

THIS ARTICLE ON iMUMBO JUMBO BY BRETT BAILEY, AND THE NOTES THAT FOLLOW IT, WERE PUBLISHED IN HIS BOOK 'THE PLAYS OF MIRACLE AND WONDER' (2003)

FOLLOWING IT IS AN ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN THE DRAMA REVIEW (TDR) IN 2004 ON iMUMBO JUMBO BY JUDITH RUDAKOFF

“AN INTOXICATING WHIFF OF THE POINTEDLY IRRATIONAL”

[From Robert Greig's review of iMUMBO JUMBO, *The Sunday Independent*]

'You whites are clever. There at the Palace in London, there people in red coats and big black hats, some on horses, very straight. And the others, every fifteen steps they stop, salute. Very smart. You people are clever: you keep your beliefs and you try to stop ours.'

[Chief Nicholas Tilana Gcaleka]

Wherever the poetry of myth is interpreted as biography, history or science, it is killed. The living images become only remote facts of a distant time or sky...When a civilization begins to reinterpret its mythology in this way, the life goes out of it, temples become museums, and the link between the two perspectives is dissolved.

[Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*]

I'm in the Transkei early in 1996, up to the hilt in zombies and *tikoloshes*, when the escapades of Chief Gcaleka first reach me. He has just returned from Britain with what he believes is the skull of the late King Hintsa:

“There's this Xhosa witchdoctor from the rural Transkei who traipses off to the HQ of the British ex-Empire at the end of the twentieth century with two chums – a prophet from an Afro-hybridised church and an octogenarian ex-Bantustan parliamentarian – sponsored by Coca-Cola and South African Breweries, to retrieve the head of a Xhosa king supposedly chopped off for a souvenir by colonial troops in the mid nineteenth century...”

Wacky, man! I don my safari suit and pith helmet and set off to track down this eccentric native chief.

February 1997: I've tracked Gcaleka to his three-roomed house in the sandy Cape Town township of Nyanga East where he lives part-time amid several of his trainees.

“I want to write a drama about the skull saga.” I tell him over the phone.

"Ja, I dreamed it last night you are coming here. Come now!" he commands.

Far from acting of my own free will, it seems I've actually been summoned by the Hurricane Spirit, a spiritual black mamba and Gcaleka's guide in matters esoteric. Things are seldom as they appear...

Gcaleka is overjoyed to meet me – not that I think he has much idea of what I mean by a drama, but any publicity is good publicity.

I have arrived on an auspicious occasion: there is to be a ritual sacrifice "to make the Spirit strong". Gcaleka – slim, with live-wire eyes – is a little disappointing at first sight: I like my witchdoctors in skins and beads, with rattles at their naked ankles; the good doctor wears blue jeans, leather shoes and a collared shirt. A twist of goatskin around his wrist is the only hint of exotica.

Vukile Handula, Xola Mda (who will play the chief and a caricature of him respectively in iMUMBO JUMBO) and I sit squeezed between his friends and admirers on a tacky lounge suite in the cramped sitting room. While the chief holds court, slapping people affectionately and stabbing the air with his index finger, we drink brandy, and sour smelling sorghum beer from a communal bucket that comes relentlessly around again and again.

His trainees, in red skirts and beads, and with clay covering their faces and matting their hair, shuffle in and out on their knees serving us and making preparations. Their apprenticeship is a hard lot: up before dawn, slaving away, dancing for several hours a day.

A soap opera flickers blandly on the TV. My handle on the Xhosa language not being up to much, I just gawk.

In his London hotel bed Gcaleka dreamed that he would find the skull on a farm alongside a river and beyond a great forest. In the same dream he saw a hand writing the word "Invernessa" on a wall with a red ballpoint. The following day, leaving his companions in London, he flew to Scotland, where the SKY television network intercepted him and conducted him to several museums and an army base, all of which had human skulls amongst their bounty. But Gcaleka was insistent that the skull he sought was to be found on the farm he'd dreamed about. Early on his second morning in Scotland, a Scottish hippy took him to pray in the mountains, and then at a frozen river, where Gcaleka claims he finally got directions to the skull. This man, he says, was Jesus, sent to help him on his quest.

Later the party set out in a 4x4 through a forest to Dingwell Farm, home of one bemused Brookes family, to whom Gcaleka explained his mission. Miraculously, Mr Brookes produced an old skull with a bullet hole in it from a shed, and presented it to his visitor. The British press was euphoric.

But Gcaleka's jubilation was soon dampened when Xhosa royalty dismissed him as a fraud and handed his precious find to

forensics specialists at Cape Town's Groote Schuur Hospital. These scientists maintain it belonged to a Caucasian woman rather than a Negroid gent.

A year after the events, Gcaleka is still in a state of outrage. He raves in his staccato Xhosa-English about the spiritual implications of this heist for the country while my Dictaphone fills cassettes (the script of iMUMBO JUMBO is edited from transcriptions of several hours of these recordings). He is very agitated about the dire state of social turmoil in South Africa: only by burying Hintsas's skull and returning to traditional values will our people find peace again, he claims.

We pore over his album of press cuttings and photos: Gcaleka in white-beaded wig and robes brandishing an assegai at Heathrow; against a backdrop of Scottish hills, displaying the skull, like a fairytale hero. No doubt about it, this guy likes hype. Another thing: he doesn't have an eye for the irony in which most of the press dipped their pens. He reads the mocking glamour of the published snapshots of him with wide-eyed pleasure.

"Don't feel shame for me," he says to me, referring to his conquest by science and the monarchy. But it is his naiveté in a sardonic world and not his defeat that strikes me as pathetic.

Xola and Vukile laugh along with him and nod when he rants, but when he turns his back they shake their heads. They consider him a loud-mouthed braggart. They've never quite fathomed my interest in him.

Later that afternoon Gcaleka changes into a long red tasselled gown and his wig. Drums are hauled into the room, and the dancing and singing begins – the initiates stamp bare feet on the linoleum, and raising their arms to the heavens beyond the cardboard ceiling they are carried away into reeling, hooting trances. At the height of all this intensity Gcaleka drives all eight of them to the floor and manhandles them into bouncing on their knees to the rapid drum pulse until they collapse in fits. The good guests sing, clap, smile, and pass that bucket around again. Things are feeling a little hyper-real through the haze of beer and smoke.

Then a large black billy goat is wrestled in by the horns, and after a brief prayer with everybody chorusing: "*amaKhos!*" ("chiefs!" – a reference to the ancestors, and the source of Gcaleka's title), it is knocked to the floor and its throat sliced open. Red blood froths onto the electric blue linoleum, and two American soapie stars kiss on screen in the background... the timing is perfect, I am ecstatic.

