

## CHAPTER 6

# What Role can Physical Theatre Play in Reimagining Democracy in South Africa?

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**Abstract:** Mamela Nyamza's body of work is an act of performance activism that reflects and speaks back to society, making critical commentary on the slippages, gaps and moments of silencing that persist in post-apartheid democratic South Africa. This paper makes use of Mamela Nyamza's *19-Born-76-Rebels* (2014) and *Pest Control* (2020) as key physical theatre case studies that provide images of recalling and remembering in order to (re)build and (re)imagine democracy in South Africa. The paper, through employing Nyamza's productions, discusses the ways in which physical theatre engages with the consolidation of democracy through dealing with complex questions about philosophies of identity, representation and expression – that are perceived politically, socially, culturally and economically in South Africa.

**Keywords:** democracy, rainbow nation, social cohesion, physical theatre, Mamela Nyamza

## Introduction

Narratives on women's contribution to democracy in South Africa is often forgotten. Women's involvement in challenging the apartheid government and its laws is often reserved for celebration once a year. On 9 August, otherwise known as National Women's Day, the nation pays tribute to women who, in 1956, marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest against the country's pass laws. This marginalisation

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of women in South African history holds an equally disturbing seat in South African theatre that ignores and/or misrepresents the presence and contribution of women towards the liberation of South Africa, including their contribution to the growth of theatre in South Africa. Temple Hauptflesch states that, during apartheid, “women operated mainly in the private and commercial world, for ... the state funded theatre organisations have hardly ever allowed women into prominent positions of power” (Hauptflesch, 1999, p. 55). The argument that Temple presents is supported by Yvette Hutchison who elaborates that theatres during apartheid functioned to further the socio-political agenda and stories of men who protested against apartheid (2018, p. 356). She goes on to state that “the plays of this period (apartheid) tended to explore male experiences of apartheid in mines, gangs, or prisons, with women being represented *in absentia*, through male memory or fantasy narratives” (Hutchison, 2018, p. 356). This refusal to acknowledge the power and contrition of women during apartheid, and in South African theatre, perpetuates systems of erasure, exclusion, silencing and oppression which mirror those that existed during the apartheid regime.

Many South African female visual, dance and theatre artists such as Sethembile Msezane, Zanele Muholi, Nelisiwe Xaba and Mamela Nyamza, to name a few, challenge the status quo of contemporary South Africa. In spotlighting one, Mamela Nyamza engages in projects that seek to interrogate issues of identity and positionality within democratic South Africa. Nyamza can be said to produce works that seek to ask: what does it mean to be South African, and a Black<sup>1</sup> female, in democratic South Africa? It has to be said the whole question of what it means to be South African in post-apartheid South Africa is one that is in constant flux. It is a question that seeks to understand democracy and to define it in a manner that shelters all who live in the country.

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1 Although the artists mentioned above are categorized as Black in South Africa, I use the term ‘Black’ as an inclusive agent for all women of colour in South Africa. That said, it should be noted that there are vulnerabilities that we ought to be aware of when making use of such terminology to refer to all women of colour within the South African context. See Erasmus, Z. (2000). Some kind of White, some kind of Black: Living in moments of entanglement in South Africa and its academy. In B. Hesse (Ed.), *Un/settled multiculturalism: Diasporas, entanglements, transcriptions* (pp. 185–207). Zed Books.

What has become apparent is that, in attempting to (re)define and (re)imagine the South African democratic nation, there have been numerous attempts at consolidating democracy. The consolidation of democracy raises complex questions about philosophies of identity, representation and expression – that are perceived politically, socially, culturally and economically. Many South Africans find themselves conflicted with the formal structures, laws and processes that govern democratic South Africa with their personal interpretations and responses to the formal structures. This in turn causes difficulties in many South Africans to recognise and locate their identity in post-apartheid South Africa. In addition, the sensitivity to recognise a democratic identity is encountered with the need to seek a sense of being and belonging through the “doing of democracy” that realises itself in participation and representation.

