



ALL PHOTOS:
IN TRANSIT WITH DANCERS FROM URA TABU DANCERS
NATALIE TOEVAI, LAUMANU PASEKA, IRENE MANUMU'A ALITINI, VAIARI
IVIRANGI, LOMINA ARAITIA, FAY TOFILAU, SONAALLOFA ELIES, ATINA LIPA PATAU



In Transit

THE MERGING OF TWO TRIBES THROUGH THE ART OF DANCE

BY LAUREN SANDERSON

In this article, Lauren Sanderson talks to choreographers Alfdaniels Mabingo and Charlene Tedrow about combining African and Pacific dance in Wanjiku Kiarie Sanderson's play *In Transit*, which premiered in Auckland in May 2017.

New Zealand's first Pasifika and African theatre production was brought to life at the Mangere Arts Centre in May this year. *In Transit*, written by Wanjiku Kiarie Sanderson, is a play that gives voice to the New Zealand African migrant and refugee communities in Aotearoa. Based on real-life stories, experiences and realities, the inspiring work offers a layered and thoughtful examination of a community navigating the challenges while adapting to an ever-evolving environment.

Influenced by her late husband's (Martyn Sanderson) involvement with the African community, Sanderson worked alongside director Justine Sime-Barton and choreographers Alfdaniels Mabingo and Charlene Tedrow

to bring their vision and story to life by fusing together African and Pacific theatre and dance.

Choreographer's, Mabingo and Tedrow, are no strangers when it comes to fusing dance styles. Mabingo was born and raised in Uganda, East Africa, and it was here he realised his passion for dancing and music. Tedrow is a well-known Polynesian dancer and choreographer, who trained at Auckland University where she was always pushed to think outside of the box. Together they bring their own experiences and influences to *In Transit*.

The duo was interested to see what would happen when African and Pacific cultures combined their theatre and performing arts traditions in a contemporary setting.

By uniting the two cultures through dance, Mabingo and Tedrow hoped to introduce new and unique styles of the art form by fusing together both traditional and contemporary movement. Storytelling was a key attribute to the choreography. "For me, the inspiration was to allow the stories to be told through multi-dimensional cultural narratives. Each dance had a story and that story became the inspiration. You can say that the dances were multiplicity inspired" says Mabingo.

"There was a beautiful multi-dimensional network of inspiration," explains Tedrow who gathers a lot of her motivation from her 'gafa (genealogy)'.

While talking with both choreographers, I began to truly understand not only what dance means to them personally but also to both African and Pacific cultures.

“Dance is a space where we experiment, share, learn, evolve, experience, grow, identify, express, rationalise, invent, innovate, communicate, historicise, challenge, document, and expand our individual and collective ideas and experiences,” says Mabingo.

“It is an extension of the humanity and civilisation in both communities. Dance forms are outward expressions of who we are at our core and whom we consider ourselves to be connected with. Dance should be allowed to transfer to and from the individual self to our collective cultural selves unbounded and with fluidity,” explains Tedrow.

Although *In Transit* is predominantly a theatre piece, dance has played a big part in celebrating and communicating the coming together of the different cultures, values and beliefs. “In both cultures and many others, dance is not a separate discipline from storytelling and storytelling is not limited to text, nor is it limited to specialised individuals. Our art forms come from our intergenerational communities. Just because we entered a western platform of storytelling – a theatre context – it doesn’t mean we leave behind what is embedded in us,” says Tedrow.

In Transit is just the beginning of this unique collaboration between cultures, but why was it important to bring it to light today?

“Our identities are coloured with traces of migratory influences. Hence, the premise was that perhaps the stories and experiences that the play captured are similar with the experiences that other migrant communities have been through. We wanted to expand the relevance of the play and allow other cultures to participate in its thematic interpretation and production,” tells Mabingo.

“When the opportunity came to collaborate with our distant relatives from Africa, I knew this was an opportunity to re-establish some of our long-lost connections; we know we are all connected but this was an opportunity to scratch the surface to reveal and experiment with these intersections,” says Tedrow.

