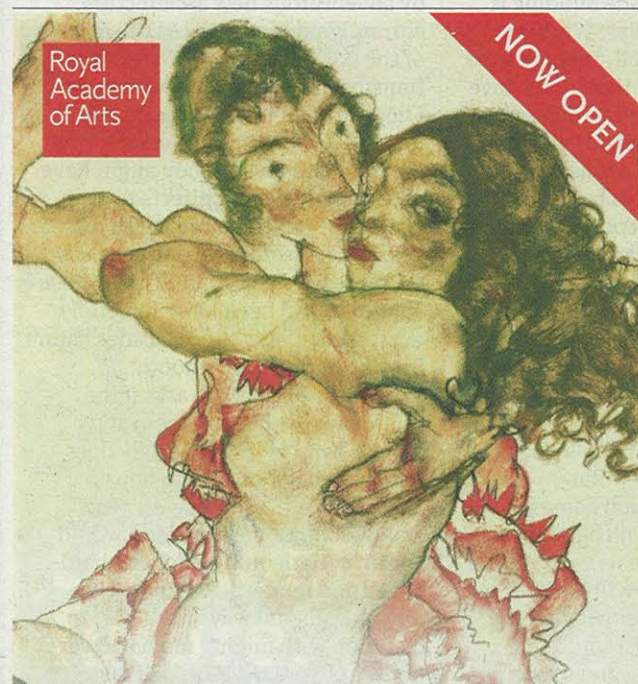


The shame of the Rainbow Nation

Every week in Cape Town, there are 10 cases of lesbians suffering 'corrective' rape. **Jo Caird** on a chilling one-woman play about the hate crime sweeping South Africa



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Egon Schiele, Two Women Embracing (detail), 1915. Pencil, watercolour, gouache, 485 x 327 mm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest. Exhibition organised by the Royal Academy of Arts in collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest and with the partnership of the Hungarian National Gallery.

Two weeks ago, four men escaped from the regional magistrate's court in the sprawling township of Khayelitsha in Cape Town. They, along with five other suspects, are accused of the 2006 murder of Zoliswa Nkonyana, a 19-year-old who, it is alleged, was stabbed and beaten to death with golf clubs for being a lesbian. A police sergeant at the jail was arrested for allegedly helping the prisoners escape.

On the day this took place, Pam Ngwabeni was on the other side of South Africa, performing *Ncasmisa! Kiss the Women*, a one-woman play that explores the experience of black lesbian women in townships, drawing on Ngwabeni's own experience of discrimination and violence, including the brutal killing of Nkonyana, who was her friend.

The play - which comes to the UK next month as part of the Afrovibes festival of South African theatre, music and visual art - is written and directed by Peter Hayes, who has occupied an important place in South Africa's gay theatre landscape for two decades. Struck by the gap between the country's progressive post-apartheid constitution (first in the world to outlaw sexual discrimination, first in Africa to legalise same-sex marriage) and the reality of life for its gay citizens, Hayes is "concerned with telling stories that aren't being told".

Having made a great deal of theatre about the gay men, Hayes was interested in exploring the experience of the black lesbians in South African townships - and, in particular, the emergence of a horrific new hate crime known as "corrective" rape, whereby lesbians are assaulted as a "cure" for their homosexuality. It is notoriously difficult to obtain accurate statistics on violence against women in developing countries, but Triangle Project, South Africa's largest lesbian and gay rights organisation, reported in 2008 that it was dealing with 10 new cases of "corrective" rape a week in Cape Town alone; and that 86% of black lesbians living in the Western Cape lived in fear of sexual assault. South Africa is not an easy place to be gay.

When Ngwabeni came out in 2005, at the age of 17, she was studying drama in Cape Town with Jacqueline Dommissie, co-artistic director of Hayes's company, Hearts and Eyes Theatre Collective. Hayes knew that the success of the project he wanted to make depended on "finding an actor who was brave enough and fierce enough to tell this story". Ngwabeni -



Shocking stories... Pam Ngwabeni in *Ncasmisa! Kiss the Women*, which is coming to the UK

who had been thrown out of her mother's home for being gay, had spent time on the street and had tried to kill herself - was the obvious choice.

