



CLASS, RACE AND OPPRESSION: METAPHOR AND METONYMY IN 'BLACK' SOUTH AFRICAN THEATRE

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Cultural work by academics on what is variously called 'black', 'African', 'committed', 'alternative', 'worker' or 'working class theatre' blossomed during the early 1980s. The work done can be divided into two conceptual strands: The first strand is performance theory analyses which locate performance within a discernable dramatic/semiotic theoretical framework designed to link culture to art. The approaches vary, but they are loosely linked by their historical materialist point of departure.¹ This work has been largely concerned to define concepts and develop theory to account for the form and origins of the theatre of the oppressed in South Africa. It is characterised by an attempt to link the forms of this theatre (its 'text', whether oral or written) to its context (political, social and economic). Relationships of process are the concern of these performance-centred scholars. They are concerned with the conjunctions between social production, ideology and form: between organiser, artist and audience; and between history, social structure and performance.² These studies try to identify the dialectical relations which lead from self-awareness toward awareness of social forces and the collective consciousness and organisation needed to forge social change.³ These authors tend to discuss theatricalism — where images speak more than words, and where action is symbolic and evocative⁴ — in terms of 'popular performance', 'committed theatre', 'worker theatre', 'working class performance' and sometimes, 'alternative theatre'. For them, culture is the total process which informs the way meanings and definitions are socially constructed and historically transformed. Popular culture is a culture of the present, created in opposition to the received culture. Popular performance mobilizes the historical resources of African culture, hopefully adapting and transforming both indigenous and foreign traditions to incorporate changing circumstances into a meaningful framework of value and accountability.⁵ The representation of these processes in performance is the main object of their study.

Descriptive responses which largely eschew theory form the second conceptual

approach.⁶ Much of this work has been published in the *South African Labour Bulletin* and is written by academics who have collaborated with proletarians in the creation of 'events'.⁷ This work is by and large uncritical of either the 'events' themselves, or the processes which led to the 'events', being concerned rather with the productions, *perhaps understandably so*. There is a tendency for this group of writers to assume that 'working class' plus 'culture' results in 'working class culture': "Emerging worker-plays are not meant for a consumer public, and they are created and performed within the perimeter of working-class leisure time and space".⁸ Although these writers may produce such disclaimers to the contrary, they tend to identify 'culture' as a form of product. The forms can vary: theatre, songs, dances and so on. This position tends to rob culture of its larger context of production and consumption, its task as organiser of human relations in specific social formations; and in this way the essentially political nature of culture is partially displaced.⁹ But above all, theory, for them, must not be allowed to dominate the description or the analysis. For instance, an unpublished article by Ari Sitas argues that "practice is primary and theory and critique is always a postmortem examination".¹⁰ Not only has Sitas been a major force in shaping and generating 'working class theatre' in South Africa, but The Junction Avenue Theatre Company of which he was a founder member, has coalesced around it a specific approach to form, featuring the imposition of an unquestioned realism, and a concomitant hostility to local 'aesthetic theorists' who allegedly rely on the imported 'thought-shops' of foreign scholars to produce their 'object[s] of thought', resulting in "the most acute insensitivity to local artifacts".¹¹

Sitas' charge, which is a familiar one amongst cultural workers who have allied themselves with the working class struggle at the level of the factory floor, at the sites of community resistance, and in terms of the political organisations of the oppressed, needs to be drawn out because it illustrates the point at issue rather clearly. Certainly science or theory creates its own object. But then, so do the cultural interventions of intellectuals such as Sitas who exploit the contradictions of their relatively privileged class positions to shape proletarian aspirations and imbue them with a 'revolutionary' thrust. This notion creates a separate and separated 'Culture' as its 'object of thought', a definition not unlike the one contained in the conventional hegemonic perspective. This perspective is, as Harvey points out, based on a two-fold mystification; that work and leisure are 'opposites' and that culture relates to leisure rather than to work.¹²

Briefly, Sitas¹³ has identified nine contradictions which result from a (moral) struggle conducted within the current dominant forms of culture and which propel this theatre to creativity. These are briefly summarised here as they form the basis of his concept of worker theatre. This paper will draw out the implications of some of these contradictions below. First, is the primacy of work as a site of oppression and struggle and the difficulty of representing this aesthetically. The second contradiction is the clash of moral codes: the new



moral order derived from worker association versus old cultural formations and practices. Third is the incongruity of individual characterisations and collective action. The one draws attention away from the other. Fourth is the clash of real time and dramatic time. Storytelling takes time — “the worker-actors strongly resist any alteration of reality”¹⁴ — audiences get restless after 90 minutes. Performance time is related to the value of dignity. A fifth conflict occurs between the oral communication of a story and the information necessary to explain and construct reality. Cognitive versus cathartic moments is the seventh contradiction. This dramaturgical device engages the audience in two ways: first it makes the audience aware that they should not confuse the play with reality; and secondly victories against management are shown not to be the definitive statement of the play. The penultimate contradiction concerns the clash between mythological aspects of portrayal as against real aspects of portrayal. Finally, there is the ‘plurimedial’ nature of the ‘event’ which runs established forms like song or dance against a strategical function within the play.

