Chapter One
A South African ‘cultural cocktail’

The themes in my work are influenced by the things I see happening – that make me unhappy. I want to create debate. I never give solutions, I pose questions in a theatrical form. About gender, equality, power, social and political imbalances.
(Gregory Maqoma, interview after rehearsal 4 August 2004)

This chapter introduces the work of choreographer Gregory Maqoma and his role in South African society. His personal history reveals a long relationship both with the arts and his country of birth, especially in terms of his challenge to its ideologies. Maqoma’s identity is mixed, as is his choreography – a mix that is threatening to essentialised views of a ‘new’ South Africa. This chapter analyses his position as a young performing artist in the South African society of the new millennium. It does so through a historical overview of arts and culture in this country and how this history has affected the role and position of the artist. What is revealed is that South Africa has a long way to go on its road to democracy and that artists such as Maqoma offer an essential voice in the dialogue about what it means to be free and equal, and about the limits that are created by these ideologies.

Maqoma in Newtown, Johannesburg, December 2003
Gregory Vuyani Maqoma

Gregory Maqoma is a 33 year-old who has carved out a niche for his work through his unapologetic criticisms of society and explorations of his identity that one could describe as: a young, black, homosexual, ‘previously disadvantaged’1, upwardly mobile, South African. His choreography sits on a fault line. Historically, he is positioned in a generation of choreographers who have known both the constraints of apartheid and the challenges of freedom. Stylistically, his work is a blend of ‘European’ forms and ‘African’ movements that he has crafted into his signature vocabulary. Politically, he both questions the contradictions of a new social order and, more recently, rejects the power of their existence by choreographing work that is intended for pleasure alone. Currently Maqoma is forging ahead with new work created under the banner of his company Vuyani Dance Theatre (VDT).

He is considered locally and internationally as one of the leading South African choreographers of the younger generation. Proven to some extent by a long list of prestigious awards and recognitions that he has received. These include FNB VITA awards for: Choreographer of the Year for Rhythm 1.2.3 in 1999 and for Southern Comfort in 2002; Most Outstanding Presentation of an Original Contemporary Work for Rhythm Blues in 2000; and Best Choreography for Southern Comfort in 2001. He also won the Standard Bank Young Artist Award in 2002, the same year as qualifying as a finalist in the Daimler Chrysler Choreography Award. In 2003, he was a finalist for the international Rolex Mentorship Programme, and was named Choreographer of the year by THISDAY Newspaper, and as runner-up in the Star Newspaper’s Top 100 People.

In the 2004 anniversary program of his company Vuyani Dance Theatre, Sylvia Glasser describes his work as intriguing because of his “choreographic complexity … layers of meaning, and … humour”; prominent arts journalist Adrienne Sichel describes it as

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1 In contemporary South African terms, ‘previously disadvantaged’ is a euphemism that refers to those who were oppressed under apartheid
“visual poetry…informed by a burning individuality”; and Georgina Thomson, director of the FNB Dance Umbrella, describes Maqoma as “one of the most interesting choreographers in South Africa over the past years”. Journalist, actor and academic John Matshikiza (2005: 26) believes that “the sophistication of Maqoma’s work, the intensity of his choreographic style, can stand up to any theatrical company in the world”. What is it about him and his work that makes him such a fascinating case?

The first level of interest is his personal dance history. Born in Soweto² in 1973, and like many others growing up in the township, Maqoma learnt a range of popular street dance forms and many moves from television broadcasts of Michael Jackson’s pop music and distinctive movement style. At the age of twelve, he began to perform a mix of pantsula, isicathamiya³ and Jackson-type combinations with a group of youth dancers called the Joy Dancers. This lasted for five years until 1990 when, at the age of seventeen, Maqoma began his formal training at Moving Into Dance Mophatong (MIDM). Here he was introduced to Sylvia Glasser and ‘afro-fusion’⁴.

Maqoma spent seven years learning the afro-fusion style at MIDM, while also beginning to develop his own way of moving and choreographing. He describes that, while he remained working in an afro-fusion style, he always “had a way in which [he] was different: in aesthetics, the form, the subject matter”. For example, one of his early choreographic works as a member of MIDM was a duet called Duplicate (1994) that he performed with another company member. Maqoma explains that this was a pure contemporary dance piece, dating back to eighteenth century Venice. It had a vocabulary of movements that was different – we worked with lifts and contact improvisation.⁵

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² Soweto stands for South Western Township – originally state-subidised housing land that was set up for black occupation with the Urban Areas Act of 1924 (cf. Tomlinson, Beauregard, Bremner and Mangu 2003: 5)
³ pantsula is a form of township dance that is a blend of jive, breakdance and gumboot; and isicathamiya is a competitive group dance that adapts Zulu movements for a uniform line of men, and means ‘to step lightly’ (cf. Glasser 1990, 1993; Erlmann 1991, 1996)
⁴ afro-fusion is a style of dance developed by Glasser which incorporates African dance with the techniques of European and American modern dance
⁵ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 2 December 2003
Already Maqoma was working with the tensions between different dance forms in his own experimental style. In this way, his work was already a new exploration of movement, as is the nature of contemporary dance. In the context of a company that presents afro-fusion works as its signature style, Maqoma’s first choreographic work was somewhat out of the MIDM mould. Early in his career he began to push the boundaries of the conventions within which he was being trained.

