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# PERFORMING SO THE SPIRIT CAN DANCE

*With the creation of the universe the dance too came into being, which signifies the union of the elements... the dance is the richest gift of the muses to man... because of its divine nature it has a place in the mysteries, is beloved of the gods and is carried out in their honour. [Lucien, 2nd century AD]*

Like molten lava beneath the fragile crust of the earth, just beneath the cool surface of our everyday existence the life force pulses... A thin membrane separates our mundane lives from this realm, unfathomably deep and wide. A realm – spoken of in myth, glimpsed in dream and meditation – which spews its magma out to astonish or burn us in moments of extreme intensity: in trance, ritual, ecstasy, trauma, revolution, orgasm, panic. These eruptions and the situations and places in which they occur enthrall me. I want the theatre I make to be such a phenomenon: let that energy flow, let it flow...

*The practical purpose of art is to channel a spiritual force into an aesthetically satisfying physical form that captures the presumed attributes of that force – it is like grounding an electrical charge to ensure safety.  
[from a book on Nigerian art, the reference for which has gone astray]*

What fascinates me, the sphere in which I try to exert myself, the aspect that I find truly, fundamentally important, is the Spirit of a drama. Drama can be like ritual: an event that incorporates everybody involved – performers and audience – affecting everybody present at profound levels of consciousness, impelling subliminal currents to flow amongst us. Drama has the potential to be immensely powerful, to stimulate the senses, the intellect, the emotions and the spirit of people; to give us *collective* access to deep realms of our psyche.

A theatrical work can serve as a source of intensely positive (or disturbing) energy – the way a shrine blesses the landscape and community in which it is situated, the way an actualised person inspires the people around her. Theatre may be a fountain of Spirit.

With the de-spiritualization of the West, theatre has largely been reduced to an audio-visual display. That is the way it has evolved. We sit in a dark hall and watch and listen, and if we identify with somebody we do it quietly, by ourselves; it does not bring us together in communion. And yet we stick with this cold tradition here in South Africa, and we say “nobody comes to the theatre anymore”, and lament the dying gasps of threadbare old genres that have all the appeal of Calvinistic church services.

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. Or instil in it the silent intensity of a Zen temple, where the deep stillness inside us may bloom. But not this passive alone watching, this safe TV aestheticism. That is the cynical ethos of the decaying European Empires; as Africans we do not have to look at ourselves through those eyes, judge ourselves according to those jaded opinions as is our common tendency. Forget the Euromerican modes and models. We do not exist in relation to them only. We may express ourselves in our own voices, with all the fervour, trauma, richness and vitality of the developing nation we are.

One of the main sources of my inspiration since 1996 has come from African sangomas – diviners or traditional healers. These people receive a calling from their ancestors – the moral guardians of their society – that most often manifests itself as a physical or psychological illness. A period of training and healing by a senior sangoma leads to the eventual graduation of the initiate, who then serves as a channel for ancestral communication between her society and what Jungians would call the collective unconscious. The ancestors communicate via dreams, and also when the sangoma enters a trance after vigorous dancing at ceremonies – *iintlombe* – in which the entire community participates.

These *iintlombe* have a profound impact on all those who attend: in effect, through their public journey into trance, the sangomas lead their chanting, clapping community on a journey into the depths of their collective imagination, coaxing the spirit of the people into a tangible throbbing force. Everybody emerges exhausted but deeply invigorated after such a ceremony. This is one of the ways in which the sangoma brings healing to her people. Such events are like temporal shrines that fuel the spirit of people.

During 1996, 1997 and 1998 I spent much time living with sangomas in rural and urban parts of South Africa, learning their songs and dances, trying to understand how their rituals work, and personally experiencing their healing powers. In two of our productions, ZOMBIE and iMUMBO JUMBO, sangomas were included in the cast, drumming, chanting, dancing into trance. The latter work was structured along the lines of an *intlombe*: a ritual enclosing a play, so to speak. The ritual climaxed with the sangomas calling their ancestors into the theatre to ask them to bless all present and to bring peace and light to the city (in retrospect, this aspect was quite undeveloped and a little bit phoney: we take it a lot further in the 2003 revival of iMUMBO JUMBO, working intensively with sangomas to structure this ceremony).

