

# Heart of Redness

 By Eugene Yiga

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For the past decade, Soweto-born composer and librettist Neo Muyanga has been working together with Mark Fleishman, co-artistic director and executive trustee of Magnet Theatre.

"We've developed a language that uses music and theatricality to tell stories," Muyanga says. "Usually the stories are inspired by history and our colonial archives. It was in that light that we had a conversation about the book Heart of Redness by Zakes Mda."

At first, given the complex nature of the 'beautifully told' story, Muyanga wasn't convinced that an adaptation would work. But after reading it a few times, the book grew on him and he was more able to separate the main themes.

"It's interesting from an historical point of view, but it's also interesting because the book speaks to the making of black modernity, which starts in the 19th century," he says. "You begin to find the roots of what South Africa has become today, which is a kind of neo-liberal hybrid economy of people who are both purist traditionalists and 21st-century futurists."



Another main theme for Muyanga is the love story, which, he says, is always a favourite for the audience.

"There's a love triangle," he explains. "And this particular story has to do with a Western-educated former exile who falls in love with two women at the same time. One is a traditionalist and the other is a moralising, but progressive, Christian. So this man in the middle is torn, and it tells us a lot about where the country sits at this point."

Indeed, Muyanga believes that Heart of Redness is not just an historical account. Instead, it uses history to tell the story of us today.

"It's about tradition coming together with what's modern and what's been infiltrated by global influences," he says. "It fascinates me because it tells me a lot about the tensions I hold in myself. And my imagination tells me that it should be of interest to all kinds of intersecting and non-intersecting sectors of South African life."



Part of the reason the work should have a wide appeal is because it draws on a range of musical genres. But Muyanga explains that he's done so in a way that retains respect for each style.

"It's not purely operatic, it's not purely musical, and it's not purely traditional," he says. "It takes from all of those. We use them interchangeably and, with respect, fuse them in a way that allows the tension to bear fruitful collaboration on stage."

Muyanga describes Heart of Redness as a new form that will explore a new language. It's about how opera made in South Africa can and should speak differently to works from abroad.

"South Africa is a singing nation and the centre of operatic practice in the black community," he says. "But nobody talks about it because nobody knows. I want to illustrate some of those strands."

*Heart of Redness* is at Cape Town's [Fugard Theatre](#) until 22 August. Book at [Computicket](#) or [www.capetownopera.co.za](http://www.capetownopera.co.za).

## ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit [www.eugeneyiga.com](http://www.eugeneyiga.com), follow @eugeneyiga on Twitter, or email [hello@eugeneyiga.com](mailto:hello@eugeneyiga.com) to say, um, hello.

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