

The Outlaws Retort: William Kentridge in New York

Metropolitan Opera & Museum of Modern Art | New York



A blast from the orchestral pit launched William Kentridge's production of Dmitri Shostakovich's *The Nose*, sending red circles diving after streams of spurting text, and black crosses spinning across the stage. These disembodied Suprematist shapes were all in pursuit of a fugitive body part – a large Johannesburg Jewish nose – which bore with it memories of revolutionary Russia. The escapee, sporting newfound legs, raced nimbly across the stage, dodging party lines and social hierarchies. Constructivist typography arrested its course, broadcasting propagandistic admonitions – “Panegyrics to paste up!” – interspersed with nuggets of senseless wisdom: “But your spine has been smashed, my beautiful pitiful age...”

Deluged with such petitions and behests, Kentridge's proscenium peeled back to reveal Shostakovich's 1928 opera in all its raucous glory – a musical tour-de-force in turn inspired by Nikolai Gogol's 1836 satirical short story of the same name. Gogol's tale recounts the odd experiences of Kovalov, a social climbing collegiate assessor who arrives in St. Petersburg seeking a promotion, only to awake one morning bereft of his nose and distressed that his mind has gone with it. Panicked, he hunts down his gallivanting nose, finding it has both grown to monstrous proportions and soared up the bureaucratic ranks to the position of a (gasp!) state councillor. When

confronted, the nose sniffs disdainfully at his former owner's requests for repatriation. “But you are my very own nose,” Kovalov insists. “Nonsense!” responds the brazen appendage. Kentridge's production takes seriously the outlaw's retort: it presses the story's dream-like structures of slippage and displacement, seizing on the profound logic of nonsense at its core.

“I understand nothing. Express yourself more plainly!” the nose demands of his pleading owner, but Kovalov can only concur that: “I don't understand the whole thing.” The incomprehension of the opening scenes spirals through to the opera's bewildered conclusion, when one character turns to the audience to gripe: “No, this I do not understand at all. I decidedly do not understand. But the strangest most incomprehensible part is how authors can choose such subjects. I confess, that is entirely incomprehensible; it's just... no, no. I completely do not understand.” Clearly no one understands anything in this story: it is a tale of senselessness and nonsense. In short, it is what happens when we lose our sense, or at least one of our sense organs, like a nose.

Both nonsensical and deeply symbolic, Gogol's tale was written in a decade famous for revolutions. Perhaps his rogue body part is a stand-in for the rogue state straining to break free of empire? Perhaps it gestures merely

FACING PAGE Production still from William Kentridge's staging of Shostakovich's *The Nose* at New York's Metropolitan Opera, 2010
 Courtesy Metropolitan Opera, New York

BELOW TOP William Kentridge, *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, 2008, production photo for lecture performance
 Photo: John Hodgkiss

BELOW BOTTOM & RIGHT William Kentridge, *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, stills from lecture performance held March 4, 2010, Museum of Modern Art, New York
 Courtesy William Kentridge Studio



to the difficulties of controlling errant parts of our bodies and their wilful impulses, or the psychological challenges of holding ourselves together as semi-coherent subjects. Certainly this notion of the wayward body, split into facets we recognise and lay claim to, and other parts we repudiate or deny, is an appealing theme for Kentridge, one in which he recognises the co-dependant Soho Eckstein and Felix Teitlebaum, the vacillating Ubu, and of course his own self.

The night before the opening of *The Nose*, Kentridge detailed such schisms in a performative lecture at MoMA, where his travelling retrospective is currently on view. On this evening, Kentridges multiplied across MoMA's stage, as the artist was set upon by various projected clones of himself, by turns bored, dubious and reproachful. Kentridge's performance, a public exegesis among querulous selves, externalised what Kant famously defined as the act of thinking: the self talking to itself. But the palimpsest of dissenting voices internalised as the artist's fractious selves also summoned a chain of ghostly authors: Shostakovich, Gogol, Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Even Miguel de Cervantes was in the auditorium, having snuck in by way of Lawrence Sterne (the Englishman apparently responsible for the surge in "nosological" narratives in 1830s Russia). By

emphasising how these earlier authors had infiltrated his own readings, Kentridge visibly opened up his thought process to further fracturing, until it seemed to explode into a heap of spectral refractions and tiny fragments. This debris was what Kentridge swept up to create his proscenium of scattered associations, poetic references and art historical invocations.