A sangoma – like many rabbis or priests – is herself often a performer, using performance techniques and her role as initiated authority to inflame the spirit of her congregation and lead her people into a state of heightened reality. The initiate sangoma learns to mould her being into a conductor for the transmission of collective energies. In a ceremony, her increasingly strident dancing, chanting and “confessing” (rapid stream-of-consciousness monologues and prayers), the clapping, drumming and singing of her supporters and the pungent smoke of herbs all aid her journey into the trance in which the ancestors “possess” or animate her voice, her movements, her being (often in apparent wild abandon). In this state she embodies and articulates those forces in a culturally encoded way which has deep resonance for her people. She is the pulsing human flower of their collective psyche.

***Dancing with all your life and once you start there's no going back, no turning around. We dance so the spirit may speak, this dance is its word, we articulate the ancient and effervescent language of dance, it grips us, this language, it speaks us,***

*throwing us mercilessly on the resonating cadences of its diction, and we do our best, to survive, and more: to transmit the volatile ancient wisdom of its will.*  
[ZOMBIE workbook, '96]

*Oh how I've grown to love this dancing of Africa, this dancing to invoke the spirits, for the spirits. What freedom it has brought me, what sweet deliverance from old constraints.*

*I stretch out my arms, my stick clasped between my hands, arch my back, and bend into the song. I dance with my heart, with joy in my heart. I bend and sway and turn and circle, revelling in the movement, in the freedom, in the ancient remembrance deep in my bones. I hear Miriam's soaring ululating and an answering yayayayaya from somewhere deep in the shadows, and as my feet pound the sand, my soul flies on its African wings.*  
[Nicky Arden – sangoma, "The Spirits Speak"]

Being in the presence of this incarnation of psychic energy has a healing and rejuvenating impact on the community and the individuals which it comprises: largely because its flowering is dependent upon their constant participation. With their clapping, drumming and singing while the sangoma dances, their repetitive incantations with which they punctuate her confessions, and their intensifying focus upon her, they drive her towards the actualisation of her role. They are the motor; their support is her fuel. The glory and power that the talented sangoma articulates at the climax of her performance is a manifestation of all the concentrated human energies in the room: her performance is an act of community.

As the ceremony wears on the drumming becomes more insistent, the songs older and wilder, until quite suddenly one becomes aware that *something else* has taken over... At such times I have had the sense that all of us present were lifted above the earth. To me this is one of the most exhilarating crystallizations of life.

In many primal societies around the world, masks also have the function of portals between the material and non-material spheres: when a man dons a mask associated with a particular spirit, animal or deity, that being is brought into physical incarnation on earth in feverish dances, and the soul of the dancer himself journeys beyond the clouds. An exchange has occurred: the mundane world is impregnated with spirit and the human voyager reconnects with the source of his being.

*In the trance dance, a being from the world of wild, free beings has agreed to visit.*  
[Richard Schechner, Between Theatre and Anthropology]

*That which I know, and which is again confirmed, is that my art and my spirituality are inextricably linked. My plays are largely an expression of that side of myself made in collaboration with the performers. When my deeper currents are not pulsing with strength the work feels hollow and thin. Applying myself to my art in turn catalyses the spirit, and so they go, hand in hand. The intloambe I attended last weekend has got me going, and today I feel truly blessed.*

*What became apparent to me talking to the sangoma, Thandeka, is that these ancestors are not outside of me, they are part of me: in the same way that physical attributes have been inherited by me from my forebears, mental, psychic and spiritual constellations have flowed down to me, rest inside of me, are the fundamentals of who I am. From right back in time, to the ages when my ancestors*

*lived in the forests, in caves, under the sea. These are my inheritance, the silted layers of my being.*

