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Abstract

As humanity and, by implication theatre, become more technomorphic, performance outside of a building specifically designed for the purpose is either ignored or pre-packaged as 'street' or 'guerrilla' theatre. Whereas the theatre building functions to separate the audience from the players and entrench the distinction between art and life, these latter styles are an attempt by professionals to overcome this distinction, to draw attention to specific problems in society and to conscientise the public to alternative everyday forms of theatre. Such theatre, however, remains a novelty (in South Africa at least) for it is a deliberate attempt by actors or directors to involve bystanders in a performance which does not normally occur outside of a theatre.

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As humanity and, by implication theatre, become more technomorphic, performance outside of a building specifically designed for the purpose is either ignored or pre-packaged as 'street' or 'guerrilla' theatre. Whereas the theatre building functions to separate the audience from the players and entrench the distinction between art and life, these latter styles are an attempt by professionals to overcome this distinction, to draw attention to specific problems in society and to conscientise the public to alternative everyday forms of theatre. Such theatre, however, remains a novelty (in South Africa at least) for it is a deliberate attempt by actors or directors to involve bystanders in a performance which does not normally occur outside of a theatre. The best examples of such theatre, however, remain spontaneous outbursts by ordinary people who resort to forms of ritual activity to express their feelings and emotions. One South African example of this was the spontaneous expression of discontent by 55 black iron foundry workers who enacted a war dance in front of Department

of Labour officials at an iron foundry. This, together with other aspects of their behaviour which led to their subsequent arrest, later coalesced into a play entitled *Ilanga Le So Phonela Abasebenzi*.

Authentic black theatre in South Africa stands almost alone in its consistent achievements as a medium of working-class expression.¹ It has largely been able to resist the bland homogenizing influences of capital, but often what starts out as working-class theatre, is co-opted by capital into an alliance, albeit an uneasy one, where content might reflect decontextualised aspects of conditions of existence without alluding to the causes of those conditions. Gibsen Kente's *Mama and The Load*, for example, a musical set in Soweto, reflects broken homes, errant husbands, domineering wives, hawking activity and drunkenness — all effects of apartheid while ignoring causes. The cogency of art, therefore, may be determined by the degree to which it exposes actual conditions of existence, their origins, how they are conformed ideologically and what their social affects are. Working-class theatre in South Africa is thriving and is, in fact, nourished by the very social formation and ideology which suppresses so brutally the majority of people who live and work in South Africa. Generally found in countries with long-standing social problems where there are harsh class conflicts, this type of theatre thrives under political despotism. The content of such theatre is endemic to the specific social formation: it is there waiting to be discovered, given form and communicated to a participant audience who are themselves part of that content. This interaction with actors is a cathartic experience which works to mitigate their lot in a performance which sees no separation or distinction between actor and viewer, stage and life or performance and reality: they are all part of the whole (through metonymy), playing interchangeable roles which inter-connect art with life. This relationship is succinctly captured by Shakespeare's Jaques:

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players
They have their exits and entrances
And one man in his time plays many parts.

Computer technology, as it is employed in much theatre, particularly the state-funded South African theatre companies, vitiates this relationship and redefines it to 'All the world's a computerised stage'. This is the title of a conference which was held in August 1981 by the South African Institute of Theatre Technology at the (whites only) State Theatre in Pretoria. This is a prime example of where technology serves the interests

of ideology and mediates a reality contingent upon the economic and political interests of state.

Third World Theatre is a reaction against this technological fantasisation and seeks to rediscover history from the perspective of working-class culture. Almost independently, it has traversed the same path as did early Greek theatre, working as an information processing centre which spreads outwards from the group of performers into the wider community sensitizing workers to their lot and suggesting ways of improvement. This type of theatre, which I have elsewhere labelled 'committed theatre', seeks to make the viewer perceive, from the inside, the ideology which has brought about the existing conditions of existence. *Ilanga* may be conceptualised as committed worker theatre. This play arose out of the frustrations of a trade union lawyer (Halton Cheadle) who devised a role playing exercise to facilitate successful communication with 55 black iron-foundry workers who had been arrested and assaulted by the police for allegedly striking illegally. During the pre-trial period it became clear to the lawyer that his clients, being illiterate, uneducated migrant workers, had no understanding of courtroom procedure, the desirability of corroborative evidence, accurate statements and the importance of witnesses. Cheadle outlines how the play arose out of the capital-labour conflict so characteristic of worker theatre in South Africa:

In preparing their defence the meeting (between the trade union shopstewards and foundry management) and the strike were reconstructed in order to get proper statements from the accused strikers. During this reconstruction, the workers did not merely re-state what was said, but started assuming roles. The idea of the play arose out of this. The Junction Avenue Theatre group assisted in setting up a theatre workshop with some of the strikers. The play grew from the workshop. The plot closely followed the events at the foundry — the worker-actors strongly resisted any alteration of reality.

