

Transculturalism in Post-independence Zimbabwean Drama: Projections of Zimbabwean Theatre at the Onset of a New Millennium

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Abstract

This article examines transculturalism in Zimbabwean theatre in the post-independence era. It begins with a historical background to the socio-cultural forces that shaped attitudes to cultural life, first in the colony, and later in the post-independence period. The article argues that prejudice, ignorance, fear and mutual suspicion lead to theatre and performing arts emerging out of decades of colonialism largely segregated and highly confrontational, along lines of race and class. While acknowledging collaborative work done immediately after independence, the article then argues that it is only a decade or so after independence in 1980 that theatre practitioners from the two competing traditions i.e. former white theatre and community-based or people's theatre in the townships, come out of their cultural straitjacket and begin to produce collaborative work in earnest. Realizing the tremendous potentialities that could be realized through cross-cultural co-operation in the arts, confrontational attitudes between black and white gradually wane after 1990, leading to cross-cultural interaction that has produced plays of outstanding cultural and artistic merit.

Introduction

In much the same way as other aspects of Zimbabwean cultural and national life, theatre and the performing arts emerged out of decades of colonialism largely segregated and highly fragmented. When the country attained independence in April 1980, three distinct strains of theatre emerged out of the colonial period. These were the semi-professional and well-endowed white theatres, popular musical theatre in the black townships and a revolutionary theatre of black cultural nationalism that had emerged out of the nationalist struggle.

This fragmentation or lack of rapprochement in post-independence Zimbabwean cultural life must be seen against the background of colonial cultural policy. In colonial Rhodesia, cultural and social life had been marked by forced separation, prejudice and cultural polarisation. Some

founding principles informing colonial cultural policy are to be found in the writings of Charles Taylor, who in his *History of Rhodesian Entertainment 1890-1930*, posits a clearly Hegelian notion when he writes that the life of indigenous people met on arrival by the BSA (British South Africa Company) sponsored Pioneer Column in 1890,

was primitive, both in its working methods and the nature of its infrequent amusements.

Taylor goes on to contrast the life of indigenes with that of the occupying forces when he further states:

The pioneers (i.e. white settlers) by contrast, were from a civilized and sophisticated environment requiring entertainment of the standard type i.e. theatre, music and variety (1968: 7).

It becomes self evident then, that as a conquest society, colonial Rhodesia was in dire need of legitimacy in its values and existence as a domineering settler society. Theatre was therefore used to consolidate and harmonise white settler cultural hegemony. Through theatre and other arts, western civilisation was contrasted with the lives of indigenous people who were regarded as uncivilized and without a culture. As the colony grew, cultural polarisation came to be driven by mutual suspicion, fear and ignorance of the other.

At independence therefore, the emergence of segregation, polarisation and division in Zimbabwean theatre was part of a residual consciousness of confrontation which had come out of the nationalist struggle on the one hand, and the tenacity of colonialist occupying forces on the other.

It is against the foregoing background that the present article sets out to demonstrate the consolidation and strengthening of a new Zimbabwean theatre in the 1990s, which theatre sought to bridge the competing polarities of Zimbabwean theatre through production of transcultural plays. These are plays in which collaborating artists deliberately sought to infuse the style of western theatre as practised in the former white theatres, with styles borrowed from traditional African theatre as practised in post-independence Zimbabwe's newly established community theatres.

Breaking out of the Cultural Straitjacket

For a decade following the attainment of political independence in April 1980, Zimbabwean theatre initially continued along a path of nearly resolute segregation, fragmentation and indeed, at times, outright confrontation. The colonial established National Theatre Organisation (itself an off-shoot of the Southern Rhodesia Dramatic Association founded in 1954) continued to co-ordinate the activities of mainly white amateur theatre companies, while the Zimbabwe Association of Community based Theatres (ZACT)

formally established in February 1986, was meant to promote new theatre in the townships, which theatre would assist the post-independence state in its quest to establish a just and egalitarian society. This theatre, founded on strong reliance on indigenous performance idioms, was supposed to go beyond mere voyeurism. It was meant to address society's day-to-day developmental issues.

