

Isango Portobello comes home to new District Six theatre

A new theatre in Cape Town's legendary District Six, The Fugard, will be the home of the internationally acclaimed Isango Portobello Theatre Company, an exciting example of what can transpire when local talent and vision meets committed international support.

The theatre will be located in the historic Sacks Futeran building in the District Six area, with planned renovations to be completed by the end of the year. The theatre is named in honour of Athol Fugard, one of South Africa's iconic theatre personalities.

The theatre complex will redevelop two warehouse spaces and a church to create the 270 seater theatre, a rehearsal studio, foyer space, dressing rooms and full staff facilities. "Creating a found space out of this beautiful and historic building in this extraordinary area is a fantastically exciting project to be involved in," said Mark Dornford-May, artistic director of Isango Portobello.

As a textile and soft goods supplier in the early twentieth century, the building was frequented by generations of District Six seamstresses and tailors. Isango Portobello's producer, South African born Eric Abraham, is underwriting the multi-million Rand project to renovate and transform the old textile warehouse into a fully-equipped 270-seat theatre. The architect firm working on this unique project is Rennie Scurr Adendorff, with architect Shaun Adendorff as the creative drive behind the design of the new theatre. R&N Master Builders are the building company responsible for the major renovations. Care is being taken to preserve this National Heritage Site, which includes the remnant of an old Gothic-style church.

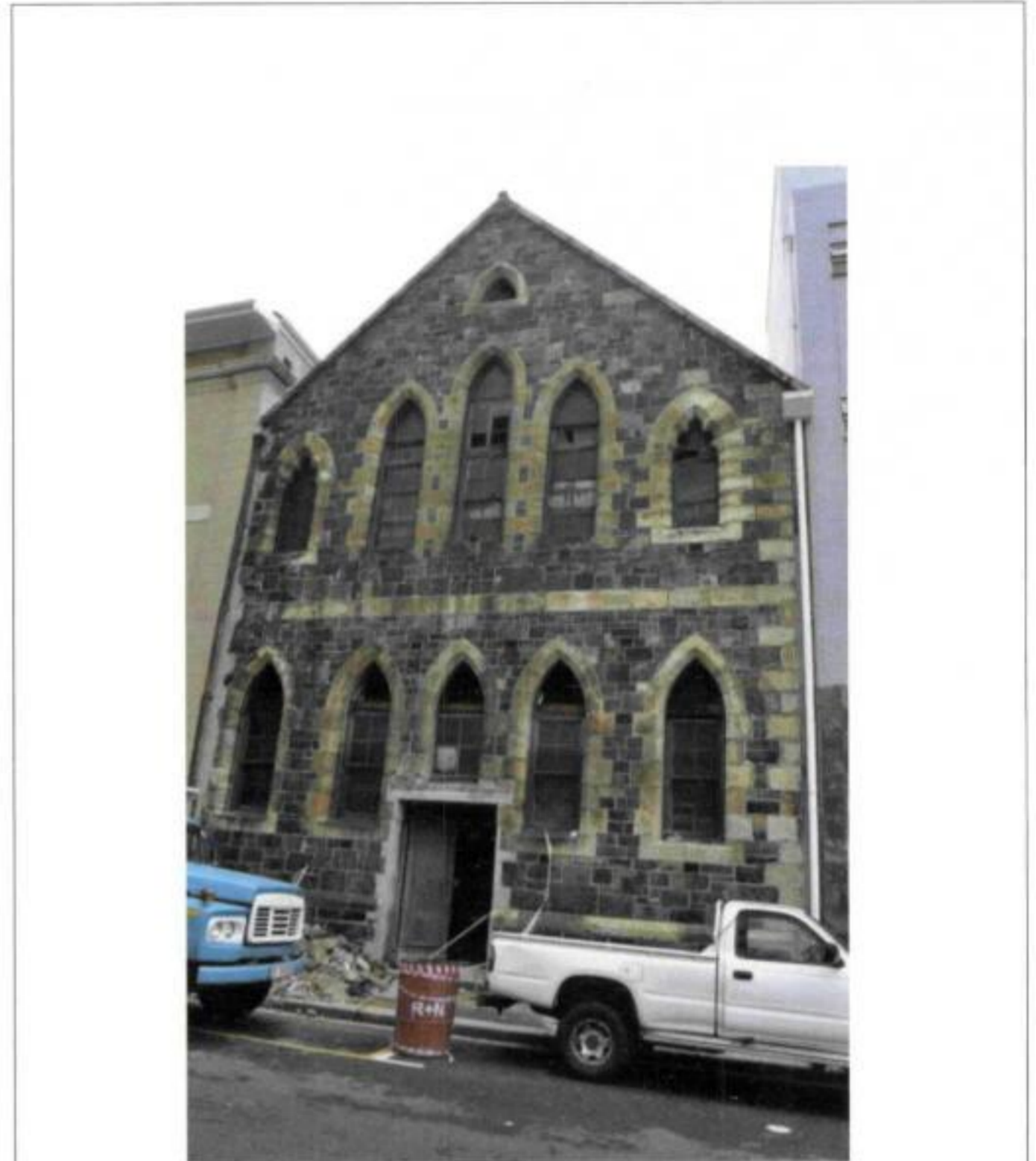
"South Africa's real wealth lies in the abundance of talent to be found in its people, from sport to culture," said Abraham. "I commissioned The Fugard Theatre in Cape Town as a gesture of faith in this country and its potential to make a significant contribution to world culture. The transformational nature of theatre is well-documented and what we have here is an internationally track-recorded South African theatre company and a world class theatre. We intend to make both one of the main cultural landmarks of the Southern hemisphere."

