

INTERVIEW WITH ARTHUR MOLEPO

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WITS UNIVERSITY

INTERVIEWER VANESSA COOKE

VC: Arthur when did you first become interested in theatre? Who influenced you?

AM: I was still in school anyway, my theatre fling. I had a first bite at school. My English teacher made us play our textbooks so, I played ah...um...Casca, Shakespeare, so I was a tsotsi from then on. Even today I'm like cast every time they want me for anything I must be a tsotsi. I must be a Mingus, I must be a tsotsi all the way.

VC: (Laughs) And you're so small.

AM: Ja, I'm a tsotsi all the way. That's when I started, I was still at school and we played everything. For us it was just fun. But when I left school I thought, what am I going to do next. I didn't know, I just left there. I was always involved in sports – played baseball, I played tennis, football. Oh, baseball there was Ramolao(Makhene), my opposition. We played against Ramolao. I didn't know him then, but it was just opposition. We played, we played, the next thing – Ramolao. Then I got involved with ...um...Selaelo Maredi. I played with Selaelo. We did some shows with him. And Selaelo is involved with Ramolao at Wits. How? Workshop '71. Oh. I'm coming. I joined Workshop'71. The rest is history. I've been there forever. But just I was, was working at World Furnishers. I had a day job, so I was doing my theatre at night and during the day I'm working for Makhulu Baas.

VC: Okay, tell the story of Barney and the Market project you did with Danny and Vanessa.

AM: (Laughs) Yes. The Market Theatre, no it was not the Market Theatre. It was just the Market Ruins at that time. Inside there was nothing. Right where the main stage is today it was, there was something like a spring. And I remember a grader around there. I don't know what the grader was doing during the day because we were not there. We used to come late, from about 5pm and spend some time there 'til late in the evening. There were no lights. Everything was dark. We worked there and then ...um...Barney (Simon), yes I miss him dearly, he made us do funny things. He said to us, he gave us an exercise, said, "You are the only people left here. You, and Danny Keogh and Vanessa Cooke. You are the last people on earth."

(They laugh)

AM: "How are you going to survive?" And we just surrounded by ruins all over, around us. That's all. And we tried to build shacks, doing this and that. I remember Vanessa, was it Vanessa or Danny, built a shack, some shack. Then this whole thing came down on Vanessa. Whaa. It was coming down on Vanessa and I was there watching.

VC: (Laughs)

AM: I just went for Vanessa – Kwaa- pull us out. That thing went Bwaa, so do you see Vanessa, there would have been like two of left without you Vanessa. Dead.

VC: Two men!

AM: Yes two men left on earth. Vanessa dead. But...um... Barney, Barney was crazy. Used to give us exercises that were like, in my opinion, just way out. This old man wants us to do such funny things. But we did them. And on Barney again – doing some, I was doing, I was doing STARBRITES with him, with Fats Dibeco, the late Fats. He gave me an exercise – he said, “You have never suffered.” I said, “Barney you don’t know. I’ve been suffering in my life. You don’t know.”

VC: ??

AM: “You don’t know what Apartheid has done to us.” So, “No you don’t know suffering.” He said to me, “Tomorrow” the next day, “Don’t have your breakfast. Just wash and come. Don’t have your breakfast. Have nothing. We’re going to have breakfast here. Before we start any work.” I said, “Sharp.” Following morning got there early as normal. Ah we going to have a big breakfast with Makhulu baas yes.

VC: (Laughs)

AM: There we are with Fats. So he gives us an exercise. He says, “Yes, now, go to Miriam(le Pere), the wardrobe lady, go to Miriam.” Like a hobo – costume.” She gave me big boots, overalls.

VC: (Laughs)

AM: Walk into town and start begging. “God (Afr.) Barney!”

(They both laugh)

AM: And we, I went begging. I’m hungry. So I went begging into town. I got vetcakes. I got lots of sandwiches, food that I collected. Later when we came back I ate my vetcakes. Fats came back with – he’s bought a Star, he’s bought this and that. I don’t know what happened to him.

VC: (Laughs)

AM: He’s got all these goeitjies with him, with yoghurt and stuff. And I said, “But Fats didn’t suffer. I suffered. Look I’ve got vetcakes and old sandwiches. Fats what have you got?” He says. “No I’ve got yoghurt.” “Did you buy them?” “Yes, I’ve got money with me.”

VC: Ah.

AM: So he was cheating man.

VC: (Laughs) Fats!

AM: Oh but it was a nice exercise for me- to go suffer in town.

VC: Tell me...um... Junction Avenue. Did you meet them through Ramolao?

AM: Ramolao yes. As I say Ramolao, we met during my baseball days. That was way back- 1968 when I met Ramolao. By then he was working here at the library at Wits, and he told me that...um...Malcolm or Junction Avenue, they were looking for some black guys to join and they

wanted to do a play RANDLORDS AND ROTGUT and they wanted black miners. And Ramolao said, "Alright. " Workshop '71 had just gone down.

VC: Robert left.

