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BRETT BAILEY AND THIRD WORLD BUNFIGHT

Journeys into the South African Psyche

“South Africa’s edgiest director.”¹ “The whizz-kid of transformed drama.”² “Bad boy of the [South African] theatre scene.”³ These are just a few of the epithets won by director-playwright Brett Bailey, variously charged with trespassing onto sacred cultural terrain and hailed as a trailblazing visionary forging the way toward a new South African theater—a theater capable of accommodating the complexities and collisions of belief, tradition, aspiration, and imagination that characterize life in that country today. Since exploding onto the South African theater scene with 1996’s *Zombie*, a volatile theatrical mix of ritual and spectacle, Bailey has built a reputation as one of the nation’s most consistently innovative and controversial theater-makers. With piercing blue eyes, a disarming smile, and a propensity for mile-a-minute verbal profusion, Bailey exudes an ease and self-assurance won through continual artistic risk taking. Bailey’s closely shaven cranium and penchant for torn khaki and denim fit nicely with his public persona in the South African media: that of a globe-hopping, extreme-theater provocateur whose adrenaline-seeking exploits have taken him to India, Bali, Europe, Uganda, Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, and Haiti during the ouster of Aristide.

Today Bailey hovers prominently on the margins of South Africa’s theatrical mainstream, intent on protecting his persona as an outsider artist with insider knowledge of African performance traditions. To date, Bailey’s work is far better known to foreign audiences in Europe than in the United States through international tours by his company, Third World Bunfight, and the publication of a compendium of early playscripts, *The Plays of Miracle and Wonder: Bewitching Visions and Primal Hi-Jinx from the South African Stage* (2003). The shifting stylistic modes and thematic emphases of Bailey’s productions over the past decade trace a trajectory of transformation for the South African psyche during the same period, from the exuberant optimism of the mid-1990s to the anxious disaffection of the new millennium. The last ten years have also seen Bailey’s personal transformation from an idealistic crusader for compulsive communality to a self-reflexive artist with a more guarded view of theater’s

The Prophet, directed by Brett Bailey, Grahamstown, South Africa, 1999
Photo: Brett Bailey and Elsabe van

mass appeal and transformative efficacy. Over the course of this self-described artistic maturation, Bailey has also developed a biting political orientation. Both attitudinal changes are rooted in firsthand experience of success, failure, disappointment, and compromise as Third World Bunfight's artistic director and, more generally, as an engaged citizen of South Africa's fledgling democracy.

Rejecting the knee-jerk emulation of "Euromerican modes and models" he sees in much South African theater, Bailey has drawn upon indigenous modes of performance as well as traditions from around the globe to create a unique fusion of forms and techniques, bursting the categorical confines of "intercultural" theater. Bailey's trademark devices and aesthetic elements include the following: site-specific stagings using semi-circular hay-bale seating; burning herbs and lighted torches that create an atmosphere of multisensory stimulation; song, dance, and percussion overlaying and driving the play's action; actors whose faces and seminaked bodies are often smeared with gray-white pigment (sparking associations with Xhosa initiates, European mimes, and the stone visages of Eastern statuary). Bailey uses stylization of the performing body through

iMumbo Jumbo,
directed by Brett
Bailey, Grahamstown,
South Africa, 1997.
Photo:
Patricia Driscoll



imitation of inanimate forms (West African statues, Hindu idols, Vodou altar figures) and invents ceremonies involving mysteriously symbolic objects and actions, sometimes with masks and iconic costume elements. Tongue-in-cheek musical numbers can erupt unexpectedly out of moments of ritual intensity; heightened characterizations oscillate between playful caricature and the grotesque, as well as restrained performances of great simplicity and spiritual depth; an often dreamlike stage reality emerges, populated by zombies, angels, devils, ancestors, and spirits.⁴

As a director, Bailey avoids reconciling the disparate elements within his individual works; as an explicator of his productions in articles and interviews, he consistently refuses to bend them toward singular, fixed meanings. He has repeatedly insisted that a play is not a "thesis,"⁵ and that he judges a performance "according to the mix of associations, thoughts and emotions the work stimulates in each member of the audience."⁶ This combination of aesthetic-practical eclecticism and interpretive ambiguity has left Bailey open to accusations of representational recklessness and cultural appropriation. The use of "pantomime caricatures" in his first major plays drew ringing denunciations from some quarters: one early reviewer accused Bailey of portraying the black characters in *Ipi Zombi?* (1998) as "savage morons" and labeled the entire production "another Bunfight saga told by real life blacks to real life whites who sit with gaping mouths and googoo eyed at performers in trance-like states moving and talking like doped-up freaks."⁷

Bailey has drawn the most flack, however, for using ritual elements drawn from a number of African cultural traditions, but predominantly those of the amaXhosa people of the Eastern and Western Cape provinces, where he has created the majority of his projects. He has even, at times, employed *izangoma* (plural of *isangoma*, a practitioner of traditional healing and divination) as cast members in his productions. As a young, outspoken white man at the head of a troupe of black performers employing a provocatively syncretic performance vocabulary, Bailey has been particularly vulnerable to critique. Playwright-producer Duma ka Ndlovu supplies a representative objection to the ritualistic dimension of Bailey's early work:

I think that Brett Bailey is brave, and I think again that you do need that kind of people in any society. However, Brett Bailey is not going to touch us the right way, because he ventures into some of the sacred aspects of our culture that there is no way he could understand.⁸

Ka Ndlovu charges Bailey with having a purely "intellectual" interest in African spirituality, but acknowledges the salutary effect of a transgressive, boundary-pushing figure on a larger artistic climate. Whatever the other ramifications of his artistic efforts over the last decade, Bailey has radically expanded the limits of South Africa's theatrical imagination. In addition, unlike the stereotypical postmodern *bricoleur* who cuts and splices source material with detached irony or cold enthusiasm for formal experiment, Bailey himself professes a genuine veneration for the African (and Asian) beliefs and

performance traditions his plays incorporate even if, in the dynamic and often disorienting spectacle of a Bunfight production itself, this stance of earnest valuation is not always clear.⁹ Bailey views his own *modus operandi* as one of valorization rather than appropriation and has repeatedly asserted his sincere belief in the continued potency and value of traditional African belief structures in a globalizing nation whose relationship with its cultural traditions is increasingly vexed.

