



CHAPTER FIVE – SYNCRETIC IDENTITIES

5.1 DEFINING SYNCRETISM

Both *Happy Natives* and *Ubu and the Truth Commission* might be read as "cross-over" in terms of the definition proposed by Temple Hauptfleisch (1997: 66). They both involve confrontations between different ethnic groups, use different languages, and (in the case of *Ubu*), present an amalgamation of different genres, such as animation, puppetry and song. And yet, both of these works still appear in some way to present different cultures and languages as distinct from one another. In contrast, the truly syncretic creation involves an amalgamation or fusion of different cultures into a new culture. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin write in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), syncretism is "the process by which previously distinct linguistic categories, and by extension, cultural formations, merge into a single new form" (14).

The word "syncretism" was derived from the Latin *syncretismus* which, in turn, referred to the Greek *synkretismos*, meaning a merger of communities. Approaches to the notion of syncretism vary, depending on whether beliefs and value systems are exclusive or inclusive. In religions which are exclusive, for example, syncretism can be seen as a form of betrayal, as a divergence from a singular truth, whereas non-exclusive belief systems are able to accommodate other traditions and even to incorporate them into their own⁸⁴. As I will try to show in this section, these two orientations towards syncretism could be used to describe the various reactions which

⁸⁴ For example in what is probably the most all-consuming living religion, Hinduism, a god has been made of Buddha, and Mother Theresa has been re-interpreted as an embodiment of Vishnu. Of course there are also Hindu fundamentalists, who are (particularly) anti-Islamic, but, in general, Hindu dogma permits the possibility of incorporating contesting religions into the vast panoply of Hindu gods, instead of seeing difference as a source of conflict. This way of thinking stands in sharp contrast to the mono-theistic faiths (Islam, Judaism, Christianity) which all consider the proposition of any other god as blasphemous to their own.

people have had to the conception and representation of syncretic identities in the South African context: whereas some might consider the emergence of the syncretic a sign of hope, others see it as a threat.

Syncretism is linked to the notion of hybridity and can be applied to amalgamations of religions, cultures, and races. In terms of racial theory, Andrew Smith points out that to be "hybrid" was initially a term of denigration (2004: 250). This was specifically in relation to "supremacist Eurocentric accounts of racial origins and racial distinction", which were used to incite a fear of the dangers of interbreeding:

A whole discourse arose alerting a European audience to the dangers of miscegenation, warning of a dissolution of the blood of the higher races and suggesting that the resulting mulattos, cross-bred humans, would prove to be sterile or retarded (250).

Ultimately this lead to the "fear of collapse, dissolution, and entropy" (250). The construction of this notion is in part derived from the idea that human cultures once existed in pure, "unpolluted" forms, presumably in isolation from the influences of other cultures. John Hutnyk points out that "[t]he idea of borrowing is sometimes taken to imply a weakening of culture, and it is exactly this that belongs to the essentialist nationalisms and chauvinisms that are arraigned against the hybrid, diasporic and the migrant" (2005: 81). However, perspectives on what it means to be hybrid have been changing, and syncretism has begun to be used as the study of a positive emergence of culture, instead of as a sign of loss. For example, Hutnyk points out that the first time the word "syncretism" was used in an anthropological context was in a 1940s study of migrant communities along Zambia's copper belt. He states that

Anthropologists had previously only been interested, in a diminutive, salvage kind of way, with the 'loss' of cultural forms under 'contact' and acculturation. Salvage anthropology was concerned with documenting 'disappearing worlds' and lost customs, survivals and traditions, and it was only in belated recognition of the resilience of indigenous communities that they began to think in terms other than decline and fade (84).

Gradually, then, over the course of the past sixty years, the idea that syncretic cultures display signs of resilience, adaptation and survival has gained currency. Instead of seeing hybridity as a negative and possibly destructive consequence, post-colonial studies are beginning to view it as an act of positive engagement with changing circumstances⁸⁵. For example, Andrew Smith contrasts the previous conception of hybridity as designating weakness and impurity with a current prevailing liberal view which sees "hybridization" as being able to take place within an environment of equality and mutual respect (2004: 251). Also, one of the most important functions of discourses on hybridity, as Andrew Smith indicates, is that they inevitably foreground "the 'constructedness' of culture" (252), and "postcolonial literary studies...[have] tended increasingly to disclose the hybridity of *all* cultural traditions *at all times*" (245).

In other words, the positive re-evaluation of hybridity has been coupled with an increasing awareness that there is no such thing as an undiluted culture. In fact, the very notion of hybridity has itself been challenged as misleading in that it implies that pure strains of culture existed from which the hybrid has been created. As Hutnyk has it: "A key question would be: to what degree does the assertion of hybridity rely

⁸⁵ It should also be borne in mind that these terms (positive and negative) imply a fixed point of judgement, whereas it must be remembered that these interpretations come after the fact. In other words, they are a reaction to an inevitability, to the truth that nothing stays the same, that everything is changing all the time.

on the positing of an anterior 'pure' that precedes mixture?" (81). Or, as Paul Gilroy says:

Whether the process of mixture is presented as fatal or redemptive, we must be prepared to give up the illusion that cultural and ethnic purity has ever existed, let alone provided a foundation for civil society (in Hutnyk 2005: 83).

Some of the dangers of an exclusive, insular focus have already been mentioned in the previous chapter, specifically with concerns raised about "ethnomania", which insists on the prioritisation of one's own ethnic division. There is also the misleading idea that there might be something to get back to, something which can be restored. I think it safe to say that an approach which seeks out the essence of a culture in a mythic past is unlikely to provide South Africans with a beneficial means of negotiating current constructions of identification. The question arises of whether it is possible – and if so whether it is necessary, or desirable – to refer to a shared past at all? If it is, then, on which terms would such a shared past be premised? Perhaps the question of the origins of the various strains contributing to the syncretic product are less important than the evidence of the new creation. For Homi Bhabha

the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity...is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom (1990: 211).

The fusion of cultural sources and an acknowledgement that there is no such thing as a pure and distinct culture are then very important concepts in the formation of a new South African identity. Trinh T. Minha-Ha writes of the post-colonial sense of self as fragmentary, seeing the post-colonial subject as hybrid and unfinished and "not tied to colonial ideals of completeness and unity" (in Fortier 1997: 130). This also

describes, to a large extent, the postmodern⁸⁶ conception of identity. Perhaps syncretism could be seen as an intersection of the post-colonial and the postmodern, in that both of these contemporary schools of theory acknowledge that an important aspect of studies in the humanities concerns ways in which different cultures have fused and formed new currents. Both the postmodern and the post-colonial share the sense of uncertainty in the foundations of identity, and yet the post-colonial examination of power is able to reflect on political or social arrangements, which is something the postmodern is less well-suited to doing. Nevertheless, in this chapter, I would like to consider the various syncretic practises (which arises out of both post-colonial and postmodern demands) of two of the foremost innovators in post-apartheid theatre.

⁸⁶ I realise that it is problematic to refer to "postmodernism" as if it is a single entity, a bounded theory; and not the porous, uncertain tendency to which the term refers. And yet, I would here invoke Wittgenstein's "family resemblance model" in terms of which an identified group may be posited, even if all members of the group do not have the same feature in common (1953: 66-77).

5.2 SYNCRETIC THEATRE IN SOUTH AFRICA

African drama...must borrow from, be inspired by, shoot from European dramatic art forms, and be tainted by exotic influences... (H. I. E. Dhlomo in Barnett 1983: 228).

Temple Hauptfleisch describes syncretic theatre as emerging particularly out of the "the last two decades of the twentieth century" in the creation of a "festival culture". He says that it was during this period "that artists in the country seriously began to syncretize and hybridize various forms of performance, combining 'African', 'European', 'American', 'Eastern', and other styles to create...distinctive South African theatre and performance forms" (2006: 182). And yet, Hauptfleisch also acknowledges that syncretism formed part of South African theatre from its very earliest beginnings, and cites, as an example, H.I.E. Dhlomo (1903-1956), one of the founders of African drama.

Dhlomo's case is an interesting one, in that some have referred to him as pandering to the dominant English culture (when South Africa was still a colony of the empire). Michael Chapman, for one, refers to Dhlomo's "often derivative, literary-romantic idiom" (2001: 218)⁸⁷, and Loren Kruger notes that South African academics have mostly tended to stay silent on his writings since he has been criticised for displaying "neo-Victorian bombast" (1993: 124). She goes on to say, however, that "his exploration of African past and present, rural and urban life demonstrates a critical respect for the syncretic character of 'new African' culture"⁸⁸. During the course of his

⁸⁷ In noting this, Chapman is specifically referring to Tim Couzens' work on Dhlomo – *The New African: A Study of the Life and Works of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (1985).

⁸⁸ Also, as Ursula Barnett notes:

Dhlomo has sometimes been criticised for being too strongly influenced by English literature in his writing. It must be remembered, however, that black students who received a high

long career, there is a trend from the Progressivism⁸⁹ of his earlier works, such as *The Girl Who Killed to Save*, which seems to justify white policy; and the more radical works of his later career, with plays such as *Cetshwayo* (1936) which protests against white domination⁹⁰. And as Carolyn Duggan points out:

In 1936 H. I. E. Dhlomo...claimed that, while he accepted that all modern drama has developed from similar disparate roots, he nevertheless decried a clinging to the past simply for the sake of the past, especially a xenophobic, inward-looking cultural expression. Dramatic expression, he maintained, benefits from outside influence and, paradoxically, we become better able to express our selfhood when there is an outside reference. More specifically, African drama should not be exclusively African (1999: 1).

Since the very first contact between Europeans and Africans, it has been impossible for either culture to remain completely detached from the other. The interaction between different cultures was speeded up considerably in the twentieth century, with its enhanced innovations in terms of transport and communications technology. David Graver, in his introduction to *Drama for a New South Africa* (1999), points out that "developments in twentieth-century European drama...have brought it closer to African performance forms, but before this century, the two were far apart, offering fundamentally distinct approaches to theatre" (3). Graver does not specify ways in

school education before the Bantu Education Act, mostly attended missionary and other church schools run and staffed by British teachers, and therefore received an education even more English-oriented than that of English-speaking white students at this time. It was never Dhlomo's aim to Westernise African literature or to discard African heritage. As early as 1939, he advocated the formation of an African archives department for African scholars planning to write on African historical and anthropological subjects, and the granting of research funds and scholarships for delving into the background of African drama...he also advocated a study comparing African life and literature with Greek, Hebrew and Egyptian life and literature, and the translation of Shakespearean and Attic drama (1983: 12-13).

⁸⁹ In the context of Dhlomo's time, to be "Progressivist" implied that one was content to adopt a subservient role as an African and that one accepted white modernity as a superior achievement which one attempted to emulate.

⁹⁰ For more on this subject, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Isaac_Ernest_Dhlomo>. Accessed 21 September 2007.

which European Drama has been influenced by African performance, though I suspect that, for one thing, he is referring to the renewed emphasis on physical performance. Ursula A. Barnett is more explicit. She says that "The rhythm of dance and song, improvisation and audience participation were deliberately brought back to Western drama in the late nineteen-sixties" (1983: 227). She also points out that the divergence between highbrow and popular theatre has been increasingly broken down on European stages of the twentieth century; and since these distinctions did not exist in African drama, this may well have been an influence from Africa on Europe (227). In this sense a syncretisation between European and African forms of theatre has been occurring, not only in South Africa, but in Europe as well, over the course of the twentieth century.

In addition to the terms "syncretic", "hybrid" and "crossover" theatre, Keith Bain adds the definition of "hypertheatricality" which he defines as "a merger between old and new, Western and African, ritual and commercial performance cultures" (2003: 146). A playwright who provides an excellent example of this sort of hybridised synthesis in post-apartheid theatre is Brett Bailey, who draws on Africanist mythology and spirituality, as well as his European background, in order to create a South African hybrid form. The playwright Charles Fourie describes Brett Bailey as effecting a merger between European and African modes in his work, saying that his plays surpass the "colonialist legacy of the stage" (in Jamal 2000: 206). Fourie points out that Bailey's productions contribute to the mainstreaming of new forms associated with "township theatre", predicting that "[d]ance, music, puppeteering, ritual, and storytelling will shape the stage itself, and reshape theatre as we know it". And Keith Bain, writing in 2003, describes Bailey as the *"enfant terrible"* of the moment" (158), describing him thus

An eclectic provocateur who draws on diverse elements strewn together in performances that resemble either ritual enactments or hodge-podge cultural stews, Bailey's remarkable talent is for concocting overwhelmingly visual and visceral theatrical experiences that draw the audience into an almost trance-like immediacy with the performance (158).

Brett Bailey's three published plays – *Ipi Zombie* (1997); *Mumbo Jumbo* (1998) and *The Prophet* (1999), collected in *The Plays of Miracle & Wonder* (2003) – seem to rely on a range of what might be construed as essentialist spiritual practices of the Xhosa tradition (an issue which will be returned to later), but his methodology is far from purist. Here is his description of his way of working in the introduction to the anthology:

METHOD: Take township traditions and styles, throw them in the blender with rural performance and ceremony, black evangelism, a handful of Western avant-garde and a dash of showbiz, and flick the switch (9).

Elsewhere, Bailey has described the aims of his company, Third World Bunfight, as being

to utilise African performance modes...to posit African performance modes mixed up with Western performance modes as equal in strength and whatever to Euro-American modes, which have tended to sit on the throne here (in Solberg 2003: 277-278).

Instead of presenting a unified cultural vision, these plays depict embattled, fragmentary selves struggling within the uncertain terrain of the liminal as the identities of both performers and characters are caught up in crises of transformation. His works deal with the clash and fusion of various belief systems. As he himself has said about his plays:

They've been placed in real life – what is real, what is myth? They have been based on true events, on historical events, most of them in the recent past....But a lot of them relate to dreams, to prophecies, to witchcraft, to creation myths, to ancestral collisions between Christianity and ancestral beliefs (281).

And Keith Bain claims that:

Bailey's is a style far removed from the structured narratives, introspective poetry and character-driven interactions of a playwright such as Fugard, yet his work points the way to a theatrical style that is capable of activating suppressed memories and speaking to the makers of history to come....This is theatricality that escapes the Eurocentric, linear, literarily text-based and effectively highbrow traditions of mainstream theatre as it developed under apartheid, placing emphasis instead on something that is highly visual, visceral, physical and ultimately "theatrical" (2003: 160).

Many of these interests in the meeting points of history/mythology and dream/reality, are also part of Reza de Wet's plays, which use dreamscapes to subvert their own probing into identity formations. Her plays take place in a world which is eerily similar to – though which can never be wholly identified with – South Africa. They represent an imaginary realm rather than attempting to portray a lost reality. The "mindscapes" they present leave viewers confronted by a sense of their own subjective awareness of history and value, rather than prescribing an adherence to a group identity. For example, *Breathing In* (2004) takes place in a setting which bears a strange resemblance to the Boer War, but where magical and mythical qualities transform the setting into an unreal and uncanny space. This is not the settled dream of origin, this is not the confident space of the unfolding of a collective ethnic reality; this is an erotic nightmare, a form of blood-letting, rather than a fortification of identity. Similarly, in *The Unspeakable Story* (1996), De Wet collaborated with Gary Gordon of the First Physical Dance Company to produce an elusive work which explores a synthesis of image, music and texts concerning the mother of the painter

René Magritte. The piece challenges notions of representation and its text slips and slides under and over other signifiers of image, physical movement and music.

There is a distinct difference, however, in the way in which these two authors make use of syncretic practices. Whereas Bailey has taken his European perspective and leapt into a world of African spirituality, De Wet has drawn elements of African spirituality into her own, distinctly Afrikaans frame of reference. These playwrights have involved themselves in a process of experimenting with identity constructions, and their works reveal – and revel in – transgressions of stable identity structures. They both share elements of Magic Realism, in that the characters in their plays accept manifestations of supernatural forces and powers as possible, and in plays by both writers there is an emphasis on folklore and legend as being valid depictions of reality. Both of these writers warrant closer examination.

5.3 BRETT BAILEY – BLACK MASK ON A WHITE FACE?

5.3.1 Introduction

Brett Bailey is one of the most important writer/directors in post-apartheid South Africa. He came to prominence with three plays first presented from 1996-1999. These plays had their origins in actual historical events relating to Xhosa culture and involved explorations of traditional beliefs in witchcraft, divination, animal sacrifice, ancestor worship, and trance dance. Since Bailey is, himself, very much a white man, whether he has a right to explore African religious beliefs has, at times, become a contentious issue. In his foreword to *Plays of Miracle and Wonder* (2003), John Matshikiza writes:

To be a white man dabbling in black territory is still taboo – to both sides. Whereas [Athol] Fugard and [Barney] Simon might have been skating on the surface of social issues that affected the lives of black people, Bailey breaks through into forbidden territory – the fractured inner spiritual world of black African culture (5).

Brett Bailey is a third generation South African of British descent who grew up in Cape Town. He writes that the only black people whom he encountered while growing up were either domestic servants from small villages in the Transkei, or ex-convicts. (This was because they lived near Pollsmoor Prison, where Nelson Mandela was also incarcerated for a time.) Bailey relates that his only encounters with African people while growing up in the seventies and eighties were thus either with "tamed black women" or "wild black men" (8).

Bailey graduated from the University of Cape Town in 1991. Over the next few years he tried a number of innovative experiments in performance – Dada cabarets,

township happenings, and a play about Helen Martins of New Bethesda lit by lorry headlight in a dry ravine in the Karoo. It seems, then, that from the outset he was experimenting with, and pushing the boundaries of what he refers to as traditional white "colonial" theatre. He felt himself alienated from both the plays imported directly from what he terms the "Euromerican models" (10), as well as from the tradition of protest theatre, which, by the early nineties, had lost much of its *raison d'être*.

