

**THESE ARTICLES AND NOTES WERE PUBLISHED IN BRETT'S BOOK:
'THE PLAYS OF MIRACLE AND WONDER' (2003)**

**AT THE END BRETT IS INTERVIEWED BY STUDENTS THAT ARE
STUDYING THE PLAY (2006)**

REVELATIONS

*Things come naturally to an end.
Yet sometimes things are broken, broken like a pot beneath your heel.
Sometimes things are crushed.
Sometimes the blood is squeezed out like a scream.
[THE PROPHET]*

We're going on a journey: we walk amongst shacks, debris, rubbish – a township landscape in squalid lethargy. Walk, walk, to the outskirts: a littered barren place where the weeds grow high and the refuse rots. We cross this space. Beyond is a wall with a small iron gate in it: "No Entry". Force the gate, gritty with rust, the smell of rust on our hands. Beyond: white earth unmarked by footprints. We walk on. Dry white earth, dust, bones – big bones in mounds, under cobwebs. An endless dustscape with empty clouds on the horizon and the dull whine of wind through dry weeds. Fragments, shards, ribs, femurs projecting dimly from the sand, and out there a beacon: a pile higher than the others. We approach it. A small withered creature crouches atop this heap of bones and skulls. She is as bleached as the bonesands, her hair in tattered shreds; cracked skin, a threadbare grey wrap, her eyes sealed against the glare. The wind, the cold, the naked sun, the whiteness. And the rustle of faraway whispering.

We're going on a journey backwards in time. To see what happened. To understand. We've heard stories and legends, histories and rumours. We have so many questions.

But no matter how much we prod her, no matter how we coax, the girl will not speak...

[THE PROPHET workbook, March 1999]

"THERE IS A THING THAT SPEAKS IN MY COUNTRY"

[Xhosa king Sarili to Sir George Grey, Governor of the Cape Colony]

For behold, the day cometh that shall burn like an oven; and all the proud and all that do wickedly shall be stubble; and the day that cometh shall burn them up... and it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing on his wings, and ye shall go forth and grow up as calves of the stall.

[Malachi 4:1-2, The Bible]

The lonely girl sits on the brink of a dark pool in a soft-grassed gorge with the rush of the waves in the distance. From the depths of the pool she hears voices; she sees faces and dancing forms. They beckon to her, these beings. They make wonderful promises. The sun caresses her skin. She hugs her knees to her chest. She listens.

And then one day the King comes to visit her, this lonely girl in the soft-grassed valley. He has heard of her visions. He is noble and wise, but now he is troubled. See, his kingdom is ailing: war and disease afflict the people and their herds. Shadows darken their faces. They do not know where to turn. What must he do?

They sit together at the water's edge, the King and the girl, and she tells him tales that make his heart smile. She tells him the wonderful promises made by the beings from beneath the water. Everything will come right. Things will be better than ever before, he will see. Wonderful new cattle will appear. The ancestors will even return to the world. Everything will be perfect.

I love this story. I love the magic in it. It takes me back to the childhood narratives of underwater kingdoms I told to friends at the poolside. It recalls my snake man spirit visitor on a parched riverbank in Zimbabwe.

I want to sit in that gentle place with that girl, the reflections of weaverbirds flitting beneath us. I want to see what she sees: the silent fish lips of her messengers mouthing words beneath the film of dark water.

I don't want to think about repercussions... It's so haunting, so poignant: it grips my heart. If it were but a fairytale.

"How will these miracles come to pass," the king asks the girl, "what do they say?"

"Ah," she replies, "that is simple. The land is impure, you see, everything is soiled. We must purge, purge everything... Kill all the cattle, every last one; then we will be ready, then our forefathers will come. Empty the grain pits, every last one; then we will be ready, then they will come. Burn the witchcraft, everyone, then we will be ready, and then they will come. A full moon is falling, a new day is dawning: the dead will rise. The dead will rise."

So the King gathers all his counsellors and the chiefs of his people, and they listen to him with round eyes. And he sends messengers to every corner of the land: "Do as our ancestors have commanded, for a great day is coming: we will be saved, but first we need to destroy everything, everything..."

From around the country the people flock to the quiet valley to witness the miraculous prophesies for themselves. To hear the old songs rising from the reeds. To see the horns of the new cattle poking like hope through the waves. And their despair turns to jubilation as they envision themselves reunited with loved ones that have passed on, living in eternal prosperity and peace.

They desert their fields. They slaughter their livestock – the feasting is unprecedented. They adorn themselves with copper and new clothes to await that day when the sun will turn back at noon to set in the east and the world will be reborn. They assemble on the beaches and wait. They gather on the hilltops and wait. And wait.

*The time has come, the day is near; there is panic, not joy, upon the mountains.
[Ezekiel 7:7, The Bible]*

And gradually the valleys become white in the light of a sun that will never turn. Silently white with the bones of beast and man as far as the eye can see.

Things reach their prime and then decline.

If this were but a fairytale...

But this is no romance with a handsome prince (or a Chief Gcaleka) to breathe the bones back to life. It's an immensely complicated story, so convoluted, disturbing and blood-soaked: dramatizing it nearly explodes me.

Why? Because it's a true story: that opening scene took place in 1856 on the banks of the Gxara River – just a few miles into the Transkei – between the young girl Nongqawuse and the Xhosa king Sarili.

And because the impurity spoken about by the girl amongst the reeds was introduced by the wrathful deity and education and money and greed and diseases of the European settlers.

And because somewhere around 400 000 cattle were butchered and up to 100 000 hopeful Xhosa men, women and children starved to death in the fertile fields they'd chosen not to cultivate, while the carrion birds and white colonialists watched, and awaited their respective fare...

And because I am a white playwright of settler stock and the victims of this tragedy were black South Africans... Politics broods over those fields of bones. This is supposed to be a period of reconciliation in our country and a part of me really wants to make a dramatic offering to those who died so tragically, so unfairly. But there is another unsentimental (or twisted) side to me that watches from cold peaks, and enjoys too much the controversial, the macabre and the theatrical to make heartfelt monuments to the dead. During the making of this work these opposing currents will drag me back and forth across the jagged terrain of this saga.

