

Woman in Waiting, World Stage (Toronto)

Review

World Stage Festival

South Africa, UK Arts International

Woman in Waiting

April 3, 4, 5, 8 pm; April 5 & 6, 2 pm

Based on the life story of Thembi Mtshali

Performed by Thembi Mtshali

Directed by Yael Farber

By Regen Danly

From the beginning of time, we have been storytellers, compelled from the deepest of places within us to share our sorrows and joy, to fight for life, to deny death its power, to affirm and validate our own identities as individuals who are yet a fragmented part of an unknowable whole.

Woman in Waiting opened last night at the World Stage Festival with the power of a fierce humanity born of the social revolution spurred by the racial tensions and conflicts of South Africa in the 60s and 70s under apartheid. This one-woman tour-de-force is based on the life experience of Thembi Mtshali, the actress who has co-written it and performs it. It is her story.



And it is unforgettable.

This young Zulu girl was raised by her grandparents, separated from her parents save for brief Christmas visits. She never saw a white face until she was old enough to join her parents and attend school where they lived. In her young adulthood she lived as her mother had, as a domestic and nanny to white families in Johannesburg.

Mtshali leads us gently, almost whimsically through an innocent childhood, then through her young years in the Soweto ghetto. As a young single mother, she saw her own newborn baby once a week while she tended to, raised and even loved the white children in her care. She witnessed and

guided their first steps, but not those of her own child.

As the title suggests, it is a life of waiting: first as a child longing to see her mother and father; then to be old enough for school; for her mother to take her to a toilet she may be allowed to use outside the master's house; and later, for the 'boss' to come home on Friday night so that she can catch the last bus to her Soweto home to be with her own child, for a day, one day each week. She becomes the eldest of a family alone waiting for the night raiders to burst through the door, waiting to be released from custody, and waiting, waiting to be seen, to be visible, to speak and to be heard. She lives with the

untenable violence and tension between black and white worlds and with the omnipotent indifference of whites. She sings a loving, gentle lullaby to her sweet, pink charges, celebrating their bright and varied futures and ends it with "and may God save my children from you." And finally..... after the Soweto riots, when 10,000 children stood together, unarmed in protest, she waits and prays for a daughter to come home.

In a particularly beautiful scene, she describes being a little girl and seeing the white children who had beautiful pink rubber dolls that would not break even if you threw them to the floor. But little black girls made their own baby dolls from the clay by the river. They formed them with their hands and the clay dolls dried hard. She learned that they were fragile and that they would break if she dropped them. She learned to take the pieces and return them to the riverbank where they would become the clay again.

" And then we learned to walked away."

Hers is a story of humiliation and pride, of learning to live with oppression and powerlessness, love, loss, grieving and hope. She speaks of the solace and healing she finds in her culture and in the music of her people, as necessary to her as the air she breathes. She tells of one young white girl who heard her music and helped change her life, eventually leading her to step onto the world stage... to tell her story.

As extraordinary as the content of this story is, it is the manner and structure of the storytelling journey that is most compelling. The gentleness, humour and wisdom revealed as the story unfolds before us is placed precisely, like cards from a tarot deck, one after another; small moments, fragile moments, fleeting pivotal incidents that define and alter her life, each in the vibrating atmosphere of the swelling up against apartheid.

She accuses with subversive gentleness, forgives, rages, mourns, accepts and indicts with the naked simplicity of unself-conscious, unapologetic truth. There is no attempt at self preservation in her grieving, no moment that reveals a word spoken too often, no hint that each word does not come from a memory that is alive and present before us. She speaks to us from her depths of the ineffable yet undeniable humanity we all share. She tells us that what we feel matters. What we know matters. We are human. We are responsible to each other. She tells us that we, her friends, her enemies, should know what she has known.

In the end, we accept our punishment, feel what she teaches us to feel, hard upon us but cleansing. And as we grieve with her, we understand that it is also her gift.

In theatre, the highest ambition of the art is to share one's most profound authenticity. Rarely has it been achieved so powerfully and eloquently.

Do not miss this.