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HOUSE OF THE HOLY AFRO

Becks Music Box

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by Jack Graziotti

A steady stream of patrons filters through the gates of the Becks Music Box, nestled between the Perth City skyline and the Swan River sunset. The welcoming scent of incense pervades the atmosphere, which is already thick with anticipation. Blonde afro wigs speckle the crowd, but few amongst it know what to expect from controversial director **Brett Bailey's 'House of the Holy Afro'**; after all one rarely witnesses an experiment in cultural fusion that blends an all-African performance ensemble (**Third World Bunfight**) and an African performance poet (**Odidi Mfenyana**) with the beats of a progressive/house DJ (South Africa's **Dino Moran**).

Just as the last of the day's sunlight slips behind King's Park, the stage lights soften upon a small group of colourfully-clad Africans, who promptly tranquilize the crowd with an enchanting hymn. Skulking around the stage as though stalking prey, the performers build harmonies to sweet, soulful peaks and drop them back to earthy, resonant lows, as shrieking bird cries punctuate the lush soundscape. The venue is stilled by this unmistakably African display; distinctly vibrant, inherently primal and entirely compelling.

The song ends to rapturous applause, then out of nowhere a ghetto-blasted woman wearing platform boots, a mini-skirt and a huge blonde afro struts onto the stage and twiddles some knobs. This is Moran's cue to send a pounding disco beat crashing through the ambience like a hammer through a stained glass window, and in an instant a boisterous, distinctly Western party atmosphere has invaded the serenity. The dreamy figures on stage (now donning kitsch western dress and sunglasses) burst into action, rambunctiously thrusting their bodies to the pulse of Moran's decks.

Thus begins a visual and auditory spectacular of extreme cultural contrast. The constant, synthetic electro beats collide with richly organic African singing and dancing. Fake guitars, sunglasses and microphones clash with tribal face masks, body paint and traditional drums. Then out strides Mfenyana, a robust African man

dressed in drag and bursting with gender-bending gesticulations, a living breathing personification of cultural contradiction.

The overbearing tone of this eclectic extravaganza is not one of harmony, but one of conflict. It seems as though the inherently human African elements of harmony (with each other and nature) are being juxtaposed mockingly against the absurd Western elements of ego and celebrity, a sentiment confirmed when Mfenyana embarks on a passionately patriotic spoken-word piece that compares the “little white lie” to the “big black truth”. Though the singing is all in African and therefore incomprehensible to this reviewer, the body language appears defiant, almost belligerent, like a fist held high, middle finger exposed.

The predominantly Western audience doesn't seem to mind, but rather laps it up. The dance floor pumps healthily and there are smiles all-round. However, after a while the beats become monotonous. The singing and dancing are not enough to carry them alone, and there is a sense of 'something missing'. Several onlookers lament the lack of supplemental instrumentation.

At one point reprieve is granted as the decks fall silent. Mfenyana prowls onto the stage dressed in a traditional cloak and hat, and sprays sips of vodka menacingly upon sections of the audience. This deliberately impudent act is followed by a traditional gospel-style hymn, unaccompanied and intensely resounding in the surrounding silence. This is the highlight of the night, a momentary glimpse of the true Africa amidst a cacophony of calculated vulgarity.

Then the beat drops back in and the orgiastic party vibe returns to finish the night the way it has gone for the most part. After a rousing finale and even more rousing applause, the cast returns for an encore led by a sole female singer in a Western wedding dress. The body language of the dancers is recognizably more welcoming – more like a hand offered for the shaking than the aforementioned fist. The piece offers a final message of peace, reminding the audience that, whilst cultures may have clashed in the past, they can be successfully married.

All it takes is respect.