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## **Theater: Southern Africa**

### **Temple Hauptfleisch**

Four brief points need to be made at the outset regarding theater in this region. First, most countries in southern Africa have a number of regional and even national languages, including indigenous languages (e.g. Shona, Zulu), imported European languages (English, Dutch, Portuguese or German), local derivatives (e.g. Afrikaans) and hybrid forms (e.g. Tsotsitaal). This complexity is not only of linguistic importance but also has significant political meaning and impacts heavily on cultural identity and cultural practices. Second, in Africa the concept “indigenous” usually refers to the black inhabitants of the continent, but in South Africa, where permanent settlers from Europe and the East came as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of indigenous cannot simply be equated with black African performance only, but must include anyone who was born in the region, irrespective of their racial heritage or the language they chose to work in. Third, the twentieth century theater of the entire subcontinent has been profoundly affected by the cultural and political life of the economically powerful South Africa, and in what follows a focus on this region is necessarily central to the discussion. Fourth, because so much of African theatre is so strongly performance based the general term “theatremakers” will be used to refer to all who make theatre, inclusive of writers, directors, managers, designers, actors, dancers and singers – unless a specific group are to be discussed.

### **Traditional and Western performance**

Any description of pre-colonial performance is inevitably limited, and largely dependent on the residue of such performance forms in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The fact is early theater scholarship across the world has tended to focus almost exclusively on the institutionalized theatre systems and the canon of literary drama, ignoring indigenous usage in most countries and not much interested in interactive and communal forms. The result is a historical record in which most of the indigenous cultural expression in southern Africa is overshadowed by imported European plays and conventions, which by the end of the nineteenth century had become the cultural norm. More disconcerting was that performance practice was similarly affected, for all indigenous “pagan” practices and performances were frowned on by the early missionaries and colonial rulers, with Christian values and morality – and inextricably related to this the European and particularly British way of life – being purveyed through the missionary schools and churches, often using dramatized Bible sketches and religious sermons to do so – ironically mirroring and perhaps replacing the didactic role played by much of the spurned indigenous performance. It would only be by the mid-twentieth century that both theater scholars and practitioners in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Swaziland, Lesotho, Mozambique, Botswana, and South Africa would gradually come to question this one-sided view, and begin to value and use indigenous forms for artistic, social, political and economic development programmes on the sub-continent.

### **Pre-colonial Theater and Performance**

Prior to European settlement in the seventeenth century, Africans practiced an array of theatrical performance forms, including dramatized songs and enacted ritual narratives. The oldest forms are found with the nomadic communities that roamed over the semi desert terrain of much of Botswana, Namibia and the Cape Province for thousands of years. The Khoisan ceremonial and ritualistic dramas and dances for example have a long history dated by anthropologists at over six thousand years. The various Bantu peoples have similar performance forms, such as the Xhosa *intsomi* and the Zulu *inganekwane*, storytelling practices which are still performed today. The same is true of their extensive dance and music traditions.

From the early linguists and anthropologists to twentieth century musical anthropologists and the oral literature movement, there have always been conscious efforts to document, preserve and/or revive these old traditions. Some forms have survived into the twenty-first century in adapted or hybridized form. A number of artists for example, like storyteller Gcina Mhlope, consciously seek to revive such traditions in performance, teaching the form and even making it a main-stream art form. The role of the praise poet in particular was revitalized in the 1970-1990 period of cultural and armed resistance with the so-called “struggle poets” and singers, and received significant international recognition during the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president. On occasion elements from indigenous forms have been adapted to suit immediate circumstances, frequently featuring in the hybrid contemporary plays, dance and music which evolved from the late 1940s onwards, to become a dominant feature of the theatre after 1970.