In his travels with MIDM, Maqoma was exposed to a range of dance styles in Africa and abroad. This was the beginning of the kinds of exchanges that would mark many of the turning points in his career, and the beginning of collaborative work with African choreographers that continues today. One example is his work with Faustin Linyekula from the Democratic Republic of Congo, elaborated later in the thesis. In 1997, Maqoma was invited as the guest of Boyzie Cekwana to a five-week DanceWeb choreography programme in Vienna where he began to express more of his individual style. During this time, Maqoma met Emio Greco, Italian born choreographer who works with Dutch theatre director Pieter C. Scholten. Together they utilise natural bodily instinct as a starting point for their creative work, which strips movement of its symbolic meaning in order to link the material and the meta-physical. Maqoma describes his contact with Greco:

We had to choose classes and I chose his, it was a coaching project. I spent 6 hours a day with him and he did something to me. I don’t have words to explain it, he managed to break those barriers, I could express myself. On the last day he said everyone must sit down. I was dancing on my own in front of them for about 10 minutes and I was transformed. After that we kept in contact. When I came back, I was a different person.

While Maqoma was completing his scholarship in Vienna, the Belgian company ROSAS performed their signature work called Rosas danst Rosas – a two-hour long 1980s choreography. One of its central themes is repetition. This had an enormous impact on Maqoma’s sense of the possibilities in movement, and influenced one of his later works called Layers of Time (1998). He choreographed this work with MIDM for the FNB Vita

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6 For information on Boyzie Cekwana see Pienaar (1996)
7 [http://www.emiogrecoandpc.nl/company.htm](http://www.emiogrecoandpc.nl/company.htm)
8 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 2 December 2003
Dance Umbrella using the Young Choreographer’s Grant that he had won. It deals with repetitive movement, innovation, and stillness in the passing of time. He says about *Rosas danst Rosas*: “I was mesmerized – I thought it was amazing”. At this performance he learnt about the Performing Arts Research and Training Studios (P.A.R.T.S.), which, at the time, was holding auditions for South African dancers. Two of Maqoma’s contemporaries were chosen that year. A year later in 1999, Maqoma and his friend and co-worker Shannel Winlock received scholarships to study there.

Another major turning point for Maqoma was his year in Brussels, Belgium at P.A.R.T.S., where he worked under the direction of Anne Teresa De Keersmaker, its founder. It was a year of working with remarkable choreographers: Steve Paxton, the guru of contact improvisation; a teacher who trained with Pina Bausch; David Zambrano, who taught Maqoma how to “fly low” (Maqoma’s words) by creating fast movements on the floor; and Emio Greco, who inspired Maqoma’s expressive feeling in his work. The dancers also learned *Rosas danst Rosas* as part of the company’s repertoire. All of these influences began to feed into Maqoma’s own kind of fusion, where he could mix these ways of moving with what he had grown up with in South Africa. While at P.A.R.T.S. he formed VDT and created *Rhythm 1, 2, 3* – the first in his *Rhythm* trilogy. This was the beginning of what has become a diverse repertoire of dance pieces that represent his signature style, and that have won him the range of local and international choreographic and performance awards listed above.

**Maqoma’s repertoire**

Maqoma’s choreography to which this thesis refers is part of a broad corpus of work. He began to choreograph in 1994 (as mentioned above) and continues to create especially through exchanges across international borders. This thesis focuses specifically on his 2004 work *Virtually Blond*, where Maqoma aims to address the contradictions in South African society. This theme is not entirely new in his work. In *Rhythm Colour* (2002), for

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9 [http://www.parts.be](http://www.parts.be)  
[http://www.rosas.be](http://www.rosas.be)
example, he commemorates the 1976 Soweto Uprising while remaking this pivotal historical moment anew. This choreography is not, however, simply the recontextualisation of a past event in the present. Into his visual narrative of this event Maqoma inserts a diversity of stories that intermingle in movement, in film and through sound. In *Virtually Blond* the historical and socio-political context of South Africa is less explicitly represented. It is, rather, through the personal narratives of each performer and our interpretations of them that the broader tales of South African society are revealed.

