
On the wild, essential energies of the forest: an Interview with Brett Bailey

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Introduction

In the nine years that Brett Bailey has been making professional theatre, he has written and directed six productions, and has directed and designed another three. In 2001 he was awarded the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year for Drama, and in 2002 his play *Big Dada* won the FNB Vita awards for Best Costume Design and Best New South African Script, as well as the Fleur de Cap director's award. His first three plays are available in *The Plays of Miracle and Wonder: Bewitching Visions and Primal Hi-jinx From the South African Stage* (Double Storey Books, Cape Town, 2003). This interview was conducted via E-mail in three sessions, from 11 November – 4 December, 2004.

Interview

Anton Krueger: I heard that you've been invited to contribute towards the conceptualisation and design of the entertainment offered by Moyo's at the Spier Estate. Could you tell me a little bit more about this project and what it entails?

Brett Bailey: Most of the work we (i.e. Third World Bunfight) do at Moyo on the Spier Estate revolves around music, song and dance: traditional African types of various genres, including pop, etc., though often with a theatrical presentation. We're the resident company at Spier for three years, with a contract to provide entertainment for Moyo.

Krueger: You've never been entirely sold on the proscenium arch, and yet I'm sure that your Moyo project pushes the boundaries of what, even you, might consider to be the standard conventions of theatre. What sort of challenges are you experiencing in creating work for this sort of environment?

Bailey: Making work for a commercial, dining environment is difficult primarily because I battle to find a concept out of which the work can arise, one which can anchor and organise the scenes/images/bytes I create. If I make a play about zombies, for instance, I have a story, and subject matter with many

associations and issues clustering around it: witchcraft; superstition vs. belief; colliding worldviews; white stereotypes of blacks; ritual vs. superficial pop etc. etc. And so I can group together a variety of dramatic styles; conflicting voices and viewpoints; provocative jibes, and sequence them and frame them so they problematise or comment on one another and acquire meaning. I can load them. My audience is static and attentive. But in a large dining environment it's very difficult to layer work and frame it adequately. A lot of what might work in the context of one of my plays comes across as flat, exotic and trite at Moyo. I continue to struggle to make pieces which have integrity there.

Krueger: A question which I'm sure a lot of people might want to ask you is how you feel about the more blatantly commercial aspects of entertaining diners, after having dealt with such deeply spiritual issues in your first three productions with Third World Bunfight. How do you bring together spirituality and fine dining?

Bailey: Only three or four of my works have been explicitly orientated towards spirituality/ritual: *Ipi Zombi?*, *iMumbo Jumbo*, *Heartstopping* and *The Prophet*.

Big Dada was a turning point, because I saw Idi Amin as the destroyer of everything spiritual or sacred, so made this an anti-spiritual/anti-ritual work. Verdi's *Macbeth*, *Medeia* and my own *Safari*, which I've made subsequently, have not really had that ritual orientation, that focus on the work as a releaser of essential energy. I suppose I've been investigating other things: possibly more of an interest in structure, design, concept and spectacle.

I'm reworking Oscar van Woensel's *Medeia* (I first made this with students of Wits School of the Performing Arts in 2003) on paper at present for presentation in early 2005, and find myself drawn back again to the ritualistic, so maybe the streams are converging.

Krueger: Sure, *Big Dada* does seem to constitute a change in direction from the three Xhosa plays. When I read the script (unfortunately I never got to see it), there were, of course, recognisable elements, like the somewhat absurd humour

tempering the extreme horror of the circumstances. In this way there were certain similarities with the story of Nongqawuse (*The Prophet*), and yet there seemed to be a shift from the spiritual to the material.

Talking about your new focus on "structure, design, concept and spectacle" as opposed to "ritual, energy, spirit": this does seem to be a significant reorientation – from inside to outside, so to speak. Which is not to say, I suppose, that the two are necessarily at odds with each other. I mean, Robert Wilson's pieces certainly seem more specifically focused on all of those first elements, and yet they are also highly ritualised, particularly in terms of the obsessive repetitions he demands, and he does also deal with very "spiritual" subjects.