It's these clashes of cultures, symbols, beliefs, historical eras that you see all over Africa that always delight me: the goats that amble across from the location into town to graze on the marigolds and petunias planted by the municipality on the traffic islands, the women hurrying along the footpaths of rural valleys with newly charged car

batteries on their heads to hook up to their portables so they can catch "The Bold and the Beautiful", the barefoot black Christians dancing around a flaming chicken sacrifice, the squalid shacklands that line the road traversed by tourists in Mercs from Cape Town International Airport to the pleasure domes of the city... all this impurity, these minglings, these collisions. This is the Africa of today. Europe's so preppy and up its own arse in comparison, and the "real African experience" contrived for its tourists is just a prissy charade for their romantic fantasies.

In Gcaleka I see an uncouth, rural sangoma strutting his stuff barefoot on European soil with clouds of smoke and attitude, ancestral invocations and a crucifix around his neck. *He's* a real emissary of this continent. Not those grinning M.P.s in their Rolexes and three-piece suits. *He* proudly represents a true spirit of Africa.

Here in the wind-blasted poverty of Nyanga East, with the leafy white suburbs on Cape Town's distant mountain slopes looking as unreal as Avalon beneath the clouds, I find the flavour for my next show: iMUMBO JUMBO: *The Days of Miracle and Wonder*.

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Easter Weekend '97, and I am visiting Gcaleka's family homestead in the hills outside Butterworth, Transkei, for the second time. There is to be an important feast demanded by Gcaleka's ancestors, and a big ox must die. It's a great opportunity for me to collect material.

In the taxi here I asked the driver what he thinks of Gcaleka: "He is not a crook, but he is like a crook – he is quick, quicker than a fax," he said.

"You mean a fox," I put in.

"No, a fax."

The creatures of techno-mythology have invaded the landscape of outer Africa it seems, but the deeper I venture into this tale the more saddened I become about the cosmological wealth they have driven out...

Now, of course I am aware that Chief Nicholas Tilana Gcaleka has a rather dubious reputation. I know he's been charged for forgery on more than one occasion. I know he's a bit of a conman, and a power-monger and an opportunistic businessman with the gift of the gab, more easily imagined selling second-hand cars in Umtata than retrieving national grails from the forests of Scotland. I know that the bigwig Xhosa traditional leaders condemn him for bringing disrepute to their nation, lambast him for titling himself a chief when he's not one, and also claim that he has no right to the Gcaleka name.

Xhosa journalists have criticised me for placing the guy on a pedestal, even for dramatising his story. They think he's a clown. But there is something bigger going on here than tickles the eye; beneath

the surface of this quirky saga writhes a whole nest of issues, and whatever Gcaleka's character or bent, in regard to the skull-quest I believe he is sincere in his intentions.

Quite simply, he was instructed in dreams to retrieve Hintsu's skull and to hand it over to his descendents, who should bury it with the rest of the late king's skeleton, thereby bringing health and harmony to the country. In essence, his mission was no different to those of Gilgamesh, Sir Galahad, Jack (of the beanstalk fame), and thousands of other legendary heroes who have set out across the vistas of land and dream seeking elixirs, princesses or magical treasures to renew their kingdoms.

After Carl Jung dreamed of finding ancestral skulls beneath his house he parted from his mentor, Freud, and began his pioneering work in the caverns of the collective unconscious...

"The Spirit tells me to do these things." Gcaleka often protests. "I'm not doing this thing 'cos I'm clever."

The cry he harkened to is a fundamental and common one in societies that have come unravelled under the tread of more dominant civilizations or changing times: the call to look back to the old order for stability. A cry that asserts tradition against the crime and violence shredding the fabric of South Africa, against the forces of wilderness that have overrun the village (as in the zombie events). And if the Spirit of the Xhosa Nation chose a rather gregarious and offbeat messenger, who are we to question?

Not too long ago, when the logic of the sangomas held a lot more sway amongst a people only lightly contaminated by the cold reason of the West and the Church, Gcaleka's mission would not have raised a Xhosa eyebrow. Then dreams were accepted rather more unconditionally and were given much higher regard than they are today. I know sangomas who have woken from a dream in which they travelled several hundred kilometres in a minibus, disembarked at a signpost or turnoff they'd never seen before, walked to a farm house on the horizon and purchased a goat of a certain colour required for a sacrifice. Within days, they had followed the directions given them in the dream, and had returned home with the very goat they dreamed about. In fact, the final trial of a sangoma's ability before she graduates is to locate her sacrificial cow, hidden in the village or hills by her associates. She must track it down entirely by divination, just as she will dream which herbs are required to heal a particular patient, and exactly where in the forest those herbs are to be found.

Dreamland is the realm used by the departed ancestors to communicate with those still bound to the earth. But for all the talk of ancestors one hears these days from the mouths of black politicians, it seems their cell phones simply set off too much interference for the spiritual signals to make much sense any more.

I read an article somewhere that was trying to find a universal definition of tragedy through comparing a Greek and a Yoruban

tragedy. The author posited that tragedy arises from the distortion of what he calls the "mythoform": the consciousness of a culture. Each culture structures and perceives the world in a particular way. The tragic hero is he who in following his destiny deviates from the mythoform, thus threatening the basis of the whole cultural ethos. Therefore, although we sympathise with his humanity, he has to be destroyed.

But in Gcaleka's story we see a different sort of tragedy, one that arises from the collision of cultures, because Gcaleka does not deviate from the mythoform of his culture: in fact he bolsters it. The problem is that today his culture is framed as a quaint absurdity by another culture.

The hills undulate gently here, south of Butterworth. For hundreds of square kilometres they are lightly sprinkled with the wattle and daub huts of the impoverished Xhosa who eek a meagre living out of their fields. It is a land of children, women and pensioners: the men and many of the women are on the big white-owned farms, or have gone to the cities, hoping for employment.

Gcaleka's two *rondavels* and square house squat beside a busy gravel road that carries hurtling bakkies and overloaded minibuses towards the sea. A few hundred metres down the road is one of the farms of Xolilizwe Sigcau, the Xhosa king. I interviewed the plump monarch briefly over his formica kitchen table the last time I was here. He scowled at me through doleful eyes, less than impressed at Gcaleka's shenanigans, at my interest in them, and at my unannounced arrival at his house. His big Mercedes panted fiercely in the dust outside. He won't be attending this weekend's festivities, that's for sure.

The chief's wife and sons live in the square house, and his ancient parents in one of the *rondavels*. The second *rondavel* is the *amakhoseni* – the spirit house – painted in cream gloss, with a big red crucifix banner hanging on the wall. It is here that all the dancing, speechifying and feasting happens. People from surrounding homes have rocked up in droves, to share the feast, partake of the ritual and submit themselves to the preaching. The men and women sit against the walls inside the hut chatting, and singing sometimes.

I aim my video camera at everything and everyone, gathering information obsessively: colours, groupings, ritual objects, costumes, the dance steps of bare feet, the frenzied gabbling of possession, the fluid movements of these beautiful, clear-eyed people. Their singing is a pure, sweet fountain of sound from the belly of the earth.

(Much later Vukile and I study the recordings I've made of the Chief: the way he talks, the way he flings his arms about, the way he touches people. He has an affecting physicality. The camera zooms in: his eyes are always moving.)

