



Into Ulwembu

*Exploring collaborative methodologies in a research-based theatre production
on street-level drug use in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.*



Portia (Mpume Mthombeni) implores her son Sipho (Zenzo Msomi) to eat in a performance of Ulwembu at the Denis Hurley Centre, Durban, South Africa, 2016. Photograph by Val Adamson.

Neil Coppen

Student Number: 215081903

Supervisor: Dr Miranda Young-Jahangeer

Co-supervisor: Dr Kira Erwin

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Declaration

I, Neil Coppen, declare that:

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As the candidate's Supervisor and Co-supervisor, we hereby agree to the submission of this dissertation.

Signed _____

Dr Miranda Young-Jahangeer
(Supervisor)

Date _____ / _____ / _____

Signed _____

Dr Kira Erwin
(Co-supervisor)

Date _____ / _____ / _____

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It is my sincere hope that by articulating the successes, failings, joys and many lessons that have emerged from *Ulwembu*, this study may encourage further use and development of research-based performance methodologies in South African theatre practices.

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Abstract

Over a yearlong creative process starting in 2014, The Big Brotherhood, Mpume Mthombeni, Dr Dylan McGarry and myself, Neil Coppen, came together to devise a collaborative theatrical intervention in response to the ‘whoonga crisis’—a proliferation of heroin-based street-level drug abuse—in Durban, South Africa. The transdisciplinary, action-led, research process we adopted for *Ulwembu* would emerge as, and be refined into, an applied, syncretic theatre-making methodology—a methodology that we would come to call ‘Empatheatre’. Over this thesis, I provide a detailed narrative around the research, devising and dissemination of our production, unravelling the context and conditions from which *Ulwembu* arose, as well as unpack the process of testing and shaping our new methodology, arriving at an iterative definition of the Empatheatre methodology. By focusing on a variety of practices and methodological approaches employed across research-based theatre forms, I explore some of the complexities that arise when one attempts to bring research to life on the stage, including how empathy in applied theatre approaches may be considered either a ‘cathartic cop-out’ or ‘epiphany inducing catalyst’. In acknowledging the integral role empathy was to play—both in shaping our creative journey and our critical responses as practitioners, as well as impacting the reception of the production—I attempt to measure the pedagogical impacts of our project on both the Empatheatre practitioners and audience members. I do this primarily—but not exclusively—through the lens of the pedagogical empathetic impacts that the devising and dissemination of *Ulwembu* was to enable. I ask, firstly, how the experience of co-creating *Ulwembu*—and our deep immersion in the research process—transformed our understanding of street-level drug addiction and the way we subsequently devised *Ulwembu*. These transformations also shaped the way we intend to approach social justice theatre projects of this kind in the future. In exploring this process, I take a critical look at my own role and function within the *Ulwembu* theatre-making processes as co-facilitator, playwright and director. Secondly, I ask if, how, and to what extent, our Empatheatre methodology and production was able to shift perceptions around drug use and the whoonga ‘problem’ in Durban and inspire greater reflexivity in local city institutions and organisations, to ultimately move them collectively towards less judgmental and more compassionate outcomes.

PROLOGUE: The Inciting Incident



*Policewoman Portia Mthembu (Mpume Mthombeni) interrogates drug runner Andile (Ngcebo Cele) in a scene from *Ulwembu* at The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015.*
Photograph by Val Adamson.

In 2014, several months before I was to commence work on our research-based theatre production of *Ulwembu* (2014–2019), I was tasked with heading up a playwriting workshop with a group of community-based theatre participants from, in and around KwaZulu-Natal. The goal of these workshops was to generate material for a range of thirty-minute productions that would later be staged at the Playhouse Loft Theatre.

One of the preliminary workshop exercises I conducted with the group involved asking participants to develop a list of five social concerns that impacted their daily lives. It was during this exercise—through the listing and ordering of concerns ranging from teenage pregnancy to domestic violence—that the group unanimously voted the street-drug ‘whoonga’ into first place.

It was not the first time I had heard about whoonga, its name derived from Swahili onomatopoeia that allegedly refers to the sound the user hears when the combination of B-grade heroin and rat poison rushes through their system. For years, my colleague Mpume Mthombeni had been complaining about the ‘whoonga boys’ who hassled her at the taxi ranks, while media outlets had devoted headlines to stories of users robbing patients of their antiretrovirals outside of clinics in KwaZulu-Natal, and adding these into the whoonga cocktail. One such article was titled ‘Whoonga’ threat to South African HIV patients (Fihlani 2011), and published by the BBC at a

time when it was assumed—but not yet proven—that antiretrovirals were a crucial component of the whoonga mix.

After isolating the problem, I encouraged participants to relate an anecdote focusing on the impacts whoonga was having on their communities. Twenty-two year-old Ayanda Ndlovu¹ was the first to accept the challenge. Standing before the rest of the group, she began to relate the story of her cousin, Njabulo, and his five-year struggle with whoonga addiction.²:

My cousin was 21 when he moved from Johannesburg to my aunt's house in Umlazi D section. When he first arrived, we were excited to see him. He was very handsome and charming, but shortly after he came to Durban people in the community began to complain that things were going missing from their homes. This is when I learnt that Njabulo was not only stealing from us all, but using my aunt's house to smoke and deal whoonga. When the neighbour's found out there was big trouble. They threatened my aunt, telling her they would burn down the house unless action was taken. As time passed and the problem got worse, my family were left with no other choice but to evict Njabulo.

When I asked what became of Njabulo, Ayanda recounted that he had joined the burgeoning ranks of whoonga refugees in Albert Park, a leafy inner-city refuge for users just a stone's throw away from the Durban harbour. She continued:

It was tragic to see what became of him. Sometimes I'd see him through the fence of Albert Park, sitting there like a hobo, no longer a handsome young man but aged and filthy.

Ayanda then went on to conclude her story with a harrowing account of Njabulo's death.

He passed on at 25. He had been addicted to whoonga for more than five years. That's five years that my aunt and family had to deal with this problem. When they brought his body from the mortuary to our house for the vigil, we noticed immediately that there was something odd... something strange about it. His body it was... how do I put this... soft. You see, it's not supposed be soft when a person passes on. In Zulu culture this means that the person's spirit may come back and take somebody from the family, or worse, one of us might inherit these problems from him. So the following morning we all took turns to talk to him and calm him and clear the passage for him, but while we were doing this... his... his...

She paused and took a deep breath.

¹ The names of the participant and her relatives have been changed to protect their identity.

² The transcription of Ayanda's account, included in this section, was reiterated to me again in a one-on-one interview that I conducted with her on 6 March 2014 at The Playhouse, Durban, South Africa.

He started moving his head and hands like a person who is still alive. It seemed as if his spirit wasn't ready to leave. And so, under the guidance of our elders, my cousins and I were made to take sticks and beat the body. We took turns hitting him. I was scared to do this because even if a person was bad while alive, we have always been taught to respect the dead. But we had to hit him. In order for Njabulo to not come back and torment us, we had to hit him. We had to defend ourselves and so we hit him – we hit him, we hit him.

Despite the family's best efforts, Ayanda explained that the body would not keep still. It was at this point in the proceedings that her aunt was made to transport the body back to Albert Park.

The park was the only real home he knew, and we imagined he would find peace there. At the park my aunt bought whoonga from one of the dealers and began to sprinkle it over Njabulo's corpse, touching some to his lips until his body finally softened and surrendered. At the funeral we all sprinkled whoonga into his grave. We did this so he would be at peace.

She concluded by clasping her hands together in what seemed a combined gesture of relief and prayer.

We did this so he would never visit us again.

INTRODUCTION

Towards a Research Focus

Initially, this inquiry was not conceived with the idea that it would serve as a case study for an academic dissertation but rather, originated as a means for me to further challenge and define my own creative practice and responsibilities. As will be detailed in Chapter 1, in November 2014, I began to assemble a team of practitioners, which saw the coming together of myself, The Big Brotherhood theatre company members including: Ngcebo Cele, Vumani Khumalo, Zenzo Msomi, Phumlani Ngubane and Sandile Nxumalo; with actor ethnographer Mpume Mthombeni and sociologist Dr Dylan McGarry. Over a yearlong creative process, the transdisciplinary (McGregor 2015), action-led (Rowe 2014), research process we adopted for our play *Ulwembu* would emerge as an applied, syncretic theatre-making methodology, a methodology that would come to be called—and will be referred to throughout the course of this dissertation as—‘Empatheatre’.

From the inception of the project, I was personally interested in exploring what sort of ‘impact’, if any, a theatre production might have on a given social rupture or situation. As a collective, the *Ulwembu* team was specifically interested in exploring if—and how—our production was able to shift perceptions of drug users and the whoonga ‘problem’ in Durban and, following, in understanding to what extent our team, process and production was able—or unable—to influence key stakeholders in taking more concerted forms of action around the crisis. It was only after the completion of the production, and a few months into its initial tour, that I decided to enrol in a MA programme and reflect on our practice-led research (Smith & Dean 2009) process and engage with and within academic spaces and discourse in the form of a dissertation.

The Research Focus

Theatre-makers, I believe, create with the hope that the experiences they offer will remain with audiences beyond the ephemerality of the performance. I have, perhaps idealistically, believed that theatre, in its most transcendent form, has the ability to empathetically shift an audience’s way of accessing and making sense of the world around them. Working alongside my co-collaborator Mthombeni on a variety of theatre projects over the years, I have come to experience

the power of storytelling as a healing and even shamanic³ art form, witnessing the function this serves across a range of South African communities.

As I will explore over the course of this dissertation, the desire for theatre to serve a more ‘transformative’ function in the societies it emerges from is as old as the art form itself and intrinsic to its application across numerous continents and cultures. However this impetus gained new political and social focus in the 1940s with the theatre of Bertolt Brecht (Prentki, 2015). His “purpose driven” (Mienczakowski 2009: 327) forms paved the way for a new generation of theatre-makers (Boal, 2008; Blau 1992; Mda 1993) who saw theatre as a potentially powerful tool for societal change.

Beyond the *Ulwembu* team’s interest in exploring how, and if, our production was able to shift perceptions, influence key stakeholders and in so doing, actuate change, and while delving deeper into this exploration over the last five years, I discovered it was near impossible to engage with such questions without acknowledging the integral role of empathy. Empathy was to play a major role in both shaping our creative journey and responses as practitioners and impacting the reception the production was to receive from audiences and institutions. In short, empathy seemed to play a central role in the transformative capacity of *Ulwembu*.

Following the above, my research questions were thus subsequently reformulated to interrogate notions of ‘transformation’ and ‘change’, primarily—but not exclusively—through the lens of the pedagogical empathetic impacts that the devising and dissemination of *Ulwembu* was to enable. However, in acknowledging, from the outset, that terms such as ‘change’ and ‘transformation’ are both somewhat ambiguous and problematic—and perhaps even more subjective and slippery to gauge when woven into a theatre-based praxis—I attempt to clarify the focus of this study by suggesting that the term ‘pedagogical impacts’ be used and understood as the more definitive term throughout this thesis, though sometimes used interchangeably with ‘change’. Following these considerations, my research focus could be distinguished into two areas of inquiry.

Firstly, over the course of this thesis, I intend to determine if and how our production was able to instigate or impact forms of ‘change’ in relation to two dimensions or viewpoints:

- 1.) *A view from the inside*: Here I will review the above question in relation to the ‘micro’ level, reflecting on my personal learning as co-facilitator, writer and director on the

³ Mthombeni often refers to herself as a ‘stage Sangoma’ and views her theatre work as a form of traditional healing. For Mthombeni, embodying different characters as an actress is often a means for her ancestors to speak with and through her.

project as well as the experiences and insights shared by my co-investigators. I will evaluate our responses by focusing on the perceived ‘empathetic’ impacts of the project. How did the experience of co-creating *Ulwembu*—and the deep immersion in the research process—transform our understanding of street-level drug addiction and the way we intend to devise social justice theatre projects of this kind in the future? Similarly, how did the project challenge assumptions around ‘community theatre’ for The Big Brotherhood performers who co-created *Ulwembu*?

- 2.) *A view from the outside*: I will examine the more external ‘macro’ pedagogical impacts of our project, evaluating creative choices we made in shaping an empathetic advocacy strategy and how this impacted the audiences’ and participating institutions’ reception and responses to *Ulwembu*. Here, I will investigate whether our research-based theatre approach was able to challenge, shift and expand the thinking of our audiences and the institutions confronting street-level drug addiction.

Secondly, this thesis will also unpack the process of testing and shaping our new methodology, which we called Empatheatre.⁴ Empatheatre is a theatre-making approach that drew on the breadth of knowledge and experience that myself, McGarry and Mthombeni had gleaned over the course of our respective careers. It was also a methodology that was created through our collaborative practice, starting with a research-based theatre project called *Mhlaba Nolahle/Soil & Ash* (2014/15).⁵ Building on our experiences from this earlier project, the application of this methodology in concert with approaches utilised by The Big Brotherhood, would come to shape our production around street-level drug addiction. Thus over the course of this thesis, I will attempt to arrive at an iterative definition of the Empatheatre methodology.

⁴ The name ‘Empatheatre’ was first proposed by Dylan McGarry.

⁵ Prior to the inception of *Ulwembu*, McGarry, Mthombeni and I, were granted the opportunity to test an early version of what would soon come to be termed Empatheatre. Our first project as a team, titled *Mhlaba Nolahle/Soil & Ash* (2014/2015) was an isiZulu research-based theatre production, which was initiated (with support from Ezemvelo Wildlife) to offer the Fuleni community in northern Zululand a space to consider and stimulate discussion around existing, sustainable alternatives to the more catastrophic short-term one being presented to them by a local coal-mining company named Ibutho coal.

Circumnavigating the Web



*The issues confronted in *Ulwembu* involve both the webs that ensnare us, as well as the potential for such webs to be a connective force, bridging gaps in our communities. In the above image, Sizwe (Zenzo Msomi) begs Andile (Ngcebo Cele) to help him quit the drug. The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.*

In chapter one I will describe how through a practice-based, collaborative and grounded theoretical approach, we set about refining the Empatheatre methodology, from an early research idea into a fully-fledged (and still evolving) research-based theatre production around street-level, drug addiction. I will provide a detailed narrative around the research, devising and dissemination of our production, unravelling the context and conditions from which *Ulwembu* arose, and how the making of *Ulwembu* subsequently informed my research focus. In Chapter 2, I will review a range of literature that is pertinent to our own experiences and processes on *Ulwembu*, establishing a contextual overview and scaffolding for this study. Here, I will discuss a variety of “purpose driven” (Mienczakowski 2009: 327) theatrical approaches and theories, which have been developed to address concerns similar to the ones that reside at the heart of *Ulwembu*. A particular focus will be placed on research-based theatre practices (Belliveau 2015b), otherwise known as ‘ethnotheatre’ (Saldaña 1998, Mienczakowski 1997). In Chapter 3, I will review a variety of methodological approaches employed across research-based theatre forms and explore some of the complexities that arise when one attempts to bring research to life on the stage. This will be followed by a critical look at my own role and function within the *Ulwembu* theatre-making processes as co-facilitator, playwright and director. In Chapter 4, I explore how empathy in applied theatre approaches may be considered either a *cathartic cop-out* or *epiphany inducing*

catalyst and relate this back to some of the seminal lessons learnt during the making and touring of *Ulwembu*.

In Chapter 5, through my analysis entitled *Disentangling the Web*, I attempt to measure the pedagogical impacts of our project on both Empatheatre practitioners and audience-members.⁶ Such ‘impacts’ will be explored against my own project findings on *Ulwembu*, and this will entail reviewing data that was accumulated through reflexive group-interviews conducted with my fellow actor-ethnographers on the project, as well as a summative, post-show questionnaire that was answered by a range of audience members upon leaving the theatre. Similarly, the audience feedback offered during the projects post-performance talk-back sessions were recorded, transcribed and translated, and will be used to either support or contest my findings. In my concluding remarks, I will show that, as with the architecture of a web, these seemingly disparate and remote discussions are inextricably connected.

Further insights will be included from a variety of sources, including my own personal reflections from my project-journals, interviews with outside stakeholders, as well as from a range of media reviews and articles (2015–2017) written over the production’s performance history. Where necessary, textual examples from the published play (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018)⁷ will be included to further enhance my arguments. However, an iteration of the *Ulwembu* script is also included as an appendix to this research.

⁶ The Empatheatre methodology is an intuitive and responsive process that begins without predetermined rules or parameters. Rather, these are defined and established as the Empatheatre practitioners’ and related participants’ journey along the process together. It is for this reason that my analysis in Chapter 5 will link the threads of comparative theories and methodologies (established in Chapters 2, 3 and 4) to assist in defining our own lessons in the field.

⁷ *Ulwembu* was published by Wits University Press in 2018. Owing to the size of our team, the play is credited to the authors under two collaborative titles, being Empatheatre (Mpume Mthombeni, Neil Coppen and Dylan McGarry) and The Big Brotherhood (Vumani Khumalo, Phumlani Ngubane, Ngcebo Cele, Sandile Nxumalo and Zenzo Msomi).

CHAPTER 1: The Making of *Ulwembu*



Zenzo Msomi (Sipho) and Ngcebo Cele (Andile) from *The Big Brotherhood*, empathetically capture the lifeworlds of young men who are trapped in the grips of a whoonga addiction. The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

I commence my dissertation with Ayanda’s account because her story had a profound and lasting effect on me. In many ways, our research-based theatre production of *Ulwembu* (2014–2019) emerged from this simple act of listening. After hearing Ayanda’s story, I was confronted by a range of conflicting emotions and questions. How could this be happening in the city where I lived? How many others were there ensnared in this nightmarish cycle of use and dependency? More crucially, what structures were being implemented by city officials and policy-makers to deal with what local activist Vanessa Burger—in an email forwarded to me titled *Whoonga Park - the Bigger Picture*—had termed “Durban’s latest, greatest humanitarian disaster” (V. Burger 2014, pers. com. 12 June)

For some time prior to this workshop, I had noticed the weekly headlines warning of an impending ‘Whoonga Apocalypse’⁸ and yet, it was only after hearing Ayanda’s story that I was able to reflect on how I—and so many others—had passively come to accept the media’s coverage as unequivocal fact and, in the process, fail to acknowledge the thousands of men and women on the ground, grappling with the daily grind of whoonga addiction. Most of all, I was

⁸ I use problematic terms such as this one, in the early part of this thesis, to demonstrate the pathologising lexicon and micro-violent wording that existed at the time, in both media and conversations between everyday citizens. As my emersion into this work deepened, I came to understand how the use of such terms was operating to enforce hugely problematic stereotypes around whoonga use. I will explore this aspect further across this thesis.

struck by the impact the drug was having, not just upon users like Njabulo but on his immediate community and family members.

Inspired by such provocations, I began to imagine a theatre project that would allow me to interrogate my own creative and social obligations as a South African theatre-maker. For some time, I had felt the need to consolidate my work in both mainstream and applied fields of theatre, and Ayanda's story had inspired me to begin imagining alternative ways of making and sharing theatre in the city of Durban. The production that emerged from these initial reflections—and will be discussed in detail throughout this thesis—was titled *Ulwembu*. The following discussions in this chapter describe the process of making and performing *Ulwembu*.

1.1 Framing the Web

Of Myths & Monsters

The creation of our research-based theatre production *Ulwembu* (2014–2019) emerged from a range of social and theatrical curiosities, which my collaborators and I had been contemplating and testing independently for some time. My own trigger or ‘epiphany’ to test these ideas in a theatrical format, as explained in my prologue, occurred after hearing the ‘inciting incident’ of Ayanda’s account.

At the time, the city and surrounding suburbs had descended into a panic over the visibility of whoonga users who were no longer concealed in the shadows of outlying communities but, instead, congregating *en masse* on traffic islands and in local parks. I would later contextualise the mounting hysteria in my two-part article published in *The Con*, titled *Whoonga Wars: Part One* (Coppen 2014a) and *Whoonga Wars: Part Two* (Coppen 2014b), where I wrote:

Outraged letters were penned to newspapers; petitions the length of telephone books barricaded politicians’ office doors. A mass of Glenwood residents united under the unfortunate – but rather apt – acronym of SOB (Save Our Berea) and spent weekends waving placards outside the Durban City Hall. Suburban parks became no-go zones and unsuspecting locals using them for recreational purposes soon became suspects. A group of teenagers playing soccer [were] accosted by police after an online forum suspected they were smoking whoonga. “WHOONGA!” wailed Facebook forums in caps lock. The drug sent subscriptions

to private security firms rocketing – until it was discovered that many of the security guards employed by these firms were addicted to whoonga themselves. (Coppen 2014a)

Before I could begin to conceive of a theatrical response of any sort, I would need to grasp the greater complexities of the ‘problem’ itself. My two-part article (Coppen 2014a; 2014b) was a self-initiated means for me to learn more about the severity of the situation. Over a period of six months, I interviewed a range of subjects including users, social workers, activists, academics and city officials. I will take a moment to reflect on three of the lessons I took from the writing of this article, as they had further bearing on the approaches and outcomes we would elaborate on during the devising of *Ulwembu*.

The first insight came with the understanding that the whoonga epidemic could not be understood in isolation but rather as a vast interrelated web whose tendrils reached across various communities, cultures, institutions, structures, fields-of-knowledge and expertise. While my interviews with role-players in the situation had helped me to make inroads into mapping the extent and complexity of the problem, city institutions and ‘experts’ had all seemed to respond to my questions with the same placatory assurances. For all the jargon and elaborate PowerPoint presentations I was made to sit through, there were very few, it seemed, who were listening—let alone responding—to the voices that belonged to people like Ayanda and her cousin Njabulo.

The second insight concerned Ayanda’s story and centred on the ritual developed by her family to banish the spirit of Njabulo. Ayanda’s story demonstrates the complex intersection of Zulu beliefs and cosmology, and the rites and rituals that arise when communities begin to grapple with – and try make sense of – drug use. In amongst the various policies that the city was rolling out, it seemed the more ‘unconventional’ responses developed by isiZulu speaking communities were being ignored, and instead, a set of generic ‘*Say No to Drugs*’ solutions were being enforced, discounting the nuanced ways the problem was manifesting in KwaZulu-Natal.

The third insight emerged in coming to understand how insidious the majority of the local media’s sensationalised responses had been in warping public opinion and suppressing any form of insightful, empathetic responses to the situation. In my article (Coppen 2014b) I had devoted a section to analysing these journalistic responses, recording how, through the use of stereotypes, users were being frequently demonized. To cite an example, in articles (Chapman 2014) on the subject featured in the local online magazine *Mahala*, editor and journalist Samora Chapman would refer to users as “whoonga heads” (Coppen 2014b), with his choice of metaphors veering between wounded animals, pack wolves and supernatural creatures. Over the range of his blog

entries, users were depicted as seething, vomiting, delirious, bewildered, buzzing herds, ghouls or mobs.⁹

From these insights and the research I had conducted, I could identify the need for a theatre production that would more empathetically attempt to address these many misconceptions but, at the same time, I was filled with trepidation. Where to begin? How could or would I—or anyone—successfully co-facilitate a project around a subject of this magnitude? This was in many ways an unprecedented ‘issue’ in the city of Durban and, while I had encountered the myriad of confusions and questions surrounding the subject, I had discovered very little in the way of workable answers or outcomes.

Assembling the Team

During this phase of my enquiry, I had discovered the limitations of being a white, English-speaking journalist and how, as an ‘outsider’ without a sufficient grasp of isiZulu, I would only ever be able skim the surface of the lived realities of the dealers, users and community members. To more authentically access and speak *with* these narratives, I would need to assemble a skilled team of actor/researcher-practitioners, whose positioning offered them access to the relevant informants and voices.

With this in mind, I invited the KwaMashu-based theatre collective known as The Big Brotherhood¹⁰ to join the team as well as seasoned Durban actress Mpume Mthombeni from Umlazi. I had worked extensively with Mthombeni on a range of applied and mainstream theatre projects over the last decade and knew she would be an asset to the process. I had also recently met and collaborated with sociologist McGarry, who had written a PhD thesis examining the emancipatory role that empathy plays in developing responsible ecological citizenship through the use of a participative, arts-based, social-sculpture praxis. McGarry had extensive experience in applied theatre and ‘transgressive learning’¹¹ pedagogies and an equally passionate interest to further hone and test these processes in Durban.

⁹ Chapman’s articles on the subject of whoonga had gone on to rack up thousands of social media likes.

¹⁰ The Big Brotherhood are an independent theatre company that formed in 2008. For a synopsis of their company and production history please refer to Appendix 3 (p 208-210).

¹¹ Transgressive learning “refers to boundary crossing and challenging oppressive normative structures, and is defined by Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2016: 51) as ‘critical thinking and collective agency and praxis that directly and explicitly challenges those aspects of society that have become normalized, but which require challenging for substantive sustainability’”

Over the last decade, I had collaborated on a variety of Twist Theatre Development Projects¹² and with a range of performing arts community groups in KwaZulu-Natal, developing the productions *To Be Like this Rock* (2010), *Secrets from the Drawer* (2013), *A Bull Called Bahlangane* (2011), *Fikile* (2012), *Sugar Daddies* (2013), *Rock of Ages* (2014), and *Stimela SenHlanhla* (2014). As well as this, my experience on a range of applied and industrial theatre projects, as well as my community arts group collaborations, equipped me with some useful insights to carry over into the facilitation of what would become *Ulwembu* (2014–2019).

Between the period of 2010 and 2017, I kept fieldwork notebooks over the duration of these participatory theatre-making processes.¹³ I had noted how sufficient research time for an idea was absent from most community-based theatre devising processes and wondered what would happen if the performers and the creative teams were afforded the space, resources and time to immerse themselves in a research process, even before a play idea itself was allowed to form. How might this enrich the advocacy and pedagogical potentials of these productions?

It was with many of these questions in mind that I entered into the process of devising *Ulwembu*, hoping that the duration of our collaborative theatre-making process would allow us to further test, interrogate and challenge many of the assumptions I have mentioned previously.

Partners & Partnerships

Ulwembu (2014–2019) first became a reality when Twist Theatre Development Projects agreed to contribute a small amount of funding that would enable our team to test our methodology through the creation of a new research-based theatre production¹⁴. The only outcome specified by this funding body was that we premiere our production at the Wushwini Arts, Culture and Heritage Centre's *Annual Festival*, scheduled for the 28th March 2015.

transformations to emerge (e.g. colonial practice or epistemology, gender and race relations, social exclusion, environmental injustice) (hooks, 1996; Dei, 2012). It focuses specifically on structures of privilege, hegemonies of power, and innovative strategies to arrest systemic dysfunction or systemic violence, and it foregrounds epistemic, social and environmental justice (hooks, 1996; Dei, 2012; Lotz-Sisitka *et al.*, 2015)" (Temper, McGarry & Weber 2019).

¹² According to their website (<http://www.twistprojects.co.za/>), Twist Theatre Development Project "is a dynamic networking project that focuses on the development of community theatre groups in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, and on the creation of sustainable relationships and networks for theatre development, both locally and abroad."

¹³ Often my notes explored the 'problematics' of how social issues were unpacked and portrayed by many of the groups on stage. Most concerning to me was how, through on-stage re-enactments of rape and domestic violence, the performers often ended up perpetuating, and even enforcing, the very behaviours they were attempting to condemn. Similarly, while community-based groups often set out to raise 'awareness' about certain social ills, I was not always convinced that these productions were imparting anything that the audience didn't already know about the situation.

¹⁴ *Ulwembu* was an autonomous project and was not initiated as part of the Twist Theatre Development Project programme and outcomes. After forming the team and idea, we approached *Twist* to support us with seed funding, which they kindly agreed to do. Funding for the project thereafter came from a variety of organisations and donors and generally involved the sponsorship of tours, conference performances and short runs.

In October 2014, we were able to meet with the full complement of our team. This meeting was the first time that Mthombeni, McGarry and myself would sit down together with The Big Brotherhood performers to ascertain if this was an issue. The Brothers felt equally passionate about. As we had hoped, The Brothers responded enthusiastically, entering into an impassioned discussion around how whoonga was impacting their community, while identifying potential informants (including neighbours, friends and family members) who they believed would co-operate with our inquiry.

While The Big Brotherhood actors hailed from the township KwaMashu (north of Durban), and Mthombeni¹⁵ from Umlazi (south of Durban), we believed that working with researchers residing in different regions would enable us to examine how whoonga use was manifesting across different contexts.¹⁶

During the earliest stages of our research, we set about establishing partnerships with various city institutions. Prior to commencement of our project, I had been introduced to the director of the Denis Hurley Centre¹⁷ (DHC), Raymond Perrier. The DHC worked in proactive ways with the inner-city homeless population, and the facility itself contained adjoining clinics, spaces from which feeding schemes operated as well as a range of function rooms.

McGarry, Mthombeni and I were determined that our project and rehearsal space be located within the city centre and situated in a space where interventions in street-level drug addiction were already occurring. Working in conjunction with the DHC, our team would be granted access to a range of informants including homeless users, faith-based workers, clinic sisters and social workers. Our partnership with DHC would allow us to verify and expand our research as well as prove to have an unexpected impact on the direction our play's narrative would take.

Another crucial partnership we developed over this period was with Professor Monique Marks at the Urban Futures Centre (UFC), based in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment

¹⁵ Mthombeni is a respected Durban actress and I knew she would serve as a mentor figure for the younger participating performers of the team. Mthombeni's involvement in this project also helped us to include and examine essential and often ignored female perspectives around street-level drug use.

¹⁶ Umlazi and KwaMashu are considered Durban's biggest 'townships' and consist of low-income housing and informal settlements. Poverty and drug abuse are large drivers of crime and gangsterism in these areas. It was these factors that were inextricably linked to additional tensions of xenophobia and homelessness.

¹⁷ The Denis Hurley Centre (DHC) is an organisation that assists homeless people in central Durban, a large percentage of whom are whoonga users themselves. The centre not only provides counselling and assistance for reunification for users who have been ostracised from their families and communities but also offers an adjoining clinic and feeding program.

at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). Professor Marks and her institution were deeply involved in the research of the Durban whoonga ‘problem’. Our partnership with the UFC¹⁸ was mutually beneficial in multiple ways. In the first instance, our own research-based theatre endeavour was given institutional credibility and connected us to a wider field of transdisciplinary insights. For our production’s advocacy strategy to serve any purpose, it was crucial that our play be able to reach and connect with audience stakeholders who ultimately had the power and agency to influence the situation on the ground. Without Professor Marks and the UFC’s involvement it would have been unlikely that we would have been able to convince senior officials to attend performances. Through this collaboration Professor Marks was able to share with us her database and connections with senior police and city and government officials. In return we were also able to offer the UFC a more innovative medium than the standard policy PowerPoint presentation or working paper to disseminate our collective research findings.

Actor-ethnographers

Before embarking on the research for what would come to be called *Ulwembu*, McGarry—drawing on his sociological academic background—guided the team through a discussion on the ethics behind participant observation and generative reflexive research techniques. Other areas covered included how to document field notes and correctly translate and transcribe interviews. During these workshops, we also urged the team to work in groups of two and prioritise their safety by steering clear of threatening situations, particularly when it came to interrogating the more covert networks of whoonga manufacturers and dealers.

Consent forms were drawn up and participants were encouraged to be upfront and clear with informants around the nature and purpose of our research. We were *not* trying to create a journalistic exposé of whoonga, nor setting out to condemn informants who used or sold the substance. Rather, we wanted to ascertain if a project like ours could address and challenge widely held misconceptions around drug use in the city, and possibly offer alternatives to those who wished to escape its relentless cycles. No names or personal details would need to be exchanged over the course of interview process, and once informants had expressed a willingness to participate, our actor-ethnographers would need to work to create attentive listening spaces for interviewees to share their stories.

¹⁸ To align ourselves with the Urban Futures Centre’s developing research on harm-reduction approaches and Opioid Substitution Therapies (OST), McGarry enrolled as a postdoctoral researcher at the institution under the guidance of Professor Marks. Having McGarry involved in this dynamic, localised field of research would continue to expand and enrich our team’s own insights into street-level drug addiction.

Some interesting questions posed by the team during this discussion included:

- *What happens if a user only agrees to do the interview if I give him money to buy a whoonga hit?*
- *Was it ethical to pay someone for an interview or even exchange a Coca-Cola for their story?*

It was crucial that such questions were addressed before the interviews began. McGarry made it clear that should the data be obtained through coercive means; we would not be able to consider the material going forwards. At this early stage, the identification and range of questions posed to informants was left up to the individual researchers to determine. We were casting our nets wide and would meet again in a month's time to examine the outcomes and begin refining our enquiry.¹⁹

Experiences

For The Big Brotherhood, the level of research and involvement differed to the usual processes and time frames of their previous projects. In the past, The Brothers had largely drawn on personal experiences to generate material for their plays—as was the case with one of their earliest productions *Just Don't*, whereby some of the group's experiences of incarceration were fictionalized on the stage. Owing to our hands-on data collection approach, many of The Big Brotherhood performers confessed to having found the initial groundwork frustrating. A concern initially shared by Big Brotherhood members Cele and Khumalo, with Cele admitting the following to me in a recorded group interview with me on 24 March 2017:

I remember there was one point early in the process where I thought, '*Ay man why Neil, why can't you just go away and write your script and call us when you need us to act man!*' We are not writers... you know... it's not something we feel we are capable of, but at the end of the day I realised that, no man, we are working here, this is what we do, I'm learning here. (N. Cele 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

For Nxumalo, the most introvert of the group, the prospect of approaching strangers for interviews was initially a terrifying one, causing him to hide behind the rest of the team members

¹⁹ Beyond this sketch of our project outline and the suggestion of our central concern, I encouraged the team not to concern themselves with contemplating any sort of theatrical output, as this would be determined from the data we were yet to obtain.

during interviews. But as time passed, it would be a skill that he became familiar with and comfortable conducting on his own.

The Big Brotherhood claimed that the more experience they gleaned in this arena, the more they were able to develop a strategy for approaching and interviewing users and dealers in their community. Cele explained to the audience during a post-show talk-back that such a strategy had led to them establishing longer-term connections with informants—demonstrating to them from the outset that they posed no threat. Cele stated:

We decided in the beginning we must go to them as friends, if you know what I'm saying, don't rush with anything, don't rush with questions because if I remember clearly, we spent two weeks with the guys [users] from KwaMashu. Over the first few days, we had to take baby steps because it's all about trust and once the guys began to trust us they started to open up.
(N. Cele 2016, group discussion. 8 April)

Similarly, Khumalo was surprised how, once a mutual trust was fostered between parties, users grew more and more willing to open up to them in interviews—a transparency, he believes, arises from their need to be ‘understood’, while seeking assistance to rid themselves of the habit.

Although all the informants were made aware of the outcomes of the project and were given the opportunity to share their stories if they so wished, in a post-show talk-back at The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Mthombeni recalled that she knew most of the people she interviewed, and it was this prior knowledge that allowed each informant to open up to her, knowing that she would both safeguard and honour their stories:

If you speak with users and dealers, they speak from their hearts because they have been granted the rare opportunity to tell their life stories. I suppose there is something healing in the act of telling one's story. If the people you are interviewing see that you are prepared to listen, then they make sure they talk to you. (M. Mthombeni 2016, group discussion. 8 April)

Insights & Epiphanies

When we met as a team a month later, we were encouraged by the depth and detail with which Mthombeni and The Big Brotherhood had immersed themselves in the task. The Big Brotherhood team had moved through their community speaking to a range of informants and arrived with notebooks crammed with interviews, transcriptions and insights. Mthombeni had reignited a

friendship with an informant in her neighbourhood who was a dealer and this interviewee had granted her unique insights into his life story.²⁰

It was decided at this session that we would need to meet frequently to keep track of the many research developments. From our workshop sessions we were able to develop a document that allowed us to ascertain where our missing areas of knowledge resided. Once the gaps had been identified, the actor-ethnographers would then return to the field to investigate further.

As a team, we identified and discussed issues of *positionality* in relation to our research—specifically regarding access to informants—and resolved to turn these relative advantages and disadvantages into project strengths by focusing our individual energies on areas we could most authentically access.

At one point over the course of our workshops, Ngubane of The Big Brotherhood had asked McGarry and I if white people believed in ancestors and, as a consequence, we had taken time as a group to discuss the alternate belief systems we had each grown up with. Ngubane then explained to the team that he believed whoonga was afflicting people who had fallen out of favour with their ancestors. From the insights shared, a conversation was initiated around Mthombeni and The Brothers' connections to their ancestors and the wider applications of these beliefs and practices in KwaZulu-Natal. From these culturally specific perspectives we were able to identify the more nuanced ways in which the whoonga problem was manifesting itself within local communities, as well as grasping the alternate strategies being called upon by such communities²¹. It became increasingly clear that this aspect would need to be respectfully featured and explored in our play.

During the follow-up workshops, we attempted to interrogate the subject matter from a range of perspectives, further complementing our study by looking into how addiction had been portrayed in popular-culture by watching and critiquing films such as *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Requiem for a Dream* (2000). Using an unlikely series of weekly prompts, we would initiate deeper conversations around our subject matter.²² To keep abreast of media coverage, we collated a

²⁰ Tragically this informant was killed in drug-related violence during the touring of our production.

²¹ Ayanda's story, which was recounted in the prologue, also featured an unusual ritual developed by her family to banish the troubled spirit of her cousin Njabulo.

²² We soon learnt that we needed to understand addiction in broader terms, and such explorations would become homework for the next meeting. For example, whilst reading Eugene Marais' (who suffered from opium addiction) *Soul of the Ape* (1969), McGarry and I stumbled across a quote that claimed addictions are a coping mechanism, called upon by beings across the animal kingdom, to escape '*the pain of consciousness*'. Such prompts would usually be introduced at the start of meetings to further stimulate conversations and enable us to reflect on our own more personal experiences with addiction—be it alcohol, cigarettes or even social media.

range of local and international newspaper articles related to our conversations, until our research flip-file was crammed with clippings.

During this period there was a growing sense of excitement as many of our initial assumptions and prejudices were being challenged. By interviewing users, dealers, police officers, users' family members, teachers, school principals, social workers, journalists, ward counsellors, doctors, activists and academics, we were uncovering—and piecing together—a picture of the situation which was far more complex than the good/evil binary used to terrify readers into purchasing daily newspapers.

Some of our more interesting insights emerged from examining media responses and, specifically, how the ‘myth machine’ in Durban (mainly in suburban and middle/upper-middle class demographics) persisted in enforcing dangerous stereotypes around street-level users, which not only worked to further alienate these vulnerable users but also enforced a stricter approach to drug law-enforcement.

In our research we came across another insidious ‘myth’ regarding the link between foreign nationals living and working in township communities and those allegedly dealing and selling of whoonga to school children. In my article *Whoonga Wars: Part One* (Coppen 2014a), this point had been confirmed by Nomusa Shembe, a senior manager for a community crime-prevention initiative called Safer Cities, who had been assigned to look into the brewing confrontation in the Albert Park area between taxi owners and addicts—most of whom were assumed to be foreign nationals. Through Safer Cities, Shembe and her team had set up a project to profile the park’s inhabitants. Of the 254 people they interviewed, 90% turned out to be South African nationals—a majority of whom admitted to frequenting the park because it provided easy access to whoonga. While there may have been instances of foreign nationals dealing and using whoonga, it seemed this narrative was being exploited to justify growing xenophobic tensions in the city at the time.

During our interactions with members of Durban’s South African Police Service (SAPS), we were forced to reconsider, and even empathise, with their frustrations around the situation. Members of the police force, we were reminded, were simply carrying out commands—often against their better judgement. Actor-ethnographer Mthombeni remarked that through the data collection process she had developed a deeper empathy for women working in the police force. In an interview she claimed:

I have a friend who is a Metro policewoman. This project made me forge a friendship with her. I felt like I could understand what she was dealing with out there. So now when I see her on

the side of the street, I spend some time with her. I observe her working, I see how people react to her presence, the different ways they react by yelling ‘Just leave us alone’ or the male taxi drivers insulting her until she has to insult them back. It’s not easy, you have to be strong and fearless as a woman working in the police especially at Portia’s level. It’s a very difficult and demanding job. (M. Mthombeni 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

Similarly, members of the police are not trained in areas of mental health and addiction. The reprimanding of users requires a specialised skill-set that is far more in line with that of a social worker or mental-health practitioner than that of a member of the police force. The urgency of the situation was reiterated Dr Lochan Naidoo,²³ president of the International Narcotics Control Board of South Africa, when he claimed “government first needs to acknowledge that the treatment of heroin addiction is a specialised field that requires a highly trained task force to tackle it” (Coppen 2014b).

In our research into recovery statistics within Durban-based rehabilitation centres, a 2% success rate was sited across the existing institutions.²⁴ With limited beds and lengthy waiting lists, a user would have to wait several months to be enrolled in a rehabilitation program and even once admitted there was a very small likelihood that the patient would see the program through.

Community members—frustrated by local police’s ineffectiveness, and fed up with being repeatedly robbed by users—had taken to driving perpetrators out of the township and, on several occasions, set fire to their homes. In my interview with Dr Naidoo, he revealed to me that most addicts are kicked out of their homes and communities and are not welcome back. Once this had occurred, Dr Naidoo explained, it was near impossible to reintegrate users back into their original family units.²⁵

Over the research phase for *Ulwembu*, we had quickly come to understand that our theatre production would need to uncover the deeper and more systemic causes of addiction. For such

²³ As we expanded our research to include the likes of criminologists and addictionologists such as Dr Lochan Naidoo, we were introduced to a series of useful, if not contentious, counter-insights. As was often the case with researching and devising *Ulwembu*, everything we thought we knew about the situation would often have to be revised.

²⁴ These statistics had first been given to me by Nomusa Shembe and were included in the second part of my article, *Whoonga Wars: Part Two* (Coppen, 2014b). In my interview with Shembe, she had verified one of the most disheartening statistics around rehabilitation success rates. Of the twenty-five whoonga users referred to the recovery program at Durban’s Newlands Park Rehabilitation Centre, only five completed the process. Of the twenty-five admitted in the second session, only two lasted until its conclusion. Recovery statistics with heroin-based narcotics, I was told, lay in the dismal region of a two per cent success rate.

²⁵ The exile of users from local communities was further exacerbating the level of homelessness in the inner-city.

insights to be collated and communicated onwards to our audiences, it was essential we first understood the social conditions and contexts that contribute to drug use.

Pathways into drug use in Durban, we learnt, are mainly motivated by poverty, the erosion of personal or community identity and the lack of positive adult role models—especially the absence of father figures. Dr Naidoo verified these claims, stating, “[w]hat we fail to understand in this country, is that a large portion of people turning to whoonga do so because they have problem with abandonment and poor engagement with their families” (Coppen 2014b).

One of the biggest problem areas we could identify as a team was that very few informants across the board were willing to accept accountability or responsibility for the situation. Rather than forming networks to forge responses and solutions, blame was simply being deflected from one party to another. The ‘blame game’ between users, police, politicians, dealers, the media, city officials and suburbanites was severely hindering relief efforts and simply enforcing deeper divisions.²⁶

I have mentioned a range of insights from our early data collection process on *Ulwembu* as these would come to shape and determine the characters featured in our production as well as the advocacy strategy we would eventually form through the scripting of our play. I will examine how we worked with each of these points as a creative strategy more comprehensively in my analysis in Chapter 5.

After our four-month research period, we began to start thinking of the data in terms of a theatre production. How could the research we had gleaned be transformed into an impactful theatrical experience for local audiences? What genre or storytelling approach would best allow us to achieve this?

During our second phase of research, I had introduced the team to verbatim and documentary theatre approaches, as well as Augusto Boal’s Forum theatre approach. I presented ‘case study’ examples that cautioned against the didacticism that many Theatre for Development (TFD) approaches tended to favour.

²⁶ In my interview with Safer Cities Senior Manager Nomusa Shembe, she had claimed the “police tend to shrug this off as a social problem and we keep saying to them, ‘But what about the dealers?’ They respond by telling us they are on it, that there are intelligence units working on the ground, but I’m saying we need to start seeing the results, because until the root causes are tackled we will forever be going around in circles treating the symptoms” (Coppen 2014a).

We were all a little daunted by the challenges our task now entailed. There would be no use in us creating a harrowing, theatrical rendering of addiction that would leave our audience as hopeless and confused as when they first entered the theatre. Neither could our story profess to offer up quick-fix answers and solutions. How might we tread this tenuous line, honouring the reality of the situation, while instilling an inkling of hope in our audience?

To determine what we hoped our play would communicate to our audience, we set about listing associated words and ideas on a white board. In this session the words: *love, hope, community, responsibility, perseverance, patience, healing, prevention, humanity, self-worth, poverty and empathy*, spanned the expanse of our paper. When we began to individually prioritize these words, the word *empathy* remained at the top of our respective lists. What did empathy mean to us? How had the empathetic connections we had all forged with a range of informants transformed our own preconceived ideas around street-level drug addiction? How would our play subtly work to stimulate a similar set of responses and discoveries in our audiences? These were all questions that were posed and discussed at great length. As we grouped our interrelated ideas with the help of color-coded highlighters, we discussed the need for the theatrical experience we devise to, first and foremost, *empathetically* address misconceptions, turn stereotypes on their heads and offer audiences innovative and new ways of seeing and comprehending the issue.

Up until this point, I had deliberately resisted staging any of our ideas, believing that the longer our team handled and discussed the data, the more effortlessly the actor-ethnographers would be able to incorporate it into their improvisational tasks.

Improvisations

One of the earliest tasks I set for the actor-ethnographers was to identify a character from within their body of research and, using the verbatim testimonial as a basis, create and perform a five-minute monologue before the rest of the group. The performances delivered by each of the participants were very encouraging, with each member managing to capture their informant's nuances, mannerisms and gestures.²⁷ After the presentations of each monologue a discussion was held by the group. Some of the questions covered within this session included:

- *How did it feel playing a character you had encountered in real life?*
- *Could this be a character in our play?*

²⁷ In many instances the performers would emulate the informant's speech patterns—abiding by each ‘uhm’ and ‘ah’—as had been documented in the transcripts.

