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Acknowledgments

A big thank you to the many people who have been a part of my research and performance work in Africa. Without their support, assistance, and encouragement, the work documented in this volume would not exist. And, I thank these same people for being a part of my evolution as an artist and scholar. I am honored, humbled, and eternally grateful for my good and enviable fortune: to be able to be deeply committed to a work I love with people I respect. To learn, travel, explore, and be enlarged emotionally and intellectually as a human being. These people have variously opened an ancient, vanishing world, and a very new world, full of contradiction, complexity, and transformation. Because of them I now see, hear, and simply exist in ways few others can imagine.

I could easily list dozens of performers, colleagues, teachers, and students that have contributed, either directly or indirectly, to the work contained in this collection. But, as in any human endeavor, there are a few that stand out, and are the first among equals. My work in South Africa could not have happened without the trust, guidance, and encouragement given to me by the performers, staff, and administrators at the Natal Performing Arts Council. I am indebted to Shelley Kjonstad, Themsi Venturas, Murray McGibbon, Debra Cairnduff, Tiki Nixumalo, Eric "Rasta" Hadebe, Kenneth Khambule, Thabani Tshanini, Colin Nhlumayo, Carl Crieke, Jolla Mkame, and Thubani Ngubane, for each were, in their own way, an essential part of my work there. A special thanks to my dear friend, Yise Gasa, a young man full of life and joy, taken, like so many others in Africa, by a preventable and treatable disease.

My field work in the lower Kalahari could not have happened without the acceptance and kindness of many in the !Ku and Khwe camp, among them, Ndala Mutenya, Alouis Siaja, Mubuto Bohera and village healers, George Dikosi Machai Mbande, and Manfred. Thanks to Catharina Meyer and Fiona
Barbour of the McGregor Museum in Kimberly, South Africa, for organizing my project with the Bushmen.

In Tanzania I would like to thank the University of Dar es Salaam and the Dean of the Fine and Performing Arts, Amandian Lihamba, for making me feel so welcome. And thanks to the Bagamoyo College of Art and my friends and supporters in Tanzania, Nkwabi Ng’Hangasamala, Frowin Nyoni, Malda, Haji Ahmed, and Mgunga Mwa Mnyeneyela.

In Kenya, among those I had the pleasure to know and work with are: Opiyo Mumma, Eric Krystal, Daniel Otieno, George Wambaya, Daudi Nturibi, and puppeteer extraordinaire, Gary Friedman. In Zambia the good cheer and energy of Professor Mapopa Mtonga stands out, along with, Light Musonda, Timothy Mugala, Idalotta Brackman, Phanny Walubita, Jerry Jmuale, George Daka, Flavia Ranzoni, Benne Banda, Leonard Milimo, and the gentle, Isaiah Bukanga. My good friend of the Finnish Volunteer Service, Micke Renlund, deserves a stand-up with applause for his tireless efforts, humor, and enthusiasm.

My work in Burkina Faso and West Africa, could not have happened without the assistance of many fine theatre artists and social activist, among them, Patrice Kabore, Jacobin Yarro, Membrene Touré, Evan Oma Hunter, Massa Coupipapy, Compaore Kassoum, Othino, Samuel, Ousmane, Boudaone, Mbelemba, Bakari, and FITMO director, Jean-Pierre Guingane.

The project could not have been completed without the abiding encouragements of friends, and family, among them, Kristin Haddeland, Anatoly Antoher, John Leipzig, Joseph Garry Jr., Rick Brettell, Lori McCarty, Elica and Kovas Brandon. A special nod to Reidar Nilsson of Tūkak Teatret in Denmark, for his friendship and leading the way with indigenous performance, and to Morten Ilsøe, a great percussionist who taught me much. This collection would have not been possible if it were not for the many conversations I had with Michael Kirby when we both taught at the Korean National University for the Arts just prior to his death. And a heartfelt gratitude goes to Lauren Hollis and Fariborz Hadjebian, for their detailed transcription and editing work. Dale Seeds, friend and colleague at the College of Wooster, has been diligent and helpful in many ways over so many years, and for that I am beholden to him. His interview with me appears in this volume.

There must be recognition of the many institutions and organizations that generously supported (both financially and in-kind) my work in Africa. Thanks to the wisdom and belief in my work go to, The University of Alaska Fairbanks, The Alaska State Council On The Arts, The British Arts Council,

Last, but not least, I would like to thank Richard Schechner. Richard was my teacher in the Performance Studies program at NYU in the early 1980s. My very first class with him was a breakthrough of understanding. His clarity and conviction as a teacher, then later, his guidance and encouragement, and patient, insightful editing, has taught me more than I can enumerate. His many letters and communications remain an important part of my development as an artist/scholar. In many ways this volume is a tribute to him and his very important work as the trailblazer, bushwhacking into existence the field of Performance Studies though his scholarship and editorship of TDR. Because of him I had the tools to see and do. As an artist and scholar, I stand on his shoulders.

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The publishers represented in this collection have been exceedingly generous with their time and assistance in securing reprint rights. I gratefully acknowledge permission to publish articles and interviews as follows:


Making a New Story with the !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen, Theatre Forum, UC San Diego, Winter/Spring 1997 Number 10, pp 45-59, © 1997 the University of
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Introduction

(Re) Mixing Place, Culture, and Performance

Listen more often
To Things than to Beings
The Voice of the Fire is to be heard,
Hear the Voice of the Water.
Listen in the Wind
The bushes are sobbing:
It’s the breath of the ancestors.

Those who are dead have never left:
They’re in the Shade that illuminates
And in the shade that becomes thick.
The Dead aren’t under the Earth:
They’re in the quivering Tree,
They’re in the groaning Wood,
They’re in the running Water,
They’re in the standing Water,
They’re in the Hut, they’re in the Crowd.

Listen more often
To Things than to Beings.
The Voice of the Fire is to be heard,
Hear the Voice of the Water.
Listen in the Wind
The Bushes are sobbing:
it’s the breath of the dead Ancestors,
Who haven’t parted
Who aren’t under the Earth
Who aren’t dead...

Okot p’Bitek from Sarzan
From: Oral Literature and Total Theatre

Several years ago, after driving for six hours on mud contorted, organ-bruising roads, I arrived at a small Evenk village in northern Sakha, central Siberia. I was taken to a low wooden building built during the last
part of the 18th century; there was no running water, but there was a loud, smoke spewing, diesel generator, which provided electricity. As a guest of the Ministry of Culture, I was in the Sakha Republic to develop a performance based on their traditional performance expressions, and my travel was part of my month long research in preparation for a production at the National Theatre in Yakutsk. I had, the day before, spent hours with an elderly shaman reputed to have been the most powerful shaman in the region. But that day, in the low building, I was to be a judge of a fashion show. My only qualification was that I was a Westerner, and better yet, an American; and so, it was assumed I knew about popular culture and fashion shows.

I was handed paper and pencil and seated in the front row, the rest of the village sat quietly behind me. Suddenly there was a blast of loud, sometimes screeching, synthesized music, heavy with pop melodies and the relentless two-beats per second of techno dance music. The audience and I sat motionless, stunned by the detonation of activity and stimuli. Lights flashed, then an announcer introduced heavily made-up teenaged girls who strutted, spun, turned, and pouted on a makeshift catwalk. Their attitudes were befitting a Paris or New York fashion show. Their clothing, like their behavior, was cut from patterns established from far away. If it were not for their earnestness, I would have thought the show a cartoon-like parody. The fashion parade of the young women was followed by a presentation of traditional Sakha music and clothing. Many of the same women were joined by their parents and presented traditional clothing, replete with furs, horse leather, and hand embroidered patterns. The evening concluded with several young Evenk men taking the stage in contemporary clothing inspired by rap and hip-hop culture. Their defiant gestures and swagger accompanied the lip-synching of the American rap group, Run DMC. Later, the traditionally attired adults, along with the young women, who had changed back into their home sewn fashions, joined the young men in a surreal tableau finale and the singing of the recently minted Sakha National anthem.

A few years ago, I watched a puppet presentation, which was part of an International Puppetry Festival in Nairobi and as a consequence had attracted several camera crews and photographers who were on hand to get their photo opportunities and CNN stories. Western trained Kenyans presented the Muppet-like performance in a park adjacent to downtown Nairobi, their subject: HIV/AIDS awareness. The introduction of grassroots puppetry in Kenya has been a highly successful means of disseminating life and death information about AIDS, Female Genital Mutilation, Corruption, Diabetes, and sexual abuse. Traditional indigenous applications puppetry in Africa has, with few exceptions, been associated with traditional medicine and fetishes. Western
puppetry, being non-indigenous, was part of its effectiveness, for it carried no traditional baggage or connotations. The soft, loveably expressive puppet creatures were able to communicate sensitive issues across sometimes contentious, political and ethnic boundaries.

In front of the puppet booth was an audience of about thirty street children—AIDS orphans who lived (if that is what it can be called) in the park. Aged between six to their mid-to-late teens, these children had lost their parents to AIDS and Kenya (like most of Africa), lacking a social safety net, had failed to care for them. Some of the children, sons and daughters of prostitutes, were themselves HIV or AIDS infected. A few of the young girls were nursing their infants whose birthplace was the park. Abandoned by society these children had created a society of their own, sustained by begging, stealing, and foraging the garbage of a larger, desperate and corrupt society. The majority of the children held plastic juice bottles, next to their noses or gripped in their teeth. In the bottles, however, was upholstery and industrial glue. Glue sniffing was how the children survived life on the streets; in a semi-sedated state they dealt with the pains of hunger and abandonment.

After the play, still consumed with the thought of the children I began to leave the park. It was then I saw two of the orphaned boys, no older than eight or nine years old, glue bottles at their noses, standing shock still, their shoulders hunched up in fear. Something was very wrong. From the bushes two policemen were carrying the body of another small boy, which they deposited into a plastic bag. The sounds of bustling Nairobi shrouded the moment as office workers passed by giving the scene no more than a glancing notice.

Where and how does my work—as an artist and scholar coming from, and working within, a Western context—fit in? Are my preparations, perspectives, and tools of expression, up to the challenge of addressing the tremendous social, political, and cultural convulsions occurring in the world around me? As I write this, and as you read this, so many desperate realities in the world are being played out. What can those blessed with privilege do in response?

Theatre, in word, conceptualization, objective, and execution, is a performance expression specific and unique to Western culture. Theatre is at the core of my skill set and central to what I can offer the world. And, I am cognizant and sensitive that I am part of a continuum, a long and diverse tradition, which includes Mamet, Shakespeare, Beckett, and Sophocles. From the ancient Greeks to this day, theatre has been a duti-
ful carrier, encoder, reflector, reactor, and reference point of Western thought, society, and cultural values. Surely theatre, an ancient and venerable expression of Western culture’s progression through history is reflecting and responding to the challenges of our momentous era? At this time of change and redefinition one would think theater to be the locus, a facilitator of change and evolution. Is it up to the task? I think not. Not the way it functions now. Western theatre, and by this I mean the text based, cause-effect, objective-materialist expression that takes place primarily in special facilities that separate audience from performer by placing the audience in the passive darkness, while placing the performer in the metaphoric position of the illuminated mind; the mind/body split diagramed. By Western theatre I mean a set of rules, expectations, and conventions, a text-based canon, a dramaturgy that has been institutionalized and propagated since the Renaissance, by state and regional theatres, and universities, which implies and perpetuates, in turn, a hegemonic encoding of the Western worldview.

The events of our globalized, connected, and technologically accelerating world are passing (or have already passed) Western theatre by because of its institutional, if not arrogant mind-set, which has limited its perspective, and made it unable to transform itself in response to the evolution of the human species and the planet it inhabits. Theatre is, at its core, a human technology and communal form created to address the very practical social and cultural needs and adjustments, which can and should have an immediate and significant impact. Theatre in the West, and its exported (i.e., forced or commercial colonization) sensibility, tradition, and dramaturgy, is out-dated, if not irrelevant. There is, and I suspect will always be, an audience for Western theatre; its adherents and subscribers, for its institutions have become, in the main, moneyed and safe conservators of tradition, reiterating a dated value system and worldview. However, in terms of social and cultural significance, theatre has been marginalized, its attributes and elements (e.g., theatricality and social remediation) mined and bettered by other media. Audiences vote with their feet, and are spending more time, money, and effort, and finding more drama, participation and satisfaction, and sense of community in sports, Las Vegas, shopping, restaurant dining, clubbing, in computer games and/or surfing the web; finding more relevance in CNN, web casts, their iPod or reality TV; and being better entertained and informed by the Hollywood, an on-line commu-
nity, YouTube or My Space. People would rather see a movie than take a chance on seeing a play, partly because Western theater and its performance cousins have become the domain for the increasingly diminishing, solipsistic, educationally and economically privileged class. That said there is still value in the elements of theatre—its original function and intent. Like corporate take over, maybe theatre should be broken into pieces, its parts sold off for greater use and profit, and its non-productive parts scraped, making the way for the new, a fresh start, providing an opportunity for taking stock and responding to where we are and what we need.

The world has become far more dramatic than anything we can possibly express on stage. The concerns and content of theatre, with so few exceptions, have become inconsequential in the highly competitive, hypertext instant dialog of our era. The events of the world swarm and whoosh around us, yet theatre limps to find its place, trotting out old or re-worked formulas when everything we do in theatre—not only its methods, function, and expression, but its purpose, and most importantly, its responsibility to the greater whole—needs to be called into question.

A White Man
I am a white man of European descent, whose skin is a symbol of power, wealth, privilege, and, for the non-white world, often arrogance, and whose history is littered with atrocities and so called greatness. I was educated and trained in Western theatre, aspiring at one time to be a Broadway director, but then something happened. I found myself working with the indigenous people of Alaska—the Yup’ik and Inupiat Eskimo, the Tlingit, Athabaskan, and Haida Indians—directing an Alaskan native theatre group, Tuma Theatre, for nearly ten years. Tuma means pathway in Yup’ik. My journey led to work with the Greenland Inuit, the Sakha National Theater in central Siberia, two projects with the Zulu of South Africa, work with the !Xuu Bushmen of the lower Kalahari, with Sri Lankan Tamils, with several different groups in Zambia, with the Korean National University of the Arts, and a group in St. Petersburg devoted to pre-Christian Slavic rituals.

My workshops, research, and teaching over the last ten years took place in Kenya, Tanzania, Burkina Faso, the Miao people of Hunan, China, and the H’mong people of Vietnam. The first-day-of-class faces
of my African Theatre class at the University of Dar es Salaam stared at me in shock. I had to assure them they had the right room; the globalized world has become a strange place indeed.

I’ve visited many remote places, and no place I’ve been to has been untouched by Western culture and its performance manifestations—be it film, television, rap music, fashion shows, or the Muppets. Bootlegged DVD’s of Hollywood movies can be found in a street market anywhere in the world, often days after release. I have watched Friends and/or Baywatch in twenty-five different countries. The influence of Western theatre dramaturgy prevails and is implicit internationally. Western performance culture and expression has won the day—it has not only won, is has taken possession, becoming the defacto form and frame of reference for global performance expression. It is the precursor of a global mythology. What remains of indigenous performance expressions and mythology has, in the main, been documented by Western scholars like myself or by Western trained locals. Of course, implicit is the imposition of the Western perspective grid: inherently rational, materialist, linear, and written rather than oral. Their performance documentation is not received through the body, alive with rhythm, cognizant and fully and bodily aware of place, context and its community of origin, but rather removed in time and space, organized and frozen and betrayed by a foreign syntax of written language, or captured on magnetic tape or film disconnected from its place origin—its spirits, elements, climate, and animals. The academy, the Western institution of the university, has become the tradition bearers—the elder, gathering, printing, and distributing the culture of others. I used to be uncomfortable being called upon by Alaskan natives to detail a certain aspect of a traditional ritual or ceremony, but now it is just part of the job.

Western culture and technology has found its way to the last remaining, once isolated, parts of the world. However, with this advance we are confronted with a crisis of loss. The earth’s resources are finite. The earth, air, oceans, animals, and forest are shifting from the status of raw material to be exploited, fueling expansion and consumption, to limited resources in need of regulation and protection; so too, the west has begun to take stock in the limited and fragile performance resources and the knowledge they encode that are now vanishing. Each day a Bushmen elder dies, a library burns.
Defined by Circumstances
My personal response has been to work with groups, developing performance exchanges, documentation and archival projects. The most important part has been the facilitation of performance projects. Such projects identify, explore and extrapolate traditional performance expressions, taking them from their original context to be applied in a modern (often urban) context. The question that instigates the work: Why should indigenous people adopt Western, theatrical expression, its dramaturgy, methods, and implied perspective, in order to talk about and to themselves? The form of and expression shapes the perspective, encodes a cosmological worldview, propagates, informs, and reaffirms a tradition. As bio-diversity is important, so too, is cultural diversity. Any given culture is bundled and encoded in no more precise, immediate, and complex way than by performance.

These performance projects—several of which are documented in this volume—aspire to re-assess and re-invigorate indigenous (and its derivatives, traditional and folk performance) as a viable expression. The belief in and result of the projects has been the reassertion and validation of a traditional perspective within the form of a Western dominated reality. Taking stock in one’s own tradition performance resources (which I view as a practical technology) also has the attributes of personal, social, and culture therapy. The confusing, disrupting, disconnecting and traumatizing effects of colonization—Christianization, money economies, urbanization, apartheid, and Sovietism—have and will deeply affect the indigenous people of Africa, Alaska, South America, Asia, and the former Soviet republics for countless generations. The corrupt and impoverished battlefield of Africa, the high rates of suicide, and substance and sexual abuse among Alaska natives, are direct results of this trauma. All indigenous people are wounded people—performance can reveal and heal a community. Performance has power, for it encodes and carries a community and culture through time and space, offering a psychophysical reassurance and embrace. The world is ordered once again by performance as the wisdom of the past speaks to the present, which in turn generates hope for the future.

The indigenous performance projects documented by the first four essays in this volume identify, explore, and apply traditional performance expressions, structures, and method of working to address contemporary issues. Implicit in the work is the jumping frames (from the
modern to traditional and back), an unbundling of performance actions and symbols, and the desire to revitalize and ultimately reimagine traditional performance in a contemporary context.

And yes, I am acutely aware of my precarious position and the pitfalls of “feel good do-gooder white guy.” Such projects can be yet another form (though more subtle and insidious) of cultural colonialism. But at the same time, “What is a person to do?” I feel responsible to do what I can as I can, for I have been graced with economic and educational opportunity with which comes responsibility to my community. And in a globalized world, my community has expanded to include all of the human race, for we are now all vitally aware that our fate is interconnected and depends on one another, be it economically, politically, or environmentally. All I can do is recognize the history my very being encodes and proceed with sensitivity and consciousness, somewhat comforted by the knowledge that I am a part of a larger cultural continuum and evolution.

I am a believer in the “power of one” and that all the important actions in life are personal and achieved most effectively when person-to-person. When touring Zambian villages with our production of Imipashi (documented in the essay, In Zambia, Performing the Spirits) I would often stoop for curious, playful children, inviting them to touch my hair and skin—for many I was the first white man they had seen. Embracing who you are is a person’s greatest strength and is what I teach and practice. Embody the change you envision. Being a European white man implies authority, inspires envy, and sometimes fear, and for that reason I put myself in our production of Makanda Mathalu, which toured throughout Zululand just prior to South Africa’s first post-apartheid election. We devised the performance, based on a Zulu legend and using traditional performance expression, as a means to educate the Zulu on participatory democracy and the concept of voting, two ideas that were new and abstract to them. There were many points in the performance when the audience had to take a vote and make a decision; otherwise the performance would have come to a standstill. The role I played was buffoonish because it was important the Zulu laugh and know whites—from whom they formerly cringed—could be human, and could be fools. The details of that performance experience are documented in the second essay in this volume, Politics, Zulus and Slapstick on Tour.
Often, while working in Africa, I found myself explaining Western and American culture to others—the dominant culture assumes everyone else knows and understands. Often times in African I would find myself in conversation with a table full of eager and bright university students, explaining foreign policy, music, fashion, or daily life and American values. While on tour with a Makanda Mahlanu in rural Zululand, I found myself in a thatched roofed, dirt floor hut, with no electricity or running water. There, with a roomful of fascinated locals, I watched the African-American actor, Will Smith jive and dance on the televisions sit-com, the “Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.” The television was connected to a car battery with the group of Zulus excitedly gathered around the flashing images. “Tom, what tribe is this man from and what does their dance mean?”

The Trickster
I have, at times, been a link, sharing not only my own culture with others, but also connecting cultures to one another. My interviews with the Mudangs in South Korea, the Bushmen healers in the Kalahari, a Santeria practicing in Cleveland, or a Shaman in Siberia, for example, included my telling them how others practice their own spiritual craft. Somehow, through it all, without my knowing, and surprising myself, I evolved a role and identity. In the work exemplified in this volume, and later for my work and life, I became an inhabitant of the “in between” space, the place of change; I became a catalyst, an instigator, an enabler, a facilitator, a trickster. Without consciously planning or aspiring, I became an archetype. A trickster is someone that knows and doesn’t, who may be right or may be wrong, who may be a fool or a hero. I may be tricking you now.

Being a trickster can be and mean a lot of things. More than a few times it meant being a convenient scapegoat. At the Sakha National Theatre, after three months of workshops and rehearsals, the play was about to open. The play was expressing everything the ensemble wanted it to about the corruption of the former Soviet system and the demise of their Sakha culture; but as we neared opening night, the actors started changing the script, softening the barb, taking the edge off the images, actions, and language they had taken so much care and joy in developing. When I asked why they were adjusting, their response was, “Because we are afraid of what the audience will think and feel. Many
people will be offended.” It was then I realized that, unlike me (a “duh”
moment for me) they lived there and would have to face the members
of their community—I had nothing long-term at stake and would leave
shortly. “Offended good or bad?” I asked. “Good. What we are saying
needs to be said for Sakha to change.” “Then blame me.” I responded.
“Tell them the American director told you to do it and you had no
choice.” They laughed with delight and the performance went on as we
had rehearsed it. Opening night there were some dour faces and upset
dignitaries, but throughout the performance there was also much spo-
naneous clapping and shouts of support.

Sometimes my trickster presence was folded into the cultures I
worked. For this is the way of all cultures, to adapt and incorporate, to
re-imagine an event or person within its own cultural context as to
make sense, take possession, and find a “place” for a stranger or strange
events. This is how all cultures grow, evolve, and survive. While working
with the !Xuu Bushmen (detailed in the essay, People Come Out of Here
in this volume) I experienced this phenomenon first hand. In their final
performance, a retelling of their origin myth, a new character was inter-
polated. A performer had covered him self with white chalk, becoming
a white man, and crossed the river into the “unknown” place. Once on
the other side of the river the performer pulled out some newspapers
folded to represent a book. I thought this odd, for none of the per-
formers in the workshop could read. Then the performer joined me,
standing nearby and mimicking my stance and attitude. It was then I
realized the performer was playing me—both the specific and symbolic
me. I had been folded into their performance and was an erstwhile pa-
ticipant in their creation myth. Though we had worked together on the
performance for nearly two months, they had never discussed nor re-
hearsed the character with the “book.” For the Bushmen I worked
with—a people who have no concept of metaphor, and for whom every-
thing is what it simply is and yet, for whom, time and space existed in
one eternal moment. Myth, dream, and reality are all a part of the same
for the Bushmen. I was told by Machai, a Bushman healer, “The man
on the other side of the river has our knowledge now. The Bushmen are
dying.” The trickster is a paradox—a vector of change as it is of conserva-

In preparation for a performance project, I do much reading, inter-
viewing, and when practicable, performing of the traditional dances,
songs, and performances enactments as to understand a culture in my
body. Ideally, a good portion of the research is done in the field, talking
with elders, healers and their patients, musicians, dancers, observing
performances, and asking questions. Because I have worked in so many
different cultures, I have developed a way of moving and being with a
culture, apprehending outlines quickly. Show me a dance and I can de-
code it, identifying the influences, interests, and objectives that shaped
it. Though each indigenous culture is unique in expression, there is a
shared diagram of how a culture relates and evolves from place.

Because of research and experience my questions are informed and
that goes far. My genuine and sincere interest and curiosity has initiated
many of friendships, which have developed and filled my life and heart.
The more you give the more you get, it is a wonderful feedback loop, a
foundational premise common to most indigenous cultures—what Lewis
Hyde terms “Gift Cultures”—whereby your wealth is marked not by
what you can obtain and horde, but rather by what you give. A fine ex-
ample of this was my experience with the Sakha Shaman mentioned at
the beginning of this introduction.

After traveling five hours over some very bad road to visit him, he
refused to see me. I was told, and he was reputed to be the most pow-
ferful Shaman in all of Sakha. So powerful that I cannot mention his
name—to say or write it would be to call him, which I rather not do
right now. When we arrived at his compound, nestled deep in the
woods near a clear water stream, he refused to see me, sending my con-
fused government translator out of his house in tears with, “He is tired
of anthropologist and he is not shaman!” We had traveled far and I was
baffled by the turn of events. I asked my translator to try again. “Say I
would only like to meet him and pay my respects.” My translator nego-
tiated and the Shaman agreed to see me, “For only twenty minutes!”
The terms I agreed to were simple: I could not ask any questions about
shamanism because, as my translator emphatically underlined, “He was
not a shaman.” I had no idea what was going on, but when we met I
found out. He was a beautiful man in his eighties, his face was creased
and weathered, yet he stood tall and proud, like an ancient and wise
tree. I greeted him, asking how he was. He replied, “I am old, my soul is
gone, I am waiting to die.” I understood then why he claimed he was
not a shaman. He wasn’t, technically. In Sakha Shamanism a shaman
has two souls, the human soul and the shaman soul. His shaman soul
had left him, so in his eyes he was not a shaman, even though he had lived a long life and had the knowledge of a shaman. We spent three
delightful hours together, his wife prepared us lunch and he even sang
and drummed for us. I never asked a question about shamanism, but he
answered every question I had about singing, dancing, drumming, and
the significance of certain sacred objects and practices. Most impor-
tantly, I asked as a friend and we conversed; and I told him about how
the people of other places in the world practiced traditional beliefs. Of-
ten I think the universe directs your journey through life for you, and
you meet those whom you need to, doing what you must. The only re-
quirement is that you remain open and responsive. Control is an illu-
sion, the trickster embodies this; chance is how the spirits speak. There
is much I do not understand, and I accept that. What I need to know
will manifest itself.

Much of what is included in this volume came from asking ques-
tions and giving of myself. My questions have been to performers, eld-
ers, traditional performers, governmental and educational
administrators, and, most importantly questioning, myself, my motives,
objectives, and heart. Questions are how I find my way; for one que-
sion leads to another and to another, providing an answer sometimes,
but just as often something totally unexpected.

