

ARTICLE ON BRETT BAILEY & THIRD WORLD BUNFIGHT – SATJ 2005

BRETT BAILEY: PLAYS OF MIRACLE AND WONDER

(New Forms of Syncretism for the South African Stage)

by Anton Kruger

I would like to introduce to you to one of the most important young writer/directors in post-Apartheid South Africa: Brett Bailey. What I'd like to do today, very simply, is just to introduce his work to you and tell you a little bit about three of his most important projects – a trilogy which he presented from 1996-1999, and which first brought him to the attention of the public eye.

These three plays all have something – or, actually, a lot – to do with actual historical events relating to the Xhosa culture, and particularly to their customs, and spiritual practices; involving the exploration of traditional beliefs in witchcraft, divination, animal sacrifice, ancestor worship, trance dance, and so on...

Since Bailey is, himself, very much a white man, this has sometimes become a contentious issue...whether he has a right to dabble in African religious beliefs. In his introduction to the book, from which the photos I'll be showing were taken (none of them, unfortunately, by myself.):

To be a white man dabbling in black territory is still taboo – to both sides. Whereas Fugard and Simon [that's Athol Fugard and Barney Simon] might have been skating on the surface of social issues that affected the lives of Black people, Bailey breaks through into forbidden territory – the fractured inner spiritual world of black African culture. (John Matshikiza)

Brett Bailey, as his name suggests, is of British ancestry, a third generation South African who grew up in Cape Town. He writes that the only black people whom he encountered whilst growing up were either maids: domestic servants from small villages in the

Transkei, or ex-convicts, since they lived near Pollsmoor Prison, where Nelson Mandela was also incarcerated for a time. Sometimes they would see prisoners escaping...so in his own words, whilst growing up in the seventies and eighties, his first encounters with African people were either "tamed black women" or "wild back men".

Bailey graduated from the University of Cape Town in 1991. Over the next few years he tried a few experiments in theatre: Dada Cabarets, township happenings, and a play about Helen Martins of New Bethesda lit by lorry headlight in a dry ravine in the Karoo. It seems, then, that he was always, from the start, been experimenting and pushing the boundaries of traditional white "colonial" theatre in South Africa, feeling himself alienated from both the imperial plays imported directly from what he terms the "Euromerican models" (p.10), as well as with the tradition of protest theatre, which, by the early nineties, had pretty much lost its *raison d'etre*.

Bailey spent a few years travelling around Southern Africa, in Zimbabwe and the Transkei, on what he would later refer to as a spiritual quest. This journey led him also to India. And it was while he was studying meditation in the foothills of the Himalayas that he suddenly wondered what he was doing so very far away from home, and decided to rather come back to South Africa, to identify himself as an African, and to explore the traditional indigenous spiritual traditions of the land of his birth.

So, in 1996 Bailey spent some time in the village of mTambalala, near the settler town of Port St Johns in the Transkei. Here he lived with a Xhosa *sangoma* a traditional healer, diviner and herbalist. He worked for a number of months with Zipathe Dlamini in his mud thatch homestead and helped hoe fields, learnt how to do beadwork, and also gathered roots, herbs and barks. Most importantly, or significantly, he participated in traditional ceremonies of dancing, drumming, singing, and chanting and took part in the *iintlombe* – communal trance ceremonies – in which bridges were constructed between the material and the spiritual worlds, between the present and the world of the ancestors.

So...here then was the beginning of Bailey's exploration into the ways of the Xhosa. His interest was not specifically anthropological or sociological, but rather spiritual. His mind still occupied by theatre, he was, very much like Artaud in Bali, in search of a more vital, primal, spiritual form of ritual in theatre which white western theatre had forgotten. When using the words "spiritual", or "religious", one must be clear on exactly which forms of religion Bailey endorses, because it is certainly not the Christian religion. In fact he is quite outspoken about "hackneyed old genres that have all the appeal of Calvinistic church services" (p.9). Instead, he writes:

Let the theatre be rich and thriving and humming like a Hindu temple, with flowers and cows and children running and bells clanging and incense smoking and devotees dancing and offering libations! or like a voodoo ceremony, with people flipping into trance, chanting and sacrificing, dust and blood and beer and gods. (p.9-10).

