THE ISANGO ENSEMBLE AND THE INDIGENIZATION OF OPERA IN POST-
APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA: U-CARMEN EKHAYELITSHA (2005), UNOGUMBE

By

ANGELIQUE MOUYIS

A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Music

Written under the direction of

Dr. Rebecca Cypess

And approved by

_______________________________________________

_______________________________________________

_______________________________________________

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May 2021
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Isango Ensemble and the Indigenization of Opera in Post-Apartheid South Africa:

_U-Carmen eKhayelitsha_ (2005), _Unogumbe_ (2013), and _Breathe Umphefumlo_ (2015)

by ANGELIQUE MOUYIS

Dissertation Director:
Dr. Rebecca Cypess

This dissertation discusses the three film operas by the Isango Ensemble, taking into account both Isango’s process of adaptation as well as their finished artistic product. In Chapter 1, I discuss the process of adaptation by tracking the ensemble’s journey from its first two productions at Spier Festival in late 2000–2001 (Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries and Carmen) to cementing the ensemble’s approach in the film_U-Carmen eKhayelitsha_ in 2005. These first two productions forecast the ensemble’s approach to content, instrumentation, and musical styles, and the re-imagination of narratives through gender-switching. Furthermore, this journey demonstrates how the South African ensemble adapted the medium of opera to suit its new-found context—that is, how the genre underwent a process of indigenization. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the film operas _Unogumbe_ (2013) and _Breathe Umphefumlo_ (2015), respectively, both of which adapt previously composed operas and cast them in new situations relevant to contemporary
South Africa. I show how adaptation of both plot and music alters the original meaning of the operas that form the bases of Isango’s work and refocuses them on the post-Apartheid South African context. In Chapter 2, I address Isango’s adaptation of Britten’s Noye’s Fludde, attending especially to its use of hymns and the inclusion of African hymns, both of which reflect a historical relationship with hymnody. I also discuss the new orchestration; gender-switching and the focus on women and girls; and Isango’s approach to filming, which incorporates live theatrical elements. In Chapter 3, I address indigenization through the hybridization of the genre with jazz and choral music, sound effects and “mickey-mousing,” and the juxtaposition of sound and sonic nothingness. Ultimately, I argue, Isango’s three film operas constitute a reinterpretation of the genre of opera for contemporary South African society.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank:

• My friends and family for their support.

• Rashakalimphani Muofhe and Simthembile Luti for providing English translations.

• My dear friend and collaborator Mkhululi Z. Mabija for our insightful discussions on the Xhosa culture, for creative dialogue, for providing me support throughout these years, and for writing the libretto of the opera *Bessie*, which forms the basis of the music of this dissertation.

• Megan-Leigh Adams, administrator of the Isango Ensemble, for putting all my questions forward to the Isango directors.

• The members of my committee: Dr. Robert Aldridge, Dr. Naomi André, Dr. Rebecca Cypess, and Dr. Scott Ordway.

I would especially like to thank:

• Dr. Robert Aldridge for inspiring me compositionally to find the drama in my music.

• My husband Niko for reading all of my work and providing feedback, for encouraging and believing in me, and my children Alexander and Lana for being the light of my life.

• My advisor, Rebecca Cypess, for continued support throughout my studies as a mentor and a fellow mother: for visiting me when I had my first baby during my studies when I did not know how I would manage. Thank you for encouraging me to attend the conference on post-Apartheid opera in Bayreuth with my ten-month-old
baby in 2018, where this whole research adventure began. I could do all of it because you told me it was possible.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS ..................................................................................vi
LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................vii
LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................ix

Introduction ....................................................................................................1

Chapter 1: Opening the Gate: Finding *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* ....................7
  Combining Talents: Dimpho Di Kopane (DDK) ........................................8
  The Outer Frame: Spier Music Festival meets Khayelitsha ....................9
  The Inner Frame: *Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries* and *Carmen* ..........14
  Getting Real: *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* on Film .....................................24

Chapter 2: *Unogumbe*: An Adaptation of Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde* ..........39
  Background ..................................................................................................40
  The Original ...............................................................................................42
  How Isango Approaches Hymnody: Adapting “Lord Jesus Think on Me” ....46
  From European to African Hymn ...............................................................51
  Orchestration: SATB Marimba Choir and Township Percussion ..........54
  Approaching Gender: Noye and Mr. Noye (and all their Children) ..........59
  The Embodiment of The Voice of God ......................................................63
  Theatricality and the Experience of Live Cinema ....................................64

Chapter 3: *Breathe Umphefumlo* (2015): Indigenization through Hybridization...69
Jazz Style and the Hybridization of Opera………………………………………………73

Introducing the Main Characters: Non-Diegetic Music and “Mickey-Mousing”.82

Conclusion……………………………………………………………………………………...88

Bibliography……………………………………………………………………………………90
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1. Opening Hymn, Noye’s Fludde, Benjamin Britten (vocal score)…………45

Figure 2.2. Isango’s SATB arrangement of “Lord Jesus Think On Me.”………………48

Figure 2.3. Unogumbe. 03:15. Hand-written subtitles of “Noye and her family.”…………………………………………………………………………………………51

Figure 2.4. Unogumbe. 03:23. Hand-written subtitles indicating “Mama Noye.”……51

Figure 2.5. Transcription of African Hymn “Watsho Lomfana.”…………………………52

Figure 2.6. SATB Marimba Choir…………………………………………………………………………57

Figure 2.7. Unogumbe. 26:01. Storm sequence with marimba choir and township percussion……………………………………………………………………………………………58

Figure 2.8. Unogumbe. 20:36. Mr. Noye and his Gossips……………………………………60

Figure 2.9. Unogumbe. Girl drawing and girl playing hopscotch in opening credits……61

Figure 2.10. Unogumbe. 32:21. Final Scene: Girls drawing rainbow…………………………63

Figure 3.1. Breathe Umphefumlo. 00:02:27. Graffiti from Lungelo’s Taxi Window: “Stop TB” and Hector Pieterson…………………………………………………………………73

Figure 3.2. Breathe Umphefumlo. 00:32:14. Steel pan band at the market………………77

Figure 3.3. Breathe Umphefumlo. 00:41:72. “The Great Zoleka”……………………………78

Figure 3.4. Vocal transcription of Zoleka’s Aria “As I Go By.”…………………………80–81

Figure 3.5. Breathe Umphefumlo. 00:03:51. Introduction of Lungelo with freeze frame……………………………………………………………………………………………………83

Figure 3.6. Breathe Umphefumlo. 00:03:59. Lungelo’s dream…………………………….83

Figure 3.7. Breathe Umphefumlo. 01:23:50. Final Scene: After Mimi’s death………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………86
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Order of events in the opening of *Unogumbe*…………………………………47
Introduction

“Isango” is the Zulu and Xhosa word for “gate” or “gateway.” This is a fitting name for the Isango Ensemble, since the ensemble opened the gates for theater and opera to enter not just any South African community, but that of the township of Khayelitsha, which is known as one of the poorest areas in Cape Town. Opera itself carries many connotations in South Africa: it is often perceived as a genre for the whites, since “non-whites” were not permitted to partake of the art form during Apartheid—whether as performers or audience members—in “whites only” opera houses. Opera also represents the legacy of the colonialists; it is a genre that functions in areas that can sustain it financially—that is, it is art for the rich.

In 2000, two British men from the Broomhill opera company, director Mark Dornford-May and music director Charles Hazlewood, upended these preconceptions by entering the township of Khayelitsha, identifying local talent, and putting on an opera, namely Carmen, at the Spier Festival in Stellenbosch. The opera was sung in English, with a few lines of dialogue translated into Xhosa and other local languages, and had references to the township setting. These were the first steps in the directors’ efforts at the indigenization of the art form, and their group would crystallize as the Isango Ensemble.

The ensemble’s work began in a context of a very young post-Apartheid South Africa, which ended in 1994, after which opera in the country took on a range of new aspects. Composers, librettists, and directors created new works and reinterpreted works

1 Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries, an adaptation of the Chester Mystery Plays, was also staged.
2 Anthony Fabian, Township Opera, Documentary (Elysian Films, 2002).
3 Among the extensive scholarship on opera in post-Apartheid South Africa, see Naomi André, Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018) and Naomi André, “Activist Operatic Spaces with New Narratives and Audiences as Puccini’s La Bohème Becomes Breathe
from the past to respond to the changing political and social landscapes. The Isango Ensemble has been among the leaders in the revitalization of opera in the post-Apartheid era. From the ensemble’s inception to the present, Mark Dornford-May and Pauline Malefane would remain the core of the ensemble, which would continue to adapt theatrical works and operas in an effort to make them “real”—accessible, relevant, and meaningful—for their community in South Africa. Malefane grew up in the township of Khayelitsha and studied at the College of Music in Cape Town, but she cut her studies short in 2000 when deciding to join Dornford-May’s ensemble.4 She was a young twenty-four-year-old when she was cast as the lead of the ensemble’s first staged opera, Carmen. (She later married Dornford-May.) She continues to be a lead performer, and is credited as co-founder and co-music director of Isango Ensemble on their website.5 As Leslie Duggan has explained, “The main artistic goal of the ensemble is to correct the problem of representation that Malefane noted after her first experience with opera by creating a space in which South Africans can see themselves and their way of living on stage.”6 Throughout this dissertation, I will show how the Isango Ensemble indigenized the art form of opera.

This dissertation examines how the Isango Ensemble adapts European operas to meet the aesthetic challenges of modern-day South Africa, rooting these operas in the South African context—specifically within contemporary life in the township of

---

Khayelitsha. I argue that these adaptations represent a clear response to the social realities of post-Apartheid South Africa. Moreover, in relocating the settings to South Africa and reframing them as engagements with contemporary social issues there, the Isango adaptations of European operas claim the musical genre of opera as a component of South African culture. While some adaptations by other artists jettison the genre of opera in favor of more popular musical idioms such as Broadway and hip-hop, Isango’s adaptations seem to insist on the incorporation of opera within the new South Africa.

The dissertation addresses three of Isango’s film operas: *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (2005), an adaptation of Georges Bizet’s *Carmen*; *Unogumbe* (2013) based on Benjamin Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde*; and *Breathe Umphefumlo* (2015), a reimagining of Giacomo Puccini’s *La Bohème*. The original European operas unfold in Seville in the 1830s, Medieval England, and the Latin Quarter of Paris in the 1840s with texts in French, English, and Italian, respectively. Isango repositions these narratives around the people and the township of Khayelitsha, while employing their own language—Xhosa. Significantly, they also adapt the operas’ musical language to encompass aspects of indigenous South African musical practice, juxtaposing that idiom with that of the European composers. These distinctive characteristics form the basis of Isango’s work; they comprise the lens through which their operas and other stage works are experienced.

This approach differentiates Isango from any other ensemble.

I address Isango’s process of adaptation with the help of Linda Hutcheon’s *Theory of Adaptation* and Hilde Roos’s concept of “indigenization” as found in her article “Indigenisation and History: How Opera in South Africa became South African
Opera.” Hutcheon explains that adaptation is both a process and a product, where neither exist in a vacuum. This dissertation takes into account both Isango’s process of adaptation as well as their product, i.e. Isango’s three film operas. Interviews I have conducted with director Mark Dornford-May and music director Charles Hazlewood also form an important foundation for my work.

In Chapter 1, I discuss the process of adaptation by tracking the ensemble’s journey from its first two productions at Spier Festival in late 2000–2001 (Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries and Carmen) to cementing the ensemble’s approach in the film U-Carmen eKhayelitsha in 2005. These first two productions forecast the ensemble’s approach to content, instrumentation, musical styles, and gender-switching. Furthermore, this journey demonstrates how the South African ensemble adapted to the medium of opera, and how the medium of opera adapted to its new-found context, which is a process of indigenization. In Roos’s words: “indigenisation seems to happen when the genre responds to issues regarding the social and political relevance or the survival of the cultural format,” and “the notion of indigenisation carries with it expectations of historical embeddedness, of time having passed and rituals and practices having had time to become sedimented and layered in new contexts.”

It is important to note that the Isango Ensemble has had several names over the years. At the end of 2000, the ensemble “put its collective head together” and decided on the Sotho name Dimpho Di Kopane or DDK (which means “combined talents”). Only

---

9 Roos, “Indigenisation and History,” 119.  
10 Ibid., 149.  
after the film *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (2005), would they change their name to the Isango Ensemble.\(^{12}\) In order to explain the ensemble’s process accurately, in Chapter 1, I will refer to the ensemble as *Dimpho Di Kopane* (DDK), and in the following chapters, I will refer to the ensemble as *Isango*.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the film operas *Unogumbe* (2013) and *Breathe Umphefumlo* (2015). I show how adaptation of both plot and music alter the original meaning of the operas that form the basis of Isango’s work and refocus it on the post-Apartheid South African context. In Chapter 2, I address Isango’s adaptation of Britten’s hymns and the inclusion of African hymns, both of which reflect a historical relationship with hymnody. I also discuss the new orchestration; gender-switching and the focus on girls; and Isango’s approach to filming that incorporates live theatrical elements. In discussing *Breathe Umphefumlo* in Chapter 3, I address indigenization through the hybridization of the genre with jazz and choral music, sound effects and “mickey-mousing,” and the juxtaposition of sound and nothingness.\(^{13}\)

As I investigate South African opera, I am aware that I am approaching the subject matter from a particular perspective, which I wish to acknowledge upfront. I was born in South Africa in the 1980s to Greek-Cypriot parents (my father was born in South Africa and my mother emigrated from Cyprus in her childhood). I attended a private Greek school in Johannesburg, which, I am proud to note, was founded by the late Advocate George Bizos, the Advocate of President Nelson Mandela. This school did not

---

\(^{12}\) From 2006–2011, the ensemble became Isango Portobello (with a producer from UK-based Portobello Pictures). In 2011, this collaboration officially ended, and the ensemble was named Isango.

\(^{13}\) “Mickey-mousing” is a film-music technique that refers to “the musical imitation of physical movement”; see Lea Jacobs, “Mickey Mousing Reconsidered,” in *Film Rhythm after Sound: Technology, Music, and Performance* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 58. I will discuss this in further detail in Chapter 3.
adhere to the “white-only” rules that were in place before 1994, and anyone of any race was allowed to attend. I remember important milestones in South African history such as when Nelson Mandela was released from prison, the period of the referendum on Apartheid, and the 1994 “free and fair” elections, the latter which occurred when I was twelve years old. I have been living outside South Africa for about ten years, and I acknowledge that discussing notions of inclusion are complex, and that cultural assumptions change; I am not up-to-date with the latest socio-cultural assumptions and expectations in South Africa as I have not lived there for some time. I also approach the work as a composer with a particular interest in the operatic form and musical theater, and so, the manner in which the music functions in opera to create drama is particularly meaningful to me. My dissertation composition, not included in the present document, is an opera I have written with collaborator and friend who is based in South Africa. It centers around a true South African story from the 1700s on the Wild Coast. The exploration of South African topics in opera is thus central to my creative work as well as my scholarship.
Chapter 1

Opening the Gate: Finding U-Carmen eKhayelitsha

Opera is known to be foreign to us—but I don’t look at it that way. Because we are doing it now.