### **Colonial Theater in South Africa**

Besides a number of earlier contacts and smaller settlements, the first formal European colonization occurred in the Cape in 1652, when Dutch settlers came and introduced the first of a series of new cultural norms and traditions which would dominate the region for more than three centuries. Under the Dutch (1652 to 1799) there was little record of formal theatre, but they brought powerful educational traditions from Holland, notably the so-called “*rederykerskamers*”, a system of social clubs aimed at cultural, moral and educational upliftment which was maintained throughout much of the British colonial period (1799-1910) as well. Indirectly this became the basis for the dominant Afrikaans language theatre, itself crucial for the evolution of a state supported theatrical system that produced a vast canon of new theatrical works over the course of the twentieth century.

However, formal institutionalized theater only came with the British annexation of the region. As in all colonies, the administrators encouraged amateur theater in the garrisons and among the civilians, and supported visits by professional companies, a tradition that provided the key models for local theatremakers - both descendants of European immigrants and aspirant indigenous African thespians. The works produced were in the colonial languages (English, Dutch, Portuguese and German) performed by local amateurs (often aided by men from the local garrisons), augmented by visiting professional companies from the mother countries. Initially they did very little locally written work, most of the material being standard European texts, including a great deal of Shakespeare – both in the original language and translated. What was original was usually a short topical Prologue or Epilogue, or a musical skit of some sort. One of the best known examples is the bilingual skit **Kaatje Kekkelbek, or Life Among the Hottentots**, devised in Grahamstown by Andrew Geddes Bain and Frederick Rex in about 1844.

The first substantial body of indigenous plays came in the second half of the nineteenth century as a direct result of the British presence, its expansionist tactics and the resulting Anglo-Boer War (also known as the South African War). Largely written in Dutch and later in “Kitchen

Dutch” (or “Afrikaans”), not only by the descendents of the original white settlers, but also the Dutch speaking slaves from Dutch east India and the mixed race descendents of liaisons between the various peoples in the Cape. A slave called Majiet for example wrote protest plays for performance in the slave lodge, while Dutch and French writers such as Suasso de Lima, Boniface and Melt Brink produced short one-act farces and satires for performance by amateurs and schools. Later more serious writers concerned with the identity of the Dutch/Afrikaans-speaking population began writing ponderous nationalistic work on the history and struggles of the “Afrikaner” peoples of the sub-continent. This tradition of playwriting would blossom and bear significant fruits in the twentieth century, particularly under the apartheid regime, as such work was seen as essential for the evolution of an Afrikaner identity.

## The Early Twentieth Century

While many Afrikaans plays had been written by now and more were being done to be taken on tour of the rural areas from 1925 onwards, only a few indigenously written English plays had been produced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, some English playwrights did emerge in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the successful being Stephen Black, who wrote popular farces such as **Helena’s Hope** (1906) satirizing the multiracial Cape Town society. A truly local tradition of writing in English would however only be established in the 1960s, when the political situation provided increasing rationalization for serious theatre focused on local socio-political issues, and the cultural boycott deprived the country of access to the best of European and American theatre and opened up a market for local work.

Among the indigenous black population theatrical performance was initially limited to the traditional performance forms – dance, song and narrative. Gradually, under the tutelage of missionary schools and other European organizations, a hybrid blend of indigenous and European forms began to emerge, prompting local playwriting. For example, in Malawi there were sporadic attempts to establish such a playwriting tradition in the 1950s but little of substance occurred until the University of Malawi sponsored the Chancellor College Travelling Theatre, in which English-language plays began to be supplanted by Chichewa-language plays that were created through participatory research and performance. With this development the potential of theater in adult education began to be realized; by the mid-1990s there was an active industry in theater-in-education.

In South Africa the Anglo-American influence on the playwriting in black communities was evident early, in works such as the first published Xhosa drama (Guybon Sinxo’s **Debeza’s Baboons**, 1927) and in Herbert Dhlomo’s **The Girl Who Killed to Save: Nonqause the Liberator**, the first play by a black person published in English. Based on a Xhosa legend, it is in the style of English sentimental comedy and melodrama.