When they are not dancing, or wobbling about on callused knees, Gcaleka's local novices crouch on the cement floor like meek mud-stained dogs. The chinking of their bottle-top leg rattles is a constant soundscape. Children dart in and out, flies descend in veils, the aroma of boiled goat meat turns the air to soup.

The traditions are celebrated and clan and community bonds are strengthened, which is after all what the ancestors wanted from the outset of this whole saga.

But the context today is a lot more complicated than it used to be, and the sharing of milky beer and charred meat while the lowing sacred herds look on is not enough to knit the old and new Africas together.

Aside from the scepticism that has eroded belief in the dreams of sangomas, petty politics has played a major role in frustrating the happy ending to Gcaleka's quest. In spite of the king's sullen denials, it is evident that the Chief had the support of his royal family and the tribal elders before he left for Britain, but when he returned to the Transkei with the skull they greeted him with hostility. He was an impostor, they had decided, trying to usurp power or to upstage the monarchy. They treated him with scorn and sent the skull away for scientific analysis.

Gcaleka's supporters attribute the turning of the tide to jealousy.

Umona (envy) is a common self-criticism amongst Xhosa-speaking people. It lies behind a good deal of the accusations of witchcraft levelled at members of their communities. I have been told of a woman who began to rear chickens and cultivate spinach to raise extra cash in the market of her village near Port Saint Johns. Her neighbours farmed only mealies, cabbages and pumpkins. Twice within that first year they torched her house and fields, so she gave up her venture. In the Kokstad zombie saga, the second woman on the hit list was the wealthy proprietor of a successful taxi company.

The success of one member of a community casts a shadow of inferiority on the others, and she must be pulled down to maintain the status quo. The logic is clear: if I feel the cold grip of envy strangling me, neutralise the object of envy and the emotion will pass.

To an obscure tribal monarchy fighting for national recognition in an isolated backwater of South Africa, the radiance of a local witchdoctor styled as a saviour by the television screens and front pages of the world must have left a sour taste in the mouth.

Of course "progress" was another factor in the outcome: once Gcaleka's find became high-profile, the educated young guns of the inner circle exerted pressure on the greybeards: the leadership must not be seen as primitive or ridiculous in the New Improved South Africa.

The leap from supporting the reclamation of a national figurehead to disavowal was easy. The soggy quicksand of mediocrity belched into action.

One of Gcaleka's two travelling companions on the British adventure was the Reverend Mzwandile Nzulwana, the prophet of the Saint John's Apostolic Faith Mission located on the outskirts of the one-mule town of Nqamakwe. I spend a couple of candlelit nights with this tranquil man at his all-night church services, where blue- and white-clad women wheel around in the clutch of the Holy Spirit, and take holy water home with them in film canisters.

The Reverend had several visions backing up Gcaleka's dreams: winged horses, the sun rising in the west: indicators of journeys to be taken and of "an honourable person" in the wrong land.

"You know pharaoh who was in Egypt?" he asks me. I am sitting with him, dazed in the dawn light, drinking sweet tea with my back to his whitewashed mud church. "When Moses came to him they told him about the vision. Pharaoh never believed, he said: 'Who's God? Who's more important than me?' So I was not surprised when King Xolilizwe denied this. But even now we are disappointed. This is the head of Hintsá."

And thumping between potholes from homestead to homestead in the big white bakkie from which she runs her booze retail enterprise, Gcaleka's wife laments: "Why don't they just give him the skull and that's that? He can bury it and the job is done. Why did they sign the papers and let him go to overseas? He is a sangoma. Scientists know nothing. Anyone can work a computer. They can turn it into a woman's skull if they want to. Those people are rich, they can buy what they want from the scientists. They are rich, those chiefs and kings."

The ancestors still loom large and stern in the psyches of the more traditionally minded chiefs. Tensions must have churned in their guts when the skull was bundled off to representatives of those ancestors' detractors: the forensics team at Cape Town's Groote Schuur Hospital.

The point is: exactly whose neck the skull once sat upon is really irrelevant. In shrines, mosques, churches and temples around the world, pilgrims flock to reap benefits from viewing the toenails, hairs and shrouds of prophets, saints and messiahs. And if these relics were sifted through the apparatus of Big Science, ninety to one their veracity would be found questionable. But no scientific test can ascertain the symbolic value of an item, the importance it has for the people who revere it.

Every so often I trek out to the foothills of the Maluti Mountains on the border between Lesotho and the Free State to spend a week or two retreating in a vast and remote cave called mThauleng. (The cast of IPI ZOMBI? lived and rehearsed here for two icy weeks in 1998 to give that play a charge of vital energy.) The cave is regarded as sacred by sangomas from around the country, and by various "new churches" that straddle Christianity and traditional African beliefs. The people that

come here to recharge their spiritual energies or to pray for luck, fertility, health and wealth, say that this cave is the womb of the earth. Life was conceived here between the male reeds and the female waters that run below, and from the great stone lips of the cave the first people and their cattle streamed out newborn into the dawn to settle the land, their sacred mother.

Within the cave a couple of deep tunnels burrow into the earth. We crawl into these to pray or to meditate: these are the places where ancestral communion is most powerful, where in the cold silence of rock we can contemplate the source of our existence. Here we are visited by dreams of startling resonance, and return to our everyday existences restored.

Now of course this cave is not really the womb of the earth. When you cross the river to climb the rocky path to the cave you remove your shoes and pray, because you are making a transition from the mundane world to that of metaphor; to the realm of myth, dreams, symbols and imagination, to revitalise yourself in the quiet waters of the collective psyche. No white-coated doctor would be foolish enough to try to prove that this place is not what believers claim it is; but what a tragedy if scientists were to proclaim it a museum to primitive beliefs because their detectors could not feel the vibes.

In the display cases and back rooms of museums in probably all the ex-colonial powers lie the bones and the royal and religious artefacts of the nations they conquered in their heyday. Delegations have been sent from several of their former colonies to attempt to retrieve these.

Because they contain the essential power of the nations of their origin, there is something almost magical about spooking away such items and reducing them to trophies, souvenirs and trinkets: he who holds these things also possesses their power. It is a humiliating gesture of domination, and it must be a struggle to rise from the dirt of the world stage and look your former master in the eyes if the skull of your greatest king still props up books in his dusty library; if the chain of lion's claws which that king wore at his throat as an emblem of his divine might hangs behind glass in your subjugator's curio cabinet. Those poses which set out periodically for the First World to fetch filched bones and gods are really out to reclaim their dignity.

Witchcraft aside, from a traditional African perspective mishaps and disorder are a sign that an ancestor has been offended in some way, and so has withdrawn his protection of his offspring from the destructive forces of the wilderness. Normally this offence concerns neglect of the ongoing rituals that the living must perform to maintain contact with the dead. One of the tasks of a sangoma is to ascertain the cause of the breakdown in this relationship, and to prescribe what rituals and sacrifices are required as a reconnection fee.

