



Ashraf Johaardien with Gregory Maqoma at Afro\_Vibes in 2008  
PHOTO Ruphin Coudyzer

## The inimitable Mr Maqoma

Ashraf Johaardien has worked with Gregory Maqoma and Vuyani Dance Theatre (VDT) on numerous occasions throughout his career in his roles as performer, executive producer of the National Arts Festival and now CEO of Business and Arts South Africa (BASA).

Where does Gregory Maqoma end and where does Vuyani Dance Theatre (VDT) begin? Since Lindiwe Letwaba took up the mantle of CEO, it has possibly been marginally easier to discern a distinction between the company and its creator, but the story of VDT will forever in my mind be inextricably bound up with the life and legacy of Gregory as its founder and creative director. Having worked in the creative sector for 20 years, I could easily share at least 20 anecdotes about my professional or creative path crossing with the inimitable Mr Maqoma – but two memories stand out:

It is 2008. I am on a boat hotel somewhere in Holland. For the first time, up close and in person, I get to meet PJ Sabbagha (artistic director of the multi-award-winning Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative, which won the 2018 Oliver and Adelaide Tambo Human Rights Award), Dada Masilo (2008 Standard Bank Young Artist for Dance) and Lulu Mlangeni (2013 winner of the South African iteration of *So You Think You Can Dance* season two). We are all literally on the same boat – and sharing the stage in Amsterdam's Frascati Theatre and the Korzo Theatre in Den Haag for works we are performing as part of Afro\_Vibes – an edgy biennial event founded by the late Raymond Vuyo Matinyana (aka Miss Thandi) as 'a showcase for what artists are really up to in Mzansi,' all under the carefully considered curatorship and artistic direction of Gregory Vuyani Maqoma. In fact, it turns out that it was Afro\_Vibes where Greg launched VDT in 1999.

Nearly (but not quite) a decade later, I am sitting in Gregory's office in Newtown discussing his dance selections for the 2017 National Arts Festival, which I will be producing. It is a curious and enigmatically poetic conversation between the past and the present. On the bill is *Sabela*, a new work by 2017 Standard Bank Young Artist for Dance Thandazile 'Sonia' Radebe. As a counterpoint, living dance legend Vincent Mantsoe's new solo work *KonKoriti* references an ancient song about pride, arrogance, physical power and selfishness. Also on the bill, former Standard Bank Young Artist for Dance, Dada Masilo's feminist revision of the classical ballet *Giselle* will be presented in lieu of the annual classical ballet as the choreographer's fourth substantial reinterpretation of a great classic. In addition, a collaboration between Cape Town's Unmute Dance Company, Johannesburg's Dance Forum, and Harare's Tumbuka Dance Company brings *Breaking Borders* to the Festival in an extraordinary collaboration that utterly obliterates borders.

These two stories are the tiniest possible sample of the range and spectrum of creatives, companies and lives that Gregory and VDT have not only touched but played an instrumental role in growing and nurturing – mine included. As CEO of Business and Arts South Africa (BASA), I commend both as shining examples of the charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent required to balance artistic integrity with commercial considerations: the formation of the Vuyani Dance Company in 2015 as a corporate venture born out of the original non-profit organisation VDT, which remains the company's corporate social investment entity, was a key strategic moment that decreased VDT's reliance on grant funding and has ensured that the organisation is able to generate income from commercial work. It also enabled the company to maintain the CSI work that the dancers continue to carry out at a grassroots level. The resolution to form a social enterprise within a profit-making structure has positioned Vuyani as leading by example in how it addresses inequality, social cohesion and unemployment in the arts.

Thank you, Greg and a very well deserved happy 20th Vuyani. BASA salutes you!



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.