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Zulu-celebration at The Norwegian National Opera

The world's only Zulu-opera is coming to Oslo in August. It's likely to explode when 70 South-Africans comes to the opera-stage.

In Soweto the spectators join in the dancing, - I wish you had been there, the atmosphere was electric, says director Themí Venturas. Maybe the Norwegian spectators must be tied to their chairs when Princess Magogo is shown the 15th and 16th of August.

The Opera, sung in Zulu, is based on the life and music of a real Zulu-princess. She is a highly loved musician, singer, composer with the rather impressing name of Constance Magogo Sibilile Mantithi Ngangezinye Thombisile KaDinuzulu Buthelezi. She was a legendary princess who was born in 1900 and died in 1984. The world premiere of the opera took place in 2001.

- But the opera is not a documentary - it's an opera says Sandra de Villiers, one of the founders of Durban-based Opera Africa. - A lot of people remembers the princess, a fact that actually made it harder for us to make the opera, Sandra says.

The Norwegian National Opera has been involved in different projects in South-Africa. In 2003, in Durban, artistic Director Björn Simensen saw parts of Princess Magogo and became deeply moved. He immediately wanted to see the production in Oslo. Now, after four years he has succeeded. This fall, there is a celebration of ten year cooperation between South-Africa and Norway in different fields. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has supported the visit with 1,5 million NOK.

This week Sandra de Villiers and Themí Venturas visited Oslo for meetings.

The lead part is sung by Sibongile Khumalo, one of South-Africa's big stars. She was born and raised in Soweto, she is an educated classical singer with a big international jazz-audience.

Princess Magogo was a daughter of the Zulu-king Dinzulu. The opera begins when Dinzulu comes back from his forced exile at St. Helena, an exile forced by the British Government. The opera depict the battle against the British colonists and the Zulu-peoples fight for their own nation. The opera also tells a strong love-story, from political reasons Princess Magogo had to give up her boyfriend and marry the man her brother, the king, chose. The opera shows how she became the highly respected person she still is. - Both women and men worshipped her, says de Villiers.

Four of the Princess own songs is incorporated in the opera. The rest of the opera is entirely composed by Mzilikazi Khumalo. Musically Princess Magogo is Zulu-music orchestrated for classical instruments, some parts are also played with traditional Zulu-instruments, like Ugubu. The Norwegian National Opera's orchestra plays in Oslo.

The members of the ensemble visiting Oslo, are young. The choir tradition is strong in South-Africa and Opera Africa has worked hard to coach young singers.