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PARADISE LOST

In Africa and in Europe, with Brett Bailey, the Mesmerizer, in Charge

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Abstract:

This article aims at introducing the extraordinary talent of South African director Brett Bailey by recreating the second installment of his Exhibit series – a unique art-and-politics event that has been stunning and disconcerting European audiences – and by presenting a firsthand account of the main developments in his work, from his first show *Zombie* until now.

The life-changing and conscience-awakening event – the Exhibit Series (Exhibit A and Exhibit B) by the South African director Brett Bailey – at the background of his oeuvre, from his first show in Cape Town in the mid 1990s till today.

It's because of people like Brett Bailey that authorities have been wary of the arts, and especially theatre, and censorship has been flourishing throughout the centuries. It's because of people like Brett Bailey that the “dogmas” of moral relativism haven't been able to (and hopefully won't) fully take hold of people's system of values. For would you call relatively bad the following fact: in the Belgian Congo Free State, at the turn of the 20th century, when the native Africans laboring over

the production of timber, rubber and ivory (to be shipped to Europe) did not manage to meet their weekly quota, they had their hands cut off? Or, if that is not convincingly enough of an absolute evil, how about this: in the German South West Africa of the same time, the punished native Herero men were decapitated and their heads were sent in sacks to the Herero women's camp, where the inmates had to boil them and scrape off the flesh with shards of glass; then the skulls, packed in wooden boxes, were sent to universities and museums in Europe in order to serve as items of proof in the "scientific research" on the black race's inferiority? It was in this same place and time that the first official genocide of the 20th century was carried out and the word "concentration camp" in German was used. As late as 2010, after lengthy negotiations, Namibia received back 69 skulls, kept until then in the cellars of the Charité University of Berlin and the University of Freiburg.

These conveniently forgotten (in the First World!) facts and many more of like kind have been emerging in an extraordinarily powerful way in

The Exhibit Series:

The Overdue Real Encounter of Europe with Brett Bailey (and with Itself).

Exhibit A: Deutsch-Südwestafrika, a "meditation on the dark history of European racism in relation to Africa", was first staged in Vienna in 2010. The location was an abandoned wing of the

Ethnographic Museum. This as an echo of the colonial-times “human zoos” in Europe (from the mid 19th century till WWII) and the Apartheid practice of showing “samples” of the black “subhuman” species alongside minerals, animals and plants in the museums of natural history while the artifacts of the white presence in South Africa were displayed in the cultural history museums. Exhibit A then visited the consciences of other European nations.

In 2012, it was transformed into Exhibit B – a version expanded to incorporate atrocities from the Belgian and French Congos. “An emotional shock” *Le Monde* called it after it was displayed in France, and *Le Soir* suggested that it “should run for months so that all government ministers and scholars can attend.”

And so that as many regular European citizens as possible could join them too! – I would add. Because the majority of us have come to take the so to speak “old riches” of the continent for granted – as something we are simply entitled to by virtue of our privileged birthplace – without ever questioning the moral aspect of their origin. Viewed from that perspective, “the plight of African immigrants, living and being deported from Europe” – also in focus in Exhibit B – stops being an issue appealing only to our human compassion and resonates as one of the many reverberations of a bloody and disgracefully earned wealth that came out of Africa and has never gone back there.

I experienced Exhibit B – since *attend*, or even less so see, can hardly capture the nature of this encounter – in Wroclaw, in the framework of the DIALOG Festival in 2013. Here’s how it felt:

An abandoned old beer brewery outside of town. A small cozy bar in it – like an oasis; also: a respite after the long trip in the chilly weather. A “respite” only, however, since the feeling of chill will stay with us as an underlying leitmotif throughout the next hour or so, as well as for long afterwards. In the bar, while waiting our turn (every 20 minutes or so, a group of 25 people is let through a door next to the counter), we are given a chance to read a leaflet by Bailey about the Exhibit, about the sad history of the “Scramble for Africa” and the “contribution” of Europe’s African experience to the “racial hygiene” theory. A sinister quote by Paul Rohrbach, for instance, reads: “Not until the native produces something of value in the service of the higher race does he gain any moral right to exist.”¹ Yet, at that moment, all this is just pieces of info, presented in an environment close to the home comfort where we’ve come to so matter-of-factly devour the terrifying news of today along with our meal.

