

The Syncretisms of Gregory Maqoma

BUALA African Contemporary Culture

by Joana Simões Piedade

May 24, 2010

Gregory Maqoma, South-African dancer and choreographer, uses his origins to build his identity as an artist. The performer came to Luanda to present 'Beautiful Me', a show in which he is the only participant, and that reflects some of his concerns about south-african society and the political power as a whole, around the world.



'Beautiful me', photo by Malocha

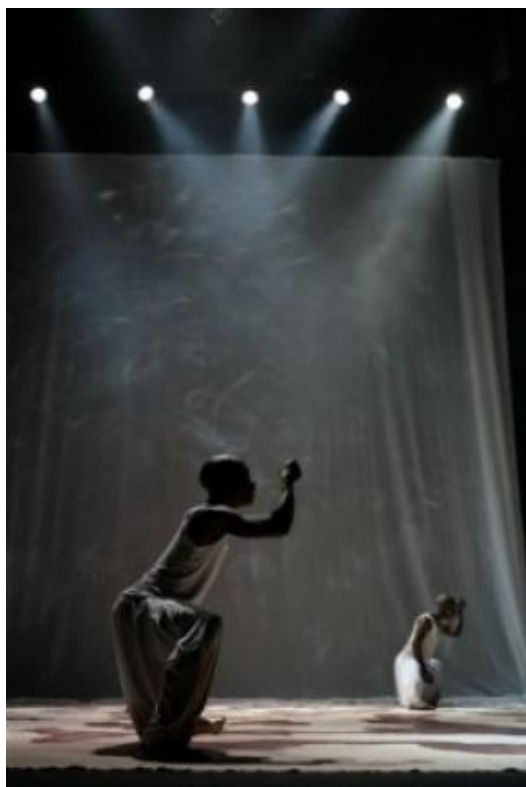
In a monologue that goes through-out the entire play, Gregory Maqoma presents his thoughts, expresses his opinions and shares his life experiences. "They expect me, constantly, to restrain my work to the stereotyped perception of the western world and the african traditionalism", says Maqoma. Beautiful Me destroys these stereotypes and offers an alternate vision of a unique artist that possesses his own culture. "I believe that people with a different background can transcend their cultural barriers and develop new cultural dynamics", he goes. Maqoma was able to step forward towards that goal and invited other choreographers (Akram Khan, Faustin Linyekula and Vincent Mantsoe) to contribute to a "truly universal work". Their contribution resulted in Beautiful Me and permitted, as he believes, "to narrow the frontiers and consolidate the idea of an African identity as an open subject".



Black is Beautiful

Gregory Maqoma was born in Johannesburg, South Africa. Son of a middle class South-African family, which he considers that "decided to keep away from traditional rituals". Despite this fact, his curiosity led the young Maqoma to participate in a circumcision ritual. "This initiation showed me that these things really exist but that if you are raised outside this context, the rituals don't mean a thing", he says.

While he was still in South-Africa, Gregory soon gains interest and fascination about the artistic world. The one to “blame” for this, is entirely his “grandmother Cecilia Maqoma, that in Port Alfred loved to attend balls”, he tells. Through this family’s influence, the dancer followed his way. Nowadays he feels that he plays a role as an artist “in a very serious way, although I still carry the burden of trying to find a balance between my own identity and what I face every day as a South-African”. The color of the skin is an obvious subject. The apartheid regime, under which he lived, was a catalyst of new artistic ideas. For example, in the play that he now brings to Angola, Gregory Maqoma talks about his colors: red, black and white. The word “black” is used in this choreography without any guilt related to it. As Maqoma says “black was never a color of death, horror and terror. Was never a color of disadvantage or of distance. Black I am. It means beauty, to cherish, to caress, to love...”



The Past Never Dies

In the play ‘Beautiful Me’, that went on stage at the Cine-Teatro Nacional in Luanda, the artist dialogues with the African history. In one of the scenes, Maqoma calls for the names of fallen African leaders and buries them to create a new history. The thoughts come tumbling in, the voices are running wild and against each other. If, for a moment, Maqoma tries to forget the South-African president PW Botha, the next minute he’s having an imaginary conversation with Michael Jackson, in which he recalls his own childhood and youth in South-Africa, living by the rhythm of the songs and the dance steps of the recently deceased King of Pop.

