

# Writing the Elusive Narrative of Soweto-Based Community Theatre, 1984–1994

**Andile Xaba**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9628-9643>

University of South Africa

xabaa@unisa.ac.za

## Abstract

The focus of the article is on writing the history of community theatre, which was a popular avenue for artistic expression for a number of township playwrights. During the period 1984–1994, there was a flowering of the arts in Soweto. Numerous popular community plays were staged, but this has not been documented due to a lack of record-keeping by the playwrights and the absence of formal theatre structures for township-based playwrights. In contemporary writing, theatre received attention from newspapers, with Gibson Kente, Matsemela Manaka and Maishe Maponya being the most prominent playwrights. Because of their popularity in South Africa and esteem with international audiences, the stature of the three playwrights presents an opportunity to see how a history of Soweto community theatre may be written. This article proposes that memory studies facilitates the writing of a more comprehensive narrative because it enables the melding of various sources: newspaper articles, theatre programmes, private archives, and information and insights from interviewees. Halbwachs’s methodology allows for a discussion in which theory (memory studies) and practice (writing the narrative) present evidence that community theatre has contributed to the development of theatre in South Africa. Without discounting the significance of (written) history, Halbwachs foregrounds the importance of memory, which resides with “people still living,” as key to formulating a narrative of the past. This is pertinent to Soweto community theatre, since the insights from interviewees and various sources also help to re-examine the perceived limitations attached to the label “community theatre.”

**Keywords:** Gibson Kente; Matsemela Manaka; Maishe Maponya; Soweto community theatre; memory studies

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## Introduction

The contributions of Soweto community theatre in the 1980s and 1990s are insufficiently acknowledged in South African drama and theatre studies and in the history of South African culture more generally. This article aims to rectify this omission by providing a broader narrative of community theatre using memory studies as a theoretical approach and by suggesting a programme for further research. Gibson Kente, who is acknowledged in academic and popular circles as the “father of township theatre,” died in 2004. Kente was born a generation earlier than Matsemela Manaka and Maishe Maponya, and all three produced many plays. However, the majority of Kente’s plays were destroyed in a fire at his Soweto home, leaving only one script from the 35 he had written and staged. In contrast, Matsemela Manaka and Maishe Maponya published their plays, and most are preserved in print. There is no common, overarching narrative linking these three playwrights to their Soweto roots. Although they were not all born in Soweto, all three of them did live and work there during the period 1984 to 1994. They were committed to uplifting the community through their plays. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration the practical issue of preservation of materials, such as their plays, posters and theatre manifestos, where applicable. All three playwrights wanted to establish a literary tradition of written plays. Kente explained to Schaffer (2006) that all his plays were written (as opposed to workshopped, improvised or adhering to the oral tradition). There are also comprehensive collections of Manaka’s plays, namely *Beyond the Echoes of Soweto, Five Plays by Matsemela Manaka* (Davis 1997), as well as a collection of Maponya’s plays in *Doing Plays for a Change* (Maponya 1995).

A historical narrative of Sowetan theatre with a focus on these three playwrights has not yet been written. The first broad focal area of this paper provides a historical survey of the community theatre produced in Soweto in the period 1984 to 1994. It is important to consider the whole sociopolitical context of Soweto (as a microcosm of South Africa) during this period, because the theatre produced at this time addressed contemporary themes and topical issues. Furthermore, the means to produce the plays, the ways in which the actors were involved in the theatre groups, and the staging of performances were affected by the period’s sociopolitical instability. During the research process, it emerged that the sociopolitical context played a significant role in the creation and production of Sowetan community theatre. The 1980s were a tumultuous time in the township, which was characterised by politically motivated violence and crime that affected the community, including the functioning of theatre companies and the performance of plays. Actors in plays were arrested (as happened to Kente and his actors). Furthermore, Sibongile Khumalo (who was in Manaka’s plays) related that actors were also harassed by the South African Defence Force, the state’s special branch unit and the police. Additionally, the *Sowetan* newspaper of the era is replete with examples of various forms of social instability.

