

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH BRETT BAILEY BY VARIOUS WRITERS AND SCHOLARS (For the real keen bean scholar who wants to get to the bottom of it all)

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Brett Bailey interviewed by Anton Krueger – October 2009

Becoming established

How have you experienced becoming an “established artist? Does it give you a greater freedom, pleasure, peace, happiness etc? Has it turned out to be the culmination of all you’d hoped it would be?

It gives me all those things you have mentioned. It makes me feel that any creative opportunity is within my reach. It allows me the freedom to do and say what I feel I want to, and cross my own as well as social barriers.

‘Culmination’ implies to me that an objective has been reached, that I am on a plateau of sorts. I don’t feel that at all, there are many more mountains to climb.

Upping the anti-

You’ve been called “anti-black”, (in terms of possibly exploiting black mythology; exoticising a culture which is not your own etc) and also “anti-white” (for example in your last work *Terminal* where you refer to the settlers of Grahamstown past and present as arrogant, bigoted etc). Are you anti anything? What are you anti?

I’m not anti-black or white. I’m anti-bigotry and cultural arrogance and brutality in its various guises.

Was exploiting black mythology etc. anti-black? Perhaps a bit naïve. A kid in a candy shop dazzled and intrigued by bright and complex new world.

‘Terminal’ anti-white? More anti the white wash of history that has been deftly used to portray European Settlers as glowing paragons of civilization and concealed their greed, arrogance and atrocities.

Emotion

I think I told you at the Long Table one night during the festival when I was too drunk for my own good about how one of my cast members had been inconsolable after *Terminal*, weeping long into the night. And for me, also, your work always creates a very emotional response, though I’m never exactly sure why.

Usually I respond emotionally to character and story, when I empathise with a character, or when a small act of kindness in the midst of an overwhelmingly

suffering triggers a sense of compassion; or when the plot changes to effect some or other development, or whatever. And yet your plays are thin on character and plot. There isn't much of an investment in the psychological development of character (at least, in the works I've seen I can't really remember "identifying" with any characters...okay, maybe with Orpheus.) Nevertheless, what I'm trying to interrogate, I suppose, is what engineers this construction or release of emotion? What makes your plays so emotional?

The power of image and sound, I think. I communicate with these more than story or text. I believe that they are more powerful – touch us on more levels and more deeply – than text. I've learnt to arrange these elements in ways that touch people.

Also the way I stage my works. My dislike of theatres is pretty well known. I believe that theatres 'protect' us from deep feeling. They are extremely safe, neutral spaces where we sit comfortably and watch and listen. I take audiences out into very charged environments beyond the borders of safety. A walk on the mountain or a visit to a desolate factory at night leaves one feeling open and invigorated. I simply drop a sequence of images and a soundtrack into that experience.

Spirituality

Your works contain a curious mixture of parody and sincerity. They make appeals to "spirituality" as well as to "emotion". Is spirituality emotional? What's the difference?

I reckon spirituality has got a lot to do with heightened awareness. This can be accessed through releasing emotion or through containing it. Either of these approaches can be used as vehicles towards heightened awareness. I am more interested in containing emotion at present.

What would you describe as your own "spiritual journey" (to use the popular parlance of the times)?

Aspiring to become more aware of myself and the world I live in. The path includes a curiosity about who wrote the rule books that govern the way our society works, and what their agendas have been, and what they have excluded.

Today the word "spirituality" conjures up cosy images of beaches and blondes with dreamy California smiles, but your version of the "spiritual" is much darker, what Ashraf Jamal has referred to as the "daemonic". Are you ever concerned that the things you awaken, the spirits you call up (whether in the trances of the early Xhosa shows, or even the historical spirits of *Terminal*), may cause some harm, may do some damage?

Jesus, do blonde-bedekked beaches conjure up spirituality? I don't relate...

'Spirituality' and 'the spiritual' have different connotations to each other for me. I have told you what spirituality means to me. 'The spiritual' has immense darkness and intense brightness. In my work I often explore the darker side – it is a good way to explore that part of Life. Like dreaming. In *Orfeus* the hero visits the Underworld and we follow him there, literally. In *Terminal* a small, ragged streetchild, lowest in the foodchain, leads us there by the hand, one by one. And so we become aware.

Politics

Re: politics – who did you vote for? Do you respect the Parliament of South Africa? Do you respect the job of politician as a career?

I was out of the country so didn't vote.
I don't trust or believe politicians. They act badly. They could do with the help of a good script writer and a strong director.

You often say that you're not interested in politics and don't have a political agenda, and yet at other times, as with some of the shows you did in Zimbabwe for the opening of the Harare Festivals, you've also said that artists have a responsibility to show corruption and etc. (I think you even referred to it in so many words "the moral responsibility" of the artist – I'd have to check if you actually said those words or not.)

Also, *Terminal*, was a very "political" work in the sense that you dealt directly with issue of the ongoing racial conflicts in South Africa's history. You even use Zuma's song in one of the pieces. So which is it? Do you (and/or do you feel "artists" should) speak out on political issues? Why is it okay to be outrageously anti-government in Zimbabwe and not, say being more overtly concerned about South African politics?

I feel differently on different days, on different projects, in different situations. I reckon my work is more social than political. The dynamics of society are what really interest me, and politics often makes a big footprint on society.

In Zimbabwe, where I have made four large scale outdoor works over the last 4 years, and where hardly anybody has been able to speak out in a public forum for fear of their safety, I felt protected by my foreignness and an obligation to portray things on stage which many locals are muttering but are afraid to say publicly. In an environment of such extremity there is little place for nuance.

At home I watch the politicians and their shenanigans out of the corner of suspicious eyes, but I am more interested in the world around them. The world that spawned them. The world they dance upon. *Infecting The City* – the public arts festival I curate in Cape Town – has strongly social-oriented themes: "Home Affairs" investigated xenophobia and dislocation this year; "Human Rite" in 2010 looks at rituals of inclusion and transformation. My approach for a large scale public arts event is different to that for an intimate paying audience.

