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## Spectacles of Excess or Threshold to the 'New'?: Brett Bailey and the Third World Bunfight Performers

### **Abstract**

One of the most innovative and controversial presences at the Grahamstown festival over last few years has undoubtedly been Brett Bailey and his Third World Bunfight performers. Both the controversy and innovation are associated with his use of what can be called shock aesthetics, as well as with the subjects dealt with in the plays which he describes as 'worlds in collision'. Looking at some of the pre-and-post-production shots, one gets a sense of what he means when he says, 'I have quite a crude aesthetic ... but I can see what's beautiful underneath the shell' (qtd in Smith, 4). Often these do not represent actual scenes from the plays, but offer suggestive, highly stylised, yet literally embodied images either as freeze-frame tableaux or moving spectacle. For example, the 1999 festival brochure advertising *The Prophet* depicts Abey Xakwe, the protean actor who appears in many guises as central figure in most Bunfight productions, here playing Nongqawuse, posed on top of a hill, Christlike, with arms outstretched. (See figure 3, p. 256.) Observing the hill more closely one sees that it is composed of aesthetically intertwined corpses, seaweed and cattle skulls. Such visual metaphor yoking together Christian sacrifice and the history of the Xhosa Cattle killing is typical of Bailey's work which symbolically and literally intrudes onto culturally sacred ground. However, again typically, this particular image is not necessarily a connection explored in the play itself.

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One of the most innovative and controversial presences at the Grahamstown festival over last few years has undoubtedly been Brett Bailey and his Third World Bunfight performers. Both the controversy and innovation are associated with his use of what can be called shock aesthetics, as well as with the subjects dealt with in the plays which he describes as 'worlds in collision'. Looking at some of the pre-and-post-production shots, one gets a sense of what he means when he says, 'I have quite a crude aesthetic ... but I can see what's beautiful underneath the shell' (qtd in Smith, 4). Often these do not represent actual scenes from the plays, but offer suggestive, highly stylised, yet literally embodied images either as freeze-frame tableaux or moving spectacle. For example, the 1999 festival brochure advertising *The Prophet* depicts Abey Xakwe, the protean actor who appears in many guises as central figure in most Bunfight productions, here playing Nongqawuse, posed on top of a hill, Christlike, with arms outstretched. (See figure 3, p. 256.) Observing the hill more closely one sees that it is composed of aesthetically intertwined corpses, seaweed and cattle skulls. Such visual metaphor yoking together Christian sacrifice and the history of the Xhosa Cattle killing is typical of Bailey's work which symbolically and literally intrudes onto culturally sacred ground. However, again typically, this particular image is not necessarily a connection explored in the play itself.

Bailey has been criticised for reinforcing grotesquely parodic stereotypes of Africa but also hailed as showing the way to a new kind of South African theatrical experience. Drawing on indigenous and creolised performance traditions from all over the world, his spectacularly staged works use large casts, including professional performers and locals — children, sangomas, priests and resident choirs who 'perform themselves' — to re-enact historical events in ways that foreground the constructedness of cultural and historical memory. The emphasis seems to be less on what this kind of theatre 'means' than on what it 'puts together', often incongruously, but at a time when there is a public obligation to uncover the truth about South Africa's past and achieve some attempt at reconciliation, or simply closure, such works which unsettle already fragile, contested and even familiar realities, are bound to raise questions. This, in turn, invites discussion of current developments in South African theatre which extends to a broader debate

on the relationships between performance and the processes of democratisation and decolonisation in the context of our often traumatic emergence from the confines of isolation into the spotlight of globalisation.

Given the current preoccupation with the performativity of knowledges, meanings and identities, it is hardly surprising that the end of the millennium saw Bailey and Third World Bunfight staging increasingly ambitious and provocative performative 'enactments' of recent and not so recent histories. The works premiered at the Grahamstown festival from 1996–1999 focussed on particularly bizarre and traumatic events, all located in the Eastern Cape. The first of these, *Zombi* (1996), was a fringe production based on an incident in which twelve schoolboys were killed in a minibus accident near Kokstad in 1995. It was believed their death was no accident, and that witches had turned them into zombies; a witch hunt followed in which three women identified as witches were killed. As a result of the 'unexpected' success of *Zombi*, which was hailed as 'innovative and exciting' theatre and subsequently toured to Cape Town, the next production, *iMumbo Jumbo* (1997), was billed as part of the main festival programme, and also had a run at the Market theatre in Johannesburg. This play within a play re-played the much publicised account of Chief Gcaleka's trip to England in search of King Hintsa's skull, the chief claiming that in this time of madness the return of the skull was essential for healing the nation. Then, in 1998, Bailey and Third World Bunfight put on a re-worked version of the earlier play, re-named *IpiZombi*, which played to full houses in the cavernous old Power Station outside Grahamstown. *The Prophet* (1999), Bailey's most spectacularly staged project yet, was based on the Xhosa Cattle killing of 1856 which led to the annihilation of more than 100,000 people. Towards the end of the Grahamstown run of *The Prophet*, Bailey described the play as part of a trilogy dealing with 'states of hysteria' following the collision between African ideas and Western or Christian forces. 'I have had enough of this now', he claimed, 'It's definitely time to move on' (qtd in Mather, 1999: 12). After an absence of a year Bailey's next project has indeed shifted from the local context, though his subject, *Big Dada*, focussing on the career of general Idi Amin, suggests a familiar preoccupation and it will be interesting to see what spin Bailey will give to this history beyond South Africa's borders.

