

A black woman's memory lane of dark years in South Africa

★ REVIVAL

The Star published this review when A Woman in Waiting had its Toronto premiere at the World Stage festival in 2003. The show is part of this year's World Stage: Flying Solo festival and runs until May 1 at Harbourfront Centre's Studio Theatre.

Thembi Mtshali got her big break in the hit South African musical *Ipi Tombi*.

The year was 1976 and it was her escape road out of a lifetime of toil and hardship. In the township of Soweto, meanwhile, young people were rioting, heralding the start of the changes that would eventually bring an end to apartheid and the installation of Nelson Mandela as president.

Now one of South Africa's leading artists, Mtshali tells her story in *A Woman in Waiting*.

She uses simple, unadorned storytelling to relate her life under the heel of apartheid. She couldn't wait to be born, she tells us, but "it was before I saw the world beyond my mother's womb — a world that would teach me to wait."

Her parents left her with her Zulu grandparents while they went to work in Durban. Mtshali counted the months until Christmas, when she would spend two weeks with her mother.

Eventually she is old enough to join them in Durban but only spends time with her mother on Sundays; the rest of the week, her mother is busy all day and well into the night slaving for her white boss.

And because her mother has no time to tell her the facts of life, Mtshali finds herself pregnant . . . and the cycle begins all over again.

She has no time to spent with

her baby; she is a "mother to rent," caring for the children of the whites.

Then there is the nightmare of raids on her home, making her late for work.

There are no great revelations here, little or no dramatic tension, just a poignant story well told.

Mtshali moves fluently around the stage, singing snatches of folk songs, hymns, carols and (later) a few bars from some of the *Ipi Tombi* songs.

What makes the show so effective is that it is so obviously honest and heartfelt. Mtshali doesn't experience any huge tragedy or brutal mistreatment. She is exploited casually and matter-of-factly by her white masters.

The fact that such treatment was once so ingrained in South African society is the real horror story.

— Robert Crew