

People in the city

Turning complacency to Ashes

CARL COLLISON

South African theatre tackles relevant social issues, believes Philip Rademeyer, the playwright and director of *Ashes*, which deals with how the death of a gay man affects his family, friends and the surrounding community.

"Theatre, at a very basic level, serves as a mirror to society. There is no way, then, that theatre in this country cannot be political."

"South African theatre, in particular, has a strong political and activist history. Although the context now is very different and we don't necessarily have protest theatre as we used to, theatre is still – and in my mind has to be – a means of engaging with social issues."

Asked what led him to tackle the play's theme, Philip replies "While doing research for a project last year, I went about the horrific murders of four young gay men in different towns in the Western and Northern Cape."

"The murders had nothing to do with each other but had in common an unimaginable brutality directed at the victims – it makes you wonder, first, how and why someone could have someone else so incredibly much and, secondly, how someone

could have so little regard for another's life. These incidents served as the impetus for *Ashes*, which explores the life and relationships of a young man and the inherently homophobic and heterosexist society he lives in."

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Philip, a Gay Bowls incident who completed his Master's degree in drama at the University of Cape Town, adds "As a gay man these issues naturally concern me. As a white gay man I am in a historically privileged position and I am protected from a lot, but the majority of the gay population are not."

"I am hoping that after seeing *Ashes*, people's sense of taking things for granted is challenged. I hope people think about a variety of things – their own views on certain matters, what is happening in our country, how being gay and white in Cape Town isn't the only gay experience in our country. I think Cape Town, being the 'gay Mecca' that it is, is particu-

larly complacent."

"Apart from the politics, it is just a very human story about a family, love and loss – and I hope people see and feel that too."

"As much as I think theatre has a political role to play, it must also make an audience feel something."

Philip and Penny Youngblood, founder of Just Co-Operative, an award-winning Cape Town-based theatre collective.

In two years the pair – who both serve as the collective's creative directors – have produced nine new works, including *The West Express*, *Scrublands*, *Full Steps On Your Feet*, *AMONGST*, *Oh* and *Ed*.

Despite a slew of creative success, Philip says "The greatest challenges to being a young, independent theatre-maker are resources and support. You really do it for the love of the form, not for anything else."

"Making a show isn't cheap, though we are a crafty bunch – we have to be out of necessity. We often make work on a profit-share basis, so no one is earning a salary."

Despite this, he adds "It is immensely rewarding when a group of people can come together – despite the financial difficulties and because of their passion, commitment and talent –



■ Philip Rademeyer, writer and director of *Ashes*.

and make something potentially beautiful and important."

"The challenges also mean a lot of young practitioners are very resilient – and that's a good quality to have."

● *Ashes* will be staged at the

Alexander Upstairs theatre, 75 Strand Street, from Thursday June 4 to Saturday June 25. Performances start at 7pm. Tickets cost R90 if bought at the door or R80 if booked online at dancesandtheatre.com