

The Semiotics of Alternative Theatre in South Africa

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Although still regarded with considerable suspicion, the academic study of black South African theatre has recently become a respectable activity in some South African universities. This recognition, however, is tempered by a fear that classical 'civilizing' influences on humankind will be invaded and vitiated by an inevitable mixing of 'art' with 'politics'. The more traditional approach which over-emphasises textual analysis comfortably confines the irreducible and protects it from socio-historical and politico-economic investigation. Such influences are often argued to have nothing to do with theatre and are deliberately exorcised from the play. The result, we are told, is a richer, more acceptable contribution to 'culture'. Any theatre which does not reproduce (albeit critically) the dominant social relations of society is considered vulgar and an insult to theatrical tradition which has become progressively divorced from the once fertile breeding ground of social experience itself (1).

The naive attempts by so many critics and teachers of drama and theatre to study South African black theatre from the same esoteric and contextually remote tenets as they normally do Shakespeare, is matched only by their equally spurious efforts to tie up such a study with the purely tribal elements of black society while ignoring the stupendous influences of apartheid which are primarily responsible for the images and expressions of both authentic and contrived 'black' theatre found in South Africa today.

Because it has been able to escape the bland homogenizing influences of capital which has appropriated 'art' in the name of a 'superior' white dominated civilization, authentic black theatre stands almost alone in its consistent achievements as a medium of popular working class expression. To understand this fully one must appreciate the relationship between art and ideology which reveals conclusions but not necessarily the mechanisms for arriving at those conclusions. Althusser (1971, p. 222), for example states, "... art makes us 'see' conclusions without premises", whereas knowledge makes us penetrate into the mechanisms which produces the 'conclusions' out of the 'premises'". In a different vein, Macherey (1976, p. 6) argues, "To explain art objectively is to trace it back to the reality which it 'reflects' and to which it 'conforms' in the way that an effect corresponds to its cause". This view of art is somewhat short-sighted, since art, particularly dramatic art, not only reflects reality but mediates that reality. This mediation will become clearer in our subsequent discussion of actor and audience participation of a play entitled Ilanga Le So Phonela Abasebenzi.

The cogency of art, therefore, lies in the degree to which it exposes actual conditions of existence, the origins of those conditions, how they are conformed ideologically and what their social effects are. Working class theatre in South Africa is thriving and is, in fact, nourished by the very social formation and ideology which suppresses so brutally the majority of people who live and work in South Africa. This type of theatre generally

thrives in countries with social problems, and where there are marked class conflicts and political despotism. In such societies content is hardly a scarce resource: it is endemic to the specific social formation. It is there waiting to be discovered, given form and to be communicated to a participant audience who are themselves part of that content. This interaction with the actors is a cathartic experience which works to mitigate their lot in a performance which sees no separation or distinction between actor and spectator, stage and life or performance and reality: they are all part of the whole, inter-twined in a metonymic relationship which inter-connects art with life. This part-whole relationship is succinctly captured by Shakespeare's Jaques:

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players
They have their exits and entrances
And one man in his time plays many parts.

This paper aims to build on previous work in this area (see Tomaselli, 1981a) referring to the genesis, development and consequences of various plays performed by the black working class in South Africa.

Definitions and Paradigm

It is first necessary to reconsider the agglomerative definitions previously employed by scholars of what is normally termed 'black theatre'. The usual definitions account for neither cause nor consequence, content nor process, offering an inverted explanation of the social relations out of which that performance has originated. That is to say, the term 'black theatre' is reductionist and derives mainly from the fact that most performers of this theatre happen to be black. To argue that such theatre deals mainly with black experience is fraught with difficulties since the causation of that experience tends to be ignored. Such a definition, by its very operational blandness, obfuscates the more cogent influences and deeper underlying processes consequent upon apartheid society which has brought about the label in the first place. The terminological division of theatre and drama in South Africa into 'black', 'white', 'Afrikaans' etc comfortably perpetuates the idea of dualism in society on the sub-continent: the notion of a dual economy, and hence the structural oppositions of tribalism versus modernity, 'culture' versus naturalism, civilization versus savagery, Christianity versus paganism and politics versus art. In the absence of a more scientific term, most commentators are guilty of imposing the label "black theatre" when analysing their dramatic subject matter, thereby suppressing theoretical anomalies which question the vulgarity of the term which, in its present form, carries little thought of relationship, process or complexity of inter-actions between the economic base and ideological superstructure. Ian Steadman's Editorial has unravelled one layer of these difficulties in trying to reconceptualise these definitions and processes. What remains to be discovered, however, is a more generic term which acknowledges material origins, process and transformation. Part of this needed clarification relates to the complex inter-relations which occur when black directors work with their white colleagues in creating a symbiotic theatre-as-drama where the social class and experiences of each intercept and are encoded into the performance. Plays such as Egoli - City of Gold, The Island, Sizwe Banzi is Dead, The Last Man and Ilanga have all been assisted by the theatrical talents of white colleagues whose own experience can never duplicate that of their black co-directors, for class determinations and social relations are assigned by economic forces far more powerful than can be affected by the intentions of individual, even sympathetic, whites who

performance are part of the dominant ideology. This is not to deny the contribution of individual white directors to working class theatre or the effect on the quality of life of their actions. Such a modification occurs on an individual rather than on a structural basis. This observation will be enlarged later in a detailed discussion of Ilanga. It is also necessary here to note the objections of the Frankfurt School, who would argue that:

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 (Arvon, 1970, pp. 32-33).

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 identification factor. Only a few black directors, for example, are able to breach the 'dialectic of (their) history', and then only partially. Although by no means exhaustive, three different types of inter-class contact can be identified in the South African situation.

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 coopted by these pressures, they will become more entrenched in petty bourgeois values and, lubricated by financial gain, embrace a petty bourgeois lifestyle and ideology. The result is that such directors alienate themselves from the worker-actors with whom they have created the play unless, of course, they share his class aspirations. In any event, a growing rift will occur between the director and his proletarian audience who remain locked into the idea of a revolutionary struggle. He will thus lose touch with the grassroots working class ideology from which his plays originally derived their thrust. He will find it increasingly difficult to identify with and articulate this working class ideology as the desire for material reward inevitably lifts him out of his working class background.

