

## Humanity held to an ape's mirror, devastatingly

**By Robyn Sassen**

As he clambers onstage in the glimmer before the production begins, you're discomfited: you are not sure if he's man or beast. It's an ambiguity Tony Miyambo holds with sublime authority over the duration of this astonishing piece of theatre, allowing Franz Kafka's disturbing 1917 tale of Red Peter which was published in fragmentary form, a story about an ape gentrified by human beings, to blossom in Johannesburg, in 2015.

Channelling a heady concatenation of implied references to Joseph Merrick, also known as the Elephant Man in Victorian culture; Sara Baartman, South Africa's very own monsterised human being; xenophobic realities and homophobia; and the most recently discovered fossil, homo naledi, the play comprises poignant truisms about identity and the danger of shallowly judging others – or putting those who look different from oneself in a context of display for entertainment.

In Miyambo's hands, it is completely mesmerising. Rather than dressing as a chimp, Miyambo embraces the notion of chimp-hood from within, and as his animal lip-smacking, snorting and gesturing burst through his tamed veneer, as he stands with a potent sense of physical disability and discomfort upon the podium dressed in a red shirt and tie – the story is crafted around an academic presentation on the evolution of man – your empathy for his complex and tragic plight is enriched and informed. Miyambo confronts the audience, challenging the theatre's fourth wall, with cautionary respect and the characteristic curiosity of a primate. You might get your foot or hand shaken, or your hair picked through for tasty fleas during the performance, but it's a gentle level of engagement and doesn't disrupt the caveats of animality presented here. Several years ago, Jemma Kahn and Bryan van Niekerk, under the direction of Sylvaine Strike staged a wordless play at the Wits Theatre called *The Animals*. It was one of those theatre gems with a short season and not a huge public profile, which nevertheless unequivocally raised the bar in theatrical brilliance.

Miyambo's embrace of Red Peter with all his vulnerabilities and embarrassing faux pas reaches a similar level of theatrical sophistication and fire to Kahn and van Niekerk's. His blend of empathy, self-deprecation and unswerving focus gives this production the wherewithal to turn your head. But further to all of this, Miyambo is a performer of nimble and great diversity. His interpretation of Red Peter is utterly flawless in his mimicry of a monkey mimicking a human interface and how his unique quandary is cynical and naive simultaneously. Nothing feels out of place in the interstices of this Red Peter.

Miyambo's performance will leave you shattered by how ideas of humanity cleave with the monkey's reflection on the base hypocrisies of the human race. Above all, Kafka's Ape is a story told with clarity and acumen and, coupled with a very simple set and sensitive lighting decisions, its central premises will haunt you. It is, you must be warned, staged in arguably the theatre complex's most disrespectful venue for an audience, but the levity and intensity of the 50 minutes of this ten-out-of-ten piece of theatre will supersede any physical discomfort.

## REVIEW: 'KAFKA'S APE' IS SUPERB

By Megan Furniss

*Kafka's Ape* is one of four shows from Joburg that have short runs here in Cape Town. It is so refreshing to get to see independent, fringe theatre from up country and it is a result of the successful partnership of The Alexander Bar in Cape Town and [PopArt](#) in Jo'burg that makes this possible.

I had heard so much about this production that played to rave reviews at the [National Arts Festival](#) in Grahamstown last year, so I was excited to see it, and it was utterly, completely worth it. Cape Town, I'll say this right up front. There are only three performances of this extraordinary work left, tonight, Friday and Saturday at 9pm, and the venue is tiny. Please go and see for yourself.

The simple staging of this adaptation of Kafka's *Report to the Academy* allows the incredible skills of performer Tony Miyambo and the deft touch of director Phala Ookeditse Phala to shine. Tony is riveting, moving and heart wrenching, as he expands on his journey from ape to man, and in so doing delivers the horrors of what being man is. His huge physical presence and control fill the tiny space, and the subtle emotion of his delivery are both mesmerising and absolutely haunting. Ape-like tics and sounds are sparingly and totally effectively used as well as dextrous and amazing swinging, leaping, and signing. There are few occasions where a single performer can tap into the deep emotion of storytelling and ideas to make the audience prickle with feeling and tears. Tony's ape/man does that.