Bailey spent a few years travelling around Southern Africa, in Zimbabwe and the Transkei, on what he would later refer to as a spiritual quest. He went on to India, and it was while he was studying meditation in the foothills of the Himalayas that he wondered what he was doing so far away from home. In an interview with Rolf Solberg, he says that he realised he "was looking for roots in the wrong place" (in Solberg 2003: 279). It was then that Bailey decided rather to come back to South Africa; to identify himself as an African, and to explore the traditional indigenous spiritual traditions of the land of his birth⁹¹.

As relayed in his introduction to *Plays of Miracles and Wonder*, Bailey spent some time in the village of mTambalala in 1996, near the settler town of Port St. Johns in the Transkei. Here he lived with the Xhosa *sangoma* (a traditional healer, diviner and herbalist) Zipathe Dlamini. Bailey worked for a number of months with Dlamini in his mud and thatch homestead where he helped to hoe fields and learnt how to do beadwork. He was also introduced to the practice of gathering roots, herbs and barks. Most importantly, he participated in traditional ceremonies of dancing, drumming,

⁹¹ Does an ancestor of European origin have the right to claim African roots? How long does a lineage have to be in a country before it can claim to belong? And who can challenge another's claim to the subjective feeling of belonging? As Mahmood Mamdani asked in the title of his inaugural lecture as AC Jordaan Professor of African Studies at the University of Cape Town: "When Does a Settler Become a Native?" (1998).

singing, chanting and took part in the *iintlombe* (communal trance ceremonies) in which bridges are constructed between the material and the spiritual worlds; between the present and the world of the ancestors.

This was the beginning of Bailey's exploration into the ways of the Xhosa. His interest was neither anthropological nor sociological, but spiritual. Like Antonin Artaud in Bali, he was in search of a more vital, primal, sacred form of ritual in theatre which, in his view, white Western theatre had forgotten. When using the words "spiritual", or "religious", one must be clear on exactly which forms of religion Bailey endorses, since these forms might be considered as more "pagan" than "religious" by members of Judeo-Christian faiths. In fact, he is quite outspoken about "hackneyed old genres that have all the appeal of Calvinistic church services" (9). Instead, Bailey provides the following example of the intersection between drama and spirituality which he is looking for:

Let the theatre be rich and thriving and humming like a Hindu temple, with flowers and cows and children running and bells clanging and incense smoking and devotees dancing and offering libations! or like a voodoo ceremony, with people flipping into trance, chanting and sacrificing, dust and blood and beer and gods (9-10).

This is a theatre of possession, which transports an audience beyond the confines of the rational, which pulls them out of the ordinary representations of the everyday. Elsewhere, Bailey has said that he wants to create "the energy of ceremony":

when people are in a ritual space together, dancing, clapping, singing... exposure to it has a healing quality to it...[and] I wanted to bring that energy into the theatre" (in Solberg 2003: 280).

Asked to define his themes, Bailey claims that

The pattern tends to be about cultural collisions between the West and Africa, spiritual collisions. Christianity versus traditional ways of thinking: theatre in a Broadway sense, or in a conceptual sense, or in a Stanislavski type drama sense and African performance modes and African theatre and ritual and ceremony. The themes tend to be about dreams, about mixing dreams with the supernatural and the natural world...things that invade from that side, and people that move between the two realms...themes about Africa (284).

Here this thesis runs into a few complications. When trying to describe the mystical realms of the ephemeral, language runs into difficulties of description. Perhaps it might be best to follow Wittgenstein's final proposition in the *Tractatus*⁹², since this is a world about which one hesitates to speak too emphatically. And yet, I would still like to make the attempt here at least to allow these words to indicate if nothing else, the general direction of the spiritual explorations implicated by these endeavours. As in the Zen parable, these words try to indicate the moon, without mistaking the hand indicating the direction of the moon for the moon itself⁹³.

5.3.2 Three Xhosa Plays

Perhaps it would be useful here to try to summarise the stories of the three plays of Bailey's trilogy – *Ipi Zombi?*, *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Prophet* – before moving on to other aspects of his style and methodology in the construction of his characters.

The first play, initially called *Zombie*, premiered at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival in 1996. It was later reworked and titled *Ipi Zombi?* (a play on *Ipi Tombi*, "Where's the Girl", a 70s musical). The story is based on an event which took place in

⁹² "What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence" (1961: 151).

⁹³ This parable is relayed in many books on Zen. One example can be found in Anne Bancroft's *Zen: Direct Pointing to Reality* (1979: 6).

a community in the Eastern Cape township of Bhongweni the year before, in which a minibus overturned on the road and twelve schoolboys were killed. One of the survivors claimed to have seen fifty naked women in the dark as the van rolled. Witchcraft was suspected and as a result, the local community was in uproar.

One of the facets of much traditional African belief is that nothing happens by chance, and that there is always a cause – usually a spiritual reason, often a curse – behind all misfortune. Ultimately, an angry mob lead by high-school students and comprised mostly of schoolboys set about hunting down the fifty witches whom the survivor claimed to have seen. Two women were killed before the police could intervene and quell the bloodlust⁹⁴. The mob also set about mutilating the corpses of the boys so that they could not be turned into Zombies (familiar, or slaves of witches).

This was the subject matter of the first Third World Bunfight Production, the community theatre project which Bailey began in 1996 with Miranda Williams. It is a story, based on fact, but also filled with myth and magic. David Graver, in his introduction to the first publication of *Ipi Zombi* (1999), says that while Bailey "does not take seriously the charges of witchcraft...he does take seriously the belief in magic and spiritual possession that lies behind such charges" (201)⁹⁵.

The second work in this Xhosa historico-mythical trilogy is *iMumbo Jumbo*, the story of Tilana Gcaleka, a sangoma who, though called a "chief" by his adherents, does not actually have a legitimate right to the title. In 1996, "Chief" Gcaleka made a highly

⁹⁴ "[F]or the period 1st April, 1994-16 February, 1995: 97 females and 46 males were killed as a result of witchcraft accusations." (*Witchcraft Violence: We Have a Plan*. 1999. Report by the Commission on Gender Equality on the Witchcraft Violence Conference. South African Government Information.)

⁹⁵ A distinction must be made between witches and witch doctors (*izangoma*). Witches cast spells (curses) which witch doctors try to reverse.

publicised journey to Scotland in order to retrieve what he claimed to be the skull of the late King Hintsa, which had allegedly been carried off by colonial troops as a souvenir in 1836. Lead by his dream guide ("the Hurricane Spirit"), Gcalaleka was informed by his ancestors that South Africa would not be healed of crime and violence unless the skull was returned to its proper resting place and accorded a suitable burial.

Gcaleka duly arrived at Heathrow in flowing leopard robes with his entourage. Once in the U.K. he had a dream in which the name *Invernessy* appeared to him, and he, consequently, descended on the Scottish highlands. There he found a farm and the startled owners did, indeed, manage to produce a skull of unknown origin sporting a bullet hole. The triumphant chief took his trophy home, but was met with scorn back in South Africa. The Xhosa king Xolilizwe Sigcau claimed that he was a fraud and no true chief at all, and scientists from the University of Cape Town claimed that DNA testing proved the skull to belong to a European woman and not an African man. And yet, as with the first play, despite the uncertainties of the conclusion, this story is not told dismissively as an example of science conquering superstition. Instead, the narrative is relayed with a sense of respect for the power of dreams and myths, and the possibility of spiritual encounters with the dead. Where the worlds of science and spirituality contradict each other, science is not automatically permitted the final word. And yet, unlike *Born Thru the Nose*, tradition is also not automatically venerated as superior to science. Instead, both views are presented and no final conclusion is drawn by the writer.

In her review of the London run of *iMumbo Jumbo* at the Barbican in London (2003), Pamela McCallum enumerates the fusion of elements which went into the production, from the ritualistic ceremony taking place as the audience entered (127),

to the sight of the actors wearing masks fashioned into images of cameras, which represented the reporters greeting the Chief on his arrival in London:

Such a defamiliarizing image of the camera – its lenses become probing eyes and noses all at once – not only foregrounds the metaphorical masks worn in Western public spaces, but also draws attention to the "life" with which media are endowed (128).

By showing how modern media can be described in terms of the ancient representation of masks, one finds aspects of Bailey's playful crossing not only of genres but also of cultures and forms of media. His play is not situated purely in the traditional world, but in scenes such as this one he portrays zones between rural and urban, and shows how a first world activity can be reinterpreted from the point of view of a third world encounter.

The third play, *The Prophet*, is possibly the darkest of the three and also deals with an intermingling of the spiritual and material worlds. This story concerns a fairly well known historical incident in 1856, when on the banks of the Gxarha River, a fourteen year old Xhosa girl, Nongqawuse, had a vision. This occurred at a time when the Xhosa had suffered heavy defeats in warfare with the Zulus and were also suffering from colonial incursions which had taken much of their land and fractured their nation. In addition to this, a terrible cattle plague had arrived from European stock and was in the process of decimating their herds. Nongqawuse believed that she had been visited by her ancestors, ancient chiefs and warriors, who instructed her to go to the Xhosa king Sarili and to tell him that if they wanted to regain their former power they would have to slaughter all their cattle, burn down all their fields, and empty all their stores of grain. If they did as instructed, a mighty ghost army would arise from their dead ancestors and defeat their enemies. Eventually, they obeyed her

instructions, and an estimated four-hundred-thousand cattle were killed. Over fifty – thousand (some put the figure as high as one-hundred-thousand) Xhosa subsequently starved to death.

The Xhosa people are still in some places of the country split between "believers" (who believed in the prophecy) and "unbelievers" (who doubted its veracity). According to Zakes Mda's novel, *Heart of Redness* (2000), many descendants of the "believers" still claim that it was the lack of faith of the "unbelievers" which led to the catastrophe. The story of Nonquwase has also been explored in other literary works, including a text by H. I. E. Dhlomo in the 1930s, a version by the painter George Pemba in 1962, and most recently in a collaboration between Speeltheater Holland and Sisonke Arts in a play called *Rode Aarde* ("Red Earth") in 2006.

These were, then, the three plays which put Brett Bailey on the map as a writer and a director, three stories dealing with a part of Xhosa history, which delve into the spiritual, mythical worlds of the Xhosa people. These three plays won a clutch of awards, culminating in the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year award for Bailey in 2001. When premiering these plays at the Grahamstown festival, Bailey always used unconventional venues, normally situated outside of the picturesque country town. The first of these plays was set in a three-quarter round, and *The Prophet* was completely in the round, structures which are reminiscent of a *kraal* (a traditional tribal enclosure). In this way the audience becomes part of an actual "audience with" a chief, king, or *sangoma*. This circle is also the place where spiritual ceremonies are performed, and by using this staging technique, the spectators become part of the ritual. Sometimes members of the cast are planted in the audience, such as the spirits of the dead in *The Prophet*, and in this way the audience is invited to be complicit in the events which they are witnessing. Needless to say, this is a role which not all

audiences are happy to adopt, and there were a few raised eyebrows and something of an environmental ruckus when Third World Bunfight performed *iMumbo Jumbo* at a traditional venue, The Baxter Theatre in Cape Town, and set about slaughtering a live cock on stage as part of the proceedings. Bailey also uses real *izangoma* in his shows. He claims that although he works with them as performers, he also sees them "as priests":

They have other functions as well. I was trying to make use of those other functions, dealing with the liminal aspects, the realm between wake and sleep....I wanted the drama to have a ritualistic quality to it...(2003: 280).

This is theatre which goes beyond representation. As Jacques Derrida writes in his essay on Artaud ("The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation"):

The Theatre of Cruelty is not a *representation*. It is life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable. Life is the nonrepresentable origin of representation (1993: 234).

To re-enact a real ritual is very different from paraphrasing it in terms of a symbolic representation. In this sense, Bailey is not only saying something, he is doing it by saying it, complying with Austin's criteria of performativity⁹⁶. In each of these plays there is a prologue (reminiscent not only of Greek and Renaissance theatre, but also of the role of an African praise poet), in which a "narrator" introduces what is about to occur. An illocutionary act thus precedes the speech of the performance in which the language of the presentation is defined. More importantly, in the course of his plays, Bailey's performers really are calling up the ancestors; they really are offering sacrifices to spirits; they really do go into trances⁹⁷. So there is an interesting overlap

⁹⁶ "[T]he performative should be doing something as opposed to just saying something..." (1990: 133).

⁹⁷ Going into a trance is also part of Bailey's actors' daily warm-up routine.

here between "play" and "seriousness". The *izangoma* are not actors in the usual sense, in that they are also "acting out" a cultural role as well as a role which represents that culture. In this sense, one might say they are "acting as" intermediaries between the spirit world and the human world, performing functions while also demonstrating how they are performed. They are not only performing on behalf of the audience in terms of an aesthetic function, but also – and perhaps more importantly – on behalf of the ancestors in the spirit world. At times the audience does not give its consent, and this has been a contentious issue. For example, Judith Rudakoff writes that Bailey's use of African ritual has not always "endeared him to all audiences" (2004: 81)⁹⁸.

In some ways, the type of theatre with which Bailey is engaged is reminiscent of the work of Włodzimierz Staniewski (a student of Jerzy Grotowski) and his theatre of Gardzienice in Poland. Staniewski's troupe initially go on expeditions to gather – or, more accurately, to assimilate – the folkloric tales and songs from rural villages (Staniewski 2004). Similarly, Bailey's troupe have also travelled in rural areas of Kwazulu-Natal and the Transkei, exchanging songs, swapping stories and learning from indigenous storytellers, shamans, healers and artists while performing at street crossings and in community centres. They then take this work to urban centres. The focus for both of these troupes is the religious significance of theatre, a veneration for tradition, as well as an interest in the transformation of traditions. Both also seem to share a form of pagan Romanticism. Perhaps Staniewski is more overt about his Romanticism than Bailey, in that he more explicitly refers to "nature" as a source of spiritual sustenance. The power which they are able to evoke from their respective

⁹⁸ In her report on a performance of *The Prophet* at the Baxter Theatre, Rudakoff writes that "[a]s the audience begins to realise that without much warning and without having given their permission, they are actively participating in a ritual, the feeling in the house shifts dramatically....It is apparent that not everyone is happy with the way the play is going" (85). She also feels that "enacting the ritual outside of sacred and consecrated space...without a fully aware and engaged host of participants is disrespectful, sacrilegious and, ultimately, dangerous" (86).

troupes is due in part to the manner in which they have been able to fuse traditional and modern sensibilities. Neither is merely re-enacting or recreating "traditional", "folkish" performances; both are interested in intercultural experimentation while remaining fascinated by the "primitive" aspect of specific cultures.

Here certain difficulties arise, since "primitivism" means very different things in a European context than it does in a developing nation such as South Africa. For the European, it may well be easier to conceptualise a certain nostalgia for cultural traditions, rituals and customs; whereas in a developing country the allusion to primitivism is more often than not taken as an insult. Nicholas Ellenbogen, who works with community theatre in South Africa (concerning himself, in particular, with environmental issues) says that theatre makers should not be afraid to explore aspects of the "primitive":

'Primitive' is a word African people really don't want to hear at the moment if they are in government⁹⁹. But you know within art we continually seek the *primitive* because of its energy. And it's about birth, about the beginning of something (in Solberg 2003: 102).

So although it may be interest to explore, for example, the influence of "the primitive" on a European artist like Picasso, it may not be as simple a matter to identify a South African artist like Noria Mabasa's work as primitive. If one examines the terminology of "development", it carries with it connotations from child psychology, from the idea that there is a natural progression towards maturity, which is, ostensibly, the technologically urbanised "North", or "West", or "First World". So, Bailey's greatest

⁹⁹ Marthinus Basson points out that "[t]erms like Eurocentric and Afrocentric are really meaningless in this country, because our government is living very Eurocentric lives. That's not Afrocentric, the life they are living, and the role models they are creating." On the other hand, when it comes to the arts: "*that* has become such a battering ram, you know, Oh that Eurocentric art! – Batter-batter-batter! Kill 'em!" (in Solberg 2003: 141).

critics have often been urban, black intellectuals, who see his obsession with the traditional customs and superstitions of the Xhosa as a misrepresentation of a nation which has "developed" beyond the rituals and customs represented on stage. Simon Lewis describes *Ipi Zombi* as follows:

Bailey's dazzlingly experimental play takes all sorts of risks, and with its frenzied drumming and the emphasis on witchcraft has even been accused of racism (2000: 1).

And yet, Lewis also points out that for him

in *Ipi Zombi* a white South African comes closer to the metaphysical concerns of a play like *Death and the King's Horsemen* in which Soyinka's fascination with transition claims a specifically Yoruba origin, unlike the familiar notion of postcolonial hybridity which tends to have a Western stamp (2).

The writer Duma Ka Ndlovu states emphatically that Bailey should not be permitted to "tell black stories", but that he should have collaborated with a "senior black member" of the community before being permitted to deal so intimately with African spirituality. In his interview with Rolf Solberg, Ka Ndlovu says that South African theatre must be Afro-centric, it must be first and foremost about the black African experience, and that this experience must be relayed by blacks (in Solberg 2003: 272). In a sense, Ndlovu is accusing Bailey of acting as a coloniser, illegally appropriating the stories of others. Similarly, John Matshikiza writes about the performance of *iMumbo Jumbo* at The Market Theatre, saying that while white audiences were "stunned by the spectacle, a bold mix of sangoma ritual, [and] stylised movement...[m]ost black people [he] spoke to disapproved of exactly those combinations. The bottom line was the perceived lack of respect for black history and culture" (in Flockemann 2002: 278). On the other hand, the reverse has also been true and Bailey's work has also been criticised by white critics and praised by black

commentators. For example, Ines Watson, the reviewer for the *Daily Dispatch*, writes:

Ipi Zombi is good theatre, but it is also exploitative of black culture and has extremely worrying aspects about it...beating drums, chicken feathers and violent death – is that really the reality? (In Bailey 2003: 151-152).

