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*South Africa's National Arts Festival* (review)

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present *Carmen* outdoors, despite the rain or professional risks. The implication here was that we—her offstage audience—join in such struggles also. Telling the story this way paid off, because Seaton and Howard allowed us to experience the bigotry through Dawson's eyes, making the discrimination especially palpable.

Through Dawson's use of storytelling, Seaton found a creative method of shining a spotlight on Dawson's life and work and demonstrating the value of sharing her history (and by implication, the history of people like her). In the final moments of the play the thunderstorm fortuitously stopped, and Dawson transitioned into a storytelling song, with hypnotic, jazz-inspired music by Carlos Simon, that incorporated details from Dawson's previous stories, combined with the image of a rebellious bird that Dawson referenced earlier while rehearsing *Carmen*'s first-act *habanera*. As Dawson held her arms out to the side like wings, the performers stood behind her mirroring those gestures. Evoking a flock of rebellious birds in flight, they all then moved into a "V" formation, as Dawson's story-song invited us in the audience, like those performers earlier, to share in her ongoing struggles for freedom. With the United States' ongoing challenges combating racism and inequality, this play's final call to join in those struggles proved especially timely. Given the richness and complexity of Dawson's history with NNOC, Seaton and Simon could certainly explore the further development of this piece into an even more substantial work, with more original music.

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**SOUTH AFRICA'S NATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL.** Makhanda, South Africa. Online, July 8–31, 2021.

South Africa's 2021 National Arts Festival (NAF) was planned as a "hybrid festival." To fit COVID times, organizers curated a program of virtual performances, live events dispersed throughout major cities (for travel-wary patrons), and a socially distant multiday festival in Makhanda, the tiny Eastern Cape town that has hosted the nation's art community annually for nearly fifty years. The multimodal plan reflected an arts sector beleaguered by sixteen months of near-total shutdown, while also addressing the need for programming diversification to deal with constantly shifting pandemic mandates. Organizers clearly recognized that a virtual festival, as implemented in 2020, was insufficient for work-

ing artists, Makhanda businesses, and Eastern Cape traders whose livelihoods depend on a bustling festival economy.

Sadly, a week before events kicked off in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown), South Africa moved to a new round of lockdowns to combat the Delta variant. On extraordinarily short notice, the NAF was again forced into a wholly virtual format. This move was devastating to overall participation, and particularly hobbling to Makhanda businesses already making preparatory expenditures. The impromptu pivot to a virtual festival created financial and logistical barriers that excluded many theatre artists (fringe festival performers and buskers were most affected), but it also created opportunities for the NAF to show off its technical capacity acquired over the course of the pandemic and for South African theatre to demonstrate the value of its particular ethic of making—which is premised on interdisciplinary sensibilities. The difficulty and necessity of developing performances that could speak as well through digital means as in a live setting was evident in the prestigious Standard Bank Young Artist Awards offering the 2019 winners—whose subsidized, career-defining works were forced haphazardly into a digital format in 2020—an extra year of funding to adopt creative philosophies that could simultaneously encompass mediated and unmediated performance contexts.

In the end, the 2021 virtual NAF provided the public convenient and ongoing access to an extensive web platform that delivered production videos and virtual versions of the festival's many facets. Makhanda's creative infrastructure, like Rhodes University's stages and recording equipment, helped deliver high-quality filmed productions with fidelity to the live auditorium viewing experience. Perhaps due to the availability of these resources, the 2021 NAF seemed to have a more distinctly Eastern Cape identity than felt in years past, including many works performed in isiXhosa, isiZulu, and Sotho, and numerous productions from university drama cohorts in Rhodes, Fort Hare, and Gqeberha.

Befitting the planned hybrid festival, many artists embraced performance skill sets and structural dramaturgies that moved among creative disciplines. South Africa's theatre scene is known for interdisciplinarity, especially "physical theatre," where actors move seamlessly between narrative characterization and abstract, poetic movement episodes. In addition to exhilarating kinetics, physical theatre offers a form of embodied translation for a country with eleven official languages.

This was a major conceit of *Ndinxaniwe* ("I want to drink"), written and directed by Qondiswa



Mfondo Zono, Sivuyile Dunjwa, and Mphumzi Nontshinga (l-r) in *Ndinxaniwe*. (Photo: Mark Wessels.)



*Ndinxaniwe*. (Photo: Mark Wessels.)



Tony Miyambo in *Commission Continua*. (Photo: Zivanai Matangi and the Centre for the Less Good Idea.)



