



Mark Fleishman & Neo Muyanga: The Third Character

[00:00:23] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello and welcome to the Salon.

Today we welcome Mark Fleishman and Neo Muyanga, frequent collaborators and parallel agitators of the South African scene.

Mark Fleishman teaches at the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies at University of Cape Town, and is the artistic director of Magnet Theatre established in 1987 in Johannesburg and based in Cape Town since 1994. He has created and directed many performance works for the company that have been performed nationally and internationally over the past 26 years and is involved in development projects in urban townships and rural communities using theatre as a tool for social justice and transformation. He has edited the collection *Performing Migrancy and Mobility in Africa: Cape of Flows* (2016), and his articles have appeared in the *South African Theatre Journal*, *Contemporary Theatre Review* and *Theatre Research International* as well as in numerous edited collections.

Neo Muyanga was born in Soweto. He studied the Italian madrigal tradition with choral maestro Piero Pocolen in Trieste, before co-founding the acoustic pop duo, Blk Sonshine with Masauko Chipembere in the mid-1990s, garnering a following throughout Southern Africa and internationally. Neo writes music plays, chorus songs and has a variety of works for chamber and large ensemble (his operetta, *The Flower of Shembe*, premiered to critical acclaim in 2012). He co-founded the Pan African Space Station in 2008 with Chimurenga's publishing editor, Ntone Edjabe, as a continually evolving host of cutting-edge pan African music and sound art on the internet and across stages in Cape Town and other parts of the globe.

In this Salon, Mark and Neo reason together on the role of speech, sound, and music in a number of their performance works, including their collaborations on the 2015 opera adaptation of Zakes Mda's novel *Heart of Redness* and their *Antigone (not quite/quiet)* from 2019, detailing their working processes and understanding of vocal, rhythmic and choreographic dramaturgies. The idea of an African approach to performance is put forward, in which the sonic dimension of the work becomes a character in its own right, an agent that will fill historical gaps, bind different audiences together and help articulate current political problems.

The conversation was recorded via Zoom between Cape Town and London on 2nd July 2020.

[00:03:10] SALON

Mark Fleishman: Good afternoon Neo, how are you?

Neo Muyanga: I'm fine. Good afternoon Mark. [*Laughter.*] How are you?

MF: Okay. So I thought it would probably be a good place to start just to introduce ourselves, who we are, and how we define ourselves and the work that we do. I am Mark Fleishman. I am a professor of theatre in the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, and I'm also co-artistic director of Magnet Theatre, which is an independent company that has been making theatre performance work in South Africa since the mid-1980s. So a period of over 30 years. So I'm partly an academic, partly a dramaturg, partly a director, partly a theatre-maker, whatever one you want to choose.



NM: I am Neo Muyanga. I am a musician, composer and a sound artist, one could say. I work mainly across the genres of new opera, African idiomatic song, and particularly interested in voice and the work the voice does as a measure of history and protest and the Black diaspora in articulating its own history. And Mark, you and I have been working together for – I was thinking about it the other day – probably over a decade, I can't remember exactly. So Magnet is like a home for me also, so very much close to that practice.