While Zakes Mda, says of *Ipi Zombi*:

This is total theatre...the predominant tradition is harvested from African ritual which has been refined in a most creative manner, leaving one breathless and spellbound. A work of genius that maps out a path to a new South African theatre that is highly innovative in its use of indigenous performance modes (in Bailey 2003: 89; also in Graver 1999: 201).

And another, unnamed reviewer from the *Sowetan* said that Bailey provides "a true picture of African spirituality...a ritual in which the audience is not just observing but participating" (in Bailey: 88)¹⁰⁰. As to the question of whether or not Brett Bailey, as a white man, has the right to dabble in black cultural beliefs, perhaps one could agree with John Matshikiza, who claims that, ultimately, one should

take Bailey at his word when he says his art and his spirituality are inextricably linked, and that, in his search for a spiritual truth, he has stumbled on a rich vein that springs from beneath the ground on which he stands (in Bailey: 6).

What is interesting is that these reviewers all take Bailey's work at face value and do not seem to question the representation with which they are presented. This begs the

¹⁰⁰ And the *Cape Times* said that his work "throw[s] political correctness in the dustbin where it belongs" (89). The *Sunday Independent*: "thrilling...spectacular in its spiritual intensity" (196); and *The Argus*: "brilliantly created and magical ritual theatre..." (196). (All in Bailey 2003. Reviewers' names not listed.)

question of whether theatre is accepted as an imaginary activity, or whether it, rather, posts signs which are interpreted as "natural" by an audience. For example, the real Chief Gcaleka – or, should I say the person "acting as" or playing the role of the Chief – came to see *iMumbo Jumbo* with his entourage of advisors and disciples and, by all accounts, he thoroughly approved of the performance, vouching for its authenticity as a representation of actual events (Bailey 2003: 145). And yet, Bailey himself eschews simplistic one-to-one representations of reality.

There seems to be a paradox here, in that Bailey both supports essentialism – in claiming African roots, and in reproducing these reviews in his book by people who claim historical and cultural rootedness and veracity of his product – and yet, he is also irreverent about traditions, for example, in his statement about his methodology. Which is it then? Does Bailey appeal to whichever view is expedient for his purposes in any given time and place? If so, would this be problematic? Perhaps this might be an occasion on which one might invoke Paul Feyerabend's dictum opposing stringent methodologies in science. In his book *Against Method* (1987) Feyerabend writes that the only principle "that can be defended under *all* circumstances and in *all* stages of human development...is the principle: *anything goes*" (28). Is there any need to limit Bailey's use of traditions, genres, styles or belief systems?

Whatever the case may be, one must acknowledge that the views on the kinds of identities being constructed by Bailey's plays are extremely diverse. On the one hand, he is said to be exploiting stereotypes of traditional black identity, and yet, he is also seen as supporting and strengthening certain forms of ethnicity. A third explanation for his forays into "traditional" identities lies in the aspect of "intercultural" exchange, in the sense that he is neither supporting nor undermining a particular tradition, but rather providing a syncretic resistance to different traditions, a new form which

challenges all preceding forms. Beyond the two polarised camps who see Bailey's work as either embodying an essential truth embedded within ritual practices, or as denigrating the sacred, there may be a third view which lies somewhere between the two. Ashraf Jamal describes some of the achievements of Bailey's work in his book *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa*:

These include a destabilisation of an authoritative perspective, the implication of reason in the irrational, the daemonisation of sense and the senses, the imbrication of seriousness and laughter, the refraction of integrated characterisation, the uneasy blending of the familiar with the horrific, the melodramatic with the dramatic, and most important, the manifestation of an aesthetic and ethical *resistance* to balancing these coeval and incommensurable positions (2005: 145)¹⁰¹.

In this sense, Bailey's plays do not seek closure, they do not reconcile opposites, they do not dissolve difference into sameness. Instead, they maintain a radical heterogeneity. Similarly, Jane Taylor sees *Ipi Zombi?* as "keenly ironic" in that it

situates several characters within a deep and reverent relation to traditional cultural belief and performance, and explores what happens when these codes come into critical contact with other paradigms, for example modern, urban political youth culture....So while [Bailey] is in part, celebrating, through recapitulation, the mode of being in a traditional ethos, the deeply ironic contradictions and conflicts played out through the bricolage of modern cultural identity provides, at the same time, an internal critique of such tradition...(in Jamal 2000: 204-5).

¹⁰¹ Jamal also links Bailey to Kentridge, saying that "[w]hat links the works of these dramaturges is the syncretic combination of elements, an interest in repetition and ritual, and a commitment to the artistic possibilities, which an exploration of irrationality and enigma and terror and eroticism afford" (2005: 136).

I suspect that Bailey is conscious of this irony, that he is aware of the paradoxes of his approach. Perhaps it is not necessary to make an "either/or" decision here between issues concerning Bailey's "respect" or "disrespect" of Xhosa customs. Perhaps he is doing both, as well as something else entirely. Perhaps he is both venerating the traditions *and* making fun of them; perhaps he is both parodying the rural African environment *and* revealing its strengths. So although he has been accused of exploitation and encouraging "primitivism", I do not believe that his work is merely what Marvin Carlson calls "Living History" (2003: 108-109)¹⁰².

Bailey is certainly not the first to explore intercultural forms of theatre and to engage so intensely with cultures other than his own. One of the most important names which springs to mind in this regard is that of Peter Brook, who built his troupe on the principles of intercultural exchange. Richard Schechner and Jerzy Grotowski also spent a good deal of time and energy exploring the ramifications of intercultural exchange, though in very different ways from each other (the former as history and the latter as practice). So perhaps Bailey is not concerned with identity issues at all, that he is not trying to be ethnic or not, but that he is, rather, trying to reach for a mystical space beyond conceptions of identity, into realms I have referred to here as "spiritual". On the other hand, one might wonder to what extent it really matters whether or not he truly respects Xhosa culture, or whether he has simply been pretending to respect it. As Nietzsche points out in a quotation picked up by Marvin Carlson:

¹⁰² Carlson uses this term to describe the contemporary fad for restoring entire communities for tourists, such as the Plymouth Plantation in Massachusetts where visitors wander through an array of costumed, generic performers recreating a semblance of historical life (109). A similar theme park is described by Mandy Lee Jandrell in *Itch* (2004:82-89). This is a "China Folk Culture Villages" park in Shenzhen, China, where real ethnic minorities can be seen behaving like real ethnic minorities. In both instances, identity is promoted as existing (or having existed) within a stable, static totality which can be restored in terms of dress and gesture.

The profession of every man, even the artist, begins with hypocrisy, as he imitates from the outside, copies what is effective...if someone wants to seem to be something...for a long time, he eventually finds it hard to be anything else...(in *Performance*, 2003: 39).

Or, in the words of Don Juan, the teacher of Carlos Castaneda: "My acts are sincere, but they are only the acts of an actor" (Bancroft 1976: 308). Does it, after all, matter whether someone is sincerely performing their identity with the knowledge that it is a role they are playing; or whether they truly believe themselves to be commensurate with a certain role?

5.3.3 Later Work

Brett Bailey's later works – *Big Dada* (2001), *Safari* (2002), *Macbeth* (2002), *Medea* (2003), *Voudou Nation* (2004), *House of the Holy Afro* (2004), and *Orfeus* (2006) – mark a departure from these first three productions, in that they move away from the specifically Xhosa cultural base, and sometimes away from South Africa entirely. Instead, these pieces reference Uganda (*Big Dada*) and Haiti (*Voudou Nation*), as well as the European colonial view of Africa (*Safari*). When I asked him about the apparent shift in his work away from the overtly "spiritual", Bailey told me that

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. [Since then]...I've been investigating other things; [with] possibly more of an interest in structure, design, concept and spectacle (2006: 324).

It seems then that a very specific shift has occurred from inside to outside, from archetypal to external. What remains is Bailey's interest in the syncretic. In terms of

the future, he is optimistic about the resources available to South African artists, saying that

the cultural resources here are incredibly rich. They are vast. The areas of possible intermingling – African, Western, Eastern strands....It really is completely inexhaustible (in Solberg 2003: 283).

5.4 THE HETEROGENEOUS INDIGENE IN THE PLAYS OF REZA DE WET

5.4.1 Introduction

In her interview with Rolf Solberg, Reza de Wet mercilessly dissects the work of other South African playwrights, finding most of them severely lacking. When questioned on the sort of direction she thinks South African theatre should be taking, she says that Brett Bailey might be the "man we are looking for", since he is able to take things from disparate cultures and transform them while "creating visual excitement" (in Solberg 2003: 191). On the other hand, she deplores what she considers to be the sterile tradition of English theatre (190) which has been the South African inheritance. She says that she does not "resonate at all with white South African theatre", since it is "what Peter Brook called *deadly theatre*" (189). In some ways, De Wet's own plays share some of the ethos of Bailey's magical representations which delve into the spiritual world. In an interview with Ashraf Jamal, she expands on this theme, stating more explicitly what she has against the tradition of realism, which she sees as prevalent in South African theatre:

Realism, which deals with psychological complexity, is described by Meyerhold as 'peeping-tom theatre' which has betrayed its aboriginal function. Since theatre – both in the East and the West and in an African context – has always evolved from ritual invocations of the unknowable, the 'truth' of theatre is still linked to magical thinking, to transformation, to exorcism, and to heightened states of consciousness, which in more recent times have been described as – and to a certain degree have been degraded by the term – fantasy. If...fantasy has a direct link to the ecstatic function of theatre, then it must surely be clear how fantasy in this context can nourish and revitalize our theatre, which has become so radically impoverished by particularly political and social realism. Death to peeping tom (in Jamal 2000: 205).

De Wet's notion of theatre is that it should be more than a means of conveying history, and also more than entertainment. Instead of trying to mirror a social reality, theatre, for her, should rather concern itself with mysteries, rituals and "the unknowable". Whereas many South African playwrights try to create a sense of familiarity for their audience, De Wet's plays are known for transporting hers into unfamiliar territory; for arousing a sense of the uncanny; for their element of *vervremdung*. As already mentioned in relation to Brett Bailey, these are not terms which can easily be accessed by academic discourses. They are not easily circumscribed by text, and yet in this chapter I will be seeking to approach, if nothing more, at least a sense of the reverence with which De Wet moves towards these ideals.

Although a number of her plays were written before the fall of apartheid, they were only translated after. Since she claims to be disinterested in politics, it might come as no surprise that there seems to have been little difference in the style and content of De Wet's work since 1994. Perhaps the only distinct change has been that she has now started publishing English plays. Earlier works have also been translated into English (by herself, and in collaboration with Steven Stead) and have been published and performed internationally. In this sense, perhaps her English work may be considered definitive of her post-apartheid writing.

In this thesis, I would like to highlight a few fairly consistent themes in De Wet's plays which make her ideally suited to the exploration of and experimentation with new South African identities. Although De Wet writes mostly about Afrikaners¹⁰³, she also acknowledges her debt to African folklore and mythology which, she claims,

¹⁰³ De Wet's scripts routinely advise that her characters "are not English-speaking South Africans, but Afrikaners and as such a 'South African' accent is not required" (2005: 17).

inevitably inform every Afrikaner experience. For example, being brought up by a black nanny was an experience common to many white Afrikaans children of her generation, and De Wet talks about her "black mother" who raised her, saying that

for her the stories were not myths, they were true...and for me they also existed, of course....She made me realise there are many realities. More than meets the eye....It depends on how you take it in, you see. You make it part of you, in which case it is unforgettable and it forms you utterly... (in Solberg 2003: 183).

Furthermore, she goes on to describe a curious symbiosis which she sees as having developed between the Afrikaner and the black cultures of South Africa; an encounter which has the potential of leading to richly syncretic amalgamations. She says that "there is a *long* history" preceding the current events in South Africa, particularly as concerns the Afrikaners, whom she describes as "really a kind of white tribe, not a nation". She goes on to say that Afrikaners have

an understanding of a kind of myth, the magical thinking that has been integral to the black experience in Africa. But then tinged with, or mixed with, a more European consciousness (108).

Talk of an Afrikaans identity arising out of this kind of mixture is a radical departure from the identity mooted by Hendrik Verwoerd, who described the Afrikaner's history in Africa as having taken place in isolation from other cultural influences. It was under Verwoerd that what has come to be referred to as a "laager mentality" developed¹⁰⁴. (A laager is a circle of wagons which the Voortrekkers traditionally formed as a defensive measure against attack from other tribes while they were

¹⁰⁴ "In the 1960s, the ruling Afrikaner nationalist elite developed a 'laager' (or 'circle the wagons') complex, especially under President Verwoerd. This complex led Afrikaner nationalists to see themselves as an ethnic and religious minority and as 'God's chosen people', surrounded by 'black heathens' and 'godless communists' and betrayed by the West" (Purkett and Burgess 2002: 231).

forging their way into the interior). Also, one of Verwoerd's policies underscoring his theory of apartheid concerned "Separate Development", a name which seems to imply that a trajectory of development can be described as unrelated to that occurring in surrounding cultures. This seems a rather absurd way of describing the 300 odd years during which the Afrikaner people developed their culture and language within Africa. To speak of syncretism and fusions between Afrikaner and black cultures does seem to be a more accurate perspective, and in this view, forty years of apartheid become a misinterpretation, a kind of illusionary gloss of reality, as ideals of racial purity inevitably are. So although de Wet is certainly indebted to a European literary tradition of playwrighting (particularly Chekhov), one of the things which her earlier works do is to describe the insistence on cultural and ethnic purity as a kind of perversity.

5.4.2 Three Translations: *African Gothic; Good Heavens; Crossing*

I would like to begin by referring to the early works of De Wet, before moving to a fuller analysis of her later English work. *Diepe Grond* was her first play. It won the ATKV¹⁰⁵ award in 1985 and provided a stinging critique of the notion of stable Afrikaner identity by portraying two incestuous children who respond to years of Calvinistic repression by murdering their parents. The play was initially written as a parody of Alba Bouwer's *Stories van Rivierplaas* (1957), an idyllic Afrikaans pastoral and the characters originally had the same names as the Bouwer characters (Alie, Hennie, Ou-Melitie). However, after strong protest by Bouwer these names were later changed to Sussie, Frikkie and Alina.

¹⁰⁵ *Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging* (Afrikaans' Language and Cultural Association).

One is never sure exactly what the relation is between Sussie and Frikkie¹⁰⁶. Part of what created such a stir, I believe, was the degree to which familiar identity structures (the traditional *boere* family on the farm) were subverted. Simon Lewis describes the play (in English, literally "Deep Earth", later translated as *African Gothic* [2005]) as "a critical re-examination of Afrikaner myth and mentality...an incestuous, confined parody of '30s Afrikaans drama aimed at forging a national identity" (2000: 2). In a sense, this kind of instability and transgressive uncertainty harks back to the very early days of Western theatre, which Anne Duncan describes in *Performance and Identity in the Classical World* (2006):

As seen in all of these spectacles, it was the line between mimesis and reality that fascinated audiences....There was a *frisson*, a thrill of transgression, perhaps even danger, in blurring or crossing this line (217).

In a similar way, De Wet's play challenges the stability of meaning. It mixes familiar elements of folkish fiction, and yet, at the same time, it arouses disconcerting suspicions that everything is not as it appears to be; that dark undercurrents underscore perceptions of idyllic domesticity. In some way it is almost as though forces at play in the unconscious are breaking through into the terrain dominated by the surveillance of the conscious mind. Chief among these undercurrents is a vein of erotic desire, heightened through years of suppression. For example, Sussie has been taught to believe that because Grové's wife has "red nails and a red mouth" that she is "bad", since her mother has told her that "women who want to improve on God's work are wicked and damned" (2005: 34).

¹⁰⁶ Madeleine Shaner, who reviewed a London run of the play, introduces the disturbed siblings as follows: "This is a strange pair, whose weirdly disturbing relationship keeps the first act on its mystified toes. Are they, or are they not lovers? Are they, or are they not siblings? Are they, or are they not, stunted adults with white-trashy, morally and ethically deficient standards?" (2005: 16).

Op Dees Aarde was the second of De Wet's plays, and she later translated it as *Good Heavens*. Here we again encounter a strictly Calvinistic Afrikaans family, whose insular world leads to the emergence of both psychic and psychotic phenomena. The family is constantly worried about ways in which the community will categorise and judge them due to a previous indiscretion. They have already been cast out by a church community, and yet they still fear that their every action is being watched and evaluated by a vigilant and merciless God who stands ever-ready to punish them. As in *Diepe Grond*, the greatest sense of guilt (and the consequent fear aroused by this guilt) is created by the threat of carnality. Similar to the society portrayed in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), this puritanical community believes that being swept away by a Don Juan or a charlatan constitutes the greatest disgrace from which not even death will ever free one.

In *Op Dees Aarde*, the girl who has fallen into the murky trough of desire is "Baby", the apple of her mother's eye. In sharp contrast to her, two spinster sisters remain bitter after years of neglect. By dying, Baby has managed to stay young and charming, and she haunts the two sisters, who have become crones. The sisters want her to repent, to admit to her guilt, but Baby never will, and there is in some way a sense that she is part of her mother's dream, since, when her mother dies, Baby disappears. And yet, Baby returns to sort out the will and the other two sisters are consequently cast out, which also implies an indictment against other sins, such as pride and self-righteousness.

