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Theatre Formations:  
Rethinking theatre and its spaces in Cape Town

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this mini thesis; *Theatre Formations: Rethinking theatre and its spaces in Cape Town* is my own work. It is submitted to the University of the Western Cape in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in Anthropology. At no other University or institution has it been submitted as a requirement for a degree or any other qualification. And that all sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.



Full Name: Zuko Wonderfull Sikhafungana

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Signature:.....

To my grandmother Bikiwe Sikhafungana who left us on 31<sup>st</sup> of October 2017.

May your soul rest in peace, I know that you are proud of me,

You kept me going in completing this writing.



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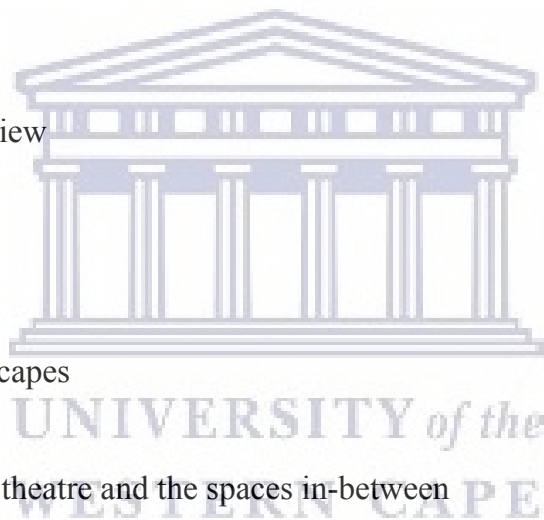
## ABSTRACT AND KEY WORDS

Scholarship on theatre in South Africa has shown how under the Apartheid government theatrical practices were divided into different genres such as protest theatre, township theatre, black theatre, mainstream theatre etc. In many ways theatre today presents the same fractures and polarisations: community and mainstream theatre. This study investigates ways in which black theatre artists from marginalised and disadvantaged communities with and without formal training negotiate themselves within theatre spaces in Cape Town. Discussing and analyzing the works and the trajectories of two case-studies: the Ukwanda Puppet and Design Company and the Back Stage Theatre Production Company, I attempt to demonstrate how works of arts that awkwardly sits with labels such as “community” or “mainstream” theatre are emerging more and more in the Cape Town theatre scene. Through outreach initiatives in the city—the Zabalaza Theatre Festival, the Magnet Theatre Culture Gangs, the Full Time Training and the Job Creation Programme—that are offering opportunities to artists that are excluded from the mainstream theatre industry, providing channels and platforms that bring community theatre outside of the township space, this study highlights how community theatre artists are reclaiming and redefining what it means to practice theatre today inside and outside the townships.

**Key Words:** Theatre, community theatre, mainstream theatre, protest theatre, performing arts, ethnography, Ukwanda Puppet and Design Company, Back Stage Theatre Production. Cape Town, Puppetry.

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## INTRODUCTION

A young version of myself was never aware of the socio-political dynamics within the theatre field of Cape Town. I grew up in Lwandle township and as a young boy I was exposed to a variety of social ills such as crime, drugs, delinquency, poverty and gangsterism. School and extramural activities are what have kept many of my peers away from heading to the pitfall. I do not remember myself being interested in any of the sport activities, my fascination has always been around creating things —from wire cars, *ikari*, “Soap-box cart”, wooden slingshots. Cultural activities such as *umxhentso* “traditional dance” and music were among my favourite before I encountered and became involved in drama groups. Such activities were and are meant to be community development programmes, keeping young children off the streets. Township streets have always been associated with danger and bad influences that easily corrupts young minds. Townships are not a setting where one gets positively motivated to engage in life changing experiences; it becomes very difficult to dream for the future as there is nothing inspiring when one looks around.

My interest in studying performing arts that are located at the crossroad of “community” and “mainstream” theatre, informal and formal spaces, was triggered by my fascination with theatre making. I consider theatre as an art form used for communication, worship, celebration, and entertainment. Following Shipley in *Trickster Theatre*, in this work I will not use the term theatre in the conventional sense, “as a set of static texts or representations”, but rather as “critical theories and representational practices emergent in how artists and audiences embody the process of acting and interpreting” (2015: 5). This understanding of theatre emphasises dynamism, change, the blending and bending of genres, improvisation and semiotic appropriation. It stresses how the border between “the real and the performed, on stage and off stage” is produced rather than given, blurred and contested (*Ibid.* 2015: 2). Having been practicing theatre from a young age, and considering myself as an independent theatre maker based in a township, I always had many questions around theatrical practices, forms and politics. For as long as I can remember community theatre has always been considered a practice that “needs” outside interventions in order to grow and flourish. Most black theatre practitioners from marginalised communities see this as appropriate and normal.



The common belief is that the success of community theatre depends exclusively on outreach initiatives offered by mainstream theatres from the city. In a sense community theatre stereotypically cannot be imagined without including socio-economic constraints as the main factor that shapes artistic creations. Or, put it differently, community theatre is lacking and a not quite “professional” theatre because of its financial limitations.

However, in the past few years, new discourses on how community theatre should be defined, understood and practiced have been emerging from the community of black marginalised theatre makers. Instead of striving for being part of the “main stage”, black artists have started to create their own spaces, building their own theatres with the minimal resources they possess. A growing number of shack theatres have been built: the Makukhanye Art Room in Site B,<sup>1</sup> Khayelitsha, Kraifo theatre in Kraaifontein and Kasi RC- Khayelitsha Art School and Rehabilitation Centre in Zwelitsha, Khayelitsha. The same artists that were once attracted to mainstream theatre, participating in outreach programmes with hopes of access and inclusion, have developed new approaches forging new learning processes and focusing on the sharing of skills and experiences, while continuing to take part in “opportunities” offered by state funded and commercial theatres. Taking their skills and experience back to their own communities rather than moving away from them, Artists in the townships are starting to create something for themselves and their communities and in the process are building a culture of theatre through audience development in the townships. This comes as a result of a need of telling their own stories to a bigger stage and a larger audiences going beyond their own communities.

Throughout its existence community theatre has been a genre that represented the unskilled. On the contrary, today artists are making training and education an important part of their practice. Access to performing art institutions is still something out of reach for many artists, but various forms of outreach initiatives have been working directly with townships groups/ companies—the Zabalaza Theatre Festival, the Magnet Theatre Culture Gangs, the Full Time Training and the Job Creation Programme— offering opportunities to artists that are excluded from the mainstream theatre industry. By providing channels and platforms that bring

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<sup>1</sup> Makukhanye meaning “Let there be light” Art Room, is an award winning Shack Theatre that is based in Khayelitsha. Makukhanye was established in the year 2007 in response of black townships having no spaces and platforms for creating and presenting theatrical works.

community theatre outside of the township space, simultaneously offering the necessary training to black marginalised artists, these initiatives and training programmes allow theatre makers to develop themselves and transform their theatre spaces, practices and performances.

My research interest lies at the intersection of community and mainstream theatre. This thesis seeks to explore the contemporary developments and the emergence of new projects, spaces, events and forms that transcend these existing divisions, introducing change to the ways in which theatre is shaped and understood in Cape Town. Taking into account the past legacies of theatre, I have looked at the ways in which young black artists are part of these changes, making a significant impact in the theatre industry. Through looking at performing arts, inside and outside the townships, I question how the so-called “community theatre” is positioned today within the larger landscape of performing arts in Cape Town. What is the purpose of community theatre today and what are its meanings? Can we still speak of community theatre? What are the professional biographies of young black artists today? According to Shipley in Ghana “[I]n the neoliberal moment, theatre is part of a broader dispersed set of contexts, genres, and technologies contributing to the development of a diffuse national public and a class of mobile and precarious youth” (2015: 9). This situation mirrors also to other contexts in the African continent and in South Africa. How do new theatre formations in South Africa speak to and of the neoliberal moment and a precarious youth? I argue that the emergence of new performative spaces that are not easily classified or pinned down as “mainstream” or “community” theatre also demand a larger reflection on the state of performative arts today in the continent. To whom is theatre most meaningful? Who goes to theatre? Who performs in theatre and for what purpose?

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This work begins (chapter 3) by providing and presenting an overview of the theatre scene in Cape Town, closely looking at the personal biography and careers of Mamele Miranda Nyamza—former artistic director of the State Theatre in Pretoria, international dancer, teacher, choreographer and activist—, Greg Karvellas, artistic director of The Fugard, and

Marlene le Roux, CEO of the Artscape theatre centre. Discussing the ways in which mainstream—independent, commercial and state-funded—theatres exist in Cape Town, I closely observed what was happening on stage in terms of the works that are presented, also looking at the “infrastructures, practices, and debates that frame how artists and audiences make and contest meanings, what semiotic registers guide the interpretation of words and actions, and how theatre becomes at times important and in other moments banal” (Shipley, 2015:4). I also address issues of inequality and discrimination, looking at the existing division among practitioners, genres and audiences that offer a clear picture of how different racial groups interact and live together with each other outside and inside the theatrical spaces.

Community theatre today is not what it was ten years ago, still it represents the majority of black theatre makers from marginalised communities (chapter 4). Most of community theatre companies, as illustrated by the case of the Back Stage Theatre Production (BSTP), produce, perform and sustain themselves without patronage or any form of external assistance. I argue first of all that theatre in the townships should not be seen as an inferior art practice but rather as a constantly changing phenomenon that continues to exist while offering performances and growing its audiences. Community theatre companies mainly function in a setting where theatre is not given much recognition. These artists continue building with what they have and creating themselves within it. However, there are exceptions, groups, companies and individuals that straddle between community and mainstream theatre (chapter 5). It is these in-between formations that we struggle to easily classify and categorise that I am interested in. Through the case study of Ukwanda Puppet and Design Company and the biographies of its members, I attempt to reconceptualise community art practices, demonstrating how “community” theatre makers are redefining. Even if they have reached well-known international and national stages the Handspring Puppet Company still claims theatre as a “community” based practice, creating a culture of theatre within spaces that are in a sense deprived of performing arts.

This study hopes to expand further our understanding of theatre. Central to my investigation is addressing issues of exclusion of black artists from “mainstream” stages. Theatre in a sense mirrors current social realities. During the apartheid regime protest theatre represented and

was the voice of the black population, after the end of the apartheid era there was a shift in theatre as plays mostly explored everyday ordinary issues. Yet, theatrical work still focuses on the difficulties and hardships that black people continued to face, it continues to be used as a voice of the marginalised in this country. Interrogating ways in which black theatre making artists from disadvantaged communities with and without formal training negotiate their careers within theatre making spaces in Cape Town, while seeking to understand the roots and dynamics of community theatre, discussing its contemporary developments and its past legacies, my work attempts to grasp contemporary forms of arts that transcend the boundaries of what is generally understood as community theatre and open up our imagination.



## Literature Review

I begin my review discussing the emergence and the history of theatre in South Africa. According to Hutchison (2004) the history of theatre in South Africa is made of a huge body of systematically preserved and documented plays and performances specifically from the colonial era. However, scholars have contested that theatre is solely a European concept. Kole Omotoso (2004) raises some of these debates while proposing ways to expand the notion of theatre to encompass engagements with the syncretic and inter-cultural performances, rejecting the idea of a singular perspective. Hutchison (2004) believes that even though this is the case, there are still profound silences, which includes research work conducted specifically by anthropologists, which has not been included in the mainstream theatre histories.

Kruger (1999) is one of the scholars contesting that theatre in South Africa is not fundamentally European nor African but it rather takes within and in-between institutions, practices and forms which are largely and variously associated with America, Europe, Africa etc. The art of theatre has no singular specific origin, different societies in different parts of the world have developed traditions, art making and performances. This is also evident in many African societies if we look at song, oral storytelling, masquerades and dances. “Theatre and performance have always existed in Africa as part of the cultural process and practice of what it means to be human” (Igweonu and Okagbue, 2013:1). According to Hutchison (2004) South Africa theatre can be traced back to the songs, stories, dance and praise poetry of indigenous people. A number of critiques claim that these do not form part of theatre histories, in response to this Hutchison (2004) argues that oral performance cannot be disregarded when tracing the history of South African theatre and this is mainly for two important reasons: the impact that these forms had on South African literature, and secondly the strong element of performance that characterizes these forms.

Hutchison (2004) solid evidence from rock art by indigenous people suggests the existence of theatre making in South Africa dating back to thousand years ago, most of these written descriptions dated from the early nineteenth century. One of the factors that might be contributing to the idea of theatre being European is because most of these forms were encountered as well as recorded by missionaries and Europeans. This on its own raises two concerning issues with regard to the recuperation and writing of South African history of theatre. The first issue being the fact that the history is both a thousand of years old and it is oral. Secondly, a number of indigenous accounts were recorded by missionaries and Europeans which were outsiders and these were not grounded on systematic observations. Most importantly they were greatly determined by the degree of cultural and linguistic understanding and of the author. The type of writing was targeting mainly German and English readers and church organizations and for this reason it is argued that the recuperation or reconstruction of oral forms is found to be more complex. The sources were primarily written from a white western ideological point of view. Kerr (1995) argues that writing about precolonial African theatre using the colonial language is in itself problematic as it causes confusion. There have been debates to whether theatre did or did not exist generally in Africa at large: to what extent it could or should it be distinguished to rituals? Furthermore Kerr argues that he believes much of this confusion is caused by using the English words like “drama”, “theatre” and “ritual” which embody meanings derived from European rather than African cultures. Africans have developed their own way of describing precolonial performing arts in indigenous aesthetic terms. “The term drama refers to displays of actions to an audience, in which there is an imitation of events in the real or super natural world and there is an element of story or suspense” (Kerr, 1995: 1).

Hauptfleisch (2011) argues that other populations that inhabited South Africa had similar forms of performance, this includes the well-known Zulu *inganekwane* and the Xhosa *intsomi* — these are story telling practices that exist and still performed to this day. This includes also music traditions and extensive bodies of dances. Some of these forms have managed to survive till the twenty-first century in hybridized or adapted form, more especially from the late 1940s onwards through becoming dominant features of theatre after 1970. However, Hauptfleisch (2011) further expresses that formal theatre which is institutionalised is the one that came with the British rule in South Africa between 1799 and 1910: governors of the time

encouraged amateur theatre among civilians while also supported visits by professional companies from their home countries and colonies in the East. “The construction of the still extant African Theatre (1800) in Cape Town by Sir George Yonge was a landmark event in this regard. This tradition eventually provided the key models for local theatre makers— both descendants of European immigrants and aspirant indigenous African thespian” (Hauptfleisch, 2011: 2). During the first stages very little work was done with most of the material which was standard European texts (Dutch, English, German and for while even French) this also included Shakespeare both in the translated and original languages. Initially black theatre work was limited to traditional forms of performances such as music or song, narratives and dances. It was under the guidance of missionary schools as well as other European organizations that interest on formal European play writing and productions started to develop (Hauptfleisch 2011). Even though most of these plays were used for school text book rather than creating play productions, this is particularly true when it comes to a number of plays in indigenous African languages published over the century. Early on, the Anglo-American influence in play writing started being evident through work such as in the first published Xhosa drama Guybon Sinxo’s Debeza’s Baboons which was published in 1927. Around the 1950s and 1970s the establishment of multiracial theatre making companies and groups began as means to state funded Performing Arts Councils (APCs). Most of the support they received came from black African intellectuals who were part of fighting the escalating domination of Afrikaner Nationalism. The publication of drama and the kind of partnership with the rising black middle class was caused or motivated by the Bantu education system, which was introduced by the apartheid government in the year 1953. One of the key principles during the apartheid regime was the “separate development” this also included ethnic separation and linguistic definition. Even though a number of black writers did not want to cooperate by continuing writing and publishing their work in their indigenous languages, there were very few who were prepared to write against the apartheid laws. Challenging the status quo as their work was published by companies that were owned by Afrikaner capitalists which were also under a government that was responsible for support and funding in schools. Most of these plays were never provided with support to be performed at all whereas some were performed for black elite audiences in urban spaces (Hutchison, 2004).

Ian Steadman wrote “The development and the history of black theatre in South Africa has only been recently documented in significant detail” (1990:212). There is an agreement regarding a number of indicators in this history. One of them is the publication in 1936 of the first play in English written by a black South African play-writer, Herbert Dhlomo, titled “The Girl Who Killed to Save: Nongqawuse the liberator” (Steadman, 1990). This play has been described by a number of critics as the demonstration of the author’s integration into middle class European cultural norms of that time and for this reason it is argued that it is in many ways the weakest of his plays. However it is an example of missionary literature, and it is considered as the first play by a black South African writer in English. “The play exemplifies liberal middle class black writing under the a system of instruction and co-option, it serves as a good examples of the ways in which black middle class dramatist were frustrated in their attempt to articulate progressive arguments in dramatic form.” (Steadman, 1990: 212). Herbert Dhlomo in an essay entitled “The Importance of African Drama” (1993) wrote the following:

“Modern theatre is not a mere emotional entertainment. It is a source of ideas, a cultural and educational factor, an agency for propaganda and, above all, it is literature. What part will the new African play in modern drama? On its physical side, he can contribute strong, fast rhythm, speedy action, expressive vigorous gesture and movement, powerful dramatic speech—no small contribution when modern plays drag so tediously.... We want African playwrights who will dramatize... African History. We want dramatic representations of African Serfdom, Oppression, Exploitation, and Metamorphosis.... The African dramatist...can expose evil and corruption and not suffer libel as newspapermen do; he can guide and preach to his people as preachers cannot do. To do this he must be an artist before a propagandist; a philosopher before a reformer, a psychologist before a patriot; be true to his African ‘self’ and not be prey to exotic crudities.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These are comments based on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) live coverage. Some of the commentary extracted from the Sowetan (10 May 1994), Mail and Guardian (13–19 May 1994), Die Burger (10 May 1994), Sunday Nation (15 May 1994) and the Star (10 May 1994)...by Herbert Dhlomo for his essay “The Importance of African Drama” (1993: 17).



Dhlomo marks a very important moment in the history of African theatre because it suggested the “complex history of cultural developments classified as ‘modern black drama in South Africa,’ the drawbacks and capabilities of these developments articulated the emergent national identity.” (Kruger, 1999: 46) As a critic, playwright and poet as well as producer for the Emancipation Centenary Celebration in 1934, Herbert Dhlomo engaged in an exemplary manner with the oppositions between elite and popular, indigenous and imported, oral and literate practices that crossed the ground laid out by new Africans. Even though he is recognised as the inventor of modern black theatre in South Africa, some present day critics recently dismissed him in search of univocal and authentic South African cultural expression, whether defined in terms a unified urban working class or rather ethnic authenticity (Kruger, 1999).

Hutchison (2004) numerous groups and theatre companies that were emerging demonstrated good qualities of collaboration. It was in the years 1952 and 1953 when Bernhardt, Guy Routh, Sidney Sepamla, Bob Leshoai, musician Gwigwi Mrwebi and others established the Union of South African Artists. This was mainly for protecting and defending professional rights of black artists in particular. By the year 1958 this had become one of the best bodies for promoting entertainment in the country. Following this initiative for the artists, two organisations that played a very important role emerged: the Rehearsal Room at Dorkay House in Johannesburg and the African Music and Drama Association (AMDA) in 1960. Kavanagh (1985: 49-50) and Coplan (1985: 205) state that Nora Taylor, the mentor of Mphahlele and Bob Leshoai was the one running the drama school at AMDA and initiating school projects. Among those who worked collaboratively from the Rehearsal Room was Gibson Kente, Athol Fugard and Barney Simon.

In 1959 there was culmination in the eclectic collaborations between artists from different cultures (Hutchison 2004). “King Kong” the musical is one of the plays that was created during this period, based on the rise and fall of a black South African boxing champion Ezekiel, well-known as King Kong Dlamini. Liberals at the time viewed this piece as demonstrating their confidence and belief that socio-political development could come through creative collaborations, particularly in the cultural field. Nevertheless, Coplan (1985) and Orkin (1991) argue that the collaboration itself was not unproblematic. However, it demonstrated to both South Africa and the artists, including the world at large, the potential

of black South African artists from urban areas. These artists include individuals like Gibson Kent, Miriam Makeba and the Manhattan Brothers. King Kong also marks the start of the township musical plays era.

According to Hutchison (2004), Athol Fugard's collaborative work was the second major factor that impacted on the development of syncretic forms of theatre in South Africa. Fugard's collaborative works started with Nat Nakasa, Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi in 1958 with a play titled "No-Good Friday". "From there on, he continued and produced plays such as "Nongogo" in 1959 followed by "The Blood Knot" in 1961 while he also went on forming "the Rehearsal Room Group" which was at the Union of South African Artists premises in Dorkay House" (Hutchison, 2004: 352). In collaboration, these artists established the "workshop" technique of theatre-making, which combined African use of physicalisation, imagery and improvisation into contemporary western theatre. Over the next twenty years Athol Fugard played a major and a vital part contributing in collaborations with a generation of black actors who were working outside the township (Hutchison, 2004).