MF: I think one of the things that interested me about this conversation and the project that it forms part of, was the dual focus on orality and aurality, and the way that I understood that was orality with an 'O' being essentially a kind of framework or paradigm for approaching the world in some way, whereas aurality is more of a focus on hearing in the context of sound per se and how it's heard. Orality is more like, let's say, a conceptual way of hearing and a way of making too, and both of those things have a very strong resonance within the African and particularly Southern African context that we work in. I did my Master's thesis in the early '80s on the ways in which research into orality might form the basis for an understanding of theatre-making practices in South Africa – at that time what we called 'workshop theatre', and it was the era of protest theatre, the anti-apartheid protest theatre of the time – and postulated that the particular structural approaches to understanding orality in the work of people like Milman Parry and Albert Lord etc., would be a way of understanding the new dramaturgies and the new ways that theatre was being structured at the time. I still believe that to a large extent, a lot of the work that's being produced in performance terms in South Africa today, 27 years after apartheid, is to a large extent influenced by those same oral poetics, those same ideas. On the other hand, Magnet started off as essentially a physical theatre company and was very much influenced by my partner Jennie's background in training with Lecoq. There was a particular moment in the work that we did where we started to focus more on sound and what sound was doing in the productions, and that moment occurred just before [the two of us] met and just before we started to collaborate together in that first production, which was *Rain in a Dead Man's Footprints*. I was making a work at the District Six Museum on forced removals which basically was an outdoor, site-specific, physical theatre-based piece which didn't have a text. It was a series of tableaux, moving tableaux, that were performed to an end-to-end, wall-to-wall soundtrack and I had, in a very quick way, gone into a recording studio with some very iconic Cape Town musicians who had a connection to District Six – Hilton Schilder, Mac McKenzie, Robbie Jansen – and recorded a whole lot of music in the styles that came out of District Six – District Six being a particular area of Cape Town, for those people who don't know, working-class, mixed-race suburb that, under the Group Areas Act under apartheid, people were [forcibly] removed from. But it was never rebuilt as a suburb after the removals, and there's a long history of memory studies and memory activities and rituals connected to that, of which performance and carnival is particularly connected. So it was the first time that we actually did a piece which combined to some extent the physical theatre background of the company with a very, very clear sonic landscape, a particularly musical one made up both of newly recorded music but also archival clips that we had got hold of. And that was the moment, I think, that we started to see the emergence of sound and music and voice as being particular to Magnet's work. And then soon after that we started a series of collaborations together which actually started through the Jazzart Dance Theatre. So our first collaborations were about working on dance. We were both not dancers for obvious reasons, but we were coming to this from our own perspectives, me as a director/dramaturg, you as a composer. Do you have memories of that time and what you thought we were doing then, and what you think did happen as a result of that interaction?

NM: I remember very clearly how Jazzart is a very particular company because it's the oldest contemporary African dance company apparently on the continent, but certainly in this country. And so they have a very particular tradition and history which I'd heard about and read about. I was very curious



to discover how they worked with questions of the history that made Cape Town, which is what we were touching on with *Rain in a Dead Man's Footprints*. This idea of these old stories that came from the 19th century of the ending somewhat of the colonial era and the beginning somewhat also of what would become the apartheid scenario, and what interested me was to try and work with you on the one hand in terms of the academic input that you were making about what the archival collection was, that we could read and think about, but also looking at what the choreographic language would have been. So I would walk in with a notebook, mainly to notate what was happening with the movement, with the dancer's feet and with their voices and how their bodies moved in space. So it was very much premised in the beginning on counting beats, counting bars, making sure that tempo was something that they would be able to use to replicate whatever the choreographic language was on top. I would take those notes home and transcribe them into some kind of template that I would then create sonic responses to, and then I would bring that back a few days later to the studio and to yourself and we would try it with the dancers and see where it would go. So the practice for me was to play two roles: one was to interpret what I was seeing on the floor and what I was hearing in the room, and then to integrate the information that we were finding about the kind of music that would have been relevant to the time, to the particular tradition that we were speaking to, the particular community we were talking about, the *Xam*, who are based in the Northern Cape was a particular inspiration, because they – Alfred [Hinkel] and John [Linden], who are the founders, the key founders and people who made Jazzart, came from [the Northern Cape] and they were accessing language from there and work that you had done previously with them, I think, that had to do with that tradition. So I had quite a lot of catching up to do on that score. And so luckily, I had a lot of reference archival material of my own. I had some recordings of so-called Bushman songs that had been released by M.E.L.T. 2000, and there were lots of other recordings that I had on tape – and I found some other material through the process of researching with you. So all of that for me was in the back of my mind while I was trying to firstly understand what the bodies were saying in space, and then to respond to you dramaturgically, with music and sound that would not only accompany the action but would also somehow embody a terrain, embody a kind of landscape, embody a kind of mind-space and sonic space also.

MF: You know, I think the important thing for me to stress is that I don't think at the end it was a case of you making music to dance to. That the tracks, as it were, of the sonic dramaturgy and the physical dramaturgy were running in parallel with each other and intersecting and touching on each other in certain ways, so that it wasn't just a case of one thing supporting the other. Was that something that you felt as well?