The second focal area expounds the above approach from the perspective of the people interviewed in this study. Most interviewees provided a first-hand account, analysis and interpretation of these community theatre plays. This cohort consisted of actors and colleagues who collaborated with one or more of the three playwrights over many years. In total, 14 in-depth interviews were conducted, producing personal accounts of Sowetan theatre that have not been recorded before. Maishe Maponya, the only one of the three playwrights still living when the study was conducted, was also interviewed (subsequently Maponya passed away on 29 July 2021). The interviewees who supplied information on Gibson Kente were Mabutho “Kid” Sithole, Kholofelo Kola, John Lata, Dumakude Mnembe and Darlington Michaels. For Matsemela Manaka, the interviewees were Ali Hlongwane, Sibongile Khumalo, McCoy Mrubata and Mostumi Makhene. Lastly for Maishe Maponya, the interviewees were Bennette Tlouana, Maile Maponya, Malcolm Purkey and Sibongile Nojila.

It was important to get information from these sources as, in the absence of an archive preserving the history of Sowetan community theatre, their memories are important in informing the writing of the historical narrative. The interviews offered insights into how the playwrights worked and described the way the sociopolitical situation contextualised the various plays. This information assisted in the writing of the historical narrative and the interpretation of the plays. Thus, collective memory is constructed out of the interaction between the written (documented) and the narrated (interviewees’) recollections.

## The Elusive Narrative of Soweto-Based Community Theatre

There have only been isolated studies on all three playwrights. Even more problematic is that as time passes, there are fewer people who have direct experience of their theatre, posing the danger of this vital form of art disappearing from the public memory of South Africans. Some of the impediments preventing the writing of a historical narrative of community theatre are suggested below. The sociopolitical instability caused by apartheid laws constrained the Soweto community. Therefore, the focus on politics by historians may have contributed to silencing the artistic side of life in Soweto during the 1980s and 1990s.

Another reason contributing to township playwrights not being seen as part of South African mainstream theatre is that academia seems to place a low value on community theatre. While this has not been explicitly stated, the fact that community theatre practitioners were performing in the township made the theatre easily accessible to the township audience, but it was difficult for media and audiences living in Johannesburg to attend performances. This is a consequence of apartheid-era racially based housing allocations and economic distribution. In the 1980s, the township was generally not safe for people living outside the township to visit, especially in the evening when some of the theatre performances were held. The lack of recreational (and theatre) facilities in the township may have made it hard for audiences and reviewers schooled in

mainstream theatre to see the theatre produced by township playwrights as being on par with theatre performed in the city.

### Recent Positionings of Kente, Manaka and Maponya

South African and internationally based scholars have written extensively about the three playwrights. Significantly, Hauptfleisch (1997) and Steadman (Hauptfleisch and Steadman 1984) include Kente, Manaka and Maponya in their survey of South African theatre. These writers classify various theatrical traditions that have developed in South Africa, one of them being “black theatre.” Other authors, among them Coplan (1985), Kerr (1995), Kruger (1999, 2020), Kavanagh (1981, 1985), Solberg (1999, 2003) and Middeke, Schnierer and Homann (2015), also discuss the importance of Kente, Manaka and Maponya in the development of South African theatre. Furthermore, Solberg’s *Bra Gib: Father of South Africa’s Township Theatre* (2011) and Kavanagh’s *A Contended Space: The Theatre of Gibson Mtutuzuli Kente* (2016) provide a more rounded portrait of Kente, as well as some commentary on his plays.

As is evident above, the writings on Kente, Manaka and Maponya have received sustained attention from scholars for over 40 years, and these analyses have provided useful insights on their plays and have also acted as a guide to ameliorate the absence of the playwrights’ own thoughts and archival material. It is informative to look at the contribution of the playwrights in more detail so that we can better see how memory studies can contribute to the writing of a more comprehensive narrative of Sowetan theatre. Hopefully this also demonstrates their contribution to South African theatre as a whole.

