

South African Comedian Goes for Laughs in Moscow

Award-winning comedian debuts in Moscow this weekend.

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Mum-z in his comedy routine **Courtesy of The English Comedy Team**

South African comedian Mamello Mokoena, better known by his stage name Mum-z, came to Russia to be with his girlfriend. A year later, he still finds himself in a pandemic-forced affair — with the country.

Mum-z came to Moscow for the first time last February, planning to spend several months with his romantic partner.

"When I got here, I did not know what to expect," he told The Moscow Times.

As his plane was landing, he recalled all the "stereotypes" he knew about Russia — "the military, the gangsters, Russian roulette" — and thought he might be greeted by a Soviet-era

military anthem at the airport.

What he found, however, was a country of "most interesting and complicated people," although the quest to understand the Russian soul was not without complications.

"I was taking photos of Lenin's Mausoleum, of St. Basil's," he said about one of his first days in the capital.

"Then there were people asking for photos with me. I thought, 'Oh, my Goodness! I am famous! They know my comedy! I've got an audience here!' Until I realized that they just wanted to take a photo with a black guy."

'Fish out of water'

The pandemic lockdown in Russia and in South Africa meant that his stay would have to be extended indefinitely.

Mum-z, 35, has been in South African comedy for over a decade. A winner of many entertainment industry awards, he came to the national spotlight on "South Africa's Got Talent" reality show in 2015. Still, in Russia, he had to start from ground zero.

"My first performance in Russia did not go very well," he confesses.

"I tried to do a lot of 'fish out of water' material, but it did not land because it wasn't authentic yet. I hadn't been here. I hadn't really experienced the culture properly."

That is not to say that Mum-z struggled to make his mixed audience of ordinary Russians, English language teachers and expats laugh. But they didn't laugh the way he wanted them to. He wants to get a particular kind of laugh.

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"I want to make sure that when I am talking to strangers, I can make them think slightly differently, but they must laugh at the same time. If I am not doing both, then there is something I need to work on."

Determined to win over the Russian public, he set off to explore the country through travel and his personal dating experience, which, he admits, inspired him to write some of his most "real" material.

"How do you go on a date when you don't speak Russian and your date doesn't speak English? That's the kind of stuff I talk about!"

Natural curiosity

During his year-long stay, he has explored many parts of Russia, including the Black Sea coastal towns. Each trip provided new skit material.

In Sochi, several cab drivers phoned their children so they could take advantage of some free

English language practice over the phone.

"They are driving and I am having a conversation with their daughter on a video chat," he laughs, explaining that those drivers, like most Russians, have had few interactions with people of color and showed a mix of excitement and curiosity.

Mokoena has developed a thick skin when it comes to racial differences, saying he often took on the role of a black "pioneer." In South Africa, he was one of just three black students in his class at a prestigious majority-white private school. His experience growing up in post-apartheid South Africa, he says, taught him how to handle situations of racial discrimination with a professional grace. He mines them for laughs.

"In the year that I have been here, I was bounced out of 12 clubs — all of which were playing hip-hop music," Mokoena said. "Those clubs were too racist to let me in, but they weren't too racist to play black music!"

But he has had many open conversations on race issues with Russians, answering their questions about Africa, the Black Lives Matter movement and the black experience.

"Those moments are quite nice because it shows that there are a lot of Russians who really want to understand what is going on in the rest of the world and want to be a part of it."

Though he is open to joking about race and class dynamics in his native South Africa, he will not start that conversation with Russian audiences so openly just yet. However, his Saturday show will touch on some of his experiences as a black person living in Europe and Russia in a performance that incorporates plenty of music, impersonations, and physical comedy.

Before leaving the country later this year, he hopes to have a big show together with other English-speaking comedians.

"I think that the English comedy scene here could be something really worth the world's attention!"

Mum-z will be performing his one man stand up comedy show at Moscow's "Steal The Show" comedy club on Feb. 20. Tickets for his performance are available online and at the door.

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