

THE ZOMBIE FILES

THESE NOTES AND ARTICLES ON THE ZOMBIE SAGA AND 'IPI ZOMBI?' WERE PUBLISHED IN BRETT'S BOOK: 'THE PLAYS OF MIRACLE AND WONDER' (2003)

"We build our fences up and up and up, even with thorns and with aloes. In the morning they are broken and the mielies are gone. There is something bigger than all of us - something worse than you can imagine. There, in the river. There, in the veld. We pray to our ancestors and offer them gifts: beer, meat and even money, but this thing is too hungry. You lock your doors at night and close the windows, but it creeps inside, in through the keyhole, and in through the cracks, in while you sleep, in while you breathe. You wake up in the morning and this thing has been inside you and then you are so empty. You wake up too quickly - it is still inside you, and then you are lost..."

[from IPI ZOMBI?]

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LOOKING FOR DIRECTION

I spent about a year in India in 1994, questing for direction and meaning in life as so many have done before and will do forever. The first few months I cycled alone through the western states, tortured by the desert and the sun, the alien ness of the people and their customs, and the smallness of my own ability for comprehension: closeted nests do not prepare one for the great gusts and currents of life; I had to be shattered in order to begin to absorb what I could never have otherwise perceived. My Indian diaries are clogged with scrawlings of angst puked out under the onslaught of the east: "Life on the Indian anvil".

Eventually I was washed up gasping on the shores of myself and headed north to the Himalayas to find solace in the thin air of the forests. I sat through a series of Buddhist meditation courses over the next months. Sitting, sitting, trying to empty my mind, I began to wonder: "why am I looking for myself in India when I'm a third generation African?"

I returned to South Africa at the beginning of '95 with a conviction to explore all things African. A flight of uncharacteristic foresight showed me that to work

successfully in theatre in South Africa I should take the African way. I wanted to rush to Nigeria and hurl myself into the Egungun Masquerades, performance rites in which spirits associated with certain masks are brought to earth in wild dances when initiates don these masks at festivals. Drama, ritual, spirit possessions, fire, flashy costumes, blood... and of course that hazy, fluid zone between realms where nothing is exactly as it appears to be. Just a matter of taste, I reckon, or of personal orientation – no wonder the conventional parlour drama of South Africa has never stood a chance with me.

My mission was 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 had attended in India. This is not a cerebral journey, nor is it the stirring up of social conscience – so much theatre that rides those wagons has left me cold – rather this is a trip akin to those we take in dreams that leave us haunted, enchanted, disturbed.

I was broke, so with no excursion to Nigeria in the foreseeable future I began to wonder about the people who live beyond the barbed wire fence around the white suburbia which had always been my home... surely such enticing rites existed in South Africa too?

In January '96 I packed my bags and hitchhiked to Port Saint Johns, Transkei, home of the amamPondo people, to start my research. I was looking for a story and a means of dramatizing it: I was convinced it lay in an interaction between Xhosa ritual and folklore. I spent a good deal of time at the library of the University of the Transkei reading history, folk stories (*iintsomi*) and theses, and living in the village of mTambalala, across the hills from Port Saint Johns, at the mud and thatch homestead of Zipathe Dlamini, a kind and humble sangoma with startling leopard eyes and the intensity of a small volcano. He had an off-the-wall white acolyte (*thwasa*), Chris (an ex-Jo'burg model and horticulturalist), who drank beer and smoked *dagga* and Chesterfields like there was no tomorrow, but helped me to understand the lay of the land and the importance of dreams here.

We slept curled on grass mats on the mud floor amongst jars of animal fat and potions (wing of bat, tongue of newt), and an array of skins, bones and drying vegetation emitting tangy auras above us. Our dreams were electric.

Mornings we hoed the fields; afternoons we did beadwork, weaving, and chatted; evenings we would head for the forest to gather herbs, bark, roots for the various ailments of Zipathe's patients: a cough, backache, stomach pain. The vast, silent forest visited by these healers in their trances; the ancient timeless woods whence the healing comes...

Can I find the healing bulbs and roots within the deep forests of my psyche to manifest in my work?

[ZOMBIE workbook, July '96]

But it was the nightlife that taught me what I yearned to know: evenings were spent in ceremonial dancing, drumming and singing: a training regimen to deepen the ability of the sangomas to enter that zone where they can meet with their ancestors and access the collective wisdom. Called by the thwacking drums, grandfathers, women and children from neighbouring homesteads gathered in the candle-lit hut to lend their energy to the searing chants. The scent of smoking herbs and wood smoke, the spiralling crescendos of song, the cast of tiny tots, bent grannies and hypnotically powerful sangomas in their sweat, skins, leg rattles and beads all dancing, dancing,

dancing to the drums blew me away. Afterwards we'd weave our way home barefoot on dark paths through the grass, a long train of us singing amongst the sleeping kraals in the silver blue moonlight, children leaping like demon silhouettes, our ears still throbbing. Stop where paths fork to say goodbye; trails leading off to quiet huts, to dream-filled sleep...

Some weekends we travelled to the graduation ceremonies of sangomas in villages deep in the green valleys. These were extraordinary events lasting several days and nights, attended by hundreds of people in their traditional finery. 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? These were amongst the richest days of my life so far.



OFF THE BEATEN TRACK IN THE TRANSKEI

Ali – entrepreneur extraordinaire; ex-boxer (hence the name); ex-“transport agent” (bus driver); husband to Lungiswa; father of two daughters; owner of three cars (a stationwagon, a bakkie and a kombi); farmer of stock and crops; breadwinner for two sisters, a younger brother, and their numerous offspring too; and proud pioneer of satellite tv in the remote village of Tselitwe – is built like the buses he used to drive. He has the head of an ox and – the villagers tell me – a heart of gold.

“I am a busy man,” is his credo. This morning he organised a team to clear the wet pelts of mud from the road that links this central Transkei village through rippling green hills to the national highway 30-odd kms away.

We drive across fields in his Cressida with country and western blaring from the radio, for a get together with the men who helped him. At the store we buy Castles and milk stouts to mix half and half into “black and tans”. The beers lie amongst ice and chicken pieces in the depths of the fridge.

“You must be a good businessman,” I prompted over lunch in his home earlier.

“My parents were very poor. I made my money by alternating one year at school, one year working. I am a busy man, I am after money.”

“For what?” I challenged, ever the flowerchild, “What happens when you’ve got all the money?”

“I will die. It’s not for me, it’s for my children, and to set up work projects here in the village.”

That shut me up. When I suggested a holiday in Cape Town he laughed.

“Who will look after my animals, my garden, my taxis? The only reason to go there is to buy chains.”

“For ploughing?” I asked naively.

“No, for wearing.”

“He’s an outgoing man,” smiled the beautiful Lungiswa.

I told them that I am studying Xhosa *iintsomi*.

