VUKA: SHARING THE IMAGE

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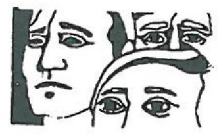
"Each generation is relevant to itself, its history-making role, above all, the circumstances that dictate its life."[1]



When black political theatre regrouped after 1976 it was with a clear sense of purpose. Two companies in particular — *Soyikwa African Theatre Company* and *Bahumutsi Drama Group* — have acted as catalysts and exponents of a new alignment of theatre with the needs and aspirations of 'the dispossessed'. During the early 1980s both companies undertook a series of international tours. There was no contradiction in this. Maishe Maponya, playwright and founder of *Bahumutsi* in 1983 gave an interview to the *East Anglian Daily Times* in which he is quoted as saying: "We hope to bring about change by depicting true incidents and situations . . . we want to stop white playwrights representing us in our theatre".[2]

Matsemela Manaka, playwright and founder of *Soyikwa,* argues that 'the dispossessed' need 'realistic entertainment that will give them courage to survive and forge ahead'. But dispossession presumes a dispossessor. Thus, he argues, 'the theatre of the dispossessed' is addressing both the dispossessed *and* the dispossessor'.[3] From this point of view the tours acquire a strategic significance in which audiences, venues and publicity are all important. The appropriation policies that 'allow' a few plays to travel overseas in order to placate/mislead the liberal conscience have to be exposed.[4] The problems of transposing community theatre from its constituency audiences also have to be faced. Can theatre created for a particular audience 'meaningfully' uproot from that audience?[5] Is there danger of cultural distortion 'to fit the international market'.[6] When such questions are considered it becomes clear how important it is that black companies are not subject to white mediation. Indeed, even the term 'black theatre' has to be questioned when it is stretched around the contributions of white South Africans. "I don't want to use the broad term 'black theatre' " Maponya declares in the Foreword to *Umongikazi,* "as it also encompasses a

white playwright reflecting black feelings and getting blacks to reflect his feelings about himself."[7]

Robert Kavanagh has expressed the opinion that in the South African context of dislocation and urbanisation it would be unrealistic to expect "a genuine modern traditional theatre with its roots in a vital rural culture".[8] The plays of *Soyikwa* and *Bahumutsi* suggest to an outside viewer that the expectation is far from unrealistic. The dispossessed are engaged in a struggle for their future and they *need* the image store of their past, not as some museum piece, but as it lives in their present knowledge of all they have lost. "Undoubtedly," Manaka declares, "we all agree that our cultural wave today has to integrate past, present and future".[9] In *Pula* the rural past is invoked not as idyll but as indictment; in *The Hungry Earth* it is restored as history; in *Vuka* it is recognized as broken. The plays associated with the Black Consciousness movement at the beginning of the decade included works which were still largely within the European tradition.[10] Anouilh's *Antigone* (TECON 1971) and Weiss' *Marat/Sade* (MDALI 1974) were given a black significance. Mthuli Shezi's play *Shanti* (PET 1973) was written entirely in English and it was written as a "well made play" though clearly straining to free itself.[11] Even as those groups were being brutally suppressed a new indigenous theatre was coming into being. The plays of *Soyikwa* and *Bahumutsi* speak with the same purposeful and relevant voice as the plays of groups like the women of the Cape squatter town of Crossroads (*Imfuduso,* 1978)[12] and the factory workers dismissed from Rely Precision Casting (*The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers,* 1980).[13]

Aware of the wide range of theatrical discourse, confident of their own voice within it and determined to use only what suits their purpose, *Soyika* and *Bahumutsi* present 'theatre of the dispossessed' as a coherent and extensive aesthetic for black theatre in South Africa at the present time. The general features of the aesthetic derive from two principal sources. Firstly, there are the communal and highly socialized forms of African performance tradition[14] — song, dance-mime, story-telling (role-play), poetry (symbolism and metaphor). These are the forms preserved and extended in the various modes of township theatre and in township culture generally. Secondly, there are certain concepts associated with European vanguard theatre. Filtered outward from the multi-racial theatre groups active throughout the 1970s, the ideas of Brecht, Grotowski, Boal and other theatre activisists have been absorbed as part of an available language. Six fundamentals emerge. This theatre is *created* collectively through workshop improvisation and exploration. It is a living and not a written text and therefore infinitely adaptable and ready for change. It is *performed* in poverty, that is, through creative use of minimalism, essentially dependent on the first word of the theatrical vocabulary, the body of the actor.[15] It is *directed* to liberating and challenging the imagination of the audience in an open and fluid discourse of episodic narrative, role-play characterisation and shared symbolism.

