

Review: SS Mendi: Dancing the Death Drill

John Siblon, 18 July 2018

As part of the marking of the centenary of the First World War, the Nuffield Theatre in Southampton recently staged multiple performances of *SS Mendi: Dancing The death Drill* written by Fred Khumalo and staged by the Isango Ensemble based in Cape Town. The play was a creative reimagining of the fateful voyage of the *SS Mendi* which sailed from South Africa transporting over 800 Native Labour Corps for service in Europe along with officers, NCO's, and crew. As the ship reached the English Channel it was rammed in thick fog by a ship three times its size, the *SS Darro*. Within 25 minutes, the ship sank claiming the lives of 616 men.

In the play, the cast of men and women begin by calling out the names and date of death of the men who drowned and whose bodies were never recovered. This act sets the tone of the performance which is to recover the memory of the men who volunteered to serve and who were written out of history at the time. The play does not shy from portraying the difficulties the men from different ethnic groups faced. They have to face the reality that they would be denied combat in Europe due to their colour. They face discrimination from a white officer who does not hide his disdain for black men. They also strive to overcome ethnic differences between Zulus, Swazi, Pondi, Xhosa, and Mfengu on the voyage. After the collision, there is a strong suggestion that the captain of the *SS Darro* could have done more to save lives, alleging that the colour of the men may have been a factor in his reaction. The play also claims the enquiry into the tragedy was a whitewash.

This was a hard-hitting play designed to show the shameful treatment of black South African volunteers during the war. The audience was moved, not only by the portrayal of the men on the *SS Mendi*, but by the sounds, music, dancing, and songs which were at the heart of the play and left an impression of the identity of the men who have been reduced to names on a Memorial in Hollybrook Cemetery not far from where the play was performed. The standing ovation was well-deserved and, at the end, the cast left the stage and shook the hands of all of the audience. This symbolic gesture attests to the the desire to acknowledge, remember, and move on from those times.