Given the dramatic social transition experienced in South Africa, it is no coincidence that the historical Cattle-Killing saga of 1856–57 has resurfaced in re-imagined ways recently, both locally in works such as Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000) (which won the Commonwealth literature award in 2001), and also in a broader diasporic context, such as John Edgar Wideman's *The Cattle Killing* (1997). This is a complexly structured narrative that is haunted by the image of that ritual Xhosa slaughter — 'the starving people, dreamless and broken, dying as their cattle had died' — thus creating a link across Middle Passage, time and space, between the devastated landscape of the South African Eastern Cape,

and eighteenth-century plague-ridden and slave-owning Philadelphia, as well as the slaughterhouse of contemporary gangland, USA:

Shoot. Chute. Black boys shoot each other. Murder themselves. Shoot. Chute. Panicked cattle funneled down the killing chute, nose pressed in the drippy ass of the one ahead. Shitting and pissing all over themselves because finally, too late, they understand. Understand whose skull is split at the end of the tunnel. (Wideman 7).

Apart from the connections that can be made between the 'inexplicable' or spiritual dimension in Bailey's end-of-century trilogy and the social crises of late modernity, also explored in works like Mda's and Wideman's, Bailey's works and the responses to them highlight first, the range (and vehemence) of responses to these productions; and second, the attempts to define or describe the kind of theatre produced; and finally, debates on the function of performance and performativity within the context of postcoloniality and social transformation on various fronts.

The very passion and diversity of responses to Bailey's works suggest that these provide fertile ground for much-needed debate on South African cultural politics for a variety of reasons, not least being the rather startling recent evaluation initiated by the Gauteng education department which recommends the restriction of apparently racist and patronising works such as Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1986), and Mfundo Ndebele's *Fools* (1997) (Maureen Isaacson, *The Sunday Independent* 15 April 2001:1). As argued elsewhere, it seems to me that performance needs to be read 'relationally' — not only in terms of theatrical trends, but also in relation to other forms of cultural production, particularly literary texts.<sup>1</sup> Responses to Bailey's trilogy range from superlatives praising the work's 'authenticity', 'imaginative power', 'energy', its 'healing qualities', as well as its ability to 'haunt' and 'enthrall' the spectators,<sup>2</sup> to disdain of its 'curio theatre' aspect, its 'overdone' pretentiousness, its being 'too loud', 'too long', 'lacking clarity', its exoticising and 'trivialising of black history', and above all, its being 'anti-thought'.<sup>3</sup> Other reviewers, while commending it as a 'brave and worthy' project for involving local communities, for tackling risky topics and for some 'fine singing', nevertheless lament the demagogic aspect referred to as well as its 'inconclusiveness' in terms of interpretations offered.<sup>4</sup> The most interesting reviews, however, are those that attempt to describe what 'kind' of theatre it is and how it relates to some of the prevailing local, international, and traditional theatre trends. They note amongst other features its operatic use of physical spectacle, myth and African ritual, its emphasis on design and theatrical tableaux; it has also been welcomed by some as an example of 'new' (and indigenous) South African theatre.<sup>5</sup>