James. A contemporary adaptation of Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa's "The Coming of the Strange Ones" (*Indaba, My Children*, 1964), the show followed three schoolboys growing up in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Its narrative proceeded through brief, disjointed snapshots of a community facing a prospectless future, left behind by the neoliberal order embraced by the post-apartheid government. Three incandescent actors, Mfundo Zono, Mphumzi Nontshinga, and Sivuyile Dunjwa, flitted between inhabiting the schoolboys and various characters in town, as well as livestock and objects (for example, swaying trees) evocative of the remote area's environment and atmosphere. Despite most of the show's dialogue being in isiXhosa (which I, like many NAF patrons, do not speak), one could easily get a sense of character and story through the actors' precise gestural vocabulary. In a coming-of-age narrative, we watched the schoolboys joyously dash through the leafy forests to make it to class, fidget their way through lectures, anxiously approach love interests in the schoolyard, talk about their (waning) life ambitions over drinks, or melt into a fever dream while smoking ganja. These character-driven scenes instantly dissolved into silent, wondrous dance interludes that moved us in time and space. They often consisted of mundane gestures (like washing one's hands), extended, repeated, or refracted into a ballet of everyday actions.

The effect was a fragmented patchwork of vignettes that told a character-driven story, while also, like a pointillist painting, systematically building a haptic atmosphere to scenically locate us in the pastoral countryside. Equally important to the dialogue and movement was the soundscape, which included actor impersonations (for example, bleating lambs or the commanding cadence of a prattling elder) and gentle drum and string music improvisation in the background. Themba Stewart's redolent set consisted of drooping tree branches and golden piles of leaves that, under the stage lights, glowed auratically, contributing to the idyllic mood.

The piece's bucolic feel made its critical conversation and tragic ending even more striking. The show was bookended with direct addresses to the audience in English, the speaking actor assuming a stern countenance and confrontational tone—perhaps in recognition that many, like myself, would only fully understand these moments. The first address defined our setting as "one of those schools . . . where the systemic mind-rape of colonization is lived," a space defined by "the crushing weight of influence like white monopoly capital that comes to steal labor and rape land." The final address detailed the climactic tragedy involving our protagonists, with a 17-year-old boy fatally shooting his school principal. The speaker located this incident as a

startling contemporary symptom of the lingering colonial relation, one that most people would abstract from this history and label just another tragic instance of Black-on-Black crime. He ended by placing the shooting in conversation with anti-apartheid freedom struggles, while also indicting the failure of the post-apartheid state: "I think I imagine June 16 [the day of the 1976 Soweto student uprising and its murderous suppression by the apartheid regime] turned in on itself. The white wig of the white democracy safeguarding white monopoly to label violence with the face of the Black child . . . No . . . You did this." Working through physical and multilingual vocabularies, *Ndinxaniwe* shows apartheid violence to be recursive, with the outright state repression of the past transforming into slow social death in the present.

Tony Miyambo's interdisciplinary solo piece *Commission Continua* similarly explored the theme of history's cyclical nature, while also implementing a unique dramaturgy that traversed theatre and audio production. The show's set consisted of furniture and objects evocative of the clerical spaces of the public archive: the photocopier, the filing cabinet, the desk and microphone for testimony, the dustbin. The narrator, an archivist played with stereotypically gawky demeanor by Miyambo, shuffled between these objects in episodes that evoked Kafkaesque entrapment in the processes of staging, citing, commemorating, and forgetting the past. *Commission Continua* ironically twisted the familiar freedom cry in southern African anti-colonial movements *a luta continua* ("the struggle continues"). Here, the enduring tradition of dispatching public commissions to investigate corruption and governmental abuse appeared not as productive social redress, but as a black hole that had ensnared South Africa in an archival rut. Noting that the country spends 200 million rand per year outfitting commissions with paper, equipment, and personnel, Miyambo sardonically pointed out that "[w]e are a state that is obsessed with the process of how to scratch its own head."

Miyambo's direct poetic editorializing was a small component of aesthetics that were mostly physical and aural. He began with a series of movements that vacillated between elongated silent passages exploring the embodied processes of maintaining the archive (scanning documents, unraveling case files, straightening papers) and absurd actions that imagistically refracted these procedures: for example, at one point the narrator stuck his head inside the photocopier and plugged his ears and nose with Post-it notes.

The show's most remarkable creative conceit began when the narrator sat at the desk and read



Nkululeko “Muchacho” Nkosi, Simphiwe “Beatz” Bonongo, and Jefferson Bobs Tshabalala, (l-r) in *Seen Pha kwa Ub’Dope—Of Art. Of Access. Of Ascension*. (Photo: Suleiman Bismilla.)

directly from transcripts of the 1996 Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address crimes during apartheid. Speaking into the microphone like a witness on the stand, Miyambo used an audio device to capture and loop back short snippets of his testimony. Doing this over and over, the performer effectively built hypnotic, musical refrains composed of archival text and its accompanying sonic effluvia (crinkles of paper, clearing one’s throat). The durational nature of this live sound mixing created an atmosphere that shifted from mesmerizing to interminable, to haunting, to numbing. The aesthetic combined the virtuosity of live audio production with a detailed dramaturgy that charted a 140-year genealogy of commissions, ranging from the banal (Commission into the Pasteurization of Milk), to the recurrent (Commissions into the Natives), to the recently topical (Presidential Commission into the Massacre at Marikana). Amid the cacophony of audio loops that echoed this historical recounting, Miyambo lamented seeing so many social problems go into the archive, while no solutions come out. His reach to audio production to outline durational national strife and its archival traces show the potential that working across disciplines holds for inventive dramaturgical interventions.