—Pauline Malefane, Township Opera, 2002

In this chapter, I reach back to the days before the Isango Ensemble existed as such, when Dornford-May and Malefane worked on stage productions of Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries and Carmen. I argue that Susan Bennett’s model of the audience’s experience of theater can illuminate new aspects of the socio-cultural context of these works—including the composition of their cast and audience as well as the social spaces they inhabit. I explore the context in which the ensemble formed, and I track the evolution of its adaptation process by negotiating the realities of the socio-cultural environment to find their distinctive approach in the film U-Carmen eKhayelitsha in 2005. Reception of the ensemble’s work by South African audiences and critics sheds light on the prevailing cultural assumptions and notions of authenticity at the time. Furthermore, arriving at the film U-Carmen eKhayelitsha was itself a process of adaptation, as the ensemble sought out its unique approach, and it reveals how the ensemble found relevance within the European-dominated tradition of opera by breaking down the preconceived notions of the art form.

14 Fabian, Township Opera.
Combining Talents: Dimpho Di Kopane (DDK)

We all come from different parts of South Africa and we bring our different skills. Some are better at dancing. Some are better singers than dancers. And some are actors. But when we get here, we put it all together and that’s what makes it amazing.

—Bulelwa Cosa, company member

Tracing the development of Isango’s artistic voice requires us to reach back to its beginnings of how the ensemble came to be in 2000. In order understand the context of the ensemble’s first stage productions as well as its reception, I will refer to Susan Bennett’s model of “the audience’s experience of theatre” which conceives of the “frames” of a theatrical performance—the “outer frame,” “inner frame,” and their points of intersection.

The outer frame is concerned with theatre as a cultural construct through the idea of the theatrical event, the selection of material for production, and the audience’s definitions and expectations of a performance. The inner frame contains the event itself and, in particular, the spectator’s experience of a fictional stage world. This frame encompasses production strategies, ideological overcoding, and the material conditions of performance. It is the intersection of these two frames which forms the spectator’s cultural understanding and experience of theater.

These frames naturally intersect and “the relationship between the frames is always seen as interactive,” as Bennett explains: “cultural assumptions affect performances, and performances rewrite cultural assumptions.” The cultural assumptions embedded in the time and place space of the development of the Isango Ensemble included who should partake in the operatic artform, who the audience should be, what material is appropriate, and these assumptions are rooted in a landscape of a very young post-Apartheid South Africa.

18 Ibid., 2.
Africa, a nation striving for a new, all racially inclusive identity (what Nelson Mandela famously referred to as the “rainbow nation”). Cultural assumptions include the notion that, when articulating a new identity, one must choose which traditions should be kept or shed; typically, those that represent a repressive past should be shed. Opera, a European musical tradition roughly 400 years old, and one that previously excluded the “non-white” population in South Africa, might be seen as unsuitable conduit to express an emerging post-Apartheid South African identity. Isango’s work demonstrates that opera can, in fact, help to reflect, express, and shape such an identity.

**The Outer Frame: Spier Music Festival meets Khayelitsha**

Enter onto the scene two British men, director Mark Dornford-May and music director Charles Hazlewood, artistic directors of Broomhill opera in London, who were invited by Dick Enthoven, the owner of the Spier Wine Estate, to assemble a new opera company in Cape Town in 2000. Enthoven is a successful entrepreneur who lived overseas before deciding to return to South Africa in 1990 after the African National Congress (ANC) was unbanned. He wanted to re-invest in the country. In 1993, he bought the Spier Wine Estate and dreamed of making Spier “a user-friendly destination and treasured space in the hearts of all South Africans.”19 He believed he could achieve this dream through an annual arts festival. In 1996, the first Spier Arts Festival took place under the direction of Australian Brad Jarrett. At this time, its audiences consisted mostly of privileged, white people, and were not yet all-inclusive. The festival continued until

the end of 1999, after which Jarrett left to take on a new role for Opera Queensland. In 2000, Dornford-May declined Enthoven’s initial offer to become the new director of the Spier Festival, but he proposed to Enthoven that, instead, he would like to direct “an ensemble company, workshops, something genuinely South African.” Enthoven agreed to underwrite the costs of this project, and after assembling this company, Dornford-May and Hazelwood would direct a mostly Black South African production of *Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries* and *Carmen* at the Spier Music Festival. The cultural construct of this event brought together dichotomous elements, as is captured in the opening of the documentary *Township Opera*:

Stellenbosch, Cape Province: home to South Africa’s world-famous vineyards; one of the most privileged areas of the country, where little appears to have changed since this Spier Wine Estate was founded in 1692. Yet, only minutes away, lie the sprawling townships of Kayamandi and Khayelitsha. Last year, at the Spier Music Festival, these two worlds collided in the creation of Bizet’s *Carmen* and *The Mysteries*, an African version of the Chester Mystery Plays.

Who constituted the ensemble, where its performances took place, and the make-up of the audience are important aspects of the “cultural construct through the idea of the theatrical event” and feed into “the audience’s definitions and expectations of a performance.” As expressed in the passage quoted just above, the worlds of the townships and Spier country, socio-economically on polar ends of the spectrum—racially separate at the time—“collided” in the theatrical event through the “elitist” art form of

---

20 The type of material presented under Jarrett included orchestral concerts, opera productions, one-man shows, and individual acts.


22 *Yiimimangaliso* means “miracle” in Xhosa.

23 The cast included both Black and white members at the time.

24 Fabian, *Township Opera*.

opera. The Spier festival, which had already been successfully running for four years, would usually draw “an exclusive audience to see primarily imported performers.”

Although racial data on the audience is not available, it is safe to assume that the audience consisted almost entirely of privileged white South Africans. However, Dornford-May and Hazlewood took active steps to shake up the ingrained notions of who could participate in the operatic art form in South Africa as both performers and audience members. The Spier festival aimed to “find new audiences” by providing free buses to people from the nearest townships, setting aside one hundred seats for every performance on a “pay-what-you-can” basis. “Bridging the gap between the two cultures” was an important aspect for Enthoven, as he later explained in an interview: “WASPS from Constantia were interfacing with people from townships. Unfortunately, in most circumstances, the two groups would rarely meet as equals, but here they were interacting with each other.” By physically changing the socio-economic and racial make-up of the audience (and the cast), the festival expanded the cultural construct of the outer frame as “the audience’s definitions and expectations of a performance” expanded. Over time, the performances directed by Dornford-May and Hazlewood would rewrite or reimagine numerous cultural assumptions related to opera.

The “collision of worlds” referred to in the documentary Township Opera began with the audition process. After auditioning potential members in expected venues such as music colleges and the Civic Theatre in Johannesburg, Dornford-May and Hazlewood

26 Fabian, Township Opera.
27 Ibid.
realized that this was not a way to find local talent. They changed their strategy. They contacted the choral networks of the townships, and held auditions there instead, working to overcome any transport problems for locals who wished to audition. Over a period of six months, they auditioned 2,000 people, 40 of whom became members of the ensemble. This lyric-theatre company consisted largely of Black members, and was called Dimpho Di Kopane (DDK), which means “combined talents” in Sotho.

Dornford-May’s and Hazlewood’s efforts in creating the ensemble and adapting the European genre of opera did not go without challenges, as they would seek to unsettle “the audience’s definitions and expectations of a performance.” Dornford-May was well aware of the ingrained perceptions on both sides of the socio-economic and racial divide that could act as barriers to what they were trying to achieve. During the rehearsal process for the Spier festival, Dornford-May noted, “The performing arts are under pressure in South Africa. They are considered Eurocentric, they are considered representative of the old regime rather than the new regime, so in a way, it’s quite a fight.”

Hazlewood has described the significant personal challenges in the lives of the ensemble, as well as the critical reception of the staging of Carmen:

Of the 40 members, only three had professional training and five members died of AIDS in the company’s first year. In January 2001, the company’s debut of Bizet’s Carmen opened to damning South African reviews, with one newspaper claiming it was preposterous for black South Africans to perform western opera but later came to London where it was deemed “The Carmen by which all other should be measured” [by] The Observer.
Mounting a production of Bizet’s *Carmen* in this context immediately invoked notions of “authenticity” and “appropriateness” that form part of the cultural assumptions of performers and audience members in relation to the genre of opera. In a TEDx talk, Hazlewood expounds on the local reaction and the conversation that occurred during the time:

One of the first shows we did was *Carmen*, a great grand slam opera by Georges Bizet, and very quickly, we had a bit of a backlash from the rather conservative old opera-going opera-supporting audience of Cape Town, where the company was based. These people were saying: “This is inauthentic—for Black singers from a township to be performing this Euro-centric form—opera. This is inauthentic, inappropriate. More to the point that *Carmen* is an opera about bullfighting. Now, Black people in a township in South Africa—they know nothing of bullfighting—again, “this is inauthentic,” they cried.\(^{35}\)

The artistic team would respond to these notions of authenticity by referring to the authorship of the original opera itself:

Well, here’s a fact: Georges Bizet, French composer, wrote *Carmen*, which is an opera about Seville, a city in Spain, a country he never even visited. So already we have a deeply flawed or inauthentic premise, don’t we? *Carmen*, a Spanish story, written by a Frenchman. So, we put this to the opera-going fraternity of Cape Town. They weren’t particularly impressed.\(^{36}\)

With a diverse cast, DDK’s performances at Spier shook the audience’s definitions of opera and its expectations of operatic performance. So, too, did the active efforts of Dornford-May and Hazlewood to diversify the make-up of the audience, by transporting locals from the near townships. The theatergoer’s experience of the story presented on stage would further redefine expectations.

---


\(^{36}\) Ibid.
The Inner Frame: Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries and Carmen

According to Bennet, the “inner frame” refers to the theatrical event itself, “in particular, the spectator’s experience of a fictional stage world.” The first two productions by DDK were Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries (a collection of Chester Mystery Plays dating to the thirteenth century that are based on biblical stories) and Bizet’s Carmen (an opera). Both of these works require attention, as they played an essential role in establishing the ensemble’s approach, its process of adaptation, as well as the content that it would continue to pursue: operatic adaptations and Bible stories. An example of an adaptation of a biblical tale will be discussed in Chapter 2, an analysis of Isango’s film Unogumbe, which was an adaptation of Benjamin Britten’s community opera Noye’s Fludde, based on the story of Noah’s Ark.

Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries

The Chester Mystery Plays were an important part of Dornford-May’s childhood. He grew up in Chester, England, and as a young boy, he acted in a Chester Mystery Play that was directed by his father. However, there was also a more practical reason why Dornford-May chose to adapt this set of plays in the South African context: “because Christianity is one of the linking factors across all the cultures.” Reinhold Zwick further explains: “crossing the immense tribal differences in language and culture this [Bible] story proved to be a unifying tradition, given that ninety percent of South-Africans are

39 Fabian, Township Opera.
Christian and therefore familiar with the Gospels.” The cycle of original plays, which are usually performed over three days, was adapted to run for just two hours, and included South African song and dance. The story “begins at the Creation and ends at the Ascension.” In the South African context, stories from the Bible would be familiar to an audience of any race or socio-economic background. The novelty of the performance consisted of the stories’ dramatization in a contemporary African style.

DDK’s “Africanization” of these tales generated some controversy. Dornford-May explains: “When we did the mystery plays and the guy playing God stood up at the beginning and says, ‘I am God,’ people walked out, straight away, because he happened to be Black. Those are the negative stories—the positive stories outweigh the negative a hundred to one.” It is the audience’s experience of the intersection of the outer frame (DDK performing at Spier) with the inner frame (Yiimangaliso: The Mysteries, in which God is played by a Black man) that resulted in an adverse reaction from members of the audience. For the audience members who remained in their seats, such a performance may have played a part in rewriting cultural assumptions. In reimagining The Mysteries for a mostly Black cast from the township of Khayelitsha, Dornford-May was simultaneously reimagining the audience and rewriting the assumptions of its members.

---

41 Riding, “Theater: A Racial Event That Became a Hit.”
42 Fabian, Township Opera.
43 In an interview conducted by the author with Dornford-May, he explained that the reaction was quite violent—about 50 members of the audience walked out on the first night of performances.
In her discussion of adaptations across literary and theatrical genres, Linda Hutcheon highlights the importance of the new context of an adaptation, and how the changes made can impact the meaning of the work radically.

[Adaptations] all have a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture. …*when* and *where* are the keywords for the exploration of what can happen when stories “travel”—when an adapted text migrates from its context of creation to the adaptation’s context of reception. Because adaptation is a form of repetition without replication, change is inevitable, even without any conscious updating or alteration of setting. And with change come corresponding modifications in the political valence and even the meaning of stories. …with what I call *transculturation* or *indigenization* across cultures, languages, and history, the meaning and impact of stories can change radically.\(^{44}\)

Because the biblical stories of the Chester Mystery Plays are so well known, the ensemble was able to indigenize them by using local languages. According to Zwelibanzi Sibiya, the Assistant Director of the production, five or more local languages were used, including English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho.\(^ {45}\) Significantly, the use of languages was not compartmentalized, or separated into different sections of the piece, but lived symbiotically in the inner frame: “every performer played in his or her first language. Adam might talk to Eve in English and she reply in Zulu. Or Adam question God in Afrikaans and he respond in Zulu, Xhosa, English or Afrikaans.”\(^ {46}\) The treatment of languages reflected the social realities of a diverse nation—one in which residents speak eleven official languages, and where many people speak more than one language but are, in theory, part of one South African narrative. The significance of this multilingual performance lies in its easy ability to indigenize the stories. As Dave Ritch, Associate Director of the ensemble, explains: “I think you want to perform the best works

\(^{44}\) Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, xvi.
\(^{45}\) Fabian, *Township Opera*.
that you possibly can, and the best works know no borders, no language barriers…

Wagner and Verdi begged to have their operas performed in the language of their audience, and if it’s good enough for Wagner and Verdi, it’s certainly good enough for the rest of us.”

Just as the performance of *Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries* used a cross-section of languages, it also employed a cross-section of local musical traditions. Hazlewood explains:

> We put together a kind of library of South African music in the broadest sense, I mean, from Afrikaans folk songs through to Zulu war chants through to Xhosa hymns of welcome, Sotho lullabies—the whole works, and then we started to sort of devise with the company how we would use any of that music and in what particular context. And in addition to primarily vocal choral work, we were also using a variety of non-instruments.

In addition to the South African material, Church Latin and Protestant hymns were also included. This inclusion of hymnody would later form an important part of Isango’s approach, as I will discuss in Chapter 2.

