

Notes from a composer-in-residence, April & May 2015

How To Say "!ke e: /xarra //ke"

Being a fortunated minstrel moor, yours truly received an unexpected commission from the Southern African Music rights Organisation (SAMRO) foundation to compose a new prescribed work for singers to be performed by competitors in this year's overseas scholarship competition.

The commission landed with the following brief:

"the work is to be a virtuoso piece testing the ability and skills of a singer at an advanced level. The text to be sung: an extract from the vision statement co-authored by Njabulo Ndebele and Antjie Krog, commissioned by the NPC. Length of the work: 5 minutes".

This was a request to make a young diva or divo sing the preamble to the National Planning Commission report - hardly a pedestrian ask for those accustomed to scaling more conventional lyrical heights! Now, i know well the poetry of both Prof's, Ndebele and Krog: I treasure it all very much!

But this preamble business ... eish - it reads more like a political position paper (necessarily) than a dexterous arioso. "No matter. That's the gig, so let's get on with it", i thought.

I began by looking for a poetic (of sorts) entry into the thing. One paragraph stood out:

Our multiculturalism is a defining element of our indigeneity.

We are, because we are so many.

Our many-ness is our strength – we carry it in us throughout our lives.

It occurred to me that the motto emblazoned on our national coat of arms, !Ke e: /xarra //ke (often translated from the !Xam as "diverse people unite"), echoes the sentiments expressed in this stanza.

How better to test a virtuoso's ability and skill than to have them vocalise this tongue-defying motto correctly under duress during a highly prestigious singing competition?!

That is how this motto became the first line in a 5 minute-long song i composed, which contained the refrain

"We are Africans. in an African century"

Sadly, i cannot give you a rendition of this new work now as it is embargoed until its premiere at the overseas completion later this year.

Violence and the immigrant

As part of a conference on 'public space, infrastructure and informality' hosted by WISER and the University of Michigan, i convened a panel on 'violence and the immigrant' at the Worker's museum in Newtown, Joburg.

This was, of course, an attempt to respond directly to the harrowing pictures and reports we keep getting concerning violence perpetrated on black and brown immigrants in South Africa by angry and disaffected South Africans in Durban, Joburg, Cape Town and other parts of the country.

The panel was conceived as a platform for seeking a more nuanced understanding of the causes and the deeper meaning of these atrocious acts of violence - nuance that is, sadly, lacking in much of the cacophonous debates we hear on our national radio and tv stations regarding 'foreigners' .

We hear much about how foreigners need to guarantee their safety in our communities by, for instance, volunteering to share their 'secret' business nous (and juju) with poor, marginalised black South Africans. The claim here being that such gracious behaviour on the part of the foreigners would help ensure their disadvantaged hosts aren't left bereft while they (the foreigners) selfishly amass opportunities in commerce. (i am paraphrasing some of the more embarrassing pronouncements coming from members of our cabinet here, sadly).

The panel consisted of an in-detail report by journalist, Khadija Patel, on the attitudes of those who admit to having perpetrated the violence in Soweto recently. You can read her full report here:

<http://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2015/xenophobiasouthafrica/index.html>

This was followed by responses by prof. Sarah Nuttall and myself plus a selection of comments from those gathered on possible ways to think about the history and the making of Johannesburg as an African metropolis of the 21st century.

This was followed by a very informative tour of the Worker's museum:

http://joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=248&Itemid=51&limitstart=3

Later that same evening, i invited my newest collaborators - the House of Prayer for all Nations choir (HNP) - to perform an alternative version of !Ke e: /xarra //ke at the WITS theatre.

The approach to HNP was made since many of the singers there are members of the congolese community now-living-in inner-city Joburg. The choir makes a point of collecting gospel material from across the continent and of singing in the many languages of Africa: kiSwahili, Lingala, English, Yoruba, isiZulu, French and seSotho and so on.

It occurred to many of us during this exercise of curating a presentation on immigrants in inner-city that we should think strategically about the church as an institution - regardless of whether this be space rented, per week, in a high-rise tenement, or across an unoccupied open field somewhere outside - that represents one of the more open platforms where Africans meet to collaborate and support each other today.

i leave you with this clip of the concert of that night.

Neo Muyanga
WISER/UCHRI composer-in-residence

<http://wiser.wits.ac.za/content/performance-neo-muyangas-uiti-hymn-12069>