



# MILWAUKEE ACTORS PERFORM IN SOUTH AFRICA

UPROOTED Theatre's  
Marti Gobel and friends  
dramatize discrimination  
on two continents

BY WILLY THORN

Marti Gobel

**INCREDIBLE EXPERIENCE,"** says Suzan Fete. "I saw monkey gland sauce on the menu!" Fete, of Renaissance Theaterworks, ran across the sauce in South Africa, while on tour with Renaissance's Brandy Kline and Marti Gobel, the producing artistic director of UPROOTED Theatre.

It was an historic trip. The Milwaukee trio collaborated on a play in the Port Elizabeth Opera House, the oldest theater in Africa and the Southern Hemisphere. "Beautiful Victorian theater—huge, ornate," Fete says. "Like the old Chicago Theatre. You could get lost in there." Kline was equally impressed by "the stately hillside theater—windswept, overlooking the ocean, tucked between Downtown Main Street and industrial docks."

Gobel became the first African American to perform in Port Elizabeth. The trio's joint endeavor, *Neat*, by Charlayne Woodard, follows apartheid-era miners in South Africa who inspire a young African American girl during the civil rights era. The trans-Atlantic cycle—South African miners inspiring Americans, who return to share both stories—"is really a wild kismet-type thing," Fete says.

Renaissance originally produced *Neat* in 2012. It was a "great show, and well received," she recalls.

More importantly, it is relatively easy to transport."

It is because Gobel is a one-woman whirlwind playing 25 different characters, sans elaborate trappings, alone on stage with a chair and backdrop.

Gobel established chops with Renaissance, First Stage Children's Theater, Next Act Theatre, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre and the Milwaukee Repertory Theater. In addition to commercial print, voice-overs and short film projects, she plays suffragist Ida B. Wells at the Kenosha Civil War Museum. Her "day job" is running UPROOTED, focused on plays, histories and voices of people of color.

But *Neat* remains her favorite role, "and these performances were the best I've ever given," she says. "A rapt, vocal audience—refreshingly interested. I felt them in a deep way, on that ride together, in the purest sense. And understand, nobody knew how they'd receive it. So, the play finished. The light went down. Dead silent. One second. Two seconds...an eternity onstage. Then I heard, 'Aye!' And they stood.

"I felt like a superstar. The love didn't stop until we got on the plane."

South Africa is a world away from Brew Town. The land moved Kline: Indian and Atlantic Ocean coasts, Great Karoo desert, Cape Town's Table Mountain, lush green farmland hills. The trio sat in towering aloe-shaded gardens, watched meerkats sprint like squirrels and saw wild baboons roadside. They ate boerewors farmer's sausage, made of kudu (antelope), and bobotie tramezzini, giant sweet curry casserole pancake sandwiches.

Gobel enjoyed sitting outside, "listening to people calling each other from across the street, out of cars, in the park. Many sing at full volume going about their day. In more than 12 dialects! It was beautiful!"

All three witnessed eye-opening poverty, and heavy security—guns and fences everywhere. "Extreme, soul-shaking," Gobel says. "The oppression hurt. Even in Africa, we are not atop the social strata. Apartheid ended only 20 years ago; it's like America post Civil War. And to know my ancestors were taken from this land..."

Still, she was thrilled by her "roots, alive and well. Oral traditions—conversation, teaching and explanation. The passion fueling even basic debates. Superstitions. Child-rearing. The incredible strength and dignity. The respect given to elders. And it was doing what I love that brought me. That is a dream come true."

The self-dubbed storyTraveling trio was part of a larger exchange: Project 1Voice, a national grassroots African-American theater project. A key connector was Milwaukeean Judith Tietyen, of Ewe Masenze Inc., ("Yes, Let's Do It!"), an educational nonprofit backing sustainable development in South Africa. After hearing Gobel on the radio, Tietyen connected her with the Sinakho ("We Can!") Trust and the Isithatha Theatre Trust.

Isithatha ("Pinpoint Light of Hope") formed May 2011 as a working home for disadvantaged township talent.

The exchange now brings Isithatha to Milwaukee with an original play from Gift Buqa and Phambili Ngcayisa, of Gqebera Township. *Heugh Road Blues*, about South African day laborers, will play the Broadway Theatre Center next fall, Fete says.

Buqa and Ngcayisa will also lead apartheid discussions and workshops on culture, theater, praise poetry and Intsomi (storytelling). "It's their first international trip," Fete says. "So we should show them some Milwaukee love."

And for those who can't wait that long, *Veil*, a play written by South African playwright Zwi Mjijima and directed by Gobel, is being performed as part of UPROOTED Theatre's "Stretch MARKS" series at 7 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 1, at Next Act Theatre, 255 S. Water St. *Veil*, about a Somali refugee, is one of six plays featured in the series to honor local artist Sally Marks, recently lost to cancer. For more information on "Stretch MARKS," go to [uprootedmke.com](http://uprootedmke.com).