Theatre practitioners as unionists: art workers in post-independence Zimbabwe's theatre sector (1980 – 1999)

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Abstract

This article attempts to frame and examine the structuring of labour struggles from the precarious subject position of theatre workers, without isolating these struggles into the occupational sector of the creative industries in the Zimbabwean context between 1980 and 1999. In this article, I frame theatre practitioners as 'art – workers' and collectives such as the NTO and ZACT as mobilising and organising agencies operating within the postcolonial Zimbabwean theatre industry. On the one hand, the NTO controlled and administered purpose-built theatres, provided funding as well as organised affiliates into a unity. On the other hand, ZACT organised multi-racial Zimbabwean theatre groups into a collective, providing and mobilising financial and organisational support towards the creation of a 'national theatre' narrative. Deploying resource mobilisation and rational choice theories, this paper submits that NTO and ZACT mobilized and coordinated their stakeholders towards addressing the precarious work conditions in the sector. This paper argues while attempts, through theatre associations, have been undertaken to organise the creative sector, this paper submits that the precarious nature of the work, employer-employee non-distinction, lack of legal rights knowledge and fierce inter-and intra-organisational competition complicates the process of re-mobilising and organising creatives in Zimbabwe

Keywords: ZACT; NTO; art-workers; theatre; mobilising; organising

Introduction

There is a dearth of research within the industry and academy that speaks to organising and mobilising within the creative sector(s) in Zimbabwe. Most research studies that have emerged from within and without Zimbabwe have largely explored funding opportunities and models (Eveleigh 2013) and contending performance and training paradigms between the National Theatre Organisation (NTO) and the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre groups (ZACT) (Ravengai 2010, 2011; Sibanda 2017). Those researches that have explored mobilising within the live performance, media and audio-visual sectors have largely come from Europe and America (Etzioni 2018; Burgess, Connell, and Winterton 2013; Charhon and Murph 2016; Knotter 2018; Krikortz 2015). Within the African performance landscape, only Nigerian and South African creative practitioners have openly called for industry-standardised basic wage income through their organised structures. The Nigerian Actors' Guild has been very active in engaging their respective ministries and voicing their frustration against low wages and employment of actors from neighbouring countries at the expense of locals by producers, whom they consider cheaper.

Through this article, I attempt to frame and examine the creation of labour struggles from the precarious subject position of theatre practitioners as 'art workers', without isolating these struggles from other occupational sectors of the creative industries. I frame the National Theatre Organisation (NTO) and Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre groups (ZACT) as mobilising and organising agencies operating within the postcolonial Zimbabwean theatre industry. In their mobilisation, these two organisations tried to collectively represent their members and advance their interests as both employers and workers within the Zimbabwean economic system. On the one hand, the NTO's controlled and administered residual colonial purpose-built theatres, provided production and organizational funding as well as organised residual colonial Rhodesian theatre organisations and practitioners into a unity. On the other hand, ZACT organised multi-racial Zimbabwean theatre groups into a collective, mobilising and providing financial and organisational support towards the creation of a 'national theatre' narrative. In essence, these two organisations became competitors for membership within the theatre sector during the first two decades of Zimbabwean independence. However, when these organisations folded, this paper argues that it has been difficult for industry leaders and practitioners to mobilise and organize Zimbabwean artists due to some reasons. While attempts through the Zimbabwe Theatre Indaba and associations such as Zimbabwe Theatre Association (ZiTA) have been undertaken to organise the creative, this paper submits the precarious nature of the work, employer-employee non-distinction, lack of legal rights knowledge and fierce inter- and intra-organisational competition complicates the process of re-mobilising and organising creatives in post-millennium Zimbabwe. I will return to discuss the strategies used by these two organisations later.

This paper is divided into five sections. This current section outlines the structure, focus and approach this paper takes. The second section characterises theatre workers specifically as 'art workers' and further buttresses this paper's call for organising within the sector. The third section provides a historical narrative of mobilising and organising in the theatre sector in independent Zimbabwe, specifically focussing on NTO and ZACT. The fourth section deals with the challenges of organising the theatre industry during the post-millennium period highlighting the conflation of employer/employee relations, theatre groups operating as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), theatre practitioners working as consultants, funding access disparities as key contributors to the major challenges. The fifth and final section presents scenarios towards creating a framework for organising within this precarious industry.

To make sense of mobilising and organising theatre practitioners in Zimbabwe, I deploy resource mobilisation and rational choice theories. The resource mobilisation theory 'stresses the ability of movement's members to acquire resources and to mobilise people towards the furtherance of their goals' (Muusha 2011, 18). This theory relies on the assumptions that (1) 'in the absence of such vital resources, social movements cannot be effective and that discontent alone is insufficient to make any meaningful social change' and (2) 'that individuals are rational and view social movements as goal-oriented' (Muusha 2011, 19). These assumptions tie well with the rational choice theory perspective that 'human beings base their behaviour on rational calculations, act within rationality when making choices, and [that] their choices are aimed at optimisation of their pleasure or profit' (Muusha 2011, 19). These theories enable us to examine and understand the ideological bases of NTO and ZACT as mobilising and organising associations and the reasons behind their demise as well as the challenges of organising theatre practitioners in the post-millennium period.