- *How does this character speak to or contradict our understanding of street-level drug addiction?*

From these exercises, we were able to reach the consensus that when our informants' stories/interviews were embodied and related in this personal way, it greatly enhances an audience members' empathetic experience of them. This is a point I will explore more fully in my Chapter 5 analysis around the pedagogic impacts of our project on both participants and audiences. While our play would go on to merge a range of genres and conventions, it became clear that the simplicity and power of these stories would need to remain at the heart of the approach. Out of this exercise, we would create a list of potential characters, noting indelible moments that had stood out for us. From this inventory, I was able to devise a series of improvisations whereby one actor's character was made to interact with that of another. Within these improvisations we attempted to answer the following questions:

- *How and where would these two meet?*
- *Could they be related? If so, how are they related?*
- *How does addiction either connect or disconnect them?*

It was through these ongoing improvisations that the participants began to flesh out their characters, often merging two scenarios or informant strands into one. These exercises had the tendency to reveal further gaps or questions in our research and, when such omissions emerged, participants were encouraged to check-in again with their informants. During this process, participants were transformed into 'authorities' on their characters, and when it came to scripting the play, each would advise on how their characters would behave and react in any given situation. While we were surrounded by a myriad of dramatic possibilities, we were yet to determine the central relationship or premise of the play. 'Is this,' we wondered, 'a mother/son story? A criminal/cop story? User/dealer? School teacher/student?' Could it be all or none of these?

1.2 Weaving Reality from Actuality

Story Development



The Ulwembu company meets for story workshops at the Denis Hurley Centre (Left) and Durban Botanic Gardens (Right), 2015. Photographs by Neil Coppen.

After generating character studies from our improvisations, we then embarked on an intensive two-day brainstorming session, relocating our workshops to the lawns of the Durban Botanic Gardens for some fresh air. For the next story/plotting exercise, I split the team into two groups. The object was to give each group the chance to brainstorm and devise a story synopsis that would be pitched to the other group at the end of the session.

Owing to the collaborative manner with which we had all been working, the two story lines presented—while posing different scenarios—possessed a remarkable range of similarities. As a dramaturge, it was however the ‘differences’ that tended to intrigue me the most. For example, in group A’s pitch, a policeman would be situated as the protagonist of the story, while in group B’s, this figure would be interchanged with a mother character fighting for her son’s life. This is where I was able to pose a range of provocative questions to the rest of the team.

- *What would happen if we absorbed both characters into one and changed the gender from policeman to policewoman? A policewoman who is also a mother, policing the whoonga crises in her community while unbeknown to her, her own son has begun using and dealing the substance?*
- *How would this complicate our story?*
- *How would it help us unearth and demonstrate the complexities we had uncovered in our research?*

Inevitably, each new question entailed a process of further excavation, as we sought to find real-life counter parts to further enrich our emerging composite ones.

Character Development

As we began to hone our narrative, we selected characters and ideas from both of these pitch sessions, experimenting further by switching characters' genders, statuses and even nationalities, all the while documenting what was emerging. Despite the harrowing subject matter, we all tended to leave these workshops energized by what was emerging. Our story line was starting to take shape. I will now reflect on how some of the characters in *Ulwembu* were crafted around the findings in our research, and what functions they were to ultimately serve in our play's 'messaging'.

Portia the Policewoman: The Merging of Two Conflicting Story Strands



Portia (Mpume Mthombeni) nurses her son Sipho (Zenzo Msomi) through an involuntary detox. The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

I have already mentioned how we had resolved to merge the character arcs of a policewoman and a mother attempting to wrestle her son from the grips of addiction. As Mthombeni was the most experienced actress in the group, we wanted to position her as our protagonist, and while the stoic single mother was a story we had encountered in our research, on its own it felt like an all-too-easy trope to hinge the story on.

Guided by Mthombeni—and with input from the rest of the group—we created a mother character named Portia who also happened to be an ambitious policewoman working in the streets of KwaMashu. It was decided that Portia's understanding of the drug she polices daily would transform when, midway through the play, she discovers that her son Sipho is both a user and runner of the substance. The merging of these two crucial strands of our research into a single character and the empathetic reversal Portia would experience mid-way through the play—would enable us to feature two prominent narratives that were useful in revealing the more layered and conflicting portrait of drug use in Durban. Once we had settled on the character of Portia, Mthombeni was able to hone her research down to focus exclusively on marginalised female perspectives within the Durban police force.

Bongani the 'Dealer' & the Subversion of Stereotypes



Whoonga dealer Bongani (Vumani Khumalo) accuses his runner Andile (Ngcebo Cele) of smoking his product. Bongani was based on the real life story of a whoonga dealer living in Umlazi. The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

Although each individual actor had developed a character of their own, when it came to streamlining the story into a script, certain casting changes would prove inevitable. It was only during the table readings of an early draft of the script, while witnessing Khumalo's powerful presence that it became clear that he was perfectly suited to play the character Bongani.

Although Bongani had emerged from various interviews with dealers around Durban, the character's real-life counterpart was identified by Mthombeni who, in the early stage of her research, began to interview a member of her community in Umlazi. Mthombeni had grown up in

the same neighbourhood as the informant and this familiarity enabled her to deepen her friendship with him while breaching difficult topics in the interview process. As Khumalo began to take ownership for the Bongani character, any further queries around his life story would be posed to Mthombeni who, after rehearsals, would revisit her neighbour and return the following day with further insights.

As with Portia and members of the police force, the character of Bongani enabled us to subvert stereotypes commonly associated with drug dealers.²⁸ The story Mthombeni had uncovered was the story of a twenty-something year-old man, arrested for a crime he had insisted he did not commit. As a result, he had spent four years in jail and upon release, was expected to resume responsibilities in his family home and provide for his whoonga-using sister and her four small children. With a criminal record and no employment prospects, the only viable career option open to him was selling whoonga. Furthermore, his time in prison had provided him with links to criminal networks that would enable him to access and sell the drug. The informant had explained to Mthombeni that his current vocation was his only means of ensuring his and his family's survival. Furthermore, the idea of Bongani's arrest enabled us to form a link between the character of Portia and Bongani, with a plot contrivance that revealed Portia as one of the officers complicit in his wrongful arrest.²⁹

²⁸ Popular culture often tends to demonise the ‘dealer’ as an unhinged, psychotic criminal, who relishes in the suffering of others.

²⁹ The intersecting lives of our characters were enhanced (and in some instances contrived) to more clearly illustrate how interconnected a community of people really are in these sorts of scenarios. A single action may well cause a ripple of consequences felt by- and impacting- a variety of role players.

Emmanuel: Questions around Xenophobia & Drug Use



Sandile Nxumalo (front) playing Mozambican character Emmanuel in a scene reflecting on the xenophobic attacks in Durban, in which the presence of other African nationals in South Africa was conflated with the whoonga crisis by the xenophobic attackers. The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

The development of the Mozambican character Emmanuel, who was played by Sandile Nxumalo, was a character who emerged somewhat later in our workshopping process. Our project rehearsal space was situated at the Denis Hurley Centre in the inner-city. While conducting one of our scripting workshops, we had suddenly found ourselves in the midst of xenophobic attacks, allegedly fuelled by a series of “highly irresponsible” (Ndou 2015) and derogatory remarks made by the Zulu King, King Goodwill Zwelithini. Below is a translated³⁰ extract of King Zwelethini’s speech, which was to find its way into our production:

KING GOODWILL: The time is now for us to have a say. I would like to ask the South African government to help us. We must deal with our own lice in our heads. Let’s take out the ants and leave them in the sun. We are asking that immigrants must take their bags and go where they come from. It is painful to me when I look at the country that our forefathers and thousands of people fought for become a criminal den. As I’m talking to you now, there are all sorts of things outside the stores, they brought untidiness to our streets, it’s filthy, you can’t even see what these stores were [with] foreigners in these areas.

³⁰ This translation, done by Bongi Ngobese, was taken from a YouTube recording of the speech.

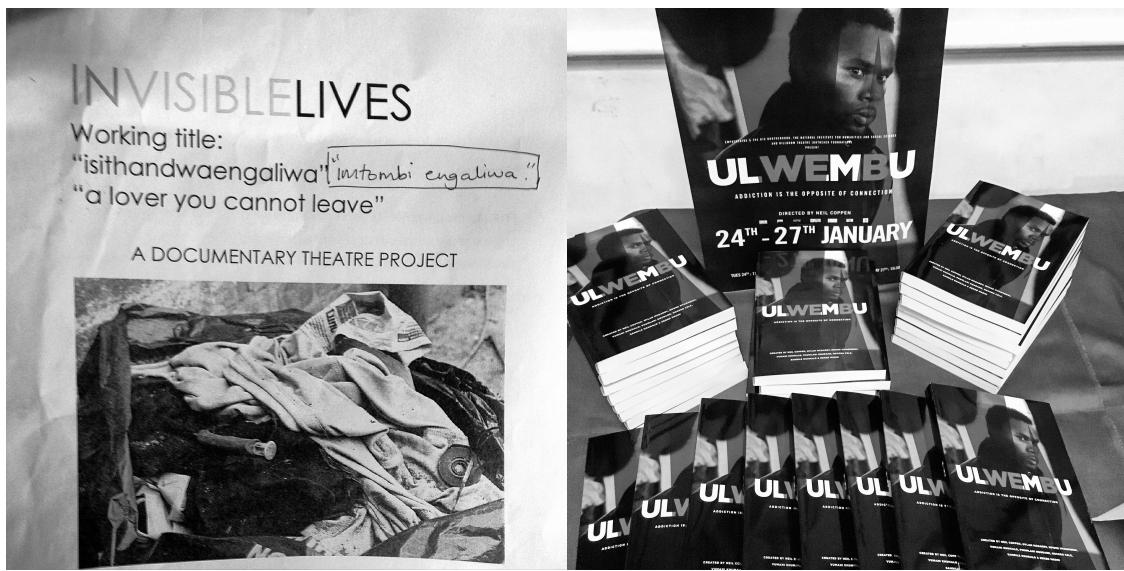
The resulting violence held the city hostage for two weeks, and often during our workshops, we would have to halt activities to allow for the roar of crowds and wailing of police sirens to pass outside. Earlier on in these workshops, we had been discussing the involvement of foreigners in the local drug trade, debating whether a foreign national should be our dealer character? Over this period, the Denis Hurley Centre had become a safe-haven for families from neighbouring African countries, seeking refuge from the violence. As our team began conversing with refugees at the centre, we were exposed to another complex aspect of street-level drug use in the city.³¹

With the recent turn in events, we agreed that the story we told would need to debunk blanket assumptions made around foreigners living in Durban. If we were to make the Emmanuel character a dealer, we would be inadvertently fuelling the xenophobic propaganda-machine wrecking chaos on the streets below. With such a narrative unfolding around us, we felt a renewed sense of responsibility to get our story and characters right. The xenophobic violence spread nationally and culminated in a Somali being set alight in his spaza shop, as well as the brutal public murder of Emmanuel Sithole³² from Mozambique. It was Sithole's story—as recounted by an interview with his wife in the *Sunday Times* newspaper—that would form the spine of the Emmanuel character in our play. After reading the interviews with Emmanuel's family, we decided to name our character after him, incorporating biographical elements of his story and combining them with the testimonials of foreign nationals we had met at the Denis Hurley centre. Over this period, we obtained recordings (and translations) of King Zwelithini's controversial remarks and resolved to use it in the play in Scene 18 (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: 45) where the Emmanuel character is seen to be listening to the speech relayed on his wireless radio.

³¹ Despite the fact that we found no evidence to support the common belief that the prevalence of drug trade in Durban was directly correlated to the presence of foreign nationals, it was the foreigners who were been driven out of the townships under the pretence that they were dealing whoonga to school children.

³² Our published play text of *Ulwembu* (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018) text is dedicated to the memory of Emmanuel Sithole.

Scripting



Left: An early version of the Ulwembu script that went under the working title 'Invisible Lives'. Right: Copies of Ulwembu as a self-published text on sale at the Hillbrow Theatre, before the text was published by Wits University Press in 2018. Photographs by Neil Coppen.

After months of developing character, plot, structure and story outcomes, we were ready to develop a preliminary rehearsal script. We had agreed to work from a script as opposed to workshopping the production in rehearsals and, as I was a playwright with experience in this field, I was asked by the team to transform our many ideas into a workable first draft.

As a team we had decided on the characters and direction our story would take, so my job was to honour the many contributions while ensuring our story encapsulated the ‘essence’ of our research. During the scripting process, I was also writing to accommodate the range of abilities of the actors in our team. When it came to the more experienced actors like Cele and Mthombeni, I knew I could push their characters into more challenging places, knowing that when it came to performances, they would be able to deliver with the necessary consistency and conviction. With the less experienced actors like Nxumalo and Ngubane, I was aware that they might struggle to deliver complex lengthy monologues and so their characters, while integral to the story, were woven into the narrative as supporting satellites around the more central, planetary protagonists.

Furthermore, I was juggling six characters and multiple story lines, which needed to somehow intersect over the course of our story. While many of these threads had been established in our brainstorming sessions, when it came to integrating them into the world of the play, certain interactions felt contrived and needed reworking.

While writing the first draft, it became evident that we were situating our narrative in the genre of a dramatic crime-thriller, with our story containing the genre's requisite plot-twists and turns.

Throughout my experience with working with community-based arts groups over the years, I had noticed that similar 'genre' exercises were the result of theatre-makers emulating the latest formulaic television crime dramas, as this was a medium that their audiences appeared most familiar with and receptive to. With this in mind, I believed that alluding to the formulas of this popular genre might serve as a useful—and even subversive way—of driving our own form of empathetic messaging in the theatrical format³³.

For the plotting of the play, I borrowed certain structural conventions that might be deemed more 'cinematic' than inherently theatrical. These, I worked into our text through interlinking mini-episodes, which, as the play progresses, begin to get shorter and shorter in duration. This editing effect worked to quicken pace and drive our narrative to its inexorable climax. Similarly, the manner in which Portia and Sizwe's story begins in the rehab meeting and flashes back to past events, can also be seen as a 'cinematic' device.

There was the obvious danger that a pacy, action-packed story might trivialise the subject-matter and my responsibility as a writer was to ensure that, while events moved engrossingly along, everything that emerged in the telling needed to be drawn from –and grounded in – our research. Although I have discussed the more 'cinematic' approaches I relied on in the scripting of *Ulwembu*, I should mention here that I was cautious of merely putting an episode of weekly television on the stage. How then did we create an impactful theatrical response in the dramatising of our data?

One of the most useful theatrical conventions we relied on in the writing and staging of our production was that of the monologue. The monologue is often employed across applied theatre models and was a convention I had often observed and used within devised community-based theatre practices. In *Ulwembu*, monologue was evident in the moments that Portia would break the fourth-wall and confide directly in the audience. Not only would this establish Portia as our protagonist but also situate her as the audience's confidant and guide. The use of monologue would also serve to remind our audience that they were very much in the world of a play with all

³³ Our thinking here was to use 'genre' to demonstrate to our audiences from the play's inception, that we would be rejecting the more predictable educational theatre approach towards the subject matter and, instead, be opting for an immersive storytelling vehicle through which to explore our chosen themes.

its accompanying conventions and more magical possibilities. The use of Portia's direct address was to occur at two crucial moments³⁴ in the play's action (see Appendix A for full script), with both monologues commencing with the phrase: *Have I lost my humanity? That's what you are thinking, isn't it?*

Throughout our research and improvisations, we had decided that a strict adherence to forms of theatre that relied on a series of talking-heads monologues would limit the dramatic potential of our storytelling. Rather, we hoped to reveal our narrative through the more urgent means of dramatic action and character interaction. Opting for this route would mean having to correlate the material and transform all passive past-tense reportage into active dialogue between the characters. What assisted me greatly during this phase of scripting was being able to refer to the character bibles, which each actor-ethnographer had developed. McGarry had grouped all of this research into a reference document, which I could easily refer to when needed. The actor-ethnographers had also developed an isiZulu urban-slang reference dictionary for me, which translated colloquial idioms from out the data³⁵. Having access to these many turns of phrases allowed me to contrive dialogue that felt authentic and 'true-to-life'.

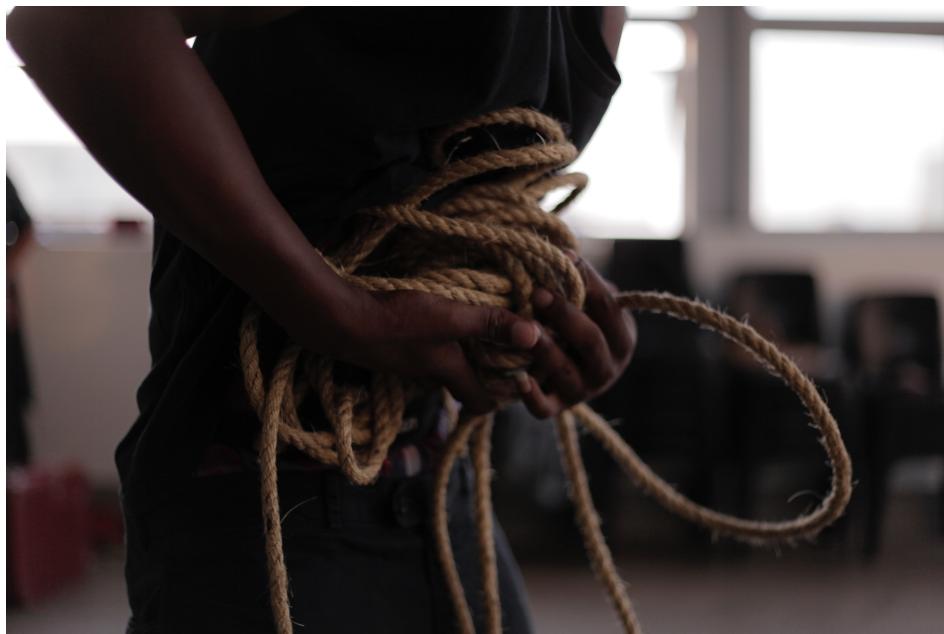
Furthermore, what I was committing to the page was simply a road map, which—with consistent input from the rest of the team—would grow throughout our rehearsals and performances. Once I had a workable first draft, we embarked on a period of extensive table-reads and discussions. In a relatively short space of time, we had moved through twenty-something drafts and rewrites of the text³⁶.

³⁴ The first use of the phrase is in Scene 1 (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: 7). Unfortunately, due to a publishing inconsistency picked up too late in the process, the second instance does not feature in Scene 22 of the same text published by Wits University Press. Please see script attached in the appendix.

³⁵ To cite a few examples: whoonga, we had discovered, was referred to by young men in KwaMashu as '*intombi engaliwa*', which translates as '*the lover you can never leave*'. This would later become a line in the play that Andile utters to Sipho when Sipho tells him he plans to turn his back on whoonga. During the groups research, whoonga was also often referred to by users as an '*eat some more*', which references the popular South African shortbread biscuit *Eet-Sum-Mor*. The comparison refers to the notion that once you start you cannot stop. Another word users relied on was '*isikhwebu*', which translates as '*mealie-meal*'. In this instance, it referred to the fact that anything can be sold for cash when one needs to stay high.

³⁶ Professor Monique Marks of the Urban Futures Centre (UFC) served as an 'outside' reader of our script and offered many invaluable critiques and suggestions around the direction our story was taking. Through Professor Marks and the UFC, we were able to constantly keep abreast of emerging research insights from her department and incorporate them into our play.

Rehearsals



Tangled ropes demonstrate the knotting of intestines and painful cramps endured by Andile (Ngcebo Cele). Rehearsal at the Denis Hurley Centre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Colwyn Thomas.

We had roughly three weeks designated for our rehearsals. At this point I would assume the role of director, with McGarry serving as an external eye. Although I was given the responsibility of guiding the team through the staging, I was careful not to let this function destabilise the creative decision-making and control we had shared up until this point.

Over the course of my career, I have always worked in rehearsals to devise a *central image*, whereby the many thematic threads of the narrative are encapsulated in a theatrical image of some sort. The name *Ulwembu*, which means ‘spider web’ in isiZulu, was chosen not just for its dramatic and perilous tenor, but as an apt image to capture the issues confronted in our play, which involved both the webs that ensnare us, and the potential for such webs to be a connective force, bridging gaps in our communities. Drawing insight from our spider web metaphor and referring to users’ testimonials around ‘*arosta*’—the name given to describe the painful withdrawal symptoms³⁷ including unbearable stomach pains that occur after smoking whoonga—we began to craft an image of connectivity and community, which would also suggest the crippling stomach cramps experienced by users.

³⁷ The ‘*arosta*’ pains, we had learnt over the data collection process, were caused by the use of Rattex, a rat poison containing strychnine, which is mixed into the heroin to prevent the user’s blood from clotting. Strychnine helps keep the blood flowing, preventing embolisms and ensuring the user lives to purchase the next hit (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: 62–63).

To achieve this image we began to experiment with two long ropes, held on either end by cast members, rising and ravelling around the belly of the narrating whoonga-using character. As the user's cramps worsened, the company would encircle the character, pulling more tightly on the ropes as they went³⁸. This image not only articulated the harrowing physiological sensation experienced by whoonga users, but also suggested an arachnid spinning its victim deeper into the threads of its web.

With the assistance from local Zulu poet Andile Mcanga, the actors composed a spoken-word isiZulu poem that would accompany this visual articulation of arosta. I include an extract below to demonstrate how the use of a heightened poetic text, alongside surreal, defamiliarising imagery worked to increase dramatic tension and externalise an experience that most users knew all too well, yet a large sector of our audiences would be completely unfamiliar with:

ANDILE: ... you think that the pain will just go away? No it will only get worse, this is an eat-sum-more!

ANDILE rises and begins to rap in Zulu. Music underscores the sequence.

ANDILE: Ebumnyameni ngibona ifu elimnyama, isi sidungekile kugijima inynkalankala, Kuthi Khala inhliziyo ibencane. Aliko icala lomzimba elingabuthwele ubunzima. Amathumbu ayadonseka Afuna ukuphuma kulo owami umqala ngithi qala amehlo athifilifili, angizifili kulo owami umziba usuphenduke isidindi. Ngizothi umangikhala ngikhale ngiziwe ubani, Ngoba ebumnyameni ngibona ifu elimnyama.³⁹

THE COMPANY, wearing balaclavas, slowly enters the stage and circle ominously around ANDILE, wrapping long pieces of rope around his belly before moving to positions on opposite corners of the stage. As their grip gradually tightens the ropes fasten painfully around ANDILE's stomach. SIPHO looks on.

ANDILE: [grimacing] And you find that all you can think about is intombi, intombi, intombi engaliwa. And soon you realise that nothing will make the pain go away except ... smoking more.

ANDILE takes the joint and inhales with desperation. The ropes relax and slacken around his stomach, falling to the ground. He is overcome with relief.

(Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: 27–28)

³⁸ This secondary image (to that of the spider web) was formed during this phase when the actor accidentally gathered the knot of ropes against his stomach in what appeared to be a tangled mess of intestines. This image echoed the words of a user who had articulated this image to us in his interview.

³⁹ Translated into English, this reads: *A dark cloud has settled over me. My intestines writhe and rise up through my neck. My vision blurs, obscured. I am no longer in my body. I melt into nothingness; I am brittle like grass in winter. If I cry who will hear me, a dark cloud has settled over me.*

The use of this arosta/rope image would be repeated twice in our production. The repetition of both images and phrases, I believe, can be an effective storytelling tool—with the audience's second experience of such an image being employed to either build upon or subvert the first. The rope image introduced in Scene 10, foreshadows the second time the audience will witness it in Scene 14, only then it is Sipho, and not Andile, in the position of the user debilitated by arosta pains.

In the latter scene, we again witness the company as rope-wranglers stalking their victim, the tension all the more palpable as the audience have already witnessed the repercussions experienced by Andile in the earlier scene. Thus the sense of dread increases, as do the stakes for Sipho, who in this scene is been bullied by Andile to pawn his father's wedding ring in order to pay for a hit of whoonga. It is a choice Sipho is adamant to avoid, yet once the ropes rise up around him, the audience know the game is up. Sipho's pain is going to get unbearable and, in the cruxes of arosta, he *must* and *will* do anything to escape the pain.

In Search of an Ending



Sipho (Zenzo Msomi) discovers the body of Andile (Ngcebo Cele) while members of the Metro police in Durban watch on. Performance at the Denis Hurley Centre, Durban, South Africa, 2015.
Photograph by Val Adamson.

During rehearsals and into the early stages of our performances, we had begun testing alternative endings for our story. We had discussed how it would be counterproductive if audiences left our production feeling too emotionally paralysed by the immensity of the problem to believe that they

could play a role in attempting to address it. How, we wondered, might the play accurately show the situation but at the same time offer other alternatives, possibilities or pathways out?

To learn more about these pathways we set a new research task, which involved the actor-ethnographers heading out into their communities and searching for inspiring narratives of users rehabilitating from whoonga use and successfully integrating back into society. Such narratives were, however, few and far between. Rather, we discovered that a range of approaches would need to be acknowledged as the ‘solution’.

Furthermore, through our research we uncovered a range of more idiosyncratic, local approaches including calling on traditional medicine and healers and sending users away from the pressures and temptations of urban life to recover with family members in rural areas. As a team we felt strongly about including and acknowledging these sorts of processes as opposed to merely the more accepted—yet largely ineffectual—Western ones.

During our research throughout the rehearsals—and guided by Professor Monique Marks from the UFC—one of the most transformative insights for our team arrived with the understanding, that prioritizing rehabilitation as a central agenda was not necessarily realistic nor viable, and that it would be more effective to examine pathways ‘out’ by promoting harm-reduction strategies as one of our play’s advocacy strategies.⁴⁰ Harm-reduction, we had learnt, entails rethinking age-old assumptions around drug use through the implementation of a series of like-minded strategies and interventions. In his paper *Toward a Psychology of Harm Reduction*, Robert J. MacCoun cites a few examples of related harm-reduction interventions which include “needle and syringe exchange, low-threshold methadone maintenance, ‘safeuse’ educational campaigns, and the use of treatment as an alternative to incarceration” (1998: 1199).

It was this body of research, and the means to more holistically understand and treat addiction, that would ultimately begin to shift our perspectives as empathetic researchers—as well as the ontology of our play.

⁴⁰ As we began reviewing reports of harm-reduction campaigns internationally, we came across a specialist whose central working premise revolved around the phrase ‘*Addiction is the opposite of connection*’. This same phrase would soon be adopted by our team as the tag line of our project.

1.3 Ulwembu in Action

Stage Design



Ropes wielded by the cast tighten around the waist of Sipho (Zenzo Msomi) helping us to reveal the side effects of whoonga known as ‘arosta.’ Denis Hurley Centre performance, Durban, South Africa, 2016. Photograph by Val Adamson.

In the published *Ulwembu* text (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: 2) our staging note reads:

The set consists of three distinct colours: black, white and red. The staging should work in traditional theatre spaces as well as within informal public spaces. The boundaries of the Ulwembu world are formed by six identical red chairs, four in each corner and the fifth and sixth on the left and right sides of the stage. A single hospital bed at the back of the stage stands with the headboard pointing upward so that the spring mesh resembles a barbed wire fence. Four red plastic crates (containing key props/wardrobe changes) sit beside the four corner chairs. All props and costumes are either black, red or white. Two parallel red ropes (each 5m long) are placed up and downstage. No wings are used during scenes. When cast members are not involved in a scene they occupy the four corner chairs, serving as silent witnesses to events.

When considering the stage aesthetic of *Ulwembu*, we had resolved to work minimally. The logistics of touring the production to a variety of venues, and with quick get-in times, encouraged us to make simple—and what I believe were effective—staging decisions. The set and props would need to pack-down into a few bags and fit into the boot of a vehicle. Less practical for touring purposes, but nevertheless essential to our staging concept, was the inclusion of a metal-

hospital bed. McGarry's decision to uniformly colour-code the on-stage world of *Ulwembu* through the use of red, black and white, aided our audiences in differentiating the realm of the play from the everyday one which might be occurring around it.⁴¹ When playing in established theatre spaces, we would utilize lighting and other theatrical tools to enhance the experience, yet when spaces couldn't offer such luxuries, the production was conceived to work as effectively without.

When performing in community-halls, classrooms, galleries and rehabilitation centres, we would seat the audience around the action (in a half-square configuration). This arrangement would intensify the audience's engagement and come to prove preferable over the proscenium arch disconnect. In the early phase of performances, our actors would exit the stage when not involved in the action, but I soon resolved to seat them in chairs demarcating the four-corners of the playing space and serving as silent witnesses' to events.

Performances



Left: *Ulwembu* performance at KZNSA gallery, Durban, South Africa, 2016. Right: *Ulwembu* performance at a centre hired for rehabilitation work in Edendale, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2017. Photographs by Neil Coppen.

Ulwembu premiered at the Wushwini Arts, Culture and Heritage Centre's *Annual Festival* on the 28th March 2015. After the premiere, we returned to the rehearsal room to trim the excessive running time and rework various aspects. While we anticipated the production would be embraced by local audiences and institutions we were taken aback by the sudden urgency and consistency of invitations for us to perform the production.

⁴¹ This would prove useful when we were performing in 'non-traditional' theatre spaces, with our play-world kept separate from the collision of everyday colours and objects found in busier public spaces.

Over the duration of its run (2014–2019), *Ulwembu* was performed at a range of drug policy conferences, community meetings, open-days, homeless shelters, rehabilitation centres, university theatres, schools and local theatre festivals. Its venues ranged from state-of-the-art theatres and suburban art-galleries, to office spaces, shelters, church halls and, on one occasion, a children's playground whereby the jungle-gym featuring a webbed climbing net, was improvised into the blocking of the play.

Over the course of its run, *Ulwembu* has gone on to reach tens of thousands of people across South Africa, often settling in for longer theatre runs at institutions like The Playhouse Loft Theatre (2016/2017) and UKZN Square Space Theatre (2015) in Durban, Hillbrow Theatre (2017) in Johannesburg and Theatre Arts Admin Collective (2018) in Cape Town.

One of the prerequisites of our project was that no audience member would ever be required to pay for their ticket; the play would need to be accessible and open to all.⁴² A generous grant from the Open Society Foundation (OSF) as well as additional support from the Urban Futures Centre (UFC) and the National Institute for Humanities and Social Science (NIHSS), enabled us to ensure that complimentary seating was available to anyone interested in attending but without the financial means to do so.

To cope with the demand, additional performances were frequently added to our schedules with the cast performing two to three shows a day.⁴³ During our company post-show check-in's, we would take the opportunity to discuss the feedback we were getting and often tweak the production to feature relevant new insights.

⁴² At The Playhouse Loft Theatre run in 2016, where *Ulwembu* was housed for a weeklong run, we witnessed the power of word-of-mouth, which brought members of the homeless population to the theatre from across the inner-city.

⁴³ During the first few runs of the production, we had overlooked the heavy emotional and psychological toll that would be felt by the cast while embodying these characters' day after day. This was exacerbated by the facilitated post-performance discussions whereby actors would have to absorb further harrowing personal accounts (sometimes from children as young as seven-years old), related to them by audience members. After witnessing the production, a concerned audience member, who worked as a trauma counsellor, generously offered his services, gratis, to the *Ulwembu* team.

Critical & Industry Reception



A newspaper headline on a street pole in Durban about *Ulwembu*, in the *Daily News*, 5 April 2016. Photograph by Illa Thompson.

Over its four-year lifespan, *Ulwembu* managed to garner major publicity in South African broadcast and print media, making it onto SABC news inserts, *Daily News* lamppost headlines⁴⁴ and front-page newspaper coverage.

The production was embraced across a variety of publications and reviewers. Johannesburg arts critic Robyn Sassen, commented somewhat problematically, in her view on how the production played against ‘convention’ by merging social justice concerns with a more ‘mainstream’ theatre aesthetic. She wrote in her review:

Directed with a muscularity and sense of conviction, this beautifully researched and deeply felt performance takes advocacy theatre which talks to the man on the street to a level that is considerably deeper and theatrically more developed than convention dictates. Normally, you might hear the words ‘community theatre’ or ‘advocacy drama’ and shrink away⁴⁵ from the product’s aesthetic value, understanding it to be a mere one-dimensional extrapolation of bald

⁴⁴ The headlines for the *Daily News* on 5 April 2016 announced, “ACTORS GO UNDERCOVER FOR DRUG PLAY”.

⁴⁵ Sassen’s comments (the use of ‘shrink away’) in her *Ulwembu* review suggests a lowering of more ‘mainstream’ expectations when it comes to attending advocacy drama or community-based theatre. Such views illustrate the more problematic perceptions around ‘community theatre’, as discussed in Chapter 2 with reference to Prentki’s ‘Unapplied Theatre’ and Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* (Prentki 2015)—frustrations that The Big Brotherhood performers allude to later in my analysis in Chapter 5.

ideologies. But the adjective ‘mere’ doesn’t fit in any understanding of this poignant and hard hitting play. (Sassen 2017)

Commenting on the productions divergence from more predictable educational theatre approaches, Durban artSMart theatre reviewer Keith Millar claimed:

[T]his production is not a stereotyped ‘say no to drugs’ play. It is a deeply-researched theatre project which is authentic, insightful, razor-sharp and frighteningly real. In fact, I would go as far as to say that this is educational theatre at its zenith. (Millar 2016)

While Journalist Lloyd Geyde wrote in his *City Press* article titled *Theatre's war against whoonga*,

Ulwembu is a gritty urban nightmare, a place where characters mostly on the margins of society eke out lives, rather than live them. It is a story about addiction, featuring drug users, runners and dealers, desperate mothers, absent fathers, helpless and vindictive police, overworked social workers, enraged communities, fearless xenophobes and foreign nationals living in fear. It effortlessly illustrates how everyone in a community is drawn into the web of whoonga. (Geyde 2016)

Geyde’s two-page article, which centred around the making and reception of our production, was published in the *Sunday Arts* supplement of the *City Press* (2016) and went on to win him a silver medal at the 2016 *South Africa Arts Journalism Awards*. In the same year, our production would go on to win six of the thirteen categories it was nominated for at the 2016 *Durban Theatre Awards*—including *Best Script*, *Best Newcomer*, *Best Director* and *Best Actress*. It would be the first time in the careers of The Big Brotherhood performers that they would be acknowledged, let alone awarded, on this ‘industry’ platform. The production was also named *Best Production of 2018* by Cape Town’s Theatre Arts Admin Collective. In 2018, the play text was published by Wits University Press (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018) and is currently available for study in schools and universities, both locally and internationally.

CHAPTER 2: Exploring the Terrains of ‘Purpose Driven’ Theatre Practices



Zenzo Msomi (who plays Sipho) in rehearsal with Mpume Mthombeni (who plays his mother, Portia) at the Denis Hurley Centre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Colwyn Thomas.

I have described both our research-based theatre project *Ulwembu* and Empatheatre methodology as ‘syncretic’ (Kamlongera in Mda 1993). To better grasp my use of this term in relation to our process, I will first set out to define and discuss a variety of theatrical approaches that either reiterate or dispute the many lessons we were able to—sometimes intuitively—ascertain over the course of our own social learning process. In this chapter, I will also analyse these approaches related to the ethical concerns of research-based theatre practices. Thereafter, in Chapter 3, I will look at the varying methodological approaches of research-based theatre forms as well as the outside facilitators’ (Prentki 2015) roles and functions in such processes, similar to those I served on *Ulwembu*.

Before launching into these discussions, it is necessary to provide an overview of the research-based theatre making processes that have significant crossovers with the form I have termed Empatheatre.

2.1 Theatre Activism: Applied or Purpose Driven?

At a theatre activism conference, I attended in Haga-Haga in the Eastern Cape in 2018, a range of practitioners and theatre activists from across South Africa were asked by the convening facilitator if they considered the work they do as ‘applied’. Most of the group confessed that they found the term prescriptive and limiting. Perhaps, these responses followed in the wake of associations formed between ‘applied theatre’ (AT) and the patronising forms of ‘Edutainment’ inflicted upon us during high school. Here, I refer to the self-conscious ‘*Say No to Drugs*’ and ‘*Let’s Talk About Sex*’ plays that revealed themselves to be hopelessly out of tune with the concerns and realities of our more ‘streetwise’ teenage-selves. AT was also a term that some of my colleagues associated with some the more problematic Theatre for Development (TFD) projects that are occasionally rolled out across ‘rural’ South Africa under faux ‘participatory’ claims. Others in the group saw the title of AT as one that makes an unnecessary—and often condescending distinction—between mainstream and ‘other *lesser*’ theatre forms. These responses, points I will return to in my analysis in Chapter 5, relate to AT’s association with ‘didactic’ and issue-driven community-based theatre forms. However, in the discussion which ensued at this same meeting, it was acknowledged that the term AT encompasses a broad scope of practice and, while some may be cautious of the term, acknowledgement must be made of the many extraordinary projects and practitioners who work under this umbrella and continue to develop methods and processes that mitigate against the less admirable, less participatory practices and outcomes.

What then constitutes a piece of applied theatre? The term, in its broadest sense, can be said to delineate a range of ‘pedagogic’ theatrical approaches. Determining which of these approaches belong under this umbrella is often unclear. Academic Tim Prentki (2015) cites a range of movements and approaches, some of which include:

Community theatre, community performances, theatre for social change, interventionist theatre, drama and education, theatre for integrated rural development, participatory performance practices, process drama/theatre, prison theatre, theatre in health/education, theatre for development, theatre for conflict resolution/reconciliation, reminiscence theatre.
(Prentki 2015: 14–15)

Prentki’s list is, however, far from exhaustive and with frequent innovations emerging in the fields of AT, such an inventory requires constant revision. Given this, I have come to favour research-based theatre practitioner Jim Mienczakowski’s (2009: 327) use of the phrase “purpose driven” theatre in that it delineates a form of theatre that is conceived with a clear intention or

‘purpose’ in mind. Phillip Taylor (2003) expands on this idea, claiming a piece of theatre may be considered ‘applied’ if spectators and participants are located by the process in “direct and immediate situations where they can witness, confront and de-construct aspects of their own and others’ actions” (2003: 7). This was true of *Ulwembu*, where the content and messaging of our production was not derived from health pamphlets or PowerPoint-presentations on the issue but rather understood in concert with the very people whom the issue impacted directly.

I acknowledge that Mienczakowski’s use of ‘purpose driven’ appears to be open to as much ambiguity and misinterpretation as those that befall the definitions of AT. One could argue that all theatre considers itself ‘purposeful’ in some way or other, even if that ‘purpose’ entails offering audiences a few hours of unadulterated escapism. Similarly, while the ‘purpose’ of a theatre production swaying consumers outside a taxi-rank to invest in a new washing powder or funeral policy is not quite the same as the one that encourages audiences to practice safer sex, eat healthily and know their status—can this not still be considered a ‘purpose’ of some sort or other?

Expanding on his use of ‘purpose’, Mienczakowski claims the term alludes to the practitioners and mediums “overriding intent to change the lives and understandings of … audiences and communities”⁴⁶ (2009: 324–325), a qualification that is rephrased by Prentki as an AT project’s “transformational intention” (2001: 120). In the case of *Ulwembu*, the intention behind the productions was to offer audiences—and our team members—the space to empathetically reimagine and re-evaluate their misconceptions and prejudices around street-level drug addiction.

For Prentki, a more successful means to resolve the dispute around what is and is not ‘applied’ or ‘purpose driven’ theatre is to first attempt to arrive at a comparative definition for “Unapplied Theatre” (2015: 7). ‘Unapplied Theatre’, Prentki claims, refers to what he ironically terms “pure” (*ibid.*) theatre—alluding to the more traditional, institutionalised theatrical approaches he describes as “unsullied by contact with the vagaries and ambiguities of the world beyond the controlled environment of the formal theatre space” (*ibid.*).

Another prevalent feature of applied theatre is the lack of reliance on bourgeois playhouses where more traditional or ‘pure’ forms of theatrical storytelling tend to locate themselves. Applied theatre’s ethos of delivering theatre to the people should be understood as an expansion of Bertolt

⁴⁶ The term ‘change’ in Mienczakowski’s definition clearly refers to the transformative, emancipatory form and not the consumer-based, behavioural change that many advertisers, NGOs and governmental agencies (Kerr 1995) have come to utilise in more questionable theatrical ‘outreach’ processes.

Brecht's *Lehrstücke* (Prentki 2015: 17), whereby the playwright relocated his performances away from elite playing spaces to more community-orientated public spaces.

From this discussion, we can determine that *Ulwembu*'s "overriding intent" (Mienczakowski 2009: 324–325) or "transformational intention" (2001: 120) to challenge prejudices and misconceptions around street-level drug use, situates our project firmly in the shades of the 'applied' or 'purpose driven' umbrella. This is also because of the manner in which our process was conceived to locate practitioners and spectators in "direct and immediate situations" (Taylor 2003: 7), enabling them to further reflect upon and debate insights in post-performance discussions. *Ulwembu*'s touring of schools, community halls, parks, hospitals and rehabilitation centres echoes the Brechtian and applied theatre ethos—that theatre processes should be placed firmly "in the hands of those whom ... were most likely to use it to support their own and society's development" (Prentki 2015: 17).

As with a variety of research-based theatre approaches, which I will examine in a moment, I cannot discuss the 'syncretic' qualities of *Ulwembu*—and my own positioning on the project—without locating it in the context of—and in relation to—Theatre for Development (TFD) practices. The participatory, grounded theoretical process behind the researching and devising of *Ulwembu* tends to echo many of the critical pedagogic practices (Freire 1996; Boal 2008) that have merged into the foundational approaches of most contemporary TFD projects. These processes are understood as exploratory and entail co-investigators—with the aid of a facilitator figure—embarking on a collective quest for knowledge.

Of central importance to TFD approaches, and of relevance to this thesis, is that theatrical outcomes are mostly guided and determined by the community and practitioners participating in the project. Prentki (2001) reiterates this point by insisting that stories enacted on TFD stages (and indeed on all stages that consider themselves 'purpose driven') need to be "firmly rooted in the cultural soil of the particular community", grappling directly with the "lived realities of the community in question" (2001: 120). The success of this immersion relies largely on the facilitator's intentions to 'empower' participants (and audiences) to reach a raised form of consciousness otherwise known as 'conscientisation'—originally '*conscientização*'—(Freire 1996). In a later discussion in Chapter 3, I will look more closely at conscientisation as a theatrical objective, as well as the ideal positioning of a facilitator in applied theatre processes to achieve this.

2.2 The Quest for Ontological Authority: An Overview of Research-based Theatre Approaches

I have described the devising of *Ulwembu* as a syncretic, transdisciplinary (McGregor 2015) and action-led (Rowe 2014) process, which was intuitively formed and tested by our team over the duration of the project. As discussed, collectively, the core *Ulwembu* team and the professional and institutional partners we were able to draw on came from a wide-range of backgrounds and disciplines. This transdisciplinary approach—which involves the merging of disciplines and practices—is a powerful means to “generate knowledge that respects as many perspectives as are needed to deal with the complexity of human problems” (McGregor, 2015) and allowed us to draw on knowledge from the humanities, sciences as well as civil society, in response to the whoonga crisis in KwaZulu-Natal.

As detailed in Chapter 1, we did not commence the process by isolating a single approach but rather let our inquiry guide and determine whom our collaborators and informants would be and the direction the creative process would take. This approach echoes that of the action-led research model, which is described as:

[A] participatory and reflexive practice that involves researchers and participants in a process of co-inquiry to address identified problems, create change or explore opportunities. (Rowe 2014: 2)

Before formulating a creative response to street-level drug addiction, the *Ulwembu* team of actor-ethnographers headed out into their respective communities, interviewing informants including whoonga users, neighbours, family members, community leaders, teachers, members of the police force, social workers and city officials. From the transcriptions and translations that emerged from these interviews, characters and situations were later woven into a theatrical text, which we hoped would speak to the complexity of our findings.

The literature that most echoes our approach is that stemming from a branch of ‘purpose driven’ theatre-making known as ‘*research-based theatre*’ or ‘*ethnotheatre*’ (Saldaña 1998;

Mienczakowski, 1997)⁴⁷. Research-based theatre practitioner and academic Johnny Saldaña provides us with the following definition of the ethnotheatre approach:

Generally, ethnotheatre employs traditional techniques of formal theatre production to mount a performance event whose characters are actual research participants portrayed by actors (though in some variations, the research participants themselves may be used⁴⁸). Significant selections from interview transcripts and field notes of a particular study are carefully arranged, scripted, and dramatised for an audience to enhance their understanding of the participants' lives through visual representation and emotional engagement. (Saldaña 1998 181–182)

Why Theatre? Why Ethnotheatre?

Ethnotheatre practitioner Johnny Saldaña warns of the tendency to use the ethnotheatre approach more for its ‘novelty’ factor than its unique ability to bring research “credibly, vividly, and persuasively” (2003: 218) to life. When instigating a project that sets out to make research more accessible in the public domain, one of the fundamental choices practitioners must make relates to the particular medium or approach adopted. By this I mean the practitioner must understand why they choose a particular medium or approach over a variety of alternate and equally effective formats, such as “traditional written report, video documentary, photographic portfolio, Web site, poetry, dance, music, [and] visual art installation” (Saldaña 2003: 220).

In the case of *Ulwembu*, our choice of theatre as our mode of presentation was related to the fact that our team had prior experience working with this medium and was interested in formulating a ‘purpose driven’ *theatrical* response to the whoonga crises in KwaZulu-Natal. Further, in agreement with Gallagher who claims that the medium’s “economy of expression” (2007: 106) and “embodied character” (*ibid.*) are key contributors in affording audiences “a complex way to ‘see’ research” (*ibid.*: 109), during the touring of our production, I was able to witness how our

⁴⁷ To clarify, research-based theatre approaches, whilst sharing many similarities with practice-led research (Smith & Dean 2009), are not necessarily interchangeable terms. Practice-led research more broadly examines the artistic processes behind the devising and making of an artistic product and may refer to artistic disciplines including dance, visual art and music, while research-based theatre is considered a methodological approach that occurs when theatre practitioners are tasked with “theatricaliz[ing] research data” (Belliveau 2015b).

