

# New direction of theatre in SA

*Ipi Zombi?* goes a long way to free the theatrical imagination

MAURICE PODBREY

**I**PI ZOMBI?, the show that will open at Spier tonight, could be a prime indicator for the way South African theatre evolves over the next few years. It was a runaway success at last year's Grahamstown Festival. It goes a long way to free the South African theatrical imagination and throws political correctness into the rubbish bin where it belongs. This show establishes director Brett Bailey as a major talent.

*Ipi Zombi?* has its origins in Kokstad in 1995, where 12 black schoolboys were killed in a bus accident. A survivor claimed he saw female witches beckoning the bus to its disaster and this unleashed a murderous witch hunt. The village people, led by the schoolboys, were convinced that the dead were now enslaved as zombies to do the witches' bidding. This is potent stuff.

Arthur Miller in *The Crucible* told the story of an American witch hunt in a strictly realistic style. Bailey chooses a gothic/buffoon approach — exaggerated and outrageous — as the zombie schoolchildren usher the audience into the world of the walking dead. The play is anything but politically correct. The reviewer for *The Sowetan* found it offensive. Indeed, our suspension of disbelief is tested by Bailey's comical approach but he knows when to shift gear. When we witness the murder of the witch and her son's attempt to reason with the collective madness, the horror strikes home and we feel the suffocation of the moment.

Bailey is a director of astonishing confidence, especially given his young years. *Ipi Zombi?* is part of a trilogy; all three plays come to grips with South African stories new and old. *Mumbo Jumbo*, was staged at the Grahamstown Festival in 1997 and then at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg. The story is of the quixotic quest to Britain by Chief Gcaleka to retrieve the head of his ancestor, King Hintsa kaPhalo, paramount chief of the amaXhosa who was killed in a skirmish in 1835, and "thereby to restore peace to this country which Hintsa's Devil Spirit is ravaging". The third play, based on the story of Xhosa prophetess Nongqawuse and the killing of the cattle, is scheduled for the Grahamstown Festival this year.

Bailey is serious and ambitious. *Ipi Zombi?* has played to black audiences throughout the Eastern Cape and the Free State and now seems set to hit the international festival circuit, funding permitting.

His work has its roots in the populist theatre of the past era. The aesthetics of that time were born out of economic necessity. There were few conventional stages available to them and little funding for décor and costumes. What they did have was an astonishing energy, a seamless interweaving of music, dance, mime and song and a deep commitment to the stories that make up our many communities.

Like Bailey, David Kramer has produced work with strong organic roots in a particular culture. His latest show, *Kat and the Kings*, was enormously popular here and in England and is about to start its North

American tour. It appears that universality is found in particular truths, not the other way round.

What is astonishing is that not one of the established theatres in this country has shown interest in presenting *Ipi Zombi?*. Indeed, phone calls to a major theatre company in Johannesburg went unanswered. This is a serious indictment of the timidity and lack of imagination that is endemic throughout the country. The next wave of theatrical activity could by-pass them entirely.

The Market Theatre has shown itself to be committed to South African theatre but it is alone in this. Funding problems seem to have left our theatres destitute conceptually as well as materially. Young playwrights who may have received a modest grant to write something will have to be very inventive to get their work staged. Among our senior writers, Reza de Wet went the route of the festivals to get her latest play, *Yelena*, on the boards — it was then taken to Pretoria's State Theatre. Both Grahamstown and Oudtshoorn festivals still offer opportunities to new ventures but the Fringe has seen declining numbers and the self-producing playwright there will be living very dangerously.

What is common to the success of Bailey, Kramer and Nicholas Ellenbogen's Theatre for Africa, now playing at the Castle in Cape Town, is a high degree of self-reliance. These artists are successful not only in the making of good work but also in the skills of marketing, fund-raising



**BLACK STAR:** Abey Yakwe as intomb' emnyama in the controversial play at Spier.

and production. It's a lot to ask of individual artists and how many like-minded and intrepid self-promoters will emerge out of the populist ranks will be critical for our future. Mbongeni Ngema's entrepreneurial skills are already the stuff of legend.

F  
E  
A  
T  
U  
R  
E