

Mother Africa



By [Tom Hackett](#) | Published 07 August 2012

It's almost packed out at the Assembly Hall on a glorious Edinburgh afternoon as the clownish, ringmaster figure of Papa Africa gamely attempts to whip up the polite crowd into an appropriate frenzy, before dancers in oversized Zulu-style masks strut their stuff in front of a six-piece live band. What follows is a circus-like variety show, where acrobats, singers, dancers, clowns and contortionists each take entertaining turns on stage.

Each section is set very broadly in a part of Africa, with projections on the back wall showing the Savanna, the Pyramids, the South African plains. Against these backdrops we get a man in a Pharaoh costume doing handstands on a teetering pile of stacked chairs; a woman playing a traditional thumb piano and treating us to a rousing ballad; Papa Africa gently mocking an audience member as he tries to teach him some traditional African drumming. The contortionist is accompanied by the image of a desert snake, and provides the most gasp-inducing and impressive of all the performances.

This is a massively simplified vision of pre-colonial African culture, thrown together with a few non-native circus tricks, which some will find quite irritating. Africa is perhaps too vast and diverse a continent for this hour-long show to be anything else; but it might have been nice to furnish us with a little bit of background, at least on which part of the landmass the more traditional elements of the performance come from. But as pure, family-friendly entertainment, it's perfectly inoffensive and often very good fun.