

Performa 09: William Kentridge on Divided Selves

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)



Paula Court,
Courtesy of Performa William Kentridge's "I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine."

The South African artist William Kentridge was part of a successful puppet troupe before he became known as a visual artist who explored the painful legacy of apartheid in tragic-comedic stop-action animations. His films unfold in vigorously hand-drawn charcoal scenes that mutate as we watch, with images often emerging from and disappearing into small cyclones of sooty black. A frequent character in these tales was Soho Eckstein, a wealthy, sometimes guilt-ridden Johannesburg businessman with an active fantasy life who bears a striking resemblance to the artist.

Given all this, it was not surprising that Mr. Kentridge stepped into his work, as himself, on the occasion of an animation that he showed at the Venice Biennale in 2006. Still, that didn't necessarily prepare you for the aplomb and authority with which Mr. Kentridge took to the stage at Cedar Lake last night to play the lead — again himself — in a performance-with-video-and-video-animation titled "I Am Not Me. That Horse Is Not Mine." His motivation was to provide an update on his work on a new production of Dmitri Shostakovich's 1928 opera "The Nose," commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera.

This was however no simple interim report, but rather an exquisitely polished work of art in itself, thanks largely to Mr. Kentridge's marvelous stage presence. Characterizing the

content of “The Nose” as the divided or fragmented self, Mr. Kentridge began by outlining the eponymous short story — by Gogol — on which the Shostakovich opera is based. Describing the way Gogol doubted the credibility of his own tale of a runaway nose, he then cites earlier authors divided against their narratives, along with earlier stories of lost noses, in Laurence Sterne and Cervantes.

To illustrate the divided selves within us all, he described his experience of being of two minds about whether, at midnight in a foreign city, to go bar-hopping or back to the hotel to sleep. Soon identical second and third versions of Mr. Kentridge were wandering around behind him (on video), coming and going, listening skeptically, moving furniture and in one bravura sequence, catching the flying sheets of paper as he started throwing out his notes.

Moving forward in time, Mr. Kentridge delves into his own anxiety about this performance, which he calls a “lecture.” We see him fretting in bed, fully dressed, while his wife sleeps. On another tangent, he takes up the Soviet purges of the 1930s, describing Shostakovich’s brush with death, Soviet-style, and wondering whether Trotsky was the “nose” of the Communist Party. In one riveting sequence he reads from the transcript of the show trial of Nikolai Bukharin jousting brilliantly but futilely with his accusers.

Mr. Kentridge’s magical 40-minute star-turn whets the appetite for his version of “The Nose,” which debuts at the Met in March. Perhaps a walk-on part is in order.