⁴⁸ In the case of *Ulwembu*, the team of collaborating actors first worked as ethnographers, identifying informants and collecting the data, and then moved into the role of co-creating and portraying these characters on stage as actors.

research-based theatre approach did offer an innovative alternative to the more predictable modes of research dissemination.

One of the foremost reasons why I believe the medium of research-based theatre may be preferable to that of, say, documentary film is that the format of documentary film relies on the original subject narrating their story to the camera, while in a staged production it is accepted that actors will portray the characters⁴⁹. When it comes to addressing sensitive issues, the use of actors portraying informants can be said to grant the original interviewee a degree of anonymity and distance. Speaking about her play *Cruising* (2006), verbatim theatre-maker Alecky Blythe elaborates on such advantages when she argues that verbatim theatre “allows interviewees to share highly personal information while offering a degree of protection for their identities” (Wake 2013: 330). In the case of *Ulwembu*, such ‘anonymity’ enabled vulnerable informants, such as drug users and dealers, to speak openly and freely with our actor-ethnographers, without the fear of later being named and further maligned.

In his paper *Theatre of Change*, Mienczakowski (1997:163-170) cites an array of advantageous outcomes that may emerge through the use of this approach—three of which I have narrowed down. These three points will be revisited again in greater detail in my analysis in Chapter 5, where I will refer back to them to examine the more ‘macro’ impacts of *Ulwembu*. They are:

- 1.) Ethnotheatre’s ability to heighten “the visibility of marginalized and silenced voices”.
- 2.) Ethnotheatre’s capacity to subvert and challenge media sensationalism and myth-making.
- 3.) Ethnotheatre is often used as an innovative means to ‘de-academises’ traditional research reports.

Approaches of Ethnotheatre and Other Research-based Theatre Forms

Returning to my use of the word ‘*syncretic*’ in describing our team’s approach, I should emphasise that while the ethnotheatre approach possesses the most similarities to *Ulwembu*’s creative process, further insights and lessons are drawn from the related research-based theatre forms of documentary, verbatim and testimonial theatre. As with the term ‘applied theatre’, ‘research-based theatre’ is considered an *umbrella* term, under which a variety of theatrical

⁴⁹ A counter consideration here is that the theatrical format relies on a cast of actors to bring a story to life. The use of performers, over filmed documentation, has obvious financial and distributive implications in the sense that a company of actors needs to be financially reimbursed for their time and work. Such costs—unless the production is heavily funded—hinder the project’s ability to reach as wide an audience as possible. Comparatively, it is not hard to see why documentary film, beyond the initial monetary outlay to research, film and edit, is far more economical, seldom incurring further costs to screen and disseminate onwards.

approaches or sub-categories fall. Some of these include verbatim theatre (Cantrell 2012), testimonial theatre (Farber 2008), documentary theatre (Hughes 2007), performed research, performance ethnography (Saldaña 1998) and ethnotheatre/ethnodrama (Belliveau 2015b).

In this discussion, I will offer a comparative overview of these research-based theatre forms, focusing on their differences and similarities, and how these might relate back to our own learning on *Ulwembu*. To begin, I will examine the differences between documentary theatre (which often includes verbatim theatre approaches), testimonial theatre and ethnotheatre, and how practitioners from these fields view their responsibilities when it comes to theatricalising research.

Lecturer in Drama at the University of York, Tom Cantrell (2012) defines verbatim theatre as:

[A] form of documentary theatre which is based on the spoken words of real people. In its strictest form, verbatim theatre-makers use real people's words exclusively, and take this testimony from recorded interviews. However, the form is more malleable than this, and writers have frequently combined interview material with invented scenes, or used reported and remembered speech rather than recorded testimony.

As with verbatim theatre and ethnotheatre, testimonial theatre sets out to translate the ‘spoken words’ and recollections of informants into a play text, yet the fundamental difference behind the testimonial approach is that these ‘words’ are not articulated by outside actors (as was the case with *Ulwembu*) but by the original narrating subjects. Testimonial practitioner Yael Farber, reflecting on her collaborations in this field, goes on to claim that this approach is “wrought from people bearing witness to their own stories through remembrance and words” (Farber 2008: 10) and that such remembrances must be grounded by the original narrator appearing on stage to convey their own recollections.

In her introduction to Farber’s book *Theatre as Witness – Three testimonial plays from South Africa* (2008), Amanda Stuart Fisher clarifies the distinctions and differences between the related forms of verbatim and documentary theatre, when she writes:

Unlike verbatim or documentary theatre, these stories are not drawn from reportage or documentary evidence. Instead Farber harnesses the power of poetry, metaphor and song to craft together theatre texts that bear witness to actual lived experience. The authenticity of these stories rests less on their claim to factual veracity, instead it emerges from the ‘testimonial truth’ of the witness presented before us. (Farber, 2008: 10)

Where ‘ethnotheatre’ may be likened to the testimonial approach—and differs from other research-based theatre methodologies—is that while remaining true to the “essence or spirit” (Belliveau 2015b) of the research, certain respectful creative liberties⁵⁰ are often taken in dramatising the data for the stage. In examining the discrepancies between verbatim and other research-based drama approaches, Liehr, Morris, Leavitt and Takahashi (2013) claim that the fundamental difference resides with what they term their ‘fidelity’ to the original research data. A verbatim play text is largely considered to contain “the exact words of the research participants organized to express context and plot” (Liehr, Morris, Leavitt & Takahashi 2013: 162) while a research-based or documentary theatre text suggests an “interpretation based on identified themes” (*ibid.*: 163).

According to verbatim theatre maker Robin Soans, “the reproduction of the ‘real’ voice on stage” (Hughes 2007: 152) is deemed an integral factor in the theatrical contract that exists between audience and theatre-maker. A fidelity to the original source text, Soans claims, assists in removing a “layer of cynicism” (*ibid.*) which audiences are inclined to enter into more traditional theatre experiences with. The power then of the verbatim methodology appears to lie in what Soto-Morettini calls the medium’s “ontological authority” (*ibid.*), something an audience experiences when witnessing texts that are confirmed to have once “existed in the realm of the real” (*ibid.*).

One of the complexities that seem to arise with the use of the verbatim methodology (in its most inflexible format) is that practitioners are understood to enter into an implicit ‘contract’ with audiences, an agreement which pertains to the ‘veracity’ of the material depicted on the stage. What this contract fails to acknowledge, however, is that an inevitable degree of creative intervention and restructuring has taken place in the preparing of the material for the stage. What audiences are witnessing is not necessarily a ‘word-for word’, ‘slice of life’ account as much as it is a theatrical reconstruction and interpretation of events. This is articulated by Hughes (2007) when she claims that a skillful-function of these playwrights, entails the editing, restructuring and contrasting of research data to form a dramatically satisfying text. However, such ‘choices’, Hughes reminds us, are “imagined, interpreted, constructed and selective” (2007: 153).

In his earlier definition of verbatim theatre, Cantrell (2012) admits that the form may be considered more “malleable” than most practitioners are prepared to give it credit for, and a

⁵⁰ I will look more closely at this contentious area in my discussion titled *Methods and Methodologies of Research-based Theatre*.

slavish adherence to the original material is not always a prerequisite of the process. This sort of claim opens up a range of heated discussions from practitioners such as verbatim theatre-maker Nicolas Kent who describes his theatrical approach “as a journalistic response to what is happening” (Hammond & Steward 2008: 165) and remains sceptical of verbatim practitioners taking liberties with data in a way that is not deemed “absolutely truthful” (Hammond & Steward 2008: 152) to the source material.

In making such claims, I believe Kent fails to acknowledge that even the most rigorous forms of journalism are inevitably filtered through the subjective lens of the reporter and newsroom editor. Furthermore, research informants, with the awareness that their narratives will re-appear in the public domain, are engaged in a selective act of representing their stories to the researcher. While I agree that sensitivity, reflection and participation are necessary to minimise extractive and exploitative processes, the quest for ‘absolute truth’ (be it in the fields of research-based theatre or journalism) might be an unrealistic and even ‘mythical’ outcome to hope for in the first place⁵¹.

For this reason, I support Gallagher’s (2007) more sensible acknowledgements around how the ethnotheatre playwright is often required to contrive “necessary fictions” (Gallagher 2007: 116) for the stage. These fictions, Gallagher renames “imaginative leap-offs” and describes them somewhat affectionately as: “respectful forgeries and faithful betrayals” (*ibid.*: 115–116). Such ‘forgeries’, Gallagher claims, are often useful in drawing our attention to “the role that perspectivism and interpretation, indeed fiction, play in all qualitative inquiry” (*ibid.*: 115).

I should acknowledge that *Ulwembu* was eventually devised with an advocacy strategy in mind and specifically (as described in Chapter 1) one that aligned to a harm-reduction approach to drug use. This emerged through our team defining what ‘purpose’ we wanted our production to serve once disseminated in the public domain. The creative problem solving inherent throughout our processes meant we were constantly applying and testing a variety of research-based theatre approaches to arrive at the most impactful dramatic solutions⁵². We were adamant that our production *feel* ‘true-to-life’, and thus were aware that approaching the subject matter from a

⁵¹ The above point is illustrated more clearly in Farber’s testimonial theatre approach, an approach that may be considered the closest one can come to representing ‘truth’ on the stage. While the use of the original research informants on stage, narrating and re-enacting their *own* personal stories may go a long way enforce Soto-Morettini’s (cited in Hughes 2007: 152) ideas around ‘ontological authority’, Farber acknowledges that the experience itself has been interpreted through the lens of the collaborating theatre-maker.

⁵² The actor-ethnographers’ ‘proximity’ to the subjects they portrayed in *Ulwembu* also tended to vary. In some scenarios, characters were drawn from close relatives, neighbours and friends and integrated with their own personal experiences (echoing aspects of Farber’s testimonial approach), while in other instances a greater distance was evident between the realities of the original informant/s and what was portrayed by the actors.

strictly academic perspective would have defeated our hopes of emotionally and empathetically engaging our audiences.

Over certain scenes in *Ulwembu*, verbatim approaches were adhered to more stringently than in others, with parts of the text functioning as articulated ‘word-for-word’ accounts from our initial informants. In other scenarios, an ethnotheatre or documentary approach was implemented whereby an “interpretation based on identified themes” (Liehr *et al.* 2013: 162) was undertaken and sections of interviews transformed into more active forms of dialogue. As research-based theatre practitioners, we recognised that while it is integral to honour the narratives of our research informants, such pursuits need to be balanced with the medium’s rich, imaginative pedagogical potential.

Beyond ‘truth-telling’ dilemmas, a critical line of inquiry implicit throughout my discussion and pursued later in my analysis, relates to whether the storytelling strategy ultimately chosen was considered the most optimal one by the collaborating participants on the team. Related to this is how we ensured that the strategy of some of our company’s members did not work to silence that of other members and what mechanisms we employed to ensure that, on the whole, the advocacy strategy of *Ulwembu* aligned to most of the group’s desire for ‘change’.

CHAPTER 3: Methods & Methodologies of Research-based Theatre – the Example of *Ulwembu*



Portia (Mpume Mthombeni) attempts to nurse her son Sipho (Zenzo Msomi) through an involuntary detox. The most harrowing discovery in our research is the desperation families face in trying to detox their children from whoonga, as well as keep them safe from violent community retribution. The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

In this chapter, I begin with a section that offers my rationale for choosing the broad methodological approach adopted for this study—called the ‘hermeneutic spiral’ or web—to offer some sense of how I developed a research lens in relation to our production of *Ulwembu*. I will then focus on the specific methodological concerns and subsequent methods used in this study. To unpack my role and responsibilities as dramaturge and “composite playwright” (Lea 2012: 62) on *Ulwembu*, I will begin by exploring a range of research-based methodologies that span the complex and fraught terrains that one is confronted with when theatricalising research. From the literature, I will be focusing on processes that tend to echo (or contest) my own learnings in these fields during the devising of *Ulwembu*. Many of the insights from this chapter will be further analysed in depth in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

3.1 Navigating the Web

Practice-Led Research or Research-Led Practice?

As *Ulwembu* was a largely intuitive and constantly evolving collaborative process between multiple stakeholders that ran over the course of five years, the research and insights that have emerged from this process tend to span multiple fields and disciplines.

In attempting to order my findings throughout this thesis, I have found the insights of Smith and Dean (2009) particularly useful. Smith and Dean (2009) explore practice-led research, and research-led practice in the creative arts, and examine how, in the art-making process and the subsequent writing up of one's findings, these two alternate methods of research are often "interwoven in an iterative cyclic web" (2009: 2). They elaborate:

Both practice-led research and research-led practice are often carried out collaboratively. Creative practitioners sometimes join forces with a researcher more specifically orientated towards basic research work. Occasionally, one or a group of collaborators, may be active in both creative work and research, but more often several people with differentiated roles interact effectively with each other. (Smith & Dean 2009: 8)

The devising of *Ulwembu* primarily involved a group of theatre practitioners working first as researchers and ethnographers before transforming the data into a 'purpose driven' (Mienczakowski 2009: 327) theatrical experience. This process was undertaken in close collaboration with sociologist McGarry and later by aligning our outcomes with the work of Professor Monique Marks and her team at the Urban Futures Centre and Raymond Perrier at the Denis Hurley Centre. This transdisciplinary approach between theatre-making and more traditional forms of research, was ultimately beneficial to all parties. Emerging research in the field fuelled our strategies around the advocacy potential and the dissemination of our production, and then, later, the feedback and responses the production received further enriched existing research around whoonga use in Durban.

For clarity's sake, I will adopt Smith and Dean's (2009) more expansive definition of practice-led research, whereby the term is considered to encompass both the creative process behind the devising and making of the production—treating the artistic process and product as a form of research in itself—while also factoring in the 'research-led practice' component, which includes post-process findings, reflections and insights which our creative process and production was able to generate.

The Hermeneutic Spiral – or Web

To structure the many layers of insights that have emerged from our practice-led research-based theatre process, I will be adapting a qualitative approach known as the ‘*hermeneutic spiral*’ (Paterson & Higgs 2005). According to academic and theatre-maker Melissa Trimingham, this ‘spiral’ is a methodology that enables artistic practitioners to structure their findings—insights that often tend to emerge out of a creative process as “disorderly” (2002: 55)—in a clear but flexible framework. She contends that the spiral is a model “that can account for such change in theory in relation to the on-going practice, whilst also successfully defining the area of research, and preventing it from spiralling out of control” (*ibid*: 56).

The hermeneutic spiral is helpful in exploring my own positioning in the *Ulwembu* process as an instigator, co-collaborator and director on the project, as well as the researcher and author of this dissertation. Trimingham (2002: 52) describes how the use of the ‘hermeneutic spiral’ acknowledges these dual complexities, claiming that the approach takes into account a positioning such as mine, where the creative practitioner is situated inside the world of the research, a position that ultimately affects the findings or outcomes of the research itself.

This interpretative ‘spiral’ is useful in exploring *Ulwembu* in that it acknowledges that the creative process does not follow an orderly, linear trajectory and allows for change to occur within its parameters. This is succinctly articulated by Paterson and Higgs who claim that the ‘hermeneutic spiral’ enables the researcher to gradually circle inwards, simultaneously dissecting and reflecting on “the parts or aspects of the phenomenon and the whole, with the objective of gaining a growing understanding of the phenomenon” (Paterson & Higgs 2005: 345).

These advantageous features of the hermeneutic spiral approach enable me to move systematically through my findings and arrive at insights into the research questions posed. These insights primarily concern the pedagogic impacts of *Ulwembu*, both on our team of creative practitioners and the participating stakeholders and audience members. However, while I will be adopting this spiral in the uncovering of my findings, I would like to propose that the patterning of a web be a more applicable structure to refer to across this thesis. I propose this web (which contains an inbuilt spiral in its structure) as it more adequately allows for me illustrate the expansive and “transdisciplinary approach” (McGregor 2015) behind our research and creative process.

In this context, I imagine a web⁵³ whose threads extend across (and connect) a variety of communities, cultures, institutions, approaches, fields-of-knowledge and expertise. Thus far, I have already begun by investigating the outer rungs of the web by framing the devising of *Ulwembu*. I will continue to touch on the multiple parts under investigation in turn, connecting threads and progressing steadily inwards, circling towards the epicentre of my argument. This is what Paterson and Higgs, drawing from Gadamer, refer to as, “gaining a growing understanding of the phenomenon” (2005: 345) while reflecting on this “understanding from the whole, to the part, and back to the whole” (*ibid.*: 346). The ‘web’ of my thesis will therefore work to spin together the various rungs of our collective learnings. As I will reveal, it is near impossible to reflect on one area of the project without acknowledging the impact this will invariably have on other aspects and areas of our learnings.

3.2 Phases of development

Phase 1: Research & Data Immersion.

In the making of *Ulwembu*, we launched our action-led research process by first ‘co-defining matters of concern’ (Latour 2004). Our central concern—and project’s starting point—was the rapid proliferation of the street drug whoonga and how it was impacting local communities.

In keeping with the critical pedagogy, our project employed what can be best described as a “problem-posing education” (Freire 1996: 60) model whereby our team initiated a “[process] of inquiry” (*ibid.*: 53) that involved the collaborating actors heading out into the field as actor-ethnographers. During this part of the process the *Ulwembu* actor-ethnographers relied upon research methods such as “participant observation” (O’Toole 2006: 401) and interviewing a variety of informants whose experiences correlated (however broadly at this juncture) to our inquiry. Within TFD approaches, this process is often referred to as a “constraint analysis” (Kidd & Byram cited in Kerr 1995: 151). This preliminary analysis can be described as:

[L]isting people’s knowledge, attitudes and practice with respect to each problem; identifying from this list the key constraints (e.g. misbeliefs, lack of resources), and deciding which of

⁵³ It was the web, as both metaphor for the insidious trap of the heroin use and the interconnectedness of both addiction and community, which was to later inspire the naming of our theatre project, *Ulwembu* (2014–2019), which translated from isiZulu means spider web.

these constraints might be successfully challenged and which current practices should be built and supported. (*ibid.*)

A critique often levelled at outsider facilitators in TFD processes is that they tend to remain blind to the deeper political, social, historical and economic causes of oppression and only ever superficially enlighten an issue for the community by focusing on quick-fix ‘micro’ solutions.

By embarking on an early ‘constraint analysis’, we were able to uncover a range of challenges, attitudes, misinformation, misunderstandings, policing frustrations and even policy blockages which prevailed around street-level drug addiction in Durban. On a more ‘macro’ level, this also entailed grappling with the motivating factors behind addiction and dependencies of various kinds. One of the ways the *Ulwembu* research team also set about developing this broader transdisciplinary knowledge was by drawing on insights surrounding drug use from a wide variety of institutions, practitioners and perspectives. The building of partnerships during a process of this sort is in many ways critical to making sense of the impact achieved by the theatre production and is an aspect of the findings that I return to in the final chapter.

From the earliest phases of *Ulwembu*, Mthombeni and The Big Brotherhood actors, would be required to assume dual roles as both actors and researchers. In their discussions on practice-led research and research-led practice, Smith and Dean (2009) note how it is not uncommon for creative practitioners (such as our team of actor-ethnographers in *Ulwembu*) to be active in both the creative and research aspects of the project. It was thus crucial that before embarking on the project, McGarry guided the team through a discussion on the ethics behind participant-observation and generative reflexive-research techniques, including the drawing up of consent forms. The first part of the actor-ethnographers’ responsibilities involved them heading out into their communities primarily as ethnographers to collect data via interviews and participant observation techniques. The *Ulwembu* data collection period lasted for several months, with our team meeting on a weekly basis to discuss and explore our research findings. Indispensable to this process was the manner in which our actor-ethnographers were able to foster meaningful relationships with informants⁵⁴ —subjects whose narratives would later form the basis of the research performance script. Notably, a second—though no less fundamental—aspect to the actor-ethnographers’ function during the field-work component, which perhaps related more

⁵⁴ While not all practitioners participating in research-based theatre processes need stem from academic backgrounds, when conducting interviews, a certain degree of sensitivity, intuition, confidence, curiosity and rigor is considered the prerequisite for producing useable data.

consistently to their background as theatre practitioners, involved their close observation of the behaviours and nuances of informants whom they would be tasked with portraying on the stage.

Phase 2: Improvisation

In the latter part of our research phase, it was not uncommon for us to explore our insights through a series of theatrical improvisations. Improvisation exercises are often used across a variety of research-based theatre processes to aid the team in conceptualizing the data in a theatrical format⁵⁵. This was true for Ross Gray and his collaborators during the development of their research-based theatre production *Handle with Care?* that focused on metastatic breast cancer (Gray, Sinding, Ivonoffski, Fitch, Hampson and Greenberg, 2008). Gray et al. (2008) describe how after analysing their research data, they used central research insights to inspire a series of improvisational games and images which were documented and referred to again over the scripting phase. Here, they explain:

Individuals read in the evenings and came prepared the next day with key quotes to exemplify the central themes from the research... These then became stimuli for further improvisations, allowing exploration of additional metaphors, symbols and sculptures. Eventually we had created a large repertoire of both visual images from the improvisation exercises and of quotes selected from transcripts for their representativeness, clarity and visceral impact. (Gray et al. 2008: 139)

Phase 3: Scripting

After our primary research period had concluded, our creative team was faced with the task of transforming the data into a theatrical text that would provide us with the road map into our rehearsals. As discussed in Chapter 1, during this phase, my involvement as dramaturge and playwright intensified and I was tasked with collating the range of data and ideas into drafts of a play text for the rest of the company to feedback on. The *Ulwembu* script was developed using what Lea (2012) defines as the “composite approach” (Lea 2012: 62). The composite approach merges more traditional playwright-centred approaches with collective approaches, where a

⁵⁵ It's crucial to acknowledge the work and devising process of South African theatre-maker Barney Simon who utilised a variety of improvisational techniques to transform research into a range of celebrated theatre productions. Colman (2014:28) surmises some of Simon's techniques as: “Suggestions of ideas for scenes begin during gossip; character research; character biography/personal biography. These stages all contribute to improvisations. The improvisations lead to the first formulation of a possible scene structure - which in turn can be altered, refined and formulated - in response to ongoing improvisations.”

development team collaborates to transforming the data into a stage text and performance (ibid.). In the composite approach, the creative team *collectively* research and develop ideas in close conjunction with one another and it is only in the final stages of the process that the playwright produces “a script inspired by, but not necessarily bound to, the work of these sessions” (Lea 2012: 67).

The playwright’s role in ethnodrama seldom entails the same artistic freedoms that more ‘traditional’ theatrical processes allow for. In a more traditional theatre praxis, the idea for writing a play is considered to emerge from the playwright’s imagination, while in the realm of ethnodrama, the playwright must shape an idea that has been informed by the “data analytic process” (Saldaña, 1998: 184). My role as playwright on *Ulwembu* echoed Saldaña’s (1998) breakdown of the composite writing process whereby the writer juggles two important responsibilities. The first sees them (in collaboration with the collective) “reducing and analyzing research data” and the second demands that they fulfil their designated role of “storyteller” (ibid.), crafting the research into an accessible and compelling narrative.

It is for this reason that the playwright within a composite approach is considered by Lea to fluctuate on a “scribe ↔ artist continuum” (2012: 68–69). When the playwright fulfils their duty as ‘scribe’, they are involved in directly transcribing the outcomes of improvisational exercises and team discussions; while the ‘artist’ function sees them drawing inspiration from the phases of collective research and improvisations and crafting these into a workable performance script. My dramaturgical work on *Ulwembu* reiterates this process, and saw me moving along this continuum between the functions of both scribe and artist.

On *Ulwembu*, I was faced with months of research and reams of story and character ideas, which we had established as a company. One of our primary exercises as a collective was to isolate the material that offered us “primary topical evidence” (Liehr *et al.* 2013: 164) and responded dynamically to our projects central research questions. Out of this culled material it was my responsibility to establish “an emergent pattern in the words” (Liehr *et al.* 2013: 164) and correlate these into a dramatically satisfying narrative.

Respectful Forgeries & Faithful Betrayals

Playwrights and practitioners in research-based theatre fields regard the use of both monologue and dialogue, extracted from the research data, as useful tools for making research ‘live’ on a stage. It is noted that the data used to form either monologue or dialogue rarely emerges from the

research with an imbedded dramatic arc. During the scripting phase of her verbatim theatre production *The Line* (2012), Gina Shmuckler describes how she had to illuminate the “emotional arc” of her characters by selecting two central narratives that had been relayed to her with a clear sense of a “beginning, middle and end” (2013: 37). Such interventions, referred to earlier by Gallagher as “respectful forgeries and faithful betrayals” (2007: 115–116) were also evident in Farber’s testimonial process, where Farber admits that interviews with her informants seldom arrived with “a natural dramatic arc” and that for an audience to journey with the characters from “indifference to empathy” certain considered and careful structural and dramaturgical interventions needed to be made (Farber 2008: 20). In the editing and theatricalising of our research material in *Ulwembu*, we began by isolating central characters and events before developing a structure, the latter of which was not always evident in the original data⁵⁶.

Another useful dramatic tool is in pinpointing an “overarching metaphor” (Schmuckler, 2013: 19) for the production. During the devising of *Ulwembu*, it was the reoccurring image of a spider’s web that came to serve as our overarching metaphor and provided us with a structural and conceptual key to centre our multiple-perspective character approach around. During the early establishing scenes of the play, characters and plot-strands were introduced in isolation, but as plot momentum gathers, the characters’ lives begin to intersect in surprising and often unexpected ways. This was a structural choice largely informed by what would become the title of our play, *Ulwembu*⁵⁷. For our team, the central spider web was a poignant central metaphor as it, firstly, symbolised the many overlapping and intersecting threads of our characters’ lives; secondly, it communicated the manner in which seemingly isolated events in a system affect the wider system, much like a ‘tug’ on one singular thread sends a tremor travelling along the entire infrastructure and is experienced by the rest of the web; and finally, it eloquently conveyed, as with whoonga, the deceptive and invisible design the spider web relies on to ensnare its victims.

The final point I would like to make is that the editing of source material for *Ulwembu* was not relegated to the playwriting process alone and, as is often noted by other ethnotheatre practitioners, continued well into the rehearsal phase. Ethnotheatre practitioner George Belliveau

⁵⁶ This is a process that Shmuckler (2013) reflects on candidly in her unpublished MA dissertation *Trauma on Stage: Making theatre about xenophobia in South Africa using the structures of trauma*.

⁵⁷ In one of our workshops, we had toyed with a variety of options for the title of the play. All of the English options suggested tended to lack musicality. Msomi had suggested *Intombi engaliwa* (which translates as “the girlfriend you can never leave), but this was deemed sexist, with whoonga being equated to the problematic gender trope of the possessive female lover. Returning to our research, we kept arriving at dual images centring on connection (or lack of) and entrapment: The trap... the snares... the spider web... the web... “What is web in isiZulu?” I asked the group. “Ulwembu,” Msomi had responded. The room went quiet. We repeated it over and over until finally, McGarry spelt it out on the white board, bold and strong: ULWEMBU. The decision was made.

(2015b) notes how often the notion of *showing*, and not always *telling*, becomes apparent when actors begin to play out scenarios on stage and that certain “key considerations and deliberate choices” (Belliveau 2015b) must be taken to condense the data into a production-time that usually lasts no longer than an hour. During our *Ulwembu* rehearsals, further omissions to the material were made when it became clear that certain ‘spoken’ moments were revealed to possess far more theatrical clout in their active demonstration, rather than their explicit telling.

Contriving Character Composites

In the writing of *Ulwembu*, we settled on a range of characters that would enable us to explore drug use through a kaleidoscope of conflicting perspectives. In establishing the primary characters of our story, certain creative decisions saw us contriving what, in research-based theatre processes, are referred to as character “composites” (Mienczakowski 1997: 160)⁵⁸. The ‘composite character’ is one formed from a variety of analogous qualities and insights drawn from the research and distilled into a single character. In her production of *The Line* (2012), Shmuckler (2013) adopted this approach and justifies her decisions by claiming the subjects were interviewed together and expressed similar ideas and understandings. The decision, Shmuckler explains, was also determined by more practical staging considerations—with only two actresses employed to play a cross-section of characters, a limit needed to be placed on the amount of characters featured in the final text.

Shmuckler’s defence of composite characters in her production are similar to the considerations we faced in forming *Ulwembu*’s protagonist Portia, played by Mthombeni. The composite character of Portia combined the story strands of an ambitious policewoman with a mother whose son becomes addicted to whoonga, a decision that was very much informed by and part of our advocacy strategy and implemented so serve a particular purpose. While the use and creation of composite characters may be disputed by more puritanical research-based theatre practitioners, I believe these ‘composites’ can serve a critical and subversive function within research-based theatre approaches. I will be interrogating this function more closely in my analysis in Chapter 5, where I will return to the example of Portia as a composite character.

⁵⁸ Character composites are not related to the ‘composite playwright’ approach previously discussed.

In Conversation

One of the biggest challenges, I faced in the writing of *Ulwembu*, was what Shmuckler refers to in her own process as sifting through hours of “direct address” and “past tense” (2013: 12) interviews and attempting to translate these testimonials into a more dynamic and dramatic form of action. One of the more practical solutions Shmuckler arrived at was by contriving a series of interweaving theatrical monologues. While *Ulwembu* mostly relied on dialogue spoken between characters, there were two instances where we relied on the Portia character confronting the audience through the use of monologue. Saldaña defines the purpose of monologues in ethnotheatre as:

[...] extended passages of text spoken by one character that are (a) addressed to another character listening on stage, (b) addressed directly to the audience, or (c) reveal inner thoughts spoken aloud—a soliloquy—for the audience. Saldaña (2003: 223)

The use of monologue in *Ulwembu* worked effectively in establishing Portia as a confidant to the audience, placing spectators in the position of the initial *listening* researchers. Saldaña (2003: 223) suggests that monologue aids in breaking the illusion of the fourth-wall, while affording the actor/character the opportunity to involve the audience more deeply and empathetically in the relaying of their story. When Portia relied on this convention, it was to grant our audience insights into her inner-thoughts, fears and vulnerabilities. The monologue, however, when overused, may weaken the medium’s ability to *show* rather than *tell*, thus inhibiting on-stage action and reducing characters to talking-heads.

In order to “advance the action” of our play and “reveal character reaction” (Saldaña 2003: 226), the *Ulwembu* team made the decision to explore a majority of our character’s relationships through the use of dialogue. Dialogue, Saldaña observes, is commonly crafted from “conversational interviews” but more often than not the playwright is required to “artificially construct” dialogue from the research data (2003: 225). With *Ulwembu*, the contriving of dialogue was made possible once the actors-ethnographers had developed extensive research ‘bibles’ around each informant and understood every aspect and facet of the character. Saldaña notes how the interweaving of data to contrive dialogue serves multiple functions, some of which include:

a) offer triangulation, (b) highlight disconfirming evidence through juxtaposition, (c) exhibit collective story creation through multiple perspectives, and/or (d) condense “real-time” data for purposes of dramatic economy. (Saldaña 2003: 226)

The above points align closely with our own experiences of contriving dialogue to advance the dramatic action of *Ulwembu*. The use of dialogue enabled us to work with elements of ‘juxtaposition’ and ‘multiple perspectives’, by the paralleling of a variety of conflicting character viewpoints—characters who in the real-life situations had not actually met. Saldaña’s points on ‘dramatic economy’ would relate to our process of whittling down large swathes of past-tense reportage into direct exchanges between on-stage characters. In departing from the talking-head format of the original interviews, our storytelling approach was freed up, allowing on-stage events to appear as if they were happening ‘in-the-moment’.

Imagining the Unimaginable

After the writing process on *Ulwembu* was complete, we entered into a month-long rehearsal process for our production. It was during these rehearsals that our team began to experiment with “embodied representations” (Belliveau 2015b) of our research, exploring the theatrical medium’s ability to offer audiences more vivid and “complex ways to ‘see’ research” (Gallagher 2007: 109).

Our heightened stage aesthetic served to remind audiences that what they were watching was an ‘imaginative reconstruction’ of real-life events. These design devices also enrich the theatrical experience. Employment of a surreal theatrical design aesthetic within research-based theatre productions can assist in creating a “distancing effect” (Shmuckler 2013: 49–50), similar to Brecht’s defamiliarisation devices for audiences.

During performances of *Ulwembu*, the actors’ used ropes to articulate painful physiological withdrawal symptoms experienced by users. In illustrating the whoonga users’ pain and desperation through the repetition of the withdrawal pains/rope image, our audiences were granted the opportunity to ‘vicariously’ experience the effects of addiction and withdrawal, without having to undergo the horrors of the experience itself. Such visual devices, we discovered, were able to offer our audiences embodied empathetic insights into the daily traumas experienced by whoonga users. Using ‘visual’ possibilities of theatre to credibly illustrate

complex research ideas in a way that no textual report could replicate⁵⁹, I feel, was something, we were able to successfully achieve on *Ulwembu*.

Talking-Back

One of the biggest challenges facing the more traditional applied theatre models—whereby actors perform a production and the audience passively spectate—is to lessen the distance that exists between actors and audience. For us to capitalize on the pedagogical potential of *Ulwembu*, it was crucial that we establish a post-performance platform for audiences and cast members to debate and discuss the experience. Mienczakowski articulates a similar concern in relation to his own theatre company’s praxis, when he writes:

The convention of a passive audience witnessing an event was not what we desired or needed. We were seeking both emotional and intellectual engagement with the issues we were dealing with. After being part of the performance event we wanted audience members to join our cause, validate or reject our data, or feel impelled to respond to or explore our arguments.
(2009: 323)

The “emotional and intellectual engagement” with the audience can be woven into the theatrical dissemination process by creating “intimate” performance spaces in the round, as well as dismantling the ‘fourth-wall’ through conventions such as audience participation and direct-address (Mienczakowski 2009: 327). Although the most successful and popular means to achieve this form of engagement is undoubtedly through the inclusion of talk-backs.

In his paper *Space and Southern African Community Theatre – Real, Mediated and Symbolic*, David Kerr (2007) examines how communal spaces and dialogic traditions in Malawian and Zambian villages have historically provided a “natural context for post-performance discussions” (Kerr 2007: 39–40)⁶⁰. Such spaces, Kerr contends, are inherently ‘participative’ and ‘dialogic’ in the manner in which they are utilised to settle disputes and promote dialogue around social issues.

In more recent years, talk-backs have come to offer a pivotal function across a variety of applied and research-based theatre processes. Mienczakowski’s ethnotheatre relies extensively on

⁵⁹ Mienczakowski’s production *Syncing Out Loud* (1992–1994) dealt with teenage experiences of schizophrenia and, like *Ulwembu*, called on a range of visual/aural devices to articulate what youngsters suffering from schizophrenic delusions experience. This was achieved by the cast on stage, who collectively verbalised the cacophony of voices that evoked the protagonist’s inner turmoil. Through the “embodiment of her auditory delusions” (Mienczakowski 1997: 163), the actors were able to articulate the protagonist’s sense of disempowerment and fear.

⁶⁰ In this paper, Kerr (2007) infers that the origins of the talk-back may not lie, as is often claimed, with Boal and his ‘Forum discussions’, nor with practitioner Dario Fo and his ‘allegorical banter’, but rather in the aforementioned highly discursive traditional African contexts.

interaction and feedback from its audience (which often comprised of various health professionals) to further develop and enhance the scripted insights. It is for this reason that the research-based theatre text in Mienczakowski's methodology is considered an open-ended research report.

Over the duration of *Ulwembu*, we considered the performances and dialogue around the production as an extension of our own research process, with post-show engagements allowing us to embark on a process of "documenting audience reactions to the stimuli and their responses to the actors and their representations" (Mienczakowski 2009: 328). The notion of the dramatic script as "incomplete" (Eagleton 2002: 62) is in keeping with Brecht's experiences of constantly redeveloping his play texts to incorporate the reactions and suggestions of audience members.

The use of public space for community dialogue and debate is not a recent development in the Southern African context (Kerr 2007) and it is for this reason that this feature has been integrated relatively seamlessly into applied theatre methodologies across Southern Africa. Practitioner Emma Durden (2010) claims that within a South African context, talk-backs prove effective in addressing taboo issues such as sex and sexuality in relation to HIV/AIDS awareness programs. Post-show discussions, Durden argues, offer audience members a safe and shared space to "engage with complex issues in a ritualised and removed way" (Durden 2010: 17) without fear of reproach from family or fellow community members. This was a point reiterated by The Big Brotherhood actor Msomi who, in a group interview, told me he believed that one of the theatrical medium's responsibilities is to enable young people to ask and answer questions they were too afraid, or embarrassed, to ask their parents or teachers (Interview, 24 March 2017).

During the *Ulwembu* talk-backs, our audiences often confessed to feeling disarmed of their prior prejudices around the situation. Such openness proved particularly beneficial in instances when members of the Durban's South African Police Service (SAPS) and street-level drug users sat together, post-performance, and were able to listen to one another's personal insights and reflections around the production's themes.

A majority of insights regarding the functions of the talk-back, which I have included in my above discussion, are lessons that we were to intuitively learn over the course of *Ulwembu*'s post-performance discussions. The inclusion of talk-backs in our process worked to continually expand our research while connecting the actor-ethnographer team members to the responses, criticisms and insights of audience members. In more 'traditional' theatre models, this sort of interaction is often considered undesirable, shattering the hard-earned illusion of the fourth-wall.

Yet, throughout our production, we were to experience how the talk-back sessions worked to democratise the playing space, granting the audience an interactive platform to validate, criticise and contest what they had witnessed on the stage. This was also an effective mechanism through which to negotiate our advocacy strategy and its reception by our audience.

3.3 The Role of the ‘Facilitator’ Across Applied Theatre Processes



Co-facilitator/director Neil Coppen talks Zenzo Msomi (who plays Sipho) through a difficult scene. Denis Hurley Centre rehearsal, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Colwyn Thomas.

As outlined previously, the creation of *Ulwembu* was a collaborative project between sociologist Dr Dylan McGarry, actress Mpume Mthombeni, theatre group The Big Brotherhood and myself. While both Mthombeni and the The Big Brotherhood actors were situated inside the communities of our research, McGarry and I—as white, English speaking participating co-collaborators—were researcher ‘outsiders’.

Over the following discussion, it is my intention to not only interrogate this ‘outsider’ status but to ascertain what the most desirable and ‘ethical’ positioning of an outside facilitator may be within similar processes. South Africa’s history of racial segregation and injustice, and the privileges afforded to those racialised as white, as well as a current, sustained legacy of material inequalities, create a nexus of power relations that require critical scrutiny when unpacking participatory action-led processes. The insights shared in the following discussion will be considered again in greater detail, when I reflect on my own positioning and learnings on *Ulwembu* in my analysis in Chapter 5.

Defining the Function of the ‘Autonomous’ Facilitator

In the researching of *Ulwembu*, we were to adopt a “transactional and transformative” (Kenny & Wirth 2009: 35) learning approach similar to Paulo Freire’s pedagogic teachings.⁶¹ In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996), Freire makes distinctions between what he terms the “banking concept of education” and “problem-posing education” (*ibid.*: 53 and 60, respectively). The banking concept is considered as “an exercise of domination” with knowledge “deposited” by the teacher/facilitator into the unquestioning receptacles of the students’ heads (*ibid.*: 59). To counter such a limited means of accessing and acquiring information, Freire proposed a ‘problem-posing education’ whereby students, alongside the facilitator/teacher figure, are elevated to the role of “critical co-investigators” (*ibid.*: 62) and engaged in a constant dialogue. Through the ‘problem-posing model’ Freire claims that power hierarchies—evident in the more draconian student-teacher binary—need to be dismantled and knowledge understood as an ever expanding “processes of inquiry” (*ibid.*: 53).

The question that then follows is how we should thus view the “humanist, revolutionary educator” (Freire 1996: 56) in terms of applied theatre methodologies, and more specifically, in relation to my own responsibilities on *Ulwembu*.⁶² In his book *When people play people* (1993), Mda refers to the work of Crow and Etherton (1982), which locates what he calls the ‘catalyst’ figures as “outsiders with specialist skills in theatre and in community development who work as organised groups in communities” (Mda 1993: 19). Crow and Etherton contentiously claim that for ‘catalysts’ to be able to instigate any form of social transformation, they need to enter into a process armed with a “higher level of social consciousness than the villagers, based on their education and general social experience” (Mda 1993: 19). The notion of the outsider possessing ‘a higher social consciousness’ is a problematic one, inferring that the ‘educator’ holds a superiority and ‘higher’ function over that of their co-investigators. This certainly was not true of my experience on *Ulwembu*.

⁶¹ Such approaches have since been adapted by a variety of applied theatre practitioners including the likes of Ross Kidd and Martin Byram (cited in Kerr 1995:151) in their seminal TFD production *Laedza Bantanani*.

⁶² Augusto Boal expanded on what may be considered Freirean concepts of the problem-posing education. This is evident in his implementation of the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) methodology. In Boal’s (2008) praxis, Freire’s “problem-posing educator” (1996: 62) (or ‘catalyst’) is replaced with the figure of “The Joker” (Boal 2008: 150), an interlocutor figure who functions as co-participant, instigator and moderator in the ‘Forum theatre’ process.

When commencing with our research process on *Ulwembu*, I could hardly consider myself any more knowledgeable on the topic than my co-investigators—the majority of whom had encountered street-level drug use in far more tangible ways than I had. Prentki (2015: 28) argues that the term ‘catalyst’ is scientifically defined as “an agent which produces a chemical reaction while itself remaining unchanged” and is an unhelpful and an inaccurate description in terms of applied theatre⁶³. Certainly, over the course of our project, I was to undergo a series of transformations, acquiring knowledge and insights that have shifted the way I both perceive and make theatre. It is for this reason; I will discard the term ‘catalyst’ in favour of the less problematic ‘co-facilitator’.

So what are the more desirable attributes and responsibilities of this co-facilitator figure in processes like *Ulwembu*? Zakes Mda (1993: 20) sees the tenets of “sustainability” and “skills transferal” as crucial to the exchange between co-facilitator and participants, claiming that facilitators need to work towards eventually rendering themselves unnecessary in the process. Freire explains that the overriding function of the “problem-posing educator”⁶⁴ (Freire 1996: 61) is to engage participants in the “unveiling” (ibid.: 51) or “demythologizing” (ibid.: 64) of their reality while imbuing their every action “with a profound trust in the people and their creative power” (ibid.: 56). Prentki sees their role as rendering co-participants reality “strange” (Prentki 2015: 74) and enabling them to view their concerns from a variety of new perspectives⁶⁵. The responsibilities of co-facilitators from both ‘outside’ and ‘within’ the community is a juggling act of sorts, with facilitators having to be versed in:

[F]acilitating critical analysis of issues; ensuring participation of all interest groups; broadening views where they are too narrow and restricted; facilitating discussion without imposing one person’s ideas. (Mlama in Prentki 2015: 74)

In order to assist in broadening views of the group, I would argue, like Mda (1993), that it is essential for the ‘outside’ facilitator to immerse themselves in the contexts and realities of communities at the heart of the research. This is something that can only be achieved once the

⁶³ In response, one may dismiss Prentki’s argument on the grounds that it is inaccurate to misappropriate words that have specific meaning in one field, and assume its meaning is the same in another. However, the problem remains that the term assumes that the “outsiders with specialist skills” (Mda 1993: 19), who quite often are more privileged, are active and interested agents for change; whereas ‘insiders’ (who may face far greater challenges instigating change due to a nexus of oppressive power relations, including the very real issue of material deprivation) are passive or disinterested.

⁶⁴ Freire (1996) also refers to the teacher figure as the ‘*humanist, revolutionary educator*’, which is also referred to in the secondary literature as the ‘*liberatory educator*’.

⁶⁵ An idea that draws on Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt! (Boal 2008: xix)

facilitator actively engages with social and economic realities of the community at the centre of the inquiry (Mda 1993).

During the research phases of *Ulwembu*, both Mthombeni and The Big Brotherhood actors afforded McGarry and I profound insights (and access) into the broader cultural contexts and specificities of the communities we were working alongside. It would be fair to assume that many of the realities and contexts McGarry and I were attempting to navigate as ‘outsiders’, were relatively removed from our more sheltered suburban realities. Considering these factors, I feel it would be disingenuous to posit myself (or McGarry) as ‘primary’ facilitators on *Ulwembu*. Rather, each member of our team assumed the role of ‘educator’ at various stages of our process. Where one team member or participant was more versed in a particular area or field of knowledge, they would be encouraged to take the reins and educate the rest of the team⁶⁶.

Lessons from the Field

In attempting to further understand the roles and responsibilities of the Freire’s “problem-posing educator” (1996: 62) figure across a range of applied theatre-making approaches, I would like to summarise a range of lessons and ethical concerns drawn from literature pertaining to Theatre for Development (TFD). In order to minimise some of the more problematic tendencies that may arise within ‘participatory’ theatre projects, minimal ‘outside’ interference and enforcement of predetermined outcomes are preferable. While this is the ideal, it should be noted that this may not be considered practical here in South Africa with the existing power relations we find ourselves in. The point I wish to make here refers to ‘participative’ interventions of ‘outsider’ government or development agencies involved in some TFD practices. Thus far, we have largely understood the facilitator in terms of a small group or individual but it is important to remember that such a term may be applied to larger institutions and even corporations who enter into theatre dissemination processes with a pre-determined idea or agenda. What is important to ascertain across these processes is the overriding “transformational intention” (Prentki 2001: 120) of the outside research group. This can be achieved by considering if the approaches utilised across the project can be considered ‘participatory’ in accordance with a Freirean pedagogy, or whether such exercises are merely used to enforce pre-determined outcomes and agendas under the guise of a ‘participatory’ banner.

⁶⁶ This harks back to the Freirean idea of the “teacher-student with students-teachers”. Here Freire (1996: 61) states:
Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges:
teacher-student with students-teachers.

