

Coffee with Mandla Mtshali

Posted on May 6, 2021



South African lighting designer, Mandla Mtshali, had every intention of boarding a plane to Switzerland to light a ballet for the Grand Théâtre de Genève. The opera house's ballet company was planning to showcase a new programme, *'Hors Cadre'*, in November 2020, which featured choreography by Fana Tshabalala (Better Sun) and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (Exhibition) while Mandla was commissioned for the lighting and set design.



It's a distinctive moment sitting with Mandla to hear his life story. If first impressions are anything to go by, the soft-spoken man is dressed in a dark and trendy-looking jumpsuit, not dissimilar in style to the suits worn by racing drivers, and right at the end of the interview, it turns out that it's his own design. The work suite has specially been created for a lighting designer or technician and allows flexibility to move, work or climb while looking neat whether sitting behind a console or attending a meeting. "What I'm wearing is the second prototype and a result of something I had written down and which had been in the pipeline for the past two years," Mandla shares. "When I saw that Covid-19 was not going away any time soon, I thought there would be no better time than right now to develop it. We had to decide on the material and where to position the pockets for tools. We've literally just started the ball rolling and it has taken a lot of hours and effort in terms of concept." The garment has space for a company logo and is unisex. The aim is to extend the clothing range to other industries, customising the layout of pockets and where tools can be kept for those working behind machines all day, truss welders, décor painters, and the likes. It's almost like personal protective clothing but carefully thought out in regards to practicality, comfort, and appearance.



Mandla Mtshali in the comfortable workwear he has designed.



The Lion and the Lamb Musical
(Courtesy The Market Theatre)

With creativity as natural as breathing, during this quieter pandemic season, Mandla has also picked up charcoal and paint to create personal artworks and he has helped set up sustainable vegetable gardens at a few retirement homes and homes headed by the elderly.



Courtesy The Market
Theatre

Born in Soweto, Mandla, and was blessed to be surrounded by people like his grandparents and his mom, a nurse. “At some point, my dad, who worked in IT, disappeared, which made life a little tough, but it wasn’t as painful as it was for many others. I wouldn’t go to bed without a meal and in that sense, was taken care of. I can’t say that I had everything I wanted and sometimes I would not see much of my mom as she worked hard, in fact, she still does, but then I would chill with my gran. There was a time when I wanted to be a doctor, I was so adamant. I felt that being a doctor meant you were constantly solving something and always helping someone. I think the spirit I have is to always help a situation get better, and even in theatre lighting, it’s about creating and enhancing a production.”

He started drawing as a child. “Give me a pencil and I would sketch images from my head, things I could see and things I dreamt about,” Mandla tenderly describes. “My mom was encouraging. She wanted to know what I would do when I finished school, and I have to say that it literally took her five years to understand what I do as a lighting designer. Now I invite her to come and watch shows. ‘You did that?’ she asks. And having received a couple of nominations for the Naledi’s, I invite her to attend the awards with me and tell her it’s going to be a nice night out, recognizing people she would normally only see on TV.”



When Swallows Cry. Written by Mike
Van Graan. Directed by Lesedi Job.

Mentor – Megan Wilson. Cast:
Warren Masemola, Christiaan
Schoombie and Mpho Osei-Tutu.

It was after completing high school when Mandla was first introduced to theatre. He joined The Dance Factory, signing up for ballet and contemporary dance classes. Based in Newton, the unique non-profit dance institution, funded by the Arts and Culture Trust of the Royal Netherlands Embassy and the National Lottery Distribution System, exposed students to various professional choreographers and dancers and equipped them through classes, workshops, and performances. “We also did shows and this is where I first saw the technical team at work and wondered what they were doing,” Mandla recalls. “I started helping out here and there, in between dance classes and theatre training, and eventually left the dance classes to focus on the technical training offered by the Dance Factory.”

The training saw Mandla taking part in many festivals like Arts Alive and Dance Umbrella, where he “happened to meet a guy called Declan Randall.” With over 400 production credits to his name, Declan Randall is a South African lighting, set, and projection designer, currently residing in the United Kingdom, and whose work has been seen on Broadway and the West End as well as in Australia, Canada, India, China, South Africa, Europe, and the UK.



Pass Over (Courtesy The Market
Theatre)

“By then I had already tinkered with lighting for three years, but Declan advised that if I wanted to do things properly, I should enrol at Tshwane University of Technology in Pretoria.” Under the watchful eye of lecturer Hardus Koekeomoer, he completed the Performing Arts Technology Diploma. “I remember having run-ins with Hardus because I had been doing things in a certain way and had to unlearn so that I could learn,” he admits. “I also spent most of my time as an intern at Mark Gaylard’s MGG Productions which is a company where you really want to go.” While the corporate world was vibrant, Mandla’s heartsong was theatre, and he soon started freelancing as a technician at UJ Arts Centre Theatre, the Market Theatre, and working on festivals like the National Arts Festival, KKNK and Aardklop. “Theatre requires sensitivity towards the work and that’s what drew me to it,” he says. Exciting times followed as he lit two solos titled ‘*Plastisization*’ and ‘*They Look at Me and This Is All They Think...*’ in 2007, which was his first-ever tour outside of Africa, and this defining moment, visiting Europe was the start of his career as a lighting designer.