AM: Mmm Robert McLaren was now in Rhodesia or Zimbabwe. Um...Ramolao said, "Alright. I'll get Arthur Molepo. I'll get Sipiwe. "So there's three of us. So...

VC: Sipiwe Khumalo?

AM: Sipiwe Khumalo, so there were three of us at Junction Avenue and we did RANDLORDS AND ROTGUT. Started working – workshopped obviously. From then we are in the play. And I've been with Junction Avenue since, until its closure.

VC: Has it closed?

AM: In my opinion Junction Avenue is closed, finished, completely gone because people have gone separate ways. Some are in Durban – Ari Sitas. I don't know where everybody is. I think ?? is in Cape Town, if I'm not mistaken. Others gone overseas. The problem is...um... as the Bible says – you've got to multiply and replenish the earth. People multiply. We end up with lots of children. You go there, you've got a family, you don't have time for theatre any more.

VC: Mm.

AM: People go their own ways. They want to do their own things.

VC: Junction was, did quite a lot of productions at the Market Theatre.

AM: Yes, we did quite a lot. We did quite a lot. But most of them – what I really enjoyed about Junction Avenue was the workshops coz that's, for me, that's where the teachings are. You learn quite a lot in workshops and especially again in...um...rehearsals?? Rehearsals you learn a lot. Unlike when you start to perform you like- that's all you have to do.

VC: Mm.

AM: It's like there's no more growth. If you try to grow, you're messing it up.

VC: You're messing the others up.

AM: Yes, you're messing it up. You can't grow any more. Workshops were beautiful. I really enjoyed workshops – until today, like when I do get a chance. I get invited to ?? come run workshops here. Yes I go I do that.

VC: So you still teach.

AM: Yes I do, I still do.

VC: Arthur you were like the first, or second, with James Mthoba, fieldworker at the Market Theatre Laboratory. I think there were three. It was Doreen Mazibuko...

AM: Doreen Mazibuko's there.

VC: James and you.

AM: Um...

VC: At the beginning, huh?

AM: And Arms(Seatloli) I remember Arms.

VC: Yes Arms as well. Arms yes.

AM: Yes Arms was there. Yes.

VC: Did you understand what Barney had in mind?

AM: At that time well I had this background of workshops, as I say.

VC: Mm.

AM: So that was my foundation. I knew what it was all about at the time.

VC: And you were able to...

AM: I was able to, to drive it through. My only problem for me ?? at that time – so that's when I started getting involved in this thing. That's when I started to move out in some way. I cannot afford not to.

VC: Touring, you mean?

AM: Touring – that took me away from that kind of teaching or workshops.

VC: And James had to go back to Fuba (Federated Union of Black Artists). So we lost you and James actually.

AM: Yes.

VC: Unfortunately.

AM: Yes.

VC: Coz Sipho Sepamla got cross with him for working at the Lab.

AM: (Laughs) But it was nice.

VC: The fieldwork?

AM: Yes fieldwork was nice because, I think, when we kept meeting other people – especially the young ones. That's when you, that's one – you learned a lot from the youngs. But I don't approve a lot of they're doing. For me it's just rubbish. I don't know what they're doing. But I learn what these young ones want. And I try to cope and go with the flow and, you know...But I always prefer them to learn what I know coz mine is better.

(They laugh)

VC: You learn from the real world?

AM: Yes I learn.

VC: The masters.

AM: Yes I got it from the masters.

(Laughs)

AM: They must learn from me.

VC: And tell us about the different styles of directors that you've worked with. I mean, you worked with quite a number of directors.

AM: Some directors, they ask people to – they actually don't direct they just tell you – stand there.

VC: (Laughs)

AM: And then go to... move from point A to point B and then C. The rest you see what to do. It's up to you to do that. Whether to add meat to them or you add sour milk, it's up to you.

VC: You don't enjoy that.

AM: No I don't enjoy that, coz I don't learn anything. And I end up in my own way saying, "I wish I could do this, I wish I could do that. "When I talk to the director, "Yes why not, why don't you do it."It means I'm directing now. I'm helping this director to direct. That's how in a way I also learned to direct, coz I'm directing myself, and I'm directing other people as well – helping the director to direct.

VC: Yes so the kind of director that you like is, is more like Barney and...

AM: Yes.

VC: ... and Malcolm.

AM: Yes just plant you there and you must grow. You must grow.

VC: Gives them something to give you a note about.

AM: And with Barney you get notes every day up until the last show you get notes.

VC: (Laughs)

AM: Show is over, you get notes. You didn't do this, you didn't do that. (Laughs) And one can never be perfect on stage. We're just human beings. One can never be perfect on stage. But you'll get notes 'til the last show.

VC: Arthur have you got any, like highlights of the Market Theatre, or things that you disagreed with, or moments anywhere, have you?

AM: Um... I always think of the – I liked the foundations. I remember the Market when it started. I remember the Market when it started because at night, because during the day I was at work, for World Furnishers, but in the evening, knocking off, I would come here, put the seats together, put this and that. It's not a theatre yet. It's not a theatre yet, we're just building it, and I like – maybe I'm too handy with my hands. That's what I like. We worked. I remember Andy Mabizela as well.