On one level it might seem incongruous that Bailey's oeuvre has elicited such intense debate: as one critic puts it rather grudgingly, '[e]verything about Brett Bailey shrieks digeridoo-blowing, teepee-weekending white boy who's managed to coil his tongue around a Xhosa click and thinks he's in heaven'. In fact, she

admits, there is something 'so flea-market fey' and 'Zen gardenerish' about his appearance that it is hard to reconcile this with the fact that 'he looks set to being a contender to transform South African theatre's fortunes' (Smith 3). This points to a comment by John Matshikiza about the use of black iconography by white artists like Robyn Orlin and Bailey. Speaking of the reception of *iMumbo Jumbo* at the Market Theatre in 1997, Matshikiza says that while most white audiences were 'stunned by the spectacle, a bold mix of sangoma ritual, stylised movement and cartoon storytelling', yet, '[m]ost black people [he] spoke to disapproved of exactly those combinations. The bottom line was the perceived lack of respect for black history and culture' (1999a 2). Before looking at the issue of this apparent black/white stratification of audiences and reviewers, which in turn could be related to the 'new ethnicity' associated with late modernity and global economies,<sup>6</sup> one needs to look at what Bailey himself claims his theatre is attempting to achieve, and additionally to consider debates around performance and performativity.

There is the view that performance is always a re-inscription or enactment of a thing already done, 'always a doing and a thing done' (Diamond 66),<sup>7</sup> and looked at this way, Bailey's theatre brings 'some sense of our weird reality to the stage' (Matshikiza 1999c: 9). This 'weirdness' is a refrain running through the trilogy. In *IpiZombi* we are told that 'this is a hungry story. The roads are eating our children'. In *iMumbo Jumbo*, we are admonished that the times are out of joint since 'young boys are raping their grandmothers', and in *The Prophet*, a young girl's prophesy leads to the self-destruction of a people. However, this weirdness also extends to an apparently seamless blend of modern technology with ancient rites, and Bailey has drawn on some of Obie Oberholzer's photographs purporting to represent the incongruities of 'world in one country' (Rasool and Witz 336).<sup>8</sup> As illustrated in the following anecdote, such incongruity is clearly one of Bailey's fascinations. Bailey recounts how, when he phoned Chief Gcaleca at his New Crossroads home to discuss his project for *iMumbo Jumbo*, the chief told Bailey, '[c]ome immediately and bring R50'. When Bailey got to the chief's modest house, 'a goat was being slaughtered [apparently in Bailey's honour], blood foamed on the wall-to-wall carpet, in front of a television where Ridge and Brooke of the popular American soap, *The Bold and the Beautiful* were deeply clinched' (Bailey, qtd in *Cosmoman*, supplement to *Cosmopolitan* April 1998: 33).

If (following anthropological models) one sees performance as a 'liminoid' activity which provides a space or site for performatively exploring alternative possibilities, or even as a site for social and cultural resistance (Carlson 20),<sup>9</sup> then, instead of seeing performance as primarily referential it can be seen as providing scope for potentialities. This in turn begs questions about the role of theatrical spectacle. For instance, in keeping with Ndebele's much-cited warning about the way spectacles of excess can 'fix' dominant South African hierarchies, there is the view that spectacle confirms rather than challenges chaotic excesses. However, is this necessarily true of performative spectacle? Loren Kruger

comments on the 'impure autonomy of theatre' which, 'as a cultural practice combines in unstable but productive ways aesthetics and politics, autonomy and heteronomy'. In other words, 'theatre straddles the border country between the aesthetic state and the political, and provides the stage on which the contradictions between them can be enacted' (18). Further, since performance essentially involves a consciousness of doubleness, or in this case colonial mimicry (Schneider 264), can spectacle under certain circumstances also function as a threshold to the 'new'?

At the risk of becoming overwhelmed by questions which seem to raise yet further questions, it might be useful at this stage to use my own situated perspective on the works as a point of departure for tackling some of these issues. I was initially interested in exploring the effects of Bailey's aesthetic, and my own mixed responses, rather than in his re-visioning of historical events — though one cannot really separate these, of course. For instance, I was at first rather disconcerted by the way *Zombi* (1996) appeared to invite the very 'curio theatre' critique referred to earlier. Entering the small Arena theatre in Cape Town, we found the sangomas (in this case women who are perceived as having supernatural powers of divination) and assorted actors already present, and as we sat down on straw bales, a spectator (a tourist, judging by his accent) said to his child, 'look son, that's a *real* sangoma'. The setting included a wall and floor covering of washing powder packets worked into an attractive pattern to represent the domestic township interior as well as the containment, as it were, of both consumer and spiritual dimensions within the single space. Both the spectator's comment and the setting were worrying because they seemed to position the audience as a species of cultural tourist, who gazes at a carefully constructed 'snapshot' of South African culture which incorporates the 'primitive' (sangomas) and the modern (kitchen appliances). Was this an instance of what (in a different context) Rasool and Witz refer to as 'providing the tourist with portable histories and an exalted sense of knowing the whole' (336)? Rasool and Witz comment on the way South Africa has, since the 1990s been invited to 'take a place in this international world of images, to imbibe from its media offerings and to become knowing and knowable' (337). Further, located as both 'African' and hence 'tribal' or chaotic, in relation to the West, South Africa, 'unable to escape these parameters ... is having to propound its "Africanness" as the embodiment of the continent's possibilities for modernity' (Rasool and Witz 336). However, as the play progressed, this initial unease was gradually replaced by a sense that expectations were constantly being unsettled in interesting ways. For instance, on the one hand the familiar contrast between traditional, tribal and hence conservative (but also bizarrely cross-dressing) elders and, on the other, the progressive, politically aware youth (usually coded by their school uniforms — perhaps most famously evoked by Sarafina-type images of the 1980s), was here disturbingly skewed when the meeting of the schoolboy comrades employs the register of struggle discourse to discuss witch hunts and reported spirit possession, while remaining a constant feature of parts of the

