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### How Does Theater Critically Engage With Contemporary Socio-Political Tensions? A Case Study on Neil Coppen and Mpume Mthombeni's *Isidlamlilo*

Kami Zimmer  
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**How Does Theater Critically Engage With Contemporary  
Socio-Political Tensions? A Case Study on Neil Coppen and Mpume  
Mthombeni's *Isidlamlilo***

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School for International Training

South Africa: Social and Political Transformation

Fall 2022

## **Table of Contents:**

❖ Acknowledgements .....	3
❖ Abstract .....	4
❖ Introduction .....	5
❖ Literature Review .....	7
➤ The Global Context: Aristotle, Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, and Amiri Baraka .....	7
■ Aristotle's <i>Poetics</i> .....	8
■ Bertolt Brecht's <i>Brecht on Theatre</i> .....	9
■ Augusto Boal's <i>Theatre of the Oppressed</i> .....	10
■ Amiri Baraka's <i>The Revolutionary Theatre</i> .....	12
➤ The South African Context .....	13
❖ Methodology .....	24
❖ Limitations .....	27
❖ Research Findings and Analysis .....	28
➤ Personal Resonance and the Power of Relatability .....	28
■ Home Affairs .....	29
■ Living Through the Violence .....	31
■ The Female Narrative .....	35
➤ Transforming the Fear of the Other and Challenging Ignorance .....	38
➤ Furthering the Interconnectivity of Political Threads .....	41
➤ Evaluating the Last 28 Years .....	43
❖ Conclusion .....	52

**Acknowledgements:**

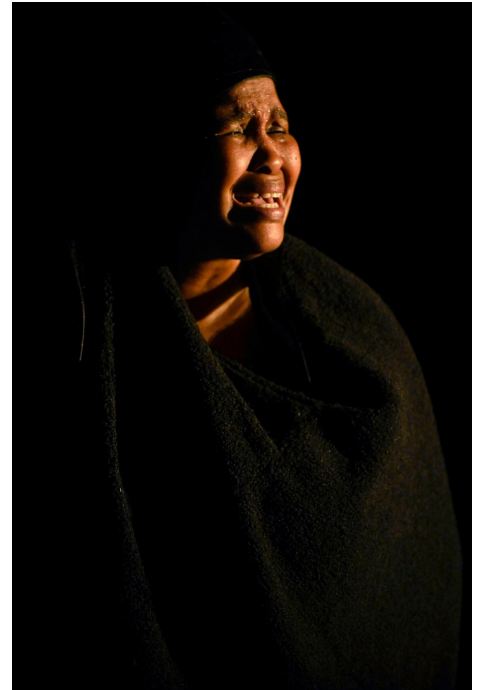
I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Janine Hicks, for her guidance and assistance as well as Neil Coppen and Mpume Mthombeni for welcoming me into their creative space. To the entire SIT staff, Dr. Imraan Buccus, Shola Haricharan, Nonceba Lushaba, Bonga Ngcobo thank you for your endless support.

## **Abstract:**

Historically, South African theater has utilized the stage as a platform to dismantle apartheid, pointing to its purposeful oppressive structure as the cause for much human suffering. In the 28 years since the dismantling of apartheid, contemporary South African theater has retained the same role, critically questioning the ways people are systematically disenfranchised. A need is surfacing, however, to address the causes for contemporary South African political disfunctions and societal inequities, other than apartheid. This study will focus on *Isidlamlilo*, a play written by Neil Coppen and Mpume Mthombeni in collaboration with their theater company Empatheatre, and will aim to understand how this play follows in the footsteps of previous South African theater, is situated within globally recognized theoretical frameworks, and gives audiences a space to critically engage with contemporary politics. *Isidlamlilo* was first performed at The 2022 National Arts Festival and was showcased from November 4th through 9th, 2022 at The Elizabeth Sneddon Theater at The University of KwaZulu-Natal. The play tells the life story of Zenzile Maseko, a former Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) assassin who presently resides in a womens hostel in Durban. This study has been specific to a play which has not yet had its impact analyzed. The researcher has observed the rehearsal process, analyzed the script and multiple performances, and facilitated interviews with audience members. Through use of these methodologies, this study has investigated how *Isidlamlilo* allowed audiences to critically engage with Contemporary South African socio-political tensions. This study finds that the play achieved educational and humanizing effects whilst providing solutions for building a future recognized for its social cohesion and confrontation of contemporary systems of oppression.

## **Introduction:**

As this study shows, theater has a specific ability to inform the uninformed, to humanize that which is traumatizing, and build a future which overcomes the forced distinct categorization of people and socio-political issues. Theater personalizes narratives recognized as solely political, encouraging audiences to critically examine the world as they know it. Such capabilities deepen the thinking of those who have the ability to impact the world, which is not reserved to the political elite, to think critically about the repercussions of their actions. A close analysis of contemporary theater works and their impacts strengthens the capabilities of future theater works that aim to accomplish the same goal of engaging with contemporary socio-political tensions. Unfortunately, theater still lacks support and funding especially in the public sphere. This study acts as an informant for future policy makers to support an increase in funding for theater works, making such works prevalence more prominent. A further study which looks at the effects of *Isidlamlilo* in a year's time, would be more credible in proving a need for the funding of theater. This study does not claim that a lack of research on theater, nor specifically South African theater, exists, but rather studies a new work which has not yet been academically analyzed in the context of South African theater and the context of global theater discourses. This academic angle, pursued through a close study of how *Isidlamlilo* achieves audience engagement with contemporary socio-political tensions, is beneficial in supporting the longevity of theater works which have broader goals than simply entertainment.



*Isidlamlilo* focuses on past violence between the IFP and the African National Congress (ANC) during the late 1980's and 1990's in South Africa, when in the lead up to the country's first democratic election in 1994, the two political parties intense polarization led to, what is now recognized, as a form of civil war. Zenzile Maseko, a Zulu woman in her sixties, retells her life story from the singular room she currently rents in a hostel. Upon an accidental declaration of her death by the home affairs office, Zenzile confronts the worthiness of her past efforts as an IFP assassin and complicates her present injustices under democracy. The objective of this study is to understand what tensions, be them political, social, or economic, *Isidlamlilo* surfaces



through telling Zenzile's story. It aims to understand if the tensions that surface are commonly discussed in South Africa, or does it highlight issues not widely recognized. The research examines how *Isidlamlilo* differs in being a tool for understanding contemporary socio-political tensions as opposed to reading, for example a history book on IFP and ANC tensions in South Africa in the 80's and 90's. It examines if the play is geared towards specific audiences and if it has a particular political agenda or if it houses universal takeaways. It aims to understand if

*Isidlamlilo* follows in suit of previous plays and names apartheid as the cause for injustices, or if it names a different entity, if it names one at all. This study investigates if *Isidlamlilo* presents contemporary socio-political tensions in new ways, asking if it suggests an interconnectedness between factors such as race, class, and gender, or if it provides a new lens through which the tensions are commented on. It aims to understand how *Isidlamlilo* deals with a complex history

that many people in the audience experienced differently, asking if it approaches the history from an angle that many can relate to or if it aims to expose an unknown lived experience.

The argument this study makes is that *Isidlamlilo*, working in line with multiple different theater theories, critically engages audiences with contemporary South African socio-political tensions by educating, humanizing, and providing solutions. It provides information on historical periods in South Africa, educating on the lived experience of one woman's narrative that is not understood by all. It further educates on the continuous nature of systems of oppression and how the presence of democracy in South Africa does not mean freedom for all. It humanizes a period of time and a lived experience that many in South Africa have personal resonance with and in doing so allows a processing of the past that can prevent the recurrence of cycles of violence. *Isidlamlilo* in itself does not claim a single possible path to take in the future in order to create a more just South Africa, however the experience of watching *Isidlamlilo* allows audiences to fathom their own solutions to shape the future of South Africa in equitable, cohesive ways.

## **Literature Review:**

### **The Global Context: Aristotle, Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, and Amiri Baraka**

To adequately locate *Isidlamlilo* in the context of South African theater as well as the global context of theater, it is critical to identify the theories that are relevant. The theories of Aristotle, Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, and Amiri Baraka will be presented to inform the analysis of the findings. The testimonies in which audience members cite the impact *Isidlamlilo* had is, therefore, understood in the context of globally recognized understandings of theater's impacts. Citing their theories first is not done with the intention of claiming they offer theories for distinct play structures that *Isidlamlilo*, nor South African theater in general, directly



replicates. It is done with the intention of connecting South African theater styles, and specifically *Isidlamlilo* to globally recognized trends that offer varying interpretations of the purpose of theater. A line can be drawn between Boals theory of Forum Theater and South African community theater in the way both utilize the audience. For example, an instance of community theater in South Africa that was used as a tool for educating on HIV/AIDS prevention included a discussion portion where the actors, who themselves were health care workers, engaged in conversations with the audience around topics such as the experience of using a condom for the first time. <sup>1</sup> Linkages can be seen between Brecht's Epic Theater and South African political theater in the way they both opt to challenge notions of power and race. For example, in Athol Fugard's *Hello and Goodbye* the spectators are challenged to historicize the role of the Afrikaaner who can no longer rely on racial privilege in the coming of a democratic South Africa. <sup>2</sup> South African theater styles, and specifically the ones used in *Isidlamlilo*, make use of globally recognized theater tactics; however, they also bring a new set of theatrical tactics into the conversation as well as perhaps introduce more fluidity between the various categories, creating theater pieces that may rely on a Boalian use of the audience, but a Aristotelian use of spectacle. Beginning on the global scale, Aristotle's theory will be presented first.

