

‘We Will Teach Them How to Use This Building’: Acts of Accountability from South African Artists¹

CARLA LEVER

On 3 March 2021, almost a full year after South Africa’s theatres were closed due to Covid-19 restrictions, renowned opera soprano Sibongile Mngoma walked into the Johannesburg offices of the South African National Arts Council (NAC) to meet with senior department officials. She was there to demand accountability over their non-payment of promised Covid-19 artist relief funds to the tune of R300 million (roughly USD 16.6 million). When it became apparent that no official would honour the meeting, Mngoma announced her intention to wait. She did not leave the building for another sixty days.

Mngoma’s impromptu NAC occupation quickly burgeoned into a national protest movement, aided in no small part by the publicity generated from her online platform as 2020 founder of Im4theArts, an activist Facebook group where she live-streamed experiences and posted strategic updates from the occupation. Outside the offices, musicians and dancers organized regular street performances in a strategic effort to highlight the less visible action inside, where a handful of artists rotated occupation shifts in solidarity with Mngoma.

After withstanding interdicts and regular harassment from security personnel, the occupation voluntarily concluded on 1 May 2021, Worker’s Day, having lodged formal complaints against the NAC with the Public Protector. Mngoma, who went on to mount other protests in the months to come, had forced the NAC into publicly and repeatedly acknowledging their failures in a humiliatingly high-profile manner. More than this, though, the sixty-day stand had galvanized a dejected cultural sector: Im4theArts had emerged as a full-blown resistance movement, with a membership of over 40,000 and a demonstrated ability to mass mobilize.²

This contribution will consider the racial and gendered dynamics of Mngoma’s act of resistance, focusing on the different precarity faced by women and artists of colour, as well as the strategic use of performance as a radical mode of dissent. Observations will be based on personal interviews with Sibongile Mngoma and director and choreographer Owen Lonzar, who programmed the occupation’s street performances. Full recordings of both are accessible in an online fieldwork repository as part of a broader project investigating the connections between creativity and social change.³

Covid-19 context

The response to Covid-19 in South Africa was swift and severe. With local scientists frequently identifying new viral variants, the country was globally isolated with stringent travel restrictions.⁴ Delayed Global South access to vaccine resources, combined with high national prevalence of co-morbidities such as HIV and tuberculosis, meant that Covid-19's first wave in South Africa was particularly devastating. While some industries were able to shift to online platforms, the brunt of the economic impact was suffered by those whose livelihoods were inextricable from liveness – notably in the service, hospitality and entertainment industries.

Governmental emergency relief funding was set at R350 (USD 20) a month: woefully insufficient, but a lifeline for many. A Presidential Employment Stimulus Programme (PESP) grant pool of R300 million was also made available for eligible artists whose work had been impacted, with the NAC engaged to disburse the funds. When these promised grants mysteriously disappeared in 2021 leaving beneficiaries with half-finished projects and empty promises, the NAC blamed the shortfall and non-delivery on internal accounting errors.

The Presidency enforced a series of heavily restricted lockdowns through 2020 and 2021. At the height of these, no persons could leave their home for reasons other than seeking essential medical assistance or procuring groceries. The social responsibility of staying home was stressed: surely no caring person would risk endangering another's life? Mngoma's fiery response was that the most egregious breach of care belonged to the State: it was their failure that had directly resulted in artists losing the very roof over their heads. Since the NAC should be considered the home of artists, she claimed, the space was logically one they should feel comfortable occupying. 'We will teach them how to use this building,' she proclaimed. 'It's called the National Arts Council and the artists are *in the house!*'⁵

Constrained possibilities for public assembly meant Mngoma was not the only one relying on social and mainstream media to reach the broader public. Indeed, Government representatives leaned heavily on media communications, complete with elaborately staged performances of State care. President Cyril Ramaphosa began each of his regularly televised formal speeches, for example, by ostentatiously removing a face mask – a move that backfired on one memorable occasion, when a fumble saw his mask cling persistently over his eyes. Such performance misfires only made Mngoma's rough and unedited Facebook livestream appear all the more authentic, the look inside the bureaucratic machinery of the NAC revealing a hollowed-out State institution as empty of ideas as it was of actions.

