuseppe Verdi, interpreted by black singers and actors as a story from East Congo - and now, for this occasion, newly orchestrated by Fabrizio Cassol - has been put off till next year. It’s a major international co-production, involving the participation of many renowned Festivals and theatre companies - from Vienna, via Paris, all the way to Cape Town. Brett Bailey, that white South African whose world-wide touring installation “Exhibit B“ with “black human exhibits“ just as they were commonly put on display in the People’s Shows and “Human Zoos” of the 19th century, is attracting a great deal of attention and last year in Berlin - even if only there apparently - triggered a debate on racism and post-colonial hierarchies.

His post-colonial “Macbeth“ was also bound to polarise, because there was a great deal of talk and debate after an initial presentation of even just an extract from the presentation of the Project. Individual vocal scenes are (still) so redolent of typical European town-theatre productions - in the atmosphere of the opera based on Shakespeare, Bailey comes across as highly political, beginning with a choir of Congolese refugees then using a “child soldier“ as narrator until he finally ends by making concrete references to the bloody history of the Congo. Even when the already mad Lady Macbeth is sleep-walking and tears open bags, in which she finds not ore but a heap of chopped-off hands - the chopping-off of hands was common at the end of the 19th century, as part of the gruesome punishment and disciplinary measures implemented to drive forward the systematic exploitation of the Belgian Congo colony under Leopold II.

But even today’s exploitation of East Congo - rich in gold, tin, ore and coltan, that mineral indispensable for our mobile phones - is a theme picked up by Bailey in his work. Thus, he portrays Macbeth as a scrupulous warlord, incited by the Shakespearean witches in the form of profit-seeking and greedy representatives of large multi-national conglomerates. It’s hard to say where the critical artistic aspect ends and the wooden mallet of the street pedlar begins.

Bailey, whose anger and earnest severity can only be fully appreciated by attending one of his talks, also invokes in his Macbeth the spirit of Joseph Conrad, who in his famous novella of 1899 “Heart of Darkness” describes the looting of the Congo Free State under the Belgian colonial overlords thus - “To rip out the treasures from the very innards of the country is what they wanted, tainted with no more moral scruples than burglars faced with tackling the problem of how to open a safe.” In truth, says Bailey, guys like Kurtz, whom Conrad describes as a “monster-Colonialist” would never have left the Congo.

Poverty, misery, ethnic conflicts and war - it’s actually only negative associations which the Congo, even in its form nowadays as a “Democratic Republic”, sends out to the First World. The title “Heart of Darkness” by its very name has played a part in this. The Congo, and certainly not Kinshasa, is not that “dark” - even if street lighting in the evening does leave something to be desired! The whole area has its bright sides.

Kinshasa, for example, even with all its visible slum areas, is an extremely vibrant city, full of creative people, whose enthusiasm and extremely ingenious spirit just blow your mind all the time. There are cultural centres like Les Béjarts or the bustling K-Mu Theatre in the N’djili district, which against all odds, fitted only with the most basic equipment and facilities - and I really mean the essential bare minimum - plastic chairs in the open air in a whole range of inner courtyards - put on theatre productions, show films and organise concerts, readings and workshops.

There’s the “Sapeurs“, who strut their stuff in chic designer gear in the midst of extreme poverty and show these smart clothes off as they dance - and tap dance too! - in trendy performances. There are artists like Freddy Tsimba, who makes very promising sculptures from cartridge cases, rusty spoons and other bits and pieces of scrap metal as well as torsos of pregnant women, for instance, as “a constant sign of a new life that

keeps starting out on a new journey”.

Or Bienvenu Nanga, known as “l’artiste de la poubelle“, the dustbin artist, because he knocks up his cheerful robots, UFOs and futuristic sci-fi objects from whatever he finds in the street. Or a photographer like Kiripi Katembo, who shows magnificent, unusual large-scale views of his town either shot from above or reflected in water - images which create an almost surreal impression.

Not to mention the music scene in Kinshasa, from traditional Soukos, with their debt to the rumba, right through to modern afro beat, folk rock and R&B variations: Kinshasa rocks - and dances. It’s constantly on the move. The live concerts at Connexion Kin exuded the power of this very special Kinshasa sound. They were put on every evening in the garden - incidentally perfumed with the gentle aroma of anti-mosquito spray! - at the Institut Français, the Festival’s main venue. Here you can enjoy highly acclaimed local lady “matadors” like MJ 30 or the girl-band Basi na Mizik, as well as cool fun groups like Jupiter & Okwess International, and Bebson “de la rue“, the rapper and street kids’ friend from the fantastic documentary “Kinshasa Kids“, appeared with his band Trionys - all world-class.

This is the pulsating, artistically creative side of Kinshasa, which Theaterformen Director Anja Dirks would like to highlight at her Festival in Hanover: “the enormous potential there is to be discovered there.” Dirks finds that “in our heads there still lingers a sort of colonial mind-set, almost as if in Africa there was no culture, at least not any that we Europeans hadn’t first introduced“. For her, it’s all about giving equal billing in the programme to African artists who quite clearly and just as validly appear alongside artists from other countries. What she wants to avoid is the reaction “Ah yes, Africa, well!” - a sort of niche effect, but also without any gesture along the lines of the notion that “so now we’re at least helping them a little.”

