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Standing up for side-splitting women

Tumi Morake, popular comic and imminent mother of three, says she is 'the picture of successful feminism', writes Christina Kennedy

FUNNY got me through a lot in life," admits Tumi Morake, who is widely regarded as SA's queen of stand-up comedy.

From laughing her way through a hijacking to cracking jokes during her emergency caesarean section, she has often fallen back on comedy to cope with painful incidents, even if it may have seemed inappropriate at the time.

A bubbly pocket rocket who is vivacious, chatty and genuinely witty, Morake has a knack for connecting with audiences and reeling them in. Her success largely stems from "this tell-it-like-it-is thing that I do ... speaking from the heart" and because she delivers her gags with a smart lash of the whip instead of a rat-a-tat machine gun.

And you can bet she will be bringing her A-game to the Blacks Only comedy show's Bling-Bling Tour that is set to unleash a laughter tsunami on Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Johannesburg in the next week.

Growing numbers of South Africans and, just a few weeks ago, audiences at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, have been bowled over by this fresh, funky, funny girl who was nominated for Comic of the Year at this year's Comics' Choice Awards. While in Scotland, she even showed a blushing local interviewer how to "twerk" her booty, channelling Miley Cyrus going ghetto-fabulous, South African-style.

One Fringe reviewer gushed that "you'd have to have a heart of stone not to instantly warm to Tumi Morake ... (with her) captivating personality (and) booming, infectious laughter".

Perhaps part of her appeal is her authenticity; audiences sense that there is a living, breathing person behind the jester and not a cranked-up gag machine running on autopilot. "You can't morph into something you're not as a comic; you need to remain you," she says.

Plus, in order to connect with people who are turning to comedy to escape from their everyday hassles, you ideally need to have gone through "stuff" yourself. And that she has done, in spades. There is a place she calls her "dark closet", where she folds up and tucks away all her troubles, but they remain part of her, and make her real.

She did not have the easiest childhood, with her activist father being jailed for treason, her mother also being imprisoned, her parents divorcing and the young Tumi



JESTER: Tumi Morake is looking forward to performing in the Blacks Only Bling-Bling Tour in the next week.

being shuttled between her mother's and grandmother's households. In the past three years, just as her comedy career was taking off, she lost four close relatives.

But "laughter got me through it", she says candidly. "Even at school I was the girl who laughed inappropriately... It's all I know. And it's not a crutch — if I didn't have this thing, I'd lose my effing mind."

Lately, she has been mulling how her parents' influence has shaped her. Her mother was "a pioneering, fearless, genius" nurse who "challenged every stereotype that came from being the girl from the village"; her father was someone who "spoke out loudly against an oppressive system". They were change

agents, doers, not passive observers, and she is determined to follow their example.

"As a comedian you have a licence to talk about whatever, but that would be doing a disservice to my parents. When I die, I don't want people to say: 'She was funny.' I want them to say: 'That chick was brave and forced us to think about some stuff.'"

Morake started out as a budding actor, writer and director before "comedy swept me off my feet in a whirlwind romance". Fearless though she may be, she knows it is important to "let go of your arrogance" and tailor her comedy to different audiences. In Edinburgh, for example, she soon realised she was "way too

aggressive" and had to "tame" and localise her act slightly if she wanted to play to more than three people at a time.

It paid off: she worked the comedy clubs and paped the city with pamphlets; word of mouth spread, reviews were enthusiastic and audiences picked up exponentially. She actually came back from the festival with pounds in her pocket.

That act of self-censorship was a necessary exception. But in general, she refuses to be a "safe" comedienne or "coon" herself for the sake of cheap laughs. "I'm here to step on your toes — that's my thing, poking and prodding!"

Although Morake has come to be regarded as "one of the

boys" on the local stand-up scene, she admits the playing field is not level and that the concerns of the two genders diverge at a certain point. Her male counterparts do not, for example, run the risk of being groped in a club, as has happened to her in the past.

She is still looking for ways to bring thorny issues such as corrective rape into her stand-up routine. "Only in Edinburgh I realised that the bravest thing we can do in this country is be a woman. I was walking around there at 2.30am and was more worried about a guy puking on me than being raped. Why are we not allowed to feel safe in this country?"

