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William Kentridge Tackles the History of Apartheid and Colonialism in His Latest Production

The new work, 'The Head & the Load,' makes its American debut in New York this month

By Julie Belcove (December 4, 2018)

SOUND STAGE Kentridge in his Johannesburg studio. Of his early years, he says, 'I gave up art and tried to be an actor, then realized I couldn't be an actor and tried to be a filmmaker, and that didn't work, discovered I was better at being an artist again, then understood that everything was going to be a mess and a mush.' PHOTO: PIETER HUGO FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

When then South African artist William Kentridge was studying colonial history at university in the early 1970s, he wrote an essay about a letter composed at the outbreak of the First World War by John Chilembwe, an African pastor. The letter, to a newspaper in what is now Malawi, then the British protectorate Nyasaland, bitterly decried the colonial power's conscription of African men in a dispute between European nations and with no promise of liberation in return. "In times of peace, everything for Europeans only. In times of war, we're invited to shed our blood in equality," Kentridge recites from memory, nearly verbatim. The newspaper did not publish the letter. Soon after, Chilembwe led a brief uprising before being tracked down and executed.

Kentridge saved a copy of the letter in a drawer. Forty-five years later he pulled it out again and made it one of the central texts of The Head & the Load, an epic performance piece on the forgotten labor and loss of countless Africans in World War I. "It uses the conditions of the war as a kind of crucible to supercharge all the questions and all the paradoxes of colonialism that get revealed during the war," he says. The nearly 90-minute work is an inventive collage of spoken word, song, dance, film, procession and his signature charcoal drawings. In other words, a typically complex and ambitious project for Kentridge, who has forged a lofty reputation as a public intellectual, weaving theater into a visual art that, though grounded in South Africa, is universal in its representation of the human experience.

Kentridge, whose piece 'The Head & the Load' opens at New York's Park Avenue Armory in December.
PHOTO:PIETER HUGO FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

On a chilly morning in New York, Kentridge has come to the Park Avenue Armory, a onetime military facility where, appropriately enough, The Head & the Load will have its American premiere in December. Serious and dignified, Kentridge has a professorial air about him, with heavily lidded blue eyes, bushy silver eyebrows and a high forehead making him appear somewhat older than his 63 years. Like a refined gentleman from a bygone era, he even uses a pince-nez. The former actor speaks off the cuff as if delivering a lengthy soliloquy, even though he claims to have a fear of forgetting his lines; for public events he always has his "book" with him.

Directing, he has decided, is far simpler than performing. "It's so easy to see all the things that are wrong and how it should be—and it's completely easy to do it until you have to," he says, offering an example from The Head & the Load, in which an actor proclaims the validity of French colonialism "on the basis of the beautiful vowels that the French have." He demonstrates in a comically exaggerated French accent: "Aah. Magnifique. Uuh Uuh Uuh. So it's easy for me to explain to that person how that aah should be, but if I'm onstage having to perform that, suddenly the aah gets caught in my throat and becomes tiny and evil, and the idiot standing onstage doesn't know how to do it—i.e., me."

The title of the piece is a riff on an African proverb that Kentridge recites, "The head and the load are the troubles of the neck," and the dramatic fulcrum is a long, deliberate procession of performers on an operatic scale through the Armory's cavernous 251-foot-long Drill Hall, holding aloft cutouts of boats, artillery and other supplies the conscripts carried overland, their stark silhouettes projected like shadow puppetry against renderings of the African landscape. "I think of it as a performed drawing," Kentridge says of the piece. The music shifts from jaunty to chaotic to a mournful rendition of "God Save the King." Monologues include instructions from a how-to marching manual and a partial list of how many hundreds of thousands of men—used mostly as porters—from each colony died. Referring to the number of Africans who served, an actor intones: "For every soldier, three carriers. For every officer, nine carriers. For every machine gun, 12 carriers. For every cannon, 300 carriers." Many of them marched without boots.

In one film clip, a hand cutting up paper is seen in close-up, a comment on European powers' disastrous decision to carve up Africa as they saw fit. The languages in the piece, the cast of which is predominantly South African, run the gamut from German, French, Hungarian and English to Swahili, Wolof and Zulu. " 'Anthem for Doomed Youth,' the great Wilfred Owen poem, is translated into dog barking, which is a kind of polemic against our—or my—limited

understanding of the First World War, which is so swallowed with the romance of All Quiet on the Western Front and the great British war poets," Kentridge says. "In those poems and in that history, there is no place for the 140,000 Chinese people who [dug] the trenches in France or the million Africans who were involved in the war, the 1.2 million Indians. So this is a piece about noting those omissions, in this case, Africa."

SOCIAL STUDIES An inspiration board.
PHOTO: PIETER HUGO FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

While on the surface a period piece, The Head & the Load also serves as a scathing reminder of racism in the contemporary world. "It of course makes you think how we are treating people today," says Jenny Waldman, director of 14-18 NOW, the British commemorative World War I arts program that co-commissioned the piece with the Armory, Germany's Ruhrtriennale and MASS MoCA. "You have a ravishing artistic experience, and at the same time you're watching the devastation of the African people. You come out with a much better sense of the power of art and the imbalance of history." Reaction in London, where The Head & the Load premiered in July at the Tate Modern, was rapturous, with critics calling it "mind-bending," "extraordinary" and "electrifying" in five-star reviews.