While most researchers emerging from Europe and America have adopted quantitative approaches, I adopt a qualitative narrative approach. In contrast to the Zimbabwean creative

industries, most European countries have dedicated government and endowment funds that are directly allocated to the specific sectors for production, research and organisational capa (Knotter 2018; Charhon and Murph 2016; Krikortz 2015; Burgess, Connell, and Winterton 2013;). As a consequence, they can create a statistical database of the sectors and specific organisations and individuals that receive or have received funding. In Zimbabwe, the government does not directly fund the creative sector. Government funds the National Arts Council of Zimbabwe through the Ministry of Youth, Sports, Arts and Recreation to oversee artistic and cultural development in the country. To this end, there is no direct funding that comes from the Government of Zimbabwe to artists except payments for services provided only.

The Zimbabwean theatre sector is 'largely fragmented and operating in an informal manner' (Eveleigh 2013, 4; Ravengai 2010; Sibanda 2019a). As a result, statistical data are problematic especially within an industry where theatre activities emerge out of passion. Most of the reports by funding agencies and organisations explore and assess the impact of their funding programmes on the specific creative sectors (Nicodemus and Mukanga-Majachani 2015; Elmqvist, Tsodzo, and Christoplos 2014; Eveleigh 2013). The Zimbabwe Statistical Agency has not helped the scenario as well, choosing to document and analyse the sector's year-on-year Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contributions, evading and avoiding the political economics influencing and affecting these figures. These statistics, therefore, are not reliable as they capture only a section of the various members of the creative sector mostly found in the urban centres. Secondly, the fragmentation of the industry highlights a need for a national longitudinal mapping and scoping endeavour that will trace and document, with detail and precision, the geographical and sectoral quantitative information of the Zimbabwe creative industries. This lack of quantitative data characterises Zimbabwe's theatre sector as highly precarious.

Theatre practitioners as 'art- workers' in Zimbabwe

Most people in Zimbabwe do not consider theatre, performance and all the attendant production roles as 'work' because they occupy an ambivalent position. Secondly, because artists exploit everyday cultural performances and practices, there is some kind of idea that they are not working or are not workers. The unfortunate scenario is that some policymakers share this parochial view and characterisation of cultural performance, making the process of policy change difficult. This conceptualisation of culture 'as an isolated category is a way to protect the continuity of exploitation, to reduce culture to a commodity, to guarantee the accumulation of symbolic capital, which is so essential to the functioning of an art worker' (Triisberg, 2015d, 191). In the same manner as theatre workers in Europe and the world over, Zimbabwean theatre workers occupy an 'unconventional position about the wage-labour relations', where they are 'subjected to vast of unpaid and/ or scarce and irregular incomes' (Triisberg, 2015, 179), where they find themselves in this precarious position. Reviewing strategies deployed by Swedish art workers to end precarity in their workspaces, Krikortz (2015: 32) observes that the 'arts sector has conditions that are poorer than in any comparable sector, and the professionals have a uniquely weak position.' This is similar to the precarious position that theatre practitioners in Zimbabwe find themselves results in many operating as freelancers, taking short-term contracts or working on calls. Freelancing as a form of precarious work 'has no legal status and does not adequately describe an individual class of workers' (Charhon and Murph 2016, 14).

Precarious work is characterised as 'those jobs with a short time horizon, or for which the risk of job loss is high. This includes irregular work, with limited control over workplace

conditions, little protection from health, social security and low income' (Hennekam and Bennett 2017, 71). As precarious work, the theatre sector in Zimbabwe involves instability, lack of protection, insecurity and social or economic vulnerability, spreading what can be termed 'democratic poverty' (Krikortz 2015, 53). In an interview with British Precarious Workers Brigade, Aiiri Triisberg(2015b, 172) characterises precarity as a producer of conditions that create hurdles for creative personnel such as 'a lack of time, energy, money, multiple-work commitments leaving little time for meetings, or even travelling to meetings, burn out, health issues including mental health [and] forced migration […]' While it could be largely localised at the workplace, precarity affects how 'we understand our future and so on – cuts across many sectors, forms of life and work' (Triisberg, 2015b, 172).