The second case occurs where the petty bourgeois director-author, faced with the same choice, decides to resist cooption by capital in the form of aspirations towards class mobility. Such an individual will find himself in a highly contradictory situation, for his class position, and its concomitant ideology pulls him in a certain direction, whereas his own conscious intellectual desire to articulate the working class position and ideology pulls him in another. He will find no resolution to this contradiction other than trying to maintain an equilibrium between these two opposing forces. He cannot fully embrace proletarian ideology and lifestyle and at the same time he will not embrace petty bourgeois ideology and aspirations, although the latter is the stronger and more natural tendency. This in-between position can only be maintained by dint of self-discipline and shows a much greater awareness than is implied by Arvon.

The third case concerns the white petty bourgeois intellectual (in Gramsci's sense) who uses the advantages of his class position, most particularly his education, together with his understanding and sympathy of the working class to shape proletarian aspirations and provide them with a revolutionary thrust. This director-author has no direct experience of proletarian

lifestyle and is, 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 self-imposed deliberate action which suggests a questioning of the ideology of his own class. This interaction between intellectuals and the working class functions to raise the consciousness of the masses. This point is illustrated by Gramsci's (1971, pp. 332-333) "philosophy of praxis" which

... does not tend to leave the "simple" in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but rather lead them to a higher conception of life. If it affirms the need for contact between intellectuals and simple it is not in order to restrict scientific activity and preserve unity at the low level of the masses, but precisely in order to construct an intellectual moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups.

The intervention by white directors in the practical activity of the active "man-in-the-mass" brings to that activity a theoretical consciousness which facilitates a greater understanding of the world in so far as this consciousness transforms perceptions of reality. This issue will be dealt with under the next section. What concerns us at this stage is the effect of this intervention on working class expression per se. In some cases, the participation of intellectual white co-directors has worked against the very earthy metonymic strengths of such theatre where they have sought to inject a modicum of theatrical convention into the play. In other cases, such plays have been brought about by whites who have introduced to actual working class migrant labourers the 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 (2). In this example, the play had its origins in black labour experience, but that experience was only externalised to a wider audience (eg. in a magistrate's court or a theatre) in performance, once the legal exercise had developed beyond its immediate purpose and was perceived by the lawyer to offer the germ of a possible participant theatre workshop. To label such theatre as "black" is to therefore oversimplify and ignore process and causation. This type of theatre is not unique to South Africa, although the specific dialect in which it is seen, is.

This paper then, rejects the reductionist concept of "black theatre" and will draw on the wider notion of "committed theatre" which functions to expose and reveal, in human terms, the consequences of ideology determined by a particular politico-economic and social conjuncture (3). Such theatre serves to reveal ideology from the inside. To paraphrase Althusser, committed theatre would make us perceive (but not to know) in some sense from the inside, by an internal distance, the very ideology in which it is held (Althusser, 1971, p. 223). This definition, while perhaps still too much imbued with the qualities of a noun, does, however, hint at a verb property as well: it also implies process and involves a specific relationship to knowledge.

Theatre-as-Drama

Just as the term "black" has been shown to be simplistic, so too, conventional notions of "theatre" and "drama" do not suffice in an explanation or even adequate description of performance expression in the Third World. Hilary Blecher (1980, p.35), for example, has described how goal-oriented theatre in the Winterveld, a vast squatter camp outside Pretoria, drew on the content of the squatters' lives and worked to sensitize these discarded and voiceless people to their situation and stimulate them to discover actions which could be potent in improving their qualities of lives. Here the director-cum-mentor helps shape and articulate what is inherent in the proletarian situation. The audience, actors and director are inter-changeable and act out their common frustrations. In *Ilanga*, for example, the actors (defendants), audience (magistrate) and director (lawyer) stand with a relative autonomy to one another in the courtroom. The deviser-lawyer, using dramatic form, helps his clients to articulate their positions and contradictions to a third party. In these terms, theatre is a mediation rather than a reflection. Through theatre in its widest sense, the fifty-five black strikers were able to mediate their position to a magistrate. In a courtroom situation such as this, or the Winterveld squatter camp, such performance can affect the individual lives of the actor-participants. Permutations of class determinants within this four tiered relationship are the deviser/author, the director, the actors and the audience. The permutations are wide depending on the class origins and class determinations of the various people fulfilling those roles.

Such is the theatre of the Third World: it has no need of the conventional tools of theatre - the proscenium arch, a stage, curtains, spot lights, a separation between the audience and performers, or even intervals: the props and technology of Third World theatre comprise whatever is available at the time, from a passing cow, barking dog and traffic noise to the bleakness of a trade union hall or dimly lit street corner. The players in the Moravian Hall in Soweto, for example, although in a building, interact with the noises of their environment and include them in their performances. It seems ironical that South African universities have seen fit to spend millions on building theatres which are equipped with everything which opens and shuts, but which have no capacity at all, except through the second hand and remote controlled mediations of technology to duplicate the ambience and dynamic flexibility and never to be repeated, constantly mutating forms of Third World theatre. At grass roots level, this theatre is technology free since it does not require large inputs of capital in the form of equipment, financial guarantees and specialised venues. Without the concomitant constraints of having to amortise these outlays, this theatre is relatively free from the ideological constraints of commodity exchange and the need to attract a paying audience. This style of expression arises out of the raw material of life and the limited resources available to its creators. It is a theatre committed politically to the emancipation of a repressed, largely illiterate society. A corollary of its working class position in the South African social formation is that committed theatre grows, expands and is nurtured by the very fact that it is, by and large, oral in tradition, construction and rendition.

