

NAME: Kurier
DATE: Wednesday, 8 April 2015
AUTHOR: Werner Rosenberger
TITLE: **“Singing for South Africa’s children”**

He recently performed as Wagner's Tannhäuser at the Lyric Opera of Chicago and will be singing the same opera at the New York MET in autumn.

Today, Wednesday, Johan Botha is performing as Parsifal on the stage of the Vienna State Opera once again. At the 2016 Salzburg Easter Festival with the conductor Christian Thielemann he is engaged for the title role of Verdi's "Otello".

And for the tenor and artistic Ambassador of South Africa, to sing a charity concert with opera and operettas for the Nelson Mandela Children's Hospital in the seven-million-metropolis of Johannesburg on 20 April with Pretty Yende at the Vienna Konzerthaus is a heart's desire.

Mandela's dream

“It will be the second in South Africa and also was Nelson Mandela’s dream”, says Botha in the Kurier-Interview in the residence of the South African Ambassador, the “Währinger Cottage”. “We are collecting money for it. On the vast continent of Africa there are only four children's hospitals. And that is far too little.”

With a "catchy program," says Botha, the 20th Anniversary of democracy in South Africa is celebrated: arias by Verdi, Donizetti, Bellini, Giacomo Puccini, Lehar and Johann Strauss, dedicated to the first democratically elected President Nelson Mandela.

Botha, who grew up on his grandfather's farm in South Africa during apartheid, admired him, and "never understood why blacks should be worth less than whites": "When Mandela was released from prison after 27 years in 1990, he could have said, 'War!' But Mandela has done the opposite; he is the only person I've seen in my life who has lived the Bible, as it should be. He stood for forgiveness and reconciliation, has appealed to form one nation together, so that our children can live together in peace. That's what I admire about him. That is his legacy."

With five years Botha told his father that he wanted to be an opera singer: "I constantly sang to the 'La Traviata'-LP with Anna Moffo and Richard Tuckerhad. At the age of ten I had my first singing lessons. And since then, I am living my dream. Who can say that he is living his dream and even gets paid for it and is loved by the audience?"

Now the Wagner role is waiting for the tenor, who lives in Vienna with his family since 1996 and feels at home here:

Tristan was planned for 2017 in Berlin with Daniel Barenboim. But due to the construction site at the Berlin State Opera “Unter den Linden” it is still open.

"After the massive increase in costs and the time-lag in the renovation it is still unclear whether the stage will be ready for the play on time," says Botha. "At the moment people in Berlin mock, that the state opera "Unter den Linden" will only be completed when the new airport is completed."

Project Tristan

An additional problem is that when the singers are free, no director is available. And when there's a director available the dates of the singers are difficult to coordinate. "A friend of mine said: Tristan is like a Mount Everest climb and if I take over the role, then I want a good basis for it," says Botha.

"It takes years to learn such a part. I first always study the whole score, not just my role, and it takes a long time to internalize text and music. I'm very excited."

Botha must feel his characters. The challenge would be first searching for the appropriate expression for the text in the part, and secondly to identify the sound for it, "so that I survive it," says Botha. "And finally, I also need to find the sound that thrills the audience. So that they can also have sympathy for a character like Otello, although he has to realize in the end that he actually was an idiot. This feeling also has to show without destroying oneself."

But now it is first about the construction of a 200-bed hospital for the little ones in Johannesburg. Because: "Children are the future of the world. And there's nothing worse than children for which there is no hope."

INFO: 20. 4. Wiener Konzerthaus (20h00), Tribute to Nelson Mandela Concert with Pretty Yende and Johan Botha, as well as the Vienna Chamber Orchestra. Tickets 01/242002 and www.konzerthaus.at

<http://kurier.at/kultur/musik/singen-fuer-die-kinder-suedafrikas/123.689.773>