

PAPERCUT COLLECTIVE

Clever miniature culture clash

UHM. Written by Alex McCarthy and Callum Tilbury. Directed by Koleka Putuma, with Sive Gubangxa, Alex McCarthy, Kathleen Stephens, Callum Tilbury and Jason Jacobs. Set design Kathleen Stephens. At Artscape Arena Theatre until December 13. **TRACEY SAUNDERS** reviews

MANY post graduate students will be familiar with the all consuming thesis that occupies both your waking and sleeping hours. In *UHM* The Papercut Collective make the unconscious battle of this visible. As is often the case, the bone of contention is what, or in this case, who to leave out.

Coecka, a young woman who was born Xhosa, but raised in the English, Anglo-Saxon tradition is grappling with a thesis on Victorian literature.

Gubangxa carries the role with a sense of lightness alongside a quiet sense of gravity. Her troubled sleep and waking dreams are populated with characters from her work in progress – Cecil John Rhodes, Queen Victoria and Sol Plaatjie all jostle to be heard.

Their tussle for her academic soul is a miniature culture clash and a clever device with which to examine the role of academic imperialism. Plaatjie, born in 1876 drums up dreams under her bed and defends his place in her thesis with rigour.

His contribution to English literature in South Africa was only acknowledged after his death, even though his novel, *Mhudi*, written in 1919 was the first novel written in English by a black South African.

The delayed publication of his novel in 1930 meant that the Zulu



GRAVITAS: Sive Gubangxa and Calum Tilbury in the charming *Uhm*.

Picture: MAGGIE GERICKE

writer, R.R.R. Dhlomo's, *An African Tragedy*, published in 1928, is recognized as the first published novel in that genre.

Plaatjie is probably better known for his role as one of the founding members and the first General Secretary of the SAANC (SA Native National Congress), which later became the ANC.

Coecka's interest in him however stems from his translation of Shakespeare's works, *Julius Caesar* and *The Comedy of Errors*, which were translated into Tswana as *Dikhontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kasara* and *Diphosho-phosho* respectively.

Plaatjie speaks with passion about his visit to England to protest the Native Land Act in 1913, where

he became enamoured with English culture and the literary tradition and tries to persuade Coecka that his perspective is an essential one. Batting in his corner is Tony, Coecka's boyfriend.

Her initial meeting with him is a comedy of errors and tackles the stereotypes which still bedevil much of society. Once they have set

tled in to an intimate relationship she accuses him of colonizing her thesis, and his pillering of characters and themes from her work for his novel lends some weight to this accusation. His role then as Plaatjie's champion is somewhat at odds with his marauding literary nature. Nonetheless he fights fiercely for the recognition of the

South African writer before Coecka's favoured candidates of Ballantyne, Clarke and Russell.

Tilbury makes for a fine toff, and the tea sipping Rhodes seems almost Chaplinesque in his exaggerated movements and sense of self importance.

The slightly farcical nature of the piece is emphasised by the white face donned by all three of the literary characters and provides another layer to this textured piece. Queen Victoria played by Stephens is more of a maniac than a monarch, but the confrontation between the two bastions of the British Empire and a representative of the colonies fails to capitalize on the comedic potential of the characters.

The anticipated confrontation is somewhat tepid and like a strong dose of the cleansing tea advocated by the queen, the dialogue could do with some steeping.

Stephens has designed a simple, yet effective set and the shadow puppets beneath the raised bed add a touch of whimsy. The metaphorical battle for the writer's soul sheds an interesting perspective on the role of culture and tradition in the acquisition and production of knowledge.

The inclusion and exclusion of certain characters in the literary lexicon is no arbitrary accident and the responsibility of recording history is a burden that weighs heavy on the shoulders of many young academics.

At a time when identity politics and racism are both under scrutiny, who writes whose history is a compelling question and *Uhm* poses it with charm and humour.

● Tickets: R65, 0861 915 8000.