

Rebel with a voice



AIDA MULUNEH

Fatoumata Diawara, pictured in Ethiopia's Afar Triangle, says: 'The West hasn't always experienced African music in the best way. I want to take people to Africa, not Africa to people'

Fatoumata Diawara is bringing her vibrant show to WOMADelaide

JANE CORNWELL

There they all were at the 61st Grammy Awards ceremony last month. Lady Gaga. Miley Cyrus and Shawn Mendes. Dua Lipa and St Vincent.

Dressed up and spotlit, performing music before a giant visual backdrop, streaming to an international audience of millions.

But the artist that evoked the most curiosity was a relative unknown: a statuesque African in a sleeveless gown and towering yellow headwrap, her neck looped with beads, a red Stratocaster slung across her chest.

Fatoumata Diawara. The title of the song she sang, *Negue Negue*, means "Let's have fun" in Bambara, one of the languages of the Mande peoples of Mali, west Africa. Diawara's ancestral home.

As her voice dipped and soared and jittery, funky rhythms rolled out on guitar, keyboards, percussion and the kamelen'goni harp, a series of images flashed up behind her.

All were of Diawara herself, a vision in block colours and geometric patterns, in situ on the vast salt plains of the Afar Triangle, 155m below sea level near the Eritrean border in the wilds of Ethiopia, the cradle of civilisation.

The motherland, as it were, of the motherland.

"Africa!" hollered Diawara, fist raised above her head, as she finished. A new legion of fans Googled her, downloaded her second album, *Fenfo* (which was pipped for best world music album by

South Africa's Soweto Gospel Choir), and saw that she'd also been nominated for best dance recording for *Ultimatum*, by English electronic duo Disclosure, which sampled her otherworldly voice.

Diawara has always embraced modernity as well as tradition. As a child this made things tricky.

"I had a fire inside me I couldn't control," she says.

"Neither could anyone else."

Today she's a self-styled Malian freedom fighter, writing songs whose lyrics span contentious topics including inter-ethnic marriage and female genital mutilation, with exhortations to take pride in culture, to show respect, share happiness.

Her songs cover the gamut of styles from blues, funk and rock to syncopated Afro-pop, delivered with a light touch and a sense of significance, so meaning is conveyed even if we don't understand exactly what she's singing about.

Now Diawara is bringing her big, celebratory show to WOMADelaide, her first visit to Australia since 2012, the year she released her debut album, *Fatou*, and was still teaching herself guitar. Full of promise then, she's now on the cusp of superstardom.

When not touring the world, which she does a lot, Diawara lives in northern Italy with her husband, an environmentalist, and their young son.

When we meet in Norway, where she is playing the Oslo World festival, she says she doesn't enjoy being away so much.



GETTY IMAGES

Diawara performs at the Grammys

But the responsibility she feels towards her poverty-blighted country is too great. "I want to speak for the modern generation of women and children who are living in silence, fighting to exist. Through music we can slowly change things," she tells me as she applies make-up in front of a mirror.

"There is so much that is positive about Mali. There is music, colour, joy. The West hasn't always experienced African music in the best way. I want to take people to Africa, not Africa to people."

It's an outlook shared by her friend, noted Ethiopian visual artist and former *Washington Post* photojournalist Aida Muluneh, who took the photographs that backdropped that Grammys performance and adorn the sleeve of *Fenfo* (which translates as "I've got something to say").

It was Muluneh who chose the

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FATOUMATA
DIAWARA

to do," she sings over electro-acoustic backing.

"Migration can be a noble thing," she says now. "But so much of it happens because of war and famine. My country nearly lost everything in 2012" — when a coup d'état by the military in the capital, Bamako, was mirrored by a rebellion in the country's north by Tuareg separatists, then by al-Qaeda and its offshoots — "it is our duty to take care of culture. They tried to ban our music but music is our blood, our god."

Diawara's forthright lyrics are unusual in Mande culture, where words used thoughtlessly have enormous power to hurt.

"I am different," says Diawara, who in 2013 gathered 40 big-name African musicians to record *Mali Ko*, a song demanding peace.

