

GRADUATION ADDRESS OF MS. SIBONGILE KHUMALO

Saturday 18 April, 10:30 - Faculty of Humanities

RHODES GRADUATION 2009

A TRIBUTE TO KV MNGOMA (1922-1999)

Chancellor, Prof Jakes Gerwel, Vice-Chancellor, Dr Badat, Chairman of Council and members of Council, members of the Board of Governors present here today, Deans of Faculties, President of Convocation, Prof Issa Shivji and fellow graduates, my children Ayanda and Siyabonga Khumalo, ladies and gentlemen, I stand here before you with a feeling of great pride yet deeply humbled by this acknowledgement.

I am grateful to Rhodes University for this honour. I am grateful to the Almighty for the gifts bestowed on me that have put me here.

I am grateful to my parents, Grace and Khabi Mngoma, for passing on to me and my brother Lindumuzi, a deep and abiding love for music and the broader arts. As a little girl growing up in Soweto, I was surrounded by music, so I presume it was inevitable that I would end up with music in my world. What I did not anticipate was being acknowledged in this way for my endeavours.

In accepting this honour, I would like to pay tribute to the man who is largely responsible for the person and the artist that I have become, my late father, Khabi Vivian Mngoma.

Khabi Mngoma was born in Troyeville, north east of Johannesburg on the 18th November, 1922. He spent some of his childhood in Annieville, a rural community outside Dannhauser in the Natal midlands, where he was sent to live with his grandfather in 1933. **(Burger I.M.-1990 "The Life and Work of Khabi Mngoma" Doctoral thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Cape Town, p2)** He returned to then Transvaal in 1936, where the family had already relocated to George Goch, formerly known as Eastern Native Township, east of Johannesburg. He was a musically gifted child and demonstrated keen leadership qualities as well. The heredity versus environment debate could not really be applied to Khabi Mngoma because while he grew up in musically fertile environments, he also came from musically gifted and adept parents. His mother, Agnes Matutu Nyembe was a school teacher and his father David Zwelonke Mngoma a virtuoso concertina-playing maskandi musician.

By the time Khabi Mngoma got to his last work post as Head of Music at the University of Zululand, he had worked in the cultural sphere as artist, teacher, publisher, organizer (of cultural activities), choir conductor and singing coach, historian, and administrator. He was a humanist and was described by his late friend Dr MV Gumede as a nation builder and self-made man. **(Alfred, Mike (2003), Johannesburg Portraits, Jacana Press, pg 121,).**

He was the embodiment of a generation that espoused the importance of service and humility.

In 1975 he was invited to establish the music department at the University of Zululand. It was here that his Philosophy of Music Education for southern Africa became entrenched-a lifelong dream for a balanced approach towards the teaching of both African and Western music. He always asserted that

"...I stem from an African and Western culture – like all present-day Africans [who have had or have considerable contact with Western culture] whether they are conscious of it or not. The authenticity of present day Africa does not just derive from the Africa of the past, of primeval forests and primitive instruments-although obviously this should not be ignored- the African of today can play both traditional and contemporary music" **(Burger p423)**

Es'kia Mphahlele articulated similar thoughts in an article published in a collection of his writings called "Es'kia"

"African culture is not a museum specimen. It is a dynamic feature of our lives. It has motive force, being active, potent, energetic, having influence. Because it is active, it assimilates- i.e. it adopts- while it can also resist."

(Mphahlele E (2002) Es'kia- A Collection of the Writings of Es'kia Mphahlele, "The rightful place of African culture in education" p 91, Kwela Books in association with Stainbank and Associates, an article first written in 1982)

Through the various music programmes he founded and ran, and through music performances and concerts, he always endeavoured to expand his pupils' vocabulary and the audiences' experience by incorporating what he believed was an acknowledgement of the dual worlds in which the 'present-day' African lived. He firmly believed that the teaching of music needed to reflect this reality for **all** students of music.

It was at the University of Zululand that he fine-tuned and got some recognition for this philosophy. A citation given to him by the Council for Black Education and Research, on the occasion of the conferment of an Honorary Doctorate from Wits University in 1987 reads as such:

"We salute you, son of Africa, who has taught us the alphabet of western music, and the meaning, the poetry of African music;
for having fought through the many years for our music to be recognized as an imperative dimension of education in particular, and our spiritual well-being in general"
(Council for Black Education and Research, 1987).

It was also at the University of Zululand that those of us who were exposed to this approach, further understood the importance of a need for balance between the intellectual and the spiritual, soul-filled essence of music-making. That it was not enough to understand music solely for academic study, yet he made us appreciate the importance of research into African music in general and Zulu music in particular and its social context and the need to replicate it for further enjoyment and appreciation. He made us understand that the study of music was an important facet of our development as a people, if our music was to be taken seriously by the larger music appreciating public.

We had to be musically literate and knowledgeable, and set the pace for African Musicology and practice. We had to be culturally relevant as musicians. It is important to note that around this time, i.e. the late 70s to the mid 80s, there was a raging debate especially among young black people, about the merits of formal study in music.

