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## Hope survives bitter reality of refugee's life

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By **MURRAY BRAMWELL**

12:00AM MARCH 7, 2019 •  NO COMMENTS

Asad Abdullahi is an ordinary man with a remarkable life story, told to author Jonny Steinberg and published as *A Man of Good Hope*. In 2016 it was turned into this compelling operatic production from South Africa's Isango Ensemble, with seasons at London's Young Vic and Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Asad's tribulations began in his native Somalia. In January 1991, when he was eight, he witnessed his mother's murder by militias in Mogadishu during the civil war that drove many thousands to seek refuge in Kenya. His childhood is one of repeated separation, loss and insecurity.

His journey is through the Horn of Africa via Tanzania and Zimbabwe to South Africa where, at the age of 20, after years waiting in camps, he hopes to prosper as a shopkeeper. He is resourceful, hardworking and indomitable but in the harsh townships a Muslim Somalian immigrant is a despised outsider.

Under Mark Dornford-May's assured direction this vivid, sometimes harrowing, often exhilarating production brings us close to the refugee experience.

The strong cast of 22 performers presents a musical odyssey with a host of characters highlighting the struggle to maintain family ties, outrun adversity and defy despair.

Boldly lit by Manuel Manim and Sue Grey-Gardner, the stage bursts with action. Lungelo Ngamlana's upbeat choreography is a dazzling mix of African dance and Broadway symmetry. The excellent music composed and conducted by Mandisi Dyantyi is scored for a marimba orchestra to which almost every cast member contributes.

The libretto in English and Xhosa is spare and often haunting in its elegiac simplicity. The singing is uniformly splendid. Tragic scenes, like the death of Asad's mother, are enveloped in glorious choral lament; joyous times are underscored with pop, soul and African folk.

The performances are rich and finely drawn. Playing Asad as a young boy, Siphosethu Hintsho is outstanding, carrying the narrative and the emotional heft memorably. Zoleka Mpotsha as Yindy, Asad's surrogate mother, and then Sadicya, the adult Asad's second wife, bring strong continuity to the story; Sinethemba Mdena is sinister as the vengeful Madoda.

As Asad in early manhood, Thandolwethu Mzembe captures his developing ambition and commercial acumen, while Ayanda Siyabonga Tikolo, as the mature Asad, embodies his gathering sadness and uncertainty. This man's good hopes are not yet completely dashed, but his story, and that of all unwelcome asylum-seekers, is cause to wonder: why not?

*A Man of Good Hope. Based on the book by Jonny Steinberg. Young Vic and Isango Ensemble. Royalty Theatre, Adelaide, March 5. Tickets: \$30-\$89. Bookings: [adelaidefestival.com](http://adelaidefestival.com). Duration: 2hr 30min, including interval. Until March 11.*