Breaking barriers through dance:
Interview with Gregory Maqoma

South African dancer, choreographer and director Gregory Maqoma founded Vuyani Dance Theatre in 1999 with the vision to build a platform for artists in South Africa and beyond - where ‘collaboration could be a catalyst for breaking cultural barriers.’
UNESCO: Why do you think gender equality is important in the field of dance?

Maqoma: Gender equality is a consideration in any sphere of life, cultural and political, why not in the arts? What is exciting now is that women have more opportunity to express their position in society through their voices, bodies and minds. We can see this happening. I always say if you have something meaningful and significant to say, it will be heard. The challenge is to find way of doing this so that it is not subjective, otherwise you risk highlighting yourself as the subject rather than an element of change.

In South Africa, opportunities exist on an equal footing. At VDT we go an extra mile in our approach where we challenge both female and male dancers to be at the same par. Dancers also have to be challenged equally, that is my belief. With our dancers we never think in terms of quotas or systems. We prioritize talent, and those who deliver the most, who are hungry enough and who are prepared to work extra hard. At VDT you earn your place, and the quality is important. When a dancer says he or she comes from Vuyani, it must be evident.

Your work conveys a strong interplay between the past, cultural traditions, and personal and collective identity today. How does the history and diversity of South African society inform your work as an artist?

As a country we have an incredibly fascinating, complex history and it is from these complexities and differences that we create such exciting work. As a country we still are trying to define our collective identity, and as individuals we are defining and redefining our identities. We do not always agree, and that is what is exciting about tapping into our collective and individual histories. For example in my recent work 'Exit/Exist' and the work of Luyanda Sidiya 'Dominion', we took the approach of holding a mirror to society. We embark on an emotional journey in trying to understand why things are the way they are, and the prevailing issues of colonialism and repression. One work delves into a century-old history and the other responds directly to the present.

South Africa provides us with those possibilities and our Constitution gives room for the artist to tell it as it is. I would also add that it allows us to go where politicians will not tread. It establishes a platform to give an opinion or to respond to a situation affecting and changing our circumstances. When we have the power to speak and dance our minds we are powerful beyond measure.

What inspired you to create Vuyani Dance Theatre?

Vuyani was created out of a need to have a space where I could unleash my own artistic cravings but also where dreams could be realized, and skills could be
developed and nurtured. In 1999 I was a student at PARTS (Performing Arts Research and Training Studios) in Belgium. Being away from home made me realize how much I deeply cared about my country and that I wanted to be part of the changing landscape in a positive way. The vestige of Apartheid left many scars, and through dance we can find healing and creative ways of overcoming its burden and legacy. Vuyani was to be a home for artists to feel safe, and where collaboration could be a catalyst for breaking cultural barriers.

**What challenges did you face in establishing the company?**

Challenges will always be there for any non-profit organization that is striving to be self-sustainable. They are not only financial but also related to building a support mechanism from government, policy-makers, the private sector as well as the community one is serving. But these challenges keep us on our toes, and they are team-building as we all share the same vision of creating sustainable change. We create works in response to these challenges.

**How have your earlier experiences shaped the decisions you have made at the helm of VDT and where you wish to take it in the future?**

I come from an area of South Africa where dance and music were always part of our culture. Growing up in Soweto I was exposed to different contemporary urban dance forms as well as traditional dances performed by migrant laborers who came from different parts of southern Africa.

At the time I didn’t know that dance was a career possibility. It was a call in a local newspaper for dance auditions offered by Moving Into Dance, the school of modern contemporary African dance created by Sylvia Glasser, that changed my whole notion of dance and paved my interest in making dance my career. Moving Into Dance introduced a community teachers training course that gave me an opportunity to develop my love for teaching and mentoring. I realized that if I was able to share my skills, I could certainly build a long-lasting career and legacy. The movement aesthetics of the company are based on early experiences, and this is the reason why we always draw talent from young dancers who have very little idea of what dance is. They bring with them their authentic experiences, which are normally what they have learned in their backyards and communities. And such experiences are vital to the making and building of a dancer. The new breed of VDT mentors work with this principle, and I am

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Gregory Maqoma in ‘Beautiful Us’, Vuyani Dance Theatre
assuming it has become our signature. Every artist who comes into the company knows that they have an opportunity to develop their art. For me that is the future, to grow not only in scale but also in skills.

**What impacts have you observed from Vuyani’s outreach programme?**

Firstly, our outreach programme is designed to give the dancers we train the full responsibility of being the catalyst of change within their society by committing a day in a week to sharing their knowledge with a school or community group. The VDT outreach programme is important for dancers to go beyond their duty of call. And, secondly it gives the school or the community group an experience in dance which comes with many benefits that are self-perpetuating.

We see future artists and future audiences coming out of the outreach programme. The young people of South Africa have the opportunity to experience dance, become more in touch with their bodies, and learn to respect themselves and one another. As the discipline of dance requires respect, we hope that through this process a more sensitive society is being molded.

We need to be thinking of future audiences by reaching out to schools and making sure that dance is part of the education curriculum so that every child can experience the art, and dance if possible. If dance does not appeal to them as a career choice, then at least they would have been given that opportunity and experience, and would be more open to watching it in the future. When schools tour our theatrical productions, it’s about giving them an unforgettable experience that they can cherish for lifetime, and to also be a life changing experience. Two of VDT’s works, ‘Skeleton Dry’ and ‘Four Seasons’, now form part of the high school curriculum in Gauteng and the Western Cape. This came about through our outreach programmes at schools, and we lobbied for these things to happen.

Though most of our outreach programmes take place in the urban areas, we have young dancers who come from rural areas who are realizing their dreams in the company. When you see a young person arrive in Johannesburg with just a suitcase, who brightens in becoming a skilled dancer and is able go back to their homes and change their family circumstances, you know that this is the reason why we have a company, to transform our societies.

We make provisions for female choreographers to come to the forefront. We commission and provide training platforms to develop female choreographers in the country, and are currently running a workshop exchange, 'sHeKhulisa’, with female choreographers in Sweden and South Africa.
Have you noticed any changes in the numbers of women and men auditioning for Vuyani since it started?

Now we are getting more and more men auditioning and becoming interested in dance. What is notable is that we are also getting parents requesting for their sons. This is a completely new chapter, and was never the case just 10 years ago. People are getting more and more exposed to dance.

What major shifts have you noticed in dance in South Africa? What factors do you think have influenced these developments?

The significant shift is that the artist wants to do things for themselves. Contemporary dance is also growing as an art form. We are creating a dialogue among the industry and are engaging all stakeholders to foster a common vision for the growth of dance. On the other hand we cannot ignore tensions between modernity and tradition. By acknowledging traditional forms and movements we are also acknowledging many centuries of our re-occurring history. We embrace tradition at VDT but we are also aware that we are evolving as people and as a country. Support at all levels is needed as both traditional and contemporary genres have a place and appeal, locally and internationally.

At VDT we collaborate with any artists who have a vision to change the world, and who are damn good at what they are doing. The company is always open to collaborators who are about change. It’s always been about the change you bring to the world.

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