When at last summoned, one is given a card with a number, warned to put on one’s coat, and, along with the rest of the group, gets ushered into a small cold room, packed with narrow, metal chairs facing another door. Next to it stands a tough-faced woman. As soon as we have taken a seat, she commands us with a peremptory tone to keep silent and wait to be called. Then slowly, with tension-charged pauses in between, she raises card numbers identical to ours and those of us who recognize theirs, one by one, are let in through that other door. And that’s the last time “let in” applies.

¹ *Exhibit B*, leaflet, p. 4., Paul Rohrbach, “German Thought in the World”, 1912, www.thirdworldbunfight.co.za

The moment the metal banging of the door slams behind the first “gone”, fills in the silence, the chill is not anymore only in the air; it quickly takes over our bodies and soaks deep down one’s soul. It’s not anymore simply a feeling of coldness, though. It’s fear. Fear that makes you not feel “chosen”, when your number is up in that woman’s hand, but terrified – terrified that you are the next who has to get in and be at the mercy of whatever or whoever is inside there. It feels like you are entirely helpless, detained, stripped of any rights – as if the raised-up number is a sentence you are in no position to appeal, change or do anything about.

Once in, you are in something like a dungeon: a labyrinth of empty, dark and very cold premises with brick and stone bare walls and cemented floor. The only lit part in each of them is a “specimen” behind a glass case or a rope: human installations, standing-still tableaux vivants – startlingly beautiful in terms of color, light and arrangement.

A nearly naked woman and a man. A furnished, neat room, full of objects, photos and animal head trophies, and a woman sitting on the bed, with her back to us and her face in the mirror, and one single discrepancy in the whole picture: she’s neck-chained. Another woman, also in an exotic environment, with a full basket in hand. Two women behind something like a counter, framed with two sticks with skulls on them....

And in front of all the “specimens”: small cards with typewritten texts, like in the old museums. The body measures of the first couple... A title: “The quarters of an officer of the German Colonial Forces,

Windhoek, 1906" (in front of the chained woman – as it turns out, the one to be raped that day) and a quote underneath by the room's owner: "I have seen women and children with my own eyes dying of starvation and overwork, nothing but skin and bone, getting flogged every time they fell under their heavy loads..." Then come the facts about the "normal" punishment when the norm is not met – they are in front of the woman with the basket, which, we come to realize, is full of freshly cut-off hands... "Civilizing the Natives" reads the title of the installation with the two women behind the counter whose task is to "clean" their fellows men's" decapitated heads until they become skulls "suitable" for research... "Age of Enlightenment" is the caption before a brown man dressed in a fine French court's outfit: a Nigerian slave who rose to be a confidant to Maria Teresa, as it turns out, was stuffed after his death and displayed alongside a collection of African animals in Vienna, while another stuffed African body was kept in another museum of nature – in Spain – till 2001...

Among these "remote-time" "specimens" stand modern ones: asylum-seekers, with their photos (face and profiles) and their identity forms, very similar to the anthropological measurement tables of the nearly naked couple, next to them. Only one contemporary "entry" is like a tableau vivant: on an air-plane seat a man sits with plaster tape over his mouth and with hands and feet tied. "Survival of the Fittest" reads the caption and the text informs us about the suffocation of an asylum-seeker on a deportation flight from Germany.

If these facts (and many more) are literally terrifying – especially at the background of the installations’ exquisite beauty! – even more terrifying – the word is “stupefying” actually – is what happens when, after having read them, we raise our eyes up. The “specimens” look back. Not a muscle moves in their bodies, their faces, their lips. Only their eyes do. Since all these are real people (immigrants living in the particular country in which the exhibit is being presented). One can hardly resist their gaze and usually looks down or sideways.

It’s as if the spirits of all the dead sufferers have been summoned here and, through the eyes of their descendents, they are watching us, the descendents of those culpable for their suffering.

It’s an experience so intense and overwhelming, so literally shaking the very essence of our being, that it feels like we are witnessing an unknown, unheard-of, motionless trance: the possessed bodies do not jump or yell or roll on the floor, yet, the invisible, no question, is there, in them, saying everything through only their eyes.

It’s this unique spiritual presence in Exhibit B that turns the mere learning of the facts presented there into a profound awareness. This is why and how they stop being just knowledge and become an experience – the experience of a whole race’s plight as if it were your own.