In the concluding remarks of a paper first published by Africa Insight in 1987 (Vol 17 no 3, 1987 pp199-203) and reproduced by SAMUS in 1990 (SAMUS 10, pp 121-126), he challenged music educators and musicologists in this way-

"...the teaching of western music to the exclusion of African music at all levels in the South African setting is both narrow and bigoted. It stultifies the black student because it dispenses with performance practices obtaining in his culture; it demusicalizes him; it reduces the capacity to enjoy music and musical creativity. And it keeps the white student in his cultural 'laager'; it perpetuates apartheid...by perpetuating the structures of apartheid in their teaching of music, music educators and musicologists are thereby perpetuating the strife current in South African society"

I wonder how much has changed since this article was first published 22 years ago. Speaking to an old friend and colleague, Motsumi Makhene, a musician and educator based in Johannesburg, he tells me that the design of a National Curriculum Statement has been completed, and that a curriculum has been adopted. The National Curriculum statement calls for the centralization of indigenous and traditional music and a reduction of the dominance of western music. But implementation remains a challenge. Part of the problem are the teachers themselves on both sides of the colour divide, the other part is a lack of incisive, visionary leadership. The cumulative effect is that specialist arts schools remain a reality in our education system, in an environment where there is a need for a broader arts education to benefit children across the spectrum, not just the gifted, privileged few.

From the time Khabi Mngoma started teaching music to young people in Johannesburg and Soweto in the 1940s, to the Youth Music programme established as an outreach programme of the University of Zululand's music department in 1976, he confirmed that a pursuit of excellence through the study of music could be replicated to the study of academic school subjects **(Khongisa Youth Centre for Performing Arts business plan – Historical Background p1)**.

Indeed it was his experience that those learners who were high achievers in the music programme excelled in Mathematics and English, Biology and Geography and other academic school subjects.

He also found that many of these learners developed a keen sense of responsibility and citizenship, compassion and empathy, respect for self and others, and generally were an asset to their communities in a myriad ways.

What does this mean for the modern day educator?

We have an education system that emphasizes science over the humanities. In a previous address to Business Arts South Africa, I quoted a Business Day article of April 17 2008, in which education correspondent Sue Blaise quoted Prof Peter Vale, who commented that

“The presiding philosophy that economic growth is a panacea for all society’s ills ...has stripped away the inquisitive for the practical and has universities turning out technicians instead of thinkers”

And yet any self-respecting educator knows the benefits of an education system that is imbued with the liberal arts in general, and the performing and visual arts in particular.

As mentioned above, it has been known to improve children’s overall performance in school. Also

1. It enables children to express themselves creatively, and bolsters self-confidence,
2. It is likely to keep children actively engaged in school,
3. It encourages openness and tolerance,
4. It develops critical thinking, creative problem solving, effective communication and teamwork, among others-skills that are necessary for a 21st century workforce,
5. It increases positive social behaviours and attitudes that contribute to reduced prejudice and aggressive behaviour. **(Points 1-4 gleaned from the teachings of KV Mngoma and corroborated by the findings of the National Arts Education Public Awareness Campaign, USA; Point 5 -Konrad RR, (2000), in a UCLA study among junior high school learners)**

Khabi Mngoma always mentioned that arts education was important for developing youngsters who were in touch with their spiritual and creative selves, that it was critical for cultivating informed and knowledgeable audiences and consumers of the arts, capable of supporting arts practitioners and rendering them less dependent. For our times, it is also worth noting that we need informed and knowledgeable investors for the arts.

I wish to emphasize that music education is a life-skill; it is a right- a human right, with an emphasis on **human**.

When, as a South African nation, we talk of ubuntu bethu, our common humanity, we are talking of a life experience and not a commercialized notion of how we can tap into others in order to rip them off. Khabi Mngoma and his generation understood this.

He represents a generation that had as its members some very special people...Es’kia Mphahlele, Henry Nxumalo, MacKay Davashe, JP Mohapelo, Mzilikazi James Khumalo, Michael Moerane, Mazisi Kunene among many many others, a very special group that had a strong sense of identity even as they grappled with the challenges of a milieu that sought to denigrate and dehumanize.

I salute him, and thank him for the gift of music passed on from his ancestors, for teaching me to live **in** love and not in fear. I thank him for cultivating in those of us who had the privilege to be in his luminous presence, an appreciation of the basic values that make life so much more enjoyable and valuable-empathy, compassion, respect, loyalty, a passion for success underpinned by hard work. That it was ok to see the funny side of life and laugh **at** yourself, especially with those who anchor you.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate my thanks to Rhodes University for this honour. You have unwittingly raised a monument to a man who is responsible for the person, the artist that I am. With this honorary doctorate, I accept and embrace membership into a collective that remains at the coalface for the reclamation of our cultural and spiritual emancipation.

Thank you. Ndiyabulela. Ngiyabonga.