



VIA INJABULO

INTERVIEW WITH AMALA DIANOR

How did you approach your collaboration with the dancers of South African company Via Katlehong?

I'd thought about what I wanted to do, but all that was somewhat upended when I visited Via Katlehong in their township. When I met Buru Mohlabane and Steven Faleni, I discovered two people full of an extraordinary energy and whose commitment to their work is also a civic and political commitment. What they do is necessary for the economy of that township, where they now play an important part. I was moved by the reality of the place; Katlehong is a township where many of the inhabitants have no electricity and live in insalubrious conditions. The population was hit hard by the covid crisis. Yet I witnessed the great lust for life the dancers of the company have. They have this desire to fight for a return of life, of the pleasure of dancing, for the opportunity to resume this extraordinary activity. We were working on what was almost a "project for healing," that is, to revive the joy of sharing a show, of doing one's job, of simply dancing. Weekends are a very festive moment at Katlehong, everyone gets together to eat, talk, and listen to music. I found myself completely immersed in their lives, experiencing relationships as part of a clan, it was beautiful. That's the very essence of their project: to create something together, to facilitate a meeting between their dancers and international choreographers, to look for differences in order to find balance... After that experience, my original project was somewhat transformed. I wanted to talk about the freedoms and power at last gained after the end of apartheid, about the question of relationships between black and white communities, but also about the way youth navigates that history, those new relationships of power, today's instability and insecurity. The idea was to talk about this in-between place, *emaphakatini* in Zulu, where one tries to exist and to find one's identity between those two extremes, between two communities that coexist but don't really share anything. Discovering the energy of the group and working in the township changed and broadened that original idea, adding the joy of being together. The dancers I met are very professional artists, with an Anglo-Saxon discipline in work, they apply themselves with rigour in order to succeed and heal, as Buru Mohlabane so rightly says. Some of them spend an hour and a half on the road every morning and every evening to commute to work, and never show any sign of weariness or fatigue. They're fully invested.

You turned that encounter into an ode to sharing and to life...

The show is a self-proclaimed hymn to youth, to dance, and to music. Music is an integral part of life in the township and of the company. Amapiano is very hot right now. It's a musical style inspired by house music which can be heard at all times and accompanies moments of sharing, arguments, and reconciliations. I wanted to talk about all that in the show, to give pride of place to that joyous and sparkling life energy, to that explosive, dancing youth, while also showing the flipside of it, the tension inherent to the country, the unstable and complex political atmosphere between the different South African communities. The impossibility of dialogue between the white and black communities, the relationships of power which are always being negotiated... All of that leads to tangible tensions in everyday relationships and discussions. And I want to explore the question of celebration as well. What remains when the party ends? What's our reality? I want to be faithful to the experience of the youth of Katlehong, to its preoccupations.

How is that encounter transposed to the stage? What about the legacy of Via Katlehong, and your own research?

As a guest of the Via Katlehong company, it was important to me not to show up with a project I'd entirely conceived beforehand, but for it to be a true collaboration. It's always about finding a balance between who I am and the people with whom I work. How to stay ourselves while finding a way to have this fusion, this union. The eight dancers taking part in the project have had very different training experiences: some have studied contemporary dance, others pantsula dance, etc. Their backgrounds and experiences are sometimes atypical: singers, entrepreneurs, musicians... Some of them have been part of the company for a very long time, others just joined it. Two of the dancers are also DJs, they dreamt of playing and dancing to their own music, so we came up with a way to make that dream come true. When it comes to music and dance, the meeting of our two worlds was incredible. Amapiano, which I discovered in Katlehong, is based on house music but with a slower BPM, thanks to the addition of Zulu chants. It's very atmospheric and catchy, very soft. Since our artistic team can dance anything, I focused particularly on pantsula, which is a mixture of tap dancing, gumboot (a dance created by miners), house, and hip hop. And it allowed me to weave it into my own research, which is already about a crossing between hip hop, contemporary dance, and afro dance. As a choreographer, I'm obsessed with the energy that goes through a particular movement. I love it when the tonic energy of hip hop is expressed through the movement of contemporary dance and acquires a new texture. Each of them leaving its trace on the other.

You had already created a show for a comparable project, which led to a similar outcome...

I previously worked on a project with nine dancers from West Africa whose goal was, from my point of view as a contemporary choreographer, to show a different side of Africa. I invited choreographers from three different countries: Alioune Diagne from Senegal, Ladjji Koné from Burkina Faso, and Naomi Fall from Mali. All three are very active in their respective countries, they direct projects, train new dancers, organise festivals. Each of them had to recruit three dancers, and I created that project to give those young dancers a chance to meet one another and to work together under different circumstances. All nine performers worked with the four choreographers (as I also took part in the artistic side of the project) in order to create a show "for many voices" based on the material we'd come up with during those encounters. Helping those young dancers to become professionals and, in spite of the differences between cultures and countries, to continue to create together, all of that belongs to the same realm as my work with Via Katlehong. Even though I'm very far from who they are and what they do, the essence of the project is to create a new vocabulary and to find a balance within our differences. Seen that way, this joint invitation to Marco da Silva Ferreira and myself makes perfect sense.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant