

Edinburgh International Festival review: Exhibit B (*****)



On so many levels, it's hard not to react to South African artist Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B* with appalled disbelief. Yet the stories it tells of the astonishing cruelty and barbarism carried out in the name of European colonialism are all too true – and, indeed, need to be more widely known.

Amid the neo-Classical splendours of the Playfair Library in Old College Quad (in what feels like a horribly appropriate setting), Bailey and his group Third World Bunfight have installed a human zoo of living exhibits, each one illustrating a particular story of colonial power – from the black women shown all over Europe during the 19th century because of their supposedly strange body shapes to masked and bound figures embodying far darker, far more distressing episodes of cruelty in our shared history of objectifying and suppressing other races. And as you gaze at the carefully constructed tableaux vivants, each 'exhibit' gazes right back at you, not with hate or accusation, but simply with awareness of the disturbing new knowledge you've just acquired.

To say it's uncomfortable viewing is a huge understatement. It's a highly confrontational, uncompromising work, but it's also delivered with exquisite beauty and attention to detail. And a 'decompression' room telling the back stories of the performers taking part is a much-needed step back into the real world, as well as adding yet another level of awareness to the work.

It's hugely powerful, deeply unsettling, but vital viewing.

Exhibit B, Playfair Library, Old College Quad, until 25 August
(not 14, 18, 21).

Photo Sophie Knijff