

Disrupting the Silence: The Past and Transnational Memory

- Vice Chancellor’s Lecture Series on Trauma, Memory, and Representations of the Past delivered by Philip Miller on Wednesday 29 April 2015

I am honoured to be here this morning to be invited by Dr Pumla Gobodo Madikizela to be part of the UFS Vice Chancellor’s Lecture Series on Trauma, Memory, and Representations of the Past.

I have been struck by the title of this lecture, ‘Disrupting the Silence: The Past and Transnational Memory’.

As a composer and sound artist, I work with silence as much as I do with the sound that breaks that silence. The one does not exist without the other. So much of my musical composition work deals with the breaking of silences – and the silences between the sounding of one musical note to the next. Using the various compositional tools at my disposal, I try to create a sound-world in which the listener can seek solace and comfort and find an emotional space to connect to their own feelings which very often cannot be expressed as powerfully outside this musical realm.

Rewind – a cantata for voice, tape and testimony, the work which I will focus on today, asks the audience to engage with the totality of these soundscapes – which as a term, connotes for me many different elements: the verbal, the non-verbal, from the noises of a chair being scraped on the floor to the vibrating string of a violin when bowed by the violinist and then all those silences in between.

I will try to share with you my creative experience and process for the making of this work by playing you video and music excerpts of one of the concert performances of *Rewind* throughout my presentation.

I am not an academic, nor a cultural theorist, but rather a composer and sound artist. So I am hoping that by showing and playing excerpts of *Rewind* to you today, and giving you the chance to listen and be exposed to this material, will reveal and engage with some of the

challenges I faced when I began to work with the recorded testimonies of apartheid survivors who had testified at the TRC.

As a way of introduction, I remember that in 2006, just before *Rewind – A Cantata for Voice, Tape and Testimony* was about to be performed for the first time at St Georges Cathedral, Cape Town, a local radio journalist asked me why so many artists were obsessed with harking back to the bad old days of apartheid? Wasn't it enough now? Shouldn't we start fast forwarding instead?

It is now 2015, some nine years since the choral work *Rewind* was born. It has been performed in a range of cities both here in South Africa, and in some of the cultural capitals abroad. The choirs who have participated in the performances have ranged from an African-American Emmanuel Baptist Gospel Choir based in Brooklyn, USA, to a young community choir from Gugulethu, Cape Town. Yet each time it is heard and seen, it presents new challenges and new perspectives as the political landscape of South Africa shifts and reshapes itself.

The very talking about *Rewind* today, a few days after the xenophobic attacks that have beset parts of our country, makes me think that perhaps this work still has relevance and a place in 2015. It seems that as South Africans we continue to have short memories. After all 2008, when the ugliness of xenophobia first raised its head, was only some seven years ago and yet we continue to repeat again and again human rights atrocities.

I will now give you a brief history of how *Rewind Cantata* came into being and what it actually is for those of you who may have never seen it or know anything about it.

Rewind is a cantata – a particular musical form of a choral work which goes right back to the 17th century. It encompasses group singing and solo singers accompanied by musical instruments. Initially these cantatas were sung in the church, but later they became more secular and less sacred both in terms of the texts upon which they were based and the places where they were performed

But there was another reason why I chose the cantata form as a structure to create this work.

It made sense to me to primarily compose music for the human voice as that seemed to me to be significant in a country so rich in choral singing. The importance of communal or choral singing is immense in South Africa. Firstly, song is one of the main ways political resistance was expressed during apartheid – whether at mass rallies or at funerals – when book writing and political speeches were banned and outlawed by the apartheid regime.

In addition, not only has choral singing had a long and thriving tradition in the church, but it has also given rise to a flourishing and developing interest in opera performance and has produced hugely successful, talented singers who now perform both here and internationally on the world operatic stages. Pretty Yende is a well-known example. And some of the soloists who have taken part in this work now sadly work for prestigious opera companies in Europe and the US.

My cantata, *Rewind*, comprises of a string octet (violins, violas, cellos and bass), accompanying 4 singer soloists including the extraordinary artist Sibongile Khumalo, and a large 80 to 100 member choir. This work was created for a live stage performance and I collaborated with the renowned visual artists Gerard Marx and Maya Marx to produce and create video projections which accompany the singing and which are projected on to a thin gauze screen (called a scrim) which hangs in front of the choir who are on stage and allows for images and words to be project on to the choir and at times disappear completely. The video projections include the texts and testimonies of the apartheid survivors as the audience hears the recordings and the words sung by the choir. (This will become clearer once I show you more examples from the video.)

