

Long journey back to confidence for black South Africans

Eric Abraham went from student activist to award-winning producer, but the Fugard Theatre, writes Katy Chance, is where his greatest transformation may happen

THERE is a sense the world over that the arts don't matter much," says Eric Abraham. In Cape Town for the opening of the Fugard Theatre, the new "home" for the approximately 35-strong, all-black theatre group, Isango Portobello, that Abraham created with artistic director Mark Dornford-May and opera singer Pauline Malefane in 2006. "There is a universal misconception that the arts will take care of themselves; that it'll 'be all right on the night' — but it's simply not true."

Abraham describes Isango Portobello as a "kind of embryonic black South African National Theatre". As ever, fertility treatment is expensive. To date Abraham has put — and he has to close his eyes and do some computing — "about R40m or R50m" into the company and the Fugard Theatre he has created as its base in District Six.

"This is probably the only theatre in the world with a black company in residence," says Abraham. "But given the transformational power of theatre, it's just a small attempt to repair the incredibly damaging impact apartheid had at a genetic level on the psyche of black South Africans. It will be a long journey back to confidence out of the humility of apartheid, but building self-belief is critical in the new SA."

Abraham was born in the old SA. His outrage at the educational disparity in SA — that whites were educated, and well, for free while blacks had to pay for their poor education — forced him to create a national, nonracial student union in 1970. It didn't make him friends in



high places. He was one of the students who led the peaceful protest at St George's Cathedral in May 1972. They were charged by riot police with dogs and batons and beaten back.

"I was very young," says Abraham, "and it was difficult to cope with the violence and subsequent intense surveillance I was under."

Later banned and under house arrest, Abraham left SA in 1976 "penniless" and worked for Amnesty International, later becoming a BBC correspondent and award-winning film and theatre producer, working with Jeremy Irons, Denholm Elliot and Glenda Jackson, among a long list of thespian luminaries. On Friday's opening night at the Fugard, with Isango's internationally acclaimed production of *The Magic Flute*: Impempe Yomlingo, good luck messages came from Sir Anthony Sher, Lara Foot, John Kani and Sir Ian McKellen.

Abraham has also become a philanthropic patron of the arts. "I got a good education courtesy of apartheid. This theatre and its company is a small contribution

to restoring self-confidence here, which is almost as important as service delivery in a fledgling democracy."

Minister in the Presidency Trevor Manuel came on board as patron of Isango a few months ago, and without his presence on Friday night it's unlikely so many other dignitaries, including the deputy president, would have attended. This alone speaks volumes about local acknowledgment of theatre being what Athol Fugard describes as "not a shallow form of entertainment".

"Theatre does something to society," says Fugard. "Tom Stoppard talks of playwrights writing about the matrix of society; it's all talking, not bombs or bullets, and the change to a democratic SA owes a lot to theatre — which is all about dialogue."

Abraham describes Manuel's patronage as "tremendous". "I'm looking to him to help us speak to major corporations for sponsorship. He's a master of persuasion and believes viscerally in the importance of this initiative."

Attempts at securing additional local funding, and what Abraham calls "domestic ownership on many levels" of the venture, have so far proved fruitless. "With operating costs of up to R20m a year, we need South African industry's engagement. The benefit of philanthropic largesse is one thing, but corporates must get behind it, even if it's a bank branding and funding concessionary tickets of, say, R5 so the local populace isn't excluded. This isn't rocket science; it's simple social and commercial commitment."

Abraham says the marketing

— and particularly international branding and marketing — opportunities are enormous. The trajectory of the company from, mostly, Khayelitsha to the West End and Paris's famed Théâtre du Châtelet — where their *Magic Flute* received standing ovations every night from a 2 000-strong audience and, last week, received the Globes de Cristal Award for Opera in recognition of its sellout season — is meteoric.

"I took the show to the Young Vic and it sold out. Then I took it to the West End. People said 'Opera! In the West End — you must be kidding!' Something like 50 000 people saw it, and it was a wonderful antidote to all sorts of prejudice, one them the prejudice of surprise at the excellence of performance from Africa," says Abraham, who will continue to fund the company's international touring, as well as undertake exchange programmes with nonprofit theatres such as The Royal Court and Donmar Warehouse in London.

Fugard is less understanding of corporate SA's reticence to come on board. He clenches his 70-something fists and says with staccatoed emphasis: "That. Is. Shameful! In the final analysis, the corporate world is at risk of having a dishonourable record if we are to achieve the democracy we want. Eric has given an extraordinary gift to Cape Town and the world. It's an inspiring and huge act of faith in the potency of theatre."

The person who approached Fugard about using his name — Abraham and Fugard,



MOVED TO TEARS: Minister in the Presidency Trevor Manuel, left, producer and founder of The Fugard Eric Abraham, right, and the Isango Portobello company at Friday's rousing performance of *The Magic Flute*; above left, Athol Fugard, very much alive, is uneasy about having a theatre named after him. Pictures: TREVOR SAMSON

incredibly, didn't meet until Friday's premiere — was who Fugard calls "that conduit of all good things", Mannie Manim, the Fugard's executive director. "When he called and asked about naming the theatre after me I didn't like it one little bit," says Fugard. "For one thing, I'm not dead!" Abraham has noted the theatre may be the only one in the world named after a living playwright. "But Mannie doesn't let go, and he called again. I gave permission with misgivings. "I feel truly humbled, but I could give you many names that should come before mine for the honour."

When Fugard saw the theatre, however, he couldn't help being "stunned" by it, and called Abraham to tell him so. "The only way I can reconcile my name being put to it is to see it as a challenge. I defy any writer to sit in the auditorium and look at that stage and not want to create work for that space — it's thrilling!" Fugard will be doing just that with his new play, *The Train Driver*, which starts at the theatre on March 24.

"That stage," he enthuses. "When you stand there, the architecture and design puts the audience in the palm of your

hand. I have been defeated by the physicality of many theatres around the world, but this one puts its arms around you."

Of the opening night's extraordinary performance, Roger Chapman, who owns London theatre company On Tour and who had flown in to see the local version, said "the singing was far better than in Paris", where he was one of the audience members standing his approval. He also mentioned that *Le Monde* newspaper said French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who had been at another theatrical function on the Paris opening night, "should

have come here (to Impempe Yomlingo) instead!"

Manuel was positively beaming as the thank-yous were said. "I am as proud as punch to be part of this production — I used to be a numbers man ... but this gives new meaning to performance measurement!"

"This show needs to be taken across the length and breadth of the country — and across the world; we cannot be selfish and keep this to ourselves. Mozart wrote *The Magic Flute*" — and he turned to the cheering company on stage behind him "for this!"

There was barely a dry eye in the house.

Paul Taylor, arts critic for *The Independent* in the UK, had also flown in, independently, to see the show: "It was immensely moving — and where else in the world are you going to find such a humane minister as Trevor Manuel? It's tremendously uplifting."

Abraham says of the London show, expanding on his belief that performing arts can help heal social, political and personal wounds and forward democracy: "When people came out of the theatre, there was a huge smile on their faces and I thought — theatre should fall under the auspices of the National Health Service; you feel better afterwards."

Actor Alan Rickman, best known for his recent evil work as Severus Snape in the Harry Potter franchise, was also there on Friday as a friend and supporter of Abraham's work, and put it even more succinctly: "There is simply more oxygen around after a show like this; it's the air democracy breathes. Art is democracy."

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