“I’m grateful to have made the right connections,” said Mandla. “Before I even went to TUT, I had three years working as a technician and thereafter continued to work and learn from legends in the theatre world like Declan Randal, William Kentridge, Mannie Manim, Wesley France, Patrick Curtis and Denis Hutchinson. I’ve learned from different schools of lighting in a sense. Being simple is complex, and takes more work. I started working with Denis Hutchinson at UJ where he would be the lighting designer while I worked as a lighting technician, and I got to see how he worked. He has a beautiful mind.”

Mandla joined the Market Theatre for 18 months, before taking up the post as head of lighting at the newly built Lyric Theatre in Johannesburg in 2008. “That’s when I started dealing with Duncan Riley, Bruce Riley, and Nick Britz from DWR who supplied lighting to the new Lyric and Nick took me through the grandMA full size. Nick was legendary and so quick... I had to ask him to slow down! It felt like I had been thrown into the deep end, but I’ve always believed that I could do anything and I just put my head down. One of the highlights while at the Lyric was lighting Trevor Noah’s first one man show live DVD recording ‘*The Daywalker*’ and ‘*DayWalker 2.0.*’ In the background, I had amazing support from the people I worked with at the theatre and who believed in me, like Debra Batzofen.”



Courtesy The Market Theatre

In a couple of weeks, Mandla had mastered the grandMA console, and ever since, MA Lighting has subsequently become his console of choice and what he asks for when working on shows. When it comes to international touring, despite being allocated a console operator, he playfully “shoos” everyone out of the theatre and prefers to personally program the show quietly on his own.

Mandla worked at the Lyric Theatre for three years and then went back to freelancing. “You can only do so much in one place, and I left to focus on being a lighting designer.” He also tried his hand at Gearhouse South Africa for a very short span, but theatre kept calling. A wonderful memory for him was helping his friend Princess Zinzi Mhlongo, the winner of the Standard Bank Young Artist Award 2012 for theatre to light *‘Trapped’*, which premiered at the National Arts Festival 2012 and toured to Salzburger Festspiele 2012 in Austria. “The Salzburg festival attracted theatre practitioners from all over the world,” Mandla enthuses. “We were the only ‘kids from Africa’ and were known by that name as we walked down the streets. We had so much time to play with in terms of setting up, something like two weeks instead of the usual three days we’d have at home.”

The shows kept coming. Mandla toured to Réunion Island, France, Taiwan and locally with *‘The Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative’* a dance organisation, all in a short time frame from August to November 2012. “It really was hard work, but I could never complain about hard work, seeing different countries and touring with different people.” In 2018 he spent three months on tour in USA moving from one city to the next with *‘Umoja’* and also went to Ethiopia and China

touring *'When Swallows Cry'*.



Pass Over (Courtesy The Market Theatre)

Mandla saw that no matter which country he visited, theatre folk were always the same. “People in theatre have beautiful spirits and want to get you to a place where you are happy,” he describes. “As soon as you walk in through their doors, you find smiles and they really are interested in what you want to do. There may be different languages but it’s almost as if there are no language barriers. It’s the love of theatre that carries us from one job to the next, by people who are always ready to serve and want to take the show to its optimal best.”

The last twenty years or more have been busy. When Mandla started a family, he worked at the WITS University at the WITS Theatre for a year as a Senior Stage Manager where he also mentored the drama students. Here he met Heidi Hoffer, Professor of Design from the Oklahoma State University, who in turn was presenting theatre workshops at WITS. It was imperative to balance his creative side with business thinking skills. He gained valuable insight into leadership, financial management, strategic management, and project management from Wits Business

School while simultaneously completing his B-Tech degree in Performing Arts Technology at TUT in 2016.

During Covid-19, Mandla was grateful to keep afloat during the trying time. “I remember being in Dubai in January 2020 doing Sharjah Fringe Festival when the pandemic was in its inception. When I returned to South Africa, I was off to the USA touring ‘Umoja’ and this is when I first started hearing about the Covid-19 pandemic. Upon my return, I was asked by Nicci Spalding of the National Arts Festival to light ‘Masicule 2020’, a concert that featured school choirs from around Grahamstown. I witnessed an amazing collaboration of school children and I really had the shock of my life! It was the most beautiful singing I’ve ever heard and certainly one of my personal highlights. Over 500 voices onstage”

For the virtual National Arts Festival in 2020, he also lent a helping hand, this time as a cameraman, for a number of jazz performances.

The greatest help, at a time when many people were not working, was the financial support Mandla received from Grand Théâtre de Genève who commissioned him at the start of 2020. He had completed all the groundwork for the show, regularly meeting with the creatives over zoom to finalise the design. “Ballet has changed over the years and it’s not always like a Swan Lake where you have all the layers. New choreographers have come in, and one of the scenes I worked on was creating a desert-like set, with broken trees forming the props. The dance saw people migrating over the course of the day, and the lighting went from day to night. In this case, it was literally trying to see where the sun comes from and trying to recreate this as natural as possible to get to the point where you can see a shadow on the floor and to use the shadows to pass time”

On the day Mandla was to board a flight to Switzerland and finally light the show, the second wave of Covid hit Europe and as a result, travel restrictions and lockdowns were reinstated and prevented the show from taking place.

The dedication that flows through Mandla is difficult to contain and quite inspirational. “Mandla is such a legend,” said lighting designer Declan Randall, paying tribute to his friend of many years. “I have known him since his days as a young technician at The Dance Factory. He was always enthusiastic and passionate about his work and it thrills me so much to see that he has carved a wonderful career for himself in the industry. The South African entertainment industry is a richer place for having him in it.”

Coffee with Mandla Mtshali

Photos: Courtesy The Market Theatre