By contrast, Mngoma's performance was evidently a decisive act. Explicitly framing her actions as protest theatre, Mngoma reflected 'I think it was my second year [of university] that we studied protest theatre. ... These things we have learned; these things we have been *taught*. So when I go on stage and I sing, for example, I understand that I become part of my [university] singing course. But this is the first time that I feel that I am part of my textbook on protest theatre.'⁶ Through occupation, she forcibly re-instated the live event as a viable and affective mode of

community support during Covid-19. A durational act of care, Mngoma's actions simultaneously protested the loss and reaffirmed the power of live performance: the more visibly rattled NAC representatives became, the more successful her stand.

Positionality

Mngoma's tactical occupation was informed by more than her artistic training, however. A Black woman, her actions showed an acute awareness of the intersecting ways in which her positionality made occupying resistant space of any kind a precarious act. Indeed, Mngoma meticulously documented all official engagement over social media livestream, with liveness becoming both her defiant praxis and her personal protection. 'The best strategy we could have adopted was to go live. Always. Remember we have a history of Marikana⁷ in this country. We have a history of '76. We have a history of '85. '90. '89...⁸ Any time anybody walked into the building we would go live. Because we didn't know why they were there. So that transparency was our shield at all times.'⁹

Mngoma explicitly drilled the necessity of live performance into new occupiers. 'I would train those artists that came into that building every day. I would say don't forget, any time that anyone walks in here, those cameras ... pull out those phones! Let's go live, Let's go live.'¹⁰ As platform, as protection, as praxis, then, liveness became an unassailable mode for Mngoma to reverse the gaze, training her lens on administrators and politicians more used to being behind the scenes. 'We are creatives, we make events for a living. So you want a performance? We'll give you one! You want to be famous? We will shine a spotlight on *you*.'¹¹

Sharply observant about the intersectional politics of precarity, Mngoma also did not shy away from laying out the classed, gendered and racial dynamics of the movement she had drawn together. White people, she pointed out, rarely joined the occupation because they feel that such direct action is 'beneath them'. Connecting the observation to a broader pattern of racialized roles, she observed that:

It's always the same in this country. On the street action is for Black people; keyboard activism is for other races. And when Black people go on the street, we are called all kinds of names. The solidarity from other races in the cultural and creative industry space had a lot to do with watch, feed them ... but *don't let that touch you*.¹²

Home work

Mngoma's defiant act both played into and subverted traditional gendered politics of care. Appealing sternly to Nathi Mthethwa, then-minister for Arts and Culture, to get his house in order, she personally ensured the 'artists' house' of the occupied NAC set the example. Indeed, Mngoma was as rigid with her boundaries for behaviour with the NAC as she was with her fellow occupiers. A charismatic presence, she never shied away from interrupting her livestream monologue to ensure that the occupiers kept to her preferred style of engagement. 'I will not have randomness, madam,' she rebuked an off-camera figure during one stream. 'No randomness, please! I will not

have madness: not from you, or from anybody else. Because *that's not how we do*. We're very sophisticated, elegant. And very *artistic*. So no.¹³

The ease with which Mngoma performed her new role both channelled and transformed her better-known public persona as a nationally beloved operatic diva. Resplendent and defiant on camera, Mngoma certainly displayed her usual charismatic performance presence. Music was still a central feature of her livestream, with Mngoma frequently leading occupiers in rousing protest songs. Even her regular speech could assume a singsong, playful quality as she kept up the energetic reportage on house activity.