“This play is not a nice rounded story of affirmation. It is a scream of horror at the pillage and destruction of Africa by colonialism, neo-colonialism and greed. A progression of invasion and corruption: a beautiful culture, a bloom of culture invaded, corrupted, torn to pieces by greed, superstition, hysteria and confusion.”
[THE PROPHET workbook, Nov 98]

It's a tricky affair, writing and directing a work in one go: the realms of the writer and the director, which often need to be quite distinct from one another, are seldom clearly defined. Too often the flamboyant director in me bullies the reclusive writer into submission. A second incarnation of a play after a couple of years (as in ZOMBIE/IPI ZOMBI?) – when the writer-self has been able to reassert his order on the text and the director-self has seen the folly of some of his theatrics – makes for a much stronger work.

During the creation process I rarely know what a play is about. The process of making it takes everybody involved on an intense journey: we are not social scientists who watch things unfold with detached interest; we are artists who have to dive right in and head for the whirlpools. We push deeper and deeper into the material and something forms itself out of our work; something is revealed: sometimes amorphous and shifting and awkward. Sometimes the difficulty of the subject matter and the struggle of our process are manifest in the knots and splinters of the product. THE PROPHET is a particularly knotty and splintered piece.

Trying to be too clever I became well and truly bogged down in all the conflicting information from dozens of storytellers and historians – black and white – and battled to choose a position to approach the material from. I have an image of myself sitting at the bottom of a valley on the banks of this dark history, trying to make sense of the babble of accounts that rise up from the murky depths.

One morning in July 1998 I drive the fifty-odd kms from Grahamstown to a farm near Alexandria, where Nongqawuse's grave lies isolated beneath a knot of small trees in a pasture. A lonely place guarded by grazing cows. They watch to ensure she will not rise again with her abattoir revelations.

On my return journey a tyre of the bakkie bursts on the dirt road and the vehicle hurtles over into a ditch, shattering the windscreen and the cow skull that was fixed to the grille.

"The grave of Nongqawuse is cursed," Makhos tells me later. "Everyone who goes there has an accident. Everybody knows that..."

I am stifled by the sensitivity of the subject matter: all those bones weigh tons, and many people query my biting into this hot potato at all: "You'll be killed for this one." I even consider making the play in Zimbabwe with Shona and Ndebele people instead of a Xhosa cast, just to take the edge off a bit. Political correctness is a difficult blanket to cast aside sometimes. It takes a lot of angst and pages of scrawl for me to relax and to realise that it really is just a story – if a tragic one – and it can be told in any way we choose.

"I look at the once-mighty Xhosa nation, and I see ruins. Rings of mud where an empire stood. That song which called them to sacrifice everything was the hungry voice of wilderness. The people butcher their cattle, desert their fields and already the blue lizards are thronging from the shadows to claim the crumbling walls. Weeds are sprouting beneath polished floors. Nongqawuse is the channel of this awful force. I roam amongst the ruins wondering, speculating..."
[THE PROPHET workbook, Jan 99]

Driving back to Grahamstown from Port Saint Johns in mid-1998, Barbara and I pull off onto a dirt road that runs alongside the big muddy Kei River that formed the boundary between South Africa and the apartheid-created Xhosa reservation or "homeland" of the Transkei. We are not far from Qorlora – the fulcrum of all these events. It's sunset and we have a long drive ahead of us. I want to smoke a joint of the heady unofficial cash crop of the region. A cold breeze comes up the valley as I light up and gaze across the pinkish water. On the opposite bank a man in a red sweater looks back at me. Then seconds later – as if by magic – he's vanished. A couple of ducks skim the water; the ripples bring a melody into my head, and then I feel the song of a small girl surfacing. With clenched fists I listen to it, then rush to the car and write it all down:

"I was down by the river – two birds flew by – the wind on my shoulders – mmmm
And on the other side – I saw a man – a man from the river – calling me
Come to me – come to me – come to me – come to me
It's cold by the river – take my hand – I'll show you things – from the otherside..."

There are many symbols (among them the most important) that are not individual but collective in their nature and origin. These are chiefly religious images. The believer assumes that they are of divine origin – that they have been revealed to man. The sceptic says flatly that they have been invented. Both are wrong... they are in fact "collective representations", emanating from primeval dreams and creative fantasies. As such, these images are involuntary, spontaneous manifestations, and by no means intentional inventions.
[C.G.Jung, Man and His Symbols]

What did that girlchild, Nongqawuse, really see down by the river? Was she speaking the truth?

White historians mention that she had the spiritual sickness that precipitates sangoma-training, and that is often associated with seeing visions; some psychoanalyse her, but they do not speculate much on the nature of her visions. Spirits are not living presences in their bookish worlds.

Black storytellers and historians talk of the effect of reflections of aloes in the water on a child with a vivid imagination, or insist that the whole episode was a trick engineered by colonialists to destroy the amaXhosa: the hardnosed British governor, Sir George Grey, and his greedy sidekicks, dressed up to dupe the girl. I have not come across one who considers that Nongqawuse might actually have had visions.

Abey remembers that one old man from Qorlora (where a group of us spent a week investigating the events late in 1998) told him that the word “nongqawuse” means a lie: that the girl had another name originally, but that after the events people called her “the Liar”. Most of the actors – all of whom are Xhosas – believe that she was a liar or the victim of a colonial ruse.

As all the plays in this book affirm, visions of spirit beings are far from alien to Xhosa people, even today. No matter what the external factors influencing the movement, the majority of Xhosas at the time did believe Nongqawuse’s prophecies. That Xhosas today are unable to accept the prophetess bespeaks the lasting pain and shame of the events. But their inability to shoulder responsibility for those events also indicates a disabling victim-mentality.