country, showed a marked increase in the immediate post-election period — and in works presented at the Grahamstown festival as well. It has been suggested that in times of severe social crises, those communities situated on the margins, particularly the rural periphery, articulate ‘other’ cultural forms (often manifesting as supernatural) to oppose the threat of either industrialisation or the Rational. According to Mary Louise Pratt, ‘Indigenous knowledge bases do not simply disappear.... They cannot help but continue to produce meaning and agency, to constitute subjects. They also enter into profound crises’ (1999 6). This point is useful in reminding us that, in terms of the play, it is not the roads that are eating the children as suggested in *IpiZombi*, but policing of the transport system, bad roads, poor drivers, profit-hungry owners, unserviced vehicles, and taxi feuds over routes.

The strategy of positioning the spectator as tourist in the original production of *Zombi* (1996) was also interrupted at various points when the staging spilled into the audience in such a way that positioned us (the audience) as participants representing certain belief systems, while the choir (played by a ‘real’ choir who were simply being themselves) functioned as spectators representing alternative, contrapuntally expressed, value systems. This worked very effectively during the funeral oration, but for me the most powerful moment came when, having all along been made aware of the ‘constructedness’ of the claims of witchcraft in relation to various interest groups in the community, we are suddenly surprised by the theatrical reality of the zombies (played by children) who emerge eerily from the very cupboard it is claimed they have been kept in, and stalk uncannily amongst us like otherworldly birds, with large painted masks. This serves to force the audience to recognise the existence of others’ ideas and beliefs in a graphic way, while not necessarily legitimising any particular belief system.

In the re-worked version, *IpiZombi*, the theatrical effects worked very differently, and in my opinion, in many respects less effectively. Instead of the containment and juxtaposition of the domestic and otherworldly spheres, the setting was designed to draw the audience more completely into an ‘other’ world. Even physically, one had to travel some distance outside the town in the ‘Heebie-Jeebie shuttle’ to the disused Power House where the action took place on an earth floor around an open fire, the air thick with the aroma of burning herbs. However, despite this emphasis on drawing one into the ‘other’ reality, there were still moments where perceptions were destabilised in a way starkly different to Brechtian alienation. In an early scene, there is a powerfully drummed trance dance by the sangomas. Instead of destabilising the familiar, here the emphasis was on revealing the power of the ‘other’ world, since the advance publicity informed us that several of the sangomas were literally in a trance state, raising speculation about the relationship between performance and ritual; or, as Okagbue puts it, ‘playing or praying’ (92–93). The ‘authentic’ sangomas were dancing in front of what appeared to be a Christianised altar, reminiscent of West Indian

voodoo, or creolised Latin American churches. When the cloth used to cover the 'host' was removed a white plinth-like column was revealed, crowned by a polished ebony statue of the upper torso of an African gracefully holding a carved fruit bowl above his head — something one would associate with colonial drawing rooms rather than a church. Just when one is adjusting to the incongruity achieved by this aesthetic, the aesthetic literally takes off when the statue (played by Abey Xake) shuffles off with small steps, his body confined by the plinth structure.

It is at moments like these that I think Bailey's work is most successful, because in such aesthetically achieved incongruities, the tourist gaze is satirically undercut, refusing the 'fixing' which was my initial concern. There is humour in reminding us that South Africa is neither entirely 'knowing or knowable' and this recalls the comment by Loren Kruger about the 'impure' nature of theatre which inhabits the boundary between the aesthetic and the political state. However, as mentioned earlier, it is also this inbetweenness that critics find so frustrating since it appears to resist conclusions and meanings on the one hand, and on the other, ignores 'real' historical facts. (For example, scientific evidence has 'proven without a doubt' that the skull Gcaleka has brought back from Scotland was in fact not that of King Hintsa after all.) Does this not, however, miss the point, since the work itself is 'performing' the contradictions involved in the processes of postcoloniality?