Committed theatre, arising directly out of the very social experiences of everyday life, exemplifies a different origin to the more conventional Western theatre forms which move from a digital metaphorical textual mode to an analogical mode when placed on stage (3). In committed theatre, this process is generally inverted and a part-whole metonymic relationship replaces the discrete sets of metaphor. The text-to-stage process becomes

irrelevant in an essentially oral tradition. The consequence is that it is unlikely to be staged by a third party who was not associated with its genesis or who does not have close ties with the director or performers. This dislocation is further emphasised by theatre architecture which removes the play from life seeking an autonomy of signs, and locates it on a stage where it is performed and acted out digitally in isolation from the socio-historical and environmental precedents which give it its essence. In this way it is removed from the material to the psychological realm. In committed theatre, the text is rarely recorded, but is nurtured in the mind of its creator and constantly updated and modified in terms of the lived relationship between people and their physical and social environments. This theatre is not wedded to the restricting conventions of dramatic heritage or the linear demands of alphabetic logic resulting from 500 years of print literacy.

The dynamic material contradictions which produce the signs of reality are reproduced in performance in the form of conflicts which, unlike literature and most dramatic texts, are not always resolved in an imaginary solution. Faced with the monolithic structures of apartheid, most committed theatre ends with a song of liberation. Such songs are usually addressed directly to the audience and are an indication of the helplessness of the working class in the face of the structural constraints of apartheid. As symbol, the song connects the performers and participant audience (if there is one) to working class emancipation whether this be articulated as a desire for better housing or political liberation. Thus, the study of committed theatre must include an investigation of process, of transformation, of the both/and sets of metonymy. Concern, therefore, is not with the word-bound digital on/off sets of metaphor encoded in a text, but rather with the concept of theatre-as-drama, analogical in mode involving continuous forms of mutating meaning, interacting with the dynamism and fleeting moments of real things, actual day to day experiences and props which may be available one minute but not the next (such as a dog barking). In theatre-as-drama, the world is a stage, not only for the actors, but also for the audience. There is no separation, either architectural or metaphorical between the performers and the participant audience. Those conceptual barriers which do exist are part of the individual's response to what he/she is watching/participating in and whether he/she interprets the performance in a metaphorical or metonymic sense. Whatever interpretation results is largely determined by the class position of the viewer and whether or not he/she is part of the dominant ideology. For the working class black viewer of a committed play, like for example, *Egoli*, the metonymical contiguity erodes not only the boundaries between art and life, but also the distinction between performer and audience: he/she stands in metonymical relation to the experience he/she enacts. As Althusser (1971, p. 223) reminds us, artists do not give the viewer any knowledge of the world they describe. They only make us 'see', 'perceive' or 'feel' the reality of the ideology of that world. Ideology is the 'lived' experience of human existence and that is why the form in which we are 'made to see' ideology in, for example, theatre, has as its content the 'lived' experience of individuals. This 'lived' experience is not a given, given by the pure 'reality', but the spontaneous 'lived experience' of ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real. In *Ilanga*, for example, performers and actors are one and the same - physically, psychologically, ideologically: there is not even a theoretical distinction between performance and acting and art and life. By acting out what they had once actually experienced, or are continuing to experience, these performers introduced a symbolical level to what previously reposed in an iconical/indexical mode of signification (4). This deeper perception has implications for both actor and audience for it helps both 'to see',

'to feel' and 'to perceive' a deeper structure of reality. The average white spectator, however, by virtue of his class position, is discontiguous with the experience enacted and his interpretation, governed by ideology, cements the boundary between art and life and entrenches the distinction between performer and audience: the play stands in dyadic relation to something else and is thus metaphorically interpreted. For the director who imposes theatrical convention, performance is removed into the metaphorical realm. For the director who allows it to develop organically, the play may be metonymic for both black and white audiences because they relate to the play as direct participants. That is to say, it is metonymic for those white viewers who are forced to live the dominant ideology but who may reject it intellectually. The interpretations through metonymy remain, however, distinct, for the metonymy is operating at different levels of meaning. The white bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie can never experience true black working class relationships; and the black working class can never experience true white petty bourgeoisie experiences, but both act and react in response to the other's actions and reactions. Both are part of the performance for both live and are aware of the economic imperatives which have brought about these conditions of existence. The greater the understanding the greater the degree of perceived metonymy which permeates deeper levels beneath the surface of the performance. The extent to which metonymy is perceived, then, is dependent on the class position, the ideology and the politico-economic determinations of the spectator.

Once performed in a conventional theatre, however, further complications arise, involving the commodity form of mass culture under monopoly capitalism.

The Political Economy of Theatre of Commitment

In the Western world, the word, "theatre," normally represents a commodity exchange relationship where the success of a performance is judged on its box office returns or attendance figures. With this penetration of capital, art is transformed into a commodity and is consequently robbed of its critical, negating role in relation to capitalist society. As a commodity, mass art is tied to the ideological purposes of capitalism. Its audience is one of passive consumers, spoon fed with 'entertainment' which reinforces the prevailing ideology. Consumption and leisure thereby mirror the alienated world of work under capitalist commodity production (5).

In contrast to capitalist forms of theatrical activity which are totally dependent on capital in its various guises, committed theatre-as-drama displays a resistance to being a commodity and is thus partially free to operate outside the relations of the capitalist system. This freedom allows devivor-experiencers, such as the trade union lawyer, to maintain close links with popular culture and maintain an ideological accord sensitive to the forces of capital and aware of the methods by which it delimits social relations. The degree of committedness is largely dependent on the degree of empathy which exists between the devivor and his subject. The further removed the devivor becomes from his subject, the less committed his work. This enddistancing between the devivor and his subject can occur in a number of different ways. We have already discussed the effects of class mobility where the devivor's new found financial success lifts him out of working class consciousness. Another example concerns Ilanqa, where apartheid legislation reduced the metonymic component turning this expression from theatre into a 'play' where actor-worker participation was reduced and finally eradicated. Once the actor-workers had been fired from the iron foundry where they had worked, they were endorsed out of the area and

