

TAPESTRY

ART, BOOKS, DANCE, FILM, THEATRE

A threadbare, poorly conceived offering

An Inconvenient Youth
by Fiona Forde (Jacana,
R150)

REVIEWED BY
GWEN PODBREY



kind, a megalomaniac bent, rank ignorance of state affairs (either within or beyond South Africa's borders), a lack of restraint, a need for instant gratification and diplomatic illiteracy to the mix and the result - as Malema keeps reminding us - can be terrifying.

Forde correctly stresses the divisiveness within the ruling party which facilitated, and - until recently - sustained, his power.

ONE OF the drawbacks of rushing into print with a flavour-of-the-month biography, is that one sacrifices both depth and style in order to be first on the shelf - as Forde's threadbare, poorly conceived and distinctly amateur little sketch proves.

Those who hoped for a probing, thoughtful analysis of the factors which propelled suspended ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema into - and then out of - power, will be sorely disappointed.

Certainly, she has presented him at his most human and vulnerable, and admits in her opening chapter that she battled to reconcile her personal affection for him with the increasingly unsavoury facts she unearthed in the course of researching the book. In fairness, Malema's background of abject poverty and emotional deprivation have undoubtedly contributed to his deeply ingrained bitterness.

Forde describes an enormous household (comprising both nuclear and extended family) living in a squalid shack in one of the poorest, meanest and most dangerous townships in the country: Seshego, outside Polokwane. On numerous occasions, Malema was left to forage for food on the streets or inveigh on kindly neighbours for a meal.

His mother Florah - who died young of a condition brought on by severe (and unattended) epilepsy - had lived as a semi-invalid for most of his life. Consequently, his only real nurturing came from his grandmother Sarah, and their bond has continued.

Indeed, she remains the only voice of authority he respects and she does not hesitate to berate him soundly when she believes he has been disrespectful towards his elders, insisting he apologise. ("When she talks to me like that, I listen," Malema tells Forde.)

Forde also addresses the rickety ANC framework, which engendered the seemingly implacable rage of the man, though the most trenchant insights on these issues come not from the author, but from commentators like Wits professor Achille Mbembe.

The interregnum between the old apartheid order and the new dispensation, in which Malema came of age, failed to either quell the outrages of the past or deliver anything tangible for the future. Former President Nelson Mandela's courageous decision to forgo revenge for the sake of a viable future, to elevate the new South Africa directly into an era of reconciliation - employing restorative, rather than retributive justice in the Truth and Reconciliation hearings (the only forum which directly addressed the 40 years of material and emotional devastation which had been endured by black South Africans) - left families like the Malemas no better off, and no more optimistic, than they had been. It is a sentiment many (particularly Jews) can understand.

Add greed, theft, thuggery of the most venal and vituperative

With factionalisation, rivalry and intrigues diverting more and more of the ANC's energies away from its function of governance, the incubation conditions for an opportunist of Malema's stripe are ideal.

However, the psychopathology of the suspended ANCYL leader encompasses more than the sum of these parts.

The Malema who has dominated headlines and dinner table topics for the past several years, cannot be dismissed as a temporary aberration, for his resilience is extraordinary.

No amount of ridicule, threats of disciplinary action or appeals for reason, have swayed him, or his loyal enclave. Not even his recent suspension can be assumed to be final. (As this review goes to print, the success of his appeal against that ruling had not yet been announced.)

While far from the "young political genius" Forde ludicrously calls him, he is undoubtedly a genius in opportunism, populist rhetoric, racial agitation and melodrama. Of such attributes do phoenixes rise again.

Whether or not the ANC relents on its suspension ruling, it is clearly reluctant to have him back on his own terms. Malema's defiant outspokenness and repeated diplomatic blunders (notably his rallying cry to invade Botswana and stage a coup there) have been embarrassing, expensive and exhausting for the Zuma administration.

Continued revelations of his tenderpreneurship in a bankrupt Limpopo Province, have added to his already grave rap sheet.

Short of being an apologist, Forde has tried very hard indeed to be sympathetic towards the man with whom she formed a friendship in the course of researching this book.

However, the paucity of her investigative instinct and her cumbersome, inane writing (eg "One day he wasn't there and the next, there he was, ploughing the socio-political landscape like an unguided missile, with little or no let-up ever since") reduce what could have been an important, timeous portrait into the most cringeworthy tabloid-ese.

There is also a certain arrogance in the reasons this Irish-born journalist proffers in her preface for writing the book in the first place: "Being an outsider enabled me sometimes to see things that were invisible to South Africans, and to ask questions that might not have occurred to some. You might not like all the answers, but what can I do?" (Some suggestions come to mind...).

A little before that, Forde confides timorously: "I fear Julius won't like this book."

Er, no, dear, we dare say he doesn't. And truth be told, neither do we.

'Statements', a journey into South Africa's dark past

MOIRA SCHNEIDER
CAPE TOWN

A JOURNEY into this country's dark past is being afforded with the production of Athol Fugard's *Statements After an Arrest under the Immorality Act*, at The Fugard Theatre, extended by popular demand until February 18. The first professional staging of this work in 40 years, it is set in apartheid South Africa where relationships across the colour bar were a criminal offence.

Two lovers - a black man and a white woman - meet secretly, while an observant neighbour reports them to the police, leading to their arrest.

Founding producer of The Fugard, Eric Abraham, was banned and placed under house-arrest in 1976 for his reporting on human rights abuses and black politics in the international media, so it is apt that he be associated with a work of this nature.