Another thing – a friend of mine said that a show like *Big Dada* is the sort of thing which made Zuma possible; all of those crazy excesses are “normalised” as being “African” and so on, and that making a spectacle of these excesses in effect accommodates people like Mugabe. Do you think this sort of work provokes or inures? Does it make people want to change things or does it numb them into acceptance of injustice?

I don't know.

Talking about *Terminal*, wherein you attacked the past and present whites of Grahamstown, writing a poetic, angry diatribe on colonisation which people read while waiting their turn in the station, referring to the abandoned station and the dead end, and the divide and so on. I don't know if you saw it, but someone left a comment on the Cue TV web-page where they had a slide show of images of the installations.

It was the project co-ordinator of the “Hospitality Youth Initiative” at the station, which is a poverty alleviation programme, and he said that the station was more of a bridge than a divide. I suppose he was attacking the writer of the article more than anything for saying that the station was abandoned, saying:

“ I find the following statement from the article completely incongruous: “The station... is the 'fault line between two different worlds. Between colony and savage hinterland. Between wealth and poverty. Between opportunity and hopelessness””. While the station might once have represented a divide between two worlds, it should now be seen as bridge between them.”

I'm mentioning this, because, you've often said that you're not a “social worker or a politician”. And yet you do, it seems, want to have an effect, to create an awareness, perhaps (a consciousness?), even to heal. I suppose my question is about the sort of difference your show made. Here is a real social worker whose trying to do very specific things – to educate, to alleviate poverty. And he's pissed off because your show, although it makes people cry and feel deeply and go through all sorts of experiences, is premised on the divide which exists, rather than trying to breach it.

Hmm, I don't have the text with me, but I think I said that the 'station sits on the railway line which forms the faultline...'. So I was talking about lines. Who is he to say how the station 'should' be seen. We each choose our own symbols (or they choose us). He sees a bridge, I see a gulf.

Sleeping Dogs

You've said that you're not consciously setting out to “heal” or to “fix” things; but what if what you're doing actually makes “things” worse? What if some sleeping dogs were better left sleeping? Why arose the howl of the unconscious if it's not causing any trouble while in its dormant state?

(This may be an interesting sideline here: you've mentioned the influence of Jung before, though in what people have written about you – of which there is a fuckin mountain I've just slogged through from the holdings at NELM – nobody yet has written about your work as possibly being "Shadow work" in the sense which Jung introduced. Has this ever been one of your considerations?)

I make works out of stuff that arouses my interests – about the world we live in, the dynamics of our society, the beauty and the ugliness, the tender and the brutal. I look with a jaundiced eye at authority because I question its motives. I search for the patterns beneath the surface. I notice the broken and the silenced and the marginalised. And sometimes I see incredibly bright flashes. And this is the world I depict in my work, that is all.

Sleeping dogs don't lie. They leave their bodies and get up to all sorts of mischief in the darkness.

...okay, that's a real hodge-podge of questions...sorry if it's repetitive, i guess i'm still trying to find my way in to this article...to find a "position"...speaking of which, if you happen to have one, it would make life much easier:

"This is Bailey, and here is his Position", so if one occurs to you...

alternatively, here is:

the short sidebar version

how old are you?

42

are you still vegetarian?

No

who did you vote for in the last election?

No vote

do you enjoy being famous?

Don't feel famous.

who is your audience?

Sensitive

what has your experience been of international collaboration?

Tricky but enriching

this is a series called "positions" – do you have one?

Looking in

Brett Bailey interviewed by Ghislaine van Drunen – April 2009
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Dear Mister Bailey,

I work for Hivos Magazine, which is sent to Hivos' donors. For the next issue, I would like to have an interview with you, since you will be visiting the Netherlands soon with the staging of Orfeus at Holland festival in June and your coming is made possible by the Hivos NCDO Cultuurfonds.

I hope to hear from you soon and thank you in advance for taking the time to read this.

Kind regards,

Ghislaine van Drunen

QUESTIONS

I haven't seen the play you're presenting at Holland Festival, Orfeus, but from what I have I read, it seems quite dark, the way you portray the underworld as the third world and more precisely the African third world.

- How did you come to this metaphor? Is this the African reality to you or is it exaggerated?
- What message do you want to convey with this African underworld in particular and with your play in general?
- Are you trying to trigger the audiences in some way? How?

It's not really the way you imagine it. I was very moved by the story of Orfeus when I first heard it some years ago: an artist whose music is so beautiful that it brings harmony to the world, who journeys into the Underworld in pursuit of the woman he loves, and who there encounters many lost souls trapped in an eternal state of torment... I gave the story an African setting because I work in Africa, and I draw on African performance and ritual forms in my work, and I wanted my Orfeus to play African music. When I conceptualized the Underworld I asked myself: who are the souls trapped in torment in the shadows of the world we live in today? I found them in the Developing World: the voiceless, the faceless, the lost: children in sweat shops, women sold into the sex trade, child soldiers shattered by the atrocities they have committed, refugees stuck in limbo... So I'm not saying that Africa or the Third World are the Underworld of today, I'm drawing attention to the victims trapped in the dark corners of our world.

There is no one message I am trying to convey. The Orpheus myth is very beautiful and sad and lonely. It tells of the power art has to bring meaning to life, nature, humanity, death. It tells of a man who is willing

to go beyond the boundaries of mortality for the love of another person. It tells of human transcendence over horror and misery. My intention was never to harness the myth for any socio-political agenda, but working on it did spark off many contemporary associations. For instance, Orpheus was an immigrant to Athens from Thrace; he brought a gift of lyre music never heard by the Athenians before. In South Africa we have a terrible problem with xenophobia towards Africans. I gave the role of Orpheus to Congolese refugee/composer/musician Bebe Lueki: his music is exquisite; like many immigrants he enriches our country. That was partly a political choice. At the end of the myth Orpheus is torn to shreds by a mob of Dionysian revelers. In South Africa over 60 African immigrants were murdered in a spate of xenophobic hatred a year ago.

You give a realistic it is said, but also shocking and negative view of Africa and what the continent has become.

