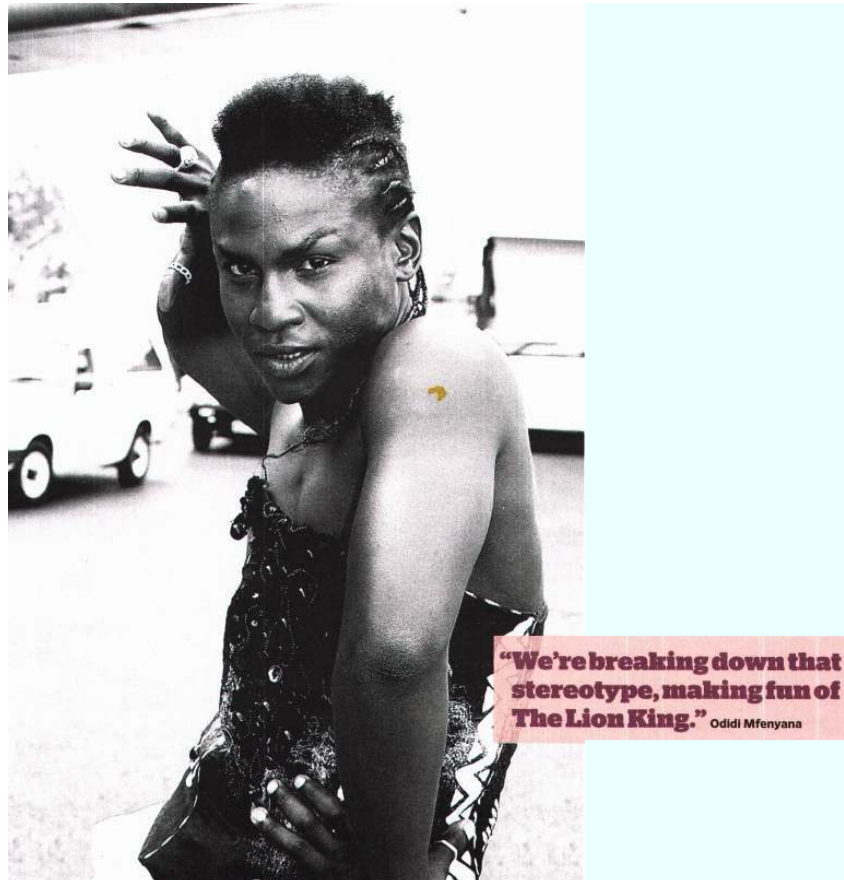




face2face Odidi Mfenyana



"We're breaking down that stereotype, making fun of **The Lion King.**"
Odidi Mfenyana

Divine Odidiva

He represents a new wave of South African performers. And as **Belle Taylor** discovers Odidi Mfenyana is shaking off the old stereotypes of post-apartheid Africa.

Picture: Aurore Vinot



“Our show is a bit of a tongue-in-cheek play on all the other shows that come from South Africa that show happy natives,” Mfenyana says with a laugh. “We’re breaking down that stereotype, making fun of The Lion King.”

Mfenyana grew up in Nyanga, one of Cape Town’s toughest townships, where unemployment stands at around 70 per cent. His father was an Anglican priest and Mfenyana and his family lived in the local rectory. His father’s position allowed him to attend a private Anglican school. Today, much of his work explores the melding of the two cultures in which he was raised, traditional African culture mixed with middle-class Western Anglican values.

“There is always that link between your traditional culture and your Western values and they always blend,” Mfenyana says. “There will be a slaughter of an animal for an event, a traditional event, but you still have the Victorian dress code at the meal, and there is a Victorian church service happening before you actually eat the meal and prayers. So there is a constant blending of the two all the time, which kind of gives Africa its own sensibility. That’s what I grew up in.”

A keen drama student in high school, he began professional work at age 15, doing small parts in theatre productions and local TV shows.

But it was a night out singing karaoke in 2001 that saw his performance career take off.

“Brett Bailey (director of House of the Holy Afro) kinda discovered me,” Mfenyana says. “He discovered me singing karaoke one night at a bar in Cape Town and said he wanted me to be in his play. Of course, I didn’t believe him. I thought it was a really clever pick-up line

and just ignored him,” he laughs.

“But thank God he persisted and ended up casting me in a show called Big Dada, which was a play that went to Europe. He wrote me into the show just so I could sing a show-stopper in the middle of it and gave me a name, Odidiva. That’s how the Odidiva drag character was born — reluctantly from my part.”

So he wasn’t a willing participant in the creation of his alter-ego? Mfenyana chuckles.

South Africa — according to actor, poet, singer, performance artist and drag queen Odidi Mfenyana — is happening.

It has a booming film and television industry, a burgeoning music scene, a vibrant youth culture and most importantly, top-quality celebrity spotting.

“Daniel Craig was shooting a movie set in LA but shot in Cape Town and there was a movie with Selma Hayek and Colin Farrell shot in Cape Town,” Mfenyana, 31, says with breathless enthusiasm. “We’ve had Leonardo DiCaprio here, we had Richard Gere and I think David Furnish tried to pick me up. It’s happening out here!”

Hollywood names aside, South Africa is producing exciting actors, musicians and artists in its own right. Mfenyana, a well-known Cape Town personality and performer, is set to bring some of South Africa’s “happening” to Perth when he performs in House of the Holy Afro at Becks Music Box as part of the Perth International Arts Festival.

Part theatre, part dance-party, part musical, House of the Holy Afro promises to be “uniquely African theatre” and vows to banish any stereotypes you have about what “uniquely African theatre” may be.



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"Put it this way, in 2001 he (Bailey) was like: 'I'm putting you in heels and hot pants', and I was like: 'Hmm, yeah, OK. Interesting'. I remember doing the fitting and oh my God! Everything my Dad told me, everything around the stereotype about what I was going to be, now it's going to happen. There's a man walking around in a dress! As a girl!"

Despite his initial reluctance, Odidiva has become something of a celebrity in South Africa. Mfenyana puts her success down to the fact that Odidiva sings live instead of lip-synching, as is the case in many drag shows.

Off stage, Mfenyana is a board member of Cape Town Pride, helps raise money for people with HIV, and recently did a televised public service

announcement as Odidiva calling for an end to violence and racism. He says it is important to remain involved in his community.

"Coming from the type of history we come from, we can't take our rights that were so hard fought-for lightly," Mfenyana says.

Mfenyana says he is looking forward to touring to Perth. "Ooh Perth, that should be interesting," he says delightedly. "There are lots of South Africans living in that town. It's like: 'Mm hmm, look what you're missing out on!'"

Obviously more than just good celebrity-spotting.

House of the Holy Afro is at Becks Music Box on February 26 and 27.



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