THEATRE & SOCIETY

Reflections in a fractured mirror

Temple Hauptfleisch

IN SOUTH AFRICA
THEATRE AND SOCIETY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Some reflections in a fractured mirror

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ACADEMIC
For Karina
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Preface

One of the exciting areas of contemporary cultural analysis has become the field of performance studies. Most theatre histories to date have tended to focus on either the history of formal writing for the theatre or on the history of formal performances in the theatre. Lately there has also been an interest in the political impact theatre has, the impact it ought to have, or the impact it ought to have had. An area not dealt with much is that of the theatre as system – the network of related and interrelating processes involved in eventually staging a play. Yet changes in the system of theatremaking, as well as changing concepts about such a system, may actually change one’s concepts of theatre itself and more specifically about the way one views theatre history. What we really need, of course, is a comprehensive new history of theatre in South Africa, but perhaps our theoretical perspectives are still too heavily locked into what one might call colonial thinking. Or into some other (equally dated) paradigm, discourse or ideology.

The present publication is intended as one possible contribution towards that necessary debate which is required to lead us closer to the ultimate ‘new history’. What follows arises from certain convictions I have come to hold about what theatre is and what it does, and in writing them up I hope to document the growth of a particular, and essentially personal, view of certain processes that go into the making of theatre, and specifically so in the theatre of South Africa. The theoretical underpinnings of my historical explorations evolved gradually and the majority of the chapters are based on ideas first explored in a variety of monographs and articles, reworked and expanded in 1991–1993. To assist those interested in such theoretical aspects I have summarized the fundamental ideas briefly in Chapter 1. However, those who prefer to get on to the practicalities of theatre history may find it convenient to skip that chapter, at least initially.

Besides a study of the relatively limited, though burgeoning, supply of secondary material on theatre in the country (see Chapter 1 and the Bibliography), the primary material used constitutes a very mixed bag of divergent data. Most of it is available in what was originally the Human Sciences Research Council’s data-base for theatre research, now housed in the National Film, Video and Sound Archives. The data employed is made up of *inter alia* archival material on the history of South African theatre, newspaper cuttings on theatre productions and theatre events, statistical data on theatre attendance in South Africa (1978–1983), interviews and discussions with a variety of theatre practitioners and extensive personal exposure to performances – specifically in Johannesburg (1980–1987) and Cape Town (1988–1996).

The fact that my interpretation of ‘theatre’ is very broad – as is my interpretation of the South African community – should, I trust, at least be provocative enough to stimulate some rethinking of old and cherished paradigms among those involved in the thankless, but invaluable academic activity of ‘studying theatre’. 
I may just point out that readers may find some discrepancies occurring between the chapters, even cases where I appear to be rejecting earlier ideas as I am led on to discover new ones. I have left most of these pretty much as they were, since the point is to display the evolution of certain ideas about theatre over the course of some twenty years, not to state a definitive case, or write a definitive history – which is an impossible task anyway.

To help the reader to find some more general use in the arguments presented here, I have added an Index and a differentiated Bibliography, in which all the consulted works on South African theatre are listed separately from more general historical and theoretical works. Texts cited are also listed separately, as are useful collections of playtexts. Diagrams are placed at appropriate points within the particular chapter and are numbered by chapter, thus Diagram 2.1 refers to the first diagram used in chapter 2. On the other hand, since they may refer to more than one chapter, photographs and illustrations have been placed together in a block, between Section 1 and Section 2 of the book, and are numbered consecutively (in chronological order).

To those who have to suffer (once more) my penchant for diagrams and illustrations: I commiserate with you, but I know no other way. Perhaps it is the actor in me, who far prefers showing to telling and to whom a picture is on occasion really worth a thousand words. It is perhaps my twentieth-century, media-shaped way of thinking, but, whatever it is, doodling in ideas remains a tool of my trade for which I beg the reader's indulgence. For the rest, I have tried to take certain points of criticism – particularly the oft heard one that I tend to create categories, but seldom use them – seriously enough to provide what I hope will be plentiful examples and illustrations. Some serious, some less so. After all: in academic thinking, as in life and in theatre, a little levity may be most salubrious and even enlightening in trying times.

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For a number of very sound reasons this book has been formally dedicated to Karina Hauptfleisch, my wife and (willingly and unwillingly) my partner in so much of the exploration recorded here. Her love and support over the years of its creation have made it so much easier to do, as has the forbearance of my children, Anzel and Gaerin, with an absent-minded father in the throes of writing and editing.

However, a book such as this, which is the result of a long process of growth, spread over most of an academic lifetime, must owe a great deal to teachers, colleagues, associates, students and friends. In fact, there are far more names than one can adequately list, but, as with every book, there are inevitably certain organizations and individuals I cannot neglect to mention, for they have influenced my life and my thinking too profoundly.

To start with the institutions. Firstly I would like to thank the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) for the sixteen valuable years I spent there learning about social and cultural research and being so wonderfully supported in my explorations of language and theatre in South Africa. Many of the ideas expressed here were developed in my time as head of the Centre of SA Theatre Research (CESAT) at the HSRC (1979–1987). Secondly there is the Centre for Science Development which funded a number of my trips abroad to attend conferences and read papers outlining the basic ideas I explore in this publication. And finally there is the University of Stellenbosch, my current employer. Here I have been provided with an intellectual and physical environment in which it was possible to grow as researcher and teacher. In particular my thanks to the research administration at the university which has been so immensely supportive of my work over the past nine years and has done much to make it possible for me to finish this publication.

To turn to the individuals, I must start with my drama teachers: Prof. J.R. Wahl of the University of the Orange Free State who, through his inspiring lectures and interest, first persuaded an eager young undergraduate to specialize in drama, and Proff. Leon Hugo and Ian Ferguson of Unisa who were the supervisors of my post-graduate work and guided me to a very real understanding of the academic demands and rich pleasures of my chosen field.

Over the years we worked together in Pretoria, my colleagues and friends at the Human Sciences Research Council’s Institute for Language and the Arts provided me with ample support, criticism and advice in the process of developing the basic ideas contained in this study. While most of them are mentioned in the bibliography, the following were of specific value in shaping the ideas contained here during our many formal and informal discussions: Martjie Bosman, P.G. du Plessis, Francis Galloway, Bessie Gericke, Charles Malan, Karel Prinsloo, Gerard Schuring, Betsie Stoltz, Jan Vorster and Gretchen Wepener. In particular I would like to single out my admirable
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Among Yvette’s numerous offices is also that of assistant editor of the South African Theatre Journal, and I cannot neglect to mention the role that journal, its many contributors, and the editorial consultants across the world have played in my academic life over the past decade or more. In this respect I would particularly like to acknowledge the enormous influence of my co-editor, co-author, friend and – often – my academic conscience: Ian Steadman. He is in no way (as indeed is no-one mentioned here) responsible for the ideas expressed in this book. In fact I do believe he does not condone or even agree with some of my more outrageous ideas, but through our joint work I have been led on numerous pathways along which I had not dared venture alone, or would even have discovered on my own.

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Breytenbach – urging me to ‘tell the story of theatre in South Africa’; I think of my friend and director Danie Burger, who shared his immense knowledge of and passion for live performance with me over many years; I think of the hugely supportive and inspiring Stephen Gray; and finally I think of the valued friendship of John L. Styan, whose books inspired my own original research and whose industry and wide-ranging interest in things theatrical remain an inspiration. I do believe this book got its original start when I first stumbled across The elements of drama in the library at Unisa.

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Reflections on the mirror: Theories, diagrams and definitions

But art, however one defines it, must still mirror, favourably or with hostility, the development of the society to which it belongs. Inevitably, contemporary art, too, reflects the complex and divisive social, political and ethical state of our civilization.

Gillo Dorfles, 1983: 8

Introduction

The debate about the precise relationship between theatre and society is an old and honourable one – whether in terms of the Shakespearean metaphor Dorfles utilizes (along with a vast range of other writers), or in terms of Aristotle’s Mimesis, Dr Johnson’s Nature, Coleridge’s Truth, and the many other metaphors used to indicate the representative nature of the arts. The way one perceives this clearly has a great deal to do with who one is and how one has been socialized oneself. It is also clear from even the most superficial reading of the many theorists over the ages, that no-one sees it as a simple, predictable or even dependable relationship, or even a matter of precise unmeditated imitation of an external ‘reality’. It is too dependent on human beings and their complex and perverse natures to be so. It is also perceived as an ‘art’ created by an individual ‘artist’ – and the terms art and artist are themselves concepts of some flexibility. But all agree, somewhere along the line, that there is a relationship of some kind between a performance and the socio-cultural context in which it occurs.

The mirror and the reflection

To me the relationship seems clear: it is observable, almost tangible, and symbiotic in nature. For this reason I find the metaphor of the mirror powerful, appealing and – in a variety of ways – true, whatever the precise interpretation one may put on it and in spite of a multitude of necessary qualifications that need to be stated. But it does not function in quite the way that my persuasive training in
practical criticism and the concept of the Western canon of ‘great books’ had originally led me to believe – or conditioned me to believe, to be more precise. So, over the years, as my own environment changed and I came into contact with a range of alternative ideas generated by a variety of creative analysts and critics, the arguments put forth in this publication began to emerge. I found myself increasingly more aware of certain limitations in my own thinking, and certainly in the traditionally received concepts of ‘art’ and ‘culture’ which I had been trained to use. In a sense then this book is an attempt to discuss the results achieved by these shifts in thinking, and to apply them to a specific body of performance in a specific context: that of South African theatre and its history.

**Theatre and society**

Using the term ‘society’ in this context immediately raises another set of problems, I know, but some of my recent explorations have been into the obscure and resented field of ‘the sociology of culture’, and it struck me that this was what many of us, myself certainly, have been engaged in all along. We have never given it that name, but the concept of the theatre as mirror really signals a ‘sociological’ interest informing the work of the critic, and a ‘sociological’ purpose for the art form.

From such a perspective, a study of the arts and artists of a specific community may be seen as something akin to a barometer with which to measure the intellectual and emotional – even political – climate in that community. It is a functional approach which sees the (cultural) critic as a valuable social commentator and analyst, and it is indeed a point of view I have come to endorse quite strongly over the years. However, I am less convinced today of the popular view that the individual artist is or can be a reflection of society, or even a catalyst for change in such a society. No single artist can ‘reflect’ or represent more than a few selected aspects of life about him or her at any given time, particularly not in a single artefact (play, painting, poem, whatever). Studying a single work can never tell one all one wishes to know about a particular community, and similarly studying the oeuvre of a particular artist will only give you that artist’s view and interpretation of the community.

Now, none of this significantly invalidates the importance of the artist and the artist’s work. The artist – qua artist – is, and is seen to be, a privileged and important part of most communities. Because he/she is a maker of artefacts, the artist may even be publicly commissioned to help create the communal culture and to act as historian of and witness to the evolution and decline of his/her own community and its cultural life.²

However, there is an additional way of looking at the role of the artist in society. In a sociological sense the artist, the medium, the artwork and the receiver of the artwork (e.g. playwright, play, director, performer, performance, and audience in the theatre) may all be said to display aspects of their times and their environment in the work, for they have each been shaped by that particular society, and would thus inevitably introduce aspects of that society (or societies) into a specific presentation.³ But, unlike the former aesthetic role, this is not a conscious endeavour by the artist, nor a function of the artwork, and hardly a privi-
leged 'gift' given to the artist. It is part of his or her nature as a human being, displayed despite any attempts at artistry, and may even require the services of a competent and objective analyst (if such a creature exists) to be extracted from the artwork-in-context. Studying and interpreting this is the field of the cultural sociologist.

The foregoing applies equally well to those popular ideas about the relationship between theatre and society proposed by the 'culture as weapon' school of thought. Once more, I do not believe that the individual artwork or artist has any real, or lasting, impact on the society, nor is such an individual artwork or artist able to change society. The process is far more complex than that, and is far less exploitable than is often believed. A fundamental hypothesis of this study is that it is the theatrical system and the sum of artefacts in any given period and given context which may be said to 'reflect' that context, and which, in the longer term, may be able to 'influence' or 'change' that specific context.

In terms of the above, then, studying theatre and its impact on society, and writing a theatre history are in themselves far more involved matters than the simple listing of theatre performances, compiling biographies of artists, providing plot summaries and analyses of plays, and so on. Both activities must, inevitably, include and be part of a discussion of the theatrical system and its place within the socio-cultural and socio-political system(s) of the particular country or region. Not that lists, chronologies and the like are unimportant – they are, and extremely so. But one has also to look at the processes involved – processes embedded in a larger, open-ended system of interacting sub-systems. And basic concepts of theatre need to be opened up, to incorporate far more than the old, conventional ideas about what constitutes theatre and drama, and what is involved in making it happen. In other words, we need to enlarge our concept of the mirror, if we are really to gain the full benefit of its reflective qualities.

Theatre as system

It may be useful at this point then to expand slightly on the concept of 'theatre as a system'. To illustrate I would refer the reader to Diagram 1.1 on the inside front cover. This model was originally devised in order to delimit the domain of 'theatre research' as a discipline and utilizes certain concepts taken from communication theory. Thus the diagram represents a process model of 'theatre' as a potential object of study. It can however also be used as an adapted systemic model, in order to show how theatre operates as a complex and dynamic structure of interlinked processes, to generate a particular theatre event within the wider systemic context of a specific community or society.

In the model the channels of communication and interaction are represented by the solid lines between the various units or elements in the structure. The lines thus represent both avenues of information transmittal and avenues of feedback, for each line symbolizes a transactional relationship between the elements. Each element again might be a process (enclosed by a square) or an artefact (in a circle). For clarity’s sake I have provided an example or two in each segment, though there may of course be many other possible examples in each case. Each process identified here may involve one or more agents or artificers,
and can it its turn be seen as a subsystem open to further analysis. In this way for example each square can be broken down to show the detailed steps taken by the agents within that particular process, to contribute to the life of the system. (Thus one may detail fully the process of directing a play, i.e. the processes engaged in by the director while preparing the play in rehearsal, or the process of marketing a production, i.e the steps taken by the Publicity Section in order to draw attention to and draw audiences to a particular performance.)

Clearly this is an ideal model, attempting to cater for as many options as is possible, but when used it cannot be a rigid or static one. Any of the units may be removed, altered, shifted or replaced in order to deal with specific performances, for each ‘event’ is of course really unique. To use this model to represent the performance of a traditional Zulu wedding ceremony for instance, would be entirely feasible, but would require a rather more free interpretation of many of the units and the concepts they represent than would be true of a performance of *Hamlet* by a state-funded Performing Arts Council. The latter indeed would most probably involve all units, and may be said to provide a rather more obvious example of how the model would work.

It is important to note that we are not talking about a structure – a rigid, fixed and somehow ‘given’ entity, but a dynamic and organic system of processes, a general (i.e. unspecific and adaptable) and an open system, constantly changing as it interacts with the larger (or macro) systems of the society in which it is embedded. And it is a sensitive system, in which any change in any subsystem or element may in actual fact affect the entire process. As may any change in the macro systems in which the theatre system is embedded (i.e. its social, political, economic and moral context).

A prominent example of the susceptibility of the system to change may be found in the change that came over theatre in England when Puritan sensibilities closed the theatres. After the Restoration not only the playwrights, but in fact all involved in the theatre system, found that they had to adapt to a different social order to the one they had known before. As an integral part of (and indeed mirror to) the social life of the times, the theatre could not but change as well, and thus both the plays put on and the system which produced those plays and performances, differ distinctively from what went before.

In a similar fashion, the invention of movable type and the steam press had a significant impact on the nature of playwriting, turning the playwright into the playwright or dramatist, writing equally for the reader and the audience-member. Later the world-wide implementation of copyright laws and the concept of performance rights similarly transformed the nature of the industry, by restricting access to popular works and making the writer a commercial power, capable of selling the fruits of his labour. The list of familiar examples is endless.

In South Africa an extremely significant ‘intervention’ was the introduction of the playwrights’ boycott in 1963, and the accompanying ban by Equity and other performers’ unions which followed a few years later. Not only did this place cultural-political pressure on the South African government, but it actually reshaped the way theatre was being put on in the country by removing competition and paving the way for indigenous plays, training and work for indigenous designers, directors, etc.
As pointed out before, we shall be referring to the concept of theatre as a system again in the course of the arguments below (and more examples of such interventions will be discussed). The central reference point in such cases will be Diagram 1.1 and the idea that any performance – formal or informal, conventional or experimental – can and must in fact, go through at least the fundamental processes outlined there. In this sense it may provide something of a communal point of reference in the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary analyses and discussions to follow, as well as in the more historically oriented chapters. It is therefore a way of seeing the shape and the qualities of the mirror that is our theatre.

**Categorization and the academic enterprise**

Now, much of the foregoing is already prone to a fundamental point of criticism one often hears today: the legitimacy of classification and categorization as a part of research methodology. It will be clear from the above that much of this book is concerned with precisely such an exercise: sifting available data about Southern African performance (and its socio-cultural environment), in order to distinguish and describe possible patterns and trends – often in terms of hypothetical models, based on other similar processes. To me this is an essential part of theatre research, if used creatively, but perhaps it needs a little more motivation at this point.

The process of academic research as we know it has long relied quite heavily on some form of reasoned selection, classification and categorization of data for its analysis of any given phenomenon. This is of course a much debated point, the very statement being dubbed ‘positivist’ at is mildest and set up for criticism by a variety of opponents from many ideological positions. It may even have been a totally misguided approach to knowledge and thinking from the very beginning, as Edward de Bono so persuasively argues (1990). It would appear that the crux of the matter possibly resides in the interpretation of the concept of data, as well as the way such data is obtained and the way it is used/interpreted. Or, as De Bono phrases it: the answer lies in perception rather than logic.

Now, while I concede that one may quibble about the nature and range of particular classifications and categories, and I shall refer to this below and throughout the ensuing arguments, I cannot do without the basic process – nor, I believe, can the very opponents of positivism and classification. In their very efforts to confront, to deny the validity of such procedures, they usually employ some kind of classification themselves. Positivism, cultural materialism, people’s culture, criticism, literature, the ‘artist’, the canon, etc. are all ‘categories’, created in order to allow one to understand and talk about some aspect of life and culture. Words indeed are the very expression of man’s categorizing. In dealing with a poem or poet, even in simply reading a written sentence, one is constantly making choices, based on perceived differences and ‘named’ or labelled in some fashion. That may very well even be where true meaning lies, as Gregory Bateson (1980) has suggested.

However, all classification and categorization (as indeed language, art and theatre) are socially and culturally produced. And it is here that problems really
arise, for cultures and societies are far from homogeneous, and are constantly changing as well. Hence the concepts and categories devised to deal with and talk about one era, one set of events and so on, must necessarily be equally unstable. Which of course lends some legitimacy to the academic enterprise of 'studying culture', and makes it possible to continue studying *Oedipus Rex*, the *Mahabarata* or *Hamlet* (or the function of the chorus in Greek theatre, the praise poet in Zulu and other African societies, the shaman in Javanese society) so many centuries after they were created or came into being. Also the hegemonic balance within cultures shifts and one finds the ideological and value-based criteria for selection changing over the years. It is this fact for instance that leads us to the dilemma of the colonial heritage and the debate about Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism (referred to below). It is an issue which has become a necessary but sensitive matter in the exciting but dangerous period of the post-De Klerk/Mandela society (in which the value of studying *Oedipus Rex*, the *Mahabarata*, *Hamlet* and African praise songs is vociferously debated).

Against this background and the belief that categorization can never be final and/or definitive in any way, let us return to the more specific issue of the classification and categorization of cultural processes and artefacts as this occurs in the rest of this study. A number of functional classifications of theatre and theatrical processes are proposed and utilized in the first section, while another kind of categorization, the one which has really been the norm in virtually all discussions of South African playwriting to date, is utilized as a springboard for certain discussions in the third section of the book (see Chapters 6–8).

As Steadman (1984, 228) has pointed out, one is plagued by definitional problems when studying South African theatre, particularly at this time of change and tumult, for the diversity of theatrical forms in this heterogeneous society has prompted diverse critical attitudes to these forms. Therefore, he suggests, thinking along the lines of categories such as 'white theatre in English', 'white theatre in Afrikaans', 'black theatre in English', 'black theatre in the vernacular', and so on have been symptomatic of the self-consciousness created in all cultural discourse in South Africa by a cultivated and imposed racist ideology. But they are more than this, they are also borrowed paradigms for viewing the social and cultural world, taken from the 'objective' and 'pragmatic' world of European and American science, as Mudimbe (1988) and others have shown.

Yet, despite the self-consciousness, neither Steadman nor I – nor indeed any other writer to date – have really been able to avoid working within the parameters of these cultural classifications in some way or other. And it was not for want of trying. The problem is of course that, while it may be true that we are all still very much caught up in a specific 'Eurocentric', academic and colonial mode of thinking about culture and art, there are also very specific ways in which the differences which are suggested by the categories are in fact real. Or at least they were real, in their specific historical context(s). Such differences are rooted in and thus defined by the many historical and imposed structures within society, so that they were inevitably constituted as different theatrical systems, and have been for more than three centuries now. And this is true, even if looked at 'from the other side' as it were: the descriptive terms might not be the same if an 'Afrocentric' position were taken up (or even a Martian one), nor would the specific borders of differ-
ence necessarily correspond (they hardly do so in one system of thinking), but any
description would still have to be aware of certain observable factors impinging on
the nature of the particular activity and/or incident.

Let us consider a hypothetical example. During the early socio-political de-
velopment of the continent, a group of early seafarers coming down the west coast
of Africa, send a boat ashore and the sailors come across an encampment of
San-hunters, who are also travelling down the coast, but on land. The inhabitants
of the encampment happen to be engaged in a communal dance. The sailors
observe this, and in an effort to befriend the natives, begin to play on a flute and
dance themselves. Now, without speculating on what may have happened fur-
ther, one could perhaps assume that some kind of record of this cultural contact
is kept by both groups of participants. (It may be in any form, a logbook, a diary,
a sketch, a rock painting, a narrative tale, a dance). The point here is: how will
this be interpreted in each case? Would cultural historians describing the jour-
ney of the sailors not see it as a meaningful cultural event in Western perfor-
ance (e.g. ‘the ensuing dances by the sailors were possibly influenced by their
contact with the African dances’), while the cultural historians of the San would
see the event as an important step in the development of African performance
(e.g. ‘the San dances were influenced by their contact with Western instruments
and dances’)? Is the significant meeting thus the start of dance in Africa (i.e. the
first introduction of ‘real’ – i.e. European – dance forms to the San), or is it mere-
ly an important event in an ongoing history of dance in Africa? The crucial dif-
ference then is that between the beginning of a tradition, and the influence on an
existing tradition. A question of perception.

The importance of this example lies in the matter of perspective. If a later his-
torian now sets out to describe the development of the dance in the region, how
does he describe this contact and the ensuing results? What is the point of depart-
ture: the European dance or the African dance? European socio-cultural values or
African socio-cultural values? The difference may look pedantic here, but it is fun-
damental to what really happened in the cultural historiography in South Africa:
the history of theatre in the region is traced from the first arrival of whites on the
shores of Africa (i.e. even an off-shore performance on a boat in the 15th cen-
tury is described as the first theatre), not the ongoing performances on land. Most
contemporary histories still begin with the coming of the Dutch in 1652, and
more particularly the introduction of the British garrison in 1799 (see chapter 2).

The problem is that looking at it in any other way, and specifically in what may
be the correct way (i.e. as a much longer, indigenous tradition), poses a myriad
of problems concerning records and criteria.

For example, if one grants that different systems of theatre may exist along-
side each other, it is important to note that such (sub-) systems often incorpo-
rate their own critical and artistic assumptions, values, criteria, and the like, and
that the systems bring forth the necessary apparatus by which to impose and
maintain not only the system itself but also the concomitant assumptions, etc.
Because they are operational systems, each such a structure is controlled by
its own legal, economic, philosophic, and artistic ‘rules’, devised and imposed by
the participants and/or their ‘leaders’ in service of that particular system. So,
when a historian approaches such a system, and sets about choosing his/her
point of departure, it in actual fact also implies choosing an entire and specific set of critical, artistic and ideological assumptions.

To illustrate something of the hegemonic power that this systemic concentration/control might exercise, let us consider a rather obvious but useful example from South African theatre history.

By the late nineteenth century, the Dutch language spoken at the Cape had evolved into a *patois* of major influence among two significant and interrelated, but marginalized sections of the population – the so-called ‘coloured’ population and the ‘Dutch’ community, both threatened by the British colonial rule. The one result of this was the growth of a conscious ‘language struggle’ among the descendants of the Dutch farmers, who felt themselves unified in opposition to the anglicization policies of the colonial British rulers. This language struggle soon became part of a much wider political movement towards a form of cultural nationalism (and the eventual emergence of the ‘Afrikaner’ as a socio-political and ‘ethnic’ entity, in terms of the evolving separatist ideology). Being an exclusivist and oppositional movement (i.e. it excluded all who identified with the British domination) it began to create specific ‘Afrikaans’ equivalents for every social and cultural organization: Afrikaans schools, Afrikaans universities, Afrikaans churches, even Afrikaans chambers of commerce – and inevitably Afrikaans cultural organizations. Central to this, and particularly to the latter, was thus the need to ‘create’ an Afrikaans culture – a literature, music, theatre in Afrikaans for Afrikaners. And this was done with immense energy, concentration and administrative flair by a wide range of cultural activists such as Arnoldus Pannevis, S.J. du Toit, D.F. Malherbe, C.J. Langenhoven, Gustav Preller, S.H. Pellissier and many others. Out of this, along with a multitude of similar purposes, there inevitably arose a single-minded drive towards the ultimate ideal of a fully professional, Afrikaans theatre company which could perform the best of the world’s work in *Afrikaans* for the Afrikaner. And this was achieved in 1925, the same year as Afrikaans was declared an official language of South Africa, alongside English.

The result was to be a ‘constructed’ subsystem within the larger theatrical system, this in turn was created, supported and promoted by the entire Nationalist/Afrikaner socio-cultural system. This included the educational system with its separate schools, separate language courses for all the language/ethnic groups and the university system with separate literature departments for Afrikaans and English and that mixed bag called ‘Bantu languages’ or ‘African languages’. There were also the state-funded companies, both in the National Theatre Organization (NTO) and the Performing Arts Councils (CAPAB, PACT, PACOFS and NAPAC) – all with separate Afrikaans and English companies, separate newspapers, magazines and journals (hence Afrikaans critics, English critics, Xhosa critics, etc.), separate publishing houses (for English literature, Afrikaans literature and publishing in the indigenous languages), separate training institutions at English and Afrikaans universities for English and Afrikaans performers, and so on. The list is endless. The result of course is that there is a separate, focussed canon of Afrikaans literature, another for South African English literature, and one each for every other indigenous language. This besides the ‘universal’ canon of British, European and – lately – American writing. African writing (in English) has at last found a home here as well.
A consequence of this structured situation has been that anyone writing a play in South Africa became heavily dependant on the nature of the particular subsystem for which he or she was writing. It is the system which to a large degree determines the playwriting paradigm, and thus influences choice in such matters as theme, form and language (see Chapter 2 for the concept).

Now, theatre in South Africa was never a totally exclusivist system – artists are not that easily categorized and boxed in, and a great deal of cross-pollination took place over the years, particularly at the more technical level of performance. While black theatre workers were not used on stage as actors or actresses, the backstage work was largely colour blind, even in the Afrikaans touring companies and the state-funded theatres. Nevertheless, by and large the rules of the game were clear: you worked in the one or the other of the specific subsystems. Or if you did shift from the one system to the other, you bloody well followed the rules of that particular system, doing what you might do when in Rome.

Similar effects to those achieved by the Afrikaans movement were obtained by the more informal process whereby a steady stream of British imports (of plays, performers and theatre companies) arrived in Southern Africa during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Their very existence served to strengthen the impression that English theatre was really the only true theatre there was – an idea which is itself an artificial construct of some dubious validity. In the same vein, the nationalistic tendencies expressed by the early ‘Afrikaans’ movement, was to find itself powerfully mirrored in the almost aggressive deployment of cultural power by the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in the post-Sharpeville period and later – a movement which did much to invert the old ‘us/them’ paradigm, and led to an insistence on the recognition of something called ‘black theatre’.

In view of the foregoing outline, I find it impossible to pretend that I am unconcerned, unaffected or even unaware of the existence of such (postulated) categories and systems, and more importantly – if one is to see theatre as a mirror of society – unaware or uninterested in the divisions and differences between the various systems, for these too are real and have been the cause of a great deal of frustration and anger over the years. In fact, the very concept of a ‘fractured mirror’ as expressed in the subtitle to this book, is in itself an affirmation of my specific interpretation of the situation. The performances, processes and plays to be discussed in this study are the products of certain creative and influential ‘witnesses’ to a period of remarkable and important change in South African society (see Chapter 7), each of which operated within a specific and circumscribed social subsystem, within the larger but fractured society which is South Africa. And the system (including its various subsystems) is as important as the expressions of it discussed here – at least in terms of the approach followed in this publication.

**Theatre history**

In the context of the foregoing we can now turn to the historical dimension of this endeavour, where we are confronted by another set of changing perspectives.

The radical changes in political, social and cultural thinking in the world, and in Africa in particular, over the past twenty years have not only changed the way
theatre and the arts function in such societies, but has also fundamentally affect-
ed the way we view such activities and our basic concepts of historiography. Such events and the changed perspectives they have wrought have in their turn caused major re-evaluations of accepted histories across the world. This sense of (re)discovery has had vast implications for virtually all of the cultural history of South Africa. It has meant rediscovering lost or discovering new facts, redefining principles of historiography, reinterpreting the old, and ultimately seeking to write a new history.

The most fundamental issue, of course, is to discover and learn to deal with the vast treasure-trove of events and artefacts produced before and during the colonization period, but ignored, denied or undervalued in the past. At the same time, contemporary work too was being stunted, through the perpetuation of skewed attitudes and critical thinking, based on a false historical perspective.

This situation, the processes involved and the causes for it all, are not unique to, or in any way limited to, South Africa of course, as the history of any former colony will testify. However, the fact is that the political history of the country has so entrenched a specific way of thinking that any wider awareness of tradition and cultural riches encompassing anything more than purely colonial values was virtually impossible, except as a revolutionary, oppositional, esoteric, or possibly even eccentric, area of study and contemplation. It is a situation which required a major and fundamental shaking up before it would change. That shake-up came in the form of the militant and overt cultural struggle of the seventies and eighties of this century, alongside the paradigmatic shifts in cultural and theatrical thinking which filtered into academic consciousness in the same period.

However, the fruits of these influences only began to be felt in the eighties, as a number of new histories sought to redefine, enhance and rewrite aspects of the local history. This was done from a number of new – often subversively new – perspectives and accompanying theories about the writing of history. These processes of redefining and rewriting have only recently been set in motion and still have a long way to go, as new vantage points are found and formerly hidden aspects of the social, political, economic and cultural history are unearthed, re-evaluated and integrated into the new thinking about the history of Southern Africa. And the history and function of performance in the region.

The historical matters dealt with in this publication are inevitably still very dependent on the meagre body of traditional writing, much of it still valuable and an important source of data. An attempt has been made to incorporate as much as possible of the new thinking and recent discoveries and analyses into the arguments as I wrote them, though it must be remembered that this publication represents about two decades of ongoing research – and precisely the two decades in which the most thoroughgoing shifts in the historical paradigm have taken place.

For this reason it may be advisable to emphasize three general shifts in perspective which it seems to me have contributed markedly to our thinking about theatre, and South African theatre in particular, in this period and which inform the discussions to follow.

1. The concept ‘theatre’: A far wider and hopefully a more flexible interpretation is given to the general term theatre in the following discussion. Traditionally
there had been relatively little difficulty with the term, but changing circumstances and recent thinking have altered that. Richard Schechner's identification of a drama – theatre – performance continuum, for example (Schechner, 1977), has been immensely useful in attempts to deal with the range of activities occurring in what David Coplan (1985) has termed 'performance cultures'. While such thinking has enlarged and enriched the scope of theatre studies, it has however also complicated them somewhat, since a great deal of new and significant, but in many ways ephemeral and intangible, material is introduced into the domain of the theatre historian. Both the solutions proposed by, and the problems inherent in, this approach are well displayed in a recent collection of essays edited by Schechner and Appel, 1990. As far as the present discussion is concerned, what seems to be the most critical point is the fact that theatre history cannot simply rely on the printed word either as source (e.g. the [printed] text and the reception document [the printed review, etc]), or as a means of conveying its own findings (i.e. as history). Which confronts us with that fundamental, and somewhat older, dilemma as well: which is more important – the playtext or the performance of that text? And even more significantly: how do you describe, analyze, evaluate and eventually write about or report on the performance?

2. Ideology and perspective: The question of the critical perspective has already been touched on in the previous sub-section. What concerns us here is the matter of ideological bias and ideological restraints in writing history, a point Saunders (1988), Smith (1988) and Van Wyk, Smit, and Wade (1996) all make, along with most other critics of 'traditional' historiography. Perhaps the most prominent – and influential – initial shifts in perspective came with the introduction of the concepts of race, class and material culture into the historical discourse. In some quarters today the debate appears to have moved on to include other, more holistic and 'post-modern' analyses in an attempt to combat a predominantly Eurocentric notion of history, and particularly the history of Africa, as well as the limitations imposed by the restricted focus of the foregoing Marxist approaches.

3. Colonialism and African culture: Finally, one might consider the way in which some of the most glibly used terms in contemporary criticism is perceived. Colonialism, for one, is not quite the simple term one may think, since the history of Africa is really one of multiple colonizations. One of the greatest colonizing nations the world has seen, for example, was Chaka's Zulu empire, and certainly the Zulu colonization of southern Africa has been enormously influential, indeed gaining mythic stature in African narrative and literature. On the other hand, most of Africa is constitutionally speaking now free of its former European colonizers, but are all those countries really in a post-colonial phase? Has the colonized mentality been shed? Recent thinking, and the political changes taking place from the late eighties, seem to indicate the contrary. South Africa is of course even more complex, for to the San hunter, he was the (original) colonizer of the Southernmost regions, then the Khoi arrived, followed by the Xhosa invaders, just ahead of the Zulu armies. The Dutch/Afrikaner next annexed the Xhosa's land, the English the Dutchman/Afrikaner's land, and so
on. And the Afrikaner? When the British were finally kicked out in 1961 (or South Africa walked out of the Empire, depending on your point of view), was South Africa decolonized, or merely colonized by the Afrikaner? Certainly the majority of the population still felt colonized. As can be seen, the debate is still very much in flux and a variety of terms we tend to use indiscriminately, have very slippery meanings within the current debate.

However, for the purposes of this study, the following terms will be used to refer to three broadly described historical periods in South African theatre and performance:

*Pre-colonial:* Before 1652, the period of indigenous expansion down the African continent.


*Post-colonial:* The period of democratization and beyond (1990–)

This is an arbitrary categorization, I know, but it does coincide with three major shifts in perspective regarding theatre, occasioned by three identifiable historical events which have tended to dominate thinking about culture and the arts in the past. And it is the past, after all, which we are dealing with in this study. Also, one may consider the last mentioned a rather optimistic category, but – as will be seen – it has some meaning under current circumstances.

Perhaps just a word about the vexed concept of ‘African’ culture (as opposed to ‘European’, ‘American’, ‘Eastern’ culture and so on). This is seen as problematic by many people and numerous readers and colleagues have problems with my use of this notion of an ‘African’ performance tradition. Now, I find their concern rather interesting considering that most of them are quite happy to talk about ‘colonial’ or ‘Eurocentric’ traditions, but somehow using ‘African’ appears to be discriminatory in some way. It is a form of paranoia which is in itself distinctive of our (justified but on occasion stultifying) post-World War II witch hunt on bigotry, discrimination and racism. However, their objections are not without foundation, and it is important that the notion be clearly defined for this publication.

I freely admit that, in the strictest sense, the very notion of a (single, unitary) ‘African identity’ or ‘African culture’ is obviously impossible to defend, for it represents a fictional concept with no objective reality. The sheer geographical size and diversity, cultural richness and heterogeneity, and political divisiveness of the continent alone would preclude any simple solutions or simple descriptions of what such a culture might entail. This has been highlighted by a great deal of recent literature on Africa (see for example Kerr, Hutchison and Omotoso, Conteh-Morgan, Breitinger, Gunner). Clearly, in this sense it is as easy (or difficult) to talk about one single, identifiable ‘African culture’ as it would be to refer to a single ‘American’, ‘European’ or ‘Asian’ culture. Or even a ‘South African’ culture.

On the other hand we do in fact talk about ‘American’ culture, and then tend to share some sense of what is being indicated. So too European culture has gained some kind of subjective and symbolic meaning for most people, as has those of the Middle East or the Far East. Clearly these geographical references do not correspond to specific reality, but they do tend to point to differences between cultures. This is a more limited and tentative notion, a way of distin-
guishing which is simplistic and reductive certainly, yet useful as a short-hand reference or a working concept which refers to some shared trends within a broadly specified cultural region. It is in this sense, indicating shared and distinguishing characteristics of performance originating in our particular region, that I use ‘African tradition’ or ‘African performance’ in this study.

Of course, such interpretations are always ideologically slanted and biased, depending on use. (E.g. the media-generated, Hollywood-defined, Coke and MacDonalds-sponsored society of high and dangerous living in America may be contrasted with the slower, older and more formal world of the printed book, proscenium arch theatre, formal painting, philosophy and study represented by European culture.) The term ‘African’ culture has often been used in a similarly derogative fashion in South Africa and indeed in European thinking, to refer to something less sophisticated, inferior, even ‘barbaric’. (Interestingly enough it has been losing that stigma gradually as the exciting possibilities of the new age of exploration – of cultural adventure and discovery has dawned on us. I hope.) This is obviously not the sense in which I use the term in this study. Nor do I use terms such as ‘Afrikaner’, ‘Indian’ or ‘British' culture as a pejorative appellation (= racist, barbaric, vicious, etc.). All such terms are used merely as distinguishing labels where I believe I have perceived differences in form, structure, performance, function and so on.

Now, I am quite prepared to admit that ‘African’ and ‘European’ dancing, for example, does not essentially differ (you move your feet to the rhythm of some kind of musical accompaniment in both), so yes: dance is as much a form of Africa as of Europe. But what does differ in terms of most of my discussions is (a) the details of those dances (the actual steps, the particular rhythms, the emotional substructure, and so on) and (b) the function of those dances in the structure of society. Way back they may have the same roots, but in our times I claim they are distinguishable – and while critics may quibble, the artists themselves are certainly ‘borrowing’ from what they perceive as useful and distinguishable other traditions of movement and dance, in order to enhance their own evolving art. Hence the ‘African’ sound of our popular music, the fascination with certain performance forms and so on. If this were not so, what would we care about studying African theatre (or Eastern theatre), why would Peter Brook and Paul Simon travel to Africa, and our artists to America?

I for one do not claim that theatre did not exist in Africa, what I do claim is that the system of making theatre is different – or displays distinctive and distinguishing qualities – which are significant if we are to trace the history of the art forms in our region. So, the detailed techniques may be different. Not better, or worse, simply different, distinguishable, and – like the specific qualities of a wine, identifiable by, and significant to, a trained palate.

The history of theatre in South Africa: The evolution of an idea

At this point, in the light of the foregoing caveats, it may be useful for the reader if I provided a brief overview of the major contributions to our current debate about the history of theatre and performance in South Africa. I would like to do...
so by looking at the way the idea of a broadened, integrated and liberated 'new' history arose during the course of this century. In the process we shall get to know a few of the major players, to whom I shall refer often throughout the remainder of this study.

As has been mentioned, the bulk of what was written about the early theatre in South Africa proceeded either from a colonial position, filtered through the thinking and writings of visiting scholars and local institutions of higher learning, or from an Afrikaner nationalist one, propounded in the writings, schools and on public platforms annexed and eventually commanded by proponents of the cause of Afrikaner self-determination and identity. Both these approaches were conservative, conventional and based on the written tradition. (It seems that this is what is, somewhat pejoratively, referred to as a 'Eurocentric' tradition today.)

The best example, and indeed a superior example of solid European scholarship, is F.C.L. Bosman's monumental and comprehensive history of theatre in South Africa from 1652 to 1855 (Bosman, 1928). Others include Ludwig Binge's far less rigorous and myopic study of the Afrikaans theatre from 1832–1950 (Binge, 1969) and Bosman's own (vastly inferior) second volume dealing with the period between 1856 and 1916 (1980). A recent example of the same thing has been Jill Fletcher's beautifully produced and highly accessible English history of the earliest European period, largely based on Bosman's work, but including some original new research. Entitled The Story of the South African theatre (1994), this useful book introduces the reader to the facts and anecdotes of the major movements during the first two centuries of European settlement in the Cape, tracing the history from the first European contact to 1930. In a way – despite being published much later – Leonard Schach's more anecdotal and very personal history (The flag is flying, 1996) does the same for this century, as does The Breytie book: A collection of articles on South African theatre (Hauptfleisch, 1985), a volume dedicated to P.P.B. Breytenbach, founder of the National Theatre Organization (NTO) and first director of the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (PACT).

A large body of information on formal theatre practice is also contained in the many extensive literary histories of the drama in South Africa produced this century. Most of them focus on playwrights and play texts, and many of the more comprehensive are in Afrikaans (G.J. Beukes and F. Lategan, 1961; J.C. Kannemeyer, 1978 and 1983; A.P. Brink, 1986), since it took a long uphill battle to have South African writing in English recognized as something worthwhile and distinctive from British literature. (This trend has since been radically reversed, with an increasing interest in the South African authors finding its place in publication and study.) Similarly, a great deal of more obscure yet valuable formal research is represented by a number of theses stuck away in University libraries (including a number of useful overviews of South African playwriting provided by inter alia Stopforth, 1955; De Koker, 1969; Woodrow, 1972; Greyvenstein, 1988; and Gosher, 1988). In addition there are the numerous articles which appeared in literary and theatre journals over the years (e.g. Voorslag, Die Brandwag, Helikon, Trek, Standpunkte, Contrast, and Teater SA. Like some of the studies mentioned below, two later journals, Teaterforum, and Scenaria, also fall into this category, though they basically appeared in the seventies and early eighties).
And then, in addition to the above, there is the wide variety of more informal sources, such as the many theatrical memoirs and biographies which appeared over the years (e.g. by Patricia Storrar, Dennis Hatfield, Lewis Sowden, Donald Inskip, Mathilde Hanekom, André Huguenet, Muriel Alexander, Brian Brooke, Stephen Black, H.I.E Dhlomo and Leonard Schach) and the occasional commemorative studies on particular theatres and companies (The Little Theatre in Cape Town, the Johannesburg Repertory Society and the Alexander theatre, the Johannesburg Operatic and Dramatic Society, the Baxter theatre, and so on). Inevitably these publications reflect the beliefs and tastes of their intended readership, which for the most part leaned towards the familiar and formal colonial-European (white) tradition of theatre that had been established in the cities and towns in the nineteenth century and flowered in the first half of the twentieth century.

However, throughout most of this work discussed above, very little of the black experience in theatre and performance is reflected and virtually nothing was written by indigenous black writers. Indeed, even those black writers who did participate in the debate (notably Herbert Dhlomo, 1903–1956), usually employed the perspective of one or the other of these 'given' traditions.

In the mid-1970's however things began to move in a different direction, as the political thinking adapted to a new Ex-Africa nationalism and as the liberation movements mobilized themselves. A number of younger academics began to challenge earlier concepts of culture and the arts, particularly within the ambit of the so-called Black Consciousness Movement and the broader South African liberation movement(s). And this rebellion coincided with a world-wide revolution in the research field. Notably influential here has been the so-called 'new paradigm' in literary and cultural studies which was evolving in Europe and America. This included a specific move towards identifying and formulating a comprehensive and 'scientific' theory of 'theatre research' ('Theaterwissenschaft', 'teaterworseling', 'theatre studies' – vide for example Smit and Van Kesteren, 1984) and the development of the notion 'performance' and 'performance studies' referred to above in our discussion of the concept 'theatre' (e.g. Schechner, 1977 and Turner, 1988).

Few South African researchers in this period (outside of literary scholars, notably Marisa Mouton, 1989) have focussed on drama and theatre theory per se, the majority being more interested in the application of such theory to a new perspective on the history and nature of South African theatre and performance (see Hauptfleisch 1980 and 1984a, Reynecke 1985 and Tomaselli, 1988). However, in a number of significant cases such application was heavily influenced by Marxist approaches to cultural analysis and criticism. Despite the inherent danger of bias in such an approach, this represented a radical break from conventional academic thinking at the time and happily led to a much clearer recognition of role played by the socio-political and the cultural-materialist context in the development and impact of a particular work or system. As a result, the social, economic, cultural and political developments in the country began to receive a much larger share of attention in the critical writing, as much in fact as the works themselves – and at times far more.

These trends were particularly noticeable in the work of a number of new researchers connected to the University of the Witwatersrand. For example
there was the work of John van Zyl, Keyan Tomaselli and Ian Steadman in the School of Drama, which led to the founding of the influential journal Critical Arts in 1980 and eventually to the establishment of a Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit (CCSU) at the University of Natal (Durban Campus), under the direction of Tomaselli. Other influential researchers affected by these matters include Tim Couzens, Martin Orkin and – to a lesser extent, but significantly – Stephen Gray and myself.

Supporting the shift in paradigm were a number of more practical developments around cultural and theatre research. Firstly there was a marked increase in the number of departments of drama in the country at this time (the original four drama departments rapidly increased to nine by mid-sixties and to twelve by the mid-seventies). At the same time the state began to emphasize research as a basis for funding in tertiary education. The result was that the majority of these departments had to look for ways of balancing their traditional practical training with academic teaching and research. (Among the more important results of this pressure were the founding of the Association of Drama Departments of South Africa and the South African Association for Drama and Youth Theatre.)

Secondly the state itself became more overtly involved in cultural research in 1969 by founding the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), an organization intended to (a) undertake and (b) promote and support research in the humanities in South Africa. In 1971 P.J. Nienaber, a member of the HSRC board and an influential literary historian, persuaded the new body to create an Institute for Language, Literature and Arts under the directorship of the playwright and literary scholar, P.G. du Plessis, and to appoint himself as general curator of a National Documentation Centre for Literature, Art, Music and Theatre in the Institute. Within this framework, the Documentation Centre for Theatre was set up and administered by P.P.B. Breytenbach (1971–1973) and Rinie Stead (1973–1978), and eventually housed more than 400 000 documents on the history of South African performance. (The holdings include the whole National Theatre Organization archives, the Space Theatre archives and the personal documents, scrap-books and collections of Mr Breytenbach himself, as well as those of many leading performers, directors and producers.)

In 1978 I was appointed as head of the centre with the express commission to shift the focus to cultural research and introduce social research techniques into the field of theatre and performance. The result was the establishment of the Centre for South African Theatre Research (CESAT) at the HSRC, which not only took over the material of the former Documentation Centre, but also undertook a number of historical, empirical and theoretical studies of South African theatre and performance. In addition, CESAT specifically helped to promote, support and publicize post-graduate study in theatre and performance studies in the country. Unfortunately the HSRC closed the centre down in 1989, and transferred its documents to the State Archives in Pretoria, while the research itself was informally shifted to the University of Stellenbosch Drama Department. This shift was formalized in 1993 with the establishment of the Centre for Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Stellenbosch.8

Two important spin-offs of the original Nienaber documentation centres have been the Nasionale Letterkundige Museum en Navorsingsentrum (NALN) in
Bloemfontein, started by Nienaber himself in the mid seventies, and the National English Literary Museum (NELM) in Grahamstown, founded in the same period under the directorship of Andre de Villiers. NALN is particularly strong in terms of Afrikaans theatre, having the documents of theatre historian F.C.L. Bosman, playwright Gerhard Beukes and actress Anna Neethling-Pohlamong others. NELM, in turn, houses some of the larger collections of South African English literary and theatrical material in the country, including the documents of individuals such as Guy Butler, Athol Fugard and Barney Simon. It has grown enormously over the years and is an immensely valuable aid to researchers in South African English literature and South African playwriting.

In continuation of both the documentation process and the new research paradigm, the beginning of the eighties saw the appearance of a number of important collections of annotated plays which sought to broaden the scope of theatre studies in South Africa by catering for and discussing more than the mainline colonial heritage. An important example of this was South African people's plays, edited by Robert (Mshengu) Kavanagh, which appeared in 1981 (and was unfortunately immediately banned in South Africa, though copies reached certain university libraries and scholars). With this book (and the subsequent publication based on his thesis), Kavanagh introduced South Africans to the theatre of Gibson Kente as well as the improvisational work of Kavanagh's own Experimental Theatre Workshop '71 and a number of other experimental theatre companies. South African theatre: four plays and an introduction (Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984), was the first such book length publication to appear in South Africa itself and was also a collection of representative plays intended to illustrate the range and variety of South African theatre, including writing in Afrikaans. This book first introduced the notion of four parallel but interdependent streams or traditions of theatre in the country. Particularly influential has been the notion of 'alternative' theatre popularized by the book. The first book length analysis of the new theatre utilizing a Marxist analysis, and possibly the most influential publication for a long time, was Kavanagh's Theatre and cultural struggle in South Africa, which was published the following year and became available in South Africa (Kavanagh, 1985). Although a number of earlier articles in international journals (notably a special issue of Theatre Quarterly in 1978 and various issues of The Drama Review) had paved the way, as did a number of local journals (including S'Ketsh, the S.A. Labour Bulletin, Staffrider and Critical Arts), it was Kavanagh's study of the oppositional theatre between 1970 and 1980 which for the first time presented readers with a truly 'alternative' history of theatre in South Africa. His overt cultural-materialist analysis of the events and forces which created a new kind of theatre in the seventies is compellingly persuasive at one level, while being irritatingly biased and dismissive of anything beyond his own theoretical position on another. In the same vein, 1985 saw the appearance of a number of other important studies. There was David Coplan's excellent study of the development of black performance, and particularly musical performance, in South Africa (In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre – Coplan, 1985), Peter Larlham's important but rather more sketchy study of a variety of black performance forms in Natal, based on the performance theories of Richard Schechner (Black Theater, Dance, and Ritual in South Africa – Larlham, 1985) and finally Ian Steadman's persuasively argued and cogently written, though highly the-
oretical, doctoral study of theatre in the townships on the Witwatersrand (Drama and Social Consciousness: Themes in Black Theatre on the Witwatersrand until 1985 – Steadman, 1985.) Unfortunately the latter work has not yet been published, and remains a most valuable but not easily accessible document, though numerous articles based on Steadman’s initial research have appeared in a variety of publications.

