

## WA:House of the Holy Afro takes fusion to a new level

EDS:Holy Afro performs in Perth on Feb 26 and in Adelaide next month.

By Rebecca Le May

PERTH,AAP - What do you get when you cross a drag queen with slam poetry, uninhibited high-energy dancing, raucous gospel and an electro-house music DJ?

The answer could only be South Africa's House of the Holy Afro, which is set to wow Perth and Adelaide audiences after proving a huge, sold-out hit at The Sydney Festival last year.

The unique, genre-busting act is the brainchild of director Brett Bailey, who describes it as a collision of gospel, wacky theatricals and voodoo rock, peppered with ritualism and kitsch costumes.

The group of eight performers - all musicians, singers, actors and dancers in their own right - was originally commissioned in 2004 for the Sharp Sharp! festival in Switzerland and was inspired by a curious act witnessed by Bailey in Amsterdam.

"I was asked to make an African nightclub scene," Bailey told AAP from Cape Town.

"I'm not much of a nightclub animal and was studying in Amsterdam at the time, and saw two beautiful blonde women in a nightclub there who had long wigs on, sitting nonchalantly on barstools while a DJ mixed sounds in the background.

"I thought 'OK, let me work with that'.

"My own work at that time was quite ceremonial African work, so a lot of concert gospel music and traditional healers that go on pilgrimages in caves in parts of Africa - I was into that."

Bailey promptly assembled a gaggle of artists with backgrounds varying from church choirs to cabaret and one of the oddest acts of all time was born.

"I got my company together, we took some songs and reworked them to a house music beat, basically."

The line up comprises dance theatre troupe Third World Bunfight, drag queen and performance poet Odidi Mfenyana, and DJ Dino Moran.

"We've found the magic now," Mr Bailey said.

"I was in Haiti for several months working with voodoo practitioners and voodoo rock music, which gives you a sense of what sort of energy infuses the pieces.

"It's very slickly choreographed with lots of costume changes and really extraordinary, deep spiritual music, but some of it is bubblegum Afro pop.

"It's pretty deep stuff but with wacky theatricals."

He said fusion was ingrained in African culture, so the performers felt at home with the kind of wild juxtapositions seen and heard in House of the Holy Afro.

"In Africa, there is gospel on the one hand and the tradition of ancestor worship is very strong.

"There's also quite a lot of hybridisation between that and Christianity: they'll be worshipping Jesus but they'll be slaughtering animals.

"They've taken ancient culture and mixed it with the traditional.

"So for a lot of the performers, that fusion is part of their culture."

He said the act drew inspiration from "anything from Broadway to avant garde".

"I'm very eclectic - not a sacred cow type person."

Punters are offered standing room only to ensure they act on the urge to dance.

"I do not want people to have any excuse to sit down," Bailey said.

"Everybody just dances and the house just takes off. It really pumps.

"It's engineered now to take you from a deep spiritual place to ecstatic heights towards the end."

He said concertgoers could expect a spectacular climax to the show.

Promoted as a "riotous house party" and a "joyous sonic safari", House of the Holy Afro promises to be one of the more vibrant performances at this year's Perth International Arts Festival (PIAF), which kicked off on February 13 and ends on March 8.

The act performs at PIAF's Becks Music Box on Thursday February 26 and on several dates at the Adelaide Fringe festival next month.

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