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Pumeza Matshikiza and a lost apartheid opera



Pumeza Matshikiza Pal Hansen for The Times

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A young South African singer is to star in a forgotten opera that has many modern resonances with apartheid history

The South African soprano Pumeza Matshikiza is poised for operatic stardom. At 31 she is about to sing the role of her life — a heroine who embodies the Rainbow Nation's gritty past and post-apartheid reality. Next week the beautiful and spirited Matshikiza takes the lead in *Zaide* — Mozart's unfinished (and now newly completed) opera — at Sadler's Wells, performing with the Classical Opera Company under the leadership of Melly Still, one of the hottest directors in town.

Zaide's is a journey from pain and punishment to forgiveness and triumphant love. When she spurns the tyrannical sultan, Soliman, for Gomatz, the humiliated ruler imprisons the two lovers. Their incarceration is brutal but ultimately life-affirming. The parallels with South Africa's own progress from apartheid through truth to reconciliation seem almost too clichéd to be true — but not for Matshikiza.

“My inspiration comes from my country,” she says. “Soliman, the head of the prison, misuses his power by imprisoning people unjustly, by doing whatever he wants with the women, by turning a blind eye to many things that are not supposed to happen. And that did happen in South Africa.”

Matshikiza grew up with her two brothers in the Khayelitsha and Langa townships of Cape Town, moving constantly (her estranged father died when she was 12). “My mother was looking for a house and there'd be a story about this house here or there ... I moved schools almost all the time.”

Like most children, she sang in her school and church choirs — a mix of Zulu songs and Western oratorios such as Mendelssohn's *Elijah* and *The Creation* by Haydn. By 12 or 13 she was also tuning in to the radio, “to Classic FM [a Jo'burg version; Henry Kelly hasn't reached South Africa], and they played Italian opera. I didn't know there was a huge operatic world that was happening somewhere. I just heard these people on the radio and I fell in love; the way they projected their voices seemed natural and beautiful. I was definitely the only one listening to opera in my neighbourhood,” she laughs, recalling the beats of Brenda Fassie, the “Queen of African Pop”, floating out of most homes. “I was known by neighbours as this person who usually makes noise, who was always singing.”

Inevitably, Matshikiza had to leave South Africa, with its one opera company, Cape Town Opera, to pursue her career abroad. “There is no future at the moment for opera in South Africa,” she says. Six years ago the composer Kevin Volans spotted her talent, bought her a plane ticket to London and sent her to audition for the Royal College of Music. She was offered a scholarship on the spot. “Politicians say that they cannot give money to opera; people need houses, people need basic things. But I disagree. Art is as important as anything else to balance societies.”

One hears this argument for the arts the world over, but for Matshikiza it has a personal resonance. She remembers her cousin as “the sweetest, gentlest guy; I grew up with him. But over many years my grandmother told me he became a criminal. He's been from prison to prison. He hijacks cars. But he's my cousin! What changed him?”

“When I go to the townships I see idle people and an idle mind is a very dangerous mind. There are people whose lives are tragic because they didn't have certain things — like music — that could have made them better people.”

Matshikiza has already sung at the Royal Opera House; as the Sandman in Humperdinck's *Hansel und Gretel* under Sir Colin Davis; and as one half of the spooky, joined-at-the-hip witches in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. But she plays her first lead role in *Zaide*. Left unfinished for 230 years, this rarity was a labour of love for Mozart. It was written without a commission — unheard of for 18th-century composers — and the 23-year-old was trying something new: a melodrama with songs and spoken dialogue instead of opera's sung-through recitative. Mozart wrote two acts in 1779 before abandoning the idea to begin *Idomeneo*, his first full-blown operatic masterpiece.

How on earth does one complete an opera conceived by Mozart (and who has the nerve)? Ian Page, conductor and artistic director of the Classical Opera Company, has written the third act using a jigsaw of pieces that Mozart composed around the same time. Mozart's letters show that these were tough years; his mother had just died, his father was a love-hate figure, a love affair had ended in rejection and, instead of wowing the crowds in Vienna and Paris, he was "trapped" in provincial Salzburg — which lacked an opera house.

All of this shows in his highly emotive music, including a quartet from *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and a rarely heard aria from *Idomeneo*. Page's *Zaide* is not meant to be a faithful re-creation of Mozart; the ending, for instance, remains "an imaginary leap". The only clue came from the composer's work as a whole; his operas rarely end without forgiveness. "Part of you thinks, 'How might Mozart have ended it?' But that's madness," admits the poet Michael Symmons Roberts, who has written a new libretto with the playwright Ben Power. "You're second-guessing something it's almost impossible to get right and you're trying to resurrect a museum piece without a clear sense of why you're doing it. You've got to make it live."

In the *Zaide* rehearsal room one wall is covered with research: graphic images of Second World War prisoners, the Moscow theatre siege of 2002, the merciless Furies of Greek mythology. Melly Still cuts a slight figure — a watchful presence but not overbearing, pushing her performers to attend to every thought, word and note. "Share the joy of every second. Bask in it!" she exhorts the singers of a love duet.

With her reputation made by *Coram Boy* at the National Theatre, Still made her operatic debut last year with Dvorák's *Rusalka* at Glyndebourne, and will return in two years to direct Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen*. Opera, in particular, can end up as a directorial ego trip but Still has a knack for eliciting a vision without drowning out the composer.

"The thing the writer wanted to communicate has to be communicated to the audience. Is there something about it that makes us think differently? Or is it just a sublime three hours — and then, what's my job?"

Zaide may prove to be on the tough side of sublime, but Still hopes to deliver the political resonances without missing its human heart. “*Zaide* has this fantastic capacity to forgive — though what she wants to do is throttle or kill or get revenge. That’s really what the story is about,” Still says. “How you forgive when you really don’t want to.”

The parallels with her young star aren’t lost on Still. “Pumeza brings all her experience to the piece — not in an overt, intellectual way,” she adds, “but her personal experiences.”

We are back to South Africa, and its faltering post-apartheid transformation. As Matshikiza’s homeland takes centre stage hosting the World Cup (at an estimated cost of £3 billion), she has mixed feelings. “I’m happy that the world can actually see South Africa for what it is.

“Most people, because they haven’t been, say ‘At least apartheid is finished’, as if everything is good. Then you meet people who’ve been to South Africa, who have cried when they saw how people live in the townships. It is a beautiful country but there is so much cleaning up that needs to be done.”

It is fascinating to meet someone so consumed by anxieties for her young country. Matshikiza talks passionately about Aids, women’s rights, corruption and her friends who still live in South Africa and what kind of nation they will shape. Opera was her ticket out of the townships and, one day, it will be her route back when she returns as an established singer, introducing the music she loves to more people. For now, this graceful young woman embodies South Africa in a role she was born to play.

***Zaide*, Sadler’s Wells, London EC1 (sadlerswells.com, 0844 4124300), June 24 and 26 and then on tour (classicalopera.co.uk)**

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