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A Conversation with Playwright Zodwa Nyoni¹

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Abstract

This interview with playwright and librettist **Zodwa Nyoni** explores the creative, cultural and spiritual foundations of *Tears Are Not Meant to Stay Inside*, the first African opera written and staged in the United Kingdom. Conducted by Sam Kasule in February 2025 (via Microsoft Teams), the conversation traces Nyoni's artistic evolution from poetry to theatre, film, television and now opera, highlighting her commitment to storytelling rooted in African performance traditions, diasporic identity and black women's experiences. Nyoni discusses the opera's development process, its grounding in Zimbabwean healing rituals, the challenges and possibilities of multilingual composition, and the collaborative dynamics between writer, composer and director. The interview also reflects on broader questions of representation, cultural specificity, and the complexities of creating African work within Western institutions.

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Introduction

This wide-ranging conversation with Zodwa Nyoni offers a rare insight into the making of a contemporary African opera and the artistic consciousness behind it. Speaking with candour and intellectual clarity, Nyoni reflects on her diasporic upbringing, her search for cultural reconnection, and her desire to expand operatic form through African aesthetics—ritual, movement, multilingualism, and embodied storytelling. The interview situates *Tears Are Not Meant to Stay Inside* within a lineage of African performance while also revealing the practical realities of creating culturally specific work in the UK: casting challenges, linguistic negotiation, and the shifting landscape of arts funding. What emerges is a portrait of an artist committed to innovation, spiritual inquiry and the reclamation of African voices within global performance traditions.

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Sam Kasule: Where does your love for African opera come from?

Zodwa Nyoni: The Buxton International Festival brief essentially was “how do you reimagine opera without any parameters? What would you do?” And immediately, I thought of what it would mean for *me* to write the opera. I'm from Zimbabwe, so for me I've never heard of a Zimbabwean opera. I thought about operating in a different language and what the form offers. So, I was like, OK, let's write it and figure it out along the way. Thankfully, my team has ended up being very good and helpful. My director is Marcus Tebogo Desando, a South African opera director and singer, who is the Director of the Prince Claus Fund in Amsterdam. And my composer is also a South African musician, Thanda Gumede, a *vocalist and multi-disciplinary artist*. His music knowledge is vast. His inspiration draws from his Zulu and Xhosa heritage mixed with Jazz, Neo-Soul, Gospel and other contemporary styles. As we are developing the opera, my love is growing.

Sam Kasule: I am studying African opera specifically in Uganda and I have found that they have a contemporary African opera tradition, except that they blend it with Western.

Zodwa Nyoni: Yeah.

Sam Kasule: When I talk about it in the African sense, I talk about using music, dance and drama and song. Of course, includes a lot of poetry recitation, and declamation.

Zodwa Nyoni: Oh, OK. I'm interested in looking at their scripts because writing my kind of my opera, I didn't know (the form), and I never had a model to copy. So, mine is a mixture of all the African forms.

Sam Kasule: Yeah.

Zodwa Nyoni: There is poetry and incantation in there. In terms of the kind of musical instruments, there is a blend of African drums and the piano.

Sam Kasule: What is it the opera about?

Zodwa Nyoni: It is about a woman, Nomvula, a black woman who is feeling disconnected from her life, her body, her spirit and from her world. So, she seeks out a traditional healer, a woman, to help her. I rooted it in Zimbabwean traditional healing practices. Traditional healers not only focus on treating illnesses, but they also engage in the spiritual healing and diagnosis in connection to the ancestors. So, she goes to this healer wanting

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to find out the 'thing' within her that is causing her to be unsettled. The opera is a conversation between the healer and Nomvula. And then you have a chorus, but you don't see it because they play the role of the ancestors. But I always knew that when I was thinking about the opera that I wanted these two black women on stage, also singing in tongues. In Zimbabwe, the Ndebele language, like the Zulus in South Africa, contains click sounds. So, there's always that challenge: how do you sing with clicks in an operatic voice as well? So, I think this is where the blending takes place. Combined with the singing is the chanting and the poetry. So, the way the script is written, is kind of in columns where you'll sometimes have the clicks separately, mostly the traditional healer's lines are in verse. Nomvula sings in English. The chorus is a mix. It's just been quite interesting to figure out how to kind of write it.

Sam Kasule: It's amazing.

Zodwa Nyoni: Yeah.

Sam Kasule: Can I ask, are you recording the rehearsal workshops processes?

Zodwa Nyoni: Yes, yes. We have been. We've had two workshops so far, and the first one was about getting an introduction to the opera and then the second one I recorded different bits of it. We had the musicians and singers as well. And that was a two-day workshop at Opera North in Leeds. And then we've got another workshop coming up in April in Buxton. I'm recording it all along the way.