The dancer talks about identity and tries to tell the audience that “colonialism spread people away from their culture, making it smaller”, he explains. Performance art critics have written that “artists like Maqoma, and other pioneers before him, are a part of process of rediscovery, reinvention and re-representation of African history”. About that, the dancer says that “doing it is hard and complex because the past may be full of shame, guilt and

anger, but it is also full of pleasure, pride and wisdom. We want to bury the negative side in the attempt to create something new and better, but the past never dies”.

Rising Career

Gregory Vuyani Maqoma started creating choreographies in 1987 while he was in a youth association in Soweto. At that time he had already approached issues which affected South African society. His formal training in the dance field started in 1990 at the Moving Into Dance Mophatong, a school and dance company from Johannesburg. He remembers that institution as “the first mixed, non-racial school for dancers”. A year later he was accepted in that company as a dancer. In 1992 he finished an one year dance teacher training course in that same school. In 1994 he created his first work for that company, for which he was awarded with a FNB Vita Pick

of the Fringe Award. A year later he received another one, the FNB Vita Pick of the Stepping Stones Award. In 1997 he went to Vienna, in Austria, with a scholarship to study at the Dance Web. In 1998 Maqoma continued being recognized and he received a scholarship as young creator which he used to make Layers of Time, dedicated to the Moving Into Dance Mophatong's 20th anniversary.



Brussels on His Way

In 1999 his career got a boost. He was nominated for the Best Choreographer of the Year category with the piece of work Layers of Time and he received a scholarship to study in PARTS (Performing Arts Research and Training Studios) in Brussels, Belgium. The times he spent there are very productive. Maqoma founded the Vuyani Dance Theatre Project and created Rhythm 1.2.3, which was first presented in the Its Festival, in Amsterdam, and for which he was nominated Vita Choreographer of the Year 2000. In 2003 Maqoma was nominated Coreographer of The Year by the newspaper This Day and he got the second place in art's category of Star Top Hundred People 2003. In 2005 he started the creation of the Beautiful trilogy, which he brought to Angola in July.

Dance Teacher

Besides working as a choreographer for his dance company, Maqoma teaches and choreographs for other companies such as the Pretoria Technicon, Moving Into Dance Mophatong, The Dance Factory, Jazzart Dance Company, Siwela Sonke, in South Africa, International Theatre School, in Amsterdam, Adzido Pan African Dance Ensemble, in London and Bennington College, in the United States. He also gives international workshops on African dance and culture and choreography. To his students he gives an advice "feel the vibration of your own movement". The same way he does.

Awarded Dancer

Gregory Maqoma is what we can call an "awards collector". In 2001 he received the FNB Vita Dance Umbrella Award with his work Rythm Blues. In the same year was selected to create for the Dunhill Symphony of Fire in Nigeria a collage of all his works since 1996, which he called Revolution.

On stage Gregory Maqoma's style is a true blend of traditional and contemporary. What we can define as "Afrofusion" reflects a major respect for African beliefs and values and, at the same time, a Western contemporary dance form. In Beautiful Me, a solo piece, Maqoma combines the ancestral stomping with modern dance and some movements which remind Indian dance while the sitar music is being played. This dynamic movement style performed by Maqoma has a very important place amongst South Africa's diverse dance aesthetics nowadays.

Article previously published in Vida magazine, newspaper O PAÍS (Angola 2009)

DanceviewTimes

Roaming to Find Your Voice

"Beautiful Me"

Gregory Maqoma/Vuyani Dance Theatre

by Rita Felciano

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA

November 5, 2009

In its American premiere South African Gregory Maqoma's mesmerizing meditation on finding his own voice in the pool of contemporary and traditional African dance glittered and flitted like a trout in a sun-speckled dream. Though ragged at its edges, "Beautiful Me" was held together by the sheer force of Maqoma's thrilling performance and the astounding collaborative input of four exceptional musicians: Poorvi Bhana (sitar), Bongani Kunene (cello), Isaac Moleleka (violin) and Mandienkosi Nhlapo (percussion). Feeding the restless energy of this remarkable dancer's own imagination were choreographic contributions from colleagues Akram Khan, Faustin Linyekula and Vincent Mantsoe. The result was intimacy that spilled beyond the borders of the personal into something akin to the global.