### Memory Studies as a Strategy to Formulate a Narrative on Sowetan Theatre

Halbwachs’s proposals offer a useful method to write a narrative on Sowetan community theatre. A student of Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Henri Bergson (1859–1941), Halbwachs was aware of Bergson’s “individualistic, psychological [and] subjectivist” approach to memory (Halbwachs 1980, 7). But he also drew on Durkheim’s sociological approach to social relations which proposes that there are collective (as opposed to individualistic) reciprocal interactions within society. Therefore, he drew parallels between these approaches. Ricoeur (2006, 120) posits that Halbwachs provided “an external gaze” on memory, which is interaction between an individual and “the testimony of others.”

Halbwachs’s contribution to memory studies was his proposition that memories are not situated in the brain only but are recalled by the person remembering through external means. Halbwachs (1992, 38) suggests that a person remembering is assisted by other people who were part of the event being recollected. Thus, fellow participants give the person remembering the “means to reconstruct” a memory. In *The Collective Memory* (1980), Halbwachs sets out his theory of memory, where, as Mary Douglas observes in

the introduction of the translated edition of the book, there are “no individual institutions or memories” but rather “social processes in remembering” (1980, 12). Considering the dispersed nature of memory studies, it is useful to draw together Halbwachs’s concepts on “individual and collective memory,” “historical and collective memory,” “time and collective memory,” and “space and collective memory.”

Jennifer Richards (2007, 21) notes that “recollection is a deliberate action; it is a ‘search’ entailing reflection on ‘time’ and the objects remembered through the orderly association of ideas and images.” The idea that recollections take the form of images in the mind and that memory “has an associative and visual character” (2007, 21) already implies that there is an underlying narrative in the process of remembering. Although Halbwachs did not specify these processes, they are implied in his theory. This aspect of collective memory assists in the writing of the narrative of Sowetan community theatre. Using collective memory recognises the importance of the individual memories of interviewees. As a conglomeration of interviews, their insights contribute towards a collective memory of the past, thus ensuring a more comprehensive historical narrative.

The interaction between the individual and the social framework is informed by several variables, some of these involving the expression of culture through commemorative events and cultural objects (for example, monuments) created in a society. Rossington (2007, 134) describes *collective memory* as involving “practices of remembrance [that] are shaped and reinforced by societies and cultures in which they occur.” In this way, we can incorporate the sociopolitical context of the time in the narrative, as it influenced Sowetan community theatre. The memories of the sociopolitical context are captured in the Sowetan newspapers of the era. Halbwachs’s recognition of the dynamic interaction between the individual memories (interviewees) and the social context (among others, the Sowetan newspapers) is therefore appropriate for this discussion. Commemorative events, for example the church services to mark the 16 June 1976 uprising, and work and school stoppages sometimes curtailed theatre performances. As part of collective memory, these events are part of the historical narrative of Sowetan theatre of the period.

Halbwachs’s theory of memory studies also outlines the interaction between an individual and the person’s social frameworks. He proposes that people who belong to the same social organisations, and live (or have lived) in the same town or country, share a common history and, indeed, share knowledge of cultural experiences. The contribution of interviewees is important as they had first-hand knowledge of Kente’s, Manaka’s and Maponya’s scriptwriting and rehearsal and training methods. The interviewees were part of the theatre groups belonging to each individual playwright. Moreover, the interviewees are part of the larger Soweto community.

Halbwachs’s input is regarded as seminal in that he introduced the concept of social frameworks to memory studies and outlined these in material social formations. Halbwachs’s theory is useful as it allows for an analysis that views an individual as belonging to more than one social grouping. For example, these may be church groups,

the family home, or the school. He also set out determinants of these social frameworks according to the times of attending church services, going to school and gathering for meals, among others. Halbwachs conducted a sociological study of social classes, and this informed his theoretical formulation of collective memory. He wrote: “One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories” (1992, 40). Thus, Halbwachs not only identified these two centres of memory (the individual and the group) but also emphasised that they have a reciprocal relationship.

Halbwachs found it necessary to distinguish between history and memory. He said that history is not part of collective memory because it resides with people who are no longer living. Yet, it is important to explore how the current generation is influenced by and how it interacts with its past. Halbwachs’s assertion here about the contribution of the current generation to memory is apt for this discussion in that there is a lacuna in terms of the written historical narrative of Sowetan theatre. It is the insights of the interviewees (the memories held by the current generation) that contributed to the writing of this historical narrative.

