

British Theatre Guide

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The Suitcase

James Ngcobo

Johannesburg Market Theatre

Hull Truck Theatre

31 August–9 September 2017

The Suitcase presented by the Johannesburg Market Theatre and directed by James Ngcobo was brought to Hull Truck as part of Freedom Festival, the annual arts and culture festival now in its tenth year. The show, performed in the main theatre, has been enjoying full houses, including during the opening weekend where diplomat Kofi Annan was present during a visit to the city.

The Suitcase is a story about oppression, survival and chance that takes place in a South African township on the outskirts of the city. The young couple Namhla (Masasa Mbangeni) and Timi (Siyabonga Thwala) leave their village under something of a cloud—their marriage has crossed cultural divides—and arrive in the city to make a new life together. The hopeful naïvety is emphasised by Namhla's unswerving faith that, with each new sunrise, a new chance arrives to achieve their dreams.

All too soon, the the harsh realities of life in the big city become painfully clear as Timi, on his daily search for work, is gradually worn down by the empty promises, rejections and refusals. It is this constant battle that encourages the idea of seizing his chance, whenever and wherever it presents itself.

Despite being set during apartheid, indicated by the passbooks and police-checks, *The Suitcase* is a universal story, describing what can happen when one part of society seeks to dominate and control another.

The Suitcase is beautifully staged with imaginative use of a basic set, boxes and benches stage left and right and a central dais where much of the drama unfolds. The dynamic movement and detailed characterisation are a visual treat—look out for playful choreography and musicality on the bus.

The two leads are first rate, as are the cast of familiar characters: benevolent stranger 'Mlotshwa' (Molatlhegi Dube) and village clown 'Pitso' (Nhlanhla Lata), but it is the outstanding music and songs of Hugh Masekela, played live on jazz guitar ((Bhekisisa Khozo) and sung by a superb trio, that transform the E'skia Mphahlele short story from 1954 into a powerful performance full of life.

Congratulations Hull Truck Theatre, for putting this show on at this time of cultural celebration and exchange in the city. The Tell the World message is underlined by the foyer decorated with suitcases and a signpost pointing to all points on the globe. A lively musical spot by Hekima, a local singer/songwriter from Tanzania, welcomes and entertains another full house.

The Suitcase by The Johannesburg Market Theatre runs until Saturday September 9 at Hull Truck then moves to Newcastle, Derby, Lancaster and Liverpool.

Reviewer: [Michelle Dee](#)