It was mid-May and the village of Savoonga on the St. Lawrence Is-
land was still buried under nearly ten feet of snow. Many houses were
so buried that steps had to be carved into the snow to reach the en-
trance doors. St. Lawrence Island is in the middle of the Bering Sea,
half way between North America and Asia, hugging the interna-
tional dateline. The shorelines of Alaska and Siberia were easily seen on a
clear day. St. Lawrence is also the home of some of the richest arche-
ological digs in North America, that of the Punik and Old Bering Sea
culture, among the first settlers of North America, ancestors to today’s
Siberian Yup’ik people. I was in Savoonga, a village of 600, to gather
oral histories and interview elders about their traditional dances,
 drumming, and singing. Because of an unseasonable snowstorm, the
last gasp of an exceptionally long and hard winter, my three-day stay
turned into a week. Unable to walrus or whale hunt, villagers occupied
themselves with bingo and the NBA playoffs on satellite cable. It was
there I asked questions and learned, from Jimmy Toolie an elder, a few
simple, unexpected lessons—words that have guided me ever since. “Just
"listen," he said, "Everything you need to know you will know. The whole world is talking, but you have to be quiet to hear it." After several days on St. Lawrence, the storm had cleared and I was about to leave. When I said my goodbyes to Jimmie, he said he felt a question in me, something that needed to be answered. "Whenever you don’t know what to say, say what’s in your heart, don’t matter how it sounds. What’s important is what it means." I pass his wisdom on to you.

Instinctually, I have somehow adopted a casual, easygoing, yet at times trying personality. The trickster. The role of an artist is very much like that of the trickster, that contradictory and paradoxical character that has a role and necessity in every culture. My trickster is the simultaneous insider and outsider, someone highly individual yet deeply concerned with the group, playful and serious, modern yet concerned with the past and tradition, of another culture yet knowing the local culture, educated but a fool. The trickster persona is in-between, where the grinding takes place, in the midst of strife, inhabiting the liminal space of change. My trickster persona affords me relative objectivity and neutrality as well; with no political, racial, or ethnic ax to grind—I speak frankly and honestly. In many places in the world, such openness is difficult; it is something new, but, in turn, it is an example—it is the sowing and growing of a seed, which others see and learn. I have often put my foot in my mouth, and as I apologize I savor it, for we are all human. If the heart is pure, others will know it; there is such a thing as the power of one. Maybe the trickster is my fate, somehow my personality; maybe it is so because I was a middle child, I don’t know. But in working with indigenous people, I have become an “in between” person, neither here nor there, unexpected, unpredictable, living in the liminal space, the space that invites transformation. Beneath, betwixt and between all of the words in this collection lives the trickster. You are forewarned.

I always travel with a notebook, which somehow makes me a trickster’s secretary, asking, wanting to know, documenting, observing, organizing, recording, and caring. My interview subjects or performance groups often point to my notebook, exhorting me to “Write that down, that is important.” The presence of the notebook encourages and invites them, I believe, to show me dance movements, sing songs, and tell stories and realize that what they are doing is important and will be recorded. In addition to providing grist for a performance, my African notebooks resulted in research and/or documentation articles—the
fruits of which you will find within the pages that follow. Field research for performance and academic documentation are generally intermixed if not simultaneous for me. Almost everything you will read in the following essays was derived from my scrawls, scribbles, or drawings, in ink or pencil. Hey, is this a scholarly book or that of some artist type? I’m sorry I do not have an answer. Does it really matter?

Though my research work is often with elders, many young indigenous performers I worked with on projects initially viewed their traditions with a shrug. Many had grown up with traditional dance and song, but many felt it irrelevant in a contemporary context, and inadequate to the task of dealing with day-to-day survival in the modern, urban and Western shaped world. “It is for the old people” I have often heard. Because of urbanization or forced migrations because of politics or economics, non-western performance is consequently being lost at an alarming rate. This book is but a modest attempt to offer an insight into a few African traditions and their process of transformation.

In order to preserve a sense of self, many wealthier non-western cultures have embraced traditional performance as a matter of national identity. Countries like Japan and Korea preserve traditional performance more out of cultural (i.e. national) identity rather than out of need for a practical, expressive outlet. The Japanese and Koreans, like the Zulu, Sakha of Siberia, and others with traditional performance cultures, freeze their performance as a way of holding them. Kabuki in Japan, Pansori and Kamunguk in Korea, essentially stopped—their costumes, staging, and stories seemingly flash frozen at the time of contact with outside cultures or forced colonization. Consequently performance becomes conservation, a museum of a bygone age of purity and glory, a bulwark against otherness, and a living historical idealization, often romanticized, but seldom charged with immediate relevance.

In Denpaprar, Bali, there is a well-financed government school devoted to the training and preservation of traditional performance. Although some of the performers will serve local needs, most will perform for the lucrative tourist trade. Once sacred rituals are performed nightly at hotels not to satisfy the tourist’s need for something spiritual and meaningful, but rather to provide something exotic. In the globalizing world full of Disney and Las Vegas replica realities, the tourist seeks something authentic, or at least something that looks and feels authentic.
What is the upshot? The world’s performance diversity is dynamically transforming, with some traditions surviving by becoming tourist attractions or frozen as expression of nationalism, but the majority are fading fast into extinction. In any event, with this process (which is accelerating along with so many elements of our world), a part of humanity’s heritage, its way of being of and with the earth, is being irrevocably lost.

The Hunter-Gatherer?
It is thus crucial that we acknowledge that humans have spent approximately 99% of their time on earth as indigenous hunter-gatherers. It could be said our organism—in mind, body, and spirit evolved from and developed according to humans being indigenous to a place. According to anthropologist Richard Nelson, humans have versatility and endurance, and as a consequence have developed acute senses, color vision, tough skin, and ability to eat a variety of foods, which makes us the most flexible of the earth’s species. We evolved as a species by being indigenous and developing a relationship with place. The deep structure of our physiology and psychology has its origins in our indigenous, hunter-gatherer self, shaping in turn our society, politics, economics, and culture. We are an indigenous, hunter-gatherer organism, and we are what we are today because of what we were. Arguably, the most successful and enduring mode of human living has been the indigenous, hunter and gatherer.

Indigenous people are those who live on and with a specific place. What we term traditional cultures evolved from this living place and the vestiges of this life are what have been subsequently coded, becoming in turn, “traditional.” The values, morality, and cosmology of a culture, along with its aesthetics, and performance, evolved from a time when people lived with and on a specific place. Today the earth’s few remaining indigenous people (and those that can still trace their lineage to an indigenous way of being) offer an insight into how, at one time, all people lived on and with the earth. Their performance, in form and function, are windows to an ancient and fundamental way of understanding the world. Are we that removed from our hunting and gathering origins? Or are we entering into a new era of hunting and gathering? Not necessarily for food, but rather for ideas, paradigms, and method to better enable our survival in an evolving world culture?
Community of Place

What is indigenous performance—I am specifically inquiring about African performance—and how is it distinct from our Western notions of theatre and performance? What does it have to teach us and can it re-invigorate the Western theatrical perspective? What can it contribute to the earth’s knowledge base? These are important questions that need to be answered satisfactorily if we are to understand the place indigenous performance occupies.

Indigenous performance is derived from a specific place. Indigenous performance is a technology, a practical and tactile event enabling the direct, psychological, emotional, and physical interaction with place. Indigenous people belong to a community of place. It is a place shared by people, animals, the earth’s elements and climate; it is a place shared by the ancestors and the spirits that created and defined a culture. Everything has spirit—the wind, rocks, a word, and even a thought. The Yup’ik Eskimo of Alaska believe there is a spirit in all things. They call the spirit yua or imua. The Maori call it mana. Every indigenous group has a similar concept.

For the Yup’ik Eskimo and !Xuu Bushmen (two of very few remaining indigenous, hunter-gathering cultures in the world today), survival before the advent of Western culture was tenuous, necessitating the full utilization of mind, body, and spirit. The hunter-gatherer had to be efficient, resourceful, and effective. For the !Xuu, like our hunter-gatherer ancestors, performance is a technology that enables survival. The !Xuu, like our hunter-gatherer ancestors, were practical people with little need for excess baggage.

Daily, body interactions within the traditional !Xuu worldview are the primary way of “knowing” and relating to their part of the earth. As their body is shaped—inhaling, ingesting, and interacting with the external world—so too is their perception, perspective, and way of being in and of the world. The human body is and active part of a larger body, the earth. To see a bird flapping its wings and lifting itself into the sky, is to vicariously experience the bird through one’s own body. To see means to be seen by the world. To perform a bird’s movements in dance, to chant its call, or to wear its feathers, is to vicariously become the bird. The interactions of thought, feeling, dream, and action have equal credence. To think of someone or something means you are speaking or they are speaking to you. A thought and a word have a
power and spirit, once thought, once uttered, that will live forever. The porousness between dream, thought, myth and reality, is at the core of the indigenous worldview and in turn its performance. Beneath each of the African performance traditions explicated in this volume lives, to a greater or lesser degree, this community of place worldview.

Everything—bird calls, animal movements and personalities, the smell, feel and sound of a certain wind, foliage, snow, geography, ancestors and spirits—is alive and connected, having an inter-relationship with everything else. For the indigenous, performance is a medium by which the sights, sounds, and rhythms of a specific place are brought into dialog. Songs and drumbeats are not random, but rather specific to place. Science only now understands that each part of the world gives off a specific electromagnetic pulse. Scientists have identified the Earth’s rhythmic pulse as 7.83 hertz. This rhythmic, electromagnetic standing wave circles the Earth between the Earth’s surface and the ionosphere. These rhythmic waves are known as Shuman’s Resonance and may be, what some scientist believe, the rhythmic brain substratum common to all living beings. The frequencies of Schumann’s resonance are intimately linked with those of human brain waves. Any adjustments in the patterns and frequency of this Earth resonance would affect homoeostasis (the ability of an organism or cell to maintain internal equilibrium by adjusting its physiological processes), REM (during dreaming), and healing.

For a decade researcher Robert Beck documented the brain wave activity of healers from all cultures and religious backgrounds—psychics, shamans, Christian faith healers, Santeria, Wicca parishioners and others, who, independent of their belief systems, all exhibited “nearly identical EEG wave signatures” during their “healing” moments. The brain wave signatures were at 7.8 to 8 Hz—identical to that of the Earth’s rhythmic pulse brain wave activity. The rhythmic pluses lasted from one to several seconds and were “phase and frequency synchronized with the Earth’s geo-electric micro pulsations—the Schumann resonance.”

Humans and all life on earth are a part of a greater symphony of rhythms moving from heartbeat, breath, and circadian rhythms to participate in a complex interaction of biological, geological, physical, oceanographic, climatic and atmospheric rhythmic movements. A movement that relates to the earth’s main rhythms of rotation and revolution, an orbit which extends and relates to the moon, the planets, stars and galaxies beyond our comprehension.
For the Yup’ik of Alaska that pulse is identical to their drum beat. To beat their drum is to align themselves, quite literally, with their place. The drum beats of every African culture is not arbitrary; sure, there was some adopting and sharing, but the origin of the beat comes from and is of a specific place. The iteration of the drumbeat is the performance of place.

Indigenous performance is sensual and intuited; it is a technology by which to dance, sing, and drum place and community into existence. To perform in this context is to mark, make incarnate, and in a sense become, the community of place. Each Zulu, or Chewa, or BaKuba or N’goni or Lozi, or !Xuu performance is a microcosm of a community of place and is performed (to a great or lesser degree) as much for a human audience as for the spirits, ancestors, elements, and animals. Performance—be it shamanic ritual, an initiation rite, a trade festival, or a dance for tourist—is a venue by which to organize, re-order, moderate, and celebrate the interaction between its community members, dissolving the boundaries and creating passages between the members of the community. Every member of a community has a place, a role, and responsibility to the greater whole. Humans, being conscious and most physically advantaged have the greatest responsibility to perform and maintain the community.

For an indigenous person, performance is the primary means of community of place maintenance and balance. As a necessary and practical tool by which to step outside of ordinary reality performance enables the indigenous to recognize, reaffirm, celebrate, and adjust relationships of its community. It is not a simply a metaphor but rather a revelation of a greater reality—simultaneously a microcosm, diagram, and mnemonic of place—a gathering point, where spirits, humans, animals, and elements converge, into a single body.

Community of Ideas
The tradition of Western theatre—as initiated by the ancient Greeks and codified during the Renaissance—asserts humans are separate from place. Indeed, it can be argued that Western civilization’s ethos revolves around its impulse to describe humans as individuals who are independent, if not the masters, of their place.

The ancient Greeks established mental concepts, categories, classifications, and conditions on reality, effectively transforming an indigenous, place based, sensual reality into an idea based reality. A community of ideas evolved and, in turn, the body was split from the
mind, which took responsibility and control over reality. That which could not be defined or function within the community of idea-reality was devalued, termed “primitive” (because it was sensory and body centered) and in need of control, conversion, or derision. What existed outside of the frame and organizing grid of the “community of ideas” was deemed chaotic and ultimately a threat to the new, emerging order. History is littered with inquisitions, witch-hunts, colonization, religious missionaries, conquests and conversions that were, at their core, the conquest of community-of-ideas-people over a community-of-place-people.

Much of the instinct behind the ancient Greek’s need to create an idea-based system came from the necessity to establish control over a new sort of place phenomenon: the multi-cultural city, Athens. Unlike other ancient cities, the Athens of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, evolved from homogeneous to heterogeneous trade and gathering point of many smaller indigenous cultures, becoming variously aligned with other city-states. The greatness of Athens, as can be said of the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, and the current ascent of American culture, is directly attributable to the confluence of cultures and ideas, which in turn force interaction, mutual objectives, and provoke innovation. With many different people from many different places gathering, a system based on objective and materially tangible ideas rather than place, needed to evolve. An idea based system, a community of ideas, could maintain and balance the new social, cultural, political and economic phenomenon. Migratory indigenous people, coming from place-based realities, were and continue to be to this day, transformed and re-organized under the rubric of the metropolis. Humans took control of the world and became, in the Renaissance, the measure and measurer of all things. The human perspective was firmly established and a material-based subject-object, cause-effect, linear (mechanical time, another grid) re-ordered the world.

When people from the community of ideas traveled and settled elsewhere, discovering “new worlds,” they carried their ideas in books, maps, charts, and treaties. The community of ideas was ideally suited to migration and mobility because it was, but a mind place not a physical place—a self-referencing mind place that became an effective way of shaping disparate and varied populations into a social, political, cultural, religious, and economic order. It is the mind place, the commu-
nity of ideas that the emerging global culture shares today, and only secondarily, a physical place.

With the advent of community of ideas, interactions with animals, spirits, and ancestors (when allowed), became circumscribed by ideas. Similarly, direct and instinctual interactions and relationships with the elements, seasons, climate, and geographical place, became categorized and removed. As the gods and spirits became transfigured into humans, so too, did human reality take precedence over the multi-vocal reality (in which humans are only one of many perspectives) implicit in the community of place worldview.

Ideas and mental constructs became the “body” of society taking precedence over the messy uncontrollable sensual reality of place. The Apollonian mind struggled and controlled the Dionysian body. The festival of Dionysus, unwieldy, visceral and emotional, gave way to state sponsored play competitions that championed ideas, words and the orderly observance, progression and rationally derived conclusion of great emotions and ideas. Words lost their place-based spirit and metaphor was born to carry meaning from one place to another; perceptions of reality expanded as they paradoxically narrowed. Words, bereft of place and spirit, became detached carriers of ideas, and ideas the new geography, the new homeland.

Rather than maintenance and balance of place as its function, the performance of the community of ideas came to function as a mediator of humans, balancing, integrating, reflecting, remediation, and celebrating ideas and facilitating social adjustment. Hence, today our dramas relate to and revolve around a human-based problem or conflict, with little interplay with non-human participants. Performance in the Western cultural context is about resolving the conflict between humans, not about participating and balancing a community of place. Resolving the conflict between humans—individuals, social, cultural, political, and economic problems, or any variety of challenges to expansion—reflects the practical needs of a culture that is idea rather than place based. Human and conflict based performance is reflective of a migratory, colonizing, expansive, and conquest to control culture. Performance in the West was, and remains, a technology to better enable migration as to deal with the cross-germination of ideas, people, values, and any number of psychological, racial, physical frictions that inevitably arise from the process creating and sustaining an idea-based culture. In this
context the elements, spirits, ancestors, and animals, if they do appear, are overwhelmingly considered adversarial, demonized, in need of control, romanticized, objectified, or made simplistic.

The structure and vocabulary of our evolving global place is being defined by Western culture, which is a rootless culture in dire need of place awareness. The community of ideas, our community, has served a useful function—it has shaped a disparate and varied population into a social, cultural, and political order. The modern world could not have happened otherwise. It has brought the world to where it is today but it has done so by removing humans from their interaction and responsibility to place, which in turn has let them destroy, pollute, and plunder with rational justification and detachment. Today, there is no place in the world that has not been identified, mapped, or somehow marked or touch by Western culture. Now, having no place to expand in the world, the community of ideas turns on itself; seeking a “foothold,” individuals seek place and reality in themselves, their concerns and performance becoming solipsistic, psychological and increasingly narrow. But I sense that this way of being is nearing its end and out of practical necessity, if not survival, must adjust. What, then, is the role of performance in this adjustment?

The New Indigenous

Our culture’s technological ambition is beginning to scale itself down and we are allowing orientation to the distinct needs of specific bioregions. Our urban-based civilization is accepting the invitation of gravity and settling back into the geography, which means understanding we are part of a complex system that might just be beyond our comprehension. We are part of a greater whole environmentally, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. Political and economic structures are diversifying into the varied contours and rhythms of a more-than-human earth. We are increasingly aware of each other’s concerns by communicating instantaneously and traveling easily. We are interconnected political, economic, and environmentally aware beings, increasingly cognizant of and sensitive to each other’s spiritual and religious practices, history and traditions. The working of earth’s animals, trees, elements, and the spirits/energy that inhabit this emerging consciousness are increasingly revealed. Collectively, we are gaining an increasing awareness of how we
humans are of one place, earth, and everything and everyone is linked and responsible to this place, earth.

Having a connection with a specific place on the earth is, I believe, a necessary starting point for a dialog between individuals and cultures. When people grounded in place awareness meet, there will be broad and fundamental implications for the evolving culture of the planet. Demonstration of responsible interaction with one's place, as conveyed through performance, is both ancient and new. We have long been becoming earthlings.

It is the challenge and responsibility of theatre and performance artist and scholars to recognize and help facilitate the re-emergence of a community of place. Dare to take a step into the wider field of community of place; educate yourself to consider the broader levels of reality, defy the narrowness and limits of the community of ideas. There is no recipe only awareness. I hope each person, in their own way, will acknowledge how best to become expressive, aware, and responsible to place.

Historical, social, political, and cultural circumstances have conspired to open a window of opportunity. An understanding of a community of place still exists, and has much to offer and teach. Beneath each of the African cultures examined in this volume, to a greater or lesser degree, lives a community of place. We all know a world culture is emerging, and with that a maturity and hopefully a patience to listen to and understand what other cultures can offer. From this we will discover what lives deeply within us, and the planet we collectively inhabit. The performance of Africa has much to offer our emerging world culture. African performance is a rich, overlooked resource, for looking at the world in an integrative way. Their performance is low tech, but a technology of survival on and with place, nonetheless. Theirs is and overlooked resource in the throes of turmoil and transformation, be-speaking wisdom to those who are patient and willing to listen.

When you read Performing Africa, read it with an understanding that it has a meaning beyond the expression of the obvious and immediate. Look more closely, look with your heart, and you will see and understand that it is also about a way of looking at, and being in, the world. Each of the essays is an expression of a specific moment in time. Each essay in this volume is also a mnemonic that describes a journey, revealing the scars, turmoil, and traumas of Africa's past and present.
Ultimately, beneath each essay, is how performance—based on and extrapolated from community of place traditions—has been resilient, preserving as it re-invents itself to respond to the needs of the present. From this example may all learn and be humbled.
Emandulo: Process and Performance in a Changing South Africa

In the spring of 1992 the Natal Performing Arts Council (NAPAC) in Durban, South Africa, invited me to develop a performance based on Zulu traditions with their recently formed Kwasa Group and their long established Loft Theatre. “Kwasa”, Zulu for “it dawns” was NAPAC’s attempt to address the changing needs of South Africa. Two weeks after white South Africa voted in favor of a nationwide referendum to allow non-whites the ability to vote, I began rehearsals for Emandulo.¹

NAPAC was one of the four state-funded Arts Councils in South Africa—the others being in Pretoria, Cape Town, and Bloemfontein—founded to provide the cultural needs of white South Africa with each council having a fully functioning theatre company, symphony orchestra, choir, ballet, and musical theatre company. NAPAC was located at the center of Durban, Africa’s busiest seaport, and was affectionately referred to by Durban whites as being “the last outpost of the British Empire.” The city itself retained a somewhat genteel, colonial air and a sense of being in a time warp somewhere between 1935 and 1992.

The Natal Performing Arts Council
NAPAC took up a full city block with its imposing, well-maintained and well-lit Tudor and Spanish-colonial facade. A seven story administrative building was adjacent to the performance facility. Also operated by NAPAC was a production building that included large scenic and costume shops, rehearsal halls, and a dormitory for some township-living Zulu employees. During apartheid NAPAC and the other Councils were seen as arrogant symbols of white South Africa’s cultural dominance over the black, “colored” (i.e. mixed race), and Asian (primarily east Indian) populations. Until the creation of Kwasa in 1990 the non-white population openly boycotted NAPAC, accusing the organization of being elitist, insensitive, and irrelevant. Under apartheid, NAPAC and the other state Art Councils were well funded, well equipped, and single-minded in offering Anglo-European performing arts.
NAPAC’s lobby was a marvel of glittering brass, reflective glass and tile, bronze sculpture, paintings, and textile art exclusively reflecting Western art tradition. A sea of rich, thick carpeting surrounded a large elegant staircase and led to a bar and café; a black or Indian security guard eyed everyone carefully and became alert when an unidentified black entered the double glass doors. Throughout the day, Zulu women, uniformly dressed in blue, constantly cleaning and re-cleaning the brass, and glass, and rug, served coffee and cakes, while white women sold tickets and looked after the gift store.

Although NAPAC had nearly 800 employees in the spring of 1992, I knew of no Zulus or people of color in positions of authority. Zulus almost exclusively served as menial laborers: drivers, janitorial workers, gofers, food service, stagehands, and guards. Blacks and whites were not allowed to sit in the same audience until the mid-1980s—matinees were established for non-whites—nor were black and white performers legally allowed to perform on the same stage. The repertory of NAPAC, as exemplified by the 1991-2 season, was overwhelmingly Anglo-European and included: Shakespeare, The Nutcracker, Beethoven, Verdi’s Falstaff, and My Fair Lady. Interestingly, and comparatively, the programming at NAPAC was not that much different from many major regional theatres in the United States.

Much as the Anglo-European cultural institutions in the United States have created—over the last 15 or so year—a panoply of outreach and minority programs so had NAPAC. The Kwasa Group was created late in 1990 as a well-meaning, politically shrewd, and culturally courageous program. Murray McGibbon, NAPAC’s Director of Drama, and Robert Cross, NAPAC’s General Director invited Themi Venturas, a white, second generation Greek-South African playwright, composer, director, and producer to develop a community outreach program. Themi was one of the organizers of the boycott of NAPAC that immediately preceded the creation of Kwasa. Themi brought to NAPAC Tiki Nxumalo, the Zulu composer and musician, and Debra Cairnduff, a feisty, energetic, and committed white theatre organizer. It was the first time in the fifty-five years history of NAPAC that the brass and glass doors of the minority, Anglo-European culture opened to let the majority community in. NAPAC was the first Arts Council to develop such a program.
Kwasa and the Loft Theatre
Before 1992 the Kwasa consisted primarily of Zulu performers from the outlying townships of Durban and the scattered rural areas of KwaZulu, a Zulu governed homeland in Natal. Two Kwasa group members were white, one colored—all, except two, under twenty-six years old. Kwasa’s mission was to provide a cultural outreach to all of the people of Natal not previously served by NAPAC. Kwasa provided a one-year training program for approximately twenty talented but untrained performers. Their training included classes in dance, production (costume, set, technical theatre), western-style acting, theatre management, and English (in response to the poor quality of education in Natal’s black schools). The teaching of theatre management was to develop not only artists but also producers and organizers who would someday return to their township or rural area to create and/or organize performance and theatre events. Kwasa sponsored weekend township festivals, organized with the help of the Kwasa students, which featured workshops, food, and local talent such as gospel singers, gumboot dancers, and traditional dancers. Before Kwasa, there was no state subsidized or assisted program for non-white theatre/performing art. Those wanting to become involved in theatre did so by working with small-impoveryed troupes or by pursuing formal university (Anglo-European) training. Few blacks or other people of color were included in the latter.

The Loft Theatre, the professional acting company of NAPAC, consisted of twelve actors all under 35 years old and all trained in western-style theatre and acting styles (predominantly at South African universities). Poorly paid, these young professionals were not too different from their American counterparts in training or career ambitions. Of the twelve Loft Theatre members two were colored, one Indian, and one Zulu, the rest white. Their 1992 season included an updated version of A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream, Winnie the Pooh, a South-Africanized version of Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, and Peter Pan.

After a year of Kwasa’s operation, members of the Loft Theatre and Kwasa Group came together for one production. The experiment had manifold motivations. Most prominent were: concern of ghettoizing Kwasa within NAPAC and a response to external political pressures to put more black performers on NAPAC stages. With NAPAC funding coming almost exclusively from national, provincial, and city govern-
ments, the specter of being cut entirely by an eventual black majority government was very real concern.

The Beginning
At the first meeting of the two groups, the Loft Theatre members were a little put off by working with the untrained and un-professional Kwasa Group. The Kwasa felt intimidated, not necessarily by the predominantly white Loft Company, but by the knowledge they supposedly had. The seven Loft members exuded an air of confidence and privilege. The Kwasa Group members were, with few exceptions, poorly educated, suffered from low self-esteem, struggled with English (their second or third language) and came from poor if not poverty level families.

The first week was a workshop and ensemble-building period, to give the two groups a common language and experience, to break down barriers-personal, emotional, racial, physical, and cultural-and to build confidence. Initially the workshop was a mix of theatre games and exercises that could be applied to any group. These included culturally non-specific trust exercises, body isolation exercises, partner awareness games, imagination building games, concentration and stillness exercises, stretching and warm-up exercises (including yoga), group encounter games, and movement/vocal exercises that led to partner work.