As with all of De Wet's plays, there is a sense of foreboding throughout; a tone of disharmony, a subtle unease. The play also delves into the ghosts of the Afrikaner past, exploring secrets which have maintained the Afrikaner psyche. There is an overbearing sense of privacy, which is used to mask a fear of disgrace coupled with a

constant awareness of shame. This permeates throughout the family's relationships and creates an insular existence shielded from exchanges with the outside world. It is fitting that the family are undertakers, since they are kept busy burying the secrets of their past, which could equally be seen as a metaphor of the Afrikaner past. There are skeletons in the cupboard and secrets which will never be revealed. (For example, we never learn how Baby died.) The long shadows of the past which haunt the family have been created by a fundamentalistic dogma and have been sustained by guilt, and the family suffers under the burden of maintaining their repression.

Reza de Wet translated her third play *Drif*, initially as *The Crossing* in *Graver* (1999) She later simplified this title to *Crossing* in the collection *Plays One* (2000)¹⁰⁷. Simon Lewis describes the play as subverting the "stolid national-familial Afrikaans drama of the 1930s" (2000:2). He also describes the play as "actively participating in forming the drama *for* a new South Africa (not 'from' or 'of') by reclaiming and popularizing hidden histories" (1). Similarly to her previous work, *Crossing* creates a world comprised of a strange alternative reality which makes it impossible for an audience to draw on ready-made political or socio-sexual definitions to come to terms with the identities of the characters portrayed. For example, neither the strange power relation between Frikkie and Sussie (in *African Gothic*) nor the mysterious Svengalian connection between Maestro and Ezmerelda (in *Crossing*), are ever entirely clarified. The "rules of the game" are not always known. Again, as in her two earlier plays, there is a sense here that a primordial desire suppressed by the forefathers has lead into a psychic quagmire from which a younger generation are attempting to extricate themselves.

¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, removing the article from the title is not necessarily a simplification, since it opens the title up to greater ambiguity.

Each of these early plays can also be read as an indictment of patriarchy. For example, in *Op Dees Aarde*, the absent husband and charlatan have abandoned the women, and in *Drif* Maestro is a hypocritical seducer. All three plays also deal with the consequences of a heightened fear of impurity; or, in other words, a paranoia of the hybrid, a fear of intermingling. These plays show how an insistence on the purity of bloodline, lineage and culture creates a horror of – and a consequent obsession with – desire, which leads to crippled, incestuous families.

5.4.3 Two English Texts: *Breathing In* and *Concealment*

Breathing In (2004) and *Concealment* (2004) were both originally written in English and, to my knowledge, have not been translated into Afrikaans, marking a departure for De Wet from work originally in her mother tongue. In *Breathing In* (a reworking of *Nag Generaal* [1987]), she again achieves intimations of the uncanny in that the world she creates seems both familiar (in terms of portraying a scene related to Afrikaner mythologies of the Boer War), and frighteningly strange (in terms of the central thesis that a beautiful young girl has maintained her youth by breathing in the last breath of dying men). It is a play about a mother and daughter and contains many paradoxes: showing, for example, how a mother's love can destroy a man for the sake of her progeny; how the nurturing and healing skills associated with maternity can be used to crush and destroy the masculine. The mother is the sort of female character which De Wet has described as embodying "the masculine principle" (1995: 92). She says "I find this masculinity more macabre than seeing it in a man and also more treacherous." In other words, although this play may be read as being "opposed" to patriarchy, the most patriarchal figure, ironically, turns out to be the mother!

In this sense, De Wet does not allow easy identifications with her characters. Anna (the mother) is a scavenger who is out to feed off the strength of men, continuously seeking out life forces to subsume in order to keep on reviving her daughter. As with all of De Wet's plays, the text contains a gothic element, and is suffused in mystery. The setting is a world in which spirits and dreams are as substantial as flesh. In many ways it is an anti-romantic play, which ridicules the romanticist notions of a man giving his life for a woman, mocking notions of sacrifice; a parody of Plato's myth of the soul mate. Instead of representing the dream of pure love, it is about the power of seduction. Anna deftly manipulates the soldier (Brand), by means of guilt, playing on his ideals of loyalty and self-sacrifice. Her daughter needs his last breath and Anna eventually persuades him to go against his General, and everything he has ever believed in – duty, patriotism, fatherland – all for the sake of love, out of pity for a beautiful young girl. The play seems to be about a kind of domination women are able to exercise over men by means of their powers of persuasion. It deals with the power inherent in the pull of attraction rather than the force of brute strength.

In the course of the play, masculine concerns of patriotism are derided. The relation between the soldier and his general reveals some of the ways in which national identity is maintained in terms of idealised notions of country and the role of honour in warfare. For example, the Boer soldier does not want to wear his dead enemy's shoes, but Anna, the forager, is prepared to take whatever she needs from anyone for the sake of her and her daughter's survival. Anna and her daughter are cut loose from commitments towards a collective identification.

In this way, expectations concerning affiliations to gender, nation and language are subverted. The play's action continues with no hampering restrictions of a moral perspective, and without the censure of a politically correct view it explores ways in

which love can make the world grow smaller, how an obsession with caring for one's kin can bring the borders in, how an ostensibly valuable human emotion, such as a mother's love, can contribute towards an insular world which thrives on egocentric self-interest. There may also be a sinister undertone here of the way mothers might rule daughters; how they might pass on their knowledge and power; how they might teach them to seduce. The play thus goes beyond the confines of a discussion on a gendered, ethnic or national identity and presents us with a frightening new form of individual identity, shorn of its connections to the outside world, unshackled from its ties to community.

Another play which is more directly concerned with patriarchy and colonialism is *Concealment* (2004)¹⁰⁸, which deals explicitly with the colonial fear of the hybrid. As previously discussed, hybridity was at first a botanical and then a biological description which only later came to be applied to races¹⁰⁹ (Young 1995: 6). The analogy made from animal husbandry was that it was through sexual contact that hybrid forms were created which would produce inferior species, in the same way that the sterile mule was a hybrid of horse and donkey. Robert Young explores a history of this suppression of sexuality between races in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995), and comes to the conclusion that this sexual censorship often had the opposite effect of intensifying desire for the unknown other, a theme which drives *Concealment*.

¹⁰⁸ *Concealment* draws on themes of suppressed feminine desire which are also dealt with in De Wet's earlier play *Worm in the Bud* (1995).

¹⁰⁹ One should bear in mind that at the turn of the century, in which the play is set, Afrikaners and English were considered as two different races. This is pointed out by Dan Jacobson in an essay on Kipling (2007: 18). The fact that English and Afrikaner are today easily conflated into a single racial category is an indication of how thinking along racial lines can change. It is, therefore, not impossible to imagine that in another hundred years, ostensibly "white" and "black" races might also be reduced to a single human "race".

In this play a father arrives in a nameless African country, which is, perhaps, again, more of a mythic place than an actual location. He has returned to fetch his daughter, May, whose husband, John, has recently died due to heat-stroke, after having stepped out into the African wilderness without his hat. Instead of finding May in mourning, he discovers that she appears to be in good spirits, although her appearance is unkempt. Her skin is changing colour and – according to Father – she is beginning to look distinctly local. When Father and Amy (May's sister) first see May, the Father does not recognise her and when Amy insists that it is his daughter he says:

Don't be ridiculous. That woman is completely dishevelled. And she doesn't have a complexion. She must be a half-breed at least (2004: 306).

When her identity is confirmed, he stares "in horror" at what has become of his daughter. It appears that she is being assimilated into the African climate which is associated with heat, dryness, colour, in contrast to Europe, which is depicted as cold and damp. As the play progresses, the audience discovers that there is a sexual connection between May and the black gardener Samuel. Also, Amy discovers John's hat among May's "underclothes", lending credence to the idea that – in collusion with the African sun – she is responsible for his death by withholding this protection from him, and hiding it in the one place he wouldn't look. From this one could also assume his lack of interest in her sexuality.

"Amy" and "May" are anagrams of each other, and yet they each come to represent very different aspects of femininity. Perhaps the word "May" also indicates a permissiveness denied the constrained Amy. They are further distinguished in terms of the character descriptions, and in particular with reference to their hair, a potent trope of sexuality. Whereas Amy's hair is "worn in a bun", May's "long, abundant hair is loosely tied back". Also, whereas Amy is characterised by her "large, luminous

eyes", May is described in terms of her skin, which is "rich, golden brown from the sun" (302). In this sense, Europe is associated with the cool, aloof, distant gaze, in contrast to the visceral description of May's body which, browned by the sun, has taken on the appearance of the hybrid, the in-between. The sun provides an extended metaphor for acculturation to African conditions throughout the play. For example, Dr Frost (the father) warns his girls that "the heat is enough to kill you" (305). He also repeatedly warns the girls about going into the sun since this will damage their "fair skin" (303). Elsewhere he says to Amy, "you look quite pale" (304) and warns her that "a young, pale-skinned woman is a terrible temptation!" (336).

Throughout the play, the natural world, the outdoors, is contrasted with the interior, domesticity of the household. There is a similar sentiment in *African Gothic* where the natural world is contrasted with domesticity, when Sussie says that flowers are not allowed indoors because she carries with her the warning from her mother that "they bring germs into the house" (2005: 30). In *Concealment* it seems there is also a relation between colourful flowers and disease. The metaphor of a tended garden is taken further when Amy speaks to Samuel. She draws a parallel between the gardens of Europe and those of Africa, saying that in England they are "[n]eat and well tended. Everything in its place" (2004: 315), and that flowers grow there which are "too fragile to survive here". When Samuel will not respond to Amy's flirtations, she loses her temper, knowing that he speaks freely to May. Eventually, fuelled by jealousy and stoked up to righteous zeal by her father, Amy colludes with him in drugging May and carting her off back to England where she is to be incarcerated.

It is not only May's possible infringement of the laws of purity that condemn her, but also because she reveals what has remained repressed within the family history: namely that her father molested her when she was a little girl. Perhaps it is bringing

this truth out into the light of consciousness which is her chief crime. She recalls the carbolic smell of his hands: "I would be filled...with a kind of...horror...and fear...because I knew...that you were coming up...to say good night. That you would...come and kiss me good night...that you would...touch...my hair!" (334).

On the one hand, there is the fear of the exotic; on the other there is an indictment of the moderation and restraint preached throughout by the father to his daughters. Again, themes which De Wet has reiterated in previous plays come to the fore – the incestuous relationship of the colonisers, who dread any mixing with (perhaps for fear of humanising) the local population. Also, the fear of revelation, the fear of the exposure of repressed desire turns in on the family unit and sinks it into a quagmire of obsession and shame. The very censoring of the desire for the other becomes a neurotic fascination. As Robert Young points out in *Colonial Desire* (1995):

Racial theory, which ostensibly seeks to keep races forever apart, transmutes into expressions of the clandestine, furtive forms of what can be called 'colonial desire': a covert but insistent obsession with transgressive, inter-racial sex, hybridity and miscegenation... (xii).

There is thus simultaneously a desire for exotic sexuality, but also a fear of breaching the borders of one's identification and crossing over into unknown terrain. This desire also creates fears within those in the colonial community who are associated with the person who has overstepped the mark. For example, Dr Frost feels threatened by the power which the invisible Samuel has over his daughter, since he wishes to keep her to himself, and to keep her English. Young describes Bhabha's view that hybridity also serves to unmask authority (22) since it reverses structures of domination when knowledge which is denied is exchanged. There is also a threat that the concealed knowledge of the father's molestation of his daughter will be revealed. His greatest fear is that his daughter will have sex with the black gardener; and yet he does not see

his own sexual contact with his daughter as anything but part of his means of civilizing her, and goes as far as to refer to it as his "fondest...most cherished memory" (334). Whereas a healthy sexuality (which might mean crossing the line of identification between coloniser and colonised) represents a terrifying danger, Dr Frost appears to tolerate incest, possibly since it keeps the culture inside the family circle. There is thus a metaphoric turn-around here, similar to the one described in *African Gothic* – what is cloistered, nurtured, protected within the purity of family, becomes exactly that which, by the end of the play, is seen as perverse.

De Wet's plays seem always to be, in some or other way, related to questions of sexuality. In the incestuous relations between the inheritors of the Afrikaans farm in *Diepe Grond*, there is a sense that Afrikaner culture is insular, mistrusting of outsiders, and this desperate desire for purity becomes a vicious obsession. This obsession must then also be hidden – for example in *Good Heavens*, Sophie rebuffs the concern of her neighbour by saying "a wound...is a private matter" (2005: 85). And Minnie says "everywhere there are townspeople who whisper behind their hands and who look at us over their shoulders" (87), while the mother talks of "the watchful eyes" (97), and Sophie is afraid of the people coming out of church, because, "what will they think?" (103). In this way the cycle of repression and suppression is maintained.

5.4.4 Conclusion

Marthinus Basson, one of the most innovative theatre directors working in South Africa today, has directed most of De Wet's plays in South Africa. He says that

Reza de Wet's plays can seem quite simple and straightforward and could easily be grouped under labels like Fairy-tale, Magic Realism or Postmodern,

yet they are unique in many ways and very, very deceptive, in the same way that the reflection of the sky in a pond with floating leaves is a pleasant illusion, masking a rich soup of rotting vegetation or worse.
(2005: 10)

Perhaps I have over-simplified De Wet's plays by writing that they are indictments against patriarchy and repression, as if there is a moral lesson to be learnt by reading them. And yet, change and transformation are certainly a part of what she sees as the significance of theatre. She agrees that her plays have been described as "Magical Realism, with gothic elements, or dark elements", though she qualifies this by saying that she is interested in

the re-enchantment of theatre, which has become...very pedantic in most countries...the magical theatre is the opposite: it creates! Theatre is a place of transformation, and a crucible of mysterious forces (in Solberg 2003: 178-179).

In this thesis, I have theorised the hybrid as a possible "good" (with reference to Charles Taylor's description of the framework required to construct an identity), however, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what De Wet might posit as a "good". When she was asked whether changes in the South African political situation have influenced her writing, she said, "I have not been aware of the need to write politically. My work has always been personal, so it has not affected me greatly" (95). Clearly she refuses to propagate specific political ends in her plays, saying that she writes "out of a purely personal impulse" (1995: 90). Also, she consistently rejects any feminist agenda, and does not promote gendered readings of her work, saying

I don't agree with categorising people. It falls into the patriarchal trap of needing to define and separate. If you accept divisions then you are accepting those structures. I believe to become psychically androgynous is the answer (90).

So what might De Wet consider a "good" or even a worthwhile end for her creations, particularly in the post-1994 environment? She does note that "[t]here is now a sense of more creative freedom" (95), and in some way her work is about liberation from repression, since she sees fantasy – a category with which she hesitantly associates her work – as "a primary way of expressing repression in society" (91).

Here there are ties to Jung's conception of the shadow¹¹⁰ which has already been discussed in the first chapter. As already explained, I feel that this theory provides a useful vocabulary with which to approach issues of South African post-apartheid theatre generally¹¹¹. The interesting thing about Jung's construction is that although the conscious mind is perceived as being in control, it is actually the forces bubbling up from the unconscious that hold the real power. One might say that the real "identity" in this case, as a cause of action and behaviour, is not the conscious, analytical mind. What this means is that those with firmly established shadows are not who they think they are. As Stuart Hall says:

you can't map the unconscious because you don't know it. But you sort of know it when it erupts on you, when it sneaks up from behind you and hits you over the head. That's when you know that something has been repressed. It keeps on coming back, disturbing your discourse from underneath (1997: 4).

The shadow is an intensely personal construction, and yet, it can also apply to groups. In the first chapter of this thesis I have already mentioned how the entire system of apartheid provides an example of the ideal conditions in which a collective shadow might be created and that the shadow aspect of a collective white psyche would have been developed within the attempt to consistently relocate, hide, and deny access to

¹¹⁰ Though De Wet does not specifically refer to Jung's notion of shadow, she does mention her indebtedness to Jung (94) and mentions the benefit she received from undergoing Jungian analysis.

¹¹¹ To re-iterate: the shadow consists of all the elements within the personality, both positive and negative, which a person deems to be unacceptable.

black populations. There is thus an urgent necessity for the integration of this shadow side. As Reza de Wet says: "if you repress something it will shatter you. Any deep repression that is never faced will destroy you" (1995: 94). Her plays, then, can in many ways be read as ways of permitting access to unconscious material, of allowing what has been repressed back into consciousness, whether this is something out of one's past which one considers to be destructive, or whether it is a positive aspect of one's identity which one has never acknowledged.

It seems that De Wet is consciously working with elements which attempt to free the mind from its repressions. For example, she says of *Crossing* that "hopefully the structures of the play are liberating" (94). So there is an element of integrating repressed desire, as well as accepting the inherent hybridity of the Afrikaner culture. Most crucially, her analysis of Afrikaans culture relies on accepting its debt to both a European and an African consciousness, and an understanding that "there is an exchange between these two cultures":

I can only speak from an Afrikaans point of view, how close the Afrikaners are brought up with the African experience or the black experience. It's very close, there's an enormous bond between these two 'tribes'. So I believe there is a new reality being created here... (in Solberg 2003: 180).

This double hope for integration with Africa and liberation from repression sustains Reza de Wet's oeuvre, making her one of the most stimulating playwrights of the post-apartheid era.

5.5 SITUATING SYNCRETISM WITHIN THE POSTMODERN

I first came across the definitions of a "Protean Self" in Robert Jay Lifton's essay "The Protean Style" (in *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader* 1996: 126-131). It refers to a new type of self which Lifton finds emerging, an identity described as follows:

The Protean style of self-process, then, is characterized by an interminable series of experiments and explorations, some shallow, some profound, each of which can readily be abandoned in favour of still new, psychological quests....To grasp this style, then, we must alter our judgments concerning what is psychologically disturbed or pathological, as opposed to adaptive or even innovative (126-127).

