

South African Theater's Gift to Lincoln Center Theater

In 1985, what we now call Lincoln Center Theater was in its seventh year of lean, so when newly installed board chair John V. Lindsay and his colleagues hired me to remedy the situation, I was eager to get any help I could get. When Harold Prince called to say I should be on the lookout for a young genius named Mbongeni Ngema, I took note.

A year later, in spring of 1986, I found myself at New Heritage watching a rehearsal for a play called *Asinimali!*, created by Mbongeni and his young company. That afternoon changed my life. After rehearsal, as I spoke with Mbongeni and his actors, New Heritage's leader Voza Rivers and the exiled poet and activist Duma Ndlovu, I sensed—and fervently hoped—that they would be part of the LCT family as long as I was there.

In those early days, when we'd done only a few plays, the press kept asking me what the theater's "mission" was. I kept answering that we were no more nor less than our productions, and not what I said about them. So when the five-play *Woza Afrika* festival became our fifth event in the first nine months - following plays by David Mamet, John Guare, the Flying Karamazov Brothers and Spalding Gray—South African theater and our Harlem partners became, perforce, central to LCT's identity.

Many people, onstage and off, dedicated themselves to the success of *Woza Afrika*, the first ever festival of South African drama in the United States. The aim, after all, was not just to present good drama and make

connections between theater communities, but also to raise money to return to the townships. There was no guarantee this would work. It was an act of faith. It happened. And it led, of course, to the phenomenon of *Sarafina!*.

Sarafina! crystallized a moment in the world's history, as plays sometimes do—think of *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Hair* or *Angels in America*. In each case, exuberant artistry aligned with horrific social-political circumstances to make art, and also more. Apartheid, and resistance to it, was a huge thing to capture, but to hear the kids in the show—and they were of course actual kids—sing the rollicking "Bring Back Nelson Mandela" hundreds of times, to hear the

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audience singing along, and then to watch the great man emerge, not long after the Broadway run, smiling and unbowed, from 27 years of brutal incarceration was very, very special. Did the kids *cause* Mandela's release? Not any more than Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* caused people to storm the Bastille. But they caught the moment. They *interacted* with the moment, as when the banished singer and civil rights hero Miriam Makeba wept joyful tears of reunion with the company backstage at the Mitzi Newhouse Theater one night, or Bishop Tutu danced a gleeful toyi-toyi with the youngsters in, of all unlikely places, Sardi's restaurant.

Events like this can turn out to be a defining moment for the creators, for the audiences, for the "real life" actors, and for a theater. *Sarafina!* was a big fat hit in the normal show-biz sense, but it was more, especially for LCT. Beyond its outward impact, the festival and the musical affirmed to a nascent theater company that we were not crazy to think that new work could be the heart of our effort. It demonstrated that the quality of the event was more important than the fame of the participants. It justified the highly controversial decision not to have a subscription base and to opt instead for \$10 member tickets, which allowed hundreds of thousands of curious people easy access to it, first at the Mitzi and then on Broadway. It encouraged us to gamble, which we never stopped doing. It linked us to the front page of the paper, not just the cultural section. And crucially, the South African plays connected us with the magnificent Harlem theater community, a relationship that would deepen over the next five years, climaxing in the long-delayed world premiere of Langston Hughes' and Zora Neale Hurston's 1930 play *Mule Bone* at the Barrymore Theatre,

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featuring 29 of America's finest actors. Voza, New Heritage and the Harlem Arts Alliance continue to be an invaluable part of my life, as do colleagues in South Africa such as Duma Ndlovu and Mannie Manim, all veterans of that adventure almost 30 years ago. What a gift this was, and remains.

One might imagine that the plays of the *Woza Afrika* festival and *Sarafina!* sprang from rage. But that's not quite it. It's true that Mbongeni, Percy Mtwa, Matsemela Manaka, Barney Simon and Maishe Maphonya used not guns but pens—and their actors' bodies—to fight apartheid. But their work emerged from courageous hope. What I remember about each of them is their intelligence and extraordinary gentleness. (And that I've never laughed so much in my life.) Enraged these artists may have been, but their plays were made with love, and they nudged the world. No easy feat. Let us not forget.

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