Introduction to Empatheatre

Pre-Covid, audiences were traditionally made to sit in a circle during Empatheatre productions. The following image shows the set up for a performance of Lalela uLwandle at Ushaka Marine World, 2019.

Empatheatre is an award-winning and long running KZN based research-based, theatre company and methodology that emerged from friendship and solidarity between artists, writers, theatre-makers, academic researchers and responsive citizens.

Empatheatre has been responsible for launching several ground-breaking theatre projects over the last decade in South Africa including Soil & Ash (focusing on rural communities facing pressure from coal-mining companies), Ulwemvu (street-level Drug addiction and harm reduction advocacy), The Last Country (female migration stories), Boxes (homelessness and Urban land justice inequalities in the city of Cape Town) and Lalela ulwandle (an international project supporting sustainable transformative governance of our oceans).

The process begins with extensive action-based research in which co-participants and key partners work to identify matters of concern and a pressing central question.

Through these research explorations the team works iteratively to shape the research data into an engrossing, relevant and true-to-life theatrical experience. The theatre production offers new ways of seeing different perspectives on a complex situation, and above all honors the participants’ narratives.
The script is first performed to participants and partners to check the credibility of the play before performances are then rolled out to strategic audiences.

Audiences are made up of people with different levels of agency, power and privilege in relation to the matter of concern. Audience members are invited who hold diverse, even conflicting, views on the central concern represented in the play. Post-play facilitated dialogues with the audience allows for another layer of reflexive data to emerge in relation to the issue of concern.

In this way Empatheatre is a method of conducting and publicly interrogating research that democratises the way in which we surface and co-create knowledge.

The following document offers a brief introduction, alongside accompanying images, of some of Empatheatre’s prior projects and glimpse of ones currently in development.

For more information please visit our Empatheatre website at https://www.empathetheatre.com/

A short video looking at Empatheatre’s history and innovative methodology can be found here…

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vioKkGqnL8Q&ab_channel=Empatheatre

Image from Empatheatre’s award-winning Ulwembu during a public performances at The Denis Hurley Centre 2016 featuring Zenzo Msimi. Pic by Val Adamson.
Mhlaba noLahle (Soil & Ash) was a collaborative initiative that drew on aspects of documentary and verbatim theatre. This isiZulu theatre piece, created over 18 months, addressed issues of sustainable rural development and social justice around mining in the iMfolozi area. *Mhlaba noLahle* offered a research-based theater approach that moved beyond traditional debates that tradeoff sustainability and economic growth. Instead the play surfaced the nuanced reality of residents’ concerns around health, wellbeing, family and livelihoods, in the face of a large coal mining development. *Mhlaba Nolahle* (2014/2015) offered the residents of Fuleni a public dialogue and tribunal to examine all the livelihood and development options available to them (including but not limited to mining). In this sense the play was an accessible alternative to community meetings, complicated PowerPoint presentations, and public arguments/stale-mates. This *Empatheatre* project carefully facilitated a collective imagining around alternative forms of development, democratic decision-making and meaningful livelihoods for the Fuleni community living next to the proposed mining site.
In 2014/15 Mhlaba Nolahle toured to a range of local Fuleni Junior and High-schools, playing on football fields and in classrooms. In addition it served as the curtain-raiser for an important Fuleni community Indaba, where residents had the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns on voting for or against the mine. Mhlaba Nolahle illustrated the power that theatre in inciting debate, while simultaneously assisting in aspects of conflict resolution.

For an internally divided community like Fuleni, the play enabled residents to navigate difficult conversations around the proposed mine without resorting to personal attacks on one other. Heated political arguments, we were told, had characterized previous public indabas on the matter.