Nowhere is this confrontation captured more succinctly than in Chifunyise S.J. and McLaren R.M's *Zimbabwe Theatre Report 1988 (Retrospective)*, wherein the former white theatre is constantly denigrated as neo-colonial, anachronistic and undemocratic, while the newly established township movement is referred to as popular and democratic. In their report, Chifunyise and McLaren become obsessively dismissive of any tradition that falls short of their preferred paradigms. They write:

Before independence... an expatriate or white minority theatre dominates. After independence indigenous groups initially collaborate with this theatre... Then these indigenous groups begin to develop an independent democratic theatre movement, which is subsequently divided by the patronage of foreign cultural agencies. Some groups abandon their independence and return to the fold. This is the neo-colonial road. Others... struggle on with the people as their base to develop an independent, democratic and often revolutionary theatre. This is the socialist road... 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 in the movement (1988: 1-2).

Be that as it may, even in those early years of the post-independence era, there were individuals who were quick to realize the tremendous potentialities that could be realized through cross-cultural co-operation in the arts. In spite of his initial revolutionary posturing as quoted above, notable among the first tentative efforts at bridging the two competing traditions was the work of Robert McLaren, a South African born anti-apartheid cultural activist who had arrived in Zimbabwe in 1984. Robert McLaren had initially made an impact in South Africa through his cross-cultural anti-apartheid theatre work in Johannesburg with 'Workshop '71'. McLaren later escaped into exile in Ethiopia where he taught at the University of Addis Ababa for a number of years before coming to introduce drama studies at the University of Zimbabwe in 1984. While at the University of Zimbabwe, McLaren spearheaded the production of relevant plays tackling post-independence subjects using new forms. McLaren's work was concerned with the political implications of reviving indigenous performing arts such as music, dance and mime. As a result, his more outstanding work from the period was, among others, anti-apartheid and political solidarity plays such as *Katshaa! Sound of the AK* and *Samora Continua*.

At the onset of the nineties, confrontational attitudes in Zimbabwean theatre gradually waned to be replaced by considerable rapprochement between and among members from the two formerly opposing traditions.

Recoiling from the cultural straitjacket of the colonial and immediate post-independence scene, a number of cultural activists have, since 1990, sought to break out of cultural and racial divisions of the past to produce collaborative experimental theatre across the divide. This has led to a process of transculturalism and hybridity in post-independence Zimbabwean theatre; leading to production of plays that resonate with traditional forms of African theatre infused with elements of western drama. Transculturalism in Zimbabwean theatre has, in the main, been the result of collaborative play production between white cultural activists and their (black) counterparts in the community (or people's) theatre movement. Worthen calls this process hybridisation or:

The practice of blending both "indigenous" and "colonizing" performance styles as an important way of recognizing the cultural work that artworks do (2000:1215).

It is through such cross-cultural collaboration that Zimbabwean theatre artists have, since 1990, produced theatre works of outstanding cultural and artistic merit as shall be outlined in the following sections.

Re-imaging Cultures — Transculturalism in Zimbabwean Theatre

In Zimbabwe today, theatre, more than all other creative arts, has displayed a unique ability to blend hitherto polarised cultures and come up with distinctive aesthetic forms that display the nation's cultural diversity and its capacity for transcultural expression.

This trend has brought to the fore, new styles and previously neglected issues which are being brought to the stage and attracting new audiences. Whereas the terms multi-cultural, intercultural and transcultural are generally used nowadays almost interchangeably to describe cross-cultural expression, in this article we use the term "transcultural" to refer to new plays that blend different performance styles to address post-independence issues affecting Zimbabweans. Barranger defines transculturalism as a concept that:

Borrows forms and styles from various cultures to create new cultural contexts to speak to large issues that embrace all humankind... It blends texts, styles, traditions, nationalities and languages in the making of new theatre pieces that speak with universal voices on issues common to all humankind in the 21st Century... It speaks to all cultures about good and evil, war and peace and the common ground of human desires and needs. In a word transculturalism refers not so much to a theatrical aesthetic expression as to "seeing" those universal themes spanning all cultures (2002: 313).

