

Profile

Collaborative Conversations: The Mothertongue Project in Profile

Sara Matchett

The Mothertongue Project is a collective of women performing: also visual artists, writers and arts educators who explore keys to the empowerment of women and practical processes of healing and transformation through creative methodologies.

Beginnings

In June 1999, over a cup of chai in a monsoon-filled Mumbai kitchen, writer, performer and director Rehane Abrahams asked me whether I would consider directing her in a piece that she was writing. According to Rehane, the piece was a seminal work that would mark a transition into a new way of being for her. On our return to Cape Town the following year, we began working on the production. While filling out funding application forms, we were suddenly confronted with the question of what to call ourselves. The production had to be attached to an organisation. Initially, we wanted to call the production *Mothertongue*, as Rehane felt that if she had had access to her mother's tongue in the form of stories when she was younger, her life might have panned out differently. In coming up with a name for our organisation, we decided that the name *Mothertongue* was better suited to an organisation and that *What the Water Gave Me* would work as a title for the production, because of its elemental nature.

After a rewarding run of *What the Water Gave Me* in Cape Town, we were faced with a choice: either to continue and grow the organisation, or abandon it and carry on with our individual lives. We chose the former. The need for a women's arts collective – one that focused on women creating and performing theatre inspired by women's personal stories – became apparent in terms of the role it would play in redressing gender imbalances historically prevalent in South African theatre. The necessity to challenge the silencing and marginalisation of women's voices in theatre was evident. We approached Andrea Dondolo, Faniswa Yisa and Julia Raynham to join us. Each of these women brought with them extraordinary gifts. Andrea is a multi-skilled storyteller, writer, performer, beadwork artist and praise singer; Faniswa, an accomplished performer, writer and dancer; and Julia, a skilful musician and visual artist.

Expansion

The expansion and formalisation of the organisation led to the creation of our second production, *Beading My Soul*. Andrea wanted to make a play that merged her passions for beading and storytelling. I suggested we collaboratively create a two-hander with Faniswa. This production went on to perform at various theatres and arts festivals in South Africa, as well as at two festivals in Switzerland.

The year 2003 saw the making of *Indawo Yamaphupha – The Space of Dreams*. The creation process gave rise to a new way of working for The Mothertongue Project. It helped us to realise a model of theatre-making that seeks to blur the divide between community and conventional theatre, by creating a synergy between the two. The first phase involved working with different women's organisations: St Anne's Home in Woodstock, Bonne Esperance Refugee Shelter for Women and Children in Philippi, Ons Plek Projects for the Girl Street-Child in Salt River, and Sifunda Sidlala Young Women's Cultural Group in Khayeltisha. Participants were taken through a workshop process that facilitated accessing personal stories around dreams in relation to realities. The second phase of the creation process involved members of The Mothertongue Project creating a conventional piece of theatre inspired by stories expressed in the first phase. This phase also saw a collaboration

with the poet Shelley Barry.

With Rehane in Indonesia studying Javanese dance, and Julia having left the organisation, we realised we needed to expand. Malika Ndlovu, Gabrielle Le Roux and Awino Okech joined us. Malika, apart from being a celebrated writer, is also an accomplished performer and director. Gabrielle, as a feminist activist and a portrait artist, works in a unique way in that the portrait is painted from life while the sitter speaks her experience. This alternative form of documenting pays tribute to variously marginalised and stigmatised people and their issues. Awino, who is Kenyan, has experience in the use of interactive participatory theatre techniques. These are used to guide participants to assess and identify their own potential for conflict transformation. Her focus has primarily been on women, as she has worked extensively with Kenya Female Advisory Organisation (KEFEADO), a gender-concern body based in Kisumu, Kenya. She is also a skilled performer.

In 2004, *Uhambo – pieces of a dream* was born. Apart from being a first for the expanded collective, it also forms part of my research for my Masters degree in Theatre and Performance. I believe that *Uhambo – pieces of a dream* is The Mothertongue Project's most comprehensive and accomplished work to date.

Uhambo – pieces of a dream

Uhambo – pieces of a dream is an integration of theatre and visual art in the form of performances, portraits and installations that probes the concept of democracy through the eyes of women taxi commuters in South Africa. The production took audience members on a journey that wove together women's personal responses to life in post-1994 South Africa. It involved four performers, a director, a visual artist/designer, a writer, a portrait artist and a stage manager: in total, a company of nine women.