This paper is primarily concerned with the play's genesis and how its structure has been altered to suit different audiences to whom it has played.

In *Ilanga* we are dealing with the concept of theatre in its widest sense. This idea assumes that most of human social activity can be regarded as types of performance and that performance does not need to be located on a stage to be termed theatre. Since reality is experienced through the mediating structures of language, it may be defined as a complex system of signs through which the real is *made*. The individual's perception of the meanings of these signs is ideologically determined. All actions,

whether on a stage or anywhere else, are encoded with signs and this definition of performance goes beyond metaphor where the world is like a stage or stands for a stage, but instead uses the metonymic device of stating that the world *is* a stage. This allows us to considerably expand the notion of 'theatre' to include the expression of everyday events such as the actions of iron-foundry workers, miners (e.g. *Egoli — City of Gold*) or prison farm labourers (*Ibumba*).

The play, *Ilanga*, was derived from the initial role playing exercise which formed the basis of the courtroom evidence in the defence of the alleged strikers; *Ilanga* went through a four-stage transformation in its development from strike to theatre. All of these stages, however, were types of performance and are contributors to the structure of the play. The four stages were:

1. The initial trade union activity which took the form of meetings with management over a period of time. The last of these meetings was interpreted as a strike by the white management. By calling the police, this led to the second stage.
2. The trade union lawyer was called in to defend the accused and obtained information about the event through a re-enactment by the workers who had been arrested.
3. Communication of events leading to the meeting or strike was performed in court for the magistrate. At this pre-theatrical level, that is, during the performance in court, the actors (iron-foundry workers) and director (lawyer) articulated their positions and contradictions to the audience (magistrate). At this level, performance is a mediation rather than a reflection, for the outcome of the judgement has obvious implications for the lives of the individual defendants.
4. Once the idea arose to perform the incidents outlined in court in front of a worker audience in a union hall, the performance becomes a play. This brings the transformation to the final stage: the enactment of aspects of the previous events in a union hall. It now becomes theatre. The common denominator through all these stages, then, is the notion of performance.

In *Ilanga*, the performers are the same people who were arrested, tried and convicted. Their original audiences were drawn from workers on the

East Witwatersrand who had all experienced similar industrial conflicts and who comprised the same class. Many had never before seen a play, film, television or Western entertainment of any kind. Under these conditions, the performers are both actors and actants, dramatists and characters; their roles are interchangeable: the characters play themselves and enact their lives before a participant audience which is drawn into the structure of the play. They are consulted about strike issues, they are sworn at if they try to avoid confrontation. In turn, the audience heckle, shout and denounce the black Department of Labour character as a sellout to the government, and so on. This metonymic relation between the performers and the audience is further facilitated by the architecture of a union hall which is not deliberately designed to separate the actors from the audience. Cheadle explains the case with *Ilanga*:

Part of the problem with a stage is that you don't get a sense of the activity or ambience of a working environment. We wanted to make the audience a part of the performance. Originally we had the black petty bourgeois SEIFSA² recruiter sellout come on and face the workers. We changed that. Now he addresses the whole audience and the workers, who were on the stage, go and sit in the front row. The crucial thing was to get the audience to participate in rejecting this character. Two of the performers never go on stage but sit in different places in the audience and would heckle and shout. They would be seen as part of the audience. Well, the response was absolutely spontaneous. We didn't even need those actors to sit in the audience because the whole audience just booed the petty bourgeois sellout as soon as he appeared. He tries to speak to the audience, saying, 'My black brothers, I come from SEIFSA, an employers organization, my name is Msibi...' Then one of the audience actors says, 'Can I ask you a question Mr «Thebehal!»?'³ Msibi retorts, 'My name's not Thebehal, it's Msibi...' By this time the audience is thoroughly involved and they all shout out their sellout's names which causes endless hilarity. And then we began to find out all the in-jokes amongst the workers and the union committee. And the black petty bourgeois SEIFSA representative keeps denying that these are his names: 'I'm one of you,' he pleads.