Sitas’ attack on scholars employing Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, Macherey, and Fanon (sic), seems to contain the germ of a resentment against analysis from any but a conventional dramatic perspective. The apparent assumption is that semiotics and aesthetics automatically excludes questions of ‘real’ culture. His position represents a common type of culturalism which imposes dualisms through metaphor on representations through performance. Sitas’¹⁵ claim for a ‘unique’ South African working class experience seems central to his dismissal of cultural theories identified and tested elsewhere, even if they have been injected with a local imperative. His trivialisation of the semiotics of performance, and his dogged rejection of theoretical guidelines which could be adopted and adapted through performance production, not to mention redefined, in the South African context, brings us no closer to an understanding of the communicative elements in the drama he has collaborated on. By positioning this drama outside the semiotics of performance, he is denying crucial elements of working class theatre: that of its communicational potentialities, as well as its necessary moment of critical/theoretical self-reflection.

To understand the reasons for the rejection of a theory of production vis-a-vis ‘working class theatre’, it is necessary to make a detour into a discussion of categories which have crept into dramaturgical discussions of theatre in South Africa.

‘Constituting its Own Object’: Problems of Definition

An analysis of the theatre under discussion, then, needs to begin its evaluation aware of the pitfalls of the dominant methodologies. The first concern is with the catch-all use of the term ‘black theatre’.¹⁷

TOWARDS A PROCESS-ORIENTED DEFINITION: ‘BLACK’ THEATRE?

The common sense usage of the term ‘black theatre’ is largely reductionist and derives mainly from the empirical fact that most performers of this theatre happen to be black. To argue that such theatre deals therefore with black experience is problematical in that the ground of that experience tends to be obscured. Such a definition, by its very operational blandness, obfuscates the more cogent influences and deeper underlying processes consequent upon apartheid which has brought about the label in the first place. The categorisation of theatre and drama in South Africa into ‘black’, ‘white’, ‘Afrikaans’, ‘English’ and so on perpetuates the set of hegemonically serviceable dualisms: the dual economy, and hence the structural oppositions of tribalism (periphery) versus modernity (centre), civilization versus savagery, Christianity versus paganism and politics versus art. In the absence of an elaborated theoretical position, many commentators lapse into use of the label when analysing the dramatic subject matter.¹⁸ In this way they inadvertently suppress the theoretical anomalies which could question the vulgarity of the term. Kalwyn Sole¹⁹ has echoed the dangers of racial or linguistically defined classifications, while Steadman too, has sounded a note of caution, arguing that ‘black’ could encompass an ideological — as in the idea of Black Consciousness — rather than only an ethnic or functionalist category.²⁰ Steadman goes on to suggest that ‘black’ theatre is understood by its practitioners as proletarian theatre. Ethnicity is thereby incorporated into the framework of a class analysis and can be used to mobilise cultural resources.²¹ Indeed, the ‘black’ theatre of the early 1970s articulated a concern with Black Consciousness rather than trying to “conscientize the white man”.²² Furthermore, many of these plays make consistent references to the imagery of Black Consciousness.²³ Pascal Gwala makes the distinction between ‘black drama’ and ‘drama for blacks’.²⁴ The former identifies a theatre that promotes dignity, self-reliance and critical assessment among Africans on their ‘own cultural terms’ in the service of the black liberation movement.²⁵ This theatre, however, presents an incomplete view of the struggle by suppressing the images of social disorganisation so ably presented by, for example, Gibson Kente, and so it also ends up as a catch-all label obscuring more than it elucidates.

Maishe Maponya, in an interview with Carola Luther, distinguished between “African theatre” and a theatre that is projected by whites — that is “black theatre”.²⁶ The former deals with “resistance” and “freedom” and “is something I’ve never seen in a production made by whites and blacks in collaboration, or in a production made by white using black actors”. The inaccuracy of this statement is attested to by the many examples of worker theatre and what Matsamela Manaka himself calls ‘black’ theatre where blacks and whites have collaborated in varying degrees.²⁷ Challenged on his definitional reductionism





which would lump *Ipi Tombi* and *The Island* in the same category, Maponya predicated his definition in terms of audience response. Criticism of the system is more acceptable to whites if it comes from white playwrights, he argued: "I mean the guys who are oppressing us are sitting in parliament and discussing things like freedom for the blacks, and as it's in their own context, not in ours, they can handle it. But my political commitment is to the oppressed, the blacks of this country..."²⁸ This observation does not explain why a Fugard production — or worker theatre — seems to draw greater black audiences no matter where they are staged than does "African theatre". Nor does it theoretically link up with the Black Consciousness use of 'black theatre', a discourse which Maponya seems to sympathise with.²⁹

Working Class Theatre?

