Lines of Resistance
William Kentridge’s rough magic.

By Calvin Tomkins

A few minutes before going onstage to deliver his theatrical monologue “I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine,” in New York on November 9th, the South African artist William Kentridge admitted that he was feeling “rather stressed.” He didn’t show it. Kentridge, who is fifty-four, is a solidly built man of medium height, with deep-set blue eyes and the distinctive profile of a Roman proconsul. Dressed as usual in dark trousers and a white open-necked shirt, he seemed thoughtful but confident.

Nearly four hundred people had come to see him, in a cavernous ground-floor space on West Twenty-sixth Street. (The event was sponsored by Performa 09, a three-week series of performance pieces by artists in different venues around the city.) The overflow turnout was an indication of how influential Kentridge’s work has become since 1997, when his drawings, prints, and strangely compelling animated films started to register outside his native city of Johannesburg. A major Kentridge exhibition opens on February 24th at the Museum of Modern Art. Organized originally by the independent curator Mark Rosenthal, the show is appearing at eight other museums here and abroad. On March 5th, a Kentridge-directed-and-designed production of “The Nose,” the rarely performed opera by Dmitri Shostakovich, will have its première at the Metropolitan Opera. It is hard to remember when a visual artist has cut such a wide swath in the city’s cultural life, or spanned so many disciplines with such aplomb. “I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine” (the title is from Russian folklore, and refers to a Russian peasant’s denial of guilt) is a by-product of his two-year focus on the Shostakovich opera, which is based on a story by Nikolai Gogol. Although Kentridge often shows up in his drawings and films, this is the first piece in which he has appeared, live, as a solo performer. Promptly at ten past eight, with no introduction, he

Kentridge performing a monologue inspired by Gogol.
Photograph by Steve Pyke
stepped up on the low platform that served as a stage, surveyed the rapidly quieting audience, and began, in a resonant and cultivated voice, to talk about Gogol’s “The Nose.”

His summary of the plot was concise and dramatic. Kovalyov, a minor bureaucrat in tsarist Russia, wakes up one morning and realizes that his nose has vanished. During his frantic efforts to find it, he spies his nose on the street, strutting about in the uniform of a government official whose rank is higher than his own. He confronts it timidly, and the nose rebuffs him with contempt. At length, after more humiliating encounters, Kovalyov and his nose are abruptly and inexplicably reunited. The Kafka-like tale, satirizing self-image and the terrors of hierarchy, set Kentridge off on a wide-ranging, forty-minute exploration of the absurdist impulse in literature, art, and history, and in his own life. From time to time, he was joined on the stage by projected video images of himself: first one and then two white-shirted figures who came and went mutely, sat down, stood up, moved furniture, and eventually imitated Kentridge’s habit, during his talk, of tossing his lecture notes into the air. Kentridge’s precisely timed attempts to intimidate or ignore his split selves, and to catch and retrieve the projected images of notes, drew somewhat uneasy laughs, but the audience stayed with him. Near the end, he put on gold-rimmed pince-nez (which he keeps in his shirt pocket, tethered by a black shoelace) and read excerpts from Nikolai Bukharin’s testimony, in 1937, before a plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Moscow. The doomed Bukharin’s appeals to reason and human decency, and the ironic laughter with which they were received, pushed the absurdist theme into political areas that Kentridge, who grew up with the ambiguities of being white and Jewish in South Africa, has dealt with throughout his work. No artist is less didactic than Kentridge, however, and he offered no explicit connections. He ended his performance in pensive silence, looking away from us as the stage lights went down.

