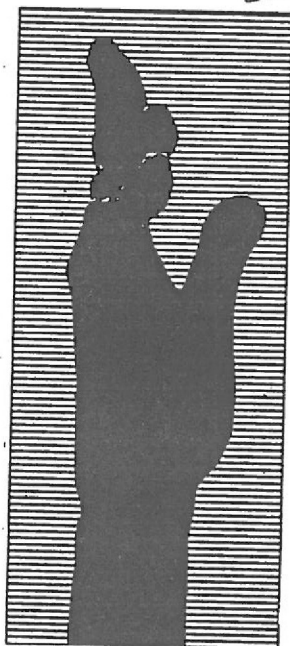


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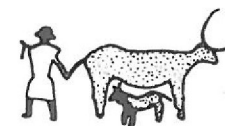
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## DIALECTICS OF TRADITION IN SOUTH AFRICAN BLACK POPULAR THEATRE

by  
David Coplan



I contribute to this collection of essays as a friend of South African theatre and not as a participant: as an outsider and not a son of the soil. It does not require a lengthy personal involvement to realize that those who are actually creating black theatre in South Africa have far more impact upon the struggle for cultural consciousness and autonomy than do academic bystanders like myself. Nevertheless the intense pressures exerted on this theatre by the institutions, interests, and ideology it seeks to supesede have created an urgent need for guiding principles, intellectual focus, and clarity of purpose in performance practice. I offer my reflections both in recognition and support of my fellow contributors to this volume, who are among those who have worked hardest to serve this need.

Their efforts are important because in South Africa, popular theatre is important. Structurally, it is not so tied to complex, capital intensive, institutionally controlled technological media as is film or even popular music. Theatre is a movable feast of expressive communication, materializing wherever and whenever communicative energy and imagination combine to give it life. As Tomaselli<sup>1</sup> and Mshengu<sup>2</sup> have both observed, the very nature of black theatre, rooted in traditions of orality and improvisation, makes it less of a physical artifact and so less subject to state censorship. More importantly:

Of all the arts, theatre is the most accessible and forceful medium through which the black working class is able to articulate its ideology, expose the contradictions of apartheid and communicate a more accurate portrayal of their actual conditions of existence to members of their own and other classes<sup>3</sup>

### What's In A Name?

In reality, this statement goes beyond a description of the expressive potential of theatre in South Africa to define what black theatre, at its most effective, really is. Problems of definition and terminology continue in South African

performance studies, however; a reflection of the cleavages and contradictions that compose black theatre's social and ideological context. The terms 'black', 'alternative', 'committed' and 'popular' have each been suggested as appropriate qualifiers of a theatre that advances the interests of the politically excluded, economically exploited, socially subordinated majority of South Africans.

It is easy enough to make an argument against any of these terms. "Black theatre", as Tomaselli<sup>4</sup> argues, seems misleading and reductive, excluding the long-term, profound involvement of white performance activists and including, at least potentially, those productions by and for black audiences that merely serve white government and commercial interests. Secondly, as Cape Town actress Nomhle Nkonyeni complained, the notion of black theatre ghettoizes this cultural movement and conceptually amputates its connection with the growing body of popular political theatre throughout the third world.<sup>5</sup>

"Alternative"<sup>6</sup> has an attractively critical, anti-establishment sound, but in the end suggests a sort of permanent marginality and a negative or diminishing definition-by-what-it-is-not; as if the fault with this theatre is not in its stars, but in itself that it is an underling. "Committed"<sup>7</sup> is to be praised for laying its political cards on the table, and for including everyone actively engaged in using theatre to promote popular interests and radical change. But this term also fails in focusing on the message at the expense of the medium. Steadman's assertion that "there is no homogeneity between Africans and their 'culture' — in the conglomerate social structure of South Africa what is important is socio-economic reality"<sup>8</sup> is true on the face of it. But it is not the whole truth, for it conceives of culture as merely a pool of creative resources, a bag of expressive tricks; selected, reinterpreted, and recombined as social forces dictate. The notion of social reality must include the historical cultures and constitutive processes which give black South African theatre its vitality and special character. To assert that a truly South African theatre is emerging from a crucial conjunction of cultures is not to reify 'the Bantu' or subordinate social realities and consciousness to the ingrained traditions of an idealized past. It is rather to acknowledge the structuring capacity of historical experience, and to grant black people a positive, autonomous self-definition based upon historically rooted values and relationships, and represented by the symbols of cultural continuity. As Steadman observes<sup>9</sup>, political nationalism is everywhere in Africa congruent with cultural nationalism. In South Africa, "committed" theatre draws much of its impetus from the Black Consciousness Movement, whose program includes heightening the awareness of historical culture as a means of promoting black self-esteem, solidarity, and principled political action.<sup>10</sup>

The term "popular theatre" has great support among working-class theatre movements elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> and would seem promising but for its suggestion of a theatre merely *by* and not necessarily *for* the people. Thus we could identify 'people's theatre as distinct from 'popular' theatre. "People's theatre" arises and

manifests itself spontaneously through the mobilizing of folk resources, but may be appropriated by commercial interests of the state, which use it to serve their own interests.<sup>12</sup> "Popular theatre" provides not only an autonomous form of expression and a source of identity and popular understanding. It also represents the people's interests, overcomes their negative self-images, asserts their grievances and aspirations, and mobilizes support for a "total" liberation process.<sup>13</sup>

In accomplishing this, popular theatre arises from the people's theatre in so far as the latter represents an expressive response to collective social experience. Like people's theatre, popular theatre must mobilize the performance resources of South Africa's historical culture, so as to reinterpret experience and articulate common interests in modes immediately meaningful to the popular audience. Popular theatre advances popular consciousness and aspirations by maintaining continuity — both culturally and institutionally — with the community that it serves. This is the conception advanced by Brecht, who argued:

Popular means intelligible to the broad masses; taking over their own forms of expression and enriching them; adopting and consolidating their standpoint; representing the most progressive section of the people in such a way that it can take over the leadership: thus intelligible to other sections too; linking with tradition and carrying it further; handing on the achievements of the section of the people that is struggling for the lead.<sup>14</sup>

In what form such a theatre can hope to exist under present conditions in South Africa is the question we must address.