The ensemble’s approach to the adaptation as a whole was a collaborative one: rather than the directors making all decisions about languages and musical works, all members of the group contributed aspects of their South African experience to create the performed work. This collaborative, shared decision-making would form the hallmark of DDK’s approach to productions going forward. Instead of the director dictating what an African version of the story should be, the “local version” of the story grew organically out of the contributions of the local ensemble members themselves. Furthermore, by

---

47 Fabian, *Township Opera*.
48 Ibid.
telling familiar stories through a soundscape of diverse South African music, what Bennet calls the “ideological overcoding,” suggests that all parties—cast and audience—are part of a single narrative. This system emerges from a shared experience in which all cross-sections of the population are represented, musically and linguistically, in one theatrical encounter. Physical places, such as Spier and Khayelitsha, conceptually distant, come together through the experience of the work and its performance. Dornford-May was conscious of the outer frame of the theatrical experience and the impact it has on audiences. He explains:

I think if we were working in a hall in Khayelitsha or Kayamandi in one of the townships then it would be fine, but then we would be preaching to the converted in a way. I think doing the work we are doing here at Spier actually has an impact right across the board within South Africa, and so, I think it’s very important that we are seen to bridge that gap between those two cultures.50

The group’s use of unconventional instruments is another theme that would persist in its later work, including the film opera Unogumbe. Instead of traditional instruments, the group used objects from the environment to create the soundscape of the performance. What Hazlewood refers to as “non-instruments” might also be called “found instruments” or “township percussion.” Examples include “oil drums, bottles, wooden boxes and even a bouncing rubber tire.”51 “Everything is accompanied by percussion and song: drumming with tires, drumming with sticks and oil drums, drumming on chests and thighs and the wooden floors of the old theatre.”52 The rhythms played on these objects would support the most important and vital part of the instrumentation—the voices of the ensemble. It is worth mentioning the importance of

---

50 Fabian, Township Opera.
51 Riding, “Theater: A Racial Event That Became a Hit.”
the choral tradition in this respect: even though some members were considered “untrained” in conventional operatic terms, they had received choral training as members of local choirs, which are numerous and widespread, in the form of school choirs, church choirs, and professional groups.

The ensemble would continue to perform its Yiimangaliso: The Mysteries in the following years, touring the South African ensemble both locally and abroad. Around 2008, there would be a key change to the adaptation: the actor who plays God and Jesus, who was first cast as a Black man, would be played instead by a Black woman, specifically, Pauline Malefane. The actor who originally played God and Jesus, Vumile Nomanyama, left the ensemble as he wanted to pursue a career in teaching. Dornford-May insists that switching gender was not the main reason for making this change:

Looking around the company at that point in time, the person with the ability, the strength and the charisma to take over the role was Pauline. So, it wasn’t really a conscious thing about casting a woman so much as casting the performer who was most appropriate for the role.

And again that’s something we now do with Isango pretty consistently… Often the sex of the performer, or how the performer would identify is not necessarily relevant to how they would be cast; which works again in that sense of breaking the fourth wall and all sorts of things… but within that, we were well aware that we were making a comment about the sexuality of God.⁵³

Hazlewood, however, insists that the change of role was indeed about gender, and that it was intended as a provocation:

Of course it was about gender—why wouldn’t you want to be a bit provocative and have a woman God? …. There’s no-one on the planet who is better suited to playing that role than Pauline Malefane. She sort of is God, really—it was a master stroke.⁵⁴

---

Switching gender roles and focusing on women would become a hallmark of the ensemble’s approach.\textsuperscript{55} According to Dornford-May, Malefane was the first ever Black female God (and Jesus) that played in theaters in London and America in \textit{The Mysteries}, and the reaction was strong and positive. He contextualizes the change in reaction, acknowledging that the initial performances were only six years after South Africa became democratic, whereas when Malefane played the role, much more time (about 15 years) had passed: “So, people got more accustomed to the idea of that particular role being played by someone non-white.”\textsuperscript{56}

Cultural expectations and definitions were broadened through the theatrical experience as well as the passage of time, and this affected reception of the racial and gender identity of the characters. Roos explains: “the notion of indigenization carries with it expectations of historical embeddedness, of time having passed and rituals and practices having had time to become sedimented and layered in new contexts.”\textsuperscript{57} The ensemble’s adaptation of Yiimimangaliso: \textit{The Mysteries} reflects the indigenization of the a biblical stories which previously could not be perceived outside of racial and gender barriers.

DDK created a socially and politically relevant production, what Dornford-May would call “genuinely South African,” through numerous means: by adapting biblical content that would be relevant to most South Africans, by using a cross-section of languages and musical traditions, by representing the Black racial majority on stage, and by bringing diversity to the audience. In Roos’s words, “indigenisation seems to happen

\textsuperscript{55} In \textit{Unogumbe}, the character of Noah is played by a woman, Malefane.
\textsuperscript{56} Mark Dornford-May, Interview by author, Skype, January 19, 2021.
\textsuperscript{57} Roos, “Indigenisation and History: How Opera in South Africa Became South African Opera,” 149.
when the genre responds to issues regarding the social and political relevance or the survival of the cultural format.” In their first foray into opera, many of these features persisted.

_Carmen: DDK’s First Operatic Stage Production_

I used to think often opera is some kind of an artwork for privileged people, in this regard, I would say for white people with a lot of money because even some other white people still feel that opera is not for them.

—Zwelibanzi Sibiya, Assistant Director

I just love opera—nobody told me about opera. But when I was in high school, I was singing in a school choir, I used to go to the library in town and then take some LPs—we used to take LPs and listen to opera LPs.

—Pumeza Matshikiza, Frasquita in Carmen

Georges Bizet’s _Carmen_, which premiered in 1875, remains one of the most popular European operas. The opera is based on Prosper Mérimée’s novella with a libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy. Although it is most often described as a story about a _femme fatale_, it continues to be adapted to tell a wide array of stories, as it is layered with issues regarding race, class, and gender. Susan McClary explains, “the opera continues to play along important faultlines of racial, class and gendered Otherness, however they may be construed at any given historical moment.” The depth and multi-layering of social and cultural issues provided an opportunity for DDK to reimagine the opera in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa. Because of _Carmen’s_ complex meanings, it is appropriate that this adaptation became the ensemble’s first staged opera.

---

58 Ibid., 119.
59 Fabian, _Township Opera_.
60 Ibid.
The first step to indigenizing the opera and making it relevant to the cast and the audience would be to alter the language. Carmen’s original French libretto was given a new English translation by Rory Bremner, a British satirist and accomplished linguist. Most of the spoken dialogue was then translated into Xhosa. Although the sung material was in English, the use of the Xhosa language in the opera created a connection between speakers of the language and the operatic medium, especially when that particular language has never lived in that art form. Malefane explains, “it makes the audience feel proud of their languages when it’s used in an opera.”

In DDK’s stage production, the opera was also cut down to two hours and accompanied by a traditional orchestra. Although the setting had not yet been relocated to Khayelitsha, the scenic design had “an aspect of township to it” as the stage was surrounded with corrugated metal or wood. The costuming was not Spanish, but it had more references to that mode of dress than it did to South African costumes.

An aspect that stands out in the production is the characters’ relationships to the orchestra and the audience. The character of Carmen interacted with the orchestra during the narrative. At one point, she would ask for her music and start playfully conducting the orchestra from the stage. Maintaining a relationship with the orchestra while onstage and directly addressing and communicating with the audience (that is, breaking the “fourth wall”) are common features of the ensemble’s stage work. Dornford-May explains:

… there seems to be no sense in pretending that the audience don’t exist, so a relationship with them is very important. And it’s certainly grown. Right from the

---

64 Fabian, Township Opera.
beginning, …all the performers were on the stage when the audience came in for Carmen. Pauline was sort of finishing getting dressed in a great big mirror, but, like she was the actress, getting ready to go on stage, rather than the character, but all of the characters were around as well. As the overture started, they gradually left, leaving Pauline finishing off getting ready in the mirror.⁶⁶

Breaking the fourth wall is not a new technique, but it is particularly interesting in this context, especially in a serious staged opera. As mentioned in the introduction, common preconceptions about the operatic form are that it is very exclusive, and very stylized—perhaps distant in some ways. In performing this opera to audiences at Spier, which included audience members from Khayelitsha, the cast is inviting the audience to experience opera by directly addressing them during the show and by offering an opportunity to engage with the characters of the opera. This conscious interplay between the outer and inner frames offers another mode of engagement for the spectator.

Both Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries and Carmen opened to rave reviews when touring in London in 2001. Only by touring the production, having sold out and extending the run, did the ensemble receive the validation that its performances could indeed hold their own in the European operatic tradition. Hazlewood explains:

In a funny way, it’s only people from outside the country who can see what lies within. I think it’s probably much harder for people within to see it because they’ve grown up so believing and having it drummed into their heads that South African ain’t good enough.⁶⁷

After opening night at Wilton’s Music Hall, Tim Rice, world-renowned lyricist, commented: “I didn’t feel that this is African; I thought, this is great international opera. I

⁶⁶ Ibid.
⁶⁷ Fabian, Township Opera.
didn’t think this is *Carmen* done African style; I thought it was *Carmen* done brilliantly. That was the thing that came over first.”

**Getting Real: *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* on Film**

*U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* was the ensemble’s first feature film. It was also the first filmed opera created in Southern Africa. Film is a completely different medium to theater, and in adapting a theatrical production to this new medium, multiple changes needed to be made. In this film, Dornford-May takes many steps to make the story appear “real” to the audience and reflect South African life in Khayelitsha, thus further indigenizing Bizet’s *Carmen*. As Dornford-May explained,

> We were going to translate grand opera into a different culture, language and medium. Yet one of the most successful things about the film is the way this transition works.

It was a significant point in DDK’s process of adaptation to transfer its work, “something genuinely South African,” to the medium of film. As Lindiwe Dovey points out, this is part of a larger “contemporary trend in which Western canonical texts are being self-confidently transformed within African contexts and claimed as part of human history.” Through its easy dissemination, the film version of the opera increased the reach and impact of the opera over its live performances. The experience of opera in Khayelitsha became open to the world, likewise garnering attention for DDK: the film

---

68 Ibid.
71 Dornford-May in Riding, “Theater: A Racial Event That Became a Hit.”
72 Davies and Dovey, “Bizet in Khayelitsha: U-Carmen EKhayelitsha as Audio-Visual Transculturation,” 42.
ultimately won a Golden Bear Award in 2005 for Best Film, the highest award in the Berlin Film Festival.

In this section, I will address this adaptation from theater to film by examining DDK’s approach to storytelling (the characters and plot), the soundscape (transitioning from Seville to music-making in the township), and the method of filming and recording in the environment to create a sense of immediacy and engagement.

In order to understand the context of the film, one must acknowledge previous Carmen films that sought to connect with contemporary audiences. These include two Black American adaptations: Oscar Hammerstein’s Broadway Musical Carmen Jones (1953) starring Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge and Carmen: A Hip Hopera (2001) produced by MTV and starring hip-hop superstar Beyoncé. Carmen Jones takes place around World War II in the setting of an African-American community, while Carmen: A Hip Hopera is set in modern-day Philadelphia and Los Angeles. In her book Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement, Naomi André dedicates a chapter discussing these contemporary Black adaptations of Carmen in addition to U-Carmen eKhayelitsha. In the chapter titled “Carmen: From Nineteenth-Century France to Settings in the United States and South Africa in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries,” André sets out a detailed discussion posing the questions of who is in the story, who speaks and interprets the story, and the notion of Black place and space (the latter particularly in Carmen Jones).73 Her critical engagement with these films brings to light the new meanings that these adaptations have created for new audiences.

73 André, Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement, 120–66.
I argue that these earlier adaptations provide important context for *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, since their creators strove to make the story speak to contemporary audiences. However, unlike DDK’s adaptation, these other two adaptations not only set the stories in new locations, but also alter the music: in the Hammerstein version, songs were used from Bizet’s original score yet vocally presented in Hammerstein’s idiom of musical theater, while, for the most part, keeping the original orchestrations.

Furthermore, the function of several of the songs also changed in the altered plot. *Carmen: A Hip Hopera* uses an updated, mostly original score, predominantly in the R&B/hip-hop style. DDK’s interpretation of *Carmen*, by contrast, intentionally adheres closely to the original score and orchestration, while altering its libretto to Xhosa. Musically, the ensemble does not stray from the operatic medium—the music and operatic mode of singing remains largely unaltered from the original, while the surrounding narrative tools are manipulated. In their article “Bizet in Khayelitsha: U-Carmen eKhayelitsha as Audio-Visual Transculturation,” James Davies and Lindiwe Dovey explain how Hazlewood “insist[ed] upon the mutual exclusivity of the film’s audile and visual worlds: the pure ‘authentic’ music of Bizet on one hand, and the pure ‘authentic’ locale of the township on the other.”

I contend that this reflects the ensemble’s relationship with the genre of opera itself—it is unapologetic in its adoption of the genre to tell their story. The ensemble asserts opera as a part of real life in Khayelitsha, existing alongside other cultural traditions.

While Hammerstein and Beyoncé altered not only the narrative of *Carmen*, but also its music and vocal style, all in an effort to make the work seem more

---

“contemporary,” DDK’s unapologetic use of the genre of opera claims opera as part of the contemporary South African experience. Indeed, an interview that I conducted with Hazlewood clarified that he seeks intentionally to undermine the commonly received associations of opera with class and privilege:

I find labels very, very frustrating—I am not a fan of labels…For me the word “opera” has very unfortunate connotations, because those are connotations to do with income bracket, to do with class, to do with education, to do with privilege by and large—I have no interest in that. I only have interest in telling stories and opera when it works well is the most evolved and extraordinary way of telling a story in so many different ways all at the same time: through words, through movement, through song, through the music working as an exo-psychological character in the drama driving you forward, telling you things that which character can’t reveal or don’t know yet. It’s an amazing thing… But the very word “opera” is off-putting because it’s outside the experience of most people on the planet. We wanted to retail it [Carmen] as a visceral story that somehow feels like a truly South African story. It’s just story-telling at the end of the day with some banging good tunes and some amazing voices to make those tunes airborne. I don’t know if we were making an opera at all. No, we were making a great piece of musical film. 75

This position resonates with Naomi André’s argument that opera—a multidimensional genre that allows for the expression of multiple voices and perspectives—represents an ideal medium through which to explore the multivalent experience of South African society. 76 This is true despite the fact that opera scholars rarely discuss the genre in Africa, and that operas about Black characters situated in a poor African township are quite atypical. 77 André explains:

[Opera] can give voice to the different experiences that exist outside the mainstream; with the participation of black composers and librettists behind the scenes, black bodies and embodied stories on the stage, and black audience members interpreting the performance, opera compellingly expresses multiple vantage points that have not been previously engaged. 78

76 André, Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement, 6.
77 Ibid., 56.
78 Ibid., 6.
DDK’s film adaptation of *Carmen* asserts the vision that opera can be used as a means of exploring social and cultural issues in contemporary South Africa.

**From Carmen to U-Carmen: The Indigenization of Language, Character, and Plot**

DDK further indigenized the story of Carmen on film by translating the entire libretto to Xhosa. It was translated from various English texts and the original French by Malefane and company member Andiswa Keda. Hilde Roos explains that “the adaptation of a libretto to the ‘linguistic and cultural background’ of the adopted country certainly points towards opera production becoming embedded in the local environment and can therefore be interpreted as a sign of indigenisation.”