South Africa's accelerating sociocultural transformations challenge the imagination as they normalize what would have once seemed stunning anomalies: rural farmers with Internet connections, township dwellers with cell phones, animal sacrifices on suburban front lawns, *izangoma* in BMWs, ritual initiations in tarpaulin-covered shacks at the edges of highways. These figures and scenarios make up the social milieu within which Bailey's work is situated, and which his early plays celebrate. A fascination with hybridity—with the “anomalous, glittering life-forms” spawned by the collisions between “First-World” and “Third-World” consciousnesses¹⁰—unifies Bailey's oeuvre, and it is this enthusiasm for the syncretic counterpoised with his valuation of the traditional that supplies the central tension of Bunfight's work.

Born in 1967, Bailey grew up in the white Cape Town suburb of Tokai, attending a coed prep school nearby and later a high-powered all-boys secondary school. The apartheid system was at its apogee of perverse complexity in the South Africa of Bailey's youth, and the 1970s saw a ratcheting up of repressive measures by the regime as well as an increasing militancy among resistance groups. The decade's flash point came during the 1976 Soweto Students' Revolt—sparked by the imposition of mandatory Afrikaans language instruction in black schools—which was brutally suppressed. In the 1980s, the winds of change began to blow and the white government enacted some limited reforms of social controls. However, a wave of boycotts, strikes, and demonstrations precipitated President P. W. Botha's notorious declaration of a state of emergency in 1986. Some of the apartheid era's worst atrocities were committed by police and security forces in the late 1980s as the regime tightened its iron fist in one last, desperate bid for control. Meanwhile, Bailey studied drama at the University of Cape Town (UCT), graduating in 1991 amid a rapidly changing political climate: Nelson Mandela had been released from prison in 1990 and a “negotiated settlement” was well underway. After a year spent “questing for direction and meaning in life” in India in 1994—also the year of South Africa's first democratic elections, in which the African National Congress (ANC) swept to power and Mandela became president—Bailey returned to South Africa, briefly taking up a teaching position at the New Africa Theatre Project, the brainchild of a former UCT professor, Mavis Taylor, that was intended “to empower and excite disadvantaged communities through theatre.”¹¹ Then, in early 1996, Bailey journeyed to Port St. Johns in the Transkei to research Xhosa ritual, folklore, and performance. His goal: “to fuse ritual and theatre in some way, to make drama which would transport performers and spectators the way I myself had been transported by



the ceremonies I attended in India.”¹² During this period, Bailey lived at the rural home of *isangoma* Zipathe Dlamini, tending fields, gathering herbs, and participating in nighttime ceremonies. Bailey writes of his time in the Transkei: “Here I learned the songs and dances and found the atmosphere and meaning that I put to use in *Zombie*, *iMumbo Jumbo*, and *Ipi Zombi?*”¹³ With a cast of sixty performers from Grahamstown's Rini township, Bailey presented his first major work, *Zombie*, on the fringe program of South Africa's National Arts Festival in 1996,¹⁴ immediately establishing himself as a unique, important, and controversial presence within South African theater.

Bailey's early works of the mid-1990s were born “in the sunshine of the ‘Rainbow Nation,’”¹⁵ when Nelson Mandela was president and everything seemed possible for the new South African democracy. A societywide rhetoric of oneness pervaded the nation's various mass media, promulgated by politicians and journalists alike. *Simunye* (“We are one”) became the ubiquitous slogan of the state-run South African Broadcasting Company. Of course, not all identity groups were comfortable or welcome within this oneness: some of the nation's Afrikaner conservatives were already beginning a psychological retreat into the laager-like confines of the persecuted minoritarian mind-set they had held before the National Party's post-World War II ascendancy. In general, however, the nation united behind the benignly patriarchal figure of Mandela and an optimistic vision of a model African state equipped with the world's most liberal constitution and the continent's most felicitous combination of infrastructure, capital, and natural resources.

Macbeth, directed by Brett Bailey, Artscape, Cape Town, 2001. Photo: John Hogg



The Prophet, 1999.
Photo:
Brett Bailey and
Elsabe van Tonder

Bunfight's *Zombie*—later reincarnated as *Ipi Zombi?*—was based on actual events that occurred in late 1995 near the KwaZulu-Natal town of Kokstad. After a minibus transporting fifteen schoolboys went off the highway, killing twelve of the passengers, one survivor testified that he had seen fifty naked women near the crash site and suspicions of witchcraft spread rapidly through the community. A vigilante force of schoolboys killed an elderly woman whom they accused of keeping their deceased schoolmates prisoner in her wardrobe as undead zombie slaves. When *izangoma* confirmed the pres-

ence of witches in the community, panic spread. At the schoolboys' funeral, a crowd attempted to destroy the bodies with torches and machetes out of belief that their burial would condemn the boys' spirits to continued unholy servitude. Local police halted the effort, leaving many community members convinced that the boys' souls were still enslaved.

In *Ipi Zombi?* the Kokstad events are pared down to their barest details. Following only the most basic narrative thread, the production offers an explosion of hysteria, taking its audience on a wildly theatrical "journey into the South African psyche"¹⁶ by mixing pantomimic antics, Xhosa songs and dances, direct audience address, dialogue, driving percussion, stylized movement, musical theater-style song-and-dance numbers, *izangoma* ceremonies, and trance-dancing. *Ipi Zombi?*'s ritual elements and showbiz razzmatazz leap out in striking juxtaposition: a divination rite precedes a lip-synch version of Doris Day's "Shaking the Blues Away," complete with zombie backup dancers, leaving the spectator jolted by the aesthetic and atmospheric switch. When the production was presented at the 1998 National Arts Festival, Bunfight occupied an abandoned power station outside of Grahamstown and erected an altar-like rostrum adorned with bones, animal heads, and crucifixes and topped by a large cupboard (the zombies' prison-house) in the building's cavernous interior—a setting of concocted ceremoniality characteristic of Bailey's early works.

