

Healing communities aim of retelling of TRC play

"THE PAST is the present and no one is taking responsibility for putting it there," writes poet Lesego Rampolokeng as part of *The Story I Am About to Tell* which opens at the Soweto Theatre, aptly on Heritage Day, Thursday, and runs until October 4.

Conceptualised by Bobby Rodwell who was writing for New Nation at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission 20 years ago, they thought of revisiting the piece because of the time passed and asking questions about the relevancy of the piece. "We might be too involved, but we were all so surprised by how relevant everything that was written and told then, still is today. Why is that so?"

Once she had decided to restage *The Story*, she brought together Rampolokeng as well as the original director, Robert Colman, and actor Dan Robbertse so that they could rewrite the piece. "But we found we didn't have to do any of that," says Rodwell.

The only thing necessary was a new prologue written (by Rampolokeng) for today and about the present and they were ready to go. "I felt it was important to reopen lots of those issues and to revisit our past," she says. "What has been achieved?" is her most critical question. What they decided to do with the play was to perform it as a historical piece which works well in Heritage Month with the two first schools attending, Morris Isaacson and Naledi High, in the forefront at the time of the historic school protests.

"We need people to know about the past," says Rodwell, acknowledging the nation's struggle with racism still today. "We need to look into our heart and mend our ways."

When first conceiving this work she was concerned that the TRC hearings were such a staged event and that so many stories were not being told or heard. "I wanted to create a piece of theatre that would travel to the smaller communities too so that everyone could be part of these testimonies," she says.

From the start they were going to use actors, but then Maggie Friedman (David Webster's girlfriend) suggested they use the real people to tell their own stories.

The original cast comprised three actors, the late Ramolao Makhene, Kenneth Nkosi and Robbertse; and three Khulumani Support Group members, who told their own stories as told at the TRC, the late Duma



The cast of *The Story I Am About to Tell* in rehearsal. PICTURE: MAMBILA MAGEZA

Khumalo of the Sharpsville Six; Catherine Mlangeni, mother of the activist Bheki Mngeni; and activist Thandi Shezi. Rampolokeng wrote the dialogue in the original, with the "real people" writing and telling their own stories as testimony on stage, directed by Colman.

But they had since given permission for their stories to be told by actors and in this version that happens. Directed by Monageng Vice-Motshabi with a new cast that includes Sello Sebotsane, Sibulele Gcilitshana, Hlengiwe Lushaba-Madlala, Thabiso Rammala, Theo Landey and Xolile Gama, this was Rodwell's attempt all those years ago to see if using people's testimony would work when staged as a piece of theatre. It did.

She's thrilled that this time they will be starting at the Soweto Theatre and she hopes they will again travel to smaller venues, reaching communities that have been directly affected by the horrors of the past.

"Their (Soweto Theatre) vision of the importance of this work has been encouraging," she says. "We can't move forward if we don't know our history."

● **Runs Tues to Thurs: 11am; Thurs to Sat; 8pm; Sun, 3pm. Block bookings: students R30. Book at sowetothatre.com or call 011 930 7462/3/4.**

Celebratory staging to drive students' future

IT'S ALWAYS good to see when good theatre is rewarded. After much acclaim at the National Arts Festival, The Market Theatre Laboratory will be staging its award winning play, *Noord!*, at the Ramolao Makhene Theatre for just three performances on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, in celebration of the achievements of the students who are about to graduate from the Lab's Theatre and Performance Skills Programme.

Noord! played to standing ovations at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown and was recognised with the Adelaide Tambo Award in the student category for celebrating human rights through the arts.

Set at Noord Taxi Rank in central Joburg and directed by Clara Vaughan, it tells the compelling story of a woman working as a taxi driver in an industry dominated by men.

The play, powerfully performed by an

ensemble of Market Theatre Laboratory second-year students, uses the poetry of the streets and striking imagery to capture life and survival in the margins of the dirty, crazy, beautiful and dangerous city of Joburg.

Created in collaboration with Kgafela oa Magogodi, Jacques Da Silva and Salome Sebola, this production is a funny and moving exploration of how gender, power and belonging are negotiated in public space with taxi ranks having significant importance in people's lives – both in a positive and negative way.

● **Tickets at R50 are available at the door (no online bookings) with all ticket proceeds going directly to the students. Friday at 6pm, Saturday and Sunday at 3pm. The Market Theatre Laboratory is based in The Bus Factory, 3 Helen Joseph Street, Newtown.**



A scene from *Noord!*

It's an illuminating, often fun and always informative week on Gauteng's theatrical landscape. **Diane de Beer** gives a roundup of the new offerings available this week. See *Boardwalk* on page 2 for some of the longer-running shows you still have to check out



Fest to make you at home with theatre

THIRTY homes around Tshwane will be transformed into performance spaces, when the innovative Home Theatre Festival hits town on Sunday. The concept is from the Brazilian Marcus Faustini. It was initiated in 2013 at the Royal Stratford Theatre in the UK and directed by its artistic director, Kerry Michaels, who later introduced the concept to the State Theatre's Aubrey Sekhabi, which then turned into a collaboration.