Democracy in South Africa functions in two ways, namely first in post-apartheid South Africa, and secondly in post-1994 South Africa. In both these ways, democracy is defined as a system of government that celebrates difference and national unity. This celebration of difference is particularly understood through the eyes of the law that recognises different cultures, races, sexes, sexual orientations, religions and ethnicities equally – as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Wonke Buqa equally reiterates this idea as he states that “democracy functions as a system that accommodates difference and favours tolerance” (Buqa, 2015, p. 7). Key to the definition and framing of democracy in South Africa is interrogating whether there has been success in reconciling the tensions of its colonial past, in order to re-imagine new ways of pursuing nation building.

The paper makes use of a secondary research methodology which occupies itself with already existing data and literature. It takes as its point of departure the investigation of “what is already known and what remains to be learned about the topic through reviewing secondary sources” (Johnston, 2014, p. 620) in order to analyse, interpret and formulate arguments and critiques. Consequently, the paper makes use of three pillars in respect to problematising the ways in which democratic South Africa is spoken about. The three pillars discuss:

1. Physical theatre as a theatrical form of embodied resistance (Sichel, 2018) that makes use of strategies of “intimate revolts” (Finestone-Praeg, 2010);
2. The on-going project of “decolonising the mind” (wa Thiong’o, 1986) as a means of deconstructing thinking, language and values that perpetuate neo-colonial systems of oppression and hegemonic social and political control, and finally;
3. A critical engagement of performances by Mamela Nyamza which reinforce the notion that “the body is a site of social, political and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution” (Grosz, 1994, p. 23), a notion which is central in creating discourse that directly speaks to democratic South Africa and theatre’s ability to comment on it.

The crafting of a post-apartheid democratic society is positioned through the diverse expression of the previously marginalised and repressed. It is to proclaim that “a democracy is consolidated not according to the number of free and fair elections or alternations in office, but according to the ideas and behaviours that individuals [and institutions] reveal [and uphold] in those processes” (Garcia-Ravero et al., 2002, p. 166). The proclamations of free participation, organisation, access and distribution are among some of the affirmations that the South African democratic state prides itself in. However, the design of the all-inclusive and consolidated society continues to be challenged and baffled by how it defines and materialises what it posits to uphold due to the deferred dreams outlined in its democratic pronouncements.

## **Mamela Nyamza in conversation with democracy**

The emergence of physical theatre, coupled with a new generation of artists that are Black and female, preoccupies itself with projects that overtly situate their race, sex and gender into the politics of contemporary democratic South Africa. Drawing inspiration from the new generation of physical theatre artists, this paper pays particular attention to the works

of Mamela Nyamza, who, through employing dance and physical theatre, uses her body as a site of knowledge that serves the intention to challenge marginalised and silenced histories from the past. Nyamza's theatrical works overtly comment on and critique democracy in order to confront issues that adopt the agenda of recovery, (re)imagination and rebuilding the post-apartheid South African state. Her work involves itself in the embodied practices of the "doing of democracy" through interrogating the discrepancies inherited from apartheid that continue to seep their way through the cracks of democratic South Africa.

Mamela Nyamza is a South African choreographer, performer, and arts activist who was born in 1976 in the township of Gugulethu, Cape Town. The significance of the year Nyamza was born, and her work in 2013 titled *19-Born-76-Rebel*, reflect the 1976 Soweto uprising riots which took place on 16 June, led by students who were protesting for better education, equitable resources and infrastructure to learning, and the refusal to be taught in Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. As a young child Mamela was introduced to formal training in ballet from Zama School of Dance in Gugulethu. She continued her dance training career by pursuing a National Diploma in ballet at Pretoria Technikon in 1994, then went on to pursue a one-year fellowship in 1998 with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Centre.<sup>2</sup> Her upbringing in a township space, together with her race, gender, sex and sexual orientation, have become significant points of discourse in her theatrical conversations that present insights into the oppression that many women – many Black women, and many Black queer women – in South Africa experience in democratic South Africa. The battle that she experiences as a Black queer female has grounded many of her productions which include *Hatched* (2009), *Shift* (2011), and *Isingqala* (2011). Additionally, her works critique the lack of attention and equitable opportunities for Black people, specifically Black females, in South African institutions of employment and theatrical spaces, as evidenced in her productions *Rock to the Core* (2017), *De-apart-hate* (2017) and *Pest Control* (2020) which confront the prejudices that Black women

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2 *I Am Woman – Leap of Faith*, – Episode 2, Season 2 – Mamela Nyamza, SABC (2013). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkeP3aCoEwE> (Accessed: 13 February 2021).

experience economically at places of work that disempower them in the same way the apartheid system did.