These attempts at proper terminology are all very well, but the editor's choice of a title for this volume tacitly recognizes that "black theatre" is the term that is likely to stick. This is not simply due to the politics of race or semiotic inertia, but to the implicit popular recognition of who this theatre is really for and about. International efforts notwithstanding, nothing of value can be accomplished in South Africa without the engagement of black South Africans. Black popular consciousness and leadership will define the terms under which a more liberated existence can be secured for all the country's people.

Steadman has helped to straighten the course by suggesting that black theatre be identified most fundamentally with the values articulated by the Black Consciousness Movement.<sup>15</sup> In his view, black theatre is that "which dedicates itself to the depiction of life lived as a black man," and which "exemplifies how performance in Southern Africa can reflect change and continuity in relation to the complexities of the social structure."

Leaders of the Black Consciousness Movement have nevertheless recognized the inherent contradiction in a struggle for political equality rooted in an ideology of colour consciousness. Hence Pascal Gwala, in envisioning a "national theatre",



equates blackness with both national consciousness and full, equal humanity for blacks, and by implication for everyone.<sup>16</sup> For him, "the Black in Black drama is allied with liberation; the search for dignity and self-reliance".<sup>17</sup> This "Black ethic," as he terms it, based in historical culture and expressed through techniques drawn from every relevant theatrical tradition, could produce an authentic national theatre; a theatre at once indigenous and universally human.<sup>18</sup> The material and social conditions for such a theatre do not yet exist. But by re-examining the roots of what, in the spirit of unity, I shall call black popular theatre, we may come to better understand what is happening and what is possible in the way of a theatre allied with the interests of a common humanity.

### The Indigenous Traditions

Unlike the peoples of the Niger basin, Africans living south of the Limpopo had no indigenous theatre in the European sense prior to the 20th century. They nonetheless possessed traditions of story-telling (Xhosa: *intsomi*; Sotho: *tsomo*), praise poetry (*izibongo*; *dithaka*), and dance that were clearly dramatic in that their performance employed episodic, mimetic narrative to create visual as well as oral representations of character and conflict. Political ceremonies and religious rituals had their theatrical dimensions, as they do in most societies, but their thorough integration into the instrumentalities of material, social, and spiritual life made performance continuous with experience and material consequence.

These performance traditions contradict the prevalent notion that there never was, and therefore cannot be, indigenous black theatre in South Africa. Athol Fugard achieved his outstanding position in international English language theatre in large measure by creating vehicles for black actors to represent black experience by means of black performance traditions. The oral basis of both expression and transmission, in fact, helps account for the continuity of tradition in today's black popular drama.<sup>19</sup>

It should immediately be clear that "tradition" here refers to expressive principles and processes, *not* products. The realization of indigenous African performance traditions is not confined to Zulu *izibongo* poetry, Xhosa *intsomi* folk narratives or Sotho *mohobelo* dance. Indeed, the use of these historical forms in black drama is only effective or meaningful in so far as their portrayal derives from contemporary reality. Beyond this reality, of course, rural folk culture, especially those forms which are linked with the pre-colonial autonomy of black societies, provides powerful symbols of ideological commitment and identity. Unfortunately, the political history of "African tradition" has made it one of the most contentious dilemmas in the development of black popular theatre.

Since the arrival of the first missionaries, the slur of primitivism and moral inferiority cast upon indigenous culture by whites has hindered the efforts of

Western-educated black leaders to employ historical culture in creating solidarity and positive identity among Africans. Just as tragically, the divide-and-conquer strategies of settler colonialism, followed by the relentless construction of a colour-caste system, has given indigenous traditions a bad name. Among urban Africans in general, the notion of tradition has never been entirely freed from the suggestion of black 'backwardness' and ethnic division: the allies of oppression and apartheid.

Since the 1920s, government and commercial interests have increasingly exploited African language and performance media in the service of the dominant ideology. For them, African traditions are another material resource which can be decontextualized and distorted to reinforce an image of blacks congruent with rationales for their political exclusion and economic dependency. Indeed, the owners and agents of mass cultural media now regard themselves as the preservers and champions of the 'richness and beauty of the African tribal heritage'. Even conservative whites became perfectly willing to prefix 'noble' to the label of 'savage' once the military, political, and social structures that had vitalized African cultural forms had been disembowelled. Small wonder, then, that the black intelligentsia and urban working class in general came to regard their historical cultures with ambivalence. As an ideal, the symbolism of African tradition is as prideful as glory, as sacred as ancestry, as supportive as the family, and as personal as the self. But as a reality, to many urban Africans, pre-industrial culture can seem as exotic as a museum, as stagnant as the homelands, as futile as a faction fight. The alienation of black people from the resources of their traditions and their history is doubly tragic, because it severs the vital connections between town and countryside, between middle and working classes, between ethnic heritage and Black Consciousness, between past and present, between identity and autonomy of self. It is essential then, to re-examine cultural tradition as concept and process rather than as content, so that its use in black theatre can heighten rather than alienate popular consciousness.