NM: Yeah, very much. I mean, I very much felt there was a brief but also an expectation for the sonic space to become a character. So to be able to tell its story, to be able to narrate something of itself. So I had to, for example, step into a role, a kind of sonic musical role that was not just about responding to dancers who need music and to be the musical director, but it was about how I would also become a character – not me, Neo, but the entity that was performing the sound, the sonic space, to a point where the movement, the dance, the storytelling could lean on that as a set, as a kind of a dialogic partner. So I very much saw my role as contingent on what was happening. It would change every single night, and we made it as a live show so it would have to be necessarily responsive to what was happening on any given night. It felt like I had to at every point renew my kind of commitment to what the place of sound was going to be for that particular occasion. I remember particularly – you know, dancers have a very interesting relationship to sound because in some ways there's a reliance on sound being the same in order for them to be able to reach the hit points that they would have settled on in the choreographic design. And at some points there was a tension there between me having to become the kind of performer, the kind of musician who could constantly replicate what was decided upon, that is the right sound at this place, and also having to be a person on stage who was responsive



to what was happening and to what was emerging in that particular moment. So the dancers at various points would say: 'But you didn't play it like you played it last week or yesterday.' And my response would be: 'Yes, but I felt we needed to respond to how you were feeling or how I was feeling today not yesterday.' But I would also have to, in some ways, determine how to set some of the stage for the sonic happenings to follow. I think it was always a calibration every time we had to perform. Sometimes it worked really much better than others.

MF: It seems that what you're describing there picks up on some fundamental characteristics of what one might call a kind of African approach to performance or understanding of performance which is not scripted. And the tension that exists in all the work that we do between the kind of Western conception of theatre or performance as being something rehearsed, something prepared for, scripted and then repeated versus a more African conception in which, while there is a tradition and there is a knowledge of that tradition, performance is a space for creativity, innovation, for improvisation if you like, within that traditional structure. And how those two conceptions play out in contemporary performance in a Southern African context – I'm very aware of the differences when you are actually playing live in a performance and when you have recorded that music and the performers are responding to the recorded track. One of the other things about *Rain in a Dead Man's Footprints*, which I think is important to understand is that the dancers were also singing. They were not silent dancers. So there was a whole other element to the kind of sonic landscape, which was the vocal one. Partly you were singing, partly they were singing. They were dancing while singing, so the kind of accuracy of the singing was kind of different. So it also speaks back to a kind of aesthetic, if you like, that's not about necessarily the perfect note and the need to also, in a sense, recover constantly when you go off that note because you are in the midst of exertions, physical exertions of one kind or another.

NM: Yes, I think that was a huge leap to make. Because on the face of it I was Musical Director, let's say, and I would on the one hand be coming in to give vocal warmups, vocal lessons, and at some point we rehearsed like a choir, that was part of the rehearsal process. I would have sections of time where I was alone with the dancers to do vocal work and then they had to become dancers again, and I, in a way, would lose some measure of my singers to the physical performance, and we had to find some kind of mitigating bridge between those spaces. So then the sonic space had to be a kind of sonic environment that could survive that, that had the kind of muscle that could support them when they needed to be more physical but also could imply what that physical exertion meant in terms of what they would sound like in the end. So we had to think a lot about where the pauses are for them, to be able to do the kind of choreographic expression they needed to do, but also where I needed them to be a lot more vocally focused because the scene needed that and not so much for them to be out of breath at a particular moment. It also meant, for example, that the lesson around keys and really staying on certain notes at some points became imperative. But I had to ultimately learn to understand that the way I hear music as a musician is not necessarily the way a dancer, who's able to sing and articulate musically, hears music – and what they're hearing as a cue in terms of what I'm providing, or I think I'm providing is being read in a different way, whether they're reading it as a dancer, whether they're reading it as a member of the chorus. Those kinds of discoveries were new for me because I had never worked like that before. So it transformed my practice fundamentally, I would say, and it transformed my understanding of what you often speak about, this idea of the chorus in the Greek sense, this representation of voices that can be a community, that can be a society, and it can be a conscience, it can be a kind of an objective, objectifying an alienated space of commentary that began to play a role for me. I also was thinking from the perspective of having come from watching protest song, protest theatre. Gibson Kente was a big influence in my life growing up, *Sarafina!*, the work of Mbongeni Ngema really informed how I came to writing for the theatrical space and the vocal theatre – opera included in



that – and so those were some of the ways I was practising for myself what would be my own voice in working with those principles.