The legitimacy of South Africa as a democratic state should be questioned and interrogated in the light of the quality of what it promised to uphold through the values of equality, political participation, free speech, expression without fear or repression, cultural consolidation, access, and development of the state. However, it seems to be confronted with some challenges in bridging the formal structures of democracy as written in law with the realisation and materialisation of the democracy as observed in society. In taking into consideration the challenges that the country continues to face in consolidating its democracy, one needs to ask: does South Africa fully engage and confront the political, social and cultural challenges that it inherited from the apartheid regime in order to recover, (re)imagine, and (re)build itself?

The aftermath of South Africa's colonial apartheid regime primarily left many South Africans with a sense of damage that manifested itself emotionally and psychologically. In addition, it presented reminders of a set of complex systems and constructs that needed to be reimagined in order to build and construct a democratic nation that is free and equal for all. Many South Africans found themselves in positions of emancipatory reflexivity where they had to rethink, negotiate and construct socio-cultural, political and economic ideologies that create meaning for themselves and their community(ies).

In this paper, I ask what of the past remains in the present and can be utilised in physical theatre performances to explore and provide a critical questioning and reflexive challenge to democracy in South Africa? While Mamela Nyamza has a rich body of work that is relevant in discussing physical theatre and democracy, this paper places a particular focus on two of her works – *19-Born-76-Rebels* (2014),<sup>3</sup> and *Pest Control*

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3 *19-Born-76-Rebels* has been commissioned and performed multiple times. It debuted in June 2013 at Young Blood (Cape Town), and was commissioned in July 2013 for the Festival d'Avignon in France. It continued to be performed in March 2014 at the Gordon Institute for Performing and Creative Arts' Infecting the City Festival (Cape Town), then continued in June 2014 at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival (Makhanda). The paper makes reference of the June 2014 performance watched by the author at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival.

(2020)<sup>4</sup> – as key physical theatre texts that provide images of recalling in order to speak to, and against, processes of (re)building democracy in South Africa. In addition, the paper examines the intersecting relationships between expression and interpretation, as embodied and performed in physical theatre performances. Important in the research is the recognition that both democracy and theatre function as continuing processes of interrogation (of the self and the other) through an active embodied practice. It is this discipline of theatre, as embodied practice and in physical theatre performance, that open up avenues for considering and mapping transformations, shifts, and developments towards imagining and building democracy in South Africa.

## Democracy as nation building and social cohesion

The framework that democracy functions under in South Africa, which is of interest in this paper, are the pillars of nation building and social cohesion. These pillars have manifested themselves through the model of “the rainbow nation” as articulated and endorsed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former South African Presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki. Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has been engaged in processes of national building and social cohesion which aim to (re)build the country from the traumatic legacy established by its history. Mamelá Nyamza’s work positions her as an artist who employs physical theatre as a form through which she engages with intersecting lenses of history and post colonialism in order to speak back to systems of marginalisation, silencing, misrepresentation and denied presence in narratives of belonging within processes of nation building (McEwan, 2003, p. 740).

The Department of Arts and Culture highlights the difficulties in consolidating the “divide attached to race, class, space and gender” (Department of Arts and Culture, 2020) which continue to persist post-apartheid.

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4 A production performed during the 2020 virtual National Arts Festival due to Corona Virus Covid-19 regulations. The production was triggered by Mamelá’s dismissal from her role as the Deputy Artistic Director of the State Theatre in 2019.

In a letter written on 4 February 2020, the Department states that the project of social cohesion positions itself as a strategy aimed at promoting national unity through “advancing constitutional democracy, human rights and equality; promoting non-racialism, non-sexism, equality and human solidarity; building unity amongst South Africans, as well as the region, continent and the international community; and encouraging healing of individuals and communities” (Department of Arts and Culture, 2020).<sup>5</sup>

Nation building and social cohesion seek to promote democracy through the lens of national, political, social and cultural identity(ies) for South Africa and its citizens. As stated by Mathebe (2002, p. 139) “national reconciliation and the idea of the rainbow nation were generally regarded as the main pillars of social cohesion and integration.” The model of the rainbow nation, including national reconciliation, functions as political and social symbols of unity. They position themselves as binding agents for a diverse country that seeks to engender a move away from racial, cultural and political segregation.

