

Q&A with *Kiss of the Spider Woman* director, Sylvaine Strike and cast

 By [Daniel Dercksen](#)

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Celebrating the return to live theatre in South Africa, Marcel Puig's extraordinary play *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, directed by the multi-award-winning Sylvaine Strike, is on at The Baxter Golden's Arrow Studio in Cape Town from 5 to 19 June 2021. ***Due to new Covid-19 restrictions this play has now been postponed.***

Forty-five years since it was first penned in Spanish, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* weaves an alluring exploration of sexual and societal norms, examining the power of escapism through the imagination and magnifying the web that it is woven between identity and sexuality.



It has captured the attention of audiences for its romantic drama, political outcry and postmodern style portrayed through its two characters, Molina and Valentin. It was adapted for the stage in 1983. The 1985 film version of the play, starring William Hurt and Raul Julia, also received widespread critical acclaim.

The plot follows two cellmates who pass their time in a prison by remembering and reinventing the classics of the silver screen. What at first seems to be a simple and straightforward – if not casual – story of two people who appear to be opposites (the romantic and the revolutionary), instead reveals a story of political intrigue and double-crossing. Starting as a contest between two opposite personalities, it soon expands into a choice between two completely different attitudes to life. The choice is not sexual, although for a long time it seems so. It is between freedom and slavery.

Seating is limited and all performances will be limited to 50% capacity, with Covid-19 protocols in place as regulated at adjusted Level 2 during the national state of disaster. These include the availability of hand sanitisers, tracking and tracing recorded, wearing of masks and physical distancing. Patrons and audience members are advised to arrive at least an hour before the start of the performance to avoid delays.



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In recent years at The Baxter, Strike has directed hugely acclaimed productions such as *Endgame*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Tartuffe*, *Tobacco* and *The Miser*. In 2019, she was awarded the prestigious Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters) by the French government and is a former Standard Bank Young Artist for Drama winner and Featured Artist of the National Arts Festival. Strike directs a stellar in *Kiss Of The Spider Woman* with Mbulelo Grootboom (*Rainbow Scars*, *Iago's Last Dance*, *Hamlet*) as Valentin and Wessel Pretorius (*Ont*, *Die Ontelbare 48*, *Balbesit*) as Molina, in this journey of self-awareness, intrigue, romance, revolution, love and betrayal, with lighting design by Mannie Manim, set and costume design by Wolf Britz and music by Brendan Jury.

The director, Sylvaine Strike and cast members, Wessel Pretorius and Mbulelo Grootboom share a few thoughts with Daniel Dercksen.



■ **How do you see Marcel Puig's classic *Kiss of the Spider Woman* in a South African context?**

Sylvaine Strike: Being a classic (for all the reasons this play has come to be one) *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is universally relevant, perhaps now more than ever. South African audiences will draw their own parallels to it. The mere fact that a Black heterosexual male shares a prison cell with a white male who identifies as female, escalates the focus on the complexities we hold as South Africans in terms of race and gender politics. Originally written to take place in a prison in Buenos Aires, Argentina, I have made a point of not setting this production in any specific context, be it geographic or political, as I believe the liminal space offers more to the imagination and audiences can invest in this story, knowing that it could be unfolding anywhere in the world.

Wessel Pretorius: *Kiss* was written during a time of political upheaval in Argentina (1970s). South Africa's political and social situation was also reaching a boiling point around this time. Sylvaine (Strike, our director) and Wolf Britz (our designer) decided to keep the era '70s/'80s without pinpointing the setting – to keep it both universal but relatable to our country. I think the semiotics of me and Mbubelo's skins, our accents and sense of humour is also quite telling without spelling it out. Then there is the added element of having a traditionally masculine figure next to a queer body and the negotiations around that – which is currently a very relevant and important topic.

Mbulelo Grootboom: The play is so relevant in South Africa because of the issue of 'othering' or 'otherness'. Minority groups such as the LGBTQI+ community and the discrimination they continue to face is something we need to continue to address.