MF: So *Rain in a Dead Man's Footprints* was one of a whole series of works that were particularly focused on archives and particularly the archives of Cape Town as it was emerging as a city. The second production was *Cargo*, which was based on the archive of slavery at the Cape. There I think we came in with a slightly more developed understanding of what we were doing. I think in *Rain [in a Dead Man's Footprints]*, we were quite reactive to what was happening in the moment, whereas with *Cargo* I felt, certainly dramaturgically, we were enacting a particular dramaturgy or dramaturgical method that we had already discovered in earlier projects. I know that we have a clip of one of the songs that came out from *Cargo*. Do you want to talk a little bit about why you chose that clip?

NM: Yes. The clip is a piece, a ballad called 'The Ballad of a Mutiny'. *Cargo* for me was a learning curve in terms of how, in some ways, trying to stay true to some elements, some measure of an archive, a historical archive that was particularly traumatic and that didn't have any sonic references for me. So we began thinking about what the music of slaves would have been. There's no reference for us to that. The references are Western music that may have been imported and where a master would have asked or demanded slaves learn and play. So quadrilles, for example, became of prominence and people were playing Western made instruments: violins, cellos, cello da gamba, and particularly voices and percussion from Asian influence, from Indian influence would have made a showing. But we didn't have recordings that I could listen to and there isn't a recording or a score I could reference, I could refer to. So part of this brief was having to respond from my imagination of what this would have been had disruptions by slavery and colonialism not happened, not taken place. The song 'The Ballad of a Mutiny' is written from the perspective of one of the characters whose name in the archive that we found was Thomas von Bengalen – he would have been named Thomas by his master. Von Bengalen would have been a slave that was brought from Bengal in India or around the Bay of Bengal in India, which we know is where some of the slaves were brought from. It was describing this character who refused to submit and wanted to run away from slavery – there was a practice of running away and running to a place just outside Cape Town, Piketberg. There was a particular community that would be settled there, and that community was perceived as, I don't know, what people I guess would call pirates or gangsters today. A group of people who had to make a living, and they had a particular code of conduct and a particular discipline among themselves. So the song, the ballad is trying to tell the story from their perspective, from the perspective of this person who runs away, achieves freedom of a certain measure, wants to live freely but also has to live according to violence because that's the system in which they are surviving. Eventually they get captured, and it tells what happens in the moment when he's captured as well. Which is trying to play on one hand on the narrative of the particular character, but on the [other] hand is us in the 21st century trying to deal with the trauma of what Cape Town has become. If you play it, I'll tell you a bit more about the particular characterisation that I took on after you play the clip.

[00:23:54 to 00:27:00] 'The Ballad of a Mutiny' from *Cargo* (2007)

NM: I'm sure you remember, Mark, how terrible I am as an actor I can perform characterisation if I'm working through the language of music and the language of song. We had a particular moment when we spoke about the character who would tell the story, what he would look like, what he would feel like. What we were exploring was a kind of character in a Western, if you like, somebody who has to deal with the harsh elements, almost pioneering in a space that has no provisions whatsoever, having to survive by their wits. So it's a character that carries a guitar, but also carries a sword and possibly a rifle of some sort. It's a hard-living kind of character, but we needed to find a way also for that to be close to the story we were trying to tell in terms of the historicity of the elements that we used musically. I was thinking about what the instruments would have been at that time, and a guitar would have been



available, the harp would have been available as a house instrument that somebody who was running away could have run away with. So those are the two spaces that I began working with, as instruments that I would be performing on stage but it was designed on this idea of also creating a kind of triplet beat, almost like a waltz, that is about this journey, is about walking towards somewhere, it's uneven, it keeps us moving forward, it's got an element of lament and sadness in it. It's suggestive of all of these possibilities that I would have been able to embody – not having the talents to act or to move around at that point, I would have been able to embody this through characterising it musically. And it seemed to work. We had another version of that which was me trying to pretend to be a more Bob Dylan kind of character, where the note was not so much the thing to be religiously staying on top of vocally while the musical harmony was proceeding. That also worked and would have worked as an expression, but the range of that for my voice would have been very difficult for me to carry night to night. So these were some of the considerations for me. Ultimately the version the song came to take was a version that I could keep repeating, a version that could set up the structure of the harshness of the steps of the person who was running but also could be able to tell an effective story just if somebody were to close their eyes and listen to the design that had been created.

MF: Just talking about character, soon after that we kind of started to collaborate on what might be called more theatre pieces as opposed to dance pieces or dance theatre pieces. There are three of those that I can refer to, the first one being *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking* which was a very hastily produced work that became the longest surviving piece in the repertoire per se. It's still being performed to this day.