As my analysis of Reza de Wet's plays has sought to show, many of her characters certainly seem to be "psychologically disturbed or pathological", and yet, they are unquestionably also "adaptive" in their attempts to deal with the situations in which they find themselves. One would hardly call Sussie (*African Gothic*), Baby (*Good Heavens*), Anna (*Breathing In*) or May (*Concealment*) "moral" characters, and yet the way in which each of these constructs her identity – in terms of a bricolage of available sources – certainly makes them "innovative". It seems that each of the plays examined in this thesis up to the present chapter have presented value systems of some form or another. Scratching the surface one invariably locates some or other suggestion as to how one "should" behave; whether these systems are endorsed on the grounds of their gendered, ethnic or political value systems, or even if they are seen as "relevant" in terms of being "cross-over productions". In other words, to return to Charles Taylor's original definition of what constitutes identity, they all, in some sense or another, rely on a value statement, or a notion of a "good".

For example, in the works of Athol Fugard and Jane Taylor, even though there are a number of ironies and ambiguities, there is still a prevailing anti-apartheid stance, or in other words, a division of the world into "good" and "bad" sides. In Coetzee and in Mda we might locate suggestions that holding onto the past too firmly is bad, and adaptation is good. But with Bailey and De Wet we enter murkier terrain, where what is presented cannot so easily be aligned into these categories. Consequently, notions of identity which previously rested confidently on structures of good and evil seem increasingly insecure.

Taking my cue from Charles Taylor, with whom I began this thesis, this identity structure seems to be related to the postmodern, since for Taylor, identity depends on a framework of beliefs and judgements which rely on the possibility of a stable truth. In his all-too-brief two page rebuttal of modern French philosophy, Taylor criticises Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard for their neutrality, or their alleged lack of interest in the question of "the good". For Taylor, this is the defining hallmark of the postmodern, and it is this which he considers as its greatest weakness (1989: 488-489). However, instead of seeing this lack of a clear value system as problematic, I would consider it to be liberating, and possibly even necessary in a post-apartheid context, since one of the great shifts which has occurred in South African literature is that it has moved away from "judgemental" texts. As Attridge and Jolly point out in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy* (1998):

South Africa has passed through a period that has for obvious reasons produced a large body of what might be called judgemental texts, both critical and creative; texts that assume an ethical sufficiency to exist in the condemnation of apartheid and its agents. For this reason the current South African situation forms a productive arena for the exploration of the uses and limitations of, as well as alternatives to, judgmental writing (7).

Perhaps it is necessary, then, to move away from the idea of creating literature which conveys judgements of value.

In her inaugural address at the University of Zululand, Lynn Dalrymple draws attention to the ways in which "[m]issionaries said playing in the African way was wrong" (1992: 15). She goes on to argue that Christian education did not permit the luxury of imagination or play "because of the possibility of being wrong". But playfulness is surely crucial to transformation, since it opens up possibilities, since it allows the description of different ways of being without necessarily prescribing the identity structures which will emerge. As opposed to a didactic form of theatre – with which South African drama has, for so long, been intimately associated – Reza de Wet posits an eclectic, transformational approach, in which being right or wrong is not necessarily important, wherein no clear guidelines are presented as to which would be a preferable course of action to follow. In doing so, these texts permit the possibility of play; they allow a space in which a sense of the freedom both to play within a multiplicity, as well as the freedom to engage with paradox, can occur. In this way, postmodern works are able to change not only what is represented, but also the processes of representation. As Marvin Carlson notes:

postmodern performance provides resistance precisely not by offering messages positive or negative, that fit comfortably into popular representations of political thought, but by changing the processes of representation itself, even though it must carry out this project by means of representation (2003: 155).

With further assistance from Carlson's book *Performance* (2003), I would like to summarise ideas by three key thinkers which might be useful in elaborating this approach. Firstly, one of the earliest proponents of a postmodern literary theory is Ihab Hassan, who claims that

postmodernism veers towards open, playful, optative, disjunctive, displaced, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of fragments, an ideology of fracture, a will to unmaking, an invocation of silence...[it] veers towards all these and yet implies their very opposition, their antithetical realities (138).

Secondly, Fredric Jameson sees the modernist paradigm as involving "valorisation of myth and symbol, temporality, organic form and the concrete universal, the identity of the subject and the continuity of linguistic expression" (148). In opposition to this is the postmodern paradigm which stresses "discontinuity, allegory, the mechanical, the gap between the signifier and the signified, the lapse in meaning, the syncope in the experience of the subject". And finally, Jean-Francois Lyotard – whose *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) was the first book to use the word "postmodern" in its title – sees the main thrust of postmodernist theory as occurring in the erosion of meta-narratives that formerly provided legitimacy for a wide variety of cultural practices, norms and procedures¹¹².

In the plays of Brett Bailey and Reza de Wet, no clear guidelines are given as to ways in which the audience should understand the configurations of identity. For example, Bailey's plays present one with the worlds of Spirit worship, ghosts, demons and witches. These elements may be seen as irrational, and yet they are presented as having a material reality which places an individual's identity within a world much larger and more complex than that of the visible. Although both writers deal with myths, these are not seen as universally applicable, or even as being understood in similar ways within different cultural collectives. Also, as in the example already presented with the camera masks in *iMumbo Jumbo*, the line between mythic presentation and mechanical devices is not entirely clear.

¹¹² According to Lyotard, the two main "myths", or "grand narratives" of science have been the "Dialectics of Spirit and the Emancipation of Man" (151).

At a first glance then, both Bailey and De Wet's work could be considered to be postmodern, however, as already mentioned, there are also difficulties in trying to align them completely with the postmodern grid. For example, Pamela McCallum cites the programme notes which describe the work of Third World Bunfight:

Our works dig deep beneath the surface of post-colonial Africa: we explore sensitive and contentious issues, and dramatise them in ways that valorise and celebrate the extraordinary wealth of cultural modes available here (2003: 128).

An interest in "depth" is surely not a postmodern priority, since postmodernists tend to be more interested in issues of surface and structure, as opposed to "substance". The programme for *iMumbo Jumbo* goes on:

Art can be a powerful spiritual source. It is artists who give form to the Spirit of humanity, and it is up to artists to protect that Spirit against the dehumanizing numbness that surrounds us.

This vocabulary ("spirit of humanity") sounds eerily similar to one of the grand narratives Lyotard describes as less than useful in *The Postmodern Condition*, namely, "The Dialectics of Spirit". If "spirit" is posted as a substantial concern, then one is perhaps moving away from the postmodern. And yet, McCullum goes on in her review to say that this vocabulary

might seem to situate these conceptions of performance within traditional discourses on the role of art, [but] quite the opposite is true. Art and performance are acts of resistance against modes of domination that can be as different as the daily humiliations of life in the struggle to survive in relentless poverty or the mindlessly repetitive glass and concrete cities of an increasingly globalized world (129).

In this way she describes Bailey's show as non-traditional, in the sense that it is an act of resistance, and not an endorsement and valorisation of a status quo. Although I do not feel entirely comfortable in calling Bailey's shows postmodern, his approach does seem to support at least some of the claims made by postmodern writers. On the other hand, Reza de Wet's plays have been dealt with more conspicuously and specifically as postmodern; for example, in P.C. van der Westhuizen's doctoral study *Parodie en Pastiche in die (Post)modernistiese Drama/Teater*¹¹³ (1997) and Hester Rossly van der Waal's Master's thesis *Vrouefigure in Reza de Wet se Drama-Oeuvre* (2005)¹¹⁴. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, her settings and characters portray many of the qualities associated with postmodern fiction, as described by Hassan. They are "open, playful, optative, disjunctive, displaced, or indeterminate forms". Her plays also depict "an ideology of fracture in that they are disjunctive". In terms of Jameson's definition, they certainly reveal a "lapse in meaning" and "the syncope in the experience of the subject". Furthermore, her characters portray what Kenneth Gergen has described as selves who live with "uncertainty, paradox, ambiguity, and constant change" (1996: 146). Finally, in terms of Lyotard's description, it seems very difficult, if not impossible to define any of her plays in terms of a meta-narrative.

One might argue, however, that postmodernism itself has become a style of meta-narrative, so perhaps it is not ever entirely possible to escape Taylor's "framework" after all. Suffice to say, then, that although it may have been useful to identify certain aspects of the postmodern within the playwrights discussed in this chapter, it might not necessarily be helpful to fix them forever to some sort of perpetually postmodern grid.

¹¹³ "Parody and Pastiche in (Post)modern Drama/Theatre," University of South Africa.

¹¹⁴ Female Characters in Reza de Wet's Dramatic Oeuvre," University of South Africa.

5.6 REACTING TO THE SYNCRETIC

In concluding this chapter on appearances of the syncretic in new South African plays, I would like to consider ways of reacting to the sorts of conflicts roused by the hybridity suggested by post-colonial studies and the loss of value posited by postmodernism. Kelly Lynn Latchaw contrasts two views on hybridity in her PhD thesis *Performance in the Wilderness: Identity Formation in Neo-, Para-, and Post-colonial Contexts* (1999). On the one hand, she cites Gloria Anzaldua who says that living in more than one culture creates "multiple, often opposing messages". Anzaldua goes on to say that the "coming together of two self consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision" which results in "perplexity...insecurity, or indecisiveness" (35). And yet, this self-same event can also lead to the arising of a new consciousness created in this "borderland", a way of thinking which accepts "multiplicity as inevitable" (36).

Gugu Hlongwane, in her PhD thesis *Simunye (We are One): Discourses of Nation Building in South African Texts*, also contrasts two views of the new. She warns that:

While optimists rush towards a theorization of South Africa's globalized hybrid cultures where black and white are happily merging, cynics exercise not only a necessary caution but a suspicion of a usurping language that encourages race blindness (2002: 102).

For Hlongwane, multiplicity is not a desirable option, since she believes that "[c]ultural hybridity means naught if Africans themselves are not reconciled to their own cultures" (140). Perhaps this reveals a certain misunderstanding of what hybridity means; particularly her reference to the idea that it is possible for one's own culture to not be hybridised, the notion that it can somehow exist separately from other cultures. And yet, I would agree that there might also be a certain danger in

creating a dogma out of hybridisation. For example, it seems that today multiculturalism is not only encouraged, but it has also at times become enforceable in terms of the funding made available to artists.

For example, Lynn Maree, an independent consultant in Arts and Education, writes in her report on "The State of the Arts" (2005) that in 2003 a recommendation by the NAC Theatre Advisory Panel to fund a play called *At Her Feet*, by Nadia Davids, which "deals with a Muslim girl growing up in multicultural South Africa, and has been acclaimed by audiences of all race groups" was overturned by the chairperson of the board of the National Arts Council "on the grounds that the play to be funded to tour 'only deals with one culture'" (305). This seems to have been an unfortunate decision, as Maree points out: "Racism and racially-structured thinking still affects [sic] the arts deeply" (306).

On the other hand, Maree cites The National Action Plan and Strategy to Combat Racism by the South African Human Rights Commission as proposing the following points, which recommend a respect for all cultures, and cultural exchange in terms of mutual validation:

We agree to share a culture: bits of it do not 'belong' to bits of our society.
We *value* the 'ways of life' of all – not tolerate, not even merely respect, real (sic) value.
We encourage borrowing and innovation, but from a sense of equality. Art forms and traditions, unlike sacred relics, necessarily evolve, borrow from what's around them, and are creatively improvised. We let the arts massage the cultures to allow for flexibility (306-307).

It seems then that there may be a danger in trying to enforce an idealistic vision of the society which should be represented on stage. Ironically, trying too ardently to enforce tolerance could lead to an even greater measure of intolerance! Furthermore,

there is also the danger which Eugenio Barba points out in his description of his own multi-ethnic, multi-national group, Odin Teatret. In his essay on "Eurasian Theatre" (1988), he writes of the cross-cultural exchanges and influences between Western and Asian theatre, warning that "there remains an undeniable embarrassment: that these exchanges might be part of the supermarket of cultures" (126). John Hutnyk offers a similar caution on embracing hybridity when he asks: "is it merely the case that hybridity offers up no more than festivals of difference in an equalization of cultures...?" (2005: 95). He goes on to say that "[t]he charge is that a flattening of differences is secured at the very moment that celebrates difference and the creative productivity of new mixings" (96).

A further difficulty, as Rey Chow indicates, is that "these concepts all serve to 'obliterate' questions of politics and histories of inequality, thereby occluding 'the legacy of colonialism understood from the viewpoint of the colonized' and so are able to 'ignore the experiences of poverty, dependency, subalterneity that persist well beyond the achievement of national independence":

The enormous seductiveness of the postmodern hybridite's discourse lies...in its invitation to join the power of global capitalism by flattening out past injustices in a way that accepts the extant relations of power and where 'the recitation of past injustices seems tedious and unnecessary' (in Hutnyk: 96).

Finally, the most glaring attack against hybridity is surely that of Robert Young who writes that it represents "a monstrous inversion" which leads towards a "raceless chaos" (1995: 23). These are all rather strong arguments against the syncretic, although I read these oppositions more as warnings against a false gloss of syncreticisation, a sleight of hand manoeuvre which allows power to be maintained by colonial or global capital. And yet, resisting the syncretic is no longer an option. As Keith Bain states (perhaps without realising the paradox): "the true roots of

contemporary local performance lie in the hybridisation (or crossover or syncretisation) of a variety of indigenous and imported performance forms" (2003: 154). The irony, of course, resides in the predicament of whether a syncretic production can be said to be "rooted" at all. Cultures are continually merging and it may not be preferable – and perhaps not even possible – to keep these cultures distinct. In her introduction to the special issue of *World Literature Today* (1996) on South Africa, Ingrid de Kok notes that

the "multicultural" celebratory impulse also connoted a deep break in the cultural hegemony of the past. At best, it opened a public space for examining the complex intermingling and interacting (called variously..."confluence," "interpenetration," "interfluence") of modern South Africa's various cultural traditions. At worst, it introduced a fuzzy blurring of profound contradictions, and a multiethnic confusion, under the soft-focus light of Archbishop Tutu's much-quoted phrase, "the rainbow nation" (5).

But I wonder whether "fuzzy blurring" is necessarily undesirable. Perhaps what we require is a good deal more fuzziness; more blurring of boundaries; more insubstantial delineations. One need only recall the clear sharp lines and specific designations which are commensurate with fascism and apartheid, to be scared off forever from the dangers of clarity. Hutnyk concludes his essay on the syncretic with the conundrum that

Maybe it is the mongrel, interfering mix that undermines racialist absolutism, and it is the corrosive friction of intercourse and exchange that destabilizes purity and property by right. But is it also perhaps the message of hybridity that reassigns fixed identity into what becomes merely the jamboree of pluralism and multiplicity? (99).

The trick then, would lie in not fixing identity finally to anything, not even to hybridity. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, to talk too strictly of hybridity

in itself creates a false sense that clear roots are distinguishable out of which the hybrid has been formed, even if it has now been idealised, in sharp contrast to its former derogatory connotations. In fact, Andrew Smith indicates Gayavotry Spivak's contempt for the search for origins when she says that she "distrust[s]...despise[s] and [has] contempt for...people looking for roots" (2004: 249). Or as Paul Gilroy states, rather forcefully,

Who the fuck wants purity?...the idea of hybridity, of intermixture, presupposes two anterior purities.... I think there isn't any purity; there isn't any anterior purity...that's why I try not to use the word hybrid....Cultural production is not like mixing cocktails (in Hutnyk 2005: 82).

I have highlighted De Wet and Bailey, here, as examples of syncretism, and yet, other writers previously mentioned could also be described as syncretic to a greater or lesser extent. Certainly *Ubu and The Truth Commission* provides a confluence of styles, races, languages and media. And in *The Bells of Amersfoort*, Zakes Mda brings different continents, languages and styles of music into conflict with each other. Mda's work has also been described as a "symbol of a fluid sensibility and a dynamic hybridity that seem to be the hallmarks of African theatre today" (Olaogun 2001: 147). For Ashraf Jamal, there is no avoiding the immanence of the syncretic, since:

syncretism has become the most strident characteristic of contemporary culture, a culture in which traditions have been supplanted by makeshift influences and each and every sacred order desecralised – converted and perverted – so that what today has come to be accepted as truth is nothing more than the bastardised remnants of a long-forgotten and – putatively – once-integrated and essential system of values (2005: 62).

And yet, Jamal describes two different kinds of syncretic practices. Contrasting "reactive syncretism" to "radical syncretism", he finds it increasingly necessary "to shift the syncretic from its predominantly enervated and reactive mode to one that is

more critically and reflexively engaged with the processes of change" (2005: 64). Reactive syncretism tries simply to gloss over differences, it consists of a "displaced, nullified and hapless fusion of influences" (74), whereas the "radical syncretism" of Brett Bailey, for example, is revealed in a "Dionysian dimension" (146) arising "from within the unresolved heterogeneity of South African culture" (150). If we bear in mind what Deleuze terms the "rhizomatic" approach, it may be argued that encouraging a multiplicity of cultures to be produced syncretically is preferable to the attempt to subsume different cultures into a single fusion.

One can never arrive at a final conclusion, never be satisfied that a culture has been completely circumscribed. Eugenio Barba concludes that:

It is possible to consider the theatre in terms of ethnic, national, group, or even individual traditions, but if in doing so one seeks to comprehend one's own identity, it is also essential to take the opposite and complementary point of view: to think of one's own theatre in a transcultural dimension, in the flow of a 'tradition of traditions'. All attempts to create 'anti-traditional' forms of theatre in the West, as well as in the East, have drawn from the tradition of traditions (1988: 126).

