

# From the People to the People: South African Fringe Theatre

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## **Summary:**

The aim of this article is to show how a popular kind of theatre has always existed in the South Africa of the last few decades: a communitarian theatre which, though mostly professional, is an alternative to the more known intellectual trends recognized in the country and abroad. This theatre is conceived by artists coming from the townships and is mainly organized for township audiences.

## **Résumé:**

Le but de cet article est de montrer qu'un type de théâtre populaire a toujours existé dans l'Afrique du Sud des dernières décennies: un théâtre communautaire qui, quoique souvent professionnel, est une alternative aux tendances intellectuelles mieux reconnues dans le pays et à l'étranger. Ce théâtre est conçu par des artistes venant des townships et est organisé principalement pour le public de ces mêmes milieux.

The South African theatre of the last few decades, mostly under the apartheid regime, has never been a homogeneous art. Several theatre trends have emerged that are opposed not only in terms of the content and aesthetics of plays, but also in terms of their multiracial components and the audience response in the country.

If we consider the internationally renowned playwright Athol Fugard, we can say that his plays, though genuinely and honestly inspired by multiracial motivations, have never gone beyond the line of white liberalism and, above all, have never touched the great mass of Blacks living in the townships. Playwright Zakes Mda has recently (1996, xv) observed that in the earlier productions, Fugard's work particularly « addresses itself to the oppressor, with the view of appealing to his conscience ». But that at the same time, his drama « never offers any solution beyond the depiction of the sad situation in which the people find themselves ». This is certainly true, but it is not the reason why it did not spread into the townships of South Africa. Fugard has always been a representative of a theatre for the élites and his discourse could not involve the African masses and the townships where, moreover, his plays were not at all performed.

Even the opening of the city venues to all 'races' was not useful for township people. The tickets for the show were too expensive and the problem of the transport in the evening could never be overcome. To attend a theatrical production was out of the question without a car, because all public connections with the townships stop around 8 p.m. in South Africa.

A popular kind of theatre has nevertheless always existed in the townships. Though labelled 'poor' by a number of critics who compare popular plays to other 'élite' plays, popular drama has nonetheless always been a dramatic genre much alive in these areas. We can assert that it has its roots first in African orality (which has storytelling as one of its main components: cf. Coray-Dapretto 2002) and then in Gibson Kente's plays.

## **Gibson Kente: his Legend Yesterday and Today**

Gibson Kente's character is *per se* part of a legend which is a paradox: This black playwright is extremely known in the artistic and popular African milieus of South Africa, but he is almost completely ignored, or intentionally disregarded, by the critics of the élite theatre of the country. However, essay-writers and theatre specialists like Robert Kavanagh, David Coplan or David Kerr have not hesitated to devote serious attention to him. Though part of a commercial and popular trend of South African theatre, Gibson Kente has been, and to some extent still is, one of the fathers of the township culture and a central figure in the development of black theatre. He has embodied the disinherited black culture from 'the inside' and thus provided African audiences with a sense of cultural identity, above all during

the period 1966-67 up to his detention in 1976, which corresponds to a special parenthesis in his life, because Kente was not a mainly political playwright.

Born in the Eastern Cape, Kente came from the Xhosa area. In his youth he was influenced by traditional music and Christian hymns. His plays are a fusion of texts, music, dance and songs. As is well known, African tradition cherishes the fusion of all these artistic fields in its performances and social events. Kente chose the English language for his plays, but one can estimate that these are based on a non-English culture where hybridisation is the most common feature. In Coplan's words Kente's music is heavily influenced by Afro-American music and it is a mixing of African gospels, township jazz and local music.

The reasons why Gibson Kente's plays were so popular in the workers' social class of the time are multiple. While he depicted the stereotypes of the black urban culture of the period with its gangsters, jazz and shebeens (illegal places where one could find alcohol), he also dramatised the everyday life to make it a real event. As Ndlovu emphasises (1986, p. xxiii) « Most township theater-goers were families who went to the theater to share in an event, music, laughter, joy, exuberance, and sorrow. Kente's milder plays provided all these things in one evening with huge casts that included dancers, singers, and 'township characters' that brought his audience to tears with laughter and sadness. » We can consider this kind of theatre as an extension of the oral tradition that even nowadays is so much part of the South African way of life.

