

## ***'Pick me, pick me!': Theriso Tsambo speaks to Michael Blake about her life and music, 24 August 2007***

*This interview was conducted during the South African Society for Research in Music (SASRIM) conference in Bloemfontein.*

*MB: Can you tell me something about your background? How did you get started in composition?*

TT: I was born in Rustenburg, and sang in the school choir. I enjoyed music. My first scores were written on brown paper and pasted on board: in tonic solfa [notation]. From primary school my earliest remembered songs are 'uDoli' (which is the name of a girl). I don't remember the composers of these pieces. They were vibrant, we were young, and they were singing about this girl who was going to see her mother. The song went 'Ha! Ha! Ha!' when Doli was happy to see her mother. The teachers made us laugh. We started singing harmony when teachers told boys and girls not to take each other's parts. We had to learn long Afrikaans poems, we were supposed to cram them. I would sing them somewhere in my heart so I didn't forget them. I used music to make myself remember them. Music was in my veins. I even memorised stations this way – from Beit Bridge to the [southern] Transvaal. I was an only girl. I had to look after boys, two brothers who were younger. I would carry them on my back and sing. I was composing all the time. My mother is Xhosa. We lived not far from the mines in Rustenburg: Bleskop mines. The workers would gather in stadiums and sing songs, work songs such as *Shosholoz*a. I was 14 or 15. The school choirs never sang my songs. My music composition was more a private form of composition. My father was Tswana. We belonged to the Methodist Church and even sang Xhosa hymns. I have written new words for some of the Methodist hymns, e.g. the hymn for mother's day, and the unveiling of tombstones. I've written over twenty pieces, all for choir. A lullaby for women; a serenade for men (*Love Song*). The rest of my output is for SATB, and is both sacred and secular. I wrote a piece for the National Choir Festival 25<sup>th</sup> Jubilee: *Jubilee ya NCF*. It was

commissioned and prescribed. My other pieces have been sung as own choice pieces in previous festivals. I had no instrumental training as a child. Except that I made a traditional instrument then: a one-string bass, with an oil tin. I have composed music for school choirs as well. SABC1 came to Mafeking, where I work [University of the North West, Mafeking campus], and made a celebration about my work, in conjunction with Motswedeng FM (the Tswana radio station).

*MB: How do you compose?*

TT: I almost did not compose, because each workshop I went to, sometimes after writing a piece I'd be told, "no, this line is beyond the range of the [voice] part", and each time I would re-correct it. Until the lady, Mrs Matshila said, "let me give you a crash course on theory of music: not to become a better composer but so that you know how to break the rules, or, which rules you'll be breaking if they say, 'outside this range'". So basically when I compose – because I didn't have intense music theory background – when I compose I am controlled by the spirit of inspiration come from somewhere. I

normally have a notebook by my bedside. It's divided into all the time signatures. If when I wake up in the night and the song I've written is a 4/4, I just go to the pages of the 4/4s. (I already have 4/4s ready in my notebook.) I use my cellphone if I'm driving, or if the melody comes maybe at a very inopportune [moment], I use my cellphone to record that. I have my dictaphone at home. I also use my daughter! I just ask her if she can sing this note, then I can write it. That's how I do it. Some people say, "use the lyrics first then put melody later on" – or they say, "melody first". I've tried both ways. If I start with the melody, I have the language: I compose using my mother tongue. If I start with the lyrics the words themselves give themselves a tune. I have this choir in my mind that normally sings for me, and I depend on that choir. If one [voice] part doesn't sing, it means that portion [of the song] doesn't need that part to sing; supposing it's the whole choir, the males are quiet, I don't have to write the melody for the males. In my imaginary choir, it means I don't have to write for them. So that's how I write.

*MB: Why do you compose the way you do?*

TT: I'm mostly inspired by events around me. One song I wrote was about child abuse. In that year – I think it was '97 – almost every newspaper had a page about how a child was killed, how a child was missing, or something; and there was this TV show where every time before the News we see 'missing children'. Some of them were never recovered. That thing ... when I'm asleep sometimes, if I don't have a solution, it comes in the form of a song, because that's the only way that ... When the song's being played I feel I'm communicating my inner feelings to the choir or the people who listen to me. Because each time I compose I don't only think of the choir that's going to sing my song, I already visualise the audience that will be listening to the song that the choir is presenting; my work. Every time I write

something I think I'm communicating with the whole community about the problems I have most sympathies for. Some of the songs, like *Thapelo ya Aids*, it was just a prayer for the Aids pandemic, when everybody would scorn patients: you know, look down upon them. Something just came to me in the form of a prayer. And eish! 1<sup>st</sup> of December, and I can hear everybody saying, "you know we like this prayer of yours about this thing" ... That's the only way I find solutions. Then the harmony: I like music that has pattern, that has harmony, and that has meaning. I like music that ... after people listen to my songs, some give a sigh of saying [sighs] "Phew! what made you write a song about that?" Each time I hear them being played, some still make me cry. It doesn't matter how many times I hear the piece, it makes me cry. I like to be part of the community I'm writing for, not just a spectator, because when you are in the game you can't see what you are doing. It's better for me if I'm outside, and write about all the events that I see.

Anything I see. I feel like I have a duty to document what has been happening around me, but in the form of music. Being an author myself (on the quiet), I don't normally struggle to get words. In fact, when the melody comes to my mind I already see little words flying around me saying, "you pick me, pick me, please!" [laughter from the audience] I don't struggle for lyrics, once I start with the melody. (It's true! I see them competing!) Other things that inspire me are melodies that are ... I remember them from my youth. Some are from the folk tales our parents used to tell us, some are songs we used to participate in at weddings, or just playing games at school, or just in the street. So some of my music have just that little bit of the indigenous forms in them.

That's how I write my songs. The one that I recorded here

[shows score of *Antuntulele*] ... As we see, mine is not in staff notation. That's where I started: I come from the age of the tonic solfa, the 'doh-re-mi-fa-soh', where our teachers used to write those notes on a brown cover and paste them on the [black]board. The sopranos will be in blue, altos would be in red, and things like that. And they said, "you stick to the blue colour, that's your part", and then the boys, "you stick to the greenish ones". Sometimes the paper gets all creased and we can't remember what's written there! That's the only type of writing that was etched in our minds. All my school years I never came across staff: I'm only learning staff now. Even this morning, I was taking my lessons from Professor Mokale [Koapeng] – I call him my Professor – he was giving a crash course, hoping that one day, my music will also be in this pattern. That song, the *Lullaby (Antuntulele)*, it's just written for women, because those are the people who take



**Theriso Tsambo at the Composers' Panel, SASRIM Conference, Bloemfontein, 24.8.07**

care of children. I also have a beautiful song for males [*Love Song*]; but otherwise, I just write for SATB. This song, one can feel that ... here are the lyrics. Just to give you an indication of what I was intending with that song: one can just feel that, at the end of this song the child will be asleep.