

Jungle Fevers

Ping Chong travels imaginatively into *The Heart of Darkness*

by Alisa Solomon

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"The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much," says Marlow, in the opening pages of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. As the maker of some of American theater's most haunting images over the last two decades, Ping Chong honors Marlow's observation in his new piece about the atrocities committed in the Congo under Belgium's King Leopold II. Between 1880 and 1920, in the European scramble for Africa's rubber, ivory, and other resources, forced laborers in the Congo were routinely brutalized, their hands cut off as punishment. Some 8 million people were slaughtered.

Striking a style that might be called engaged formalism, Chong and his co-writer and co- 's *King Leopold's Ghost*, manage to create elegant theater without aestheticizing their gruesome subject. *Blind Ness: The Irresistible Light of Encounter* mixes slide projections, a vivid soundscape, abstract choreography, and shadow puppets with documentary material and several intersecting narratives, dramatized and delivered in telegraphic reports.

Out of a chorus of 17 actors—most of them students from Kent State University, where Chong originated *Blind Ness*—the key players emerge. The central figure, of course, is the conniving King Leopold II (M. Burke Walker), who patiently maneuvers his way to international support, employing paid lobbyists and promising to bring Africa moral uplift. Even using quick strokes—such as Leopold menacing a servant over his breakfast menu—Chong and Rohd spend a long time establishing the king as a gluttonous con man, and in these early sequences, the actors flounder between buffoonish caricature and unadorned presentation.

But as Leopold's opponents enter the story, the piece finds its dramatic drive.

Details:

Blind Ness: The Irresistible Light of Encounter

By Ping Chong & Company

La MaMa E.T.C., 74A East 4th Street, 212.475.7710

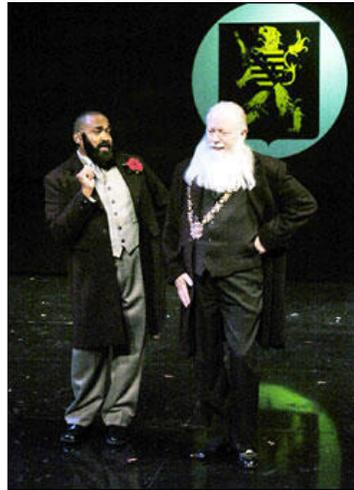


photo: Shiho Fukada
Courting the king: Bermea and Walker

Edmund Dene Morel (Rohd), a shipping clerk, notices discrepancies in the invoices from the Congo and launches an investigation; Roger Casement (Jeff Randall), an Irishman, likewise blows the whistle and joins Morel to form the Congo Reform Association; and William Sheppard (Bobby Bermea), the first African American missionary in Africa, documents a massacre in Pianga with a recent invention, the Kodak camera.

Throughout, the action is framed by Marlow's quest for the infamous Mr. Kurtz: As Marlow (Rohd) stands silhouetted behind an upstage scrim, Conrad's piercing prose, in a husky voice-over, seems to emerge from our own jungle-addled brains.

In addition to shining light on the largely forgotten murderous crimes in the Congo, *Blind Ness* strikes uneasy contemporary notes. Sheppard, for one, wonders whether more people might have been saved "if [he] could have gotten [his] photos around the world faster." Fat chance.