

Brett Bailey believes that his Third World Bunfight concept, propelled by the collision of cultures, can

blast South African theatre into the next millennium. ADRIENNE SICHEL encountered this unorthodox playwright



Brett Bailey is among the new breed of South African playwrights and theatre directors. That means he simultaneously takes on the roles of teacher, researcher, storyteller, negotiator, dreamer, administrator, cultural diviner, pragmatist and visionary. That's just for starters.

Bailey's long list of pioneering duties for *iMumbo Jumbo* - *The Days of Miracle and Wonder* which opens at The Market Theatre tomorrow, include getting a permit for a human skull, inducting traditional healers into theatre techniques and budgeting for live chickens, candles and impepha (traditional herb) all valuable ingredients in his production.

iMumbo Jumbo, which was the talk of the mainstream Standard Bank National A Festival in July, is the re-life story of Xhosa chief Njobas Tilana Gcaleka v o., in 1995, went to England in a blaze of international publicity, to

retrieve the head of King iHntsa kaNtsho. In his highly visual production, Bailey and his players take on a multiplicity of issues including colonialism and the ravages of Western mass media imperialism. Chief Gcaleka will not only attend the Johannesburg opening but will give a post performance press conference.

During the six-week rehearsal process at The Market the Capetonian - encircled daily by the Third World Bunfight company: 39 children, sangomas and actors and trainee actors from Grahamstown, Cape Town and Gauteng - looked like a Zen master.

That's no accident. Although only 30 years old, this son of a middle class, white, Cape Town family has paid his spiritual dues. When he was seven he bought a *Madzisa*, which is still a favourite talisman. That doesn't mean he doesn't go to church. He does, now and again, to satisfy his love of ceremony.

"I see rituals and ceremonies as part of theatre. I get fanatical. Sometimes I feel like Jesus in the temple of thieves. Theatre has been completely secularised and that's quite sad. It's got immense power to be a temple, to be a nurturing place. Sometimes it's just a place for shallow entertainment."

Bailey studied theory of drama at UCT as a "vlock". In 1991, the year he graduated, Grahamstown Fringe audiences walked out when the women in white leotards started menstruating in *The Dreadcat Cosmic Kaleidoshow*, a deconstruction of Ian Fleming's *Dr No*.

Seeds for his later work, which combines ritual with storytelling and intercultural forms, were first sown at the 1993 New Moon Festival in a dry river bed in New Bethesda. When the Cape Town east didn't pitch, Bailey's *Dawn X*, a play about the Owl House's Helen Martins, was improvised on the day with local inhabitants and township children in front of lekkie headlights. A subsequent New Bethesda community project "with hippy Cape Town folk like



Miracles and wonder ... Brett Bailey (second left) with (from left) Noxolo Donyeli, Tony Madikane, Boniwe Tyota and Vukile Handula (drumming) get into the urban spirit of *iMumbo Jumbo* which draws on Xhosa song, dance and storytelling

MOTLALLETI MAILARE

Conjuring with cultures and myths

me, bombed" left Bailey "really fucked up for a while". So he spent 1994 in India studying Buddhist meditation and touring on a bicycle. The sense of direction he found led him back to Africa.

He was determined to go to West Africa to study masquerades, but he couldn't find the funding.

"I did some reading about the movement of the Bantu and the Nguni. So I thought there had to be some vestiges here. I started looking into Xhosa folk stories and sangomas and realised 'my God, it's all here'. And everyone said 'you can't go to the Transkei, it's too dangerous. You'll be murdered.' I was scared for a while but it was incredibly rewarding. On a R5 700 grant from the Foundation for the Creative Arts, I spent three months living with sangomas and studying folklore theses at the University of the Transkei."

Did he set out to create a new form of South African theatre?

"Ja, in a way. When I came back from India I thought, 'how can I work in theatre in such a way that it can survive in this country?' I thought the only way was to try and reach across the social spectrum and stop making elitist crap. I can do the avant garde work, but make something else that reaches everybody. We will make theatre that survives and from there we can be more indulgent."

"Theatre people complain about why people aren't coming to the theatre. They aren't coming because they have a snotty idea that audiences have to change to see what they want them to see, instead of being servants to the public. They must create amazing stuff to capture the imagination."

South African theatre once conscientised people politically. Now, Bailey passionately believes, it has the ability to heal.

"This is not nasty medicinal healing. It's keeping in touch on a deeper level than just laughing."

Where does spirituality end and theatre begin?

"They melt into each other. Like they do in my life."

iMumbo Jumbo is dedicated to his granny "who opened my eyes to that which can't be seen". Marie Bailey is a spirit medium living in Masvingo, communing with spirits at the Great Zimbabwe ruins.

"I'm definitely going to do a play there," predicts her grandson.

Theatricaly, Bailey's major influences were Artand, Brook, Crotowski and Jung. In 1995

he taught playwriting and directed some plays for Mavis Taylor's New Africa Project. His penchant for working with large groups cutting across age, race and cultures was put to the test that year, with his life savings, at the Whale Festival in Hermanus. *The Day the Whale Came* was an inventive migration myth about a whale being taught the laws of the land, by a whale, before they were colonised. The pageant in the harbour was upstaged by a real whale which danced on its tail for 20 minutes.

He went to the Transkei where he was also searching for an intsoni, a traditional Xhosa folk tale, to dramatise.

"Nothing grabbed me. Then I heard the zombie story (school children killed in a taxi collision in Kokstad in 1995 were not buried because they were said to be zombies). I met a white Kokstad farmer who was having a braai in the middle of absolutely nowhere. I mentioned the story and he said, 'It's a load of kaffir bullshit'. So I took a taxi back to Kokstad and spent three days researching it."

Zombie astonished on the 1996 Grahamstown Fringe and was then performed in Khayelitsha, Nyanga and Langa before it ran at the Nico Maku.

Mention the term community theatre and Brett Bailey becomes downright unspiritual.

"Community has become a liberal word for black. In the Grahamstown programme they called *iMumbo Jumbo* community theatre. That really pissed me off. For me community theatre has taken up where agit prop left off. It deals with issues like Aids awareness and child abuse. Creativity was subservient to

voice of protest. It had to be at the time. It's very condescending that black people's theatre is relegated to the realm of conscientising or something else."

Ironically it's an invigorating "something else" that this man from Cape Town so passionately pursues as he redefines and re-invents South African theatre.