### *Poetics*

In 335 B.C, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote *Poetics* to categorize the various genres of poetry by how they approach the art of imitation. He spends the majority of the book discussing the elements of tragedy which he claims is composed of these six elements: 1) Plot 2) Character

<sup>1</sup> See Evian, C. "Community theater and AIDS education in South Africa." pp. 30

<sup>2</sup> See Colleran, Jeanne Marie and Spencer, Jenny S. "Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater" pp. 131

3) Thought 4) Diction 5) Song and 6) Spectacle (Aristotle, 13). He claims, the plot of a tragedy should not “begin or end at any arbitrary point”, claiming the play must begin with an event, rather than be based off of the aftermath of one, and should conclude with the resolution of tensions that surfaced during the play (Aristotle, 14). Characters must act in accordance with universal laws of nature; a character should not be made to make themselves invisible since human invisibility is impossible (Aristotle, 18). The audience should hear the characters thoughts as they reason with their past lives or problems they are currently afflicted with, and said thoughts should be conveyed through spoken language hence making the tragedy different than a language-less dance or pantomime (Aristotle, 19). In every tragedy, he suggests there must be a musical element of song. His claim to the importance of spectacle is of most use to this study. Spectacle, he explains, references the play's use of the set, sound, lighting, and costuming to provide an encapsulating world for the audience to be entertained by. The final key element present in tragedy is catharsis, a purging of emotions which is to come from an imitation of an action that arouses “pity and fear” (Aristotle, 19). Aristotle's main argument is that tragedy is an imitation of life and its ultimate goal is human reflection.

### *Brecht on Theater*

First published in 1964, German playwright Bertolt Brecht wrote *Brecht on Theater* in an attempt to explain his theory of Epic Theater which can be categorized with one singular quote claiming that “art is not a mirror with which to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it” (Brecht, 34). In complete contrast to Aristotle’s theory of imitation, Brecht believed that theater should not comfort the audience but should force them into critically thinking about their world as they know it. Brecht believed this would be achieved through *Verfremdungseffekt*, a tactic

known in English as “the alienation effect”. This effect is achieved by actors explaining what is going to happen in a scene before the scene begins or projecting an explanation of what is going to happen in the scene on the backdrop of the stage while the scene is happening. Other choices that would be recognized as Brechtian would be actors speaking in the third person about themselves, or using repeated gestures to represent a character rather than fully embody them. In regards to the elements other than the acting, the usage of lighting, costuming, and set design as separate effects rather than as coexisting features together is also Brechtian in style. These choices ultimately are used to constantly remind the audience they are watching a play rather than inviting them into a different world. Brecht explains that the dramatic theater spectator will exit the theater space saying “Yes, I have felt like that too” whereas the Epic Theater spectator will exit the theater space saying “I’d never had thought it” (71), implying that Epic theater does not ask audiences to empathize with a story.

### *Theater of The Oppressed*

Brazilian theater theorist, Augusto Boal, wrote this text in 1974 to introduce a new approach to theater which changes the role of the audience drastically. Instead of being spectators, people who passively listen to a story, Boal coined the term “spect-actors”, people who actively engage with the story being shared with them. *Theater of the Oppressed* presents his format for Forum Theater, a style in which community building, conflict resolution, and social change ultimately transpire through interactive storytelling that relies on not only audience critique, but audience engagement in applying their critique. In Forum Theater there are three main roles: The joker or facilitator, the actors, and the spect-actors. Forum theater begins with suggestions from the spect-actors for scenes the actors should perform that depict social, political, or economic issues.

The actors then improvise the scene, only stopping when one of the spect-actors yells “stop!” and presents a solution to the problem. It is then the spect-actors role to take the place of the actor who caused the problem and test their solutions effectiveness. The scenes can transgress in a multitude of different directions, hence implying that the purpose of Forum Theater is not “to show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which all possible paths may be examined” (Boal, 119). It is ultimately to show how possible it is to reestablish the dialogue that is critical to human relationships. Boal explains that conversations between black folk and white folk, women and men, the Northern hemisphere and Southern hemisphere have become dominated by the more economically and politically powerful in the relationship and have left the oppressed voiceless. He observed a production of knowledge so impenetrable by those not already in dominant discourses and pushed for Forum Theater as a tool for putting knowledge production in the hands of the oppressed for the goal of educating people out of their oppressive circumstances. Boal claims “the theater itself is not revolutionary: it is a rehearsal for the revolution”, explaining how plays which show characters on stage creating the revolution allow for audience members to feel themselves as radical revolutionaries without actually making the revolution a reality.<sup>3</sup> This also speaks to the idea of healing as a revolution, in which the revolution which theater can induce is one of healing from past traumas, an outcome which Forum Theater has been proven to achieve.<sup>4</sup> Augusto Boal's main argument is that through a participatory understanding of the audience, theater can educate and create a space for dialogue and healing that furthers social cohesion.

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<sup>3</sup> See Boal, Augusto “The Theatre of the Oppressed” pp. 98

<sup>4</sup> See Afrary, Kamraan and Fritz, Alice Marianne “Expressive Arts and Narrative as Forms of Healing: More Than Words” pp. 80

*The Revolutionary Theater*

Amiri Baraka, otherwise known as LeRoi Jones, a black theater theorist and playwright from The United States writes about theater as the revolution itself in his 1965 essay *The Revolutionary Theater*. Theater, he argues, “is shaped by the world, and moves to reshape the world, using as its force the natural force and perpetual vibrations of the mind in the world” (2). He describes the “holiness of life” as the “constant possibility of widening the consciousness” (1). Revolutionary theater, Baraka claims, must encourage people to eliminate the forces that wish to prevent a widening of such consciousness. Theater should force change, it should accuse and attack and expose the oppressors to their deaths that are to come. Revolutionary theater can be identified by its language which reaches those who do not speak the language of the oppressor, whether that quite literally means using a language that differs from languages recognized in global economic markets or if that means expelling terminology that has been historically reserved for the academically informed elites. Revolutionary theater deals with the current world and with characters who are victims of the current world. Brecht wanted to make the oppressors in his audience outraged, but Revolutionary theater doesn’t necessarily involve the oppressors at all, in fact it mostly excludes them. Baraka explains that “Americans will hate the revolutionary Theatre because it will be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real” (3). Revolutionary theater is supposed to eliminate the oppressors, and invite in the oppressed. It has many linkages to protest theater in South Africa in that both have always critiqued state power and its victimization of the economically, politically and socially oppressed people that inhabited that territory. Baraka’s main argument is that theater should be the force which frees the people who are most targeted by the systems of violence and oppression deployed by the current world.

### *Global Theory Conclusions*

This overview of four global theories is stated to provide this study with context of how theater makers have been understanding the role of theater through time. Aristotle saw theater as an imitation of life and Brecht saw it as a tool with which life could be shaped with. Boal viewed theater as a way of disseminating knowledge to the oppressed, as a rehearsal for the revolution. Baraka viewed theater as the revolution itself, a performance so outrageous that the world has no other option but to change. These four theories are by no means the only globally recognized theories, however they provide a context that situates the styles of political, protest, community, and traditional theater that strike South Africa today in the global discourses that aim to understand the purpose of theater. Separating these four theories as they have been does not signify a complete and total separation of them and is not done with the intention of setting up a “binary between methods of creating and producing theatre” (Loots, 1997). Theater makers may even rely on a variety of tactics from different theories to cater to the topic their play discusses, the people in audience, and the impact they want to see their play have. *Isidlamlilo*, as the findings show, uses Revolutionary Theater tactics to achieve a Boalian effect and pulls from Aristotelian tactics to achieve a Brechtian effect. With this background in four prominent theater theories now explained, the relation they have to contemporary South African theater styles, and *Isidlamlilo* can be further investigated.

### The South African Context:

Many questions were asked of theater when the governmental framework of apartheid was dismantled in the first democratic election. Theater makers wondered what role theater would have as lingering inequalities prevailed, while the government responsible was no longer

in power.<sup>5</sup> Anne Fuchs and Geoffrey Davis, in their 1996 book *Theater & Change in South Africa* clearly explain the dilemma theater makers faced.

“It is clear that political change on such a scale will engender, indeed already is engendering change in many aspects of theatre. As the now “irreversible” move towards a hopefully democratic, non-racial, post-apartheid society gathers pace, the nature of the required changes will become more apparent. These will affect the themes playwrights write about, the formal aesthetics they adopt and the theories evolved about their work in like measure. Past achievements will have to be re-evaluated as new priorities are established. New forms of theatrical organization will have to be put in place more appropriate to altered political circumstances” (3).

Scholars have since looked into the past analyzing the themes, the aesthetics, and the theories that Fuchs and Davis determine as factors that will have been ever changing in South African theater as the country itself undergoes its own transformation. This next section will take a brief look at South African theater history and how the themes, aesthetics and theories used have shifted throughout time. This will allow the comments audiences members have shared about *Isidlamlilo*, that form the basis of this study, to be contextualized accurately in 2022.

In 2007 Temple Hauptfleisch wrote “The Shaping of South African Theatre: An Overview of Major Trends” in which he identifies 3 periods in South African theater history, the pre colonial (before 1652), the colonial (1652-1990), and the post colonial (1990-on). In the pre colonial period he talks about performance in the broader sense, mentioning dances widely performed by the San people that have been recorded in rock paintings. He cites events such as weddings, initiation ceremonies, harvests and more that fall under categories of social, religious, and military performances performed by the Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, and other ethnic groups native to South Africa. The early colonial period is marked by Dutch interest in theater as an educational tool for the community. Upon British occupation the value of theater as

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<sup>5</sup> See Graver, David “Drama for a New South Africa” pp. 7

entertainment was encouraged and the classic productions of Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Twelfth Night* often took the stage in Cape Town. Continual British expansion established professional English theater, which had large contributions from touring companies that passed through South Africa. This period also saw the development of Afrikaans "indigenous theatrical tradition which could promote the cause of Afrikaans and Afrikaner nationalism" (Hauptfleisch, 6). In 1947 the National Theatre Organisation, supported by The British Commonwealth, came into existence and later morphed into the Performing Arts Council (PAC), both which worked in racially exclusionary ways as the government furthered its same exclusionary agenda. The PAC helped stage and produce professional English theater which white British audiences desired.

Hauptfleisch deems the period of time between 1956 and 1975 as the first break from British colonial theater. It was a period when theater took an oppositional approach and asked questions of the minds behind apartheid. It was here when Athol Fugard's Township plays such as *Nongogo* and *No-good Friday* were performed. The Group Areas Act of 1950 made it difficult for racially mixed casts and playwrights to work together. For a period of time, however, it heightened the prominence of indigenous black African theater because of its necessary reliance on its own community resources. Unfortunately, mainstream English theater grew in resources and popularity amongst white audiences, and the apartheid state harshened its censorship policies. Performances that lended a hand to political consciousness became a necessary route for theater to transition into. Hauptfleisch elaborates on the causes of this below.