Now any ancestor whose bones have rested in a grave for 150 years without his skull is going to be somewhat peeved if his progeny

have made no effort to restore it. And the ancestor in question here was the king and symbolic father of the entire Xhosa nation. According to Gcaleka's dream guide, the Hurricane Spirit, the crime, violence and social turmoil in the country are the direct results of the frustrations of King Hintsa, whose wrathful "Hell Spirit" has wandered the land headless for the past century and a half, unable to rest. The skull has to be reclaimed and reburied. Then the ancestral realm will be reconciled with the mortal one, traditional collective values will be reaffirmed, and the national pride, morality and social harmony of the pre-colonial Golden Age will be restored.

In as much as the call from the depths of the Xhosa psyche to which Gcaleka responded was one for stability in uncertain times, it was also one for the reclamation of power from the nation's colonial subjugators. The might of that people, much eroded by colonial incursions, was finally shattered in the mid-1850s, after the predictions of Nongqawuse – that a new age would follow the destruction of all their livestock – resulted in catastrophe (these events are dramatised in THE PROPHET). The British exploited the devastation for their colonial ends.

Tellingly, Gcaleka's dreams began less than a year after apartheid fell and a Xhosa president took the helm of the country.

The skull that Gcaleka brought to South Africa from Scotland – and which he still doggedly claims is Hintsa's – is now exhibited as a curiosity at the Groote Schuur Medical Museum. The colonial master has been exchanged for the scientific one.

This whole saga really is just another round in the battle between materialistic and mythological consciousnesses – a fight between a god with no heart and a god with no head – where the reverberating symbol of the latter is reduced to a powerless object in the former, and where a sacred quest for self- and national actualisation is made to look ridiculous by dull men over-endowed with self-importance and utterly deficient in imagination.

In an age without DNA tests, in a land less confused, Gcaleka would probably have been welcomed home as a hero, and the skull he carried buried with pomp in a ceremony to mobilize his nation around the great days of yore. Men would have rattled their spears while women ululated, and the glory of the ancestors would have been recalled.

But in our age of high materialism, if the imagination has any place it is in the service of the Market. And a lot of black Africans cannot help themselves, but must gaze at their world through Western eyes, with the sneering arrogance of the West they imagine they despise. So much for the African Renaissance...

Bhalizulu Mhlonthlo, the aged ex-Transkei parliamentarian who was Gcaleka's second travelling companion to Britain, sits on his bed in his tumbledown hut in a has-been black suit and fossilised feet. He shakes his head and clicks his tongue as he gazes into the valleys

surrounding his precipitous eyrie near Willowvale: "The wind is changing, at times you can feel it coming across the fields, through the windows, but the black people cannot feel it anymore...they don't listen. These are the empty times that are coming. The wind is changing."

Late on Easter Sunday, after Gcaleka has sprinkled holy water on the British and South African flags, lit candles brought from Scotland for his ancestors and Jesus, and psyched everyone up with an interactive sermon on the misguided behaviour of the Xhosa leaders, we head out into the afternoon sun for the sacrifice.

In the kraal out back a huge brown Nguni ox has been selected for slaughtering; he glowers and snorts as the wailing crowd approaches, drums throbbing, sangomas leaping and spinning in their carnival attire.

The ancestors, weakened by the failure of their progeny to heed their call to rally around Hints'a's skull, require blood sacrifice to boost their strength. The cries of the dying bull will signify ancestral approval: the longer and louder the bellowing, the greater the cause for joy. This was to be a bludgeoning of unprecedented jubilation.

Standing amongst this throng of clapping, singing people while their spiritual guides address their forefathers who have gathered invisibly in this open-air temple – tiny children clinging to the wooden fence of the enclosure, grandfathers wrapped in white blankets praying, solemn-faced youths in suits, all beneath a cloud-shot pink sky on these eternal green hills – I have the sense of being present at something very meaningful. Time's confining walls are broken by the pounding rhythm and the ancient harmonies, and all around me I feel the tingling energy of a vast, rich collective stretching back across centuries, all immediate, tangible, present, now. This is African Spirit.

A knife is plunged again and again into the bulky neck of the thrashing ox. His great white tongue reaches out to twist around the life that is rushing away. His blood is drawn down into the damp black earth that it came from. The crowd raises its voice in ecstasy. The ancestors are appeased, for now...

A COURT OF CATS

(a grand collection of sangomas at a graduation ceremony at the bottom of the world, in the village of Majola, Transkei)

The Court of Cats, if you please, take it from me.

"Water" He cries, "bring me water! Let me wash these hands, oh wash these hands."

He is playful, even arrogant, this feline Witchdoctor King.
A mixture betwixt and several others between, or besides.
She produces a vast blue urn, the mortal girl,
Too in awe even to voice her awe – no "your Worship", "your Highness", "your Majesty".
His hands are stiff on unbent arms, unyielding to the vessel.
She tips the fluid towards Him.
Pigeons splattering in a fountain.

"By your leave, by your leave, a speech!"
He intones, and liquid slips from His wrists.
The people slink and slacken and smile.
"By your leave, by your leave, by your leave,"
He winces, smiles, He rolls his eyes,
And the girl bares the basin away.
"My attention has been drawn,"
He smiles, He shimmers, He slinks,
"My attention has been drawn to your honourable, dignified presences."
A movement in their mouths, a binding in their breasts:
They soften with pleasure.
He sucks on a joint, He suckkuckucks on a joint.
Mmm.
He smiles, He shimmers, He scintillates,
He clicks his sticks to a rhythm He hears.
They soften, they silent, they vacant – the masses,
They love to listen, to watch: how strange He is, how weird and nocturnal,
In His leopard prints, in His furs and His feathers and beads,
His black cat black cat eyes,
And perpetually shrouded in smoke.
He speaks right into their dreams.

"We are here to be, together to be, be all."
He sucks on a joint, He suckkuckucks on a joint.
The softening of pleasure.
A flicker of flame,
His claws in the floor,
Crouched on a limb in the thickets of His lair,
Slow-eyed He sways and rocks:
"AmaKhosi!"
While stretched upon the dung – the commoners – their legs send toes pricking up into the dim (their several toes),
Bodies slumping, their faces beads on His plingstring song.
He neighs a sharp-pitched laugh.

This is the Court of Cats, I must repeat, resound, remind,
This is the Court of splendid Cats.
And let no man fail to consent, to stoop or submit.
And let no man fail to kneel and to mouth in apish form,
For this is the Court of Cats.
And let no woman fail to silent, to merge, to sway.
And let no woman fail to sound His song when He plucks her plingstring
chord.
For this is the Court, the Cauldron of Cats, on the brink of the
bottomless night.

NOTES FROM iMUMBO JUMBO WORKBOOKS

More than just a stand against materialistic rationality, this iMUMBO JUMBO must be a celebration of dream, ritual, spirit, the unconscious and the irrational; must actively empower these... it is about a world pervaded by Spirit. The Spirit cannot be quelled, though scientists and kings may thwart it for a while, though people may side with Big Science. The victory is the Spirit. The ritual of Life. The play must always remember this.

