An Investigation into the Practice of Directing and Theatre Making in Post-Independence Zimbabwe up to 1990: Some Urban\(^1\) Theatre Directors and/or Theatre Makers as Case Studies

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Abstract

This article examines the theatre making and directing styles inherent in urban Zimbabwean theatre in the first ten years after independence. It does so by scrutinising the works of selected urban theatre makers and/or directors in order to access the general modifications that they have made to the theatre of the period. The objective is to appreciate the characteristics of such theatre for purposes of delineating the theatrical style of the period. In addition, the article also discusses the manner in which the socio-historical environment influenced a whole array of the creative processes involved in a production. The article further argues that the theatrical style of the period both collaborated with and resisted Western illusionistic theatre aesthetics as practised by the historically dominant white mainstream theatre.

Introduction

The article is an attempt to delineate the theatre making and/or directing styles of the first ten years after Zimbabwe’s independence. Each generation of directors and/or theatre makers has effected general modifications by refining and varying the form of drama to create something that can be recognised as the style of the period. In addition this article is cognisant of the fact that a director and/or theatre maker in a specified period can make individual alterations that break stylistic conventions of his/her period

\(^1\) Urban theatre directors were used as case studies (Harare, Bulawayo and Mutare) due to the fact that it is in the cities that theatre makers find the funding, audience as well as the infrastructure to do their work. Because of this, their work is more exposed and vibrant. Urban culture also tends to resonate the conditions and contradictions of society in a relatively denser way.
by putting an individualistic signature to his/her work. In the words of Hodge “style, then, may have broad meanings referring to historical periods, but it can also have very narrow meanings referring to the unique work of individuals” (1971:282). The hypothesis that provides a framework to this study is that the resultant style(s) of the period under investigation do not exclusively radiate from the directors’ genius, but also from prevailing economic socio-political conditions.

This is vindicated in Chiwoome in the following words “art gets entangled in the various contradictions of its time” (2002: viii) and that “cultural inhibitions, prescriptions and conventions” (ix) will affect directorial and theatre making choices. Directorial staging techniques will either conform or revolt against a society’s existing requirements for behaviour. The argument is advanced that there was a coterie of artistes who conformed to the official cultural ideology supported by the newly inaugurated government at independence – the socialist realists, while another section of artistes – the Western psychological realists (supported by a white minority) refused to toe the line. However, regardless of the polarity between these two styles of theatre making and directing, artistes of the period were affected by both of them at the same time thereby altering the identity of theatre.

**The Evolution of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic**

Theatre making and/or directing is affected by the director’s era, contemporaneous events and existing theatre practice. The theatre of the first ten years was influenced greatly by scientific socialism that the new government adopted as a guiding philosophy. It should also be noted the dominant culture for close to a century (churned by the historically dominant white community) did not die with the emergence of a new ruling elite. It was simply weakened but continued to operate institutionally. The cultural life of directors and theatre makers of the first ten years after independence was played by two aesthetics\(^2\) – socialist realism and western psychological realism.

In 1980, the ZANU (PF) government came to power defeating a white government that had dominated successfully the political and cultural landscape for nearly a century. Partly because of its peasant background and sympathies as well as its connections to the largely communist Eastern Europe and China, which provided logistical support to its

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\(^2\) The term ‘aesthetic’ constitutes a separate study in the field of Philosophy. However, for our purposes, it is used to mean rules, principles, guidelines, doctrines, theories and ideologies which artistes of a given period choose to govern their creative output. It also has a bearing on the tastes of the audience who also accept to be uplifted by artefacts which employ these elements. The audience, therefore, judges the work according to pre-established rules, which are also the same as those used to govern the creation of such work.
armed wing ZANLA, the ZANU (PF) government chose scientific socialism as its mode of development – economically, politically and culturally:

Although ZANU (PF) has correctly adopted scientific socialism, the truth is that this knowledge is not widespread among the masses. Yet history teaches us that ideas only become a material historical force when they are grasped by the masses - by the people. This means that it must be the aim to educate every Zimbabwean in the outlook and methods of scientific socialism (Chung and Ngara 1985: iii-iv).

Socialist realism evolved as the dominant aesthetic in Zimbabwean theatre and art in general.

It was Maxim Gorky who coined the term socialist realism. It was officially adopted as a creative method in the former USSR after the First Soviet Writers Congress on the subject in 1934. Chung and Ngara who were tasked by the ZANU (PF) Secretary for the Commissariat and Culture Herbert Ushewokunze to write literature that explained the doctrine of scientific socialism warned people not to “play down the importance of literature and theatre arts in the curriculum”, the reason being that “...the nation will continue consuming those art forms that negate our ideological orientation” (1985:116). The attempt was to suffocate the psychological realist aesthetic largely employed by the small white enclave theatres dotted in the major urban areas – Harare, Gweru, Mutare, Masvingo, Kwekwe and other mining towns which Chifunyise and Kavanagh dismiss as using “archaic conventions” and “bourgeois aesthetics” (1988:4). These scholars, however, concede, “even now after independence, this theatre (employing western techniques) is still accorded pre-eminence institutionally and in (the) media (1988:1)”. Even though the government has not officially supported this western type of theatre, it is still in existence providing the impetus for the development of new theatre making and directing styles.

From about the middle of the 20th century, the identity of western theatre has been changing with the emergence of the avant-garde, modernists and post-modernists whose mission has been to revolt against the western bourgeois illusionistic theatre. The term ‘western’ is, therefore, used in this article in its narrow and old sense to mean mainstream bourgeois theatre and should not be taken to include the avant-garde, modernists and post-modernists even though they originate from the West. This is the sense it is also generally used in Zimbabwe.

Although the government promoted only one style, it was not possible to create a homogenous style in a complex society like Zimbabwe. Fischer puts it succinctly in dismissing homogeneity in a historically complex society like Zimbabwe:
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The art of a historically complex age can never be homogenous, if only because the society of such an epoch is not homogenous; it can never be more than the expression of a social stratum, of a group of persons with some common interests; it will exhibit simultaneously just as many different stylistic tendencies as there are different cultural levels within the relevant society (1963:148).

Even though these two aesthetics were antagonistic, they should never be considered as fixed fortresses. They influenced each other in a shifting and fluctuating way, providing centres of dynamism. The first variety of socialist realism is a shining example of the degree of inter-influence between the two aesthetics. Although on the surface there seemed to be animosity between ZACT (Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre), which represented the interests of black theatre practitioners, and NTO (National Theatre Organisation), which largely represented the interests of white theatre practitioners, there was a degree of cooperation and influence between these two organisations. That inter-influence had a bearing on the theatre making and directing techniques of the artistes who created work during that period. Plastow illuminates the degree of inter-influence:

Indeed, ZACT refuses to allow its members to have any dealings whatsoever with NTO, although increasingly this policy is honoured in breach. In fact NTO and ZACT trainers do sometimes cooperate on courses and by 1992 relations between the organisations seemed slowly improving …the NTO has promoted several new projects which include and promote black drama. Numerous workshops have been run for black playwrights and actors (1996:244-5).