Similarly, Worthen defines intercultural performance as:

A kind of performance that attempts to bridge the differences between two cultures not so much by erasing or occluding them as by concocting artworks in which these boundaries become visible and meaningful (2000: 1216).

In Zimbabwe, this process was not entirely unrelated to the nature of funding for the theatre after 1990.

In 1990, the new Zimbabwe government abandoned its decade long post-independence policy of commandist economics, opting instead for a World Bank and IMF sponsored Economic Structural Programme. On the cultural front, this was complemented by an expansion in donor aid to include creative and performing arts. Donor assistance for theatre came mainly from Scandinavian countries. This aid was channeled through non-governmental agencies such as NORAD, DANIDA, SIDA and HiVOS. For instance, the then newly established Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre (ZACT) received substantial grants from HiVOS to set up and maintain a national secretariat while activities for the National Theatre Organisation (NTO) were funded through grants from SIDA.

For ZACT, it is through such sponsorship that international partnerships were forged, leading to cultural exchange programmes that brought together performing artists from abroad to come and work with people's theatre companies in the townships and vice versa. It is through these links that ideal opportunities for cross-cultural fertilisation were created and sustained.

In post-independence Zimbabwean theatre, the twin processes of transculturalism and hybridity occurred in tandem with the establishment of new theatre venues, particularly since 1990. Chief among these were Amakhosi Township Square Cultural Centre in Makokoba in the city of Bulawayo, Gallery Delta, Alliance Francaise and Theatre-in-the-Park in central Harare. Establishment of these theatres became a significant part of a search for new and exciting forms and techniques that would appeal to both sides of the traditional cultural divide. These new theatres promoted evolution away from rigidly specific western or African forms, opting towards integration of different performance traditions, both European and African. As a result, theatre in the new venues necessarily became experimental. It sought to transcend the voyeurism of traditional semi-professional white theatre and the serious didacticism of township community theatre, treading a middle road characterised by an admixture of protest, entertainment and social commentary. Griffiths, Ashcroft and Tiffin define hybridity as a process that allows:

A means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past and developing new antimonolithic models of cultural exchange and growth (1995:83).

Stylistically, theatre in the new venues tended to be experimental and improvisational. With the exception of Amakhosi's Township Square Cultural Centre, these new theatres tended to be very small and intimate, seating no more than seventy-five people at full capacity. These theatres did not lend themselves to the construction of elaborate sets. Plays performed in these venues relied on minimal casts, using minimal sets and properties, something that allowed them to borrow freely from the acting and production styles of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski and traditional African storytelling theatre. As Hauptfleisch rightly puts it:

In a sense the artist, writers, playwrights and director are looking to... utilizing the form of one tradition or art form, to enhance, alter, give weight to another and in the process, possibly creating a new form, or at least a work which would have a wider potential acceptance and impact – whether in box office and sales terms, or in terms of social, political or educational aims (1997: 69).

These productions hardly ever got published as playscripts. Pre-eminence was given to the spoken (or performed), rather than the written word.

Cast and patronage of theatre in the new venues was both non-racial and multi-lingual.

In terms of architecture, the new venues moved away from the traditional proscenium and its representational style. In those instances where the proscenium was retained, it was largely modified (as in the case of Amakhosi's Township Square) into an open arena. Seating and staging arrangements that were decidedly presentational characterised these theatres. Typical examples were the Gallery Delta's open-air theatre and Theatre-in-the-Park's arena stage, the latter of which, was to all intents and purposes, a form of theatre-in-the-round.

Having examined some of the theoretical frames that have characterised post-independence Zimbabwean theatre since 1990, we now take the opportunity of the following section to analyze a range of representative examples. As the next section reveals, plays produced in the new venues deal with a myriad of issues ranging from gender and race relations to HIV/AIDS and political rights.

Zimbabwean Theatre at the Onset of a New Millennium

In 1986, three founding members of Bulawayo's Amakhosi Theatre, namely, Cont Mhlanga, Mackay Tickey and Thokozani Khupe teamed up with Chris Hurst, a white Zimbabwean and a graduate of the London School of Drama who had formerly performed in the exclusive white tradition. This collaborative process was to produce a play that was to serve as a harbinger of the character of Zimbabwean theatre at the onset of the new millennium. The play they produced not only became a controversial and satirical three-

handler entitled *Workshop Negative*, it was also an honest assessment of (newly) independent Zimbabwe's varied and contentious attitudes towards racial integration and socialist transformation.