"Then in the period between 1972 and 1974 what had been a tentative movement towards a serious and locally grown theatre of opposition became a virtual revolution. The reasons for this are complex and numerous, and often go back many years, but major factors were the overt and militant growth of the Black Consciousness movement (particularly since 1969), the cumulative effect of the playwrights' boycott (1963) and the Equity ban (1966), the increasing frustration of working along segregated lines, and a growing disillusionment with the state funded Performing Arts Councils (PAC's) as a force for change" (15).



In 1972, Maishe Maphonya's *The Hungry Earth* was first performed in Soweto offering a story of how black male workers were treated working in the mines in apartheid South Africa. Francis L. Rangoajane describes how the play resembles Brechtian techniques in the way the actors present the life of a working class black man in South Africa in the form of a lecture rather than weaving that experience into a theatrically informed story.<sup>6</sup> Liane Loots, in her work that examines protest theater in South Africa discusses how although the play positions black males as victims to the system of apartheid, it simultaneously gives a voice to the concerns of that group.<sup>7</sup> The play does not adhere to Aristotelian notions of plot and character, but rather relies on Brechtian tactics that clarify Maphonya's message and do not confuse the political message with the aesthetic, entertaining elements of a play.<sup>8</sup> It was during this period of time in 1974 when John Kani, Winston Ntshona and Athol Fugard wrote *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, a play which looks at the violence of the pass law system and how it effectively deemed black people into a state of nonexistence. Similar story lines have been reproduced in other plays of the time, suggesting the frequency of occurrences of arrests based on pass law violations. This points to a Brechtian ideal of politicizing that which is viewed as normal. Brecht's plays often depicted everyday situations which his audiences may have been accustomed to, and he felt his theater could cast a political light upon such incidents.<sup>9</sup>

Alongside this oppositional theater there were also prominent advancements in alternative theater groups, such as Junction Avenue Theater which would later go on to produce

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<sup>6</sup> See Rangoajane, Francis L. "Political Shifts and Black Theatre in South Africa" pp. 59

<sup>7</sup> See Loots, Liane "Re-membering Protest Theatre in South Africa - A Gendered Review of the Historical and Cultural Production of Knowledge Around Two Plays: *The Hungry Earth* and *You Strike The Women, You Strike the Rock*" pp. 146

<sup>8</sup> See Loots, Liane "Re-membering Protest Theatre in South Africa - A Gendered Review of the Historical and Cultural Production of Knowledge Around Two Plays: *The Hungry Earth* and *You Strike The Women, You Strike the Rock*" pp. 146

<sup>9</sup> See Brecht, Bertolt "Brecht on Theatre" pp. 86.

works like *Sophiatown* in 1986. Theater companies such as these viewed the stage as a place where cultural and historical narratives often presented as conflicting could “meet for dialogue and exchange” (Graver, 11). Alternative theater groups were focused on opposition to the apartheid state as well as training specifically black performers whom the university system excluded. Black township theater also grew during this time, not only in line with the messages of Black Consciousness, but also as a theater which performed the traditions practiced in those communities.

After 1976, Hauptfleisch notes a transition to theaters’ usage as a weapon when it 1) gained recognition as being a socio-political tool 2) attempted to dismantle racial and linguistic barriers and 3) shifted further away from imported European styles and focused on indigenous methods. The theater created in this time period was “highly abrasive, propagandistic and confrontational in style” as opposed to previous works which were more committed to aesthetics (Hauptfleisch, 17). Connections can be made between Augusto Boal's *Theater of The Oppressed* and this period in South African theater, in the ways that it was “taken up by the politically disenfranchised and used as a tool to drive social change” (Loots, 142). It was in this period of time when playwrights such as Fatima Dike were creating pieces such as *The First South African*. In an interview with Fatima Dike in 1980, the black female South African playwright reflects on *The First South African*, her second published play, claiming her aim was closer to Hauptfleisch's second point: to dismantle racial and linguistic barriers and bridge the cultural gap that the apartheid state created in classifying all South Africans as Black, Indian, Coloured, or White. She explains how the play, which is based on a true story of a man who was born with white skin and blue eyes despite having a black mother and a white father, answers the question what is to be made of someone who looks like a white man, has the heart of black man, and is

actually a coloured man under the laws of apartheid? In including a variety of different characters, from the passive father, to the powerful mother, to the shoplifter, allowed people from a multitude of different backgrounds to make connections to their own experiences and reflect on the aspects of the character that they may have agreed or disagreed with. Dike claims her theater is not meant to force audiences to accept what she has said, but rather gesture at her point of view and leave the audience in a state of reflection. The play deals with contemporary characters that one would see in a South African township, and deals with a legal framework that was currently in place, therefore actively questioning the violent produced in the categorization of people based on race that apartheid perpetuated.<sup>10</sup>

A few years later in 1981 Percy Mtwa and Mbogeni Ngema were refused entry into Bophuthatswana while touring with Gibson Kente's production of *Mama and The Load*, and were inspired to create *Woza Albert!*. The play tells the narrative of Jesus Christ as if he had been born during the challenging and oppressive years of apartheid and offers a critique of the ways the Christian faith worked in tandem with the apartheid state. In his article "Woza Albert! Performing Christ in Apartheid South Africa", Marthinus Johannes Havenga concludes that Mtwa and Ngema, and Barney Simon, the founder of the Market Theater which housed the first performance of *Woza Albert!*, succeeded "in holding a mirror up to the South Africa society, presenting the audience with images of what is really happening under the apartheid state" (Par 24). With scenes that depict everyday events likely to occur in apartheid South Africa such as police raids on night clubs, harrassment of black prisoners by white prison guards, and interrogations by police for not carrying a passbook, *Woza Albert!* offers an acute depiction of the injustices of the time. The play ends by naming the apartheid heroes, such as Albert Luthuli and Lillian Ngoyi who's lives were lost in the name of liberation and calling upon them to rise

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<sup>10</sup> See Gray, Stephen "An Interview With Fatima Dike." pp. 158

from the dead. Besides providing audience members with an awareness of events occurring around them, Havenga also cites the play as one that encourages audiences to “make ethical judgements about these realities, and work towards subverting evil and bringing about the good in the world” (Par 24). The play largely worked as an educational tool when it gathered fame in the international industry, having successful runs in The United Kingdom, United States and Australia.<sup>11</sup> In “Political Shifts and Black Theater in South Africa”, Francis L. Rangoajane describes how the plays “episodic and comical nature” (61), allowed the play to critique many topics of concern in South Africa in an entertaining way. This suggests that if theaters goal is to educate the masses on certain issues that affect people's current lives, a level of lightness through means of humor may allow audiences to come away feeling “better inside themselves, knowing deep down that it would be okay one day” (10), as Archbishop Desmond Tutu was quoted saying in reflection of *Woza Albert!*. This play would fall under a theory of theater that opposes traumatizing or waking up audiences to the horrors of contemporary life so they have no other option but to join the revolution. Tutu’s comment not only applies to the comical elements of the play, but also Mtwana and Ngema’s choice to pose a solution to the contemporary challenges. They offer the idea of “the coming of the light” or that which is good in the world, ultimately overpowering that which is evil. It is not inherent that plays offer a solution nor claim a solution to even exist, making *Woza Albert!* stand out amongst other South African plays that conclude by suggesting a more revolutionary ending that doesn’t offer a fix but rather a warning of the destruction that is to come if the oppressors continue on with their tactics of oppression.

Hauptfleisch elaborates on the changes in theater after 1985 and highlights a shift from the propagandist style of the late 70’s that transitioned into theater which explored areas of social and personal concern while still having a firm grasp on social-political commentary. He

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<sup>11</sup> See Havenga, Marthinus Johannes “Woza Albert! Performing Christ in Apartheid South Africa” par. 12.

attributes this to a widening of the cultural struggle that audiences craved theater makers to begin discussions around. Lliane Loots cautions about the the trap of dismissing women's contributions to resistance theater during this time period, and brings attention to this in her examination of the way South African protest theater has a gendered remembrance. In her work, Loots examines how *You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock*, by Phyllis Klotz, Thobeka Maqhutyana, Nomvula Qosha, and Poppy Tsira, marks the transition from theater that offers solely political commentary to offering insight into the social and personal aspects that are always at play.<sup>12</sup> The play tells the story of three women who sell chickens in a market outside Cape Town and uses real life recorded experience along with fabrication to explore the misogynist and racist policies that affected the lives of women during apartheid. Loots sheds light on the plays ability to look at the “interconnectedness of power relations” and how it challenges the post modern impulse to categorize the opposition to apartheid as a uniform category of race “to which all other manifestations of power (for example class and gender) have been subsumed” (Loots, 146). *You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock* also relied on a research based approach in which real women's lived experiences were gathered through a series of interviews to inform the story that would be told through the play. In connecting the personal and political, this era of theater provided an interesting foundation for what Hauptfleisch describes as the theater for healing period that began in 1990.

It is in this period when cross cultural events began to spring up as the intense separating of racial and ethnic groups began dissipating, international theater reappeared as the cultural boycott was suspended, and artists began thinking about who would theater address as the cause for such striking social and political problems once the apartheid government was ousted.

