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Media Release

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UCT uses dance production to spearhead reflections on slave history

As part of its ongoing work in transformation, the University of Cape Town (UCT) held a special function at the Baxter Theatre this Friday 10th August to celebrate and reflect on aspects of UCT's slave history.

The event was timed to coincide with the acclaimed dance production – Cargo – which is currently running at the Baxter, and guests of UCT went on to attend this powerful and poignant show.

A collaboration between two of South Africa's most exciting movement theatre companies, Jazzart Dance Theatre and Magnet Theatre, Cargo explores issues of slavery at the Cape. The production takes as its foundation the fact that for 186 years cargos of porcelain, silks, spices and slaves from Mozambique, Madagascar, Indonesia and India were a major part of the culture of the Cape and uses performance to re-imagine and bring to life this history.

Such history is also feeding into initiatives at UCT this year to reflect on the University's past and the land it is built on. According to Martin Hall, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at UCT responsible for Transformation, this process has to include an acknowledgement of slavery.

"Slavery is an integral part of the history of UCT. Our Rondebosch campus is built on land tilled by slaves in the 17th century, and our Hiddingh campus in town is part of the Company's Gardens precinct, where slaves worked to provision the trading fleets," said Hall.

"Today, aspects of the Cape Town's colonial slave past still haunt the city but have largely been forgotten or are ignored. Yet acknowledging and remembering the past is a critical part of transformation," he said.

The Cargo function forms part of a larger series of events that UCT has initiated this year as part of its RESPECT programme, designed to cultivate a culture of courtesy and mutual respect on its campuses. Other events touching on the theme of slavery at UCT include the commemoration of slave burial grounds located on the Middle Campus just above the Baxter Theatre – a consultation process with communities and other stakeholders for this is currently under way.

UCT's Departments of Archaeology and History and Centre for African Studies are also feeding into the process. The three have done significant work in recent years in unearthing slave history both at UCT and in the wider Cape Town. Part of this work includes the transcription of extensive slave inventories for the Cape which makes it possible to trace lines of descent.

According to Hall this is an apposite time to look back on slavery both in Cape Town and in the world.

“This year is the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade, and next year is the 140th emancipation at the Cape,” he said. “Since 1994, all South Africans have been on a journey to find out who they are and where they come from – acknowledging the country’s slave history – and celebrating how far we have come since then – is an important part of this journey.”

END.

Issued by:

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