“Myths,” said Lungiswa.

“Do you know any?” I asked.

“You will have to find an old woman, but she will not speak English.”

“I know one,” chirped Ali.

“He lies. He is always telling lies.”

“I never tell lies!”

“Everyday you tell lies,” she laughed.

“Only one minute out of every day I tell a lie,” he said.

Lungiswa was delighted.

“There was this boy, and the giants – the zims – were after him, so he climbed the high tree...”

“He’s lying,” she giggled.

“And the boy, he pees down into their mouths, and they shout, yho! Water from the gods!”

“*Wena!*” she cried.

“And he shits down into their mouths, and they shout, yho! Food from the gods!” He squealed with laughter.

We pass a curvaceous woman in a West African tie-dye dress.

“This is my girlfriend,” he tells me.

She shyly leans in through the car window, “How are you?”

“Tell him who you are,” demands Ali.

“I am Ali’s friend,” she smiles, disappearing above the window.

“We are a lot more than friends!” he scoffs, revving up the hill.

A man twirling an umbrella walks by in a too-tight cream suit buttoned up to the top and a T-shirt collar at his throat. The valleys ooze water beyond.

We meet Vuyani, the principal of the primary school, also on his way to the gathering in his big white 4x4 bakkie. He points to a large square house on top of the hill, away from the village of round and rectangular huts. “That is my kraal.” Also the clinic, a wacky pale pink Afro-deco building bristling with antennae, “We built it with our own hands, before the R.D.P. in ’85. Now we have nurses but no medicines – nothing!” The hospital, 8kms away, takes the full quota. Vuyani is obviously bitter about this. The bureaucracy, it seems, is a lumbering thing.

The party of men has gathered on soft red upholstery in the sitting room of a house at the bottom of a verdant valley. Stained glasses, remnants of brandy and Coca Cola are evidence that the celebration has been going some time. I am about to be introduced to a Xhosa drinking party, the two main characteristics of which seem to be pathological speechmaking and getting fall-down drunk. I am the undisputed guest of honour and the subject of most of the toasts. The other subject concerns the road: the sorry state of it, the initiative taken by these men to fix it, and the fervent hope that tarmac will soon pave the way to the N2. As the evening progresses these two subjects begin to merge somehow, and I become associated with the tarmac as the agent of imminent prosperity.

Sandile – “Schoolboy” – another headmaster of a nearby school, is the most imposing orator. “I will do anything to get at the truth,” he proclaims with brandy in hand, “I will use any weapon, send any baboon, any snake... But more important than this, more important than something and something is the fact that you are here with us.”

One by one the men toast me: how honoured they are to host me, what a change in South Africa I signify, what an important person I am. I am rather overwhelmed and very embarrassed. I think of the black men who've come to my door in the city seeking work or money, of the doors I've shut on them without a second thought.

Setting aside my black and tan I stand up: "Gentlemen, I am the one who is honoured by you. I could never have expected this hospitality after the way my people have treated yours. If one of you were to visit my suburb you would never be welcomed like this. I am humbled by this."

The speeches wind around and about us all evening, Kwesi the travelling insurance broker, Blade and Vuyo, the all-day drinkers whose wives support them. We move on to Schoolboy's house where I am presented with a glass dish: "This is empty, may it be full for you, and may you bring your friends with you to this place so that they see Tselitwe is not a violent place. They are welcome here." More drinks.

I chat to Mr Mandla Skaap, Afrikaans-speaking, pensioned off from his jail warden job because of depression. I agree it must be a depressing occupation. He bemoans the state of things: "You can trust nobody nowadays, not even the policemen: if you do not feed a dog properly it bites."

Then to the Windsor Hotel, a ramshackle beery tavern. Rounds of speeches, rounds of drinks. Bodies have gone slack and swerving. Sandile snores loudly, Ali glowers and sways, Blade giggles and Vuyo rambles out a 20 minute monologue before breaking down and sobbing into the night.

Eventually everyone stumbles across the hills homeward in the darkness. I sigh with relief, it was not the place of a guest of honour to show impatience two hours ago.

Mr Gideon Rhorhwana, possibly 70, with the close-fitting skin and blue eyes of an ancient black man, has five daughters. One of them is married, another lives here with her child, two live vaguely elsewhere, and the fifth – who also lives here – is an *igqirha*, a sangoma. He has no sons, thus he cannot sit on a bench outside his home and let the sun soak into his skinny limbs. He must plough and hoe to make ends meet.

"If you do not sew you cannot reap," he tells me. He sewed in the mines and factories of the Reef from the '50s to the 80's, but it seems the harvests have been small. "There are no jobs, if the ANC could make jobs then it would be alright. They say they are going to start mines here in the Transkei: coal and money – gold – and paraffin. Now there is so much stealing."

Stock theft. Cattle are hustled away at night or when the community is at a feast or a funeral, driven into the no man's land between Tselitwe and Qumbu, and transported away, "as far as Vereeniging, to be sold for nothing." The old man lost his six cattle in 1985; woke up one morning and the gate was open and the kraal empty.

"You can't trust anyone, they will break into your house and steal the chickens, they will even take the food from the pot they are so hungry."

I mention that I've heard that the training of an *igqirha* is very expensive.

"Yho! And you must slaughter chickens, goats, cattle..."

"All at the same time," adds his youngest daughter with a baby slung across her back.

Where did he get the cattle, since his had been stolen?

“I had to buy them: R1 500, R2 000! No, it’s not an honour to have an *igqirha* in the family, but if it must be it must be.”

Before 1970 there was practically nobody in this region. The Nationalist government, in its wisdom, dumped hundreds of people here so as to consolidate the amaHlubi people and to free grazing land for big farms. The people were angry of course. They were given £5 for each house they lost.

“It is not the Xhosa way.”

Few people farm here, the birds ravage the crops and the winter frosts kill even cabbages.

“Are you happy now,” I ask, for it is beautiful.

“Yes, we are happy now,” he smiles.

“There is nowhere else to go,” sings his daughter.

“No,” he echoes, “there is nowhere else to go.”

[ZOMBIE workbook, Jan ‘96]



NOTES FROM THE WILDERNESS

Buzzards were fighting over some entrails in the street. He watched the difficult movements of the creatures, puffed and ceremonious as if they were performing an ancient dance.

[Gabriel Garcia Marquez, “In Evil Hour”]

BENEATH THE SKIN

Hot bloody day in Port Saint Johns, the buildings are sinking into the black mud and the vegetation on the hills above riots into a serrated sky. They say big Zambezi sharks swim miles up the Umzimvubu River on whose banks this town subsides. When the great river floods, the red-brown water boils through the streets and into the dwellings and shops. I imagine sharks thrashing in submerged kitchens, mauling forgotten grandmothers in the lonely gloom of their shacks.