To work from "the tradition of traditions" implies a respect for the idea of traditions, without valorising any one specific tradition as superior to all others and to be "anti-tradition" is also to respect this "tradition of traditions". This is, I believe an indication of a healthy syncretism. It is no longer possible to avoid being multi-cultural and resistance to the ebb and flow of the many traditions in which we are caught can only lead to an unnecessary stagnation, to repression. In the conclusion to this thesis, I will attempt to address a number of questions which have been raised, specifically concerning the question of whether it is necessary (or even possible) to forge a discrete identity at all.



CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSIONS

6.1 RACE AND THE RAINBOW

6.1.1 Racial Constituencies

In the course of this thesis, the many limitations not only of this particular study, but of this *type* of study have become increasingly apparent. After having explored some of the ways in which identity has been approached by various disciplines in the humanities, I considered four very broad means of constructing an identity – gender, political dispensation, nation and amalgamation. Each of these approaches is relevant to the types of identity descriptions which have emerged in the plays published since the harsh segmentary categorisations of identity by apartheid. And yet, as I have repeatedly tried to indicate, there are also many other ways of charting identities in South Africa, many alternative routes to mapping this landscape. This has then not been the search for a "real" identity, but more an indication of some of the identities represented in terms of the characterisations developed in a few texts published since apartheid.

I have so far avoided bringing the issue of race directly into these investigations and have instead referred to race – in terms of Robert Young's description – as belonging to the outmoded science of eugenics. The theatre which I have been specifically promoting here is a radically syncretic strain which shies away from the essentialism of racial categories. And yet it may be of concern to some that the authors I have discussed in greater detail in this thesis are all white, with the exception of Zakes Mda. It may, therefore, be argued that I have not adequately represented writing by "other" racial groups – black, coloured, Indian.

There are a number of reasons for this, including the initial decision made to limit this study to published works, since the published material since 1994 has been overwhelmingly white. From the outset, the scope of this thesis was very broad, and limiting it to published texts was one way of narrowing down the study into a manageable representation of works. I have also deliberately shied away from anthologies which pre-empted questions of identity, such as collections specifically focused on fixing and promoting a particular racial identification. These include *Black South African Women* (1998), and *South African Indian Writings in English* (2002). The ethos surrounding the creation of such anthologies seems to me to promote the very segmentarity and racialised classifications which this thesis has been opposing. As I have repeatedly tried to show, the move away from definition in terms of race seems to me to be the single most important liberatory gesture required to free ourselves from the legacy of apartheid.

Still, there are a number of plays which deal with issues of race in interesting and exploratory ways which have not been dealt with here. There are writers who deserve entire studies dedicated to their work alone, even if they have not necessarily been published. For example, among the more remarkable productions by black writers are Aubrey Sekhabi's harsh kitchen-sink realism in *On My Birthday* (1996) and *Not With My Gun* (1998). There is also Sello Maake ka-Ncube's¹¹⁵ *Koze Kuse Bash* (1997) about the unravelling lives of black urban youth caught within a spiralling cycle of self-indulgence. And worthy of particular mention is Mpumelelo

¹¹⁵ Ironically, Ncube left South Africa for London, because he claims he did not feel black enough in South Africa. When asked why he initially left the country, he responded that "being in South Africa, everything becomes so 'rainbow-y' that you end up not knowing what colour you actually are", and went on to say that he would "rather go and be a hybrid in a foreign country than in [his] own homeland" (2007). It seems that rather than attempt to be part of a syncretic identity, he would rather leave South Africa entirely to live on a continent where he will invariably be defined as "other", which would then bolster a more stable sense of his estranged African identity. Recently he has returned to take up a role in *The Lion King*.

Paul Grootboom, whose remarkable pieces *Cards* (2005), *Relativity* (2006), and *Telling Stories* (2007) have defined him as one of the most idiosyncratic new voices of South African theatre. Grootboom's plays are delivered in a harsh, uncompromising style which includes a cinematic approach to playwriting and directing. His works typically feature large ensemble casts and multiple levels and scenes. They are plays saturated with eclectic sound tracks and feature rape, crime and unparalleled levels of violence. These are works drenched in blood and harsh laughter. There are also many other black writers who warrant further exploration and in depth analysis, such as Gcina Mhlophe, M. M. Masondo and Lesego Rampolokeng, whom I have, unfortunately, not been able to consider in any detail.

In terms of a coloured identity, this racial categorisation seems to be as problematic for the present government as it was for apartheid authorities. In Pieter Dirk Uys' most recent production at the time of writing (*Evita for President* [2007]) he refers to the predicament of many coloured people of having been too black for preference during apartheid, and now finding themselves too white to qualify for the benefits of Affirmative Action. This indicates a set of concerns which I briefly touched on in my opening comments on the portrayal of Demetrios Tsafendas as a man caught between races in a world which emphasised racial identity. (I will return to the question of coloured identity in the next section, where I discuss the theatrical representations of Demetrios Tsafendas further.)

It seems that coloured theatre makers rely to a large extent on comedy, and their unique style of self-deprecating humour – exploited most visibly by Marc Lottering – remains a feature of any festival. At the time of writing, Oscar Petersen and David Isaacs' successful series *Joe Barber* is in its fourth incarnation playing to audiences who consist largely of what Malcolm Purkey has referred to The Market Theatre's

"coloured constituency"¹¹⁶. Similarly Kevin Athol Ehrenreich's popular comedy series based on the character of "Gatiepie" – of which the most recent was *Gatiepie Sien Vrou Spoke*¹¹⁷ (2006) – also plays principally to coloured audiences and relies on a particular "coloured" identification. Earlier I mentioned Abduragman Adams' play *Angels Everywhere* (2005) which examines a coloured identity from a slightly more serious angle, though it could also be described as a comedy. Another important play is *Suip* (1997) by Heinrich Reisenhofer and Oscar Petersen which tells the story of a group of *bergies*, disenfranchised coloured people living on the streets of Cape Town who are descended from the original Khoisan inhabitants, most of whom are today homeless alcoholics. Despite the tragic nature of this theme, it is remarkable that the play still manages to be a comedy, relying on the natural storytelling gifts of the *bergies* themselves. The origins of many coloured people in the slave trade was also highlighted in David Kramer and Taliep Petersen's *Ghoema* (2006).

Indian theatre in South Africa is represented by writers such as Ronnie Govender, whose 1972 play *The Lahnee's Pleasure* remains one of the longest running shows in South African theatre history. His more recent play, *At the Edge* (1996) has been invited to countries all over the world. Rajesh Gopie's one man show *Out of Bounds* (2003) has also been highly acclaimed. These are both one man shows firmly rooted in an Indian identity, and relate Indic theatre to the generations of Indians descended from the original migrant workers. Although Indians constitute one of the smallest racial communities in South Africa, Indian theatre as a genre has attracted more attention than the theatre of any other racial group, in terms of being the focus of academic articles¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁶ Statement made during a seminar held at Parktonian Hotel, Braamfontein, on 26 May 2007.

¹¹⁷ "Gatiepie Sees Lady-Ghosts".

¹¹⁸ Articles on Indian theatre include: (1) Muthal, Naidoo. 1997. "The Search for a Cultural Identity: A Personal view of South African 'Indian' Theatre". *Theatre Journal*. Vol. 49, Issue 1. (29-39). (2) Hansen,

Despite this very brief mention of writers divided according to racial categories, I must re-iterate that I have deliberately tried to avoid raising issues of racial identity, since I feel that we must begin to dispel categories of race in favour of what Xolela Mangcu calls "transculturation" (2008: 5). In *To the Brink: The State of Democracy in South Africa*, Mangcu claims that "our heritage of racial syncretism is being overwhelmed by...racial nativism" (xiii). Furthermore, he sees "racial nativism" as opposing "the long traditions of racial syncretism that have always characterised South African political and intellectual history" (2). In this sense, focusing on issues of race and trying to restore an essentialised racial identity are antithetical to the demands of democracy.

It is interesting to note the emphasis which many white writers and directors have placed on staging "cross-over", or multi-racial pieces. I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that most plays today by white writers and directors include characters from other races. It remains rare, however, that "non-white" pieces involve white actors. For example, the works previously listed by Sekhabi, Grootboom, Ngema, Ehrenreich, Govender, Rubnick and Gopie do not include any white actors at all. In fact, Paul Grootboom's latest play, *Inter-Racial* (2007), goes as far as to use black actors to play white roles! And yet, every play by a white writer which has been discussed in any detail in this thesis (with the exception of some of the plays by Reza de Wet) has used a multi-racial cast of characters.

Thomas Blom. 2000. "Plays, Politics and Cultural Identity Among Indians in Durban". *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Vol. 26, Issue 2. (255-269). (3) Govender, K. 2001. "Subverting Identity after 1994: The South African Indian Woman as Playwright". *Agenda*. Vol. 49 (33-43). (4) Mesthrie, Rajend. 2005. "Assessing Representations of South African Indian English in Writing: An Application of Variation Theory". *Language, Variation and Change*. No. 17: (303-326).

It seems, then, as though white writers have been at the forefront of adaptation and transformation in terms of their racial identities, whereas the compulsion on black, Indian and coloured identities has been to reinforce and strengthen their sense of identity in terms of race. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given the history of South Africa, and the fact that in the past black characters have generally involved subservient roles. Perhaps the emphasis in plays by "non-white" races has often been on reclaiming previously disenfranchised racial identities, whereas the focus in white plays has been on finding a middle ground in which to create a shared South African identity. Perhaps one could also interpret this as a demonstration of "white guilt" or see it as a response to the perceived threat of marginalisation, in that whites are hoping to assure their place within a black majority. It could also be a means of trying to secure government funding, in terms of the of the NAC policy discussed in the previous chapter.

Whatever the case may be, it appears that white writers are more visibly concerned with promoting a racially syncretic identity. And yet, there may also be a certain risk in efforts to enforce a sense of multi-culturalism, not least of which is the risk of promulgating an artificial, inauthentic and "politically correct" identity which kowtows to the dominant power structures within the country. As already mentioned, for Ashraf Jamal there is a danger in a "reactive syncretism" which glosses over differences in the attempt to try to enforce a state of unity. On the one hand, then, "the syncretic promotes a more positive engagement with difference", and yet Jamal goes on to make the claim that "the dominant deployment of syncretism in contemporary South Africa merely constructs the illusion of a positive engagement or merger of difference" (2005: 66). So although the syncretic may seem to be the obvious antidote to the cellularised society of the past, an illusory, forced syncretism becomes a cynical exercise.

Ironically, an emphasis on "multi-culturalism" *per se* might also reinforce notions of essentialism in terms of an essential universalised "humanity", instead of creatively engaging with the differences inherent in various constructions of identification. Even though a writer like Reza de Wet, for example, does not always write "multi-culturally", the identities revealed in her plays are most often transgressive in terms of their Afrikaner identities and in this way, De Wet's plays reveal a greater interest in the syncretic than many deliberately "cross-over" productions.

6.1.2 Over the Rainbow?

On the eve of the dramatic end of apartheid, Karen Press cited one of the goals of the new dispensation as being "to create an independent, unitary nation out of a diverse range of social groups that were previously seen (and saw themselves) as separate political entities" (1990: 23)¹¹⁹. This ideal has been expressed in terms of the popular "rainbow nation" analogy first made public by then Archbishop Desmond Tutu after the 1994 elections¹²⁰. And yet there are a number of possibly unintended associations attached to this trope. Presumably the ground connecting the tenor and the vehicle of this metaphor refers to a rainbow as a promise of God's mercy, appearing as it does in the Biblical account of the deluge. In this sense it could be read as a sign of grace after punishment. And, of course, it also represents a unity of diverse colours. Temple Hauptfleisch reads the trope of the rainbow to signify that diversity should be respected, writing that

¹¹⁹ Ironically, the state motto of the apartheid government, "Unity in Diversity", sounds like a very similar proposition.

¹²⁰ According to Henk van Woerden's *Mouthful of Glass* (2000), Demetrios Tsafendas was the first person to use the expression in 1964 when he cause a ruckus in a bar in neighbouring Mozambique by standing on a table and proclaiming loudly that there would be a new country whose flag would have "a rainbow on it" (85).

the rainbow cannot exist if the various bands in its spectrum are not secure in their own identity. Perhaps much of what has made the country recover and grow over the past decade has to do with its ability to recognize, accept (or tolerate), and use the differences that it previously feared and despised (2006: 195).

And yet, there are also other, rather more unsettling properties of rainbows. Besides the fact that there is neither white nor black in a rainbow, one should also bear in mind that a rainbow is an illusion, a trick of the light, insubstantial. Rainbows appear and disappear, they do not actually exist. Perhaps this is also an apt description of how identity works, in that it exists only momentarily, as an assemblage of circumstances at a particular juncture. Gilles Deleuze's concept of an assemblage may here be of interest. J. Macgregor Wise describes it as "a collection of heterogeneous elements" (2005: 78) which can be objects and qualities, but which are more aptly described as "lines and speeds" (79). In this sense an assemblage is a collection of functions and activities demarcated as going in a certain direction and taking possession of a territory over which it stakes a claim. The configuration of the "rainbow nation" as an assemblage thus goes some way to explaining how it can be used as a means of controlling the flow of meaning for certain ends. It also underlines the danger of defending and fighting for an identity as a substantial, permanent, unchanging essence when it is constantly being altered or reinterpreted for specific ends. Collective identities, like languages and cultures, also have a certain life span, so it is completely natural to expect that they will also, eventually, die out and that new ones will be born.

Further criticism of the "rainbow nation" trope has been made by a number of academics, most notably Ashraf Jamal, Leon de Kock, Bhekizizwe Peterson and Gugu Hlongwane. Although they may disagree as to how the metaphor operates and why it

is less than helpful, they all seem to agree that one of the reasons why it may be dangerous is that it seeks to flatten out differences and simplify complexity. For example, Ashraf Jamal says that "in glossing difference it has failed to address a radicality or heterogeneity that subsists at the core of South Africa's differential condition. The problem lies first in the elision and suppression of the incommensurability of difference" (2005: 66). And De Kock refers to the "rainbow nation" trope as an "imagined singularity" which is, in fact, a "tatty patchwork" (2001: 290). Bhekizizwe Peterson says that the "nebulous celebrations" of the "rainbow nation" are "suffocating the arts" (1995: 584), claiming that this is a result of a reluctance to deal with the "complexities of identity". And Gugu Hlongwane sees the analogy as faulty since, according to her, whites are still "the social and economic beneficiaries of an apartheid regime that supported a lopsided accumulation of wealth and social power" (2002: 3) and, therefore, whites are not entitled to share in a national identity with blacks.

Another question arises of how accurately "multi-cultural", "cross-over", "rainbow" plays reflect daily reality. For example, a survey by the *Sunday Independent* on inter-racial relations revealed a few interesting statistics. A report by Nonkosi Mngxali and Ntuthezelo Vananda on "young, recently employed black Africans" (2006: 17) claims that a majority of respondents stated that their family and friends only socialise "with others from the same racial group". Jan Hofmeyr also writes that one of the main problems with reconciliation is "the lack of informal social contact between individuals from different racial groups" (2006: 17). Furthermore, Hofmeyr cites the most recent SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey (Sarbs) and finds that there is very little informal contact between races, with 31 percent of respondents saying they had no contact at all, whether formal or informal, with anyone from a different race, while 72 percent indicated that they "rarely or never socialise with somebody from a

different population group". And yet, tuning in to any one of the SABC television channels on any given day of the week, it is more likely than not that in terms of both broadcasted programs and the advertisements shown, one will come across a representation of an egalitarian, multi-racial society fully integrated in terms of economic, social and sexual relations. Perhaps what is being portrayed is the hope for integration, since 76 percent of Hofmeyr's respondents "believe that it is important to pursue the cause of a united nation" (17). So perhaps instead of providing a reflection of society, the "rainbow nation" trope may be an indication of the aspiration for, paradoxically, a multi-cultural homogeneity.

I have repeatedly lauded syncretism as a crucial tool towards the definition of a new South African theatre. And yet, as Jamal indicates, syncretism does not necessarily promote transformation and change. Most importantly: "change can never be achieved through the sustenance of a master narrative" (98) and the "rainbow nation" ideal is in itself simply a new master narrative, a stifling and constrictive construction. Similarly, Malcolm Purkey warns of the danger of lumping "transformation" together with concepts such as "national unity", saying that it could rob one of a necessary objectivity. He asks whether theatre can "be involved in the struggle for transformation, reconciliation and national unity, and strike a necessary critical distance at the same time" (1996: 155). If theatre (and culture, generally) are employed in the services of a unifying master narrative, can they still be aesthetically and creatively challenging?

6.1.3 Choosing to Identify

It seems that all of the writers quoted who fault the "rainbow nation" trope do so because they read it as trying to subsume many different identities into a single

formation. These authors are then in agreement that there are more identities in South Africa than just one; but how many identities are there? Are there, as Hlongwane (2002: 4) states, principally two – one white (rich, powerful) and one black (poor, still disadvantaged)? Are there as many identities as what there are languages? By referring to the "radical heterogeneity" of South African identities, De Kock and Jamal both seem to support the notion that there are an endless variety of identities. Certainly at one level one could say there are as many identities as there are people living in South Africa, and when one considers that each person is aligned with different identities at different times, there could be even more than this number! And yet, I believe that the interests of those who talk of "identity" lie in finding out where individual identities overlap, where sets which are used to define them intersect. In other words, how groups form. The definitions of collectives may be neither essential nor permanent, but the assumption, nevertheless, remains that it is possible to refer to people in some or other way as forming part of collectives. Descriptions of shared qualities, values, interests, properties, ideals and so on could be imposed from outside (as they were during apartheid) or they could arise out of the subjective perceptions of individuals.