Bailey: When I was at University, I got hold of a book by Stefan Brecht about Robert Wilson's early works. No pics or anything, just text, descriptions, interviews. It blew my mind. I watched him work for a few hours in Berlin when I was up for some award. I was amazed at the body of technicians he had working under him. I suppose there are similarities in how we work with performers, though he told me that he is not at all interested in the inner-life of his characters, and I certainly focus on that too.

Krueger: How much "free play" do you allow your actors? Do you still demand as rigorous a physical regimen from them as you did with the early plays? (I'm referring here specifically to the comments you made in your book *The Plays of Miracle and Wonder*, where you described a pretty tough rehearsal schedule in the Transkei.)

Bailey: There's not much free play at all when they're in performance, though our rehearsal processes are long: normally eight weeks. In that period there's a lot of improvisation and playing etc. which is used to explore character, shape, movement, energy etc. But ja, my approach to physical training is still Nazi.

Krueger: You spent some time in Haiti this year. Could you tell me a little bit more about what you were doing there?

Bailey: I completed a postgraduate degree at Das Arts, an experimental laboratory for the performing arts in Amsterdam, and my final project there was the writing and designing of a piece, *Vodou Nation*, which I made with Haitian dancers and musicians in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. I was commissioned to make the work by Jan Ryan of UK Arts International, to tour the UK for 3 months. I had reservations about tackling the project, as I knew nothing about Haiti, and had serious concerns about just barging in and misrepresenting a country which has suffered so much misrepresentation. But the opportunity to work in a third world backwater in the Americas, home of Vodou, and hotbed of political intrigue, swayed me.

I was given the CDs of a Haitian Vodou-rock group, RAM, whose songs were to be the basis of the show. RAM's songs are in Creole, and tend to be rock interpretations of repetitive, cyclic enigmatic phrases.

The play I wrote – entirely without text – dramatised the history of Haiti in an allegorical way, mixing history and myth, historical characters with the vivid personalities of the Vodou pantheon.

Krueger: Sounds interesting. How did it turn out?

Bailey: The writing/designing process was very enriching: the cultural wealth of Haiti being extraordinary. Working without text was liberating and difficult: everything had to be conveyed by images. I wanted to make a show where narrative was unnecessary, just to make a series of *tableaux vivants*, one for each of the RAM songs I selected, and each one looking at a particular aspect of Haiti. Each one multi-layered and associatively connected with the others in the series – the way a painter would work. I get frustrated with the linear conventions of theatre, with plot and story.

The producer wanted linear conventions, because she wanted a show that would have wide commercial success. But my vision is generally too dark and tangential to have wide commercial success, so she wasn't being very astute to begin with.

Anyway, I made something which was somewhere between the two, a compromise, a series of very vivid scenes with a story of colonialism and slavery and revolt and liberation and dictatorship and supernatural Vodou intervention etc. etc. etc.

It was quite baffling to anyone watching it... narrative is definitely aided by text, is the moral of this tale.

Directing the show was extremely unsatisfying, owing to different languages and work ethics between the creative team and the cast.

Krueger: I notice that you use the spelling "Vodou". Why?

Bailey: "Vodou" is from the Creole. "Voodoo" is from Hollywood.

Krueger: I recently saw a very old film on Voodoo/Vodou, and what particularly interested me was the figure of the "joker" who would walk into ceremonies unannounced. It seemed that he would just be passing by and stumble into this highly organised ritual almost by accident, and then he would play his crucial role in the ceremony by, effectively, disrupting it. He would drink a lot and smoke a string of cigarettes and dance somewhat wildly about before accosting the audience and answering their questions on the nature of the spiritual. Did you encounter this transgressive figure during your time in Haiti?

