



Performing Charlotte Maxeke

A Centre for Humanities Research Production

With 2021 being declared “The Year of Charlotte Maxeke,” the DSI-NRF Flagship on Critical thought in the African Humanities at the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, has embarked on a special production based on the life of Maxeke. CHR artists Ukwanda Puppets and Designs Art Collective and Buhle Ngaba, with the CHR’s Itumeleng Wa-Lehulere, Dr Aja Marneweck, and Professor Jane Taylor, are working on a puppetry production that will be a provocative re-imagining of the life and legacy of Charlotte Maxeke. This endeavour is inspired by the work of Dr Thozama April, who received the Charlotte Mannya-Maxeke Award by the Charlotte Mannya-Maxeke Institute (CMMI) in partnership with the University of South Africa for her “groundbreaking research” in documenting the life history of Charlotte Maxeke. Dr April’s powerful, ongoing exploration of Maxeke’s narrative extricates “women’s political pasts from the dominant trends of the meta-narratives of women in liberation struggles on the continent” (April, 2012). Dr April’s doctoral dissertation is a crucial reflection on questions and fragments of Maxeke’s life outside of the meta-narrative of figurehead and “Mother of the liberation struggle.” It significantly brings to light Maxeke’s international creative and intellectual pursuits and her important influence within the Pan-Africanist thought and theory of the Black Atlantic, as well as leading international thinkers and activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois. As Dr April shows, Maxeke is so much more than we know and her story is so much bigger than is popularly represented.

The CHR creative team has significantly chosen puppetry as a core artistic medium through which to explore, excavate, and bring to light significant elements of Charlotte Maxeke’s story, aspects which will help young people connect with her today, which might inform the way we think about her in new ways for the future. The project is being undertaken in anticipation of the opening of Greatmore – the first arts and humanities research hub for UWC’s Centre for Humanities Research in the city.



PROJECT TEAM

Itumeleng Wa-Lehulere – Director



“As a scholar, as an artist, I feel humbled by the notion that I have been given the opportunity to unmute this great woman of South Africa, whose story has not been done justice up till now. I feel confident that the team assembled here will produce an artistic piece that will be moving, artistically credible, and intellectually engaging. To be able to tell the story of this untold heroine of Africa and South Africa is a very proud moment in my career.”

Itumeleng Wa-Lehulere is convenor of the Factory of the Arts at the Centre for Humanities Research. His artistic career started as a poet, musician, and dancer. After completing his performance diploma under the prolific Professor Mavis Taylor, Wa-Lehulere worked with many notable theatre directors that include Barney Simon, Janice Honeyman, Ester van Ryswerk, and Mark Fleishman, among others. He has also worked intensively with Mike van Graan at the Community Arts Project School of Popular Theatre. He has conceptualised and directed a number of prominent theatre pieces, including *You Strike the Woman, You Strike the Rock; Down Adderly Street; Gap Toothed Sisters; Roxy*, the musical; *Diaries of my Womanhood; Red Winter; and Echoes of our Footsteps*. These productions have been performed in major theatres in South and abroad. Wa-Lehulere has taught at several arts institutions and founded and directed the multi-award-winning Ikhwezi Annual Theatre Festival in Association with the Baxter Theatre Centre at the University of Cape Town under the leadership of Mannie Manim. The Festival was chosen as the Cultural Development Project of the year (2004). From 2014-2016, he was the Artistic Director of the Jozi Bookfair, hosted by Khanya College at Wits University. Wa-Lehulere is an intellectual who strives to tell current and thought-provoking works that speak to the times.

Dr Thozama April – Research Advisor



With a focus on Women’s and Feminist Historiography, Dr Thozama April’s doctoral dissertation was titled “Theorising Women: The life of Charlotte Maxeke” (supervised by Premesh Lalu). Dr April held a Next Generation Researcher position at the CHR from January 2016 to December 2019, where she was preparing a book manuscript based on and going beyond her doctoral dissertation for which she has just received a publishing contract with Jacana. April is working on a historiography of colonialism in the Eastern Cape and on de-colonial and nationalist thought. In 2020, April took up a permanent post at the University of Fort Hare.