From the times of the earliest records, and probably before, the performance traditions of Bantu-speaking South Africans have been based upon the principles of interconnection, visibility, imagery, and efficacy. The first principle, interconnection, is so pervasive that the other principles can only be understood in reference to it: distinctions between principles are in fact hermenutic, rather than empirical. The interconnections are of two basic kinds: 1) synesthetic — the flow of meaning, translation of images, and coordination of expression between various visual, aural, and tactile media including dance, song, mime, poetry, narrative, costume, and ceremonial enactment; 2) the continuity between expressive and instrumental action, which effectuates identity and social structure and mediates relations among individuals and groups in the social, natural, and spiritual aspects of being.

A perceptive if ethnocentric account of synesthetics comes from A T Bryant,





who observed two Zulu men's regiments performing in a first fruits ceremony early in this century:

The two choirs thenceforth sang together, each its own part, with different words and different tunes, and yet all so tastefully blended together as to create perfectly harmonious, albeit exotic, music. As they sang they all danced together, assuming simultaneously, in perfect unity and much barbaric grace, identically the same poses of body and movement of limbs, shields, and sticks, as to present a combination of harmonious sound and rhythmic action most graceful to ear and eye...<sup>20</sup>

In African dance songs, words, music, and movement form "an indissoluble whole",<sup>21</sup> a complex of intersense modalities with a unified focus of meaning. Similarly, in story-telling, "the formal structure of the performance is a synthesis of verbal narrative, body movement, vocal dramatics, and song".<sup>22</sup> It is these interconnections which move traditional performance into the realm of dramatic action, an inherently multi-media art form. The principle which most directly effects this transition from dance-song to drama is visibility: the coordinated translation of verbal and musical images into metaphors of movement. Delegorgue, travelling in Zululand in the 1830s, witnessed the dancing of royal regiments before King Dingane: "each man indicating the action and pathos of the song by the direction of his stick, the motion of his other



hand, and the turn of his body".<sup>23</sup> As Adams' Sotho informants put it:

A beautiful song is a song that when it is sung the sound agrees with the rhythmic action of the feet. The beauty of the song is mostly not its words but what is apprehended with the eyes.<sup>24</sup>

The importance of expression in action, of making meaning visible, has been documented in genres of dance, oral poetry, and narrative throughout black South Africa. In Xhosa story-telling, for example:

Movement is vital to the tradition; action is all important and character is revealed not by description but through action. Similarly, theme is revealed not by preaching or digressions, but through action.<sup>25</sup>

Lestrade explicitly noted the movement towards drama in his literary classification of South African Bantu song:

With *satiric songs* we enter definitely upon the class of lyric connected with concerted dramatic action. Such songs... are often illustrated by mimic action parodying the thing satirized. And it is with this type of song, also, that we enter the type of Bantu poetry which, in modern times, very frequently takes the European and his ways as the object of satire. Dance songs involve praises of the skill of some able performer, or a narration of some real or imaginary past event... being acted out as well as sung. In the mimic songs, we have even more direct dramatization, some events being described at full length in the words, and symbolically imitated in vigorous action. But it is in the game-songs, work-songs, and ritual songs, and even... in the songs in tales, that we encounter the greatest degree of combination between the lyric and dramatic. In these, we are not listening to a mimic narration of real or imaginary events: we are hearing, from the lips of the performers themselves, a symbolized description of a real and living action taking place in the very present before our eyes. The union between lyric and drama could hardly be closer.<sup>26</sup>

In some areas of Southern Africa, satirical songs were an element in a more complex theatrical display. In 1586, Friar Joao Dos Santos visited a Chope royal court in Southern Mozambique, and recorded that "The king... has another class of kaffir who are called marombes, which means the same as jester, and who sang, shouted praises, told jokes, and performed acrobatics".<sup>27</sup> In the early 1900s such comedians performed at dance competitions on the South African goldmines. There they dressed in old European top hats and tailcoats, worn comically askew. Their jokes, satiric praises, displays of mime and acrobatics drew upon their experience at the mines as well as upon the lives they left at home. They also created miniature dramas satirizing European mine personnel,



as well as the trance dances and healing rituals of traditional diviners, then as now a favourite with audiences of African migrant workers.

Recently, J K McNamara observed Ndaub dancers from Mozambique use the mine dance arena to dramatize the common work experience of all the miners underground. After an enactment of a mine accident "from which the victim miraculously recovered after certain rites had been performed over him by an underground 'boss boy', or team leader", a sequence followed

in which the lead dancer, wielding a spade, lashed 'rock' into a 'cocopan rail loader' (in reality a tomato box). When lashing was completed the dancer suddenly turned up the box onto the arena floor, an action which represents the tipping of ore-bearing rock into the ore-pass. The action also appeared to have a subversive intention in terms of sabotaging the products of labour, judging from the approving roar of the crowd that followed.<sup>28</sup>

This dance-drama was performed by a team who had undergone rites of initiation together in the same rural home district. It demonstrates, as did Mitchell's classic study of Zambia's *kalela* dance, how performance traditions based in ethnic and community loyalties can express a general solidarity and an identity of values and interests among all workers in a culturally heterogeneous context.<sup>29</sup>