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<sup>12</sup> See Loots, Lliane “Re-membling Protest Theatre in South Africa - A Gendered Review of the Historical and Cultural Production of Knowledge Around Two Plays: *The Hungry Earth* and *You Strike The Women, You Strike the Rock*” pp. 145

Theater in South Africa had rested on the notion that apartheid was the common enemy and therefore the dramatization of contemporary problems would require artists to identify new approaches.<sup>13</sup> There were specific events such as the first democratic elections and the publicized Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings that acted as catalysts for plays such as Jane Taylors *Ubu and The Truth Commission*, however there were also later plays such as Mike Van Graans *Some Mothers Sons* that didn't focus on one particular post 94' events incapability to heal the country, but aimed to address the failures of the legal system as a whole, both under and free from apartheid rule. Van Graan wrote *Some Mothers Sons* in 2006, 12 years after the advent of democracy in South Africa. The play follows Braam Visser, a twenty something year old Afrikaner lawyer who at the end of the play finds himself in prison for shooting at 3 people who killed his wife and unborn child, and Vusi Mataboge, an anti apartheid activist who is detained at 27 when he meets Braam who proposes the idea of working together to get him released. The men grapple with the question of how justice is served best? Does the legal framework they helped to create as practicing lawyers, really provide the correct tools for justice to be served? How does the concept of justice change when its placed against the backdrop of racism perpetuated by the apartheid state? Although written in post 94' South Africa, it deals with the violence produced by the system of policing in apartheid South Africa and speaks to the horrible conditions many suffered under when arrested under the Supression of Communism Act, or under the terms of the emergency regulations which allowed for 180 day detentions without trial. It reaches past placing the blame on apartheid as it critiques the legal systems efficacy in the past as well as the present and looks into the human psychological reasons for killing, for assisting, for defending, and for accepting.

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<sup>13</sup> See Graver, David "Drama for a New South Africa" pp. 7-8

In the past twenty years, as much as scholars have noted a prominent increase in black female playwrights,<sup>14</sup> such an increase should be questioned in relation to the critique of the gendered view through which South African theater is remembered.<sup>15</sup> Fatima Dike has explained that she could not have written her play *So, What's New?* in the 1970's because at the time, female playwrights were governed by the struggle so much that the goal was "to harness our power together to fight the struggle through theatre", rather than discuss the politics of existing as a woman (Perkins, 25). Loots explains how the dynamics between gender and racial politics were positioned in opposition to each other in the case study of *You Strike A Woman, You Strike A Rock*.

"*You Strike The Woman, You Strike the Rock* is an example of protest theatre produced, directed and workshopped by women about women under apartheid. The uniqueness of this play lies in the fact that a group of primarily black women were not afraid to voice gendered concerns during a time when it was considered divisive of women to speak of sexism when the 'larger' evil of racism prevailed in society. Secondly, in a time when women's voices were generally not being heard in theatre, this group of women spoke political discourses that challenged the construction that theatre was a public endeavour and therefore the domain of men and male performers; a binary which absented many (black) women from theatrical practice - a legacy which South Africa still lives with. While, for example, women playwrights like Gcina Mhlope (*Have You Seen Zandile*) and Sue Pam-Grant (*Curl Up and Dye*) were writing plays during this time, the theatrical voices chosen or preferred were personal ones. These plays emphasises the individual stories of women's lives that had, as a backdrop, the racial politics of an apartheid South Africa" (145).

Contemporary South African playwrights such as Philisiwe Twijnstra have been working in the intersection of the personal and political aspects of being a woman, creating pieces such as *The Red Suitcase* in collaboration with Mpume Mthombeni in 2016 and *Itshe* in 2021. Twijnstra writes about sexual liberation as a liberation movement and writes characters whom speak to the

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<sup>14</sup> See Rangoajane, Francis L. "Political Shifts and Black Theatre in South Africa"

<sup>15</sup> See Loots, Lliane "Re-membling Protest Theatre in South Africa - A Gendered Review of the Historical and Cultural Production of Knowledge Around Two Plays: *The Hungry Earth* and *You Strike The Women, You Strike the Rock*"

violence and abuse female bodies endure while bringing into question the space sensuality occupies and what happens to that space within a body that has suffered. In contemporary times, the politicization of the personal has been relied upon in theater not only in relation to women's struggles, but as an in general tool through which to relate to audiences lived experiences. Neil Copen and Mpume Mthombeni's theater company "Empatheatre", has been combining the personal and political for the past decade in South Africa. They have addressed a variety of community concerns such as the pressure rural communities face to give up their land to coal mining companies, as addressed in *Mhlaba noLahle (Soil & Ash)* in 2014, street level drug addiction, as addressed in *Ulwembu* in 2014, the experience of female migrant workers, as addressed in 2017 in *The Last Country*, homelessness and land injustice in Cape Town, as addressed in *Boxes* in 2019, transformation of the global governance of oceans, as addressed in *Lalela uLwandle (Listen to The Sea)* in 2020, and *Isidlamlilo* in 2022 which cannot necessarily be categorized as addressing one singular topic. Copen and Mpume, along with their co-director Dr. Dylan McGarry, an educational sociologist and artist in South Africa, use research based methodologies to identify community concerns and collaborate to create immersive storytelling experiences which offer new perspectives on complex issues. They relate to Boals theory in changing the definition of the audience to create intimate theater experiences. In a performance of *Boxes* at Belhar High School, the play was performed in an auditorium with around 30 chairs in a circle around the actors. After the play the audience members and characters engaged in a dialogue to deepen the audience's insights in regards to the themes addressed in the play. This structure was not unique to this specific performance and this informal theater staging is often replicated in their productions. They relate to Brecht's understanding of politicizing that which is normal, and limiting the use of spectacle to better convey a political message. In a run of *The*



*Last Country*, the actors performed in an intimate setting at The Denis Hurley center with very limited lights, set, props, and costuming. They relate to Amiri Baraka's theory of revolutionary theater and create theater which itself is the revolution. In their run of *Mhlaba noLahle (Soil & Ash)* they performed for residents of Fuleni in the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi region of South Africa, where a large mining company was hoping to evict residents off of their ancestral land via coercive means. The community was divided on the issue, and the performance helped the community address each other without judgment to eventually come to an agreement. The application to mine on the border of the community was eventually rejected in 2018. *Isidlamlilo* is situated at a very specific time in the history of theater in South Africa and in the history of Coppen and Mthombeni's work. Connections can be made to the broader global theater theories as well as to the historical trends in South African theater. The piece, however, also traverses new topics and divulges new methods of articulating the complexities within such topics. These similarities and divergences will be further explored in the findings.

## **Methodology:**

This is a single case study that follows a generic qualitative research design, as outlined by William H. Percy and Sandra and Kim Kostere in *Generic Qualitative Research in Psychology: The Qualitative Report*. The purpose of following such a research design, as suggested by Vicki L. Plano Clark and John W. Creswell in *Understanding Research: A Consumer's Guide*, is to obtain a multitude of perspectives on the researched topic. Data has been collected through interviews with Neil Coppen (director and writer), local theater makers and professors of drama as well as audience members with no previous theater experience. This study is limited in time, however not in resources. Neil Coppen is a Durban based theater maker

who has shared his creative and research based process as well as goals for *Isidlamlilo*.

*Isidlamlilo* ran from Friday November 4th to Wednesday November 9th. The researcher attended a rehearsal on Thursday November 3rd and shows on Friday November 4th, Saturday November 5th, and Wednesday November 9th. The interviews were extensive and in depth, lasting thirty minutes to an hour and thirty minutes in length. The interviews have been structured with pre-formulated open questions that aim to answer how the writer, local theater makers and professors of drama, as well as audience members with no professional relationship to theater feel *Isidlamlilo* critically engaged them with contemporary South African socio-political tensions. This methodology is utilized with the intention of gathering a complete view from the creators, the public viewers, and local theater makers on how *Isidlamlilo* engages them. A total of eight interviews were conducted, three males and four females of either Black, Indian, or White racial categories, with one subject who does not subscribe to a racial category. The audience members range from twenty-six to fifty-six years of age. Preliminary exploratory analysis, as cited by J. W. Creswell, is used to familiarize the researcher with the data collected prior to thematically analyzing it.<sup>16</sup> The interviews have been recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed to conclude what specific current political tensions the play reflects. V. L. Plano Clarke lays out a reliable model for thematically analyzing data that requires selecting specific themes mentioned and organizing the data within the margins of such themes.<sup>17</sup> Such a model has been followed in the analysis presented in this report. This research is credible because of the multiple perspectives data was collected from and does not conclude that contemporary engagements occur if only the writer and not the public viewers find them to have

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<sup>16</sup> See Creswell, J.W. "Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research" pp. 243

<sup>17</sup> See Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). "Thematic Analysis". In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), "APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, Neuropsychological, and Biological." pp. 57

occurred. This research is transferable because it requires sets of interviews that can be repeated by a future researcher. This research is dependable because the multiple subjects interviewed that approach the topic from different perspectives inhibit the researcher from concluding findings that are influenced by their own biases, perspectives, and motivations. It is confirmable because the precedent in research conducted on the impact of theater as a tool for critical engagement acknowledges this study's use in informing future theater makers. The research is not only applicable to local theater makers, but also to globally recognized creators since theater which engages in contemporary tensions is not specific and or reserved for South Africa.

This research contributes to the local community of political theater makers and viewers by allocating them a new resource which to reference on a work of theater that has not yet been researched. More importantly, it offers community policy makers a source which proves the value in funding theater that critically engages audiences with contemporary socio-political tensions. Mutual trust has been maintained between the researcher and the research participants to ensure cultural boundaries are respected. Informed consent has been acquired by the researcher prior to interviewing subjects and anonymity and confidentiality of research participants has been maintained. The ethical research guidelines outlined in the Human Subjects Review policies have been consistently adhered to.

This study ultimately researches the ways Neil Coppen and Mpume Mthombeni's *Isidlamlilo* engages audiences with contemporary socio-political tensions in South Africa. Through a total of eight structured interviews with pre-formulated questions the researcher has collected data that provides insight which informs the research question.

## **Limitations of the Study:**

The main limit to this study is time. With the period to submit a proposal, conduct research, draft the findings into a written format, and make analyses and broader conclusions beginning on November 7th and concluding on December 1st, the study has been partially restricted by a lack of time. With more time, the researcher could have further developed the analysis of findings in a more structured manner to better illuminate the impact *Isidlamlilo* had on audiences.

With more time the researcher could have also interviewed a broader range of audience members, specifically including audience members who have less personal connection to the story, which limits the study in terms of dependability. Although the research includes narratives from Black, Indian, and White audience members, a better balance of perspectives could have been achieved, as well as Coloured identities included. Audience members with a lived experience further from the one shared in *Isidlamlilo* would have provided insights into the educational aspects of the show, which exposed them to a narrative unknown to them.

