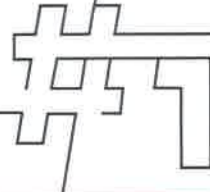


DANCE UMBRELLA GAZETTE

New Dance Writing – Festival Edition



"I have to be a feminist; everyday should be a protest day," proclaims dancer, choreographer Nelisiwe Xaba. It's weeks ahead of Johannesburg's 27th Dance Umbrella, and the award-winning artist is participating in the festival's writing workshop, patiently reviewing her almost two-decade-long dance career, while addressing the politics attached to being a black, female dancer. The theme of this year's Workshop is "choreographing gender", so the writers gathered in the Dance Space in Newtown, are prepped and anxious to engage with the Goodman Gallery artist.

"Feminism isn't that thing that happened in the 1960s. We haven't resolved what our grandparents fought for," the Soweto-born dancer says. "My grandmother participated in the struggle for women in the 1960s. So for me, it's always been something that I should carry on; there's no way that my life cannot be about protest."

"We haven't resolved what our grandparents fought for"

Her 2012/2013 collaborative dance and installation piece with experimental filmmaker Mocke J van Veuren, titled *Angels & Uncles*, which critiqued virginity testing, won the FNB Art Prize. Xaba's activism is embedded in her art, yet it is not didactic. "As a feminist, I disagree [with virginity testing] but it's important to spark the conversation. It's also not good to tell people who are practising a tradition that it is wrong, I think that shows arrogance."

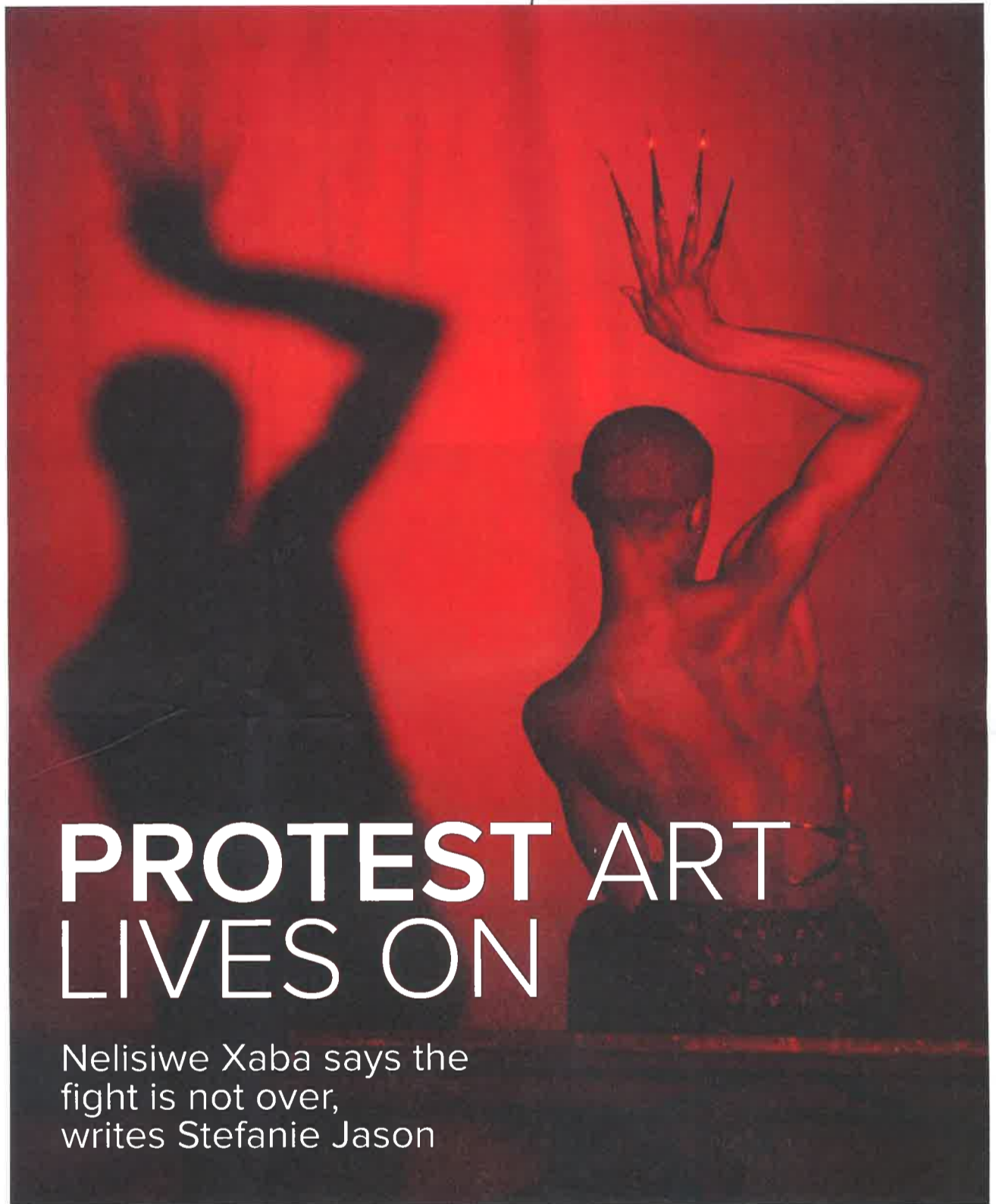
Xaba, who honed her craft at the Johannesburg Dance Foundation and the Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance in London, is not new to gender activism. From *They Look at Me and That's All They Think* to her collaborative work with Haitian choreographer Ketty Noel *Correspondences*, Xaba's work reads like the journal of a brown-skinned woman who has travelled around the world exhibiting her art on the walls of her body.