"In a three-minute song you can say so much. I've been building since my zero day to live my truth, make music, be free."

Born in Cote d'Ivoire to Malian parents, Diawara was a wild child who was sent, aged 11, to live with an actress aunt in Bamako, where her charisma drew attention and she embarked on an acting career.

Aged 18 she was in Paris, playing the lead in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Back in Mali she starred in Dani Kouyate's popular 2002 film *Sia: The Dream of the Python*, about a girl defying convention.

Against her parents' wishes she joined a French street theatre company, refusing an arranged marriage and fleeing to the airport in a taxi pursued by police (who were told she'd been kidnapped), making it on to a plane to Paris.

On tour in Europe she would sing to amuse herself, as she used to do as a child: "My sister Arwa passed away when I was eight. We were very close. My father had four wives and many children and

not much time for me. One day Arwa complained of belly pain and then she was gone. I cried so much and for so long. One day I decided to turn my crying into song. Singing was my medicine."

Encouraged by compliments, Diawara did gigs in Paris bars, landed a role in an African-themed musical, sang backing vocals on albums by American singer Dee Dee Bridgewater and the Malian diva Omou Sangare, with whom she performed live, often erupting into the arm-flailing didadi dance of southern Mali.

After the release of *Fatou* she collaborated further, joining Damon Albarn's Africa Express concerts, working with Cuban pianist Roberto Fonseca, singing on Bobby Womack's comeback album. She had a role in the 2014 Oscar-nominated film *Timbuktu*, playing a woman given 80 lashes for singing and responding in a voice part howl of pain, part chant of revolt. *Fenfo* has consistently topped best album lists, including one compiled by former US president Barack Obama.

Performing live, she says, is where she's most herself. Onstage in Oslo, her feet bare, her hair encased in a swath of blue, Diawara delivered a set that began with slow-burning blues, building tension until she was pacing the stage for a fiery rendition of the Nina Simone favourite, *Sinnerman*.

Her unravelled headwrap became a prop alongside an ancestral horsehair whip. By the end, several local West Africans had leapt from the crowd to dance frenetically alongside her.

"Onstage I'm open and wild," she'd said earlier. "But I'm connected. I'm in the music. I'm free."

Fatoumata Diawara is at WOMADelaide from March 8

Hope survives bitter reality of refugee's life

THEATRE

A Man of Good Hope
Based on the book by Jonny Steinberg. Young Vic and Isango Ensemble. Royalty Theatre, Adelaide, March 5.

MURRAY BRAMWELL

Asad Abdullahi is an ordinary man with a remarkable life story, told to author Jonny Steinberg and published as *A Man of Good Hope*. In 2016 it was turned into this compelling operatic production from South Africa's Isango Ensemble, with seasons at London's Young Vic and Brooklyn Academy of Music.

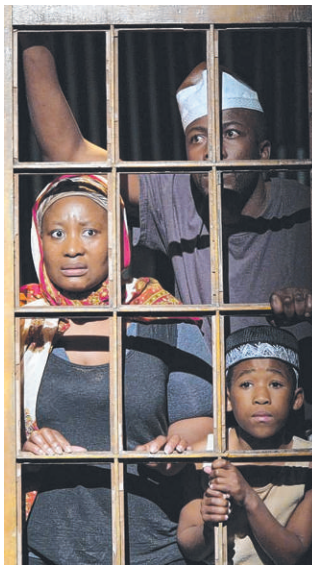
Asad's tribulations began in his native Somalia. In January 1991, when he was eight, he witnessed his mother's murder by militias in Mogadishu during the civil war that drove many thousands to seek refuge in Kenya. His childhood is one of repeated separation, loss and insecurity.

His journey is through the Horn of Africa via Tanzania and Zimbabwe to South Africa where, at the age of 20, after years waiting in camps, he hopes to prosper as a shopkeeper. He is resourceful, hardworking and indomitable but in the harsh townships a Muslim Somali immigrant is a despised outsider.

Under Mark Dornford-May's assured direction this vivid, sometimes harrowing, often exhilarating production brings us close to the refugee experience.