Isango Portobello was started in 2006 as a collaboration between producer Eric Abraham, director Mark Dornford-May and South African opera singer and actress Pauline Malefane. The collaboration complements Portobello's slate of international projects for stage and screen, and is part of Abraham's commitment to promoting South African film and theatre achievements in the international arena.

Abraham, a former foreign correspondent and human rights activist, was banned and house-arrested by the apartheid government in 1976, and exiled for 15 years. Once London based, he became a BBC journalist and then went on to produce film and theatre. He produced the Oscar-winning Czech film *KOLYA* and Olivier award-winning Isango Portobello's *Magic Flute – Impempe Yomlingo*. He said that, "The Fugard Theatre will provide the Isango Portobello company with a much needed performing venue in its home town so that it can become deeply rooted within its own community in South Africa".

Isango Portobello's inaugural productions, *A Christmas Carol – Ikrismas Kherol* and *The Magic Flute – Impempe Yomlingo*, were performed to widespread acclaim at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town in 2007, before transferring to the Young Vic in London, becoming two of the fastest selling shows in its history. Together these productions won the Whatsonstage Theatregoers' Choice Award for Best Off-West End Production. In February 2008, *The Magic Flute – Impempe Yomlingo* transferred to the Duke of York's theatre for an acclaimed West End season, and won the 2008 Olivier Award for Best Musical Revival.

More recently, the Isango Portobello production of *The Mysteries – Yiimimangaliso*, which premiered at the Baxter Theatre in June 2009, transferred in September to the Garrick Theatre in London's West End to unanimous critical acclaim. The company then moved to the iconic 2 000 seater Chatelet Theatre in Paris where it performed *The Magic Flute – Impempe Yomlingo* to standing ovations.



The Fugard – church façade

Films directed by Dornford-May with other members of the ensemble include the Berlin Film Festival, Golden Bear-winning *u-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, and the much acclaimed *Son of Man* which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival.

"While overseas acclaim is very affirming, the future of Isango Portobello cannot be assured without a groundswell of support from its home-patch, from audiences and South African industry and commerce," said Abraham.

The company has recently acquired a boost in local endorsement through the patronage of one of South Africa's most well-respected cabinet members. Former Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel, who is now head of the National Planning Commission, became the patron of Isango Portobello in August 2009.

A new addition to the Isango Portobello team, Mannie Manim, a much garlanded mainstay of South African theatre, will join The Fugard in January following his retirement as CEO of Cape Town's Baxter Theatre in December. Having been both a long-term supporter of the company and lighting designer for all its productions to date, Manim will work with the Company in developing The Fugard and both the local and international profile of the Isango Portobello Company.

Most of the Isango Portobello cast members come from the township areas surrounding Cape Town and have had the opportunity to travel across the world to perform on top international stages with the company.

"It is hugely exciting for Isango Portobello to be moving into our own home. Thanks to Eric Abraham's generosity we will have the opportunity to bring our work to the people of Cape Town and to continue to develop both our own talents and the talents of younger generations of South African performers," said Pauline Malefane, principal performer and founding member of Isango Portobello.

The Fugard is due to open in February 2010.