Within the first days of the workshop personalities began to emerge, revealing the human detail of forty years of apartheid. For most the games and exercises were new, challenging, and entrancing. Even a few yoga sessions went well. The Zulu and non-Zulu alike were open, if not hungry to learn; and soon an ease began to emerge between the groups, along with a willingness to work together. Among the Kwasa Group members there was a sort of awakening and excitement in making contact with their own individual feelings—something that was not a part of their experience. The Kwasa members began to realize they had potential, had something to say and that they, too, could become professional actors.

Performance Culture Explorations
The workshop then turned to more culturally exploratory and performance specific work. The performance and cultural heritage of the Zulu was to be our guide. Similar to my work with Alaska native performers at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the objective was not only to de-
velop actors and a performance, but also to evolve a performance method and style organically extrapolated from a rich indigenous performance tradition. The Zulu members of Kwasa carried within them a strong and vital folk culture of dance, song, drumming, and ceremonial traditions. The Zulu “rhythm of resistance”, denied free expression under a repressive political rule, lived on in performance.

Long after the destruction of the Zulu kingdom, when independent African power had become a distant memory, these dances continued to resonate in the minds of dockworkers, domestic servants, and farmhands with the glory of the Zulu heritage. Above all the songs articulated the most deep-seated desires of the expelled, dehumanized, and dispossessed black masses: the cry for land, the longing to regain the land the forefathers had lost to the white settlers. (Pratt 87)

That the Zulu maintained a strong link with their performance traditions became, ironically, a way for the colonizers to assert their power. White cultural expression was held up as superior to “primitive” Zulu performances. When the Zulus spoke in the language of performance they were forced either into a traditional expression formulated in the pre-contact era, or they had to adopt European forms. The former locked the Zulu into a syndrome of cultural exclusivity and isolation; the latter co-opted and imposed a form inherently incompatible to their worldview. As a way to control and exclude, Apartheid attempted to deny the evolution of a contemporary Zulu performance expression.

The Ritual Warm-Up
The ritual warm-up was the starting point in the identification and mining of Zulu performance culture, providing the riches to be evolved into a contemporary expression. Obvious during the workshop with the Kwasa/Loft groups was the strong sense of Zulu performance tradition living within each of the Zulu members. Recognized also was the conscious perception of their own performance tradition (western and Zulu) as being formalized, rigid and somehow a sacred holder of cultural tradition. This sensibility was understandable given the political and cultural identity and resistance the performance tradition had incorporated and encoded since colonization. The continuance of the militaristic and regimented style of Zulu dance and song, and use of traditional shields and weapons, enforce the impression of suppressed but ever present identity and resistance through performance. The
warm-up, however, was a way to circumvent the Zulu’s own rigid perception of their performance tradition, to make the performers available to a larger range of performance expression and, in turn, share the performance with others. The intent was to guide the Zulu to the resources living within them and demonstrate that they knew much and had much to offer. For the non-Zulu participants the intent was to present an alternative performance language—a Zulu performance language.

The warm-up, like Zulu performance, began with the beat: the beat of the Zulu people, their rhythmic interpretation of their existence on their part of the earth. The relationship between the land, animals, ancestors, and its people was expressed and held in their unique rhythm. Like a heartbeat, the spirit that gave life was sustained by its function with each existing as an expression of the other. Traditional Zulu goat-skin drums were purchased and Tiki Nxumalo joined our project as musical director. With the assistance of three of the Zulu men, Tiki laid down a fundamental Zulu 4/4 dance beat. At first a series of rhythm exercises were performed to explore the traditional Zulu rhythm in every part of the body, beginning with the forehead and working down to the toes. The body part/rhythm isolation exercises were important for the Zulu to break their habitual way of interpreting their own traditional rhythm. For the non-Zulus it was an accessible way of being introduced to the physically forbidding, and sometimes militarized regimented Zulu rhythm/movement. In traditional dance the Zulu tend to concentrate the rhythm expression in their lower body and leg-relying on hip or powerful stomping movements—leaving the upper body less expressive or secondary. At issue with the Zulu participants was the exploring and development of expressiveness (using rhythm as inspiration and unifier) in subtle ways and places like the eyes, mouth, and fingers. After a series of rhythm isolation exercises, the traditional Zulu rhythm became for the group a focusing point—the rhythm serving as a catalyst for an infinite variety of expressions.

Three “Traditional” Zulu Movements
To begin work on the ritual warm-up, each of the twenty-seven Zulu and non-Zulu participants were allowed only five minutes to react to the following instructions: “Present three traditional Zulu movements—whatever you think that is—there was no right or wrong answer”. After the five-minute period each person presented his movements to the
group. I deliberately chose a few of the white Loft actors to give their presentations first. As expected the Loft members gave a commendable but stilted impression of Zulu lifestyles, showing how little they really understood the Zulus and their culture—essentially, I set them up. When it came time for the Zulus to give their presentations they were hesitant. Some Zulus thought they misunderstood the assignment because they did not recognize their own culture expressed by the white performers. I had to prod the suddenly shy Kwasa members to present their assignment. Then something remarkable happened. A Kwasa member, Senele Ndlovu, came to the center of the circle sheepishly to present a few tentative moves. Suddenly other Zulus began a call-response, Senele replied with a strong dance gesture and the group came to life. Then, Bongekile Ndaba, a Zulu woman, came out singing, joined Senele to present her movements, and was joined soon after by Nora Msani. At this point a few of the men started beating a simple Zulu rhythm on the floor as a few others ran to get goat skin drums and bring them to the circle’s edge. The other Zulus responded to the spontaneous combustion, each in turn presenting fragment improvisations of Zulu dance and mimetic representations of daily Zulu life. All of the movements were in time to the traditional beat. They included women washing clothes at a stream, carrying water on their heads, men brandishing spears, digging, herding animals, courting, falling in love, killing traditional movements mingled with traditional dance. A courting and marriage vignette spontaneously evolved with a cast of characters entering the situation as the scenario required. Benefit Nzimande took the role of caller, prodding the other Zulus to join in.

Without premeditation, a scenario developed. Thabani Sibwasi became a stern Zulu father, Eric Sibiya the obsequious, would-be lover requesting Patricia Majapelo’s hand. Others started singing, whistling with recognition, answering for the character, and then chanting in response to Thabani’s questions and thoughts. The marriage proposal evolved into a massive dance improvisation with the non-Zulus invited to participate. Freely interactive, the presentation went on for nearly an hour. The familiar traditional Zulu rhythm drove and informed each movement and sound. The non-Zulus, including myself, at first sat stunned by the force of this sudden explosion of expression. From that moment forward, there was amongst the non-Zulus in the group, anew found appreciation and respect. For the Zulus a vital link was made be-
tween theatre and their traditional performance culture in their minds and bodies traditional dance and theatre expressions were no longer mutually exclusive, and they realized that they had a valuable contribution to offer the emerging ensemble.

**Process as Method and Metaphor**

The group was to become an erstwhile tribe, and the ritual warm-up was to be its physical, vocal, and cultural gathering point—a ritual that bound them together within a tradition greater than themselves. Group members were asked to repeat and explain their movements, each was called upon to compromise, adjust, make combinations and decide on sequences that best served the group’s objectives. In keeping with an oral tradition sensibility, no written notation was allowed—each person had to remember each of the agreed movements, beats, and songs that were put into place. Discussion and debate, a vital step forward in the ensemble building process, was encouraged and took center stage.

The most vocal disagreement came from several Zulu men who refused to do any women’s dance steps, which included a coming of age snake dance that Zulu women perform. Kenneth Khambule, a tall, powerfully built Zulu, became visibly upset: “Zulu men do not do women’s dances! Zulu men do not drink ljuba (beer) together with women and they do not do women’s dances either. That was not what we do traditionally”. The Zulu women became quiet and suddenly uneasy, saying nothing in response until Jennifer Woodburne, a white Loft member, strongly disagreed with Kenneth. She argued that it was “only an exercise and that it didn’t matter about the tradition. We are creating a new tradition.” Kenneth replied, “It did matter.” The issue of sexism was then raised; and the discussion, then, led to how sexism and a tradition of enforced chauvinism parallel the experience of apartheid. The facial expressions and subsequent words of the Zulu men revealed that they had never connected the issue of sexism and racism.

It was an important day in the development of the group. That day the group made an agreement to freely talk about any subject or issue they felt was important; they agreed that discussion was part of the process. The discussion of racism and sexism marked the breaking of an important barrier and would set a tone for all our subsequent work. Two of the most sensitive issues had been broached, while at the same time, the first step in the transformation of Zulu performance culture
from a traditional to contemporary context had taken place. With the women’s movements and the group’s songs incorporated, both sexist and traditional barriers were now actively breached. Initially, however, some of the Zulu men exaggerated and made fun of the disputed women’s movements, but the demonstration of resistance soon faded.

**Becoming an Ensemble**
The ritual warm-up, like the holistic herder/gatherer/horticultural Zulu worldview that it was inspired by, functioned on many levels. 1) It established and, was a daily validation of, the performance language we were asserting—an invigorated dictionary of movements-rhythms-sounds. 2) The Ritual Warm-up became a methodological model and living example of how to participate creatively with traditional Zulu performance culture. 3) It exercised traditional Zulu movements-rhythms-sounds and thereby liberated them from the rigid context of traditional Zulu dance-song-drumming, demonstrating that new combinations were possible and that all ensemble members (Zulu and non-Zulu) could actively participate with a rich performance language. The ritual warm-up laid the foundation from which to create the project’s ultimate objective—the performance of *Emandulo*.

**The Story of Umshayandlela**
After reading scores of Zulu stories, legends, and myths, one simple story revealed itself as the one to focus and organize the project. The strong narrative of the story “Kenelinda” or “Umshayandlela” as it was known in Zulu, offered interpretative latitude as it provided sufficient work and challenge for twenty-eight performers. At the end of the first week, in keeping with the Zulu story telling tradition, I narrated the story to the assembled group. A brief version of the story is as follows,

In the golden era of Zululand there lived a man named Thulwane, who had a herd of many cows. Next to his son, Fana, they were nearest to his heart of all his possessions. Among them there was one more precious than the rest, her name was Umshayandlela. No matter how dry the grass, or fierce the winter, she remained fat with her milk gushing forth at milking time. Never had a cow of such size and beauty been known in all the land. The meat from such a cow, thought all the tribes around, could not fail to be both soft and good; and, in turn, make them both strong and good to look upon. Many tried to buy Umshayandlela by honest means, but Thulwane would not part with her. And over the years a great love had developed between the cow and the boy. Fana would sing to Umshayandlela; and she grew to love his voice, acknowledging no other master.
One day two fierce warriors with cruel eyes and gleaming spears came to Fana on the faraway grazing lands and demanded his beloved Umshayandlela. Fana knew that resistance would be useless. What could a small defenseless boy do against two such wicked spears? ‘Take her,’ he said after a pause, ‘you have greater strength than I.’ The two warriors tried to take away the prize cow, but she would not move. In anger they turned threatening to Fana who replied, ‘I will make her move.’ Fana put his arms around the cow’s neck and sang softly into her ear. With a sorrowful look at her little master, Umshayandlela allowed the thieves to drive her away. ‘The voice she obeys must go with her’ laughed the warriors, and so they drove Fana behind the cow with their sharp spears. When they reached a swiftly flowing river Umshayandlela would not cross until Fana again sang to the cow. When they reached the captors’ home the warriors tied Umshayandlela to a tree and raised their spears to stab her in the heart. But their newly sharpened spears refused to pierce the skin. Fana, not wanting the cow to suffer, sang to Umshayandlela and the spears went in, and the cow fell down and died. Sharp knives were produced, but the knives refused to cut the skin, and again Fana had to sing to the dead cow before the knives would go in. So Umshayandlela was skinned and all the meat cut up for roasting. When all was ready, the thieves and their kin gathered around to eat, but they could not bite the meat because it stuck in their teeth like stone. In anger they turned to Fana to kill him. To save himself his clear young voice rose once more to sing to the flesh of Umshayandlela. The flesh became tender and all the thieves ate to their hearts’ content. When nothing was left but skin and well-picked bones, all settled down to sleep.

As the thieves slept an old woman came to Fana and whispered into his ear, ‘My child, you are young. I once had one like you, and I would not have you die. These men are cannibals, and when hunger strikes again, you will be their meat. Go now and with haste while yet they sleep!’ But Fana replied: ‘I cannot leave here without Umshayandlela.’ Then gather her up and call to her and she will go with you,’ said the old woman. Silently Fana gathered up all the clean-picked bones, and arranged them on the bloody skin in their place. He then sang softly to the bones. One by one the skin and bones shuddered and each of the limbs jerked back to life and then, slowly, she was able to raise herself. Fana encouraged Umshayandlela, calling to her ‘Woza (come), Umshayandlela, Woza!’ Breath filled Umshayandlela’s lungs again and the boy and his cow slipped into the moonlit forest.

The next morning, as Thulwane was searching the distance with sad and troubled eyes, he gave a shout of joy as he saw two figures side by side, and heard Fana’s clear young voice, breaking on the early morning stillness, singing as his father never heard him sing before, ‘See, we are home, oh Umshayandlela!’ (Savory 42-46)

The Evolution of Umshayandlela into Emandulo

Most of the Zulus had known, or had childhood recollections of the story, yet they asked many questions. Patrick Sibwasi wanted to know why Fana, the herd boy gave Umshayandlela away so easily. I said that it was probably for the same reason that the Zulu people surrendered to the British and the Afrikaners. Fana, like the Zulu people, were outnumbered and overpowered and had little choice and could no longer watch the suffering. With that several heads bowed; and it became very difficult for me to speak for the hurt that was suddenly in the air. I tried
to explain that Umshayandlela was the story of all South Africa’s people and that all were returning home with Umshayandlela after a long, traumatic journey.

What ensued was a two-day sit-down work session with the ensemble to determine collectively what the story meant and how it should be performed. Gradually the story of Umshayandlela was transformed into an allegory of repression, exploitation, resistance, and cultural reaffirmation. Political and cultural interpolations sprang from the fertile soil of the legend and served as an inspiration and a loose, guiding plot.

The Tree Person Tells the Story
It was decided that the story was to be told by the Tree Person, Uhlanga LweZizw, “Reed of all nations.” This ancient and wise spirit was said to live in certain acacia trees or in huge hollow reeds and connects past, present, and future. The tree was Emandulo, meaning the’ ancient one’ in Zulu; the ensemble itself are seekers of information from this ancient tree spirit that make an offering of their performance to an ancient elder. Yisa Gasa, a gentle, self-effacing Zulu from a rural area, developed the character of the contemporary Zulu who was led through the story of Umshayandlela. It was decided that Yisa, a Kwasa member, should play himself and be one of the ushers seating the audience as they enter the theatre—a job that Yisa had performed for income. Costumed in white shirt, bow tie, and black tuxedo pants, he would be both an usher and a symbol of western imposed culture and servitude. Yisa would be an Everyman going on the journey of the story told by the Tree Person. The Tree Person, played by Thabani Tshanini, would draw Yisa into the story and, in so doing, call up the spirits of his ancestors.

The Shades
The first called by the Tree Person were the shades—ancient spirits said to be everywhere, and able to guide, hinder, or assist human events. They are the ancestors of the Zulu people (Berglund 78-79). Five of the Shades were whites or colored: Jeremy Blackburn, Leila Henriques, Cindy Sampson, Jennifer Woodburne and Griselda Hunt; three were Zulu: Eric Sibiya, Rasta Hadebe, and Phumelephi Ndlovu. Zulus believe that ancestral shades are either white (the spirit world being the opposite of the human world), or of indefinite color; for this reason, the appearance of the first white people in Southern Africa was thought to be
somehow spiritually sent or connected with another world. In performance the shades—black and white cast members—covered their entire bodies in a white clay (traditionally used by Zulu diviners) with black and red markings specific to their Shade character. The individual markings changed and evolved during the month-long performance run of *Eman
dulo* to reflect character and performer evolution. The guidelines for the markings, however, were required to represent simultaneously death, birth, and life (Bryant 510).

The interplay between historical, mythological, and contemporary issues was discussed with Zulu ensemble members telling stories passed on by from elders and relatives. Some revealed a deep-seated belief in the Shades—for the rural Zulus it was a statement of their reality, for the urban and township Zulu it was a rediscovery, and for the non-Zulus it was a re-imagining of their own reality. The inclusion of the shades as active participants in the performance was appropriate and reflective of a re-emerging spiritual sensibility. The Shades represented, “an element of morality, an element of natural processes, and an element of mystical processes (Ngubane 131). During performance the shades intermingled with the performance and the audience, variously being mischief-makers, witnesses, mourners, manipulators, musicians, commentators, celebrants, combatants, stage helpers, and spirit helpers. In performance the shades balanced and counter-balanced sorcery, outside evils, life crises, and incidental environmental dangers. That four white people would play shades was discussed and it was agreed that it created no difficulty. The first men to walk the earth were not like the people of today:

They all looked exactly alike—golden-eyed, hairless, with skin as red as Africa’s plains. In those days there were no black-skinned or dark brown people, no Pygmies, no Bushmen, no Hottentots, no long-bearded Arabic, no white men. The splitting up of humanity into different races came much later, through the wickedness of men themselves. (Mutwa 6)

**The Creation of Umshayandlela**

The wedding of the Lord of the Sky and Earth Mother begets Umshayandlela, the divine cow—symbol for the fertility and spirit of the Zulu land and the life provided by that land. Four traditional Zulu knob sticks (traditional war clubs the white government had banned as weapons) were brought out by the shades to become the symbolic legs of
Umshayandlela. Four Zulu men performed the legs of the cow by melding traditional dance with narrative movement and are joined by the head and tail of Umshayandlela, performed by two Zulu women. The hind legs were a symbol of the land; the front legs represent its strength; the head symbolizing understanding and wisdom; and the tail was the spirit of the land to sweep across it (Berglund 661). Each part had a distinct personality, and could separate from the whole to dance, sing, talk and act up, but the meaning, strength and identity of Umshayandlela existed only when the cow functioned as a whole. For the Zulu, traditionally herders and gatherers, the cow already enjoyed important cultural respect, elevating Umshayandlela to a mythical level was considered an organic theatricalization. An enormous cloth, with the shape and markings of a cow skin, would serve as transformable ground cloth—a symbolic representation of Zululand—on which the action took place.

The Buyers
Those that tried to buy Umshayandlela in the original story were symbolically transformed into those that threatened Zululand. Four women came to bid for the cow, each in turn arguing to the Lord of the Sky and the Earth Mother that they needed the cow most and would treat it best. Personified were the four major historical combatants for traditional Zululand: the British, the Afrikaner, the Zulu, and the Xhosa. Each was to be dressed in their culture’s clothing of the 1880s—an era of major political and cultural transformation. Each woman, speaking in her native language, would offer gifts and songs to the Lord of the Sky and the Earth Mother—that they were women suggested that the four cultures came benignly at first. All were selfish and petty, alien to the intent of the Lord of the Sky and Earth. The buyers disrupt the balance that typified the world preceding their intrusion. For their disruption of the natural order, they are chased away by the angry thunder of the Lord of the Sky.

The group’s insistence that the Zulu and Xhosa buyers be included surprised me. Their acceptance came in part with recognition that both Zulu and Xhosa tribes could be as petty, destructive, and exploitative as the British and Afrikaners (other discussion considerations included east Indians and Jews). The inclusion of the Zulu and Xhosa as poten-
ially disruptive forces, pushed the interpretation of the story out of the narrow, and potentially didactic, confines of racial exploitation.

The recognition that the British, Afrikaner, Zulu, and Xhosa were all competing for the same land and were willing to fight over it was historically and politically relevant, if not obvious. That all four were to be refused as unworthy indicated that the ensemble was urging the performance to see beyond political, cultural, and racial issues to deal with the more essential issue of ecological or spirit world responsibility. In traditional Zulu belief that one does not simply take possession of something, it was instead considered a gift that comes for a reason and with reciprocal obligations. A balance must be maintained. The group reasoned that, instead of recognizing their obligations, Buyers had instead aimed to possess Umshayandlela for selfish purposes. Within the traditional Zulu worldview, to possess without recognition of one’s obligations was evil.

Fana the Herd Boy
The cowherd boy, Fana, was transformed from a de facto inheritor (as in the original story) of the cow/land into a lonely searcher. The loneliness of humble Fana was met by the loneliness of the cautious Umshayandlela. Fana must prove himself by way of a dance demonstration and call-response song. The song that Fana sings portrays his genuine humility and generosity and, so, Umshayandlela is won over. The casting of a Kwasa member, Gavin Starkey, as Fana, aided in broadening the cross racial cultural significance of the performance. Gavin was raised in KwaZulu and was fluent in Zulu, but unlike other Zulu Kwasa members was self-confident, well educated and well spoken. Being of Zulu and Portuguese ancestry, Gavin was living in both Zulu and western cultures. Like most colored in South Africa he was of neither and of both cultures simultaneously. Observing the compatibility of Umshayandlela and Fana, the Lord of the Sky and the Earth Mother give Fana the cow with their ritual blessings. As the story progresses, Umshayandlela and Fana became mutually inter-dependent partners. To demonstrate their relationship, a traditionally inspired Zulu song with multiple harmonies was developed. The song and its rhythms linked Umshayandlela and Fana and, then, grew in complexity of emotion to mirror their evolving relationship.
**The Warriors**

The Warriors of the original story were evolved from the vague and anonymous to the particular. In keeping with the interpolated point-of-view of the Zulu spirit world, a Zulu “sangoma” (witch doctor) was introduced into the story. By way of evil magic, the sangoma conjures up a Zulu warrior, a British soldier, an Afrikaner Boer, and two Christian missionaries. All of these characters were dressed in costumes of the colonial era. Like the Buyers, the Warriors were alien evil spirits who wanted to take possession of the cow/land. In this way the military and political conflicts that have plagued South Africa were put into a Zulu spirit world context—in the traditional Zulu worldview. Kenneth Khambule, at his insistence, played the Zulu sangoma; I later discovered that he was the grandson of a powerful sangoma. The Zulu, Brit, and Boer were the husbands of the women who earlier attempted to buy Umshayandlela. When the alien Warriors meet with the cow parts they immediately catechize, educate, and control the cow parts and make servants of them. The Afrikaner, played by the Indian Loft member, Annesh Ramklown, whips discipline, obedience, and the hegemonic Afrikaans language into the cow limbs. The head and tail of the cow are taught hymns and Christian behavior. The Brit and Zulu Warrior, played by the Loft’s Robert Fridjhon and Kwasa’s Senele Ndlovu, respectively, make political deals on how Umshayandlela was to be divided—the Zulu gets the short end of the deal. Yisa and Fana are helpless. In keeping with the original story the powerless Fana sings to the suffering Umshayandlela and the cow was led symbolically across the waters to a new and strange land, traveling from the tribal to the colonial world. The cow parts sing, talk, and cry as they represent both allegorical and very human fates.

Arriving at the new land each of the warriors attempts to kill Umshayandlela but cannot because it was protected by the Shades. Umshayandlela, however, was beaten and degraded until Fana can stand to watch no more. Fana sings, the Shades relax their protection, and the cow replies mournfully as it dies. The sacred meat cannot be cut by the Warriors because it is protected by the Shades. As in the original story, Fana sings to the dead animal (and allegorically to the Zulu nation) as it was being kicked, pulled, and abused. The Shades respond to the will of Fana and allow the cow parts to be pulled apart. The warriors next go into a fit of anger when they cannot eat the cow parts, the meat being
hard to their bite. Again, Fana sings to the cow and the warriors celebrate their victory with dance and song.

The bodies of the Umshayandlela parts are hung variously across railings; some are hoisted into the air to hang lifeless to suggest, simultaneously, both animal flesh and contemporary torture room. Each of the warriors, the missionary and Sangoma, with the assistance of the wives, sings a traditional Zulu sacrifice song as they mark the inert cow part/bodies with the vivid colors of the South African flag. The wife of the British soldier, meanwhile, takes posed photos of the warriors as they stand proudly next to their colonial conquest. When the warrior group leaves, there was a mournful stillness as the Shades, Fana, and Yisa remove the bodies from their degradation. The lifeless and brutalized cow part bodies are laid side by side by Yisa, Fana, and the Shades. The idea for this scene was inspired by a newspaper photo that appeared the day of this scene’s discussion—similarly depicted were unclaimed black bodies, causalities of recent township violence.

Both Fana and Yisa sing to mourn Umshayandlela, and as their mourning becomes stronger, a faint reply was heard. The songs of Yisa, the contemporary Zulu, and Fana, the mythological Zulu, combine to exhort Umshayandlela to return to life: “Woza (come), Umshayandlela, Woza!” The same song that marked Umshayandlela’s death was sung to celebrate her re-birth. Though battered, scarred, and having passed through a long and bloody story, the cow reassembles with a song and dance that carries her, Fana, and Yisa home to a new South Africa.

The story comes full circle and a balance, having been disrupted and challenged, was restored. Like the indiki possessions of the early twentieth century, the story and possession of Fana and Umshayandlela by evil aliens was transformed from potential destruction into a journey of spiritual and cultural growth. Yisa, the contemporary Zulu, has likewise been empowered by his experience (Ngubane 148-49).

Performance Outline and Development
With most roles cast during the discussion phase, the ensemble began at the beginning of the story and worked through each scene. The outline work began with Yisa awakening Thabani Tshanini (the Tree Person); both Thabani and Yisa were free to perform the scene in whatever way they deemed appropriate. Both men pulled extensively from their traditional Zulu dance/song background. After each interpretation, the
ensemble would comment and offer suggestions on how to clarify the scene—what to cut, add, and improve. My role as director became that of a pro-active guide and interviewer; what I offered was my experience in organizing and shaping their ideas and feelings into a theatrical expression.

Adjustments were incorporated, until the outline for the first scene was understood and agreed on a song for the calling of the Shades, for example, was identified and was subsequently roughed out collectively with a group of five responsible for the song's completion. In turn each scene was performed extemporaneously with the ensemble as critic, playwright, and interested participant. Over a period of two days, the entire story was given a performance outline. Some of the outlined scenes had more detail than others—some scenes, because of a lack of strong plot motive, were noted but deliberately left vague. The reality of giving performance tangibility to a formerly abstract story enlightened the ensemble not only to its creative potential (individually and collectively), but to a creative process as well. The story outline was something tactile, participatory, and theirs. There was, and would be, no written record of the outline or performance.