The play, by echoing both the present-day realities and future concerns of Fuleni residents, and by carefully considering the two opposing stances (those for the mine and those against), without explicitly judging one over the other, worked towards offering alternative and more sustainable longer-term solutions. Such alternatives gave the audiences a new set of tools to work with in arriving at a set of decisions that would be beneficial to all members of the community.
Over the course of 2015, a dynamic team of story-tellers, playwrights, theatre-makers, academics and researchers explored a growing concern on the rapid increase of smoking heroin in communities around Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal. Locally the drug is known as Whoonga, and is usually a concoction of B-grade heroin and a variety of other toxic chemical components. The result of the two-year research and play-making process was a powerful theatre production titled *Ulwembu* (isiZulu for Spider web).

The creative team consisted of Neil Coppen, Mpume Mthombeni, Dylan McGarry and The Big Brotherhood made up of Vumani Khumalo, Phumlani Ngubane, Ngcebo Cele, Sandile Nxumalo, and Zenzo Msomi.

To create the script, the group listened to oral histories and testimonials from a broad cross-section of Durbanites, and transformed these accounts into an unforgettable documentary-theatre production on street-level heroin use in the city. *Ulwembu* provided a platform for transformative dialogue to take place around drug use, that engaged the empathy, intellects and imaginations of audiences by allowing them to follow a series of characters’ realities without judgment or prejudice.

The play afforded local audiences the opportunity to walk in the shoes of misunderstood others as narrated through their own experiences: be it drug users, dealers, police-officers, social-workers or...
affected parents. Ulwembu was an integral advocacy component of a broader network of partners working on a harm-reduction approach to drug use in the city. Ulwembu went on to perform at the National Drug Policy Week and for members of the South African parliament.

During our two-year research process we researched the daily realities of police, parents, people who use drugs, the homeless, government civil servants, faith leaders, doctors, teachers and social workers. The core team met weekly for two years, sharing findings, stories, experiences, questions and ideas around the complex web that embodies not just Whoonga addiction, but addiction in general. The development of Ulwembu drew from a variety of theatre methodologies and genres, ranging from documentary, verbatim, forum, invisible and community theatre.

Over the duration of its run, Ulwembu was performed at a range of drug policy conferences, community meetings, church halls, open-days, homeless shelters, rehabilitation centres, universities, state-of-the-art theatres, suburban art-galleries, and on one occasion, a children’s playground with the jungle-gym net improvised into the blocking of the play.

One of the prerequisites of our project was that no audience member would ever be required to pay for their ticket, especially those without the financial means to do so. A generous grant from the Open Society Foundation (OSF) as well as additional support from the Urban Futures Centre (UFC) and the National Institute for Humanities and Social Science (NIHSS), enabled this.

*Ulwembu* not only impacted on the ‘doing’ of policing of street level drug addiction, as testified by police officers in the audience, but also contributed to broader organizational reform within police and health care organisations. The play went on to influence national drug policy, including supporting a pilot harm reduction programme in Durban run in collaboration with the Denis Hurley Centre, Urban Futures Centre and TB/HIV CARE.

*A scene from Ulwembu’s public performances at The Denis Hurley Centre 2016 featuring Vumani Khumalo & Ngebo Cele. Pic by Val Adamson.*
Over the course of its five year run, Ulwembu garnered major publicity in South African broadcast and print media, making it onto SABC news inserts, Daily News lamppost headlines and front-page newspaper coverage. The production went on to scoop six of the thirteen categories it was nominated for at the 2016 Durban Theatre Awards—including Best Script, Best Newcomer, Best Director and Best Actress. In 2018, the play text was published by Wits University Press (Empatheatre & The Big Brotherhood 2018), and is currently available for study in local and international schools and universities.

To view the trailer please visit…
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwfydHhH0&t=42s&ab_channel=Empatheatre

Scenes from ‘Ulwembu’ featuring Zenzo Msomi, Mpume Mthombeni (top) and Ngeso Cele (bottom) at the Playhouse Loft 2017. Pics by Val Adamson.
Characters ensnared in webs of addiction in scenes from 'Ulwembu' featuring Zenzo Msoni and Ngebo Cele at the Playhouse Loft 2017. Pics by Val Adamson.
The Last Country

The final image of Ma Twala’s dream house in ‘The Last Country’ at Courtyard Theatre performances. Pics by Val Adamson.

