

‘The Fall’ speaks to student activism, but also the power of real life

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WHEN student politicisation and mass mobilisation were sprouting into life in the corridors and residences of UCT in 2015, I had the opportunity to experience and witness the rumblings of what Du Bois called “sorrow songs”.

What was happening at UCT was, of course, not new to that institution even in the short duration of my time there.

I recall, as a first-year student in 2003, the brewing tensions between UCT’s management and leadership and various groupings of student leaders.

One of the student leaders in my residence had some stiff words for the then vice-chancellor Prof Njabulo Ndebele, about the university’s impotent transformation promises and talks about talks.

This cycle repeated itself with renewed strength between 2004 and 2005, with the question of building names and tuition fees being some of the important issues on the SRC agenda.

Still, in 2013, questions of UCT’s resistance to transformation refused to go unnoticed and this time the election irregularities committed

by Daso (DA Student Organisation) became the point of contention and the university’s eventual marshmallow-handling of the saga.

Then we arrived at 2015, when “songs of sorrow” carved out of the pain and suffering of collective black and brown bodies were morphing into twitching muscles, fermenting mental ill-health, and the catastrophic wounds of our foremothers and forefathers were still bursting with pus.

All the while, Cecil John Rhodes sat in his chair contemplating new technologies of subtle torture and the renewing of the liberal racist machinery of hatred and psychological insecurity.

I went to see the production of *The Fall* at the Baxter last Thursday. The stage design sidestepped the trap of overcrowded props that can add often little to no value to a story. Three tables and projected visuals onto the back wall of the stage is all that the cast of six actors needed.

This de-cluttered frame was gradually filled with the complexities, discontinuities, tensions, hopes, frustrations, joys, fears, intellectual meditations, debate and the violence that characterised the student

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movement, both within and without. I had consciously decided to initially minimise my involvement in the student movement and eventually I would completely withdraw and watch from the sidelines.

My own memories of political violence and death that I lived through in KwaZulu-Natal in the mid- to late 1990s, resurfaced in unexpected ways for me. Later, when I heard some students declare that they were willing to take up arms and to be criminalised in the name of transformation at UCT, my mind resurrected images of mutilated young men in the streets and the sugar plantations on my way to school.

Watching things unfold and escalate from the sidelines meant that I had no concrete sense of the gestations, absurdities and brutalities simmering and exploding in

the front-lines and behind closed doors.

Like many people, I was consuming bite size stories from those who were in the action, at best, and the spectacles produced by the media, at worst.

In watching the play, I was relieved that I had not given into the pressure and fever that seemed to infect many people in 2015 and 2016. You will recall that there was not a week that went by without, at least, a handful of articles and opinion pieces competing for publication space both in print and online media.

Ironically, the bulk of the commentators were, at best, on the periphery of the student movement or worst still, were milking their opinions from the (mis)reading of post-colonial literature and theory. Even those who were not skimming



HARD-HITTING: The cast of *The Fall*.

Picture: ERIC MILLER

Gqola, Winter, Hooks, Lorde, Fanon, Biko and Sobukwe still fell prey to the need to be needed and perceived as radical and relevant.

The Fall silences all these pretences with a gripping and nuanced telling and interpretation of Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall in ways that those of

us who were not involved, and consequently shattered by these experiences, can never achieve. We are imposters hungry for relevance in a political and ethical project that we could not have imagined nor have had the courage to initiate. At this point, the first responsible thing we can do is to

watch the play.

There are several difficult issues and questions that the play opens, without at any point pretending to give us answers and resolutions.

This, in itself, makes the play compelling and mature. One issue that still aches in my mind and heart is the violent resistance, especially by heterosexual men to coexist with the multiplicities of human identities and particularly sexual and gender identities.

In this regard, heterosexual male violence is an extension of racist male violence and psychological insecurities.

The Fall is thus not only about the questions of transformation in higher education and socio-economic change in South Africa.

The Fall indeed, speaks to these issues, yet it also speaks to the civil war against the flourishing of human life beyond the narrow confines of heterosexual norms, expectations, being and becoming in the world.

● *The Fall is on at the Baxter Golden Arrow Studio until June 24. Dr Khanyile is a senior post-doctoral fellow at the Historical Trauma and Transformation Research Unit, Stellenbosch University*