'Sanibonani, sanibonaaaaani.¹⁴ It's a Friiiiiiday; it's day fifty-two,' she sang into the camera in one heavily viewed video archived on her Arts page. 'Whilst we're here, we're actually going to enjoy the artists' building that is called the NAC. And *we're* the artists, not them. If you had to ask them what is your art, they'd be like "*Stealing! Stealing! Lying, lying! Looting! Looting!*" That's their art. Our art is actually art. So while we're here we're going to make sure that you enjoy our presence at the NAC. Because *it belongs to you too*, you see? Public spaces for the public!'¹⁵

By contrast, she also meticulously documented the cost of her performance praxis, often recording exhausted and without make up, depicting the realities of sleeping rough on boardroom chairs or sitting on the floor in hallways to charge her phone at available plug points. In an interview with the local press, she also spoke frankly about the vulnerability of leaving behind her four-year-old daughter to take up the fight in the boardroom. 'Sometimes I fear even to call her as she does not understand why I am not at home,' she revealed.¹⁶

Matriarch, diva, occupier, warrior, activist: Sibongile Mngoma seized the agency to continually recast herself over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, raising her voice in powerful new ways. As the sole, and star, performer in South African lockdown, she became something of a fabled presence, a patron saint for artists who had lost faith in their skills and value. Director Owen Lonzar, who programmed the occupation's street performances, observed:

Sibongile had become a bit of a ... I don't know what you'd call her ... a Mother Theresa? She had stood up for people when others weren't doing any of that. And people were very drawn to her. It was like they were going to meet Gandhi. They'd want her to see *them* as much as they wanted to see her. They wanted that recognition from her particularly that they were part of this thing.¹⁷

Mngoma's extraordinary sixty-day occupation, undertaken in a country with a long and proud history of protest theatre, showcased just how resilient and resistant contemporary performance can be. Her sit-in forged a social movement that achieved something more profound than holding a corrupt State to account: it expanded both the politics and possibilities of live acts in a time when these were cast as antithetical to building communities of care.

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful for the support of the 'Reimagining Tragedy From Africa and the Global South' project at the University of Cape Town (Andrew W. Mellon grant 1804-05734). I would particularly like to thank Sibongile Mngoma and Owen Lonzar for their generosity with time and insights.
- 2 As of publication, the group's membership stood at 41,400 members.
- 3 Interviews are available on the ACTivism fieldwork repository of 'Re-Imagining Tragedy in Africa and the Global South', Ibali: UCT Digital Collections, at <https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/RETAGS/page/activism>, accessed 16 January 2024.
- 4 This identification was made possible due to the country's advanced genome sequencing capabilities, honed from decades of laboratory engagement with endemic tuberculosis. Many countries did not have the capacity, or elected not, to genome sequence.
- 5 Carla Lever, 'ACTivism Interview | Sibongile Mngoma', Ibali: UCT Digital Collections, 26 July 2021, at <https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/RETAGS/item/32836>, accessed 16 January 2024.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 The Marikana massacre of 16 August 2012 saw police shoot and kill thirty-four workers during a strike at the London Platinum mine in Marikana, in South Africa's North West province. It was the single deadliest use of force against protestors since the Apartheid-era Soweto Uprising of 1976 (also referenced by Mngoma).
- 8 All listed dates are synonymous with State and police violence against Black and poor protestors.
- 9 Lever, 'ACTivism Interview'.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Translated from the isiZulu, 'Sanibonani' means 'hello good day', as addressed to a group.
- 15 Sibongile Mngoma, 'Sibongile Mngoma Goes Live with Im4theArts', 23 April 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/sibongile.mngoma.12/videos/2844032879203948/?idorvanity=166753357992354>, accessed 16 January 2024.
- 16 Edward Tsumele, 'We Are Going Nowhere: Artists Occupying NAC Offices Vow', *CityLife/Arts*, 19 March 2021, at <https://citylifearts.co.za/we-are-going-nowhere-artists-occupying-nac-offices-vow/>, retrieved 16 January 2024.
- 17 Carla Lever, 'ACTivism Interview | Owen Lonzar', Ibali: UCT Digital Collections, 21 July 2021, at <https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/RETAGS/item/30488>, retrieved 16 January 2024.

CARLA LEVER (carlalever@gmail.com) is a research fellow on the *Re-imagining Tragedy in Africa and the Global South* project at the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies, University of Cape Town where she focuses on protest and creative activism. Her open-access monograph on contemporary South African protest and performance with Amsterdam University Press is forthcoming.