

BODIES OF RESISTANCE

Mamela Nyamza in a conversation with Lisa Tracy Michalik

What is behind the provocative title 'Black Privilege'? There aren't any Black privileges.

With the title I'm mainly asking questions: are there Black privileges – for a moment, for a second? I put something in the room that doesn't exist. The piece *Black Privilege* shows how, for example, you can have the best educational qualifications but still be unemployed. As an artist in South Africa, I have problems finding spaces where I can perform and teach. There are hardly any opportunities for Black people. The mainstream theatres are run by *whites*: they have the privilege of deciding who has access to the stage and who doesn't. I have the privilege of being educated. I have the privilege of moving my body on stage. *White* critics or *white* people in the audience expect me to dance "like Black people dance". They want to see a kind of "happy dance" from me. When they see my actual work and it doesn't correspond to their expectations, they don't understand it. But it is not a Black privilege that I am allowed to be on stage. That privilege is not one I have because of my colour.

Did you have a specific inspiration for this piece?

One great inspiration was Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. I was inspired by the heroines of South Africa who went unrecognized. There are a lot of great women who inspire me. Such as my late dance teacher Aline Westergaard. She helped me to become the artist I am today. And Germaine Acogny, the Queen of African Dance. She founded a school of African Dance in Senegal. Another important inspiration is the dancer and choreographer Judith Jamison. When I was ten years old, I was able to see her, a Black woman, dance a ballet solo. I could name countless others.

You often mix different dance styles in your work. Is there a political dimension to the dance elements you have chosen in *Black Privilege*?

The piece definitely has my own "Mamela signature". I have reached the point in my career where I use my body on stage as I wish, not as is expected of me. I refuse to copy what *white* artists do. When the media here in South Africa report about me, this is done by *white* journalists who then compare me to *white* artists or dead Black artists. They do not permit me to be myself. In order to be successful you need a *white* benefactor to open doors for you. We have no space to make art, to perform, to give something back to the community. And the worst thing is that many Black people are brainwashed by this "white supremacy". They think that everything *white* is automatically better. I take an active stance against that. I want to change the landscape of South African cultural politics. I do what I, a Black woman, want to do. That is the political dimension. I decide when, whether and how I move on stage.

On the subject of South Africa's cultural landscape: you're in the running to become the new Artistic Director of Dance Umbrella, the largest dance

festival in South Africa. If successful, you would become the first Black woman in this position. What changes would you make?

I want to open doors that have been closed to us and to destigmatize Black women in our society. People will be used to the work of the previous management. How will they react to me and the direction I want to take? Will potential sponsors trust me? Will any non-Black audiences come? Will I be able to fill the whole theatre here in my own country? In South Africa, music is thought of art but dance less so. I want to do something to change that. Most people are used to thinking of dance as commercial entertainment. My dance doesn't fit in with that. I want to open up the cultural landscape so that forms of dance such as mine can find their place. That's why I'm so proud of being the first dancer and choreographer to be the "featured artist" at the National Arts Festival. This is the largest arts festival in Africa. It means that my work is presented, celebrated and above all seen on a large platform. I want Black dancers in South Africa to be seen.

Translation: David Tushingam