

Social Impact Arts Prize '22

(for the river that swallowed its mouth)

TWO TEMPESTS

BETTINA MALCOMESS

two tempests (for the river that swallowed its mouth) is a project by Bettina Malcomess that manipulates the history of the Gariep Dam region in order to address the problem of scale in relation to climate change. Both parts of the project, a film and radio play, will take 'The Tempest' as a departure point, treating Shakespeare's tale of weather, power, magic, slavery and retribution as a parable for the intersection of decolonial and environmental urgencies. Drawing from local and historical narratives embedded in the Gariep Dam region, *two tempests* considers the potential of human agency at a collective and individual scale.

Shakespeare's 16th century fiction begins with a magical storm conjured by the usurped Duke of Milan, Prospero who seeks retribution for past injustices. The resulting shipwreck brings a series of characters to the remote island on which Prospero and his daughter live in exile, along with the enslaved Caliban, a monstrous figure indigenous to the island, and the spirit-servant, Ariel.

"In the play weather, magic and fire are as much protagonists as the human figures of power and ambition. Several cast members are in fact shape-shifting spirits, who change character, form and gender throughout. Of all of Shakespeare's works, the tempest seems to speak to the 21st century, an allegory for the human misuse of technology (represented here as magical force), natural resources (the island, the ocean, the weather) and human exploitation, where Caliban is a figure of indigeneity and blackness, exploited and enslaved by the settler Duke, Prospero." Malcomess, 2022

Malcomess's film works across themes and timescales, looking at the histories, fictions, ideals and mythologies that encircle the Gariep Dam. The South African War and the concentration camp graveyard at Bethulie, which was mistakenly relocated to accommodate the dam's construction, procure a particular emphasis. The dam's construction represented a masterful feat of geo-engineering for the Apartheid government, transforming the surrounding ecosystem by making 'land' into 'water'. For Malcomess, the site signifies a point of convergence for issues around water security, histories of land dispossession and extractive industries.

For the second part of the project, Malcomess will work with historians, ecologists and young people from the Graaff Reinet community to produce a localised 'Tempest', using foley sounds, music and community theatre methodologies. By giving voice to young people within the community through a play where human and elemental roles are equally weighted, this part of the project seeks to trace the human presence within the environment.

In both iterations, *two tempests* is concerned with the problem of scale, which requires that, "...we find another language, visual, sonic, spoken and written, with which to understand ourselves as part of the environment, as responsible as the corporations and state to whom we give over control." Malcomess, 2022

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