

Review of 'Spearman'

By Kerry McPhail

Summoned by a Shared Drum Beat

The Gambia is a small West African country, bounded by Senegal, with a narrow Atlantic coastline. Famed for its diverse ecosystems and abundant wildlife, including monkeys, leopards, hippos, hyenas and rare birds. Its capital Banjul, and nearby Serrekunda offer access to beautiful beaches.

With a population of just over two million people, The Gambia boasts six different tribes, each of which have their own language, culture and traditions - including of course, traditional music.

Yet whenever there is a ceremony or party in The Gambia it does not matter which tribe you belong to - if you hear drumming you can always go along and listen - or join in the party! The more crowded it becomes; the happier everyone is - for when the drumming season is in full flow, people gather to dance, sing and watch.

On arriving at Spearman, premiering today at Journey's Festival International in Portsmouth, I was immediately aware of two insights. Firstly, the gathering audience, drawn by the unusual spectacle of drumming outside a Portsmouth Cathedral, who waited politely in a typically British fashion, sitting neatly in a reverent circle. Secondly, at the magnificent contrast of the historic building, steeped in tradition and the seemingly mystical shipping container moored in the midst of its grounds. Of course, Portsmouth being a sea-port, tales of travelers, sailors and adventurers abound - but this particular shipping container invited closer inspection.

Leicester based Urban Artist N4T4 painted the exterior of the container live on site. And within it resides 'Spearman' - the real reason we are gathered here today.

'Spearman' is a single-screen life-size video projection of the eponymous Gambian village drummer (real name Famara Bojang) who left his home in Kartong village in order to undertake a dangerous migration across land and sea to Europe, in the hope of discovering a better life. Filmed on location in Germany where Spearman now resides,

the high-definition video depicts him in traditional Djembe Fola (African Drummer) costume, performing traditional West African rhythms.

The Container positioned in the grounds of Portsmouth Cathedral forms the setting for this extraordinary collaboration between artists, musicians and audiences. The warmth and sunshine of The Gambia a far cry from the chilling October winds of this seaport city, the shared understanding of what it is to wish to seek a better life is an aspiration universal to us all.

Painted with human hands, eyes and cityscapes, the container's hinged door swung open to reveal the most extraordinary signs of life inside. For installed firmly in its midst was none other than the Gambian musician Famara Bojang, aka Spearman, drumming in full African costume on a screened installation.

First presented at the Kartong International Festival in The Gambia in February 2017, this site-specific work brought together an electrifying performance by Spearman and his former drumming troupe, Kouman Kan Africa.

The Journeys Festival International celebrated here in Portsmouth is an annual event, celebrating the creative talent of diverse and exceptional refugees and asylum seeker artists, who share their experiences through great art and culture, bringing together musicians, artists and collaborators in their midst.

The astonishing arrival of the shipping container at first site is viewed as urban art. It is only when one steps inside and indeed enters the realm of Spearman himself that one realizes that what is happening here today is the most extraordinary demonstration of how art transcends all distances - from tribe to technology - from culture to universally understood experiences - and how one man's story, travelling across continents in the hope of a better life, has created meaning and connection of a depth that he himself never anticipated when setting out on his breathtaking journey.

I watch Spearman filmed as he plays vibrantly to the assembled crowds from his celluloid installation in the privacy of the container, today forming an impromptu gallery space.

Audiences of all ages revel in his percussive beats - from the four year old perched on the steps, banging her foot experimentally alongside the rhythmic drumming, to the shawled pensioners sitting sedately in the stone circle just as the tribal elders would have gathered originally.

And as Spearman's performance is beamed from the container in which so many set out in the hope of a better life, so does his magic burst forth and inspire the real life events of Journey's Festival unfolding before us today.

Leading the charge, Portsmouth's very own Drum Nation, ably conduct the opening proceedings, as leader Annette directs her fellow drummers in an inspired and colourfully vibrant call to action, urging audiences to enter into the spirit of the unfolding events.

Assembled audiences visibly shed inhibitions, breaking out into smiles as the pervasive communal beats led to hands clapping, toes tapping and hips swaying in time to the pervasive percussive beats, demonstrating the commonality of the life force in all of us - the primordial human heart beat.

Inside, on a screen, Spearman himself drummed along, half glimpsed, half watching and directing proceedings - for it is his story that has inspired artists and collaborators on the project - Wilson and Spencer - to travel to The Gambia and create this masterful work that supports Journeys Festival.

Step forward celebrated Master Drummer, Khalifa Conte, African Maestro! Tony Spencer called Khalifa to the stage, and passed to him the traditional Felika headgear in honour of his performance.

With the energy and verve of a rock star taking to his stage, Khalifa beamed as he invited Drum Nation's Annette, artist Tony Spencer and his fellow musicians to join him in a rousing tribal drumming performance that elevated the event to ever greater heights.

Audiences were clearly enthralled and aroused to participation, many rising to dance, as Khalifa gained the rapt attention of the crowd. Alive with the vibrant rhythms of nature the impromptu concert stage was owned by his mighty presence. Clearly and instinctively at ease with his beats, he is a musician who clearly sees beyond himself, sharing his stage generously with his fellow musicians, urging Annette and Tony forward and beaming at the audience nodding enthusiastically as they clapped and joined along.

Watching close by, artist Kye Wilson looked on appreciatively, gazing at Spearman, who drummed alongside in celluloid form in accompaniment

from his confines in the container. One could not help but reflect that the real-life Spearman, now living in Germany, was yet collaborating at a distance, the power of technology and art, transcending the boundaries of time yet ever respectful of tradition, collaboration and community spirit.

Wilson and Spencer have made visible and tangible the extraordinary meeting points between art, music and tribal custom, entering a dialogue on Africanism and diaspora and examining the powerful role technology plays in embracing and encompassing all aspects of diversity.

For while Spearman - at one time undertaking his own real life and treacherous journey to a his new homeland - now plays on in filmed format and the sun is bursting forth, it becomes clear that the real message of Spearman's journey is that no adventure is ever really undertaken alone. Just as his own ancestors foreshadowed his story, Spearman has passed the baton on to Wilson and Spencer to share and take it forward to the world.

Spearman's courage in undertaking his own journey is revealed to us in the warmth and generosity of an experience enjoyed by audiences on an October afternoon in England, that stretches back across time to the sunlit shores of The Gambia and beyond to a new life in Germany, where Spearman has made a new life for himself today.

Did those ancient drummers of years ago ever imagine that one of their own village musician's would one day be travelling to a world far beyond their own comprehension or reach?

The power of Global technology does not diminish one iota the original energy and custom of the tribal rhythms it preserves and celebrates. Rather it elevates and brings them to an audience of millions, creating new possibilities for shared universal understanding and reverence.

As I got up to leave, elevated and energised by the power of the drum beats, I fancied Spearman himself was grinning from the doorway of his container, his celluloid performance forever capturing the tribal heartbeat of a man who in many ways never left home at all. Rather his homeland was within him at all times - inspiring generations of musicians and adventurers yet to come.