

# Multi-Disciplinary Performance Marks Heritage Day in South Africa

“Reuben T. Caluza – The B-Side” thrilled Johannesburg with a mix of nuances.

BY MELODY EMMET OCTOBER 16, 2023



REUBEN T. CALUZA THE B-SIDE

In celebration of Heritage Day on Sept. 24, a chilled, euphoric, eclectic crowd of Johannesburgers crowded into the John Kani Theatre at the Market Centre Precinct for two performances of the multi-media production, “*Reuben T. Caluza – The B-Side*” adapted for stage by Khayelihle Dominique Gumede.

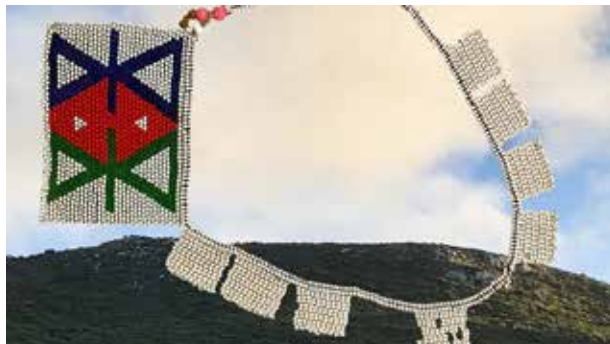
The reinterpretation of [songs](#) by South African composer *Reuben T. Caluza*, first recorded in London in 1930 for the album “**The Double Quartet**,” revives a slice of South Africa’s musical history. Although he has been referred to as “one of South Africa’s most accomplished composers,” Caluza has largely been lost to South Africans today. This undoubtedly was due to the historical devaluing of black artists.



#### *Oxford Bags*

In a multi-media amalgamation including performance, orchestral arrangements, song and film, the theatre production of “*Reuben T. Caluza – The B-Side*” invites reflection on the complexities of South Africa’s colonial past and simultaneously resonates with South Africans today. Familiar themes: migrant labor, race, The Land Act of 1913, Joburg city life, segregation, liquor, police, jail, love, and loss are part of the mix.

“**Ingoduzo R**”, a song about a migrant worker who leaves his fiancée behind in a rural area in search of a better life in the city is one of many songs that could have been written today. The lyrics warn of the dangers of abandoning true love and getting lost in a world of liquor, jealousy, crime and ultimately ending up in jail.



#### *Ingoduzo*

The visual backdrop to the film incorporates images of Zulu ‘love letters’ – beadwork, still popular today, in which the colors of the beads convey messages of purity, cleanliness and true love.

“It was striking how much of the text that Caluza worked on was still very relevant today,” singer and composer Tshegofatso Moeng, who conducts the performance says. “It was just a no-brainer when we started digging into this guy’s archives. He was dealing with topical issues, often in a very smart way because the music itself was hymn-like but the subject matter was often difficult and deep and incorporated something like protest.”



*Tshegofatso Moeng*

The Heritage Day performances go back to a pioneering initiative by internationally acclaimed composer Philip Miller. During the Covid-19 lockdown pandemic in 2020-2021, Miller was looking for a way to assist “his musical family” who were unable to generate an income. He hoped that by rearranging Caluza’s song “Influenza 1918” and sharing it on social media, he would raise awareness and financial support for musicians he had worked with over many years.

The [song](#) is a lament of the Spanish flu outbreak in 1918 in which about 300,000 South Africans died. There were obvious parallels with the human experience of isolation, pain, loss, grief, and economic hardship during Covid 19, as well as in the political response to the pandemic and the consequences of the socio-economic inequalities.



*ILandAct*

Moeng’s plans to pursue an operatic career in Germany were curtailed by the pandemic. He and Miller began to work together virtually sharing ideas about arrangements and orchestration. The collaboration evolved organically over a WhatsApp group joined by Rio based Brazilian video designer, Marcos Martins.

There was a lot of exchanging of scores back and forth and then when it came to actually choosing the music, the singers themselves were very much involved.

The singers and musicians were asked to [record](#) images of what they were doing during lockdown on their cell phones. They sent back images of people looking through a window, standing on an empty balcony, empty streets, children playing, or just sitting around doing nothing.