The Last Country was developed as part of a funded research project called Migration and the Inclusive City. The project was run in Durban as a collaborative partnership between the Democracy Development Program, the African Solidarity Network, and the Urban Futures Centre at the Durban University of Technology. Funded by the Cities Alliance the project developed a network of partners to inform an inclusive city led response to migration in Durban. The project aims, objectives and strategic report on social inclusion, gender and migration for the city can be accessed on the projects website (http://durbanmigration.org.za).

The project used an oral histories methodology, triangulated with interviews and dialogue sessions in the city. Migrant women have specific experiences and perspectives that are vital to consider in the creation of responsive and inclusive policy frameworks. The project built a multi-tiered educational and awareness strategy from the research, including radio shows and theatre.

The Last Country theatre production was created using the 30 oral histories collected from this project. The Last Country is performed by Mpume Mthombeni, Philisiwe Twijnstra, Nompilo Maphumulo and Zintle Bobi and has toured KZN over the last three years, playing to capacity audiences in hostels, theatres, schools, universities, community halls and for municipal and local government officials.
The Last Country was an immersive 50-minute theatrical production and explores the stories of women migrants hailing from the DRC, Zimbabwe, Somalia and rural KwaZulu-Natal. Through the stories of Ofrah from the DRC, MaThwala from Ndwedwe in KwaZulu-Natal, Aamiina from Somalia, and Aneni from Zimbabwe, the audience intimately listens to experiences of leaving home and arriving in Durban, where the women find various strategies in which to remake a sense of belonging and create a place something like home. The script carefully weaves together experiences of struggle, pain, humor, hope and resilience in ways that explore the complexities, commonalities and differences of migrant women. This intimate theatre experience seats actors and audience together in a large circle, and performances are followed by a facilitated discussion on what it means to live together in the city of Durban.
The Last Country reached over 1500 audience members, and engaged them in a critical dialogue on what it means to live in an inclusive city. Audience members included the women who told their oral histories, the general public, high school children, city officials, civil society and a large group of local government officials at a dedicated performance for SALGA members (South African Local Government Association). The response from a senior municipal official, to what it was like being part of The Last Country performance best illustrates how storytelling based on empirical research shifts perceptions;

“For me it was hard-hitting. It was a real wakeup call for me, something which I had not had before. And I guess when you see it in two-dimension, when you read a text book or a case study, you kind of get cynical and you almost get comfortable where you think that the researcher had a bias. Or you never fully see what the researcher was seeing through their rose-coloured glasses, and you kind of park it, and don’t ascribe much importance to it. But when you see it in front of you, and you see that the research is talking to you, and you see that it is pounding at your door, it is a whole new concept of learning and it’s a whole new concept of awakening. It was a brilliant thing!” (Interview 19/03/2018)

Audience sit in the round at the Denis Hurley Centre performances of The Last Country. 2017

The Last Country performances were a far more successful catalysts for creating spaces of empathetic listening, as opposed to more formal research presentations like seminars and reports. Storytelling is a powerful way to make real the endeavor of collective humanity, as opposed to simply telling someone to be compliant to a checklist of human rights indicators.
The Last Country video is being used as a teaching resource at two universities. At the Oxford Department of International Development at Oxford University in the UK as an example of creative methods in oral history research. It has also been requested for use at a graduate methods course to frame discussions around representation in migration studies, at the African Centre for Migration and Society at Wits University in South Africa. In 2019 The Last Country was a gold medal finalist in the performance category at the Institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences Awards. To view the The Last Country trailer please visit…

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is2B7nokmzk&t=13s&ab_channel=Empatheatre

Scenes from 'The Last Country’s public performances at The Denis Hurley Centre 2017 featuring (top) Mpume Mthombeni & (bottom) Nompilo Maphumulo.
The South African city of Cape Town suffers from a legacy of apartheid spatial planning. Apartheid forced removals relocated hundreds of thousands of people classified as black, coloured and Indian away from the city and into townships, ghettos and informal settlements on the urban periphery.