Initially trained in South Africa, then in Vienna, at P.A.R.T.S in Brussels and with Kahn, Maqoma is a truly global dancer thinker. He brings to his work the multiple influences from his early street dance and traditional African dance experiences, a highly stylized sense of theatrical space, and the theatrical savvy of someone who has seen a lot and absorbed more.

Maqoma divided "Beautiful" into three sections through which he entered into conversation with his fellow artists, starting with the focused intensity of Khan's approach to Kathak, followed by the drama of Linyekula's political engagement and concluding with fellow Sowetian Mantsoe's Afro-Fusion evocations of life in the townships.

He balanced these high intensity encounters with the recurring image of a long-legged bird that strutted and roamed the landscape, its wings at bay or grandly flapping, its darting head taking everything in. While the avian provided continuity in an at times too loosely structured work, it also connected Maqoma to nature. It looked like the piece's most consistent traditional African element. Maqoma used it first at the beginning when he verbally addressed his father in a poem (reprinted in English in the program) "Baba I am a peacock."

It's in the Kathak section that Maqoma was at his most spectacularly expressive, topping his heel and flat-footed beats with butterfly Flamenco wrists, scooping and slicing arms that disappeared in a blur of motion like accelerating propellers. More than once his body simply became another musical instrument. At one point the vibration of his footwork created a bass rumble beneath soaring string melodies. You watched the energy soar in his torso, and the ground started to respond. The way he traveled downstage in a narrow beam of light only to intersperse the close to the body movements with simple strides and running patterns spoke of freedom and discipline all combined in one human being.

For part two, Michael Mannion's throughout excellent lighting design created a wide-open space in which an arm swinging Maqoma traveled, accompanied by a lone cello. But gradually the tension built as he moved and crouched down around a projected compass, calling up historical periods and the dictators that came with it. It was a ritualistic evocation

of a time and place that—with the name of Mobutu —clearly has not yet come to the end. Maqoma seemed to call up ancestral spirits—his father among them—in dancing that became increasingly agitated, twirling, spiraling and kicking. In an odd image, he violently beat his own bottom, trying to egg himself on or mutilate his body? The piece moved towards a kind of ecstatic rant that can happen when musicians and dancers step beyond technique into the realm of intuition. For a split second you could see where jazz had come from.

The third “change is possible” part, proved to be the most problematic since it involved a lot of spoken, not always comprehensible text. Here Maqoma spoke about his (and presumably Mantsoe’s) experiences as the “good kid.” He gibed at the Pope, President Bush and the Queen; he recalled the poverty which meant a sharing band uniform and the conflict with his father (“I wouldn’t play football”) who made him incessantly practice his “R”s.

The index finger became a central motive, pulling Maqoma into space but also exploring his own body. A lot of the dancing became hard edged with dropped poses, stiff-legged spins, Voguing and a furiously propelled run on his knees. But he also returned, one more time, to some of the movement material from the opening Kathak material, here to the purity of Bhana’s voice and sitar.

Two final observations. The contribution by the playing, clucking and clapping musicians, cannot be overstated. Their sensitivity and tuning into the dancer was extraordinary. Percussionist Nhlapo, in particular, often became a direct extension of Maqoma’s body. No wonder the dancer often looked as if he wanted to melt into the band.

The most problematic decision—one that rarely succeeds—was Maqoma’s stepping outside his persona in trying to bridge the space that naturally separates the performer from the audience. It started when he blew little breaths at us, and ended with us being asked to help him repeat his “R”s” so he could claim his first name. Of course, everyone, myself included, obliged. The sincerity was captivating, but also sounded a little false because a performance is a performance is a performance.

BEAUTIFUL ME

Gregory Maqoma/Vuyani Dance Theatre at REDCAT

By Melissa Berry

November 11, 2009

Conversation with Father (opening lines of *Beautiful Me*)

Baba I am a peacock I'm a peacock

I have beautiful colors

Red

Black

White

I would like to get closer to you

I dream of flying

I have five toes

I could with the

One

Two

Three

Four Five

But I would like to get closer again

I fly

I dream of flying

I fly



REDCAT – *Roy and Edna Disney /CalArts Theatre* – is the esoteric jewel in the crown of the Downtown Los Angeles Disney Concert Hall complex, and always provides the unexpected in intimate theatre and performing arts. At REDCAT, rather than being a spectator audience, one is invited intellectually and emotionally to experience the performance with the performer, and the eclectic audience are those looking for a more intimate theatre experience. This one-man performance of South African choreographer and performer Gregory Maqoma's *Beautiful Me* did more than just fulfill these expectations.

