

Writing myself out of a labyrinth



In this interview with **Phillippa Yaa de Villiers**, **Makhosazana Xaba** finds out about a person with a rich and complex past who writes with power and honesty about herself. She is also that rare person who is able to tap the clown in herself.

Let's start at the tail-end of your one woman play, *Original Skin*, those last lines...

If this room were a boat, I would lay her washed body in it and cover it with lilies, light incense and candles and place them around her head. And then, I would pour petrol on it and set it on fire and gently push it out, to meet the setting sun. And as the night advances, I would watch my room of pink and white, blazing on the dark water. And I would look up at the stars and plot a new direction.

Those words gave me goosebumps. How have people responded to your play and what response got you thinking. The most useful have been ones where people have challenged me to think about the intention behind what I'm doing.

When I was in Grahamstown there was a woman who was very moved by this show – an Indian woman, a teacher. She started telling me she has adopted children in her family. Quite a few children and she told this story about a cousin who lives in America. They applied to Durban to adopt a child and they wanted an Indian child

and the child they got was black. And she said, "But it's fine because we love the child just like she's one of us." But I felt that perhaps there was something that she was telling herself or that they couldn't tell themselves. They told themselves that they loved the child just as they loved all their children but there was something about her that wasn't quite easy to love. And maybe it was because she was black.

Then she said to me, "Do you really want to burn your mother like that?" And I said, "No". She said, "Your mother did so much for you. She was the only person in the world who wanted you – particularly your situation. So how could you be so angry with her?" And I said, "I was angry for a very long time but the story that I wanted to tell, I just wanted to crystallise that experience into letting go of a racial identity. That was the intention behind that image." I wanted it to go deeper than the anger that I felt because that was part of a process which had to happen.

It's a process that anyone goes through, separating from their parents. They always talk about

teenagers being difficult because they are busy dividing themselves and they do need to separate from their parents for their identity to really grow, and no one denies them that. But as an adoptee, I have felt a lot of my life that I wasn't supposed to move on. I wasn't supposed to symbolically destroy my parents.

What were your intentions with that scene, what did you mean to do with your mother? Your adoptive parents are white and they raised you as a white child in denial about your mixed race identity.

Really I didn't want to punish my mother. I didn't want to put her on trial in front of the whole of South Africa. I wanted her to let go. And I also wanted to describe an experience in my life which is just like anyone else's life. It's just that those are my circumstances.

I found *Original Skin* fascinating in that you took us to a world often not visited. What are your dreams for *Original Skin*?

I would like it to travel around South Africa and around the world. I would like it to go to high schools and I would like to perform it in Australia.

Let's turn to your book of poetry *Taller than Buildings*, which I believe is a superb work of art. You are now into your third edition. Tell me about bringing your first book to life.

I didn't actually know that I was writing a book. People sometimes ask how long it took to write and I say, "Forty years." I had this opportunity to get a manuscript together. I had just decided, I'm 40 now. I've got limited time. Whatever my dreams are I'm just going to try and manifest them. It was very hard because writing is such an honest way to express yourself and see yourself. And then you start seeing your relationships and you go very deeply into yourself to find where you are in the world. I felt like I was writing myself out of a labyrinth.

don't like that people have to use communal taps for example. But in Cuba people lived with such grace and self-respect that it wasn't so much about the taps. They weren't talking about their lack all the time, they were always talking about their wealth and that's quite an empowering thing. They also talk about gratitude and love a lot.

Let's move on to your other identity, being a professional clown. Where did you study this and why?

I wanted to go to theatre school. When I was in America I met a film producer who had written a book on theatre companies around Europe and he said to me, "You are so funny!" And I said to him, "You know, in South Africa, we have this

clown work – which is very, very important for me because the clown is the most essential human behaviour. A clown is similar to a child. A clown can't help who it is and so it's a very important level to find as an actor. So for me it was the basis. After that you can go into melodrama or become a comic or whoever, it doesn't matter. But for me the clown was the centre of the work of an actor. And I really struggled at that school, never found the clown in me.

You worked in hospitals as a professional clown, I often see clowns at shopping malls and at children's parties.

Clowning is very commercial.

There are two main schools of clowning that I see in South Africa. There are clowns that you find at parties and in shopping malls. Then there's also the circus clowns; it's a small thing that's growing.

Most of the clowning that I did was in hospitals, working for this amazing charity, based in Switzerland, that sends clowns into hospitals. They gave us five years of clowning in South Africa for children that were ill. So it was challenging from the point of view that sometimes the only reaction would be a tiny smile. And that's all the child could manage. But for me, that was the greatest gift: to take your performance to become very, very refined and emotionally attuned to the person you were performing for.

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Hamelle de Klerk

You were in Cuba recently at an arts festival and you read from your book. What was Cuba like?

It was wonderful. It's like a crucible of revolutionary thought where it had actually been manifested. Cubans tried to make revolutionary ideals part of society. And, because it's such a small country, they succeeded to a large extent. And they're still quite a poor country but it's got a character and a flavour that's very comforting for me. I felt very much at home there. It's not like I admire poverty. I

apartheid thing. Can you imagine what it's like to be judged for your skin colour?" And he said, "You're so funny! Just the way you tell the story, you're a natural clown." And I said, "Am I?" And he said, "You must go to this school in Europe. It's called the The Jaques Leqoc International Theatre School in France. You don't have to audition. It's the most expensive school in Europe but you'll find a way to go there."

So off I went to the Paris. It was a theatre school which does a lot of

Phillippa Yaa de Villiers has just won the "Writing Beyond the Fringe" competition which is a partnership between the National Arts Festival and Passa Porta Literacy Festival and de Buren, Belgium.

Makhosazana Xaba has published two books of poetry and does regular interviews with South Africa's creative women in the Labour Bulletin.