

Zombi magic triumphs

Ipi Zombi. By Zakes Mda, Cue guest writer

THE RITUAL BEGINS with members of the audience drinking coffee near a coffin on which a black reliquary fetish squats proudly between the icons of Jesus, Mary and an angel. Some are standing around a brazier of burning logs, or just milling around, waiting to climb the steep stairs into the Third World Bunfight temple where magic is about to happen.

And it does happen, exploding right in your face with booming drums, pulsating dances and hypnotic images. We learn from the narrator that these are hungry times. The rich are eating the poor, and the roads are eating the children. Therefore what we are about to see is a hungry story, a true story, a story that eats everybody.

It is the well publicised event that happened in 1995 when twelve school-boys died in a kombi crash in Kokstad. Claims were made that fifty naked women were seen dancing at the scene of the accident. Whereas "the voice of reason" insisted that the accident happened because the driver was either drunk or asleep due to tiredness, the students believed that it was a result of witchcraft. They decided to take action, hunt down the suspected witches and execute them.

At the funeral of the boys there is a debate between the Christian ministers who declare that the spirits of the deceased are resting peacefully in heaven, and the students who believe that their spirits were stolen and are held prisoner here on earth. They have been turned into zombies, and are kept in one old woman's cupboard. Hence the witch-hunt and the murder of those suspected of witchcraft.

The play is not judgemental at all in its depiction of these beliefs. However we do get the irrationality and sense-

lessness of it all when the students claim that the old woman is bewitching them because she is jealous of their youth. After all, we are told, in our country there are many women who use witchcraft. It's a woman thing, you see.

This is total theatre that combines many traditions. But the dominant tradition here is that of the performance modes that are harvested from African ritual. But these modes are not used in their classical state. They have been redefined in a most creative manner that leaves one breathless. The choreography is of an excellent order. The dances of the traditional healers and diviners - the amagqirha - hold one spellbound. Here the audience is transported to an "intlombe" - the sacred gathering of sangomas where divinations are made.

Brett Bailey, the man who wrote and directed this play, took his actors to the Cave of Motouleng near Clarens in the Free State "to find the spirit of the play". Some of the early rehearsals were held in this awe-inspiring cave which is a holy place of the African indigenous religion. Here sangomas and other worshippers take regular pilgrimages to commune with the ancestors. At Motouleng members of the Third World Bunfight interacted with the pilgrims and communed with their own ancestors. The play has obviously incorporated a lot of what was learnt in those caves. Bailey's actors are highly disciplined, and are capable of feats that are beyond imagination. The most charming one is Abey Xakwe, who plays the role of Intombi 'Nyama.

This is a work of genius that maps out a path to a new South African theatre that is highly innovative in its use of indigenous performance modes. Do not miss it!