Minibuses avoid potholes, barefoot villagers head into the hills balancing plastic bags of provisions on their heads, a sangoma sells goats tethered to the post of a huge Vodacom billboard.

I sit at the café, reading Xhosa folktales of madness and invasion; tales with casts of lost children, witches, talking animals, river snakes, cannibals and *tikoloshes*. These stories well up from the great black oceans from which human consciousness and our societies arose not so long ago – and from which each of us surfaces every morning. Stories from the darkest pits of memory. They lap around our ankles with cold threats of the dissolution and horror that follow transgressions of the codes and rules that bind us together. In traditional African communities these codes were clear, and if chaos burst through the walls of psyche or civilization, the sangoma – who is a journeyer in both the sub-aquatic world and on dry land – was able to ritually heal the breach. But today, where the African landscape is a jumble of ruins and structures and

conflicting signs, the ancestors have lost their authority, there can be no clarity, and people are sucked away through the wreckage by the spiralling currents.

Hot bloody day in Port Saint Johns, and a car, driver drunk at the wheel, hits a yellow dog on the tarmac, crushing its pelvis and splashing its blood on the fender. The bitch screams with bullet hole eyes and drags her broken body across the pavement, and the world comes suddenly apart: every mangy, threadbare, snarling cur pariah pavement special dog that ever got kicked in the ribs appears from the shadows of twisted dreams and with flashing fangs bears down on the injured party to rip her apart in a streak of blood and matted fur. Then they turn on each other, these dogs, with a howl, and whirl across the road with teeth snapping and skin ripping, twenty dogs lost in a timeless ecstasy of red.

The people watch, stunned a moment, entranced, their feet sunk in black mud. Then horrified they shout, break branches from trees and run beating at the scattering animals.

The bitch lies still in her blood in the dirt with her eye as torn as the sky.
[ZOMBIE workbook, '96]

I am stroking the old cat, Moshy, stroking and stroking her, harder and harder, and she's all purrs and kneading claws, on and on, losing herself in the pleasure, until there comes a moment when she is no longer aware of who she is and who I am, she is just her primordial passionate catself in the throws of cosmic movement, and in that instant of forgetting she lashes at me with fangs and claws and blood wells from deep veins.

[IPI ZOMBI? workbook, Mar '98]

There is a figure which keeps appearing to me. He underlies this play. It is his portrait that I'm using in the poster. At present I see him in sculptural iconic form, but IPI ZOMBI? will be his dramatic manifestation. Come with me, I will lead you towards him.

He is huge, unmoving, old as ever, staring out through opaque eyes, lips gaping; a terrifying and ambivalent idol bristling with metal spikes, radiating dark light, blackened by smoke and caked with the grunge of sacrifices. You stumble upon him in a forest clearing and the hair stands up on your neck. He terrifies because he is impenetrable: so powerfully alien and yet so anciently familiar. Before him you stand stunned on infirm ground, stripped naked and trembling with ecstatic fear, your pulse racing red with the drums. You linger a while in awe and then move away, chilled...
[IPI ZOMBI? workbook, Feb '98]

I know the hectic primal energy of this play, this IPI ZOMBI? It's something I *know*. Now I need to enable my actors to find it within themselves. They must find the way into the forest inside them. They must leap into the flames of the fire inside them.

"The great evil in society is fragmentation, the ultimate punishment is ostracism." The essential thing for us to explore is the fear of the wilderness in the human psyche, in society. Just beneath the fragile web of society lurk the wild forces that can shatter it.

[IPI ZOMBI? workbook, Mar '98]

"And when they grow up one day," I asked softly, "Do you think the cruelty will leave them? What kind of parents will they become who were taught that the time of

parents is over? Can parents be recreated once the idea of parents has been destroyed within us? ... They set people on fire and laugh while they burn to death. How will they treat their own children? What love will they be capable of? Their hearts are turning to stone before our eyes, and what do you say? You say, 'This is not my child, this is the white man's child, this is the monster made by the white man.' Is that all you can say? Are you going to blame them on the whites and turn your back?"
[J.M. Coetzee, "Age of Iron"]

This play is a story of a battle between Order and Disorder, an insidious, faceless disorder that laughs all the way through...
[IPI ZOMBI? workbook, Feb '98]

THE HORROR! THE HORROR!

Tramping around the green and boggy hills of rural Transkei in March 1996 looking for a story to dramatize I chanced upon a white Kokstad farmer wreathed in the pungent smoke of his wors braai. We fell to chatting, he and I. Tell me about the Kokstad zombie saga, I nudged over a Castle. "A load of kaffir bullshit," he grunted. I left for Kokstad the following morning. "You're getting into some weird stuff," a friend cautions me with knowing looks when I tell her of witches and demons and spiritual sex slaves. She'd seen "Angel Heart". "Aren't you scared you're accessing things you can't deal with?" I don't know.

"My mother was not a witch, I never saw a snake or even a bird inside her room, there's no proof." These words have stuck with me for some reason. I am intrigued by them. Spoken so earnestly by a twenty-something guy in a plush red Morkels armchair in a small-town township they seem in some hazy way to illustrate the wide plains between my suburban world, and the landscape of this saga.

Many believed his mother was a witch - an accomplice in the brutal killing of twelve school boys in a kombi crash in September 1995, guilty of mutilating their souls and then imprisoning them in her bedroom wardrobe that spring. Two weeks after the boys died an outraged mob descended on her home trashing furniture and appliances, sweeping herds of porcelain animals to the floor, demanding the keys to that cupboard. Stripping her of her clothes they dragged her into the warm evening, and singing loudly carried her to the killing field. "Like Bafana Bafana." says a schoolboy with a sly grin and downcast eyes. Like what? "Like Bafana, up on our shoulders, like a soccer champion." She was the first of three executed. His two friends snort with laughter.

In the monochrome bleakness of the headmaster's office at Carl Malcomess High I feel very far from things I comprehend. Beyond the mesh of bars on the window the bright, ramshackle houses of Bhongweni Township are peaceful and charming in the morning sun: sweet-peas tangle on fences, roses startle against blue walls, china ornaments gaze blankly from every window.

Walking through the littered, dusty streets in April 1996 I find it very difficult to imagine the dramatic crowd scenes that had played here six months before. Girls jump through elastics as girls do, toddlers squeal, grandfathers puff pipes on *stoeps*,

sunglasses hiss “D.P.”; the spires and conifers of white Kokstad prong the sky on the opposite hillside.

Yet, I’m warned, as night creeps across the hills, it brings in it’s shadow the loping forms of the creatures of the African psyche: *tikoloshes*, were-snakes, *mpundulu* birds, witches and zombies...My skin prickles.

On 29 September 1995 a kombi carrying 15 boys from Carl Malcomess went off the highway 28 kilometres from Kokstad. 12 boys were killed. Some people claim the driver was drunk, others say he dozed off. One of the survivors of the crash reported seeing 50 naked women on the side of the dark road as the kombi rolled - a flash of 50 fiendish faces in the wild sweep of headlights - and hysteria mushroomed overnight.

