



# ISILILO

Written by  
Siyambonga Mdubeki

Directed by  
Ncumisa Ndimeni  
Baleni Ernest



## A word from The Forge's Performing Arts Programmer

"Nothing lasts long enough to have been. These fragments of everything descend upon us haphazardly. Only rarely do we see the immanence of wholes. And that is the beginning of art."  
Dambudzo Marechera, *House of Hunger*

Welcome to The Forge Theatre! Thank you for taking the time to support local South African artists. It means so much to us and to them that you have braved Covid-19 to be here.

We are excited to have *ISILILO* as the first theatrical production in The Forge theatre. Although we have held many events here, none of them have included theatre-makers on the stage. It's an honour to have this incredible cast and crew share their talent and commitment to social justice through the arts.

*ISILILO* is a mix of comedy, absurdism, physical theatre and dramatic prose. It is an extraordinary example of contemporary South African theatre and the dynamism with which our local practitioners treat their narrative and performative responsibilities. It is also a deeply South African story in form and content.

The Life Esidimeni tragedy rocked our consciousness. The rainbow nation had again faltered and instituted unbelievable suffering and pain on the lives of its citizens. Siyambonga Mdubeki and his troupe of actors have been able to recount the collective traumas of the families who lost loved ones at the height of this investigation. Through delicate story-telling, beautiful prose and truly dynamic scenes and prop-work, this cast has gifted the victims of the tragedy their humanity.



We hope you enjoy it and that *ISILILO* – along with our other programming – energises you to stand up against the injustices of the South African state.

Fezokuhle Mthonti  
Performing Arts Programmer at The Forge

## A word from the playwright

It was 2016 when I came across a news headline that read "At least 144 mentally ill patients died during Life Esidimeni." I found it hard to believe that this could sound right to anyone. "*At least 144 mentally ill patients died during Life Esidimeni.*"

I had had an interest in what was happening with the Life Esidimeni incident, but now I had to read more.

At first I hadn't thought about writing a play. I was just a concerned citizen. I read articles about the tragedy and learnt that families were being compensated R1.2 million for the loss of their loved ones. I thought "surely this is not justice for the families? How do you put a price on a life? Does money take away the pain?"

There was no way I would have had answers to these questions from the outside. I approached a journalist by the name of Suzanne Venter at *Rapport*. Suzanne provided me with articles and information she had about Life Esidimeni and the arbitration process. Going through the stories I wondered about the victims' thoughts and feelings, especially since no one had been held accountable, let alone been imprisoned.

Suzanne introduced me to Christene Nxumalo, the leader of the family committee. Mrs Nxumalo had lost her sister during the transfers. She introduced me to others. I met with the families, tried to understand their side of the story and what they wished could have been done to avoid it all. I recorded everything and listened to it when I was at home by myself to try make sense of it. The families recounted how their loved ones were ill treated in the NGOs they were moved to.

They spoke about the terrible conditions. I even heard about instances of patients being given the wrong medication. At that point I knew that I needed to do something.

Telling this story was a no brainer.

Siyambonga Mdubeki  
Writer of *ISILILO*





The cast (from left): Tsegofatso Masekwameng, Zanele Mthombeni, Siyambonga Mdubeki



The directors: Baleni Ernest and Ncumisa Ndimeni

*ISILLO* is a look into the state of health institutions in South Africa through the life of a young boy whose dreams are deferred because of his father's deteriorating health. As the story unfolds, we encounter young Gcina Mabitsela, the protagonist, having to choose between his career as a soccer star, the love of his life and caring for his father.

The Forge is honoured to present *ISILLO* again to Gauteng audiences on the 25, 26, 27 March. This play first debuted at the Market Theatre in 2020.



"I am watching this play for the second time now. This will be a mouthpiece for Life Esidimeni families, as our government looks down on us. They think that since they have compensated us, everything is alright. We still need justice for our own lost families. I think this play will give us justice."

Mrs Jabulile Hlatshwayo

"I lost my younger sister who had a disability, she was epileptic and she was lost into the system, I would like to put it, because she was sent to hospital and she never came back. There was never an explanation from the hospital as to what happened, but her body was bruised, with blood veins all over her, but no one explained what was going on. So the family just concluded that clearly she was given wrong medication because, how does someone go to hospital and just die without any explanation?"

Zanele Mthombeni

"What a beautiful story, beyond the activism, beyond the story. What an honor and a privilege to be part of that room and to witness all that. You know when you think of people from Life Esidimeni, you think of them from a state of, when they are already born, that they suffered from a mental health issue, but to go through the timeline of this man, for me it just hits home. It is so relatable, I could empathize. I left saying 'what if this was my father? what if?'"

Chris Djuma, Market Theater Lab.

**THE  
FORGE**