Kente's company also had another peculiarity for his time: it was **an independent one**: that is to say « independent from the white power » that till then had subsidised and even completely controlled black artists on the stage. Kente was a professional in his role of businessman/director and the catharsis that people realised in attending his plays largely compensated the fact that wider political issues were not addressed by his work. His stereotyped characters were also accepted because they were part of a common culture and his plays expressed a sincere desire to show things positively on the basis of an African Christian perspective.

Yet, in the '70s, South African dramatic political history generated different attitudes towards theatre among various playwrights. Matsemela Manaka and his *Soyikwa African Company* (1976), influenced by the advent of the Black Consciousness movement and theatre, had a different approach. This dramatist and political activist, who had a close relationship with the audience and addressed himself directly to the working class by casting working-class actors in his plays, was influenced like Kente by indigenous South African traditions such as Xhosa story-telling. He was also inspired by West African theatre – particularly that of Wole Soyinka, whose name was echoed in the name of the company – and the 'Poor Theatre' techniques of Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, from whom Manaka learned « the prime importance of the actor's creative, bodily and vocal resources » (cf. D. Kerr, 1995, 232).

As times changed, the traditional audience captivated by Kente's work was no longer completely satisfied by the simple representation of their experience realised by this playwright. In the middle of the '70s his plays *How Long, I believe* and *Too Late* became more political, but his arrest in 1976 (the period of the Soweto uprising) while attempting to film *How Long* in Kingwilliamstown, rapidly put an end to his political claims. Later on with *Mama and the Load* (1980) and other plays of the same period Kente marked a return to his theatre of 'self-realisation' (Kerr, 1995, p. 221), where the central themes are « poverty and family disintegration, the decline of adult moral authority and guidance, and the need for renewed kinship and community among urban blacks. » (Coplan, 1985, p. 212)

Twenty years later, Gibson Kente is still a legend in the townships, but his popularity is not free from criticism. In 1997 the « Bra Gibson Kente Theatre » was opened and called after him in Sharpeville. He has recently worked for television and in 1998 the Civic Theatre organised a Tribute to him on the basis of his 29 musicals, but, in the words of Charl Blignaut (*Mail & Guardian*, 23 April 1998), during the tribute the song and dance were there, but there was no drama, no enactment ... absolutely no picture of the grittiness of the era being painted on stage. In February 2001 Kente produced his latest play *Ezakithi* ("It is us"). Gwen Ansell (*Mail & Guardian*, 9 February 2001) says that the play has all of Kente's typical ingredients that fuse tradition and urban style, but the problem lies in the play's politics. In spite of

Kente's assertion that he would cut politics out of the play, Ansell thinks that in his play he conveyed a deeply conservative political message « where South African history is rewritten as a tale of liberal accommodation to create a 'salad nation' with no acknowledgement of struggle or suffering ». Kente was certainly a pioneer in creating a new language for South African musical theatre three decades ago, but he has apparently not renewed his talent, and the influence of his legend has developed independently of him.

### **When the Legend Diversifies and Produces Good Fruits**

Playwrights such as Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa toured with Kente (the former as lead actor and the latter as singer and dancer) in *Mama and the Load* when they decided to collaborate on a play of their own. Ndlovu (1986, pp. xxii-xxvi) tells us that they left Kente and his material, artistic and psychological security to spend a year writing and rehearsing in kitchens, bedrooms, cars, buses, trains, backyards, to try and produce a play concerning a « second coming of Jesus », specifically to South Africa, and to treat the questions and expectations that this fact would have in the country of apartheid. After they approached Barney Simon from the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, one of the white directors most involved with multiracial drama, *Woza Albert!* (1981) was created within this collaboration. The play became one of the biggest theatrical events in South Africa and abroad: it won many awards in Edinburgh, Los Angeles and elsewhere (we saw its French edition in Paris under the direction of Peter Brook at the Bouffes du Nord in 1989), but « most importantly, they [Ngema and Mtwa] performed in the townships of South Africa, as well as the cities, whenever they were in the country and were thus accessible to a much wider audience. » (Ibidem, p. xxiv) Ndlovu asserts that *Woza Albert!* had been created for the townships because of the « abundant energy and a rhythm that gave the play a strong musical feeling ». He also emphasises that township audiences were now more prepared for this kind of *agitprop* theatre after the uprising of 1976 in Soweto, the strong presence of « Black Consciousness » and the formation of the Medupe Writers Associations and of other similar cultural groups in the country (ibidem).

