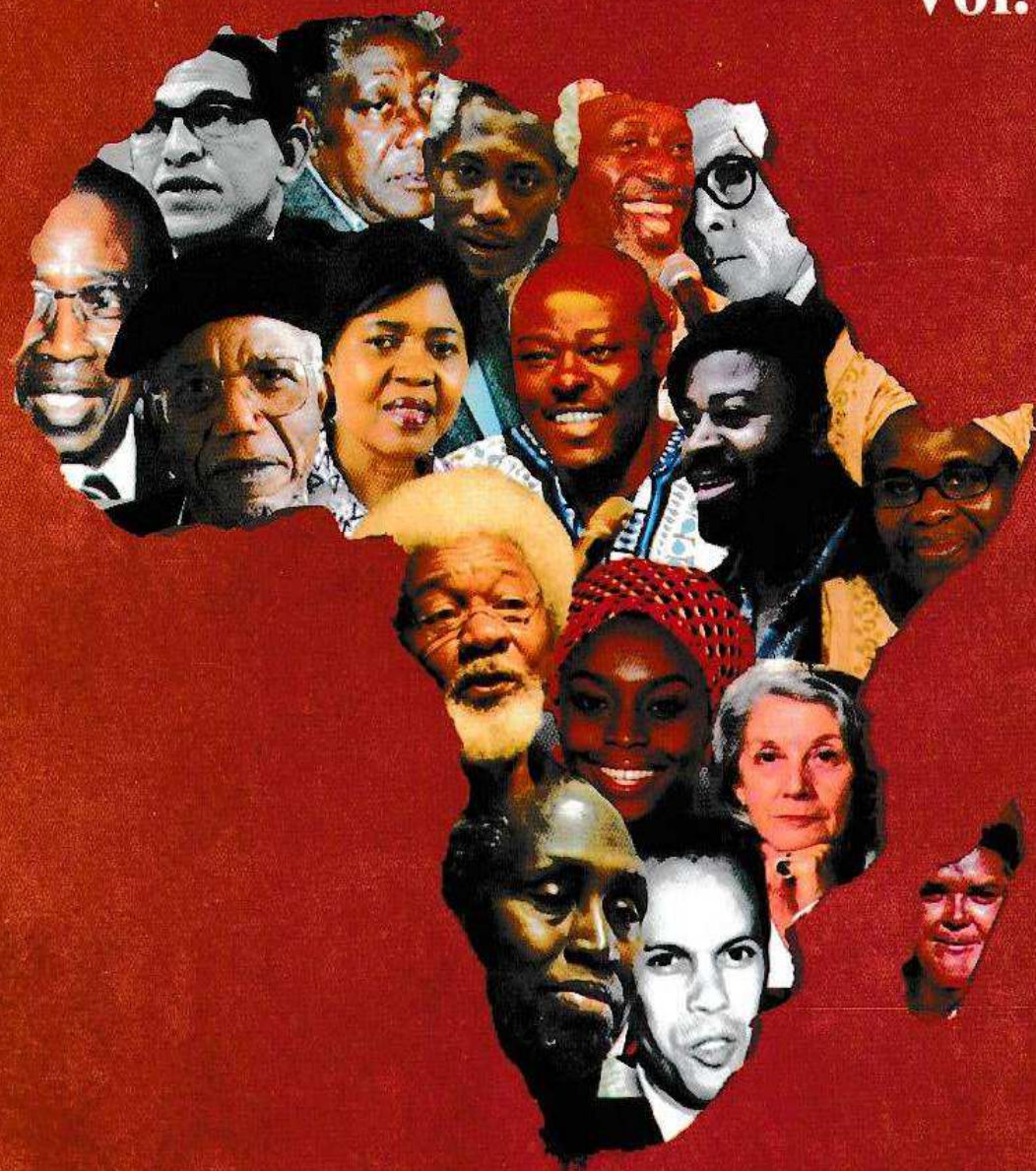


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REACH!

