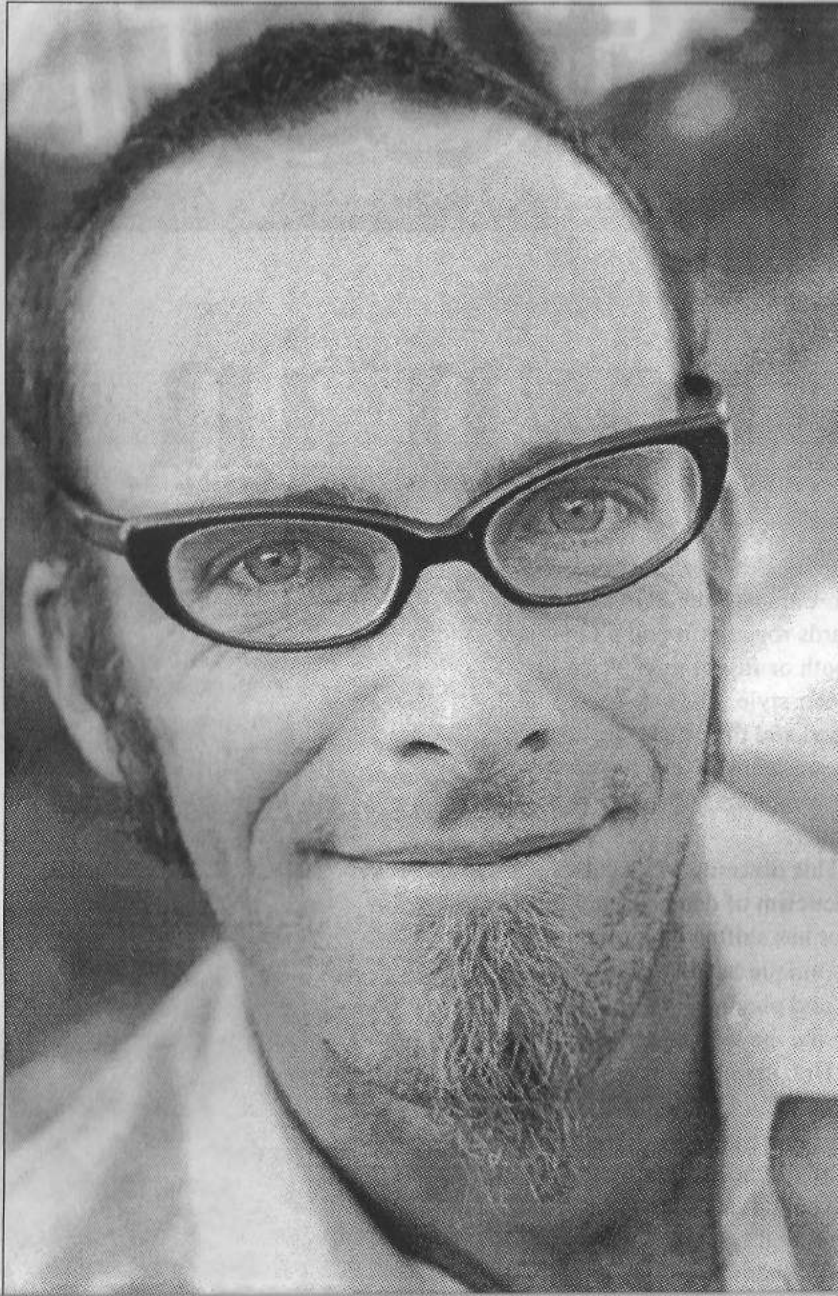


A ceremony of healing

Where *iMumbo Jumbo* and *Ipi Zombi*? came easily, *The Prophet* has been “like pulling a tooth out”.

Backstage

by Tina van der Heyden.



Back stage: Brett Bailey
by Mary Lynn Mather, Cue

Writer, designer and director of *The Prophet*, Brett Bailey uses a large group of local children to tell his version of the story of Nongqawuse, the young girl at the heart of the Xhosa cattle slaughter of 1856.

“We are living in a time where talk about renaissance and the huge flowering of culture is all around us,” he begins, explaining the dangers of choosing to focus on a kind of Armageddon, particularly painful for many people.

“I see this as a ceremony of healing, where the story is brought into the temple and laid on a platter or an altar. It has been influenced by voodoo and styled as a voodoo ceremony of sorts.”

For years now, the idea has been turning in his mind and imagination, emerging as the final piece in his trilogy. But where *iMumbo Jumbo* and *Ipi Zombi*? came easily, this play has been “like pulling a tooth out”.

As he sifted through different accounts and listened to versions of the saga, he kept hearing that he was looking for trouble and being too controversial.

“I felt people would be walking into the production with swords and lances, so I decided to disarm them,” he says. “You can’t aim things at children. I’m glad I did it. It would have been very stodgy with adults. Children bring innocence, sweetness and life into this story.”

To counter any dangerous suspicions that he was portraying something serious as childish or silly, he has the young performers in the roles of the white soldiers too.

“There is a sense of devastation and horror. Children are the future. Everything moves in cycles, from beginning to end. In the natural world, moons and pumpkins wither and return.”

Bailey decided to approach his topic as a fairy story: “Strange beings promise a girl the earth, and instead death comes.”

Even though *The Prophet* is based on the annihilation of 100 000 people, he prefers to see hope and growth, represented by the children who stand up and bow after playing their parts.

All his recent works have dealt with “states of hysteria” and the collision between African ideas and forces Western or Christian. “I have had enough of this now,” he states. “It’s definitely time to move on.”

Before heading for Amsterdam and a scholarship in September, he has vowed to “take six weeks off, lie in the sun and read, and not think a single theatrical thought”.

He may also indulge his growing fascination with rituals and ceremonies. “Perhaps I’ll do Bar Mitzvahs next year,” he announces, and he keeps a straight face.