As a composer I felt daunted by how to begin making this work. I was overwhelmed:

- How was I to work with the painful testimonies of apartheid survivors who had come forward to break their silence and publicly tell their stories and through their voices, reveal to South Africans and the world the horrors that they had endured?
- How was I to work with these recorded voices which I had listened to mostly on radio over the weeks and months while the TRC was in session and now had returned to, in an attempt to make a piece of music reflecting on the TRC process?

How I began, was to start off by listening to the analogue cassette tapes which Antjie Krog, the writer and journalist, had sent me. These were her own recordings made while she attended sessions of the TRC as a journalist. While listening to those raw recordings of TRC survivors, perpetrators, translators and commissioners, something very powerful occurred. As I played these tapes on my tape recorder I would press play, then listen, then press stop, then fast forward to another testimony.

I began to be aware how I would get caught or almost snagged by a word or a phrase from the testifier and consequently I would rewind and listen again. In between the sounds of the fragile tape stretching and spooling, I started to hear the 'sound world' of *Rewind!* A world of vocal shards, sighs, gulps for air, feedback from microphones, clearing of throats, sips of water taken during moments when the speaker lost their speech. All these sounds seemed to have their own grammar and created and served as signifiers to me of the emotions that were hidden often by an almost banal flatness which sometimes pervaded the testifiers' accounts of the events that had brought them to seek forgiveness or some kind of truth and resolution at the TRC.

So these sounds or vocal signifiers began to reveal to me far more about the pain of their stories than the actual words of their testimony.

[Play video clip from *Rewind: The Bag*]

Suddenly I understood: This was the sound language which could become the basis of this cantata which would stay true to the voices of the many survivors that had come to the TRC to tell their stories.

Setting the TRC to music so to speak runs the risk of diminishing or denigrating the process of giving testimony. Instead, I believed that the music and sound world of *Rewind* would give a universal connotation that found resonance in audiences both locally and internationally.

A particular testimony – one of the first I returned to when listening to the broadcasts of the TRC – was the testimony of Mrs Eunice Miya, one of the mothers of the Gugulethu Seven activists.

At the TRC, Mrs Miya had testified as to how she came to hear of the news of her son's death. She had seen an image of his body broadcast on national television. She said to the commissioners: "The reason why I am here again is because ... nobody had come to tell me that Jabulani had passed away. First of all, we were listening to the news with my daughter. One of the children was shown on TV who had a gun on his chest. Only to find out that it was my son, Jabulani. I prayed. I said, oh no, Lord! I wished the news could be rewind." (sic)

I wish the news could just rewind.

This statement of Mrs Miya went to the very heart of what I was trying to do. How do you undo the past- un-tell it- unsay it? I was rewinding back to these testimonies, but this multitude of testimonies, of trauma and loss and pain could never be erased.

I had to ask myself the question: is their value in rewinding these tapes – in returning to them and playing them again. This I could only answer by making and completing the work.

[Play music from *Rewind*: Mrs Miya]

I will now discuss my methodology and selection of testimonies:

As we know, there are so many testimonies – both written and oral – that were both collected and heard at the TRC. The challenge was how was to select a meaningful sample of testimonies that could begin to reflect what had occurred both within the TRC process and in the broader context of South Africa during the apartheid years.

There was no scientific method employed. Apart from the practical time constraints of producing a musical cantata for an audience, how could one person's pain be more significant than another's?

So, once I could free myself from being concerned with telling everyone's story, what became significant was working with the sounds – the vocal cadences, the shards, the sobs the silences. Making *Rewind* therefore has never been about finishing or completing or being the definitive commentary on the TRC in any way.

But sometimes the particular can speak for the universal. The specific for the general.

[Play from *Rewind*: No Greater Than]

The smallness of the stories that were heard at the TRC also had a powerful influence on my choices. One of the many stories presented at the TRC, was the testimony of Mrs Mary Plaatjies. In fact I came across her testimony not through searching through my archive of tapes, but through reading the book by Prof Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela: *A Human Being Died that Night*.

The miniscule details of the testimony became a profoundly moving account of the circumstances leading to the death of her son.