Rather than attempting a "faithful" retelling of the Kokstad events or an analytical dissection of their causes and effects, *Ipi Zombi?* immerses its spectators in the dark, unnameable energies that drove them, forcing a confrontation with "the fear of the wilderness in the human psyche, in society."¹⁷ For Bailey, "wilderness" represents those natural forces beyond human control and rational understanding as well as the primal energies of "the forest within," the secret depths of the unconscious. At the production's close, the Bunfight actors leave the performance space simmering with the antistructural energies they have generated—this is ritual drama that stops definitively short of the final phase of anthropologist Victor Turner's breach-crisis-redress-reintegration sequence.¹⁸

Bailey's next production, *iMumbo Jumbo*, was, by contrast, ebulliently optimistic. Once again, the project was based on an actual occurrence: the 1996 quest of Nicholas Gcaleka, *isangoma* and self-styled Xhosa chief from the rural Transkei, who journeyed to the United Kingdom to retrieve the skull of his ancestral king Hintsisa, killed by British troops in 1836. In a dream vision, Gcaleka had learned that the strife and violence in South Africa's communities was being caused by the ravages of Hintsisa's restless spirit. The solution: to return the skull to its proper resting place in the land of Hintsisa's birth. Gcaleka's U.K. trip—sponsored by Coca-Cola and South African Breweries—became a media circus. Gcaleka did indeed find a skull on a rural farm in Scotland and returned to South Africa triumphant. However, forensic experts at Cape Town's Groote Schuur Hospital concluded that the skull was female and Caucasoid, and Gcaleka was widely discredited—even ridiculed—in the South African press.

In *iMumbo Jumbo*, however, Bailey portrays Gcaleka as a champion of the “Spirit” of his tribal nation, a defender of the integrity of the Xhosa “mythoform.”¹⁹ The capitalized keyword “Spirit” dominates Bailey’s manifesto-like writings of the late 1990s in which he grapples with defining his central, artistic-metaphysical objective: “the injection of Spirit into theatre and our lives.”²⁰ *iMumbo Jumbo* is a joyous valorization of “Spirit,” the shared life-essence that binds together communities (both spectatorial and demographic), and one that veers toward polemic when the Gcaleka character is given space to spout his communalistic, antimaterialistic, often antirational philosophy. Bailey’s Gcaleka is ultimately thwarted but not defeated by skepticism and scientism: the play ends with a ritual joust in which he subdues Hints’s spirit, represented as a West African masquerade, and “sends the audience out into the night with the blessings of the Spirit.”²¹

Bailey’s introductory notes to *iMumbo Jumbo* explain that, in traditional Xhosa religious belief, dreams can serve as virtual rehearsals for an actual journey, providing an *isangoma* with the directions and coordinates needed to track down a particular healing herb or sacrificial animal. The play endows Gcaleka’s journey with the surrealistic quality of dream, collapsing together the *isangoma*’s visionary prejourney with the actual trip to the United Kingdom: journalists with cameras for faces and angels with garbage-bag robes and plastic wings surround the pantomime Gcaleka at Heathrow Airport; Gcaleka encounters Jesus Christ on the cross, removes the nails from his hands, and is led by the Son of God to the farm where he discovers the skull. In staging the expansion of the geographical parameters of an *isangoma*’s dreamworld to include Heathrow Airport and a farm outside Inverness, Bailey conjures up a mise-en-scène infused with the global and deterritorialized imagination described by postcolonial theorist Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*.²² The very idea of Gcaleka’s quest—to raise money through corporate sponsorship in order to travel to the former colonial “motherland” and reverse the flow of pirated cultural relics—is itself a testament to the power of globalization and mediatization in shaping individually conceived life-possibilities. And in *iMumbo Jumbo*’s depiction of Queen Elizabeth II in traditional Xhosa dress, using local turns of phrase, speaking into a cell phone, and cradling a porcelain corgi, Bailey achieves a reversal of cultural flow that Gcaleka could not, accomplishing a kind of postcolonial jujitsu as he presents the colonizing power and its monarch through the kaleidoscopic lens of a hybrid imagination.

A brief digression on Bailey’s penchant for provocative titles would perhaps be useful at this point, as these provide a key to the sometimes dizzying tonality of Bunfight’s productions. Both *Ipi Zombi?* and *The Plays of Miracle and Wonder* wink mischievously at charges of cultural appropriation: the first title references the 1974 musical *Ipi Tombi*, produced by white theatrical entrepreneurs Bertha Egnos and Gail Lakier, much criticized for “projecting a romanticized image of the black man in Africa, trading on the excitement, vigor, and exoticism associated with tribal life”;²³ the second puns on a

lyric from Paul Simon’s *Graceland* album (“These are the days of miracle and wonder”), produced in collaboration with Ladysmith Black Mambazo and other South African musicians whose contributions, so goes the critique, were subsequently elided. In his title *iMumbo Jumbo*, Bailey has chosen a term with a more loaded colonial history: the Mandingo word *maamajombo*, describing a masked ritual dancer, was imported into the Western lexicon through the publication of Francis Moore’s *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa* of 1738. On Moore’s account, the “Mumbo Jumbo” was used to keep the women of the Mandingo tribe in awed subjection by means of supernatural scare tactics.²⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century the term had taken on its more familiar, colloquial usage: “obscure or meaningless language or ritual; jargon intended to impress or mystify; nonsense.” Bailey’s titular transformation of the term—adding the Bantu-language prefix “i”—playfully reasserts the word’s African origins, but the title’s tonality remains provocatively ambiguous. Is it irreverently ironic? Is it a provocation, intended to raise the hackles of the politically correct? Is it a challenge, designed to alert the audience member to his or her own exoticizing mode of spectatorship? These various interpretive possibilities unsettle and complicate the spectator’s receptive attitude before the performance even begins. The very name of Bailey’s company, “Third World Bunfight,” functions similarly by ventriloquizing the voice of “First World” disdain, which sneers at the global South as a developmentally backward geographic zone gripped in a chaotic and incessant struggle for limited resources.

