

***On process in “Soweto, Soweto, Soweto: A Township is Calling!”***

**Freddie Hendricks and Sharrell D. Lockett in Conversation**

2012

In reference to Offering 1 – “The Hendricks Method” by Sharrell D. Lockett and Tia M. Shaffer in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*

---

**Abstract**

During several interviews with Sharrell D. Lockett, acclaimed theatre director Freddie Hendricks discussed some particularities of his writing and devising process in one of the Freddie Hendricks Youth Ensemble of Atlanta’s most notable productions, *Soweto, Soweto, Soweto: A Township is Calling!* The musical piece, developed in 1990-1991 in response to apartheid, is still performed today by the Youth Ensemble of Atlanta. In this particular interview, Hendricks shared insight into the ensemble’s process and reflected on the time that the musical was performed in Johannesburg, South Africa (2000); highlighting the transnational exchanges that took place between the Youth Ensemble of Atlanta and several young theatre makers in South Africa.

---



**Freddie Hendricks**



**Sharrell D. Lockett**

The Youth Ensemble of Atlanta (YEA), formerly known as the Freddie Hendricks Youth Ensemble of Atlanta was founded in 1990 in Atlanta, GA by Freddie Hendricks and a few of his artistic colleagues. The ensemble served as an artistic space primarily for African American and Black teens of the diaspora to create theatre. Using devising as their central creation instrument, the ensemble performed over seven full-length musicals under the Artistic Direction of Freddie Hendricks.

The ensemble's most notable production is arguably *Soweto, Soweto, Soweto: A Township is Calling! (Soweto)*, which has been performed on four continents. Developed in 1990-1991 in response to apartheid, *Soweto* is still performed today by the Youth Ensemble of Atlanta. Hendricks wrote the first thirty minutes of this ninety minute piece to provide a solid outline, and then the rest of the piece was devised by the ensemble. Over the course of my research thus far in regards to Freddie Hendricks' acting methodology, the Hendricks Method, and the ensemble's repertoire, I had the opportunity to interview Hendricks formally and informally on several occasions.

The interview that follows took place in 2012 when I was investigating the semiotics and devising process in *Soweto*. During the interview, I further learned how YEA served as a space where youth could access their inner artist and help shape the way that they know themselves in relation to the world. With this, I became interested in the transnational exchange that took place between YEA and young theatre makers in South Africa when *Soweto* was performed in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2000. Armed with a deep understanding of the ever-shifting political climate, in this interview Freddie Hendricks provides a glimpse of what artistic practice and empowering global exchange looked like in the context of activist art-making with the Youth Ensemble of Atlanta.

Sharrell: What was your goal in devising *Soweto, Soweto, Soweto: A Township is Calling!?*

Freddie: Change was the agenda. If you put something out in the world, it catches. I believe with all my heart we were instrumental in bringing awareness to the national community about apartheid in South Africa. And I am grateful that we were even a part of the many groups and organizations that helped bring light to apartheid in South Africa and its residue."<sup>[1]</sup>

Sharrell: Do you think that by performing in *Soweto*, the young black actors developed a better sense of identity and pride in America?

Freddie: I know we had discussions like that before. Whether you wanted to be called black,

African American, or whatever, but I don't know. I have no idea how they felt, but I'm sure it [performing] did.

Sharrell: Can you talk more about the writing and devising process in creating *Soweto*?