In this first American tour of the Vuyani Dance Theatre, South African performer Gregory Maqoma, 36, brings his past to REDCAT with an evening that breaks down into a 55-minute solo, incorporating movement, live and recorded speech, and an ensemble that is the collaboration of four diverse South African musicians. With a sitar, violin, cello and percussion, the ensemble seated off to the side of the stage conjures sounds that help to create the mood and tone of Maqoma's story telling. Besides chanting, they also include in their singing the click sound in the manner of the Xhosa language. This is the South African language that many of us have heard in which clicks replace the "c", "q", or "g" for emphasis and emotion. Their unexpected and playful jam session using this language to riff off each other recalled the "scatting" of early American jazz, with the audience enthusiastically offering words of encouragement, and just as magically moving on with Maqomo as continued his journey by creating another atmosphere.



Beautiful Me is the product of Maqoma's upbringing in the 80's which provided myriad of sights leading to insights leading to his vision of becoming the new Michael Jackson, and becoming a star. This youthful admiration for Jackson combined with the South African dance form lead him to form a dance group with five friends. Growing up in of Soweto, he infused his country's traditional dances into his emulation of Jackson, thereby creating his own aesthetic. *Beautiful Me* in turn, is not only a self-portrait, "but a reflection of African identity." Although his dancing won him admiration from his peers, this was not the case with his father, and this schism is one of the subjects for the performance. Maqoma explains, "*Beautiful Me* is about relationships – relationships with other artists, with my father who was traditional in a Western sense and wanted me to play [soccer] and be a doctor, not a dancer of any form. Throughout my upbringing I was always against my father's wishes, so that created tension." Maqoma's choreographic story includes this emotional tension when growing up, and his lifelong emotional explorations and adventures. All of this is presented with a kind a palpable kinetic energy that is his unique creation garnered from his classical dance training combined with his own moves.

For *Beautiful Me*, Maqoma collaborated with three other choreographers. Akram Khan, Faustin Linyekula, and Vincent Mantsoe who brought in dance styles that included contemporary kathak – a form of classical dance, and Afro- Fusion. Maqoma chooses to "set" the key to this creative work with "possibilities of change, growth, and discovery". He states, "The possibilities are endless." With this as a kind of mantra, his *Beautiful Me* is a creation of these endless possibilities that stay with the audience long after the performance has ended.

Maqoma begins the evening downstage center in a soft pool of light. He introduced himself to us body part by body part with each having a will of its own and its singular exploration of the space around him. His body is strung together in such a manner that he can compartmentalize it at will, as when only his torso is in play, or he reaches around in a double jointed manner and slaps his behind with a sassy spank. Working singly and working in unison, his movements are slowly involved in a rhythm created by the intricate percussive accompaniment of his bare feet. Next he seamlessly segued into classical plies which culminated in a leap that seemed to be in slow motion encompassing the width of the stage. His sudden insertion of a definitely recognizable "moonwalk" and "slide glide" is done with sly humor and affection. It's this sort of thing that endeared him to the audience throughout this evening by keeping him and his art so accessible. At one point *Maqoma* comes downstage to an eerily lit single microphone and poses questions to the Pope ("Have you seen God?) and to George Bush ("Why don't you pull the trigger yourself?"). There is nothing facetious or confrontational about this. It's a simple, almost naïve and childlike question. Upon asking the questions, he returns to dancing on his multi-layered journey. He has established that he in the one and only single human dancing machine and we are mesmerized and his for the rest of the evening.

Beautiful Me is not some specialized one-man show performed in some esoteric setting only for the initiated. It's a piece of work for anyone who wants to go beyond their own normal day to day routines and see someone else's interpretations of their own life in a completely different environment. This is the kind of performance that is essential in helping to develop global understanding. It provides some answers to global curiosity without guilt provoking and bludgeoning us by perhaps our own lack of information. With his body, Maqomo is able to take us to these places that we could never visit on our own.