In order to graduate as a witch an initiate must sacrifice a human being to the Dark Powers - straight A’s for a virile young male. It seemed the class of ‘95 had just graduated.

According to popular opinion witches slice off the tongues and genitals of their victims for medicinal potions, pierce their skulls with thin bones to make them obedient, and stow their spirits in their wardrobes as a labour-force for poisonings, murders, menial tasks and fornication: witch-children are born of the passion of witches and these zombies.

Catastrophe large and small in traditional African belief-systems is often attributed to these witches, Satanic women - and most often it is women - who harness evil to breed disorder in their communities, motivated by hatred, jealousy or power-lust, or having inherited the “gift” from their mothers.

It seemed witch-fears had been brewing in Bhongweni for some time before the crash, with plottings and even voodoo dolls being mentioned by people I spoke to. Things had not been going too well: much unemployment, drug-peddling escalating, high failure rate in exams, a spate of car crashes...witches were definitely up to their high jinks, and the old, ugly and powerful women of Bhongweni were catching the community’s beady eye.

The mass-murder of 12 innocents in a kombi holocaust brought the festering to a head. In neon-lit classrooms students and other comrades mustered by night and drew up a hit list of 50 women. A Mrs Magudu vaulted to Favourite after her 10 year old granddaughter complained of exhaustion to schoolmates: the zombies in granny’s cupboard were keeping her up at night begging for food and cigarettes. When Mrs Magudu’s niece was stabbed to death by unknown assailants shortly afterwards everyone knew the zombies were on the prowl, and two nights later Mrs Magudu was hoisted onto the shoulders of her jurists like a sports hero and paraded away.

How many were involved, I ask a cafe owner who lives along the route.

“Oh, too many.” He gazes down the lane shaking his head, “From here to there,” indicating a lamppost 50 metres farther on. Small girls must have stopped jumping and stared as the crowd went by, the elastic going slack between their legs.

To elicit a confession and a list of accomplices from Mrs Magudu her persecutors beat her with sticks and stabbed her, “She just prayed to God and said I don’t know nothing,” so they crushed her to death with pieces of masonry. Another of approximately 200 suspected witches who are put to death each year in South Africa.

I asked her son what his feelings would have been if he had had proof that his mother was a witch - if he had on occasion seen a bird fluttering in alarm in his mother’s room.

“No, then she must be killed.”

He would not be involved himself though, he assures me; he would just alert his friends.

I am out of my depth. I drink bottomless cups of Spur coffee, trying to process this stuff. What about justice, I ask. What about guilty until proven innocent?

A group of darkies plated silver by the streetlight at the phone booths outside makes me feel I'm in Haiti.

"How could you kill three women on the testimony of a 10 year-old girl?" I asked one of the schoolboys, baffled.

"Nobody would lie about such things," he answered, and I felt the immensity of a continent behind his response.

After much snooping around and harassing of policemen I track down Senti Doko, 19, ex-member of the Carl Malcomess S.R.C. and charged with 8 others for the murder of the women. About to come face to face with a blood-soaked hoodlum of uncertain temperament all my childhood black-man-stereotypes gyrate before me, and I feel intrepid picking my way across the muddy debris of his backyard armed with mighty pen and Dictaphone.

Senti sits quietly on his bed, his hands in his lap, his head a dark silhouette against a lacy background in the frame of his window. BONA magazine pages paper the walls.

"Ja, I'll go to jail, maybe for 25 years. That's how life is."

I'm impressed by his calmness, his clarity, his presence. He himself has been the victim of zombies, poisoned and suffering stomach cramps the previous year: "Do you ever see a person sleeping and he is chewing something? That is when the zombies are feeding him a herb. These witches must be killed because they will kill us all. They will turn us all into zombies."

What happens when one society has an utterly different belief-system to that which prevails? Everything is starting to look a little complicated. Many of the youths saw themselves as the moral guardians of a community which had closed it's eyes to the actual source of the disorder destroying it: "The Christians say we must bury those dead and just forget...the police they do nothing, they just drive around in their big cars, so who is going to stop these witches? We want a clean society."

I approach Sergeant Ndindwe, police liaison officer in Kokstad. Surely, even though murder has been committed, when a set of beliefs is so coherent and a community feels so threatened by elements not acknowledged by The Law you face ethical difficulties sentencing someone to a long jail term?

The Sergeant scowls and presses his elegant fingertips together. One is bound by the law of the land, he intones. One must deliver stiff penalties as a deterrent to such behaviour. Tsotsies and others with dues to settle fan the witch-fears to their advantage.

He dodges my inquiries into the rumours that some black policemen were involved in the Hunts.

"Why were only 9 of you arrested when so many were involved in the killing?" I ask Senti.

“They were chosen by the chairman of the S.R.C. We don’t know why. He was there at the meetings and at the killing even. Then we were to get his auntie next and he ran away to warn her and so he went to the police. That’s how it is.”

He was dealt 15 years and a R2 000 fine by the courts in May ‘97.

This case does cast a strange light on what is considered just. And it is easy to regard this African outlook as barbaric if we do not take the trouble to consider the priorities. In a community-orientated society if somebody becomes too powerful, too rich, too successful, she threatens the stability of her community. She conjures up fear or hatred or jealousy in her neighbours, and is responsible for these negative emotions she has aroused in them. To restore harmony to the people she must be neutralised.

The system is logical, although rather horrifying to those of us who live on the side of the barbed-wire fence where individuality is the icon. From that viewpoint our selfish orientation must appear a heinous sacrilege to the sanctity of community and tradition, leading to atrocities such as the unravelling of the social network and the loss of collectivity...

On Sunday 13 October, two days after Mrs Magudu was “neutralised”, a crowd of 5 000 assembled to mourn the dead boys on the field of Carl Malcomess. Under a huge marquee choirs hymned, preachers preached and elders consoled the bereaved with pastel images of Heaven. A boisterous crowd of youths gathered on the periphery. As the proceedings moved to closure Senti Doko approached the elders and demanded the coffins be opened. An argument ensued; when the youths threatened violence the coffin lids were lifted and twelve ashen faces peered blindly at the tented ceiling.

Horrified parents reported how their sons’ faces had changed shape, “It used to be long and thin, now it is fat.” Nails had grown on cold fingers. Beards sprouted on 14 year-old faces.

“They were like old men,” recounts Senti, “They were still bleeding blood after two weeks, each one had a scratch on the nose in the same place.”

The explanations and pleas of the more West-thinking people could not still the shocked believers: “Our sons were taken, they put *nyama* in the coffins - meat, animals...”