AUTHOR: LARA FOOT-NEWTON
(1967 -)



Type of work:	Play
Type of plot:	Family Drama/Social Criticism
Time of plot:	Post-apartheid South Africa
Locale:	South Africa
First published:	2009

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Marion Banning is 63, and South African of English heritage. At present, she is a miserable wreck whose life is characterized by apparent decay. Her Victorian cottage is at best a junkyard; her health is severely deteriorated and made worse by smoking. She is traumatised by her past and appears quite resigned to installmental death. She is separated from her husband Frank, estranged from her daughter Anne and two grand-sons; and worst of it all, hallucinated by the murder of her beloved only son Jonathan by the trio-gang of Douglas, Sticks and Arthur. Marion is lonely and without interest in shopping, cooking and eating. Having been selfish all along, she has no one anymore living with her or visiting. She falls and gets up alone, sinks into coma-like states, wets the sofa and lives

with the smell of her decay only to look forward to a certain death. She appears to fast-track the death-day by increasing her smoking, not eating or engaging in any life enhancing event. Even the path through the forest she sometimes rarely walks is dotted with images of death and decay. Marion indeed is a qualified candidate for *Reach!* Solomon Xaba is the instrument of reach, and that across racial barriers to salvage Marion from her impending plunge to death.

Solomon Xaba is 19, and rural Xhosa. At 10, he has already lost both parents to HIV/AIDS, and had his share of stigmatization. He was chased away from school by pupils with sticks who think he has AIDS. When his grandmother intervenes for him at school, he is merely quarantined to an isolated corner of the class. He has known rejection, poverty, shame and frustration in his short life. With his grandmother and little sister as his only relatives, Solomon began early to scavenge for survival. Going against his grandmother's instructions not to follow Douglas, Sticks and Arthur or boys of like temperament, Solomon unwittingly witnesses the gruesome murder of Jonathan by the deadly trio gang in a scrap yard. Jonathan pleads with Solomon in a last wish to "tell my mother I wasn't scared." Solomon is however threatened by the deadly trio that should he betray information to anyone on the murder he witnessed, he and his family would be dealt with. He is dilemmatic, torn between the urgency of delivering Jonathan's epitaphic message to his mother, Marion, and/or risk the dastard threat of Douglas and gang. For seven years, Solomon finds no courage to convey Jonathan's message to Marion until he visits a mountain perhaps for spiritual rekindling. Mustered as it were by that, Solomon begins to visit Marion's, yet seeking an appropriate moment to break the 7-year old news. The moment comes during a night of fun and laughter and Solomon cashes in on the opportunity and delivers Jonathan's message to Marion. The acquaintance between these two which has already begun during earlier visits becomes strengthened to the tune of Solomon becoming the initiator of the renewing, renovating and rejuvenating symbolic structures of *Reach!* He re-paints the dilapidated walls of Marion's Victorian Cottage, brings food, encourages her to cook and eat, buys a new television set and succeeds in re-engineering Marion's interest to look forward to the World Cup games in South Africa. Most importantly, he appears on time to wrest Marion out of her coma state back to life and living. At the end of *Reach!* Marion and Solomon have literally become mother and son having both decided to put their pasts behind them and use the present to enhance a changed future.

THE PLAY

The play takes place exclusively in Marion's Victorian-state cottage. It is the only setting of the play for the two-some characters, Marion and Solomon. The play takes place at winter time, hence restricting most actions to the interior. Marion is attempting to complete a letter she is drafting to her daughter Jane. Through the letter, illusions of disappointments, regret, sickness, decay and death are created and communicated. While the Victorian Cottage only has "furniture worn and tired...", representing a beaten and battered environment of what used to be good, active and up to date; Marion personifies the furniture's description in her "old ticker..., little lethargic... not quite as energetic as I used to be..." self-assessed and concluded description. The entrance of Solomon and his question to Marion on her current life now further reveals the deepening dive towards oblivion which her life now heads. "Well, now... it is empty, but once, not that long ago, I had a full life."

The entrance of Solomon to Marion's home and life marks the entrance of life and hope for Marion. It is Solomon that dispels the hovering air of loneliness. It is Solomon that repaints the house. It is Solomon that reminds Marion about food. It is Solomon that rekindles her appetite not just for food but also for life in its entirety. With tactical observation of the times, Solomon, much aware of Marion's idolization of Jonathan, her murdered undergraduate son strategizes for the best moment to deliver Jonathan's message, bottled up for seven years in his head.

Then the best night arrives, spiced with story-telling from both 'actors', Solomon injects the anti-climax' that nearly destroys the entire preliminary fun-characterized episodes of the night.