There are similar problems of ascription with the idea of 'working class theatre', as employed by Sitas and others.³⁰ The problem with this notion — as with the empirical use of 'black theatre' — is that it lacks "a sustained critical tension with regard to possible forms of interaction between agents of diverse class location".³¹ A familiar form of class-economic determinism ensues which usually argues that "the only authentic working class art must derive solely from agents of the working class, which, in turn, would seem to suggest a strategy

based on working class spontaneism".³² This theatre, we assume, emerges somehow out of, or is constitutive of, working class culture. But, as Harvey states, the working class is part of the capitalist mode of production and shares in the culture that serves this mode.³³ Though not a homogenous culture, it designates forms of struggle within capitalist culture. The danger here then is that working class culture may come to be regarded as events and performances in an enclave surrounded — though not swamped by — unfriendly capitalist society. The image is appealing, but a bit too romantic to be practised.

It is undeniable that the theatre that developed under the auspices of the trade union movement that itself developed after 1973 is very different to the theatre that preceded it, and the worker theatre that has developed elsewhere. This theatre deals mainly with the migrant part of the workforce. However, since the form taken by this theatre, *Ilanga*, *The Dunlop Play*, *The Frame Play* and *Ziyajika/Turning Point* and *The Spar Play* has largely been shaped by approach of The Junction Avenue Theatre Company, it is the result of transclass collaborative white and black efforts. This does not negate the validity of 'worker' experience. It does however suggest that the designation 'worker' is itself the site of diversity, possible diversity, and also of external mediation which has its own theoretical fish to fry.

A Popular Theatre?

The term 'popular theatre' is often used by academics in South Africa without any theoretical elaboration. Ross Kidd however, applies it to "cultural/educational activities in which the popular classes present and critique their own understanding of the world in relation to the broader aim of structural transformation".³⁴ Specifically, popular theatre seems to be underpinned by four key elements: first, the need for analysis with regard to the political economy and social formation; second, the strength and coherence of the created *fictions*, which, using irony and contradiction, lead to a detailed and comprehensible understanding of the problems; third, the need for a continuing organization,³⁵ and fourth, the unification and exchange of experiences between groups engaged in popular theatre.³⁶ Theatre is defined by Bappa and Etherton as the *actual social process* whereby the people come to make their own political and economic analysis for future action. The play provides a means of objectifying social reality *for the purpose of changing it*.

Augusto Boal³⁷ takes the above analysis further, incorporating an interaction and sharing of the means of theatre production with audiences, actors and creators of dramas. Ultimately, however, even this theatre relies on the interventions of intellectuals.³⁸ This intervention and mediation has yet to be seriously addressed, though this is beginning to be done by the Association of Writers and Researchers of the New Theatre, and the Participatory Research Group in North and South America, Africa and Asia.

A Process-Oriented Definition

What remains to be developed is a more generic notion which acknowledges material origins, process and transformation. Part of this necessary clarification relates to the complex inter-relations which occur when black directors work with their white colleagues, where the social class experiences of each intersect and are encoded into the performance. Plays such as *Egoli - City of Gold*, *The Island*, *Ziswe Banzi is Dead*, *The Last Man*, *Ilanga*, *The Dunlop Play* and *The Hungry Earth* have all been assisted by the theatrical talents of white people whose own experience can never duplicate that of their black colleagues. Class characteristics and social relations are framed by economic and social forces far more powerfully than can be fundamentally affected by the good intentions of individuals who are willing to commit class-suicide in the service of the oppressed classes. This is not to deny the contribution of, for example, the white and other petty bourgeois members of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company or white trade unionists to working class theatre or the subsequent effect on the quality of life of working class individuals. But such contributions occur mainly on a humanist rather than on a structural basis and perhaps explains the contradiction of white organic intellectuals trying to live out their alienated intellect in another form of colonialism through a cathartic performative working out of the realism forged in the workplace. As Arvon points out:

Great works are never cast in the partisan mold of a single class; they express the relationships of various classes within society as a whole, enabling their authors to rise above their class barriers... As a man, he belongs entirely to his class, whose ideology he shares completely, whereas as an artist or a writer who has become aware of the dialectic of his history, he brings to light the objective elements, the real dynamic forces underlying social evolution."³⁹

The relations between classes and their expression in art, however, are not as simple as Arvon implies, particularly in South Africa where skin colour is an added dimension of identity and experience. Only a few black directors, for example, are able to breach the 'dialectic of their history', and then only partially. Three main kinds of inter-class contact can be identified in the South African situation, and deriving from these, a number of further contradictions can be detected.