There was other syncretic theatre evolving parallel to the popular township musicals (Hutchison, 2004). Fugard continued his collaborations with the Serpent Players of Port Elizabeth in 1963, after leaving Johannesburg. One of the first members was the legend Mam'u Nomhle Nkonyeni; the group started working with and performing classical texts such as Antigone and The Caucasian Chalk Circle. This was before they moved into improvisation. Black actors during these times began telling stories about their own personal experiences as black individuals living in the apartheid era. This is the case of plays such as "The Coat" (1966). The play was created from a personal account of one of the group members, who was arrested by the police and whose coat was sent back home to his wife. Secondly, the "Last Bus" (1968) was also a play that came from actors' personal experiences of having to take a bus home from the white suburban areas to the township before 10 pm. There are many plays that were created out of personal accounts of group members at this time such as "Friday's Bread on Monday" (1970) by Zacharias Nkuingini, inspired by children having to go buy stale bread, that no one bought on Sundays in a white area for 5 cents every Monday. In the beginnings of the year 1970, Athol Fugard started to work more closely with two of the group members: John Kani and Winston Ntshona. In collaboration they work-shopped "Sizwe Banzi is Dead" in 1972; "The Island followed" in 1973. These

plays triggered different views and were received differently by different audiences. According to Hutchison (2004) some critics argue that black people who were attending theatre at the time found these eminal to the consciousness of black mass audiences. Furthermore Coplan provides some of the most direct responses from different individuals as follows:

“Too complex in structure and expression, too ‘talky’, and too unmusical—in short, too Western in form—to be worth seeing more than once [...] Other African critics complain that characters representing the African ‘common man’ in Fugard’s plays [...] are too shuffling unintelligent, and unconscious; not proud enough or admirable enough to represent black suffering, values and aspirations” (Coplan, 1985: 215).

Regardless of the responses and the manner in which these plays were received, they were outstanding and played a very important role in formulating new theatre in South Africa. They brought together Western literary drama tradition and popular performance, in a process of changing politics in South Africa through personal and individual stories of those that were silenced at the time (Hauptfleisch, 1988). This was the beginning of theatre working as the voice of the voiceless. Through theatre a form of protest was triggered. And this is what Fatima Dike calls protest theatre (Hauptfleisch, 1989). Theatre became a platform to inform and cry out.

This is also evident on Fatima Dike’s work particularly her play titled “The Sacrifice of Kreli” created in 1976, this was also a collaborative work that used a traditional African tale to relate the past to the present (Hutchison, 2004). The play was based Rob Amoto’s historical research. The story took place in the year 1885 and follows the efforts of Gcaleka Xhosa chief Kreli revitalising his nation after they were defeated by Cape colonial forces from 1877 to 1878. Fatima Dike together with the Cape Town’s Sechaba Theatre Company which was founded by Rob Amato used historic text to comment on the current South African issues of the time. This play was performed in Cape Town to South African audience using isiXhosa, the first performance was stage at the Space. It was successively also performed in the Transkei. Although it was not only limited to isiXhosa, English was also used in places such urban areas where the audience was predominantly white. “This is a good example of

how inter-racial ‘fringe’ venues such as the Space in Cape Town (1972-9, later the People’s Space), the Great Hall, the Box and the Nunnery at the University of Witwatersrand, and the Stable Theatre in Durban made collaboration and new work possible” (Hutchison, 2004: 355). Fatima Dike had the opportunity of being the one who created and produced the First South African and Glasshouse at the Space in Cape Town.

### *Theatre as a Tool of Resistance*

Steadman (1990) argues that South African scholars in the 1980s focused increasingly on the political importance of theatre in a rapidly changing society. The majority of their works produced insights into theatre practitioners’ strategies who were at the time attempting to redefine South African cultural identities. The analysis of the work of these theatre makers highlighted the political determinants of specific performances and plays (Coplan, 1985). “The appearance of Critical Arts in 1980 marked an important shift in the appreciation of African theatre” (Peterson, 1995: 576). Steadman states that “[T]he history and development of black theatre in South Africa has only comparatively recently been documented in any significant detail” (1990: 212). According to Banham (2004), theatre constitutes a vast history, particularly from the colonial period much of which has been systematically documented. “During the apartheid era in South Africa, white theatre practitioners were producing, directing, and performing plays that were subsidised by the government” (Van Heerden, 2008: 26). These are the circumstances that forced black theatre makers at the time to initiate and pursue a different narrative establishing what we today know as protest theatre to express their anger and voice out their own concerns. As a result of the racial segregation, “protest plays were performed in community halls, church halls, or during opposition rallies, primarily because the regime that governed the country in that period did not agree with the contents of the protest plays” (Loots 1997: 143).

Crow and Banfield (1996) argues that the more than fifty years legacy of apartheid policies was not an easy struggle for South Africa. Even though South African heroes fought and died for the liberation of the country until the apartheid regime was brought to its knees, scars that will forever remain were left. Theatrical work to this day has been used as a catalyst in the process of healing left scars, the state in this country has systematically utilised its power—

physically, politically and economically—in order to coerce and dominate the non-white majority enforcing “separate development”. The result is the extraordinary high degree of social inequality, black township communities being torn apart by high rates of crime, unemployment, political violence and a number of other social injustices. Social challenges are on a rapid growth for a black population mostly living in hostile and unpleasant conditions in both homelands and the townships.

Crow and Banfield (1996) argue that the important political changes that were placed in action after 1994 had cultural implications while entailing new artistic agenda. Regardless of representation and censorship, a significant body of theatre and literature, which was fundamentally a documenting tool of protest against apartheid, grew. At this point in time theatre in South Africa took a different direction as part of further developing a genre that was in fact a unique outcome of the old apartheid regime. Crow and Banfield were interested in observing the directions in which theatre in South Africa was to be taking in the next few years—as prior 1994 theatre was used as a political tool. At this stage they note that seeking to transcend and protest against the injustice had opened up theatrical possibilities that might have become key source of creativity in the future. This is the “workshop” drama in the making in which black and white artists collaborated to challenge the very basis of apartheid.

Anne Fuchs contends that most of the theatre companies that have taken part in this kind of work can be seen as “trying to live and form a non-racial society through their personal association, with blacks and whites contributing specific cultural artefacts and techniques which were synthesised into new forms of theatre” which was itself “a metonymic image of a new south Africa” (Fuchs, 1990: 174). There is a wide variety of collaborations that took place in South African theatre in response to the reality of apartheid, specifically within and beyond the genre of the “workshop”. This included theatre that originated from blacks and specifically created for black audiences; sometimes this was an urgent necessity, which made use of white devisors, managements and directors. Black writers such as Zakes Mda and Fatima Dike’s work have been also directed by a white director, Rob Amato and this type of work was only presented in spaces such as The Space in Cape Town. (Crow and Banfield, 1996)

## *Theatre as Popular Culture*

Batanani (1974) states that popular theatre includes performance of drama, singing, dancing and mentions that these performances are called or referred to as popular because they are aimed at the community as a whole, not just at the elite or those who are educated. They also involve locals as performers, the use of local languages and they are performed for free in spaces that are easily accessible. This kind of theatre deals with or rather addresses social issues of concern which everyone relates to. This is not the complete and only way of understanding popular theatre as it is inadequate. It is inadequate in the sense that it does not clearly differentiate between popular theatre and literary theatre. On the other hand, theatre that may be performed by people in their own languages does not necessarily fall under the category of popular theatre. Leis (1979) contends that popular means that artistic work is understandable and meaningful for both people as a collective and for people as individuals, it enriches and expands the people's own forms of expression. Adopting and strengthening the point of view of the most unprogressive section of the people, rooting itself in tradition and developing them in a positive manner. Kerr (1982) formulates the following determinants on the material modes of popular theatre production: popular theatre beings as a collective creation, characterized by improvisation and audience participation, actors practice self-criticism engaging in post-performance analysis and possible action, performance are for free. This is the type of theatre which I can strongly associate with community theatre. Literary theatre on the contrary is a type of theatre that consists of individual authorship, script, structured stage, post-performance contemplation, audience applause, actors magic—the mainstream kind of theatre.

Popular theatre has always been part of not just South African popular arts but African arts at large. Steadman (1990) states that the term “popular” has been used to refer to the ways in which members of an oppressed group use literature and performance to conscientise audiences in relation to a broad vision of structural change in a society. Theatrical performances in South Africa both in the past and today, have expressed opposition to power, in ways directly parallel to political developments. However Steadman (1990) prefers to view the creative practitioner of South African theatre as being inscribed in a multiplicity of social relations of production of sex, race, religion, vicinity and language.

Bryam and Moitse (1985) argues that Paulo Freire's concept of conscientisation has a strong influence on the progress of "popular theatre". This notion of conscientisation is realised through a process that assists people in understanding and identifying the problems of a particular social order within their context, with popular theatre providing the means of expressing that social reality. This is how they break it down "the codification—the theatrical performance—becomes a mirror through which the people can see themselves, their social situation, and the problems they encounter, in a fresh and stimulating manner" (Bryam and Moitse, 1985: 81). Furthermore they elaborate conscientisation as a methodology of overthrowing what Freire calls a "culture of silence" through cultural action, and this is deeply rooted in his philosophy. Freire (1972) advanced a formula of interaction and dialogue in which teachers and students could work together in collaboration providing questions, and new ways understanding. Subverting situations in which the teacher is seen as a "narrator", encouraging independence of the student in a context where the student is understood as a passive object, at the same time being trapped in a culture of silence, and robbed of the opportunity of becoming creative, since he is viewed as mute in the force of power and superior knowledge. As the student is not able to have his own authentic voice since he is seen as a passive receiver of ideas that belong to others. This resulting to the factor that teaching and learning are not experiences that are shared. Therefore conscientisation is a process of dialogue which enables the individual to transform himself in relation to his fellows and act critically towards himself and society it is a process of "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1972: 15). The process of conscientisation therefore, involves participants being actively engaging in dialogue through which they personally identify their problems, reflecting on why problems exist, and then take action to solve the problems.

### *Community Theatre*

Community theatre is not a South African concept but rather a global one. It is understood and interpreted differently according to different parts of the world and it is practiced differently. In this study I will be specifically looking at the South African context. For this part of the world there are a number of factors that triggered the existence of community

theatre, such as apartheid and its laws. The term “community” in a South African context has a different connotation. People were divided into different communities—black, white, Indian, etc.—in accordance to their race. As a result, today’s society is still made up of these divisions that are clearly marked geographically: black townships, colored locations as well as the white upper class areas. These divisions are not only based on race, they also reflect economic statuses.

The government’s attempt of using culture to establish an apartheid ideology triggered a clearly recognisable black popular theatre within a decade. This effort did not only establish apartheid laws but in the process black theatre, community theatre, protest theatre, and theatre in the township began to surface. In the initial stages this was closely associated with the collaboration of black and white theatre makers who were against the arising policies of “separate development” as I have illustrated in the first part of the chapter. An example of this is Teda de Moor who was in support and also promoted black theatre work particularly for white audiences. He also worked with students from the Jan Hofmeyer School of Social Work in Johannesburg from the year 1941 (Banham, 2004).

Von Brisinski (2003) states that during the apartheid era community theatre was understood and regarded as popular theatre, as “self-consciously projects [...] the aspirations and practice of the people in contesting racial or class oppression” (Kerr, 1995: x). Artists were united and brought together by a common goal which was to fight against the regime that oppressed them. Community theatre existed to serve a purpose before 1994 and continues to serve a purpose even today. “Community theatre has thus not diminished after apartheid, but has taken on a diversity of forms and functions that may need to be taken into account realizing its liveliness and livelihood” (Von Brisinski, 2003: 117). This particular kind of theatre has only been perceived as a tool for voicing concerns and social issues. It has served in fighting against the oppressive nature of the apartheid system. Yet, even to this day it still continues to be used as a platform for expression.

The evaluation of community theatre for development in Africa has largely been hypothesized or placed on the final product rather than on the process of creating. Even if such evaluation focuses on audience reception, consumption remains the major concern (Mda, 1993). The main goal of community theatre is to transform the lives of its targeted



audiences— however it has been overshadowed by an overriding tendency of being treated as a “showy spectacle” (Breitinger, 1994). Even though community theatre is a process of transformation, a number of scholars still see it as if it was intended for consumers of a finished product. Without placing emphasis on details on each step of the process of inventing this form of theatre. Chinyowa in his article “Evaluating the Efficacy of Community Theatre Intervention in/as Performance: A South African case study,” argues that community theatre “is to be regarded as a potent force for social intervention” (Chinyowa, 2006). Kershaw (1994) states that community theatre practice has the ability to produce an instant and a long term influence on the development of broader social, cultural as well as political realities. Nicholson (2005) argues that applied theatre can be viewed both positively and negatively since it can be done in non-theatrical spaces with participants who do not consider themselves as artists while to some extent it does what is done by community theatre. He furthermore states that “the practice of making theatre in community settings creates spaces that enable participant’s voices to be heard” (Nicholson, 2005: 163). Community theatre practice allows community artists to speak out against the dominant ideological system using means of cultural resistance to challenge, if not subvert, the prevailing status quo (Chinyowa, 2006). While community theatre strives for social change and transformation, it is faced by ambiguities in terms of the agency, power and representation of its participants. Thompson concludes “if theatre were simply an opportunity to challenge people’s antisocial attitudes and change, it would lose the possibility for the unexpected, surprising and radically disturbing” (2006: 35). If theatre was used to challenge the same individuals it ought to stand for in South Africa under the apartheid regime. It would not be powerful in the same manner in which it is. If it was not used as a confrontational tool, that questions and in many ways disturbs the status quo— it would not have the same impact and effect it possess.

Daniel Oluoch-Madiang in his research in Zambia differentiates between two types of theatre. Conventional theatre (stage theatre) which is the performance of a drama on a stage before a formal, mostly paying, audience in a theatre hall with actors wearing costumes, using props, and carefully following a script. This is the traditional sense of theatre; the type of theatre performed at the schools and college drama festivals, at the Lusaka Theatre Club, are examples of conventional theatre. In all these examples, organised theatre troupes

perform a written drama for a paying audience (Oluoch-Madiang, 2006). Non-conventional theatre (community theatre) does not have to be based on a written script or performed by trained actors in costumes on a formal set, in a theatre hall. There is not a clear division between the performers and the audience. Usually it is not performed for a paying audience because it is in an open space and any person can walk by, observe, and participate. Community theatre uses theatre to interact with the community. Working together, the actors and the audience use theatre to discuss or solve problems facing the community. It is used to educate, mobilise communities, and to discuss and question behaviours, attitudes, or knowledge to bring about social change (Oluoch-Madiang, 2006). Community theatre “is a collaborative effort between the audience and actors and goes through stages, from problem identification to discussion of possible solutions” (Oluoch-Madiang, 2006: 16). Public health issues, democracy, spiritual growth, gender equality, and peace initiatives are some of the social concerns that have been explored using non-conventional theatre.

While there are many differences on how community theatre is performed in different parts of the continent, “community theatre is an effective way of communicating sensitive issues without the attending antagonism that would have normally occurred in direct realistic situations, a point earlier observed” (Eyoh, 1986: 25). Community theatre, directly or indirectly, focuses on social and developmental issues, and arises out of, and speaks to the material, social and political conditions of particular geographical, demographic communities. It is an integral part of the theatre industry that is firmly located within the non-profit paradigm.

### *Theatre and performance*

“Anthropologists have studied performance largely for what it can show about other human institutions such as religion, political life, gender relations, and ethnic identity” (Beeman 1993: 370). However there is a growing number of studies that has focused directly on performance in particular. Scholars have been focusing on studying performance structures

and the conditions under which they occur, the cultural meaning they engender, and their places within community life. This is particularly visible through performative activities that are specifically conceptualized for entertainment such as spectacle and theatre. Within the discipline of anthropology, the earliest theoretically influential work on performance were conducted by Mead and Bateson in Bali (1952, 1970, 1972). These works laid the foundations for considering traditional performances a legitimate field of study (Beeman 1993).

Turner's (1974, 1982) early works on Ndembu rituals and his conceptualization of liminality and reversal in human action played a very important role in the successive studies on performance by scholars such as Beeman (1977, 1979), Davis (1982), and Schechner (1985, 1988). Turner (1974) analysed historical and social events such as revolutions and social disturbances; it was at this stage that he extended his concept of the "social drama" to include the structures of ritual. Besides his specific analysis of Ndembu ritual Turner's work has been inspirational and seminal. Geertz (1972) also attempted to demonstrate the interrelationship between performance and other general dimensions of culture such as religion, politics, and normative modes of personal conduct in his studies of Balinese life (Beeman, 1993). In his work *Negara* (1980), he focuses on the inherent theatricality and performance aesthetics of the political construction of the Balinese state.

Furthermore Beeman (1993) believes that most of Richard Schechner's work was influenced by both Gregory Bateson and Victor Turner, which led him to develop a series of approaches to the study of both modern and traditional theatricality. With the trained eye of the director, he has analysed the ritual and the cognitive underpinnings of theatrical performance in detail. Schechner has shown that to study performance a researcher one must study far more than just the event that appears before an audience. Beeman has drawn attention to the long process of preparation and rehearsal that has its own socially determined structure. He has also developed several approaches for investigating the intrinsic relationship between performance reality and the events of the real world in which performance is enacted. Continually he has treated the stage as a laboratory of performance, experimenting with various performance elements to observe the effects on both performers and audiences.

According to Fabian (1990) seemingly the concept or rather idea of “performance” have served its users contrary purposes. For those theorists who seek structural, logical or quasi-mathematical and ultimately neural foundations for the science of man, “performance” refers to actual physical palpable, doing, talking, moving, in short, to that which is declared “empirical” behaviour. “Competence” usually figures as the obligatory counter-concept to this notion of performance. A performance does not “express” something in need of being brought to surface, or to the outside; nor does it simply enact a preexisting text. Performance is the text in the moment of its actualization—in a story told, in a conversation carried on, but also in a book read. That performances can be staged, that they can be good or bad, that they can be genuine or faked, or simply go wrong, that some people are better performers than others, all this points to the dialectical, processual relationships between texts and performance. For Schechner a “performance engages intellectual, social, cultural, historical, and artistic life in a broad sense” (1992: 9). A performance combines theory and practice. Performed acts, whether actual or virtual, more than the written word, connect and negotiate the many cultural, personal, group, regional, and world systems comprising of today’s realities.

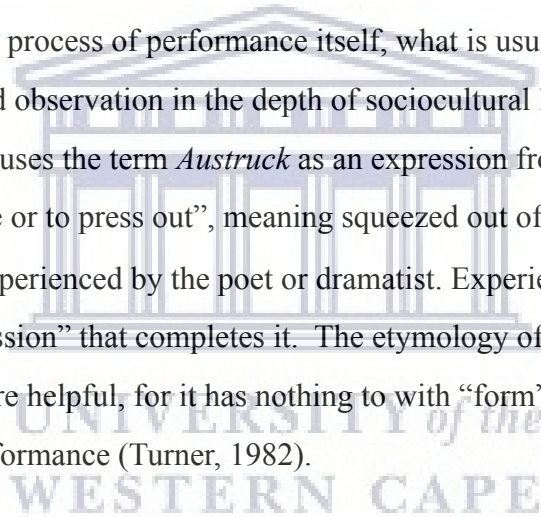
According to Beeman (1993) when anthropologists study theatre they generally focus on its functions as a way of supporting other cultural institutions such as politics or religion instead of focusing on different theatrical forms. However, important anthropological work have been done in a number of different genres around the world such as: dance theatre, textual theatre, music text dance; performers as in human actors, mask theatre, animated objects, in scripted and unscripted content and the roles of audience, audience as a participant, audience as a witness audience as evaluator. As a way of opening and steering the direction in terms of focus Beeman (1993) adopts an improved and reliable method of analysis by Hymes (1975) and Jakobson (1960). Theatre can be studied through four variables: the nature of the content of presentation, the nature of the performers, the role of the audience and the form of media used in presentation. These forms can also be differentiated according to the degree to which they are organised. Forms that are more codified or organised in this manner have proved to produce work that is understood extensively. Those that are less thoroughly codified largely tend to be improvisatory and show great difference in local performance standards.

According to Barber (1982) theatre has been used in anthropology as an approach that requires great caution. Without doubt popular plays are used by people for dealing with issues and themes that people themselves consider as important. Nevertheless it is important to be cautious because we cannot entirely rely on plays as direct expressions of what people think. “A work of literature cannot be read as a straight source of sociological information. Although literature is a social product and bears the imprint of the conditions of its production, it does not ‘reflect’ either social reality or an ideology” (Barber, 1982:432). Karin Barbers position is that the work of literature is exactly work, specifically conceptions, language and the results of the work performed by an author on themes includes “ideological materials” that are accessible in the specific position in society which she or he occupies. The author works on imposing on these ideological materials a complete, unified, literary form and in so doing she or he attempts to incoherence and smoothen any inconsistencies, providing proof of social conflicts through ‘adding to them an imaginary resolution’. However, Macherey (1976) further states that it is impossible to compose a completely level, consistent and smooth solution. In resisting the authors harmonizing intent cracks and flaws will always break through. To Macherey (1976) these gaps or flaws are extremely important since they represent the “silences” that the text is unable to express. To the critical reader they reveal limits—the edge as it was—of a specific ideological position, displaying its outline. In her reading of two Yoruba plays, Karin Barber argues that “we can see very important flaws or gaps in each: silence about the same thing in each of them. It is this silence that speaks to Anthropologists about the people’s ideas of wealth, work, poverty and how social issues affect them” (1982: 432). It is of importance to define the sense of the ideological materials from which plays are conceptualised and at the same time made “popular”. Also one of the important steps for Barber was acknowledging that the theatre tradition was exclusively Yoruba, and the plays were performed in Yoruba. In Yoruba speaking areas this form of theatre is sincerely popular in both senses of the word: attracting wide ranges of audiences which is not the elite but rather ordinary farmers, petty traders, workers, minor public servants, school-children, drivers so on and so forth.

Barber (1982) describes plays as unscripted texts which were learnt and composed orally and presented in ways that made it easy to be performed as improvisation. Largely, these plays presented and portrayed ordinary people and everyday life. The audiences would easily

identify and relate to most of the issues which were presented through these plays, most importantly they would sincerely endorse the “lesson” that the plays were teaching or rather the moral of the plays. A number of audience members would testify that they go to the theatre not just to laugh but to seek a model which they can practically apply to their own lives. “It seems reasonable to make the assumption, then, that the ideas, images, and themes that are used as materials in the production of the plays are drawn from the ideology of the Yoruba masses: that is, the people with relatively low incomes and little education” (Barber, 1982: 434).