ike many people, I can remember the first time I saw a Kentridge film. It was in 1999, in a Projects show at the Museum of Modern Art, and the film was called “Stereoscope.” An eight-minute sequence of hand-drawn animations, it included a heavyset businessman in a dark chalk-striped suit, sitting at a desk piled with papers; a dozen or more people manning a huge switchboard, from which swiftly moving cobalt-blue lines proliferated and intersected; individual men and women being pushed aside and obscured by pages of meaningless numbers; a dense crowd of people surging through city streets; men kicking or beating helpless victims. The businessman reappeared toward the end, holding his head in apparent anguish; the word “GIVE,” in large capitals, filled the screen and changed to “FORGIVE”; the businessman stood, looking down, as blue water poured from the pockets of his clothes, filling the room. The images were crudely but powerfully drawn, in charcoal and blue pastel, and filmed
in an old-fashioned stop-motion technique. I had never heard of Kentridge, didn’t know he was South African, didn’t understand that his images were rooted in the terrible history of apartheid and its aftermath, but the film made me forget where I was.

“Stereoscope” is the eighth of Kentridge’s “Nine Drawings for Projection,” the series that launched international interest in his work. During several conversations I had with him last fall, when he was in New York, he told me that the first film in the series, titled “Johannesburg, Second Greatest City After Paris,” came about more or less by accident, in the late eighties. He was thirty-four years old at the time, married to a doctor, with two young children, and he considered himself a failure at everything he had tried to do—painting, acting, commercial filmmaking. It was a particularly grim time in South Africa. To stem the mounting internal opposition to apartheid, a state-of-emergency law had been passed in 1985, and arrests and police brutality were on the rise. International sanctions and boycotts had isolated the country from Europe and most of the world. Kentridge decided at this point to go back to the one thing he had always been able to do well, which was drawing. The artists he admired most, then and now, tended to be great draftsmen—Goya, Max Beckmann, Picasso—and his new, large-scale charcoal drawings and engravings, many of them quick studies of people he had seen on the street, had that kind of unrefined intensity. A Johannesburg art gallery exhibited them in 1985 and 1986, and although quite a few were sold, Kentridge still felt discouraged. “I had a terrifying moment of thinking, An exhibition every eighteen months, another forty years of work—is that all it’s going to be?” he told me. “I needed to find something else.” Using a borrowed 16-mm. Bolex movie camera, he began making a film in his studio, with the Warholian idea that anyone or anything that came in would be included. One of his charcoal drawings was on the wall; he filmed its successive changes and erasures. When his close friend Angus Gibson, a filmmaker and film editor, saw the raw footage, Kentridge told me, “he said the only interesting part was the drawing, and why didn’t I make a film out of drawings? Angus nursed that first film into being.”

Kentridge didn’t know where he was going with it. “I had two men,” he said. “One was Soho Eckstein, a character I’d used in posters for trade unions. That was easy, the businessman in the pin-striped suit—it was made for drawing. I had no idea what the other man would wear, so I decided to make him without clothes. And I put a woman between them, who became Mrs. Eckstein.” The naked man is Felix Teitlebaum, a sensitive poet and dreamer, the lover of Eckstein’s voluptuous wife. Felix and Mrs. Eckstein appear in three of the nine films, and Soho appears in all of them. “Much later, I realized there were elements of me in both men,” Kentridge said. “I look back now and think, How lucky not to know what you’re doing.”

Banner design for production of “The Nose.”
COURTESY WILLIAM KENTRIDGE / MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NY
There were no storyboards; nothing was worked out in advance. “It doesn’t start with a social message,” he explained. “It starts with images that interest me, or provoke me.” He found he could make a crowd move across a landscape by placing a tiny dot in one corner and gradually adding more. He called his method “stone-age animation.” For a sequence that would take hundreds of computer-drawn cels in a Pixar film, Kentridge used a single charcoal drawing, altered and rephotographed again and again. The shadowy leftover traces of smudged or erased lines made each film a palimpsest, a history of its own making. I still can’t figure out why these stubbornly low-tech films are so moving. In “Sobriety, Obesity, and Growing Old,” the fourth in the series, Eckstein, whose wife has left him, stands facing away from us into a blasted postindustrial landscape, under a sign reading “Her Absence Filled the World.” Kentridge’s friend Yvette Christiansë, a South African poet and novelist who teaches at Fordham, told me that when she shows a Kentridge film to her freshman class “they don’t breathe until it stops, and then they don’t know how to talk about it. This happens every time.” I know artists who dismiss his work as retro and maybe a bit kitsch. The Times art critic Roberta Smith has described his drawings as generic and impersonal. The European curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, one of his main supporters, once wrote that Kentridge, by denying coherence, clarity, and style, has created “an art of ‘resistance’ to modernism and post-modernism.” I agree with her. For me, the “Nine Drawings for Projection” have a rough magic that’s unlike anything else in contemporary art.

