Teen choir finds comfort in opera

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Comfort ye, comfort ye my people... – a poignant and famous line from Handel's epic masterpiece, *Messiah*, is now the title of an operatic musical borne from dusty Bloekombos streets.

Unforgettable childhood moments often shape the rest of our lives, personalities are formed by them and they are for the best part nostalgic and wholesome.

But not for everyone, especially those who grew up in impoverished Cape Town communities.

Mali Kwatsha (19), from Bloekombos was only five when he learned he was abandoned on a dumpsite by his mother – a memory that evokes much emotional pain.

An alcoholic, Mali's mother was lost to the thriving shebeen life in the township, where a string of social ills are employed to cope with everyday reality.

"Neither my father nor I ever knew why she did it, but I believe that alcohol had killed her love for me," Mali says in an interview with *TygerBurger*.

His anquished father, a construction worker, found him later that night after returning home from work and raised his son alone. His mother never returned.

Mali is one of 24 teens in the Bloekombos Secondary School choir who will be performing in this much anticipated musical theatre production, a year and a half in the making.

Nasiphi Ntosimbi, Jason Make, Mali Kwatsha and Sibuyiselo Nywili during a rehearsal last week. PHOTO: DESIRÉE RORKE

Autobiographical

Mali's story and those of his peers outlines the autobiographical texts and songs for *Comfort Ye*, which comes to Artscape in March.

"I wanted them to create their own story, which started in a 10-day workshop during December 2013. They penned their stories and I used it as material to write the text," German stage director and librettist Robert Lehmeier explains.

Lehmeier is associated to Umculo Productions, an international music organisation that supports lasting social change through music in South Africa.

He describes the piece as heart-wrenching and gripping, with a deeply spiritual undercurrent.

"It is stories of love and death in the midst of abject poverty, substance abuse and teenage pregnancies, and the title *Comfort Ye* brilliantly encompasses the theme of the production. How to overcome and find hope when everything seems so desperate," he says.

"The main story revolves around one day in the life of a young man in Bloekombos. It's six o'clock in the morning, he kisses a girl, then runs away as the police arrive. It is a dark story, full of ambiguity and shadow, but finds its way to an optimistic conclusion."

Formerly, the laughing stock of the choir world, the 24-piece ensemble of Bloekombos Secondary choir will sing and act alongside eight professional singers and actors and a baroque chamber orchestra in this piece that encompasses several choruses and arias from *Messiah*.

Final rehearsals started two weeks ago, and Bloekombos Secondary is a hive of activity every weekday afternoon.

Lehmeier and director Shirley Apthorp agree: "These youngsters are great and we are very impressed with them. It was a joy to work with them. They are talented and their performances are honest and powerful with a stage presence hard to emulate."

Jason Make (17) says this experience has changed his life for the better.

"It motivated me and made me wiser. It taught me how to make good decisions in life and how to distinguish the right path from the wrong," he said.

Confidence and courage

"As a performer it taught me confidence and how to project and act," he adds.

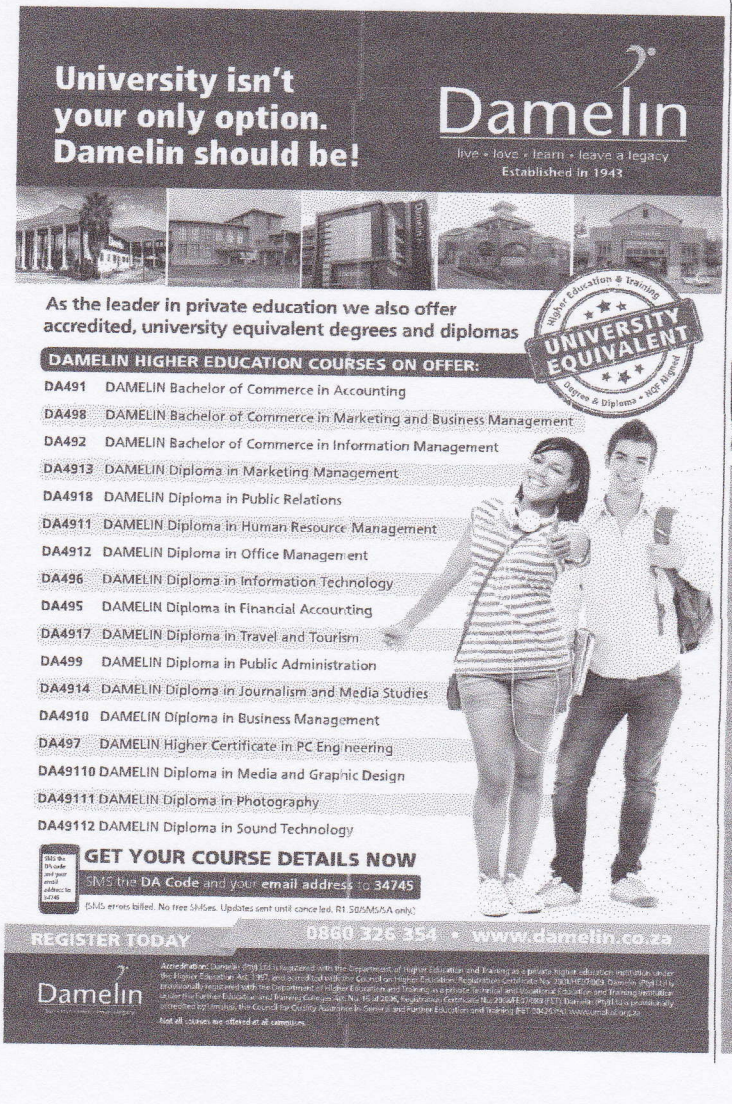
Both Sibuyiselo Nywili (15) and Nasiphi Ntosimbi, are excited to perform on the same stage that brought soprano Pretty Yende fame.

"We had so much fun and can't wait for the opening night. Being part of *Comfort Ye*, made us proud and gave us courage," Sibuyiselo says.

Although most of the youngsters feel a career in the performance arts is not what will ultimately lift them out of poverty, they do agree that this experience has given them the courage and willpower to finish school, advance tertiary education and work towards their respective dreams.

"I never knew I could sing this well, but coming from a poor home, I can't pin my dreams on singing alone," says Mali.

"I will have to study and find a good job to support my father and I and build a better life for my family."

One thing is for sure though, come 6 March, many a childhood dreams will come true.

▶ The world premiere performance of "Comfort Ye" which has already received international invitations, takes place at Artscape's Drama Theatre on 6 March, at 19:00, with further performances on 7 and 8 March at 15:00. Tickets are available at computicket and Artscape Box office. They range from R50 - 120 per person.