“Even at school I was the girl who laughed inappropriately... It's all I know. And it's not a crutch”

Tackling delicate subjects through comedy can be achieved successfully, she believes. It was not too long ago that joking about race was taboo, yet it is now common comedy fodder.

She has even managed to incorporate xenophobia into her material in the past, having a vested interest as her husband, actor, director and screenwriter Mpho Osei-Tutu, was born in France of Ghanaian and Basotho parents: "You just have to find a pitch that doesn't offend."

Male comics routinely weave below-the-belt content into their shows, Morake contends, yet in her experience people complain when a female comic talks about sex. "I've had to take charge of my sexuality... (Female comics and women) are not allowed to have any kind of power or say

when it comes to sex. We're not. We must just lie back and take it — pun completely intended."

There are so few female comics, she says, because "it's like extreme sport, man. The chicks who don't make it are really not funny, and then there are those who just in it for shock value and are trying to be aggressive like the guys. But they are just coming across as desperate, and audiences get uncomfortable."

One of her favourite funny femmes is Celeste Ntuli, known as the "Zulu queen of comedy". "She fills a room with her presence. I think I have presence — I don't fill a room, but you can't ignore me. Celeste bulldozes you. My God, I love her. She's fearless."

She is totally pumped up about being "back in the lion's den" of a Blacks Only comedy show.

But she and Osei-Tutu are also excited about a project they are working on together: they are producing a still-under-wraps sitcom for local TV.

Despite being pregnant with her third child, Morake considers herself "the picture of successful feminism".

"I work hard, I have a successful marriage and I will have my babies — as many as I want — and no-one can tell me otherwise."

"Why can't I have both (a career and a family)? We can set our own rules."

■ *The Blacks Only comedy show's Bling-Bling Tour opens at the GrandWest Casino's Grand Arena in Cape Town tomorrow, before travelling to the ICC at Port Elizabeth's Boardwalk Casino on Saturday and then to Carnival City's Big Top Arena in Ekurhuleni on October 12. Book tickets at Computicket.*

Old and mostly new in season's ninth year

PENNY HAW

NOW in its ninth year, the Spring Drama Season gets under way at the Artscape in Cape Town on October 21 with a performance of Philip Rademeyer's play, *The View*. Starring Gideon Lombard and Ella Gabriel, the play features a young man observing ruined Earth from a prison cell in space. *The View* (which is the first play in the festival) has been ranked number one in the "Gewildste Teaterproduksies" ranking at Aardklop Festival that is on in Potchefstroom.

Lombard and Gabriel have been named top actor and actress in the event too. It runs until November 9.

The View will be followed, from November 11 to 30, by Anelise Rusi's play, *iSystem*, which confronts the issues of police corruption and examines the difficult circumstances in which they work. It is directed by Fatima Dike and features actors Sizwe Msutu, Thembanzi Luzipho, Riaan Visman, Zondwa Njokweni and Stefan Erasmus. Rusi was previously a participant in the Artscape's Black Playwrights' Forum.

The next in the series is Paul Slabolepszy's *My Low-Fat, Almost Italian Wedding*, in which Roy Sargeant directs Graham Hopkins, Anthea Thompson, Hannah Borthwick, Nhlahlhla Mkhwanazi, James Cairns, Mark Elderkin and Murray Steyn. It is on from December 16 to January 4.

This year's "showcase production" is Rafiek Mammon's play, *The Garage Sale*, directed by Geoffrey Hyland.

It is about siblings Avril and Mike Williams, pizza delivery man Flip and a ménage à trois with a twist, set in suburban Cape Town. It runs from December 13 to 15.

The Spring Drama Season is part of the Artscape's New Writing Programme, which is devoted to the professional writing and production of new South African plays. More than 50 unsolicited English and Afrikaans scripts are submitted for consideration each year. Plays written in Xhosa are also considered. The writers of plays that are considered promising are invited to collaborate with an editor/director to undertake any necessary rewriting and/or reworking of the pieces.

Qualifying plays may, thereafter, be included in a showcase performance or a performed reading. Successful plays go on to be considered for full production.

"This year's Artscape Spring Drama Season boasts stimulating and varied productions by some of the most esteemed theatre makers from across SA," says Sargeant, who, in addition to directing *My Low-Fat, Almost Italian Wedding*, is Artscape's drama consultant and the director of the Artscape New Writing Programme. "The programme is designed to entertain audiences while inviting inspiring local theatre makers to seek professional production support."