For facilitators working under such dictates, both the research and play-making process must often be tailored to fit into existing structures. When this sort of practice is implemented without sufficient community consultation and participation, the “emancipatory potential of the medium” (Mda 1993: 12) is greatly compromised. As *Ulwembu* was an independent self-initiated exercise—with a majority of our funders coming on board only after the production’s research and devising process was complete—we were able to shape and determine the direction of the project on our creative teams own terms.

When defining parameters of research alongside co-participants, the facilitator should refer to the “bottom-up” (Kerr 1995: 149) approach and ensure the research parameters encompass both micro and macro issues facing the community. When outside facilitators take the form of developmental agencies, they often fail to consider the contexts and needs of the focus community. In this instance, TFD approaches are misused as a form of ‘mass media’ messaging, a sort of blanket approach used to reach as wide an audience as possible while failing to consider the idiosyncrasies that exist between neighbouring cultural groups. Such an expansive sweep fails because the ‘messaging’ of such performances has not been driven and determined by the immediate concerns and needs of the community.

Earlier, I discussed how *Ulwembu* rooted itself in the communities most affected by drug use by formulating its base on the finding of actor-ethnographers who were located inside the neighbourhoods of KwaMashu and Umlazi in KwaZulu-Natal. In an earlier section in Chapter 1, I examined how our team immersed themselves in areas of research that spoke to both the ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ complexities of the situation.

In scenarios where ‘outsider’ outcomes are pre-determined and helicoptered into a community, there is the tendency for certain insidious character *types* and *tropes* to emerge. During the play-making process, the facilitator should steer participants clear of using reductive stereotypes, types and tropes that perpetuate rather than subvert prevalent myths. Kidd (cited in Kerr 1995: 160) refers to this as “scapegoating the poor” where poverty is often depicted on stage as “self-inflicted” and the result of “deficiencies or inadequacies” of the poor. This sort of sinister, neocolonial myth-making is further perpetuated by the use of “stereotyped characters” (*ibid.*) which according to Kerr enforce the belief that indigenous rural characters are backward and ignorant while the modernizing ones are desirable or ‘good’. In Chapter 1, I explored the manner in which the *Ulwembu* team created characters which deliberately set out to subvert these stereotypes and challenge, as opposed to perpetuate, myths around drug use in Durban.

The facilitator should avoid transposing outside playmaking aesthetics into a project and rather seek guidance and inspiration from participants' pre-existing storytelling modes and conventions. If the facilitator is to look at initiating an applied theatre project that speaks 'with' as opposed to 'on behalf of' its intended audience, it is essential that the existing theatre-making aesthetics of the community is referenced (Denzin 2011). Drawing on insights from Kamlongera's (1989) study, Mda claims that the facilitator can play an integral role in forging and redefining a syncretic yet "authentic African theatre" (Mda 1993: 8). Such a syncretic theatre should utilise relevant traditional cultural conventions and styles so that the intended audience may feel a strong sense of identification with what plays out on the stage. By using traditional or popular means of storytelling, Durden argues that "audiences are more able to understand and make meaning from new information that is couched in a familiar form" (2003: 15). In my previous section around ethnotheatre methodologies, I explored a range of syncretic, research-based theatre strategies and conventions we were to call upon. I will leave the examination of how we were able to 'couch' our narrative in familiar and more 'popular' theatre forms, for my later analysis in Chapter 5. In this later Chapter, I will reflect further on how, during the making and performing of our research-based theatre production *Ulwembu*, we worked consciously to minimise many of the more problematic scenarios inherent in some TFD practices.

Positionality & Power

Given the diverse social and economic positionalities that everyone arrives with, the question of how power relations are equalised between facilitator and participants in practice becomes central. I would like to now look more closely at action-based, performed research approaches, and how the facilitator or 'humanist, revolutionary educator' (Freire 1996) needs to consistently and critically navigate their own positioning within the parameters of the research project.

Ideally, action research is "a participatory and reflexive practice that involves researchers and participants in a process of co-inquiry to address identified problems, create change or explore opportunities" (Rowe 2014: 2). But for the facilitator situated on the outside of the community there are a variety of often 'unconscious' factors that may well impinge on the process. This is where the understanding of 'positionality' or "where one stands in relation to 'the other'" (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane & Muhamad 2001: 412) becomes important, especially in unpacking my own role within the *Ulwembu* theatre-making process. Rowe defines positionality as "the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization or the participant group" and uses the

terms ‘outsider’ (non-member) and ‘insider’ (member) to describe how participants either emerge from within or outside the researched community (2014: 2).

Rowe argues that what needs to be understood, is “the degree of relatedness of the researcher to the study participants along dimensions of culture, class, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, childhood lived experiences” (2014: 3). Such relatedness naturally impacts the way co-participants interact with one another but also on how the research data itself is obtained, made-sense of and finally disseminated⁶⁷.

It is integral to acknowledge how notions of ‘positionality’ and ‘power’ in a South African theatre-making context, remain as fraught as ever. As an example, being an outsider facilitator on *Ulwembu*, I initially failed to acknowledge how my use of English (and lack of fluency in isiZulu) isolated certain members of The Big Brotherhood from fully investing in the creative process. Similarly, in exploring positionality in *Ulwembu*, it will be important to understand how gender factored into the demographic of the group, with Mthombeni being the only female member of our creative team. I would argue that it is the responsibility of the facilitator to remain vigilant over how entrenched historic privileges, which simmer beneath the surface of race, gender, class and language, may unconsciously act to silence participants and foreground specific narratives more than others.

This is echoed by theatre practitioner Thembi Venturas (2017), where he examines how a myriad of inequalities play out within an intercultural creative decision-making process. During the rehearsals for the project *The Last Anniversary* (2014), Venturas describes how the European collaborators would often make uninformed creative decisions on behalf of the African cast members. The African contingent of the cast—though clearly unhappy—were noted by Venturas to not speak up out of fear that they would compromise their chances of further participation in the production. The onus for communicating any suggestions and corrections fell to Venturas who, as “a white man”, the group assumed “would carry more weight in fighting for their South African cultural positions” (2017: 68).

In action-led research, it is often assumed that the more similarities the ‘inside’ facilitator researcher shares with participants the more likely there were to be “common expectations, intentions and power equity” (Rowe 2014: 3) and the more likely it was that “access will be

⁶⁷ To contextualize and understand how this ‘degree of relatedness’ operated inside our project and amongst our team members, I will be referring to the thoughts, impressions and insights offered by Mthombeni and The Big Brotherhood actors on the matter, in my Chapter 5 analysis.

granted, meanings shared, and validity of findings assured” (Merriam *et al.* 2001: 406). The outside researcher in the equation, by virtue of differences with regards to race, class, age, language, would always tend to remain at a disadvantage in the way of access and inclusion to the arena of research. I would argue that this notion is too simplistic, agreeing with Rowe that positionality needs to be understood as “multidimensional” (Rowe 2014: 3) and intersecting, with ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives providing varying advantages and disadvantages across alternate stages of the research process.

It would help for us to imagine positions of *insider* and *outsider*, depending on the nature of research situation, to span along a fluctuating continuum (Rowe 2014). To more clearly articulate this idea, while McGarry and I may have been at a disadvantage in areas of access and language on our project, we would often remain at an advantage in terms of ‘professional’ expertise and through our more ‘privileged’ positions, linking the project to wider institutions and funding opportunities. While researching and devising *Ulwembu*, I discovered that such ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ need to be acknowledged and discussed openly amongst co-participants, and then leveraged across the various processes to enrich the outcomes of the project itself. This notion of ‘transparency’ is in keeping with the advice Rowe (2014) imparts around openly addressing the often unconscious hierarchies that play out in participatory research. The model of research-based theatre, with processes driven and determined by participants and its reliance on “consensus and group decisions” (Lea in Belliveau 2015a: 11), can be a powerful means to demolish the hierarchies inherent in more conventional creative processes⁶⁸.

Conscientisation: Mythical or Obtainable?

In concluding this chapter, I return for a final time to the Freirean concept of the “humanist, revolutionary educator” (1996: 56) within an action-led theatre-making process. For Freire, the primary outcome of the dialogic process was to assist with facilitating the emergence of a critical form of consciousness known as conscientisation (Freire 1996).

In more recent years, ideas around conscientisation have shifted, with the term been considered an awkward pedagogical concept to both define and measure (Kruger 1999). Despite its limitations, I believe arriving at a definition will aid us later in ascertaining the pedagogical

⁶⁸ At the start of *Ulwembu*, no members of our team were designated roles or functions that separated us from the other. Creative responsibilities were only later delegated by the collective, as our focus began to shift from researchers and ethnographers to creative ‘problem solvers’ and practitioners. I have examined this in Chapter 1 and will return again to it in my analysis in Chapter 5.

impacts *Ulwembu* would have on myself, my co-participants and the audience members and stakeholders. In searching for a definition that pertains to more ‘purpose driven’ theatre projects, I encountered the following, offered by practitioners Martin Byram and Frances Moitse:

[C]onscientisation is realised through a process that helps people to identify and understand their problems within the context of a particular social order. Popular theatre provides a means of codifying that social reality. The codification — the theatrical performance — becomes a mirror through which the people can see themselves, their social situation, and the problems they encounter, in a fresh and stimulating way. (Byram & Moitse cited in Mda 1993: 45)

In light of this definition—and more contemporary concerns around its application, I feel it is overly optimistic to imagine that the awakening of such a ‘critical consciousness’, in both participants and facilitators, is achievable through a brief and passing theatrical interlude. Rather, I agree with Kruger’s (1999) claims that conscientisation needs to be understood less as the *holy grail* of pedagogical processes—a fleeting but profound epiphany offered to participants—and more as a concerted ‘long-term’ process. As Kruger argues:

Conscientization requires time and sustained social interaction if visiting facilitators are to get beyond the role of experts, if the host community is to get beyond passive reception, and if both are to work toward the transformation not merely of the immediate performance and its script but also of entrenched scripts of thought and behavior. (1999: 210)

Similar concerns are articulated by Prentki when he argues that “consciousness-raising without action cannot move people beyond protest” (Prentki 2001: 133). Looking ahead to my analysis of the pedagogical impacts of *Ulwembu* in Chapter 5, I offer that it would be useful to reframe these statements as a question. Combining Kruger and Prentki’s claims, such a question might be reworked to read: *How/did Ulwembu raise the ‘consciousness’ of both collaborators and audience members, beyond the immediate arena of the theatre-making/performance space, in ways that challenged deeper and more ‘entrenched scripts of thoughts and behaviour’?*

CHAPTER 4: Empathy in Applied Theatre Models



Sipho (Zenzo Msomi) is handcuffed to the bed by his mother Portia (Mpume Mthombeni) in a bid to help him come clean from the drug. Denis Hurley Centre rehearsal, Durban, South Africa, 2015.
Photograph by Colwyn Thomas.

“Empathy must be understood as the terrible weapon it really is. Empathy is the most dangerous weapon in the entire arsenal of theatre and related arts...”

(Boal 2008: 93)

“Research-based drama can also be an extraordinary vehicle for training health professionals ... Even more importantly, it takes audience members beyond a preoccupation with techniques and goals, to an empathic experience with the ill person. It is exactly such empathy that is arguably the precondition for transformation of health care.”

(Gray et al. 2008: 143)

4.1 A Cathartic Cop-Out or Epiphany Inducing Catalyst?

I commence this discussion with two provocative and contradictory quotes, to demonstrate the rather divergent point of views taken when it comes to understanding the use of *empathy* in applied theatre models. In the former, Boal conceives of empathy as a manipulative and coercive tool, whereas in the latter, Gray *et al.* seem to appreciate it as an extraordinary tool with transformational capacity.

In creating *Ulwembu*, our priority was to offer audiences the space to *empathetically* re-evaluate their prejudices and misconceptions around street-level drug use. Certainly, empathy played a seminal role in our theatre-making processes, enough to be factored into the name of our methodology, Empatheatre, and to form one of the primary questions behind this thesis. It is for these reasons that a preliminary discussion around the use of empathy in applied theatre approaches will prove useful as we begin to move deeper into the epicentre of my analytic exploration of *Ulwembu*.

My aim in this discussion is not necessarily to resolve the disputes alluded to by the above conflicting views. Rather, it is to examine a range of insights and case studies and in the process reveal how an empathetic theatrical approach can be *tyrannical* (Chinyowa 2015) as well as *transformative* (Haarhoff 2018) depending, of course, on how it is wielded by the practitioner.

Over the following discussion, I will look at the possibilities for ‘transformation’ that may be initiated through the spectators’ empathetic identification with characters and events depicted in a research-based theatre production. I will also explore how empathy in such presentations needs to be understood in relation to the facets of deep-listening, imagination, catharsis, epiphany and the medium’s alleged ‘therapeutic qualities’. I also intend to establish how empathy is not exclusively useful (or as some practitioners might posit, dangerously manipulative) in the actor/audience interchange but integral to the action-based research process behind most performed ethnographies.

On Empathy

Empathy has come to take on a host of meanings and definitions. Author Paul Bloom, in his book *Against Empathy: A case for rational compassion* (2016), lists a variety of ways the term is now utilised to describe everything from acts “of understanding other people, getting inside their heads and figuring what they are thinking” (2016: 3) to “our capacity for caring, love and goodness” (*ibid.*: 4).

In her paper *Notes on Empathy, Cognitive Neuroscience, and Theatre/Education*, Rhonda Blair (2015) argues very much for empathy and assists in uncovering the linguistic and philosophical underpinnings of the word, describing it as a concept built on the notion of ‘sympathy’, first defined in more philosophical terms by Robert Vischer as *Einfühlung* which translates as “in-feeling” (Blair 2015: Para.2). The English word *empathy* first emerged in 1909 and was coined

by psychologist Edward Titchener from the English translation of the Greek for “to make suffer” (*ibid.*).

Empathy can be attributed to a broad spectrum of neural activations and bodily sensations and is a term applied across a variety of fields and sciences (*ibid.*). Although as human beings we are essentially “wired for empathy” (*ibid.*), cognitive functions and experiences over time can work to “suppress” (*ibid.*) our empathetic agency. To counter this, pedagogical theatre-practices are highly effective ways to reactivate and re-enforce this potential in both participants and spectators.

Referring to a model developed by Lamm, Batson and Decety (cited in Blair 2015: Para.3), Blair expands on three definitions and ‘basic attributes’ of empathy:

- 1.) You must to some degree be feeling what the other person is feeling.
- 2.) You must to some degree be able to visualise or imagine yourself in the other person’s situation.
- 3.) You need to know that you are *not* in fact the other person.

I will focus predominately on Lamm *et al.*’s second attribute, as this speaks to how an audiences’ powers of ‘vicarious’ and ‘empathetic’ visualisation, combined with their ability to relate to “the lives of others”, ultimately shapes and impacts the manner in which a piece of performed-research is received and understood by the audience (Mienczakowski 2009: 322).

Due to its mimetic nature—and depending on the level of immersion experienced—theatre presents characters who may, in the spectator’s mind’s eye, appear to be real. Through the audience’s vicarious recognition of the world and characters of the play, empathy may emerge (Durden, 2010: 24). For Durden (2010: 24) this concept ties into the Aristotelian understanding of *catharsis*, whereby audiences—in order to avoid befalling similar tragic outcomes, and via empathetic identification—absorb, and later act upon, lessons learnt by the protagonist of the play. Such a view has its sceptics, as we will discover, when I discuss Augusto Boal’s (2008) Marxist critique of catharsis shortly.

The ‘Art’ of Healing

The “play-theory” (Myles cited in Durden 2010: 23) model examines how children acquire knowledge about the world around them via the role-play functions imbedded in most children’s games. Theorist Janet Myles discusses the pedagogical impacts of vicarious learning as “a

communicative social process” that lies at the heart of play theory, and a process that is often employed within Entertainment Education (EE) methodologies (cited in Durden 2010: 23).

According to Durden, by combining the vicarious forces of “observation, imitation and imagination” (2010: 23) participants are able to weigh up their options, while rehearsing lessons that may later be applied in real-life situations.

Boal’s (2008) celebrated Forum theatre understood the subversive possibilities of such role-playing in the adult world and instigated an applied theatre process, whereby the spectator relinquishes their passive position as observer to assume the more dynamic role of performer and who, through vicarious role-playing, image-making and game playing, “trains himself for real action” (Boal 2008: 98). It is the “experiential understanding” stimulated by these role playing scenarios that Mienczakowski claims tend to “be empathetic, problem solving and intuitive in orientation” (2009: 325). Like Boal (2008), he argues that the same pedagogic potential that operates through vicarious forms of play exists in adults.

But how does the ‘vicarious nature’ of theatre operate in less interactive and more traditional presentational models of performed research? Lincoln claims that through the presentation and witnessing of research-based theatre productions, “experience once lived becomes experience which others can now live, however temporarily” (cited in Mienczakowski 2009:325). Blair furthers this idea with her belief that the audiences’ imaginative faculties assist in “helping the viewers’ bodies imagine themselves inside the stories we tell” (2015:102).

I should note at this point in the discussion, that the interplay between empathy and vicarious imagining tends to work both on the outside audience members observing a theatrical presentation and within the theatrical process whereby participants/actors embody characters or roles. Referring to the latter point, Phillip Taylor (2003: 5) observed how through a participative community-based theatre project in New York (initiated in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks) the process created a ‘healing space’ for participants, who were granted the opportunity to vicariously imagine themselves into “the perspectives of others and gain entry points to different worldviews, perspectives which might even articulate why the events of that day of barbarity might have occurred” (2003: 5). Here, Taylor is referring to the ‘therapeutic’ function of theatre—healing insights that are enabled by the medium’s ability to allow both audiences and participants to empathetically amble in the shoes of the misunderstood ‘others’. It is interesting to note that in an interview with *Ulwembu* co-participant Mthombeni, when asking her what she thought the primary purpose of theatre was for her as a practitioner, she had replied with the

isiZulu word “iyalapha” (M. Mthombeni, 2017, group discussion. 24 March) which loosely translates as ‘therapeutic’.

Expanding on Taylor’s (2003) definitions of theatre as ‘therapeutic’, Mienczakowski claims that most acts of performance are inherently “therapeutic in intent and consumption” with health theatre (HT) being used as “a mode of therapeutic encounter” between actors and spectators (2009: 324). I will return to this discussion around both the inherent power and problematics of theatre offering ‘therapeutic encounters’ within the actor/audience exchange, but before I do, I would like to explore empathetic listening approaches often called upon in research-based theatre methodologies. Most methodologies in this field require participants to collect ethnographies and oral histories, which will later be crafted into a performance script. During this data collection process, empathy first emerges in the act and art of *listening*.

Empathetic Listening/Witnessing

In Stuart Fisher’s introduction to Farber’s (2008) book, she acknowledges the profound healing potential of theatre processes which prioritise listening. On Farber’s process, Stuart Fisher writes:

[H]er belief in the healing power of telling one’s story is inextricably bound up with the presence of a *listener* … it is not only essential for these stories to be told, but that they must also be listened to and acknowledged. This places a crucial demand on those of us who watch and perform these plays. For we, in turn also bear witness to the testimonies that emerge from these texts. (2008: 11)

It would be useful at this point to consider the two central acts of listening/witnessing involved in research-based theatre processes. The first group of listeners (as was the case with *Ulwembu*) are the actor-ethnographers interviewing a subject or person at the centre of the study—the transcription/translation of which, will later evolve into the script for the play. The second listening/witnessing act occurs through the audience experiencing the account relayed back to them via the actor-ethnographers’ performance.

In their case study of their research-based theatre production *Handle with Care?* Gray *et al.* reflect on how research informants who were living with metastatic breast cancer played an indispensable role in offering the rest of the research team “an empathic starting point” (2008: 142) into their field of enquiry. It was this ‘starting point’ that would prove essential in developing a play that would go on to instil an empathetic series of responses from health professionals tasked with treating patients diagnosed with this non-curable disease. Through the

initial process of bearing witness to these narratives, an empathetic identification with the other was forged, allowing participants to accurately grasp the lived complexities of the data that they had been tasked with translating into performance.

In their study, Gray *et al.* found that the arena of research-based drama can provide an “extraordinary vehicle” (2008: 143) in helping health professionals navigate the complex life and death predicaments that arise from working in the field of health care. The employment of empathetic listening approaches enabled health-care workers (the target audience of the play) to move past the mere technicalities and outcomes of treatment and into a more meaningful exchange with their patients. It is ‘empathy’ that Gray *et al.* argue is a “precondition for transformation of health care” (2008: 143). Similarly, it is through the communal act of listening and sharing stories that Mienczakowski believes that spectators become “conscious of the multiple, deep and interwoven facets of their relationship with the hierarchy of disempowerment” (2009: 324) and are moved to a place of “empathy rather than fear” (Mienczakowski 1997: 163).

I would tend to agree with the findings and responses of the above practitioners, believing that one of theatre’s primary roles is to offer research participants/performers and spectators a communal platform for engaging, listening and healing—even when such ‘healing’ occurs in people who have themselves not lived through the experience themselves. Should we consider this a cathartic cop out? I would argue that there is immense value in such compassionate forms of identification working to challenge and shift an audience’s prior assumptions and prejudices, and this is something I will delve into in greater detail in my analysis around the ‘empathetic pedagogic’ responses shared by our *Ulwembu* audiences. What is evident from the case studies mentioned thus far, is that for a therapeutic theatrical encounter to have any pedagogic effects, an empathetic openness needs to be seen as a prerequisite in a dialogic process of data collection and performance.

On Catharsis & Epiphany

I would like to return now to the discussion on the ‘therapeutic’ effects of research-based theatre. A therapeutic interaction can be seen to entail addressing and unpacking a problem with the intention to either heal or solve it, or arriving at some sort of acceptance. I will look more closely at two responses, which I will refer to as ‘epiphany’ and ‘catharsis’, as they have an important bearing on our understanding of empathy in the context of our research-based theatre production *Ulwembu*.

1.) **Epiphany:** Through the dialogic nature of therapeutic encounters, the patient, or in this instance audience member, may arrive at what is commonly termed a ‘Eureka’ or ‘AHA!’ moment. Such moments, I will refer to as epiphanies, or what Turner (cited in Denzin 2013: 4) terms “ruptures in the structure of daily life”. The epiphany is that feeling when something reveals itself with a startling and often unexpected clarity and which are otherwise referred to across research-based theatre literature as “existential turning-point moments” (Denzin 2013: 3-4) or “emancipatory insights” (Mienczakowski 1997: 163).

2.) **Catharsis:** Others might find that through externalising their struggles while being attended to by an attentive ear, they are able to achieve catharsis. The same catharsis, albeit vicariously experienced, is also possible through witnessing or listening to another’s story. In a more traditional sense of therapy, this is where the idiomatic term *‘to get things off one’s chest’* may emerge from. Augusto Boal assists us in defining catharsis by citing Bernay’s 1857 theory, claiming the word ‘catharsis’ was initially used as a “medical metaphor, a purgation which denotes the pathological effect on the soul, analogous to the effect of medicine on the body” (2008: 24–25). It was this ‘purgation’ that would create a welcome feeling of release in the patient, and a sensation described by Boal as “homeopathic” (2008: 27) in the sense that the “cure is brought about by the stimulus” (*ibid.*). Throughout Boal’s discussions on this subject, the catharsis that arises through the ‘telling’ becomes a substitute for real action, but in response to this, I would argue that the act of telling the story should be considered as a form of ‘action’ in itself.

Here I must differentiate between the catharsis that the original informant telling their story to the field worker/ethnographer may experience, and the catharsis or epiphanies potentially experienced by the audience when witnessing the retelling of such a story. Earlier I discussed the value of deep empathetic listening and the potential for healing that such a dialogue might promote in the informant who narrates their original story. I now turn to the catharsis and/or epiphany experience potentially available to the audience through their witnessing of the play itself. Specifically, the question arises as to how the ‘therapeutic’ nature of the theatrical experience translates, if at all, into change. While many applied theatre practitioners aspire to offering spectators a range of epiphanies or “emancipatory insights” (Mienczakowski 1997:163) the latter ‘cathartic’ response is viewed a little more sceptically.

The Cathartic Cop-out

One of the most influential practitioners in the realm of emancipatory theatre methodologies is Bertolt Brecht and his epic theatre, which was created to counteract the empathetic indulgences prevalent in more realistic theatre models of the time. Brecht believed such “emotional orgies” (Boal 2008: 85) were ultimately created to seduce spectators—via an empathetic identification with the protagonist—into submitting to the dominant ideological dictates of the ruling class. To counter this, Brecht developed an alienation technique in his theatre praxis known as *Verfremdungseffekt!*, which Boal defines as “to watch from a distance, without involving oneself, as one who observes, thinks and draws his or her own conclusions” (*ibid.*: xix). Brecht hoped that by making the familiar unfamiliar, spectators would remain outside the experience, and by the denouement be moved to “reflective, critical action, not only emotional catharsis” (Denzin 2011: 5).

Augusto Boal (2008) remained as sceptical as Brecht of these traditional Western theatre formulas and their ideological origins. Of particular concern to Boal was the spectator’s passive reception within the traditional Aristotelian messaging model of theatre, which persists in present day theatrical presentations. In this model, the historical emergence of the primacy of the playwright and the play script came to control and determine what could be uttered by the actors before the passive, accepting ears of the play-going public. According to Boal, an essential part of this “coercive” (2008: 34) strategy was the unscrupulous use of catharsis, woven into the tragic formulae with the desired effect of “purging” audiences of their “political deficiency” (2008: 29), while inspiring them towards more virtuous behaviour.⁶⁹

Boal goes on to describe “Aristotle’s coercive system of tragedy” (*ibid.*: 34), as a model still deeply entrenched in various forms of contemporary theatre practices and media. For Boal, “ideological penetration” (2008: 94) occurs through the vicarious identification audiences form with protagonists, which is at the heart of largely Western American narratives. The message reiterated in these narratives is that citizens need to abide by the rules of an unjust capitalist order or, like the tragic heros and heroines who dare to stray from the virtuous path, be rejected and discarded by it.

69 It is this same “coercive system” (Boal 2008: 98) that Boal’s methodology behind *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO) seeks to address by reframing audiences no longer as passive recipients, but as active and empowered ‘Spect-Actors’ (*ibid.*: 135), who, by drawing upon the challenges faced in their own lives, are able to form powerful collective counter-responses to the “imperialist interests” (*ibid.*: 83) disseminated through art. Boal argues that through his TO approach, the Aristotelian notion of catharsis is replaced with Brecht’s more radical and desirable outcome of “critical consciousness” (*ibid.*: 98).

As with Boal, Prentki (2015) remains cautious of the terms ‘therapeutic’ and ‘cathartic’ and the purgative roles they are purported to play in theatre. Prentki warns that in recent years too many uncritical applied theatre models have abandoned their emancipatory agendas to serve up patronising forms of “theatre therapy” to marginalised sectors of society instead (2015: 15).

Rather than inciting necessary critiques, these practices are “geared towards an agenda of domestication; helping those with ‘problems’ to fit back into society on society’s terms – ‘pro-social’ behavior” (Prentki 2015: 15). Bloom (2016) similarly argues against empathy’s selective biases and weaknesses when he writes:

Empathy is biased, pushing us in the direction of parochialism and racism. It is shortsighted, motivating actions that might make things better in the short term but lead to tragic results in the future. It is innumerate, favoring the one over many. It can spark violence; our empathy for those close to us is a powerful force for war and atrocity toward others. It is corrosive in personal relationships; it exhausts the spirit and can diminish the force of kindness and love.

(Bloom 2016: 9)

While Prentki, Bloom and Boal all offer valid criticisms around the use of empathy, catharsis and their combined powers of “pro-social” coercion (Prentki 2015: 15), they do not consider alternate narrative vantage points to the ideologically problematic ones posited above. Here, I refer to the meaning of empathy and catharsis in stories that remain housed within traditional play structures and playing spaces, yet subvert these structures by amplifying voices and concerns of the oppressed, while brazenly challenging the dominant ideologies perpetuated by the oppressor.⁷⁰

Much has been written with regards to the ineffectiveness and even dangers of unburdening or purging an audience through mere catharsis—or worse, mistaking catharsis for actual transformation. Audiences’ emotional identification and recognition of events depicted in theatre may be able to unearth powerful latent bodily responses and thoughts and feelings. But just how these emotive responses translate into action is largely determined by the lived experience or personal knowing of the individual spectator (Liehr *et al.* 2013).

It might be assumed from the above statement that empathetic identification is conditional, and that should the lives depicted on stage bear little resemblance to the “personal knowing” (*ibid.* 165) of the individual audience member, then the level of association and impact may be

⁷⁰ As South African apartheid protest theatre revealed in the 1970s and 1980s, an even greater awareness and ‘critical consciousness’ may arise by exploding and subverting traditional theatre structures from within rather than demolishing them and attempting to start afresh. The work of Athol Fugard, Barney Simon and Mbongeni Ngema are examples of practitioners who did just this.

diminished. This creates the perception that theatre with a transformative agenda needs to work closely with an audience, whose reality reflects that depicted on the stage or else all efficacy may be lost.

I am not entirely supportive of this argument, and believe that while an identification with related life experiences on stage is certainly helpful, it is not essential nor always desirable in creating an impactful exchange. For theatre to have any sort of ‘transformative’ effect, it needs to work at widening its scope and reach, rendering the largely ‘invisible’ lives of the oppressed, urgent and visible before the oppressor. This is alluded to by Bacon’s paper, *A Pedagogy for the oppressor: Re-envisioning Freire and critical pedagogy in contexts of privilege*, where he writes:

[H]istorically those in power control the systems that create, maintain, and reproduce the social order, this population is the linchpin of the system’s continuation. As such, pedagogies that explicitly explore the dynamics of oppression are deeply relevant among such groups, particularly in addressing the role that privilege plays in maintaining unjust systems. (2015: 229)

To incite any form of ‘change’, a large part of *Ulwembu*’s advocacy objective was to enable largely silenced and neglected narratives to be amplified and disseminated beyond the community of people who already identified and empathised strongly with them.

Theatre of the Oppressed... What about the Oppressor?

The idea of a ‘Theatre of the Oppressor’ forms part of the more recent critiques that emerged against Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, being that his praxis, to its detriment, excludes confronting and holding accountable the complicity of the oppressor. While a revolutionary societal overhaul is deeply desirable, it is neither a realistic nor imminently obtainable outcome. Should theatre then not be attempting to forge deeper, more insightful connections between the oppressor and oppressed (as interchangeable as these terms may be), with the intention to challenge and ultimately shift the hegemonic behaviours of the oppressor? By focusing exclusively on the oppressed in the Forum theatre format, Prentki claims we run the risk of “excusing those in positions of power in the status quo from having to change their attitudes and behaviors” (2015: 21). Furthermore, the role of the oppressor cannot be simply understood in terms of simplistic binaries and tropes like the fat-cat politician or sadistic policeman. As Prentki again explains, “one of us may move between oppressor and oppressed functions many times, even in a course of a single day” (*ibid.*).

Our own discoveries with addressing and featuring the absent oppressor in the play-making process of *Ulwembu* emerged not from the literature I have mentioned above but through and as a result of our own internal social-learning process. As I will further elaborate on in my analysis section (Chapter 5), the inclusion of the pedagogy for the oppressor (Bacon 2015) was one of the key insights and impacts of our Empatheatre process. It was within the early stages of our research that we realised that in order to attempt to empathetically shift the dominant perceptions around street-level drug addiction, the often-unconscious behaviours of the *oppressor* would need to be exposed and unpacked.

Catharsis & Audience Composition

For Prentki (2001), Mda (in Solberg 1999) and van Graan (2006), the pedagogical impacts and potential of theatre with a socially transformative imperative, largely boils down to the particular socio-economic positioning and positionality of the audience, and how catharsis often has the unintentional effect of absolving the oppressor from taking stock of their complicity in everyday acts of oppression. Prentki more clearly articulates the argument by encouraging us to look at the “way in which the composition of the audience affects the reception” (2001: 130).

In his discussion, Prentki (2001) states that the composition of the audience determines how a message or meaning is ultimately received. In the case of anti-apartheid protest theatre prevalent in the ‘70s and ‘80s in venues such as the Market Theatre, Prentki maintains that a majority of black ‘township’ audiences (the oppressed) viewed events portrayed in protest theatre as “a token of whether they would ultimately succeed in the struggle” (Prentki 2001: 124), whereas for a white liberal audience (the oppressors), the stakes were considerably lower. An ‘empathetic’ white audience may well have appreciated the heart-breaking acts of courage and defiance demonstrated by the black actors and, at the same time, felt that by virtue of attending the production, they were playing a vicarious role in validating the dissent exhibited on stage. A resounding ovation at the play’s denouement may well have been considered a sufficient show of political solidarity.

By living and momentarily suffering through another’s oppression, the audience member may well feel absolved—even ‘uplifted’—from having to play a further role in alleviating such injustices outside of the theatre complexes. This might well relate to what Blair (2015) says, when urging us not to immediately jump to the conclusion of equating ‘feeling’ with actual transformation. A problematic tendency, she elucidates as: “believing that, because we’re feeling something we label ‘empathetic’, we’re doing something ‘authentic’” (Blair, 2015. Para.9).

While Durden believes empathy can be a powerful and persuasive tool in applied theatre processes, useful in sparking “recognition” and “awareness”, she cautions, that such “awareness does not always translate into the action that is necessary for change” (2010: 24). Liehr *et al.* (2013) are likewise circumspect in claiming that an empathetic response from an audience can be deemed a catharsis that necessarily inspires change beyond the immediate theatre experience.

In many ways this thesis, and the inception of our theatre project *Ulwembu*, was inspired by Ayanda’s (see Prologue) simple but profound recollection. The empathetic epiphany that this narrative afforded me was enough to instigate a desire to know and understand more. Empathetic storytelling, as much of this discussion has explored, should aspire to sparking participant epiphanies or “emancipatory insights” (Mienczakowski 1997: 163), while steering clear of the manipulative route of ideological coercion. By utilising what Boal (2008: 85) termed “good empathy”, participants and spectators in a research-based theatre process, are able to, in moments, transcend societal divisions, foreground silenced voices, while enabling the oppressor to experience more tangibly how their behaviours impact and hinder others’ freedoms.⁷¹ Empathy is also a therapeutic tool that needs to be understood more as a ‘catalyst’ rather than the definitive outcome of a chosen applied theatre methodology.

I explore these insights further in the following Chapter 5, examining how offering participating practitioners and audiences empathetic insights into the various life-worlds of our characters would serve as one of the projects most significant pedagogical impacts.

⁷¹ Speaking on Brecht, Boal claimed “good empathy does not prevent understanding and, on the contrary, needs understanding precisely in order to avoid the spectacle’s turning into an emotional orgy and the spectator’s purging of his social sin” (2008: 85).

CHAPTER 5: Disentangling the Web



Sipho (Zenzo Msomi) is caught in the beam of a police officer's flashlight in a scene from *Ulwembu* at The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

We now move deeper into the web, returning to my research question's first area of focus with an analysis of *Ulwembu*'s pedagogic impacts, whereby I attempt to collate the discussions and discoveries explored over the course of this thesis. Thus far, I have uncovered a broad context of this field of theatre-making and looked at how this resonates with creation of our own research-based theatre production around street-level drug addiction. While many of my prior discussions have occurred in relative isolation, for this chapter, I will be analysing the pedagogic impacts of our project, reflecting iteratively on the various "parts" (Gadamer cited in Paterson & Higgs, 2005: 346) under investigation, connecting the threads of my 'hermeneutic web' in relation to my specific research questions posed in Part Two of Chapter 1.

Ulwembu, and the testing of our Empatheatre methodology, was born out of our team's belief that theatre—as a visceral and empathetic medium—can and should play a more sustained role in addressing the inequalities and injustices that exist within South African society. Throughout this part of my analysis, I intend to determine if, and how, our production was able to instigate or impact any forms of 'change' in relation to two dimensions or viewpoints. As previously stated, these are:

- 1.) *A view from the inside*: Here I will review the above question in relation to the 'micro' level, reflecting on my personal learnings as co-facilitator, writer and director on the

project as well as the experiences and insights shared by my co-investigators. I will evaluate our responses by focusing on the perceived ‘empathetic’ impacts of the project. How did the experience of co-creating *Ulwembu*—and the deep immersion in the research process—transform our understanding of street-level drug addiction and the way we intend to devise social justice theatre projects of this kind in the future? Related to this question, and of equal importance, is evaluating if the project managed to challenge the assumptions around ‘community-based theatre’ and whether The Big Brotherhood performers feel the process was able to relocate them from the perceived ‘margins’ to the ‘centre’ of the theatre industry in Durban.

- 2.) *A view from the outside:* I will examine the more external ‘macro’ pedagogical impacts of our project, evaluating the creative choices we made in shaping an empathetic advocacy strategy and how this impacted the audiences’ and participating institutions’ reception and responses to *Ulwembu*. Here, I will investigate whether our research-based theatre approach was able to challenge, shift and expand the thinking of our audiences and the institutions confronting street-level drug addiction.

In an attempt to clarify my intent—and to reinstate my point made in *The Research Focus* section of Chapter 1—I have chosen to use the term ‘pedagogical impacts’ (as opposed to ‘change’ and ‘transformation’) as the more definitive qualitative term. In continuing my discussion from Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I ask whether the empowering new ‘insights’, offered by the *Ulwembu* process and production to participants and audience members alike, should be considered contribution enough to the ‘cause’. Furthermore, I question how such “emancipatory insights” (Mienczakowski 1997: 163) manifest, if at all, and whether they reveal themselves as subtle shifts in prejudice or, more optimistically, seismic ruptures which incited more determined forms of action and intervention.

5.1 A View from the Inside



Desperate prayers from the church congregation during the painful detox of Sipho Mthembu (Zenzo Msomi) as his mother (Mpume Mthombeni) watches on.. The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

In order to examine the pedagogical impacts of *Ulwembu* on my co-participants, it is necessary to examine if (and how) the play-making process was perceived to ‘empower’. Here, I refer particularly to Mthombeni and The Big Brotherhood performers. The most adequate means to gauge this would be to first ascertain if co-participants felt they achieved a level of conscientisation (Freire 1996) or “critical consciousness” (Boal 2008: 98) around the subject matter at the heart of our exploration. Earlier, I defined the Freirean concept of conscientisation and examined how it functions within an applied theatre praxis. I did this by reference to the Byram and Moitse definition whereby they claimed conscientisation can be understood in the way a theatrical performance “becomes a mirror through which the people can see themselves, their social situation, and the problems they encounter, in a fresh and stimulating way” (cited in Mda 1993: 45). In attempting to establish this I will need to examine how, through the *Ulwembu* theatre-making process, participants were able to shift their prior perceptions and knowledge around the issue of street-level drug addiction. I ask if The Big Brotherhood actors and Mthombeni were able to re-examine their social reality and prior perceptions “in a fresh and stimulating way” (*ibid.*).

In my narrative around the making of our production in Chapter 1, I described how once the central issue/concern and parameters of research had been agreed upon, Mthombeni and The Big Brotherhood performers would operate as ethnographers, moving through their communities and

calling upon ethnographic research methods such as “participant observation” (O’Toole 2006: 401) and in situ interviews. The early involvement of the actor-ethnographers—who conducted and steered much of the research—led to what I believe were some of the *Ulwembu* process’s most enriching pedagogical outcomes.

Pedagogic Impacts on the *Ulwembu* Team

In this part of the inquiry, I draw from two recorded group interviews I conducted with the *Ulwembu* team in Durban on 15 December 2016 and 24 March 2017, as well as comments from post-show talk-back sessions between audiences and the team in April 2016. For The Big Brotherhood actors Msomi and Cele to develop their characters, the process required that they befriend and speak with users in KwaMashu, ascertaining what led them to drug use in the first place. As was the case with Mthombeni’s experience of interviewing policewomen for Portia, these earlier interviews helped them to challenge assumptions they held around the plight of drug users in their own communities. As Msomi remarked during a post-performance talk-back with the audience in April 2016:

There’s a line that ended up in the play that says: “How can someone steal wedding rings from a corpse’s fingers at family funerals?” and that’s the sort of belief we had before starting out. But the more we sat with these users, the more we understood what they were going through.
(Z. Msomi, 2016, group discussion. 8 April)

Mthombeni recounted that her attitude was similar to that of Msomi’s before the research phase of the project commenced, and it was only in speaking and listening deeply to people in Umlazi that she was able to contest her previously held prejudices. For Msomi, the research process offered him revelatory insights through the people he befriended and ended up portraying on stage. Critical to the emergence of these “emancipatory insights” (Mienczakowski 1997: 163), Msomi claims, was developing the fostering of a deeper form of empathy. On this he commented:

Ulwembu changed and transformed the whole team from just doing a job to injecting a love for what we do deep into our hearts. With this project, came a new understanding of the word empathy, as much as we understood empathy before, we now see that this is now more than a job, we are empathising with the people who we live and work amongst. (Z. Msomi, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

Similarly, Fisher praises the “trust” and “respect” (Farber 2008: 13) that Farber’s testimonial theatre was able to foster with her informants, claiming that it is the depth of her connections which ultimately “safeguards the integrity of the work” (*ibid.*). Certainly, this resonates with our

learnings on *Ulwembu*, and how the ‘intimacy’ and ‘respect’ forged between informants and *Ulwembu* practitioners translated into a more complex understanding of their character’s inner-worlds and lived realities and the nature of addiction itself. Developing the capacity for deep empathetic listening, I would argue, was an essential tool in opening up the *Ulwembu* team to such discoveries. Co-facilitator on *Ulwembu*, McGarry, shared in an interview:

Listening is one of the most emancipatory things you can give. Listening is a gift. You are gifting someone your attention. But you also become a different type of listener – an active, empathetic listener. It’s all about them, not about you. Most people we worked with were so vulnerable. It had never been about them. That’s probably why they are users in the first place.
(Geyde 2018)

For Mthombeni, taking the time to listen, and the “intimacy” these sorts of interactions fostered during the interviewing process, ensured a certain amount of accountability when it came to later honouring her informants’ realities on the stage. Here Mthombeni comments:

It’s a different thing having a conversation with person because you connect with your eyes, with your soul, and you are listening and that person is listening to you and all the time you are thinking, I am going to have to go and play this character on the stage. I’m going to need to do justice to their story. (M. Mthombeni, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

In an attempt to understand the extent and depth of conscientisation that occurred in the *Ulwembu* team, it is helpful to examine how the team’s empathetic faculties developed through engaging with informants (and the subsequent embodiment of these narratives on stage) would enable participants to interact more meaningfully in the ‘real-life’ contexts of their own communities.

For Mthombeni, a transformation not only occurred around her perceptions of addiction, but also through her friendships with a variety of policewomen she had met while researching her character Portia. These interactions, Mthombeni claims, offered her a deeper respect for women working within the local police force. Explaining to an audience member at a post-performance talk-back in 2016 that it was in listening to people in her community that her perceptions were transformed, Mthombeni stated:

I was so negative towards people who are using drugs. I was like what’s wrong with these people? I used to think they should be arrested, I was so judgmental, but as soon as I listened to my neighbour and his story and to users who told me why they started smoking, it really touched me. I don’t know whether it’s because they are my neighbours or because we grew up together but when you begin to understand things and people close to you and you start to look at them with different eyes. (M. Mthombeni, 2016, group discussion. 8 April 2016)

Mthombeni also articulated the extent and depth of her own learning and how this had enabled her to interact more confidently with members of her community, when she remarked:

Today I was talking to my neighbour, she told me about the neighbour's son who died in KwaMashu because of whoonga ... If I hadn't done this project, I would never be interested to know what happened to the boy. I wouldn't have asked anything. I would have just been quiet and of the opinion that I was before I started the project...I can confidently say my whole way of looking into the drug issue has totally changed. (M. Mthombeni, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

Nxumalo likewise tells me that his experience of researching and developing the migrant spaza shop owner, Emmanuel, shifted his own prejudices around foreigners living in his surrounds. He commented:

I felt these emotions myself while playing this character and even felt like a person from Mozambique ... After the research, I finally understood, I understood what was going on with these people. These people from Mozambique, from places like Nigeria, coming here in South Africa. They are not here to destroy something, or take away things from us, they are here trying to make a living for their families back home. (S. Nxumalo, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

From the above analysis of my co-participants' reflections, it would be fair to assume that Byram and Moitse's (cited in Mda 1993: 45) description of the notion 'conscientisation' amongst participants of the group was attained in some form or other, with *Ulwembu*'s grounded, action-led research process affording participants the chance to comprehensively re-examine and even re-imagine "their social situation, and the problems they encounter, in a fresh and stimulating way" (*ibid.*).

Beyond Empathy

While the reflexive, empathetic listening that occurred throughout our research was a pre-requisite for moving our team towards a collective "critical consciousness" (Boal 2008: 98), here I refer back to Prentki's (2001) claims (first noted in Chapter 3) that "consciousness-raising without action cannot move people beyond protest" (2001: 133). In the same discussion, I reframed Kruger's (1999: 210) and Prentki's (2001) critiques of conscientisation into a question related to our own project. My question read: *How/did Ulwembu raise the 'consciousness' of both collaborators and audience members, beyond the immediate arena of the theatre-making/performance space, in ways that challenged deeper and more 'entrenched scripts of*

thoughts and behaviour? That is, did the process incite “action” (Prentki 2001: 133) in co-participants beyond the relaying of insights through the vehicle of our play?

During my interview with the *Ulwembu* participants, the word ‘empathy’ featured frequently in the group’s reflections and can be seen to be one of the predominant pedagogic impacts (and catalysts) of the project thus far. As with Blair (2015), Durden (2010) reminds us that while empathy can be a powerful and persuasive tool in applied theatre processes, useful in sparking both “recognition” and “awareness” (Durden 2010: 24), she cautions that such “awareness does not always translate into the action that is necessary for change” (*ibid*).