From his first independent choreography, Maqoma has challenged the status quo. Further examples of this are found *Miss Thandi* (2002), *Southern Comfort* (2001) and his *Rhythm Trilogy* (1999) of which *Rhythm Colour* is a part. The kinds of social issues that he addresses in his work are generally about the contradictions in society. In particular, he deals with the tensions between individual needs and desires, and social demands and constraints. He explores the complex relationship between the self and society often through the lens of sexuality and other aspects of personal identity. For example, he began to develop *Miss Thandi* while he was in Holland in 1993/1994 to express his “South African identity”. He explained how his idea for this tribute to drag artist and cultural ambassador Raymond Matinyana developed:

> I admired his determination to change perceptions and break barriers, and go to places where not everyone wants to go.\(^{10}\)

What his early work shows is his push for something different, something new, something that would become his own signature. As David April describes:

> His works *Ketima, Miss Thandi, Southern Comfort, Rhythm Colour, Rhythm 1,2,3* are about the exploration of identity, relationships, issues of culture, what we’re taught to believe. They’re adventurous and brave. … He questions individuals and society using dance as a tool.\(^{11}\)

While much of his earlier work focused on the personal through questions about national and political identity, in 2005 he began a new trilogy of work that steps out of his earlier thematic focus. In *Beautiful, Beautiful Us*, and *Beautiful Me*, he draws on his well-known vocabulary of movement to express his exploration of identity that he separates from any

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\(^{10}\) Personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 September 2004

\(^{11}\) Personal communication, Johannesburg, 2 March 2004
overt political statement. In certain ways, then, this set of works is an extension of what he began in *Virtually Blond* in 2004. From solo to trio to company work, he explores themes related to human connection. Both of these works could also be seen as an extension of his seminal VDT work *Ketima* (2003). Here he examines the stages of human evolution and relationships, how individuals find their own paths of individuation, and how they relate to those around them. This includes elements of sexuality, infant-child relationships, and questions of existence.

This is contrasted with his 2004 work *Somehow Delightful* in which he explicitly points fingers at his audience and at different sectors of society. This is an overtly political work of the ‘new’ South Africa in which he parallels the themes that he addresses in *Virtually Blond*, but his emphasis is on the social not the personal, on politics and economics rather than directly on emotion. He criticizes South Africa for its contradictory class and race relations, and for the superficiality of aspects of its professed democracy.

His numerous collaborative works reveal his commitment to experimentation. His work with Congolese choreographer, Faustin Linyekula, for example, illustrates the way in which their contemporary dance can challenge the boundaries set by expectations of what an African choreographer should be creating and representing. This issue is addressed in more depth in chapter two. He is currently working with the South African Ballet Theatre – a collaboration which stretches both Maqoma’s creative possibilities and the dancers’ range of experience. One of the dancers remarked that working with Maqoma has “been very hard. His style is unique and so different from what we’re used to” (Mkefa 2006: 21). He continued to explain that, “sometimes we can’t hear the hidden rhythms in the music that Gregory is asking us to dance to … Gregory is able to hear in between rhythms in the music” (idem). Another dancer remarked, “Gregory’s style of dancing has forced us to use different muscle groups in a different way” (idem). In Maqoma’s own words, his work “breaks the rules” that define classical ballet. This shows how Maqoma works outside of the conventions of classical dance.

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12 *Top Billing*, SABC 3, 14 September 2006 (*Top Billing* is a South African elite lifestyle television programme)
Maqoma has also worked in London with Adzido dance company on a work called *Silk* and has been instrumental in extending the South African segment of the Afrovibes festival. He tours extensively and is currently working with London-based choreographer Akram Kahn. As Royce (2004: 182) examines, collaboration is central to opening the space for innovation and pushing the boundaries of an identified genre. This creates challenges to technique and to the role of the artistry of a performer (idem). While it remains to be seen what kind of impact Maqoma’s technique will have on the dance world, what is clear is the way in which his work moves beyond the limits of any safe definition of contemporary dance and its themes.

Maqoma is not afraid to subvert norms, to play with genres and to experiment with styles. He draws on what he has learned and threads this together in a unique choreographic tapestry that blends the modern, traditional, and popular. His unconventional style has marked him as one of the forerunners of the new generation of choreography in the post-apartheid South Africa. As journalist Zingi Mkefa (2006: 21) describes of Maqoma’s rise in the late 1990s:

> His special talent was his ability to combine classical technical proficiency with raw, urban Jozi\(^{13}\) grit.

Today he is seen as a mentor to younger choreographers. He is also pushing the boundaries of contemporary dance through his collaborations with artists in other fields.

**Post-apartheid South Africa and contemporary dance**

Maqoma rose in his career at a time in South African history when many new opportunities began to open up to young artists. In particular, young black males could begin to own their artwork and create independently. New funding became available, possibilities for travel increased, and dance as a profession for black men was becoming more established. Although many young black female choreographers and dancers also began to find more success in the dance arena, they were (and are) faced by the

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\(^{13}\) *Jozi* is the popular term for Johannesburg
challenges of juggling motherhood, family and professional life. These challenges are highlighted for both male and female artists by the demands of increased pressure to be loyal to ‘traditional African ways’.