DDK fully indigenizes the opera by relocating the narrative to the township of Khayelitsha and by altering the characters and plot. DDK’s film adaptation strips away the racial difference between the protagonist and the rest of the community that exists in Henri Halévy’s libretto for Bizet’s opera: U-Carmen is not a member of the Romani people, nor an exotic outsider, but a member of the majority Black community of the township of Khayelitsha. Santisa Viljoen and Marita Wenzel have argued that, by turning Carmen into a cultural insider, Isango frame her “otherness” as a result of her wish for freedom from male domination. While expanding on the complexity of the new Carmen’s character, Viljoen and Wenzel also illustrate that through ellipsis—that is, the

---

79 Davies and Dovey, “Bizet in Khayelitsha: U-Carmen EKhayelitsha as Audio-Visual Transculturation.”
81 In the article “The Same, yet Different: Re-Encoding Identity in *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*,” *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* 13, no. 1–2 (2016): 53–70, Santisa Viljoen and Marita Wenzel explore the identity formation of Carmen, as compared to the original novella by Prosper Mérimée, the libretto by Halevy, and the opera by Bizet.
deletion of certain scenes—as well as cinematic techniques such as the close-up, Isango sheds light on Carmen’s inner world. These techniques render Carmen less a caricature and more a multi-faceted character.

U-Carmen’s life resembles that of other women in Khayelitsha—she works at a cigarette factory, and she is a single mother. This “de-layering” of the characters’ social situations allows for a more complex portrayal of Carmen herself; here, her differences (which become her “fatal flaw”) stem from her strength of character, not her ethnic descent. This, in turn, allows for the reimagining of Carmen’s story in a way that is relevant to South Africans. It casts her as a strong woman who does not bow down to the will of men, but as someone who chooses freedom in a male-dominated society. This change is noteworthy in the context of Isango’s oeuvre, since strong women protagonists always appear at the center of the narrative, even if the original story does not obviously call for this.82

Both Mérimeé’s novella and Bizet’s Carmen have a misogynistic angle: They exoticize Carmen, who forces Don José to submit to her other-worldly powers. In the end, Halévy’s libretto suggests that Carmen herself is to blame for having brought about her own murder by Don José. While in Halévy’s libretto, Don José and Zuniga are both part of the dragoons, in U-Carmen eKhayelitsha, the characters of Don José and Zuniga (called “Jongi” and “Captain Gantana”) are now police officers. Dornford-May deepens the plot and the character of Don José by using aspects of Mérimeé’s novella. For example, in the novella, Don José reveals to the narrator that he has previously committed murder. Dornford-May uses this in U-Carmen: through the use of flashbacks,

---

82 In Isango’s adaptation of Britten’s Noye’s Fludde, the protagonist, Noye is a woman; I will discuss this further on in this dissertation.
we see Jongi (Don José’s character) accidentally killing his brother in a scuffle over an argument about his brother’s wife. Furthermore, his brother’s wife is Micaela (now called “Nomakhaya”). In Bizet’s opera and in the film, Micaela is a foil to Carmen—the “good girl” whom Don José/Jongi’s mother approves of. In U-Carmen, she is also Jongi’s brother’s widow. This connection adds an extra layer of obligation for Jongi—the woman he should be with is Nomakhaya, but his obsession with Carmen prevents him from this unspoken obligation.

The audience sees additional hints of Jongi’s dangerous nature: When Carmen argues with Jongi, berating him for deserting her during her dance for him, Jongi exclaims that he is called back to the barracks. When failing to calm her down, he grabs her by the neck and pushes her back into the shebeen. Indeed, the audience later learns that Jongi beats Carmen frequently. Carmen is a victim of domestic violence, which is unfortunately an all-too-common story in the lives of South African women. Dornford-May explains that he wanted to reflect this social reality in the film:

I think it’s very important that art is not just about entertainment—it has to carry a message. For me it was important that [the film] commented on society. We wanted to comment about the position of women in society—that there’s still a lot of violence against women, and I think where Pauline’s Carmen differs from previous Carmens is that instead of just being a femme fatale there is a sense of a very strong independent woman resisting what men want her to be. Even at the last minute she says, “I was born free, and I’m going to die free.” So even at that point in her life she’s making a decision to stay herself, to stay independent.83

While the original characters of Carmen and Don José become more complex in DDK’s film adaptation, Escamillo’s role in the film is reduced. Escamillo (now “Lulamile Nkomo”) is not a bullfighter, but a successful opera singer who has been

83 Dornford-May in Davies and Dovey, “Bizet in Khayelitsha: U-Carmen eKhayelitsha as Audio-Visual Transculturation,” 43.
studying in New York and returns to his home, Khayelitsha. The love-triangle we see in Halévy’s libretto between Don José, Carmen, and Escamilo that eventually leads to Carmen’s demise is no longer at the center of DDK’s film. Instead, Lulamile’s role is lessened—he is made a side character, even though he does express an interest in Carmen, as do many of the other men in Khayelitsha. The drama of Carmen and Jongi’s relationship stems from their own incompatibility, and from Carmen losing interest in him because of his dangerous nature—not because she has moved onto someone else. Arias such as the famous “Toreador Song” of Escamilo are not part of this adaptation, nor is Don José’s “Flower Song.” Neither of these songs does anything to further the plot in the film medium, and so they are omitted. The realism of film medium eliminates the need for Jongi to pontificate around Carmen’s flower that he kept; the fact that we see him keep it, and that Carmen notices it too, is enough. These omissions are necessary to keep a sense of realism in the narrative, one that Dornford-May strove for throughout the film.

Also in an effort to project a sense of realism in Khayelitsha, the film adaptation moves the site of Carmen’s murder. It does not occur outside of the bullfighting arena, but rather, more realistically, outside a large concert hall where Lulamile is about to perform. Carmen and her girlfriends are part of the choir supporting his singing. The concert hall is teeming with fans. The scene between Carmen and Jongi does not refer to Lulamile at all—the drama is focused on these two characters, and emphasizes Jongi’s obsession, which makes the scene all more devastating. The end of the scene reads as follows:

*JONGI pushes CARMEN outside the concert hall.*

JONGI: So you love me no more? So you love me no more?
CARMEN: No, I love you no more.
JONGI: I still adore you, Carmen. My heart still burns with passion.
CARMEN: What do you want from me? You’re being ridiculous.
JONGI: I swear I’m still in love with you.
   Carmen if it’s your desire, I’ll be a smuggler,
   I’ll do whatever you ask, whatever you want.
   Carmen please don’t leave me
   Remember what we had
   Our love burned with passion!
   Please don’t leave me now!
CARMEN: Carmen’s not scared of death.
   Free I was born, and free is how I’ll die.
JONGI has a scuffle with CARMEN.
JONGI: I’ll ask you one more time, you bitch! To come with me...
CARMEN: No! No! Here’s your ring, the stupid ring you gave me… Take it!
CARMEN throws the ring.
JONGI (spoken): Down to hell!
JONGI grabs CARMEN. JONGI stabs CARMEN.
CARMEN’s friends and LULAMILE rush through the concert halls doors
to CARMEN’s dead body which is leaning against the wired fence.
JONGI: You can take me away! I killed her.

The words sung in the original scene, in which Don José asks Carmen if she loves Escamillo, are not uttered or even suggested here. She does not sing the words “Je l’aime” (“I love him”), which are so dramatically significant in the French libretto, and also the final straw that leads to Don José murdering Carmen. Mérimeé’s novella and Bizet’s Carmen suggest that Carmen is at fault and brings her own murder upon herself. By omitting her relationship with another man, U-Carmen eKhayelitsha portrays her as an innocent victim, and the audience can truly empathize with her.

Sounds and Spaces: From Seville to Township

U-Carmen eKhayelitsha smoothly transitions from sounds and spaces of Bizet’s Seville to those of modern-day Khayelitsha. As the setting changes, so, too, does the work’s musical language; music-making that is part of everyday life in Khayelitsha is on
display. For example, shortly after the opening of the film, we see Carmen arriving late to a choir rehearsal. She is part of a choir, together with the other women who work with her at a local cigarette factory. This reflects the reality that choirs are common in the township, and this is integrated into the narrative. Furthermore, while Bizet’s overture is playing, we enter the cigarette factory where the workers are singing anti-Apartheid freedom songs, where they ululate and drum on the table and roll cigarettes. The non-diegetic sounds of the orchestra are almost at the same volume level of the diegetic songs of the cigarette workers, presenting a clash of two traditions. This introduces the local music of Khayelitsha and places it on the same level as Bizet’s music, establishing that we will also hear traditional music in the score. Also, when Lulamile returns from overseas, the community performs a traditional song of welcome, one that would naturally occur in the community. Later in the plot, Lulamile holds a traditional ceremony to honor his ancestors for all the blessings he has received. This tradition involves the sacrifice of a bull, which can also be seen as an allusion to Bizet’s bullfight. At the cry of the bull, we hear the locals break out in a traditional song. The music-making that occurs normally in Khayelitsha complements and offsets the music of the opera.

Dornford-May consistently aimed for a realistic portrayal of Khayelitsha and its inhabitants in the film medium, and he also sought to make both the diegetic and non-diegetic sounds come across as organic to the environment and as natural as possible. The film’s ability to transport the audience to a foreign locale is more direct than the mental

---

84 Davies and Dovey, “Bizet in Khayelitsha: U-Carmen eKhayelitsha as Audio-Visual Transculturation,” 45.
leap one has to take in the theater, and the camera is able to travel long distances and wide spaces, as well as to capture extreme close-up images. *U-Carmen*’s cinematography assumes a documentary-like style, with “a lot of hand-held photography and freedom for the actors to do what they wanted, confident that they were not restricted by technicalities. It feels as if the camera work is observational rather than contrived.”

This filming method along with the milieu contrast with the very stylized norms of opera:

> The film merely points out how a strong commitment to a conceit of authentic performance—the ways in which the singers passionately inhabit their roles—can deculture or flatten out routine hierarchical assumptions of high culture value... The important point is not whether opera is considered “high” or “low”; it is that it is now intermeshed in the South African cultural landscape. 

The perception that the opera is “intermeshed” in the cultural landscape of South Africa not only has to do with the indigenizing the story, but also the manner in which the score sonically resonates. Dornford-May explains that the approach to recording the film was inspired by Alan Parker’s 1996 film of *Evita* (the Andrew Lloyd Webber through-composed musical) and the sound and film editing work of Oscar winner Alan Murch, who sound-designed the famous *Godfather* films. Parker’s approach was to decide ahead of time whether the performer would be in full shot, mid-shot, or close-up. From there, he pre-recorded the sound accordingly, adjusting the volume levels to harmonize with the “distance” between the viewer and the singer. This contrasts to the sound of an opera film, which is usually heard at one level, as if it were always in full shot. Dornford-May also adopted Murch’s approach to pre-recording and recording sound on set. Murch explained to Dornford-May that in the opening wedding scene of the *Godfather* films, he

---


got a sense of life by pre-recording the soundtrack. He also recorded the band playing on the set. These tracks were mixed according to where in the shot they were. Dornford-May wanted to take these ideas forward in the film. He pre-recorded the sound and also had the cast sing on set. Sometimes, the pre-recorded sound would be cut and just the singer would be recorded:

So that gave it a whole different life and reflected their environment, because again in traditional opera film, people can sing in a huge church or in a small room and the quality of the sound doesn’t change but listening to Carmen, you’ll find, for example, on the stairwell in the last act, it’s very, very reverberating and it gives it a different sense of reality... I think we were the first to use it certainly in terms of opera, and once we developed it, we used it in all the films.87

Although the audience may not be consciously aware of this technique in watching the film, it contributes to the believability and realism of the situations in the film.

Hazlewood explains how his and the director’s approach stemmed from their view that opera films did not succeed coming across as “authentic.” He explains:

Both Mark and I had a very strong antipathy to musical film because it always feels like such a fool’s premise, their voice right here becomes their voice somewhere in the ether. It’s not real—it doesn’t feel truthful. So, as much as possible, of course we had to record absolutely everything the orchestra does and everything the voices do in the recording studio, we always wanted to leave space in the mix. We’d multitrack everything very, very carefully, so that, where possible and when we particularly needed it, on set, in the filming of that particular sequence, that character, that artist, that singer would sing live in the shoe, so you get this, very like the same quality of speech, very dry and right in front of your face. So we worked really hard to achieve that, and I think we did actually. It does feel very much more authentic and real than musical film usually does.88

The documentary-style filming technique along with the recording of the score in the environment where it is performed and produced contribute to the realism of the story.

and visceral connection to the spectator. Along with indigenizing the plot, the opera becomes socially relevant to contemporary South Africans. André explains:

In a new gesture for a telling of Carmen, the experiences of South African audiences are mirrored back in the films. In terms of who is representing whom, the stakes have also changed and it is no longer the exotic Other who is being defined by a Western narrator. Instead, we have a new articulation of sub-Saharan Africa that takes into account the experiences of postcolonial, post-apartheid cultures and repositions who is on the outside looking in.89

This new articulation of Carmen in turn redefined the concept of the art-form of opera itself, preconceptions which have been expressed at the beginning of this chapter. Dornford-May explained that, in his view, U-Carmen actually went beyond the scope of the opera, expanded the artform, and redefined what opera is:

What I’m ultimately proud of is that we’ve made a film which is not really an opera. It goes far beyond people’s conventions and notions of an opera film. The company tells it with such veracity and truth that it is nothing like those over-stylised opera films, which were all about incredible settings and amazing costumes.90

Dornford-May’s idea that the film is “not really an opera” reflects how the cultural construct of opera can change and grow. André confirms this point, noting how the understanding of opera can change as it is approached from new, unconventional angles:

Through the examination of opera from the vantage points of race, gender, class, sexuality, and other cultural identities, our vision of opera changes. No longer functioning as an exclusively elitist event for the upper crust of society, its use by different populations can transform the way opera works in culture.91

89 André, Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement, 166.
91 André, Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement, 26.
In a more recent interview, Dornford-May explains that he does, in fact, think that opera on film has advanced tremendously:

> [W]hen I was saying that, you are talking some time ago now, a lot of opera film was really people singing rather badly to previously recorded tape, usually in a very slight adaptation of the original stage setting. And that obviously is not strong on film. It just doesn’t make sense. It’s not what people expect to see nowadays. So, moving [Carmen] so that it was in real situations, the shebeen and the township, visually, I think, it moved the genre forward, but also in the sense that we did pre-record sound.\(^2\)

As noted above, *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* won a Golden Bear Award for Best Film at the Berlin International Festival in 2005. It was the first South African film to win this award. The fact that the film was also an opera speaks to how the ensemble innovated the form by making opera a natural part of South African music-making to express South African social realities.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter we have seen how DDK’s process of adaptation developed from the multi-lingual and multi-musical biblical retelling of *Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries* to the stage production of *Carmen*, which brought together diverse performers and audiences, to completely indigenizing the artform of opera by realistically portraying the life and sounds of Khayelitsha in the film *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*. Dornford-May realized his initial idea of making something “genuinely South African” by rendering the adaptations socially relevant to South Africans and allowing the operatic form to embody multiple voices and perspectives. The ensemble would continue to

---

\(^2\) Mark Dornford-May, Interview by author, Skype, January 19, 2021.
reimagine European operas onto film such as Benjamin’s Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde* and Puccini’s *La Bohème*. I turn to these works in the following chapters.
Chapter 2

*Unogumbe* (2013): An Adaptation of Benjamin Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde*

…an adaptation is a derivation that is not a derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing.

—Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* \(^1\)

*Unogumbe* (“flood” or “deluge”) retells the biblical tale of Noah’s Ark for a modern South African audience. Benjamin Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde* (pronounced “Noah’s Flood”) is set in Medieval England,\(^2\) while Isango’s adaptation of the opera is relocated to the South African township of Khayelitsha. Like *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, the sung language is mostly isiXhosa, while the subtitles of the film remain in Medieval English, providing yet another dialogic space of experience. Women and girls are the driving force in the adaptation: The protagonist, Noye, is reconceived as a woman married to a drunkard, trying to keep her family together; in addition, girls provide the frame to the story, appearing at the beginning and the end, as well as serving as an “audience” and controlling shadow puppets throughout. Unlike *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, which remains loyal to Bizet’s original orchestration, Isango adapts Britten’s score to a contemporary South African context by altering the original orchestration to include African instruments. The ensemble’s treatment of English hymns and the inclusion of South African hymns speak to the country’s historical relationship with hymnody. Through relocation of the plot, subversion of gender roles, the juxtaposition of English and African hymns, and use of indigenous language and African instruments, this film-opera

---


\(^2\) Britten follows Pollard’s original text almost exactly, other than omitting a few lines and adding three hymns. Gerald W. Van Deventer, “A Study and Performance of Benjamin Britten’s Sacred Opera, ‘Noye’s Fludde’” (M.Mus. diss., University of Southern California, 1968).
decolonizes the genre of opera in a novel and uniquely South African way. Britten’s opera becomes a scaffold for a new manifestation of opera as an indigenous cultural activity.

**Background**

Isango’s creation of *Unogumbe* coincided with the Britten centenary. The idea for the film came from the Britten-Pears Foundation itself, which liked Isango’s work and was looking for groups to take on new projects during the centennial year. Isango surveyed several Britten works and settled on *Noye’s Fludde* as the basis for their adaptation. As with *Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries*, the ensemble was partly attracted to the content because of its biblical roots, “so everyone can relate to it. But it’s also a story of great hope, and so when we looked at it as a company, we sort of instinctively gravitated toward that.” The setting also captures the disparity between rich and poor, and it reveals the looming reality of global warming and impending floods.

The ensemble had previous experience with Britten’s libretto, which is adapted from the Chester Mystery Plays as found in Alfred Pollard’s book *English Miracle Plays, Moralities, and Interludes*. Britten follows Pollard’s original text almost exactly, other than omitting a few lines and adding three hymns. It is one of the texts that the ensemble included in their own stage adaptation of *Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries* (discussed in Chapter 1). Isango was therefore familiar with the text. Dornford-May explains: “We

---


learned from doing *The Mysteries*, and brought some of that knowledge directly [into *Unogumbe*.]

By the time the film version of *Unogumbe* was made, Mandisi Dyantyis had become Isango’s music director and arranger—positions that he continues to hold today. This is significant, since, unlike Hazlewood, Dyantyis is a local musician. He joined the company in 2006, and since then, he has been “co-Music Director and arranger/composer for all Isango Ensemble productions.” He has music-directed and composed music for Isango’s stage productions of *The Magic Flute: Impempe Yomlingo*, *A Christmas Carol: iKrismas Kherol*, *Venus and Adonis*, *The Mysteries: Yiimimangaliso*, *Aesop’s Fables* and *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists: Izigwili Ezidlakazelayo*. He plays an important role in further indigenizing the ensemble’s adaptations, as he brings to them his South African background and array of musical influences: He is a Xhosa man who grew up in Port Elizabeth; he found his musical voice in Cape Town where he came to study music. He is a jazz trumpet player and singer with a traditional church music background (he conducts a Black Methodist choir), and he is also influenced by classical and South African music.

*Unogumbe* (2013), was the Isango Ensemble’s first filmed opera that was not originally one of its staged productions. At the outset, this sets this work apart from the two other subjects of this thesis (*U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* and *Breathe Umphefumlo*) as a process of adaptation—the latter were adapted and performed on stage by Isango.

---

5 Mark Dornford-May, Interview by author, Skype, January 19, 2021.
7 “The Team & Ensemble: Mandisi Dyantyis.”
themselves, and their production was transposed to film. In *Unogumbe*, the method of “transcoding” the narrative went directly from Britten’s score into a new medium of film.⁹ “Transcoding” is “an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work” that can involve a shift in medium.¹⁰ The impact of this process is displayed in Isango’s film, and it forms the subject of this chapter. Furthermore, while there have been many amateur and professional productions of Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde* (many of which can be found on YouTube), and many film versions of the biblical story of Noah, at this time there has apparently never been a film made of Britten’s opera. (Britten’s opera figures into Wes Anderson’s 2012 film *Moonrise Kingdom*, wherein “the two child protagonists, Sam and Suzy, meet at a production of ‘Noye’s Fludde,’ and the climax of the film happens at a performance of it a year later.”¹¹) By contrast, *Carmen* and *La Bohème*, have had multiple adaptations in the film world.¹²

**The Original**

In order to grasp the inventiveness of *Unogumbe*, it is necessary to highlight certain aspects of the original opera. Benjamin Britten composed *Noye’s Fludde* in 1958 for the Aldeburgh Festival. Britten’s work is an adaptation of the fifteenth-century Chester miracle play based on the well-known biblical story of Noah’s Ark. This one-act opera, with a running time of about fifty minutes, is intended to be performed by professionals and amateurs together, with both groups represented among the singers and

---

¹⁰ Ibid.
¹¹ Weininger, “In Church—and on Screen—‘Noye’s Fludde’ Delights.”
the orchestra. Moreover, it is meant to be performed in front of a congregation, which also takes part in singing three hymns. These distinctive aspects of the work have led it to be characterized as a “community opera”\(^ {13} \)—an instrument of communal participation and the building of a shared experience. In the composer’s notes to the score, Britten explains:

> Some big building should be used, preferably a church—but not a theatre—large enough to accommodate actors and orchestra, with the action raised on rostra, but not on a stage removed from the congregation. No attempt should be made to hide the orchestra from sight.\(^ {14} \)

The orchestra is a large force which includes a string section, bugles, percussion, hand-bells, four-hands piano, organ, and recorders (as Britten notes, “there should be as many Recorder players as possible,” perhaps in acknowledgment of the role of the recorder as an educative instrument).\(^ {15} \) The large-sized orchestra and the many performers involved (including congregation) usually performs in a church or church-like setting which highlights the spiritual nature of the biblical story. The theatrical event projects a devout and serious nature. The story is of a vengeful God who plans to destroy the world with a flood, but who saves only one righteous man, Noah, by telling him to build an ark and use it to rescue his family and two of every animal. The Voice of God, which as Britten notes, should be “Tremendous,” is portrayed by an unseen performer who instructs Noye from somewhere offstage.\(^ {16} \) This “tremendous” tone is set by Britten’s instrumental opening—it is in a minor key, with some dissonant bass motion; it is serious and

---


\(^{14}\) Benjamin Britten, Noye’s Fludde (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1958).

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) “The Voice of God…should be highly musical and should have a rich speaking voice.” Ibid., n.p.
“Majestic,” as Britten instructs. The instrumental opening is followed by a homophonic hymn sung by the congregation “Lord Jesus, think on me,” with an orchestral accompaniment that continues its dissonant undertones throughout the hymn. The characteristically solemn tone of the hymn leads to the entrance of The Voice of God, which is underpinned by accents as well as swelling rolls on bass drum and timpani. Britten intended his opera *Noye’s Fludde* to expose children to the music of the twentieth century, and for it to live in a sacred space. Britten’s specific instructions on the performance venue and the quality of performers, the use of hymns and inclusion of the congregation, his devout setting, and his own loyalty in adapting the original Chester miracle play keep it in this space. Isango’s adaptation reflects social realities that lie further from traditional religion, bringing the story into dialogue with contemporary issues such as the role of women in the social fabric of South Africa, and the impending danger of humans’ lack of care for each other and for the environment.
Figure 2.1. Opening Hymn, Noye’s Fludde, Benjamin Britten (vocal score).
How Isango Approaches Hymnody: Adapting “Lord Jesus Think on Me”

…the first major influence of missionaries on African music was in church: hymns taught in four parts—soprano, alto, tenor and bass—and Western harmonies.

—Thusalizwe Nkabinde

…modern African popular music is an offshoot of the baroque hymn. The baroque hymn is therefore the most influential music genre in South Africa today

—Bongani Mthethwa

Britten’s opera includes three hymns that are sung by the congregation. These hymns are familiar to the congregation and invite the audience to join in, making the performance a communal event. While there is some dissonance in the accompaniment of the opening hymn which can be seen in measures 15, 17, and 18, where the bass line clashes with the harmonies in the right hand (see fig. 2.1), generally the hymns are sung in unison, making it easy to join in. In their adaptation of Britten’s work, I argue, the Isango Ensemble built on Britten’s use of hymnody, which holds special significance in South Africa as a musical practice common to both Black and White audiences. In Unogumbe, two hymns are sung in English, not isiXhosa. The third hymn is omitted from the adaptation.

Since the opening of the film will be discussed in much detail, the order of events are outlined in the following chart:

---

18 Detterbeck, 144.
19 The final hymn of Britten’s work (which is not included in Unogumbe) has many strophes: “The Spacious firmament on high” has six strophes, and it is set to Tallis’s Canon. The first three strophes are sung in unison, the fourth is sung in canon (two parts), the fifth is sung in four-part harmony, and the sixth and final strophe is sung in unison.
Table 1: Order of events in the opening of *Unogumbe*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time point</th>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>00:00</td>
<td>Opening Credits</td>
<td>A girl toddler in the foreground is writing on the ground with chalk. In the background, young girls happily play hopscotch. Snippets of a solo of the hymn “Lord Jesus Think on Me” sung by a young girl over diegetic sounds of the wind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:29</td>
<td>Close-up on the face of a girl about 11 years of age singing</td>
<td>The first strophe of “Lord Jesus Think on Me,” unaccompanied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:57</td>
<td>Close-up of the hands of a conductor conducting. Slowly the ensemble comes into focus and the camera stops on a close-up of Noye (Pauline Malefane) singing solemnly before the camera expands to show the rest of the singers. They are each standing behind their marimbas but not playing their instruments</td>
<td>The first strophes of the hymn “Lord Jesus Think on Me,” in SATB arrangement, no accompaniment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01:43</td>
<td>Image transitions to wide-angle views of Khayelitsha, outside of the rehearsal room. We see the face of God surrounded by a halo of light.</td>
<td>The second strophe of the hymn is heard from a distance sung by the ensemble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02:27</td>
<td>Flames burn. God’s angry face slowly comes into focus behind the flames.</td>
<td>A voiceover: God speaks his first monologue in Xhosa, over a sung Kyrie.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03:10</td>
<td>Daytime, Noye and her family walk across a field towards the work house. The train of Khayelitsha is seen traveling in the distance.</td>
<td>Ululating. The voiceover of the African hymn “Watsho Lomfana.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The opening hymn, “Lord Jesus, think on me,” is initially sung as a solo by a young girl. The film then transitions to what looks like a rehearsal room, where singers stand behind their marimbas in front of a conductor. The ensemble repeats the hymn sung by the girl, but it is remarkably different from Britten’s original—instead of being sung in unison, with orchestral accompaniment, it is sung a cappella in four-part harmony, in the
style of a Bach chorale. Furthermore, the phrasing is adjusted to sound more natural than the original version. In Britten’s version, the first word of each phrase (“Lord,” “And,” “From,” “And”) is a half note, which slows down the motion of each phrase. In Isango’s version, these upbeats are quarter notes (see fig. 2.2).

Figure. 2.2. Isango’s SATB arrangement of “Lord Jesus Think On Me.” Transcription by Angelique Mouyis.

The specific arrangement of this hymn reflects a particular history that South Africans have with hymnody, which reaches back to 1852 with the arrival of the Dutch East India Company. In her dissertation, Allyss Angela Haecker explains that at this time, the native population was introduced to the music of Europe: “The primary source of imported choral music was the Genevan psalter, Calvinist hymns and simple Dutch folksongs called liederwysies, the majority of which used sacred texts and were
unaccompanied.”20 What followed was an immersion of Dutch and British customs with African traditions, and African songs slowly transformed to sound more like hymns.21 “The cultivation and imitation of Western art music within the native population had a profound influence on indigenous collective singing in South Africa that would be maintained into the twentieth century.”22 As a result, most native composers adopted the four-part hymn as a component of their own compositional practices.

Markus Detterbeck also expands upon the significance of the hymn, explaining how missionaries influenced local composers. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, mission-trained musicians began producing an output of secular and sacred choral compositions. Their style was heavily influenced by the hymns and psalms they were taught by the missionaries. Such composers included Enoch Sontonga, who, in 1897, wrote the Xhosa hymn Nkosi Sikelel’iAfrica (God bless Africa), which now forms part of the South African National Anthem.

In most of their compositions the only African aspect was the vernacular lyrics. The musical structure, the shape of the melodies and the choice of harmonies, however, were almost exclusively influenced by Western music. At this point it is enough to say that the musical background of early composers was mainly restricted to the mission stations and the musical practice introduced by the missionaries.23

---

21 “[R]hythms were simplified, tonality was altered to reflect major tonalities, a three- or four-part homophonic texture prevailed and typical African speech-tones were modified to fit the syllabification and stress of hymn phrases.” Ibid., 11.
22 Ibid.
Even though there has been much development and change in the practice of hymn singing since this time, the influence of the Western hymn is still evident on South African vocal music today. Detterbeck explains:

Nearly all the neo-traditional music that exists today in South Africa has evolved from the African encounters with European culture, and hymns in particular can be regarded as an important source of most the musical genres performed by black South Africans today… According to Musa Xulu, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the secularization of the hymns was responsible for the emergence of many new musical styles, which he regards as “secularized [versions] of the hymn.” These styles include “wedding songs, isicathamiya, instrumental forms like mbhaganga, the choruses as sung in the schools, and political songs.”

In *Unogumbe*, the new vocal arrangement of the opening hymn can be seen to reflect South Africa’s historical relationship with Western hymnody. Dyantyis is attuned to the historical connection, as he explains: “This way of singing has remained with us in Southern Africa through missionaries, but the texture has changed because African voices are different from European voices. It makes the opening strong—you know from the start that this is an adaptation like no other.” The relationship of the hymn to the space/place is broadened when the film imagery shifts in the second strophe—the camera moves outside of the rehearsal room, where we see a wide-angle view of Khayelitsha township, which establishes the setting of the story. The four-part hymn lives organically in this place—it carries the voices of the people who live here, in Khayelitsha, and has done so, historically. I argue that this hymn, whose form forged a musical relationship between locals and Western music tradition, is a fitting musical entryway into a South African adaptation of a Western opera.

---

24 Ibid., 144–5.
25 Mandisi Dyantyis, Personal communication with author, February 20, 2021.
From European to African Hymn

In addition to Britten’s music, original South African music also underpins certain transitions in the film. Most notably, after The Voice of God’s opening monologue, there is the powerful sound of ululating. Noye and her family walk to the workhouse, for Noye is a welder. They carry objects that will become part of the ark. The audience knows that these pictures present “Noye and her family” and “Mama Noye,” since those indications appear in handwritten subtitles (see figs. 2.3 and 2.4).