The Practice of Intellectuals

The first concerns those black director-authors who form part of the petty bourgeois class, and whose financial success, afforded them by their plays, tends to push them towards greater aspirations for class mobility. Where co-opted, they assume petty bourgeois values and lifestyle. Such directors alienate themselves from the worker-actors with whom they have created the play,

unless, of course, they share their class aspirations. In any event, a growing rift may occur between the directors and their proletarian audience who remain locked into the rawer and more immediate experience of exploitation. They may lose touch with the working class ethos from which their plays originally derived their thrust. They will then find it increasingly difficult to identify with and articulate a constructive working class ideology though they may try to continue to allude to it in their plays. This is particularly the case with Gibson Kente who, although largely ignoring structural causation of black poverty and repressive living conditions, nevertheless continues to draw huge audiences. The ideological rift in his case is compensated for by an emotional identification through slick entertainment and appeal to popular predispositions. It is not implied here that this will necessarily happen in any economically deterministic way; but both theory and practice indicate that this exists as more than just a possibility.

The second case occurs where the black petty bourgeois director-authors decide more consciously to resist cooption. Such individuals will find themselves in a highly contradictory situation, for their class position, and its concomitant ideological tendencies pulls them in a certain direction, whereas their own conscious intellectual desire to articulate the working class position and ideology pulls them in another. There is no resolution to this contradiction other than trying to maintain a dialectical tension between the two opposing forces. Consider, for example, the disinterest shown by ex-clerical worker Maponya in collective forms of expression: "I am not interested in working for another organisation like a trade union or educative body, and having my art used as their vehicle. The integrity of my work would be compromised, and I value my independence".⁴⁰ Here, Maponya apparently wants individual recognition as an 'artist', and to maintain individual authorship in the face of a collective contribution. His plays are, however, often enriched by drawing on the suggestion of his colleagues. While he makes inordinate material demands on his actors — "he or she must be prepared to go out and look for a job to subsidize him/herself" — he seems to talk about his 'art' in idiosyncratic terms only. This is a characteristic of the petty bourgeois class and cannot be nullified by his subject matter which exposes the oppressive conditions under which his characters live. This in-between position can only be maintained by dint of self-discipline and requires a much greater awareness than is implied by Arvon. For this reason, these practitioners of worker theatre sometimes resist the theoretical interest shown them by academics, for they are able to grasp implicitly the highly unstable social ground of their praxis.

The third case concerns white petty bourgeois intellectuals who use the advantages of their class positions, most particularly their education, together with an understanding of and sympathy with the working class to help shape proletarian resistance. The director-authors (or co-actors) may have no direct experience of proletarian lifestyle and are, therefore, more firmly in the camp of the petty bourgeois than is, for instance, the individual in the previous case. Under these conditions, identification with the working class is a conscious and



deliberate action which entails the questioning of the ideology of their own class. The intervention by white directors in the practical activity of the active "man-in-the-mass"⁴¹ brings to that activity a theoretical consciousness which can facilitate a greater understanding of the world in so far as this consciousness transforms perceptions of reality. Their theoretical intervention is NOT post hoc as Sitas would have it, but intrinsically part of the process of cultural production theory and is not an autonomous "conceptual baggage of aesthetic values".⁴³ As Coplan observes of the work of Kente and Mhangwane, their plays "testify to the existence of an implicit, collective theory of dramatic effectiveness among working-class township audiences".⁴⁴

The point of intellectual intervention is "to construct an intellectual moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups".⁴⁵ That intervention, however, needs to extend to the dialectical redefinition of form itself. Whether this can be done satisfactorily by petty bourgeois intellectuals is of course the big question.

REALITY AND ITS MEDIATION

Metonymy and Metaphor

In some cases the participation of intellectual white co-directors (or facilitators) has worked against the very earthy metonymic strengths of worker theatre where they have sought to inject a modicum of theatrical convention into the play. This practice often entails a dualist perspective where stage + performance are equated with 'theatre'. Theatre, in this sense, stands as representation of life and underlines its separateness from it. Such a division must trivialise the centrality of the concepts of performance and metonymy where life + theatre exist as a continuum to "a theatrical conceit".⁴⁶ This approach to direction deemphasises the relations between art and life by emphasising the discontinuity of such relationships. To protect its own object this position *has* to disparage the power of metonymy by confining it to a restrictive literary sense, thereby ironically ruling out a powerful conceptual tool for achieving its end. It also imprisons the mise-en-scene in terms of metaphor. The consideration of "the use of gigantic mechanisms to begin approximating the experiences of production"⁴⁷ was seen as necessary to retain a sense of realism in the play version of *Ilanga*. This option was rejected however because, amongst other reasons, it would be "not so much the realism in the stage that would dominate but the symbolism of the structure".⁴⁸ But as Jakobson and Halle point out, symbolism is primarily metaphoric, and metaphor, as the substitution of one element of language for another, is internal to the circle of semiosis by virtue of a similarity between their signifieds and *not* between internal and external referents.⁴⁹ The connection in the case of the latter is not necessarily one of resemblance, but *culture*, in other words, arbitrary. In contrast, realism is primarily metonymic. Scenic metonymies are founded on physical contiguity closely linked to the action.⁵⁰ Whether or not

the iconic use of props could be made to work from the workers point of view, its representational basis has the effect of substituting a metaphoric reality through offering relations of likeness rather than connecting the worker-spectator (or non-worker spectators) through metonymy where they become participants in the performance itself. (This of course, was Sitas' objective.) In the latter case the emphasis is on the part-whole relationship of art (the performance) and life. Work here is not separated from leisure through the metaphorical interventions of either stage design or the comparative nature of metaphor through words or gestures. We will return to this point.