To Burgess, Connell, and Winterton (2013, 4084) precarious work implies 'insecurity, which in addition to changing the experience of work, generally relates to limited access to training and career path resulting in negative outcomes beyond work at the individual, social and political levels.' In other words, The British Trades Union Congress conceptualises precarious work as vulnerable employment; 'work that places people at risk of continuing in poverty and injustice resulting from an imbalance of power in the employer-work relationship' (in Burgess, Connell, and Winterton 2013, 4084). Precarious work deals with worker vulnerability due to job uncertainty and insecurity over income, employment conditions and employment continuity (Burgess, Connell, and Winterton 2013; Triisberg, Henrikson, and Krikortz 2015d). To counter this state of precarity in the creative industry practitioners, in this context theatre practitioners, there is need to consider them as 'art workers' who transgress from 'artistic praxis to political action,' wedge 'counter-power' and occupy 'political functions in a new order' (Apostol, 2015 , 105). Triisberg 2015a, 147) observes that 'if art practitioners are workers of society, wouldn't it mean that their precarious working reality can only be changed by transforming the very social relations that define political and economic conditions in the "social factory"?' This invokes Maurizio Lazzarato's concept of immaterial labour as a framework through which we can define theatre as work within the Zimbabwean cultural and political context.

The concept of immaterial labour describes 'activities that are normally not recognised as work, highlighting specifically the affective and communicative modalities of post-Fordist labour' (Krikortz. 2015Triisberg , 149). In other words, it refers to a type of work that does not produce physical commodities but informational and cultural contents of the commodity. Framed in this way, theatre work is moved out of the 'art for art's sake' and/ or leisure-time activity into a category of work that must be remunerated, respected and protected. The freelance or call actors or project-based theatre personnel become categorised and viewed in the same manner as 'conventional' workers. Viewed from this lens, theatre work 'signify such activities such as central features of creative working process that is essentially a cognitive and communicative type of labour, founded on the activities of assembling, rearranging and mediating knowledge' (Triisberg, 2015a , 149). The concept of immaterial labour is a useful tool for conceptualising the modalities for creative and cognitive labour such as theatre production and performance out of its precarious condition. From this perspective, we can 'scrutinise the precarious dimensions of cognitive work such as the indistinct borderline between formal and informal work relations, the excessive commitment and personal investment, the spatial and temporal limitlessness of workplace and work hours' (Triisberg, 2015a , 149). Through framing theatre workers as art workers, we can categorise all kinds of creative activities within the theatre enterprise as work and create a foundation for mobilising and organising Zimbabwean practitioners.

Organising and competition in the theatre sector during the first decade of Zimbabwe's independence

The theatre industry was organised and mobilised along racial and ideological perspectives in the first two decades of Zimbabwe's independence (Seda 2004). On the one hand was the NTO, which largely serviced the white Zimbabweans while on the other was ZACT that had black indigenous Zimbabweans as the majority of its membership. The key to mobilising and organising the theatre industry was safeguarding cultural and political space within the cultural industry in post-independence Zimbabwe (Sibanda 2019b). This cultural and political space wielded social and economic capital. Social capital is 'a way of conceptualising the intangible resources of the community, shared values and trust upon which we draw in daily life' (Field 2003: i). Samuel Ravengai (2011, 5) observes that out of 300 theatre companies in Zimbabwe by 1996, '20% of them were affiliated to the white-dominated National Theatre Organisation (NTO) while the remaining 80% were affiliated to the black-dominated Zimbabwe Association of Community-based Theatre (ZACT)'. This membership disparity was largely due to the differing ideological inclinations and framing of theatre practice.

The NTO, while well-endowed with financial and material resources due to its historical links to colonial state funding, presented itself as an association of amateur theatre workers, drawing its membership from the predominantly white communities of commercial farmers, business people and elite schools in the suburban districts. As amateur workers, theatre practitioners performed, directed and stage-managed productions for free. However, because they came from financially stable households and communities, the precariousness of the sector was overshadowed as both cast and crew usually contributed in one way or another for the successful hosting of a theatre performance or event. In essence, the theatre became an elitist casual practice largely servicing the whites and private-schooled middle-class blacks. Contrastingly, ZACT, emerging out of a government ill-resourced education programme Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with Production (ZIMFEP), anchored its approach to theatre practice on professionalism and framed theatre work as gainful employment. ZACT's kind of practice intersected with what Chifunyise and Kavanagh (1988, 2) call 'revolutionary theatre'. This theatre was based on Karl Marx's historical materialism. From this perspective, ZACT's approach regarded theatre as a political and ideological tool for the liberation of the proletariat and peasants. In essence, ZACT targeted exploiting and exploring the challenges, fears, dreams and agency of the working class within the spaces of locale and living. Thus, Ravengai (2011, 42) submits that members or associates of ZACT were not allowed to join NTO which was viewed as a 'cultural imperialist'. Conversely, 'whites could join ZACT on ZACT's terms, a move which wa Mirii thought was impossible as doing so would be tantamount to committing what he called class suicide' (Ravengai 2011, 43). This second position, as it shall be seen, created challenges (and opportunities) for theatre organisations such as Amakhosi Theatre Productions that did not affiliate with either NTO or ZACT, but exploited opportunities that emerged from both associations.

