Mentee: Tracy September
Mentor: Ntando Cele
Project Title: September

All rights reserved. This work was created as part of the mentoring and coaching platform *double* of the Migros-Kulturprozent.

Die Mentorats- und Coaching-Plattform des Migros-Kulturprozent

SEPTEMBER @ Kunsttage Basel 2023

Project Goal

Branching out of my mostly musical practice, through this project, my aim was to explore ways in which I can expand my musical performance and story telling practice into theatre performance. Theatrical performance, writing and staging are very different from performing on a concert stage or simply creating music and sound for film or theatre … or story telling in a museum or gallery. The aforementioned spaces are where I am most comfortable and fluent. However, in recent years, with more exposure to theatre spaces and works, I want to explore how theatrical performance can broaden the possibilities I have within myself for storytelling and performance. Through SEPTEMBER, an existing performance that blends storytelling and musical performance, with the coaching and guidance of Ntando Cele, I explore how to build on what already exists in SEPTEMBER, to create a one woman theatre piece. As a master of the one woman show, Ntando is perfectly suited for the role of my coach, more so because she can relate to the subject matter of the performance personally.

The Process

As someone who works full time as a professional musician and performer on various projects, my initial conversation with Ntando was about how to find ways to incorporate what already exists in my practice as tools or catalysts to research how these activities can feed a newly forming theatre making practice. In Ntando's words, "there is no need to reinvent the wheel, but rather, improve the wheel so it can function at its maximum capacity". For us, this meant looking at what I was already doing and exploring ways in which these things could become tools or opportunities that are part of forming a theatre making practice.

As a start, we took stock of all the projects and performances I had lined up for the coming year and identified which of these could form part of my year of learning theatre making. Based on this programme, we scheduled monthly coaching meetings where Ntando would give me 'homework' for the month and I would report on my progress in the following month.

MIRA movement & costume research phase
Workshop with Ivy Monteiro
Tanzhaus Zurich, January 2024

TIMELINE - August 2023 - August 2024

August '23
Initial meeting to discuss our mutual aims and my ambitions and map out our way of working by defining and planning the process.
First viewing of SEPTEMBER by Ntando during Kunsttage 2023

September '23
Feedback and exchange about the performance. Reviewing the content and exploring the possibilities of what could come from what exists. It was in this meeting where I first heard of documentary theatre. Ntando shared that within the theatre canon, SEPTEMBER could be classified as documentary theatre. Feedback on performance elements, approach, tone, intention, the role of the body on a theatre stage - the body is part of the storytelling. It can be used as another voice. As the sole body on stage, what other tools or mediums can I use to express the words and/or music in different ways? Lighting? Costume? Video projection? Movement? Objects of metaphor? The possibilities are endless. The real question is what elements feel like an extension of my artistic voice or style? Something we spoke about in depth was the role of the images and pictures in the performance. We both agreed this is something that needs to be more intentional and connected to the rest of the performance.
Homework:
Start a collection of references of pieces/things/visuals/performances etc that I really like, and explore the works that already speak to me. What is it about these works that I am drawn to?

October '23
Introduction to the theatre making process. From the inception of the idea, to how the work ends up on big stages. How to build a production team. How production team members get paid. Applying for funding to research the work. Finding a space etc etc. Ntando also shared a list of books and texts I should read about theatre making.
Homework:
Start dreaming. Starting to think about the things I like and start reviewing the script and content and imagining possibilities. What could already change or be added? Based on the people I have worked with in the past, or productions I know of or have seen, start to imagine my dream production team. Who are some of the people I would love to work with? Who do the people whose work I love work with?

November '23
Sharing about my initial 'dream team'. What to look for in a team. When to start asking people if you want to book their time. Having multiple options to manage people's availability but having your dream team as a start. Working with a house production team vs. your own. How much time you need to work on your own and how much work you need to do before you start to get

the team involved. What do I need to have in place? Different working models depend on the people involved.

Homework:

At this time I was also going to be in South Africa making music for a theatre production. Observe the directional style. How texts are developed. The role of the performer vs. the director. What would it mean if a director was directing something I wrote? Do I want a director? Or just a dramaturg? Can I direct myself?

{Converting Eviction - Infecting the City, performing arts festival, Cape Town, South Africa}

Lillian Zikala, played by tracy september Uhlanjululo

December ‘23
Sharing experience of working on the theatre production and observations. I realised that most of the work I really loved was body and movement centred. Bodies were being played like instruments, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes loud, sometimes melodic or harmonic or even dissonant. Small tender gestures can be just as strong as forceful movements. The intention writes the score.
Homework:
Observe how my body moves/reacts/speaks in moments of everyday storytelling. Finds ways to explore the body as performance. Use my existing resources and network to find ways to work with the body. Find inspiration.

January ‘24
This month I was working with Ivy Monteiro again, doing the sound design for their dance piece in collaboration with Wellington Gadelha, ‘MIRA’ that premiered at Tanzhaus Zurich, in February 2024. I asked Ivy and Wellington if I could sit in on all their rehearsals that month whilst they worked out the choreography. I observed and in some moments I could join and give input
Homework:
Take notes and observe the exercises, methods, tools, approaches etc Wellington and Ivy. What inspires me? What can I use? Who are their influences?