“This is an exhibit, not a dramatic performance,” says the site of Third World Bunfight, Brett Bailey’s company, about Exhibit B. But Bailey is a performance director and theatre does have a role here. As it does in any well-staged exhibition. Theatre starts already in the “waiting room” with that woman in charge, where you feel like you are not the

one who chooses to go or not to go in. It's in the montage of the contrasts throughout the whole experience: between the warmth of the bar and the chilly "world" after the door next to the counter, between the comfortable and the uncomfortable, between the beauty of the exponents and the brutality of the facts about them, between today and then, between us and them, between the usual visitor-"specimen" relationship and one that takes place here. It's precisely in the deliberate reversal of roles – i.e. the observer becomes the observed and morally measured – that the theatre plays its most striking part here. Because the gaze of the "specimens" is more than an eye-opener, it's like lifting of a curtain in our souls and hearts – a revelation that helps turn our understanding of the world, or at least of an important part of the established stereotypes, upside down.

"Exhibit B is not about the horrors of colonization," said Bailey at a Festival discussion. "This is only an aspect. It's about the representation of the Other, the distortion that was done by the colonizers... An ideology about black people who are inferior and the European benefactors who are rescuing them has been set in marble and bronze, and in immense beauty in museums; for instance, a beautiful brown woman 'happily' carrying water or white people civilizing the Africans."

This was a continuation of Bailey's thoughts from the exhibit's leaflet: "The dim chambers of our collective imagination are haunted by silent misinterpretations and twisted configurations of Otherness," he writes there. "They cloak the atrocities that occurred under colonialism

in the shimmering robes of civilization, and energize degrading stereotypes and dehumanizing systems such as Apartheid that I grew up in.”²

The surprisingly strong – albeit not surprisingly gruesome! – connection between another dehumanizing system, Nazism, and colonialism is especially highlighted in Exhibit B. “Auschwitz was the modern industrial application of a policy of extermination on which European world had long since rested,” the exhibit’s leaflet quotes Sven Lindqvist.³ Another thing: “The father of the Nazi war criminal Hermann Goering was the first imperial commissioner to Deutsch-Sudafrika; two of Josef Mengele’s (the butcher surgeon of Auschwitz) teachers conducted pseudo-scientific research on the Herero to justify their annihilation,” points out South African critic and writer Brent Meersman.⁴

Finally, the connection is quite literal, as we come to find out from the last of the Exhibit B’s extraordinary exponents, in the last of the halls:

The caption there reads: “Dr. Fischer’s Cabinet of Curiosities.” Dr. Eugen Fischer, the text tells us, was a professor of anatomy and the rector of the Berlin University during the Third Reich, who developed his theories of racial hygiene in no other place but the concentration camps of South West Africa.

These are the only exponents whose eyes do not look back. And this is the only hall that is not entirely and dreadfully quiet. Its air

² Exhibit B, leaflet, p. 3, www.thirdworldbunfight.co.za

³ Exhibit B, leaflet, p. 3, Sven Lindqvist, *Exterminate All the Brutes*, 1992, www.thirdworldbunfight.co.za

⁴ *Resisting the muse of imperial 'science'*, Mail and Guardian, South Africa, 2010-06-08

vibrates with breathtaking music: song lamentations of the genocide – an impossible harmony between the heartbreaking sorrow and the beauty of the insurmountable human spirit. It's four heads, dyed in gray clay, in profile to us, that sing. (A Namibian choir, which has also arranged the songs.) The bodies are hidden behind low cubes. Above them, in frames, hang black-and-white photos of decapitated heads on iron rings (dating from 1906).

In front of this whole exposition, there are several rows of seats. For those of us who can no longer bear the emotional burden of this unique “calling of spirits” that Exhibit B is, this unheard of, motionless trance where the invisible has been coming into eye contact with us in the previous halls and now sings to us – all the time via the bodies of people alive and real today. As alive and as real as were (or are) all those who were (or are being) killed, tortured, crippled, suffocated or simply denied the right to be considered as people (equal people, that is) because they were/are different, i.e. other than us.