Daily Events
The next task was to add muscle and flesh. Given the large group and limited (six weeks) development/rehearsal time, creative groups consisting of five to ten people were assigned specific tasks. A typical day would start with a presentation of the announcements, then the day's objectives, organization of events, and assignment of creative groups. The process was not only the preparing of a performance; it was concurrently a model in cultural worker methodology.

Each day a new leader and drummers were chosen for the warm-up, to encourage leadership and drumming experiences for all involved—for the Zulu to lead the non-Zulus, for women to drum (traditionally a male responsibility), and for non-Zulus to lead and drum. The work would then move directly into a theatre game or exercise that addressed current rehearsal needs or training issues.

As confidence of the group members grew, personal issues increasingly found their way into our discussions. The reality of daily life in a country undergoing tumultuous social change could not be kept from the rehearsal hall. Unforeseen events would become incorporated into
the process, informing the performance development. Kenneth Kambule, for instance, revealed old scars of a whipping on his back. When I asked him about the marks his reply was: “It was nothing, man, nothing.” He resisted my pressure to talk about it, but a week later, during a discussion about the Warrior scene and how symbolically and literally the Afrikaner uses a whip, Kenneth told the circled group how, when 13 years old, he was beaten while watching a demonstration in his township. Because he was big for his age, the police decided to make an example of him. He was whipped and then spent two weeks in jail along with some sixty other black youths. His family did not know if he was dead or alive.

The story was familiar to all, and especially painful for some. There was a long mourning-like silence and some tears. Nodding their heads with understanding, some of the other Zulu men began talking about their wounds—physical, emotional, and spiritual. For an hour, what was previously suffered in silence was spoken, often for the first time, revealing what they had come to live with as a normal part of their existence. Nearly every Zulu male and half the Zulu women had been arrested, beaten, or at some point held by the police. Policemen, it should be noted, were often Zulu. As the group talked, a connection was made between their experience and the necessity of performing that experience. They all had stories of hurt and loss to tell, and Emandulo was one of them. The entire group, black, colored, Indian, and white, to a greater or lesser degree, were wounded by what they had lived through. Thereafter the process of performance became, in its way, a process of grieving, understanding, and healing.

The Creative Group Process
Creative groups, once assigned, went to other rooms where individuals took responsibility for themselves and their groups. Initially the groups served fundamental character and story needs. For example, the Shades worked in isolation for several days developing their individual and group characteristics. Ethnographic and oral history records were distributed and combined with personal story telling to provide a point of creative departure by which Shade movements, vocalizations, songs, attitudes, and personalities evolved.

The six Umshayandlela performers and Fana established a sophisticated dance and song relationship inspired by Zulu traditional perform-
ance. The Warriors group defined their entrance scene, establishing a distinct movement and vocal/language for each character. They established a hegemonic hierarchy, which became a complex current beneath the Warrior’s relationship towards one another and the story. The Buyer group established who they were, what they thought of one another, and what gifts and songs they offered. The Lord of the Sky, Earth Mother, Yisa, and Tree Person, initially composed a creative group that developed the language and actions for the opening scenes. At the end of each day (or every second or third day) each group would give a presentation: a dance, a new song, a scene, a recently written speech or dialogue, or simply the explaining of a scene’s action. Presentations were always reviewed, discussed, and encouraged, and were vital steps towards building performance confidence and mastery. The excitement of creativity palpable, and, together with a healthy competitiveness, made the group anticipate subsequent assignments.

In this atmosphere anything became fodder for development. On one occasion three Zulu men took a twenty-minute break when only a ten-minute break was given. When the latecomers arrived with soda cans in hand, I scolded them for keeping the group waiting. They apologized; but fifteen minutes into the work, I sensed something was wrong. Patricia Majapelo explained: “We don’t like it when you yell at us. Too many white men have yelled at us.” Though Patricia was not among the three, and though I did not consider my voice anything but firm and business-like and only directed to the three, she and other Zulus were adversely affected by it. Underlying the issue of discipline was their fear of betrayal: “It was like you don’t like black people,’ they said, ‘and think we are lazy, stupid and not as good as white people.” They were voicing all the unspoken self-doubts and fears institutionalized by apartheid.

As individual personalities, talents, and leadership ability emerged so did the composition of the creative groups. Yisa, an accomplished traditional dancer, worked with the Shades on their dance; Prince Mathe, Benefit Nzimande, and Thabani Sibwasi, who were Umshayandla performers, worked with the Warriors as drummers and choreographers. Shades, and non-Zulu Loft members, Lelia Henriquees, Jennifer Woodburne, and Cindy Sampson, worked with the buyers to develop western-style acting and singing skills. They were learning how to learn, and teaching one another. The musical director, Tiki Nxumalo, and I
would move between the various creative groups to observe or work with the groups according to their request. Many times such sessions would become training sessions in drumming, song, dance, or acting. Often these sessions would deal more with issues of conflict resolution, time management, or group organization, rather than performance development.

**Outside Events**

Three weeks into rehearsals, one to three Kwasa members were absent daily. They were students and, thus, not paid. Consequently many had difficulty paying for transport to and from the Umlazi or Claremont townships where many of them lived. These townships (which were essentially established as ghettos for blacks) were ten to fifteen miles from NAPAC and some days they simply did not have transport money. On other occasions Kwasa members would come in rattled by an incident of random violence, such as the shooting of trains by out-of-town workers (away from family and homes) that lived in hostels. Some of the violence was inspired by the conflict between the ANC and Inkarta, the Zulu political organization. One day Lindalani Nzimande was visibly shaken after bullets had whizzed by him on his train ride from home—several workers had fired randomly at the train, killing two people. When rehearsals lasted until 5 p.m. (it became dark at about 5:30 p.m.), several Kwasa members would hurry to leave in order to protect their homes and family from being burned and/or looted by either of the political factions or hoodlums that preyed on unprotected homes. During the second week of Emandulo’s performance run, the brother of Benefit Nzimande, one of the Umshayandlela performers, was killed.

Issues and events of the outside political reality blended with the images and ideas of the play. In one instance the Kwasa Group blacks were told by the guard/doorman to enter by the stage door, not the posh main entrance that the Loft Theatre members used. A protest was raised with the administration, and then the lobby became accessible to the Kwasa members. One of many small victories.

In the NAPAC cafeteria a subsidized lunch could be had for less than one dollar. But many Kwasa could not even afford a cup of tea. Some would lie on their stomachs at an outdoor park “because then the hunger pains are not so bad.” Almost daily, four or five Kwasa members would ask the Zulu grill woman for ten cents worth of white bread and
gravy, or they would eat table leftovers. The Loft members and I got in the habit of giving them food or money. Sometimes, embarrassed by their need, some of the students would avoid me at lunch so I would not feel forced into giving them money. One day Patrick and Linqelani were in the cafeteria with a hungry look; I wanted to give them some money, but they refused, saying they were not hungry. When I insisted, they relented, and as Patrick put his hand out to receive the coins, I noticed a battered and out-of-date library book under his arm: *A Practical Guide to Theatre*. I asked him about the book, he answered: “I want to do a theatre group in my township.”

We lobbied the administration on the Kwasa’s behalf. NAPAC was being cruelly insensitive and made no connection between a white organization making money off the labor of black performers that were going hungry, and the historical circumstances of white South Africans profiting from the sweat of the black. While the administration’s resistance was an example of an institutionalized mind set, what aggravated the irony was that NAPAC was then spending nearly a million rand (approximately 300,000 US dollars) on a superficial and over-produced musical theatre production based on the music of the rock group *Queen*—escapist theatre pandering to the white audiences. Yet Kwasa was often promoted as the most visible indication of NAPAC’s change. When a four million rand emergency grant was made to NAPAC from Durban City Council, NAPAC director Robert Cross stated on the front page of the *Natal Mercury*, Durban’s largest daily newspaper, that he was “Delighted...not only will this save our permanent companies for another year, Kwasa—our community program aimed at making performing arts a way of life for all in the region—will be able to grow as we had hoped and planned” (*Natal Mercury*, 10 May 1992). Once the contradictions of the Kwasa situation were pointed out to the liberal thinking Mr. Cross, he apologized for the insensitivity and provided one full meal a day for all the Kwasa members for the duration of *Emandulo*’s performance run.

During this time in rehearsal, both Loft and Kwasa members had difficulty personalizing their work. An unconscious barrier made it difficult for them to take their work to the next imaginative level.

After some frustration, we discussed the possible causes of the problem. Both Zulu and non-Zulu cited the cause as being how they were raised and educated. A heavily structured educational system was in
turn re-enforced by asocial order that discouraged going beyond instructions—another indelible effect of apartheid.

The ensemble felt a profound sense of sadness, hurt, and helplessness. It was like discovering that one was infected by a disease.

**Into Performance**

The performance started with an Everyman being pulled into his Zulu mythology. The performance followed a path of myth, from the origins of the Zulu cosmos, to the creating of the land/Umshayandlela; then to its habitation and befriending by Fana; and then to its possession and abuse. Delivering a similar effect was the metaphoric significance of the performance accumulating until it abruptly ceased to be theatre, suddenly transforming into reality, with its story line remaining continuous; and the death scene, the mourning song and the subsequent song imploring resurrection like a synapse between performance and reality, which Emandulo’s subsequent public performances only made stronger. The performance’s metaphoric mourning became a public mourning; without consciously working for it, the performance had organically found a catharsis. The acceptance of Umshayandlela’s death was followed by the imploring demand of Fana: “Woza, Umshayandlela! Woza!” Umshayandlela rose again into a celebration of rebirth, demonstrating the release of a past and the hope for a healed South Africa.

**Into the Theatre**

Our performance space, the Loft Theatre, was a 200-seat black box theatre. The seating was arranged in the round to convey the sense of community and traditional performance. To complement the feel of community, comfort, and intimacy, and to avoid the implied structured formality of chairs, the first two rows of the seating platforms were laid with Zulu grass mats. The stage area was laid thick with dry grass and leaves-typical of rural Zululand. Though a large production staff was assigned to Emandulo, many production elements had been left undone at the time of move-in—much of the work and production organization falling on the shoulders of the talented and dedicated set and costume designer, Andrew Donald.

NAPAC showed itself to be the state run bureaucracy it was, which meant many meetings, much paperwork, countless departments, and a large number of people called “Organizers.” It all seemed like a facade
of normalcy from a bygone time when the life and times of South Africa had a very different order. My dismay about the production organization prompted Jennifer Woodburne to comment: “Things at NAPAC are just like things in South Africa, everything is slowly falling apart.” Morale among the general staff at NAPAC was running very low; the staff was becoming increasingly anxious about personal and career survival within an institution and a country that was in the beginning stages of devolution and many unknowns. Many cutbacks were rumored; several mass meetings were held to allay employee fears that NAPAC was imminently closing. As I left NAPAC, the black workers were planning a work “stay away” in protest of low wages. On our first day in the theatre, some Kwasa actors were late because of renewed violence and roadblocks in the townships. Walking to the theatre one day, I watched a thousand or so Zulus demonstrating and doing “toi toi” warrior chants down a main business street, protesting the slow, divisive progress of those working for a new constitution. The tropical heat added to an ‘on edge’ atmosphere from which the theatre was not immune.

Female Body as Political Battlefield
A controversy arose over which of the women should go bare breasted. Unmarried Zulu women were at ease with being bare breasted—a widely accepted traditional practice. However, the white women playing the Shades had several doubts and could not reach a consensus. It was agreed that all had to go bare breasted (wearing body paint and clay) or none at all. The concern was how the bare breasts of white women might sensationalize and detract from the intent of the performance. The bare breasts of white women in public were viewed as a political issue. The white female body had been historically claimed as sacred and protected since the arrival of the first white female Calvinists that colonized South Africa. Some popular theories about the development and institutionalizing of racism in South Africa suggest that that motivation may have evolved from the need to separate and protect white women from black men. This paradigm of segregation conveniently re-enforced a Calvinistically inspired sexism that afforded white men a clearly defined social role of dominating protector.

Racism and the laws of apartheid defined the roles of both blacks and white women, securing white male autonomy and authority in both
domestic and public realms. It was not until 1992 that soft porn became legal in South Africa. Ultimately the Shade women, in agreement with the rest of the cast, felt that uninhibited expression of the white female body was a worthy fight but would muddy the intent and expression of Emandulo, reducing, it was feared, the performance into a sensation about white breasts. Only Norah Msani, the Zulu woman playing the head of Umshayandlela, would go bare breasted during the performance—her bare breast not being politically controversial and, given her role, symbolic of the nurturing cow. The decision that only Nora and no white woman go bare breasted was ultimately decided less on the grounds of racial consideration and more in terms of artistic context and expression. As it turned out, Nora’s bare breasts—covered with black and white clay to suggest the markings of a cow—were appropriate and natural to her role.

“Why things must change”

A heated discussion arose amongst the Zulu men and the designer over women wearing “beshus” (cow skin waist coverings traditionally worn by men). For women to wear a beshu was for some a cultural sacrilege. Unfortunately what began as a discussion, evolved into an issue of power. The costume designer and I had seen the discussion, though heated, as continuous with our process and were confident that the issue would work its way to a solution. However, other production personnel, not familiar to our working methods and sensing conflict in the fact that blacks were voicing strong disagreement with a white designer and director, told the administration. A NAPAC administrator made an appearance the next day requesting to speak to the actors. He insisted the actors sit like school children, grouped before him, (whereas I had encouraged them to sit on all four sides to understand working in the round). Then like a pedantic schoolteacher he scolded the ensemble, warning them that they must obey the dictates of the director and designer. “Any future lack of discipline or respect will be reported to me and I can assure you will not be tolerated.”

The four days before the first public performance were concerned with polishing the performance—performers would be seen arriving early to rehearse a song or dance in the lobby or, even, on the street. Small things found their way into the performance, lending it an increasingly detailed expression. One such addition was the ‘Sorry’ chorus. In South
Africa a much used, common expression was to say ‘sorry’ when interrupting, excusing oneself, asking for something to be repeated, or when asking a question; “sorry” it seemed, was applied ad nauseam. So over used was the polite saying of the word that it almost seemed as an incessant apology meant to mitigate any number of social or racial inequities. I had counted, in one day, its use forty-four times; the group was so inspired, we created and incorporated a “sorry” chorus that the Warriors chanted as they ate Umshayandlela.

The Audience
The audience for the first preview performance was all white with the exception of two people; it did not matter, however, the presence of an audience was all that was needed to spark Emandulo to life. With singing and dancing, sweating bodies, loud drumming, the burning of imphetho (Zulu herb used for healing and ancestral worship), grass covered stage floor, clay covered Shades interacting with the audience, and with textures, movements, and emotions, the audience could not but participate. A discussion was held with the predominantly liberal, middle-aged audience at the end. Reactions ranged from ecstatic to confusion and discomfort. Some resented that the performance included so much Zulu language, others were tired of seeing and hearing about the social-cultural-political struggle, or complained that the drums were too loud. Some were disturbed and saddened by the story; a few said the grass and imphetho smoke aggravated their hay fever; and some others said that nothing should be changed and that it could not be any better.

There was work still to be done, but overall the ensemble and I were feeling confident and agreed that the true test was its presentation in front of a Zulu audience. When I was told that the Africa Arts Center (a local arts charity) had purchased seats for an entire preview performance for a benefit, I thought that the opportunity for the performance to find itself in front of a Zulu audience had arrived. I did not expect a nearly all white audience of predominantly young, well-meaning, liberal professionals dedicated to supporting African (meaning Zulu in Natal) art and artists. The aim was to raise money to send several Zulu artists to art school. They were an enthusiastic audience and, afterwards, they paid me copious compliments. In the lobby they were eating finger sandwiches, sipping white wine, laughing and chatting when I noticed a few of the Kwasa actors peeking around a corner in their street clothes.
Surely there would be no difficulty in inviting the Kwasa members to the reception; they were, after all, African artists and this was a group dedicated to their appreciation and support. The director, a white woman in her late thirties, was blunt without hesitation: “No, this was a private party.” The irony of the situation, however, did not go unnoticed by an elderly white woman, a member of the organization, who overheard and told the director: ‘Then I believe your private party was nearly over.’ With that she handed a large silver platter of food to the thankful and hungry Kwasa members.

Opening night was a success with reactions and reviews in the white press ranging from polite to confused to excellent. The Sunday Tribune said: “There are flashes of perceptive contrast that suddenly bring the performance into sharp focus and give it very topical meaning.” The Natal Witness remarked: “It was the kind of theatre that demands the viewer be a participant in what was happening, part of the process, rather than a cold objective observer (don’t worry, you won’t be asked to get up on stage) and while some may find this approach unusual, I recommend you drop your defenses and let yourself have an extraordinary experience.”

Built organically, the opening was only a seed for the growth of the performance. For many of the ensemble members the opening night was only prelude, a beginning of something greater. The opportunity to run for a month in Durban, and then to sold-out houses on tour in Pietmaritzburg, allowed the group to explore and truly make the story their own. The experience had given the ensemble a part of themselves and taught them about their potential. Emandulo had become a performance ritual that embodied as it celebrated the expression of self, culture, and spirit. To a greater or lesser degree, the performance became a healing, a therapy, and an encounter group. In testament of its effect, several audience members (Zulu and non-Zulu) returned on many occasions, bringing friends and relatives. For most Zulu audiences it was the first time that they had seen any type of theatre, or even been in a theatre. Repeatedly, the Zulu audience remarked on how the performance made them feel interested and proud of their traditions. For many audiences it was significant to see non-Zulus performing alongside Zulus and participating in Zulu culture. The brass and glass cultural palace of the whites, once alien and formidable to the Zulu, had opened its doors to a vast unknown—the new South Africa.
Politics, Slapstick and Zulus on Tour

Wearing an oversized sombrero and carrying the rhythm with cymbals, Yise Gasa announced to the curious, almost frightened faces that something quite out of the ordinary was going to happen. For the gathering section of our performance, I wore a Roman helmet made originally for some forgotten production of Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar,” and oversized hands of white gloved foam to greet, wave, and attract people to our performance. Yise and I roamed the outdoor market clowning, shaking hands, patting children’s heads, and comically cajoling people to attend our performance.

Crossing the street from the main market, our performance adrenalin pumping as I shouted some mad nonsense, I stopped, realizing that it was right there, only days before, that two people died and scores were injured when a hail of AK47 bullets assaulted a transit bus. The distant abstraction of a front-page newspaper report, and photos of sprawled bodies in blood pools was jolted to life with a shock. Across the street was the taxi rank where 50-plus Zulu-owned passenger kombis stood. The kombi owners and Moslem Indian-owned bus companies were at war, the latter trying to undercut the Zulu taxi business and gain access to a very lucrative and growing market. The situation was reminiscent of the territorial gangsters in Chicago during the 1920s. Such a confluence of images, ideas, and feelings made South Africa a unique complexity. Politics, however, was only one element that blended into the complex swirl of history, race, greed, money, and power at a time of monumental change.

It was December 1993 and a group consisting of four Zulu actors, a Danish percussionist, and I performed street theatre in the township of kwamashu, 35 kilometers outside Durban, in the province of Natal, South Africa. In the southern hemisphere, December is the height of summer, and being near the coast of the Indian Ocean means humidity with temperatures around 90F—with an unrelenting sun. When we pulled into the kwamashu bus and train station with our new white “kombi,” a ten-seat Toyota van, we caught the attention of many. Shoppers and merchants alike turned to stare intently, their bodies
suddenly still as our kombi passed through the open-air market. But
the children—the dozens of smiling faces and excited eyes—paused for
only a beat before they trotted along side the vehicle, jumping up and
trying to peek through the windows.

The swelter of the heat reflecting off the tarmac created a languid
atmosphere that people seemed to swim through, the tropical atmos-
phere belying an underlying tension of caution and alertness. Walking
around the busy station to determine the best performance area only
added to the stir of curiosity and uneasiness of the passing crowds. In
kwaMashu, considered one of the most violent townships in South A-
frica, strangers and unusual activity drew attention and were immedi-
ately suspicious. This was especially so during the time of rising fear and
uncertainty that preceded the country’s first multi-racial elections.

KwaMashu, as with most other of Natal’s townships, was predomi-
nately Zulu. Established under apartheid, townships were set up as rac-
ially defined areas-cum-ghettos that geographically isolated non-whites
from the white areas where they served as domestic and industrial la-
bors. Since the lifting of the last of apartheid’s laws in 1990s the
situation has, in reality, altered little. Blacks may now travel, work, and
live wherever they choose in the “new” South Africa, but few can afford
these newfound freedoms. The legacy of apartheid’s social, economic,
and psychological traumas will take generations to remedy. And, as
elsewhere in the world, racial segregation has given way to a “new world
order” based on economic stratification.

The population of kwaMashu is 400,000, give or take 100,000; no
one is sure, given a census taking that is no match for the unwieldy
squatter camps that occupy most open spaces within the township. Ru-
rnal Zulus seeking urban employment swarmed into urban areas after the
Group Areas Act was abolished in 1989. KwaMashu was not an area
frequented by whites. Whites who went there did so as govern-
ment officials, policemen or members of the feared paramilitary “Internal Sta-
bility Unit.”

Many people turned, stopped cold, and stared quizzically as Thu-
bani Ngubane, Eric Hadebe, and I walked through the market. We were
lead to the station manager’s office by a tall, thin boy who made us his
responsibility and kept the small group of cautious but curious children
bursting with playful excitement, respectful. Seeing a white man was a
big event for the children. My saying “hello” would send some of the
children into fits of laughter while others hid from my glance. The hair on my legs and arms fascinated two precocious girls. As I had done before, I paused and stooped, inviting them to feel my arms and hair on my head. The swarm giggled with the experience of touching white skin for the first time—we all exchanged close-up smiles. Thubani and Eric waited, chatted, and joked in Zulu with the adult bystanders. After six weeks of performing our traveling show, we had come to realize that the show was only a part of a larger event.

Everywhere we went, we would secure permission to perform from the person of authority, be it a stationmaster, local chief, magistrate, or rural shop owner. Permission was a matter of respect in terms of the Zulu hierarchy; however, just as importantly, permission was a way of assaying or allaying potentially volatile situations. Experience had taught us that it was most effective if a white man and a Zulu went together to ask for permission to perform. It frustrated the Zulu members of our group, but it was an accepted reality. Even in kwaMashu, one of the more politically conscious townships in post-apartheid South Africa, the mere presence of a white man still gave a request credibility and authority.

It was decided that Thubani would do the talking. Thubani was born, raised, and still lives in kwaMashu, a stark, rugged, over-populated place filled mostly with weather-beaten homes and shacks that sit close to one another. As an actor, singer, and playwright of several years, Thubani was excited about the prospect of performing a show for his community and friends. The manager of the run down shopping center and adjacent outdoor market across from the bus and train station was welcoming. Wearing a soiled white shirt and tie, he puffed up with authority and responsibility at our request for a decision. The small manager’s office, its paint peeling, contained scared metal cabinets and a single desk with one phone and a few papers on it. Sitting back in his swivel chair, the manager looked into the distance, apparently deep in thought, as about ten others and myself waited in silence for his properly considered decision. Like a Zulu chief giving a decree, he said that he was more than happy to oblige our request to perform, even though he was uncertain what theatre was. It took us a few minutes to explain, and then we struck a cord.

“Zulu Dancing! When?” asked the manager in Zulu, with a smile missing teeth.
“Right now, in ten minutes after we set up,” replied Thubani in Zulu, a language full of clicks and pops and accompanied by physical gestures.

When we got back to the kombi, there was already a crowd of shoeless and mostly shirtless children dressed in rags and dust—their group watching our group from a short distance, knowing that something out of the ordinary was going to happen.

It took us ten minutes to set up our show, Makanda Mahlanu—which means “King Five Heads” in Zulu.

A painted canvas went over the kombi to create a colorful green backdrop. We set up our cartoon-inspired props, donned our costumes, and put on our funny hats. With a loud bang of a goatskin Zulu drum and a cymbal crash, the show began. Our ancient Zulu drumbeat created an odd contrast to the sounds of the nearby market and the passing traffic, the drums evoking the rich, hidden rhythms that live deep within the hearts, bodies and earth of the Zulu people. The rhythms of the drum drew the Zulu near—it was a phenomenon we had witnessed before and gave the cast a special delight.

Reactions to us in KwaMashu were extreme, as they always were. Some went into a sort of shock, freezing stock still with a wide-eyed stare until we coaxed them with our comic antics. I was later told by a Zulu Sangoma (a traditional diviner/healer) that this frozen expression “was what the Zulu did when they saw a ghost.” Others, however, smiled, did a little dance or laughed with delight. Some, both children and adults alike, would run or huddle in fear, confused by the perplexing sight of a funny-walking, goofy-talking white man with oversized white hands.

Children waved to us with excitement from across the road. As theatrical traffic cops, Yisa and I stopped the buses and cars, and with my big hands I ushered the children across. The Indian bus driver and his few passengers waved, bemused and curious, as Yisa and I rushed across the street like crazy clowns. You must be a hopeless idealist, an opportunist, and an unrelenting pragmatist to do street theatre.

The market on the opposite side of the street was not legal, meaning vendors didn’t pay rent for their space. However, neither the kwaZulu government nor the Durban city government had the will, or wherewithal, to do anything about it. The market was a warren of helter skelter shacks made from shipping crates, cardboard boxes, tarpaulin, and
metal signs. Many of the makeshift stands doubled as the homes, beds, personal clothing, and kitchen utensils mingled with merchandise. The merchants sold fruits and vegetables, candy, cigarettes and matches, used auto parts, pots and pans, cassette tapes, and stationary, among other things. One section was devoted exclusively to the selling of used clothes originally donated by charitable organizations in the U.S. and Europe. One T-shirt was emblazoned with “Ohio University,” another with an Italian flag and “Roma” written beneath. It being winter and cold (by Zulu standards) at night, the most popular items were sport jackets and winter coats, many of which, ironically, had designer labels. The most pungent area of the market was the meat market. Shaded only by makeshift awnings and without refrigeration, flies visited the intestinal meats, pig and cow heads and feet that sat on slabs of dark, soaked plywood.

Another area of the market was devoted to the selling of “muti,” Zulu medicines. Blankets spread out on the ground displayed mounts of various herbs, grasses, tree barks, and strips of dried animal parts. The most powerful muti, things like snake or monkey parts, were in glass jars. Among the Zulu, traditional medicines and healing is popular; the open-air muti market is their drugstore. Some say the continuing popularity of traditional healing is in direct proportion to the lack of access Zulus have to Western health care.