Kentridge IS A third-generation South African, born into a prominent Jewish family who emigrated from Lithuania around the turn of the last century. One grandfather was a longtime member of Parliament; a grandmother was the first female barrister in the country; and both of his parents, Sydney and Felicia, were leading anti-apartheid lawyers. Sydney, 96, earned renown representing Nelson Mandela in his 1950s treason trial, winning an acquittal. He also represented the family of the late anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko in the inquest of his 1977 death, meticulously illuminating the culpability of the security police who had taken him into custody. (The much-decried inquest found Biko's cause of death "inconclusive," and there have been calls this fall to reopen the case.) Felicia, who died in 2015, co-founded the South African Legal Resources Centre, which focused on overturning apartheid-era laws. Despite, or perhaps because of, his parents' outsize reputations, Kentridge felt no pressure to study law. "My family had a sense that my dad and my mom had done it, and everything was going to be less good if it was followed up," he says. "I became an artist partly to avoid the law, to avoid the rigors and logic of it, to find a way of arriving at meaning but not through the principles of cross-examination and logical argument."

He immersed himself instead in the arts. "All children draw. I suppose I just forgot to stop," says Kentridge, who has the habit of sweeping his hands across the tabletop, as if he doesn't know

what to do with them when not drawing. He was also deeply involved in theater, directing plays at home, acting in high school and at the University of the Witwatersrand in his native Johannesburg in the ’70s and even studying mime in France at the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq. “I was advised by everybody: ‘Choose. You can’t do both.’ I gave up art and tried to be an actor, then realized I couldn’t be an actor and tried to be a filmmaker, and that didn’t work, discovered I was better at being an artist again, then understood that everything was going to be a mess and a mush.”

Kentridge spent about two years in his 20s experimenting with drawing techniques before making a creative breakthrough. He was trying out charcoal to copy a Brassaï photograph, which suddenly gave him a sense of freedom to move beyond the photograph. “There was something about the looseness of charcoal as a medium that gave it a lightness of thinking,” he says, “an ability to change it.”

Drawing in the pure black-and-white of charcoal on paper unleashed his mature artistic practice, and to be sure, drawing is still at the heart of it. “A drawing always reveals the process of thinking, because a drawing is just a record of arriving at the finished drawing,” he says. “Some artists, they think with paint, but for me [drawing is] the medium of thinking.”

HANDS OF TIME Kentridge in his studio. “I think of it as a performed drawing,” he says of his latest stage work.
PHOTO: PIETER HUGO FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

In the 1980s Kentridge began making short animations as “a thing I did for myself to feel I’m not condemned to just forever doing charcoal drawing.” The films were made with single cels on which he would draw, erase and redraw, leaving behind ghostlike traces of the image’s history, which could be read as a metaphor for the legacy of South African colonialism. His most famous revolve around the fictional characters Soho Eckstein, an overweight, balding capitalist in a pinstripe suit, and his nemesis, the artist Felix Teitelbaum, both of whom came to Kentridge in dreams. “I was keeping a dream diary,” he recalls. “ ‘Soho Eckstein photographed with 120 artists and photographers who had been recording Johannesburg, the second greatest city after Paris’ was the phrase that I woke up with. The other one was the phrase ‘Felix Teitelbaum’s anxiety flooded half of Central Park.’ They’re both kind of nonsense, bizarre phrases.”

He then, more consciously, created the character of Soho’s wife, who bounces between the two men. In one film, she abandons her husband for Felix, and as a despairing Soho watches their coupling in a picture frame on his desk, his empire disintegrates around him. In another, scenes of Felix brooding alone in a room gradually filling with water are interspersed with images of

bleeding black African bodies that disappear beneath the landscape. Felix, who is always depicted naked, is a self-portrait—Kentridge was too embarrassed to use a model. At a July screening of his films at the Tate Modern, days before the premiere of The Head & the Load, he joked that over the years his body has come to more closely resemble Soho's rotund one. Soho does bear more than a passing resemblance to his creator, and the series serves as an allegory for the lasting devastation of apartheid and its twin companions, greed and guilt.

Contemporary art has taken a sharp turn toward the political in recent years, but independent curator Mark Rosenthal, who organized a major 2009 exhibition of Kentridge's work, notes that having a compelling message is not enough to make great art. "The question is whether it is expressive and poetic and moving and successful—success being that it has a political message but also an aesthetic power and punch," he says. "William, of course, does."
Kentridge's parents immigrated to London in the 1980s. "I don't think they could bear appearing in front of South African judges anymore," Kentridge says. "South Africa was in its most stuck situation, before the structures of repression fell apart and apartheid ended."