NM: Every day.

MF: 12 or 13 years later, whatever. So that's one side of it, and there I'm particularly interested in the way in which the music has been described by audiences all over the world as being a 'third character'. It's basically a two-hander, but people in the audience constantly say the music is the third character. I believe that characters are operating slightly differently in that production than what you were describing in the character of the Thomas von Bengalen song in *Cargo*. The other two pieces were *The Fire Raisers* by Max Frisch and the creation of the puppet chorus of firemen in that production, singing in a particularly local singing tradition not local to Cape Town necessarily but to South Africa *isicathamiya* tradition, which is most commonly associated with Ladysmith Black Mambazo internationally. That was also choral, it was puppet singing, it was this particular way of singing. And then the third one, *Voices Made Night*, which was an adaptation of short stories by the Mozambican author Mia Couto, where we were working very much with not only music – which was there – and you were responding to what the actors were doing on stage from the piano. But also the way in which we were creating particular vocal landscapes or vocal scores that moved beyond the semantics of language. So it wasn't only the words that they were speaking but the sounds that they were making in chorus, the way that those sounds and the onomatopoeic and other kind of ways of expanding or extending the range of the performers' voice to create something that was heightened beyond the everyday but wasn't song per se. It wasn't musical in a way that the others were. Do you want to just talk a little bit about anything related to those three?

NM: Yes. Firstly, *The Fire Raisers*. *Isicathamiya*, as you say, is a sound, a sonic space that is outside of South Africa best understood through the lens of Ladysmith Black Mambazo because they are the biggest band we have that's won numerous Grammys and are famous as a South African band worldwide to such an extent that they've actually started to define for people outside South Africa what the South African choral sound is. In fact, there's a vocal effect on GarageBand that you find in the Mac in Apple that is called South African choir and those effects are mimicking Ladysmith Black Mambazo. So it's become ultra, ultra, meta mainstream. The difficulty and the challenge there was again working with actors. You know, the advantage but also the complexity in working with South Africa is everybody



here – or it feels like everybody here – has a capacity to represent musically. Many of us come from backgrounds that make us feel able to articulate ourselves musically, harmonically, and a lot of that is done through voice. So working with voice is not strange for many actors who come from the South African context – but to be a specialist vocalist is another ask. *Isicathamiya* is an a cappella tradition, so there I had to work with the chorus as an a cappella group that couldn't lean on music that came from elsewhere to keep tuning, to keep timing. People actually had to learn very definitive line structures, musical melodic line structures in terms of vocal parts that are very similar to four-part harmony writing in the way that a normal conventional choir would work – except we were not singing normal conventional choral music, we were telling stories and they had to find ways every single iteration of remaining in tune with one another, having a particular tempo timing and remembering the story that was being told. They had characters that were also involved with other things, so each member of the chorus also had an individual role to play. So very much like asking an opera singer who has a role as a star to then be a member of the chorus. It's a very difficult transition to make. It was very successfully done, I thought, but [that was] because we had to do a lot of workshop work in preparing for it. The haste doesn't help if the scenario is having to prepare something of that level of complexity. Every day we had to find ways of remembering what we did and what worked and what didn't. For me, I learned a lot about working harmonically with people who sing in a kind of a free expression but don't necessarily sing as members of a trained choir. Because my background includes both styles of work, I sometimes use them interchangeably without recognising in myself necessarily at what point I'm reaching for which skill. So to be working with a group like that really brings it to the fore and helped me understand in my own practice at what point the transition moments are, and what to focus on depending on the kind of group I was working on or with. *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking* for me was characterisation of a different kind. I felt very present on stage in the moments where I was performing with that production so I had to find a way of sitting – and I was sitting the entire time – had to find a way of sitting that lasted comfortably the whole performance. I only had one instrument at that point, it was an electric guitar. I chose an electric guitar because we knew very early in the production that we would be going touring but we would be going touring through parts of the continent that didn't necessarily have resources like huge mixers and bins for feedback and hearing yourself, monitoring on stage. So I had to find an instrument that could be easy to carry through those kinds of travels but also that could speak in multiple ways because the story was telling about a difficult journey, moving from the Congo and transitioning through very violent, very dangerous borders on to the streets of Johannesburg in South Africa as a migrant – and what languages that would imply and what possibilities in creating different kinds of tension but also different kinds of joy and rhythm. So the electric guitar – and some people have said this – the electric guitar really should be thought of as an African instrument by now because of how, for example, the Congolese have transformed the relationship of the electric guitar to music, dance music, but also to music of African tradition through the rumba and through kwassa kwassa. So the choice there was about embodying a very particular character that would have to translate the journey from the Congo – roughly the Congo I was thinking because it's a French-speaking country – to South Africa, and what would change, what would transition in that, I had to elaborate through guitar pedals. That was a huge joy for me, I got to know my electric guitar pedals very well. In fact, I had to buy one particularly new one to be able to do a certain kind of looping and also to be able to play the role of translating what the two actors on stage were doing when, in sections where they were speaking either in French or in an invented gibberish language, the guitar would be the translation for people in South Africa about what was being said at the time.

