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**Sarafinal! cast** © Brigitte Lacombe

*Sarafinal!*, a Drama Desk Award nomination for *Township Fever!*, and a share of a Grammy Award for producing part of the sound track on Disney's *The Lion King* (ultimately he was declared ineligible for the award due to a technicality - Coleman). One would have thought that with a track record like this, Ngema was destined to succeed in whatever theatrical enterprise he undertook. What then went wrong? Why did his most recent venture into musical drama fail so abysmally? What ultimately brought him down?

A brief recap of his career may be helpful here. After serving a short period of apprenticeship with Gibson Kente, a popular township playwright and director, Ngema made his first big splash by teaming up with another of Kente's performers, Percy Mtwa, and creating a series of sketches built on the premise of Jesus Christ's second coming, this time to South

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Africa. Under the guidance of Barney Simon, an experienced theatre director, their two-man show, originally called *Our Father Who Art in Heaven*, opened at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg as *Woza Albert!* and immediately made an impact, drawing a larger black audience to that innovative theatre than any previous production (Jones 110). An extensive tour of the townships and black homelands followed, and the fame of *Woza Albert!* spread. It was an easy play to transport because the props consisted of little more than a couple of crates and a coat rack holding several items of clothing that the actors put on to impersonate various characters. To play white men, each actor clapped on a clown's nose—half a squash ball painted pink that was secured around his neck with an elastic band. This was minimalist theatre requiring no elaborate stage sets, fine costumes or fancy equipment. It could be done anywhere. The play relied entirely on the mimetic talents of the actors, who provided all the sound effects as well as an extraordinary range of visual effects.

After proving themselves locally, Ngema and Mtwa took their show to Britain, Germany and America, where it continued to be a smash hit, winning awards wherever it went. It remained abroad for nearly three years, and in the intervals between tours, Ngema returned to South Africa, founded his own small theatre company called Committed Artists, and trained a group of young men in performance techniques. He has said:

*In 1983 I established Committed Artists with the sole aim of training young, disadvantaged South Africans. My methodology entailed a combination of Western and African theatrical techniques. Grotowsky, Stanislavsky and Peter Brook were the main Western influences on my method, particularly with their experimental theatre (what Peter Brook called the immediate theatre). The African sphere was the most accented, especially the Zulu culture. This is what made this method unique, for African life and movement has a rhythm of its own. (Ngema vii)*

In 1985 Committed Artists launched their first production, *Asinamali* (We have no money!), in a cinema in Soweto, then moved it downtown to the Market Theatre before embarking on very successful national and international tours. *Asinamali* had the same kind of intense energy that distinguished *Woza Albert!*, but it made much greater use of song, dance and tightly organised ensemble work. It also dealt in an unusual manner with the tragic lives of five men imprisoned after the assassination of a prominent strike leader. Peter Brook saw the production in Harlem and was struck by its dynamism, noting that

*If you approach a situation like the South African one naturalistically, you can't present terrible events like these in any other than a tragic, sentimental way. The events in their very nature are tragic or sentimentality-producing events. But what I found profoundly right and extraordinary about *Asinamali*! was that this horrifying situation was being presented, pitilessly, through a joie de vivre. The events were not softened by it, but*

*heightened to the last degree because they were presented, not through a sentimentality, but through a vitality. (Jones 114-15)*

Ngema was not one of the performers in this play, but he had trained all the actors, written the script, composed the songs, and choreographed the dances. *Asinamali* was his first great success as a director-producer, and he often travelled with the company when they performed in America, Europe, Japan and Australia, a tour that lasted more than two years.

Whenever he returned to South Africa, he went out and searched for fresh talent, simultaneously recruiting experienced theatre professionals to help him with his next show, which he decided would celebrate South Africa's black schoolchildren who were then leading the struggle against apartheid. He rounded up twenty teenagers, 'moved them into a four-room house in Daveytown, near Johannesburg, lived with them, and trained them vocally, mentally and physically' (Jones 124). At the same time he developed a script, composing songs and writing lyrics as he went along. After fourteen months of hard work and fine tuning, the result was *Sarafina!*, his most ambitious undertaking and by far his most remunerative. After opening to great applause at the Market Theatre, Ngema in 1987 took his cast of twenty-three youngsters to Lincoln Centre in New York where their engagement was extended repeatedly until they moved to Broadway and played to capacity audiences at the Cort Theatre for the next eighteen months (Jones 129). '*Sarafina!* was probably the highlight of my career,' Ngema has said, adding, 'Ironically, it was the least sophisticated of all my work.' (Lee 34). The story-line, he admitted, 'is not strong. It's very simplistic...[But] I did it deliberately. I was telling it through the eyes of the kids. And those kids, wearing those uniforms...people just loved them. It's easier to love young people than adults on stage...For the first time in South Africa, we saw a young professional cast. We saw a Broadway musical played by kids, who, even though they were young, were highly professional. You see, it's not so much the story but how it's done!' (Berman 32).