- Is there someone responsible for the state of Africa in your view? Who and why so?
- Are you pessimistic about Africa's future?
- What about South-Africa? Is it drawn into this African underworld or does it manage to keep away and develop on its own, as it has until now?

Hmm. I think I have covered some of this above. I am not commenting on the state of Africa, I am alluding to some of the shames that skulk in Africa and the Developing World. Who is responsible for those abandoned to such suffering? The power-hungry, the capital-hungry, the Market – Africans and non-Africans. No surprises here. As resources become more scarce and populations explode across the globe I cannot imagine things getting any easier for those at the very bottom of the food chains of the world.

- Are you, as a playwright, designer, director and stylist (everything you are said to be, quite impressive!) committed to some kind of ((South)-African) cause (political, social, cultural)?

I am saddened and angered and fascinated by those who trample others, who destroy beautiful fragile things out of self-interest. I believe a great deal of the world's wisdom, beauty and complexity has been (and continues to be) despised and destroyed by European cultural arrogance. With my work I aim to show the wonders and the difficulties of a world beyond the Great Walls of the West.

- Why have you chosen theater as a means of expression?

Um...

Your theater company is called 'Third World Bunfight'.

- Can you explain this name?
- Is your troop all South African or are the actors from different countries?

- How are the actors selected?

'Bunfight' kind of has two meanings: a grand tea party, and a heated argument. It conjures up a kind of jovial chaos for me: people hurling cakes at each other at a banquet. Kind of like the mad mix up of ideologies, religions, aesthetics and meanings one finds in the Third World. There is no Third World Bunfight troupe so to speak. The name is a brand for the theatrical works I do. I audition performers the way any theatre director does. Of course there are some performers I love to bits, and that I have worked with for several years.

I read that you try to offer training and work to stage artists from communities that are 'left behind', so to speak.

- Can you elaborate on that?

No. That's sort of a focus area from previous years. What I am doing quite a bit of is working with non-performers. For example, if I do a piece on xenophobia I like to work with refugees who are just themselves, not people who play refugees. I find there is a different kind of power with these people: the power of presence rather than of performance. The way I find holding a human skull, for instance, more mysterious and provocative than holding a plastic replica.

Your coming to Holland Festival with your play Orfeus won't be the first time you perform in the Netherlands.

- What do you think of Dutch theater audiences and how do you think they will react to your play? - How do African audiences react to your plays in general, and Orfeus in particular? Is it similar to or different from Western audiences?

The landscape I depict is understandably more familiar to South Africans. The situations and issues I touch are very real to South African audiences. We are a warm and emotional people. The work is not seen as exotic. In my experience, and at the risk of generalizing, Dutch audiences tend to hold themselves at a distance from theatre; to appreciate it more than feel it. My fear is that Orfeus, like a catalogued African mask in the Tropen Museum, will be gazed at inquisitively from the safe side of a glass pane, not touched and felt.

The play is taking place in a special and secret location.

Why is that?

- Can you disclose a little bit of information about the location?

- Why did you choose not to perform the play in a theater?

No, I won't talk about the location.

I'm not really a 'theatre person': I don't particularly like being in theatres. I find the experience clinical, sanitized: sitting in comfortable seats passively watching something 'over there' on the stage. For film-viewing such a seating arrangement is satisfying for me: I can be

drawn in and utterly engaged. But somehow not for live performance, it is never enough. My most riveting experiences of live performance have been in rituals or ceremonies, where the 'audience' is a part of what is happening and where the action plays out all around; where the venue, rather than being a neutral human parking lot, has texture and meaning integral to the performance. I like to create works that take people physically out of comfort zones, where their senses become heightened, where they are taking a physical as well as an emotional/intellectual/spiritual journey.

Brett Bailey interviewed by some other Dutch somebody – April 2009

QUESTION

In a number of plays, like *Orfeus*, *medEia* and *Macbeth*, you like to transform ancient and European myths and plays in an (contemporary) African setting. Why?

I am attracted to stories that have a strong mythic, archetypal core; ancient stories that inspire the feelings of mystery and wonder we feel in the presence of any artefact from a distant time. These stories put us in touch with the consciousness of people who lived close to the root of our civilizations. They travel to us across the ages like the light of stars thousands of light years away.

The post-colonial, socio-political landscape of Africa is the world I live in and the world that fascinates me. The flotsam and jetsam of the West – religions, ideologies, consumerables – are forever washing up on Africa's shores, fusing with other elements both foreign and African, hybridising, morphing, being transformed, redefined, turned inside out. These ancient stories I work with are undergoing a similar process.

QUESTION

What is the reason you have chosen to have *Orfeus* being performed outdoors, like in a quarry or in a vineyard?

I'm not really a 'theatre person': I don't particularly like being in theatres. I find the experience clinical, sanitized: sitting in comfortable seats passively watching something 'over there' on the stage. For film-viewing such a seating arrangement is satisfying for me: I can be drawn in and utterly engaged. But somehow not for live performance, it is never enough. My most riveting experiences of live performance have been in rituals or ceremonies, where the 'audience' is a part of what is happening and where the action plays out all around; where the venue, rather than being a neutral human parking lot, has texture and meaning integral to the performance. I like to create works that take people physically out of comfort zones, where their senses

become heightened, where they are taking a physical as well as an emotional/intellectual/spiritual journey.

QUESTION

The role of Orpheus is performed by the Congolese musician and singer Bebe Lueki. In other plays you worked with Ugandans, Zimbabweans and other Africans. What makes it so interesting to work with other African artists?

Well, Africa has a huge wealth of diverse cultural languages and forms. I reckon artists all over the world enjoy working with fellow artists from other countries, don't they? I mean Dutch artists enjoy working with Belgians, Germans... It's part of what we do. I also work with Dutch, English, Far Eastern artists.

The Orpheus myth tells of a poet-musician who came from a distant country bringing to the Greeks an art form they had never encountered before: one that brought harmony to the world. South Africa is living in restless times, blighted by violent xenophobia. One factor in choosing Bebe to play Orpheus, apart from the haunting beauty of his voice, was to acknowledge the enrichment that foreign Africans bring into our society. Tragically, like so many African immigrants in South Africa recently, Orpheus was killed by a mob.

