

# The Power of Bate Besong

**Alfred Matumamboh offers a critical appraisal of a new drama**

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In his new play, *The Banquet*, Bate Besong has painted for us a terrifying tragic scene of human existence. He piles up dreadful images, in his characteristically calculated manner, to evoke a vision of the dehumanisation and calamity that the evil in man has compelled him to wreak upon himself. The density and intensity of the frightening images and metaphors inform us of the doom that we have unleashed upon ourselves.

The brilliance of the drama's conception transports the audience or reader to a transcendental realm. The playwright has given us a truly sublime piece of imaginative work. The swift flow of glorious action in the play has a profound capacity to waft the spectator far beyond the reach of himself. One feels oneself delivered into a den of evil that cages the human soul, and so rendered a perpetual victim of the darkness we harbour deep within.

Watching or reading *The Banquet*, it is difficult to miss the infectious and immensely profound inspiration that possesses the powerful intellect of the dramatist. Thus is vividly revealed the jungle of evil that has gripped the human heart. In terms of its powerful evocation of the evil in man, the play is comparable to Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*. Both plays demand change by default. By exposing the sickness of the human condition, in a dreadful diagnosis that impels one to feel the hideous and monstrous creation of a human nature red in tooth and claw, the dramatists are advocating an eradication of evil in human society.

The action of Besong's play and the drama's content reveal the wasteland man has made of life. Evil has overcome and chased out the good of the human world. Clearly, we

view man as an utterly bastardised beast. The odious, the abominable and repulsive have become the norm. As the characters wallow in their world barren of virtue, we perceive the playwright both as a prophet of doom and as a weeping soothsayer.

The actions of the play bristle with a cerebral sensuousness that bewitches terribly, inducing a macabre feeling. In this epochal tragic and historical drama, with known political figures both dead and living voicing their political ideologies, Besong depicts an image of man as a creature presented with horrible alternatives in life. The 'anglos', a symbol of the helpless victim in the play, is given two deadly options to choose from. Each lead to disaster of one kind or the other.

Like the unyielding ground that the gravediggers work, the heart of the oppressor Mbozo'o is equally cruelly hardened. And because of intense desire for selfishness, man always enters the wrong course of history. Human stupidity goes round in a circle. And so the road after Foumban is a labyrinth that meanders through the mountainous jungle of futile striving embarked upon by a hypocritical and callous bourgeois ruling class.

Overwhelmingly, the presence of evil renders impotent the positive forces in the drama. The hopeful aspect in the human soul seems trapped and helplessly crushed by hideous juggernauts. We read in vain to find some sign of relief, a glimmer of hope for mankind in the present. We sadly discover that man is hemmed in between two gargantuan monsters; the enormous size of the sprawling beast dwarfs the possibility of a positive spark in the human soul.

The grotesquely bizarre gravediggers indulgently engage in a ghoulish dance as they jubilate over the immediate triumph of evil over good. As the character Arreykaka asserts with relish, "The vulture eats the sacrificial lamb without any consequences. The cockroach is anxious to dance, but will the cockerel allow it?" this quotation captures in a concise manner, the mute conflict between evil and good, with the former overcoming the latter relentlessly. Humanity has been pushed to the edge of a cliff and has toppled over. The sensation of the crash is desperately crushing. The pogrom depicted in the

play compares aptly with Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* and Mongo Beti's *Main Basse sur le Caméroun*.

Besong handles the universal themes of suffering and death, leaving his particular stamp on them through his style. It is no exaggeration to say that *The Banquet* stands at the summit of imaginative writing in Anglophone Cameroonian literature. And few plays from the continent can match the emotion, power and intellectual vigour of this play. The dramatist presents people caught up in the throes of modern man's cannibalism.

Take, for instance, the Takenbeng women of the drama. The atmosphere of this scene is choked with the bloody brutality of the symbols of evil in human form. The taste of life is rancid and sour. We see the women as representative of the helpless victims of human self-destructiveness. Pitifully, they drown in the sea of life created for them by those in total control of the purse strings and the trigger. They wait in vain for those who may rescue them. Their waiting turns out to be an exercise in futility, like a drowning man clutching at a passing shadow.

As Horace demands in *Arcs Poetica*, there is a smooth blend of horrible action, pitiable and monstrous characters and a frightfully barren setting in Besong's drama. All three dramatic elements help to intensify the charged impact of the gory atmosphere. The graveyard scene presents to us the dehumanised beings who have sunk to a nadir of callousness. So used to corpses and death are the gravediggers that it has become an integral part of their inhumanity and beastly lack of conscience.

The gravediggers talk about corpses with a cold indifference that sends an eerie chill down the spine of the audience. They are the minions of the devilish gang of robbers called government. Here Besong divulges, with the clinical exactitude of a surgeon wielding a knife, the effect of evil on the dehumaniser himself. By indulging in this savage activity, massacring the masses both physically and psychologically, the dehumaniser ends up dehumanised. The septic state of the human condition is powerfully evoked.

With frightful flashes of lighting and terrifying rumbles of thunder, the picture of the horror-charged atmosphere is intensified, so that it holds a weird yet fascinating compulsion for the audience. Though the thin and distant thread of hope is glimpsed in the singular act of officer burning his hangman's garb, the evil monster still holds sway in the present.

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