Russell Muusha (2011: 18) suggests three important components for a movement's formation: 'insurgent consciousness, organisational strength and political opportunities.' Insurgent consciousness refers to 'the ideas of deprivation and grievances' which make 'certain members of society feel like they are being mistreated or that somehow the system is unjust' (Muusha 2011, 18). This provides a collective sense and motivation to mobilise. At the onset of independence in 1980, the NTO felt pushed against the wall by the government of the day and by extension ZACT. The NTO believed the socialist trajectory sponsored by the quasi-government-supported ZACT would contaminate theatre in Zimbabwe while ZACT believed

that the kind of theatre propagated by the NTO was archaic, irrelevant and out of touch with the common Zimbabwean (Sibanda 2019a, 72–73). It is ironic that the NTO, which presented itself as an amateur, now sought to define a professional theatre narrative and trajectory in the new Zimbabwe. However, in this continuum of ideological and pedagogical positions, ZACT mobilised multi-racial community-based theatre groups across the breadth and width of the country, while NTO consolidated its members and recruited even more upcoming urban middle-class black theatre groups. Although the antagonism between these two organisations divided the sector at some point in time it, however, conscientised theatre practitioners of their economic rights and the precariousness of the sector.

Organisational strength invokes the resource mobilisation theory by demanding the resources and strong leadership as pivots for organising social movements. The NTO excelled under the strong and courageous leadership of the late Susan Haines while ZACT flourished under the tutelage of the charismatic and resourceful Kenyan, Ngugi wa Mirii. Under the leadership of Susan Haines NTO relaxed its racial and Eurocentric paradigmatic view to theatre practice opening up and allowing theatre groups from the townships to participate in the Winterfest Competition, under the Popular Theatre Festival section, performing in a language of their choice (Seda 2004). Initially, all entries needed to be scripted according to the Aristotelian structure and performed in English. This was a key grievance that community-based theatre groups raised as part of a discriminating practice within NTO, creating grounds for the consolidation of ZACT. As a counter to the Winterfest Competition, ZACT introduced its own National Music, Dance and Drama Festival (NMDDF) (Ravengai 2011). Critical to these two kinds of festivals is that the Winterfest was a competition with winners earning a trophy, prize money and a chance to defend their position in the succeeding year, while the NMDDF offered appearance fees for contracted groups.

Drawing from his Kenyan experience of mobilising communities under the Kamiriithu Community Project, Ngugi wa Mirii sought to counter NTO's mobilising and organising strategies by fundraising and centralising the command of ZACT. In addition to the meagre funding from the government, ZACT turned to Nordic institutions such as the Dutch-based Humanist Institute for Cooperation (Hivos), which provided funding for cross-cultural exchange programmes. Although riddled with its challenges of cultural imperialism, this programme provided platforms of training, travelling and touring for community-based theatre groups. ZACT therefore now had material resources to mobilise and organise just as NTO had been doing. Training, touring and exchange programmes became rallying mobilising and organising strategies for ZACT, targeting rural, peri-urban and township-based theatre practitioners. To modestly convince its target group, ZACT tailor-made and contextualised its training approach to specific geographical and cultural spaces.

As observed earlier that during the late Susan Haines' reing, NTO opened up its recruitment to community-based theatre groups that took advantage of NTO's partnerships and ZACT's exchange programmes to create sustainable relationships with their overseas partners who enriched their organisational development and practice. One case in point is Amakhosi Theatre Productions who managed to create a working framework, through the NTO, with Christopher Weare, then Rhodes University Lecturer and Christopher Hurst, a Central School of Speech and Drama graduate. The relationship between Chris Hurst and Amakhosi Theatre Productions resulted in the creation and performance of *Workshop Negative*[1] (1986), which won the Winterfest Festival in 1986, and the establishment and strengthening of Amakhosi Performing Arts Workshop (APAW) (Sibanda 2019a). It is important to note that Amakhosi Theatre

Productions did not officially affiliate with any of these two organisations, but exploited opportunities that emerged due to their organised structures.

Because Amakhosi Theatre Productions refused to officially join either NTO or ZACT, Robert Kavanagh (formerly Robert McLaren) (University of Zimbabwe), wa Miriii (ZACT) and Chifunyise (Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture) sought to discredit their work. These three argued that Amakhosi Theatre Production's *Workshop Negative* was a misrepresentation of post-independent socio-political and economic landscape (Chifunyise and Kavanagh 1988). Chifunyise and Kavanagh (1988, 14) sarcastically referred to the play as a 'negative workshop' sponsored by the British Council, Anglo-American, commercial farmers and urban intellectuals to the detriment of the country. This invocation of the 'possible' funders of Amakhosi Theatre Productions located the narratives in the production into the class distinction characterising the NTO/ ZACT continuum. Ironically, *Workshop Negative* (1986) was about exposing 'night-time' imperialists and capitalists who masqueraded as 'day-time' socialists, (Mhlanga 1992) who exploited everyone for personal gain. The direct indictment of *Workshop Negative* as a play for imperialists, industrialists and intellectuals, positions Amakhosi Theatre Productions as an enemy of the Zimbabwean socialist state. What these three leading arts managers and leaders failed to realise was that Amakhosi Theatre Production's *Workshop Negative* located its narrative in the precariousness of work during the first decade of Zimbabwe's independence, which also included art workers. Yet, their ideological base differences with NTO and the security of their respective positions in the academy, government and as head and founder of ZACT, blinded them from seeing beyond Amakhosi Theatre Productions' political struggle against precarity in the workplace.