Halbwachs also holds that collective memory may be organised through time so that there is “collective representation of time” (1980, 88–89). Here, Halbwachs proposes that what is important to memory is not the fact that past events occurred in the past; nor does he emphasise the notion that subjects may remember the duration or length of time since past events occurred. Instead, his contribution is that collective memories are organised according to times at which social events occurred in people’s lives.

Another relevant aspect of collective memory is the way space can represent it. Halbwachs (1980, 158) emphasises the importance of physical spaces, as the shared use of space also demonstrates common usage by a community. It is through these collective social engagements (or events that happen within these specified frameworks) that people will have memories. As an example, Eyethu Cinema and the Orlando Donaldson Community Centre (DOCC), among many other venues, were key components of collective memory. In Halbwachsian terms, the buildings by themselves are not repositories of memory. Rather, it is the way in which the communities used the venues that contributes to collective memory. People remember their shared emotional reactions to the plays they saw at a community hall. Inscribed in their memories are also extraneous factors, for example, compromised ablution facilities, the presence of food vendors outside the performance venues, and other experiences linked to the time and place connected to their favourite plays.

## Kente, Manaka and Maponya as Main Figures of Sowetan Community Theatre

Memory studies helps to retrieve information about the past as well as to illuminate the trajectory of the development of South African theatre and the ways in which Soweto playwrights have contributed to social cohesion. There were approximately 20 active community playwrights operating in Soweto during the period under review. These include Sam Mhangwani, Peter Ngwenya, Stan Mhlongo, Butiza Ndlela and Sabata Sesui (of the Thabisong Youth Club), Willie “General” Tshaka, Lucky Shao, Doreen Mazibuko, Don Masenya, Ali Segoi, Sadumo Miya (of the People’s Cultural Organisation), Sabelo Nkosi, Nomazizi Williams and Boy Bangela (of the Zakheni Cultural Group). Some of these playwrights toured other South African townships, Southern Africa as well as Switzerland, Canada, North America and Europe. Primarily, these playwrights were active in community halls in Soweto. I term these playwrights “non-professional playwrights” not as an indication of inferior writing, directing or production values. The main difference between them and Kente, Manaka and Maponya is that the latter founded enduring theatre companies and enjoyed (sometimes limited) commercial success and were able to pay a salary to their actors. And they have had a lasting influence on the cultural life of Soweto.

The information below hopefully helps to quantify the three playwrights’ contribution to South African theatre, thereby also emphasising the validity of theory (Halbwachs) and practice (writing a historical narrative).

There is considerable evidence that Gibson Kente, Matsemela Manaka and Maishe Maponya contributed significantly to South African theatre. There are 35 plays that are attributed to Kente, and he trained several actors that are still active on South African television. One script is published in Kavanagh’s *South African People’s Plays: On phola hi*. Kente turned two of the theatre scripts into television dramas for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), meaning that there is a record of only three plays from which a script can be compiled. His most popular plays include *How Long* (1973), *No Peace in the Family* (1984), *We Mame!* (1987), *Sekunjalo—The Naked Hour* (1988), *Give a Child* (1989) and *Mgewu Ndini* (1990). These were performed in community halls and were enthusiastically supported by Soweto audiences.

Matsemela Manaka’s best-known plays include *Children of Asazi* (1984), *Koma* (1986), *Toro—The African Dream* (1987), *Goree* (1989) and *Ekhaya Museum over Soweto* (1991). Maishe Maponya’s best known plays are *Umongikazi—The Nurse* (1983), *Dirty Work* (1984) and *Gangsters* (1984). Manaka and Maponya were proponents of the Black Consciousness ideology. Although they lived in Soweto, they adopted different means of expressing their creativity in theatre, in this way presenting different facets of Soweto through their plays. They adhered to different political orientations, yet their common goal was to foster the betterment of their community through theatre.