Let me then briefly summarise the three plays in this trilogy before getting on to other aspects of his style and method. The three plays in the Xhosa trilogy are called "Ipi Zombi"; "Mumbo Jumbo" and "The Prophet".

IPI ZOMBI

The first play, initially called "Zombie", premiered at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival in 1996. It was later reworked and titled "Ipi Zombi". This was based on a true account of something which happened to a community in the Eastern Cape township of Bhongweni in the year before. What happened, was that a minibus overturned on the road and 12 schoolboys were killed. One of the survivors claimed to have seen 50 naked women in the dark as the mini van rolled, and witchcraft was suspected. The local community was in uproar.

This is one of the facets of much traditional African belief: that nothing happens by chance or by accident, that there is always a cause, usually a spiritual reason, often a curse, behind all misfortune. Ultimately, an angry mob, comprised mostly of schoolboys and lead by high-school students, set about hunting down the 50 witches which the survivor had seen. Two women were killed before the police could intervene and quell the bloodlust. (And apparently some 200-250 people of both sexes are still killed every year for being witches in South Africa according to the Witchcraft Report of 1995.)

The mob also set about mutilating the corpses of the boys so that they could not be turned into Zombies – in other words, familiars, or slaves of the witches.

So this was the subject matter, a true story, of the first Third World Bunfight Production, the community theatre project which Bailey began in '96 with Miranda Williams. Before touring the Cape it had become a surprise hit of the Grahamstown festival (which – if I could throw in a punt here, is apparently the second largest English speaking theatre festival in the world, besides the Edinburgh festival).

IMUMBO JUMBO

The second work in this Xhosa historico-mythical trilogy was "iMumbo Jumbo", and this is the story of Chief Nicholas Tilana Gcaleka, who, in 1996, made a much publicised journey to Scotland in order to retrieve what he claimed to be the skull of the late King Hintsa, which had supposedly been chopped off and taken home by colonial troops as a souvenir around 1836.

Gcaleka, lead by his dream guide "the Hurricane Spirit" was informed by his ancestors that the land would not be healed (that's the whole of South Africa) unless the skull was returned to its proper resting place and accorded a suitable burial. Gcaleka arrived at Heathrow in flowing leopard robes with his entourage and after a dream in which the name *Invernessy* appeared, he descended on the Scottish highlands. There he found a farm and the startled owners did, indeed, manage to produce a skull of unknown origin

sporting a bullet hole. The triumphant chief took his trophy home, but he was met with scorn back in South Africa. The Xhosa King Xolilizwe Sigcau claimed that he was a fraud and no true chief at all, and scientists from the University of Cape Town claimed that DNA testing proved the skull to belong to a European woman and not an African man.

And yet, as with the first story, the tale is not told dismissively, but in full respect of the power of dreams and myths, and the possibility of spiritual encounters with the dead.

THE PROPHET

The third play, "The Prophet", possibly the darkest of the three, also deals with a confusion between the spiritual and material worlds. It concerns a story which is fairly well known in South African history. In 1856, on the banks of the Gxarha River, a fourteen year old Xhosa girl, Nongqawuse, had a vision. She believed that she had been visited by her ancestors, ancient chiefs and warriors who instructed her to go to the Xhosa king Sarili and to tell him that if they wanted to regain their former power they would have to slaughter all of their cattle, burn down all of their fields, and empty all of their stores of grain. If they did as instructed, a mighty ghost army would arise from their dead ancestors and defeat their enemies. Eventually, they obeyed her instructions, and an estimated four-hundred-thousand cattle were killed...and up to one hundred thousand hopeful Xhosa subsequently starved to death.

This was a devastation from which they have yet to fully recover, and the Xhosa people are still in some places of the country split according to believers (who believed in the prophesy) and unbelievers. Many "believers" still claim that it was the lack of faith by the "unbelievers" which lead to the catastrophe. This is a view discussed in Zakes Mda's recent novel about the incident Heart of Redness, It's also been explored in other literary

works, perhaps most famously by one of the first African playwrights H.E. Dhlomo, in the 30's.

So...these were the three plays which put Brett Bailey on the map – three stories all dealing with a part of Xhosa history, and delving into the spiritual, mythical worlds of the Xhosa people. As I've mentioned, these three plays won a clutch of awards, culminating in the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year award in 2001.