In his biographical paper called *Identity, Diversity and Modernity in Urban Cultural Cocktail* (2002), Maqoma expresses how he has had to find a way of incorporating his traditional Xhosa identity into his cosmopolitan, urban lifestyle. The fact that he is homosexual has added another layer of challenge to the perceptions of who he is as an African male in the new South Africa. He is perfectly positioned to question identity because of his place both as a ‘traditional African male’ and an individual who has had to exist outside of conventional life for much of his youth. He is both at the centre and the periphery. Maqoma was born into transition and uses the uncertainty and fluidity that this change allows to challenge the pretences of an emerging nation. On a broader level, too, South Africa in the new millennium is seeking a way of defining itself as free and democratic. Maqoma questions what exactly this means through his representations of the contradictions that still exist in South Africa today.

On a broader level, Maqoma is working in a climate of uncertainty for many choreographers in twenty-first century South Africa. There is much more access, exposure, and possibilities for experimentation, and less pressure to create some kind of national identity through dance on the one hand. And on the other hand, these artists face major pressures from official culture to represent a unified picture of Africa. Additionally, artists want to explore their personal identities in post-apartheid South Africa. On one level this could be understood in terms of a postmodern fragmentation of identity and a rejection of the modernist meta-narratives of the apartheid era. However, it is almost too simple to put it down to a shift in ways of thinking about identity. The reality of their everyday lives is that they still exist to a large extent in a system that appeals to the narratives of the past even though they are inverted. In many ways, South

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14 As we all are to one degree or another. What creates distinction is what people choose to do with their place in the world
15 See Latour (1993) for a critique of the ideas of the modern and the postmodern
Africa presently has an official culture establishment that perpetuates a kind of colonialism and imperialism for its own people.

This problem is compounded by an idea of Africa in the West, where certain things are expected of Africans. For instance, artists must create work that upholds an idea of heritage and is rooted in an idealized image of the past that carries through to the present. It is unexpected, for instance, for African choreographers to be cosmopolitan and deal with universal issues in their work. In a parallel example, Morphy (1995: 212-213) explains how Aboriginal art entered the global market as a “primitive” form that from a Western perspective freezes art in a time warp. It both ignores the meaning of that artwork in the context of its creation, and limits its possibilities for conversation with an international audience. One of these limits is in the application of a purist notion of what indigenous art should be, and the idea that this is contaminated by contact with Western forms. Whatever is produced for those outside of an Aboriginal context is seen as inauthentic (ibid: 214-215), an idea that is explored further in the next chapter. How then do contemporary artists who are defined as ‘other’ create work within these constraints? As with visual artist Gordon Bennett in Morphy’s discussion (ibid: 228-230), choreographers in Africa challenge the ideas upon which the distinctions between west/other, innovation/tradition, global/local are based. What Maqoma’s work points to is this debate about the universal and the particular in relation to notions of Africa as other, and how this is internalised and reinscribed within national discourse in an African state that is based on an ideology of democracy, such as South Africa.

Underlying this process is a wall of cultural defensiveness on the part of official culture, which denies what is still unresolved in its current democracy. It finds ways to feel good about itself in order to boost a false sense of security in its national project. One example is the notion of the African Renaissance, which presents Africa as rising out of a conflicted past into a unified present 16. In this way, South Africa can rewrite its past

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16 See for example, president Mbeki’s speeches on this idea at the 1998 African Renaissance Conference (http://www.anc.org.za/ancedocs/history/mbeki/1998/tno928.htm) and the launch of the African Renaissance Institute in 1999 (http://www.polity.org.za/html/gordocs/speeches/1999/sp1011.html). The notion of the African Renaissance itself is elusive and can be understood from multiple perspectives. It is
trauma and ignore the ways in which its effects permeate today. As in Zizek’s (2003: 126) parallel to the pop psychology of John Gray who tells people revisit the moment of their childhood trauma and revise it so that it was positive. The problem with this is that no amount of revisionism can erase past trauma. The question is how it is dealt with in the present. A revisionist approach limits who is allowed to say what and why. In many ways, this is the story of contemporary dance in South Africa. Although there are multiple ways of defining personal, national, and artistic identity, choreographers in this country have had to face sometimes very extreme restrictions in order to create their work.

The roots of contemporary dance in South Africa are mostly in the experiences of white female choreographers who traveled to Europe, Canada and the United States and brought back the techniques that they had learnt there. According to journalist Adrienne Sichel, some teachers were doing the Graham technique in the 1940s, but it was only in the 1970s that important developments in contemporary dance occurred. In Sichel’s view, the most important of these were the opening of the Jazzart studio in Cape Town and Sylvia Glasser’s MIDM in Johannesburg. In particular, she emphasizes the importance of Glasser’s experimentation with African dance and the techniques she learned in Canada. Prior to this, most of the history of professional dance is in classical ballet, in which many dancers were trained and out of which companies emerged. The dance companies that were based on experimentation, such as Jazzart and MIDM, sometimes worked within, but often against the classical hierarchy.17

This all occurred within the context of apartheid, which had enormous ramifications for artists in South Africa. According to cultural critic and playwright Mike van Graan, some of the key problems were that blacks and whites could not perform on the same stages, there was unequal access to education and to art in schools, most of the infrastructure was not my intention to debate this idea, but rather to present it here as it affects the work of contemporary African choreographers in South Africa.