South Africa has produced many fine writers but very few visual artists of international stature. For Kentridge, becoming an artist was “a completely unnatural thing to do”—the natural thing, he says, would have been to study law. Three of his grandparents and both his parents were lawyers. “My paternal grandfather was a member of Parliament here from 1913 to 1956,” he told me, “and I don’t know if he practiced law. My grandmother on my mother’s side was the first woman barrister in South Africa and the second in the British Empire.” Both sides of the family had immigrated to South Africa before the turn of the last century, to escape the wave of pogroms in Russia; in South Africa, as assimilated Jews (the family name had been
Kantorowitz), they prospered, first in small trade (tailors, locksmiths) and then in the law, becoming part of a tiny liberal élite in a land where highly conservative whites ruled over an overwhelmingly black majority.

When Kentridge was five, he discovered in his father's desk a folder of eight-by-ten photographs of black people who had been shot by the police in the Sharpeville massacre. “It was certainly a shock to be expecting to find chocolates and see these photographs,” he recalls. “But it was even more of a shock to see the difference between an entry wound, just a dark little hole in the back of someone’s jacket, and the next photo of the person rolled over, with an exit wound that was the whole chest exploded. I never mentioned to my father that I had seen them, not until years later. That the adult world could be this violent—it didn't fit any conceivable notion. It was one of those moments when one’s understanding of the world turns a sharp corner.” Sydney Kentridge, his father, was a leading trial lawyer in the anti-apartheid movement, and his wife, Felicia, co-founded the most important public-interest law firm in South Africa. They were brilliant, magnetic people, extravagantly admired by their many friends, and by the liberal intelligentsia whom they welcomed to their house. A family member recalls the novelist Nadine Gordimer’s saying that when Felicia walked into a room it took your breath away. When William was growing up, he often considered becoming a lawyer. “I think I'd have been able to do that, and do it well,” he told me. “But it always seemed that my father’s was an impossible act to follow.” His three siblings apparently felt the same way. William’s older sister, who lives in Toronto, is a marriage officer. His younger brother is a management consultant, and his younger sister is an artist; they both live in England. Sydney and Felicia Kentridge left South Africa, moving to London in 1981. “My father couldn't bear to appear before the terrible South African judges anymore, and it seemed impossible that things would change,” William told me. “I am the only one who's still here.”

The family lived in a large, comfortable house, on a hillside about two miles from the city’s center, with three acres of rambling English-style gardens. Their black servants lived in separate quarters on the property. Kentridge was a bright, articulate child, with a lively sense of humor. His father recalls an incident when he was five, and his mother, who was taking him out, told him to wash his hands and put on his shoes: “ ‘One or the other,’ William said. ‘Not both.' ” He went to the all-white boys’ school that his father had attended. Most of his classmates came from families that supported the conservative United Party, and they saw nothing unusual about their social situation. Because of his parents, though, Kentridge was aware early on that he lived in an abnormal society, where terrible things were done every day.
He did well in school, and he acted in all his class plays. He also did a lot of drawing. He remembers, at one of his first art lessons as a child, being given a piece of charcoal, which seemed “more serious than a pencil.” Kentridge had art lessons every Saturday morning until he was fourteen, when he started going to life-drawing classes with an artist named Bill Ainslie, whom his parents had got to know when they asked him to paint a portrait of their younger son and daughter.