All three of these plays are set more or less in the round, which is reminiscent of a "kraal", a traditional tribal enclosure in which audiences become part of an actual audience with the chief or king, or *sangoma* and in which appropriate ceremonies are to be performed. And the audience becomes part of this ceremony. Sometimes members of the cast are planted in the audience, such as the spirits of the dead in *The Prophet*. The complicity of the audience is thus relied on for the success of the production.

Bailey also uses real *sangomas* in his shows. As mentioned the *sangoma* is a diviner and healer, also known as a witch-doctor, though of the type who identify and cast out witches. When premiering these plays at the Grahamstown festival, Bailey has always used non-traditional venues normally outside of the picturesque town of Grahamstown. There were also a few raised eyebrows and a bit of an environmental ruckus when they performed *iMumbo Jumbo* at a traditional venue, the Baxter, in Cape Town and set about slaughtering a live cock on stage as part of the proceedings.

In this sense, Bailey is not only saying something – he is doing it by saying it, complying with Austin's original criteria of performativity. His players really are calling up the ancestors, they really are sacrificing, they do go into trances...in fact, actually going into a trance becomes part of his actor's basic daily warm up routine.

So there is an interesting overlapping of "play" and "seriousness" which occurs, since the *sangomas* really are quite sincerely fulfilling their cultural role, as well an aesthetic function. They are not actors in the usual sense. What they are acting out is their role as

intermediaries, performing not only on behalf of the audience, and the director, but also, more importantly, on behalf of the spirits, and their ancestors.

In many ways what he is doing reminds me of the work of Włodzimierz Staniewski and the theatre of Gardzienice in Poland, whose troupe initially goes on expeditions to gather, or rather assimilate the folkloric tales and songs from rural villages. (Staniewski, Włodzimierz & Hodge, Alison. Hidden Territories: the Theater of Gardzienice. London: Routledge, 2004.) Similarly, Bailey's troupe have also travelled in rural areas of Kwazulu-Natal and the Transkei, and performed at street crossings, in community centres, and exchanged songs and swapped stories and learnt from indigenous storytellers, shamans, healers and artists. This work they then take to urban centres and the focus in both cases is, repeatedly on the religious significance of theatre, on a veneration for nature, for tradition, for a natural music arising from the performers lived experiences, and also, a pagan sense of Romanticism. Well, Staniewski is more overt about his Romanticism than Bailey, but they are also both interested in intercultural experimentation and are fascinated by primitivism.

And here is where certain difficulties arise, because perhaps primitivism means very different things to European cultures and to a developing nation such as South Africa. For the European, it may well be easier to conceptualise a certain nostalgia for cultural traditions, rituals and customs, whereas in a developing country it may come as a bit of an insult. If one examines the terminology itself here; the notion of "development" surely has connotations from child psychology, from the idea that there is a natural progression towards maturity, which is, ostensibly, the technologically urbanised "north", or "west", or "first world".

So, Bailey's greatest critics have often been urban, black intellectuals, who see his obsession with the traditional customs and superstitions of the Xhosa as a misrepresentation of a nation who have "developed" (there's that word again) far beyond the beliefs represented on stage.

Yet Bailey is surely not the first to explore intercultural forms of theatre; engaging, particularly with a culture which is foreign to his own. One of the most important names which springs to mind is that of Peter Brooks, who's built his troupe on the principles of intercultural exchange. Grotowski, and Richard Schechner have also spent a good deal of time and energy on exploring the ramifications of intercultural exchange, though in very different ways to each other, one as history and one as practice.

On the question of whether or not Bailey, as a white man, has the right to dabble in and explore black cultural beliefs, I'd like to close off with another quote from John Matshikiza's introduction, where, ultimately, he claims that one should:

...take Bailey at his word when he says his art and his spirituality are inextricably linked, and that, in his search for a spiritual truth, he has stumbled on a rich vein that springs from beneath the ground on which he stands. (6)

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NOTES

1. As you may be aware, we have quite a few different population groups in South Africa. These can, roughly, be divided into our 11 official languages, which are, more or less in order of size:

isiZulu (23.8 %); isiXhosa (17.6%); Afrikaans (13.3%); Sepedi (9.4%);
 English (8.2%); Setswana (8.2%); Sesotho (7.9%); Xitsonga (4.4%);
 Siswati (2.7%); Tshivenda (2.3%); isiNdebele (1.6%)

*(in 2001, source: Statistics South Africa: on South African Languages Web:
<http://www.languages.web.za>: <<http://www.cyberserv.co.za/users/~jako/lang/stats.htm>>
 14 May, 2004)*

This is besides the Indian languages Hindi, Urdu and Tamil, and the Chinese variants Cantonese and Mandarin, as well as many "Bushman" or "Khoisan" languages, which are also spoken by smaller population groups, but which do not constitute official languages. So, we have got a truly polyglot society with enormous differences, sometimes, in cultural perspectives.