The principle of visibility in turn affects the operation of imagery in African performance, as an examination of traditional praise poetry quickly shows. Zulu *izibongo* and Sotho *dithoko* for example appear superficially to consist of aesthetically embroidered historical verse narratives. But scholars agree that narrative sequence is entirely subordinate to the delineation of character against the background of normative cultural values. Structurally, the poems are a series of verbal pictures created from the limitless figurative resources of African language. As elaborations upon a mutually resonant set of master metaphors,<sup>30</sup> these images are ordered according to an emotional and aesthetic logic of incremental effect. Zulu literary scholar and poet B W Vilakazi once compared *izibongo* to an exhibition of sculpture, in which stanzas are like lights directed so as to illuminate various aspects of each work. The lights act independently and from different angles, to bring the figure to life.<sup>31</sup> In this case, the sculptures must surely represent the human form, because the verses present facets of personality in sensory images. The poem advances more through the concatenation of imagery than through narrative, and the spirit of the story is more important than the plot. Oral prose narratives reflect this principle in the stringing together of independent episodes around a central character<sup>32</sup> and in the "use of parallel sets of images to embody a theme".<sup>33</sup>

The principle of imagery, in the context of notions of visibility and inter-

connection, moves the performance of praise poetry in the direction of drama. The recitation of *izibongo* is a kind of dramatic enactment, in which history is made theatrical by pictorial metaphors and by expressive body movements adjusted in their rhythm to the tempo of the chanted words. On occasion choreography supersedes poetry, for the fewer the words, the better the poet is able to represent history in action.<sup>34</sup> The ultimate realization of this form of dramatic action is the *giya*, the improvised solo dance dramatization of military prowess performed in coordination with the shouting of their praises by the members of their regiment or "homeboy" dance team. While there is a standard vocabulary of *giya* movements, each performer brings to them his own skill and interpretation; an expression of individual personality in the language of collective values.<sup>35</sup>

Zulu women compose praise poetry as well, and performance is accompanied by solo dancing and dramatic gestures. The audience sings, claps, and exclaims in support, but the poem itself is a statement of personal identity, "expressing tension between the ethics of community solidarity and the striving egotism of the individual".<sup>36</sup> The performance of oral poetry is in this sense inherently dramatic because it is in reality a collective act. Common experience and perceptions based upon shared values and understandings provide the context within which any performance becomes aesthetically, emotionally, and socially meaningful. As Scheub remarks, "African oral tradition is never simply a spoken art. It is an enactment, an event, a ritual performance. Patterning of imagery is the most visible artistic activity, involving the blending of the contemporary world and the fanciful fabrications of the tradition".<sup>37</sup> Today, the juxtaposition of images provides the central aesthetic dynamic of black theatre.<sup>38</sup>

#### Tradition and Cultural Dynamics

It is important to emphasize that these traditional forms are not archaic, or frozen, or only a thing of the past. As Lestrade recognized back in 1937, new traditional literature in Southern Bantu languages is being composed all the time.<sup>39</sup> Landeg White has shown how praise poems have served to record shifting power relations in Zulu society over the past two centuries; changing in style, imagery, and theme in response to historical factors. Xhosa praise poetry, which traditionally recounted the exploits and failings of chiefs and war captains, now eulogizes African *indunas* (compound overseers) and shift bosses on the mines.<sup>40</sup>

Sotho miners have left praise poetry to its original purpose, and invented *sefela*,<sup>41</sup> a new genre of oral poetry aesthetically encoding their life experience as migrant workers. Sotho women sing and dance their "*seoeleoele*" poetic narratives in drinking bars throughout Lesotho and in the black townships of the Orange Free State and Transvaal. On the mines Xhosa praises are composed

in response to specific aspects of present events and situations. Today, as in the past, oral poetry endows "history with the cultural symbolism of the imaginative tradition".<sup>42</sup> Each performance employs standard, previously composed, and improvised verses in fresh combinations, and no two recitations are precisely the same. This episodic, improvised mode of expression is fundamental to black performance culture and its continuing social vitality. The underlying principle on which this vitality depends may be summarized as "efficacy".<sup>43</sup> Efficacy in ritual performance substantiates the covenant between human and supernatural powers. Efficacy in dramatic performance means to go beyond simple diversion into representations that affect audience consciousness and will to action. Following this principle, performance not only reflects but also formulates and augments experience as "part of the complicated feedback process that brings about change".<sup>44</sup> In praise poetry, the imagistic measurement of the subject against the standard of cultural ideals enhances social control as well as power.<sup>45</sup> The praise poet mediates between chiefs and their people as diviners do between people and the spirits.<sup>46</sup>

The praises of political leaders have been a fixture at mass political meetings for many decades. In the Transkei 'homeland', they have become a form of political resistance to the Prime Minister, Chief Matanzima, since the censorship or arrest of an *iimbongi*, as if he were a common journalist, would undermine the legitimacy of Matanzima's traditional authority.<sup>47</sup> On the mines, Xhosa *iimbongi* perform a similar function in representing miners' interests, moral values, and grievances to the black *indunas*. Among the miners themselves, *iimbongi* provide social comment and promote adherence to the norms of *umteto*, the informal black culture of the mines. The *iimbongi* is also a peacemaker, whose "subtle mockery and bawdy humour undoubtedly defuse many a tense situation where members of various nations are grouped together in unnatural surroundings".<sup>48</sup>