While doing research in Mutare, Harare and Bulawayo many respondents echoed the claim raised by Plastow and they singled out the following resource persons as being involved in the training of black artistes: Robert McLaren (UZ), Susan Hains (NTO), Andrew Whaley (NTO), Ngugi wa Mirii (ZACT) Chris Hurst (NTO) and John Haigh (NTO). The major thrust since 1980 has been to create a “whole new theatre movement” (Chifunyise and Kavanagh 1988:1) assisted by the “party [ZANU (PF)] and Government” through the provision of “ideological guidance, making funds available and creating an atmosphere conducive to genuine artistic production …” (Chung and Ngara, 1985:117). The objective was to change the creative method of writers, theatre makers and directors so that they could embrace socialist realism. Chung and Ngara add:

… writers cannot play a truly positive and constructive role in the building of socialism in Zimbabwe unless they take it upon themselves to be informed about the forms and functions of literature in socialist society. The Zimbabwe Writers Union could make a major contribution in this regard by effectively mobilising writers to adopt a progressive outlook and to promote socialist ideas … (1985:116).
A ‘grand narrative’ (Marxism-Leninism) was birthed on the day of Zimbabwe’s independence.

A grand narrative is a term used to “describe the kind of story that underlies, gives legitimacy and explains the particular choices a culture prescribes as possible courses of action” (Taylor and Winquist 2001:164). Taylor and Winquist also argue that a grand narrative also called a ‘master narrative’ provides “a framework in which all other cultural narratives find their ground and acquire meaning and legitimacy” (ibid: 165). In Marxism-Leninism, for example, whose creative method is socialist realism, the subject is the proletariat and the peasantry, and the goal to be achieved is the socialisation of the means of production. This was the cultural framework from which directors and theatre makers were supposed to work. Although directing is part of theatre making, the term ‘theatre making’, which is frequently used in this article, is broad enough to include scriptwriting, theatre design and the process of putting together a production from conception to the product itself. The intention is to decipher how the socio-political environment influenced a whole array of the creative processes involved in a production.

**The Conformists: Conditions Necessitating Conformity**

Due to an undeclared competition between socialist realism and western psychological realism the notion of conformity begs the question: conforming to who or what? There were a number of black directors and theatre makers who conformed to the residual western aesthetics as discussed below. Their theatre making and directing techniques are similar to those documented in Wortham (1969) and this article will, therefore, put more emphasis on socialist realism, which has not received adequate scholarly attention. What needs to be emphasised is that a greater proportion of theatre makers and directors were more exposed to the techniques of socialist realism than otherwise and this coterie forms the second category of conformists. This group, among others, comprised Stephen Chifunyise, Vimbayi Chivaura, Robert McLaren, Ngugi wa Mirii, Kimani Gecau, Gonzo Musengezi, Micere Mugo, George Mujajati and Thompson Tsodzo. Stephen Chifunyise and Thompson Tsodzo seem to conform to socialist realism in their public statements in academic writing, but it appears that most of their published plays, with the exception of Tsodzo’s *Shanduko*, and Chifunyise’s *The Retrenched Ones* do not follow what they have said and, in some cases, what they have been seen practising with other community theatre groups. This disparity is not necessarily on account of their own volition, but the publishing requirements of the Literature Bureau.
According to Veit-Wild (1996) the Literature Bureau’s old colonial policies have hardly changed. They still push the western realist agenda. The oral performance elements mostly found in socialist realist plays may be incompatible with the realist requirements of literary drama. It is no surprise that most of the socialist realist plays performed between 1980 and 1990 have not been published.

At independence various branches of the state superstructure which included, among other things: the state owned media, the state intelligence service, academics and the Censorship Board were put in place to make sure nation building moved on one track and in one direction. On the socio-cultural front, cultural workers became the watchdogs of Government sponsored scientific socialism. During these formative years a lot of debate on culture was generated. The operative word was ‘relevance’. Theatre was either relevant (good to the new social system being moulded) or irrelevant (bad, regardless of its quality because it mostly churned out western culture). Zinyemba demonstrates the irrelevance of western plays that were staged at the 1985 National Theatre Festival and prescribes what he views to be ‘relevant’ drama:

One cannot be any further from Africa, let alone Zimbabwe, than by watching these plays featured in the so-called ‘National Theatre Festival’. …drama and theatre can be relevant to a people living in particular historical, economic, social and political circumstances…Zimbabweans have a rich cultural heritage and a challenging history from which relevant drama and theatre has been born and can continue to be born and to be nurtured (1996:8).

The state owned media also criminalised any other theatre making techniques that were not drawn from Zimbabwean traditions. In the 1984 CABS Play of the Year competition, the Chairperson of the National Theatre Organisation Susan Hains declared that there was no winner as all entrants had not reached ‘international standards’ to which a Herald correspondent suggested ‘international standards’ were simply “a euphemism for accepted European practice” (cited in Chifunyise and Kavanagh 1988:10). The Herald correspondent then commented that the “so called pundits of theatre in the National Theatre Organisation are slowly becoming irrelevant to the new cultural needs and aspirations of Zimbabwean theatre” (ibid: 8). Thus the press played a role in checking the direction of theatre.

The National Theatre Organisation, which organised Theatre Festivals, also played an ambiguous role in guaranteeing that theatre moved in the direction that favoured the one supported by the state. This contradictory role that it played was not by design but by default. The foreign adjudicators, which it invited, favoured the infusion of local techniques as opposed to western techniques as their theatre at that time was also
challenging bourgeois theatre in the form of modernism and postmodernism. Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and Samuel Becket were some of the theatre innovators who were evolving aberrant theatre styles in Europe. As local black and multiracial productions that entered the National Theatre Festival started to infuse local techniques and local content, this practice paid dividends. They started winning prizes with Cont Mhlanga’s *Nansi Lendoda* winning the best play of the year in 1987. The white theatre clubs, which dominated this event, did not expect this scenario and they subsequently announced their non-participation after black companies scooped top prizes five years in a row. According to Chifunyise they believed that such plays “were awarded top prizes mainly because of their content and the aspect of relevanc” (1994:59). Zimbabwean theatre companies owned by mostly black theatre makers strove for ‘relevance’ and local content in order to win prizes. In the early 1980s, it was a strong motivational factor to beat a white theatre company in a competition like the National Theatre Festival. It was the dream of every black theatre maker to be accorded such an honour as this glory was not available or accessible to him/her during the colonial period. The question then is: Did theatre makers and/or directors embrace this socialist realist aesthetic? To what extent did this aesthetic affect the directors’ staging techniques?

To a very large extent socialist realism affected the theatre makers’ and directors’ techniques, but in answering the above questions, the second generation of theatre makers and/or directors needs to be discussed as it has shaped theatre making and directing styles in the first ten years after independence. Worth noting is the fact that in 1980, Zimbabwe (with the exception of Stephen Chifunyise) did not have trained black directors and theatre makers to match the demand of theatre skills required to drive the cultural agenda of the government. Foreign nationals hired by the government, therefore, dominate the analysis in this article.

**Generations of Zimbabwean Theatre Makers and Directors**

In discussing black Zimbabwean writers, Veit-Wild (1993) uses the term “generation” in the same sense it is used here. The term is applied to a group defined by a common background of social, political and educational experience, which may find a specific expression in the literary works of this group. In this case, such a political and social background dictates the adoption of a system of techniques, conventions and forms which directors and theatre makers consciously or unconsciously accept as a law to govern them. The collective element enters the output of an individual creating a uniform expression of an age which is unmistakable (although the works will be different and unique depending on specific gifts, inspiration, talent and creativity of the director and/or theatre maker). The date of publication or production of each play...
is not a factor in determining the form, content and production style of the play. It is the life experience of the playwright or director. As the life experience of the playwrights and directors is almost the same in each generation, there is greater tendency to handle similar issues and to employ similar production techniques in the play and this explains the disparity in writing and directing when moving from one generation to another.

