



Tsakane Madwanganyi as Winnie

JOBURG, 1998. Journalists, photographers and cameramen crowd outside the Johannesburg Central Methodist Church for the next round of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hearings into atrocities committed under apartheid. Everyone is scrambling for their close-up, the right angle, their soundbite as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, the former wife of then-president Nelson Mandela, is set to testify about allegations that she was complicit in murder, torture and arson during the 1980s.

This is the opening scene of Act One in *Winnie the Opera*, a local production about one of South Africa's most divisive political figures. The opera, which opened to a standing ovation at the State Theatre in Pretoria on April 28, takes a snapshot look at Winnie's life. Writer, Warren Wilensky leads the audience into the past, highlighting certain events he believes shaped history to bring Winnie to this point, where she is flayed by international media and despised by many.

Opera is not often based on the lives of actual people and so, it may seem an odd way to depict someone's life story. But, it is an art form that is highly emotive and Winnie's story is nothing if not dramatic. In their heavy bass voices, lawyers fling accusation upon accusation at Winnie during the TRC hearing. Composer Bongani Nodana-Breen skilfully weaves the orchestra's music, creating tension, then relenting, continuously building it up and surrendering again.

It's so successful that members of the audience constantly cast furtive glances to where Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and members of her family were sitting during opening night.

Winnie the Opera is historic in that it is the first full-length opera to be composed and orchestrated by a South African black composer and Nodana-Breen has done a masterful job. To the conventions of classical music he adds traditional choral music, themes from standard church hymns and Xhosa instruments. Unlike traditional, European opera, the singing is conversational and is performed in both English and Xhosa, with some Afrikaans slang thrown in. Soprano Tsakane Madwanganyi, who plays Winnie, captures the drama and inner conflict of her character. This, she says, was not difficult. "I think there's a marriage between politics and opera – both are very dramatic. You just look at her (Winnie's) life and you think: what an opera!"

Though opera is not particularly popular in South Africa, this production has modernised and localised the medium. Taking a cue from the global operatic stage, *Winnie the Opera* is not merely a



Winnie is interrogated by her accusers, above. Cover picture: *Mothers of the Missing* (who act as spirit guides) with Winnie while she is in solitary confinement at Pretoria Central Prison.

This Winnie Soars

Review by *Andrea van Wyk*

musical show but a visual spectacle as well.

Beautifully animated backdrop graphics depicting the Pondoland Hills complement the scene where the family of Nelson Mandela and Winnie negotiate her lobola. In the scene where Winnie is tortured, the light casts shadows across her lonely fig-

nie nor about defending her. Wilensky explains that her faults are what make her such a great protagonist.

"It's not the story of a grand heroine. It's the story of the human condition, essentially," he says.

And as such, the show does not disappoint. The production is dramatic, poignant, provocative. A moved Winnie Madikizela-Mandela told the media after the opening performance, that she was humbled by the interpretation of her life. She admitted that she had never before set foot in the State Theatre, which was viewed as one of the monuments to apartheid. When I asked her how it felt to see her life play out on stage, she laughed and threw her arms around me, saying, "My dear, it was amazing!"

The show very unfortunately had only a week-long run at the State Theatre, but the producers hope to take it to Joburg, Durban, Cape Town and abroad. One can only hope the talent and brilliance of this production will be taken to the rest of the world.

While opera appeals to a very limited market, this particular story certainly has mass appeal. Like Argentina's own heroine-villain Eva Perón, the enigmatic story that is the life of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is a global one: the story of anyone and everyone.

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ure so as to create the impression of prison bars, while actual news broadcasts of the time are incorporated into the scenes of the TRC hearings.

According to the producers, *Winnie the Opera*, is neither about condemning Win-