...all the elements of the great Cattle-Killing Movement were already in place. Everywhere in Xhosaland the homestead heads gazed at their favourite cattle, wondering whether to slaughter them before the plague of lungsickness rendered them utterly useless. At the great places of the chiefs, Sir George Grey’s magistrates took up their positions, visible symbols of colonial domination and concrete warnings of further oppression to come. The minds of the people were filled with ideas of a mysterious black race across the sea, newly resurrected from the dead.
[J.F. Peires, *The Dead Will Rise*]

All the tension about how to tell the tale is crippling me; my back is a mess of knots. Camel, my bohemian masseuse and a Grahamstown historian, lights incense and thrusts her knuckles into my muscles.

“It was the greatest, most treacherous, wholesale massacre of one people by another people,” she intones referring to colonialist exploitation of the Xhosa’s plight, “but also the Xhosa were to blame – they accepted it, they bowed down to it...”

Candle flames flicker and Bulgarian choirs keen from the tape deck.

“When the doors are kept shut the wicked things can be mostly kept out. But when something like this moves through, the doors are ripped open and all manner of horrible slimy things come hopping, crawling, slithering into the psyche – and in the Xhosa they’re still there.”

“After Nongqawuse the Xhosa were divided, they are lost. Not like the Zulus – they are still strong. It has destroyed everything and has confused us. Our things have lost their meaning... That’s what the play was about: confusion. People not trusting each other.”

[Xola Mda, *TWB*]

I don't think Nongqawuse lied, not in the beginning anyway – if only because I myself have experienced a similar visitation (or hallucination; call it what you will). Like a dream image that manifests in relation to personal trauma, Nongqawuse and her prophesies arose because they had to: as a response to the ordeal of disintegration afflicting the Xhosa. She was a key formed by the Xhosa psyche to unlock the door to survival... but the metal of this key was contaminated by new and alien elements, and – as in Chief Gcaleka's story – the world into which the unlocked door swung open was not the one known by the ancestors.

*John Matshikiza speaking on SAFM this morning about Mandela and what he means to Africans: "He is the mythological king who steps out of the forest and saves the village. This resonates deeply in the African consciousness." And I think, God forbid, this references the Xhosa kings of THE PROPHET too, coming out of the exile of death to save the nation. And look how it fucks out! Not a great allegory for the African Renaissance, I must say...
[THE PROPHET workbook, April 1999]*

I look at my workbooks for THE PROPHET: the luminosity of the New South Africa has dimmed somewhat; the fanfares of 1994 have died away. Nelson Mandela has stepped down, and corruption, violence, poverty, AIDS and dissatisfaction are on everybody's lips. Just north of us Mugabe is enforcing his tyranny on Zimbabwe (our play dedicated to him – BIG DADA, the rise and fall of Idi Amin – is on the horizon). The JUJU – the healing deities of THE PROPHET – will chant: "we are almost at the end of the rainbow..." Are we following so many other African countries into the abyss?

I recall the vistas of an Africa impoverished by the steel and furnaces of industry that I saw through the eyes of my spirit messenger in Zimbabwe... Spiritual drought is the sickness of the moment. I want to bring the country alive with this work: the earth and her life forms are reduced today to property and materials. This play must sanctify the world.

Can art/drama really make a difference? Or are we who live along the margins of society just naïve dreamers? Deluded prophets?

In line with the sense that through performance spiritual forces might be propitiated, I choose to present the saga as a ceremony of healing for the tens of thousands of unburied Xhosas who died in the scrub of the Eastern Cape. But maybe this is misguided. Perhaps pretentious. Can I, a white African, really construct a ritual for black Africans?

Yet many of the performers are able to find intense meaning in this: it was their great-great-grandparents who suffered back then. The hungry ghosts share their blood. Nondumiso Zweni, the priestess who controls the ritual-drama, really feels she is putting those restless spirits to rest when she invokes the healing. Abey, as Nongqawuse, feels them roaming on the howling wind outside, and brings them up through his body to expel their sickness. These people are feeling these things deeply.

I don't know what we tap into. What is ritual and what is drama? Where is the line between them? Nothing is clear.

I cover my confusion in a spectacular façade of mock-vooodoo ritual, placing the emphasis more on the ceremonial than the narrative. "What do you want to share with the audience?" Saskia, our Dutch dramaturge, asks me.

What do I want to share? A startling, wonderful, disturbing experience. Something that quietly unfolds in the midst of other unfolding things: together they

unwrap this tale of sorrow... A mesmerising quality was central to the events of the Cattle Killing: I see the nation utterly enraptured by the images of hope and bounty offered to them by their prophetess. In that heady space that comes with expectation and with lack of food, the thousands were bathed in the ecstasy of every rose-tinted syllable that fell from her lips. I want my audience to have a similar feeling, to be dazed and swept away by the exotic atmospherics and the whirl of chanting, imagery and rhythms.

And we do succeed in this with a good deal of our audience. Most, however, have only a vague notion of what the drama is all about, which is a waste of the profound material. The narrative we have constructed is just not strong enough to break clearly through the surface of the hysteria.

Of the three plays published here THE PROPHET was the most difficult to make. My memories of it have an acrid taste, and I have always felt that the play is weak. Now, delving into it over three years since we made it, though I question many of the choices I made both in the concept and in my direction, I am less dissatisfied with it. Probably the biggest fault in its 1999 showing was that it just was not ready when it opened. I had not yet distilled a clear essence from the cloudy masses of ideas and images that swirled around the saga, and the poor baffled performers had not yet found their way into the piece.

I will approach Nongqawuse's story differently next time – probably as an opera. There is a lot of material to work with in THE PROPHET: I mined tomes of oral poetry and traditional drama from West and Southern Africa to find ways of telling the story. Of all THIRD WORLD BUNFIGHT's plays this one – in form anyway – probably comes closest to some sort of African ritual drama.

And I still love it: the beautiful simplicity of the fairytale beginning at the riverside, with the great black leather wings of history waiting just beyond the hills to beat down into the valley. The tensions between the enrapturing siren song and the terrible reality astonish me. I long to return to this tale.