Perhaps nowhere was the trend toward theatrical interdisciplinarity more visible than in the offerings

of Jefferson Tshabalala, winner of the prestigious Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Theatre. Continuing his multiyear exploration on the operations of cultural production for Black creatives, Tshabalala’s 2021 digital epic *Seen Pha kwa Ub’Dope—Of Art. Of Access. Of Ascension*, traversed the fields of music performance, poetry, film production, and creative entrepreneurship. The ostensible performance “product” was a musical album release, and a series of music videos and promotional features that followed Tshabalala’s invented characters J. Bhozza and J. Bhoboza, swaggering rappers from the *kwaito* (township hip-hop) scene. Rather than work through editorial commentary or representational dramaturgy, Tshabalala performatively enacted an aspirational trajectory for Black cultural expression. He self-reflexively manifested his own ascension to musical stardom—even in COVID times—complete with all the trappings one might expect from someone who recently inked a deal with a major label: high-def, well-edited videos and virtual concerts, an entourage of hype-people, and even an original clothing line.

The project’s scope extended beyond Tshabalala’s own characters, encompassing processes of artistic collaboration and institutional creation. In a livestream, we toured the grounds of the Birdie Theatre in Sophiatown, which were inhabited by a



Garage Dance Ensemble in *Gat Innie Grond, Wond in My Siel*. (Photo: Dale Davids.)

collective of multidisciplinary creatives like Nandi Nhlapho, Amukelani Thandeka Mabaso, Chris Djuma, Nkululeko Nkosi, and Simphiwe Bonongo. The collective embodied characters living the dope life, DJing, producing, promoting, and partying; they evoked a sense of self-confidence, upward class mobility, and a spirit of community support that belied the lack of opportunities greeting young Black artists in South Africa.

Hip-hop's reliance upon filmic lifestyle promotion and multiplatform performance distribution made *Seen Pha kwa Ub'Dope* particularly well-suited to adapt to a wholly virtual festival, but I cannot help but imagine what the entire package would have looked like as a physical event in Makhanda as planned. No doubt live hip-hop concerts would have engaged not only festival patrons, but also residents of local townships who are often alienated from the NAF's literati-facing offerings. One can envision how Bhozza and Bhozoza sauntering through the streets, hawking merch, embodying a Black artistic success story might have inspired hope and pride for an incipient community of young creatives. Still, Tshabalala's work adapted for the virtual festival was remarkable, in that it utilized digital media not merely as a socially distant means of approximating live performance, but as a locus of embodied production capable of creating com-

munity, transforming place, and cohering a variety of artistic skillsets.

Likewise, *Gat Innie Grond, Wond in My Siel* ("Hole in the Ground, Wound in my Soul"), directed by Cape Town-based choreographer Byron Klassen, saw film as both a means for theatrical storytelling and an embodied project with performative dimensions. Experimentally fusing modern dance, documentary film-making, and performance ethnography, the movie consisted of interviews and snapshots of daily life in O'kiep, a poor Coloured community in the arid bushland of the Northern Cape, interspersed with explosive movement pieces by the Garage Dance Ensemble local to the area. The film's narrative highlighted the struggle to maintain a generational connection to the land despite lingering pollution from industrial mining in the area and wide-scale unemployment since companies pulled out.

The dances were inspired by the community's heritage and daily routines like hanging laundry, building fences, or butchering animals. Performers began by doing these tasks, sometimes dressed in work uniforms and other times outfitted in nondescript whites and blacks conventional to modern dance. They suddenly transitioned into poetic choreography premised on extension and corporeal

beauty, all in bare feet on pebbly dirt. Some particularly expressive dances took place in wide-open desert spaces, gesturing through costume, music, and cinematography to the heritage of Namaqua people indigenous to the area, and to O'kiep's identity as an island of resilience amid a harsh geo-historical context.

Dance operated in the film as both a poetic interpretation of the community's struggles and an applied performance project aiming to entertain and uplift. Cameras conspicuously captured townspeople on their stoops, rapt in the dynamic movements set against the town's forlorn architecture.

Eventually, community members spontaneously joined in the choreography, improvising in the streets alongside the dancers. These authentic expressions of joy were placed alongside interviews with older community members outlining a history of "living well" despite challenges like the lack of running water. The project ultimately showed how performance can document through repertoire the daily struggle for survival, while simultaneously endowing space with the motility and spirit necessary to reinvigorate the social fabric.

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