Freddie: It's like the first thirty minutes of it I wrote it myself and then the rest of it became like an outline, which the ensemble filled in with monologues and scenes. First, I started telling them about [apartheid] and they knew nothing about it at first. So I started to teach them about [apartheid], what I knew, and by that time I knew a lot because I studied a lot about apartheid and South Africa so I knew quite a bit about it. So we sat around and we talked about what it's like to be oppressed and of course they began to compare that to slavery and I said yes, it's very similar to slavery but it's by law in South Africa and then they got it. They said oh, okay I get it. We would get together in rehearsal and we would sit around and we would discuss the issues of apartheid in depth. The discussion had to be in depth so their minds would be on nothing but that. Then they divided into groups and decided what they wanted to do. The rehearsal process was so free that if they decided they just wanted to write a monologue, they could write a monologue. And you know I would give them the format or structure that I wanted. And then I would give them assignments to go out and bring in whatever they wanted to. There was no limit. Whatever they found on South Africa they could bring it in. I didn't care if it was a map and they wanted to get up and show somebody where

South Africa is on a map and tell us what relation it is to other African countries. Whatever they wanted to do they could, and from there I would say ok, we have that, now I want to make something from that. Some of the kids brought in monologues, but there was always a structure and they just filled it in with monologues. Like, if Sahr Ngaujah<sup>[2]</sup> was there and he was doing a particular monologue, the monologue that he did was different from the monologue that was done when he left. When Duain Martyn<sup>[3]</sup> came in, he performed the monologue that he wrote because I had him write it. That's part of the educational process, or that was a part of my process, for them to grow as artists.

Interview: Why do you think it was important for the ensemble to write their own material?

Freddie: It was important for them to write it because to me it was educational. It was all about them. To get them to learn something. To get them to grow. I always wanted them to be better than me, you know. For me, it wasn't about me receiving any credit for it. I had the outline already and I knew where I wanted to put the monologue and I said now you give me the monologue. Of course, I detracted and I subtracted and I added things to the monologue and the monologue grew within the rehearsal process but it was a collaborative thing. It was the same process with the songs and that's the way I wanted Charles<sup>[4]</sup> to work with the choreography. That's the way I wanted whoever was doing the music at the time to work. We had a lot of musical directors to come in and I said this whole process has to be collaborative, otherwise the young people, they're getting nothing from it. Because everything I do, I just wanted it to empower them and to change their lives. That was the important part. That was one of the reasons why before I would send them off to write, or to collaborate with each other, we would have an in-depth conversation and the conversation might last three or four hours. We would have a conversation about whatever it was and we would talk about it and there is no right or wrong. There was no right or wrong. It was just what you felt because I feel that's the only way people can build self-esteem and even build the muscle of creativity that's within them-selves. They have to believe that they're okay. They have to believe that they're special.

Sharrell: Were there any apprehensions about performing in South Africa in 2000?

Freddie: No.

Sharrell: Did the kids feel odd or uncomfortable because they were portraying the actual lived experience of many of the audience members?

Freddie: There's a line in the beginning of the play that says, "It is easy for us Africans in America to stand up here and try to tell you what apartheid in South Africa is like, right? No!" Boom. There you go, we answered the question. "It is not easy for us to stand up here and try to tell you what it is like." We are affecting an accent. The script is like a class in itself. So when we went to South Africa the people were blown away because a lot of the kids didn't even know about it, their own history, they would come up and say thank you for teaching us about what happened ten years ago or five years ago. The little kids were like oh wow I didn't know my mom went through this. It was crazy. And it was so wild. An incident occurred in South Africa that I think really, really stuck with the American kids. We were stopped at a road block and asked for our passports. I mean apartheid was over, but the World Cup was there and a lot of protests were happening at this particular time and we were stopped. I had to get off the bus and talk to the police because our Managing Director had left all of our information at the hotel. They wanted to

know who we were and where we were going. So we had to ride with them to the police station. They got on the bus with guns and everything. So the American kids said oh wow. It all became a bit realer, a bit more realistic. Seeing somebody get on a bus with a gun or dogs and ask for your identification. And that's a scene in the play also. They held us for like two to three hours, but then we were let go. And [YEA] went and turned it out the next day.<sup>[5]</sup> I think we did three shows in one day because the response was so big. We were only supposed to do two shows. The second show was over but then a bus load of kids that had driven from another part of South Africa to see this show came and they're all standing out there. I can remember looking out from the balcony at them and their blue and white uniforms and it kinda reminded me of the kids from my vision,<sup>[6]</sup> so I said we gotta do this show. So the kids put on the wet costumes and they did it.<sup>[7]</sup> Even till this day I have kids in South Africa that are really doing well because we were involved in a lot of workshops over there and I actually wrote a four to six page letter of instructions for a few of the kids on how to start their own theatre companies and they did.

