

Performance review

Today It's Me. By Donald Molosi. Directed by Gao Lemmenyane and Lebogang Disele. Maitisong Theatre, Gaborone, Botswana. 25 April-03 May 2015.

Today It's me, a stylized, narrated musical written by Botswana's talented playwright and actor is about a brave popular singer from Uganda, Philly Lutaaya, and how he handled his HIV positive status and AIDS in the 1980s.

The narrative of the production sees Philly at a point when he was caught up in the most difficult period of the AIDS pandemic in the world. It was difficult because of the stigma attached to the illness and the lack of knowledge about how to deal with it, which sent ripples of suspicion, rejection and prejudice among many, due to the inadequate knowledge gleaned from information about its causes. In the years of its peak in the 1980s and 1990s, HIV/AIDS was perceived as a disease of the morally degenerate; the populace thought of it in connection with loose morals and careless living because the popular understanding was that it was primarily sexually transmitted. Philly, despite his shock and fear of the prejudice attached to his HIV status, chose to make it public. The decision resulted in his alienation from the society he lived in and the media that had previously promulgated his artistic contribution to the music world. His victory, however, lies in his having been able to communicate with his audience and the world at large that there is a suffering, curious and frightened human being in each victim of HIV and AIDS.

The play opens after the death of Philly where key players, those close to him in one way or another enlighten the audience as to their various perceptions of the situation. These same people close the play, in Brechtian style, with comments meant for the audience to think about, in relation to the ones that open the play.

The show was supported by an excellent live band which set the mood and provided appropriate accompaniment to Don Molosi's equally beautiful rendition of the late singer's songs. In addition to the band there was a dancing quartet that offered additional artistic stylized movement in harmony with the different songs and their messages.

The production was stage managed by Nonfo Kgotsietsile, Atang Bowe and Prince Ruele, all of whom are Theatre Studies students at the University of Botswana. Bowe saw to the costumes, which greatly enhanced the context scripted in the play. Ruele managed the lighting, bringing out not only the mood and message of the play, but added to the directors' conceptual stylistic design. The set was symbolic with the use of lighting and music to carry the impressions. The play began with symmetrically arranged black chairs, surrounded by the AIDS logo fashioned in fabric to mark the acting area of the first scene with key participants in Philly's story seated on these chairs. The end of the play has a similar setting but with an important difference; there is no logo and there is space for Philly's last moments on his floor/death-bed in the centre. After the opening scene the bare stage gets transformed into various locations, mostly neutral public places; a stadium/performance area, airport, and a hospital. Scene changes, requiring dual or even triple role changes took place quickly on stage. This allowed for a smooth flow of the action to carry the development of the loose plot through the important stages from knowledge, development and culmination in the passing on of the star.



Kgomotso Tshwenyego, Donald Molosi, Teto Mokaila, Lebo Motubudi, Zanele Tumelo, and Donn Swabby in *Today It's Me* at Maitisong Theatre

Impressionistic dramaturgy allowed for effective representations, such as the dancers posing as telephone receivers at the end of one of their dances accompanying Philly for a light-hearted chat with his brother Abby, beautifully played by Donn Swabby, about the good life in Sweden. The contrast of this spectacle which is cast with the next phone call when Philly reveals his HIV status to Abby and his decision to make that status known on arrival home is significant. The variation was just a mime of the phones skillfully allowing the actors to exchange a range of emotions as their characters dealt with the delicate matter: the brother's reaction and the impact of Philly's determination. Actor Donald Molosi sings in Luganda as articulately as in English, with an accomplished understanding of the messages through his voice as well as the body language. The few spoken expressions in Luganda are also intoned well to carry the intended messages.

Lebo Motubudi plays the part of the narrator, a Ugandan Indian, Nirav Patel with very well executed gestures and convincing accent. The narration is supported by the various actors as they play their roles in an alienation style that allows the audience to fill in the gaps. Philly's mother, Maama Lutaaya, played by Kgomotso Tshwenyego opens with a mother's moving lament on the heartbreak of the loss of a child which sets the scene for the contribution of those that follow in the opening scene. Hers is the most poignant family statement in this scene. The other family comment is on the telephone conversation between brothers, one afraid of the stigma but ready to support and the other determined to go on a mission of giving AIDS a face and warning people about the trials and agony of being ostracized.

Today it's me offers different perspectives of the AIDS scourge, allowing the audience to engage with the situations and react, also variously. The Tanzanian nurse working in Uganda, who was effectively played by Zanele Tumelo, exudes confidence and a no-nonsense personality, possibly informed by her life as a surviving wife of an AIDS victim, as well as her profession as a nurse. She provides a powerful comment about staying HIV negative and behaving positively even if a partner is HIV positive. She derides those who neglect their infected spouses and pleads for sensitivity from those who fail to care for their infected 'loved ones'. This gives rise to a series of questions which the audience must grapple with. Is the nurse's attitude a personal spiritual commitment or simply a humane disposition? This contrasts with a journalist's angry comment on the conspiracy theory that the inception of the pandemic is linked to the

West trying to wipe Africa out! Where is the truth or fabrication of all this? The actor who plays the journalist's role, Teto Mokaila, also plays the kind doctor who had treated Philly. Can a professional successfully divorce himself from private undertakings? Mokaila did an impressive job of portraying the contrasting roles of each of the characters he played. He also acted as Idi Amin Dada, perceptibly evoking that role in the flashback about the expulsion of Indians from Uganda in 1972 as a landmark of Ugandan history which affected our narrator, Nirav Patel.

The casting of Nirav gives insight into the race and ethnic relations of the then socio-political context. Nirav, not only insists he is Ugandan and Philly's fan, but also married his childhood playmate, Ella, the domestic maid's daughter across both social and racial divides. His narration and performance is sad as well as amusing and romantic. This was heightened by his bringing onto the stage the dramatizing of an Indian drinking the local brew and dancing to the popular music of the times, and pushing the boundaries by publically living with a black woman.

The audience responded well to the emotional moments well from the comments and questions solicited at the end of the play. They could easily relate with the Lutaaya situation, although maybe, it looked as if it had been overtaken by new developments connected with HIV & AIDS at this time and may seem to many as history. The fact is that it is still important because the world has not won the battle of fresh infections, and attitudes have not really improved about lifestyles that can be dangerous to a society which relaxes its drive to curb the disease. Have we become so used to the fact that anti-retroviral treatment allows a victim to live a good life that we do not need a reminder that it can be a tortuous situation for the infected?

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