QUESTION

Your theatre production House of the Holy Afro is something completely different. It is a very camp, almost kitschy late night club show with singers, musicians and a DJ, but very well received internationally. Were you tired of the more drama like theatre? Or is it a next step towards opera ?

I had already directed opera (Verdi's Macbeth) when I made 'Afro', so no, I would not say it was a move in that direction. 'Afro' was commissioned for a South African festival in Bern, Switzerland. I was asked to make a nightclub show. I'm not really a nightclub kind of guy. I was in Amsterdam at the time and so I visited a couple of clubs to get ideas. In one club two gorgeous blonde women were sitting on barstools singing while a DJ mixed backing tracks on his Mac. The idea that sprang from this was to put together a cast of black South African singer-dancers and have them perform African traditional, gospel and pop songs with a DJ, and to decorate it all with an outrageous fusion of African design and fashion and kitsch pop. It has been fun, but I wouldn't say it's an avenue I'll pursue very far.

QUESTION

Can you tell us why you have started your own company (Third World Bunfight) in 1998 ?

1996, not 1998. Why? Third World Bunfight is the brand name under which I produce the big scale Africa-focus theatrical works I make. There is not a troupe of performers or artists, just a large pool of artists that I draw from for various pieces.

QUESTION

You are often referred as provocative, controversial, being the enfant terrible and the wild child of the new South Africa theatre-makers. Can you explain?

Hmm. My work made quite a splash on the South African theatre scene in the late '90s. This was soon after the fall of apartheid and its ethos of separation, and I brought a heady mix of township performance, rural animist ritual and spirituality, pop and postmodernism to the stage, working with politically sensitive material and boisterously herding a whole bunch of 'sacred cows' into the same camp. My work is seldom commercial in nature and often deals uncompromisingly with social sore points, so I have gained a certain reputation.

QUESTION

You once mentioned that the South African official tourism marketeers still promote your country with lions and traditional Zulu's. However, young theatremakers as yourself and Paul Grootboom show a different South Africa. Can you comment on that?

There are these big commercial success stories – Umoja, African Footprint etc. They tour the world with saccharine, foot-stomping versions of South Africa. Just curio entertainment really, with no other pretensions. I stay far away from them...

Am I a 'young theatre-maker'? I am 41 years old, and have been making theatre for 15 years. Paul and I, like many other South African theatre-makers, deal with the more gritty reality of life, but at home we would not be put in the same category of artists. Paul's work tends to focus on the complexities of life in the townships of Johannesburg. My work is more myth-orientated and looks at the often-explosive interactions between First and Third Worlds. As in any country there's a whole range of theatre-makers working with different material, some superficial, some didactic, some provocative.

QUESTION

As far as I understood, you grew up in Cape Town in a predominantly white atmosphere. You graduated at the University of Cape Town in 1991. Can you inform us how South African theatre and theatre making have changed after Apartheid collapsed?

That's quite a big question. I don't attend much theatre. I don't think I'm really qualified to tackle it.

QUESTION

You have been trained – amongst others – at DasArts in Amsterdam in 2000 and graduated in 2004. Can you tell us some of your experiences whilst being here then?

DasArts was a wonderful privilege. Ritsaert ten Cate, the director, had such a clear and beautiful vision. He gave many young artists from around the world the opportunity to come together in a laboratory, to experiment and dig deeply into interesting material. On a block that dealt with food and performance we worked in restaurants, abattoirs, monasteries, with food artists, wine tasters, academics. Incredibly enriching. It has taken me several years to realize how much I learned there.

Brett Bailey interviewed by some Danish somebody – March 2010
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I'd like to hear about your work in Third World Bunfight and as a stage director.

Tell me the story of Third World Bunfight.

How did the company start?

What inspires your work?

It depends on the particular work: the post-colonial complexities in Africa: political, social, artistic, historical; the post-apartheid complexities of South Africa; collisions between world-views and ideologies; the non-rational; the spiritual; the disturbing; my distrust of authority; colour; music; kitsch; human emotion; ritual and ceremony; violence; the visual world; the hidden/silent worlds; my fantasies...

What is the company's mission?

There is no 'company' *per se*. Third World Bunfight is a brand name I use for the works I make. I cannot really say that there is any mission. I am an artist that makes performance in response to a story or situation that captures me – usually it is grounded in and playing with the elements listed above. I tackle a subject a bit like an investigative journalist does, spending several months researching, and then turning my findings into image, song, narrative, sequence, juxtaposition. My eyes are open to the politics of the times and the world we live in. Powerful people, corporations and cabals battle each other for power and crush people in their struggles: they harness the media, history, religion, consumerism, causes etc. to further their ends. I look at the world and I try to see what's going on behind the surface, and I make

art that reflects what I see. Is it my 'mission'? Maybe it's just my orientation.

What are the conditions for your work within South Africa?

Not really sure what you mean?

House of the Holy Afro will come to Copenhagen during IMW – what is a “holy afro”?

An Afro is a hairstyle, popular with black people in the 70's – 'Big Hair'. There is no such thing as a 'holy afro' – it is just a title. The music is House Music. We make use of some gospel music, over-the-top styling, the mad syncretism of Christianity in Africa. There is nothing literal in the title of the show. It's just pop.

The performance is described as “Afro Kitsch”, what does that mean?

What is 'kitsch'? You don't know the word? Excess. Extravagance. Camp. Outlandish. Overdone... I suppose 'Afro kitsch' means that it is all of these in an African style. This work is pretty different to the other stuff I do: not really political, though it pokes a middle finger at those tacky, nauseating 'Real African' entertainment shows that tour the world, like 'Afrika Afrika' and 'African Footprint'.

Your work has an interesting combination of mixing traditional expressions and stories with contemporary theatrical contexts and forms – what are you exploring in this cocktail.

What does tradition mean to you?

How do you use tradition in your work?

Do audiences need to see traditions in theatre?