We live in spite of ourselves, our dreams forecasting the way to come, showing the way we've come, like rivers.

We wonder in awe at the might of mystery, at the fragility of our own comprehension on the great slough of the waters down to the sea, down to the sea.

And beneath, amongst the silent serpent currents I roam – amphibian I – amongst the threads of water, the soft long calls of brooks and streams, down, down, in spite of my fear, to where the voices beckon, I descend, amphibian I.

Can you show me? Is this the way?

Among the snakes wait the soft, straight-mouthed People of Beneath. They call to slow me, to touch me, to tell or to trick. I falter, try to rise, gasping for air while my lungs implode in green amber light.

These women and men: I find them amongst great boulders and tree trunks from faraway peaks, sitting in a circle, in a ring of water on the river soil, and utterly glowing with mud. White, white, this glowing ring.

Mother. Father. Why have you called?

Again they call, the Old Ones, with gap-toothed smiles and secret winks. "Come to learn among the flames, with a great liquid wind passing overhead."

And we come. Dazed at first, and cloudy, then brighter, until among the ring we sing.
[iMUMBO JUMBO workbook, '97]

NONGQAWUSE

NONGQAWUSE: ripped from the womb of family life, her parents killed in settler wars. Stunned and stunted and burned by horror. In reverie she escapes beneath the waters: another world, where the others live, Mother and Father. Where it's safe. And now the war approaches again: here comes more strife, smoke in the sky and death in the cattle. Her fantasies become more lucid – all-consuming – to balance the encroaching crisis.

Nongqawuse, awkward, gangly girl, I see you: withdrawn, otherworldly, terrifying, revered and iconified. You infect the people with ecstasy: the sick will become well, the old young, the dead will return, the settlers and their ploys will be driven into the ocean... such a clamour of joy. You are an angel: the one chosen from the whole nation for visitations by the messengers of the gods. You hold the nation in your small nail-bitten hands.

As the crisis intensifies, the people become junkies for Nongqawuse's dreams. They crawl to her in desperation and she soothes them, tranquillises them: they depart dazed and high. And each time the movement fails and their spirits plummet, they crawl back for another fix, even more needy. The absence of hope is too terrible to bear.

They in turn feed her vision. And it grows, swelling inside her until it is much bigger than she is. It eats her up, it depletes her, then abandons her in a broken heap at the end of each bout of prophecy. She is the mouthpiece of something vastly bloated, insatiable, and at night she cries herself to sleep.

What is it, this parasite inside her? Where does it come from? It is a titanic, tortured thing from the depths of humanity's swampy psyche, an ancient god of pre-reason, born of the need to survive. The fantasy of a sick little girl, dragging itself from the primeval mud to shake its fist at reason, to stop the sun in its course.

On that last day, the pleading of the king, desperate and mad, and the chanting wails of the people summon this thing in her one more time: vast, all-powerful, terrible. It engulfs her body like a hell mouth, and screams its hope and pain at the sun. It bawls at the heavens.

And when the sun passes the girl drops like a stone, and the nation is finished, its energy gone. But she is released: the thing has left her, and although bruised and winded she can reclaim herself. As the sun slides westwards, she drags herself through the dying, frenzied, hypnotised mob of her people to a place of silence beneath the knotted trees.

Nongqawuse is played by Abey – a strong and captivating performer, beautiful and luminous. He stands between genders as she does between realities, an amphibian submerged in the water of dreams and visions.

Abey must be worked into a grunting, nightmarish trance before Nongqawuse can blossom into the siren and liberate her visions. With no dance to carry him, Abey harnesses this formidable trance energy through sheer concentration, yielding to the drumming and the singing. Nongqawuse must be pushed far beyond herself, as the drums and ululating push the audience beyond itself. All is utter madness. Then it peaks, the wave breaks, and we enter the entranced slow, mesmerised world of prophecy: "Do you hear my voice – calling you – come to me – come to me..."

"It was very, very painful. It was here, in my stomach and in my head. It was not in my imagination, it was the spirits themselves that were locked in my head – they were

much, much stronger than me, you know, the spirits of The Dead. It was the spirits that were forcing me, they've been like begging me, "we want to come out", and I've been like hiding from them. In order for me to believe that these things were very, very dangerous and that they were real, I saw them from the candle, from the burning flame. I saw them in that flame I looked into, they were old people, old old old people..."

[Abey Xakwe]

THE DEAD

THE DEAD: they are darkness, the void, the wilderness, the night, the vines that tug the bricks apart, the savannah that reclaims the clearing, death that devours life, the silence that swallows utterance, the darkness that consumes the flame... The battle to live, to exist socially and morally is the battle against them. They predate creation. They are the alpha and the omega, the womb and the extinguisher of life.

Taking a cue from the Hell Spirit of iMUMBO JUMBO's King Hintsa, which Chief Gcaleka claimed was throwing the land into chaos in its fury, I opt for a symbolic portrayal of Nongqawuse's messengers, looking at what they represent now: those crawling, slithering things that disease the strength, pride and dignity of a nation: embodiments of festering rot. We call them The Dead.

The roles are complex and stretch the imaginations of the players: Xola plays a guy called Wanda who attends a performance of THE PROPHET and is possessed by a mountain spirit which uses his body to incarnate one of The Dead – those beings which live inside Nongqawuse's head!

They are plastered with reeking mud (collected from a healing sulphurous spring just outside Port Saint Johns), and wear cow horns on their heads in association with the hundreds of thousands of cattle that died, with Christian concepts of demons, and with Pan – that classical god of panic and unreason. Also they recall to me those vicious embodiments of apartheid brutality sculpted from nightmare by Jane Alexander: "The Butcher Boys".