Drama, drama! The coffins were toyi-toyed into Kokstad on the shoulders of a chanting crowd. Back to the mortuary. Back to the fridge. To bury such “witch-meat” would doom the victims’ souls to eternal slavery. Alarmed at the spectacle the whites of Kokstad believed the Revolution had come and deployed dogs, teargas and policemen. The teargas blew back into the faces of the defending forces and one of the officers was bitten by his dog. The coffins eventually reached cold storage where they were to lie for another six weeks.

Enter the sangomas.

The antidote for zombies requires that sangomas reunite the zomboid spirits with their bodies. A Cape Town sangoma told me that once she had danced herself into a trance she would be able to spiritually enter the cupboard and catch the zombies (who, she assured me, are terribly strong). Thereafter they would have to be doctored and nurtured back to life. Others say that the being must then be killed again and properly buried: thus can the soul enter the ancestral realm.

Sangomas brought in from Swaziland and from Pietermaritzburg detected and unearthed a baboon’s skull spiked with pins, and a bottle of old coins from the floors

of a couple of those bright little houses. These “keys” were evidence of mischief: when in trance the sangoma can sense the evil vibrations of such charmed objects.

“Of course there are witches,” admits an old Bhongweni sangoma to me, “but this was not from the witches only. All these things were because the people are not respecting their Ancestors anymore. We are being punished.”

The various Christian flocks flung their arms up in horror at the boldness of Satan’s assault on Bhongweni: the “big” churches appalled at the community’s plunge into paganism; the cross-over churches - those hybrids of Africa and Christendom - aghast at the proliferation of witches.

On his way to a stock show the Reverend Eldred Ricks takes time out to meet me at the Wimpy for early morning tea. A middle-aged white cattle rancher, he is the eccentric leader of Kokstad’s largest black congregation: one which doubled in size as a result of the zombie saga.

“Ja, there are witches in these parts: in all black areas,” he confides, “I know these blacks.” He tells a tale of how witches once tried to kill him with lightning after an incident with some women he found writhing on a farm road. As he ran through a deep gorge lightning sliced down through the sky towards him, rocks and aloes splintering in sparks as he deflected the bolts with cries of God’s name. Between sips of Rooibos he mentions human *muti*-killings he’s witnessed, and the exorcism of demons.

Alienated by the purist churches, his congregation erected a tent in Bhongweni where for three weeks they held long praying and singing vigils to drive Satan from the place and to restore the flocks to their Shepherd.

In another church a gun was pulled on a member who accused a church mother of witchcraft, and the head of St. John’s Church fled to a neighbouring town, accused of poisoning two of the crash-victims with laced holy water.

Meanwhile zombies were sighted roaming the inky streets and hysteria silently bloomed. The Kokstad Advertiser quoted one woman: “I remember waiting all day in the sun at the sports field because the sangoma told the children that the bodies would reappear, but they never came.” Trade in crucifixes and traditional medicines exploded. The eyes and ears of the world’s press bulged.

After yet another sangoma had failed to raise the boys, claiming his powers were weakened by a vast horde of witches flying invisibly above, the parents decided to bury their sons. In the still evening heat of 5 December a bakkie loaded with the coffins stole into the township cemetery. Families gathered solemnly beneath the bluegums. The cemetery is fringed by the squatter camp where many of the less ruly elements live; many come from the rural Transkei with a deep fear of things that go bump in the night. As the coffins were unloaded a rich aroma of two month-old corpses drifted over the shacks alerting the inhabitants, and a *panga*-wielding mob swooped.

If you are unable to reunite zombie and body the only thing left to do is to destroy the body, thus terminating any super-natural life of that being, evil or otherwise. While parents sobbed, their sons were dragged from their coffins, hacked with *pangas* and torched. Police arrived just in time to save the day. But did they save it?

Because the assailants were stopped before they could do much damage to the corpses, few people accept that the boys are really dead. Nobody wears mourning for their boys as is the custom. I wonder how a mother feels with the knowledge that her son is forever lost and enslaved; that when darkness wells up around the bluegums

and spreads into Bhongweni's streets her child heads slowly with the other tongueless ones towards the tasks of some cruel mistress...

In the cemetery a patch of sand marks the place where a bulldozer finally put the lid on the affair. I sit amongst khakibos and long grass feeling contemplative. Bees purr over white cosmos but the smell of human shit predominates. I feel an immense sadness for the tragedy and the richness of it all. The awe and sadness I feel in any place of entombment, no matter what colour the tribe, no matter how wide the gap in belief-systems or language or culture might appear in life; no matter how deep the misunderstandings.



HISTORY OF ZOMBIE/IPI ZOMBI?

ZOMBIE and ultimately THIRD WORLD BUNFIGHT arose out of a gap I noticed at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 1995: apart from barefoot black kids singing Xhosa songs for cents on street corners there was no local township representation on the festival program.

The frontier town of Grahamstown was established by the 1820 English settlers in the Eastern Cape as a bastion against the western verge of the amaXhosa who lived nearby. It was one of the centres from which troops, farmers and missionaries rode out to dismantle that people. Today, from opposite hillsides, two faces glare at each other across a small, polluted stream that might as well be a sea: the white face of the lush suburbs and the squalid black one of township sprawl.

After leaving the Transkei Miranda Williams and I set ourselves up there in a rented room with roll-up mattresses in May 1996. We had a rusty Datsun, about R10 000, a plot outline and a whole lot of enthusiasm. We held open auditions in Rini Township, deciding to take whoever applied. After co-opting twenty members of the Mdantsane Adult Choir and seven sangomas we eventually had a cast of about sixty people, most of them in their late teens and early twenties, and only a few with rudimentary performing experience, including Silulami Lwana, Rhea Cakwebe, Nyishe Hoboshe and Thulani Mene – who would perform in all these plays of miracle and wonder.

We rehearsed in a variety of halls and classrooms, recording improvisations onto a tape recorder for me to transcribe into script later. Up to twelve people were piled into the car at one time to be ferried between venues and to their homes in the icy nights. Humble beginnings... We called our company "Abanya 'bantu" – "The Other People".

ZOMBIE, with its dark, smoky naïveté, thundering sangoma music and caricatures based on the clenched forms of West African statuettes, was a whole new South African theatre experience. Rini Township joined the National Arts Festival in six sold-out shows on the Fringe in the gymnasium of an elite all-boys private school ...

In October of the same year we began rehearsals for the Cape Town production with a cast of thirty local performers, including Xola Mda, Abey Xakwe (who have been in every subsequent production), and Them bani Luziph o, Tony

Madikane, Vukile Handula, Sindiswa Makayi and Nomvula , who would all reappear in iMUMBO JUMBO. We worked in a huge pensioners' community hall in Gugulethu Township, watched by the bug eyes of several grannies and grandpas who all had to have their say about the subject of the drama.