The study is lastly limited in the researcher's position as a non-South African. The researcher believes their role is not necessarily to insert themselves into Zulu culture, which they do not ethnically identify as, and export the lived experience of those who do into academia. The research does not offer the same depth of analysis that, say, a researcher who considers themselves to be of Zulu ethnicity, would offer nor does the researcher attempt to analyze the data as if they shared the same ethnic background. A focus is given to Zulu identities in regards to the limits because Zenzile Maseko, the only character in *Isidlamlilo* is of Zulu ethnicity and the play uses both isiZulu and English elements. Even not on ethnic grounds, the researcher's position as a non-South African restricts their ability to fully comprehend where *Isidlamlilo* lands in the context

of South African history in general. The researcher spent time studying the literature which explains South African history, and specifically South African theater history, and its implications on the broader socio-political landscape. The conclusions of a South African researcher who has been witness to those implications themselves, however, would be much more informed contextually.

### **Research Findings:**

The findings presented next are informed by interviews with 8 participants. Besides Neil Copen whose consent was received to publicly use his name, the interviewed subjects' names are kept anonymous, therefore pseudonyms are used to cite the data collected. The interviewed subjects are as follows: Suria, a 26 year old Indian female, Anne, a 28 year old White female, Thabiso, a 31 year old Black male, Sphesihle, a 34 year old Black female, Amahle, a 39 year old Black female, Tarlia, a 49 year old Indian female, and Eric a 56 year old male who does not subscribe to a racial category.

#### *Personal Resonance and the Power of Relatability*

*Isidlamlilo* follows a singular story of Zenzile Maseko, a sixty something isiZulu gogo living in a hostel, however, audience members have reflected on how although the degrees to which audience members know this character or know her experiences may vary, the play offers a point of connection for everyone. One of the interviewed subjects claims the true power in this type of performance lies within the moment you stop seeing the character on stage and begin projecting yourself, your family, your friends, or simply just the people you observe around you as you move through space. Relatability has the power to provide access to narratives that may

be partially or fully unknown. For those who watched *Isidlamlilo* who do not personally know someone similar to Zenzile, the point of connection may be that they understand the pain of going to the home affairs office or that they have observed older Zulu women moving through space the same way Zenzile does. Some know the inner monologue of Zenzile on a deeper level because they too have experienced what she has and some know nothing of her life and her story. The findings will show that despite these differences, *Isidlamlilo* draws audiences in and offers points of access for a wide variety of people which encourages personal reflection and a growth in awareness.

### **Home Affairs:**

Neil Coppen, the writer and director, expresses how the inclusion of the home affairs storyline is the key in reeling in audiences very quickly because many have been witness to the hostile experiences at that office. He tells the story of a Malawian friend of his who reflected on



the character named “Pink Nails”, a young woman working at the home affairs office who consistently angers Zenzile after repeatedly telling her that the home affairs computer system has mistakenly declared her deceased and there is nothing she can do, other than file a

complaint. Despite not having the same exact problem as Zenzile, Coppens friend reflected saying “that’s the story of my life here in South Africa as a Malawian trying to get residency and trying to be seen”. All audience members do not necessarily share the feeling of being

mistakenly declared dead, but rather they resonate with the taxing experience one goes through at the home affairs office. Sphesihle, a 34 year old black South African female explains that audience members might not have a Zulu grandmother who used to work for the IFP, but they can identify similarities to how Zenzile reacts and how they themselves react when for example, waiting in line at the home affairs office. Sphesihle identifies the way Zenzile shifts in her wheelchair as a moment that resonates with her, as she too knows the pain of waiting in that line. Watching Zenzile at the home affairs office reminds Sphesihle of how differently she experiences “the system” in comparison to a white person, giving the example that while she spends almost an entire day waiting in line, a white person may pay someone to go to the home affairs office in place of them. For the people in the audience who pay to have someone handle their home affairs trips, Coppen expresses how he hopes the scenes in the home affairs office help them realize the stakes of other people's lives in comparison to their own. He explains how for Zenzile, a trip to the home affairs office is about survival, about being declared living so she can receive her grant money from the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) so she can pay her rent. For others, a trip to the home affairs office is for the purpose of getting a passport renewed in time for a trip to Italy. Anne, a 28 year old white female explains how although the experience of people like Zenzile was not a new narrative for her, she was further reminded of the way “people’s identities get reduced to a piece of paper or a number” while watching *Isidlamlilo*. Thabiso, a 31 year old black male expresses how transformative the home affairs scenes are in authentically allowing people to step into Zenzile’s world since they too understand this displeasure. Thabiso feels that it creates a bridge for people to communicate who experience the same system drastically differently.

### Living through the violence:

For many audience members, the violence Zenzile was involved in during the 1980's and 1990's between the IFP and the ANC, was a period of time they lived through. *Isidlamlilo* shed light on the intense polarization between the two parties, a polarization that Sphehile also remembers as her experience growing up amidst that violence:

“I remember the IFP and the ANC problems in the townships. I remember my grandmother saying to me, when someone asks you “who did you vote for?”, you don't mention who you voted for because you don't know if that person is IFP asking you and if you say “I voted for the ANC”, they're going to burn your house. A lot of houses in our township were burned because of that”

In *Isidlamlilo*, Zenzile is depicted in the heat of that violence. Her husband, who worked



as an IFP assassin before her, was killed by ANC members. In the play, the second Zenzile receives the names of the men who killed him, she kills every single one of them. Sphehile explains how South Africa often tries to frame stories as having some level of

morality to them, whereas *Isidlamlilo* does not make a claim to what Zenzile did as an IFP assassin as wrong or right, it simply tells her story and humanizes her perspective. She reflects on how what happened between the two parties in the 80's and 90's left tensions that still exist, claiming to this day, she will never see an ANC and IFP member in a picture together, but she will see a Democratic Alliance (DA) and ANC member in one. She explains how the play provides “more layers to understand the position of powers, especially if you belong to a certain



party” in how it showed that Zenzile doesn’t kill people because they are bad people, she kills because they attempted to kill her or had killed her husband.

Coppen recounts the experience of a woman who watched *Isidlamlilo* who lost her brother to the IFP and ANC violence of the 80’s as a humanizing, as opposed to re-traumatizing experience for her. Theater and specifically *Isidlamlilo* is “about humanizing moments in time that we are so taught to see as one particular thing”, explains Coppen who included that fact that humanizing the woman who Zenzile is based on was not a difficult task. In his interviews with the real woman, he saw how she was equal parts cruel as she was compassionate, equal parts tyrannical as she was maternal. *Isidlamlilo* remembers an intense moment in South African history that, if not dealt with in a humanizing manner, loses the positive effects of healing and understanding. For many South Africans who lived through the violence, the topic may not be one they revisit often, so addressing it in the theater space has to be done with care. Amahle, a 39 year old black female explains how she tends to block certain parts of her life out of her mind.

“As South Africans we’ve been through so much, we go through so much, that sometimes my brain protects me and puts things away in cabinets in the back of my mind. It’s only when i’m in a situation like this [watching *Isidlamlilo*] when i’m being reminded, for example, about the tensions between the ruling party and their opposition”

Amahle discusses how she doesn’t revisit those memories from the late 80’s and early 90’s often, however watching *Isidlamlilo*, memories came back to her of when her mothers brother had to move into her home because the “butchering of humans” as a result of the IFP and ANC tensions was too intense where he lived. Revisiting those memories evokes many emotions for Amahle, however she feels that if there was more engagement with past history and with past hurts, such as the engagements that occur in *Isidlamlilo*, there would be more moving forward

and less repetition of history. She talks about how the violence in July of 2021 in South Africa in response to the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma mirrored some of the same political mindsets present in the 80's and 90's. She recounts the moment in *Isidlamlilo* when Zenzile claims she didn't know the ideological differences between the IFP and the ANC, but rather joined the IFP because she enjoyed the way she could freely celebrate her culture at the meetings. She cited the looting that happened in July of 2021 in South Africa as a similar setting in which people's cultural loyalty outweighed actually looking at reality. Engaging with the past, Amahle explains, is critical to stop perpetuating cycles of violence.

For the audience members who have a personal resonance to living through the violence between the IFP and ANC in the late 80's, *Isidlamlilo* wasn't so much a history lesson for them but allowed them to reflect on dynamics not widely known in regards to that time period. A dynamic widely surfaced was the apartheid state's instigation of the violence and how it benefitted from seeing the country up in flames. Historically, the National Party (the ruling party under apartheid) and the IFP have aligned in regards to their ethno-nationalist ideologies: The IFP being Zulu Nationalist party and the National Party being an Afrikaaner Nationalist party. The apartheid state has been recognized as what is now called The Third Force during the IFP and ANC violence of the late 80's, backing the IFP with supply of arms and other forms of support. The goal in backing the IFP was to inhibit the ANC from gaining control therefore enstating a democratic state by perpetuating continual violence that would envelop the country. Tarlia, a 49 year old Indian female explains that many people today associate with political parties who are unaware of the manipulations that are in motion. She reflects on the difference between what she learned in school and what she understands as an adult, the history she learned growing up being one jaded by apartheid. She suggests that because of this, people may have

been involved in the violence while not understanding they were being manipulated into doing so. For Tarlia, this manipulation by the apartheid state was not discussed in the play for limits in time that she understands. *Isidlamlilo*, however, did surface less tangible forces that don't always sway one's involvement in political violence, but sway their political preferences, namely the need for safety and security. Tarlia was reminded of the scene in the play in which Zenzile switches from being an IFP member to an ANC member in the hopes it would increase her chances of getting a house from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a social and economic policy initiated by Nelson Mandela in 1994 to address the vast housing needs in South Africa. Zenzile transfers her membership to ANC since her name had been at the bottom of the RDP list for years, whilst ANC members were getting the majority of houses built. Tarlia explains how Zenzile didn't switch parties because of an ideological draw to the ANC, but because the ANC promised her security. While some reflect on the apartheid states manipulation, Sphehile reflects on a gendered understanding of manipulation, not pointing to the apartheid states instigation of the violence, but pointing to how a specific tactic deployed was to recruit women to fight. She explains that based on assumption, women would not be suspected to be assassins working for the IFP, therefore giving them the upper hand in taking out their opponents.