We give them a wild and terrifying nature. Working in the rivers and forests of Port Saint Johns we find ways of movement born of creatures which slosh through the deep mud of swamps; which speak as if through cleft palates, like beings unused to human form or expression. In rehearsals I drive these men into brain-searing trances. In performance they collapse in blind twisting turmoil after each dance sequence. Three times Nongqawuse predicted a "Great Day". Each time the prophecy failed with increasingly devastating consequences. In THE PROPHET The Dead are brought to their feet three times to perform their volatile dances of possession as the sun climbs towards its apex. They must dance and dance with fire in their minds, cancel out ideas of character, role, self: all that matters is the dance, which channels their energy and consumes them utterly.

THE JUJU

"You dim, vague humankind, living your sort of leaf-lives,
without tree-powers, you claystuff, you wingless shadows of wings,
you dream-flyers, sad solid mortal matter.

Listen to us, the deathless, the air-born, air inhabiting, air-borne sureties of the joyous eternal verities.”

[The Bird Chorus in Aristophanes, The Birds]

In the silence of the grassy Gxarha River valley I sit amongst the reeds in the summer of 1998, wondering about history. Only a few metres from Nongqawuse’s pool I have found the sun-bleached skull and the scattered vertebrae of a bull – perhaps a descendent of those that were left rotting in the fields of euphoric carnage. Butterflies shimmer from flower to fecund flower.

It is between the aloof distance of the stars and the wilful aggression of the wilderness that we strive and die.

The Cattle Killing drama is framed by the immensity of a huge and impassive continent. The great indifference of Time and Nature to human endeavours: we build our monuments, construct complex social-cultural systems, inflate our ideals and hopes to the status of gods, and eventually the great wash of Time pulls it all down, and Nature washes over the traces... dust to dust. African dust. These are things one senses beneath the wide skies of untamed lands. In urban centres, in Europe, where the spirit of the land has been suffocated, one cannot feel these things.

This rite we are making is performed in a crumbling wasteland – rubble and ashes lie everywhere. And will some phoenix rise from all this? That is what we hope for.

And the gods we invoke to heal us? They are cold, distant, abstracted: beings with a wider view than ours, who chant enigmatic aphorisms, fortune cookie epigrams and mantras from the delirious depths of stagnant dreams. What are they saying? What does it all mean? Who knows?

We make sounds, we utter words, we pray... and though we invest these appeals with so much meaning, like Nongqawuse’s prophesies they are ultimately empty, daft and idiosyncratic.

“Juju” is a West African word meaning a fetish or a magical charm. In THE PROPHET it refers to a pantheon of voodoo-inspired deities who are brought to life by the two priests, and who in turn summon The Dead into the ceremony. Each of the nine performers who plays these statuesque gods chooses the deity they wanted to be – the god of war, of love, of sex, of fertility, of peace... We spend hours exploring the natures and power of these gods, and learning their slow, synchronised hand and arm gestures borrowed from Hindu and African icons.

Their text is a mishmash of poetry, religious philosophy, Broadway lyrics and extracts from a piece I wrote in 1991 called “Waiting for America”.

Had I opted to characterise the Juju as the pained spirits of those people who perished in the tragedy rather than as cool nature deities, the play might have a lot more emotional punch... a few people tell me that they weren’t really moved by the piece, and it is a story with such potential for tears. I just don’t respond to things terribly emotionally I suppose, I am simply captivated by the phenomenon of it all: the rings of mud where an empire stood, the mute girl cowering on a pile of bones.

THE LIFE FORCE

The passion in THE PROPHET burns in the priestess of light – played with profound sensitivity by the beautiful Nondumiso Zweni – and in her counterpart the priest of darkness, played by Luyanda Butana. Wondrous things emerge between them in rehearsals in our cavernous venue, on our mandala stage. Nondumiso claims one of

the shrines as her “fortress” – a place of nature and life. She wants it to be full of the light of candles. She sees the big pile of cattle bones as the death of nature: this is Luyanda’s place. The stage has become, in her words, “the battleground” between opposing forces.

The events of the tragedy are dramatized by a group of primary school children (from Grahamstown’s Rini Township), in the delightful naïve style – normally called traditional or village drama – that you find all over Southern Africa, where very little attention is paid to character development, and the simple plot is perforated with traditional songs and dances.

The simple dialogue, acting and drama of the children, and the warmth it brings to the whole play throws a cynical audience off guard. This naïve little gem in the centre, and the hectic chorus all the way around. Chilling.

At the end, while the Jujus look on through glassy eyes, these children rise from where they have fallen in death, and bow, and lead the audience out in song.

The hope is in the children. Through them we are reincarnated again and again.

Through them the Spirit will always arise...

A small child works his way off the edge of his sleeping mat.

A bird soars high above it all.

They divined for our elderly people.

When they were preparing to leave Heaven to go to the world

They said, what are we going to do?

They asked themselves: where are we going?

We are going in search of knowledge, truth and justice.

In accordance with our destiny, at the peak of the hill we were delayed.

We are going to meet success.

We will arrive on earth knowledgeable.

We will arrive on earth in beauty.

We are searching for knowledge continuously.

Knowledge has no end.

[Nigerian diviner, Kolawole Ositola, in M. Thompson Drewel’s “Yoruba Ritual”]

April, Bulawayo: saw an amazing image today on tv of a small girl in traditional costume who had won some competition. There she stood on a rostrum while people put things around her neck, a crown on her head, a staff into her hands, and then raised her arms. And she stood there completely uncomprehending, not knowing how to respond, just dazed. Not grateful. Not triumphant in any way. Just non-plussed. She’d had glory foisted on to her, and all around her awe, obsequiousness, joy. Baffled little girl.

THE FEAR OF SILENCE! Silence is death, silence is the void, silence is the end of the world! At the trough of every cycle, once the wave of hysteria has broken, is silence. And the characters have to pull themselves out of it and into sound again. The silence looms bigger and louder, unstoppably swelling under the noise.

[THE PROPHET workbook, March 1999]

HISTORY of THE PROPHET

In July 1998, immediately after the National Arts Festival run of IPI ZOMBI?, I began work on THE PROPHET, delving into one hundred and fifty dusty years of articles, histories, diary accounts and folk stories.

