

Brewing up innovation...

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By Adrienne Sichel

Freshly brewed African beer splashed on the centuries-old Castle of Good Hope wooden floor – very possibly for the very first time.

What did the old slave and colonial ancestors think as the brewer (Brian Mtembu) prepared and poured Home Stead Beer, encased in all the hype that goes with branding? This particular umqombothi, laced with spiralling cultural ironies, is said to work miracles.

What it didn't do, central to the installation performance Mabele Mabele Habatho (to give back to the people), was win the collaborating Joburg artists the sixth biennial MTN New Contemporaries Award.

For their two-part entry, completed by the installation Hijacked by Rainbow Nation finalists Ntsoana Contemporary Dance Theatre's Brian Mtembu, Humphrey Maleka and visual artist Vaughn Sadie were inspired by Josburg's five castles. Especially the Three Castles building in Marshall Street commissioned by Paul Kruger in 1898. Propped up masonry in Block B and Sadie's video imagery projected commentary on the neglect of South Africa's architectural and historical heritage.

Fellow Joburg finalists Madeyoulook (Nare Mokgotho and Molemo Moiloa) were also intrigued by how history fares in democratic South Africa for their intensely witty Trojan horse-esque Monuments Programme: Horse Non-Monument which The Cape Doctor promptly blew down at the entrance of The Castle.

Cape Town's Unathi Sigenu and Khanyisile Mbongwa's installation, Die Kat, which won the R80 000 prize, made brilliant use of the Green Room steeped in Dutch East India Company (VOC) history. During the week it functioned as the Council of Policy and Court of Justice, where slaves' fates were decided, and on Sundays it was a church.

A fragile wooden staircase leading to nowhere has forms dressed in Zion Christian Church robes floating above it. I immediately thought of Yinka Shonibare's headless figures and Mary Sibande's Sophie. Next door a cylindrical mobile invites visitors to manipulate the marionettes who shed ghostly dancing shadows on the walls, an activity which ingeniously connects 21st century citizens to the past.

Completing the finalists were University of Johannesburg lecturers Moeke J van Veuren and Farieda Nazier with their intellectual teaser Taxi Queen: Now in 3D! The competition's guest curator Portia Malatjie, who scoured all nine provinces for finalists, discovered the number of powerful interdisciplinary collaborations which explained the composition of the contestants.

What this selection also did was highlight the difference between very promising young artists, which the winners undeniably are, and the value of ongoing collaborative experience which hones conceptual mortar and artistic grit. Perfect examples are Van Veuren, who has growing international cachet with dancer-choreographer Nelisive Xaba in their 2012 triumph Uncles and Angels, and Sadie whose work with Sello Pesa and Ntsoana performers Mtembu and Maleka, is already legendary.

The MTN New Contemporaries Award, presented at The Castle on December 12, was also a reminder that 2012 was also the year of curated contemporary dance-linked festivals. Leading the way were the Africa Centre's infecting the City (directed by Jay Pather), Gipca's compelling inaugural Live Art Festival and the highly problematic Danse l'Afrique danse! Biennale in Johannesburg and Soweto.

Highly notable was the number of cross-pollinations between dance makers and high profile artists. Think of William Kentridge, Philip Miller and Dada Masilo at Documenta (13) and touring Europe with Refuse the Hour; Robyn Orlin, Marianne Fassler and Moving into Dance Mophatong's Beauty remains...; Gregory Vuyani Maqoma, Simphiwe Dana, David Tlale and animator Miletta Postic's Exit/Exist.

Causing a major buzz in London (following the South African premiere at Artscape's Women's Arts Festival) were Mamele Nyamza and British Nigerian actor, playwright and director Mojisola Adebayo's I Stand Corrected. This riveting piece about the corrective rape of black South African lesbians has earned six nominations for the 2013 Offies (Off West End Theatre Awards) for Best New Play, Production, Directors, Ensemble, Choreographer and Lighting Designer (Mannie Manim).

These intersections between live art, visual art, dance, and choreography and theatre craft provide a vivisection of South Africa's diverse zeitgeists. Similarly, the MTN Award simultaneously provides both a stimulus and a peephole into the volatility, vitality and chutzpah of our curating and art making.

The MTN New Contemporaries Award Exhibition, presented by Iziko Museums and the MTN Foundation, is at The Castle of Good Hope, in Cape Town, until January 25. Interns are hosting exhibition tours.



Unleashing memory: The MTN New Contemporaries Award 2012 winner Die Kat, by Cugulective co-founders Unathi Sigenu and Khanyisile Mbongwa, is being installed in The Castle's Green Room, which is part of the exhibition presented by Iziko Museums and the MTN Foundation

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