

Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo / You Strike A Woman, You Strike A Rock

Sometimes I wonder if Women's Day and Women's Month have gone the way of Christmas and Easter. Sometimes I wonder how many people have heard the names Sophia Williams-De Bruyn, Rahima Moosa, Helen Joseph and Lilian Ngoyi. I certainly was not taught these names at school but I fervently hope that the future my 4-year-old daughter grows up in, will be a place where she learns about these four extraordinary female South African icons and others like them.

I was at an international boarding school in the UK when the Group Areas Act was repealed in 1991. With the exception of summers spent in Cape Town, the rest of my year was spent with the Europeans of Europe and young people my age from 40 countries from the four corners. I was an androgynous, olive-skinned 16-year-old with shoulder-length curly hair and a Transatlantic accent. Other than the passport I held, I was not really discernibly South African in any meaningful way. Having been raised and schooled to reject the racial classifications of the Population Registration Act made it all the more complicated when it came to explaining to my peers why I was neither black nor white – or even really biracial. My blue 'Book of Life' identified me as 'Cape Malay' – but what exactly that meant, I really had no idea at the time. So I just hung out with the Arabs or the Indians who embraced me as one of their own. I amused the Middle Easterners with my curious smatterings of Arabic (most of which I had learned by rote and didn't really understand) and I could join in with Indians' cooking sprees because I was familiar with many of the dishes. The similarities of shared language and familiarity of the food made me feel like I belonged – maybe even more so than I did at home where, ironically, I had always experienced a vague sense of cultural dislocation and disconnection. But on some level, I felt a twinge of guilt for reinventing myself and realigning my national allegiances quite so blithely. In defence of my then teenage-self, up to that point, I really

had no idea who I was or where my people really came from. Removed from my country of birth, I reached for the familiar to render myself, and at least some version of my cultural identity, visible.

I returned to South Africa from the UK in 1992. My first job was as an usher at the Baxter Theatre – and it was there that I fell in love with the comfortable darkness of an auditorium when the lights go down, with the sound of an audience shifting quietly in their seats and with the perfume of chocolates being passed around. But more than that, it was in the theatre that I first fell in love with a series of extraordinary South African women who taught me who I was, showed me where I belonged, and helped me to excavate the stories of where I came from:

Mannie Manim appointed Carol-Ann Davids and me as part of his team when he took over the Baxter Theatre in 2000. So we were professional colleagues nearly two decades ago but we've grown to become friends and comrades-in-arms ever since. Carol-Anne's extraordinary novel *The Blacks of Cape Town* (which was incidentally adapted into a play that's been running for three years now) is the ultimate metaphor for the nonsense that was racial classification in South Africa and helped me find the grace to stop beating myself up for never really feeling coloured or ever behaving coloured 'enough'.

Before Jade Bowers' meteoric rise to directorial fame, as a final year design student at the Wits School of Arts, she coaxed me out of a creative slumber of nearly five years and we staged some truly magical work together. Jade's most recent work includes Anton Krueger's *Strange Land* starring Renos Spanoudes (which premiered at the Market Theatre earlier this year and will return by popular demand in September) and *iNDUKU*, written and performed by Ayabonga Makanya, which premiered to great acclaim at the 2019 National Arts Festival.

Grace Meadows briefly preceded me as acting head of Arts & Culture at the University of Johannesburg and during



Carol-Ann Davids



Jade Bowers



Nobesuthu Rayi



Grace Meadows

my tenure as head from 2010 to 2015, together we produced shows, festivals and other extraordinary arts experiences unlike the former Rand Afrikaans University could ever have imagined. Grace is currently the British Council programme manager for South Africa and continues to be one of the strongest advocates for the socially transformative power of the arts I know.

At the 2019 National Arts Festival's Chairperson's Reception partnered by Business and Arts South Africa (BASA), Festival CEO Tony Lankester announced Nobesuthu Rayi as the new (no longer acting) executive producer of the Festival. From a chance encounter with Nobesuthu as the former artistic manager of the PE Opera, I had lured her to join me as an associate producer of the Festival during my brief stint there. I honestly would never have survived producing Africa's largest celebration of arts, culture and creativity were it not for Nobesuthu. I am so thrilled for her and proud of her for stepping into this insanely challenging role.

This year for Women's Month, I celebrate these four key women in my life and BASA celebrates their predecessors as well as their phenomenal female peers.

*Halala ladies!
Uyarocka! CF*



Business & Arts is a monthly column by ASHRAF JOHAARDIEN, an award-winning playwright, performer and producer. He is the CEO of Business and Arts South Africa (BASA), and a PhD candidate with the Unit for Creative Writing, University of Pretoria.