The same principle operates in dance drama, which traditionally promotes group solidarity and social harmony.<sup>49</sup> Among the Zulu, social harmony is a matter of mediating the structural tensions between opposing groups. At traditional weddings, the social and procreative alliance of rival clans is expressed in fiercely competitive *ukuqumushela* and *ingodla* dancing between members of the bride and the groom's parties.<sup>50</sup> In former times, royal military reviews and *ukubuthwa* ceremonies marking the creation of new regiments were occasions for competitive dancing and singing.<sup>51</sup> The rivalry was so intense that fights often broke out between participants who felt that performance alone was not sufficient to express it. Rural-based homeboy dance clubs flourish today among Zulu migrant workers in Johannesburg. While the clubs take on other social functions, competitive dance itself is the reason for their formation and continuity. The expressive structure of the dance is therefore a factor in and an index of social adaptation. Like the old regiments, these clubs are also fighting units in the stick fights and factional clashes so important to the maintenance of

the workers' *ubuntu* (human identity) in the urban political economy.<sup>52</sup>

The overall implications of the principle of efficacy for black theatre are that performances are so linked to their social meaning that they are entirely continuous with experience itself. There is thus no necessary psychic distance between spectators and actors, audiences and dramatic action, reality and representation.

### The Transformation of Tradition: Black Popular Theatre

During the late 1950s, two events signalled the emergence of a clearly identifiable black theatre in Johannesburg: the arrival from Port Elizabeth of young playwright Athol Fugard; and the multi-racial musical theatre production, *King Kong*.

Fugard's plays, starting with *Nongogo* in 1958, were 'well-made' in the Western literary sense, yet represented a new use of black actors to represent South African social experience through the use of African expressive techniques. Over the years, Fugard has developed the 'workshop' method to integrate African principles of imagery, visibility, and improvisational composition into contemporary Western theatre. Although his productions have seldom been directed towards or performed for black audiences, he played a major role in the formal training of a generation of black actors in theatre outside the township variety stage.

The work of black actors like Zakes Mokae or Fats Bookhalane in *The Blood Knot* (1962) and John Kani and Winston Ntshona in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972) reflect the success of improvisational workshop techniques in infusing Fugard's literary plays with an African sensibility. These actors' use of African expressive principles gave the performance of these plays that quality of profound tragic-comedy which is South Africa's unique stylistic contribution to world theatre. They also introduced Western audiences not only to the social and psychological horrors of South Africa's human nightmare but to the vitality and richness of African performance culture.

*King Kong* (1959) was a musical drama based on the spectacular rise and tragic downfall of flamboyant black South African heavyweight boxing champion Ezekial "King Kong" Dhlamini.<sup>53</sup> Amid the cultural ferment and political tension in Johannesburg in the late 1950s, *King Kong* embodied the faith of liberals both black and white that social and political progress could come through creative multi-racial collaboration in the cultural field. *King Kong* was an overwhelming success, and South Africa has seen nothing like it before or since. When the show travelled to London, however, its muted politics and unfamiliar comedic style severely reduced its appeal. The black musicians and cast members went their separate ways, with stars Miriam Makeba, the four members of the Manhattan Brothers, and several of the musicians remaining in





permanent exile. Black South African performers have always seen in overseas tours a means of combatting the cultural isolation, financial hardship, and professional frustration to which apartheid condemns them. Unfortunately, the prospect of appearing in London or New York often creates unrealistic expectations, and real success is often elusive. Taken out of its social context, black South African performance often loses its communicative impact and expressive points of reference. Overseas performances cannot have the direct sense of connection with the daily concerns and experiences of their audiences, from which the creative vitality and fundamental purpose of popular theatre derive. Though overseas performances have frequently had a major artistic as well as political impact in Europe and America, they can be injurious to black popular theatre in South Africa itself.

Back in South Africa, the Sharpeville Massacre, Separate Amenities provisions of the Group Areas legislation, the banning of the African National Congress, and the general atmosphere of racial polarization put a temporary halt to ventures in multi-racial cultural collaboration. Yet *King Kong* had shown what could be done, and gave African performers a chance in international showbusiness. It also deprived the black townships of many of their most outstanding talents, and reinforced the orientation towards foreign recognition at the expense of a popular theatre for black communities. *King Kong* and its multi-racial production company, United Artists, did however help to ignite the flame of popular theatre in the townships.

Gibson Kente, a former teacher at the Jan Hofmeyr School and composer and arranger of jazz vocals for such stars as Miriam Makeba, became interested in musical theatre while a member of United Artists. He soon realized that the

future of black popular drama lay in the black urban communities themselves. In the early 1960s he set out on his own and produced, wrote, composed, and directed *Manana, The Jazz Prophet* (1963) and *Sikalo* (1964); musical melodramas that were milestones in popular theatre for the African mass audience. Though he spoke of reaching an international audience with an African musical theatre modelled after Broadway, Kente achieved unprecedented commercial success with shows performed in English but rooted in local black city culture. He combined black American and South African styles of performance to create a theatre that expressed both the experience and aesthetic values of audiences that had never been exposed to plays.

Unlike West African counterparts such as Nigeria's Herbert Ogunde, however, Kente presented his shows in English; the language of international showbusiness, black unity, and resistance to the cultural implications of apartheid. Virtually all township playwrights write in English, although it would be possible to use one or another of the major African languages or the polyglot street dialects of the township. While African vernaculars are frequently intermixed with English in performance, the latter is regarded as an essential weapon in the struggle against cultural isolation, parochialism, and state control of the channels of intergroup and international communication.