It is *experienced* by the audience through joy in the "skilled and subtle messages" of performance[16] and in the opportunity for participation and comment. It is *resonated* through a multiplicity of languages both literally and figuratively. Finally, this theatre has a sense of *incompleteness* which, as Etherton explains, is necessary if the audience is to be involved in the process of the play.[17]

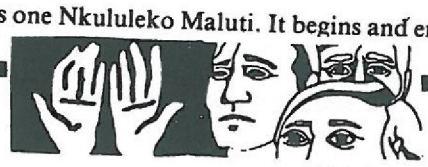
The content of 'theatre of the dispossessed' will clearly be as wide ranging as the needs of the community dictate, but the form, as so far proposed, seems to have a consistency which indicates its usefulness. It is highly mobile. It is integrated with the popular culture. It demonstrates collectivity as a way of changing things. "We saw clearly what we already knew. We belong together." These are the words of Mandlenkosi Makhoba describing the touring of *The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers* to audiences of fellow metal workers. "They knew what they saw was true . . . so . . . they joined in. These fellow workers also wanted to tell of their struggles."[18]

'VUKA': STORY AND IMAGES

Soyikwa African Theatre Company was set up by students in Soweto in 1976. Matsemela Manaka is the playwright in the Company but all works are created collectively in workshops. The Company has developed a rigorous training programme and has a special interest in traditional oral literature. *Vuka* is a Soyikwa production created by Manaka and Moalusi John Letwaba (performer). Essentially it is in the story-telling tradition and employs many of the elements noted in Scheub's account of Xhosa ntsomi.[19] Three general features mentioned by Scheub are of particular interest. Profound themes are implied through the structuring of surface plots. The imaginations of the audience "have their full role to play". There is an intricate blending of word, song and body movement. Two structural devices in *Vuka* seem to refer directly to story-telling tradition: the use of the "answerer"[20] in the audience and the shaping of the story around the same event told twice. Repetition is, according to Scheub, "at the structural and aesthetic core of ntsomi production".[21]

In its extensive use of image and metaphor and in its historical/political perspective as described by Kunene, "Oral poetry uses symbolisms which aim at operating as a common language".[22] The performer of *Vuka* thus has a constantly shifting discourse at his command. Unrestricted by stage apparatus he is free to approach his audience and make them part of the event. At the same time the structure of performance skills and the images he creates all allow him to make a distance — in order to demonstrate, elevate or provide opportunity for critical assessment. The fluidity of the formal structure thus enables the actor to respond anew to each audience and its particular context.

The story concerns one Nkululeko Maluti. It begins and ends with his death in



captivity. Between the two representations of that death — the first a deeply moving lament, the second a stark statement of fact — Nkululeko takes the audience through the events of his life. His brother has run away with a girl-friend without paying lobola (bride wealth). The girl's family, the Dubula clan, attack Nkululeko, demanding compensation of R2 000 — an unrealistic demand accompanied by unrealistic menace. Nkululeko is precipitated into a nightmare flight from persecution that becomes a journey toward understanding the economic source of his troubles. Understanding leads to action and to his death in prison. But the story of Nkululeko is not the story of one man. For Nkululeko is the Xhosa word for Freedom and Dubula (literally "to shoot") signifies Violence. Moreover, the title *Vuka* means "wake up". Nkululeko's story thus has the quality of myth. It is the story of the struggle between the forces of good and evil from which no-one, the title implies, should stand aside.

There are three central and interlinking images metaphorically proposed in *Vuka*. The first is that of the journey in search of refuge. The train, the bus stop, the suitcase, the disguise, the work permit, the passbook, the PO Box number; these are the experiential references of a nomad people, dispossessed and unfree. In *Vuka* each of these familiar images is encountered anew — made strange — in the abbreviated sequence of Nkululeko's story.