GREGORY MAQOMA BEAUTIFUL ME AT REDCAT

By Kelly Hargraves
10/30/2009

Maqoma's one hour solo piece, performed with live music, starts slow and meditative, and takes long enough to make you wonder where you are headed on this journey.



A strong man in a loose wrap-around tunic stands silently in a square of light. As he begins to move, it is immediately obvious this is a body that can do anything. A classical stance (first position), only slight rhythmic footwork, but a cacophony of gesture from the arms. No space is traveled really, but the kathak like arm gestures and foot stomps tell of images and stories. Upper body flexions that are more of a quiver. And then the quick African steps one "expects." When he does speak, it is in his native tongue, a clicking rolling lingo.

Maqoma then moves down stage and stands facing us for a long time, encouraging, inviting, exposing, A rhythmic invitation to join in the conversation he is having with us, through his body. Then he reverses upstage, faces the back wall, and the musicians, opening up the space to a wider field, speaking of history as it flows through his movement and space. A mix of classical poses, arabesques juxtaposed with clearly African rhythm and steps.

The hands shake, as he testifies, identifies, his place in his story, his country's place in the world. He annunciates this conversation by asking us questions. "What would I say to the Queen, the Pope, the President, my father...?"

Then he calls upon ghosts on the stage he addresses by name, Vincent, Akram and Faustus—the three choreographers who collaborated to make this piece with Maqoma—represented by 3 microphones lower stage left.

With his words he tells us "He is an African dancer, who sells exotic stories", but with his body he makes it clear, it is not on our terms. The dance's pacing is consciously frustrated. He won't allow the trance of the high energy movement to take over. There may be a flurry of hip moves, complete with ass slaps, but sudden stops to stand still, to tell a story, to strike a balletic pose will interrupt. A Michael Jackson tribute, complete with nostalgic memories of a child hood spent replicating the moves of MJ, will give way to a recorded voice explaining the transition of art and culture as it evolves, and how artists may represent, reproduce, and reconstruct but the past is never dead.

This, even as the crowd encourages more of the intensity, even yelling "for the money." We can move and be moved, but we are not the only audience for this dance. It is an inner dialogue, a dialogue between colleagues who collaborated across borders, between history and the present.

Seattle Theater Examiner

Vuyani and Gregory Maqoma dance theatre is a must-see!

By Letitia Harmon

November 14, 2009



Last night **Gregory Maqoma** and his 4 musicians gave a knock-out performance of a piece choreographed by Gregory Maqoma and collaborators, [Beautiful Me](#). There is one more performance tonight. I highly recommend changing all your plans to be able to attend! This is a phenomenal show.

Beautiful Me is part of a trilogy which Maqoma created to explore identity, specifically South African identity. Growing up in Soweto, South Africa, Maqoma lived through dissolution of Apartheid when he was a teenager. He recalls seeing [Michael Jackson](#) on television in the 1980's. It had such an impact because up until that point, black people were portrayed in a negative light on television. Everything that was good was white, and everything bad was black. Here

was a successful, innovative, iconic man doing dance moves that deeply connected with Maqoma and his friends. Hardly knowing what they were doing, they created a new aesthetic, combing traditional dance movements from their culture with the pop icon's choreography. That aesthetic is beautifully synthesized in this performance, and it is possible to see the strong influences of each.

Maqoma is accompanied by four musicians, Poorvi Bhana (sitar), Bongani Kunene (cello), Isaac Molelekoa (violin), and Mandienkosi Nhlapo (percussion). Both they and he use their respective instruments, and implement their own bodies as an additional percussion section. The work comes alive as the feet and mouth and hands become yet another musical instrument. The entire body is an orchestra.

Besides being culturally meaningful and lovely, this dance piece is simply a stunning work of athleticism and talent. Maqoma moves effortlessly with the grace associated with modern dance, using abstract styles from contemporary artists. Even if it were devoid of meaning, this piece is exciting and interesting to watch. But what makes it truly special is that you leave the performance feeling not only impressed and jazzed over this amazing dancer, but touched by what you have just witnessed.

Maqoma is, in essence, a storyteller, and uses both text and movement to walk us through memories and this search for identity and place. He reminds us that if we erase history, and all those names and dates and places, we will erase who we are. We have to know those things to find ourselves. They are a part of our past and our present.

Gregory Maqoma: Photo by John Hogg