

THE MULTI-LAYERED KAROO MOOSE

South Africa has given the world its fair share of great theatre talents and productions, from Athol Fugard with *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* to Barney Simon with *Born in the RSA*. Lara Foot Newton, playwright and director has also found her voice and place on the world stage among her contemporaries. She tells **Belinda Otas** why she is passionate about engaging audiences in the social and political consciousness of the society they live in.



Described as an optimist who believes in the power of redemption, Lara Foot Newton's work is associated with political awareness, personal anguish, the social evils of abuse, rape and violence, hope, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Foot Newton is regarded as a creative spirit and was recognised early on in her career as one of South Africa's most promising directors. She says she was inspired at the age of 17 to get involved in theatre after paying a visit to the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, in 1984 and seeing Barney Simon's *Born in the RSA*. It was an experience which ignited her passion for the stage and the desire to address social and political taboos through her work.

"At the time, there was major censorship in South Africa. It was at the peak of apartheid and the play was about what was going on in the country and it was the first time that I understood what was going on in the place where I was living. It was an extraordinary piece of theatre and it really changed my life that I decided there and then that whatever those people were doing on stage, I wanted to do that. I wanted to be part of the social and political consciousness going on in the country and I fell in love with theatre."

That passion is once again at the heart of *Karoo Moose*, her newest production, which opened to critical acclaim in South Africa. *Karoo Moose* is a multi-layered production driven by a central narrative which explores the themes of family trauma,

the loss of innocence and the process of redemption. To date, it has picked up over 20 awards including eight Naledi Theatre Awards, South Africa's premier accolades for theatre work and recently transferred to London, UK.

Known for the dark and brutal subjects she deals with in her plays, it is also well documented that Foot Newton handles them with sensitivity and depth. She believes theatre is about involving people with the world and society they live in. "My mission I suppose is engaging the country that I live in because I think it's only if you engage in the dark side that you can also enjoy the joy and union of the country. So, my work engages in both sides. I think if you isolate yourself from your society through

fear, naivety or ignorance, you lose out on the joy of where you are staying. So, I try to cut across both – the violence of our country and the healing of our country."

Quizzed about the recurrent theme of redemption in her work and if she thinks theatre can evoke a discussion centred on redemption or even offer it to society, Foot Newton says, "I think redemption is a bit of a strong word because there's no specific moment of redemption or one isolated moment of forgiveness, it's a process. Healing is a process. Redemption is a process. The process involves engagement and empathy and that in itself takes time and I suppose takes the experience of life. So, I think theatre contributes to this experience. It's one of



Lara Foot Newton's (inset) critically acclaimed new play *Karoo Moose* (above and right), has captivated audiences and recently transferred to London.

the places where people can share and engage and it's certainly the place that I personally find healing."

Born in Pretoria, Foot Newton studied at the University of Witwatersrand, where she gained an honours degree in drama and an achievement award for outstanding directing. Recognised nationally and internationally for her unique vision, and the courage and honesty with which she approaches her work, storytelling is seen as Foot Newton's strongest weapon. In 1995, she won the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year Award and has since gone on to make her mark on South Africa's theatre landscape. She has directed over 40 productions and more than 20 of those have been new South African works. She has also directed contemporary classics like *Waiting For Godot*, *The Crucible* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Foot Newton cites the likes of Barney Simon, Athol Fugard and Peter Brook among her influences. She was mentored a few years back by Sir Peter Hall, who had a direct influence on *Tshepang*, a devastating portrayal of the phenomena of infant rape in South

Africa, which brought her national and international acclaim in 2003. *Tshepang* successfully toured nationally and internationally to an overwhelming positive response. It was so well received that in Amsterdam, the audience assembled on the street after a performance to applaud and cheer the cast. *Tshepang* would go on to win the *Fleur du Cap* award for best new South African play in 2003 and was published in 2005. It was also translated into Zulu. Foot Newton is also a fellow of the Sundance Film Festival and is currently working on the adaptation of *Tshepang*. However, she maintains she is primarily active in the theatre.

Karoo Moose was inspired by a story Foot Newton was told by her childminder in Stockholm, Sweden some years back. Originally written as a film script, she started playing with the idea of turning the script into a stage play when it became challenging to get the funding needed for the film. She says the process of going from film to theatre was inspiring and simple as opposed to theatre to film. If anything was difficult, "It was the process of finding the right company which took me some time but once I had the right company, the process was an absolute joy. Probably the best experience in theatre I have ever had."

Karoo Moose sees Foot Newton going back to her roots in traditional African theatre. "When I go back to traditional African storytelling, which often contains elements of magical realism, I feel comfortable. I suppose it's where I feel the happiest. It gives something to me which I cannot explain. It is very fulfilling, I



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feel at home," she says. She also explains why she was keen to incorporate elements of traditional music into the production. "If you see the play, you will see it's vital, it's just part of the heart of the play. It needs rhythm, it needs voice, and it needs upliftment and percussion. It is part of the fabric of the piece."

As a playwright and theatre director, Foot Newton is very confident of her ability to transpose the vision she saw on paper to the stage. She says she is not anxious about how the European audiences and critics will respond to the play. "*Karoo Moose* has played to all kinds of audiences and we are a culturally diverse country in South Africa. No matter who watches the play, the audience is very warm towards it. The cast has something very magnetic about it which attracts the audience towards them and the audience loves them and I imagine the audience in London will react to them the same way. I can't say I am anxious, I am excited."

Over the years she has gained a reputation with the critics for the debates her productions raise. In South Africa, she says *Karoo Moose* has evoked "The question of hope and violence. Yes, the play explores violence, yet it's hopeful. There's always this debate where some critics see my work as very dark because I examine the themes of violence and other critics see my work as very hope-

ful, maybe even naively hopeful. So there's always a debate around that. And that's great. It's fantastic because that means people are interacting with the exact question that I am engaging with."

Dedicated to developing theatre in South Africa, Foot Newton has recently embarked on a new venture with the formation of the Masambe Company. The objective is to instil a love of reading and belief in theatre for humanity and the primary goal is to "Take work of international standard in our country to areas where [people] otherwise would not be able to see theatre work or have contact with the theatre. I suppose you could call it an outreach company, moving into an area with plays done in the language of that area. For example, *Karoo Moose* was translated into Xhosa and we took it into churches, community halls and schools in the Western Cape. So the idea is to create a love for theatre specifically in schools but by using the language of the children that are watching and using plays that are of very high standard."

If Foot Newton is going to make South Africa and the world listen to why theatre is the place to start a discussion about the social and political decay in the wider society, she certainly has her work mapped out. However, her work to date is also a testament to the fact that she can and will get people talking. ■