That the three playwrights are the main figures of Sowetan community theatre is underscored by attention from scholars, among them Kavanagh (1981, 1985, 2016), Steadman (1995), Hauptfleisch (1997), Davis (1997) and Kruger (2020). The writers offer a point from which to pivot into memory studies, as is hopefully demonstrated in this discussion. However, the voice that has been absent from the dialogue on South African theatre is that of the *Sowetan* newspaper. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Elliot Makhaya and Victor Metsoamere reviewed the plays and wrote about Kente's, Manaka's and Maponya's activities in Soweto. They provided useful descriptions of the plays and as Sowetans, their writings also illustrate the importance of audience participation during performances. Therefore, practically, melding contemporary commentary with academic discussion on the plays (some of which was written long after the plays were performed) helps to give a longitudinal view on theatre developments.

Collective memory differentiates memories that reside with people who are still living from history, which is primarily captured in historical texts. All the actors reflected on their direct interaction with the playwrights. Their insights contributed to the writing of the narrative in various ways. Senior actors shared memories of the 1970s, while younger actors related memories situated in the 1980s and 1990s. However, their memories did not necessarily adhere to strict historical boundaries. They reflected on the performances of the plays and also on the sociopolitical context of the period. Each of the playwrights in question influenced other playwrights in Soweto. In Halbwachs's terms, the memories of the interviewees are a reconstruction, and it is an analysis of these insights that enables the writing of a historical narrative.

Halbwachs proposed that collective memory may be organised according to time. To this end, we can look at the performance times of Kente's, Manaka's and Maponya's plays and investigate how this aspect might inform the writing of a historical narrative. In Soweto, there was no specified time for performances to take place, save to say that performances were mostly held on Friday and Saturday nights. Kente's plays were also performed on weekday afternoons for school children. In their recollections, interviewees also framed their memories of Kente's, Manaka's and Maponya's plays as having occurred a "long time ago." The temporal distance, from the democratic era (the time of the interviews) to the period under review, also prompted a discussion on sociopolitical changes in relation to Sowetan theatre. Additionally, the Halbwachsian concept of space reinforces the importance of Soweto as a cultural space as all three playwrights had premises in the township.

## A (Partial) Narrative of Sowetan Community Theatre

This discussion sets out to write a narrative of the history of Sowetan community theatre in terms of Halbwachs's memory studies. It is evident that a multipronged approach is necessary to write this narrative, with a focus on the contributions of Gibson Kente, Matsemela Manaka and Maishe Maponya. The purpose is to see how writing on their plays, including archival materials (inter alia the *Sowetan* archive, the PACT Archive,

and Ali Hlongwane’s archive), and interviews with them and their associates contribute to a more comprehensive narrative of Sowetan community theatre during the period 1984 to 1994. Therefore, the memories of the interviewees and other archival materials,<sup>1</sup> namely, posters, theatre programmes and photographs of past productions, have enriched a narrative of the past.

## Collective Memory and Writing a Narrative of Soweto Community Theatre

One of the reasons memory studies has become prevalent in academia is that it allows marginal groups of people in society to bring to the fore their history and to tell their stories using their own voices. As Barry Schwartz (2016, 19) notes, “there can be no history, without memory.” Therefore, collective memory has a role to help knit together (or to assist in the construction of) various strands of information to form a more comprehensive narrative. When speaking of a specific place, for example Soweto, it is important to bring to the fore the memories of people who were in Soweto and who had seen these plays within the sociopolitical context of the time. In this discussion, this cohort is exemplified by the articles in the *Sowetan* (primarily written by the journalists Elliot Makhaya and Victor Metsoamere), the interviewees as well as the researcher, who has had first-hand interactions with Kente, Maponya and other Soweto-based playwrights. It is important to position this experience from the vantage point of people who have lived in Soweto. In this article, collective memories convey shared experiences and values that help to frame the narration of Soweto community theatre.

