

Languages English

In conversation with Mike van Graan

Denisa Tomkova



Laibach performance at *The Extreme Centre* symposium in Cologne. Credit: The Akademie der Kuenste der Welt, Koln, Germany. Photographer: Roel Weenink

"Solving Europe's problems are linked to solving problems in other parts of the world, and for this, Europe needs to go beyond itself in dialogue, analyses, solution-seeking and action." Mike van Graan

Mike van Graan is the former Executive Director of the African Arts Institute and is the former Secretary General of the Arterial Network, a continent-wide network engaged in the African creative sector. He currently serves as an UNESCO Technical Expert on the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. He attended the symposium and we talked about the issues raised at the symposium quite in depth for a couple of days while the symposium took place. As an intellectual, policy maker and playwright, who has first-hand experience of the racism of the apartheid system from growing up in South Africa, he raised the concern that the symposium was too Europe-centred.

1. How do you understand the term 'Extreme Centre' yourself? And do you agree with such a name at all? Much of my recent work in the cultural policy space, has been around interrogating policies, themes and analyses that might have relevance in Europe and the Global North more generally, and that are introduced to the Global South, but where fundamentally different conditions militate against such

generalised "packaging". I'm not sure that the concept of the "extreme centre" is relevant to most countries in Africa where citizens generally do not participate in western-style elections and are not governed in western-type democracies.

2. When we talked during the symposium in Cologne you raised the concern that the symposium was too Europe-centred. Can you please elaborate on this? In many of the discussions, it was assumed that populism is a particularly "right wing" phenomenon (which it isn't) and that this manifestation of populism "just happened". The reality though is that much of the rise of chauvinistic nationalism in Europe in the last few years has to do with the recent influx of particularly Arab and African refugees/migrants. It is in this context that "right wing populism" has arisen. Europeans appear to be responding to the symptoms e.g. nationalistic populism, rather than the causes of migration/refugees, causes for which Europeans have direct and indirect historical and contemporary responsibility. Solving Europe's problems then are linked to solving problems in other parts of the world, and for this, Europe needs to go beyond itself in dialogue, analyses, solution-seeking and action. But understanding complexity is one thing, having to translate that into electoral power struggles is another.

3. What kind of dialogues do you think Europe should have with the Global South? Simply because Europe may be more economically, militarily, culturally and politically powerful than various Global South regions and countries, it does not mean that it should simply impose its agenda; rather, Europe should engage with others as partners, recognising that there are inherently unequal power relations at a range of levels, but seeking to devise and implement solutions together, that serve the interests of both the Global South and Europe.

4. How do you think art or specifically theatre, can successfully talk about and present to a public such important political themes? I have a recent play – *When Swallows Cry* – that specifically addresses the issue of African migrants/refugees. I believe that the two most important roles that theatre can play are:

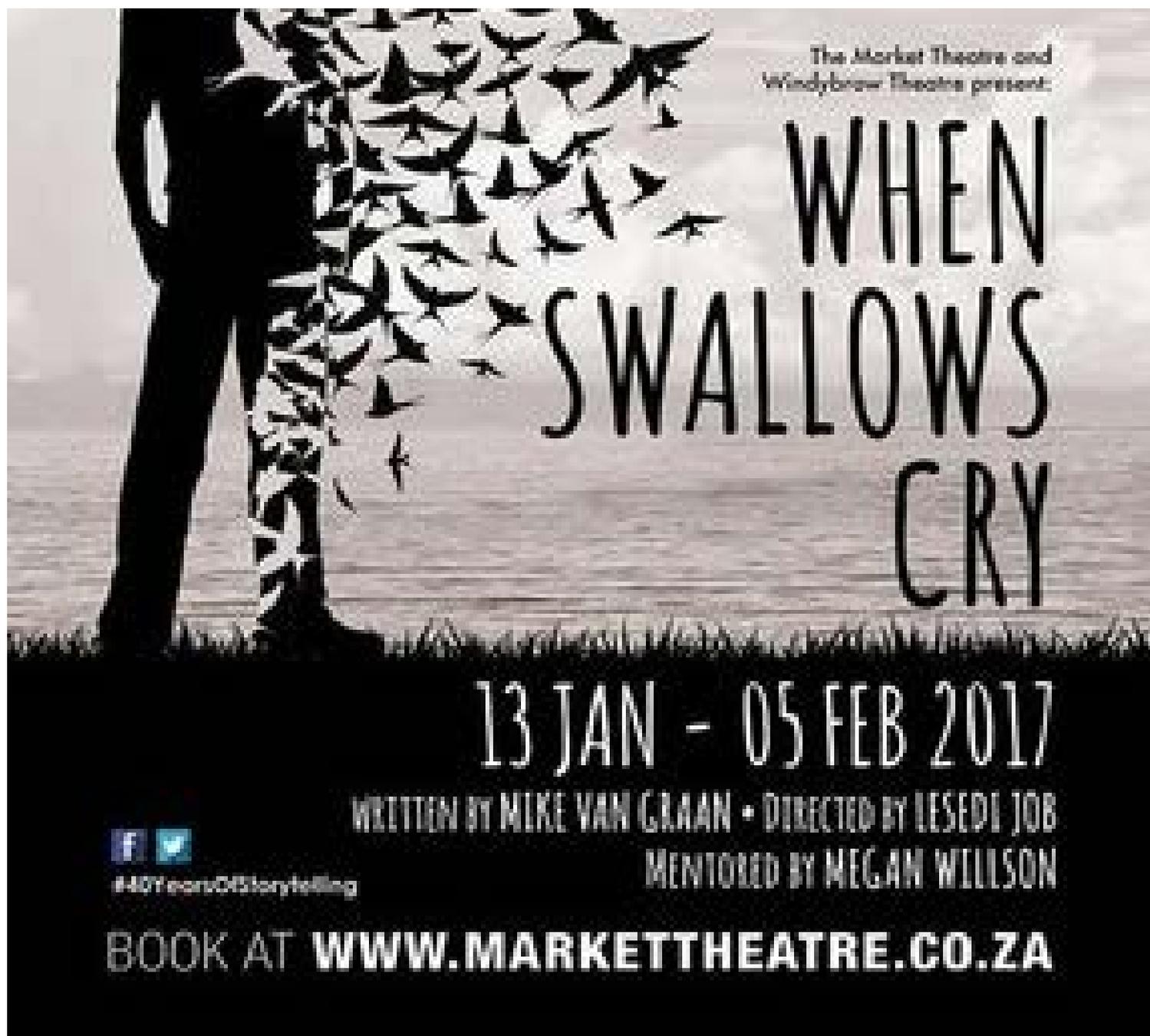
a/ To humanise and give concrete expression to the faceless statistics of migration/refugees, so that through experiencing the on-stage stories of the characters audiences may empathise with them.

b/ For theatre to provoke post-performance discussions and engagement that will lead to greater understanding and then progressive action– also among those who might not go to the theatre often, but whose worldviews are most in need of being challenged.



The image of a *The Extreme Centre* symposium ticket asking: *Where can democracy find its place in the 21st century?*. Credit: Image by the author





The poster to the theatre play *When Swallows Cry* written by Mike van Graan

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