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Review: *Mayihlome/Aawaan*

Mayihlome/Aawaan brings together a collection of South African and Indian musicians and poets in an impressively collaborative production comprising instruments, sounds, voices, visuals and poetry. Envisaged as a sequel to a similarly constituted work, “Insurrections”, which developed as a ‘creative response to a sense of outrage in nature and among people in the contemporary world’, *Mayihlome/Aawaan* offers an intimate exploration of hope in the midst of violence and war.

Conceived as an oratorio, the work draws on the expressive inflections of instruments from both sides of the Indian Ocean – the sarod and sarangi from India; Nguni bows from KwaZulu Natal, and guitar, saxophone, bass and drums, which are ubiquitous to both – to construct an evocative soundscape thematically channeled by vocals, spoken word, and the occasional ambient sound. The 7-tracks take us into a world – sometimes recognizably South African, sometimes more generally inferred – that is at once harsh and chaotic, and follow a narrative that moves variously through expressions of fear and defiance to a place of calm and ultimate joy.

The track sequence is carefully considered, opening with a piece that subtly mutates from restful drone to discordant scream, laying bare the messy, violent context to which the rest of the work is compelled to respond.

For instance, Track 2 explores gendered responses to the violence of apartheid and to the grueling experience of the migrant labour system. It sets up a dialogue between voices that together, attempt to make sense of the situation, the male voice represented as strained and frenzied, while the female chorus provides solace in a gentle, soothing and steadfast rejoinder.

Track 4, ‘Song for Ourselves’, offers a compelling intermingling of Indian and African idioms, with bass and bow melody lines providing the structural moorings above which Indian voices and instruments circle and fly. Here musical tensions move in and out of focus, signifying sonically the physical and emotional responses by indigenous people (identified as San, though generally resonant) to their persistent experiences of loss.

Track 7, the title track, is strongly rooted in the Phrygian mode, a compositional choice that

was no doubt informed by its prevalence in both North and South Indian music, as well as in jazz and various European folks musics. As a result, there is no dominant pull in this piece to any one style, but rather melody and words (rendered in a play of different languages) drive the dramaturgical sensibility, which makes an assertive appeal for the right to dream.

The production concludes with a 4-part piece that shifts gradually from the somewhat eerie rumbles and wails of birds from what appears to be a bloodied, imperiled world, to a place of composure. It ends with a joyous chorus that draws on the carnivalesque rhythms of the Cape *Goema*, marking the final shift from a politics of despair to one of hope.

The production reveals two elements that depart markedly from similarly constituted compositions in South Africa, which seek to reflect multicultural experience through the fusion of cultural sounds and styles:

First, there is a notable equanimity in the blending of musical idioms and instruments, offering an expressive parallel to a post-apartheid cultural sensibility perhaps, which reveals a confidence in difference. Parts come together naturally, as voices in a dialogue between equals, rather than a politically calculated apportionment of parts. There is a compositional maturity in this element of the production that plays also to the work's broader theme of humanity, transcendent of, albeit comfortable with, cultural, ethnic or gendered disparities.

This transcendence is revealed in the production itself, which uses a variety of clever compositional tactics to reinforce the discursive and affective elements of the work. I am drawn in particular, to the aesthetic play on spatiality to evoke geographic and imaginative distance/intimacy, fashioned from the use of echo, timbre and instrumental/voice overlay. Equally, temporality (or timelessness) is subtly infused into the narrative, pulling the past into the present, and creating a narrative place to imagine a better future. Here I refer to Track 6, 'Migrant's Lament', in which the plaintive, unsettled voice of the migrant is as aesthetically meaningful in South Africa today as it might have been over a century ago.

As a live recording, the production is not perfect: sometimes melodies are rendered a little out of tune or the mix is not as impeccable as would be a studio production. However, the power of the production lies undeniably in its humanness, its intimacy, and in the profound poetic conviction of its co-creators to a culture, politics and mindset of hope.