Or, actually, why not you and me included, despite my being white?! For there's always somebody who could look down on us as being “those others”, right?! As did the famous film producer Samuel Goldwyn, who once bought a love story without having read it and, upon finding out that the leading women roles were of lesbians (then a taboo), just shrugged: “After all, we could always call them Bulgarians!” Or, as I was once told by a Western critic, when he agreed to be interviewed by a Bulgarian, he imagined meeting a fat cow that eats potatoes. These two examples do not differ substantially from the shocking statement I heard

once from a perfectly amiable young South African woman, long after the Apartheid had become history: the native Africans have less developed brains, she confided without a slightest shed of doubt. And yet another example: a South African friend giggled at the fact that his wife didn't even know how to change the toilet paper before the Apartheid ended, since there were always domestics in charge of this chore...

After you get out of Exhibit B, you feel like you cannot talk, or don't feel like talking at all. Yet, after having experienced it, it's impossible for one to stay voiceless – were it only in front of one's own conscience: questioning our untouchable European status quo, the free market's freedom of trading for the advantage of the haves, the ease with which we build barriers towards the others and the difficulty of overcoming those ones built in front of us...

The greatest achievement of Exhibit B is that it manages to make us feel and recognize the centuries-old and, alas, ongoing crusade against Africa per se and the even longer one against Others in general as phenomena of equal ignominy as that of the Holocaust and any other genocide for that matter.

Another thing one starts questioning after Exhibit B is how it could ever be claimed that there's poetry in violence and there's love in pain. After having experienced it, all the theatre provocateurs of today (in)famous for their self-hurting on stage – literal or figurative, it's all the same – seem so flat and superficial, and their being sold as phenomena so snobbishly empty! The very perpetuating of the “violence sells” idea in

the media and, alas, in literature and the arts, as well as the idea that violence is deeply innate to human nature, feel plain shameful.

“Our belief in the potential of arts and performance to activate people, energize depressed situations, integrate the marginalized, transform and heal, underlies our ethos,” is the credo of Third World Bunfight. With Exhibit B, Brett Bailey and his team manage to fulfill this to the utmost. Moreover, the Exhibit series catapults the South African director to the highest possible status of international arts activist with a huge potential impact, the likes of Michael Moore, or in a more European and regional context, of Oliver Frlijc.

Who is Brett Bailey?

I consider myself very lucky to have seen his debut show in South Africa and to have followed his work from then on.

Meeting Brett Bailey at Point A

It was in Cape Town, in 1997. Fairly recently, the Apartheid had become the past. More important, at the helm of South Africa was a person who had proven that forgiveness – even when it comes to life and death situations – was possible. It was exactly this example of Mandela that had created the euphoric feeling that, if the country had managed to make the step aside from the usual vicious circle of vengeance, then all good intentions, ideas, dreams could become a reality, too.

In this most propitious for creativity time, the white Brett Bailey (then 30 years old) had made a furor with his first show *Zombie* (written, designed and directed by him) with a whole black, non-professional cast.

I saw its last performance (later on, it was transformed into *Ipi Zombie?*) on the very last night of my stay. I had seen a lot of theatre, but no other show had been so close to that Africa I had sensed and experienced outside theatre halls. That Africa which was invariably true to what she felt in her heart, even when rational logic pointed to the opposite – i.e. an Africa as intuition and wisdom; an Africa connected with the earth, nature and ancestors; an Africa that feels herself to be a part of the Universe. Here're my first notes after *Zombie*:

Disarmingly naïve, the beginning of the show is like striding over the frame of a painting of Henri Rousseau, *Le Douanier*. As soon as you are behind the big leaves of the jungle of the foreground, though, you find yourself in a totally different world towards which the naïve is just a path. The present and the past, the visible and the invisible, the real and the fantastic are dwellers on a par in that new place.

Built on a direct narrative principle – of addressing the audience and then presenting concrete episodes – *Zombie* is telling a shocking true story. In 1995, 12 black boys died in a bus crash on their way back from school. One of the three survivors then said that he saw 50 naked witches near the bus in the moment of the tragedy. This witness's story kicked off a real witch-hunt in the township of the victims (the murdering of a young boy is believed to be part of a young witch's initiation): three women were killed, the bodies of the boys were stolen and a shaman tried to resurrect them. The peak of the hysteria was the statement of a small girl that her grandmother was hiding the souls of

the dead in her closet. This was another “solid” proof for the presence of 12 zombies roaming the streets in the night.