For Turner the “anthropology of performance is an important aspect of anthropology of experience” (1982: 13). Every cultural performance and this including, ceremony, ritual, carnival, poetry and theatre, are explications and explanations of actual life. As Dilthey (1927) argued, through the process of performance itself, what is usually sealed and not accessible to reasoning and observation in the depth of sociocultural life is displayed or rather drawn out. Dilthey (1927) uses the term *Austruck* as an expression from *ausdrucken* which literally means “to squeeze or to press out”, meaning squeezed out of an experience or event which has been directly experienced by the poet or dramatist. Experience is a process that “presses out” to an “expression” that completes it. The etymology of performance may offer anthropologist clues that are helpful, for it has nothing to with “form”. Then a performance is the accurate ending of performance (Turner, 1982).



## Fieldwork

Fieldwork is a “trial through battle in a war for which the novice has little preparation. The student knows that this is a challenge he will have to face, a major rite of passage that will provide him with the opportunity to prove his ability, courage and temperamental suitability for the profession” (Freilich 1970: 16). Being practically in the field is totally different from studying about fieldwork from a book or a journal article. In theory fieldwork appears to be quite easy, whereas in reality it is challenging in many ways which cannot be predicted. Before going into the field I had everything planned out and I even had a time schedule, with a starting and finishing dates. As the fieldwork unfolded, things were in fact totally different; I experienced good and bad moments, and I eventually, stopped following my plan and accepted to take things as they came. My research required a lot of traveling around which required physical strength as I travelled back and forth from the townships to the inner city and other surrounding areas and back home. To be honest the only thing that kept me going was my personal interest in theatre. For that reason I really recommend that future researchers may conduct research on what really interest them personally. In this sense, fieldwork taught me deeply the concept of the “research interest”. My wanting to find out more about theatre in Cape Town motivated me in acquiring more data, stimulating my curiosity. I was always eager to learn more.

Between my informants and myself there were lot of commonalities that strengthened our relationship as I am myself a performing artist. Being a black independent theatre maker after twenty-five years of democracy in South Africa is exactly what triggered my research. I grew up in Strand, in the Lwandle township and I attended primary and secondary school education in public schools. My interest for *umdlalo weqonga* (drama) started at a very young age, when I was ten. The first performance that I attended was in church, at a fundraising event. It was only in 2005 that I first stepped inside a proper theatre space when I went with

the school to see “The Suitcase” directed by James Ngcobo and performed by Faniswa Yisa, Mbulelo Grootboom and Chris Gxalaba. The “Suitcase” was a catalyst to my dream.

My personal encounter with and journey into theatre is not just a singular experience that only speaks of me as an artist. I share this experience with many other artists from the townships. Since I had no option of doing drama at school I decided that I could join a community drama group, the *Masakhane* Production.<sup>3</sup> It was within this group that my desire of becoming an actor emerged. I discovered more about my capabilities and inside my heart I already knew that this was the path I want to take in life in terms of career. When I was in my final matric year I applied at AFDA: The School for the Creative Economy in Cape Town.<sup>4</sup> I was accepted but I had financial difficulties that did not allow me to enroll. I took then the decision of studying at the University of the Western Cape where I did my bachelor of arts.

### *Places*

This work aims to understand how black theatre making artists from marginalised communities with and with no formal training negotiate themselves within theatre making spaces in Cape Town. Attempting to understand ways in which theatre becomes an external intervention that contributes in the inclusion process of black artist—looking at theatre as a vehicle of social change more particularly in uniting a nation that is built on racial divisions. As part of this investigation I am also addressing issues of exclusion—through looking at questions of accessibility to theatre spaces and platforms for creating and presenting theatrical works. Extended to the kind of challenges that theatre makers in Cape Town face

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<sup>3</sup> *Masakhane* meaning “let’s build each other” was a community theatre group based in the township in Strand which existed from the year 2004 and faded out in the year 2012 after its name was change to *Siluncedo* meaning “we are help” when its founder permanently moved to the Eastern Cape.

<sup>4</sup> AFDA is the School for the Creative Economy and offers courses in film, television, performance, business innovation, computer technology, radio and podcasting. It has campuses located in Auckland Park, Johannesburg; Observatory, Cape Town; Durban North, Durban; Central, Port Elizabeth and Gaborone in Botswana. AFDA is registered as the South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance, and is a private higher education institution which offers higher certificate and degree programmes that are registered by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) AFDA was originally an acronym for “Africa Film Drama Art.”



generally—and ways in which theatre is received and understood both within the city and in the township. Having also engaged with the stereotypes that exist around theatre and with the understanding of theatre as a job market. My main argument is that the theatre industry—has the potential of serving as a form of enactment for artists and their communities including its audiences which forms their cultural and social position.

This study is also interested in exploring how mainstream theatres both commercial and stated funded are actively involved in bridging the gap between community theatre and themselves. Through this I aim to understand the role and contribution of theatre in the history of South Africa and ways it has offered in liberating the country—in connection to ways mainstream theatre provides today for bridging the gap between itself and ‘community’ theatre looking at programs that mainstream theatres run as a way of inclusion. Finally highlighting on how community theatre is viewed and understood today in relation to the job market? These are the questions through which I am rethinking theatre and its paces in Cape Town.

My ethnography was conducted in Cape Town and within the surrounding townships of the city, such as Masiphumelele, Khayelitsha and Lwandle. While the Ukwanda Puppet and Design Company is originally from Masiphumelele, the team has moved to Woodstock where it has its workshop. Moving closer to the city has afforded them with opportunities and “gigs” that may occur at any given time. They moved to the city after their colleague, fellow artists, performer, puppet maker, friend, brother Ncedile Daki had passed away. Ncedile died in 2017 after being shot while his car was hijacked. In the years that I have worked with Ukwanda I did not meet Daki, but there are many instances whereby his name was mentioned. Even today it feels like he is still part of the team. I could sense his presence especially during the performances. I could see his tremendous skills, his talent and the love he had for the puppets he made. It was announced on the day he was killed that he had been awarded a six months sculpture fellowship in the United States at the Cornell University. As part of my interest on Ukwanda Puppet Company I also conducted some research in Barrydale—a village which is a three hour drive from Cape Town located on the border of the Klein Karoo and Overberg regions. This is where Ukwanda have been working with the

community for the past ten years building puppets and running puppetry shows, notably the magnificent December parade.

I followed the Back Stage Theatre Production (BSTP), a theatre company that was established in 2014, currently located outside of Cape Town in a small township known as Lwandle, Strand. This is where I also reside and therefore, getting hold of the BSTP team, of which I am part of, was not much of a challenge. The BSTP was founded by myself, Siphumzile Pharela, Gettrude Buys, Sibusiso Maranxa, Tito Zantsi, Khulekani Ndlovu and Nosibusiso Nkukwana. Most of its founders were previous members of a community theatre group, *Siluncedo* Production,<sup>5</sup> which existed in Lwandle for a number of years. Siluncedo ended its activities after Siyabulela Nkosa, the leader of the group, had decided to relocate in the Eastern Cape. Instead of continuing with Siluncedo myself and other artists wanted to create something of our own which also had different goals and objectives, this is when we decided to take a different direction.

I have also conducted fieldwork at the Factory of the Arts in Cape Town, this is where I was initially introduced to the Ukwanda team. The Factory of the Arts is supported by the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and it is “a site for cultural production, a creative hub, an educational environment, and home for art practitioners, aspirant artists, curators, and students and scholars in the arts and the Humanities”.<sup>6</sup> The Factory of the Arts contributed in many ways to this study; I regularly attended its forums and meeting with the artists in residence and I also participated in practical workshops. Like other artists, I attended the Master Classes that was offered working together with professional artists from the mainstream theatre industry. During these meetings I conducted participant observations and these situations offered me the opportunity to know the artists better, giving me a platform for building rapport with my informants. This is how I got to be comfortable around Ukwanda people and how I built most of my networks with the artists. These are also ongoing relationships that did not end with my fieldwork. My networks were built through seminars and artists forums particularly from the Centre for

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<sup>5</sup> We are of assistance.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.chrflagship.uwc.ac.za/factory-of-the-arts/about-the-factory-of-the-arts/> Accessed 10 August 2019

Humanities Research and the Factory of the Arts, as I was introduced to the Ukwanda team by Prof. Jane Taylor and Prof. Heidi Grunebaum.

The process of meeting with Greg Karvellas artistic director of the Fugard theatre and Marlene Le Roux CEO of the Artscape Theatre was initiated firstly by a number of emails. Through the emails I had introduced myself including my field of interest and I never experienced any difficulties as they both warmly received me into their spaces. I also visited the Fugard and the Artscape Theatre situated in the inner city. The Fugard theatre is one of the main independent theatre in Cape Town. It is named after Athol Fugard, South Africa's greatest living, internationally acclaimed and most significant playwright, who for more than fifty years wrote soul searing-plays. His work that reflected the racism, cruelty and brutality as well as inhumanity of the apartheid era has moved to laughter and tears audiences around the world. I have collected data at the Artscape Theatre and I have attended various art forums where artists met in conversations on the state of the contemporary theatre in Cape Town. Artscape Theatre Centre is a state theatre which belongs to the provincial administration. It was established in 1971 as the Nico Malan Theatre Centre. In line with the new South African political dispensation in 2001 it was then renamed to the Artscape. Finally I also visited the Magnet Theatre situated not far from the inner city. The Magnet Theatre is one the main theatre companies in Cape Town which is independent and it is mostly known for its work on stage as well as for its outreaching training programmes that mainly collaborate with community theatre artists from the townships.

### *Methodology*

Most of this research is based on two research methodologies: participant observation—a method pioneered by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942)—and Clifford Geertz's "deep hanging out." These were the best choice when I was joining theatre artists during events, rehearsal sessions, performances and post-reversal hang-outs. These research methods were particularly useful especially with the Ukwanda and the Back Stage companies. Walmsley (2018: 276-277) states that "there is very limited literature available on deep hanging out", this is despite the fact it has been described by Wogan (2004: 130) as "the future of localized,

long-term, close-in, vernacular field research.” This term was coined by James Clifford in 1997 and reformed by Geertz (1998) in the title of a book review he authored for *The New York Review of Books* to “describe the fieldwork method of immersing oneself in a cultural, group or social experience on an informal level” (Walmsley 2018: 277).

On my first day at the new building of the Factory of the Arts which is situated in Woodstock where the CHR is in process of initiating as an art school, I have also met with different artists mostly from the surrounding townships of Cape Town such as Khayelitsha and Delft. The Factory of the Arts played a major role for me as it facilitated the meeting Cape Town artists. This was the space in which I used “deep hanging out” method. In these instances, I would just start conversations around a set of questions which I had prepared in my note book, mainly those that I could recall without checking the note-book. I did not want to record these informal conversations, which were natural and spontaneous. Most of the information that I received was significant in guiding my investigations further. I took notes and I discussed the main points with the informants once we had formal interviews.

I have interviewed the main members of Ukwanda and BSTP as well as Jennie Reznick, the artistic director and training coordinator, Zukisani Nongogo, expanded public work program intern and a Culture Gangs facilitator, and trainees of the Full Time Training and the Job Creation Programme at the Magnet Theatre. I was also able to access artistic director Greg Karvellas of the Fugard theatre and Marlene le Roux COE of the Artscape Theatre Centre.

Most of my interviews were not conducted immediately, as soon as I had met my research participants. Before I started with the interviews I took time to observe and learn more about the people. An example of this is my first encounter with Mamela Nyamza a well-known and respected dancer, teacher, choreographer, and activist in South Africa. I had a privilege of spending two days with her during her public conversation which was organized by the Factory of the Arts, CHR. I met her on a Friday morning and we chatted during the drive from the University of the Western Cape to Khayelitsha, Kasi RC, a “shack theatre” located in Zwelitsha where she was giving a master class. After the class we drove back to Cape Town where the conversation was going to be taking place. We arrived about two hours earlier and went to get something to eat. The following day, there was also a master class at Theatre Arts Admin Collective. I did not conduct formal interviews with Mamela, yet we had

plenty of time to discuss on many topics. She was aware of my objectives as researcher. Mamela is a very vocal artist and she is well known in the theatre industry for what she stands for as an activist. I was privilege to be able to observe her and interact with her.

Having built a good working relationship with the Ukwanda team made the research process smooth to an extent. From this experience I have learnt that there is a great difference when you are interviewing someone and you have don't have strong relationship with the artist. The first in-depth interviews I conducted with the Ukwanda was with Siphokazi Mpofu and Siphon Ngxola. The conversation lasted a full day! During the interview they were willing to show me how to make and how to manipulate puppets and therefore I learned a lot. They are very passionate about what they do, this was clearly expressed by their body language, the glow that appear on their faces every time they begin to move the puppets. In organizing for my interviews, I would prepare a set of questions for each session: I had a note book and I used my cellphone to record the sessions. I have always made them aware of my recordings. The set of questions that I had prepared would trigger other questions in the interviews, which mostly resulted in very interesting conversations.

Building relationships and networks is not something that happens overnight, it takes time and comes with its own challenges. While building “rapport” with the Back Stage Theatre Production was not much of a challenge as they are easily accessible to me and I have been working with them for years now, doing research on them, and on myself, was a completely different thing. Initially it did not feel as if I was doing enough research, but through my interviews and questions, I began to see the BSTP from a researcher’s perspective. It was difficult to find distance from the work that I have being doing with them. Also, my work triggered ideas and opened up conversations we have never had the opportunity to discuss and explore as a team. So, in a sense, my research was useful to the company as we had the chance to discuss ideas and issues that we had never approached before. I personally have never thought of viewing our company from an outsider’s point of view. This has also triggered my thinking. Even though “doing research at home” at instances felt as if I knew everything or had answers for every question I could possibly ask, at times I experienced the opposite: I did not have answers for all my questions. I can conclude that I now see the BSTP differently than before starting my research. Meeting the Ukwanda team required me to be fully prepared both emotionally and physically. As researchers, we never know what to

expect from the field. It is also important to leave room for disappointment. The first time I met the Ukwanda team I had no idea of how they were going to receive me even though I was positive about it. Before meeting them I had done some online research already about them, so it did not really feel as if I was meeting them for the first time. I was happy they have welcomed me to their space warmly, but at first I was really nervous. I was pleased to discover that we were not just meeting for my research but that in fact we were building the foundation for a long-term relationship. Throughout the time I spent with the Ukwanda team I have also got to develop interest in puppetry and puppetry making. I do not dwell much on that aspect in this writing as I think that I will need a separated paper. Puppetry is a thesis on its own.

### *Reflexivity*

I have by all means aimed to conduct this research as a student of anthropology rather than as an artist. As Fabian in his article “Theater and Anthropology, Theatricality and Culture” argues “theatre as a source of intercultural knowledge involves recognition, not only of performative next to informative knowledge, but also of anarchic VS. hierarchic conceptions of knowledge” (1999: 28). Furthermore he states that it is only at this point that we can be able to acquire anthropological knowledge through what he calls “participative play” and “playful mimesis.” This is the kind of approach that I have taken in my research, in my fieldwork: to consider the researcher (myself) as part of the performance, as a performer, to consider the research that I have conducted as result of a “participative play.” It is this kind of knowledge that he calls “performative,” that demands participation and therefore mutual recognition. During my fieldwork, immersing myself and building a strong rapport with the research participants, I have introduced and conducted myself as both an anthropology student and an artist. My research participants most of the time interacted with me as a fellow artist more than as an anthropology student. Furthermore, Fabian argues that much of the cultural knowledge is performative in essence rather than informative and that this has consequences for the way we think of ethnography. The ethnographer, as Turner (1982: 99) has argued is an “ethnodramaturg” and drama should be considered a form of social action (Fabian, 1999).

I have been conducting this research both as an insider and outsider as I am also an artist at Back Stage Theatre Production, and I have been on the theatre scene for a number of years well before I decided that I would conduct a study on theatre. As Karin Barber and Catherine Cole both point out in relation to their own experiences of acting while doing performance research, I have conducted this research as a dramatist not only for my performance skills but also for the symbolic value that a black, male theatre maker conveys in South Africa. In the other companies and institutions I have been conducting fieldwork as an “outsider”, although I was received as a fellow artists. This is one of the facts that have helped me a lot in building rapport with my informants. For me, personally, it is challenging meeting new people and being comfortable with them, as I take time to adapt to new environments. I always need time to find myself and be comfortable in new spaces. Especially spaces that are in town as I am from and grew up in the township.

Before going to the field I was very excited and anticipated that everything will go as I had planned. When I imagined my field work, it appeared to be easy. This work have challenged me intellectually, physically and emotionally. Intellectually, in the sense that since I am an artist myself and I have some knowledge about theatre I thought it was going to be much easier for me but then the questions which I have been thinking around are something I have never thought about before. I have also met and learnt about other genres of art which I was never interested in before, such as puppetry. Through this I have learned that research sometimes can be unpredictable regardless of how much you know about the topic. I was challenged emotionally because I had deadlines to commit to and missing one deadline ruins the whole process. Those are some of the factors that can lead to anxiety and depression. You feel like you are not coping and you are behind the schedule. Physically, I was challenged because my sites of research are located far away one from the other. As I was using public transport I had to walk long distances sometimes in extreme weather conditions, sunny and rainy days. One of the most difficult parts was not finding the locations on time and having to ask around for directions. On the field I was always alone as researcher meaning that I had to go through all these experiences alone and these things are not written in theory books where everything seems doable.

## Theatre Landscapes

In order to lay a firm foundation for my main argument it is of importance for me to provide and present an overview of what the theatre scene in Cape Town looks like today. In this chapter I will be introducing an internationally acclaimed theatre practitioner and two directors of two well-known theatres in the mother city. For the purpose of this study I am closely looking at mainstream theatre— both as independent, private-commercial and as state funded. When unpacking the mainstream theatre industry suggesting to understand state and commercial theatre as separate parts, I am simply attempting to highlight the plurality of experiences and theatre-scapes, emphasising the importance of not drawing easy conclusions by treating mainstream theatre as a single, monolithic entity. Theatre in South Africa still is to this day a mirror of different social realities and racial legacies —which are crucial for the understanding of today’s theatre scene within the city. After twenty-five years of democracy, the commercial and to an extent the state theatre scene in Cape Town is still predominantly white, showcasing mostly English and Afrikaans productions. “During the apartheid era positions were clear, at least as far as South Africa’s Black majority was concerned. On the one side there was “white” theatre— well-funded because it was subsidised or commercially successful— and on the other side there was “black” Protest Theatre (Hemke, 2019: 17). In the place of what was then “black” protest theatre at the time, today we have community theatre, even though community theatre is a broader term that encompasses protest theatre in some degree, and goes beyond it.

The beginning of this chapter is focusing on commercial, independent theatre which I am exploring through the case study of the Fugard Theatre and the discussions that I had with its artistic director, Greg Karvellas. His biography and his working experience says a lot about where we come from and where we are as a country in terms of performing arts. In the second part of the chapter, I closely look at Marlene Le Roux, the CEO of the Artscape.



Marlene is a director of a state funded institution and she explained to me how a state funded theatre functions and operates in relation to both commercial and community theatre. With her I am particularly trying to understand how state funded theatre has changed and how it has addressed issues of transformation today. To further understand the nature of state funded theatre in Cape Town I interviewed both Greg and Marlene. Their professional experiences are lenses through which I attempt to understand both commercial and state funded theatres, through the eyes of individuals that are experts in these fields. Besides their views, experiences and beliefs I am also interested on how they have managed to position themselves within these spaces. To which extent do their backgrounds contribute to their careers and the professional positions they occupy today? In the final section of the chapter I look at the experiences of the dancer, choreographer and activist Mamela Nyamza. Nyamza is the ex-artistic director of the State Theatre in Pretoria. I have chosen her because her career as a black theatre practitioner speaks to the experiences of many black artists in Cape Town and in South Africa at large. Mamela is an activist for the arts: she is well known for addressing issues of concerns through a variety performances and dance compositions. One of her remarkable works, “De-Apart-Hate” is a multilayered piece through which she confronts racial prejudice. I will be looking at Mamela both in terms of her work as an artist as well as an activist, discussing her protest at the Fleur du Cape Awards Ceremony at the Artscape in 2017.

All these three figures that have been operating in different capacities within the “mainstream” theatre industry of Cape Town have walked totally different, journeys, experiences and come from very diverse backgrounds. Their points of views are important because they bring different positions and approaches to the research— and their experiences alone speaks to what goes on within the theatre industry in Cape Town. During my fieldwork I had very interesting and mind-opening interviews in particular with those who are running big theatre spaces in Cape Town. The main aim of these interviews was to understand state and commercial theatre as separate entities, but I also wanted to indirectly interrogate the category of “community” theatre and approach issues of exclusion of black artists, attempting to understand change within state funded intuitions of today. Moreover, it is important also to frame the developments of the performing arts in Cape Town within larger historical and economical frameworks. How is the neoliberal moment affecting even more the dichotomy

between mainstream and community theatre? If the current “South African economic crisis appears as unable to change while serving to ensure the persistence of existing social structures; a situation that continues to fuel ethnic divisions throughout society—even without apartheid laws” (Hemke 2019: 16), how can we apprehend the contemporary state of performing arts?

