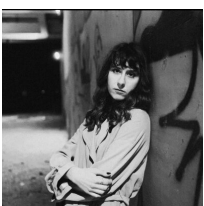




L' Opéra du Villageois

ZORA SNAKE

What belongs elsewhere



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More ritual than theatre, 'L'Opéra du Villageois' is a commemoration of the blatant destruction of cultures, worldviews, and ways of life—now existing only in the hundreds of thousands of mute, unrecognizable relics of African heritage populating contemporary European museums and archives. Zora Snake is an unforgettable, mesmerizing performer, and the subject matter is of utmost importance. However, as a whole, the performance relies too heavily on stale symbolism and an overly pointed scenography to provoke deeper introspection.

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The performance brings to mind a recent temporary exhibition at Belgium's Royal Museum for Central Africa, 'ReThinking Collections', where artifacts from the Democratic Republic of Congo—close to Zora Snake's homeland of Cameroon—were displayed with an uneasy self-awareness. Stolen, seized, violently extracted objects now scrutinized under the light of 'restitution' debates. Yet, a swallow does not make a summer, and museum labels and self-proclaimed 'awareness' alone cannot restore the bleeding sores of history. Even further, guest appearances of African artists highlight a persistent issue in European cultural programming: African performances are often showcased in festivals, relegated to the margins, granted a fleeting presence rather than a sustained, structural place within the canon. So here we go again, with Zora Snake, a singular representative of African performing arts, inserted into a hostile landscape like a reluctant offering—an aberration within institutional curation.

The two-part performance commences in the lobby of the Théâtre National Bruxelles-Wallonie. A square made of black tape marks the space. Inside, a snakeskin-patterned carpet drapes over a cube-shaped stool, alongside wine and two seemingly ritualistic objects: a figurine and some sort of whip. These objects will recur throughout the performance. Maddly Mendy Sylvia, dressed in a white satin dress dances through the audience while playing a flute. Two men carry what initially appears to be a golden statue wearing an African ritual mask. A sculptural stillness. Then, the sculpture breathes. It is Zora Snake, his body gleaming like gold, his chiseled frame glistening like an idol both worshipped and condemned. A tapestry flows before him like a shroud, reaching up to a mask. In a pedagogical manner that is to be a recurring theme of the performance, the mask is helpfully covered with the words 'stolen mask'.

When Zora Snake begins to move, his impossibly precise and fluent (and, yes, snake-like) body vocabulary takes the audience's breath away. Accompanied by the flutist, he stamps, rolls, whirls and curls through the lobby. The objects now take on symbolic weight: wine spills in a semi-circle around the 'stage'; he drinks it as though it were Christ's holy blood—then chokes on a wine-drenched Belgian flag wrapped around his head. A series of recorded voices echo through the space, narrating the origins and social function of the mask, invoking Aimé Césaire, and recalling Macron's 2017 promise of restitution of African cultural heritage to African nations—a promise that remains largely unfulfilled. The critique is pointed, but altogether predictable: the government is indifferent, the institutions complicit.

At the culmination of this first part, we are ceremoniously guided by the dancer to the theatre's upper studio. Zora Snake climbs through the theatre infrastructure with refreshing wildness, as when he climbs up the reeling of the third-floor inner gallery and shouts to the masses gathered below. As I ascend the seemingly endless staircase with the audience, I notice a well-known critic sneaking to the side, taking the elevator instead. A small detail, yet one that sticks with me. In my inexperience, I opt to follow the crowd that blocks up a small staircase. For a moment, I worry I might miss something crucial. But no—Zora Snake waits for us all.

Macron's voice returns, repeating that the time is ripe to turn the chapter. The snake pattern sprawls across the carpet, while remnants of the first act—the wine, the instruments, the colonial residue—linger heavily in the space. Then, a shift. Zora Snake turns the colonial gaze back on itself. He strips off his snake-

patterned tights, revealing red underwear adorned with a winking face—a smirk in fabric form. Yet, the hard truths remain elusive.

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Like the first act, this segment unfolds as a sequence of sacred yet contemporary imagery. Ritual persists: salt is poured onto Zora Snake’s head, released by a knife’s stab into the bag. The grains form a fragile pyramid atop the European Union flag. He pours ketchup from its peak, striking it, rejecting it. The gestures oscillate between offering and refusal, possession and desecration. But after an excess of (too literal) symbolic objects, his body again takes center stage. It is difficult to do justice to his mind-bending virtuosity. Hip-hop handstands dissolve into krumping tremors, his frame contracting and releasing with unsettling precision and speed. His spine ripples, his shoulders lock and release with intensity. He is, without question, an exceptional dancer—his physical intelligence commanding every shift of weight and change of intensity.

And yet, an uneasy thought lingers. For all its technical mastery, for all its critique, the piece feels too easily digestible. The symbols are potent but familiar: the Belgian flag, the European Union, the colonial ghosts, wine, African relics. These are well-trodden narratives in the performance circuit. The strongest decolonial critiques implicate the audience, forcing them to confront their complicity. Here, the gestures, though powerful, risk being consumed and repackaged by the very institutions they critique.

‘Ils ont pris l’oeuvre, pas l’esprit’, he gasps toward the end. Yet, he seems oblivious to the complexities of an economic system that forces contemporary artistic ‘spirits’ like himself to ply their trade to European stages. The climax stays vividly in my memory: audience members assist in what appears to be a burial ceremony. He lies motionless, clutching a bouquet of flowers, whispering into the void: ‘Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait, Belgique? Pourquoi?’ ‘Elle m’a dit I love you’. His voice fades as he is buried whole, vanishing into the earth. The emotion is palpable, yet something feels lacking. A white man behind me mutters, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’il a espéré?’ A triggering question. It almost physically hurts.

The clarity of Zora Snake’s stance is both his strength and his limitation. ‘L’Opera du Villageois’ ultimately ends in a ceremonious burial, but the strong introspection is not there. As much as I appreciate his work, I cannot shake the feeling that he is a stronger dancer than choreographer – for now. That his critical position, however urgent it may be, does not cut as deeply as his movements. And as I watch all the self-content faces descend from their seats in the concert hall and return to the chilly Bruxelles night, a creepy concern sets in—could this piece be too easily appropriated? Could it be absorbed, reframed, wielded as an institutional salve rather than a disruption and call for change?

I hesitate to write this, but the feeling lingers all the same. Sorry, Zora Snake.