Sam Kasule: Can one look at the revised scripts as the performance develops?

Zodwa Nyoni: Well, since all my writing is done on the computer, I can offer you the different drafts of the libretto. There's nothing that's scribbled down anymore.

Sam Kasule: Yeah, but then do you track it?

Zodwa Nyoni: Yeah, I definitely track my writing.

Sam Kasule: It must be exciting to go back to it and look at what you did.

Zodwa Nyoni: At the same time, I'm working on a new play, stage play for the Manchester Royal Exchange theatre and the Manchester International Festival. I've been working on that play for five years and it's about the 5th Pan African Congress and I've, like, been tracking all the scripts in the last

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five years. So, I've got a folder of about like 20 dated scripts and I'm like, I cannot wait till I get to the final draft and get it published.

Sam Kasule: It will be interesting to study the opera script because you are writing the script, somebody's composing the music.

Zodwa Nyoni: Yeah.

Sam Kasule: What made you think about doing a musical or opera?

Zodwa Nyoni: Mm hmm. Do you know? I think a lot of it comes from across my career because I've moved across different forms. I initially started writing poetry before I went into theatre. From theatre, I went into film. From film I went into TV and now its operas. For me, the consistency is about storytelling. What I'm always interested in is how I can challenge my own writing and how I can evolve it. So, when this opportunity came up, I knew I'd never written an opera on this scale, but the opportunity was really open and there weren't any limitations on what you had to do. Coming from a theatre background, I remember asking them: What's are the writers' tools? What do I need to know? What? What's the structure? They said that these are terminologies. You can decide how you write your opera, but there isn't necessarily an opera structure that you have to abide by. It's not the same way that you would do, let's say, if you're doing, a stage play - we can talk about a three-act structure or a five-act structure. So, I was like, OK, so I guess it's open in that sense.

When I started talking a lot about kind of the opera and what was preoccupying me, there was this kind of desire to listen to the operatic voice. Having listened to a couple of operas, what really resonated with me was this idea that the voice could wail. I liked the idea of wailing, and I was already thinking about ritual. I like the idea of ritual, and I think it was ritual and plus culture. I wasn't quite sure what would emerge from that. And then the more that we started talking about opera and thinking about some of the ideas that were preoccupying me, I liked the idea of somebody going to a healer and needing healing and then needing to cleanse themselves. There's something about the operatic voice where one is able to make that sound of cleansing and that sound of wailing. How does it sound if you place it alongside traditional singing in Zimbabwe? So, I think I started putting all these different kinds of components together. Initially what I had was a ritual of healing. Then, the story started to evolve out of

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it. So, then the woman evolved out of it because I think one of the questions that Marcus was asking was about who was wailing and what are they were wailing about. And this is when the characterization started to grow from it. But I'm always naturally interested in communicating with an audience.

Sam Kasule: OK, but this is very interesting. There are two things that have been, that have interested me about what you've said, which lead me to ask what you studied at university.

Zodwa Nyoni: I studied at the Leeds University's School of Performance and Cultural Industries. My M.A was in Writing for Performance and Publication. What led me to picking up the pen was an anthology in high school which had poems from other cultures. Generally, I used to enjoy English literature but there was something about writing from a specific cultural reference that I connected with. There's always that thing about trying to figure out how you fit in a place that you've migrated to. I migrated twice between Zimbabwe and England during my childhood. So, when we got that anthology, I remember seeing poems from India, Pakistan and South Africa. Prior to that I wasn't being taught about non-western writers. I was a first-generation Zimbabwe migrant that needed something to connect to.

Sam Kasule: What does that mean for you to try and write from your cultural point of view?

Zodwa Nyoni: I find a sense of self and identity. Throughout my university years (undergraduate and postgraduate), a lot of the research that I looked at was about African performance styles and writers. In my first one woman show, 'Home Has Died' which I performed as an undergraduate, I created a funeral. I invited audiences to this funeral where we mourned members of my family that had passed away whilst we were in England, and we couldn't go back home for their funerals. My mother who performed with me allowed us to process not only the loss of people but also the disconnection from home when you're in the diaspora. And then as I moved on into my postgraduate period, a lot of my work looked at, what it means to write about the continent as an act of reconnection. I think a lot of my work tends to communicate or exist between those two spaces – home and the diaspora.

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Sam Kasule: Earlier you also said that it is about the wailing.

Zodwa Nyoni: Mm hmm.

Sam Kasule: At times when you play Western classical (choral) music to people in Africa their response, in their mother tongues is that they don't want to listen to people wailing!