MF: Also, I think that the music there creates a kind of, in theatre studies terms, 'poor theatre'. There's very little on stage, there are the bodies of the performers, there's a very, very limited text which, which is changing from French to English as they move down the continent, so the landscape that they're



traversing, to a large extent, is depicted both like the physical landscape, but also the affective, emotional landscape that they're traversing is being depicted, to a large extent, through the music and through the way the music is changing and evolving along the way through the three-part structure of the dramaturgy. So it's playing, a very important part of filling the empty space, so to speak, with a particular texturing which makes the piece feel so much bigger than it actually is when you simply reduce it down to the sum of its parts.

NM: We've also spoken about what changes from the moment when I'm touring with the piece, versus the moment when I can't tour anymore because of other commitments, and the recording accompanies the two actors. So that's what you're describing still takes place, but the first instance is me responding to the actors on stage and the subsequent instance is different for the actors, because it's about having a score that they follow.

MF: Exactly. And that goes back to what I was saying before about in the beginning it's much more like an African experience for me, because it's this conversation, this dialogical conversation going on between the body of the performer, the storyteller, so to speak, the musician and the space in a particular way. Once it gets recorded, the music turns and becomes almost the script that the actors are following. So the actors are to some extent being conditioned by what has been pre-determined by the script, and I think that shifts it slightly as it goes on over time. Fundamentally, it does the same thing and it had a long longer life in the latter mode than in the former mode but I think it does qualitatively change the experience for an audience. Then in *Voices Made Night*, in the particularity of the performers, the vocal work that was going on there which was more an extension of speech than song, what do you think about that?

NM: We had different voices at that point. We spoke very specifically about the actors you'd chosen to play certain roles. There was one actor, Mfundo, who participates in choral activity and who's a friend I know in choral circles and township singing circles. There was another actor, Chiminae Ball, who was trained in opera and could sing that style, so I had available this possibility of working in this twin mode of somebody who could do this lyrical bel canto line. The piano helped with that and the church music, the church personality, that we were embodying in certain sections of those stories helped work with that versus the choral energy that had a call and response, this antiphonal energy that comes from the township but also comes from our more indigenous style of musicking and was another palette that I could apply in that production. So those two poles helped create a complexity, a different kind of complexity to what we had previously worked with. Certainly for me vocally I had a space to then play with a lot of that characterisation also to tell the story of these differences in the South African or Southern African soundscape.

MF: Just before we move on to talk about the most recent work that we did, the *Antigone* production, can you just reflect a little bit on *The Heart of Redness*, and very specifically on approaching opera which was when we were working with a combination of trained opera singers and these kind of performers that we've been talking about up until now?

NM: That was a fascinating moment for me, to try and articulate what I thought could be done in making new propositions for opera as a space outside of the Western paradigm – or the European paradigm. As you know, I strongly believe that opera has a very particular voice in a particular space from a Southern African perspective because people have been working here with opera for over 150 years in a way that could qualify as possibly an indigenous or other version of the operatic. The challenge was working with opera singers from an opera company that are trained in the classical European Western tradition as half the ensemble. The other half of the ensemble were Magnet Theatre, who are trained in physical theatre, workshop theatre, who are bodies in space that can invent and can respond to direction in a way that makes them co-conspirators, co-originators vocally as well as dramatically.



