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“Grounded” in love, honesty and brutal truths, Nyamza and son reveal their vulnerability

By Tammy Ballantyne (Guest Writer)



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We are invited to be seated on the stage; chairs arranged in rows on either side of a raised platform with lights. Should we go or choose the safe space of the auditorium? What will Mamela Nyamza ask of us? We are very close, we cannot fidget, hide or detract. I choose the stage.

Nyamza arrives, her bald head sprinkled with glitter, glistening under the lights, dressed in a sparkly, white dress, gathered with a hoop around the edges. Her arms, legs and feet are bare, exposed, muscular; my eyes are drawn to those long, hard-working feet and toes. Her back to us, she moves only her toes, her recorded voice speaking of stability and security. We watch as her feet flex, curl, rise on tip toes, sink into a *grand pli  *, a little wobbly at times, great effort being made to balance. Her feet prompt the movement as she navigates the platform, long arms reaching, legs punching out rhythms; we see the muscles tensing, feel her eyes boring into ours as the insistent beat of the music carries her through her sequence, extra-long chain earrings swinging and glinting in the light.

When she speaks, she finds stillness, studying her toes then gazing outward as she softly engages us in details of her history and life, speaking the names given to her, her mother, her grandmother and

the magnitude of dates marking births and deaths, ending with the year she lost her mother and birthed her son, “my own product — Amkele”, and announcing “I am gay”. Her son bursts into the space, in a silver jumpsuit, performing his own rap song, an emerging musician, red lights illuminating the space, Nyamza responding to the beats, arms swinging, feet constantly in motion.

And so begins a frank and open conversation between mother and son, where he asks her questions about their family, her relationship with his father, the injustice of her mother’s death, the significance of names (“Why didn’t you give me an English name” — she responds quickly with “Because I had more freedom to choose and I refused to give you an English name, would you want to be called Welcome?? I hated my name Miranda...”) and then it switches to Nyamza’s turn to throw out questions to her son about hair, language, cultural practices, entitlement and gender identity.

The work reveals the deep inner life of this relationship between a single mother and her boy-child; we are drawn into an intimate exchange, the honesty is startling and throughout, Nyamza is always moving, echoing her emotions through her body, tapping into rhythms only she can feel, her feet beating, stamping, curling; those bare toes with their own stories to tell, a dancer’s feet, hardworking, tired feet...but they are still walking...

During the post-performance talk, Nyamza reveals the very real process of birthing this work. It was commissioned by the Asphalt Festival gGmbH, Dusseldorf, Germany to be premiered in 2021 but

Covid intervened. So, she had to create an augmented reality version, a small excerpt of which we see right at the end of the performance. She shares that they have “finally cracked the egg, the piece is raw, we really go inside and make our pain public...it is very intimate for us and very healing.”

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I am struck by this very outspoken artist's incredible vulnerability and the sharing of such a deep bond with her son. Nyamza has always been courageous, her works always challenging us, daring us to think differently about glaring issues and injustices that still plague our fractured society, but in “Grounded”, the energy wells and pools from a deep source of honesty, of loss and a journey of reconciliation.

She is visibly emotional and drained after the piece and mother and son take time to re-enter the space for the discussion. She reveals that “it's very hard to gather myself after such a physical work. As artists, we have a calling and after this performance, I need to take out the energy. I use my body as a prop, going through my history, my dance life (ballet, contemporary, African dance) and my feet are speaking it all. I chose to work from my feet upwards, to allow them to provoke the movements.”

This unique inter-generational collaboration has come *home*, a fitting addition to the 24th JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Experience with it's theme of “the im(possibility) of home” and it's challenge to dancemakers to consider “ideas of belonging and what

constitutes ‘home’ at this particular moment in history”. Nyamza and Mandla extend an invitation to all of us to discover our own ways to belong, however painful and tiring it might be, that we all can walk back to our home, whatever shape it takes.

Choreography, direction and performance — Mamele Nyamza

Featured artist — Amkele Mandla

Digital and videography — katty van denberghe

Videography and photography — Ayanda Msiza

Technical manager (stage and lighting) — Wilhelm Disbergen

Sponsor/funder of ‘Grounded” — Asphalt Festival gGmbH,
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