I'm not sure what you mean by this. I wouldn't say tradition is an important part of my work at all: traditional what? What traditions?

What is your position on political theatre?

As I've said, I'm a pretty political person. I see the world politically (as well as mythically, voyeuristically, etc.). In South Africa there is so much inequality, greed, crime, pain... I feel it. I cannot distance myself nor my work from it. I interrogate it, I look into it and explore it, and find the secrets that are swept under the rug, and the voices that are silenced, and the beauty, and the glittering things. For me, that is political – trying to understand, and articulating what I find, and showing it to people uncompromisingly. As curator of Infecting the City my agenda is similar: I ask artists to peer deeply at our society, and to present what they find – in the public spaces of the City, where everybody can engage with it. I don't know that I believe that art/theatre can actively change society, but it can reveal what we otherwise overlook in languages that allow us to get new and deeper perspectives on our reality.

Describe your work in a South African context. Are you a “lone wolf” or part of a movement?

I don't see myself as part of a movement. I've always just walked my own path.

You have worked in many places around the world do you experience that Europeans have specific expectations to art coming from Africa?

I don't like to generalise about Europeans: different countries are different, and they have different sub-cultures or markets within them. There is a strong taste for the simplistic, exotic African stuff – but perhaps that taste for the exotic is merely a human quality. I do often feel that there is a patronising way of responding to African works: sub-standard works are applauded simply because they are African. And because there is a European market for superficial foot-stomping rubbish, African artists make it so as to make a living and get exposure. I can't imagine there is a big market for African works that are fiercely critical of European values, neo-colonialism etc. My new piece – EXHIBIT A (Vienna and Braunschweig this summer) – will test these waters.

Would you describe yourself as a South African artist?

Yes.

Do you feel your work is understood/ received differently in Europe than in ZA?

Of course. Some of the works that I make for home I would never present in Europe. The context is too different. Europeans have no way of reading the codes, and, de-contextualised, things would be misinterpreted. If I make a work particularly for local audiences it is very much about the inner sanctum of the world we share as Southern Africans. 'Exhibit A' I am making specifically for European audiences, giving them some insight into the way we as Southern Africans look at them. Other works – Orfeus, House of the Holy Afro – are more universal.

What can Third World Bunfight tell Europeans about contemporary Africa?

I don't feel like we have a responsibility or mission or agenda to tell Europeans about contemporary Africa. Maybe that's one of the expectations that Europeans have about African works that you asked about earlier: like work from Africa is some sort of National Geographic spectacle that gives cultural insight into this strange African world. That's bullshit. If a European performing troupe comes here to South Africa, they are not coming to tell us about contemporary Europe. They are just coming as individual artists who grapple with the human condition in a particular environment. So possibly that's what Europeans could learn from us if they were able to: that Africans are

also people who grapple with the human condition in a particular social/historical/natural environment ...

The overall theme of the coming edition of the IMAGES publication is "tradition and renewal" - to explain some of the questions you can't answer.

1) In Orfeus I saw a brilliant mixture of what can be perceived as drawing upon "tradition" but renewing and politicising it. For instance you use the myth of Orfeus, combined with ritual acts such as the fire, the circle, the use of music and process of entering the underworld. Why take an old Greek myth and set it in a modern, African context?

The Orpheus myth really captivated me when I read it a few years ago. It is so simple and clear. The more I spent time with it the more it revealed to me, of myself and of the world. The myth goes back 3000 years. I feel it is like a shining talisman from another age, full of ancient power. Like a pebble that's rolled down a stream for millennia – eroded to its essence. Working with a little story like that now, here, in Africa where I live, illuminates this moment in a very particular way: it reveals the beauty and the terrible sorrow of this context. It is very magical. I wrote the piece after having spent a month in Bali, so the piece has the very simple, quiet, ritualised quality that I witnessed in much of Balinese life. I set it in contemporary Africa because this is the world that matters to me: a world where there is suffering and beauty and silence and mystery and horror. The Underworld is the land of shadows cast by the ruthless greed of the Developed World, which crushes and destroys so much to feed itself.

2) You say that Afro is pointing fingers at the idea of authentic Africa in shows such as African Footprint. This is connected to questions raised in IMAGES. I agree with you that this also is political because it points to our (western) expectations of African art. So tell me how does Afro do this - and why?

I think that many in the West like to see a sanitized, safe, 'clean' version of Africa in theatre and entertainment. One that corresponds to the postcards they buy when they step out of their air-conditioned hotels on their Great African Holiday. They see two Africa's: the shiny, polite tourist version, and the war/poverty/AIDS/starvation version that the media revels in. Afro is not interested in either of those. Africa is one huge seething melting pot, where the crap of the Developed World – religions, ideologies, consumer products, cultural spillage... - fuses with the colonially-shattered fragments of Africa, and mutates into phosphorescent new forms and shapes and sounds. This is what Afro taps into. Uncompromisingly.

3) You say that you go your own path. Can you tell me more about what this means? Are you able/ not able to do this in ZA? Is there a

platform for contemporary work such as yours in ZA - or do you need to go abroad?

I am able to do my own stuff in SA, although money is not very easy to find to fund works. What does it mean, to walk my own path? It means I don't care about 'bums on seats', I will not compromise what I say or how I say it for commercial imperatives, I criticize whoever I think is in the wrong (my work is called 'anti-white' and 'anti-black'?!?!), I couldn't give a toss about political correctness... I once had a teacher who cautioned me never to censor myself as an artist, always to follow my impulse, and I try to stick to that: if I feel the impulse to express something as an artist I do it. I trust myself. I believe we can learn more about the world we live in from such creative works than from those that toe lines that academics or politicians have drawn.

Brett Bailey interviewed by Anton Krueger – November 2004

Tell me about your work at MOYO.