iMumbo Jumbo premiered at the 1997 National Arts Festival with a cast of sixty, including ten *izangoma* and a church choir. The play is structured as a pantomime drama, acted out by the Bunfight actors, self-consciously “nested” (to borrow a usefully suggestive term from Richard Schechner²⁵) within a larger ritual performance, a theatrical version of the Xhosa communal ceremonies known as *iintlombe*. Like these Xhosa ceremonies, Bailey argues that the theatrical event can serve as a “fountain of Spirit,” its actors channeling an “intensely positive energy”²⁶ that envelops all present in a rejuvenating, spirit-strengthening atmosphere of social solidarity.²⁷ In *iMumbo Jumbo*, Bailey hoped to summon an “energy of ceremony” whose “healing quality” would affect all present in the theatrical-venue-turned-ritual-space.²⁸ The notion of national healing was very much in the air in mid-to-late-1990s South Africa: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was urging victims and perpetrators of apartheid-era crimes to come forward and testify in the spirit of peaceful resolution, and the TRC’s chairman, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was invoking the unique moral complex of generosity, compassion, and interdependence encapsulated in the Bantu-language concept of *ubuntu*. The curative aim that dominates Bailey’s writings of the time and lies at the heart of his reading of Gcaleka’s quixotic quest is essentially embedded in this cultural moment. In his manifesto-like statements of the time, Bailey casts himself, like the Gcaleka character of *iMumbo Jumbo*, as a spokesman for a newly imagined spiritual collectivity—even as a theatrical savior, bringing a life-giving injection of ritual energy to a dying art form.

The gaping conceptual hole in Bailey's early self-theorizing is his failure to acknowledge that ritual efficacy relies on homogeneity of belief structures among *all* of its participants. In other words, the euphoric moment of ritual "communitas" depends upon deeply ingrained values, attitudes, and ways of knowing shared by those who occupy the more spectatorial as well as the more performative roles within ritual proceedings. An intriguing pilot study by researchers at the ethnically diverse University of the Western Cape offers valuable insights into the diverse ways in which Bailey's work has been received by a younger generation of South Africans. Forty-nine students from UWC attended a performance of *iMumbo Jumbo* at Cape Town's Baxter Theatre and were asked to submit written reviews of the experience:

Responses ranged from descriptions of visceral reactions of acute discomfort, estrangement, shock and fear, to feeling appalled or deeply offended at apparently "blasphemous," "racially insulting" and "foul" language, to being "enraptured," "fascinated," or made to feel "at home," freshly re-connected to cultural traditions.²⁹

The above-described multiplicity of response confirms that Bunfight's performances can be places of uncomfortable but potentially exhilarating encounters. It also demonstrates how heterogeneous composition and attitudinal diversity among audience members might undermine the transformative dynamics Bailey attributed to his productions during this early period. Indeed, many of the UWC students reported a highly self-conscious experience of spectatorial difference as they continually checked their own responses against the visible reactions of peers belonging to other ethnic groups during the performance.³⁰

Sensory saturation, rhythmically driven exhilaration, and intense interpretive investment have all featured strongly in my own experiences as a spectator at Bunfight productions. My metabolism and imagination have been left humming with energy long after my departure from the performance space. Over time, images from these performances have returned to my mind's eye with unusual vividness. But does all this add up to healing? To spirit-strengthening and solidification of social bonds? It is difficult to say. Bailey writes of his company's efforts: "We are delving into the realm of African ritual in an endeavour to touch people profoundly, subliminally even, with drama."³¹ I accept the possibility that Bunfight's work has impacted me deeply on some subliminal level, but I personally have not felt myself swept up in the communal euphoria Bailey's manifesto-like writings once evoked.

Nevertheless, Bailey's obdurate conviction that performance *could* transcend and dissolve boundaries of ethnicity, class, and background provides a telling theatrical touchstone for the utopian current of collective thought in mid-to-late-1990s South Africa. Critic John Matshikiza's assessment that Bailey had invented a "new language" for a new South African stage—a transformed form fit for a transformed nation—that might interpellate all spectators "both as theatergoers and stakeholders in a national enterprise of extraordinary potential"³² only makes sense within the context of this



optimistic cultural moment. Since then, a grudging resignation to the fact that there will be separate theaters for the nation's various spectatorial constituencies has set in for many of South Africa's theater-makers. The early Bunfight productions were presented in a number of highly disparate venues: small venues at the National Arts Festival, community halls, outdoor stages in rural areas, as well as South Africa's largest producing/presenting houses (the Market Theatre and the Baxter Theatre Centre). In a recent interview, however, Bailey acknowledged that a theater accessible to people across the social spectrum was at best an "ideal" and continued:

iMumbo Jumbo, 1997.
Photo:
Patricia Driscoll

I think what I've come to realize is that theatre is, probably all over the world, a middle-class pursuit. We've translated our shows into Xhosa with the *Ipi Zombi?* tour. *Big Dada* we made in Umtata—we did it in school halls and church halls in Umtata. We got no audience, with the excessive marketing and stuff. We've done shows in the townships in Cape Town, where the actors come from, where we've advertised excessively as well, and audiences haven't come—in fact, white audiences have come for a "township experience." It's very difficult. . . . Although it's an ideal to reach people, I've sort of—I mean, have I given up? I don't feel like I'm orientating so much towards trying to reach the masses anymore. I'm not trying to be an evangelical church.³³



Macbeth, 2001.
Photo: John Hogg

Bunfight's national and international tours have heightened Bailey's sensitivity to differences between audiences and the context-specific limits on the potentials of theatrical performance. For example, the most ardent attempts to synthesize theatricality with ritual efficacy might well be transfigured into spectacular exotica under the alien gaze of attendees at a European festival. Bailey admits to naïveté and even "youthful arrogance" in his once-insistent demands for ritualistic stringency and now tailors his productions to particular target audiences, noting the impossibility of providing spectators with "a cultural primer beforehand."³⁴