The second image is that of violence endemic in a system that deprives people of the means to establish social norms. The initiating image of lobola corrupted and debased by materialism is treated humorously — there is no reverence for lobola itself. What matters is the actual and structural violence that permeates society. Violence in the 'homelands', in the townships, the violence of pass laws, unemployment, exploitation, insecurity, harassment — Nkululeko encounters the Dubulas at every turn. The actor employs a percussive sound beaten upon the consciousness of the audience. Spade, sjambok (club), dustbin, bucket, ladder, are the audible as well as visible symbols of struggle and flight, of every nightmare escape across the backyards of Soweto.

The third image is a visual one: the Christian cross simply painted in black on a large white cloth hangs at the back of the acting space. In front of it at the beginning of the play Nkululeko is buried. In front of it at the end he stands, arms outstretched, and tells the audience that he was "mysteriously found hanged" because he went amongst "his people". The lights fade on that image. In black theology, as in liberation theology, the Cross is a symbol of God's active intervention in the world. Through its association with the resurrection it proclaims God alive, building His kingdom in the caring community. "God cares that people starve, that people are uprooted, that families are separated," Bishop Demond Tutu reminded the congregation of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, 1984, "you were turned toward God in order to be turned toward your neighbour."[23] The cross in *Vuka* represents the spiritual dimension of existence as proposed in black theology. It also makes ironic commentary upon the state

of affairs in a nation professing Christianity. Above all, it acts as a challenge to the conscience of the audience, whether Christian or not. Before he dies Nkululeko addresses the audience:

> **"Is this how Jesus Christ died on the cross?**
> **Great Britain on top, Russia to the left,**
> **USA to the right, Europe underneath?"**

The questions are brief, dramatic. They imply much and effectively recharge the symbol of the cross by a process of "defamiliarisation". Since, as Schlovsky has said, a signal given many times produces drowsiness and inhibition there is always a need for the recreation of imagery — a way of returning an object from "recognition" to "seeing".[24] The connection of Christ on the cross with contemporary world economic/political forces in such uncompromising language does just that, provoking a dialectic in the closing moments of the play.

'VUKA': THE PLAY

At the back of the acting space hangs the cloth with the simple cross marked upon it. Some props and pieces of costume are concealed behind it. On the floor at one side is an old-fashioned record player, at the front, almost amongst the audience, a battered brown suitcase. Stage right, a large stepladder with bucket, sjambok and a pair of cumbersome sandals standing beside it, a pair of blue dungarees draped across one rung. Stage left, a large filled sack, a heavy duty metal spade and a metal dustbin with a lid. The lighting is basic, used to spotlight the actor and to indicate changes of mood or event.

The Prologue: Death and Mourning

The stage dark, there is heard, as at a distance, the sound of a man singing. He enters, moves around the stage area slowly, painfully making the shape of a prison as he softly laments the Zulu chant "Khali Shoni ilanga" (when the sun goes down).

Suddenly the lights come up and the actor (who only wears a pair of long johns) 'becomes' another prisoner who must bury Nkululeko who has died. Swiftly he collects the sack, heaves it onto his shoulders and carries it with realistic mime gesture to backstage where he lets it down and returns for the spade. This he employs, violently 'digging' the grave under the image of the cross. The sound of the spade crashing onto the stage in fierce rhythm, together with the heavy grunting breaths of a man working under pressure provide the 'music' of the scene, violent, rhythmic, and strongly emotive of power and determination. It is "the pulse of a people, the beat of their life".[25]

Now the theatre becomes graveyard. The earth gapes to receive its terrible load.

The actor struggles to raise up the 'body', lowers it into the space before the cross. Because there is only one actor this is both a telling of the tale and a metaphysical symbol of man's control over his own life.

Kneeling now, grieving over the sack, the actor intones in Sotho the invocation, the traditional call for the dead. Gradually, as the lights focus narrowly upon that central image a great cry swells and swells his whole body. Heaving under the weight of the words he moves into the farewell chant in Zulu: "Hamba kahle cawe lihle: Rest in peace warrior".

Suddenly the actor stands, the lights go up and he speaks in Engish: "It is time to break the chains of oppression". As he mimes the tearing apart of a chain with his hands the Prologue ends and the story of Nkululeko begins. With the English words, however, the previous lament acquires the dimension of anguish and anger for a nation. The sound of the chant which almost breaks the body of the actor is more than individual grief. And it is very simply by the introduction of the English language words at this precise moment that the transition is registered and its significance made clear.