While black middle-class theater before the 1960s reflects a taste for European dramatic literature, a popular form of theater was emerging among working-class black people. Esau Mtetwa founded the first black professional troupe, called “Lucky Stars,” in Natal in 1926 and toured the country, putting on popular sketches and plays in the vernacular, based on Zulu legends and customs. This trend was hastened when the 1930s and 1940s combination of economic depression and drought forced whites and black rural farmers to seek a livelihood in the rapidly expanding mining towns and cities. Because of the rapid growth of economically depressed mixed race areas and a growing number of slum areas in the cities, many ethnic groupings were eroded, particularly among Africans. This led to an increasing synthesis of ethnic performance traditions

with the worker theatre as well as models of performance from the West, especially America. Eventually this gave rise to successful combinations of ethnic and jazz music with ethnic and international dance. For example in 1959 the musical *King Kong*, about the rise and fall of a heavyweight boxer, was first produced in Johannesburg, and brought African musicians and actors to the attention of the theater establishment there and in London and New York; it also provided an example for many aspiring actors and directors who saw in it the commercial and artistic possibilities of the musical play that blended indigenous and imported conventions.

### **The Rise of Resistance Theatre and Theatre for Development**

In Zimbabwe the colonial imposition of European traditions was resisted for many years, but during the 1970s a burgeoning of anti-settler "resistance art" provided perhaps the most important stimulus to black artists. In the years since political liberation, radio and television have provided platforms for the work of writers like Stephen Chifunyise and Thompson Tsodzo. But perhaps the most important and original drama has been produced by the community-based theater movement organized by the Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with Production. This organization spawned work that is currently best represented by grassroots community organizations and the University of Zimbabwe's undergraduate courses in drama.

The former British protectorates of Lesotho and Botswana have in many ways been tied to the political economy of South Africa, and it is not surprising that their cultural development has run parallel in many ways. Thematic concerns of playwrights have ranged from the obvious theme of oppression by colonial settlers to long-standing concerns with marriage and polygamy, superstition and modernization, and contemporary issues emanating from the effects of apartheid. The first play written and published in Setswana (the major indigenous language of Botswana) was *Motsasele* by Leetile Raditladi in 1937. But the most famous achievement in Botswana's theatrical history (though not without its detractors) has been the theater-in-development project *Laedza batanani* ("The Sun Has Risen, Come Out and Work," 1974), in which theater became the medium for a massive education project. The first play written and published in Lesotho was *Sek'ona sa joala* ("A Calabash of Beer") by Twentyman Mofokeng in 1939; in the 1980-2000 period the best-known Basotho playwright was and remains Zakes Mda, whose plays have been translated into many languages. His award-winning play *The Hill* (1979) dealt with the effects of apartheid migrant labor on rural societies, and many of his subsequent works commented incisively on the uneasy co-existence of first and third-world societies on the sub-continent, his prophetic short play **We Shall Sing for the Fatherland** being an excellent example. In the 1970s the National University of Lesotho established a flourishing theater-in-development industry in which theater companies tour rural areas and assist in adult education, including the teaching of literacy. Zakes Mda became one of the key theorists of this movement and published his doctorate on the field.

Theater in Swaziland is best known through the work of a woman who is neither Swazi nor a playwright. Anthropologist Hilda Kuper's *A Witch in My Heart* (1970) presents a view of the role of women in Swazi society that has not been matched by the work of any Swazi writer. In Swaziland there exist many types of indigenous performance, which take the form of ceremonies and rituals, but there was not by the mid-1990s a developed theater tradition.

In Namibia theater-in-development was important during the early 1970s, though the South African state funded South West African Performing Arts Council imported South African work and also produced and toured a great deal of classical and European fare in Afrikaans, English and German. After independence this would become the Namibian National Theatre, which is still active.

The influence of the liberation war was strongly felt in Mozambique and the songs and poetry of the war years were widely used in the work of practitioners involved in making theater through participatory research and performance, with some early theater being based on a vaudeville tradition. In 1971 a Portuguese director, Norberto Barroca, staged a play by Lindo Lhongo called *The Newlyweds*; or, *Dramatic Consultation on the Bride Price*, which explored the transition from tribal customs to a contemporary urban and political context, using traditional forms of performance to examine themes of change and continuity. In general, however, theater did not develop in Mozambique to an extent comparable with that in some other countries of the region. This is possibly due to the extent of repressive colonial rule there and to the devastation caused by decades of warfare.

