

Taking joy in young people



**ROBYN
COHEN**

in the limelight

WHAT are your dreams, what is wrong; what is right?" These are the questions Umculo – an international music organisation that supports social change through music – posed at workshops conducted with school children ages 12-19 in Kraaifontein.

Robert Lehmeier, a director and librettist based in Berlin, assembled a narrative drawn from characters, themes and situations which came out of the workshops. That has culminated in *Comfort Ye* – a musical theatre production which premiered at Artscape for three performances on March 6, 7 and 8. Participants from the workshops are in the production, along with actors, musicians and other performers.

Umculo, Xhosa for art, music and reconciliation, was established in 2010 by music critic Shirley Aphthorp, who also lives in Berlin.

She was born in South Africa and her family settled in Australia when she was two years old. After studying music theory and violin at the University of Tasmania, she received fellowships and grants and settled in Berlin, working as an opera critic for publications like the Financial Times.

SA remained close to her heart

being involved in the creative process."

Comfort Ye spans 24 hours in a township, starting at 6am. "We see a young pregnant girl with her boyfriend. He is an outsider. He is chased away by the community. So she is left alone. There are a lot of themes which are interwoven. The sugar daddy theme was a big issue – that came out of the workshops. It's a hard-hitting story."

Cape Town theatre-maker Fatima Dike was part of an educational team facilitating the workshops.

Aphthorp said: "The story is dark but it's challenging. It's ultimately about hope – how do you keep going in South Africa when you are faced with so many challenges? It's about people. It's full of life and promise."

The title comes from the famous tenor aria from Handel's *Messiah*.

"Handel's *Messiah* is all about hope," said Aphthorp. "That was our starting point. And the tenor aria helped us to focus. 'Comfort ye, my people' – it's about consolation. Unlike their peers in Germany, the young people we work with in SA know how to console one another when a parent or a friend dies. They have all been through things that no child should have to experience, and they have responded with wisdom and generosity. We wanted to show that."

● Tickets are R50 to R120 from Artscape on 021 421 7695 or Computicket on 0861 9158000 or see www.computicket.com.



SA'S GOT TALENT: The cast of *Comfort Ye* is put through its paces during rehearsals.

with visits to her family here.

Aphthorp started Umculo to nurture and develop talent. She had heard about Bloekombos Secondary School in Kraaifontein and its 90-strong choir and was bowled

over by their talent and enthusiasm. She hoped to give the children an opportunity to showcase what they can do here and abroad.

They have yet to secure funding to tour abroad. *Comfort Ye* is

Umculo's fourth production and is its first original piece. Lehmeier said: "When we did the *Fairy Queen*, I thought what could be the next step? I thought it would be great to have the kids contribute by