



The Market Theatre presents
And The Girls in their Sunday Dresses
Directed by Princess Mhlongo



And The Girls in their Sunday Dresses has been adapted for the stage from Zakes Mda's collection of short stories. It is the highly entertaining and humorous story of two characters, The Woman and The Lady who meet during a long wait in government queue for subsidized rice. The Lady, who has brought her chair with her, is a retiring prostitute, preoccupied by what has defined her for many years - her mannerisms and appearance which she thinks all mark her as a sophisticated woman of the world. The Woman, although a domestic worker, is a far less complicated and insightful person. She is the one with the food - and thus the two characters are mutually dependent.

And The Girls in their Sunday Dresses, directed by Princess Mhlongo was the hit of the 2009 National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. The cast consists of two award-winning actors: Lesego Motsepe and Hlengiwe Lushaba, two of South Africa's most acclaimed comedians.



A literary work worth its salt can be transplanted into any era and still work. If the themes remain relevant, it matters little when and where the action takes place. This is why the stage adaptation of Zakes Mda's ***And the Girls in Their Sunday Dresses***, directed by Princess Mhlongo, goes down a treat - it could be set today, or 15 years ago, or 30 years ago, and it remains entertaining, challenging

and invigorating. Mda published this novel in 1993, but one wouldn't know it, looking at the two characters and the situations they face while waiting in a queue to buy cheap rice.

You see, this is protest theatre in a sense, but it is not overt in its politics – rather, it encourages us, through finely balanced dramatic and comic moments, to consider how to react to the human dilemmas facing us all.

Be it under apartheid, during the pre-democracy euphoria, or today, most people have experienced abuse of some variety. Our two female protagonists – “the Woman” and “the Lady” – have both been trodden on by men. But “men” in this sense can be construed not as an anti-male diatribe but as referring to the system in general. Motshepe plays a simple domestic worker, but is nobody's fool and her demure, “frumpy” appearance belies a feisty temperament. Lushaba is a treat as “the Lady”, a brassy, blowsy prostitute. Resigned to accepting her lot passively, she takes a chair with her wherever she goes, so she can “relax while waiting for something to happen”.

As in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the process of waiting turns out to be more significant than the anticipated result of the waiting. The two women discover they have more in common than initially meets the eye and, through sharing their respective stories and heartbreaks, they resolve to renounce their victimhood, stop waiting and seize control of their circumstances. “You don't wait for the revolution; you make it happen,” says the Woman.

Christina Kennedy, ABRAXAS

**Title: And the Girls in their
Sunday Dresses
Director: Princess Mhlongo**

THE image of a young woman in a summer dress as a symbol of a care-free, privileged existence seems a popular motif at present. Craig Higginson's new play, *The Girl in the Yellow Dress*, also evokes this.

In this play, it is government employees who blithely step over disempowered women queuing outside their offices who embody this motif.

So while Higginson's play aims to demystify this female stereotype, Zakes Mda, who penned his story in the 1970s, focuses attention on the disenfranchised women who observe these women from afar.

On a superficial level this play echoes Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in the sense that the narrative is simply centred on two women who are waiting, waiting for the girls in their Sunday dresses to attend to them.

In this story it is clear what they are waiting for: to buy bags of rice that a government agency is distributing at a low price to the poor. Thus this inactive narrative takes place outside a government building – a barbed-wire fence functions as the only physical marker of the edifice, underscoring its impenetrability.

The two nameless women, played by Lesego Motshepe and Hlengiwe Lushaba, are used to waiting in queues. Lushaba's character has created a “waiting chair” – a chair covered in cushions. A mug and a pair of stilettos hang from it, engineering this notion that she has adapted to a life spent in limbo.

A dressing DOWN

Playwright Zakes Mda tackles government holding citizens to ransom, writes Mary Corrigan

Primarily waiting is associated with a state of uncertainty and inactivity. This notion informs these women's existence, but Mda positions “waiting” as not only a state of paralysis but one underscored by passivity.

In other words, the person waiting accedes control to the authority that places them in this precarious state. It is for this reason that Mda selects female characters; women are stereotypically pegged as passive beings.

Nevertheless, he doesn't present us with two flaky women.

Lushaba plays a self-centred, vain prostitute with attitude and while Motshepe poses as an unsophisticated woman with traditional attitudes about sex and religion, she has a fiery disposition, which surfaces whenever the government employees who have been holding them hostage for four days pass them by.

The play charts the dynamic and evolving relationship between these different women as they come to understand and confront their docility.

Interestingly, though one of the women is well educated (played by Lushaba), she is resigned to inertia, she accedes control – liberation rhetoric always underscores education as the key to freedom. In this way Mda suggests that for the women to be liberated from this unseen authority that holds them prisoner it will take more than a fighting spirit or an educated point of view; it is predicated on an awareness that things could be otherwise and that they can't depend on someone else to shift the power dynamic.

There is obviously a strong political subtext to this play – Mda did, after all, conceive of it in the late 1970s. It is said that the idea for the play came to him while standing in a queue in Lesotho.

No doubt as he stood in that queue it dawned on him that this basic activity operated as a succinct metaphor for the manner in which the apartheid government held its citizens to ransom.

Nevertheless, not only does director Princess Mhlongo update the play – references to duplexes and the fact that the women are in relationships

with white men – she also identifies ways to give it new relevance for the post-apartheid epoch. Government corruption and inaction underpin the women's long wait for rice and Mhlongo very subtly implies that ordinary folk who have voted for this government are not as beholden to these leaders as they perceive.

Sombre socio-political ideas might underpin this production but in no way do they present a melancholic experience.

The absurd situation that the characters find themselves in allows the humorous foibles of human nature to become apparent. Caught in this vacuum of pointless waiting and inactivity trivialities takes on importance. Lushaba excels as the vain prostitute who hides her vulnerability behind a loud, brash façade. Lesego renders it dawned on him that this basic activity operated as a succinct metaphor for the manner in which the apartheid government held its citizens to ransom. Though the play does run out of steam towards the middle as it shifts into a more serious gear, ultimately it is a hugely entertaining production that is both amusing and relevant.

● *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* is on at the Market Theatre until August 22.

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