While theater for development has increasingly become the defining form of African theatre, such projects did not have the same prominence in South Africa. Interactive theater processes were sometimes used for educative purposes nevertheless. In the late 1970s for example drama in education (creative dramatics) and theater in education were introduced as a means of conscientizing the youth, and in the 1980s trade union workers' theater became an important tool to foster union solidarity and to develop political awareness among black workers. Much of this latter work was linked to Brechtian theories and Boal's notions of forum theatre, all crucial elements in the later political theatre. In the late 1980s and early 1990s a form of theater-for-development began to emerge under the new dispensation, to focus on social issues such as the AIDS pandemic, violent crime, rape, nation building and voter education for the formerly disenfranchised masses – and much of the government funding and private sponsorship has gone into this.

### **State-funded and Commercial Theatre at Mid-Century**

White Afrikaans-language theater was privileged from the start, for it was not only a political tool serving the Afrikaans language and the Afrikaner nation, but the artists had a captive audience: working in a dominant local language of European heritage for a population trained to value European cultural forms. This was strengthened by the Nationalist government's direct subsidies of theater, initially through the bilingual (Afrikaans and English) state funded National Theatre Organization (1947-1962), then through four bilingual provincial performing arts councils which evolved from it (1963-1993). These institutions produced a flood of theatrical work by a local theatremakers, including some outspoken critics of apartheid, such as André P. Brink, Bartho Smit and Adam Small. Plays like Smit's **Christine** (Smit) and Small's **Kanna hy kô Huistoe** [Kanna Comes Home] interrogated the racist value systems in the country, and as a result ran foul of censorship laws. In the 1970s a more overt form of resistance developed among Afrikaans-speaking youth, notably through a powerful Afrikaans cabaret movement, initiated by Hennie Aucamp and involving the growing Afrikaans alternative rock music movement. During the 1980-1990 its impetus was primarily anarchic and political, expressing abhorrence and resistance of the regime, culminating in **Piekniek by Dingaan** [Picnic with Dingane] in 1989. As a form cabaret still

exists but has lost its edge as the apartheid spectre faded, and has reverted to more nostalgic blend of musical presentation and stand-up theatre.

A number of white English theatremakers also found employment in this subsidized theater in the early years, among them the renowned lighting designer and theatre manager Mannie Manim, who later co-founded the Market Theatre, and authors Guy Butler and James Ambrose Brown. The new work focused exclusively on South African themes, seeking to develop a distinctively South African idiom. However, few writers would achieve the sustained success of the key Afrikaans dramatists till the 1990s, and none the international stature of Athol Fugard.

Alongside the state-funded system, there has always been a strong commercial theater industry in the country, including touring companies playing the Empire in the late nineteenth and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, vast conglomerates like African Consolidated Theatres that sponsored theatres and productions throughout the Union, many smaller urban companies doing European and American fare (e.g. Leonard Rayne and Brian Brooke) and local touring companies of mainly Afrikaans-speaking actor-managers, notably the charismatic and bilingual André Huguenet. This continued to flourish with entrepreneurs like Taubie Kushlick and Pieter Toerien, who produced primarily American and British hits that managed to bypass the international playwrights' boycott in the 1970s and 1980s. In the early post-apartheid years the world opened up for the country to finally welcome international theatrical hits from Broadway, the West End and the European capitals, and especially the large-scale musicals such as **Les Misérables**, **Phantom of the Opera** and, ironically, **The Lion King**. They have since become the bread and butter of the up-scale commercial theaters run by Pieter Toerien and others.

By mid-century some of these entrepreneurs felt compelled to do more politically relevant work, anti-racist plays from Europe and America as well as indigenous anti-apartheid plays, such as Basil Warner's **Try for White** (Leonard Schach, 1958) and Lewis Sowden's **Kimberley Train** (Leon Gluckman, 1959). However, the tighter censorship and racial laws of the 1960s soon put a virtual end to the latter trend.