VC: Mm.

AM: Andy Mabizela and then Nandi.[Nyembe]

VC: Yes.

AM: Yes it was always, like, hectic and all hands on deck.

VC: And Albert [Phulwane]

AM: And Albert, always busy building. We'd do this and, and with Mannie [Manim] sitting there in that little corner of his. That's when we built the Market with Andy Mabizela and them, and things started flowing. You could see people coming to watch shows, yes. This is what we were building. This is what is working. It's functioning, fully functioning. Yes we can see it working. But as times, as the time, years went on things are, seem to be changed. For me the Market is no longer that Market. Coz even if you go there today you don't see the Market. The Market is like a little drop in the ocean. There's so many things around it, so many high rises. I don't know what is going on there. The Market has lost its "Market feeling" that this was the old vegetable market.

VC: Mm.

AM: It's no longer that. It's no longer... I don't know whether they know where this Main market came from. It's no longer that Market, this old market where people used to buy food...er... we were not buying theatre or drama – no it was food, food. The Market is no longer that, changed, changed altogether. Sad.

VC: It is sad.

(Pause)

VC: And what was your favourite production – that you were in?

AM: I like what I am doing, can't see that I have a favourite.

VC: You don't?

AM: I like what I'm doing. If I don't enjoy what I'm doing then forget it, it's crap.

VC: (Laughs)

AM: Forget it. I must enjoy what I'm doing. If I enjoy it I know my audience is going to enjoy it.

VC: Ja.

AM: Then I'll have fun with them. I enjoyed everything that I did. But SOPHIATOWN was I'll say the highlight that took us around.

VC: You saw the world.

AM: Tour, yes. We saw the world with SOPHIATOWN. Then came STARBRITES. We travelled quite a lot as well, which was good. I would, I would imagine, oh I would say shows that took me around were my highlights, yes. I like doing the normal show that we do and end of the run you'd...

VC: Say it's finished.

AM: (Laughs)

VC: What's your philosophy of theatre?

AM: Um...

VC: If you were to – If you were to describe that kind of theatre that...

(Pause)

VC: ...you do?

AM: Whew, I don't know what I like. That's my philosophy on theatre.

(Pause)

AM: No I'm open. I don't want to govern myself into a little pot, or little corner. I just go for anything.

VC: So you're open to...

AM: I'm open. Any challenge that comes I go with it. I face it. I'll definitely do it.

VC: Okay, anything else you'd like to comment on about the Market Theatre?

AM: Er... I don't know what more to say about the Market Theatre except for this big, huge change.

VC: Ja.

AM: Apocalypse happening there.

VC: The 'horror'.

AM: It's the horror, yes. I'm scared to go to the Market today.

VC: If you can see it. You can't even see it. It's so small now.

AM: Um.. I've just been there, last week, yes. I went around looking for Haccie (Haccius Mokopakhosi). I couldn't even find Bra Haccie anywhere. What is going on? Where are the people?

(He laughs)

VC: Well Arthur thank you. That's fantastic. Okay.

AM: What else- ask me a question.

VC: I just feel very sad. I feel sad because we've interviewed three people now and everyone – I mean where, where in this country can you find such a deep commitment to er... an endeavour, a project. I mean it was more than just a project, hey and it's gone, more or less.

AM: Mm.

VC: Well, it's still there and I'm very glad James (Ngcobo) is there now, but, you know, hopefully the, the qualities of the people who used to work there, and worked to build it, will come back.

AM: I doubt – the people who built that place will not??

VC: Possibly the commitment to performance and the quality of work that I think...

AM: Today the way I see things I might be wrong but I realise that James is putting a lot of his stuff on. And when I check the stuff that he puts on, for me, it's not even...

VC: And what about people like Mncedisi(Shabangu), those guys?

AM: Mncedisi is good.

VC: Maybe they'll carry on the ...the...

AM: Commitment to theatre. But Mncedisi 's good on his own.

VC: Mm.

AM: But he gets driven by somebody else. That's not him. When he does his own thing, on the side, yes it's really good. I really like his work. Definitely.

VC: I think he is a, a product of the Market.

AM: Of the Market ja. You name them he's always there. He's a product of the Market.

VC: So there are some. Who are committed to theatre.

AM: I mean take Mncedisi for instance. Last time he had a show at Windybrow. I'm not saying he shouldn't go anywhere else. I'm sure his peers...

VC: But it shouldn't be at the Windybrow necessarily.

AM: That's the point. What I'm about to say is he's got a home. Why can't he put it here at home.

VC: I know.

AM: He's not allowed because the artistic director's got his own programme. He's got his own things, his own shows.

VC: I believe it was very good.

AM: I liked it. I really liked it. It was good. It was really good.

VC: So there is some hope still. Don't be sad.

AM: Okay I'll stop being sad.

(They laugh)

VC: Thank you Arthur.

AM: Alright.

VC: Thank you for coming.

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