The third and final component needed for an effective organising process is a political opportunity. This derives from the political opportunity theory that dictates that the environment in which a movement emerges influences its development and potential impact (Muusha 2011: 15). The political environment provides a background for the grievances around which theatre practitioners mobilise and organise themselves, prioritising some issues and disadvantaging some. The NTO, due to its long history and funding base of former Rhodesians who had left the country or in business focussed on creating an enabling environment first for its affiliated white theatre clubs and members. Most of NTO's members owned businesses in major towns while some owned commercial farms in and around major urban centres. When the Zimbabwe African Nation Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) unleashed its fast-track-land-reform[2] at the turn of the century, funding for the NTO collapsed as its core members lost their sources of income and businesses. As a result, the new political environment in Zimbabwe took away the mobilising and organising agency from the NTO forcing it to remain operational in name and paper. As a result, most theatre clubs such as the Harare based Repertory Players (REPS Theatre) and Bulawayo Theatre Club are struggling financially and failing to mobilise and organise old and new members. Other formerly NTO affiliated clubs like the Masvingo Theatre Circle, Hwange Little Theatre and Courtwald Theatre in Mutare have collapsed and their spaces are taken over by indigenous theatre players.

ZACT mobilised and organised around the government-inspired socialist and nationalist ideologies, which primarily sought to reclaim resources and share them equitably among the stakeholders. Consequently, although ZACT campaigned for an indigenous performance narrative framed as 'national theatre', it operated as a government's counter 'organ' to the NTO programme and activities. Its existence, therefore, seemed to largely hinge on the strength and existence of NTO. Secondly, because wa Mirii adopted an 'isolationist' and 'linguistic puritanism approach' to theatre practice and performance, choosing to enforce the use of only

Ndebele and Shona on members of ZACT (Ravengai 2011, 42–45), once the government departed from a socialist perspective and adopted liberal economic policies espoused under the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), ZACT was left redundant and out in the cold. Accordingly, when the government withdrew funding in 1986, ZACT started disintegrating (Byam 1999). The attachment of cultural production to state-party politics has been seen to expose the art workers to exploitation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems 2009). Notwithstanding the role played by ZACT in mobilising and organising community-based theatre groups into a strong collective that challenged domination and hegemony in the theatre industry and professionalisation of theatre work its over-dependence on government support and political capital exposed art workers to exploitation, and abuse especially during the gala-era.[3]

The disintegration of ZACT had a spiralling effect on the theatre sector as its former members lost focus due to a lack of centralised coordination of programmes (Sibanda 2019a). ZACT's failure to relate to other contending organisations such as the NTO resulted in a confrontational approach and frosty relations between the members of the two organisations. This meant that it was difficult for members of ZACT to work with NTO members, hampering the cross-pollination of ideas, skills and paradigmatic practices in the process (Sibanda 2019a). When ZACT folded, member theatre groups either transformed into non-governmental organisations (NGO), art trusts or switched to producing commissioned applied theatre projects. However, without proper financial administration training, these theatre groups found themselves facing more challenges than opportunities. Although ZACT and NTO are now defunct, their strategies debunked the 'widespread belief that artists are far from too independent and focussed on their work to self-organise and participate in social movements' (Apostol 2015, 103). NTO and ZACT's ability to mobilise and organise 'demonstrates that obstacles at organising can be overcome when workers are educated, supported and empowered by becoming partners in the process […]' (Guard et al. 2012, 165).

Key to mobilising and organising within the creative industries world over revolves around issues to do with the precarious nature of work and basic wage and/ income. In mobilising theatre practitioners and providing financial literacy training, ZACT politicised the weak position of artists due to their low incomes. In essence after these workshop trainings, township-based theatre practitioners started demanding contracts, moving away from oral agreements where they usually ended up getting the short end of the stick. For instance, Amakhosi Theatre Productions started offering its key actors' contracts and payslips after they attended the NTO facilitated workshops that dealt with management and financial literacy (Personal Interview, Cont Mhlanga 2017). Secondly, this experience and knowledge filtered into APAW modules that theatre students took at Amakhosi Theatre Productions. Artists, especially those from the black townships, usually accepted what was offered for their services without usually negotiating a better fee or contract. After these workshops, theatre practitioners became aware of their worth and the expenses they incurred in creating and producing a specific product for a customer. Subsequently, theatre practitioners were able to 'negotiate the labour market', and 'develop modes of thinking and learning that enable[d] them to adapt quickly to new markets and market niches, technologies, consumer needs, business models and jobs' (Hennekam and Bennett 2017, 71).