In order to explore to what extent the Empatheatre process moved co-participants from avoidance to action and ignorance to insight, I will examine if (and how) the “emancipatory insights” (Mienczakowski 1997:163) participants gleaned from the process, translated into more direct forms of action and interaction in their everyday lives and careers. I will undertake this analysis through three separate categories of questions:

- 1). **From protest to action:** How did the process empower participants with knowledge and information that they would be able to directly use to assist and benefit people in their immediate communities? How were the team enabled to challenge the deeper and more “entrenched scripts of thoughts and behavior” (Kruger 1999: 210) in their own communities?
- 2). **Unexpected pedagogic outcomes of the process:** What were the more unexpected pedagogic outcomes? How did the process enable co-participants to develop and hone useful skill-sets on their own terms?
- 3). **Repositioning of The Big Brotherhood:** Was the process able to challenge the negative assumptions around “community theatre” and reposition The Big Brotherhood company in their communities and the theatre industry at large.

From Protest to Action

I have already explored aspects of the pedagogic impacts of the process on individual participant’s assumptions and prejudices. But it is also important to explore to what extent the participants’ involvement as “critical co-investigators” (Freire 1996: 53) enabled them to develop “social actions on their own terms” (Prentki 2015: 60). This section examines co-participants’ reflections on how their learnings manifested beyond mere personal epiphanies and well-crafted performances on the stage, into a sense of being agents of transformation within their own communities.

In Chapter 3, I discussed how conscientisation needs to be understood less as the *holy grail* of participatory processes and more as a concerted long-term process (Kruger 1999). Both Cele and Msomi shared with me that as a result of *Ulwembu*'s data collection process, The Big Brotherhood actors have formed and sustained friendships with informants that have outlasted the theatre-making process itself. Msomi elaborates:

It's much easier now for [the users] to approach us and talk to us ... Even if they don't have problems, even if they just want to talk to you, they know that they can just sit with you and talk like a friend, which is something that never happened before. If we hadn't done this show and the research then we would not have developed these relationships in our communities. (Z. Msomi, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

Mthombeni spoke about the lasting relationships she was able to form, as well as the range of useful information she now has at her disposal, knowledge that has inspired her to "get involved in conversations on the subject" (M. Mthombeni, 2017, group discussion. 24 March) and offer guidance and insight to people seeking it. Msomi agrees that the process has equipped him to speak more confidently to the complexities of the problem, and how he now finds himself frequently sought after for advice by people in his neighbourhood.

The work I feel we are able to do outside of the play is not only with the drug users but other community members who hold the same attitudes and opinions that we had before making this play. Now we are able to correct them and say, "Why would you do that? Why would you look at the users like that?" We now have all this information and research that we are able to share. I believe we are starting to change the communities' minds, to shift their perceptions around whoonga. (Z. Msomi, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

For Nxumalo, the process not only enabled him to speak more confidently with people but also allowed him to form a far broader and more complex 'macro' understanding of addiction. Such insights, he shared, have inspired him to support users in his neighbourhood, many of whom are attempting to rehabilitate themselves. In recent months, Nxumalo has provided a safe house and counselling for users, many of whom visit him to either inform him of their progress or seek further guidance.

Then [the user] told me that we mustn't take the job we are doing with *Ulwembu* lightly. It is helping many people. Now many boys who are users in my neighbourhood come and visit me to talk. They know that when they come to my home they'll find a friend who will not judge them for smoking and who they can come to and ask questions, they can ask how can I do this or what are the options for rehabilitating themselves. They tell me we have done a lot for them. (S. Nxumalo, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

The depth of my co-participants' knowledge around whoonga use and addiction enabled them to serve as educators in their respective communities, challenging people's perceptions through more "sustained social interactions" (Kruger 1999: 201). Such interactions continue after four years of the project running, since its inception in 2014. My findings demonstrate that the team's collective conscientisation led to participants getting involved in the issue on a level that significantly exceeded the anticipated advocacy outcomes of the project itself.

Unexpected Pedagogic Impacts of the Process

Language Proficiency

One of the earliest questions around the production was who our target audience would be, and how this would determine the choice of language our play would be performed in. We had intended for *Ulwembu* to be inclusive and accessible to all who would see it, yet our concern was that with such a diverse audience base, an exclusively isiZulu or English production, would prove too limiting. The Big Brotherhood have been working largely in English since the inception of their company—a choice the group have made to ensure their work is able to connect with audiences 'outside' of their immediate communities. Here it should be acknowledged that in order to break into 'professional' theatre circles, Community-based theatre groups often feel the need to work in English to ensure their work is able to reach broader audiences. Yet, while The Brothers were determined to perform mostly in English, Mthombeni, McGarry and I, insisted on incorporating as much isiZulu as possible, so as not to compromise the source narratives' nuances and specificities.

As the actors grew more comfortable in performances, we would begin to experiment by shifting the play's language ratio of isiZulu/English to speak to the dominant demographic of each audience⁷². Theatre practitioner Yael Farber (2008: 26) enforces many of my own thoughts around the positionality and merging of languages (English and isiZulu), and the necessity for theatre-makers to foreground the use of indigenous South African languages on South African stages, when she states:

There's a fundamental connection between the psyche of the country and the languages the people speak. The denigrating of indigenous language through colonialism is a psychic violence. It was central to these three plays that authentic indigenous language be intrinsic to

⁷² When touring to township communities the production would largely take place in 70% isiZulu and 30% English but when running at theatres around the country, this ratio would be reversed in favour of English.

the texts. When an actor speaks in their vernacular, the actor is deep in their integrity, while the audience is momentarily an ‘outsider’ who misses out. When the actor then breaks from vernacular, and returns to English-the audience no longer takes this for granted, but is aware that this storyteller is reaching out in a language imposed on them which is a profoundly generous act. (Farber 2008: 26)

Khumalo validates Farber’s claims, when he confessed in an interview that for a large part of his life he had harboured a deep resentment for white people and having to speak and perform in the English language. (V. Khumalo 2017, group discussion. 24 March). It was during this discussion around language with the team, that I came to realise how, as a co-facilitator and director on the project, I often took for granted what a daunting task it was for participants like Nxumalo and Ngubane to stand before audiences and perform lines in a language that was not their own.

Throughout the improvisation and rehearsal process, Nxumalo in particular had struggled, appearing anxious whenever having to perform before the rest of the team. At the time, I had failed to acknowledge that this was owing to the fact that he was embarrassed about his English abilities. Such anxieties were further compounded when it came to learning the English lines (and having to learn to pronounce words like ‘xenophobia’) only to arrive at rehearsals to discover the script had been rewritten and he would have to start the learning process again.

The anxiety both Nxumalo and Ngubane felt over speaking English in the preliminary research phases was again experienced during media interviews. Yet, they also shared that realising they were being understood within these situations offered them a tremendous sense of personal accomplishment and pride over the course of the *Ulwembu* process. Ngubane related how he was able to overcome such challenges on multiple occasions, with the most significant occurring during an interview with a white social worker:

One day, I was sent to speak to a social worker. I was praying the whole way to the interview, saying “God, please can I only have to speak to black people for these interviews.” When I arrived there, I found a white woman, and I told her: “I know I have to speak but I don’t know what I’m going to say because my English is poor.” I ended up talking to the social worker for more than two hours, and I ended up speaking, sharing information, and she was understanding me the whole time, and when we finished, I said “Yes... yes... yes... I speak English like this!” Sometimes it is a blessing to be under pressure. (P. Ngubane 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

I was certain that in The Big Brotherhood’s post-project reflections that the use of English in our creative process might have been considered one of the projects failings, but Nxumalo and

Ngubane both claim that this aspect offered them one of the most invaluable outcomes of the process. Over the duration of *Ulwembu*, both these performers had used the process as an opportunity to practice and improve on their proficiency in English, developing a skill that would have a more practical application for them, beyond the time-line of our project.

Mentorship & Acting Skills

Earlier in this Chapter, in the section looking at the pedagogic impacts of research-based theatre on my co-participants, a large portion of the group spoke about how serving dual role of researcher/actor in the research-based theatre processes enabled them to craft more complex and nuanced portrayals of their characters. All of the actors had agreed that the methodology we had refined together was one they would continue to apply on future projects. Nxumalo cites the process, and support given to him by the group, as something that has greatly enriched his confidence in his abilities on the stage:

I was not an actor before I came here. What I was doing before, was just pretending to be the actor but in *Ulwembu* I experienced so many things and I now feel I know exactly what acting is, what it means to be and feel, what somebody else feels or experiences. (S. Nxumalo 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

Nxumalo also asserted that participating in all facets of theatre-making on *Ulwembu* (from research, scriptwriting and performance) has equipped him with a variety of new skills. As with Mthombeni, Ngubane stated that the research process on *Ulwembu* taught him that it is far more enriching to be involved in a production from an early stage, in researching, shaping and collaborating on the characters one will end up portraying on the stage. He also cited the acquisition of a new skill during the *Ulwembu* process as a useful advantage, stating:

I've realised that it doesn't profit me as an actor when the script is just sent to me. It's a very different experience when you start with the research, doing it yourself. Now I can call myself an actor while at the same time again I have many other skills to work with. (P. Ngubane 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

Integral to the groups' theatrical learning and development on this project was the participation of a more experienced actress like Mthombeni. Watching Mthombeni assume this mentorship role while developing her character of Portia was a daily 'master class' and tended to inspire the younger members of the team to delve deeper in shaping characters of their own.

Re-positioning of The Big Brotherhood

The Big Brotherhood co-participants have always maintained a strong sense of social justice in the theatre they create. During my research, when I had asked the group what they perceived theatre's role or primary function to be, they had replied that its purpose is to convey an educational message through an entertaining and engrossing story with characters that are both 'accessible' and 'true to life'. Cele had insisted that theatre should be 'political', while Khumalo cited its power in 'conveying new information' to audience members. For Mthombeni, theatre's primary purpose is to offer audiences 'iyalapha'⁷³, while Msomi believed theatre enables young people to ask and answer questions they were too afraid, or embarrassed, to ask their parents or teachers. While both The Big Brotherhood actors and Mthombeni agreed that theatre serves an important function, they expressed frustration that their profession is largely misunderstood in their own communities, with their plays often dismissed as a 'sketch'. Msomi claims that black performing artists continue to face such setbacks in the industry as a result of South Africa's enduring apartheid legacy:

There isn't a culture of theatre going, or paying for theatre amongst black audiences. You can imagine how hard it is trying to sell a product to people when they don't know what the product is in the first place. (Z. Msomi, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

South African community theatre is associated with amateur theatre collectives situated in South African 'townships'. Such collectives are considered to serve what academic Marek Spitzok von Brisinski sees as "an important social and educational function" (2003: 123), assisting with the transferal of skills from older to younger members of the community, while initiating processes that empower members "to better understand their history and themselves" (*ibid*). Yet in contemporary South Africa 'community theatre' is often considered by more senior artists a limiting term, frequently indiscriminately applied to any theatre troupe emerging from a South African township.

When speaking to practitioners hailing from these groups, many of the more experienced performers complained that the title tends to maintain their isolation from mainstream theatre spaces, relegating them to the same category (and pay bracket) as amateur performers. Van Erven enforces this idea, claiming that while community theatre is socially engaged and has a prolific output and support base, owing to its geographic isolation, it is largely overlooked "by inner-city elites, policy-makers and by cultural commentators" (van Erven 2001: 27). Acknowledging this

⁷³ Therapeutic experiences.

ongoing form of marginalisation, Prentki (2001) urges South African theatre practitioners to work hard at subverting the binaries between limiting terms like ‘community’ and ‘mainstream’, ‘developmental’ and ‘traditional’ and in the process set about reimagining what theatre is and can be. He writes:

...the existing binaries of mainstream and alternative, formal and community theatre, need to be subverted and replaced by an understanding of the ways in which theatre, across a whole range of contexts, has the power to be developmental in the sense of moving its participants and audiences from one position, one attitude, one pattern of behaviour, one consciousness, to another. (Prentki 2001: 119)

In his paper *Rethinking Community Theatre: Performing arts communities in post-apartheid South Africa*, Spitzok von Brisinski contests the label ‘community theatre’, citing the term’s problematic “historical implications” and in its place, he proposes the use of “performing arts communities” (2003: 117). The Big Brotherhood themselves echo this call for recognition. Whilst they might have emerged as a ‘community theatre’ group, they requested that after fifteen years of experience their group be referenced in my thesis as a ‘theatre company’ and not a ‘community theatre’ group.

Here, I am interested in understanding if the *Ulwembu* process, and its reception, was to have any effect in contesting the term ‘community theatre’ as well as the widely-held misconceptions harboured by many of the performers’ family members and peers. I should mention that all the members of The Big Brotherhood are over thirty with ample experience in theatre-making.

Speaking about the association with community theatre, Msomi admits:

It’s become frustrating for us because you get to a point where your work is seen as amateur because of the ‘community theatre’ title we have inherited. When people are introduced to you, and hear that you are a ‘community theatre group’, they immediately assume your work is not up to a professional standard, which is not the case. (Z. Msomi, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

The Big Brotherhood members have mostly come to find the community theatre label patronising, claiming that it limits them in terms of exposure and earning potential. Cele, visibly annoyed by my mention of the term, shakes his head in dismay:

If you can notice, this term called ‘community theatre group’ is only referred to black communities. ... Every time, when you refer to a black production, then it’s like jaaaaaa that’s community theatre. Or am I wrong? ... How come the term is never associated with white

people⁷⁴? We all come from communities of some sort don't we? ... Art and theatre comes from all sorts of communities. (N. Cele, 2016, group discussion. 15 December)

The Big Brotherhood members claim an adequate portion of their incomes is derived from their theatre work and performances. As a vocation, it is not just an after-hours hobby or 'passion project' but a career choice, which each participant takes very seriously. Msomi's belief is that the term 'community theatre' is often misused, and does not wish for community theatre to be frowned upon given the opportunities it affords many young, black artists who are unable to train at more formal and costly institutions.

As Khumalo went on to explain, local cultural bodies and organisations understand the power they hold over supposed 'community-based' artists and tend to wield the term inconsistently to suit their various mandates. A few years ago, The Playhouse Company in Durban told the group that owing to their age and experience in the industry, they were no longer eligible to apply for 'community theatre' or 'developmental' programs funded by the organisation. Yet, last year, when The Brothers were invited by The Playhouse Company to tour *Ulwembu* around 'rural' KZN schools, in their contractual negotiations with producers, each performer was offered a basic weekly salary that was more in line with those paid to community theatre groups. When the actors researched and requested mid-level industry fees—on a tier with their ages and level of experience—The Playhouse reasoned that this was not within their budget as *Ulwembu* was considered a 'developmental project'. The negotiation resulted in The Big Brotherhood actors having to accept the initial low wage offer, as they were not in a financial position to protest by walking away from a month's worth of income.

It would seem The Big Brotherhood exist hovering in a somewhat tenuous professional/semi-professional limbo. A large part of governmental funding is channelled to so-called 'development projects' aimed at enhancing skills within communities, which, due to age and experience, the group no longer seem to qualify for. Yet, with the 'community theatre' label still attached to their work, it is hard for them to be acknowledged as professional role-players within the local industry and command the same opportunities (and pay) as performers of a similar age and experience.

Khumalo summarises the conundrum:

⁷⁴ Cele raises a valid point. I launched my own theatre-making career in 2005 without having studied formally at an academic or arts institution. After my first play *Tin Bucket Drum* (2005) received a favourable reception on the fringe at Grahamstown's National Arts Festival, I was considered a professional theatre-maker by my peers and the industry alike. The reception of the work on a national platform seemed to legitimise me in eyes of the audience and the theatre fraternity. I did not have to fend off labels of being an 'amateur' over the fact I had not emerged from, or studied under, one of the more established universities or art schools.

The painful thing is that we went from a community group from KCAP and went to Playhouse, they then said “guys you not allowed to work here anymore because you are not a community theatre group” ... They said The Big Brotherhood won't be under the development projects or something because they ... are no longer a community theatre group. And the question is who are we? (V. Khumalo, 2016, group discussion. 15 December)

My interest was then to ascertain if the *Ulwembu* process helped to challenge and shift The Big Brotherhood's frustrations articulated above. That is, did this process grant the group exposure and assist in countering the ‘community theatre’ label that they were so adamant to disassociate themselves from. Secondly, how had our process sought to answer Prentki's (2001) call for theatre-makers to forge performance platforms that reposition “closed communities” (2001: 120) and marginalised narratives at the forefront of national conversations.

In our interviews, The Brothers all claimed that their involvement in *Ulwembu* has raised their status and visibility in the industry; with Khumalo listing front-page media coverage, positive reviews, sold-out performances, ongoing national tours and wins for the *Ulwembu* cast at the 2016 *Durban Theatre Awards*, as an indication that the group is starting to be given the recognition outside of their more immediate communities. For Msomi, the visibility of The Big Brotherhood's participation in local institutions such as the Urban Futures Centre, presence on prominent national theatre stages, as well as the positioning of each performer as local pioneers in the field of research-based theatre, has enabled them to adequately distance themselves from the ‘community theatre’ label. On this, Khumalo remarked:

The fact that we are competing ... in the *Durban Theatre Awards*, that means we are no longer a community theatre group; and the fact that we have been nominated in 8 categories ... that we won five awards, also means we are no longer the community group. (V. Khumalo, 2016, group discussion. 15 December)

The Brothers feel the exposure *Ulwembu* has given their company has allowed people in the industry (and their communities) to witness the extent and power of their craft, and challenge their assumptions of them being ‘sketch’ or amateur theatre enthusiasts.

My Role as Co-Facilitator on *Ulwembu*



The Big Brotherhood actors recreate the scene where Sipho (Zenzo Msomi) is arrested by police for director Neil Coppen. The Denis Hurley Centre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Colwyn Thomas.

I will now be reflecting on my own positioning and role as a co-facilitator on *Ulwembu*. While both Mthombeni and the actors from The Big Brotherhood were situated inside the communities of our research, McGarry and I were located as researcher ‘outsiders’. Over this discussion, I would like to examine how I attempted to navigate the more problematic aspects of my ‘outsider’ status and address my positionality as a white, English speaking male on the project. I will also record some of the pedagogical impacts that emerged from these approaches. In Chapter 3, I attempted to establish the ‘ideal’—or at least more preferable—positioning of a facilitator in a research-based theatre methodology. In my summary of this discussion, I concluded that to minimise the ‘tyrannical’ (Chinyowa, 2015) potential of the outside facilitator figure in applied theatre practices, four factors should be considered. Over the course of this analysis, I will examine these insights in relation to my own positioning on the project, drawing on my reflections on the playmaking process combined with iterative insights from the literature, which will be supported by further feedback from my collaborators.

- 1.) Minimal ‘outside’ institutional interference and predetermined outcomes are preferable. Even when an outside facilitator works ‘autonomously’, they should remain vigilant to how positionality, power and privilege have the ability to shape—and skew—research.**

In a section of my literature review titled *Positionality & Power*, I discussed how positionality, in more recent years, has come to be understood as “multidimensional” (Rowe 2014: 3) and that a “multiplicity of perspectives” (Lewis cited in Merriam *et al.* 2001: 411) is actively encouraged. In the same discussion, I also looked at how the positions of *insider* and *outsider*—depending on the nature of the research situation—fluctuate on a continuum, providing varying advantages and disadvantages at different stages in the process.

The notion of *transparency*—with our team members openly discussing our privileges, access and agencies—was very useful in addressing the often unconscious or implicit hierarchies that play out in participatory research processes. Rowe asserts that such hierarchies can be actively acknowledged and addressed by “continually bringing them to the forefront for discussion … seeking to redress power imbalances that disenfranchise or minimize the voice of key participant groups” (2014: 4).

From the outset, McGarry and I were aware that—as two, non-isiZulu speaking, white men—entering into certain research scenarios alongside The Brothers or Mthombeni would compromise the level of trust and intimacy that the actor-ethnographers were carefully fostering with informants. In an open discussion with the team, it was identified that our strengths as co-researchers resided in being able to access institutions which would aid in widening the scope of our enquiry, while securing future funding for the roll-out of the project. That is, as a group, we decided to strategically ‘capitalise’ on the privileges our respective positionalities afforded us, leveraging hegemonic biases in our favour. This was evident in me drawing on my relationship with the Denis Hurley Centre (DHC)⁷⁵ and with McGarry enrolling as a postdoctoral researcher at the Urban Futures Centre, connecting our team to an expansive new network of researchers, police officers, government officials and policy-makers.

I would agree with Merriam *et al.*’s claims, that while the insider status of research is often seen as more “truthful” and “authentic” (2001: 411), such exclusivity and intimacy may deliver data that is inherently subjective and “too close to the culture to be curious enough to raise provocative questions” (*ibid.*). As outsider facilitators, armed with our “curiosity with the unfamiliar” (Merriam *et al.* 2001: 411), McGarry and I came to understand that one of our primary roles on the project would be to challenge our participants, as they were challenging us, to think more broadly, engage more deeply, and ask more ‘provocative questions’ around what appeared on the surface as ‘everyday’ or overly familiar. In the same way, The Brothers and

⁷⁵ The DHC premises would come to house our project’s meeting and rehearsal space.

Mthombeni challenged some of the institutional assumptions around research that reconceptualised the role of actor/researcher in applied theatre practice.

Drawing on our respective insider/outsider access and contacts as a team would enable us to educate one another in different aspects and arenas of addiction, while collectively developing a “broader knowledge” (Prentki 2015: 81) of the problem itself. This transdisciplinary research approach (McGregor 2015)—where insights were drawn from a diverse range of informants and institutions—would be reflected in the writing of *Ulwembu*’s play-text, whereby we resolved to adopt a “multiple perspective” (Saldaña 2003: 222) character approach. Drawing on our combined strengths as a research team allowed us to grasp the more pervasive ‘macro’ (social, historical and economic) roots of addiction and avoid perpetuating the quick-fix ‘micro’ solutions—or what Prentki called the patronising “pro-social”, “agenda[s] of domestication” (2015: 15).

I assert that the ‘uncomfortable’ realities of such obvious imbalances of privilege need to be acknowledged, confronted and, as much as possible, transformed to benefit the rest of the team in collaborations such as ours. If one has been granted access to institutions and funding avenues by virtue of privilege (as McGarry and I had), one is also granted the opportunity to ensure the inclusion of those who have been excluded from participating in similar opportunities in the past and present. We must resist the tendency to stand as gatekeepers—whether consciously or not—and rather work to wrench open the gates so that others may have access to the platforms, facilities and institutions that are often rendered inaccessible.

To reiterate an earlier point foregrounded by Mda (1993), facilitators need to work towards eventually rendering themselves unnecessary in the process, thus the tenets of “sustainability” and “skills transferal” (1993: 20) are crucial to the exchange between co-facilitators and participants. After *Ulwembu* had run for a year or so, we collectively decided that the financial and administrative matters of the show would be handed over to The Big Brotherhood theatre company. However, our absence in financial negotiations opened up a range of complexities we had not anticipated. We soon discovered that without the involvement of McGarry and myself in these negotiations, The Brothers were open to exploitation when it came to wage and budgetary negotiations. Upon reflection, our exit strategy—owing to our varying positionalities on the project—was more complex and fraught than we had initially imagined and in order to ensure the members of the team received the fair rate, we would need to remain part of the negotiations with parties wishing to produce the production elsewhere. The complexities of how race and class in South Africa work to exclude and exploit black actors moving into professional theatre spaces is

an issue that needs to be challenged and requires further confrontation. Personally, it was an important learning on how the best-intended plans can unravel in the face of structural injustice and inequalities, both within the specific field of theatre in South Africa and society at large.

2.) When defining parameters of research alongside co-participants, the facilitator should refer to the ‘bottom-up’ approach and ensure the research parameters encompass both micro and macro issues facing the community.

Using Lea’s “composite approach” (2012: 62), explored in Chapter 3, enabled an acknowledgment of our individual strengths and limitations, and a sense of co-producing, that assisted in some ways to flattening power relations during the process. Open and honest conversation across all of our creative strategising was necessary to achieve this.

My designation as playwright, dramaturge and later, director, was decided upon by the group, and no member of our team ever assumed a role or responsibility in the process without the collective decision to assign such positions. Belliveau (2015a) notes that while research-based theatre approaches may begin “without a clear designation of theatre leadership roles” (2015a: 11) and it is only later through the identification of collaborator interests and strengths, that such roles become more clearly defined. As I was a playwright with some level of experience and proficiency in the field of research-based theatre, I was tasked to transform our many ideas into a workable first draft of the script. Yet throughout the process, my co-participants remained deeply involved in determining the direction our narrative and characters would take.

By exploring the issue through “a bottom-up” (Kerr 1995: 149) approach, we were all placed as “critical co-investigators” (Freire 1996: 62) and engaged in an evolving dialogue around our findings. But more than this, I would argue it was the deep respect and trust that developed over the process, that ultimately ensured the success and longevity of our endeavour. In our discussion, Cele had noted how the collective team ethos and commitment allowed him to feel as if he was contributing both consistently and equally to the outcomes of the project:

There was no one in this project who was in power or holding the power. In every session we did, we would all have a turn to speak. Even Dylan, when he worked with us on gathering the stories, it was always about reflecting on how and what we felt though the research we were getting. (N. Cele, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

Nxumalo supported Cele’s claims, stating that no one in the project viewed themselves as ‘superior’ and that even when I had moved from co-participant into the more defined role of director, my interventions never felt “overpowering” (S. Nxumalo, 2017, group discussion. 24

March). He also admitted that the collaborative openness of the process was initially unsettling for him, as it differed substantially from the more defined and standard theatre-making hierarchies he was used to. As with Cele, Msomi says he felt that everyone shared a combined sense of “pride and ownership” (Z. Msomi, 2017, group discussion. 24 March) from the outset of the project as we were all clearly located as “equal” (*ibid.*) stakeholders. For Ngubane, the depth of the company’s friendship, and sense of inclusion, was felt in the smaller gestures and rituals that the team collectively participated in. For Ngubane, this equality was further manifest in incidents where everyone, including McGarry and myself, collectively took accountability and would apologise for the shortcomings of an individual member. For Mthombeni, my role as director meant that she was “pushed” (M. Mthombeni, 2017, group discussion. 24 March) to excavate new depths of her character, and my creative guidance and rigour were perceived as positive contributors rather than controlling and authoritative ones.

When analysing equality and positionality on *Ulwembu*, it is necessary to consider Mthombeni’s experience as the only female participant on the team. As I have mentioned previously, The Big Brotherhood were already established as a collective of five male-actors and from my preliminary research on whoonga, I had learnt that there was a misconception around the substance only impacting vulnerable young men. Mthombeni’s considerable involvement and input would enable us to offer a more inclusive exploration of our topic by including marginalised female perspectives. Nevertheless, within the uneven ratio male/female ratio of our team, I wanted to know if Mthombeni felt the power dynamic favoured or foregrounded the male perspectives. Mthombeni admits that she was initially uncertain, having worked on past productions where the majority of male performers felt the constant need to “assert themselves … and take-over [the creative process]” (M. Mthombeni, 2017, group discussion. 24 March). But shortly after the *Ulwembu* process began, she claims she felt that her gender was not something she needed to consider further.

I never felt like I was the weakest link in the team when it came to my gender. There was never a point when I was made to consider the fact that I was a woman in this process. That never really crossed my mind. It was just us, just a group of human beings working together, trying to make sense of this tragedy and speak to as many people as possible with our play.
(M. Mthombeni, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

From the above insights, I would agree with Belliveau’s (2015a) claims that the collaborative model of research-based theatre is a powerful way to subvert hierarchies that tend to characterise more conventional creative processes. In processes driven and determined by participants, Belliveau (2015a: 11) claims “consensus and group decisions” are favoured over authoritative

ones. Such collective ‘consensus’ and decision-making remained at the heart of our approach and is what I believe contributed to everyone on our team playing—and feeling that they played—an integral and equal part in defining the problem, grappling with it throughout the research and finally in embodying it on the stage.

3.) During the play-making process, the co-facilitator should steer the group clear of using reductive stereotypes, types and tropes that perpetuate rather than subvert prevalent and damaging myths.

The *Ulwembu* theatre-making process—and the amount of time we were able to spend together as a team—allowed us to access deeper empathetic insights into one another and aided the group in transforming perceived limitations into strengths that would ultimately enrich the outcomes of the project. An example of this is evident in the casting of the Mozambican character Emmanuel, a role originally earmarked for Ngubane. As we worked through a range of improvisations, I had noticed that Ngubane struggled to grasp the nuances of this character, often resorting to unintentional yet patronising forms of caricature. Acutely aware of how the foreign informants who had inspired the character of Emanuel were already precariously situated in their real-life contexts, I resolved to swap Ngubane into the role of the Police Captain and recast Nxumalo as Emmanuel.

Initially, I had struggled to place Nxumalo as a character in our story, yet as I grew to understand the positioning of our Emmanuel character (far away from home, trying to build a life in a foreign country without a grasp of local custom or language), Nxumalo and I came to realise that he could identify deeply with Emmanuel’s sense of alienation and isolation. I would encourage Nxumalo in rehearsals to reflect and draw on his interiority—his anxiety over speaking English; his fear of being perceived as an ‘outsider’ in terms of the rest of the group’s abilities—to more authentically portray Emmanuel on the stage. It was only through us being able to acknowledge and understand Nxumalo’s vulnerabilities that I was able to actively work alongside him in transforming them into performance strengths.

From my experience working on *Ulwembu*, it became apparent that through the adoption of an approach likened to Freire’s “problem-posing education” (1996: 53), participants were able to form a “compassionate identification with the other” (Blair 2015) enabling them to more empathetically grasp the lived nuances of the data which they had been tasked with translating into performance. An example of this is evident in how, after months of research, actor Cele was able to craft a complex and moving portrait of the young whoonga runner named Andile, during

our rehearsal process. Cele's observations of the '*paras*'⁷⁶ at taxi ranks and their various twitches and itches as the substance begins to wear off, were subtly incorporated into his performance during the rehearsal phase. This occurred without much prompting from myself, as these were all tics and traits he had observed over his period of research interaction. Such layering tended to occur intuitively throughout the rehearsals, with each actor referring to their internalised character-informant bibles/libraries to breathe further life into their portrayals.

While a character like Andile might have been considered the antagonist—even villain—of the piece, through Cele's meticulous observations and interactions with his informants, he was able to transform his character into a relatable but deeply flawed, comic-tragic creation, resisting the more obvious and simplistic stereotypes.⁷⁷ As Cele says:

I didn't want to him to come across as a bad person, Andile is charming, street smart and desperate at the same time. I wanted him to come across as a real human being. (N. Cele, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

While examining the role of the facilitator in Chapter 3, I noted Kidd's (cited in Kerr 1995: 160) claims that when an outside facilitator imports preconceived ideas into a community-based project, there is the tendency for certain types and tropes to emerge in the storytelling. In Chapter 1, I had mentioned some concerns over stereotyping and how "performing arts communities" (Spitzok von Brsinski 2003: 116), in attempting to confront social-issues in their work, often ended up perpetuating the very behaviours these practitioners were attempting to condemn. With *Ulwembu*, we had actively set out to develop and test a more comprehensive research process, guided and determined by the participating practitioners themselves, to see if such concerns could be addressed. The enduring final product of *Ulwembu*, I believe, stands as a testament to the success and longevity of this sort of theatre-making approach in the South African context.

4.) Lastly, the facilitator should avoid 'helicoptering in' outside play-making aesthetics but rather seek guidance and inspiration from co-participants' pre-existing storytelling modes and conventions.

In my literature review (Chapter 3), I explored how the facilitator needs to build on the existing storytelling traditions and theatre-making aesthetics of the community. Mda claims that to achieve this, it is imperative that the aesthetic is drawn from and inspired by the communities

⁷⁶ Colloquial slang and abbreviation of '*Parasite*'

⁷⁷ As I have discussed over the course of this dissertation, the subversion of stereotypes and challenging of dominant myths occurred predominately in the character arcs of Portia, Andile, Emmanuel and the dealer Bongani.

whose stories are been honoured, while at the same time merging “indigenous performance modes with Western styles” (1993: 8). By building on existing conventions and modes of storytelling, Durden (2003: 15) argues that “audiences are more able to understand and make meaning from new information that is couched in a familiar form”.

One of the tendencies I had identified in my prior collaborations with community arts groups was that while tackling social-issues in their productions, the impulse was to often pin such ‘issues’ onto melodramatic (and violent) plot twists gleaned from the latest SABC soap operas or action films. Despite the theatre-maker’s best intentions, sensitive themes were often sensationalised in the process. How then could we actively work with the influence and popularity of television narratives yet avoid perpetuating the accompanying stereotypes in the process?

As mentioned in my project narration in Chapter 1, while conceiving the narrative of *Ulwembu* and assembling the first draft, it became clear that we were referencing the genre of a dramatic, crime-thriller. The decision to ‘couch’ our story in this familiar and popular form had occurred after I had witnessed its popularity with community-arts theatre-makers and audiences alike.

I believed that by using genre to set up familiar expectations in our audience, we could work to challenge, from the inside out, the requisite clichés and stereotypes. It was also important for our team that we resisted merely putting an episode of weekly television on stage, and to counter this we worked to mine the theatricality from out of our material.

A Profound Trust – What We Learnt Together



The Ulwembu family (from left to right) Mpume Mthombeni, Zenzo Msomi, Phumlani Ngubane, Sandile Nxumalo, Ngcebo Cele, Dylan McGarry, Vumani Khumalo and Neil Coppen) after a performance at the Hillbrow Theatre in Johannesburg, South Africa, 2017. Photograph by Victoria Graaf-Raw.

In his seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire writes on the need for a “profound trust” to exist between participants, with a common “love, humility and faith” (1996: 72) uniting the group in their collective quest for knowledge. It is this ‘profound trust’ and sense of a nurturing creative community that I consider to be one of my own biggest pedagogical lessons across this experience.

In the beginning of our process, when I had first approached The Big Brotherhood actors, I had cautioned them over the size of the company, which consisted of five members. My reasoning behind this stemmed from simple economics and touring logistics, and I explained that touring a company of this size would ultimately be to the actors’ disadvantage, by impacting the individual earning potential for each performer.

Despite my reservations, The Brothers were insistent that every member of their team remained with the production, be it as performer, administrator, researcher or co-writer. If there was learning and experience to be gained, every member would avail themselves to benefit from it. This rationale is certainly understandable when one reviews the many comments made by

members of the group around how their company has supported and nurtured them over the years.

Over the course of the *Ulwembu* process, I observed the mentorship shown by the more experienced actors in The Big Brotherhood towards the less experienced actors. As The Brothers have consistently remarked, there was no ego involved; no individual member ever tried to position himself above the others; everyone was working towards a common outcome; and any success the production achieved was always attributed back to the collective. In hindsight, the *Ulwembu* experience was the closest I have come in a creative process to truly grasping what the term ‘ensemble’ means.

Working with The Big Brotherhood, I was able to witness the power of community and creativity in concert. Here was a group of role models who had forged a self-initiated creative space that enabled them to creatively reflect on the changing world, and in doing so, offer one another additional emotional and financial support. As Khumalo and Nxumalo explain:

About The Big Brotherhood, what we noticed about them even before I've even joined them that besides work they are always together like this. They share whatever they have. If there's one bread, someone is suffering and doesn't have bread, they'll cut that bread. I joined them and I felt like I'm home with them. (V. Khumalo, 2016, group discussion. 15 December)

I didn't go to school for acting but today I'm a professional actor because of the help I was given from these brothers, that's why I love them, respect them and I'll always respect them. Not for a single day will I ever leave them in my life. I'll always be there when they need my help and I know they'll always be there for me. (S. Nxumalo, 2016, group discussion. 15 December)

It is Msomi who perhaps best articulates Freire’s notion of the “profound trust”, the “love, humility and faith” (1996: 72) that must exist—and certainly continues to exist—between our team of practitioners. He reflected:

We all feel pride and ownership of *Ulwembu*, but more importantly we take an interest in each other’s lives. I worry about my fellow actors lives. I worry about Dylan’s life, about Neil’s life. Seeing us as family holding hands before the show, singing and blessing the project emphasises this point for me. We are more than just workers, we are collaborators, we are a family. (Z. Msomi, 2017, group discussion. 24 March)

At the close of our discussion, I ask the group if they thought we had succeeded adequately in task we had set ourselves. Of all the illuminating responses offered, I will close with

Mthombeni's response to an audience member, which I believe most realistically surmises the ethos and spirit of our endeavour:

That is something that we often discuss as the cast: What impact do we have as individuals? Personally I don't have answers and I don't have all the solutions. This is a huge challenge and I'm grateful that through *Ulwembu* I can do something that talks to the core of the challenge rather than sitting in the corner judging and complaining. (M. Mthombeni, 2016, group discussion. 8 April)

5.2 A View from the Outside



Portia (Mpume Mthombeni) and her son Sipho (Zenzo Msomi) consult a traditional healer (Sandile Nxumalo) in an attempt to find alternative pathways out of whoonga use. The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

In the first Chapter, I mentioned how city institutions and experts, overwhelmed by the proliferation of the street-drug whoonga, all seemed to respond with the same placatory assurances that steps were being taken to address this 'crisis', while demonstrating little unity in the implementation of their strategies. In the following analysis, I intend to determine if, and how, *Ulwembu* was able to counter this lack of cooperation by sharing insights that, subsequently, may have evolved into more concerted and collective forms of action. Here, I will examine the more 'macro' pedagogical impacts of *Ulwembu* by evaluating audiences' and participating institutions' responses to our production.

Before doing this, it is important to reiterate how active the audiences were in these performances through the talk-back sessions that followed the performances, and how such responses actively shaped revisions of *Ulwembu* over the years. After experiencing the power of the earliest *Ulwembu* talk-back sessions, we began to revise our ending to stimulate deeper post-performance insights. In Chapter 1, I mentioned the difficulty we encountered when trying to find an adequate ending for our play. Initially, the production did not include the prologue/epilogue of Portia addressing the support group, and rather ended with Sipho crouched and weeping over the dead body of Andile.⁷⁸

In discussion with the team, the original denouement, while providing a satisfactory dramatic close to our story, tended to leave our early audiences feeling disempowered about the situation. As previously discussed, I had noted some of the problematic traits of community-based theatre productions in my initial journal observations. I remarked how we, as theatre-makers, often tend to re-enforce a problem when we simply set out to re-enact it without offering audiences possibilities or new ways of thinking around the issue itself. I wondered what use is theatre when it simply serves as a passive mirror, reflecting the problem back at people who experience it daily. Belliveau (2015b) identifies this tendency, and encourages the research-based practitioner to avoid overstating the issue by leaving enough room for spectators to “become part of the conversation, imagining themselves in the situation”.

Had *Ulwembu* been a straightforward, non-“purpose driven” (Mienczakowski 2009: 327) piece of theatre, our team might have been less concerned about leaving audiences on such a sustained note of despair. However, when working with a ‘transformative’ advocacy agenda—such as the one that resided at the heart of our project—we learnt to critically reflect on poignant dramatic choices against those that might play a more constructive pedagogic role. With these concerns in mind, we would settle on a concluding scene, leaving Sipho standing alongside his mother, Portia, in the same rehabilitation meeting that the play begins with. Here, we find Sipho poised at a crossroad, commencing with an opioid substitution therapy program (OST) and looking towards a future of possible renewal, reconciliation and healing.

Furthermore, in the talk-back at the end of each performance, our audience were encouraged to discuss the choices currently available to Sipho, sharing possible solutions and suggestions—and pathways that may or may not have worked for them personally. Using the play’s narrative as an example, we were able to create four possible future scenarios for the various characters and

⁷⁸ See Scene 25 (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: 60).

obtain feedback from the audience on how viable these pathways out of addiction might appear in reality. Thus, our audiences were able to participate in the generation of new research (through personal testimony) while playing a role in determining the character's future trajectory.

Here, our practice echoes Mienczakowski's ethnotheatre methodology, whereby the play text is considered as an open-ended research report, with post-show engagements allowing practitioners to set about "documenting audience reactions to the stimuli and their responses to the actors and their representations" (Mienczakowski 2009: 328).

Over and above the range of insights offered in the post-performance forum-style discussions, which were recorded and transcribed with permission from all participants, we also conducted a summative, post-performance, research questionnaire. These two data sets assisted in measuring the extent of the productions pedagogical impacts on audience members, and is the focus of the following section of this thesis.

Summative Questionnaire Findings

To gauge audience members' impressions at the end of each performance, we asked spectators to fill out a questionnaire that posed three questions (in both English and isiZulu). These included:

- 1.) *How did the play make you feel?*
- 2.) *Are there any characters from the play you felt you could relate to? If so why?*
- 3.) *How would you imagine the play should end? What choices do you think they (the characters) could make moving forward?*

Over the last four years, we transcribed and collated several-hundred of these responses and were greatly encouraged by the way in which the production worked to challenge prejudices and broaden the audience's perspectives around the problems associated with drug abuse.

Overall, the majority of audience informants felt 'emotional' when discovering the extent and complexity of the situation. While sadness was the emotion most commonly cited, this was usually followed by claims that the narrative served as a call to action, with many expressing the intention to do something about it. Most respondents claimed to want to participate in 'change' and, in the very least, help change perceptions of how addiction and the youth on the streets are perceived and understood in general. As with many of the participating actors' responses, which I reviewed in the previous section of this analysis, an overwhelming majority of informants cited a deepening empathy and awareness in their answers. This echoes Mienczakowski's claims that

through the communal act of sharing and listening to stories, spectators are able to become “conscious of the multiple, deep and interwoven facets of their relationship with the hierarchy of disempowerment” and are subsequently moved to a place of “empathy rather than fear” (1997: 163). Below, I include a selection of audience respondents’ comments from performances that occurred in 2015 through to 2017, which reflect some of the responses we were commonly to receive:

“The play completely engaged my emotions. I felt great empathy for all of the characters. It brought overwhelming awareness of the vicious circle. I really need to do something about it.”

“I felt a sense of urgency. I felt a deep connection to those involved and affected by whoonga. I now realise how real it is, and I acknowledge my ignorance. I now see the issue for what it is.”

“... It was eye opening. It’s very easy to sit and judge and think addicts made their choice or chose to be addicts. The play gave me more empathy, understanding and less judgment.”

“It got me de-stigmatised. It made me think more about the users more than the problem.”

“Firstly I was shocked, then felt sorry for parents whose kids are affected by whoonga/other drugs. I think it inspired me to consider being more compassionate than judgmental.”

“...(I felt) horrified at first and now feel more empathetic to the man at the stop street. It’s deeper than a dealer problem.”

From the above it appears that a degree of “critical consciousness” (Boal 2008: 98) occurred in a majority of audience respondents, with most expressing the need to be more ‘compassionate’ and ‘less judgmental’ around their interactions with users and addiction.

It is, however, worth recalling my earlier discussion around the problematic possibility for audiences to feel that—through a fleeting empathetic act—they have done enough to connect and acknowledge both the plight and suffering of another and the root causes of these conditions. Prentki (2001), Mda (in Solberg 1999) and van Graan (2006) all claim that the pedagogical impacts, and potential for future transformations within applied theatre models, largely boil down to the demographic and ‘positionality’ of the audience.

Catharsis occasionally has the effect of absolving the oppressor from taking stock of their own complicity in everyday acts of oppression. Perhaps, the frustration with a summative study of this nature is that, without adequate long-term follow-up research conducted several months down the line, it is unclear how these responses and the intentions to ‘do something about it’, persisted

beyond the immediate theatre experience. Similarly, however, without a long-term study, it may be equally pessimistic to imagine that all initial empathetic responses result in no critical reflective shifts for audience members. A call to action—and the act—may come in many variations, and small acts of kindness can be as meaningful for users as the larger-scale mobilisation for harm-reduction strategies.

Talk-Back Discussions

One of the most impactful strategies we had for gauging audience responses was through the use of post-show forum discussions or ‘talk-backs’. The talk-back, as I have discussed at some length in Chapter 3, are a means to counter more traditional and non-“purpose driven” (Mienczakowski 2009: 327) theatrical approaches, whereby actors perform and the audience passively spectate. In the below discussion, I will analyse some of the encouraging pedagogic impacts which occurred through the use of the talk-back feature in our project.

Participant Accountability

Through the use of the talk-back feature in *Ulwembu*, we were able to democratise the experience, granting our audiences the opportunity to validate, criticise and contest what they had witnessed on the stage, while further absorbing new insights into our own body of research. In *Ulwembu*, the inclusion of the talk-back worked on multiple levels, not only granting “participant observer status” (Mienczakowski 2009: 328) to our audience, but also instilling a deeper sense of accountability in the participating practitioners. I refer here to the way the *Ulwembu* actors quickly discovered that, in this hot-seat exchange, they would need to be equipped to answer a range of questions around their research, process and personal experiences. Engaging frequently in such discussions enabled each actor to more confidently shape and articulate their personal thoughts around their experiences and learnings on the project.

Audience Accountability

In their conversation around the value of the talk-back function, Liehr *et al.* deem its primary function is one that “intensifies” (Liehr *et al.* 2013: 165) audience engagement by encouraging mental alertness and a sense of shared “responsibility” (*ibid.*) over what has transpired on the stage. The post-show discussion, Liehr *et al.* argue, adds to the transformative potential of research-based theatre by “healing divisions” while both “informing” and “connecting” (*ibid.*) individuals throughout the process.

Through the use of talk-backs over the course of an earlier Empatheatre project titled *Mhlaba Nolahle* (2014/2015), we observed how audience-members were able to fully express themselves and air grievances (without fear of reproach) by referring directly to the characters and scenarios from the play, as opposed to implicating a neighbour or family-member sitting next to them in the audience. These findings were again found in *Ulwembu*, and the following two talk-back examples, I believe, demonstrate how such conversations are able to both “inform” and “connect” (Liehr *et al.* 2013: 165) individuals, while promoting a deeper sense of accountability.