Actually, Brett Bailey has promised to take us into a reality with a surreal edge with the subtitle of his show: “Descending into the shadowy side of South Africa with choirs, spirits, animals, vampires and people – alive and dead.” Immediately soaking into us, this “shadowy side of South Africa” is reminiscent of similar stories from around the world, yet with a major difference: the dominant joyous tone, very unusual for such a story – like in gospel music, where the sorrow tastes more of life than of death. In other words, telling a tale about death, *Zombie* is life itself. At the end, the actors invite the audience to dance and sing with them on stage and in the aisles of the chamber hall of the Nico Theatre.⁵ So, born from reality, it melts back into it.

Bailey had the courage to stage *Zombie* in the very same township where the improbable events it described had really happened and to even form some of his cast from among the local inhabitants.

Not any less courageous, again based on a true story and with a nearly all non-professional native Africans cast (of 60!), was the next show of Bailey’s I saw: *The Prophet*, his fourth production. It was again written, directed and designed by him and again developed for the Grahamstown Festival (the second biggest English-speaking festival after Edinburgh). It was already 1999. I was in the rough Grahamstown for the first time, and seeing *The Prophet* in an out-of-town abandoned factory

⁵ Now Artscape

was an unforgettable experience: the first time theatre really felt like a trance. Here's how I described it then:

Enter the Spirits

The Prophet takes us directly into the realm of the dead. And it does this via the only known way: the spiritualistic séance. It takes place in a small hall with a floor covered with earth, hay and ox skulls. A small podium in the center is surrounded by straw mats for part of the audience; behind them there's a circle of chairs, next to the walls, interrupted symmetrically by six gray statues of human size standing on grave stones. It is these very statues that come to life in the beginning of the show: the spirits of the Xhosa ancestors arriving "from beyond stars and under seas" to tell the truth about the fatal prophecy from the mid 19th century that brought about an unheard of destruction to the then mighty nation. According to a vision of the nephew of the Xhosa's chief, only if all the animals were slaughtered and the whole crop burnt would the nation be saved from the British invasion. The participants in the tragic events that follow come to life amidst the audience as well: they sing and dance, cry and wail, go into a trance and die, and everything happens so close to us that it feels like a crack has opened up in Time: it's 1856 now, and we, too, are participants in the events; or we are witnessing the existence of parallel worlds right here and now in real life, not in any sci-fi film or book.

I've seen other shows resembling spiritualistic séances--of such gurus as Barba, for instance. But, and with all due respect to them, this is the closest theatre could ever get to the reality of the surreal.

These two shows of Bailey made it obvious that there was a new director with an extraordinary storytelling talent, in the ranks of Robert Lepage, Ariane Mnouchkine and Yukio Ninagawa, and that every next production of his would have the potential of becoming an event not just in South Africa alone. Until then, for the outside world, South African theatre had meant mainly Athol Fugard, the Market Theatre, John Kani and shows like *The Island*, i.e. theatre connected with the resistance against Apartheid.

Bailey was the new South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Archbishop Tutu was working at full steam to create the so coveted peace, both in society and in people's souls. With his theatre, Bailey was actually doing the very same, only with the ease of a magician. His magic wand was his knowledge of, and involvement with, the real essence of Africa – with her hypnotic energy and her mysticism, frequently inexplicable for outsiders. He had experienced that Africa from within and had accepted and fallen in love with her unconditionally.

Before doing his first show, Bailey had spent several months living in a hut with a Xhosa *sangoma*, a traditional healer. He had gathered herbs and roots with him, taken part in ceremonies of healing and connecting with the ancestors, he had danced, sung, chanted, fallen

in trances, he had witnessed miracles of cured people who had hitherto been written off by official medicine.

Before that, Bailey had also spent time in India, getting a firsthand experience of similar ceremonies. And it was there “that he suddenly wondered what he was doing so very far away from home, and decided to rather come back to South Africa, to identify himself as an African, and to explore the traditional indigenous spiritual traditions of the land of his birth.”⁶

Later on, Bailey wrote: “Let the theatre be rich and thriving and humming like a Hindu temple, with flowers and cows and children running and bells clanging and incense smoking and devotees dancing and offering libations! Or like a voodoo ceremony, with people flipping into trance, chanting and sacrificing, dust and blood and beer and gods.”⁷ And for a long while, part of Bailey’s method of working was asking his performers to warm up by going into a trance.