Although the Zulu's constitute the largest single group, the Xhosa's are more politically powerful at present. Most of the ANC are Xhosa, as is Nelson Mandela.

2. How everybody got to South Africa is another story...there is evidence that the Nguni tribes from central and north Africa, well, there is still debate about exactly where they came from, settled in North-East Southern Africa, near Zimbabwe and Mozambique at least around 350 AD, though it was only in the 1400's that large kingdoms were established for the first time in South Africa by the Xhosa and Zulu tribes...which wasn't that long before the Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama first dropped anchor off the coast (1498 – Mozambique), though the first actual settlers, who were Dutch established a post only in 1652...The original inhabitants of the Cape, the hunter gatherer society of the people who are now referred to as the Khoisan were caught between the groups and not many survived the subsequent rather violent interactions between the Nguni tribes and the Europeans. The three major European groups who subsequently swept up the coast and into the interior were, in order of appearance, the Dutch, the French and then the English.

3. Let me give you a taste of this criticism, before I get to the content of the plays themselves:

Firstly: Mfundo Ndebele, writing for the Sowetan newspaper, has this to say about iMumbo Jumbo:

The portrayal of half-naked, bare breasted blacks with bodies smeared with animal fat and clay, suggests a time-freeze in black advancement. The play feeds on white prejudice and widespread ignorance about contemporary blacks in South Africa. (1997:21)

Ines Watson, the reviewer for the Daily Dispath, wrote:

Ipi Zombi is good theatre, but it is also exploitative of black culture and has extremely worrying aspects about it...beating drums, chicken feathers and violent death – is that really the reality? (p151-152.SATJ).

Zaheda Mohamed:

If you are into seeing black people portrayed like savage morons tinselled with cross-dressing in calabash boobs and a dance on a coffin, then go ahead, indulge...to denigrate people's stories and selves...is a cheap trick that whities can now get away with all in the spirit of reconciliation...(p.152)

Similarly, John Matshikiza wrote about the performance of "iMumbo Jumbo" at the market theatre that while white audiences were "stunned by the spectacle, a bold mix of sangoma ritual, [and] stylised movement",..."[m]ost black people [he] spoke to disapproved of exactly those combinations. The bottom line was the received lack of respect for black history and culture" (1999:2 in 278 Flockemann)..

4. Both witches and sangomas use similar forms of magic, though the distinction is that the one specialises in curses and negative use of power, to cause sickness and to manipulate others, whereas the other specialises in reversing these curses and in healing her subjects. (*agqwirha* = witch and *agqirha* = witchdoctor / sangoma)

5. To return to the original problem in the complaint about "primitivism". The great Russian theorist, playwright, actor Nikolas Evreinoff asserted, transformation is historically prior to formation, and the pre-aesthetic content of theatre is more primary than the aesthetic (p.). Certainly, there can be no denying that he aesthetic does play a very big role in what Bailey is doing; if one considers his extensive and elaborate costumes; his innovative stage designs; his manipulation of a vast cast, there is no doubt a great deal of thought and intention behind his moves...yet repeatedly in his own statements about his work it keeps coming back to the spiritual, the emotional, the religious.

6. The live theme park was brilliantly satirized by Julian Barnes in England, England.

7. "METHOD: Take township traditions and styles, throw them in the blender with rural performance and ceremony, black evangelism, a handful of western avant-garde and a dash of showbiz, and flick the switch: THIRD WORLD BUNFIGHT" (Bailey:9)

8. This is a very important and highly significant type of "restored behaviour", (to use Schechner's term), and both the sincerity and the artificiality of the situation are underlined.