Speaking via Skype, I ask Ngwabeni if she has ever been a victim of violence. "Fortunately for me, no," she says. "Not even once." After a pause, Hayes says, "What about that guy who came at you?" and Ngwabeni casually replies, "Ooh, ya. Now I remember. I was once. I remember now: this guy almost killed me." While Ngwabeni was living in Khayelitsha, a neighbour began to harass her for being gay. She ignored his taunts for several weeks, but then one day, when Ngwabeni was on her way to work, he pulled a knife and attempted to stab her. She escaped by using her handbag as a shield and enlisting the help of a passerby.

Ncasmisa! (which translates as *Kiss!*) doesn't concern itself solely with the violent and painful aspects of life for black lesbians, though. "It's really important for me," says Hayes, "that lesbians who see this play see their lives affirmed and celebrated - that it's not just stories

of rape and murder and attempted suicide and your mother throwing you out. Yes, that's the reality, but within that reality safe spaces are created where women are in loving relationships."

The play takes the form of a series of linked fragments, some chilling, some uplifting, that tell the story of Ngwabeni's journey from football-loving tomboy to self-assured performer and gay activist. The challenges of coming out in an intolerant society, and the struggles encountered by black township lesbians, are explored in dance, monologue and song. After most shows, says Ngwabeni, "people come to me and say, 'I'm also a lesbian, I've been in the closet for a couple of years now', and then some will tell me their stories. They finally feel like there's someone out there who feels the same way they feel."

Brian Merriman, who runs the International Dublin Gay Theatre festival, where the play appeared earlier this year, is full of praise for how well

Ngwabeni blends the horrific with the hopeful. "She really moved people in a joyous way - and one should not be joyous in the face of such a burden."

There are moments, however, when even a person as brave and forward-looking as Ngwabeni finds it difficult to remain positive. I contacted her a few days after our interview to get her response to the news of the escape of her friend's alleged killers. By the time she replied, the four had been tracked down, but Ngwabeni was full of anger and despair - and convinced there would never be justice for Nkonyana. The trial has, after all, already been postponed 20 times.

"Sometimes I think there is no hope," says Ngwabeni, "but then my director reminds me what we are doing: for many lesbians in the townships, I am living a dream. I am out, I am proud and I am talking about our lives - travelling all over the world doing this. This is another way to show my sisters what life can be."

i *Ncasmisa! Kiss the Women* is at the Albany, London SE8 (020-8682 4446), 7, 9 and 10 October. Then touring to Birmingham and Manchester. Details: ukarts.com



Another view Etiquette expert William Hanson on Dinner for Schmucks

If you're served lobster at a dinner party, you shouldn't start talking to it. But that's what happens in this film, in which corporate investment executive Tim (Paul Rudd) is challenged by his boss to invite a moron - or "schmuck" - to a dinner party in order to compete for a promotion: whoever brings the biggest schmuck wins.

Tim brings Barry (Steve Carell), a taxman and mouse taxidermist; among the other schmucks at the dinner are a mind controller, a man with the world's best beard, and a woman who talks to dead pets. She starts channelling the lobster's thoughts as it's placed in a vat of boiling water, which rather puts everyone off their food. Talking to one's dinner really isn't the done thing - but then neither is it advisable to invite people in order to deliberately humiliate them. That goes against the two basic rules of good etiquette: to respect people, and to put them at their ease.

I've never sat next to anyone at a dinner who stuffed dead mice for a hobby, but one does occasionally find oneself sitting next to slightly peculiar people. If that does happen, the last thing you should do is openly laugh at them. I actually prefer meeting quirky people - they're often far more interesting than bankers.

The dinner soon descends into a huge fight. That's never happened at a party I've been to - though if it did, I wouldn't just stand back, as the guests do here. I'd wade in and split the fighters up.

Tim eventually realises that he is the real "schmuck", not Barry. Though I don't stuff mice myself, I felt a certain affinity for Barry. I've also stood outside the norm. I don't go to nightclubs, I don't drink, and I started becoming interested in manners when I was still at school. A lot of people said, "Oh God, he's lost it - there's this 17-year-old teaching etiquette." And now here I am, reviewing a film for the Guardian. Like Barry, I've come out on top in the end.

i Interview by Laura Barnett. William Hanson is a freelance etiquette consultant; see williamhanson.co.uk. *Dinner for Schmucks* is on general release.

Ngwabeni says she has never been a victim of violence. Then she says: 'Oh ya, now I remember. This guy almost killed me'