were forced to return to their homeland, Kwa Zulu. Some, however, continued in the play, their incomes being supplied by an entrance charge, while vacant roles were filled by black members of the amateur Junction Avenue Theatre Group. Once this process began, the intention of the play was diluted and a degree of institutionalization was introduced. Ilanga had run its course and further performances became less empathetic. It is this concept of empathy which links the theoretical consciousness of the deviser with the practical activity of the workers. This implies that the deviser does not need to have a similar class determinant as the experienter-performers. While empathy can tendentially overcome class determination, the latter is, in the last instance, the over-riding factor. The source of this empathy might stem from many different origins. In Ilanga, it is the result of lawyer-client interactions where the lawyer, who becomes deviser, is able to draw on the resources and freedoms of his class to generate a committed working class theatre which might not otherwise be aware of this communicative potential. Empathy thus lubricates a theatre which is located at the intersection of society, art and politics in a particular historical conjuncture. In such theatre, art and politics are no longer simply background issues, but crucial to the structure of the performance and its message.

This is in contrast to more bourgeois forms of theatre, which through capitalism:

inevitably alienates writers from popular life ... (an) alienation which leads modern writers to over-rate immediate causation, which they generally and inevitably see in terms of biographical-psychological causation, and so to acquire their preference for biographical form (Lukács, 1976, p. 376).

Very often individual writers or directors do not exist at all in Third World theatre. One play, Infuduso, was generated by the women of the Crossroads squatter camp in Cape Town to communicate their misery and poverty to the wider community beyond their temporary geographical boundary marked by overcrowded-tin shanties and muddy potholed streets. This theatre was not scripted and has no identifiable, or for that matter, commercially saleable author. Such a collective authorship draws from common social experiences, minimizing the effect of personal biographical experiences. Infuduso can be performed anywhere and, indeed, has been: in Crossroads itself, BBC 2 (6) and in the Market Theatre in Johannesburg. This translocation from the props of everyday life to the artificial props of a conventional theatre, where the space and the building itself stand for an escapist activity called 'entertainment', performance interpretations may be affected in terms of class origins of audiences which patronize that theatre. This remains true even in the case of 'fringe' theatre (such as The Market and The Space in Cape Town) where the dominance of capital is not so subtly sublimated. While not denying the contribution of The Market or The Space to the genesis of a South African theatre, it must, nevertheless, be acknowledged that the majority of their audiences, and certainly most of their funds, come from the moneyed bourgeois and petty bourgeoisie elements of South African society. There is, thus, an uneasy alliance between capital on the one hand, and committed theatre which makes use of these venues, on the other. This uneasiness is unambiguously reflected in the continued bewilderment of the press critics of white read and financed newspapers who tend to see an opposition between grubby politics and the esoterica of what VeVe Clark calls "thee-tah". That these productions are viewed at all is mainly a function of deference to capital which has allowed the performance of plays which would otherwise be ignored, as well as to the accessibility enjoyed by, for example, The Market Theatre's publicity department to the press. Plays which are

unable to draw on the resources of professional publicity agents are almost never reviewed even if they are staged at these theatres. It is not surprising, therefore, that white South Africans are unaware of a vibrant, healthy and expanding dramatic activity going on in the smoky, polluted backstreets of black townships and squatter camps. It is thus entirely predictable that the last to know of these activities are the critics, and students of drama and theatre. Our reliance on Western forms of interpretation and the bland acceptance of a set of prerequisites which shape the way we define theatre has led to over-emphasis on "the most manageable or most concrete of the elements of theatre, namely the text and author" (Hauptfleisch, 1980, p. 15). Hauptfleisch, although offering no reasons for this imbalance, shows, for example, that 43.3% of research in the theatre arts in South Africa falls into the categories of "Playwright Analysis" and "Text Analysis". Less than 0.5% has dealt with the political or socio-cultural aspects. Clearly, this pattern of research in the more privileged institutions of this country is a direct reflection of how forms of theatre are identified. It follows then that a significant proportion of theatre which actually exists is simply not seen by white South Africa because, ideologically, it is only interpreted as theatre once it is located in a building labelled by the noun, 'theatre'. This very anonymity confers upon committed theatre an autonomy and a rare originality. Because it is ideologically invisible, it often escapes the ravages of censorship and other restrictive laws which govern freedom of expression in South Africa. Recordings of the media can be censored; where a text is available or a performance accessible concrete evidence can be produced in court. In contrast, ideas cannot be restricted and court evidence of something reposing in the oral tradition and which changes daily is difficult to pin down legally. Censorship thrives where art is a commodity but is more difficult to apply where theatrical expression resists the penetration of capital. This is not to say that black actors and directors are able to totally escape state intimidation. Those who use conventional places of performance such as administration, church and school halls and conventional theatres are more easily identifiable and many have experienced intimidation of one form or another. Further restrictions on out of doors gatherings enforced by, for example, the Riotous Assemblies Act etc push performances further underground. Repressive state pressure, however, is often counter productive for it further strengthens the metonymic relation between actor and audience. The actor cannot escape the consequences of his actions and the audience are reminded of the consequences of their actions being recreated by the actor.

Having outlined the political economy of committed theatre-as-drama, we may now turn to a specific instance which will take the form of an interview with Halton Cheadle, one of the devisors of the play Ilanga Le So Phela Abasebenzi.

Background to the Event

Fifty five black workers, the majority of whom were migrant workers from Kwa Zulu, belonged to the Metal and Allied Workers Union. The company, an iron foundry, resisted recognizing the union or the union shopstewards of the foundry. This dispute between the union and the company took the form of several meetings between the two, and finally erupted in a strike. The workers were arrested for striking illegally. In preparing their defence, the meetings and the strike were reconstructed in order to get proper statements from the accused strikers. During this reconstruction, the workers did not merely re-state what was said, but started assuming roles. The idea of the play arose out of this. The Junction Avenue Theatre group assisted in setting up a theatre workshop with some of the strikers. The play grew

from this workshop. The plot closely followed the events of the foundry - the worker actors strongly resisted any attempt on the part of the devisor to alter the course of events.