Four months later Abey, Xola and Rhea Cakwebe and I travelled across the Kei River and southwards from the N2 national road to the coast, to the village of Qorlorha, on a hillside above the twisting course of the Gxara River. We were there to gather historical accounts and stories from the descendents of those who had lived and died through the Cattle Killing.

We rented a round hut from a local family for a week, and the guys went out every morning armed with tape recorders and notebooks while I read and wrote. The unvarying version of events recounted by people was that Sir George Grey and his cronies dressed themselves as spirits to dupe Nongqawuse. People did not want to talk about the tragedy that had befallen their ancestors – they are still ashamed of it, said my reporters.

The temperatures were in the mid-thirties, fleas kept us awake at night: things were not going well.

Then I had a bright idea: since we were cultural workers, the least we could do was give something back to the community in the form of the work we do. We would do spontaneous performances for the locals, as we had done in other parts of the country. My team did not look enthusiastic, but I was on a mission now, and I called the shots.

We set out in the bakkie one hot morning with masks and costumes. It was pension day, so we were assured of a captive audience: scores of rural pensioners and their hangers-on who queue at remote spaza shops to collect the measly R350 that must see them and untold grandchildren through each month.

Following directions across bumpy tracks we arrived at an isolated sprawl of dwellings. Women were grilling mealies and selling fruit, wizened men and women in their shabby Sunday best smoked Boxer tobacco in the sun, and a long queue of people snaked into one of the buildings.

We scampered beneath the canopy of the bakkie and dressed ourselves in short grey wraparound skirts and Cameroonian masks with alarmed expressions. Then we slunk out on to the grass to entertain the crowds.

Did we anticipate delight? Standing ovations? Oh sweet naiveté. Women dropped their wares and ran screaming. People fled.

Still we advanced, undulating our arms, placing our feet artfully. But absurd artiness is not as celebrated amongst the sticks and stones of Outer Xhosaland as it is at arts festivals. Doubtless we appeared utterly menacing.

All of a sudden the mood changed, the crowd swung around, and people began pelting us with rocks. We withdrew slowly, trying our best to stay in character – the show must go on – but the mob surged towards us yelling and brandishing all manner of weapons: knobkerries, assegais, sticks and axes.

Xola, Rhea and I managed to get back under the canopy, but poor Abey got lost in the throng. We were surrounded by a bellowing horde of grannies and grandpas, beating the car with their weapons, thrusting spears through the grilles that

covered the back windows and baying for our blood. They tried to pull the doors open to get us, but we clung to the handles for dear life.

“No! No!” I cried, “We are Arts and Culture! Arts and Culture!”

The bakkie rocked with the hammering of wood and iron. These people knew what happens when men dress as spirits and come creeping amongst them: they had carried the humiliation and anger of such an occurrence for a hundred and fifty years.

In the nick of time a fat male teacher hauled me out and shielded me with his body as I scrambled to the cab. A rock slammed into the back of my head as I opened the door, and an axe was sunk through the metal flesh of the bonnet. A gunshot went off nearby.

“Go! Go!” roared my saviour.

A shocked Abey was already in the passenger seat – he had been beaten over the head with a cell phone.

Thank God the keys were in the ignition and the bakkie started up, but I had lost my spectacles in the back somewhere, and as we lurched blindly down the track the exhaust pipe was torn out by a rock.

My fellow performers were ashen, appalled. I was exhilarated.

Within fifteen minutes the police pulled us over and poked an assault rifle through the window. It took a good deal of explaining and demonstrating to prove that we were not bandits out to rob the elderly of their monthly pittance, but deluded entertainers, intrepidly striving to take the light of culture beyond the dark frontier.

We made THE PROPHET in 1999 in Port Saint Johns, that wonderful tumbledown town at the mouth of the Umzimvubu River where I wrote all three of these plays, and where I had yearned for years to work with the company. In the rich, wet soils of that sub-tropical landscape everything grows larger than elsewhere: plants are monstrously lush, flowers lunge at you; cut your foot and within a day a cavity of septic mush has flourished... this environment, I hoped, might have a similar effect on our work.

Saskia Noordhoek Hegt, a Dutch actress-friend, joined us as dramaturge: ours was a tense relationship, as ideas on methodology and meaning clashed.

Apart from the regular TWB troupe, the cast included five performers recruited from the nearby city of Umtata, and Tongesai Gumbo, a choreographer from Zimbabwe. When we relocated to Grahamstown a few weeks before the show opened, we picked up six singing grannies and the thirteen children who were to perform the village drama. The adult actors and I had made the scenes of the village drama through a workshop process in Port Saint Johns: I would provide a scene-sketch and they would write and rewrite the scene in small groups, imbuing it with a flavour I could never hope to create. In Grahamstown each performer was allocated a child to whom they then taught the role.

While we explored characters, angles and the depths of trance under the lush trees of the Port Saint Johns caravan park, Barbara hauled my rickety bakkie across potholed tracks, scouring the local villages for cattle bones, paying school kids R1 a set of horns and R2 a skull. The bones emitted a dank smell beneath the dripping leaves.

THE PROPHET was presented on the main program of the Standard Bank National Arts Festival, in the deserted old Power Station where we had shown IPI ZOMBI? the previous year. A bus labelled “The Cattle Truck” ferried those without cars from centre of Grahamstown to the venue.

The temperature at night was below ten degrees Celsius, and an icy gale raged outside. My heart went out to the poor actors who played the JUJU, whose clay-smearing bodies were barely clothed, and who were able to move little more than their arms for close on two hours.

Because of the theme I had expected the show to generate a lot of controversy, but of all of our works this one probably raised the fewest hackles – I suspect this had to do with children dramatizing the events. But maybe I had simply played it too safe and hadn't really dealt with the contentious issues after-all.

In his review of the show, Matthew Krouse of the Mail and Guardian, referred to me as “the Stromboli of community theatre”. Who is Stromboli, we wondered? An Italian theatre genius? A fiery Mediterranean volcano? We put the quote in all our fundraising proposals. Turns out he's the cruel bastard puppeteer who kidnapped poor Pinocchio from Gepetto and enslaved him in his circus...

