

# Greek myth, African vision

THEATRE

## Orfeus

Holland Festival, Amsterdam

King Hades rules the Underworld from the comfort of his armchair. He sits in a dank, half-ruined warehouse stacked with unopened boxes of UN food and medicines. Hades speaks with articulate conviction about a world changing for the better, about hope, opportunity and growth. Today, he adds, he can help you get whatever you want – drugs, children, women aged between 13 and 36, all virgins, quiet, obedient, dispensable. And all for a quarter of the price you'd pay anywhere else.

Hades has a MacBook, wads of cash and plenty of alcohol to hand. To his right sit four of the promised virgins, masked and chained to their chairs. One of them is Eurydice. Hades hands her over to Orfeus, but only on condition that he does not look back. Of course, he does.

This is Brett Bailey's *Orfeus*, an African re-telling of the Greek myth. Audience members assemble at Amsterdam's Muziekgebouw, only to be loaded into a bus with blacked-out windows and driven to an undisclosed location.

"You are going on a journey," we are told. "Turn off your mobile phones and take no photographs. You will stay together at all times, move fast and not speak."

Bailey and his company, Third World Bunfight, have been blending African rhythms, rituals and traditions with western theatre techniques for more than a decade. *Orfeus* is an adroit blend of fireside story-telling, Shamanic rite and site-specific installation. Congolese singer Bebe Lueki's voice has a bruised sweetness that is just right for the title role.

Healer, narrator, bride and snake: Bailey tells the first part of his tale comparatively straight. But the descent into hell becomes a compelling mirror of evil in the developing world. We are led through dark industrial ruins past the Forgotten Man, who lives in a pile of garbage, the Broken Man, shackled to a bed-frame and wired



Bebe Lueki as Orfeus (left) and Andile Bonde as The Guide

Lauren Clifford Holmes

for torture, the Garden of Eternal Youth, where children sew shoes for rich westerners, and on to Hades. Even here, music brings meaning.

The fading light, the scent of woodsmoke and wildflowers, and the sound of birdsong weave themselves through Lueki's song and James Webb's haunting soundscapes to multiply the sensory and emotional impact of this quirky *Orfeus*. A gem in this year's Holland Festival.

★★★★☆

Shirley Apthorp

[www.hollandfestival.nl](http://www.hollandfestival.nl)  
Co-production with the Vienna Festwochen

THEATRE

## The Wiz

City Center, New York

Critics were not kind to *The Wiz* when it opened on Broadway in 1975, and they were even less charitable towards the movie version three years later. It is easy to see why: this African-American version of *The Wizard of Oz* came at a musical moment when 1960s soul and funk had waned, and hip-hop hadn't yet taken over. Thus the music and lyrics, by Charlie Smalls, lean on generic R&B and arms-thrown-back ballads, and the cumulative uplift

effectively kills the last two scenes.

And yet there was something fresh about the show's arrival on Broadway. It didn't rely on a civil-rights theme, nor did it merely shove black performers into white roles. *The Wiz* took a great story and joined it to a jazzed-up vernacular.

The City Center version, part of the invaluable Encores! series, thankfully retains the Broadway setting: Dorothy starts her odyssey in Kansas, and does not pose, as Diana Ross did in the movie, as a Harlem schoolteacher.

Even with the rural opening, City Center's director, Thomas Kail, and his choreographer, Andy Blankenbuehler, infuse *The Wiz* with some of the same urban rhythms that they brought to *In the Heights*. They can't paper over the songs' deficiencies, but they keep things moving, and they're clever enough to highlight the vaudevillean rhythms of William F. Brown's book. What's more, the designs tickle the eye with patchwork colours and ingenious uses of perspective.

The Lion, Scarecrow and Tinman get the burlesque-like jokes, and their interpreters (James Monroe Iglehart, Christian Dante White and Joshua Henry) make the most of them. The diva delivery of Tichina Arnold, as the wicked witch, is heightened by the *Firebird*-y red ensemble with which the costumer Paul Tazewell has swathed her. She roars on to the stage in act two as if all that occurred previously were merely prologue.

I wish I could be as effusive about the above-the-title talent: as Dorothy, the pretty, Janet Jackson-ish pop star Ashanti gives her ballads a crowd-pleasing shine, but her comic timing is glacial. By contrast, Orlando Jones, as the wizard, is polished except when he sings; with such rousing colleagues, his voice sounds only adequate. ★★★★★

Brendan Lemon



Off to see the wizard: Ashanti and James Monroe Iglehart

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