The Event

The specific cause of the strike was the unfair dismissal of a union member. The workers stopped work and called a meeting with management. The management addressed the workers but interpreted the meeting as a strike. They immediately called in officials of the Department of Labour and the police. The fifty five workers were arrested and taken to the Boksburg Police Station. On disembarkation they were taken singly from the police van and assaulted by six policemen.

The Union instructed their lawyers to apply for bail and defend the workers. Criminal charges were laid against the police, and action has been instituted against the Minister of Police for damages.

The following day the arrested workers appeared in court. They were still dressed in their work clothes - leather aprons, goggles etc. Bail was finally granted at R80 apiece, which the union paid.

The legal case was prepared. The defence was that the stoppage was not a strike, but a meeting. Such meetings had taken place during working hours before. It therefore became important to reconstruct those meetings in order to take a consistent statement. The lawyer, Halton Cheadle, comments:

I found it absolutely impossible to take statements. Each of the 55 arrested workers had a different version of what took place. They all saw things differently. Some remembered one incident only, others ten different incidents. I was unable to cross check. So I decided to follow a different tack. I set up a role play and cast one of the workers as the manager. The manager would come in and no sooner than he opened his mouth, one of the 'worker s' said: "No, he didn't say that. Remember he said this ...". And what happened was that they collectively reconstructed the incident. I had a tape recorder and once it was agreed that the re-enactment was accurate I would record it. We would then find out who replied to management and what he said. No sooner had they got into the spirit of things, than the worker who was acting the manager really started acting the part. This manager has some really unfortunate habits like pulling up his trousers with his wrists. The black actor-worker mimicked this and everyone just collapsed laughing. At one stage during the re-enactment one of the worker s got up and shouted at the 'manager! In response one old man said to the fellow shouting, "It's no good saying that now. You didn't say it then. It's too late now". Humbled, the younger worker sat down. So it was actually quite cathartic in a way.

They had three meetings before the strike. Each was re-enacted in this way. We also re-enacted the strike itself. They acted out the dancing and what actually happened when the Department of Labour arrived and tried to speak to the workers. I didn't realise what they had done. No-one had told me of this incident in their statement. Then we acted out the strike because I wanted to know what the Department of Labour has said and how the workers had responded. It transpired in the re-enactment that they did not refuse to work, and that they were going to go back to work. The police arrested

them before they could do so.

All these things have legal significance but it gives some idea of how the play arose. In a sense it was them just acting out their own experience. It was a very effective way for me to take a statement.

Ilanga: Drama-as-Theatre

Armed with a transcription of the role plays, Cheadle approached Ari Sitas of the Junction Avenue Theatre Group and together they established a theatre workshop with some of the dismissed foundry workers. Cheadle provides the contextual details:

To give you an idea of who these labourers were: they were migrant workers; they were illiterate and one of them said that he had never seen a play in his life. Later he recalled that he had indeed seen one, but this turned out to be a slide show which was given by (sociologist) Eddie Webster during the strike. Eddie had slides of the machines in the foundry and a movie of foundries in the United States. 'That was his first play'. He mixed up slides, film and theatre. He had never been to any form of what we might call Western entertainment, and yet he acted absolutely amazingly. He was probably the best actor of all, and the keenest. He actually insisted in getting a job here on the East Rand so that he could participate in this sort of workshop. He had never even seen a black play. Black plays are very much township and middle class black entertainment. These guys were hostel dwellers. They were illiterate.

In the workshop we acted out some of the meetings. One of these meetings involved a black petty bourgeois representative from the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation (SEIFSA) who was called in by the employers - a total sellout or "impimpi". These foundry workers are rough men, tough and hard working. This sell-out comes in with tight pants, wearing dark glasses in his hair St Tropez style and spoke to them about being brothers together. Their dislike and hatred of him was obvious. We took that incident and one of the actors from Junction Avenue was able to characterise him. He came in and spoke through the side of his mouth. The foundry workers were amazed, "That's him", they said. And then we would say, "Now don't just stick to the truth" - this was one of the great problems we had. The workers responded, "No, it didn't happen like that". We tried to get them to move more freely - not what they did do but what they would like to do if the event was repeated, or what they would like to have said now that they had thought about it. It was very difficult for them to move from describing to giving free rein to their imagination. This resistance was a very useful corrective on us. We constantly attempted to imagine an expanded situation. They were absolutely insistent in their descriptions. They would change the structure of the play which we had worked out because they said it wasn't correct. With bad consequences artistically, but it worked. We did a whole series of little incidents. We tried describing hostel life: "What time do you go to bed?" "Do you sleep at night?" "What time do you wake up?" "Tell us exactly what you do then". It was all done in Zulu. So we taped the situations, transcribed them and had them translated. And so we just carried on doing incidents.

And one day we thought, let's go, let's do it - and we did the strike play. We structured it as follows: we had a clock machine. One of the issues which came out in the description of foundry life was the absolute hatred of the clock machine. The clock machine is on a wall. The workers have to insert a card into the machine and it clicks in his time of arrival. From this card the number of hours worked is measured. If the worker arrives late, this device clocks him in as being late. The worker gets fired if he clocks somebody else's card in. It is control through 'time'. It's a major issue for these workers. It's symbolic significance is real. I can talk of time in an abstract sense - a different concept to real time. The clock machine clocks away through the whole play.

We structured the play together, myself, Ari and five workers. One of the workers was basically fatalistic. He would go and clock the machine and smack it as hard as he could. He tells stories of how terrible life is, how if he came in early the clock machine gives him no extra money, but if he comes in late it takes money away. He describes how miserable it is living in a hostel, never seeing his wife and children. He offers a long monologue: how early he had to get up in the morning; how long it took him to get into work, "We spend hours in the bus. We live far away. They push us as far away as possible. We are like a disease we live so far away". He describes the journey to work and how everybody in white houses are still asleep. "And then it takes the manager ten minutes to get to work. It takes us two hours". While he is giving his monologue he is also changing into his work clothes. He is recreating people coming to work.

