



**ZANE HENRY**

**T**O REALLY appreciate the new home of Isango Portobello Company, one has to know where they're coming from.

Their previous, temporary home was Athlone Methodist Church. The hall formed a makeshift rehearsal room. The offices were set up in cramped containers with standing fans. There was precious little dressing room space. The 32 members of the company sang and danced in the draughty, dimly lit hall, and if you had the good fortune to hear and see them in flight, you were transported to some place grander. Some place more like their new home, The Fugard.

The building is within the historic Sacks Futeran building, in District 6, with the original congregational church hall in Caledon Street as its entrance.

At the time of writing, it is a work still in progress. Workers mill around knocking things with big hammers and wiring things that need wiring. Members of the company are buzzing around excitedly, getting in the way of the workers, but not caring.

The foyer is airy, with an old-fashioned wooden box office at the entrance and a modest bar on the side. Raw brick pokes through the masonry; one spot is in the shape of the continent of Africa.

The theatre itself is rectangular, with three-tiered padded-bench seating. Director Mark Dornford-May is talking to executive director Mannie Manim about some technical issue.

Up some stairs to a roof garden with impressive views of surrounding District 6 and Table Mountain. But most impressive, at least for those who know where Isango Portobello comes from, is a majestic rehearsal studio in the original church hall.

Light pours in from high, stained-glass windows on to wooden floors. It's both similar and very different to Athlone, with the most crucial difference being that this belongs to them.

Then there are the expansive dressing rooms...

The opening season of The Fugard will comprise the Isango Portobello's award-winning London West End hit shows - the 2008 Olivier award-winning *The Magic Flute - Impempe Yomlingo* and *The Mysteries - Yiimimangaliso* and a world premiere, on March 19, of Athol Fugard's new play, especially written for the opening, *The Train Driver*, which he will direct.

The gala evening is to be hosted by cabinet Minister Trevor Manuel, who is also the patron of

Isango Portobello and the founding producer of Isango Portobello, Eric Abraham, who commissioned and sponsored the theatre and underwrites the company.

"The name is, of course, taken from Athol Fugard," says Dornford-May. "It's safe to say that he is one of the world's most valuable and highly regarded playwrights."

"His name is a link to a non-racial theatrical past. We hope to get more work from him in the future. This is our home now. The only work we'll present is

work that we produce. This is our home."

● Tickets for the opening season performances at The Fugard theatre can be booked by phoning the box office at 021 461 4554.



**BIGGER, BETTER:** Inside The Fugard theatre, in District 6. PICTURES: JEFFREY ABRAHAMS