ZOMBIE opened in Cape townships, playing at cultural centres and halls in Khayelitsha, Nyanga and Langa to raucous crowds: at the Nyanga hall there was so much noise outside from those who couldn't fit into the hall that the actors could barely be heard.

Transporting the cumbersome sets, props and livestock was a nightmare. The large white goat which ate whatever props she could get her teeth into had to be squeezed into the back seat of Miranda's Volkswagen Beetle, and cleaning up her shit and piss was a late nightly chore. She lived in the yard of the house in which we were renting a room in Observatory until her bleating drove us mad and we replaced her with a vivacious white chicken called Cornelia who rode to performances on my shoulder and was eventually stolen and devoured a few months later during the rehearsals for iMUMBO JUMBO in Grahamstown.

ZOMBIE ran for two weeks at the Nico Arena in Cape Town. Once again we had a ridiculously low budget, and apart from a small weekly salary the performers were each promised two percent of the door-takings. By the end of the run this did not amount to very much, so we begged the theatre administration to sponsor us the venue for another week to raise more money. I went on stage at the end of the show on the last couple of nights of those two weeks, decrying the lack of support for what we were doing and lambasting the old-school bias of the theatre, where the headdresses in a production running in an adjacent venue cost five times what our actors had each earned for ten weeks of work. Rebecca Waddle, a Johannesburg actress, was moved to write us a cheque from the bottom of her heart for several thousand Rands, which kept the show afloat for a third week and vastly increased the wages of the actors.

In 1998, following on the success of iMUMBO JUMBO, we established a training program – THIRD WORLD BUNFIGHT HQ – in a cavernous warehouse in the no-man's-land between Grahamstown and Rini. The fifteen performers who went through the intensive training included Abey and Xola from Cape Town; Silulami, Rhea, Nyishe and Thulani, who had been in the Grahamstown version of ZOMBIE and in iMUMBO JUMBO (1997); also from Grahamstown: Luyanda Butana, Boniwe Tyota, Makhosi Yafele and his sister Noxolo Donyeli, who had all joined the company for iMUMBO JUMBO, as well as Bongani Diko, Lucy and the fiery Ace Bonde. Finding women with basic training and talent was very difficult, so I auditioned in several Eastern Cape towns, bringing Linda from East London and Nomfundo from Umtata. Barbara Mathers, a best friend of thirteen years, ducked out of the hotel industry and joined us as company manager.

The training program consisted of classes in acting, improvisation, mime, movement, trance, yoga and traditional African music and dance. We also held workshops in script-writing, fund-raising, telephone skills and the like. In pairs the trainee-actors ran drama groups in seven Rini schools two afternoons a week.

At HQ we tackled the zombie saga again, giving it a slick, dark, ritualistic and scaled-down new life for presentation on the main program of the National Arts Festival. This was IPI ZOMBI?, which played in a deserted power station about seven kms out of town. Along with the Japanese Buto-inspired movement piece – “heartstopping” (performed first in a kaolin quarry and then in the graveyard of the settler fathers of Grahamstown, who were no doubt spinning six feet beneath the black feet that danced on their graves), IPI ZOMBI? toured the Eastern Cape (see

“Zombies on Safari”), ventured into Kwa-Zulu Natal, played the Spier Amphitheatre in Cape Town, and then toured Zimbabwe in 1999.

NOTES ON THE TEXT AND PERFORMANCE

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, 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 from me by 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, Mar '98]

Style style style is all I think about, and no wonder I get nowhere, when I don't even know what the story is about...

[ZOMBIE workbook, April '96]

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. 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]

As a creator the language I speak is not so much one of words, it is one of other signs: of images and sounds. These signs or symbols are as complex – if not more so – than a language of words, for they resonate with so many nuances, meanings, associations, can be read in so many ways.

I must be clear about what I am trying to communicate.

[ZOMBIE workbook, July '96]

I bleed through these works
My nerves grow right inside them
I begin to bud in February
And flower in July
Then again in mid-summer
Six months a year I am but the stem for the sap of my plays.
[IPI ZOMBI? workbook, Mar '98]

Okay, I'm depressed; okay, I'm feeling downright lonely, but are we moving forward? Am I going to be accused of rehashing and not pushing beyond, not finding new horizons beyond the barriers? Well, it all depends on the research I'm doing with my performers, on pushing them over the edge. I have to keep experimenting here. I have to be clear in my goal. My aim is to design a sequence of emotional states through which the performers have to travel in the play, a sequence which will completely submerge them and lead them to a point of giving over utterly, where they are totally dancing the performance.

Where do I go now, how to get to the heart? How to push further? I feel I have to take my troupe into the woods somehow...
[IPI ZOMBI? workbook, Feb '98]

Sometimes elated, sometimes despairing. This life of art is a lonesome thing. A one man show.
[IPI ZOMBI? workbook, March '98]

WAIT, WAIT, IT'S COMING! IF ONLY I COULD WRITE AS FAST AS THE IMAGES FLOW THROUGH ME! The two realms – showbiz and ritual – can work together: a high speed show; the whole show is like a tumbling act, one scene flipping into the next, the intensity getting higher and higher. The audience is close in, ³/₄ round. The play is presented to all sides, a drumming, banging, plinking, kudu horning rave. Actors on stage flipping in and out of role, demanding of the audience, taking us on a journey as themselves – as ACTORS not characters...
[IPI ZOMBI? workbook, Feb '98]

ZOMBIES ON SAFARI

Huge human shadows prance murderously on the facade of a rural *spaza* shop with JOKO TEA emblazoned upon it. An open coffin lies to one side. Drums throb menacingly in the darkness. A witch is about to be executed by a mob of chanting youths, and five hundred faces gilded by the headlights of my bakkie watch with glittering eyes.

There is something about the energy of this crowd which unnerves me, here, amongst thatched mud dwellings twenty-five kilometres from the nearest town, where the line between “reality” and “illusion” is not the same that we urbanites perceive. I

imagine a throng descending on the huts of red-eyed lone women after the show and illuminating the mealie fields with bonfires.

I creep to the narrator hunched around a cowhide drum and instruct him to add a footnote to his final monologue on the essence of evil - "there is something bigger than all of us, something worse than you can imagine..." - "Tell them that this is a *terrible* story, one which should *not* be repeated," I hiss.

This is the last of almost twenty performances of IPI ZOMBI? in the Transkei, and it is highly unlikely that theatre has ever been experienced here in the long grass of mTambalala, let alone drama of such a volatile nature: the saga of witch hunts and zomboid souls is rather a disturbing little tale with which to attempt to ignite a cultural renaissance, perhaps, but it keeps the audiences glued to their grass mats.

"Every weekend we bury children in this village, there are many witches here," a spectator tells one of the cast after the show.

When our own minibus slides off wet roads and rolls downhill into the shrilling jungles of Port Saint Johns the following day (thankfully without any injuries), the hair of the black cast bristles.