Performance

Performance is a bundle of signifiers, a density of signs.⁵¹ derived from an interacting set of floating polysemic systems. Performance semiotizes or fixes the object.⁵² It is not always easy to ascertain what makes a sign into a stage performance (as in *Ilanga*), though it is easy to identify stage performances through conventions, metaphor, the use of artificial signs and dramaturgical structures. The substitution of cause for effect through metonymy ensures performance in the wider social sense; metaphor defines performance in the narrow stage sense.⁵³ Enactments which derive directly out of processes such as the legal imperatives which brought about *Ilanga*, tend to resist purely metaphorical definition. Such enactments have an ontological significance, whether used in a court of law, in the workplace, or on stage. Any attempt to decode a performance must take cognizance of the complexity of the cross-referencing which occurs between the text and its context. This does not mean that audiences will necessarily confuse the play with reality. Rather it means that audiences will (hopefully) perceive more clearly (through metonymy) the contiguous relationships between the enacted performance and the social experience that is being evoked.

The argument comes down to questions of how we perceive reality-out-there on the one hand, and representations of reality on the stage on the other. What are the semiotic links, if any? Are they metonymic, metaphoric, or both? Is there a transcodification, from one system (life) to another (the stage)? Is it necessary to accept the stage-audience dichotomy?

THE DRAMATISTIC MODEL

The connection between drama as an individual creative action and drama as a social creative activity has been made by John van Zyl. He proposed a *dramatistic model* which is both methodology and ontology: "At a performance of radical theatre, the audience is part of the performance and there is no division between the stalls and the footlights. Signified and signifier become one".⁵⁴ The nature of this amalgamation, however, is distinct from the short-circuiting effect of the filmic sign which is automatically collapsed without the transcodification which can occur through theatrical performance. On the stage, metonymy is able



to use contradictions (such as those Sitas has identified) to position the audience in metonymic relation to the performance enacted. Metaphoric based performances, in contrast, tend to reinforce the abstract separations that are propelled by the capitalist relations of production. The distinction is not always quite so neat, however. In township theatre, metaphor and metonymy often co-exist. This apparent anomaly is best explained through recourse to Umberto Eco's theory of metaphor which identifies metaphor as embedded in subadjacent metonymic contiguities.⁵⁵ He argues that performance often invents combinatory possibilities beyond the semiotic circle and not anticipated by the code. The interpretants elicited from audiences can differ, and depend on their class experiences and ideologies. Ian Steadman, for example, relates the context of a sequence in Matsemela Manaka's *Pula!* (Rain!). One sequence of the play places the action amidst the audience:

The theatre is turned into a shebeen and the audience becomes its customers. The actors converse with the audience, offer them drinks, ask for cigarettes, and even dance with them if they are willing... the playwright... discusses the corruption of black unity through alcoholism, prostitution and robbery. The scene reaches a climax where the theatre lights are apparently fused, screams occur offstage, and Tsotsis (gangsters) attack the shebeen and rob the actor-customers. During the first performance of this scene in a Sowetan community-hall reality and fiction became momentarily confused — in a situation where such attacks are commonplace.⁵⁶

The merging of reality with fiction described by Steadman emphasises the power of metonymy where audiences are drawn from the subject's classes. This experience is ubiquitous, as is evidenced by Manaka's own observations.⁵⁷ Again, in a scene from *eGoli*, metaphor leads to audience participation, paradoxically, leading the township audience to identify emotionally with metaphorical abstractions as if they were real objects (as in metonymy). Consider this description by Steadman:

eGoli is a unique theatrical metaphor for social and economic conditions in South Africa. John and Hamilton are chained to the economic system which exploits black labour and creates golden cities on the backs of that labour. Beneath the golden city is a network of gold veins being hollowed out by black workers — the system is in danger of collapse. The chain signifies different things. Firstly, the men are chained in bondage to the economic system. Secondly, they are chained together as partners against the forces of oppression. Thirdly, the goal of all workers is to break the chains of oppression. When this writer saw the play in performance in Soweto, the breaking of the chain was accompanied by salutes and participatory exclamations from black members in the audience.⁵⁸

Thus such plays, whether of the 'worker' kind like *Ilanga* or the more 'theatrical' kind like *eGoli*, when performed for an audience drawn from the same class as the actors, function metonymically, connecting stage experience and audience experience (or interpretants) to each other, thereby integrating them with the everyday class experiences of oppression and struggle.

Performance: Off and On-Stage

This brings us back to a discussion of roles and reality.