Zodwa Nyoni: Yeah.

Sam Kasule: But then, you talk about the wailing, and the wailing coming to you as well. I get the sense that you are unconsciously creating the distance between yourself and Western music and describing.... It is interesting that you have written wailing into your opera. The other point is about the medicine man. Did you research ritual performances before creating that character?

Zodwa Nyoni: I did some research, yes. I looked into spiritual healing, what the Sangomas do and how they are ingrained into Zimbabwean traditional practices. There are a variety of methods to diagnose and treat illnesses such as the use of herbs, incantations, divination, and communication with the spirits. I used these as tools for storytelling. The opera is in five acts. It begins in an aching spirit, moves within Nomvula's body; rises up and out through the mouth; is passed to the traditional healer and then the ancestors. Everything is interconnected. I wanted to create an opera that looks at not only how you heal the physical body, but also up into the spiritual realm.

Sam Kasule: Well, can you heal when you are in the diaspora?

Zodwa Nyoni: Yes, I think you can. I always have conversations with people about spirituality, migration and what I feel connected to. Having grown up in England, I had to reconnect to Zimbabwe. I used my writing to do this. I wrote a short film called *The Ancestors*. It was produced by BBC Films, BFI and redbagPictures. It's based on a traditional Zimbabwean ritual whereby young children must have a slit made on their ear lobe. By doing this, blood is spilt and they make communion between themselves and the ancestors. This act initiates them into the culture. Colonisation and Christianity deemed this practice uncivilized and unhygienic. Mass migration and westernisation further distanced the African diaspora from knowing traditional cultural practices, fundamental to the formation of identities...

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So, in *The Ancestors*, I wanted to explore what happens to ancestors that are disconnected from their descendants? And what is the process to reconnection? Three ancestors go on a mission to Earth to initiate all their descendants. I lived in Leeds at that time when I was writing the film, so this is where it's set. They get a list of names from the council of ancestors. The first descendant, Selena is a student at the university. She is a third generation Zimbabwean. To the ancestors' surprise, she doesn't want to do the ritual because she sees herself as Mancunian. They, ancestors end up arguing if they can force Selena to do the ritual. The ancestors died at different points in Zimbabwean history. Ancestor 1 died at the point of meeting the colonialist. She is traditional and wants to reclaim her descendants as forcibly as they were taken. Ancestor 2 died at the point of Independence. He understands the beliefs of Ancestor 1 but recognises how the country and its people have changed due to colonisation. He is more of a mediator. Ancestor 3 is the youngest one and died recently. He has a contemporary view of culture and connection to self, the diaspora, and the (African) continent. He feels that Selena should get to choose who and what she connects to. I was working out my thoughts and feelings in relation to my culture and identity. For my healing, I would have done the ritual, but Selena and Ancestor 3 make other choices which have unforeseen consequences.

Sam Kasule: Within the opera, we're talking about, how do you think of healing and where do you go to be healed?

Zodwa Nyoni: Therapy is very helpful. I've had therapy but I also know that when my father died just having therapy wasn't enough because I needed to find a place to put him. I kept coming back to this thought, dreams of him existing in an afterlife beyond this place. It wasn't death, like an end. It was a continued existence elsewhere, a transition into another state, place with the ancestors. That gave me more comfort than going to the bible or heaven in a western and Christian context. I needed that traditional and spiritual element to be able to grieve and heal. It felt fitting that within this opera, when we're talking about what it means to heal, you're not only referring to healing as a physical element but as a spiritual element, especially for this black African woman in the opera.

Sam Kasule: And even if you are in the diaspora, who are you calling out to?

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Zodwa Nyoni: For me, logically, you'll have to call out to your ancestors. Maybe I would have written Jesus, but I'm not Christian.

Sam Kasule: What feelings and experience have you had that have prompted your work and interest in this area?

Zodwa Nyoni: Firstly, I've never really felt included or invited into opera. But I'm curious about its mechanisms. I know what it feels like when an operatic voice passes through you, and you feel it. It shakes your core. I wanted to make something I and an audience can resonate with. If you can't find the thing, then you might as well just make the thing and find yourself in that. There was also the opportunity to collaborate with a composer who understands ritual and traditional music; more specifically, Southern African traditional music. Collaborations are fascinating because there's a curiosity of what we'll discover during the process. I learn new things about myself as a writer. I think I'm really allergic to complacency. I want to push myself and continue to play.

At the core, I know what my interests are. I know I'm interested in the diaspora. I'm interested in black women. I'm interested in spirituality, folk tales, folk music and liminality. So, I ask myself what does that look like in an opera versus a stage play, a film, a TV show, or novel?