Having said this, there is still the sense that there can be something quite tricky about the way Bailey's work 'plays with' images and ideas that are then exported back and forth between third and first world (Accone 12). For instance, in a photograph by Obie Oberholzer accompanying an article about the play, three bare-breasted women (sangomas/witches?) with colourful sarongs around their waists — but with masked and obscured faces — are situated in apparent dancing stances in front of towering cactuses (Knox, 1). This photograph provides an interesting subtext — or is it confirmation? — of the objectification and even fetishisation of women who are the victims of the witch hunts depicted in the play. In the earlier play, *Zombi*, the slaying of the first woman targeted by the community, led by the young school-uniformed comrades, was represented in slow motion, suggestive of a brutal and brutalising, ritualised rape. In the later version, however, the killing of the witches appeared somehow less brutal because of the way the event was represented within the context of the 'other' world. Similarly, the appearance of the zombies too had less surprise effect for the same reason. This suggests the dynamic and unstable aspect of the meanings made by the audiences which are in turn determined by the aesthetic and in this case, site-specific performance strategies. A further problem (for some) is Bailey's use of prepubescent girls dancing 'without their shirts on' as some viewers put it and which they found deeply disturbing given the prevalence of sexual abuse of young children.<sup>10</sup> My own feelings here are similarly mixed, since the children are put 'on display' by Bailey as director, whereas the older women have, one assumes,

chosen to put themselves on display by participating in the project. However one responds, one seems to fall into some kind of aesthetic 'trap', caught up in the traffic of images between developing and developed worlds. Looked at another way, perhaps, it is perfectly appropriate to feel uncomfortable given one's cultural and ideological position.

Each play uses different strategies for penetrating the invisible fourth wall. In *Zombi* the spectator/performer positions were unsettled, both literally and figuratively, while in *iMumbo Jumbo*, the elision between performer and spectator extended to the 'real' history which it was re-playing. For example, in the performances at the Grahamstown Festival that I attended, the audience gradually became aware that some of the spectators sitting amongst us in the local community hall were invited guests who were not 'playing', but had actually participated in the excursion to Scotland to retrieve the ill-fated ancestral skull. Towards the end of the performance the priest who accompanied the wily Chief was invited to address the audience which he does with great dignity and without any sense of irony (considering that the skull is not the skull it is thought to be). *iMumbo Jumbo* is perhaps the most overtly ironic of the plays in terms of the way images are exported back and forth, which could also explain why it has been the most commonly reviewed. However, the most sustained inversion of spectator/performer interactions occurred in the final play of Bailey's trilogy which premiered at the Grahamstown Festival, consisting of *iMumbo Jumbo* (1997), *IpiZombi* (1998) and *The Prophet* (1999)..

Like *IpiZombi*, *The Prophet* was performed at the Power House venue outside Grahamstown. On arrival, the audience was requested to wait while the venue was 'prepared'. When finally allowed into the playing space, they filed in, through a tunnel lined with political party posters of smiling and scowling candidates from various political groupings, which provided a sobering reminder of the scale of political events in our recent history, and created the sense of entering a passage from the present to the past. Or was this intended to suggest how 'unreadable' that past is? The audience was then ushered into the large high-ceilinged space which already felt strangely crowded. Along the sides of all four walls were raked seats, and in the middle of the space a raised platform. The seating was described as 'unconventional', in that the 'old and infirm' were seated on chairs staggered around the four edges of the room, with the younger members on the ground in the middle, with a circular alleyway running between. Those who chose the old and infirm seats higher up later became aware that seated amongst them were what appeared to be immobile statues/meditative figures, all differently attired, with eyes obscured by an assortment of goggles and sea shells. Were these the silent but breathing spirits of the ancestors? The ubiquitous Bailey children were covered in blankets behind a makeshift screen in a corner of the room, including, for the first time, three blond-haired boys of settler descent. An extraordinary effect was created by this seating arrangement, since looking around the room,

spectators saw themselves looking at other spectators seated amongst the ancestors, breaking the invisible barrier between audience and performer, between here and then, and between us and them. Two performers appeared who seemed to act as stage managers, a man and a woman. The music began: sung as a liturgy, it told the familiar story, but emphasised the circularity of history as indeed did the staging itself with its circular seating. The ancestral singing was neither recognisably African nor European, beautifully choreographed and punctuated by the occasional kudu or seaweed horn.