Theatre, dance and physical theatre have a history of functioning as artistic forms of cultural and political activism towards the same goals held within systems of social cohesion and nation building in South Africa. In her book entitled *Body politics: Fingerprinting South African contemporary dance* Adrienne C. Sichel states that “South African activist artists of the 1980s and 1990s, with many dancers and dance professionals among them, helped fight for democracy and the establishment of a cultural policy and legislated institutions such as the National Arts Council and the Department of Arts and Culture” (Sichel, 2018, p. 24), which both fund the arts in South Africa and advocate for social cohesion and nation building – through the arts. The history of physical theatre in narratives of resistance and change is evident in its ability to continually challenge tradition through experimentation. Physical Theatre insists on “experimenting with traditional narrative structures and deconstructing known dance and theatrical codes and languages... to question conventional

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Arts and Culture (4 February 2020). Social Cohesion and Nation Building compact. [online] <https://www.gov.za/SocialCohesion#> (Accessed: 14 February 2021).



perceptions of what dance or theatre might be” (Finestone-Praeg, 2010, p. 30). The importance of South African physical theatre in deconstructing traditional modes of storytelling is in its ability to innovatively tap into the theatrical aesthetics of personal and historical memory to provide biographic and autobiographic embodied narratives that position the body as a site for resistance against the status quo (Sichel, 2018, p. 56).

The key question to ask is: how does physical theatre performance enter into and position itself in spaces that historically did not allow for access to, or allowed for only a restricted access to, social and political discourses about systems of power? The response to this fundamental question is that physical theatre in South Africa positions the arts as a medium for social, cultural and political engagement specific to the South African context. Physical Theatre functions as a medium that artistically and critically questions the micro and macro aggressions embedded within democratic South Africa through remembering narratives that have been silenced or misrepresented.

*19-Born-76-Rebels* is one such production that evokes memory to creatively narrate and engage with the Soweto Riots of 1976 which were motivated by the inadequate and unequal education of Black pupils in South Africa. In addition, the production provides an insight into the negotiations that took place between the African National Congress (ANC) and the apartheid National Party (NP) to shape the journey towards equality (specific to education of all pupils in the country) and democracy in South Africa. The performance is predominantly physical theatre-based with very few words and dialogue. It makes use of movement, embodiment and physical gestural performativity to convey the narrative and plot.

The evocation of memory in South African Theatre functions as an important tool used to articulate narratives of violence and trauma in order to “offer a glimpse of the ways South African drama [and physical theatre] negotiates the experiences of trauma in the twenty-first century” (Maufort, 2015, p. 242). It is this ability to collect and re-collect memories of trauma embedded in the body that provides theatre-makers with the ability to complicate and nuance South African experiences of identity and pain through artistic mediums of expression, as evident in *Karoo*

*Moose* (2007) by Lara Foot and *I Stand Corrected* (2012) by Mamela Nyamza and Mojisola Adebayo, both of which explore sexual abuse, violence and rape in South Africa. Jay Pather, a South African choreographer, in speaking about the body, trauma, physical theatre and democracy, states that “as a South African choreographer, it has not been difficult for me to draw connections between a social and political context and such formal choreographic principles as proxemics, kinesics, cellular memory and sentience, both during and after apartheid” (Pather, 2015, p. 317). Important in Pather’s statement is the recognition that apartheid sits firmly in moments of trauma – within and outside the body – that reveal themselves in South Africa – both in the body and in society. Mamela Nyamza’s work identifies and interrogates these moments of trauma that show themselves through violence that perpetuates systems of nuanced racism, sexism, homophobia, abuse and inequitable access to education and resources.