Interestingly enough, the period 1984–1985 seems to have been a seminal one for theatre research in the country, with a number of other publications, besides the six mentioned above, appearing on the scene. There are of course among these publications which were simply extensions of the research that had gone before. Thus, Charles Malan’s collection Spel en spieël. Besprekings van die moderne Afrikaanse drama en teater (1984), Temple Hauptfleisch’s The Breytie book: a collection of articles on South African theatre (1984), Daymond, Jacobs and Lenta’s Momentum. On recent South African writing (1984), White and Couzens’s Literature and society in South Africa (1984) and André P. Brink’s Literatuur in die stryderk (1985) and Aspekte van die nuwe drama (1986) all basically provided new perspectives on the Afrikaans and English theatre and literature of the twentieth century, although occasionally introducing a provocatively new slant to old ‘facts’. At the same time, Stephen Gray’s wide ranging and compelling explorations in South African literature (vide Gray, 1979), led inter alia to a reassessment of Athol Fugard (Gray, 1980) and the rediscovery of Stephen Black as a major theatrical figure (see Stephen Black: three plays – Gray, 1984). In its turn, Tim Couzens and Nick Visser’s similar service for Herbert Dhlomo (The new African. A study of the life and work of H.I.E. Dhlomo – Couzens, 1985 and H.I.E. Dhlomo: collected works – Couzens and Visser, 1985), helped to open up new vistas for other scholars concerned with theatre history.

Arising from the same pressures to academic discussion and excellence and in the wake of our previous joint project (Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984), Ian Steadman and I launched the South African Theatre Journal (SATJ) in 1987. This was intended to provide a mouthpiece for the theatre research community and to promote the idea of cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary theatre and performance studies in South Africa. In many ways the journal quickly became an evolutionary text-book on South African theatre, with regular reviews of books, conferences and theatre festivals providing the contextual background for the historical, critical and theoretical articles published over the years. (Originally administered and published at the University of the Witwatersrand, the offices moved to the University of Stellenbosch in 1988 and is now published by the Centre for Theatre and Performance Studies there.)

The next few years saw a number of new researchers coming to the fore, not only as writers of important articles for the various journals, but also through the publication of further book length publications of note. For example, works as discrete as P.J. du Toit’s exploration of the history of amateur theatre (Amateurtoneel in Suid-Afrika, 1988), Julian Smith’s socio-literary study of theatre on the Cape Flats (Toneel en politiek, 1990, a summarized version of his more comprehensive 1987 thesis) and Astrid von Kotze’s documentary exploration of the worker’s theatre movement (Organise and act, 1988) all greatly broadened the scope of theatre research in the country, as did Martin Orkin’s

Of course, this whole movement towards reinterpretation is but one of many trends, and certainly the old, established paradigms of thinking and study remain firmly in place as we approach the twenty-first century, and perhaps necessarily so for the time being, given the relatively uncertain nature of current theory and the shortage of comprehensive data. This situation is reflected in a large variety of publications – from the journals such as *Scenaria* and *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, to the numerous books, theses and articles coming from literature and drama departments. Some admittedly do display a much heightened sense of the shifting contours of academic thinking and artistic and performance practice, as illustrated by the writings of P.J. du Toit, Julian Smith, Myles Holloway, Annette Combrink, Stephen Gray, Ian Ferguson and others who have actually managed to move the borders of literary thinking about performance in southern Africa over the years and make yet extremely valuable contributions to theatre historical interpretation and data. This despite their more ‘conservative’ approach and their commitment to literary theoretical perspectives.

In addition to the above, other less critical and more informal sources continued to record and trace the history of the important theatres, companies and performances of the times. For example, this time saw the appearance of Brian Astbury’s superbly illustrated tribute to his Space Theatre (*The Space*, 1979), the Brian Barrow and Yvonne Williams-Short collection of essays on the Baxter theatre (*Theatre alive! The Baxter story 1977–1987, 1988*) and Pat Schwartz’s lavish book on the Market Theatre (*The best of company. The story of Johannesburg’s Market Theatre*, 1988). The various Performing Arts Councils also produced such publications on their work at regular intervals, while journals and newspapers continued to publish interviews and overviews reflecting the theatre events and personalities of the day.

Against this background of theory, intensive research and documentation, the late eighties and the early nineties were taken up with numerous efforts to somehow integrate, expand on, and find a new theoretical basis for the debate and the newly available data. Subsequent articles by David Coplan, Lynn Dalrymple, P.J. du Toit, Mark Fleischman, Myles Holloway, Matsemela Manaka, Andries Oliphant, Martin Orkin, Ari Sitas, Julian Smith, Kelwyn Sole, Ian Steadman, Keyan Tomaselli, Astrid Von Kotze and many others have tended to carry the debate about the social and political role of theatre considerably further (see the pages of the various journals, as well as the Bibliography). At the same time other writers focussed more overtly on the idea of rewriting the South African theatre history along similar lines as those followed in the political and social histories of this period. The latter idea was soon being expressed publicly by a number of academics, including Tomaselli (1981), Hauptfleisch (1984a, 1992 and 1993), Steadman (1987 and 1991), Dalrymple (1986) and Haynes (1987).

As the cultural struggle reached fever pitch, and the combatants began to sense the looming end of battle, we find these same issues gradually taken up
publicly, in a variety of cultural and political forums at a variety of venues, most notably the Grahamstown Arts Festival. On the one hand there are the rather ineffective though important annual conferences of the various academic associations (e.g. SAADYT and ADDSA), and on the other the more enterprising debates organized by various community-based cultural organizations throughout the country between 1986 and 1990. One of the more dynamic proved to be the Community Arts Project (CAP), particularly during the period 1988–1991, when it was under the directorship of Mike van Graan. When Van Graan moved to the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) in 1991–1992, he used that as a forum to set up an even more ambitious project, the National Arts Policy Plenary (NAPP), which became the National Arts Coalition (NAC) and eventually fed into various position papers on the Arts produced by the Ministry of Arts and Culture's Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG) and the ministry's eventual *White Paper on Arts and Culture* (1996), a document which promised major changes to the whole arts and culture establishment in the country.

Of course, this debate about and shifting interpretation of cultural tradition and form has always been preceded, accompanied and/or illustrated by the actual performances on display at the wide range of cultural events in the country and abroad. In fact, in many ways the artists have been leading the theorists and critics, as one might expect. Indeed, as one might hope. However, more will be said on this aspect of the shift in the ensuing chapters.

In the context of these ideas and the enterprise on which we are engaged, it is very significant that the period since the transfer of power in 1990, is clearly characterized by a number of factors, among which: (a) open access to previously banned and/or inaccessible publications and scholarship; (b) the growth of interdisciplinary study in all fields; (c) recognition of the African connection with a resulting increase in contact and exchange with Africa, African scholars and institutions studying Africa; and (d) an enormous growth of interest in South Africa among international scholars. Once more we see a surge of new publication, with some excellent new critical works appearing, among them books by Michael Chapman (*Southern African literatures*, 1996), Eckhard Breitinger (*Theatre and performance in Africa: intercultural perspectives*, 1994), Liz Gunner (*Politics and performance. Theatre, poetry and song in southern Africa*, 1994), Isabel Hofmeyr (*'We spend our years as a tale that is told': Oral historical narrative in a South African chiefdom*, 1993), Russel Kashula (*Foundations of southern African oral literature*, 1993), D.B.Z. Ntuli and Chris Swanepoel (*Southern African literatures in African languages: a concise historical perspective*, 1993) and David Kerr (*African popular theatre. From pre-colonial times to the present day*, 1995). A number of new collections of African and South African plays also came out in that period (see bibliography), while most new encyclopaedias of the theatre included South African theatre for the first time in many decades (e.g. the *Routledge encyclopaedia of post-colonial literature*, 1993 and the *World encyclopaedia of contemporary theatre* volume 4: *Africa*, 1997).

Should one consider these studies in the context of the the many other works still in progress at the time of writing, the picture is exciting, from an academic point of view, seeming to suggest that we might at last be moving towards real progress. I doubt that the definitive history of South Africa is about to be written,
even that it can be started as yet. There are just too many lacunae in our data and weaknesses and/or blind spots in our theory. But at least I believe we have an over-abundance of real questions to tackle.

**Conclusion**

To round off this introduction to our particular exploration of South African theatre, I want to return to Dorfles's statement above. The important point seems to lie – for me at least – in the last sentence. It could very well have been written with our poor, fragmented and violence-ridden country in mind. For not only is our society fragmented – and it will be so for some while still I fear – but the mirror itself is a fractured instrument, reflecting skewed and partial images, from odd angles at times – or bleary and obscure ones, if any at all. It is but a poor instrument – and has not always been expertly wielded, as De Bono suggests in another context. In the ensuing argument I hope to highlight at least a few of the cracks in the mirror, and perhaps begin to work towards a reintegration of the total image – as far as such an exercise would be possible in any country today.

**Notes**

1. As numerous writers have shown, the concept of theatre and art as a reflection is no call for external – or even internal – realism. A pop-video for example is anything but ‘realistic’, but it is in every sense a creation of its time and its society, by an artist created and shaped in a similar way. The ‘reality’ involved is the fact of a medium called television (and its powerful appendage, the VCR in the home), the fact of electronic music, the fact of the graphic possibilities of video editing and the manipulation of electronic images and the presentation of these in some kind of acceptable combination of sounds and images. And the fact that this is a multi-billion dollar industry, producing artefacts which appeal to and perhaps even ‘speak’ for an enormous number of people.

2. See Chapters 6 and 7, where these points are debated again.

3. One also needs to realize that this is true of anyone who does something or creates anything of exceptional or even competent standard (from a formal poem, painting, drama, or composition, to the most fundamental artefact – a superb wine, a functional chair, an absorbing television documentary). No, I want to amend that. Even the bad artisan, the bad poet, the bad musician, the bad chef may be reflective of something in his or her particular community. Or a good artisan may be involved in a bad – but influential – artefact (think of television soap operas).

And these are extremely important points to remember when dealing with what is termed ‘popular culture’ today. They are all part of the context, and hence part of the performance – directly or indirectly. For this reason one may not privilege any category of such artists or artisans, if we are going to use them as material for a sociological analysis (i.e. ‘reflection’) of the society. They are all part of the whole socio-cultural system, within which the more creative and reflective artist also works.

I hasten to add that, given my specific European-style upbringing, I also believe that certain artists and their works are profitable and enjoyable objects of study, more so than a mass of others – I do believe therefore that there is such a thing as an object of art – a masterwork in a particular genre – and such a being as a genius-artist working within a specific medium. I would thus not deny my own heroes –
Sophocles, Catullus, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Racine, Molière, Milton, Mozart, Rembrandt, Beethoven, Monet, Nietzsche, Chekhov, Rodin, Synge, Yeats, O'Neill or Fugard – any of their pre-eminence, even though I may rank a few other, less 'respectable' individuals along with them. (P.G. Wodehouse, Ansell Adams, Fred Astaire, Barbara Streisand, Steven Spielberg and Charles M. Schultz are among the many who come to mind immediately.)

4 Political satirist, Pieter-Dirk Uys, for example, has suggested that the only time the theatre has had any significant political impact was when Lincoln was shot by an actor in a theatre. Perhaps one might make a case for artist-politicians? Ronald Reagan certainly used his histrionic abilities and South Africa's Eugene Terreblanche is a consummate performer (vide Crystal, 1991), as is long-serving Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pik Botha.

5 The idea of 'imaging' and the impact of theatre and the performer is explored at greater detail in Chapter 6.

6 I know that I have been struggling for years to do so, and have not really succeeded. In South African theatre: four plays and an introduction (Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984) for example, we used the terms Afrikaans theatre, English theatre, Black theatre, Alternative theatre as specific categories referring to entire theatrical systems. This categorization is discussed in detail there and many of the reservations concerning such a fragmentation of theatre are also voiced. For the same reasons I have since used the same categories in other publications, including an earlier version of chapter 7 (Hauptfleisch, 1992, originally written in 1984 and based on the book). That categorization became somewhat fixed in the minds of others writers for quite a while. There has long been differences of opinion about the use of a capital letter in the terms 'white' and 'black' (as in 'white theatre' and 'black theatre', as opposed to 'White theatre' and 'Black theatre'). For a long time I have used the capital, by analogy with 'Afrikaans' and 'English', but since the trend seems toward the lower-case usage, I employ the latter form in this publication.

7 In a more general sense the changes in historiographical thinking about South Africa are reflected in three useful overviews provided by F.A. van Jaarsveld (1974), Christopher Saunders (1988) and Ken Smith (1988) respectively. For a more specific focus on such thinking in terms of South African literature, see Chapman's introduction to his comprehensive Southern African literatures (1996), Ntuli and Swanepoel's ideas in Southern African literatures in African languages: a concise historical perspective (1993) and the the seminal collection of articles collected by Smit, Van Wyk and Wade in Rethinking South African literary history (1996). Other, often radical, perspectives on the relationship between African history and culture are highlighted for example by Kunene (1992), Mphahlele (1992), Mudimbe (1988), Ndebele (1992), Ngugi (1987), and others.

8 A number of other institutions in South Africa study theatre and drama as part of a broader field of interest. Examples are the Institute for the Study of English in Africa (ISEA) at Rhodes University, Institute for Contemporary Cultural Studies (ICCS) at the University of Natal (Durban), the Centre for the Study of Southern African Literature and Languages (CSSALL) at the University of Durban-Westville). However, the Centre at Stellenbosch is the only one at the time of writing with theatre and performance as sole and specific focus, despite its commitment to interdisciplinary and cross-cultural study.

9 'We have left perception to the world of art. Has art done a good job? Changes of mass sentiment have certainly come about through art, as have revolutions. At its best art is
dogmatic, eccentric and propagandist. It presents perceptions – which may be new and valuable – but has never presented the tools for changing perceptions. It can continue on its course with its valuable contributions to culture, but let us not pretend that it fulfills the perceptual role. We need to learn the logic of perception and tools for broadening and changing perception. Being at the receiving end of perceptual propaganda, no matter how worthy, is not enough.' (De Bono, 1990: 43).
The shifting paradigm
Introduction:  
Canon, paradigm and theatre history

Theatre studies has traditionally, like most Western academic disciplines, limited itself to the tangible and verifiable ‘truth’ provided by written and visual evidence. The result has been a history of theatre based largely on ‘available texts’ and such other momentoes and evidence as may be found in programmes, handbills, diaries, and the like. This notion has been exceedingly enhanced by the reputation of one Aristotle of Greece, who not only established this idea, but also went on to introduce the notion of the ‘canon’ to Western thinking. Some works were innately better than others, better examples of some kind of ideal – itself derived from one or more of the extant examples.

Such elitist thinking has been attacked by many individuals, and on many fronts, over the years. The names of Antonin Artaud, Richard Schechner, Jerzy Grotowsky, Augusto Boal and many others come to mind. But, no matter how powerful their arguments, the point remains that by and large, the very structure of the theatre system in Western, or Western dominated societies, leans towards an elitist interpretation of theatre and hence a perpetuation of a Western form.

It is a premise of this book that this Aristotelian tradition is as strong in South Africa, as we shall see, but that one may – by distinguishing two parallel but differing trends in theatre – observe a distinctive conceptual shift in thinking about theatre in Southern African society. This shift is not complete by any means, nor is it universally welcomed. It may not even be a ‘good thing’ at all, who knows, but it is happening, and has been in progress for about two decades now.

In this section of the book I want to consider the nature and some of the ramifications of this shift in perspective, and look at the effects that it has had (and NOT had) on South African theatre and South African theatre studies.

Before turning to the shift itself however, let us briefly consider the two concepts which, I believe, together go to make up the notion of a theatre tradition: the concept of the canon, and the concept of the paradigm.

When using the word ‘canon’ in this publication, I do so in the very specific literary sense, i.e. to refer to the body of literary texts studied as part of a central literary system. In the case of theatre it thus refers to the playtexts (usually published texts) studied in drama courses in literature departments and the formal sections of theatre courses; the ‘great tradition’ of playwriting in the country, as it were. It is that part of the tradition absorbed by the critics and the qualities of those texts are then used as the criteria for judging new work.

The term ‘paradigm’ is a term I have adopted from sociology, to enable me to refer to something different and exceedingly more dynamic which I see occurring among writers and performers. The paradigm is in effect an evolutionary
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The concept, the model used by dramatists/theatre practitioners for the creation of performances. It is the sum of current thinking about theatre, and as such tends to determine aspects such as form, styles, techniques, themes, and so on in the writing/creation of new work, not by prescription but by example. The products studied when discussing the paradigm could therefore include published texts, but will also refer to other scripts, events and performances – as well as ongoing discussions among artists, manifestoes, and the influences of a myriad of other cultural, social and economic forces – i.e. the real terrain of theatre studies. The paradigm is thus necessarily always somewhat wider, and often ahead of the canon – which is a very conservative element in the literary system and can only display, in retrospect, the results of paradigmatic changes.

To give an example: When Thespis wrought the initial changes to the way in which plays were structured and produced, he was helping to create a new paradigm for tragedy. Aeschylus then came along and, under the influence of a variety of socio-cultural and other factors, reproduced Thespis's form, but adapted it in his turn, and through his success altered the existing paradigm so much that new writers had to follow his lead, and adapt his discoveries for their own use, in their own context and time. In this way the paradigm continued changing as the playwrights copied each others' work and techniques. However there were no 'rules', merely examples. Then came Aristotle, who described the form of the tragedy based on the writings to hand (presumably those of Sophocles in particular) and picked out a list of what he considered the best writers and texts (i.e. he suggested a canon of Greek tragedy). Aristotle thus fixed the form for critics and influenced their ideas about excellence. Yet the paradigm remained the most powerful force and could not be tied down: times changed, circumstances altered and playwrights continued exploring, experimenting, fine-tuning their plays for production, as the works of Euripides show. Indeed, I believe very few effective playwrights have ever paid much serious attention to Aristotle's version of the paradigm. It is only among critics that his excellent critical analysis of the nature of tragedy in the Greek culture at a particular time was revered to such an extent that, in many cases, it came to be seen as something more, inviolable, a kind of 'playwright's instruction manual' and/or a measure of excellence for all plays, in all cultures and at all times.

In the following four chapters we look at some of these concepts, and the way they apply to South African theatre and its history.
From the Savoy to Soweto: The shifting paradigm in South African theatre

It was 2 February 1903. A balmy summer's evening in Cape Town. Just after a long protracted and distasteful war which had long since lost its glamour for everyone. In the city's Good Hope Theatre, a captivated audience of the Cape Town elite sat enthralled at the opening night of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondoliers*, presented by the D'Oyly Carte Company 'directly from the Savoy theatre, London'. They applauded genteelly, showing their sincere appreciation for the performance. This was, of course, but one of the many distinguished theatre companies which had visited the Colony over the years, bearing gifts from 'home', and the 'Savoy operas' - popularized by the D'Oyly Carte Company - were among the most prized of these.

Sixty two years later, on another summer's evening, four years after Sharpeville, another musical play opened before a small but wildly enthusiastic audience of the whistling and yodelling theatregoers. The theatre was an inadequate hall, the city Soweto, the modest and sentimental little play *Sikhalo* by the then struggling young writer, composer and producer, Gibson Kente. By the mid 1970s this man was to rank as one of the most successful theatrical producers of popular entertainment in the country, with up to four well-paid companies out on the road at any given time. His particular brand of theatre, the so-called 'township-musical', was destined to profoundly influence the industry in South Africa.

These are clearly two isolated, yet intimately linked, events - symbolic of a major paradigm shift in South African theatre.

In the past, writing theatre history was easy for South African scholars, for yesterday we were all, in a sense, Europeans, and could trace our roots back to a simple and basically well-documented catalogue of events spread over about twenty centuries. The significant moments of that history were as familiar to us as the daily rituals of our own lives, and the heroes of that saga live on in our culture, in our legends, in our languages.

After all, who would not call Aristotle master, who can speak and not quote
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Shakespeare, who use silence and not once think of Chekhov? It was a safe world to live in, that yesterday, created, shaped and preserved by the ideologies inherited from our forebears, and happily passed on to our children. It was a world shared with the rest of the Western civilization.

But yesterday was a glorious presumption.

Today we stand confronted by a redefined world. In that world none of the old ideologies can hold, since they do not match the perceived realities. Numerous others are knocking at the door, demanding to be acknowledged, for today we find that we are of Africa. So writing theatre history has become a complex, uncertain and yet exciting new exploration.

We have been raised in a world we helped to shape, where history began in 1652 – a history which we believed would last, unchanged, for ever. For we – like all children – had great faith in what our elders taught us. Who were we to question what they told us – or what media they used to do so? Yet somehow, with a little nudging, a little idealism perhaps, we have managed slightly to alter our perspectives; to accept that there may be other – even older – traditions, with other roots and other heroes, well worth knowing. It is at that shift in perspective I wish to look.

Before turning to the shift itself, perhaps just a brief word about terminology. There are a variety of terms which have conveniently been used to refer to various kinds of ‘performance’ in South Africa. In Diagram 2.1 (below) I have tried to indicate how these terms relate to each other and to outline the parameters of two fields of study, namely ‘drama history’, i.e. literary study and the ‘theatre history’.

As can be seen, a vast field of study lies unexplored beyond the more familiar areas of academic concern. It is basically the area of popular entertainment and

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**Diagram 2.1** The parameters of various traditionally used terms

![Diagram 2.1](image-url)
of ritual/social performance – broad, relatively undefined activities, always present, but seldom noticed in the past. Yet it is from here that the real changes in the theatre paradigm referred to in the introduction have originated in South Africa. Now, with this in mind, let us look at Diagram 2.2.

**Diagram 2.2** The paradigm shift in South African theatre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Africa</th>
<th>Hybrid</th>
<th>Europe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910 Traditional dances Izibongo</td>
<td>Love and the hyphen (Mine dances)</td>
<td>Hamlet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>The girl who killed to save</td>
<td>Pygmalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955 Marabi dances</td>
<td>Inhizizi Ngumthathathi Buzani kubawo (King Kong)</td>
<td>The Kimberley train The blood knot The maimed Magnus Siener in die suburbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Umabatha</td>
<td>Waiting for Godot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Sizwe Bansi is dead</td>
<td>Dimetos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Faustus in Africa</td>
<td>Equus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 2
From the Savoy to Soweto

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Basically we are dealing with two distinct—and entrenched—theatre traditions, which one may refer to as the African tradition, which points to a tradition of performance evolved in Africa itself, and the European tradition, which we popularly trace back to the Greeks and Aristotle, and which was imported into African culture during the past two and a half centuries. There is, however, also a third, incipient one which, for perhaps obvious reasons, I have named the hybrid tradition. The term ‘hybrid’ is used here not to refer to a ‘mechanical, additive forcing together of diverse traditions’, as one commentator phrased it, but to what I see as a distinctive new tradition. It is a theatre which has evolved in part from the two older traditions, but which is generically distinct from them. While the evolutionary process has certainly not been completed yet, it is beginning to constitute something like a separate tradition, one in which we see writers and performers still struggling to find and refine really specific forms and styles of their own, but which has already established itself as a force within the larger theatrical system.

The pattern here is far from unique in Africa of course, as Graham-White (1974), Etherton (1982), Schipper (1982), Conradie (1990), Breitinger (1994), Kerr (1995), Hutchison and Omotoso (1995) and others have pointed out, but because of certain special—and often unfortunate—socio-political and sociocultural circumstances in the country, it has maintained a rigidity which has long prevented any real assessment or any real progress toward the kind of integrated and dynamic paradigm represented by the hybrid tradition.

Despite all the faith white South Africans have always had in their own inherited and canonized past (‘after all, we were part of the Empire!’), and the civilizing and progressive power vested in it, the oldest theatrical tradition in the country is patently the African.

Current thinking places the earliest settlement in South Africa at around 6000 BC. (Tobias, Bredekamp, et al in Cameron and Spies, 1986). These people, the San (or ‘Bushmen’ as they are popularly known), lived here alone until they were joined by the Khoikhoi round about the time of Christ. Significant for us is the fact that there are actual records of the ritual dances from that period, in the form of rock paintings of the San. (See Lewis-Williams, in Cameron and Spies, 1986.)

Although a great deal of controversy still surrounds the dating of these events, it would seem that the first Iron Age, or crop-raising, settlements were established by the ancient Bantu-speaking peoples around 300 AD (Maggs, in Cameron and Spies, 1986). These are the peoples who finally settled the whole of South Africa, and whose—long suppressed—culture has become the kingpin of the emerging paradigm.

The ‘theatre’ of this 8000-year-old civilization has never truly been discussed, except incidentally by archaeologists, ethnologists, anthropologists, and the like. Until the late 1970s and early 1980s that is, when the studies of Coplan (1980, 1985), Larlham (1985), Kavanagh (1985), Steadman (1985), and their colleagues began to focus attention on the issue. The reasons for this are obvious and are firmly embedded in the powerful hegemonic control exercised over all historical and cultural thinking by the ‘Western’ or ‘European’ culture which began to arrive on the shores of Africa from 1488 onwards. Of course research elsewhere in Africa did this, but South African academics had little or no access to...
such ideas because of the cultural and academic boycott on the one hand and Eurocentric attitudes at the various institutions on the other.

The principal means for this cultural colonization was the most potent of all weapons: the written word. Intimately linked with the entire socio-economic production process, the concept of literacy and reading brought with it the western system of schooling and education, a system which has the single ability of being able to read and write as its hub.

To illustrate: To read and write requires someone to teach reading. This in turn supposes a school, schools imply a curriculum, (a curriculum constructed by the teacher and/or the school – and those behind the school – and consisting of those things the teacher considers important). But, in order to be a teacher, he himself will have to have gone through the same process, so that he may read, and know what to teach.

In fact, it constitutes a perfectly closed circle of cause and effect. Within such a system, it was quite natural that the history came to be seen as recorded history – with 'recorded' meaning ‘recorded in writing'. Reinforced by economic and political control – also based on the written word – the literary culture thus became an irresistible force which virtually swept 8000 years of history under the carpet.

After all: What could remain of the medicine dance of the San, the Umtshotho dance of the Xhosa, or the poetic tales of the Izibongo (praise-singer), if they were not reduced to writing for the passive consumption of the white European cultural patron? Like the artefacts of the potter, bead-maker, and the decorator, these artists and their art were styled quaint and primitive, and were collected like archaeological samples. Where they were able to be collected of course.

But collecting a dance was like trying to bottle the wind.

So a modern day theatre archaeologist (to borrow a concept from VeVe Clark, 1981), has had to rely heavily on the very scarce and unsatisfactory records provided by early travellers, on the oral history of the culture, and on creative extrapolation from present-day remnants of past events. The result has been a very general, and often tantalizingly evocative, though minimally factual, picture of a vast network of popular performance forms, with their own specific codes and conventions, permeating a highly organized African society. As Dhlomo (1939), Mutwa (1974/5), Larlham (1985), Katzenellenbogen (1983) and others have shown, it was as formal and structured a theatrical system as any European or Eastern one, but a distinctly different one.

For the purposes of this argument I want to highlight five significant general characteristics of these African performance forms:

- It is a ritual and symbolic performance form.
- It is participatory and public in performance.
- It has a musical base.
- There is a strong tradition of oral narrative.
- The dance forms are distinctive, not only in their physical attributes, but in their function within the total performance.

It is in these elements, as described – singly and in combination – by such varied commentators and writers as Harald Scheub (1975), Hugh Tracy (1948), Jeff
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Opland (1989, 1991), Peter Larlham (1985) and Edith Katzenellenbogen (1983), which have been retained in seminal form over the past centuries and have found their way into the new paradigm – *inter alia* via some very interesting popular urban adaptations such as the Marabi dances, the ‘gumboot’ dances, the Stokfel, and so on. (See especially the work of David Coplan, 1985.)

The familiar European tradition on the other hand, is a relatively young arrival on the continent. To give it a date, the Western concept of theatre can be said to have arrived and colonized South Africa in 1652 – with the first arrival of Jan van Riebeeck and the first Dutch settlers. If one wanted to be more precise though, it was the coming of the British in 1795 which brought the first ‘real’ theatre to the colony. For almost half a century the British garrison and the associated Civil Service were the mainstay of the Cape theatre, supported by a variety of amateur movements among the Dutch, French and German settlers. It is a history which has been superbly documented by F.C.L. Bosman, in his monumental study of the early period from 1652 to 1855. (Published by J.H. de Bussy in 1928 – just when Herbert Dhlomo was first essaying into the field of theatre and dramatic theory.)

The period following that was largely dominated by the gradual professionalization of the English theatre through increased visits by touring companies from Britain, and increasing activity from the Dutch amateurs. By the turn of the century the European concept of theatre was totally embedded in South African society and in all subsequent histories, which dealt with that history in terms of a very narrow and later even parochial concept of what the word ‘theatre’ meant. (See Diagram 2.1.)

In simple terms, there were three kinds of English language theatre in the country: the ‘classics’, the new ‘serious’ work, and the melodramas, musicals and other ‘popular’ fare from the West End and elsewhere. (A typical 19th century programme used by the Garrison at the Cape, or a turn-of-the-century programme from the Leonard Rayne Company or the Holloway Company, would illustrate something of the range of performances available to audiences.)

Initially the Dutch/Afrikaans theatre largely eschewed musicals, preferring European ‘classics’, locally written pieces of a patriotic nature (it was the time of the Anglo Boer War, after all), and one act farces which could be used as entertainment pieces in a broader cultural programme. The latter were in fact the most popular, with numerous cultural societies and debating societies acting as adult-education bodies, promoting and protecting the fledgling new language and culture. It was thus, in this sense, a highly committed entertainment form.

So, what was most significant in this period seems to be the differences between the theatrical systems in the country. Whereas the English theatre was largely urban and intended primarily as entertainment, the Dutch/Afrikaans theatre was often rural, and seen as an educational tool and a weapon to be utilized in the cause of Afrikaans nationalism. But it was still a purely European form, despite the local focus and content. Gradually the Dutch/Afrikaans theatre too was professionalized (the first company going on the road in 1925) and evolved into a formal theatrical system along British lines.

The result was that various infrastructures were created to facilitate and promote this theatre. Theatre buildings were built (in the European style and according to European specifications), a variety of privately owned professional com-
companies were founded (including what was later to become the entertainment giant African Consolidated Theatres) and eventually state funding was also provided, in the shape of the National Theatre Organization (1948–1961) and its successors (the four provincial Performing Arts Councils, founded in 1963). The various schools and universities presented courses in dramatic literature, where they employed the ‘great works’ approach – an approach in which the ‘great works’ were of course either Anglo-European (from Aeschylus to Ibsen and Shaw), or, lately, American. The growing number of theatre training institutions, again, focussed on providing the artistic, administrative and technical staff to supply this growth industry.

By 1950, the product of all this intense activity was a virtual clone of the London West End theatre or the Broadway theatre. It was a glittery, elitist, highly professional and excellently marketed cultural product, well in pace with its parents. In fact, certain new works were being launched in local versions almost as soon as they premiered in London or New York.

So it came about that the familiar Eurocentric definition of theatre became the paradigm for all subsequent creative work as well. The Anglo-European canon of dramatic works was simply appropriated as the South African canon for study and the models for emulation – even by the literate African population of this country, when they worked within the central theatrical system. This is amply illustrated in the work and theories of Herbert Dhlomo and the dramatists writing in the various African languages. The echoes of this school-inculcated belief in the European model is still seen in aspects of the work of Fatima Dike (e.g.

Diagram 2.3  Phases in the paradigm-shift

1800  
Non-canonized, local texts/local content

1880
Entry into the canon(s) of locally written theatrical/literary works

1955
The evolution of local form(s), and their entry into the canon

1980

?
The first South African), Maishe Maponya (The nurse) and Zakes Mda (We shall sing for the fatherland) – even though the shift in paradigm is already very apparent in the themes and general feel of their works.

Returning to Diagram 2.2 for a moment, let us now consider the past century and the shift illustrated by the diagonal lines in the figure. It is a shift both in the formal (European) drama canon, and a shift in the theatre paradigm itself. This shift in the (literary) canon has, it seems to me, gone through four distinctive stages to date (see Diagram 2.3), slowly effecting a paradigmatic shift as well. In reality, of course, all are immensely complex procedures, and they are obviously interrelated and overlap considerably. Nor are the shifts themselves necessarily the smooth transitions suggested by the rather symmetrical diagram, but are quite possibly a far more irregular, even disjunctive, series of smaller shifts and changes, with a large number of events even remaining stable for long periods, or disappearing for a while and then reappearing again at some later stage. Yet the general direction of the shifts within the overall theatrical system would seem to be towards the middle of the diagram at this point.

Allowing for a little oversimplification for the moment, I should like to explore this idea of a four-stage evolution of the ‘European’ canon a little further, by referring to a few examples and a few significant events. Thereafter we may look at the influence this has had on the playwriting paradigm.

The first stage, during which the first locally written texts begin to appear, consists of two processes which seem to have run almost parallel, and it is difficult to separate them. To illustrate, let us first of all consider two programmes for ‘entertainments’ from the year 1807, presented under sanction of the governor, the Earl of Caledon, in the African Theatre in Cape Town on Saturday 25th July and Saturday 8th August respectively. On the first of these occasions the Garrison performers put on the comedy of The West Indian and the tragedy of Tom Thumb, and on the second The beaux stratagem and the farce of The old maid. These performances took place right at the start of the ‘European’ period, and they are typical of the kind of programme presented till mid century. Besides the sheer enterprise exhibited here (one-off presentations of four different shows within a period of two weeks!), a significant point is the contributions of a certain ‘Captain Frazer’, who not only performed in the plays, apparently specializing in female roles, but also wrote certain occasional pieces for the particular performances. It is specifically his contribution to the production of the farce of The old maid which intrigues us, for, besides topical references to the players in the presentations, the epilogue also contains the following lines:

But any thing to bring you here together:
I love to see you crowd one top the to’other!
To pass the time – the heavy hours to cheer:
To harmonize John Bull with friend Mynheer:
To gain plaudits of these Brilliant Rows
Join’d with the smiles of the bewitching Vrouws
To give to Charity one little Mite;
And in one bond of friendship to unite –
Is all we aim at …
Perhaps this may be seen as the first play with what one might call 'local content' slight as it is—and Captain Frazer might just be one of the first local playwrights, in the European sense. However, Captain Frazer's contribution is totally eclipsed by what has traditionally been seen as the first truly South African playtext (again, in the European canon), as well as one of the first examples of written Afrikaans. Written in 1844 by Andrew Geddes Bain and George Rex, and performed in Grahamstown *Kaatje Kekkelbek* (Or *Life among the hottentots*) is of seminal importance to the entire history of South African theatre, not least for the character of 'Kaatje' herself:

My name is Kaatje Kekkelbek,  
I come from Kat Rivier  
Daar's van water geen gebrek,  
But scarce of wine and beer.  
My ABC at Ph'lp's school  
I learned a kleine beetje,  
But left it just as great a fool  
As gekke Tante Meitje.\(^6\)

It was a musical play, parts sung to the theme of 'Calder Fair', the rest spoken. But what makes it so important is:

- the use of language varieties for dramatic purposes;
- the use of topical reference; and
- the singularity of the character herself (In fact Kaatje, as prototype, was to re-occur in many plays later, in a variety of guises, *inter alia* in works by Stephen Black, Guy Butler and André P. Brink.)

These factors were enough to ensure a place for this text in the theatre canon, if not the literary one. The format here, however, was clearly still in the European tradition.

The same is true of another 'original' work of the period, namely the Grand Pantomime of *The Kafir War* or *The burnt farm* (1850), as part of the *Equestrian gymnastics*. Here the interest — as in the first two examples — lies in the eclectic nature of the entertainment. Related to familiar models in England and the United States (e.g. the 'Wild West Show'), this particular extravaganza deals equally with the fate of the Dutch farmers and the English soldiers, and includes a look at certain 'African' traditions. (In what form we can merely conjecture.)\(^7\)

The description on the advertisement reads:

The First Act will represent a living picture of an attack by these Savages on the solitary homestead of a Frontier Farmer, while heroically defending himself, and all that is dear to him; — he is seriously wounded, but still he faces the enemy, till, weak and exhausted, he falls. His House is next plundered and set on fire, and his Family carried off, which renders him so desperate that badly wounded as he is, he vainly tries to rise and save them.
In the Second Act the magnanimity of the British Troops against their Savage enemy will be displayed, who ultimately become the means of restoring to the dying Farmer what is dearer to him than life itself, – his Family!!! In this Act, an opportunity will offer to represent the character and customs of the Chief MACOMO and his people, their Dances and Pleasures.

This focus on local issues, and thus the creation of local texts, was to intensify as the century progressed, with more and more writers providing the material for local productions. From the start, the majority of translation and original writing occurred in Dutch/Afrikaans, by Dutch settlers and such French Huguenots as had been assimilated into that community. The reasons for this had primarily to do with:

- the shortage of available texts in Dutch; and
- the ‘permanent’ character of the Dutch and French Huguenot population (Holland and France were not ‘home’ to them, as England was to the British colonials).

Another process that was taking place in this phase was the introduction of literacy to the African continent, primarily through the intervention of missionaries. It was in this period that private Church-funded schools were established, orthographies developed for the various languages and translations of the Bible and other works prepared. It was, in effect, the time when Shakespeare can be said to have been introduced to African theatre. Some of these ‘civilizing’ influences were going to have the most startling and interesting effects later.

Then, towards 1880, a number of important socio-political and socio-economic events took place. Among them were the discovery of gold and diamonds, the increasing urbanization of thousands of farmers and labourers – mainly Afrikaner and African – and the onset of British expansionism which led to the Anglo-Boer war.

Out of this cauldron came a radically changed set of cultural sub-systems, and hence a far more complex theatrical system.

The main characteristic was to be exclusivity. The Afrikaner, now fired by intense nationalism, rapidly appropriated all cultural institutions for social and political purposes. From the very first performed and published full-length Afrikaans playtext (Magrieta Prinsloo, a tale of the Great Trek by S.J. du Toit), the theatre became subservient to the national cause. Within a decade a formal canon of literary works (including drama texts) had been published, and with the establishment, during the second and third decades of this century, of Afrikaans-medium universities, the first Afrikaans Literature departments, Afrikaans professional theatre companies, and Afrikaans newspapers to support these ventures, the whole closed system of Afrikaans culture was complete.

The end result of this was a very serious, though popular and very dynamic, tradition, which (at least for the period 1920–1972) provided the only really significant body of locally written, performed and published plays. However, it was an inbred, Eurocentric tradition, creating plays in the European mold. Even the best – such as Die heks (The witch) by Louis Leipoldt, Putsonderwater (Well-with-
out-water, or *The virgin and the vultures* by Bartho Smit, *Kanna hy kô hystoe* (*Kanna is coming home*) by Adam Small and *Siener in die suburbs* (*Seer in the suburbs*) by P.G. du Plessis — could simply have been European or American plays on South African topics. But the essential feature was a commitment to Afrikaans aspirations.

Alongside this exclusive Afrikaans sub-system we find the English sub-system evolving along predictable lines, creating its own infrastructures to match. However, being tapped into the larger vein of Anglo-European — and later American — theatre, the growth of the local canon was entirely stunted. (One of the most astounding — and important — writers/producers, Stephen Black, was only brought into the canon by 1984, when the first of his plays was published!) Predictably, the plays that were written, exhibited the same predilection for European models and themes, but what makes the English theatre special is its entertainment function. It was the English theatre which kept alive the musical, the revue, and the farce — important elements of the new paradigm.

It was from this English theatre that we also find the cultural missionaries who first drew black performers, producers and writers into the ambit of the European theatre and created a network of amateur theatre in English for the black population. A separate tradition best illustrated by the work of H.I.E. Dhlomo, the first published black playwright in English and a major theorist and propagator of an ‘African drama’. He, too, has only recently been rediscovered (see Couzens, 1985 and Visser and Couzens, 1985).

As Steadman (1985) and Kavanagh (1985) have shown, it was this English theatrical tradition which was to provide the structural base for the current phase of the shift and was to produce writers as varied as Gibson Kente, Fatima Dike, Zakes Mda, Matsemela Manaka, Maishe Maponya, and Mbongeni Ngema. However writing/creation among the black population also took a variety of other forms.

In the first place, in emulation of, but also under the guidance of and/or pressure from the growing separatist ideology of the government, a whole infrastructure for African literature — and hence for ‘African drama’ — was established: a separate one for each of the nine indigenous languages. (Separate schools and universities, separate publishing systems, and so on). Hence we now have a wide-ranging formal canon of literary African drama on a European model, in terms of the reigning paradigm. This is primarily a written canon, seldom — if ever — performed and created under very rigid educational, moral and economic prescriptions and restraints. Any play in an African language is only feasible if it has the kind of potential audience that the prescribed market can provide. So, the authors write what the schools and the educational authorities dictate — not what the stage, with its very limited potential audiences, demands. On the other hand, the schools merely demand texts that look like plays in form, not necessarily texts for performance.

The foregoing was also true of the prescribed works created to be studied by white children, but in the latter case there was a tradition of school performance attached to the prescribed work, which did in a sense lead to a more active local (amateur) playwriting tradition — particularly in Afrikaans. (See e.g. Du Toit, 1988 and Greyvenstein, 1988.) The latter performance tradition, when introduced into black schools, concentrated on plays in English, and certainly not on writing by blacks.

Chapter 2
From the Savoy to Soweto
Attempts to break out of this straitjacket have run into a variety of further barriers, among which:

- the sheer number of languages (and their varieties) spoken in the country – and often intermingled in urban settings (see Chapter 5. Also Schuring 1977 and 1985);
- the limited theatre-going tradition (in the Western sense) in South African society in general (Hauptfleisch, 1985 and 1987), but in the black community in particular;
- the unavailability of the necessary facilities and funds for the development of an African-language theatre; and
- a growing resistance to the use of African languages in favour of English as *lingua franca*, particularly during the Black Consciousness period of the seventies. (The latter is again a complex and constantly shifting phenomenon, heavily influenced by conflicting ideological trends. See i.a. Steadman, 1985, Coplan, 1985 and Orkin, 1991.)

In contrast to this there is the enormous canon of popular radio drama in the African languages – plays which were widely performed and listened to, but not published or studied. More recently the many television plays made for the SABC's Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho services seem to have the same impact and share the same fate. Once again we are looking at a general, and even international, trend of course (there are huge numbers of Afrikaans and English radio and TV scripts in the same category, for example). In addition, the local film industry began to flourish as the society moved out of the shadow of Apartheid, generating even more indigenous scripts in local languages. In contrast to this there is the enormous canon of popular radio drama in the African languages – plays which were widely performed and listened to, but not published or studied. More recently the many television plays made for the SABC's Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho services seem to have the same impact and share the same fate. Once again we are looking at a general, and even international, trend of course (there are huge numbers of Afrikaans and English radio and TV scripts in the same category, for example). In addition, the local film industry began to flourish as the society moved out of the shadow of Apartheid, generating even more indigenous scripts in local languages.8

Alongside these Eurocentric developments, the original 'African' tradition also developed in a variety of ways, as described by Coplan (1985), Larlham (1985) and others.

The major developments, besides the rural retention of traditional forms, seems to me to have been popular urban adaptations of these forms, and – in places – the evolution of new forms. Central to it all, however, has remained the musical and dance-oriented base of performance, and the often improvisational format employed. Major influences, however, have also been exercised by the American developments in popular music (a factor vastly accelerated through the radio, particularly the invention of the transistor and thus the introduction of the portable radio) and the American way of life (as mythologized through the movies and television). These influences have permeated black urban society and still provide many of the overt symbols for the urbanite. What is significant about this urban African performance sub-system is the extent to which it, too, has remained elitist, in the sense that very, very few whites ever see such performances.

So it is with this – ostensibly – neatly packaged tripartite theatrical system that we arrive at the beginning of the second-half of this century, and the third phase of the shift.

Once more the initial impetus for the shift seems to be embedded in the socio-political context of the times. The late 1950s saw a number of radical shifts in attitude, notably a hardening line from the ruling Nationalist Government (total...
separation was the ideal), a far more militant response from the various black freedom movements and, slowly, a growing wave of white – even Afrikaner – protest.

The culmination came somewhere around 1960, with events such as the Sharpeville massacre, the promulgation of the Group Areas Act, the secession from the British Empire and the founding of hard-line organizations like Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spearhead of the Nation).

In this critical period – that is between 1958 and 1961 – the theatre suddenly produced radically new works, which fundamentally altered the shape of the theatrical system as a whole. These included:

- Lewis Sowden's *Kimberley train*, Basil Warner's *Try for white*, Athol Fugard's *The blood knot*, and Bartho Smit's *Die verminktes (The maimed)* – all plays with a 'try-for-white' theme, and plays which turned the politics of the day into a viable theatrical issue. Fundamental to these plays was the concept of what later became known as the ‘alternative’ theatre companies – Leonard Schach's Cockpit Players, Athol and Sheila Fugard's Circle Players in Cape Town, Union Artist's Rehearsal Room at Dorkay House in Johannesburg, Serpent Players in Port Elizabeth, and even the National Theatre Organization's Kamertoneel in Pretoria; and

- the 1959 premiere of *King Kong*, a ‘township-musical’, which literally created the archetype for a new genre. It was an immensely popular production which spawned a variety of imitations such as the 'show-biz' froth of *Meropa* and *Ipi Tombi* and the more serious *Sponono* by Alan Paton and Krishna Shah. The musical also launched the careers of many artists, (such as Miriam Makeba, Stephen Moloi and Ken Gampu), inspired a number of writers and composers and led to the founding of various organizations, including the African Music and Drama Association (AMDA) and the creation of Union Artists and its Rehearsal Room at Dorkay House, where the English and the urban African theatre arts could get together. Athol Fugard, Gibson Kente, Bob Leshoai, Connie Mabaso, Alton Khumalo, Bloke Modisane, Zakes Mokae and Barney Simon were among the numerous alumni of that famous workshop and the entire Union Artists period. (See e.g. Robert Kavanagh, 1981 and 1985, on this period. Also Coplan, 1985 and Steadman, 1985.)

In 1965 the government banned all racially mixed casts and racially mixed audiences – effectively stifling the incipient growth of a hybrid theatre in the country. So effective were those measures – on the surface at least – that most theatre practitioners were forced to adapt their work to the new restrictions. Thus, for example, Athol Fugard produced only unicultural plays for the next seven years – works which could be performed with whites-only casts (*Hello and goodbye, Boesman and Lena* and *People are living there*). In contrast, the spurned black performers and creative artists in the townships, who included individuals such as Gibson Kente, Sam Mhanghwane and Boiky Mohlamme, turned to their own community for inspiration and support. They began to adapt the urban performance forms to a new format, a popular entertainment form which literally created its own audience and its own infrastructures.
Towards the latter part of this period, under the influence of both the above-mentioned movements, as well as the growing grassroots cultural struggle and workers' movement, a new kind of theatre – ‘community theatre’, ‘workers’ theatre’, call it what you will – began to surface in the black community, as Blecher (1980), Tomaselli (1981), Kavanagh (1985), Steadman (1985), Sole (1987) and Von Kotze (1988) have all so eloquently illustrated. It is pure ‘people’s theatre’ of the style described by Boal (1979) and, in the case of Experimental Theatre Workshop ’71 at least, heavily influenced by the work of Paolo Freire. Bertolt Brecht is another important influence in this movement. Prominent examples of this kind of work are Theatre Workshop ’71’s Crossroads and Survival, the so-called Dunlop play and Illanga lizophumela abasebenzi (usually referred to simply as Illanga). While the first two examples evolved from the broader socio-political and socio-economic issues within the community, the latter two events took place within the more specific context of labour relations. In this case the aim was to resolve the dispute and to sensitize workers to the issues involved, by involving them in the creative process. The work of Reverend Mzwandile Maqina served a very similar purpose for the people of the townships, by involving the audiences in the action through song. (See Steadman, 1985, for an extensive discussion of Maqina’s work.)

The impact of these developments within the politically turbulent late seventies and the eighties has been enormous.

Theatrically speaking, the eventual breakthrough once more came as the result of a variety of factors, which all seemed to come together at this time. Along with the profound impact of the changing socio-political climate, there now came a growing distrust of all state-funded organizations which were seen as agents for entrenching the status quo. This included a disillusionment with the role of the Performing Arts Councils, which led to the creation of a variety of ‘alternative’ companies and venues. Of course, as pointed out above, this latter movement had its roots in the fifties and sixties with organizations like The Cockpit Players, The Serpent Players and The Rehearsal Room, and had its way prepared by a number of experimental companies within the state funded Performing Arts Councils, notably PACT’s Arena theatre, PACOFS’s Werkswinkel Teater and CAPAB’s Experimental Theatre Laboratory (for which Fugard and company ‘created and presented’ Orestes in 1971, for example). However, the real changes were rung by a number of groups in the seventies, notably the Space Theatre in Cape Town, Experimental Theatre Workshop ’71 and the Market Theatre in Johannesburg.

Also important were the very strict censorship in the country, the playwright’s boycott of 1963 (which enforced a homegrown writing tradition in English and lessened the external competition), and the introduction into South African theatre – through the drama schools as well as the examples of individuals such as Barney Simon, Athol Fugard, Mavis Taylor and others – of the improvisational ideas of Antonin Artaud, Joan Littlewood, Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowsky. The latter led to a flood of improvised work from students, for example – as well as much of the recent work at the festivals and other non-mainstream venues. Finally there was the expanding influence of the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s and the various transformations which we find the central ideas in that movement going through in the eighties.
The effect of this crucible of new, and often radical, ideas has been stunning in its variety, its energy and its inversion of the long dominant theatrical system in South Africa.

At the centre of this system, as the focal point of what is becoming the new canon in theatre studies, lies what would appear to be a totally shifted paradigm: not African, not European – but somehow something new, an evolving South African form of theatre, seeking to fix on a life and character of its own.

Already, it would seem, the initial canon of that new paradigm has been partly established, and is augmented daily – though this fourth phase is still very much in progress.