As a distancing device, Bailey uses the children to tell the story: of the devastating Xhosa Cattle Killing of 1856–57, which followed the prophesy of the young girl Nongqawuse who advised that no crops be planted, and that all the cattle be slaughtered in anticipation of the liberation from the control of white settlers.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the play one has a strong sense of communal outrage at the fact that it is a mere 'girl' who makes the prophesy. Nongqawuse's head is covered by a zebra skin, her sister-friend is the one who brings the message, a message that, oddly, Nongqawuse (played by Abey Xakwe) also hears broadcast through the portable radio she holds to her ear. There is a strong sense at times that one is watching an amateurish school play, and the king's voice is recognisably a childlike imitation of Mandela's. While some felt that the use of children to tell the story trivialised the event, Bailey says he chose this because, as he puts it, '[c]hildren bring innocence, sweetness and life into this story', a story which is perhaps too hard to tell otherwise? And to disarm those who might think he is presenting the story as 'childish' he had the British soldiers played by the three blond children too (qtd in Mather 12). John Matshikiza says that the use of the children provides an interesting critique on the festival itself, in that '[Bailey's] storytelling urchins are a bizarre mirror of the gangs of street kids singing cheekily for their supper in the streets of the festival town.... But they do not own the festival. They are their own wry comment on the whole thing' (1999b: 9). Here an interesting outsider's perspective on the use of children as storytellers is suggested by Eastern European critic, Kalina Stefanova, who sees this device as a very effective for of theatrical 'grotesque': 'In a time when wars look, and for some even may feel, like games not taking into consideration their devastating consequences, this directorial choice gave the show a very unexpected impact in the long run — an impact of an extremely topical grotesque' (194–95).

Bailey claims that his work is about 'giving a slant on reality, not about reflecting the whole of reality' and in this way he attempts to balance the rational and the mythical (qtd in Matshikiza 1999b, 1). In the play, the stage manager-actor seems to function as a voice of balancing reason as she remonstrates against the extravagance of the prophesy, but when, despite her warnings, all have succumbed to it, it is she who sings the haunting lament over the dead and chases away the gloating vultures stalking amongst them (played by the settler-soldier children). On one hand Bailey suggests this is a millenarian fantasy appropriate

to the times we are living in; on the other, it is, we are told, 'a sad story but uplifting in the telling' — a transformative aesthetic. He claims that his intention is not to open an old wound in order to demonise Nongqawuse; instead, 'his interest is in helping to heal. It is his belief that his style of ritualistic theatre where the performers themselves achieve some state of mesmerisation, and the audience is drawn in as active participant, complete with the aura of incense and medicinal herbs, is part of this healing process' (Matshikiza 1999, 1). It can be argued that this suggests the return to a pre-Enlightenment notion of aesthetic experience, or *aesthesis* which, as Terry Eagleton reminds us, was originally a discourse of the body, and referred to 'the whole region of human perception *and sensation*' (13) [emphasis added].

However, as mentioned previously, one of the common criticisms of Bailey's work is that in the emphasis on visceral spectacle and ritual he is 'anti-thought'; the kind of spectacle presented obscures the real forces at play, mystifying what are in fact traumatic historical events. After all the 'myth and mystery and smoke 'n mirrors storytelling' what are we left with, asks Adrienne Sichel (1999 2), apart from images that keep bubbling to the surface of our consciousness? Bailey claims that he and Third World Bunfight concentrate on 'developing and uncovering a rich theatre aesthetic and language from South African soil, fertilised with outside ideas and methodology' (qtd in *Daily Dispatch*, 3 Feb 1998: 10). This comment is interesting in view of the discussion earlier about both the referential or the 'liminoid' potentiality of performance, as well as speculation about the kind of theatre he is producing. For instance, 'developing and uncovering' suggests the already 'done', whereas the growth metaphor of 'fertilisation' suggests the creolised form that will result from this interaction. Outlining the kinds of meditation techniques he uses to prepare his performers, Bailey says, 'I believe that theatre can be like ritual: an event that incorporates all people involved — performers and audience — and which affects people at profound levels of consciousness' (1998 191). Bailey mentions the influence of both Xhosa trance-dance forms, as well as Japanese Noh theatre, and Eastern theatre styles. He has also been strongly influenced by Artaud, Boal, Grotowski, Brook and Jung. All of these influences are of course evident in his work — particularly Artaud's emphasis on ritualistic physicality of performance, and his avant-garde, modernist preoccupation with the primitive, but there are also other ways of looking at Bailey's aesthetic and methodology, beyond the movements associated with these figures. One of these is Eugenio Barba's 'third theatre' which is neither institutional nor avant-garde and stresses the autonomy of meaning for the action achieved through a network of relationships between actors and spectators.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Bailey strongly rejects the association of his work with the avant-garde, for these practitioners often 're-invent' the 'primitive' or the 'other' in response to the scientific ethos of modernity. Bailey instead draws on viable heritages that are part of an existing performance continuum. This is why Zakes Mda sees Bailey's

