

Wheelchair-bound dancer left stranded

March 24 2009 at 09:08AM

By Thandi Skade

Dancer Makhotsa Sompane's only concern used to be whether Metrobus would send a wheelchair friendly bus along her route.

But now she worries about whether the bus will stop for her after one Metrobus driver refused to help her onto the bus and another drove past her at a bus stop without stopping.

Wheelchair-bound Sompane, who works with Agulhas Theatre Works, a mixed-ability dance company, claims that one particular bus driver who operates along her route from Berea to Ghandi Square has an "attitude" and is inconsiderate towards disabled people.

'I don't want special treatment, I just want to be able to get to work'

On March 19, Sompane was waiting at the bus stop on the corner of Herman and Corobrick roads in Berea when this particular bus driver pulled up to the stop.

Instead of pulling up to the pavement, Sompane alleges the driver stopped in the middle of the road. She could not access the bus as it was positioned higher than usual and as there were no other passengers around. She asked the driver to assist her onto the bus.

He turned to her and rudely answered, "Oh today you want help", before driving off. Minutes later a second bus approached the bus stop, but did not stop.

Three weeks ago, Sompane said, she approached Metrobus management to request they send a double-decker bus along her route as they are wheelchair-friendly.

A single-decker bus has steps which makes it difficult for her to get aboard, she said.

As a result, she has had to use metered taxis to get to work four times this month and has had to catch lifts home with colleagues.

She logged a complaint with Metrobus two weeks ago and she was assured that the problem would be sorted out, but it hasn't.

"I don't want special treatment, I just want to be able to get to work. But I don't expect a bus driver to treat me like I'm some kind of freak, because I'm not," she said.

She was allegedly told by a bus dispatcher that it's not a bus driver's responsibility to help her onto the bus. She described the drivers' failure to pick her up as "frustrating" because they are aware of her situation, but simply don't care.

"I think management isn't doing its part because they know that I am in a wheelchair and they say they help disabled people, but their drivers drive past me without stopping because they claim they didn't see me, but they know I am at that bus stop every morning at the same time," she said.

Ari Seirlis, a representative of the SA Disability Alliance, said thousands of disabled people are marginalised on a daily basis because of the state of public transportation in the country.

"Presently there's no access to functional public transportation for people who are mobility impaired," he said.

He did, however, say he was optimistic that the state of the public transportation system would improve drastically with the Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) system and the Gautrain, which he said is going to be "absolutely accessible to mobility impaired people."

Metrobus said on Monday they were investigating the incident.

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