Sharrell: Can you talk about the differences and similarities between the *Soweto* performances in America and the *Soweto* performances in South Africa?

Freddie: It's always been received well. [The show] made people interested. It made people do the same thing I did when I first heard about apartheid. I need to go and look this up. I need to go and investigate or look this up for myself and see what is really happening in South Africa, and that was the reason for the piece, to enlighten people. That's the reason why I do my art. I mean what is art for if it's not for people to be enlightened. I can't remember a time when we did *Soweto* and we didn't get a standing ovation and tons and tons and tons and tons of love and just curiosity about the piece. I think that's why we put change into the world along with *Sarafina*<sup>[8]</sup> along with Mbongeni<sup>[9]</sup> in South Africa who did *Sarafina*. I think, through our art, I think we helped change the apartheid movement. I really do. I really believe that. Because we put all of that out into the universe.

Sharrell: When the show was performed in South Africa was there a connection that took place between South Africans and Atlanta, Georgia?

Freddie: It was a huge connection because the people couldn't believe that there was somebody else that cared enough to even tell their story. That was one thing I would get from some of them. They would say, "What? You mean you care about that situation? Why are you doing this? I love you. I'll never forget you as long as I live." Those were some of the comments we used to get, especially from some of the people that were youth in 1976 in the youth uprising. They would come up and they would say it's hard to believe that people are remembering our story and telling our story from another country. They said we could have never fathomed that something like this would happen so they were thrilled. It was nothing but love and positivity. You know sometimes I might have felt a bit apprehensive because I wanted to tell [their story] right. I wanted the accents to be right. I didn't want it to be off kilter. Not only did doing *Soweto* change me and other artists that were involved in putting up the show and doing the show, but it helped change the lives of some of the people in South Africa that saw the show. It gave them a piece of their history that I guess, maybe they didn't talk about anymore. Because even now, like in America, if you look in an American history book, how many pages are there on slavery? You know you try to forget those particular

things. The people that are writing the books, they didn't want to put [slavery] out there, so it's like some of the kids said I didn't even know this happened. That was one thing I couldn't believe. Some of the younger South African kids who were maybe like seven, eight, or nine said this. And I guess the parents, I don't know, maybe they were ashamed. You know I think they should have been proud to tell their kids about their history. Because my belief is you can't grow and have a productive future, if you don't know about where you came from. If you don't know about your past.

Sharrell: Were there conversations had between the American youth and the South African youth?

Freddie: I just remember it was just the usual thing. You know when I would stand up in front of [the South African youth] they would be quiet and listen. It was just like teaching anybody else. One thing I noticed is that the harmonies they had were totally different than the harmonies we had in America. The workshops were fantastic because I got a chance to know several kids who lived in South Africa. As a matter of fact a lot of them slept in our rooms at the hotels. They didn't want to go home. They just wanted to be around us.

Sharrell: What do you think is the overall message you wanted YEA students to embrace after performing *Soweto*?

Freddie: I wanted them to learn everything. I wanted them to learn about themselves. Because if you're gonna learn about another culture. If you're gonna learn about South Africa, why can't you learn about yourself. I wanted them to be empowered, to think that they could be empowered to change their situation and if you change your situation you can change your world and if you change your world, you can change *the* world. I just wanted them be empowered. Although this moment in South Africa started with kids wanting to march peacefully, holding up signs of better education, look what it turned into. So I just wanted them to see that once you have any kind of commitment to something you can make a change, you can change your life, you can become a doctor, you can become a Ph.d., you can create records, you can be in a dance magazine, you could be teachers. If this [change] can happen look what can happen for you.