These areas remain today and continue to house the working class and unemployed in locations far from secure job opportunities. Violent crime and poor access basic services also mark these areas as difficult places to live. Access to well-located land coupled with the development and protection of affordable housing options is key to redressing the legacy of apartheid segregation. There have been no affordable housing units built in the Cape Town city-center since the end of apartheid. Given this, the rapid gentrification by property developers of the few working class neighborhoods close to the center of the city, often ending in evictions of existing residents, is of serious concern.

*Boxes* was a social-justice theatre production developed as part of an Open Society Foundation’s project. The project aimed to connect South African investigative journalists writing on
corruption with theatre-makers and artists. It was hoped that alternative dissemination strategies would enable these narratives to reach wider audiences in the lead up to the 2019 South African elections.

Boxes centers around a young Cape Town couple: Kaye (Quanita Adams) and Lawrence (Mark Elderkin) who had recently moved into the inner-city of Cape Town. They find their preparations for a housewarming dinner derailed when Lawrence announces he has accepted a job offer to design a state of the art residential development in lower Woodstock. When it is discovered that local residents will be evicted from their neighborhood to make room for the development, Kaye begins to probe the repercussions of her partner’s latest architectural venture. As Kaye and Lawrence battle it out, we learn of Kaye’s interactions with her aunt Sumaya in the Bo Kaap, who due to rising rates is forced to sell her family home, and in the process has returned to her activist roots.

As Kaye and Lawrence attempt to arrive at some sort of resolve before the arrival of their dinner guests, audiences encounter a myriad of characters including property developers, politicians, residents and whistleblowers whose lives are impacted, for better or worse, by the gentrification trends sweeping across the city and suburbs. Over the course of four short scenes, Boxes probes the legacy of Apartheid spatial planning and forced removals, examining past and present notions of ‘development’ and ‘progress’ by interrogating the question: Who is really benefiting from all this?
The process of devising and creating *Boxes* drew from a range of research-based, verbatim and documentary theatre methodologies. The research for *Boxes* explored a myriad of perspectives and insights into justice issues around urban-land, property development and evictions that has been occurring across the City of Cape Town.

*Boxes* was produced by *Empatheatre* and written by Neil Coppen and Ameera Conrad, in collaboration with journalist Daneel Knoetze, Mari Stimie, and performers Quanita Adams and Mark Elderkin. *Boxes* toured schools in Cape Town and held public performances which ignited a much-needed debate on gentrification in the city.

*Boxes* enjoyed a hugely successful tour of Cape Town and surrounds during April and May 2019 performing 21 shows for audiences of Grade 10, 11 and 12 high school learners, students at UWC, UCT and CPUT, and for social justice organisations such as Ndifuna Ukwazi, Reclaim the City, Social Justice Coalition and the Development Action Group. *Boxes* also played at a Freedom Day event at the District Six Museum. In addition, *Boxes* performed for an audience of 200 occupiers at Cissie Gool House, previously known as the Woodstock Hospital, who were directly opposing being evicted by the city. Over a period of three weeks, the production was viewed by more than 2500 people, with each show followed by a facilitated talk-back discussion.
Images from the Boes tour across the Western Cape schools and community centers, 2019. Pics by Retha Ferguson.
Lalela uLwandle

Lalela uLwandle is a research-based theatre project that makes visible stories of living with the ocean that are seldom seen or heard in the public domain. Lalela uLwandle means “Listen to the Sea” in isiZulu. At some point in our lives, many of us have picked up a large shell and placed it against our ears to hear the sound of the oceans within it. It is this image that we invoke in this project, of standing quietly on the beach and listening to the stories of the ocean, and the people who have an intimate relationship with it.