17 Much of this history is oral. This discussion in this section on the history of dance and the performing arts in South Africa is based on Adrienne Sichel’s talk on 18 August 2004 at the Africonnexions Conference attached to the New Dance Festival, Johannesburg; and Mike van Graan’s talk on cultural policy on 14 February 2004 at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
in white suburbs, and censorship suppressed critique of government. In dance, for example, the University of Cape Town trained dancers who were not white, but they were banned from performing on the stage. Companies like Jazzart and MIDM broke the law by working with dancers of all races. As van Graan states:

Governance and management of cultural institutions played into the interests of apartheid.

After the 1976 student uprising in Soweto, international donors supported the arts in black communities. With this came international pressure to end apartheid and the masking of political rallies as mass culture events within South Africa. In van Graan’s words, “culture became a shield for political organisation”. Within the contemporary dance sector, exchanges between choreographers and dancers from different backgrounds emerged as a way for them to begin working as a community. Especially because in many ways South Africa was cut off from the rest of the world, even though foreign funding was crucial to the survival of art at the time. As Sichel describes:

There was a choreographic revolution.

There were certain key events in the dance world that created this “revolution”. In the late 1980s, the Dance Alliance was formed, which became a lobbying force and a network for dancers. It lasted until the mid-1990s when complacency and fights over funding caused its collapse. In 1987 the director of Vita Promotions, Philip Stein, dance critic Marilyn Jenkins and Adrienne Sichel formed the Dance Umbrella as a free and open space for dancers and choreographers. It was a merging of dancers across racial and social divides that was a threat to the so-called order of apartheid. As the South African director and performer, Gerard Bester, describes:

It gave choreographers the platform to experiment, to develop, and allowed for writers of dance to begin the documentation and analysis of dance styles and trends.18

In 1989, dance became a part of the FNB Vita Awards at the Wits theatre as an adjunct to the Dance Umbrella festival. In the same year, the African National Congress (ANC) was

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18 Personal communication, Paris, 7 October 2006
unbanned and at the same time international donors had to face problems in their own contexts to the extent that their focus shifted away from South Africa.

Key turning-points in the South African arts industry occurred in the early 1990s in parallel with the changes in the country more broadly. In December 1992 artists organised themselves across many divides for the first time at the National Arts Plenary at the University of the Witwatersrand. More than 800 people created a statement of intent that was read in 6 languages and was a symbol of inclusion. Political parties were invited but only to observe. Out of this, the National Arts Initiative was launched to formalise a representative organisation for artists in South Africa and to make recommendations based on research of international policy and local needs. South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994 saw the new Ministry of Arts and Culture that formed the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG) to link government and artists. The ACTAG report was adopted in 1995 and was the basis of the call to artists to participate in the drafting of the White Paper on Arts and Culture. For dancers, this was a time of major change. Some work was sent overseas to test the waters and gauge how it would be received. According to Sichel, the response was often positive, while in South Africa, this widened the schism between classical dance and the rest of the dance world.

Artists had high hopes for their industry in a country that some believed was “a political miracle with Mandela as president” (van Graan)\(^\text{19}\). However, with this came a new kind of censorship. It became very difficult for artists to challenge the new regime. Additionally, the White Paper was not implemented for a number of reasons including a kind of “struggle fatigue” (van Graan), those who had been in positions of authority left, and the government did not support it. The performing arts sector was faced with a new set of challenges. There was greater access to the arts, and the Provincial Arts Councils were transformed into independent companies and the money that had gone to them would go the arms-length government funding body - the National Arts Council (NAC). However, the arts sector suffered at the hands of an inexperienced and uncoordinated ministry that ignored certain of the ACTAG recommendations and governed through

\(^{19}\) Such beliefs are an example of the expression of South African exceptionalism (cf. Bekker 2002)
superficial transformation rather than through a handover with proper mentoring. Additionally, projects funded by the NAC could not be sustained because of how the money was divided. This body was also surrounded by controversy because of governance problems of its own. By 2000, the performing arts industry was in crisis. This encouraged the launch of bodies such as the Performing Arts Network of South Africa (PANSA) as a representative network for artists to lobby on their behalf and support sustainable development of the sector.

In the dance sector since 2000 there are specific problems that it has needed to face. According to Sichel, while there are more structures, partners and provincial activities, this kind of art form has not been regarded as a profession. For major national and corporate events involving dance performance, dancers have to conform to certain criteria. Additionally, certain contemporary choreographers who have successful careers are no longer based solely in South Africa (for example Robyn Orlin and Vincent Mantsoe). Related to this is the thirst that many of these artists have had for exposure to international work. As Maqoma explains,

> I had to leave the country to do it myself. I was brought up in a school where you follow rules. I had to break away from the conventions of that school and find my own freedom and give myself the opportunity to indulge – put on make-up, a wig, dresses, dance to the music of Bach. I couldn’t do this before because my situation was clearly defined.\(^\text{20}\)

At the same time, certain arts practitioners feel a concern about this kind of exposure. David April, for example, explains that:

