

Kate Molleson: Hello, and welcome to the Edinburgh International Festival 2025. I'm Kate Molleson, and this is The Warm Up, an insider's guide to the performance that you're about to experience.

Today it's all about *Faustus In Africa!* Through puppetry and animation, Handspring Puppet Company reimagines Faust's downfall and reframes the classic tale to confront colonialism and the climate emergency.

Before we hear from the director William Kentridge and the actor Jennifer Steyn, we're gonna hear from Festival Programmer Emma Hay. Before that, here's our festival director Nicola Benedetti.

Nicola Benedetti: With enduring relevance, 30 years after its original performance, *Faustus in Africa!* explores the moral trade-offs and compromises that shape our world. It reimagines the timeless tale of Faust's downfall, reframing it to confront the catastrophic costs of colonialism and of the climate emergency.

Directed by William Kentridge, this bold reworking of the Handspring Puppet Company's multi-award winning 1995 production combines puppetry with Kentridge's celebrated animations.

William Kentridge: I'm William Kentridge. I'm an artist who lives and works in Johannesburg, also direct, theatre projects and other performance pieces. *Faustus in Africa!* is a revival of a production that was made 30 years ago at the time of the transition in South Africa between the apartheid regime and a new democratic regime.

And the production at that point looked at what was the, I suppose, the cost of this pact with the devil that was made between the incoming government and the outgoing government. 30 years later, the project is the same. The piece of theatre is the same. The puppets haven't aged. The text is the same, the music is the same. The video projections are the same. We, the performers or directors, have all aged a lot. So there are new younger actors.

But what has changed is the view of the world on to the production. It's as if the world has shifted and twisted. So questions which weren't central in the 1992 of Reparation of African artifacts, the relationship of the whole question of colonialism was just starting to bubble into the consciousness of former colonial powers, which it's now very present in that.

What to do with old monuments, how to deal with the past. These are questions which have got stronger rather than have disappeared over the last 30 years.

Kate Molleson: What can the audience expect from this performance?

William Kentridge: The audience are going to see the remarkable carving of the wooden puppets made by Adrian Kohler from Handspring Puppet company.

He and Basil Jones of Handspring Puppet devised and made and trained those remarkable horses and other puppets in *War Horse*. So this remarkable carving and manipulation of puppets. You see the manipulated with the puppets. We're not trying to hide the manipulation and you can't stop believing that the agency, the life is actually in the wood.

And so you kind of, there's a pleasure of self deception of watching this and knowing that you're being fooled. Not pretending you're not being fooled. You know you are, but you can't resist the journey.

Jennifer Steyn: Hello, I'm Jennifer Steyn and I am in *Faustus in Africa!* The objective is to perform the text through the puppet.

The challenge for me is to subdue my performance so that the focus is on the puppet. I had to learn the puppetry for this particular production. However, in the cast, there are actors who predominantly speak the text, and then there are puppeteers who are skilled puppeteers, but the puppeteers also speak the text.

So you have this lovely mix of people highly skilled in the work of puppeteering and actors who have a particular skill of delivering a text. And together we've learnt each other's skills, and so the learning is ongoing and exploding as we go along.

Kate Molleson: How do you warm up for a performance?

Jennifer Steyn: I go on stage where I set my props and greet my puppets and see how they are and what they need and what needs to be adjusted for that particular performance. And then one moves onto stage where you are with your fellow actors. And this is very much part of our warmup in this production, but also generally where there is humour and connection and finding out where everybody's at.

And then we do a sound check and we do a swing exercise together. We go back to our dressing rooms, and then we meet again to focus as a group, which includes a beautiful hymn that we've all learned in Xhosa. Which brings us into the sacredness of our task ahead because I think right from warmup one is committing to something sacred.

That the process of performance and sharing a story is a sacred one, and therefore, the preparation is a sacred one.

Kate Molleson: The theme of this year's Edinburgh International Festival is The Truth We Seek. What does seeking truth mean to you?

William Kentridge: I think that's a question I would never ever put to myself.

It's never terms that come into the studio. Those kind of questions are left outside the studio and inside we're busy making the work. If it has echoes for people, if it has resonances, if it has illuminations, that comes out at the end. But if you say each day saying, what is the truth? How do we find the truth? Then I couldn't imagine spending 10 minutes at work.

So one has the big questions. You leave them outside the storage studio. You work with the material you've gathered, in the hope that when it's finished and it leaves the studio, those big questions are still waiting outside and can go on the journey with the project that you've made.

I mean, one of the things that astonished me one thinks as an artist, 'Oh well at least the scientists are working with demonstrable proof', but then a physicist friend said to me, 'I always said, oh, I always deal with science as a series of metaphors rather than thinking of it as absolute truth,' he said, 'Well, you must understand that all mathematicians think that physicists are just poets. 'Cause none of the physicists maths actually works.'

And I just think of it as a kind of poetic description. When you do the rigorous maths, it never holds. And then another mathematician said to me, he said, 'You do understand with all these complex proofs or theorems, there's not one that's been found that doesn't have some logical mistake in it'.

So even at its most pure form, it's still a kind of a poetic wish rather than an absolute truth. Let it be said a poetic wish that works. People are able to calculate their orbits and trajectories and know when things will happen, but even in deep maths, there's always a works metaphorically as well.

Kate Molleson: William Kentridge and Jennifer Steyn, diving in a wee bit deeper into the various themes of *Faustus in Africa!* You can see *Faustus* at the Lyceum from Wednesday the 20th till Saturday the 23rd of August. Play runs for an hour and 30 minutes with no interval.