Thubani Tshanini was another of our cast members who was already working the crowd from the height of his stilts. Wearing an absurdly tall black top hat, he recited, in traditional form, rapid-fire Zulu invitations to the stunned onlookers. Thubani, Yise, and I were in improvisational high gear now and the market was our playground where anything could happen—and did. We functioned much like I imagine jesters and minstrels might have functioned in medieval Europe. Yisa and I had several improvisational slapstick routines that ranged from babbled arguments to disco dancing to manic games of hide and seek. Sometimes our routines included our “tall brother” Thubani; we would weave in and around his stilts or perform a song punctuated by Yise’s cymbals and Thubani’s huge bicycle horn. None of our routines was very complicated but, rather, relied heavily on the broad comedy and spontaneity. Over time, we developed scenarios that we could apply to any market situation: sneaking up on an unsuspecting shopper as other marketers anticipated their shock; taking over a merchant’s stall and
sitting his fruits and wares: or simply and suddenly standing stock still as people wondered what was going on. Our routine of being annoyed by an imaginary fly that would eventually get into our clothes and pants dates from 16th century Italy’s Commedia dell’Arte.

Our comic assaults and marketplace performances never failed our objective to gather and please an audience. In the farm village of Harding, we gathered a lunchtime crowd from a nearby market by stopping traffic and leading people to a local post office parking lot for the performance. In rural Ngabeni, we set up and performed at the center of a makeshift market in the middle of a field. The market was held once every three months for traders to sell to elders who were receiving their quarterly pension payment of about $80 U.S. We just happened to be driving by, saw the crowd, and performed. That audience was ready-made and willing; a semi-circle of hundreds of people formed as we were setting up.

In Durban we performed at Berea station, a sprawling, noisy hive of open-air market stands and the hub of train, taxi, and bus transport for black Natal. Among the vendors and the din of humid urban activity, we performed for thousands, many of who were looking down from the second level of the bus station. Shoppers, workers, and sellers created a deep, close, and lively crowd. We improvisedally incorporated workers pushing handcarts as they passed through the narrow passage we occupied as a stage. The many coins thrown by an appreciative audience bought us all a big lunch.

After our crowd-gathering antics, a drum signal to start the show would call Thabani, Yisa, and I back to our stage area. In kwaMashu, as elsewhere, we led a following of gathered audience members. When we got back across the street, a crowd of about 400 had gathered around the drummers, Thabani Ngubane, Eric, and Morten Ilsee, a Danish percussionist and theatre student doing his internship study with us. This trio had been doing much the same as we had and their signal meant audience interest was peeking and the show needed to begin. Timing was everything and over the course of our tour the group developed an instinctual sense for the audience and one another.

Our timing would, however, adjust according to circumstances—performing in a township was very different from performing in the rural areas. Once, after 90 minutes of bumpy, twisting, muddy roads, we arrived at the remote rural area of Inchanga. At a country store, we
found a few Zulu men sitting with blurry eyes drinking Ijuba beer. The pace of life was slow and unhurried, punctuated by an occasional cow mooing. There were only a few people in sight, and the sun was preparing to set. We were tired and discouraged by the small number of people, but having come so far, we decided to do the show come what may. Within 15 minutes, the amazing beat of the Zulu drums, like ancient magic, gathered nearly 300 people for us. Audiences came from the far distance, over picturesque rolling hills with a late afternoon blue-sky backdrop. Across the veldt that the Zulu shared with cattle, goats, pigs, and chickens, children and adults came, wondering who was calling them. Approaching, their eyes and ears strained to comprehend our seemingly strange, out-of-the-ordinary happening. A relaxed and highly interactive performance followed. On several occasions, audience members entered scenes to dance and participate with us. We directed them through the performance, much to the amusement of the crowd.

What distinguished the township audience from rural residents was their reluctance to gather closely around the performance space. Large community gatherings in townships were rare and, for fear of violence, approached with hesitation. What made the situation more suspicious was that our purpose was unclear in an area where people generally associated public gatherings with politics, protests, or funerals. Only a few years previous, such public gatherings were illegal and caught the immediate attention of security forces. In notoriously violent KwaMashu with pre-election tensions running high, we had to work especially hard persuading, cajoling, clowning, and dancing to encourage people to gather closer. It was the rhythm of the drum, changing into well-known Zulu dance beats that put our timid audience at some ease. Asked to clap their hands in accompaniment, some finally began to move and dance with the music. We knew we had them then.

The drumming stopped and, like a cheerleader, I led the audience through a Zulu welcome with a traditional call requiring an audience response. A white man acting crazy, speaking and dancing Zulu was an unusual experience; the audience pulled in closer to get a better look at such a curiosity. Then the audience stilled to hear Eric’s voice introduce the story of Makanda Mahlanu, the Snake King with five heads.

The narrator, played with a big smile by Eric (a dreadlock Rastafarian who is the well-known lead singer of a local Reggae group) applied traditional Zulu method of rapid-fire storytelling (Ihubo) to
introduce a story we would illustrate with music, dance, slapstick, magic, and much spontaneous improvisation. Banging his traditional cowhide shield with a dance stick, he introduced the snake with five heads in a poetic Zulu that loses greatly when translated into English.

Makanda Mahlanu you’re the great king of the snakes
He who shines his light of wisdom under the water
Those who caught sight of the king’s lamp are enticed to bow down

He who re-located to curse Mother Nature
There’s a volcano eruption, thunder and lightning
And suddenly the entire earth is plunged into extreme darkness

He who flies high and above the sun and moon to sniff the clouds
Oh Makanda your kingdom is divine
It has a magic spell that simply halts the sun from shining

When thee meditates the water becomes still and clear
The dark clouds gather and very light rain begins to fall
All of nature worships his hidden strength

Thy kingdom has multiple powers
He who can bring hope where there’s despair
He who can bring belief where there’s confusion and pain
He who can invent the day and make holy
And take that holiness as he wishes

Though beginning with a traditional evocation of the well-known story, our theatrical interpretation of Makanda Mahlanu, which we rehearsed for eight weeks, early on evolved into a somewhat different tale.
Our intent was to re-imagine the story to address the realities of contemporary South Africa while reaffirming the continuity of Zulu traditional culture. No performance like it had been attempted before. Commissioned by the Natal Performing Arts Council (NAPAC), the overarching purpose of the project was to bring theatre to Natal’s underserved black majority.

All of white South Africa, from the government to the private sector, embraced the process of re-tooling their entrenched ways of operating and thinking in anticipation of a black rule government after the April 1994 election. NAPAC, one of four national government-funded Arts-Councils—and bastion of traditional, white Western theatre, dance, opera, and music—was no exception. State funded and institutionalized racist mindsets, however, are especially resistant to fundamental change.

NAPAC, like most of South Africa, was, and is, trying hard and sometimes frantically to find new ways of working in a quickly emerging multi-cultural/racial reality. It was in this spirit that I was first invited to direct a production for NAPAC in spring 1992, and why Themi Venturas, their innovative associate director, asked me to return to assist this time in the development of the “Hlanganani Project” (Hlanganani is Zulu for “where people gather”). The goal of the Hlanganani Project was to explore and establish alternative performance methods and expressions that more accurately reflect the rich Zulu culture.

The loosely characterized five heads of the original Zulu myth evolved through discussion, improvisation, and rehearsals, into five distinct characters: greed, fear, cunning, strength, and reason. Each represented what the cast believed to be an essential player in South Africa’s current political, and cultural turmoil. Symbolic of current events in South Africa, each of the conflicting characteristics represented by the heads were dependent upon one body—much like the political reality of the nation itself. It was apparent, from the beginning that the events that surrounded us could not be kept outside the rehearsal room.

The NAPAC I returned to in 1993 had just undergone a major reorganization to re-define itself for the coming multi-racial “new” South Africa. NAPAC was in chaos, with low morale and disorganization everywhere—it was not an ideal working situation. Within a week of my arrival, things deteriorated further when a strike by 202 of NAPAC’s laborers was called. The South African Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACAWU), a predominately black union, struck in protest of
the theatre’s re-organization, which they felt, was politically and racially motivated and economically unfair. Nearly half of the 202 strikers had their jobs “retrenched” (meaning eliminated), due to the re-organization mandated by NAPAC’s major funder, the Durban city council.

The strikers’ Zulu “toi-toi” protest chant-dances filtered into our rehearsal room from the streets. Originally developed by Chaka Zulu’s warriors as a preparation for battle, the rhythmic call-response chants can be unnerving, if not frightening; especially when you are the object of it’s unified and focused anger. Whenever I exited the theatre, strikers waived their fists at me, stared defiantly, and catcalled. My ideals and work as an artist were thrown into question. Should I sympathize with the strikers or continue and remain committed to the purpose of my work? I was an outsider, a foreigner, a white man, and my presence was especially high profile. It was no use explaining that my intent was honest, sincere, and meant to contribute to developing an expression for people just like them. After much thought and discussion, I decided to continue with the project. The work we were engaged in would continue through the work of others, I reasoned, whereas politics, especially the brand the strikers were practicing, was topical, short-term, and self-serving. As the strike unfolded, my decision proved correct—as the strike increasingly showed itself to be motivated by political power playing and money.

Arsonist set the Opera, NAPAC’s 1300 seat main theatre, afire two weeks into our rehearsals, causing extensive damage, organizational disruption, and employee panic. Soon after the fire, several employees still coming to work were threatened with bodily harm. There were several bomb threats, even though security doubled and police patrolled surrounding street corners. Strikers began to harass, intimidate, and beat up workers. At one of NAPAC’s rehearsal halls, a security guard was shot in the head and left for dead. Then strikers began accosting audience members, myself included, on the street as they approached NAPAC’s sponsored Durban Music Festival. Ironically, the festival was a bold and costly attempt to specifically attract black and Indian audiences to the theatre and chart a new direction for NAPAC’s programming.

We were not far into the rehearsal process when the actors became noticeably preoccupied, forcing the progress of the play development work to almost come to a standstill. The actors felt trapped, with no
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place to hide. The strikers knew the actors and where they lived. In Natal, house burning and tire necklacing (when a gasoline-drenched tire is put over a person’s head and set afire) are common means of retribution in the poorly policed townships. Life among some township Zulu holds little value. Reports of people being shot or thrown off township commuter trains because of politics, rivalry, or thievery were commonplace.

The Zulu actors found themselves in a difficult spot. With unemployment among young black men over 80 percent, they could not afford to turn down four months of employment. They went to the union offices and told a room filled with angry strikers that they were not taking the laborers’ jobs from them—but it didn’t matter. They were warned and they had better stop. The strikers did not want to hear that they had continued working, and did not support the actors and other artists when they called work stoppage the previous year. The work stoppage by actors and artist—which had lasted several weeks—was in protest of NAPAC’s Eurocentric programming and lack of racial diversity in its leadership. The SACAWU strike was about money and power for a few—not about ideals. In the changing South Africa, the play of politics, the cry of inequality, the red flag of race, and threat of violence increasingly is part of the country’s transition. Unfortunately, greed, fear, and self-interest also figure heavily into the country’s remaking.

The actors and I found ourselves in a volatile situation that was like a fire, simultaneously fueled and threatening us. The ideas and themes of our evolving performance were directly inspired by what we were experiencing firsthand.

The story of Makanda Mahlanu began with each of the five heads of Makanda presenting its characteristics with the help of the others. First was Greed, played by the slightly chubby but incredibly energetic Thabani Ngubane. In kwaMashu, he lived with seven other family members in the same run down, two-room house that he was born in 27 years ago. Thabani’s weekly income (and the income of all actors) was equal to approximately $70 U.S. dollars. He, like the others, was the sole financial resource for his family. In Greed’s scene, a gumboot dancing presentation—a style of dance developed by black mine workers in the 1930s—was a backdrop to Thabani’s Greed character.
I want all what I can get
I want all what I can get
Your money give me that
Your beauty give me that
Your power give me that
Your vote give me that

Yeah Yeah Yeah
I want all what I can get
I want all what I can get
You happiness give me that
Your lust give me that
Your intelligence give me that
Your talent give me that

I want all what I can get
I want all what I can get
Your culture give me that
Your tradition give me that
Cause I want all what I can get

During the Greed scene, Thabani would make his point by actually taking shoes, children, shopping bags, umbrellas, or whatever else he could get from the audience.

Once, while performing in rural kwaXimba on the grass in front of the district magistrate court, Greed took several purses from office workers on lunch break. After a few moments of puzzlement, some women realized Greed had no intention of returning the purses to them. There was a very vocal exchange about how the women gave up their purses without much of a struggle. Greed: “You must be careful that someone like me does not take what is yours. Give me your vote next. I want your vote! Will you give me your vote? It is as important as your purse!” In street theatre, the line between performance and reality is sometimes mercurial; the line wavers even more so when performing improvisationally for an audience with little experience of theatre. Some women thought Greed was serious about keeping their purses. To the delight the audience, an impromptu chase ensued with a few of the women running after Greed. The cast finally persuaded Greed that
these women knew their minds and “were not going to have anything taken from them.” With an important point illustrated, their purses were returned.

The next character, Fear, was played by gentle Yisa Gasa, who used the music and dance of the traditional Zulu spiritual healer, the Sangoma, as the musical motif for his scene. The well-known rhythms, songs, and dances of the Sangoma never failed to evoke spontaneous participation; the audience knew exactly how to respond to Yisa’s Sangoma invocations.

Yisa grew up in a rural area known for its powerful Sangomas. He knew their inflections, gestures and movements; presenting them with a knowing, ironic detail warmly delighted our audiences. The impact the performance had on our audiences is hard to conceive. Life in Natal's rural areas is grueling. Many of the Zulu work for subsistence wages for laborers on nearby white farms and ranches that produce vegetables, cattle, and South Africa's cash crop, sugarcane. Transportation is limited and expensive—roads are either dust or mud, depending on the time of year. There is little electrification, telephone service, or running water, and land for personal farming is still limited. Schooling and medical services are inadequate and woefully overtaxed. It was, however, in the remote rural areas of Natal, where traditional medicine and lifestyles hold strong. Yisa’s sangoma performance was especially enjoyed. Audiences, eager and grateful, danced, clapped, and sang without much provocation or inhibition. Those that had so little seemed always to give the most. Performing amidst the smoke of small fires, with the stench and textures of cow dung at our feet, added a sense of timeless communal ceremony. Rural audience members, some holding their recently purchased live and fluttering chickens by their feet, watched. Some women watched as they maintained large bundles of shopping or buckets of water on their heads while, others, mainly men, watched and commented with amazement or drunken lightheadedness induced by Ijuba, a mealy Zulu beer.

Fear, to fend off real and imagined troubles and paranoia, used a cartoon-like oversized ax to protect himself from evil spirits. Our audiences never failed to scream and scatter with delight as he charged them. Slapstick, stage combat, pratfalls, and low comedy ensued as he chased and threatened the other characters who jumped, ducked, mugged, and hid from his attack inspired by blind, unfounded fear.
Yisa’s character was afraid of everything and lashed out disrupting what little order there was. It was not until his brother “snake heads” clamed him that some order was restored.

My role as Cunning, an oily, conniving city slicker came next, backed by the smooth vocals of isicathamiya singing (a Zulu musical style popularized by Ladysmith Black Mambazo). Cunning wore a straw hat, glittering tailcoat, and persona of a circus ringmaster. The backup song warned about the tricks and deceptions of my character, Cunning. Standing on a platform, I gave my presentation:

Let me tell you about the future
Makanda Mahlanu is the future!
People always want to know about the future.

Think of yourself satisfied and happy
A great job, good wages, low food prices, low gas prices!
Let me tell you about the future
Makanda Mahlanu is the future!

There you are as happy as can be owning your own business
Waking up after a good night sleep
Turning on your big TV
Your children are playing outside in the playground
The world is a safe and secure and peaceful place

Everything will be free
Free Telephone
Free Electricity
Free quality education, no more of this useless Afrikaans shit.
Let me tell you about the future
Makanda Mahlanu is the future!

I’m your friend
Stick with me
Believe in me
• Performing Africa •

Trust me
I love you, you’re beautiful
I bring you hope
I bring you the future
I am the future!

Cunning then worked the crowd like a hustler, pumping handshakes and patting children on the head, asking them what they wanted. Then helping audience members on to a small platform, like an Evangelical minister-cum-oily politician, Cunning promised them everything they wanted including a vote, a constitution, peace, unbelievable wealth, and happiness. It was significant a white male played this role to expose, demystify, and ultimately poke fun at the socially and psychologically ingrained dominant power. The use of English (the second or third language of the Zulu) was also important. Well-spoken English for the Zulu is associated with education, power and authority. Cunning’s use of English, being so obviously fallacious, demonstrated that both the white male and his language can be deflated and should not be accepted uncritically.

Then came Strength, played by Thabani Tshanini, a muscular gymnastic dancer from Ladysmith. He eyed and threatened the audience with his large knobkieri, a traditional Zulu weapon that has been the subject of much political contention between the ANC and Inkarta. Not familiar with theatre and its relationship with reality, or possibly skittish because of the reality that surrounded them, some audience members would go scurrying away in genuine fear as blustering Strength approached them with the lethal weapon.

We managed to effect a similar reaction outside of a Kentucky Fried Chicken in Ulundi, the administrative capital of the kwaZulu government (and home of Butelizi’s Inkarta Freedom Party), when we performed for surprised government employees on their way home from work. Strength’s appearance and sudden lurch at the audience sent an entire section of our circled audience fleeing in unison with the balance of the audience taking a few steps back. The moment was both hilarious and sad. Several of the fleeing audience kept running and went some distance before they stopped. We were all surprised by the reaction and Thabani immediately toned it down as Yisa, and I went around the perimeter to give our audiences reassurances, gathering them back to the
performance. The next day in Ulundi, we performed in an echoing, vandalized, and stripped bare auditorium for nearly 500 uniformed school children. The reaction to Strength was almost identical, but this time girls were crying and some of the older boys stepped out to meet Strength’s challenge. Such a challenge and posturing is an institutionalized part of the traditional Zulu culture of the warrior. Again, Yisa and I had to make reassurances.

Strength’s traditional Zulu war dance provided the musical motif for the scene. And once the challenge section was over, it did not take much prodding for the audience to sing, clap, and respond to Strength’s traditional call-response summons to battle. The Zulu warrior culture and the values of fighting, machismo, and sexism were then simultaneously evoked and parodied by Strength’s presentation:

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Am I not strong?
(audience: Bayete)
Am I good in Demonstration?
(audience: Bayete)
Am I not a powerful man?
(audience: Bayete)
Am I not obeyed by everyone?
(audience: Bayete)
Am I not terrific?
(audience: Bayete)
Am I not a great warrior?
(audience: Bayete)
Am I not a Zulu!
(audience: Bayete)
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The last character presented was Reason, the snakehead that held things, if tenuously, together. Eric Hadebe, our narrator, (who was also the well-known lead singer of a local reggae group), played Reason. With a smirk he told the audience: “I have reserved the best part of the show for myself.” Reason combined reggae and rap in an odd testament to the ricocheting cross-pollination of world music. Rap can trace its rhythmic origins to the praise singing of West Africa, which is where the Zulu originally migrated. Likewise, reggae, the music of Rastafaria, is rooted in Africa and routed through Jamaican blacks. In an appropriate
demonstration of reconciliation and re-integration, Reason told his story using these music modes. Such a recombination of old and new was at the core of our performance expression; we wanted the audience to reaffirm and re-imagine self and culture.

I'm gonna tell who I am
In a rap style
Because all I wanna see
Is your big smile
I make the people stay with peace and love
Order is my friend chaos is my foe
Make love not war

I teach and I guide come on everybody
Let's have a vibe
I'm gonna count to three
And you will stamp your feet
One Two Three

Come on everybody let's have a fling
Listen to the beat and now try to sing!

Unlike the other snakehead characters, Reason was hopeful and collaborative, demanding nothing from the audience and asking only that they listen, participate, and enjoy themselves.

During one township performance, when we were singing “Make Love not war,” a fight broke out in the audience. Immediately a space cleared around the five combatants, the attention of the audience going to the progress and threat of the fight rather than our performance. We didn’t stop the show even though we felt upstaged by the fight, and without discussion the cast worked the fight into the show, referring to the fight as an example of what we were singing about. We paused and commented to the audience about how people fight and how it is disruptive to their lives and well-being. “You are scared now! Why? Because one person chooses to make life difficult for himself and for everybody else! We cannot let one person get in our way and stop the good people! Chase him away! Go on, chase him!” exhorted Eric with the rest of us chiming in. The audience finally chased off a pickpocket,
order restored, and when their attention returned they applauded us for continuing during the fracas.

The month and half of the strike action at NAPAC forced us to find alternative rehearsal space in and around Durban—at actor’s homes, in parks, at a grammar school, libraries, and empty lobbies. We lost several days of rehearsal for the simple lack of a safe rehearsal venue. A few potential rehearsal spaces refused to rent to us out of fear of striker reprisals. When we did rehearse, actors would take the precaution of arriving and leaving at different times—traveling separately and with ever changing and circuitous routes as to avoid arousing the suspicions of the strikers. They always carried shopping bags with clothing, books or food inside as to provide a justification for being in the city if stopped by a group of roving strikers.

Despite a court ordered prohibition against intimidating NAPAC employees, the strikers stopped the actors and myself on several occasions. My white skin protected me, for the strikers knew that the police would be much more severe on them if harm came to me, a white American. My status, and that of many NAPAC orchestra members, as a “foreign worker” did not go unnoticed by the strikers. Epitaphs blazoned on several placards protested NAPAC’s hiring foreigners as members of their ranks were re-trenched. Neither the union nor the workers comprehended the bigger picture of re-organization beyond the loss of jobs. Re-organization was all a part of a plan to distribute funds more equably to a broader range of arts groups. Previously only the nation’s four, Eurocentric arts councils received arts funding. All re-trenched workers received generous financial packages and skills training opportunities.

When the show was ready for an audience, a new set of problems arose. We had to avoid certain townships where the strikers lived out of fear of being seen performing a NAPAC show. In order not to be countered by strikers we, at first, concentrated on touring rural Natal. Jolla Mkame, our community coordinator, and Carl Criek our tireless Afrikaans producer, called around the province for locations to perform Makanda. Invariably they confronted a curious problem. Local chiefs, indunas (local head men), magistrates, store owners, community workers and the like asked: “What is theatre?”

Few of the rural people had any idea of what theatre was or why we wanted to bring it to their area. Other African countries have used
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Theatre as a powerful tool for communicating important issues such as AIDS awareness, birth control, health care issues, agricultural initiatives, soil erosion, forest management, insecticides, voter education and the like. In rural Africa, with high illiteracy and little or no electricity (television or radio, theatre is often a major mode of communication. Under apartheid, black theatre in Natal and South Africa remained tightly controlled out of fear of political activism, and consequently evolved very differently than it did elsewhere on the continent.

Jolla and Carl explained that theatre was like dancing and story telling with comedy, poetry, and magic. Once they understood “theatre,” there came the inevitable follow up question: “Why are you doing this? Are you ANC or IFP (Inkarta Freedom Party)?”

Many times they refused us permission out of fear our performance would somehow disrupt the already fragile local politics by presenting ideas that would inevitably inspire, offend or be misinterpreted by somebody.

When we did perform, some audience members accused us of being either pro ANC or pro IFP. Accusations of political affiliation occurred even though we took great pains during the development of the performance to avoid language, gesture, or suggestion of political affiliation. For instance, we dropped the use of “Viva the People” because “viva” was a word associated with the ANC and the chant “Viva Mandela!” Much to our puzzlement, audience members would sometimes suddenly turn and leave inexplicably during the middle of a performance. When some were asked why they left the performance, they explained the fear of being seen as sympathetic to our political message; they feared that attending the show would somehow get them into trouble. Others perceived us portraying of characters “like Mandela” or “Making fun of King Goodwill” (king of the Zulu), or “Making the snake like Butelizi” (leader of the Zulu Inkarta party). One man said he left “Because someone might see him laughing and get angry.” Audience concerns were heightened because of the general sense of paranoia and mounting tensions associated with pre-election uncertainty and threat of impending violence. Nonetheless we took note of specific moments within the performance and worked to adjust them as best we could without sacrificing the show’s integrity.

The story continued with Makanda’s inability to find a suitable wife in the animal kingdom. Frustrated, Makanda decided to seek a wife in
the land of the humans (i.e. the audience). Each of the five snake heads had a different criteria and agenda as they searched the audience for their love’s desire. Much slapstick, discord, and chaos ensued before the snakeheads realized they needed the talents of human ministers to court the women of the audience. Using a traditional Zulu courtship presentation, Thabani Tshanini and Thabani Ngubane respectively wowed the audience with bravura verbal presentation filled with word plays and rhythmical fancy:

(Thabani Tshanini)
Since I was born in a box of matches
I never seen a beautiful lady like you
Your body moves like a fish in the water
Your body is like a blue train in the railway line
What about your figure?
It reminds me of a Coca Cola bottle
Com’on lady let’s walk hand-in-hand
Let’s hold each other’s hand to the gates of love
No one can open them except you and me
In a chameleon step
With love and trust written on our faces

Are you taking me out or putting me in?
If I was drowning in the river you would pull me out?

(Thubani Ngubane)
Your mother’s knees.
I’m not swearing you, I’m swearing love!
Slant and slant, all the mountains are slanting for me
When I slept on a grass mat, it annoys me
When I sleep on a goat skin it reminds me of you pretty lady
When I sleep on a bed it talks nonsense to me
I said so me who is a piece of soap which
Was left over when the women were bathing in the Inhalzan River.
The dogs are biting him, throwing him against the fence
Finder, finder horn of a witch doctor
The animal that climbs the tree even though it doesn’t have feet.
Horn that grew on a dog
I wonder why they didn’t grow on a cow
The one that swims in a crocodile infested river
But the crocodile don’t do anything to him
They come out and eat the bubbles

If your dress had holes in it you won’t mend it?
If there was a lion or me which would you run to?

Each proposal ended with a riddle, which decided the woman’s worthiness. The women’s failure of the riddle test meant the Sangoma had to be called to throw enormously oversized bones to divine who Makanda’s bride-to-be should be.

The unlucky girl was the daughter of one of Makanda’s ministers, played by Thabani Ngubane. The reality of having to sacrifice something close made him change his opinion and turn against supporting the self-serving snake. A debate ensued that required the audience to respond to his predicament.

The snake is evil, slimy, unhealthy, unnatural, rules by fear, will beat my daughter and not treat her well. The snake will take my daughter and I will never see her again—she will live in the river. To marry the snake is a big problem for a human like Patricia—it means there will be no future for her, for our family, our ancestors and people will be angry and never forgive him or my daughter. If she marries Makanda, her spirit will never go to heaven and our forefathers will curse us.