Artistically, Kente and other black commercial playwright/directors like Sam Mhangwane and Boykie Mohlamme have created a unique style of presentation that smoothly integrates music, dance, and social drama in a characteristically visible and energetic manner. To achieve this, Kente created regular ensembles and provided them with rigorous professional training. Acting and episode are melodramatic, with powerful emotions expressed physically, almost acrobatically, in the rhythmical blend of farce and pathos, song, dance, and mime that is the essence of theatricality in the African tradition.

This is a theatre of self-realization, where Africans go to see themselves and their environment presented larger than life on stage. While the excitement is generated here, as in all popular theatre, by the tension between realism and rhetoric, audiences demand complete, recognizable authenticity. To establish psychic distance from episodes too painfully real, Africans often laugh at moments where white audiences would sit aghast, silent with shock of shame. Yet so complete is the involvement of both actors and spectators that characters often seem to interact as much with the audience as with each other. Psychic distance shortens, and the frame of enactment dissolves as it pushes against the ground of reality with increasing force.<sup>54</sup> Rhetorical awareness is maintained, while theatre comes to depend not on the voluntary suspension of disbelief but on the continuity between drama and lived experience.

Politically, Kente has been forced to walk a tightrope between irrelevance and censorship. His strategy has been to concentrate on the African townships; the reality of suffering and conflict, the need for personal morality and sacrifice, for



family loyalty, community solidarity, and self-assistance. Still, the contradiction inherent in portraying the consequences of apartheid without directly indicting the system has created problems for Kente and for the younger generation of playwrights who came after.

The new playwrights and their young audiences seek to confront political issues directly, which means challenging the System. The realistic portrayal of their conditions of life is an important formal value for Africans, and in the bitter political climate of the past decade, nothing has seemed more real than the government's unrelenting reinforcement of white supremacy and black dehumanization. Having created a mass audience for theatre, Kente found himself pushed by the surging Black Consciousness Movement, and even by the local success of Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, to offer a more critical examination of political conditions and how they affect people's lives. During the 1970s, Kente produced a series of plays, *How Long, I Believe, Too Late*,<sup>55</sup> and *La Duma*, which gave stronger representation to the intolerable conditions of black urban life, and to youthful voices calling for immediate change. While these plays do express militant black political aspirations, they conclude by validating the moderate reformism of an older generation of African community leaders who urge the government to reverse its course before it's Too Late.

This lack of resolution and political commitment betrays Kente's contradictory position, in which commercial success has given him some investment in political moderation, while his continued popularity depends upon his ability to express the pressing demands of the urban African community. His very command of a mass black audience compounds the problem. Kente was harassed and jailed for attempting to film *How Long* in 1976, while Workshop '71's far more radical but university-based *Survival* was allowed to tour the United States. When *Survival* finally began to attract large audiences in the townships in 1978, it was promptly banned. Other plays in popular 'township' style that deal directly with political oppression and command a large popular following, such as Reverend Magina's *Give Us This Day* (1974) and Khayaletu Mqhayisa's *Confused Mhlaba* (1974) have also been ruthlessly banned.

Today the townships produce literally hundreds of hastily assembled dramatizations of black experience by struggling young playwrights. Kente has had an enormous impact simply by creating a new popular theatre with the potential to transform black political and cultural self-consciousness. The existence of such a theatre, with its fully realized indigenous aesthetic standards and presentational style, has provided the foundations for an explicitly political theatre with mass appeal. Participation in theatre allows black people to express their creative potency and to achieve some mastery over their lives; to communicate their agony, resilience, and social vision when institutional means are denied them.

In the townships unfortunately, government censorship and by now even the theatrical conventions Kente established limit the range of artistic and political expression available to new playwrights and directors. The Black Consciousness Movement, on the other hand, still inspires playwrights to attempt to create a new dramatic tradition that relates past experience and local resources to present challenges. The most important such attempt during the 1970s was called "Workshop 71".

Workshop 71 began in 1971 as an attempt by Witwatersrand University English literature teacher Robert "Mshengu" Maclaren to get both black and white playwrights and actors to join him in creating a broadly South African theatre "out of a composite culture of all South Africans, at a time when there is not a meeting of cultures but a confrontation of cultures".<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately neither the political, professional, nor aesthetic context for such a meeting existed at the time, and the withdrawal of black directors like Sam Mhangwane left Workshop 71 an entirely university-based experiment. Undaunted, Maclaren and a multiracial group of young actors followed Fugard's lead and began creating new plays out of a blend of township drama and Western improvisational 'workshop' techniques. Like the township playwrights, Workshop 71 struggled "to depict a new reality through the transformation of existing performance traditions."<sup>57</sup> Without props or written scripts, Workshop 71 gave popular black theatre a new direction; one which integrated African and Western expressive styles and structure and connected their traditions to social reality and experience.

In addition to plays about black city life, Workshop 71 took up the concern for African historical culture. Credo Mutwa's *uNosilimela* (1973) is an African romance modelled on Zulu folk narrative and mimetic dramatization.<sup>58</sup> Its protagonist is a young princess doomed by magic and spiritual fate to wander through time, reliving the tragic history of her people. Her sufferings are intended to restore respect for traditional values among urban Africans. The revaluation of the past in the terms of the present is intended both to reduce black self-alienation and provide a cultural framework for the regeneration of South African society as a whole. The play is less effective, however, in its presentation of contemporary realities, and the neo-traditional, fantastic elements of staging proved too innovative for township audiences in 1973. Black audiences will not accept representations of tradition unless they are linked by authentic experience to the current realities of black South African life.