Weaving the stories, histories and contemporary concerns of diverse South African coastal communities into an Empatheatre production, Lalela uLwandle explores themes of intergenerational environmental injustices, tangible and intangible ocean heritage, marine science and the myriad threats to ocean health. Lalela uLwandle is an invitation to a participatory public conversation on ocean governance in South Africa. It is funded under the One Ocean Hub, a five-country hub of researchers exploring more democratic methods of engagement in ocean governance.

Lalela uLwandle tells the stories and family histories of three people: Nolwandle a marine educator whose mother is a Zionist and grandmother a sangoma; Niren a young environmental activist whose family has a long history of seine-net fishing brought here from India; and Faye a retired marine biologist living on the South Coast, reflecting on her role in science and activism. Audience members sit in a listening circle with the actors and bear witness to these intergenerational stories of the sea.

The stories recount how the ocean is linked to various livelihoods, medicine and healing, scientific awe, study and wonder, and to spiritual connections with ancestors and loved ones who have died. In the telling, it deals explicitly with acts of past and present power and exclusion in South Africa. It performs the painful experiences of forced removals along the KwaZulu-Natal coastline under apartheid, which robbed both Zulu people and Indian fishers from a life on the coast. It explores how extractive mining on land and sea, as well as industrial fishing continue to create forms of oppression and exclusion in South Africa.

It also performs the tensions between environmental justice and environmental conservation, so frequently played out in real life when local people are restricted from accessing heritage and livelihood sites in Marine Protected Areas. Post-performance facilitated discussions make space for the audience members to share any questions, comments, and concerns.

*Scenes of forced removals from the coastal regions enacted by Mpume Mthombeni as Nolwandle in Lalela Ulwandle KZN Coastal Town tour 2019.*
Scenes of Mpume Mthombeni as Nolwandle in Lalela Ulwandle KZN Coastal Town tour 2019.
In October 2019 *Lalela uLwandle* toured 6 small towns on the KwaZulu-Natal coast, with a final week's run in the city of Durban. Audiences consisted of the general public, as well as strategically invited guests from government, civil society, small-scale fisher associations, marine scientists and conservation officers.

Each performance is followed by a facilitated post-performance discussion with the audience. In many of these discussions’ audience members grappled with what it means to think collectively in a time of climate change and ocean degradation. They asked of themselves and fellow audience members how the injustices and inequalities in our past, and in our present, should shape our thinking of ocean governance in South Africa.
Frequently audience members emphasized how different intangible heritages must be included in policy decision-making about the seas. Post-performance discussions became a tribunal space for sharing testimonies of oppression, and concerns around profit-seeking in the ocean. They were also importantly spaces in which the participants experienced how different ways of seeing, and being, do not necessarily preclude connections and solidarities for ocean health.

*Lalela uLwandle* had wide media coverage as the themes of the play was a topical issue. The tour aligned closely with the appeal deadline for the oil and gas offshore drilling decisions in KZN. A total of 17 articles on *Lalela uLwandle* in print were identified, and reached 451 002 people. Radio broadcasts on the play reached an additional 171 000 people in Kwa-Zulu Natal.

Through the connections made between audience members and the researchers involved in the development of the play, a nascent network with a shared concern for coastal justice was formed. In this way, the play (and the dialogues and learning that the play catalysed) has formed the basis for a ‘Coastal Justice Knowledge Action Network’, made up of civil society, academic researchers, marine scientists, lawyers and others, to respond pro-actively to emerging developments in the Blue Economy that threaten social and environmental justice. The *Lalela uLwandle* production has since left the Kwa-Zulu Natal borders from where the stories emerged, and interacted with other fishing cooperatives and groups, as well as other scientists, activists and practitioners in the Eastern Cape.