Kentridge, though, remained in Johannesburg, where he and his wife, Anne Stanwix, a physician, raised their three children. He was determined not to succumb to the art world's designation of appropriate cities in which to live. "As a young student," he says, "it was very much, if you wanted your work to be seen in New York or any of the other art centers, you're meant to bring your pots and pans, and in the revolting term of that period, which still makes my blood boil, you had to pay your dues, as if I was a medieval peasant and had to come and kneel in front of the castle of the great galleries and museums of New York and hope that some little crust would eventually be thrown my way."

The international cultural boycott of South Africa kept curators and critics away, but Kentridge found their absence liberating. "One worked without any of that expectation," he says. "There was none of the terror of art magazines—this is what one has to do if one wants to be a real artist. We knew we were never going to be that, so we could work in much more idiosyncratic ways."

When the white supremacist regime fell and curious art professionals began making the rounds, Kentridge was astonished that they offered to exhibit his drawings in group shows, which included the work of foreign artists he admits he didn't necessarily understand. In the early 1990s a curator wanted to exhibit one of his short films on a television monitor. "Instead of saying, 'Fantastic!' I was insulted," he says. "I thought, It's a film, not a piece of art. It must go to a film festival. It mustn't be in a gallery. I had to be dragged kicking and screaming. When it was up, I was very embarrassed. I thought, What are people going to think? Then, when people said, 'I really liked the film,' I said, 'Oh, OK, they're right, I'm wrong.' "

The international art world had its first substantial taste of Kentridge in the 1997 edition of Documenta, where he showed two Soho and Felix films that encapsulated the wrenching torment of apartheid. Kentridge began showing with New York's Marian Goodman Gallery, respected for its roster of cerebral artists such as Gerhard Richter and John Baldessari, the following year. "He was very, very much in demand," Goodman recalls. "We had so many

institutions dying to show his work, and he had this full flowering. He was getting one invitation after another."

As his reputation grew—Rosenthal's 2009 retrospective traveled to nine cities on four continents, including New York, Paris, Jerusalem and Moscow—he found himself even less hemmed in by boundaries and turned his attention to opera. In 2005 he took on Mozart's The Magic Flute through the lens of the Enlightenment, authoritarianism and colonialism, in a production for Brussels' La Monnaie that traveled to the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Five years later, at New York City's Metropolitan Opera, he staged Dmitri Shostakovich's satirical The Nose, based on Nikolai Gogol's absurdist story in which a bureaucrat goes in search of his missing nose; Kentridge's video projections capture the titular character dancing (on famed ballerina Anna Pavlova's body), diving, hurdling and riding a horse. Then, in 2015, he returned to the Met with Alban Berg's Lulu, creating a frenetic visual backdrop of projections to rival the dramatic score.

Kentridge is hands-on. PHOTO: PIETER HUGO FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

His opera productions have earned raves but are not what Pierre Audi, artistic director of the Armory who also spent 30 years in that role for the Dutch National Opera, describes as influential for the simple reason that Kentridge "is not very easy to imitate." Kentridge does not consider theater separate from his studio practice, Audi says, making him unique among contemporary artists in that regard. "William has decided to make these productions a very central part of his studio," he explains, adding that unlike most visual artists, who are shy when stepping into theater or opera, "he takes charge of the entire production. Kentridge is not a visitor to the stage. He's decided to make it a powerful, expressive tool in his art."

When the Armory proposed a commission, Kentridge was already working in his studio on a production of Berg's opera Wozzeck as "a kind of premonition of the First World War," using local actors and dancers as stand-ins for the opera singers. "There's something remarkable about the improvisations that were done by the team of largely black, African performers that I work with," he says, "so when the invitation came from the Armory, [I had] the thought of using some of the improvisations and material that never found its way into the opera but was very rich in itself. So in some sense we had the sense of the look and partly the cast of characters I wanted to be in the piece."

Also informing The Head & the Load was a piece he mounted along the Tiber River two years ago, tracing the history of Rome, both heroic and shameful, as he said at the time. Triumphs and

Laments comprised a frieze stenciled from Kentridge's drawings onto a roughly 600-yard length of wall, coincidentally placed between the Vatican and the old Jewish ghetto; an opening-night audience watched from the opposite bank as a procession of performers passed, their large shadows projected onto the wall of drawings.

Kentridge remains an intrinsic part of South Africa's creative community. In 2016, he founded the Centre for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg, an interdisciplinary incubator meant to nourish dancers, musicians, actors and writers—all primarily South Africans—with an ethos of art for art's sake. "It's about acknowledging that in the process of working there are often new ideas that develop which one should latch onto even if it means abandoning the starting idea of a piece," Kentridge says, adding, "Some of the pieces are fabulously successful, some are interesting failures, and some are uninteresting failures."

As for its quirky name, the Centre "has within it the kind of polemic that the good ideas have been so calamitous, all over the world, all the great utopian ideas of the last century, that our hope now must be with the less good idea—from smaller interventions from the margins." Still, nearly 25 years after the relatively peaceful end of apartheid, Kentridge says that "there are more optimistic events and processes happening than have been for a long time. Whether or not those are enough to undo the damage that was done the last 10 years, and whether the good that was done in the 10 years before that is enough to begin to undo the last 300 years... I don't know." At least, he allows, "I'm less cautiously pessimistic than I was."