### *Greg Karvellas and the Fugard theatre*

Greg Karvellas was born in Durban in 1982, he then moved to Johannesburg with his mother and that is where he grew up. He decided that he wanted to become an actor while he was at a normal model C school in West Rand —his friend had just moved to the National School of Arts (NSA) in Braamfontein. Greg was already part of a drama club when he heard about this school and he decided he wanted to join the National School of Arts. Even though his parents were not sure about his decision they supported him, and also this is a government school so it was not really an extra for them financially. For his standard 9 and 10 (matric) years he went to the National School of Arts to do drama as a special subject. While at the school he discovered stage management and back stage work. He was interested in these subjects and because he did not see himself as a good actor, he enjoyed being in the backstage. The art school had music students and ballet students and therefore there were many productions happening through the year and somehow he would always find himself opening and closing the curtain, so to speak.

It was while he was at the National School of Arts when he heard about the University of Cape Town (UCT) Drama School. He spoke to his parents about his interest in furthering his studies in a higher institution still maintaining a focus on drama. In 2001 he auditioned and got accepted and started his undergraduate in theatre and performance, theatre making stream. The theatre making stream is about acting but it has a bigger focus on directing, storytelling, translation and history of theatre; there is less focus on performance and more on other aspects of theatre. For your final evaluation you were expected to direct a piece. It was after this that he decided he wanted to focus on directing rather than being on stage. At the beginning he could not find any directing work. This was mainly because no one

knew him so no one was interested in working with him. Greg did a lot of stage management again and because he already done so much of it in high school, it became natural to him. He spent many years as a stage manager and worked his way up to production manager while working on all sorts of things, everything and anything he could get his hands on.

Around 2010 and 2011 he decided that he wanted to venture into directing again even if there were not much opportunities available for him. He teamed up with a very good friend of his and did a piece called “Champ” as part of the “New writing, new voices” programme at the Artscape Theatre Centre. Being part of the programme played a very important role in their careers as the play won the Fleur du Cap for Best New South African Script, the Rosalie van der Gucht Prize for New Directors that went to Greg, and for Best Supporting Actor. This opened many doors for Greg. After this there was a little bit of recognition and the right people within the industry took notice of him. This project is the one that kick-started his career in directing. In the meantime he started to work at the Fugard as a barman until the artistic director position that he now occupies became available.

Greg’s journey as a theatre maker is not unique and illustrates the difficulties of the theatre industry in Cape Town, which is a relatively small field. As a white male, Greg has been able to study and pursue his passion from secondary school level and he was able to take it further to a tertiary level, from the National School of Arts to UCT. The mainstream theatre scene in Cape Town has always been and still is today a white and elite space. Greg’s story also show how through education an artist access and construct professional networks that ultimately will grant exposure.

“The mainstream theatre was privileged from the start, while it had a captive local audience in a population trained to value European cultural forms” (Hauptfleish, 2011: 4). Since apartheid, government subsidised national theatre. Even today the mainstream theatre survives also through state funding. Through this research I have come to understand that mainstream theatre is a business and financial benefit is a priority that comes first before skills, telling of stories and showcasing talent. This is where the clash between mainstream and community or independent theatre is. “Theatre in South Africa is a white middle class

pursuit” says Greg, “because of apartheid and how people were restricted. It was only through certain theatre makers and theatres like the Space or Athol Fugard and the Market Theatre that the industry started breaking down those boundaries.” When Greg left UCT there was a group which at the time was called the Mechanicals and they used to do work at the Little Theatre.<sup>7</sup> He was never part of the Mechanicals but a lot of his friends were and they did a lot of independent work. So there was a huge scene of independent theatre and Greg had done a number of plays with his friend Luwie, the one he did “Champ” with. The Alexandra bar was another independent space, a church under the bridge in Observatory which is no longer there anymore.

“It was tough and I mean it’s still tough now for independence theatre. I didn’t... you know in the beginning we could only present our work at independent spaces, like “Champ” that was the only sort of formal platform I was given until I worked at the Fugard and I started directing work here.”<sup>8</sup>

Today, according to Greg, audiences are a “tricky thing”: attempting to convince people to come to the theatre is becoming harder and harder, which means that new independent work is becoming harder to sustain. For instance at the Fugard at the time of my interview with Greg they were hosting “Kinky Boots” and “Athol Fugard’s Statements”. “Statements is a production very much about apartheid, about our history and about forbidden romance between a man of colour and a White woman set in Apartheid South Africa. Then they had Kinky Boots which also has an important message but this is a kind of a show that is more colourful, it seems like a more fun option”. The programme of the Fugard is about balancing art for audiences, giving them options. A theatre must keep in mind what audiences would like to watch and pay for.

The Fugard continues to try to find ways to open access to people who may not necessarily have opportunities within the industry through internship programmes addressed to young artists and assisting them with professionals like designers and directors. It is a kind of a process that Greg himself went through, which aims at providing learning experiences for

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<sup>7</sup> The Little Theatre Complex is home to the University of Cape Town's drama and fine arts departments, and is a rite of passage for most thespians, performers and theatre-goers in Cape Town.

<sup>8</sup> Greg Karvellas, Interviewed at the Fugard Theatre, Cape Town, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2019.

young artists. Also in terms of audience development, Fugard is trying to make seats and transport available to communities— groups and companies who might not be able to go to an 8 o'clock show and get home at 11 pm. Many other venues are also doing this kind of work in terms of development programmes such as the Baxter Theatre through the Zabalaza festival. However creating platforms to showcase new talents and offering resources costs money. Venues like the Fugard, or Gate 69 and the Kalk Bay Theatre, are completely independent as they do not receive any state nor corporate money. The Fugard is financially supported by its box office, this is how they program and how they look at how to sell tickets. The Fugard also has its funding producer Eric Abraham.<sup>9</sup> Any income has to pay for the salaries, the lights, the sound, the stage management, the bartenders, the ushers and the actors, and it has to come from ticket sales.

“This goes back to the old equation of risks. When one puts on a piece of theatre they have to balance it out, as they get to spend hundreds or thousands or millions of rands depending on how big the show is, they have to sell a certain amount of seats over a certain amount of time in order to pay for operation costs. This is where it becomes challenging and tricky when this kind of a theatre, that particularly has a white target market and audience, now has to stage a piece by black township theatre makers about black township stories which they do not relate to in any way.”<sup>10</sup>

As an independent theatre the Fugard has the responsibility of working out who will buy the tickets, who will come and watch the show, and how much will result in terms of financial gain. This is why tickets are very expensive. For the Fugard being a completely 100 percent commercial space is about how they balance the business side and the love for what they do. It is a process in which one has to work on it all the time. Most of the theatres that involve themselves in community development are government funded intuitions like the Artscape and the Baxter.

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<sup>9</sup> Is a film, television and theatre producer, best known for producing the Academy Award-winning film *Kolya* (Best Foreign Language Film, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Greg Karvellas, Interviewed at the Fugard Theatre, Cape Town, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2019.

“Arts funding in our country is complicated because I don’t believe that the arts funding that is available is really getting down to the artists. I feel like it’s getting pumped into new buildings and resources which aren’t important. In terms of the state run theatres, I think there’s a lot of problematic staff around funding and how that money is being made available to artists in order for them to be able to craft their work.”<sup>11</sup>

### *Marlene and the Artscape*

Marlene Le Roux was born in September in 1967 and she identifies as a disability and women’s rights activist, she is one of the co-founder of the Women’s Achievement Network for Disability and the CEO of the Artscape Theatre Centre. Marlene is a survivor of polio and apartheid and most importantly for her, she grew up within a community of musicians particularly known as the Cape Minstrels. She has a background, of which she is extremely proud of, as community musician, even though during Apartheid there were no music and drama classes for black and coloured children. Regrettably, this is still the case in a number of townships in the Western Cape. Like a number of community artists today Marlene nurtured her craft through a church choir. In her first performance she shared the stage with the composer and guitarist Whilst Martenison, and playing with other artists in her community was her learning process. Marlene grew up in a scheme,<sup>12</sup> and rehearsed in a *hokkie*—a backyard shack. She feels she has a strong cultural background and that her identity is rooted in a community that was rich with music. Singing competitions that were organised by her church played a very important role in her development.

Marlene had the privilege of studying at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). UWC at the time had a music department and she did a bridging course. Her mother was a factory worker and her granny was a grape picker and this is the reason why she does not like going to farms for wine tasting. She grew up in the times where people were given cheap wine for their hard labour at the end of the week. When she was a child, her mother bought her a

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<sup>11</sup> Greg Karvellas , Interviewed at the Fugard Theatre, Cape Town, 23rd September 2019

<sup>12</sup> Government subsidy house.

piano; she still does not know how she managed to buy one. The piano filled the entire small house and they had to walk around it. All her mother wanted was her daughter was to learn the instrument. Before opting for UWC she first attempted auditioning at the University of Cape Town Opera School. The professor said it straight to her mother's face "Mam' first of all you don't have the money for your child to come here, secondly what are we going to do with a disabled singer?" On that day they went back home and they started to look at other options; UWC came up. Being part of UWC was the best thing that has ever happened to her and she refers to UWC as "the best drama school ever". She did the Bachelor of Arts (BA) with music as a major and then she choose "indigenous" languages. As part of her course modules she also did Political Science and eventually she decided to do teaching training and after the completion of the Bachelor of Education (Bed) she became a music teacher. She also joined the group of the Saint Singers, a group of male theology students—she was the only female— who performed around the country. She refers to UWC as the university that really made her the person she is today. At that time students were all "black" fighting against apartheid.

It is at UWC that she started singing struggle songs and later became a teacher and got herself involved in communities that had never experienced music. She would visit primary schools which had no music curriculum or classes and start to introduce music education. On the other hand she ran a music NGO in Mannenberg and in Gugulethu funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). Through this initiative she was also able to introduce and form a brass band; the project grew to an extent that they were able to offer classes for music and dance and formed brass bands in all provinces. She saw this as her mission.

With her music she travelled as far as to schools in Mdantsane, Port Elizabeth and then started a music school in Bafalo Flirts and she was one of the founding people of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SATU). It was at this stage that she became a subject adviser for the development of the national music curriculum. She strongly believed and fought for schools to be given trained music teachers. This is why at the Artscape when she received the opportunity of being the CEO she started big education programmes simply because she believes that it is impossible to do theatre without some form of education development, and for her this is the most important aspect of transformation. Transformation

starts with pre-primary school and with music classes. She strongly believes that it is extremely important to use theatre as a vehicle for social transformation.

The Artscape Theatre Centre formerly known as the Nico Malan Theatre Centre opened in 1971, belonging to the provincial administration. It is one of the oldest theatres in Cape Town with a history of being predominantly a white theatre “Nico Malan was under the influence of the government which was able to influence its programme and prevent critical or challenging works, the Baxter was much less under control since it was protected to a certain degree by the university’s academic freedom” (Nawa & Schneider, 2019: 11). Being a state theatre comes with great responsibility as the public have to be in your interest and on the other hand it has to comply with the public financial Act. Even when it comes to employment Marlene cannot just employ anyone without taking the necessary steps and legal documentations. Because the Act is for government institutions, they must abide by it. Marlene sees the public financial act as a disadvantage as it is somehow a challenge when it comes to decision making, when they have to execute certain plans and put on productions. This is the reason why she started the Resource Centre—in order to train artists to independently do their own paper work. This a creative centre that distribute information to art practitioners. It is also a space where artists create network, hold meetings and workshops and that provides artists with administrative support through its computer lab facilities, consultations and capacity building. Artscape also keeps its tickets very low, and they have big programs for community NGOs.

Before 1994 while the theatre scene was dominated by protest struggle theatre, the historic Artscape was only showcasing white shows which were censored. Marlene needed to change many things when she was appointed as the new chair. The Artscape at the time prided itself as a white only theatre. Today the theatre prides itself in representing three South African languages isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans. One can expect to see shows presented in all three languages. For Marlene transformation means change for individuals with disabilities, doing away with homophobia, racism and prejudice in the work place. Artscape is built on four values: inclusivity, people-centred, culture of excellence inclusivity, and innovation. This institution understand arts as a vehicle for inclusion and believes that its work is people-centred. Artscape aims at creating a culture of excellence which is critical to the growth and sustainability of the theatre itself. Constantly striving to be the leading innovative performing



arts theatre, both locally and globally, Artscape invests in partnerships locally, regionally and abroad, focusing in all art forms.<sup>13</sup>

### *Inclusion, Representation and Transformation in Theatre*

The 2017 Fleur du Cap Awards triggered conversations around discrimination and inclusion in performing arts. As part of my fieldwork, after following events around the protest on social media, I also attended a discussion panel between theatre artists and the Fleur Du Cap Theatre Awards committee on May 2017. The discussion was about how these particular awards can be improved and be more inclusive in a way to also incorporate the work of black artists. To this meeting I was invited as an artists, as the committee wanted to clarify and explain the manner in which they granted awards and assessed theatrical performances. The invitation for this meeting was open to both professional and community theatre artists. There were a number of artists who attended the meeting, and notably Mamela Nyamza who engaged a lot within the forum, raising issues of discrimination, following her protest at the award ceremony. At this time she was around the time she was working on a dance production, a physical theatre piece titled “Rock to the Core” written and directed by herself, featuring Chuma Sopotela, Buhlebezwe Siwani, Zikhona Jacobs, Indalo Stofile. “Rock to The Core” is one of Mamela’s works in which she discusses the inequalities that continue to exist within the theatre industry. As a black theatre maker, it is very difficult to get funding and this is also one of the reason that contributes in the low rate of black theatre works presented on the main stage. Furthermore, most black artists prefer getting casted in white productions in order to generate income. Her work in many ways speaks for artists, “demanding change and transformation within the arts and mainstream exclusive theatres.”<sup>14</sup>

The Fleur Du Cap Theatre Awards is supposed to recognises and celebrates excellence in professional live theatre—drama, comedy/farce/sketch, comedy, one-person show, revue (music interspersed with scripted dialogue), cabaret, musicals, music theatre (scripted play

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<sup>13</sup> Artscape Theatre Centre Education and Training Diary 2019

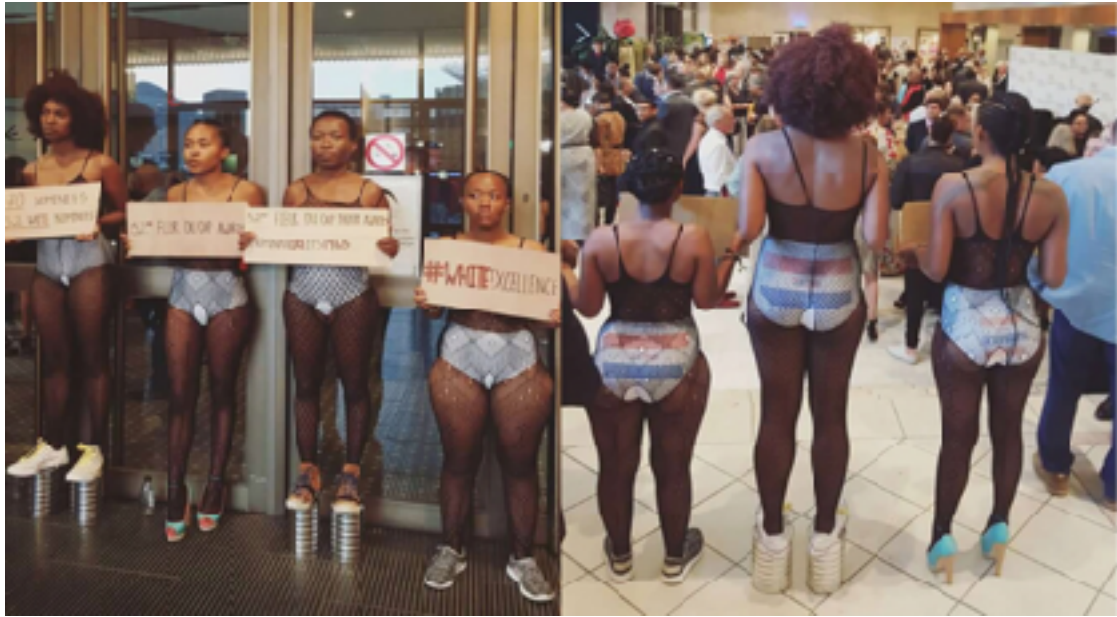
<sup>14</sup> From the plays synopsis in the Cape Town Fringe Festival programme newspaper downloaded from [https://capetownfringe.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/CTF\\_2017\\_Web.pdf](https://capetownfringe.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/CTF_2017_Web.pdf) Accessed 27 October 2019

interspersed with songs), theatre for children and young people, opera (professional productions of entire operas only)—in and around Cape Town. Distell, South Africa's premier producer of wines, spirits and ready-to-drink alcohol beverages, sponsors these awards. The judging panel that regulates the recipients of the award yearly gathers people within the industry and experienced in theatre such as journalists, writers, critics, as well as drama teachers. The appointment of panel members is done following requirement for expertise coupled with diversity in respect to race, gender, and language. Each year the Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards panel considers all productions that are, in the judgment of the panel, professional live theatrical productions that officially open in an agreed, eligible theatre venue in and around Cape Town. The panel of these awards only considers professional theatre productions those that are particularly staged in theatre venues such as: Alexander Upstairs, Artscape Theatre Centre (all venues), Baxter theatre Centre (all venues), Drostdy Theatre, Fugard Theatre, Galloway Theatre, HB Thom Theatre, Kalk Bay Theatre, Magnet Theatre, Masque Theatre, Maynardville, UCT Hiddingh Campus, Oude Libertas Amphitheatre, Theatre Arts Admin Collective and Theatre on the Bay. They also state that given the dynamics of the theatre landscape, this list is not exhaustive and venues may from time to time be included.<sup>15</sup> Yet, generally it means that venues in the townships are rarely considered. These guidelines for the awards demonstrate how black community theatre makers are perceived and received by the main stream theatre industry. Community theatre is basically forbidden to participate on these awards.

Mamela Nyamza together with Chuma Sopotela, Buhlebezwe Siwani, and Zikhona Jacobs has held a protest demonstration during these awards which was addressing the fact that these awards exclude black artists.

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<sup>15</sup> From fieldwork notes which I have taken from the judging panel and a paper which we were given during the meeting as Melanie Burke was doing the presentation based on them. These documents had no particular authors as they appeared as guide lines of how the awards are structured and what the requirements are. This take from both the point I have noted during the meet as well as from the whole panel of the awards on the 28th of May 2017 which was held at Artscape, Cape Town.



During the 52<sup>nd</sup> Fleur Du Cap Awards Ceremony held at the Artscape Theatre Centre  
 Photographs by Posted on Facebook by Naushad Khan (2017)

The protest poster claimed: “70 nominees/ 52 white nominees”, “2<sup>nd</sup> Fleur Du Cap Awards”, “52<sup>nd</sup> Fleur Du Cap Theatre Awards #NOMINATELIKEITS1965”, “#WHITE EXCELLENCE”. These artists had the courage of speaking up against the system that segregates them due to the colour of their skin after so many years into democracy. Black professional theatre makers encounter challenges of exclusion and discriminations in the mainstream theatre, hence they cry out for more works particular by black artists to be given a platform on the main stage.

Directly from her Facebook timeline Mamela Nyamza posted:

“The problem really begins when we, the protestors, are labelled as “those four ladies”! We continue to be regarded as anonymous, nameless, faceless, voiceless in the midst of our protest against lack of equity and access in the arts. So, let me first give back our identities as artists: we are Mamela Nyamza, Chuma Sopotela, Buhlebezwe Siwani, and Zikhona Jacobs our protest was all about the gatekeeping, the discrimination, and indeed the dishonesty of the mainstream theatres of art in South Africa. Under their watch, they allow elitist audience to strive for the elitist art

and artists. Under their watch, they allow black people to be misused in the works of arts with no recognition awarded for their work. Hence the chosen costume we wore for our protest. As black people, we continue to be used as labourers, just like prostitutes on stage, and all accolades and high salaries go to the so-called directors and producers. Our white underwear with the old apartheid South African flag depicts a total lack of transformation in the mainstream art and its theatres. Hence the statistics we highlighted on our placards. After 23 years into democracy, we still have a skewed biased event for the minority in this country, and we are saying A LUTA CONTINUA against racism, sexism and fascism in our land.”<sup>16</sup>

Mamela Nyamza boldly voiced out how the mainstream theatre in Cape Town used black bodies and did not acknowledge or award them: 70 nominees/ 52 white nominees. Out of 70 nominees only 8 Black artists were nominated and this is where Mamela’s frustration and anger come from. This was the 52<sup>nd</sup> award ceremony and yet there was no change in terms of how black artists were represented.

Mamela Nyamza is an activist, performance (artist), a choreographer specialising in dance she was born and grew up in Gugulethu, Cape Town, South Africa. She acquired her training in dance at the Zama Dance School under the Royal Academy of Dance in Cape Town, South Africa. She is well known for blending styles in a way that challenges traditional standards. She has performed nationally as well as internationally. After I had a privilege of spending time with Nyamza and having learned more about her, I came to the conclusion that the changes she has been seeking in the theatre industry in particular that of Cape Town are yet to take place. At the time of my interview, Mamela was working full time in Pretoria as an artistic director of a state theatre. On the road while we were on our way to Khayelitsha where Mamela was going to conduct a master class, she told me that the theatre scene in Pretoria is still far behind that of Cape Town. Also from her public conversation that took place at Theatre Arts Admin Collective in November 2019, one could clearly see how attached and passionate she is about work, she would easily get emotional when talking about it.

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<sup>16</sup> Facebook Post by Mamela Nyamza 2017.

“Always when there’s something that troubles me or doesn’t sit well with me I create work out of that.”<sup>17</sup>

Mamela uses her craft to express how she feels and voice out important issues that not only affect her personally as an individual but also as a professional. As far as I know Mamela is the only female artists that stands boldly against the oppression and discrimination of black artists through her theatrical work but also in her talks when she is invited as a speaker.