However, the true influence of the integration of Africa and Pacific cultures in *In Transit* came from the relationship between Simei-Barton and Sanderson; both ladies are politically driven and continue to challenge the idea of diversity in New Zealand theatre.

In Transit unites people through theatre and dance, highlighting the significance and importance of the arts, especially in Aotearoa today. “Dance can heal, inspire and empower people of the future. We only need to engage in it and you will be shown all its magnificence! Siva maia!” exclaims Tedrow.

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I believe Mabingo speaks on behalf of all the cast when he says; “A culture without dance is a culture without memories and expressions. When we access and share these dances and their attendant stories, we are moved to the centre of these cultures and communities. That way, we learn, our thinking is challenged, our ways of being change, and we peel away layers of biases, stereotypes, and ethnocentrism. With what is going on right now, the world needs this attitude towards dance now more than ever before”. ■



REVIEW

In Transit Tala Pasifika African Connection

MANGERE ARTS CENTRE, AUCKLAND
7 MAY 2017

BY NIK SMYTHE

Playwright Wanjiku Kiarie Sanderson has spent seven years developing *In Transit*, culminating in this premiere production by Africa Pasifika Productions and Tala Pasifika Productions. Myriad performance, cultural and narrative strands are interwoven under the directorship of Justine Simei-Barton, in what I understand to be the world's first New Zealand African-Pasifika collaboration.

Paul Simei-Barton's simple set consists of three mobile sections of metal fencing, representing both incarceration and community division, with a few items of furniture. To our left sits the band comprising guitar, bass, keys and three drummers, fronted by the commanding strength of vocalist Milly Grant-Koria whose opening acapella song fills the sizeable theatre with soulful emotion.

The musical overlays and interludes are frequently accompanied by accomplished young female dancers whose expressive movements, while perhaps not strictly traditional, seem entirely authentic as choreographed by Alfdaniels Mabingo and Charlene Tedrow. Their recitals encompass both Pacific and African cultural forms including a powerful climactic representation of Māori who, as tangata whenua, are essentially hosts to the first and second generation migrants portrayed here.

Central to the narrative is NZ-born Ahmed, a young drama graduate and aspiring writer, looking to capture and share the stories of his parent's generation. As the play begins Ahmed is somewhat estranged from his own father Kizito who is as concerned and disappointed with his son's life choices as Ahmed is frustrated by what he perceives to be his father's unenlightened attachment to the old ways.

Other ordeals are revealed as the play ensues: Hawa, who fled to New Zealand as a refugee after her children were

abducted, presumably for slavery; Gillette, a long-term immigrant in the habit of turning any conversation into a politically-charged debate decrying colonial oppression; and Nyote, who found political asylum in this country after being chased out of his own for dissident activities.

Sababu, a Sudanese refugee struggles to impress upon her rebellious 17-year-old daughter Maisha the critical importance of academic qualifications and the patience required to achieve them. Maisha has her own dubious ideas to fast-track herself to the material trappings of Western glamour, ultimately prompting Sababu to reveal one of the productions most emotionally impactful backstories.

In Transit was written in tribute to Sanderson's late husband and legendary Kiwi screen actor and writer Martyn Sanderson. Presumably his and the other stories are based on actual events. Indeed, a prevalent sense of truth helps its relatability to an unversed audience, as do a number of expositional dialogues.

The overarching theme is a universal one, exploring the minefield of communication difficulties between cultures and generations. Both the older migrants and their offspring feel the other has no idea, despite not actively seeking to understand the other's perspective. As they start to listen to each other, they begin to understand and a more helpful and effective communication begins to take place.

The show being a multi-layered and multi-stylistic concoction of viewpoints and concepts, it is a struggle to absorb every specific detail on a single watch. However, having entered as a novice to the worries and concerns of our local African community, I leave thoroughly entertained and with a sense of greater understanding. ■

This was based on a review originally commissioned by Theatreview. Go to: <https://www.theatreview.org.nz/reviews/review.php?id=10224> for the full review