

SINGING THE TIMES

In a vibrant musical celebration, Patti Nokwe and her two daughters, Marilyn and Tu, have brought to the stage the remarkable story of Patti's life, with its hardships and successes, sorrows and joys. *Beathur Baker* spoke to them

Photo by Ruphin Coudyzer



Tu (left), Patti (at the back) and Marilyn

The sorrows and the joys...



Patti Nokwe and her daughter Tu

Photo by Ruphin Coudyzer

A hush falls over the audience in the small theatre. A large and powerful woman on stage leads two young girls sitting at her feet through the chords of a sad, stirring song.

As their voices trail out over the crowd, the tempo suddenly changes. Dancing and rejoicing to the lively strumming of the guitar, they now are singing about a big celebration in the village.

From November last year to mid-January this year at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, Patti Nokwe and her daughters sang the story of Patti's life. For a family bound together by music, there could be no better way to tell it.

It is a moving tale of the tragedy, despair and poverty Patti had to overcome. She grew up in rural Natal. She remembers how there was always singing in their home - her father's favourite hymns, her mother's gentle voice and her own childhood chants in games with other children.

Then her father decided that she should go and stay with relatives in Durban. Her mother pleaded that Patti was her only daughter and asked her father to choose a child of one of his other wives to send away. But her father refused. He told her mother not to say anything more on the subject because his word was final.

The young girl had to leave for a strange place. Her mother advised her to turn to God for guidance. Although she was very sad to leave her home, once she settled in Durban, she enjoyed going to school. It was not long before her musical talent began to shine.

She started lessons with an Italian tutor, Madame Davi. She

could often escape from her poverty-stricken life and sing proudly to audiences all over Durban.

But she was treated very harshly by *uMakoti*, her cousin's wife. When her friends were free to play, she had to sell fatcakes. And sometimes when she came back from her lessons, *uMakoti* would beat her.

She was called back home when her mother was dying. But she had to hide her grief as best she could and soon returned to Durban.

When she was 19, she ran away and married the musician and performer Alfred Nokwe, the "man of her dreams". Patti and Alfred's children inherited their parents' musical gift.

As they grew older none of the five Nokwe children ever doubted they too would sing.

Her daughters Marilyn and Tu fondly remember Patti telling them the many stories of her life.

The show, *Singing the Times*, is the product of more than ten years Tu spent collecting information for a book about her mother's life. From the age of 12



Photo by Natasha Pincus

Marilyn, Patti and Tu: mother and daughters celebrate a life of song

Despite a life of hardship, Patti Nokwe would not be defeated. Right from her childhood she could cope with any hardship life brought along because of her love of song.

she would write down all the stories her mother told her.

Later, while she was studying performing arts in the United States, Tu spent a lot of time putting the pieces of her

mother's story together. "Even now my mother still keeps on coming to me with something else she has just remembered," says Tu.

Tu says: "There are so many lessons about South African life in the story, then and now. People think my mother is a strong and courageous person, but the story is also about so many others who have suffered just like her, but whose stories have not been told."

Although not the first time on stage for any of them, Marilyn says: "It's the first time we are appearing together, and that makes the play very special for us."

The Nokwes are very excited about the possibility of going on tour with the play. There is also the possibility of a film version being made.

The mother and daughters enjoy a very close relationship. From the way they share ideas and consult each other, it is clear that each has a special place in the others' lives.



Photo by Ruphin Coudyzer

Tu on guitar

"Our mother allowed us to be open and free with her about anything that happened in our lives. Fortunately she was always there to listen as well," says Tu.

Nodding in agreement, Marilyn adds: "That is why we are able to work together so well, because, more than anything, she has inspired and encouraged us all the way."

Patti sums up their relationship: "It was difficult at times,

but each of us has different strengths. In this way we managed to stay together as a family and yet feel free to strive towards our individual goals."

Marilyn is a singer in the well-known band, Mango Groove. She has performed with many leading singers like Ray Phiri, Siphon "Hotstix" Mabuse, Letta Mbulu, Lucky Dube and Chico.

Tu started the famous Amajika Performing Arts School in Durban. This is where many talented young performers like Leleti Khumalo of *Sarafina* began their careers.

Now Tu will run a Johannesburg-based arts education project for children which she has just started up in Marilyn's backyard "for the time being", she says, laughing.

This is a family that will carry on singing the times for many years to come.

The Amajika Performing Arts Projects can be reached at: Johannesburg (011) 615 3266 and Durban (011) 503 4417 ●



Photo by Ruphin Coudyzer

Marilyn tells the story with feeling