Like *iMumbo Jumbo*, Bunfight's third "play of miracle and wonder," *The Prophet* (1999) was structured as a dramatic action "nested" within a larger performance event—in this case, a children's "village drama" enactment of the Xhosa Cattle Killing of 1856–57³⁵ encased within a "voodoo-inspired" ceremony with "gestures borrowed from Hindu and African icons."³⁶ Significantly absent from *The Prophet* is the hyperkinetic irreverence of the earlier works, manifested chiefly in their pantomimic characterizations and their tongue-in-cheek citations of pop culture. The more somber tone was due in large part to the

nature of the source material—the Cattle Killing is generally regarded by the amaXhosa as the greatest tragedy in the history of their nation, resulting in more than one hundred thousand deaths from starvation—but Bailey also attributes the tonal shift to his take on societal developments of the late 1990s:

I look at my workbooks for *The Prophet*: the luminosity of the New South Africa has dimmed somewhat; the fanfares of 1994 have died away. Nelson Mandela has stepped down, and corruption, violence, poverty, AIDS and dissatisfaction are on everybody's lips.³⁷

As President Thabo Mbeki's technocratic regime took over the executive reins in 1999, it became clear that the rosy glow of Mandela's presidency had obscured a host of social ills: rising crime rates, epidemic levels of HIV/AIDS infection, widespread violence and sexual abuse, a growing wealth gap between the rising black elite and the nation's everyday citizens. Attitudes toward government have since soured in many quarters.

The Mbeki regime's obfuscatory stalling on the HIV/AIDS crisis, the gradual disclosure of systemic corruption at all governmental levels, and a generalized failure to deliver on ANC election promises of social betterment have all led Roger Southall, editor of the Human Sciences Research Council's 2007 "State of the Nation" report, to dub the present ANC-led government "worryingly dysfunctional."³⁸ More polemical voices in the national press repeatedly voice warning cries that South Africa is sitting on a "time bomb" of inequality. Evidence of the time bomb's ticking came in the form of massive national public service strikes during June and July of 2007, and, more recently, on September 3, 2007, when hundreds of demonstrators in the Protea South neighborhood of Soweto blockaded streets to protest the government's failure to provide them with new homes, running water, and other promised amenities. The ensuing confrontation with law enforcement, during which protestors threw rocks and held up makeshift shields and police fired tear gas and rubber bullets, yielded television images eerily reminiscent of apartheid-era battles between activists and security forces in the late 1980s. If, as Bailey claims, Bunfight's works do indeed tap into a national consciousness and channel its latent impulses, there is little wonder that the company's post-2000 productions have entered darker, more anxiety-ridden regions of individual and collective psychology, delving into themes of violence, exploitation, and the exercise of power (along with the excesses and vulnerabilities of love and attraction).

Bunfight's directional shift toward a more somber tone and a sharper political bite was inaugurated by *Big Dada* (2001), a highly satirical "postcolonial cabaret" based on the life of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin and dedicated to Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe. Drawing on research into rural and urban drama in Uganda, Ghana, Benin, and Togo, Bailey conceived *Big Dada* as a grotesque cartoon employing the stylistic trappings and devices of community theater. The play takes the pantomimic characterizations of *Ipi Zombi?* and *Mumbo Jumbo* into more sinister territory as Bailey's "tragicomic caricature" of Amin³⁹ chops and bludgeons his way to power atop a gaudily decorated platform outfitted with gold lamé curtains; Bailey's pageant-style exploration of the spectacularly bloody theatrics of Amin's rise to power is played out upon this stage-upon-a-stage. However, the metatheatrical boundaries established by this conceit are eventually ruptured as Amin and his human-dog bodyguards take the play's narrator hostage, secure the doors of the theater space, and orate directly to the audience, who become the people of Uganda under Amin's regime. The play's grotesque climax comes in the stage-image of an enthroned, bull-horned Amin gorging himself upon the flesh of the executed narrator, whose body is draped pieta-style across Amin's lap. As his hold on power evaporates under pressure from Tanzanian military action, Amin—microphone in one hand, bloodied knife in the other—serenades the audience with Paul Anka's version of "My Way" and dances his exit through the auditorium, evoking the historical Amin's escape to political asylum in Saudi Arabia. For some critics, *Big Dada*'s seductively spectacular pageantry and unapologetic skewering of homegrown African corruption and the strategic meddling of foreign powers during the Cold War era served up "history in broad two-dimensional outline,"⁴⁰ muddying

rather than crystallizing insights into the dynamics of tyranny, complicity, and collusion. As with many Bunfight productions, the play's open-ended conclusion certainly leaves the audience with a potent mix of vibrant images, unresolved questions, and lingering visceral sensations. The themes of ambition and regicide in Giuseppe Verdi's *Macbeth* (Bunfight's other major project of 2001, a commission for Cape Town's Artscape opera company) afforded Bailey another opportunity to pursue his dissection of power figures: the opera's plot was reconceived as a power struggle in a modern-day Central African state, with Macbeth as an ambition-driven army general and the witches as diviners.⁴¹ Inserted references to former Zairean dictator Mobutu Sese Seko and to controversial ANC party president (as of December 2007) Jacob Zuma explicitly anchored the production in the continent's contemporary political landscape.⁴²

In 2004, Bunfight took up residence at the Spier Wine Estate, a winery and tourist complex outside the Western Cape university town of Stellenbosch. Spier has done much in recent years to promote the arts, hosting an annual, four-month-long summer festival of performances at which some of South Africa's most high-profile theater-makers have debuted work. In return for logistical and financial support, Bunfight provided dinnertime entertainment at Spier's Moyo restaurant, an outdoor eating establishment housed in a massive Bedouin-style tent. At Moyo, diners—many of them foreign tourists—help themselves to lavish buffet meals within a Disneyfied Pan-African ambience. Bailey voiced some frustration at the terms of Bunfight's residency, admitting that he “struggle[d] to make pieces which have integrity” at Moyo, where “a lot of what might work in the context of one of my plays comes across as false, exotic, and trite,”⁴³ and resigned his position as the restaurant's entertainment director in August 2007.

