



Photography by Stella Olivier

## history, alive

*House and Leisure's* Contributing Art Editor, Zanele Kumalo, discovers a true version of our history told through the theatrics of William Kentridge's latest opera, 'The Head And The Load', on its debut in South Africa

**Above** A scene from William Kentridge's 'The Head And The Load' opera, an exploration of Africa's role in World War I. Having shown in New York, Miami, London and Amsterdam over the past five years, the performance recently made an African debut at the Joburg Theatre for a limited run.





It's the quietly vibrant opening night of 'The Head and the Load' and the long-awaited African premiere of William Kentridge's exploration of Africa's role in World War I.

An animated stream of people travels past the usual rows of tomato-soup-coloured chairs that face the Nelson Mandela stage at the Joburg Theatre and step onto it to take our seats. The back of the stage has been reconfigured to accommodate an intimate audience of 500 that can take in a 50-metre-long platform.

After I sit down and select airplane mode on my phone, I close my eyes for brief seconds only to flutter them open when a momentary hush stretches across the space. I've been trying to neatly fold away the conversations I've had with a few of 'The Head and the Load's' creative team over the days leading up to this run to get a behind-the-scenes perspective on the theatre production and unwrap its germination. But I also want to intuit aspects for myself in the same way I would usually reject an itinerary packed only with guided tours when I try to find my way around a new city.

I am regularly confronted with the fact that the way in which I know my way around my own country, the continent's history

and its journeys, was purposefully steered past many realities, including the hidden history of the SS Mendi and the South African and African labourers dispatched to support the war efforts.

During 'The Head and the Load', the narrator, speaking in isiZulu and isiXhosa, introduces us to the nuances and the spectacle faced by the African porters and disarmed soldiers who had to carry parts of a dismantled ship on their backs, and those who died while helping European armed forces over 100 years ago.

At various moments, the orchestra pit appears from and disappears into a box that is wheeled around the stage. Dadaisms, drums, thrums and descants bounce from one end of the stage to the other. I don't realise I've been holding my breath while a herald screeches and moans from a moving perch, and while film projections cast shadows on screens and bodies and sculptures, illuminating the key takeaways of this untold story.

The arias are rousing, the paper kilts and headdresses worn by some of the cast read like open letters, and the choreography of one man helping his wounded fellow through a parade rattles my heart. Each detail creates an ambitious monument, which at first





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I feel like I might miss along the large-scale frame and notice a few neighbours whipping their heads from left to right as if watching a tennis match. I decide to use the conductor as an anchor; he and his baton are a metronome to steady my pulse.

I am grateful for the 'artistically subjective unravelling of artefacts' in this operatic collage and use it to go back and layer over the memories created from those textbooks and novels that I was given during childhood, which left out this archive.

When I speak with Thuthuka Sibisi, the production's co-composer and musical director, he talks about how they built this contemporary work, which he calls a kind of *sintu* (meaning humanity or culture in isiXhosa) opera, around what those times might have sounded and felt like. Basing the score on details they might have found, like the hymn books and musical instruments the men were 'gifted' to keep up their spirits, amplifies the sense of grief, which is as overwhelming as this densely structured and standout performance.

It's when he expands on that arrangement of time, which he describes as non-linear, that I reframe the Ghanaian proverb from which the production takes its name: 'The head and the load are the troubles of the neck.' Thuthuka says, 'We do not bury the dead; our ancestors come through us at any point and we are the message bearers or conduits to their stories.'

Even though too many of those men did not return home, there is some comfort that an archive of their stories, which carries the weight of their importance, has made it back here and will continue to travel around the world through all of us. ●

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#### A word from Kentridge himself...

'The Head and the Load is about Africa and Africans in the First World War. That is to say about all the contradictions and paradoxes of colonialism that were heated and compressed by the circumstances of the war. It is about historical incomprehension (and inaudibility and invisibility). The colonial logic towards the black participants could be summed up: 'Lest their actions merit recognition, their deeds must not be recorded.' 'The Head and the Load' aims to recognise and record.' – William Kentridge

**Above** Featuring original music and reworked traditional African song, composer and sound artist (and long time collaborator on William Kentridge's projects) Philip Miller worked with co-composer and music director Thuthuka Sibisi for the production.