[Play song from *Rewind* of Mrs Plaatjies sung by Sibongile Kumalo]

Once I had worked with these short fragments of recorded testimonies. I faced the challenge of how to use their voices in a way that honours their experience. Even though the legal view was that, because these recordings were in the public domain, I was free to use them without contacting the testifiers. I knew that this was not the approach I could comfortably take. I myself needed to reach out and make contact with those survivors in order to feel certain that the testifiers themselves were in agreement that I could include their voices and stories in *Rewind*.

I initially wrote personal letters to each survivor whose voice I was to use and include and explained what I was doing. Some people wrote back to me, with their answers; others spoke to me on the phone. The overwhelming response was that every one of the people whose voices I had wished to include, not only agreed but wanted and encouraged me to include their testimonies in the cantata.

I remember speaking to Mrs Nomonde Calata and asked her how she felt about me working with the recording of her heart-rending cry she had emitted when testifying about the death of her husband Fort Calata who had been part of the Craddock Four. She told me that by playing the recording of her cries during the hearing, had allowed her husband's memory not to be forgotten and I should play it over and over again whenever I could. She was emphatic about this and explained to me that her cries were a living memorial to her loving husband and in a strange way for her- hearing her own voice cry and taken over by the voice of Sibongile Khumalo out felt almost like a soothing balm to her traumatic loss.

[Play the cry of Mrs Nomonde Calata]

I came to realise that once I had completed the work, a peculiar situation arose in that – in a sense – this archive of recorded testimony which I was using, had made the testifiers unintentionally 'performers'. They had in fact become an intrinsic part of my sound world for *Rewind*. In this respect, they needed to be credited and compensated as performers. This I did and continue to do when the work is performed before a live audience.

But my contact with the testifiers went further. My intention at the premiere of the work was to invite as many survivors and their families as I could to the opening night at St George's Cathedral and later the following year to the Market Theatre where *Rewind* was opening in Johannesburg.

After discussions with psychologists and trauma counsellors, I realised that I needed to be very cautious and careful as to what the repercussions would be for those survivors whose stories were heard and included in the performance. I needed to create a safe space for the survivors to be able to attend the performance without exacerbating the trauma that they had already suffered and re-traumatising them.

I contacted Prof Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and asked her whether she could attend and mediate a preparation day for the survivors and their families. I hoped that this process would allow everyone to preview the work and express their concerns to me and their fellow survivors. I also invited the soloists of the work to be part of this process.

I continued to be aware that this work has the potential to arouse painful memories both for the survivors who attend the performances as well as the choir performers. In Cape Town, I contacted The Tutu Peace Centre for Healing who sent the then-director who spent time both before and after each performance with people, including the singers as well as the testifiers and their families who needed emotional support.

The response to *Rewind*:

Rewind has had a substantial touring history both in South Africa and abroad. The first time it was performed in its entirety was at St Georges Cathedral in 2007 on the 16th December – Reconciliation Day. It was for one night. The audience was made up of apartheid survivors and their families, commissioners from the TRC, Bishop Desmond Tutu and Constitutional Court judges.

The rest of the audience comprised of a mixed group. Some were there to experience a cultural musical event, but some were there to try and find meaning and connect in some way with this idea of reconciliation that was part of the Mandela dream of a rainbow nation.

There was an overwhelmingly positive response to the first performance of the work. I was quite humbled at the time and quite frightened by the power that *Rewind* seemed to have. I spent much time trying to understand what happened on that first night's performance which had been rough and ready, yet absolutely had such a major impact on the audience.

Their responses were very South African: some people ululated, some people laughed at painful moments of raw storytelling and some people wept. These varied responses became something that I started to understand were the coping mechanisms of comprehending the horror described.

Songs like 'Who's Laughing' seemed to evoke wonderful disruptions of joy and laughter and of toyi toying.

[Play: Who's Laughing]

After this performance, *Rewind* then toured to the USA. What made this next performance and many of the performances in other countries significant was that, due to a very practical financial constraint, we could not afford to tour internationally with an entire 100-member choir. We were forced to use local choirs in the communities where we performed.

So, our first performance in Brooklyn New York involved a community church choir, the Emmanuel Baptist Church, who rehearsed the music in collaboration with the South African soloists and a small group of South African exile singers living in New York. I was worried that the introduction of non-South Africans to the choir of *Rewind* would somehow diminish the emotional impact and authenticity so vital to the audience's experience. But something surprising happened.

