

Profound Musical about Nelson Mandela the Warrior

Review by Annette Embrechts of De Volkskrant,
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Musical Amandla! Mandela

It is remarkable how Kenneth Herdigein is able to portray the icon Nelson Mandela, on stage, with such deep understanding.

Amsterdam, people that were there, twenty years ago, when Nelson Mandela first visited Amsterdam still get goose bumps when they recall the sight of Mandela cruising the canals; such courage and intelligence, such self control and diplomacy, such humanity and history wrapped up in one person.

A similar thrill went through the Carré on Saturday evening, when the actor Kenneth Herdigein, as Mandela, appeared arm in arm with Winnie Mandela (Sophia Wezer), the then wife. Cries of delight from the audience, as if the historic moment is being repeated, when the world's most famous apartheid prisoner is released after 27 years of imprisonment on Robben Island.

It is remarkable, with how much insight, Herdigein was able to portray this icon on stage. It was so accurate that guests from South Africa said, after the show, here stands our Mandela.

One could be critical of the uniquely measured and sharp accent – the shrill staccato at times piercing. But Herdigein's portrayal was phenomenal. Above all he does not present a Mandela that is above any criticism, but a resolute warrior, stubborn and passionate.

The drive behind Amandla! Mandela – The Musical – is not only Mandela the person, but the unending source of inspiration to the ANC-champion; the ancient wisdom handed down by the Xhosa chiefs of his tribe regarding equality, brotherhood and mutual respect.

Script writer and director Koen van Dijk has taken the more salient features of Mandela's political career, from his younger years to his inauguration as the first black President of South Africa, and skillfully arranged them into a stirring musical drama. Peaceful resistance, revolution, voting rights, sabotage, race laws, nationalism and communism are all dealt with with spirited verve and profundity. The conflict with his ANC colleagues, over his idiosyncratic ways is also dealt with in some depth.

The show is musically the most interesting during the first half, when the South African a-capella choir, Khayelitsha United Mamboza, provides much of the African dynamics as an under-current to the violent controversies. After the interval the composer, Frank Uytendaele chose more western melodies, which revealed that not all the performers possess the same level of singing abilities.

But the cast is convincing, stylishly costumed and exceptionally cohesive. Besides Herdigein; Felix Burleson, Raymi Sambo and Jeremy Sno did sterling jobs as Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo and Ahmed Kathrada respectively.

The typecasting of the white actors amongst the largely black tableau was remarkable – the roles are for ones reversed: Wil van der Meer as the eloquent anti-

apartheid lawyer George Bizos and Peter Bolhuis playing the parts of a number of white leaders (Hendrik Verwoerd, Pieter Willem Botha and Frederik Willem de Klerk). They all, more than, hold their own.

On many levels, this Amandla! Mandela makes theatrical history; an important musical about the history of South Africa but also about the emancipation of actors of colour on a previously white musical stage.

Amandla! Mandela – The Musical from Bos Theatre Productions, 24 October, Carré Theatre, Amsterdam. On tour up to and including 31 March 2010.