The Beginning of Consciousness

The actor as Nkululeko now addresses himself to "Baba" (a term widely used in Africa to denote both "father" and respected "elder") who is invested somewhere in the audience. Thus, the audience as a whole is paid a respectful compliment and put into the position of having responsibility to care and to help. The role of the 'answerer' thus acquires a wider significance. Nkululeko tells how his brother has run away with a pregnant girlfriend. Then he enters the role-play, becomes the father of the runaway girl. He puts on the blue dungarees, huge earrings, wooden sandals and clumps noisily to the attack, demanding R2 000. With just a change of facial and body expression, Nkululeko 'returns' (no change of costume) and comments wrily "My god what a lot of money". Suddenly, his whole posture puffs out with indignation as he struts around mimicking the "ghetto queens" gossiping amongst themselves at the effrontery: "R2 000! He would do better to forget her and take me for R200!".

The mood and characters change again. The actor now plays Dubula and Nkululeko in quick succession, Dubula insistent, swaggering hypocritical over the loss of a daughter; Nkululeko anxious, appealing to the audience — "as if we hadn't lost a son also!" Dubula swings into the attack, sjambok flailing and a Zulu war chant presenting ambiguous challenge and warning of violence building in society:

> **"We are a burning fire. Be careful we burn, we burn. Where are the weapons? Where are the arms?"**

This section ends quietly. The actor discards the Dubula props as he continues the narrative to the audience in the Nkululeko role, tells how he fled to the Transkei on a bicycle and found the place full of Dubulas! The humour frames the metaphor of violence in the 'homelands' predicated on ethnic divisions and separateness. Keeping the intimate tone of shared amusement the actor moves the story onto Johannesburg and the themes that city presents. "My god what a pool of unemployment!"

From Metaphor to Irony

Nkululeko puts on a grass skirt, plays some local 'pop' music and begins to dance on stilts. This, he tells "Baba", is the "business" he set up. Enlivening the audience with noisy laughter, he gestures, indicating that they should throw money and join in making the rhythm by clapping and stamping. He uses Zulu language to get the show "on the road". The reference to lack of employment opportunities and to blacksploitation tourist entertainment is underlined by Nkululeko's own commitment to the only form of independence left to him. Temporarily the experience of this scene is one of vibrancy and fun. Through active participation in the event, however, the audience is in an ironic situation whether as exploiters or as sharers in misfortune who accept crumbs of comfort and do not resist.

The audience is stopped short when the actor abruptly flings down his props, rushes to turn off the record player and returns putting on the mask of white officialdom — a pantomime nose and spectacles. In the role of white policeman the actor chastises Nkululeko, appropriates his means of livelihood and dumps it at the back of the stage. The next scene, inevitably, is the pass office. Nkululeko pulls the ladder to the centre of the stage, filling in with extemporary jokes. Mounting the ladder he faces the audience who must now share the role of Nkululeko since the actor has become the white bureaucrat. This he does simply by gesture and expression. Once used, the mask of white identity is discarded —it has been absorbed into the discourse as reference. The space between the top rungs of the ladder is now the window where petty officialdom issues its bored questions and commands, now the ridiculous little grid as it appears from the other side. The actor with but a slight adjustment of feature conveys the two sides of the familiar dialogue and implies the glass between. The whole pass law system is reduced to a confrontation at the top of a ladder. The visual image is contrasted by the language which is left to speak for itself.

Nkululeko is forced into a low-paid job as a window cleaner, and political enlightenment begins as he recounts to the audience what he saw of developing affairs in Johannesburg and Soweto.

> **"The white people tell us to clean their windows — clean their windows whilst their city is on fire!"**

The approach is conversational but it is the quiet before the storm.

The Soweto Uprising

The ladder becomes alive as the story of Soweto is unleashed. The actor is the embodiment of the disturbances, the sound of the streets. He forces the ladder across the stage, a vehicle of fury from which he leaps with the bucket that was but a moment before the workman's tool. At one and the same time he recreates the jubilation of the students in their solidarity and the oppressive sounds of police retaliation.

