

# It's like a finger pointing a way to the moon

MOYA MICHAEL

Moya Michael's new piece offers more questions than answers



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In Moya Michael's 'It's like a finger pointing a way to the moon', spectators are introduced to a space between presence and absence, a diasporic self on stage engaging with a distant ancestral community. Here, the boundaries between the contemporary and traditional blur together through a non-linear collage of tangible, corporeal stage tableaus and vistas projected on the back wall, video footage from Michael's journey and encounters in Southwestern Africa. Collaborating with musician Simon Thierrée, filmmaker Victoire Karera Kampire and dramaturg Joachim Ben Yakub, Michael has developed a multimedia *melange* of dance, music, video and poetic storytelling. With a piece clocking in at 1,5 hours, the artist has ample opportunity to display her talents. Yet for all the poetical abundance, the piece at times seems to suffer from a lack of dramaturgical economy.

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The title refers to a Bruce Lee quote from the movie 'Enter the Dragon': "It is like a finger pointing away to the moon. Don't concentrate on the finger, or *you will miss* all that heavenly glory." Following Michael's previous critically engaged works such as the solos "Coloured Swan", and "Outwalkers", where she addressed questions of diasporic identity, exoticism, expectations, and Africanist movement vocabulary, her new piece approaches the issue more subtly. While still critically embedded in the diasporic condition, her idiosyncratic collage gives the work layers beyond the pointing finger. Yet, as a journey back to the "former world of worlds", to quote the concluding poem, and performed by a group of Brussels-based artists for a Western audience, the eerie sense of exploitation provoked by the piece itself becomes a lingering unspoken question.

The performance opens with light playing on a set of beige rectangle-shaped curtains that drape the back wall, as well as two string curtains descending like waterfalls on the left. A video is projected on them, initially ambiguous and raw in quality (like *cinéma vérité,* the shaking footage tell of a handheld video recording). We gradually recognize the scene: an open dirt road at night. Later we understand that the excursion takes place on the Namibian savannah. The music is meditative and serene. As it envelops the space, we perceive the dancer hidden behind the curtains. We only see her legs, her feet and parts of a scarf. She swirls at the spot, while the repetition of movements, accompanied by Thierrée's rhythmic strains of violin, creates a sense of ritualistic immersion.

As Michael steps forward she occasionally rearranges the curtains, straightening them or pulling them to the side. A scent of burning smoke sweeps through the theatre, evoking both discomfort and intrigue. As evocative objects – a double rectangle sand hourglass, arrows, and bowls – are placed and moved around the stage, the fragments of a story begin to take shape. Yet, the narrative is never linear. This is a performance of dispersed moments. The show-notes claim the piece tries to move "with what we cannot comprehend". The work is often more suggestive than assertive. Yet, moments of clarity occasionally disperse the mist.

## The scene proves a stark reminder of the colonial voyeurism inherent in the tourist experience.

At one point, Michael sings a jazzy tune, 'The Living Museum Blues', while vivid images of children hunters in traditional garbs are projected onto the backdrop, their bodies leaping across sandy landscapes. Here lies the crux of Michael's message: the stage becomes a living museum. The documentary recordings of her homeland are now transformed into a spectacle for curious tourists. When she remarks, "they just want to know and learn and help," the musician's bemused inquiry —"what?"— underscores the disconnect between intention and reality and places the whole performance in another light. This irony peaks as spectators peruse Michael's meticulously curated pricelist for "traditional activities" like hunting, bushwalking, or an activity day including an intriguing highlight like watching "the traditional doctor healing a patient". Yet, while the scene proves a stark reminder of the colonial voyeurism inherent in the tourist experience, I could not help but wonder if the audience, bathing in images of African tribal cultures from the plush seats of a venerable European theatre, do not themselves indulge a similar dynamic.

The jazz tune morphs into a furious crescendo. Bathed in crimson light with the sporadic fire bursting from the video backdrop, Michael crawls and contorts with an animalistic intensity. Amidst discordant notes and frenzied movements, her words —"She was more than tired, she was dead"— are shivering. She channels

the raw energy of a wounded beast, grappling with forces beyond her control.

In contrast to the frenetic conclusion of the jazz interlude, other scenes offer moments of serene introspection. Throughout the piece Thierrée uses different string instruments, clapping or using the instrument as percussion. Occasionally, a soundtrack adds pre-recorded voices from the video projector, or a variation of electronic beats. Here, the quality of movement takes centre stage. Her schooling from PARTS is evident, and fusing with her Southern African influences, it gives Michael a fascinating idiosyncratic movement vocabulary characterized by fluidity and precision, as she seamlessly transitions between sharp and flowing movements. Her hands are the focal point, tracing invisible paths in the air as she follows their lead with unwavering focus. With each gesture and dynamic rhythm, her body twists with a sense of controlled abandon.

In the final scene, Michael recites an epic fable about the daughter of the moon and the genesis of the world, where “animals have lost their voices”. Sitting in a rectangular space, surrounded by a projection of people engaging in traditional handcrafts, Michael attempts to tie together the disparate images of the past hour to a united, poetic whole: “She still knows who she is while the land is still there, alive, grounding, nourishing, preceding her.”

Michael embodies her fluid, hybrid identity with seamless, ambiguous precision. Yet, while the piece provides a sharp critique of the colonial voyeurism inherent in the tourist experience, lingering questions about the exploitation epitomised by the performance itself remain unanswered.