

*ABZ - "Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon"  
Themba Mbuli and Nicola van Straaten in conversation  
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Hello and welcome to the "Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon" Podcast, brought to you by ANY BODY ZINE! Between Twenty and Thirty is a podcast initiative started by ANY BODY ZINE featuring myself, Kopano Maroga, and Nicola van Straaten talking to different artists and cultural workers about their lives between the ages of twenty and thirty, for between twenty and thirty minutes. Where were they? What were they doing? What did their lives look like? How did they make it work? Join us every new moon, to find out.

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Nicola: Hi to everyone that's listening. This is Nicola here, I'm sitting with Themba Mbuli, and we're at the Theatre...

Themba: ...Theatre Thikwa...

N: ...Thiwka in Berlin. Themba, thank you so much for making time in your busy schedule.

T: It's my pleasure. It's my pleasure...

N: So maybe you can just start by telling us a little bit about what you do currently, and how you kind of identify yourself and a little bit about your practice or your creative work.

T: Okay. Currently... what do I do? Let's just summarize. I'm a performing artist, mostly I'm an arts administrator, running two companies. The one, which is a dance company in Cape Town called a [Unmute Dance Company](#). Then the other one is [Broken Borders Arts Project](#), which is an organization that is creating links between African artists. Apart from that, I'm an independent artist where I perform and choreograph and ja, I think that's just a summary.

N: Okay, cool. Where are you from originally?

T: Originally, originally, I was born and raised in Soweto, Johannesburg, ja. That's where I grew up.

N: And now you're based in Cape Town?

T: Now I'm based everywhere.

N: You're everywhere (laughter).

T: Half of the time I'm in Cape Town and half of the time I'm in Joburg. It depends where the work is needed most.

N: All right. Okay. And so, if you take us back to your twenties, like 20 years old. If you can rack your brain and try remember what year it was and where you were, and...

T: When I was 20...

N: Kind of? Ja, what did you - What were you doing as it as a 20 year old or what were you feeling or thinking or planning to do?

T: Which year was that? I'll have to do some calculations. (Laughter)

N: What year were you born?

T: So I was born 1987. So that was 2007...

N: Okay. So that was 2007.

T: Okay. I had just finished my graduation at a college called Moving Into Dance [[Moving Into Dance Mophatong - MIDM](#)]. It's also a dance company that is based in Newtown, Johannesburg. Ja, so I had just finished my training as a dancer.

N: Okay, yeah. And what made you get into dance in the first place?

T: It was... It was just by coincidence, actually. I didn't plan to be a dancer, I didn't even imagine to be a dancer. So growing up, I think it - at around age 14, I'd already been performing, but I was doing mostly theatre and acting and stuff. So I didn't care about dance. I just wanted to tell stories. So fast forward a few years later, when I finished matric, in South Africa we have these youth clubs that we call "community theatre", whereby young people come together just to create work and perform in community halls. So I was doing that, I remember. Then I came across my mentor who was from Sweden, Kent Ekberg. So he saw one of the performances. So we had a chat about the performance after the show, it was the first time that I met him, they were doing a tour in Soweto to see what's happening, so performed for them. So after the chat he - I remember, he said, 'I think you're really talented. And I would like you to further what you're doing. I would like to link you with some of my friends that I know, in Joburg so that you can see if you can train, you can further train.' And I was like, 'Okay - why do it? Let's see, let's see.' Then he took me to a graduation of Moving Into Dance, where I trained, it was a graduation day, where the dancers were being trained. And I think for me - that was the first time I saw contemporary dance on stage. And I was blown away because I was like, wow, these people, they are not even using words and they are telling you something with their bodies. Wow, I want to do this. So the following year, I started their training program. That's how it started. So I didn't even imagine that I was going to be in the dance field.

N: And was it an easy transition?

T: No. No... (Laughter). I didn't have two left feet. I had three. (Laughter) It was so bad. It was difficult. It was tough, it was tough. I remember at some point, halfway through the training, I wanted to give up because I couldn't crack it. I couldn't crack it. Then one day, I just - it just happened. I started feeling it in my body, I was like, Okay, I'm getting used to this. So yeah, but it wasn't easy. Also I remember, because in my training, in my group that year, most of the dancers were already trained previously. Some of them had been dancing since they were young, doing ballet, doing all sorts of

things. So dance has already been part of their body. For me, it was the first time. So, I remember I used to be the laughing stock, yoh, this boy! What is he doing? And I was like - I'm not here for you people, I'm here for myself. And I continued my training.

N: And do you feel like the relationship to your body changed during those training years?

T: Of course, of course, of course! How I treat my body, how I listen to my body, how I carry my body, it changed a lot, it changed a lot. The kind of food that I'm eating, my diet completely changed. So it changed a whole lot of things. Ja.