As compensation, however, the residency at Spier's one-thousand-acre estate has provided Bailey with what he calls a “canvas” of “wild, barren terrain” upon which to stage a crop of site-specific spectacles.⁴⁴ Since setting Dutch writer-performer Oscar van Woensel's *medEia* in and around an abandoned shantytown film set on the estate in 2005, Bailey has become increasingly enamored of the outdoor, site-specific approach. Bailey's *medEia*, which centers on themes of violence, isolation, and xenophobia, furthers Bunfight's movement toward darker, politically resonant subject matter. The events of the Medea story are “nested” within a ceremony of hope conducted by a chorus of women to bolster their spiritual resistance to victimization and marginalization. Jason and his Argonauts are conceived as a marauding gang reminiscent of the *Tonton Macoute* militia of Haitian dictator Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier; Medea is a village priestess who, under the spell of Jason's violent charisma, agrees to steal the Golden Fleece and flee the land of her father, King Pelias (a fat-cat African dictator in peaked military cap and dark glasses). As in the mythic source material, Jason's subsequent neglect, infidelity, and abuse push Medea toward vengeful resolve. After Bailey's twin, role-doubled Medeas murder their children by plunging dolls into a zinc bathtub filled with water and throw a final cry of defiance at the audience, they join the chorus of women in a poignant but uneasy display of female solidarity: Medea may have proven

herself a survivor, but her descent into bloody nihilism has harmonized her with the blasted world in which the play's events transpire.

Bailey's most recent full-scale theatrical project, *Orfeus*, was first presented outdoors at Spier in February 2006, and a stripped-down version was staged in an abandoned quarry on the outskirts of Grahamstown as part of the main program of the 2007 National Arts Festival. The latter version re-imagines Orpheus's quest as a shamanic journey into Jungian depths, bookended by two ritualistic sequences partly inspired by the minimalism and beauty of Balinese ceremonies. Defamiliarized within the ceremonial matrix of one of Bailey's hybrid rituals, everyday objects and simple movements (the spreading of white paste on a figurine, the pouring of water from a tin kettle) resonate with multiple symbolic potentialities. In *Orfeus*'s central section, images of personal nightmare interpenetrate with bleak scenarios drawn from Bailey's vision of Africa's troubled unconscious: five chained children, the “Shoemakers,” lace pristine white sneakers in an electrified pen while Hitlerian speeches bark from a loudspeaker; the blindfolded “Broken Man” writhes on a wire bed rigged up with electric cables; the

medEia, directed by Brett Bailey, Spier Wine Estate, Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2005. Photo: Brett Bailey and Pieter Hugo





Orfeus, directed by Brett Bailey, Spier Wine Estate, Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2006. Photo: CUE

almost naked “Forgotten Man” stands up to his thighs in a culvert’s icy water, grasping ineffectually at thin air; the pith-helmeted King of the Underworld types away at a laptop next to a huge container full of red-masked sex slaves. According to Bailey, these images were intended to spark multiple associations: sweatshop labor, repressive education systems; Alzheimer’s disease, ostracism of the aged and the sick, personal abandonment; the guilt of child soldiers; neocolonial exploitation, human trafficking.⁴⁵ Between these *tableau vivant*-style installations, spectators were led stumbling across the darkened floor of the quarry, over piles of cattle bones and through the noxious fumes and searing heat of blazing car-tire bonfires. In many ways, *Orfeus* offers up a compendium of Bailey’s dramaturgical techniques to date, combining the ritual and the political, the meditative and the provocative, dreamlike surrealism and worldly reference, concentrated spectatorship and site-specific wandering, open-ended thematic multivalence and symbolic closure. It is also tempting to read the figure of Orpheus as another of Bailey’s alter ego-like champions of “Spirit”: Orpheus is, after all, a poet of transformative potency, whose music tames wild beasts, wins over the king of the underworld, and “bring[s] order to the world with his art.”⁴⁶

Bailey’s newly emergent political orientation has also dictated some of his choices in freelance work. Before reworking *Orfeus* for Grahamstown, Bailey accepted a commission to direct the opening night performance of Zimbabwe’s Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA). Against a tailspinning economy, skyrocketing inflation,

politically motivated beatings and detentions, and widespread shortages of fuel, food, and other goods in May 2007, Bailey orchestrated a dangerously satirical revue for HIFA’s outdoor stage in the city center, before an audience of six thousand. Bailey’s syncretic musical extravaganza (featuring a Shona rendition of Santana’s “Oye Como Va”) culminated in a scene in which the “Secret Police,” a “gang of black-suited and sun-glassed dancers,” stormed the stage and massacred the performers with pick handles. In a telling instance of the daily whitewashing that goes on in Zimbabwe’s state-controlled news media, the *Herald* newspaper offered the following account of Bailey’s spectacularly satirical staging: “In a way the performances showed music from its cradle to the present [demonstrating] that art is diverse, beautiful, delightful, uplifting, and, above all, outrageous.”⁴⁷ Bailey returned to HIFA in April 2008 for a repeat engagement during the bizarre limbo period after the nation’s presidential election that pitted Robert Mugabe against opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai. While the world awaited the dubiously delayed release of the official election results, Bailey again crossed a potentially dangerous line into explicit political provocation by weaving testimonial accounts of everyday Zimbabweans’ anxious dream visions into *Dreamland*, a barely disguised musical allegory of a “king [who] stole the songs from his people and bewitched them into a deep sleep.”⁴⁸

All this is not to say that Bailey has recast himself completely as an activist crusader. Bunfight’s current project, *House of the Holy Afro*, is a “nightclub show” created in collaboration with house DJ Dino Moran that, in Bailey’s words, brings together “traditional Xhosa and gospel songs set to house beats and hip-hop poetry—highly stylized and choreographed in an OTT Afro-kitsch vein.”⁴⁹ The piece, which features six Bunfight performers and Odidi Mfenyana, a “cross-dressing cabaret diva,” was a hit at the 2007 Edinburgh Festival and represents Bailey’s unapologetic embrace of unadulterated showbiz razzmatazz. As Bailey’s oeuvre has evolved, his work seems to have split into two distinct currents: the dark theatrical strain described earlier and a strain of flashily culinary entertainment represented by *Holy Afro* and the dinnertime performances at Spier. Thus the *Miracle and Wonder* trilogy of plays, with their often dizzying mix of sources, tonalities, and stylistics and their “come one, come all” attitude, have given way to a series of productions more carefully calibrated to conjure certain atmospheres, achieve specified effects, and target particular audiences.

