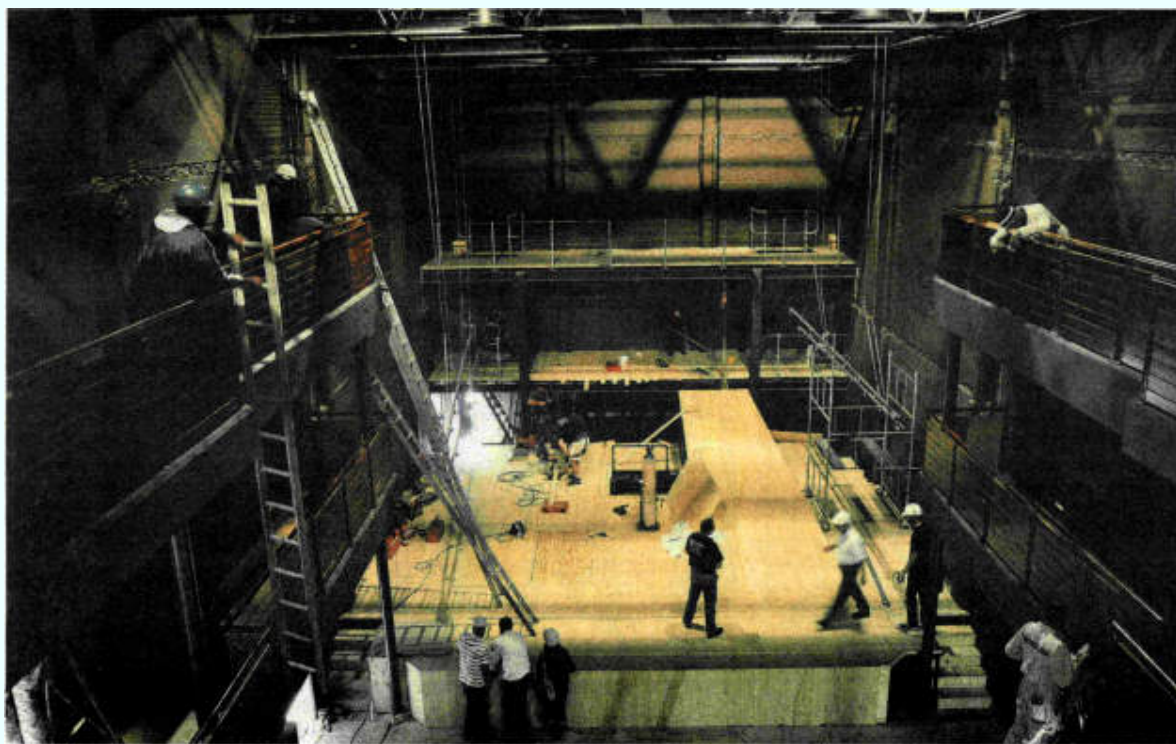


A THUMP IN THEATRE'S CHEST

Cape Town's art scene takes a leap towards better health with the opening of the Fugard.

STEVE KRETZMANN checks it out



UNDER CONSTRUCTION . . . The new Fugard Theatre takes shape as workers add the final touches to the venue.

A PATIENT stripped of all but the most rudimentary life support, not only does South African theatre's heart continue to beat against all odds, but it even, and surprisingly often, jumps out of bed and delights us with the most thrilling surprises.

The brand new Fugard Theatre is one of these. Within a semi-arid performing arts landscape where oases of creativity are sparse, it flowers as a new space promising to grace Cape Town with magnificent blooms.

This weekend, on the edge of the old District Six, where Cape Town's cosmopolitan CBD has for decades crumbled away to a desolate

expanse of prime land that was once a bustle of streets and lively cheek-by-jowl dwellings, the theatre emerges from a six-month cocoon of scaffolding.

The new home of the young, award-winning Isango Portobello Company, the Fugard spread its wings on Friday with a gala opening of the company's West End hit *The Magic Flute* – Impempe Yomlingo. It was hosted by patron Minister Trevor Manuel.

It will then stride out with a world premiere on March 19 of *The Train Driver*, written especially for Isango Portobello by the theatre's namesake, the eminent Athol Fugard, who will come over from his resi-

dence in California to direct the play in-house.

The fact that Cape Town, and South Africa, has a new theatre at all is reason to pop the champers, but the aura surrounding the Fugard adds up to more than the sum of its parts. Located on the city's east side in the midst of an arts vanguard, it is putting a shine on what until recently was an area where the only people who felt at home were tramps. It is a block from the historical Grand Parade and central station, allowing the company's 30-odd permanently employed performers to travel directly from their Cape Flats homes to work – and with the public transport system being upgraded, patrons might also find this option attractive.

The building it occupies – an historical textile warehouse still bearing the Sacks Futeran & Co. legend, also incorporates the original Caledon Street congregational church hall – seems to have spent years waiting for Isango Portobello to claim it.