At the local University of the Witwatersrand, which he entered in 1973, after a year of compulsory military service, Kentridge majored in politics and African studies. He also directed and acted in theatrical productions, many of which were politically based; student opposition to the apartheid government was rife at the university, and Kentridge did some marching and protesting. At least half his time, though, was spent off campus at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, a non-racial, non-credit art school that Bill Ainslie had started in 1972. Kentridge was trying to be a painter then, and not making much headway. His problem was with color. “I found it really difficult to choose one color as opposed to another,” he said. There was no such indecision in his relationship with Anne Stanwix, an Australian whose family had moved to South Africa when she was sixteen. She had come to his high school once, with the debating team of her all-girls’ school. Kentridge had been in the audience that night, and afterward he invited her to have tea with him. They met again in freshman year at the university, where she was studying medicine, and they have been together ever since.

For several years after college, Kentridge seemed headed for a career in the theatre. He and some fellow-students had started the Junction Avenue Theatre Company in 1975, while they were still in school; they performed in Johannesburg, doing Alfred Jarry’s “Ubu Roi” and other experimental workshop productions, one of which, “The Fantastical History of a Useless Man,” was about “what it felt like to be white and useless in South Africa.” Kentridge said, “We finished it in 1976, just as the Soweto riots exploded, and we had this big discussion: Do we keep going or do we stop?” The group eventually joined forces with a black theatre company called Workshop ’71 and continued performing. Kentridge acted, directed, designed sets, and made posters. (He also designed posters for the black trade unions, which had gained the right to strike in 1979.) He kept taking art classes at Ainslie’s foundation, and made drawings and prints on his own. Eventually, though, his problems in handling oil paint convinced him that he could never make it as an artist, so he decided to go to Paris and become a serious actor.

“There was this theatre school I’d heard about in Paris, L’École Jacques Lecoq, whose approach was very different from traditional forms of theatre training,” he recalled. “Instead of starting with a text, Lecoq started with movement as the basis. It wasn’t mime—there were several schools of mime in Paris, and none of them spoke to the
others. A lot of theatre directors have come out of the Lecoq school—Simon McBurney, Ariane Mnouchkine, Luc Bondy, who just did the ‘Tosca’ that people hated. But within three weeks it became very clear, to me and to others, that I should not be an actor. Every week, we had to do a series of improvisations, and every week mine would look exactly the same.”

He and Anne finished out the year in Paris. She was doing her residency at the American Hospital, and he was learning more about art, he said, than he had ever learned in art school. Kentridge described a rigorous exercise in which Lecoq students had to act out six degrees of tension in breathing and speaking—he demonstrated them for me—from a kind of lassitude that made movement of any kind virtually impossible, to the sixth degree, in which the simple act of picking up a fork involves a “ricetus of tension that corresponds to Japanese Noh theatre.” The exercise, he said, helped to instill a physical awareness of energy withheld and spent, and it could also be applied to drawing: “You go from a looseness of mark-making to an efficient one to a gestural one.”

He and Anne decided it would be fun to get married in Paris, but, lacking the required documents, they married in London instead. In 1982, they returned to Johannesburg—“that rather desperate provincial city,” as Kentridge once called it. The city and its complex history fascinate him: the mineral wealth (gold and diamonds) that made it an industrial giant and left on its outskirts a wasteland of abandoned mines and industries, which appear again and again in his films; the fact that its two most famous residents in the last century were Gandhi and Nelson Mandela; the discovery, in limestone caves thirty miles from the city, of hominid fossils that push back the date of human origins by a million years or more. “There is something extraordinarily ugly/beautiful about Johannesburg that informs his work,” his friend Angus Gibson said last fall. “I can’t imagine him living anywhere else.” The Kentridges took a house in a low-rent district near the center of town, where, a little later, drug dealers operated openly. “People were constantly coming in to get their wounds mended by Anne,” Gibson recalls.