There is also another meaning of identity, related to the use of the word as a verb. To "identify with" involves a choice and a response. As Stuart Hall says, all advertising is an attempt to call us (1997: 11), and yet we must respond to the call to be identified as a user of a certain product. So one identifies oneself in terms of the call to which one responds. In this sense the "Rainbow Nation" trope forms part of a discourse perpetuated by certain forms of institutionalisation. It is a call which has gone out from government bodies, religious organisations, and big business, and it asks for our acquiescence. How one responds to this call would form part of how one chooses to identify oneself.

Steven Connor elaborates three definitions introduced by Michel Pêcheux, three responses to attempts at responding to institutionalising discourses which seek to identify one – Identification, Counteridentification and Disidentification:

Identification means living within its terms; 'counteridentification' is the mode of the trouble-maker who stays within a governing structure of ideas, but reverses its terms; while 'disidentification' is the attempt to go beyond the structure of oppositions and sanctioned negations supplied by a discourse (1997: 267-8).

In terms of this definition, much of the apartheid era theatre which resisted the state might have been characterised by counteridentification, whereas now – with the exception of playwrights like Mike van Graan – this is possibly the least popular form of writing for theatre¹²¹. In plays like *Green Man Flashing* (2004), *Hostile Takeover* (2005) and *Die Generaal* (The General, 2007) he has directly attacked the present government and its policies, satirically dealing with bribery, corruption, rising crime, language policy and a range of other issues which have beset the South African government in the years since the end of apartheid.

Reza de Wet's *Concealment* (2004) could also be read as providing a counteridentification in terms of its critique of patriarchy and colonialism. I would say, however, that the majority of De Wet's plays could be read as "disidentifications". Judging from interviews with her which have been published, I would venture a guess that this is also the mode in which she prefers to work, particularly when one considers that she sees her work as personal, rather than political. This is what makes her plays different from the dominant mode in most of the other plays which have

¹²¹ Although there are other examples of writers attacking the government – such as stand up comics like Pieter Dirk Uys and Cokie Falkow – Van Graan is the most publicised playwright writing in this vein.

been discussed here. While some of the writers in this study may resist complete submersion within the status quo, many of them still identify with the notion that it is a good thing to have a strong, stable sense of identity. Extreme examples of this belief are demonstrated in performances which endorse a strong sense of ethnic or national identity, such as the plays mentioned by Mbongeni Ngema. Public pageants staged by the government at the Union Buildings in Pretoria and in stadiums across the country on holidays such as the Day of Reconciliation (December 16), National Women's Day (9 August) and Freedom Day (27 April) are also strong appeals towards *both* identification in terms of racialisation as well as in terms of a national "multi-cultural" agenda. Identity, in terms of both a racialised ethnicity *as well as* the story of the "rainbow nation", can thus be described as responses to the invitation by specific organisations to identify with particular categories on which their structures have been premised.

6.1.4 Bastard Identities

During the course of this thesis I have been struggling to find the balance between seeing identity as overly rigid, on the one hand, and entirely formless on the other. I began by referring to Anthony Sher's play on Demetrios Tsafendas, *I.D.*, and highlighted Tsafendas' struggles with identity under the severely restrictive classifications of apartheid. Sher was not the first to write a play on this enigmatic figure in South African history. L.D. van der Merwe wrote a play called *Tsafendas* which was based largely on the court proceedings of his trial, and Ian Hadfield wrote *Conversations with a Tapeworm*¹²². Matthew Krause and Robert Colman also cast Tsafendas in a satirical musical *Famous Dead Men* (1985) and Liza Key made a

¹²² These two plays were sourced from DALRO (Dramatic Artistic and Literary Rights Organisation) but I was unable to determine when they were written.

documentary about him called *A Question of Madness* (1999). I also wrote a biographical play about the assassin called *Living in Strange Lands* (2003). In one scene from this work, I had Tsafendas railing against purity:

Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd believed in purity. He believed that the races should be kept apart, that there should be no mixing; but how can you have progress, growth, development – how can you have evolution with one-hundred percent purity? You can't have evolution if you're too pure. You must have new blood for things to change...purity is like incest....It makes you weak, sick, deformed (18).

Ultimately, I had Tsafendas advocating racial miscegenation as an hysterical solution to his plight. In a scene inspired by Van Woerden's discovery of the arrest made in Mozambique (when, as mentioned earlier, he caused a disturbance in a bar by demanding a flag with a "rainbow on it"), Tsafendas rants from on top of a table:

And I said 'That rainbow represents the many colours of our nation'...and I showed those blacks my hair and I said, 'Look at these curls my friends, that's why the whites don't want me....That's why they won't have me near them....But one day there will be a mixing of all the races...white, black, yellow, pink, brown, everybody...the answer is in coming together, not staying apart...we must inter-breed, we must conceive a new race to which we all belong....It is the only way forward! To integrate. To become one race. To mix our flesh and blood so that one day everybody will be bastards!' (19).

This desire to become bastardized is a revelation of Tsafendas' fragile state of mind, and yet it also refers to a profound dis-ease within the South African landscape. Gilles Deleuze makes an interesting reference to G.M. Lory's study of Breyten Breytenbach at the end of *Feu Froid* (1976) in which Lory points out Breytenbach's desire to be "a bastard, with a bastard language" (in Deleuze 1993: 272). And Athol Fugard refers to himself in his notebooks as having a "bastardised identity" (1983: 7). Granted, this total rejection of a type of hierarchical eugenics masked as purity may only be one

side of the coin. On the other side, there is also Jung's warning that a "[l]oss of roots and lack of tradition neurotize the masses and prepare them for collective hysteria" (1972: 164). In a sense, Tsafendas' outcry in this play is a frenzied outburst as a result of his having been pushed too far. It indicates an extreme attempt to balance the severe restrictions of state classifications.

Even this appeal towards a mixing of races still relies on the notion that there is a distinct difference between races, yet I think one must be wary of describing inter-racial encounters between black and white as being only between "Europe" and "Africa". What is at stake in the syncretic encounter, after all, is not only this confluence between continents (an encounter which has been continuing for at least half a millennium), but, as Paulin Hountondji says, it is also between different aspects of African society:

Pluralism does not come from any society from outside but is inherent in every society. The alleged acculturation, the alleged 'encounter' of African civilization with European civilization, is really just another mutation produced within African civilization, the successor to many earlier ones about which our knowledge is very incomplete, and, no doubt, the precursor of many future mutations, which may be more radical still. The decisive encounter is not between Africa as a whole and Europe as a whole: it is the continuing encounter between Africa and itself (1983: 165).

Plays which explore identities being forged within the new African experience, without necessarily being founded on myths of "African", "European" or even "global", (least of all "universal") identities, seem to me the most interesting. Hopefully this thesis has moved beyond a general celebration of hybridity towards a specific examination of the dangers of being caught up in many of these identity issues. These ongoing struggles with identity do not necessarily require specific resolutions and the failure of identities in many instances may, paradoxically, turn out

to be part of their strength. For example, one of the reasons I admire the plays of Reza de Wet is that by positing fantastic, phantasmagoric reference points she is freeing one from the idea of the importance of specific identifications. One has to wonder what South Africa might be like if racial identity were not required on every official form. What would it be like to not be reminded constantly of one's racial categorisation? How would it be if one were not required to report, to state, to keep on telling the story of this classification? Would we be more free?

6.2 CHANGING THE BODY

6.2.1 Transformation, Again

This thesis has, to a large extent, turned out to be specifically an examination of ways in which narrative identity within plays has changed. For Eugenio Barba, all important theatre has to do with transformation, with transition, as well as with the production of meaning, not simply its reification. He says that "[t]ransition is itself a culture...it is essential for a culture to produce meanings. If it does not, it is not a culture" (1995: 5). In this sense, he claims that theatre is "not museum, but metamorphosis" (36) and that a crucial aspect of it is that it is "an activity in search of meaning" (36). One of the most important functions of theatre, according to the examination posited in this thesis, is that the stage creates the opportunity for change, for transformation, for the nurture and growth of culture. Similarly, according to Reza de Wet, the crucial function of theatre is neither to educate nor to entertain, and least of all to perform a socio-political function. Instead, she says that theatre has

the profound function of transforming. To enlighten or to inform is deadly. Transformation is radiant. To inform does nothing. It only goes into your mind. The other, as Artaud says, goes into your whole body (in Solberg: 188).

De Wet is here referring, I believe, to an ancient, *ur* interpretation of the theatrical ritual whereby enactment not only demonstrates transformation, but is transformative in itself. Richard Schechner says:

Modern Western theatre is mimetic. Traditional theatre, and...I include the avant-garde in this category, is *transformational*, creating or incarnating in a theatre place what cannot take place anywhere else. Just as a farm is a field where edible foods are grown, so a theatre is a place where transformations of

time, place, and persons (human and non human) are accomplished (2003: 186).

In this sense, De Wet and Bailey both attempt to access a much older, primal mode of theatre, in opposition to the mimetic realism often associated with many European theatre movements. Mimetic theatre has been associated with a colonial era where South African concerns were depicted as subservient to the priorities of an imperial government. Long after direct influence in terms of legal and political ties were severed with a European metropol, much South African literature continued to nurture the famous "colonial cringe", as if the country were still a far-flung colony hoping to impress the motherland.

In this sense, one of the most necessary transformations might be to outgrow the influence of the cold northern lands separated from us by a vast continent, *as well as* the influences of the central African cultures which informed much of the Nguni imagination. For South African culture to develop (or, to use a psychoanalytic metaphor, to "individuate") it must first separate from the influences of its "parent" cultures. This involves a separation from not only the European cultural influences, but also from the traditional African models. Transforming identities thus depends more on experimentations with the new, than with reifications of the old. Our various traditions may have been nurturing, but they might also prove to be limiting.

This process of cultural transformation involves a degree of fear, since one is moving from the known to the unknown. Transformation is always dangerous, since one can never fully know where one is going and one does not yet know what one will become. In order for transformation to take place, one requires the freedom to experiment, to play; and this is what is so important to the ability of drama to transform identities.

In her inaugural address at the University of Zululand, Lynn Dalrymple (1992) sets out a number of considerations in the creation of a new curriculum after apartheid. Her field is Drama in Education, and she describes, in particular, the importance of drama in the process of learning to create new identities. She says that it is no accident that a "play" (14) is known as such, since it describes a "hypothetical situation" which "provides an opportunity to rehearse different possibilities and learn from the rehearsal without real danger to existing relationships". To play with theatre makes one aware of some of the many possibilities of "making different choices"¹²³. Transformation becomes what Dalrymple sees as one of the most important aspects of an arts education, particularly of theatre, when she says that "our attitude towards arts education at this stage in our history must be tilted towards discovering ourselves as a transformed society rather than simply conserving any of the various heritages" (6). In this sense, there can be no prescribed routes in search of identity, certainly not in a thesis such as this one. The place in which transformation occurs, in which the outcome is not yet certain, could also be called a liminal zone. According to Viljoen, Lewis and Van der Merwe:

A liminal zone is...a zone of playful transformation. Like any boundary it is a zone of heightened semiotic activity....Liminality is the result of processes of separation, transformation and re-incorporation. Periods of ambiguity, transition and marginality can be termed liminal in this sense (2004: 18).

How long this liminal space might last before a "settled" culture emerges is not the issue, since culture is always in a state of transition. It is important to keep playing, to

¹²³ In this way one could see the choice made by Jimmy in Greig Coetzee's *Happy Natives* as a repetition of the past. Dawid Olivier in Fugard's *Sorrows and Rejoicings* is, perhaps, instructive in how not to be a man. (And yet I do not think that Dalrymple means that play should necessarily have a didactic function. Instead, plays permit one to explore new terrain, rather than framing a moral lesson.)

keep in mind Barba's definition, to remember that theatre is "metamorphosis", not "museum". One alternative to the "mimetic" tradition of theatre is physical theatre.

6.2.2 Physical Theatre

At the start of this thesis, I referred to legal means of identifications in terms of the individual body. This is the sort of identification in which state structures are interested – height, eye colour, age, and so on. The most individual of identifications may reside then, with the body. I also mentioned issues of text and body, and considered to what extent the body could represent a type of text, or whether it would be more accurate to read text as a type of performance. I settled, eventually, on the pragmatic choice – albeit rather conservative – of focusing this study on published plays and grounding my more detailed explorations in the printed word. And yet, mention must be made, if only in this cursory fashion, of the immense contribution made to the development of post-apartheid drama in South Africa by physical theatre. By not being bound overtly to textuality, this form of theatre-making may be able to work with and transform identities perhaps more easily than text-based work. Textuality conceptualises, abstracts; whereas the move towards a physical theatre challenges an emphasis on intellectualisation. It does also not rely on any specific language.

One of the first modern Europeans to take an interest in a non-textual theatre is Antonin Artaud who, in his appraisal of the Balinese funeral rites, praised the physicality of highly ritualised performances. In *The Theatre and its Double* (1970) he describes the text as being a tyrant over meaning, and demands a break – violent, if necessary – from the restrictions imposed by the definition of words and the confinements of grammar:

Dialogue – something written and spoken – does not specifically belong to the stage but to books....I maintain the stage is a tangible, physical place that needs to be filled and it ought to be allowed to speak its own concrete language. I maintain that this physical language, aimed at the senses and independent of speech, must first satisfy the senses (27).

Artaud's suggestion for a theatre of sensation implies a theatrical language beyond the verbal, which involves spectacle and emphasises visual and rhythmic elements, rather than dialogue. Although Reza de Wet invokes the name of Artaud in liberating theatre from realism¹²⁴, she does, paradoxically, seem to insist on a fairly rigid textual definition of the stage script. For example, Temple Hauptfleisch describes her saying "the script's done", implying that her "written script [is] meant to be performed that way" [in Solberg 2003: 54.] Hauptfleisch contrasts De Wet with Mark Fleishman, who relies on improvisation and non-textual elements in his productions.

Brett Bailey is primarily a writer and director who remains very concerned with the visceral and visual elements of his productions. In Bailey's collection of published plays the visual component of the text is as important as the words themselves. Every page is covered in photographs and colourful designs, so these are not purely textual representations. His plays also involve fusions of different performance forms – including dancing and music – and are not reduced to the text. This is a form of theatre which is well suited to a country where people speak many different languages. For example, Nicholas Ellenbogen sees the language of the physical body as very important in his production. His troupe, *Theatre for Africa* is involved mostly in projects which educate audiences on issues involving the care and conservation of the

¹²⁴ "Unfortunately theatre practitioners seem to be trapped in a rather ordinary world. It is all the political theatre that was done, which was terribly realistic, that has blunted artistic sensibilities. I think someone should bring Artaud into this. His amazing vision is required now to make theatre vital exciting, dangerous" (De Wet in Solberg 2003:187).

environment and he sees physical theatre as a way of reaching a wide number of people who might not speak English, since his plays do not need to be translated:

A lot of our theatre has to be very physical, and depends less on language than first world theatre does....Language is a big problem (in Solberg 2003: 91-2).

An emphasis on the body bridges many of the gaps between speakers of different languages. This is not to say that the language of movement is necessarily universal, but that the codes inscribed within gesture may be more easily decoded into the signification systems than the lengthy process of interpreting into, say, the eleven official languages of South Africa. Mark Fleishman claims that while formal theatre has declined in many ways in the years following 1994, dance, on the other hand, has enjoyed huge growth "because it contains the idea of untranslatability, of being able to house things that language can't". He continues: "There has definitely been a move away from 'theatre' towards a more inclusive concept of 'performance', which combines various disciplines" (in Jamal 2000: 199).

Other important contributors in the field of post-apartheid physical performance theatre include Gary Gordon, Jazzart, The Junction Avenue, Andrew Buckland, Rob van Vuuren, Bheki Mkwane and Ellis Pearson. The collaborations between the Handspring Puppet Company and William Kentridge have already been touched on in chapter four (albeit from a slightly different perspective), but they are certainly also immersed in a theatre which is distinctly different from text-based work. The text of *Ubu* is also noteworthy for its rich use of visual representations.

Here, I will only briefly consider the work of two other contributors to this field, namely Mark Fleishman and Sylvaine Strike. Fleishman directs Magnet theatre, and writes in his essay "Physical Images in the South African Theatre" (1996):

I would suggest that for most people making theatre in South Africa the written word on its own is woefully inadequate to portray or explain the full complexity of the reality they face....A complex subject requires complex treatment and gives rise to a complex text in which the written word, the spoken word and the transformative material body amongst others are in a constant state of dynamic dialogue. There is no essential hierarchy where one mode of expression, one process of making meaning can be seen as more important than another (174).

Furthermore, he sees the body as a type of text, which challenges the logo-centrism of the written word¹²⁵. Eugenio Barba goes further in his emphasis of the physical, contrasting a theatre "sustained by *logos*" with one which is "above all, *bios*" (1988: 128) and favouring the emphasis on the body and its biology over textuality. Perhaps Fleishman is principally concerned with complexity, rather than necessarily favouring physical movement over language. He certainly does not discount language, as he says in his interview with Rolf Solberg (2003):

we're not rejecting language. Language is there, but the language operates in a less literary way, if you like, than in the well made play, the literary dramatic text (64).

In this way, Fleishman's work embraces the complexity of the codes elaborated by the physical as another system of meaning alongside the textual, verbal signs of language. Sylvaine Strike, who won the young artist of the year award in 2006, works, amongst others, with James Cunningham and Helen Iskander of Fresco Theatre. Both Cunningham and Strike are graduates of the Lecoq School of Mime in Paris¹²⁶ and

¹²⁵ "In South African theatre...the body isn't simply a vehicle for the embodiment of the text; it serves as part of the text in its own right. The physical body in South African theatre is a source of primary meaning which constantly challenges the hegemony of the written word in the meaning-making system" (175).