Among works that have since received serious consideration are Fatima Dike's *The sacrifice of Kreli*, Experimental Theatre Workshop '71's *Survival*, Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona's *The island* and *Sizwe Bansi is dead*, Barney Simon, Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtw's *Woza Albert*, Barney Simon and Cast's *Born in the RSA* and *Black dog*, Maiese Maponya's *The hungry earth*, Matsemela Manaka's *Egoli*, Mbongeni Ngema's *Asinamali!*, Phyllis Klotz and cast's *You strike the woman, you strike the rock*, Kramer and Petersen's *District Six – the musical*, Junction Avenue Theatre's *Sophiatown* and Ngema's *Sarafina!*

Even the most superficial comparative analysis of this short chronological list makes it possible to trace a number of trends. Firstly there appears to be a gradual shift from the high seriousness to a far more popular ‘entertainment’ approach to protest and social comment – employing all the 'entertainment' elements of the African and township models (music, dance, comic narration, nostalgia) as well as the physical and structural potency of the European theatrical tradition. Secondly there is a noticeable move towards multicultural and specifically multilingual plays, in which language becomes both medium of communication and symbol. Lastly, there is a still increasing shift towards what one might refer to as the ‘African’ model. Take the production of *Asinamali!* as an example. It is pure theatre: six actors, with no set and hardly any props except their near-naked bodies, singing and dancing out their stories in stupendous unison, without accompaniment. The language is the polyglot of the country (English, Zulu, Xhosa, Tsotsitaal), the style is reflective, yet amusing and even bawdily entertaining, and in some ways related to the verbal narrative traditions of the *ntsoni*. Yet the venue, the external – and the internal – context remains partly Western, remains the South Africa of the mines, of Johannesburg, of the Market Theatre. And so do the physical parameters of the show, as I saw it: within the square open space of the Laager Theatre at the Market Theatre.9

The total effect is one of immense energy and vitality, strangely seductive yet compelling in its almost confrontational and intimate style. In the end audiences find its simple yet incisive message difficult to ignore.

This is a long way from the graceful, formalized entertainment of Gilbert and Sullivan, and it is equally far from the nice, formal and ‘well-made’ plays of Guy Butler, H.W.D. (Harley) Manson, Chris Barnard, Geraldine Aron or even of Athol Fugard. It is a dynamic, ephemeral, yet quintessentially local new paradigm for South African theatre. It also happens to be one which poses immense yet exciting problems for the writer, the teacher and finally for the historian. How, after all, can one bottle the wind?10
1 As indicated in Chapter 1, this has been one of the most debated concepts I have introduced into my writing. I use it here in the sense outlined there.

2 David Coplan, commenting on an earlier version of this chapter, was unhappy with the word ‘hybrid’, and suggested something like ‘syncretic’ as a more appropriate term. I certainly concur with his basic argument that what we are dealing with is something new and original, and I have attempted to make that clear in the text. However, I find the term ‘hybrid’ less problematic than he does. I quite like the thought of the evolving theatre being the ‘offspring of two ... (beings) ... of different species ...’ (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1964). It seems to me, that what we have is the result of some kind of passionate intercourse – not a ‘mechanical’ process by any means.

3 As shown in Chapter 1, the concept of a ‘new’ South African history was one of the most crucial points of debate in academic thinking in the period under discussion. Not only among historians, but among all social and cultural scientists, including theatre historians.

4 The writings of these scholars have been immensely liberating in that they have documented, defined and focussed attention on the neglected African performance. However, they have done so in opposition to the existing canon of theatrical works, and have therefore not – thus far – attempted to integrate their perceptions and information with a larger history. The one publication which attempted to do so to date, namely Hauptfleisch and Steadman (1984), was itself the victim of the divisive structures and processes operative in the society, but it has at least, I believe, succeeded in opening up the idea of some kind of middle ground.

5 A question that arises immediately is why the shifts have occurred, and more particularly, why they have done so at these precise points and in these particular ways? What one wants to look at of course are all the socio-economic, socio-political, socio-cultural and other factors which have created the context and have occasioned the shifts. Clearly this is an enterprise way beyond the scope of the original, exploratory, essay. Nevertheless, it remains an enthralling possibility for further study, and I have touched on some of the reasons in the following chapters. For the moment, however, my own interest is simply in identifying what appears to me to be a specific phenomenon within the South African theatre system.

6 The text of Kaatje Kekkelbek used here comes from Bosman, 1982, Bylae X, pp. 541-3. As with so much else on the early history, Bosman’s mammoth study remains the most authoritative source. The African theatre programmes and texts come from the theatre collection of the South African Library in Cape Town.

7 Nineteenth century England was much interested in ‘African’ acts, but then primarily as biological and social curiosities and exhibits in side-shows. In fact, posing as an ‘African’ would appear to have been one of the few ways for a non-European to get into the entertainment business at the time. However, exposure to the reality and vigour of more authentic African culture seems to have offended the Victorian audiences of Dickens’s day, as a visit to London by a troupe of Zulu performers in 1853 illustrates (Lindfors, 1979).

8 Some recognition of these facts is noticeable from the fact that the study of film as an art form was slowly introduced to some South African schools during the 1980s, while new thinking around the school syllabus has offered some opportunity for considering media studies as an alternative option – one already utilized in a number of university literature and drama courses of the late eighties and nineties.
9 The danger of oversimplification is, of course, always present in a survey of this nature, and this statement for example raises a number of possible questions. For instance, I am uncomfortably aware of the fact that my definition of ‘Western’ is becoming less and less useful here, for in the South Africa of the 1990s so much of what was originally imported (ideas, technology, conventions) has by now become ‘Africanized’ enough to really constitute part of the South African context. Thus one might ask of the cities created by the mining industry: are they ‘Western’ (i.e. an imported and imposed way of life) or ‘South African’ (i.e. a particular way of life shared by millions of South Africans)? Even: to what extent is South Africa itself a hybrid society, with its own, unique character?

These are issues we might indeed need to confront as we go on to rewrite – or to write at last – the history of South Africa.

10 In Chapter 4 we shall explore this idea of a shifted, popularized and performance oriented paradigm for playwriting and play creation in South Africa a little further. Using further examples, we shall be discussing some of the elements which appear to have entered into the paradigm during the eighties and nineties.
Introduction: performance theory and a concept of theatre

In view of the changing concepts of South African history (as touched on in Chapter 1) and the idea of an 'extended' history of South African theatre, as outlined in Chapter 2, how is one to define 'theatre' as a concept in a neo-African context, dominated by what David Coplan (1985) refers to as 'performance culture'? What activities may all qualify for inclusion in a more 'democratic', reinterpreted and 'decolonized' view of theatre in a post-colonial country? Furthermore, how does one study such performances and such a system, given the truly inadequate tools and data at our disposal? Indeed, as Robert Erenstein pointed out during the discussions at a seminal conference on 'Street theatre versus Festival', how does one study any of the ephemeral forms under discussion with tools designed to cope only with a printed and documented art form (i.e. 'drama')?

The kind of questions raised here have really only become important to the majority of scholars during the course of the past three decades or so, though recent events have in fact accelerated this reappraisal and have made it part of a more general, popular movement. Thus the 'rediscovery' of Africa is clearly evidenced by films such as Out of Africa, White mischief, and Cry freedom, while musicians, artists and writers from the region have gradually made their impact felt all over the world. The international repute of dramatists Wole Soyinka and Athol Fugard are evidence enough of this at one level, while Paul Simon's expeditions to Africa for his Graceland album (recorded with Ladysmith Black Mambazo), and conversely, the European and American reputations of African musicians, including multiracial South African pop groups such as Savuka and Mango Groove, seem to point to a far more widespread interest in things (South) African. Certainly since the opening up of the society and the lifting of the cultural, sport and other boycotts in the period after 1990, the flow of internation-
al observers, academics, sportsmen, artists, and so on, visiting and working in the country has grown exponentially – a trend very noticeable in the film industry, which displayed a significant influx of film-makers interested in exploring and exploiting the country and its stories.

Now, one could spend a great deal of time debating and illustrating the nature and the extent of the problems which such a confrontation of cultures may occasion for both the European and the third-world researcher, critic and writer. There are many. However, it is perhaps sufficient for the moment to consider two basic problems that theoreticians and students of African performance have had to solve before they could even begin to understand the nature of the theatrical processes they wanted to study.

One requirement was to move beyond the hegemonic limitations and control of Western (i.e. colonial) thinking about what constitutes theatre, culture and the arts – largely in order to avoid the skewed vision which may derive from using the familiar and comfortable Aristotelian models of drama as the basis of description, analysis and comparison. It is an approach quite generally employed by commentators in the past, and one violently objected to by most African artists. (See for example Chinua Achebe’s vastly entertaining indictment of the ‘colonialist critic’, the more complex response Wole Soyinka has to Negritude and its criteria for cultural criticism and Ngugi wa Thiongo’s thought-provoking call to ‘decolonize the mind’.) This kind of thing is also effectively derided by Michael Etherton (1982, p. 32ff) in his discussion of recent studies on African theatre.

The second requirement was for a more appropriate new theoretical paradigm which would enable one to study, describe and discuss the multitude of ‘unclassifiable’ activities that confront one in non-Western societies.

The latter problem has, in part, been solved through the evolution of the concept of ‘performance theory’, although not everyone necessarily accepts all the implications of the idea as formulated by its most prominent proponents. The former problem has been a somewhat harder nut to crack, but as more and more writers ventured beyond the confines of their own parochialism, it became clear that one was speaking about many kinds of ‘performance’, rather than of a single, dominant new art form. In other words, the concept does not supplant former concepts of ‘theatre’ and ‘drama’ (which in themselves are not unitary concepts by any means), but simply encompasses them in a broader concept, allowing for comparison with other events and activities which had formerly not been reckoned as part of the history of theatre.

Given these two ‘shifted realities’, it becomes possible to view African theatre, and – for the purposes of this study, South African theatre – as a continuum of performance forms which ranges from ritual dance and song to formal, classical theatre in the Western sense. Along that continuum lie a whole series of other forms, many of which have to date not really been seen as part of ‘theatre’ proper (or even less as ‘drama’), but which have been immensely influential in actual performance and in the evolution of new performance forms.

To illustrate, let us start with a simple diagram (3.1), based on two – admittedly somewhat arbitrary and artificial, yet serviceable – polarities within African, and more specifically southern African, society today:
The shifting paradigm

Diagram 3.1 Two polarities within South African theatre

In the centre somewhere one finds a whole cluster of possible 'performance events' which all involve the two classic elements of theatre: performer and spectator. It is in this area that one may find, inter alia, a harvest festival in Venda, a wedding ceremony in KwaZulu, a ntsumi-narrative in rural Transkei, a 'gumboot dance' on the Johannesburg goldmines, a marabi evening in Soweto, a 'Coon carnival' in Cape Town, a 'township musical' in a Mamelodi civic hall, a satirical revue by Pieter-Dirk Uys as well as performances of Woza Albert in the Market Theatre, The pirates of Penzance in the Natal Playhouse and A midsummer night's dream in the Mannville open-air theatre in Port Elizabeth. (Certain of these terms are dealt with in more detail below.)

I want to propose that one looks at all these forms or events as part of a greater whole, part of a single, complex but open system of performance, in other words a set of interlinked and mutually dependent structured processes or subsystems, which together make up that entity referred to as 'South African theatre or performance'. It is a network of interrelated systems which has evolved, and is still evolving, in a rather special way, under the pressure of certain general and a few very specific impulses – a system which poses spectacular challenges for the theoretician, critic and historian.

The forms of South African theatre

The point is that, of late, there has been a remarkable and actively growing interchange between the various 'performance' systems and subsystems within the cultural macrosystem, as I have sought to show in the second chapter. (Chapters 4 and 5 will take a closer look at specific examples of this.) These interchanges include such matters as the bridging of the divides between various genres and traditions (e.g. ritual, festival, street theatre, mainstream theatre, fringe theatre, popular theatre, and so forth), as well as shifting perceptions concerning the function of theatre and performance. The concepts of influence and evolution are again extremely difficult and complex areas to pinpoint, but I would nevertheless like to take a little time to look at a few examples found in South Africa.
### Table 3.1 The forms of South African theatre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance form</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Indigenous, traditional communal</td>
<td>The snake dance; <em>ntsomi</em> narrative; the <em>izibongo</em> (the praise-song); the initiation ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Indigenous, contemporary communal</td>
<td>Marabi dance; the gumboot dance; <em>toyi-toyi</em> dancing; the Coon carnival; funerals; church services; Soweto Day celebrations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Imported, Western communal</td>
<td>Law court ceremony; church services; schooling rites; Christmas festivities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Indigenous, Western communal</td>
<td>Volkspele (folk dancing); Van der Stel Festival, Voortrekker ceremonies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Imported, Western elite</td>
<td>Serious formal plays; comedy; pantomime; opera; ballet; musical; experimental forms; etc. Imported texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Indigenous, Western elite</td>
<td>Mainstream writing in Western format by local authors. (<em>Christine, Boesman and Lena, The first South African</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Indigenous, 'alternative' Western</td>
<td>experimental, non-mainstream improvisational performances based on Brechtian and Grotowskian models; community theatre following the examples of Augusto Boal and others (<em>Orestes, Randlords and Rotgut, Outsers</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Indigenous, hybrid</td>
<td>Performances using formal and thematic elements from all the foregoing traditional and imported forms, e.g. ‘township musicals’ and improvised cross-cultural performances (<em>Woza Albert, Sophiatown</em>), cabarets, performance poetry and storytelling events</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in South African performance today. From there we may go on to consider certain methodological issues raised by this kind of study.

To begin with, the total system seems to be evolving away from certain separate and distinctive forms (see Table 3.1, Categories 1-7) towards a set of more integrated forms I have termed ‘hybrid’ for the moment, based on the analysis in Chapter 2 (Table 3.1, Category 8). Coplan (1985) uses the word ‘syncretic’ for the same concept, while a number of researchers in other fields (literature, music, fine arts) have noticed a similar trend in their domains. (See for example Mzamane, 1984 on the influence of traditional oral forms on black writing. This is also clear in the work of many African playwrights, e.g. see Conradie, 1990 on syncretism in Wole Soyinka, and Breitinger, 1994 on Rose Mboya's
The shifting paradigm

Section 1

The eclecticism and pastiche involved is of course a typical post-modernist manifestation in the arts, but for the moment we are concerned with specific occurrences in South African art, and theatre in particular. The concept itself has already been discussed in some detail in Chapter 2, and will be developed further in Chapter 4, but what I wish to look at here are a few examples of the interchange between the 'older' and the 'new' performance forms, and how the theory proposed in the first chapter allows us to view the nature of the system as a whole.

Table 3.1 lists eight very broad categories of performance found in South Africa. Of course there are many others, and clearly the very act of categorizing is a suspect 'Western' academic exercise (a point discussed in Chapter 1), but for the moment let us use them as working definitions. In what follows I shall attempt to abstract certain very general characteristics of these performance forms, particularly certain less familiar ones. These are for discussion only, in order to broaden the basis of the debate a little – and to provide a few possible hypotheses for further exploration.

It is important to note that all eight of these categories of performance still exist, alongside one another, even today. Some have survived in less potent form, others have been adapted, but all do exist. Thus, for example: imported Western theatre now reaches South Africans via films and television, rather than directly, since virtually no European or American companies visited the country during the cultural boycott period (mid 1960s to 1990), as they did between the 1880s and the 1950s. But the impact of popular and art films – as well as filmed plays and musicals – on theatre practice in the country has been significantly influencing form, style and content.

Category 1 represents the kind of performance traditionally associated with Africa: ritual dances and songs, ritual festivals and the like. Most of our information about this is either based on extant drawings (in caves, or by later Western travellers) or on the descriptions left by travellers, missionaries and ethnologists. The latter may be construed as interpreted versions of the actual events, seen as pagan rituals, rites, etc., with little attention being given to simply documenting the entirety of the event, or to considering the performance aspect of it all. Recent theatre archaeological explorations of these forms are thus faced with immense problems, having to re-construct past forms through the deconstruction (in Derridean terms) of and extrapolation from old historical texts, available illustrations, a few remainders of the original forms (unchanged and/or adapted) and parallel forms in other performance systems (African, European, Eastern, etc.). (See e.g. Larlham, 1985; Katzenellenbogen, 1985; Kerr, 1995 and Conteh-Morgan, 1994 on this.)

For our purposes a few common elements in these old performance forms are of interest. In the first place there is the mimetic element. What may well be the oldest record of South African performance, most likely dating from approximately 6000 BC (Lewis-Williams, In: Cameron and Spies, 1986, p. 34), is a rock-painting of what appears to be a dance associated with a San hunting expedition and depicting hunters acting out the roles of animals. The ritual/religious/social function of the dance has been debated at some length, but most significant for us now is simply that it is an early record of an ongoing imitative or mimetic tradition. Unlike all the others.
traditional of performance still found in South Africa today. A tradition in which, unlike other parts of Africa, masks and costumes play a subordinate role, if at all. The important factor is the use of body as mimetic element. This tradition has largely been retained in contemporary versions of such performances, as is clear enough from recent films or pictures of San, Xhosa and Zulu dances recorded by researchers.  

Secondly, there is the strong interrelation between performance and music. It is a factor long clear to ethno-musicologists such as Hugh Tracey (1948) and David Coplan (1985) as well as most music historians attempting to deal with so-called ‘African music’. The musical, or more importantly even, the rhythmical base of traditional South African performance is an extremely important factor in view of the Western convention of separating the genres and the artificiality of most Western attempts at (re)integrating the forms.  

The importance of the foregoing two elements has long been acknowledged by scholars, but a less noticeable though equally significant attribute has, it seems to me, been the narrative element. Alongside the dance forms, occasionally integrated in performance, at other times on its own, the storyteller and the praise poet have always played significant roles in African culture, both as oral historians and as performers. As an area of interest in its own right, the oral tradition has become the focus of considerable activity and scholars working in the field have done much to increase our knowledge and understanding of the storyteller, singer and poet as social and cultural being (see Groenewald, 1990; Kashula, 1993 and Hofmeyr, 1993, for example). However, we still have little information on or understanding of the performance function of the narrative tradition, as an integrated part of African cultural life.

Today the performance poet and the praise singer still function within South African society, even though the subjects of their narratives may have changed and the objects of their praise may have a modified status. Indeed, in the political/resistance period (1970–1990) the performance poet achieved great significance as spokesman of the people, while the post-apartheid period since 1990 has seen the praise singer in particular become a central figure in South African civil and public life. These too are being studied, though the focus of the oralists appears to be primarily on the continuation of the traditional conventions, rather than the evolution of new or adapted forms.

The element of telling, of addressing an audience directly, interspersed with mimetic enactment of significant episodes from the narrative, is therefore a central facet of this category of performance. Also, as Larlham (1985) and many others have shown, in the forms remaining today, this conversely implies an age-old tradition of listening in pre-literate societies, a tradition in which the spoken word is far more potent than the printed word. It constitutes a very significant cultural and political fact in today’s post-industrial South Africa, where illiteracy is still a major factor, particularly in rural areas.

Lastly, there is the communal function of the various performance forms. Certainly they all provide entertainment for the community, but in each case there also appears to be a social function, as well as a social-critical element. Beyond the conventional, this refers to a truly ‘popular’ theatre, generated through, participated in and shaped by the community and its needs. Thus, a wedding ceremony
serves to celebrate continuation of the community, the *imbongi* (or praise-singer) is both poet laureate and licensed critic and, like the *ntsomi*, records the history, myths and even the traditions of his/her community, and so on.

Category 2 (indigenous, contemporary communal) represents one direction the development of indigenous performance took, following on colonization by Dutch and British settlers in the 17th and 18th centuries. It originated primarily from the impact which the culture of the new settlers (see Category 3) had on the socio-political, economic, demographic and other structures of the region, and the influence this had on the traditional forms described above.

Among the many radical changes that occurred were such diverse factors as the advent of Christianity, the growth of industrialization and urbanization, with the accompanying capitalist labour policies, the introduction of literacy and Western educational concepts, and Western popular arts and media. (For example, J.P. Malan, editor of the *South African Music Encyclopaedia* and a fierce campaigner for the preservation of the African heritage, is fond of pointing out that one of the most devastating influences on the form of traditional African music has been the invention of the transistor radio. But then Malan's attitude is that of the historian. That same invention has also been enormously influential in shaping modern-day African jazz – itself a hybrid form of great significance and intriguing complexity.)

It is particularly in the twentieth century that we find the original notions of performance gradually being adapted to the new socio-cultural context. Certain of the adaptations are superficial (adding modern ornamentations to traditional costumes), while others are more fundamental, affecting both style and function of the performance, or even leading to an entirely new form. One of the major factors in the shift has been a more distinctive separation of functions. Thus, for example, entertainment and/or competition (as in dance competitions and jazz concerts) would be opposed to communal rituals (e.g. church services, funerals, initiation ceremonies), in line with Western thinking.

Peter Larlham (1985) and David Coplan (1985) provide numerous examples of this kind of shift. Among them are adapted dance forms, based in part on Western (jazz) music, other local developments (such as the Afro-Afrikaans guitar style called 'tickey draai') and even formal ball-room and music hall dance forms. Yet the performances as such still have an important social function within the black townships, as illustrated by the *marabi*. As Coplan (1985: 94) describes it:

Growing out of shebeen [i.e. illicit drinking house] society, *marabi* was much more than just a musical style. As music it had a distinctive rhythm and a blend of African polyphonic principles, restructured within the framework of the Western three-cord harmonic system. As a dance it placed few limits on variation and interpretation by individuals and couples, though the emphasis was definitely on sexuality. As a social occasion it was a convivial, neighbourhood gathering for drinking, dancing, coupling, friendship and other forms of interaction.

Originating as true hybrid or syncretic form in the 1920s, *marabi* had a low social status, being rooted in urban working-class life, yet it functioned significantly as a
means of coming to terms with the evolving and often threatening urban society. Marabi occasions became ‘a focus of the continuing struggle for order in urban African society. They were in many ways centres of community life that gave working-class people some sense of social coherence’ (Coplan, 1985: 109).

Clearly the majority of the new dances were primarily seen as entertainment forms, gradually finding their own particular audiences within the polyglot and complex social structures evolving in the townships. Thus, removed from their distinctive communal (or tribal) base, the nature of the social ritual changed. This process was accelerated by a number of factors. Among them was the popularity of the many kinds of dance competitions held in the cities. Formal ball-room dancing for example is immensely popular, as is poignantly reflected in both Athol Fugard’s Master Harold ... and the boys and Junction Avenue Theatre’s Sophiatown. Then there are more unique forms, such as the music-hall style song and dance competitions called Isicathamiya, and the Isishayameni, impromptu street-corner dancing events participated in by men returning from work (Larlam, 1985). Other competitions include the mine-dances and the annual Coon Carnival in Cape Town (Note 2, Chapter 4). The commercialization of certain of these events has further removed them from their original ritual and communal base. Thus, for example, we find the famed ‘gumboot dancing’ being organized as performances by the managements, as entertainment for tourists shown around the mines. Similarly, groups of ‘Zulu dancers’ are created to perform at ‘ethnic villages’ and at festivals, agricultural shows, and other public events aimed at tourist groups. They are thus divorced from their real ritual function, and become little more than ‘theatre’ in the Western sense.

Another group of communal events, however, have adapted in a rather different way, to retain the ritual and communal element of their origins, though they have incorporated many radical shifts in basic orientation. While most religious events such as wedding ceremonies, church services and funerals have assumed certain Western values, particularly in the new urban environment, two elements make this category of indigenous contemporary performance significant in the South African theatre system.

Firstly, there is the very potent histrionic element present in all such events within the African Christian churches. Dancing and singing are fundamental to these rituals (in strong contrast to the Puritan tradition adhered to by the majority of white churches). This is amply illustrated by the many ‘informal’ church services that take place in open city lots, along roads outside the cities and even on buses and trains. The more formally organized meetings likewise may become impressive performances, often on a vast scale, as Larlam (1985) has shown. For example, every Easter there are huge annual gatherings at various points in the country, when literally millions of the faithful trek up into the mountains or to the towns of northern Transvaal or Natal to dance, sing and pray for days at a stretch. It is the kind of event totally alien to the ‘Western’ traditions of South Africa, yet it is a hybrid activity with roots in both Western and African religion and performance.

In the second place, the church has always had a strong presence in South African political thinking (one need but look at the history of the early missionaries or the Afrikaner and his Church). However, since the early 1970s and the advent of the so-called ‘liberation theology’, it appears to have assumed an even more
momentous role as all cultural processes were appropriated for the freedom struggle. (Such names as Trevor Huddlestone, Beyers Naudé, Desmond Tutu, Alan Boesak, and Alan Hendrikse for instance, are all inextricably linked with the current political debate. So too, on the other side of the political spectrum, there is the other former minister, and right-wing leader, Dr Andries Treurnicht.) Of particular significance to us is the stature the funeral service attained within the black community. Each death, each funeral procession with its weeping and angry mourners, was elevated to a symbol of life under oppression and was utilized as an occasion to mobilize support for the ongoing struggle. A picture of mourners carrying a coffin became a visual and theatrical metaphor of stark clarity, created and effectively disseminated through the mass media. No wonder so many plays used the metaphor as a frame for improvised theatre (see Barney Simon and Company's *Black dog/Inj'emnyama*, for example).

The primary factor in all this is the process of hybridization described in Chapter 2, the mingling and borrowing which created something not quite African, not quite Western, but somewhere in the middle. (E.g. church services utilizing African dance and music, traditional communal dancing utilizing American jazz music and Western clothing.) Part of the hybridization lies in the radically redefined socio-cultural functions of these new forms, which at times forcefully dictate not only the form but also the content of the performance. In these terms a funeral can become something far greater than only burying a deceased relative or friend, it becomes a matter of orchestrating an outcry against oppression. It is the kind of thing Augusto Boal would relish.

Category 3 (imported, Western communal performance) is really the Colonial equivalent of Category 1, i.e. the imported traditions of eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century Western, or really Anglo-European culture (in the broader, anthropological sense of the word). It is thus also the joint fount of Category 2. The performances here are the ceremonies, rites and rituals of (white) Dutch, French and British society, from such everyday activities as drinking tea, producing wine, going to church, the Sunday dinner, attending school and playing cricket on to the more arcane mysteries of the law courts, the Freemasons' lodge, the stock exchange, and so on. And then of course there is the public pomp and ceremony of the military parades, state funerals and the like. These are the activities we would hardly classify under theatre, but which in their fashion constitute social performances of immense significance in the shaping, ordering and control of a 'civilized' society. They are the performances we see reflected in and shaping the theatre of Europe and America to this day.\(^6\)

These festivities include the festivals and ceremonies of the mother countries — thus for example such British public holidays as the Queen’s birthday and Guy Fawkes day were celebrated way into the sixties of this century. Even after the secession from the Empire and the declaration of an independent Republic in 1961, remnants of the original festivities were unofficially retained and nurtured by certain sections of the public.

To most contemporary analysts and critics this refers to a familiar, unremarkable world, distinguishable (and perhaps inferior to?) the meaningful performances one would designate 'art'. Therefore, unless filtered through the mediating role of the dramatist/artist, few would see any kind of significant ritual or
theatrical shape in the above-mentioned activities and events. Yet the rituals are there and the ceremonies do in fact represent deeply embedded beliefs, traditions and conventions within the particular society. Consider, for example, the Easter Festival with its mixture of pagan and Christian mythology, or the complex symbols and ceremonies of the Christmas celebrations – all part of the fabric of 'civilization' as it was exported to the colonies of the British empire, according to the light of the times. These are the same beliefs, traditions, and conventions which are reflected in both the form and in the content of contemporary plays. When viewed from a 'performance' perspective therefore, these events are theatre in their own right – involving players and audience in a specific and meaningful relationship, as part of an ongoing and continual affirmation of the values and forms of the society as a whole. To many social analysts and critics this category of performance constitutes much of what is most insidious in the Western cultural hegemony, providing the structures and patterns of emulation which could be utilized to undermine the indigenous culture.

Closely related to the foregoing is Category 4 (indigenous, Western communal), since it flows directly from it and shares most of its essential features. Though the direction of the evolution taking place here is the same as in Category 2 (that is, towards some kind of shared centre, where one might expect to find the truly indigenous form – see Category 8), the basic point of departure differs significantly. What we have is the evolution of certain local social performance forms, in some cases adaptations of received practices, and in others virtually new creations in the spirit of the original Western culture – though the distinction is mostly a difficult one to draw.

Many of these have to do with what is seen as the 'Afrikaner nation'. Thus, among the more prominent examples one may find the rituals and ceremonies of the Voortrekkers, an Afrikaans version of the Boy Scouts. The formal procedures resemble those of the Boy Scout movement quite closely, even though there are a number of significant differences as well. Like Lord Baden-Powell's organization, which based its central ceremonial forms on a Kiplingesque concept of survival through discipline and a belief in the superiority of the civilized man in a primitive and disorganized natural world, the Voortrekker movement has based its mythology and its rites on an image of the fictionalized and idealized pioneer of the Great Trek. Fundamental to this is a belief in the foundations of Afrikanerdom, namely a belief in God, belief in the Volk (i.e. the Afrikaner nation), and a belief in discipline and military preparedness. Thus marching, camping, and a strict code of conduct become part of the pageantry and performance participated in. The ceremonies and rites of the Afrikaner Broederbond, a secret society which, it is claimed, has virtually ruled the country for the past forty years, are a well-kept secret, but are for that very reason enormously influential.

Another set of conventions and ritual practices which have played a crucial role in South African society is the system of 'Christian national' education which has dominated the country's educational policies for more than four decades. Even the way the day is structured, transgressions are punished, courses are planned, uniforms are viewed, and so on, may become ideological tools, as Lynn Dalrymple (1990) has shown in a semiotic analysis of schooling rites in KwaZulu.
In the same category we may place the formulae and forms of the Afrikaans-speaking churches, local political rallies, and so on.\(^7\)

The Day of the Covenant (celebrating the defeat of the Zulus by the Boer pioneers at the battle of Blood River) is a significant and problematic case here, for it was 'celebrated' in a wide variety of ways, depending on the political/religious position of the citizen or group of citizens. The point is that, under the Nationalist government, it was an official public and religious holiday, yet it had specific significance only for a small section of the entire population. Like the celebrations now attached to commemorating the events of 1960 (Sharpeville) and 1976 (Soweto), the event gained immense symbolic value over the years, and any ceremony linked to that day thus became imbued with considerably more meaning than it would have had otherwise. Under the Government of National Unity, the Day of the Covenant was renamed the Day of Reconciliation and has – remarkably so – lost much of its symbolic power among the younger generation.

Less contentious examples would include the interesting case of the annual Van Der Stel Festival held in Stellenbosch. This event, based on an actual open day apparently held on the popular Dutch governor's birthday in the eighteenth century and revived in the 1950s, today combines mimed 'target shooting' with traditional blunderbusses, an 'historic' pageant, a modern day braai/vleis (i.e. barbecue) and a fête in a day-long carnival. Other creations are the conscious development of the Afrikaner folk dances called Volkspele and the so-called Boeremusiek (folk music) which accompanies it. More spontaneous perhaps are some of the social rituals surrounding rural market days, Christmas festivities, and local rugby and cricket matches.

I have tended to focus on the strong and obvious Afrikaner ceremonies, but in a similar fashion to the last case, there are other local festival type events brought in and continued by other segments of the population. These include the Cape Coon Carnival, which has already been mentioned above (and perhaps more properly belongs here), the student 'rags' and the ways in which Christmas is celebrated in South Africa. We find a wide variety of innovations in the latter area – including the central role played by the 'braai' and outdoor entertainment. The whole area of sport and entertainment of course is itself replete with local adaptations of imported ceremonies – the very fact that the country boasts a separate ministry for Sport and Recreation (in contrast to a single ministry for Arts, Culture, Science and Technology) is surely a telling one in this regard!

The next two categories (5 and 6) are really quite familiar to Western theatre historians, constituting what is usually described as 'South African theatre' by the majority of writers (Bosman, 1928 and 1980; Binge, 1952; Inskip, 1972 and Kannemeyer, 1988). It is primarily of importance here because of the dominant role the Western cultural hegemony (in the narrower sense) has played in Africa and South Africa in particular, a point I do not think it necessary to belabour here. (A more detailed discussion of the theatrical implications is contained in Chapter 2, for example.) However, as in the case of Category 1, it provides a base form from which later developments were to flow, for it is against the background of this 'Western' theatre – and even in direct opposition to it – that many of the shifts that have occurred over the past three decades have taken place.

Basically Category 5 refers to texts conceived and written in Europe or
Europe or America, then presented here – either through imported theatre companies (especially in the period between about 1850 and the late 1920s) or through local productions by amateur, school, university, and professional companies. It includes the whole range of melodrama, farce, music hall, vaudeville, musicals, cabaret, pantomime and dance, as well as the full canon of ‘serious’ fare. The ‘classical’ tradition, represented by Shakespeare, Molière, Schiller, Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, O’Neill, Anouilh, Brecht, Williams, Miller, Osborne and so on, has been particularly popular and influential, as has been the theatre of the Absurd. The plays are usually performed in English or in Afrikaans, though the occasional Zulu, Sotho, or Xhosa translation has been made. (The most famous, though it belongs lower down on Table 3.1 perhaps, is Welcome Msomi’s popular Zulu translation of Macbeth, which he entitled Umabatha.)

It is this tradition which, for a long time, particularly among English-speaking historians, constituted all of theatre history. Even the recognition of indigenous writing (as described below) took a very long time, the constant endeavours of a handful of committed academics and the fame of an internationally recognized author to finally be accepted as worthy of study in the late 1970s.

Category 6 is an inevitable and necessary adjunct of Category 5. It is the new, indigenous ‘canon’ of locally written work in the Western mold, a canon of writing based on a paradigm derived from the Western concepts of theatre and the theatrical endeavour. This process makes use of the infrastructure and conventions introduced to the country by the British and Dutch, through the kind of performances referred to in Category 5. For both practical and ideological reasons a significant body of this work was written in Afrikaans, as part of the struggle to establish a formal literature and a political future for the language and its speakers. The writers include highly accomplished playwrights who over the years produced a number of trenchant studies of Afrikaners and Afrikaner issues for the various theatre companies. Among them are J.F.W. Grosskopf, W.A. de Klerk, N.P. van Wyk Louw, Bartho Smit, P.G. du Plessis, Chris Barnard, Andre P. Brink, Pieter Fourie, Deon Opperman and Reza de Wet. Conspicuous among the English playwrights is of course Athol Fugard, but the names of Stephen Black, Lewis Sowden, H.W.D. Manson, Guy Butler, Geraldine Aron, Pieter-Dirk Uys and Paul Slabolepszy have become very much part of the larger canon. The same tradition has also influenced many black writers – those writing ‘closet’ plays in the various African languages, intended for study as prescribed books at schools, as well as the many notable writers using English as a lingua franca (from the first work of Herbert Dhlomo in the 1920s and 1930s to the more recent writings of Fatima Dike, Zakes Mda, Maishe Maponya and Mbongeni Ngema).

The importance of this local tradition must not be underestimated, for it has dominated the South African theatrical system for almost thirty years now and has established a certain set of expectations concerning indigenous theatre which cannot be avoided or ignored. Thus, for example, these writers all made use of local content, but used the received Western theatrical forms to produce plays intended for presentation to elite bourgeois audiences schooled in Western concepts of theatre and theatrical convention, in venues modelled on existing theatres in London, Paris, Berlin, and New York. Most of these works (except for the verse plays of Manson, Butler, Opperman and others) were conceived and
created in the terms of realism and in the form of the ‘well-made play’ – which of course has really remained the dominant tradition in the twentieth century, despite almost every effort to unseat it. Besides a number of attempts at writing verse plays by Manson, Butler, Small and others, there were the usual emulations of the Shakespearean model, of course (e.g by the epic poets D.J Opperman and N.P. van Wyk Louw), as well as a brief flirtation with the theatre of the Absurd in the early sixties (which produced some rather good work, particularly among the Afrikaans writers). However, by and large, the models have been the great figures of naturalism and realism – from Ibsen to Osborne.

A very special case here is what may be termed the ‘African musical’. This is an American style musical, but using a South African theme and involving black writers, composers, performers and musicians. As shown in Chapter 2, the most famous, and most influential of these was the 1959 production of King Kong, based on the tragic career of heavy-weight boxing champion Ezekiel Dlamini. With a libretto by Harold Bloom and music by Todd Mshikiza it utilized evolving African jazz and ‘kwela’-music. A number of people involved in and affected by this play went on to become writers and entrepreneurs themselves, the most famous being Sam Mhangwane and Gibson Kente. The style of theatre they evolved (the so-called ‘township musical’), was to become an specific and influential form of hybrid theatre in the eighties (see Category 8, below), though part of it was also taken up in the more commercial ventures such as Ipi Tombi and Meropa.

From the beginning of formal theatre in South Africa, and at least up till the late seventies of this century, Categories 5 and 6 have actually constituted the central and dominant form within the South African theatre system, exercising a hegemonic control over both the ‘canon’ (what is to be published, what is to be studied) and the ‘paradigm’ (what form the new, indigenous plays should be written in). It yet remains a powerful force, for it is here that the central playwright/creator remains dominant in the playmaking process and it is in this category that we find most of the published and studied playwrights till the very late eighties and the early nineties. (See for example Athol Fugard, Paul Slabolepszy, Zakes Mda, Pieter Fourie, Deon Opperman, Reza De Wet.) In contrast, Categories 7 and 8 represent two types of performance culture which were in a sense set up in opposition to this elitist theatre – at least challenging its hold over the paradigm, particularly under the restrictive and repressive Apartheid regime.

Category 7 (indigenous, ‘alternative’ Western) is a dynamic imported concept of theatre-making which found the perfect soil for its propagation in the socio-political turmoil of the post-Sharpeville South Africa. The concept of ‘alternative’ theatre, which also implies experimental, workshop theatre companies, venues and performances, dates from the late 1950s, with ventures such as National Theatre Organization’s experimental Kamertoneel, Leonard Schach’s Cockpit Players (formed to produce avant garde new European and local work) and Union Artists’ Rehearsal Room at Dorkay House. Run for a time by Athol Fugard and involving a number of other notable theatre people of the time, the latter was a venue where new local work could be workshopped and presented, and almost more significantly, where black artists could get into theatre.
Of course the idea of 'independent' theatre companies, focussed on developing a 'new' theatrical tradition is an old one, particularly prominent for the first time with the rise of the Realist/Naturalist movement in the previous century (vide Antoine's Theatre Libre). But the direct influence first came to South Africa in the 1960s, when commercial theatre of the Broadway variety was the main fare, and the 'experimental' theatre concept – based on concurrent developments in Europe and America (e.g. the work of the Becks, Schechner, Schumann, Halprin, Chaikin, Forman and Wilson in the USA and Joan Littlewood in England) – was imported to find a home in the state-funded National Theatre Organization's Kamertoneel. This concept was then carried over to the four Performing Arts Councils, which each equipped themselves with experimental venues where designated companies could try out new indigenous work. Adam Small's trenchant Kanna hy kô hy sostoe (Kanna comes home) for example had its first production in the Old Presidency Theatre in Bloemfontein, for the Performing Arts Council of the Orange Free State (PACOFS). Similarly, Athol Fugard was invited to 'create' Orestes for the Cape Performing Arts Board (CAPAB).

In the seventies however, under the influence of an increasing radicalism in political thinking and a massive disillusionment with the Performing Arts Councils, the concept of a state-funded 'experimental' theatre had become problematic, and numerous independent, 'alternative' groups and venues now originated in the major urban areas. The aims were varied, from attempts to simply try out new ways of playmaking to attempts to produce provocative, even propagandistic and radical, political theatre, but the central qualities were an anti-establishment (i.e. anti-mainstream) position and a non-commercial enterprise. Thus we find such varied ventures as Experimental Theatre Workshop '71, the People's Experimental Theatre (PET), the Serpent Players, the Space Theatre, the Market Theatre, and the Baxter Theatre. In the 1980s this tradition became part of the main theatre paradigm, as we shall see.

Basically there were two forms of this kind of theatre.\(^8\) Firstly there were those directors and performers who simply wanted to import certain political forms (e.g. the German political cabaret in the case of Hennie Aucamp and Herman Pretorius at Stellenbosch, the Brechtian epic theatre in the case of Malcolm Purkey and Junction Avenue Theatre) or duplicate experiments done in Europe and America, experiments unlikely to be popular with mainstream managements. The results ranged from excellent productions of the Marat/Sade, Berkoff's Decadence and the seminal Afrikaans cabaret Met permissie gesê, to the stunning improvisational work of groups such as Barney Simon and The Company at the Market (Cincinatti, Outers) and the political commentaries of Junction Avenue Theatre (Ranlords and Rotgut) and the Cape Flats Players (Dit sal die blerrie dag wies).

Secondly, and often flowing from the above, there are those works which sought to use the techniques developed elsewhere, in order to confront the realities of South African society. Thus the concepts of political theatre, community theatre and street theatre (from Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht to Augusto Boal and Paolo Freire) were invoked to undertake numerous experiments in theatre-making on the Cape Flats (the Community Arts Project, for example, and Phyllis Klotz with plays such as You strike the woman, you strike the rock),
The shifting paradigm

Theatre Workshop 71's influential work (e.g. with *Survival*, *Crossroads*, and *Imfunduso*), Junction Avenue Theatre's essays into Union theatre (*llanga*), Fugard's work with Kani and Ntshona (*The island, Sizwe Bansi is dead*), Barney Simon's ongoing workshops at the Market (*Born in the RSA, Black dog/Inj'emnyama*), and so on. This burst of energy and creativity stimulated equally varied and exciting work among students, semi-professional and even amateur cultural workers – which had by now obtained a number of platforms, notably at the annual Grahamstown Arts Festival, as well as many local festivals. To catalogue the growing list of performances here is an impossibility, but what is essential is the fact that in the majority of these cases, the aim is to transcend, undermine and even break down the artificial barriers between peoples established by the Apartheid regime. So the majority of these productions, unlike those in categories 5 and 6, employed improvisational workshop techniques and utilized multiracial casts, many members of which were untrained, since no training facilities existed for the majority of black performers till late in the 1980s.9

At the time however, the plays were performed before multiracial audiences and – specifically under the initial influence of the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s – often attempted to reach the working class, to mobilize the proletariat as it were.

This wave of creative energy continued to grow in strength from the late 1970s and has become more varied and less propagandistic in its approach. As a result it had in many ways, by the mid-1980s, usurped the central position in the theatrical system,ousting performances of European and American classics and even box-office successes to the periphery. Serious theatre in South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s, primarily consisted of indigenous productions of indigenous works, cast in a non-formal format.10

The form which that theatre is most likely to take in the long run appears to me to be best illustrated by the kind of work that I have grouped under Category 8 as 'indigenous, hybrid'. It is here that all the varied strands of convention, tradition and experimentation somehow seem to get tied together in a hybrid form of performance which is uniquely South African, a form I refer to in the next chapter as 'crossover theatre'.

Again we are not looking at a single, uniform and clearly defined theatrical form, but rather at a specific, yet eclectic, attitude towards playmaking, at a much expanded concept of (South African) performance. It is a concept in which anything goes, in which the best (and the worst) of any of the other seven categories of performance may be utilized in a specific presentation, to create an individual, specific form in order to communicate a particular concept, vision, message, or whatever. Thus the narrative, mimetic, communal and musical go side by side with the Christian, social, judicial and other rites and ceremonies utilized in such varied works as *Woza Albert*, *Egoli, Too late*, *Asinamali*, *Poppie Nongena*, *U'phu van der Merwe*, *You strike the woman, you strike the rock*, *Piekniek by Dingaan*, *The Dunlop play*, *Sophiatown*, *Faustus in Africa* and the Jazzart version of *Medea*. Realism, as a style and convention is totally irrelevant in this context, it is pure theatre, pure and integrated performance.

The central issue in these plays and performances is to explore and communicate a variety of (socio-political) messages across the gulfs that separate the
peoples of the country. Because they realize that no single author can really understand both sides (or indeed, the multiple sides) of any question in the deeply segmented and anger-ridden society, more and more theatre groups turned to the unique opportunities offered by improvisational and workshop techniques in order to come to grips with the problem. But, since it is not merely a matter of matching differing concepts of society but also of matching different concepts of theatre, they began to utilize the improvisational format in order to create texts which married the ‘non-theatrical’ performance elements contained in indigenous (traditional and contemporary) communal performance with the more conventional forms of the Western tradition. The results may be surprisingly effective theatre, though they often do not produce publishable texts for the canon. While this kind of playmaking clearly does not necessarily guarantee success in performance (and there are numerous dismal and boring examples to support this contention), such failure in itself appears to be an important process within the developing theatrical system.

The best of the hybrid work is a complex fusion of a variety of traditions, conventions and performance techniques drawn from various times and cultures. Thus it is at times difficult to separate out the provenance of the individual techniques used, because the new hybrid work truly constitutes a gestalt of its own. Similarly many of the conventions are difficult to ‘place’ with ease, since the broad principles of performance hardly differ so much from place to place.

Thus, for example, Woza Albert employs the commedia dell’arte style as frame, but emphasizes the narrative element in a way reminiscent of the ntsomni usage – but utilizing two narrators and thus setting up dramatic interchanges in something like vaudeville fashion. The actors tell their story about Christ’s (Morena’s) visit to the South Africa of today in picaresque fashion, acting out selected scenes from the narrative. (It is a technique often used by director Barney Simon in his improvisational works for the Market Theatre – e.g. Cincinatti and Born in the RSA). By maintaining the improvisational nature of the performance, they continually adapt elements in the performance to allow them to comment on current affairs. (Again echoes of both the commedia and the ntsomni conventions.) The mime itself, the specific and energetic use of body and voice (making onomatopoeic sounds as well as singing, without musical accompaniment) relates strongly to African dance and singing traditions, both traditional and modern urban adaptations of such forms referred to under Categories 1 and 2 above. The stage as an ‘empty space’, itself of course a convention which relates not only to the well known and conscious 20th century development, but also to many ‘non-standard’ performance forms in Europe (the festival and the cabaret for instance) and specifically also to the way performance space was used in traditional African communal performance (see for example Credo Mutwa’s descriptions of the performance space in a Zulu performance, 1974/5). Costumes are minimal, a few props are utilized to suggest character changes and that is all. Again a narrative approach, but with echoes of a variety of ancient and modern performance styles. Even the choice of the clown figure as basic model for the narrators, of course, has a wide range of reference, from the commedia itself to vaudeville again and to a number of more conscious 20th century experiments (e.g. Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, Pavel Kohout’s August,
August, August, Peter Brook's production of *Midsummer night's dream*, Dario Fo's *Mistero Buffo*, and the musical *Godspell*).

Whatever the actual component parts, the dynamic fusion of content (an amusing, yet trenchant, commentary on the politics of South Africa today) and form (a blending of narrative, mime and song) has produced a uniquely South African work, which has produced a specific style rooted in a particular attitude towards performance and performing.

*Asinamali* ('We have no money'), created by Mbongeni Ngema, one of the Woza Albert trio, makes its own kind of adaptations to the style evolved for the earlier play. The same basic form is enlarged to include six actors who narrate their own stories, and includes more musical numbers and choreographed group dances and movements taken from the world of the mines and the prisons – in their turn part of category 2 above. The play also illustrates another facet of the new paradigm. The language of the play is the polyglot of the society at large: Afrikaans, English, Zulu, Xhosa, tsotsitaal, etc. (The latter is a patois spoken in the townships – see Chapter 5.) The range of characters too come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, so it truly becomes an attempt at a non-segregated, cross-cultural theatrical experience. The aim is not characterization but the illustration of certain issues, so it is the total effect of the energy and the conviction that strikes the audience rather than the 'truth' (i.e. the veracity) in a Western sense.

Another kind of hybridization is illustrated by a play such as *Sophiatown* by Junction Avenue Theatre Company. Structurally the play is based on the form of the melodramatic 'township musical' popularized by Gibson Kente (see Kavanagh, 1985). The performers combine township music, dance routines and narrative techniques with a stab at Brechtian alienation effects, to tell a straightforward realistic story about a Jewish girl who went to live with a black family in Sophiatown. Unashamedly using melodrama, sentiment and laughter, but now in a much more conventional 'realistic' frame, the play lures the audience into sympathizing with the characters, and thus perhaps empathizing with them when they are moved from their Sophiatown home by government policy. As in *Asinamali*, language is a major metaphor in the context and by employing a number of languages and their varieties the performers/creators seem to be signalling to the multicultural audiences that the play is seeking to represent South African society at large, not only the limited and limiting sectional interests of a ruling elite. In this respect *Sophiatown* is political theatre at its most devastatingly persuasive.

**Conclusion: Some thoughts on methodology**

With this hybrid theatre of the 1980s edging into the dominant position within the South African theatre system, the country found itself at a point of immense complexity and flux, but also one of great exhilaration. And certainly a challenge for the researcher and historian.

While aspects of South African theatre have naturally received a great deal of attention over the years (Afrikaans theatre, English playwriting, black theatre in particular), the concept of a more integrated system, as outlined in part above, has received very little attention to date. It has neither been studied nor theorized in any really coherent way. Even when it has been touched on, this has usually been presented as an add-on, a hybridization of existing systems, rather than as a coherent whole that can be studied as a new paradigm.

With this situation, and with the performances recorded, a wealth of data is available for at least a partial analysis and attempt to understand the development of the theatre and its relationship to the society.
taken place in terms of theories and methodologies devised to deal with occurrences or processes within the Western (i.e. European or American) cultural context. All this to the increasing frustration of African artists and critics of course, even though the artistic/academic enterprise they are engaged in is itself a development of the Western cultural context. The artificial distinction between art and life, between fine art and applied arts, as well as the need to talk about, define, categorize and evaluate art forms are all creations of a book-culture, not a performance culture.

With this kind of thinking, any performance is only ‘legitimized’ when it can be recorded and ‘placed’ somehow in terms of a Western concept of theatre, or at least a recognizable concept of performance. The theory is that, before that has been done, one cannot select the appropriate tools with which to describe, analyze or evaluate what is happening, why it is happening or what the significance of the event is. Indeed, we cannot really place it within any kind of acceptable history of performance. So the obvious strategy in the past has been: anything that does not fit into the clear-cut categories is left out of the reckoning. Festivals, street theatre, ritual dances, communal performances of all kinds were ignored and thus never recorded with tools or in ways that would make them meaningful to the theatre historian. But, as in the case of the hybrid theatre in South Africa today, any convention is somehow really the sum of a variety of older social rituals and performances, whether they have been recorded or not. So the loss is not only in terms of the old cultural event, but most palpably also in terms of our understanding of the new theatre convention.

Clearly the entire academic discourse today needs to be adapted to the realities of the world ‘out there’, not only for the sake of understanding African theatre, but in order to cope with our expanding perceptions of the whole performance-based structure of society, even in the West. It is not necessarily a need to discard the Western concept of analytical study, but to expand our thinking in such a way as to encompass creative processes not currently catered for in its theories or in its arsenal of recording and research tools and methods. (I say this while acknowledging the already immense advances wrought by the concepts of performance studies advanced by Richard Schechner and so convincingly demonstrated in *Drama Review*, as well as some superb studies of ‘popular entertainment’ by individual researchers over the last few years.) In the end, the aim is to evolve appropriate working methods whereby theatre archaeology may become a pliable, yet perhaps slightly more exact science than it has been to date, and a tool in the hand of the historian as well as the theatre practitioner. In this respect the theatre of Africa – and the evolving new theatre in South Africa – offers a marvellous laboratory for testing any new theories and/or techniques through hands-on research during a crucial period of evolutionary and revolutionary change.