Buhle Ngaba – Playwright



“It’s not just about everyone trying to plug Maxeke into the national story, it’s about what she did to make sure that we are seen as women, as the citizens who are here. It gives us the cultural and academic integrity that we deserve because it’s been there, it’s always been there, and in the lives of ordinary people and in everyday living. That’s what’s special about Maxeke. We are looking at an ordinary girl who just kept going through the times. For me it’s a huge undertaking that’s very beautiful and far bigger than all of us.”

Buhle Ngaba is an Artist in Residence at the Centre for Humanities Research. Ngaba studied Acting and Contemporary Performance at Rhodes University and Processes of Performance at the University of Leeds. She performed in the 2014 world premiere of John Kani’s *Missing*, directed by Janice Honeyman at the Baxter Theatre. The play toured internationally and for her role, she was nominated by both Fleur Du Cap Theatre Awards and the Naledi Theatre Awards for Best Supporting Actress. Ngaba was awarded the prestigious Brett Goldin Bursary, affording her an internship at The Royal Shakespeare Company (Stratford-Upon-Avon, UK) in 2016 where she began to conceptualise and write her first play, *Swan Song*. In 2017, she won two South African Kanna Theatre Awards, including Best Upcoming Artist for *Swan Song*. Ngaba was nominated for a Fleur Du Cap Theatre Award (2018) for Best Leading Actress for her performance in *What Remains*, written by Nadia Davids and directed by Jay Pather. In 2016, she was named as one of the *Mail and Guardian’s* Top 200 Young South Africans. She also received the Gauteng Youth Premier’s Award for Excellence. Her book for children and young readers, *The Girl Without A Sound*, has been published in all 11 official languages. COVID-19 has impacted the performing artists globally. In response to this, Ngaba spearheaded the #lockdownshakespeare initiative with the South African Shakespeare Society, contributing to the SA arts economy by promoting theatre makers and helping to provide some financial support. Ngaba is conducting research for her new novel that is focused on the life and times of her great aunt Ruth Mompati.



Ukwanda Puppets and Designs Art Collective – Puppetry Directors and Puppet Designers



“We want to know about her life. She was so focused. The more I read the more I get curious, wanting to know about Charlotte Maxeke, to know how important education is. In our villages when we are women it's always about men, but she was so respected. It goes back to: I am not aware of my history but reading now. There's a lot about Charlotte Maxeke, she opens my mind so much.” - Siphokazi Mpofu

Siphokazi Mpofu, Siphon Ngxola, and Luyanda Nogodlwana are Artists in Residence of the CHR's DSI-NRF Flagship. They have performed at schools, theatres, festivals, and significant UWC events. They have travelled abroad, won awards, and through workshops and other interventions have made invaluable contributions to the CHR's ongoing commitment to re-imagining a post-apartheid city. Their work was at the heart of the annual Barrydale Puppet Parade and Performance through an extensive partnership with Net vir Pret and Handspring Puppet Company. Ukwanda began as Artists in Residence while under the apprenticeship of Handspring. Their first production *Qhawe, a Xhosa Fairytale* was inspired by stories from Xhosa tradition about a time when animals once had the power to communicate with people. In 2018, Ukwanda created the play *Warona* and toured high schools and township theatres around Cape Town to great success. Seeing first hand the problems caused by drugs in their communities, they felt driven to tell the story of a young girl who becomes trapped by addiction. Altogether *Warona* was seen by over 2500 people, mostly school children. The play was awarded the Standard Bank Ovation Award at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival. Working from home in 2020, Ukwanda made the short film “The New Normal Life,” initially commissioned to communicate information around Covid-19 issues and safety protocols for young people in SA. Adapting their own sensibilities to the task, Ukwanda created a piece about more than rules, centring on community, family, and care. The film was performed by Siphokazi and Luyanda and directed and filmed by Siphon, with artistic mentorship from veteran puppeteer and theatre maker Craig Leo. It received much media attention, including an article published in GroundUp. The Charlotte Maxeke production will be Ukwanda's third puppetry production for theatre. Ukwanda are set to be resident artists in the Laboratory of Kinetic Objects (LoKO) at Greatmore, where they will continue to receive the invaluable support of Jane Taylor, Jud Cornell, Itumeleng Wa-Lehulere, and the Handspring Puppet Company.