This performance deserves full houses and long runs wherever it goes.

## REVIEW: CHIRP OF THE MOMENT

Blown away at the NAF16 by Kafka's Ape -virtuoso performance by Tony Miyambo. I have been following this production for a while, during various runs in Joburg and it was on my must-see list at the festival. Phala has taken Kafka's iconic Report to an Academy (first published 1917) and ingested and then regurgitated the text - albeit with some tweaking and contextual references. It's a masterful adaption and breathtaking performance. Injecting mirth and lighter moments into the intense script, Tony interacts with the audience - some of it scripted and some not- and I am not going to spoil it and tell you more. This is a beautifully crafted piece of theatre. Tony said it won a silver ovation award at last year's fest. Hope it gets picked up for international festivals. Last performances today - Thursday July 7 at 4pm and 10.30pm in St Andrews Hall.

## Kafka's Ape

By Christopher Steenkamp

Matisse, Hodgins, Dylan, Self's face, Burroughs' cranky smile, overflowing ashtray, empty cans of everything, toilet role, notebooks, typewriter, screen, smell, motherfucking Ulysses, Infinite Jest...Time to bounce out of this overstocked mess, this lot can get a bit much. Geniuses and all, but at the end I'm still inside. Into the night with me, deep into it, 969 festival, Kafka, Miyambo, wine. These dead (and nearly dead) and definitely dead workaholics are getting me down, I need some cultivated flesh in motion. Check for the keys, rummage through the everything drawer, it isn't easy, why is there a cigarette butt in here? They're everywhere, are they humping?

Metamorphosis was a good read, not sure what the monologue I'm about see is about, but K scribbled with conviction, won't be kak. I rise slowly, unevenly, like a man freshly tackled, prized keys in hand, bank card, access card for gate. I sigh at the half smoked pack peeking at me. Maybe I should leave them on my desk, buy another en route, I always forget to have enough cigarettes. Slow bureaucratic suicide. Finicky, fiddly, guns are so much better, why I bother with combustibles of such a low caliber when there are glocks in the world. I grab the cigarettes. Slow-mo self emulation with a morning cough it is. Metamorphosis was about a young man turning into a bug, this one's about an ape? Racist South Africa clears his throat, I reach for the door before the dog speaks.

Fast forward to 2055, my children watch me die. They don't understand my obsession with race, it was another time I guess, but the dark side of nicotine addiction gives Christopher Jnr. nightmares. Stairs now, I might see, I do, a neighbour, grease proof interaction commences in 3, 2, 1... Don't say heita. Don't say heita. Embarrassment averted, my people need to do a course. Who are my people, note to self, find out where my people reside, call a meeting, maybe take a gun. Where would I holster it? The back of the pants thing seems dangerous, little silver clip visible to the world, I can't put it there. Kafka made the sublime, the other, the weird, seem so natural. The young man who turned into a bug seemed so plausible. Guy who tried to rob me had a piece down the front of his pants, seemed weird, too cock blow off'ey for my liking. The side holster seems cliched, death should always reach for originality, anything permanent in fact. Under the arm holster, like Dicaprio in that remake, thirteen year old's shouldn't have guns, but he did look older than 13. Miyambo is short like a 13 year old, when it comes to genius, size doesn't matter.