**Notes**

1 Like so many of us, Coplan is here following the ideas of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, ideas which are fundamental to the kind of study I engage in here. For the purposes of this chapter then, I employ the term ‘performance’ in Schechner’s sense, though quite broadly interpreted.
Section 1

The shifting paradigm

2 An IFTR-backed ‘professors’ conference’, University of Vienna, 30 September to 3 October, 1988. This particular chapter derives from certain ideas I first proposed at the same conference and published in Maske und Kothurn in 1987. I would like to thank the Department of Research Development and the Rector’s Special Fund at the University of Stellenbosch for financial assistance, which made it possible for me to attend the meeting. The ideas were expanded somewhat for a paper presented at the annual ASTR Conference in Seattle Washington (October, 1991), during a special session on ‘African and South African theatre’ organized by Albert Wertheim and attended by Ian Steadman, Peter Larilham, Myles Holloway and myself, along with a number of American and African historians working in the field. That paper was published in SATJ 6/2 (September 1992). This chapter is based on the latter article and certain responses to it by colleagues and friends.

3 The distinction ‘Western/African’ is slightly problematic at this stage, as I have pointed out in Chapters 1 and 2. As things develop, much of the originally ‘Western’ culture is being absorbed by the African continent and its peoples, so that what was originally imported and thus distinctly ‘Western’ (ideas, technology, conventions) have now become ‘African’ too. Witness for example ‘African socialism’ and the many forms of ‘African Christianity’, or the gold mines of the Free State: are they and the social conventions they have spawned not now a specific (South) African creation? The notion of ‘Africanism’ and an ‘African identity’ are in fact points of some critical debate among Africanists and particularly scholars from Africa at international conferences and publications. Since 1990 the question of ‘South Africanism’ and who and what constitutes a South African nation has also become a rather interesting question.

For the moment though, I still use the terms in the conventional sense, to distinguish between ideas and concepts conceived in and originally designed for Europe and America, as opposed to ideas and concepts arising in and conceived for traditional black (South) Africa (as far as one can tell). The term ‘indigenous’ though is used with this slightly expanded meaning, namely to refer to all things (ideas, products, processes) arising in South Africa itself, whether originally conceived here or being adapted from imported models for local use. See Table 3.1.

4 Modern-day exhibition dances, intended for tourists, are far more ornate, making use of flamboyant costumes and a certain amount of body-painting. To what extent such ornamentation was part of the original performance is uncertain, though the extant pictures show far less than we have today. What this may in fact constitute is a form of ‘disfigurement’ which evolved in the later colonial period, of the kind so convincingly illustrated by August Staub in his analysis of the Mardi Gras in New Orleans. (Staub, 1987, 1992)

5 With the roots of Greek theatre much closer to African performance than to modern-day theatre practice, one may perhaps speak about the rediscovery of a lost gestalt. I am not thinking of the elitism of opera, or an over-theorized Wagnerian gesamtkunstwerk, but of a ‘popular’ performance tradition (in the Marxist sense) in which music and movement constitute an integrated form of expression.

6 The concept of men and women ‘performing’ in everyday life, the concept of role-play and of theatricalism in societal structures and processes, is of course a whole area of discussion in its own right, as Irving Goffman (The presentation of self in everyday life), Elizabeth Burns (Theatricality: A study of convention in the theatre and in social life), Victor Turner (Dramas, fields and metaphors), among many others, have shown. It has also become a theatrical metaphor utilized by a whole range of writers, including Luigi
Pirandello, Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee and Tom Stoppard. My interest here is in something else however: it is in the way in which the conventions of overt public performance have impregnated the shape, content and focus of the formal and informal theatre.

7 Most of the clearest examples here come from the Afrikaner culture. The reason for this is that the Afrikaner nationalism led to very conscious efforts to define and distinguish its own ‘culture’ from that of the ‘English’ (i.e. the British colonial government). Hence they consciously created their own ‘local’ versions of most Western social, economic, political and cultural structures, ceremonies and organizations. The very language Afrikaans is a product of this nationalism. It is a powerful sentiment we find recurring in another form with the rise of the so-called ‘Black Consciousness Movement’ and the liberation struggle waged between 1960 and 1990.

8 While many writers (Tomaselli, Steadman, Coplan, Purkey et al) have commented on and described this development in South African theatre, Mark Fleischman’s incisive article on workshop theatre as oppositional form (South African Theatre Journal 4(1) May 1990 pp:88–118) is an excellent introduction to some of the fundamental concepts, at least as they pertained at the Market Theatre.

9 Today there is one drama department at the University of Zululand providing training in aspects of African performance, and one at the University of Durban-Westville looking at the roots of South African/Indian performance, while all other campuses now also take in black students. The majority however only provide training in ‘Western’ theatre at the moment.

10 The economics of theatre may possibly change this position now. In interviews held in 1990 for example, Mannie Manim – formerly of the Market Theatre – hinted that the poor quality of recent ‘committed’ writing is going to lead to more selective choices of plays, since they cannot afford to perform to empty halls. Similarly, Maishe Maponya has on occasion lamented the lack of interest shown by the public in his form of protest theatre. Mbongeni Ngema in fact altered his own style in Sarafina! to make it more palatable, and thus perhaps more generally box-office material. Certainly Kramer and Petersen, who had co-authored the popular and influential District Six – the musical, had gone totally commercial by the 1990s.

11 All three the examples mentioned here have recently been published, despite the manifest problems of representing adequately in print what is essentially a performance made and performance intended text. Woza Albert has been published separately by Faber, as well as appearing in a number of collections, among which (with Born in the RSA and Asinamali), in Woza Afrika!, a collection of South African texts edited by Duma Ndlovu and published by Brazillier in New York (1987). Cincinnatti is included in Hauptfleisch and Steadman: South African theatre: four plays and an introduction (HAUM Educational: Pretoria, 1984), while Sophiatown first appeared with David Philip (Cape Town, 1988) and later in At the junction, a collection of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company’s plays (University of the Witwatersrand Press, 1995).
Crossover theatre: Performance in a multicultural community

Introduction

In this chapter, I want to take a closer look at what is, for me, one of the more exciting developments in South African theatre during the eighties and early nineties of this century. For this reason I want to concentrate on what seems to have occurred in category 8 of the forms outlined in Chapter 3, particularly as statutory Apartheid began to disintegrate.

To do so, let us once again start off with a few examples:

We are in a small, simple theatre space, with a bare stage, in the early 1980s. There are two up-ended tea chests side by side about centre stage, and at the back is a wooden plank serving as clothes rail, on which hang a few garments and hats. The lights dim and then, just as the audience is ready to start tittering restlessly, there is the soft sound of music, or song. Or both. The overhead lights come on, sculpting the two men on stage, stripped to the waist, smiling and playing what appear to be imaginary musical instruments. They constitute an instrumental jazz band, using their bodies and their mouths – double bass, saxophone, flute, drums, bongos, trumpet, and so on. But the sounds are almost real, vocally produced. They play an intricate jazz tune – and then transform into the audience, applauding wildly. During this the one gets up, goes behind the clothes rail and reappears wearing a pink nose and a policeman's cap. He addresses the audience, commenting on the beautiful music, the beautiful audience – and then suddenly shifts into the dramatic mode to present a seriocomic enactment in which he demands to see the musician's passbook.¹

And so they start on the play for the night, acting, improvising, narrating, miming, singing the story of how Morena or Christ comes to South Africa and meets people from all walks of life ...

The second example takes place in a different theatre, larger and more elegant than the former. The set is a stylized yet recognizable scene from old Cape Town. Damaka, a blind man, appears and addresses the audience, setting the
scene by telling of his mother and of the life under the Apartheid laws and about the people who made those laws. Then a voice joins in, chanting, 'De law, de law, de law, de law ...' and the cast appears, to sing the first song. A dramatized scene follows between Damaka and the young girl, Mary, upon which the singing group, 'The Sexy Boys' enters, practising for the next Cape 'Coon Carnival'.\(^2\) They are dressed in the flamboyant costumes of those festival participants, and the play shifts into full musical format – to utilize the songs and dances of the Cape, sung in English and Afrikaans, in order to celebrate the memory of District Six (a famous multiracial residential area at the heart of Cape Town) and its culture, and to lament the black days when all the so-called 'coloureds' were moved out to the sand flats of Mitchell's Plain and the District was razed to the ground by Apartheid forces.\(^3\)

What I have described here are the opening scenes from just two well-known and popular productions arising from the intense years of the cultural struggle, both displaying a new kind of performance style which was increasingly taking centre stage in South African theatre. Woza Albert, devised by the performers (Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa) in conjunction with innovative director Barney Simon in the early 1980s (and discussed in the previous chapter), is basically serious yet entertaining protest theatre which has become theatre legend. In fact, it has become part of the South African canon – widely studied and performed, well into the 1990s. The joyous District Six – the musical by David Kramer and Taliep Petersen opened in Cape Town during 1987 to become a box-office success of unusual proportions, while making a significant socio-political point which reached an enormous number of people of all ethnic varieties and political persuasions. All this, despite presenting audiences with a rather mediocre production of a very flawed text and dubious premise. Somehow the combination of humour, music and energy combined to impact directly on the sensibilities of the times and transcend the immense artificiality of the text and performance.

Originating in the 1970's movement towards an 'alternative' theatre of experimentation (described in chapters 2 and 3), this kind of thing spread all over South Africa during the 1980s as the restrictions of Apartheid were challenged or gradually fell away. Some productions were polished, dazzling and lucrative – others smaller, less self-assured and rougher around the edges, or slick but darker toned – even aggressive and hard-edged. But all tapped into the immensely rich resources of creativity and dramatic potential the country holds by virtue of its large ethnic and cultural mix, and utilized the whole new festival-based theatre system that had developed in the country. Amazingly enough, given the uncertainties engendered by the social, political and economic changes brought on by the country's staggering progress towards democracy, these performances actually seemed to proliferate as we moved into the 1990s and the new post-Apartheid era. The result would appear to be the emergence of a new kind of play, even a new kind of performing arts system – with its own, novel set of conventions and rules.\(^4\)

Each presentation appears to be a spontaneous and uniquely conceived performance, in which one finds multiple variations of the basic approach, namely an eclectic and easygoing borrowing from a variety of genres, forms, traditions and styles. Nowhere has this amazing variety been more evident than at the
various arts festivals, notably of course the annual Grahamstown Arts Festival\(^5\), where somehow, at some time or other the majority of these performances were shown, and tended to generate more work, by more performers. Thus in 1988 a hard-hitting and polemical Afrikaans cabaret called *Piekniek* by Dingaan (literally: *A Picnic with Dingaan*)\(^6\) caused a sensation at the predominantly English festival. With its roots in the experimental political cabaret pioneered by Hennie Aucamp and Herman Pretorius at the University of Stellenbosch, and based on the seemingly blasphemous poetry of André Letoito, it used the form and rousing music of the modern pop concert as a metaphorical framework in order to attack, ridicule and subvert most of the holy cows of the Afrikaner establishment. The ever-creative and dynamic Janice Honeyman directed the performance for the Cape Performing Arts Board and the performances caused an uproar of approval and disapproval – not only of the content of the play, but also the ‘popular’ form in which it had been cast, the very fact that it was in Afrikaans and being produced by a state-funded organization, and that it was making the voice of an alternative and new young generation of Afrikaners heard.\(^7\)

Now, *Piekniek* by Dingaan was very much in the aggressive, confrontational style espoused by Woza Albert and other work from the Black Consciousness stable, but a year or so earlier a gentler production had appeared at the festival, a cross-cultural performance called *U'phu van der Merwe* directed by Lucille Gillwald for the Market Theatre. It was a compelling example of a new breed of play which gradually began to replace the agit-prop work which had done so much to conscientise the theatraugers in South Africa, an early example of what has since come to be termed ‘theatre for reconciliation’ or, in Mavis Taylor’s words, ‘theatre for healing’. The production, utilizing the oral storytelling tradition as a framework, had representatives of various peoples of the country get together around the evening fire and – through narration, mime, song, dance, and all the techniques of the traditional storyteller (gesture, verbal and ideophonic enhancement, core-images, repetition, rhythmic patterning, and so on) – discuss and explain the significance of their traditions, cultural usages, fears and dreams as sources of difference as well as sources of commnality. The only noticeable absentee in this meeting is Van der Merwe – the white man and the Afrikaner, an invited, but as yet unwilling guest at the celebration. The metaphor is simple, strong and obvious – in many ways even prophetic of events to follow in 1990. Yet the show was fun-filled, accessible and endearing – never accusatory.\(^8\)

Looking at the four examples described above, it is clear that there can be no suggestion of any easily identifiable ‘South African theatrical style’, for the qualities that distinguish these performances from more traditionally conceived works may seem intangible really. It certainly does not have anything to do with themes or subject matter, for the plays deal with everything: political issues, feminist issues, ecological issues, religious issues, educational issues – though the South African political situation inevitably remains an extremely strong thematic thread, running through virtually all the work, even that produced under the new political dispensation of the ANC-dominated Government of National Unity. Yet these performances do appear to have a few noteworthy things in common which not only make them rather unique in South Africa, but may indeed also explain something of the international interest in South African theatre today.
Among the shared qualities one may number the adaptability of the performers (who increasingly appear to be multi-talented dancer-singer-performers, rather than actors or actresses alone), the essential seriousness of the content of the plays, the impressive physical energy involved in performance, and then the quality I would like to talk about in this chapter: a conscious yet dynamic employment of the many older and more 'accepted', though not necessarily 'legitimate', traditions of performance available in this country and the mingling of them in a single, hybrid work. Perhaps a work which can address the full spectrum of the South African population, or at least broaden the general appeal of the work – not only for ideological reasons, but also from purely pragmatic and commercial considerations. And most important of all, the critical acceptance of these new theatrical forms as part of the main paradigm of theatre in the country.

In a sense then, this represents a more conscious effort to entrench, utilize and capitalize on the evolutionary trends identified in Chapter 2.

'Crossover' culture

As pointed out there, the tendency towards integrating elements of different traditions occurs throughout Africa and is often referred to as syncretism in critical writing, while I have referred to it as hybridism in this publication. It is a natural and almost inevitable aspect of the kind of multicultural and multilingual society we have in South Africa, flowing from the artists’ ongoing search for new and exciting forms and techniques, and the socio-cultural impact of their constant exposure to an immense variety of stimuli – from Africa, Europe, America and the East, through the variety and proliferation of the (electronic and other) media. It is also an old and popular tradition of commercial theatre, foreshadowed in the popular presentations of the mid-19th century (e.g. The Kafir War, described in Chapter 2), the satirical skits and farces of the turn of the century (e.g. the Dutch/Afrikaans farces of Melt Brink and the English social satires of Stephen Black), and central to the vaudeville, music hall and other popular musical traditions of the first half of the century (see Zonk, King Kong and the origins of the township musical, for example).

But since the mid-1980s it would seem that another aspect of the matter was coming to the fore, something more conscious, more functional and workman-like, linked to a directed effort to create something called a ‘South African’ culture perhaps. The closest I have been able to get to a similar concept is to be found in the world of American popular music – where ‘crossover music’ refers to music which has been written in such a way that it could be placed in more than one category – usually with an eye to the charts (e.g. a ‘country and western’ song composed and presented in such a way that it could also be a contender as ‘bluegrass’, ‘rock’ or whatever). In a sense the artist, writers, playwrights and directors we are looking at do pretty much the same thing really – utilizing the form of one tradition or art form, to enhance, alter, give weight to another – and, in the process, possibly creating a new form, or at least a work which would have a wider potential acceptance and impact – whether in box-office and sales terms, or in terms of social, political or educational aims. On the
other hand, the desire may simply be for critical acclaim. Whatever they are, the ambitions of artists are always complex and varied.

Now this concept of ‘crossover culture’ and its influence in contemporary South African theatre lies deeply embedded in a number of interesting shifts in thinking which have taken place over the past two or three decades – both internationally and in South Africa. Among them there are of course a few obvious ones, such as the pervasive influence of the international communications media which has brought European-American culture to the world and has in a sense led to the realization of Marshall McLuhan’s concept of the ‘global village’. So, too, there has been the advent of pan-national thinking, not only in the political sense (e.g. United Nations Organization, NATO, the European Economic Community, the Association of African Unity and so on) but also economically – as demonstrated by the powerful and pervasive ‘multinationals’ – of which South Africa has its share. In the country itself there has been the enormous influence of the political and cultural struggle which has been waged over the past four decades in particular – a reflection of the powerful international liberation movement which has culminated in the ‘New Europe’, among other things.

The post-World War II movement’s emphasis on commonly shared values and aspirations and the strong opposition to any kind of segregationist thinking in art and life has changed matters irrevocably for most people – whether they admit it or not. This is true, not only in the way they create art, but also in the way they respond to it, and the way it has in turn shaped our society. It is interesting though, that while the original post-war move was in the direction of globalism and anti-ethnicity, recent events in Europe and elsewhere seem to be re-emphasising the nationalism and ethnic loyalties of a century ago. While the debate in South Africa, given its heritage of statutory discrimination, tends to emphasize the concept of one unitary and non-ethnic state, many of the negotiations are seriously looking at regional and ethnic differences as well, and particularly at ways in which to accommodate these in the new post-Apartheid South Africa – while still rejecting the negative aspects of racism. It is a thorny issue, which is inevitably reflected in all discussions about culture and the arts. And in the art-products themselves.

In this sense, the concept of the initial Conference for a Democratic South Africa – code-named Codesa – also seemed to point to some kind of ‘crossover’ phenomenon taking root – or at least being sought after – in national affairs, a phenomenon richly displayed in the initial and heartening spirit of reconciliation and negotiation which first led to the conception of Codesa, and in the nature of the public – and private – negotiating process surrounding the forum, as well as the way it is was dealt with by the media. Subsequent turmoils and setbacks tended to dampen that spirit somewhat, but to a large extent the initial change in paradigm had taken place and the form and context of the ‘performance’ had been irretrievably altered. The results of this change were clear to see in the process that led from there to the installation of a Government of National Unity in 1994 and the acceptance of a new South African Constitution in 1996.

At a more philosophical level – and this is certainly true in the arts – there has also been the growing form of eclecticism which is sometimes dignified with the term ‘post-modernism’, a philosophical approach which has found its art-critical
expression in the proliferation of new literary paradigms, such as semiotics, deconstruction, reception aesthetics, cultural criticism, and the like. It is material which has been marvellously popularized, for instance in the Umberto Eco's *The Name of the rose* (both the novel and the film). In fact the films of the last decade or so offer superb and slightly less self-conscious examples of the post-modern tendency (e.g. *The unbearable lightness of being*, *Blue velvet*, *Bagdad Café*, *The icicle thieves*, *Pulp fiction*), while David Lynch's intriguing series *Twin peaks* did much the same for television. This may be shown to be equally true of modern and popular music, contemporary dance and the fine arts. Even of the applied arts – designs for fashion, textiles, furniture and household utensils, architecture, advertising, transport, and so forth. The commercial sector indeed has been one of the quickest to latch onto the benefits of this new, lateral way of thinking. The concepts of a 'mixed economy' and the 'informal' sector have in fact become burning and exciting issues in the discussions surrounding the economy in a new South Africa, and they have much to do with the same trend toward post-modernism and hybridism.

An interesting facet of this trend is to be found in something which is sometimes simplistically referred to as 'nostalgia'. In fact, it is a much more complex and profound matter, with an international following, a post-modern trend towards a rediscovery of the past in terms of the present and the interpretation of the present in terms of the past – which has left a deep impression in the artistic forms, fashion and even entertainment. At the popular level for instance, the post-modern use of pastiche and nostalgia may be clearly seen in recent films, books and posters about the fifties (*Peggy Sue got married*, *Back to the future*, the remake of *Cape Fear*), the renewed adulation and canonization of James Dean, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe and so on (cf. Madonna's Marilyn Monroe take-off in creating her own 'persona', the use of Monroe in numerous adverts). In terms of music and pop-video symbolism too there has been the rock-and-roll revival – with the reappearance of Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison, the Beatles, Shakin' Stevens and even a composite bit of nostalgia of the Travellin' Wilburys starring a whole number of old pop stars, including Orbison, George Harrison and Bob Dylan. Similarly we find old film footage (from features and newsreels) being used as the visual material for music videos. (How many times has one not seen scenes from *Casablanca* in videos, adverts, and other movies?)

Meanwhile full-length animated movies in the Disney tradition have also made a return (*The neverending story*, *Beauty and the beast*, *Aladdin*, *The lion king*), and comic book mania has grown to a million-dollar business – a development not in the least inhibited by the stupendous success of the *Superman* and *Batman* movies. At the technological level one has such marvels as the use of laser disk players in the shape of old Wurlitzer juke boxes which remind us of a more personalized past, where you chose your own music. Of course, the extreme popularity of the so-called 'theme parks' and 'nature trails' – all references to that mythical, 'better' past our society and our lives have lost.

The point though, in crossover terms, is that much of this is functional and conscious, calculated for effect and profit (economic, cultural, egoistic) and tapping into the general trend and the public mood of the time to artistic and other purposes.
In South Africa a great deal of this nostalgia has found its way into the cultural system and into show business in one way or another, for it is a world of international symbols shared by the majority of urbanites.

The form the ‘revivals’ take differ greatly from place to place, and there is hardly a single trend to be discerned. But music seems to be a fundamental part of much of this, as does dance. At the more frivolous end of the spectrum there is a whole range of sheer entertainment, from simple ‘tributes’ to a variety of artists (Cole Porter, Edith Piaf, Marlene Dietrich, Jaques Brel, Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Abba, Queen – the list is endless) to more ambitious musical shows. The Cape Town list for the nineties alone includes the long running Juke is king at the Baxter Theatre, Fairyland, Crooners and Klop-klop at the Dock Road Theatre, Geoffrey Sutherland’s outrageous Queen at the opera at the Nico, a series of decade-bound musical presentations by Mike McCullough (Sixty-something, Fifty-something etc.) and the equally popular series of Jo’burg follies (’95, ’96 and so on; the latter in fact are themselves a take-off of productions popular in the forties and fifties). Slightly more satirical pastiches are provided by such outrageous froth as Charl-Johan Lingenfelder’s irreverent Abba-esque and Almost the sound of music. At the same time the last decade has seen a proliferation of cabarets, revues and similar attractions at a variety of intimate theatre venues, nightclubs and discos throughout all the major cities across the country. There have also been an attempt or two to reincarnate the old circus-style variety show and the vaudevilles of the turn of the century.

The advent of the so-called Rave culture in the nineties has increased this post-modern trend enormously, as music, dance and decor concepts are plundered, recycled, revamped and pumped up for the apparently insatiable delight of the ravers. In turn one is already finding such concepts fed back into the theatre in the form of a new performance paradigm – such as the Lingenfelder’s 1997 rave-version of Sutherland’s more Hollywood-musical style original of Queen at the opera.

All this appears to me to represent powerful and liberating cultural thinking, which at its best helped the arts to break out of some of the sterile and formalized bounds which had begun to entrap them. One of the most important facts is that much of this performance has moved in from the peripheries to become part of the central cultural system in the country. High art and low art have drawn far closer together than they have been for a very long time, possibly since the nineteenth century. In a time of enormous socio-political change and immense economic uncertainty and depression (euphemistically referred to as a ‘recession’), with the parochial but powerful state-funded arts system as represented by the regional Performing Arts Councils in the four provinces crumbling and under threat of closure and the South African Broadcasting Corporation wallowing in uncertainty, these trends began to offer a modicum of hope for employment for the many out of work performers, as well as the constant stream of new young artists and technicians leaving the training institutions. Of course such a laissez-faire attitude may also represent a trap, morass of dark corners and murky waters, where who-knows-what sins may be hidden or overlooked. One area of concern has long been and still is the wildly varying nature and quality of composition, choreography, writing and performance
displayed. Critical standards need a great deal of reorientating and re-evaluation in order to cope with the current mix of styles, approaches, and attitudes about theatre and performance – notably the vexed issue of the aesthetic versus the pragmatic in the debate about matters such as art, entertainment and 'relevance'. This has been in particular the playing field of the cultural gatekeepers and cultural engineers for many years now – with parties of all political and aesthetic persuasions fielding their teams of spokespersons and specialists in every conceivable forum where they may be able to stake a claim for influence and funds. But perhaps the gains offset the losses in the longer run.

The point is that a large number of socio-cultural pressures came together in the early 1970s, to combine and set off a rather distinctive trend towards hybridism in the society at large, a shift in thinking which gradually gained momentum to become a powerful force in the eighties, and almost the dominant trend in the 1990s. It is a trend which displayed itself throughout the socio-cultural, economic and political fabric of South African life.

**The roots of South African theatre**

But let us return to theatre proper. To understand the nature of what seems to be occurring here, it is useful to take another brief look at the roots of South African theatre for a moment. As shown in Chapters 2 and 3, such roots go back a very, very long way, in fact to long before the colonization of the Cape. One may presume the oldest known performances in the region to be shamanic dances which the San (or Bushmen as they are popularly known), recorded in rock art paintings – the earliest known dating back about 25,000 years (see Cameron and Spies, 1986). More important, their ritual, ceremonial and socio-cultural traditions (which include narrative, dance and mime), as well as those of later settlers of the sub-continent (the Nguni, the Sotho, and so on), are part of a continuous tradition of performance which still exists today, particularly in more remote parts of the country. In adapted form these performance forms have also migrated to the cities, towns and mines, evolving into a plethora of performance and entertainment forms – dance competitions, oral poetry, indigenous jazz, township musicals, and so on, centered in community halls, night clubs and the ubiquitous shebeens. Much of this was ignored, actively shunned or even prohibited by white colonial and Apartheid society for more than three centuries and consequently retreated below the public surface. But it was to reappear in the fifties of this century and become a central tradition in what we have occurring now. Today much of the original tradition is being artificially preserved, resurrected, or even exploited – as one may see from the dances performed at the mines, in the many tourist-oriented 'Zulu villages' in Natal, a number of documentaries, feature films (notably Jamie Uys's *The gods must be crazy*) or in television advertisements exploiting 'native culture'. One of the striking examples in the post-Apartheid years was an advertisement for railway transport (*Spoornet*) in which a family of San-dancers portray various animals, then shift into mimetic enactment of a steam train – while a trite commentary talks about the safe transport of valued goods.

As shown, numerous other strands of the performance network in the coun-
The shifting paradigm

try only arrived much later, with the coming of the Dutch (1652) and later the French and British garrisons (1795). It was particularly the latter influences which brought about the more commonly accepted formal theatre network we tend to think of today – the theatre buildings, the proscenium arch theatres, the productions of popular and classical works. This tradition introduced generations of privileged South Africans to Shakespeare, Molière, Chekhov, Shaw, Miller – as well as the Gilbert and Sullivan ‘Savoy operas’, British drawing room comedies, French farces, Broadway comedies, and American musicals. It is the same tradition which created the elocution movement, the drama training schools, the many commercial companies and the state-funded National Theatre Organization (NTO, 1947–1961) and its successors, the four regional Performing Arts Councils (1962–). Indigenous writing, particularly the many Afrikaans playwrights, are a product of that tradition – as is Athol Fugard and the whole tradition of English playwriting in the country. Even the central playwriting tradition among black writers – from the pioneering and influential theorist and playwright, Herbert Dhlomo, writing in the 1930s, to Fatima Dike, Maisha Maponya, Matsemela Manaka and Zakes Mda, writing in the 1970s and 1980s (see Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1985; Kavanagh, 1984; and Orkin, 1991 on this, for example).

However, as indicated in the foregoing chapters, this Western influence also brought a large number of other, less acknowledged, and often less reputable, traditions over the years. Equestrian spectacles, melodrama and pantomime, vaudeville, music hall, the circus, the diorama and magic lantern show, cabaret, revues – the list is enormous. There is also the vast field of popular music, ranging from jazz to rock ‘n roll. All this was, and is, grist to the performer’s mill. It is the same tradition which later brought forth the radio, the film and television – performing arts which have flourished here as elsewhere.

To re-emphasize the point: there is clearly no one, single, unadulterated tradition of ‘theatre’ in South Africa, and – more important – there has never been. On the contrary: there is a whole range of traditions and forms, some of which I have tried to categorize in Chapter 3, and they are all available to the imaginative talents of a new breed of cross-cultural writers, directors, and performers who came to the fore during the years of cultural struggle.

Crossover theatre

What has been taking place since the mid-1980s is a mingling of the foregoing traditions in service of the contemporary theatre – through the creation of non-racial and multi-dextrous companies, able not only to perform, but to actually create texts, and to fill out the performances in all kinds of original and personalized ways. For example, Nicholas Ellenbogen, the creative founder of the Natal Performing Arts Council’s innovative Loft Company, and now the director of an exciting company called Theatre for Africa, and his associate Ellis Pearson, have slowly built up an individualistic style of performance for their companies which require not only the skill to act, but also to sing, dance, mime, juggle, tumble and perform a whole myriad of other physical and vocal tasks. The results have been stunning, both in the simple yet creative plays they have improvised, and
the impact of their eccentric and imaginative performances. In *Horn of sorrow* (1988) for example, the human performers become animals, two doubling up to represent a rhinoceros. They then tell the story of the slaughter of the rhino – an African story tapping into the roots of African myth, ritual and performance – while at the same time working within (some of) the confines and traditions of Western theatre, as well as Southern African myth, ritual and ceremony – and the international concern with the ecology. This concern was followed up by a number of other works, including *Elephant of Africa* (1992) and *Guardians of Eden* (1997). In doing so it made use of many of the same narrative and mimetic techniques we referred to above when discussing *U'phu van der Merwe*.

In another case, the performers in *Sophiatown* (1986) by the influential Junction Avenue Theatre got together with director Malcolm Purkey to create a play about the temporary sojourn of a white, Jewish girl from Yeoville in the house of Mamariti, a shebeen owner, and her lodgers in Sophiatown. Drawing on a great deal of historical research, they created a marvellous set of lively characters, and placed them in a house in Sophiatown. What this gave them was an opportunity to draw their themes, style and form directly from the cultural life of a time and a place which had particular significance in the cultural and political history of South Africa – the 1950s in Sophiatown. They introduced the township jazz of the time into the story, utilized the multilingual speech of the townships – including the Drum-magazine journalesque, used and sent up the dress codes of the times, and introduced the fabulous and mythical legends of the screen, streets and shebeens into the fabric of the play, in order to ‘recreate’ the 1950s on stage.

It was essentially a Brechtian exercise which used the ‘township musical’ as a frame for the play. This in itself was a hybrid creation, as shown in the previous chapters. Spurred by the popular success of the 1959 production of *King Kong* and created by a multiracial group of creative workers and performers, the musical proved that there was a popular market for a local story told in a fashion which could exploit the traditional love of song, dance and narrative which underlies the ‘African’ concept of ‘theatre’. The form, taken and evolved by such entrepreneurs as Sam Manghwane and Gibson Kente, became extremely popular and widely known in the townships – providing Purkey and his cast with an ideal musical form for their Brechtian experiment in epic theatre.

In the eventual performance they created, we find a critical analysis of the devastation brought by Apartheid, but couched in comic and musical form. So the characters on occasion simply narrate their own experiences (in typical agitprop style, but a technique also strongly rooted within the Zulu/Xhosa narrative traditions), often laughing about their own predicament, on other occasions breaking into lyrical song and dance at moments of high emotion, and so on. The dances again range from relatively traditional material to lively fifties jazz. Amazingly enough, it turned out to be an immense box-office and critical success with audiences from across the social and political spectrum – despite stilted performances by a number of the largely amateur cast and its fundamentally dark message.

In the 1990s these improvisatory techniques were becoming ever more widely applied throughout the industry, for a wide variety of political and non-political
The shifting paradigm

purposes. For example, they are an integral part of the work produced by contemporary dance groups such as the Free Flight Dance Company and Jazzart (see for example the latter company's remarkably moving 1995 production of Medea, directed by Mark Fleishman). And the same ideas are absolutely fundamental to the evolving notion of 'physical theatre' first introduced by Gary Gordon of Rhodes University and the First Physical Theatre Company (see Frege, 1995). On the other hand, some directors and writers have experimented with the idea of combining and enhancing the human voice and body by the use of technology in multi-media presentations. Surely some of the most ambitious of these have been William Kentridge and the Handspring Puppet Company's two major productions: Woyzeck on the Highveld (1992) and Faustus in Africa (1995), in which performers, puppets, film and other techniques are combined.

Again these examples illustrate the marvellous range of performance in the country today. Clearly the influences outlined above have all contributed to this, but there are two major influences which I believe have done more, over the past three decades, to bring this about than any other. The first is the political radicalization of art, the other the popularization of consumer art. In many ways they may appear to be contradicting influences, yet somehow they have come together in the new theatre of South Africa. There seems to be an underlying thread that holds them together, a shared need to reach an audience in the most direct, accessible and meaningful way.

Politics and theatre

Between 1955 and 1990 most serious theatre in South Africa evolved directly out of the appalling political situation. While it is only one trend among a number of possibilities, this is the theatre which came to be viewed, internationally in particular, as 'South African theatre', as the public platform for protest and resistance. Locally the theatre and performance were for many years also seen as the most direct, least easily censured, means of communicating with a largely illiterate and disadvantaged mass of oppressed people. It is an old and venerable theatre tradition, which may be traced right back to the Greeks and the Medieval stage. However, the particular form it has taken here derives from twentieth century practices in Europe and the Americas.

As pointed out in the foregoing two chapters, the fundamental thinking for this utilitarian view of theatre arose during the sixties and seventies in Britain and America, becoming particularly prominent in the United States in the anti-war demonstrations of the 1970s, when we have the whole anti-establishment movement spilling over into fabulous and creative new theatrical and performance ventures such as the renowned 'happenings', the street theatre, guerilla theatre, environmental theatre, agitprop theatre, and the like. Much of that experimentation happened to filter into South Africa too, mainly via the drama schools and leading primarily to the founding of the many famous 'alternative' theatre companies and theatre venues of the 1970s. The Space and the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town, the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, the Abbey Theatre in Durban, and many others all became rallying points for plays, playwrights and performers who required a stage for experimentation and resistance. Later, as the situ-
ation opened up, even the state-funded performing arts councils once again began to provide such venues – the more notable being the Arena in Cape Town, the Loft in Durban, the Old Presidency and the Observatory in Bloemfontein, and the Arena and Windybrow in Johannesburg. But there were many others throughout the country – large and small, public and private, temporary and permanent (or at least long term).

At the same time even more radical movements in the arts, influenced by the work of Bertolt Brecht, and inspired by South American theorists and practitioners such as Paolo Freire, Augusto Boal and others, began to filter into the country, subverting commonly held ideas about what theatre is and what it can do, and finding a fertile feeding ground in the oral, musical and mimetic culture of the African continent, as well as in the philosophical approaches of the Black Consciousness Movement and political resistance movements such as the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Azanian People's Organization (Azapo). It is such influences which paved the way for the excitement of Woza Albert or Mbongeni Ngema's Asinamali! The roots of the provocative and even more basic 'people's theatre' or 'workers' theatre', in which the workers created plays utilizing their available skills to express their problems in dance, song, mime and narrative, also lie in these influences – and they in turn are the very heart of the loosened bonds of the theatre. The true resistance work of Natal groups such as the Dunlop workers, whose The Dunlop play opened in Durban in 1983, and the Sarmcol workers from Howick with their seminal work Mpophomeni (or The long march, 1986), for example, have been supremely important in this respect. Such exercises helped to create a whole new wave of theatrical practice aimed at dealing with and highlighting the plight of the worker in industry. (See Von Kotze, 1988 on this movement.) These are overtly propagandistic and largely pedagogic works, with few aesthetic pretensions – but they are compelling as social documents and often cited as demonstrations of the power of performance as a communicational tool and an agent for change.

The impact of these influences initially resulted in a truly us-and-them situation, consisting of various semi-autonomous and largely recognizable theatrical systems (the 'establishment', including their own experimental groups; the public 'township' theatre; the oppositional, 'alternative' theatre; and the underground oppositional theatre – including the 'workers' theatre' described above and so on). The most debated and slippery of these 'categories' are the so-called 'black' and 'protest' theatre of the late 1970s and early 1980s – amorphous terms difficult and perhaps impossible to define except in oppositional terms. (These too can only have any real validity within a specific – and constantly changing – historical, social, political and cultural context.)

Much of this work resulted in exciting visual performances, utilizing a work-shopped, improvised format which contributed significantly to the new forms we have now, but at the same time much of the material, initially at least, was pretty single-minded and heavy-handed stuff: meant to get a message across to a largely illiterate, multilingual, multicultural and theatrically unsophisticated working-class audience. (How truly effective such theatre is as an instrument of change we shall consider again in Chapter 6 of the next section.) It set about
this with the bluntest instrument available: often direct propaganda or political rhetoric, which did not make for ‘good’ (i.e. enjoyable, critically pleasing and/or commercially viable) theatre. But then, being what it was – a weapon in the struggle – it had no need to concern itself with the ‘rules’ of ‘good’ theatre. Along the way much was lost in terms of art – and yet certain artistic discoveries became possible nevertheless. Notably the effectivity of utilizing the traditional skills of untrained performers – such as oral narrative skills, dancing and singing, a mind freed from the strictures of ‘realism’ and the aesthetic demands of formal concepts of ‘Art’.\footnote{13}

It was particularly these strengths which were picked up by certain more formal and influential companies, directors and authors: Experimental Theatre Workshop ’71 with their stark and exciting workshopped productions of Survival and Crossroads; Barney Simon and the Company at the Market with Cincinatti and Born in the RSA, Junction Avenue Theatre Company with Randlords and Rotgut and Sophiatown; Maishe Maponya and the Bahumutsi Drama Group with The hungry earth and Gangsters, Matsemela Manaka and the Soyikwa Theatre Company with Pula and Egoli; Mbongeni Ngema with Asinamali! and Sarafina!; Adam Small and the Cape Flats Players with Kanna hy kô hystoe (Kanna is coming home), and Phyllis Klotz and Cast with Wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokotho (or You strike the woman, you strike the rock, 1986). And of course Athol Fugard’s brief but effective spell of improvisational work with John Kani and Winston Ntshona in The island and Sizwe Bansi is dead. All these groups worked across cultural, linguistic and traditional borders to create an exciting, direct and relevant theatre which makes its own rules. It is the same pattern which is to be discerned in the increasing number of workshopped plays and political cabarets/revues which have been put on by students at the various drama festivals (e.g Kampustoneel and the Grahamstown Student Festival) over the past number of years. It is a trend which was later picked up by a number of groups working within the state funded Performing Arts Council-system as well, and, since the political ‘legitimization’ of the PAC’s through the political transition, has led to a number of exciting and daring crossover productions in the new experimental venues created by these councils (some of which have been referred to above).

### The popularization of consumer art

The other influence of importance to these companies came not through the political agenda of resistance culture, but from what one may either see as expediency and artistic opportunism, or as a highly creative use of cultural symbols. Basically it is the use of images, forms and techniques from the mass media and popular entertainment in the formal arts (partly touched on in the section of this chapter entitled Crossover culture) – and hence also in stage performances. The use of pop music in Piekniek by Dingaan or The return of Elvis du Pisanie, or the tradition of the cinema crooners\footnote{14} in the works of David Kramer and Taliep Petersen (District Six – the musical, Fairyland, Crooners and Klop-klop), are fine examples of supremely successful shows deriving from this source.

Particularly interesting is the utilization of street and other performances of all kinds – tumblers, acrobats, jugglers, pianists, tap-dancers, rappers, and the
like – as characters and performers in plays. This sort of thing is extremely well represented in the contemporary cabaret circuit for instance. In fact, the very concept of the revue or cabaret as a major theatrical form, is a creation of the cultural struggle and the forces outlined in this chapter. One of the real breakthroughs was the introduction of the European cabaret tradition to Afrikaans audiences and performers through the work of award-winning author Hennie Aucamp and lecturer/director Herman Pretorius at the University of Stellenbosch. Particularly the first cabaret – Met Permissie Gesé (=‘By your leave’) – set the tone for the Afrikaans literary cabaret in South Africa when it was performed in Stellenbosch’s H.B. Thom Theatre by Pretorius’s students and then transferred to to the Market Theatre with a professional cast under the direction of Janice Honeyman, to conquer Johannesburg and the country. In this it was linked to a flowering of the Afrikaans ‘luisterlied’ (literally ‘song to be listened to’, i.e. basically a chanson), particularly through the thought provoking lyrics of Koos du Plessis, Anton Goosen, David Kramer, Johannes Kerkorrel and others. It established the concept of the political cabaret as a viable alternative to formal theatre, eventually paved the way for such other influential and controversial productions as Aucamp’s own Slegs vir almal (=‘Only for everyone’), Libby Daniels’s Indaba/In gesprek/In conversation in 1987 and the Andre Letoit, Ralph Rabie, Nataniel and Gerrit Schoonhoven collaboration Piekniek by Dingaan a few years later – the latter two productions by CAPAB both running into serious censorship problems within the institution’s management, and having to be performed privately. By the beginning of the 1990s the cabaret circuit in South Africa had become extremely popular and wide-ranging, but somewhat diffuse and to a large extent de-politicized.

This trend towards the popularization of the non-canonized and consumer art as a resource for the artist is particularly noticeable and perhaps even further developed in certain other branches of the performing arts. Think for example of the music industry. American, Paul Simon, visited South Africa in the mid-1980s and, combining with Ladysmith Black Mambaso on his world-wide best-selling album Graceland, suddenly made the ‘South African sound’ world property for the first time since the late 1950s (when the sounds of the ‘Pennywhistle Kwela’ and the songs of Miriam Makeba did the same for a while). Yet, what Simon did in his own individualistic and somewhat formalistic fashion (implanting his lyrics on their music), had been evolving far more profoundly in the music of such diverse jazz musicians as Dollar Brand/Abdullah Ibrahim, Hugh Masekela and Steve Newman for a number of years. The same is true in the pop field with high-powered groups including Johnny Clegg and Juluka (later with Savuka), P.J. Powers and Hotline, Amapondo and Mango Groove, as well a variety of individual performers (e.g. Brenda Fassie, David Kramer, Mara Louw, Sipho ‘Hotstix’ Mabuse, Lucky Dube, Ray Phiri, Nico Carstens, Tony Cox and so on), who all manage to step outside the limitations of their stereotypically conceived ‘ethnic’ or ‘cultural’ boundaries, while yet retaining something uniquely characteristic in their music. This is of course what being an ‘artist’ implies, but the point is that those ‘characteristic’ qualities are, in part, drawn from some kind of indigenous, traditional ‘gene pool’ which distinguishes their music from that of the rest of the world. There are many, many more such examples. What this music has in
common is a willingness to borrow and adapt sounds, rhythms, styles and songs from across the spectrum of the cultures in this country. And the result is exciting, new and popular – crossover culture thus.

Much the same is true of that other area of stupendous development: contemporary dance. Already referred to above under ‘Crossover Theatre’, it yet merits a little more attention here. When Frank Staff first choreographed Afrikaans poet-dramatist N.P. van Wyk Louw's enthralling epic poem *Raka* in the late 1960s and followed this with *Mantis Moon* a few years later, it was fully expected that these exciting and original South African dance works would set off an explosion of creative and original work. Funnily enough it did not happen, possibly because of Staff's untimely death. Dance seemed to revert to the old and tried stand-bys of the classical repertoire, and it took almost a decade for the movement towards a true indigenous contemporary dance to begin, but once started, it blossomed. A variety of companies have been established over the years (e.g Jazzart, the Free Flight Dance Company, the PACT Contemporary Dance Company, the First Physical Company) and the works of individual performer/choreographers such as Robyn Orlin, Tossie van Tonder, Esther Nasser, Gillian Hurst, Fred Hagemann, Gary Gordon, Alfred Hinkel, Christopher Kindo, Jenny Reznik, Jay Pather and many others have helped to redirect and enlarge the range and content of dance in South Africa. Drawing on a multitude of indigenous dance traditions (*umganga, isicathamiya, toyi-toyi, gumboot dancing, pantsula*, etc.), as well as the whole dance world of the ball-room, the dance hall, the disco, the pop festival and the streets (ranging from the waltz and tango to rock ‘n roll and breakdancing) they sought to expand dance as a form. But this also served to utilize dance in the creation of full-scale, cross-cultural *theatre*, with its own popular following. Nowhere is this more evident than in the excitement generated by the many festivals, notably the IGI Vita-sponsored *Dance umbrella* in Johannesburg, and the large dance contingents at the Grahamstown and Oudtshoorn Festivals every year. Again there is this sense of eclecticism: of classical dance, jazz and indigenous forms co-existing in a distinctively new form.

As popular music and contemporary dance have moved through these shifts in perception, they have begun to have a significant and direct influence on the shape of theatre in South Africa – a point illustrated by many of the examples I have referred to above. The fact is, when pop music and modern dance turned themselves into full-fledged dramatic theatre, and pop videos became film, it left theatre itself totally and irrevocably altered – and confronted by stupendous new opportunities and challenges.

**Conclusion**

Obviously such works do not necessarily make up all of the core canon of South African plays, even in the 1980s and 1990s. There has always been a nucleus of formidable playwrights writing and working in other forms and other traditions, authors whose works are studied and emulated for their more traditional theatrical and literary qualities. Athol Fugard has been one of these for more than thirty years. Among the younger generation those still active in the post-Apartheid years include Paul Slabolepszy, Pieter-Dirk Uys, Reza de Wet, Charles
songs exciting:
can't manage.

that explosion cause end-bys onwards bemed. First, er dance umgany as the survival and dancing) once in bowing. Any fest- and the s every indige-
the shifts on the amplel turned on, it leftious new

J. Fourie and Deon Opperman. (We shall be touching on some works by these and other formal dramatists in Section 3 of this publication.) But it is interesting to note that among the most popular – and influential – plays of the 1980s (referred to earlier in this chapter), a large number are crossover, hybrid creations utilizing the energy, colour and dynamism of a wide range of indigenous and other performance forms, to address the issues of the day. Along with this, it is also noticeable that while there were daily expressions of concern about the future of the performing arts and the loss of what is termed 'quality' and 'standards', the real life of the art was shifting away from the serious, drab world of hyper-realism and the repetitive and single-minded one of 'pure' protest theatre, to simple, joyous, imaginative performances of pure theatricality – which rapidly created their own reason for existence in the 'crossover' world of total theatre. An often immensely mobile, direct, adaptable and eminently accessible 'poor' theatre.

The trend we have been looking at is but a part of what was going on in South African theatre during, and for the first few years following, the cultural struggle. There is, as always, great variety in the art form, but it is, to my mind, one of the most significant developments in this century. Not only for theatre as an art form and an industry – but for South Africans in their search for ways of reaching across chasms, and for bridging the turmoil.

Notes

1 The passbook, which had to be carried by every black South African, was one of the greatest humiliations imposed by the Apartheid ideology and was hated by all. Containing all the individual’s life-particulars, including the necessary stamps to approve travel, employment, residency, etc., it was a means of controlling and manipulating the lives of all black citizens. Failure to present it at any time could mean summary arrest, and the cold-blooded and petty way in which this system was abused over the years was horrifying and often criminal. The whole system has now been abolished, and has been replaced by a general purpose identity book carried by all South Africans.

2 The so-called ‘Coon Carnival’ which takes place in the Western Cape, and particularly Cape Town, during the first week of January, starts on 2 January – ‘second new year’ – and has strong links with similar festivals elsewhere, such as the New Orleans Mardi Gras and the Rio de Janeiro Carnival. Deriving from the days of slavery, when the slaves and so-called ‘Malays’ and ‘coloureds’ were allowed to take to the streets as singing and dancing troupes who competed for the annual award and entertained the citizens as a way of raising funds. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, with its intense politicization of the arts and culture, the carnival lost a great deal of status, but this was slowly reversed, as indigenous culture came back into favour as we approached the 1990s. This particular play, District Six – The musical, did much to achieve this ‘reinstatement’. (See also Chapter 3.)

3 This was another cause of great anguish and anger in South Africa. It was also a signal failure of Apartheid in that the enormous gash of open ground created by the razing of District Six was to lie there as a reminder of the folly of the ideology for almost thirty years. No-one was prepared to build there again, and a prime piece of real estate, intended for use by privileged whites, lay unused. It is now very gradually being settled again, in some cases by the same people who were forced to leave in
Debates about the shape and form of a new arts dispensation began raging even before actual transfer of power to the ANC-dominated Government of National Unity in 1994, inspired by the perception that the road to a new political dispensation was indeed opening up. Among the many issues raised were: How should theatre be managed? How would available funds be shared out? Would there be sufficient funds, would there be any for the arts? What about training? There was also, as always, the intense debate about the cultural models: Were they to be oppositional and exclusive (e.g. Eurocentric or Africa-centered) – or, as ANC spokesman on culture Albie Sachs (In: De Kok and Press, 1990) has suggested, integrationist and conciliatory – i.e. South African? The 1996 White Paper on the Arts answered most of these questions, leaning towards an eclectic yet integrationist concept of art and culture and suggesting the redistribution of funds through a National Arts Council.

Officially now known as the Standard Bank Festival of the Arts, after its current sponsor. (The former had been Five Roses Tea.) The annual winter festival has grown from modest beginnings as a festival organized by the 1820 Settlers Foundation to celebrate the coming of the British settlers, and concentrating on the cultural heritage of those settlers, to a multi-media and multicultural extravaganza of immense proportions. Arguably the most important cultural event in South Africa today, it has really become a yardstick of what is happening in the country – culturally, politically and socially.

In 1995 another arts festival, the Kleinkaroo Kunstefees, took place in Oudtshoorn, to celebrate Afrikaans culture. Organized in the same format as the Grahamstown festival by a number of cultural organizations concerned about the future of the language and backed by money from the largest publishing and media firm in the country (Nasionale Pers), the festival has expanded so rapidly that by 1996 it rivalled Grahamstown in size and consequence.

(DSee the South African Theatre Journal which, since its inception in 1987, has annually published reviews of the Grahamstown and other festivals.)

Dingaan, a half-brother and one of the assassins of the famous Chaka, was the king of the Zulu nation who, according to the dominant history, had lured the boer leader Piet Retief into his kraal and had treacherously had him and his men slain – a deed which led to the historic battle of Blood River on 16 December 1838 (the so-called Day of the Covenant – see Chapter 3). These events were to become the mythical source of the Afrikaner nation and the lodestone for the apologists for Apartheid and interracial suspicion.

CAPAB later rejected the play, refusing to put it on in Cape Town, as a result of the direct intervention of the Administrator of the Cape Province in his capacity as Chairman of the CAPAB Board of Directors, and it had to be put on privately by the cast at the independent Baxter Theatre. During the ensuing furore, the artistic director for CAPAB, Johan Esterhuizen, was summarily dismissed for his opposition to the move, but had to be reinstated as a result of a vociferous outcry from artists and the public. He has since voluntarily resigned to become a lecturer in the Drama Department at the University of Stellenbosch and one of the most influential activists urging a new and more equitable arts dispensation in the country.

