

Feel a little magical mystery

Isango Portobello, known for reworking the classics into an African context, comes of age at its new home at The Fugard

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AT A TIME in South Africa where identity in theatre is lacking, the opening of the Fugard Theatre, featuring Isango Portobello, is refreshing.

Interpretation in theatre is everything, the lifeblood that feeds the imagination of audiences seeking provocative and challenging entertainment that celebrates the art of live performance.

If there is one company that epitomises this notion it is Isango Portobello.

The performers pour their heart and soul into the music, drama and dancing, which makes their riveting staging of *The Magic Flute - Impempe Yomlingo* and *The Mysteries - Yiimimangaliso* proof that South Africa is up there with the best in the world.

The energy the ensemble of 35 artists creates and sustains inspires the audience. Under the direction and vision of Mark Dornford-May, the musical direction of Pauline Malefane, and with choreography by Lungelo Ngamlana, this is theatre at its most exciting.

With its sellout performances in London and Europe, Isango Portobello has come of age at its new home at The Fugard.

After two years of working from a church hall in Athlone, the Isango Portobello company has made itself at home in the Fugard Theatre in the heart of District Six.

"At last we have a real home; it is a historic moment," says Malefane, co-music director and founder of Isango Portobello.

The company is known for reworking classics, finding a new con-



INSPIRATIONAL: Music director and founder of Isango Portobello, Pauline Malefane, also takes on the role of God

text within an African setting for the stories, and creating new work relevant to South Africa.

Mozart gets an African injection with the imaginative and bold new look at *The Magic Flute*.

Featuring an orchestra of marimbas, this version of *The Magic Flute* broke box office records when it played at the Young Vic in London. It also won the Whatsonstage Theatregoers' Choice Award for Best Off-West

End Production, and an Olivier Award for Best Musical Revival when it transferred to the Duke of York's Theatre in the West End. It

has also recently won the Globes de Cristal Award for Opera presented in Paris.

The company then performed a two-week run at Paris's 2000-seat Châtelet theatre to standing ovations, then moved to the Nieuwe Luxor Theatre in Rotterdam.

It is an experience to watch the cast infuse Mozart's memorable score with a jazzy township rhythm and producing a tour de force.

The unplugged raw energy of the singing and music is amplified by the magnificent acoustics of the new theatre.

Last June the company's produc-

tion of *The Mysteries - Yiimimangaliso* premiered at the Baxter Theatre before a three-week run at the Garrick Theatre in the West End, where it played to critical acclaim.

The Mysteries is an African version of the great biblical English medieval mystery folk plays, a popular form of theatre performed on carts and pageant wagons in the streets of towns and villages in Europe at the time.

In a vibrant spectacle of song, dance and music, Malefane plays God with an ensemble of 33 performers playing a range of Biblical characters.

Of the talented ensemble, Zamile Gantana is sensational with his comical performance as the womanising Papageno in *The Magic Flute* and Noah in *The Mysteries*; Nobulumko Mngxekeza is delightful as Pamina and Mhlekezwe Andy Mosiea equally impressive as Tamino in *The Magic Flute* - as is Noluthando Boqwana as Lucifer in *The Mysteries*. And musical director Mandisi Dyantisi steals the show as the conductor of *The Magic Flute*.

Malefane is formidable, taking on the role of God and the evil spirited Queen of the Night (*The Magic Flute*), or playing the marimba.

Her gentle approach and powerful delivery are captivating. As with her equally brilliant performances in the films *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* and *Son of Man* (winning the South African TV and Film Award for her performance), Malefane is a dignified performer with a unique talent.

There is honesty in Dornford May's interpretation that is endearing, sparking the realisation that we all speak a universal language.

The dance sequences created by choreographer Ngamlana capture the heartbeat of Africa.

The performances of *The Magic Flute - Impempe Yomlingo* and *The Mysteries - Yiimimangaliso* should not be missed.

● *The Mysteries: Yiimimangaliso* is on February 24, 26 and 28 and *The Magic Flute: Impempe Yomlingo* is on February 23, 25 and 27. Tickets are R50 on Tuesdays, R80 Wednesday to Saturday, R120 on Friday and Saturday and R80 on Sundays. Students and pensioners pay R50 on Tuesdays to Thursdays and on Sundays. Tickets for the opening season at the Fugard Theatre can be booked on 021 461 4554 or www.thefugard.com

