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Investigating performance poetry as a medium for addressing HIV/AIDS stigma

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INVESTIGATING PERFORMANCE POETRY AS A MEDIUM FOR ADDRESSING HIV/AIDS STIGMA

BY

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RESEARCH REPORT PRESENTED TO THE DIVISION OF DRAMATIC ART OF THE WITS SCHOOL OF ART IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF A MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE IN DRAMATIC ART

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Dedication

To my family.

Acknowledgements

I would like to say thank you to my supervisor Sarah Woodward for her excellent guidance and support from the inception of this research to its completion. I would also like to thank Drama For Life for supporting me with a scholarship during my study at Wits University. I also extend my thanks to the poets who worked with me in this project –Juliet, Boitumelo and Philani. I would also like to thank the Division of Dramatic Art members of staff for their academic support. To my family, relatives and friends I say, thank you so much for your unwavering love.

Above all I thank God Almighty for the marvellous deeds that He continues to do in my life.

Abstract

HIV/AIDS stigma is a major challenge in combating the spread of the Human Immune Virus (HIV) and addressing challenges of HIV and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). This work investigates ways of addressing HIV/AIDS stigma using performance poetry as a medium. The performance poetry is carried out in the form of a performance concept from Palestine known as the Debate in Sung- Improvised Poetry. Stigma makes it difficult for people living with HIV/AIDS to seek treatment and to live a fulfilled life in their communities and it slows down or hampers efforts by the governments and nongovernmental organisations to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic on national and international levels. Stigma is defined in this research and the ways in which it manifests are discussed. HIV/AIDS stigma leads to people living with HIV being shunned or discriminated against and at extreme cases they are even subjected to physical hurt or abuse. At times people caring for people living with HIV are also stigmatized. The research also notes that there is self stigmatization that people inflict on themselves. In all the cases stigma affects a person's Needs thereby preventing them from living their lives to the fullest, which Abraham Maslow calls reaching the summit – self actualization. Stigma is embedded in the culture of silence and this research uses performance poetry through the Poetic Debate to unlock the silence. The Poetic Debate was used with some aspects of Slam poetry and has also borrowed from Playback Theatre to come up with a kind of theatre that is centred on audience participation. This platform was created through conducting a series of process workshops with three performing poets. During the workshops poets improvised poems on HIV/AIDS so as to voice out those issues that most people do not want to talk about, as it had been realised that silence around HIV/AIDS usually attract stigma. The process workshops ran for one month culminating into a performance/final workshop rich in metaphor where an invited audience was present. During the process workshops the poets performed written poems and also improvised poems spontaneously as I gave them words to improvise on. During the final workshop the audience gave the poets words to improvise on. An atmosphere of playfulness was created through games and exercises so as to invite the audience to participate during the final workshop and also to create an atmosphere that encourages interaction and creativity. This was at the centre of the research so that people can raise questions concerning HIV/AIDS and offer answers and solutions and in doing so dispel the stigma around HIV/AIDS. The conclusions show that performance poetry, through the Poetic Debate, has a strong possibly therapeutic potential to address HIV/AIDS stigma especially among the 15 – 29 age group who are interested in poetry as an art.

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