

«The Spirit of Shebeen comes to Berlin»

A REFLECTION BY
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THE SHEBEEN

Hate them or love them, there are many ways to describe a Shebeen. You could say it's a peri-urban establishment often found in improvised dwellings at the periphery of cities and suburbs, often against a backdrop of overpopulation, crime, poverty, lawlessness, and underserved communities in stark contrast to the neighboring suburbs and city centers. In his book *Shebeen Tales*, Zimbabwe's leading author Chenjerai Hove writes «Shebeens are where jokes are born, news is embellished and exchanged... unique vantage points where men go after a day's work, both to escape from the troubled world around them and to observe and comment on it; where ordinary person who, with the help of dry wit and illegal beer, pokes fun at the rich and mighty». I would further add, where one goes to relish local food (*Skoppo, Mqushu, Malumqodi, Magwinya, Dombolo, Morogo, Mawutwa, Liver*), sing and dance unashamedly without fear of judgement, scorn or prejudice, and all at little to no costs. Dare I not forget the role Shebeens played as covert political hangouts when political gathering were banned by the Apartheid regime, and as the launching pad for global heavy weights such as *Miriam Makeba, Bra Hugh Masikela* and many more.

THE PITCH

A few days before the event, the venerated curator and artist, Thabo Thindi, came to see me in Wedding, Berlin, to inform me about the concept of bringing the Shebeen to Berlin and asked me to document the experience. As someone born in South Africa and bred in Soweto, where my grandmother once owned a Shebeen, I was enthralled to be part of this experience.

THE SHOW

Staged in a huge open field at Tempelhofer Feld, a former Berlin Airport now housing circus tents in one of its many sections, is the new pop-up home of *ko-Shebeen* for the day.

Inside a circus tent, 12 artists are assembled at center stage amid scattered musical instruments and minimal décor, including 3 visible street signs dangling on a constructed street pole. On them, the newly proposed Berlin street names to commemorate and acknowledge the Herero massacre of the 1st Reich are embossed. The lighting is very dim, almost eerie, and the seating arrangement—benches and chairs on either side of the stage—is reminiscent of a bull horn formation. Opposite the stage, behind the seating, a projector is displaying a collection of classic historical images from South

Africa's musical Jive, Marimba and Mbaqanga era in *Sofia Town*, as well as theater artefacts from renowned South African theater pieces such as *King Kong*, *Jim comes to Johannesburg* & *Iphi Ntombi*.

I arrive 30 minutes late, it is 4:30 pm and the venue is packed, people of all ages and colors, toddlers, youngsters, adolescents and elders, all quietly fixated on the performance. I perch myself right at the back, against the wall, standing, just managing to evade the piercing gleaming light of the projector.

On stage, the lead protagonist Thabo Thindi exemplifies an impoverished black man in South Africa in the early 90's who, like so many others since the Gold and Diamond rushes of the 1800s, left the rural areas and homestead with his tattered belongings heading to Johannesburg City - Egoli, the place of Gold - in search of riches and fame. Reminiscent of the storyline of *Jim comes to Joburg*, the play centers on the «American dream» trope, and Thabo, through a series of skits and monologues, takes me and the audience through the troughs and crests along the journey of upward socio-economic mobility. We watch as he grows in confidence and stature, his lot and material belongings gradually accumulate. Colloquially speaking, in South Africa they would say *uyaSwenka*, *uyaZizwa*, which translates roughly as «feeling himself». Thabo impersonates these metamorphoses through his monologue with the non-existing Sis Rosie, a close companion seemingly accompanying Thabo throughout the performance, who gives us, the audience, another window through which to follow the progression of the plot. He achieves this through proudly showcasing newly acquired accessories and conversations with us, often switching from English to Zulu and Setswana (South African languages), he occasionally lures the band into participation. The occasional impromptu solo performance by the artist named Excosé, mesmerizes me with his contortionist individuality, adding that special touch of the «odd character», so often prevalent in the Shebeen context.

Thabo interlaces his performance throughout with the makeshift band comprising an all-Black cast of 3 vocalists, a drummer, a trombone player, a pianist, an actress and singer, as well as a graffiti artist, who seamlessly accentuate the scenes through song, adding a pleasant harmony and flow to the plot. They perform popular South African songs from all across the musical spectrum that fit intuitively to the theme of the scenes, from Marimba, Mbaqanga to Jazz, Gospel, and Ischathamiya. The songs such as the likes of *Nkosikelkia iAfrika* from Enoch Sontonga, to *Phatha Phatha* from Miriam Makheba, *Ntshilo Ntshilo* from Johnny Dyani, *We are Growing*, by Margaret Singana and many more, bellowed by the vocalists, are met with uproar as the audience and I rise to our feet, dancing and ululating in a homely familiar fashion. The little circus tent reverberates at times, and it takes a few moments for the energy to settle back down, at which point Thabo reappears to resume the ensuing scene.

At one point, an impromptu speech by *Professor Mnyaka Sururu Mboro* about Germany's role in the Namibian genocide adds the all too familiar «Madala-Prof in the corner moment», a common occurrence in many Shebeens, momentarily defusing the excitement with a profound and somber moment of honest reflection. Madala is term of endearment bestowed on the wise and elderly.

The performance closes triumphantly with a cynical gesture, when Thabo, now dressed in a full 3-piece suit and holding onto his shiny belongings, for he is a partially «made man» now, impersonates former *President of the Republic Thabo Mbeki's* renowned speech «*I'm an African*», to loud applause from the crowd. It is nearly 7pm (3,5 hours later) and the live music continues uninterrupted for another 30 minutes, roughly, as the audience gathers and dances together, finishing off with the proverbial South African «*Step Dance*», so popular at weddings and most festivities. Thabo thanks all and sundry.

THE REFLECTION

As I travel back home to Wedding on the subway, reflecting on this joyous occasion, the words that spring to mind are «We Want More»!

Add local South African food to the mix (*Masala*), more performing artists, authentic Shebeen paraphernalia, South African expat participation in hosting and impromptu performances, on a monthly or quarterly rotation, and a new Jerusalema Dance and Song competitor will be invented in Berlin! Watch my words, as we say in South Africa!



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«KO SHEBEEN
— COUNTERING
THE OBVIOUS»
THABO THINDI

PERFORMANCE



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NOVEMBER 13
CABUWAZI ZELT /
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COLUMBIADAMM