The pattern followed by this latter example has its roots in the kind of educational work done by Esther van Ryswyk (most notably with her 1979 theatre-in-education presentation of Indaba, written by Peter Krummeck), Robin Malan, Eileen Thorns, Peter Terry
The concepts of 'crossover culture' and 'crossover theatre' were first explored in an article commissioned by the Tongaat-Hulett Group Limited in 1992 and delivered as a paper to the Stellenbosch Forum, 10 March 1993. This is an expanded version of that first essay, which was aimed at a more general, popular audience.

There are eleven formal linguistic communities alone, not to take into account the regional, economic, religious, political, cultural and other differences so heavily emphasized by the Apartheid-ideology – but real nevertheless, having been shaped and ostensibly legitimized in society by more than three centuries of colonial rule.

Sophiatown was what was known as a 'freehold' area in the 1950s, where both whites and 'non-whites' could live. It also became the centre of a cultural development of great impact. Notably the writers working for the influential Drum magazine, and the jazz musicians and performers who were to create a distinctive South African style, lived and worked there. So too did a number of the leading figures in the growing resistance movement. It also had its share of other cultural formations, such as gang, shebeens, prostitution and other illicit and illegal activities. Much of this history has now been recorded in a whole range of publications and films on Sophiatown, Drum and the jazz period – many of these in response to the play. Sophiatown was razed and turned into a white suburb called Triomf (= Triumph), its inhabitants all relocated to the segregated townships which evolved into Soweto. The collection of Junction Avenue Theatre Company plays published in 1995 contains a comprehensive description of the background to, origins and form of the play text.

Again we are dealing with extremely difficult terms of course. What exactly is 'African'? Is there such a thing? Is the Sphinx 'African'? Is a South African gold mine 'African'? Is a 'Gumboot dance'? Similarly, the concept of 'theatre' does not exist in African languages, for what is being done in performance is not conceived of in the same fashion as it is in say Paris, London or Tel Aviv. Somehow most publications are still groping for an answer, but for the purposes of this discussion, what we are talking about here are historically recorded African performance forms.

While the first drama schools were created in the 1930s and grew to ten in 1990, there was only one devoted to black performers (at the University of Zululand, founded in the late 1970s) and one for Indian performers (University of Durban-Westville, also in the 1970s). All the rest were originally for white actors only. (The so-called 'coloureds' of the Apartheid era had the University of the Western Cape to go to, but this had no Drama Department.) While the 'white' universities took in 'non-white' performers from quite early on, and the situation changed radically with the removal of the apartheid restrictions of the past, the fact of the matter is that for most of this century only white performers could get any kind of formal training. Thus, all black theatre was essentially amateur in the sense that the performers had no training and no access to any formally constituted and permanent acting jobs.

The 'cinema crooners' were part of a tradition deriving from the accompanied silent cinema showings, which developed into a tradition of live entertainment before the beginning of the film show. Even talent shows were organized in these cinemas or 'bioscopes' as they were known in South Africa. Many a well-known artist or group...
launched their careers by first appearing here, in the absence of a café cabaret and revue tradition. In Fairyland for example Kramer and Pietersen use this tradition from the forties and fifties as a springboard for a nostalgic and sometimes critical review of the developments in the so-called 'coloured' community of Cape Town. This was followed up in the late 1980s with a show simply called Crooners, presented nightly at a Cape Town hotel, and in 1996 they devised a new show entitled Klop-klop (=‘Knock-knock’), along the same lines.
Theatre and society
Introduction:
Society in the theatre, the theatre in society

In section one of this book we considered some of the ways in which the theatre system(s) in South Africa evolved over the centuries, and identified a number of the factors which seem to have influenced and stimulated such evolution. Underlying those arguments, and fundamental to the metaphor of the mirror that I have utilized as title and theme for the book as a whole, is the notion that theatre is always in an active, complex and symbiotic relationship with the society from which it has originated (or even the particular community in which it – temporarily – finds itself). It is a point quite extensively argued in the first half of Chapter 1.

Linking up with those ideas then, I should like to reflect on two specific issues in this section, to illustrate something of the complexity and fascination of the symbiosis by means of specific examples. Each of the matters to be discussed have, in their particular way, been of extreme importance for the overall development of theatre and performance in South African culture – and remain substantial points of debate and influence today.

The first case I look at is the rather interesting relationship between language in society and language on stage. This of course touches on a variety of other related matters, such as the nature of stage dialogue, the processes of verbal communication, the patterns language use and multilingualism in society, and the symbolic significance of language choice, language identity and language variants in South Africa. In Chapter 5 some specific examples of this in a few South African plays of the 1970s and 1980s in which language varieties and/or multilingualism are an issue, are explored.

The second case concerns the widely held notion that one may utilize theatre as a weapon with which to combat the many disadvantages of and wrongs imposed by modern society. The supporters of the idea claim that theatre may be used to cure such ills as ignorance, illiteracy, bigotry, racism, oppression, poverty and illness. As pointed out in Chapters 2–4, this belief has its roots in the work of a number of influential European and American theorists and practitioners and has been a popular and extremely influential approach for more than two decades of cultural struggle in South Africa. In the seventies and eighties it was clearly seen as a politically correct point of view (and way of working) and was seldom queried or criticized. However, more often than not, its real success was difficult to evaluate objectively, beyond an absolute belief that something had changed somehow. In Chapter 6 therefore, I play devil’s advocate for a moment, in order to interrogate some of the basic assumptions of the theatre-as-weapon argument.
Citytalk, theatretalk:
Language and theatre in South Africa

As has been shown in the foregoing chapters, making theatre is primarily a social activity, aimed at setting up a communicative transaction between willing participants within a particular social context.\(^1\) This implies that a performance presents the audience with a living community, in which human beings interact verbally and otherwise and that this interaction becomes the medium through which the communication takes place. The transaction may be illustrated as follows:\(^2\)

**Diagram 5.1** The transaction between performer and audience (Hauptfleisch model)

![Diagram 5.1](image)

The function of *dialogue* in this transaction is quite complex, as A.K. Kennedy and others have shown. However, it is important to note (particularly for the kind of performance-based work we are dealing with in this chapter) that this model differs significantly from a similar one proposed by Kennedy (1983:11):

**Diagram 5.2** The transaction between performer and audience (Kennedy model)

![Diagram 5.2](image)
He clearly still sees the verbal dialogue as communicating directly with the audience, as verbal medium. The proposed model sees the interaction at verbal and non-verbal levels of communication as total process. The implication is therefore that the world on the stage is a self-sufficient and closed community, with its own conventions for interaction, and this includes linguistic conventions. The relationship between that world and the one inside – and outside – the auditorium is thus circumstantial rather than direct and/or inevitable.³

**Dialogue and the playwright: some premises**

Theatre is of course far more than a mere verbal medium, working as it does with what I prefer to call ‘total communication’.⁴ Yet the text – as the one constant in any play – is primarily verbal, and the creator of that text (whether playwright/creator, actor or group), is always in some degree a verbal artist. It is at that aspect that we shall be looking, in other words at the playwright/creator as maker of dialogue.⁵ Let us therefore consider some working premises for our discussion of dialogue in performance.

In the first place, concerning the general attributes of dramatic dialogue:

- dialogue on stage is artificial, it is a distillation of and selection from everyday language for the purposes of communicating a specific message under particular circumstances;⁶
- dialogue in a performance is an integral part of a single communicative transaction;
- the playwright is not the sole creator of his dialogue form – it is also determined by a number of external social and cultural factors.

Secondly, the nature of dramatic dialogue is shaped in part by three demands made by the dramatic form itself:

- a play has to communicate its message directly, by aural and visual means, to an audience at the very first exposure;
- dialogue needs to be ‘performable,’ i.e. it is to be spoken language;
- dialogue in a performance must be understandable to an audience made up of a wide spectrum of the general public, and having a variety of backgrounds.

Finally, the essence of dramatic dialogue is significantly influenced by a central aim of most playwrights – at least serious playwrights. Normal, everyday language, as spoken by the average man in the street, has a very limited range of expression. The aim of any artist – particularly a verbal artist – is to transcend the limitations of ‘normal’ human communication, to somehow say more than words can. Hence the enormous weight given to the non-verbal elements of performance, and hence too the basic artificiality of an enterprise which aims at being so much more than a mere mirror to be held up to ‘nature’.

**The playwright and language variety**

Language variety is a fact of life in most countries, but it is an infinitely more complex issue in a multilingual society such as South Africa (see for example...
Section 2
Theatre and society

Claassen and Van Rensburg, 1983; Lanham and Prinsloo, 1978; Schuring, 1977; and Sinclair, 1983). The existence of variants, and various languages in our case, is a pivotal factor for communication within society, and it is therefore of prime importance to the playwright, whose job it is to reflect – and reflect on – certain issues within that society. But variant forms are also useful tools in the hand of the playwright, capable of use in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes in performance. As background to the discussion to follow, let us take a brief look at four functions variant linguistic forms may have in the modern theatre, i.e. the representational, the comic, the poetic, and the metaphoric functions.

Representation (or realism)
The first function relates directly to a commitment to theatrical ‘realism’, a specific theoretical position deriving from a concept of the play as a mirror of life, and institutionalized by significant developments in Western theatre round about the turn of the century. The basic tenets of the theatre of Realism and Naturalism have dominated the work done in Europe and America during this century, despite the critical success (and significant influence) of ‘non-realistic’ forms and movements. The bulk of the commercially and otherwise successful theatre still remains inextricably linked to the tradition of Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, O’Neill, Miller, Rattigan, Osborne, and their heirs, even if in somewhat adapted form (as with the later Pinter, Albee, Stoppard, Shepard, Mamet and so on). This is also very true of white South African theatre (particularly that of the so-called ‘establishment’ variety), as may be seen in the work of authors such as Lewis Sowden, Barthsmit, Chris Barnard, P.G. du Plessis, Athol Fugard, Deon Opperman, Paul Slabolepszy and Reza de Wet. It also holds for certain black writers (such as Fatima Dike, Zakes Mda and Maisha Maponya), as we shall see in the next section of this book.

Reinforced by such technical changes as the move from verse to prose drama, the introduction of the box set, electric lighting and modern sound systems, it became possible – theoretically at least – to present actual ‘slices of life’ on stage, i.e. to really reflect the sounds and structures of the ‘real’ world in the ‘artificial’ world of the theatre. Once this position had been accepted, language and language variants became increasingly important in the ‘realism’ of the particular representation. Dialectal and colloquial forms could now be used to typify characters and distinguish between them (often by varying code and register, as well as by introducing idiosyncratic usage and idiolectal markers), and to ‘place’ a play and/or its characters geographically, socially, and otherwise. Clearly, the more realistic a particular version of a variant appears to an audience, the more likely they are to see the characters as real – and the more likely they are to accept the implied frame of reference (socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic context) that the use of a specific variant introduces into the fabric of the performance.

Examples of this representational use of dialect abound in South African theatre. Classic examples of geographical placement are Adam Small’s evocation of District Six and its inhabitants in Kanna hy kó hystoe, P.G. du Plessis’s Siener in die suburbs, and Athol Fugard’s version of life on the Swartkops River in Boesman and Lena. (Social dialects are also important in Du Plessis’s ‘n Seder
val in Waterkloof, Fugard's People are living there, and Fatima Dike's The first South African – of which more later.) In all these plays the overwhelming response has been: 'This is how people talk. This is how they are!' Realism has thus been served, as has the play's ‘message’, since it too may now be perceived as 'real'.

Comedy

The use of dialectal forms for comic effect is perhaps the oldest of all, dating back to Aristophanes and Greek comedy, and possibly earlier. Shakespeare has some beautiful examples of stock characterization through dialect in characters such as Gower, Fluellen and MacMorris – not to mention Falstaff. Idiosyncratic usage perhaps finds its apogee in Sheridan's inspired creation of Mrs Malaprop, while Shaw has provided us with the sociolectal example of Eliza Doolittle.

Comic use of dialectal and similar forms of course relies heavily on such standard comic techniques as stereotyping (the typical Welshman, the typical Chinaman, the typical black man, etc.), exaggeration and caricature, and leads to the use of extremely artificial language forms which are intended to capitalize on the ‘non-standard’ aspects of the particular variant. The core feature of this application of dialectal forms is selectivity. The point is that the playwright, in the process of creating his language, selects what one might term identifiable markers taken from the particular variant, and then welds them onto the standard language he might be using. In comedy such markers are very noticeable because they are intended to be. Problems may arise, however, when the selections made by a particular playwright under particular circumstances are seen as a true reflection of the original variant. Hence the eventual derivation of such stereotypes as the ‘stage Irishman'; in South Africa, the ‘stage Coloured' has existed from the days of Bain and Rex's 1844 revue on a character they called 'Kaafie Kekkelbek' (lit. = Kate the babble-mouth – see Chapter 2 (p. 37) for a passage from the text). Very often such fabricated forms thus become the norm for stage usage, and may obscure the real characteristics of the genuine article.

Poetry

This is a somewhat esoteric use of dialectal forms, truly successful examples of which are scarce in world literature. Yet there are a few plays in which certain dialectical or sociolectal forms have been used for poetic purposes. Among them are some of the jewels of our time: Sean O’Casey's Juno and the paycock, Eugene O'Neill's Desire under the elms, Tennessee Williams's A streetcar named Desire, Dylan Thomas's masterpiece Under milk wood and J.M Synge's superb one-act play Riders to the sea. The most important South African example is undoubtedly Adam Small's Kanna hy kô hystoe, though Fugard and Du Plessis also use the rhythms and sounds of the dialectal forms for more than realistic purposes in plays such as Boesman and Lena and Die nag van Legio.

Synge, and his mentor W.B. Yeats, both had an intense belief in the power of the spoken word. In his Preface to The playboy of the Western World (itself a fine example of both the comic and poetic uses of dialect), Synge (1963:174) makes the following significant point:
In countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form.

Because language varieties usually deviate from existing grammatical and syntactical norms (or establish their own variable norms), the writer is theoretically free to manipulate the form of his language, to exploit its positive qualities, to replace the rest, and to utilize the language as it best suits him. In other words, he has total poetic freedom within a realistic framework – especially in cases where the language variety of his own society reflects a lively and original imagination among the people.

Theatre practice, however, makes rather stringent demands on the writer of dialogue. Staged dialogue needs to be understandable, direct and performable at all times. As a result, dialect usually provides only a basis for the dialogue, or adds colour and sound to it, though it can, in the better examples, also add something of the spirit of a particular society, somewhat in line with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It can also bring along with it numerous associations about the community and the reader or audience member’s experience of it.

**Metaphor**

Metaphor provides the most potent use of dialectal forms – perhaps indeed of language varieties in general, and certainly as far as current South African writing is concerned. What happens is that the use of a particular dialectal form (or particular language) carries with it a significant – and very specific – frame of reference, for it ‘places’ the dialogue in an identifiable social, geographical or situational context. The fact that it is used to foster realism, means that it is part of a process whereby the writer is attempting to re-create, on stage, a known world in which certain assumptions are accepted as part of the ‘reality’ sought. Such assumptions have multiple functions: they become an expositional shorthand (placing the play and its characters immediately, obviating the need for certain kinds of establishing scenes), they enable the writer to work far more subtly because they do not require explanation (for they are part of a shared reality) and, at times, they even acquire a metaphoric function, becoming statements in their own right. Thus choice of language by a character has a specific political meaning, eliciting the same kind of stock responses we get when certain stereotyped characters appear (for example a policeman, a priest or a government official in a play by Gibson Kente, Melvin Witbooi, or Maishe Maponya). Sociolectal and dialectal choices may be equally important, serving as metaphoric indicators of total value systems, and eliciting varying responses by audiences in terms of their own ideological and social background.

The problem of course is that the metaphor only really works in an environment where there is a shared frame of reference: a problem in all committed theatre, but crucial in black theatre which has for so long needed to communicate in two directions: inward to its own core-community and outward to the uninitiated rest-of-the-world, uninformed, and largely uncaring.
These four uses of variant forms (e.g. for purposes of realism, comedy, poetry and metaphor) occur in much of South African theatre, particularly in the post-1976 period, usually in combination. However their effectiveness is qualified by three general difficulties faced by all writers in dialect, namely: problems in transcribing the sounds and other features of the language in question; problems of understandability, particularly when playing to sophisticated audiences\(^1\); and problems of obtaining actors able to cope with the peculiarities of language. Yet despite the problems, language and language variants are part and parcel of our society in South Africa — and have become an inherent part of our theatre. One of the most exciting developments in this regard has been the evolution of a new poetry of the stage, in a language born of the polyglot environment in and around South African cities.\(^1\)

Citytalk

There are eleven formally accepted South African languages, a fact acknowledged by the 1996 South African Constitution in which they are all accepted as official languages (an awkward but necessary compromise reached after long and emotional debate). The languages are two ‘European’ languages (Afrikaans and English), four Nguni languages (Zulu, Xhosa, Swati and Southern Transvaal Ndebele), three Sotho languages (Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho and Tswana), Venda and Tsonga. Ostensibly these languages represent the mother tongues of eleven identifiable and distinct ethno-cultural units or groups (though Afrikaans and English are somewhat problematic here). The assumption that the different languages also imply different — and perhaps irreconcilable — differences between the peoples, their customs, and their aspirations, has been fundamental to apartheid society. It has also pervaded the arts and the academic world by way of separate literary systems, for example (admittedly not a local problem only, since literatures in Europe and elsewhere are also still classified along language lines), and separate educational systems.\(^3\)

But this apparent structural diversity is based on a number of false premises, among which is the belief that language (and cultural) diversity is a fixed, unchanging and uniform phenomenon. In fact the opposite is often the case, particularly in urban environments, and it is here that some of the most interesting linguistic patterns in South Africa have been quietly evolving over the past century.

In two influential articles sociolinguist G.K. Schuring (1981, 1983) takes a look at a modern phenomenon of city life, which he calls *flaaitaal* (*Flytaal* according to Van der Merwe, 1979:17). It is also known variously as *tsotsi* language (e.g. Du Preez, 1985), *isitsotsi*, *setsotsi*, *setoropeng*, *sintu*, town talk, black slang, etc. (the latter three are derived from Mfenyana, 1977). The name itself is really immaterial, one might as well refer to it as Variant X as this author did in an earlier article (1983). (Or perhaps, more accurately, Variant Xn for it is a variant and constantly changing linguistic form, as Schuring shows.) What is important is that the vast multicultural and multilingual peri-urban ghettos spawned by and sprawling around South African cities have all spontaneously evolved a number of variant languages for everyday intercourse. Each township has a number of sub-standard language forms\(^4\), each of which is used as some kind of *lingua franca* for certain social and/or cultural purposes. They are not all
used for the same purpose, though, each of the many forms having very specific and often very clearly circumscribed socio-cultural functions. For example, Schuring (1985) has identified a variety he terms omgangs-Sotho (colloquial Sotho), or Pretoria Sotho, in the townships around Pretoria, where it is used as *lingua franca* in a multilingual community. He then makes a clear distinction between this variant and two other forms on the continuum of non-standard languages, namely slang (which has a somewhat more restricted set of users, and a more restricted social function) and arcane languages (which have very specific functions as secret code, and clearly defined users – one thinks of Kwaitos in Soweto, used only by a set of criminals working from within jails or, in a way, of the *hlonipha* language used by Xhosas). All this besides the original eleven standard languages, and such other variants as ‘Afrikaner English’, ‘South African English’, ‘Kaaps’, and ‘black English’. Then of course there is the whole plethora of immigrant languages (German, Portuguese, Dutch, Yiddish and so on), and the ‘made’ languages like Fanakalo. A veritable Tower of Babel from one point of view, this citytalk – but also an immensely rich mine for the playwright.

**Theatretalk**

Given the concepts of theatre and dialogue raised in the introduction to this chapter, and the polyglot language situation in the country’s cities outlined briefly in the previous section, it is clear that language and language varieties have an important role to play in the verbal arts here, a far more significant role than they would play in other monoglot or linguistically less diversified countries. The language varieties are not only the means of communicating, but also, at times, become the subject of the communication itself or symbolic of the central issues which it raises. This is particularly true of the theatrical arts with their emphasis on verbal/non-verbal interaction.

One could then assume that South African plays would tend to be multilingual texts which – directly or indirectly – mirror the language mix of the society with which they are dealing. Yet this has, with a few rare exceptions, patently not been the case in the past, as may be seen from a study of the majority of the work produced up until the mid-seventies of this century. The point is that theatre has always had to deal with the discrepancy between this perceived reality (i.e. a multicultural and polyglot society) and the prescribed reality of the stage (i.e. an artificially maintained unicultural and unilingual medium of expression). While language variants (dialects and sociolects) have never really posed a direct problem, the different languages have. So, ways have had to be found to get around the restrictions. Because theatre is an artificial representation of life, not life itself, playwrights could basically opt for a number of ways to avoid the problems imposed by their market. One of the following two options was the most natural to deal with the ‘multilingual’ problem, at least in the days before the advent of the experimental and oppositional theatres and companies at the beginning of the 1970s (described in Chapters 3 and 4):

1. The playwright can focus on ‘closed’ situations and ignore the existence of anyone outside the given culture, or introduce them only by indirect refer-
ence. Thus for example, no English-speaking characters appear in Afrikaans plays by P.G. du Plessis, Chris Barnard or Pieter Fourie. Also they tend to avoid ‘non-Afrikaans’ (or perhaps even ‘non-Afrikaner’) settings for their plays. In the case of the former two, we seldom even find a black character, a practical way of circumventing the restrictions imposed by the apartheid ban on mixed casts in the late 1960s and early 1970s (the technique also raises intriguing ideological questions, of course).

In similar fashion Guy Butler and James Ambrose Brown, for example, have limited themselves to the South African English (SAE) environment, while H.W.D. Manson totally avoids the local situation in his verse plays.

2. A playwright can also transliterate all dialogue into the base language of the given culture. In other words, write the play in a chosen language (usually English or Afrikaans) and then plant markers from the character’s ‘real’ language on the base language to suggest that the person is speaking that particular language or dialect. It is a venerable convention, used by many writers, including Shakespeare, Synge and Shaw. This is what Small, Du Plessis and Fugard have done.

In Small’s *Kannahykiehystoe* and Du Plessis’s *Sienerindie suburbsthe base language is AB Afrikaans (= standard Afrikaans), with markers from ‘Kaaps’ and ‘Southern suburbanese’ respectively. In Du Plessis’s *'n Seder val in Waterkloof* again the markers are sociolectal, indicating the social differences between the family from Krugersdorp and the Professor in Waterkloof. Similarly, Small uses the difference between AB Afrikaans (which in this case surely represents RP English?) and Kaaps to differentiate between the ‘young’ Kanna (who grew up in District Six) and the alienated ‘older’ Kanna, returning from Canada.

Atheol Fugard’s base language is standard SAE, but his linguistic environments vary greatly, including the polyglot townships (*The bloodknot, Sizwe Bansi is dead*), urban Afrikaans (*Hello and goodbye*), urban English (*Master Harold ... and the boys*), rural Afrikaans (*The road to Mecca*) and Kaaps (*Boesman and Lena*). Clearly language differences, language variants, and the use of the ‘transliteration’ process are basic to Fugard’s dialogue, and to his dramaturgy – an issue which has had a significant impact on later South African writing.

In this way each writer has inevitably always written only in one language – either Afrikaans (Du Plessis, Barnard), Afrikaans or English (Small), or English (Stephen Black, Fugard, Paul Slabolepszy), despite the fact that they were writing about polyglot communities and basically within the realist tradition.18

Viewed historically, the conventions employed by these writers are inevitable, since, besides their own socio-cultural identity and linguistic bent, a number of external influences – some fundamental, some circumstantial – dictated its use. The most central of course is the unfortunate fact that drama has traditionally been taught in the language departments of South African schools and universities. So, except for a few classic translations as examples (the Greeks, Shakespeare perhaps, Ibsen and Chekhov), only plays in that particular language will be taught. And this emphasis has extended itself to theatrical – even film – production (the National Theatre...
Organization had two companies, one Afrikaans, one English – as have had most of the Performing Arts Councils), reinforcing the public idea that plays are either Afrikaans or English. The influence of the African language courses have been similarly restrictive. This is true of drama studies throughout the world, wherever the subject is taught within language departments. In South Africa, however, this language and cultural segregation has been reinforced enormously by the socio-political and educational structures enforced by the state. Besides these central factors, a few others may bear mentioning for the purposes of the argument to follow:

- the official languages policy of the government, which effectively helped to maintain and reinforce concepts of language purity through segregated schools and mother tongue instruction;
- the need for a communally understood language to ensure communication within a multicultural community – hence, in particular, the choice of English as *lingua franca* for many more formal purposes (see Schuring, 1985, for example);
- the language orientation of theatre companies and publishing houses and the markets they were aiming at;
- pressures brought to bear by certain cultural and political movements or ‘causes’: the Afrikaner cause, the ‘liberal’ cause, et cetera in later years, also the Black Consciousness cause, as Kavanagh (1985) and Steadman (1985) have pointed out. Linked to these are the formal cultural and language bodies: SA Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, the English Academy, the various African Language Boards, the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings (FAK), Afrikanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging (ATKV), Inkatha and so on, which are all set on the preservation and promotion of particular language and cultural traditions;
- the segregation of communities, and especially the segregation of theatres, which made the presentation of racially mixed productions difficult; and
- the penetration of European and American (i.e. English) values into the value systems of the peoples of this country (or, in Gramscian terms, the hegemonic hold the Anglo-European conventions have had within South African society) and their influence on the individual writer.

The way these and other pressures function varies from case to case, but suffice it to say that, virtually until the mid-1970s, there was no real third option. Multilingual theatre was a rarity and a risk for any writer.20

The play to which we are now going to turn our attention is a product of a new era, that of the 1970s and the early 1980s, when the whole nature of theatre in South Africa was being altered radically. As shown in the previous section of the book, the period became one filled with various kinds of ‘alternative’ theatrical activity characterized primarily by efforts to move across the barriers set up by the society as it was then.21 This does not mean that most of these pressures have disappeared, but certain other events have somehow intervened to make room for – and indeed require – other kinds of theatre, with their own demands, and their own opportunities. Thus, among many other examples, we have seen
the 'legitimization' of the township musical of Gibson Kente and others, the cabaret form first exploited by Hennie Aucamp and Janice Honeyman, the satirical revues of Robert Kirby and Pieter-Dirk Uys, the ironic workshop productions of Junction Avenue Theatre, the 'slice-of-life' improvisations of Barney Simon and the Company, and the community theatre of the Cape Flats and the streets of Soweto (see Chapter 4).

It is all part of an evolving theatrical tradition characterized by a deeply committed social and political involvement, and by an Afrocentrism which informs not only its content, but also its structure and its use of verbal, visual, kinetic and aural effects. Some of the most significant work of the period had its genesis in the world of the urban black theatre – a theatre rooted in a world dominated not only by appalling socio-economic and politically bizarre conditions of life, but also by most of the linguistic problems and challenges posed by a cosmopolitan setting. It is in this theatre one can perhaps best see how the languages, dialects and sociolects of the country find themselves reflected and utilized on stage: how, in effect, citytalk becomes theatretalk.

**Citytalk to theatretalk: the case of Sophiatown**

Like Barney Simon and Cast's *Cincinnati* (dealt with in Chapter 7), Fatima Dike's *First South African*, Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona's *Sizwe Bansi is dead*, Barney Simon, Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa's *Woza Albert* or Ngema's *Asinamali*, Junction Avenue Theatre Company's *Sophiatown* is a play which gains much of its compelling vitality from the innovative and exciting ways in which it uses language. Let us consider briefly four ways in which language is used for dramatic purposes in this workshopped production.22

In the first place, the use of a variety of languages serves as an indicator of 'realism' within the play, for within the framework of the play – which is basically an evocation of an era – the characters are both individuals and stereotypes. Thus, for example, Mingus is an intriguing and delightful individual – cocky, romantic and fascinated by the movies, yet hard as nails, shrewd and streetwise. In fact he must surely rank as one of the most appealing characters in the entire South African dramatic canon, alongside such greats as Stephen Black's Sophie September, Athol Fugard's Boesman and Lena, and P.G. du Plessis's Jakes (from *Siener in die suburbs*). But he is also a clearly recognizable and representative 'type' (the pseudo-American gangster, living parasitically off his own people). This dualism is also demonstrated excellently by the contrast between the abstract and evocative set, and the meticulous demands for realism in the costumes and props.

The play takes place in Mamariti's freehold Sophiatown house. The setting is not entirely naturalistic; each character ... has a corner defined by his or her things ... The play is played against a backdrop of painted images deriving from newspaper, magazine, and photo-journalist documentation of Sophiatown and its events. Each character is immaculately dressed in '50s period costume.

The departure from some of the conventions of 'realism' makes room for the use of song and dance in the play, while the sociolectal language patterns displayed (and
some of the characters demonstrate a number of registers during the play) are intended to create the impression that 'this is how people actually talk'. More significantly, perhaps, they also symbolize cultural values by pointing out differences between characters. Thus we find Jakes, the learned man, the 'situation', who speaks only English, but a specific variation which one might term 'Drum English':

Gerty Street, that's where I found myself, in a shack at the back of a Softown home. Living at Mamariti's Diamond Shebeen ... Freehold! It was ours! Not mine exactly, but it was ours ... I was banging out a living at Drum Magazine. My beat was boxing, but I wanted to cover the Softown lifestyle ...

In contrast, Mingus the gangster alternates between his basic Afrikaans, American slang and Tsotsitaal, with its hybrid origins (see Schuring, 1981):

Charlie! Gaan vat daai delilah and bring her hier so. She's a rubber-neck. Gaan! Speed.

And so we may go on, character by character: Mamariti, Shebeen Queen and traditionalist of sorts, Mr Fahfee, 'Fahfee runner and Congress politician', Princess, Lulu, Ruth.

Simply by admitting the possibility of a multilingual conversational convention, the 'mirroring' of reality is, at this level at least, far more 'real' than in most previous plays. This, despite the fact that, before anything else, language in the play remains, and must remain, theatretalk, dialogue created to achieve specific theatrical effects in a highly artificial 'musical drama'.

This realism through language variety is in effect part of the nostalgia for a better past engineered by use of set, costumes, music, dance and detailed reference in the dialogue to the mid-fifties, including the names of many public 'characters' from the period, journalists, artists, politicians and musicians; the names of clubs, the gangs, the shebeens, the publications and other institutions; and the political life of the times. It is a technique also used in masterly fashion by Fugard in a play like Boesman and Lena, for example. It is perhaps, in the end, the ironic use of nostalgia which is this play's most potent tool: in theatrical, commercial and political terms (see for example the work of David Kramer and Taliep Petersen, discussed in Chapters 3 and 4).

At the idiolectal level, too, the language use of both Mingus and Mr Fahfee is distinctive, and - somewhat in the tradition of Mrs Malaprop - part of the delightful vein of comic invention which invests the play, particularly in the first half, where we find such comic scenes as the writing of the 'love letter'.

MINGUS: Jakes, ek wil 'n brief hê – I want a letter of love ...
Ja ek's in love jong, met 'n real tjerrie, a real sweetheart, a princess.
That's her name, Princess ...
Start writing! Write the address – I want her here tonight at six o'clock ...
Jakes ... Tell her I fought in the war man – tell her I'm a war hero ...

There is also the whole Yiddish/Tsotsitaal issue, which starts out lightly, as a game, and relies heavily on linguistic issues for its effectiveness. But then it
turns serious, actually pointing up one of the central issues of the play and paving the way for Lulu’s (i.e. the students’) revolt against the school language policies:

RUTH: ... Sit julie gents, sit julie magitas, en die larnie van die stuk will get you a brandy.
FAHFEE: Mahok.
RUTH: A larnie’s a white girl, right?
FAHFEE: Ja, a smart white person like you.
JAKES: But you’re Jewish, right?
RUTH: So nu! What’s Jewish? I don’t know what the hell I am. I’m Jewish on Mondays, I’m white on Tuesdays, I’m South African on Wednesdays, I’m democrat on Thursdays, and I’m confused on the other days. Mostly I’m just confused.
JAKES: She’s like us, Fahfee. What am I? The boere want us in separate locations, but what am I? I speak Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, English, Afrikaans. In moments of weakness I even speak Tsotsitaal.
FAHFEE: Hey! Tsotsitaal? Dis die taal van die ouens ...
JAKES: So who the hell am I? I’m a would-be intellectual, living in a wasteland, with no power to change anything except words – and a fat lot of good they do!

Prophetic words these, for in the end Jakes actually has to choose between action (symbolized by Fahfee) and words.

So in this sense, too, the authors of this text have exploited the possibilities of language variants to the full. By combining the comic and the serious in this way, they prevent the comic element from dominating and thus robbing the rich language patterns displayed of their poetic and symbolic functions.

At a poetic level, it is particularly the songs which seem to lift the ‘realistic’ prose of the township in many ways. On occasion, particularly at the beginning and at the end of the play, the songs, combined with Jakes’s staccato-like, new-journalism prose, attain a seriousness which they do not have elsewhere. This is certainly not so out in the streets – except again in the heightened circumstances of performance. So too, in a scene strongly reminiscent of the removal scene from Adam Small’s Kanna hy kô hystoe, Mamariti, Lulu and Mingus’s lament for the lost home in Sophiatown, spoken in counterpoint form against the background of the song Sesiyahamba, sung by the cast, is superb theatre:

MAMARITI: The day they moved us out was the day the big rains fell. That was the day of the tears and the day of the saracens.
LULU: We watched them move the first street – Toby Street, where Dr Xuma was. The rain was falling and we were only a few ...

Finally, at the symbolic level, language becomes a central issue in the play through reference to the Government’s language teaching policies (foreshadowing the 1976 issue). This is illustrated primarily in the Mingus/Lulu confrontation, where Afrikaans is both the base language of the township at the time (used by everyone except the intellectuals, the ‘situations’), and thus a social indicator, and a growing political issue (to culminate in the 1976 protests). It is sad, but
inevitable therefore, that – when at the end Lulu describes the arrival of the police, the hated ‘boers’ – it is they who speak Afrikaans, and they who come to stir up the bees Mr Fahfee has found in his litany of numbers:

Stone the street lamps. (Repeat) Let the Gattas move in the dark. (Repeat) Watch out ...

But the time was not right. The Gattas did their job and the buses left for work as usual.

I signal ‘Bees.’ If this number comes up, we signal ‘Bees.’ Bees mean trouble, large crowds, army. Well, I signal Bees. Ja, I signal Bees. They can’t stop us for ever.

At the same time, the play points both to the divisive role played by language patterns, attitudes and policy in the country (the discussion on Yiddish, for example), and to its communicative role, as symbolized by Tsotsitaal – with its Afrikaans base and English, Zulu, Sotho and Xhosa vocabulary (Schuring, 1981). Through language we thus get a glimpse of the polyglot community in Sophiatown – a loss which lies at the heart of the nostalgia evoked by the play, and the tragedy it contains.

As we observed earlier, theatre communicates by showing us the interaction between people. In Sophiatown the medium of that interaction is, at least in part, the strange polyglot that has evolved in our cities, the citytalk become theatretalk, a vibrant evocation of an era, a people and their past memory given life. It is indeed vibrant and potent theatre. For, as Jakes says: ‘Memory is a weapon. Only a long rain will clean away these tears.’

Notes

1 Social context: For the purposes of this discussion, I use the term to mean ‘socio-political plus socio-economic plus socio-cultural context,’ i.e. the total communal environment. This is simply convenient under the circumstances, since the issue here is the use of certain products of social and other processes, not the processes themselves.

2 The theory for all this derives from models proposed in Hauptfleisch, 1978c, 1984a and 1984b, to which I refer the reader. It is summarized in the Introduction to this book. For the purposes of this argument, I take this as read.

3 This is not to deny the aims of those theatre practitioners who are constantly trying to break down such barriers by drawing the audiences into the performance. However, not one of them has ever been able to convince me that he/she has been able to circumvent the fundamental artificiality of the theatrical enterprise.

4 A point somewhat more generally accepted today, of course. See, for example, J.L. Styan, John Russel Brown, Bernard Beckerman, Raymond Williams, Martin Esslin and Marvin Carlson, to mention only a few of the more conventional literary and dramatic critics of latter years. A number of recent developments, such as discourse analysis and semiotic theory, have also considerably enlarged our critical vocabulary for and general awareness of this field (see Marvin Carlson, 1993 for an overview).

5 In the rest of this discussion I shall be using the term ‘playwright’ to refer to the total creative team which helped to shape and fix the text as used in performance. This includes, but is not limited to, the traditional playwright as we know him/her in Western tradition. On the other hand it makes provision for the kind of communal
creation that we find in so much of the black and alternative theatre in Africa today, including the work discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

6 Kavanagh (1985:213) seems to imply at times that it is possible for theatre dialogue to actually be used 'exactly as [it] might be in such a situation in real life'. He claims in fact that his theatre group (Theatre Workshop '71) managed to do just that in their production of Crossroads in 1971. I cannot endorse this point of view. The whole nature of the theatrical enterprise precludes any true 'realism'. (See also, for example, Steadman on the so-called 'reflection theory', Steadman 1985:10 and p. 46, note 7.)

7 Some of these issues are dealt with at greater length in Hauptfleisch, 1983a:66–69. See also Kavanagh's fascinating discussion of language in his analysis of four South African plays (1985:40, 78, 101, 139, 192 and 210).

8 A rather suspect deduction in most cases, of course. But very common. What is proven, though, is the efficacy of the theatrical illusion. However, the converse argument would seem to hold some intriguing possibilities for analytical purposes, as Kavanagh (1985) illustrates.

9 Briefly, and very simplistically, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis maintains that thought and language are interdependent. This suggests that the language of a community and, specifically, the vocabulary of a particular language, reflects the mental processes of that language community (see Whorf, 1956 for example).

10 See for example Schuring, 1977, Hauptfleisch, 1983b, and Scheffer, 1983 for a discussion of some of the implications of language choice in South Africa in the seventies and early eighties. Matters have obviously changed since, but not very much.

11 See Kavanagh (1985) and Steadman (1985) in particular for the shifts in audiences black theatre has gone through over the years in order to make provisions for this. In a study by the Centre for SA Theatre Research at the Human Sciences Research Council (Hauptfleisch, 1987) it was found that only 3–5% of South Africans attended the theatre, and almost 50% of them were university graduates in one of the so-called professions. This is in line with international trends today (see Kamermann and Martorella, 1983 for example). Theatre – at least in the Western sense as we usually teach it in this country at this time – is an elitist activity for the most part, even in the black community. Various forms of 'alternative' performance (dubbed 'Popular', 'Community', 'Alternative' or, in Kavanagh's terms, either 'People's' or 'Majority Theatre') have attempted to break through these socially delimited barriers, but only with restricted success. Looking beyond the Western model, at something like an 'African theatre' (see Coplan, 1985, Larlham, 1985, et al.), we are caught in various other kinds of socio-cultural restrictions. The elitism remains. (On this, see also the argument that follows in Chapter 6.)

12 In another article (1983a) I have applied some of these theoretical ideas to Afrikaans and English plays drawn from the canonized repertoire of published plays. In this chapter I want to follow this up by looking at some more recent performances and some 'alternative' texts by various South African authors and groups.

13 The eccentricities of playwriting in the African vernaculars (Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, etc.) are equally interesting in this regard, since such attitudes are central to that kind of literary activity. See also Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984, on Afrikaans and English theatre, where one finds similar attitudes concerning the 'conventional' theatre in South Africa – despite the relatively innovative comparative approach of the publication.

14 The sociolinguistic concepts of standard/sub-standard languages, as well as the concepts of 'register', 'code', 'variant', et cetera, are descriptive terms for specific...
manifestations in verbal intercourse, and do not imply any evaluative judgements – at least not in my use of them. For more on these and similar concepts, see for example Bernstein, 1971; Claassen and Van Rensburg, 1983; Du Preez, 1985, 41 ff; Pride and Holmes, 1973; Schuring, 1985 and Stoltz, 1982.

15 Schuring (1983 and 1985) provides particularly useful outlines of the situation in South African urban areas, and of the distinction between the forms.

16 See Finlayson (1978) on the *hlonipha* tradition.

17 Recent research seems to point to far more freedom in this respect during the previous century – as illustrated by the famous text of ‘Kaatje Kekkelbek’ for example. However, once we reach the period of the Afrikaanse Taalstryd (about 1880 and later) language began to become a political issue and the concept of language purity started to evolve (see Hauptfleisch, 1983b and Chapter 2 of this book). It is at this stage that we find the twentieth century pattern emerging, though there are still a few exceptions, such as Melt Brink and Stephen Black. Another, much later, exception was of course Harry Bloom with his libretto for *King Kong* (see Kavanagh, 1985, pp. 84–112, for a discussion of this text and of early Fugard).

18 Discussions centred on the language use of these and other playwrights are contained in Hauptfleisch (1983b) where the ‘transliteration’ process in particular gets some attention. Adam Small’s moving drama *Kanna hy kò hystoe* was written in what is perhaps the best known and most frequently used variant on the South African stage – the so-called ‘Coloured’ dialect of the Cape, also known as ‘Bruin Afrikaans’, the ‘Cape dialect’ or, lately and perhaps most aptly, simply ‘Kaaps’ – a term I myself prefer because of its reference to a region rather than to a ‘population group’ or community. Not only is it much more accurate, but the term has popular support as well. *Kanna* also happens to be the first South African drama on which an in-depth linguistic analysis was carried out. In a certain sense Frank S. Hendricks (1978) created a good model for similar studies of other local writers, provided such studies could arrive at a better delineated comparison between the real language use within the society (based on empirical study) and the writer’s version of it. However, a discussion of the possible reasons for deviations would be useful as well. In his influential study of pre-1976 South African writing, Robert Kavanagh (1985) has looked at certain township plays in this light, but he too relies on his intuition rather than empirical description to make his points. Like Hendricks, he assumes a direct relationship between the society and the stage: a dangerous assumption in both cases, and one I emphatically do not share. Esmé du Preez (1985) has done something similar with certain of Fugard’s plays. Although her basic interest is literary, rather than linguistic, she at least does not fall into the ‘representation’ trap quite as easily, nor does Banning (1989 and 1990), who, like me, assumes that stage dialogue differs markedly from language in society.

19 Fugard has often been asked why certain of his plays are not in Afrikaans and he confesses that they ought to be, but he does not have the confidence in his ability to write the language (see for example Rapport, 18 October 1971). Conversely, Du Plessis has often expressed a wish to write in English (i.a. during personal conversations with the author), but he again does not believe he could manage the natural dialogue – which has become his trademark – in his second language.

20 This is equally true for academics working within a comparative framework. Stephen Gray (1984), for example, himself a pioneer in this respect, points out some of the difficulties in this field in a review of Hauptfleisch and Steadman’s 1984 collection, *South African theatre: Four plays and an introduction*. Martin Orkin has also tried his hand at it in his *Drama and the South African State* (1991), as does Michael Chapman
in Southern African literatures (1996) – certainly the most ambitious (and controversial) attempt to integrate the literatures of the subcontinent to date.

21 'Alternative', that is, to the three kinds of established theatre up till then, namely the 'showbiz' work of the various commercial theatres in the main centres (by and large producing Broadway and West End successes); the 'serious' work of the Performing Arts Councils (safe, local work and the classical works from the international canon); and what can be seen as the incipient 'black' entertainment industry – the *King Kongs*, *Ipi Tombis*, *Meropas* and their imitations in the black township musicals by local entrepreneurs. Of course the 'alternative' concept itself is far older than this, as I have shown in Section 1 of this book. Aspects of this period of turmoil and possible reasons for the inevitable changes are discussed in a series of books including Hauptfleisch and Steadman (1984), Coplan (1985), Kavanagh (1985), Larlham (1985), Orkin (1991), Gunner (1994), Kerr (1995) and Chapman (1996), and well as a number of articles by these and other authors such as Anthony Akerman, Stephen Gray, Mark Fleischman, Keyan Tomaselli and Russel Vandenbroucke.

22 While most of the plays referred to earlier are available as published texts, *Sophiatown*, on which I have focused in this final section, had not yet been published at the time of writing. In this case the discussion was based on a number of performances of the original production, the detailed notes in the programme, as well as on a later version of the working script kindly provided by director Malcolm Purkey. Quotes are from this latter text. The text has since been published by David Philip (1991) and has appeared in a collection of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company's plays, published in 1995 by the Witwatersrand University Press. The notes to these published versions provide a great deal of information about the township itself, the creation of the play and its performances.
The company you keep:
Subversive thoughts on the impact of the performance, the playwright and the performer

It was crazy. People going over Niagara Falls in a barrel and killing themselves just for the celebrity of it. Assassins murdering for it. Maybe the real reason nations declared war was to increase their celebrity status. You could organise an anthropology around it.

Robert M. Pirsig: Lila – an inquiry into morals p.260

In 1990, in a much publicized and vehemently discussed paper entitled ‘Preparing ourselves for freedom’, African National Congress activist Albie Sachs made the interesting proposal ‘that we should ban ourselves from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle’. He suggested a period of about five years (Sachs, 1991: 187).

It is the kind of thing certain to please the mainstream artistic establishment in South Africa, who had, over the years, been becoming more and more frustrated by what they perceived as the limitations of the so-called ‘protest theatre’ of the 1970s and 1980s, discussed in Section 1 of this book. Not that this was Sachs’s intention – far from it. His concern was with the inevitable levelling off and simplification which tends to occur within what is an essentially complex art form if real criticism – in terms of the medium’s own conventions – is replaced by what he calls ‘solidarity criticism’: if a shallow and forced relationship between art and life/politics is mistaken for the genuine and integrated symbiosis which it ought to be. For effective theatre and art, he seems to suggest, is something more than politically correct posturing, it is an integrated and essential part of a truly free society, both arising from and impacting on its socio-political context.

In saying this, Sachs is actually echoing the ideas of some of the leading theatre critics of our time. While acknowledging the long-term influence of theatre, Martin Esslin (1978) for example, also expresses doubts about the real short term impact of a single play or production. Like Sachs he bases his argument on the slightly tenuous yet often stated premise that art is more effective as a
means of communicating with and affecting an audience than is propaganda. He adds a rider to this though, namely that art is less popular as a medium or weapon, because it is less malleable. It is complex and indirect, and can therefore never be one-sided, while propaganda – by its very nature – has to be one-sided, direct, overpowering and unambiguous. Sachs (1991, p. 188) phrases this thought exceedingly well:

In the case of a real instrument of struggle, there is no room for ambiguity: a gun is a gun, and if it were full of contradictions, it would fire in all sorts of directions and be useless for its purpose. But the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions – hence the danger of viewing it as if it were just another missile-firing apparatus.

But this attitude represents one, conservative, possibly even reactionary, viewpoint deriving from a long established concept of culture and art, including a specific concept of what constitutes ‘theatre’. And it is probably for this reason that there was a great deal of negative reaction from a large body of cultural activists at the time, who seemed to see this as a negation of their own achievements. (For examples see the reactions documented by Carol Steinberg, 1991 and Ingrid de Kok and Karin Press, 1990). And of course they, too, could draw on a long tradition of theory, equally well argued by a number of luminary figures in the theatre landscape, concerned with the way theatre may be an instrument in a process of cultural and political change. The names of Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Richard Schechner, Augusto Boal, and many others are all linked to theories and activities associated with the claim that theatre can have and has a direct and emphatic effect on people and may precipitate social change. Each of these practitioners can point to a number of examples of the way this can and appears to have been done (see for example Ross Kidd, 1984, Kees Epskamp, 1989, Zakes Mda, 1993 and David Kerr, 1995). I am not going to present their arguments here, they have done so often enough themselves. Nor am I even going to deny some of the claims, beyond pointing out that much of what may be truly effective depends on a form of theatrical intervention which derives from notions of drama as therapeutic tool – social engineering which utilizes theatrical processes as a means of conscientizing a community and/or solving community problems. (This is primarily the position of Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire, for example, while it also represents the major thrust of the Drama in Education and Theatre in Education movements. It is certainly true of many of the examples provided by Kidd, Mda, Epskamp and Kerr.)

But the latter is NOT what most of the theorists and practitioners referred to above are talking about when they refer to ‘agit prop’, ‘committed theatre’, ‘political theatre’, ‘radical theatre’, ‘guerilla theatre’ and all the other cult terms which have come and gone over the years. In fact, even the most radical exponents (usually self-styled radicals) of the arts are rooted in a conventional, historically determined and hence historically embedded, conservative tradition/concept of the arts and their function in (and impact on) society. They are by and large, usually talking about planned public performances, often in a theatre venue or at
least a theatrically conceived space, employing professional players, with specific communicational goals. Or at least many who read them think in this way.

However, based on the last two decades of ‘committed theatre’ in Apartheid South Africa, I have come to believe that such individuals may possibly be underestimating the underlying complexity of the medium. Certainly they appear to overestimate its potential for direct impact on society. In saying this, I am not thinking so much of Sachs’ idea that the complexity, subtlety and ambiguity of the art form per se make it unsuitable as an effective tool or weapon for socio-political change, but more specifically of the way theatre and the theatrical system operate as a social process. On the semiotics of the theatrical system, if you will.

Let us first of all consider the role of theatre within society. Statistics have shown that theatre – at least in its narrower, more formal sense in which it is conventionally seen – is an elitist activity in Westernized society, frequented by about 4–6% of the population, while published plays are seldom bought or borrowed from libraries. In a series of studies conducted by the Centre for SA Theatre Research at the South African Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) between 1979 and 1982, we looked at theatre attendance and expectations of audiences in South Africa (see Hauptfleisch 1983 and 1987). The findings of these programmes correspond quite closely with the various findings documented by Jack B. Kamerman and Rosanne Martorell in their exhaustive survey of studies done in the USA (1983).

To illustrate the implications of this, let us consider a typical play put on in Stellenbosch, a large South African town near Cape Town, with what one may term a high ‘cultural profile’ in Western terms, in that it boasts a large university and many cultural amenities, clubs and societies. If 4% is about the maximum of ‘regular’ theatre-goers one can expect (and local and international surveys tend to confirm this), one can perhaps do some calculations. Let us take the Stellenbosch population of 57 000 permanent residents and approximately 14 000 (transitory) students, giving us about 70 000 residents, and consider the potential audiences for the local theatres. They consist of the 350-seater H.B Thom Theatre, a well-equipped Western-style theatre which serves both the university and the town as formal playhouse and its tiny little experimental venue called Die Keller (= The Cellar), seating 45; the open-air Oude Libertas Theatre and the Spier Amphitheatre, both used during the summer months; the tiny Libertas Theatre Club used by amateurs and students; and the 200-seater Breughel Theatre, a community theatre with its own semi-professional company. In theory at least, these venues should be able to count on pulling in at least 2100 individuals (at a conservative 3%) per run of a show. That is about four full houses for the H.B. Thom – a number it has been known to get in, but only on the rare occasion. The other theatres fare even worse. Most notably, and sadly, this is particularly true of the real community theatres, the amateur Libertas Theatre Club and especially the more adventurous and semi-professional Breughel – the latter despite its specific and definite community focus among the economically and educationally disadvantaged of the Stellenbosch area.