> As South Africans we have not really learnt how to express ourselves. The majority of people in South Africa were discouraged from doing it. Now we’re free and people are taking advantage of it…We turn to overseas and we lose our identity…When South African companies go abroad they pander to the idea of “African dance is typically this or that”. That needs to be challenged…I support exchange, but people shouldn’t compromise their beliefs or art or culture.\(^\text{21}\)

This concern with losing an identity is an interesting one. Underlying it is a question about what it means to be a South African or African choreographer in a free society – in

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\(^{20}\) Personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 September 2004

\(^{21}\) Personal communication, Johannesburg, 2 March 2004
one where there is more mobility and access across the globe and therefore more cross-fertilisation. Those who transcend these issues and make statements as artists, because that is what they do, pose the real challenge. However, in many instances, this idea of creating art for arts’ sake is still a luxury. According to Sichel, within South Africa, although bodies such as Business and Arts South Africa (BASA) and the NAC exist, dance is not appreciated at national levels in its own right. As Sichel states, “In South Africa dance is a problem for people – you don’t have to pay to see it. This idea is misguided”. 22 Dance in this country is therefore still finding its place.

Contemporary dance in South Africa has not settled into a definitive post-apartheid genre. In this way, it may have entered its own postmodern era. The hybridity, self-reflexivity and irony in Maqoma’s work, for example, are all features of postmodern art. Schechner (1982: 97), for instance, explains that “postmodern performance abandons narrative as its foundation”. Writing about the links between social change and performance in the 1980s, he charts the shifts in techniques for creating art. In his view, what replaced narrative are the uses of a kind of ritual repetition in playing with form – “speeding, slowing, freezing”; and creating conscious awareness of the self as other, for example (ibid: 99). But what does it mean politically to be in a postmodern era?

In South Africa, contemporary dance went straight from the modernist works created in response to apartheid to its current mixed forms. According to Tammy Ballantyne23, because South Africa was so isolated from the rest of the world, dance in this country has never been exposed to the kind of postmodern work outside of its borders that was being created from the 1980s onward. There were, however, international choreographers who came to South Africa, and certain white female choreographers who traveled to Europe and the United States and brought back what they had learnt. Although there has always been exchange between artists across the globe, mobility was extremely limited and access was not available to a broad range of dancers. The kind of postmodern work found in South Africa currently is therefore affected by relatively recent exposure to more

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22 Talk at Africonnexions Conference attached to the New Dance Festival, 18 August 2004
23 At the time of this research, Tammy Ballantyne was the national coordinator for PANSA. Her background in the performing arts is in dance studies, publicity and marketing
international work, and its own history of resistance to oppression and the legacy of apartheid. A lot of the current work draws specifically on aspects of European contemporary dance. This is not always successful as it is not necessarily rooted in a search for a new vocabulary that emerges from the experience of being a choreographer in South Africa. It often has the effect of being a cut-and-paste mix of elements.

This relationship with postmodern dance in South Africa is contrasted with the United States, for example. Banes (1983) analyses dance in the 1960s USA with a focus on the Judson Dance Theater. She examines fourteen choreographers who she describes as “the seedbed for post-modern dance” (Banes 1983: xi). Artists such as Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Robert Morris, Lucinda Child and Trisha Brown, and collaborations between musician John Cage and Merce Cunningham, broke away from the conventions of ballet and modern dance. The emphasis in the Judson Dance Theater was on process and collective work, where artists were pushing the boundaries of what is considered dance.24 These artists broke from the traditions of early modern dance (of the 30s and 40s) using elements such as dancers making noises on stage – against the established “muteness of the dancer” (ibid: 109); creating work that was performed outside of the bounds of the stage – playing with space, and collaborations with artists of other genres in creating multi-media works (ibid: 167). 25 During that time South African choreographers were concerned mostly with who they were as citizens of a corrupt nation and members of an oppressive social system, and telling stories about that. Robyn Orlin, for example, describes how on certain occasions, her performances were disrupted by the South African special branches and closed down. 26 These were the kinds of everyday realities that choreographers had to face.

Dealing with ‘what is dance?’ was therefore not as high on the agenda as dealing with ‘who are we as a nation?’ In many ways, South African choreographers are still dealing

24 This kind of avant-garde upsurge was true also for modern dance in its rebellion against the codification of ballet (cf Banes 1983: xv)
25 This is not to say that postmodern dance did not occur in other places. Much of the literature, however, focuses on its development in the USA, and some on European, specifically German modern dance (cf. Reynolds & McCormick 2003)
26 School of Arts Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, 15 March 2004
with the legacy of apartheid. In South Africa, artists have not had the luxury of theoretically questioning the role of art in society as there has been in a European and American history. The ‘function’ of art has been defined differently – often as active rebellion against corrupt modernist institutions. Doris Humphrey (1959: 189) stated:

To say that dance should grow up, deal with contemporary life as the other arts did, was to be met with the age-old attitude that dancing was for fun: dancing should be lovely and graceful.

