

Grisly comedy not to be missed

When a grisly subject is given comic treatment, the incongruity between form and matter may be disconcerting, but it can also prove effective as a means of depicting the by-products of evil, as this innovative production demonstrates.

A saturnalia of violence generated by superstition in the wake of death is nothing new as material for powerful theatre (shades of *The Crucible?*); but its presentation in this case is highly original. Leavened with song, dance, mime and humour, the gruesome theme becomes less harrowing, and staged amid the abundant beauties of an outdoor venue like Spier on a breezy summer evening, the show is more like entertainment than the exhausting catharsis of pure tragedy.

Not that there is anything flippanant about Brett Bailey's *Ipi Zombi*? The wit is carefully metered and used to counterpoint rather than undermine the intrinsic gravity of the subject matter. Like the interrogative title of the show, the humour is wry, not hilarious. The pace is brisk and the characters credible despite surreal make-up that often borders on the outrageous, consistent with the production's

IPI ZOMBI?

Reviewer: **Beverley Brommert**

DIRECTOR: Brett Bailey
CAST: Members of Third World Bunfight
VENUE: Spier Amphitheatre, until January 16

stylised nature.

This is not a show that leaves its audience placidly contemplating the action from the reassuring distance of their seats: spectators are physically drawn into the drama, their nostrils filled with the acrid smell of burning leaves, pulses throbbing at the percussive assault of beating drums in ritual sequences. Some even have to parry a direct attack from rampaging witch-hunters on the loose in the amphitheatre. It all adds to the atmosphere, like frequent asides to the audience from a voluble narrator in tribal dress.

Visual effects have an impact out of all proportion to the production's frugal budget and play a key role in its success. The simplest props are exploited for maximum effect – the black umbrellas carried at a traditional Xhosa funeral are a case in point. Minor

costume changes are startling and suggestive, like the school-boys' ties that turn into vigilante head-bands in the twinkling of an eye.

Luyanda Butana's neat choreography, with its strong, simple lines and emphasis on symmetry, works well in imposing some order on the rampant action and underpins the stylisation of episodes.

Despite the pervasive element of macabre fun, there are sequences that shock the viewer: the ritual murder and mutilation of the first "witch" spares no one's sensibility, while the axing of a corpse in a violated coffin is made more dramatic by the wind wafting away shreds of whitish material in an involuntary collaboration between man and nature...

Most arresting of all is the sinister finale in which the zombies emerge, white-daubed and grotesquely masked, from an old woman's cupboard ... or is it the bush surrounding the township? With the protean nature of the set and the mutability of the characters, one cannot be sure:

One thing is certain, though: this is an important piece of South African theatre that should not be missed.