Generation 1
The first generation of theatre makers was born between the early part of the 20th century and 1939. Their support of nationalism took various forms. The first was to project a thrust to rejuvenate African culture by staging plays that glorified rural linkages and the past. According to Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni (1999), the evidence points to one Hudson Ndlovu who joined the Bulawayo City Council in 1959 and produced dramas which attempted to purify Ndebele culture of the corrupting influences of Westernisation. Dramas revolved around dances of warriors and how to crown a king. There is also one Rev. Osias Mkosana who joined the Bulawayo City Council in 1957 and produced two plays uSikhwili ‘The Grudge’ and Ngiyalunga ‘I am doing well’. Mkosana described the plays as based on the lives of the Zulus and the Ndebele. The details about directors are tentatively scant but playwrights in Harare included Paul Chidyausiku who wrote Ndakambokuyambira (I Warned You) (1968), Davidson Mugabe who wrote Rugare Tange Nhamo (Peace Comes After Trouble) (1972) and Arthur Chipunza who wrote and performed Svikiro (Spirit Medium) (1978) to preserve Shona culture. The plays so produced were assimilationist in nature in the sense that except in content, everything else resembled the drama of the Metropolis. Some members of this generation even tried to prove that they could do what the white man could do by performing popular European plays. Adrian Stanley directed Macbeth with an all-African cast in 1961.

For others, their theatre making was closely linked to the emerging African Nationalism. Runyararo Drama Club, which was active in the 1950s experimented with political plays especially an adaptation of the novel Cry the Beloved Country. Another play Under the Sun was also political. A coloured actor Pat Travers played Ndabaningi Sithole in the play leading to one of the white audience members to “complain to Ken Marshall, producer of the play, about Pat Travers who seemed to have been politically motivated” (Makwenda 2005:52). Simon Muzenda also performed Solomon Mutsvairo’s epic poem Nehanda Nyakasikana leading the Ian Smith government to impose a restrictive status on him. In fact some of the theatre makers became nationalists. Mahlangu (1994) confirms that members of the two prominent cultural organisations – The Matabele Home Society and Mashonaland Cultural Society
together with some trade unionists formed the first black political party in the then Southern Rhodesia – The African National Congress. There was a group of theatre makers in this generation who neither wrote nor directed plays, but just acted. They included Ruth Muchawaya who acted as (Nowawa), Joseph Chaza who acted as (Nolulu) in the Africanised Macbeth in 1961. Ben Musoni, Kenneth and Lina Mattaka also belong to this generation. Runyararo Drama Club, which produced Under the Sun in the 1950s, comprised of Victoria Chingate, Sonny Sondo, Sam Matambo, Steven Mtunyane and Pat Travers.

**Generation 2**

Theatre makers and/or directors of this generation were born between 1940 and 1959. Their artistic work began around the 1970s. The configuration of this generation invariably reflected the different political persuasions that obtained during its formative time. There was a group of nationalists who advocated for multiracialism and these were Michael Mawema’s National Democratic Party (NDP) and Abel Muzorewa’s United African National Congress (UANC). There was another group of nationalists who were radical and advocated for total black control of all structures and could work with whites on the basis of invitation and these were Joshua Nkomo’s ZAPU and Robert Mugabe’s ZANU. Theatre makers and directors were also divided along the same political lines.

The first coterie of theatre makers and directors comprised black people who worked with white liberals to create multiracial productions. These theatre makers and directors included Walter Mparutsa, Dominic Kanaventi, Steven Chigorimbo, John Indi and Friday Mbirimi who worked with the white liberal John Haigh from 1974 when the theatre group Sundown Theatre Company was formed. They mostly performed Athol Fugard’s plays. Another experiment in multiracial theatre was the joint effort of Ben Sibenke and a white liberal playwright and director Karl Dorn to establish the People’s Theatre Company. Their repertoire of plays included Sibenke’s My Uncle Grey Bonzo, Dr Madzuma and the Vipers and Chedembo Chanhuwa (The Polecat Stank), Dorn’s Home Holds the Heart and Chifunyise’s Shocks and Surprises. What is characteristically common to this group is its preoccupation with African issues especially as they relate to their coloniser or the systems the coloniser has put in place. However, every art serves the ends of some sector of society. The question is whose ends of some sector of society did this coterie serve? Apart from the African content inherent in most of the plays, the playwriting was predominantly Western. The acting and directing style was equally Western. The function of this type of theatre seemed to favour liberal ideology. Athol Fugard whose plays were John Haigh’ staple was criticised by Mda for creating a type of theatre that:
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makes a statement of disapproval or disagreement, but does not go beyond that. It addresses itself to the oppressor, with a view of appealing to his conscience. It is a theatre of complaint, or sometimes of weeping. It is variously a theatre of self-pity, of moralising, of mourning, and of hopelessness. It never offers any solution beyond the depiction of the sad situation in which people find themselves (Mda 1996:xv).

Although the context might have changed when they were performed in Zimbabwe, the function of this protest theatre remained the same. This group of artistes was the only one together with Amakhosi which met the affiliation standards of the white dominated National Theatre Organisation.

The second coterie of generation 2 comprised the radical cultural nationalists who probably took their cue from the radical nationalists. The group included Thompson Tsodzo, Stephen Chifunyise and Vimbayi Chivaura, Robert McLaren3, Ngugi wa Mirii, Micere Mugo and Kimani Gecau.4 Some plays by Tsodzo and Chifunyise qualify to belong to the first coterie of generation 2 for reasons that this article has explained. Amuta describes the cultural nationalist phase as a historical trajectory:

In which the native intellectual remembers his authentic identity and kicks against attempts to assimilate him. But owing to his own cultural alienation, the native intellectual’s attempts at cultural reaffirmation stop at romanticisations of bygone days (1995:159).

In the context of this schema, the liberalism adopted by the first coterie of generation 2 theatre makers and directors was contamination to this group. Their work was characterised by unbridled traditionalism which exalted the artistic splendours of the past. This was how the cultural nationalists interpreted the socialist ideology adopted by the ZANU PF government. What formed the artistic consciousness or worldview of these cultural nationalists was a common historical experience which found expression in their theatre. This generation was part and parcel of the liberation struggle as its age-mates were either guerrillas or collaborators. Their choice of form and content assumed the dimensions of an obsession. To them, colonial violence was not only physical, but cultural and this was why they were preoccupied with healing the damaged culture by excavating the fossils of old African culture and weakening and eventually eliminating the Western forms. For directors not originally from Zimbabwe like Kimani, Mugo, wa Mirii and McLaren, they experienced similar conditions in their

3 Robert McLaren is from South Africa. His political inclination is more towards the left. Far enough left, according to him, to suggest that theatre should be used in South Africa as a means of mass organisation, mobilisation and conscientisation. (see Kavanagh 1985:x).
4 Ngugi wa Mirii, Micere Mugo and Kimani Gecau are from Kenya and they escaped arrest from President Daniel Arap Moi’s government for practising socialist theatre and fled to Zimbabwe.
countries of origin but with varying degrees of intensity. Amuta asserts that “the native intellectual who decides to give battle to colonial lies fights on the field of the whole continent” (ibid: 159).