Marion would desire Solomon to assist her report the murderers of Jonathan to the police. But Solomon, with vivid recalls of Douglass' mean threat to him and his family, would rather tread the wish with caution. All through the play, Solomon visits regularly. On one of such visits when he comes with a brand new television set, he meets Marion half-dead, soaked in her urine on the couch. With three significant calls, Solomon interrupts Marion's progressing passage and 'resurrects' her back to this side of eternity. He further, delicately and most respectfully, gives her a hand to the bathroom, leaving her there to tidy up her mess.

The play reaches its beautiful high point in *reaching out to another* to facilitate life rather than, bask in the stupor of frustration, depression, decay and die. The

Reach! By Solomon to Marion is recompensed as Marion in turn *Reach(es)* back to Solomon in a typical mother-son filial relationship. Both 'family' members now sit together admiring the new television set and look forward to enjoying the fast-approaching World Cup event in South Africa.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL CONTENT

By the arrangement of this collection, this segment is supposed to be discussed piecemeal, that is, analysis separate from critical content. But this author is professionally 'rebellious' against the 'divorce'. By this author's research knowledge, analysis of any sort cannot be separated from critical discourse. Many critical theory authorities agree with this position. So, on the three books by this author's-examination, namely, *Reach!*, *Shwele Bawo!* and *Nothing But the Truth*, the format as re-defined here, shall be followed. Apologies for the 'rebellion'.

Reach! is an 'instructional' drama. The instruction here is against the 'rainbow' people each attempting to develop their unique colour oblivious of whatever apparent challenges doing so might entail. *Reach!* preaches against individualism and projects it as cajoling bait for self-defeatism and destruction. Loneliness also characterizes the life of the lone ranger. Marion would have died being alone and choosing to remain same. But upon the acceptance of Solomon, her installmentally decaying life and structures are re-phased and rejuvenated back to form and life.

Reach! indeed dramatizes pains, graced apartheid pains that democracy cannot whitewash or whisk away. Marion's idolized only son Jonathan was killed by the gang of Douglas, Sticks and Arthur. He cannot be brought back to life no matter how hallucinated, traumatized or frenzied the mother gets. And there is no saneness in depressing oneself to death about it either. *Reach!* instructs through its sequences that such past pains had best be forgotten. It advocates for all with painful scars to find the courage to put the past behind and wheel one's consciousness to other life-enhancing interests and make progress.

In *Reach!* the South African society is exposed as crime infested, courtesy of apartheid orientation to crime and evil. Marion acknowledges that... "If we can't distribute the wealth, then at least we have succeeded in the equal distribution of violence". The country appears to be under siege to the extent that people literally live in perpetual fear, while others are on self-exile, like Jane, Marion's daughter, in far-away Australia who cannot visit South Africa by reason of the

preponderance of violence. *Reach!* shows the incompetence of the justice system against the sophistry of crime. The likes of Douglas, Sticks and Arthur are still on the prowl carrying out their obnoxious trades unabated.

The advantage of education and its role in empowerment and capacity building is recommended in *Reach!* The South African black population represented by Solomon, must enjoy education-*Reach!* Solomon's depressing and yearning challenges for a good social standing, good education, good housing and respectability in and for lasting relationships, are all within reach of educational, *Reach!*

Perhaps the most paramount message of Newton's *Reach!* is demonstrably that people need one another. No one may survive alone for too long. Marion would have died alone in her Victorian cottage like a common animal if Solomon did not reach out to her across racial barriers. Solomon himself would have continued in his self-defeatist inferiority that the white folks would still keep their superior-distance from the blacks, despite the so-called 'uhuru' if Marion did not reach out to him with motherly affection again across racial barriers. At the end while Marion inherits Solomon in place of Jonathan, Solomon also inherits Marion in place of his mother lost to AIDS.

The playwright's use of symbolism such as "Victorian - style cottage" where its furniture is "worn and tired" to reflect and represent Marion's decaying post-apartheid life, is a beautiful device. The personification of Mr. Donovan "with too much spit" and Fred his dog "with three legs, blind and smelly..." and a "dead mossier all covered in goggas" are vivid images that confront the reader at the outset. Then as the perusal continues, Marion seems convincingly cast in the mould of the nausea-attracting spit, three legs blind and smelly. Solomon intervenes and saves her timely from ending up as a "dead mossier..." in her lonely house" covered in goggas."

Reach! is the needed bridge to link families and people of South Africa together as they experiment on democracy.

Effiong Johnson