Yet, despite these statistics, a strong belief has always existed that the arts may yet be an influential weapon in the struggle to change society – as shown
above. Much of the theory consists of the idea that if your message is relevant to people, they will come and see your play – and go home changed in their perceptions. It may be, but television and films are still far more accessible and widely used as media. And what effect will the conversion of two thousand really have on the thinking, and value systems of the remaining 68 000 (or 55 000 permanent) inhabitants of Stellenbosch? For the point of the statistics is: the 4% is the same 4%. They are the regular theatre-goers, individuals from this core group make up the audiences for all the shows that are put on.

Furthermore, there are indications that it might even be the same category of people who attend theatre, musical concerts and art exhibitions – all three of which Stellenbosch has ample. In one of the HSRC studies we ran some statistical comparisons between formal theatre goers and those who attended (classical) music concerts: the profiles were identical enough to make the differences negligible for statistical purposes. Art lovers differed slightly, but still not very significantly, in profile.

So the question is: Is there perhaps a maximum number of people one may reach with a live show, and nothing you are going to do is going to change that very much in the long term? You may go out into the streets after them, try to seduce them in with comedy, dance, wine, women, song, or whatever. You may try to teach them appreciation, set out to condition them by megadoses of exposure to theatre, it does not matter. The available audience is just so large: let’s call it 10% (to make provision for a large ‘latent’ audience which occasionally attends a performance) and that is that. This is indeed what Kamerman and Martorella (1983, p. 221) seem to suggest in the following statement taken from their interesting statistical overview of almost forty studies undertaken in the United States:

... cultural democratization (if defined as increasing representation of non-elites among visitors to museums and performing arts events) does not seem to be occurring, despite arguments to the contrary, outreach efforts of some arts administrators, and a degree of pressure from those responsible for public funding of the arts ...

However the authors do qualify this by suggesting a number of formidable barriers to opening up the arts to provide access for non-elites, matters which I am sure have been – and are still – even more crucial in our own situation in South Africa. (These include transport problems, financial restrictions, lack of facilities and the like.)

Let us now consider the way theatre conventionally communicates a message. There are a number of pertinent points. Theatre communicates a variable message dependent on the intercession of live performers – who may or may not interpret the message precisely as intended. (A performer may have been miscast, may have an own agenda, may simply be stupid, or may just be off on a particular night.) It does so by requiring that members of the public (i.e. their would-be audiences) come together in an agreed-upon space, to see and hear the message, and usually asks them to pay for the privilege. The message is delivered as a one-off, direct event, with no chance to page back, re-read, etc. (Unless you return the next night, when the performance may work differently of
course, or you now read the text – which many argue is NOT really the play since it cannot reflect the performance.) So simplicity is required, and directness, if the message is to be clear and unambiguous.

When the show is over, what does the audience member take home with him or her? His or her impressions of a certain (personal) interpretation of a multiply mediated version of an original text (see Diagram on the flyleaf). And he/she is one of a small number of people exposed in this way. The rest of the people in town have been involving themselves in all kinds of other pursuits, unrelated to the event witnessed by our audience.

Now, none of this can ever discount the possibility of a particular evening's performance producing an epiphanous experience in the individual. We are impressionable beings and any experience can become transcendental, given the right circumstances. For example, I for one vividly remember my first exposure to the Slave's Chorus from Nabucco, it haunts me to this day and has profoundly influenced my thinking about music and life, I believe. It did not occur in a theatre though, but, by sheer chance, under a lamplight outside some stranger's house, on a cold Highveld night, after an emotionally upsetting visit to a girl-friend's house.

However, what we are talking about at present is theatre as a potential ‘mass medium', as a medium through which a specific group of individuals, a community or even society itself may be changed. Given the proposition made above, how can theatre have an impact on society at large, beyond the individual? There are two or three possibilities.

One is the missionary principle, similar to that utilized by organizations such as the Laubach-inspired literacy programmes, with their slogan of 'each one teach one' – i.e. word of mouth. I relate my experience of the play and my interpretation of the message to my friends, who go on to do the same for their friends, and they in turn convert more. Theoretically such a process could quite possibly turn the original two thousand of our example into eight or ten thousand by the end of the week.

A few problems here of course: one being the fact that the impact of a play is often pretty emotional and multi-faceted (cf. my example of the Slave's Chorus above). It does not translate well into words. Words are notoriously clumsy and limited in dealing with impressionistic and complex issues. Also, there is the famous ‘telephone game’ syndrome – no message passed on verbally remains intact. It changes in nuance, accent, eventually even factually as it passes from mouth to ear.

The second possibility has to do with the kind of people who go to the theatre. Studies again seem to indicate that these individuals are, for the most part, members of an elite group – quite wealthy, often highly educated, professionals, somewhat older, and so on. Potentially, then, members of the influential layers of society, the decision-making cadre. So, the impact of a successful play may affect an influential group of individuals who may act in accordance with the effect and so change certain aspects of society 'from above', as it were.

While both these possibilities undeniably exist, the most interesting phenomenon for me has been the extent to which works of art (novels, plays, poems, paintings), and more often their creators, are talked about, lauded, and the
issues they raise taken seriously by people who have not necessarily been exposed to the actual work of art or met the artist. Why is this so?

The answer seems to me to lie in a simple rethinking of the processes involved, of realizing that theatre (and most art in fact) is a form of indirect communication. It communicates by association, rather than by direct argument. This happens inter alia in the familiar way by utilizing the principles of parable, metaphor and the like rather than direct address, but also by setting up associative networks of a specific kind, networks through which the art-making process may even become a message in itself. It is this latter process that interests me here.

In the case of theatre it implies that much of (or at least some important elements of) the meaning, and particularly the significance, of a play is transmitted by seemingly tangential aspects of the total 'performance event'. These include:

The image of the author: Athol Fugard as a ‘witness’ and opponent of Apartheid (see Section 3), Shakespeare as all encompassing cultural symbol within the Eurocentric tradition, Gcina Mhlope as modern young African woman, traditional storyteller and oppressed South African.

The image of the performers: Pieter-Dirk Uys as the amusing public figure and the hard-hitting satirist of Apartheid society, John Kani as the leading black actor of his generation and the star of numerous anti-Apartheid plays, Sandra Prinsloo as a consummate classical actress and the epitome of the glamorous Afrikaans star.

The image of the place of performance: a formal and well-appointed prosценium stage in the Nico Malan performing arts centre as opposed to a small, uncomfortable, ‘poor’ space in a warehouse in Cape Town for instance. Or the contrast of a dimly lit and subtly decadent ambience of a mid-town restaurant cum cabaret-venue and the corner of a smoke-filled and noisy Soweto shebeen, or a Durban street corner at rush hour.

The image of the occasion: a Soweto funeral, the annual 1820 Settlers' Foundation's Arts Festival in Grahamstown, an African Cultural Festival in Harare, an AIDS-benefit in New York, the Edinburgh Festival, the inauguration concert for Nelson Mandela in Pretoria.

The image of the company presenting the play: During the Apartheid years there was an enormous difference in the perception of ‘meaning’ between a play produced by The Company at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg and by the PACT Drama Company at the State Theatre in Pretoria. The image of the company by whom (and thus venue in which, and even the occasion on which) the play is being performed clearly becomes a particularly crucial and meaningful component of the ‘total message’ of the play and/or performance itself. Hence the title of this chapter.

The ramifications of this ‘imaging’ process are displayed in a variety of ways in our society. The most obvious and acceptable is the way in which many artists
(painters, musicians, authors and performers) indeed appear to have become influential public figures, who have helped South Africans adapt to a new reality over the years by being set up – or setting themselves up – as symbols for specific ideological ideals. The symbolic role of an Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Ezekiel Mphahlele, André P. Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Abdullah Ibrahim, Hugh Masekela, Johnny Clegg, David Kramer, Athol Fugard, Bartho Smit and others are obvious but certainly open to re-interpretation today.

Less direct, but equally powerful and possibly more insidious in a way, is the commercial exploitation of such images. The way public figures are created (through exposure in newspaper and magazine articles, interviews on television, cameo parts in advertisements, etc.) and then go on to become experts on everything in society – consequential and inconsequential, from where to dine out to the prevention of AIDS and whom to vote for. A rather obvious South African example occurred during the first free elections in 1994, when the American actors Morgan Freeman and Denzel Washington were utilized to help propagate voters’ education among black urbanites in the run-up to the historic 27th April elections in the country. The performers, in South Africa to work on their film Bopha!, were taken to various centres by the body responsible for voter education to draw people to the information sessions. It was not the actor as person, but the public persona of the ‘movie actor’ which was being utilized of course, and in this case, movie actors with a particular political profile. It is of course merely a twist on the old ‘endorsements’ idea from the world of politics and hard commercial advertising, applied to the public and social sphere (e.g. the use of all kinds of celebrities in the anti-drug and Aids awareness campaigns launched on public radio and television, and in the advertising around the 2004 Olympics bid launched in Cape Town in 1996).

This is, of course, no twentieth century invention – the impact of an Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Yeats or whatever is well documented. As are the deeds of mass murderers and serial killers, fanatics, ‘deviants’ and politicians. So, too, the matinee idol status of the nineteenth century actors and actresses. Our media has just made it easier for celebrity to be disseminated. And our computer-documentation, the Guinness Book of Records (and other ‘books of lists’) have given us something to aim at.

The fact is, such public celebrities are easily perceived as experts on anything – child rearing, language issues, the opposite sex, and – willy nilly – become sex and other symbols of one kind or another. Which of course means more bread and butter work: How many performers are not better known for their endorsements and roles in advertisements, than for the films they have made or the roles they have played on stage? On the other hand, it is even possible that the power they now have, as performer-of-the-image and spokesman for society, may transfer back to the theatre, to the next role they play, making it profound beyond its real power. The reasoning seems to go something like this: ‘So-and-so will only play the role if it has real meaning, so the play must have – hidden? – depths …’

Film lends itself to ready and marvellous examples. An instance which interests me is the impact his role in his 1992 film Unforgiven had on Clint Eastwood’s complex public image. Today his persona cannot be a simple, gun-
crazed psychotic anymore, or he will not be perceived that way at least. Even retrospectively the Man with No Name and Dirty Harry are redeemed, their fight-fire-with-a-larger-fire philosophy somehow justified and given meaning by the purgatory suffered by William Munny in the film. Eastwood (and thus the character he portrays) has a new, enhanced image.

These are aspects of what Pirsig refers to as 'celebrity' in his novel: a source of enormous social power which may be utilized for good – or bad, as it may be.

But the main point I wish to finally make here has to do with another kind of imaging and celebrity – the conscious and immensely influential matter of association. If one were to phrase it as a hypothesis, it might read:

A significant part of the ‘message’ of a performance is encoded in the choice of a particular medium for and the specific venue in which to present it. In particular by that venue’s (consciously created) public image, and the image of those associated with it.

In a sense of course this is pretty close to Marshall McLuhan’s famous notion that ‘the medium is the message’, but for once I think theatre provides quite a useful illustration of the McLuhan idea.

The ostensible medium for socio-political change, if we see culture as a tool for reform (not to use the term weapon), is the artwork produced by the artist. I want to rephrase this to say that the artwork, and the artist is only a medium whereby a longer term process of persuasion is set in motion by the particular artistic or cultural grouping. In terms of theatre then: it is not only what you write and perform, but for which company and in what venue, that is significant. Not only does the venue lend credibility to your message, but your play again is a contribution to helping the company establish its particular image and its own longer term credentials. Thus for example: an overtly political play, protesting the oppressive laws of Apartheid, performed in the government-supported State Theatre in Pretoria is perceived as something very different from the same play when put on in the independently funded Market Theatre in Johannesburg, with its history of oppositional work. In its turn, even the latter would contrast most strikingly with a performance of the same play in a badly appointed community hall in Soweto, among and for the oppressed majority.

The significance of such distinctions appear to have been tacitly acknowledged – and manipulated – by the powerful censorship structures of the 1980s. On a number of occasions plays with overtly subversive messages would be allowed to be performed – but only in ‘selected’ or ‘approved’ venues. That is: only in venues patronized by the small elite of regular theatre-goers, and more particularly those in a sense already ‘converted’ to the cause espoused by the play, that is the audiences of the ‘political’ theatres, such as the Market Theatre. However the same play would be kept from the general public by restricting its performances to the ‘approved’ theatres only (theatres not only economically but also geographically beyond the reach of the average black citizen). In this way the oppressed and deprived masses were prevented from exposure to ostensibly inflammatory material. The performance history of Barney Simon, Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa’s Woza Albert provides a marvellous example of such
manipulation, for it was allowed performances in all the ‘fringe' theatres in the country, and toured extensively abroad – but hardly ever managed a formal production in a black township in South Africa.

All of this appears in a way to refute my central argument, but the point is still: this palpable fear of the live performer and the accompanying gate-keeping system, was set in place by the presumed power of the theatre as a medium for propaganda, an assumption based on claims made by theatre practitioners themselves – the very claims I am attempting to dispute or at least qualify here.

The case of Afrikaans author Elsa Joubert’s *Poppie Nongena* (also called *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*) provides another interesting example in this regard. The play was based on Joubert’s controversial Afrikaans novel about the trials of a black woman in South Africa. The book, which went on to win the Hertzog Prize, the most prestigious literary award for Afrikaans authors, as well as the CNA Award, excited much debate and – because of its otherwise non-offensive format (a simple story of a woman confronting the cruelties of an unjust society, in contrast to the much more provocative and sexually explicit writings of Etienne Leroux and Andre Brink) – played an important role in shifting public perceptions about the role of the (Afrikaans) writer/artist in the struggle.

It was adapted for the stage by Joubert and the director Sandra Kotzé, and had its first production (in Afrikaans) under the direction of Kotzé for the state-funded Performing Arts Council of the Orange Free State (PACOFS) in Bloemfontein – a politically conservative, largely Afrikaans community. It was subsequently produced (in English and Afrikaans) by Marius Weyers for the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (PACT) in (Afrikaans-dominated) Pretoria and (English-dominated) Johannesburg (as well as some black townships around Pretoria) and later by Lucille Gillwald for the Market Theatre (in English).

Now, what intrigues me is the extent to which, in some respects, the PACOFS and PACT productions were possibly more significant at that particular time than that of the Market Theatre, for they were dealing with heretofore forbidden socio-political issues in the very halls of power, at the expense of the oppressors themselves, and possibly even addressing a certain number of the unconverted. On the other hand, the Market Theatre could take the production overseas to England and New York, as it did with so many South African works, for the Market had established its own political credentials over the years. And of course this, too, was significant: an oppositional theatre putting on a play by an Afrikaans writer, thus for the first time giving the concerned white Afrikaner a voice in international theatre.

So, the various productions of the individual play combined with and actually utilized the image of the particular company to project and enhance its message. The ‘meaning' of the Market Theatre production differed qualitatively from that of the PACT one.

Significantly both productions in the longer run contributed to changing the face of South African theatre, and more importantly to the changing perceptions about that theatre. Which in turn seemed to signal an important message to the broader South African community (and possibly even the world) about incipient socio-political and socio-cultural shifts within the society itself. So, it seems that theatre may indeed have an effect on society, albeit an indirect one.
However, when we consider this example, it is important to remember that it was most probably the same four percent of people who saw the play (or at least people drawn from the same socio-economic and socio-cultural class). If that did not change, what did? What had changed were the perceptions about PACOFS and PACT as state-funded, state-controlled theatre companies which had broken out of the restrictions of the past (even if only slightly). And this was what was reported countrywide by the media – a compelling message of change even to non-theatre-goers.

Another kind of example is provided by a 1991 revival of Pieter-Dirk Uys’s controversial satire Die van Aardes van Grootoor. The play was first performed at the Market Theatre in 1978 to great commotion and excitement, for it was seen as a real breakthrough for protest theatre in the country. Like Poppie (which it preceded) it was a play in Afrikaans which not only addressed the politics of the day, but was being put on in an English theatre known for its radical left-wing position. In the play Uys used the format of the immensely popular afternoon radio serials in Afrikaans to satirize South African racial and other prejudices, and to outline some of the changes he foresaw for the country. It was seen and enjoyed as a daring, crude, funny and energetic work, presenting a biting but ultimately bleak vision of the future. It ran for two long seasons, was published and became part of common memory as far more radical and exhortative plays began to dominate the theatre of the 1980s.

In 1991, after the political changes in the country hit the headlines, the same play was revived by Pieter Toerien Productions, a company whose image is totally different from that of either the Market or the state-funded councils. To date, Toerien’s work had been the South African outlet for Broadway and West End plays. It was the direct descendent of the mainstream British theatre of the post-World War II era: urbane, elitist, non-aligned and purely commercial, made up of musicals, drawingroom comedies, thrillers, farces and the occasional more serious (but marketable) work from London or New York. Although Uys himself directed the play for Toerien, neither the text nor the satire could survive the limitations imposed by the new context: what had been a trenchant, topical and ultimately disturbing experience when presented in a rough and ready theatre space which had established itself as the hub of the emerging protest theatre of the 1970s, became at best nothing more than a mildly amusing but rather embarrassing farce in the pseudo-Edwardian grandeur of the Theatre on the Bay in Cape Town. In fact, when performed before those audiences, raised on Ray Cooney and Agatha Christie, it appeared rather hysterically crude and badly constructed, with its satire distinctly off-target.

An issue of some importance here is naturally also the matter of terrorization by association and the often debilitating self-censorship that may accompany this. Prescription, and proscription are inescapable elements of human society, be the source of authority the church, the state, the communal sense of ethical values or parental rule. Certainly, as the winds of change swept ever more urgently through the country, most South Africans, from all sides of the political and ethical spectrum, found themselves assessing and reconsidering everything (from language to economics) in terms of a possible future society in which their current associations and affiliations may be considered wrong and held against
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Theatre and society

them. The result has been something of an identity crisis for many institutions, companies and individuals as the country tried to come to terms with the miracle of the transition to majority rule in the 1990s.

Getting back to the central hypothesis then: theatre is a cultural symbol within most societies and is highly privileged in terms of funds, facilities, exposure (see the arts pages of newspapers and arts programmes on television) and educational status, and hence is imaged as highly influential. In fact the formula may be seen to read:

The arts (and thus theatre) = art = culture = belief and value systems = socio-cultural and socio-political structures

So, if the theatre as system of processes and beliefs, is seen to shift its emphases and structures, it tends to signal or denote corresponding changes in the society itself. And vice versa perhaps, because of its status, any value-based change in the theatrical system at large must in the long term also affect the larger system in some way. But, as I have sought to show, theatre cannot, by its very eclectic and communal nature, achieve the latter effect through a single, unaligned and de-contextualized performance. Theatre is, and must inevitably remain, a team event, to which all the players contribute something of value: the author, the performer, the audience – and inevitably the company and its venue. It is the power and celebrity generated by that particular combination of elements which is the driving force behind the true impact of theatre as a socio-political instrument.
Witnesses
Introduction:
The playwright as witness

In a significant passage from his *Notebooks* (1983: 172), Athol Fugard has the following to say about himself as playwright:

Then tonight, talking to Sheila – telling her that the idea had come to me yesterday at this table, that my life’s work was possibly just to witness as truthfully as I could, the nameless and destitute (desperate) of this one little corner of the world.

Fugard’s view seems to me to encompass a slightly more realistic assessment of the role of the artist as social and/or political activist than is usual, especially among proponents of the ‘art as weapon’ and the ‘cultural struggle’ school of thinking. On the one hand the suggestion is not quite as neutral as the idea of the artwork as an ‘objective’ mirror held up to Nature (i.e. a reflection of society), for to witness does imply a measure of moral, religious and/or legal responsibility to bear testimony to what has occurred, and to what one has experienced of it. It is an injunction perhaps to ‘go forth and bear witness’ by giving evidence and expressing your understanding of what is happening, based on certain belief and value systems you share with the rest of the community. On the other hand, as I have argued in Chapter 6, the idea of witnessing is never simply a naive belief in the potential impact of the individual playwright or a single dramatic work, for it sets certain limits to the ability of the playwright to directly influence his society. Witnessing is a social activity which has meaning within the confines of a structured social situation involving other people. A court, a church, a market-place, a theatre. Such testimony accrues value as the evidence accumulates. A single testimony is seldom admissible as sole evidence, even though the particular witness may have an impeccable record of honesty, integrity and valour, and may therefore be the ‘star’ witness for the prosecution and/or defence.

To illustrate again, let us consider the example of Athol Fugard’s 1972 play, *Statements after an arrest under the Immorality Act*, for a moment. It is a provocative and thoroughly ‘committed’ work, which presents a dramatization of certain traumatic events in the lives of two characters and thus exposes a number of the more reprehensible aspects of the Apartheid system, while it also explores the very human dilemma of two ‘star-crossed lovers’ within that system and amid those events. A memorable and influential play for all who have seen or read it. But as a single act of theatre it was not able to, and could not, as I have suggested before, noticeably change the structure of South African society in its time, for it remains a story, a (re)telling of one (fictionalized) event.
by one single and specific author. A cultural event itself shaped by its times. What does make it potent is its status as another telling piece of evidence – along with the similar and related incidents narrated by other artists (Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Es'kia Mphahlele, André P. Brink, Adam Small, Breyten Breytenbach, Wally Serote, Bessie Head, Fatima Dike and so on) and the status of Athol Fugard as witness in view of his ongoing and consistent testimony over more than thirty years and more than twenty performed and published plays. So, this in effect makes him one of a number of witnesses, who over a period support and complement each other and each other’s testimony (see Chapters 1 and 6).

In this section of the book I want to explore this view of the artist’s role in society, by taking a look at a few playwrights who seem to me to qualify as important witnesses to the trauma of their particular world in that disturbing period between the Soweto Riots of 1976 and the last ditch stand of grand Apartheid with the intensified State of Emergency in 1986. It is debatable whether these playwrights and their performers all necessarily saw their role in quite this way at the time, but it does give us an interesting perspective from which to view their contribution to the theatre and the times.

The writers and performers referred to in this section all come from the second half of the century and in a way may be said to constitute part of the auctorial context within which Athol Fugard worked and witnessed. After looking at four plays from the period in Chapter 7, we will finally examine a few technical aspects of Fugard's own work in the next two chapters (8 and 9).
The burden of testimony:  
Four plays from apartheid South Africa

As pointed out in the Introduction above, the plays discussed in this section are all viewed as the products of certain influential 'witnesses' to a period of remarkable and important change in South African society. Furthermore, each of those discussed here operated within a specific and circumscribed social subsystem, within the larger but fractured society which is South Africa, and they are discussed within those frameworks. Now, this approach does take us back to the rather ticklish problem of categorization and the analytic way of thinking, a point already discussed in Chapter 1, but perhaps requiring a little further exploration here.

In 1983, when this particular chapter was first drafted for a book on South African literature in English edited by Michael Chapman and others (1992), a framework of four broadly defined subsystems of theatre in South Africa was postulated. These were named 'Afrikaans theatre', 'English theatre', 'black theatre' and 'alternative theatre'. The 'categories' themselves were based on the practice and critical thinking of that period, as expressed in a variety of articles by a number of writers at the time as well as a book I had written with Ian Steadman (Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984). The concepts now appear rather outmoded, for the system itself has adapted to and changed along with the political, cultural, economic and social structures of the society over the years. Even at the time there were problems with the categories as they stood as well as with the process of categorization itself, so the whole endeavour could only be extremely tentative at best. The book soon came under attack from certain quarters for precisely this, even though it was praised for its attempt to break out of the straitjacket of the very categories themselves by being inclusive, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural in approach. The one exception to this has been the category 'Afrikaans theatre', which everyone seemed to view as something distinctive. As a system this was still being staunchly supported and promoted by one section of the cultural spectrum well into the late 1980s and even on into the 1990s, while being derided, ignored or lauded in turn by the other sections, particularly in the Apartheid years. But in its case, too, the definitions were
Section 3

Witnesses

blurring as we moved into the last decade of the century, though there are still those who see the language as being under threat.

Although the restrictions thus imposed on historians and critics were awkward, and the simplicity of certain concepts had to be rejected in ensuing publications, we could not deny the existence of a range of distinguishable, even though intricately connected, subsystems within the theatre industry and the cultural structure of South African society. My own position is outlined in some detail in the first section of this publication.

In line with this thinking, and the arguments presented in Chapter 1, I have decided to leave the argument basically as it was then – a contemporaneous look at the theatre of the times. I therefore also retain what was at one time a useful concept of four broadly defined subsystems – with all their limitations. In expanding the article for this chapter I have nevertheless sought to relate the arguments to current thinking and particularly the alternative proposals I made in the first section of this book. It ought to be clear enough, for example, that while I have selected the plays for discussion below as illustrations of a specific theatrical category or socio-cultural system as well as specific thematic issues, the choice has also been guided by the qualities of the particular playwright or group as ‘witnesses’ to their times and the world they knew⁴ – in the way that this chapter is witness to my position at the time.

So, with this in mind, let us look at the decade 1976–1986.

Four witnesses, four plays

One: The Afrikaner observed – Reza de Wet and Diepe grond

The Afrikaner has long had an enormous fascination for South African writers. Virtually every play in recent South African theatre history has featured some aspect of Afrikaner life, including much of Fugard, and virtually every ‘protest’ play from the 1970s and 1980s. However, some of the most nuanced yet harshest critics of the more negative aspects of the Afrikaner ethos have been Afrikaners themselves, or at least Afrikaans writers – a fact well illustrated in the 1960s and early 1970s by the work of such prominent playwrights as Bartho Smit, Chris Barnard, André P. Brink, Adam Small and P.G du Plessis. These were writers all working within the Afrikaans theatrical system, which evolved out of the British colonial occupation on the one hand and the Afrikaans language struggle on the other (as briefly outlined in the first three chapters). In terms of the categories in Chapter 3 (Table 3.1 p. 49), it would fall into category 6. It is a system which created enormous opportunities (particularly in the 1950s and 1960s), but also imposed a large number of onerous restrictions on the authors in terms of themes and performance.

Reza de Wet is one of the better examples of a mainstream Afrikaans playwright from the 1980s. When talking about Afrikaans theatre, I am referring to writing in Afrikaans for performance in an Afrikaans system. There is a great deal of it, and since the beginning of the 1980s it has been revived to a remarkable degree, despite the impact of the introduction of broadcast television in South Africa in 1976. This was principally achieved in two ways. Firstly through the conscious efforts of the various cultural organizations and secondly through the
re-appropriation of Afrikaans as a language by the ‘people’, i.e. those involved in the struggle for a democratized South Africa.

The efforts of the formal (white) Afrikaans cultural organizations led to a massive revival of formal Afrikaans playwriting, and the Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuurvereniging (= Afrikaans Language and Culture Organization) in particular did much to actively achieve this by promoting Afrikaans plays and performances, notably through its amazingly successful Kampustoneel project, which was intended to encourage the writing of new full length plays in Afrikaans by providing University Drama Departments with funds to commission a new play and then workshop it. All the new plays were then presented and commented on by the audiences at the annual play festival in Pretoria. This festival rapidly became a highlight on the theatre calendar and over the course of fourteen years produced scores of fine texts and a number of outstanding playwrights, and became a casting market for new student talent. Unfortunately the experiment was discontinued in 1996 and replaced by a new one aimed at professional theatre companies. However, the last Kampustoneel was held in 1995 at in Oudtshoorn, as part of the immensely successful Kleinkaroo Kunstefees (= Little Karoo Arts Festival), a heavily endowed undertaking by many concerned organizations, aimed at promoting Afrikaans theatre and culture in South Africa in the new South Africa.

The re-appropriation and politicization of the language by the dispossessed Afrikaans-speaking peoples (mostly the so-called ‘coloureds’) on the other hand promoted a more informal, community based theatre – primarily on the Cape Flats, as well as a willingness to allow Afrikaans into the formerly restricted ‘liberal’ venues (the Market Theatre, the Baxter Theatre, the Grahamstown Festival). In 1992 an Afrikaans play (by Charles Fourie) won the prestigious Amstel Playwright of the Year competition for the very first time since its inception, although Afrikaans plays had been shortlisted for a number of years. Another important feature of this revival has been the development of non-conventional forms within the Afrikaans theatre system, notably a wide-ranging cabaret movement in Afrikaans, based on the formal political cabaret from Europe, and the growth of a satiric vein of theatre, particularly the one-man shows of Pieter-Dirk Uys and others. Also more and more playwrights are becoming bilingual or multilingual writers, either writing plays in both Afrikaans and English, or using two (or more) languages in the same play. (Pieter-Dirk Uys, Deon Opperman and Charles Fourie are prominent examples – see also Chapter 5).

Among the significant older playwrights of this period were Pieter-Dirk Uys and Pieter Fourie, who both began writing in the early seventies and continued to provide extremely important work, but Kampustoneel also provided a launching pad for many new authors, including the prolific and creative Deon Opperman who shot into prominence at the very first Kampustoneel festival (1981), the exciting post-modern and experimental craftsman Charles Fourie, and Reza de Wet – who made her debut in 1982 and over the next ten years proved herself to be the most accomplished literary figure among them (she won the prestigious Hertzog Prize for Afrikaans Drama in 1994 and again in 1997). Her eight published Afrikaans plays (and one English play) are all tightly wrought tales that seem to tap into the very heart of the Afrikaner consciousness by way of wide-ranging literary allusion, myth and mysticism. Like so many of the authors discussed
here, she is basically a regional writer. Thus, in the way that Fugard’s ‘region’ is the Eastern Cape Province, with Port Elizabeth as hub, Paul Slabolepsy’s the southern suburbs and mining towns around Johannesburg, and Barney Simon’s urban Johannesburg, so the surface realism of De Wet’s plays sets them in the rural Free State (the platteland). There is an interesting difference however: De Wet tends to write about past events and all the plays are set at different historical periods of this century. Her first play, for example, is set round about the ‘present’ of the 1960s, the second in 1929 and the third in 1902. The next three plays, Mis, Mirakel and Drif, are similarly spaced.

Her first three plays were published as a single volume, with the title Vrystaat Trilogie in 1991 by HAUM-Literary, a publishing house which has itself contributed significantly to the Afrikaans revival. The collection consists of Diepe grond (which has been translated as Deep ground and was performed with some success in America during 1991), Op dees aarde and Nag, Generaal. In 1992 two interlinked new plays – Mirakel and Mis were completed, the former premièring at the 1992 Grahamstown Festival along with Pieter-Dirk Uys’s new play, Die vleeroos, and Mis premièring in Cape Town in 1993. The latter plays were published by HAUM as a trilogy in 1994 under the title Trits: Mis, Mirakel en Drif, and Drif was first performed in the same year.

Op dees aarde (Literally ‘on this earth’, but deriving from the Afrikaans equivalent of the English expression ‘What on earth?’), is a fantasy play with strong and direct links to the paintings and imagination of Marc Chagall and the fairy tale, dealing with a family’s diverse reactions to the annual visitation by the spirit of a daughter who had died while in labour with her illegitimate child. Nag, Generaal (‘Goodnight, General’) is loosely based on the story of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, relocated in the dying years of the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). The latter presents us – in something like Grecian dramatic form – with a critical moment of revenge, penance and renewal. Once again, as in all her plays, De Wet employs the external trappings of realism in order to present what is essentially an expressionist play, which explores not only the events themselves but also the psychological and psychic forces that caused them. The same is true of the plays in Trits, a series of plays linked by images of show-business (a Pierrot figure and a circus in Mis (lit. = dung or fog), a travelling company of actors in Mirakel (= Miracle), a travelling magician and hypnotist in the magnificent neo-Gothic play Drif (translated and performed as Drift in the Nico Arena in 1996, though the title has multiple meanings in Afrikaans).

These qualities are markedly present in the play which launched her career as playwright and which many critics still deem to be her masterpiece. I personally prefer some of the later plays, notably Drif, but I do acknowledge the sheer power of Diepe grond. For example, at its first performance at Kampustoneel (performed by Rhodes University students, with De Wet herself as Soekie), she was hailed as the great new Afrikaans playwright, and even as ‘the greatest woman playwright in the world today’. This hyperbolic reaction has cooled down a little over the years, but subsequent work has gradually confirmed her status as a playwright of remarkable authority and complexity.

Briefly Diepe grond concerns the lives of a brother and a sister who have an incestuous relationship and who, on being discovered by their parents, kill them
and bury them under the floor of the house. They then continue to live on the
dying farm, looked after by the mysterious Ou Alina and constantly playing
games based on incidents from their relationship with their parents. These
include ‘Afliuster by Pa en Ma se kamerdeur’ (‘Eavesdropping at Mom and Dad’s
room’), ‘Pa raas met Soekie’ (‘Dad scolds Soekie’) and ‘Ma vra Frikkie oor die la-
kens’ (‘Mom asks Frikkie about the sheets’). As the farm withers away around
them, Frikkie digs for water in the living room, for they can hear the water deep
in the earth below them – a promise of a new future.

The plot is focussed on the arrival of the lawyer Grové, the representative of
all that threatens their continued existence. They receive him and play games
with him, alternating between ‘adult’ behavior (she is thirty, her brother twenty-
five), in which they imitate their parents, ‘coquettish’ behaviour and ‘childish’
behaviour. Finally they tie him up and kill him by flaying him with a whip. Alina
then starts cleaning up, while the two ‘children’ are put to bed.

It is a dark, almost Gothic tale, but told with a strong dramatic sense in which
enactment becomes as strong as words and bewitching in the balance it man-
ages to hold between dark comedy, grotesque horror and thought-provoking
seriousness. For present purposes, two matters seem to be of importance in
the way De Wet works as witness to her times and her region.

Firstly, there is an unrelenting and obsessively overriding sense of sin which
pervades every action of the play. It is a direct reflection of one of the most pow-
erful themes in all Afrikaans writing: the legacy of Calvinist puritanism. It is no
accident that De Wet dedicated this play to Bartho Smit, whose own plays,
notably Putsonderwater, are some of the most damning indictments of the same
moralizing attitude ever written. It is a rebellion against the restrictions of Biblical
fundamentalism which pervades the work of Barnard, Brink, Du Plessis, Pieter
Fourie and Deon Opperman in the same way as it does the work of O’Neill and
Miller in America.

What makes De Wet’s play different however is that she attacks the root
cause of the sins by showing the sins not as abhorrent practices in themselves,
but abhorrent consequences of a dubious philosophy: the ‘sins’ Soekie and
Frikkie commit are unforgivable under virtually any moral system, and the play
really does not present them as sympathetic characters at all. They are lying,
cheating, murderous and criminally insane in the legal sense. They are also
shown to be dirty, crude and indolent – certainly no heroic or exemplary figures.
But the play presents us with the reasons why this may have happened, and
does so in an extremely theatrical, entertaining and hence effective manner.

The way De Wet does this is to have the ‘children’ play the games referred to
above. Each game (or part of a game) is actually an enacted flashback to a
moment between parent and child, in which a crucial moment of skewed com-
munication and parental intolerance and domination is displayed. Perhaps the
most startling and entertaining of these moments is the game ‘Ma vra Frikkie
oor die lakens’ (‘Mom asks Frikkie about the sheets’), in which Soekie as the
mother takes Frikkie (as Frikkie the boy) into an imaginary chicken-run, and then
proceeds to talk to him about his masturbation at night. She does this while on
the one hand feeding the chickens, and on the other talking to him ‘kindly’, sug-
gesting that his father would like to beat this evil out of him (for it is from the

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Devil himself, this monstrousness). She displays an almost obscene interest in
the graphic detail of his dreams – until she discovers that the object of her son’s
fantasies is herself. Then she calls her husband to come and drive out these
devils that infest her son.

It is precisely the interpretation of the original Biblical injunction about the sins
of the fathers, and the way and context in which it is communicated, that
becomes the important point of the play. Thus we are not simply told, but also
shown – graphically – how intolerance and violence begets intolerance and vio-
ience, as we move from past to present. A compelling message in a modern-
day South Africa, presented in an original and superbly theatrical way.

Two: The liberal revolt – Paul Slabolepszy and Saturday night
at the Palace

Unlike the Afrikaans playwriting tradition with its century old history of gradual
growth, the English tradition of theatre in South Africa is older, but the English
playwright as dominant figure is largely a child of the second half of the twenti-
eth century, fed by the liberal movement’s abhorrence of the growing institution
of Apartheid and finally gaining legitimacy in the period following the playwrights’
boycott of South Africa – when access to new plays from abroad was cut off and
the writer in English finally got onto an equal footing with the Afrikaans writer. As
in the case of Afrikaans, certain external factors helped. Among these there was
a conscious effort at promoting English theatre and culture (notably through the
1820 Settlers’ Foundation and its annual Arts Festival in Grahamstown. Also vari-
ous awards, including the Amstel Playwright of the Year Award). There was also
the very important swing towards English as the ‘language of liberation’ in the
country, which urged authors to express themselves in that language. And then
of course, there was the international success of Fugard, which dazzled all
would-be playwrights.

As shown in Chapters 2 and 3, the English theatre tradition in South Africa is
basically the legacy of the British colonial occupation, and when used here refers
to writings in English by (white) South Africans working within the traditions of
Western theatre (Category 6 in the table provided in Chapter 3). This could
appear to be a racist categorization, I know, but it really was being used that
way at the time, despite the fact that some histories did make token references
to individual black authors such as Herbert Dhlomo or Bob Leshoai who were
writing in English and the British tradition (see De Koker, 1969 and Gosher,
1991). It is the counterpart of the Afrikaans tradition, and consists of the spiri-
tual descendents of such earlier writers as Stephen Black, Madaleine Masson,
H.W.D. Manson and Guy Butler. Foremost among them of course has been Athol
Fugard, whose works and unique contribution are discussed in great detail in a
number of publications (see Gray, 1980; Hauptfleisch et al, 1980; and Read
1991 for bibliographical detail), but alongside Fugard we find an array of others
who, as individual writers, have focussed on their own specific experiences with-
in this society. They include Geraldine Aron, Ian Ferguson, Damon Galgut,
Stephen Gray, Henry Rootenberg, Pieter-Dirk Uys, Anthony Akerman, Reza de
Wet, Charles Fourie and the writer discussed here: Paul Slabolepszy.
Generally speaking the writers in this category have tended to opt for one of two approaches which one might, half-seriously, term the Manson and the Fugard options. The former, the formal adoption of a general ‘myth’ and the employment of a neutralized, poetic dialogue, is found in the work of Ferguson (Ritual 2378), Gray (An evening at the Vernes; Schreiner) and Galgut (Echoes of anger), where it is on occasion reworked into a discussion of universal issues surrounding contemporary reality. The plays themselves thus have something of a ‘literary’ quality, despite the real theatricality of some of the texts, and clearly form part of a venerable tradition of formal playwriting which has included a large number of poets and playwrights over the years.

The second category of plays, dealing with everyday contemporary events and characters, and employing some kind of regional or social dialect, has an equally prestigious pedigree. It includes the work of Aron, Rootenberg, Slabolepszy and Uys and traces its origins back to Stephen Black and the regional writers of Britain, Ireland and America. The themes here vary from highly personal issues (e.g. Bar and Ger and Mickey Kannis caught my eye by Aron) to uncompromising political writing (e.g. God’s forgotten by Uys, Somewhere on the Border by Akerman).

Paul Slabolepszy’s award-winning play Saturday night at the Palace presents us with an example of these two extremes in combination. The story concerns the arrival of two friends, Forsie and Vince, at an isolated roadhouse somewhere on the East Rand (i.e. the eastern part of the Witwatersrand urban complex near Johannesburg) late one Saturday night. They are pushing Forsie’s motorbike, which has apparently broken down. As they arrive, arguing and joking with each other, the roadhouse, manned by a single waiter – September – is being closed for the night. They bully the waiter into making them some food, while they use the opportunity to spin out stories about their dreams and ideals. But then the interchanges turn nasty, as Forsie reveals the real reason he had for bringing Vince there: to tell him that his fellow lodgers did not want him back. This rejection makes the violent Vince tear into Forsie’s own life, among other things destroying his illusions about the girl he thinks might be interested in him. Then he turns on September, taunting him, threatening him, and finally handcuffing him to the motorcycle. When these games eventually reach their climax and Forsie tries to intervene, Vince is accidentally killed and Forsie, panic stricken, runs off. So September is left to face the police.

While it has its focus on the personal dreams and disappointments of Forsie and Vince, the play takes a realistic look at the complex cross-cultural contact enforced by the urban South African context. This is done through the introduction of the waiter, September, who is black, but working in the white world of Forsie and Vince – a lower middle class world of frustrated dreams in which each one has to struggle for self-respect and emotional survival.

In its extreme realism – both in the detail of its beautifully conceived set, described down to the typical tariff lists with their misspellings and South Africanisms (‘parfay’, ‘vetkoek and curry’) and of its dialogue – the play presents itself as a regional work, set in the urban sprawl of the Witwatersrand. Against this background the title of the work is ironic, pointing to the pretentious dreams which form the core theme of the play. The little roadhouse clearly does not live up to its regal name, nor to the American echoes it conjures up – nor do the lives
of the characters to the public images they so self-consciously try to promote. But the setting becomes far more than an ironic point of reference, it becomes a metaphor for the twisted and inadequate communication we witness in the brief hour on stage. Slabolepszy employs the simple triangular relationship to explore the kind of world which has nurtured Vince and Forsie – and the thousands of others like them, who manage to survive from day to day in a world they have not made and cannot quite understand. These two are friends, having known each other for quite a while, sharing the same lodgings, the same friends, the same terms of reference, the same in-jokes:

VINCE [singing]: You can stay as you are for the rest of your life...
FORSIE: ... or you can blow your brains out ...
VINCE: Brains out ...
FORSIE: Brains out ...
VINCE: Brains out ...
They laugh. Vince drums on the counter, bellowing the last line.

(pp. 16-17)

There is once more a sense of prophetic irony in the bizarre twist they give to a well-known advertising ditty for cane spirits, with its idyllic promises of another, romantic and vastly different lifestyle, somewhere over a hypothetical horizon. (The original shows young people sporting about on some tropical isle and the text goes: ‘You can stay the same as you are for the rest of your life, or you can break away with Mainstay.’) The point is that both Vince and Forsie live double lives in which they try to balance dream and reality in such a way that they are both able to get away from, and yet keep some hold on, the mundane lives they lead. In Vince’s case the central dream – among a number of others – is his career as soccer star. Despite his manifest failure, as illustrated by their first words when they appear, success is always lurking somewhere in the near future. He can play this dream out to himself whenever he requires it, and thus it becomes a last resort when he makes a final attempt to turn away from reality:

VINCE: ... Got to get back to Durbs. [Inspired] Hey! I’ll go take a trial with Highlands:
Forsie shakes his head.
VINCE [Brightly]: There’s it! Take a joll over to Pretoria. Arcadia Pepsi. Those bastards need a striker ... (He boots the Coke crate across the stage, using it as a soccer ball.)
FORSIE: It’s just dreams, Vince! (p. 52)

Forsie’s dreams are far more mundane, but equally unattainable, and include a romantic yearning for love, illustrated by his mooning about the girl he had tried to ‘chat up’ at the dance, his desire to meet ‘old Clint’ and his dreams about owning a new motorcycle. In the end he loses it all, even the more likely ones. The motorcycle he has is left behind in his desperate flight and the girl is lost to the hard realities of life:

Vince walks up to Forsie. He smiles thinly.
VINCE: One last word of advice. I wouldn’t waste my time with Sally Venter – she’ll only cause you grief.
FORSIE: What do you mean?
VINCE: The fact is – I been in there. I know the territory.
Forsie stares at him, blankly.
VINCE: (Smiling smugly) You scheme she’s a virgin? So’s the big
hole-of-Kimberley. (pp. 70–71)

Yet, despite these similarities and shared experiences, the two friends have dif-
ficulty communicating on any significant issues. Slabolepszy structures his
whole play about this inability to communicate. Forsie has clearly set up this
moment, so that he can talk to Vince about the situation at home, but Vince, possibly
sub-consciously aware of this, keeps shutting out the issue, by shifting the
focus of their activities to extraneous matters: the soccer manager, his love-life,
the roadhouse, the waiter. By being purposefully irresponsible, he can avoid the
showdown to come. When it does, we already know enough about the two, their
origins and their dreams to share in the agony of their disintegrating lives.

The introduction of September is an important structural move by the play-
wright. In the first place, his presence provides Vince – and thus the author – with
a useful tool with which to postpone the final confrontation and increase the ten-
sion in this already tautly structured play. Every time Forsie insists on confronting
the issues, Vince will start calling for September and creating a diversion. In the
second place, he becomes an external point of reference whereby the basic dif-
ference between the two friends is highlighted. Whereas Forsie displays a symp-
pathetic though patronizing interest in – and later concern for – him, Vince quick-
ly turns what starts as a drunken game into a vicious attack on the waiter, vent-
ing his frustrations on the innocent bystander. To Vince, and ultimately and dev-
astatingly to Forsie as well, September is nothing more than one more object in
his environment. Which, if generalized, perhaps gives us this play’s most com-
pelling socio-political message. But, even more significant, is the implication that
the gulf of incomprehension yawning between them and September, might just
be more easily bridged than the one torn in their friendship.

Three: Black theatre and the colonial experience – Zakes Mda
and We shall sing for the fatherland

Attitudes towards the use of the term ‘black theatre’ have been greatly varied in
South Africa (see Steadman, 1984, pp. 224–5 for instance), but by and large it
had by the mid 1980s been accepted as a distinctive theatrical subsystem within
the country and, in terms of audiences perhaps the largest one in the total
system. It is in many ways comparable to its counterpart in America, but with
significant characteristics of its own. To define what one means by it is slightly
more difficult, but to lead us to a working definition here, let us start with the fol-
lowing somewhat loaded but conveniently open formulation:

Black theatre can be seen to be theatre which identifies with a set of
values. It is theatre which deals with the lives, the needs and the aspi-
rations of the majority of South Africans, and which tries to instil a
consciousness in its audience of what it means to be ‘Black’.
(Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984, p. 140.)
What makes this definition useful is that it makes room for the kind of cross-cultural creation we find in plays like Woza Albert and Gangsters (in other words plays not exclusively written or even performed by blacks) and it gives one something of the mental set which characterizes both 'serious' black playwriting and current critical approaches to the phenomenon itself. Unfortunately it also becomes an exclusive definition, based on intent alone and not on structural and systemic issues as well - and the latter are what interests me here. It virtually excludes such matters as who the audiences are, who the writers are, and where the roots lie. It thus, inevitably, could be used to exclude all theatre which is traditional (in the African sense) or aimed merely at entertainment. Much of the popular melodrama and musical drama still being performed is the fare sought after by large numbers of the audiences (the legendary popularity of Sam Mhangwane's The unfaithful woman and Gibson Kente's work is proof enough of that), but it is not sufficiently catered for in this definition, as is much of the writing in the African vernaculars. However, a number of the foregoing forms may in fact be seen as constituting subsystems of their own, all supportive of and context to, the kind of theatre we are discussing here.

In view of the foregoing points, I would propose the following simplified working definition of black theatre for this discussion:

Plays written in English by black authors, dealing with issues pertinent to the black experience.

It is a little more specific, yet still almost alarmingly open, and poses a great deal of problems when we come to a study of the theatrical systems within which these plays are performed. The work of Gibson Kente is no problem: it is perhaps the nearest thing to true 'black theatre' in the sense that it is by a black author, writing about black experience, performing with black performers, for black audiences in venues basically only accessible to such audiences. Even though the theatrical paradigm - and indeed the theatrical structure of the business - is Western to a large extent, it is a closed theatre system, along the same lines as the Afrikaans system. The work of Maishe Maponya and Matsemela Manaka are similar, but they do go further, dealing with situations of contact between whites and blacks, aimed at a white audience as well and on occasion utilizing hybrid venues (the Market Theatre for example). Even more problematic are the more overtly 'literary' works of Fatima Dike and Zakes Mda, originally written for and created and performed within hybrid/white venues and indeed within the English system.

Despite these difficulties, the above definition - or something like it - was employed throughout the 1970s and 1980s to signal an awareness of the emerging new theatrical power of black playwrights, performers and audiences - an emergence which at first stood in sharp opposition to the two entrenched systems. Which brings us where we need to be: to the published texts.

Once again there are quite a few sub-categories of playwriting here. Besides the kind of distinctions discussed above, we also find two basic kinds of playwriting developing in parallel here, as in the case of English theatre: the solitary writer in his study, and the group writer in the theatre. The published texts are few, but we do find representatives of both kinds of writing among them.
In the first category we find writers whose plays have largely been structured on paper and in which the dialogue is of prime importance. This is the literary tradition pioneered in 1935 by Herbert Dhlomo with his *The girl who killed to save (Nonqause the Liberator)*, the first published play in English by a black writer, and followed up in his other works. This category also includes work by Fatima Dike, Ronnie Govender, Bob Leshoai, Zakes Mda, and Lewis Nkosi. These plays have by and large been cast in traditional western theatrical mold, reinforced by formal schooling and the British amateur dramatic tradition. The texts are thus less dependent on song, movement and visual imagery than on verbal communication, and are often meant to be read rather than performed. (This same tradition is echoed in the African language plays, written and published for use in schools – see Chapter 3 for example.) On the other hand, most of these works are thematically complex, rich in metaphor and on occasion manage to come alive in reading – and even in performance.

Because of the volatile and polemical nature of black theatre in the period under discussion, and in view of its beleaguered position in some ways, a great deal of writing however was done in production and was purposely non-literary, non-western (in the traditional sense) and primarily performance oriented. The performers aimed for immediate impact and dynamic reaction, not long term reflection. The plays, when performed, abound in visual and aural images which are often simply and directly presented in performances which do not have the benefits of modern theatres. In this context the actor becomes the primary focus of attention, and the primary tool of the playwright. It is exciting, vital and immediate theatre – but often provides us with strangely sterile-looking texts. Each text is little more than the outlines of a story, an indication of performance potential for something which may change from performance to performance, and from audience to audience. It is surprising, and gratifying, therefore that we do have some of these texts available today (see Bibliography). Among the published works are the plays of Gibson Kente, Matsemela Manaka, Maishe Maponya, Shimane Mekgoe, Makwedini Mtsaka, Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Mthuli Shezi, as well as the texts created by a variety of co-operative ventures, which we shall be returning to later. In the majority of cases these plays fulfill the requirements of the original definition given above, being plays about being black in South African society, and drawing their vitality and shape from all the traditions feeding into the cultural melting pot in which they are formed.