Consistently, the four foreign directors felt that what the coloniser had done in their countries of origin must be corrected in another as long as the geo-space was African, more so, when the Zimbabwean government granted such blessings. Unlike the first generation, which preoccupied itself with the past, the second generation’s main focus was on the present and only took recourse to the past to explain the present. The second generation of theatre makers and/or directors was different from its literary counterparts in that it was optimistic about the future whereas the latter were writing a literature of disillusionment even before independence. In a way, socialist realism, which was supported by the government, found potent weapons and conformists in the second generation of theatre makers and/or directors who embraced it wholeheartedly. Their repertoire of plays revolted against colonisation both politically and aesthetically by denouncing western-staging techniques while purposefully employing traditional African theatre modes designed to rouse the people against colonisation. Such a return to the past can only be good if it takes advantage of the old cultural forms which make a people unique and potentially transformable.

However, if the return to the past is to lock a people in a theatrical museum for ideological convenience allowing no progress to take place, it is antidevelopment. The question for generation 2 is: Can there be a ‘Zimbabweanness’ which transcends all the historical factors that have shaped society to be what it is today? This article argues that romanticisation of old theatrical forms for purposes of exoticism is ahistorical as it is uncertainable and papers over the cracks created by African heterogeneity.

Generation 3
Generation 3 theatre makers and directors were born between 1960 and later. There are the youngest artistes in this article. The artistic work of the older members of this generation like Cont Mhlanga and Daves Guzha began in the mid 1980s. The number of directors is as many as theatre companies that exist today in Zimbabwe. Some of the directors the researcher had personal contact with in Bulawayo include: Raisedon Baya, Sithokozile Zulu, Stix Mhlanga, Bekezela Dube, Mandla Ndongeni and Christopher Mguni. In Harare some of the directors include Samuel Ravengai, Daves Guzha, Owen Seda, Stanley Mambo and Daniel Maposa. In Mutare the most outstanding directors include Keavan Simomondo, Ambrose Maropa and Lucky Saungweme. Much of the theatrical output Zimbabwe is experiencing at this juncture
is a product of generation 3. Since they were either unborn or children and/or adolescents during the war of liberation, this generation is somewhat detached from the war, more open minded and critical about society than its antecedents. This generation especially in the urban areas of the main cities in Zimbabwe “has tended to demonstrate a shocking obliviousness of both nationalism and the history of the struggle” (1999: Zimbabwe Mirror, 9-15 July). The group represents the third and fourth, and, in some cases, the fifth generation of black urban dwellers. As such, most of them have become ‘detribalised’, owing to the absence of unifying and controlling forces of indigenous native society such as kingship and chieftainship.

Unlike its rural counterparts, urban generation 3 is heterogeneous owing to multiple influences that have played its life. Migrant workers from South Africa, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia have influenced the cultural complexion of this generation. Considering that Zimbabwe has about fifteen ethnic groups who mostly make the city their meeting point, the resultant culture is of a hybrid nature, which does not come from pure ancestry, but convergent cultures. Apart from this internal diversity, generation 3 also accepts that it is a product of both nationalism and colonialism and as such colonial and nationalist forms of theatre are available to it for creativity. However, this generation neither believes in artistic rules set by Western realists nor socialist realists. They work without rules in order to establish the rules for what will have been created. The first and third generations of theatre makers and directors, however, fall outside the scope of this article and have been included for contextual reasons.

Four people from the second generation of theatre makers and/or directors were strategically placed in influential positions to facilitate the smooth diffusion of directing and theatre making skills. For this reason, the analysis of the practice of directing and theatre making will have a bias towards these key people. All of them were agreed on the general nature and style of theatre that they were supposed to bequeath to Zimbabweans. Stephen Chifunyise resigned from the University of Zimbabwe, after serving it for three months, to become a cultural officer and later Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education and Culture. Here, he controlled the direction of theatre through policy formulation and implementation. Apart from his full time job, he continued to write and direct plays as well as getting involved in numerous voluntary theatre-projects.

Ngugi wa Mirii and Kimani Gecau were employed by the government sponsored Foundation for Education with Production (ZIMFEP) to help establish community-based theatre in the country along the lines of the Kenyan Kamiriithu Theatre. This was an important arm of the Department of Culture as these two theatre makers were assigned to plant rural and urban community theatre groups that created theatre...
using socialist realist guidelines. Apart from being given the mandate to establish socialist theatre groups, they were also tasked to develop theatre skills like playmaking, scriptwriting, directing and performance. Most of their creative products like *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* toured the country diffusing theatre skills through a process of osmosis. Gecau and wa Mirii also conducted theatre workshops to train local black artistes on the process of mounting a production. ZIMFEP through its employees – Kimani Gecau and Ngugi wa Mirii popularised the staging techniques of song, dance, mime and open-air-theatre which in pre-colonial times, according to wa Mirii, was “organised to match seasons, pattern of labour, leisure time, beliefs, rituals and many other cultural ceremonies” (1988:7). The inclination towards what Soyinka calls the ‘resuscitated splendours of the past’ can be seen here.

Robert McLaren, who writes as Robert Mshengu Kavanagh, joined the University of Zimbabwe Faculty of Arts Drama in 1984 to knock down “archaic conventions” embedded in bourgeois white theatre; to “establish potential new directions in both content and form” of theatre (Chifunyise and Kavanagh, 1988:29) and to develop an ideological direction in key with the most progressive elements in Zimbabwean society as represented by the liberation struggle, the struggle for majority rule, the struggle against racism, colonialism and the struggle for a socialist Zimbabwe” (Notes on programme of the Faculty of Arts Drama’s production of *Chokwadi Ndechipi/Iqiniso Yiliphi? (Which is the Truth?)*. He adopted a very radical position in attempting to advance the new socialist culture towards dominance in the new Zimbabwe. He advocated for a strategy which sought “weakening and eventually eliminating cultural forms inimical to this development” (the advancement of the culture of the majority) (Kavanagh, 1986:4). What he had in mind, which he liked to see ‘weakened’ and ‘eventually eliminated’, was the minority white culture with its artistic manifestations as he, in the same paper, called for the unplugging of its sources of dissemination, notably film and television. He warned that if capitalist film which is a “vehicle for the transmission of imperialism” was not checked it would act “as a particularly effective Trojan horse in the society for capitalist interests” (ibid: 6).

At that time more than sixty percent of the programmes beamed on Zimbabwe Television was foreign and therefore according to Kavanagh “embodying a range of values which the audience is rapidly learning to aspire to – values which are quite inimical to socialist transformation” (1986: 8). Chifunyise (1994) reported about the activities of Robert McLaren that the major productions turned the University of Zimbabwe into a cultural workshop. He underscored the fact that the talents and
experiences of academics were married with those of artists and workers outside the university to produce illustrative theatre that appealed both to university and out-of-university audiences. Members of Zambuko/Izibuko, a university based theatre group, and drama students formed their new theatre companies upon leaving university. In this way, McLaren’s products perpetuated theatre skills learnt while at university. His style also embraced wa Mirii and Gecau’s staging techniques of song, dance, mime and drama. To that stockpile of techniques, he also added choral recitation or antiphony, slogan chanting and political commentary, which he borrowed from the pungwe. McLaren also added theatrical stylisation or presentational style, grotesque characterisation and a non-linear structure that was rather episodic as opposed to a realist structure that is plot oriented and tracks towards intensification and complications which build to a climax.