N: Right, so you've graduated from this incredibly tough program and you're 20 and like, what is your next - what was your next step? Were you scared? Or, I don't know, did you have contacts or - ?

T: My next step? I think, from that age, I didn't - I never had this urge to look for work. I always - I knew that I'm a creator, I create stuff. I just always wanted to create something. So after my training program finished, I joined a company. It's a dance company that was called Inzalo Dance Theatre. Just to practice, to see, what has this training done for me. So I worked for them for a year. Dancing, doing nothing but dancing. So, but... I was hungry. I was hungry to create, in the process. So I was not settled...

N: Okay, because... you were in that company, you were obviously, well, I assume you were - there was a choreographer and you were doing, you were performing their work.

T: Yes, yes, we were doing their works, the company's works.

N: And what kind of work was it?

T: It was contemporary dance. Ja, it was contemporary dance by, I think, all the works we did were by Moeketsi Koena. He's one of the older generations in dance in South Africa who did well to raise the South African contemporary flag. So it was mostly contemporary dance. Then, I think at that point I was so frustrated that I decided, you know what? I think this dance thing is not for me, I'm just gonna stop it and that was at the end of the year. So, when they I resigned on this week, on Sunday I went to see a performance, another dance performance from the company that I - the college that I trained at because they also have a dance company. So, after the show, I remember, I met with the artistic director, she was asking me, Sylvia Magogo Glasser, the founder of Moving Into Dance, she was asking me, "How was the - How did you find the show?" So I was giving her my honest review. Then, she was so impressed that she was like, 'Please come see me on Monday.' Go in there on Monday. She gave me a contract, please come work in this company.

N: As a performer?

T: As a performer, teacher and choreographer.

N: Okay.

T: I was like - Okay!

N: Nice!

T: How about this? I just quit, but it didn't happen. So the universe clearly didn't want me to stop. So...

N: So then you started for Moving Into Dance.

T: Yes, I started creating work, I started teaching, I started dancing. So I did - I practiced everything.

N: All right. And how long were you there for?

T: I didn't stay long, I'm bad with companies... I'm so bad! I think two years?

N: Okay. I mean, I think the current climate two years is pretty long to stay in one place.

T: Yeah. People stay for more than five years. So, for me, after two years, I was like - no.

N: You were ready for the next...

T: I'm ready. I'm ready now. Then I joined another company. But this time it was a company - a French company from Reunion Islands. We created a production that was touring around the world, for about two years, also. Then after two years, I made a vow to myself, I said, You know what? No more. I'm not joining any companies anymore.

N: Alright. So that was your last ...

T: That was my last...

N: Company that you joined, not founded.

T: No, joined, ja. That was 2012, I think.

N: 2012. Okay. Ja, so I guess you're in your mid-twenties by now. And with this company, you got to travel.

T: Yeah.

N: How was that?

T: It was an eye opening experience. It was really... because most of my works that I've created, it's work that I got inspiration from the travels. So I got to see the world, I got to understand some cultures, I got to understand more about South Africa because now, I was outside - looking at it from an outside eye, so, I got to understand more, the dynamics of the country. Ja, so it was really eye opening experience.

N: Ja. And then after that?

T: And then after that, that's where my solo career started.

N: Alright. [Phone beeps]

T: Sorry, I need to put this on silent.

N: No worries...

T: That's where it started, I created a solo work called *Dark Cell*. From that solo work, I think it's the one - I think that work put me on the map. It got me a whole lot of recognition because - it just became a hit. So I've already - I've toured, like, more than 15 countries with that solo.

N: And I like, under what framework or like, how did you make this solo? Because I think for a lot of young performance makers, the question of having access to space and time like, I guess you had some resources or connections through your previous job? Like, how did you find the place to make, and the time to make, a solo? And did you have an outside eye? Or did you just work alone?

T: (Laughs) You won't believe this. I remember at the time, my ex-girlfriend, we were staying together. She was so frustrated with me because I used our living room to create the work. (Laughs) So, during the day I would move the furniture, put it in the corners - and work.

N: Okay... Work from home.

T: Work from home. That's right, because I didn't have space. I had just moved to Cape Town.

N: So by this point you had moved to Cape Town because in the previous companies, were all mainly in Johannesburg.

T: Yes, ja.

N: All right. And what made the move to Cape Town?

T: It was through this company - the last one that I was apart of? Because we premiered in Cape Town...

N: The French company?

T: Yes. So we did the premiere of the work at Artscape in Cape Town and then from there, I was like, You know what? I'm not going back home. I'm staying here. Because Joburg, also, for me - it felt too much and it felt like it took away a lot of energy from me, because in Joburg there's a lot of work. So you end up doing a lot for other people but nothing for yourself. Yeah, the money is good but you're not doing anything for yourself, really. Ja, so that, for me, didn't work. I was like, no, I'm not going to work for people until I die. I'm going to start doing stuff for myself.