With strident black, red and white armies of marching text advancing on the viewer, Kentridge's stage-set unfolded like an enormous newspaper, plastered with classified ads and stamped with "senseless requests". Yet rather than offer the document of sense-making a newspaper aspires to be, the cacophonous onslaught of verbiage induced only giddy hyperstimulation. English headlines jostled Russian aphorisms, while revolving ribbons of text announcing scene locations vied for attention with flashing projections and Shostakovich's discordant music. Meanwhile, as the opera's dialogue crawled along the bottom of the stage, snippets were snatched and projected onto the set with a dissonant temporal lag, so that the words bounced off the walls like delayed rebukes or advance warnings. Language – advice, commentary, quotes – was strewn everywhere. Yet this surfeit of text, like the stridency of the music itself, seems to intimate a certain failure of language. Or more specifically: it reprised the avant-garde notion of a peculiarly modernist



breakdown of our sense-making operations, the insufficiencies of which were to be dosed (ironically) with a paroxysm-inducing barrage.

In this way, the plethora of words and nonsensical tidbits formed part of the larger excesses of *The Nose*, which was structured around a dialectic of multimedia chaos punctuated by moments of reprieve. Just when it seemed that pandemonium had triumphed, serenity would tiptoe onstage in the form of Anna Pavlova spinning gracefully through space (albeit mounted by a gargantuan nose). Trading not only in a rich array of imagery and visual references, but also in an ambitious range of media, Kentridge's production featured set designs animated by projected shadows, collage, prints, sculpture, video and archival film footage. Often the line between media was intentionally blurred, so that sculpture flattened into drawing or, as in the set of the newspaper office, architecture scrolled into papyry shelves and crinkled into doors. In this instance, the cutting and pasting of paper gave way to the collaging of architectural space. Moreover, Kentridge's snipping and folding moved from three dimensions into four: the rapid cuts and jumpy tempo of his film clips summoned the montages of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. Finally, all of this Cubo-Futurist mounting of paper, space and time was in turn layered onto the musical montage of Shostakovich's opera, fostering a productive bristling among the multiple media. Disharmony, to be sure, was being courted. How else to salute the dissonant ideals of the Russian avant-garde, whose bane was the seamless integration of music and image, or text and image?

Kentridge's *modus operandi*, of cutting and layering, also seems to account for the temporal instability of his production, which shifted from 1917 to 1925, then jumped to the 1930s and back again. Kentridge did not simply propel Gogol's 1836 story forward to meet Shostakovich's 1928 opera, but

he created a temporal grounding as shaky as the music itself. Thus Lenin's 1919 directive to "seek out reliable anti-futurists" (i.e. traditionalists) bumped into imagery of the nose pole-vaulting and diving in a show of Stalinist Russia's athletic prowess. And footage of crowds hoisting Vladimir Tatlin's 1920 *Monument to The Third International* into a bright future segued to the Stalinist culture of terror of the late 1930s. Taking his cue from the Constructivist desire to abolish the unifying "frame", Kentridge stacked up time in a heap of empty frames.

These layered temporalities are perhaps best illuminated by the footage of the artist-as-nose ascending his studio ladder and tumbling down, again and again – a metaphor not merely for the precariousness of political regimes and their leaders, but for the potential reversibility of pre- and post-revolutionary time, which is shown to fold in on itself, crumpling utopian dreams of advancement. That these images were filmed in a country whose leader, Thabo Mbeki, had himself only too recently toppled down the party

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ranks suggests, further, that the temporal reversibility implied in this filmic sequence is echoed in the idea of spatial mirroring. In this way, just as time slides forwards and slips backwards from the temporal break of the revolution, so too far-flung spaces appear as chimerical refractions of each other. In these mirror images, the space between Johannesburg and St. Petersburg appears to contract, drawing the ghosts of Russia's past to Johannesburg; hastening the post-revolutionary furies of Moscow down the length of Africa.

