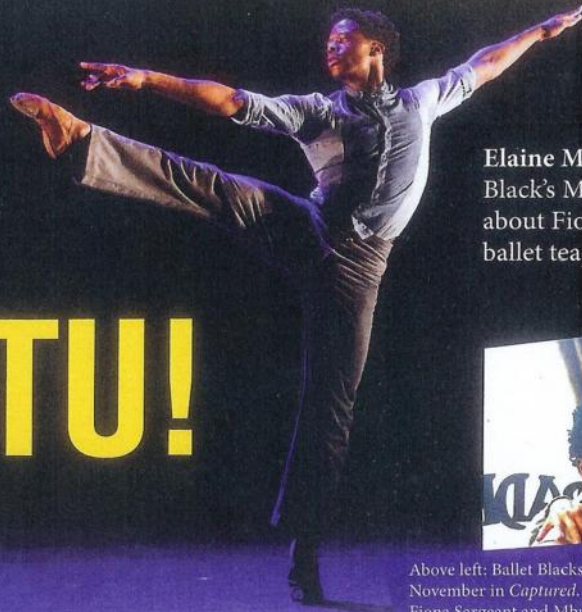
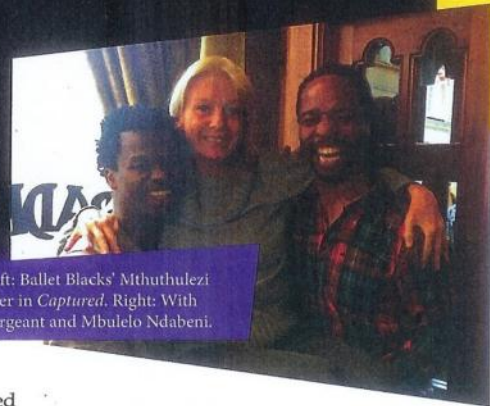


TUTU!



Elaine Mayson talks to Ballet Black's Mthuthulezi November about Fiona Sargeant, his first ballet teacher in South Africa



Above left: Ballet Blacks' Mthuthulezi November in *Captured*. Right: With Fiona Sargeant and Mbulelo Ndabeni.

When Mthuthulezi November entered the room where Fiona Sargeant was giving ballet classes to the children of the black township of Zolani, she asked for his name but seemed not to hear correctly. Throwing her hands in the air, she exclaimed: "Tutu! The perfect name for a ballet dancer. I know you will be an incredible success!" Everybody laughed and the fun began.

This is the story of an unsung heroine. Fiona Sargeant has worked tirelessly to teach ballet, choreography and much more to the children of the Western Cape of South Africa. Petite, with slender limbs, blonde hair and blue eyes, she is an unlikely figure to find in a township. However, she believes it is her calling. Not only has she been teaching for over 20 years, but she has sown the seeds for children to grow, mature and be nurtured by other hands, helping them gain recognition and careers in dance. These achievements are against the odds, but her determination and true grit have overcome many obstacles. Her first pupil to enjoy a professional career is former Rambert dancer Mbulelo Ndabeni, who took classes with Fiona in the township of Khayalitscha in Cape Town. He is still in touch with her and values the immense contribution she made to his career.

Born in Wolverhampton, Fiona trained at the Nesta Brooking School,

Elmhurst, Rambert and Central School of Ballet, where she worked with Christopher and Carole Gable. She enjoyed a 15-year career in the UK and South Africa, where she was involved with the CAPAB Ballet and Dance for All. Later, she qualified as a teacher with the Royal Academy of Dance. In Montagu, she runs her own company, Dancescape SA, for which she has many plans. One project is to train dance teachers, but one of her greatest successes is the dancer known as "Tutu", now a member of Ballet Black. I met up with Mthuthulezi at the company's studios in Marylebone to talk about his beginnings in the township and his subsequent dance career.

EM: How old were you when you heard about the ballet classes where you were living?

MN: I was 15. I used to play soccer by the hall where Fiona taught. It was in the small township of Zolani, where I was born. It was actually my younger brother, Siphe, who told me about the classes. He said they were doing this strange dance called "ballet". All the township children did African dance, but it was only some of us that went to ballet. We were very enthusiastic and naive.

EM: Had you seen any ballet at this stage?

MN: We had never seen a ballet or

heard anything about it. Fiona wanted to see me do some African dancing, as the other children said I was good. I showed her some of the routine and she asked if I could teach it. I did this and she had the idea to infuse it with ballet steps. That meant I had to start learning ballet, so I ended up going every day.

EM: What was the building you rehearsed in?

MN: An old church, but it was used as a crèche and we just had the corner of it. We had nothing.

EM: Did Fiona give you ballet classes as well as take rehearsals?

