

Bailey's calling up the spirits to stay

By Solomon Makgale

LIKE an arrow aimed straight at our souls, *Ipi Zombi?* hit this year's National Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown with thunderous impact.

Produced and directed by Brett Bailey, it is a mind-boggling, disturbing piece of art that is proving to be one of the country's most talked-about productions in years.

Bailey cleverly utilises theatre to get people thinking, moving them spiritually, and to alter perceptions.

The hypnotic pounding of a gigantic drum with funeral chants and wailing in the background sends shivers down your spine. It creates a peculiar presence – powerful and spiritual. The ambience makes your body stiffen as the immediate aura causes your spine to freeze. *Ipi Zombi?* is not fictitious, it is figurative, an authentic reflection of the power of African spirituality. It is a

ritual in which the audience is not just observing but participating.

Nomfundo Dubula, who plays a witch doctor, tells me that when she is on stage the distinction between herself and the character gets blurred. "I feel like I am the most powerful witch doctor. A spirit wells up inside my belly making me powerful and capable of anything," she says.

Other actors interviewed also talk about how they become their characters. Just how is this possible? The cast spent two weeks in a cave with witch doctors, sangomas and diviners. There, the cast prayed together to the ancestors, "so that we could catch the spirit of the play," says Audile Bonde who plays a zombie.

Bailey also inseminates the spirit of the cast through meditation and yoga. He says that sangomas who dance for over hours every day taught him that to dance, "allow their bodies

to be possessed by the spirits easily".

Bailey describes this in terms of power and healing. "We meditate on the spirit of fire during rehearsals and before each performance. It makes these people very strong, healing them as well."

Western influences on our culture have popularised the perception that traditional healers, witchcraft, sangomas and amagqhirah are non-existent or impotent. Western playwrights and critics have always shown African customs as exotic, savage and barbaric or else have reduced it to mysticism. Most people believe it to be, like a Kokstad farmer who said of the minibus crash on which the play is based, a load of "kaffir bullshit".

Ipi Zombi? shows the contrary. Professor Andrew Buckland of Rhodes University, who is familiar with Bailey's work, points out that the truth about African spirituality "hits you right in the face, you cannot deny it".

But, however good *Ipi Zombi?* may be, it is potentially destructive. Already, its foundations are beginning to shake. A certain woman jerked and manifested spirits during a performance. Actors also complain of having strange dreams, sometimes the spirit that possesses them while on stage comes back to them.

And what has Bailey had to say about that? "I look after them. After a heavy session we relax and talk about our feelings." But will this help especially if he wants "his guys" to be "completely tranced out of their heads for future shows"?

Some actors, like Silulami Lwana whose only source of income is acting for Bailey, do not like the idea. When asked why he continues doing it he says: "It is for the love of theatre."

However, the question is, is it really for the love of theatre or is it done out of desperation for money?