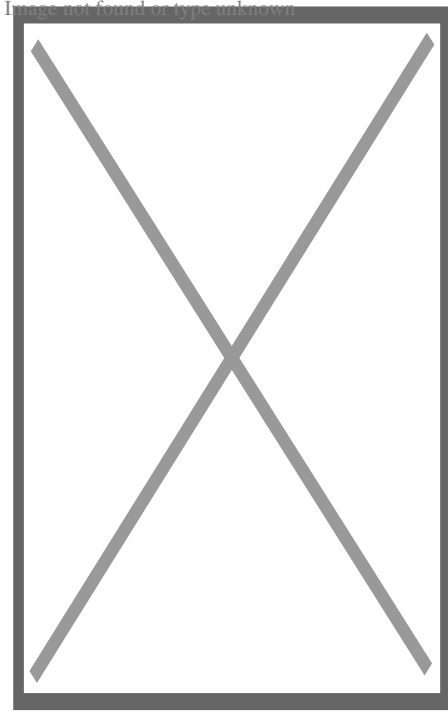


Nomvula Molepo shares her story



Meet the beautiful, talented and dedicated Nomvula Molepo, Head of Technical and Stage Services at The Market Theatre in Johannesburg. Nomvula literally blocked out any voices that said “she couldn’t” and went out to prove that “she could”. In this Q&A, she also thanks her mentors who recognized her steadfast spirit and willingness to learn.

Can you remember the first time you knew that you wanted to work in theatre?

Wow! It was when I watched a play, *Titus Andronicus*, at the Market Theatre. I was intrigued by the lighting and set. At the time I was in matric (final school year) and was part of the community theatre group from Alexandra Township doing drama.

How long have you been at the Market Theatre?

Twenty-four years now. I started as an intern for two years working in all departments; fixing cables, painting the stage floor, maintenance of lighting equipment and working as a stagehand during the performances.

Do you have any memories that could make someone smile, thinking back to those early days in your career?

Sure. I used to be scared of heights, things like climbing step ladders with one hand while holding a light! Oh my, it was scary. And I used to be scared of touching power cables thinking that I would get shocked by electricity. I was unfamiliar with the theatre terms used like "set" or "striking lights" and would ask, why are they striking? I understood a strike to be a protest.



Motlotlo Makhobotloane and Nomvula Molepo

As a woman in the industry, what challenges did you face or did you find that people loved you and raised you up to enable you to hold the position you have today?

Most male lighting technicians were not convinced that a woman could climb a ladder to rig lights. Many male colleagues believed that it was not our place as women to work with lights. Some believed that I would never make it as a lighting technician and that I should rather do stage management as many women were stage managers. They told me that there were no female lighting technicians, but guess what? The more they tried to discourage me, the more I wanted to know about lighting!

I started going to libraries and getting books about lighting as back then we did not have Google. But I must say that not all male technicians discouraged me. I came across people like bra Aubrey Ndaba and Jacob Mogale (Jakes) who at all times give me words of encouragement to work hard as a female lighting technician. I met people like Dan Riley, may his soul rest in peace, and Ian Blair who introduced me to the lighting world. My love for lighting grew stronger and I was able to face and overcome the challenges of being a woman in this industry as a lighting technician.

Before getting the position of the Head of Lighting after two years of training at the Market Theatre, I was employed as a lighting technician. While I was working as a lighting technician I worked with different lighting designers like Mannie Manim, Wesley France, Declan Randall, and Denis Hutchinson, and would always ask questions about how they drafted the lighting plans or how they decided on which lighting positions to use for that particular production. Declan Randal was my mentor who during that time was a senior lighting technician at the Market Theatre.



Denis Hutchinson, Jakes Mogale, Nomvula Molepo and Kevin Stannett outside The Market Theatre

Years later I was assigned to design the lighting for a show which was directed by Tina Johnson. The cast was female only and the director insisted that she needed a female lighting designer. I cannot remember the name of the show but that was the first show I designed. Thereafter people started to know about me in the industry as I was the first black female lighting designer. As a lighting designer, I was nominated several times for the Naledi Theatre Awards as the best lighting designer. I finally won a Naledi Award for Best Theatre Lighting Design in 2009 for the production *The Jungle Book* directed by Craig Higginson. Years passed until I was promoted to the Head of Lighting, a position where I would train young upcoming lighting technicians. Most of whom now work for big institutions. Through dedication, persistence and interacting well with different stakeholders I was promoted from Head of Lighting to Head of Stage and Technical Services in 2020.

As a lighting designer, could you list one or two of your favourite shows and why you enjoyed working on them?

I don't really have a favourite show as all the shows I have designed were directed by different directors using different styles of directing. But I must say that I enjoyed lighting a dance piece called *Noted*. The piece was a bit tricky to light as it had a projector which projected onto the floor, so it was interesting to incorporate lighting and projection. At some point, I used the projector to light the dancers which was both interesting and amazing. *The Jungle Book* was another show that was great for me as the lighting was more magical and different from the other shows I worked on.

Do you have an opinion on how theatre has grown, changed or adapted in South Africa over the past twenty years?

The theatre has grown in terms of new technology now introduced like LED lights. We still have not reached the point where we want to be, especially with the grant funding that we receive from the Department of Sport, Arts & Culture to accomplish most of the work we need to achieve. Most of the art institutions are now upgrading

from the old conventional lighting equipment to LED lighting which is a great start. But we can only achieve this transformation by getting financial support from the art and culture department.

What advice could you share with young people wanting to join our industry, especially young women?

Ask questions, do research, gain practical experience by volunteering, be persistent and attend training or workshops.

Do you have any time for hobbies or activities to unwind?

I used to play tennis just to relax my mind, but I stopped during the Covid-19 pandemic and I have not gone back to play. I also like reading online novels... after doing the house chores.



Some years ago and part of her lighting journey. Nomvula Molepo with DWR's Kevin Stannett.