Dr Aja Marneweck – Production Coordinator



"The imagery and beauty of puppetry can speak across social and cultural boundaries. It's forms and textures, of bringing sculpture and art to life, has always been a means for ordinary people to connect to the magical, and it has a way of touching our humanity in very sensitive and meaningful ways that can open up questions about who we are and what we are and how we connect to each other and ourselves in the process."

Aja Marneweck is an NIHSS Specialist Artist in Residence in the Laboratory of Kinetic Objects (LoKO) at the Centre for Humanities Research. Marneweck's work engages the multimodal creative and discursive discipline of puppetry as an agent for transformative social, spiritual and cultural practices, as well as considering the unique lens it might offer radical contemporary creative practices in South Africa today. Marneweck holds the first South African doctorate in Practice as Research in Puppetry Performance entitled "Towards a Feminine Semiotic: Spiritual and Sexual Emergency in Women's Puppetry and Visual Performance." She has received multiple grants, residencies, and research awards. Marneweck is the creative director of the women's animism and puppetry company The Paper Body Collective. Since 2014 she has served as the creative director of the Annual Giant Puppet Parade, a large-scale interdisciplinary public puppet arts collaboration (created in 2010 in partnership between the CHR at UWC, Net vir Pret, and the Handspring Puppet Trust), which takes place annually in Barrydale in the Klein Karoo. This is a unique collaboration that allows rural and urban publics and artists to use puppetry to engage complex issues of history, heritage, land, creativity, identity, power, access, and ecology.

Professor Jane Taylor – Dramaturg



Professor Jane Taylor, the Andrew W. Mellon Chair of Aesthetic Theory and Material Performance at the CHR, has a history of scholarly as well as creative work within these domains. She has written several plays for puppets, working with artist William Kentridge and Handspring Puppet Company, as well as a recent puppet play for Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt – a work dealing with the early history of neurology. She has written a novel on transplants and most recently has completed a monograph on William Kentridge's production of *The Nose*, for the New York Met. This study explores the subject/object relation, as well as the aesthetic experiments associated with Soviet Constructionism.



GREATMORE



Greatmore, Woodstock, Cape Town.



Artist impression of the new lobby on Greatmore street from the courtyard. Courtesy of Wolff Architects

With refurbishment well underway on **Greatmore**, this former derelict school building in Woodstock, Cape Town, is set to become the first arts and humanities research hub in the city for UWC's Centre for Humanities Research. Greatmore, supported through the DSI-NRF Flagship and the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS), is envisioned as a nexus for youth mobility that will one day open its doors to artists, scholars, communities, and collaborators across the urban, peri-urban, and rural, as well as internationally.

UWC's new footprint in the city is a significant step in breaking through the spatial and intellectual circumscriptions of apartheid for a university that had once been denied arts education. The CHR at UWC has been committed to developing a public arts programme and to fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and scholarship between scholars and artists. In the past five years alone, the CHR Flagship has supported many graduates across the humanities and social sciences at UWC and is host to a cohort of DSI-NRF Early Career Doctoral Fellows, Next Generation Scholars, and artists in residence.

Greatmore, sitting across from what had once been a designated white area, and a short distance from UWC's main campus, represents a new horizon where a next generation of arts and humanities scholars and practitioners can flourish. After five years of implementation, Greatmore is taking shape to meet the needs of UWC and the CHR's Flagship commitments to, and graduate fellowship programs in, the public humanities. Greatmore will also be the site of several international partnerships in support of the Flagship's dedication to building national, African, and international scholarly and research networks.



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