*Scenes of Mpume Mthombeni as Nolwandle in Lalela uLwandle KZN Coastal Town tour 2019.*
Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic *Lalela uLwandle* was scheduled to host shows, and post-show tribunals at the United Nations Ocean Conference in Lisbon, Portugal in June 2020 – as well as shows and tribunals with the South African Marine Sciences conference, and the National Marine Spatial planning committee in South Africa. These events have however been postponed till 2021/2022. In the interim we created a podcast version of the play, a ‘radio-drama’ adaptation of the production, and will be hosting online discussions with UN fellows and decision makers in June 2020.

To watch the *Lalela uLwandle* trailer please visit:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubhDF6WB7o4&t=15s&ab_channel=Empatheatre

To listen to the *Lalela uLwandle* podcast please visit:

https://soundcloud.com/user-670708972/lalela_ulwandle
Images of post-show Lalela uLwandle audience engagement KZN Coastal Town and EC tour 2019.
Amagagasi/Tides - Tracking the tides of history and re-imagining futures in Northern Zululand.

A Mbazwana Creative Arts (MCA) & Empatheatre collaborative storytelling project.

In June of 2021, The Empatheatre team conducted preliminary workshops with thirteen young performers/activists from the The Mbazwana Arts Centre in Northern Zululand. Emerging from these sessions is an exciting new project titled Amagagasi/Tides - Tracking the tides of history and re-imagining futures in Northern Zululand, with research conducted by participants over the next year, culminating in a touring theatre production scheduled for July/August 2020.

Amagagasi is a collaborative theatre-making/storytelling project which aims to support a novel democratic decision-making space for rural youth in northern KZN through the process of restorative public storytelling, including voices and perspectives that have been excluded in spatial planning and zonation of world heritage sites that excludes cultural, spiritual and other local perspectives.
The two collaborating organizations (Empatheatre & The Mbazwana Creative Arts headed up by Sphamandla Mzombe & Dumisane Ngubane) share a combined vision for forging inclusive creative processes and spaces where local artists/writers/musicians and performers are positioned centre-stage of their own stories.

The Empatheatre team and participants from the Mbazwana Creative Arts collective brainstorm new ideas as the Mbazwana Arts Centre Workshops in Zululand. Pic By Jacki Bruniquel

The participative research and theatre-making/touring component of the Amagagasi project aims to foster a new public dialogue and alternative approach to spatial planning of rural areas surrounding conservation and mining concessions. One in which traditional knowledge, contemporary social dynamics and cultural phenomena are foregrounded in these decision-making processes.

The Amagagasi project will work with concurrent practices and outcomes, on the one side there is the creation of a powerful piece of street-theatre in which audience members participate in a ‘call and response’ storytelling process that re-maps (in vernacular isiZulu) the land/and coastline, creating an “alternate archive” that re-tells the story of the region from local people’s perspective, and then explores, alongside the public, the potential of devising a new map of the region.

The project received its initial research scoping funding from the One Ocean Hub (OOH) and through the South African National Biodiversity Institute’s (SANBI)’s African Coelacanth Ecosystem Programme (NRF-ACEP) funded Deep Connections Project, all of which committed pilot funding for our preliminary start-up workshops. The project forms part of a greater initiative spearheaded by OOH, and SANBI’s NRF-ACEP funded deep connections project to enrich and deepen our understanding of
marine ecosystems and the relationship people have with them. The first workshop took place in June of this year whereby The Empatheatre facilitators used chalk drawings on the hall floor to map the KZN coastline and asked participants to locate where they were born and narrate an early childhood memory pertaining to it.

Gradually the cement floor of the arts-centre hall came alive in white chalk lines and illustrations telling a myriad of stories...stories that introduced us to rivers, coastlines, homesteads, lakes, plantations, cattle, horses, hippos, and magical snakes and baboons of the area. Participants then also shared their first memories of the sea, while standing on the map to illustrate where they first encountered it. Over the next few hours the group travelled up and down this mapped coastline listening to participants telling a series of stories and personal recollections around the Sodwana Bay area.