### *Influenza*

“In the early days, before we actually went to the studio to record the album, everything that was put on line was done over cell phones. The singers would record themselves at home and we would receive those cell phone recordings and put them together to make the song using software. Then Marcus would get that from us, and he would create a video, ’Moeng says.

“Philip sent me fragments of films that the singers themselves had recorded on cell phones with very low resolution,” Martins explains. “I started enlarging them, colorizing them, saturating the color.” This gave rise to a film language that became the basis or the **films** for all the songs and a practice of using material that was easily accessible.



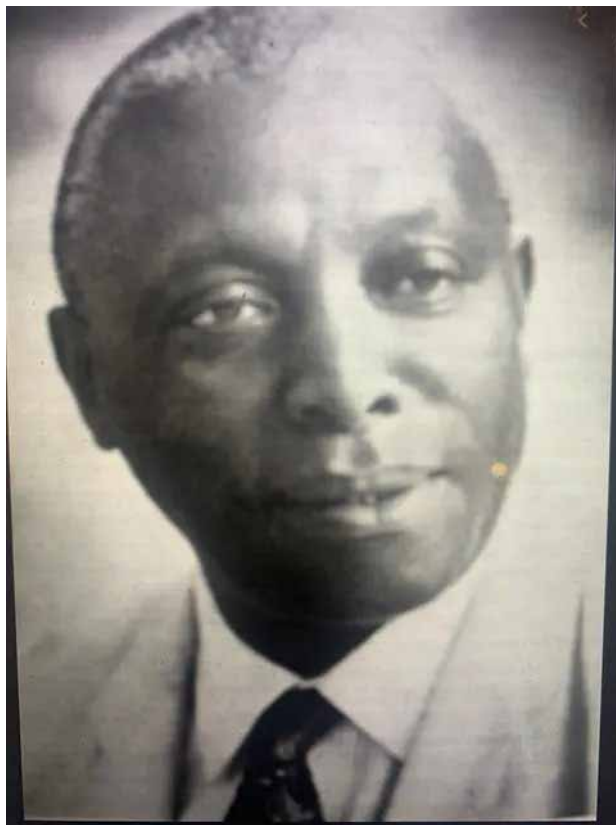
### *Rickshaw*

A video artist, graphic and interactive designer and a professor at the School of Industrial Design of the State University of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, Martins completed his master’s degree at the School of Visual Arts, New York, and his doctorate in Communication Sciences at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.



*Marcos Martins*

Caluza's musical influences ranged from choral hymns to ragtime music, which he was exposed to during a period of study in the US. Ultimately, he developed a combination of song, dance, and performance, which became intrinsic to African choral music.



*Caluza*

As a person, he was an enigma, both conservative and an activist. This anomaly of wagging a cautionary finger and simultaneously protesting against the injustices of his time are found in his music.

“I think it is very interesting that someone can at the same time be a conservative and an activist. We live in a very polarized world where we see people as this or that. Maybe a hybrid figure like Caluza can teach us something today,” Martins says.

What began as one video on social media using mostly cell phone images became 12 distinctive films. Through the [films](#), Martins hopes to engage people in action using visuals rather than discourse.



*Idipu*

One of the films made by Martin to accompany the song, “uDalimedi”, is an archive of the WhatsApp exchange that brought the project into being. It includes creative exchanges, happenings in daily life, birthday greetings, the news of the day, political commentary, and philosophical reflections on the state of affairs in the country. Ultimately it is an archive of the process of developing the project. It also brings to awareness how much of our time we spend scrolling in search of more stimulation, more information. There is only one line in the song “uDalimedi” – *“Listen to the dynamite going off under the mountain.”*



*Dalimedi*

The “Rueben T. Caluza, The B-Side” album was released on Heritage Day in 2022.



*Nokuthula Magubane and Ann Masina*

One of the challenges of turning an album into a stage production was getting films, which were created for recorded music, to match a live performance.

In some of the films, there are visuals in between the singing; in others, images appear before the singing begins. “Tshegofatso is a genius. He managed to calculate all that and to conduct me and Mathieu in the tech box while conducting the performers on stage,” Martins says.