*Reclaiming this matter, making it consciously part of who I am, is what is meant by connecting with my ancestors. The herbalist who gets her knowledge of which plant to use to heal which ailment from a dream rather than from a guru, is accessing the inherited wisdom of a forebear. Opening myself to the ancestors of the forest I become aware of the forest inside me – all the ancient knowledge it holds.*

*[IPI ZOMBI? workbook, '98]*

And the actor? Is it possible for actors, like sangomas, to tap into and release deep collective energies, to serve as ferrymen for their audiences to the sacred groves of psyche, according to the character of the dramatic ritual? With techniques, stringent discipline and commitment, and strong belief and aptitude I believe it is.

How do I guide an actor with the necessary qualities to attain that blossoming, to articulate a rich and beautiful language we can all understand, which opens our souls, while the Spirit rushes through him like a river? This is one of the aspects I have worked on extensively during training-rehearsals. Inspired by experiences at *iintlombe*, and through experimentation with performers, I have developed several exercises to harness these powers.

In training my group members I spend much time encouraging them to yield themselves to various spirits or emotions, to sacrifice themselves to their imaginations. I guide them on journeys where their minds and bodies are taken over completely by anger, joy, love, pain... the spirit then moves onto their tongues and flows out through their voices, then into their gestures until their very being becomes a vivid articulation of that spirit. Through creative visualisation we do intense exercises in which they make contact with powerful subterranean energies, bringing these surging through their limbs and radiating out through their bodies.

Sometimes actors have to be pushed, pushed beyond their precious selves. Sometimes they have to be thrown around so that the shells of inhibition and politeness and convention and mannered technique can be shattered. Then the real core can be accessed. Then they can feel that raw lava that moves inside them, that can flow between them. And how else can we in the audience feel something move down there beyond our guts, beyond conscious memory, if the actors are not working with the same material?

Sometimes I push my actors hard: long hours, intense work in improvisation and trance, late at night with drums and flame accompanied by wailing, fits and gnashing of teeth. I have blindfolded them in a forest for hours while they explored their animal selves, and then chased them screaming and stumbling blind down a steep river course. Let the energy flow, let it flow...

A few people who have watched me at work have found this shocking, especially the nice Dutch women I have worked with, who come from soils without Spirit. They freak out when they see me roaring and cursing, and the voices and bodies of the actors animated not by their conscious minds, but by something else, something volatile from within which whirls the body on frightening and unfamiliar strings. Familiar only in dream or delirium. They accuse me of being manipulative.

*Like a sangoma riding the bucking horse of her dance, the artist who pours himself relentlessly into his work, allowing it to flow, flow, flow is going to access and pour out work of that profundity and energy, from deep places, if he can reach*

*them. It's the pressure of pushing, working, driving that forces the gas out of the pot, that brings up the deep golden oil.*

*Don't worry, I'll get there – the pressure is on and it's going to be onner.*

*And what of my cast, my actors? How to inspire the same in them? How to draw the bones and the blood through their flesh? They must be disciplined and focussed. Mallets and razors must be applied, and love and tolerance and patience. A climate to grow in, an environment to be purified in. To become.*  
*[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, May '97]*

In a hill village in India in 1994 I stumbled across a late-night rite of some sort. All the villagers were sitting on a bank, and before us the priests were blowing horns and singing and sprinkling stuff on a fire, and then all of a sudden the spirit they were summoning seized the village cobbler. He began stretching and moaning like his bones were breaking, and then he ambled down to the priests where he proceeded to beat the hell out of the fire with a heavy chain while brass bells clanged.

Now what was amazing to me was how his body moved, the legs and arms and head all off kilter, the muscles dancing like flames in his face: you could see that whatever was possessing him was an infrequent visitor to this world, had very little experience of the human body. But the power of that spirit was unquestionable. I was astounded.

A human being – his body, his voice, his mannerisms, his customs – is a mask for all that flux inside and beyond each of us; that flux that is clenched into a particular individual, tamed and conventionalised early in our lives. I want the relationship between the physical entity and the boundless etheric ocean to be disturbed.