## Postcolonial and decolonial perspectives in South African physical theatre

The call to provide new ways of thinking and living that unshackle South Africans from colonial history and racist culture is a difficult project since this history and this culture continue to find ways of breathing in post-apartheid South Africa. It cannot be denied that democratic South Africa struggles to resolve the colonial legacies that have been left behind by the apartheid regime, and which somehow find themselves surviving in institutions of governance, employment, education and social interactions. Gilbert and Tompkins argue that postcolonialism provides an ability to interrogate and question colonial pasts, and propose critical ways in which the present can interact with the past in order to build a democratic nation. They state that “the notion of the postcolonial is endlessly differentiated because it positions the artist and the reader/spectator in changing the structures of power, empire and national formation” (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1998, p. 384). Postcolonialism is political in its ability to create a platform that acts to interrogate the hegemony that underlies colonial representations. It is said to be “an engagement with and contestation of

colonialism's discourse, power structures, and social hierarchies" (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1998, p. 2). As such it addresses reactions to colonialism in a context that is politically and historically motivated, and extends to contexts that are not necessarily determined by temporal constraints.

The project to dismantle the inequalities that are prevalent within South Africa calls for a united front that makes use of both postcolonial thinking and the project of decolonisation so as to redefine and restructure institutional cultures in democratic South Africa. Mbembe notes that "'decolonisation' is a project of 're-centering'. It is about rejecting the assumption that the modern West is the central root of Africa's consciousness and cultural heritage. It is about rejecting the notion that Africa is merely an extension of the West" (Mbembe, 2015, p. 16). The argument that Mbembe presents marries well with the line of thinking expressed by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose project concerns itself with Africans engaging in processes of "decolonising the mind" (wa Thiong'o, 1986) in order to reassert themselves within their society(ies). Ngũgĩ<sup>6</sup> states that the most important aspect of colonialism was the "domination [of] the mental universe of the colonised, the control through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relation to the world" (wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 17). While the project of decolonisation means different things to different people, one can gather, from Ngugi, that it is an act of freeing Africans from the residual effects of colonialism on their cultures that negatively affects their ways of thinking and institutional cultures. To state this differently, "decolonisation ... is not merely (or indeed primarily) an *event* that took place when and where formal colonial rule came to an end, but rather a *process* of challenging the cultural and epistemic legacies of colonialism in broader fields of history, aesthetics and culture" (Andersen, 2018, p. 1).

In talking about the performing body on stage, particularly within the postcolonial context, Gilbert and Tompkins state that:

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6 Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born James Ngũgĩ. Ngũgĩ's name is not in the western form of last name, first name, because neither Ngũgĩ nor wa Thiong'o is his "last name" in the sense that is used in the west. He returned to the traditional Gikuyu form of his name, which roughly means Ngũgĩ son of Thiong'o, and is referred to on his own web site as Ngũgĩ. [online] <http://www.librar-thing.com/author/thiongongugiwa> (Accessed: 29 March 2021).

In the theatre, the actor's body is the major physical symbol; it is distinguished from other such symbols by its capacity to offer a multifarious complex of meanings. The body signifies through both its appearance and its actions. As well as indicating such categories as race and gender, the performing body can also express place and narrative through skilful mime and/or movement. (1998, p. 203)

In saying this, Gilbert and Tompkins speak to the idea that the body is a site of knowledge-power that holds many signifiers about its history and culture, and as such the performing body can be seen as a site of resistance that can find alternative ways of self-representation. This idea is supported by Terese Migraine-George in *African Women and Representation: From Performance to Politics* (2008); she draws parallels to the dynamic role of African women playwrights and performers to speak in spaces in which they previously did not have an opportunity to speak about their politics (Migraine-George, 2008, p. 8). Migraine-George's discussion is important as it brings into the conversation works by artists such as Lara Foot with *Tshepang* (2004) and *Karoo Moose* (2009), Chuma Sopotela with *Inkuku ibeke Iqanda* (2016), Nelisiwe Xaba's *They Look At Me and This Is All They Think* (2011), and Mamela Nyamza's *19-Born-17-Rebel* (2014). These works by these Black female artists serve as a tool for physical and symbolic presence that supplies a voice to the many silenced and misrepresented narratives of many other women within democratic South Africa. In support of this, as Jeanie Forte observes, "one crucial aspect of contemporary feminism is the expression of pain, the pain of the female body in patriarchal culture" (Forte, 1992, p. 252). This is because the body, and her body, in its interrogation of the status quo of social and political moments, becomes political. It authors narratives that mirror society in order to allow audiences to reflect on possibilities for change and transformation.