Sitas emphatically rejects the idea that "Alpheus Nhleko, a grinder at a metal foundry" would see that "in his 'life he plays many parts' or that his theatrical performance is a rebellion to the white man's machines or technological fantasisation".⁵⁹ It sounds hard to say, but what Nhleko recognises or not is irrelevant. That he unconsciously lives this condition does not mean that worker performances are an opaque transposed content with objective 'out-there' real referable objects, about which absolute knowledge can be obtained. If Nhleko finds it "very hard to understand that today he is a worker and tomorrow a boss", this does not suggest that his historical understanding of his condition is the final word. Reality is not directly apprehensible, but is mediated through signs and ideological subject positions. The manipulation of these through the aesthetic of performance links the play/performance with the very life that Sitas claims is ignored by at least one "well meaning aesthetic theorist".⁶⁰ It is this semiotic link that makes the acting ability of the actor/performer largely irrelevant in a Third World context. By Third World we mean countries which are located in terms of their relation to transnational capital which is largely responsible for the "nightmare of the modern factory system".⁶¹ Sitas also asks, "how do you portray steelwork and foundry work with their furnaces smelting away at 1800°C, the noise and the dust...?"⁶² Shakespeare provides the answer in the first chorus of the first speech in *Henry V*. The very essence of theatre is that everything is semiotized.



We would argue then, that the implicit theoretical position taken by our second group of commentators is conceptually barren. It is impossible to analyse beyond mere description or identification of contradictions within the given form that typifies most of conventional Western drama. Such work merely prepares raw data for a radical analysis. No matter how much it is argued that an absolute realism exists on the factory floor — a realism that defies dramatic analysis and which is unique to that situation — there is no reason why that realism is not susceptible to semiotic or performative scrutiny, if for no other reason than that they both deal with signs as a matter of their significance or sense.

In a number of cases, plays have been brought about by white organic intellectuals who have introduced to working class migrant labourers the aesthetic/intellectual concepts of theatre and performance. *Ilanga*, for example, arose out of the frustrations of a trade union lawyer who devised a role playing exercise in order to facilitate successful communication with his clients who had been gaoled for an illegal strike, and who understood nothing of courtroom procedure, let alone the significance of corroborative evidence, accurate statements and the importance of witnessing the events in question. In this example, the play had its origins in black labour experience, but that experience was only externalised to a wider audience (that is, the magistrate's court and later, a trade union hall and later still, a theatre on the Wits campus) in performance. Indeed, the performance on the stage and deftness in handling what must have been for the workers a remote semiotic context became in effect the dress-rehearsal for an undeniably real performance no less semiotically overcoded. Michael Vaughan has described this as a 'drama of occasional mobilisation'.⁶³ The performances occurred in "cultural spaces" which may be institutional or non-institutional, that act as physical and social carriers of events in popular or working class culture".⁶⁴ In *Ilanga*, the actors (defendants), audience (the magistrate) and director (lawyer) have a relative autonomy to each other in the courtroom. By using a dramatic form the lawyer directed his clients to articulate their arguments to a third party. In these terms, theatre is a mediation rather than a reflection. The original performance was not disconnected from 'reality', even though the play was continued by the Junction Avenue Theatre Company after the original actors had unmediatedly been endorsed back to the homelands.

The theatre-as-drama stimulated by the experiences of the lawyer in a capital-labour conflict becomes the theatre of commitment once the actors (in both the sociological and dramatic senses) decide to perform for an audience drawn from a wider set of social experiences. In *Ilanga*, initially at least, that audience comprised their working class peers who attended such plays in union halls. Once the play was taken out of this organic environment and transplanted to a more conventional theatre, the spontaneous metonymic component is replaced with a much more controlled, mainly metaphorical text-to-stage relation. This

new largely petty bourgeois audience, especially if they are white, is less able to relate to the play as it was originally performed in a union or township church hall. The distinction between audience and players is both architectural and one of class. *Ilanga*, for example, had to modify its call for strike action as it was thought that the white audience would not appreciate this approach. In theatre-as-drama the world is a stage, not only for the actors, but also for the audience. Those conceptual barriers that do exist are part of the individual's response to what they are watching/participating in and whether they interpret the performance in a metaphorical or metonymic sense. Whatever interpretation results is largely determined by the class position of the viewers and whether or not or to what degree they are subject to the dominant ideology. Also, techniques which worked well in a hall do not always work in a more conventional theatrical environment. Where an actor addresses an audience and involves them in a decision whether to strike or not, this enhances the metonymic contiguity in a hall populated by a participant audience. In a theatre such a technique can become crudely propagandistic and devoid of subtlety. The architecture of the theatre and composition of audience has caused a change in the meaning of the signs involved. Where one set of meanings operated in the performance in a hall involving a participant audience, in a theatre filled with a more class remote audience only some of the tiers of signification are activated. Where the analogical probity of metonymy connects audience and actors to life in the former case, in the latter it degenerates into digital sets of metaphor (in the Jakobson sense) where the performance operates at a largely symbolic level distinct from the lives and experiences of its audience. Interpretant production, the generation of the idea to which the individual signs give rise, is curtailed and the original spur of the performance is vitiated.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL AGENTS

This paper has taken issue with the maxim that "practice is primary and theory and critique is always a postmortem examination".⁶⁵ It has argued for a theory of semiotic production with regard to popular performance. A theory of production should not be forged in isolation from organic social movements, popular culture or history. Claims that theories of form or aesthetics are *post hoc* denies the materiality of theory operating at the level of resistance itself, giving it form, direction and a strategic offensive. The revolutionizing of the content of life should be paralleled by a revolutionizing of the content of theatre and the dialectical redefinition of its form.