Bailey: Ja, that's "Baron Samedi", lewd lord of the cemetery, guardian of the gates to the underworld, symbol of death and regeneration. He is the Vodou character I am most attracted to. I made a special three-day trip across the Atlantic at Halloween to attend his ceremonies last year. He is a disturber, a provoker, one who disrupts the mundane joys of people and wags a gravestone in their faces.

In *Vodou Nation*, the show I made with the Haitians which charted the rise of a Haitian dictator from slavery, he brought the tyrant to his knees and tore him to shreds and liberated new life into the country. This is the dude I worship. This is the dude in me who makes the plays.

Krueger: What else have you been working on this year?

Bailey: I've just made a piece called *The House of the Holy Afro*, for nightclubs: a collaboration between Third World Bunfight and a local DJ, Dino Moran. The piece is basically traditional Xhosa and gospel songs set to house beats and hip-hop poetry – highly styled and choreographed in an OTT Afro-kitsch vein. We performed in Bern, Switzerland at the Sharp Sharp! Festival, where every European festival director that saw it has booked it.

Now I am reworking *Big Dada – the rise and fall of Idi Amin* for a local and European tour, and *Medeia*. I love coming back to pieces again and again, refining them, investigating new avenues, applying to them what I have learned in the interim.

Krueger: Which directors do you admire? Have you seen anything recently which really made a strong impression on you; which made you re-examine your own motives for making theatre?

Bailey: I saw a work a couple of years ago, directed by Ratan Thiyam of the Chorus Repertory Theatre (Manipur, India). They use a wide range of traditional Indian dance and performance forms to interpret stories of Indian Mythology. Mind-blowing lighting and extraordinary discipline. I was gob-smacked.

I'm drawn to the freedom contemporary dance has, unfettered by the narrative and linear progression that encumbers theatre. But contemporary dance does very little for me. It's too precious most of the time for my taste. Generally text-based theatre leaves me cold: it does not transport me anywhere, and I'd find the stories more engrossing on film.

Driving past the slums of New Crossroads on the N2 between Cape Town and Stellenbosch always makes a strong impression on me and makes me re-examine my motives for making theatre.

Krueger: A question on cultural identity: Homi Bhabha talks about identification as involving "the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the

subject in assuming that image." (*The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994:45). With what images of identification and transformation are you playing at present? And on which values are these images/identities based?

Bailey: The values? Jeez. I keep my eyes and ears open. I think deeply about things. I reflect on what I see and hear and feel in the world around me. I am drawn to things that sparkle and slide in the inter-zone between worlds that collide, particularly here in Africa. In the images I make to represent this inter-zone, I synthesise all manner of things that I come across, I cast light on things that are often over-looked or under-valued – the value is the representation of this world.

Krueger: What do you think of ways in which South Africa is being represented in the global imaginary"?

Bailey: By theatre-makers? I think the work of artists like Lara Foot-Newton, Yael Farber, The Handspring-Kentridge collaborations draw attention to the complex realities of SA. They valorise our experience, which is necessary in a world order which overlooks or denigrates Africa. Also, they do not idealise the country in Rainbow colours. No African Footprint there. We need articulate black directors to put their view on the world stage.

Krueger: You've spent quite a bit of time recently in Europe and in Haiti. How did these first and third world views you encountered differ from each other? In which ways, do you think, is your work imagining South Africa to the world?

Bailey: Differences between world views? Bru, there's no comparison, on any front. To generalise randomly: the first world is sanitised, materialistic but cut off from the body, conceptual, compartmentalised, self-reflexive, self-conscious, curious but arrogant. The third world is impulsive, volatile, sprawling, physical, spiritual, brash, poor, hungry, self-absorbed.

In South Africa more than anywhere else I see the interaction between these realms and the anomalous, glittering life-forms they spawn. So I suppose my work reflects that to the world.

Krueger: Continuing on this line – your work has always seemed transgressive to me, in the sense that it inevitably seems to go beyond theatrical (and, possibly, cultural) expectations. Are there boundaries which you believe need to be transgressed? Any comments on the nature of (and, perhaps, the necessity for) transgression?