There might well be a wealth of talent around in Africa, but you quickly get back into thinking along lines of providing development aid.

But this is not quite so easy to put into practice. In Africa, there might well be a wealth of talent around, but conditions are abysmal and it’s always other people who have money. In any joint collaboration you quite quickly and willy-nilly get back into thinking along lines of providing development aid. And who pays the piper calls the tune. “At the end of the day, we’re still a colonial state,” says Faustin Linyekula in a down-to-earth tone of voice. “How can we talk to each other as equals if it’s you that’s got the money?”

Ntone Edjabe from Cape Town, Publisher of the pan-African culture magazine Chimorenga, expresses it more radically at the “Shared Spaces” event, “It’s your money I need, not you!”

One way out of this post-colonial dilemma perhaps lies in what Linyekula and Edjabe describe by the key word “Respect”. Otherwise, what can be heard from all sides, the biggest problem for African artists is isolation. To tackle this problem, open up access to the work of other artists and interact with colleagues - internationally as well as within their own country or even continent -, is something which festivals like Connexion Kin or Theaterformen or an initiative like “Shared Spaces” can actually provide. “It’s so important to get to know other perspectives“, says polyglot Linyekula. “Just look at how the people here live. Most of them think it’s normal. They don’t know anything else.“

Linyekula, who has appeared on the world’s stages, has consciously decided to go for life in the Congo. Twelve years ago he returned to his homeland and founded the Kabako Studios as a centre for the Performing Arts and Dance, a laboratory for research, training and production, which since 2006 has had its home in Kisangani in the North of the country. “The Kabako Studios are first and foremost a place for the mind,“ says Linyekula, “an ideal place to show that it’s still always possible to dream beyond the borders of this stricken country.“ What is particularly experimented with here is the use of “Art” to make us believe in ourselves“. Faustin Linyekula is a good speaker and he puts his ideas across absolutely convincingly and authentically. The slim 39-year old is seen as a shining light in the young African dance and theatre scene. Quite a few colleagues have much to thank him for - the 25-year old dancer and hip-hopper Patrick Mbungu Boyoka, for example, who calls himself Dinozord and for six years shared the fate of the street kids of Kinshasa called the “Shegue“ who were disowned by their families because they were thought to have been bewitched. In his dance solo “Boyoka“, he tells the story of this life.

It was Linyekula, who established Dinozord as a dancer and cast him in a great many productions. With the already slightly older piece “Sur les traces de Dinozord” they are guesting at the beginning of July at the Foreign Affairs Festival in Berlin. As so often with Linyekula, the question is, “In the war-ravaged and crisis-

afflicted Congo, what's become of the dreams people had?"

"Drums and Digging" is a sad story, but not a hopeless one. There's an atmosphere of creation in the air.

In "Drums and Digging", his new piece, he hits a fatalistic note. "I'm in a blind alley and I no longer know how deep it is," says Linyekula, who as the "story-teller", wearied by the distressing story of his country, himself appears on stage; at the beginning, sitting helpless and perplexed on a bank next to a mute wooden puppet, thinking back to Obilo, the village of his childhood, he recounts how the village has changed, how the new religions, the New Apostles, the New Evangelists have demonised and driven out the old traditions. Even there, in good old Obilo, the narrator can no longer find any trace of his "search for dreams, for a fresh wind". It then falls to the strong-voiced dancer Véronique Kwadeba, to think back to the place of her childhood. In her case, this is Gbadolite, which was also the home village of Mobutu Sese Seko, the dictator with the leopard skin cap. In the '70s, as President of Zaïre, he turned the small village of Gbadolite into a "Versailles of the Jungle" – with three palaces, two power stations and an airport for Concorde. The story of this overwhelmingly huge building project is told like a fairy-tale, as the dream of a President who has lost any connection with reality and his fellow human beings.

The timid movements of the dancers, the songs in Mongo and Ngbanci, ethnic languages which even in Kinshasa hardly anybody understands, then the Afrika-Sound-Collage created from boxes, the sound of drums as if from the depths of night - all these combine to lend something wonderfully archaic, poetic and timeless to a very personal, historically and politically nuanced search for traces of the past. "Ruins are all around us, but they're also in us. <TH>.<TH>." – "Drums and Digging" is a very sad story in its view of the Congo. But it's not a hopeless story, something Faustin Linyekula makes a point of stressing. During the performance, he and his dancers build the framework for a house out of wooden slats. That's what's meant to remain in the mind - the act of creating something together.

"Drums and Digging" – the title is a pretty good description of how Congolese artists generate their materials and always question and challenge themselves about the history of their country. The Performing-Arts-Scene, which has grown up there in the last twenty years, as well as in countries like Mali or the theatre-crazy Burkina Faso, is described by the Head of the "Zürcher Theater Spektakels", Sandro Lunin, as "hugely exciting and rich in its form of speech and versatility"; the only problem is though that it is yet again threatened by Islamism and spreading fundamentalist Christianity.

Lunin is an established expert with a proven track record of the (west)-African theatre scene and, as such, a member of the Jury for the "Turn" Fund, which the Federal Cultural Foundation has recently set up: The sum of 1.4 million euros is being made available in 2013 to promote exchanges and cooperation projects between German institutions (from all sectors) and African partners. A totally meaningful and sensible business: combining commodities trading with culture.