McLaren’s plays toured the country including major cities Harare, Mutare, Bulawayo, Gweru, Masvingo, beer halls, shopping centres and growth points. Prospective artistes copied these techniques establishing the style of a generation. Thus Chifunyise and Kavanagh declared the emergence of a new theatre and appealed to their generation to support and follow it:

However, since independence a whole new theatre movement has emerged ... an independent democratic and often revolutionary theatre. This is the socialist road ... in consistence with the social, political and economic aspirations of the broad majority of the people and the Marxist-Leninist objectives of the popularly elected government, we support our country and call on all artists who genuinely wish to contribute to the development of our national culture to support and join this movement (socialist theatre movement) (1988:1-2).

What is unique about this coterie of four cultural strategists held together by aesthetic agreement is their shared repugnance of western bourgeois theatre making and directing techniques. Except for Kimani Gecau, who seems to be the only introvert of the four, the rest have come out strongly against western techniques. Their version seems to gravitate more towards African socialism, which according to Chung and Ngara “is romantic idealism – the belief that the African past is the ideal to aspire to...” (1985: 10). Their techniques of song, dance, mime and open-air-theatre are all excavated from the past and there is a strong inclination to celebrate African purity untarnished by western forms. Chung and Ngara assert that ZANU PF at its August 1984 congress “rejected unscientific versions of socialism such as African socialism...” (ibid: 12). It adopted a kind of socialism which “must be harmonised with our own historical, cultural and social circumstances” (ibid: 12). To achieve this Chung and Ngara have this to say:
The culture of a future socialist Zimbabwe will have to be shaped by our history. We are a multi-ethnic nation with a diverse cultural heritage and we should be able to incorporate into our new socialist culture the positive elements from each cultural sub-group. In this respect, our future national culture can be seen as a fusion of three major elements – indigenous African culture...western culture and socialist ideology (1985:80).

For the four cultural nationalists, the Western cultural dimension seems to be missing or negated. However, there is available evidence that some believers of socialist realism such as Mujajati, Musengezi and Tsodzo embraced the progressive theatre making techniques of the Western type and mixed them with socialist ideology to create the first variety of socialist realist theatre discussed below.

The theatre of the first decade after independence is, therefore, not solely a product of the directors’ genius, but a number of factors which this article has tried to underline. Other factors, which led to the entrenchment of socialist realism as the official aesthetic, included censorship laws as well as self-censorship. With the change of government in 1980, the new government did not change existing censorship laws. The reason for this conservatism was the realisation that theatre and art in general does not only act as a mirror of society, but also has the capacity to affect it:

...cultural expressions are always more than mere reflexes of social, economic or political conditions. Culture does not simply mirror, it symbolises and thus always has a sign – function. More than that any living culture must be viewed as a communicative process in which a society not only expresses but also generates and forms its worldview (Barber, 1997:23).

If that change caused by theatre is viewed as inimical to the ideological direction of the state, then the state had to check the power of theatre. Theatre performances had to be and are still supposed to be approved by the Censorship Board. Veit-Wild has recorded two performances that were banned by the Censorship Board in the 1980s (even though) one of them The Honourable MP was socialist realist in outlook, but confrontational in content.

Its message was too strong for the sensitive Zimbabwean authorities. When-still unpublished-it was about to be staged during the first International Book Fair in 1983, the performance was prohibited at the last moment. ... A play with a similar theme but more dramatic power by young Ndebele playwright, director and actor Cont Mhlanga, Workshop Negative suffered a similar fate in 1986 (1993:308).
The subjection of theatre productions to censorship has continued up to this day. Raisedon Baya’s *Super Patriots and Morons* was banned a few hours before going on stage at HIFA 2004. This also helps to illustrate the fact that apart from embracing socialist realism, the content and techniques also spoke back to the authorities in a dialectical way. Theatre benefited and/or suffered (depending on which side one is) from the political environment while at the same time the political environment was also challenged by its own creation. The cumulative fear for the state intelligence service, censorship laws and the watchdogs of socialist realism led to a considerable degree of self-censorship among theatre makers and/or directors. In 1983 Dambudzo Marechera the playwright and novelist was detained for a week by the state intelligence service for allegedly being critical of the government during the 1983 Book Fair. Denford Magora writer of the play *Dr Government*, which criticised the government’s role in fighting MNR insurgents in Mozambique, met the same fate in 1992. This led to the Chairperson of NTO Susan Hains to say this about self-censorship:

> A lot of groups became very frightened, certainly from the playwriting point of view...There was fear about writing, not just plays, but possibly novels, poems...people were nervous about writing anything that could be construed in any way as being critical...or talking about sensitive issues (Gunner 1994:246).

A director and/or theatre maker had to toe the line or suffer the consequences.

**Varieties of Socialist Realist Theatre**

Two socialist realist trends manifest themselves on the Zimbabwean theatre landscape. The first variety is somewhat elitist, but simple enough to speak to its intended audiences – the workers and peasants. It borrows its techniques from Western psychological realism and the politically and ideologically correct artistes in America, Europe and Africa. This demonstrates an interesting irony of the capacity of antagonistic classes to influence each other where the forms and conventions of theatre developed by the white bourgeois begin to impact on the rising new theatre by black people. From America, an example is the New Theatre League, which in 1933 was the first and only professional American Marxist theatre. Having recognised the weaknesses of agit-prop theatre which “appealed essentially to the converted” (Rabkin 1964: 47) the New Theatre League sought to “examine the bourgeois theatre very closely, learn the methods it employ(ed) in its propaganda ... and ... adopt the technique it use(d) to make its propaganda effective” (ibid: 48). The American socialist realist Clifford Odets, author of *Till the Day I die* (1935), *Awake and Sing!* (1935) *Paradise Lost* (1935) and *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) belonged to this league. The same theatre making and directing techniques used in the above productions are inherent in
the socialist realist Russians’ work, notably Maxim Gorky and Nikolai Gogol. The Germany director, Erwin Piscator who was a member of the Germany Communist Party (KPD) used almost similar techniques with the addition of film clips. In Africa, this variety is profoundly entrenched in the stage works of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Ngugi wa Mirii, and Micere Mugo. This is the dramatic staple\(^5\) from which the elite Zimbabwean socialist realist theatre makers fed leading to the creation of such works as Tsodzo’s *Shanduko*, Chifunyise’s *The Retrenched Ones*, Musengezi’s *The Honourable MP* and Mujajati’s *The Wretched Ones* and *The Rain of My Blood*.

This variety of socialist realism creates a simple linear structure to rehearse its narratives – almost identical to the Aristotelian structure adopted by Western realists in 1850. Like other forms of realism, it demands a faithful reproduction of reality, but that reality is not a depiction of the actual world, but of life in its revolutionary development. The Marxist-Leninist ‘grand narrative’ discussed above dictates its content and form. In Fischer’s words socialist realism:

> Sees in the working class the determining ... force necessary for the defeat of capitalism, for the growth of a classless society and the unlimited development of material and spiritual forces of production to liberate the human personality (1963:111-2).

In socialist realism, nothing happens outside the realm of the working class. Since workers and peasants have to be seen as products of an oppressive history, history must always feature prominently in the subject matter of the play in order to explain how the present was shaped to be what it is. It is an artistic chronicling of the struggles of the workers following the cause-to-effect principle. The play always ends prophetically with the victory of the workers – a bright future!