Workshop Negative is set in a (newly) black owned tool-making factory. Its principal characters are two employees: one black (Mackay Tickeyes) and the other white (Chris Hurst), who turn out to have been bitter adversaries on the frontline during the war of liberation. Besides the animosity of being former adversaries, the two are also grappling to come to terms with the post-independence government's newly enunciated policy of racial reconciliation. Added to that they also have to contend with the hypocrisy behind socialist transformation as championed by their new black boss (Thokozani Khupe).

Stylistically, *Workshop Negative* displays varied influences. From African storytelling it borrows narrative structure. The play adopts a simple cause-to-effect linear plot. In traditional society, this structure was typical of the fable wherein the primary intention was to teach moral lessons. Having used such simple plot structure, the play then adopts a multi-lingual narrative style, based on all three of Zimbabwe's main languages. This enables the play to appeal across a broad spectrum of local and international audiences as clearly evidenced by the tours undertaken within Zimbabwe and its subsequent ban by the Zimbabwean government from touring the SADC region on account of its indictment of post-independence leadership as being essentially corrupt hypocrites.

On the surface, the play's three characters are simple, two-dimensional archetypes that represent newly independent Zimbabwe's three classes of citizen. They are represented as follows: an emerging, exploitative and corrupt black bourgeoisie, the white colonial in a period of social and political transformation, and the ordinary, disillusioned post-independence black Zimbabwean. However, the playwright deliberately reverses traditional expectations in terms of race and socio-economic role so that the former Rhodesian white boss and/or landowner is a mere handyman in Mkhize's workshop. To that extent, characterisation in *Workshop Negative* is an admixture of the simple and the complex. Because of a constant state of mistrust and uneasiness, constant squabbling over and petty serious misunderstandings characterise the shop floor.

Although the three actors in *Workshop Negative* do not necessarily play multiple roles, the use of three-handler dramaturgy is itself traceable to the art of African storytelling wherein the singular narrator assumed many different roles through mime, voice and movement. From traditional African storytelling theatre the play also borrows a highly presentational style that works in tandem with a minimalist set. The play's presentational style dispenses with an elaborate set, using only those properties and costume essential to evoke situation and locale. It is non-illusionistic. As a result,

Workshop Negative only made use of an old drum and pieces of iron to suggest a toolmaking factory. This enabled the play to tour different parts of the country with much ease, also allowing it to be performed in a variety of venues and auditoriums without the hindrance of a cumbersome set.

Workshop Negative also bears influence from the Far East. Because the play's dramatic action contains intense conflict leading to physical fights, there is use of martial arts to present well-choreographed stage combat. This must be understood within the context of Amakhosi Theatre having started off as a karate club that was based at Stanley Hall in Makokoba township, Bulawayo. *Workshop Negative* was written and produced at a time when skills in martial arts were very popular in Zimbabwe's urban townships.

Because of the evidently tremendous creative opportunities that could open up with cross-cultural co-operation in the performing arts, in 1993 the National Theatre Organisation obtained a small grant from SIDA (Swedish International Development Agency) to run a theatre and acting skills workshop for a group of actors drawn from people's theatre companies based in the townships. This project, which was based at ILSA College in Harare, became known as The Poor School. Chris Hurst who had earlier worked with Amakhosi Theatre in Bulawayo facilitated it.

To showcase the results of their training, students of The Poor School came together to produce a transcultural production based on an ancient Ndebele legend and folktale to which they gave the name, *Three Faces of a Woman*. Their mentor, Chris Hurst, directed the play. *Three Faces of a Woman* was showcased at Harare's Gallery Delta, a sculpture garden with a provision for a small open-air theatre. Gallery Delta was soon to emerge as one of a few prominent venues at which experimental work involving cross-cultural collaborations took place.