Like the advancing text of the projections, Russian history beams forward from the past, or backwards from the future, as an urgent warning and a silent rebuke. On the one hand, Kentridge's production celebrates the transformative energy of the 1917 revolution for the unmatched zenith



of arts and culture that it spurred; on the other, the slow decline or violent shattering that invariably follows such revolutionary efflorescence is repeatedly evoked – often through the physical shattering of form. In these reflective shards, South Africans may discern parallels with their own country's rosy post-apartheid afterglow, and its recent struggles against corruption, violence and xenophobia.

The opera ends with a signal image of exploded dreams: the nose being repeatedly shot by a policeman, each time dynamiting into a cascade of tiny pieces. A signpost of this authoritarian backlash cryptically announced, "Another Kheppi Ending". On one level this phrase is an ironic play on the Disneyesque "happy ending" – the Americanism disparagingly adopted by the Kino crew in the 1920s. But at the same time, the nose succumbs to the absolute power of the "kepi", the round, red-brimmed policeman's cap that is the face of post-revolutionary justice. Significantly, this is the manner in which the defected appendage is returned to the larger body politic: crushed by the crimson circle of the law.

The final shattering of the nose also enacts Kentridge's endless flirtation with the constitution and dissolution of form, which is echoed when his mangy Cervantesian horse implodes, mid-opera, into a pile of scraps. Like Kentridge's aphoristic smatterings, these collapsed images evoke the fragile chimera of coherence, both visual and cognitive: the threshold between form and formlessness becomes a metaphor for the tissue-thin boundary between sense and nonsense. When the artist films himself shuffling these same dozen pieces of black paper into and out of joint, poking and dragging his paper horse across the border of existence, he demonstrates once more how the cohering of base material into the semblance of an image parallels the mind's groping towards coherence. And he highlights too the contingency of these connections, the ease with which the fragments slide apart into unintelligibility. The opera commenced with a forceful image on this theme, a projected sculpture that rotated slowly towards the audience. The work was incomprehensible, an unreadable spew of torn black paper

FACING PAGE TOP, LEFT - RIGHT William Kentridge, video stills from installation *I am not me, the horse is not mine* (*His Majesty Comrade Nose*), 2008

FACING PAGE BOTTOM, LEFT - RIGHT William Kentridge, video stills from installation *I am not me, the horse is not mine* (*Commissariat for Enlightenment*), 2008

TOP, LEFT - RIGHT William Kentridge, *Nose 29 & 30* from *Nose*, 2008, aquatint, drypoint and engraving from a series of 30 prints, 35 x 40cm Publisher: David Krut Publishing, Johannesburg

BOTTOM, LEFT - RIGHT Animation backdrop for William Kentridge's production of *The Nose* showing portrait of its composer, Shostakovich

All images courtesy William Kentridge Studio, Johannesburg

squares suspended on a messy wire armature. But then, unexpectedly, the mass of fragments lined up and locked into place: three dimensions flattened into two to produce a portrait of Shostakovich. For a fleeting second, as debris mimicked form, disarray clicked into understanding, and the image slipped into the realm of the sensible.

But then just as quickly it snuck away. And it is precisely the nomadism of thought – how truths are already fading in the moment of their emergence – that Kentridge's MoMA lecture alluded to. Unravelling the unified product that *The Nose* became, he underscored its illusion of simulated coherence, both by nudging meaning from the finished production to the meanderings of his working process, and by refusing to present its chaos as resolved. Chafing, similarly, against the pretences of reasoned exegesis expected of the lecture format, Kentridge granted his thoughts free reign to publicly chase each other around in circles. Meanwhile, he tossed his nonsensical notes in the air one by one, declaring: "These notes make no sense whatsoever. I think what I meant, with these notes, I think what I mean, what I am trying to find..." With Kentridge having successfully undermined his reliability as a witness to his own work, we are left plying that same border between sense and nonsense, and forced to agree that the insistent seeking of meaning from the artist is as absurd a notion as a two-legged nose.

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