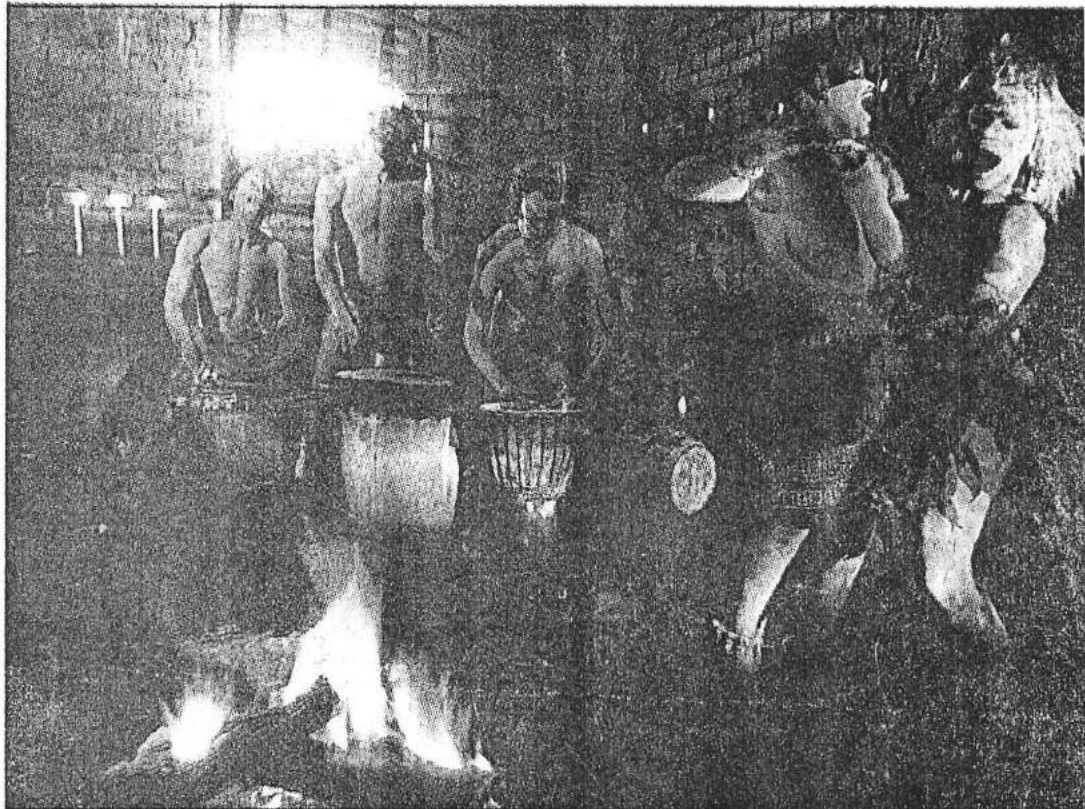




FRED KHUMALO
at the
Grahamstown arts festival



BEWITCHED AND BEZOMBIED: The cast of Brett Bailey's new play *Ipi Zombi* drum up a storm at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown
Picture: OBIE OBERHOLZER

A glimpse into South Africa's dark soul that's worthy of Tarantino

ON THE night of September 30, 1995, 12 boys from Bhongweni township in Kokstad, Eastern Cape, died in a motor accident.

Survivors claimed they had seen 50 women, naked in the darkness, at the roadside shortly before the crash — trainee witches after human blood. Legend has it the witches imprisoned the souls of the dead, who became zombie slaves.

This rumour sparked one of the bloodiest witch-hunts in the history of South Africa.

And this story is the springboard from which playwright Brett Bailey launched *Ipi Zombi*, his journey into the dark soul of South Africa; a play which opened at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown on Friday.

Had Quentin Tarantino been a playwright, he would have been proud to produce *Ipi Zombi*.

Like Tarantino, Bailey takes a horrifying subject and gives it a funny twist.

Fellow playwrights are enthusiastic about Bailey's work.

"Writers like Brett are using theatre to explore challenges and problems that our society is grappling with at the moment," says playwright James Whyte.

Critics, on the other hand, say local theatre has been caught in a cycle of victims and villains, oppressors and oppressed.

Attendance at the festival has fallen because theatre is perceived to be boring and obsessed with the past.

"Some people have complained that the festival has become too black, while others are saying it's still lily-white. We've done our best to get all sectors of society involved," says the festival press officer, Marguerite Robinson.

"Writers are exploring the personal, psychological terrain of the human condition. The festival is testimony to a new beginning for South African theatre."

Playwright and novelist Zakes Mda is also optimistic about the future of theatre. "Directors like Sello Maake kaNcube are proving the prophets of doom wrong. When we had the first democratic elections, some critics said now that apartheid was dead, South African writers would not have anything to write about.

"But I have a problem with people who say the theatre in those days was not challenging. There never was anything wrong with what we called protest theatre. It grew out of our society. We could not write escapist stories, or art for art's sake.

"Work like kaNcube's *Koze Kuse Bash* addresses the issues facing our society now."

Koze Kuse Bash, playing in Grahamstown, examines the culture

of a township street bash — an all-night street party where children drink, take drugs and experiment with sex and guns.

Without being preachy, kaNcube traces the life of a naive girl (played by Leleti Khumalo) who gets into an affair with a car thief and gunslinger.

In an attempt to gain acceptance among the township "in" crowd, the young girl suddenly finds herself plunged into the violent, boozy maelstrom of street bashes.

Her helplessness mirrors the plight of many young people in the township today.

Themes at the festival range from witchcraft to crime; from sexual to substance abuse.

Scriptwriter Harry Hofmeyr of Kwakhala Nyonini television

made his theatrical debut at the festival with his play *Requiem*.

It is the story of Henry Vosloo who in his teens is raped by a man. In the rage of his growing manhood, he becomes schizophrenic, kills his father, a church minister, and eats his body — literally living out the old man's constant exhortation: eat my flesh, and drink my blood.

Whyte and the Take-away Shakespeare Company have brought a South Africanised *King Lear* to Grahamstown.

"Men in tights and make-up speaking iambic pentameters with English accents are not entertainment. It is a perverse act of colonisation — audience torture at its worst," says Whyte.

There are many South Africans who can relate to that.