Arguments for and against the marriage became a dialogue moderated by the cast. Then the audience voted on the issue. Participatory democracy and open discussion were alien to the Zulu who have only known rule by either rigid traditional chiefs or under repressive apartheid. At first timid and sometimes confused by their sudden required participation, the audience was informed: “The show will stop unless you vote!” While performing the show in Ladysmith, a town in north-
ern Natal, the performance came to a complete and awkward halt when no one in the audience responded to our call to vote on the issue. “We cannot go on!” Bellowed Thabani as the father. “You must participate otherwise the snake, Makanda will have its evil way. Today it is my daughter, tomorrow it will be your daughter, your son, yourself! You no longer have to stand by with your arm’s folded and wait for others to make decisions!” Then Thabani pointed to audience members. “You and You! Unfold your arms! We have struggled for the opportunity to have a voice and now you must use it! Freedom means responsibility. Freedom is not something granted and that is it! It must be used or it will die. Use your freedom!” Soon the entire audience was vocalizing their approval and raising their hands to be counted. “That’s right! I am proud of you! Get used to your freedom, your voice and your vote count now!”

The voting section of the performance was often the most awkward and difficult. It was where the fantasy of the performance crossed over and became parallel the people’s approaching political reality. It was almost palpable how the recognition of crossing realities came over our audiences. Bodies would stiffen, eyes would brighten, and jaws would tighten, as the audience recognized the deeper significance of our story.

Another “minister” of Makanda then forces Thabani into accepting his fate of being Makanda’s son-in-law. Thabani pleads with the audience for support, to consider the evil intent of the snake and the bleak future of his daughter, and his family. The muscular Thabani Tshanini, in comical blond wig, red evening wear and pumps, entered wrapped in giant plastic chains to sing her lament. It was a moment that never failed to send the audience into hysterics of disbelief. Because of the macho-warrior culture of the Zulu the scene delighted but challenged the men in the audience who reacted with a mix of discomfort, embarrassment, and delight.

Why me? How can I marry a king?
I’m too young, I can’t even cook porridge
I am not fit to be a part of the royal family
I see death in front of me
I’m so ugly
I am the one that must marry the snake?
There are more snakes in the world he can choose from.
Why does he choose me?
I don’t want people to be scared of me.
I want to be with people.
What can I do about my boyfriend?

Makanda, a large snake puppet with five heads then came to claim his bride, but the father was willing to fight to the death for his daughter. Again the father pleaded with the audience to support him to transform, rather than destroy, the evil Makanda into something that will serve the future. He exhorted the audience to support him: “For next time it may be your daughter, your son or loved one. We must stand and work together to end this madness, this time of fear, and evil.”

Some audience members were given one end of the of multi-colored cloth streamers that attached to the Makanda puppet. The audience then had to “transform” the destructive and self-serving snake into something useful. With the streamers waving and the rest of the audience joining hands and chanting “Leave us!” in ritual-like unison, the audience willed the transformation of Makanda. After a brief, comic battle, the once fearful and mighty Makanda collapsed into an inert heap.

Expelling the evil spirit of Makanda with their words came next. The ghostly evil spirit of Makanda (in long flowing gauze) chased through the audience to the delighted fear of the children. The evil snake needed to transform into something new and good. Again the will of the people prevailed. The audience, closing their eyes and breathing their breath into the remains of the snake, presided over the emergence of a handsome young man (played by Eric). The young man promptly declared himself the hope of a new South Africa. However his moment of glory ended abruptly when the overjoyed and much stronger daughter carried him away, claiming him for herself.

I drank the type of tea I’ve been looking for
I got the sweet orange from a lemon tree
Now I found the one I love
The one to share love with
The performance ended happily, with song, dance, and intermingling with the audience lasting for some time. The audience liked the feelings the performance experience evoked and wanted us to continue. Often times it was difficult to leave our performance sites because of people thanking us, wanting to know more about us and wanting to know about how to do theatre themselves. Most gratifying was when the old people would approach us afterwards. Standing quietly for their turn to talk, they would invariably extend work-callused and gnarled hands in thanks. There was a specific and firm look in their eyes, it was a look that said they “have lived to see the day.” Smiles, jumping kids, shaking hands, and pats on our exhausted, sweaty backs, was the payment we lived for.

The performance, using a wild mix of comedy, slapstick, traditional and modern music, dance, and song, debate, poetry, and audience participation, had served a time honored performance function. It brought the community together on their terms, in their environment, dealt with their issues, and applied a performance language derived from their cultural imagery, mythology, music, dance, and sensibility. It was something that the Zulu were never allowed to explore during their long repression under apartheid.

The performance served as a vehicle for the Zulu to see and re-imagine themselves and their culture. It became, without our working for it, a contemporary Zulu ritual. And like a ritual, the performance became a way of personifying and making visible the abstract and intangible ideas, issues, fears, and feelings that surrounded pre-election South Africa.

During our thirty-four performance tour we played every variety of outdoor, and to a lesser degree indoor, space throughout the province of Natal. The audience numbers varied from anywhere between 250 and 2000. Our audiences were overwhelmingly Zulu, but on occasions, especially in urban areas, both white and Indian audiences would join us with equal delight. The amount of Zulu spoken in the performance would depend upon how we sized up the audience. Generally, however, excepting my few lines of English, the performance celebrated the Zulu language. This fact in itself was startling for our Zulu audiences not accustomed to seeing and hearing their language and traditions reaffirmed and celebrated.
At Taylor’s Halt outside of Pietrmaritzburg we performed at a primary school established for children of families displaced by township violence. Their homes burnt or their township so violent that the government had established a safe haven refugee camp for them. At Umsunduzi Bridge we spotted a large gathering of people outside of a health clinic. Gaining permission from the nurse operating the clinic, we performed for several hundred people and several grazing goats that insisted on sharing our grass stage.

After convincing a liquor storeowner and several men operating an outdoor auto body shop, we received permission to perform in a large dirt lot, next to a large used clothes market, in the Durban township of Claremont. The sound of nearby traffic and a rowdy after work audience of 700 plus proved to be our biggest performance challenge. Some audience members insisted on performing with us, more than a few were drunk, and to add to the anything-can-happen atmosphere, a few trucks and even a transit bus passed through the lot we called our stage. To our delight a local church choir, on the way to their rehearsal, joined the audience and helped several of our songs along.

Each performance was a unique experience, each special in its own way. With names like Nkondwana, Umlazi Centre, Stedville, Ladysmith and Izakheni, each place was unique and extraordinary. On the Durban City Hall stairs at lunch hour we performed for smartly dressed office workers; at the South African Sugar Association mill we performed for workers; on the Durban beachfront we performed for swim-suited Zulus and Afrikaners on vacation; and in Umlazi, Durban’s largest township, we honked our horn and beat our drums as we drove through the streets to lead people to a large soccer field where we performed in front of nearly a thousand people sitting on an adjacent hill slope. There were hours of driving winding roads, days of staying at hotels, and much Zulu singing and drumming in the kombi that had no radio. Thubani Tshanini became our very own song maker who, like a traditional Zulu poet, never seemed at a loss for words or songs about our unfolding adventures.

After some time we felt like theatre commandos always on the move and look out for an audience and open space to perform in. Generally NAPAC arranged our performances in advance. Last minute cancellations, however, were frequent because of increasing pre-election tension and instability. One day’s safe area could be the next day’s trouble spot. With such day-to-day instability we eventually got into the habit of pitching up the show wherever we thought we could get away with it.
On a few occasions, seeing a large crowd gathering and suspecting some sort of political action unfolding, police patrol cars or armored military vehicles would stop by. As a sign of the changing times, however, soldiers would often sit and smile from their armored vehicles.

The most lasting and vivid impression of our tour was performing at a few of the many squatter camps that surround Durban, amidst vast, sprawling, and squalid warrens of shacks made variously of shipping crates, plastic, tree branches, mud, metal, and any other practical material. Without water, sewage or electricity, these camps were the home to uncounted thousands from the rural areas seeking to eke out a meager wage in the city. Many of the camps had been in existence for years and had even organized mini governments to provide order, sanitation, education, and leadership when dealing with the city government.

One squatter camp was next to a large freeway. When we arrived the local Hare Krishna group was dispensing meals. The rag tag but proud squatters honored us like celebrities, rolling out a tattered old carpet for our stage. In an opening surrounded by tall trees and shacks we beat drums and ran through the rugged pathways of the camp, cajoling the wounded and down trodden squatters to join us. It was our most emotionally charged show. Our audience hungrily observed and absorbed everything we did, every word, song, and gesture—laughter somehow feeding their souls. After our performance, we watched a play devised by a theatre group from the camp. It was a simple and beautifully told folk tale dealing with life in the camp, sexism, urban adjustment, communications, dislocation, and survival. A vivid expression of the social and moral struggle of proud people accepting intolerable conditions. That day we were all humbled. That day I understood the necessity of theatre and why I continue to do it.

At the end of our performance at the kwaMashu, station Eric came to me saying that some taxi drivers wanted to speak to me. As I walked towards the group of men, I braced myself for what I thought would be their anger at my presenting the performance that meant a disruption in their lucrative transport business. The taxi business was very tense, with disputes settled, without much thought or hesitation, by means of violence. The post-show euphoria that I was enjoying quickly evaporated into the reality of a potentially difficult situation. Suddenly, I was feeling, very conspicuously, the intruding white man. A big, round man came forward and gruffly asked:

“Are you the one who is responsible for this play?”
I nodded and was about to offer an apology when he extended his open hand, held mine, and shook it warmly.

“I represent the taxi owners of kwaMashu, and we would all like to thank you and your group for the beautiful performance you gave us.” The other men also offered handshakes.

“We saw all the action over here and the passengers asked if they could see it. I told them to go ahead, that we would wait and not to worry,” the big man said.

Another man said that he had heard about our performance from some of his passengers but had never seen theatre. He wanted us to come back and perform the show again so more children could see it.

“Can you come back on Saturday?”

The big man added: “We want our children to see things like this, my life is almost over, but for them there is the future to prepare for.”

We performed Saturday.
In Zambia, Performing the Spirits

Shoeless and shirtless children ran cheering excitedly along side the vehicle as it bounced over ruts of red earth. As our Toyota Land Cruiser entered the circle created for our performance, we immediately became the focus of gathered attention. We drove across the circle of dry grass to a makeshift stage—a large wooden box surrounded with drums and puppets. Suddenly there was a spontaneous cheer from the crowd with arms waving, faces smiling and much whistling. Our arrival signaled the beginning of the performance to the crowd who waited for nearly forty minutes in the warm, but not yet hot, African sun.

There is a unique crystal-like clarity and gentle freshness that characterizes the winter sky of southern Africa. Its sharp blue providing a perfect backdrop for the colorful mosaic of colorful clothing dotted with beautiful black faces. We were in Kitwe the heart of Zambia’s “Copperbelt,” formerly the world’s most productive copper, zinc, and tin mines until the bottom fell out of the international metals market in the early 1980s and first world countries started using laser optics instead of copper. Since then the Copperbelt Province, as the rest of Zambia, has been tail spinning in a whirl of foreign debt, inflation, unemployment, abject poverty, tribal in-fighting, and government corruption.

The Land Cruiser pulled behind our “stage box” to provide both backdrop and a backstage for our performance. Timothy Mugala, Leonard, Milimo, and Jerry Jmuale who were drumming in a sweat at the box, nodded happily. At the center of the circle was shirtless Peter Piri, who was entertaining the audience with his traditional comic dances. Though from the Bemba tribe, Peter knew scores of traditional dances from many different tribes; he was presenting an impromptu, sometimes bawdy, crowd-pleasing warm-up to fill the time. The audience followed every move of his torso and stomach as he rotated and punctuated the syncopating drum rhythms with his astounding isolations.

As we jumped out of the white Land Cruiser, hundreds of children, like curious but cautious bees, gathered around us. Micke Renlund, the
Finish producer of our performance, and I were probably the only “musungus,” white men, in the radius of miles. Our presence, along with the performance preparations, was creating a big stir and much curiosity.

Light Musonda, a small smiling man with a Buddha-like disposition, our stage manager, greeted us with a traditional bow of the head and touching of his heart. We did the same. Opening his ever-present notebook, he informed Micke and I of the situation and our state of preparedness. We had learned from our previous performing experiences that presenting an hour and a half performance in a found outdoor space in Zambia had to have military-like organization in order to be successful. Delays, complications, and anything-else-that-can-go-wrong-will, were common and seemingly inevitable. Nothing ever worked according to plan and the strangest, most unexpected things always came up. Doing outdoor theater in Africa has its own mysterious laws and characteristics. I had learned the hard way to be prepared for the worst, hope for the best, refuse upset, accept and appreciate the potential of the ever fluctuating givens, and most importantly—improvise. That is how Africa itself works—and survives.

The children stood wide-eyed staring up at me like I was some space alien. When I wasn’t looking, some children ventured to touch my white arms, giggling with the novelty of my strangeness. For many they were seeing their first white man, and if not their first, the first they were able to touch. My white skin is in black Africa a contradictory and charged symbol of all and any emotion that can fit between what is feared and what is aspired to, and what is hated to what is envied. My white skin represents all that has historically terrorized black Africa, yet conversely now is looked to as a hope of survival.

Children were everywhere, they are truly in a unique creatures living in a world of their own. Sweet friendly faces, curious, mischievous, and alive. It was for them we did our performance. Not that Imipashi was a children’s show, but because it was also a re-affirmation of the life and hopes they were so full of—a performance that spoke to the innocence in us all.

Light explained that everything was ready to go. Joshua Muyambo, one of our puppet makers was on “circle patrol” wearing his policeman’s cap and carrying his large stick. His job was to organize and maintain our performance circle. His stick and policeman’s cap were
well-established symbols of authority. Two local men had been interviewed and hired for 100 Kwacha each (20 cents) to help Joshua maintain the circle. They were given policemen’s hats too, but instead of sticks, long cardboard tubing to make sure they would not take their job too seriously.

Establishing and maintaining the circle was primary, for much of our audience had never seen such a theatrical performance before and would be uncertain about the extent of their participation. Our performance included a number of tribal dances and audience members often wanted to actively participate—which was fine to an extent. However, lacking a known, pre-established sequence of events (as is the case with traditional performance), the circle was all we had to maintain order. Often times, as the show began the audience would multiply to up to three thousand people with those in the back pressing forward to see better. An orderly circle was essential for the protection of the first four rows of seated children. Vivid in our mind was the hard lesson we learned from one of our first performances, at Kaunda Square, a “compound” (village-like district) in Lusaka. As the crowds gathered there the circle grew tight around the performance and almost swallowed us whole. Small children had been stepped on and people started shoving, pushing, crying, and screaming. We found ourselves helpless and in a sea of a few thousand people; I will never forget how the crowd instincts of curiosity developed into panic, then escalated into a survival frenzy. Maintaining the circle was our responsibility and an issue of public safety.

Our performance of Imipashi, which means “the spirits” in Bemba, had evolved from the Litooma Project, a three month program of workshops, performance development, and touring. The idea and ambition of the Litooma Project was unlike anything Zambia had seen before. It was a first-ever national theatre project, bringing together performers from tribes (who were sometimes rival) all over Zambia. What evolved was Imipashi, an allegory inspired by a well-known Lozi myth, tracing the journey of the Zambian people from creation to the corruption of present day nationhood. Never had such a “national” theatre project ever been attempted.

The idea and objectives for the project also struck a cord with a wide array of funders contributing to the project: the USIS; the British Council; Finnita, Finish Development Aid; SIDA, Swedish Economic
Development Organization; NORAD, Norwegian Overseas Development; the Embassy of the Netherlands; and FVS, the Finish Volunteer Service, Micke’s generous employer and host of the project. The Zambian Department of Cultural Services contributed the equal of nearly $1000, the largest amount they ever gave to a single art project. The three week workshop, six week rehearsal and development, and four week performance tour, was budgeted at $28,000. An unheard of and unprecedented amount for a performance in a country where the average wage is 40,000 to 80,000 Kwacha per month ($35 to $75.) It was the first nationwide performance project ever initiated in Zambia. The project created much discussion and anticipation—what performance should always do—but with opportunity came the sharpened double edge of responsibility.

A Finish actor and an American director from Alaska—two white guys—made idealistic plans for assisting Zambian performance in a way they deemed necessary. What a strange and unpredictable place the world of the late 20th century has become, bringing unlikely people by chance to unlikely places to do unheard of things. Familiar fears of being presumptuous, meddlesome outsiders, and nothing more than a sophisticated and subtle new wave of cultural imperialist gnawed at my thoughts when we began the project. There was however, as with my other projects with indigenous people, a sense of responsibility to respond and assist where I could. There is a need to do something meaningful and lasting. Being a white man with the advantage of education, opportunity, and resources is a power to be used or abused. Or it can simply lie fallow.

Light and Micke had arrived hours before and had positioned the performance across the dusty street from the Kitwe market, an ideal setting. I had arrived late because we had only one vehicle and had to make three trips to shuttle people from Copperbelt University, where we had spent the night in dilapidated dormitories, to the performance site. We had been promised a bus for this part of our tour. But when we went to University of Zambia in Lusaka to retrieve the bus, we were met by several machine gun toting military men. The government had shut down the University after a long running dispute between faculty and administration had come to a head. The Zambian president had fired the entire faculty—including those with tenure. Set back but undaunted by the sudden turn of events, the majority of the cast traveled
for five hours on commuter buses to Kitwe. The props, costumes, Micke and I (the only two licensed drivers), and five cast members stuffed, piled on, and comically over loaded the Land Cruiser and drove to Kitwe. The road we drove was notorious for its anything-goes-driving, car jackings and murder, drug running, and smuggling of stolen goods. It is the major highway through Zambia connecting Tanzania in the north to Zimbabwe and then South Africa to the south. It is a road also known for prostitution with women crowding the waysides and truck stops. Prostitution is so widespread, forced mainly by poverty. The road is known as the “AIDS Highway,” truck drivers are blamed for the rapid spreading of the disease throughout the region.

The location for the performance was perfect: in an open field across from the market. The Kitwe market was the center of the town’s daily social and commercial activity. The open-air market, thick with shanty stalls of weathered wood, was protected from the sun by a sea of colorful material. The market was a warren of narrow, labyrinth-like passages, where vendors sell fruits, vegetables, oils, maize, dried fish, house wares, auto parts, and used clothing donated by first world charitable organizations. The market was the best place to draw an audience and would be where, with a nod, Light Musonda sent several of our “Spirit Performers”—the performance had begun.

Four groups of two performers each, went to the market, two groups went to a housing area, and two to a nearby area full of textile shops. The masked Spirit Performers had developed a repertory of performance sketches, songs, and comic routines to disrupt daily activity and invite audiences to our performance circle. The idea, inspired by several different festivals and ceremonial events indigenous to Zambia, served to announce our performance as an event similar to a festival or traditional ceremony. It was also an exciting way to draw in a larger audience; it was a way for us to stir up the community and generate much excitement. It was a device I had used with great success while working with the Zulus in South Africa. It gave me a special delight to sit in the circle with the children watching their expressions as they heard screams of delight and surprise coming from the distance. The Spirit Performers had made contact and the air became charged with anticipation.

Within moments the drummers began and the circle came to life. Our drummers were amongst the best in the country and their poly-
rhythmic precision riveted attention and stirred emotion. The drummers, led by Peter Piri, included Tyford Bilma, Jerry Jmuale, Timothy Hugala, Lenard Milimo, and Fraxton Phiri. Some had worked together for years and all were trained in their respective tribal drumming traditions since childhood; they would provide the drumming (using a variety of different drums including marimbas) throughout the performance. Their sound was tight, detailed and transporting. They lived to play and knew how to please their audience.

Once the drumming started George Daka, a tall delicate man and leader of the respected University dance company, did an invocation at the center of the circle. Speaking like a diviner, his calls were punctuated by his rattle and the ecstatic calls of his “helper,” Martha Kamilo. Using the well-known performance vernacular of a traditional healer, he effectively established a sacred circle, the traditional-mythological-spiritual frame from which the performance would refer and flow. With maize (corn meal, the staple food of Africa) George outlined the performance circle, then with water and a tail switch he blessed and prepared the audience. All the while Martha, danced and called simultaneously in support and in her own ecstasy. They were preparing the circle for the arrival of the Spirits, and like the many initiations still very much a part of traditional Zambia, the circle was where the community would observe and share its mythology. The circle was a place where the magic of performance would bring together the human and the mythological to retell and reaffirm deep-seated values, order, and beliefs.

Going to the center, George went through the motions of lighting a fire, which when we performed at night, was actually what he did. For our night performances we used cans cut in half, full of diesel fuel and placed at the center and perimeter of the circle. In daylight the gesture of lighting a fire was quickly recognized—it was what people did or saw each day. With the fire the Cone People emerged from their hiding and rushed into the circle spinning, dancing, and threatening to collide into the audience, sending children screaming and scattering excitedly. They had never seen anything like these spinning, playful, and spirit-crazy creatures.

The four Cone People (as we came to call them), represented the carnal directions and elements, and were festooned with corncobs, and vividly painted by the performers. Inspired by the Makishi masquerade
dancers performed by the Luvale, Luchazi, Chokwe and Mbunda people of northwestern Zambia, the Cones were likewise full bodied and had only eye and armpit holes. Made of wood, wire, and canvas, they were a group invention equally inspired by the Makishi tradition and the cornfield next to one of our rehearsal locations. One late afternoon, the performers were asked to develop an improvisation based on the Spirits of the cornfield. After forty-five minutes in the tall stalks, about thirty performers emerged adorned with husks, stalks, leaves, and even earth. The shadows of the setting sun combined with their sounds and movement to create a very unearthly scene that sent the children watching the rehearsal running in screams of terror. We knew then a place in the performance had to be found for the Cone People.

The Cones gathered around the fire at center dancing with George as to identify their relationship with him, then spun out of center to play their drums. Their drumming called the distant Spirits, who within moments came running into the circle, through the audience and from every direction. Dancing with happy anarchy, the sixteen masked performers were both a shock and delight for audience members. Like pied pipers they brought with them hundreds of people to join the audience. The Spirits had taken people from their daily routines and gathered them to tell their story.

The Cones, like the Spirits, were incarnations of ideas still very much alive in traditional Zambian beliefs; they are what motivate the actions of the “seen” world. The Spirits, true to their tribal mythology, were either mischief-makers, ancestors, fearful, vengeful, unpredictable, or kindly. The ideas and actions of the Spirits evolved through discussion, improvisation, and culling from existing traditional dance motifs. Because of the importance and tribal identification with animals in Zambian traditional cultures, each of the Spirits associated with a specific animal. Some of the animals were tribally significant, others less so. The animal associations however, were what guided and shaped the actions, interactions, and attitudes of the Spirits and their subsequent characters. These animals included: monkey, leopard, elephant, crocodile, snake, rat, lion, impalas, hare, and tortoise. The performer’s animal association also influenced their mask and totem puppet design.

The Cones, Spirits, and the sudden increase in audience numbers, built an excitement and set a tone for the performance. The coming together was not, however, for a traditional ritual performance, but rather...
a theatre performance that applied the vocabulary of traditional ritual and ceremony. It was a multi-tribal event, melding traditional performance into something new. Imipashi would speak in a familiar performance language and in a mythological context to address contemporary issues—the modern world as seen from a traditional vantage. Within the circle the story of Zambia, a modern nation state of many tribes, would be played out. The sacred circle, like its tribal ritual models, was where the re-imagining of their world could take place.

Zambia—one of the world’s largest per capita recipients of foreign aid—is heavily in debt to foreign banks, has a steadily climbing inflation rate, and an ever declining currency value, making it one of the poorest countries on earth. Zambia, in the mind of the West, might as well be any number of other African countries that conjure up the idea “Africa,” a vague country continent, simultaneously exotic, complex, and miserable. And like the rest of Africa, Zambia is suffering from post-colonial trauma, only to realize it is still a colony—still at the bottom of capitalism’s food chain, scurrying to survive on the crumbs of Western and Japanese foreign aid and loans.

Zambia is a nation created from the imagination of politicians, businessmen, and far away powers. Except for the Zambezi River to the south, Zambia’s boundaries reflect not geographic or tribal demarcations, but rather the legacy of a colonial manipulation. Winning its independence in 1964 transformed Northern Rhodesia, a British work colony, into one of the first self-ruled African states. However, with seventy-three tribal groups inhabiting the country, Zambia has never fully realized the idea of united, Western style nationhood. The wide diversity of customs, traditions, and languages that lend Zambia its unique and vivid character is also the knotty root of its problems. Deep-seated inter-tribal antagonisms, fueled by a long history of numerous territorial conflict, many dating prior to first contact with whites, do not make for the infrastructure of a modern political state.

Today the antagonisms of the past are a prelude to the political, economic, and cultural suspicions and prejudices prevalent in Zambia. Kenneth Kaunda, the president of Zambia from 1964 to 1992, attempted to unify the nation with socialist policy and by down playing tribalism. The conflict between tribalism and nationhood is not unique to Zambia, but it remains a phenomenon poorly understood in the West. Somehow, however, the predicament of Zambia has not lead to
the war and terrorism that has savaged places like Rwanda, Haiti, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Somalia, Angola, and the former Yugoslavia.

Corruption, disorganization, and mismanagement have burdened Zambia with a bloated and inefficient bureaucracy, horrendous to nonexistent public services, high prices and taxes. In 1993, several ministers were convicted or implicated in a number of crimes, which included: international drug trafficking, money laundering, bribery, kickback scams, and corruption scandals. It was common to see rows of BMW’s and Mercedes Benz’s parked outside the mansions of high ranking government officials who, supposedly, have an annual income equal to $40,000 a year—indeed, a testament to corruption, re-directed foreign aid, and moral collapse.

To drive through the potholed streets of Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, is to drive though a maze of streets lined with cinder block walls erected to shield homes from rampant crime. Like a futuristic nightmare, broken glass and razor wire top the walls. Large metal gates, guards, and dogs are the norm; every house window has bars, every door a metal gate. Lusaka is like an armed camp with only a thin line somehow preventing its total social breakdown.

How and why does someone like me fit into such a setting? The confluences of history, race, politics, economics, and cultures often find manifestation in performance. That is at the core of the work I do. My work organizes an event using performance as technology by which to examine self and cultural-economic-political-social predicament. It is an event that asks the participants to take stock in themselves and their resources. It asks them to step out, however slightly, from the flow of modern time and space to regain a deeper and older resource. I begin with questions to provoke other questions, all in search of a few answers. The work has no pre-imposed agenda; it manifests itself, myself serving as provocateur and guide. If there is any pre-determined goal it is this: to leave behind the awareness of method, process, and possibility. It is from this that I derive meaning and satisfaction.