This Brooklyn audience drawn from the multicultural city of New York and its neighbouring boroughs responded equally emotionally – sometimes even more so than the South African audiences.

At the time of the New York performances, both the American singers and audience members spoke to me and the other local soloists after each performance and told us about finding a deep connection to this work which spoke to their own past as African Americans and the need to break the silence of their own history of slavery.

The work has moved to many different countries but even when in cities like London where a large part of the choir comprised of what I called the 'grey haired brigade' of small community parish choirs from the local churches and town halls in and around London, many of the choristers who had very sketchy impressions of South Africa's apartheid past, ended up toyi toying on the stage of the Royal Festival Hall. Many of these choristers wrote to me afterwards and told me that they had never experienced being part of a choral performance like this and would never forget their participation.

So, I do ask myself: What makes *Rewind* work for audiences both from abroad and locally?

I think we have to start with the choice I made as the composer to use the actual recorded voices of the testifiers from the TRC. Then I think, adding to this, is the power of a 100 member choir- on the audience. A 100 singing voices reverberating into the performance space seems to touch audiences alike – beyond merely an aural level of pleasure.

I believe that a collective body of people singing is a unique symbolic act of communal remembering. But more than that: it is a deep form of identification of our humanity and allows for some form of catharsis for those testifiers who have attended the live performances. Just as a parent sings a lullaby to calm a crying child, the choir singing reaches those of us who continue to mourn.

Quite often after the performance finishes, members of the audience share with me their experience of a deep need to connect with each other as human beings and to acknowledge to each other our common humanity. This I believe is the universal power of music and song to convey a spiritual dimension to what perhaps is sometimes too graphic and painful to fully comprehend.

I also believe that the actual make-up of the choir also plays an important role in how the audience responds to the work. The *Rewind* choir consists of both young and old singers – some who had personally experienced trauma living under apartheid – to others, the born-frees too young to have even listened to the TRC testimonies. As such, there is a sense that these stories are being handed down by way of song from elder to child, forming a living sound memorial that reconnects with the strong African tradition of oral story telling.

School children and teachers have attended performances of *Rewind* as part of special programmes and curricula dealing with South Africa's apartheid history and of the TRC in telling this history. It has been gratifying to hear young children tell me that they had firstly never experienced hearing and watching a live performance like *Rewind*, both in terms of the music and the visual language. They expressed their excitement at engaging with the TRC and apartheid through music and song.

Due to funding constraints, we have not been able to travel this work throughout the country, but through the work of the film-maker Liza Key a documentary has been made which includes excerpts of the performance and includes interviews with both apartheid survivors and perpetrators. This documentary has been made available to schools and communities.

If anyone here today is interested in obtaining the DVD of this film, please indicate to the faculty as I have brought copies.

[Play second part to Mrs Nomonda Calata]

Rewind has not been performed for many years now and I am not sure how it would be received today in 2015. It seems sometime that the voices of apartheid survivors and their concerns focus on basic but important matters of decent reparation, rather than re-telling these stories.

I still wish for *Rewind* to be seen by more young people – students, scholars, school children – as way of exposing them to the ways in which music and song and the arts in general can convey the powerful stories of our nation without fearing to engage with the subject matter. But for now *Rewind* has not been planned for performance any time soon.

The Sound Garden Memorial Project at the Johannesburg Holocaust Museum:

For the final part of my presentation, I wish to talk briefly about a new project I have embarked upon for the newly-built Holocaust Museum in Johannesburg which opens towards the end of this year. The curators Tali Nates and Lauren Segal have asked me to create a sound memorial for their open-air garden which is a space where visitors to the museum will be able to seek contemplation and meditation after having experienced the exhibits in the actual museum space. The challenge that faces me is to create a sound work which goes beyond the history of the holocaust of the Jews during World War II, but to also engage with the Rwandan genocide which took place in 1994 in Africa.

I would like to ask my colleague, Théogène Niwenshuti to present this work with me and discuss briefly the process we have embarked upon.

The first phase of this project is to hold a series of workshops with both Rwandan survivors and holocaust survivors currently living in South Africa. The idea of these workshop meetings is to explore personal memories through song, sound and music. The very first workshop of five Rwandan survivors was held last month in Johannesburg, mediated and convened with the assistance of the Holocaust Centre and with Theogene's help and skills.

I am going to play you a few sound clips from this workshop which can then open up some discussion about what I hope to achieve by working with this particular process.