Future Bunfight projects include European tours of *Macbeth* and *Orfeus* in 2009, and a U.S. tour of *Orfeus* is also a possibility. Bailey is now working on a version of Verdi’s *Aida* for production in Sweden and *FELA*, a musical biography of Nigerian Afro-beat superstar Fela Kuti to play in South Africa during the 2010 FIFA World Cup “as an antidote to the glut of ‘curio-performance’ which will no doubt swamp our stages” during the tournament.⁵⁰ Bailey is also preparing another collection of plays for publication, tentatively titled *Plays of the Underworld*, and will curate the Spier Performing Arts Festival until 2010. Bailey’s long-range plans include the founding of a “Pan-African Performance Academy” that would bring together directors, playwrights,

actors, and designers from across the continent in order to develop collaborative networks and to “bring critical thinking into African performance.”⁵¹ Formulating concrete institutional structures to promote the kind of cultural interpenetrations that have dominated the thematic and formal elements of Bailey’s work to date is no doubt a challenging undertaking. However, it is also one that, by fostering conversation, collaboration, and experiment, could unlock possibilities for hitherto unforeseen expansions of Africa’s theatrical imaginations—imaginative expansions necessary to forcefully present, as Bunfight’s productions have done over the last decade, images of life in Africa capable of countering the blurrily distorted visions of the continent circulating in the “First World” imaginary. If the images, situations, and conflicts within Bailey’s work concretize “the paradoxes of South African modernity,”⁵² these “paradoxes” are, in fact, only paradoxical to a regressive or static imagination incapable of dealing with the dislocations and disruptions—salutary and destructive—that characterize daily life in South Africa’s globalizing phase. The schemata of such a backward-looking worldview are in desperate need of forceful updating, and the controversies and confusions that Bunfight’s productions have generated are perhaps evidence that a theatrical version of this necessary work of imaginative renewal is indeed taking place. As the evolution of Bailey’s work over the past decade has shown, this renewal is ever-changing, transforming along with the collective psychic substrate out of which it arises and upon which it works.

NOTES

1. Matthew Krouse, “My African Dream,” *Mail and Guardian* (South Africa) online, July 16, 2003, www.chico.mweb.co.za/art/2003jul/030725-african_dream.html (accessed July 26, 2007).
2. Catherine Knox, “The Story of Our Times,” *Mail and Guardian* (South Africa) online, June 16, 1998, www.chico.mweb.co.za/art/gtown98/980615-zombi.html (accessed July 26, 2007).
3. Judith Rudakoff, “Why Did the Chicken Cross the Cultural Divide? Brett Bailey and Third World Bunfight’s *iMumbo Jumbo*,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 48, no. 2 (2004): 81.
4. Although I will, of course, attempt to do justice to Bunfight’s aesthetic through verbal description, sometimes a picture is indeed worth a thousand words, and I direct the interested reader to the company’s Web site, www.thirdworldbunfight.co.za/site.html, where production images as well as several short video clips are available for perusal.
5. Anton Krueger, “On the Wild, Essential Energies of the Forest: An Interview with Brett Bailey,” *South African Theatre Journal* 20 (2006): 332.
6. Brett Bailey, “Big Dada and I,” *Times* (South Africa) online, February 25, 2007, www.sundaytimes.co.za/article.aspx?ID=392995 (accessed July 26, 2007).

7. Zaheda Mohamed, “Cheap Tricks and White Lies,” *Cue* (Grahamstown), July 6, 1998, 3. This critique, while certainly aimed at the specifics of Bunfight’s style in these early works, should be located within a context of the South African theater community’s contemporary unease with the broadly expressive “township style” of black performance, developed most influentially by township impresario Gibson Kente. This mode of actorly expression would later influence the physically dilated style of protest theater brought to international attention by the acclaimed *Woza Albert!* devised by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema, and Barney Simon.
8. See Rolf Solberg, *South African Theatre in the Melting Pot* (Grahamstown: Institute for the Study of English in South Africa, Rhodes University, 2003), 270. Whether Bailey has visited the sacred places—literal and metaphorical—of Xhosa culture “on his own” is a matter for debate; Bailey has often emphasized the collaborative nature of Bunfight’s work and the tremendous creative input of black African performers and choreographers in the company’s productions.
9. At least some critics are willing to take Bailey at his word. John Matshikiza champions Bailey’s work as “opening a door to the possibility of a kind of collective catharsis” and calls his plays “huge, theatrical, colourful, reverential, irreverent”; see Brett Bailey, *The Plays of Miracle and Wonder: Bewitching Visions and Primal Hi-Jinx from the South African Stage* (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2003), 7.
10. Krueger, “On the Wild, Essential Energies of the Forest,” 329.
11. Liz Mills, “A Tribute to Mavis Taylor,” *Monday Paper*, November 1997, 10–17, web.uct.ac.za/depts/dpa/monpaper/97-1034/mavis.htm (accessed July 28, 2007).
12. Bailey, *Plays of Miracle and Wonder*, 14–15.
13. Bailey, *Plays of Miracle and Wonder*, 16.
14. Held in Grahamstown, the Eastern Cape, the National Arts Festival provides an annual staging ground for new productions by South Africa’s major producing entities as well as cutting-edge work by up-and-coming practitioners.
15. Brett Bailey, interview with the author, The Rhodes Theatre, Grahamstown, South Africa, July 3, 2007.
16. Knox, “Story of Our Times.”
17. Bailey, *Plays of Miracle and Wonder*, 85.
18. See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 37–41.
19. Bailey seems to have borrowed this term from anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong, who set forth the “mythoform” concept in ambitious works combining ethnoscience, philosophy, and aesthetic theory, such as *The Powers of Presence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).
20. Bailey, *Plays of Miracle and Wonder*, 10.
21. Bailey, *Plays of Miracle and Wonder*, 243.
22. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1–23.
23. Peter Larlham, *Black Theater, Dance, and Ritual in South Africa* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 72.

