

art southafrica

Black, white and some other colours too

VOL 07 ISSUE 04 WINTER 2009



ISSN 16846133



9 771684 613121



ZAR 80 VAT INCLUSIVE



This is a moment from Exile, a free performance produced by Alfred Hinkel, Michael Lister, Mary Manzole and Penelope Youngleson. Staged at Cape Town's Adderley Street Fountains, the half-hour routine formed part of Spier Performing Art Festival's Infecting the City programme of public performances. The event, directed by Brett Bailey and held in February, explored the various dynamics underpinning xenophobic violence in this country. (See reviews, p.83.)

Infecting the City

VARIOUS VENUES | Cape Town



In November last year, Jason Mkhwane, chairman of the ANC Youth League's Sedibeng branch, told Al Jazeera, "When you see a cockroach in your house what do you do to it? You kill it." South Africans are all too familiar with the fumigator tactics of politicians who insist that the labels "cockroaches", "dogs" and "snakes" are metaphoric and do not amount to hate speech, despite the use of the term "cockroach" in Rwanda. In February, the orange

and black cockroach logo was seen in Cape Town's CBD, signalling Spier's performance festival, *Infecting the City*, with its pertinent theme "Home Affairs".

Using the 2008 wave of xenophobic violence as its springboard, the festival, curated by Brett Bailey, explored the psychologically ambiguous lives of those not afforded security or comfort: foreign nationals, refugees and asylum seekers; Mozambicans, Zimbabweans, Nigerians, Congolese and even 'infected' South Africans. Various site-specific performances engaged with Cape Town, an insistently segregated city with a deep history of intolerance embedded in its archival layers of concrete, tar and brick.

In the performance *Limbo*, these layers are subtly excavated in the site-specificity of Church Square with its statue of Jan Hendrick Hofmeyr, a champion of the Afrikaans language, and its proximity to the Groote Kerk, Parliament, Slave Lodge and tree stump where slaves were once auctioned. A blue figure cloaked in orange (evoking traditional Somali dress) hovers purposelessly on a traffic island on Spin Street. Lingering in front of the Bread Milk & Honey coffee shop, as if promised a land of plenty, the "Spirit of Migration" is later witness to the brutality of the border police who use the encroaching sound of brass instruments to beat people into compliance. The blue and orange ominously allude to the colours of the old South African flag in which, "Orange stands for heroic courage... the Blue wants loyalty and honour," as one is reminded in the song *Ons Flag*, which ends, "Our flag remains our bond of unity, even if times get hard, it's God who watches over Nation and Land, South Africa our own".

"South Africa our own" seems to be the motto that drives the Department of Home Affairs, leaving foreigners in limbo - literally placeless and identity-less, like the Burundian refugee Callixte Kavuro whose statement "every step I take towards a more stable life doesn't... get me anywhere" is echoed in a poem by participating artist Kai Lossgott: "...one step forward, three steps back, travel faster, than we can arrive...". During the performance, the phrase, "Do you have papers here?", is repeated in Xhosa, Amharic, Somali, French, Shona and Lingala, reminding the viewer that without the right language, right

accent, right papers, one has no access to security, health and protection. The "right" papers - a bureaucratic stamp of approval - are often denied despite the Freedom Charter's statement that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it", and a liberal and respectful constitution. "We can have all the beautiful paperwork in the world," says participating sociologist Zimitri Erasmus, "but without a leadership which authorises the vision of the paperwork... the lives of refugees... remain difficult... The recent violence provides an opportunity for South Africa to peer beneath its beautiful paperwork to see its shadow".

Famous for its bungling bureaucracy, Home Affairs is represented in the performance *Amakwerewere* (Thibault Square) as a mangle of red tape engulfed in shadow. A gender-ambiguous figure parades in red stilettos with rope wrapped around its waist. A massive wig that covers the entire head (front and back) renders the red-tape-figure faceless, reminding one that bureaucracy is office, not individual; authority, not personality. It is precisely the anonymity of "the institutionalised denigration of refugees" that condones vilification, denial and the stereotyping of nameless foreigners who are seen to be "thieves, impostors - and legitimate targets" (Hein Marais, 'The foreigner in the mirror', *Mail & Guardian*, May 23-29, 2008). To quote Wits anthropologist David Coplan, an age of forced removals has given way to "enforced transience".

Such transience is captured in the performance *Exile*, staged at the Adderley Street fountains, which recollects the experience of Prosper Tafa who crossed the Limpopo River in search of safety. "My heart thudded suddenly at the realisation of how vulnerable I'd become," he says. "Death felt near". Suitcases - symbols of movement - are gathered up, but the bearer is beaten with water hoses. Water is a complex medium in *Exile*. It is the rush of danger, the stinging whip of the hose, but it also the sign of healing as it douses the burning flames that engulf the wire sculpture of a man alluding to Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave who was killed in an act of blind hate.

The title *Exile* points to the irony that South Africans who now see South Africa as "our own" once ran to their neighbours for refuge. As Zambia's first President, Kenneth Kaunda, stated in a speech at State House, Lusaka, in 1990: "All other southern African nations are free because of our unity... It was decided before Independence... we'd support all freedom fighters. We don't regret what we sacrificed for Africa. Mother Africa". It is this spirit of African camaraderie that *Exile* holds up as hope through the diviner figure that towers above the audience on stilts, alluding to the tall god Moko in West Africa. Able to foresee danger and protect the village, this African figure has emerged in Trinidad's Carnival as Moko Jumbie, who walks through the crowd, protecting the city. In *Exile*, this figure evokes Africa's ancestral spirits as a reminder of what it is we need to do to protect not only the city, but all Africans walking its streets.

Ruth Simbao is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Fine Art at Rhodes University and co-chair of Women's Academic Solidarity Association (WASA)

Tossi van Tonder as the "Spirit of Migration" in *Limbo*, a site-specific performance created by Brian Geza, Fabrice Guillot, Kai Lossgott and Julia Raynham and held at Church Square, Cape Town, February 2009