

# Collab test of students' mettle

KGOMOTSO MONCHO

**T**HE DRAMA departments of UP (University of Pretoria); UKZN (University of KwaZulu-Natal) and DUT (Durban University of Technology) are bringing *FrontLines*, a play that explores the aspects of global war and conflict, to UP's Masker Theatre this week.

The most exciting thing, besides the play itself, is the coming together of these three departments for their first collaboration. How often does that happen? It's a brilliant idea that should be encouraged. Given the logistics because of the distance between the institutions, the three directors of the piece: DUT's Tanya van der Walt; UKZN's Tamar Meskin and UP's Marié-Heleen Coetzee prove that it can be done.

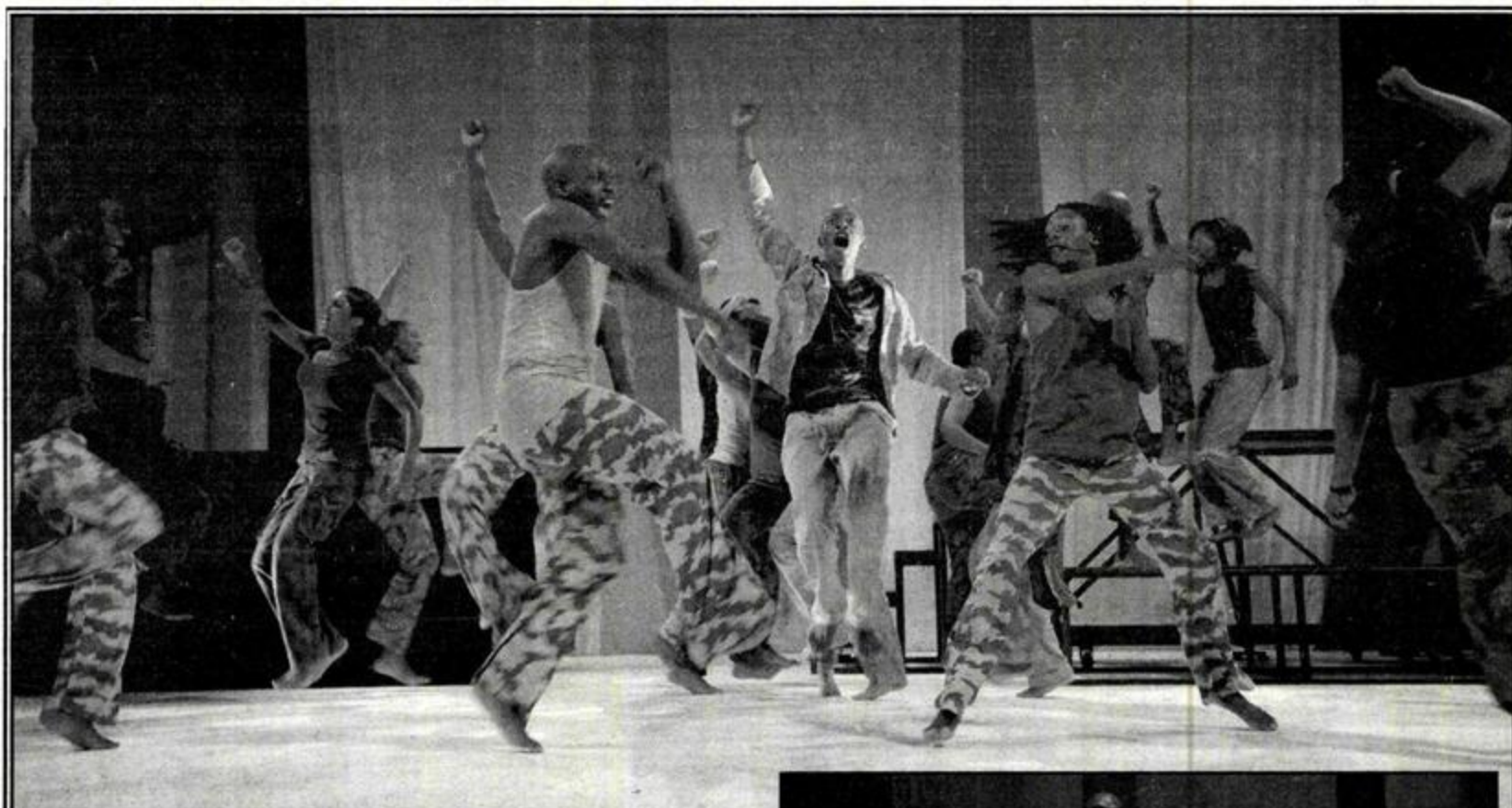
*FrontLines* is jointly devised by Meskin and Van der Walt, but this is the first partnership with UP.

Although UP has had collaborations with the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and DUT with UKZN as mentioned, it's a fact that drama departments of various institutions in the country don't team up often enough.

Perhaps it's about time many start adopting Meskin's sentiments that "acting is about generosity".

"Part of the problem has to do with history. There's an uneasiness between the former technikons and the new technikons. There are lots of drama departments in the country in close proximity to each other and the issue tends to be a separate identity, but I think it's a waste," says Van der Walt.

"With the logistics some people are not willing to risk failure. But we did and found out it's exciting for the students to be exposed to each other. It's eye-opening and



PLEA FOR PEACE: A scene from *FrontLines* depicting the Soweto uprising, above, and right, a scene from a war ensemble.

PICTURES: VAL ADAMSON

important for their life skills," Meskin explains.

And Coetzee brings in another important point: "The professional world is so small and these alliances create a network of support and peers. This creates an opportunity to make connections before getting into the professional world."

In doing this project, the trio is also being exemplary in showing the students and providing them with an environment to create new work, because the industry won't

always give you work. At times you have to create it for yourself. It helps that they're friends so they can deal with constructive disagreements. It's challenging, and they may have artistic differences, but they're approaching this play coming from the same place.

*FrontLines* has had its own journey from being a three-hour long production to it being interpreted by popular slam poet, Ewok, from Durban. It has been cut over the years, evolving every time,



and this fourth version will be different with a new perspective from UP and an update of current world issues.

It will feature four students from DUT, four from UKZN and 11 from UP. The play is a collection of thoughts, images, testimonies, letters and responses to global conflict in the 20th century. With this it tries to present a human face and a personal view of war.

"This all started with a book I'd read on border wars. After reading it, I went straight to Tamar and said I wanted to do something with this. From there we started collecting people's personal stories of war. We

did a lot of research and the material is true. It's a profound process because we live this narrow constrained life," Van der Walt says.

"It's not an easy piece of theatre as it asks the questions on what people believe about peace, what's right and wrong, and about their hope for humanity and the future. History is important, but we're not interested in what made it happen, but rather its consequences. This is not political propaganda, but political activism. And the key piece is how it grapples with these questions: what world would you envisage for your children? What vision do you have for the future?"

It's a passionate plea for peace," Meskin says.

*FrontLines* has a basic skeleton to it, but it also depends on the specific strength of the students. With a new set, a new space and choreography, it's entering another phase of its evolution.

"Another lesson from this is you don't have to go into the rehearsal room knowing what you want. You can play. And that's what universities are there for. To push boundaries and teach the students to stretch," Van der Walt concluded... profoundly.

● *FrontLines* is on at the Masker Theatre, UP Main Campus, from today until Saturday at 7pm. Tickets: R35 adults and R30 students.