¹²⁶ Other South African performers who have graduated from the Lecoq School are Ellis Pearson (who works with Bheki Mkwane) and Jenny Resnick (who works with Magnet Theatre).

continue the particular tradition and style of this establishment, which makes the performer's bodies the centre of any production. The productions with which Strike has been involved include themes such as suicide (*Black and Blue* [2004]), incest (*The Travellers* [2005]) and alienation (*Coupé* [2006]). It may be difficult to access ways in which these plays present identity, and even more tricky to align these identities with any collective descriptions, since they are reliant on a performer's particular engagement with movement, mime and gesture, rather than with narration. That is not to say that gesture is not also part of a coded system, but it is, perhaps, a series of codes which is more open, more fluid and flexible to interpretation than language.

In *Black and Blue* (2004), for example, the dialogue would hardly fill two pages. Instead, the presentation of the piece focuses on a symbiotic energy between two performers, involving a fine attention to physical details of voice, movement and gesture. It is a strangely light piece, which comes across as almost frivolous, even though it deals with themes such as suicide, mourning, loss and recovery. It poses as a children's pantomime while addressing deep-seated fears in the South African psyche. The play strips away layers of coding inscribed by the grand narratives of race in its attempt to portray the compassion of one person for another which becomes more important than the story of their enculturation. It is not only a new story about the transformations of white and black identities, but is also a new way of telling a story.

All three of Strike's plays mentioned here make use of a small revolving stage. Each presents a world which can easily be turned around and reversed, indicating the instability of any contextual setting. Each work thus appears to depict a stage within a stage, which also emphasises the constructed nature of the performance, the "theatre-making" involved. These plays all rely on richly imaginative metaphors and symbols to open up sites of ambiguity.

Mark Fleishman endorses physical theatre as a viable means of transformation since it is not restricted to cultural interpretations embodied in a particular language. He says:

We in South Africa have to learn to re-invent ourselves in a most active way and the theatre has a part to play in this process. Our challenge is to present images of the body in various forms constantly re-invented and transformed (1996: 182).

Fleishman mentions two kinds of transformation that occur. The first is when the performer's body "changes in front of the spectator into a multiplicity of characters and images" (176). This type of transformation is typical of township theatre, in plays like *Woza Albert!* (1983). It is also notable in one man shows, including the work of Andrew Buckland, Greig Coetzee (including *Happy Natives*), James Ngcobo and Pieter-Dirk Uys, where these consummate performers are able to change characters through the slightest shifts in postural and gestural alignments¹²⁷.

But there is also a second, more significant type of transformation which occurs. This "involves a physical action or gesture which begins as one thing and metamorphoses into something else passing through a range of possibilities" (177). According to Fleishman, it is in particular this second type of transformation which can be liberating. This is not simply the adoption of a new role, or a different image, it is not only exchanging one identity for another; but an act of transformation which reveals that the alternative identity was already part of the original formulation. It is not so much simply a change of role, as the transformation and reinterpretation of an image. In this way, theatrical movement is able to open up some of the ambiguities of identification.

¹²⁷ See footnote to page 156 for a more detailed list.

For Jerzy Grotowski, the aim of theatre was to change both performers and spectators. He wanted the audience to also achieve the "translumination" which the actors undergo. There have been other radical theatre practitioners who have described this state of transcendence. For Artaud and Barba it is called "presence", for Mnouchkine "state", and for Grotowski "translumination" (Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2005: 88). This is the "Holy Theatre" of Peter Brook, which "presents the invisible on stage" (155). It may not be possible to transcend language in a thesis such as this one which is wholly based on language; and yet, one might, as the surrealists suggested in their first manifesto, use language to demonstrate "the cry of the mind turning back on itself" (in Nadeau 1968: 241). Perhaps to turn away from language is the only way to demonstrate identities which are permeable and perpetually changing. If one wishes to leave behind nationalistic, gendered, and even syncretic identities and instead encourage the mysterious element of transcendence of "total theatre" or "holy theatre" conveyed in "a language beyond speech" (Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2005: 170), then one may need to turn away from a dependence on language itself.

Physical theatre thus has a vital role to play in the presentation and representations of identities in South African theatre. Theoretical investigations into the terrain of the physical presence of the performer involve an intricate set of theoretical tools which have been elaborated by writers such as Philip Auslander, Peggy Phelan, Baz Kershaw, Richard Poirier and Henry Sayre, to name but a few. I have no doubt vastly oversimplified the field of physical theatre by means of this brief excursion. Yet I felt that at least some mention should be made of the enormous contribution to new South African theatre by this genre. This brief section has provided little more than an indication of some of the possibilities it presents and an entire thesis on its own

would be required in order to do it justice. For now, it is time to bring the many strains of speculation begun in this particular thesis to a close.

6.4 EXPERIMENTS IN FREEDOM

6.4.1 Theatres of Freedom

In Ashraf Jamal's *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa* (2005), he examines responses to Albie Sachs' seminal speech "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom" (1990) in which Sachs asked that ANC members place a moratorium on "culture as a weapon of struggle" for five years. Sachs was calling for an end to ostensibly "political", agit-prop art which emphasised injustices in terms of power and materials. According to Jamal, the first steps towards freedom require a move away from a theatre of opposition:

The first proposition that Sachs makes is that for culture to become free, it must cede its pathological attachment to the oppressive regime that shaped and constrained its deliverance. Culture, to attain this freedom, needed to be active and not reactive. For while it may be both necessary and worthy, reaction remained the insistence of the slave, of the unfree. The very reactive nature of resistance culture, therefore, ensured that it remained implicated in the very specular and juridical economy that it sought to undo (2005: 3).

In this sense, post-apartheid culture in general and theatre in particular needs to rid itself of its dependence on the categories imposed by apartheid. After all, to be perpetually caught within the "reactive" mode of "resistance culture" is not to be free, but to be trapped by the parameters defined by that struggle. To become free means not only being free to challenge, but also being free to explore.

Since the end of stringent censorship, there has also been more freedom to explore controversial topics such as, for example, sexuality. Peter Hayes has been one of a number of theatre makers who have been exploring homosexuality with productions which include *The Homosexuals: Out in Africa* (1992); *Get Hard* (1992); *Journey* (1995); *The Stories I could Tell* (1996). Pogiso Mogwera's plays also typically deal

with queer identity, including *Dumela Bangani* (1995), which deals with violence against gays in the townships, and *Hanging Oopside Down* (1996) a dance work featuring male partnering¹²⁸. More recently, there is *The Boy Who Fell From The Roof* (2006) by Juliet Jenkin, which tells the story of adolescent infatuation and desire.

Another controversial topic which has been addressed is violence in society, from the brutal plays of Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom such as *Relativity: Township Stories* (2006) – in which a gangster kicks a pregnant woman for approximately fifteen minutes on stage – to the horrors of baby rape portrayed in *Tshepang* (2005) by Lara Foot-Newton. Whether these controversies are raised in order to be liberatory, or sensational, or whether the incentive to produce them arises from a more polemical aim, the debates encouraged by these plays explore the limits of freedom in that they test the parameters of convention.

Perhaps "true freedom" will remain an unattainable ideal, since one might never be entirely free from one's situatedness in language, culture, and the consensus of meanings in which one finds oneself. In this sense, the dream of freedom must be tempered by what Homi Bhaba refers to as our task to be both "human and historical" (1994a: 256). The exploration of what is meant by "freedom" has formed a pivotal role in this thesis, which has attempted to undertake an exploration of ways in which freedom has been defined and displayed by theatre makers in South Africa. Coming to terms with what it means to be "free" and struggling to become free from the impositions of specific identity structures are what this thesis is largely about.

¹²⁸ Further details about these works can be found in Michael Arthur's essay "Gay Theatres in South Africa" (1999: 147-153).

6.4.2 Gilles Deleuze on Identity – Segmentarity and the Minoritarian

Gilles Deleuze constructs an interesting theory on identity which involves the designation of different types of lines which demarcate certain territories. He says that "[w]hether we are individuals or groups, we are made up of lines" (1993: 226). He goes on to describe an initial division as forming "segmentary" units. These rigid descriptions "cut us up" into "packets" involving various roles we are asked to adopt. These segments rely on "binary machines" (228) such as classes, genders and races, which operate on certain planes. Segmentary lines are also devices of power "each fixing the code and the territory of the corresponding segment" (228).

In a sense, this thesis has dealt largely with segmentary lines, with broad divisions of identity within contemporary South African society. For example, in discussing gender, ethnicity and nationalism, I have been assuming that these divisions are valid interpretations of identity. From a particular point of view, in terms of the inscriptions which exist, these are significant defining properties of identification. But there are also lines which are much more supple, which Deleuze refers to as "molecular": "They trace out little modifications, they make detours... [b]ut rather than molar lines with segments, they are molecular fluxes with threshold or quanta" (226). These smaller divisions, lines which cut across and become entangled in the broad segmentary lines, undermine the solidity and power of the larger divisions. For example,

molecular sexuality...is no longer that of man or woman, molecular masses...no longer have the outline of a class, molecular races...no longer respond to the great molar oppositions. It is certainly no longer a matter of synthesis of the two, of a synthesis of 1 and 2, but of a third which always comes from elsewhere and disturbs the binarity of the two, not so much inserting itself in

their opposition as in their complementarity. It is not a matter of adding a new segment onto the preceding segments of the line (a third sex, a third class, a third age), but of tracing another line in the middle of the segmentary line, in the middle of the segments, which carries them off according to the variable speeds and slownesses in a movement of flight or of flux (230).

For Deleuze, some of the key questions concerning identity include discovering the existence of "rigid segments" and areas of description which have become binarized and are now, according to his definition "overcoded" (253). To be "overcoded" implies that the significations have become concretized or fixed in such a way that they resist all attempts to alter them. In other words, they become "fascistic". It is not simply a matter of doing away with these descriptions completely. Deleuze also asks "what are the dangers if we blow up these segments too quickly?" (254) since this could harm the organism itself. Since one is inevitably already caught up in these segments, it becomes a question of first realising when and where they arise, and the reasons they have been invented – before one can become aware of the terms in which they have been operating.

In this thesis, I have been attempting to draw the broad strokes of segmentary identifications, and then to move closer into the molecular lines of description. According to Elizabeth Grosz, Deleuze is for processes which are "'minoritarian' and molecular, rather than majoritarian and molar" (207), and these are the concerns finally highlighted here in this thesis. At the start of this study I introduced Deleuze's definition of two types of structure: the "arborescent" and the "rhizomatic". Instead of installing a foundation of fixed variables with which to define identity, I have tried as far as possible, in line with the operations of a "rhizomatic" schema, to keep definitions open and to tease out different identity structures from a number of published plays themselves. True, I have used the frame of conventional structures (gender, nationalisms and so on) and yet, in every instance these large groups of

identity structures were found to be lacking, and it seems that the identities revealed in the plays under investigation either resisted these classifications, or ultimately showed the inconclusive nature of being identified in these terms. Paradoxically then, it seems as though the search for identity has revealed the advantages of casting off definitions of identity.

6.4.3 Accepting Paradox – Learning to Let Go

One of the advantages of fiction is that it allows one to explore approaches to identity which might contradict each other. Whereas, for example, a legal identity demands a limited number of what Higgins and Leps refer to as "fixed markers"¹²⁹, fictional identities are permitted a larger degree of freedom. And yet, this also makes it difficult to focus a study of identity in fictional entities onto particular forms or types. Instead of using theatre as a means of fixing a sense of identity – as frequently happened with theatre under apartheid, where revolutionary counter identities were deliberately employed to subvert these definitions – theatre might instead now be used as a means to open up an exploration of identity, and to experiment with emerging identities.

At the start of this thesis, I introduced Ricoeur's notion of describing identity as either "body" (sameness) or "sign" (self). To experiment with the physical body is perhaps more easily done than to experiment with identity at the level of the sign. Because the body is visible, its permutations and borders can be measured and controlled, whereas the sign is fundamentally unstable and depends on a consensus among a

¹²⁹ "Literary texts are especially useful for a discursive critique of the problematic of identity: whereas in legal terms, individuals and nations can be identified through a limited number of fixed markers, literary fictions can display them as discursive processes of elaboration, in which conflicting forces converge, disperse and even at times annul each other" (Higgins, L. and Leps. M.C. 1999: 119).

social body which is outside of the control of the individual, in a way that the individual body is perhaps not. Furthermore, to experiment with meaning at the level of the sign, where the guise of identity is most elusive and most powerful, always has profound ramifications for the body.

What does it mean to be free? If South African writers are now more free than they were before, what, exactly, have they been doing with their new-found freedom? According to Daniel Roux, "there has been a surprising paucity of writers who have made use of...new freedoms in genuinely interesting and resourceful ways" (2000: 243). And as Jamal (2005) says, "the struggle towards a transcendent and celebratory cultural imagination continues" (2005: 17). Jamal goes on:

The South African imaginary has by no means overwhelmed, bypassed, or ignored the conditions for its continued oppression. Imagination remains in abeyance; freedom is but a word... (17-18).

What does one need to do in order to be free? Shane Phelan says that "[i]f we are to be free, we must learn to embrace paradox and confusion" (1989: 170). Is it possible to imagine a "stable" freedom, which is not disruptive, which is not flavoured by doubt and contradiction? Jung also states that "the paradox is one of our most valuable spiritual possessions, while uniformity of meaning is a sign of weakness...only the paradox comes anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life" (1993: 15-16). And Nietzsche warns that "[e]verything absolute belongs in the realm of pathology" (1955: 154), while Deleuze claims that "[p]aradox is initially that which destroys good sense as the only direction, but it is also that which destroys common sense as the assignation of fixed identities" (1993: 41).

What these comments suggest is that, instead of destroying notions of identity, uncertainty and paradox are crucial for the experimentation required in order to

create and assess emerging constructions of identities; whether this is in terms of collectives, or in terms of individual responses. To be free then might mean not only avoiding the creation of a sense of stability within identification, but becoming free from clinging to the idea of having to have a particular identity at all, since having a strong, clear-cut sense of one's identity is a threat to the possibility of ambiguity because it creates a strong sense of right and wrong and in so doing dispels paradox.

It may thus be a healthy sign if we do not agree as to the definition of identity. Lyotard points out that the assumption that the goal of dialogue is consensus is false (1984: 65). Instead, he says that "consensus is only a particular state of discussion, not its end. Its end, on the contrary, is paralogy" (65-66). Furthermore, he goes on to say that "[c]onsensus has become an outmoded and suspect value" (66). Instead of trying to reach agreement, "dissension...must be emphasised. Consensus is a horizon that is never reached" (61). Lyotard overturns the standard meaning of a paralogism as an invalid argument and instead he makes it an intentional part of easing a conversation open into new terrain. What he is perhaps implying is that one sometimes needs to be intentionally wrong, to refuse to be "right", and possibly avoid the self-righteousness of one's own arguments. In a sense, anti-apartheid theatre was "right", since it was part of the "good"; whereas the experiments of the post-apartheid have become more reckless and deal with less "serious" issues, responding playfully to the world in which South Africans now find themselves. To be paralogical is to be deliberately illogical; to accept the terms of the game, but also being prepared to change them. It is not the rejection of a speaker, but a questioning of all his or her statements. If there is no such thing as a stable, essential identity, then South Africans are in the very fortunate position of having their multiple allegiances made visible to them on a daily basis. A loss of identity may in this sense be cause for celebration in that this permits

perpetual constructions of entirely new forms of identification. Complex identities might not necessarily be problematic, as Robert Thornton says:

It is the very complexity of all possible allegiances, together with the fact that maintaining multiple identities and cross-cutting allegiances has remained possible, that helps to make South Africa uniquely stable and violent at the same time (1996: 152).

In terms of Thornton's postulation, then, there may be a distinct advantage in not resolving differences of identity in South Africa, since this might lead to the strengthening of collectives which might then seek to dominate other groupings. Uncertainty becomes a measure which checks the ability of some to limit the freedom of others, and a country of minorities such as South Africa is thus ideally suited to embody this sense of paradox. Perhaps violence on an individual level is the price one has to pay for relinquishing violence at the level of the state. Our heterogeneous community makes us realise the fragility of community and the uncertainty of identifications. The transformation of South African society does not imply that it will ever be finally transformed into an ideal society. As Thornton says about the nature of "transition": "South Africa is not simply in 'transition' to a final state, or to some other 'end of history'" (158). In this sense it seems necessary to remain permanently in a state of transition, constantly transforming, rather than to have in mind a clear idea of the ideal end of one's transformation.

Paradoxically, then, the plays which I have emphasised in this thesis are not texts which discover or fix an agreed upon identity, but works which show the failings of too rigid adherence to past identifications. In other words, they are plays which *let go*. They do not necessarily tear down old identities in the hopes of erecting new forms in their place; but they let go of the idea that holding on to an identity is a vital part of engaging with a culture and creating meanings. In this sense, it is not

differences in identity which are the problem, but rather the style of identities, their tone and attitude, the directions of their flux and flight. Most importantly, the faithful adherence to a particular identity with which one identifies is seen as not only restrictive, but dangerous. The more identities are reinforced, the more dangerous they become. As Karen Press said at the beginning of the process of transformation: "Like so much in South African cultural life, it is not what must be learnt that is important, but what must be unlearnt" (1990: 307).

South Africans are in the process of unlearning the grand narratives of the past; unweaving the many strands which fixed them into differing segments of society, which aligned them with separate races, classes, genders, ethnicities and nations. Although micro-fascisms which cling to these structures and proliferate them still exist within South Africa, I believe that there is now, more than ever before, the opportunity to experiment with the exploration of performances of identities which are syncretic, minoritarian, fractured, unstable and uncertain. Perhaps being permitted to develop paradoxical identities is what it means to be free.