

MEDU ART ENSEMBLE BRINGS TO  
GABORONE "WOZA ALBERT!"

WEDNESDAY 3 MARCH / TOWN HALL  
FRIDAY AND SATURDAY 5 & 6 MARCH / UNIVERSITY

TIME 8 PM TICKETS 3 PULA

AFRIKA...

DON'T DARE MISS IT! 4.3.2

Tandi Bhengu reports from Johannesburg on a new play that is exciting the city. The wonder is, writes Bhengu, that *Woza Albert!* has so far been tolerated by the authorities

IF CHRIST ARRIVED in South Africa, he would say: "Throw away your pass, man, and follow me..."

So says actor Mbongeni Ngema in *Woza Albert!* - the highly-acclaimed satirical explosion which was performed recently at the multiracial and experimental Market Theatre in Johannesburg.

Ngema goes on: "Christ would show the bastards that Africans are not just pieces of paper, but people."

*Woza Albert!* - *woza* means arise - was created by Ngema and fellow township dweller Percy Mtwa. Helping them was Barney Simon, South Africa's leading white director.

The origin of *Woza* is interesting. Mtwa and Ngema went out on the streets and asked the question, "What would happen if Christ came to South Africa?" The two actors, with director Barney Simon, dramatised the responses and created a series of vignettes, most of them hilarious.

On stage, the actors put over their script in a *melange* of Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, English and Afrikaans. But even the unilingual can follow it, for mime fills in the gaps.

### Ping-pong balls

In this way they present a wide variety of characters from Prime Minister P.W. Botha to Morena ("Christ" in the Sotho language), in a kaleidoscopic entertainment that is fast-paced and very funny. When they portray Whites, the actors attach ping-pong balls to their noses.

The play makes an important political statement. This is put across in such a way that the Whites in the audience cannot fail to acknowledge the immense difficulties and humiliation bestowed on the Blacks of South Africa by the crippling apartheid laws.

The show opens with Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema on the stage dressed only in brown tracksuit trousers and worn *Yakkies* (running shoes). For the next 80 minutes the play flows from one satirical situation to another, all rich with wit and humour.

In the play, Blacks hear that Morena is coming to Johannesburg. Different



Mtwa and Ngema - Ping-pong Whites

characters, ranging from a stallholder selling food to a cynical brickmaker who resents making bricks "to build huge houses for whites", disclose what they will ask for when Morena arrives in South Africa. All the characters are portrayed with superb skill by the versatile Ngema and Mtwa.

Morena arrives at Jan Smuts airport in a Boeing jetliner from Israel. He is met by Prime Minister Botha and the entire Cabinet. Morena's hundreds of fans greet him enthusiastically. Among the many requests that are shouted to him is one by the brickmaker to visit the Coronation Brick Works the next day.

This he does, to be accused by the Afrikaans foreman of being a communist and forcing his "kaffirs" to talk to a "terrorist".

He phones the police who are relieved that at last they can track down this black "imposter of Christ" (Christ is white in their minds, remember).

They take him to John Vorster Square, the police headquarters in Johannesburg notorious for its brutal interrogation of political prisoners.

Despite the presence of 19 guards, he escapes with the help of the Angel Gabriel. He is recaptured and put into solitary confinement on Robben Island.

Two prison officers are congratulating themselves and saying that Morena will not get away now when one looks out and sees a figure walking across the sea that separates the island from Cape Town. Yes, it's Morena. Their superiors instruct them to take a helicopter and bomb the escapee.

This order is carried out - but the bomb destroys Cape Town, leaving the black Christ unharmed.

The play ends with a bored Morena in a cemetery on the mainland looking for something to do. The cemetery gardener appears and together they raise the dead. "Woza Albert!" "Woza Steve!"

Morena, being charitable, is about to proclaim, "Woza Hendrik Verwoerd!" - but the disgusted gardener stops him just in time. Verwoerd, a former South African Prime Minister assassinated in the early 1960s, was after all the architect of some of the country's harshest apartheid legislation.

It seems a miracle in itself that the all-powerful South African Censorship Board has left this potent and very relevant production intact. Far more innocuous productions have been banned in this country.

### Awareness

*Woza Albert!* brings new awareness to those who choose to ignore the consequences of life for the majority in this repressive society.

Percy Mtwa, 28, was born and bred in Wattville, Benoni, on the Witwatersrand not far from Johannesburg. The son of a local tailor, he has danced and played music in nightclubs from his mid-teens.

Mbongeni Ngema, 26, was born in Umkumbane, Durban. He once worked as a "handboy" - the chap who carries the skilled tradesman's tools. He became a guitarist, backing township plays in Durban. His break as an actor came when the lead actor in Lucky Mavundla's *Isigcino* was absent from a performance one night.

*Woza Albert!* reveals the raw side of township life and shows the sophistication one needs to survive in that kind of environment. From the Blacks in the audience you hear the delighted laughter of recognition.

And the Whites in the audience? On the whole, they are the type of South African who would welcome a truly multiracial future for the country, with equal opportunities for all races. There is a note of sadness in their laughter - also frustration, anger even.

After all, *Woza Albert!* whips their conscience mercilessly.



**Collection Name: MEDU ON-LINE**

***PUBLISHER:***

*Publisher:* Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

*Location:* Johannesburg

©2022

***LEGAL NOTICES:***

**Copyright Notice:**

All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

**Disclaimer and Terms of Use:**

Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of the Historical Papers Research Archive, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of the MEDU Art Ensemble Consolidation Project, Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.