



THE DUKE'S JESTER: Fikile Mvinjelwa as the vengeful, tortured hunchback Rigoletto in Cape Town Opera's 2008 production of the opera of that name

Picture: STUART RALPH

The world's his stage, now he's home from the Met to sing for SA

Acclaimed Langa baritone Fikile Mvinjelwa shows the way for African opera stars, writes *Christina Kennedy*

FIKILE Mvinjelwa was among the first wave of black opera singers to start reaching for the stars during the dawn of democracy in South Africa in the early 1990s. And the former Langa resident has more than lived up to his early promise — he now sings with the New York Metropolitan Opera. The Washington Post hailed him as a “real find” when he performed in Virginia Opera’s production of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Rigoletto* two years ago, saying “the pick hit of the evening was South African baritone Fikile Mvinjelwa in the key role of Rigoletto himself”. He “proved to be a genuinely riveting, truly memorable tragic hero/avenger”. This week Mvinjelwa returns home to perform as the guest artist in Opera Africa’s double bill at the State Theatre in Pretoria and Joburg Theatre. The first half comprises the new, Zulu, one-act operatic work, *Ziyankomo and the Forbidden Fruit*, composed by Phelelani Mnomiya, with a libretto by Themba Msimang; the second half features excerpts from popular operas. Mvinjelwa, the toast of New York in the title role in *Rigoletto*, as Amonasro in *Aida* and as Ezio in *Attila* — all by Giuseppe Verdi — is no stranger to South African

stages and works. The 2001 Standard Bank Young Artist award-winner has performed widely for the Cape Town Opera, in particular, and has graced local and international stages in works such as Brett Bailey’s production of *macbeth: the opera* as well as in Mzilikazi Khumalo’s *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu* and Philip Miller’s *Rewind Cantata*. “Indigenous opera is critical to show audiences that South Africa is part of the world and that we don’t just need to listen to European opera,” he says. “Look at what Russia has done to encourage the writing of Russian operas and how big opera is in that country. We should be doing the same here.” Mvinjelwa plays the pacifist King Mpande in *Ziyankomo*, which takes a slice of Zulu history and shapes it into a tragic-romantic operatic vignette to tell the story of a warrior of royal blood on trial for cavorting with one of the king’s concubines.

In addition to Mvinjelwa’s striking baritone voice, audiences can expect to experience the theatricality that has made him a firm favourite on the world’s stages. Of his trademark expressiveness, he says: “I learned that from Angelo Gobbato [his mentor at the then-Capab Opera company and the University of Cape Town, who is directing part of the Opera Africa season]. He taught me that your performance has to come from the heart; you must be passionate. You must involve the audience so that they’ll want to come again. You can have the most beautiful voice in the world, but if you’re boring, you’re boring!” Like many of South Africa’s rising opera stars, Mvinjelwa cut his teeth singing in a township choir, in Guguletu in Cape Town. It was while participating in a mass choir event, singing Verdi’s *Requiem* in Cape Town, that he became hooked on opera. “It was my first time in an opera house. Hearing the orchestra and the

soloists, I fell completely in love.” In 1993 he joined the Capab ad hoc chorus and the following year went on to study opera at the University of Cape Town while being attached to the Capab Opera Studio. “It was tough. Abel Moeng and I were the only two black guys in opera college and, coming from the background that I did, I didn’t know how to read music and didn’t understand German, French or Italian. It was a case of sink or swim.” There was also the unavoidable burden of expectation to become one of the first post-apartheid black opera singers to excel. His hunger to succeed, self-discipline and dedication have propelled Mvinjelwa to where he is today — winning awards such as an FNB Vita and coming second in Bulgaria’s Boris Christoff international singing competition along the way. “I’ve been attached to the Met since 2009 and working at this level is unbelievable,” he says, unable to conceal a hint of disbelief at his good fortune. “You’re working with the best singers and conductors in the world — but you have to be on top of your game every day otherwise you’re gone. The competition from singers all over the world is huge. There’s nothing bigger than this. I’m just happy that they’re still inviting me!”

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