Dance master class at Kasi RC in Khayelitsha  
Photograph by Zuko Sikhafungana (2019)

Having been able to observe Mamela’s master class at Kasi RC one of the shack theatre in Khayelitsha, I was able to understand what she meant by creating work with what one has. Kasi RC is a very small shack theatre. I initially thought that Mamela will have difficulties in teaching a dance master class in such a space, working with about twenty artists. She was also aware about these constraints; yet she told the group that if they do not have enough room they will have to work with what they have: “working with spaces, accommodating where we are.”<sup>18</sup> Her master class and dance choreography revolved around the use of space

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<sup>17</sup> Mamela Nyamza at Theatre Arts admin Collective, Cape Town.

<sup>18</sup> Mamela Nyamza at Kasi Rc in Khayelitsha.

and how to work with minimum limited resources. She did not only focus on the dance but also encouraged young upcoming theatre makers from marginalised communities to participate. She shared her life stories with the group and told them how she managed to build her name in the industry. What was mostly interesting for me is how she kept on enforcing to the group the importance of creating your own work and believing in it.

“You don’t have to dance like white people, you are capable of creating your own dance moves. Don’t say we did not do contemporary dance, it’s also ok to do the types of movements we are doing, which are not western”.<sup>19</sup>

Mamela studied ballet and throughout her career she has been experimenting with it. She further told the group the importance of going to school and studying these western dance forms, as she studied ballet, to deconstruct it. Today she is able to create work around ballet because she knows and understands it, hence she is able to critique it through her abstract choreography.

Mamela’s intervention is important as it addresses issues of concern that not only affects her as a black theatre maker but rather affecting all black people in different spheres. For me Mamela is one of the very few brave people to stand up for truth and in most cases she does that alone. As Mamela is paving the way now, it is time we bring back the artist that recognises their position in society and probe, and make the art that disturbs the status quo (Motloutse, 2016). In order for transformation to take place in South African theatre, black theatre makers within the industry need to acknowledge that there is a problem.

Through Mamela’s work, life and activism we are able to see that theatre in Cape Town is still predominantly white. Black theatre makers are still received in ways that underestimate their capabilities. Mapadimeng (2013: 69) noted that “Arts festivals too still occur largely on racial lines which in turn limits opportunities for interracial dialogue. They remain largely racially divided and less integrated as the predominantly white Afrikaans festivals [...]; the predominantly Black African festivals [...]”. Furthermore he uses an example of the Cape Town International Jazz Festival and the traditional National Arts Festival of Grahamstown

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<sup>19</sup> Mamela Nyamza at Kasi Re in Khayelitsha.

as being some of the few festivals that attract mixed audiences. “These festivals are elite in nature as they are not easily accessible to economically marginalised ordinary South Africans” (Mapadimeng 2013: 79).

### *Mamela Nyamza’s speech*

During my fieldwork Mamela was still at the South African State Theatre (SAST) as deputy director and she was later fired in November 2019. Her dismissal was followed by a speech that she shared at Artscape during the Dance Umbrella Africa Festival in which she voiced out her frustration about shows having no audiences. As she was upset about the state of the theatre scene in Cape Town she also took the same frustration into social media. Expressing her feelings about how the Artscape functions, she continued using the platform she was given to be a voice for others. This shows that it is not just about employment but rather a bout deep change and transformation within the industry. In the voice recording of her speech posted on her Facebook timeline on 19th December 2019, Mamela expresses herself as follows:

“From outside in the foyer, what is displayed is embarrassing. I’m sorry to put it but I’m gonna say it, it’s embarrassing. This is Cape Town and the majority of the people here they are black, I’m sorry to put it like that I’m not being racist or anything. I am an artist, I say it from the heart. I say it as it is and this is how I feel right now. No publicity, no press release, no marketing, is it because this skin is a stigma? Am I a stigma for being here, am I killing something? Am I killing value for being here?

Pardon?

I am not performing, it’s not for me, it’s for the youth of this country, it’s for the coming up generation. What you here to see... well I mean you will see what you here to see but then it’s embarrassing that there are no people to watch it. We are from the South Africa State Theatre presenting Dance Umbrella, partnering with Artscape but Artscape did nothing. We brought eighteen artists here with money and those artists need to earn something. They were not given anything, we are trying this, it’s a new thing, we trying these entities to actually partner with each other and

work together. How are we gonna actually flourish as artists in this country if we actually even denied an audience? This is a big institution, it should actually market such productions but yet we are still stuck here. Many artists are leaving Cape Town for Joburg and myself, to actually be a deputy of the South African State Theatre in Pretoria not at home already is a disgrace, because there's nothing for us here. There's nothing for us here, this is home I am not a foreigner here. I will speak, this is home. I'm sorry if you are here seeing me talk, you gonna hear me talk today because I don't have this opportunity to cease this microphone I don't know whether the CEO is here. I don't know if there's anyone from the board here or the council, please fix it. Fix it, we are artists we want to see change, we want to see transformation. These artists are not paid, the best thing that we could do as South African State Theatre is to bring them here so that they can be seen by you. Being a different art that is not safe, that is not beautiful, it's art. Please spread the word we are relying on you now. We are now relying on you to spread the word. Thank you Artscape for not promoting the Dance Umbrella Africa but we will go forward and move forward, you not gonna stop us, thank you.”<sup>20</sup>

Mainstream theatres like the Artscape have a certain amount of power, they are capable of influencing society through what they stand for and represent. Through the types of shows that the Artscape is staging and showcasing it is able to build audiences. On the theatre's foyer Mamela was confronted with posters of shows that she believes were predominantly white— with white cast members and by white directors. This is what triggered her anger, among a number of posters that were advertising those shows there were very few which represented black artists. Most of these were part of the Artscape outreach initiatives and education programmes that the theatre offers. This is not the first event from which Mamela felt angered. In a number of occasions, she has felt the discrimination of black theatre makers.

When it comes to platform of presenting and staging work it does not only refer to venues and space but also to accessing audiences. Audiences are an important aspect of a theatre and

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<sup>20</sup> Mamela Nyamza at Artscape Theatre Centre addressing the audience, speech posted as an audio record on her Facebook Time-line on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2019.



a performance. In her speech Mamelola mentioned that the venue was predominately black for the show that was about to be performed. Indirectly she wanted to interrogate white audiences questioning their absence. This speaks to the reality of theatre in Cape Town, there are divisions that exists when it comes to audiences and the kind of performances they access and purchase. It was not a coincidence that the Dance Umbrella had no audience. We mustn't forget how business and the commercial side of theatre shape the kind of show that are performed and seen by audiences. A theatre must offer what will please audiences or a show will have empty seats.

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The above life stories are important as they draw on completely different experiences and backgrounds. These are not stories of everyday actors that are on the ground but they are rather stories of professional individuals that to an extent have the power to bring change the industry and that shape it every day with their work. Unlike theatre makers on the ground Marlene and Greg are runners of the theatre in Cape Town; they are part of the decision makers and their contribution in one way or the other influence the direction and the state of theatre in South Africa.

“A story can be many things, if not all things: account, challenge, interpretation, anthropology and all words ending with –logy, case study, confession, disagreement, discourse, experience, journey, justification, perspective, prejudice, protest, question, reason, statement etc. Everything can be a story, if only because everything is the outcome of a process; although not everything is ‘sayable’” (Jackson, 2002: 21). It can be argued that in order for a story to exist it must be listened to, as much as an experience acquires meaning through narration (Tyler, 1986: 138: Jackson, 2002: 18). A story changes when told (Arendt, 1958: 50), listeners interpret in whatever way they want and do anything they want with it (Boyd, 2009). For me stories are an essential part of an ethnography and as Maggio argues “ethnography should be an autobiography about the other, the confession of a representation, the story written by an ‘author’” (2014: 41). This connects with being to some degree aware of the inter-subjective dimension of knowledge production.

These life stories are relevant, in a sense that they represent the nature of the theatre scene in Cape Town. Through these stories we are able to see experiences of the privileged and the marginalised, we see the role played by education, and history has shown that arts education was not included in township school's curriculum. As Marlene has stated a number of times that arts education was not and is still not part of many marginalised schools. Greg's experiences when it comes to education contrast with the young black upcoming artists who wish to study theatre further. He just had to make decisions and through the support of his family he was able to study arts. This demonstrates the pace in which change and progress for an equal society is taking place. "The economy still remains by and large white owned and controlled... Race remains not only the aspect of identity but also the key marker of socio-economic and political inequality" (Mapadimeng, 2013: 69). Most commercial theatres in the Cape if not all of them are predominantly white owned. Even though they may not be supported by the state they function running shows every day. These are types of theatres in which one hardly finds black audiences as much as one hardly finds black theatre works, as most of them pride themselves of staging "world-class productions". Black directors, actors, singers or dancers spend most of their lives as "emerging artists" that participates in developmental programmes, struggling to create and present their work independently. What does transformation mean for the theatre industry? Why do we have community outreach programmes specifically aimed at assisting black communities in the year 2019? How does these programmes assist Black theatre makers? Are these theatre makers able to stage their works without these programmes in the so called professional spaces? What does it really mean for black artists to take theatre as a career?

Private owned independent and commercial theatres prioritise its audiences and this in a sense influences what is presented on stage. It is important for them to present work that entertains and at the same time gives audiences the urge of returning to the theatre without feeling offended. On the contrary black theatrical work one way or the other always finds itself being confrontational and addressing issues of inequality. Audiences in Cape Town theatres are still predominately white, theatres cater for them in terms of what they put on their stages. The Market Theatre is well known for staging black confrontational work and its home to many black theatre makers and goers. What is the Market Theatre doing which is not being done by theatres in Cape Town? Theatre in South Africa has always been a key for

transformation. “It was one of the struggle grounds of the oppositions against apartheid in the seventies and eighties. But the theatre has lost most of its old audiences during the last twenty years and the struggle for new audiences is ongoing and is far from being won” (Nawa & Schneider, 2019: 10). This is simply because theatres are no longer serving the purpose they used to serve for audiences. Audience presence depends on what the theatre itself offers in terms of what it stages. “Theatre was a mobilisational force, and for many practitioners, supported by an audience eager to be rallied to action, it was fulfilment enough that the theatre effectively served that function” (Mda, 2002: 283). What about theatre today?



## “Community” theatre and the spaces in-between

Contemporary community theatre is connected to what is known as protest theatre which has been changing and evolving over the years. Von Brisinski argues that “Community theatre in South Africa has undergone major changes from the apartheid to post-apartheid periods. From the 1960s until 1994 popular theatre was driven by the impetus of challenging the injustices imposed by the apartheid regime and raising awareness of these injustices” (2003: 144). When the apartheid regime collapsed, community theatre black artists began to explore and interrogate other social issues such as stories of family life which were less politically oriented. Community theatre is a form of art practice that has been evolving and changing with time in terms of its content and forms. It can be fittingly conceptualised also as popular theatre. Kerr contends that it is a type of a theatre that “self-consciously projects the aspirations and practice of the people in contesting racial or class oppression” (1995: x). Community theatre can also be looked at as a social activity which is inseparably interconnected with the origins of society itself, not different from other social activities (Courtney, 1974).

“Popular art is given serious attention because of its sheer undeniable assertive presence as social fact. Largely it proclaims its own importance in everyday lives of many Africans. It is found everywhere, it manages to grow and develop without recognition or encouragement from official cultural bodies sometimes even confronting them” (Barber, 1987: 1). Protest theatre, popular theatre and community theatre are often used indistinctly to indicate a set of contiguous practices, very similar, characteristically defined by consciousness, political orientation and the engagement with people. “Popular arts penetrate and are penetrated by political, economic, and religious institutions in ways that may not always be predictable from our own experience” (Barber 1987:1-2). These are art forms in which experience is characteristically condensed while they are expressive on different levels.

“Community theatre” is one of the terms or rather labels that have been highly criticised: for a long time, it has been associated with “non-professional” practices. Walsh contends that “community theatre in South Africa in general is facing the problem of dwindling audiences and weak scripts, so the need is really for directors to commit to developing casts and further expanding ideas in performance” (2006: 69). But how is “professional” understood within theatre making in South Africa? Who gets to dictate which stage is a professional or a non-professional one? How alternative training and years of experience (Copteros, 2002) should be valued? Given that community theatre is associated with black marginalised artists how can we understand the politics of theatre in Cape Town? “The notion of community theatre as inferior in some way needs to be addressed and clarity generated on how artists with no formal drama training can be recognised and rewarded for their years of experience” (Copteros, 2002: 68). Community theatre was and is frequently multilingual, performed by people who have no professional training, the plays often the outcome of a group’s work rather than being of individual artists (Fleischman, 1990). However, things have changed, black theatre makers have been finding ways to further develop their skills, and those who were lucky enough to access tertiary education in performing arts went back to their communities and shared their skills. Also, lately, theatre development programmes have been offered by mainstream theatres. Yet, mainstream theatre continues to hesitate in staging community theatre works because of the negative association and the stereotypes that have been attached to them.

Vargas argues that the concept community is meant to “emphasise the political purpose of this type of theatre; in some instances, it is also used to draw attention to the presumed grassroots background of the theatre practitioners themselves” (1973: 20-24). Community theatre is not exclusively a South African concept but rather a global one. It is understood and interpreted differently according to different parts of the world and it is also practiced differently. According to Awotona’s *et al* (1995) often “community” in community theatre indexes “township”. The use of the term is not only for referring to the practice, it also works as reference to black marginalised community theatre practitioners. Therefore, when black artists practice art, they are in fact creating a space for themselves, within a community with which they feel a sense of belonging, while at the same time creating a community on their own.

“With the installation of a racially unified government and the repeal of apartheid, the continued use of the word [‘township’] in South Africa works to reinforce an area identity, still largely determined by race, amongst local residents. This identification might be positive, and used to build community spirit. It might also however be negative, and act to reinforce the segregated conceptualization of place by name” (Awotona *et al*, 1995: 1).

Audiences form a very important part of the performances, hence different theatre genres throughout their existence have been working on building their own audiences.

“Audiences are not all the same. Just as much as performances, they are a historical product” and “if the audience has an active role in constituting the performance, cultural historians seeking to uncover histories of consciousness in African popular genres cannot afford to ignore it” (Barber, 1997: 347). In the history of theatre in South Africa a separation of audiences has always existed. To this day, the division among audiences offers a clear picture of how different racial groups interact and live together outside and inside the theatre space. Performances question social factors that shape our daily lives. According to Fleischman in South Africa “the first mass black theatre audience was created in the 1960s” (1990:97). In many black communities, theatre remains a stranger and it is regarded as something that is only meant for white people. For someone from the township, to experience a full live performance one has to travel to the inner city which is very far, and as a matter of fact in mainstream theatre it is rare to see audiences coming from poorest parts of Cape Town.

In many ways, community theatre is to break away from a Eurocentric frame of reference and develop an Afrocentric approach to the arts. Community theatre in Africa “has more to do with the collective subject than with the individual subject of Western drama” (Fleischman, 1990:89). Even though more recently community theatre is prioritising its commercial side, its foundation is built on sharing stories and voicing out social injustices “for free”. Western theatre are often built on financial gain and this is where the term “professional” comes in. We can therefore see how “professional” is apprehended in mainstream and community theatre.

In this chapter I am looking at community theatre in Cape Town attempting to track and follow its development and its current state, and to unpack its challenges. My focus is to understand community theatre in relation to mainstream theatre as these two entities are separate and independent but in many aspects connected. I argue that the future of theatre in South Africa is indeed to be found in these linkages. Having explained the forms mainstream theatre takes in Cape Town in the previous chapter, I am now exploring community theatre through closely looking at the example of the Back Stage Theatre Production (BSTP), a community based theatre company. Through this case study I wish to highlight how a company works and produce itself in the landscape of the township. I then discuss the ways in which “community theatre” is understood and practiced today by a number of people who are involved in performing arts. As part this chapter I am also looking at outreach initiatives—the Zabalaza theatre Festival as well as the Magnet Theatre Full Time Training and a Job Creation Programme and Culture Gangs—in which many community artists have taken part in. Over the years, these programmes have in a way become part of community theatre making, while they have also been vehicles through which community theatre has travelled outside the townships and has been presented on the so called “professional stage” in the Cape. These programmes have also contributed to changing and reshaping the forms of community theatre. Art is not static. Because community theatre artists “create work that [is] rooted in the actors’ experience of the world” (Walsh, 2006: 67), community theatre today is not what it was in the past 25 years. Just like a number of socially constructed terms, performing arts change with time. More importantly it seems to me that in contemporary time’s community theatre has been growing in ways that one could have never imagined or predicted. The fact that community theatre has been able to survive throughout these years without resources demonstrates largely that there is something really interesting and special about it.

### *The Back Stage Theatre Production*

The Back Stage Theatre Production (BSTP) is a township based Theatre Company located in the outskirts of Cape Town in Lwandle. The BSTP was established in October 2014 by

myself, Siphumzile Pharela, Sibusiso Maranxa, Gertrude Buys, Nosibusiso Nkukwana, Tito Zantsi and Khulekani Ndlovu. The BSTP has developed in order to be a sustainable theatre company that is able to provide for its artists. The practice of this kind of art requires time, discipline and determination from the artists themselves, hence the BSTP believes that working with different people, skilled and unskilled, plays a major role on one's personal development and growth.

A proper rehearsal space for BSTP have been a major obstacle for a number of years. Over the past five years ever since the BSTP has been using a bedroom as a space for rehearsal. Like many other community theatre companies in Strand, its rehearsal venue is a private home. This is a challenge for a number of theatre making companies and groups. Most theatre makers have been using backyards, pre-schools, garages and at times even shared spaces with churches.



Back Stage Theatre Production rehearsal session in their bedroom space.  
Photograph by Zimkitha Ngaleka (2018)

In the context of Lwandle township, and to an extent some other surrounding townships in Cape Town, artists share the same difficulties. Art in general is misjudged or rather people are misinformed when it comes to the importance of art making. By art I'm not only referring to theatre. When the Back Stage first started in 2014, the company was using a garage as a



meeting and rehearsal space. The bedroom became their official space from 2015 to this present day. Being part of this theatre company myself I had to open up and willingly offer my bedroom to be our meeting and working place. When we first moved to this space, we hoped it would be a temporary adjustment; we had put our expectations in our ward councilor and we made a number of attempts, for about three years, to obtain a venue, but they all failed.

In our community sport is the most supported activity, soccer ranking at the first place. This is even visible as our community have a number of soccer fields that are maintained throughout the year. Facilities but also funding are allocated to soccer, yearly. This demonstrates the possibility of art being funded and sustained for the benefit of the community at large. Theatre does not belong to the theatre makers alone as it is not only created for the creators but also for the audiences. The devaluation of art is mostly seen black township schools where art is not considered as part of the curriculum. In most cases you will find young people being the ones leading and establishing drama groups. This clearly demonstrates an interest and a need for intervention. I refer to forms of artistic practices within black townships as “unofficial” art. This is because unlike the mainstream commercial art forms they become part of the everyday life of the communities in which they are practiced. Community theatre also has a potential of becoming a hub for mentoring and keeping young children out of the streets. It has the potential to be a tool of education, but of course it cannot be limited by developmental aspirations. Simply put, contemporary community theatre is not about financial gain. Growing up in Lwandle township as a young boy I used to watch young people at the time performing in our schools and community halls as drama groups. These shows were mostly free of charge and if an entrance fee was required it was affordable.

Like in any other community theatre company formal training is not a requirement for joining the BSTP. When this company started none of its members had any type of formal training. This team works with the body as the primary source of meanings and it offers its own training to its members. The fact that the large majority of Black artists are unable to access formal course or enroll in universities does not mean that these artists do not receive any training. This dates back to Gibson Kente’s era where he used to train his own actors. Some of the BSTP members are studying performing arts while others acquire training through

public workshops and master class programmes. Those who are privileged to access higher education share their knowledge and skills with those who are not. Once a month the company holds workshops where they interchange skills and knowledge and engage in reading practices. For the past two year they have been educating themselves in this manner. Even though these artists are a result of a generation of artists that did not focus on the commercial side of theatre making, the BSTP has been prioritising the business side of their company.

“Ever since I started being involved in theatre making, it was just difficult for me to stop and abandon my craft just like that, especially when you have a dream and a plan. The most painful thing about this form of art is that you have to have another job besides it so you can be able to sustain yourself and your craft.”<sup>21</sup>

Besides acting, Siphumzile works on a full time job in retail. He started practicing community theatre from high school. After high school he continued for a year even though theatre was not providing him with any form of stable income. Most of the money that the BSTP made during its initial stages was only utilised for the needs of the company, and not for salaries. The only instances in which these artists were able to generate an income for themselves were when they were casted into professional productions. They also generated funds for their company by hosting their own shows, taking part in festivals, and competitions. Today the BSTP is able to manage its finances at the same time providing its members with opportunities of work in which they are able to receive small salaries. Siphumzile also told me BSTP artists value community theatre because they are not only entertaining their community but also educating their audiences. Regardless of the challenges that come with practicing theatre, telling and sharing stories is of much importance to them. Their plays educate in many ways; they also believe that they can touch many lives through theatre. To an extent they can also provide life solutions for some of their audience members. They know and understand the power of theatre in people’s lives. One of their biggest targets is to remove the stigma that exists in townships around theatre.

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<sup>21</sup> Siphumzile Pharela, Interviewed in Lwandle, Strand, August 2019

When the BSTP first started some of its members were high-school learners while it included also university students and workers. Along the years since its commencement people have been joining the team and for different reasons others have been leaving. Over the years, as a young and growing company the BSTP have been learning and striving to further develop itself and its artists.