So on the one hand, we had to work with what these two worlds would be saying to one another, with what I felt was an opera company that wasn't yet convinced that it could work in a different register to what would have been considered the Western register. So we had a lot of convincing to do, a lot of musical convincing to do. One of the ways I had to do that was to deliver a fully written, fully through-composed score. 'Composed' is what you would call it because they've got every part of what is supposed to happen from beginning to end on the staves. Unless it's on the staff it doesn't exist. They don't improvise, they don't invent, they don't come up necessarily with something they think would be better, or equal, or adding tension to the character unless it's notated. So I had to, first of all, be fair and deliver that because there's a huge respect from my perspective, certainly, for the training, the ability that somebody who's trained in that way has for working on stage. But at the same time I come from the perspective of having huge respect for people who workshop ideas in a way that allows them to be representative of what they themselves feel needs to be said and how it has to be said at that particular point. We were also dealing with the complexity of the book. Zakes Mda's very thick, very long, very complex book, *The Heart of Redness*, transitions over a period of many lifetimes for what might be one character but who has many different lives as the progenitor, as the ancestor, as the progeny of a particular [bloodline], and the same name maybe used for different people. So you had, I think, a brilliant impulse which was to have the same character played by two people at a time. There was one moment where on paper it looked crazy to have one NomaRussia who was an actor, a Magnet actor, and another NomaRussia who was an opera singer, and they were at the same time articulating the role, and an audience who had to follow the story. I thought we went very much out of all of our comfort zones at that point because we had to deliver what would be a score, what you were describing in terms of being a script that the actors have to follow and the music – because we had a live ensemble that was playing that I was conducting – couldn't be stopped. When you begin an opera, you have to finish it, right? You can't take a break, and you can't revise, and you can't improvise a particular section. So that was a train that was moving that people had to stick to. You had improvising Magnet actors who were imposing themselves on top, through art. We had a third dimension which was an audience of opera-lovers from the township who are not necessarily called opera-lovers, but they are because the townships in Black South Africa are full of people who follow opera. They don't necessarily go to the opera house but they follow opera, and they also follow the tradition that informs opera which is the choral tradition in South Africa. They could understand the references that we were making from the stage, from the operatic space, from the choral space and also from the tradition that Zakes Mda's book speaks to of the Eastern Cape and the coming together of the colonial dispensation together with an indigenous population. So at some point we had at the very front [of the audience], while performing, the classical opera audience of Cape Town opera in suits and ties who were expecting a particular kind of etiquette, who are very proper. And then at the back we had the voices of the township that were responding to what was happening on stage and singing back and interjecting back, to a point where it reflected what I think we all think is the operatic in Southern African terms. But I know that some people are very troubled by it and they asked me: 'Well, how did you even conceive of doing that?', as if we had been inventing it from nowhere. And my response was: 'We were responding to what we know happens anyway, and we put it on the stage and in order to come to terms with it ourselves.' But also for me, my personal project there was trying to bring the world of opera that I love so much closer to what I think is the forgotten practice space of the operatic in Southern Africa, which is a choral movement in South Africa.

MF: I know that you can carry on talking about that for a very long time, but in the interests of time, I'd like to move on to the *Antigone* project, which is the latest thing that we did together, which is part of a research project, 'Reimagining Tragedy in Africa and the Global South'. As part of that production *Antigone (not quite/quiet)*, was a triptych created in three parts. The first part being *Ismene*, a solo



performed by Jennie Reznek, in what might be called a dramatic mode. The middle part is *Antigone*, which was performed by a chorus of 13 people, most of whom, 99%, were Black, and that was done essentially through sound and music – that was what I asked you to create for the piece. The third part was a media installation on a triptych of three screens, a video installation of a particular *isiXhosa* poem from the 19th century, from the early 20th century. Can you just talk a little bit – because we also have a little bit of sound about that – about what your approach to that *Antigone* section actually was for you?

NM: That was a huge privilege to work on because we were working with a very young group of people, people who are at Magnet and people who were at UCT Centre for [Theatre, Dance &] Performance. I was excited about working with people who had very strong opinions about the story they wanted to tell. We started by asking them, for example, what a character like Antigone would represent, not just in the world but what that character would represent for them in South Africa today. We were speaking very pointedly to people who were coming from participating in the Fees Must Fall, Rhodes Must Fall movements, people who were very involved in the idea of what South Africa has become post-democratically. We were asking them to think about a voice that says ‘No’, and a body that says ‘No’, and what it articulates and how it articulates. The brief from you, based on the text we were working on, the translation we were working on was: what if we imagine this body now, after the sentencing. So in a cave where Antigone ends up finding herself, what kind of dark space, what kind of things can be articulated from that space? Is the entity speaking back from the grave, back from the dead, or are they speaking from the afterlife, or are they speaking as a presence that we’ve decided to ignore? So I had to think about the sound space, the sonic space for that, but also my request was for the actors we had to form one body so each one of them has personal opinions and personal talents and personal ways of articulating. We asked them specifically to articulate as one body, as one character, and what came out – this was interesting, much more interesting than I could have imagined. If you play the clip that you have now, I’ll be able to speak more pointedly about the particular principles we were touching on there.

