



Perci MoeKetsi takes the lead role in *Madiba*.

Nelson Mandela's revolutionary struggle comes to life on stage, as the world tour of *Madiba* kicks off in Australia.

MANY SIGNIFICANT historical events have been transformed into great theatre, especially when the story involves personal struggle and triumph. The story of Nelson Mandela, the South African anti-apartheid activist, has been brought to life in a new musical bearing his clan name, *Madiba*.

Created by Jean-Pierre Hadida and Alicia Sebrien, *Madiba* premiered at Paris' Le Comedia Theatre in 2016. The first English language version, touring here, marks 25 years since the end of apartheid in South Africa.

Madiba begins with Mandela as a young lawyer/activist, arrested for treason and imprisoned. He becomes a symbolic backdrop as the audience is introduced to other characters including the white racist policeman, Van Leden, who's daughter Helena falls for the black activist and artist, William. There's a clever use of William's black-and-white sketches in the staging.

The couple's forbidden romance provides a *West Side Story* edge, adding extra drama to the narrative. But, of course, it's Mandela's ultimate release from prison and victory as



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South Africa's first black president that is the predominant story arc.

A slow start and underdevelopment of the characters in the first half – even scenes with Mandela seem brisk and disjointed – leaves the audience feeling unconnected and wanting more. The second act picks up but doesn't provide the much-needed momentum the play lacks. There's a redemptive moment for Van Leden that gives the show a poignant kick, but it comes too late.

It's a pity this is something of a misfire because it sports a great local cast – Tim “Timomatic”

Omaji (*So You Think You Can Dance*), Blake Erickson (*Cry Baby*), Tarisai Vushe (*The Lion King*), Barry Conrad (*Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*) and Courtney Bell (*The Sound Of Music*). Rapper and Kylie Minogue dancer, David Denis is the show's Narrator.

Omaji, Conrad and Bell do justice to their roles but, while Narrator Denis has great energy, the rapping can, at times, seem gimmicky. Most perfectly cast is South African Perci MoeKetsi in the lead role. His wide smile and soulful eyes bear an uncanny resemblance to Mandela.

This musical borrows heavily from other classics. There's the huddled groups of interpretive dancers (*Hair*), the show-stopping victories (*RENT*), and the good-versus-bad operatic baritones (*Jesus Christ Superstar*). Such homage is not a bad thing and, considering the story is mainly set during the '60s and '80s, seems fitting.

A surprise moment with Mandela's grandson adds emotional punch to the conclusion but, while Mandela's fist in the air may look dramatic, the gravitas is just not there.

Madiba has great intentions and untapped potential. It should be emotional and confronting and could be so much more. A story like this should be as powerful as *Les Miserables*.

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