> Socialist realism...anticipates the future. Not only what has preceded a particular historical moment, but also what will succeed it, is woven into its fabric ... the prophetic component has gained new force and dignity in socialist art (Fischer, 1963:112).

This revolutionary romanticism permeates *The Rain of My Blood*, *The Wretched Ones* and *The Honourable MP*.

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\(^5\) In 1992, this researcher enrolled for a BA degree at the University of Zimbabwe. He studied these plays as well as the theatre innovators involved under the courses Literature and Socialism (English) and practical Theatre Arts III (Theatre Arts). This researcher acted as Dr Barnes in Clifford Odet’s *Waiting for Lefty* produced at the University of Zimbabwe’s Beithall in 1994 and directed by Robert McLaren. In 1987, Robert McLaren also directed *Kremlin Chimes* by Nikolai Pogodin, another Russian socialist realist. Since 1987, Nikolai Gogol’s *The Government Inspector* has been alternately a set play for Ordinary Level Literature in English.
In the case of Zimbabwean plays written by Africans for Africans, there is, however, a considerable use of African dramatic forms, most notably songs and very minimal dancing or sometimes lack of it as in _The Wretched Ones_ and _The Honourable MP_. What can be concluded about this variety is that, dramatic dialogue is the paramount communicative mode while songs remain subservient to it as opposed to being dominant as in the case with the agit-prop variety. As the plays and their characters are psychological, staging techniques are virtually similar to those in bourgeois mainstream theatre. Performers rely on the psycho-technique\(^6\) for acting. Even Kavanagh, a socialist director, underlines the importance of this psycho-technique:

> Before an individual actor or a group can begin work on anything they really need to have the following things: relaxation, concentration, sincerity, observation, imagination, improvisation skills and ensemble (1997:9).

It would look like the psycho-technique or variations of it are indispensable to any kind of theatre.

The songs such as those in the _Rain of My Blood, The Wretched Ones, The Honourable MP_ are rather performed than just sung as singers would do at a concert. Kavanagh comments:

> In a play songs need to be acted out more. We have to try harder to project the meaning of the song in the context of the play. This can mean adding descriptive action to the singing ... In _Katshaai_, the actors, while singing mime and dance the hesitation, the fear and then the retreat. Acting out a song also demands gesture, facial expression and above all, emotion (1997:95).

What needs to be emphasised is that all these staging techniques were partly dictated by the socio-political circumstances and contemporaneous events. When the performance shifts to songs, slogans and speeches, as in the above plays, the acting shifts from representational to presentational. In other words the performer, steps out of character to address the audience directly employing slogans, songs or speeches (presentational). After a typical sketch, the performer steps back into character. As these moments are fewer and shorter there is greater tendency to remain a psychological character more often than not.

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\(^6\) A technique of acting evolved by Constantin Stanislavsky in 1936 which uses conscious means to arouse the creative nature inside the performer. The techniques involve inspiration, imagination, concentration, feeling for truth, the magic if, the given circumstances, emotional memory, physical actions, tempo-rhythm and radiation. (see Stanislavsky, C. 1936 and 1949).
In terms of design elements, the set creates a convincing illusion of reality. The audience will gain the impression that they are watching something happening in real life. In 1994, the University of Zimbabwe Theatre Arts Department produced *The Honourable MP*. The director Fani-Kayode Omoregie vividly re-enacted MP Pfende’s living room, and the rural shopping centre. As a stagecraft lecturer, his designs were even ambitious and the slight lack of some realistic details was due to budgetary constraints rather than a matter of deliberate style. The performers were appropriately costumed in realistic garb. For two years the students, who formed the cast, were drilled on Stanislavski who was the main architect of psychological realism. The acting was psychological throughout. The directing process included script analysis, blocking, movement, the ground plan, composition and picturisation. The same steps are followed in a typical western bourgeois theatre except that in socialist directing the degree of consultation with the cast is greater. In an ideal creative process, this aspect of consultation is the main tag of socialist directing as opposed to the bourgeois director who by far plays a leading role in the rehearsal process. The creative process can be termed autocratic and in a way individualistic while the socialist director is there to drive the agenda set by the collective theatre company. Kavanagh quotes a former Soviet Union director outlining the working methods of a democratic or socialist director:

Before rehearsals began, the director submitted to the theatre company an outline of how he or she intended to go about directing the play. The director’s ideas were then discussed with the author, if possible, and the actors. If or when agreement was reached on the directorial approach, the rehearsals began. During the rehearsal process group discussions were held and the actors contributed their ideas and commented on the process. The director proceeded on the basis of the agreements reached at these discussions. Thus the director supervised a process that had been democratically decided on by the company and proceeded on the basis of consultation and discussion (1997:30).

However, the level of democracy is dependent on a number of variables. In the case of Kimani Gecau and Ngugi wa Mirii’s directing of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, language was a barrier as the two directors, at that time, did not understand the local language Shona. As directors who were relatively proficient in their craft, they found themselves offering the cast a kind of master class on acting as the cast was made up of inexperienced students, teachers, peasants and workers. It becomes difficult to pursue the principles of democracy as a director would do when working with a cast that is conversant with the requirements of a production. The level of democracy only increased when parts of the play required the use of local dances,
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music and improvisation which the cast had to teach the directors and ask them to enforce the agreed staging choices.

The second variety of socialist realism, which is evident in Zimbabwean theatre, is agit-prop (short form for agitational propaganda). This variety of theatre is still championed by the second generation of theatre makers and/or directors, which perhaps rightly accuses the colonists for causing “voluminous damage” (wa Mirii, 1988:7) to Zimbabwe’s artistic modes of expression. The ideals and techniques of the western bourgeois theatre are viewed as inimical to the political and theatrical virtue and should go through “a cleansing process, to acquire new habits and attitudes” (wa Mirii, 1988:7). Ngugi wa Mirii delineates the staging techniques that have come to characterise agit-prop:

For our theatre to develop a truly Zimbabwean character and form it MUST involve the use of dance, mime, song, drama and gestures which are so powerful that colonialism failed to destroy them. Any theatre that ignores these characteristics is abstract and irrelevant to the aspirations of the Zimbabwean masses in their struggle to build socialism in Zimbabwe. This is the ONLY genuine direction for a true Zimbabwean theatre (1988:40). (Emphasis is mine).

It can be noted that these kinds of techniques point towards a hectic, breathless, speedy and hyper energy performance. The content of the play is predictable as peasants and workers are always the creators of history while the rich try to oppress them. Ngugi wa Mirii again prescribes the content:

…it should expose the root causes of their (peasants and workers) poverty, ignorance, exploitation and oppression ... such a theatre should ... articulate the determination and ability to change an oppressive reality. Such is the content of a socialist theatre for a socialist Zimbabwe (1988:40).

What is most striking about this variety of socialist theatre is its close resemblance to the pungwe, an all night vigil performed by guerrillas during Zimbabwe’s liberation war in the 1970s. A missionary who attended pungwes wrote a letter to another missionary describing the pungwe “… the guerrillas spend a lot of time addressing meetings with long speeches. Their speeches are very repetitive, with lots of singing and lots of slogan chanting… it rouses the people” (Ravengai, 1994: 29). Ross Kidd describes a similar performance during a pungwe:

People joined in the singing, contributed their own sketches, music, dances, responded to the politicisation talks with slogans and bursts of song, and participated in the discussions which punctuated the various cultural presentations. Villagers and
Samuel Ravengai

fighters acted out and danced their commitments and built their strength and unity through music making (1983:5).

