

SAmag : With Lee-Ann van Rooi

1) For those who are not familiar with your work, give us a rundown of some of your career highlights thus far.

2016...As the outspoken Emilia in Shakespeares' Othello. The iconic Fiela in "Fiela se Kind", my two one-woman plays, "Woman Alone", based on the true story of Dannelene Noach, a SA'n nurse who accused of being a witch, survived 99 days in a Saudi Arabian prison. Henrietta with Love, a nostalgic look into middle age women during early Apartheid and trauma.(2016 NAF Standing Ovation Award) Other highlights include: Andre P Brink's "Bidspringkaan" (Fiesta Award 2014) a wonderful release into mythical realism and African fantasy and Rondomscrik (Fiesta Award 2015 & Fleur du Cap 2015)based on the brutal rape and murder of Bredasdorp teenager, Anene Booysen.

2) What is your earliest memory of theatre?

Oral Tradition. Getting lost in a story told by one of my family members. We love to talk, laugh, share, cry, dance together. Emotion flows very freely. It's a huge family, quite daunting for outsiders, I would think.

My first role? Mary in the Kindergarten Nativity play but remember wanting to play the magnificent Angel Gabriel. Apparently, I made a big fuss but eventually settled into Mary...I think I had a little crush on Joseph too at the time, so that helped placate the need to play Gabriel and as part of the deal, I was added to the Angels in the opening scene. I wore Mary's costume under the Angel's. It was hot and sweaty, in a tiny, crowded, dusty Church Hall in Wynberg, Cape Town. During the scene change, my foot went right through a mite-infested floorboard. The cut burned and bled throughout the performance. I still have the scar today.

During Apartheid, I saw the most beautiful Operas, Musicals and Ballet at Artscape, then known as the Nico Malan Theatre. When my great aunt Estella Roberts was on duty as the Red Cross First Aider at the matinee's, they received 2 tickets, Row Q1&2, or P1&2 – memorized incase we "got lost".

Being "coloured", we were not allowed to enter via the main entrance but via the backstage Stage Door. All us cousins got to go, the draw-card being the snack during the interval, of course...but the lustre didn't last long for the others. Soon it was only me who willingly got lost in a dark, plush-seated, air-conditioned auditorium. Where, for a few hours, the amount of melanin in my skin, was irrelevant. Over the years, the smell of the Theatre has remained the same. But chocolate always tastes better in the dark.

3) Why theatre and not something else?

That old saying of "it chose me" applies here. I have tried many other occupations. Education (I am in fact a qualified teacher and still teach from time to time) Food and Beverage (2 years), Tourism & Hotel Industry (3 years). I really have tried to walk away, many times. But I keep being pulled back in. I could say it's my addiction, that I am a slave to it...but over the years, I think the term "in service" rings more true. In service: to the task, the character, the story.

4) When did you realize that you wanted to be part of the theatre world?

I love stories and I love to play. Theatre helps me interrogate my world. It forces me to change. It gives meaning and relevance to my every day.It is not my raison d'être. But live performance especially, has a depth of power which is at once ancient and brand sparkly new. It fascinates me, so I share it. When I find those qualities in another occupation...I may just let this one go.

5) What does theatre mean to you?

Theatre is Air, Beauty and Responsibility. It belongs in the Air, we breathe it, borrow it, speak it, do it, feel it, and land it. Turn it into Beauty and in sharing it with others, we raise responsibility of the individual, of the collective society.

We are in constant communication, with ourselves, with others, with objects, with the world. Performers seek it more than others and with constant daily practice, become professional at it. Then, there are the non-performers, who either by choice or skill, contribute, collaborate and formalize the stories, supporting, grounding, packaging them for audiences.

Exposure to good Theatre, opens the door to critical thinking. The viewer gives their

permission to be creatively moved, permission for the artist to creatively imprint upon the viewer. The viewer is invited to make their own choices via the narrative. And when they step out of the space, the stories live on within them, hence the responsibility. Good Theatre yields life. Artists are the custodians of life.

6) After all your years in this field, what still excites you about SA theatre?

