

# Climbing into the Generation Y mind

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**T**hemes of alienation, existentialism, spirituality, self-sacrifice and... cannibalism? South Africa's adventurous student theatre practitioners are certainly not sticking to tried and tested recipes, if you'll forgive the pun.

This year, the Festival's student theatre offering has provided an illuminating snapshot of the issues that are weighing on the youthful mind. These young guns are the big theatre shots of tomorrow, and by taking a close look at what they are thinking and how they are articulating it, we can anticipate the kind of work we'll be seeing on our stages in the not-too-distant future.

From original works to adaptations of well-known scripts and short stories, young people are expressing themselves creatively and showing that there is, indeed, hope for Generation Y.

Contrary to popular belief, these are not shallow layabouts with one eye on Facebook and the other on the Xbox. They are active, interested and engaged young citizens who are alert to the problems of their world – and aren't afraid to explore intrinsic and extrinsic themes, no matter how controversial they are.

The Market Theatre Laboratory stepped up to the plate with the delightful piece *Touched*, comprising two companion pieces telling of the lives and loves of the people on a fictional township street. But that was pretty much the sum total of the comedy at the student Festival – most of the works dealt with the darker impulses of mankind.

Sets and props ranged from minimalist to elaborate tableaux; there was ample experimentation with multimedia, occasionally to the point of overkill; and costumes went from whimsical to barely there to... well, *not* there – as in the case of the Tshwane University of Technology's *Cleansed*.

The late English playwright Sarah Kane has always fascinated young people with her darkly brooding and cynical works such as *4:48 Psychosis*, and TUT's production of her "pain is pleasure" play *Cleansed* – in which a brother and sister caress in the nude and there is simulated genital mutilation and a prosthetic penis – prompted some shocked audience members to walk out. And that's after the director cut out the same-sex scene between two black male characters for the play's Grahamstown run!

Nevertheless, the students took it in their stride and have handled the situation – and the explicit text – with sensitivity and aplomb, like real pros. In fact, some of the plays showcased at the Festival are virtually ready to hop, fully-formed, straight onto a mainstream stage. Two pieces based on Franz Kafka

texts stand out in this respect.

One is the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (Pietermaritzburg campus) *Metamorphosis*, directed by Adam Steyn, which cleverly transposes this urban nightmare into a modern-day isiZulu context without losing any of its impact. In fact, this adaptation actually enhanced the original story, as did Wits University's *Red Peter's Way Out*, based on Kafka's "civilised ape" tale *A Report to an Academy* and directed by Phala Ookeditse.

Robust physical vocabulary featured strongly in those two plays as methods of enhancing and propelling the narrative, and it appears that more tertiary institutions are incorporating physical theatre into their dramatic repertoire. *Mem-Re* was the University of Stellenbosch's submission, choreographed and directed by Dayne Nel and exploring our compartments of memory with strong symbolism and visual metaphors.

Visiting US professor Charles Dumas and Karabelo Lekalake directed an abridged version of playwright August Wilson's *Seven Guitars*, following a group of African-American friends in 1940s Pittsburgh, for the University of the Free State. This enabled black and white students at this formerly fractured institution – which is now Oprah's new BFF – to step out of our own cultural and racial milieu and explore another socially significant period in history.

The experiences of South African women featured prominently in two pieces – the University of the Western Cape's *Khululekani Emakhaya*, which dealt with issues of not feeling at home in one's skin, language, or household; and the University of Pretoria's *Orolo*, penned by Nico Scheepers, a contemplation of the notion of empowerment.

Like Ariel Dorfman's *Purgatorio* on the Main programme, the notion of purgatory was probed in the Durban University of Technology's *La Conscientia*. Also delving into the metaphysical realm and dealing with notions of fragmented, introspective and disaffected youth was City Varsity's quirky cyber-drama *The Domain* and the University of Cape Town's *Seven/VII*, a Raymond Carver-style assortment of "short cuts".

Then we had the "rock stars" of the student fest – certainly in terms of their gory subject matter. The UKZN's Durban campus came to the party with *Splinters*, written by Amy Wilson and Donna Steel, which provided a provocative window into the mind of a bullied teenage girl who is driven to commit an extreme act – a school massacre.

But the show that was packed out at most performances was Rhodes University's *Taste*, Debbie Robertson's startling, macabre and ultra-dark comedy about some beautiful, spoilt young things who have a few friends over for dinner... literally.

There are two things that emerge clearly from the student fest: one, that our youth are searching, probing and casting



Brilliant student theatre on display at this year's Festival. Photo: CuePix/Dianne Jordan

around for life's answers in ways that are often startlingly creative and lucid; and two, that we have some stellar talent to look forward to on our professional stages in the near future. Generation Y – or should we say Generation Why? – rocks big time!