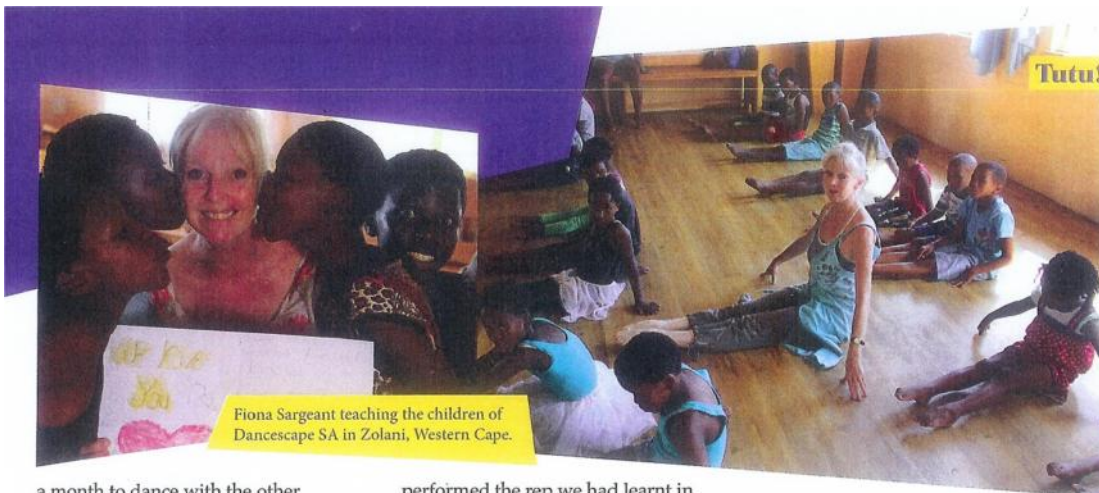
MN: Yes. In the beginning it was all about having fun, but then Fiona really began to push us and made us watch videos of ballet. She took us to performances by Cape Town City Ballet and we got to see what it could be like to be a dancer. We had to decide whether it was a career we wanted to follow.

EM: Is this when you wanted to become a ballet dancer?

MN: Yes, Fiona showed us videos of black dancers in Cape Town. We were inspired, but we thought we could do so much better!

EM: So you were already competitive?

MN: Yes! We were taken once >



Fiona Sargeant teaching the children of Dancescape SA in Zolani, Western Cape.

a month to dance with the other black dancers in Cape Town that we had seen on the videos.

EM: What happened next?

MN: Some of us went to take class at Fiona's school in Montagu. She wanted us to have more competition and better facilities to continue our training. I was still at school, but needed to make a decision. I auditioned and went to the Cape Academy of Performing Arts for three years, winning a scholarship to attend.

EM: Did this mean everything was paid for?

MN: We had our accommodation and training paid for by the Ballet for All trust, but Fiona helped us a lot with fundraising back in Montagu, which paid for our travel and food. This is when the dancing started to get hard. We were exposed to a different group of dancers who had started training at the age of five. They were much more experienced than we were. We did ballet, contemporary, hip hop, singing and acting.

EM: Was Fiona still involved in your training at this point?

MN: She came to watch us perform and was always around to pull strings if we needed anything. The Academy was directed by Debbie Turner, and I stayed for a fourth year on the postgraduate course.

EM: Why did you move to the UK?

MN: At the end of my fourth year, Simone Muller wanted to bring some dancers to England to sample the culture in London. She chose me and another girl to come for two months to work with Ballet Central. We learnt and performed the repertoire but also

performed the rep we had learnt in Cape Town. The school liked us so much that the two months were extended to five. Whilst we were performing, Cassa Pancho [founder and artistic director of Ballet Black] saw me dance.

EM: Were you sad to go back home without a job?

MN: When I arrived home, a friend who had been dancing in *West Side Story* in Cape Town was injured. I was asked to take over the role, as they knew I was reliable. However, half way through the run I heard from Cassa that she had a contract and would I like to take it? I said yes please!

EM: When did you join Ballet Black?

MN: September 2015 as an apprentice. Now in my second year, I am a junior artist.

EM: Do you go back to South Africa?

MN: I try to go back a lot, but rarely to Zolani. I go to Cape Town and work on my own choreography, but I do visit the township. I want to be active and continue working when I am in South Africa.

EM: Is that because your life is very different from that of your friends?

MN: It's hard for me because I don't like a lot of things that are happening in the townships. I go back and see people who had so much potential but they have nothing and no opportunity. It breaks my heart. My mum is there and that is the main reason I go back.

EM: What are your plans for the future?

MN: I don't have plans, but I can see myself doing a lot more choreography in the future. I'm working out my own dance vocabulary. I see what resonates with my own body and

I like experimenting. Eventually I would like to set up my own company. I want to teach at some point as well, especially back home.

EM: Did you know that Fiona has set up her own company? She hopes it will grow and help people like you have the opportunity to dance professionally.

NM: If one day I could take over Dancescape SA, then that would be amazing. My main goal after my dancing career is to go back to South Africa.

EM: What advice would you give young dancers in the townships?

NM: Whatever profession you are in, you have to believe in yourself. Working hard and believing is the key.

EM: Fiona was your first teacher. What was the one attribute above all others she gave you?

NM: She let me be myself. I think this is often missing in the tuition of young dancers today. I don't like how they are treated. She was never hard on us. She knew the talent was there, but never wanted to take it away. She gave us the opportunity to play and find out who we were, and let us misbehave in a way that gave us freedom to explore movement. It was never just ballet. Fiona gave us a platform to be creative, opening the door for us to love ballet so that it was never a chore. For some reason, she knows how to work in the townships. I am grateful she made dance so much fun. Fiona does an incredible job and I will always treasure my time with her. ■

For further information about Dancescape SA, visit dancescapesouthafrica.org.za.