

Must Gandhi fall?

Insurrections Ensemble and the Gandhi Project

special feature

Living Rights
Festival



Solidarity for Change

By Ari Sitas

The performance of 'Must Gandhi Fall?' staged during the Living Rights Festival, was not exactly a play though that's what people thought they had come to see. IFAA's Acting Director ARI SITAS explains.

THIS STATUE MARKS THE CENTENARY OF
THE EVENT ON THE NIGHT OF 7 JUNE 1933,
WHEN M. K. GANDHI WAS FORCIBLY REMOVED
FROM A TRAIN COMPARTMENT AT THE
PIETERMARITZBURG STATION
BECAUSE OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RACE.
MY ACTIVE NON-VIOLENCE BEGAN FROM THAT DATE.
MAHATMA GANDHI



Many people have asked me in a rather bewildered tone, what was it that we staged during the Living Rights Festival at the Avalon Theatre at the District Six Homecoming Centre in Cape Town? The performance was not a play but felt like one! It was not a political statement although it sounded like one, it was not a musical but it was full of music and it was not an art work but it was full of art! And it was about Gandhi without Gandhi appearing on stage once!

Must Gandhi Fall? was precisely a “pluri-medial” performance that tried to invite audiences into a world of difficult questions and disquiet. It was not an easy project, not only because of the large number of participants involved but also because the Insurrections Ensemble¹ itself was not in agreement on whether the Gandhian legacy must “fall” or crawl or be revived so it could/can “walk”!

Nevertheless, we had to rise to the real challenge of the Living Rights Festival: what can living be in an environment of violence, militarism and genocidal indifference? We had to bring excellent wordsmiths, musical composers and performers and visualists together² – and again, to focus not on just any music, or any words or images but screeds of creativity to weave something around the legacy of non-violence and the threats to freedom.

We had to trust each other because of a long period of collective work in South Africa and India. The Insurrections Ensemble and its broader AfroAsian family of related projects and friends became the talk of the progressive creative world recently but alas, our capacity to move has been curtailed.

It was a wild dream by us, that started way back in 2008.

Sumangala Damodaran, one of its founders, was curating the repertoires of song of the socialist and anti-colonial movement in India, I was part of the people’s and co-founder of the workers’ theatre movement in South Africa. She was a classically trained singer; I was a poet and a lapsed dramatist. We said let’s try and create a dialogue between our worlds. We had both worked with musicians and poets. So, we reached out and we had a dozen brilliant creators before 2009 was over. It became a successful addiction in the years to come.

The Covid pandemic unfortunately forced us to survive between Zoom and streaming. We have had a growing following in Africa and India, with major tours planned but the pandemic hit us hard. And the prize money won in national awards for composition and musical arrangement had run out.

To play with a Marxian adage: people may dream of alternatives, engage in crazy acts of voluntarism but alas they are constrained by broader objective forces, in this case by forces that have turned toxic.

Our work depended on the mobility of brilliant trans-local creators, each with their own enticing ensembles, coming together for an affordable period of time to produce challenging works.

As was expected we started with uncertainty and after the audience responses we took courage and confidence: first in 2012 at the Fugard Theatre in Cape Town, then premiered at the District Six’s Homecoming Centre in 2014 and 2015, then the Centre for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg in 2018 and in 2019 at the Theatre Arts Collective in Cape Town and so on! We tried to be as non-commodified as possible and always align our work with visionary centres of culture.

The first part of each year was taken up by the writers who responded to an agreed theme. The texts in many languages were sent to the composers who proceeded to delete, reconstruct, trying to put them into song-like shapes. It has to be said that poets had to learn humility as what happens to their work may be brutal.

The Gandhi Project was supposed to happen in 2023.

Most of us were appalled by the rising tides of violence and so we thought ... OK, Gandhi had drafted *Satyagraha* in 1923 in an Indian jail. Was his gospel of non-violence still relevant? After discussions with the Gandhi family and especially Professor Uma Meshtrie it was agreed to postpone it for 2024 to coincide with 120 years since Gandhi started his utopian experiment in Durban: the Phoenix Settlement.³

This is easy to say and harder to achieve: Gandhi is the easiest and the most difficult bridge between the freedom struggles of India and South Africa. Congress here, Congress there!

Is it possible to separate [Gandhi’s] philosophy of praxis from his philosophy of being and both from the everyday conduct of an individual?

But there is a mounting critique of the Mahatma: was he a Racist, a Sexist, a Casteist? Were Nkrumah, Nyerere, Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr unthinking in embracing non-violence as a modality of militant struggle? Is it possible to separate his philosophy of praxis from his philosophy of being and both from the everyday conduct of an individual? Is it possible to control our outrage at how his murderer is sanctified by India's radical right? Can one do a project in the shadow of the 2021 carnage in Durban and the killing of African people in Phoenix by Indian residents and the calls for revenge in the townships around there?

There were serious disagreements in the group. For example, one of the founders of the Ensemble had less of a problem with Gandhi but with the musical work of the Mahatma's African friends in Inanda: their Christian hymnodies stultified the continuity of Zulu musical traditions. He walked off the project. Another felt that the musicality around Gandhi's ashrams and what was encouraged by him was deeply uninspiring. Then there were stories of the multiple communities that both were touched and harked to touch their hero.

So we decided on a four-part movement and agreed there would be no Gandhi on stage. Touching Gandhi (the need to resist calls for his persona or his statues to fall); Criticising Gandhi (all the challenges had to be amplified); Martyrdom (his stance against communal violence and his empathetic projects); The Now (how such traditions speak to our catastrophic present).

Once agreed, creativity was unleashed to populate these movements: composers composed, lyricists jotted and edited lines, whoever could not attend because of financial constraints had to be pre-recorded and, in the end, to put the piece of 19 transitions down to its tiniest detail.

It worked and it will travel. Meanwhile the album from the recording of that night is being mixed.

ENDNOTES

¹ For the expansive work of the Insurrection Ensemble see www.insurrectionsensemble.com; also Ari Sitas, 2023, *Music Notebook*, Cape Town: Chimurenga.

² The project was undertaken under the auspices of the "Other Universals" project at the universities of Cape Town and Johannesburg. The narrators and writers were Ruchi Chaturvedi and Amrita Pande; the lyricists were Anvar Ali, Vivek Narayanan, Sabiha Satchi, Philippa Yaa de Villiers; Lu Dlamini, Tina Schouw and Ari Sitas; the musical composers and performers were Pritam Ghosal (sarod & composition), Reza Khota (guitar & composition), Sean Sanby (double-bass), Ru Slayen (percussion), vocals: Lu Dlamini (guitar & composition), Tina Schouw (guitar & composition), Sumangala Damodaran (composition), Kathyayini Dash (tanpuri & composition), art and visual animation was by Benjamin Haskins and artistic direction by Ari Sitas.

³ See Bernedette Muthien's book review in *New Agenda* 96, March 2025 of *Gandhi's African Legacy Phoenix Settlement: 1904-2024. A History Through Letters*, by Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, UWC Press, 2024.