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They were silent: investigating the potential shamanic role of a contemporary theatre performer and how ritual and theatre can be synergized

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2010-03-15T11:46:59Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/7683

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DECLARATION

I declare that this report is my own unaided work. It is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts in Dramatic Art to the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination to any other University.

Kabi Thulo

.....15th .....day of .....December.....2009

ABSTRACT

This study gives expression to my journey of mediating my Sangoma, artist (performer and theatre maker) and scholarly roles. It is a personal journey that paints the picture of my multi-faceted identity, particularly within the context of pursuing my Masters studies. This study is not trapped within the confines of giving expression to my identity, but also engages with specific research questions that have guided the course of the research that is detailed in this Research Report.

Three essential areas of enquiry demarcate the parameters that define this study's locale. These are: how ritual and theatre can be synergized; can a ritual-based theatre performance facilitate communitas amongst an audience and what the potential shamanic characteristics of a contemporary performer are? These enquires were grappled with through a creative project entitled *They Were Silent*, which is a collaborative (research) project done by myself, Jessica Lejowa and Lerato Sekele. This creative project points to the practice as research paradigm and methodology employed by this study. It was through practice as research that this study managed to facilitate interplay between theory and practice. The theories that ground this study are Victor Turner, Richard Schechner and Malidoma Patrice Somè's ritual theories. Jerzy Grotowski's notion of ***Total Act*** and Richard Schechner's theatre performance practice theory that views a theatre performer as a shaman also constitute this study's theoretical base.

This study's research findings are derived from the devising, performance and post-performance phases of its creative project. These findings give voice to the merger of ritual and theatre as being dependent on the context, intentions and other factors related to a ritual-based theatre performance. Essentially, this study posits that ritual and theatre can merge when the ritual and theatre performance contexts co-exist. This Report illustrates the challenges related to the potential of a ritual-based theatre performance to facilitate communitas amongst a theatre audience as a means of

addressing societal fragmentation. *They Were Silent* succeeded in creating communitas to some extent. However, this study's shortcoming related to the facilitation of communitas through a ritual-based theatre performance is that its finding cannot be regarded as absolute and general.

Regarding the potential shamanic characteristics of a contemporary performer, this study generally agrees with the theory that speaks of this subject and makes the point that a contemporary performer's mode of performance, performance context and intentions can define a contemporary performer's shamanic characteristics and role. This study also makes a pertinent point that a contemporary performer's shamanic characteristics are not necessarily dependant on a performer being a practicing shaman as I am.

This study provides a possible conceptual approach of how theatre and ritual can merge, illustrates the complexities of communitas and proposes a perspective into how a contemporary theatre performer could be shamanic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Undertaking my Masters studies was a long and challenging process that has led to growth in all aspects of my life. I would not have made it to this point in my life, academic and artistic career without the support from a number of special individuals that have contributed in very meaningful ways to my existence, particularly since 2008 when I started with my Masters studies. This Report has been the last river I needed to cross in order to complete my Master of Art Dramatic Art by Coursework and Research Report degree. It is at this point that I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the following people:

- Ntate Kenosi Tlhanole and Mme Mabotshadi Thulo, thank you for blessing me with life and working extremely hard to ensure that I am well. Your sweat and tears over the years have made me the human being that I am. You are the best parents and my Masters degree is my gift to you. Ke ya le lebohoha batswadi baka.
- Mokgele Maleke Thulo, thank you for your endless support my brother and for being an ever-burning candle that has lit my life's journey.
- Kedibone Finger, you are an amazing aunt. Thank you for the much needed financial support since I started pursuing tertiary education.
- My grandmother, Badirwang Thulo, there are no words that can explain how grateful I am to have had you by my side.
- Lebogang Tshitlho, you have picked me up when I was down on many occasions. Thank you for being a brother.
- Jessica Lejowa, you are a wonderful colleague. Thank you for being open-minded and welcoming my spirit. I will forever be thankful for your critical role in facilitating my spiritual healing and artistic growth by agreeing to work with me on *They Were Silent* in 2008 & 2009. It is impossible for me to fully express how thankful I am. I respect your artistry, beautiful mind, interesting eye and resilient

spirit. Ke go leboga go menagane mma. Lerato lame mo go wena le tibile go feta mawatle.

- Lerato Sekele, thank you for allowing yourself to travel the tough journey that *They Were Silent* was. Your commitment, talent and courage made this study possible.
- Grace Meadows, Ndiyapo Machacha, Moabi Mogorosi, Denzel Edgar and Lebo Motaung, I thank you my comrades.
- Marilyn, your spiritual guidance and healing kept me sane through the various turbulences that I have experienced during the course of my Masters studies, particularly during 2008. I thank you immensely and give more thanks to your ancestral spirits. I pray for the Most High to give you strength and guidance throughout your journey as a traditional healer and therapist.
- Mma Mpho Lecoge and Bongile Lecoge-Zulu, thank you for your love and incredible support. Your presence has kept me sane and given me strength, particularly during the period leading to the completion of my Masters studies. Ke le leboga mo gomaswe.
- My teachers: Kingdom Moshounyane, Sabata Sesiu, Gay Morris and Mandla Mbothwe, Professor Christopher Odiambo, Dr. Kennedy Chinyowa and Professor Hazel Barnes. Thank you for teaching me to be a learner and challenging my thinking and being during the course of my scholarship.
- Sara Matchett, I was blessed to work with you as my supervisor. I would not have managed to conduct my research and complete my Research Report. Your intuitive guidance, critical engagement with my work and understanding of my academic and artistic journey assisted me in ways you can never imagine. Thank you for believing in my academic and artistic undertakings that have culminated into this Research Report.
- Warren Nebe, I sincerely appreciate your support and teachings. Thank you for *Drama for Life* because it has enabled me to advance from being a crawling infant to a walking child. You are an amazing teacher and individual. Thank you ever so much for constantly challenging me as your student and for helping me to find my way through the maze of academia.

- Vincent Mantsoe and Gregory Maqoma, your work (*Ebhofolo* and *Beautiful Me*) inspired *They Were Silent*. Thank you for the inspirational conversations we have had. Vincent, you have planted a seed within me, I wish you can be able to watch it grow.
- Adrienne Sichel, you have contributed to *They Were Silent*'s through your critical engagement with it. Thank you for being a critical and astute reviewer of South African theatre.

DEDICATION

To my ancestral spirits (Bataung ba ha Ramokhele; Bakwena ba ga Sechele, Amazizi aka Sweleba, Amahlubi aka Zanela, Amandebele aka Ndabula, Bangwaketsi, Bafokeng, Bo Tholo Mmina Tshipe, Ntatemoholo Khanyapa le madlozi a boMndau); my family; people who are experiencing various life challenges as a result of not answering their ancestral calling; and my unborn child. *They Were Silent* was meant for you all.

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