

# Silvia Cassini's 'Speak Their Names' Play Review

Article by The Editor

||

Posted: February 07, 2023

**Art & Culture**

**Theatre**

# Silvia Cassini's 'Speak Their Names' Play Review

Article by The Editor

||

Posted: February 07, 2023

**Art & Culture**

**Theatre**



“To sleep—perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub!”

Shakespeare's Hamlet had a sense of foreboding at the prospect of wandering off into dreamland, dreading that which may haunt him there. Cassini's Federico Taverio actively invites it, in this play about an obsessive writer caught between two worlds.

Federico is hell-bent on redressing the arch of history by transporting 20th Century feminist movement gains back to the deeply patriarchal post-Reformation era. Unlike Hamlet, whose dreams are obstacles, they are Federico's medium to achieving his grandiose goals. All the while he wrestles between his ingrained regard for tradition and functioning society, and his internal Messiah complex born of childhood trauma that could end with him hung on a gallows, or worse.

And what a puzzling, entertaining play *Speak Their Names* is. Buoyed by its ever-present lead Brian Ogola in a tense script by playwright Silvia Cassini, it is theatre at its finest – imaginative, empathetic and immersive.

Seven years on from her critically-acclaimed debut, *A Man Like You*, Silvia has returned with this sophomore effort inspired by real-life events in late-16th Century Italy, which has seen her land a nomination for Best Playwright & Original Script at the upcoming Kenya Theatre Awards (February 23rd), amongst nominations for Best Supporting Actress (Nixsha Shah), Best Actor (Brian Ogola) and even Best Production.



Supporting Brian Ogola in his flawed hero role are the bewitching (pun intended) debutante Nixsha Shah, and the inimitable Nini Wacera, who takes on the dual

roles of Federico's forsaken present-day wife Lily as well as Franchetta, an older, wiser 'ghost/ Earth-mother' from 400 years ago. Franchetta is noteworthy as the only woman who was silent under interrogation, and who by her sheer refusal to confess to witchcraft was eventually freed. She was the only woman to return to Triora. The rest died, or disappeared, their fates lost to time. Ironic then that her interrogation, that of the only woman who was silent, is all that survives in Triora's archive after it was ransacked and burnt by the Nazis in 1944.

Having explored the mind of a Somali terrorist in *A Man Like You*, Silvia takes on perhaps a more challenging, even frightening, endeavor – delving into her own mind. This meta-exploration of a writer writing another writer is undoubtedly a window into her own psyche. To watch this play is to be actively involved in the challenge of its creation, which is all the better.

For all its layered intrigues unfolding onstage, the story of how *Speak Their Names* came to life is as interesting as the play itself.

It begins with a lockdown in France where Kenyan-born Italian Silvia found herself marooned on the outbreak of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. For a claustrophobic storyteller whose creative spark hinges on social interaction, to be restricted to mundane routine within a strict 5-kilometer radius for the better part of a year, was difficult, to say the least. So when the lockdown eased in June 2021, Silvia drove across the border to her grandfather's birthplace in Liguria, behind the Italian Riviera.

In the wake of a devastating storm that had brought down the tunnel between France and Italy, Silvia explored the hilly medieval area of her ancestors. She came across Triora, the 'village of the witches', so named for its shameful history in which women were subjected to unspeakable cruelties during the Counter-Reformation Inquisitions. Between the 1587 and 1589, 200 women were tortured here, for crimes as slight as 'taking their eyes off the cross' or as improbable as 'conjuring great storms'. An unlucky 32 women and a boy were convicted and awaited sentence in prisons in Triora and Genova, bandied about for two years between Church and State, whilst officials from each deliberated who had final responsibility for them.

But what really motivated events in Triora, when women who had practiced their healing arts there for centuries, were suddenly accused of murder, infanticide and convening with the Devil? Sandro Oddo, Director of the Ethnographic Museum in Triora, was key to Silvia's uncovering the answer. At its root, a complex conspiracy of revenge, alchemy, contraband and treason, in which murderous nephews, revenge-taking uncles, Dominican priests and men loyal to the rulers of France, combined with smugglers and falsifiers of coin, to create a maelstrom of male witchery that left few clean. On the verge of discovery, the elders of Triora derailed attention onto their wives, beginning a process that spiraled out of their

control and saw them backtracking for its halt. Armed now with the not just the ‘where’ are the ‘how’, but also the ‘why’, Silvia began the painstaking work of telling Triora’s story.

What we see on stage is not only her drawing out of specific individuals with a hand in the events, but a larger indictment of the roles played, or not played, by Church and State. By failing to take a firm hand in the events, they are both guilty of letting them unfold; the Church by apathy, the State by zeal. Matthew Ondiege’s sanguine coldness as Deputy Bishop Del Pozzo poignantly symbolizes the Church’s indifference to the women, whilst Martin Kigundu as Giulio Scribani brilliantly captures the ruthless brutality of the State, an institution as grandiose and self-obsessed as Scribani is himself.

For much of the play, Federico does not understand that he is staring at a grand conspiracy. Only with the help of his ‘little witch’ Giovanina (Nixsha Shah), a sprite who populates his dreams, does he piece everything together, to finish the play he is stubbornly fixated on. It is fair to say that the scenes between Brian Ogola’s Federico and Nixsha Shah’s Giovanina are something to behold. Some actors might approach this script with overwrought displays of emotion. Not these two. They show a restraint beyond their ages and it is easy to imagine the future of Kenyan theatre in their hands.

As for the future of *Speak Their Names*, its initial run in Kenya may have ended, but there are surely more stagings coming, hopefully after it sweeps the Kenya Theatre Awards in a couple of weeks time. Silvia dreams of reprising the run *A Man Like You* had off Broadway, of taking the play on the festival circuit and of coming back finally to Italy, which she calls the play’s spiritual home. Having landed herself Leonardo Pignataro, collaborator on the Italian translation of *Game of Thrones* as her translator, she seems set to add another chapter to the multi-layered experience that *Speak Their Names* already is.

\*This review is by [Tim Mworia](#)