I tell my performers that the play itself must be like a dance. You learn the dance steps, you repeat and repeat them, you master them, you improvise on them, you fly with them... there comes that time when you do not have to think about them at all, they just happen; that's when you can focus entirely on the fire that surges through all of you on stage together. The role: the emotions, moves, characterisation... these are all superficial elements to be learnt and mastered: the mask to be worn in the performance. Now the inner energy that presses against this mask must be stirred up. I want it to pulse against the physical body like a hand against the taught skin of a drum. I want human fire on my stage. And that requires intense inner friction. And that needs somebody to shake things up. And if I come across as a madman when I make it happen, well too bad. We are dealing with powers here that lie beyond the safety of town walls.

*'Ritual drama is the struggle of man against external forces which challenge his efforts to harmonize with his environment (and ancestors).'* [Wole Soyinka]

*You see, iMUMBO JUMBO cannot be merely a portrayal of such a struggle: South Africa is in a mess. iMUMBO JUMBO is the struggle itself. This is the tricky bit. My performers have to believe in the struggle they are going through. They need to channel energy during their performance to bring order. They need to believe that their actions, their presence, their energy during the performance have an effect on the world. Their dance brings harmony to a troubled world in a similar way to the dance of Shiva who animates the world with the vibrating rhythm of his dance.*

*[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, '97]*

*This is my art form and my alchemy, and with these performers I can work my magic... I work with light, though my spell has a dark incantation and uses strange ingredients – the ingredients of the forest, the rough and the crude, not the smooth and polished. I can have no expectations regarding my spirits and ingredients – my performers – for they are volatile and need be wooed and coaxed.*

*And my intention? To make magic. And part of that magic is to bring the community together, and the other part is the fiery gleam of the work itself. It must be a catharsis – a whirl into fear and then out into light again. I must know my spell. I must be clear and bold, and sensitive and focussed and kind. I must weave this spell well.*

*[ZOMBIE workbook, '96]*

Some performers give over completely to these exercises in trance, and emerge elated, terrified or otherwise deeply moved; it has taken a lot of coaxing and cold water to bring a few out of a state of catalepsy. Others, afraid, resist, and it takes several sessions before they begin to trust me, themselves and the exercise. Every session is followed by extensive discussion to try to comprehend and assimilate what has been experienced. Participants have expressed that they felt chased by something, engulfed by something, that they had been transported elsewhere, that they were dancing with their ancestors.

I believe that these exercises facilitate the performers access to deep, collective areas of self, the locus of mythology, dreams, folklore: it is no accident that the work of TWB centres on these.

*“We definitely need trance. In the beginning I was afraid, it’s a dangerous place because you are out of control. But now I like it – I’m no longer scared, I defeated that one. I believe it adds a lot of strength physically and mentally, this is another side of theatre that is very, very rich. When sangomas are present that is the best because you learn from them, these are their things. It’s like a baby sucking from the mother...”*

*[Abey Xakwe, TWB]*

*“The thing about BUNFIGHT, working with that spirit, working at night, with fire, this is the power, you know. Trance taps into the inside of you, to believe in what you are doing. If you believe in what you are doing it helps you to believe in yourself. The life of the company is not only in the halls, you know, we would go into the bush, we could do things anywhere. Those are the things about BUNFIGHT. It doesn’t matter what the conditions, we can transform, and the energy will still be there... I do these exercises with actors I work with in the townships, because I want them to be strong. They say to me: ‘That white guy has made you crazy.’”*

*[Xola Mda, TWB]*

I continually assure them that these forces and feelings are not to be feared, that they are cleaning the channel of their self for the free-flow and conscious control of these currents; that when these channels are open they will truly be able to *perform*, touching people at deeply symbolic levels. It is my aim to inspire in the people with whom I work a deep love for the ritual and craft of making drama, of preparing the mind, body and spirit towards that end. People who have found that love – and who

have acquired the skills and confidence to make drama happen – will ensure the flowering of creative spirit in any soil.