work as an example of 'total theatre' that combines many traditions, predominantly harvested from African ritual 'but redefined in a most creative manner that leaves one breathless' (1998 6). This last point suggests that the stratification of audiences' and reviewers' responses is not as Manichean as Matshikiza suggests. No doubt there are elements of all these influences present in Bailey's work, but the cultural and regional specificities of his work and performers ensures slippage beyond any of these categories. Importantly though, it must not be forgotten that Bailey is not just 'tapping into' these traditions — the 'fertilisation' process is not a natural one, it requires hard work and extraordinary discipline to achieve the performed hysteria at the heart of the trilogy. (This discipline was perhaps best illustrated in *Heartstopping*, a short work in which the ancestors offer their hearts to the spectators. This work without words only had two performances in 1998, one at the old Settler graveyard where the ancestors appeared appropriately from behind the gravestones; after they were banned from that hallowed site they moved to the disused shunting yard where they put on a different but equally powerful performance.)

Despite the criticism that Bailey's work is 'anti-thought', the emphasis on African spirit possession and ritual in his work can be read as effectively placing those generally marginalised realities at the centre in a way that makes it difficult for the spectator to maintain the position of cultural voyeur because of the affective force of the spectacle. Awam Ampka has argued for theatre as 'a space for translations', saying that the only way that 'a reified Eurocentric logic can be challenged is by the subject residing at the centre [literally and perhaps metaphorically] in order to disrupt the apparently stable norms of (neo)-colonialism' (qtd in Imoru 114). According to Bailey, his plays are 'not just sensational stories, they're also attempts to revise, re-think and re-structure the nature of South African theatre today', and criticising the way theatre has been reduced to an 'audio-visual display' he says, 'South Africa does not have to emulate this.... We can express ourselves in our own voices, with all the fervour, trauma and vitality of the developing nation that we are' (qtd in O'Hara 5)

To return to the question of 'newness' that has been associated with Bailey's work: where then is the 'newness' located? Perhaps it is in the collisions of worlds, or ideas and beliefs, where the familiar is destabilised so that one is seduced by or forced to contemplate alternatives. Is it the controversy and the vehemence of the responses to the works that generate newness? Or it is the playfulness, self-consciously contrived though it is at times, that refuses the fixities of the new ethnicities? Can the 'performance zone' (see Okagbue) serve as a meeting ground where cultural specificities are themselves 'unfixed' in a strange re-working of the contact zone between cultures referred to by Mary Louise Pratt (1992)? Or does newness reside in images that are exported back and forth, forcing constant translation and re-reading in a way that is unsettling, not as a Brechtian *Verfremdung*, but in terms of a specific South African experience? Perhaps this is

