

# Playful child within



**Terri Dunbar-Curran**

**MUMMENSCHANZ** transcend words and culture and cut straight to the heart of what it is to be human – using little more than black bags, toilet rolls, bright material and oodles of imagination.

Founded by Floriana Frassetto and Bernie Schürch almost 40 years ago, the Swiss group have found global success with their unique blend of visual theatre, which uses neither music nor language. They will be at the Baxter with their trunks full of weird and wonderful masks until March 19.

“*Mummenschanz* came from a need to bring the audience back to a playful mood,” says Schürch. “It felt like people were losing that childlike state of playfulness. We bury it underneath so many things. So we’re peeling the layers off.”

Together with performers Raffaella Mattioli, Pietro Montandon and lighting technician Jan Maria Lukas, the group are looking forward to sharing their blend of magic with Cape Town audiences once again.

“In 1968 we were youngsters and we wanted to bring our message about communication, miscommunication and human rights across. We wanted to change the world with what we had. But we didn’t have much,” laughs Frassetto. “All we had was a big trunk of tricks. We didn’t have sponsors, all we had were recycled materials, jerrycans and toilet rolls, and with that we

wanted to change the world.”

One of the main forms of expression they were interested in was masks, an idea they have developed and perfected over the years to incorporate face, half-body, full-body and 3D masks. “There have always been masked characters. They have more power than the other people. When you are masked in the light of the stage you become very big,” says Schürch. “You capture the audience and they forget to wonder about how it’s all done.”

In addition to breaking down the boundaries of language, the pair wanted to suggest an alternative to

the classical white-faced mime.

“We have invented, without knowing how great it would become, a new form of visual theatre,” explains Frassetto.

One of their most memorable acts involves a clay mask that the wearer manipulates and moulds as they perform.

“We needed to develop a mask that was as eloquent as the human face. Then that one mask grew over the whole body and became a bag,” says Schürch.

They wanted to find a way to make the mask move as quickly as speech, something that was not possible with static creations. The clay mask, which weighs about 8kg, takes roughly an hour to prepare for each performance. “Like the Japanese say, you take a mask and you take an hour to put it on,” Frassetto says, eyes gleaming.

The group have about 100 pieces in their repertory which they draw on when crafting the show, ensuring that there is something for everyone. The timelessness and universality of their work mean that their audiences range in age and culture. That sort of broad appeal generally isn’t all that easy to achieve.

“I think it’s the simplicity, the abstract, very strong emotional core, the playfulness and the fun interactivity,” says Frassetto.

“Everyone is ready for a break, wherever they are in the world. They are ready to imagine. And it’s fun to hear people try to describe it.”

Schürch agrees: “When the people exit the theatre they all have smiles inside and out, and we couldn’t ask for more.”

Their ideas are an accumulation of what they experience in everyday life, what they read about and what they see, be it during a walk on the mountain, an interview or in

a TV news report.

“Then we come across a material we can use. We take it and improve it and make it wearable and then we improvise, each of us taking a turn. Then we work out a basic choreography and story. But only when we take it to an audience does the work start,” says Frassetto. “It’s a long process and each piece continues to breathe with our maturing.”

That constant refinement means that even if you have seen their show before there will always be something new.

Frassetto says that in many modern shows the music is too loud and the lighting too over the top, so they have tried to keep *Mummenschanz* as essential and modest as possible. “I must say that Jannie really does beautiful work of simplifying all the great technical problems. He makes it so the audience can see what they have to, but still remain in the world of mystery.”

The group travel with trunks full of their imaginative masks and costumes, all of which they design and create themselves.

Some of their ideas have been more successful than others and they laugh over memories of giant black-and-white pancakes and a hand holding chopsticks and other food-inspired masks they once dreamt up. That boundless energy is channelled into a show that defies convention and entertains without all the extraneous bells and whistles that so often distract from the real magic.

“We’re musicians of the silence,” says Schürch.

● Tickets are R149 to R299. To book, call Computicket at 083 915 8000.



**UNMASKED:** Founders Floriana Frassetto and Bernie Schürch.

