

# Gothic tale with a pop art flavour

Mozart meets Fugard as *The Magic Flute* opens Cape Town's newest theatre, writes **Marianne Thamm**

**T**HERE was a palpable air of joy as the 29-strong members of the Isango-Portobello Company initiated the stage of their magnificent new home, The Fugard, in Cape Town's District Six last week.

It was an infectious spirit sustained throughout the two hours and 15 minutes the company performed their highly original, award-winning adaptation of Mozart's operatic fable, *The Magic Flute* — Impempe Yomlingo.

The opera, composed in 1791, is the story of a young traveller (Tamino) who finds himself indebted to the Queen of the Night, who claims the evil Sarastro has kidnapped her daughter Pamina. The Queen of the Night gives Tamino a magic flute to help him. On his journey he encounters an array of characters including Papageno the bird catcher.

The opera is symbolic of the education of humankind from chaos to enlightenment through trial, represented by Tamino, and error, represented by Papageno.

And while this production has received accolades, awards and standing ovations from Tokyo to Paris, it was almost as if, in initiating their new home, the company was buoyed by a deeper sense of occasion and meaning. All in all, it was a triumphant homecoming.

In the front row sat the now frail 78-year-old theatre icon, Athol Fugard, after whom this theatre has been named. Afterwards, Fugard wept as he thanked artistic director Mark Dornford-May, producer Eric Abraham, and the company for

## CAPE TOWN OPERA

**The Magic Flute —  
Impempe Yomlingo**

**By:** Mozart  
**Adapted and directed:**

Mark Dornford-May

**Musical Directors:**  
Mandisi Dyantyi and  
Pauline Malefane

**Choreographer:** Lungelo  
Ngalama

**Words and Music:** Mballi  
Kgosidintsi and Nolufefe  
Mtshabe

**With:** Members of the  
Isango Portobello Company

**Where:** Fugard Theatre,  
Harrington Street, District  
Six

**When:** Until February 28

restoring to District Six a theatre he hoped would help to heal wounds and reflect South African talent.

All the ruling party big cheeses were there. And while they may have been in town for President Jacob Zuma's state of the nation address earlier in the week, it was good to see in the packed audience the minister of arts and culture, Lulu Xingwana, and other ANC heavyweights. They included the deputy president, Kgalema Motlanthe, minister of human settlements, Tokyo Sexwale, and minister in the presidency: national planning commission, Trevor Manuel, who is also a patron of the company.

Manuel was spot-on when he suggested the company made it feel as if Mozart had written the opera for them. The trans-formation of the at-times odd

European fairy tale to an African setting has brought it a unique energy, humour and pop art sensibility. It is quite clear why audiences are beguiled by it.

The choreography, costumes, lighting (by Mannie Manim), creative props, extraordinary adaptation of Emanuel Schikaneder's libretto to an African setting, and of Mozart's orchestral music for marimbas, oil drums and other percussion instruments is an artistic triumph. Musical directors Mandisi Dyantyi and Pauline Malefane deserve the highest accolade for this seamless transposition.

Isango's vocal prowess, especially since many have not been formally trained, has also captivated overseas audiences — and rightly so. Everyone on stage is on top form vocally, physically and dramatically. Mhlekezzi Andy Mosiea as Tamino, Zamilé Gantana as Papageno, and Nobulumko Mngxekeza as Pamina all deserve special mention.

One of the most difficult singing parts is that of the Queen of the Night, played by Malefane, a formidable soprano. The diva might be pregnant with her second child (she is married to Dornford-May), but this certainly did not detract from her opening night performance.

*Impempe Yomlingo* runs in repertory with another Isango production, *The Mysteries — Yimimangaliso*, a less successful but nevertheless worthwhile adaptation by Dornford-May of the medieval street theatre based on the stories of the Bible.



THRILLS AND FRILLS: Pauline Malefane plays Queen of the Night

Picture: KEITH PATTERSON