[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, April '97]

I dream that Gcaleka and I are together under a wide-spreading old tree somewhere, somewhere near a cemetery. He leads me to a narrow gateway marked by two tall rocks. On the other side is dense forest. He passes through the gate and calls me to follow. I am afraid, I don't want to go with him. The Otherside. He takes my arm and pulls me, but the gate is too narrow to allow me through, and I don't want to go with *him*. I don't trust him really...

[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, May '97]

I must not feel the ridiculous, naff pressure to be clear and straightforward. We are dealing with non-logic here. We are dealing with dreams. Amaze and confuse. Daze and amuse. Use bold strokes!

[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, May '97]

The place where the bushes were being burnt, where the potent fumes made the forest itself fall into dreaming...in the bright white smoke I saw spirits turning into air.

[Ben Okri, The Famished Road]

No need to pussyfoot and be delicate with this play. This picture must be painted in bold strokes, brightly. This is not a play of soft gentle moments. This is a play of riot and pain and noise and blood and dirt and pride and metal and corruption and clash and con and stink and life and jealousy and death and colour and semen and fame and sex and glory and hype and gods and lineage and nationalism. Amongst all this brashness lie bright gems.

[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, March '97]

Ooh! How this work flexes and bumps and jumps and redefines itself. Cells multiplying and changing. Just when you think you can see it, it turns around in its womb and is more marvellous or dismaying than ever.

[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, April '97]

This play is surfacing like a great African whale, and I'm battling to get a grip on it. I'm battling to view it. I need quiet and space and time. And I don't have it. I feel I don't have the structural net to catch it in. Keep it simple!

[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, April '97]

I keep forgetting: my actors do not have to BE the characters. This cast must be like a sports team, playing at being the characters: "We are not these people that you see, we are merely playing at being them, briefly. Though we play the enemies of the hero, we are actually his supporters".

[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, April '97]

Well, I've got my Bunfight troupe together: very strong, beautiful, alive people. Makes me terrified and amazed; terrified because so much of what I've designed must be taken beyond itself by these people. I have to play with them to uncover their talents. Amazed because of the rich jewel potential this play has with such a team.

[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, May '97]

HISTORY OF iMUMBO JUMBO

To make iMUMBO JUMBO, THIRD WORLD BUNFIGHT set up for almost three months in Grahamstown again, colonising a wing of the old colonial Cathcart Arms Hotel, which had run to seed in the New South

Africa. The Cape Town contingent – Miranda, Tony, Xola, Thembani, Vukile, Sindiswa and Nomvula – was joined by two sangomas from the rural Transkei: Thembisa Dlamini, a lovely, vibrant woman with an extraordinary voice, and Seku ||, one of Gcaleka's own protégés and a breathtaking dancer. The rest of the cast of more or less forty-five came from Rini Township, and included six choristers from the local flock of the Saint John's Apostolic Faith Mission (Reverend Nzulwana's church), another seven sangomas and eight primary school children.

Henrietta 11/5/11 10:24 PM
Comment:

Two young men who became permanent members of the company joined us at this point: the impish Luyanda "Spashasha" Butana – who would choreograph many of the show-stopping dances over the next few years, and who has a hand in youth dance projects all over the Eastern Cape – and Makhosi Yafele, whose brightness and profound inner quiet have been very valuable. It has been a joy and a reward to watch the development of these guys. Makhosi's gregarious and talented sister, Noxolo Donyeli, and Boniwe Tyota also became part of TWB with this production, and went on to perform in IPI ZOMBIE and THE PROPHET.

As in ZOMBIE, a good deal of the script was generated by recording improvisations on tape which were then transcribed and edited. Dances, based on video recordings of Malawian and Zulu traditional steps, were collectively choreographed.

We rehearsed long, long days in a ramshackle Anglican church with loose floorboards on the lower slopes of Rini: Vukile (who played Gcaleka) first thing in the morning, then the sangomas, then the rest of the cast in the afternoon. The Christian faction came in once a week in the evenings.

I had this crazy notion to keep all these groups separate until the premiere, and then to allow the show to find itself in that first performance. A week before we opened I held a one-off trial run, bringing everybody together for the first time, just so they could get a sense of the general flow and their cues: it was a rambling, chaotic disaster, and I was in a state of panic. We had to work our asses off over the next few days to pull a show together that had pace, rhythm and tension.

Our sangomas in ZOMBIE had had to travel the sixty-odd kilometres down to the coast the previous year to request permission (with the aid of a few bottles of brandy) from their ancestors to perform in that play. They were from the traditional Xhosa school, the "*camagu*" *amagqirha*, who believe their ancestors live underwater. Gcaleka was of the Zulu-influenced "*amakhos*" school, which looks to the forest for ancestral guidance: the sangomas of iMUMBO JUMBO were prepared simply to slaughter a few fowls to secure spiritual sanction for their participation. They did this (with the aid of several bottles of brandy) on the yellow wood floorboards of my bedroom in the Cathcart Arms, while the spirits of the white pioneers scowled from the rafters...

My bedroom was also the workshop where I painted suits in ethnic designs, and made masks and props.

I had eschewed the allotted main program venues because of their conventional stages, and iMUMBO JUMBO played in the Recreation Hall in the coloured neighbourhood between the white suburbs and the township: an apt location for this drama of cultural collisions. Most of the company, who dreamed of velvet drapes and banks of multi-coloured stage lights, shook their heads in wonder. We constructed a three-quarter round amphitheatre in the hall, with the audience on tiers of hay bales. The show was lit almost entirely by candles massed precariously on long poles amongst the seating: those who were not fazed by the vortex of theatrics could not help sitting on the edge of their seats with all that incendiary potential around them. A good thing nobody knew that an hour before the curtains went up on the first performance we'd seen a long black snake sliding into the straw... the Hurricane Spirit, no doubt, giving us his blessings.

Chief Gcaleka travelled from Cape Town to watch the show. He sat next to a friend of mine, astounded at Vukile's flamboyant imitation of his mannerisms, and his ideas and words tripping off Vukile's tongue. "Hey, that man he thinks same like me!" he told Julia.

The show was a sell-out success with rave reviews, and within a month we'd been invited to remake it for an eight-week run at The Market Theatre, Johannesburg. Here we streamlined the show and cut the cast to thirty-five, bringing in local sangomas and Christian choristers, and Michael Sishange as Nzulwana. Abey replaced Xola as Gcaleka in the pantomime – "The Days of Miracle and Wonder" – staged within the play. The urban buzz of Jo'burg gave iMUMBO JUMBO an electricity that the Grahamstown production could never have had, but obviously the rural grit was rinsed out in the process.

John Kani, director of the theatre, demanded that the women be put in bras rather than bearing their boobs in the second half of the show: "It is not in our culture for women to show their breasts." I was told. Well, where I had lived in the rural Transkei, over the past eighteen months I had seen more swinging brown boobs than I cared to count, I replied, and for two months in Jo'burg my actresses' boobs swung. (When the show tours abroad in 2003, though, bras will be the order of the day: have I grown up, or am I just appalled by the potential for exotic titillation on European stages...?)