"This is a message from our ancestors about what we are doing," whispers Nyishe – who plays a louse-eating witch – with the darkness of foreboding in his eye-sockets.

"No, this is the result of going around a sharp corner at 100kms/hour in the rain." I counter. We agree to differ.

Our Kokstad performances had been cancelled after we received phone calls from relatives of suspected witches terrified that we'd spark off a reprisal of the killings.

"We are the pride of the Eastern Cape," the narrator brags in isiXhosa, "We who are travelling from village to village, from town to town, while others are afraid, locked in their houses, believing their televisions..."

Our intentions for touring the show were a little more noble than to inflame "superstitions" and to give rural folk bad dreams: Third World Bunfight (fifteen daunted township actors, a driver and two batty whities crammed and bundled into a minibus, a bakkie and two trailers teetering with sets, costumes, props, instruments and voluminous baggage) was on a mission to provoke a flowering of drama amongst the folk of the far-flung corners of the Eastern Cape, to inspire dramatizations of the wonderful stories of this neglected province, and to learn how to make theatre accessible to people across the social spectrum of the country.

IPI ZOMBI? had premiered to "sophisticated" audiences at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in July, and with noises of a world tour pulsing in our ears we set out to prove ourselves on home-turf, and to change perceptions that all black theatre need be didactic "community theatre" - the R.D.P. set to song and dance.

After the Festival we spent a month translating the drama into isiXhosa at our training base – "HQ" - and preparing it to be staged in any of the boggling variety of venues on the itinerary: township netball courts, *fin de siecle* town halls, the function room of a Southern Suns hotel, a broken farm dam, a church, rural meadows and sheds.

Beauty and Patience, our two performing hens, had to be left behind in Grahamstown to a grizzly fate when it turned out they were broilers whose legs are genetically engineered to collapse after two months.

Our grand premiere in the vast and verdant Mdantsane stadium near East London coincided with protest action by local schools bewailing preliminary examinations, so attendance was poor, but that night we ignited the Amatola Sun in Bisho with muddy high jinks on plush carpets; *sangomas* chanting and burning herbs while waiters wafted in and out with G&T's, and one-armed-bandits clanged and pinged in the background. In the delirium of feasting at the buffet-counter afterwards, cast members heaped desert-bowls with mayonnaise.

Doubtless owing to the Miss Beauty Pageant the night before not a soul turned up for the show in Stutterheim's gusty township the following morning. We waited bleakly on the netball court in our costumes for about half an hour listening to the clattering of wind-hammered shacks, then packed up and made for the town centre to perform mime pieces on street corners plastered from toe to head in white clay.

Shocked black spectators, confronted by the ghouls of their nightmares, threatened violence, forcing the performers to break out of character and introduce themselves as representatives of a harmless troupe from Grahamstown rather than of a zomboid invasion. Very real fears of the supernatural rise quickly in these little pockets. The actors piled into the kombi with wild eyes and tales of narrow escapes. I was delighted.

Abey, our 1.2m high star is missing again, probably signing adolescent girls' school shirts. Featuring in a tacky SABC 1 series, "Double Shift", he is instantly recognized and mobbed by adoring fans wherever we go. Silulami, with an eye for business, wants to go into partnership with him, charging 50c a handshake, R1 an autograph and R2 a kiss. We flaunt him shamelessly as a draw card for the show. His appearance on stage about thirty minutes into IPI ZOMBI? is a show-stopper in itself.

We race back to King Williamstown's Ginsberg township to find that the community hall we had booked for R150 several weeks ago has been double-booked by a band of militant fund-raisers who won't hear of us sharing the hall with them, even when we promise them the door sales. Heated exchanges follow, watched by choral women billowing in purple satin. In zealous disdain we take to the streets just outside the hall and kids flock out to watch us. The township fathers muster with jutting chins and order us to leave.

"You can't stop us from performing in the streets." we protest.

"This is our community, you can't just do this." - short, irate man in boxer shorts, spectacles and *plakkies*.

"Yes we can, this is South Africa." Barbara, the company manager, and I exploit delaying tactics while the performers wow the noisy crowd.

"This is not South Africa, this is Ginsberg. This is our community... you don't know anything, you haven't suffered..."

We leave it at that, with the word "community" reeking of conservatism, and a great plume of dust exploding from our tyres.

Next stop the guest ranch "Khaya la Bantu", near Komga, sleeping in a big thatched hut in the cultural village - quite a rude shock for the cast after M-Net and hot showers in the Sun the previous night. I catch the guys of the group piling their duvets and blankets into the kombi for a cramped night. Why? "No, Xhosa men can not sleep in the same room as women, we will start to think of our girlfriends, these are sensitive things..."

We set up on a muggy Sunday morning at the bottom of a big burst dam backed by tangled forest. Michael Corbett, the host, has trucked in choirs, school kids and farm labourers who flank the walls of the dam, while the whities in straw hats sit

on hay bales in front. A large party rushes off just before we begin when news arrives that elderly neighbouring white farmers have been attacked and bludgeoned.

“Look at the evil in this country, people raping each other, killing each other, young men carrying guns... this is a story of sickness, and no-one is knowing how to heal it!” rants the narrator.

Whites watch the pictures and look non-plussed when the black crowd ripples with laughter. This would have been a perfect opportunity to have forged bonds, I reflect, to have mixed the audience, to have encouraged those who don't speak isiXhosa to seek translations from their black neighbours. In such ways theatre can be deeper and wider than the stuffy conventions which constrain it would have us believe.

At festivals theatrical types sigh and roll jaded eyes. “Theatre is on its deathbed...” they lament. But no, it has just been kept locked in a black box for too long, it stinks of naphthalene. Time to take it into the light and shake out the dust...

We are delving into the realm of African ritual in an endeavour to touch people profoundly, subliminally even, with drama. I push my performers into hectic trance states in their training to bring deep material to the surface and into their performances. We lived and rehearsed in a sacred sangoma cave in the Free State for two weeks in May to imbue IPI ZOMBI? with the power of that environment, and before every show we spend half an hour in deep and energetic concentration so that the actors enter the arena burning with the spirit of the play, to set the audience alight, to take them on a journey. This company is about journeys.

Monday morning: we cross the Kei River and begin a series of school performances, two exhausting shows a day, unpacking and erecting the cumbersome set then striking and lashing it to the vehicles again. Rushing to Kentucky outlets, on the move. I am prone to shy away from school halls and the like, preferring more off-beat venues with trees, derelict buildings, many levels and awe-inspiring backdrops, so that the audience and performers feel they are a part of something unusual and special. My choice is often met with despair by the company – who have to haul the props etc. across the landscape, and who would rather subject their bare feet to floorboards than gravel – and by schoolteachers who have to try to keep control: lessons quickly subside into mayhem at the sight of the gaudy, over-burdened troupe traipsing by. Scholars spew out of classrooms brandishing chairs and desks. Barbara has an intrepid time trying to harvest tickets from the overwhelmed hordes, and teachers patrol with big sticks, baseball bats and cell phones. At the Butterworth Technikon we even have a courtesy machine-gun-wielding security guard.

