

The Calling

The Calling is a piece that presents an imaginary, broken metropolis, created from personal and found historic footage of, mainly, Johannesburg, but also New York, Brussels and other places. It looks at what lies behind the human creation of, and search for, Utopia, and plays these myths off against the harsh realities of survival in cities such as Johannesburg. I have drawn from historical and literary sources to create a journey without beginning or end in which destiny is lost, found, questioned, denied, invented, dissolved, longed for and called upon from afar. On the one hand, The Calling presents my response to the old French fable, attributed to Charles Perrault, of the good and evil sisters.

In this story, a girl lives with her evil stepmother and stepsister. One day, the stepmother sends her to fetch some water from the well. There, the girl meets an old woman who asks for a drink of water. Having been given, with great tenderness, a cup of water, the crone (who is really a witch/fairy character) puts a spell on the girl. From then on, every time the girl speaks, jewels and flowers fall from her lips. Upon returning home, the greedy stepmother sees what has happened and sends her own daughter out, hoping for the same reward. The 'evil' sister meets the same witch/fairy who, this time, appears as a well-to-do lady who demands some water in a haughty and arrogant way. Instead of being kind, the evil stepsister reacts by being rude to the witch, all the while expecting to find an old woman. Her "reward" is the curse of having snakes and toads spring from her mouth whenever she speaks. She is rejected by the cruel mother and banished to live her life in the woods.

In her book of short stories (*Symmetries*, High Risk Books, 1998), Luisa Valenzuela re-fashions the story in *The Density of Words*, this time from the perspective of the so-called 'evil' sister, and equates this condition of being made an outsider to that of being an artist. That which one has to say as an artist is not always easy to say nor, for others, easy to hear. One sometimes has to put forth ideas, words and images that repulse, in order to 'speak' one's own 'truth'. This image really appealed to me, as did the concepts of reward, curse and punishment. It made me think about the choices, personal tests and circumstances that we all face, the little events in life that all contribute to where we are, physically, mentally and spiritually.

I went out into the streets of Johannesburg, sometimes before dawn, to visit those derelict office buildings now often occupied by so-called illegal immigrants; mostly, people from all over the continent of Africa. I made a number of informal interviews with the people I encountered in this way, to find out the personal, economic and political events that made them come to this metropolis. An outsider, speaking with other outsiders. All strangers in one way or another. I saw the city as something like the woods and swamps in the folk tale mentioned above - a place which, having been called to it, one roams with a sense of trepidation, but also a sense of exhilarating freedom. Walking around and going up to the rooftops of skyscrapers in this City of Gold made me think of the age-old dream of the ideal city, the promised land, a Monomotapa. I heard voices in many different languages echoing down the corridors, and they were calling to each other, calling into the future.

I began thinking of different cities as sisters, too, and made several links between the cities that I happened to visit. New York, a city of wealth, bejewelled with lights, but with a dark side that rumbles and roars under the surface. Brussels with its various problematic links to Africa and the seat of the United Nations (another uneasy sisterhood?). And Johannesburg, my home, and yet, in different ways, a strange territory to me. Its wealth of people, its incredible promise and also, sometimes, its palpable misery.

In her time, Hildegard von Bingen was something of a rarity; ironically, even though she was a nun of great learning and religious fervour, she spoke and wrote in ways that women just didn't speak in that time - not in recorded history, at least. To me, she became this sister in the woods, her words of praise and pleading like beautiful, glistening toads and snakes. The chorus of ecclesiastic voices singing her twining verses of the New Jerusalem, to me, could so easily also issue from the throats of the many thousands of travellers, immigrants, refugees and nomads of this world. I believe that not one of us are ever really at home, and that much of the beauty of being in this world is the condition of being utterly and perpetually lost.

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*O Ierusalem, aurea civitas,
ornata Regis purpura.*

*O aedificatio summae bonitatis,
quae es lux numquam obscurata.*

*Tu enim es ornata in aurora
et in calore solis.*

*O beata pueritia, quae rutilas in aurora,
et o laudabilis adolescentia, quae ardes in sole.*

...

*O Ierusalem, fundamentum tuum positum est
cum torrentibus lapidibus,
quodest cum publicans et peccatoribus,
qui perditae oves erant, sed per Filium Dei inventae
ad te cucurrerunt et in te positi sunt.*

*Deinde muri tui fulminant vivis lapidus,
qui per summum studium bonae voluntatis
quasi nubes in caelo volaverunt.*

*Et ita turres tuae, o Ierusalem,
rutilant et candent
per ruborem et per candorem sanctorum
et per omnia ornamenta Dei,
quae tibi non desunt, o Ierusalem.*

*Unde vos, o ornati et o coronati,
qui habitatis in Ierusalem,
et o tu, Ruperte, qui es socius eorum in hac habitatione,
succurrite nobis famulantibus
et in exilio laborantibus.*

- De Sancto Ruperto. O Ierusalem

*O rubor sanguinis
qui de excelso illo fluxisti,
quod Divinitas tetigit,
tu flos es,
quens hiems de flatu serpentis
nunquam laesit.*

- De Undecim milibus Virginibus (Responsorium)

Hildegard von Bingen (1098 – 1179)

From a recent review:

“Foreignness and exclusion are the crux of Minnette Vári’s double-projection video *The Calling* (2003), which features a nude woman roaming the rooftops and gazing out over Vári’s Johannesburg in half-light. Sometimes she resembles a live gargoyle, sometimes a fugitive, and sometimes an otherworldly apparition looking longingly at the metropolis stretched out below her. The piece is set to the medieval composer Hildegard von Bingen’s ethereal plainsong *Jerusalem*, a paean to that holy city that ends, “You adorned ones who live in Jerusalem, help us who are serving and labouring in exile.”

Sarah McFadden; *Art South Africa*, Vol. 2, Spring 2003

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DVD

2-Channel Video Installation (Panoramic Projection)

Duration: 3 minutes, looped indefinitely







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2003

All images: composite stills from the double projection of The Calling

dimensions are variable · minimum total width 8m · stereo audio