QUESTIONS to BRETT BAILEY RE. *THE PROPHET*

Dear Students

Thank you for your interest and questions. Two things in opening: I think that if you spend time on the introductory chapter to THE PROPHET in my book 'The Plays of Miracle and Wonder' you will find much of the information you have sought from me here, and I encourage you to go back to that, as it was written soon after the production of the play, and what I am writing in response to your queries is mediated and diluted by the passage of 7 years. Secondly, it is inaccurate to assume that there are logical, rational or even conscious reasons for all aspects of a work of art. A large proportion of what appears in a piece has welled up out of the ground excavated by an artist in uncovering a particular work and becomes an integral part of the work: it is the essence of the work. It impoverishes the work to reduce aspects to this or that idea, as if the work were the dramatic articulation of a theory. When asked what something in one of my works means I often reply: 'what does it mean to you?'

Best

Brett Bailey

Your questions:

What kind of spaces have you used for the performance of the play? How has the space influenced the effect of the performance? Have you found you are always able to create a space the same as that indicated in your introduction to the play?

The Prophet has not been presented since the premiere at the '99 Grahamstown Festival.

How was the mood of the play affected by the presence of real sangomas? What effect did they have on the 'actors'?

There were no real sangomas in The Prophet. There was a singing group of elderly Grahamstown women who accompanied the performance, and performed some ritualistic actions. I doubtless included these women because of their gorgeous singing, because of how they expanded the sense of an entire community being involved in the production, and because of the gravitas and texture they would have brought to the production. I've employed sangomas in ZOMBIE and iMUMBO JUMBO: they bring a sense of authenticity to a production, blurring the lines between what is real and what is artifice: I like that effect that their presence can have on both audience and performers. I suppose they make (some of) the performers feel that they are involved in something more than just a 'show'.

What kinds of instruments were used in the play? Who played them?

These elderly women played the mouth bow (uhadi). One young performer raised on a platform overlooking the arena played percussion: big drums and the likes. The Dead played djembes during "come to Me". The Juju played kelp horns and later cowbells. I don't recall other instruments.

What is the effect of the Juju meant to be?

Something haunting and otherworldly and not quite pin downable. Adding a weird, ethereal layer. I can explain it musically: the children who dramatized the plot were very naïve and earth-bound: a childlike melody. The Dead had a volatile, strongly bass rhythm. The Juju with their chanting mumbo jumbo mantras and impassive stillness were like strangely lilting strings in the background.

Have you used white actors in any of your plays? How has/might their presence affect the work?

Only a couple of times: in a production of Medea with Wits students 4 years ago, and in Orfeus this year. And of course the little boys in The Prophet. I am interested in the dynamics of race: I cast white actors as white people and black actors as black people, and thereby explore conflicts/tensions of race. So for instance in the opera of Macbeth which I'm making next year, the entire cast is black (the work is set vaguely in the DRC) except for the witches, who are three white dudes in suit and tie

who arrive on set at the beginning, strip down and dress as witches and start the opera by pressing play on a cd player. They also play very apparent stage managers who shift sets and props during the opera, 'invisible' to the other characters. On one level I'm looking at the impact and manipulations of corporations, IMF, World Bank etc. on contemporary African politics...

How have you used characters on stage when they are not directly involved in a scene? Do they remain on stage? If so, doing what?

Sometimes they remain on stage: in IPI ZOMBI? they sat around watching, singing, accompanying the action on instruments, leaping up to play any number of roles on cue. The sangomas in iMUMBO JUMBO watched and accompanied too. I use this device to frame or contextualize the drama in a particular way. For instance in IPI ZOMBI? the actors played a wildly rural mud-caked, blanket-shrouded troupe called The Natives. They leant the whole smoky production a volatile, other and ritualistic quality. Members of The Natives then threw on costumes to play the various characters of the drama.

What is the rationale for having Nongqawuse talking tonelessly?

Smoke and mirrors... I wanted the production to have a weird, hypnotic feel, like the Cattle Killing movement might have had on the consciousness of the Xhosa people. I felt that her message mesmerized her people, and in like manner I wanted the audience to be mesmerized into a sort of liminal passivity. Like Phillip Glass's music can do. I like using drones and candles and fire and repetitive chanting and incense etc. for this. On a more basic level the toneless voice associated her with the spiritual Juju, and had to do with her channeling messages from the Other Side rather than speaking her own words.

Could you explain the issue of gender in the play – Nongqawuse played by a male actor for example? How does gender work in the real world of the sangomas?

Um, I cannot really say how gender works in the sangoma world. By far the majority are women, but I don't know if that influenced my casting of a male actor as Nongqawuse. Abey Xakwe, who played the role, also played Intombi 'Nyama in IPI ZOMBI? (the little girl who communicated with the zombies and started that witch hunt hysteria, who was in turn played by Malaksa, a transvestite from Jo'burg) and Nicholas Gcaleka (in the pantomime within iMumbo Jumbo): the sangoma who traveled with the Spirit of the Black Mamba – the Hurricane Spirit – to the UK to retrieve the missing skull. For me these 3 characters have a strong

commonality, and Abey linked them together. (In Orfeus he played the Frog, the audience's guide through the Underworld). All three are transgressive characters who slip across boundaries, and gender instability was appropriate to colour this (as will casting three white men as female black witches.) On top of this Abey is a wonderfully deep and subtle performer, whose polio-afflicted body also conveys an otherness and a 'wounded healer' power.

What are the various audiences to whom *The Prophet* has played and what have been their reactions to the play?

Only a Grahamstown Fest audience.

Could you explain how you see "xuluqamqam" as sung by the children working in the play?

I don't really get the question. I swiped the chant from a Shona folk tale, tho I don't recall what it was about. Again on one level it was a pseudo-ritualistic device to have an effect on the audience, and to tie the piece to African folktale and folk drama traditions. The plot of the drama as enacted by the children, and a lot of the text of the Priestess drew from these traditions.