February - March ‘24
In this period I was in South Africa composing music for the film “Uhlanjululo” by Zamani Mkhwanazi, where I also got the opportunity to star as one of the main characters in the film. In this period, I had to compose the music for the film, perform the music and also play the character in the film. I had never acted as someone else before or on film, but I chose to do it as an opportunity to explore playing or performing as someone or something else, outside of myself. Ntando and I decided to use this as an opportunity to explore character development.
Homework:
Take notes and observe. What does it mean to be someone else? In music performance,you are always yourself. How can I embody someone else? How can I transform? How does this transformation transform the work? How can my body help me to tell the story better? How can this all apply to SEPTEMBER?
Ntando and I spoke and reflected on these questions in each of these months

April - May ‘24
In this period I was invited to do the sound design on a theatre piece by director and dramaturg Miriam Ibrahim, called Adas’s Raum, at Theater Dortmund in Germany. I asked if I could be there for all the rehearsals and development of the piece in Dortmund. I was able to observe the costume, stage, lighting and video design for the piece from its initial rehearsal and tryout stage, all the way up to the premiere. I got to speak to each person about their area of expertise and how they approach their work. The highlight was meeting the stage designer, whose work I truly admire. We had a meeting and she agreed to work on SEPTEMBER. She also does video and costume design, so this may possibly be a way to have a small team to begin with. We have been exchanging ideas.

Homework:
Observe and take notes. Speak to production team members. Ask them for tutorials or workshops where possible. Reflect on how you can apply this knowledge to SEPTEMBER. What is inspiring me?Ntando and I spoke and reflected on these questions in each of these months

June ‘24
Taking stock. Reflecting on the last five months. Starting to restructure and rewrite SEPTEMBER to include my new found knowledge. Ntando was present for a DJ set I played at Schauspielhaus last month. The set took place in the context of a theatre and dance festival. Ntando observed how ‘theatre folks’ enjoyed the DJ set and wondered how Ii could incorporate my DJ practice into the performance as well. This has led me to consider transitioning into a small “party” at the end of the performance. It was something that had crossed my mind a few times but I never imagined it be4ing realistic. Ntando’s suggestion was affirmation.
Homework:
How has my recent experience impacted my approach to the work? What are some new ideas I’d already like to incorporate in the work? What are some things I discovered about myself in the process?

July ‘24
Discussion about the next steps. Envisioning which house or space I’d like to physically start researching and developing the work. Ntando shared that her production company, MANAKA PRODUCTIONS would like to start producing works and are starting the MANAKA Academy for this purpose and they would like SEPTEMBER to be one of the first works they produce.
Homework:
Dreaming with the benefit of knowledge. Knowing what I know now about all the steps it takes to create and produce a theatre piece, what could a dream scenario look like now? When could I start working? Who could my production team be? When would I bring them in? Knowing my schedule, what are potential timelines I can set for myself?

August ‘24
Meeting Ntando’s producing partner. Discussing funding deadlines and realistic timelines that work for all. Expectations, capacities and a clarification of roles between myself and MANAKA. Ways of working and a plan for the coming year. MANAKA will do the fund raising, I will find a house to host the work. MANAKA will book tours and shows in other theatres and festivals, I will ensure I create a good creative team and start to speak to potential collaborators based on the time frames discussed.
Homework:
tracy draft a 1-2 page document with an updated and adapted description of SEPTEMBER that is specific for theatre houses and try to find a theatre house in Zurich specifically. Document ready by the end of October. House confirmed by early ‘25 to meet funding deadlines.

Costume development workshop
by Gianna Sophia Weise
Theater Dortmund

Reflections

This mentorship period really felt like a blessing. So many things fell into place organically. It felt like I was “learning on the job” with the guidance of my chosen mentor in the process. Theatre works very differently to music. There are far more people involved in the “food chain” so to speak. There are many moving parts at play at the same time. As someone who really just wants to focus on creative work, it really helps to have a producer for the work. Nonetheless, I will still have to manage a creative team and that does intimidate me slightly, I’m used to working very autonomously. However, having had my recent experiences in the theatre world, I also really appreciate the power of teamwork and collaboration. And getting to work with people from different disciplines. It also takes a lot longer to get a project off the ground, as opposed to simply just jamming where you can as we do in music. It really is like training a new muscle and I'm looking forward to it.

Challenges

The greatest challenges were in my head. Wondering if I was being audacious in trying to enter a field that many people have taken years to study. I also realise that timing is everything in theatre. One really has to start planning and working on a project far ahead of time. Theatre houses start confirming their programmes for the season almost two years ahead. This means my original plans or imagination of how quickly or simply it would be to get to the moment of staging the piece have been shattered to some extent. When Ntando explained some bureaucratic systems I would need to have in place to produce a theatre piece e.g. having a 'Verein' or business registered and then managing big budgets, I did not feel like I really had capacity for that. This is the type of work that completely overwhelms me. In the end when MANAKA approached me to produce the work and take on this work, I was an incredible relief.

Going Forward

MANAKA PRODUCTIONS will produce SEPTEMBER through the MANAKA Academy, with the aim of having the piece premiere in January/February 2026. All funding and co-production deadlines considered, the work will have its first research phase in June/July 2025, then again in September/November 2025 in preparation for the premiere.

Sharing - I will do small sharing of my work at the outdoor theatre space Terra Alta in Accra,Ghana as part of a residency I will be doing there in November '24. They asked for an offering of a performance and I believe this would be a good opportunity to try out SEPTEMBER with all the new inputs I have.

Lillian Zikala, played by tracy september Uhlanjululo

Ada's Raum premiere
Theater Dortmund
2024

Conclusion

The mentorship and coaching experience will certainly impact my artistic practice for years to come. It feels like the beginning of another artistic chapter that may last even longer than my music career. Also, the experience of Ntando being able to identify aspects of my existing practice that can be part of the magic of my unique theatrical voice. It is also incredible that Ntando and I will now be working together to produce the actual piece. This has been the best outcome of this project. I look forward to wherever this path is leading me.