After this big success both Ngema and Mtwa in 1985 wrote some new plays *Asinamali!* ("We have no money!") and *Bopha!* ("Arrest him!"). The idea of a rent strike in the Lamontville township in 1983 gave Ngema the idea for *Asinamali!*, while Mtwa's *Bopha!* concerned a black policeman arresting their own people and even members of his own family. Both plays were quite explosive because they were based on life in the townships at that time and they addressed their residents directly. In spite of their tragic content, they were full of life and not deprived of humour. Ndlovu emphasises (and we fully agree with him as we have seen *Bopha* in Bad Boll, Germany) that, in opposition to white South African writers' plays, these works were able to offer a vision of hope in giving direction, asking questions, providing answers, and telling audiences that things will change in the country sooner than most people think.

The rise and fall of Mbongeni Ngema with his two plays *Sarafina I* (1987) and *Sarafina II* (1996) are recent history. The first play has been a very big world success, but most South African township residents have never had the possibility to see this play (influenced by the big American productions) for lack of appropriate theatres or places of entertainment. *Sarafina II*, which received one fifth of the budget of the Health Ministry to deal with the problem of AIDS, was a big flop and the scandal of the year. It was also the evidence of Ngema's 'arrogance' in behaving with people and money. A proof that even the most gifted artist can go astray. As for dramatist Percy Mtwa, after a period of trouble due to his opposition to American Hollywood film-makers who misinterpreted his play *Bopha* and his expensive lawsuit against them, he disappeared from the scene for several years. In 1998 he was appointed artistic director at the Windybrow theatre in Johannesburg. This theatre is committed to put community-based plays on a professional stage. Mtwa is now back in the limelight as a playwright and has recently produced a play *The Patriot* at the Barney Simon Theatre at the Market. In this play two performers, Peter Mashigo and Lebohlang Elephant, play a multitude of roles standing in an interminable queue at the polling booth. A mix of high comedy and real tragedy « gives the play a *Woza Albert!* feeling and offers a thought-

provoking, feel-good evening at the theatre ». Though not a perfect play « it should be seen for a variety of reasons, not the least being that at last South African theatre is moving away from racial and political themes towards more universal concerns. » (Cf. Pat Schwartz - *Mail & Guardian* - 7/3/2002).

### **Thulani Sifeni Mtshali: Inside the Community**

We met the members of the Bachaki Theatre in 1993 at the South African « Standard Bank National Arts Festival » in Grahamstown where they performed *Golden Gloves* (Grahamstown Festival's best of the Fringe Award of the year and Vita Award of the Windybrow Festival of the same year). From that time on, Thulani Sifeni Mtshali and his collaborators Thabo Mabe and Kagiso Mbhele have become part of our life and important informants for our research about South African Theatre. The birth of the Bachaki Theatre (Bachaki meaning "visitors" or "travellers") goes back to 1987 when a group of Artists from various townships such as Soweto, Atteridgeville and Vosloorus, after thirteen months of research, workshops and writing, presented their first production, *Top Down – The Law of Nature*. The play was first conceived for a two week visitors season, where five persons a day were invited to a flat to watch rehearsals and discuss the play afterwards. The play was a thought-provoking examination of a black teacher's experience within the African education system of the time (a period full of open struggles against apartheid and of repeated states of emergency) and it was first performed publicly on 19th March 1988 at Joubert Park Presbyterian Cathedral. It then played in several townships in South Africa and in such known places as the Market Theatre or the Funda Arts Centre (seat of Manaka's Soyikwa Institute of African Theatre in Soweto). Then it toured abroad in the United Kingdom (S.O.A.S., Leeds university etc.) and briefly in Basel, Switzerland. Nevertheless the main aim of the Bachaki Theatre was « to bring theatre back to the townships », to whatever venues still existed in these areas set aside for non-White occupation by apartheid in South Africa. In Japha Mphahlani's words, one of the organisers of the drive to revive township theatre in 1993, it was simply a question to get theatre back « to our natural setting ». It was also a question to recreate with the audience that dialogue about a social dilemma, which had existed in the times of Kente's productions; and to express it through drama, singing and dance. Bachaki got out to the townships and created (without resources) grass-roots theatre which was both educational and entertaining. Mtshali, Mabe and Mbhele were of course talented interpreters (and Thulani Sifeni Mtshali an inspired community-leader as we prefer to say instead of director!): in addition to a real sense of theatre they were skilled in body language which allowed them to play a whole range of characters, and sometimes also to make understand languages different from English to non-English speakers, in the pure tradition of African storytelling.