24. See Francis Moore, *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa* (London: Edward Cave, 1738), 116–17.
25. See Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 66–111.
26. Brett Bailey, “Performing So the Spirit May Speak,” *South African Theatre Journal* 12, nos. 1 and 2 (1998): 191.
27. Victor Turner’s influential notion of ritually catalyzed “communitas” clearly underlies Bailey’s thinking here—indeed, a view of the performance event as a “liminal” space apart, within which powerful cultural energies find expression, constitutes a deep structural element of Bailey’s theatrical thought. Indeed, much of the artistic-metaphysical philosophy laid out in *The Plays of Miracle and Wonder* reads as an intensely idealistic manifesto borne out of two primary influences: the anthropological strand of performance studies and a Jungian view of the “collective unconscious” as a repository for cultural archetypes and fantasies. Bailey has acknowledged reading Richard Schechner’s work as a university student and extensively researched Jung’s trips to Africa in the 1920s for *Safari*, a production about the psychiatrist’s travels staged with a Ugandan cast in 2003.
28. Solberg, *South African Theatre in the Melting Pot*, 261–75.
29. Miki Flockemann, Gino Fransman, Ignatius Ticha, and Linda Tini, “Furiously Enthused? Performing Identities, Encountering *iMumbo Jumbo*: A UWC Case Study,” *South African Theatre Journal* 19 (2005): 194.
30. The coauthors of the UWC study conclude that *iMumbo Jumbo* opened up a space in which audience members could “simultaneously identify with and yet look at culture as performance,” enabling “shifts in thinking” and the destabilization of previously unexamined belief structures. Flockemann et al., “Furiously Enthused?” 204–5.
31. Bailey, *Plays of Miracle and Wonder*, 79.
32. Bailey, *Plays of Miracle and Wonder*, 7.
33. Bailey, interview with the author.
34. Brent Meersman, “Cheap Township Tat and Designer Chic,” *Mail and Guardian* (South Africa) online, September 7, 2007, www.chico.mweb.co.za/art/2007/2007sep/070907-bailey.html (accessed December 30, 2007).
35. Paramount Xhosa chief Sarili ordered the cattle killings after embracing the millennialist visions of a teenage girl, Nonqawuse, who prophesied the return of ancestral chiefs, the repulsion of the British, and the dawning of a new Xhosa golden age if the expression of faith symbolized by the mass slaughter was carried out.
36. Bailey, *Plays of Miracle and Wonder*, 163.
37. Bailey, *Plays of Miracle and Wonder*, 156.
38. S. Buhlungu, J. Daniel, R. Southall, and J. Lutchman, eds., *State of the Nation: South Africa 2007* (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2007), 8.
39. Bailey, “Big Dada and I.”
40. Guy Willoughby, “A Cartoon Cabaret,” *Mail and Guardian* (South Africa) online, August 10, 2001, www.mg.co.za/articledirect.aspx?articleid=153176&area=%2farchives%2farchives_print_edition%2f (accessed July 31, 2007).
41. Bailey’s self-professed ignorance of operatic conventions and disdain for the superficiality of libretto texts supplied him with the confidence to slash forty-five minutes from Verdi’s original score and add a heavy dose of video projection. For Bailey, opera represents “a relic from Europe”—“a form which can be invaded, broken, shattered” (Adrienne Sichel, “Welcome to Brett Bailey’s Underworld,” Tonight [South Africa] online, June 26, 2006, www.tonight.co.za/index.php?fSectionId=352&fArticleId=3903325)—and a rich generic platform from which to springboard into an exploration of his own interests rather than a lofty art form whose traditions deserve reverential treatment.
42. Bailey’s fascination with political as well as spiritual/ritual dynamics took him to Haiti for several months in 2004, where he worked with a local cast to produce *Vodou Nation*, what Bailey has called “a confused musical drama that charted the history of the island from precolonial times, through colonialism and slavery, and into the equally abominable mess that has succeeded the revolution.” Bailey, e-mail correspondence with the author, March 12, 2008. The production wove together Vodou-rock music, elements of Vodou practice and belief, and 3-D video animation, ultimately touring the United Kingdom for thirteen weeks. Bailey was, in fact, in Haiti during the three-week rebellion leading to the controversial deposal of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide; the chaotic events surrounding the ouster left a deep impression on *Vodou Nation* and subsequent Bunfight works (like *medEia*, 2005). For an engaging personal account of Bailey’s time in Haiti, see Brett Bailey, “Playing in the War Zone,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 48, no. 3 (2004): 180–85.
43. Krueger, “On the Wild, Essential Energies of the Forest,” 323–24.
44. Bailey, interview with the author, July 3, 2007.
45. Ibid.
46. Brett Bailey, *Orfeus* program notes, 2007.
47. Brett Bailey, “Upstaging the Main Act,” *Times* (South Africa) online, July 1, 2007, www.sundaytimes.co.za/article.aspx?ID=502474 (accessed July 26, 2007).
48. Brett Bailey, e-mail correspondence with the author, May 7, 2008.
49. Krueger, “On the Wild, Essential Energies of the Forest,” 328.
50. Bailey, e-mail correspondence with the author, March 12, 2008.
51. Bailey, interview with the author.
52. Flockemann et al., “Furiously Enthused?” 198–99.