Gate coming up, greet plastic copper at the door, security agent, buzzers and sign ins and calling the people with guns. He should have a gun, maybe he does. Shit, I wonder if he's prepared for all the eventualities that could occur. Does he know CPR? Does he floss? Immaterial in a life or death situation, but dying with someone else's bad breath in your mouth isn't necessary. Inner city security guard, he smokes too. In a thousand years we'll be able to bum bullets like cigarettes. A smile, a wave, he doesn't suspect a thing, poor fucker... Miyambo is superlatively adaptive, screen or stage, big with the red curtain, calm with the celluloid. Master of his craft. Final step onto Joubert Street coming up, the plunge,

the juxtaposing border, binary switch, the click, bam. 6 million people, just like that, chest feels pressed on. Eyes on me, mine to floor first, sigh, then straight ahead. Size me up fucker, do it, you and your buddies, wait- he sells apples, I know that guy. Stay calm, smile, don't smile. This white skin makes me stick out something terrible, I'd stick out less as a 6 foot roach. Is this a panic attack? Theatre time, Miyambo, funny guy- theatre guy, actor guy, Wonderboy (in cinemas soon), Late Nite News, Bantu Hour (coming soon), The Secret Ballot... I get into an Editor's Uber. I've never seen Miyambo do something serious. Wits theater, heavy cement exterior, fascists sure know cement. Nevermind, ours now. Miyambo, Miyambo, there's a musicality in his name. Two glasses of wine please. Theater foyer looks important. Flirt, small talk, exhibit excitement, then show steely indifference. -A spill over showcase, hard to crack I've heard. Kafka's Ape, simply named, brutal. Dactyl like, stings like a Bukowski uppercut.

Grandiose, be a part of the intellectual continuum, be a smarty pants. Cue haughty eyes, feel for flask, fucked and clever, nicely done bru, nice.-Have you read much Kafka? I hear my asshole squeek. Pretension hails an Uber van.

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NT. THEATRE- NIGHT

A chatty woman, MAUREEN (32), sails by. Eyeing the room for new conversations.

MAUREEN

(To no one in particular)

Blah, blah, blah Kafka.

Her FRIEND climbs out of her ass covered in what looks like chocolate spread.

FRIEND

(Muffle muffle muffle) Kafka.

CLAUDIA (27), a wild eyed young woman, comes running up the isle, she unpins a hand grenade and throws it at Maureen.

END

I talk about wanting to finger a goat, or fucking an orange, some such triviality, time to level out, stick my upside down flag into this over tilled soil. Raw grotesque salvation. What would Lenny Bruce do?

-Heroin?

-Then what?

-Then fuck out a window and be talked about like Jesus.

-Overkill, what kind of goat was that again?

We're herded into the small amphitheater that is the downstairs bit. Cushions laid out, like those bonfire pits favoured in beachside resorts, watch mother nature take a hit for our warmth. Exchange the driftwood for psyches and the kindling for ideas and we have an apt metaphor. Joburg theater's studio space versus this one? Same, but different, this one seems more demanding. Let's see how it burns. Not quite a fire, more a white hot solar flair, aimed straight at my guts.

If I tell you I nearly cried would you think less of me? For not allowing the salty bulbs, well earned, well satisfied, brilliantly harvested emotions to enjoy their moment? Well, my tear ducts have unionised, man territory, you need to consult the proper structures to get in. I wipe an undisclosed wet something off my cheek. Miyambo, the talented prick, he did it. Kafka's original bit of scribble wasn't changed much, but I doubt the world has ever seen this version. It wasn't a play as much as an onslaught, a one act riot of one. I want to feed an armed Miyambo cocaine and write the exclusive. Continents would fall. Buck Mulligan spoke of Irish art being represented by a servant's cracked looking class. He means identity, originality, Ireland's crown shaped dominion. Are we like the Irish in the 20's? Added to the need for progression, is authenticity, severing ties with the whip's library, that slavery came with a reading list is unfortunate, but must now be dealt with. We don't want reversion to some previous time, but a seat at the world's table, as us. I hazard that Kafka's Ape is both 'ours' and 'theirs', a happy middle ground filled with beautiful unhappiness. You can't but feel like an insider, partly the crisp clear narrative, partly because you're inside, but detailed energetic genius & superhuman physicality pulled this one off. An unfettered, to the point, business meeting for the soul.

Bravo Phala O. Phala (adapted & directed by) and bravo Tony B.Miyambo (as Red Peter-The Ape), as a liker of things, yours was liked superlatively.