The success of *Top Down* gave Bachaki's theatre a very good reputation and the possibility and willingness to organise regular theatre workshops with the youth (students and unemployed) in Pimville (Soweto), but the Bachaki still had no funds, no accommodation and no rehearsal space. So the creation of *Golden Gloves* was a real challenge for the group who decided to work and rehearse under the trees near the Orlando Power Station (Soweto). They showed us the place, which we have filmed in a video; what we remember are two or three cows ruminating around, the cold wind and the Power-Station's discharge-water channel that you had to cross to reach the place.

All the plays created by the Bachaki are connected with socio-political themes typical of South African society, but the group, and specifically Thulani Mtshali, have never used theatre as a direct political weapon. The stories have in fact been conceived to show the *consequences* of a specific political system on the people of the country and their fight to oppose it. *Golden Gloves* speaks of the expectations of Vusi, who, after having at last received his matric (the South African secondary school diploma), dreams of getting a job, becoming rich, conquering the girl he loves. He is quickly disillusioned: all doors are closed for him. The racial and class discriminations are still there to remind him that he is nothing even with his cherished certificate. When, in the end, he is at last employed with two other colleagues in an insurance firm called *Golden Gloves* it is only to be better cheated by the dishonest head of

the company, who absconds with all the money that they had so hardly collected through the insurance contracts. A very serious subject which is treated in the style of a comedy, with songs and dance, and in the traditional structure of sketches, where many different characters are depicted and voluntarily stereotyped to produce a rhythm full of life and freshness, in spite of the touching insight.

If some critics think that plays of this kind are not complex enough and find their narrative a little rough, they cannot deny their honesty and forthrightness (Cue, 9/7/1993). Bachaki's commitment is to develop African theatre to reflect people's conditions «in the most meaningful, constructive and truthful manner», as Thulani Sifeni Mtshali explains. «We consider ourselves professional artists although we are not accorded that status because we are based in the townships.» (Cf. Sifeni Mtshali's interview to Sandile Memela, *City Press*, 25/4/1993)

In July 1996 the Bachaki premiered another play *Weemen* (a blend of "we" and "women") at the Grahamstown festival. Based on a real story of domestic violence experienced by an aunt of Sifeni Mtshali, this play and its detailed comment have been included in Perkins' anthology on Black South African Women (1999, pp. 102-112). The story is captivating and well structured, nevertheless it did not have the success it deserved. The subject was in fact still taboo for the stage at the time and Mtshali says that «After seeing the show, many people were surprised that a man had written this play...», but he realised that it was something that he had to express as an artist, not only as part of a personal experience, but because it was a phenomenon common to many other families (ibidem, p. 103). The Bachaki also decided to revive *Golden Gloves* whose subject, unluckily, is not at all out of date in contemporary South Africa, and they added some new appropriate cues to the play. (We had the opportunity and luck to film it completely in 1999 in Johannesburg.) They recently took it in performance all over the country, especially to the townships where they also organised many workshops, and again it was a big success. "From the people to the people"-theatre is deeply rooted in South Africa: it is an alternative network to that of the established organisations of the big cities. Theatre workshops are also very often organised in the schools and arouse a lot of interest. Many other groups more or less known compose this réseau of grass-roots performance: we pay a sincere tribute to them and to their commitment to township residents. We particularly remember with emotion and love Thulani Sifeni Mtshali, who lost his life on 5th March 2002 in a car accident, caused by somebody's irresponsible behaviour. With Matsemela Manaka, in July 1998, theatre lost two of its more genuine members, always keen to serve their people.

Luckily ideas, most of the time, do not die with people. Thabo Mabe has thus taken up the torch of the Bachaki Theatre; he has also now involved one of the ancient cofounders of the Bachaki into it: Angifi Proctor Dladla is a playwright and a teacher of history and language; he also teaches writing and theatre to inmates at Boksburg Prison.

The Bachaki Theatre is now working on a project which tends to spread theatre into the high-schools through the organization of workshops, drama competitions and drama festivals. Story-telling sessions for pupils are also developed in primary schools.

The aim of the Bachaki to bring theatre back to the people (and to the townships through performances and the different school activities mentioned) is therefore going on and on. This theatre is a form of humanity in the choice of the subjects and in the prime involvement of its conceivers, who make the audience become real contributors of their work in progress. It creates a fruitful background for a theatre coming from the people and at the same time concerning people, their experiences in life, and the multiple sensitive facets of their inner souls.

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