It could be said that at that point in his career, Ngema seemed to be doing everything right. He was offered recording contracts, an Academy-Award winning director made a full-length documentary about *Sarafina!*, and then came the Hollywood version of the musical with megastar Whoopi Goldberg in a leading role. This feature film, shot in the environs of Soweto, employed about 100 actors and up to 5000 extras (Makgabutlane 1992:40). By the time it hit the big screen in 1992, *Sarafina!* had been running continuously on the stage for five years.

And during this period, Ngema had not been idle. Thriving on his success, he tirelessly 'assembled a second company, rehearsed them in Johannesburg, and sent them on a tour of Europe and Japan. In 1989, this company went to Paris and performed at Peter Brook's Bouffes du Nord as part of a

**Right:**  
**Asinamali cast**  
photograph © Pam  
Frank

**Below:**  
**Mbogeni Ngema**  
**and Percy Mtwa**  
**in *Woza Albert!***  
© Ruphin Coudyzer.



alities and their morality under the forces of...a 'pressure cooker situation'...The desperation of these workers got me...Township Fever! is about music, about Johannesburg, about Soweto, about Mshengu Village, about the homelands and about how our environment plays upon us. Apartheid dehumanises the oppressed—but it also dehumanises the oppressors. (Ngema 128-29)

To get this message across, Ngema relied on his usual bag of tricks: lively mbaqanga music, energetic dancing, athletic performances, a mixture of sentiment and joie de vivre—the kind of theatrical experience Peter Brook recognised as possessing 'vitality.' In an interview Ngema explained his 'philosophy of theatre' this way:

nationwide celebration of the bicentennial of the French Revolution' (Jones 131). There were also *Sarafina!* revivals in London and New York. As apartheid crumbled, audiences abroad simply couldn't get enough of this show.

Throughout these years, the money just kept rolling in, and Ngema's ambitions grew accordingly. By 1990 he had a new show, *Township Fever!*, ready for production. Bigger than anything he had done before, this involved thirty-six actors plus a thirteen-piece band and dealt with the murder of four scab workers during a 1987 railway strike in South Africa. Ngema has said:

*I was fascinated by the idea that people without any criminal record could be compelled to commit gruesome acts totally out of character with their person-*

*I think it is because I am a musician: that I tend to have the kind of approach I have. When theatre does not have a beat, does not have a rhythm, then theatre tends to bore. Theatre must be like a piece of music which has a beat that people can sit and listen to...or dance to. And within that beat there are so many other colours you put in. But first and foremost, theatre should entertain. When people are entertained, then they will be informed and enlightened. The vehicle we use is entertainment, first of all. (Makgabutlane 1990:20)*

However, at this point in his career, given his past successes, the audience he appears to have sought most avidly to entertain was an international one, and this may have led him to blunt the political force of his message. In interviews published a few weeks after *Township Fever!* opened, he stated,



You see, when people pay \$70 for a ticket, they do not want to hear about the sufferings of black people from a strange country in Africa. They want to be entertained. (Mendel 18)

They are not gonna be bored by you telling them about your struggle in South Africa. They don't care about South Africa. Those people want to go and see a good theatre piece. Finished. Whether it's a South African piece, a Jamaican piece, a British piece, they just want to see good theatre. In fact, they are a harder audience to entertain. Most of the time they do not see political theatre anyway; they refuse to go to fringe theatre in New York City. They do not go off-Broadway or off-off Broadway because they don't want to hear politics. Those are the ladies with fur coats. (Makgabutlane 1990: 24)

By now Ngema may have been aiming his productions at New York ladies in fur coats rather than at his own people. Certainly he had his eye on the main chance—a production that would culminate in a screen adaptation, just as *Sarafina!* had. In a 1992 interview he said, 'The story told in *Township Fever!* (Which followed in the footsteps of *Sarafina!*) is a more powerful story. I am at the moment talking with studios in Hollywood. If someone came to me and said, "Here's R10 million, let's make a movie," I would go for it' (Makgabutlane 1992:40).