■ **What do you think makes *Kiss of the Spider Woman* such a powerful play?**

Strike: Its timeless relevance as a piece about human nature and the need for connection.

Pretorius: In its essence, it is a meditation on human connection and how much we need it. Two vastly opposing characters are forced to share a cell and manage, through the sheer need for contact, to bridge their differences.

Grootboom: The themes of the play remain relevant because the issues raised are still those faced in South Africa.



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■ ***It also carries a theme that most people can easily identify with; finding ways to escape what imprisons us. Your views on this.***

Strike: In the recent context of our own experience of lockdown and confinement, we have become acutely aware of the measures humans can go to in order to escape mental and physical imprisonment. This is a timeless theme of course, but I believe we understand it better now.

Pretorius: What is uncovered throughout is the idea that for both characters life outside is also a prison. Valentin finds his escape from reality through politics, philosophy and a cause. Molina finds his through aesthetics and film. They employ the exact same mediums of escape inside the prison.

Grootboom: People crave escapism because life can often become too much. The hardships faced by many causes us to feel the need to break free from what might be holding us back.

■ ***Do you think Valentin and Molina can survive without each other?***

Strike: In the world beyond the prison, Valentin and Molina's paths would never have crossed. They are destined to meet in a space from which they cannot escape, forcing them to understand one another and even like each other despite being opposite personalities with entirely different belief systems. They will survive without each other, yes, but they are forever altered.

Grootboom: Valentin is a conundrum, an enigma, a contradiction – but aren't we all? He is a political prisoner who believes in Marxism but tends to fall for classy, sophisticated women. They need each other to survive and, at the end of the day, they need human comfort. I relate to him because he puts up walls to cover his soft and sensitive nature.

Pretorius: I find it incredibly liberating to play Molina. They are deeply emotional but use storytelling and romanticisation to protect themselves – something all performers can relate to. Sylvaine has also added many layers to the character that has made it thrilling to try and get inside their skin. Molina, like myself, loves movies, romance, drama and all things pretty. They would sacrifice anything for the people they love. I would also take a bullet for someone I've decided to love. But I also believe, growing up gay (certainly for particular generations) can cause an innate sense of isolation and loneliness that Molina definitely battles with. I think Molina's emotional survival depends on Valentin, yes. But Molina has fended for themselves since childhood and has had to grow thick skin. This is a time before pronouns and nuanced rhetoric in regards

to gender politics. It is through Valentin that the audience also gets to ask questions and develop empathy for something they might not understand. What develops between them is a bond and a friendship that carries them both through their sentences.



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■ ***Do you think South African theatre will be the same after the pandemic that has crippled many theatres?***

Strike: Theatre has and will survive, always. It is an ancient and necessary essential service for the soul.

Pretorius: I've learned two things about theatre during this pandemic. Theatre practitioners in South Africa are very very resilient and audiences miss and crave theatre when it is suddenly not available. Much like the themes of *Kiss*, theatre is basically the most direct and immediate way we can connect with other beings and their stories.

Grootboom: I don't think that South African theatre will be the same. Artists will find creative and innovative ways to make sense of the pandemic. It happened after 1994 and it will happen again. Theatre will evolve to become more resilient and make sense of the uncertainty.

■ ***What do you hope audiences will get from watching *Kiss of the Spider Woman*?***

Strike: I hope they are highly entertained, rejoice in the return of live theatre, relish in discovering Valentin and Molina and delight in witnessing their complexity unfold into an unlikely friendship. I am certain that no one can watch this play and remain unmoved by the lesson we are taught from it: That our differences, our othering, mean very little when we realise we need one another.

Kiss of the Spider Woman is on at The Baxter Golden's Arrow Studio in Cape Town from 5 to 19 June 2021. Tickets available via [Webtickets](#)

Due to new Covid-19 restrictions this play has now been postponed. Those that have purchased tickets already for the shows, can 'park' their tickets for the return season.

ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and

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