“It’s such a pleasure to meet you—you look even sleepier in person than you do on YouTube.”
unemployable. You’re nearing thirty, you’ve never had a job, and no one will hire you, so
do what you’re doing and stop complaining.’ Our first child, Alice, was born soon
afterward, in 1984, and suddenly there was a big change of focus. I started drawing
again. That’s the point where I began to write ‘artist’ on application forms, rather than
‘technician.’ Sink or swim, I was reduced to being an artist.”

The cultural boycott of South Africa, he says, made it easier to find his way. It meant he
could work quietly on his own, without trying to keep abreast of current developments
elsewhere. His knowledge of contemporary art was limited. “I had never heard of Bruce
Nauman,” he said. “I was aware of Joseph Beuys—Beuys and his honey pump, which
was supposed to be political art. But politics is not spreading honey around the main
building at the Documenta art exhibition. It’s putting electrodes on people’s testicles,
locking them up, putting them in fear of their lives. There was some anger separating
me from the naïveté of Jasper Johns, who could celebrate his national flag so un-
ironically. In South Africa you could not begin to paint the flag.” The minimalists and
conceptualists made him marvel at the huge gap between his experience and theirs.

“Part of this was a mixture of ignorance and provincial disdain for the center,” he said.
“At any rate, there was no expectation of my work appearing in Flash Art or Art in
America, so the terror those magazines exercised over a lot of young artists wasn’t there.
And by the time the cultural boycott ended, in 1990, I was making the animated films.
When they were shown in exhibitions outside South Africa, and curators responded to
them on their own terms, I was astonished.”

Two of Kentridge’s films, “Felix in Exile” and “History of the Main Complaint,” drew
widespread comment at the 1997 Documenta X exhibition, in Kassel, Germany. His
timing could not have been better. Globalism was in flower, and one of its
manifestations was a surge of interest in new forms of art from countries outside
Europe and the United States. “He just came soaring through that,” according to
Connie Butler, the chief curator of drawings at MOMA, who saw his work the next
year at the Drawing Center in New York. “His drawings had an intensely local feeling,”
she said, “but I remember being struck by the combination of their intimacy and their
performative quality—something I had never seen before.” Klaus Biesenbach, one of
three MOMA curators who will install the Kentridge show at the museum next month,
told me that Kentridge’s time-and-process-based art, “which bridges opera, theatre,
movies, sculpture, and drawing,” could not have been shown on this scale at a major
museum ten years ago. “It’s a huge shift in paradigms,” he said.

Apartheid ended in 1994, when the African National Congress Party won the first
democratic election, and Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa. For
Kentridge, though, the key event had occurred four years earlier: “I was driving on a
highway, listening to the boring opening of Parliament in 1990, when the
The transfer of power from the outgoing government to Mandela’s party was fraught with tensions and uncertainties. “It seemed wonderful that we had a country transforming itself without the streets running in blood, and that we had a political compromise, but the price of the compromise was deeply felt,” Kentridge said. “The main decision was to put the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in place, with the understanding that terrible criminals would be let off scot-free as long as they told the truth about what they had done. There’s a cost to pay for that kind of amnesty. The choice was made between truth and justice, and it meant not taking responsibility for your actions.”

This dilemma was reflected, though never overtly, in Kentridge’s work. In 1992, he had begun to collaborate with the Handspring Puppet Company, a professional troupe that performed mainly in Cape Town and Johannesburg. He made animated film projections, which were used onstage with large, hand-carved wooden puppets, each of them manipulated by two live actors. “Faustus in Africa!,” their 1995 adaptation of the Faust story, resonated with undertones of the bitter choices being made in post-apartheid South Africa. Testimony from the Truth and Reconciliation hearings informed “History of the Main Complaint” and figured prominently in “Ubu Tells the Truth,” an animated film whose central image is the monstrous tyrant of Jarry’s play. Kentridge never tried to illustrate apartheid or its aftermath directly, but much of his work in the nineteen-nineties stemmed from his own struggle to come to terms with a compromised society. As he once explained, “I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures, and uncertain endings. An art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay.”