N: You needed to make your own work.

T: Ja.

N: Okay, so you made this work in your living room...

T: In my living room.

N: And it became a hit! (Laughter)

T: In my living room! It was a block of flats - because also, in the piece, I'm using chairs and buckets - Yoh! The neighbour under us... That woman used to come every day to knock, like, 'Guys! What the heck? Can you please give us some peace? These chairs are noisy!' I'm just like, 'Sorry. I'm sorry!'

N: When it became successful, did you at least tell your neighbour, like, it wasn't for nothing! (Laughter)

T: No, by then I had long moved out of the place.

N: Okay, and where did that premiere?

T: At Baxter Dance Festival. So I applied with, like everyone, to present my work. So I presented my work there. Then from there, someone who came to this festival, one of our prominent curators in Cape Town, Jay Pather, he saw the work. Then he wanted it for another festival, it was called Live Arts Festival. Then from Live Arts Festival, someone saw it there, then they wanted it for somewhere else then it just became a ripple effect of that until it started touring outside the country.

N: Okay. All right. And then how long was it touring...

T: It's still touring.

N: Still touring. Okay, wow.

T: Yeah, it's still touring.

N: Okay.

T: I think the last show I did, it was in Namibia last year. So this year we just did it in Joburg, at POPArt Theatre.

N: Okay. And are you - so, it's... are you still performing it?

T: I'm still performing it.

N: All right. What is it like to grow with... ja because you made that in 2012, did you say?

T: Yes.

N: Ja. I mean, what's it like to grow and perform with a piece over a period of seven years?

T: In the beginning it's all fun and all those things but - because I was still finding and growing with the piece, and I was excited to discover new things. But now I think the piece has reached a point where I think I've...

N: It's exhausted.

T: I've exhausted it and now it's starting to feel exhausting to perform it. So what I did, now, I'm making series of the solo. So instead of presenting it as a solo, I invite a person to do it as a duet or as a trio, so that it stays fresh for me also because it gets exhausting to do one thing over and over, especially for so many years.

N: Okay. And then, how did you, how did you come to meet Andile [Vellum] and start with Unmute, and maybe you can talk a little about that? And when that kind of happened?

T: Yeah. That transition... ja... [phone beeps] Sorry! My waking up alarm...

N: Oh shit, is this supposed to be your nap time? I'm sorry! (Laughter)

T: It's okay. So, so I was already living in Cape Town by then. So I was staying with my ex-girlfriend, Nadine Mckenzie, she's in the performances, [*Ashed* and *Trapped*] she's the one in the wheelchair. So at that time, she was working for an inclusive dance company that was called Remix Dance Company. So because, you know how funding is in South Africa... So because of funding, the company closed down, they didn't have funds to continue doing their work. So at that time, I was doing some of my stuff. So the guys were just sitting and doing nothing and waiting for some work. Then I approached the guys, all the Remix people, people who were part of Remix, to say, 'Guys, instead of waiting, I have this concept that I wanted to create a production called a minute. Thank you. Sounds like I have this concept.' By then I wanted to create a production called "Unmute".

N: Okay.

T: So, I was like, I have this concept of a production called "Unmute and it's all based on people who are deaf because people see... society sees people who are deaf as mute but in actual fact, they've got a voice. They're using their hands to communicate. For me, that's not... that's a voice for me. So I used that concept to say, Guys let's create a work and see what's gonna come out of it. So I approached Andile. Andile said, Yeah, I'd love to do it, Let's go for it. Then we just played around in studio, then we approached Youngblood [[youngbloodafrica](#)]. They supported the creation process. We did the first presentation. It was okay.

N: When was this?

T: This was 2013. So the first presentation - it was okay, it was not bad. Then I applied for a residency, in Joburg for Dance Forum, it was part of Dance Umbrella. So the same production, we went to finish it in Joburg. Then we came back, we presented it in Cape Town, it became a hit. Then everyone wanted the work. Then now, we had a challenge of now - we have this product that we have to carry. And people didn't want to pay individuals, they wanted to pay it in a collective account or whatever. So we said, we were like, guys - you know what? This production is doing well. Let's just create an organization out of it and call it "Unmute" so that we are able to sell this work without a hassle. So the aim actually was not to create a company, it was to create a base for the production to sustain itself. Ja.

Then it just kept going. Then we realized that actually, it's not just about the production. We realized the importance of the work that we were doing, based on - especially based on the interactions we had after the performances, especially with the schools. How the kids received the work and how much it meant for them. We realized that, actually, this thing is beyond just performing. It's actually life changing for other people and it's actually an inspiration for young people who've got disabilities who

think that they cannot make it in the mainstream society. It's an eye opener for those kids, who are not exposed to people who are living with disability, who are thinking that people with disabilities are not capable. So it was really a revelation for us. Then we decided, you know what? Let's just continue with this work and try to bring the company out of it. So that's how the company came about.