[00:51:52 to 00:54:16] Excerpt from *Antigone (not quite/quiet)* (2019)

NM: There’s a lot of talk, I know, lately about the technology in theatre and performance particularly. The idea of immersive sound or binaural sound is very, very present, and this would, I would say, qualify as a low-tech version of these kinds of experiments. We wanted to put an audience inside this landscape, the soundscape that is constantly shape-shifting and moving, that is mysterious. And to do that we had microphones everywhere. We made the stage live and we made choices about bringing low resonance. We had a subwoofer in the room to really flutter below the audience so that they were impacted on by the bass and they were part of a moving scenario, and it wasn’t a comfortable space of sitting outside of the action and watching as it proceeded. I think the actors/singers really took that on very seriously. So they would perform, for example, the idea of extending their vocalising, they would accentuate their body movements so that the feet and the hands were creating percussion and they were creating sonic space that was telling the story together with the way they chose to use their voice. Then they were using texts and textual references to particular historical moments in South Africa. So the speech that Sive is making there has references [to] what would have been the Freedom Charter speech of the 1950s in South Africa. That was one of the places that people looked to, to identify what Black people who were fighting against apartheid had as an aspirational kind of expression for themselves, and what united people around a particular cause. I feel like the young people we were working with, are very much feeling like these are days for articulating a new cause. What we were very keen to do was make a space for that to be articulated and for ourselves to understand it – they were speaking very much also back to South Africa’s particular problem of gender-based violence. We had many young Black women in the ensemble who were very affected by the stories of gender-based



violence that were being reported in the media around the time that we were rehearsing, and in fact we had to take a decision to postpone rehearsal in one particular moment so that people could participate in a march and that people could articulate on the street. I remember saying how I detected a transition, the emotional quotient that came back to rehearsal when they came back to the floor was significantly engaged and different because they felt like this was the story they wanted to tell from their own lives. It wasn't just a story about Antigone that happened in Greek mythology, it was about the story they wanted to tell today. So we were trying to work through very lo-fi technology, microphones, making the whole space live, but we were also making the audience complicit in the story that was being told.

MF: I think what is happening there is there's these various strata, if you like, of sound texture or material that is being layered on top of each other in that space, even in that little clip. Because you've got the recorded sound of the opera from another time and another place, which is in a kind of distorted way resonating, and then you've got the percussive sounds that they're making on the floor at the same time through the kinds of choral dance moves that are happening or gestural actions that are happening at the same time. Then you have the poetry which speaks to a particular tradition of spoken verse [that], as you say, reflects back on a particular text from a particular political moment in South Africa. So there is a whole lot of time, space and sonic strata that are engaged in an overlapping kind of way, or a simultaneous kind of way, in the space at the same time. There's a kind of depth effect as opposed to a kind of narrative linear development effect happening in the piece. Obviously, there is a linearity unfolding in time, but there is also that sense of the strata and the depth that is being reflected at the same time. We've come pretty much to the end of this conversation and our conversation time and, you know, what I really appreciated is not so much a kind of teleological development of the work from, say, new writing to physical theatre to sound, but a kind of co-existence of all of these things at the same time. So that in each of the works that we're doing, a little bit of each of those things is present all the time. Thank you very much for joining me in this conversation.

NM: Thank you. It's always a pleasure to talk to you, and to think with you. Thank you, Mark.

Transcription by Samantha McAtear

Clips Summary

[00:23:54 to 00:27:00] 'The Ballad of a Mutiny', from *Cargo* (2007)

[00:51:52 to 00:54:16] *Antigone (not quite/quiet)* (2019)

Audio available at www.auralia.space/salon2-markfleishman-and-neomuyanga/.

To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Bano, Tim; Muyanga, Neo; Fleishman, Mark (2021) LMYE Salon #2: Mark Fleishman & Neo Muyanga - The Third Character, *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.14013428.v1>.