Other incidents which are acted out in the play are all drawn from worker experiences which have occurred in the foundry. Without this participant audience the play loses its essence and vigour. During the actor-audience debate of whether to strike or not the argument may go on for up to half an hour. There are a number of monologues by different workers who describe life in the foundry and the misery of hostel accommodation. The first character is fatalistic, the second is 'chancer' who 'ducks and dives', and the third is a union representative who complains, 'You have given up and you are ducking and diving. The real answer to our problem lies in the collective struggle.' Cheadle thus describes *Ilanga* as 'a totally didactic and propagandist play'.

While the play is performed for a participant audience drawn from the same social class as the actors it functions metonymically, connecting actors and audience to each other thereby integrating them with the everyday experiences of life itself. Once the play is removed from this organic environment and transplanted into a more conventional theatre, architecture, technology and functional divisions suppress the spontaneous metonymic components which are replaced with a more controlled metaphorical mediation of the play. The audience remains the audience, the actors are only actors and the content is interpreted as something separate from everyday life. This discontinuity is further strengthened by the fact that the original participant-actors, having lost their jobs, were endorsed out of the white area where the foundary was located, since in terms of the Group Area Act they are not allowed to remain in a 'white' area for more than 72 hours after dismissal. Some of the 5 actors continued in the play, their incomes being supplied by an entrance charge, while vacant roles were filled by black members of the amateur Junction Avenue Theatre group. Once this process began, the original intention of the play was diluted and a degree of institutionalisation began to be introduced.

The composition of the audience also contributes to this art-life dislocation for there is now a class conflict as it is unlikely that the petty bourgeois (mainly white) elements of South African society who would see the play in a theatre, would relate to calls for strike action. They certainly would not participate as the black working-class audience did for they have nothing to relate to. Most, if not all of what the play dealt with would be outside their social experience. Thus, when the play was staged at a University theatre where most of the audience was expected to be white, it had to be considerably restructured to meet the conventions expected by this more sophisticated audience. As Cheadle remarks, white audiences would probably be opposed to striking and rarely think of such action whereas black workers constantly discuss whether, where and when they might strike. In order to resolve these issues where a white audience was present, one of the actors in the audience would say that it is better to go on strike in a week's time unless...

In a conventional theatre the play is uncomfortable and uneasy. The lack of a participant audience, the loss of metonymy and the fact that the play is in Zulu reduces its subtlety and techniques which worked in a union hall become crudely propagandistic and amateurish. The monologues where the three workers address the audience look contrived where they were previously spontaneous; where the worker audience in the hall joined the actors on stage in discussion and argument during tea

time (interval) now the play runs continuously without a break for the petty bourgeois audience wouldn't know what to talk about and would, more likely, escape into the fresh air outside for a coke and a smoke. These observations, of course, raise the question of whether or not this kind of theatre should be staged for the benefit of white audiences at all. The dramatic changes which are required to make the play sensible to such spectators definitely vitiates the structure of the play and adversely affects performances.

Ilanga has done its job. It has run its course and finished its cycle. To try to resurrect it under alien circumstances will ultimately destroy it and force it into the very world of theatrical convention and commodity exchange it is seeking to overcome. Yet elsewhere other plots are bubbling as worker theatre rides the sea of labour discontent. Certain events stand out, for example, the issue of pension funds. Halton Cheadle explains:

Black workers are being coopted into the total strategy through management who are trying to compel workers to belong to pension funds. This raises the issue of where pension funds invest their capital. They invest it in government stocks. The irony of it all is that workers are providing a form of capital accumulation at the expense of their exploitation.

The issues are multiple. The theatrical challenge is whether the working class can overcome the slavery of apartheid-based technology and resist the material advantages of co-option from a largely capital free worker expression, to the lure of wealth, convention and petty bourgeois lifestyles.

NOTES

1. For further information on the background of this paper, see Keyan G. Tomaselli, 'The Semiotics of Alternative Theatre in South Africa', *Critical Arts: A Journal for Media Studies* 2 No 1 (June 1981), pp.14-33.
2. SEIFSA is the employers organization of the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa. It comprises over 60 independent employer associations whose members collectively employ more than 500,000 people of all races.
3. Mr Thebehali is the Government appointed mayor of Soweto, a dormitory residential area of over one million black inhabitants, just outside Johannesburg. Mr Thebehali is regarded as a sellout by the people of Soweto.