

Review:

Dazzling Zulu opera



“Far from being a pale, provincial copy of European opera, this South-African opera is genuine and unique.”

By

[Torkil Olav Baden](#)

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There is a relentless honesty about the South-African opera “Princess Magogo” that is currently guesting in Oslo. I cannot deny that I had been a little worried that it would be a provincial attempt to mimic European opera traditions. I was pleasantly surprised to be met by a bold, original work – as was the enthusiastic opera audience.



From the Zulu opera 'Princess Magogo'

Photo: Jörg Wiesner/The Norwegian National Opera

Revolt against British oppression

The show comes across as a national opera, telling the country's history through the life of the singing princess Magogo. She has been charged by her father with cultivating and passing on the heritage of Zulu song and culture, which she does in a critical period in Zulu history in the 1900s.

The many short scenes switch between political and personal events. The people's revolt against violent oppression by the British is gripping. We are shown conflicts and reconciliation between tribes, with the Princess's arranged marriage as the political lubricant. The athletic folk dances and exotic costumes are absolutely breath-taking.

Cohesive, but never monotonous

The music by the African composer Mzikazi Khumalo has been harmonised and scored for a Western orchestra by British-born conductor Michael Hankinson. To my Norwegian ear, it certainly sounds as though he has managed to maintain its authenticity. Every now and again, I thought I heard snatches of Puccini and other Western influences along the lines of the musical "The Lion King". The composed sections alternate between traditional dances and folk songs. A series of *leitmotifs* ensure continuity, but the work is never monotonous.

Lush images of nature and religion

There is deep-seated originality in the suggestive rhythms and melodies. And the Norwegian National Opera's orchestra did a fine job, never missing a beat, under the direction of Leslie Dunn.



Shibongile Khumalo in the title role

Photo: Jörg Wiesner/The Norwegian National Opera

The poetic language is full of lush images of nature and religion. The story is marked by a strong sense of the presence of ancestors.

The soloists and chorus from Durban impressed the audience with their vocal talents. The realistic direction, the beautiful, often monumental scenery, and the gorgeous costumes all helped create a show that challenges the European way of thinking. The story of the Zulu princess who composes music and sings shows us how music is at the very heart of the nation's soul. Songs about everyday life, history and individual fates are priceless for a people trying to find themselves.