

Pauline **MALEFANE**

“People don’t find opera sexy”

Pauline Malefane is one of South Africa’s most successful music exports. Born and raised in the township of Khayelitsha, Malefane is an award-winning opera singer and actress, whose voice is simply electrifying. As Malefane and the Isango Ensemble return to London, she tells **Belinda Otas** why young women must discover themselves first in order to find fulfilment in their careers.



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AW: Some people still view opera as an elitist genre of theatre; what are your thoughts on that perception?

Pauline Malefane: You know whose fault that is? I don't blame those people. It's

the opera singers themselves and the audience – in their head, they are still stuck in the 1920s, 30s and 50s, those are the people who are making opera look a bit dull. You can't tell me that people today want to see a production from 1945. Times are changing and times have changed! Take cellphones – they are fairly new, but Samsung brings one out every six months. If you look at opera itself, it has changed, but people are stuck, even the singers. If you listen to someone who is singing today, and someone who sang in 1945, there is a huge difference. Opera is and should be fun – ok, fine there are those people who are stiff and you cater for them, but you also cater for those people who are young and vibrant and want to see something good and relevant. Even in the way they seat in these places, the auditoriums themselves discriminate. It's nice to have history, you learn from history, but we need to move with the times. People don't find opera sexy at all.

Our readers often ask about how young African women who aspire to do great things in the creative arts industry, like you, can be nurtured to develop their craft?

I'm sure there's a million ways to do it. I'm not an expert but I'm learning. I have people that I mentor and there are people who are my mentors that I look up to, but I think the most important thing I would say is to first find yourself. Find what your strengths are before you start aspiring to be someone else. It's very important for someone to really do a soul-search, and do what they are passionate about given that before you get to success, there is a period of trial and tribulation. Don't do it because you need the money.

As one of the leaders within the Isango Ensemble, where there are a lot of women in the company, how are you able to influence, mentor and nurture other women?

We are an ensemble. We don't separate women from men. We are all equal. Obviously, when we are sitting and

having lunch or tea, we talk as women – how can we make it better for ourselves? If I see someone is very talented and they are not working up to the standard, I would tell that person. As a company we are there for each other but also, as women within the company, you know that if you have a problem, whether it's personal or work, you can come to me or someone else. What I have noticed is that working through other people's challenges also helps me to become a better singer, actress and a teacher.

Infrastructure and funding seems to be an issue across the board within the creative industry. Does this contribute to the underdevelopment of women?

It's just something that's across the board. It's difficult because you have to do what the money says. If whoever is putting the money forward says I want this, you have to do that. Up-and-coming singers are not given the chance to do big roles because the money says I want big names from America or somewhere else. I once did an opera and we toured with it and all of a sudden they said, now we are going to get someone from America and you have to step down, and that person would have to do the first cast and I was going to have to understudy. I was like, no thank you very much. You keep your money because I'm not going to do it. Why should I do that?

There's a lot of that happening. People are not given a chance. Where do you think these people are going to get the experience from, if you only have one opera house in Cape Town? It's sad because there is a lot of talent and some singers go abroad as it's much better and bigger there. If they are not doing lead roles, they are doing choruses and they are able to feed their family back home. So ultimately people have to make a living, and it's not possible here.

Due to popular demand, the Isango Ensemble is coming back to London with *Venus and Adonis*. What indelible mark do you think the company left on audiences last year that made them ask you back?

The first people who were very keen to have us back were The Globe theatre, because of all the productions that were there, we were the only company that did Shakespeare's poem. The other companies were doing the plays, but



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we were doing an epic poem and so, even before we came, I'm sure they were looking forward to whatever they were going to see because they wanted to see what we would do with it. We came at it from an angle they were not expecting. It was quite shocking for them and enjoyable. We pride ourselves on excellence and make it a point that it's of world-class standard, and when we perform we have fun on stage and we put the story across. These stories have been told hundreds of times, but when rendered in a way no one was expecting, it's a breath of fresh air. People love to see new things and experience theatre from people who are also enjoying it on stage. ■

Venus and Adonis opens at The Globe Theatre, London, on 29 April