The libretto is written. The composer has been working on music for months. We are about to go into another workshop. In the first workshop, we looked at English to Ndebele translations. My mother was the translator. And then, the composer (Thanda) felt we needed to call out to the ancestors at the beginning of the ritual. We talked through all the points of music, intersections with poetry; and how we incorporate movement whilst singing. The next workshop will focus on putting everything together and seeing a rough run through.

Sam Kasule: Yeah. Yeah, that's very good. I think you need to record that process because it is important. What you said relates to one of the questions I wanted to ask: how do you write an African opera which qualifies to be on stage performed by Western trained performers?

Zodwa Nyoni: We have a team of Africans creating the opera. I've written the libretto, Thanda has written the music, and Marcus will direct. So much care and specificity has gone into its making. Casting the singers is the next task.

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Sam Kasule: How do you work with these singers, who, although they are black, have been classically trained in the Western sense?

Zodwa Nyoni: What's interesting, I remember having a chat with Iwan Davies, Head of Music at Buxton International Festival about language. And we were talking about the clicks in Ndebele and how the performers will need a certain kind of confidence if they are going to run through the consonants and vowels. Then we started talking about the Welsh language, tongue and lip placement; and we replace European sounds with African sounds. The singers will have to learn how to respect the sounds of the words.

Sam Kasule: How do we sound them whilst we're singing?

Zodwa Nyoni: When we discover this we go into the next phase of the development. There are moments of singing, chanting and speaking. If they don't land the click, 'nqo' or 'nko' correctly it changes the meaning. And it becomes more important, particularly for the traditional healer to learn the words. My mother came into one of the earlier workshops and we recorded all the clicks for the singers. We recorded the translations of the poetry and the lyrics so that the performers could go away and work on them.

Sam Kasule: What are the first languages of the performers? Is English their first language or do they speak an African language?

Zodwa Nyoni: One of the prima donnas we've confirmed is Cameroonian by birth, but she grew up in France. The composer and director like I mentioned earlier are both South African and will be contributing to the singing. Within the chorus we also have a Zambian baritone singer. There are multiple languages in the room. The aim is always to bring people into the room who can bring a cultural specificity to the roles. But unfortunately, as you know with making work in the diaspora, sometimes the pool of talent can decrease the more specific we get. I've seen this with casting stage plays over the years. I am currently casting for a new production, *Liberation* with the Royal Exchange Theatre and Manchester International Festival. It's based on the 5th Pan African Congress which took place in Manchester in 1945. It will be premiering this July. Our goal has been to cast every actor to match the cultural background of the characters. But if you alter any variant, for example, age and race, it increases or decreases your options. A large majority of black actors in the

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UK are either of West African or Caribbean heritage. But if you're looking for Southern African or East African, that is over 45, the search expands even internationally. Then you start having conversations about budgets and new writing. I've always found myself in this conversation since my first play, *Boi-Boi is Dead* in 2015. The play was about an Afro-jazz musician, so we needed an actor who could also play the trumpet. But the pool became smaller and smaller. We ended up with two potential actors of different ages. I wrote the play envisioning the main character, Boi-Boi, to be in his fifties. Similar with *Liberation*, the play, we are still in search of a Kenyan actor on the same demographic and potentially having to widen the scope.

Sam Kasule: Why?

Zodwa Nyoni: The pool of actors who are older than fifty years is just starting to get smaller and that is a constant frustration.

Sam Kasule: What is causing this problem?

Zodwa Nyoni: It's availability of opportunities to train, to get auditions, to get paid work, to have complex scripts and characters; and the general instability of the arts as a career pathway. When I think about my parents, I think I was quite fortunate because when I went into the arts, there weren't comments such as: performing arts is not traditional African thing where you go; I want you to be a doctor or an engineer. But they weren't insisting on what I had to do. In fact, I was already engaging with the arts at community level. I was making contacts and getting opportunities to travel. I've always thought of creativity and business together. We must make a living as an artist, as much as any other sector. If you don't have the support, knowledge and exposure, it can be very difficult to access those opportunities.

Sam Kasule: Why haven't we seen culturally and linguistically different artists try to create theatre works or even African operas in UK?