The challenge of mobilising and organising in contemporary Zimbabwean theatre sector

The collapse of ZACT and subsequent quietening of the NTO as theatre workers' mobilising and organising associations in Zimbabwe has left the sector at crossroads. The theatre sector

has become divided with the gap between the 'very few artists who are successful and the many who are not privy to the wealth of today's art world' (Apostol 2015, 110) growing bigger by each day. As a result, most theatre practitioners have been forced to 'rely on multiple jobs to generate enough income, typically diversifying their expertise with non-arts or support roles' and a 'marked reliance on financial support from family and friends' (Hennekam and Bennett 2017, 71). As it shall be explained in this section, the key fundamental challenge affecting the mobilisation and organisation of theatre practitioners in contemporary Zimbabwe is financial funding.

Another major challenge affecting the re-mobilisation and organisation of the theatre sector is multiple-job holding. Multiple job-holding and its synonym, temporary workers, have been highlighted as complicating factors of worker's knowledge and or entitlements as well as under representations of the sector in national statistics in Europe and America (Hennekam and Bennett 2017, 92; Triisberg, Henrikson, and Krikortz 2015d; Charhon and Murph 2016). The largely semi-professional nature of Zimbabwean theatre means that most theatre practitioners derive their major incomes from other industries. For instance, most prominent actors, theatre producers and directors are gainfully employed elsewhere or rely on their or family businesses, yet they operate as full-time theatre practitioners. In essence, these practitioners use their resources from their gainful employment or businesses to fund theatre productions and activities. Several challenges emerge herewith regarding mobilisation and organising as well as creating a truly reflective database. First, there is a conflation of the employer/employee dynamic. Most directors and producers within the Zimbabwean contemporary theatre sector fail to distinguish the employer–employee relationship. In most in-house productions where directors of theatre take up the producer position, find themselves receiving a pay check like contracted actors. In essence, this becomes a self-centred approach of 'making more money for practitioners in a position of authority within theatre groups. As a result, there has been a mushrooming of 'briefcase' theatre organisations that employ only the director or the family of the director so that finances are kept within the 'organisation' (read as a family).

Secondly, there is also a conflation of personal/business finances. The theatre sector strives on ticket sales, sponsorships and collaborative funding. Due to the semi-professional nature of the sector and the constraining economic landscape in Zimbabwe, sponsorship and collaborative funding are hard to come by. As a result, producers who are usually managerial directors tap into their personal finances to support a pilot programme with the hope ticket sales will cover both the production and overhead costs. If the production fails to break even, the theatre organisation remains indebted to the producer, who is the managing director of the organisation. In cases where the producer also takes another creative role, this becomes even more complicated. In essence, the employee bears the financial risks of the organisation; employer. In terms of organising and mobilising this scenario creates challenges as the employee is one and the same as the employer.

Upon the disintegration of ZACT most community-based theatre groups transformed into non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and/Trusts, seeking to exploit the funding channels and connections that the association had created with funding organisations. In principle, these theatre organisations were transformed into service providers attending to many societal issues upon commissioning or partnering with government or other better-funded non-governmental organisations. Exploiting popular cultural performative strategies, these groups would usually get commissioned to create applied theatre performances that educated, mobilised and fostered solidarity (Guard et al. 2012) through securing the 'spectator's participation and challeng[ing] the normalcy of power relations by 'setting the social world head over heels' (Bourdieu in

Guard et al. 2012, 166). The transformation and categorisation of theatre organisations as NGOs comes with its restrictive challenges as well. As NGOs, theatre groups compete for the little funding coming through Nordic funded institutions. As a result, collaboration, mobilising and organising become a complicated process as these organisations view themselves as competitors, to such an extent that members do not share or engage each other even in their private lives.

Funding access disparities between bigger and smaller organisations have also proved a major challenge regarding mobilising and organising. Initially, funding came through NTO and ZACT, later through registered theatre organisations, then through the Culture Fund Trust of Zimbabwe and finally, established and entrepreneurial individuals with links to international funding organisations. During the ZACT/NTO period, most of the funding went through these associations and would be distributed to member organisations. This made belonging to either of the two associations even more important and beneficial. Those organisations such as Amakhosi Theatre Productions which did not officially belong to either NTO or ZACT created sustainable working mechanisms and relationships that enabled them to access resources when available or exploit networks outside the organised platforms.