My secret agenda is to engineer a certain amount of hysteria, as this is what the play is about, and the theatrical experience should reflect that. Once the audience has gathered in a towering ring around the arena I ask them to sing a local song to entice the performers, and then I gleefully send the zombies in their loin cloths, powdered bodies and long, haunting masks cantering menacingly at the crowd. Once, in a packed chapel, the zombies stole in through the gothic windows... fabulous carnival chaos! The narrator quickly learns to blast riotous children into order to keep the play running: “If you don't shut up, we're packing up!”

Black audiences respond to drama in a very different way to their more reserved white compatriots. I remember as a schoolboy being admonished in assemblies not to turn around and look if there was a noise from behind: “always look forwards.” This behaviour does not seem to be conditioned into black scholars, always alive and responding to what is happening all around them, unpredictable in

their responses to action, exploding with laughter at what was never anticipated as humorous: the violent killing of a woman, the desperate hacking of corpses with axes in an attempt to destroy the evil witchcraft. I don't know why this is, sometimes I find it disturbing when I cannot understand, sometimes I let go and laugh along with them.

A white professor in Umtata tells me: "*They* are used to it, *they* have seen so much violence." I don't know - drama stirs up deep feelings, drama releases emotions: that is enough for me.

We play the Great Place of Xhosa monarch, King Sigcau - a big fenced-in meadow with a tiny, bland hall forty-five kilometres from nowhere and a rather sad indication of the national pride of the amaXhosa Nation. In Umtata, after we had been let down by a local organizer the company spread into the streets with song and drums, and within half an hour we had filled the Umtata City Hall for R2 a ticket. We stormed Port Saint Johns' Needles Hotel at lunch time and performed for free on a balcony overlooking the taxi rank to an immense crowd, and we set up in a muddy three-way intersection of Mtumbane Township for a spontaneous show, pausing half-way and threatening to depart unless the audience contributed coins into the cooking pots being passed around.

Responses to the shows are thrilled, excited, challenging: "We know we are going to die, so why must you make a drama about it?" "Aren't you afraid of these things, they should be left alone..."

A fortnight after we'd strayed on to the dirt roads of the Eastern Cape we point our fenders north and wind towards the cultivated lawns and manicured manners of Hilton College in KwaZulu-Natal for their annual festival. My bakkie's exhaust system sounds like a lawn-mower, the kombi is held together by masking tape and plastic bags, we epitomize our company's name amongst the svelte automobiles and pale complexions of the KZN Well Heeled - an altogether different tribe to the rural Eastern Cape amaXhosa.

We set up in front of the quiet little cemetery half a kilometre from the complex of theatres, stalls and marquees, with a vista of purple hills reclining on the horizon. The sad-faced zombies creep quietly from behind the gravestones and do their strange little dance in the arena, the clouds above sigh and unleash a gentle shower, Barbara and I ply the audience with duvets, broken umbrellas and plastic sheeting. The cast fights the rain and holds its three-hundred velvet-coated patrons spell-bound for eighty soggy minutes of the same wacky little saga that gripped an equal number of people from a different world in the headlights of a battered bakkie in the long grass of Pondoland three nights before. Maybe some day we'll get them all together.



OTHER STUFF

IMAGES FROM mTAMBALALA

Shadows from a single candle on the walls of a crowded hut, shadows and silhouettes.

Grass mats, baskets, chopping mats, costumes hanging on walls and thrown over straw bundles; branches, animal skins, chickens roosting, a huge blue plastic beer bucket, an old mealie grinder, piles of blankets, a heap of shoes.

The rank smells of fermenting sorghum, sweat, smoke, blood.

Old shapes of people, with pointed chins and thin arms gesturing, talking, singing, clapping, blanket-shrouded against the cold.

The drunk with Louis Armstrong voice singing his slumped lines.

Children dervishes singing the banshee evening in, stamping the dust and ash of the central hearth, stamping in rattles borrowed from the old sangomas. Flaying the drums.

The first songs and dances are by the smallest threadbare children! And when the old folk eventually rise to go we see their battered wings: the grizzled ancestors protecting the stage of the world: the sphere, the arena, the kraal where their progeny suffer in dance.

[ZOMBIE workbook, July '96]

THE COURT OF CATS

(a grand collection of sangomas at a graduation ceremony at the bottom of the world, in the village of Majola, Transkei)

The Court of Cats, if you please, take it from me.

“Water” He cries, “bring me water! Let me wash these hands, oh wash these hands.”

He is playful, even arrogant, this Witchdoctor King.

A mixture betwixt and several others between, or besides.

She produces a vast blue urn, the mortal girl,

Too in awe even to voice her awe – no “your Worship”, “your Highness”, “your Majesty”.

His hands are stiff on unbent arms, unyielding to the vessel.

She tips the fluid towards Him.

Pigeons splattering in a fountain.

“By your leave, by your leave, a speech!”

He intones, and liquid slips from His wrists.

The people slink and slacken and smile.

“By your leave, by your leave, by your leave,”

He winces, smiles, He rolls his eyes,

And the girl bares the basin away.

“My attention has been drawn,”

He smiles, He shimmers, He slinks,

“My attention has been drawn to your honourable, dignified presences.”

A movement in their mouths, a binding in their breasts:

They soften with pleasure.

He sucks on a joint, He suckkuckucks on a joint.

Mmm.

He smiles, He shimmers, He scintillates,

He clicks his sticks to a rhythm He hears.

They soften, they silent, they vacant – the masses,

They love to listen, to watch: how strange He is, how weird and nocturnal,

In His feline prints, in His furs and His feathers and beads,

And perpetually shrouded in smoke.

He speaks right into their dreams.

“We are here to be, together to be, be all.”

He sucks on a joint, He suckuckucks on a joint.

The softening of pleasure.

A flicker of flame,

His claws in the floor,

Crouched on a limb in the thickets of His lair,

Slow-eyed He sways and rocks:

“*AmaKhosi!*”

While stretched upon the dung – the commoners – their legs send toes pricking up
into the dim (their several toes),

Bodies slumping, their faces beads on His plingstring song.

He neighs a sharp-pitched laugh.

This is the Court of Cats, I must repeat, resound, remind,

This is the Court of splendid Cats.

And let no man fail to consent, to stoop or submit.

And let no man fail to kneel and to mouth in apish form,

For this is the Court of Cats.

And let no woman fail to silent, to merge, to sway.

And let no woman fail to sound His song when He plucks her plingstring chord.

For this is the Court, the Cauldron of Cats, on the brink of the bottomless night.

[ZOMBIE workbook, Feb '96]