

Bailey sticks with winning style



SHADOWS OF THEIR FORMER SELVES: Brett Bailey's latest production *Ipi Zombi?* retells the true story of the witch and zombi hunts which took place near Kokstad in 1995.

IPI ZOMBI?, now on at the National Arts Festival

IF A production was judged merely on the amount of attention that it attracted, then Brett Bailey's *Ipi Zombi?* must be one of the highest rated shows at this year's festival.

And perhaps that was the problem. Heightened expectations are nearly always disappointed and this show, which has been playing to full houses, seemed often to be a shadow of its predecessor, last year's *iMumbo Jumbo*.

Anyone who saw and enjoyed that startlingly unique production will find the techniques used in this one very familiar. From the costumes, to the set, to the music — even to the chickens — the similarities are striking: Bailey has obviously found a winning style and intends to stick with it.

This year's production is a much simpler tale than that of *iMumbo Jumbo*, which was more complex and multi-layered in its approach. Again it takes a bizarre event which occurred recently and presents it theatrically with a great deal of declamation, drums and drama.

The difference is that with *iMumbo's* telling of the Hintsas' head debacle there was a great deal of humour, whereas in *Ipi Zombi?* the events are so grim that we go away with a feeling of disturbed uneasiness.

The play concerns the strange happenings which overtook the people who lived in Bhongweni township outside Kokstad in 1995 after a bus

by Ines Watson

crash killed 12 schoolboys.

Overwhelming community grief gave rise to rumour which quickly ran rampant. Mass hysteria is an ugly thing and it makes people do mad things — and so it was in Bhongweni.

It was claimed that witches had caused the crash, that the spirits of the boys had been transformed into zombies which were being kept in an elderly woman's wardrobe. Events got to such a stage that two women were gruesomely murdered and the 12 bodies hacked and desecrated in order to exorcise "the evil spirits."

This horrific piece of recent history is presented in a suitably unsettling style with the murder of one of the women portrayed in a particularly convincing way.

As the dreadful events unravel, Bailey resorts frequently to dance and drums — a device which certainly oils the theatrical flow but which eventually begins to feel like padding.

With the atmosphere enhanced by the sounds of the drums, the smell of burning herbs, the air full of the swirling dust under the dancers' feet, we are immersed in a world governed by superstition, magic, fear and terror. Bailey has succeeded again in taking us to a world that is at once foreign and yet familiar.

And yet, something rankles. To review anything in racial terms can

be offensive and simplistic and yet this was the last of three productions about black South African life that I saw in the same day.

The first was a simple 35 minute play from a local Grahamstown drama group at the Studio. It had no gimmicks but it had sincerity and a collection of characters which were totally believable. They gave the case for and against circumcision rites and they told it like it is.

This was followed by the Young Artist Awardwinner for Drama, Aubrey Sekhabe's *Not With My Gun*. Set in a black township, it was excellently written and performed and had a script which kept the packed audience alert, entertained and enlightened.

And then there was *Ipi Zombi?* It is perhaps ironic that a white observer can relate more to characters created and performed by black writers and directors than that of Brett Bailey's voodoo nightmare vision.

Ipi Zombi? is good theatre but it is also exploitative of black culture and has extremely worrying aspects about it.

Leaving the gloomy *Power Station*, I couldn't help but think that this was a perfect production to tour overseas. How foreign audiences would love it.

Beating drums, chicken feathers and violent death — is that really the reality?

● *Ipi Zombi?* can be seen at the Power Station today at 19h00 and on Saturday at 19h00.