The creation process was divided into two phases. The first involved myself, as the director of the production, and one of the performers carrying out workshops with women from Bonne Esperance shelter for refugee women in Philippi, and St Anne's Home for destitute mothers. The workshops employed drama as a means of exploring the women's responses to the past ten years in South Africa. We looked specifically at what freedom meant to them. This phase also involved conducting a series of interviews with a variety of women taxi commuters about their responses to democratisation in South Africa. Kali van der Merwe, a visual artist/designer, ran photographic workshops with the women from Bonne Esperance and St Anne's. At these workshops, the women took photographs, which were based on a series of questions. The women then made books that told the stories of the photographs they had taken. Gabrielle painted six of the women we engaged with (either in the workshops or during the interviews). While she painted them, they spoke their stories. She recorded the stories, which accompanied the portraits. The books and portraits formed part of the performance, in the form of installations. All the material collected was given to Malika, the writer who started finding the links and stories to feed into phase two of the process. This second phase involved the company of nine going into an intense four-week rehearsal period. Malika shares her experiences of the process:

Trust was a constant element of the process, because if you as a creator/writer or director/facilitator of a creative process, dare to let the stories tell themselves and lead the way, while engaging with input from several diverse creative individuals as well, trust is the anchor, no matter what currents are flowing. We were all navigating into the unknown really, and relying on our faith in each other, the creative process and the intentions behind the production we wanted to make.... It was a deliciously dynamic process in which I felt ever ready to try something else, another angle, integrate a new theme, as we forged ahead,

trying to shape the content of the production while honouring the real-life stories and issues that interviewees had shared with us (interview with Malika Ndlovu).

Conversations were set up between the women who shared their stories, the performers, the director, the writer and the designer. This resulted in the text constantly being collaboratively transformed. In the end, the performance was multi-authored.

The performance took place in three spaces: two minibus taxis and a theatre space that had been transformed into a performative installation space. This meant that the audience journeyed with the action. On arrival at the theatre, audience members were divided into four groups and stamped accordingly. They were asked to wait in a queue behind a flag with an image that corresponded with their stamp image. The experience was like that of queuing at a taxi rank at peak hour. In essence, their performance had begun before the performers' performance had begun. They had no idea what was going to happen; all they knew was they had been stamped and asked to stand behind a flag. After approximately ten minutes of queuing, two groups were ushered into the theatre that had been transformed into an installation space and the other two groups entered the two taxis respectively.

While on the taxis, the audience heard stories from a lesbian "gaartjie" (money collector and tout). She related her experiences of being a woman in a male-dominated profession. She talked about the rape of a lesbian and the incompetence of the police, who failed to treat the matter with the seriousness it deserved, suggesting that accessing South Africa's democratic constitution is not necessarily an easy process. On the other taxi, the audience were caught in the middle (literally) of an argument between a homeless South African woman who had been waiting for a house for three years, and a woman refugee from Burundi. The xenophobic outburst that ensued placed the audience in a position that evoked a sense of discomfort. At first, they did not know whether the performers were part of the audience or not. Invariably they engaged in the argument, themselves becoming performers in that moment. The space of the travelling taxi blurred the divide between audience and performer, resulting in a constant shifting of roles on the audience's part, from theatrical audience to theatrical and/or social performer and back again. The taxi space gave them licence to participate in and shape the action.

The theatre-cum-installation space was divided into two spaces: the external garish face of representations of democracy, characterised by "Proudly South African" slogans; and the raw reality of what was actually being experienced by the three taxi protagonists. There were no seats in the theatre, which was filled instead with the presence of a performer standing on stones. All around her were installations, portraits and quotes from other women who were part of the workshops and interviews, and whose stories informed the performances. The performer in this space embodied the three taxi stories. It was in this space that the audience got to hear these characters' experiences and stories in more detail. The spatial relationship between audience and performer, as well as their involvement in the action, served to deconstruct and ultimately to reject the traditional patriarchal theatre space, where audience is clearly separated from performer.

As with all Mothertongue productions, *Uhambo – pieces of a dream* engaged the audience in ritual activity. The production provided the structure for these rituals to take place, and the audience filled them with individual personal experiences. To illustrate this, I have included some examples of the notes audience members were invited to write:

"The warmth of your support from each other gives me hope for us women."

"None of these things have happened to me, but I feel connected. I understand – so thank you."

“Amazing what women can achieve together.”

“You have given me the courage to write and speak about what I have been afraid of writing.”

“Hi. I am NC. I am 50 years of wishing for a house for my children for the future.”

“I really enjoyed reflecting and engaging with the work and feeling quietly hopeful in the end.”

“This was an amazing, beautiful, moving, enjoyable, uncomfortable experience.”

Uhambo – pieces of a dream has served to open up new and challenging ways of working for the organisation.

Why we do what we do

The methods employed by The Mothertongue Project are inclusive, involving collaborative, democratic processes: a radical shift from the patriarchal authority of the lone playwright. For us, the notion of the lone playwright is intrinsically linked to and typifies patriarchal discourse. Conversations and multi-authoring, on the other hand are governed by fluidity, which allows for “differences” to emerge, collaborate and create. This paves the way for consciously exploring the role the arts, and theatre in particular, can play in challenging the marginalisation and silencing of women in language, discourse, society and culture. The embodied disposition of theatre provides an apt locus for women to “re-member”, recover and reclaim silenced aspects of themselves.

For more information on The Mothertongue Project, visit www.mothertongue.co.za.

Reference

Interview with Malika Ndlovu, Cape Town, October 2004.

Sara Matchett is a founder member of The Mothertongue Project.