The conversation between postcolonialism and decolonising the mind has recently also been accentuated through the #RhodesMustFall movement which began in 2015 with protests by students at the University of Cape Town. These protests demanded a shift and restructuring of the education in higher institutions of learning with a call to decolonise the curriculum into an inclusive curriculum that dismantles the hegemony

of Western knowledge systems. In addition to this, the movement and protest called for three things to be decolonised:

First, changing or removing iconography, monuments and other material legacies of colonialism in and around the universities, notably the statues of the British imperialist and colonial politician Cecil John Rhodes (1953–1902); second, a call for more Black South African academics (in the case of UCT) and more racial diversity (in the case of Oxford); and third, the inclusion of more non-Western authors, approaches and topics in order to decolonize curricula and allow a broader representation of epistemologies. (Knudsen & Andersen, 2018, cited in Andersen, 2018, p. 2)

The #RhodesMustFall movement served as an important process towards decolonisation and postcolonial approaches to thinking, a process which was captured, documented and embodied by Sethembile Msezane. Her performance art and live sculptures document and speak back to the erasure of South African women in South African history.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, this act of documentation and critiquing is evident in Nyamza's work *19-Born-76-Rebel* which tackled issues of race, class, and social development in South Africa – specific to the education system within the status quo.

Historically – within institutions of higher education and faculties of dance and movement training – the practice of movement studies and physical performance has been perceived as meaningful curriculum when solely approached through the codified forms supplied and taught within Western Discourse dance canons. This is to say that, for many years, institutions of higher education considered dance forms such as ballet, contemporary dance, and modern dance as acceptable forms to teach because of the history – both written and codified – that they hold. The popularisation of Western dance forms – in theory and practice, within institutions of higher education – has remained largely unchallenged because the academy has failed to see emergent ways of knowledge production as valid epistemologies and ontologies. In addition, institutions of higher education seem to harbour a reluctance (within contemporary

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7 Sethembile Msezane, *Living sculptures that stand for history's truth*, TEDGlobal, 2017 [https://www.ted.com/talks/sethembile\\_msezane\\_living\\_sculptures\\_that\\_stand\\_for\\_history\\_s\\_truths](https://www.ted.com/talks/sethembile_msezane_living_sculptures_that_stand_for_history_s_truths) (Accessed: 14 February 2021).

democratic South Africa) in relation to the changing and transforming demographics of the student population whose ways of knowing, of being, and of becoming need to be equally considered, in addition to those that are already established within the academy. The challenge, therefore, presented to institutions of higher education by students follows similar trajectories to Mbembe's postcolonial and wa Thiong'o's decolonising the mind projects.

*19-Born-76-Rebels* remains relevant even in contemporary South African education as many institutions seek to explore ways of decolonialising the education system in order to make it equal and all-inclusive. This has been evident in the calls to transformation prompted by the #FeesMustFall Movement which, in many ways, echoes the dialogue and discourse that Nyamza and Sopotela reveal in *19-Born-76-Rebels* as they read a passage in the book in Afrikaans and commence to tell the audience about where they come from in Afrikaans – which was the medium of instruction for teaching and learning during apartheid. In addition, the production echoes areas of inequality to educational prosperity and access – much in the same way as the #FeesMustFall Movement did – as the performers reveal to the audience the reality of apartheid government spending on education per child in 1982, with a Black child receiving R146 while a white child received R1 211.

Important to note in the works by South African physical theatre artists is questioning “when, or in which moment, a movement becomes political” (Foellmer, 2016, p. 58). The notion of movement being political in physical theatre is aligned to the politics of body which places the performing body has a site of knowledge and socio-political and cultural inscriptions that are layer the body, and, subsequently, to the narratives that it performs. The body being situated means that it is inscribed with narratives about the past and the present, about history and culture, about struggle and triumph that can only be known through embodied practice. Such performativity can be observed and disseminated through physical theatre that allows for the self-exploration to challenge the institutional systems and constructs. The body in postcolonial theatre, through the use of the discipline of physical theatre, demands a degree of engagement that, in contrast, cannot be achieved in text-based theatre.

