

worldstage

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MoPo Productions
(South Africa)

Tshepang

Studio Theatre
235 Queens Quay West
February 18 - 20, 8:00 p.m.
February 21, 2:00 p.m. & 8:00 p.m.
\$15-30

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MoPo Productions – *Tshepang*
Written & Directed by: Lara Foot Newton

Production Notes and Overview

Written and premiered in 2003, *Tshepang* has become an international success. It presents a rare and necessary foray into a world few have seen before and is one of the most powerful plays to come out of South Africa in the past 10 years.

Tshepang is a portrayal of a town cut off from its own heart by poverty. Lara Foot Newton's haunting and uplifting masterpiece of redemption is based in part on the true story of the rape of a nine-month-old baby – the consequences of which are still resonating today. *Tshepang* is compassionate, hopeful and absolutely unforgettable.

Inspired by the shocking true story of the rape of 9 month old "Baby Tshepang" and, as playwright Lara Foot Newton writes, "thousands like her," the play takes African storytelling and mixes it with complex psychological and personal issues. It draws on the experiences of South Africans, dealing with issues such as innocence, the focus of the world media, accusations and counter accusations in a setting of brilliant simplicity and symbolism. While the topic may be brutal, the way it is handled is sensitive, even poetic, earning the production praise from audiences and critics around the globe.

The play centers around Ruth who has not uttered a word in three years, since she first learned that her 9 month old baby girl had been raped. Like a modern day Ancient Mariner, Simon, Ruth's constant companion, weaves a mesmerizing narrative, telling how this terrible act of violence in a desperately poor South African township where "nothing much happens" brings the townspeople and their way of life into the media eye, forcing the community and the country to face its own role in the tragedy.

Biography

Lara Foot Newton is a South African theatre director, writer and producer. She has been recognised nationally and internationally for her unique vision and the courage and honesty with which she approaches her work. Storytelling is Foot Newton's passion, and after winning the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year Award in 1995, she brought her skills to senior directing posts, including at Johannesburg's Market Theatre from 1996 to 2000. She has directed more than 30 productions, 23 of which have been new South African works, including the hugely acclaimed *The Well Being*, which played to sold out audiences at the National Arts Centre in 2004. In 2005, Lara Foot Newton was appointed Rolex Protégé in Theatre under the mentorship of Sir Peter Hall. The two worked together on *Tshepang*.

Performance History – Lara Foot Newton

2003 – *Tshepang*

2004 – *The Well Being*

2005 – *Hear and Now*

2007 – *Reach*

2008 – *Karoo Moose*

Press Notes and Reviews

- [Tshepang] had the whole audience in Amsterdam assembled on the street after the performance to applaud and cheer. – *Baxter Theatre*
- If you only see one show this year, Tshepang demands to be the one superbly written and performed. – *Sunday Independent, South Africa*
- "intelligent, startling and harrowing... absorbing performances" - Irish Times
- "artfully managed and painstakingly recounted... Lara Foot Newton's play does what one hopes theatre is meant to do" - Irish Independent

Online Review London

www.onlinereviewlondon.com

Tshepang (review)

By Roderick Swanston

Published: October 2004, www.onlinereviewlondon.com

"Nothing much happens here" is a recurring verbal motif throughout *Tshepang*. It is ironic because what the play shows is that terrible things do happen in isolated and seemingly passive communities trapped by poverty, poor prospects and separation from the outside world. Now the outside world has come to see that the slip beneath civilization narrated as a single, fictional incident in *Tshepang*, is much more widespread than was previously thought. Little children experience violent sexual abuse from the earliest ages, and after the revelation in 2001 of what had happened to baby *Tshepang*, the cork came out of the bottle and story after story began to reveal the appalling truth.

Lara Foot Newton's starting point is the rape of the nine-month old baby, *Tshepang*, in 2001. At first it was thought six drunken men had gang-raped her, but it was later revealed they were innocent and that the culprit was her mother's current boyfriend. Though Newton closely bases her play on this real-life incident she distances her narration by making a fiction from the facts. This enables her excellent play, while appearing to be a simple story, very subtly to suggest an interpretation and understanding of what lay behind so horrific an incident. Subtly the play tries to explain how could such a thing happen, and, so often?