Again, what we are dealing with here are not two mutually exclusive categories, but simultaneous and interacting forms, which feed and support each other. In this way the admirable plays of Fatima Dike (*The sacrifice of Kreli; The first South African*) most probably owe much to the fact that the playwright was a resident playwright with the Space Theatre and could reconcile African history and myth with modern day events through a judicious use of certain Western theatrical techniques. Zakes Mda's finely structured plays on the other hand become compelling theatre through the use of performance techniques inherited from African forms, including mime, dancing and singing.

While Gibson Kente was probably the most prolific playwright of all, Zakes Mda is surely one of the most accomplished craftsmen. His published work, among which two Amstel Award winning plays, not only displays fine structural
and verbal qualities, but illustrates a strong sense of theatre and fantasy. Thematically his plays, though all concerned with the realities of the black experience, cover a wide range of issues, from the plight of migrant workers in Lesotho (The hill) and a conversation between a pimp and God (Dead end) to a justification for the armed struggle (Dark voices ring). But through all these plays there runs the thread of a single theme: dreams for the future, and the individual's commitment to them. Mda is a writer greatly concerned with the social function of art, and sees his writing as something which draws on and reflects social, political, economic and historical factors in his society, in South Africa (Mda, 1984: 296). This attitude is directly reflected in his writing, for the dreams, whatever they are, are concerned with this society and the people who find themselves in it. On the other hand his artistic control of his medium enables him to turn what could simply have been mere rhetoric into persuasive theatre which serves his cause remarkably well.

This point is well illustrated by the title play in his collection We shall sing for the fatherland. It is short, like all the plays in the volume, and simply constructed. As in the Slabolepszy play, the title is important, for it is both ironic and prophetic, besides having a poetic ring to it. Set in South Africa, where the Afrikaner emphasis on the 'vaderland' and on 'vaderlandslieder' has been so powerful a unifying force, the use of the word fatherland gains a number of ironic echoes running back through time to Hitler's Germany and Caesar's Rome: echoes of patriotism gone awry, echoes of military victory, echoes of conquerors, dividers and rulers. At the same time the word refers to a dream, an ideal, for which his characters – and all their companions – once fought, and for which they now still may sing. They are disillusioned, yet proud, lauding their new, albeit imperfect, fatherland – for it is, at least, theirs too now.

The basic plot concerns two ex-soldiers of the 'Wars of Freedom', now surviving by dint of their military 'operations' in the well to do suburbs (the 'operational areas'), launched from their 'headquarters' in a public park. Through their eyes we then see a series of characters moving past – members of the new society which has been created by their battles in the Wars of Freedom. They discuss each of these characters, admiring them. But then they are rejected by these people whom they have helped to achieve their present positions. At the end of the play they have frozen to death in the park, and their spirits return to see what has happened to their world.

By inverting the normal look at things – by looking at what had been rather than what is – Mda gains artistically in a number of important ways. In the first place he distances events and can draw his audience into his play bereft of their normal expectations. The situation is not the here-and-now of South Africa, but some land of its own – although the references are very familiar. (It is a distancing technique also well used by J.M. Coetzee in Waiting for the Barbarians, for example). The result is that the issues can be looked at without the expected stock reactions of either total agreement or total rejection. Secondly, the inversion of the normal order of things enables the writer's superb ironic talent to have full play. By placing his characters at a kind of historical crossroads as it were, he invests them with an ability to see the future in the light of the past.
Thus the issue in the play is not simply the fact that the colonials have at last regained the fatherland they had been bereft of by the colonialists, but something more complex and more compelling.

The plot presents us with what appears to be a sad situation, one in which the two old freedom fighters find themselves forgotten now that the wars are over. They are even – ironically – chased from ‘their’ park (a resounding metaphor for their country, significant in South African terms especially) by Ofisiri, one vastly inferior to them (‘only a trooper’), but part of the new order they had helped create. They are ignored now by the new nobility – the businessman, the banker, the young lady and the civil servant – who are all too occupied in fulfilling the demands of the society they have finally been given. Yet, initially, all this is only as it should be to the Sergeant and Janabari:

JANABARI: I am proud of what we have achieved.
SERGEANT: And proud of all the good we see around us – good brought about by our work.
JANABARI: Proud to see our young men and women holding positions which used to be held only by our colonial masters.
(p. 18)

But when they eventually, having been doomed to sleep in the cold of the park and die there, attempt to sing their song for the fatherland, the words do not come. So they go to sleep without singing. In this symbolic moment, Mda poses his central question: are the Wars of Freedom ever won? Are they perhaps not simply an ongoing struggle in which the system itself never changes, it simply changes hands?

It is a question which does not only point forward to South Africa, but also reverberates agonizingly back through the history of all post-colonial Africa.

Within this metaphor work the playwright manages to create two remarkable characters who give life to what may so easily have become simply another stock ‘protest’ play with stereotyped characters chosen to illustrate a premise. The Sergeant-major and Janabari are not angels, nor are they superhuman. They display such common human qualities as fear, hunger, envy, doubt and duplicity, which make their observations about, and reactions to, the events they observe and experience so much more poignant and credible. Their exchanges, particularly about their ‘campaigns’ and their relationship has the humour of a comic turn in a vaudeville presentation, but one is constantly aware of the unmentioned realities behind the simple banter.

Four: The meeting ground – Barney Simon and Cincinatti, scenes from city life

One of the terms often employed to get away from the implied ethnicity in the terms ‘black theatre’, ‘Afrikaans theatre’ and ‘English theatre’ has been ‘alternative theatre’. It is a rather unspecific term, used in various ways over the past few years by different writers, ranging from a synonym for ‘black theatre’ (by Tomaselli, 1981b, for example) to a simple opposition to established ‘legitimate’ theatre – as a synonym for ‘fringe’ or even ‘experimental’ theatre therefore. For
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the purposes of this discussion I should like to propose the following working definition:

It is a hybrid form of theatre, created under workshop conditions and resulting from the mingling of the various theatrical, linguistic and social traditions in South Africa.

This is very much a temporary definition, good only for the period under discussion (approximately 1970 to 1985) for its name, by its very etymology, implies opposition to some kind of 'alternative', some other fixed point. The alternative of the moment was the ethnically and linguistically defined theatres discussed before, theatre which can in reality only deal with the issues of a clearly defined ethnic community - for the structures that existed in the past did not allow for true cross-cultural, and therefore truly South African, theatre. Facilities for such presentation had to be created outside and despite the social, political and theatrical establishment.  

The result was the creation of a number of 'homes' for alternative theatre, starting with Union Artists' Dorkay House and leading up to the founding of venues such as the Space Theatre, the Baxter Theatre, the Glass Theatre, the Abbey Theatre and the Market Theatre. These were all places where theatre could be 'made' in workshop format, feeding in the experiences of director and actors, and could be presented to multi-racial audiences by multi-racial casts. Alongside these specific venues we also find numerous alternative theatre companies forming in the 1970s (Experimental Theatre Workshop '71, Junction Avenue Theatre Company, the Troupe Theatre Company), many of them short-lived, particularly the student companies which became so popular at the beginning of the 1980s.  

Today, with the removal of most of the legal bars on this kind of theatre, the Performing Arts Councils have also re-created facilities for it - and thus in a sense making the term something obsolete for the moment. But for the period under discussion, it will suffice.  

Having its roots in aspects of the commedia dell'arte and the theories of theatre practitioners such as Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowsky and Richard Schechner, the concept of a group-made play rests on the assumption that the performance is far more important than the text. Its fundamental process is improvisation based on the experiences of the actors and its text evolves from a visual and aural presentation of feelings, beliefs and awarenesses elicited during the workshop sessions. This is a far cry from the conventional playwriting process we have come to know through western theatre, in which a preliminary written text is given to the actors for performance. The results of such a creative process have seldom led to a major work of dramatic art (from the literary point of view), for it tends to provide us with a number of loose scenes based on experiences by the individual actors/characters rather than an integrated and a sharply focussed look at a central issue. However it has been responsible for some major theatrical experiences, for it is primarily a theatrical process, intended for that magic moment in the theatre when actors and audience commune around a given issue.

In South Africa this process not only links up with the vital indigenous tradition of communal performance (see Larlham, 1985 and Coplan, 1985, for example),
but it also became a necessary tool through which creative artists could attempt to bridge the chasms of ignorance that had been created by the divisive nature of the society and its formal and informal structures. By bringing together actors from varying backgrounds, having differing concepts of – and even ideologies about – society, the playmakers could explore areas of South African life inaccessible to a single playwright limited by his own experience and acculturated value system (see Chapter 3 and Fleischman, 1990).

Some of the more significant theatrical pieces in the recent history of our theatre are to be found among the many works produced in this category over the years: Sizwe Bansi is dead by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona (1972), Survival by Workshop '71 (1976), Woza Albert by Barney Simon, Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema (1981), Marabi and Sophiatown by Junction Avenue Theatre Workshop (1982 and 1986), Asinamali and Sarafina! by Mbongeni Ngema and cast (1985 and 1987), You strike the woman, you strike the rock by Phyllis Klotz and cast. There have also been the whole range of so-called 'workers' plays' of the 1980s, which were created within the trade union movement and have been well documented by Astrid von Kotze (1988). Certainly the most consistently successful and creative in this field has been Barney Simon of The Company at the Market Theatre. Besides Woza Albert, Simon's collaborative works include such notable productions as Cincinatti (1979), Black dog/Inj'emmnyama (1984), Outers (1985), and Born in the RSA (1985).

Simon is a remarkable 'prime mover' in this respect. A creative writer himself, he has the ability to inspire group cohesion and creation while at the same time welding together the often disparate ideas of his heterogeneous cast into some kind of aesthetic unity. In Black dog/Inj'emmnyama, for example, he and his cast used the events of 1976 as the focus, and related the experiences of a number of individuals to that traumatic occurrence. By linking up their experiences, the collection of anecdotes cohere to form a single play of remarkable impact. In Outers the focus becomes the lives of a few tramps and their hangers on in Joubert Park. Through their eyes, in something like impressionist format, we see the life about us from another perspective, a perspective also used by Mda in We shall sing for the fatherland, albeit for another purpose.

Cincinatti, an early work by Simon and his cast, illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. The play itself has been one of the most popular serious plays in recent theatre history, to be counted in the company of Fugard's work, Slabolepszy's Saturday night at the Palace and Simon and company's own Woza Albert. It also established a model for this kind of explorative and 'alternative' approach to the cultural and racial situation in the country.

Once more the title of the play is significant. 'Cincinatti' was the name of a well-known night club in Johannesburg which had been closed down by the police. In the play the multi-racial club becomes a symbol for the dreams the characters have for themselves, the city and the country itself:

Cincinatti, Ah –
Who stopped the colour wheel from turning
Rainbow colours gliding round the room
We weren't afraid to dance together
With freedom floating like a lost balloon.
This concept of the club as a haven somehow outside the restrictions of the larger society becomes the focal point for a number of dialogues, presented as little vignettes, scenes from city life, as the very significant subtitle suggests. The discussions are all inspired by or at least refer to the traumatic closing of the club, but the club itself is seldom the real cause of the action within the particular episode. Abraham and Thembsie meet at the station, not at the club; so do Pieter and Arthur; Candy picks Pieter up outside Arthur’s flat—after ‘meeting’ Pat inside, Pat who has only been to Cincinatti once; and so on. While the dream of the club, of the ‘other’ world of the might-have-been or the might-someday-be which each episode reveals is somehow symbolized by the dream palace that has been destroyed by the ‘real’ world (brutally symbolized by the police), the scenes themselves deal with small, intimate moments between individuals. The effect is thus something like that of a montage rather than of a full-scale, premeditated painting; like a medley of tunes, rather than a full symphony: the significance of it lies not in the artist’s original and clearly-structured vision, but in the personal gestalt the receiver is enabled to set up. There is no real ‘storyline’, just these impressionistic sketches.

In a sense the central weakness of this approach is illustrated by the sub-title to the play: Scenes from city life. All Simon’s other collaborative work (including the dynamic and extremely theatrical Woza Albert), relies on a tenuous central concept (the closing down of a multi-racial night club) to bind together the loosely conceived scenes in the play. The result is that there is no really compelling intrigue to carry the action along, nor a sound enough structure to focus the audience’s attention on cardinal issues. It is a subtle, but extremely visual and aural technique which can elicit marvellous emotional responses in a theatre, but often less so on paper.

On the other hand, the power of this kind of playmaking lies in its honesty, in a sense in its non-specific point of view (determined by each character/actor himself), in the way each experience is verified in the speech patterns and cultural references provided by the actor. Sheila’s nostalgic references to lichees and mangoes, Pieter’s to beeswors and pampoen for example are more than stereotyped expressions employed for descriptive purposes, they arise from a much more fundamental cultural bedrock. In their cases it includes experiences of and reactions to fundamental and imposed societal mores – including a multi-racial urban society and apartheid principles in action: mores and principles momentarily set aside in the dream world of Cincinatti. The point is: the characters in the play are almost all, in some way or other, moving outside the law. The society we see in the play is not ‘normal’, but ‘abnormal’: it includes strippers, whores, pimps, drug-addicts, drunks and various kinds of sexual perverts. Into this world the play introduces two naïve rural visitors: Abraham from Zululand and Pieter from the Karoo. The play thus deals with an ‘abnormal’ subculture,
within an ‘abnormal’ society. In the process it enables us to perceive – and perhaps identify with the crises in – the human lives that exist below and behind the abnormality.

**Conclusion**

The twenty years of South African theatre between 1976 and 1996 have been exciting, inventive and – in many ways – influential. Created within a society teeming with problems and possibilities, it has been a mirror in which the audiences saw themselves, their dreams (be they ideals, nightmares, fantasies, or daydreams) and their creations honestly and with far more sympathy than they often allow themselves. And much of this excitement was fired by the traumatic socio-political events of 1976–1986, for it was a period of theatrical vitality which provided a stimulating environment for the further evolution of established writers and for the inspiration of new talent. This chapter has sought to highlight a few key witnesses to that period. One would like to believe that they, and the works they created, went a long way towards preparing the way for that mythical ideal: a uniquely South African theatre in which the playwright, as witness and as craftsman, has in a sense become re-integrated as a pivotal and integral part of the theatre, rather than as an adjunct to the dominant literary system.

**Notes**

1. In the ensuing discussion I shall be looking at published theatrical texts only, which of course leaves out of reckoning a very large number of other works which may be as significant, for the criteria used by publishers are not necessarily theatrical, but somewhat more literary. However, I believe the currently available published texts do provide us with quite a useful overview of the range of dramatic writing of the post-Soweto period, if read against the background of the social, political, economic, cultural and theatrical trends of the time. Of course a great deal of attention has been paid to the other, more informal and ‘alternative’ work in Section 1.

2. See for example Kavanagh, 1981, p. ix on this. Provisional statistics gathered by the Centre for SA Theatre Research point to a very lively interest in ‘theatre’ in Soweto for example – more than 20% of the respondents during a survey expressing interest in it. While the concept of theatre must be broadly interpreted here (to include musical concerts as well, I suspect), it does strengthen the argument that black theatre in fact constitutes a separate and unique theatrical subsystem in South Africa.

3. This fact was particularly well illustrated for me by a 1981 production of *Dark voices ring* directed by Lynn Dalrymple with students from the drama department at the University of Zululand. The performance took place during a conference of University Lecturers of Drama at the University of Natal, Durban.

4. Theoretically, thus the ‘alternative’ of the 1990s would need to be a rejection of the trends being described in this section, for by 1990 they had become something like the norm in the system. So what was to be next from the non-conformists? A revitalized classical theatre? Formal productions of Chekhov, Gilbert and Sullivan or Japanese Noh plays? Certainly musical shows based on nostalgia about popular music and musicians were proliferating by 1993. Was this ‘alternative’, or merely ‘escapist’? Perhaps the time for rebellion is not quite there when the whole society is
in a turmoil of self-examination. Once there is a 'new South Africa' there will be a 'new South African theatre' and something to be against. (See Chapter 9.)

5 See Hauptfleisch, Fourie and Cornelissen, in Hauptfleisch, 1985, on the rise of the small companies. Steadman, 1985, pp.26–28, has more to say on this 'alternative' movement.

6 The most natural term to use would seem to be 'workshop theatre' or 'improvisational theatre', options which were used more frequently later (inter alia by Mark Fleischman in an influential article in SATJ 4(1) 1990), but in the South African circumstances of the time, the 'alternative' concept said something about attitudinal issues which the other term avoids. The concept was widely used at the time, and it and some of its manifestations were discussed at some length in a whole range of publications (e.g. Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984 and Kavanagh, 1985, as well as various articles by Tomaselli, Mshengu, Blecher, Purkey and others).

7 It is interesting to note the extent to which food becomes a kind of *leitmotiv* in this play: Thembsie taunts the old man with eating too much mielie meal, Pieter and Arthur go drinking together, Vicky makes up to Hedley by preparing breakfast for him. *Cincinnati* in a way also represents a spiritual feeding place for the wandering spirits in the play.
Athol Fugard’s status as South Africa’s best known playwright, and his reputation as writer of international acclaim has, it seems, largely been based on what he writes about, rather than on how he sets about it. Thus he has risen to a great deal of prominence for example, for his intense and life-long opposition to Apartheid, becoming a symbol of the artist against oppression (along with such others as Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Mongane Serote, André P. Brink, Es’kia Mphahlele, and Breyten Breytenbach). However the majority of critics are divided on this, many finding his works rooted in, yet transcendent of, the merely local and therefore far more ‘universal’ in meaning. Others again argue that his politics are naive and based on an outmoded form of ‘liberalism’, or that he is so irrevocably tied to his own position as bourgeois white South African, that his works are inevitably counterproductive of the political aims of the majority. In fact, these and similar issues quickly became and remain a major area of debate in Fugard studies.

Of course the matter is far more complex than this and in the long term it certainly cannot be reduced to a simple either-or issue concerned with where Fugard stands in terms of the South African liberation struggle. In fact, even the most critical commentators are uncomfortably aware of this. However, because of the heat generated, the debate has tended to obscure Fugard’s equal, if not more important and long-term, contribution to theatre in the world today. Since the former issue is dealt with extensively elsewhere (a comparison of the studies by Michael Green, Robert Kavanagh, Martin Orkin, Russel Vandenbroucke and Dennis Walder would provide some idea of the opposing positions held in this regard), this chapter and the following one will look at certain formal aspects...
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of his dramaturgy, which has impacted enormously on South African theatre and the playwriting paradigm over the past thirty years.

It has often been said of Athol Fugard that he is the prime example of the playwright, the constructor of plays in physical, theatrical space – and he himself has always striven consciously to define his artistry in this fashion, as his published Notebooks and a variety of interviews attest. It is a quality he almost certainly derives from the extent of his personal involvement in the process of theatre-making, as, inter alia writer, scribe, teacher, actor, designer, stage manager and director. He is not, and has never been, a study-bound writer of 'literary' playtexts. He is a practical craftsman, thoroughly versed in the tools of his trade, whose every play has, at least in part, been shaped in rehearsal and had its first production under his personal direction. In the majority of cases he would play one of the roles as well. It is a way of working which apparently evolved from his early days of 'poor theatre' (in both the fundamental financial sense, and in the more theoretical Grotowskian one) when he worked with amateur black actors, in the badly equipped halls and rooms of the townships of Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth – experimenting, improvising, learning, teaching. This was the late 1950s and early 1960s. Some of those colleagues from the early days were to become invaluable partners in a wide range of projects over the years and include such award-winning performers as John Kani, Winston Ntshona, Zakes Mokae and Yvonne Bryceland. The basic process evolved there has since become the only way he can and will work – and the eventual advantages are obvious to anyone confronted with the complex and tightly woven texture of his best plays in performance, for they become moments of total theatrical communication in which images, words, sounds, gestures, and actions become one indelible statement.

This approach has caused him to evolve a very personal style of theatre, one through which he is able to utilize the particular – i.e. the details and realistic surface of life about him – in order to probe fundamental human reactions to specific, but generally encountered existential problems. Despite Russel Vandenbroucke's disclaimer that 'Fugard cannot be considered either a stylistic or thematic innovator' (Vandenbroucke, 1986: p. 264), the form in which Fugard has chosen to cast his thoughts has been as influential as the content of his works. When the theatre-making processes and the products they produced were introduced to that generation of writers, performers and audiences who had grown up with a colonial heritage of British Drama (Shakespeare to Shaw basically), a revolution was ignited in the art form, the result of which was those works we so distinctively recognize as South African theatre now. At the same time Fugard's own discoveries in theatre-making have enabled thousands of theatre-goers to identify with and enjoy his explorations of the world of his 'region' and have provided the world canon of English plays with a few immensely performable works that appear set to become true twentieth century classics. If there are no utterly new inventions there, they constitute excellent examples of how the existing conventions, forms and styles may be integrated and reinterpreted in the service of the performance. (We look at a specific example of his theatre syntax in Chapter 9.)

In the evolution of Fugard's theatre, two elements recur constantly in some way or another as specific concepts in both his writing itself, and in his thinking
about writing. They are the **image** and the **word**. The way in which he has struggled with and sought to integrate, utilize and give physical, theatrical life to these two concepts has to a great extent shaped his own distinctive form of theatre and his presentation of characters and the world in which they live. Let us start by considering them individually.

**The image**

*Boesman and Lena* opens on an empty stage. A man appears, heavily burdened, followed after a few moments by a woman, similarly burdened. They have their total worldly possessions on their backs, including their shack, which they set about assembling on stage. When the play ends after two acts, the house has been smashed, so they pick it up and walk off in the same way, everything on their backs, and the stage is empty once more.

It is a visual image as strong as any in the canon of contemporary theatre. Of course, the echoes of similar images from Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*) and Brecht (*Mother Courage*) are obvious and indeed useful. But the image itself is actually a very personal one for Fugard, with its roots in two generative images which Fugard describes in an often-quoted passage from his *Notebooks* (July 1968: p. 166). The fuller version, quoted here and containing the crucial last line, comes from Fugard's own Introduction to *Boesman and Lena and other plays* (p. xxii):

> Realized that the genesis of the play lies possibly in an image from over ten years ago – Coloured man and woman, burdened with all their belongings, whom I passed somewhere on the road near Laingsburg. It was sunset and they were miles from the nearest town. Then of course, also the old woman near Cradock on the drive back from Norman’s trial. ‘Put your life on your head and walk.’

Fugard is immensely aware of his reliance on the image in his playwriting – and he defines the concept for himself by paraphrasing Ezra Pound (Fugard: *Notebooks*, p. 77): ‘the instant in time’. In his case it is very often a visual image which serves as a generating point for the plays. Thus there is the studio photograph of a man sitting with a cigarette in one hand and a pipe in the other which was used as the basis for the improvisation of *Sizwe Bansi is dead*. The main ‘story’ of the play starts and ends with the Man (Sizwe Bansi) striking precisely that pose – the pose of a man with a dream. The play explores the dream and the forces that threaten it. *Statements after an arrest under the Immorality Act* also arises from a photographic image: a set of six photographs in a police file taken during the arrest of a couple contravening the Act which prohibits any sexual relationship across racial barriers (Fugard, Introduction to *Statements*, 1974). The re-enacted ‘photographs’ of the two people, trying to hide their nakedness as the lights flash on them, becomes a stunning visual correlative for and preamble to the verbal ‘exposure’ they are subjected to in their ‘statements’ that follow.

The image may be as simple as a photograph or an old coat, or it may be more complex, more verbal, as we shall see in the discussion of *Boesman and Lena* in Chapter 9. The generative image Fugard supplies for *People are living there* in the same Introduction (p. xii) is a case in point:
One image has resurrected an old complex of ideas: Milly's panic when she realizes late at night that she has spent the whole day in her dressing gown.

Just that. But it becomes the central image with which the eventual play opens:

An arm comes up. The light goes on. We see Milly. About fifty years old, dressed in an old candlewick dressing gown, her hair disordered, her face swollen with sleep. She waits expectantly, as if the light and chimes might evoke some response in the silent house.

The play then goes on to explore that existential panic, as Milly tries to get something from the few hours of the day that remain, something which will make sense of her life. Which she does by creating an image of her own, an image of 'having fun': a party with cake, cold drinks and party hats.

In this way, as each play develops, Fugard gradually refines and then extends the original image into a network of related or complementary images. Yet the original, generative image remains virtually unaltered at the core of the play, must in fact remain unaltered for it to remain the same play, as Walder (1984: 4) has shown. Thus for example, according to Fugard, *Hello and goodbye* originated from two very disparate images he had noted in his Notebooks, the first a memory of his crippled father's pain, crying out in the dark (p. ix-x) and the second a face from his youth, a man standing motionless on a street corner in Port Elizabeth (p. xiii). Unlike some of those used in other plays, neither of these images becomes a direct physical presentation on stage, though Johnnie does narrate his father's pain and eventually his own solitary vigils on the street, watching the prostitutes. Yet they permeate the whole complex of images Fugard created in the eventual play, including Johnnie taking up his father's crutches at the end of the play, to become his father (a 'resurrection', long awaited by the man at the cross-roads?), Hester tearing open the boxes, spilling their contents on the floor in search of the 'compensation' – and her life.

Not all the images are equally successful or course, as one might see from some of the early plays (for example *No-good Friday, Nongogo*). Some images are rather belaboured and obvious, not quite intrinsic to the action of the particular play, and others are slightly out of focus, perhaps not quite worked through. *A Lesson from aloes*, while in some ways exceptionally well conceived in terms of the world Fugard is trying to look at, sets up the terms of the images in somewhat set-piece fashion, while *A place with the pigs* loses much through the non-specificity of its references and images. Certainly his 1991 play, *My children, my Africa*, lacks the impact of a strong central image or set of images through the characteristically loose-seeming chronological structure he chose. The play becomes what it uses as opening metaphor: a debate between the opposing parties across racial, sexual, and generational divides. Like so much of the angry agit prop theatre of the early 1980s in South Africa, the play becomes dependent on a series of narrative addresses to the audience for its exposition of character, and thus far more obviously verbal, far more overtly – even uncomfortably – cerebral, than is usual in Fugard. It is a fault he has attempted to rectify in *Playland*, his first essay
There is a word

Despite his frequent insistence that the words of the play are only a part of his ‘truth’ or meaning, Fugard is extremely fond of words and they are fundamental to his thinking and his writing. His dialogue for instance is colourful and expansive and his very individual use of regional dialects has become an important and distinctive attribute of his writing. It clearly links up with his interest in the ‘texture’ of things – including the details of the everyday – and his view of himself as a ‘regional writer’. Surface realism is a tool he uses constantly to seduce his audiences into joining him in an exploration of his far from mundane themes, and the sounds and rhythms of language varieties are superbly useful in simulating such realism. (See Du Preez, 1985; Vandenbroucke, 1986; Kavanagh, 1985 and Banning, 1989 on Fugard’s language.)

The plays often also contain inordinately long speeches, which is one of the most obvious markers of the didacticism which underlies a great deal of Fugard’s writing – and indeed that of most serious writers in South Africa. Furthermore, while the language is made to seem sparse and tight, it remains very self-consciously ‘language’: rhythmical, symbolic, image-laden and aware of the meaning of words and their power. The last-mentioned attribute is particularly interesting in terms of Fugard’s dramatic form.

To illustrate, let us return to Boesman and Lena for a moment. At a point early in the second act, Boesman describes the bulldozing of the squatter camp, as
well as his own emotional reaction to the destruction of their ‘pondok’ (= shack, lean-to). He is talking to Lena, on a bare stage, with their personal belongings – a few pots, pans, bottles and the makings of a lean-to – piled about them. The excited description is pure narrative, enhanced by the gestures and mocking physical impersonations of Lena and the other squatters reacting to the event. In the midst of this, Boesman turns to Lena and forcibly demands her attention. ‘Listen now,’ he says, ‘I’m going to use a word ...’ (my emphasis).

The word in this case is freedom, and the play has been structured around that concept and the possible nuances of meaning it – and its antithesis – may have. But the word, and the concept itself, have their roots in the generative visual image described above: two people carrying their lives on their backs. Thus ‘freedom’ for Boesman and Lena becomes a Thoreausque desire for casting off the coils of possession, of shedding the load of the past and even of one’s life, of the self. (‘Heavy’ is the word most often in Lena’s mouth, and it is applied to herself, her physical body and to her own life.)

As will be shown in Chapter 9, this is a concept mirrored exactly in the images Fugard supplies in his play. The empty stage, the burdened actors, the description of the razing of the shacks. But Boesman, the uneducated cast-out, seeks to define that image, that thought, by encapsulating it in a word – the one, single, defining and final word – by giving the thought a name: Freedom; so that image and word may become one.

Every single play Fugard has written contains this idea of The Word in some form or another – even the plays workshopped under his guidance (from The coat to The island). It is the ‘word’ as a means of coming to terms with, defining, explaining, gaining control of a reality the characters have difficulty comprehending. Not that the word is the same in each case (though certain words – freedom, the future, truth – do recur often enough to become thematic in his work), or even a single word. It can also be a phrase, a thought, or a verbal game of some kind. Whatever form it takes, the word derives from the theme which derives from the original generating image. But once set, it signals the key scenes in the play, becomes in a sense the verbalized image of the play’s fundamental focus and the issues surrounding this. It represents one of the ways in which Fugard’s characters seek to control and gain an understanding of the reality in the world about them. They are verbalizations of the emotions and thoughts stimulated by the variety of images in which the dramatist has involved them – and his audience.

Basically this concept of The Word appears in two guises in the plays: as ‘the word/idea/thought’ and as a name.

In the first case, a character will use a word consciously, a single word, often prefacing it with the warning that the word is to be used, or with some indication of the importance the word has for the situation or for the character’s own thinking. Thus for example:

‘That’s a big word ... Money. It could mean security ...’ (Nongogo, p. 74)
‘That’s a word, hey! Brothers! ...’ (No-good Friday, p. 123)
‘... independent. A big word isn’t it?’ (The bloodknot, p. 27)
Chapter 8

There is a word

‘There’s a word – beer does it in the dark – Brewing!’ (Hello and good-bye, p. 189)

‘I used to think the right word for me was numb. There wasn’t any Feeling.’ (People are living there, p. 167)

‘Remember your words when we jumped off ... Heavy words, Winston ... “Farewell Africa”.’ (The island, p. 67)

‘I’m proud! ... I teach my children how to spell that word.’ (Statements after an arrest under the Immorality Act, p. 90)

‘Caring. Not the most exciting of words, is it? Almost as humble as the tool. But that is the Alchemist’s Stone of human endeavour ...’ (Dimetos, p. 17)

‘You know what the really big word is, Helen ... I used to think it was “love” ... But there’s an even bigger one. Trust.’ (The road to Mecca, p. 31)

‘Home? Don’t use that word. I don’t know what it means anymore.’ (A place with the pigs, p. 29)

‘... my head was trying to deal with that one word: the Future! ... what does he really mean ...?’ (My children, my Africa, p. 60).

‘...we were in Hell. Ja! For your information you don’t have to wait for Judgement Day to find out what that word means. Hell is right here and now.’ (Playland, p.35)

On occasion the word is used on its own, without preamble, but with the same purpose. In such cases the word is often marked out for special emphasis in the printed text, usually with a capital letter – and is intended to be played that way in performance, with emphasis, as something strange and new and significant. In People are living there Milly recalls: ‘Every time, every chance – falling starts, black cats, white horses – every wish was Happiness! ... I had it. That night I mean ... Happiness.’ That then is what her party is about: a situation in which she tries to discover/recapture a brief moment of Happiness – or just to understand what the word means. In A place with the pigs Pavel rages at the pigs who have eaten the butterfly: ‘This is my punishment Praskovya ... to watch brutes devour Beauty and then fart ... to watch them gobble down Innocence and turn it into shit ...’. In My children, my Africa, the intellectual Mr M also talks in capital letters: ‘I’ve been sweating ... Because of those animals, the one called Hope, has broken loose and is looking for food ... It is as dangerous as Hate and Despair ...’ (Scene iv). In Playland the word Playland (p.16) is capitalized as is the magical Number Six, for it is seen as the Big One – the sixth commandment – the one broken by both characters in the play and for which they must forgive themselves and each other (e.g. p.34).

Elsewhere the word is on occasion introduced as a ‘thought’ or an ‘idea’:

‘I like the thought of this little white girl ... better than our future, ... It’s a warm thought for a man in winter. It’s the best thought I ever had and I’m keeping it ... Ja, there’s a thought there. What about you
Section 3

Witnesses

Morrie? You never had it before? ... that thought?
(The blood knot, Scene 3)

Alongside this word/thought pattern, Fugard also has another phrasing for the concept. It is found in the idea of ‘naming’. Virtually each play has a reference to names in it, and some plays are even structured around the concept (e.g. Nongogo and Sizwe Bansi is dead). Again, by putting a name to something, one gains a modicum of understanding of and control over it. The characters often define themselves, their lives and their world in this way. Like Sophia in Dimetos:

If I’m not a servant what am I? Mother? Sister? ... There’s also ‘friend’, ‘companion’ ... if the others are too personal. How do you see me Dimetos? Who am I?
(pp. 20–30)

To Dimetos the answer is simple, initially at least, yet complex, unfathomable. It lies simply in a name: Sophia. Later in the play Sophia finds herself redefined in terms of another name:

DIMETOS: ... I have no argument left, Sophia ... least of all with my fate.
SOPHIA: So I’ve finally got an identity. Not mother, sister, companion or friend ... but your fate.
DIMETOS: Part of it.

Knowing your name – or the name for what you are – has ontological status, becomes an insight into a fundamental truth. ‘Where do I begin?’ asks the former prostitute Queeny in Nongogo (p. 133) and Johnnie replies that ‘there is a name for everything’. So she gives him a name: ‘Nongogo. A woman for two and six’. It is who she is, what life has made her. Admitting that becomes the crucial moment in the play. It becomes ‘Acceptance’ – to use a Fugard-like formulation.

In Sizwe Bansi is dead the questions surrounding identity and a name gain a physical dimension in the structure and presentation of the play itself, as Sizwe Bansi switches pass-books, and accordingly identities, lives, status – with Robert Zwelinzima, so that he may have access to a job in the city. And it frightens him:

I don’t want to lose my name, Buntu (p. 36) ... Don’t make jokes, Buntu. Robert ... Sizwe ... I’m all mixed up. Who am I?
(p. 37)

His new friend, Buntu, is more practical:

Look, if someone was to offer me the things I wanted most in my life, the things that would make me, my wife, and my child happy, in exchange for the name Buntu ... You think I wouldn’t swop?

What’s in a name after all? Nothing but a (new) life. Perhaps.

Names and naming abound as devices in Master Harold ... and the boys. Thus, when the crisis arises in the relationship between Sam and Hally/Master Harold, it is shown physically in a number of images (inter alia of Sam dropping his trousers and of Hally spitting in his face), but given its most telling verbal form in Hally’s insistence that Sam change his mode of address:
HALLY  (Pause as Hally looks for something to say): To begin with, why don't you also start calling me Master Harold, like Willie. [...] 
SAM  (Quietly and very carefully): If you make me say it once, I'll never call you anything else again. 
HALLY  So? (The boy confronts the man.) Is that meant to be a threat? (p. 54)

The attitudes/feelings/antagonisms provoked by the names people are called in the course of the action roar through the play like a wildfire from here on, turning it into one of Fugard's most effective attacks on hypocrisy and racism.

An interesting and more extended form of naming occurs in what may be called the 'naming game'. Found in many of the plays, it is normally used to prepare the way for the central theme or to reinforce it. In Master Harold ... and the boys for example the naming game involves naming heroes, i.e. role models - which is what Hally is looking for to give direction in his confusion, and what Sam constitutes for both Hally and Willie. The play explores the pressures brought to bear on that delicate relationship by psychological and social forces raging within and around the three men. The physical equivalent of the naming game is the dancing lessons Willie receives from Sam. It is another image to be carried through and worked out in the rest of the play.

In Nongogo, when Sam facetiously tries to help Patrick select a name for his soon to be born child, it also turns into a game. They try out and discard a number of names, for as Patrick says, a name is 'all I'm ever likely to give it'. As the question of the name recurs at various points further on in the play, it begins to accumulate more and more weight, until it climaxes in Queeny's single-word admission of her previous life/occupation: 'Nongogo'. The game establishes and reinforces the central image of the play - a woman for two and six - and sets up the moment of revelation and acceptance, when Queeny reappears in the final scene: dressed to kill.

The naming game has a slightly different function in the opening scenes of Hello and goodbye, where it takes the form of a catalogue. Johnnie is shown counting off the seconds, naming the items surrounding him and planning his moves for the next day, in an effort to retain his sanity, to grasp some kind of reality with which to ward off or at least make manageable the unknown/unexplored and threatening world looming outside. The detailed reality of his memories appear in marked contrast to the slight, almost impressionistic set described for the play. Into this naming exercise comes the one name he has forgotten: his sister, Hester. She arrives like an alien, threatening his creation.

In a sense this game is the same one Lena plays in Boesman and Lena, when she tries to name all their stops on their road to the place they find themselves now. As if, by understanding that, being able to name every place, in the right order, she would understand her life. It is possibly futile, as Boesman proves, when he recites the correct sequence:

LENA  (pause ... she is loaded): Is that the way it was? How I got here? ... It doesn't explain anything. 
BOESMAN: I know. 
LENA: Anyway, somebody saw a little bit. Dog and a dead man. (They are ready to go.)
Knowing where you came from does not show you what you have on your back. All you can do is carry it, say the words, the names and the images.

Throughout both the foregoing sections we have seen the word and the image to be inextricably linked in the texture of Fugard's work. It is around and through this nexus of word/image that Fugard structures the action of his play – by supporting them with, and even converting them into, individual actions by his characters. In other words, by turning the abstract image/word into the 'carnal reality' of an actor in a physical space.

**The carnal reality of the stage**

For Fugard playwriting is a process of structuring and exploring a series of intensely laden images and concepts, rather than displaying or narrating a conventional story in the usual causal sequence.

When we consider the foregoing two aspects of his work, it becomes clear that, despite the often almost mundanely 'realistic' and seemingly conventional surface of the works, Fugard's theatre is far from being purely representational in the popular, conventional sense. There is a sparseness, a condensation of time and space, and a concern with the existential, even amid the seeming triviality of the sets and the 'ordinariness' of the characters, which go way beyond the surface of the 'story'. Yet, unlike his mentor, Samuel Beckett (see Vandenbergroucke, 1986: pp. 269–270), Fugard deliberately moves into and uses the surface of regional realism in parable fashion, making it a medium by which to get his audiences to come to grips with issues beyond the individual, the personal and the parochial. At the same time, to Fugard (as for Beckett) playwriting is a process of structuring and exploring a series of intensely laden images and concepts, rather than merely displaying or narrating a conventional story in the usual causal sequence.

What makes it work eventually, in the theatre, and what has given Fugard's work the stamina to endure and indeed gain popularity over three decades, is the simple fact with which we began this chapter: Fugard is a playwright, a maker of plays who works with living actors to create moments of theatre in living time and space. For him the whole process of writing/making a play is focused on one moment only: that highlighted moment when the performer moves out into the three-dimensional space before an audience, and lets the image happen. When the word, the image and all else take on physical life and become other human experiences to be witnessed, thought through, lived through.

Fugard calls this the 'living moment', for which he admits to having a fascination (Notebooks, p. 89). He describes it as:

... the actual, the real, the immediate, there before our eyes, even if it shares in the transient fate of all living monuments. I suppose the theatre uses more of the actual substance of life than any other art. What comes anywhere near theatre in this respect except possibly the painter using old bus tickets, or the sculptor using junk iron and driftwood? The theatre uses flesh and blood, sweat, the human voice, real pain, real time.
Let us end then, with a final look at how a craftsman integrates the image, the word and the actor-in-space-and-time into a ‘living moment’ of theatre. Let us look at one more scene from *Hello and goodbyee*.

The play takes place in a set made up of a pool of light, within which a few pieces of furniture suggest a room. The edge of the light suggests the walls of the room. But it also suggests that it may all be dream, or like a dream. People appear and disappear randomly, and time and space are fluid really – despite the solid furnishings. Hester has given up her hopes of finding the ‘compensation’, realizing it was never there. There is only life. So she moves to the edge of the light, greets Johnnie and leaves. He is lying on the ground, where he had fallen when she had pulled the crutches from under his arms as he revealed the fact of his father’s death.

*(Johnnie makes a move as to get up, then sees the crutches some distance away from him on the floor. He stares at them for a few seconds then very laboriously drags himself along the floor to them. With equal effort he holds them upright and goes onto them. He stands still, on one leg for a few seconds, then realizes he is standing on the wrong leg and changes over.)*

**JOHNNIE:** Why not? It solves problems. Let’s face it – a man on his own two legs is a shaky proposition. She said it was all mine. All of it – my inheritance. These, seeds ... and memories ... I’ve got a reason. I’m a man with a story. [...]  

What’s the word? Birth. Death. Both. Jesus did it in the Bible. *(Pause.)* Resurrection. *(Pause.)*

**CURTAIN**

By becoming his father, by assuming his crutches – and hence his past – Johnnie becomes someone else from the nervous, desperate figure in the opening scene of the play. Taking up the crutches becomes a symbol for taking up the burden of his father’s whole life, the trivia of which now lie spread around him in the contents of the boxes. The actual assumption of the burden is not simply verbalized, it is shown, in the image of the man on the crutches, and it is a conscious decision, as both the words and the actions suggest (e.g. the little touch of Johnnie switching legs). But then the whole event is given another dimension by the introduction of one word of resounding significance in the narrow world Johnnie occupies: ‘Resurrection’. As words, images and actions come together in the little pool of light called the stage, and one is confronted once again with that ultimate Biblical irony whereby to gain eternal life a man must first die, a man on crutches becomes a man resurrected. Johnnie’s first miracle.
Once in an empty space: 
An analysis of Fugard’s stagecraft in 
*Boesman and Lena*

In this chapter I would like to take the ideas expressed in Chapter 8 a little further and examine a few of the ways in which Athol Fugard makes use of the total language of drama in order to express the carnal reality of one concept and one word in a particular play. For many reasons, but primarily because I like the play exceedingly, I have chosen to end this section with a discussion of the freedom concept in *Boesman and Lena.*

I think most critics today are agreed that the basic function of drama is communication of a playwright’s concepts to an audience seated in a theatre. Indeed this is the fundamental premise of theatre semiotics (see for example Elam, 1980; Pavis, 1992; Carlson, 1990 and Mouton, 1989). The medium for such communication is the total play, the words-in-action performed by actors on a stage. The ‘vocabulary’ of that language consists of all the communicative cues (or communicative symbols) employed by the playwright and the performer (e.g. dialogue, chorus, song, gesture, movement, lighting, dance, etc.), while the ‘syntax’ of the language is the structural arrangements whereby the cues are united into one total communicative expression.

Clearly such a syntax would differ from play to play, from playwright to playwright and from age to age, though the principle might remain relatively constant. Within the bounds of certain external conditions (societal and environmental), each playwright has a virtually infinite number of possible combinations from which to choose, and the choice he finally makes has a major influence on the meaning of the total play. It is the syntax, the structuring of the individual elements into a unified whole, which turns the aggregate of all the various cues contained in the play into a single communicative act.

In effecting this kind of unification the dramatic form exhibits a singular dynamic quality which is of extreme importance in what is to follow. The point is that form (the total structure of syntax) does not influence the audience as a thing in itself, but simply controls our reactions to other elements in the play by presenting them to us in a certain way in a certain context. A specific form is a specific way of thinking and feeling – and therefore a specific way of expression.
It controls the thought processes and it is itself always a process, ongoing and complete only once the expression is complete.

Charles Morgan (in Corrigan and Rosenberg, 1964: 132-3) identifies this dynamic quality as follows:

... in a play, form is not and cannot be valuable in itself, only the suspense of form has value. In a play, form is not and cannot be valuable in itself, because until the play is over form does not exist.

Continuing on this, Susanne Langer (in Corrigan and Rosenberg, 1964: 5) argues that the situation in a play has its own 'organic' character, one which grows and develops as the play proceeds. All acts in a play are forward-looking and the play itself does not simply create a 'perpetual present moment', but rather a 'present filled with its own future'. The point is that 'sheer immediacy, an imperishable direct experience without the ominous forward movement of consequential action', as Langer puts it, would not be really dramatic.

The sense of destiny is there because of the fact that, while the form is in suspense (i.e. incomplete) for the audience, it has been conceived and executed as a complete and unified abstraction. By reconstruction and structuring the playwright has created a total situation in which all actions have been stripped to essentials and been given 'significant context'. In this way each prop, each character, each action in the play, no matter how real or unreal, becomes a meaningful item with a past, a present, and an imminent future within a total framework, the shape of which the audience does not yet know, but which it seeks to apprehend. Stanislavsky (1968: 175) expresses much the same idea with his concept of 'perspective', which is 'the calculated, harmonious interrelationship and distribution of the parts in a whole play or role ... the simplest entrance or exit on the stage, any action taken to carry out a scene, to pronounce a phrase, words, soliloquy, and so on, must have a perspective and an ultimate purpose.'

That total framework is the syntax of drama, and all vocabulary items – textual, theatrical or contextual – are made meaningful by it, in the same way that a word only achieves full meaning in a sentence.

Now, as shown in Chapter 8, Athol Fugard's plays tend to be very focused, utilizing a specific concept and providing it with what Fugard calls a 'Carnal Reality' on stage. In Boesman and Lena the question of freedom is one of the most important such concepts. It forms a major theme in Fugard's total message and is intrinsic to the play as a whole. In the discussion to follow I shall focus specifically on the way in which Fugard uses the physical qualities of the stage to communicate the basic characteristics of a rather complex view of personal freedom.

Let us, however, start with a brief look at the structure of the play as a whole, for it is fundamental to Fugard's dramatic technique.

The overt story-material of the play concerns two so-called coloureds who travel and live together in the area surrounding Port Elizabeth. Neither Boesman nor Lena has a fixed job and they have no home. They have literally been carrying their lives on their backs wherever they have been. Having settled in one place, they build a pondok, scrounge round for something to eat and enough to drink, stay on until evicted, and then move on to the next place, where the whole...
process repeats itself. In this way they simply drift on, crossing and re-crossing the same piece of earth, year in and year out.

From the general situation outlined above, Fugard selects as plot material a couple of hours during one night, just after Boesman and Lena have been evicted once again. The particular night he selects is critical, as it is one during which a subtle change is brought about in the relationship between the man and the woman. At the start of the play it is clear that Lena is physically and mentally dominated by Boesman. By the end of the play matters have not quite been reversed, but Lena has asserted herself and Boesman has been forced to acknowledge her and to accept certain things about himself. The development of the freedom concept is structured to run parallel to this dominance factor in the play. Boesman has had an awareness of personal freedom earlier that morning, but has lost it, while Lena gradually achieves such awareness through the course of the play. As her awareness grows, her independence and her ability to dominate Boesman also increase.

Because Fugard uses the situation around the campfire not only to discuss the rather abstract concept of freedom, but also a number of closely related themes, he first of all has to make a number of syntactical decisions, the most fundamental one concerning the temporal structure of his play. Is he to deal with the entire history of Boesman and Lena, by treating it in a chronological series of scenes (as Shakespeare might have done), or is he going to employ a vertical, or 'classical', structure? Because of the interrelated themes in the play, Fugard chose the latter approach. The result is a structure which may be illustrated as follows:

**Diagram 9.1 The temporal structure of Boesman and Lena**

![Diagram](image)

In this kind of structure the meagre surface incidents presented merely reflect the immediately visible part of a much deeper and more complex relationship between the characters. All that really takes place at the physical level on stage
is that Boesman and Lena enter and pitch camp. They discuss and argue about their travels until Outa appears. Thereupon Lena narrates various scenes from their past in monologue. When Outa dies, they strike camp and leave. However, the relationship is dealt with in more depth by means of various reference techniques, such as memory scenes, monologues, symbolism and in particular the verbal and gestural attitudes evoked by Outa.

In chronological time, or what Henri Gouhier (Tonelli, 1977) has termed 'time of plot', the action of the play could encompass as little as two and a half hours. This is represented by the solid line in this figure and is very close to the real time, or 'time of representation'. (The play runs for about an hour and forty minutes, with an hypothetical hour having passed between the first and second acts.) The action at this level is naturalistic, with Boesman building a real pondok and Lena making a fire, but time as such is not really important, and there are few time cues in the overt plot. (There is no stage direction regarding time in the text and only a few vague references to 'this morning', 'this afternoon', 'tomorrow', 'it is dark' and Lena's bewildered cry, 'Where did the sun go?')

At the imaginative level the plot encompasses a much greater span of time and space, dealing with their entire lives through references to the past and future. This is represented by the dotted lines in the figure. Time as a chronological factor is irrelevant here, beyond an awareness of now as opposed to the past and the future. Even such an awareness of now is hazy, and moves to a rhythm which is related to, yet different from, that of the overt plot. Gouhier's 'time of action', implying the interior poetic rhythm which regulates the action, is convenient here to describe the way in which the interior development of self-awareness has been structured by means of random images from an undefined past. These images are evoked by the incidents that occur around the fire and are verbally (and occasionally gesturally) articulated by the two characters as the play proceeds.

One of the concepts articulated from the very first moments of the play is the one of freedom. Verbally Fugard introduces the word only very late in the play, early in Act Two:

**BOESMAN:** ... then I went back to the place where our pondok had been. It was gone! You understand that? Gone! I wanted to call you and show you. There where we crawled in and out ... I could stand there? There was room for me to stand straight. You know what that is? Listen now. I'm going to use a word. Freedom! Ja, I've heard them talk it. Freedom! That's what the whiteman gave us.

While the word itself is produced somewhat self-consciously, almost as if it were a magic incantation, the concept is metaphorically illustrated by Boesman's factual examples and his personal interpretations of the concrete details. It is at this point that the crux of Fugard's language of the drama is to be found, in the visualization and concrete embodiment of abstract thoughts and feelings. However, Fugard's use of this metaphoric system goes beyond the mere verbal references illustrated by the passage above. His is a total approach to the language of the drama, one in which the non-verbal elements become a functional part of the central message. Fugard himself sees them as even something
more, with the words as a surface factor in the play, ‘acting as a thin, frozen crust to a deeper darker reality. The ice on a pond’. He uses Boesman’s jealousy and loneliness as examples and asks:

... where does he ever articulate or ‘state’ this terrible jealousy and loneliness? Nowhere. Yet it is there on the stage ... it is behind the word ... revealed rather than stated. Boesman kicking over his mug of tea and then throwing his bread into the river is saying something as clearly, if not more so, than at any time he finds a few of his old and blunted words in his mouth.