Workshop 71 tried again with actor James Mthoba's *uHlanga* (The Reed, 1975) a review of African history and the performer's own life presented in the form of an improvised folk narrative composed of episodes discontinuous in time. Mthoba attempts to relate historical culture to black self-respect, identity, and autonomy of will. As he put it himself: "*uHlanga* directly states to all of us that

no man is without his peculiar indestructable form of culture even if there may be external forces seeking to eradicate it".<sup>59</sup> Perhaps the most accurate and dramatically satisfying recreation of African history and independent culture to date is Xhosa playwright Fatima Dike's *The Sacrifice of Krel*. Based on original research by producer Rob Amato, the play recounts the efforts of the Gcaleka Xhosa chief Krel to revitalize his people after their final defeat by Cape Colonial forces in 1878. Hidden with his followers in a canyon far from his former domain, Krel sends his personal diviner into the nether world of the ancestors to learn what course of action he should take. Beset by defeatism and threats of desertion among his men, Krel uses his diviner's miraculous return from the land of the dead to rally his people to return to their traditions, reclaim their children from the foster care of the neighbouring Bomvana, and renew their resistance to dispossession and national disintegration.

In the hands of Cape Town's Sechaba Theatre Company, the story of Krel became a commentary on the nature and challenge of African leadership relevant to contemporary efforts at national regeneration. The sets were almost painfully stark, the costumes authentic to the time and place. The presence of invisible non-human actors, from the agonies of the great sarificial ox to the uncanny scent of spirits on the wind, was communicated entirely by the muscular subtlety, facial gestures, and audible imagery created by the actors in movement and voice. They had a quality Elizabethan actors must have had, performing Macbeth in the light of afternoon; they brought their night with them. *The Sacrifice of Krel* was performed in Xhosa in the Cape, where this language is dominant, and in a mixture of English and Xhosa for audiences elsewhere. Fatima Dike regards African English not as a compromise but as a poetic medium in its own right, capable of expressing the beauty and rhythm of Xhosa speech to an international audience. Though the play was more successful in small towns than in large cities, it remains a model for the effective mobilization of historical culture in the modern context.

These plays were not originally staged in the townships, but in a 'fringe circuit' of small multiracial theatres. Operated first in the shadow of apartheid, they have flourished since the government eased regulations against racially-mixed audiences and casts in 1977. The Market Theatre complex and Witwatersrand University theatres in Johannesburg and the People's Space (until its closure in 19 ) and Baxter Theatres in Cape Town have become centres for the political and stylistic development of South African drama. Among the plays recently produced in both cities is Matsemela Manaka's *Egoli*, which evokes the daily degradations suffered by Johannesburg's migrant mineworkers.

Like traditional African drama, *Egoli* is composed of discontinuous, improvisational narrative episodes; but also employs flashbacks, drama sequences, and other non-naturalistic techniques in order to break down the physical barriers between actors and audience.<sup>60</sup> This approach derives from that of Workshop

71, and like the latter, it must struggle to win the attention of the popular township audience. *Egoli* has been performed for racially mixed audiences in the 'white' cities, in Germany, and in the United Kingdom, as well as in black townships throughout South Africa. Under South African social and political conditions, there is a natural temptation for innovative artists to seek recognition and support overseas. Once there, unfortunately, their work and the awareness they seek to create can only have an indirect impact on South Africa.

Maishe Maponya's *Hungry Earth* has been staged in London as well as in Soweto. It takes its title from the soil which swallows the bodies of African workers, who die in such numbers from mine and industrial accidents and the thousand other unnatural shocks the flesh of black South Africans is heir to. Here, episodes of working life are linked by songs, chants, and monologues on political topics. Naturalistic sound and mime are used and actors switch roles from scene to scene, often talking to the audience directly in order to destroy the rhetorical, illusory frame of the drama and jolt the audience into critical appraisal of the action.<sup>61</sup>

Maponya and Manaka explicitly reject the aesthetic criteria and critical standards of Western theatre, regarding them as irrelevant and counter-productive to African performance communication. While they also rightly reject the commercialism and political myopia of Gibson Kente, they have built upon the audience expectations he created, transforming popular consciousness

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by the heightening and intensifying of black experience on the stage.

This has been accomplished by the application of traditional African expressive principles to the construction of drama in performance. Interconnection explains the continuing reliance on music and dance as well as physical and verbal expression. Visibility guides the improvisational energy and intuition of the actors' raucous, intensely physical style, and explains the acknowledged influence of Polish drama theorist Jerzy Grotowski on Manaka.<sup>62</sup> Through the layering of mutually resonant but disjunct, sometimes non-naturalistic episodes, imagery, rather than narrative, provides the plays with their structural unity. Efficacy is the ultimate artistic goal, achieved by the permeability of the frame of dramatic action, the physical involvement of the audience in the progress of the performance, and the practical effect on the consciousness of everyone present.

What these young playwrights are trying to do is to create what Richard Schechner calls "actuals".<sup>63</sup> An actual is simply the idea of art as an event: something consequential happens for both actors and spectators here and now, leading to a change of consciousness for the participants. The play has a quality of having-been-lived, while the performance has the quality of living now.<sup>64</sup> The actors address the audience not as a collection of money-paying strangers, or forced participants in a show of solidarity, but as a community, even as a congregation, in order to create a sense of collective participation and transformation.<sup>65</sup> Experimental techniques take time to filter into the mainstream of township theatre and to gain acceptance among an audience accustomed to Kente. Yet *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *Survival*, applying some of the traditional principles of African theatricality, ultimately attracted large black audiences, and there is no question that black theatre prospers in the face of apartheid. The need to formulate and interpret shared experience under stress is, after all, the mother of cultural invention.