N: Okay, wow... so first came the piece and then came the production.

T: Yes. But then, already I had a company, the Broken Borders company, which was carrying the solo around.

N: Okay, so you started a company to... kind of house your solo work?

T: No, not at all.

N: Okay.

T: We created it with friends of mine, Fana Tshabalala and Thulani Chauke, they're from Joburg. Because all three of us, we've been traveling the world and we realized that most of the collaborations we've done, it's people from Europe, people from the US, people from wherever, but never with African people, so that - we found that very problematic. So we decided to create this organization Broken Borders, so that we say that, you know what? We're going to break these artistic borders and start creating works with other artist on the continent. So we created the organization for that.

N: And when did you start this organization?

T: 2012, before the solo.

N: 2012, okay.

T: Yeah, before I created the solo.

N: All right. And what are the main kind of strategies to like - how does this organization work? And like how does it create networks within...

T: So basically we already know artists in the African regions, especially in the SADC [Southern African Development Community] region, in the southern part of Africa. We already know quite a few artists that we've come across along the way. So it was a matter of saying, guys, let's just - we don't have to create work, let's just get into to studio and play and see what we can find. Let's invite each other to start having conversation, discussions about anything. Let's start breaking these boundaries that we've created for ourselves. So the first attempt, we created a production called *Broken Borders*, with artists from Zimbabwe, Tumbuka - is it Tumbuka Dance Company? It was a dance company from Zimbabwe. Then Fana also did a collaboration with artists from Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa, so I also did a collaboration with artists from Namibia. So, we've really been having these conversations with the other artists. Also, because, especially other African states, they think, well - they have a right to think that, too - they think that South African artists are arrogant. They don't want to work with other people. Of course, I understand where they're coming from, also. So also we're trying to break that, to say, you know what? We are open and we're ready to have conversations, artistic conversations.

N: And do these artistic conversations always take place, like in physical space when you're physically together or - ?

T: Not at all. Not at all...

N: No, it's just exchange...

T: It's just exchange because now, I'm going - when I'm done here I'm going straight to Mozambique to have another exchange with other artists from the continent. So it's not about the work, but it's about looking at the state of the arts, especially right now in Africa and to try to find solutions where - how we can develop it further. So it's not just creating work.

N: Okay. So is it kind of like your solo work and these two companies that kind of like are you... where do you - where does most of your time go towards or how is it divided?

T: It really depends on the amount of work for whatever project. Some years I spend most of the time with Unmute. Some years, I spent most of the time with Broken Borders and some years of - just on my own, doing my stuff, so it really depends on the season, what the season brings. Ja. But this year, I think, I've done equally because half of the year, I was in Joburg until June. Then from July, I've been in Cape Town. Okay, but in between the two I was doing my solo works. So it's really been balanced this year for the first time.

N: Okay. And do these organizations have funding or is this like...

T: That's the thing. I'm one person who doesn't believe in the model of funding, because we can't really depend on the government all the time. So how, especially Broken Border, how we've survived is through performances. We make work, we sell work. That's our business and we've never applied for any funding. So it's - I'm not fascinated about funding. I just want to create and sell work. If funding comes, yeah, I'm not gonna say "No, I don't want it". I'm gonna take it, but it's not my main focus. It's the same with Unmute. For the past five years, we've survived on productions. So the funding that came, it didn't come for the company, it came for the development project or for the training program or for the outreach program, but never for the company. So the company has been surviving through performances.

N: Okay, through ticket sales and...

T: Through ticket sales, like now - invited to the festival, they sell your work, they buy your work, that's how the survival is made.

N: Ja, it's something I've really noticed, kind of, a sort of different practice with the artists, especially in in Europe, it's like - you have to have funding to make work but at back home I feel like artists are really entrepreneurs. Like, you have to - it's more a business. Like, you have to find another way to survive because funding is...

T: Because also there's a lot of us, we can't all queue for the same funding, cause I'll queue forever. Ja. So it's a bit of getting out there and doing it yourself.

N: Okay. If your 20-year-old self would suddenly materialize in this room, is there anything that you would want to say to him?

T: I think to the 20-year-old self, what I would say to him, is to believe in himself more, because I realized later that I could have done so much, but because of that fear of failure, I stopped myself doing a whole lot of things. So I only realized that later in my life, that actually failing is part of the process, it's part of the growth, and it's part of getting it right. Because when you fail, it gives you an opportunity to see things differently, to try different approaches. So I think the younger self was more afraid of failing. So, I've missed a whole lot of opportunities because of that.

N: All right. Well, thank you so much for telling us your story.

T: It's my pleasure, it' my pleasure. Thank you for the interview.

N: Thank you!