

Reflections on Scarcity  
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As Joburg Ballet's SCARCITY takes to the Johannesburg stage, South Africa stands on the cusp of a sixth democratic election cycle that offers a potential escape from perceived political "scarcity" and ferments (and foments) in the aftermath of a Budget Speech that cleverly leverages abundance out of actual financial "scarcity".

This pivotal juncture offers an opportunity to reconsider the role of the ballet company in our post-Apartheid country, and to reflect upon the impact and evolution of ballet across thirty years of democracy and whether the artform has anything useful to say about our current social and political lives.

This reflection on SCARCITY, while heartfelt, is also limited in at least two ways: conceptually, because it is personal and confined to examining the societal and artistic role of the ballet company; and temporally, because it is a small glimpse into a dynamic artform at a particular moment in our national socio-political evolution.

My foundational question, therefore, is whether ballet in South Africa is still emblematic of Eurocentric "high culture" and continuing anathema to an evolving South African dance and artistic aesthetic? Adrienne Sichel, now retired but for decades our pre-eminent performing arts critic and writer, devised the following equations to codify dance genres in the pre-democratic era driven by the nationalist government's perceptions of elitism. I have added my own italicized parentheses:

*"Ballet = tutu = beautiful = art"*

*(potentially engaging and entertaining but saccharine-and-vacuous)*

*"Contemporary dance = ugly = rolling-on-the floor = alien = not art"*

*(potentially engaging and entertaining but deep-and-meaningful)*

Is it possible, post-democracy, to alter the variables in Sichel's equations to arrive at a notion of a South African ballet company that engages and entertains with integrity, and which honestly interrogates prevailing societal norms and the authenticity of the human condition? As early as 2012 and after detailed analysis of the inevitably racialized overtones of South Africa's dance history, Steven van Wyk was able to conclude that to rail against ballet in the post-Apartheid dance landscape would be to deny the multiple ways in which this form is deeply woven into South Africa's cultural fabric.

An analytical crux of Van Wyk's thesis is his examination of the training and professional *oeuvre* of Dada Masilo who debuts her newly created *Salomé* (interpreting Oscar Wilde's play) as part of SCARCITY. While *Salomé* explores desire, power and passion in Masilo's uniquely woven and textured movement language, the point is not that Masilo uses a balletic dance vocabulary in *Salomé* or any of her other creations (because she does not), but rather that Masilo herself is a product and brilliant exponent of, but ultimately represents conceptual and artistic reaction to, the classical ballet tradition.

This is not to downplay the broader range of vocational training (beyond classical) to which Masilo and her fellow SCARCITY choreographers have been exposed. Rather, schooling in a wide diversity of dance forms, including classical ballet, is the prerequisite for entry into many (if not most) professional dance companies worldwide, notwithstanding their disparate objectives or various societal and geographic locations. Even genre-specific companies, such as Jazzart Dance Theatre and Flatfoot Dance Company, include classical class as a component of the company dancer's training and development.

Without exception, the choreographers and dancers who bring their considerable combination of talent to SCARCITY have been comprehensively, but not exclusively, classically trained and while the programme does indeed include tutus, for example in Craig Pedro's *Ukukhanya Kwenyanga: A Moonlight Waltz*, even that costuming staple is re-envisioned with Xhosa print and bead motifs.

By contrast, Jorge Pérez Martínez's *Azul* seeks to evoke the creator's Mediterranean and Spanish roots and Hannah Ma's *The Void* peers into the beauty and connectivity of human existence.

While Masilo can now smile at her younger self's ambition of being a ballerina, it is not inadvertent that the mature artist has built an international reputation on reinterpreting the classical balletic tradition from an Africanist perspective, teasing-out human essences that are as valid to a (South) African as to a European worldview. For example, in relation to Masilo's version of *Swan Lake* Van Wyk comments that her balletic expertise extends, rather than diminishes, the critique of that classical staple in a manner that imbues her reinterpretation "with an authentic South Africanness".

The recent Budget Speech announces an approach to government's financial woes that depends upon generating abundance from scarcity. In a philosophically similar manner, Joburg Ballet's SCARCITY is built upon the creative and artistic abundance of a South African ballet company that locates itself firmly within prevailing local contexts and, in the words of the company's CEO, which seeks to respond artistically to the experiences and lives of its fellow citizens – through dance.

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