For the audience members, such as Tarlia, who lived through those periods of violence, the play does not open up an unknown world for them, but provides a place to reflect on that period of their lives. For some, such as Amahle, who do not confront those pains often, it illuminates their experience in a more humane and personal light, suggesting that if more people were provided the space to process their experiences in such ways, the continuation of violence could be prevented. For others, like Thabiso, it gives them a space to process why the violence

was occurring and remind themselves of hidden forces (be it a more literal force like the apartheid state, or a non-tangible element such as the need for security or a draw to cultural celebration) that positioned people as opponents who may be more alike than they think.

Audience members who resonated with the lived experience of Zenzile during that time in South African history were provided with ample space to reflect on their past and envision a trajectory for the future.

### **The female narrative:**

For some audience members, the relatability was simply in the fact that a woman was telling the story, as opposed to a man. Sphehile concludes that *Isidlamlilo* was not original because it talked about tensions between the IFP and the ANC, but because it told the story of those tensions from the perspective of a woman. She explains that she “could sit down and stomach the politics from the play because it came from a woman. That's rare. It brought a new fresh understanding that is not one dimensional. It connected to what I understand human beings are”. She explains that Zenzile was relatable because she has given birth to a child, she has fallen in love, she has a vagina. She remembers how in the scene when Zenzile was bathing, she thought “that's exactly how my grandmother would bathe herself”. Sphehile claims that so many of the narratives of violence during the anti-apartheid struggle are told from the male perspective and suggest that women cannot be violent or that the story of the anti-apartheid struggle is reserved for men. She suggests that women are able to explain what men cannot, and the beautiful part of the show is that everyone could understand Zenzile regardless of their gender. If a man had been given the same script, he wouldn't be able to tap into an understanding of the world that women could relate to, claims Sphehile. She talks about how her

dissatisfaction in South African protest theater has always been that it never shows how racial power relations were and are intensified by gender power relations. *Isidlamlilo* manages to do exactly that, therefore making it a more accurate remembrance of the violence she experienced growing up.

Anne explains a similar understanding as Sphesihle, as she speaks about how the play doesn't approach an entirely new subject, but it provides a gendered understanding of the subject, which is not frequently done. She talks about how the play, by highlighting the tensions between political parties that haven't necessarily dissipated, brought up the question of how much change can be seen now that South Africa is 30 years into democracy. She explains that the play centered older black women as those who have been left behind in the development of a democratic South Africa, an opinion she thinks is valid in surfacing.

Eric, a 56 year old male talks about how the play tied in to the principles presented in *You Strike A Women, You Strike A Rock* and the 1956 Women's March on Pretoria when women rallied over the idea that once the systematic power structure affects the women of the nation, it is affecting the core of the country, the very glue that holds it together. Coppen expresses a similar sentiment in regards to a line in the play when Zenzile claims the gogo's of South Africa keep the country together, while the others sit back and watch it fall apart. He explains how gogo's in rural areas will work in the agriculture fields to support and feed ten to fifteen grandchildren and children. Eric identifies similar figures that he sees in the streets of Durban, older women selling goods in the markets to support their families. He speaks about how he brought a young female Zulu friend of his to the show who afterwards expressed that the show was incredibly emotional for her because she felt like that was her aunt on stage. For Eric, his point of connection was not that he had an aunt just like Zenzile but it was the way Mthombeni

moved her body through space in the same way that females of that age tend to move through space. He explains that one of his closest friends is reaching that age of relying on her wheelchair and walking around in such a frail manor. Eric feels that although *Isidlamlilo* was not designed for black audiences, that demographic may have an easier point of access simply because of having family members or friends who may be extraordinarily similar to Zenzile. He explains Empatheatre's previous work usually includes multiple voices as opposed to just one, providing a variety of access points for different audience members. In multivoice plays, Eric explains, "the presumption is that for every audience member, one of those characters is closer to where they are". He explains that what makes *Isidlamlilo* challenging, is that from a cultural point of view there was only one point of access. He explains that as a non-African he identifies a tension in Zenzile's interpretation of spirituality and "magic" and claims that in the diverse audience he could see that some people view her interpretation as normal, acceptable, and uncontroversial



whereas others who may have thought "that's an interesting metaphor, because it's not really true". He mentions that although the play only makes usage of one woman's voice, the character of course changes throughout the play which is helpful in developing more

points of access. For others, like Suria, for whom *Isidlamlilo* was her first experience at a one woman show, she found it more effective that there was only one voice on stage. She comments on how plays that depict Zulu culture often have many people on stage, with in sync choreography, and elaborate costuming to further the sense of community and belonging that is

present in Zulu culture. Suria, however, finds it more impactful that one woman was able to convey that same sense of collectivism all on her own.

Being cautious not to paint all African women with the same brush and reduce their identities, Thabiso identifies a trend he has seen in elder African women, a trend he saw in his own grandmother who upon hitting around 45 or 55 years old made a sudden shift towards practicing religion. He attributes this to the religious idea that one is judged upon their death and accredited the shift that older women make towards being faithful to God in their later years as a way to make up for harm they have caused in their lives or find peace with harm that's been done to them. In Zenzile's case, her turn to religion can be attributed to both. For Thabiso, he resonates with Zenzile's desire to find God in her later years because it was a shift he feels can be seen in many African women of Zenzile's age.

### *Transforming the Fear of The Other and Challenging Ignorance*

Although many in the audience had personal connections to Zenzile, there were still audience members who could not identify with her character simply because they were not black or didn't have a grandmother or aunt who was similar to Zenzile. However, that disconnect did not prove to be a negative, but rather opened a space for those unfamiliar with the lived experience of black women in South Africa to transform their fear of that which is unknown to them. Even beginning with just the set, Thabiso describes how if you are someone who has a Zulu woman working as a domestic worker in your home and you've never been to her house, the second you enter the theater you can see what that house would look like. The set and the props immediately put you into Zenzile's world which he claims is one of the greatest powers of theater. He explains the importance of understanding each other below.

“*[Isidlamlilo]* had so many moments in it that reminded the person who is not Zulu speaking or is not English speaking that these worlds integrate. That there's communication between the domestic worker and their boss or the young black entrepreneur who's rich and the white person working for them. I believe it's a healing process for the country. Theater is a connector. You can watch TV, but TV will keep your attention span for an hour or two and then it's gone and you watch something else. But when you go and watch something on stage it's an actual experience, you see it in person. We need more work like this that creates that bridge between White man and Black man and Indian woman and Coloured woman. The question is when are we going to understand each other? Whether you are Indian, Chinese, Korean, Black, Somalian. That's the true question. Where do we meet?”

Suria, a 26 year old Indian female comments on a similar ability the play had that differed from reading a book about the violence of the 80's and 90's. She explains how she isn't normally a person who pays close attention to contemporary politics as she finds herself frustrated with them. She watched *Isidlamlilo* not having much previous knowledge of the history of the IFP and the ANC and explains how it was so much more impactful to learn the history through the play because she immediately understood Zenzile's pain, proving there to be no need for further research or further reading. She recounts how she felt a surge of emotions and thought to herself “is this what the black gogo's in South Africa went through?”. She explains that this isn't a narrative that is widely known and there was a huge difference in watching *Isidlamlilo* as opposed to hearing about the IFP in general and hearing about people who she has no personal connection to. When she could identify herself even just a little bit with the character on stage then there was no need for further explanation.

Anne explains how she is not of the opinion that history belongs to any one person and that it is critical for people to engage with others' experiences to ensure a well rounded understanding of the past as well as a correct situation of various identities in the present moment. She explains how it's hard for those who are different to mix and to take an interest in



one another because as humans we are afraid of what we don't know. The storytelling that occurs in *Isidlamlilo*, she claims, is effective in widening peoples minds to others experience and is helpful in preventing an ignorance from consuming people and leading to harmful assumptions based on limited information.

Amahle explains the disappointment she feels when she walks on to school campuses and see's a group of Indian kids sitting separate from the White kids, and them sitting separate from the Black kids. She explains how *Isidlamlilo* is a catalyst for beginning a process of checking in on eachother in spite of there being fear of what is unknown. She remembers when she first began studying music at university and her Indian friend expressed that she would have never developed friendships that traversed ethnic and racial lines if it weren't for that particular educational setting because she always kept to people who looked like her. Amahle states that the arts provide spaces where narratives can grow and the process of getting to know each other on the human level can begin. She see's *Isidlamlilo* as having the potential to begin conversations between white people who employ black female domestic workers in their homes, but do not know them on a human level.

The understanding of the other that occurs in watching *Isidlamlilo* is not limited to just race, ethnicity, and gender but also encourages intergenerational understandings of each other. Eric explains how the IFP that is seen today is very different than the IFP that the play depicts, explaining how the IFP was previously a cultural movement against apartheid that has become a political party today. He finds it fascinating to be reminded of that because most young people who are aware of the IFP today do not have the understanding of the cultural dimension that has dissolved in contemporary times. He explains this generational divide was present at the coronation of the new Zulu king that happened in October of 2022. He witnessed the older

generation be more drawn to the deep rural, chiefdom cultural parts of Zulu identity whereas the younger generation still regarded their Zulu identity as a critical part of them, however not in the same way that the IFP valued Zulu identity during the 80's and 90's. *Isidlamlilo* he feels can offer younger generations a deeper understanding of how the political parties seen in contemporary South Africa have changed and shifted over time.

*Furthering the Interconnectivity of Political Threads*

Many audience members found that *Isidlamlilo* effectively furthered a narrative of interconnectedness of political, economic, and social issues that burden South Africa. Many pointed to the significance of the female narrative through which the story was told, highlighting how it pointed to the ways gender complicates the lived experience of someone whose life is already altered by the political and economic sphere. Coppen expresses that he hopes the play effectively “muddies the terrain” and breaks audiences free from binary thinking. “We are taught in silos in this country when we think about our history and our past and each other”, notes Coppen in reflection of the ways problems stemming from issues of gender, ethnicity, race, housing, education, food, and more are taught as separate entities that do no effect each other. *Isidlamlilo*, notes Suria, gives her a sense of intertwining between issues of racial segregation and gender in how the play showed Zenzile experiencing both at the same time. She says she usually considers socio-economic issues in South Africa as separate entities and *Isidlamlilo* brought her to realize the problematic habit the country has of dealing with one problem at a time. Amahle expresses similar sentiments claiming how the country cannot deal with one issue and leave out another, giving the example of the rise in gender based violence that was noted during the COVID lockdowns when women were forced to share spaces with their aggressors.

