

Visual Arts

William Kentridge talks about his new work that combines illusion, animation and energy

The South African artist's short film is being shown online in support of London's Coronet Theatre



Katlego Letsholonyana in 'Mayakovsky: A Tragedy' © Courtesy of The Centre for the Less Good Idea

Jan Dalley MAY 4 2020

Over a crystal WhatsApp line to Johannesburg, William Kentridge explains to me the principle of Pepper's Ghost. As you may know (I didn't), it's an optical illusion that creates a ghostly presence on a stage, popular in 19th-century theatre for gothic phantasmagoria, magic shows and illusionist effects, but still in use today in, for instance, stadium rock concerts. And yes, it really is done with mirrors. Even today's teleprompters are effectively worked by means of Pepper's Ghost.

It's no surprise to learn that the great South African artist, maestro of multimedia effects, should be thanking Pepper for some of the magic worked in his short film *Mayakovsky: A Tragedy*, which will be available online from May 6 to support the Coronet Theatre in London's Notting Hill. In this ludic version of the Russian poet's 1913 one-man play, Kentridge uses a single sonorous-voiced black actor with a range of techniques — “pre-cinematic techniques”, as he points out, such as graphics, shadow puppetry and animation — to deliver the richly layered, high-energy performance.

Pepper's Ghost has more than a one-time walk-on. At the [Centre for the Less Good Idea](#), an arts centre in downtown Johannesburg that Kentridge established four years ago, where performers and creators from dancers to cinematographers can create projects and performances, the Ghost is a running theme. For the seventh in their seasonal programmes, Kentridge explains, "We decided we'd work with found texts, existing texts, and using that technique — and see what happened."

But first, I ask him to explain the beguiling title of his arts centre. "It's all about the energy that comes from unexpected collaborations," he tells me. "When people are creating a piece, they get the first idea, the 'good' idea. Then as you work on that, all kinds of different ideas appear on the periphery — the 'less good' ideas, if you like. They come to the fore and there's a new energy and interest there."



Ghosts and shadows: William Kentridge © Stella Olivier

When it became clear that the centre's latest programme faced lockdown, Kentridge says, dozens of live projects were converted to film or online versions — "We had a whole online festival." And their Pepper's Ghost theme seemed to take on a new resonance: although the optical illusion, so magical on a live stage, loses some of its impact on film (we are so used to elaborate special screen effects we might hardly notice), the metaphorical echoes can't be lost. A shimmering chimera of a reality we can't quite grasp, of what might have been, is becoming a familiar sensation in lockdown.

And the technique is also perfect for the elusive, multi-layered work of Vladimir Mayakovsky. What, I ask Kentridge, attracts him to the radical Russian?

“Mayakovsky has been an interest since my student days, in the 1970s,” he replies. “I knew the strange text of his *Tragedy*, which was written as a play, so I re-read it and rediscovered his particular way of looking and thinking about the world. He was perfect for the kind of anti-naturalist form that interests me. I had a form looking for a text and this was it.”

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And, of course, Mayakovsky’s politics: always angrily at odds with the social order, even within revolutionary circles he could be an outlier. This spirit, and some of the brilliantly pointed, mocking graphics and animations projected through the Ghost, took me back to the stunning retrospective of Kentridge’s apartheid-era work at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town earlier this year: a cornucopia of the finest protest art, savage,

relevant, fearless and funny, using a broad range of techniques but always stemming from his astonishing draughtsmanship. It was balanced by a simultaneous exhibition at Cape Town’s Norval Foundation of Kentridge’s mature work, sculpture as assured, pacific, solid and serene as the former was edgy, transient and reactive.

Kentridge says Mayakovsky — who also worked through an era of fierce censorship — appealed because of the Russian’s “different attempts to think about Utopianism in the arts. And the possibility of a transformed society. He was radical both in [artistic] form and in his wider thinking.”

Mayakovsky’s work also reflected a visual energy about the city which, says Kentridge, chimes strongly with Johannesburg at the moment, which he feels is on the edge of social chaos, “improvising all the time”. Although he describes his own fortunate lockdown, at home with his family and at work in his garden studio, as “pure pleasure”, he is vividly aware of the difficulty for others — especially “how one keeps a community of artists and performers during these very extreme times”. The Centre for the Less Good Idea is asking its alumni to contribute films to “The Long Minute”, one-minute Instagram films each day by film-makers, dancers, authors, musicians, and others: reassurance, as well as stimulation, a sense that a better future is not too far away.

Meanwhile, in London's Coronet [Inside Out](#) programme, *Mayakovsky: A Tragedy* joins an online programme that includes work by Hanif Kureishi, [Ben Okri](#), Hisham Matar and others. "I have very good memories of working with the Coronet," Kentridge says, "and I'm happy if this film cements the links between Johannesburg and London, and viewers across the world."

thecoronetheatre.com

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