Figure 2.3. Unogumbe: An Adaptation of Benjamin Britten’s Noye’s Fludde. 03:15. Hand-written subtitles of “Noye and her family.”

Figure 2.4. Unogumbe: An Adaptation of Benjamin Britten’s Noye’s Fludde. 03:23. Hand-written subtitles indicating “Mama Noye.” Train of Khayelitsha behind the family.
The South African music that seamlessly serves as the transitional material between the The Voice of God’s opening monologue and his appearance to Noye in the workhouse reinforces and grounds the new context of the opera.\textsuperscript{26} This transitional scene where Noye and her family walk to the workhouse is accompanied by an African hymn (see fig. 2.5).

\textbf{WATSHO LOMFANA}
\textit{(Isango Chorus)}

Transcription by
Angelique Mouyis

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{watsho_lomfana_diagram.png}
\caption{Unogumbe: An Adaptation of Benjamin Britten’s Noye’s Fludde. 03:09. Transcription of African Hymn “Watsho Lomfana” by Angelique Mouyis.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{26} This music is also found in the closing credits.
African hymns have the following characteristics: They are antiphons, or have a “call-and-response” structure; there is usually a chorus leader singing the “call,” while the chorus/group responds. Furthermore,

the most distinguishing feature of “the chorus” is the introduction of accompanying body movements, gestures, hand clapping and dancing... By singing and dancing together, the congregation or any other performing group experiences a sense of community, of belonging, that has an almost therapeutic effect.27

Elliot Pewa explains that singing the African hymn inherently breaks down social barriers among participants, as displayed in the “personal involvement, fraternity or brotherliness that is displayed by participants.”28

The African hymn used as transitional material accomplishes several things: It is juxtaposed to Britten’s hymn which was heard a few moments earlier, sung by the same ensemble in an SATB arrangement. Western and African hymn are thus brought together in the same space and performed by the same ensemble, and both are woven into the soundscape of Khayelitsha. This usage of hymnody echoes the communal activity of the original opera in the performance of this hymn. It serves as an introduction to the protagonist, Noye and her family, as the dynamic force of the opera and underpins the image—Noye and her family are a strong unit that sticks together. It is also the transitional material that takes the viewer and Noye’s family into the workhouse, where the drama of the story begins: God and his angels appear and literally hand Noye a blueprint to build her ark.

28 Quoted in ibid., 147.
The hymn is an allegory. The text literally translates to: “The generous young man said, we must eat the peanuts. We are eating peanuts.” This traditional song comes from a certain region in the Eastern Cape; it is sung when there are festivities and tells of a generous young man (presumably the host) who ensured his guests lacked nothing. It relates to Noye, as she saves her family by building an ark.

**Orchestration: SATB Marimba Choir and Township Percussion**

As discussed in Chapter 1, Isango’s first film opera *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* intentionally remains loyal to Bizet’s score and orchestration, only omitting several scenes that were unnecessary for the adapted narrative. The score is indigenized through translation of the original French libretto into Xhosa. In *Unogumbe*, this indigenization is taken a step further. The instrumental medium is shifted from orchestra—which can be seen as a “Western” medium—to a marimba choir and township percussion. Hutcheon explains:

> an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This “transcoding” can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (the epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation.

I argue that shifting the musical frame—the instrumentation—from a conventional orchestra to local instruments in itself has created a manifestly different interpretation of this opera, and reflects what Hutcheon calls “a creative and interpretive act of

---

29 Personal communication with Rashakalimphani Muofhe, January 7, 2021.
appropriation.”\textsuperscript{31} It reflects Isango’s relationship with the operatic form itself as their instrumental choices organically reflect who they are as South Africans.

*Unogumbe*, however, was not Isango’s first artistic endeavor to utilize the marimba choir. Isango used this ensemble in its stage production of *Impempe Yomlingo* (2007–2011), an adaptation of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. Sheila Boniface Davies and J.Q. Davies describe the production’s instrumentation:

An onstage marimba ensemble—comprising eight custom-built instruments—replaces Mozart’s orchestra, augmented by “township percussion” in the form of oil barrel drums, glass bottles filled with water, djembes and hand clapping. Thirty-five singers double as instrumentalists, with the playing of marimba and percussion managed through a continual swapping of roles. The score is further extended by neotraditional isiXhosa choruses that often overlay or develop out of existing melodies.… Material transformation, here, underscores the transformative elements of the story on one hand, while enacting a politics of cultural and aesthetic reform on the other.\textsuperscript{32}

This “transcoding,” or shifting of instrumental medium was a significant step, as it became a common thread throughout Isango’s productions and films to follow. In the adaptation of Mozart’s opera, director Dornford-May sought to create an “African sound”: “After our Carmen … I felt we could go on a step and replace the orchestra with an African sound, and this [*Impempe*] seemed the perfect piece with which to try it.”\textsuperscript{33} Music director Dyantyis was initially hesitant about reworking the original score, until he grasped the cultural authenticity of the process. Dyantyis explains: “There’s a backbeat. There’s a groove, in everything that we do. If we are going to be proud of it, we need to

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{32} Sheila B. Davies and J. Q. Davies, “‘So Take This Magic Flute and Blow. It Will Protect Us As We Go’: *Impempe Yomlingo* (2007–11) and South Africa’s Ongoing Transition,” *The Opera Quarterly* 28, no. 1–2 (June 2012): 55–56, https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbs039. Furthermore, the sound of the flute was replaced by the sound of a “jazzy” trumpet, played by the music director, Mandisi Dyantyis.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 64.
put in the music the way we think and the way we are. That’s when everything started opening [up].”

Interestingly, the SATB marimba choir is quite a recent addition to South Africa’s traditional instruments (see fig. 2.6). In his article “How the Southern African Marimbas Came into Existence,” ethnomusicologist Andrew Tracey explains that the marimba, is in fact, “NOT a traditional South African instrument.” He explains how the ensemble was initially developed in Zimbabwe in the 1960s, when the Director of the Rhodesian Academy of Music wanted to foster indigenous music making and learning within the country. With Andrew Tracey, the idea of developing the marimba came about for several reasons: because of its absence in the country—it had no affiliations with any groups; it could play traditional and modern music; it was not too expensive. The instruments would be made in pitch ranges similar to SATB choir. A marimba factory was set up in South Africa only in the 1980s. There, Professor Dargie, Head of Music at Fort Hare, set about introducing the instruments and created a “new liturgical music for marimba in Catholic churches and youth clubs, at first among Xhosa speakers in the Cape Province, and later country-wide.” In his 2004 article, Tracey does acknowledge that a new marimba sound has developed which can be seen as the development of a contemporary South African tradition:

A distinct South African marimba sound has already developed, even regional styles can be heard, and inventiveness and originality is the hallmark of many groups. The instrument is perfectly suited to the energy of African musicality. In the beginning, however, it caught on quite slowly which, it seems to me, relates to

---

34 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
the general lack of instruments in our musical traditions and the corresponding emphasis on the voice.\textsuperscript{37}

A hallmark of Isango’s work—one that is prevalent in this film—is that all of the singers also play the marimbas. In live productions, the marimbas are usually visible, and an audience member can witness the singers shifting from their roles onstage to playing marimbas, or doing both at the same time. From the singing of the very first hymn, even though the singers are not playing their marimbas in that piece, the film is setting up that these instruments will form part of the musical landscape.

The sound of the marimbas gives Britten’s score an intimate quality, as they are naturally soft instruments, compared to the “tremendous” nature of the original composition. In addition to marimba choir, found percussion is used throughout the film. This is most evident in the climactic scene of the storm, when the second English hymn is sung. While singing, the ensemble also plays marimbas and township percussion,

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
conducted by Dyantyis. The use of township percussion includes found objects such as a metal sheet, an oversized plastic water jug filled with sand, and a long pipe which is swung around. Using these instruments relates to the instructions found in Britten’s original score, where he instructs “Slung Mugs and Sandpaper can be concocted at home:”

The former are mugs (or cups) of carrying thicknesses and size—so as to make a kind of scale—slung on string by the handles from a wooden stand, and hit with a wooden spoon (by one player). The latter consists of two pieces of sandpaper attached to blocks of wood and rubbed together.39

Isango follows Britten’s instructions by concocting their own instruments from home, keeping in the spirit of the original piece (see fig. 2.7).

Figure. 2.7. Unogumbe: An Adaptation of Benjamin Britten’s Noye’s Fludde. 26:01. Storm sequence with the use of marimba choir and township percussion, conducted by Mandisi Dyantyis.

Arranging the opera for these instruments also takes into account the community aspect of Britten’s opera. Dyantyis explains:

Britten wrote for the people he was working with. He was all about the community, so a lot of his arrangements are based on the people and the talent he

39 Britten, Noye’s Fludde, n.p.
In arranging the score, I tried to do that, starting with the use of marimbas and using the different vocal and rhythmic textures that we had in the company at that time.\textsuperscript{40}

In seeking to understand the significance of Isango’s reorchestration of Britten’s work, it is helpful to consider the work of Linda Hutcheon, who explains that the process of adaptation can sometimes be compared to the process of translation. She cites Walter Benjamin (from the essay “The Task of a Translator”) who suggests that “translation is not a rendering of some fixed nontextual meaning to be copied or paraphrased or reproduced; rather, it is an engagement with the original text that makes us see that text in different ways.”\textsuperscript{41} Changing Britten’s instrumentation to marimbas and township percussion makes us see Britten’s music in a different way. Isango engages with the “text,” or, rather, Britten’s score, and translates it into a language that reflects contemporary South Africa. Furthermore, the ensemble is also engaging with the operatic form itself, and with its own translation, the group asserts that it is capable of “speaking its language.” By performing the instrumental accompaniment themselves, the ensemble members are staging the process of deepening their relationship with Britten’s music and the operatic form.

**Approaching Gender: Noye and Mr. Noye (and all their Children)**

An important focal point of *Unogumbe* is the meaningful reconception of the protagonist as a woman. In contrast to the biblical narrative adapted by Britten, this woman is the moral force of the opera, while her husband is a drunkard whose lack of

\textsuperscript{40} Mandisi Dyantyis, Personal communication with author, February 21, 2021.
\textsuperscript{41} Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 16.
control threatens to tear her family apart. According to Dyantyis, Isango wanted to reflect the social reality that many children in South Africa are brought up by single mothers.

In Britten’s work, the drama is propelled forward by Noye and The Voice of God, both played by men, while women and their “feminine” attributes are seen as negative or unfavorable—Mrs. Noye is a stubborn woman who drinks too much and socializes with her friends, who are “gossips.” Noye wastes a great deal of time arguing with her to get into the ark, and finally, her children force her aboard. This scene plays out very differently in Isango’s version, in a very humorous way, through the playful choreography of Mr. Noye and his crew. Furthermore, the first image we see of Noye alone is one where she is welding. This immediately upends gender stereotypes—from the outset, she is portrayed as an independent woman who builds and fixes things.

Figure 2.8. *Unogumbe: An Adaptation of Benjamin Britten’s Noye’s Fludde*. 20:36. Mr. Noye and his gossips (with humorous choreography), before Mr. Noye gets pulled into the ark.

Among the main features of Britten’s work is that it was designed for an audience including children and performed by a cast including children. The significance of children, particularly girls, is magnified within the film *Unogumbe*. The opening of the
film shows children, all of whom are girls, happily playing hopscotch while one of them, about three or four years old, sits and draws on the concrete ground with chalk. She outlines while the title credit “Unogumbe” appears, as if she is the author of the story that is about to unfold. The girls provide the frame to this story—they are not only there to attend the tale of Noye, but, through a series of narrative devices, they are the force that propels the story forward. Musically, the opera opens up with the single unaccompanied voice of a young girl, about ten or eleven years old. She sings the hymn “Lord Jesus Think on Me” discussed in the beginning of the chapter. She begins either warming up or improvising, and by seeming to “remember” the words “And purge away… Lord Jesus” before singing the first strophe of the hymn, filmed close up.

Figure 2.9. *Unogumbe*: An Adaptation of Benjamin Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde*. Girl drawing and girl playing hopscotch in opening credits.

The young girls are omnipresent throughout the film. In a short scene without music, the young girls are seen cutting out birds, animals, and a ship out of black cardboard—what we will later realize are the shadow puppets used to portray all the
animals that enter the ark. These shadow puppets also portray the ark’s journey under water surrounded by sea creatures. These shadow puppets are handled by the girls. The children are also shown painting water-color pictures as the storm starts to brew, depicting lightning, raindrops, and an angry sea.

In a live production of Britten’s Noye’s Fludde, the animals that enter the ark are played by children. In Unogumbe, the roles are once again reversed; the adults in the ensemble portray the animals, while the girls are in the audience. (The scene is a play within a play; we are watching a rehearsal of the scene, with the girls as the audience.)

Like the opening image, the closing image, too, centers around the girls. To the sound of joyful alleluias, the girls draw a colorful rainbow with chalk on the ground, and dance on it happily along with the ensemble (see fig. 2.10). As in the biblical story, this rainbow is a token of God’s promise that his “vengeance shall cease.” In this adaptation, the girls produce this rainbow, suggesting that they are an extension of the hands of God.

Thus, in Unogumbe women and girls are the agents of the story: they are the ark builders, the puppeteers, the artists, and the underlying force that keeps the community out of deep water. This is consistent with the ensemble’s treatment of women throughout their work; Isango has often made women a focal point, and this forms another point that highlights their engagement with contemporary social issues.
The Embodiment of The Voice of God

In Britten’s original score, The Voice of God is accompanied by music of the same serious tone as the instrumental opening. His introduction and instructions, spoken from offstage, are accented by rolls from the timpani and percussion. Isango does not portray God as a disembodied voice. Rather, he appears as an embodied person surrounded by a halo of light. As the first hymn ends with the words “Point thou the
heavenly way,” his face slowly comes into focus from behind the flames. God speaks isiXhosa. Medieval English subtitles appear, which are from the original libretto, sometimes simplified for clarity. Under his voice, we hear a mellifluous Kyrie (a cappella), underscoring the multiple layers of meaning, including the sacred, that persist in the adaptation. The Kyrie accompanying God’s voice provides a solemnness and seriousness to God’s presence, as opposed to the terror-inspiring version in the original. He also speaks without orchestral accompaniment when handing Noye his blueprint of his Ark. In his final appearance, The Voice of God speaks to Noye through an old black-and-white TV screen used in the ark. He calmly and happily instructs Noye and her family to leave the ark, offering them a rainbow:

My rainbow in the heaven shall be,
By this rainbow you shall know,
That such vengeance shall cease.
For now, you shall grow and multiply.

The Voice of God’s final line is spoken in English. It is followed by a joyful outcry from Noye and her family that the saga has finally ended. The final hymn from the original version is cut, and the film opera ends with the joyful alleluia discussed earlier.

**Theatricality and the Experience of Live Cinema**

Transposition to another medium, or even moving within the same one, always means change or, in the language of the new media, “reformatting.”

—Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*

---

42 The subtitles follow the original libretto, with simpler spelling, and there are some changes to the Medieval English vocabulary is no longer understood.
43 In Britten’s score, this Kyrie is sung by the children further along in the score, before Noye attempts to get Mrs. Noye to enter the “shippe,” one measure before Rehearsal Number 50, p.79.
In film, the grandeur of Britten’s opera is replaced by a sense of immediacy, promoted by the use of close-ups and extreme-close ups which are commonly used in film. This factor in itself changes the nature of the opera on film. We are drawn into the world of Noye. The intimacy of the story and its relevance to contemporary South African society is supported by the orchestration, and by the use of the African instruments performed by the lead singers themselves. In contrast to the “majestic” tone of Britten’s original opening, the tone in the film adaptation is set by a new opening, performed by a single girl’s voice without instruments. In fact, the entire first five minutes of the film have no instrumental accompaniment at all. Only in the moments after The Voice of God has given Noye his instructions to build an ark do the marimbas roll chords ever so softly under Noye’s lines “Ah Lord, I thank thee still,” as if the music and story emanate from her.

In their anthology Live Cinema: Cultures, Economies, Aesthetics, authors and editors Sarah Atkinson and Helen W. Kennedy discuss various immersive and participatory experiences of cinema. They examine numerous cases where a live audience engages with film with differing degrees of liveness. A few examples include sing-along musicals, films that are presented with a live orchestra, or films which are streamed live to a live audience. Although Unogumbe does not fall precisely into any of these categories, the discussion around immersive cinema is helpful in understanding the spectator experience of Unogumbe. Atkinson and Kennedy use Philip Auslander’s definition of “live” which pertains to events in which there is “physical co-presence of

---

performers and audience […] production and reception, experience in the moment.” In Isango’s film, the imagery seamlessly alternates from the literal narrative to the rehearsal of the opera. Furthermore, within the film, the rehearsal of the opera has a live audience—an audience of girls, who are not acting but reacting to the performance of the rehearsal “in the moment.” Therefore, there is a co-presence of performers (the cast) and audience (the girls) that creates an aspect of live experience. The spectators thus engage with the narrative, as well as the reaction of the audience (the girls) in the film.

_Unogumbe_ was Isango’s only filmed opera that was not originally one of their staged productions—Isango went directly from Britten’s score to the film medium. By including the live audience of girls within the film as well as the rehearsal process itself, it is evident that Isango did not abandon the theatrical medium altogether. Instead, the ensemble folded it into their process of adaptation, by depicting the rehearsals with a live audience and using theatrical elements. These theatrical elements include the making of the shadow puppet-show depicting the entrance of the animals—a device that would be used in live theatre. The spectators watch the young girls make and control the shadow puppets in the film. By becoming puppeteers, the girls then become part of the narrative—from audience to a vital part of the plot. This brings an immersive element within the film, as the audience in the film becomes a participant in the narrative. Again, these theatrical devices and the depicted rehearsal process make the audience experience aspects of live performance, even though it is in the film medium, which usually only captures the story literally.

---

46 Ibid., 3.
The progression of the story is interrupted by cuts to the conductor leading the ensemble singing and playing marimbas. In keeping with Britten’s original instructions, the Isango adaptation makes no attempt “to hide the orchestra from sight.” This is also reminiscent of Isango’s approach to live stage productions as discussed in Chapter 1 in *Carmen*, where the characters (Carmen in particular) were communicating and interacting with the orchestra from the stage, creating another level of engagement for the audience and the cast. Furthermore, these cuts to the rehearsal room create the sense that the audience is taken behind the scenes. This technique is introduced right at the outset: After the opening hymn is sung as a solo, we cut to the ensemble singing the first strophe in four-part harmony, a cappella. The focus is on Noye, singing under the baton of a conductor, before the camera pans out to the rest of the ensemble who sing at their marimbas—the only part of the conductor we see is his waving baton. As the film progresses, in these presentational scenes, more and more of the conductor becomes visible, whereas, at the start, only the conductor’s baton and part of his face are seen from behind conducting the performers. By the time the storm arrives, his whole figure is in full sight, while he passionately conducts the chorus of singers (who are playing marimbas as well as township percussion) encircling him in the storm sequence (see Figure 2.7). This directorial choice brings the music and its music-making to the visual forefront and places the viewer-listeners inside the music-making.

Atkinson and Kennedy discuss an example of “Live Cinema,” specifically the production *Forbidden Zone*, where live cinema is the presentation of a theatre production which is simultaneously being performed, filmed, projected and observed live on a screen above the stage. On the stage

---

below the screen, audience members are able to see the inner workings of the film set in which the on-screen action is being shot.\

Various aspects of this performance of Live Cinema apply to *Unogumbe*. Watching rehearsals with a live audience gives the sense that we are watching a film that is being simultaneously performed and filmed. Furthermore, witnessing the making and manipulation of the shadow puppets, and watching the conductor conduct the performers, the audience is exposed to the inner workings of the opera being shot.

The director manufactures a live performance experience within the film, thereby revealing the power and importance of the artform. These aspects of the film show South African musicians taking control over the operatic artform in their own society.

**Conclusion**

In the film *Unogumbe*, we have seen how Isango’s approach to hymnody reflects a historical relationship to it, and the inclusion of an African hymn is brought into the same space as “European” opera. The re-orchestration of the opera for marimba choir reflects a contemporary South African sound. Gender-switching Noye to a woman and bringing girls to the forefront is a hallmark of Isango’s approach that is carried throughout its work. With the use of theatrical devices and filming rehearsals with an audience, *Unogumbe* is given characteristics of Live Cinema. The Isango Ensemble’s *Unogumbe* presents a grounded South African reinterpretation and re-expression of a European opera, while engaging with the concerns of a contemporary South African audience and operatic culture.

---

Chapter 3

*Breathe Umphefumlo* (2015): Indigenization through Hybridization

Some stories are so strong that even if you take them from a hundred years ago when they were written and put them in the present context, they will still make sense. So, [la] Bohème is about … these guys living together, unemployed, and this lovely girl. So, it’s a story of—it’s exactly how people live in the township—you know, people who are unemployed, but very happy within themselves and know how to look after each other. […] I’ve had a lot of friends and relatives who have died of TB. It’s a very sensitive issue and it’s an issue that is close to everybody’s lives. I really do hope that Bohème becomes another medium—another way of communicating to people about TB.

—Pauline Malefane on *Isango’s staged production of La Bohème* (2012)

Isango’s film *Breathe Umphefumlo* is an adaptation of Giacomo Puccini’s opera *La Bohème* (1896). Isango takes the original plot about struggling artists in the Latin Quarter of Paris in the 1830s and refocuses it, both politically and socially, making it relevant to contemporary South Africans. To make the story “real” and “authentic” to its new environment (as in *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*), Isango alters the language, adapts the plot and setting, re-orchestrates the instrumental accompaniment, and hybridizes the artform by adapting some of Puccini’s music to a jazz idiom and incorporating choral elements. Furthermore, Isango’s adaptation introduces new sonic effects including non-diegetic sounds and “mickey-mousing,” as well as juxtaposing sound and silence, which also contribute to the hybridization of the art form.

Puccini’s original libretto was written by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica. It was adapted from the novel *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* (1849) by Henri Murger, which

---

explores the lives of so-called “bohemians.” “The figure of the artist was central to bohemianism not because Bohemia was made up of artists, but because the nineteenth century made the artist’s intense preoccupation with self-examination and self-development symbolic of wider issues in individual and social life.”² The *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, which was later adapted into a play, appealed to Parisian audiences, as well as to Puccini, who completed the opera in 1895.

The plot of the opera *La Bohème* follows Rodolfo, a poet, who meets and falls in love with Mimi, a seamstress, who is suffering from tuberculosis. Their journey together, which begins in winter and ends in less than a year with Mimi’s death, is accompanied by his friends, Marcello (a painter), Musetta (a singer), Schaunard (a musician), and Colline (a philosopher). Mimi’s death at the end of the opera not only reflects the loss of Rodolfo’s love and a member of this group of artists, but a larger loss—namely, the loss of innocence.

*La Bohème* contained aspects that had not been seen in earlier operas. There is no grand opening or scene setting—we are immediately taken to the middle of the action, *in medias res*, where “a slice of life has opened before us”: we are in the garret with Marcello and Rodolfo.³ The colloquial language used amongst the characters was “unthinkable” in earlier opera. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker explain how this idiom accurately reflects the characters of the artists: “If the colloquial idiom both expresses and determines the character of proletarian figures, an anarchic approach to language reveals the Bohemians’ free-spirited independence of social conditions.”⁴ Puccini, who is

³ Ibid., 13.
⁴ Ibid., 65.
known for his ability to set the atmosphere of a scene aptly with his orchestration, was heavily criticized for his parlando style—that is, setting the conversations between the characters to sound more like natural speech than previous operatic composers. Critics did not respond favorably to his musical setting at the time, but audiences connected deeply with it.5

Isango continued this heritage of realism as well as social and political relevance in their film adaptation of Puccini’s opera,6 as Naomi André has shown: “the focus on the depiction of reality is a trenchant theme that links both the Puccini Bohème and the Isango Ensemble adaptation of Breathe Umphefumlo.”7 The film’s opening surtitles, which have no accompanying music but only the diegetic sounds of the scene, open on the township of Khayelitsha and set up the opera as a story about tuberculosis. We are presented with a startling statistic: “Globally two million people died of TB in 2014” and “Khayelitsha is one of the most affected areas in the world.” While tuberculosis may seem like a problem of the past, in South Africa, it still constitutes an epidemic, and the transposition of this plotline from 1830s France to the contemporary South African context is plausible. Pauline Malefane has described her own experience with tuberculosis:

I’ve had a lot of friends and relatives who have died of TB. It’s a very sensitive issue and it’s an issue that is close to everybody’s lives. I really do hope that [la] Bohème becomes another medium—another way of communicating to people about TB.8

---

5 Ibid.
6 Prior to the film, Isango performed a stage adaptation of La Bohème called La Bohème Abanxaxhi.
7 André, “Activist Operatic Spaces with New Narratives and Audiences.”
8 Malefane in ArtsEmerson, Meet Isango Ensemble!
The fact that this disease is curable today highlights the tragedy of the situation. It points to the failure of the South African government and social institutions to address the disease adequately—a failure that results in the loss of life, including to people like Mimi. As Malefane points out, there are many people in South Africa—many Mimis—who will suffer the same fate. The senseless loss of life is infuriating and pointedly highlighted through Dornford-May’s film adaptation of the opera.

Isango grounds the plotline of *Breathe Umphefumlo* both historically and politically: Whereas the opening of the original opera takes place on Christmas Eve, Isango’s film is centered around the public holiday of Youth Day, which commemorates the Soweto Uprisings of June 16, 1976, when school students protested the compulsory ruling that the Afrikaans language would be the medium of education in schools. What was meant to be a peaceful protest turned violent, and young children were senselessly killed by government authorities. Re-centering the narrative around this day highlights the struggles of the protagonists around which the story is built. Mimi, Lungelo (originally Rodolfo), and their friends are university students with dreams of graduating and pursuing careers in fields about which they are passionate. Through still frames, we discover that Mimi is working toward a degree in botany and dreams of becoming a Nobel Laureate, while Lungelo is pursuing a degree in journalism, and also dreams of becoming a poet and soccer star. However, these aspirations, as well as the aspirations of their friends, are destroyed when a brawl at a market on the evening of Youth Day results in their expulsion from university (the exact reason is unclear), leading to a life of poverty in the township. Isango intentionally imbues the narrative with South Africa’s significant political history and shows how the youth of modern-day South Africa are still
struggling with the effects of this history generations later (see fig. 3.1). While the students of the Soweto uprisings were fighting for their own education, so too are the protagonists of this opera in their own way. The challenges and struggles of the youth in contemporary South Africa are brought to the forefront, and so too is the issue of tuberculosis, which still has a marked impact on everyday South Africans.

Figure 3.1. Breathe Umphefumlo. 00:02:27. Lungelo looks out from his taxi after leaving Khayelitsha on his way to his dorm and passes graffiti that includes a sign “Stop TB” and the famous picture of school pupil Hector Pieterson shot by police at the Soweto Riots in 1976 that is generally familiar to all South Africans.

Jazz Style and the Hybridization of Opera

As in the film U-Carmen eKhayelitsha, Breathe Umphefumlo’s libretto is translated (mostly) into Xhosa with English subtitles. The manner in which Isango uses the Xhosa language reflects modern life in the Cape, where this adaptation was filmed and where Isango is based. Librettist Mkhululi Z. Mabija, who is Xhosa, explains that the Xhosa language that is spoken across Isango films is very contemporary:

It is impressive how Isango makes the words fit in with the Puccini melodies because the language reflects the manner in which Xhosa is spoken today, by the
youth. Included is slang and the use of street terms. It’s not the Xhosa you will find spoken in the middle of the Eastern Cape, which is a more pure form of the language. It is very Capetonian, Western Cape Xhosa—very specific to the location, specifically Khayelitsha.9

Isango’s translation relates to the manner in which language was used in Puccini’s opera. As previously discussed, the colloquial language of La Bohème was considered “unthinkable” at that time.10 In the same way that the language of Puccini’s opera accurately reflects the language of the artists, so too does Isango’s Xhosa translation. Isango’s approach to translating the libretto displays a commitment to making the opera socially relevant. It opens up the opera to the community of the Cape, specifically Khayelitsha, by using the local vernacular in the translation. Where the medium of opera may not be familiar to some, the use of the spoken language in this way makes the opera more accessible and engaging, and it indigenizes the genre of opera.

Musically, Puccini’s score remains more or less intact, although Isango applied many cuts, only keeping the scenes necessary to tell the story.11 As in the film opera Unogumbe (discussed in Chapter 2), Puccini’s score is re-orchestrated; this time it is orchestrated for marimba choir and steel pan band. To bring out the long melodies so characteristic of Puccini’s orchestral writing, music director and orchestrator Mandisi Dyantyi uses the vocal ensemble to fill in the gaps left by these percussive instruments; that is, the singers in the opera also provide “orchestral” support.

One respect in which Isango adapts Puccini’s operatic score is in the introduction of jazz. A key moment that highlights this hybridization in is the aria of Zoleka, who is

---

9 Mkhululi Z. Mabija, Personal communication with author, Facetime, February 1, 2021.
10 Groos and Parker, Giacomo Puccini: La Bohème, 65.
11 For example, Parpignol and the children are cut from the film opera.
recast from Puccini’s character Musetta, and now is a jazz diva. Her aria is diegetic: she performs for everyone while she sits at the keyboard at her concert. In contrast to the other music in the film, this aria is sung in English, with moments of vocal improvisation; she sings to her own keyboard accompaniment as well as double bass and soft drums. The aria is thus presented as a jazz standard.

