

'Theatre, like the plague, unravels conflicts, liberates powers, releases potentials, and if these and the powers are dark, this is not the fault of plague or of theatre, but life.'

By Richard Wasserfall

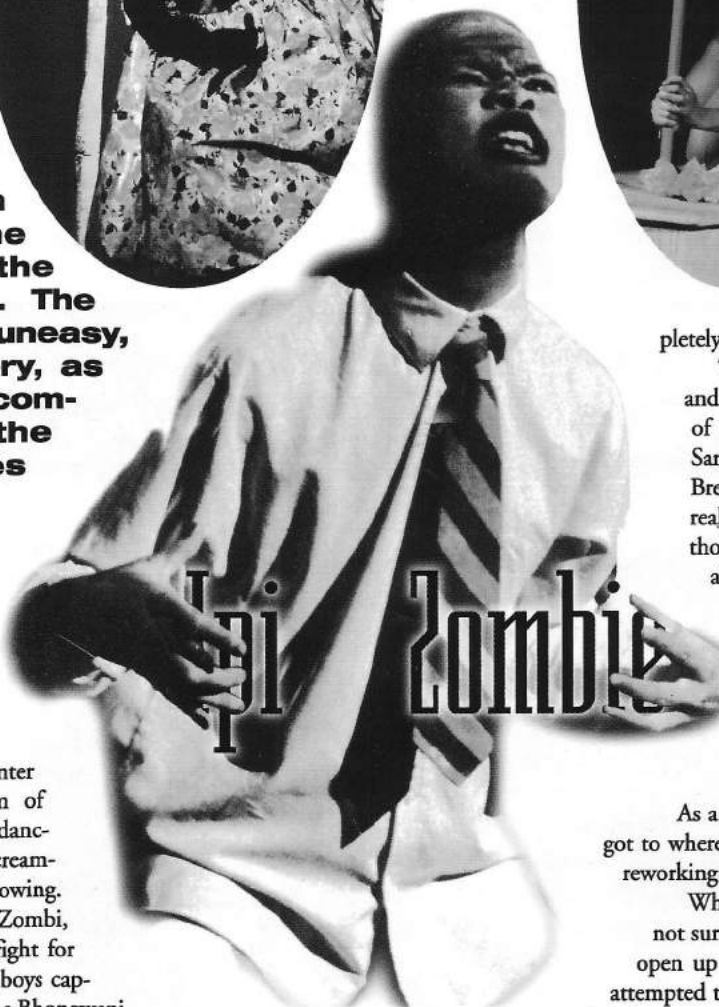
In the decaying industrial architecture of the Old Power Station in Grahamstown is set the hearth of the African Night. The audience is uneasy, yet anticipatory, as they try to comprehend the frozen figures before them.

Then there is deep drumming, kicking the heartbeat awake. The theatre has all of a sudden become something of a boat trip down Conrad's Congo. We have transcended a mere cross-cultural encounter and past into the realm of heavy drumming, savage dancing, woman wailing and screaming, and anger and tears flowing.

It is the story of Ipi Zombi, the tale of the dramatic fight for the souls of twelve schoolboys captured by the 'witches' of the Bhongweni township and turned into Zombies after a bus crash in 1995. As we gazed on the telling of the horror, however, the cast of Ipi Zombi took the pains of pointing out to us whites (the majority of the audience) that we are ignorant (which we were) when it came to the spiritual reality of African culture; that witchcraft is real and needs to be exorcised at all cost. After that point, any remaining pretence about cross cultural assimilation became pointless. What remained was that one's superstition is another's vital and horrifying belief. We call things how we see them and then the issue of judgement becomes murky. Brett Bailey, director of Ipi Zombi tells me, 'When I first attended a sangoma ceremony, my eyes nearly popped out of my head. Exposure to that does something to you. It shows that a logical coherence exists in each culture. It made me aware of the relativity of my own worldview.' And indeed, Ipi



Photos by Sally Low



Zombi opened up a new logical coherence before white eyes as the mutilation of the bodies to free the souls closed the drama.

Yet, Ipi Zombi was never intended to be an exercise of black meets white in colonial Grahamstown. The fact that we were a white audience was incidental. Brett Bailey and the Third World Bunfight recently took Ipi Zombi to the schools and communities of the Eastern Cape and Transkei as well. The white audience was just part of the process of teaching uprooted generations of this country what the African spiritual culture is all about. Still, I am grateful to them for the insight, for no longer will I look on witchcraft killings in a completely condemnatory and superstitious light.

The Ipi Zombi cast took their task to awaken me, and others, very seriously. They went out into the hills of the Free State and lived for two weeks with the Sangomas in caves and where they prepared. I asked Brett if Ipi Zombi was the beginning of an approach to real african theatre, not culturally colonised by western thought. 'No, I don't think so.' He is quite emphatic about this point although he does allow that it may open the process for a new approach to theatre in South Africa. Did you achieve your aims? 'I don't think we reached that point where the aims were met. This was the second time I had done Ipi Zombi, so I think I had lost the viscera of the story. Telling the story a second time, it was difficult to touch that horror again.

As a process, we got where we wanted to and the actors got to where I wanted them to be, but I lost the plot a little in reworking Ipi Zombi.'

Whether he meant literally or figuratively or both, I'm not sure, but what I believe Ipi Zombi did this year, was to open up a very dark place in the South African psyche. It attempted to show people that the spiritual heart of the land is fighting back against rational sterility, and, in the process, made the theatre piece a real and honest attempt to deal with both cultural and cross cultural healing and understanding. The question you are no doubt asking is, "why this spiritual heart is so dark and malevolent?" The following quote from Antonin Artaud, which comes from the Ipi Zombi entry in this years Festival Programme, I guess explains it. 'Theatre, like the plague, unravels conflicts, liberates powers, releases potentials, and if these and the powers are dark, this is not the fault of plague or of theatre, but life.' The darkness of Ipi Zombi was not the theatre, nor of spirituality, but the truth of the event on which it was based, and yet it took the theatre to explain to me, and many others around the country, the emotional and spiritual damage the event caused in so many lives.