As the sketches are purely improvisational, the structure is non-linear and mosaic. At best, it is episodic as opposed to the realist structure which is linear and progresses towards a complication or series of complications. Examples of plays, which fall into this category, include Kavanagh’s *Katshaal* (1985/6), *Samora Continua* (1987/9), *Mandela: The Spirit of No Surrender* (1990), Chindunduma Secondary School’s *Takaitora Neropa* (1983), Chaminuka Youth Training Centre’s *Rivers of Blood* (1985). All these plays employed the agit-prop staging techniques. In fact, Kavanagh highlights the degree of borrowing “Katshaal was based on the *pungwe*…” The play begins with speeches, songs and dances in which the audience and the actors together celebrate Zimbabwean independence” (1992: 96). Kavanagh’s subsequent plays used the same agit-prop techniques “*Samora Continua* begins in exactly the same way as Katshaal!” (1992: 103) that is based on a *pungwe*. Based on these facts, agit-prop can be understood as some kind of revue with a loose montage of sketches, employing dance and music in order to have an effect on the feelings of the intended audience – the workers and peasants. Its qualities include totality, immediacy, caricature and energetic direct address to the audience. Kershaw, describing agit-prop as it obtained in Britain, highlights aspects that are quite visible in Zimbabwean agit-prop:

Agit-prop … has no stage, no curtains, no props … it is mobile – it can be taken to the people instead of waiting for them to come to you. And it is a theatre of attack… Individual items – songs, sketches, monologues can be improvised, can be shuffled and reshuffled according to particular local needs (1992:79).

*Katshaal* for instance did not need a proscenium stage. It was performed in halls and beer-halls. The only props available included drums and wooden guns. When the cast could not find the audience at Sizinda Hall in Bulawayo, Robert McLaren thought “well, if the people can’t find us then we must find them” (1988: 31). At a beer hall, “dialogue of any kind could not be heard” (ibid) so they shuffled the performance and concentrated on songs and dances. Some songs, which were not politically correct in Bulawayo before the signing of the Unity Accord in December 1987, were either left...

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7 As early as 1920 Erwin Piscator was using agit-prop in Germany. In 1933 The New Theatre League in the USA was using agit-prop. In the 1970s, the guerrilla fighters were using agit-prop. It would not be wise to force influences between these divergent groups nor would it be prudent to credit either wa Mirii or Robert McLaren as the initiators of agit-prop in Zimbabwe. They just popularised it. It is, however, possible that Robert McLaren, might have poached some ideas from the above groups to enrich the Zimbabwean version of agit-prop.
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out or replaced with more neutral ones. It is a malleable performance that changes according to local needs.

As the performance borrows from disparate sources such as speeches, song, dance, mime, choral speaking and sketches the theatre making process and directing is collaborative. Those members of the cast who have a gift in singing or were part of the cultural event in its functional context would assist with the musical direction. The Katshaa! of 1985/6 was performed by mostly students, some of them war collaborators who knew how to stage a punge. These people helped with the music and dancing in Katshaa! as well as Samora Continua. In fact, an added advantage of doing an agit-prop type of theatre with a predominantly African cast is that:

> Africans have a marvellous ear for music, and a lot of them have got very beautiful singing voices, and an incredible instinctive feeling for harmony; and of course, they are marvellous dancers (Stanley, 1981:23).

In fact, the whole directing process is aided by the natural qualities an African performer brings to the stage as Adrian who had been working intermittently with Africans in Zimbabwe since 1958 says:

> ... many of them (African performers) have an irrepressible sense of humour, and of course, terrific vitality – a capacity for enjoyment which is exhilarating and which communicates itself to an audience (Stanley, 1981:23).

All the director does is to coordinate the intermeshing of these different art forms for effect. The technique of energetic direct address or choral speaking to the audience is an aspect that African performers have an avid taste for:

> The art of oratory is in ... Africa carried to a remarkable pitch of perfection ... each official spokesman stands up in turn and pours forth a flood of speech, the readiness and exuberance of which strikes the stranger with amazement, and accompanies his words with gestures so various, graceful and appropriate that it is a pleasure to look ... These oratory displays appear to afford great enjoyment to the audience for every African native is a born orator and a connoisseur of oratory ... (Finnegan, 1970:444).

When one watches the video recordings of Katshaa!, Samora Continua, Mandela: The Spirit of No Surrender, one is struck by the speed, energetic dancing, direct address as well as the naturalness and appropriateness of gestures. However, where one area of the arts in the performance is problematic, the director can seek help from people who are well versed with that cultural component. For example, the African National Congress “sent the Amandla coordinator from Lusaka to drill actors on South African
songs and dances” (Kavanagh, 1992:94) during the making of Katshaal! A similar arrangement was also done during the making of Mandela: The Spirit of No Surrender where an ex-Robben Island prisoner, Andrew Masondo, was invited to help in the work-shopping of three scenes that dealt with life on that island during apartheid. The theatre making and directing style is entirely collaborative where the performance is built on the basis of discussion, debate and improvisation. The final product is entirely presentational in style as opposed to the first variety of socialist realism that is dominated by representational/psychological acting. The presentational style is similar to what Hatlen calls ‘theatricalism’ by which he means.

All types of non-realistic stylisation, free from any effort to create the illusion of actuality ...The actor suggests or assumes a role, rather than creating a psychological character. The performer may step in and out of character ... play several roles, go in and out of emotional states, address the audience directly, comment on the action; or simply tell a story ... The total effect of the production may come from a series of signals in spurts, juxtaposed or simultaneous, projected in incongruous ways without obvious continuity... (1992:211).

All these elements of theatricalism or presentational style are found in the plays cited above. Katshaal! begins with speeches, songs and dances in which the audience and performers together celebrate Zimbabwe’s independence. The audience responds verbally to the slogans enchanted by performers thus blurring the line dividing the two – audience and performers. The performers step out of the audience and act out a scene and then the narrator tells a story to the audience chronicling the history of oppression in Southern Africa. This is a theatre piece being shared between performers and audiences. There is no pretence of ‘actuality’ as is projected in the representational style of staging.

Another element of style that distinguishes the agit-prop variety from the first variety of socialist realism is the domination of three elements – song, dance and mime in a theatre event. Whereas these elements are subservient to dialogue in the first variety, in agit-prop they are ‘dominants’. Rohmer cites Jacobson (1981) defining the ‘dominant’ as the focusing component of a work of art. It rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant that guarantees the integrity of the structure. Rohmer also cites Fischer-Lichte (1988) as saying that a dominant sign system within a performance can be spoken of if it is superior to all other signs with regard to its density, its use in particularly important moments or its general frequency. In almost all agit-prop plays song, dance and mime serve as the common denominator. In a way, Rohmer’s position that Zimbabwean theatre is characterised by song and dance as dominants does not hold water, as other varieties of theatre do
not obey his observation. The syncretic theatre, which became more visible after 1990, for instance, does not have a constant dominant, but shifting and fluctuating dominants. The first variety of socialist realism’s ‘dominant’ is dramatic dialogue.