Then the next worker comes through. He is the 'joller'. He comes in and clocks the machine and listens to the monologue. He comments, "The problem is that you are not prepared to 'duck and dive'. If you come in late you get someone else to clock your card. You don't have to stay in the hostel, you can stay in the 'kitchen'". Those are the structured conversations - we structured them and the workers were to ad lib them in performance. But then what happened was that a completely free and unstructured interchange occurred. We had a real kind of tension occurring between the 'joller' and the fatalist.

Q: Would this change in terms of the experiences of the day?

Yes. They knew roughly what was expected of them. The experiences were so real, it was like a real life experience.

Q: To what extent was the script modified in terms of various daily experiences?

We structured various positions. The third worker would come on. He was the union representative (It is a totally didactic and propagandist play). He would say, "You have given up and are just ducking and diving. The real answer to our problem is a collective struggle". Then just as these conversations terminate a bell goes, a siren. And the guys rush to work. So we re-created the situation with the foreman shouting "Start work". We structure exactly what is going to happen next. There is no

ad libbing in this regard. We assigned specific roles. Once the role and structure have been agreed upon, then the actual script is open, and it does develop. There is no doubt about it. If something does not work the first time they will try something else the next night. There are certain lines which are actually set out and which come up every time. The hostel monologue, for example, is always the same.

Q: How does working in a union hall differ from working in a theatre?

Part of the problem on a stage is that you don't get the sense of the activity. The idea is to make the audience a part of the play. Originally we had the petty bourgeois SEIFSA representative come on and face the workers. We changed that around. Now he speaks to the whole audience and the workers on the 'stage' went and sat in the front row. The crucial thing was to get the audience to participate in rejecting this sellout. Two of the actors would be sitting in the audience. They never go on stage but sit in different places in the hall and would heckle and shout. They would be seen as part of the audience. Well, in fact, the response was absolutely spontaneous. You don't even need those actors because the audience just boos the shit out of anyone who is a baddie. The moment the SEIFSA rep came on he was booed down. He tries to speak to the audience, saying, "My black brothers I come from SEIFSA, an employers' organization. My name is Msibi..." One of the audience actor's then responds, "Can I ask you a question, Mr 'Thebehali'?" (7). "My name's not Thebehali it's Msibi" would be the retort. And then what happens is that the audience all shout out their "impimpi's" (sellouts) names which causes endless hilarity. And then we began to find out all the in-jokes amongst the workers and the union committee. And the petty bourgeois representative keeps on denying that these are his name, "I'm one of you", he pleads.

Then we had the Dept of Labour enter. This actually happened at the foundry. He tried to persuade the workers not to form a union which he called "foreign ideology", but instead to have a liason committee. We don't know exactly what he said so we re-created something else where he says, "Just in Bantu custom..." He goes on: "Workers lose their heads with all that talk about unions, tell them" he orders the Boss Boy. "It's a problem of communication. If you translate properly, then there will be no problem. OK. Tell them that industry looks a bit like Bantu society. The manager is their father. And do they talk to their father directly in Bantu society?" And everybody heckles and ask, "Who are the children? Do you think we are boys?" "No! Out of the question" continues the official. "They talk to their mother who talks to their father who talks to the mother to talk to them. So, they don't talk to the father directly. So, they don't talk to management directly. So they talk to their mother. And who is the mother of all the black workers in South Africa? The Dept of Labour". The workers then tell the Boss Boy to say, "They want to know if the manager sleeps with the Dept of Labour". At this stage the audience usually goes berserk - an incredible uproar. The official then says, "You have got it all wrong. What I am trying to say is that the union is not their mother. The union is a union. The Dept of Labour is like their mother."

Most incidents were drawn from their experience at the foundry. Others were introduced to create humour. One scene involves an accident and a notorious company doctor. The injured worker goes into the sick bay. The doctor comes in and puts his stethoscope against the wall and declares the worker 'fit for work'. That sort of incident goes down pretty well - the 'doctor', the 'supervisor' and the 'nduna' and the real worker 'villains'.

Then we act out the dismissal scene. That couldn't be changed at all. The workers insisted that it be re-enacted exactly as it took place. There is the arrest, the strike and finally they pack their bags and leave. As they leave they scream at the audience. This again brings in the idea about the audience being part and parcel of the workforce. They accuse the audience of taking their jobs, "You clap and laugh and enjoy our story but no sooner are we chucked out of our jobs than you take our jobs". That leaves the stage for the final propaganda line: one of the audience actors gets up and says "Look brothers, it's wrong to accuse us ... What we need is unity. We will never get anything unless we have unity. If we have unity they will understand...

Q: In what other ways do you include the audience?

The audience is really the body of workers - it represents the workers at the meetings and the workers at the end of the play. When the play begins the actors go in with the audience and sit all over the place. Only the front row is empty because we want the front row to be used by the actors when they are addressed by the SEIFSA representative. After the first two actors have entered the acting space a bell goes and the three remaining actors roar in across the chairs recreating the sort of hustle and bustle of getting to work on time and being screamed at for being late. Take the strike, for example. The manager tells the workers that they have ten minutes to sign an agreement. "Either you go back to work or you go". Then the actors turn to the audience and ask their advice. If the audience cries for strike action then the actors argue against going on strike explaining all the difficulties. We are just trying to get the audience to think about the consequences of their decision. If the audience says "don't go on strike", then the actors say they must go on strike. If the debate is really good and everybody is participating we will let the argument develop for up to half an hour - but we will stop it at some stage. Then the audience is asked to vote for or against. If the audience votes for the strike the actors say that they will listen. If against, then the actors say they are going against the audience the audience decision.

That is the end of the performance. The point is that we could never do that to a white audience because they would probably be opposed to striking and wouldn't even think of such action. In contrast, workers are always discussing whether they should strike, where and when etc.

Q: Were you aware of any police intimidation or surveillance?

No. No-one knows about it. Ours is a small venture. Once you have got a union you have got protection. We get our audience through membership. When we performed for the 1981 History Workshop on the Wits campus we allowed in a more general audience.