This approach presents an increasing trend in memory studies as there are several examples in which collective memories of a social group assist to define a historical narrative of that social group. The importance of claiming an original voice is evident in the way in which collective memories have assisted to define Jewish memory discourse and Jewish identity, to name two methods that have been appropriated to position memory studies (Rossington and Whitehead 2007). Anne Whitehead (2007, 158–60) writes of memory discourse as being influenced by Jewish “beliefs and attitudes.” She argues that collective memory has been incorporated in Jewish memory discourse as the memories of people within that society bind them as a social group. It is through their memories that the society expresses its “common origin, a shared past and a shared destiny.” Additionally, space or territory (as has been proposed by Halbwachs) is also important in Jewish memory discourse and identity, as exemplified by the attachment to the land of Israel in discourse about Jewish identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Keuris and Krüger’s articles “South African Drama and Theatre Heritage (Part I): A Map of Where We Find Ourselves” (2014a) and “South African Drama and Theatre Heritage (Part II): What Does the Future Hold?” (2014b) identify the limitations facing the archiving of theatre materials in South Africa, and advance possible solutions in this regard. A key initiative, the SA Drama and Theatre Heritage Project, was launched at Unisa in 2012.

Chedgzoy (2007, 216) argues that in historical narratives, different stories from a number of interest groups within a society “compete for a place in history,” with the result that women’s voices and feminist viewpoints have been subsumed by masculine voices in the shaping of a “culture of memory.” As an example, she notes that recent key texts in the field of memory studies, namely Raphael Samuel’s *Theatres of Memory* series and Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de memoire*, give privilege to what men have said and done as an unchallenged source of historical narratives. Chedgzoy (2007, 217) also makes the illuminating point that feminist scholarship is “itself a work of memory that has retrieved many women from oblivion as historical actors and recorders.” In this way, gender plays an important role in how recollections are shaped within a narrative of a society. Thus, questions concerning who remembers and who recounts the recollections are imbued with power, because the person writing the narrative of the past has a say in how past events are remembered. In a similar fashion, this article argues for the writing of a Soweto theatre historical narrative from the perspective of people who have lived there.

This article employs Halbwachs’s approach as it proposes a methodology for collective memory that prioritises remembrances with a view to synthesising them into a narrative. Halbwachs’s theory de-emphasises ideological imperatives as the basis for writing a historical narrative. This is a suitable approach for this study because it avoids a bias that could have overshadowed the different ideological beliefs that were expressed by Kente, Manaka and Maponya. The playwrights’ ideological beliefs are represented in this paper as part of analysing the themes they explored in their plays.

Halbwachs’s manner of separating history from memory also explains the way in which collective memory gives continuity, without necessarily eliminating gaps, to a historical narrative, and this helps to present a more comprehensive narrative of events. Following Halbwachs’s theory, the most informative way to relate a narrative of the past is to include the memories of interviewees because, as living members of the Soweto community, they are part of the *cadres sociaux* or social framework that enables collective memory. In relation to their memories, it is important to point out that they share “thoughts” or common consciousness with the people with whom they interacted in shared experiences of the past and with those who have an interest in Sowetan theatre in the present day.

Part of the social framework is the way they recall the *period of time* when they were active in theatre, and their thoughts on the specific geographical locations that were significant in the development of Sowetan theatre. As Schwartz and Schuman (2005, 183) point out, Halbwachs’s theory of collective memory enables one to gain a fuller meaning (of the playwrights and their plays) because it considers the views of ordinary people, in this case, the interviewees, in contrast to historians. Halbwachs recognised that the past is experienced by people engaged in social processes, therefore the social framework in which they live and interact on a day-to-day basis is important in their recollections. Halbwachs points out that memories are a reconstruction of the past and

in this study, written, published and archival material and oral recollections have allowed me to see Kente's, Manaka's and Maponya's contributions not only from the perspective of individual interviewees, but also from the view of their social interactions as part of the wider community of Soweto (and of South Africa). He also adds that individuals belong to several social groups and their recollections reflect their multifaced experiences as well as their shared beliefs, "myths, traditions and customs" (Gedi and Elam 1996, 35). Within this social framework, the interviewees have experiences of interacting as members of the same theatre group, with Kente, Manaka and Maponya, as well as with audiences, journalists and other township arts practitioners. Their recollections include beliefs, values and social practices in, for example, the theatre, creative writing, acting, singing, dancing, fine arts and poetry fields, as memories that have been passed down to them by the preceding generation of theatre practitioners and their community networks.