The (re)imagining of language and dismantling the hegemony of language – both in the language spoken in traditional theatre and in the physical language of embodied performances – serves as a fundamental process towards decolonisation. For Ngugi, decolonising the mind goes beyond challenging the colonial structures that remain in Africa, but is additionally embodied in the act of embracing indigenous knowledge systems, languages and writings (wa Thiong’o, 1986). In speaking about Ngugi’s work, Casper Andersen notes that “the colonised mind had to be decolonised. For Ngugi this meant giving up the language of the coloniser in his own writings and a struggle to change an educational system that gave precedence to Western traditions at the expense of all others” (Andersen, 2018, p. 4). In considering physical theatre and the works of Mamela Nyamza, “giving up the language of the coloniser” functioned as a process of disarming the coloniser’s language as important in two ways: first, it is observed in the ways Nyamza challenges the hegemony of dance language through overtly moving against ballet, the formal dance training that she received, as the predominant physical and dance form of use in her works. Her productions explore a movement language that makes use of mime, physical theatre motifs, and traditional and indigenous dance forms in collaboration with ballet, allowing them to co-exist uniformly without one being dominant over the other. Secondly, Mamela Nyamza subverts narratives of power and hegemony through refusing silence, and to be silenced, as a strategy of the oppressed to counter the oppressor. This is made evident in her production *Pest Control* (2020) which premiered during a screening at the virtual National Arts Festival (vNAF) in 2020 as an act of resistance against her oppressor – her former employer, the South African State Theatre.

Adam Jarowski is quoted as saying “silence is oppressive when it is characteristic of a dominated group, and when the group is not allowed to break its silence by its own choice or by means of any media controlled by the power group” (Jarowski, 1988, cited in Houston & Kramarae, 1991, p. 388). *Pest Control* is a work that refuses to be dominated and to be silenced. It is a production that overtly and loudly speaks up against the injustices of Black female exclusion in places of employment and the lack of transformation in such spaces. Similarly to her work *Rock to the Core*

(2017) the production serves as a protest to gain access into spaces where Black women are denied entry, even in democratic South Africa. Nyamza is quoted as saying:

It must be emphasised that the protest had nothing to do with us wanting to get awards for ourselves, but rather, had everything to do with equal acknowledgement and access to mainstream theatres, and recognition of all Black artists, whether as performer or director. (City Vision, 2017)

*Pest Control* is a production that seeks to find a language to express the dissatisfaction with Nyamza's previous employer, the South African State Theatre, which dismissed her in 2019 following a speech by Nyamza in Cape Town in 2018 which was about the lack of access, transformation and equality in the arts – particularly with regard to the lack of Black artists' productions being promoted during the Artscape Dance Umbrella Africa festival. The production amplifies the politics and activism connected with the whole issue of the employment of female employees within democratic South Africa through an autobiographical telling and physical embodiment of Nyamza's dismissal from the South African State Theatre. The production invites the audience into the CCMA hearings and arbitration proceedings that adjudicated her dismissal from the Theatre – everything is explored through texts and audio recordings of the arbitration process. This is further amplified by her choice in costuming, as she is dressed in the attire of a woman in fencing gear holding both a fencing sword and megaphone. The production, which is a screen dance film (due to the social distancing regulations and restrictions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic), illuminates the volatile state of female representation in the workplace and the spirit of transformation as supposedly endorsed within contemporary democratic South Africa.

*Pest Control* functions as a form of protest dance – through the medium of film – that highlights the gross shenanigans within the workplace that fail to provide justice to female employees. The production alludes to the lack of transformation in employment equality that affects women in the arts and other sectors of the economy, which disenfranchise their ability to grow and develop within their places of employment. During the performance Nyamza resists and protests this lack of



inclusion through a repetitive chanting in IsiXhosa as she says “Rhaaa! Phuuu! Haay!” which are expressions of disgust and exasperation at the system within the workplace that is located within contemporary South African democracy. During the performance she includes a recording of a speech she gave in Cape Town citing the lack of equal representation for artists – and artists of colour – to ensure that their work is visible and accessible to audiences in festivals and theatre venues that are historically white and colonial in nature.

Both *19-Born-76-Rebels* and *Pest Control* make use of physical theatre to create, question, critique, and story narratives that continue to persist in contemporary democratic South Africa. They allow for artists to position themselves as instruments for disseminating information about social, cultural, and political engagement specific within the South African context. Physical theatre, as evident in the works of Mamela Nyamza, provides platforms and artistic mediums of negotiating identity, being and belonging in contemporary South Africa. It is through the discipline of physical theatre that artists like Nyamza are provided with the platform and ability to question and interrogate the ways in which they have experienced and engaged with democracy beyond the nostalgia of post-apartheid and post-1994. At the heart of both productions is the strong challenge that Nyamza presents to the pillars of free speech, equality, and access as entrenched in the Constitution.