The Spirits settled into a large circle around George singing a song of appreciation—a traditional song from the Tonga tribe. Bowed to the ground, the Spirits sang as the Cones and Martha went to George with a twelve-foot high puppet. Entering the puppet, George became Nyambe, the creator. Although inspired by a myth of the Lozi people, Nyambe, bore a similarity to a number of Zambia’s tribal origin myths.
It was the representation rather than the detail of Nyambe that had attracted us. Also important was the ritual act of witnessing: to see how a human performer becomes diviner than a god. With George’s transformation came the time of myth. Nyambe, the creator, came amongst us, and like a ritual, reiterated and reaffirmed deeply seated beliefs.

The Spirits circled Nyambe as the Cone People returned to their drums, continuing the heartbeat that would underlie the performance. Nyambe’s presence brought order to the formerly disorderly spirits. Then he gave them an identity. With the arms and head of the Nyambe puppet controlled by its operator, the animated god “gave” each of the Spirits their tribal identity. Not able to present all of Zambia’s seventy-three tribes, we instead presented the tribes with the representatives. The performers respective tribes:

- Martin Chisulo-Luvale
- Meriam Inambao-Lozi
- Mary Manzole-Tonga
- Lenard Milimo-Lala
- Catherine Musonda-Bemba
- Joseph Malisau-Tembuka
- Laiza Phiri-Senga
- Tyford Bilma-Ngoni
- Peter Mulenga-Lenge
- Benne Banda-Chewa
- Flavia Ranzoni-Whites
- Linda Enriquez-Meyer-East Indian

Two white women participated in the workshops and performance—Italian-South African Flavia Ranzoni, and Mexican-American Linda Enriquez-Meyers—and like the others Nyambe gave them tribal identities. Flavia, a non-actor traveling in Zambia, became interested in the work, asked to join, and was accepted by the group. Linda, the wife of a U.S. Embassy physician, had been doing theatre work in Lusaka and likewise became a welcomed addition to the workshop and performance. The two white women, along with Micke and myself, brought a creative and cultural exchange to the work. Whites and East Indians in Zambia comprise less than 2% of the total population, making our presence and work, especially creative work, with the group very much out of the
norm. Our participation also had the effect of making the Zambians more aware of the inter-tribal prejudices they had taken for granted; also, the presence of foreigners with very different cultural ways, forced them to see themselves not as tribal representations, but, rather, as people who share a Zambian identity. Working with whites required the Zambian participants to show, and so appreciate more acutely, what they as a group had to offer. They could not assume we whites knew what they were about, and, instead, had to explain and demonstrate dances, cultural references, mythology, history, and lifestyles. In so doing they identified and objectified the value of their knowledge. This is precisely what the project had hoped to achieve and build upon: to identify, explore, and express their collective cultures. Having whites participate in their culture on their terms, was also a significant sociological and psychological step towards cultural and personal empowerment, self-worth, and esteem. This fact did not go unnoticed publicly and added a specialness to the event. Prominently identified was the participation of an American, a Finn, and an Italian, as were the words “multi-cultural,” “international,” and “multi-racial,” used in newspaper, television and radio reporting about the workshops and performance.

To address the subtle inter-tribal antagonisms, some performers were deliberately assigned to perform the tribal dance of a traditional rival. Initially this caused some grumbling and some insensitive “correcting” by those from whose tribal dance was being attempted; eventually, however a sense of ensemble sharing and teaching evolved. In this instance, as in others, I took advantage of my being an outsider by asking them to do things no insider could nor would even think of asking. By dancing the dances of another tribe, boundaries were broken and performers expanded their performance vocabulary while gaining insight and appreciation for other tribal ways. Dance sharing established a paradigm and attitude that would guide the workshop and performance process: traditional performance was a language accessible to all and not something limited to tribal identity. This porous passing back-and-forth between tribal cultures and performers was seen as a source of strength.

When Nyambe gave each individual its tribal identity, the chosen would perform that tribe’s distinct dance. Fellow performers would clap, drum, and sing in accompaniment—often times evoking the audience to do likewise. The performance of the tribes also brought dances
to parts of the country that otherwise had no direct experience with the tribe each represented. The disparate tribal dances, given to the tribes in performance by a single creator figure, resonated with political, cultural, and cosmological allegory. Seeing the dances of sometime rival tribes being sung and danced along side of one another symbolically demonstrated to our audience that the wealth of traditional Zambian culture was a cohabitating whole rather than separate entities.

The idea for the Lizoomo Project originated in Finland at the Tampere International Theatre Festival, August 1993. In attendance at my lecture presentation was Idalotta Backman and Micke Renlund, two Finish theatre artists and cultural workers. Micke worked for the FVS in Lusaka—the Finish Volunteer Service (the Finish equivalent to the Peace Corps)—and was assigned to work with the Department of Cultural Services, a Zambian government agency. During his three years in Zambia, he had developed the National Theatre Resource Project, organizing and conducting theatre training programs throughout the country. He also facilitated the monumental task of documenting traditional ceremonies and rituals.

A professional actor in Finland prior to his work with FVS, the stocky and pony-tailed Micke Renlund exuded boundless idealism, generosity, and energy. So much on the move and full of ideas, he was nicknamed “Action Mike.” His National Theatre Resource Project was essentially a one-man operation with an office in a barracks-like building with one desk, two chairs, and a file cabinet. The Department of Cultural Services had little funding, almost no equipment, and few poorly paid employees. In Zambia, where eating regularly is often a struggle, concerned with culture is a very low if not non-existent priority. The general attitude of the government was that tribal cultures were strong enough to take care of themselves. At a time when many pressing practical issues overwhelmed the nation—like housing, education, food, and health care-cultural funding was seen as a very low priority.

After several talks in Finland, Micke and I developed a project outline we thought best suited to Zambia's performance needs and objectives—it was the outline he would present to the Center, the Zambian government, and a host of international funders. The dilemma of how to bridge the distance between popular theatre and traditional tribal performance was prominent in our discussions. Other issues included actor training, the development of a theatre style unique and expressive
of culturally rich Zambia, and application of traditional tribal performance as a viable contemporary expression. While waiting for my flight at the Helsinki airport, Micke and I talked and came to a general agreement. We would organize a two week performance training period from which would evolve a six week performance experiment and development period—the resulting performance would tour Lusaka and as much of the country as possible.

It would be a project emphasizing the identity and realization of a black African self. The unique identity and point-of-view of Zambia exists in the margins, pushed there by the overwhelming juggernaut of Western culture. Their vantage is important, and like other indigenous people, seldom heard. Now it is a vantage threatened with absorption before it can participate in the dialogue of world cultures. The Zambian sense of self (like other indigenous people) has been stricken with self-doubt, the result of generations of colonial scarring. What remains of their pathway to the rich traditional past is strewn with fragments of self, culture, identity, and place. Theatre is, and performance has been since the origin of humanity, a pro-active means, a technology by which to revisit, reaffirm, and re-imagine self, community, and culture. With a handshake Micke and I agreed to begin work together in eight month’s time.

Micke decided to offer the project to the Center for the Arts, the arts division of the University of Zambia. The Center offered a few courses in the visual arts, dance, and theatre. Like other universities worldwide, the University of Zambia was cutting funding for their art and theatre departments. While the Center’s director, the hard working and dedicated Mapopa Mtonga, was out of the country, the administration converted their black box theatre into a print shop. The elimination of the entire Center was an imminent danger. The University’s administration had become influenced by Christian fundamentalism and saw the Center, especially its dance troop, as espousing anti-Christian and heathen tribal beliefs. The irony of the late twentieth century is that two white men, Micke and myself, along with several European funding organizations, saw the Litooma Project as a way to encourage traditional performance and culture.

Micke reasoned that the Center for the Arts, the country’s major dance and theatre training center, was the best choice for “producer,” and as such needed morale boosting. The fact that so much foreign
money and attention focused on the Center made the government and university suddenly reconsider the Center’s value.

Following Nyambe’s assignment of tribal identities, he ascended to a large box reserved for pronouncements consistent with the raised throne area of tribal chiefs. The Spirits circled counter-clockwise and passing before the elevated Nyambe stooped in thanks to pick-up a totem puppet representing their tribal and animal identity. The totems were their “soul” doubles. Zambian traditional cultures almost universally hold that each person possesses a soul (moyoo in Lozi) which, after death, goes to Nyambe (Turner 51); this double (silumba) can also be put into the service of evil. The totems incarnated this cultural concept as they enabled theatrical expressiveness.

The totems became, like “souls,” incorporated into their dance and song and a part of their identity. The song circled and climaxed and then Nyambe bestowed on all the tribes of Zambia, traditional values, demonstrating that all tribes have a shared value system. The gift to the people of Zambia were, Love, Happiness, Intelligence, Virility, Perception, Strength, Solidarity, Sensuality. Peace, and Respect. The performers cheered in happiness and appreciation then bowed as Nyambe left, fatigued and wanting, to rest before returning the following day to bestow the rest of his gifts onto the people of Zambia.

While Nyambe gave gifts, a man and a woman, wearing contemporary street clothes, entered the circle from the audience. Intentionally suggesting they were two audience members wanting to join the performance—which sometimes happened—the two soon revealed themselves as the mythological figures of Kamunu and Mayandu, the first man and woman. They had watched Nyambe’s gift-giving and felt deprived. Nyambe, who was exiting, tells them he must rest. He continues to exit followed by Martha, now Nasilele, the wife of Nyambe and by Micke, who since the first appearance of Nyambe has been playing musical accompaniment on the tenor saxophone. The inclusion of the sax was Micke’s idea and turned out to be popular and exotic in a part of the world that has limited exposure to such instruments.

Kamunu and Mayandu stop Nyambe again, pleading to be given a tribe and gifts as he did for the others. Nyambe asks them to be patient then leaves. Kamunu, played by the very talented and physically agile Isaiah Bukanga (from the Nsenga tribe), cries comically to the delight of
the crowd. Mayandu, played by Phanny Walubita (Lozi), in contrast is cool and calculated, plotting vengeance. She persuades Kamunu to imitate Nyambe, convincing him that he too is capable of god-like abilities. In short order she dresses Kamunu in a large headpiece with body-length material attached. The large, brightly colored papier-mâché head had mirrors for eyes. Isaiah created the headpiece inspired by a number of oversized head piece masks widely used by a variety of tribes in Zambia, Zaire, Malawi, and Tanzania. Mayandu, in a matter-of-fact way, removes his pants. It was an action that greatly amused the audience who identified how her servitude also meant his dependence.

Ascending to Nyambe’s stage box, Kamunu timidly wakes up the resting tribes and their totem spirits. Mayandu, his prompter, henchman, and biggest fan, shouts and prods the tribes into wakefulness. Soon their lust for power and money becomes a metaphor for modern Zambia. With comic declamation, Kamunu tells the tribes he has come in Nyambe’s place and will complete the giving of the gifts. Rather than virtues, however, he gives them vices.

MAYANDU: That is now a man thinking. Go and stand there (pointing to the throne) and prove your words.

KAMUNU: But wife, that place is sacred.

MAYANDU: Sacred to your lunacy? Are you not ashamed of yourself? Go up there!

KAMUNU: I shall go, for it is said that: “He who threatened and he who is threatened, both are mistaken.” Fear is like perishing in shallow cold waters.

He advances slowly to the throne—then calls out and the tribes of Zambia begin to rise.

Do not be afraid or surprised. I am the messenger from your God. I have come to simplify what your God had presented. This for your understanding. I am Kamunu and she is my wife Mayandu. We are both sacred beings. My words for you are: You should practice hatred. You require money for happiness. You should do what ever you feel you should do. You should think only of yourselves and not your community.

NYAMBE (enters): Who gave you the powers to be on my throne?

KAMUNU: I used my will power.

NYAMBE: You prove me a failure.

The tribes cheered Kamunu on excitedly until Nyambe’s return brought sudden silence and remorse. Nyambe tells of his disappoint-
ment and how, as a consequence, he will not give his remaining gifts to the tribes. Instead he will leave them, escaping the meddlesome Kamunu, and go to the far side of the sun—Nyambe’s symbol. Immediately two spiders entered chasing the tribes with a large spider’s web. One of the spiders, Jerry Jmuale, used stilts. A member of the matrilineal Chewa tribe, the small and agile Jmuale came to life when performing Nyua inspired dances such as the spider. Initiated in the all male Nyua secret cult when eight, the twenty-six year old had mastered fifteen of the thirty-three dances of the society. With age he will be initiated progressively to other Nyau dances. Some of the dances are more complex, and build on previous techniques, concentration, and spiritual development that come with age. His facile ability on stilts was something to behold. Since he was not performing a Nyua dance in sacred context, he did not wear the Gule Wamkulu (great dance) mask that normally accompanies the dance—he, instead, wore a rubber gorilla mask with fake hair, the type you might find in a masquerade shop in the U.S. The audience delighted in his performance as he chased the Spirits across the circle with a few steps.

A three-foot high Nyambe puppet entered, circling to a slow exit. The spiders followed Nyambe and a large sun carried on top of a bamboo pole; Micke played a mournful sax accompaniment. The tribal performers also followed singing a Ngoni mourning song traditionally sung for battle dead. 

Isaiah and Phanny proved to be ideal choices for the roles of Kamunu and Mayandu. Both were seasoned members of popular theatre groups. Isaiah was from the Tiza Arts Theatre Club in Ndola (Northern Province), and Phanny was a member of the Zambian Army Theatre Group, doing television and theatre. Like other popular theatre actors, they were primarily self-trained. Popular theatre actors learn from other actors and become quickly seasoned by the tutelage of outdoor, anything-can-happen-or-you-lose-your-audience, performing.

There existed only a few and infrequent theatre classes at the Center for the Arts, with training in music and visual arts fairing only slightly better. Zambia has no national theatre or gallery. The closest Zambia has to an idea of a national theatre is the Lusaka Playhouse, a dirty, colonial era ramshackle barn of a proscenium arch theatre that performs Western styled plays for mostly a small white and upper middle-class black audience. Both University and the Department of Cul-
tural Services support highly regarded dance groups that perform a sampling of traditional tribal dances from throughout the nation. These groups, however, have developed a presentational style geared for consumer and tourist presentations at a place like Lusaka's Hotel Intercontinental.

Micke operated theatre training programs that provided much needed basic acting, directing, and management skills to the Popular Theaters—there numbered over a hundred such groups nationwide. The popular theatre movement began in Zambia in the late 1960s as part of a socialist inspiration to bring theatre to the people. The intent behind the popular theatre movement was as much a part of the idealism and political consciousness of the late 1960s, as it was a response to the real needs of communicating to the rural and urban semi-literate and illiterate.

The popular theatre style uses a broad physical style of acting, with no-tech, few props and costumes, and is performed at found sites in a rural field or urban compounds, similar to other parts of Africa, as stated in the previous chapter. Prior to our workshops and Imipashi rehearsals and production, Isaiah had toured his province performing a show about animal poaching. Phanny had appeared in a television drama, which had a similarly broad moralizing plot line, depicting the evils of property grabbing—a practice among some tribes whereby the wife and children lose all property to in-laws in the event of her husband’s death.

Surprisingly, the popular theatre movement in Zambia and throughout Africa, chose not to incorporate or even recognize in its style of presentation the rich traditional performance heritage of tribal Zambia. Part of this was deliberate, as Zambia, like other multi-tribal African nations, was wanting to distance itself from tribal politics and thinking. Socialist and egalitarian minded popular theatre saw itself as an ideal, demonstrating a modern (i.e. Western) and pragmatic alternative to tribal ways. A modern Zambia had to move forward; and traditional tribal performance lost value when dealing with pressing, if not overwhelming contemporary issues.

The Litooma Project went to great lengths to include an understanding of methods, exercises, and organization so as to make the greatest, long-term impact. Provided with notebooks and pens, the participants were encouraged to keep their own records, describing the ex-
ercises and process. Actively encouraged throughout the workshop and rehearsal, was their interaction—I wanted them to observe and reflect on the process, which aside from the workshops and rehearsals included skills enhancement. Lela Penlton, a Finish puppet maker and performer, who with her assistant Joshua Muyambo, taught puppet making and performing skills; and Micke, an accomplished musician, taught western musical skills.

Nor was the skills exchange one sided. The participants offered their methods, shared their dances and experiences. For many it was the first time they had realized the value of what they knew. In a sense the workshop, rehearsals, and performance became a forum for the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and tribal cultures. Many participants remarked with enthusiasm about the benefits of the opportunity to work and exchange ideas with other popular theatre performers.

All of the performers spoke English, however, some did not speak it well and tried to hide this fact out of fear of embarrassment. Once discovered, additional time for translation and cultural interpretation of each exercise, note or direction, became incorporated into our rhythm of working. To make sure the process was communicating as fully and equally as possible, we instituted a policy of my stepping out of the discussion to allow the participants to integrate the material by freely talking amongst themselves in either Bemba or Nyanga—the two most widely used languages. A variety of group members led these discussions, translations and interpretations, so as to engender leadership responsibilities. During this time, I would sit by, available for clarifications. Sometimes their discussions would take up to an hour in duration, and include much emotion—it was time well spent. Leadership of the discussion by some, however, gave rise to underlying tribal antagonisms; however, as these tensions occurred we moved quickly to identify, discuss and remedy them. I am deeply indebted to Light Musonda, our stage manager and my right hand man, who was a second set of eyes and ears, patiently informing and educating me to the subtle interactions between the participants, their implications, and their tribal context.

Issues of inter-tribal antagonism, language and educational disparity and rural versus city (Lusaka) discrepancies came to the fore during performance development. “Creative groups,” who were assigned and/or volunteered, worked on specific dances, scenes, or songs. The idea behind the creative groups (comprised of three to nine people each) was
to develop a sense of creative independence and self-reliance—it offered an opportunity for the groups to figure things out for themselves, address objectives, and organize their work without my direct influence. Often times the creative groups took the initiative developing significant contributions that were brought to the group to be worked into the eventual performance. However, sometimes the groups, working by themselves with only my occasional visit, accomplished little, having been paralyzed by underlying antagonism. Some group members would resent the leadership of another, disagree without constructive criticism, or simply refuse to contribute if an idea came from someone they thought “under” them. For some it was inter-tribal resentments; in other situations, disparity in education or verbal abilities created tensions and even social hierarchies. I pulled Timothy Mugala to the side several times for the way he treated Leonard Milimo and Tyford Bilma. Both men had limited formal education but worked hard and sincerely. It was very upsetting to see them stutter in confusion when the educated and charismatic Timothy browbeat them with his “correct” way of doing things. Both Timothy and Tyford were from the Tumbuka tribe, and part of their interaction dealt with tribal hierarchy and rivalry. To his credit, Timothy and others eventually adjusted their behavior, becoming more accepting and respectful of others.

From the beginning, I viewed my role as that of guide, organizer, teacher and, reluctantly, an arbitrator—my preference is to develop such work by consensus. However, when I sensed the group was sidestepping culturally ingrained tribal antagonism by deferring to me—using me as the final word—I called them on it. An attempt was made to openly discuss any issue—dealing with the performance, personalities, organization, and other matters and have them take responsibility for examining and resolving a given issue for the good of the project. One such issue was the name of the performance. Some participants wanted Imipashi, a Bemba word for “spirits”, others wanted Mīzumu, the Nyanja word. Their proposal was that as the director of the performance, I must decide. Since the 1992 election of Chaluba as Zambia’s president, the large Bemba tribe had been seen as becoming too powerful and arrogant, taking over key positions in government and business. The non-Bembas in the group wanted to use the Nyanja word and language in the performance, even though in certain areas Bemba is more widely understood. Our heated discussion lasted for hours; we voted for Imi-
pashi, because its meaning did not include connotations of evil spirits; we also decided to adjust from Bemba to Nyanja whenever necessary, in response to audience comprehension. Democratic methods have not come easy to Africa.

As time went on, if I sensed the group or an individual was deferring to me for authorization rather than trusting themselves or one another, I would reply: “I’m not your bwana!” Bwana is the obsequious word for boss and carries with it a stinging colonial resonance. My being white made it all the more resonant. Through the repeated use of the phrase in a variety of situations, they came to understand its meaning and implications. Initially I used the phrase so much they became able to anticipate my reaction, nodding with a smile of recognition. Eventually, the company became more confident in themselves and trusting of one another. Some lessons are harder to convey than others.

I continued to give them my “Bwana” speech: “I am not your bwana! I am working with you! You cannot depend on me, because I will be going and you will have to do it yourselves for yourselves. Your success lives in how well you can work together. Everything you need you can work together. Everything you need is right here. It is in you and it is in this group.”

With Nyambe’s departure from humanity, Kamunu and Mayandu seized the opportunity of taking advantage of a grieving and vulnerable people. The tribes, in despair, go grieving to their “families” in the audience. It wasn’t long, however, before Kamunu and Mayandu conspired to stir discord, blaming the loss of Nyambe by pitting one tribe against the other. Kamunu, instigating the tribes into accusing one another for their loss, stirred up familiar tribal antagonisms and prejudices. The tribes finally do battle—facing off in two rows, singing and dancing Bemba and Ngoni war songs—they march to their deaths.

During the moment of their deaths, a Nyau mask spirit character makes its first appearance. The appearance of “Kasinja,” played by Jerry Jmuale, was an audience favorite that evoked audience cheers with many running into the circle to give him money. It marked the first appearance of a traditionally recognizable spirit character and provided an important stabilizing effect, reaffirming and reassuring the audience of the perseverance of traditional values and spirits. The action, characters, and ideas that had preceded this appearance were familiar and relatable, however they were new and outside a traditional performance context (i.e., theatre), portraying a narrative of loss and disruption. With the
appearance of Kasinja, the narrative suddenly jumped into the context of mythological continuity—a similar effect might be equal to the appearance of Christ during a contemporary Western drama. Kasinja’s appearance evoked a stabilizing order of tradition as it stepped out of the narrative action to glimpse a greater sense of self and perspective. Kasinja would appear again, always unseen by Kamunu who was not spiritually aware, to remind the audience of the perseverance of their cultural beliefs despite the narrative merely being played out. The inclusion of Kasinja, and other traditional performers later in the story, also added a sense of the sacred to the performance. Accordingly, I learned never to address the performers while wearing traditional masks, allowing the dancers to take the masks off in private, and to never associate the mask with its performer. Giving direction or notes to Kasinja, I would be careful not to address Jerry, but rather address Kasinja, in general. This, as a rule, I observed in respect to all of the traditional mask performers.

After Kasinja’s spirit dance over the dead tribes of Zambia, Mayandu and Kamunu, like sorcerers taking possession of souls, knock on the earth three times and sing to raise the dead. The Spirits, now metaphors for tribal Zambia, give up their totems (symbols of their soul) and in so doing become zombies fully under the control of Kamunu and Mayandu, who beat and abuse the totems while the performers, standing in the distance as zombies, react as if it were they, themselves, who were being abused. Spirit possession, and the tampering of the soul by another, is a well-established and living belief amongst Zambia’s many tribal cultures.

With the tribes under his control, Kamunu, still thirsting for power, calls upon the spirit world. The Cone people enter thinking Nyambe has called them but, instead, find themselves in the middle of a deceptive plot. With the aid of the tribes, the Cone people likewise transform into Kamunu’s mindless servants. Kamunu and Mayandu parade around the circle, with the Cone people under Kamunu’s control, bestowing blessings on the audience. With the performer’s action an absurd cross breeding of political, tribal, and religious symbols and actions came pointedly together.

The power mad Kamunu toys with the zombie tribes and Cone people until he becomes bored, at which time he sends them away. Once alone, Mayandu admonishes Kamunu for being unnecessarily
abusive and power hungry. Tolerating no objections, Kamunu turns on
his wife, knocking her down. Kamunu then announces to the audience
that he is their king and they have gathered to pay him homage. His
speech brought many laughs but, confronting the audience he claimed
they laughed because they too were zombies and he willed them to
laugh. “Why don’t you leave? See, you stay here watching me because
you are in my control. You have no mind of your own—only what I tell
you. You cannot think for yourself.”

Isaiah Bukanga and Phanny Walubita proved in this dialog heavy
scene their long experience playing to large outdoor audiences. Per-
forming in areas sometimes two hundred feet wide, competing with
street sound and a vocal audience, the two never failed to capture their
audience with subtleties of character, relationship, and language. It was
remarkable to hear an audience of about three thousand spectators
suddenly break into loud laughter with an aside, a change of infle-
cction, or facial expression. Isaiah successfully combined physical expression
with an expressive rubber face that made his bungling fool villain ac-
ceptable if not lovable. Phanny, in contrast, played her role as calcula-
ting, severe, and smart; she was everything Kamunu was not, and liked it
that way.

Then Kamunu called out the visible signs of his control of the mod-
ern world. With the appearance of very familiar characters from the
audience’s daily life, the performance expanded on tribal and mytho-
logical context into a very recognizable reality. With this scene the my-
theo-spiritual origins of tribal Zambia, connected and extrapolated, into
a contemporary context. The archetypal and symbolic suddenly became
real—it was the first time the Spirits appeared without their masks. The
Policeman introduced the modern reality overseen by Kamunu. Played
by the tall, well-built Leonard Milimo in an actual uniform, he entered,
saluted Kamunu then patrolled the audience with the familiar gait and
admonishments of an actual policeman. His entrance, like that of ot-
thers, was accompanied by drumming and dancing. The Teacher, played
by Linda Meyers, was next, demanding sections of the audience to recite
familiar school lessons—which often evoked responses. Catherine Mu-
sonda played The Doctor wearing a white lab coat, syringe in hand, giv-
ing out condoms and taking temperatures. Miriam Inambao, (a
government nurse normally assigned to work with a Lozi popular the-
atre group), played The Nun in full habit, giving blessings and reminding
the audience of colonial religions. The Politician, played by Benne Banda, (actor and journalist with Lusaka’s leading newspaper), went around the circle wearing a comic bowtie, shouting “Vote for Me!” and making preposterous campaign promises. Martin Chisulo played The Businessman, circling the audience, trying to make one-sided deals. Other characters included The Prostitute, representing AIDS, played by Laiza Phiri; a Television Set (there is one, government owned station), played with comic brilliance by Peter Mulenga who spouted familiar government statements; Money, played by Flavia Ranzoni, waved oversized Kwacha at the audience with a tease; The devil played by Tyford Bilima, wearing a rubber devil’s mask and frightening many—he played beer and liquor containers as instruments made to rattle; The Chief was played by Joseph Malisau in traditional looking skins, declaiming the righteousness of tribal ways; and Micke played Mandrax—the ecstasy evoking synthetic drug that was creating such a political stir in Zambia—wearing a large pill and playing a trombone. Each of the figures had their own recognizable, archetypal performance language, and all were under Kamunu’s control. Under Kamunu’s guidance, the scene built into a frantic chaos, losing any narrative structure that had existed before, suggesting the all too familiar confusion of living in modern Zambia.