Such a revolution is taking place in forms of committed theatre which have emerged in South Africa over the last decade. It is emerging in the face of attempts to conventionalise that theatre and despite theoretical struggles going on between academics on the place of theory in production. It is taking on a unique form derived from peculiar relations of production in South Africa and



in different (theoretical) responses to it. Capitalism is not just another exploitative social formation. It is one which subsumes all previous formations. That is: as against all previous intrinsically coded forms of labour, it substitutes a *de-coding*, an abstraction, a quantification, which opens the way for an endless expansion of production and accumulation. This abstraction, abstract labour, is therefore the limit-point (or decoding) of all previous forms of labour. As such, it is a decisive and permanent revolt against coding, and therefore against culture. Along these lines, Deluze and Guattari can say that capitalism has haunted all previous social formations as a nightmare, threatening the overflow of their codes, or in other words, the overflow (overthrow) of traditional culture as a principle.⁶⁵

It follows then that in any project of cultural resistance in our society, like worker theatre, there will be a strong tendency towards a recouping of this loss, of collective desire. Let us suppose for the moment that such a recouping could be permanently successful. What that would do is block the form of equivalent exchange intrinsic to late capitalism by becoming a barrier to the privatization of desire upon which generated exchange and abstract labour is predicated. In other words, it would rupture late capitalism at its abstract heart. But to do this in any but a dramatic or performative way is not really possible since it would involve turning the clock back to its pre-decoded past. It is certainly possible to do this in drama though, precisely by revitalizing the dramatic codes, by in other words re-animating metonymy and metaphor.

However, the limits of this tactic must be clearly appreciated, it must always, in some or other way, be a nostalgia of sorts in that it involves an impossible revolt of coding (and a prior history) against the principle of abstraction and decoding (late capitalism). There is a parallel here with 'anti-theoreticist' theoretical impulses like Sitas' culturalism. Their inclination to side with the particularistic histories against abstract analyses is morally correct. This is indeed the right direction for an aesthetics of cultural resistance to take. As Gramsci in a different connection said, "One cannot make politics — history without the *passim*, without this sentimental connection between individuals and people-nation".⁶⁶ But the trap must not be ignored. If we are indeed, with late capitalism, at the 'end of history', the imperative becomes finding ways of **breaking through** the webs of universalisation capitalism has substituted for culture; not to cast back to previously successful invocations, precisely the invocations that are the present currency of worker theatre.

Taking 'natural' categories of culture — like drama — as privileged sites for the reinvigoration of organic culture and for the contestation of dominant culture begs the very problematic that should be investigated in order to take resistance beyond symbolic revolt. In times of severe social upheaval, produced by both late capitalism in general and by South Africa's particular social struggles,

normally constituted cultural mechanisms no longer work. *They become dead forms*. When this begins to happen, and it certainly doesn't happen overnight, the accomplishment of social and personal relocation in processes of sense-making is sought outside of accepted and expected cultural formats, in larger scale movements which reformulate the cultural meaning system as a whole. No stage-confined drama — no matter how shop floor authenticated — can compete with the mass participation political theatre of funerals, street demonstrations and mass meetings. The notion of **community participation** is, in these practices, metonymically being re-defined in a way that could never return the ascendant oppressed to a relatively passive audience role on any mass scale again, no matter how relevant the theatre itself to their class quandary. This is by no means to say that current theatre by workers is irrelevant: it remains an important crucible for the distillation of common work experiences of oppression. But it behoves intellectuals of all types involved in working class cultural interventions to be far more aware of the forms of their interventions, and of the nature of the all-important links back to the organic community of experience that these forms allow or forestall.