*The scenes of the play are like beads, each one differing in texture and colour. Laid out in a line we have something that looks like a necklace. A pattern. One of my jobs is to design this well, to design a sequence of emotional states through which the performers have to travel in the play, an intensifying sequence that will completely submerge them and lead them to a point of giving over utterly, where they are totally dancing the performance.*

*But what gives it life? What animates it? That is the Spirit of the piece, and that must be summoned from within the performers. A Spirit of drums and trance and sweat and voice. An ancient Spirit from deep within. From the start the performers must learn to harness this, and it is a dangerous thing, for with a life of its own like a snake it will writhe and strike or slither away.*

*Tonight on stage it must dance. It must dance and sing. It needs the form of the beads to contain it. The serpent alive in the beads. The blood must throb, the eyes be wild, and the body clenched when the lights go up.  
[ZOMBIE workbook, July '96]*

If the actors then are channels of collective and nourishing Spirit, the play is the vehicle for that Spirit. The way the play is constructed determines the journey the actors will take, and determines the nature of the journey inwards that their audience will take. The play is the shrine, and the character of the play determines – and is determined by – the gods we want to visit.

What techniques and methods are open to us? What techniques have people from different cultures and disciplines evolved? What rhythms, images, sounds, sequences, emotions strike chords and open springs deep within the consciousness of performers and audience, and liberate us?

Of course the audience has a responsibility here. Is it possible to encourage an audience to relax their steadfast role as passive spectators, so that they may throw themselves behind the actors the way sports fans do for their team at a match, the way people do at a sangoma ceremony? Why do I myself feel gung-ho about singing and clapping with everybody else at one of these events, but squeamish beyond endurance when somebody in a conventional theatre demands a response of me? The problems here lie with the impoverishing conventions theatre has inherited over the ages; everything about a theatre discourages us as audience from being visible or audible, until we show our appreciation at the end. Making utterance from the stalls feels like farting in a Victorian drawing room, and no matter how much anybody tells me it's okay I'm still going to blush when I do it. The hallowed halls of traditionally white theatre can only gain from the vivacious black audiences that have started to trickle in over the years.

The conventions are strong and audiences need to be helped. For iMUMBO JUMBO's Grahamstown Festival run, I eschewed the proscribed scaffolding seating and opted for bales of hay and wooden pallets (the only half-round arena on the whole African Festival!); the play used just fourteen stage lights, with over sixty candles doing most of the work; *mpepho* smoked through-out the show. The atmosphere was markedly less enfolding and more formal on the main stage of Johannesburg's Market Theatre, where fire chiefs and commercialism and hay fever were more inflated presences. To get the audience to accompany the sangoma chants with clapping was often a feat and sometimes impossible. In Grahamstown, IPI ZOMBI? and THE

PROPHET were both staged in a battered old power station on the outskirts of the city, with audiences seated on an array of old car seats, armchairs and crates, while the action spiralled amongst them.

*I've found the format of this play: one great, throbbing, celebrating community. Brimming with Spirit and joy. Becoming gripped by Spirit. And swelling eventually into the swirling Hurricane.*

*Everyone is involved in the mayhem of it, though Gcaleka is the leader. The whole is a mixture of serious sermonizing, narrative, wild dancing, confessing, joking etc.*

*At the intlombe, in the heat of the moment, everybody rises spontaneously, gripped by the Spirit; it has them, it holds them transfixed, they are possessed and inspired by it. It inhabits them. The Spirit. One spirit running through everybody. Be it the spirit of the angels, or blacks or whites or coloureds. We are one in pride and exhilaration and movement. Do you hear? Do you feel?  
[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, Easter Weekend '97]*

I am only starting to understand these things. We have only just begun our investigations of ceremony, drama, collective, self, but I know they are inside me, have been budding there for years; they are beginning to reveal themselves as we explore the forests within, like herbalists learning and gathering their plants. It blows my mind.