Kentridge’s parents returned from London several times a year for visits of varying length. They came back less often as the years passed, and in 1997 William and Anne and their three children—Isabel was born in 1988, Samuel in 1992—moved into his parents’ big house in Johannesburg. “We’d thought the only way we could manage it financially was to break up the property and sell off sections,” Anne recalls, “but that was the year William showed at Documenta, and the year Marian Goodman asked him to join her gallery in New York. He was also approached by a dealer in London, and suddenly we could afford the rates and taxes and all the gardening costs. His parents had planted two cypress trees—one on either side of the front door—which had grown so high, in forty years, that they blocked the view. When we told William’s parents that...
we were going to cut them down, it felt a bit like matricide and patricide—those two looming figures too large for us to cope with.” Anne worked long hours at the main public hospital, where she was a rheumatologist. She also took a keen interest in William’s work, commenting on it with candor, and even appearing nude in one of his films. Kentridge turned the sitting room into his studio, where the children were always welcome—he would get them to make shadow puppets or paint posters. He took them to school and brought them home, and he did much of the cooking. (His birthday cakes were very inventive: Alice remembers getting a giraffe one year and a pirate chest full of gold coins another.) Eventually, he built a larger studio, in the garden.

Work poured out of him—films, sculptures, puppet-theatre productions, charcoal drawings, and also prints, which have always been an important part of his oeuvre. One of Kentridge’s projects with the Handspring Puppet Company had been an adaptation of Monteverdi’s opera “The Return of Ulysses,” which he designed and directed. Widely performed, it caught the attention of Bernard Foccroulle, then the director of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, in Brussels, who asked Kentridge if he would be interested in staging—designing and directing—a full-dress opera. Kentridge loves opera, a passion he shares with his father, and the prospect of working on a big stage excited him. Finding the right opera took two years. He spent a year and a half working on “Tannhäuser,” but Wagner’s long, static scenes were inhospitable to the kind of staging, with animated-film projections, that Kentridge had in mind. “Finally, in 2004, I went to the director and said, ‘Sorry, I can’t do this.’ He said, ‘Well, we’re also thinking about “The Magic Flute,”’ and I said yes, immediately.”

He had seen the opera only once or twice. He adored the music and the libretto’s childlike, fairy-tale qualities, but, as he said, “I realized I knew very little about it. I knew that Act I has great scenes, with wild beasts and bird-catching, and in Act II there’s an impossible series of scenes with priests, where you don’t really know what’s going on, and then you have a great duet at the end. One of the main jobs was to make the story flow—not to let the second act be a confusion. It had to work like a fairy story.” For Kentridge, the most pressing problem was how to adapt his own process-oriented method of working to a situation that involved dozens of other people and a lot of meticulous planning. One reason he had failed as a filmmaker, he told me, was that it was hard for him to give other people instructions—to do so would imply that he knew what he was doing in advance. The solution he found this time was to spend many months alone in his studio, working out the film elements, and then to have a series of workshops with a four-person team of experienced collaborators, whom he chose and brought to Johannesburg: a set designer, a costume designer, a video editor, and an assistant director to work on the staging. Many drawings and a number of independent works came of this process, including a model theatre, built in his studio,
with three-dimensional sets and backdrops. “It was a lot harder when I had to confront
the singers on day one of the rehearsals,” he said. “I was completely terror-struck—and
acted as if I knew what I was doing!”