## BIOS

**Sharrell D. Lockett's** research is situated in acting/directing theory, Performance Studies, Black studies, and Fat studies. She is lead editor of *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches* (2017), a groundbreaking anthology that is the first book to highlight diverse acting/directing methods rooted in Black American cultural aesthetics. In the fall of 2017, Lockett launched Black Acting Methods® Studio, a training program in performance theory and practice grounded in Black American cultural aesthetics. Her sixth & seventh book projects will engage with the career of acclaimed theatre director Freddie Hendricks, and transweight celebrity performance. She is a proud invitee of Harvard University's Mellon Institute of Theater and Performance Research, Cornell University's Performance Encounters series, Northwestern University's Mellon Program in Black Feminist Performance, and the esteemed Lincoln Center Directors Lab in NY. Lockett is Assistant Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at Muhlenberg College.

**Freddie Hendricks**, of Atlanta, GA., is a 1976 graduate of Lincoln Memorial University. He is the founder and former Artistic Director of The Freddie Hendricks Youth Ensemble of Atlanta

(YEA). He has created over 20 critically acclaimed productions that tackle contemporary issues such as child abuse, teen pregnancy, HIV and AIDS, youth violence and apartheid. The productions feature self-empowerment for every generation as their underlying mission is to create art that inspires positive social change. As one of Atlanta's international artist groups, his company has performed in Belgium, Holland and South Africa. Hendricks has conducted workshops, directed and created productions throughout Europe. His critically acclaimed production of "What's Going On," a tribute to Marvin Gaye, toured Europe for six months. Hendricks has performed on many stages across the country, though his greatest joy comes from his work with youth. His work inspired the formation of The Youth Ensemble of Soweto (YES) in South Africa. A leader in the arts for decades, Hendricks was honored as a distinguished teacher of America in Washington, D.C. by President Bill Clinton in 1996 and 1998. He was awarded the Abby Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts in 2002. Hendricks was also the 2012 Alumnus of the Year at Lincoln Memorial University. Hendricks, a humble and honest creator, has worked with several notable names, and more importantly has helped shape some of today's most accomplished artists. Hendricks was the mentor and acting coach of Charity Jordan from the movie "Selma", and Broadway's "Fela!" stars, Saycon Sengbloh and Sahr Ngaujah. Several more artists have been shaped by Hendricks, and give him the credit for molding their talent, including: D. Woods, Young Money's star SnL (Shanell), Saturday Night Live star Kenan Thompson, and National Theatre star Jahi Kearse. As an acting coach, Hendricks has coached actors on BET, MTV, ABC, and Nickelodeon. Hendricks remains one of the most innovative and inspiring artists. He has been a leader in the arts for decades, and will continue to create world-changing art to help heal the world. Art must have a purpose to be great, and Hendricks' purpose is to create art that inspires positive social change and that leaves a legacy.

---

[1] This interview was conducted and recorded in 2012, however, this piece of information was ascertained during

a phone interview with Freddie Hendricks. 15 October 2009, Atlanta, GA.

[2] Sahr Ngaujah eventually went on to star in *Fela!* on Broadway as Fela Anikulapo Kuti.

[3] Duain Richmond Martyn went on to star in the 2013 national tour of *Fela!* playing Fela Anikulapo Kuti.

[4] Charles Bullock is the resident choreographer for YEA.

[5] "turned it out" is another way of saying "they did an awesome job."

[6] Freddie Hendricks is referencing a vision that he had as a young adult in which he saw a sea of kids outside of his window reaching for him and asking him to save them. This moment sparked his work with youth.

[7] The costumes were in the process of being washed for the next day performances.

[8] *Sarafina!* is a musical about the uprising of youth in Soweto against apartheid, which premiered on Broadway in 1988.

[9] Mbongeni Ngema is the playwright and screenwriter of *Sarafina!*