She mentions one of her favorite moments in the play being when Zenzile recounted the way she would fight back against her husband if he ever wronged her. That does not mean, however, that *Isidlamlilo* did not highlight the violence Zenzile endured because of her gender, especially as a young woman. Eric also had reflections on the way gender intersects with other issues, explaining how so many women in South Africa find themselves in Zenzile's position. The position being women living in their older years without formal housing, without government issued identification, and without jobs recognized in formal economic markets. Although women are in some ways more empowered than under apartheid when there were significant obstacles for them to obtain education or jobs, Eric claims that in other ways they are more disempowered when it comes to present day gender based violence and the increased likeliness to be a victim of such violence when their economic status or housing status places them in a state of vulnerability. Eric also points to not only the mingling of social, political, and economic problems but the mingling of each of those areas across the past and the present. While acknowledging that all theater must be positioned somewhere and cannot aim to address every single factor that affects people's lives, he finds it refreshing to see a piece of a theater that looks back historically but also connects to the present. He says so much political theater takes place in the past, which is not necessarily bad, but there's nothing new to say on those topics. He appreciates the way *Isidlamlilo* connected the past to the present. Anne expresses how the play connected many issues for her in showing how being declared deceased made Zenzile lose access to her grant money (an economic problem), which made her unable to pay rent (a housing issue) and also affected her familial relationships with her daughter and granddaughter. For Anne, *Isidlamlilo* explores the run ons in one person's life highlighting how we are intertwined with other people and other institutions. She notices a trend in South Africa of simplifying

issues, noting that it's not harmful to have a focus or specific interests in one area be it gender, or education, or housing, but it is harmful to not recognize the ways all spheres affect one person's lived experience.

### *Evaluating The Last 30 Years*

As the brief overview of South African theater history showed, many questions have been asked of theater makers in the years after 1994. The main question asked has been what enemy is theater going to name now that the framework of apartheid has dissolved. Of course, works can still name the lingering affects of apartheid that have riddled the country with inequality as an enemy, however 28 years into democracy audiences are ready for new sources to be identified. Upon asking interviewee's if they felt *Isidlamlilo* named a singular enemy for all of the injustices Zenzile faced throughout her life a variety of responses were collected. Tarlia names greed as the cause, explaining how people need to look inwards at themselves and identify the greed that lives within. Sphehile also relates to the need to look inward. She explains that many South Africans continue to blame apartheid for its backwardness and its continuation into today. She claims the problem with South Africa is that in the transition into democracy, the country continued with the system that was already there, the only difference being that now it's facilitated by black people. She explains how *Isidlamlilo* represents the failures of democratic South Africa rather than pointing fingers at apartheid because it shows how Zenzile was failed by the current system.

Zenzile survives a multitude of events that would have killed most people, from being struck by lightning, to being bitten by snakes, to being in a coma for 7 months, to getting COVID. The only time she is ever declared dead is when the computer system for the home affairs office mistakenly declares her deceased. In demanding her life back Zenzile tells Pink

Nails to teach the system to see. Coppen describes his aim in this moment, having been to express that out of all of the events that should have killed Zenzile, it is the system of bureaucracy that finally puts her in the ground. “The system”, he says “is the most deadly of them all”. Suria similarly identifies the system of bureaucracy as the ultimate power *Isidlamlilo* names as the enemy. Coppen purposely chose to make “the system” a more tangible object: a computer system. He wanted to express how systems are unable to see, they are just numbers, they do not have the ability to see the person standing in front of them asking to be deemed alive. Thabiso similarly reflects on how *Isidlamlilo* highlights the dehumanizing effects of being caught up in the system, commenting on how Pink Nails is brainwashed into losing her compassion for those that come to her in need. He doesn’t blame Pink Nails for the harm inflicted on Zenzile, however he notes that if she could overcome the dehumanizing effects of working for the system (the bureaucratic government) and allow her compassion to come through then she could see Zenzile for who she is, a human being in need of assistance. He explains how people working for big corporations today have lost the sense of helping others, naming this as the cause for why there's such a drastic disparity between the wealthy and the poor. He explains that people know the difference between having R300,000,000 as opposed to R3,000,000. They are not ignorant to the fact that if they have R300,000,000 they can change the life of someone with R3,000,000 drastically and still be wealthy themselves. The problem, he explains, is that the system has eliminated the humanity in people and taught them not to help others. This is why Pink Nails doesn't help Zenzile, because she doesn't see all that she has endured, she sees her as a number.

Anne explains how the play doesn't reduce the enemy to one singular entity, but rather uses the foundation of being dead bureaucratically as the starting point for which Zenzile is

challenged with and continually layers a multitude of elements as causes for Zenzile's struggles. She finds it effective that *Isidlamlilo* does not simplify the enemy and instead offers Zenzile's stroke, aggression between political parties, apartheid, the lightening bird which takes her parents life and scars her as a young child, and even herself as parts of her story that she is constantly in tension with. Anne explains how these tensions ultimately surface in the home affairs space where Zenzile is not being heard by a faceless government entity which is ineffective and results in essentially killing her.

Coppen explains that the looting in South Africa in July of 2021 which riddled the country with arson, and other forms of protest actually largely inspired the writing of *Isidlamlilo* for Mthombeni and him. Jacob Zuma was arrested in 2021 after being found guilty of contempt for failing to appear before a commission investigating corruption accusations. People took to the streets in protest of his arrest on claims of conspiracy and undermining from opposing ANC members. The KwaZulu-Natal province faced a brunt of the violence due to the considerable support Zuma had in this region. Mthombeni and Coppen were inspired to write the play to fulfill the need to talk about how political tensions continuously take the lives of many, especially in KwaZulu-Natal

Amahle explains how the resurgence of this violence can be attributed to people not addressing the real enemy in the South African context. She identifies the enemy in the form of the question "what are we being loyal to?", claiming that the problem with Zenzile's generation is that they would rather fight with Pink Nails' character than have to answer that question. Amahle references the continual voting of ANC into power, without critically analyzing the ways they have bettered the country since 1994. *Isidlamlilo* makes it clear that for many people, the current system does not benefit them in the ways they were promised it would. She claims

that voting for a political party simply because of the idea that they are owed loyalty for their role in the anti-apartheid struggle is no longer valid if real change is to come for South Africa. She notes how *Isidlamlilo* effectively addresses these contemporary tensions, as opposed to plays by, for example, John Kani which retell the same story of apartheid.

Coppen elaborates on how the reconciliation narrative that the entire world was fed in 1994 completely painted over the traumatic history. He notes how so much theater in the West and in Hollywood perpetuated the idea that everyone was moving forward peacefully without any acknowledgement that Black Power was in its own struggle with itself when the white government was leaving which resulted in hundreds of thousands of people dying in the most horrific ways. *Isidlamlilo* does not give into that narrative, but rather highlights the tensions that have an effect on people's lives today. He explains how Zenzile was promised freedom in 1994, however in 2022 she's still sitting in the same one room concrete block being falsely declared dead by the very same people who promised her a free life. Eric also surfaces a trend he sees in governmentally funded plays in which the government is only willing to fund theater which is about the past and fights the old battles rather than addressing current tensions. Even though *Isidlamlilo* received funding from the National Arts Council Presidential Employment Stimulus Programme, Eric feels it managed to be a contemporary South African play that addresses contemporary South African systems of oppression as opposed to apartheid.

*Relation to Global Understandings:*

So how does *Isidlamlilo* allow audiences to critically engage with contemporary politics? Does it provide a reflection of contemporary life that resulted in catharsis for the audience as Aristotle's theory of theater suggests? Does it act not as a reflection of South Africa, but as a tool

to shape the future of South Africa as Bertolt Brecht's theory of theater suggests? Does it begin conversations that find solutions out of oppressive circumstances as Augusto Boal's theory of theater suggests? Does it widen the audience's consciousness and itself change the very South Africa seen today as Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) theory of theater suggests? *Isidlamlilo*, as the findings show, uses tactics from all the theories presented and its effect resonates with multiple theories as well. The findings will next be analyzed in relation to each theory.

Aristotle's notion of theater that should lead to a purging of emotions can be identified in *Isidlamlilo*, according to the findings. *Isidlamlilo*, however, does not simply offer a reflection of life, but rather questions the economic, social, and political structures in place. Many interviewed subjects, especially those who had a similar lived experience as Zenzile or relate to her narrative felt an overwhelm of emotion in reaction to the play. In that sense, *Isidlamlilo* is reflective of a possible experience of black women in South Africa, a narrative which is complicated by other aspects of Zenzile that make her experience multidimensional, such as her former job as an assassin. It provides insight into moments of great strength and joy in Zenzile's life, being cautious not to fall into the habit of reducing black women to their trauma. Amahle and Sphehile both were reminded of their experiences growing up during the violence of the 80's and 90's, evoking a surge of emotions upon watching an experience that they could relate to. For them, however, it was important that the play does not only reflect what it meant to be a black woman fighting for the IFP, or what it means to be a black woman living in a hostel in contemporary South Africa, but offers a complete picture of Zenzile, both noting her sense of humor as an effective tool used to explain her situation. Zenzile was not reduced to a black South African woman, as many shared narratives tend to do. In providing the multidimensional character, the situations Zenzile experienced throughout her life were unable, as Anne explains,



to situate one singular entity as the cause for her pain. *Isidlamlilo* was cathartic yes, because it resonates strongly with people whom have a Zenzile in their life or who remember the violence of their childhoods, however it was increasingly a cathartic experience because it doesn't simplistically limit the reasons for Zenzile's suffering.