A diverse demographic of spectators and role-players (including people who use drugs, family members, religious leaders, police, government officials, policy-makers and civil society) is crucial in deepening perceptions, while correcting misconceptions, around drug use in the city. In my Chapter 4 discussion on empathy, I included Prentki’s (2001) remarks that the composition of the audience ultimately determines how a message or meaning is received. It was the diversity of our audiences, and the use of talk-backs, that would lead Professor Marks to note:

The dialogue between the actors and the audience, together with the visual representations of real-life characters caught up in the web of drug use, provide insights that generate empathetic responses rather than moralistic and judgmental ones. (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: xii)

When the more ‘moralistic’ responses persisted post performance, they were mostly addressed and corrected by fellow audience members. This occurred after a performance at The Playhouse Loft theatre (2016), where we hosted a mixture of police and users in our audience. In Scene 1 (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: 7) of the play, we witness Portia bullying a hapless young dealer/user named Andile. Exhausted at the prospect of arresting the repeat offender, Portia oversees a cruel form of punishment whereby the police officers accompanying her, force Andile to ingest the contents of his whoonga ‘stash’.

During the talk-back, one of the senior police officers in our audience took exception to this scenario, claiming it was sensational and untrue and an irresponsible depiction. Without our facilitator having to intervene, the policewoman’s comment was promptly met by a sea of raised hands in the audience and a range of testimonies offered by users who attested to the fact that this level of harassment was something they experienced on a frequent basis. If anything, one user in our audience had claimed, the aforementioned scene paled in comparison to the actual experience.

The second example concerns a performance at a centre used for rehabilitation work in Edendale, Johannesburg, where again our audience included police, a wide range of users enrolled in a rehabilitation program and high-school learners from a nearby school. In this particular session the actors and facilitator took a backseat allowing for a conversation to occur more directly between the learners and recovering users in the audience. In this instance, a range of impassioned recovering users assumed the role of facilitators and educators, answering a variety of questions posed by the learners and members of the police, while using the plays characters and narrative as a means to prompt and reflect on their own experience with addiction.

5.3 Working Responsibly with Empathy in Ulwembu



The Ulwembu company: (back, left to right) Ngcebo Cele, Vumani Khumalo, Phumlani Ngubane, (middle, left to right) Zenzo Msomi, Mpume Mthombeni and Menzi Mkhwane (front). The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

In my discussion in Chapter 4, I contested the claim, that we should view an audience's 'empathetic identification' with the characters on stage as conditional. I argued against the view that should the lives depicted on stage bear little resemblance to the "personal knowing" or lived experience of the individual audience member, then the level of association and impact may be diminished. This view, I argued, creates the perception that theatre with a transformative agenda needs to work exclusively with a 'target' audience whose reality echoes that depicted on the stage or else all efficacy may be lost.

While I believe an identification with related life-experiences enacted on stage is certainly helpful, it is not essential—nor always desirable—in creating a ‘transformative’ exchange. For theatre to have any sort of emancipatory effect in the society it emerges from, it needs to work at widening its scope and reach, rendering the largely invisible lives of the oppressed urgent and visible before that of the oppressor, whose reality and positionality, more often than not, tends to be very different from that of many of the marginalised characters’ lives and stories depicted on the stage.⁷⁹

This line of thinking is in keeping with Prentki’s (2001: 123) declaration that South African theatre needs to conceive of pedagogic theatre processes “which will enable the periphery and the centre, the oppressed and the oppressor, to engage each other in dialogue which leads to social action.” From the earliest research stages of *Ulwembu*, our team remained cautious to conceive a narrative that omitted the integral role the oppressor plays in most scenarios. Prentki (2015) warns against this very tendency, whereby applied theatre models focus too narrowly on the plight of the oppressed while “excusing those in positions of power in the status quo from having to change their attitudes and behaviors” (Prentki 2015: 21). In *Ulwembu*’s narrative, the role of the oppressor is complex and moves beyond a simple reading of the police or drug dealer as oppressor. It works to provoke the question as to whether the policemen and women, ill equipped as they are to stem a crisis of this magnitude, should not also be considered both oppressor and oppressed in this scenario? Again, Prentki acknowledges this complexity, illuminating how “one of us may move between oppressor and oppressed functions many times, even in a course of a single day” (*ibid.*).

It was for this reason that we resolved to merge the character arcs of a policewoman policing the whoonga crises in KwaMashu and that of a mother who attempts to wrestle her son from the webs of addiction. In establishing the primary characters of the play, Mienczakowski comments on how creative decisions in research-based theatre processes often entail the creation of character “composites” (1997: 160), whereby a variety of analogous qualities and insights offered by informants, are distilled into a single character. As discussed in Chapter 1, the character Portia, played by Mpume Mthombeni, is an example of such a composite. However, the merging of these narrative strands was more than simply being economic with our data. Rather, it was a

⁷⁹ In our earliest discussions as a team, we had asked ourselves collectively if the well-off suburbanite writing enraged letters of weekly complaint to the newspaper is as much of an oppressor as the misguided law-enforcement teams persecuting users down on the streets, and following this, should the play not try and speak to all these often ‘unconscious’ role-players in such situations.

way for us to illustrate the complex oppressor/oppressed binary that we had encountered in our research.

Guided by Mthombeni, with input from the group, we created a mother character named Portia who also happens to be an ambitious and militant policewoman working in the streets of KwaMashu. Portia was contrived so that when we first encounter her in the play, she is likely to reflect and reiterate a majority of the audience's own prejudices around drug users. Yet, as events take a dramatic turn, spectators are forced to empathetically re-examine and contest their own perceptions alongside her.

To demonstrate how we worked with this 'composite' character to stimulate deeper insights in our audience, I will examine how the use of Portia's direct address to the audience, in the form of monologue, was to occur at two crucial stages in the plays action, with both monologues featuring the key question '*Have I lost my humanity? That's what you are thinking isn't it?*'. By the use of this phrase in the latter scene, there is a deliberate and carefully placed subversion that is worth noting. The first time this question is posed to the audience is in the scene described earlier, where Portia oversees the police officers forcing a young user to eat his whoonga:

BULAWAYO and two other officers grab ANDILE and force some of the contents of the bags into his mouth. He lets out a cry, followed by silence. The scene freezes. PORTIA steps out of it, holding a torch to her face, and addresses the audience.

PORtIA: Have I lost my humanity? That's what you're thinking, isn't it? It's easy for you to sit there and judge me and my colleagues? This is the twelfth youngster we have had to reprimand like this tonight, and I can guarantee you there will be a hundred or so by the end of the week. I saw this kid arrive in our neighbourhood at the beginning of the year. [Pause.] Watched his habit grow out of control. It's gotten so bad that even at funerals things go missing. [Beat. She glances over at ANDILE with disgust.] How can I have sympathy for a boy who steals wedding rings off corpses' fingers at family funerals? [She shakes her head.]

(Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: 7)

The second use of monologue in the play—and repetition of the phrase *Have I lost my humanity? That's what you're thinking, isn't it?*—emerges towards the end of the story in Scene 22. At this point, Portia has discovered that her son Sipho has been both using and dealing whoonga. In a harrowing scene, we observe the once proud and fearless Lieutenant now reduced to a frightened and vulnerable mother, handcuffing her son to his bed as a form of involuntary withdrawal from heroine:

PORIA: *[to audience]* Have I lost my humanity? That's what you're thinking, isn't it? *[PORIA removes the handcuffs from her belt.]* But what must a mother do? They say there is no end to this nightmare ... that once a child is addicted you might as well consider them dead ... But I won't surrender. Sipho. I won't leave your side until we have driven these demons away. All I have is patience and love ... that's all I can give.

PORIA gently takes SIPHO's left hand and handcuffs it to the bedpost.

SIPHO: *[clutching his belly with his right hand]* It's painful, Ma ... It's sore.

PORIA: I know my boy ... I know.

SIPHO: Let me free, Ma. *[He rattles the handcuffs against the metal frame.]*

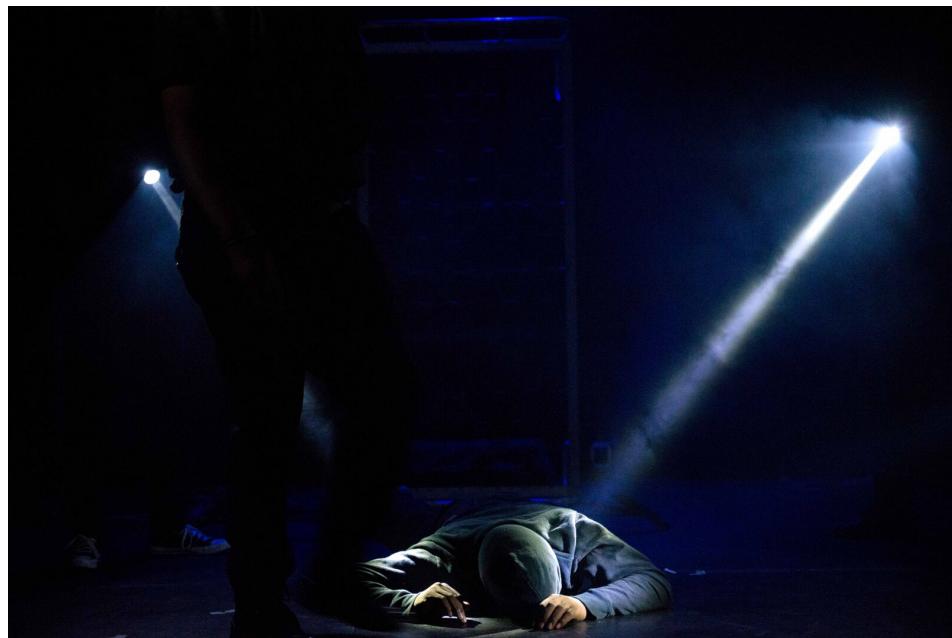
(Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: 52)⁸⁰

Portia's painful enlightenment—illustrated in the question '*Have I lost my humanity?*'—aided us in sparking similar epiphanies in our audience, and the use of a 'composite' such as this, I believe, speaks to the responsibilities that practitioners have in negating stereotypes that perpetuate, rather than critically interrogate, prevalent myths. Our use of empathetic storytelling devices to incite "emancipatory insights" (Mienczakowski 1997: 163), while steering clear of the manipulative route of ideological coercion, was in keeping with what Boal refers to as "good empathy" (2008: 85). It is through character reversals—such as the one woven into the complexities and contradictions of our protagonist Portia—that *Ulwembu* enabled the 'oppressor' to more tangibly experience and reflect on how their behaviours often unconsciously impact and hinder others' freedoms.

While Blair (2015) claims that as human beings we are all essentially "wired for empathy", she also relates how cognitive functions and experiences over time work to "suppress" our empathetic agency. A character such as Portia, I have argued, was a highly effective device to reactivate and reinforce the dormant empathetic potential that exist within us all.

⁸⁰ Unfortunately, due to a publishing inconsistency picked up too late in the process, the second use of: '*Have I lost my humanity? That's what you're thinking, isn't it?*' does not feature in the published text by Wits University Press (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018). I have written the repeat of the phrase back in to accompanying textual example to demonstrate how the scene played out during performances.

5.4 Measuring Ulwembu's 'Macro' Impacts



Zenzo Msomi (Sipho) in a scene from *Ulwembu* at The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

In *Theatre of Change*, Mienczakowski (1997) cites a variety of encouraging outcomes behind the research-based, ethnotheatre approach. In my discussion in Chapter 2, I extracted three pertinent points, which I will now look reflexively back on.

- 1.) Ethnotheatre can heighten “the visibility of marginalized and silenced voices”
(Mienczakowski 1997: 170)
- 2.) Ethnotheatre has the ability to subvert and challenge media sensationalism and myth-making (Mienczakowski 1997: 163)
- 3.) Ethnotheatre “de-academises” the traditional research report (Mienczakowski 1997: 170)

Increasing the visibility of marginalised and silenced voices

The first point of my summation of Mienczakowski's outcomes contends that research-based theatre has the ability to heighten “the visibility of marginalized and silenced voices” (1997: 170). I have already examined this aspect in relation to how exposure from *Ulwembu* was able to assist in repositioning The Big Brotherhood and increase their visibility in the national theatre industry, but in the following conversation my use of “marginalized and silenced voices” (*ibid.*) refers to the subjects and informants on which *Ulwembu* was based, particularly whoonga users on the streets of Durban.

Reviewing the responses we received from both recovering and current-users in our summative questionnaire assisted us to gauge if our production was adequately depicting and honouring whoonga users own lived-experiences. Some of the responses we received through this questionnaire, collated between the years of 2015 and 2017, included:

“The play brought tears to my eyes. As a recovered addict I could relate to everything the characters went through. It’s a difficult struggle and seeing it in the play touched me as I am so lucky to have had a parent who never gave up. In my darkest days of addiction, I even hit my mother. So to me she is the strongest most loving person I know.”

“I am a recovering addict and that’s the most realistic representation I’ve seen. It moved me to tears because I could relate to every moment.”

“It took me back to the days of my active addiction.”

For many users and recovering users who attended *Ulwembu*, it was the play’s ability to visually represent complex experiences and scenarios that accompany drug use, that seemed to import the most power and meaning for them. The theatrical imagery used in our production granted non-users in the audience the opportunity to grapple and empathise with the experiences of users, reiterating Conquergood’s (cited in Denzin 2011: 11) belief that performed research has the ability to “evoke and invoke shared emotional experience”⁸¹.

In my Chapter 1, I described how we constructed a reoccurring central image⁸² by drawing on testimonials around arosta⁸³. To embody this experience on the stage, we had used ropes tightening around the belly of the user, with the remaining performers pulling more tightly, as the pain ramped up to an unbearable intensity. After one of the performances, I was approached by a user who had been in the audience. The user relayed to me what it felt like for him to see this experience externalised in such a way, stating that it was exactly what his experience of that pain ‘looked’ like and that it managed to capture and show people what the withdrawal stomach cramps felt like.

⁸¹ In Chapter 3, I looked at case studies where the visual possibilities of theatre are utilised to credibly and successfully illustrate complex research findings. Mienczakowski (1997) describes how in his production *Syncing Out Loud* (1992–1994), which dealt with the teenage experiences of schizophrenia, he called on a range of visual and aural devices to articulate what youngsters suffering from schizophrenic delusions experience.

⁸² The use of unusual and defamiliarising visual devices, suggests the alienation technique refined in Brecht’s own theatre praxis and known as Verfremdungseffekt! (Boal 2008: xix) and also Prentki’s (2015: 74) contention that one of the primary responsibilities of the facilitator is to render reality ‘strange’ on stage, enabling participating practitioners and audiences to view their concerns from a variety of new perspectives and vantage points.

⁸³ The name given to describe the stomach pains that occur as a withdrawal effect, after smoking whoonga.

I would like to mention one last example of how our production of *Ulwembu* was able to increase “the visibility of marginalized and silenced voices” (Mienczakowski 1997: 170) and establish alternative platforms that seek “social justice, social acceptance and understanding for the subjects” (Mienczakowski 2009: 323). During a weeklong theatre run at The Playhouse Loft Theatre in 2016, members of the inner-city homeless population began arriving at the theatre door, having been encouraged by friends who had attended the production. Not only was *Ulwembu* a story that resonated with users’ daily lives, but it was also an experience that welcomed them into ‘elite’ inner-city theatre spaces, encouraging them to contribute their personal stories and insights during the talk-back conversations. More often than not, the testimonials given by users and members of the homeless population were witnessed by members of the police, city politicians and policy-makers, academics and government officials, offering these informants a chance to participate in conversations, which, in the past, had excluded them. As a result of this, users felt that their stories and struggles were being acknowledged. For many users, *Ulwembu* was also a wake-up-call to seek assistance and help, while for recovering users, the production served as powerful form of reinforcement and affirmation around lifestyle choices that had been made.

Subverting and challenging media sensationalism and myth-making

The second point is Mienczakowski’s claim that research-based theatre has the ability to contest and challenge “pervasive and powerful” (Mienczakowski 1997: 163) media misinformation. Gray *et al.* had argued that research-based theatre has the power to articulate the complex, lived actualities of people’s lives, and by doing this, is able to counter the media’s tendency to “simplify and sensationalize” (2008: 142) them.

In my early research on whoonga, I noted how insidious the local media’s responses had been in warping public opinion and suppressing any form of insightful and empathetic responses. How then did *Ulwembu* work to challenge this? I have already discussed how throughout the scripting process we set out to challenge stereotypes perpetuated by the media, but there was another even more literal way that *Ulwembu* was able to counter misinformation, and that, I argue, occurred via the positioning and visibility of our project and participating practitioners in the media itself.

So far, over its five-year life-span, *Ulwembu* (2014–2019) has managed to garner major publicity in South African broadcast and print-media, making it onto SABC news inserts, *Daily News* lamp-post headlines and front-page newspaper coverage. Journalist Lloyd Geyde’s (2016) comprehensive article *Theatre’s war against whoonga*, which centred around the making and

reception of our production, was published in the *Sunday Arts* supplement of the *City Press*. Re-reading and analysing the many articles and interviews which Mthombeni and The Brothers had participated in, I began to take stock how the process had transformed the *Ulwembu* team into outspoken activists. Thus the front pages of national newspapers became spaces for my collaborators to pro-actively redress the “pervasive and powerful” (Mienczakowski 1997: 163) misinformation generated around street-level drug use in the media.

In a *Daily News* front page article titled *A year of living dangerously* (Newman 2016), actor Msomi had responded to journalist Latoya Newman’s question on what he had learnt in the *Ulwembu* play-making process, and his response typifies the sorts of insights frequently generated by my fellow collaborators across a range of media platforms.

I came to a sense of understanding that there will always be people who take drugs for a range of social, economic, mental health and personal reasons. I recognised that drug use is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses a range of behavior from self-denial to constant dependence and produces varying degrees of personal and social harm. I have come to respect the basic human rights and dignity of the people who use drugs. They are members of our communities, they have families and their health and safety is as much of a concern as it is for the general public. (Msomi quoted in Newman, 2016)

The Power of Research-based Theatre to “de-academise Traditional Research Reports (Mienczakowski 1997: 170)

Finally, I wish to discuss the medium’s ability to “de-academises” (Mienczakowski 1997: 170) traditional research reports, making research accessible and relevant to audiences who may benefit more directly from the information imparted to them.

A crucial partnership that we developed during the first phase of *Ulwembu* was with Professor Monique Marks at the Urban Futures Centre (UFC). As discussed in Chapter 1, Professor Marks and her institution were deeply involved in the research of the Durban whoonga ‘problem’. The partnership we entered into with the UFC was mutually beneficial in the sense that our own research-based theatre endeavour was given institutional credibility and connected us to a wider-field of transdisciplinary insights, and, in return, we were able to offer the UFC an innovative and accessible medium to disseminate their research beyond academic circles.

Liehr *et al.* (2013), like Mienczakowski (1997), argue that theatre’s “advantages over purely textual reports” exists in the way “it sustains connections to bodies, emotions and the full range

of sensory experience that was present in the original data-gathering situation” (Liehr *et al.* 2013: 137–138). For Gray *et al.*, the embodied nature of research through performance is a meaningful way to challenge the “fate of many manuscripts that lie unread on library shelves...commented upon perhaps occasionally by other academics” (Gray *et al.* 2008: 139). Gallagher likewise contends that the theatrical medium remains one of the most popular, alternative forms of research dissemination owing to its “economy of expression” and “embodied character”, which offers audiences “a complex way to ‘see’ research” (2007: 2).

In her introduction to the published play text (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018) Professor Marks supports these claims, commenting on how *Ulwembu*’s approaches, when applied to her own field of research, “left an indelible mark” on both her psyche and her “understanding of how best to research both the everyday and the extraordinary” (*ibid.*: xv). Reflecting further on the project’s ‘impacts’ on her own praxis, Professor Marks concludes:

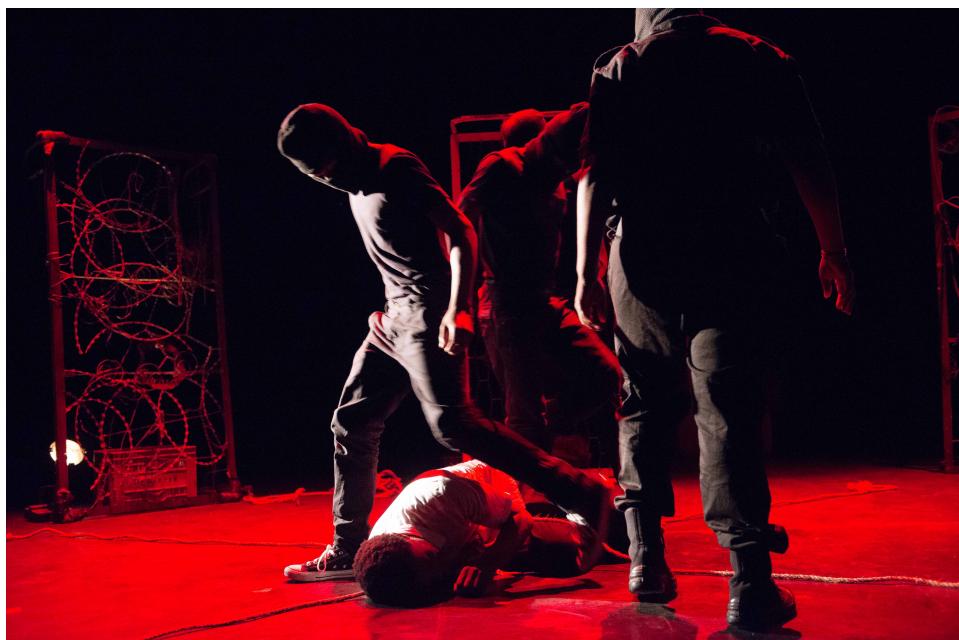
Equally important, at a personal level I have come to realise that I can play a role in the creative world and that it is imperative to collaborate with creative artists in making sense of and bringing to the fore narratives and solutions that resonate deeply with our humanity and our need to fix ‘wicked’ problems. (*ibid.*)

By working in conjunction with the *Ulwembu* team, Professor Marks would experience what she calls research-based theatre’s unique ability to “unearth the nuances and deep emotive underpinnings of all those entangled in the world of whoonga use” (*ibid.*). Crucial to the success of the production, she contends, was the “wide range of social groupings, including people who use drugs, family members, religious leaders, police, government officials, policy-makers and civil society” (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: xiv) who constituted the make-up of our audience.

One of the most encouraging longer term outcomes of *Ulwembu* is that since the production the Urban Futures Centre has begun to work frequently with research-based theatre practices and, more recently, commissioned members of our Empatheatre team to transform over 30 testimonials from migrant women across Africa into an immersive hour-long theatrical production. The play, titled *The Last Country* (2017–2019), is currently in its third year of touring

and has further built and expanded upon many of the lessons acquired during the creation of *Ulwembu*.⁸⁴

5.5 Wider Advocacy Impacts



Passers-by stumble over Sipho (Zenzo Msomi) in a scene from Ulwembu at The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

Earlier in this thesis, I posed the question whether research-based theatre practices, beyond merely entertaining and informing spectators, could operate on a more ‘macro’ level, inspiring social reflexivity, listening and empathy amongst organisations involved at higher policy-making levels. I have already mentioned in Chapter 1 how, in our early research, one of the biggest problem areas we could identify as a team was that very few leaders or stakeholders were willing to accept any form of responsibility for the situation. Rather than forming networks to forge responses and solutions, blame was simply being deflected from one party to another, hindering relief efforts and enforcing deeper divisions.

How then did *Ulwembu* challenge this? As I mentioned in my analysis of our talk-back function,

⁸⁴ The Last Country (2017–2019) is an immersive theatrical production adapted from the 30 oral histories of migrant women collected as part of a greater research and advocacy project. The script sensitively adapts the stories of women migrants hailing from DRC, Zimbabwe, Somalia and KwaZulu-Natal. Through the stories of Ofrah from the DRC, MaThwala from Ndwedwe in KwaZulu-Natal, Aamiina from Somalia, and Aneni from Zimbabwe, the audience intimately listens to experiences of leaving home and arriving in Durban, where the women find various strategies through which they remake a sense of belonging. The script carefully weaves together experiences of struggle, pain, humour, hope and resilience in ways that explore the complexities, commonalities and differences of migrant women.

by enhancing and supporting the research of Professor Marks and her team at the Urban Futures Centre, *Ulwembu* was able to assist in uniting several different sectors in Durban and, through its performances, stimulate dialogue between parties. During the run of the production, partners from SAAMS (South African Addiction Medication Society), SASOP (South African Society of Psychiatrists), Metro Police, South Coast Recovery Group, TB/HIV Care, University of Cape Town, the Urban Futures Centre, Denis Hurley Centre and the South African Depression and Anxiety Group, all came together in an unprecedented new collaborative drive to create the first harm-reduction and OST⁸⁵ program in the country that would be freely available to street-level users.

During our run at the Hillbrow Theatre in Johannesburg (2017), we performed the production for a large audience that crucially included invited members of Parliament and other organisations directly involved in drug policy. After this performance, the director of the ‘Hawks’ (the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation) approached us to tell us that we should not underestimate how powerful the evening had been for them.

Towards the end of last year, the production was performed at the 2018 *Drug Policy Week* conference in Cape Town, which included key local and international policy-makers in its audience. Shaun Shelly—Policy, Advocacy & Human Rights Manager at TB/HIV care, who was responsible for inviting the production to the conference—shared with me at a recent meeting that after seeing *Ulwembu*, he re-allocated the conference budget, usually reserved for flying out a top international speaker, to ensure the production travelled to Cape Town instead. Currently, at the time of finishing this thesis, the production has just been invited to New York and St Louis at the *Drug Policy Alliance Reform Conference*, which takes place towards the end of 2019—and so *Ulwembu*’s international journey begins.

When I asked Raymond Perrier, centre director of the Denis Hurley Centre via email correspondence, to reflect on the impacts of *Ulwembu*, he claimed the production, first and foremost, provided the DHC with an essential means of advocacy which was vital in helping them shift the many dominant and more problematic perceptions that persisted around street-level drug use. He wrote:

A great challenge when supporting drug-users is to help others to see them as real people coming from families ‘like ours’. The play has been invaluable in shifting that perception

⁸⁵ Opioid Substitution Therapy

when presented to community and religious leaders, school learners and ordinary theatregoers.

(R. Perrier 2018, pers. com. 2 September)

Perrier goes on to claim, that one of the most significant ‘outcomes’ of the production, was the impact that the plays message was able to have on DHC leaders and stakeholders, such as the Archbishop of Durban, Cardinal Napier. Perrier explained how after Cardinal Napier and his advisors had attended a performance of *Ulwembu*, armed with new insights from the play, the Cardinal began to fundraise further to “develop a residential rehab centre specifically for street-dwelling drug users” (R. Perrier 2018, group discussion. 2 September). In this instance the “emancipatory insights” (Mienczakowski 1997: 163) the production afforded the Cardinal and his team, manifested in more tangible forms of action—the results of which can be seen in the construction of a new rehabilitation facility on the outskirts of the city.

Reflecting on the play’s impacts, Professor Marks endorses Perrier’s claims around the powerful advocacy potential and use of the production. Commenting on how *Ulwembu* was able to both introduce and promote alternatives such as opioid substitution therapies and the roll out of harm-reduction campaigns, which local policy-makers at the time were failing to acknowledge as a viable or necessary option in the city. On this she writes:

The research that constituted the foundation of *Ulwembu*, as well as its performance, and the engagement that resulted from this, directly influenced the establishment of South Africa’s first Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST) Demonstration Project, which is located in Durban ...

The voice given in *Ulwembu* to people who use drugs has played a very important role in advocating for harm-reduction interventions in South Africa, including OST. (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: xiv)

CHAPTER 6: Closing Thoughts



Andile (Ncegbo Cele) and Sipho (Zenzo Msomi) get high together in a scene from *Ulwembu* at The Playhouse Loft Theatre, Durban, South Africa, 2015. Photograph by Val Adamson.

The above discussions around the more ‘macro’ impacts of *Ulwembu* demonstrate how the production, “through its ability to evoke and invoke shared emotional experience and understanding between performer and audience” (Conquergood cited in Denzin 2011: 11), would enable a range of spectators and role players to more empathetically grasp how *interconnected* they were in the situation. Rather than simply transferring blame, *Ulwembu* inspired greater reflexivity in local city institutions and organisations, moving them collectively towards less judgmental and more compassionate outcomes.

The range of *Ulwembu*’s pedagogic impacts across audiences and institutions revealed themselves in a variety of forms. These impacts included:

- 1.) Significant empathetic shifts in perception and ‘conscientisation’ (Freire 1996) around street-level drug use amongst some audience members, such that it resulted in focused action.
- 2.) Uniting a cross-section of stakeholders and role players (the ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressor’) in a “shared emotional experience” (Conquergood cited in Denzin 2011: 11) followed by the opportunity to engage and interact with one another in constructive dialogue.
- 3.) Challenging media sensationalism by increasing visibility of marginalised voices and relocating these voices to the forefront of the conversation.
- 4.) Being used as seminal form of ‘advocacy’ by various institutions.

- 5.) Inspiring more tangible outcomes in the form of a harm-reduction campaign and the building of city infrastructure to support users on pathways to recovery.
- 6.) The renewed and continued use of research-based theatre in local academic institutions.

Over the course of this thesis I have spun an extensive web, describing a journey that commenced in 2014, when 22 year-old Ayanda Ndlovu took to the rehearsal-room stage and related her harrowing story. Armed with the insights Ayanda's story had granted me, I had set out to interrogate my own social and creative obligations as a South African theatre-maker. My search commenced by asking whether the theatrical medium could play a useful role in confronting a crisis of this scale and severity and, if so, what would an adequate and contemporary "cultural response" (Purkey cited in Spitzok von Brisinski 2003: 114) look like when applied to the street-level drug crises in Durban. More pertinently, what pedagogical impacts might a theatrical process—such as the one that came into being—have on participants and audiences alike.

To begin answering these questions, I began on the outer, furthermost rungs of this web, with the making of our production, unravelling the context and conditions from which *Ulwembu* arose. I narrated how our family of practitioners intuitively refined the Empatheatre methodology as the project developed from an early research idea into a fully-fledged research-based theatre production around street-level drug addiction. Drawing from these threads and patterns established in the previous chapters, I then set out in Chapter 5 to explore the pedagogic impacts the production was to have on both myself, my co-participants, audience members and participating institutions.

We now conclude at the centre of the web. I believe it is important to clarify our Empatheatre approach, so that social-justice theatre practitioners as well as academics and activists wishing to pursue such a model (or approaches similar to it) might have a more concise road-map or departure point from which to commence their own explorations. This penultimate section below outlines the iterative Empatheatre methodology, which was employed in the researching, devising and performances of *Ulwembu* (2014–2019).

6.1 Empatheatre as Theatre Methodology

Empatheatre's closest relative in the applied fields of research, performance and dissemination is that of research-based theatre or ethnotheatre, and is an approach that has much in common with

Mienczakowski's (1997: 169) call to "de-academise" research and instead privilege "informant voices above the voices of the ethnographers and researchers" (*ibid.*).

Empatheatre is a responsive, action-led research/theatre-making process with few sets of predetermined rules or parameters at the commencement of each new project. It is a collaboration guided and shaped, over an extended period of time, by participating practitioners' determination to more deeply know and comprehend a given social rupture or situation. Empatheatre capitalises on the rich potential of the live theatre experience to unpack and demythologise the complex inner-workings of the selected social rupture. Emerging from an extensive, action-based research process, co-participants—consisting of players with varying backgrounds and knowledge/skills sets—work through "consensus and group decisions" (Lea in Belliveau 2015a: 11) to initiate a process which first prioritises the "co-defining matters of concern" (Latour 2004).

Via a range of transdisciplinary, ethnographic research-methods, including participant observation, the central matter of concern is researched further before the team set out to shape the data into an engrossing and relevant true-to-life theatrical experience. Such embodied experiences are intended to offer theatrical epiphanies that speak directly and emotively to the realities of the situation and, above all, to honour the informants' narratives—narratives that are carefully woven into the messaging fabric of the play. Theatre, as the *Ulwembu* team believes, is a healing, emancipatory and empathetic art-form, which grants audiences the opportunity to develop greater understandings and insights in spaces where conflict and injustice prevail. "Good empathy" (Boal 2008: 85) and vicarious ways of imagining form a powerful connective tissue in our advocacy process, called upon to amplify truths, promote deeper listening and provide the platform for audiences to enter into "shared emotional experiences" (Conquergood in Denzin 2011: 28).

The Empatheatre approach steers clear of shock or scare tactics. Instead, the preference is to grant participating practitioners and audiences the opportunity to walk in the shoes of misunderstood and marginalised others through engaging complex lived experiences, rather than perpetuating stereotypical or simplified views of social issues. By participating in such experiences and through carefully facilitated post-performance talk-backs centred around the 'epiphanies' of the play, spectators and participants—the oppressed and oppressor—are able to re-examine and reflect on their own realities, prejudices, perceptions and misconceptions.

The theatrical outcomes of Empatheatre projects do not profess to offer a final word nor any definitive solution but, within the confines of an attentive space, serve as a catalyst for

emancipatory conversations and personal and social transformations to gradually emerge. Empatheatre's interest is in understanding the transformation and pedagogical impacts and shifts (Lotz-Sisitka, Wals, Kronlid & McGarry 2015) that may occur with audience members and participating practitioners. In each process, we track and consider our own learnings and capacity to develop as empathetic, responsible participants.

6.2 The Epicentre of the Web

Finally, we arrive at the epicentre of the web, and return to the initial overriding research question of whether our research-based theatre methodology Empatheatre was able to play a role in instigating any form of 'change', or transformation, to the situation?

Over the course of this thesis, I have explored the many anticipated—and often unexpected—outcomes that occurred during the application of our syncretic, research-based Empatheatre praxis. I believe the many findings articulated across this thesis, enable me to answer my establishing question with cautious optimism. I would not hesitate in advocating strongly for further applications of research-based performance methodologies to assist in the emergence of an essential and contemporary variant of South African theatre.

Returning to Trimmingham's (2002: 55) definition of the hermeneutic spiral outlined in chapter 3.1, the outcome of using this qualitative research approach is to enable the practitioner/researcher to conclude their study with enriched knowledge of their respective field, armed with insights that may well inspire change in the practitioner or aid in the further reinforcement of their practice. From my discussions across this dissertation, I would argue that many of the findings have worked to reinforce certain aspects and areas of my theatrical approach, while offering "emancipatory insights" (Mienczakowski 1997: 163) into areas that need to be further interrogated and understood. It would be impossible for me to claim that by embarking on this project—and in the writing up of my research—a seismic personal change did not occur.

In his seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire writes on the need for a "profound trust" to exist between participants, with a common 'love, humility and faith' (Freire 1996: 72) uniting the group in their collective quest for knowledge. It is this 'profound trust' that I consider to be one on my own biggest pedagogical lessons across this process. With Freire's sentiments in mind, I return again to the contested term 'community theatre'. At this juncture, it is necessary to

reconsider the word ‘community’ in relation to theatre in general. Over the past four years I have spent co-facilitating the process of *Ulwembu* with The Big Brotherhood actors, McGarry and Mthombeni, and observed the safety-net of care that exists between this group of practitioners, I have come to understand the profound role a sense of community can and *must* play in a research-based theatre-making praxis.

I believe the insights shared over the course of this dissertation have revealed to what extent a research-based theatre process like Empatheatre is “able to move its participants and audiences from one position, one attitude, one pattern of behavior, one consciousness, to another” (Prentki 2001: 119). It was a process that relocated marginalised “performing arts communities” (Spitzok von Brisinski 2003: 116) from the fringes and “into the limelight as subjects developing social actions on their own terms” (Prentki 2015: 60).

This is not to say that Empatheatre approach is by any means new in its field, nor do I propose this to be a methodology that will work as powerfully across the applied theatre spectrum. I do however believe that our model’s syncretic approach, which intuitively and reflexively draws upon and adapts to a variety of circumstances, disciplines and skills-sets, will enable it to further transform and develop into the future. Certainly, no two projects, groups of participating practitioners, issues or ‘matters of concern’ (Latour 2004) are ever the same, and for this approach to remain locally accessible and relevant, the facilitating figures should never be dogmatic or inflexible in its application, but rather allow those participating to determine which of its approaches will work most beneficially for them.

Perhaps the one essential aspect that is required if broader pedagogical shifts are to occur—as illustrated through this thesis—is the importance in building a network of partners who engage and collaborate with the theatre process from the earliest research phases throughout dissemination. Critical to the success and impacts of *Ulwembu* were the partnerships our team established with Professor Marks and the Urban Futures Centre, and Raymond Perrier at the Denis Hurley Centre. Both these institutions would lend our theatrical endeavour institutional credibility, while connecting us to a wider field of transdisciplinary insights which would assist in shaping and determining our plays advocacy strategy.

Most importantly, through the Denis Hurley Centre’s and Urban Futures Centre’s data-bases, we were able to work in concert with influential members of the police, city and government officials, most of whom would attend the production, and ensure that our play’s advocacy strategy was connecting with spectators who ultimately had the agency and power to effect the

situation on the ground. This was reiterated by Professor Marks, who claimed that a large part of the production's pedagogical impacts lay in it playing to audiences of diverse groupings, which included "people who use drugs, family members, religious leaders, police, government officials, policy-makers and civil society" (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018: xiv). It was Professor Marks too, who was able to introduce us to policy stakeholders who are now beginning to open doors internationally for the production.

During the *Ulwembu* talk-backs, our audiences often confessed to feeling disarmed of their prior defences and prejudices around the situation. Such openness proved particularly beneficial in instances when members of the Durban police force and street-level drug users were able to sit together post-performance and listen to one another's personal insights and reflections around the production's themes. The building of partnerships during this process is in many ways critical to making sense of the 'impact' achieved by the theatre production.

Through the many reflections on our methodology and production, and in sharing the lessons learnt over this exhaustive yet enriching process, I hope that fellow practitioners, both locally and internationally, will be inspired to further utilise, transform and study Empatheatre approaches.

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Appendix: The Script

"I was profoundly touched by ULWEMBU and its quest for humanity and dignity... there is no such thing as good and evil in places of survival..."

Professor Monique Marks, Urban Futures Centre

"Not only does ULWEMBU present a compelling theatre experience, but its true-to-life format means that this team is taking the bull by the horns and using the Arts to take to the frontlines of the war against drugs."

Independent Online.

"... this production is not a stereotyped "say no to drugs" play. It is a deeply-researched theatre project which is authentic, insightful, razor-sharp and frighteningly real. In fact, I would go as far as to say that this is educational theatre at its zenith."

ArtSmart Review.

"ULWEMBU powerfully reveals the root causes of substance abuse"

South African Police Service

"If you are brave enough to hear what is seldom heard on a issue that touches rich and poor - then you need to let your heart be touched by this talented team..."

Father Tully, Emmanuel Cathedral

"...this play challenges us, in a very graphic way, to face up to the human face of the problem and recognise that we do not know who it will hurt and how"

Raymond Perrier -Denis Hurley Centre

Dedicated to Emmanuel Sithole

ULWEMBU

Created by

Neil Coppen,
Dylan McGarry,
Mpume Mthombeni,
Vumani Khumalo,
Phumlani Ngubane,
Ngcebo Cele,
Sandile Nxumalo,
& Zenzo Msomi

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FOREWARD

By Lloyd Gedye

*Can theatre change lives? **Lloyd Gedye** spends time with the creators of an extraordinary new play, Ulwembu, born of the life stories of whoonga (nyaope) users in KwaZulu-Natal communities. He comes away believing in the power of the stage.⁸⁶*

‘They died in front of my eyes,’ says Phumlani Ngubane as we sit in the foyer of the Durban Playhouse’s Loft Theatre. ‘They were shot. They stole from a bad person who hunted them down. They were murdered right in front of my eyes ... My heart is pained, even now.’ His colleague Zenzo Msomi nods solemnly as Ngubane speaks and then adds: ‘We were like family with them. They stole from the wrong house.’ Actors Ngubane and Msomi are part of a KwaMashu theatre collective called The Big Brotherhood, and on the day we sat down to chat in mid-April, they were in the middle of a run of their play Ulwembu (Spider) at the Loft Theatre.

The play’s focus is the scourge of whoonga – or wunga, or nyaope, as it is known in other parts of the country. The play is based on more than two years of deep research and the couple who were murdered were Ngubane’s landlady and her boyfriend, both whoonga users. ‘Some people in my community turned against me, as I was associated with the users,’ says Ngubane. ‘They felt like I was defending them.’

Ulwembu is a gritty urban nightmare, a place where characters mostly on the margins of society eke out lives, rather than live them. It is a story about addiction, featuring drug users, runners and dealers, desperate mothers, absent fathers, helpless and vindictive police, overworked social workers, enraged communities, fearless xenophobes and foreign nationals living in fear. It effortlessly illustrates how everyone in a community is drawn into the web of whoonga. Large ropes pulled by the whole cast to contort around the users as they go into withdrawal represent this web.

At R25 a hit, whoonga is one of the cheapest drugs around and, for dealers, it’s a big-money industry. The Big Brotherhood’s research suggests that a user can spend up to R150 a day. So a single user can be worth R700 a week to a dealer – R33 600 a year. ‘There is huge demand and prices are going up,’ says Big Brotherhood member Vumani Khumalo. Msomi says 90% of the users they interviewed said they wanted out. ‘The more

⁸⁶ Originally an article published in the City Press, 03 March 2016.

we spoke to the users, the more we could see that they were just people who were trapped.” Users and former users who have seen the play maintain that it is incredibly realistic in painting a picture of addiction.

But Ulwembu is doing more than that. It is asking us to face up to the realities that this is a community problem, and that it is going to require smart minds and a group effort to fix. “Who do you blame?” asks actress Mpume Mthombeni, who plays a user’s mother in Ulwembu. “It’s so easy to wash your hands, but what do we do with all this blame? This problem is all of ours.”

The story of Ulwembu goes back a few years, to May 2014 when award-winning Durban playwright Neil Coppen was heading a workshop with community-theatre participants from KwaZulu-Natal. He asked them to write lists of social issues that they felt young writers should be confronting in their work. The number one issue on everyone’s list was whoonga. “I had seen the whoonga problem mushrooming and taking over the city,” says Coppen. “I saw the way the media was reporting it, as a zombie apocalypse – people in rags around drums of fire – the nightmare of the suburbs ... We were dehumanising the users by creating these monster myths,” he told me.

During the workshop, then 22-year-old Phumzile Ndlovu shared a story about her cousin Jabulo, who had come to stay with them in Umlazi’s D Section. He soon became hooked on whoonga and was dealing the drug too. Her family, under threat from the community, had to throw him out and he relocated to Albert Park. He was addicted to whoonga for five years before he passed away at the age of 25. Driven by fears that his spirit would come back to harm the family, his corpse was beaten with sticks and then taken back to Albert Park, where whoonga was sprinkled on his lips and into his grave. The act was performed so that he could find peace. Coppen says it was this story that first lit the spark of what would become Ulwembu. After the workshop, he began to research the whoonga problem. “I spoke to everyone, from the hysterical white woman running the activist group to the business owner who was being broken into at night,” he says. “When interviewed officials at the top, it was worrying how little research they had done into how similar criseses had been tackled elsewhere, both locally and internationally.”

Realising that he was going to have to dig deeper, Coppen started looking for collaborators. “As a white male, I didn’t have an authentic enough access to the story or to the communities living through this hellish experience,” he says. “I could speak to social workers, but they all tended to say the same things, regurgitating statistics and text book answers... It seems they weren’t quite equipped nor prepared for the magnitude and escalation of the crises they suddenly found themselves confronting on a daily basis.”

So Coppen invited The Big Brotherhood, a community-theatre group he had worked with before, as well as actress Mthombeni, to collaborate with him. At this time, sociologist Dylan McGarry entered Coppen’s life. McGarry had recently completed a sociology PhD

with a focus on empathy and he was interested in using theatre in the sociology and education fields. He conducted workshops with the actors, where they were trained in ethical research.

“The idea of listening,” says McGarry, and pauses ... “listening is one of the most emancipatory things you can give. Listening is a gift. You are gifting someone your attention. But you also become a different type of listener – an active, empathetic listener. It’s all about them, not about you. Most people we worked with were so vulnerable. It had never been about them. That’s probably why they are users in the first place.”

After training, the actors decamped to their own neighbourhoods in Umlazi and KwaMashu, and returned two months later with notebooks laden with detailed research. “Dylan calls them intuitive sociologists,” says Coppen. “Nobody could have got that level of access.” “Before, I thought all whoonga addicts were just criminals – people who would mug you and steal your phone,” says Mthombeni. “So imagine, now I had to approach these people and talk to them ... You need to think about how you approach the users in a respectful manner.”

She says that, in a way, you are asking the user to undress in front of you in telling their story. “And then you realise these people have never been heard and are crying out for attention,” she says. “They are so relieved that they can pour out their problems to you.” Msomi says that the users respected that the actors came to them in a “neutral way”.

“They want to stop smoking whoonga. They say they don’t know how,” he says. “They say the pain from the withdrawal, known as ‘arosta’, is so terrible they have to keep smoking.” It is most commonly the physically addictive opiate heroin, which is part of the whoonga “recipe”, that makes it so hard to kick. “These people have a problem that needs to be supported, not punished,” says Msomi.

Ngcobo Cele from The Big Brotherhood says that the more whoonga users are judged, the more they feel as though they’re on the outside of society. “One guy I met was being bullied at school and then an older boy stood up for him. The older boy was smoking whoonga, so the younger boy started to impress the older boy. He was thinking: if I have this guy on my side, I won’t be bullied at school. A lot of it is all wrapped up in trying to be a hard man in the township, someone who commands respect.”

The theatre production of Ulwembu also functions as part of the research. “It takes in everything as it goes along and changes,” says Coppen. After every performance, the audience is encouraged to remain behind in a facilitated discussion. It is loaded with users, people from rehabilitation centres, police, social workers, the homeless, sex workers, family members and former addicts. The conversations are lively and poignant, and loaded with testimony and sharing. “The audience have a common reference point in the play,” says Coppen. “They mostly tend to refer to the characters, without having to use

themselves or each other as direct examples. It's a process we believe that allows for a deeper listening and engagement." He tells of a previous performance where a senior police leader protested about a scene where the police make the users eat their drugs when they are caught. A whole group of users in the audience stood up and testified, one after the other, about how it had happened to them.