These organisations (Amakhosi Theatre Productions and Rooftop Players, later rechristened as Rooftop Promotions) easily exploited established funding platforms and relationships after ZACT folded, moving in to create strong networks of theatre performers in Bulawayo and Harare. Through such funding networks such as Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), Australian Aid and British Council among others, Amakhosi Theatre Productions and Rooftop Promotions were able to provide freelance artists with space to perform, grow, network and work. Amakhosi Theatre Productions was able to build from the ground Amakhosi Township Cultural Square while Rooftop Promotions rented a gazebo located at Harare Green Gardens and converted it into an intimate theatre-in-the-round space; Theatre-in-the-Park. This period consolidated theatre activities as work because artists that worked with Amakhosi Theatre Productions and Rooftop Promotions were remunerated more than any theatre workers, except maybe those working with former NTO aligned purpose-built spaces. Amakhosi Theatre Productions and Rooftop Promotions became the employers of choice and there arose the challenge regarding mobilising and organising. Cont Mhlanga, founder and Creative Director of Amakhosi Theatre Productions, and Daves Guzha, Founder and Director/Producer at Rooftop Promotions, have been at the forefront of fighting discrimination and exploitation of theatre artists in the industry. However, as their organisations grew in influence and stature, there emerged a conflation between them as individuals and their companies. Consequently, Mhlanga became Amakhosi Theatre Productions and Guzha became Rooftop Promotions and vice versa. Thus, they became together with some of the key theatre directors and actors compromised in the mobilisation and organising of theatre practitioners because they were considered employers. Yet, they also became employees of their organisations when they wrote scripts, directed and or produced theatre productions. This kind of scenario created a wedge between theatre organisations that own performance spaces and freelance artists because it was usually not clear who the employer was. In 2018, Raisedon Baya, Saimon Mambazo Phiri, Nkululeko Dube, and William Nyandoro were branded the mafias of the Bulawayo arts industry basically because of this historical conflation of the employer-employee-funder conundrum. Because these directors have consistently produced theatre content even under volatile economic conditions, using at most cases their resources or working with teams voluntarily, they have been branded 'mafias' seeking to control the theatre sector in Bulawayo. While this exposes the underlying precarity of the theatre sector in Bulawayo regarding the conflation of personal/ organisational finances,

volunteerism and creating of content out of love for the 'work', it also exposes the deep-lying structural and fraught relations between art workers in Bulawayo.

As it can be seen in the foregoing discussion that most of the challenges the theatre sector faces in mobilising and organising emanate from funding and availability of resources, the transformation of the Culture Fund Trust of Zimbabwe from a fundraising, fund managing and fund-dispersing organisation into a programme implementing cultural organisation did not help the situation. The Culture Fund Trust of Zimbabwe has three strategic objectives: 'establish a sustainable fund with a strong management capacity, identify talent and create platforms for innovation and space to grow the culture sector and access finance, markets and capability, skills for culture agents' (Elmqvist, Tsodzo, and Christoplos 2014, 5). Although characterised as an 'independent, non-governmental organisation governed by an independent board of directors acting in their capacities' (Elmqvist, Tsodzo, and Christoplos 2014, 8), the majority of artists in Zimbabwe perceived it as a quasi-government institution created to fundraise and provide financial support to their arts organisations. However, the funding opportunities that the Culture Fund Trust of Zimbabwe had created and provided helped in the mobilisation of theatre groups into collectives and highlighting that collaboration was better than the competition. In 2015, the Culture Fund informed the arts industry that they would not be accepting applications for funding grants as their strategic objectives had changed. Thus, without any centralised and coordinated fundraising, management and dispersing of funds, the theatre sector has recoiled back to the 1990s when NTO and ZACT lost their political agency.

Conclusion

Although there are numerous challenges in mobilising and organising the theatre sector in the contemporary Zimbabwean landscape, the potential to mobilise and organise abounds. Many initiatives that have recently emerged to challenge precarious working conditions in the art field have adopted strategies that are rooted in the working reality of artists (Triisberg, Henrikson, and Krikortz 2015d). Reviewing the precarious nature of artwork within the European Union and America, Ad Knotter (2018: 14) submits that there is a need to 'redress the imbalance of market power between employers and workers, to set wages above their "competitive level" and to forge a redistribution of income wages and company profits.' For theatre practitioners in Zimbabwe to move beyond the precarious position they currently find themselves in, there is a need for them to collectively mobilise and organise in a manner that improves and 'validates workers' knowledge, builds workers' solidarity and self-confidence and fosters an activist culture' (Guard et al. 2012, 163).

In mobilising and organising, theatre practitioners in Zimbabwe need to first understand and appreciate the precariousness of their work, which is a result of low wages, lack of job stability, lack of access to personal and/or family benefits and job insecurity. Currently, theatre workers and other art workers are not eligible for group medical aid cover, funeral assurance and social security grants because of the precarious nature of their work. Women working within the creative disciplines in the theatre sector lose income and/ or employment when and if they fall pregnant. Theatre practitioners need to mobilise and organise around the notion of art workers, which will give a 'certain intellectual and political affinity with this current cycle of struggles' (Triisberg, 2015a , 148) within the Zimbabwean public workforce. Zimbabwean public servants find themselves in a dicey situation as the deteriorating socio-economic conditions continue to erase their savings and monthly subscriptions for health insurance and life assurance. In essence, due to the escalating costs of living, public servants are as good as vulnerable and exposed because their health insurance does not provide the basic necessary

cover. In locating their mobilisation and organising in the bigger struggle, theatre workers will be able to create new political affinities anchored on affirmative action. Triisberg (2015b, 173) submits that 'being able to voice these problems and see them as part of a systematic social issue, rather than as an individual on is the first step towards action.'