Another exciting generative exercise was the drawing of a chalk time-line across the expanse of the arts centre floor and asking participants to pick up a piece of chalk and fill in the time-line with narratives, anecdotes, stories, myths, events and historic episodes that they personally felt impacted the Mbazwana region and their own lives. This allows for the team and participants to place stories and histories against landmarks and places, but also weave together their memories of the region with each other’s.

Participants were also encouraged to return back to their communities, in-between these sessions, to interview their elders about other stories of the land and sea… stories which were later written (or drawn) into the time-line and narrated back to the rest of the group.
This time line spanned 15m and over the next few days would leap to vivid illustrated life with drawings and isiZulu key words written along it, these were place-holders and land(time) marks for us to return to – walking along the timeline felt like walking as a group across the coastline, and each story felt like the tide rushing up to meet us. All of these tidal shifts revealed layer upon layer of fascinating stories and histories of the region from the beginning of time (mythical and remembered)…… right through to the present day moment. Once again the group moved along this time-line listening to each participant narrate (and even re-enact) their contributions.

Empatheatre co-facilitator Dylan McGarry helping keep the chalk time-line up to date. Mbazwana Arts Centre, Zululand, 2021. Pic By Jacki Bruniquel.

After surfacing a range of narratives through these mapping exercises—combined with a variety of participative theatre and writing-games and exercises which were conducted by Empatheatre facilitators—on the closing day, participants were divided into groups and asked to theatricalize and perform a story which had resonated with them the most over the last few days of storytelling, sharing and listening.

One of the most profound moments in the workshop was witnessing Dr. Phillie Mbata from the One Ocean Hub engage with and participate in the timeline process. Dr. Mbata who is based at the Department of Environmental and Geographical studies at UCT, had conducted her PHD over a decade prior in the region and worked with indigenous knowledge holders, many of whom would have been the grandparents of the participants, and had subsequently passed on. As an isiZulu speaker from Umlazi, she has been carrying stories and histories gifted to her, and finally had a chance to share many of them back with the participants. It’s a rare moment when academic work comes back to a community in the language of the place and that can be fully held and used by the next generation who the stories rightfully belong.
At the close of this workshop, a shared project WhatsApp Group was created and participants have been provided with a data allowance from June to November 2021 (Courtesy of NRF-ACEP) to continue interviewing and sharing stories centring around the research questions/collective interests which were decided upon over the course of the first meeting.

Over the last two months the WhatsApp group has already generated a wealth of incredible interviews with local fisherfolk, sangomas and elders from Mbazwana and continues to surface powerful narratives, mythologies and belief-systems pertaining to the region. All dialogue, sharing of stories, and collaborative analyses of the stories are occurring in vernacular isiZulu, Empatheatre feels strongly that every stage of the research and devising of a new project should occur in the main language of the region, and we have been very inspired by the rich idiomatic and poetic framing and shaping of stories that is emerging in northern Zululand dialects.

We are currently fund raising and preparing for a series of follow up workshops that will work to transform these insights and oral histories into a thrilling hour-long theatrical production which will tour the Mbazwana/ Sodwana bay region for a week in July next year.
“Walking along the timeline felt like walking as a group across the coastline, and each story felt like the tide rushing up to meet us. All of these tidal shifts revealed layer upon layer of fascinating stories and histories of the region from the beginning of time (mythical and remembered) right through to the present day moment.” Reflects Dr. Dylan McGarry Mbazwana Arts Centre, Zululand, 2021.

Pic By Jacki Bruniquel.

On the closing day of the workshops, participants were divided into groups and asked to theatricalize and perform a story which had resonated with them the most over the last few days of storytelling, sharing and listening. Mbazwana Arts Centre, Zululand, 2021. Pic By Jacki Bruniquel.