Q: How did the change of venue from a union hall to a more conventional theatre on the Wits campus affect performance?

Let's take the case of half-time, interval I suppose. We would get the audience to sing a FOSATU song and march into the acting area. This is on the same level as the audience. They march on and and push the manager back, the white foundry employer; So the

It is really hell of exciting.

Q: What happened to the legal case and the accused strikers?

We lost it. They each got six month suspended sentences.

Q: Do you still use this technique of role playing in taking statements?

I always use it now. We have got a case against the Minister of Police for R64 000 for assaulting the foundry workers. It was very hard to find out what happened. The police took them out of the van one by one, assaulted them and put them in a cell. The workers said that they heard the beatings but did not see any of the beatings. But when we re-created the scene I could show them how they must have been able to witness the assaults. It was amazing how the whole pattern of evidence arose. I asked one of the defendants where he had stood in the truck. He was next to the airvent, and looking through it he saw number 1, number 7 and number 9 being assaulted. He did not understand what I had wanted.

Another example, when one of the workers was escorted to a cell he was assaulted at the door. "Was the door shut". I asked. "No, it was open". "Who was in the cell?" "yes we all were". "Didn't you see him getting hit?" "Yes we all did". They obviously did not understand what I had been asking for previously. Then everyone put in their evidence that they saw the assault. Then they saw the blood in his eye and the bit of his ear which was chopped off, oh God, all that sort of stuff came up.

The Socio-Semiotic of Performance

The theatre-as-drama (as in Ilanga) stimulated by the experiences of Halton Cheadle as an attorney 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 the working class who attended such plays in union halls. Once the play was taken out of this organic environment and translocated in a more conventional theatre such as The Nunnary on the Wits University campus, the spontaneous metonymic component is replaced with a much more controlled metaphorical text-to-stage performance triple division. The audience is unable to relate to the play as it was originally performed in a union or church hall. The distinction between audience and performers is both architectural and one of class. Techniques which worked in a hall do not always work in a more conventional environment. Where an actor addresses the audience and involves them in a decision whether to strike or not enhances the metonymic contiguity in a hall populated by a participant audience; in a theatre such a technique becomes crudely propagandistic and devoid of subtlety. The architecture and composition of audience have caused a change in the meaning of the signs involved. Where symbolism operated in the spontaneous performance in a hall involving a participant audience, in a theatre filled with a more remote audience (in terms of class) only the first two tiers of signification - icon and index - are activated. The analogical probrity of metonymy which connects audience and actors to life, degenerates into the digital sets of metaphor where the performance is seen in terms of relations of likeness which are discontinuous to life and operate on a purely indexical level. Interpretant production, the generation of the

first part of the play is movement up to power and the second part is down.

Q: So the interval is actually brought into the performance?

Yes. The actors and audience would have their cokes inside. They don't go anywhere. There are no curtains to close. The actors have no make up - they have nothing to worry about. They all participate, drinking coke in the way workers would have tea time. A siren would go, indicating tea time.

Q: The audience would immediately know it was interval or tea time?

Yes. They would know because it is an audience composed of workers. They know exactly what a siren means. It would be tea time in the play and interval for the audience. Then the siren would go again for the end of tea time and the play would start itself quite naturally and the audience would take some time to find their seats. The actors would have a big piece of metal and they would act out working singing a work song. So we would have at least three or four minutes while the audience was seating itself. To answer your question, it would not work like this with a white audience so at the History Workshop where the majority of the audience was white we simply ran the play right through without an interval.

It's a hell of a loose play. The design of the Wits venue effectively separates the audience from the play. The whole thing about a union or church hall is its flat floor, so everything is on one level.

Q: How did having migrant workers as actors affect the play?

Although the play worked the workshop did not survive because, as migrant workers, they were not allowed to remain in the area for more than 72 hours after they were dismissed. If it wasn't for Junction Avenue and their black actors who substituted the play might not have gotten off the ground.

Q: How did these more experienced actors carry the idea through? Has the play lost any of its original spontaneity?

No, the spontaneity is still there. Some of the original actors are still available and the Junction Avenue actors maintained a sense of spontaneity.

Ari and I are thinking of setting up a workers theatre in Springs, but this time with workers who have Section 10(1) (a) (b) and (c) residence qualifications. They are not shift workers either. They are permanently in Springs. It's bloody hard to get a workshop off the ground because of these problems. In Springs, there are also women available, which is not the case with migrant workers.

Q: How do you, a white intellectual, see your role within this kind of worker theatre?

I am not at all embarrassed about being intellectual and the workers are not embarrassed either. The form it takes would be our intervention. The substance is theirs. It is an on-going relationship.

idea to which the individual signs give rise, is curtailed and the original essence of the performance is vitiated, if not lost completely.

The idea or interpretants associated with the sign "theatre" by the average theatre-going audience will differ from the idea elicited in a black worker who participates in the performance in a union hall. Once the play is removed to a theatre environment, it will have an appeal to a different kind of audience, one that can afford high admission prices, feels comfortable in a multi-racial environment, and one which is generally conditioned to a view of theatre as something to do with the development of intellectual life but something divorced from the life of social experience. This type of audience, which has nothing in common with the social experiences of the worker-actors, may be unable to fully comprehend a play like Ilanga or Egoli for they are unable to relate to the values, motivations and causations which brought about the play in the first place. This occurs despite the fact that the audience itself is part of the dominant ideology to which the play is a reaction. The function of the performance as an information and awareness processing centre providing a group therapy which spreads outwards from the small group of performers to the wider society will not, and indeed, cannot be shared by an audience drawn from another, more dominant class which sees life, the world and its myriad relationships from the confines of its own opaque ideology. This audience, which does not even share an intellectual empathy with the performers, will try to dyadically separate out 'theatre' from the surface of reality to make sense of a play which contradicts their own perceptions of South African conditions of existence. Metaphorical distinctions replace metonymic part-whole contiguities. The siren wailing for half-time (tea time), for example, is interpreted as simply a substitute for interval which is usually signalled by the closing of curtains and the switching on of house lights. Instead of tea time (interval) forming part of the audience-actor performance, operating in an analogical mode, it is seen more conventionally as a digital device to give the audience a chance to go outside and smoke a cigarette or imbibe some refreshment. Such interactions between the audience and the performers where the two are drawn from different classes is uncomfortable at least, and totally non-communicative at worst. This kind of open-endedness which, in union hall performances, totally involves the audience who are consulted, sworn at, who vote on strike issues, who identify their sellouts etc could not work with an audience not party to the social experiences of the actor-workers.