Second, theatre practitioners should resist the neoliberal contrasting conceptions that locate art-making as a hobby and/ or frame art practitioner as entrepreneurs. On the one hand, the idea that art is a hobby and is not supposed to be a source of a stable income is the basis of low wages, part-time employment and a lack of a basic wage within the Zimbabwe creative industries. On the other hand, the framing of theatre practitioners as entrepreneurs indicates a 'desire to erase the problems of an entire social group from the administrative domain of the state apparatus by simply "jumping" statistical categories' (Triisberg 2015c, 88). In so doing, theatre practitioners and other art workers will be forced to conform to the logic of the neoliberal creative economy. Yet the mobilisation of theatre practitioners as art workers invokes their individual 'artistic subjectivity and class composition', 'class politics and the role of art and art institutions in the age of the art market' (Apostol 2015, 105) and 'finds forms of collective agency in the strategic arsenal of workers' struggles' (Triisberg 2015a, 144).

Third, to find political agency for mobilising and organising within this precarious sector, there is a need for a clear distinction between the employer and employee. This calls for the professionalisation of the theatre sector. Currently, there have been many theatre associations such as Zimbabwe Theatre Association (ZiTA) and International Theatre Association (ITI) among others that have tried to mobilise and organise theatre practitioners; but have all succumbed to the same challenges as ZACT. Theatre practitioners have remained in the same precarious position with only marginal gains in collective action and sharing of resources. A better strategy could be the formation of a Guild that will unite the fragmented art workers across the breadth and width of Zimbabwe around issues of professionalisation of the industry, basic wage, job security and health and social security. The creation of a Guild will enable a diagnosis of the sector that does not separate the production of knowledge from action through a collective understanding of personal experiences and current changes that produce these conditions in the society.

The continuous emergence and mutation of associations, seeking to mobilise and organise theatre practitioners, within the Zimbabwean theatre sector suggests that, in the words of Triisberg, Henrikson, and Krikortz (2015d, 151), 'there exists a radical desire to re-imagine social relations and resistance practices in the cultural sector.' Yet, there remains a need to generate comparative quantitative data regarding the working, living conditions and specific needs of theatre practitioners, if the sector is to be successfully integrated into the labour market. This kind of quantified data will explicitly express the grim reality of the precariousness and exploitation of theatre practitioners within the Zimbabwean theatre sector.

Notes on contributors

Nkululeko Sibanda holds a PhD in Drama and Performance Studies from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College). Nkululeko's research trajectory is anchored on a post-structuralist theoretical and critical cultural studies framework that seeks to destabilise the assumed primacy of Western epistemological and ontological modern structures and strictures of visual language, knowledge, and semiotic models. Initially my research sought to interrogate and theorise the processes of design, and their significance within theatre performances emerging from the communities on the margins of the cultural industry as a counter framework

to colonial and neo-colonial practices in Zimbabwe, specifically and Third World countries in general. I have now further opened my research focus and adopted an interdisciplinary approach that examines modes of signification, visual language and social critique emerging in postcolonial Third world countries. Specifically, my research is now concretely anchored in exploring the politics of cultural production within an African performance practice. Consequently, the need to develop a formidable, relevant and effective cultural production (creating+reading) theory and practice model within African performance practice (from an African paradigm) sits at the base of his research endeavours.

Notes

1. *Workshop Negative* (1986) is a political satire that overtly interrogates and caricatures Zimbabwean politics through performance as a means of engaging government and/ or exposing politicians. *Workshop Negative* attempts to situate its satiric subjects (Zimbabweans) within a particular time (post-independence Zimbabwe) and place (Zimbabwe) and within identifiable ideologies (socialism and capitalism). As a political satire, the play addresses challenges of corruption, nepotism and cronyism and its effects on the Zimbabwean social fabric.

2. The Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP) formally began with the Land acquisition Act of 2002. The Program, that effectively co-opted the farm occupations since 1998, redistributed land from white-owned farms and estates, as well as state lands, to more than 150,000 farmers under two models, A1 and A2. The A1 model allocated small plots for growing crops and grazing land to landless and poor farmers, while the A2 model allocated farms to new black commercial farmers who had the skills and resources to farm profitably, reinvest and raise agricultural productivity. The number of large capitalist farms, mainly white owned, fell by around 75%, while there was a 16% drop in the number of large foreign and domestically owned agro-estates (Mkodzongi and Lawrence 2019, 1).

3. The Gala era refers the period stretching from 2000 to 2008. This period was characterized by musical and performative overnight vigils – *pungwes* -where ZANU-PF propaganda was reinforced as a celebration of nationhood and sovereignty. These night vigils usually celebrated key historical figures and dates such as the independence gala (Independence Day), *Mzee bira* (Simon Muzenda) and *Umdala Wethu* gala (Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo).

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