Money, in fact, had become a major preoccupation for him at the very height of his success, when he was simultaneously touring two *Sarafina!* companies, negotiating film rights for the Whoopi Goldberg production, and training the large troupe of actors in *Township Fever!* 'My company is funding itself on huge budgets,' he exclaimed. 'Before we staged *Township Fever!* we were talking half a million!' (Mendel 19)

He had other projects up his sleeve, too. Asked in 1990 what his plans were, he said, 'I wish I had more money. I want to start my own record company. In fact, I am in the process of doing it. It might take a year or two. And then maybe later go into movies' (Makgabutlane 1990:24). Five years afterwards, asked 'what single thing would improve the quality of your life?' his answer was unequivocal: 'Money, money, money' (Metsoamere 8).

Not that he hadn't already made a small fortune. In fact, by 1994 he had earned enough to buy himself a nice house with a kidney-shaped swimming pool and a sunken tennis court in an affluence white community in Bryanston, a suburb north of Johannesburg (Jones 144-46). A year later he had also fulfilled his dream of starting a record company, Mbongeni Ngema Productions, which has by now produced at least four albums and CDs (Anon., *Tribute* 10), and he had launched a film company as well, Mbongeni Ngema Films, which currently has two films in the pipeline, one of them based on the life of Winnie Mandela (Isaacson 2). In addition he recently published a collection of his musical librettos called *The Best of Mbongeni*

Ngema, and since January 1994 he has been serving as a salaried director of musical theatre at Durban's Natal Playhouse, where three of his own new musicals have been produced. All in all, one could say that life has not been unkind to Mbongeni Ngema. And to give him his due, one could have to concede that he certainly has taken full advantage of the opportunities available to him, capitalising on them whenever he could. He has worked very hard and he has prospered.

But ever since the original *Sarafina!* caught the world's attention and made him a wealthy man, his career has been on a downward trajectory. The trouble started with *Township Fever!* which offended the leadership of COSATU, the labour union federation that had ordered the execution of the scabs killed during the 1987 railway strike. Ngema was accused by union officials of co-opting, 'for his own commercial gain, a major event in the people's struggle' and of personalising a communal tragedy by adapting it to his own life as a musician (Jones 148-49). Drama critics also didn't like the show, feeling Ngema had 'devoted too much energy to the music and not enough to the script, which badly needed editing. A few critics suggested that he should have delegated some of the work to collaborators' (Jones 151). He was simply trying to take on too much and, as a consequence, was losing creative control of his own gigantic production. It wasn't a matter of him being too big for his britches; the problem was the reverse: his britches were too big for him.

His next show, *Magic at 4 a.m.* was another musical extravaganza, this one originally inspired by Muhammad Ali's 1974 fight against George Foreman in Zaire. In fact, it was at first envisioned simplistically as a South African tribute to the champ (Jones 163), a kind of black *rocky*, the sort of show that would have tremendous box-office appeal and motion picture potential. Ngema invited his biographer Laura Jones to collaborate on the libretto, and her concluding chapter in *Nothing Except Ourselves*, describing the shaping of the production, is the fullest account available in print of Ngema's characteristic *modus operandi*.

He usually starts with a vague concept—in this case one promoted by a meeting with Ali and his handlers, who attended the New York premiere of the Hollywood film of *Sarafina!* He then seeks backing for the development of the script (provided at the outset by a theatre in New Jersey), negotiates a suitable venue for the performance (this time the mammoth, 1,100-seat Civic Theatre instead of the smaller Market Theatre), assembles a large company (well over fifty, not including lovers, families, and other hangers-on,' Jones 166), and starts putting them through drill ('doing calisthenics, singing scales, and learning dances,' Jones 168) before actually tackling the task of writing the book, music and lyrics his Committed Artists would perform.

But once he has a deadline for his show, he goes at it full-throttle. Jones reports that he and she brainstormed on a