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# Nelisiwe Xaba: A Dancer With Balls

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X-homes 2010.

I first met critically acclaimed dancer and choreographer, Nelisiwe Xaba, in 2008. We made T-shirts together for the anti-Xenophobia protest march Johannesburg in June. She never said a word the entire evening, (if she did I didn't hear it ) while I and our other mutual friends chattered or argued and debated about which slogans worked, how many we should make, the fonts, the style etc. She just got on with the work at hand.

The next time we met, it was in 2009 for an interview on the short run of her solo-performance pieces, *"They look at me and that's all they think"* and *Sakhozi says 'non' to the Venus*, which she self-funded at the Market Theater in Jozi . Both works were based and inspired by

the story of Sara Baartman (1789-1815) a Khoi-khoi woman famously exhibited as a sideshow attraction in 19th Century Europe, under the name “Hottentot Venus”. I watched both her pieces with awe, I had never seen her perform before - she is often travelling and working abroad and on the continent. I wondered why I didn't know about her before (being a lover of dance and all) or why there were not many people, black women like me, going out to see what other sisters are doing. Her performances are powerful and challenging, and thought-provoking. I have never been left unchallenged by her work.

Her meticulousness is evident in how her work is structured: from the costumes she chooses, the props she uses, body movement, facial expressions, no action or movement is wasted. All tie in methodically together into smooth and powerfully vibrant performances only Nelisiwe Xaba can deliver. I have loved all of the shows she's produced including that of X-Homes in Kliptown ( one of the oldest townships in Soweto and the venue where the 1955 freedom charter was signed) in which I barely escaped her urine which she splashed angrily at her audience as part of the piece.

If there's a critique from a novice, it would be, she is very much more than just “intense”. The day of the interview was over-cast, just like this one today. We sat in a cove at Gramadoelas restaurant at the Market Theater, and indulged in what was to be the most enjoyable interview I have ever had. We both laughed, and giggled like two school girls while sipping tea. I was surprised when I stumbled on a short transcript of the interview the other day and re-reading now I see it was probably the most seriously, real, interview I have ever done. Xaba is also, as it turns out one of the funniest people I've met yet, with a balanced mix of irony and witt I smile just thinking of that day. I didn't want the Interview to end I remember... I was already in Love.

# The Interview:



**SWA:** *How did you navigate your way through the dance industry almost two decades down the line?*

**XABA:**” I had to fight. Nothing was given to me, all I had (have) I had to do it myself. I know that for my male counterparts things were just given to them and they didn’t know how to handle it, because it was given to them. No one gave me anything. I had to build my name, build everything myself. So, no one can say I gave her something, including all these Dance Institutions for all I care. The dancing industry is full of men, and no they’re not better.

**SWA:** *Is there a need then to build support structures for young (female) dancers? Would you consider perhaps setting up a something to train aspirant dancers?*

**XABA:** Sometimes I dream of having my own studio, my own Non-Governmental - Organization (NGO). But at the same time I don’t believe in NGO’s.... to keep giving something to people, maybe they don’t need it. They don’t need it so they don’t know what to do with it. So I would like to create something where young girls or boys, if they want to be dancers, would have to make an effort. I don’t want to open another school where I have to rely on funders to give me money for the underprivileged, I don’t believe in that. It’s a great gift from NGO’s or from Europeans, but it doesn’t help. How many NGO’s do we have in Africa? What do they do? If NGO’s were helping Africa, Africa would be at the same level with first world countries today.

**SWA:** *In Sakhozi says “non” to the Venus, you tackle Immigration Issues amongst other pressing issues, tell us more.*

**XABA:** It boils down to the relationship that Europe has with Africa. It's the superiority complex that they have with us. Also it's not only Europe that should be blamed. We've been blaming Europe forever. I think our Governments will blame Europe until I'm dead. Africa needs to start having balls. Africa needs to stop having her legs wide open and cross them probably, and start having some dignity. Europeans are closing their gates to Africans, and we're opening them wide, I don't understand that. I don't know what we gain from them. Europeans gain money from doing business in Africa. I don't know what we gain.

**SWA:** *Who are you challenging?*

**XABA:** Unfortunately cabinet ministers or parliamentarians won't attend the show. They are too important (laughs). I grew up in Apartheid - South Africa, and then there was a movement of consciousness, (Black Consciousness Movement/ BCM) especially with the youth. We made each other conscious, but that's all gone and I don't understand why it's gone when it should be starting, beginning actually. So I look at my work as a form of creating a consciousness.

**SWA:** *You'll also be performing your 2006 piece, they look at me and that's all they think, what does this piece relates to.*

**XABA:** This goes back to exoticism. When you're performing in Europe, people are mainly interested in seeing your body. Sometimes they don't actually care about what you're saying. The black body is still so exotic. When your body is your tool to make or create art, then it becomes a challenge. How do you get your message across when someone is actually not listening and they're just looking at your body? How do you get them to listen? That's the challenge. *They look at me*

was also a challenge to Europeans that the black body is just a body “actually”. So you can listen to what I’m saying, or see what I’m talking about, to open a dialogue”

**SWA:** *How do you deal with your own personal narrative? The irony your work evokes?*

**XABA:** This time it is a choice. It’s not like Sara Baartman who had no choice, a contract or costume. Of course it is an art-form that gets abused. My challenge is how do I use my body in a way that exhibiting it does not degrade it, and how do I do that with pride.

**SWA:** *Why do you think, many women, like Sara Baartman are still “caged” today?*

**XABA:** The problem for me starts with the basics. If we women don’t teach girls to be powerful girls, they will never be powerful women. You can’t expect a 21-year-old to be a powerful woman, when you’ve never taught her when she was five how to be a powerful girl. The state of women in Africa is still ridiculous. Men are still men. Men haven’t changed despite the fact that we marched in the 60’s. It’s like the struggle of being black; you have to fight everyday of your life. Same with being a woman, you fight everyday of your life. We live in a man’s world. We live in a White world. Until we change that world, nothing can change for us.

ends.



Sakhozi says non to the Venus

## Biography:

Nelisiwe Xaba was born and raised in Soweto (South Africa), and received a scholarship to study at the Johannesburg Dance Foundation. After studying dance in London (with a 1996 Ballet Rambert Scholarship) she returned home to join Pact Dance Company, where she was company member for several years, and with whom she toured to Europe and the Mideast. She worked with a variety of choreographers, visual and theater artists, particularly Robyn Orlin, with whom she created works such as *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, *Down Scaling down*, *Life after the credits roll*, and *Daddy I've seen this piece six times before and I still don't know why they're hurting each other*, which toured for several years in Europe and Asia, winning the Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance. In 2001, Ms. Xaba began to focus on her own choreographic voice, creating solo and group dance works that have been performed in Africa and Europe, including *Dazed and confused*, *No Strings Attached 1*, *No Strings Attached 2*, *Be My Wife(BMW)*(commissioned by the Soweto Dance Project), and *Black!.. White and Plasticization*. Ms. Xaba has also collaborated as choreographer and dancer with fashion designers, opera productions, music videos, television productions, and multimedia performance projects.