A special category has for long been the African musical, a most viable product for export. Besides the influential but hybrid **King Kong**, it was the so called "tribal musicals" which made the real money. Despite being criticized as inauthentic and exploiting indigenous culture for commercial gain, these productions created work and training opportunities for many performers excluded from the state system. Gibson Kente, one of these, would develop an own theatrical style based on the King-Kong format, and become the country's most successful entrepreneur. He not only turned black citizens into theatergoers, but popularized his "township musical" to such an extent that it would be snapped up and adapted by the political movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Other prominent African musicals were *Ipi-Tombi*, a collaborative effort produced by Bertha Egnos, and *Welcome Msomi's Umabatha*—a Zulu adaptation of *Macbeth*—achieved critical acclaim in 1972 at the World Theatre Season in London. In the 1980s David Kramer and Taliep Petersen's collaboration on the successful "colored musical" **District Six – The Musical** (1987) ran for years, while the spectacular musicals of Mbongeni Ngema dominated the 1990s with *Sarafina*!; *Magic at 4:00 A.M.* and **The Zulu**. The latest international success is Richard Loring's **African Footprint** (2004).

This entire mid-century growth period was substantially supported by state investment in the founding of a range of drama training institutions at the various Universities. Initially however,

with two exceptions, these were limited to white students and it was only in the 1980s that free access was available to all – which meant alternative training methods had to be found.

## Theatre and Resistance

By the late 1950s frustration with the politics and the arts system had set in among theatremakers and artists across language and cultural divides. A search began for ways in which to coordinate and support black and multiracial work and to offer training for new performers and artists, also for alternative venues for and forms of theater-making. A key early example was Union Artists, which not only supported and mentored many artists, but were responsible for the influential **King Kong** project. By the 1970s a radical increase in national and international resistance to apartheid and the burgeoning Black Consciousness movement spearheaded radical changes in black resistance politics, stressing cultural liberation through an alternative, “black,” South African aesthetic. Militant political plays and performance events emerged from groups like Peoples’ Experimental Theatre and the Theatre Council of Natal – both groups charged brought to trial in 1974–1975 under the Terrorism Act for their involvement in the dissemination of “subversive” plays and literature. This in turn led to a radical shift toward political theater and what became known as black theater by writers such as Fatima Dike, Maishe Maponya and Matsemela Manaka – as evidenced in Fatima Dike’s **The First South African** and Maponya’s **The Hungry Earth**.

At the same time a number of younger white and black activist-theatermakers began to work together and important multi-cultural fringe groups emerged. Even within the state system of performing arts councils, Ken Leach, Pieter Fourie, Francois Swart and others sought to do subversive work in experimental venues.

The most crucial factor however was the founding of a number of independent venues in the 1970s – the most influential being the Space Theatre in Cape Town (1972) and the Market Theatre in Johannesburg (1976). Focusing on developing theatre projects that addressed the cultural contradictions of South African life, they found ways to circumvent the racial laws. Among the new works that were being produced were Athol Fugard’s steady stream of trenchant plays, beginning with **Blood Knot** and including his masterpieces (**Boesman and Lena**, **Master Harold and the Boys**, **The Road to Mecca**). His simple but compelling neo-naturalism became the model for a substantial number of young theatremakers to add their voices to the clamor for change in the 1980s. Paul Slabolepszy, Anthony Akerman, Pieter-Dirk Uys, Deon Opperman, Reza de Wet and others began to produce significant new work, led by Slabolepszy’s **Saturday Night at the Palace** and leading to De Wet’s award-winning Gothic dramas about the Afrikaner psyche. Another phenomenon was the rise of the satirist and stand-up comedian as political activist – the notable examples being the immensely effective Pieter-Dirk Uys and his alter ego, Evita Bezuidenhout with constantly updated shows like **Hell is for Whites Only** and **Adapt or Dye**.