In this paper, the social framework includes the written memories of community theatre in Soweto as captured in the *Sowetan* (1984–1994) and archival material that includes scripts, posters, theatre programmes and photographs from Kente's, Manaka's and Maponya's plays. All these elements provide insight into the contributions made by these playwrights and thus assist in the writing of a narrative such as this. For instance, interviewees talking about Kente provided information on the playwright's systematic theatre training method, which he never recorded in written form. Kholofelo Kola and Dumakude Mmembe expounded on the cast's arrest during the tour of *Sekunjalo* and this supplemented information that was reported in the *Sowetan* newspaper. Memory studies enables an understanding to illustrate that although Kente wrote, directed and produced his plays, his success in township communities was sustained by mutually beneficial relationships between them and his work. His plays, therefore, actively promoted social cohesion in these communities. Furthermore, the information from the archives and from interviews with people with whom Kente worked assists in reassessing Kente's legacy and coming to the understanding that his plays were more than simply a vehicle providing entertainment and spectacle to the Soweto community. Collective memory makes it possible to defend his contribution to South African theatre as a whole. Halbwachs's theory of collective memory has shown that Kente created an artistic community in the townships that sustained not only his own company and actors, but also small-scale traders supporting the arts, such as seamstresses and food vendors.

Halbwachs's theory that collective memory is facilitated by a social framework has also enabled the researcher to gain insight into Manaka's and Maponya's contributions. Manaka (and his colleagues at the Funda Arts Centre) developed and left behind a substantial archive consisting of theatre programmes, concept documents on their approach to acting and theatre at Funda, annual reports, press releases and paintings and scripts. As he was also active as an editor at the literary magazine, *Staffrider*, Manaka purposefully developed a literary tradition that inspired his students at Funda. Another insight is that Manaka, as well as Kente, developed theatre that was concerned not only with resisting apartheid, but also with reflecting the aesthetics of Pan-African (in terms

of shared dance and music tropes and poetic forms of expression) and Africanist (in terms of the economic self-sufficiency of Africans and Black Consciousness ideology) perspectives. Specific to Manaka is that he advanced African spiritualism while promoting intra-continental solidarity in his plays. That their influence is enduring is particularly apparent in the productions *Goree—A Tribute to Matsemela Manaka* (2002) and *The Gibson Kente Music Tribute* (2017), the revival of *How Long* (2018) and in the reissuing of *How Long—The Album* (2018).

The application of Halbwachs's collective memory has also shown that both Kente and Manaka influenced other artists who later formed their own theatre companies. In the case of Kente, direct offshoots from his theatre company were the Melisizwe Community Theatre and a similar group that called themselves the "Ex-Kente Players." Kente was also an inspiration to young, non-professional township playwrights in the 1980s and early 1990s. As for Manaka, he enjoyed a special rapport with colleagues Sibongile Khumalo, Sphiwe Khumalo and Mostumi Makhene, and with his students Ali Hlongwane and Job Kubatsi, and helped to solidify the commitment to Pan-Africanism in their works. A different aspect to the contributions by Kente and Manaka is that it can be said that Maponya's plays offer an unambiguous illustration of why it is important to take cognisance of the prevailing class consciousness in the community when analysing Sowetan theatre.

## The Interviewees

One of the most critical insights that has emerged from the methodology of memory studies has been the information provided by the interviewees. The actors in Gibson Kente's plays provided valuable information on how Kente managed his theatrical company as well as recollecting dialogue and songs from Kente's important productions. The memories of the actors, who are in their senior years, have not been brought into a comprehensive narrative of township experiences of the past before this endeavour. They provided information that challenges the argument that Kente's plays were primarily about entertainment and that the playwright devised plays only according to a commercial imperative. Most of the actors Kente trained (even those not interviewed) are still active in the arts.

Indeed, the information captured during research indicates that an archival research project focusing on Soweto playwrights is a viable one, as there is much material still to analyse and interpret. The researcher's interaction with the interviewees was initiated from a place of shared cultural memory of Soweto and of playwrights who were active in the township. As Assmann (2011, 11–16) observes, culture engenders a feeling of community and shared identity. During the interviews, having similar values as the interviewees allowed the researcher to prompt discussions arising from his own knowledge and lived experience of these plays and playwrights. This underlined Halbwachs's belief that social engagements occupy a central role in collective memory. Having grown up in Soweto, the researcher has vivid memories of Kente's plays and an awareness that in the 1980s (as well as previously and beyond), his name invoked

admiration within all strata of the Soweto community. As is evident in the literature surveys, the plays of Kente, as well as those of Manaka and Maponya, still attract scholarly enquiry and continue to inspire a new generation of South African playwrights.

