

Die Kaap is weer Hollands

Contemporary hip-hopera traces the history of Afrikaans, stitches its disparate strands together and gives it hope for the future

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in the limelight

LONG before it was appropriated by apartheid architects as white, right and uptight, Afrikaans had deep roots in this country.

For many, it remains the language of the oppressor and symptomatic of cultural divisions and schisms.

It doesn't have to be that way. Afrikaans has the capacity to be the language of liberation, a joyous celebration of heritage, suggests a group of writers, poets and musicians who have come together to create Afrikaaps, on at the Baxter from April 7 to 23. In this show, they seek to redefine who the Afrikaners of the 21st century are.

The production, which has its world premiere at the Absa Klein Karoo National Arts Festival (KKNK) in Oudtshoorn this weekend, is being produced by The Baxter, the KKNK and The Glasshouse – a multidisciplinary theatre company in Amsterdam.

Billed as a "hip-hopera", Afrikaaps draws on genres like goema, Kaapse Klopse, jazz, poetry and video.

"We deal with the origins of the language – how it was birthed and born. One obviously can't look at the history of language without



THE CONDUITS: Catherine Henegan and Aryan Kaganof are the driving forces behind *Afrikaaps*, which has its world premiere at the KKNK this weekend and starts its run at the Baxter next week. The show has a potent cast of talented young performers.

acknowledging the past – where Afrikaans was the backbone of the nationalists and apartheid,” says director Catherine Henegan during the rehearsal period.

The production is a work in progress and she is reluctant to reveal too much as the text is in flux.

Although Henegan is listed as the director, she sees herself as a facilitator, rather than someone who calls the shots and tells the cast what to do: “I like the mash-up – the hip hop approach to mixing different genres and media to tell a story.”

Working with her is Aryan Kaganof, who is credited as dramaturg for this production. “I am an electricity conductor for Catherine,” he quips.

It is an apt metaphor. They both see themselves as a conduit, a channel to enable the performers to tell their stories. Henegan, who grew up in Joburg and studied drama at Wits University with design as a major, has lived in Holland for more than a decade. She is the co-founder of The Glasshouse. Kaganof lives in Cape Town now, but lived in Holland for 16 years.

In 1983, at the age of 19, he left South Africa to escape serving in the SA Defence Force. He returned in 1999 and changed his name from Ian Kerkhof to Aryan Kaganof –

but we won't go into that here. Afrikaaps is the story – not his life trajectory as film-maker, visual and performance artist.

On frequent visits to South Africa, Henegan was struck by the popularity of poetry and spoken word. Much of what she saw was happening in pubs and venues where there were many distractions – booze and so on.

“I thought it would be great to work with poets and writers and put them into a theatrical context – and give them the full focus of an audience.”

With The Glasshouse, Henegan has worked extensively with people who do not come from a theatre background.

She is particularly interested in using technology as a tool in storytelling and wanted to bring those skills to her home country.

Henegan secured funding a year ago and brought Kaganof on board. Afrikaaps evolved with a potent cast: hip hop poet, performer and musician Jitsvinger; composer, pianist and jazz muso Kyle Shepherd; singer and poet Blaq Pearl; hip hop artist and activist Emile Jansen; bassist and musician Shane Cooper; singer, actor and dancer Moenier Adams; rapper and break-dancer Bliksemstraal; and

poet and storyteller Jethro Louw of the Khoi Khonnexion.

This is not just a random bunch of performers. “The majority are in their 20s. It is very young, fresh and direct from the Flats. A few are from Kuils River and further afield. They all have histories,” says Henegan. “Emile Jansen has been at it for over two decades as an activist and performer. Kyle Shepherd is 22 and he has been nominated for two Samas (SA Music Awards). He is an extraordinary talent to watch.”

Several of the artists are involved in community-building projects. “Blaq Pearl, for example, is a counsellor at Pollsmoor Prison. She is totally committed to social development,” adds Kaganof.

The performers are the creators of this production and have called themselves the Argitekbeke (architect mouths).

The Argitekbeke may have a life long after Afrikaaps has run its course and may collaborate on other productions.

It is hoped that the show will be a catalyst in creating awareness and raising consciousness about Afrikaans as a potent medium of expression. It is a language that incorporates so-called high and low Afrikaans: standard Afrikaans, Kaapse Afrikaans, Bolandse

Afrikaans, algemeen-beskaafde Afrikaans, and so on. The disparate strands are stitched together in a proudly Afrikaans celebration – sans the stereotyping of the divisions of the old South Africa.

Film-maker Dylan Valley has documented the process of rehearsing and workshopping the text. Some of that footage will be screened during the production.

He is also using the footage for a stand-alone documentary, which will mean that a wider audience will get the opportunity to engage with the issues raised in the show.

Considerable research has gone into its making. Much of the digging into the origins of Afrikaans has been informed by the material that Kaganof has excavated since the early 1980s. In 1983, soon after arriving in Holland, he met poet and linguist Vernon February.

“Vernie wrote Mind Your Own Colour – an analysis of coloured stereotyping in South African literature. He told me about the history of Afrikaans; that the Qur'an was translated into Afrikaans long before the Bible was. He made a huge impression.

“That started me collecting materials. It was one of those things that brewed, gestated and simmered

for years – and ever since I've been obsessed with language – in all forms.”

In the new South Africa, people suppress their language to get ahead, Kaganof says. English is cool, so out goes the mother tongue – whether it is Afrikaans, Xhosa or Tswana. “It is linguistic suicide. There is a cutting point in your teens when you leave your mother tongue and it's gone.

“The linguistic issue is huge in the liberated South Africa. Who was the country being liberated for? Twenty years after Mandela's release, the answer is: it is for mostly white English-speakers.”

And let us not even get on to the topic of the high-profile angry white Afrikaans rock bands who rant their lyrics to adoring fans. Meanwhile, many of them live in Gardens, lunch at Melissa's and have scant grasp of Afrikaans.

“Afrikaaps is not about anger,” Kaganof said. “It is about hope – and the incredible blooming of a culture – of reclaiming the mother tongue. Music lovers will love it.

“The flow is organic, rich. It slams from one piece to another – a roller-coaster sensation, a thickly textured tapestry of sound.”

● Tickets from Computicket on 083 915 8000.