Janine Lewis notes that Fleishman suggests that for most people making theatre in South Africa the word alone is insufficient to portray or explain the full complexity of the reality they face (Lewis, 2010, p. 175). This is to say that in postcolonial theatre the art and discipline of physical theatre allows for the live to function as a means of communication that provides information that can be meaningful – both to the performer and the audience. As such, the body allows for points of embodied reference that cannot otherwise be perceived. This is a key idea in Merleau-Ponty’s writing (as quoted in Cavallaro, 1998, p. 88):

The body is primary a way of being in the world. It is a form of lived experiences which is fluid and ever-shifting. And it is also a way of interacting with one’s environment, of shaping it and being shaped by it.

This notion of the body functioning as a vessel of lived experiences entails that it has the ability to transmit and disseminate information, through physical theatre performance, that carries the body's discourses and value systems – as experienced and lived within society – which assist in formulating narratives on political developments – for example, on ways of building democracy in South Africa.

The self-representation of the body, through physical theatre, functions as a political tool that is central in strategising considerations of ways to create work while challenging the status quo. This notion is supported by the notion that the narratives are inscribed within the body, and as such allow for a postcolonial approach to theatre that challenges the dominance and hegemony as experienced and lived in daily lives.

## Conclusion

Jolley and Bernard, cited in Buqa (2015, p. 1) state that “ubuntu became one of the key concepts of the new democratic South Africa which inspired people of different races to embrace one another after apartheid.” The concept of ubuntu encouraged a blind belief in an imagined multicultural country experiencing the enforcement of national reconciliation and cultural integration, but that did not adequately tackle the social, economic and political implications inherited from the apartheid regime.

The building of a national identity, as positioned through the rainbow nation, prioritised the acknowledgement of differences within multicultural South Africa over the understanding of these differences. The idea of the rainbow nation is that it functions as a space of tolerance of the various races and cultures in the country through the understanding that “the rainbow is incomplete without each of the colours, but none of the colours or strands is dominant over the other” (McAllister, 1996, p. 12). It positioned itself as a system of belief that encouraged the marketability of equality, representation, tolerance, and co-existence.

In his reflection on democracy and the rainbow nation Adam Habib (1997, p. 16) warns that:

the rainbow metaphor, by only focusing on race variables, is thus theoretically misleading... Very little, if any, attention is paid to the socio-economic and other variables that will impact on democratic consolidation in South Africa.

Important in Habib's writing is the recognition that there are fundamental omissions in the rainbow nation that produces incomplete realisations and materialisations of social, cultural and political empowerment to the pillars of equality, representation, and co-existence entrenched by the Constitution. The building of democracy in South Africa calls for a critical engagement with formal, structural, and institutional systems of power that converse with issues of – apart from the established social, racial and cultural differences that are said to live in harmony – economic stability, class, gender, sex and sexuality, sexual orientation, authority, and many other variables that make up a stable democratic state.

Both *19-Born-76-Rebels* and *Pest Control* make use of physical theatre to create, question, critique, and story narratives that continue to persist in contemporary democratic South Africa. As already noted, the discipline of physical theatre affords artists like Nyamza the framework to make strong statements about the society around them. It allow for artists to position themselves as instruments for disseminating information about social, cultural, and political engagement specific to the South African context.

Theatre and performance are rarely considered as avenues for exploring political and social discourse in South Africa. However, what becomes clear, particularly in works such as Nyamza's, is that theatre, specifically physical theatre, allows for the body to speak and present the fundamental contradictions and complex demands of a democratic state. Her work opens up channels for engaging with the pain of living in South Africa – a pain that is translatable to the issues of race, class, gender, and sex. The utilisation of physical theatre allows for a visual and visceral representation of the loopholes that are within the South African democratic state. It allows for the body to politicise sentiments that hold historical residues from the past – economically, socially, politically and culturally. In so doing, physical theatre allows for an active and visual engagement with the fractured democratic state and can generate conversations, discourse, and dialogue about the possible arrangements that can be made

to mobilise a conscious activation of democracy as an active and process towards transformation.

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