There was also ire from some of the black intelligentsia about sangomas participating in the show: theatre is not the place for such spiritual matters, went the line. I was accused of being exploitative. Ho hum.

The sangomas themselves claimed they were delighted to have an opportunity to show people what they really did. Well, maybe they were also just happy to get a chance to perform and to earn some money.

The cultural landscape is an ideological minefield these days...

The Jo'burg critics waved banners and flags, and iMUMBO JUMBO was hailed as a watershed work, but that didn't bring the people thronging from the relative safety of their suburban fortresses to a theatre in the bloodstained city centre, and eight weeks was a long time to play to small audiences in the yawning cavern of The Market Theatre.

A few weeks into the run Miranda gave birth to Camilla Nozuko, her daughter by Tony. The play was dedicated to this new little person, and to an old and special person to me and hundreds of other Cape Town theatre people: Mavis Taylor, the doyenne of black theatre in that part of the country, with whom I had lived on and off over the previous two years, and who had died while we were rehearsing. A woman with a spirit of fire!

ARTICLE IN THE DRAMA REVIEW (TDR)

Why Did the Chicken Cross the Cultural Divide?

Brett Bailey and Third World Bunfight's *iMumbo Jumbo*

Judith Rudakoff

More than just a stand against materialistic rationality, this iMumbo Jumbo must be a celebration of dream, ritual, Spirit, the unconscious and the irrational; must actively empower these...it is about a world pervaded by Spirit. The Spirit cannot be quelled, though scientists and kings may thwart it for a while, though people may side with Big Science. The victory is the Spirit. The ritual of Life. The play must always remember this.

—Brett Bailey, *iMumbo Jumbo notebook*, ([1997] 2003a:108)

The Context

Saturday, 9 August 2003. Cape Town. I'm jetlagged from two overnight flights in a row, and not quite grounded. Travel this fast and this far in a seemingly timeless cyclical void of eating, sleeping, and watching movies at 40,000 feet

removes any sense of the distance covered. I'm two continents away from home, Canada, and I'm at the theatre.

It's closing night of Brett Bailey and Third World Bunfight's production *iMumbo Jumbo: The Days of Miracle and Wonder* (1997) at the Baxter Theatre, coproduced by BITE 03 Barbican London in association with UK Arts International. Written, directed, and designed by Bailey, the show promises to be spectacular. Bailey, a white South African who grew up in a middle-class environment, is the bad boy of the theatre scene. Earlier productions, such as *The Prophet* (1999) and *Ipi Zombie?* (1998), not only secured his reputation for large-scale, visually spectacular extravaganzas, but also established him as an artist committed to researching, exploring, and dramatizing the histories, myths, and legends—ancient as well as contemporary—of black Africa, especially those of the amaXhosa people. This hasn't always endeared him to all audiences, particularly in a theatre climate where the issue of voice appropriation continues to grow in importance.

Bailey's company, Third World Bunfight, has begun to garner much attention and acclaim, nationally and internationally. In the elaborate program for *iMumbo Jumbo*, Bailey characterizes the company:

Third World Bunfight is a South African theatre troupe strongly committed to the stories, performance forms and Spirit of Africa. Our works dig deep beneath the surface of post-colonial Africa: we explore sensitive and contentious issues, and dramatise them in ways that valorise and celebrate the extraordinary wealth of cultural modes available here. (2003b)

Third World Bunfight also prides itself on having created, since it was founded in 1996, an all-black performing company comprised of untrained actors from disadvantaged areas such as the Grahamstown Township of Rini, Port St. Johns, and Cape Town. In the relatively few years since its inception, the company has developed and sustained sponsor relationships and funding partnerships with a significant amount of national and international corporations, foundations, and businesses.ⁱ

In his recently published book *The Plays of Miracle and Wonder* (2003a), Bailey and others comment eloquently and articulately about his philosophy on the process of play creation and about his engagement with the rituals,

ceremonies, and daily lives of the people and nations whose history and beliefs he has chosen to theatricalize. Theatre critic John Matshikiza writes: [T]he worlds of [...] ancestral spirits that inhabit our rivers and trees and the few other unviolated spaces that are left to us, are our last refuge against a vengeful and unpredictable god who has been bestowed on us by those who defeated our ancestors on the field of battle. And that vengeful god has always been portrayed as a white man. Why should Brett Bailey, another white man, be allowed to violate that final sacred space? There is never going to be an answer to questions like these, except to take Bailey at his word when he says his art and his spirituality are inextricably linked, and that, in his search for a spiritual truth, he has stumbled on a rich vein that springs from beneath the ground on which he stands. (in Bailey 2003a:6)

Which leads me back to the closing night performance at the Baxter. I am there with a white friend and theatre colleague. In the few hours since my plane landed, I have already had a heated discussion with one of my black theatre friends who refuses to attend Brett Bailey productions on the grounds that he doesn't need to see another white man reinterpreting his history or staging folkloric representations of rites he holds sacred. The audience at the Baxter is, if one can generalize by observing, well-heeled and largely white. As the play begins and music, costumes, and pageantry escalate, the audience is clearly enthralled by the exotica: they are totally immersed in the environment Bailey and his troupe have created, titillated but still comfortable in their plush, familiar surroundings. As well, the audience is engaged with both the characters of the story unfolding and those within the dramatic device of the play-within-a-play. From the first moments of the Hurricane Spirit's entrance and direct address monologue to the audience, to the brilliance of the full cast, musical production numbers, this is what can only be termed a theatrical event.

For the premiere production of *iMumbo Jumbo* at the annual Grahamstown National Theatre Festival (which showcases work from all over South Africa), Bailey chose a far less mainstream venue. Performed in the Recreation Hall in a "colored" neighborhood that was positioned, as Bailey describes it in his "History of *iMumbo Jumbo*" that accompanies the published text of the play

(2003a:144), “Between the white suburbs and the black township: an apt location for this drama of cultural collisions.” He goes on to explain how his company, who “dreamed of velvet drapes and banks of multi-coloured stage lights, shook their heads in wonder”:

We constructed a three-quarter round amphitheatre in the hall, with the audience on tiers of hay bales. The show was lit almost entirely with candles massed precariously on long poles amongst the seating: those who were not fazed by the vortex of theatrics could not help sitting on the edge of their seats with all that incendiary potential around them.” (144)

The Baxter Theatre in Cape Town provides as much of a contrast to this initial venue as possible. Built in 1977 in the comfortable suburb of Rondebosch, amidst large Tudor-style houses on the edge of the University of Cape Town’s main campus, it feels as staid and as solid as it sounds. The main theatre, with 666 seats, is a far cry from the small, community-hall setting of the premiere production.

iMumbo Jumbo dramatizes the actual story of Chief Nicholas Tilana Gcaleka, a spiritual leader and chief, who Bailey describes as “*sangoma*, priest, liquor salesman, guru” in his notes to the published script (2003a:106). The chief traveled to Britain in 1996 to retrieve the skull of his ancestral king, HintsakaPhalo, chief of the amaXhosa nation, who had been murdered in 1836 by colonizing forces. In so doing, Gcaleka intended to restore peace to his country. Bailey characterizes the play:

This whole saga really is just another round in the battle between materialistic and mythological consciousnesses—a fight between a god with no heart and a god with no head—where the reverberating symbol of the latter is reduced to a powerless object in the former, and where a sacred quest for self- and national actualization is made to look ridiculous by dull men over-endowed with self-importance and utterly deficient in imagination. (109)

Given the effects of aspects of the final performance of *iMumbo Jumbo*, which I will discuss below, Bailey’s description and the subject matter and style of

the piece take on even greater significance. The work, Bailey claims: takes the form of a *sangoma* ceremony of homage to the departed ancestors. Chief Nicholas Tilana Gcaleka holds this *ntlombe* to tell the people of the world about his beliefs, philosophies, and predictions, and to strengthen the Spirit in the audience by incorporating them in this ritual.” (2003a:106)

Brett Bailey's Chicken

Close to the end of the play, in a scene entitled “State of the Nation,” there is swift shift in tone that leaves the audience somewhat disturbed. In it, Chief Gcaleka addresses the issue of the Xhosa people throwing away their customs and disrespecting their ancestors, and the ramifications, which he sees as violent and hateful. He invokes the case of a boy raping his grandmother, using vulgar language and graphic examples. Though this is a short scene, and the tone almost immediately reverts to the humorous, parodic tone prevalent earlier, the audience around me is clearly unsettled. People are looking at each other. The entrance of the character of Queen Elizabeth of England and another character who is a caricature of Nelson Mandela brings the house back to a comfort zone. The Queen, resplendent in traditional Xhosa face paint, beads around her neck, wearing a short skirt and a bra, cradles a plaster Corgi dog in one arm and a cell phone in the other. She and the Mandela character engage with the Chief in conversation. The audience is relieved.

But not for long.

As the story of Chief Tilana Gcaleka’s travels to Scotland to retrieve the skull of his murdered ancestor comes to a conclusion, and as the majority of the Bunfight actors leave the stage, we hear the sounds of ritual drumming. The stage begins to fill with actors, some in character and some who are, I learn afterwards, practicing sangomas enacting a ritual. They intone a sangoma chant, a lament for a father who was killed. Children in the cast distribute fruits that have been blessed to audience members, who are willing participants in what they still relate to as theatrical event. People around me are smiling, curious. I am sitting quite far back in the sold-out auditorium, but even from my vantage point this is an increasingly intense experience. The drums seem

to get louder. The chanting becomes overwhelming. Incense is wafting throughout the large house and many candles are lit onstage. As the audience begins to realize that, without much warning and without having given their permission, they are actively participating in a ritual, the feeling in the house shifts dramatically. People are not just looking at one another uncomfortably; they are whispering and some are gesturing. It is becoming apparent that not everyone is happy with the way this play is going. One of the sangomas carries a chicken onstage. It's white. It's alive. It's making its displeasure known. The chicken is blessed. And then, as the audience watches, it is slaughtered by sangoma Ntombe Tongo. Even before the first sight of blood, several audience members get to their feet and leave the theatre as quickly as they can. At first, those leaving do so quietly and decorously, as the chicken is blessed, as its head is moved through the smoke. When it becomes clear that the animal has been killed, the people exiting become less polite. Some are in tears, some are speaking quite loudly; though it's difficult to hear what they're saying above the drums and the chanting, it's obvious that they're angry and upset. Approximately 30 patrons, by my estimation, left the theatre. According to a member of Third World Bunfight, speaking casually in the theatre bar after the show, phone calls expressing outrage were already coming in to the theatre before the play had ended.

The Aftermath

Over the next few weeks, it becomes virtually impossible to go anywhere without hearing about Brett Bailey's chicken. At dinner parties, in the daily papers—Brett Bailey's chicken is unavoidable. What are the issues at stake and why are they inextricably entwined with Bailey's theatre work? Many of the people who left the theatre, and indeed many who later commented without having seen the performance (or any performance of *iMumbo Jumbo*, which followed the premiere run at the Grahamstown Festival with a run at Johannesburg's Market Theatre and then toured to London England's Barbican Theatre) were animal rights activists. They drew attention to the staging of the play without a chicken onstage in

England. They focused on the place in contemporary societies of the ritualistic slaughter of animals in general and they emphasized the ethical concerns of performing such a ceremony before an unsuspecting crowd, without prior consent. Not even theatre manager Manny Manim of the Baxter had been informed that a ritual slaughter was to occur that night.

Others who protested believe, as I do, that to present a folkloric representation of ritual onstage is entirely acceptable, but that enacting the ritual outside of sacred or consecrated space (and I include the audience area as part of the arena) without a fully aware and engaged host of participants is disrespectful, sacrilegious and, ultimately, dangerous. Members of the spirit world are not easily amused or appeased.

Some of the newspaper articles and letters to the editor are worth examining, primarily for their various, diverse responses to Brett Bailey's chicken.ⁱⁱ Also remarkable is the cultural divide—clearly defined by the opinions espoused—between the white and black writers, discernible by their names and sometimes by the town or area in which they live.

One of the areas of commentary that emerged early on emanated from the fact that in South Africa, where animal sacrifice is part of religious worship for some people, there are strict laws and bylaws that govern ritual killing of animals. Neighbors, for example, must be informed of any animal slaughter and, if they so desire, the ritual must take place out of their sight. This means that while a family cannot simply perform the ritual slaughter of a sheep or an ox on their front lawn in a residential neighborhood, they are legally permitted to enact a cultural slaughter of an animal so long as it is done out of sight of the public. Shaun Bodington, Chief Inspector for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Cape Town, also explained, in his comments in the papers, that in order for these rules to apply, the sacrifice must be undertaken for specific religious or cultural reasons (C. Bailey 2003). Subsequently, and as a result of the hue and cry, the SPCA launched an inquiry into the legality of the sacrifice and whether or not the animal was killed humanely. Bailey and Third World Bunfight, it turns out, did not have a permit to slaughter an animal in a public venue, leaving both the company and the Baxter open to potential lawsuits.

Curiously, Brett Bailey's chicken was not the animal brought onstage throughout the rest of the run of the show at the Baxter. This other chicken, named Veronica by the cast and crew, had become more of a pet than a prop and as such, on the day of the closing performance, a different bird was purchased specifically for the purpose of the ritual slaughter. Veronica has since retired from the stage to live out her days at Spier wine estate in Stellenbosch (Kemp 2003b).