Contemporary choreographers in South Africa have long been aware of the fallacy of this notion of dance. For decades dance has been a platform of protest, of expression that was denied in other spheres of social activity, and of disruption. Although Maqoma is also telling a story about his society, the way in which he plays with form breaks away from his training, and embodies a postmodern approach.

What contemporary choreographers are faced with today is the broadening opportunity and challenge of living a country that is redefining itself in an increasingly cosmopolitan context. Opportunities for travel and exchange are different from what they were under apartheid. In the 70s and 80s in South Africa, cultural exchange programmes were inherently tied to the struggle against oppression. In the new millennium, and certainly since the mid-90s, the scope for exchange was widened, although its reality is often limited by new problems with access to resources that cut across racial and class lines in new ways. This reality of freedom brings with it new responsibilities for the next generation of contemporary choreographers. It is clear that many of them are grappling with where they belong in the ‘new’ South Africa. The biggest issue at present is their search for new movement vocabularies that say something about who they are. It is also important to note that contemporary dance is a niche genre and therefore only appeals to a particular audience This is both what gives it its edge as artistic social commentary, and what creates problems of access to funding because of the expectations of what an artist should be in the new South Africa.
As Maqoma explains:

It is great that our work gets an opportunity to leave our shores and find new audiences. My concern is always about appropriation and reception. As we pack our bags and head for the big stages, are we aware of the fact that the essence and the soul of the work has been left behind and that we are negotiating a compromise. We therefore have to override other perceptions and stereotypes set by the outside world.\(^\text{27}\)

In a context where being African or South African is not clearly defined through a struggle against oppression, and the scope for self-expression is broadened, artists like Maqoma work to create new identities. Part of this is working against ideas of what should or should not be African.

Certain artists in the ‘new’ South Africa are tired of creating ‘issue-based’ work (particularly when it involves an appeal to a detached development discourse). This does not mean that it has no place. On the contrary, artists are still seen as provocative social commentators in many ways. Playwrights Mike van Graan and Lara Foot-Newton, for example, are committed to addressing issues of the abuse of power and the problems with democracy in their work *Green Man Flashing* (2004)^\(^\text{28}\) and *Tshepang* (2001)^\(^\text{29}\), respectively. Simultaneously, artists like Maqoma are interested in commenting on society without probing political issues. In this way they are making statements about the place of art and the role of the artist in society. To what extent can they make art for arts’ sake? In South Africa this is a complex question.

\(^{27}\) In proceedings of the 7\(^{\text{th}}\) *Jomba! Contemporary Dance Conference, African Contemporary dance? Questioning issues of a performance aesthetic for a developing and independent continent* (2004: 28)

\(^{28}\) *Green Man Flashing* won the Jury Award at the Pansa/UCT Drama School Festival of Reading of New Writing in 2003 and premiered at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 2004. It has also toured Johannesburg and Cape Town in 2005 with performances at the Market and Baxter Theatres respectively. In this work, he examines the tensions between personal freedom and social justice. In his words, “in South Africa you have the rights to express yourself but exercising them could have consequences” (in Tromp 2005: 8)

\(^{29}\) *Tshepang* is based on the true story of the rape of a 9-month old baby (cf. Foot Newton 2005)
**Artist in society**

As will be elaborated in later chapters, the place of the artist is often very ambiguous. Work that represents a palatable image of the nation is often lauded particularly by the political establishment, while contemporary dance that is more abstract or less of a crowd-pleaser is left in its niche. As a result, many South African contemporary dancers and choreographers struggle to create audiences at home. In many ways, these artists create work because it is a calling for them and they cannot imagine doing anything else. It is an expression of who they are as individuals. At the same time, they are rooted in their social context. Artists in South Africa have a long history of being explicitly aware of their relationship to society.

Abbs *et al* (1989) examine how perceptions of the role of the artist change according to shifts in social thought. In South Africa there is a blend of different possible parts an artist may play. Many follow the twentieth century turning “inward to the psyche” discussed by Ritter (1989: 46), while also using the personal to comment on the social. What is interesting is the gap between an artist’s intention and how they are perceived in their society. In Maqoma’s case, he aims to quietly create controversy and is at the same time well-loved by those whom he often criticizes. In certain situations, it is politically correct to appreciate his work. In others he is excluded, as will be explored in the following chapter.

According to Beardsley (in Gorman 1979: 27), “the artist’s intention is a series of psychological states or events in his mind”. Maqoma’s intention, as he explained to me, has been always to consciously challenge the boundaries of his training. He believes that it is his role to question society which places him in the position of an artist who becomes a meter for social injustice, whose role it is to educate and expose the hidden. This role is applicable to many of his works, for example *Virtually Blond*, but is most clearly illustrated in *Somehow Delightful* (2004) mentioned earlier. Matshikiza (2005: 26) interviewed Maqoma on his political stance in this work. He explained that he is not aiming to be political in his work, but rather wants to “create some sort of debate on
issues that affect everyone in this country”. As Matshikiza (idem) rightly points out, “the politics inevitably comes through”.