In an e-mail interview with the SAJR, he recalled receiving "regular, credible" death threats during that time. "As it happened, the same group that targeted me claimed responsibility for the assassination of academic Dr Rick Turner a year after I escaped."

Recalling the "intolerable" restrictions he was placed under as a 22-year-old, he said he had been "completely isolated, had no family or community support, was constantly harassed by the Security Police and had little chance of



Jeroen Kranenburg looks on as Bo Petersen (left) and Malefane Mosuhli embrace. (PHOTOGRAPH: JESSE KRAMER)

earning a living.

"My application for an exit visa was refused; I was left little option but to escape," he said. He was granted political asylum in the UK and spent 15 years in exile there.

Abraham has produced several award-winning films and plays, including *Kolya* (1996), which won an Oscar for best foreign language film and *Impempe Yomlingo*, the South African production of *The Magic Flute*, under the auspices of Isango Portobello (2007) which won the Olivier Award.

In 2010, Abraham established and underwrote The Fugard Theatre in District Six - an area of forced removals under apartheid - and has produced a number of what he describes as "West End-quality" productions there, from *Broken Glass* starring Sir Antony Sher to Fugard's *The Train Driver*.

He says he intended The Fugard to be "a beacon of remembrance and crucible of cultural connection" in the city where "some of Athol's most powerful anti-apartheid plays were performed at great personal risk".

Would *Statements* still have the impact that it had during apartheid, I wonder. "The power of good theatre is to transport us back and inform the present," he begins.

"Of course its impact when it was performed under apartheid and held up a mirror to one of its vilest aspects, was different, but its impact now is no less of a gut punch to the audience.

"The humanity in the writing and performances is timeless. *Statements* is about personal freedom and love across a line."

As to whether today's audiences would identify with the subject-matter, he says that is "all the more reason for them to see it. To see how easy it is for people to be so cruel and inhuman to each other; how lies are so easily perpetuated and accepted by the broader community; and so that they can see what they don't have to live through and how great a triumph the downfall of apartheid really was.

"Audiences are pretty savvy in extrapolating what they see on the stage with their life today. Freedom has to be fiercely protected," the former Struggle activist warns, referring to the Protection of State Information Bill and the attempts to undermine the judiciary as "part of an erosion of such freedom".

Though Fugard had no directorial input, Abraham says he was "overwhelmed" by the production and felt it gave him fresh insights into his own work.

Do you call it a mental illusion?

ROBYN SASSEN

"I KNOW what you're thinking," seems an ordinary enough ice-breaker, but what happens when this line is used by two mentalists and an illusionist? Do you run screaming into the night, do you giggle coyly, or do you bring out your inner skeptic? Johannesburg boasts three top magicians: Michael Abrahamson, Gilan Gork and Ilan Smith, each promising to mess with your head and turn your thinking.

Each reveals that the concept of "magic" is more nuanced than common-or-garden-party tricks. Each presents a skill premised on how the mind works; each boasts a different level of specialisation.

Former lecturer in Stats and Actuarial Sciences at Wits, Michael Abrahamson (43) switched tack 20 years ago, swapping the lectern for the stage.

Although still a stats lecturer in his "spare time," he is today a full-time mentalist. His show is about being interactive. Abrahamson claims to never using "plants" in the audience. His work includes high velocity maths, memorising numbers, and literally, reading minds. He also moves objects around the room with his mind.

"All the time, I get hecklers and sceptics. I love it because it gives me opportunities to teach my skills."

Mind bending is not Abrahamson's only bag of tricks. He has tailored his mentalist skills into study skills programmes enabling any level of learner to conquer the basic thing that's



Mentalist Gilan Gork. (PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN MARK PASS)



Mentalist Michael Abrahamson. (PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY GARLAND)



Illusionist Ilan Smith. (PHOTOGRAPH BY JASON CROUSE/THE PHOTO PLACE)

never taught at school: how to learn.

Illusionist Ilan Smith (31) from Pretoria, has been doing magic since he was 16. Eighteen months in a yeshiva in Israel encouraged him to unpack magic strategically, to examine where it becomes "real".

"My rabbis told me my challenge is never to have people really believe what I do is real. It's my disclaimer.

"But real magic is when someone comes to a show and forgets his or her stresses," he says. He performs for Jews and non-Jews alike, from the patrons of scummy bars to the CEOs of major companies.

Something completely different is the shtick of 27-year-old Johannesburger Gilan Gork, who started "messing with people's minds" as a five-year-old. His parents owned an educational toy centre. These days, he bends metal with his mind. "I switched from sleight of hand magic to mentalism as a teenager.

"The people who inspire me

most are not mentalists; they're playwrights, composers, dancers... people who can take their audiences through a journey of emotions... it is not about a 'look what I can do' mentality."

As a tot performing in public, Gork began to note patterns of behaviour in his audiences, foundational for his development as a mentalist. Indeed, all three of these professionals agree that the most important skill is watching audience reaction carefully. It's only magic if it takes you by surprise.

- Gilan Gork's completely interactive "Beyond the Mind", is at Old Mutual Theatre on the Square in Sandton, February 7 - 11, (011) 883-8606.

- Ilan Smith's "Imagine", directed by Greg Homann is at the Fringe, Joburg Theatre, in Braamfontein, February 22 - March 4, 0861-670-670.

- Michael Abrahamson's next gig is at Northcliff High School on March 21; he is currently assessing interest on the part of learners in Johannesburg Jewish day schools: info@powerbrain.co.za