As part of that experiment, *Three Faces of a Woman* completely dispenses with set, using instead, a tremendous fusion of masque, dialogue, song and dance to create an exciting dance drama based on an old Ndebele legend. It retains the narrative structure of the original Ndebele folktale as it describes the story of a young bride, who on her way to a new husband, is accosted by a hideous monster, which cunningly trades places with her, and unites with the unsuspecting suitor. The monster "bride" then wreaks havoc in the groom's home, which havoc fans out far and wide, leading to social strife and a devastating drought. The original state of equilibrium is only restored after a series of divination rites and an elaborate rainmaking ceremony.

In the tradition of African storytelling theatre from which it derives, *Three Faces of a Woman* does not make use of a set. The play's dramatic action unfolds in the empty space of Gallery Delta's open-air theatre. The theatre's open-air garden surroundings also help to accentuate the play's

settings, which range from forests to plains and open air spaces. What the play lacks in the absence of a set, it makes up for through subtle lighting changes, use of mime, costume, hand properties and actor transformations, which allow the actors to use their bodies to simulate an eerie forest in one instance and a deep pool in another. Use of actor transformations also derives from the art of the storyteller who was able to play and simulate different roles and settings through voice, mime and movement.

As part of transcultural experimentation, *Three Faces of a Woman* makes innovative use of masks, although these are not necessarily indigenous to Zimbabwean cultural expression. Chris Hurst, the play's director explains this innovation when he says: "Actors working with masks often find their character by reacting to the effect the mask has on them" (1993). In this way, transcultural experimentation is used to address acting as a universal concept.

Besides the Gallery Delta and Alliance Francaise in central Harare, another venue that has helped to redefine post-independence Zimbabwean theatre in the new millennium is Rooftop Promotions's Theatre-in-the-Park. This is a small, grass thatch rondavel arena theatre located in the centrally situated Harare Gardens. It was established in 1995 with a specific aim to reintegrate Zimbabwean theatre by providing a central venue where artists from different walks of Zimbabwean cultural life could present new plays. It was also felt that mainstream theatres had failed to transform their repertoire to suit post-independence socio-political realities and in that process, attract newer and more racially integrated audiences. A central location would not only ensure easier access for ordinary Zimbabweans, but also tap into Harare's tourist and expatriate audience resident in city centre hotels and lodges.

Because of its compact size, Theatre-in-the-Park easily lends itself to experimental work. Artists are restricted to the production of plays with no more than six characters. Use of elaborate sets is not encouraged.

In 1995, a multi-racial cast of three produced a new play, *Strange Bedfellows* that, in many ways, represented the new thrust towards transculturalism in Zimbabwean theatre at the onset of the new millennium. Stephen Chifunyise, a leading playwright from Zimbabwe, wrote *Strange Bedfellows*. It was directed by Helge Skoog, a visiting Swedish director at Rooftop Promotions, and performed by Georgina Godwin, Helge Skoog and Daves Guzha.

Georgina Godwin had had extensive theatre experience in former white theatre, having worked at Harare Repertory Theatre. In 1993, she had co-produced *Mhondoro*, an epic drama based on the trial and execution of Ambuya Nehanda, an icon of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, following the First Chimurenga of 1896. Daves Guzha was producer and founder of Rooftop Promotions, parent company for Harare Gardens's Theatre-in-the-

Park. Guzha's Rooftop Promotions, through work produced at its Theatre-in-the-Park, continues to be in the vanguard for the production of cross-cultural theatre in Zimbabwe today.

Strange Bedfellows dispenses with the traditional linear plot structure and makes innovative use of the technique of play-within-a-play in which two actors (Daves Guzha and Georgina Godwin) and their director have just arrived to a rehearsal of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. The play's Swedish director (played by Helge Skoog) wishes to transpose *Miss Julie* because of certain similarities relating to class (and racial) prejudice in *post-independence* Zimbabwe, which he believes compares well with Strindberg's Swedish original. Instead of being a rehearsal of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, *Strange Bedfellows* becomes an explosive encounter on mutual racial suspicion, intolerance, and disharmony. Borrowing from Albert Camus's theatre of the absurd, the original plot, which is supposed to be a rehearsal of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* does not move. Instead, the play's mixed cast of Sandra (white) played by Georgina Godwin and Farai (black) played by Daves Guzha becomes bogged down in an intense argument on racial prejudice and mutual suspicion. An otherwise linear plot thus becomes static.