Kentridge had come to view the opera as a reflection of the Enlightenment, whose
contradictions and ramifications were personified in the character of the high priest
Sarastro. “Mozart’s opera opened in 1791, two years after the French Revolution,” he
said. “By 1792 or 1793, you had the first real Sarastros in the Committee of Public
Safety and in Robespierre, people who said that in the interests of pure rationalism and
what’s best for everyone we’ll chop the heads off thousands of people. Sarastro decides
to kidnap Pamina, and put her under the control of his thug, because he knows what’s
good for her. That’s in the libretto, but the music that Mozart gives him is very calming
and reassuring.” Kentridge was not about to politicize Mozart. His thinking led,
however, to a separate but related work called “Black Box,” another miniature theatre,
with a twenty-two-minute scenario of filmed projections and puppet figures on
mechanical tracks. The subject is colonialism in Africa, which, as Kentridge points out,
was justified by the European powers as bringing enlightenment to the Dark
Continent, and the piece makes reference to the near-annihilation by German colonial
troops, in 1904, of the Herero tribe in German Southwest Africa—now Namibia. The
soundtrack is a collage of Namibian songs and “Magic Flute” arias, somewhat altered—one
of Sarastro’s arias, instead of being sung, is played by a military brass band. The
most delightful moment in Kentridge’s “Magic Flute” comes in the first act, when an
animated rhinoceros, hearing the flute, dances on its hind legs and turns somersaults;
“Black Box” includes archival film footage from a 1912 rhinoceros hunt in Cameroon,
which ends with the rhino thrashing in agony, and two white hunters cutting off its
horn.

“The Magic Flute” was warmly received when it came to the Brooklyn Academy of
Music, in 2007, after highly successful runs in Brussels, Lille, and Naples. The Times’
Anne Midgette called it “an exuberant dialogue between drawing and music.” Writing
in the Wall Street Journal, Matthew Gurewitsch said that it “has Kentridge’s fingerprints
all over it, yet never betrays Mozart’s generosity and sweet temper.” The production
disclosed a new dimension in Kentridge’s art, a playful, lighthearted expansiveness that
had not been evident in his earlier work, and an ability to operate on a large—the
largest possible—theatrical scale. A number of viewers, this one among them, had
reservations. I loved the animations, which filled the stage with mathematical diagrams
and fast-moving projections, in white light, of abstract and natural forms—Kentridge
had filmed himself, as Papageno the bird-catcher, holding and releasing wonderfully
lifelike doves—but there were times when I felt that the visual effects were a distraction
from the music. This may well have had to do with the BAM performance, which was
handicapped by a lack of rehearsal time and the absence of great singers. “Some people
hated it because there was too much to watch,” Kentridge said, when I mentioned my reaction. “But opera is an impure medium, combining many different elements. It’s also a completely contemporary form, in that what’s possible today, in combining image and music, was not possible thirty years ago. The whole popular-music industry is based on music videos. The operatic tradition of combining large-scale visual spectacle with live music is the pattern of popular music-making now.”

Kentridge discovered “The Nose” when he bought a book of Gogol’s short stories in an airport bookstore. Although he reads a lot of fiction, he says that there are gaps in his knowledge of the classics, and Gogol was one of them. He was struck by the tale’s affinities with the absurdist strain in art and literature, which, in the last century, had moved from the periphery into the mainstream. (A note in the introduction to the Gogol volume led him to Laurence Sterne’s “Tristram Shandy,” written the century before Gogol, which tells of a man whose nose was squashed flat at birth.) Kentridge learned of the Shostakovich opera soon afterward. Completed in 1930, when the composer was twenty-two, the production was shut down after a few performances, a victim of Stalin’s brutal crushing of the post-Revolutionary avant-garde. “It’s about a world gone awry, about dislocated logic and a driven irrationality where language stops making sense,” Kentridge told me. “That’s very much part of the nineteen-thirties in Russia, the period of the show trials. The absurd is the only form adequate to describe that breakdown of logic and rationality.”

