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"Masakela and Mahlasela: Joy in the music of history"

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Masakela and Mahlasela: Joy in the music of history

Shaun Brady, For The Inquirer

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The songs that flugelhornist Hugh Masekela and singer-guitarist Vusi Mahlasela performed at the **Annenberg Center** on Saturday night were the soundtrack to the Apartheid era, and thus dealt with grim themes: racial segregation, violence, imprisonment, and struggle.

But the mood conjured by these two South African icons was buoyant and celebratory, a vivid illustration of the role music played in lifting the spirits of their countrymen during decades of oppression.

The light-hearted mood could be summed up in Mahlasela's gallows humor, as he introduced a very short song called Jailbreak, written by a friend during his prison term - then proceeded to scrape the strings of his guitar to simulate a sawing sound. Or in Masekela's prologue to his 1987 hit Bring Him Back Home, when he noted that Nelson Mandela and his compatriots ended their decades-long jail terms as old men, then asked the audience to stand and shake a little booty for those old wonderful geezers.

Masekela and Mahlasela, who were honored with a citation by City Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell and state Sen. Vincent Hughes, experienced the fight against Apartheid in very different ways.

Masekela, 76, left the country in 1960, leading a successful jazz and pop career while providing a voice in exile for those he left behind.

A generation younger, Mahlasela remained in his native Mamelodi Township, becoming known as The Voice for his stirring songs of protest. During a pre-show conversation, however, Masekela insisted the two weren't as different as their biographies might suggest, both essentially being township kids who come from the same womb of people and history and music.

Their performance offered what Masekela called a kaleidoscope of South Africa, featuring beloved songs by fellow greats like Johnny Clegg, Bright Blue, and Masekela's former wife, Mama Africa Miriam Makeba. Mahlasela began the evening alone under a spotlight, offering a stunning solo rendition of his 1994 song Ubuhle Bomhlaba that showcased the range of his impassioned voice, from soaring to growling, percussive to purring.

Masekela and the duo's four-piece band entered with a joyous version of the familiar anthem Meadowlands, followed by a Makeba classic.

Dancing and playing a variety of hand percussion when not playing his flugelhorn or singing, Masekela showed no signs of his age, even during a fiery read of his signature hit Grazing in the Grass, a mainstay of his sets since its 1968 release.

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