However, he brought to the theatre not simply the appearance of the ritual but its essence: the belief that our getting back into a real bond with nature and the invisible could bring a cure for all types of wounds – physical and spiritual, both of the individual human being, of a group of people and even of the society at large.

⁶ “Brett Bailey: Plays of Miracle and Wonder (New Forms of Syncretism for the South African Stage)”, p. 2, Anton Kruger, SAT], 2005

⁷ Bailey, Brett. *The Plays of Miracle & Wonder*. Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2003, pp. 9–10

Getting Directly Political

In *The Prophet*, there was a layer that made the show transcend the magic of the ritual: the Xhosa chief's entourage, his niece and the British invaders were all performed by children. In a time when games are frequently made to look and feel like wars and wars may feel like games for those who are not on the victims' side, this casting gave the show the effect of a very topical political grotesque. The disappointments were about to replace the euphoria of the big change in his homeland, and Bailey was, naturally, turning to political satire.

It's exactly with these kinds of shows that the outside world first saw his theatre. In 2001, *The Big Dada* – a satirical post-colonial cabaret about Idi Amin – was part of the international season at the Barbican Center in London. It was followed by other exclusive mixtures of politics, music and ritual, like *medEeia*, *macbEth*: the opera...

Then came *Orfeus*. It was created for the Spier Festival – an annual theatre event in the famous wine complex of Spier, based in the marvelous valley between Cape Town and Stellenbosch. Since 2004, the complex had offered hospitality to Bailey and his company. The location had provoked him to do most of his works in the open air; so the untamed African nature had become very involved in them. In order to reach their place, the *Orfeus* audience had to climb a hill up to an improvised amphitheatre. Then, for the second part of the show, they had to take on a new journey: in the labyrinths of hell, which turned out to be our world, presented as snapshots of children's exploitation, drug dealing, weapon and sex trafficking – all that presided over by a laptop-

armed Hades. It was the first time Bailey had put a special emphasis on silence—both as a way to provoke contemplation and to counterpoint the horrors that had become our common reality.

In 2007, he transferred the show to Grahamstown, re-cutting it for a stone quarry next to the city, thus putting an even bigger accent on the politics. In both places, the show had a huge impact, and it was invited to Europe. When I read it would make a stop at the Holland Festival, I immediately decided to go there.

But I had a premonition. And one should always pay attention to one's intuition – as the real Africa from Bailey's shows always tells us to do. Not from this show next to Amsterdam though. Not that it was not good. I had sensed the well-known magic energy. But as soon as Eurydice fell into a trance in the midst of us, sitting in a circle in the open air, I felt an invisible wave of distrust going through the audience: something of an unspoken "How could this wallowing in the earth creature be Eurydice?" The Western rationalism was interfering, preventing our collective imagination from freely taking off and eventually spoiling the magic.

Several days later, Bailey gave one of the most accurate definitions of freedom, Dutch style (and why not Western style, too?): "Here people are free to be prostitutes, to smoke marihuana, etc., but only in the designated glass boxes."

This "labeled" freedom – as a permitted behavior in a concrete place – is not enough for one to become part of Bailey's shows. For them, one needs real freedom: as a state-of-mind, as senses open for everything that logic cannot explain. That's why in Amsterdam, for the

first time, I thought that maybe they needed to be seen in the place they had been created for. For Africa is this type of freedom. And when we go there, it wakes it up in us. Or at least there's a chance for this to happen.

Yes, before 2010, European audiences and critics had already enjoyed quite a few of Bailey's shows. Yet not until the Exhibit series had they fully appreciated his talent. As acknowledged by Meersman, there was even a patronizing nuance in the praise of some of them. "This time," he wrote about Exhibit A, "the knives are out and Bailey subversively turns exotic spectacle on its head."

This year, Exhibit B will travel to the UK and Russia, with new installations that reference the racist underbelly of these countries. With this whole series, South Africa's "greatest director, hauntologist, mesmeriser,"⁸ is about to achieve his much deserved status of international mesmeriser, too.

⁸ Ashram Jamal, SLIP 2012, as quoted in www.thirdworldbunfight.co.za