Because the Artscape has been impressed by the courage and commitment of young theatre professionals who produce plays at their own expense, even taking some of these productions overseas, the initiative is slightly different this year. Sargeant and his colleagues have introduced a "play it again" element to the season with the production of Rademeyer's *The View*, which had previous limited outings in Cape Town. Slabolepszy's play has also been produced once before. The other plays, however, are new.

■ www.artscape.co.za

In art, anything goes, except Zuma

CHRIS THURMAN

ROSS Douglas thought he was in a tight spot. He had done his best to make sure the FNB Joburg Art Fair would meet the diverse needs of artists, media, gallerists, collectors, sponsors and visitors.

He had sought balance between business and aesthetics, creating an unpretentious but impressive space that would be equally welcoming to schoolchildren, poseurs, wealthy buyers and skint bohemia. There would be refreshing, thought-provoking, beautiful work on display; there would be uninspiring stuff too, but that could hardly be helped. Some of it was familiar to those who travel the South African visual-arts circuit, but much was new.

There were big, bold mosaic installations in the atrium: Sam Nhlengethwa and Gerhard Marx working with Spier Architectural Arts to produce fascinating street-level and aerial views of Joburg. Finally, to add that obligatory "random" factor, an absurd free radical operating in this otherwise tightly organised environment, there would be a stuffed giraffe wearing a red scarf, standing on a stepladder.

Then, on the eve of the opening, Douglas had a premonition. He saw Gwede Mantashe addressing a crowd with a loud-hailer outside the Sandton Convention Centre. He saw saboteurs sneaking into the fair and defacing paintings. He saw, in short, *The Spear Saga II*. He also saw reduced sales, the withdrawal of galleries and



ART ATTACK: The emergency meeting at the FNB Joburg Art Fair about the painting that caused all the trouble. Picture: CHRIS THURMAN

the terrible wrath of his sponsors. Douglas emphasised that he had not been pressured by FNB in any way (the bank has already had to do the we're-sorry-but-we're-not-sorry dance with the ANC this year). But the Department of Trade and Industry and the Gauteng government were unlikely to take kindly to the stand of Cape Town gallery Commune.1, representing Ayanda Mabulu.

So Douglas requested that Mabulu's now famous painting, *Yakhal'inkomo* — Black Man's Cry, be removed. The gallery complied, and we all know what happened: Mabulu was outraged, the C-word was used (censorship), the hue and cry reached the ears of David Goldblatt — the celebrated photographer removed his own

work from the most prominent space at the fair, the protest was successful and Mabulu's painting was hung again.

Now that the hubbub has died down, and it is clear that Douglas created exactly the event-skewing controversy he wished to avoid, a few observations can be made. First, there was no need to fear a repeat of *The Spear* episode. Artist Brett Murray got all the stick when Mabulu had already depicted the presidential penis in a less-than-flattering light without censure; the key issue in that debate was white representations of blackness.

Nonetheless, it is understandable that Douglas expected a high-level backlash against a picture directly castigating President Jacob

Zuma — as an individual or as a symbol of the state — in relation to the Marikana tragedy. The government's inability to tolerate criticism has made politicians the last sacred cows. Crass treatment of the human body, profanity, religious iconoclasm and anything else that might offend the prudish viewer do not seem to fall into the same category; if they did, Mabulu's other exhibited works would also have had to go.

Moreover, only certain politicians are off limits. Douglas did not refer to Mabulu's portrayal of Cyril Ramaphosa, Julius Malema or British royals as problematic. Elsewhere at the fair, Richard Mudariki's *The Surgeon*, laying bare the science of Robert Mugabe's tyranny, remained unconsidered. You can say what you like about anyone — as long as it is not Zuma.

Beyond this, there is the broader question of why some artists are considered devious, as if they "misrepresent" reality. Not quite; they interpret. Even photographers, working in an ostensibly more reliable medium, comment by selecting and framing their subjects. Goldblatt is a fine example. Ultimately, he and Mabulu are driven by the same impulse.

Asked at the fair why he has again eschewed colour photography in recent years, Goldblatt answered: "I work in black and white because I'm angry at what is happening in SA." Our collective anger is directed at the state — but sometimes people such as Douglas get themselves caught in the crossfire.

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