Bailey: Yes, of course. Generally, the walls that contain society are erected to keep the lowest common denominator in place. Those who erected them do so out of fear that they might be displaced, out of fear of what lies beyond the walls. They are barriers of control. Some of these controls are necessary, some out-dated or just plain oppressive. The necessity for them is always shifting. They need to be tested all the time. If they are never breached, those inside them are deprived of the wild, essential energies of the forest.

Krueger: I've just read something interesting about you in a recent *Mail & Guardian* (November 19-25, 2004: p.3). Matthew Krouse writes in a report on the Sharp! Sharp! festival in Berne that the ambassador, Ms January-Bardill, made a statement to the effect that "culture is... social therapy", before she "called on the Swiss public to perform its role as therapist" by watching the pieces on offer. Apparently, "an irate Bailey together with DJ Moran" confronted her in the street about her statement. Krouse doesn't go into any detail on this altercation, but maybe you could fill me in on what happened, from your perspective.

Bailey: Ja, ja. I challenged her at the opening event, just after she made that speech, saying that I took umbrage at having my work contextualised in this way. I told her that when I present my work, I'm not going for a consultation; that the relationship she spelled out implied a one-way flow and a hierarchy whereas, to me, the work is at best an interaction which is mutually beneficial/enlightening to both artists and audience, and which is often more therapeutic for the audience than for the performers, who, like shamans, are giving energy to the audience and taking them to realms beyond themselves...I said that European audiences need no encouragement to sit and dissect and analyse art, and that from my observation of the insular, constrained and conservative Swiss, the audience was in far more need of therapy than the performers.

She was quite feisty in her response, saying to Dino that as whites, we did not feel the pain of apartheid, etc. But we kissed and made up the next day...

Krueger: If you had to run a course in directing, how would you go about it? What would your prescribed textbooks be? Which methods would you teach?

Bailey: You know, I don't read books on directing. I can't remember any one I have read. And methods...? I never studied directing nor acting, so although I read some Stanislavski and Grotowski and Brecht et al when I studied at university, I don't know too much about methods. For a course, I reckon I would allow candidates to choose a play to direct, and would then mentor them each step of the way, probing them with questions, making suggestions, drawing their attention to character, design, motifs and themes, encouraging them to explore how the play relates to the social/political/cultural environment we live in, and to tease out these aspects.

I'd encourage young directors to work across artistic disciplines and cultural borders, and to research deeply the material they are working with.

Krueger: In your own training, did you ever have a guru, or a mentor?

Bailey: Not really, cos as I've said I didn't really train for what I'm doing. I lived and worked a bit with (late) Professor Mavis Taylor, whose boldness and openness in working with township performers gave me courage.

Krueger: Are there any questions which you would have liked me to ask you –?

Bailey: Maybe on process –

Krueger: And, if I had asked them, how would you have answered them?

Bailey: I work pretty much with a 'total theatre' aesthetic, if I use the term correctly. Writing, design, music and directing are all inter-related. Oft times I draw what the scenes look like before the text emerges. Sometimes, if a scene is

not realised properly this is problematic, as it ends up being design overloaded: style dominates content.

Sometimes, I'm not sure what a play I make is saying. Critics say 'what is it saying?' and I can't really say. It's not a thesis. As I work on a piece I get a sense of what needs to be made manifest through it (or what needs to manifest itself), and during the process this becomes clearer and I know I am getting closer to actualising it. I can feel where I am unable to really resolve parts of it.

It's difficult to stay true to this, because the intellect gets in the way a lot of the time. So, often I'm not sure what the piece really means, or even of my response to it. This sounds vague, I know. I envy painters or musicians. I feel they have the freedom to give expression to something they feel without worrying so much about meaning.

I'm learning that things come of their own accord. Sometimes to work too much on some aspect when making a play is misguided, because then you over-intellectualise it and settle on a dry response to the problem. I like to have a long process time, so that when I identify something that is tricky to see and resolve, I can just shelve it for a while and wait for it to appear. I still get panicky though...