Why does Mhlakaza clutch a bible?

He was the personal servant of the Archbishop of Grahamstown for several years, traveling by foot with him around the country several times. He had ambitions to become a minister, but was sidelined because of his race, and eventually slipped back to the Transkei. Historians speculate that this experience greatly motivated him in spreading the gospel of Nongqawuse: his frustrated ambitions, the preaching skills he had acquired, the resentment towards whites, and the apocalyptic imagery assimilated from the Good Book. Possibly it also associates him with the evangelical Christians of today and their naïve, manipulative sales pitches of fire and brimstone.

Could you help us understand why it was that so many people listened to and believed the prophecy?

Read the introduction to *The Prophet* in my book.

Why do the dead mark Nongqawuse with blood? Is she in your interpretation to blame?

I don't have a viewpoint of who is to blame: there were many causal factors, and different characters would plant the blame on different forces. Characters in my plays have lives, motives and goals apart from my own. They are cannot be reduced to allegorical figures.

Look what I write in my book in the introduction under the title THE DEAD:

“they are darkness, the void, the wilderness, the night, the vines that tug the bricks apart, the savannah that reclaims the clearing, death that devours life, the silence that swallows utterance, the darkness that consumes the flame... The battle to live, to exist socially and morally is the battle against them. They predate creation. They are the alpha and the omega, the womb and the extinguisher of life... I opt for a symbolic portrayal of Nongqawuse’s messengers, looking at what they represent now: those crawling, slithering things that disease the strength, pride and dignity of a nation: embodiments of festering rot. We call them The Dead.” These agents or embodiments of destruction have selected Nongqawuse for their liberation: they anoint her with blood. Or because she is the agent of their liberation they anoint her with blood. Or the effect of these horned beings daubing a little girl with blood is chilling and powerful. Or...

When is the play set? – Question prompted by the reference to the tape-deck and Mercedes-Benz...

Well again it's about framing, and about who is performing the play. The drama as played by the children is set in 1856. The whole – Juju's, Dead, Priestesses etc. is set in 1999. The performers, like the audience, are from Grahamstown at the end of the 20th century. The story might reference political/social currents that we are familiar with today: issues of power, status, the media...

What would your advice be for an international group of actors in performing this play as far as the songs are concerned? How could we source them?

This question ties in with the previous one. It would make sense for me for the context of the performers to be foregrounded, so that they source and use their own songs: 'a group of international actors perform The Prophet.' I would help wit songs such as 'Come to Me' and 'She said the Dead would rise'.

What is the function of the three little white boys?

They play the English colonial soldiers who swept across the devastated country claiming the land and gathering the survivors to scatter across SA as farm labourers. Their movement associated them with carrion birds. The boys were the descendents of settlers. The fact that they were

children somehow neutralized the brutality of the history: it gave rise to a disturbing ripple of laughter or current of empathy in the audience towards something so horrible. Their presence served as a slightly magical/comical return to the community drama feel of the work after the mad tranced out and noisy climax...

Your sketch of the set indicates a 'shrine of light'. How is it used in the play?

It was not really used as I recall. It was 'temple set', and more for my own sense of balance than for anyone else's comprehension.

How have you used theatre lighting (when available) to enhance the play?

Candlelight gives it that temple atmosphere. The 5 or 6 stage lights we employed stripped the play of any stagey feeling.

What would your response be to the idea of representing the Juju's through voice (V/O) rather than as live entities on stage? What is the effect of their continual repetition meant to be? What sort of vocal quality is desirable for them?

Voice over may work, though I liked their presence: unmoving icons that come to life and provide a slow gestural counterpoint to the actions of the other players. They sang/spoke in harmony, a little like in a Catholic litany.

To what extent are the ceremonies that are performed on stage reflections of real rituals as performed by the Xhosa? What is the role of the priestess within this reality? What does she believe in?

Very little was drawn from Xhosa ritual: rather actions or images arose from the feeling of Xhosa, Indian and other ceremonies. The Priestess is enacting and leading a ceremony of exorcism. She conducts us through the story, and at the end disempowers the vampire-like Dead and chases away the white people demon spirits whose colonial insurgence and cultural arrogance were the causes of the movement. They profited from the devastation which was the aftermath of the movement and willfully fragmented the nation. Her last words, spoken to the white soldiers, are:

PRIESTESS: *Hamba! Phuma!*

Get out! Get out!

Stay away from my children!

A hundred and fifty years you've been here!

A hundred and fifty years among the bones and the ashes,

Eating my children, defiling my house.

Your breath stinks of my pride.
Your breath stinks of my blood.
Get out! *Phumani!*

What were the gender politics like at the time of the cattle killings?

I don't feel up to this question: investigate traditional Nguni social relations...

Your stated intention was to try something that could 'heal'. To what extent do you believe this possible from a piece of theatre?

I think it is very possible, but I don't think *The Prophet* was at all successful in this. I know of German/Austrian pieces that have confronted people with the horrors of the Nazi holocausts and have had an incredibly powerful impact. Groups of say abused women can find it very cathartic to perform in and/or attend a performance which deals with their issues. I think the intention to heal has to be very clear: in *The Prophet* I had various and conflicting intentions, and I suspect that the healing ceremony was more a choice of style than of actual intention.

If you were to summarize the whole of *The Prophet* into a single image, what would that image be?

Undoubtedly the photograph – published in my book – of the prophetess astride a heap of skulls, drift wood and white powdered bodies taken at dawn on a runway on a hilltop above Port Saint Johns.

Could you explain something more about the religious background to the play? We need to understand what they believe!

I think you should do your own research here. My book has some background, otherwise there is a vast literature on pre-colonial Xhosa society. Noel Mostert's thick book, 'Frontiers', and J.Peires' 'The Dead will Rise' are 1990's accounts of the Cattle Killing movement, and Peires' 'The House of Phalo' is a document of 19th century Xhosa life.

Many thanks
Theatre Arts Students
Waterford Kamhlaba United World College of Southern Africa