The interviewees on Manaka and Maponya were considerably younger than Kente's actors. This is because Kente was from an earlier generation of playwrights. Similar to the playwrights, they had adopted Black Consciousness as an ideology that informed their belief systems, as well as their own theatre-making. This commitment generally persisted into the democratic era in South Africa. Most of Manaka's and Maponya's colleagues had long stopped being active as artists, though they maintained an interest in the arts and politics. The exceptions were Sibongile Khumalo, who had been active as a singer, and Maishe Maponya, who continued to work as a drama lecturer, playwright, poet and arts activist. Perhaps a longer narrative is opportune, as both expressed during the interviews the intention to collaborate with a writer in future to capture their unique experiences. Unfortunately, both passed away in 2021 and had not recorded in written form their memoirs.

The interview with Ali Hlongwane, who collaborated with Manaka during the playwright's creative period in the early to mid-1980s, illustrated the importance of the archive to an understanding and interpretation of Manaka's plays. In one example, his memories (what he narrated to me and the archival material he has collected) provided valuable insights into the workings of Manaka's rural theatre programme. None of the written reports in the 1980s speak of the challenges the actors faced when based in rural communities during the genesis of their plays. Challenges resulting from the unstable political climate were a result of suspicious community members who were apprehensive about participating in plays with an anti-government message. The Funda Centre personnel (who conducted the projects) also experienced generosity from the community, as they lived with local families during the development of the plays. The development of a rural play could take up to three months. Hlongwane's vast archive requires an institutional home, where it may be presented in its fullness to a wider community of scholars and the public in general.

One of the insights gained from interviewees on Maishe Maponya concerns the playwright's complete trust in the rehearsal process as important in enriching his initial text when writing a play. Specifically, Maile Maponya revealed that at times actors improvised dialogue while on stage; Maponya himself gave credit to John Maytham, saying that the actor contributed much of the dialogue of the character Hannekom in *Dirty Work*, a one-character play. This information assists one in understanding the playwright's process and suggests that Maponya's plays employed elements of polyvocality to portray the contemporary South African sociopolitical context. Indeed, there is much information contained in the interviews that warrants further analysis in the future. Hopefully, this discussion serves as a starting point in which a basic narrative of the history of Sowetan community theatre is established.

## Conclusion

In revisiting the central endeavour of this discussion, namely, to find a method that facilitates the writing of a more comprehensive narrative of Sowetan community theatre than has been done previously, it is opportune to take cognisance of the totality of the interviewees' inputs. Underlying their comments was a disquiet that in the democratic era there are no plans or innovations on the horizon to revitalise the once-thriving theatre practice in Soweto. Below, their thoughts as recommendations are reformulated for future action on Sowetan community theatre:

(1) That a research project or study group be established that looks at the playwrights who have played a role in Soweto and to outline their contributions to South African theatre.

(2) That the research group approach the national, provincial and local governments and the private sector with the proposal that a theatre heritage route be established in Soweto, to recognise the contribution made by Kente, Manaka and Maponya to the vibrant culture and economy of Soweto during the 1980s and 1990s. Although this study focuses on Soweto, the playwrights have a national significance. One can link such an endeavour to include more contemporary playwrights and other theatre practitioners, too.

(3) That the research group begin the process of developing special plans and programmes to revive community theatre in the township. Ultimately, managing these plans will be the responsibility of the provincial arts and culture government department. Therefore, it is important to explore ways of collaborating with provincial and local government structures. This project will hopefully support recent developments that are already in place, namely, the building of the Soweto Theatre and the redevelopment of the Jabulani Amphitheatre (in the past a popular venue for music and traditional dance performances in the township).

(4) Another recommendation is to look at the feasibility of archiving theatre material by Soweto playwrights in a theatre museum that would be based in the township. This archive may be linked to the Soweto Theatre in Jabulani, for example.

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