



# TIME TO SHAKE IT

A groundbreaking voice in African theatre says this time the medium is the message.

**Ara Jansen** reports.

House of the Holy Afro

**W**hen you ask producer Brett Bailey about House of the Holy Afro, he has a one-word answer: bubblegum.

You'd expect the South African director, playwright, designer and agent provocateur to wax lyrical about all the messages and underlying themes pervading his latest production. But in fact there is only one thing which is important about this show. Bailey says don't expect to spend it any other way but dancing.

Bailey has also studied the healing techniques and folklore of traditional shamanic healers and is considered a groundbreaking voice in contemporary African theatre, creating works he describes as "worlds in collision".

In some ways House of the Holy Afro seems unlike his previous and more politically armed works but on closer examination, it has a politics all its own.

Those are the politics of dancing — and to borrow a phrase — the politics of feeling good.

The House of the Holy Afro makes its Perth debut at the Beck's Music Box as part of the Perth International Arts Festival. The nightclub spectacular audaciously fuses urban and traditional African music, gospel, house, slam poetry, dance music and Afro pop for a night of dancing mayhem.

This celebrates, according to Bailey, a real view of South Africa today, not the homogenous view of ever-smiling singers chanting in bright clothes.

Dubbed the Soweto Gospel Choir on acid, this show unites a theatre troupe, performance poet Odidi Mfenyana and DJ Dino Moran all creating body-moving beats in ritual church-like worship.

Bailey conceived the production in 2004 after visiting clubs in Amsterdam where beautiful women sat on stools singing and an MC jammed beats behind them.

"My idea was to group traditional African music and spiritual music by taking a whole lot of our own songs and mixing it with house music," Bailey says.

"There really is no message this time. There are a lot of shows that come from South Africa that have

happy natives doing traditional music, which is a tourist version of Africa as far as I'm concerned; what's inside a curio brochure. It's sanitised and designed for bourgeois taste.

"This show is slick and modern and even features a gender bender and there are no choirs. We pick up on the mayhem of the country and thrive on that."

House of the Holy Afro is a Third World Bunfight production, which is a non-profit South African performance company directed by Bailey.

During its decade-long history, it has been a leader in cutting-edge performance. Based near Cape Town, the company is known for its provocative and uniquely African theatre works which challenge stereotypes of Africa.

The company engages a diverse range of Africans — many of them untrained township and rural actors — by using and fusing different performance forms, music and design modes.

For the past decade Bailey has created productions which have included the opening concert of the Harare International Arts Festival, and written, directed and designed productions like Big Dada: The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin, Vodou Nation, iMumbo Jumbo, Safari: C.G. Jung in Africa and versions of Orpheus, Macbeth and Medea.

He is currently working as co-curator of this month's Infecting the City, the Spier Performing Arts Festival in inner-city Cape Town.

"I am very eclectic and pick up what I can and throw everything together. I also tend to mix things up. I've done Macbeth with a full orchestra and African instruments and prefer any venue to a traditional theatre, which are very dull spaces.

"For me Holy Afro brings together fun, art, fashion, music and theatre. It's only a political statement in that it breaks a lot of genre barriers and mixes stuff together but it's not a political work."

**House of the Holy Afro is at Beck's Music Box on February 26 and 27 from 8.30pm.**



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DETT BATHY