Zodwa Nyoni: Representation matters. If you're not exposed to opera, specifically, African opera, you will not see yourself in that space. And if you don't feel you're welcome in that space, and importantly, if you don't have somebody who is going to be your advocate to help you work through impostor syndrome, it can feel like an impossible space to excel in. Over the last 20 years of working in the arts, access has also changed a lot

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based on the funding that's available. Particularly in theatre, Arts Council funding used to support new work, new writing and dramaturgy, that funding is gone now. Audience engagement and community engagement is the focus now. Theatres are getting rid of their literary departments and dramaturgs which used to be the first points of call for writers. Today writers have nowhere to go to develop their writing. But all of it is vital. The audiences knew work to engage with. When I first started playwriting, I met dramaturgs that exposed me to theatre and took me to watch shows. We discussed the scripts, characters, structure and form. I learnt a lot from those relationships. Now the dramaturg role is covered by the new work producer. The new work producers tend to lean more into producing than they do into the literary and the script. I'm just getting into opera and I'm sure there's plenty that I will discover about how this sector works.

Sam Kasule: Hmm, thanks. These are very good points. What made you think about composing what some African scholars call the song?

Zodwa Nyoni: You know, I knew quite early on what I was interested in. I wanted a ritual. I knew that I wanted a ritual about healing, and particularly black women's healing. Crying is very cleansing (for some). Language has always been prominent in the development process. Once I got the commission, I was really excited about not writing an opera in English. I didn't know how I was going to write it, but I knew it was never going to be in English, and if it did have English, we would have to think about when and how we used English in translation. So, the first draft of the opera that I wrote was in English because English is my first language. And then, when it came to the second draft, I wrote it in Ndebele.

Sam Kasule: Yes. Ok. Thank you. Though that made me think about the play, I was commissioned to write in Luganda by a Ugandan theatre group. Luganda is my mother tongue. Because I live in the diaspora and I don't speak the language every day, I wrote the script in what one could describe as 'classical' Luganda which no one speaks today. I sent the script to the director... and his response was that 'I was writing Luganda in English! The script reads like an English script.' I had to psychologically disengage myself from English and rewrite the script in contemporary ordinary Luganda.

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Zodwa Nyoni: Yeah, to be honest, I don't think I will ever be able to fully escape my very English upbringing and my English training. I do my best to keep my mother tongue, but I think, I know if somebody from Zimbabwe or South Africa were to read my script, they'd probably say, oh, there are inconsistencies here and there. I am the product of the diaspora. Even today I had a conversation with my mother in Ndebele and she says, 'oh, you tried'. It's similar to when people talk about speaking broken English. It (Ndebele) feels broken, divided. This feeling will always be there because I happen to realise that *my tongue migrated too*. What comes out of my mouth is a representation probably of who I am and my relationship with both worlds, Zimbabwe and UK. I will try my best with the script. I'll be as accurate as I can, but I think those (of back home) who are watching it might say: '*Look at this English woman.*'

Sam Kasule: O, I like that phrase, '*My tongue migrated too.*' It captures everything. You are right, your tongue migrates when you migrate to the diaspora. It's interesting how the phrase resonates with the title of your opera; you can't keep your tears inside.

Zodwa Nyoni: Yeah.

Sam Kasule: In one sense, speaking African is more than just the language, it's quite broad. How do you make the opera speak African?

Zodwa Nyoni: All the components (chanting, singing, poetry, movement) that come together are important and the choices that we make in instrumentation, the choices that we make in the way I've structured the text, the idea that you begin by calling out to the ancestors to come and bless the space; are how we make the African opera speak.

Sam Kasule: Yes.

Zodwa Nyoni: Ritual is important in Zimbabwe. When we look at healing, the relationship between the two characters in an African context, it makes sense for Nomvula to consider going to a traditional healer rather than just going to a GP (General Practitioner/Physician).

Sam Kasule: Yeah.

Zodwa Nyoni: The singers will have to also consider new performance techniques. Making the opera speak will also include considering how the voice makes noise beyond singing. In an earlier workshop with the singers,

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I liked the guttural noises they made, breathing techniques - building rhythm with body, stomping, beating chests. I wanted to incorporate this into our performance too. And it's been really fascinating talking to the people at the Buxton International Festival whose initial reaction was, "oh, opera singers don't usually do that." I said, "well, they're going to have to because it doesn't make sense for me to write an African opera where the performers are static and don't use their whole body as an instrument. Why would they be static? It's African music. It's expression. They must move. So, you must figure out how you control your voice but also move and breathe."

Sam Kasule: Yeah, that's true because in many African cultures acting involves singing and body movement. And when somebody starts singing, they start dancing.

Zodwa Nyoni: Yeah. I have the same principles with my stage play, *'Liberation'*. So, if people don't get to Buxton to watch, *'Tear Are Not Meant To Stay Inside'* they can come and see my play as well. It's running until the end of July.

Sam Kasule: Where?

Zodwa Nyoni: At the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre as part of Manchester International Festival 2025.

Sam Kasule: OK. Thank you very much for spending time to talk to me about your work.