



The lighting design by Oliver Hauser reflects the mood and emotions of the main characters as the story unfolds. Pictures: REGARDT VISSER

# THEATRE THAT MAKES YOU THINK

Theatre is more than a spectacle, it's a mirror to our world. **Ryan Enslin** recently discovered what happens when the stage fades for those who have dedicated their lives to the craft, taking in the new play 'Bitter Winter' and the plight of actors in South African theatre

I've always loved the theatre – the sense of occasion as showtime approaches, standing in the crowded lobby, weaving through a relentless queue to grab a drink before the final bell. The hum of anticipation in the air as I present my ticket, step into the auditorium and find my seat, as close as possible to the stage. Always.

The intimacy of live performance is enthralling, connecting with the artists and with the world they conjure before my eyes. A bead of sweat tracing an actor's temple under the stage lights, a fleeting look or a breath held a second too long makes me feel as if I'm inside the story, a silent part of the production itself.

At a recent performance of *My Fair Lady* at The Teatro, two things struck me. I wondered about the state of local theatre in South Africa: beyond international blockbusters, where are the home-grown productions? How are local theatre practitioners faring?

By chance I was seated next to Weslee Lauder, producer of *Bitter Winter*, a new Paul Slabolepszy play that opened last Thursday at the Pieter Toerien Studio Theatre.

*Bitter Winter* offers unique insight into the life of actors, following a series of interactions in an audition room between rising star Prosper Mangane (played by Oarabile Ditsele) and Jean-Louis Lourens (played by Andre Odendaal). Jean-Louis is in the twilight of his career, no longer the flavour of the month. Between their dialogue, Felicia Willemse (played by Chantal Stanfield) turns up the tempo as she co-ordinates the casting process.

The play unfolds as an inter-generational, cross-cultural journey. Prosper, initially standoffish and dismissive, comes to appreciate Jean-Louis's nuanced skill as an actor. While this plays out, we witness Jean-Louis tapping into what made him a formidable talent back in the day, embracing his classical training and sharing insights into the craft with a now eager Prosper.

Production designer Frankie van Straten



Andre Odendaal as Jean-Louis Lourens in 'Bitter Winter'.



Oarabile Ditsele as Prosper Mangane, who embarks on a journey of self-discovery.



Chantal Stanfield as Felicia Willemse, who ups the tempo between the main characters.

masterfully crafts a set that draws the audience into the journey. The set is designed at a 45° angle, allowing the audience in the intimate theatre the sensation of being in the same audition room as Prosper and Jean-Louis. It's daunting at times, particularly when the characters are at odds with each other, such as the skill of their performances.

Superb lighting design by Oliver Hauser drives the story, reflecting the changing mood of the actors as the play unfolds.

My thoughts about the state of our theatre industry were reignited. The playwright Slabolepszy shares with me the following quote, attributed to Arthur Miller, "theatre is humankind's conversation with itself", and I wondered what this conversation is telling me. "I love theatre that makes you think, when you leave questioning something, or a conversation in the foyer afterwards," continues Slabolepszy.

Lauder shares his hope for the play: "I

want you to come away saying, 'wow, actors nearing the end of their careers aren't taken seriously'." He wants to sensitise audiences to the work of being an actor, what goes into the craft behind the scenes and to start a conversation about the state of theatre in South Africa.

*Bitter Winter* portrays, in disturbing detail, the extent of the disconnect both Lauder and Slabolepszy are concerned with – the challenges creatives are confronted with in the twilight of their careers – and a portion of ticket sales from the show are being donated to the Theatre Benevolent Fund (TBF).

Founded in 1964, the TBF is South Africa's only arts and entertainment charitable fund which provides financial assistance to arts professionals facing hardship due to old age or ill health. It's a registered public benefit organisation and requires no registration, membership or fees.

As the final moments of the play unfolded, I was absorbed in the magic of live performance – the intimacy, the raw emotion, the silent conversations between actor and audience. But this time, the experience carried a deeper weight: the play profoundly brought to life the concerns I've been having about South African theatre.

Beyond the beautifully crafted performances and masterful staging, *Bitter Winter* is a call to awareness; a reminder that while the South African arts are brimming with talent and legacy, they face challenges. *Bitter Winter* offers hope through the passion of its creators and cast, support for the TBF and powerful storytelling.

As I left the theatre, I held on to the reassuring thought that South African theatre may have its issues, but as long as stories like these are being told, there'll be a reason to take my seat – in the centre, as close to the stage as possible.

*Bitter Winter* runs until March 16 at Pieter Toerien's Studio Theatre, Montecasino. Tickets are available via Webtickets and selected Pick n Pay stores.