South Africa is a nation of warriors. We are cruel. Brutal. We live hard, fast lives, we take and we destroy. But, we also have courage and hope and immeasurable love. Our Theatre reflects that. We have warrior-hearts. We are challenging, constantly adapting, changing, living, moving and breathing. SA Theatre is brave, restless and does "not go gently into that good night"

7) With the influence of technology do you think traditional theatre still appeals to the public?

Technology has glorified value and masquerades in making the world easier, better, smarter. But all it does is overload on untrustworthy detail. I think the power of technology is severely misjudged. Power given by those who struggle understand it. So people throw money at it. To me, it is merely an extension of the story. It does not really DO anything by itself, of itself, it needs us to give it direction. Danger rests in the ability of technology to breed complacency and inertia. That is the enemy of Theatre. Theatre is extremely appealing. But it requires effort.

8) With theatre finances always being a big obstacle that hampers both audience attendance and Artists participation alike, what impact did this have on this year of theatre?

Last year, under the artistic direction of Rob Murray, the Cape Town Fringe, had exciting initiatives such as Backyard Theatre, where audiences traveled into peoples backyards for a theatre experience, an affordable experience. It needed the backyard because the "Voorkamer" was too small (sic). The 40 seater Alexander Bar gives new meaning to the words "full house" and in the Theatre history books, the rise of the solo performer will be attributed to the state of the times.

We are in the business of the emotions, so its personal. Your worth is a conversation, not an answer. Everybody needs to be comfortable with the offered rates. It's a reflection of your involvement in the project and the value you placed on your work. I am valuable to the project needing to align with my brand, but never irreplaceable.

9) How do you feel about shows that are in a different language and what would you share as encouragement for people to attend shows that are not in a language they would understand? If it is good, go. Good Theatre transcends the spoken word.

10) The theatre of the modern age varies greatly from what it was, why do you think this is?

(please also touch on the following topics: the role of the government; audience attendance; the role of the artist with regards to theatre etiquette)

Capitalism is failing. Tenderpreneurs get in the way. There is no such thing as democracy. Low-budget is the norm.

Already, there is not much difference between the weekly rate for Theatre and a "packagde deal" for Film or T.V. Its insane. More work, less money. Once artists actually realize this growing phenomenon, there will be more theatre makers and performers.

11) Which young theatre artist's (performer/director/ choreographer/writer) work do you admire, that you don't know on a personal level, and why?

I'm excited about :

Jason Jacobs

UCT graduate.

Featured Young Artist at KKNK this year. Director, Performer & ASSITEJ Ambassador. Kalahari Swaan, In Wag Van, Stof Rooi

Thembela Madliki

Rhodes Graduate

I saw her work, Nyanga (based on The Crucible) at NAF 2016. Been selected for the Next Generation Residency on ASSITEJ's Cradle of Creativity Festival (May 2017) for young theatre makers in TYA (Theatre for Young Audiences) with 25 other young directors from around the world.

Not so young... but still breaking new ground:

Penny Youngleson (Siembamba and Sillage and Nat)

Phillip Rademeyer (Ashes and The Graveyard)

12) What role do you play, as an individual, in assisting up and coming artists?

I mentor those wanting to enter and remain in the industry.

13) What do you love about SA Theatre?

The " come, let us do this" attitude.

Added to that, the focus on groundbreaking work for a very specific audience, 0-6months....6-12 months, 2-3 year olds. They are the " audiences for now" as stated by Jaqueline Dommissie Festival Director, Cradle of Creativity, ASSITEJ South Africa, address in 2015.

14) What changes do you see in younger theatre makers today in terms of theatre as an art form?

Upgrading of the "old guard" and showcasing "niche culture". Same-same, but different.

15) What would you say is the biggest challenge that South African theatre makers are facing today? What would your advice be to them?

Disabling the "blame" and "shame" mentality. Overcoming the apathy of entitlement. Breed new Leaders capable of Leading, because it is not enough to just be born into leadership. Have pride in your work. If you love it, others will too. Breathe your own Air. Share your own Beauty.

16) What are your hopes for SA theatre in 2017?

Generally? Refinement. Going deeper, not wider.