9. And Zakes Mda, said of Ipi Zombi:

This is total theatre...the predominant tradition is harvested from African ritual which has been refined in a most creative manner, leaving one breathless and

spellbound. A work of genius that maps out a path to a new South African theatre that is highly innovative in its use of indigenous performance modes. (Zakes Mda, p.89 also in Graver, p.201)

Another reviewer from the Sowetan said that Bailey provides: "...a true picture of African spirituality...a ritual in which the audience is not just observing but participating." (88:miracles etc)

The Cape Times said that his work "throw[s] political correctness in the dustbin where it belongs" (p.89)

The Sunday Independent: "...thrilling...spectacular in its spiritual intensity" (p.196).

And The Argus:"...brilliantly created and magical ritual theatre"...(p.196).

Also, quite significantly, the real Chief Gcaleka, or should I say the real person playing the real role of the Chief came to see iMumbo Jumbo, (the real play about his exploits) with his entourage of advisors and disciples and, by all accounts, he thoroughly approved of the performance and vouched for its authenticity as a representation of actual events.

10. I think it is safe to say that he is playing a game. Now, not all games are good, or beneficial, such as the games played in *Liason Dangereax*, or in the act of war. At the same time, however, we shouldn't dismiss games either, simply because some are less than useful to a happy life.

11. In each of these plays there is a prologue, reminiscent of Greek and Renaissance theatre, as well as of the African praise poet in the African oral tradition, in which a "narrator" introduces what is about to occur. An illocutionary act precedes the actual speech of the performance itself in which the language of the presentation is defined. (Austin – 220). He's been able to acquire funding for many of his productions on the basis of them being "community theatre"...in fact, he's been called the "Stromboli of community theatre" by Matthew Krouse of the *Mail & Guardian*...{Bailey says that they thought it sounded like a great quote and they used it on all their fundraising proposals, though they didn't really know what it meant. They thought it might be some Italian theatre genius, or a fiery Mediterranean volcano...It turns out, as you may be aware, that Stromboli is "the cruel puppeteer who kidnapped poor Pinocchio from Geppetto and enslaved him in his circus". (p.195).}

13. Besides the accusation levelled at him that he is exploiting, or encouraging "primitivism", perhaps the greatest danger in what Bailey is doing, lies in the possibility of his work becoming a "Living History", to use Marvin Carlson's word. Well, I don't know if it's a danger or not, but I don't think it's what he wants to be doing. This is the sort of exhibition which Richard Schechner so brilliantly describes taking place at Plimoth Plantation, (in *Between Theater and Anthropology*). A similar situation has now also been recently recreated in the guise of the "China Folk Culture Villages" theme park

in Shenzhen, where real ethnic minorities can be seen behaving like real ethnic minorities. (Itch 82-89).

14. To return to my initial question then: does Brett Bailey have a right to is Brett Bailey for real? & what does it mean to be "for real"? Does he truly respect and is he trying to preserve the Xhosa cultures, or is he simply pretending to be? Perhaps one answer could be: does it matter? As Nietzsche points out, in a wonderful quote picked up by Marvin Carlson:

The profession of every man, even the artist, begins with hypocrisy, as he imitates from the outside, copies what is effective...if someone wants to seem to be something...for a long time, he eventually finds it hard to be anything else...(in...p.39)

Or, if you could handle a bit of mysticism, from don Juan, the teacher of Carlos Castenada, who said: "My acts are sincere, but they are only the acts of an actor." (Bancroft: 1976:308).

hi

brett,

here's the paper i delivered at the IFTR in may...as mentioned, it was very much an introductory talk, so i doubt there's really anything new here...i didn't always stick with the script but tried rather to talk around the topic, whilst showing a few photos i'd scanned in from your book...the notes at the end came in useful during the lively discussion which followed the presentation...

so...here then is take two on the interview...maybe we could kick off with some discussion on your activities over the past year and then take it from there.

thanks

anton

QUESTION

ONE

What are you working on at the moment? I saw there was a revival of iMumbo Jumbo this year, and I read a while ago that you had been invited to contribute towards the conceptualisation and design of the entertainment offered by Moyo's at the Spier Estate. Could you tell me a little bit more about this project and what it entailed? Is it still going on?

A follow on question which I'm sure a lot of people might want to ask you is how you feel about the more blatantly commercial aspects of entertaining diners, after having dealt with such deeply spiritual issues in your first three productions with Third World Bunfight. How do you relate spirituality and cuisine?

You've also spent some time in Haiti this year. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

- When were you there?
- What were you doing there?
- Would you describe it as a successful encounter?