

# "OUR ROOTS ARE THERE"

## Vusisizwe Players in Fredericton

The Vusisizwe  
Players  
of South Africa



Poppy Tsira

Nomuula Qosha

Thobeka Maghutyana

by Kwame Dawes

Conversation was suspended. Lady Smith Black Mombazo were filling the warm living room with their haunting harmonies, slow but complex rhythms, tongues rolling and clicking. The three women and the man became increasingly distant. Their bodies swaying, smiles and mutterings coming from them. Then, in smooth transition they were replicating and adding an immediacy to the voices coming through the stereo. Here a fist rocking, there a steady jerking of upper torso, a finger pointing to some fresh insight. We listened.

Xolani spoke: "We are in South Africa now. Physically we are in Canada but psychologically we are home. We are home."

We were relaxing after the stunning performance by these three women Thobeka Maghutyana, Poppy Tsira and Nomuula Qosha in the energetic theatrical *tour-de-force* "You Strike the Woman You Strike the Rock" at the Playhouse. Talk was animated, full of wit and an unpretentious charm characteristic of the kind of ease found in the company of friends. Poppy Tsira is an explosive woman with a sharp wit and the kind of laugh that makes onlookers wish they heard what she heard. Nomuula Qosha is constantly singing between snatches of insightful and articulate statements about the social and political commitment of the company. Thobeka Maghutyana maintains a queenly presence emphasizing with her sudden bright smile and strong facial expression that "I am happy, see me, I am relaxed, relaxed...yes." Xolani September one of the founders of the company discusses the dilemma of ignorance in blacks especially Americans. He is convinced that a knowledge of the history of black people is fundamental to any valid education. He is collecting relevant texts - Malcolm X, Alex Haley, etc: to hand onto his children. Xolani wants action and theatre sometimes does not seem enough.

Talking to these people you realize that their artistic talents are significant and spurred on by the zeal and purposefulness which gives unquestionable focus to their lives. They are not unaware of the implications of their radical anti-apartheid stance in South Africa, yet they are determined to articulate the need for change and to celebrate the hope of change. They are inextricably linked to South Africa; they love their country and are zealous about seeing that country radically freed from the oppressions within that land. There is no question about not going back.

"People don't understand," Xolani laughs. "They ask if I am going back. They don't understand that I want to smell the ground after rain. Those little things are important. Home is home."

It is impossible to understand the strength and dynamism of these people through a series of short dialogues but their statements help to give us a sense of their drive and commitment. The follow-

ing is a series of statements made by members of the Vusisizwe company during their four month tour through North America found in a number of interviews with various newspapers and journals. A veritable montage of ideas and statements that form a telling picture of who they are.

Thobeka Maghutyana

"If you know nothing about South Africa you will be changed after seeing this (play)."  
"Our play is to entertain people. There's humour in it, you will laugh and you will cry. Everything is there."

Poppy Tsira

"We weren't there in 1956, so we talked to women who were at the march."  
"Our mothers and grannies sang the song. When we do the show in Cape Town, you see the old grannies sitting in the front row. They sit there and cry."  
"In school, we were never taught our history."  
"We were taught European history and South African history. We want to know what our own people did, our heroines and heroes. Each woman must be able to know who she is, where she came from and where she's going."

Nomuula Qosha

"We want our history to be known by our kids. By the time they become adults, they won't know their own history unless something is done."

Poppy Tsira

"I would love to liberate my sisters, and to liberate my brothers who seem to forget things. I'd love to brush off the chauvinism out of their heads."

Thobeka Maghutyana

"For people who have no knowledge at all of the situation in South Africa, let this be the first touch, the first taste. For the rest, there's a need to continually be told what's going on."

Poppy Tsira

"Women got guts - because women bear and breed, they bear the men. The woman, she is shouldering the problems of letting the children grow, shouldering problems in the house, shouldering problems from the government, like the imposition of the pass laws."

"You have struck the woman,  
You have struck the rock.  
You will be crushed."

Nomuula Qosha

"(As a domestic) You work 12 to 14 hours a day, six days a week. You spend all this time with the white children, but you never have enough time for your own. It's killing me inside. I don't know how to say it. You don't know whether your own kids are going to school or not."

Thobeka Maghutyana

"It's too quiet here (in Canada). I miss the noise of helicopters, the police, throwing stones, that's everyday life. Something bad but it's happening."

"In the township where I stay, I enjoy myself

because I open my front door and ahhh, Mr. Policeman is standing there with his gun. And there's a helicopter - it's home."

Poppy Tsira

"I would never leave South Africa. Leaving is cowardice."

Nomuula Qosha

"It is home."  
"Our roots are there. Your roots are something that you can't uplift."

"People are eager to hear a voice from South Africa."

"They want to know what is happening there. In South Africa, things are not better. They are never better, they only get worse."

Thobeka Maghutyana

"Our children are not afraid of dying, they are not."  
"The police is passing with a gun. A child, I'm talking about a five-year-old child, he'll look at the police and say 'Why don't you shoot me? You've got a gun, shoot me.' They are not afraid."  
"Within two years' time, South Africa will be free, I'm telling you."

"Five years is too much - people are tired of it. When South Africa is free, think about Thobeka sitting here telling you this. We will be free."

"You have struck the woman  
You have struck the rock  
You will be crushed."

fr. Georgia Straight, Vancouver Sun, New York Times,  
Toronto Sun.

The tour has been a consistent success if success is to be based on reviews all of which were rave enthusiastic responses. They leave for Germany next week and then return to South Africa. When all is done one can be grateful for the enlightenment and hope that these performers convey, but more crucially one is impressed and encouraged by the determination by these friends to right injustices in their homeland.

"You have struck the woman,  
You have struck the rock.  
You will be crushed."

The song commemorates the historic demonstration of August 9, 1956, when a crowd of 20,000 marched in Pretoria to protest the inclusion of women in the restrictive South African pass laws.



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