After one performance, a 10-year-old street child speaks about how she is glad the mother character in the play did not give up on her son. The part that is implied, but remains unsaid about her own story, is heartbreaking for many.

Another schoolteacher testifies how 12 kids in his class are using whoonga, and five are running the drug. To the cast, he says: "We need you desperately." Sam Pillay, head of the Chatsworth Anti-Drug Forum, says the play represents what he sees on the streets every day. He began fighting the rise of the designer drug "sugars" in his neighbourhood in 2005 and has been warning city officials about the extent of the problem for years.

Professor Monique Marx from the Urban Futures Centre at the Durban University of Technology says they are trying to show government that it is cost-effective to roll out opiate-replacement therapy, such as methadone. She believes this should be coupled with the decriminalisation of the drug, a far better option than pushing whoonga underground. "Support, don't punish," she says, summing up her approach. Dr Lochan Naidoo, a Durban-based addiction consultant in the audience, says that by the time public health facilities implement methadone treatment for users, it will be too late, as happened with the roll-out of antiretrovirals. A middle-aged woman a few weeks out of jail after a nine-year drug conviction warmly thanks the cast and tells Cele, who plays Andile, a whoonga runner and user in the play, that she saw herself in him. "I was in tears here," she says. "I was in that story."

"Everyone has witnessed something together," says McGarry. "And you have created a safe space for sharing." In its essence, theirs is a continuation of South Africa's vibrant protest-theatre tradition. The difficulty of black life is unpacked on stage to prompt social change.

At one point over the four days I spend with the cast of Ulwembu, I am sitting in The Playhouse foyer waiting for McGarry, who ran across the road to get some bean curries for lunch. He returned with the story of how a young guy from the street followed him into the takeaway joint and wanted to know more about the "whoonga play" that was on. McGarry told the young man he was involved and could get him a ticket. As we sit eating our curries in the foyer, the young man approaches to confirm his seat and thank McGarry. It's clear that whoonga is all around us. We are all caught up in its web.

CHARACTERS

Lieutenant Portia Mthembu: A 46-year-old policewoman in KwaMashu.

Sipho Mthembu: Portia's 16-year-old son. An aspiring poet and songwriter.

Bongani Msleku: A 30-year-old dealer in Kwa-mashu.

Andile Nxumalo: A 16-year-old whoonga user and friend of Sipho.

Emmanuel Abreu: A 35-year-old Spaza-shop owner from Mozambique.

NOTES ON STAGING

The simple set consists of three distinct colours: Black, White and Blood Red. The staging is versatile to work on a traditional theatre stage or in the round in a public space. The boundaries of the Ulwembu world is held together by six identical black or red chairs, arranged with four chairs in each corner, and the fifth and six chair on the east and west wing of the stage. A metal single hospital bed rests on its hind legs, standing vertically with the headboard pointing upward to that its spring mesh might resemble a barbed wire fence at the rear end of the stage. Four red plastic crates (that contain key props/wardrobe changes) sit beside the four corner chairs. All props and costumes are either black, red or white. Two red ropes (each 5m long) run parallel to each other and are places up and down stage. There are no wings or back stage used during scenes; when cast members are not involved in a scene, they sit silently on chairs arranged on each corner of the playing space, and act as silent witness to each scene as it plays out. Seated actors between scenes move in carefully choreographed slow motion when preparing costumes and props for the next scene. The play is performed in isiZulu and English, the ratio of English and isiZulu is adjusted according to the demographics of English/isiZulu speakers in the audience.

ITERATIVE SCRIPT

Edited by Dylan McGarry & Neil Coppen

The process of developing ULWEMBU has been one of constant transformation and adaptation. Our two-year research process drew from a variety of theatre methodologies and genres ranging from documentary, verbatim, forum, invisible and community theatre. As mentioned in the foreword by Lloyd Gede, the development of ULWEMBU relied on a constantly reflexive collaborative and transformative approach, where the process of developing the play has been far more important to the team than the final output of a completed script and stage production. The core team met almost every week for two years, sharing our findings, stories, experiences, questions and ideas in what seemed to be a never-ending investigation into the complex web that embodies not just whoonga addiction, but addiction in general. Sometimes actors (who conducted the primary research themselves as ethnographers) would recite monologues verbatim in community policing forums, meetings with the police and other government spaces. This ‘invisible’ theatrical approach allowed narratives and voices to be inserted into spaces in which many were unable to participate. It also provided invaluable feedback and reflexivity to our script development, and overall advocacy for more holistic and inclusive responses to the challenges faced by the city around drug use, homelessness, and primary health care issues.

As a team, we collectively shadowed and explored (sometimes undercover) the daily realities of police, parents, people who use drugs, the homeless, government civil servants, faith leaders, doctors, teachers and social workers. We began this process with the goal to respond to the complexities surrounding street level drug addiction in Durban, and found ourselves exploring and tending to a myriad of sociological, political, economic, cultural, psychological and spiritual realities, that in turn, changed us. That which we were seeking to transform (i.e. the severe disconnect between street level drug users, the police and health-care workers), began to transform us as individuals and as a ‘family’ of practice.

In light of this, we have chosen to iterate the script with footnotes, and links to appendices that aim to contextualize the process of developing ULWEMBU, and show how the many players depicted in the narrative had a very active and reflexive hand in the shaping of not only the story, but also the subsequent impact this story had on local policy and projects in Durban.

We are indebted to the Durban community who came together in the most extraordinary and unexpected way to help us tell this story, a story that belongs to all of us, and a story that continues to change and evolve.

ULWEMBU



THE PLAY SCRIPT

By Empatheatre and The Big Brotherhood.

PROLOGUE: OUR STORY

Six chairs form a circle on the stage. Portia stands a little hesitantly at the center while Sipho sits beside her. The rest of the cast occupy the remaining chairs. Portia addresses the room.

Portia: For weeks I've sat in this support group, afraid for that moment where I would have to step forward and tell our story. (*Pause*) Before I joined this group, it felt like I was alone in the world... that no one would ever understand. How could they? As a mother I felt ashamed, that this was all my fault, that I had failed.

It is only through all of your courage, that I have come to realize that we all turn to things to numb the pain, to distract ourselves from our deepest fears. (*Pause*) My name is Portia Mthembu and I'm ready now to tell my story.

Blackout.

SCENE 1: BEHIND THE STATION

The wail of police sirens, flashing of red and blue lights. Andile wearing black hoodie (concealing his face) comes hurtling through the audience and onto the stage.

Portia: (*Yelling from Audience*) You run I shoot. Do you hear me? You hear me?

Torch beams scan the darkness as members of the METRO police arrive on stage. Portia, a sturdy policewoman of around 40, wearing a bulletproof jacket, leads the chase.

Andile is trapped. He stops out of breath as Portia, flanked by the rest of her unit (including officer Bulawayo and Zikhali) surround the boy.

Portia: I will pull this trigger. I will shoot.

Andile tries to dash but is pushed forcefully back down to the ground by officer Zikhali.

Bulawayo: Get down on the ground.

Portia: On the ground. Do you hear me?

Portia pins Andile to the floor, securing his hands behind his head. She inspects his face with the flashlight.

Portia: You..... again?

Andile grimaces.

Portia: Ayanda?

Andile: Andile

Andile again tries to wriggle free but Portia shoves him back down.

Portia: How could I forget. What have we got today, eh?

Zikhali: Empty your pockets.

Andile: Please, Lieutenant.

Portia: Don't waste our time boy.

Andile: I have nothing on me.

Portia: I'm a busy woman. Empty them.

Andile: Please...

Portia: (*Assertive*) Empty your pockets.

Andile: Just let me go... please.

Portia: Would you like Captain Bulawayo to empty them for you? Do you remember what happened the last time Officer Bulawayo had to empty them for you? (*Calling to her back-up off stage*) Bulawayo!

Bulawayo: (*He steps forward*) I am here Lieutenant.

Portia: You remember Officer Bulawayo, Andile?

Andile: (*Stammering*) I remember.

Portia: And Officer Zikhali?

Andile: Yes, Ma.

Portia: I would like to make this quick and easy for all of us this evening. Empty your pockets.

Andile empties his pockets. A few zip-lock bags filled with whoonga straws⁸⁷ fall to the ground.

Andile: Please Ma, please let me keep my goof.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ "Straws" is street-slang for a type of whoonga sold in plastic drinking straws. They apparently originate from a group of dealers in Chatsworth, Durban.

⁸⁸ Slang for whoonga. Refers to being high, i.e. 'I'm so gooft.'

Portia: Allow you to pollute all the other children in this community? You want me to arrest you *again*? How many times has it been this month? (*No answer*) You can't remember, eh? Zikhali, can you?

Zikhali: I think five, Lieutenant.

Portia: (*Shaking her head*) And for what? (*She holds up the whoonga straws*) For this nonsense? (*She holds the packet of whoonga straws in front of his face*) Where are you getting these? Where?

Andile doesn't answer.

Portia: Where are you getting these from Andile?

Bulawayo: Answer the question boy. Where?

Zikhali: Make him talk Bulawayo.

Andile doesn't answer. Bulawayo boots him in the stomach. Andile collapses, moaning.

Bulawayo: Where are you getting this stuff from, eh? Who is your dealer?

Portia: I'm running out of ideas.

Zikhali: Let's teach him a lesson.

Portia: The days of all that paperwork and fingerprinting at the station are over.

Andile: Please, Lieutenant, let me keep my goof. I will starve if I can't sell it.

Bulawayo: Did you hear that? Shame this boy must be hungry.

Zikhali: Let's make him eat it, Lieutenant.

Bulawayo: Ja, eat it.

Portia: (*Concerned*) Eat it?

Andile: (*Begging from the ground*) Please no... please, Lieutenant.

Bulawayo: Quiet.

Andile: Please...

Bulawayo: Destroy the evidence and we can all just move along. (*Beat*) Eat it boy.

Portia: (*Looks a little concerned*) It won't hurt him?

Andile: It's too much. (*Begging*) Please.

Bulawayo: He must learn. EAT IT!

Portia: Listen to the Officer Andile...

Zikhali: Eat it!

Bulawayo and his men grab Andile and force the contents into his mouth. He lets out a cry followed by silence. The scene freezes. Portia steps out of it, holding the torch to her face and addresses the audience:

Portia: (*To Audience*) Have we lost our humanity? That's what you're thinking, isn't it? It's easy for you to sit there, judge me and my colleagues? This is the twelfth youngster we have had to reprimand like this tonight, and I can guarantee you there will be a hundred or so by the end of the week. I saw this kid arrive in our neighbourhood at the beginning of the year, (*Pause*) watched his habit grow out of control. It's gotten so bad that even at funerals things go missing. (*Beat. She glances over at Andile with disgust*) How can I have sympathy for a boy who steals wedding rings off corpses' fingers at family funerals? (*She shakes her head in disgust*)

We snap back to the scene.

Bulawayo: Now the other one.

Andile: I can't..... please...

Zikhali: You heard us.

Andile empties the second and third straw into his mouth.

Bulawayo: Swallow.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ In our interviews, police officers were finding that arresting street-level drug consumers was not helping the situation but rather contributing to recidivism. Improvised forms of punishment, such as forced consumption of the evidence by the drug users, were seen by some police officers as a more 'humane' alternative to arresting young users and trapping them within the overcrowded, punitive, judicial system. After one show, a high level police officer commented in an open feedback session that this scene was an exaggeration. The Police Colonel was quickly corrected by users in the audience who testified to being forced by police to eat their own stash, merely days earlier. This exchange opened up a really productive, empathetic and constructive conversation between street level drug users and the police.

Andile shakes his head.

Bulawayo: You heard the officer.

Zikhali: Swallow.

He gulps it down, gagging.

Portia: He needs water.

Bulawayo: He'll be fine.

Zikhali: Chew boy... chew.

Portia: Someone give him water. (*No response. Andile gags. Portia looks at Zikhali*)
Zikhali! Amanzi.⁹⁰

Zikhali is carrying a bottle of water. He tosses it towards Andile who washes the substance down.

Portia: Go back to school Boy. You hear me?

Bulawayo: Let's put him in the van.... drop him somewhere down the South Coast.

Portia: Ai! It's a waste of time... these *sgebengu*⁹¹ are like dogs.... you can take them way out past the freeway, and by the morning they are at your front door begging for scraps.

The police disperse leaving Andile in a heap on the floor.

SCENE 2: THE POLICE STATION, CAPTAIN'S OFFICE

Portia warily takes a seat in front of captain of the station.

Captain: Do you have any news for me, Lieutenant?

Portia: News?

Captain: The press keep calling for a comment.

Portia: We're getting closer, Captain.

⁹⁰ Water.

⁹¹ A robber or a ganster.

Captain: Closer?

Portia: To the dealers, Captain.

Captain: Closer is not quite the comment I am looking for Lieutenant. (*Pause*) The media are calling it the Whoonga⁹² Apocalypse. (*Pause*) The reputation of this station is at an all-time low.

Portia: We're chasing some new leads.

Captain: (*Strongly*) I need some good news, Lieutenant.⁹³

Portia: Don't we all, Captain!

Captain: I need some high-profile arrests for the front pages. Something to put the community at ease.

Portia: These things take time, Captain.

Captain: We don't have time on our side, Lieutenant. (*Pause*) There are more addicts each and every day out there on our streets and what does that do for crime... the economy? It's a far reaching catastrophe this. (*Pause*) Our children are no longer safe.

SCENE 3: THE SCHOOL YARD.

Sipho in school uniform enters and sits alone. Andile, also in school uniform, enters and takes a seat beside him.

Andile: Hey Cheese boy,⁹⁴ why you looking so sad today?

Sipho shrugs.

Andile: Girl troubles?

⁹² The drug whoonga (a concoction of B-grade heroine and rat-poison) has been plaguing local KZN communities since early 2000, yet only garnered public attention recently when it reared its head in the inner-city and surrounding suburbs of Durban, South Africa.

⁹³ The current punitive models for drug possession and consumption in South Africa are monitored by arrest quotas, which were established by the South African Police Services. We found many officers feeling they were under enormous pressure to make more arrests each month, and to appease the media and suburban residents who blamed the majority of the crime in their communities on whoonga consumers and dealers. The pathologising of whoonga users by the media further fueled these pressures, which in turn made holistic, collaborative, harm-reduction processes less possible – as the police felt they had to ‘clean-up’ the whoonga problem using primarily punitive processes.

⁹⁴ Slang for overly pampered and groomed. A derisive nickname denoting supposed affluence. It comes from the expression ‘...he can afford to have cheese on his bread.’

Sipho: How'd you know?

Andile: I always used to see you hanging out with that girl from Grade 10.

Sipho: Ja, Simphiwe. (*Exasperated*)

Andile: She was *fresh, yellow-bone, shandapa!* What happened?

Sipho: She met someone else.

Andile: Those sugar daddies have all the fun.

Sipho: *Wangi gabha.*⁹⁵ She told me about him yesterday.

Andile: How's your heart, *imfana*?

Sipho: Ai, it's heavy bra. (*Pause. Sipho looks at Andile*) Where have you been? I haven't seen you around school for a while.

Andile: I had some business to take care of.

Sipho: What kind of business?

Andile: Just some sales.

Sipho: What you *slagin'*?⁹⁶

Andile: Ah Cheese boy, you ask a lot of questions hey.

Sipho: My friend Themba says that you are *trappin.'*⁹⁷

Andile: (*Laughing*) Is that what Themba says?

Sipho: Ja, he says you sell from behind Emmanuel's store, after school.

Andile: Sell what?

Sipho: Whoonga.

Andile: (*Unconvincingly*) Na, he must have me confused with someone else. I'm innocent.

Sipho: He says you are blazing⁹⁸ as well, says that's why you always fall asleep in class.

⁹⁵ Literally, 'A lot of bottle.' Slang meaning, 'she left me.'

⁹⁶ *Selling*

⁹⁷ *Dealing*

⁹⁸ Street-slang for smoking.

Andile: Why are you so interested? (*Pause*) You ever tried it?

Sipho: Tried what?

Andile: To smoke....

Sipho: Cigarettes?

Andile: No.... umziko, khethe, straw?⁹⁹

Sipho: No.

Andile: I bet you'd like it.

Sipho: You think so?

Andile: I don't think so, I know so! That heaviness you speak of. That pain in your heart. You can make it go away. I had it too Cheese boy. When I was in Jozi, my girl of three years left me. Three years! I was going mad without her. *uMa ngala ungibangela iscefe*,¹⁰⁰ the teachers at school, complaining about my grades. I was in trouble with the blue uniform. The world felt like it was pushing down on me. (*Pause*) My friend Zorro brought some to school one day (*Pause*). A few puffs and none of it mattered anymore. I was hovering above everything. It's like you're floating.... floating above all the hurt and pain. I was the owner of the whole territory, man. (*Beat*) Tomorrow you should come with me.

Sipho: Where to?

Andile: We'll go on an adventure. Get out of this prison. Come with me to paradise. Cheese boy. All you have to do is say yes... come on.

Sipho: I don't think that...

Andile: Come on.

Sipho: I have an essay due...

Andile: Cheese boy, leave the rest up to me. (*Pause*) Just say yes?

Sipho hesitates.

Sipho: Okay.

SCENE 4: PORTIA'S HOUSE

⁹⁹ Alternative street names for whoonga.

¹⁰⁰ My mother was giving me hell.

Sipho is sitting on the sofa watching television. Portia sneaks up behind him and conceals a package behind his chair.

Portia: How are you my boy?

Sipho: I'm not a boy anymore, Ma.

Portia: You're right, you're a big man now. (*Pause*) 17 years... today?

Sipho: (*Annoyed*) 16.... yesterday.

Portia: Yesterday? Happy Birthday.

Sipho: You forgot!

Portia: (*Wearily*) When you work so many night shifts in a row you lose track of what day it is. I'm tired.

Sipho: I'm tired too...

Portia: They're putting pressure on me at the station. (*Pause*)

Sipho: Tired of hearing how tired you are, Ma.

Portia: Rub your mamma's shoulders?

Sipho: No, Ma.

Portia: I've been running after Totsi's all week. The bulletproof vest is hurting my shoulders.

Sipho: Does this mean I get a raise in my pocket money?

Portia: R10.

Sipho: R20.

Portia: R20!!!

Sipho: And you pay upfront.

Portia: Upfront? (*She removes her purse and gives him R20*) Come... come (*She pats her shoulders impatiently. Sipho starts to massage them*). How is school going?

Sipho: Ma, I don't want to go back to school anymore... it's a waste of time.

Portia: But you are doing so well. *Usufuna ukuba uskhotoeni, uhlale matuckshop ufuqa amagwinya?* (You want to be a *skhotoeni*¹⁰¹ hanging around the tuck shop eating *gwinyas*¹⁰² all day?)

Sipho: No Ma, I want to be a musician. They are not teaching me anything that interests me.

Sipho squeezes Portia's shoulders a bit too hard.

Portia: Ai! Gentle *imfanawami*.¹⁰³ Did you make us some dinner?

Sipho: There was nothing in the fridge.

Portia: Nothing? Shall I make us a sandwich?

Sipho: There's no bread.

Portia: (*Confused*) But I went shopping.....

Sipho: A week ago! (*Pause*) I'm a growing man.

Portia: (*Laughing*) Ja, *uyafuqa!*¹⁰⁴ With a grown-man's appetite. I'll take you out on my next night off, ne? We'll go to a restaurant to celebrate properly. (*Portia remembers the carry packet she arrived with*) You really thought I forgot? I want you to open it.

Sipho opens a box and reveals a pair of new red sneakers.

Portia: These are the ones you wanted, ne?

Sipho: (*Excitedly*) Yes!

(*Sipho slips them on to his feet*)

Portia: Do they fit?

Sipho: Thank you!

Portia: (*Remembering*) I want you to have this.

Portia removes a chain with a gold wedding ring around it, from her pocket and hangs it around her Sipho's neck.

Portia: This was the wedding ring your father gave me. He saved up for two years to be able to buy it. (*Pause*) The day he was killed on duty, was the same day I learnt I

¹⁰¹ (*Uskhoteni*) Refers to a junkie or 'good-for-nothing.'

¹⁰² (*Amaqwinya*) Deep-fried bread, also known as *vetkoek*.

¹⁰³ *My boy.*

¹⁰⁴ *You eat till you're stuffed.*

was pregnant with you. (*Touching his face tenderly*) I see so much of him in you. He would have been so proud of you. (*Referring to the chain*) I want you to keep this close to you. Keep it close to your heart.

Lights fade. The A cappella hymn: ‘Somebody’ by King’s Messengers Quartet begins (See Appendix for lyrics).

SCENE 5: BEHIND EMMANUEL’S SPAZA-SHOP

The song continues over this next scene as Andile and Sipho, still in school uniform, enter. They look around cautiously before Andile takes a seat on the bench and sets about rolling a whoong spliff. He lights it, takes a drag before passing it to Sipho. As Sipho takes his first drag, the hymn recedes into the distance and is replaced by a gritty, surreal soundscape.

The two sit back to back in the aftermath, hazy from the drug. Finally, Sipho musters the strength to speak.

Sipho: I want to feel that feeling again.

Andile: That can be arranged.

Sipho: When?

Andile: You can meet me behind this *ikwere kwere*¹⁰⁵ spaza-shop after school.

Sipho: His name’s Emmanuel. (*Pause*) I can’t wait that long.

Andile: (*Produces a packet of whoonga*) I’m going to give you a present bra. It’s a two days’ worth of goof.

Sipho: Two days?

Andile: Ja. You going to need to this to help you through the nights.

Sipho: How much will it cost me?

Andile: The first stash is free.

Sipho: Ai... Ai..... free? What’s the catch?

Andile: From now onwards I’m your dealer, you only ever buy from me?

Sipho: Okay. I’m down with that.

Andile: That’s my boy!

¹⁰⁵ A derogatory term for foreigner.

SCENE 6: BEHIND EMMANUEL'S SPAZA-SHOP

A Mozambican man named Emmanuel enters wielding a Sjambok.¹⁰⁶

Emmanuel¹⁰⁷: Ai what's going on here? Shouldn't you two boys be in school? You (*pointing to Andile*) I've told you before you can't hang around here killing yourself with this rat-poison. You giving my Spaza-shop a bad name! Must I call the police again, eh?

Andile: (*Indifferent*) Do what you like. I'm not afraid of you or the police, *ikwere kwere!* Maybe it's me that should be calling the police, so they can come check if you have a permit to be working here in our territory, eh? If you don't like it then just go back to Mozambique.

Sipho: Stop it, Andile.

Andile: Go back to where you came from.

Sipho: Stop it! Emmanuel is my friend.

Emmanuel recognizes Sipho slumped on the floor.

Emmanuel: Sipho?

Sipho smiles. Emmanuel attempts to help him to his feet.

Emmanuel: (*Sternly*) What are you doing hanging with this *sgebengu* eh, Sipho? What would your mother say if she found out?

Sipho: (*Gooth*) Please don't tell her. Please bra, Emmanuel. We are just having a little fun.

Emmanuel: He's bad news this Andile. (*Sipho stares blankly at him*) And you're a bright young man. (*Glaring at Andile*) I've seen this one destroy far too many young lives. (*To Andile maybe even handling him physically*) I don't want to see you here again. Do you hear me? (*Andile runs off.*) You can't go back to school or home looking like this. You must wait here until you've cleaned up. This is the last time this happens boy.

Sipho: Yes Emmanuel.

Emmanuel: The last time.

¹⁰⁶ A whip made from recycled melted plastic.

¹⁰⁷ We named the character Emmanuel after Emmanuel Sithole who was brutally murdered during the 2015 xenophobic attacks in Durban, while we were creating this script and conducting research. This play is dedicated to Emmanuel.

SCENE 7: THE POLICE STATION

Portia is once again attending a briefing in the Captain's office.

Captain: Lt. Mthembu.

Portia: Captain.

Captain: Do you have any headlines for me yet?

Portia: Nothing worth hanging on a lamppost, Captain. My guys are working towards a bust...

Captain: I'm doing a press briefing at the end of this week. I'm going to need them to work harder.

Portia: We are moving as fast as we can.

Captain: May I ask why you and your team keep wasting your time with the small fish.... the *skhotheni* at the bottom, eh? Don't you think it's time you started clamping down on the big boys at the top?

Portia: It's only through the runners and dealers at the bottom that we are able to find out who and where the big boys are hiding. These guys are almost impossible to get to.

Captain: What about intelligence?

Portia: Intelligence is working on it but, like I said, it's a slow process.

Captain: The public are losing confidence in us. You just have listen to any radio-show or read any newspaper to hear what the word on the street is.

Portia: I didn't enter this profession to win a popularity contest, Captain.

Captain: They're saying we can't be trusted... that we are all corrupt... that the dealers have bribed us to keep out of their way. The communities are tired of being robbed.

Portia: So am I, Captain.

Captain: It seems you and your team needs to look at revising your strategies.

Portia: The more I deal with this problem, Captain, the more I feel the way we police these issues needs to be revised all together.

Captain: Do you have any suggestions?

Portia: We are understaffed and underqualified. We need training, specialized teams. This isn't something we can solve as a single police station.... we need help from the top... help from the community. Government need to step in. (*Pause*) From my

experience down on the ground, arresting these users just seems to be making it worse.¹⁰⁸

She exits.

SCENE 8: EMMANUEL'S SPAZA-SHOP

Portia is busy paying for some groceries. Emmanuel stands on the opposite side of the counter. They greet each other warmly, as if old friends.

Emmanuel: Good afternoon, Lieutenant

Portia: Bon dia, Emmanuel.

Emmanuel: (*Speaking carefully in basic isiZulu*) Kunjani namhlanje?¹⁰⁹

Portia: Your Zulu is getting good! Some bread and R12 Vodacom, please. (*Pause*) How are you keeping?

Emmanuel: Things are okay.

Portia: You look worried.

Emmanuel: People came round here this morning and threatened me in my shop.

Portia: Again?

Emmanuel: Ai! I am not sleeping anymore.

Portia: Is it the same people as before?

Emmanuel: It's hard to say who. It's hard to know who to trust anymore in this community. The other night after I had locked up, they broke in here and stole all my stock.

Portia: Again?

Emmanuel: Ja.

Portia: I am sorry to hear this, Emmanuel.

¹⁰⁸ This dialogue is a verbatim transcription from police in Durban, during feedback workshop meetings in 2015.

¹⁰⁹ *What do you want today?*

Emmanuel: They accuse me of dealing drugs to youngsters but I am no dealer, Portia. I make an honest living with my shop. (*Pause*) You know if it was up to me... I would pack up and go home tomorrow. I miss my village in Beira¹¹⁰ and my wife and children. I don't feel welcome here anymore.

Portia: I will look out for you. Let me know if you are not feeling safe?

Emmanuel: (*Calling after her a little anxiously*) Portia, sorry Portia would you mind transferring this money back home to my wife Selina for me again? I'm sorry to ask but it's the end of the month now.

Emmanuel holds forth a brown envelope.

Portia: I will do it on Monday. (*She takes the envelope*) Stay safe Emmanuel.

Emmanuel: God bless you, Portia, *ngibonga*.¹¹¹

SCENE 9: OUTSIDE EMMANUEL'S SPAZA-SHOP

Portia turns to leave and collides into Bongani who is entering the store. Her packet of groceries scatter on the ground. Bongani apologises profusely and crouches down to help her pick them up.

Bongani: I'm sorry, Ma.

Portia: That's okay.

A moment of recognition as they scan each other's faces.

Portia: I know you....

Bongani: Bongani.

Portia: Mseleku.... Bongani Mseleku.

Bongani: (*Bitterly*) You have a good memory.

Portia: How could I forget. (*To Bongani*) It's been a while?

Bongani: Four years.

Portia: I trust you're enjoying your new-found freedom.

¹¹⁰ Beira is a village in northern Mozambique.

¹¹¹ Thank you.

Bongani: Four years.

Portia: That's a long time.

Bongani: You stole four years of my life.¹¹²

Portia: You brought it upon yourself.

Bongani: Left me with a criminal record.

Portia: You and your friends destroyed a young girl's life.

Bongani: I didn't lay a hand on her, Officer.

Portia: (*A little smugly*) I'm a Lieutenant now.

They stare at each other for a moment.

Bongani: Do you know how hard it is to find a job with a criminal record? To run a household, feeding three children when you can't find a job?

Portia: The court made the final decision in the end.

Bongani: I was innocent!

Portia: That's not what they found, Bongani.

Bongani: You ruined my life, Lieutenant.

Portia: You reap what you sow. (*Beat*) *Uvuna okutshalile.*

Portia exits.

SCENE 10: OUTSIDE EMMANUEL'S SPAZA SHOP

Sipho is lying on the floor clutching his belly, writhing around in terrible pain.

¹¹² The character of Bongani is based on an in-depth ethnography conducted by Mpume Mthombeni, who plays Portia. A neighbour in her street is a dealer who was wrongfully arrested for a crime he didn't commit. As a result of this he spent 4 years in jail. When he came out he had to provide for his family, his sister and her children. His mother was not working so it was up to him to provide for his family. He didn't see selling fruit as a viable option and, because of his criminal record, couldn't find a job so the easiest way to make a living was by selling whoonga.

Sipho: Andile help me dog, please.... help me. I'm dying from the stomach pain here. It hurts... it hurts so much.

Andile: *Arosta*.¹¹³

Sipho: Ar.... what?

Andile: Arosta. It's part of the come down.

Sipho: What's causing this?

Andile: The rat-poison in the *goof*.

Sipho: What?

Andile: The rat-poison leaving your system.

Sipho: You never told me we were blazing rat-poison!

Andile: The drug would kill us if we smoked it clean. The *rattex* is part of the mix.... it keeps the blood flowing.

Sipho: How can I make it stop?

Andile: There's only one way my bra.

Sipho: (*Desperate*) Tell me what it is.... tell me.

Andile: You have to smoke more.

Sipho: More?

Andile: It's the only way.

Sipho: Do you have any more on you?

Andile: Of course.

Sipho: Let's blaze.

Andile: Not so fast Cheese boy.... you're going to have to pay up from now on. R25 bucks a hit.¹¹⁴ That's four hits for a R100. That should keep you going for the rest of the day.

¹¹³ *Arosta* is the street name for the pains that occur as a side effect of smoking whoonga. It can range from itching, pain in the stomach, joint pain, headaches and sneezing. The pains are related to the use of *Rattex*, a rat-poison containing strychnine, which is mixed into the heroin to prevent the user's blood from clotting. Strychnine helps to keep the blood flowing, preventing embolisms and ensuring the user lives on to purchase their next hit. As the body builds immunity to the substance, the blood begins to form small clots in the veins, which often causes whoonga users to scratch compulsively.

¹¹⁴ Our research revealed that the average whoonga user in Durban spends approximately R100 to R150 a day to keep the *Arosta* at bay.

Sipho: What about the rest of the week?

Andile: You going to have to find the cash for that.

Sipho: I don't have any money.

Andile: That's not my problem, bra.

Sipho: Ai Andile, help a friend out.

Andile: I'm not a charity, Cheese boy.

Sipho: (*Begging*) Please.

Andile: This is my business. My boss will kill me. You have to pay upfront from now on.

Sipho: I don't have cash on me.

(*Pause*)

Andile: (*He looks at Sipho's new sneakers*) What about those?

Sipho: These were a birthday present.

Andile: I'll give you a week's supply.

Sipho: *Ai, voetsak!*¹¹⁵ Once I get rid of this pain then I'm going to stop smoking this shit forever.

Sipho takes off his shoes and throws them angrily at Andile who collects his prize and examines them. Andile laughs.

Sipho: What's so funny?

Andile: Ha! You think you can turn your back on whoonga just like that?

Sipho: (*Clutching his stomach*) Hurry up with that *blaze* man.

Andile: Your blood is dirty now, Sipho. You smoke once... twice... three times and you're fucked! That's why they call this *Intombi engaliwa*.¹¹⁶

He lights the joint for Sipho and hands it to him. Sipho smokes.

Sipho: You'll see. I'll give her up.

¹¹⁵ Afrikaans word meaning 'piss off – get out of here – get lost.'

¹¹⁶ Another street name for whoonga, *Inthombi engaliwa* directly translated means *A lover you cannot leave*.

Andile: Not before she steals your cash... breaks your heart.... and leaves you in a gutter.

Sipho: I'm not weak like you, Andile.

Andile: Every morning I wake up and say: "No more.... today I am I'm done with this."

Sipho: I have my whole life ahead of me.

Andile: That's what we all say.

Sipho: I'll do it!

Andile: You think you'll be able to ignore it....

Sipho: You'll see.

Andile: ... you think that the pain will just go away? No it will only get worse, this is an eat-sum-more!¹¹⁷

Andile rises and begins to rap in Zulu. Music underscores the sequence.

Andile: Ebumnyameni ngibona ifu elimnyama, isis sidungekile kugijima inynkalankala, Kuthi Khala inhlizyo ibencane. Aliko icala lomzimba elingabuthwеле ubunzima. Amathumbu ayadonseka Afuna ukuphuma kulo owami umqala ngithi qala amehlo athifilifili, angizifili kulo owami umziba usuphenduke isidindi. Ngizothi umangikhala ngikhale ngiziwe ubani, Ngoba ebumnyameni ngibona ifu elimnyama.¹¹⁸

The company, wearing balaclavas, slowly enter the stage and circle ominously around Andile wrapping long pieces of rope around his belly before moving to positions on opposite corners of the stage. As their grip gradually tightens, the ropes fasten painfully around Andile's stomach. Sipho looks on.

Andile: (*Grimacing*) And you find that all you can think about is *Intombi, Intombi, Intombi engaliwa*. And soon you realise that nothing will make the pain go away except... smoking more.

Andile takes the joint and inhales with desperation. The ropes relax and slacken around his stomach, falling to the ground. He is overcome with relief.

¹¹⁷ During the group's research with users and dealers in Kwa-Mashu, whoonga was often referred to as an 'eat-sum-more' which references the popular South African shortbread biscuit of the same name, the comparison refers to the notion that once you start you can't stop.

¹¹⁸ *A dark cloud has settled over me. My intestines writhe and rise up through my neck. My vision blurs, obscured. I am no longer in my body. I melt into nothingness; I am brittle like grass in winter. If I cry who will hear me, a dark cloud has settled over me.*

Andile: But whoonga costs money, ne? It doesn't just grow on trees. So first you pay 25 rand for one hit. In the beginning you need one hit a day but as your body gets more and more used to it you start to need two and the next week... four. And soon 25 bucks becomes 50, then 100, until finally you having to find R150 bucks a day to fund your goof.

Sipho: Where the fuck am I going to find R150 a day?

Andile: The user always makes a plan *mfana*. It's all about the hustle, my bra. (*Strikes a pose*) Allow me to introduce you to Andile Nxumalo's survival guide to ensure you remain well and truly *goot* in KwaZulu-Natal in the 21st century. (*Andile begins miming the actions of the next sequence bringing them to life with comic flair*)

There are many ways you may choose to source this sort of income such as... (*Pause*) working as a caddie there by Greyville golf-course on Saturdays...

Sipho: I don't know anything about golf.

Andile: Ai, relax boy. All you have to do is carry the clubs around for the *gqonqa*¹¹⁹ who are too lazy to do it themselves. Smile at the *Baas*¹²⁰ politely and always congratulate him after each shot.... saying things like (*Putting on accent*) "What brilliant aim you have Sir!"... or, "Excellent shot."

They get tipped and blaze up.

Andile: Or you can help carry the *Gogo's*¹²¹ groceries at the *Bridge City Mall*. (*They re-enact the scene*) Be polite.... greet them warmly.... remind them of their favorite grandson. Tell them you are saving up to invest in your university education for when you graduate from high school.

Andile: Although there is always the point where you come short. This is where you going to need to start taking some chances *Mshana*.¹²²

Sipho: How do you mean?

Andile: When I first started smoking whoonga, I used to steal meat from the delivery truck at the stop street and then sell it to people in the township for half the price.

Sipho: You mean breaking the law?

Andile: When your stash is running low... that, my friend, is when you need to have a "quick-fix" emergency plan.

¹¹⁹ Referring to wealthy white people.

¹²⁰ Parodic mispronunciation of 'Boss', common to the Zulu-English accent.

¹²¹ Grandmothers; grannies; elderly women.

¹²² *My friend, or, my comrade.*

Sipho: Emergency plan?

Andile: It is at this point that I should tell you about what is known by the user as “isikwhebu”¹²³ ...I’m talking minimum effort for a maximum high. Everything you see around us can be transformed into quick cash and more *goof*. It’s called Isikwhebu.

Sipho: Isikwhebu?

Andile: (*Listing the many options*) Sound system shoes ungayshiyi ne ayina. Playstation fone nezingubo, ntshontsha ngisho ipenti kulayini... Hayi angikaqed... ntshontsha nama grossa ekhabetheni ngisho umtwana umtwana omcane elele umnqume izitho siyozidayisa thina sife ukubhema Mfana sife ukubhema.¹²⁴

Andile gets more and more high, as he points out all the possibilities for financing his habit, and eventually collapses to floor with Sipho.

Andile: (*Laughing deliriously*) Soon you won’t care if it’s your own mother you are stealing from...

Portia calls frantically for Sipho from off stage. Andile vanishes.

SCENE 11: PORTIAS HOUSE

Portia enters the stage and confronts Sipho.

Portia: Sipho... Sipho!!!

Sipho: What’s wrong?

Portia: These thieves have ransacked us again.

Sipho: What happened?

Portia: They must have broken in last night.

Sipho: What makes you think that?

Portia: The toaster and kettle are gone and that envelope of money I am supposed to be sending home for Emmanuel has gone missing.

¹²³ Directly translated, *isikwhebu* refers to maize meal. A colloquialism referring to the fact that everything is for sale, and that anything can be turned into money. Used as slang among whoonga users.

¹²⁴ Playfully listing theiving options, in more or less a rhyme, for example: ‘Sound-systems, playstations, medication, copper-wire, hair-dryers, hair-extensions, not to mention... (Pause) iPhones, iPads, Samsung’s, handguns, hubcaps, wedding rings and other bling. (Pause) Suitcases, shoelaces, cricket bats, chicken fat. (Pause) Leather boots, pots n’ pans, bicycles, coke-cans, wall-fans, nail-polish, gold-teeth, those silk-sheets, Gonqa’s leather-wallets, you know... something fancy... like your sister’s panties...’

Sipho: Serious, Ma?

Portia: What I can't understand is that there's no sign of breaking and entering.

Sipho: Someone must have left the door unlocked.

Portia: You were the last one home last night. Did you forget to lock when you came in?

Sipho: I... I might have. I had soccer practice.... went out with friends afterwards.

Portia: I tried to call. (*Pause*) Why you haven't been answering my calls or sms's?

Sipho: My phone was stolen.

Portia: When?

Sipho: About a week ago... at school.

Portia: (*Concerned*) And you only tell me now.

Sipho: I thought I'd told you already.

Portia: (*Looking at her son suspiciously*) Sipho....

*Sipho sees her looking at him closely and turns away to avoid further scrutiny.
Portia takes his face in her hands and turns him towards her again.*

Portia: Are you okay my boy?

Sipho: I'm fine, Ma.

Portia: You look....

Sipho: Tired, I'm just tired.

Portia: Is that all?

Sipho nods.

Portia: This neighborhood is under attack. We have to keep things locked at all times. These *skoteni* will steal the sheets off us while we sleeping if we not careful. Ai! I'm fed up with this now... fed up.

They both exit.

SCENE 12: BONGANI'S HOUSE

Bongani throws Andile onto the stage and paces furiously after him waving a handful of cash in his face.

Bongani: This isn't enough.

Andile: It's all there, bra.

Bongani: I gave you four thousand rands worth of stock last week to sell and you giving me two thousand back. (*Aggressively*) Come... where's the rest of my money?

Andile: Ai, just chillax.... there was *four sgodo*¹²⁵ there when I last checked.

Bongani: Would you like me to count it again for you? Eh?

Andile: That won't be necessary.

Bongani: Then tell me, where is the rest of my money?

Andile: It must have fallen out my pocket on the way here, Bra Bongani.

Bongani: You think I'm stupid?

Andile: I wouldn't steal from you. You my friend man... my boss. The cops have been hassling me, they took some of my goof from me last week.

Bongani: You think I'm stupid?

Andile: No.

Bongani: What am I going to tell my boss, eh, when he comes for his money? I have a family to feed. You want to see us all starve?

Andile: I'm serious bra. I had it earlier.

Bongani: You smoked it, didn't you?

Andile: No

Bongani: Just tell me! (*No answer*) Tell me!

Andile: Only a little bit, Bra Bongani.

Bongani: You wasting my fucking time.

Andile: Please... I'll make it up to you.

Bongani: *Uwena shlama!*¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Four thousand. A *sgodo* is one thousand.

¹²⁶ You piece of shit!

Andile: I only tried a little to keep the *Arosta* away while I was working. You don't know what that pain is like.

Bongani: I'm not here to fund your filthy habits. You want to be my runner then I have to be able to trust you.

Andile: It won't happen again.

Bongani: That's what you said the last time.

Andile: It won't.

Bongani: I'm a patient man, Andile. Four years in prison taught me this. After your aunt kicked you out her house, I was the one that took you in and let you crash on my floor. I've fed you.... bailed you out from the police station over and over again. I've looked after you and this is how you repay me eh? (*Beat*).

Andile: I need some more *goof* to sell.

Bongani: Not until you have paid me in full.

Bongani begins to leave and Andile calls after him in desperation.

Andile: I have a new client. (*Pause*) The one you wanted. (*Bongani stops in his tracks*.) The policewoman's son.

Bongani: (*Turning back to him*) Lieutenant Mthembu's boy?

Andile: Ya... ya he's in deep, bra Bongani. (*Pause*) You have the insurance you were looking for.

Bongani: (*There is a silence. Bongani speaks up reluctantly*) I'm giving you till Sunday afternoon to find my money. No more *goof* till you've paid off all your debt. Do you hear me?

Andile: Please bra Bongani... I just need –

Bongani: (*Interrupting sharply*) You understand?

Andile nods before scrambling off stage.

SCENE 13: OUTSIDE EMMANUEL'S SPAZA-SHOP

We hear a commotion off stage. Emmanuel enters chasing Sipho from his shop. Sipho runs across the stage.

Emmanuel: (*Yelling after Sipho*) Sipho Mthembu I am a friend of your mother. A friend of your family for ten years now and this is how you treat me? Stealing money

from out of my till in broad daylight. (*He shakes his head sadly*) How do I tell this to your mother? How do I tell her only son is now smoking this rubbish?

SCENE 14: OUTSIDE EMMANUEL'S SPAZA-SHOP

Andile enters followed by Sipho. They are both in the cruxes of Arosta scratching and sweating. Sipho is counting the money he stole moments ago from Emmanuel.

Sipho: I have it bad.

Andile: Me too, *Mshana*.

Sipho: Please, Andile, give me a smoke. I have some of your money. I'll find the rest later. I promise.

Andile: I'm dry.

Sipho: Dry?

Andile: All out.

Sipho: Nothing.

Andile: Nothing.

Sipho: (*Freaking out*) How am I going to get high?

Andile: I don't have any *goof* on me. I got into some trouble bra. I have to pay off some debt first.

Sipho: But I need a hit now!

Andile: So do I.... So do I.

Sipho: How much you need to pay off your debt?

Andile: *Two-sgodo*.

Sipho: Two-thousand!!!

Andile: You can help me bra.

Sipho: How? I only have (*He counts the money he has stolen from Emmanuel*) R 200 and that's for my smoke today.

Andile: (*Looking at Sipho's neck*) What about that?

Music begins: an ominous underscoring. Sipho looks down to the ring hanging around his neck, then back up at Andile.

Sipho: This?

Andile: Come on Siphs.

Sipho: (*Trying to change the subject*) What about your aunty's house? Let's hit that again.

Andile: She kicked me out again last week (*In a fit of desperation*) There isn't a door-knob or light-fitting left to steal from that house. (*Pause*) Give me the ring.

Andile tries to snatch the ring and the two fight. Andile forces Sipho to the ground in a headlock...

Andile: It's gold, ne? Give it to me.

Sipho: It belonged to my father.

Andile: *Aseena-choice*,¹²⁷ bra!

Sipho: It's all I have left of him...

Andile: There's no time for sentimentality Cheese boy. (*Threatening*) *Ndlala ibanga ulaka*.¹²⁸ We need to get high.

Again Andile tries to snatch the ring and Sipho is forced to fight him off.

Sipho: I can't.

Andile: The pain is only going to get worse.

Sipho: Please don't make me do this.

Music takes a darker turn. Sipho winces from his stomach cramps, removing the necklace and clutching it in his hand. In a repetition of an earlier rope image, the cast (faces concealed by balaclavas) move around him winding the ropes around his stomach. As they pull from each direction, the rope tightens and the pain becomes unbearable, bringing Sipho to his knees.

Andile: Listen to me. We just loan it to my boss in the meantime.... till we can pay it off. You and I do some running.... get some new kids at the school hooked and pay it off in no time. (*Pause*) Trust me.

¹²⁷ Meaning, 'It's a means to an end.'

¹²⁸ 'Hunger breeds anger.' In our research, a drug user described how the 'hunger' for whoonga made him so desperate that he would resort to anything to get hold of his next hit, even violence if needed. Traditionally, this idiom is used to refer to poverty leading to violence.

Sipho has no other choice but to submit. He reluctantly holds the necklace out for Andile. The cast tugs at the ropes and Sipho lets out a moan. The ring falls into Andile's open palm. Sipho collapses to the floor and Andile exits.

The light fades.

SCENE 15: BONGANI'S HOUSE

Andile and Sipho are standing nervously before Bongani. Bongani is inspecting the ring, holding it up to the light.

Andile: It's gold, ne. The real deal.

Bongani: Why should I trust you?

Andile: You can't fake that shit Bra.