Home Theatre is about opening up theatre to new audiences in innovative ways. It consists of a string of productions that are performed in the comfort of the homes of the chosen participants. These 30 solo performances will be performed simultaneously by 30 artists. An actor is thus given the chance to create a unique show for a host in their own home and it will be based on the host's personal stories, experiences, likes, dislikes, hopes and regrets.

The host will be in charge of inviting family and friends to the performance and for this first time, household names in the South African arts have been roped in to co-create these stories and perform them, including Presley Chweneyagae (*Tsotsi*), Thato Molamu, (Nicholas in *Generations*), Peter Mashigo (*Ga re Dumele*), Pat Sanku Bokaba (*Muhango*), playwright Dos Moelele and Keketso Mojela, who is known for her stage performances in Paul Grootboom productions.

Areas including Mamelodi, Mabopane, Centurion, Atteridgeville, the Tshwane CBD and Soshanguve will simultaneously become a home theatre for a group of enthusiasts who will be part of the production in some way.

Additional magic is that these performances will be filmed on small home cameras by 30 film students from Tshwane University of Technology and Boston City Campus and this footage will then be broadcast on the State Theatre website and screened at the theatre on October 17.

"For me, one of the reasons to bring Home Theatre to South Africa is to engage with our communities and begin to dialogue so that we can understand their aspirations, frustrations and successes. We are proud to have brought Home Theatre to South Africa as this will also enable a lot of our communities to enjoy theatre and participate. Access to the arts is important because the arts are the soul of this country. The more people we get to watch theatre the better for this land and its soul," says Sekhabi.

The party's on, hatecrashers!

'BRING a frock and a few benches, lipstick and two tired old survivors,' says actor Robert Whitehead, and you have a show!

He's talking about *Gross Indecency* for which he teams up with the other Robert (Colman) at Joburg's youngest theatre, POPart, in the Maboneng precinct in downtown Joburg.

"It's such a cool place," say both Roberts – well, almost in tandem.

But they're delighted that they have been afforded the time and place for their collaborative *Gross Indecency* which they describe as "a bumpy ride through the dark and dirty gays of South African LGBTI (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Intersex) history!"

It is the true story of a very big queer party held in Forest Town in 1966. A police raid led to stringent new homophobic laws (part of the Immorality Act) and the infamous "three men at a party" clause – not unlike the house arrest laws that considered three people or more as a crowd – who could be arrested for homosexual acts.

Their research comes from the Wits Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action archives (Gala) which they describe as phenomenal.

"They were our scriptwriters," says Colman as he recalls Pieter-Dirk Uys' famous words about the apartheid government being his scriptwriters.

"Much of what we say comes verbatim out of the archives," he notes. "We hardly had to change a word," adds Whitehead. Those were the dark days of apartheid when rules were made at a whim by a government that didn't view human rights as part of their concern.

"They were looking at all these drastic new laws concerning gay people which were really

drastic," says Colman and this is the period and time they're spotlighting.

It also resulted in the first and historical gay and lesbian movement in this country.

"We have such a strong history of storytelling, especially with a kind of cabaret style," says Whitehead and that's the route they take with Tony Bentell on keyboards and Vanessa Cooke in the director's chair.

The two Roberts have often worked together as have the rest of the gang, but from the beginning, the two actors workshoped and wrote the script and did a short run last year to test the performances. The response was exciting and for this two-week run, Cooke who is having a hectic directorial stint (mentor on *Cincinnati*, and now directing *Blackbird*) came in to shape the end result.

The story is rooted in the reality of two characters called Rita Haywire and Lana Turna-Me-Over. "They can't remember their real names any longer," says Whitehead with a sly twinkle. You can see that even with its darker undertones, they're having a blast.

"They can't really remember since their retirement from hairdressing and the airways," adds Colman who explains that they also play two justice figures of the time, Smiff and Wessels.

The party they host where all the trouble begins is a 70th birthday bash. "It was our own little Stonewall moment," says Whitehead, referring to the New York (LGBT) riots in 1969.

Because they know one another so well, they play off each other easily, but have very different and distinct styles. "It's such fun," says Whitehead who is grateful for his TV persona on *Isidingo* but loves returning to stage to work the different muscles and get his creative energy back. "It's too easy to fall into



Robert Whitehead and Robert Colman in *Gross Indecency*.

patterns when you keep doing the same thing," he says. Colman nods his head. In his other life he does a corporate writing and to get his artistic juices flowing strongly is a gift.

There's not much chance of stagnation with these two veteran actors who love their craft but also recognise a good story with heat and heart when they find it.

This one is serious and shocking for those who remember and those too young to know this world. But they also hope to travel the work.

"This is real poor theatre," reminds Whitehead and you know that these two relish the fact that it is their words and characters that have to win the audience over:

● ***Gross Indecency* runs from tomorrow until October 4 at POPart. Book at popartcentre.co.za Telephone enquiries: Hayleigh at 083 245 1040 or Orly at 082 472 2559. POPart Centre is at 286 Fox Str, Maboneng Precinct, Joburg. For more detail: [Facebook.com/popartjhb](https://www.facebook.com/popartjhb) or Twitter: @POPARTJHB.**

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