It is not easy to run a theatre company based in the township where there are no resources to support the work, yet the BSTP has managed to stay on its toes, producing theatrical experiences for audiences around the Western Cape. Today the BSTP is made up of the five original permanent members and it continues to function as it was when it first started with twenty members. To be able to financially support its artists, the BSTP had to reduce its members; yet the company continues to work with young upcoming artists in Lwandle offering drama and dance classes. The team believes that in Strand there is no recognition for art as there is no Community Art Centre.



Zimkitha Ngaleka offering dance classes and Zuko Sikhafungana offering drama classes at Umngqophiso Pre-primary School in Lwandle. Photographs by Sibusiso Maranxa (2018)

In terms of acquiring skills and training, the BSTP members have to travel to the inner city where they attend workshops in spaces like the Artscape Theatre Centre. Watching theatre shows is one of the ways in which they learn more about this art form. When they travel to town the only means of transport for them are trains as there are no direct taxis from Strand to Cape Town.

The creation process of the latest BSTP show, “The Crime Scene”, started around February 2018 and as usual it took place in their bedroom space. When the rehearsal process was complete and the time for presenting the final show came, the team decided to have their first performance in their rehearsal venue. This was done to open the show to the community before it was performed in other venues out of Strand. This was around August in the same year when the play was complete and ready for staging. For The Crime Scene a home was opened to the public. As part of this initiative the team was also in a sense bringing theatre to the people, inviting the audience at a “home”. This was very important for building and growing the local audience of the BSTP.

It was after this show that the play was taken to the Drama Factory one of the private owned theatres around the Helderberg area. When the team presented its work in a predominantly white spaces they brought their own audience to the space. Audience is a very tricky part of theatre making especially when a community theatre company is staging its work in an urban area, different from the one that originated it. Having learnt about the importance of building an audience within such spaces from its previous experiences, the BSTP was prepared. Most Black productions even at the Artscape for example when they are staging a isiXhosa production like “Amaza” they target black community schools and they bring learners to the theatre. The BSTP has its audience and support whereas it is less supported in some of the white areas in which they have performed. Different genres in theatre have different audiences.



The BSTP team preparing the venue for staging the show of “The Crime Scene”  
Photographs by Zuko Sikhafungana (2018)

The BSTP team today comprise of only students and workers —as a result making theatre has been very difficult and challenging, especially when one does not have other means to generate incomes. Within this team there are no members that rely only on theatre making as their main source of income. What drives these individuals is love and passion for the arts. Collaboratively, bringing together different experiences from the worlds of universities and employment, they are putting together ideas, creating their work.

The point I am trying to make through the case of the BSTP is that contrary to general perceptions, community theatre is not just made by amatorial performances and groups, but also by artists who accessed in various ways different opportunities and are no longer interested in leaving the community theatre field for mainstream theatre. Most community theatre professional artists began their journeys within community theatre, and most of them, even after they have acquired higher education degrees decide to work with artists from within their own communities. This is commonly known as “giving back to your community”. This comes with the belief that communities are the ones that make these well-known artists and there is an obligation for them to show their appreciation by giving back. Community theatre artists are aware of the importance of training and education in this field, but not all artists get opportunities to study drama, hence those that have these opportunities, come back to share with others. Some have given up on acquiring formal training but they are still driven by the passion and understand their work as professionals, as the amount of effort, time, commitment they put into their work is a testimony to it. This is how community theatre artists are in the process of reclaiming their work, even if the main stream theatre industry tries by all means to place them in categories that deny them opportunities, recognition and platforms for presenting their work on a larger scale. “Today, the focus of community theatre is on further education and skill training” (Von Brisinski, 2003: 115).

#### *“Community theatre” problematised in context*

“Community theatre” as a genre and as a term has been highly problematised and been viewed as underserving the mainstream stage because of its lack of commercial potential. For years it has been seen as an inferior theatrical practice, practiced by armatures, ordinary

people from black disadvantaged communities. Mahomed (1993) instead of accepting the term “non-professional”, which implies dubious competence, or “amateur” which invokes the affluent leisure of neocolonial times, prefers to refer to community theatre practitioners as activists or rather simply theatre practitioners. Mda argues “that the distinction between professional and non-professional perpetuates the legacy of unequal distribution of resources of post anti-apartheid theatre” (1997:293). Von Brisinski argues that instead of calling them “community theatre groups which has many historical implications—prefers to call them performing arts communities based on their constitution and the new functions they have within the arts and in society” (2003: 117).

Andrew Horn (1986) in the attempt to trace the relationships between theatre and society argues that popular black theatre has been the representation of major dramatic forces of a society. Community theatre has always represented a black population; under the apartheid regime it was used as a protest tool against the oppressive system and particularly in South Africa it is rare to find “community theatre” being practiced by a white population group. The only instance in which you encounter different racial groups in community theatre it is during collaborations. And most works by black or rather black and white in collaboration, attempt to give a representation of our society where the black man is oppressed. This is evident in Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona’s collaborative work. This is a continuity between the present and the past condition of theatre in South Africa. My reference to “Black theatre” is therefore not different from the concept of community theatre, here I am using these two terms interchangeably. Black theatre has been for a very long time underrated due to the manner in which it spoke against the system of oppression. As a result, there is less work documenting the work of “black plays”. Black theatre was regarded as “too poor to advertise in the press; too despised to be regularly reviewed by the white dailies; censored and bullied; deprived of purpose-built theatres; its performers under-remunerated and compelled to maintain daytime jobs in factories, schools, and offices-popular black theatre in South Africa nonetheless represents the major dramatic force in the region” (Horn, 1986: 212). Black theatre just like its members was oppressed and violated in many ways as it spoke against the system of the time.

“Community theatre I think it’s kind of a problematic label, let’s not call it community theatre, to me it’s theatre. People making theatre, “community” theatre for me it feels a bit like something gets called community theatre because it’s done in the township with no budget. I think again and I’m looping back to those groups and as part of the program we run here sometimes is to bring those theatre organizations into our space to watch a show as fellow theatre makers. To go like: ah! Ok lights, sound, stage, ok like how do we translate that?”<sup>22</sup>

“That is the thing [community theatre] I am fighting against it, I think it’s a terrible label because it’s sealing, it stops you. Once you are labelled community theatre most people can’t work out of that, and it also means that they can pay you less. It can afford you economic constraint, you can never grow on your work. The best thing is to go out hundred percent professional, regardless of where you come from, I’m 100% professional and that means that you have to live up to the standards of that. Hundred percent professional! And that is why you have to make sure you understand the art form, because of you being unprofessional, they will come back to bite you.”<sup>23</sup>

These two theatre practitioners’ views demonstrate how people have been grappling with the concept of community theatre. Greg understands this label as belittling and underestimating not just to the practice itself but also the artists and their communities. Believing that this terms should be non-existent— theatre making should be theatre making regardless of where it is being practiced. Greg strongly believes that given the necessary resources, community theatre has a potential of functioning independently like commercial mainstream theatre. Mongiwekhaya also finds this label problematic: it shows how community theatre have been misunderstood over the years— and for a long time theatre from the township has been carrying a negative stigma. Interestingly community theatre is becoming an inappropriate and problematic term that does not represent the actual performative practices that are on the ground.

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<sup>22</sup> Greg Karvellas, Interviewed at the Fugard Theatre. Cape Town, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2019

<sup>23</sup> Mongiwekhaya Mthombeni, Interviewed at Gugasthebe Cape Town, Langa. 13<sup>th</sup> August 2017

The term “community theatre” is often seen and understood as the theatre of the poor that represents marginalised groups in South Africa. Greg understands exactly how this genre has been perceived: there is nothing wrong with it per se, the problem comes with its association and misrepresentation. Apart from geographical differences mainstream and community theatre are both theatre genres with no inverted commas. One of the most important points that is missed when problematising community theatre is that community theatre is as a matter of fact independent theatre. In a sense, the experience of many community artists in the township is not so different to the one of Greg Karvellas when he was young and doing independent theatre with his university friends. Perhaps we should boldly start to refer to theatre in the townships as independent. To work without the necessary resources and formal funding or a decent space is something that characterizes independent theatre in general—especially in neoliberal times where funding for the arts are decreasing and difficult to reach.

Geographical location is also not that unimportant, community theatre is not just defined by its artists but it exists also in close relationship to the township and its history—it is also popular for challenging the status quo. While during apartheid theatre was used as a platform for fighting the apartheid regime, today it has taken a shift: young people do not only want to use it as a space for voicing out their concerns, but also to tell their stories and in so doing they are reclaiming it, and adding new meanings, aiming at developing its commercial side.

“When we first started practicing community theatre I was still young, if I remember correctly I was doing grade 8 by then. We were only fascinated by the idea of making stories and performing them in front of an audience. The financial gain was the last thing in our minds. My team and I set down about two or three years ago and discussed ways that can assist us in being able to make a living out of our work, as we are now adults with responsibilities. As much as we love what we are doing at the end of the day we have bills to pay. As part of working on this we are taking our work very seriously and yes we are professionals we are doing away with the idea of community theatre makers as being non-professional...”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Siphumzile Pharela, Interviewed in Lwandle, Strand, August 2019



Community theatre does not reflect a sort of technical division of labour within the arts. Community theatre is an institution on its own, it has managed to function both independently as well as with partners. Ever since its existence it has managed to redefine itself, older generations passed stories and skills to younger generations. As long as there are communities, community theatre will always be part of them.

Spaces such as the Makukhanye Art Room, the first shack theatre in South Africa, and other initiatives of this nature demonstrate that artists want to remain in the township and in so doing they are redefining what theatre means. Makukhanye meaning “Let there be light” Art Room is an award winning Shack Theatre that is based in Khayelitsha. Makukhanye was established in the year 2007 in response of black townships having no spaces and platforms for creating and presenting theatrical works— Furthermore this also shows that for a number of years, artists have been existing in between spaces.

I think the beauty of South Africa for me is what I’m trying to do here, every theatre piece for me is a highlight because I come from a community space where community theatre was understood as professional theatre, it just did not have light and sound. I just don’t like the term ‘community’ theatre today because it is just... how can I say? You can have a brilliant play at Guga S’thebe it will be referred to as community theatre because of the content that it speaks to. But without the challenges of the community, same play can be here as well. We need to be very careful of the terminology when we referring to community theatre because this theatre has been built in 1971 only for white people and it is built in the city, where do our people live? The outline areas so we coined the term community theatre because we never had access here. There second thing you must remember we don’t have proper public transport to travel to these spaces. When we talk about community theatre it’s basically because we want the community to have access to theatre. Community theatre should not be seen as a term that reduce our craft. Today we put a connection to community theatre that it’s not professional, no. You need to look at the background, look at what is the context of it.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Marlene le Roux, Interviewed at the Artscape Theatre Centre, Cape Town, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2019.

Marlene strongly empathises on the importance of considering context when dealing with the concept of community theatre. Community theatre is seen and understood differently by its practitioners, this is because it's the only form of theatre which they have created for themselves and in which they have access. Marlene argues that community theatre is only underrated because it is created and practiced within black marginalised communities. She further poses the question of what happens when the same theatrical work is taken into the city on the so called main stages.

### *Community theatre opportunities, training and education*

In the past years a number of programs have been operating in the theatre landscape to bridge the gap between community and mainstream theatre, providing training and platforms to showcase performances outside the townships. Ever since its existence, community theatre has always had some sort of assistance systems in place for building and training artists. This reflects the “nature” of the township in general. People from these communities always find themselves having to be assisted by an “outside hand,” be it in basic needs such as housing, sanitation, water and electricity. “Townships are short of, or poorly serviced with, basic facilities such as roads, streetlights, storm-water drainage, water and electricity, as well as social services such as policing, schools, hospitals, public open spaces and recreational facilities, including community halls” (Morris, 2007: 168) Townships are never fully developed; this is how it has always been. Most sport and recreational programs in the township need the intervention of the government. Without this intervention they are unable to develop and progress accordingly. The point I am trying to make is that the challenges black community theatre makers encounter in the township are a portion of larger issues that affect marginalised communities, just the tip of the iceberg.

The Zabalaza Theatre Festival is a community theatre program that is organised by the Baxter theatre Centre which was founded in August 1977 as the theatre of the University of Cape Town. The Zabalaza outreach programme was formed in order to offer opportunities to young

community theatre artists.<sup>26</sup> This program aims to equip artists who would like to become professionals with the basic and necessary skills—writing, directing, stage managing, acting, etc. Furthermore, Zabalaza also offers opportunities to groups/companies to present their works on the main stage. This programme aims at contributing in building and nurturing black marginalised artists. The promoters of the festival search and identify talents that need mentoring in order to move to a professional level. This is one of the programmes that helps create and promote a culture of theatre within black communities. This it does through the mini festival performances that are organized within townships in spaces such as the Makukhanye Art Room in Khayelitsha—this is while its main festival takes place at the Baxter Theatre Centre.

The Magnet Theatre is a theatre school to many that have graduated in its training programs and to those that are still trainees. Totally different from all outreaching initiatives that are bridging the gap between mainstream and community theatre, Magnet Theatre holds monthly workshops with community companies in terms of skills development, and also offers a full training program to artists, preparing them for the larger industry and providing them with job opportunities within the field. Magnet Theatre was established in 1987 and still runs to this day. It is located in Old Match Factory, in Observatory, not too far from Cape Town's inner city. This is an independent theatre company that mainly deals with physical theatre. Ever since its existence Magnet theatre has created a variety of regional, national as well as international works. It focuses on theatrical research, challenging participants, artists and audiences, shifting perceptions and in so doing changing local and global contexts. One of its missions is to create an original reputation for South African works and place more emphasis on the body as the primary element of theatre. Magnet Theatre tries by all means to contribute in building and transferring skills amongst marginalised communities offering training in physical theatre and theatre-making. It provides facilitation and support to the youth that is underprivileged, historically having limited access for enrolling in universities. Through the training and skills programs that it offers, it aims to contribute in creating job

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<sup>26</sup>“The full name, Zabalaza Intsika eBaxter Theatre, loosely translated, means two things: striving towards being a pillar of the Baxter Theatre Centre and striving towards success.” (<http://www.baxter.co.za/about/zabalaza/>)

opportunities.<sup>27</sup> Magnet Theatre offers a Full Time Training and a Job Creation Programmes which run every year. Before establishing this program Magnet Theatre has been working with community theatre companies for seven years in Khayelitsha. In the year 2008 after working with communities, it initiated this training programmes which offer opportunities to young people and artists who, for one reason or another, are struggling to enroll in higher education and learning institutions. This programme offers all the necessary skill that these young people will need when pursuing their careers—physical theatre, voice, dance, singing, improvisation and play making. The classes are conducted by highly experienced theatre-makers and teachers.

Magnet theatre places more emphasis on the use of the “body.” They strongly believe that the body is the primary source of theatre making. Hence the “body” is their primary requirement for being admitted into training as they disregard other aspects such as race, gender, financial status, school grades, etc. Magnet Theatre believes that the body can communicate across cultures, as it has a universal language. Specifically, in South Africa, they believe that physical theatre is one of ways in which to address contemporary issues of violence. The body is violated in different ways particularly in the South African context and its history. Community theatre has been fighting against this violence ever since its origins. An example of this would be protest theatre which fought the apartheid regime using the body as its weapon to speak up to the oppressor. Community theatre even today uses the body as a tool to voice out its concerns. Its long term goal which hopes in “transforming the theatre industry from one that is white dominated to one that is more inclusive.”<sup>28</sup>

I interviewed Jannie Reznick at the Magnet Theatre in October 2017. I wanted to get the sense of how she understands “community” theatre, and if the Cape Town theatre scene is transforming, and how to locate her work within the larger landscape of the performing arts. In this interview I wanted to get a broader sense of both community and mainstream theatre and how the two interlink. Jannie is very passionate about theatre and contributed so much in its development particularly in the Western Cape. A number great performers have been taken under her wings; theatre in Cape Town would not be the same without her. Even during the

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<sup>27</sup> <http://magnettheatre.co.za/history/> Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> October 2019

<sup>28</sup> <https://magnettheatre.co.za/project/magnet-training-programme>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

interview, she showed so much interest; she responded to my questions beyond my expectations. She is not just passionate about theatre but about her work in general, be it on stage or running the theatre itself.

“I think it’s Uhm!... Kind like a sort of pyramid. So, in a way, a lot of young people start by kind of getting into groups when they are at school, in which they get involved after school hours. They are attracted to theatre because of [how theatre give them] the way of expressing themselves and giving voice to their own concerns. Often they get together in groups, and there’s no one in those groups that has any training or any skills”.<sup>29</sup>

Community theatre is devalued and placed at the bottom of the pyramid, whereas community theatre makers and artists view theatre as a powerful field that needs to be empowered and acknowledged. Those who are involved in this field see a need for it and they are working to keep it alive. Without the initiatives that are implemented to bridge the gap between community and mainstream theatre, community theatre appears to be powerless and voiceless, while in reality it is not. Not to disregard the contribution that these programmes make in uplifting the level of community theatre, I strongly believe that the partnership or rather the working together of community theatre and such programmes is good for both parties. These programmes would not exist without community theatre. I would also argue that there’s an equal balance in terms of contributions from both community theatre and the programmes. It would also be of importance for the mainstream theatre industry to acknowledge the community theatre artists. Many black artists from the township who are today professionals in the industry and have begun their careers in the townships. This is what community theatre does, it exposes the artist to mainstream theatre.

Culture Gangs and Performing Community Memory (PCM) is a support programme for existent drama groups in Cape Town. It acts as a support system to a number of community theatre companies in Cape Town. The goal of this project is to expose young minds to the idea of creative thinking: “It creates gangs of youth who are committed to culture and not to

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<sup>29</sup> Jennie Reznek, Interviewed at Magnet Theatre, Cape Town. October 2017

crime”.<sup>30</sup> This project works with community theatre companies and learners: it runs workshops, holiday programmes, theatre visits etc. Young people also get the opportunity to be mentored. Here Mandla Mbothwe who works together with facilitators Zukisani Nongogo and Yonela Sithela in creating new work. From the year 2018 they have been working with one hundred and fifty youngsters from Nyanga East (Red Zebra Foundation), Samora Machel (Black Star) and (Upawu Community Development), Dunoon (Intsika YakwaXhosa), Vrygrond (Lesedi Arts Group), Khayelitsha (Uthandolwethu) and (Chris Hani High School).<sup>31</sup>

I spoke with the Culture Gangs Group leader, Zukisani Nongogo, who is originally from the Eastern Cape, graduated from the UCT Drama Department in 2016. Zukisani, although a professional, values community theatre as he considers it of great importance within Cape Town. Zukisani went to a primary school in Kwazulu Natal, Porchepstrone, in the rural Eastern Cape, yet it was a good school and drama was part of the curriculum. It was on the school timetables just like every other subject they did and they got marks for it. It was one of the best schools in that area, located in a small town known as Hughey. When applying for a university degree Zukisani’s first choice was journalism; he had applied at Rhodes University. Unfortunately, things did not go well for him there. When his application at Rhodes was turned down, he was left with the only option of going to UCT, where he was accepted to a diploma programme. When he finished his studies at UCT, he was really confused. UCT was a good institution for him, but because he was from the Eastern Cape, he was not so much exposed to the reality of the industry in Cape Town and to what it meant to be on the job market as a black artist. When he graduated he did not really know what he wanted to do.

It was the Magnet Theatre that mediated his access to the Cape Town theatre industry. Now Zukisani works as one of the facilitators of the Culture Gangs Project. He engages with community theatre groups around the townships where they create original productions in collaboration with local people. Throughout the year, they also hold various workshops for

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<sup>30</sup> <https://magnettheatre.co.za/project/the-culture-gangs/> Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> October 2019

<sup>31</sup> <https://magnettheatre.co.za/project/the-culture-gangs/> Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> October 2019

theatre making, voice, directing, etc. They get professionals from outside to conduct those workshops. As Zukisani explained to me:

“The overall goal is sharing these skills with the community artists, and at the end of the whole process they have something to take with... For the closing function they get to perform both in their townships and at Magnet Theatre. Through these shows they also get to utilize the resource’s the theatre has which they do not have.”<sup>32</sup>

Zukisani also told me that he realised that there are things that community theatre artists already know of which he did not and that university graduates still have to learn a lot from community theatre. He views his work with community theatre artist as a platform of exchanging knowledge and skills. Working together with community theatre artists creates a dialogue between graduates and artists and this is what artists of both mainstream and community theatres really need in order to develop and go forward. I have found that for Zukisani community theatre is about addressing issues that are close to the people, bringing up important matters and creating spaces for dialogue where people can do introspection. And that is what is exactly happening in community theatre. However, he argues, community theatre often lacks quality, in terms of storytelling and narration skills. But theatre is not just about conveying a message across, it is also about entertaining people.

One thing that Zukisani really enjoys is writing even if he did not get the opportunity do study further, it is something that he would have continued throughout his life, regardless of education or not.

“I don’t think I would have the courage of pursuing a career in theatre if I didn’t have the paper from UCT.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Zukisani Nongogo, Interviewed at Magnet Theatre, Cape Town. October 2017

<sup>33</sup> Zukisani Nongogo, Interviewed at Magnet Theatre, Cape Town. October 2017

The paper that Zukisani is refereeing to, its degree, plays an important role particularly within the Cape Town industry. Community theatre artists are aware of the importance of education; structural forces working in keeping them out of the mainstream denying access to the main stages. “ [...] Apartheid education denied black people access to the arts at school level, [...] career opportunities for black performers were extremely limited in the performing arts council era and [...] tertiary training institutions with drama departments were generally inaccessible” (Van Graan, 2006: 5). Unfortunately, and sadly this is still the case for many black artists. Initiatives of this nature are the only opportunities for many artists in the townships.

