

Beauty and the (Un)believers

Friday 6 July 2006

Review: RED EARTH
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CUE

Red Earth is an innovative puppet theatre collaboration which weaves together different threads of the same historical tale. It's a controversial slice of Xhosa history about Nongqawuse, the young girl whose prophetic visions led to thousands of deaths and the decline of the Xhosa nation.

The prophecy that divided the Xhosa in the mid-nineteenth century

– between those who believed in the visions and those who did not – is told skilfully using puppets and figurines.

The minimalist setting consists of velvety drapes that create the river and the red earth of the village setting. Blends of African rhythm and classical tunes fill in the atmosphere, creating a bustling African village and an ethereal setting at the river where Nongqawuse experiences the event which alters the course of history.

Macebo Mavuso and Tau Qwelane embody the conflict between the

Believers and the Unbelievers – represented by Nongqawuse and her young friend – as they intuitively flow with their puppets.

In this absorbing production, a scruffy stork is the messenger of life who mediates the story with liberally sprinkled words from his tin beak. The play presents one version of what happens that day beside the river, using a balance of satire, humour and dialogue.

Given the topicality of conflict and famine on the African continent today,

this well-timed drama is a subtle exploration of the ways in which beliefs can pull a people apart.

Excellent characterisation raises this production to great heights, although it does not attempt to address the many complex issues of identity or cultural transcendence often associated with these types of partnerships.

Red Earth illustrates the beauty of pure storytelling even though the actual events are steeped in controversy. Its fusion of uncluttered elements translates into a play that proudly ex-

plores Xhosa roots without drowning a diverse audience in the tedium of a happy dancing tale.

Although the story has been told before (by H.L.E. Dhlomo, and, more recently, by Brett Bailey in *The Prophet* and Zakes Mda in *Heart of Redness*), retelling the tale with these beautiful puppets makes it come alive under the direction of master-puppeteers Mavuso and Qwelane of Sisonke Arts.

Red Earth is at Graeme College today at 2 pm and 7 pm, and tomorrow at 11 am and 3 pm.