

» Theatre

Provocative satire on failing manhood premieres tonight

ON STAGE 'The Urge' tackles delicate issue of erectile dysfunction with empathy and humour

BY MARGARETTA WA GACHERU

Tonight is the long-awaited return not just of the Nairobi City Players, albeit in the form of a brand new theatre troupe that claims the name of a now-moribund amateur acting company.

It is also the return to the Nairobi stage of the dynamic duo of Odingo Hawi directing Steenie Njoroge in Dr JPR Ochieng-Odero's brilliantly disturbing but highly entertaining satire on that peculiarly male condition commonly known as Erectile Dysfunction (ED).

The show's entitled *The Urge* and it makes its world premiere tonight through Sunday evening at Alliance Francaise.

It is a one-man production although Steenie, who plays Kamang'a Solo, speaks frequently to his anatomical "friend" who some call Binaisah, others call him Ngongi while others simply name him my "member", my "package" or just my manhood!

In any case, the show unveiled the tabooed topic that men normally wouldn't disclose in public (which is probably why NCP recommends the play for "a mature audience.") But Kamang'a, who is a middle aged man, talks frankly with Binaisah about the problem that apparently confronts a multitude of men, be they African, European or Asian, I am told.

It's got to be a good laugh as Steenie strikes the perfect pitch, making us empathise, pity and also snicker at all of Kamang'a's problems which come to us in multiple forms—everything from



Steenie Njoroge stars as Kamang'a Solo in new JPR Ochieng-Odero satire, 'The Urge'.

flashbacks to song to storytelling that contains both humour and pathos, humiliation and dire dreams of murder and even suicide.

Another reason *The Urge* is bound to be good is because Odingo and Steenie have shared theatrical chemistry for many years. They have also worked together with a number of theatre giants, everyone from the late great director-playwright John Ruganda, Sidede Onyulo, Stella Muka, Jacob Otieno and Wakanyote Njuguna.



Lucille (Trizah Wahinya), Doris (Hilda Nyambura) and Sam (Gibson Ndaiga) in Phoenix Players' 'Cemetery Club'.

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Meanwhile, Phoenix Players do not try to "indigenous" their current production of *The Cemetery Club* by Ivan Menchill which is wise since the premise of the play is quite "un-Kenyan."

It is the sort of show that I would call a drama with brilliant comedic elements mostly provided by Trizah Wahinya who plays Lucille, one of three widows who constitute the *Cemetery Club*.

The trio are long-time friends (including Michele Nyambura playing Ida and Hilda Nyambura as Doris) whose bonds have been strengthened since all three have lost their husbands in the last few years.

But those bonds aren't based solely on their all being widows. It is also because they all believe they can speak to their spouses whenever they visit their graves.

Whether they really do is not clear; but they all find some solace in meeting up once a month at Ida's place and then going to visit their spouses' graves.

But besides their monthly cemetery stops, their "club membership" is also based on their long-standing friendship. That becomes clear once they bump into Sam (Gibson Ndaiga), a widower who also "visits" his deceased wife regularly at the cemetery. It is Lucille who literally throws herself at Sam, but his interest is with Ida who initially looks like a "plain Jane" until she realises Sam is interested her and then her behaviour changes dramatically. She not only spruces up her wardrobe; she even gets a new hairdo.

But what is most troubling about this new twosome to Doris (the most grief-stricken of the three) is that Ida intends to

disengage from their "club" since she does not feel she can be "involved" with two men at once, one living, the other dead!

Lucille's motive for wanting to nix the growing intimacy between Ida and Sam is because she still holds out hope for getting with him herself.

Either way, the two women are allied in their efforts to kill the blossoming courtship. So they secretly take Sam aside and lie about Ida's feelings for him.

They recommend that he not take her to their friend Salma's umpteenth wedding; instead he should take them all together to the event. He's disappointed but agrees and even invites another woman Mildred (Margaret Karanja) to go with him. This of course devastates Ida who does not have a clue what her friends have done to her.

It is only after the wedding when they are all tipsy and back at Ida's place that Doris spills the beans. The scene gets ugly after that as Ida accuses both her friends of having selfish motives. That's not the end of the story but I refuse to be a spoiler and give it away. All I'll say is that the ending is bitter sweet and the acting is wonderfully emotive as the trio share both belly laughs and bitter tears.

Finally, Heartstrings opens next Friday night, November 6 in *It Wasn't Me* at Alliance Francaise but just through Sunday night.

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Trio of painters' works occupy all the walls at Karen Country Club

BY MARGARETTA WA GACHERU

Fresh from her fourth successful show in Beijing, Geraldine Robarts has teamed up with two Kenyan artists and one scientist to mount her current exhibition of paintings at Karen Country Club entitled *Art from the Heart*.

Gabriela Gakuo is a former student of Geraldine when she taught fine art at Kenyatta University in the late 70s, and Liz Kirui is a lawyer and self-taught painter who hopes to devote herself to painting full-time sometime soon.

In the meantime, the works of all three artists take up two floors, several rooms and high-ceiling walkways at Karen Club, a space that affords them a remarkable amount of wall space for hanging their luminous art.



Gabriela Gakuo's "Beneath the Blue" at Karen Country Club. MARGARETTA WA GACHERU.

The scientist and former Group Technical Director at Nation Media Group, Mike Fairhead, has according to Geraldine, also contributed tremendously to the exhibition.

In all modesty, Mr Fairhead claims he has had little to do with the actual painting, but both in terms of the materials used and the concepts conveyed in Geraldine's art, his modesty is unfounded.

For instance, she doubts she would have thought to scatter Swarovsky crystals atop her multi-layered oil paintings despite her frequent use of uncommon materials such as resin from France and gold leaf flex, both of which can be seen in paintings like *Cosmic Energy*, *The Heart of the Matter* and *The Universe Expanding*.

"The crystals were Mike's idea," confessed Geraldine who further concedes that her partner of 20 years has not just gotten her reading his copies of *The New Scientist*. He also regales her with stories about the universe and cosmic energy, themes that show up in her current collection. Nonetheless, Geraldine's eclectic style shows itself in other works

like her wonderfully atmospheric portraits of oceanic mood shifts and celestial blue skies.

She also has one luminous family scene of Elephants (also layered in oils, resin, gold leaf and crystals), as if to pay attention to the First Lady, Margaret Kenyatta's concern for saving Kenya's Elephants. Mrs Kenyatta opened their exhibition late last week, when she shared another one of her key concerns—that of raising the standard of care for children with cancer at Kenyatta National Hospital.

The three artists had already committed themselves to sharing any funds raised during their show with the Children with Cancer charity, of which Mrs Kenyatta is a patron. Unfortunately, by mounting their art in such an exclusive space as the private country club, the public at large haven't had easy access to view the exhibition.