

The spirits of Bailey

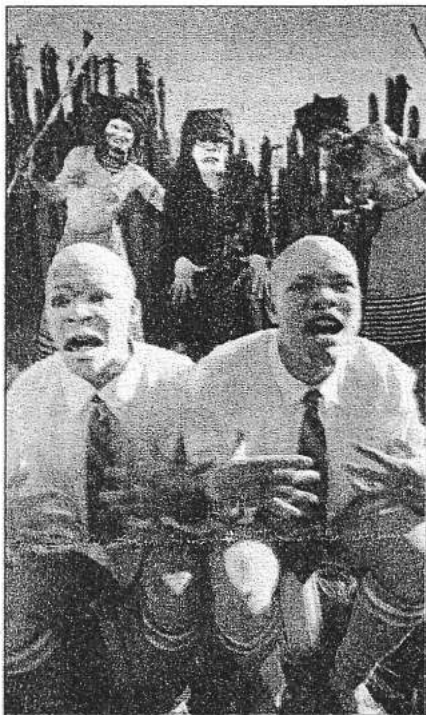
Is Brett Bailey's *Ipi Zombi* the new taste of South African theatre? PETER FROST explores the spicy ingredients that Bailey mixes to cook up a storm of hype and glory

Three years ago, a white boy with squiff glasses and a manic look in his eye put on a show called *Zombie* at the 1996 National Arts Festival. It was the story of a minibus load of kids who had died in an accident. A girl reported seeing a line of women watching when it happened, and a terrible witchhunt began in Kokstad. It was true, it was South African and it brought elements of traditional African ritual theatre into the mainstream for the first time.

Stuck in a Rhini township hall, few saw it and even fewer cared. Yet now the white boy is being hailed as the only hope of SA theatre - a star, an enigma, the focus of hysterical world attention. So what happened in between? Why the pandemonium? And who is Brett Bailey?

BRETT BAILEY is a Capetonian whose association with theatrical maverick and educator Mavis Taylor shaped many of his social, if not theatrical ideas. Before *Zombie*, before his other work, *iMumbo Jumbo*, there was his confrontational theatre. He would pitch up in Adderley Street, disguised, with a bunch of like-minded agitators he had chosen, then derobe and harangue shocked Germans and quizzical fruitsellers with a piece of theatre that was as short as it was sharp. Then he would disappear again. One of his better-known outings involved behaving like a lunatic escaped from Valkenberg in the middle of town. It nearly got him locked up for real.

Talking to Bailey is an experience - like a firefly on uppers, he burns and darts, never still, always alert. He is not just a pissed-off young dude



either. He is Satrean; questioning absolutely everything and accepting no reality as cast in stone. To the outsider, it may all seem terribly pretentious, but face to face, his scepticism and energy for finding an alternative expression, is as real and honest as sand in the Karoo. His words and sentences machine gun, then silence. In the lull, he mulls.

SO ZOMBIE 1996 didn't work in G'town. Unperturbed, he returned to Cape Town and started on project number two, *iMumbo Jumbo*. It is the story of the return to Scotland of a chief to bring back the head of an

ancestor. Again, Bailey worked with a small core group of trainee actors and dancers from the Cape Community Arts Centre, where he teaches. He then supplemented them with non-theatre people from various communities, on site.

The nuts and bolts of his working style are simple; locate the core emotions, map out a general structure for the piece based on ritual African tradition, Bhutto, Brook and Brecht, costume it in bizarre combinations of Western and traditional kitsch, and let go. Oh, and not forgetting the ubiquitous wildlife - there is always a chicken in a Bailey work, and usually it steals the show.

iMumbo Jumbo went to the 1997 Festival, as *Zombie* had before, and this time it worked: it became the buzz find of the festival. People flocked and fought for tickets. Bailey's eclipse was ending.

But he desperately wanted to revisit *Zombie*. He knew it could be better, sharper, inspiring and important. Finally his faxes, niggling, and irritating paid off. He was scheduled for the 1998 Festival with *Ipi Zombi* - on the main stage with expenses covered.

In typical Bailey style, he shunned the conventional spaces of the Monument or Rhodes theatre and chose the creepy Power Station outside town to set his work. It was the star attraction of the festival, a sell-out success.

Bailey walked away from the festival very much the new champion and South Africa eagerly awaits his next creation. It is this work that will set him up as a great or bring him down as an imposter.