We hear part of this aria at the beginning of the film, when Lungelo is in a kombi (taxi-van) while being driven from Khayelitsha to his dormitory. In fact, it is the very first piece of music we hear in the film. Lungelo is listening to the radio, which provides the audience with expository information: the radio reports that today is Youth Day and explains what it commemorates; it also informs listeners that there are electricity outages which are a common occurrence in South Africa. Furthermore, there are many events scheduled to commemorate Youth Day, and Zoleka will be performing that evening at the university, if the electricity turns back on by the evening. The radio host then introduces Zoleka’s song, which we hear played diegetically on the radio. Zoleka’s aria is cut short as soon as Lungelo exits the taxi when he arrives at his dorm, and he is introduced in freeze frame.12 By featuring a piece in the style of a jazz standard as the first piece of music in an opera film, Isango upends preconceptions and definitions of opera. At the outset, the director establishes that other styles of music will be juxtaposed with Puccini’s score and signals that these styles will become part of the operatic genre.

Musetta/Zoleka’s aria appears in full in Act II of the opera. It is worth discussing the diegetic and non-diegetic ways in which Isango approaches the music from the

---

12 Note that in the original opera, there is no introduction (we are in medias res). In Isango’s film, a lengthy introduction is needed to set the scene, explaining the problem of TB, introducing Youth Day and the commemorations that will be occurring across the country, and the state of power cuts that are common in South Africa due to a lack of infrastructure maintenance.
beginning of the Act to the end of Musetta’s aria: the adapted orchestration and content
display a conscious effort to make the music feel as organic as possible to the scene. In
Puccini’s original story, Act II opens with crowds gathering in the streets of Paris in a
market of street sellers. It is Christmas Eve. Rodolfo buys Mimi a bonnet, Coline buys a
coat, and Schaunard buys a horn. The friends, including Marcello, then go to Café
Momus to dine. Musetta, who had previously left Marcello heart-broken, enters with
Alcindoro, a rich elderly man, whom she taunts. She sees Marcello and tries to attract his
attention with the aria “Quando me’n vo” (“When I Go Along”). During her aria, the
other characters respond in counterpoint: Alcindoro is annoyed and exclaims “What will
people think of you?” and Mimi recognizes that Musetta is still in love with Marcello.

In *Breathe Umphefumlo*, Act II opens with the electricity coming back on (it had
remained off during the whole of Act I). Everyone is happily attending the June 16
commemoration where Zoleka will perform. As in Puccini’s story, there is a market
where vendors are selling items. While an “invisible,” non-diegetic marimba choir and
vocals serve to provide the accompanimental support in Act I, a steel pan band performs
at the market in Act II and provides the underscoring for the singing (see fig. 3.2). The
diegetic sounds of the steel pans and the singing provide a sense of liveness to the piece
as they live in the same space diegetically. While in Puccini’s score the crowds sing
“Merry Christmas” and vendors sing about all the items they are selling on this day,
Isango’s chorus sings names of heroes of the struggle, such as Nelson Mandela, Walter
Sisulu, Chris Hani, Hector Pieterson, and Lillian Ngoyi. They also sing words of the
struggle such as “Amandla Ngawethu,” “Free Africa,” and “Viva!” It is difficult to discern exactly what the chorus is singing, as not all of the subtitles are provided. All of this new content relates to the reason this gathering is taking place—as a commemoration of the 1976 Soweto Riots. We also see Lungelo buying Mimi a blanket (the equivalent of the bonnet in Puccini’s opera), and Sizwe (Schaunard’s character) buying Xolile (Coline’s character) a leather jacket. In Isango’s adaptation, Sizwe and Xolile are a couple. The friends happily dance to the music of the steel pan band.

Figure 3.2. Breathe Umphefumlo. 00:32:14. At the market, a steel pan band plays providing entertainment for the characters as well as the orchestral accompaniment of the score. Sizwe (in red pants) approaches the band to dance. To the right, Mimi and Lungelo embrace—Mimi is wearing the blanket that Lungelo bought her.

13 “Power, it is ours!”

The orchestration changes once the characters leave the market where the steel pans are playing, and the friends enter a bar area where Zoleka’s concert will take place. A marimba choir now forms the accompaniment to the singing, not the steel pans. This change in instrumentation supports the change of scene. Here, we meet Zoleka for the first time. As in Puccini’s libretto, Zoleka taunts Ayanda (Alcindoro), and tries to attract Mandisi’s (Marcello’s) attention. Before her performance, the audience attending Zoleka’s concert applaud at her entrance. Finally, an emcee introduces her with the lines, “Let’s welcome our jazz singer. The Great Zoleka,” and her aria begins (see fig. 3.3).

Figure 3.3. Breathe Umphefumlo. 00:41:72: The emcee introduces “The Great Zoleka” before she sings “As I Go By” (originally “Quando me’n vo”), a jazz standard accompanied by piano, double bass, and drums.

The spectators are witnessing a performance within a performance. The presentation of this aria illustrates the intermingling of jazz and operatic elements. Zoleka sings her jazz standard in English accompanied by piano, double bass and drums;
however, Mandisi, Ayanda, and Mimi sing their counterpoint as Puccini wrote it, but in Xhosa. Added to the scene are back-up jazz vocals which include a snippet of South African music in Xhosa. The result is a layering of jazz, opera, and choral music. While in *U-Carmen* there were moments where Bizet’s score was layered or sometimes clashed with traditional songs, in *Breathe Umphefumlo* the musical genres and languages exist symbiotically in the same piece of music.

Figure 3.4 shows my transcription of the vocal parts of the aria (with piano introduction). The adapted version of the aria is transposed down a major third, from E major to C major, and the consecutive eighth notes are swung. The ossia staff shows Musetta’s original melody, transposed to the new key. Zoleka begins the song an octave lower (mm. 5–19), which suits the jazz idiom, and also shows off Malefane/Zoleka’s extensive range. Zoleka pushes and pulls the melody, in line with the style. When arriving at the middle section (mm. 21–28), Zoleka’s melody is heard in the original range. By beginning the song an octave lower, Isango initiates an intense build-up in intensity. From mm. 19–21 and mm. 37–41, Mandisi and Ayanda sing Puccini’s original melodies, in an operatic style and in Xhosa, and so does Mimi in mm. 43–49. In mm. 39–45, a new sonic element is introduced—back-up vocals singing in close harmony, which add a choral element to the song. In mm. 45–46, the backup vocals sing new content: “This girl is so beautiful. We are so proud of her and continue to be proud of her.” This part is sung straight (not swung) and is reminiscent of South African choral music.

Dyantyis confirms that this choral element features a local approach to singing: “I took some of the harmonic ideas from the orchestration and used the natural way that we harmonize in in townships: 1-3-5.” From m. 39 to the end, Zoleka sings in the original
range with counterpoint from the other characters and backup vocals. She extends the end of the song, adding her own improvisation to end with a flourish. Zoleka’s aria illustrates how jazz, opera, and choral music live in one space; this juxtaposition contributes to the hybridization of the opera.

Figure 3.4. Vocal transcription of Zoleka’s Aria “As I Go By.” Transcription by Angelique Mouyis.
Fig. 3.4. Continued.
Introducing the main characters: Non-diegetic music and “mickey-mousing”

Another aspect that contributes to the hybridization of the opera is the introduction of sound effects, often called “mickey-mousing,” as well as the juxtaposition of sound and silence. “Mickey-mousing” is a term that denotes “the musical imitation of physical movement.”15 As discussed in Chapter 1, *U-Carmen* uses a documentary-like style of filming, and the score includes Bizet’s music as well as traditional songs that naturally arise from the situations presented in the film. In *Breathe Umphemulo*, freeze frames and inserts that produce a comical effect are added to the documentary-like filming. For example, our main characters are introduced by a freeze frame, in which their names are typed out, with the sound of a typewriter and the typewriter “ring” that indicates the typing has reached the end of the line. Then, the image dissolves, and we see a close-up of a certificate; the dissolving is accompanied by a cartoonish, ascending glissando, which is wobbly and dreamlike, that indicates a transition. This indicates that we are seeing an imagined future, in which the characters are holding their degree certificates. They each turn the piece of paper around, to see where their names are handwritten, along with the title indicating what they aspire to be. They wear graduation caps and gowns and stand in front of the university, and happily walk off with their degrees. The “dream” transitions back to the present with the same cartoonish glissando effect.

The first character we are introduced to is Lungelo Silwana, “Studying for a BA in Journalism” (fig. 3.5). We see a flash forward to his certificate, behind which he has handwritten: “LUNGELO / POET + FOOTBALL STAR.”

---

Figure 3.5. *Breathe Umphefumlo*. 00:03:51. Introduction of Lungelo with freeze frame, typed subtitles accompanied by sound of a typewriter.

Figure 3.6. *Breathe Umphefumlo*. 00:03:59. Lungelo’s dream of graduating, accompanied by fanfare and applause.

The sound we hear is applause from a crowd and generic fanfare music, while Lungelo punches the air happily shouting “Yes!” after which he walks off (fig. 3.6). A little later, we meet Sizwe (originally Schaunard), who is selling tickets at the university for the
Zoleka concert. His freeze frame reads: “Sizwe Peter / Post Graduate Drama Student.”

Behind his certificate, he has written: “Post Graduate Drama Queen!!!” His character is openly gay in the film. We also meet Marcello’s character, Mandisi Dingaan (Studying for a BA in fine arts, “Play-Boy… Sex-God… REVOLUTIONARY”) and later, Colline’s character, Xolile Lokwe (“Studying for a BA in Philosophy”). Xolile’s introduction differs from that of the other men: before he can walk off with his certificate, an old white professor walks up to him, rips his certificate up, silencing the applause, and hands Xolile back the leftover pieces. Xolile then rolls up the leftover pieces of his certificate, as if making a joint, takes a puff, and says “Xolile, Ganja man!” and walks off to the sound of a reggae rhythm.

Beyond the introductions, we hear the cartoonish sound effects again when all the men are in their dorm room—the equivalent of the garret in La Bohème. In accelerated motion, the men get dressed for Zoleka’s concert after having smoked a joint. We hear an accelerating, ascending three-note sequence moving up a scale, played on midi instruments. The melody finally descends and decelerates tracking their movement around the dorm room. This composition technique is called “mickey-mousing.” These effects add a particular impression to the film and operatic score and are part of the hybridization of the score. I perceive the use of these effects as adding a light-hearted, playful feel to the introduction of these characters; it suggests that they are young, perhaps naïve, with their futures ahead of them, and they like to have a good time together. The loss of their innocence occurs early in the adaptation—not with the death of Mimi, but when the university students are expelled at the end of Act II, and they are left to their own defenses. These sound effects do not reappear after this point. These effects
also signal that we are watching a contemporary film. Whereas Puccini used techniques that were novel at the time, Dornford-May is using effects and sound techniques that signal a contemporary film.

Lusanda “Mimi” Ndlazi’s introduction is different from that of the men; hers does not have a cartoonish quality, and is comprised, in fact, of music adapted from Puccini’s score. This music begins when Lungelo hears coughing through the stairwell at his dorm building. Concerned, he approaches to where the coughing is coming from. The scene transitions to Mimi’s dorm room, where she is drawing pictures of flowers and coughing with her bottle of pills in hand. A melody from Rodolfo and Mimi’s duet is heard, sung by a chorus of voices and accompanied by marimbas; no words are sung. Unlike the other characters’ music, Mimi’s continues through her flash forward, to her holding her certificate, and to the present moment in her dorm room. After her introduction, the music ends, as Lungelo leaves Mimi’s door.

It is significant and poignant that the non-diegetic music begins with Mimi’s first appearance in the opera, as if the music of the opera emanates from her. In fact, when we reach the point of her death, the music literally falls away, and we are left only with the diegetic sounds of the space—the group sits under a highway in Khayelitsha, and soon after, a train passes (see fig. 3.7). This contrasts to the original opera, where the musical underscoring continues after Mimi’s death, and we hear Rodolfo’s sung cries over a somber orchestral texture. Even the credits of the film have no accompaniment, which underscores the notion that the music of the story is an outgrowth of Mimi’s life, and it ends with her death. The lack of music at the end of the film also highlights the tragedy
of Mimi’s story and of so many people suffering and dying from tuberculosis who go unnoticed and uncared for in South African society.

While Zoleka’s aria signals the hybridization of opera through the incorporation of jazz into an operatic work, Mimi’s death silences opera altogether. This may be understood as representing another form of hybridization: the juxtaposition of sound with nothingness. Without the presence of the young people in this opera, the sound of their music disappears entirely. Sound is a manifestation of their lives, and Mimi’s death is the death of the generation.

**Conclusion**

In *Breathe Umphefumlo*, the Isango Ensemble hybridizes opera by juxtaposing conventional operatic music and singing with jazz and choral music. In Act II, use of the
diegetic sounds of the steel pan band in the marketplace as the non-diegetic accompaniment provides a sense of realness and grounding to the opera, while delineating space. As the characters move to the concert area, a new orchestration, the marimba choir, accompanies the singers. The use of sound effects to introduce the main characters and “mickey-mousing” add yet another sonic component to Puccini’s score which contribute to its hybridization.
Conclusion

Isango’s three film operas illustrate its process of adaptation and indigenization of opera, which previously had the connotations of being a European or colonialist art form. Their process of adaptation is illustrated from their very first staging of *Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries* and *Carmen* (which included aspects of South African song, language, and locale), to imprinting their process of adaption on film in *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*. In *U-Carmen*, Dornford-May and Hazlewood strove to produce a story and sound production which came across as realistically as possible, as well as being relevant to contemporary South Africans, while keeping Bizet’s orchestration mostly intact. In *Unogumbe*, the process of indigenization was furthered by changing the orchestration to marimba choir and township percussion performed by the cast themselves, and led by new music director, Mandisi Dyantyi. Isango adapted a European hymn into SATB form to reflect a historical relationship to hymnody, and the ensemble juxtaposed this hymn with an African hymn. Furthermore, gender-switching the protagonist Noye to a woman reflected realities in the local society, and this would become a hallmark of Isango’s approach. Also included in *Unogumbe* are theatrical aspects such as the filming of the rehearsal and the audience of girls, which characterizes the film as “live cinema,” and provides additional modes of engagement for the spectator. In *Breathe Umphefumlo*, Isango would continue to make the operatic artform their own, by hybridizing the form with jazz, operatic, choral elements, as well as non-diegetic sound effects and mickey-mousing.

All of the films indigenize the operas by translating the language to Xhosa, the vernacular of the Cape and Khayelitsha. They are further indigenized when the location is
changed to Khayelitsha, or a South African university, and with this change come alterations in plot. Significantly, the operatic voices remain true to the original operas that form the basis of Isango’s repertoire of adaptations, demonstrating Isango’s commitment to the operatic art form. The ensemble continues to reimagine operas from the core European repertory in new ways that make them relevant to a contemporary South Africa.
Bibliography


Davies, Sheila B., and J. Q. Davies. “‘So Take This Magic Flute and Blow. It Will Protect Us As We Go’: Impempe Yomlingo (2007–11) and South Africa’s Ongoing Transition.” The Opera Quarterly 28, no. 1–2 (June 2012): 54–71. https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbs039.


INTERVIEWS AND PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS


Mabija, Mkhululi Z. Personal communication with author. Facetime. February 1, 2021.


SCORES


VIDEO/FILM RESOURCES

https://youtu.be/A74G_YaDQiM.