Notes and References

- 1 See Steadman, 1981, 1983; Coplan, 1984, 1985; Tomaselli, 1981a, 1981b; Mshengu, 1978, 1979; Sole, 1984a, 1984b; Kavanagh, 1985; and Blecher, 1980.
- 2 Coplan, 1984, p1.
- 3 Ibid. p7.
- 4 Steadman, 1981, p2.
- 5 Coplan, 1984, p2.
- 6 See Von Kotze, 1984; Brink, 1984.
- 7 The word is Sitas's, 1984, 1986. The 1986 paper is a shortened, modified version of the 1984 conference paper.
- 8 Von Kotze, 1984, p92; Sitas, 1986, p87.
- 9 See also Harvey, 1984, p63.
- 10 Sitas, 1984, p27.
- 11 Sitas, 1984, pp2-3; Sitas, 1986, p86. Perhaps underlying Sitas' unease with the 'thought-shops' of foreign and local scholars is that "In 'popular' forms of literature, the text does not have the status or character appropriate to (the individual relation between the reader and the text); indeed, the text tends not to exist, in an absolutely definitive sense. The relatively elusive status of the 'popular' text can pose methodological problems of research, especially when expectations derived from the dominant methodologies of the definitive text are the starting point" (Vaughan, 1982, p52). Harvey, 1984.
- 12 Sitas, 1984, pp15-16; Sitas, 1986, pp93-104.
- 13 See also Cheadle in Tomaselli, 1981b, p67.
- 14 Sitas, 1984, p6; Sitas, 1986, p57.
- 15 Sitas, 1984, argues that "What we are faced with is a lot of content, elements of popular culture and working class life transposed on stage in unresolved, unique and sometimes contradictory ways. There is a screeching content in search of theoretical forms, but not yet, there can't be, a conceptual baggage of aesthetic values that necessarily flows out of a working class position in society" (p4). While conceptually clear on the organic origins of working class experience in terms of the relations of production, Sitas claims a lack of theorisation with regard to 'popular', 'theatre', 'event', 'culture', and 'working class'. Simultaneously, however, he seems to reject any attempt to connect these through a theoretical injection from



a theory of signs or aesthetics which considers culture in terms of its signifiatory content and constitutive relationships. He thus dissociates content (which can be theoretical) from form (which is not yet ready for theorization).

- 17 See Tomaselli, 1981b.
- 18 See, eg, Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984, Chapters 1 & 2.
- 19 Sole, 1980, 1985.
- 20 Steadman, 1981, pp2 & 12.
- 21 Coplan, 1984, p3.
- 22 Tshabangu, 1975.
- 23 Sole, 1984.
- 24 Gwala, 1973.
- 25 Coplan, 1981, p7.
- 26 Maponya and Luther, 1984, pp26-27.
- 27 Manaka, 1984.
- 28 Maponya and Luther, 1984, p29.
- 29 This seems to be indicated by the following passage from Maponya:
 - "I don't believe there's such a thing as a white African. I won't entertain the idea of whites calling themselves African... In the end it's a question of heritage" (Luther and Maponya, 1984, p28).
- 30 Paradoxically, Kelwyn Sole (1984b, p24 and 1984a, p71) would seem to imply that certain unnamed scholars are guilty of this reductionism. Nowhere have radical performance scholars used the term in this manner.
- 31 Vaughan, 1982, pp52-54.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Harvey, 1984.
- 34 Kidd, 1980, p281.
- 35 Bappa and Etherton, 1983.
- 36 Latin American Statement, 1982, p6. The *Third World Popular Theatre* was one attempt to establish this unity by building up an informal network of theatre workers which would facilitate the exchange of material and ideas. The informality of the network was to protect it from the victimization of right wing governments (Mwansa and Kidd, 1982, p4). It appears, however, that this network was indeed broken through intimidation by various governments of their citizens who wrote in the newsletter.

Another grouping is the Association of Workers and Researchers of the New theatre (ATINT — Asociacion de Trabajadores e Investigadores del Nuevo Teatro) whose commitment is to "participatory theatre for social change" (*Bulletin of the ATINT*, 1985, p2). This organisation is primarily oriented to South America. There are a number of other bodies such as the Participatory Theatre Research Group which is based in Canada.
- 37 Boal, 1979.
- 38 Crow and Etherton, 1980, p574.
- 39 Arvon, 1970, pp32-33.
- 40 Maponya and Luther, 1984, p32.
- 41 Gramsci, 1971.
- 42 See, eg, Blecher and Simon's improvisational experiments in the Winterveld; Cheadle's role playing exercise in *Ilanga*. Also *The Dunlop and Spar Plays*.
- 43 Sitas, 1984.
- 44 Coplan, 1981.
- 45 Gramsci, 1971, pp332-333.
- 46 Sitas, 1984, p5.
- 47 Ibid, p16; Sitas, 1986, p95.
- 48 Ibid, p17; Ibid, p96.
- 49 Jakobson and Halle, 1956.
- 50 Veltrusky, 1940, p88.
- 51 Barthes, 1964, p262.
- 52 Elam, 1980, p20.

- 53 See Goffman, 1959 on metaphor and performance.
- 54 Van Zyl, 1977, p39.
- 55 Eco, 1985.
- 56 Steadman, 1983, p13. Also see Steadman, 1986.
- 57 Manaka, 1980, p24.
- 58 Steadman, 1983.
- 59 Sitas, 1984, p5.
- 60 Sitas, 1986, p85.
- 61 Sitas, 1984, p8; Sitas, 1986, p86.
- 62 Sitas, 1984, p16.
- 63 Vaughan, 1982, p54.
- 64 Sitas, 1984, p11.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Deleuze and Guattari, 1977.

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