

De-Apart-Hate: Mamela Nyamza

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Home

Mamela Nyamza's production entitled *De-Apart-Hate* (2016) is a moving performance steeped in powerful symbolism. This piece that follows a deeply vital journey of embodied defiance and liberation. Performed by Mamela Nyamza and Mhlahli Gwatyu, both smartly dressed in black and white formal attire, these two individuals occupy the almost empty stage with a visceral sense of presence and commitment to their performance. On the far right-hand side of the stage is a rainbow-painted bench, a potent signifier of the 'Rainbow Nation' post-1994 narrative as well as the iconic apartheid bench.



Mamela Nyamza and Mhlahli Gwatyu in 'De-Apart-Hate' at Cape Town Fringe Festival 2016 – Photo: Nardus Engelbrecht

But this brightly-coloured bench betrays its optimistic appearance as Nyamza and Gwatyu take their first seat and we notice that the bench is in fact unstable, dipping from side to side like a see-saw. The performers precariously balance on this wobbly seat and wait. They wait for a long time, pushing the audience deeper into stillness and a kind of fidgeting anxiety. We all wait together; both the audience and the performers are tense in a certain expectancy of what will happen next. While we wait, I realize the

potency of this image and metaphor that Nyamza has created, all the more potent in the midst of the current political climate and social context in South Africa. I envision throughout the country, South Africans sitting on something that could collapse at any moment – and waiting.

Then suddenly, with no warning or cue, they burst from their seat and the audience does too, the explosion of movement gives us a fright after such a period of visual silence. The performers go into stillness again again, but for a shorter period this time. Slowly a rhythm is established into a disconcerting kind of game and the bench begins to shake and dive, gradually dismantling into the absurdity of it all. The bench is not the only aspect of this performance that is dismantled. Throughout the piece, the performers create a rhythm that builds, crescendos and collapses. This happens repeatedly in different and surprising ways.

One example of this rhythmic construction and deconstruction occurs when Nyamza kneels onto all fours (a position both sexual and pious in prayer, a tension she plays with throughout the entire piece) and Gwatyu climbs onto her back, standing. As he balances on her back, he starts to shout, “Ephesians 5:6”¹ becoming the evangelical, charismatic preacher who repeat their phrases with fervour, in order to drive a point home, but in their repetition their phrases begin to lose all meaning, repeated and repeated until hollowed out, emptied as the scripture itself warns against. Nyamza repeats after him, “Ephesians 5:6”, affirming him with “Amen” and “Hallelujahs”. The scene builds and builds, the enthusiasm and intensity of their voices manifest in their bodies until the ‘podium’ collapses and Mhlahli falls off Nyamza’s back. They then switch to “Deuteronomy 32:8”² and start to build the rhythm again.

But perhaps the most effective rhythmic and metaphoric deconstruction occurs towards the end of the performance with Nyamza’s final defiance and personal, embodied dismantling of institutional myths and fallacies. Gwatyu is lying on the floor, and Nyamza lowers the bench over him, almost like a coffin. For the first time in the piece, she faces the audience directly, staring us down (something she is fiercely good at). She raises her tightly-fitting black dress, daring us to respond (we’re frozen), widens her stance and sits down to perch on the edge of the upside down bench, with Gwatyu underneath. Slowly she reaches towards her crotch, revealing a slip of pink that turns out to be the pages of a Bible. As she opens her legs, she opens the book, nestled perfectly in her crotch, which must have been there for a while, waiting for its perfect debut. In a moment of pure and unholy reclamation of self, she holds the book against her pubic Mons, staring defiantly at the audience, slowly licks her finger, then turns a page. She continues to turn the pages, quickening in speed and starts to repeat “Leviticus 18.22”³. This is the moment that the entire piece seems to be building towards, a powerful image that fills the viewer (well, this viewer) with an electric shock followed by the utmost satisfaction at being able to have witnessed this work of art right there in front of me.



Mamela Nyamza in 'De-Apart-Hate' at Cape Town Fringe Festival 2016 – Photo: Nardus Engelbrecht

¹Ephesians 5:6 reads: *Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.* (New International Version)

²Deuteronomy 32:8 reads: *When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the people according to the number of sons in Israel.* (New International Version)

³Leviticus 18:22 reads: *Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.* (New International Version)

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