Only 3 or 4 of my works have been explicitly orientated towards spirituality/ritual: IPI ZOMBI?, iMUMBO JUMBO (1997, not 2003), heartstopping, and THE PROPHET. BIG DADA was a turning point, because I saw Idi Amin as the destroyer of everything spiritual or sacred, so made this an anti-spiritual/anti-ritual work. Verdi's MACBETH, MEDEIA and my own SAFARI, which I've made subsequently, have not really had that ritual orientation, that focus on the work as a releaser of essential energy. I suppose I have been investigating other things: possibly more of an interest in structure, design, concept and spectacle. I am reworking Oscar van Woensel's MEDEIA (I first made this with students of Wits School of the Performing Arts in 2003) on paper at present for presentation in early 2005, and find myself drawn back again to the ritualistic, so maybe the streams are converging.

Most of the work we do at Moyo on the Spier Estate (where we are the resident company for 3 years) revolves around music, song and dance: traditional African of various sorts, pop etc. tho' often with a theatrical presentation. Making work for a commercial, dining environment is difficult primarily because I battle to find a concept out of which the work can arise, one which can anchor and organise the scenes/images/bytes I create. If I make a play about zombies, for instance, I have a story, and subject matter with many associations and issues clustering around it: witchcraft, superstition vs. belief, colliding worldviews, white stereotypes of blacks, ritual vs. superficial pop etc. etc. And so I can group together a variety of dramatic styles, conflicting voices and viewpoints, provocative jibes, and sequence them and frame them so they problematise or comment on one

another and acquire meaning. I can load them. My audience is static and attentive.

In a large dining environment it is very difficult to layer work and frame it adequately. A lot of what might work in the context of one of my plays comes across as flat, exotic and trite at Moyo. I continue to struggle to make pieces which have integrity there.

What have you been up to this year?

I completed a post-graduate degree at das arts, an experimental laboratory for the performing arts in Amsterdam. My final project there was the writing and designing of a piece, VODOU NATION, which I made with Haitian dancers and musicians in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. I was commissioned to make the work by Jan Ryan of UK Arts International, to tour the UK for 3 months. I had reservations about tackling the project, as I knew nothing about Haiti, and had serious concerns about just barging in and misrepresenting a country which has suffered so much misrepresentation. But the opportunity to work in a Third World backwater in the Americas, home of Vodou, and hotbed of political intrigue, swayed me.

I was given the cds of a Haitian Vodou-rock group, RAM, whose songs were to be the basis of the show. RAM's songs are in Creole, and tend to be rock interpretations of repetitive, cyclic enigmatic phrases. The play I wrote – entirely without text – dramatised the history of Haiti in an allegorical way, mixing history and myth, historical characters with the vivid personalities of the Vodou pantheon.

The writing/designing process was very enriching: the cultural wealth of Haiti being extraordinary. Working without text was liberating and difficult: everything had to be conveyed by images. I wanted to make a show where narrative was unnecessary, just to make a series of tableaux vivants, one for each of the RAM songs I selected, and each one looking at a particular aspect of Haiti. Each one multi-layered and associatively connected with the others in the series. The way a painter would work. I get frustrated with the linear conventions of theatre. With plot and story.

The producer wanted linear conventions, cos she wanted a show that would have wide commercial success. But my vision is generally too dark and tangential to have wide commercial success, so she wasn't being very astute to begin with.

Anyway, I made something which was somewhere between the two, a compromise, a series of very vivid, scenes with a story of colonialism and slavery and revolt and liberation and dictatorship and supernatural Vodou intervention etc. etc.

Quite baffling to anyone watching it... narrative is definitely aided by text, is the moral of this tale.

Directing the show was extremely unsatisfying, owing to different languages and work ethics between the creative team and the cast.

Have just made a piece called 'The House of the Holy Afro', for nightclubs: a collaboration between THIRD WORLD BUNFIGHT and a local DJ, Dino Moran. The piece is basically traditional Xhosa and gospel songs set to house beats and hip poetry, highly styled and choreographed in an OTT Afro-kitsch vein. We performed in Bern, Switzerland at the Shap Shap Festival, where every European festival director that saw it has booked it.

Now I am reworking 'BIG DADA – the rise and fall of Idi Amin' for a local and European tour, and MEDEIA. I love coming back to pieces again and again, refining them, investigating new avenues, applying to them what I have learned in the interim.

Yes, I did pick up that Big Dada constituted a significant change in direction from the three Xhosa plays. When I read the script (unfortunately I never got to see it), there were, of course, recognisable elements, like the somewhat absurd humour, tempering the extreme horror of the circumstances. In this way there were certain similarities with the story of Nongqawuse, I suppose; and yet there did seem to be a definite shift from the spiritual to the material.

But it's great to see that you're not standing still, or resting on the laurels of past achievements. When I was interviewing Anthony Akerman a few years ago, he said something to the effect that you were one of the most exciting directors around but had to be careful of falling into a routine. (I think he'd only seen the first two plays). I think that beautiful book which Double Storey produced really captures the essence of that "first phase" of 3rd World bunfight, and in some ways could also be seen as closing off a chapter in your own development...and now it seems you're moving on...

That's very exciting news – about your success in Bern with "House of the Holy Afro". Congratulations! I'm sure you're going to have a wonderful time on the European festival circuit. What have you got lined up? Vienna? Paris?

Talking about your new focus on "structure, design, concept and spectacle" as opposed to "ritual, energy, spirit": this does seem to be a significant re-orientation; from inside to outside, so to speak. Which is not, I suppose, to say that the two are necessarily at odds with each other. I mean, Robert Wilson's pieces certainly seem focused on all of those first elements, and yet they also come across as highly ritualised (particularly in terms of those obsessive repetitions he demands) and he does also deal with very "spiritual" subjects.

Do you think that there's any relation at all between your own work and his?

WHEN I WAS AT UNIVERSITY I GOT HOLD OF A BOOK BY STEFAN BRECHT ABOUT ROBERT WILSON'S EARLY WORKS. NO PICS OR ANYTHING, JUST TEXT, DESCRIPTIONS, INTERVIEWS. IT BLEW MY MIND. I WATCHED HIM

WORK FOR A FEW HOURS IN BERLIN WHEN I WAS UP FOR SOME AWARD. I WAS AMAZED AT THE BODY OF TECHNICIANS HE HAD WORKING UNDER HIM. I SUPPOSE THERE ARE SIMILARITIES WITH HOW WE WORK WITH PERFORMERS, THOUGH HE TOLD ME HE IS NOT AT ALL INTERESTED IN THE INNER-LIFE OF THEIR CHARACTERS, AND I CERTAINLY FOCUS ON THAT TOO. OTHER THAN THAT I HAVE NOT ATTENDED ONE OF HIS WORKS.