Early in 2005, Peter Gelb, who would soon take over as the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, approached Kentridge about staging an opera for the Met. Gelb has defined his primary goal as helping the Met “reclaim its place in the forefront of American theatre and world theatre,” and he has hired some of the most innovative theatre and film directors to re-stage operas in the repertory or to direct new productions. The opera Gelb had in mind for Kentridge was Verdi’s early and rarely performed “Attila.” Kentridge thought about it overnight, and then, as Gelb recalls, “he came back and said he was not remotely interested in ‘Attila,’ but how about ‘The Nose’?” Gelb did some quick research. “I was aware of the opera, but I didn’t know it,” he said. “I also had to find out if Valery Gergiev, who is the leading Shostakovich conductor, would be willing to take it on. He was, and I told William we would do it. It was very quick. I was convinced.”

Gelb, Kentridge, and his four-person team went to St. Petersburg, where Gergiev arranged a special performance of “The Nose” for them, as part of the White Nights Festival. From there, Kentridge went straight to Johannesburg, where he set to work. It took him several months to work out the visual language of the piece; its main element is a huge collage, in the Constructivist style, of newspaper pages and agitprop slogans in Russian, German, and French, against which images would be projected. Although the
actual nose appears and sings in only two scenes of the opera, Kentridge produced countless drawings of it, some of which will appear as projected images—the nose on horseback, the nose dancing (its legs are sometimes Kentridge’s and sometimes Anna Pavlova’s, in archival footage). “The shape of the nose is my nose,” Kentridge told me, beaming, “an Ashkenazi Jewish nose.” He clearly had enormous fun conceiving the visual elements. The Met agreed to pay for two extended workshops, one in Johannesburg and one in New York. (It is also sharing the cost of a European production of the opera, which will take place in 2011, in Aix-en-Provence.) Gelb has signed Paulo Szot, the Brazilian baritone who won a Tony Award in 2008 for his performance in “South Pacific,” to sing the leading role of Kovalyov. There will be six performances at the Met, starting March 5th. Asked whether “The Nose” might return to the Met next season, Gelb was cagey. “I don’t know,” he said. “It may have to wait for the next nasal festival.”

When Kentridge left New York in November, he was headed for Naples, where a show of large-scale tapestries, made from his drawings by a small weaving studio in Johannesburg, was opening at the Capodimonte Museum. After that, he looked forward to two months at home. Alice, his older daughter, now fully recovered from a yearlong ordeal with cancer, was getting married in January, at the house, and the whole family would be there. When things finally quiet down, late this spring, Kentridge has promised himself a sabbatical, a year or so of reading, thinking, eating well, and drinking “better wine than I deserve.” He also plans to make another animated film from charcoal drawings, “going back to basics, which is to say, drawing Johannesburg.” I asked him whether he had ever seriously considered living somewhere else. “Never to the extent of making plans,” he replied. “Just vague longings. Each time I go to Paris, I say, ‘What a gorgeous city—why don’t we live here?’ ”

One of the strange things about post-apartheid South Africa, he added, is that so little has changed. “In many parts of the country, it hasn’t changed at all. Children in poor rural schools still get a miserable education. It’s also true that the main beneficiaries since the ending of apartheid are white South Africans. No sacrifices have been required. No one’s lost their beautiful house. There’s lots of violence around, but you had that before—now you have more of it. That’s the price of extreme inequality. There may not be a correlation between poverty and crime but there’s a very clear one between extreme inequality and crime, and a whole history of reasons why it’s as nasty and violent as it is. In South Africa, there is never an assumption that a calm and gentle death is one’s birthright. September 11th in America had an interesting effect here. It helped lots of us understand that living in a dangerous, unstable world was not only a South African phenomenon, and that made people here less anxious to leave.”
In the end, Kentridge stays because South Africa’s compromised society reflects and nourishes his work. “My work is about the provisionality of the moment,” he told me. “I’ve become very suspicious of certainty. First comes understanding the value of doubt. For me, that’s how we go through the world.”

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