The South African political economy has even inspired spontaneous theatre among black miners, industrial workers, and urban squatters. In 1978, the women of the famous Crossroads squatter camp near Cape Town created their own play, *Imfoduso*, dramatizing the efforts of the police to tear down the camp and deport its residents to the homelands; and the women's own successful resistance. After performing for their neighbours, the women took their production on tour to other black communities and ultimately to the Market Theatre in Johannesburg.

Another example is *Ilanga* (The Sun), a workers' play that developed out of the efforts of union lawyer Halton Cheadle to defend 55 Zulu foundrymen arrested for striking illegally in 1980. For purposes of their defence, Cheadle had them act out the events of the strike, an exercise that led to the elaboration of these roles into a full-scale play.<sup>66</sup> The strikers demanded exact recreation of statements and events from each other, debating each enactment until consensus was reached. No one was allowed to embroider his reconstruction to show himself or others in

a better or worse light than they deserved. Eventually, with the help of Johannesburg's multiracial Junction Avenue Theatre Company, these reenactments were adapted to courtroom procedure and actually performed for the magistrate during the trial. The strikers lost the case, but *Ilanga* emerged as a real piece of theatre, performed for co-workers at the Metal and Allied Workers Union hall.

*Ilanga* achieves an almost seamless, yet reflexive continuity with experience, as the characters play themselves before an audience who identify directly with the action and are drawn rapidly into participation in the play. Characters address the audience directly, and actors perform among the audience as a means of encouraging their engagement and response. The natural evolution of *Ilanga* from a legal strategy to a vehicle of collective consciousness demonstrates the social vitality of theatre in South Africa and its importance in contemporary cultural reintegration. Through videotape reproduction, *Ilanga* has been seen by thousands of industrial workers throughout the country.

The Junction Avenue Theatre Company began creating 'workshop' plays, ones that could be made and performed by working people themselves, in 1979.<sup>67</sup> After *Ilanga*, the company created *Dikhitsheneng* (In the Kitchen), a play about domestic servants performed for audiences of maids and their employers in suburban church halls.<sup>68</sup>

In Durban, two members of the company organized the *Dunlop Play* for members of the Metal and Allied Workers Union at a Dunlop tyre plant. Performances were held at the factory itself in the period between shifts. At the start, each actor introduced himself to the audience, identified his job, and mimed its action with appropriate sound effects. Written scripts provided an overall structure, but each actor prepared his part through improvisation with the participation of the other workers. Techniques of mimesis and reenactment drawn from traditional storytelling provided both expressive resources and a sense of cultural familiarity for the participants. Though specific scenes emerged without difficulty, an overall play structure and plotline were hard to establish. Ultimately, the directors settled on the idea of one worker's career experience as a narrative thread, and made extensive use of illustrative tableaux which were not plot oriented.<sup>69</sup>

A second workshop created songs, which not only enhanced the emotional force of the performances, but drew the cast together at the start of each creative session and lead them easily into reengagement with the material and the task at hand.<sup>70</sup> The traditional part structure of "call and response" was used, and at the actual performances, audiences joined in spontaneously on the chorus, and actors frequently improvised new lyrics. Some spectators even followed the cast onto the stage for a brief impromptu song and dance. The actors often spoke directly to members of the audience, and their responses were incorporated into the performance. Some of these exchanges became a permanent part of the play,





which was thus constantly rewritten through actor-audience interaction and remained a perpetual work-in-progress. Many of the songs outlived the play itself and have become part of Durban's black urban folklore.<sup>71</sup>

As an event, the *Dunlop Play* had a number of practical effects. Workshop participants gained a new sense of self-confidence and self-worth, and several became leaders and were elected shop stewards at the next union election. New social networks were created among workers, and resistance to mistreatment stiffened. A canteen boycott occurred in the weeks following the play's performances. A cultural group involving workers from all sections of the plant and other factories as well has been formed, and many of its members are writing plays and working collectively on them in a continuing effort to raise worker consciousness.<sup>72</sup>

Activists in the South African liberation movement have largely ignored or mistrusted theatre as a medium for the raising of political consciousness. Those who do recognize its potential often argue that aesthetic and political goals are mutually exclusive, and that playwrights ought to avoid artful metaphor and dramatic structure, which conceal rather than intensify the message. My experience of South African theatre suggests, however, that cultural expectations, qualities of performance and emotional expression are as important as social authenticity and ideological content in reaching the popular audience. The cultural traditions of black theatre in South Africa demonstrate that it is not simply the power of the tale but the fresh and artful nature of the telling that turns performance into transformation.

The relevance, effectiveness, and unity of this theatre depend upon whether it can be popular in the best sense: arising out of the community that it serves and organic to the lives, concerns, and aspirations of those who perform and support it. As such it can provide a critical interpretation of political realities that can be expressed in no other popular forum. In articulating issues of common concern with historical resonance and emotional force, this theatre of urgency gives a voice to the voiceless and a sense of psychic community to the self-alienated. It is this urgency which, reinforced by cultural vitality, gives black theatre its energy and potency, and makes it a force to be reckoned with in South Africa's continuing human crisis.

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