the most significant aspect of Bailey's work — the traffic of images and symbols playing between performers and audience, between developing and developed worlds, not in order to deconstruct, or endlessly defer meaning, but to suggest new ways of being, ways that have not yet materialised, nor yet even been fully imagined? One way of looking at Bailey's theatre, then, is in the terms he suggests, as itself an expression of 'the fervour, trauma and vitality of the developing nation that we are' (qtd in *Vuka*, 2.6, 1999, 4–5).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For instance, instead of concentrating on 'newness' in play scripts, reading these in relation to other genres, particularly fiction, can establish a useful dialogue that offers scope for re-reading both the fiction and the performance ('The Aesthetics of Transformation: Reading Strategies for South African Theatre in the New Millennium').
- <sup>2</sup> Interesting here is that praise for the 'authentic' aspect comes from a critic from Eastern Europe. Kalina Stefanova who has followed Bailey's work since *Zombi* in 1996, notes that she has seen similar productions, by theatre gurus like Eugenio Barba which also use spiritual séance, 'In comparison to *The Prophet* they look and sound no more real than the pseudo-channelling of Whoopie Goldberg in the famous movie *Ghost*. To me, the Brett Bailey show is still the closest the theatre has come to the reality of the unreal' (194–95). See also Darryl Accone, '*iMumbo Jumbo* opts for a selective reality in devising theatre for the millennium'; Adrienne Sichel, 'Conjuring with Cultures and Myths'; Simpiwe Piliso, 'Tikoloshe, Why Are You Under My Bed?', and Solomon Makgale, 'Tapping into the Power of the African Spirit'.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, Vukile Pokwana feels that history has been badly served through the way the account of the self-proclaimed Xhosa Chief Gcaleka has been 'shabbily reinvented in a theatrical ritual'. It 'fails to accurately depict the details surrounding the expedition'; indeed, it 'fails to escape the donga of hype and sensationalism' (34). For Mfundo Ndebele it is ironic that Bailey celebrates indigenous cultural aspects: 'The portrayal of half-naked, bare-breasted blacks with bodies smeared with animal fat and clay, suggests a time-freeze in black advancement. The play feeds on white prejudice and widespread ignorance about contemporary blacks in South Africa'. In fact, says Ndebele, middle class blacks might be embarrassingly reminded of the 'backward' past they want to leave behind. But then rather oddly he adds, 'All the same, it highlights the thinking and behaviour patterns of a marginalised but significant sector of the population' (21). See also, Zia Mohamed, 'Cheap Tricks and White Lies'.
- <sup>4</sup> See also, Bongani Ndodana, 'Fine singing, unsubtle acting mark *Zombi*'; Glyn Spaans, '*Zombi* with great gusto: but how long can zeal last with a chant'.
- <sup>5</sup> It is interesting to distinguish the reviewers who see theatre in terms of performance traditions and genres, from those for whom it is an aspect of sociology or history like Ndebele and Pokwana. For instance, Zakes Mda himself a theatre practitioner, commends Bailey's work as pointing to new directions in 'total theatre' (1998 6), while Darryl Accone claims that at best 'it is truly new and genuinely South African theatre for the next millennium' (12). Robert Greig, refers to Bailey as 'the best thing in South African theatre today', noting that this panoramic theatre breaks new ground:

while it remains close to rural rather than urban roots, the works are 'moving designs, rather than stagings' creating new directions in hybridisation (12).

- 6 According to Livio Sansone not everything about the 'new ethnicity' of late modernity is really new. Commenting on the way 'Africa' has been a contested icon in Brazil, 'used and abused by both high-and low-brow cultures, by popular and elite discourse on the nation', Sansone says: 'in a world where the "value" of ethnic cultures and identities is their distinctiveness vis-a-vis Western urban culture, black cultures do not enjoy the official recognition of "established ethnic cultures"' (7). This has some relevance for the way rural or marginalised communities in South Africa, while part of an ethnic majority, might feel similarly excluded. On the other hand, for some, says Sansone, 'in a society on the periphery of the West wanting to be increasingly rational', certain forms of 'aestheticised blackness' are 'the expression of a popular yearning for the exotic and sensual — associated with black people' (17).
- 7 Diamond says that while 'common sense insists on a temporal separation between a doing and a thing done, in usage and theory, performance drifts between present and past, presence and absence, consciousness and memory', but, 'On the one hand, performance describes certain embodied acts, in specific sites, witnessed by others (and/or the watching self). On the other hand it is the thing done, the completed event framed in time and space and remembered, misremembered, interpreted, and passionately revisited across a pre-existing discursive field' (66)
- 8 See Oberholzer's *Raconteur Road: Shots into Africa* (1997). Though Rasool and Witz are not referring to Oberholzer, they comment on the way the re-formation of the South African polity and social fabric in the 1990s led to the consolidation of a set of tourist images which boldly proclaim South Africa as 'a world in one country' (1996 336).
- 9 Marvin Carlson discusses Victor Turner's model of performance (which in turn draws on Van Genep's notion of performance as a rite of passage — moving from one social situation to another) in terms of its in-betweenness, its function as transition between two states. This emphasises performance itself as a border, a margin, a site of negotiation, even a space for creating 'new culture' (20).
- 10 Between 1997–1999 I accompanied 'study-abroad' students from Northwestern University to Bailey productions, and this topic come up each year.
- 11 Bailey mentions that he drew on sources such as Jeff Peires' *The Dead will Arise* (Ravan Press 1989), and Helen Bradford's critique of Peires. He has also included extracts of H.I.E. Dhlomo's *The Girl who Killed to Save (Nongqause: The Liberator)* in the play.
- 12 Ian Watson describes the sociology of Eugenio Barba's third theatre as follows: 'Unlike either institutional theatre or the avant-garde, in which the emphasis is on producing, reflecting, and/or distributing culture, the focus in third theatre is on relationships: on the relationships between those in a particular group, on their relationship to other groups, and on their relationship with the audience. This focus on the network of relationships in third theatre has its foundation in the individual and his/her role in the collective' (243). See also Stefanova's comment (note 2 above).

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