Another important factor was the distinct shift toward a new style of improvised political theater in which the previously neglected African traditions become dominant. Inspired by the early improvised work of Theatre Workshop ‘71 (**The Women of Crossroads**), John Kani, Winston Ntshona and Athol Fugard (**The Island**, **Sizwe Bansi is Dead**) and the innovative improvisational work of Barney Simon, the plays tended to incorporate aspects of pre-colonial African genres into their more formal structures and blend these with the new urban cultural experiences of their audiences. This is best epitomized by Barney Simon, Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa’s seminal **Woza Albert** (1981), Ngema’s **Asinamali** (1985), and Junction Avenue Theatre’s groundbreaking



**Sophiatown** (1986). By the late 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century a large number of producers had evolved the hybrid play into a distinctive South African form. Among this later work are such haunting works as William Kentridge and the Handspring Puppet Company's unique adaptations of world classics (**Woyzeck on the Highfeld**, 1992 and **Faustus in Africa**, 1995), Mark Fleishman, the Magnet Theatre Company and Jazzart's sensitive collaboration based on Khoisan performance traditions (**Rain in a Dead Man's Footsteps**, 2003), David Kramer and Taliep Petersen's anthropological journey into the slave and Khoisan history (**Ghoema**, 2005) and Brett Bailey and the Third World Bunfight company's satirical look at colonial preconceptions about Africa (**Ipi Zombie**, 1996, **iMumbo Jumbo**, 1997 and **Big Dada**, 2003).

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## The Festival Circuit

From a structural point of view the most important facet of the post 1994 period has been the rise of the festival culture in southern Africa. The oldest and best known is the annual National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, founded in 1974 to support the embattled English language and culture. For long the only national festival, it soon went beyond its parochial boundaries to encompass all cultures in the country and to provide an indication of emerging trends in the whole subcontinent. Today it is a twelve day international festival with fifty thousand attendees seeing more than five hundred theater events. In the 1990s the fall of the apartheid regime opened up the field for formerly excluded artists, and closed down the state funded companies thus putting pressure on artists to make their own work. At the same time formerly protected cultures had to look to their own survival and development. This led to the founding of a series of arts festivals, beginning with the annual Oudtshoorn Festival, dedicated to the now embattled Afrikaans language and culture. Within a few years this began to rival the Grahamstown festival in size, while ever more festivals came, catering for a variety of cultures, languages, economic situations and cultural tastes. Growing exponentially, the year 2004 saw more than 150 local festivals in the country, and at least 40 significant arts and cultural festivals being aggressively advertised across the country. This includes a state supported Mayibuye Festival of African arts in Bloemfontein. The festivals have become the core of the industry and in many ways constitute the annual theatrical season.

It is apparent from the work showcased here that the old formulas of both European-style formulas and the aggressive agit-prop style of anti-apartheid theater were being adapted and even debunked and that theater practitioners were seeking new forms, methods, and themes that are expressive of the new African psyche and context. Since 1994 therefore there has been an increasing focus on the struggle for identity and nationhood, the search for peace and the exploration of notions of memory and forgiveness - issues most notably symbolized by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and endemic to works such **Ubu and the Truth Commission** (1997) by Jane Taylor, William Kentridge and the Handspring Puppet Company, **Die Jogger** ("The Jogger", 1997) by André P. Brink, **Die Toneelstuk** ("The Play" 2001) by Breyten Breytenbach. Notable too are the many plays focusing on healing of the wounds of the past, from Athol Fugard's **My Children! My Africa!** (1989) and **Valley Song** (1995) to such festival works as **Peace Shall Prevail; Now Is the Time for Reconciliation; People Like Us**, and John Kani's thought provoking **Nothing but the Truth** (2002).

From a history of pre-colonial performance, followed by colonial subjugation, in which indigenous practices were suppressed or marginalized, to its resurgence in the form of politically motivated theater and drama, practitioners of drama and theater in southern Africa have finally cast

off some of the more restrictive European models and the declamatory political style of the struggle period, and finally, using a variety of hybridization processes, firmly established a distinctive and nuanced regional cultural identity.