

CONTEMPORARY THEATRE REVIEW  
an international journal Volume 9 Part 2

# Women, Politics and Performance in South African Theatre Today 2

Issue editor: Lizbeth Goodman



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**WOMEN, POLITICS AND  
PERFORMANCE IN SOUTH  
AFRICAN THEATRE TODAY—2**

***CONTEMPORARY THEATRE REVIEW***  
***AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL***

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## **Speaking With and Without Words—An Interview with Nomhle Nkonyeni Lizbeth Goodman**

This interview was recorded at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, after a performance of Athol Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, directed by Jerry Mofokeng, with Bill Curry as Boesman and Nomhle Nkonyeni as Lena. This adds the perspective of an 'actor' to the voices included in Part 1 of this volume, for while Mhlophe and Dike both perform their own plays and poemdras and poetry, there is a different process involved in taking words written by someone else and finding a way to bring them to life on stage. Nkonyeni faced this challenge in a revival of one of South Africa's best known plays, written by a white Afrikaner male. She was the first black actor to play the part of Fugard's Lena, a black character written to be played by the (white) actor, Yvonne Bryceland. [For more details on Fugard and *Boesman and Lena*, see Dennis Walder's article, pp. 51–59.]

**KEYWORDS:** Audiences, Attendance Patterns, Class Divisions, Gender, Performance, Politics, Political Theatre, Racial Considerations in Performance, South African Theatre, Women's Voices.

**GOODMAN:** Nomhle Nkonyeni, you are one of South Africa's most respected performers. You are also, at the moment, performing in a potentially controversial role: as Lena in Fugard's play. Of course, the character herself is black, so your portrayal is in many ways more appropriate than the portrayal by Yvonne Bryceland. But that is the 'Lena' most people know. Can you tell me first of all: when were you asked to play the part of Lena, were you influenced by Yvonne Bryceland's Lena?

**NKONYENI:** I did see that first production with Yvonne Bryceland; I saw it in Rhodes University. I saw her playing Lena; she was very, very good, and I remember it was 1975 when the market wanted to do it, and I was approached to play a part. I was excited but the portrayal of Lena by Yvonne Bryceland was still very fresh in my mind, the image was still very fresh because it left an indelible Lena in my head. So I felt I would be doing disservice to the character because I felt I was portraying Yvonne, not the character. So when I was approached twenty years later to do it I was quite excited, I must say.

GOODMAN: How have you approached the character? How did you find your own way of playing Lena?

NKONYENI: I can't remember how Yvonne presented her character, so that was not such a big influence or problem for me. I did my own research. I read the script and studied quite a number of different kinds of Lenas, not in the theatre but in the streets. She is such a character; we can find many of her. There are quite a number of Lenas, so I went out and talked to them, asked who they were and where they came from and how they became what they are. You see I am talking about the characters now, finding characters in people. I was inspired by one woman in particular: I chose a very dominating woman in this case. She dominated her husband, she was quite strong but she gave him a lot of trouble, and I asked her why. You know, what she said is true of so many women. She said, if she were to beat this thing, her husband, up, it, or he, would die. So she can not touch it or him, can not fight back. It is not because she is too weak but because she is too strong, too kind maybe. She said, 'I let him beat me up but he knows one day if I turn my back and say "hey" he will die.' When I heard that I knew she was most like my Lena, and I chose to be like her: to be a Lena who was strong, who wasn't a wimping woman.

GOODMAN: You do portray Lena as a very strong character, but that is achieved quite subtly at times. Even in the moments when you are silent and Boesman is speaking, attention tends to be focused on you, as Lena. Of course, I don't mean that you are in any way upstaging him, but rather that the character Lena, and her situation, and the situations and interests of the audience, all seem to collide in a concern for and interest in Lena, in you.

NKONYENI: Really. That's hard for me to notice when I am being Lena. But I'm glad, because Lena deserves that kind of attention. I didn't set out to make her be this or that, but to give her the right to be, and what she ends up being is very strong.

GOODMAN: You have certainly succeeded, and so Lena succeeds. There is an energy coming from that character and your portrayal of her; she doesn't 'miss a trick'; it's not so much a portrayal of a woman who knows instinctively, but rather of a woman with strong instincts. So she seems wise, even in her silences.

NKONYENI: That is what I felt playing her, that she speaks without words at times. Yes, that is how I feel about Lena. Boesman can do anything, say anything, try to put her down, but at the end of the day Lena is his strength, he leans on Lena. Whatever he does, she is there and he can not deny her, can not do without her. He may ignore her, but at the end of the day there are things he picks up from Lena: it is her strength that makes him survive. That's what I felt.

GOODMAN: How do you feel about performing in Fugard's play—a play which deals with issues of race and gender, in South Africa in 1994? Is it an important play for our times?

NKONYENI: Yes it is, because it's worse in this country and it's worse in this town than it has ever been before. Maybe some things in life have improved, but there is so much uncertainty now, so much insecurity, fear, frustration, and also hope. So, we find quite a lot of Lenas in this town. When you walk down the street and meet a strong woman, a Lena, and you talk to her, you will probably find that she is a very articulate person, a well thinking person, and you might start questioning yourself about where is she from, what made her into a 'Lena' of today. So, yes, *Boesman and Lena* is an important play, and maybe more so for women, for strong women. It offers a kind of hope, though not in any big way. Some reviewers and critics say the play is outdated, but I don't think so. It's a classic, it's beautiful.

GOODMAN: Just to play the Devil's Advocate here: on the one hand, it's easy enough to see why some critics would be hesitant; it is easy to pre-judge this play, even though it is often considered a