How much "free-play" do you allow your actors? Do you still demand as rigorous a physical regimen from them as you did with the early plays? (I'm referring specifically to the comments in your book about your tough rehearsal schedule in the Transkei.)

NOT MUCH FREE PLAY AT ALL WHEN THEY ARE IN PERFORMANCE, THOUGH OUR REHEARSAL PROCESSES ARE LONG: NORMALLY 8 WEEKS, AND IN THAT PERIOD THERE IS A LOT OF IMPROV, PLAYING ETC. TO EXPLORE CHARACTER, SHAPE, MOVEMENT, ENERGY ETC. JA, MY APPROACH TO PHYSICAL TRAINING IS STILL NAZI.

Have you seen or heard of something recently which really made a strong impression on you; or which made you re-examine your own motives for making theatre?

I SAW A WORK A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO DIRECTED BY RATAN THIAM OF THE CHORUS REPERTORY THEATRE (MANIPUR, INDIA). THEY USE A WIDE RANGE OF TRADITIONAL INDIAN DANCE AND PERFORMANCE FORMS TO INTERPRET STORIES OF INDIAN MYTHOLOGY. MIND-BLOWING LIGHTING AND EXTRAORDINARY DISCIPLINE. I WAS GOB-SMACKED. I'M DRAWN TO THE FREEDOM CONTEMPORARY DANCE HAS, UNFETTERED BY THE NARRATIVE AND LINEAR PROGRESSION THAT ENCUMBERS THEATRE. BUT CONTEMPORARY DANCE DOES VERY LITTLE FOR ME. TOO PRECIOUS MOST OF THE TIME FOR MY TASTE. GENERALLY TEXT-BASED THEATRE LEAVES ME COLD: IT DOES NOT TRANSPORT ME ANY WHERE, AND I'D FIND THE STORIES MORE ENGROSSING ON FILM. DRIVING PAST THE SLUMS OF NEW CROSSROADS ON THE N2 BETWEEN CAPE TOWN AND STELLENBOSCH ALWAYS MAKES A STRONG IMPRESSION ON ME AND MAKES ME RE-EXAMINE MY MOTIVES FOR MAKING THEATRE.

An enormous question: what do you make of the question of "cultural" identities in South Africa? Homi Bhabha writes about Fanon speaking "from deep within the struggle of psychic representation and social reality", which I thought was quite an apt description of what many artists are (or, perhaps, should be) doing. With which sort of representations are you "struggling" at the moment, (if the word has not been completely emptied of meaning)...

Bhaba goes on to talk about the question of identification as being "the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image." ...With what images of identification are you playing at present?

WILL GET BACK TO YOU ON THIS...

And wherein do you think the values lie of the images with which you're representing the "world"?

THE VALUES? JEEZ. I KEEP MY EYES AND EARS OPEN. I THINK DEEPLY ABOUT THINGS. I REFLECT ON WHAT I SEE AND HEAR AND FEEL IN THE WORLD AROUND ME. I AM DRAWN TO THINGS THAT SPARKLE AND SLIDE IN THE INTER-ZONE BETWEEN WORLDS THAT COLLIDE, PARTICULARLY HERE IN AFRICA. IN THE IMAGES I MAKE TO REPRESENT THIS INTER-ZONE I SYNTHESIZE ALL MANNER OF THINGS THAT I COME ACROSS, I CAST LIGHT ON THINGS THAT ARE OFTEN OVER-LOOKED OR UNDER-VALUED. THE VALUE IS IN THE REPRESENTATION OF THIS WORLD.

What do you think of ways in which the nation state of the Republic of South Africa is being represented in the "world imaginary" (to use a concept coined, I think, by Leon de Kock)?

BY THEATRE-MAKERS? I THINK THE WORK OF ARTISTS LIKE LARA FOOT-NEWTON, YAEL FARBA, THE HANDSPRING-KENTRIDGE COLLABORATIONS DRAW ATTENTION TO THE COMPLEX REALITIES OF SA. THEY VALORISE OUR EXPERIENCE, WHICH IS NECESSARY IN A WORLD-ORDER WHICH OVERLOOKS OR DENIGRATES AFRICA. ALSO THEY DO NOT IDEALIZE IN RAINBOW COLOURS. NO AFRICAN FOOTPRINT THERE. WE NEED ARTICULATE BLACK DIRECTORS TO PUT THEIR VIEWS ON THE WORLD STAGE.

You've spent quite a bit of time recently in Europe and in Haiti, how did these first and third world views you encountered differ from each other? In which ways, do you think, is your work imagining South Africa to the world?

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WORLD VIEWS? BRU, THERE IS NO COMPARRISON, ON ANY FRONT. TO GENERALISE RANDOMLY: FIRST WORLD: SANITIZED, MATERIALISTIC BUT CUT OFF FROM THE BODY, CONCEPTUAL, COMPARTMENTALISED, SELF-REFLEXIVE, SELF-CONSCIOUS, CURIOUS BUT ARROGANT. THIRD WORLD: IMPULSIVE, VOLATILE, SPRAWLING, PHYSICAL, SPIRITUAL, BRASH, POOR, HUNGRY, SELF-ABSORBED. IN SOUTH AFRICA MORE THAN ANYWHERE ELSE I SEE THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THESE REALMS AND THE ANOMOLOUS,

GLITTERING LIFE-FORMS THEY SPAWN. SO I SUPPOSE MY WORK REFLECTS THAT TO THE WORLD.

I recently saw a very old film on Voodoo in Tahiti (I notice you use the spelling Vodou, is this more correct?)

'VODOU' IS THE CREOLE, 'VOODOO' IS THE HOLLYWOOD. NONE IN TAHITI TO MY KNOWLEDGE...

