

'A MAN LIKE YOU' - 14 May 2017

TRACEY SAUNDERS reviews

A MAN LIKE YOU. Written and directed by Silvia Cassini. With Michael Kudakwashe, Kevin Hansen, Davina Leonard and Amwoma Mboga. Lighting and sound design by Alacoque Ntome. Music composition by Levi Wathaka.

It's a tribute to the diversity of offerings on Cape Town stages that one can watch a Zimbabwean born actor performing on a London stage via the NT Live offering (*Amadeus*) at the Fugard Theatre and later in the day watch Zimbabwean and Kenyan actors performing on a stage in Observatory. Via Nairobi, Harare and New York, *A Man Like You* has arrived in Cape Town following a successful run at the Harare International Festival of Arts and this brief season is a rare opportunity to watch theatre from another part of the continent.



Michael Kudakwashe and Kevin Hanssen in 'A Man Like You' – Photo Stefano Cassini

Written and directed by Kenyan-born Silvia Cassini, a writer, actor and director, the script draws on her thoughts after the attack by Al Shabaab on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi on 21 September 2013 which left sixty seven people dead. Since then, it has become one of many such attacks across the world. So much so that incidents have become almost normalised in the news cycle with lists of organisations who have perpetrated the attacks and standard political condemnation given out by rote followed by a wellspring of Islamophobia when groups such as Islamic State and Boko Haram are involved. After the dust has settled and the body count has been finalised though, very little attention is paid to the why and the wherefore. What motivates someone to kill civilians and is that motivation solely the purvey of Islamic militants?

Exploring deep-seated beliefs

This intense dialogue between a British-born diplomat, Patrick North (Kevin Hanssen) and his Somali captor, Abdi (Michael Kudakwashe) asks some of those questions and explores the deep seated beliefs held by both sides of the so called "war on terror." The conversation between these two men dominates the text but they are not alone on stage. Mostly seated in a wing back chair is Patrick's wife, Elizabeth (Davina Leonard). She is not always visible but the sense of her remains on stage as

does the deep seated anguish which she experiences. Her quietly convincing role of the wife who waits is delivered with perfect emotional cadence. There are no wild histrionics and she embodies that stoic British mentality which stands her in good stead but at what cost?



Michael Kudakwashe and Kevin Hanssen in 'A Man Like You' – Photo Stefano Cassini

North has a wife, children, a father-in-law, a penchant for beautiful objects and is by all accounts a man who cares deeply for others. We are given a less concrete picture of Abdi's family life, a deliberate oversight perhaps which emphasises the slim narrative advanced behind perpetrators as opposed to victims. Another young man, Mboga, enters the cell menacingly armed with an AK47 and dressed in slightly more stylish attire than your average militant. He is one of many drawn in to conflict and the life of the military in the absence of any other option. There are glimpses as to what drives him – money, conviction, religious fervour – but no definitive explanation.

A necessary discussion and electric tension

The play runs at the pace of the airport thrillers that Abdi thoughtfully provides his prisoner with but the dialogue between the two men is far more measured. Representing different cultures, worlds and religions their steadfast beliefs they are proxies for the multitude of narratives which play out on the streets of Mogadishu, the transport networks of Europe and the forests of Nigeria. With the rise of fundamentalism on all sides of the political divides and violence increasingly an answer to many a political conflict the discussion is a necessary one.

The chemistry between Hanssen and Kudakwashe is electric. The relationship that evolves between the two of them is a delicate dance with many of the moves first tested on the Shax board. Initially captor and captive, their relationship becomes far more complex. This is one of the strengths of the play. Who is "right," who is "wrong?" When is murder justified and what does a traitor really look like? There is no black and white, the nuances of guilt and responsibility, the extremes of nationalism and the deep seated malaise experienced by most countries are woven through their discourse and your sympathies veer between the two of them. While the polemic which presents the global situation sometimes tends toward the pedantic, the world views presented ensure that this is not about two men in a cell in Somalia but about everyone caught up in the modern conflict of our age. The play doesn't provide you with answers but leaves you questioning why it is that so many across the globe are willing to take up arms and die.



Michael Kudakwashe and Kevin Hanssen in 'A Man Like You' – Photo Stefano Cassini

Deeply satisfying piece of work

This is a deeply satisfying piece of work addressing issues in a way which opens up conversation and with strong performances by an accomplished cast. With the urgency of a Grisham thriller and the considered debates advanced Pilger-like, it holds your attention throughout. Special mention must be made of the make up artist who creates effects which would make any Hollywood creative team proud. In a week where it feels as if the theatre world has descended on Cape Town with the 19th ASSITEJ World Congress and International Theatre Festival for Children and Young People beginning this week, don't miss this opportunity to experience international theatre from our own continent.

Where and when: Theatre Arts Admin Collective 15 – 20 May