"I don't have an interest to put on my status that I'm an activist. I just am," says Xaba ahead of her upcoming show, *Fremde Tänze* (Foreign Dance). Created while participating in a residency in Freiburg, amidst the Black Forest in Southern Germany last year, the work was inspired by Xaba's research on some of the Modernist German choreographers from the early 20th century whose vocabulary was inspired by notions of exoticism gleaned from 'foreign' cultures. In this work Xaba created a piece that addresses exoticism and the gaze - a recurring topic for the star.

"Since last year I've started accepting the fact that I am [seen as] a queen of exoticism and the exotic," she says. "[My body is] political. I am aware that I travel more because I'm a black female. But what I'm interested in is the gaze and the angle of that gaze. The angle that you view or gaze from, is the point that it becomes political," she points out.

Xaba's expression of feeling exoticised as a black woman in the contemporary dance field and society is rooted in a history that can be traced to the 19th century such as with the eroticisation and representation of South African-born Sarah Baartman, who was put on display in Europe's 'human zoos', to African American dancer and actress Josephine Baker in early 20th-century, in France.

Centuries later, a similar gaze, especially on women, is perpetuated in popular culture from commercial music videos to high-fashion magazine spreads. Xaba's *Fremde Tänze* is not the only piece at the Dance Umbrella to critique this type of



PROTEST ART LIVES ON

Nelisiwe Xaba says the fight is not over, writes Stefanie Jason

"I'm interested in the gaze and the angle of that gaze."

othering and representation. Wena Mamela, choreographed by celebrated performer Mamela Nyamza, reflects on her life as a black South African woman while unpacking traditional roles assigned to women in dance and society.

A collaborative work between Tumbuka Dance Company and Company Nora Chipaumire will address how these issues are pertinent to men too. *Portrait of myself as my Father*, choreographed Chipaumire highlights male representation, masculinity and the black African body, while looking at issues around identity, specifically the "Zimbabwean self". Sunny Motau and Rachel Erdos's brainchild *Fight, Fight, Feathers*,

*F***ers*, performed by MIDM Company, explores the politics of masculinity, via the fight or flight theory.

Wrapping up the workshop, Xaba meditates on her controversial piece *Sarkozy Says 'Non' to the Venus*, which was designed to challenge the gaze in relation to contentious museum spaces in Europe, where the likes of Baartman were displayed like objects. "There's beauty in my work but not the kind of beauty you find in glossy magazines," she once told the City Press. "There's no way I can create work where we are just being beautiful, dancing and just gyrating."
— *Fremde Tänze* shows at the Dance Factory on March 14 & 15