Other comments featured the unavoidable references to KFC and the eating of chickens that have, arguably, suffered extensively throughout their short lives before becoming battered, breaded, and deep-fried for consumption. There were also allegations from members of the black community that the white community simply didn't understand the spirituality of the ritual. Sivuyile Mangxamba wrote in the *Cape Argus*:

As long as Cape Town is in Africa—Baxter Theatre included—white residents are increasingly going to find black neighbours whose African belief systems have not been diluted by colonialism and the evangelic missionaries of the last two centuries. As more black people become affluent and move in to the southern suburbs, Camps Bay and other areas that symbolise social mobility, their white counterparts will have to accept that once in a while a goat, sheep, or even an ox will have to be slaughtered in a thanksgiving ceremony to ancestors. (Mangxamba 2003)

Mangxamba goes on to compare the ritual slaughter of Brett Bailey's chicken to the taking of Communion as the drinking and eating of "the raw body and blood of Christ." He comments that, "At least the *sangomas* at The Baxter had the good manners to cook their chicken first." The sacrificed animal was, it was widely reported, *braiied* or barbecued at a cast party later on and eaten with gusto.

There were those who commented that many of the letters to the editors in the daily papers referred to the beauty of the white chicken. (Yes, there were questions about whether the chicken would have been considered beautiful if it had been black.) Once the racism card had been dealt, letters to the editor became increasingly oriented in this direction.

Siviwe Bangani, in a letter to the *Cape Argus*, wrote: "Since when and where has slaughtering a chicken or a goat become murder? If it is murder, why do

they not investigate thousands of other murders happening everyday in Nyanga, Gugulethu, and Khayelitsha and so forth?” (2003). After two weeks of facilitating drama workshops for youth in Nyanga, Gugulethu. and Langa Townships and hearing stories of the participants’ personal experiences of extreme violence in their neighborhoods, I can’t help but agree with Bangani.ⁱⁱⁱ

And I have to wonder at the reasoning behind comments such as those expressed in another letter in the same issue of the *Cape Argus* by Lynn Hill in which she wrote, of Brett Bailey, “Perhaps if he had his head dipped in smoke, his neck stretched and cut and was left to bleed to death he would understand the pain and suffering the chicken had to endure” (2003).

In a letter on 15 August 2003 responding to white South African actor Graham Weir’s strongly held views that the chicken slaughter was out of place (in Kemp 2003a),^{iv} Bev Bird of Hout Bay raised the issue of the validity of ritual sacrifice, categorizing the killing of the chicken as, in essence, entertainment and arguing that this was reprehensible:

It is fatuous to argue in defence of this act that chickens are routinely slaughtered for food or for ritual purposes. Such slaughter notionally serves a necessary purpose. The killing of an animal for mere amusement or theatrical entertainment is a different matter altogether [...]. African theatre is no different from any other theatre: it is intended to reflect life, not replicate it.

Otherwise we may expect actual murders and rapes and circumcisions in future African stage productions. I regard the killing as reprehensible. (2003)

Many letters and discussions focused on the issue of informed permission. If Bailey had announced that an animal would be killed before the performance and given audience members the right to decide if this was an act in which they chose to participate or even observe, would it have been different? If Bailey had informed management at the Baxter, or applied for a legal permit to enact the sacrifice, would this have altered the perception or the effects of the event? Was the discussion and debate divided along racial lines or was this a case of a theatremaker believing in his absolute dominion over the stage space his work was inhabiting?

Other debates examined the apportioning of blame. For example, the actor/sangoma who slaughtered the chicken was described, in several reports, as having made the decision independently to kill the animal, doing

so as a ritual of gratitude to his ancestors on the closing night of the production's run.

And where was Brett Bailey throughout this huge public outcry? By all accounts, he was no longer in Cape Town, having left soon after the closing-night chicken braai to travel to Mpumalanga, to begin work at a BBC script-writing retreat. He did, however, write a response letter, which was published on 18 August 2003, in the *Cape Times*. In it, he first addressed the killing of chickens for the fast food industry and the conditions under which these animals are raised, indicating that animal rights activists in Africa have not historically focused on these chickens. He also reminded the public that in the past, when Third World Bunfight had conducted opening or closing rituals that involved animal sacrifice, there had been nothing to compare to the current response. He addressed the issue of appropriateness of venue for the sacrifice:

The difficulty with a theatre is that boundaries can blur: something which is intended as a cultural sacrificial offering may easily be seen—because of the nature of drama—as merely a stunt: the stage implies a certain way of regarding what is presented upon it.

This is the biggest problem I have with presenting the ritualistic work of my company in a conventional theatre: what is real runs the risk of being reduced to spectacle.

In the 1997 versions of *iMumbo Jumbo* we faked the sacrifice of the chickens. I did not want this faking in the latest version. I wanted the ceremony to be culturally accurate. Our resident hen, Veronica, was brought on stage every night, blessed by the *sangomas* who performed the ceremony, and then returned to her crate.

Yet where all other ceremonial details were strictly adhered to, this felt phoney.

The sacrifice of the hen on Saturday night was intended not as a publicity stunt (which would have been a poor marketing tactic coming on the final night of our run); it had to be done: the last performance had to be real. So while I'm sorry that the event offended some people, I do not regret that it was performed.

As an artist, I take on the role of pushing boundaries; the boundaries of society and of my self. To open up issues and to investigate them. To promote debate.

The theatre, like an art gallery, is a safe place in which to do this. In an over-sanitised world it is one of the few places left to us where such testing should be encouraged.

One cannot know the outcome of such works—either within one’s own heart or in the psyche of society—until it has been done.

The issues here are more multi-layered and complex than the sensationalists would have us believe.”

Indeed. And to plumb the depths of all of the issues raised on either side of the cultural divide would take much time, many pages and the sounding of many, many voices. For now, I’m satisfied with observing the ruffled feathers, and waiting to see what happens after the food for thought has been suitably digested. (Bailey 2003c)

<EN>Notes

ⁱ. Funding sources included the National Arts Council of South Africa, the Arts and Culture Trust of the President, the Standard Bank Foundation, the Royal Netherlands Embassy of South Africa, HIVOS, Interfund, Pro-Helvetica Arts Council of Switzerland, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Stockholm Stadsteatern, the Anglo American Chairman’s Fund, the South Africa Development Fund, Avis Car Hire, Theatre Institute of the Netherlands, Business and Arts South Africa, Wereld Musiek Theater Festival (Netherlands), Barbican Centre-BITE Festival (London, England), Warwick University Arts centre (UK), UK Arts International Ltd,

Harare International Festival of the Arts, the Market Theatre (Johannesburg, SA), Spier Festival (Stellenbosch/Cape Town), the Standard Bank National Arts Festival (SA).

ⁱⁱ. Some of the headlines are worth quoting in and of themselves: "Slaughter at The Baxter" reads one headline in the *Cape Argus* (AUTHOR 2003) while above this piece a second article bears the title "Lucky for Plucky Clucker" (Kemp 2003b). See also Biggs 2003; Benetar 2003a, 2003b; Morris 2003; Uys 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ. From 11 August to 21 August 2003 I facilitated drama workhops for youth at Gugu S'Thebe Community Centre in Langa, at Oscar Mpetha School in Nyanga, and at Thembaletu School for the Disabled.

^{iv}. Weir is quoted as saying, "If the actors are unable to get their message across without acts of violence, they should not be on stage. They were able to get their message across to great effect in London where the use of the chicken on stage was not allowed. I think Bailey should be publicly flogged" (in Kemp 2003a).

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