Today Zukisani, when he sees the quality of artists here in the Cape Town industry, he realises that even if he can be an actor he will not be a very good one, there are people who are really talented, who really know how to act. And this he sees mostly from the community theatre artists he works with. Zukisani is not just facilitating, he also does admin and for community theatre companies in order to support them. Artists from the townships need to understand how a formal company is structured and work, and this implies also the focus on the paperwork. This allows the company to not just grow in the field of drama but also in other important aspects.



Community theatre, protest theatre or township theatre are all labels that refer to the theatre that is practiced outside the mainstream boundaries. These terms are taken as to represent underprivileged groups—most of which in South Africa were victims of the apartheid regime. Community theatre still exists today, however its very same meanings have changed with time. The journey of the BSTP demonstrates how community theatre evolves and it is experienced differently by different generations. When they were young theatre was a safe space, an extra mural activity that contributed in their personal developments. As they became adults they needed to find new ways of practicing their craft, ways that were totally different from those they used to do, when they had no responsibilities. With the aim of making a career and a living out of what has always been part of their lives, asked them to



take a shift. This team proves that community theatre makers are able to steer and redefine community theatre to serve their own interest at a particular time.

Today community theatre in Cape Town is used by most black theatre practitioners as a tool of questioning social issues, of exploring history and the present with possibilities of interrogating and influencing the future. Today community theatre makers are taking it up on themselves to make training a fundamental part of their practice. While using platforms and opportunities offered by the mainstream. Outreach initiatives such as the Zabalaza Festival and the Magnet Theatre are playing vital role in giving black theatre makers and community theatre a “title”, practices and experienced that are respected within the mainstream theatre industry of Cape Town.



## Reconceptualising Community Art Practices

In order to understand new emerging theatre formations and developments within community theatre, I am closely looking at the case of the Ukwanda Puppet and Design Company. This chapter discusses how this company has started and how it has progressed throughout its existence until today. Different scholars have argued that community theatre around the world has contributed to processes of change, particularly among populations that have experienced disempowerment (Harding, 1998; Erven, 2001). In this context I am interested in exploring how the boundaries of theatre, specifically those defining the ways in which community theatre is currently viewed and understood, are stretched and transgressed. Ukwanda is an important case study because it shows how one community theatre company that started in a township, managed to overcome its “boundaries” through alternative education paths and access to different forms of patronage. Community theatre should be seen as “a rhizome of connections of life-giving potentials: relationships, partnerships, alliances and ever expanding webs of knowledge and action, beliefs and systems that harnesses the power of the collective and optimizes human functioning” (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005: 5). This is evident if we trace the journey of Ukwanda and point out the rhizomatic nature of its developments. Ever since Ukwanda started they have been creating and telling community based stories regardless of which stage they find themselves on, and most interestingly they always use isiXhosa as the main language of their productions—n cases where the audience is predominantly English speaking they tend to use both English and isiXhosa. Even though most of their work is presented within mainstream theatre platforms their performances explore alternative ways of theatre making. They do not create stories shaped by the interest of the audiences like it happens in most commercial spaces, they strictly use theatre as a “safe space [of...] exploring difference, question everyday life, and say the unsayable” (Diang’a, Kebaya and Mwai, 2015: 107). This is evident in their recent play Warona through which they also aim at increasing awareness on social issues. Although they could be easily defined

as community theatre company, their work has been presented not just locally but it has reached national and international audiences. This almost never happen to the majority of the companies in the townships.

Ukwanda Puppet and Design Company formerly known as the Masiphumelele Youth Development Theatre Group was formed in 2010 by Luyanda Nogodlwane and the late Ncedile Daki, both of them former members of Handspring Puppet Company. Located in the township of Masiphumelele, and in residence at the Factory of the Arts at the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR),<sup>34</sup> Ukwanda worked with a number of professional artist in the theatre industry, more particularly focusing in puppetry. This company is made up of three permanent members which currently are: Luyanda Nogodlwana, Siphon Ngxola and Siphokazi Mpofo. Ukwanda is a small team of three capable of fascinating, thought-provoking and groundbreaking work. Ukwanda has worked and is still working with a variety of artists and scholars nationally and internationally. Ukwanda have been supported and mentored by Handspring Trust for Puppetry Arts and the CHR at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The trust is an initiative of Handspring Puppet Company which was formed in 1981 and based in Cape Town. This trust is focused on creating socially engaged puppetry rooted in both South African traditions and contemporary pop culture. The Handspring Trust for Puppetry Arts was established in 2010; the trust identifies, mentors and produces the next generation of puppetry artists through workshops, academic engagements and the support of projects in rural areas and townships.<sup>35</sup> The Ukwanda team has been privileged enough to be part of this amazing initiative and the results show in their work, and their contribution in the puppetry field. Throughout its existence Ukwanda have been working very closely with Handspring. It is through this relationship and partnership that they have acquired most of their skills and experience. Under the wing of Adrian Kohler and Brasil Jones, Ukwanda have managed to create and present their own works in different platforms in and around Cape Town. As a team they have acquired most of their training and experience through this trust and its activities such as the Barrydale Parade.

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<sup>34</sup> The Factory bring together established art practitioners, students, cultural practitioners, communities (especially of those with little access to arts education) and humanities scholars in an ongoing search for a re-scripting of the meaning of the post-apartheid.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.handspringpuppet.co.za/about-handspring-puppet-company/> Accessed 10 September 2019.

As part of this chapter I am also discussing the last Ukwanda production, Warona, which is directed by Thando Doni and features Siphokazi Mpofo, Luyanda Nongodlwana, Siphon Ngxola, Asanda Rilityana, Siphon Mahlatshana and Mandiseli Maseti.

### *The Journey of Ukwanda Puppet and Design Company*

Luyanda Nongodlwana was born in the Eastern Cape in the village of Tsolo not far away from Umtata. This is where he grew up before moving to Cape Town in 2002 after completing grade 9. He continued with his studies in Masphumelele—or “Masi” as he calls his township— where he enrolled in high school and completed grade 12. After matric he was unable to further continue his studies due to financial difficulties. At that time he was not working, nor was he studying; he used to spend most of his time at the Masiphumelele library which at the time offered various social and creative activities. He used most of his spare time to keep himself busy, practicing art, building sculptures and making paintings. As he kept on being involved in the libraries activities, he met Ncedile Daki and other artists with whom he continued to work together with.

It was around June when volunteers from abroad visited Masi library, this was an opportunity for local artists to display their artworks presented itself, that Luyanda showcased his own work. The volunteers were drawn to his paintings and sculptures and the lady that was running the library at the time, Susan Alexandra (Sue), noticed his work. After the event, Susan approached Luyanda and they had a conversation where he told her that he was looking for a job. Sue promised him that she would put him in contact with artists she knew. After a while, Sue contacted him again and they went to Kalk Bay to meet director Andrian Kohler and Producer Brasil Jones, founders of Handspring Puppetry. At this stage Luyanda knew nothing about puppetry making and he had no particular interest on the field; this was mainly because puppetry was alien to him at the time. It was during his meeting with the Handspring team that Luyanda had the opportunity of seeing the puppets for the first time. He was overwhelmed by the experience and really loved what he saw. When he first saw the puppets he saw them as sculptures, probably because he was a sculptor at the time. After the

first meeting, Adrian and Basil told Luyanda that they did not have any work for him at that stage. However, after buying two of his paintings they promised to call him back when they had a bigger projects.

After a while Handspring called him and offered him a job in their upcoming production, which was “The Warhorse”. The Warhorse is a record-breaking production, a play that has been staged for eight years in London, performed in eleven countries around the world, which has been seen by more than seven million people. The play itself is based on the novel by Michael Morpurgo.<sup>36</sup> Before working on the Warhorse project Luyanda had worked on another projects with them. Yet, for him, the Warhorse was the biggest production in which he got to work. In this project he was part of the team that built the nine horses, four soldiers and two birds. The show started touring around the world in England and Canada. The work for him was expanding and started to be more serious. Adrian and Brasil were moved by his dedication and passion especially in creating the puppets. As the show was getting bigger they could no longer monitor and oversee the working progress done by puppet makers—as the production required them to move around traveling. Luyanda was then assigned to other positions and responsibilities filling in for Adrian and Brasil when they were not around. They assigned Luyanda to a supervising position as they added more employees and at the time there were around twenty-two workers who were part of the production. In this process Luyanda got the opportunity to learn more about the art of creating the puppets—cutting plywood,<sup>37</sup> using machines, sculpturing cane and using chemicals. He felt love for what once was “alien” to him.

As his love for puppets grew, he decided to create his own company and to approach Adrian to get advice and support. Adrian was happy with the idea. Luyanda started collecting left over material and off cuts at the workshop, taking them back home. His first ever puppet was made with foam. He shaped and completed it but he did not have a costume for it; it was a giant puppet. He went back to Adrian, who gave him the costume to dress his puppet. At this stage he was creating the puppet for his own show which he planned staging at Masiphumelele. He made a video of the show and went back to Adrian. It was after this

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.warhorseonstage.com/about/> Accessed 10 August 2019

<sup>37</sup> A type of strong thin wooden board consisting of two or more layers glued and pressed together with the direction of the grain alternating.

whole process that he decided to drop and forget about painting. However he still sees sculptures and puppets more like the same, even though he is more fascinated by puppets because they are moving objects; he refers to them as moving sculptures.

Like many artists in black communities, space has always been a challenge for Luyanda. During the day he was working at Handspring, later when he was back he would start working on his own puppets. His projects required him to have his own workshop which he created outside his shack using just a bulb for the light as he was used to work till midnight. His neighbours did not understand what he was doing every night, they even thought of him as being crazy. Siphon joined the Ukwanda Puppet Company when he started assisting Luyanda in making puppets. They already knew each other as they are from the same village in the Eastern Cape and they also lived together in Fishhoek.

When they first began making their own puppets they faced a number of challenges as many community based black artists from the townships. Puppets can be easily made out of almost any material such as plastic, fabric, cardboard, paper etc. Luyanda was inspired by a big well known puppetry company that was based on creating world class and large scale puppets; he had a desire of creating similar work. For this reason he started using the very expensive material that he found at work and which he could not afford to buy himself. They managed to access an old building at Masiphumelele which was an art centre before it closed down. The space was not far from Masi taxi rank and they stayed there for a while after eventually being moved out of it. The community needed the space for other social activities which were seen as more important. Ultimately the space became a church and a burial society venue. By this time Siphon and Luyanda were officially working together and Ncedile Daki had also joined the company.

As they started working together they wanted to take their craft to the next level by developing a puppet performance show. They started adapting stories from books. Since stories in books are not necessarily written for puppetry performances, Luyanda had to re-write and adapt them. As usual he turned to Adrian for advice and mentoring, his relationship with Handspring was and still is very strong. Adrian advised him to find someone that was specialised in writing to assist in the process and this is how they met Mongiwekhaya (Mongi) Mthombeni. Mongi was their first director, he worked with them in their first play

titled “Qhawe” which they performed at the Grahamstown Festival featuring Luyanda Nogodlwana, Siphon Ngxola, Nomakhosi Meveni, Siphokazi Mpofu, Sydwell Klaas, Zikhona Jan and the late Ncedile Daki.



Ukwanda Performing Qhawe at Grahamstown National Arts Festival  
Photograph by CuePix / Jane Berg (2015)

When Ukwanda first started Qhawe back in Masiphumelele each one of the puppeteers on stage had one puppet to manipulate and they had no director. They were reading the play out loud and rehearsed with no one to monitor their progresses and overseeing the sessions. They took turns in directing, each of them getting the opportunity to play the role of the director and observing how the play looked like. Ultimately they had no experience and understanding of what to look at when directing a play. This is how they created their first production which was then staged in Masi, inviting both Adrian and Brasil in their first show. This was a productive start for them as they also managed to receive feedback from the Handspring people. At this stage they had no experience at all as they did not even know or understand well the puppetry movements. They were imitating what they observed and didn't have any background knowledge: they did not know how puppets move and how they are supposed to be moved. Handspring began from there to mentor them, introducing them to

the basics. It was then that they began to understand the “life” of a puppet and how one should treat it.

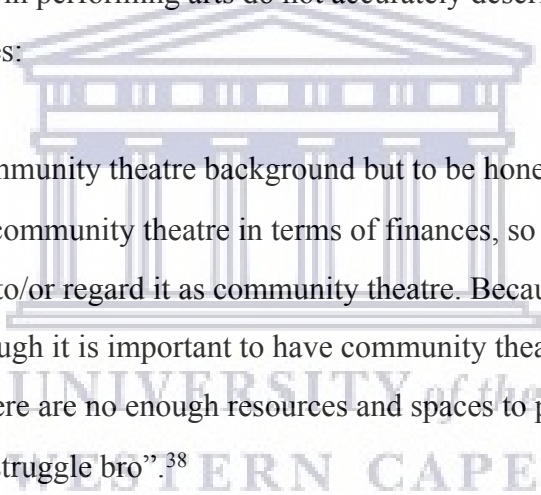
The journey of Luyanda as an artist is to an extent similar to that of many black theatre makers from marginalized communities. This is where the journey and the history of Ukwanda began. However, I am particularly interested in Luyanda’s personal story because of what his biography can say on the ways in which new opportunities are emerging for young black artists and on the new meanings community theatre practices have today. Most community theatre groups and companies are made of people without formal training who were not able to pursue their studies further. The history and struggles of community theatre today in Cape Town mirrors the lives of those it represents and the shockingly unequal society in which the marginalised strive for basic needs.

The relationship with the Handspring Puppet Company has allowed Ukwanda to accessing training and skills development and to build contacts and networks both nationally and internationally. Ukwanda’s scenario is unique in this sense as it was initiated with its foundation on a well-established company. This is what makes this team in many ways different from a number of community theatre companies. Handspring has played a vital role in the growth of Ukwanda as they recreated a young generation of theatre and puppetry makers that will continue the legacy that the company has built for years. The type of training, experience and mentorship they have received could not be acquired through formal learning or in university. This example shows the plurality of formation paths that are possible within the arts, and that displace the power university degree or formal training have in shaping the future of artists. Every journey is unique, there is no single route that one can choose to get into this industry. The most important aspects are passion, talent and consistency.

Popularly known as a platform for voicing out social concerns, today community artists, like the Ukwanda company, are reclaiming and redefining what community theatre is and what it means to tell stories which are rooted within black experiences. The kind of partnership they build with companies outside the townships shows that community theatre is in a sense evolving also in economic terms. What was then seen as a platform for protest today is turning into a career field which has the potential of sustaining its creators. For years Black



artists have been accustomed in being casted by white directors working in white productions in order to make a living. Marginalised artists are beginning to question how mainstream theatre has received their work, they are starting to problematise the exclusion of black bodies from mainstream programmes while in the meantime they are using outreach initiatives to make themselves visible. Being mentored and working with a company such as Handspring has afforded Ukwanda with more opportunities in financial and working terms. The artistic journey of the Ukwanda points to the fact that there is a need of overcoming the traditional existing gap between mainstream and community theatre. They show how these categories—community/mainstream theatre, professional/non-professional—awkwardly reflect the existing productions and the aspirations of the artists. When one closely looks at Ukwanda it is easy to understand that even though this is a community based company, the already existing categories in performing arts do not accurately describe their work and what they do. As Siphokazi states:



“It is good to have a community theatre background but to be honest with you there’s not enough support for community theatre in terms of finances, so for me I cannot take my big production to/or regard it as community theatre. Because I will lose at the end of the day, although it is important to have community theatre for young upcoming artist. And there are no enough resources and spaces to present work, community theatre is a struggle bro”.<sup>38</sup>

From our conversations it was very clear to me that she knows what it is like to be a community theatre maker. Community theatre has its pros and cons as Siphokazi is stating, most black theatre makers in Cape Town are a result of community theatre. The major problem with this theatre genre throughout its existence has been its commercial side. It is very much easy for theatre makers to practice when they are still in school with no responsibilities. The problems for many begin when one has to find a real job.

Training and mentoring has played a very important role in the development of the company which is what many black marginalised theatre makers are not exposed to. Since the

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<sup>38</sup> Siphokazi Mpofu, Interviewed at Ukwanda’s apartment at University Estate in Cape Town, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2017

Ukwanda have come to existence they have managed to perform in a variety of stages and venues in and around the Western Cape. They have presented their work within the CBD as well as in the surrounding townships, community halls, schools, shack theatres while also having taken part in theatre festivals such as the Zabalaza Theatre Festival, National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, the Montague National Youth Arts Festival etc.

### *Warona*

The play *Warona*, produced by Ukwanda in 2018-2019 also illustrates well how Ukwanda exists in an in-between space that cannot be easily defined as community or mainstream theatre. I am arguing that community theatre, as a general concept that gather productions and art from marginalized communities, is not static as it might seem. Quite differently from how it is generally portrayed, it has the ability of being “mainstream” and “commercial” while still embodying its originality when we are closely looking at its productions. For example, plays like *Warona* are able to exist both in mainstream and community theatre. Here I am also looking at what makes these possibilities happening, in a sense imagining Ukwanda without the external patronage.

During my fieldwork in June of 2019 with Ukwanda they were staging their recent work *Warona* within black marginalised communities. This was before they went to stage this same production in Makhanda. Puppetry requires intensive training and preparation as well as dedication. Most importantly it requires passion: these young people show tremendous love not just for puppetry as a form of art but to the puppets themselves. For them puppets are living beings with personalities, this is a unique way of viewing the puppet which to an extent requires a certain amount of understanding the puppet itself. Puppetry in South Africa has a very young history as “its diverse European roots started to take on an eclectic and collaborative character and social consciousness in the 1980s” (Kruger, 2012: 172). It is in the 1990s that the boundaries between the ordinary theatre and puppetry begin to blur progressively as puppetry started to form part of a number of award-winning and internationally acclaimed mainstream theatre productions that contained a combination of visual elements. “Prominent puppet artist such as Gary Friedman and Handspring Puppet Company serve as significant markers in the evolution of contemporary socially relevant and

eclectic puppetry which explores the metaphysical uniqueness of the puppet” (*Ibid.* 2012: 172). Even though puppetry first appeared in South Africa in the 1830s, it is still not a popular form of art especially in black marginalised communities. Gary Friedman and Handspring Puppet Company are the only historically prominent puppet artists that I have come across in South Africa. Ukwanda at some point in their journey have experienced being mocked and made fun of because of what they do. This backward thinking on its own demonstrates the lack of understanding and interest in this particular form of art by many, especially in the townships. To some degree this extends to performing art in general, hence the culture of theatre in most black communities is non-existent.

I was privileged enough to be around Ukwanda throughout their process of conceptualisation and of bringing Warona to life. Warona is the first puppet to which I was personally introduced to, while it was still incomplete. When Warona the main character of the show was created the team already had an idea of the direction they wanted the story to take. At this time it was already concluded that Siphokazi will play the main character. Ukwanda is a very small team of three which makes it very difficult for them to fully run their shows without extra hands. To make their job easier the team hire actors when necessary. Mongiwekhaya their first ever director was assigned to direct this show, this was before Thando Doni took the position. When Thando arrived he introduced new ways of creating and telling stories to the team. He began the creation process as an improvisation workshop and allowed actors to individually write their own scripts which were eventually brought together to make one complete story. All the actors of the show are black artists who are accustomed to township life and the everyday challenges that faced by young people in such settings. And this is what Warona is based on.

The process of creating this play was an interesting one for me as the team began by drafting a synopsis and then started to build the puppets. When I first visited the team Warona was the only complete character for the play and other puppets—Warona’s mother, Vera and the butcher, Tito—were still in separate incomplete pieces. In the process of creating puppets the team also used prototypes to explore and test the final performance. Creating this plays has been a process as each aspect of the show needed time to reach perfect. In the process of creating the show the team had small public demonstrations where they would showcase the incomplete work to random groups of people in order to get additional feedback. It was after

this that the show was then showcased to a larger audience in an around the city of Cape Town.

The play is set Kwa Njandini meaning “where dogs live” which is a fictional name that represents townships in Cape Town. Within the story they describe the setting as a small informal settlement that is situated 60 kilometers away from the CBD, a place that is dry and very hot, dirty and over populated, which smells of blocked drainages, where you see people going to church every Sunday. This description is that of many townships not just in Cape Town but in South Africa at large. The story of Warona is inspired by such settings where young children turn to be victims of drug abuse. Warona takes the audience on a journey of a young innocent girl being overtaken by tik.<sup>39</sup> The play comes with a warning and a hope to educate teenagers who are faced with challenging and at times tempting decisions that could negatively affect their lives and future. Warona is surrounded by negativity and everyday struggles. Her dream is one day to be able to leave the township. A dream that is shared by many living in these isolated and deserted areas. Warona is unable to bare the idea of existing in such conditions, eventually she gives in into drugs in an attempt of escaping the reality of her everyday life. The most important thing in this play is that it comes with a lesson, providing hope while presenting the dangers of drug abuse.