(Rae, 1971: 35)

It is through his total language of space, gesture, movement and silence that Fugard expresses a specific concept of personal freedom and poeticizes the frustrated mutterings and rebellion of the two old people drifting across the mud flats.

_Boesman and Lena_ opens on an empty space. It is theatre at its most elemental – an empty stage under full lighting. At a purely technical level this empty stage represents a theatrical _tabula rasa_, an undefined situation which has an infinite number of possibilities for development: it can be anywhere, any time, anything. That is the first concept established by the play: infinite time and space, or, in other terms, total freedom. The appearance of the characters gradually limits and defines the possibilities of the space. They give it a specific shape and identity by their words and actions as well as by the possessions they bring onto the stage, tying it down to a specific reality.

The first one to enter is Boesman, heavily burdened, and he is followed by Lena, staggering under her own burden and dumb with fatigue. Boesman stares at her ‘with a hard, cruel objectivity’.

Lena sets down her load and the sequence relating her to the seagull follows. By means of her mimed actions the actress on the bare stage forces the audience to follow her gaze and to provide an imaginary setting for the actions colouring in a wide expanse of sky and land about the two of them, huddled in the centre of the stage. The free movement of the bird emphasizes the earth-bound nature of their own lives. She supports this visual comment verbally by expressing her disgust at the two of them being down in the mud and her wonder at the bird’s grace and freedom. Her few words gain specific impact by the way they are said. She staggers to her feet to swear at the bird, but is rapidly enchanted by its flight, partly identifying herself with it in its liberation: ‘Must be a feeling, hey. Even your shadow so heavy you leave it on the ground’. However, the outburst has exhausted her and she squats again, to turn her eyes from the sky to the mud. Muttered while she is prying mud from between her toes, the following words inevitably lead to the final curse: ‘Tomorrow they’ll hang up there in the wind and laugh. We’ll be in the mud. I hate them.’

Within these first moments of the play Fugard establishes the foundation for his discussion of the concept of freedom. The empty stage has a distinct symbolic role to play in the development of this concept. It represents an open space which, in Lena’s terms, has ‘boggerall’ on it. It is ‘kaal’, having no decor or habitation of any kind on it. Presenting no fetters to the imaginations of Boesman and Lena, it both emphasizes their isolation and poverty, and symbolizes
complete freedom. To them the initial 'kaalheid' represents a world where they may have taken any direction and where many things are possible. But into this area of potential freedom Boesman dumps the impedimenta of his life, in the centre of the stage, to begin building a pondok and so settle down again. They are, in fact, fettered to the mud flats and their possessions, as well as to each other.

The realistic little camp they assemble serves as the specific set for the action, but it also becomes a powerful visual symbol through its juxtaposition to the empty stage. Boesman and Lena not only metaphorically, but also literally, bear their lives on their heads. In the course of the play Boesman is constantly adding to the load they must carry. He walks off, searches around and returns with items such as an old sack, a piece of corrugated iron and an old motorcar door. Gradually the load grows, filling the space and getting heavier and heavier. The concept of heaviness becomes synonymous with bondage and is both verbally and visually stressed throughout the play. The image of tiredness and treading heavily on the ground is a constantly recurring one, illustrated by the movements of the actors and the many expressions of movement used ('walk ... hard'; 'tramped'; 'walk our legs off ...'). This concept is expressed overtly when Lena dances, stamping her feet, in Act Two. Each new addition to their load makes it heavier, causing them to tread their lives deeper into the muddy and rotten ground, itself a symbol of their degradation. To rise from the mud, to walk upright, is to attain freedom.

From a technical point of view, this concentration of everything they have on stage is useful in that the decor (the mattress, the fire, the pots, the wine, the pondok) will always remain the same, even though the place may change. So, reference to the past must always be in terms of tangible items present on stage. In this way their lives are visualized concretely throughout the play, along with the verbal detail supplied in the dialogue. This also creates some of the sense of unchanging monotony which is evoked by their recollections of their endless migrations.

This image of an empty stage gradually being filled is repeated at the figurative level as well. When Boesman and Lena enter they are, like the empty stage, two characters of extensive potential because they are (figuratively speaking) free of any encumbrance. As far as the audience is concerned they have neither past nor future because, except for their clothing and baggage, nothing is yet known of them. (This is, naturally, true of all characters in all plays, barring perhaps some characters in historical plays or the so-called documentary drama. In Boesman and Lena this quality has specific symbolic meaning, however.)

Soon, however, they start acquiring a background. Through Lena's increasing flow of words and their constant bickering, they drag more and more of the past onto the stage, and their apparent freedom quickly evaporates. This past history becomes part of the load they carry and is symbolized by the physical paraphernalia on their heads as well as the catalogue of places where they have been before. They have spent all their lives in wandering across the flats and both the extent of the journey and the incidents along the way are illustrated by and linked to the various stopping points. The register of these names (Korsten, Veeplaas, Coega, Redhouse, etc.) has various functions. Firstly, it serves to localize the play,
to describe the world of the two outcasts. Secondly, it is used to accentuate the peripatetic nature of their lives. Thirdly, the names are employed mythopoetically, in the way J.M. Synge uses place names in his plays. Not being given any real substance in the play, they become imaginative reference points whereby a sharp contrast may be drawn between the mud and desolation of ‘here’ and the wonders and pleasures of the idealized ‘there’. They ultimately represent the unseen part of their lives, which weighs on them through the memories to which they cling.

Freedom is casting off the past too; it is accepting the present:

BOESMAN: When I turned off the road, when I said to Swartkops. I didn’t want to! Say it, or think it. Any of the old places. I didn’t want to. I tried! The world was open this morning ... It was you with your big mouth and stupid questions. ‘Where we going?’

Every corner! ‘Hey Boesman, where we going?’ ‘Let’s try Veeplaas.’ ‘How about Coega?’ All you could think of was those old rubbish dumps. ‘Bethelsdorp ... Missionvale ...’

Don’t listen to her, Boesman! Walk!

‘Redhouse ... Kleinskool ...’

They were like fleas on my life. I scratched until I was raw.

In the course of the play Lena struggles to understand her life, and Fugard symbolizes her search through her efforts to remember the sequence of the travels:

LENA: It wasn’t always like this. There were better times.

BOESMAN: In your dreams maybe.

LENA: What about Veeplaas? Chopping wood for the Chinaman? ...

BOESMAN: Forget it. Now is the only time of your life.

LENA: No! Now. What’s that? I wasn’t born today. I want my life. Where is it?

Finally she too accepts Boesman’s pragmatic view:

LENA: ... You’re right, Boesman. It’s here and now. This is the time and place. To hell with the others. They’re finished, and mixed up anyway. I don’t know why I’m here, how I got here. And you won’t tell me.

Doesn’t matter. They’ve ended now. The walks led here. Tonight.

This statement signals her final rebellion and the first definite steps towards freedom, a freedom completed at the end of the play when she comes to the realization than knowing the sequence of her travels does not reveal anything anyhow: ‘Is that the way it was? How I got here? ... It doesn’t explain anything?’ She has finally rid herself of the weight of the past.

The implications of the combined load of the past and present and the possibilities of becoming free of it are spelled out by Boesman and when he recalls the few moments that morning when the whiteman had physically stripped him of everything. After the ‘slum clearance’ of the bulldozer, and having got rid of his weight of baggage, he says, he could stand up straight, he could laugh, he had been reborn without a past and facing a new and unblemished future. But that had been the morning. Things had changed soon afterwards, as Lena kept pushing him back to the old places. Eventually he succumbed:
BOESMAN: I saw the piece of sinkplaat on the side of the road. I should have passed it. Gone on! Freedom's a long walk. But the sun was low. Our days are short ... Too late, Boesman. Too late for it today.

So I picked it up. Finish and klaar. Another pondok.

He simply carries on collecting baggage, until at the end of the play he stands on stage as a final absurd symbol of their ensnared lives.

The most significant new addition to their load is Outa of course: the corpse of the old man becomes the weight which finally drives Boesman back into total bondage. Outa is a character employed as a physical property. He is the catalyst who initiates the changes that take place in the lives of Boesman and Lena. He is two-dimensional: we know little about him because he merely mumbles in response to Lena's queries. His most significant act in the play is his act of dying. All the other actions that take place between him and Lena occur in her mind as she pretends to have a conversation with him.

Boesman's failure to retain his freedom is symptomatic of a failure to perceive one of the greatest loads of all, the relationship between Lena and himself. When the two of them appear on stage, there is an invisible link between them. Fugard spells it out in his stage directions. They are both wearing shapeless, grey clothing and walk barefoot. Their ages have been obscured by a life of dissipation. In effect, therefore, they look alike. However, they also act alike. Fugard uses various echoes in the play to illustrate the similarity between them: for example, Lena adopts Boesman's concept of freedom and uses the same terms to describe it; Lena first tells of the morning's events, then Boesman repeats them, although from his own point of view.

But it is through Outa that Lena finally comes to the realization that to be truly free in Boesman's terms means to throw away the relationship as well:

LENA: Tonight it's freedom for Lena. White man gave you yours this morning, but you lost it. Must I tell you how? When you put all that on your back. There wasn't room for it as well ... You should have thrown it on the bonfire. And me with it.

But the introduction of Outa also brings to a head another aspect of the freedom concept suggested by the first scene of the play. The play opens in complete silence. When Boesman enters he sits down and waits, without saying a word. When Lena enters she immediately starts speaking to Boesman, but he answers her with silence. The silence has the effect of expressing Boesman's disgust on one hand, and highlighting her need to talk on the other. Her words flow fast and range over a number of subjects as she tries to find a topic to which he will respond. But Lena's need for conversation and companionship is understandable in the vast empty landscape that surrounds them, for at least it may be made more habitable that way.

Boesman's needs in this regard are more complex because he is unable to verbalize them, and possibly even unable to define them. There is a slumbering violence in Boesman, apparent from his first appearance on stage, which becomes the only way for him to make contact with Lena, the only way for him...
to know that he is alive. Lena finally spells it out for him: ‘Maybe you just want to
touch me, to know I’m here. Try it the other way. Open your fist, put your hand
on me. I’m here. I’m Lena’. In the end the invisible bond between the two of them
is their need to be respected, to be given life in the eyes of another human
being. While each one has his or her own way of demanding that attention, it is
this bond which finally prevents complete independence and freedom.

When Boesman finally stands ready to go, ‘grotesquely overburdened’ in sym-
bolic bondage, Lena stands there kaal, having cast off her material goods, her
entire past, Boesman and even Outa. She seems just within reach of total free-
dom, but even those sacrifices are not enough. The final burden is perhaps the
heaviest of all:

LENA (gently easing her body down): Hey, heavy! No wonder we get
moeg. It’s not just the things on your head. There’s also yourself.

To throw away Boesman means to throw away their relationship, and therefore
to throw away her own life. She has been prepared for every sacrifice except
that one. So she makes a symbolic move indicating her return to bondage, but
it is a move dignified by renewed self-awareness and self-respect:

LENA: Give! (He passes over the bucket.)

Hasn’t got a hole in it yet. Might be whiteman’s rubbish, but I can still
use it. (It goes on her head.)

The bucket has become the symbol of her life.

Finally, then, both Boesman and Lena have returned to the form of bondage
they had when they entered in the opening scene of the play. Many things have
changed, however, including the relationship between the two of them. Most
important of all, as Lena says, ‘somebody saw a little bit’. And that, in the end,
is the aim of Fugard’s total message in which all the elements of his total lan-
guage are employed to communicate the complex texture of their lives, their
dreams and their frustrations – to place an audience somewhere along the route
travelled by Boesman and Lena, and to make it see and make it care.
Reflections in a fractured mirror
Reframing the mirror:  
Some reflections on theatre and performance in a new dispensation  
(1990–1996)

In this study I have largely been concerned with three matters: a reassessment of South African theatre history in the light of a broader and more inclusive concept of theatre and performance, some of the ways in which theatre and society interact and impact upon one another and, finally, the specific way in which the theatre as system, and the theatre practitioners who operate within it, tended to respond to and reflect major shifts and changes in the political, economic, social, cultural, academic and other spheres – particularly in the period between the 1961 Sharpeville shootings and the dismantling of Grand Apartheid, initiated by F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela in 1990 and leading on to the changes wrought by the ANC-dominated Government of National Unity. It is hoped that at least some of those findings will be of more than merely local interest, for they seem to me to represent important indicators of how theatre may evolve and change anywhere, under altered socio-political and other conditions.

The new period in South Africa, between President de Klerk’s first momentous speech before parliament in 1990 and the acceptance of the new South African constitution in 1996, has been equally remarkable. It is a period which has certainly thrown the whole world of the arts into total disarray, as no doubt did the political upheavals in Eastern Europe. The theatre practice of the period seems to have undergone radical changes, not only in the kind of plays being put on, but also as regards the themes chosen, the venues being used, the professional stature of the performers, the nature and preferences of the audiences and even, surprisingly, the critical reactions of commentators and reviewers. It has also, thus far, been a time of very intense introspection and wild speculation by all and sundry, leading on to a whole range of (formal and informal) debates and symposia on the future of the arts in South Africa and the re-allotment of funds for the arts – culminating in the 1996 government White Paper on the Arts and Culture. Certainly it has not been a ‘safe’ time, in the sense that the confi-
dent 1950s for example felt safe in their self-assured belief in the superiority of their economy, their culture and their political ‘democracy’. It may very well even be that accursed thing, a very interesting time.

**Theatre and society in limbo 1990–1996**

Bearing in mind the views of theatre and theatre history expressed in the foregoing arguments, I want to take a brief look at what occurred in the theatre and its context between 1990 and 1996. As noted before, it was a time of huge conjecture, replete with wildly oscillating emotional responses to the equally tumultuous daily events in what has on occasion rather aptly been referred to as ‘pre-post-Apartheid’ South Africa. It was also a time of great uncertainty among artists and administrators, and intense soul searching among the more responsible critics. The problem is of course, that everyone wants to know what is going to happen to theatre in the new South Africa, and no-one can really tell with any degree of certainty.

I certainly would not be rash enough to make any kind of serious prediction here, yet. For the sake of the argument, let us consider a few trends that had manifested themselves by 1996. Perhaps one may glimpse the first traces of an evolving pattern there. Then again, one may not. At any rate, the exercise may provide us with some material with which to test one or two of the theories proposed in this book.

Now the reality ‘out there’ is that something has changed. A great deal in fact – politically, socially, economically. Of course certain quarters contest this, saying that nothing has changed – and yes, they too have a point. By 1996 the country has a duly elected, ANC-dominated, representative parliament, a new constitution guaranteeing the rights of the state and the individual, free interracial intercourse (in all its senses), free access to everything for everyone. True. Yet the reality is that the economic changes are far slower to come, and indeed some of the changes are negative, with large numbers of (mostly) black citizens still struggling on or below the poverty line and unemployment increasing. Another truth: South Africa is now referred to not as the skunk of the world, but the murder capital of the world. This too is most probably true. Violence is certainly endemic, as is crime and corruption in general, at all levels of society.

For the first four years of this decade the whole process of democratization in the country was in limbo, as final negotiations were set up, broken down, repaired, and restarted in the ongoing ebb-and-flow of political powerplay and one-upmanship. A very delicate situation, fraught with enormous danger. By 1995–1996 this had stabilized somewhat, with more and more people apparently accepting the situation, though many whites were still emigrating.

What then has been the theatre system’s response to this volatile and confusing situation and to the socio-political redefinition of the country? Rather interestingly I find a strangely mixed reaction from a wide range of individuals and organizations. To illustrate, let us consider three attitudinal responses that surfaced directly after the momentous start to the De Klerk/Mandela revolution and the road to the new constitution:
This cry of profound relief was perhaps the initial response of the majority of artists and audiences. The statement may of course be read in two ways. It may be: ‘Ah, we have won our political freedom, so let our plays rejoice!’ (Or perhaps: ‘Let us keep reminding ourselves of what we have suffered, lest we forget …’). On the other hand, it may also be a cry of ‘Ah, we have won freedom of expression for the theatre’, i.e. now we can do the kind of plays we have always wanted to do, not being prescribed to by others (i.e. the censorship board, the government agencies, the liberation movements, the educational authorities, the liberal press, the conservative press, the churches ...), as well as the freedom to enjoy what we wish to enjoy, without being made to feel guilty about it.

What do we now choose to do? The responses have been many, but notably they have accentuated a - heartily welcomed - movement away from the specific kind of political theatre that characterized the 1976–1989 period. The movement appears to have been in four general directions:

1. Direct engagement in highly emboldened avant garde, obscene, politically aggressive and other previously banned forms of theatre. Thematical the topics in this kind of theatre range widely, with continued interest in issues of intolerance, violence, feminism, gay life, euthanasia, aids, religion, Afrikanerdom, and a variety of cultural rituals.

Interestingly enough much of this is basically a student reaction and one followed by the previously suppressed theatre groups in the black urban townships. The simple economics of theatre (see below) have apparently quickly stifled this trend, except in a few isolated cases.

At a more serious and perhaps more significant level, this release from old taboos has freed a number of theatre workers thematically, allowing them to move into other areas of social significance. Notably there has been an increasing interest in the use of theatre for didactic and development purposes – with adults and children. The nature of this shift in emphasis is well illustrated by the extent to which the concept of ‘theatre as a weapon in the struggle’ has been replaced by notions of ‘theatre for healing’ and ‘theatre as bridge builder’ in the public forums of cultural debate and in the companies being set up. In 1996 this movement was dealt a serious blow because of the scandal that erupted around the Aids-awareness programme of the new government and Mbongeni Ngema’s Sarafina 2. In the minds of many potential sponsors, rejection of the play and the whole process by the Aids workers themselves placed an enormous question mark over the whole notion of theatre for development.

2. A return to formal theatre, including far more productions of the classics (international and local), by such diverse writers as Seneca, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Oscar Wilde, Shaw, Tennessee Williams, P.G. du Plessis and Athol Fugard. Dance, opera and operetta have initially also seemed to come back into their own, despite the dire predictions of the ‘Africa-will-swamp-us’ school of thought (see below). PACT for example increased their opera performances from 296 in the 1987/8 season, to 594 in the 1990/1 season.1 A 1995 production of The doll house at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town not
only won a number of awards, but had its season sold out, while the same happened for a student production of Chekhov's *The Seagull* in Stellenbosch in 1996. The better of the serious new works of Broadway and the West End are also available and being put on, as are previously banned works, though the latter are less often produced than one would have expected.

In some ways there is a kind of 'thank goodness it's all over, now we can get back to real theatre' feeling among this group. And attendance figures of many of the conventional performances seem to endorse the pervasiveness of this feeling. However, one is still in a fin-de-siècle period, and perhaps to some critics and commentators, these may merely be seen as signs of the Colonials fiddling while the Colony finally crumbles. In a way this refers to the next direction as well.

3. A marked emphasis on theatre as entertainment. Productions of popular comedies, murder mysteries, love stories, melodrama, 'family' plays, musicals, cabarets (in the musical sense, not the political cabaret), musical tributes and a whole range of crossover dance-and-music plays. Nostalgia and long-neglected forms such as vaudeville and music hall also reappear now in various guises. Even theatre venues go back to the early Edwardian models not only for the fare, but for the form and appointments of the theatre spaces themselves (e.g. the Victoria Theatre at the Waterfront and the Theatre on the Bay in Cape Town). With audiences this reaction is primarily one of relief for being freed of the sombre, aggressive and often badly wrought 'protest theatre' of the 1980s. With a number of authors also a much needed respite from monitoring their political position all the time.

In this category too we find an enormous revival of the big musicals (e.g. *My Fair Lady*, *The Sound of Music*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*) and local musical works (such as the numerous tributes to previous decades – *Crooners*, *Fifty Something*, *When Juke Was King* etc., famous singers and composers – *Queen at the Opera* for example). Typical of the escapism sought is what must rank as one of the coups of the decade, namely Pieter Toerien and Cameron-Mackintosh's presentation of *Les Miserables* at the Nico Opera House in Cape Town during 1996. The Australian company was imported to do the show and it ran for four months and was virtually sold out throughout, despite daunting ticket prices for a country racked by inflation.

4. A cleansing of the slate, a chucking out of the old and a creation of an 'African' or South African theatre, taking the classical forms and styles of the pre-colonial era, blending them with the best of the 'struggle' period, in a new hybrid. This 'crossover' movement is extremely far developed in the music arena, as I have shown in Chapter 4, but less obviously prevalent in the theatre of the 1990s. Recent events and negative experiences seem to have revived old fears that audiences are not ready for this, that they prefer undiluted Western theatre. Or perhaps one might argue that the imported and/or classical texts are just better constructed, because they have gone through a longer and more rigorous sifting process?

So far the 'Great South African crossover play' thus still hovers in the background somewhere, a little nearer than the 1959 *King Kong*, but not quite there yet. *Sarafina!*, for example, was extremely popular in certain
areas and overseas as well, but not widely so among general theatre-goers in South Africa. It was clearly too specifically political for its times. *District Six – the musical* was less overtly political and was extremely, even embarrassingly, popular in Cape Town, but was technically too weakly written, constructed and performed to transfer beyond its sentimental and nostalgic Western Cape environment. Athol Fugard is still working his way through the traumas of his times in disconcerting and specifically Fugardian fashion, which is not quite crossover, while the small scale successes of the eminently crossover forms created on the cabaret/kabaret circuit have yet to translate successfully to the larger stage. However, the Grahamstown Festival and Kleinkaroo Kunstfees programmes contain a flood of attempts at finding the ‘South African’ formula, so the concept is not dead. Linked to the change in concepts of theatre referred to in 1. above, this movement seems to remain one of the most dynamic and exciting indigenous ideals for theatremakers, despite the continuing success and even growing popularity of certain formal playwrights in recent years (e.g. Deon Opperman, Charles Fourie, Reza de Wet and Paul Slabolepszy).

**‘Oh no, now chaos is upon us ...!’**

Relief is not the only reaction to recent initiatives in South Africa. There is also great concern about the future and the loss of perceived gains and values from the past. Between 1990 and 1996 the cries about under-funding and crises at the various councils for example, seemed to underline these fears, as did many of the debates about the future of the councils, which proliferated throughout the country. The publication of the White Paper on Arts and Culture confirmed the fears of many, particularly in terms of the future role of the Performing Arts Councils, which they see as eventually being replaced by a National Arts Council (members of the council are already being appointed). In 1996 their budgets were cut significantly and huge restructuring set in motion, a process continuing with even more stringency in 1997.

Now this reaction too has a number of possible guises:

1. The first is a simple matter of confusion and concern among workers in the theatre. With the country’s economy in grave jeopardy and unemployment in general soaring, the Performing Arts Councils and the South African Broadcasting Corporation under constant attack, the philosophical basis of the arts being questioned, the level of violence and intimidation proliferating, and the shape and policies of a future government uncertain, there is a deepening crisis among performers and other artists, as well as students. Is there really any future in being a performer? There are certainly no signs of security, at least not in the sense the privileged white performers had come to know it over the past thirty years of state run theatre. For a while in fact, since the mid-eighties, there were signs of large scale desertion of the theatre by performers, often to far more risky but prominently commercial areas – restaurants, art galleries, advertising, insurance and the like. Interestingly enough though, it appears that by the end of 1992 the trend was being reversed slowly, with many of the formerly familiar faces popping up again here and there.
Reflections in a fractured mirror

1. On film, television and stage. It is a trend that is still continuing, as the industry gears itself to becoming a fully free-lance industry.

One positive growth from this has been the development of a variety of other industries based on theatre and performance skills: live advertising, industrial theatre, theatre for development and the whole range of recording, film, radio and television opportunities opened up by the deregulation of broadcasting in the country have made the industry vital again.

However, the basic fear is still very prevalent: are we going to be able to work? And if so, under what circumstances? Will a new dispensation really benefit us, or was the old system better? The national Performing Arts Workers Equity (PAWE) has its work cut out to negotiate some kind of secure future for its members.

2. A second, and equally potent, form of this concerned reaction has been there from the very beginning: a resistance to any kind of change, nurtured by the conservative and fundamentally colonial core of the mainstream system (the classical and mainstream work of the Performing Arts Councils, the commercial work of impresarios such as Brian Brooke, Taubie Kushlick and Pieter Toerien, the annual entertainments of the amateur theatre groups, etc.). To individuals whose whole concept of theatre is – and will always be – the received British colonial one of formal theatrical presentations in an established theatre venue with ‘proper’ seating, lighting, plays, players and acting, the notion of a redefinition of theatre and ways of making theatre is unthinkable. It is obvious that such individuals and groups would greatly fear the kind of development envisaged by those who favour the ‘cleaning of the state’ approach and manifestly prefer the options provided by reactions 2. and 3. under the previous section.

To such people the vibrant protest theatre of the 1970s and 1980s was already a massive threat, and now of course they see total disintegration of all that is sacred. The extremists tend to proclaim categorically that ‘theatre is dead’, for they fear that it will become totally ‘Africanized’ (i.e. gum-boot dancing, naked girls, drums and incoherent shouts, replacing the epic poetry of Shakespeare, the musical majesty of Wagner, the subtle and succinct symbolism of Chekhov, an so on). They foresee that the theatre system will fall into the hands of untrained and untrainable amateurs, no money will be available for the Real Arts (drama, opera, music, ballet), audiences will be expected to ‘participate’ by dancing in the aisles and singing along with some unknown and monotonous Xhosa or Zulu song, etc. It is a paranoia graphically expressed in virtually every issue of journals such as Scenaria for the past five years, and so the cultural conservationists work hard in order to keep control and money in the hands of those who think like they do.

Yet despite all their arguments, and in vindication of their concern it seems, the 1996 White Paper and the 1993–1997 budgets brought harsh reminders of the stringent financial realities ahead. Each year the budget was cut back more severely and in the case of two embattled councils (NAPAC and CAPAB) at least, the attention turned towards an obviously vulnerable target: opera, that most ‘Eurocentric’ – and expensive – of theatrical traditions.
3. Linked to this conservatism, and its accompanying drive to maintain the status quo, is the sectional fear of the Afrikaans establishment. There is tremendous and widespread fear that Afrikaans culture and literature could be swamped and submerged in a new dispensation dominated by English. The result has been a number of conferences on the future of Afrikaans as language and of its structures (including the Afrikaans-dominated Performing Arts Councils) and the establishment of a national Foundation for Afrikaans (Stigting vir Afrikaans) to generate funds and support to promote the language wherever and in whatever way it can. By far the most spectacular (and positive) process that came out of this was the annual Klein-karoo Kunstefees (= Little Karoo Arts Festival) held in Oudtshoorn to celebrate and promote Afrikaans in the performing and other arts. The first festival was organized in 1995, and in 1996 the number of people visiting it had tripled, as had the participants. Within two years the festival had become a generator of cultural energy to rival the Grahamstown festival, and had legitimized the Afrikaans language cause as little had before.

As the most highly organized and focused of the linguistic/cultural groups in the country (in terms of the language question at least), the Afrikaans establishment may possibly just be anticipating a very important debate which is still going to require much diplomacy and negotiation once the Zulu or even the English purists actually awake to the true implications of the official language policy and the crossover cultural evolution in the new political dispensation.

Linguistic/cultural identity is a fraught issue in many parts of the world today, but is at present quite underplayed in South Africa. Remarkably so, if one considers the huge potential for conflict and confusion latent in the multilingual, poly-ethnic, and class-ridden society of the region (see chapter 5). On the other hand, this too may be understandable, once one considers the crucial political complexities already under debate in every national forum.

'Right, now let us organize the arts ...' or 'So, who gets the money?'

As mentioned before, the prospect of a changing South Africa has raised the hopes of everyone that now, at last, there is a chance to rectify the many flagrant wrongs that exist in the arts system in South Africa. Also to have the arts take up their legitimate place in the societal hierarchy. The result was a whole range of conferences, symposia and meetings of concerned bodies and individuals, who sought to redress the imbalances and propose new structures and procedures for promoting, supporting and managing the arts. Every known and unknown 'cultural organization', institution and 'expert' on the arts was drawn into the debate at one time or the other between 1990 and 1996. The remarkable fact is that, unlike even a year or two previously, most of these individuals were suddenly quite prepared to talk to each other, consult each other and even make use of each others' facilities. This is very noticeable if one considers the many alliances one now finds between the formerly rejected Performing Arts Councils and the former grassroots and so-called 'progressive' arts movements.
While some more fundamental issues on matters such as the place of critical perceptions and criteria also seemed to find a niche in some of the debates, there are two issues which often seemed to take precedence at these conferences: who will run the new structures (for structures were what was being planned) and who will get the funds. The result was that the debates increasingly seemed to revolve around procedural and managerial matters and less around art and art production. More and more arts administrators (or ‘cultural commissars’, as they were satirically referred to on more than one occasion) appeared to be coming to the fore, as those in command in the old system (and a few who had gained access to that system through their training, their experience, or their political clout) tried to redesign the structures in such a way that they retain as much of the power as possible, while those still outside the controlling structures, tried to gain access to that same power.

The arts in South Africa, contrary to popular belief and critically biased ‘experts’, have long been quite Handsomely funded – in certain selected and privileged areas for certain privileged cultural, ethnic and economic groups. The theatrical system for whites for example (and it was only for whites till the early 1980s), received vast sums in subsidy for the Performing Arts Councils in order to build and manage huge theatre complexes. Some of the funds were also used to mount productions and pay performers. Other major companies shared in the wealth one way or the other. The famous Market Theatre in Johannesburg for instance, built its reputation partly on its hard-line rejection of state aid and involvement – yet was heavily subsidized through a favourable rental deal negotiated with the City Council of Johannesburg and through significant financial and administrative support from the private sector (see Schwartz, 1988). The equally reputable (and politically correct) Baxter Theatre in Cape Town owed its entire existence to a large private grant and the administrative and other support of the University of Cape Town – which of course did get a state subsidy, as do all South African universities (see Barrow and Williams-Short, 1988). Indeed, the rhetoric and practice of political ideology and the expediency of theatre funding and support, as manifested during the years of political and cultural struggle, could lead to a very interesting study of the convoluted and devious manipulation of truth and propaganda, and the degree to which a desired end may justify the most dubious means.

While there has never been complete satisfaction about the way such funds were distributed and utilized, it was really with the first glimmerings of the idea that the time of redistribution was at hand that the real debate began. And the debate – wherever it took place – seemed to take it for granted that there were these huge funds for the taking. Once a new government was in place the Arts Councils would go, and the money would be redistributed. But in what way? Who gets the money? The answers are not only a matter of politics and economics, but are, I am afraid, crucial for cultural advancement of any kind. And it ought to be obvious that the optimum good of the three domains do not necessarily have to coincide.

During the period of uncertainty suggestions for the restructuring of the Arts Councils (or, phrased differently, the re-distribution of arts funding) ranged from demands for the total dismantling of the councils and the founding of an independent national Arts Council (and this was a heavily argued point of view in the first year of the De Klerk era), on to a more receptive approach which would...
incorporate the councils into some kind of wider-ranging, democratic structure or structures. The 1996 White Paper has opted for a combination of the two ideas, retention (and even expansion to five more provinces!) of aspects of the old Performing Arts Councils, but also the introduction of a National Arts Council as funding body.

Conclusions

Two matters arise from the events and trends described above which have concerned me particularly in this study. And they seem to me to present some rather intriguing material with which to conclude this book. Both issues are linked to the notion of the theatre as a social construct, a system of processes which generates, transmits and interprets meaning within a society, and may even, as a system, reflect something of the nature of its parent society.

The mirror as social construct

One of the complicating factors facing the reconstructive theatre historian (the kind of ideal being we hypothesized about in Chapter 1) under South African conditions, has been the fractured nature of the arts as a mirror in which to view the society. The institutionalized and conventionalized way in which all social activities and processes are perceived and managed in the country (vide Chapter 3), appear to correspond to actual social constructs imposed on the wider societal system. Hence one has the concept of separate and differing cultural structures for separate and differing social and other groupings, the fundamental concepts of separate development through separate amenities, and all the rest of the Grand Apartheid paraphernalia. Yet, despite the entrenchment of such structures and categories, closer scrutiny reveals that they do not necessarily and always correspond to, represent and/or fulfill real social, emotional, cultural needs and values. At least not in perpetuity. So, the reflection in the social and cultural mirror is skewed by the fractures within the mirror itself and a non-alignment of mirror and object, and it does not directly represent the ‘reality’ of life out there.

Yet for some perverse reason, the arts – and drama and theatre most certainly – have been managed and taught all along as if the foregoing dichotomous system did not exist. Thus it was argued that there is only one kind of activity which one may call Theatre. So, what was considered good in Victorian and Edwardian theatre in England, for example, was brought out to places as disparate as Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Durban, Grahamstown, Johannesburg and Fort Hare, and was found to be good for South Africa. Anything new which may evolve here could only be presented, perceived and evaluated in terms of the structures already in place: formal literary plays, based on published texts with an Aristotelian structure, intended for proscenium (or adapted proscenium) theatres and reviewed by competent critics in a daily press schooled in international journalism. If the event were completely different, evolving within another (unrecognized) system of its own (a rural ritual performance, a township dance competition, or a jazz festival for example), it would have to be presented, perceived and evaluated in terms of the structures in place for its own system – which did not include well-equipped halls, a formal publishing system, a literary or possibly even literate audience, or
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a sophisticated press, but did display such things as an informal approach to venue, an influential system of word-of-mouth marketing, a participatory style of presentation and a sense of the ephemerality of the form.) However, there appears to have been little or no crossover or cross-pollination from one system to another at this point. If such a hybridization did take place it was billed and presented as a curiosity, something alien and exotic, particularly in the dominant Colonial system.

While much of this is true of all western theatre, or theatre in colonially influenced countries, in South Africa all this became firmly locked in place through legislation after the Nationalist Party won the 1948 election and went on to rule for the next 45 years. This fundamentally affected many generations of artists and art patrons. Then, as I have sought to show, the attitudes and systems began to change. A slow and often bitterly resented process, which only seemed to gather real and awesome momentum as the informal ‘theatre’ of the country took to the streets in a wide range of brutal, shocking and confrontational events. Thus the general public found itself exposed to a wide spectrum of intrusive and commanding ‘performance’ events such as armed clashes and organized marches and rallies, the parliament live on television, sport extravaganzas, pop-concerts and pop-videos, Jean-Michel Jarre’s 1993 media-and-light spectacle with the opening of The Lost City at Sun City, President Mandela’s inauguration and inaugural concert in 1994, the Rugby World Cup in 1995, and so on. Much of this was presented and interpreted for the public by the media, itself an increasingly important part of the theatremaking system. The same public was also surrounded by a dizzying variety of ‘street performers’ in daily life: the commuters, vendors, beggars, buskers, and so on. Yet, despite this proliferation of visual and aural stimuli, the concept of the mirror itself, and the way we talk about art and the arts, has not changed much to date. And this is so despite the ‘opening up’ of the debate by artists, academics and critics in the multitude of forums that have been set up over the past few years. People still seek some kind of integrated meaning in each individual work of art, dissecting its contents (words, images, forms, sounds) to understand its comments on (i.e. reflections of) the world about the artist and themselves.

Of course this is legitimate if one accepts and wishes to retain the concept of art as something somehow apart and privileged beyond the daily run of artifice, if one wants to retain a belief in genius. Yet, as I have sought to show, no artist, artwork or artefact can generate meaning and comment in abstracto, for the work, its creator and its receiver are all embedded in and were shaped by the larger social system of the particular community. Thus, as a mirror, the play or the painting is necessarily fractured, its glimpse of reality partial and skewed. Studying the mirror itself and its nature as reflective surface, the way it has been fractured, and why, can tell one far more, I believe, about the conditions in the world about us, than the most intense concentration on a particular image in the mirror, the words of a single poet, or the paintings of a single artist.

To return to the situation by the end of 1996, as outlined in the previous section. Is it possible that one may also use such events and trends as indicators of what is happening in the society at large? Or at least some nuanced indicator of the reasons why things may be happening?
Peering into our fractured mirror, it seems to me that the schizophrenia of Apartheid South Africa is clearly displayed in the equally schizophrenic theatrical system that evolved in the region, and that the paranoia of uncertainty facing the country is eloquently conveyed by a theatre system in disarray. At the same time there is a tentative but clear sense of rapprochement to be detected in the evolution towards crossover theatre and the increasing preference for utilizing theatre and theatre techniques as bridge-building and healing processes, rather than as weapons to be mobilized in an ongoing political and cultural struggle. And that, at least, ought to be something to be optimistic about.

**Theatre system, theatre structure and the new society**

My other concern is with the concept of ‘restructuring’ the arts in South Africa. And this concern is likewise based on my particular theories of how theatre operates as an open and dynamic sub-system within the societal system.

It ought to be clear from the arguments presented so far in this book, that theatre (and the arts) cannot simply be organized or structured from above. It is a fundamental premise of my argument that theatre events (performances) occur as the result of a whole range of dynamic and open, yet interdependent, systems and processes occurring within society at a given time. The subsystem that we call theatre evolves similarly and is part of the entire process, and may contain, at any given point, some kind of formulated and closed structure (a Performing Arts Council for example, which has itself been shaped by the system), as part of the processes whereby it shapes and facilitates the particular occurrence or performance. However, the structure does not (ultimately, totally) determine the performance and its shape and form – it can merely facilitate the presentation, and possibly react to and reshape itself in view of the new demands made on it. Numerous other pressures combine to shape the final product, and one can never predict either the process or the outcome. Nor is it possible to ‘engineer’ the process or the outcome (as is assumed in the concept of social – or cultural – engineering). The phenomenon of a Boesman and Lena or a Woza Albert, for example, is not the result of a planned, organized and manageable structure (as opposed to an open system) – it is an artefact in a particular form, which has grown from a given but randomly connected set of circumstances and processes in this particular society at a specific time, and which in turn gave birth to an altered system and a new paradigm in theatremaking, for its time.

What can be planned, organized and supported, of course, is some kind of sympathetic infrastructure to the arts. This is sensible, democratic and ultimately civilized in a very profound way. One may also debate quite considerably what those needs are, but when the debate begins to supersede the need to produce artefacts and artworks, something is wrong. Artists do not debate their future in conferences and seminars, they debate it in creation, illustrating their frustrations, needs, ideals, etc. through the work they do. That is their job. The public enjoys and supports such work – if it is commendable. That is their job. And the administrators, agents and brokers? They bring the artists and the public together – that is their job. The whole arts system is really dependent on equilibrium in this triangular yet symbiotic relationship between artist, agent and
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public, and it evolves its particular, but ultimately transient and changeable, structures from that constantly shifting relationship.

Only the context (time; place; social, political, economic, moral and cultural milieu; etc.) can establish the need for and ultimate shape of the structures at a given time, not vice versa. The most dynamic systemic processes and structures have been those that followed and responded to particular needs, in circumscribed circumstances, not those that sought to impose or to govern them. Whatever one may feel about the National Theatre Organization (NTO), for example, it served a specific need felt by (an influential) section of the society in its time, and it did bequeath a number of improvements and facilities to South African theatre of the sixties. Like most institutions though, it eventually lived too long, unable to change quickly or adequately enough, and thus developed beyond its ability to serve the more dynamic system. So it was replaced by something which appeared able to do so: the four regional Performing Arts Councils. Again they seemed to provide for the immediate and serious needs of the moment. But then they too became rigid, milch-cows to feed bureaucrats. The changes in the system outstripped the Performing Arts Councils with their government-appointed boards, their conservative Western concepts of theatre, their top heavy bureaucracy and their resultant inability to adapt, and so change came too late, based on wrong principles. The 1990s caught them unprepared, and they were rapidly under siege.

By 1993 the demand had become clear: change had to come. But in what way, where and in what direction? By 1995 the map was on the wall and by 1996 many companies had finally begun to fold under the pressure. Even though the 1996 White Paper spells out a bureaucratic structure and a general arts policy, based on the notion of an Arts Council, there is as yet no clear social, political, economic structure to serve, the cultural milieu is in a high state of flux and artists are free and/or floundering, seeking their way. In view of the arguments proposed here, it seems to me that a funding structure with the broadest possible scope is the best we can do at present – and I have no great quarrel with the proposal of the ministry in that regard. In fact it would be impossible to outline anything like a definitive and all-embracing arts policy at this point. To do so may even prove fatal, for it would be based on incomplete (and – at this stage at least – impossible) understanding of the times, yet would almost assuredly work with largely rigid and prescriptive models – based on models which existed or exist elsewhere, or have been fancifully cooked up in the heat of open debate, rather than models evolved through the essential dynamism of creative discovery during hands-on artistic practice. It has to do so, for it is looking at structure, not at system.

Unfortunately, this limitation on their prophetic abilities have never yet deterred the more determined cultural engineers of any time or region. Thus at the time of writing, as I have shown, large and influential programmes of cultural planning have already been launched by various bodies and organizations throughout South Africa, and many more are doubtlessly being planned. All the theatre historian can do is to view these events, debates, conferences and symposia as part of the unfolding history of drama, theatre and performance in Southern African society – and do the job of recording it as best has he or she...
is able. It is, after all, an inevitable, if not always totally necessary, part of the process shaping that new cultural system, which the (hoped-for) new socio-political system – equally clumsily slouching towards a birthplace – might eventually require.

Notes

1 This information derives from information collated and analyzed by Johan Esterhuizen of the Drama Department at the University of Stellenbosch, for use in his Masters thesis at that university. I thank him for allowing me access to his data.

2 At the time of writing it had become fashionable to refer to and specifically advertise shows such as Roald Dahl's *The BFG* and other presentations, in specifically this fashion. A reaction no doubt to the 'dark days' of committed theatre, when sex, violence and crudity appeared to be *de rigueur* in any production, and prevented two generations of children from accompanying their parents to anything except the annual *Agatha Christie* put on by Pieter Toerien Productions, PACT's annual revival of *Joseph and the amazing technicolor dreamcoat*, or the occasional Christmas musical. It was a fact very often commented upon in letters in daily papers.

3 Cabaret is basically used here in the English sense, of a musical presentation, with some songs, dancing and jokes. The Afrikaans word *kabaret* has a different provenance, deriving from the Dutch and German political cabaret tradition, perhaps best illustrated in the famous Bob Fosse film of Isherwood's musical play (1972). Although it was the Afrikaans *kabaret* in particular which popularized the form in the early 1980s, it is today seldom unilingually Afrikaans and has but tenuous links to the harder-lined original works of Europe. The two forms have, in fact, amalgamated into a pliable and scarcely definable multi-purpose form (see SATJ, Vol. 8 No 2).

4 To get an indication of the range of organizations involved and the issues at stake at the height of the battle (1992–1993) in what *Die Suid-Afrikaan* called the 'cultural “battle for turf”', see the debate between Mike van Graan of the National Arts Initiative, and organizer of the National Arts Policy Plenary (NAPP) and Mario Pissarra of the Cultural Worker's Congress, speaking on behalf of the Federation of South African Cultural Organizations (FOSACO) (*Die Suid-Afrikaan*, April 1993: 20–23.) Many of the points debated then, eventually found their way into the huge ACTAG policy document of 1995 and the White Paper.

5 Please note that I am not suggesting that everything NTO or the Performing Arts Councils did was morally or even artistically right in view of the politics of the day. Not by a long shot. On the other hand, within the confines and demands of a specific and clearly defined political, social and economic structure, within a clear cultural milieu, they each served a specific and defined purpose as well as the times demanded. Initially at least. Remember that *other* sub-systems and structures served other purposes at the same time, some even less, some much more, 'moral' to us today. Thus other, equally dynamic, systemic processes and structures also followed and responded to particular needs, in circumscribed circumstances, and did not propose or prescribe them: The Rehearsal Room at Dorkay House, Theatre Workshop '71, the PACOFS Experimental Group, The Space Theatre, Market Theatre, the Grahamstown Arts Festival, Kampustoneel, The Loft Company/Theatre for Africa, The Dance Umbrella, even the commercial theatre of Gibson Kente or Pieter Toerien, were the products of their circumstances, not the creators of their times. (This point is made in Chapter 3 as well.)
This same point may be illustrated with reference to any other system, including the so-called ‘alternative theatre’ of the revolutionary period, as I have sought to show in the body of this study. The Space Theatre, having served its purpose, quietly disappeared in the late 1970s to make way for the Baxter Theatre. The latter in turn had become a largely commercial venture by the end of the 1980s, making its best money out of nostalgic musical shows and children’s plays – although putting on the occasional new Fugard. At the time of writing the Market Theatre too had been going through some traumatic times, with pivotal administrator and driving force, Mannie Manim, having moved to the University of the Witwatersrand, where he formed an independent company (Mannie Manim Productions) to mount prestigious literary productions, notably new work by Fugard, Slabolepszy and others.

As for the individual artists, their allegiances seem to have shifted too, many now going into more lucrative commercial fields, such as television, film and musicals.
One of the most original and exciting forms to emerge from the 1980s was the Afrikaans-language kabaret. Amanda Strydom and Bill Curry appear here in a scene from Hennie Aucamp's compelling *Met Permissie Gesê*. Originating from a student production under the direction of Stellenbosch University's Herman Pretorius, this 1981 Market Theatre production was directed by Janice Honeyman and was perhaps the first prominent example to actually have an impact across cultural borders. (Photo: Ruphin Coudyzer)
If a single play may be said to represent all the exuberance and power of South African theatre in the 1980s to the world, it would undoubtedly be *Woza Albert*. It was not the only, nor necessarily the best, workshopped play to come out of the struggle, but was certainly the most travelled and the best known. Based on an idea by Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa, and shaped under the direction of Barney Simon, the Earth Players' exhilarating performance piece opened to rave reviews at the Market Theatre in 1981.

(Photograph: Ruphin Coudyzer)

For more than three decades Athol Fugard has dominated South African playwriting, producing more than twenty finely crafted plays and influencing virtually every writer to follow in his wake. *Master Harold ... and the boys* is one of his most personal and haunting works about growing up in Apartheid South Africa. This 1983 Market Theatre production featured Duart Sylwain, Ramolao Makhene and John Kani. It was directed by Fugard himself.

(Photograph: Ruphin Coudyzer)
Bobby Heaney’s engaging production of actor Paul Slabolepszy’s text for *Saturday Night at the Palace* first burst into public prominence in 1982, featuring Bill Flynn, Fats Dibeco and Paul Slabolepszy. It immediately went on to set all sorts of attendance records. Tapping into the roots of suburban life and Apartheid angst, the sultry, disturbing tragi-comedy about lost dreams opened the way for a number of other young South African writers to flex their muscles. Slabolepszy himself became one of the most prolific and versatile playwrights of the 1980s. (Photo: The Market Theatre)
A major event in the cultural and political sphere was the appearance of Afrikaans novelist Elsa Joubert's multiple award-winning documentary novel *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*. The dramatised version by Joubert and director Sandra Kotze provided a profound experience for theatre audiences across the country and, in Lucille Gillwald's English version for the Market Theatre, travelled abroad as well. This fine 1983 PACT production was directed by Marius Weyers and featured Nomsa Nene and Peter Se Puma in the lead roles. (Photo: Bob Martin)
Another superb example of a crossover workshop production from the second half of the 1980s was Junction Avenue Theatre Company's Sophiatown. Based on a tantalizing hypothesis and utilizing nostalgia, song, dance, narrative and comedy in Brechtian fashion, the play explored the impact of Apartheid on the dynamic urban life of the 1950s. Directed by Malcolm Purkey, the play opened Upstairs at the Market in February 1986. Featured in this publicity still are Patrick Shai, Ramolao Makhene, Megan Kruskal and Arthur Molepo. (Photo: Ruphin Coudyzer)

Possibly the single most influential person in terms of the development of a hybrid South African theatrical style and form was the enigmatic teacher, writer and director Barney Simon. His influence was seen everywhere and his own eagerly awaited workshop productions brought moving, relevant and thought-provoking theatre to the townships, the Market Theatre and the festivals. *Black Dog/Inj'emnyama* (Market Theatre 1984) utilized the improvisational skills of Marie Human, Gcina Mhlope, John Leduba, Neil McCarthy, Kurt Egelhof and others to explore the grotesque impact of the oppressive Apartheid system and the armed struggle for political freedom on the people of the country. (Photo: Ruphin Coudyzer)
Financially, and in some ways artistically, the most successful black playwright to emerge from the cultural struggle was actor, director, composer Mbongeni Ngema. Utilizing the skill he acquired while working with Barney Simon, he created *Asinamali* (1986) and the hugely popular *Sarafina!* (1987). The musical, focusing on the role of the children in the struggle for liberation, starred Lileti Khumalo and a host of other performers. Produced by Committed Artists in conjunction with the Market Theatre, the play went on to win a Tony Award for Ngema during its New York run. (Photo: Ruphin Coudyzer)

Besides theatre for healing and theatre for development, the 1990s also saw an increasing interest among performers to utilize literary and biographical works as sources for performance texts. A particularly enthralling example was Barney Simon’s superb dramatization of Can Themba’s short story *The suit*. Sello Maake Ke Ncube and Stella Khumalo played the leads in the 1995 Market Theatre production. (Photo: Ruphin Coudyzer)
As South Africa moved towards and into the 1990s many workshop plays sought to utilize the form to promote reconciliation and healing. A highly interesting early experiment in this regard was Lucille Gillwald's fun-filled presentation entitled *U'phu van der Merwe*. Featuring Butiza Ndlela, Willie Tshaka, Vincent Buthelezi and Sabata Sesiu, the performance piece utilized cultural customs to explore the notion of reconciliation and the problems posed in a multicultural country. First produced in 1986 in the Laager at the Market Theatre.

(Photograph: Market Theatre)
Combining myth, ritual and realism in a unique and personal way, the plays of Reza de Wet represent a high point in the evolution of the literary South African theatre. Superb performance pieces such as *Diepe grond*, *Mirakel* and *Drif* challenge audiences intellectually in a way few others except the works of Fugard do. This production of *Mirakel* was directed for CAPAB by Marthinus Basson in 1994 and opened in the Nico Arena. Featured here is Louw Verwey. (Photo: Marthinus Basson)
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One of the exciting areas of contemporary cultural analysis has become the field of performance studies. Most theatre histories to date have tended to focus on either the history of formal writing for the theatre or on the history of formal performances in the theatre. In this publication, historian, theorist and critic Temple Hauptfleisch documents the growth of a particular, and essentially personal, view of certain processes that go into the making of theatre, and considers how such processes have impacted on culture in South Africa. Written over the course of fifteen years, the work documents the evolution, nature and impact of a rather unique theatrical system.

Theatre and Society in South Africa is intended as an exploration of the nature of theatre and performance, and is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand the nature of South African culture in the latter half of this century.

Temple Hauptfleisch is internationally recognised as one of the leading South African theatre researchers. He is currently director of The Centre for Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Stellenbosch, and chairman of the Department of Drama.