Bongani taps the ring against his teeth.

Bongani: (To Sipho) It's real?

Sipho: My mother gave it to me.

Bongani laughs.

Bongani: (Slipping the ring on his finger) The wedding ring of Lt. Mthembu.

Sipho: (Confused) You know her?

Bongani: Everyone knows 'the good Lieutenant'. (Sarcastically) You could say we're old friends. (Looking at the ring) What am I supposed to do with this? (Turning to Andile and kneeling) Are you asking for my hand in marriage?

Bongani laughs loudly the others join in nervously.

Andile: We want to put it down as insurance until we can pay it off.

Bongani: (Acknowledging Sipho) You know I don't like to leave guests in my house standing around. (To Andile) Get him a chair.

Andile: (Anxious and scratching¹²⁹) Ai, Bongani we don't have time for chit-chat. We need get the goof and hit the street.

Bongani: (Firmly) I said pull up a chair!

Andile gets Sipho a chair and Bongani gestures politely for him to sit.

¹²⁹ Scratching is common during Arosta, as the clotting in the blood causes an uncomfortable itchiness.

Bongani: Sipho, is that right?

Sipho nods nervously

Bongani: You must understand Sipho, I have to be very careful of letting any one of Andile's *para* friends work for me.

Sipho: I'm not like his other friends, *Malume*.¹³⁰

Bongani: Please, call me Bongani. (*Pause*) What you need to understand, Sipho, is I'm just a small part of a very big business. So when you *Para*'s at the bottom start smoking the goods instead of selling it like you're supposed to.... that harms me. You understand?

Sipho: I understand.

Bongani: That harms my buisness... my family.... my safety. Do you follow?

Sipho: (*Nodding*) I follow.

Bongani: My family always comes first, you hear?

Sipho: Yes.

Bongani: When someone threatens my children's future... it makes me very angry. (*Pause*) So you reckon you two can sell four *sgodos* worth by the end of the weekend?

Bongani cuts the drug, separates it into two halves.

Sipho: We can, *Malume*.

Bongani: (*Correcting him*) Bongani.

Sipho: I mean, Bongani.

Bongani: I'm giving you until Sunday 5 o'clock.

Andile: We'll have your money by then.... no worries.

Bongani: This your final warning Andile.... Do you hear me boy?

Andile: Yes Boss.

Bongani: Your final one.

Andile and Sipho exit.

¹³⁰ (*Umalume*) isiZulu for *uncle*. Referring to another man as uncle (specifically a maternal uncle), it's a term of respect, the equivalent of 'Sir.'

SCENE 16: OUTSIDE EMMANUEL'S SPAZA-SHOP

Andile sits rolling a joint. Sipho hovers impatiently over him, scratching himself.¹³¹ The bed is placed on its side and facing the audience, the springs of the bed might resemble a barbed wire fence.

Sipho: Hurry up, bra.

Andile: I'm hurrying.

Sipho: (*Clutching his belly and pacing*) When this deal is over (*Beat*) I'm finished with this shit. I hate it, no one takes us seriously... no one cares about us. Even when you want to say something nobody listens. We are a joke Andile.... a fucking joke. I don't like what I've become. My whole life has come to a standstill. From Monday to Sunday all I can think about is smoking. (*Pause*) I want my old life back. I want to be the person I was before.

Andile: Shut-up wena.

Andile lights the whoonga joint and they each take a toke. Sipho inhales deeply and leans back onto the springs of the bed, which is still standing upright and facing the audience.

Music. Two cast members now control the bed's slow descent to the floor. Sipho is lying on it, as it moves from the vertical to the horizontal. The image magically suggests the intense relief and all too brief transcendence of Sipho's high. As the bed lands back on earth Andile shrinks off into the shadows.

SCENE 17: SIPHO'S ROOM

Portia enters carrying a bowl of food. Sipho is still lying asleep on the bed.

Portia: (*Concerned*) Sipho.... Sipho.

No answer from Sipho. Portia shakes him.

Portia: You still haven't eaten. You must eat something. (*Still no answer*) I'm calling the doctor.

Sipho: I'm fine, Ma....

Portia: This is your fourth day off from school.

Sipho: It's just a tummy bug. I'm okay.

¹³¹ The blood clots caused by the whoonga in the bloodstream, leaves the user very itchy.

Portia: I've never seen you like this.

Sipho: I'll be better in the morning.

Portia: Eat something.

Sipho mumbles pathetically.

Portia: You must try.

SCENE 18: EMMANUEL'S SPAZA-SHOP

Portia remains watching over her son in a freeze. Emmanuel enters downstage carrying a portable radio. We hear the crackle of static as he tunes the radio finally arriving at a live Zulu broadcast of King Goodwill Zwelithini's Speech.¹³² He listens intently, fear written across his face.

King Goodwill: "The time is now for us to have a say. I would like to ask the South African government to help us. We must deal with our own lice. In our heads, let's take out the ants and leave them in the sun."

"We are asking that immigrants must take their bags and go where they come from. It is painful to me when I look at the country that our forefathers and thousands of people fought for become a criminal den."

"As I'm talking to you now, there are all sorts of things outside the stores, they brought untidiness to our streets, its filthy, you can't even see what these stores were (with) foreigners in these areas."

Yells from a crowd, offstage. Angry accusatory voices. Emmanuel, fearing for his life, vanishes.

SCENE 19: CAPTAIN'S OFFICE

Captain: Lieutenant, I need you and your team on high alert this week.

Portia: What's going on out there?

¹³² While conducting our research, King Goodwill Zwelithini delivered a speech in Pongola, which allegedly fueled the xenophobic attacks that broke out in the city a few weeks later. We found ourselves rehearsing in the midst of brutal xenophobic violence, right outside the rehearsal spaces at the Denis Hurely Centre in the CBD. Each day, the Big Brotherhood team witnessed foreign nationals fleeing their homes in KwaMashu to stay in refugee camps in the city. A recurring theme of blame emerged among various people we interviewed: they held the foreign nationals responsible for the whoonga epidemic in their communities – yet there was no evidence to support this. Out of the entire foreign national community in Durban, only a fraction has been found to be involved in the dealing of drugs.

Captain: You heard about the King's speech?

Portia: Yes.

Captain: There have been outbreaks of violence reported against foreign shop-owners. The people are claiming the foreigners are selling whoonga to schoolchildren.

Portia: Not every foreigner living in this country is a dealer, for god's sake.

Captain: (*Shrugging*) The people are fed up and frustrated. They're looking for someone – something – to blame. (*Grimly*) A Somalian was set alight in his container in B-section last night.

Portia: Jesus.

Captain: We're anticipating more disruptions over the next few days. I'm going to need as many patrol-vehicles down on the ground as possible.

Portia: I'll get onto it.

Portia makes to leave.

Captain: Lieutenant.

Portia: Yes.

Captain: Be careful.

SCENE 20: BEHIND THE STATION

In what seems to be a repeat of the first scene of the play, we hear police sirens, see the flashing of red and blue police lights, the frantic searching of flashlights in the blackout. A boy – a in a black hoodie – whose face we can't see, comes running through the audience and onto the stage.

Portia: (*Yelling from Audience*) You run, I shoot. Do you hear me? You hear? I will pull this trigger.

Members of the METRO police force are hot on the criminals heals. Again, Portia leads the chase. The policemen all point their flash-lights at the boy. Portia, flanked by the rest of her unit (include officer Bulawayo and Zikhali), form a semi-circle around the figure.

Bulawayo: Down on the ground! Facedown boy.

The boy tries to dash but is pushed down to the ground by Officer Zikhali.

Portia: On the ground. You hear me?

The officers pin the boy to the ground with his face down.

Portia: Empty his pockets... empty them.

The officers empty two packets of whoonga straws. The boy struggles but they have him firmly in their grip.

Portia: Having a busy night, ne? Planning on throwing a big party, eh? You know you could go to prison for a long-time for carrying this amount of drugs. (*Beat*) You going to tell us where you are getting all this? Even better, you're going to show us where you are getting this (*Referring to the straws*). Do you understand?

The boy mumbles something into his hoody, his face still pressed into the ground.

Portia: (*To the offices*) I can't hear him. Show me his face.

The offices pull the boy to his feet and hold him up. All the torch beams focus in on his face. Bulawayo removes his hood and reveals Sipho. A moment of stunned silence and recognition. Portia clocks Sipho.... Sipho clocks Portia.

Zikhali: Let's make him eat it, Lieutenant.

Bulawayo: Ja, Eat it!

Portia: (*Intervening*) Wait, wait this one is a first time offender. Let him go. Let his arms go. (*She pulls the men off her son*) Give me some time alone with him.

The rest of the policemen reluctantly step back.

Portia: Stand up (*Brusquely*) Stand up.... Sipho stand up.

Sipho: I am sorry, Mamma.

Portia: (*Dumbstruck.... A long silence.... Softly*) You are going to take me to the place where you got this from.

Sipho: He will kill me, Ma.

Portia: (*Softly*) Right now. (*Angrily*) Jenge manje!

SCENE 21: BONGANI'S HOUSE

Portia enters Bongani's house with Sipho. Sipho lingers anxiously in the background. She stands clasping Sipho's packet of whoonga straws. Bongani and Portia stare at each other for a few beats.

Bongani: Lieutenant, how kind of you to make a house call.

Portia: Mr. Mseleku, I think this belongs to you.

Portia throws down the stock down at Bongani's feet.

Portia: I should arrest you right now. Fast track my promotion at the police station.

Bongani: Did you bring an extra pair of handcuffs? I think your son will be joining me.

Portia: Is this your idea of revenge, Mr. Mseleku?

Bongani: I like to think of it as 'insurance' for the future, Lieutenant.

Portia: Insurance?

Bongani: You son was found dealing five hundred grams of whoonga or Brown Heroin on him tonight. That's what.... mmm? Ten to fifteen years in prison? (Pause) Are you planning to arrest him... treat him like a filthy criminal.... Drop him on the other side of the township with no money or light to find his way home. See, it's different when it's your own flesh and blood. Handing him over to the station would be the right thing to do. No? Surely the law must now take its course?

Portia: You tricked him, my only child. (*Portia pulls her gun on Bongani. He raises his hands*) You set this trap and he fell right in, *uyinja!*¹³³ You want to see him go to prison? My only child.

Sipho: Ma, don't!

Portia: Thula wena!!¹³⁴

Bongani stands with his hands raised but loses none of his composure.

Bongani: (*Talking Portia down in a calm and clear voice*) I wouldn't wish a prison sentence on anyone, Lieutenant. Do you know how hard it is to find work with a criminal record? (Pause) You think I chose to be a dealer after I came out of prison? (Pause) You see my sister is an addict... she has three children.... and no husband. I am the one that has to provide for all of them. When I came out of jail at the start of

¹³³ You Dog!

¹³⁴ Be quiet!! or, Be still!!

this year.... dealing whoonga was the only career option open to me.¹³⁵ (*Pause*) I don't do this because I enjoy it. I had other far more exciting dreams for myself. You put an end to those. (*Beat*) I do this now to survive and that is all.

Bongani gestures for Portia to sit... she does.

Bongani: (*Pause*) When you arrested me, all those years ago, you didn't even ask to hear my side of the story.

Portia: My job is to make arrests. The court founded their decision of evidence collected at the scene of the crime.

Bongani: The court made their decisions on rumors not evidence. (*Pause*) Rumors can be dangerous things Lieutenant. Rumors cost me four years of my life in the end.

Portia: The Captain will hear about this, we'll close you down send you back where you belong.

Bongani: (*Laughing*) The Captain? (*Pause*) Who do you think is paying for his children's expensive schooling, his wife's new car? (*Beat*).

Portia sits silently.

Bongani: It's late.... My advice to you now is to go home... take your Sipho with you. From now on you protect me and my business and I'll make sure that no one finds out about your son's activities. *Izandla ziyagezana.*¹³⁶

Portia: (*Standing up*) Are you blackmailing me?

Bongani: I prefer to see it as coming to some sort of agreement.

Bongani pulls the wedding ring out and hands it Portia.

Portia: You are ruining my life.

Bongani¹³⁷: (*A brief pause*) You reap what you sew... Uvuna okutshalile.

Lights fade.

¹³⁵ Our research revealed that first time ex-convicts are offered around R10,000 as a 'starter-pack' by a local network of dealers who are also ex-convicts, to set up their own franchise. The dealers we interviewed said they could pay this off within a month and have a fully-fledged business within two weeks. It's recognized that arresting drug users is possibly one of the worst ways of responding to the issue. Not only is our prison system overflowing by 115%, but throwing people in prison, people who are drug users themselves or from areas that are riddled by gangsterism, creates more work, and more potential problems down the road.

¹³⁶ 'It takes both hands to wash.' This is equivalent to 'You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.'

¹³⁷ Sadly, the person who inspired the story of Bongani was killed in 2016 in what seems to be a violent drug related altercation.

SCENE 22: SIPHO'S HOUSE

The bed is placed center stage and Sipho lies down in it. Portia turns to the audience and addresses them.

Portia: (*Talking to audience*) I should have seen the signs. I was so busy pursuing the problem in the back-alleys of KwaMashu that I didn't notice it creep into my own home. How could I have been so blind? And now where to? What must a mother do? They say there is no end to this nightmare.... that once a child is addicted you might as well consider them dead... But I won't surrender, Sipho. (*Portia removes handcuffs from her belt*) I'm won't leave your side until we have driven these demons away. All I have is patience and love.... that's all I can give.

Portia gently takes Sipho's left hand and handcuffs it to the bedpost.

Sipho: (*Clutching his belly with his right hand*) It's painful, Ma.... It's sore.

Portia: I know my boy.... I know.

Sipho: Let me free, Ma (*Rattling the handcuffs against the metal frame*).

Portia: I can't.

Sipho: (*Yelling*) Let me go!

Portia: Not until the poison has left your system.

Sipho: Let me go!

Portia: It's only been two days. Eat some porridge... here.

Portia holds forth a bowl of porridge.

Sipho: (*Crying*) Let me go, Ma!

Portia: Those people in the community will kill you if they catch you stealing from them again. This is for your own safety my boy. (*Pause*) Try and eat.

Sipho strikes the bowl from out of her hands and the contents scatter across the stage. He writhes in pain. Portia goes on her hands and knees to clean up the spilt porridge, again confiding with the audience.

Sipho is still delirious with Arosta, he tosses and turns. Andile enters and hovers over the bed.... a hallucination perhaps? Only Sipho appears to sense his presence and calls out.

Sipho: Andile.... Andile....

Portia: Andile isn't here.

Sipho: Get me Andile.

Sipho grasps at the air frantically with his free hand.

Portia: (*Adamant*) That sgebengu won't put a foot in this house.

Sipho: I need Andile.

Portia: You will never smoke that rubbish again!

Andile vanishes back into the shadows of Sipho's room.

Sipho: I need to smoke Mamma. The pain is killing me. (*Yelling*) Andile! Andile!

Portia: I can't let you do that.

Sipho: I'm dying...

.
Portia: So that you can live again soon. It's been four days Sipho... Why go back?

Sipho collapses again.

Portia: (*Back to audience*) You must understand. (*Exhausted*) I tried everything I could. Not even God could heal him.

Off-stage voices praying. Three men from the church enter, laying their hands on Sipho in the bed and praying wildly.

Voice 1: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me...

Voice 2: May this demon be cast out of this poor boy...

Voice 3: May the blood of Christ wash over him, and cleanse his blood of this poison...

Voice 4: Behold the Cross of The Lord, flee bands of enemies...

Portia: (*Praying to herself desperately*) Will this ever stop? Will I ever sleep? Will I wake from this nightmare? Sweet Jesus, bring me peace!

Portia and all the voices together: AMEN.

Portia tries to lift Sipho's head and get him to drink water. He drinks thirstily, the water spills over him.

Sipho: Ma, please let me go... Please take these off.... Please Ma... Ma!

Portia: (*To the audience*) One of my neighbors said her son had healed himself by consulting a traditional healer, so I took him to a Sangoma¹³⁸ after that.

A pool of light reveals the sangoma, huddled over a mat, divining from bones and muthi.¹³⁹

Sangoma: He will need to drink this and you will need to wash his body with *uBokodowayo* twice a day. This will help him forget. He will never turn his back on this.... He will always be looking over his shoulder. His ancestors are calling him out of the city, he is drowning in this city. He must leave this city.

Portia addresses the audience.

Portia: (*Whispering to herself*) Will this ever stop? Will I ever sleep? Will I wake from this nightmare? Sweet Jesus bring me peace. (*To the audience*) The social worker tried his best to guide us...

Social worker enters at the side of the bed, looking down at a clipboard before addressing Portia.

Social Worker: I'm afraid, Lt. Mtembu, you will have to put his name on a list.

Portia: How long will we have to wait?

Social Worker: Anywhere from one to three months

Portia: We cannot wait that long, my son may be dead by then.

Social Worker: There is only two public rehabilitation Centres in this province. They full up quick.

Portia: And when he does finally go to the rehab what are the chances of him being healed?

Social Worker: There is currently a two percent chance of recovery.

Portia: (*Shocked*) Two percent? Oh God...

Social Worker: In the meantime I suggest you try get him into an NA group where he can speak with others. There's also a number for a private doctor who can prescribe methadone.

Portia: Methadone?

¹³⁸ Traditional herbalists and healers.

¹³⁹ Traditional medicines created and administered by traditional herbalists and healers (Sangomas).

Social worker: You know how a diabetic must take insulin to treat his diabetes? Well, methadone – you could say, is the like the insulin for heroin users. (*Interrupting*) Just a word of warning though, Mrs Mthembu... (*Pause*) *Ungaliyisa ihashi emfuleni, kodwa ngeke uliphoqe ukuthi liphuze.*¹⁴⁰

Social worker exits. Portia now walks to the bed with a suitcase and bus ticket in hand.

Portia: (*to Audience*) I kept him like this for two weeks, two weeks until neither of us could bare it any longer.

The cast begins singing a plaintive Zulu hymn. Portia begins unlocking his handcuffs. Sipho slowly sits up in bed, rubbing his wrists.

Sipho: Ma?

Portia kneels before him at the bed.

Portia: I don't know what else I can do. I will never give up on you. I just.... I just don't know what more I can do?

Sipho rises, and embraces her. Portia hands him the bus ticket and packed suitcase.

Portia: You have to help me Sipho. The choice needs to be yours. I cannot make it for you.

Song continues as Sipho leaves the scene.

SCENE 23: CAPTAIN'S OFFICE

Shouts from off stage. The Captain and Portia enter.

Captain: Lieutenant, we need you and your team on the ground.

Portia: We are on our way Captain.

Captain: Mobs of people are moving through the township burning spaza-shops and calling for the heads of dealers. This morning they killed a young man from the township. They beat him to death after they found him carrying whoonga.

Portia: I'm on my way, Captain.

Sound of angry mob increases. Portia exits.

¹⁴⁰ 'You can take a horse to the river but you can't force him to drink.'

SCENE 24: EMMANUEL'S SHOP

Emmanuel's store is burning. A mob of angry men, armed with pangas and knobkerries, throw him onto the stage.

Attacker 1: We have him. We have the dealer!

Attacker 2: Get out of here *Ikwere kwere!*

Attacker 1: Burn him!

Emmanuel: Please.... Please... don't...

Attacker 3: He's ruining our children's lives.

Attacker 2: He must pay. This one must pay now!

Emmanuel: I've done nothing wrong.

Blue and red siren lights flash on the stage. We hear shots being fired off stage. Portia arrives on the scene forcing the mob away from Emmanuel.

Portia: People... people this man is not a dealer! This is not justice!

Attacker 1: (*Shouting*) Burn him!

Attacker 2: Burn the *ikwere-kwere!*

Portia: (*Addressing the crowd*) You blame this man for all our problems? How easy it is to blame one man for so many things. So easy to wash your hands clean with another's life. You are quick to judge users and accuse Emmanuel today, but it doesn't seem to bother you, that you are the ones giving our children the money for whoonga. (*Beat*) *Iqaqa alizizwa ukunuka,*¹⁴¹ none of us are innocent!

Crowd member shouts out: But he is a dealer, he must go!

Portia: You don't know that. (*Beat*) Actually, you know who the real dealers are in D Ssection. I know there are dealers in this community who pay your children's school fees to buy your loyalty... (*Pause*) You can go ahead and blame Emmanuel... you can blame our kids for stealing... you can blame the police for not doing enough, but what do we do with all this blame? We can't eat blame, we can't smoke it, we can't sell it... We just move it around, like we do with the users. We just move them around from one area to the next, because we don't want to deal with the real issues here. What happens to one of us, happens to all of us!

Portia helps Emmanuel to his feet.

¹⁴¹ 'No polecat ever smells its own stink.'

Portia: This problem isn't someone else's. It's all of ours.... It's all of ours.

Music rises. The crowds disperse.

SCENE 25: ON THE STREET

Sipho enters the stage with his suitcase, calling out Andile's name. There is no answer

Sipho: Andile.... Andile!

Sipho sees Andile's body crumpled in a heap on the floor and rushes over to it. Portia enters upstage and watches.

Sipho: Andile... Andile! (*He shakes the body and it does not move*) Andile!

Portia places a hand on her son's shoulder and shakes her head sadly. Lights fade.

EPILOGUE: OUR STORY

A circle of chairs on the stage as in the first scene. Portia is at the center and Sipho sits beside her. The rest of the cast occupy the chairs.

Portia: This is where I'll end my story tonight. After listening to all the stories here, I guess we might be considered the lucky ones. So many communities torn apart. So many young lives lost... but we are both still here. (*Pause*) When Sipho returned from his Gogo we went to visit the doctor that the social worker had suggested to us. He is now on Methadone treatment.... We have to pay for it but it's helping. (*Pause*) We are taking it day by day now, we try to be more patient, more gentle with each other. We share our stories and we listen, and by listening... we begin to heal.

Somebody' by King's Messengers Quartet plays as the lights fade.

The end.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: LYRICS TO HYMN

The Acapella hymn: 'Somebody' by King's Messengers Quartet

*Somebody knows when your heart aches,
And ev'rything seems to go wrong;
Somebody knows when the shadows
Need chasing away with a song;
Somebody knows when you're lonely,
Tired, discouraged and blue;
Somebody wants you to know Him,
And know that He dearly loves you.
Somebody cares when you're tempted,
And your mind grows dizzy and dim;
Somebody cares when you're weakest,
And farthest away from Him;
Somebody grieves when you're fallen,
You are not lost from His sight;
Somebody waits for your coming,
And He'll drive the gloom from your night.
Somebody loves you when weary;
Somebody loves you when strong;
Always is waiting to help you,
He watches you— one of the throng
Needing His friendship so holy,
Needing His watchcare so true;
His name? We call His Name Jesus;
He loves ev'ryone, He loves you.*

APPENDIX 2: POST-SHOW DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

The below transcript is an example of the post-show discussions held after every performance of ULWEMBU. The ULWEMBU cast sits on stage alongside facilitator and co-creator Dylan McGarry and take questions and responses about the production from the audience. Questions and answers given in isiZulu have been translated.

The following recording was taken at the Loft Theatre, Durban Playhouse 2016, special thanks to Bongi Ngobese for transcription and translation.

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/researcher) Another round of applause please (*crowd clapping hands*). My name is Dylan McGarry, and I'm the sociologist on this project as well as one of the co-creators. We'd like to give you an opportunity to ask any questions to the cast and to the rest of the team about the process and our research. You might want to share with us about how you feel, or if you are a user, ex-user or a family member affected by the situation, you are more than welcome to share with us your own experiences. We are going to open it up to the floor and I'll pass the microphone around for you to pose your response or question. We will be recording this, as we consider this a crucial part of our research. Everything that we are attempting to explore in this play, the audience is involved in shaping and developing through their own narratives and feedback. Through this process we are attempting to gather research around the problem and to do so are we working very closely with the police, the department of health, with the public, schools and NGOs. If you don't feel comfortable speaking publicly, there are forms coming around that you can write your response or ask a question, also if you want to speak, but do not want to be recorded please let us know, or please do not speak into the microphone, as the recorder can only pick up the microphone conversations. You can leave your contact details and we will contact you. (*Looking to audience*) Any questions/responses?

A young audience member: Are the drugs real?

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/Researcher) The drugs used in the play are just "mealie-meal" (ground white corn) but if you are asking in general if this drug is real, the answer is sadly yes.

Audience Question: Drug users don't usually open up, they don't feel comfortable speaking to strangers. How did you manage to get them to speak about their experiences? What was your secret behind getting them to tell their stories?

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/Researcher) Great question.

Ngcebo Cele: (Actor) Ja ehh. ... (*Crowd giggles and asks him to speak in both English and Zulu*) Thanks for the question that you asked my brother. It was hard but our plan in the beginning was that we must go to them as friends, if you know what I'm saying, don't rush with anything, don't rush with questions because if I remember clearly, we spent two weeks with the guys from KwaMashu. On day one we had to take baby steps because it's all about trust and once the guys began to trust us they started to open up. Most of them are coming during this week to watch this show because we are friends with them now, you know what I'm saying, it's all about trust.

Vumani Khumalo (Actor) We were surprised, almost all the users were interested to open up to us about their experiences with whoonga because they are desperate to get out of it. They don't want to smoke any more, they really want help and that's why I believe they wanted to speak so openly and freely. The people who are difficult to talk to or interview are the dealers but the users and ex-users they speak for themselves and we found it easy to enter into a conversation with them.

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/researcher) Let's speak about dealers because you managed to do some work with the dealers.

Mpume Mthombeni: (Actress) I personally have some guys that I know who are living in my neighbourhood who are smoking whoonga and one of them is a hairstylist. They are happy to speak out about their addiction to get help. If you speak with them, they speak from their hearts because they have been granted the opportunity to speak about their life experiences. If they see that you are prepared to listen then they make sure they talk to you. One of my neighbours is a dealer. He was wrongfully arrested for a crime he didn't commit. As a result of this, he spent 4 years in jail and when he came out, he had to provide for his family and his sister and her children. His mother was not working so it was up to him to provide for this family. He didn't see selling bananas as a viable option and because of his criminal record he couldn't find a job, so the easiest way to make a living was by selling whoonga. He's around 20 years of age and because we grew up in the same neighbourhood, and go to the same church together, it was easy for me to talk to him. He told me, "Mpume I really don't have any option and I don't know what else to do."

Audience member: Mpume how has your attitude changed towards people using drugs from this play and process?

Mpume Mthombeni: (Actress) Before I started this project I was so negative towards people who are using drugs. I was like what's wrong with these people? I used to think they should be arrested; they must be this and that. I was so judgmental. I was so quick to judge but as soon as I listened to my neighbour and his story and to users who told me why they started smoking, it really touched me. I don't know whether it's because they are my neighbours or because we grew up together but when you begin to understand things and people close to you and you start to look them with different eyes. I suppose what I'm saying here, is that as a mother myself, having two young boys who are growing up in a place surrounded by this problem I feel grateful to God that they didn't get hooked into these drugs.

Pumlani Ngubane: (Actor) We are all affected by this. We are all addicted in some way or other. So we all need help and when you speak to the users you find out that they need help and if you don't push them away from you then they won't break into your house and rob you. So my advice is that we must not push users away from us, that's the only way we are able to make them see that they are people themselves as well.

Audience member: I'd like to ask, in terms of this story, where did you get it? Did you research or did someone advise you or did you create it yourself?

Mpume Mthombeni: (Actress) We all (gesturing to the team) researched the story line. All of us had to go out and talk to users and the ex-users. Through this process we spoke to nurses, police and community members. Everything you see on stage today is taken from this area of research. All that you've seen in ULEMBU is a true story. Even the scene where you saw the mother-character that I play Portia, handcuffing her son to the bed – that is a true story. Nothing here is improvised or taken from our imaginations. We took real stories from people and put them on the stage.

Zenzo Msomi: (Actor) For my character, I spent a year or so doing the research. I live in KwaMashu where there are many users. Ncegbo and I, who both play the users in the play, we had to take our time going out to the streets and speaking with users, learning about their behavior and understanding how they started smoking whoonga. When we first met them, we were so judgmental. There's a line in the play that says: "How can someone steal wedding ring's from a corpses' fingers at family funerals?" and that's the sort of belief we had before starting out. But the more we sat with these users, the more we understood what they were going through. We wanted to put their experiences on the stage in the most honest way we could.

Audience Member: I'd like to congratulate the actors. You guys did an awesome job. Mpume you are so wonderful to watch. My question to the actors is.... how, after this experience, do you become yourself again? How do you return to normality because you guys have done so much research and you have to perform this over and over again? It must be emotionally very tough.

Mpume Mthombeni: (Actress) As I said before, when we started making this play, I was so judgmental and I was saying arrest them, kill them, do this and that to them but this experience has changed me. For our research we went and spoke to users and ex users so in that way I was able to learn more about the drug. The dealer I spoke to for my research was my neighbour in Umlazi who the character of Bongani is based on in the play. I started putting myself in his shoes and I asked myself that what if I was in his situation, so in that way I stopped being judgmental and started listening and empathizing. As the mother of two myself, if I was at the same situation that he was, God knows what I would do to protect and look after my family. Playing this character is so emotionally hard because you have to be real and sincere every time and honour the stories people have entrusted to you. Taking on reality like this takes a lot out of you.

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/Researcher) Any other questions? (*to Audience*) How do you feel about the ending? and how do you feel about Sipho? Do you think there are other alternatives that we didn't cover in the play? What do you think could have been done to save Andile's life?

Audience Member: I'd like to respond in Zulu... (translation) Sipho's mother is someone who didn't take care of Sipho. This was seen in an earlier scene where she forgets that it's his birthday. Sipho was turning 16 and she wasn't giving him any love or attention. To me that was not love, nothing can buy the love of the mother.

Mpume Mthombeni: (Actress) I hear you and I understand what you saying but to me what caused this mother to forget the birthday is because of how busy this mother is and to how stressed she is, so she has a lot in her mind as she's caring for the community and trying to fight this whoonga that is destroying the society she's living in as you can see that the captain is putting lots of pressure on her and is wanting more high profile arrests. She's not neglecting the child but rather trying to stay afloat at work.

Zenzo Msomi: (Actor) The other thing I'd like to add is that my character Sipho feels like his mother is neglecting him but there is true love between Sipho and his mother. There's plenty of whoonga users on the streets and that puts pressure on the

police to try and find ways to deal with that situation as quickly as possible. So the police, who are also parents, then spend too much time at work and neglect their children. It's an endless cycle.

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/researcher) Just to respond to that question, what we have discovered, is that the opposite to addiction is connection. Sipho has lost his connection with his mother because she was so busy with work and what's needed is the reconnection between the two. A very important part of recovery is creating connections and we have learned is that you can't just focus on the drug without looking at the issues that lead to drug usage.

Audience Member: My problem about the drugs is the way in which they enter into our society, as illustrated by the play. Firstly the drugs come from the people who think they are superior while there are people who are more superior than them. Its not easy for us to wipe out this drug issue so easily in our society because there are so many laws attached to these issues. My question is what can users take to get off the drug?

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/Researcher) What we've got from the research is that we haven't had access to the higher sources that are supplying drugs to our society and what you speaking of is how drugs are kept within our societies but what I think we need to do is that we need to do many workshops with police to help find the solution to this. There is treatment like using opioid substitution treatment method by using methadone which helps to deal with withdrawal symptoms on heroin users.

Audience Member: Is the treatment suppressing this addiction, or does it help to get rid of it totally? How do we access it?

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/Researcher) Different things work for different people so it's hard to pin the solution onto one thing. At the moment you can access methadone but it's only available in the private sector and not in the public sector. What we pushing for is the advocacy of rights of those who are using whoonga. We want to reduce the harm that is caused by using drugs. We are no saying no to drugs but we are saying lets reduce the harm caused by drug usage.

Audience member: Thank you. The play that we have just seen has shown us the complexity of the challenge we are facing when it comes to substance abuse. What stood out for me from this story was the way in which we as parents often, without knowing, play an enabling role. Often our actions end up pushing our children away

and this makes them even more vulnerable to drug use. Sometimes we might not realise that giving them money feeds the problem. The play showed us all the misconceptions, such as the fact that foreigners are the only ones who are selling drugs to our communities but the play showed us that there are other South Africans who are selling drugs and it's so difficult to solve this situation until the whole community gets involved in one way or the other. I wish this story can be shared with all communities in this province and country. I don't have many words to describe what I have seen here today.

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/researcher) Thank you for that. It's the reason why we called the play Ulwembu (isiZulu for spider web) because it is a thread that pulls in one direction and the other one to another direction but they are all connected.

Audience member: Thank you so much this was absolutely beautiful and powerful play. Personally I don't think methadone alone will solve the problem. We need a working early childhood development program to address this crisis. I think we are going to get methadone in the public sector, as it is available in the private sector. I'll suggest that we link this issue to HIV and AIDS programmes to make sure we put pressure on the government.

Audience Member: Well done guys this production was hugely successful. I'd like to ask the question: when the character Sipho, who is a drug addict, went to the farms (rural area) what form of rehabilitation did he receive from the farms because I'm also from Umlazi and I have 4 to 5 neighbours whose children are smoking whoonga and I want to know how to engage with their families to help them.

Zenzo Msomi: (Actor) Thank you. The story of my character Sipho going to the rural areas is a true story we heard from various ex-users. What they did in order to quit, was go to the farms where the whoonga is not easily available. The plan was to isolate themselves away from the city where whoonga was not easily found, the problem of course is what happens after the user is rehabilitated and then has to come back to the city where the drug is easily available? More often than not they tend to fall back into the same habit.

Ngcebo Cele: (Actor) With this project we wanted to understand different pathways out of the drug. We were having conversations with different people from various communities to find out from them what worked for them, asking what was the way forward and this one was one of them but definitely not the only one we heard proposed to us. What works for one person in this process doesn't always work

for another.

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/researcher) Also to follow up on an earlier question about the users in your community. As we showed in the play that there are only two rehabilitation centres available in Durban but this is not the only option, there are still other pathways out of addiction that could be available but are not available in Durban. What we are trying to push through this play is much larger advocacy programme and harm reduction programme The United Nations has said it that opioid substitute therapy like methadone are human rights like ARVS are. Methadone should be available for heroin users globally but it's still not currently available in our country.

Audience Member: Thank you, my name is Joyce and this play just hit home hard because two months ago I had a nephew who was in school in Joburg and I received a call from his mother saying that police have called her to come to the police station because they had arrested her son and friends of his after they found them smoking whoonga. This news shattered the whole family and we had so many questions. Some of the questions this play has helped me to understand, like the policewoman's son Sipho. As we see in the play, the signs were already there but she couldn't see them early enough. Things were disappearing and been stolen from out of the houses but as parents we blame other people before our own children. That scene for me was a big eye opener. My question is: my nephew is in Joburg. Are you planning to take the play there? I wish you can take it nationally because this problem happens right under all of our noses but we refuse to see it. My second question is that, is this just a "Black" problem in KZN? The third question is that the methadone that they are given, how long should they take it? My last question is that, is there anything that the government can do to pay for this drug and be given to people as these children come from the poor families.

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/researcher) Thank you so much, the cast will respond to that question.

Ngcebo Cele (Actor): To answer your first question sister. This play is created to tour as far and wide as possible. We aiming at taking it to communities, take it to people and to places. It doesn't have to be performed in theatre's like this one.

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/researcher) Would anyone in the cast like to respond to the question that asks if whoonga is only a problem faced by Black communities here in South Africa?

Ngcebo Cele: (Actor) Yesterday in the audience there was a white guy who had been a whoonga addict and he stood up and told us this is a problem that effects all society. He told us that this is a universal problem from blacks, Indians and whites. I remember well that at Albert park when we were doing our research there was an Indian guy who came to sit next to us, he asked for the light, and then asked us what we were doing there because he saw our scripts, pens and notepads. We told him what we creating a play on whoonga users and he said “Ahhhh I’m one of them, I’m a *thaka* (user).”

Dylan Mcgarry: (Facilitator/researcher) There’s also Sam Pillay who we work with and he says that there’s a lot of whoonga usage within the predominantly Indian, black and white areas and across South Africa that are fighting the challenges of heroin drug usage. Let me respond to the question quickly about methadone. The problem with methadone at the moment is that there is a desperate need for it, as what it does is that it helps alleviate the pain, the Arosta. So if you can take it, then the person can be able to function properly but the challenge is that it’s not easily available and you have to pay up front for it in this country. The people who need it the most are currently unable to afford it. The other big challenge is that it’s going on black market, it’s hard because you must get it on prescription and you have to manage the dosage quite carefully. Some people can use it for few weeks while others have to use it for the rest of their lives and stay on it in the same way you would an anti-depressant but dosage needs to be monitored by doctors. We are trying to get to government to provide methadone in clinics so to reduce the problem. This kind of drug is freely available in countries like Portugal, America and across Europe and it’s a legal drug, so that is what the advocacy group is trying to push for

Audience member: My name is Shaka Luthuli. I don’t know much about theatre but I’d like to know from what I saw on the stage, in the scene where the actors were listening to the Zulu Kings speech on the radio. Was that a real radio broadcast? Or just you using your creativity?

(The crowd begin talking and debating: “Saying it’s a true story etc.”)

Ngcebo Cele: (Actor) Yes that’s his real speech. It was the same speech that is blamed for inciting attacks on foreigners living in Durban. The king really delivered that speech!

Audience Member: Do you not think using this speech in your play will have a negative impact and is it not disrespectful to the Zulu King?

Ngcebo Cele: (Actor) While we were rehearsing at the Dennis Hurley centre we heard this speech delivered on the radio. The Dennis Hurley centre cares for the inner-city homeless population as well as foreign people and refugees. We decided that we as theatre-makers needed to respond to this situation in the work we were making. That is what we have been doing through this play, is constantly responding to any situation that is happening out there on the streets. That is why we have the Mozambique character of Emanuel in the play.

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/Researcher) One of the reasons why we used King Zwelithini's speech is to show the stigma associated between "Foreigners" and how they are often, wrongly, connected to the myth machine that is associated with whoonga. There are so many myths associated with Whoonga such as Whoonga dealers are only foreigners from other African countries and from our research this is not true, most dealers are local people.

Audience member: I just want to say drugs are the universal problem not just a blacks only problem. My sister's son is addicted to *tik* so I don't know how whoonga is connected to *tik* in the way it effects the development of the brain. But he was also sent to the farm where my sister lives to recover. But sadly even there he managed to get drugs as he was able to grow his own dagga. He was even taken to Mozambique to a rehab and was again taken to Cape Town but it's too late... his brain is damaged. He's now has the mind of a young child.

Audience Member: Hello, your play was beautiful and powerful. I want to get a sense from you guys who are performers. Do you feel you can make a difference to solving this problem?

Mpume Mthombeni: (Actress) That is something that we were discussing as the cast: What impact do we have as individuals? Personally I don't have answers and I don't have all the solutions. This is a huge challenge and I'm grateful that I can do something that talks to the core of the challenge rather than sitting in the corner judging and complaining. My biggest dream is for all of us to own up to the fact that we are facing a huge problem and start working together in communities to tackle it and support those in need. When you think about it, we are all addicts in some way or the other whether to Facebook, alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, technology. You name it. We live in an addictive age.

Audience Member: I don't know where to begin but I would like to say I'm very impressed. I didn't expect a lot, I think you've just made my day and you have reached all my expectations. You've portrayed reality and the fact that we must not

shy away from this and thank you so much for that, it was beautifully presented I have two observations. I come from the Catholic Church and we run some programs there. There was a line from the policewoman earlier in the play we she said... “How should I have sympathy for a boy who steals wedding rings off corpses’ fingers at family funerals.” which really hit home hard for me. I think many of us are willing to have sympathy, are willing to be sympathetic towards what we see but what this play does, is encourages a deeper empathy. How many of us in the audience see these people on the streets and say “Ohh shame poor child... Oh shame he’s or she’s hungry” but are never really willing to put ourselves in another’s shoes because that is where real responsibility and willingness to step up come from. The willingness to really take a step to understand what’s really happening. The policewoman could only understand the problem when she discovered her own son was a user but she could not feel or empathise with what Andile was feeling. The problem is smaller and more immediate then we mostly make it, the problem is not that big, the problem is not Andile. We are willing to talk about politics and government people, yes sure we must speak about those people, but where do WE begin getting involved doing something, Andile lying on the streets dead? If I fail to respond on Andile lying on the streets dead and get angry responding to politicians for not doing anything, then I am a hypocrite.

Audience member: Can I just close off in a positive note, I know that everyone in the room might be feeling guilty or ashamed for not having noticed this problem sooner or done something about it when they see it happening everyday on the city streets. Here is the good news: “We can all do something about it. All of us. How many are we here? Do we have numbers? Let’s just assume that there are a hundred people in the auditorium here tonight. Everybody here is busy thinking: How can we get rid of this problem, how can we end whoonga in our community. So here are the actual steps. One person must assign themselves to another person, just one if we are hundred here it means we can solve the case of a hundred other people. Even if it means you go and sit on the streets with them, just go and sit with them and don’t even tell them to stop smoking whoonga, they don’t want to hear that. Just go and sit there and be friends with them. If you arrive trying to solve their problems, they will run away. Talk to them nicely, listen, don’t judge them, help them if they are hungry. You know what, they will start to connect with your heart. Many of these children out there they lack love, they don’t know what love is. If you show them love that is one of the greatest and most transformative gifts you can offer them.

Dylan McGarry: (Facilitator/Researcher) Thank you for that beautiful positive way to end tonight. I just want to say thank you to all of you for coming and just a

quick note if anyone knows someone who's struggling or are you struggling yourself, we have contacts and we have two brilliant contacts which are *Lifeline*, you can call them at any time and also the *Depression Society*, they have a lifeline and we will give you their details, they can also help you if you're struggling and you need someone to talk to. Finally, this project has a bigger picture with Urban Futures Centre which is working with Metro police and SAPS. We are working with TB/HIV care and Dennis Hurley centre trying to develop a humane holistic harm reduction programme project in Durban and you'll hear more about it later this year. You can stay connected with us through Ulwembu.net. Thanks again to everyone for coming out.

Crowd claps hands as the cast leave the stage.

-End-

APPENDIX 3: BACKGROUND ON BIG BROTHERHOOD PRODUCTIONS

At the time of writing this thesis, The Big Brotherhood consisted of the members: Ngcebo Cele, Vumani Khumalo, Zenzo Msomi, Phumlani Ngubane and Sandile Nxumalo.

One of the first projects which the Brothers collaborated on was titled *Crime Busters* (2005), a theatre production which focused on the consequences of committing crime. The earliest incarnation of *Crime Busters*, was described by the actors as more of a workshopped *sketch* than a fully developed play. Owing to the fact that some of the actors had spent time in prison, they were able to draw from a range of personal experiences and reflect on their own lived experiences in the play. The project was later redeveloped under the new name of *Just Don't, Wrong Choice* (2006), with the assistance of director Edmund Mhlongo and relied on the team improvising and refining scenarios during the rehearsal process. In this phase, a more traditional three-act structure was introduced, and the story now followed the journey of a teenage school boy sentenced to jail for stealing a cell phone¹⁴². The production would experience a further iteration as part of the Playhouse Community Camp under the guidance of theatre-maker Chris Hurst who assisted the group in reshuffling scenes and clarifying some of the story-telling aspects¹⁴³. *Just Don't* went to tour schools across KZN and to this day, is considered the collectives most popular and widely seen pieces.

After the success of *Just Don't*, the members of the group approached the Netherlands funded, Twist Theatre Production Projects to help them establish and register their organization, and thus Big Brotherhood Productions was born. The first play the Brothers created under this moniker, was a Twist Theatre Development commission titled *Camp 13*, which focused on the disillusionment of the ANC's forgotten *Umkhonto we Sizwe* veterans. The group claim that the piece grew from a mutual interest they had around the older men of their community, who they would encounter in KwaMashu, B-section, drinking alcohol and complaining bitterly about the state of the nation. The intention behind the Brother's research, was to ascertain why these former revolutionary soldiers had felt so betrayed by the present day government. Their research process entailed interviewing a range of MK veterans before delivering transcripts to an appointed

¹⁴² What begins with the theft of a phone, descends into the young man's imprisonment, the accidental murder of a prison warden, an increased prison sentence and finally the contraction of HIV through rape.

¹⁴³ While a scripted version of the *Just Don't* (2006) was eventually written, it was developed as a direct transcript and recording of the original improvised production.

mentor/playwright David Stein, who would set about transforming the transcribed and translated data into a rehearsal script.

Owing to the fact that *Camp 13* was openly critical of the ANC government, the Big Brotherhood performers recall, that a variety of industry players cautioned them of the impact such politicized work may have on future funding opportunities from Government affiliated arts organizations.

Ngcebo Cele claims, that while the group were concerned about political repercussions, they remained resolute in their mission to tell the mens' stories. While the subject matter may have been deemed controversial and risky, *Camp 13* resonated deeply with KwaMashu audiences¹⁴⁴, many of whom felt that their frustrations had been legitimized and honoured on a public platform.

Following on from *Camp 13*, The Big Brotherhood created (with support by TWIST and in collaboration with myself as a writing mentor and Edmund Mhlongo as director) a production titled *A Bull Called Bahlangane*. The production was the groups way of trying to make sense of the many political conflicts occurring within their community and the country at large. For *A Bull Called Bahlangane*, the Brothers and myself, contrived an allegorical fable where a respected elderly man in his community passes away and his five adult sons descend on his homestead for the funeral. The fathers prized bull named Bahlangane¹⁴⁵ divides the brothers, causing rifts and factions as they argue who is the most deserving benefactor. The brother characters were used as devices to embody conflicting political ideologies. Through the families in-fighting, the brotherhood is gradually torn apart, and ironically it is the youngest son, whose opinions are seldom considered by his elders, who is revealed to harness the greatest insight and wisdom of them all.

¹⁴⁴ After witnessing a performance, an ANC ward councilor of the region even rallied behind the group to ensure more people from the community were granted the opportunity to witness the production.

¹⁴⁵ The English translation for *Bahlangane* is unity.