Since my first encounter with live puppetry in 2017 when I started developing an interest in puppetry I started thinking about puppets in ways that I have never done before. As an artist I had never considered puppetry—objects used in performance which functions as the emotional and/or intellectual and/or ideational prosthesis of the person—as such a powerful medium of performance. What caught my interest is how to consider the puppet: a body or an object on stage? Through Warona I began to question to what extent can a puppet be the emotional and or intellectual prosthesis of a human in a performance for an audience. Who is manipulating who, the body or the object, the upper or the puppeteer? Where does the puppet begin and the human ends? What is the puppet’s way of connecting to an audience? Can we think of characters/actors as puppets in productions where there are no puppets? Torpey (2009) believes that through disembodied performance stories that cannot not be performed on stage find ways to be told. Theatre has used a number of methods to do this in its long

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<sup>39</sup> Tik (or lollie, tjoef, crystal meths or ice) is a drug that comes in a form of small white or blue rocks or rather crystals that are snorted, smoked, injected into ones veins or swallowed.

history but it is puppetry only that have come close, allowing human bodies to take other forms on stage without engaging in representational metaphor or indirection. The use of the bodies and the puppets as objects of representation open new ways of thinking and viewing the world. Stage semiotization as Hawkes (1980) termed it, is of particular interest and importance with respect to the actor and his physical attributes, since he is, in Veltrusky's phrase, "the dynamic unity of an entire set of signs". In classical dramatic performance the actor's body obtains its mimetic and representational powers through becoming something other than itself, totally different from the individual. "This equally applies to his own speech and to every other part of his performance to such an extent that even purely contingent factors, such as physiologically determined reflexes, are accepted as signifying units. The spectator understands even these non-purposive components of the actor's performance as signs" (Veltruský, 1940:84- 85).



Warona the puppet at Ukwanda workshop studio  
Photographs by Zuko Sikhafungana (2017)

*Warona* demonstrates that there is something interesting and important about the puppet and its relationship with the human—be it in a form of the puppeteer or the audience in general. This is substantiated by how the audience sympathise with Warona in the play, when the story begins to take shape and presents a reality faced by many in the townships. Regardless of these events being showed through a piece of wood or a doll, the audience connects with the

puppet, this happens simultaneously as the puppeteer also connects with it, being simultaneously on stage. I believe it is through these energies that the puppet comes alive. What is more interesting is how even audience members who are not accustomed to township life are drawn to the story. Even though puppetry is one form that is mostly associated with children, Ukwanda shows cater for a wider audience which includes children and adults. For example, Warona is suitable for both young children and adults.

Warona is a professional show that toured around Western Cape marginalised communities—Paarl, Delft, Kraaifontein, Lwandle etc. What these artists did is something new and in a sense it is breaking down the old ways of practicing theatre. Yes, one cannot shy away from the fact that theatre is not alien to these communities as the same communities are home to many community theatre makers. Audiences themselves are acquainted with theatre. What Ukwanda is doing differently here is that they are a team from a township, creating work that speaks to people who are inhabiting them, and the same their work has the potential of being taken to the main commercial stage. Commercial theatre in Cape Town is shaped by its audiences, hardly confrontational and mainly there to be entertain. Most works that speak to issues of inequality in South Africa are seen in the reenactment of classical plays mostly by Athol Fugard. One can hardly find or see current protest plays unless you attend festivals such as the Zabalaza.

When Ukwanda first started performing in Masiphumelele they did free shows. When they were performing Warona within the surrounding townships of Cape Town they did it free as well. Even though the show was free of charge in some townships it was a challenge to get audiences to come to see the show. This was the case when they were performing in community halls and the main reason for this is the fact that puppetry is still misunderstood. However what is interesting about Warona is that it does not only tell a powerful story, it also challenges ones perspective about puppetry and puppetry making. The lack of understanding when it comes to different art forms in townships still exists.



Ukwanda performing Warona during its Cape Town school at Lwandle Museum  
Photograph by Zuko Sikhafungana (2019)

### *Training*

During my fieldwork I have engaged with the Ukwanda team about a number of issues in and around the theatre industry in Cape Town. In one of my conversations with Siphokazi we were discussing the role and the importance of training and education, and more especially for black theatre artists from marginalised communities.

Siphokazi started doing puppetry back when she was still in high school and that is when she fell in love with it. When she first encountered puppetry they used simple doll puppets that are totally different from what she is using today. When she started pursuing puppetry making she had no intentions of making a career out of it. Drawing from multiple conversations I had with all the three members of the Ukwanda team, I have come to understand that their journeys are somehow similar and they are all driven by passion. Siphokazi was an artist at *Isibane* Drama group,<sup>40</sup> a community theatre company based in Khayelitsha, Makhaza. She went to further her studies at Northlink College in Bellville where she studied marketing management. Siphokazi developed herself as a puppet makers at UNIMA South Africa,

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<sup>40</sup> *Isibane* translates as “light”.

“Union International de la Marionette”.<sup>41</sup> This is where most her knowledge about puppets (creation and performance) comes from. In 2014 Siphokazi was lucky to be selected out of twenty UNIMA graduates and she was granted the opportunity to be an intern at the Handspring Puppet Company which at the time was everyone’s dream. Through her dedication and commitment today she is proud to call herself a professional puppeteer and puppet maker and this is also because of the additional training she received from Handspring while being part of the company.

In August 2017, during their first presentation of Warona, I had the opportunity of meeting Mongiwekhaya Mthombeni for the first time. Mongi who was also the recipient of the Fleur du Cap Award for Best New South African Script for his play “I see you”, was very kind and welcoming throughout the interview and I felt like I knew him for years. It was not much of a challenge conversing with him, I think this was simply because we are both theatre makers and having that in common made it easier for us to engage in a fruitful conversation. We began by discussing his play “I See You” which I had read before meeting him. Mongi stressed how in order for one to practice theatre there is no need to have a tertiary institution degree, but for those who are not fortunate to access tertiary institutions, he stated that one at least needs to find an apprenticeship like for example at the Market Theatre Laboratory (The Lab) in Johannesburg. He himself has been a teacher there and he knows a lot of great performers and some of his friends who have gone there. The Lab was Founded by Dr John Kani together with Barney Simon in 1988, it offers a two year course where you learn different kinds of skills such as acting, theatre-making, writing and directing. The first important thing to learn is the basics, Mogi stated: how it works, how you conceive and imagine a show. After all, theatre is not just about telling your story, it is about crafting it.

Mongi regards himself as a wordsmith—a fancy word which according to him means “the story teller of the universe”. Like most theatre makers he started his journey at the very bottom. After figuring out that he was struggling and he could not make money by himself for himself, he realised that he needed training. He pursued his studies at Rhodes

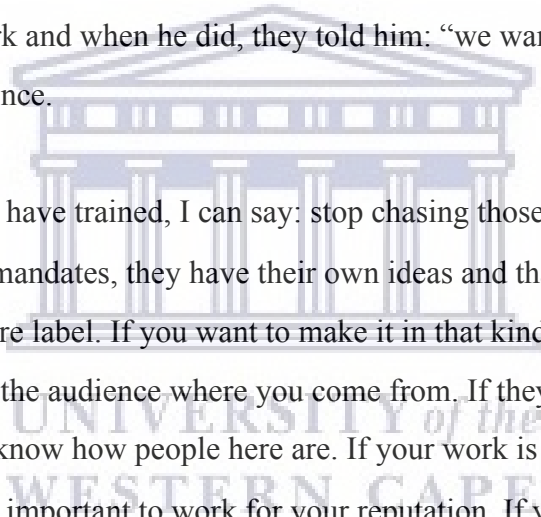
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<sup>41</sup> UNIMA SA, is the South African association of Puppetry and Visual performance which was established in 1972 working to develop puppetry art in South Africa through encouraging the exposure of South African puppet makers at the same time developing community theatre maker’s skills. This organisation was later formally registered as an NPO in the year 2005. <http://www.unimasouthafrica.org/> [Accessed 25 November 2019].



University when he finished his degree, still he knew that that was not what he wanted. He pursued his dream training eight hours a day and working with corporates to make a living. If he had to dress up as a clown, he would dress up as one. He would be paid and use that money for his training. When a professional director would ask him to do something, he would not only be able to do that, but go even beyond.

With Handspring, when he had the auditions five year ago, he confessed that he had never picked up a puppet in his life. They looked at him and said: “you are too young to play this role, you not right for this role.” But he said: “just give me a chance, just let me be in the room and do something”. And they said: “fine, we will give you a shot”. They opened the door and he had to deliver. All he did was to forget about everyone in the room and focus on learning the technique, and because he trained eight hours a day, he knew how to understand how things work and when he did, they told him: “we want you to do it!” And he became part of it ever since.



“Even to the people that have trained, I can say: stop chasing those big theatres, those big theatres have mandates, they have their own ideas and that’s where you get the community theatre label. If you want to make it in that kind of a space first create here, and capture the audience where you come from. If they are willing to pay for your work, you know how people here are. If your work is boring, they will tell you ... it is also important to work for your reputation. If you work hard on that, it might take five or ten years but it will .... You know this game is hard, man; this game is so hard and you have to be a better performer than anyone could possibly expect you to. No pity parties, don’t be pitied. If you find yourself in situations where people feel pity for you going ...argh! shame.... That is not a career!”<sup>42</sup>

Mongi’s professional path is not different from that of most professional theatre makers in general. From the very start of his journey Mongi focused on getting training and he had access to spaces that offered what he needed to become a professional. Driven by passion, Mongi has made personal decisions, knowing exactly where he wanted to go. He also

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<sup>42</sup>Mongiwekhaya, Interviewed at Gugasthebe Cape Town, Langa. 13<sup>th</sup> August 2017

developed an in-depth understanding of the theatre industry in South Africa; he knew exactly what the risks of pursuing a career in theatre making are.

His professional path demonstrates the importance of training which does not necessarily have to be in the form of a formal tertiary institution. His path also demonstrates the difficulties of acquiring a tertiary education in the arts. This might be because there are not enough universities offering education in theatre and those that exist are too expensive for many young black artists. Hence we have few black professional with higher qualifications in the industry; this also shows how small the industry is. Mongi has also pointed out that as an artist it is important to multi-task, being versatile and learn different roles and positions in order to make it. Job opportunities are rare hence most artists create and invent their own work. This is the importance of university: university equips one on how to make it, but not all universities prepare their students for the outside world. Some are fortunate enough to be guided on how to create their own working opportunities and they also have access to funding. The performing arts market can be very limited for some individual and broader for some depending on contexts and social factors such as race, gender and socio-economic status. In this industry there are playwrights, actors, directors, stage managers, light and sound designers, trainees and teachers. Most community theatre makers are not interested in jobs like light and sound, design and stage managing. This is due to the fact that these aspects of theatre are not part of their theatrical experiences as they do not have access to proper theatre venues. Those who know about these jobs are those who received education on theatre and have a broader understanding of their contribution.

### *Barrydale*

Ukwanda has been part of the Barrydale annual giant puppetry parade and performance event for long time and today the team is playing one of the major roles in making the parade—designing and building the giant puppets and preparing for the performances under the Handspring mentorship.

The parade began in 2010 as a project of the Handspring Puppet Trust in partnership with Barrydale community based organization Net vir Pret working mainly with children and young people. Net vir Pret is also one those spaces where children explore and become the people that they ought to be one day. All these activities are mainly art-based and throughout the year they are shaped around the theme of the parade. The event itself brings the community together producing businesses opportunities in town. Young children are able to have after school activities in which they are able to learn about themselves as well as the craft they are practicing, beginning to see theatre being practiced within their own communities, as the creating and preparation process for the parade takes a full year. During the year different artists, young and old, create and build their own puppets while they also use the same space for rehearsals.

Barrydale is a village which is at a three-hour drive from Cape Town, located on the border of the Klein Karoo and Overberg regions. Barrydale was only introduced to giant puppets about ten years ago and at first this was something the community was never exposed to. This was totally new for the people in upper Barrydale who did not have any experience with theatre and performance. What started as a children show was tremendously transformed when the puppets were introduced and important issues that were affecting the community took the centre stage. This village is divided into two parts: upper and lower Barrydale. Upper Barrydale host the marginalized community of “coloured” people while the lower Barrydale is the wealthier and richer upper class white area of the town.

For artists in and around Barrydale puppetry became the perfect medium to convey issues of concern. When it first started, the parade also had its challenges in terms of space—as it took place in the lower Barrydale. People from the upper side would have to go down and the space was not suited for performances: there was no proper sound and this was a huge challenge for them because the show did not make the intended impact on their audiences. It was after this first event that the show was moved to the local primary school which is situated on top of the hill, in between the two sides. This was a not the perfect space—a net ball field—and there were no proper seats, the audience had to sit on a slope, but it was good and better than the first space they had. Later on, the Handspring Puppet Trust built proper seats and the space just became an excellent space to perform in, that can fit in over two hundred people, children, young people, actors and puppets. Today they also have a rehearsal

space called a *Karioki*, it is a space where puppets are also stored. The parade in some way also helped bridging the gap between the two communities, as the artists rehearse in the lower Barrydale side and go up for the performance in the upper side.



Ukwanda performing the Rhino's at Barrydale  
Photograph by Zuko Sikhafungana (2017)

Barrydale parade is one of the Ukwanda's major projects which has existed for ten years and is still growing today. While they do not regard themselves as a community theatre company, mainly because of the negative connotations that comes with barring the label, Ukwanda continues to share its skills and knowledge of puppetry arts with communities through staging its works in various communities and conducting workshops on puppetry making. Barrydale puppet parade is a community event made up of intellectuals, artists, skilled and non-skilled people brought together by the puppets every year on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December, South Africa reconciliation day. This parade is a community based project that started in a community and continues to work within the same community. One can look at this initiative as a way of creating performing arts within communities that were art deprived. As this is an ongoing project, it plays an important role in encouraging marginalised communities on creating their own works, deconstructing the idea that theatre making is a practice that is only found in the city. Ukwanda as a theatre company that is re-conceptualising and introducing new ways of seeing and thinking about community theatre plays a very important role in the development of this parade. Through this parade Ukwanda is able to demonstrate the capabilities of community theatre especially when there is support. One thing that is holding a number of community theatre companies backwards is in fact support in terms of training,

funding and mobilization of resources. This parade that exists annually demonstrates well the potentiality of community theatre when it is given the right platforms and support. The parade is for the Ukwanda a fulltime job. This is one of the factors that differentiates them from most community theatre companies/groups. The majority of theatre makers in the townships have alternative jobs to sustain themselves as their craft does not produce any form of income.

Every year the show revolves around different themes: this year's theme was robots and insects titled "The Final Spring" focusing on climate change. The spectacle is a combination of story, music and dance. Most of the themes explored in the parade more generally educate the public of Barrydale about different issues that indirectly and directly affects them.

Largely the shows are to entertain and celebrate South Africa's diversity. Fundamentally, during the process of these shows a group of youngsters is taken out to study and learn more about the theme at hand. For example in 2017 when the chosen theme was about Rhino poaching, Ukwanda together with the local artists were taken out to visit actual rhinos in a game park, as they needed to observe how these animals behave and move as part of their preparations for the performance. Jane Taylor (2018: 1) states that "an ethics of 'mutuality' is established during periods of close investigation, as performers study the animals they will be staging. The puppeteer does not simply observe the animal, in order to create a compelling performance; rather the puppeteer must 'become' the animal through identification." In 2018 the parade was titled "River and Redfin" celebrating and reclaiming the power and mythologies go water, while raising awareness on the local river in times of draught. Ukwanda are the ones who craft and build life size puppets for the Barrydale shows.

The parade plays a very important role in crossing the rural and urban divide as it brings together different audiences from Barrydale, Cape Town and even abroad. Ukwanda plays a very important role, contributing in making a difference not just in Barrydale but in the lives of the community members giving hope and dreams to children and teenagers in a place where dreams are shuttered and the youth finds employment in the farms. Art in this village became a vehicle and a tool for fighting systems that oppress marginalised communities.

The parade becomes a powerful tool where South African inequality and the divide that has long existed between different racial groups are publicly addressed and challenged. These

artistic expressions involve the entire village including its people: the farm worker together with the farmer. Community theatre has the ability of becoming an essential part of the change that basically constitutes cultural movements (Kershaw, 1992). As Diang'a, Kebaya and Mwai (2015: 109) argue that community theatre "is not only about education, development or change, but it also interrogates the socio-cultural and geopolitical living conditions of people."

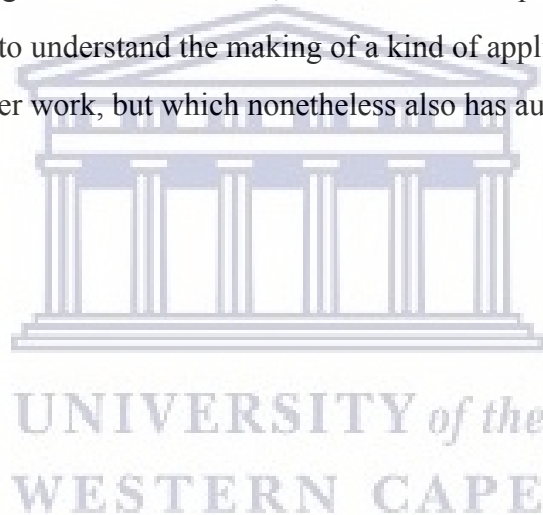
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It is important to note that Ukwanda in most of their work are concerned with addressing issues of life, particularly of those that are marginalised. The Ukwanda team was fortunate enough for having mentors from who to get advice. They built the foundation of the company with the help of an international professional company. The Handspring Puppet Trust also contributed in a number of ways in shaping an outstanding company which is capable of existing in the in-between spaces and above theatre categories. Through mentoring and platforms such as that of Barrydale, Ukwanda is able to create and perform their own work, create connections while contributing to the development of the next generation of theatre makers coming from marginalised communities. The Ukwanda cases study raises questions around how theatre labels such as community and mainstream theatre are limiting and poorly reflect the kind of work that is emerging today in the townships in Cape Town. Their work questions the ways in which we understand performing arts: is "community theatre" employed only to index practices in townships or villages? What happens when a show from the Fugard is performed at Makukhanye Art Room in Khayelitsha?

It is clear that one of the main issues in community theatre revolves around space, space to work and space to perform. Space is still a challenge for Ukwanda as they rely on Handspring company for some of their preparation work when building prototypes for the Barrydale parade. Also if they were not artists in residence at the CHR they will probably still struggle to find a safe workshop space in the township. This has always been a major challenge from the beginning when Luyanda was building puppets for Qhawe, which was produced in Masipumelele but completed and finalised at the workshop of Handspring simply because they had no space and no tools. Most of their performance are paid performances meaning

they are able to sustain themselves through their craft. Through shifting their focus and not only basing themselves in the townships, they are able to change the nature of the work they produce.

Finally, training seems to be at the centre of being a successful theatre maker, regardless of it being formal or not. From Mongi's experiences one can conclude that there's no form of training that is better than the other, nor a hierarchy of training when it comes to theatre making. One of the most important things about creating yourself within theatre making is being practical and learning on the job, this is where the experience is. This is exactly the same path that Luyanda took. This brings us back to the power of collaboration as Ukwanda shows how fundamental it is to build collaborations with different artists, actors and directors. "One of the things collaboration does, even outside the specifics of a particular work, is that it allows one to understand the making of a kind of applied arts, art in the service of some other, larger work, but which nonetheless also has autonomy on its own (Taylor, 2009: 205).



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion ever since its beginnings, community theatre has been demonstrating its power in making the impossible possible. The structures or rather programmes that assist community theatre in terms of its development appear as if they dominate community theatre in every aspects, whereas community theatre have been exiting and still continues to exist independently. Hence community theatre seems to be depending on the mainstream outreach initiative programmes for its development. One can only imagine what would happen to the mainstream theatre if the external financial support was withdrawn. Unlike community theatre, state funded and commercial theatre are mainly focused on financial gain. Black theatre makers from marginalised communities somehow they pose a threat to the mainstream. We cannot shy away from the fact that as much as these programmes support the artists in the townships, also ultimately theatre benefit from community theatre artists as well. Community theatre has the ability to be independent and be successful, artists today are starting to realise the need of reclaiming their art practice and they are beginning to make their mark. This is why there is a growing number of art spaces that are being created by artists themselves within their own communities. Artists are no longer interested in being governed by the theatre industry, yet they aim for larger stages to share their stories and concerns. They strive to make themselves visible as community theatre artists.

Makukhanye Artroom in Khayelitsha is a good example of how community theatre is in a way reclaiming and redefining itself. This shows that black artists have observed and seen that they are not always welcomed in mainstream theatre spaces. What makes this initiative more powerful is that they are creating their own spaces in their own communities while building their own audiences, hopefully also attracting people from outside the townships. When black artists have their own spaces, this also opens possibilities of creating partnerships with mainstream theatres. A good example of this is the The Fugard offering lights and sound to Makukhanye Art room and inviting these artists as fellows to come see their shows. In this way they are attempting to bridge the gap between community and mainstream. This is extremely important because community theatre is theatre, and it allows people to express themselves and tell their own stories. The problem begins when theatre gets



put into the “community” box which in a sense limits arts. Community theatre, which “is indeed confronted by ambiguities in terms of the agency, power and representation of its participants” (Chinyowa, 2009: 11) should not be a box or a category to diminish performing arts and artists’ work but rather a term that is chosen by its creators and not by outsiders.



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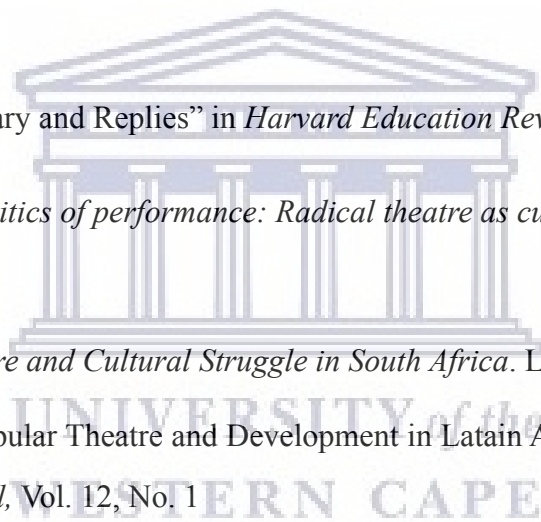
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