According to Abbs (1989: 204), artists can only create through their culture. In his words:

The creative process takes place inside a specific aesthetic field where the forms of the past are constantly recreated and recast (ibid: 205)

This relationship between the artist and his/her context is highly visible not only in Maqoma’s work, but also in the work of other African contemporary choreographers. Faustin Linyekula, for example, describes his intention in creating work in the DRC:

When I create work in Kinshasa, I am confronted with a reality of destruction, death, and disease. But I don’t want to make them cry – they don’t need it. I don’t want them to laugh either. If there is anything I want from them maybe it’s just to dream – for one hour to forget where they are – but also to try and propose very modest spaces for dreams, in a hopeless situation. Perhaps that’s art, I don’t know. Is it dance? Maybe it is dance because I carry it with my body.30

There are parallels in the roles that Maqoma and Linyekula carve out for themselves. Both use dance to express their criticisms of society, and neither do so to be pitied. For these artists, dance is a necessary restorative creative process that is also personally fulfilling. This is not dissimilar from the experience of Mozambican choreographer Augusto Cuvilas, who creates in order to:

make visible things that are not clearly visible.31

The work of these choreographers raises questions about the role of the artist in articulating the tensions between the public and the private, the individual and the community. What happens when the private wounds of individuals become the material for public statements about society, as in the case of Virtually Blond (elaborated later)? Is this exploitative or is it a necessary evil in this line of work? Artists are members of their broader community like any other individual and function as such. However, the socio-political context within which artists work influences their positioning and role. In South Africa it is questionable to what extent the luxury of making art for arts’ sake exists. In

30 In proceedings of the 7th Jomba! Contemporary Dance Conference, African Contemporary dance? Questioning issues of a performance aesthetic for a developing and independent continent (2004: 31)
31 In proceedings of the 7th Jomba! Contemporary Dance Conference, African Contemporary dance? Questioning issues of a performance aesthetic for a developing and independent continent (2004: 41)
many cases artists either have to pander to the ideals of the official culture establishment, or become social commentators and watchdogs of formal power structures where no other channels exist. These questions are explored throughout this thesis.

What is interesting in Maqoma’s case is how he is positioned in relation to the performers with whom he works, and also in terms of his status in society. In interviews with the dancers, many of them expressed how adding to their CV’s that they have worked with Maqoma would give them additional bargaining power in future projects. Some of them spoke of him as a mentor, teacher, and friend. Others expressed a respect for the work that he does but did not respond favourably to having any kind of relationship with him outside of the professional arena. Amongst all of the dancers, however, Maqoma is seen as an exemplary case of an individual who has followed his own path and developed his own style, and has been successful at creating a name for himself.

Much of this has to do with his conduct in relation to the media and funders and the support of his management and marketing team (consisting of two individuals at the time of this research) who are responsible for sustaining the everyday running of his company. In relation to the media, for example, he would make himself available for interviews regardless of his rehearsal schedule. He would invite the press to showings of his work before a premier, with the motivation that they would write a positive press release or at least engage with his work to create dialogue around it. He has also positioned himself as a trendsetter in his work with other choreographers, artists and designers. Black Coffee created many of his costumes, including those designed for Virtually Blond. There is a marriage of approach in this collaboration, as both Maqoma and Van der Watt of Black Coffee do not want to be labeled according to purist notions of Africa. In his view, “what [Greg and I] do is inherently South African, without forgetting the global” (personal communication 16 February 2004).

While Maqoma may be strategic in the everyday running of his business, he is also a key commentator on South African society and issues of humanity. As Ritter (1989: 150) states, “whether he symbolizes heroic aspiration or its opposite…the player evokes a
heightened awareness of life”. Ritter illustrates the presence of these roles in one character using Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. What this example also shows is the importance of the artists, whether hero or vagabond, to challenge idealistic world-views. In Ritter’s (idem.) words, “idealism, it seems, cannot survive without the complementary pull of sobering reality”. Maqoma’s work can be seen as the pull towards a sobering view of the world through a critique of an idealistic national identity. Although he has also been idealised by certain individuals within the performing arts industry, his work is a call to face a human reality.

**Conclusion**

Maqoma has emerged at a turning-point in South African history. This new democracy is carrying the wounds of its past while attempting to face a future based on an ideology of freedom and equality. In this context, the role of art and the artist is not clear. Choreography such as that of Maqoma’s highlights this lack of clarity. By rooting his work in the contradictions of a democratic society with a deeply problematic past, he forces us to face the problems of the present. He works against the denialism that is often apparent in the official culture establishment and opens up the space for dialogues about what is not resolved and what needs to be addressed. It is not surprising that Maqoma’s reality check is not always well received. The next chapter illustrates this by elaborating the theme of the artist as social commentator through a discussion about African identity. It focuses on the tensions between safe representations of the nation and the hybrid forms of dance such as Maqoma’s. What it reveals is the difficulty of defining what it means to be African, particularly in a postcolonial, democratic context.