In almost all agit-prop plays there is grotesque characterisation. The characters are almost cartoon like in their delineation. When the director animates them they are terrific, direct and effective. At a Cultural Gala for the heads of state at the 1986 NAM Summit in Harare, part of the agit-prop play *Katshaal* was performed in which three characters grotesquely depicted U K, USA and Germany. They were riding on the backs of fellow actors playing black people. They illustratively sucked their breath and swelled up chorally chanting “together we are bloated with the blood of the blacks/we multiply and swell like ticks” forcing, according to Kavanagh (1992:101), the US ambassador to walk out and others to mount diplomatic protests.

**Individual Styles**

The first ten years after independence were characterised by a socialist realist style; period related, just like one can speak of the Elizabethan style, Victorian style, Romantic style or Classical Greek style. This article has also projected the fact that apart from its broader meanings of being period specific, style has narrow meanings referring to the individual alterations within the general style to create a unique work specific to an individual. Even if theatre makers and/or directors had a choice between Western realism and socialist realism or their creative recombination, the special talents, specific gifts, inspiration and creativity inherent in each theatre practitioner made their works different and unique.

Robert McLaren’ style is a bit slippery as it gravitates between the above variations of socialist realism. When he wants totality, immediacy and agitation his potent weapon is the agit-prop variety. When he wants persuasion and authenticity he is a bit eclectic, as he tends to mix the two varieties and even adding more techniques. In the case of *The Darkness of our Light* (1992) and *Simuka Zimbabwe (Arise Zimbabwe)* (1994), two plays that speak against ESAP, the dominant sign system is dramatic dialogue with minimal use of mime. The 1994 production of *Nyika Yake/Ilizwe Lakhe*, combined all aspects of socialist realism this article has described. The history of Zimbabwe was performed in song, dance, storytelling and dramatic dialogue. The scenes that revealed that history stretching about a hundred years backwards were episodic. Each scene was complete in itself, almost resembling a Brechtian scene except the alienation techniques were not inherent. The scenes did not follow a cause-to-effect principle, but were held together by their adherence to a production concept. What was striking about his directorial style in this show was his recourse to simultaneity of performance channels. He juxtaposed dramatic action with factual
material (drawings, posters, pictures and documentary film slides), which he projected onto the backdrop on the University of Zimbabwe Beit Hall stage from some projectors in the control room. This technique of using slides and films is historically associated with Erwin Piscator who used it between 1924 and 1950 in Germany – and is quoted as having said about it in 1926 “the photographic image conducts the story, becomes its motive force, a piece of living scenery” (Braun, 1982: 151). Both of them (Robert McLaren and Erwin Piscator) being Marxists, it is possible that there were some influences. Thus Robert McLaren’s style can be seen as eclectic presentational, but within the framework of socialist realism. It is eclectic in the sense that he selects theatrical elements from a variety of sources, systems and styles.

Another director and theatre maker with an individual style is Stephen Chifunyise. Despite the public statements he has made in newspapers, books and journals advocating for socialist realism, it appears only one or two of his produced plays conform to the aesthetic he has hyped. From his earliest collection of plays Medicine for Love (1984) to his latest play Muramu (2005) the content has been restricted to local social and cultural issues while the structure and inherent staging techniques have remained predominantly Western. The only exception is probably his political play The Retrenched Ones, which was performed at the University of Zimbabwe Beit Hall in 1993 and Two Angry Men produced by Rooftop Promotions in 2001. Both plays employed mime, music and dialogue.

Tsitsi Dangarembga shares the same style as Stephen Chifunyise. Even though Tsitsi Dangarembga was a member of Zambuko/Izibuko, her creative style in She No Longer Weeps (1988) has remained rooted in old western dramaturgy. She has now moved into film-writing and directing where western realism is more applicable.

The same style seems to inform the directing methods of Walter Mparutsa and Ben Sibenke. Mparutsa’ staging techniques in his direction of Chifunyise’s Wedding Night (2003) comprised among other things motivated movement, picturisation, composition and a variety of blocking strategies which one would find in a typical Western theatre. In a questionnaire that Walter Mparutsa was asked to fill in, he indicated that the creative process included script reading during which process, he literally taught the play to the cast while also welcoming their contributions. He indicated that he gave the play a statement and asked his cast to be creative while being guided by the super-objective he had crafted for them. The designers were also guided by his interpretation of the play Wedding Night. All creative departments were independently creative yet tapping from his vision of the play. Although the issues raised, including the characters, were very culture specific, other components found in a typical Zimbabwean socialist realist play were missing – dance, song and mime. Part of the reason is that before and after Zimbabwe’s independence, Walter Mparutsa has
been working in a number of theatre projects involving white directors like Andrew Whaley, Susan Hains and John Haigh. Sundown Theatre for instance, where Walter Mparutsa and others were actors, staged Athol Fugard’s plays (directed by John Haigh) in the “expected western theatre tradition and...did not feature traditional performing arts ...” (Chifunyise, 1994: 58). In fact Walter Mparutsa became the first black actor to win an acting award in a white dominated National Theatre Festival in 1982.

What should be noted is that those black people incorporated into white directed theatre companies did not learn anything beyond western techniques: “[w]hile there were no significant changes in its (NTO) European theatre orientation, these accommodative gestures were interpreted as extending theatre skills to blacks...” (ibid: 57). Ben Sibenke and his company People’s Theatre Company also joined NTO and that explains his fascination with western techniques in his play My Uncle Grey Bonzo, which won the National Theatre Festival Award in 1981, the first to go to a black theatre company. In fact in 1983, he was a judge in the NTO CABS Play of the Year competition whose criteria for judging was very Eurocentric and was quoted by the NTO Chairperson Susan Hains as saying playwrights “must familiarise themselves with the conditions of entry” (Chifunyise & Kavanagh, 1988: 9) which were accepted European practice. What the black theatre makers and directors who chose western realism as a creative method should be credited for was their ability to handle relevant local themes and issues while using western dramaturgical tools. This is not the same as what Zinyemba found anomalous in the 1985 National Theatre Festival where only western written plays were staged employing western directorial techniques.

Even though there were mechanisms put in place to encourage and accentuate socialist realism as the national aesthetic, realism as invented in 1850 by Eugene Scribe and others did not die a forced or natural death in Zimbabwe, but it continued on a small scale in the white theatres and some black theatres. The weakening of Western techniques, which was sought by the four cultural nationalists, was indeed achieved, but the intended elimination failed. From over fifty white theatre companies that had established themselves during the colonial period Plastow quotes Susan Hains as saying that a “Big Five” has remained in “Harare, Masvingo, Bulawayo, Kadoma and Mutare” and that “all of these retain lavish theatre buildings and continue to put on predominantly light ‘white’ entertainment” (1996:245).

**Conclusion**

This article has tried to analyse the directing and theatre making styles inherent in urban Zimbabwean performances in the first ten years after independence. It has tried to delineate the broader and general style of the period as one that is revolting politically and aesthetically against colonisation and establishing itself as socialist
realism – with two district varieties. However, all these stylistic choices don’t happen in a vacuum nor should the directors concerned be credited exclusively for their genius. This study has argued that the conscious and unconscious directorial choices of staging a production are affected by the director’s era and socio-political events of his/her time. The article tried to provide the socio-political context under which the second generation of directors and theatre makers operated and how the two affected each other.

References


