
Artist Notes

Talking (R)Evolution One Artist At A Time: Gregory Maqoma

by Joan Frosch

Numbers of international choreographic experimentalists are in development of critical discourses that illuminate their inventive practices. An elite group of those artists bring their critical discourses into deep conversation and negotiation with choreographic exploration: South Africa's Gregory Maqoma is one such artist. The results are startling.

"Identify a moment that really tickles you—a highlight. If I had to lose everything, I would keep this," Maqoma advised his repertory class at Bates to choose the conceptual foundation for their work. Rather than "set" the key to creative work, he further advised them to "set it with possibilities" of change, growth, and discovery. "The possibilities are endless," he then clarifies the point with a sharp upward movement of his shoulder articulating to a hand gesture that, well, seems endless. The 34-year old dancer/choreographer challenges top speed with utter relaxation, and strong directional movement with light and exquisitely changing focus. He embodies a clear knowing, juxtaposed with a sincere and fully committed questioning of self. Freshness and openness to the discovery of a moment unknown and never anticipated proves his deep engagement in creative process and his bold trust of the same. He counseled the students to "...feel the vibration of your own movement." Contained, precise, purposeful, simultaneously efficient and generous, and often delicious, Maqoma's movement is lively conversation with himself, his past, his future, and his audience.



Photo: John Hogg

Maqoma appears to be a source of soft power: with a delicate change of his focus, the world changes, to a better, more alive place. Indeed, *Beautiful Me* is part of a trilogy that explores the ultimate beauty of humanity. In this masterful work, Maqoma deploys articulate and fiercely authentic dancing, cultural borrowings and insightful movement quotations, gentle humor and searing wit. The work melts frozen images of "African dance" and points to a new way of being an artist in the world. He muses mid-movement that he "... sells exotic stories to survive." This "exotic story" poses new questions for the dance burgeoning in the postcolonial moment and new lenses are de rigueur.

"I am constantly expected to conform to stereotypical perceptions of the Western world and of African traditionalists," Maqoma has commented. *Beautiful Me* not only unpacks such stereotypes, but offers the alternative views of a fully enfranchised individual actor/dancer who owns and/or appropriates culture as he see fit. He calls the world as he sees it. As if to press the point of believing that "...people of different backgrounds can transcend cultural barriers and create a new and dynamic culture," Maqoma took the extraordinarily open-minded/hearted step to invite other choreographers to contribute to this truly global work. In *Beautiful Me*, choreographers Faustin Linyekula, Akram Khan, and Vincent Mantsoe provided stimuli for building movement conversations to stretch boundaries and actively reformulate African identity as a wide open question.

In fact, the work has the feel of Maqoma in dialogue with not only his contributing choreographers, but with his history, the musicians, and the audience. There is a sense that we all count in this conversation/negotiation of self with the world. As Maqoma explores his

relationship to the Kathak-inspired dance of Khan, we discover that we are reflecting not only on Maqoma but on cultural expectations as he dances outside the frame of our standard lenses. He quotes Linyekula in word and deed. He inhabits magical moments of Mantsoe. Maqoma cyclonically blurs movement and culture into a new space--a rectangle of white light where he asserts with ease that he is more than we had first understood. He invites the audience to peel off the skins of the stereotypes they hold. Raw, real, yet still playful and engaging, Maqoma propels us further along the interconnected trajectory of the 21st Century. He uncovers, he experiments, he investigates humanity in ways that are now no longer "other" to him—or to us—and... he is beautiful.

Maqoma creates a complex choreographic rendering of postcolonial subjectivity. *Beautiful Me* is situated in the filigreed interplay of playfulness and gravitas, collaborative music and movement of varied signatures, voices, sounds and presentations, and History/history/his story (including Wole Soyinka's exploration of the artist in society). Maqoma is at the center of a kaleidoscope, as is each person in the greater scope of humanity. Maqoma shows us that he who negotiates for her/himself a transformation into subject can no longer be objectified and becomes a...subject of beauty.

I would argue that Maqoma's framing of beauty may be particularly notable in response to the prevailing methodological and theoretical lacunae in the study of African performance, where instead of unique and extraordinary subjects people may be viewed as cultural masses, or "herds," in Linyekula's term. These undifferentiated groupings can be facilely (mis)categorized and ontologically imprisoned in a web of "African aesthetics." As Mbembe posits, "To be sure, there is no African identity that could be designated by a single term or that could be named by a single word or subsumed under a single category. African identity does not exist as a substance."

In one part of the full-length version of *Beautiful Me*, Maqoma poses questions to the Pope ("Have you seen God?") and to George Bush ("Why don't you pull the trigger yourself?"). Well, I have many questions for Maqoma and will start with this one: "Can we still see the beauty when the curtain goes down?"

Mbembe, Achille, 2001: 272.

Reference

Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

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