The strong cast of 22 performers presents a musical odyssey with a host of characters highlighting the struggle to maintain family ties, outrun adversity and defy despair.

Boldly lit by Manuel Manim and Sue Grey-Gardner, the stage bursts with action. Lungelo Ngamlana's upbeat choreography is a dazzling mix of African dance and Broadway symmetry. The excellent music composed and conducted by Mandisi Dyan-tis is scored for a marimba orchestra to which almost every cast member contributes.



KEITH PATTISON

A Man of Good Hope

The libretto in English and Xhosa is spare and often haunting in its elegiac simplicity. The singing is uniformly splendid. Tragic scenes, like the death of Asad's mother, are enveloped in glorious choral lament; joyous times are underscored with pop, soul and African folk.

The performances are rich and finely drawn. Playing Asad as a young boy, Siphosethu Hintsho is outstanding, carrying the narrative and the emotional left memorably. Zoleka Mpotsha as Yindy, Asad's surrogate mother, and then Sadiya, the adult Asad's second wife, bring strong continuity to the story; Sinethemba Mdena is sinister as the vengeful Madoda.

As Asad in early manhood, Thandolwethu Mzembe captures his developing ambition and commercial acumen, while Ayanda Siyabonga Tikolo, as the mature Asad, embodies his gathering sadness and uncertainty. This man's good hopes are not yet completely dashed, but his story, and that of all unwelcome asylum-seekers, is cause to wonder why not?

Tickets: \$30-\$89. Bookings: adelaidefestival.com. Duration: 2hr 30min, including interval. Until March 11.

Motivational award for a former child soldier



HOLLIE ADAMS

Fabrice Manirakiza arrived in Australia as a refugee at 14

MATTHEW WESTWOOD
ARTS CORRESPONDENT

Fabrice Manirakiza has suffered deprivations the like of which most of us could hardly imagine, and yet he has dedicated his life to spreading a simple message of faith, the importance of education and personal resilience.

Orphaned at eight in his native Burundi, a child soldier at 11 and a refugee in Australia at 14, Manirakiza uses music and motivational talks to inspire young people to overcome whatever hardships they may face.

His audience ranges from marginalised African youth to schoolboys at elite Catholic schools such as Sydney's River-view and Xavier College in Melbourne.

"I encourage everyone to understand a different perspective of life and to understand people like me, who come from migrant countries," says Manirakiza, 26. "Even people here who are facing bullies — my main message is that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Manirakiza is the winner of an Australia Council honour, the Kirk Robson Award, in recognition of his workshops with marginalised youth in which he uses music to spread his message and to encourage group participation.

"For me, being a leader is using your talent to make a positive impact, and of course self-belief," he says. "I am standing here because I believed in myself. Believing in myself has made Australia believe in me by giving me a second chance of life."

Other winners in the Australia Council Awards, announced at Sydney's Carriageworks on Monday, are author Helen Garner, rock musician David Bridie, artist Susan Norrie, choreographer Vicki Van Hout, actor and director Rachael Maza, producer Rhoda Roberts and experimental artist Joyce Hinderding.

This week also saw the announcement of the Sidney Myer Performing Arts Awards whose main prize was won by the Gold Coast's Bleach Festival and accepted by artistic director Louise Bezzina. Musician Genevieve Lacey and arts producer Annette Downs also won awards.

Manirakiza says that before his parents were killed, they brought him up to understand the importance of education and Christian values.

He says he knows the difficulties faced by other young people from war-torn Africa — a group that has been linked to crime and delinquency in parts of Melbourne.

"Most of these young people have faced worse than I have," he says. "These are people who have witnessed their brothers and sisters being killed before their very eyes. They have come to Australia and sometimes they find it hard to fit in ... It becomes a culture shock."

Cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes can go both ways. When Manirakiza was accepted as a refugee, some other Burundians who were not successful had a prejudiced view of Australians.

"They said we shouldn't come to Australia because white people eat black people," he says.