Strange Bedfellows is a three-hander which also uses a minimal set. As a result, the play relies on dialogue and intense conflict for the evocation of atmosphere, just as in the oral tradition. This also allowed the play to enjoy a successful run at Harare's Theatre-in-the-Park, a venue where plays are generally presented as theatre-in-the-round, without use of elaborate sets that may act as a potential hindrance to an audience's sightlines.

Using a European classic as its starting point, *Strange Bedfellows* offers useful insights into the vexed question of inter racial relations in post-independence Africa.

In July 2001, Taura Tinzwe, a multi-racial Zimbabwean theatre consultancy produced *Hatina Mari, Hatibhadhare*, an adapted translation of the Italian playwright Dario Fo's *Can't Pay, Won't Pay*.

Taura Tinzwe is run by Dawn Parkinson originally from Harare Repertory Theatre (a former white theatre club), Dylan Wilson-Max a freelance actor, and Dominic Kanaventi a veteran actor from the colonial township tradition.

With a small grant from the Dutch organisation HiVOS, Taura Tinzwe adapts Dario Fo's original to suit Zimbabwe's current economic meltdown and the food riots of January 1998. Like Dario Fo's original, *Hatina Mari, Hatibhadhare* is set in a poor working class neighbourhood. The play uses a mosaic plot to explore the trials and tribulations faced by two neighbouring couples that are caught up in a situation of (Zimbabwe's) escalating cost of living. These leads to industrial unrest, food riots, looting, running battles with police, marital stress and disguise.

Unlike the other plays analysed so far, *Hatina Mari, Hatibhadhare*, is somewhat unique in the sense that it adopts a highly representational style, with a strong influence of naturalism, common with plays produced in the former white theatres. In the theatre of naturalism, the playwright (and director) deliberately withholds his/her sleight of hand so that the play's principal characters are left to react to social situations according to the dictates of their material conditions. To that extent, naturalism in drama usually promotes art theatre or the production of plays that are highly endowed with elaborate costume, properties and sets. As a result, *Hatina Mari, Hatibhadhare* comes with a fairly elaborate set, which is however portable and versatile. Whereas art theatre of the naturalist tradition usually relies on immovable proscenium stages, *Hatina Mari, Hatibhadhare's* portable set enabled the play to tour the country's main centres, performing in high-density suburbs, where incidentally, the City Council owned public halls had proscenium stages. The play's set came with elaborate but portable window and door flats with rickety furniture and discoloured walls to complete the picture of a truly run down working class neighbourhood. Because of its ability to tour nationally, performing in the people's own languages about issues touching their day-to-day social experience, *Hatina Mari, Hatibhadhare* became a form of popular travelling theatre. In the spirit of post-colonial transcultural interaction, *Hatina Mari, Hatibhadhare* brought together artists from different backgrounds to produce a topical play that addressed contemporary social issues.

Conclusion

The plays outlined above are by no means exhaustive of the number of new plays produced in Zimbabwe since 1990. However, the plays selected for analysis provide clear testimony to new synergies that have come to characterise Zimbabwean theatre produced by cultural activists who since 1990, have sought to break out of the straitjacket of cultural polarisation.

Transculturalism in Zimbabwean theatre has served as a powerful tool to demonstrate cultural identities and their performance forms as fluid composites. As Peters notes:

Those who have not learned that cultural identities (like racial ones) are fluid composites with multiple genealogies will perpetuate for us all the sad history of racism and intercultural animosity that has been part of the human inheritance in the 20th Century (1995:210).

Post-independence theatre in Zimbabwe has clearly demonstrated that:

Cultural representations... can be borrowed without one missing them or attempting to retrieve them at gunpoint, they have the grace (like human

beings) to be fruitful and multiply without much training, and they have the good sense (also like human beings) to transform themselves in the process (1995:210).

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