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Theatre missionary: From Alaska to Africa

HAY and grass mats underfoot, a painted, beaded, cow-skin-clad ancestral spirit crouching at my knee, drum beats thumping through the foggy light ... it is easy to forget that I am in the Natal Playhouse in central Durban.

I am watching *Emandulo* (Zulu for a long, long time ago), swaying with the rhythm of the Zulu songs, and eyeing the bald-headed God in his Heaven-in-the-ceiling as he perches precariously over the swirling and spinning spirit medium.

In its most radical departure yet from traditionally Eurocentric productions, Napac's Loft-Kwasa production of *Emandulo* is a step towards the revival of the indigenous traditions of performance that have for too long been stifled.

The production recounts the ancient Zulu tale of Mshayindlela — the cow who refused to be kidnapped by cannibals, only to be persuaded each step of the way by his intimidated shepherd.

Only after Mshayindlela has been roasted and devoured by the cannibals, the shepherd whispers to the bones of his cow, reawakening the spirit of Mshayindlela, and the two make a quick escape.

The version currently running at the Loft theatre at the Natal Playhouse until June 7 adds a clever twist. Cannibals are replaced by colonialists of all types — Afrikaner whip-wielding farmers, British settlers, and sermonising Christians — who compete for the best cut of Mshayindlela's meat.

As the ancestors roar and grumble in horror and the spirits shriek and dance, it dawns on the audience that the land of Africa — symbolised

The Loft-Kwasa production of Emandulo is a break away from Napac's Eurocentric tradition.

LENA SLACHMUIJLDER

*spoke to its American director,
Tom Riccio*

by Mshayindlela — is being devoured by outsiders seeking to serve their own interests.

To make this break in performance style, Napac drama director Murray McGibbon imported 36-year-old Italian-American director Tom Riccio from the opposite corner of the world: Fairbanks, Alaska.

How can this outsider, an Arctic Circle-dweller be the right person to delve into the traditions and myths of ancient Zulu culture and develop a performance in a month?

McGibbon calls him an "expert on aborigine culture"; Riccio refers to himself as a "theatre missionary" who likes to learn. During the past 10 years, Riccio has worked with the Tamils from Sri Lanka, the Inuits of Greenland, and most recently reviving the theatre of the Alaskan Yupik Eskimos as an assistant professor at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks.

While not prone to generalising, Riccio comments that all over the world, indigenous cultures entail similar cyclical themes of harmony and restoration — sharply in contrast with Western culture's emphasis on conflict. He hopes that theatre in indigenous cultures can be



Director Tom Riccio ... 'I try to plant a seed of self-empowerment'

used as an affirmation of their culture in the face of the bombardment of Western values.

"Theatre tells us who we are and where we are," explains Riccio, "we need to build confidence in the method of performance of indigenous people."

As in Riccio's Yupik Eskimo productions,

Emandulo has no script. "I with the idea for the production said Riccio, who read hundreds of Zulu folktales and watched dozens of township performances while still in Alaska. The story, its characters and characters have evolved through workshops and improvisations at instilling personal and cultural confidence in the actors.

"I try to plant a seed of self-empowerment," says Riccio. "They need that they are the creators — that it is their show."

Although Riccio speaks no Zulu, the play is almost entirely in Zulu. This is an attempt to attract a largely Zulu audience — which would be a first at a Napac performance. It can only enhance the performance, explains Riccio. "When you don't know the language, you're liberated to experience the performance with your eyes, ears, mind and body."

The production marks a first in cooperation between Napac's mostly white professional Loft troupe and the in-training Black group — composed mostly of black students focusing on community and educational theatre.

When he leaves South Africa, Riccio returns to Denmark for more work with Greenland Inuits, and then heads to Petersberg to work with a group who is reviving pre-Christian song and rituals. "If I stay in South Africa longer, my work would be to define a vocabulary of movement and performance styles specific to Zulu culture," Riccio.