The scene progresses with conscious dialectic. The actor portrays both the students and the workers who find scraps of paper telling them to stay home from work — messages they cannot even read. The hostel dwellers, anxious to protect their jobs, attack the students. The actor throws himself into the percussion sound of street violence with the sjambok clashing on the metal dustbin lid. And then quietness. The parents of the children return from work into the Soweto railway station. The tone is elegaic:

> **"Some people died. Some people are still**
> **wearing black to this day. And I ask: why?"**

The question is allowed to hang a moment in the air.

The Journey from Soweto

The audience is now provided with an opportunity for self-critical perception as the actor recreates the public meeting at Regina Mundi Hall in Soweto. Dressed in a priest's surplice he seeks to calm emotions, to lead his flock back to peace and reason, and get them all to join in singing the African national anthem. The question of how to react to the familiar call to "turn the other cheek" is thus made reason for the audience and restored to their control. Then it is the turn of the politicians:

> **"My god! What language! Who could**
> **understand it?"**

Once more the Dubulas catch up with Nkululeko. Images of prison, violence, terror and flight return. The actor hauls the dustbin into the centre of the stage, clambers on it, scrabbles at imaginary walls. He becomes a flailing mass of arms and legs and twirling sjambok. The Dubula metaphor reaches its tragic climax. But death in a hostel riot is not the end for Nkululeko.

With the stage in almost total darkness he crawls forward to the suitcase that has been lying at the front of the stage throughout the play as a visual image of the

metaphysical journey. In half light and in silence the actor holds the attention of the audience upon the new image he is creating as he gathers clothes from the battered case: the image of disguise and total isolation. For a moment his spirits revive as he 'dresses up' under the lights — the audience his mirror. But the game does not last. The actor becomes desperate as he searches every pocket, every corner of the suitcase for a scrap of paper, the address of a friend to whom he can turn. When he finds it, it is of no use:

> **"I need a house number, not a P.O.**
> **box number. I need somewhere to go."**

The actor walks forward amongst the audience:

> **"I need someone to help me. I need a**
> **volunteer. I need someone to help me**
> **find my freedom."**

From this moment of claim upon the audience the actor returns into the narrative, describes the journey to Bophuthatswana by 'bus, train and on foot. Finally, he sits on his suitcase, a discarded newspaper in his hands, creating a sense of the world that is oblivious. Humour and irony bounce back as he reads and then comes the moment of revelation:

> **"Shares go up and we go down into**
> **the bowels of the earth."**

The commodity statistics provide the challenge of the cross to the conscience of the world. Is this how Christ died, trapped between the competing interests of the over-powerful? It is a dangerous understanding. Now the lights are flashing, the actor running, trapped, tearing off his clothes (having them torn from him) till he is stripped to the original long johns and falls dead. Black out.

Epilogue

Spotlighted, in direct line with the cross, arms outstretched as if in blessing, the actor speaks quietly to the audience, offering them a new and even more responsible role.

> **"My good people it was not my intention**
> **to disturb your peace of mind. I just**
> **want to tell you that I went amongst**
> **my people to bring them together . . .**
> **I was mysteriously found hanged."**

The lights fade on the image that embraces all who accept the message of the cross and/or the challenge of Nkululeko who is Freedom.

'VUKA': THE PERFORMANCE

Moalusi John Letwaba seems through the responsiveness of a well trained body and a controlling intellect able to change in stature, age, even racial feature with but a slight adjustment of posture, a hint of gesture. No movement is exaggerated, everything is controlled and flows from the centre of his being. When necessary he can demonstrate a terrifying energy, filling the stage with not one but an army of the Dubula clan. Then as suddenly he magnifies the space around him, becomes a child, approaching the audience (Baba) with respect, with hope that creates a shape for response. He has also a wide vocal range. He can adopt the tone of self-assured bureaucrat, of fervent politician or optimistic priest. He can shake the house with rage or grief or jubilation and he can drop one quiet word into a space of silence to provide it maximum effect. But there is no sense of effort. His musical register of tonal speech elides the distance between the spoken word and chant so naturally that there is no transitional disjunction. The complexity of *Vuka* derives in part from the sense of ease with which Letwaba inhabits and creates the many forms that work together. Direct narrative and comment, cool irony, the poetry of passion and compassion and a particular level of shared humour — he balances them all one against another, presenting them to the audience, even drawing them from the audience which he holds always at the centre of the event. And it is this centrality of the audience which is at the heart of *Soyikwa's* work.

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