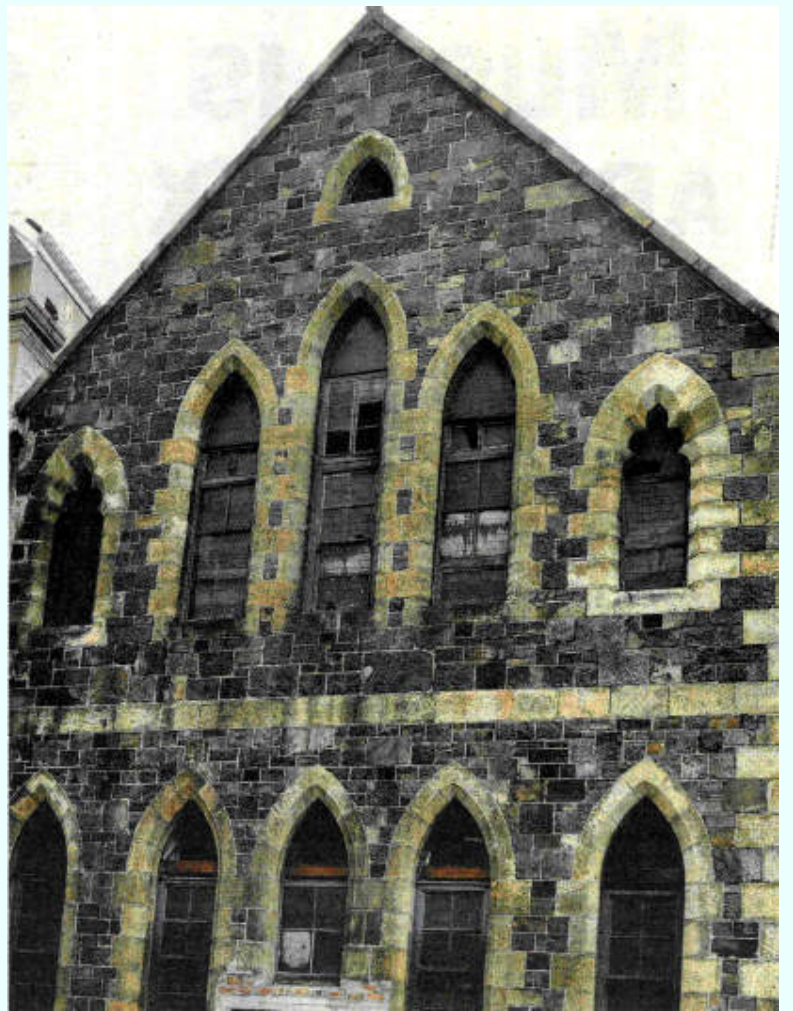
The building used to thrum to a hive of textile workers, but has some experience of the performing arts. Rented from lessors District Six Museum, the Arts and Media Access Centre (formerly the legendary Community Arts Project and Media-works) operated its performing arts, visual arts and media classes and activities there from 2003 until its sad demise in 2007.

Students who neglected to remove their shoes while practising township dance moves provided the pockmarks on the wooden floorboards in what are now the Fugard's lavish dressing rooms.

Much of the interior of the old warehouse has been gutted, to create



SKILLS WILL BE HONED . . . The rehearsal room.



NEW FACE . . . The facade of the newly renovated Fugard theatre in Cape Town.

a three-tiered gallery to seat 270 people, while the soaring old church hall has had a floor put in to create what might be the most magnificent 200 square metres of rehearsal space in the country. Despite the last minute frenzy of workers bustling

through air thick with cement dust last week, a walk through the premises provides an infusion of optimism and energy for theatre goers and performers alike as the performing arts' heart monitor registers a new beat. – West Cape News



HOME SWEET HOME . . . The Isango Portobello Company will call The Fugard home.

ABOUT ISANGO PORTOBELLO

■ Director Mark Dornford-May, with his company Dimpho Di Kopane (DDK) had a hit with the movie *uCarmen e-Khayelitsha*, winning a Golden Bear award in Berlin in 2005.

However, the company fell on hard times and DDK, which was established in 2000, was dissolved.

■ In October 2006, with the help of some new funders the Isango Portobello office opened.

■ Together with his wife Pauline Malefane, who played the lead role in *uCarmen*, Dornford-May and his team rehearsed in a church hall in Athlone and worked out of shipping containers, all the while looking for a new, permanent home.

■ During this time they put together *The Magic Flute* – Impempe Yomlingo and took it to the UK where it was a hit in London's West End, winning the 2008 Olivier Award for Best Musical Revival. More than 50 000 theatre

goers saw it in the UK, and it played to capacity audiences and standing ovations in Japan, Singapore, Ireland, the Netherlands and France.

■ The *Mysteries* – Yimimangaliso, which is also to run in the Fugard's opening season, played to critical acclaim in the Garrick Theatre in London's West End in September last year, after opening at the Baxter in June that year.

■ Now at their new home, the Fugard, the company have been joined by co-founder of Johannesburg's Market Theatre and recently retired artistic director at the Baxter Theatre, Mannie Manim, and Georgina Rae who fills the post of general manager.

■ The rest of the Isango Portobello creative team consists of co-music director Mandisi Dyantyi and Lungelo Ngamlana as choreographer and associate director. – West Cape News