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NOW SHOWING

Reflections in the Dust (MA15+) Written and directed by Luke Sullivan, *Reflections in the Dust* is a boundary-defying movie that combines a post-apocalyptic drama set somewhere in Australia, shot in black-and-white, with interviews with the two stars, conducted by the director and shot in stark colour. The Clown (Robin Royce Queere) and his daughter Freckles (Sarah Houbolt) survive in a swamp-like wasteland. In the interview segments, which are interspersed with the fictional story, the actors are no longer in character, or at least not completely. *Reflections in the Dust* is a memorable experience and Sullivan is a filmmaker to watch.

STEPHEN ROMEI ★★★★★

King of Thieves (M) The 2015 robbery of a vault in a jewellery store in London's Hatton Garden netted the thieves a record sum of £14 million (\$25.8 million) and generated headlines worldwide. When it was discovered the crime was carried out by men who were mostly past retirement age, it quickly became clear that a movie had to be made. James Marsh's *King of Thieves* answers this call, with a top cast headed by Michael Caine, Tom Courtenay, Jim Broadbent and Ray Winstone. What could possibly go wrong? Quite a lot, as it turns out. They're a tiresome bunch, and they don't even get along with one another. A lot of the film consists of bickering and backstabbing. The relentless four-letter dialogue does not help create a positive vibe.

DAVID STRATTON ★★★★★

VICTORIA

MUSIC

Blue Planet II Live in Concert Joanna Lumley narrates a screening of the visuals from the BBC series *Blue Planet II* as Vanessa Scammell conducts the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in the performance of Jacob Shea, David Fleming and Hans Zimmer's score. *Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre. Saturday, 8pm; Sunday, 3pm. Tickets: \$61-\$153. Bookings: (03) 9929 9600 or online.*

TASMANIA

EXHIBITION

Steven Carson Steven Carson exhibits mixed-media installations inspired by the rhythms of jazz. *Rosny Barn. Rosny Hill Road, Rosny Park. Wed-Sun, 11am-5pm. Tickets: \$10. Bookings: (03) 6217 9607 or online. Duration: 2hr. Until March 11.*

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

EXHIBITION

Mortimer Menpes: Impressions of Brittany This exhibition presents a selection of works on paper by Adelaide-born artist and illustrator Mortimer Menpes, created during his time in Brittany. Menpes had moved with his young family to the artist colony of Pont-Aven in 1881. These works illustrate the daily life of Bretons, depicting their customs, clothing and lifestyles. *Art Gallery of South Australia. Gallery 18, North Terrace, Adelaide. Daily 10am-5pm. Free entry. Inquiries: (08) 9432 9555 or online. Until March 31*

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

EXHIBITION

Idols Mythological ideals have been reimagined in the work of

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran and Renee So. *Fremantle Arts Centre. 1 Fennerty Street, Fremantle. Daily, 10am-5pm. Free entry. Inquiries: (08) 9432 9555 or online. Until March 31*

QUEENSLAND

MUSIC

Fergal Onions John Harrison's *Fergal Onions* follows a musician who inspires a neighbour to return to his saxophone. *Queensland Symphony Orchestra Studio. 114 Grey Street, South Brisbane. Today, 10am, 11.30am. Tickets: \$20. Bookings: (07) 3833 5044 or online.*

NSW

STAGE

The Miser John Bell stars in Moliere's *The*

Miser, adapted by Justin Fleming and directed by Peter Evans. *Sydney Opera House. Playhouse, Bennelong Point. Tonight, 7.30pm. Tickets: \$35-\$95. Bookings: (02) 9250 1777 or online. Until April 6.*

NORTHERN TERRITORY

EXHIBITION

Weapons for the Soldier Young men of the APY Lands present a group exhibition, *Weapons for the Soldier*. *Araluen Arts Centre. 61 Larapinta Drive, Araluen. Daily, 10am-4pm. Tickets: \$6-\$8. Inquiries: (08) 8951 1120 or online. Until April 22.*

Edited by Sophia Morrison Full reviews of new films will appear in *The Weekend Australian* on Saturday

Send event information to listsings@theaustralian.com.au