

Patience, silence given a voice

PLAY: *A Woman in Waiting* (Barney Simon Theatre at the Market Theatre complex.)

CAST: Thembi Mtshali and Yael Farber

DIRECTOR: Yael Farber

By CHRISTINA KENNEDY

TO the measured, metronome heartbeat of water dripping, the stage's darkness gradually fades as ripples of light wash over the set, revealing a woman lying in a wooden crate, singing, waiting.

It's a metaphor for Thembi Mtshali's physical birth from the womb as she proceeds to emerge and tell her life story, but also alludes to her spiritual rebirth that we will witness during the course of the play.

Despite this one-woman show being an autobiographical one, it's a drama about not just one South African black woman, but many: women who spent much of their pre-democracy lives waiting. Waiting for injustice to vanish, waiting to come into their own, waiting to purge the demons of the past.

However, it's neither a protest play nor a gratuitous piece of self-absorbed theatre,

in the "oh dear, I've had such a hard life, I feel so sorry for myself" vein.

What *A Woman in Waiting* is, is one of the most powerful and sincere plays I have seen in ages. Funny, playful, poignant and, above all, vivid, it borrows from the themes of apartheid SA but infuses them with a shot of modern introspection, making for topical and engrossing theatre.

Inspired by the patient waiting and silence of women at the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings – masking a barely-contained anguish that would "cause their hearts to burst" if they spoke out – director Yael Farber and Mtshali conceived this play to encourage those in pain to speak.

Mtshali is a revelation. You may remember this dynamo from theatre hits *Ipi Tombi* and *Mapantsula*, and television shows *It's Good It's Nice* and *African Skies* – not to mention a role in Steven Spielberg's disaster movie *Deep Impact*. And she certainly does make an impact on the viewer – a deep one.

Small wonder that she scooped the Best Actress award for this play at the

Carthage Festival in Tunisia.

Together, Farber and Mtshali take us on an engulfing odyssey through the protagonist's life. While Mtshali admits that this entailed many sealed wounds being ripped open, Farber's treatment of same is empathetic.

There is not much in the way of props, but that which exists is manipulated skillfully and cleverly, and is rich in symbolic value.

This brave narrative transports us back to the day she was born. Even then, she could not wait until her pregnant mother had crossed the river before deciding to arrive! But since that brief moment of freedom of choice, she had to shoulder the burden of patience until she became liberated – socially and mentally.

In her expressive, exuberant way, Mtshali whisks us back to her days as a lonely – but imaginative – child growing up in rural KwaZulu-Natal while her parents worked in Durban. As we know, for a child time takes forever to pass – while for adults, it whistles by.

She brings across how, as a child, she was filled with innocent wonder – until she made

her harsh entrance into the Real World, being shouted at for sitting on a white man's toilet, her pride and idealism being flushed away.

Mtshali reveals her anguish at being employed to take care of other people's privileged children while neglecting her own daughter. And so the cycle repeated itself: just as she waited for her mother, so her own daughter had to wait for her.

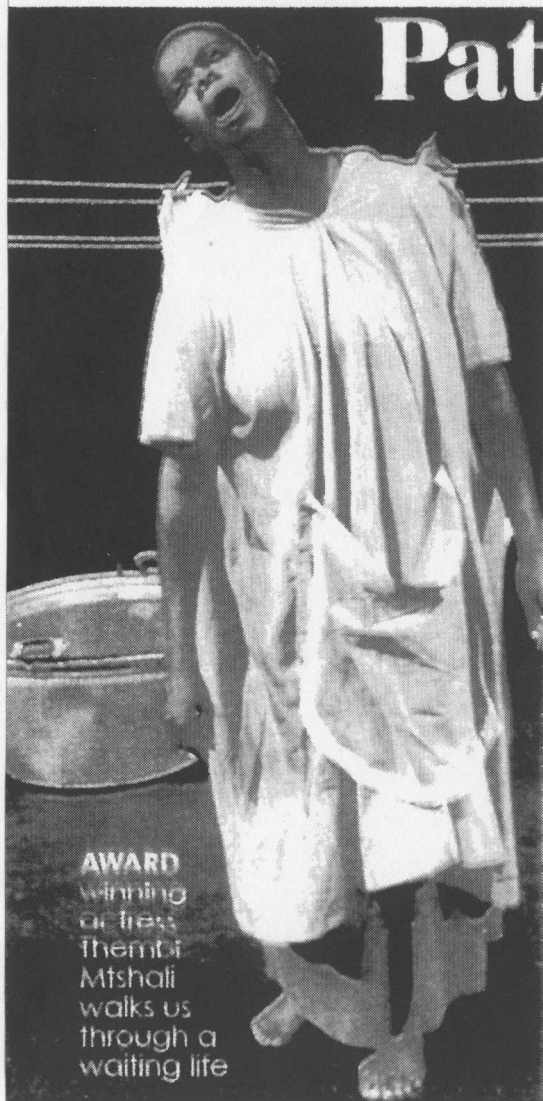
Even when she was "discovered" and made it big in theatre, she was still waiting – and then democracy finally arrived.

Nevertheless, the final catharsis for many was the laying to rest of ghosts that the TRC process provided.

Throughout, Mtshali laces her agony and ecstasy with humour, keeping the audience enthralled and prompting frequent outbreaks of spontaneous applause.

It's often evocative, lump-in-throat stuff, and you would be forgiven for surreptitiously de-misting your eyes.

Mtshali gives a towering, resounding performance that will resonate in the mind of anyone with a heart for a long time.



AWARD
winning actress Thembi Mtshali walks us through a waiting life