A uniqueness of South African theater is that audiences are diverse in categories of race, gender, language, ethnicity, and more in ways that make theater works unable to serve only one purpose (only to educate or only to heal from the past). Brecht claims the purpose of theater is for audiences to come away thinking "I would have never thought it" as opposed to "Yes, I have felt like that too" (Brecht, 71), and *Isidlamlilo* achieves both of those reactions. Suria who had no previous knowledge of what some black women went through during the 80's and 90's stepped away thinking "is that really what black gogo's went through?" and Amahle, who lived through that time period stepped away feeling like her lived experience was replicated perfectly. So yes, *Isidlamlilo* is not Brechtian in that it alienated the audience through a limited use of set, sound, and lighting. Sphehile explains that such Brechtian tactics could have been effective. She



explains how *Isidlamlilo*'s use of lighting, set, and sound allows audience members unfamiliar with Zenzile's narrative to disengage with the intensity of the story whereas stripping the play of these elements could

have led to more accountability from the audience to recognize the ways they perpetuate a divide between people different races, ethnicities, and genders. Sphesihle does, however, comment on the positive effects of using such elements, explaining how the accuracy with which a womens hostel in 2022 in Durban was represented in the set design was helpful in making audiences understand what it means to inhabit that space. Anne explains that the set was effective in giving her the feeling that she was stuck in this box, in the cramped one room within the hostel. Eric claims the use of the Sneddon theater arose accessibility issues, explaining how it was one, challenging fiscally to find transportation to the venue and two, an uncomfortable space for people living in hostels in Durban to enter. Coppen addresses this concern as well, having provided resources for people living in hostels to get the chance to see the show. He also envisions *Isidlamlilo* in the future being performed in perhaps a womens hostel so that the story, which accurately depicts life in a womens hostel, can be humanizing for the women currently living that experience. Sphesihle also notes how the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre attracts the

audiences who need to be exposed to Zenzile's narrative. Coppen comments on this, explaining that so many South Africans are complicit never asking or knowing any context of



where, for example the domestic workers in their homes, come from. *Isidlamlilo* answers the questions that so many never ask, which he thinks is a shattering experience for many who

realize how detrimental their disinterest is. Coppen expresses his dissatisfaction on one night of the performance when there was a large white audience, but he was reminded that “this is why it's performed mostly in English because these are the people that this work needs to be done on. They need to have this sense of reevaluation and understanding”. It was necessary that the audience was brought into Zenzile’s world in order for *Isidlamlilo* to achieve a Brechtian effect of opening audiences up to new entirely new understandings, as opposed to comforting them with a world they find soothing.

A critical aspect of Augusto Boal's work is that it does not “show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which all possible paths may be examined” (Boal, 73). Anne explains that *Isidlamlilo* is not “necessarily didactic in telling people what to think, but rather presents something in a new way that people can engage with on an emotional as well as mental level”. Coppen explains that he believes that the real power in political theater is when the play doesn’t preach or tell any one person how to think. He believes people get defensive when plays attempt to indoctrinate one singular message in them and he hopes that through the telling of Zenzile’s extraordinary story audience members won’t feel like they are being told to think in one way. He hopes the second the audiences step out of the theater they will begin to question the ways they made sense of the world before and how they make sense of it now, which the findings show surely happened.

Boals work also largely aims to create dialogues between those who historically do not communicate and see the other as human beings. The findings emphasize that *Isidlamlilo* is the catalyst for a multitude of conversations to begin. Most highlighted was the conversations between those who have domestic workers employed in their households and the domestic workers, however the conversations that may begin are not necessarily always that literal.

Amahle explains how the play should spark conversations across lines of race, expressing how as people we are so afraid of those who do not look like us that we don't bother to know those who have a different story. Anne reiterated the fear humans have of that which is unknown to us, explaining how the play engages people in stories which might be unfamiliar to them, yet crucial to understand. Coppen cites the dialogue building as a main aim he and Mthombeni had in creating the play as well.

The widening of consciousness that Amiri Baraka speaks about is present within *Isidlamlilo*, as well. Anne speaks about how the play is effective in expanding audiences' understanding of each other by exposing people to a different lived experience as to prevent ignorance from consuming them. The play, as Tarlia explains, is valuable in exposing people to others' lived experiences because that is what will invoke compassion and help reserve judgment. She speaks about the idiosyncrasies and stereotypes that are attached to each race in South Africa that should constantly be challenged, something she thinks *Isidlamlilo* does.

*Isidlamlilo* is increasingly revolutionary in that it deals with the current world and with a character who is a victim of the current world, however it is unique in that it travels through time showing how Zenzile Maseko was a victim to the apartheid state, and continues to suffer even under democracy. Sphesihle explains how one of the strongest parts of the play was that it acknowledged how Zenzile continues to be trapped in the system, despite the widely pursued narrative that the post 1994 democracy effectively supports everyone. *Isidlamlilo* is revolutionary in its use of isiZulu and English as an element that forces change. The bilingual storytelling identifies what the historically dominant lack and acts as resistance to meeting them where they are, instead forcing them to work to understand that which they do not. Thabiso recalls how after the show he overheard a discussion in which audience members expressed a

desire to understand what Zenzile was saying when she spoke in isiZulu because they were excluded from such moments.

*Isidlamlilo* impacts audiences in ways that global discourses suggest theater should, and its impacts are not limited to these four theories either. The play follows in line with understandings of theater that suggest its purpose should be more comprehensive than entertainment without enlightenment. This close study of *Isidlamlilos*' alignment with various theories recognizes that *Isidlamlilo* has impacts that many who think critically about the role of theater cite as a valid reason for putting forth theater works.

## **Conclusion:**

*Isidlamlilo*, this study found, engages audiences with a wide variety of tensions ranging from tensions between political parties, between generational understandings of culture and loyalty, between genders, and many more. It resonates on a personal level with many, whether or not they can identify Zenzile's lived experience personally. *Isidlamlilo* offers three points of connection for audiences to resonate with: the home affairs office, the historical retelling of the violence that enveloped South Africa in the 1980's and 1990's between the IFP and the ANC, and the female narrative. The play, differs from previous South African plays in not naming a singular enemy, such as apartheid, as a source of oppression, but rather provides an interconnected understanding of struggle. *Isidlamlilo* does not differ from other South African theater works in providing a historical understanding of tensions between the IFP and the ANC, but it provides a new gendered understanding of those tensions as the narrative was presented from the female perspective of Zenzile Maseko. In the past, South African theater has struggled in politicizing the personal experience of being a woman, and *Isidlamlilo* offers that angle for

audiences. The play also utilizes the diverse audience to speak to both people who have the lived experience that the play replicates, people who know someone with that lived experience, or people who have no understanding of that lived experience. The play simultaneously educates audiences and acts as a tool for healing. *Isidlamlilo* caters to multilingual audiences which proved to be effective in encouraging audiences to understand that which they do not. *Isidlamlilo* personalizes a narrative that has been historically dehumanized and allows audiences to engage with a traumatic past in ways that suggest a path for healing. It does not encourage one path of thinking, but rather offers multiple sources of tension and how they can be dissolved by further action from the audience. It encourages conversation and discussion as a viable path forward, suggesting many people lack in knowing the people around them on a human level. Many attribute this to a present fear of that which is unknown, identifying open dialogue between differing groups as helpful in overcoming that divide. *Isidlamlilo* relies on theatrical elements of set, sound, and lighting design that transported audiences into Zenzile's world, as opposed to leaving the creation of her world up to audiences' own imagination. This proves to be effective for audiences who have no personal connection to Zenzile's story in providing a realistic understanding of her experience. For some audiences, this proves to limit their connection with her narrative and inhibit the accountability the narrative has the potential to encourage uninformed audiences to lean into.

This research brings up two main further questions. The first being what is more important: showing audiences a realistic depiction of a narrative unknown to them with assistance from lighting, sound, set, and costuming or holding the audience accountable for digesting the narrative and allowing a questioning of their misconceptions and prejudices by staging the play in an intimate theater space with room for open dialogue after? Some would

argue, however, that it is possible for audiences to be just as transported into a world unknown to them without help from lighting, set, costuming, and sound. The second being do plays which only use a singular character have the same potential to relate to diverse audiences as plays that use multiple characters who come from different backgrounds. The research conducted in this study proves that one character has the ability to resonate with many different audience members, however the research was not done in comparison to a play which utilizes multiple voices. It can be asked if inclusion of multiple characters provides more points of access or does it leave room for audience members to disengage from characters whom they do not understand and only engage with the ones they do?

The four global theater theories were presented not to make a claim to the importance of categorizing theater works, but to provide background for the lens through which *Isidlamlilo* would be analyzed. The various global understandings of theater use, all different in nature, suggest that theater should have some broader impact other than just to make people smile. *Isidlamlilo* makes use of a variety of theater tactics and, as the findings show, has extraordinary impacts on audiences' lives. This is a theatrical study of a political event. It suggests that in order for social and political transformation to continue effectively in South Africa, it is necessary to personalize the political. It is necessary to view remembering, humanizing, and communal future building as essential, as opposed to suggesting that expanded economic models that better support informal markets or increased affirmative action measures in higher education settings are more significant steps to take for transformation. Audience members came away from the experience questioning their social relations, questioning the way they understand their experience of history and others' experience. They are envisioning conversations sparking up and dialogues beginning that cross boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity that, especially

in South Africa, have had a history of being situated as distinct and separate categories. They feel their history and experience was humanized in ways it hasn't been before. A further study would be interested in revisiting the audience members of *Isidlamlilo* in a year's time and researching what impact the show has had on their lives since then. Have they noticed a shift in the way they view those different from them? Have they understood more people on a human level because they faced their fear of the unknown? Such a study could instead, analyze a theatrical event through a political lens, possibly researching the effect *Isidlamlilo* has on policy or the effect it has on the functioning of the home affairs office. A further study would also be interested in researching the next performance of *Isidlamlilo*, if it is performed in a womens hostel or a different intimate theater space, and understanding how the impact of that performance differs from the impact of the 2022 performance in the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre.

This research provides an understanding of how *Isidlamlilo* critically engages its audiences with contemporary socio-political tensions in South Africa. It was done with the purpose of informing future theater works that also aim to engage with contemporary tensions in the ways they can most effectively meet their goal. The continuation of theater works which aim to make such strides is crucial, because as this study shows, theater has a particular ability to build empathy so that a safer and more inhabitable world that will sustain the prominent and ever emerging diversity of people can emerge. This study does not claim to hold all of the answers on how to create the most effective piece of theater that aims to induce change, however through a focus on one singular play offers insight into how theater can proceed with its significant capabilities.



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