

# The evolution of love

Anthea Buys

In Grahamstown, audiences vote with their feet. They come and go mid-performance as if, for the 10 days of the National Arts Festival, theatre etiquette — even plain old human etiquette — is on hold.

So it surprised me that only two audience members walked out of the opening performance of Steven Cohen's *Cradle of Humankind*. And that was before the footage of the giant fish-mouthing anus singing *Die Stem van Suid Afrika*.

*Cradle of Humankind* is not shocking in the way that South African audiences might expect it to be, based on recollections of some of Cohen's earlier work. The anus shot is the only conventionally pornographic moment.

However, as a hybrid of dance, time-based installation and performance art, the work is aesthetically and ethically challenging. At times it seems glacially slow compared with the fodder of fast-paced action that is served up in stage performances at the festival. And, of course, it stars 91-year-old Nomsa Dhlamini, Cohen's childhood caregiver and his mother's former domestic worker.

These two qualities are the grounds for some gripes about the work that might say more about the tastes and sensitivities of the Main Festival audiences — for the most part, white, middle-class, educated people who will return home to domestic workers — than about the work itself.

Some people find it boring and others take issue with Dhlamini's participation in the performance, which they find exploitative. The grippers are offset by adoring though, and *Cradle of Humankind* incited two-thirds of the opening night's audience to a teary standing ovation. It has been 25 years since Cohen

was last at the National Arts Festival and seven since his last performance in South Africa, and his brief return from his current home in Lille, France, is very welcome.

The piece was inspired by the palaeontologically rich area in northern Gauteng that has been dubbed the Cradle of Humankind. According to evolutionary scientists, this is the place where humans graduated from apedom millions of years ago.

"It was supposed to be a work about evolution," Cohen said in an interview following its presentation in Annecy, France, in 2011, "but it just turned out to be a work about love".

*Cradle of Humankind* is a tribute to Dhlamini, whom Cohen regards and treats as a mother in real life. It is also a heartbreaking admission of his complicity in her oppression through apartheid South Africa's system of domestic employment in white households for men and women of colour.

In the opening scene of the performance Dhlamini discovers Cohen trying to escape an egg-like sphere. With a bow and a quiver of arrows, and not much else, she evokes the Khoisan, Southern Africa's first people. She helps him by lifting the bubble over his head and freeing him. He is tiny, barefoot and vulnerable — a newborn — and she has birthed him.

As his character grows, he embarks on a civilising mission, playing Western music on a wind-up gramophone and making Dhlamini measure herself against an impossibly tall ruler. This process culminates in a later scene, in which Cohen opens a child-sized coffin and takes from it a pair of prosthetic animal paws, which he affixes to Dhlamini's hands. She slowly locks her new paws in heavy manacles and shows her off to the audience. It is a gut-wrenching moment after the intimacy they have established, even though this inti-



Family affair: Steven Cohen and Nomsa Dhlamini in *Cradle of Humankind*. Photos: Mario Todeschini

white people, cannot but be fraught with associations with slavery and colonial European curiosity shows.

This discourse has not evolved, whereas the manifestations of racism and sexism in the world have. In lacking a sanctioned way to speak about more recent versions of interpersonal prejudice, we tend to manipulate these in line with the postcolonial payoff lines we know.

Cohen and Dhlamini provide hope for us beyond these ethical knots. Towards the end of the piece, both emerge on stage as strange part-human, part-animal creatures, shot of the political baggage that seemed to lead them to a dead end. They are the same now, and wander about the stage, holding hands, talking and looking at the world around them.

It is an Edenic fantasy, and does not provide any clear solutions. However, it suggests that in reimagining our relationships with others — and particularly all those we think of as "other" — we can move beyond pain and guilt and find love.

macy was inequitable from the start.

A simplistic, but likely, criticism of Dhlamini's performance is that she is reduced to a stereotypical "mammy" figure, a slave-mother who exists to nourish, validate and ultimately be spurned by the object of her care. Her bare breasts, which droop and rest on her glowing tutu later in the performance, trigger this association, but in a contemporary South African context, their exposure represents a lot more as well.

As in the film *Maid in South Africa* (2005), in which Dhlamini cleans

a house while stripping down to a comically kinky outfit, she is an object of both desire and subservience. The exposure of Dhlamini's breasts makes her age, her years of mothering and her co-option into a "pornography" of identities in post-apartheid South Africa unavoidably plain.

Another difficulty, which is consciously raised in the piece, is Dhlamini and Cohen's racial difference. Postcolonial criticism teaches us that the representation of black women's bodies, particularly by