These observations must, of course, raise the question of the permanency of such theatre and whether it should be staged for audiences other than those drawn from the same class as the actor-workers. The dramatic changes which are required to make the play sensible to non-worker audiences have a definite dilettantish effect on structure, performance and response. To commit the play to a text would simply be to record it for historical purposes. It would be almost impossible to re-enact that text at a different time, a different place in a different society and maintain a similar relation to its new non-participant audience. Plays like Ilanga, Egoli and Imbumba arise and die in relation to the ebb and flow of worker experience in their need to expose new areas of social injustice, sensitise workers to alternative means of emancipation, and to maintain a level of consciousness which may otherwise be suppressed under state legislation and repression.

Such worker theatre proceeds within a cycle. To try to resurrect them under alien circumstances will ultimately destroy their purpose and force this theatre into the very world of theatrical convention and commodity exchange it is trying to overcome. Under these conditions, what started out as theatre, becomes a play, a text and is consequently sucked into

bourgeois interpretations where biographical and psychological influences predominate in subsequent enactments. With this transformation the role of intellectual, as Gramsci would describe him, is equally vitiated as this capitalist intellectual is unable to understand the ideological significance of form or substance.

There is no lack of subject matter from which worker theatre can draw. Halton Cheadle has raised the issue of pension funds, for example:

Black workers are being coopted into the total strategy through management who are trying to compel workers to belong to pension funds. This raises the issue of where pension funds invest their capital. They invest it in government stocks. The irony of it all is that workers are providing a form of capital accumulation at the expense of their exploitation.

Worker theatre must, therefore, be conceptualised as alternative theatre for it strongly resists a content determined by capital, that is subject to the interests of capital and that is controlled by capital. The semiotic components - use of signs, production of interpretants and their relation to the interpreter all stand in opposition to bourgeois forms of theatre.

Conclusion

This paper set out to reconceptualise the paradigm of "black theatre" and has shown this term to be ideologically loaded. All so called black theatre is a product of its social environment, from the stereotyped rhythms of *Ipi Tombi* and *Meropa* to the harsh images of *Egoli* and *Ilanga*. The former 'tribal' renditions reinforce the prevailing ideology, while the latter try to expose it from the inside. Each of these performances is encoded with signs which mean different things to people of different classes, social experiences and ideology. To therefore study text alone is to miss these shifts in how the sign is used and how it is interpreted by audiences drawn from different classes. We have replaced the term "black" with the notion of "committed" theatre giving a particular form of expression a specificity which sets it apart from the bland and agglomerative bourgeois definitions of 'drama' and 'theatre'. This definitional turmoil has been brought about not only by reconceptualization of the notion of ideology over the last ten years, but also through the discipline of semiotics which sees all forms of human activity in terms of performance. Reality is always experienced through the mediating structures of language and is an active process through which the real is made. Reality, therefore, may be seen as a complex system of signs and perception of meanings of those signs is ideologically determined. All actions, whether on a stage or anywhere else, are encoded with signs and this definition of performance goes beyond metaphor where the world is like or stands for a stage, but rather uses the metonymic device of stating that the world is a stage. This allows us to expand considerably the definition of 'theatre' to include the expression of everyday events such as the actions of iron foundry workers, miners or prison farm labourers. The performers in these plays are both actors and actants, dramatists and characters; their roles are inter-changeable, signifier and signified become one: the characters play themselves and enact their lives before the audience. They create and are created and stand in metonymic relation to the experience they are re-creating. Van Zyl states this relation succinctly: "The act of performance is the act of creation is the act of criticism. The part stands for the whole, is part of the whole and ultimately is the whole" (Van Zyl, 1977, pp. 47-48).

Alternative theatre is working class theatre and has taken 'theatre' back to its roots; it has rediscovered the origins of theatrical heritage; its very crudity has reintegrated theatre with life: the stage has slid into every aspect of working class existence and through metonymy has become identical with the 'lived' relationships of human existence.

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Notes

1. See, eg, Steadman, I. 1980: "Critical Responses to Contemporary South African Theatre" Critical Arts, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 40-46.
 2. For a detailed analysis of transformation see Tomaselli, K.G. 1981: "Ilanga Le So Phonela Abasebenzi: An Example of the Devolution of Theatre From the Laser to the Candle". South African Labour Bulletin, Vol. 6, No. 7 (forthcoming). For a textual review see Molepo, M.M. 1981, Vol. 6, No. 6, pp. 49-51.
 3. Digital communication is concerned with discrete elements. It deals with choice, with either/or sets rather than both/and sets of metonymy. Analogic communication does not deal with breaks in meaning such as either/or sets, but rather with varying pitches, quantities, densities or rhythms. For further information see van Zyl, J.A.F. and Tomaselli (eds.) 1977: Media and Change. McGraw-Hill, Johannesburg
 4. Here I am using the Peircean triadic relative of icon, index and symbol. For further information see Tomaselli, K.G. 1980: "Semiotics and Semiology - Their Implications for Art". South African National Gallery Bulletin, No. 2, pp. 1-5.
 5. This point is discussed at length by Lovell, T. 1980: Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics and Pleasure. BFI, London
 6. Exerpts from Infuduso were broadcast on BBC 2 in 14th February 1981. The program was entitled "Arena, I Talk about me - I am Africa."
 7. This is a reference to the government appointed Mayor of Soweto who is regarded as a sellout by the people of Soweto.
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