Boredom is one thing Newton suggests. Young men, as Simon the main character relates, just into puberty (measured by the number of pubic hairs they have) are initiated into sex by a local whore managed by her pimp. The charge for her services is small, the main part of which includes a comic book which she reads while the young man is

having sex with her. If she finishes the comic book before he is satisfied she order him off, but to satisfy the youths' final moments of desire her pimp has conveniently placed a loaf of bread in a tree nearby. Simon adds wistfully he preferred the bread as the indifferent turning of the comic-book's pages rather turned him off. This debased initiation into sex without a trace of love or reciprocation became quickly associated with drunkenness and a growing sense of ennui. As Simon says, some say that boys will poke their penis into anything that has a hole.

Religion is not absent from the mix of causes. Christian values, a symbol here for all civilizing agents, are represented by carved African nativity figures. But poignantly Simon points out that baby Jesus is a girl, since they are all waiting for the birth of Jesus's sister. We need her now, he says, as Jesus is too out of touch to be able to deal with current events. The girl Jesus will understand, but she has not yet come. She will also, Newton implies, generate a female-orientated religion that will stop the kind of male-satisfaction religion that prevails, and whose perversion can lead to the rape of a nine-month old baby.

The only contact with the outside world comes when the story gets into the press who turn up at this remote village with all their accompanying paraphernalia and superficiality. Only the story matters not the human results. Gerhard Max's suggestively minimal set represents the media by trees with dark glasses suspended on them and by pages of newspapers being spiked onto the branches.

This is a harrowing play made all the more poignant by its understatement. Simon, for whom the play is a long monologue except for the one word spoken by Ruth, tells the story: his story and that of Ruth, whose baby was the one raped before the play began. Mncedisi Shabangu's performance of Simon is a virtuoso piece of acting, and wholly riveting.

The play begins obliquely with Simon's picture of the sun-baked ennui that is his and the villagers' daily life. The sun's the heat breeds idleness and despair. Gradually he reveals some of the characters in the village, and later some of what they do. Then, bit by bit Newton manoeuvres Simon's narration to unravelling the incident itself and Shabangu's performance, becomes darker and angrier.

In one sense this is an undramatic play: two characters on stage, one alone speaking; but it is not. Newton makes Simon seem, at one level, simple by writing his monologue like the narration in a Homeric epic. He is the messenger reporting events that happen off-stage to other people. But on stage with him is Ruth, the child's mother, on whom the most devastating guilt has descended. At first she is seen frantically scrubbing the floor, possibly it seems at first grinding seed to make bread. But as the play unfolds her obsessive rubbing recalls Lady Macbeth trying to wipe blood off her hands. It is her way of talking, and like Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, she carries a burden physically represented by a bed - the child's bed, the place where she had sex, the beginning of her troubles. She is not without blame as she went off the tavern leaving her baby alone at her hut. That's when the rape happened. She had put a temporary respite from the drudgery of her life above the care of her baby, and the baby had paid the price, a price Ruth will never be able to pay.

But there is a glimmer of hope, of civilization, in the character of Simon. He has stood by Ruth, even though she has not spoken for three years. He cares for her,

cajoles her, encourages her, without, it seems, any reward. He waits patiently for her to emerge from her private hell. He is the one who brings the love that neither baby Jesus nor the outside world can offer.

This play has two characters on stage. Ruth who speaks only one word but whose mime and expression constantly counterpoints Simon's narrative. Kholeka Qwabe terrifyingly conveys obsessed Ruth's guilt and obsession.

But the outstanding performance of the evening was Mncedisi Shabangu as Simon. Almost without our noticing it he regulates the intensity of the play like a symphony. The initial homely story-telling tone gives way in his voice, actions and looks to the much more harrowing reporting of the thing that happened where 'nothing happens'. It is a magnificent, utterly compelling performance made the more so by his average looks, slightly podgy build and expressive face. He looks on stage as though whatever the world can bring he has to face it. He is an Everyman, but rises above this. Such strength portrayed was Mncedisi's triumphant realisation of Simon in this most moving play.

This is a moving play whose epic narration lasting a little over an hour hides its subtleties and power in a simply told story. 'Nothing much happens here' says Simon. It sure does.

Don't miss it."

Media Links to Articles Stemming From the Actual Case:

<http://www.mnet.co.za/Mnet/Shows/carteblanche/story.asp?id=1872>

<http://www.dispatch.co.za/2002/03/08/southafrica/BABY.HTM>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2153543.stm>

<http://www.aegis.com/news/suntimes/2002/ST020307.html>