...what interested me in particular was the figure of the "joker" figure who would walk into ceremonies unannounced...who would simply be passing by and stumble into this highly organised ritual and play his crucial role in the ceremony by, effectively, disrupting it...He would drink a lot and smoke many cigarettes and dance about a bit before accosting the audience and answering their questions on the nature of the spiritual...did you encounter such a transgressive figure in your time there?

JA, 'BARON SAMEDI', LEWD LORD OF THE CEMETERY, GUARDIAN OF THE GATES TO THE UNDERWORLD, SYMBOL OF DEATH AND REGENERATION. HE IS THE VODOU CHARACTER I AM MOST ATTRACTED TO. I MADE A SPECIAL 3 DAY TRIP ACROSS THE ATLANTIC AT HALLOWEEN TO ATTEND HIS CEREMONIES LAST YEAR. HE IS A DISTURBER, A PROVOKER, ONE WHO DISRUPTS THE MUDANE JOY OF PEOPLE AND WAGS A GRAVESTONE IN THEIR FACES. IN 'VODOU NATION' THE SHOW I MADE WITH HAITIANS, WHICH CHARTED THE RISE OF A HAITIAN DICTATOR FROM SLAVERY, HE BROUGHT THE TYRANT TO HIS KNEES AND TORE HIM TO SHREDS AND LIBERATED NEW LIFE INTO THE COUNTRY. THIS IS THE DUDE I WORSHIP. THIS IS THE DUDE IN ME WHO MAKES THE PLAYS...

Continuing on this line – your work has always seemed transgressive to me, in the sense that it always seems to go beyond theatrical expectations...are there boundaries you believe may need to be transgressed? Any comments on the nature of (and, perhaps, the necessity for) transgression?

YES, OF COURSE. GENERALLY THE WALLS THAT CONTAIN SOCIETY ARE ERECTED TO KEEP THE LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR IN PLACE. THOSE WHO ERECT THEM DO SO OUT OF FEAR THAT THEY MIGHT BE DISPLACED, FEAR OF WHAT LIES BEYOND THE WALLS. THEY ARE BARRIERS OF CONTROL: SOME OF THESE CONTROLS ARE NECESSARY, SOME OUTDATED OR JUST PLAIN OPPRESSIVE. THE NECESSITY FOR THEM IS ALWAYS SHIFTING. THEY NEED TO BE TESTED ALL THE TIME. IF THEY ARE NEVER BREECHED, THOSE INSIDE THEM ARE DEPRIVED OF THE WILD, ESSENTIAL ENERGIES OF THE FOREST.

I've just read something interesting about you in this week's Mail & Guardian: Matthew Krouse wrote a report on the Sharp! Sharp! festival in

Berne, where Ms January-Bardill made a statement to the effect that "culture is...social therapy", before she "called on the Swiss public to perform its role as therapist" by watching the pieces on offer. Apparently, "an irate Bailey together with DJ Moran" confronted her in the street about her statement. Krouse doesn't go into any detail on this altercation, but maybe you could fill me in on what happened here from your perspective. What was your perception of what the ambassador meant? What did you tell her, and how did she respond?

Ja, ja. She stated that South Africans are in need of social therapy and that we as artists are the patients, and called on the Swiss public to perform its role as therapist... words to that effect. I challenged her at the opening event, just after the speech, saying that I took umbrage to having my work contextualised like that. That when I present my work I am not going for a consultation, that the relationship she spelled out implied a one-way flow and a hierarchy, where-as to me the work is at best an interaction mutually beneficial/enlightening to both artists and audience, and often therapeutic more to the audience than the performers, who like shamans are giving energy to the audience and taking them to realms beyond themselves... European audiences need no encouragement to sit and dissect and analyse art. And that from my observation of the insular, constrained and conservative Swiss, the audience was in far more need of therapy than the performers. She was quite feisty in her response, saying to Dino that as whites we did not feel the pain of apartheid etc. We kissed and made up the next day...

If you had to run a course in directing, how would you go about it? What would your prescribed textbooks be? Which methods would you teach?

You know, I don't read books on directing. I cannot remember any one I have read. And methods...? I never studied directing or acting, so although I read some Stanislavski and Grotowski and Brecht et al when I studied at university, I don't know too much about methods. For a course I reckon I would allow candidates to choose a play to direct, and would then mentor them each step of the way, probing them with questions, making suggestions, drawing their attention to character, design, motifs and themes, encouraging them to explore how the play relates to the social/political/cultural environment we live in, and to tease out these aspects.

I'd encourage young directors to work across artistic disciplines and cultural borders, and to research deeply the material they are working with.

In your own training, did you ever have a guru, or a mentor?

Not really, cos as I've said I didn't really train for what I'm doing. I lived and worked a bit with (late) Professor Mavis Taylor, whose boldness and openness in working with township performers gave me courage.

Are there any questions which you would have liked me to ask you, and, if I had asked them, how would you have answered them?

Maybe on process:

I work pretty much with a 'total theatre' aesthetic, if I use the term correctly. Writing, design, music and directing are all very inter-related. Off times I draw what the scenes look like before the text emerges. Sometimes if a scene is not realized properly this is problematic, as it ends up being design over-loaded: style dominates content. Sometimes I'm not sure what a play I make is saying. Critics say 'what is it saying?' and I can't really say. It is not a thesis. As I work on a piece I get a sense of what needs to manifest through it, and during the process this becomes clearer and I know I am getting closer to actualising it, and I can feel where I am unable to really resolve parts of it. It is difficult to stay true to this, because the intellect gets in the way a lot of the time. So often I'm not sure what the piece really means, or even of my response to it. This sounds vague, I realize. I envy painters or musicians here. I feel they have the freedom to give expression to something they feel without worrying so much about meaning. I'm learning that things come of their own accord. Sometimes to work too much on some aspect when making a play is misguided, because then you over-intellectualise it and settle on a dry response to the problem. I like to have a long process time, so that when I identify something that is tricky to see and resolve, I can just shelve it for a while and wait for it to appear. I still get panicky though...