And so Kamunu proceeds with his destructive way by turning the world upside down and inside out, a metaphor for the manipulated values of modern Zambia. He indoctrinates those under his control and “re-orders” the world to his whims. At his command right becomes left, “come” means “go,” “jump” means “squat” and “wrong” means “right.” He renames men, calling them women; he calls Flavia, one of our white performers, black; identifies himself as handsome and intelligent, then orders them to leave by ordering them all to stay. The confusing duplicity of the world of Kamunu was full of slapstick, but resonated with the recognizable sense of communication and social breakdown, and the ugly, chaotic uncertainty Zambians had come to live with. The scene, inspired by the performers’ experiences, evolved through discussion and improvisation.

“In Zambia, everything is tired but somehow we get to tomorrow,” is what George Daka, our Nyambe told me. The simplest communication posed tremendous complications and challenges at every turn. Photocopying machines were non-existent. Phones were donated, Soviet
era rejects working infrequently, if at all. Only two phones worked on the campus of the University of Zambia (enrollment 20,000 +) for the entire three months I spent in Lusaka. The only assured way to communicate with people was to drive to whomever you needed to communicate with. Such communication was by chance or persistence; some days Micke and I spent hours driving all over town to accomplish what a simple phone call could do. Ordering a phone might mean waiting for years; and, then, breakdowns were common, as were power and water outages.

Likewise transportation was a constant, complicated, and time consuming nightmare. Some of the performers walked to rehearsals, a few rode bicycles, but the majority rode in the back of a pick-up truck provided by the Swedish Development agency. Sometimes twenty people and drums crowded in, with many of us standing in the back of the truck as we swayed and sang our way to our rehearsal. Those that missed their pick-up, either didn’t show, or walked to rehearsals, arriving several hours late because they could not afford the equivalent to ten cents for a bus ride. Fraxton Phiri, one of the drummers and Coner people, came to Micke and I sadly one day asking if we could help him. His father had just died and he wanted us to use the pick-up to drive his father’s casket to the cemetery because he could not afford transport. We did so, and gave him an advance on his wages so he could buy food for the customary gathering of the extended family during mourning. Fraxton was the sole supporter of nine people, earning an equivalent of $52 dollars a month.

Just getting the project started was no easy matter. After a three-week delay of the workshop starting date, I decided to begin in spite of the fact many of the nationwide participants had not yet arrived. The participants had to be notified by the notoriously inefficient postal system, which in many cases took three weeks for cross-town delivery. Another problem was getting women, especially from the provinces, to participate in the project. Except for Miriam, who was in her mid-forties, all the women were single; husbands of popular theatre actresses would not let their wives come to Lusaka.

Having worked in Africa before, I knew a sure way to get things started was to simply start; others somehow come, attracted to the activity. When we started the workshop, there were only four participants from various parts of Zambia, although we had anticipated 35. Though
none of the University Dancers had any previous theatre experience, they had amongst them a wealth of traditional dance knowledge. Dr. Mtonga, director of the Center for the Arts, suggested I use them in the project and generously paid their wages. At about the middle of the second week of the workshop, we had 23 popular theatre performers and the 12 member dance troop participating. The interaction between the social-realistic popular theatre artists and the traditional dance troop would set the tone for how the two formerly discrete styles of expression would co-mingle. By the beginning of the third week, six weeks after my arrival and five weeks after the original starting date, we were ready to begin.

Performer’s health was also a critical issue throughout. Nearly every day at least one, and at times up to four, people were absent because of a variety of ailments. Three group members were HIV positive, others suffered variously from recurring bouts of malaria, a variety of stomach ailments, malnutrition, tick bite fever; there was even one case of cholera. Health care in Zambia is abysmal and AIDS is a time bomb waiting to explode in the years to come. So inaccessible was healthcare for the poor, that one day I found Isaiah rubbing himself down with automobile brake fluid to dry out a severe skin rash—he said it was all he could afford. Living conditions invited illness. Many lived without electricity and fetched their water from public faucets, which was oftentimes unsafe to drink. The majority of the local participants, like Jerry Jumale, lived with their spouse and children in a dirt floor shack, drew water from a community faucet, and cooked outside on an open fire. Out of town participants were housed at the Finnish Volunteer Service dormitory, which was for them like a luxury hotel and caused some envy among the Lusaka participants. For many of our participants, the daily meal we provided at the British colonial era “Rugby Club” was their only meal (we generally worked five days a week, six to eight hours a day). I would, often times, buy and distribute oranges to augment their diet.

Our workshops began at the Chickwakawa Theatre site. Chickwakwa was less a theatre and more an outdoor amphitheater in ruin. Located about 15 km from the city center next to a housing area and cornfields, the stage house was a converted tobacco drying building on what was a former tobacco farm. Established during the late 1960s by a group of activist students that viewed theatre as a vehicle for social
change and cultural identity, Chickwakwa means to “cut grass to its roots,” hence its role as a “grass roots” theatre. The original idea was to premiere and have an extended run of *Imipashi* at the site in order to revive Chickwakwa. The notion soon evaporated in the heat of Zambian sun that sapped the early days of the workshop of energy and spirit. Lusaka had few large indoor spaces available but, after much searching and negotiating, persistent Micke secured a cavernous geodesic dome called “The American Dome.” Donated by the U.S. Government, after twenty some years of being transported to a dozen countries as testament of American ingenuity, the dome had seen better days. However, it was a clean and secure space and came to provide an important sense of “home” for our work. The downside of the dome was its acoustics, which made for wild reverberating echoes, especially during our numerous drumming sessions.

Working with the Center for the Arts as our umbrella producer, was to prove uneven for a variety of reasons. The university fiscal operations, for one, proved cumbersome and at times suspect, causing tremendous delays and hardship for cash strapped project participants. Because of recent revelations of widespread corruption, the International Monetary Fund had imposed severe pressure on the Zambian government to clean its financial house or risk losing all aid. In response, all governmental money dealings had to be scrutinized by as many people as possible. All this meant that production and performer disbursement forms needed several signatures and could sit on several desks for weeks before any cash disbursement. Micke’s and my association with the project complicated matters: in Zambia, the presence of whites signaled money. Often naïve whites, especially foreigners, were targeted as easily bluffed by cultural differences and expectations long enough to be fleeced. Taking a cut, bribery, and corruption are an institutionalized part of the culture in this economically desperate country. A bottle of vodka, for example, was the cost of my visa, secured in three hours; it would otherwise have not been ready for “weeks.” Another first hand experience of Zambian official’s desperation, occurred only a few miles after passing through boarder posts upon entering Zambia, the bus I was riding on suddenly stopped for gun toting military men conducting a “special inspection.” A few dollars and some candy let my bags pass without another inspection and possible “confiscation.” The
mention of my invitation by the Director of Cultural Affairs (with a letter to prove it) persuaded respectful circumspection.

At times participants went literally hungry waiting for payments issued from the Center. Generally speaking, the performers suffered with accepting and patient resignation; they were used to such treatment and expected the worse. However, soon money issues began to negatively affect working attitudes and trust in the project and me. The performers were at the lowest end of the money receiving line, and experience told them those higher ups seeing the money before them were taking their time because they were taking their cut. The situation was becoming critical and change needed to take place. After citing several irregularities with the budget reporting, and after much difficulty with cash disbursement, Micke took over as the production manager, storing boxes of Kwachas (the largest note is 500, the equivalent to 80 cents) in a closet of his house. Mapopa Mtonga, the director for the Center, who had nothing to do with fiscal matters, agreed and thought it best that we take over direct control. Several hundred dollars went unaccounted for, however. Although we never found out how, a university employee, and former member of the production staff, had somehow found money to refurbish his living room. We could, however, never prove his guilt.

Not satisfied with earthly power, Kamunu demands Mayandu assist him in calling the unborn so he can control the future. Using diviner inspired rhythms, song, and movements the land of the unborn appears. The spirit mask, Kasinja, returns, bringing with him two other Nyua spirit masks carrying large colorful branches festooned with ribbons and small infant puppets—unborn children. The two mask characters carrying the branches both wore St. Peter masks. These masked characters, played by Timothy Mugala and Fraxton Phiri, demonstrated how the Nyua performance tradition incorporated Christian characters. Nyambe also appears bringing with him a spokesman for the unborn, Martin Chisulo. The diminutive Chisulo, a popular theatre actor from the northern province, speaking for the unborn, confronts Kamunu, telling him that he cannot have the future. A dynamo of a performer, he gave an impassioned speech, confronting the audience and eliciting traditional responses to his call to action. As the spokesman of the future, he directed the two St. Peter characters to symbolically whip and strip Kamunu. Kasinja, meanwhile dances in celebration, exiting with
Kamunu’s head piece and costume. The future leaves Kamunu standing by himself in his polka dot boxer shorts, pleading for the audience’s assistance.

With the defeat of Kamunu, the Spirits return (sans masks) and, by regaining their totem puppets, symbolically take possession of their souls again. Circling Kamunu and Mayandu, with Kasinja circling in celebration, the two stood trial, were judged and chased away. This process was to the great satisfaction of our audience. Grandly, Nyambe returned with Martha holding his sun symbol aloft as Micke played a joyful sax. The entire company returned to end the performance with a traditional Tumbuka circle dance of celebration that often times was joined by up to one hundred audience members.

Crowded by the audience, which included hundreds of children, it was forty-five minutes before we were able to pack and leave the site. Several of the performers left immediately to catch buses for our afternoon performance site in Ndola, an hour away. There, performing outside a soccer stadium, in one of the notoriously dangerous crime areas of Zambia, we would perform to nearly four thousand people. Like everywhere we performed, the audiences were eager and hungry for what we presented. It was a new thing, much like the idea of Zambia, a nation of so many, sometimes uneasy, cultures. The performance was a living demonstration of how past and present, the tribal and western ways co-mingled. It was a performance spoken in their verbal, rhythmic, and physical language, structured in their thinking and expressed by their people.

*Imipashi* was an examination, a celebration, and ultimately the re-imagining of their community. A nation community, with its parts combining to create a new, greater, and stronger whole. *Imipashi* was an initiation, returning to a sacred history to witness and participate with the gods and mythical ancestors. And like an initiation, pass from one consciousness into a new consciousness: a trans-historical, multi-cultural consciousness full of challenge, and, hope of transcendence.
The !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen

It was the second day of interviewing. Already they had told many stories and sung many songs for me. Some of the stories spoke about the Zebra, Crocodile, Wildebeest, and Hyena as fondly as if they were related to the narrator. Some of the songs were about a clumsy monkey fetching water, a young woman laughing at an older man’s awkward advances, a lion following an unsuspecting man. And there were songs about traveling and singing with the wind. Accompanied by hand clapping, drumming, or a simple string instrument, their songs were full of feelings rooted in the land they had lived on for longer than anyone knows. The songs of the !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen were simple and subtle songs, presented in a playful, easy way. In rhythm, phrasing, and tone, they were a moving aural pathway to an “old” conception of reality that is now shared by only a few.

The Bushmen talked a long time amongst themselves. Finally Fernando, our translator, said they were discussing whether or not they should show the “special” dances to me. Then I was told they would leave and come back later. We agreed to meet in one hour. Later it occurred to me that the group might not have a sense of what “an hour” meant. The South African army camp at Schmidtsdrift was sixty miles north of Kimberly, at the lower edge of the Kalahari, surrounded by nowhere. Before being brought to the camp, these people had lived in even more isolated areas. For the !Xuu such conventions of measure did not exist; time is a modern, urban mechanism for measuring life and space.

Upon returning, one !Xuu man told me that they didn’t know what an “hour felt like,” but they returned when it “felt right.” Inside the trailer, a refuge from the shadeless, hot desert Sun, early arrivals squatted in a large circle and passed a pipe fashioned out of a tree branch and tin. Their clothes were donated by European aid agencies or the South African military. These Bushmen had been self-sufficient hunters and gatherers living on and with the land until they were forced by circumstances, after thousands of years of independence, into the food chain of modern civilization and capitalism. They have become like
others around the world who, too, are victims of modern civilization and capitalism—clothed in rags, homeless, exposed to harsh realities.

Machai and George stepped up into the trailer nodding, smiling, and shaking hands effusively instead of the verbal greetings we couldn’t make because of our language barriers. Machai put on an elaborately beaded belt and a colorful beaded headpiece. In each hand he held a rattle. Others had returned with small drums and rattles made from cans for beer, automotive fluid, or orange juice, and filled with pebbles. Fernando said they were going to perform some “special” dances.

Several sets of rattles combined with the polyrhythmic drumming and three levels of women clapping. Machai led the song with others singing chorus. A few women added high-pitched birdcalls. Machai was shaking his shoulders and head and soon others joined the dancing, shaking with a shuffle step across the floor. The dance and song cycled, weaving the room into another space, one outside my normal sense of time and reality. Soon most of those in the trailer were shaking at the shoulders and hips to create “heat.” Silenga, a small, older woman, also wore a beaded headpiece. Her eyes were closed and her face relaxed—she was entering an altered state of consciousness. The dance and song had many spontaneous swells of emotion and energy that pleased the group. The dance took them to some other place deep within their cultural identity, a place where they were happy.

Until the early 1970s two Bushmen groups, the !Xuu (pronounced with a prefix click as “kone”) and the Khwe, had lived unmolested by the outside world in the south eastern part of Angola along the Namibia and Botswana boarder. Their habitat was semi-desert, with forest. They were “river” or “forest” Bushmen. In the early 1970s UNITA, the socialist, Cuban-backed freedom fighters of Angola, entered the !Xuu and Khwe areas and suddenly the Bushmen were part of the Angola bush war. After UNITA came to power in 1975, there was a clandestine operation to remove the Bushmen from their lands. They were easy targets and their lands became part of a haphazard land redistribution program. A few thousand !Xuu and Khwe fought AK 47s and mortar attacks with spears and poison arrows—more resistance than the UNITA soldiers expected.

At about the same time, the South African government was mounting a secret guerrilla war against UNITA. Soon the !Xuu and Khwe, having little option, found themselves in alliance with the South Afri-
can Defense Forces (SADF). They were excellent trackers, scouts, and fighters, becoming the fabled “Bushmen Battalion.” By 1990, international criticism and mounting internal political pressures forced South Africa to cease their secret war against Angola. The independence movement in Southwest Africa soon won nationhood as Namibia. The !Xuu and Khwe found themselves unwelcome in either Angola or Namibia. Association with the apartheid-tainted SADF did not make them welcome in South Africa either.

In 1990, the SADF settled the !Xuu and Khwe “temporarily” on a military reserve at Schmidtsdrift, which became a refugee camp for four thousand people—a sea of army issue brown tents. Except for the store and school, the camp had no electricity. Families lived on a small monthly allowance (about $90 US). Inadequate water and sewage and overcrowding resulted in a variety of illnesses. Alcohol deepened problems of family and cultural disintegration. Their existence in limbo created anxiety, uncertainty, and depression. The Bushmen wanted only to return to their ancestral homes, but the post-civil war chaos of Angola, and ill will between South Africa and Namibia, made an amicable return unlikely. The !Xuu and Khwe were nomads on a political and cultural landscape of which they had little understanding.

The !Xuu and Khwe Trust had been established to facilitate autonomy and cultural adjustment. The !Xuu and Khwe Cultural Project was formed and its director, Catherina Meyer, developed a very successful arts workshop for the camp. The objective was to reaffirm cultural identity and assist with the introduction of the Bushmen to a cash economy. The cultural project employed several folk artists who produced traditional crafts, which were sold to white collectors at local craft fairs and art galleries. These kinds of activities were encouraged and, though sponsored by SADF and the Trust, direct funding for my work at Schmidtsdrift came from the Northern Cape Tourist Association. I was to develop a Bushmen tourist show. The idea was to help the Bushmen and to draw tourists to the economically stagnant Northern Cape region.

On the third day the interviews became an outpouring of their plight. Their stories were about how one day both !Xuu and Khwe were shot by soldiers and how they fought back—they were about how the bombs came. They felt the camp was a prison and wanted only to return to their land. The gathering became a kind of town hall where the spiri-
tual leaders of the two groups gathered, discussed, and exchanged thoughts and shared concerns for the first time.

Ndala Mutenya (a !Xuu)
We do not feel happy about being here and we do not feel welcome in South Africa.

Mohera Kuwiq (a Khwe)
In Namibia we could eat, but here only the ones that have jobs can eat and survive.

Nyama Mokuke (a !Xuu)
We feel like we need a lot of help here and we want to take care of ourselves.

George Dikosi
In Namibia we could hunt. There were all kinds of food in Namibia and Angola, but there is nothing here.

Alouis
When we came here and looked for food we were caught and arrested. Where must we find food? We are hungry and the Army does nothing!

Machai Mbande
Our hearts are not happy here and we do not know who will help us.

Despite their anger there was a general sense of passive acceptance that is the Bushmen way. It is how they have survived for so long as hunter-gatherers, accepting and moving with change rather than resisting. Now there were long silences. The atmosphere was heavy. I suggested we return to showing some dances and sharing some stories like we had done the day before. George said he was hesitant about singing his songs because the !Xuu did not know his language or style of clapping even though he and the other Khwe had made attempts to learn the !Xuu style. Our discussion, which had started with their common plight, turned to the issues between the two groups.

The !Xuu are small in frame and stature with yellow-brown skin, high cheekbones, and almost Asiatic eyes. The Khwe, or as they are also called, Barquana, are larger with darker skin and more pronounced Negro features. Both groups were referred to as Bushmen by anthropologists and governments. While the Khwe considered themselves Bushmen, the !Xuu considered the Khwe to be blacks or Bantus.

In southern Africa the difference between blacks and Bushmen is an important distinction historically. The migrating black Bantu tribes from the north considered the Bushmen inferior because of their stone-
age life styles. Their relative passivity also made them easy targets. Successive invasions by Bantu tribes and then by colonializing whites pushed the !Xuu and Khwe into the remotest areas of their once large hunting areas. Prohibited from hunting or cultivating on the surrounding desert lands, they became partners in misery, reduced to being refugees and poachers who risked arrest for hunting on local ranches. In the camp the army had bowed to the wishes of the two groups and kept them physically separated. A group of trailers stood between the two groups and housed the school, store, clinic, military offices and motor pool, and the cultural project. Though there was some social and ceremonial interaction between the !Xuu and Khwe, they were essentially two different groups—together by force of circumstances. The theatre workshop was to bring the two groups together in a joint effort.

On the fourth day of interviews we lost translator Fernando. He had accepted more lucrative employment on a local ranch. We used most of the morning trying to find someone who spoke English and the native tongues. We settled on two translators, both of whom spoke Afrikaans and their native tongue; neither spoke English. The interviews became absurdly torturous. Catherina translated my English questions into Afrikaans. Luis then translated into !Xuu and Lerrato translated into Khwe. Responses came back the reverse route. Sometimes the space between my question and their reply was so long I would forget what I had asked. It was nearly impossible to keep a train of thought, a sense of momentum, or to ask for clarification and detail. Furthermore, Luis was a !Xuu man educated by the Catholic missionaries who had abandoned his traditional culture. As a church deacon, he regarded the other !Xuu as heathens in need of salvation. Consequently, when translating he censored whatever he found un-Christian.

In spite of the, sometimes comic, translation problems, the interview sessions were essential to access and assess the community and to formulate with the group an understanding, purpose, and strategy for creating theatre with them. The interviews also established a rapport, setting the tone for my participation and thinking. And seeing their dances and cultural rhythms was just as important as hearing their personal and traditional stories. They captivated, overwhelmed, frustrated, and deeply disturbed me. Before me were the remnants of a proud and ancient culture; and I was a helpless witness to its breakdown and slow,
ignoble dissolution. It was like watching a fire slowly burn through a library of invaluable knowledge. By losing their ancient folkways, their relationship with their land and animals, their culture was slipping way, and so was a part of humanity's legacy.

The group consisted of seven traditional healers—Machai, George and Silenga amongst them, and the rest were their assistants and musicians. All were between thirty-five and seventy years old. It soon became clear that there were deep conflicts between these older people and the younger members of the community.

Machai
They think they are better than us because they can read and write. To them we are old and foolish.

Arenesto ndala
The sooner they learn about the new ways the better they will be.

Machai
We old people still like to think about the old times, but if we tell those old stories to children they say "leave those old things we are living in modern times. Can't you see we are wearing clothes today and not antelope skins."

George
The old ways should not be abandoned so quickly because it is still important to know those ways. What we do must show them about the old ways. Before we lose the old stories. Those stories hold us together and make us who we are.

Tumba gisenda
We must tell them our story even if they laugh at us. Someday they will understand and use it.

Silenga
Those old ways are gone now and we must start with a new story.

Riccio
What is the new story?

Silenga
We don't know, you must help us.

Riccio
Should the performance tell the new story?

Ndala
We don't know. What should be a part of the new story?

George
In the past we have suffered, in the future we don't know if we will suffer.
In the old story we were not chased, now in the new story we have been chased.

We finished the session with the agreement that the story lives within the group; and that the group must create it if necessary, and then tell the others. The purpose of my presence and the function and reason for, of what we were doing finally became apparent to many of them. I couldn’t explain theatre to people who had no concept of it. However, they understood there was a story within them that needed telling.

That evening I attended a healing ceremony conducted by George in the Khwe camp. When I arrived at the tent about forty people, mostly women, were seated on blankets in a circle, rattling and singing in support of George, who was at the center next to the fire and his patient. He wore a T-shirt and torn dark pants, no shoes, and no special regalia. The sick woman lay wrapped in a blanket with her naked back to the fire. Near her back was a covered plate, red powder medicine on it, and an automobile brake shoe shaped into a ten-inch knife. George was also healing two grandchildren of the sick woman who were also sick because they ate from the same bowl as her. Throughout the ceremony, George first ministered to the woman, then repeated the same actions on the infants.

As I entered, George welcomed me by anointing my brow with the red medicine, a ritual he performed on everyone entering the ceremony. The group gave me a place at the inner circle and I immediately felt comfortable, as if being with family, huddled close together against the cold desert night. There were no drums, only rattles, hand clapping, and singing. Rhythms and counter rhythms were dense and complex. The voices of the women laid a vocal and rhythmic bottom while the voices of George and the few other men sang counter to and over those of women. Each healer has a unique style and method of healing; the songs George used were his only.

The rhythmic pattern of the music, the unity of voices, combined with the flickering light of the fire and the focused attentions of all those gathered were hypnotic, transporting me to a place between realities. The overwhelming sensation was of losing self—my individuality was secondary to the collective event that surrounded me. The cyclical music spun and distorted time, yet there was an underlying sense of a slow,
inexorable accumulation, as if everything within the event was building up into something, which we were all a part of. Somehow songs would stop in unison—a testament to the relaxed yet highly sensitized focus of the group—then another voice would begin another song and the song cycle would continue.

George goes to the sick woman, listens to her back, and massages her with the red powder medicine mixed with cooking oil. With the wooden tip of his rattle he finds the point of her illness and presses into the woman, then slowly pulls the rattle away and, taking the invisible illness from the tip of the rattle, puts it into the medicine on the plate and quickly covers it with a white cloth. Turning the woman over, he feels her neck, head, and stomach, pausing with absolute stillness over something only he sees. The intensity of the singing rises in support. After working with the patient for a time, he sits and sings, as if calling on powers within himself. His eyes roll white and his body shakes as he bolts up and dances around the fire. His shoulders and hips shake back and forth quickly and sharply. Such movement activates the nerve endings in the spinal column to create the “heat” necessary for healing.

There are several short breaks in the healing process. Participants pass around cigarettes, pipes, and cans of beer as they talk and laugh. Even George tells what seem to be jokes. The healing ceremony is as much a social as a spiritual event. For Bushmen, like other indigenous people, the two spheres of human endeavor are not mutually exclusive. The healing is as much for the well-being of the community, as it is for the sick person—social interaction is a healing, too. But each break also serves as a necessary release for the build up of heat. Heat is necessary, but too much could overpower George.

The singing resumes. George sits very still and his young male assistant massages his neck. Soon George stands, talking to something only he sees, his body shaking with dance. He removes the white cloth from the plate and takes up the knife. He kneels next to the woman and lifts his shirt, exposing his stomach. Using the rattle as a hammer, he pounds the knife into his stomach. “It is hard to believe what I am seeing,” I thought. “Is it a sleight of hand trick, or something I am imagining?”

George takes the knife out of himself, leaving no scar or blood. He dips the knife into the plate of red powder and wipes the knife on the woman’s neck. He pounds the tip of the knife into her chest. The sing-
ing is like a sea of aural ebb and flow, embodying, surrounding and supporting an emotional wave of human energy. It is unlike anything I have ever known.

Having experienced the healing ceremony, an entirely new way of perceiving and approaching my work with the !Xuu and Khwe was urging itself. It would be wrong to introduce an alien performance form, such as theatre, into their culture. However, I also felt that there was a need for a contemporary expression of what they were going through. The workshop could provide perspective and tools to augment and expand perceptions of self. These tools would offer them the ability to see and understand themselves in the larger, “modern” context in which they found themselves. The “sickness” they were confronted with was a new kind of sickness, one that came to them from their interaction with the outside. Their performance and healing technology, by their own admission, was inadequate to the task. But was I a part of their cultural transformation or part of its dissolution? The colonialist errors of the past haunted me. To do nothing in this situation would be wrong. But to do something wrong could mean doing more damage to an already fragile and abused predicament.

The synaptic moment between ritual/ceremony and theatre, a moment that had taken place in Western culture and other cultures around the world, is about adaptation. It is about expanding a homogeneous group consciousness so it can see self and community as interactive with other groups and in a new, larger context. Theatre was, and is, a tool of adaptation in constantly adjusting worlds. The ancient Greeks evolved theatre to help them adapt to their urbanization and statehood; and with theatre, the emphasis shifted from maintaining homogeneous-cosmological balance, to responding to social-cultural adjustment. Ritual and ceremony are tools rooted in the hunter-gatherer, mytho-spiritual reality of human development. Consciousness, once expanded to include “others,” used theatre as a means of dealing with the problems resulting from contact, interaction, and social adjustment. Theatre serves that same function today.

Sitting in George’s tent, white-haired Gomez Kapango told us the story of N!ngongiao, the “first story and the best story, even though it is sad.” N!ngongiao means “people came out of here,” and it is the story about when “People came out of the big stone.” When I asked why no one had told it before now, George replied: “Because everyone knows it
and doesn’t think of it as a story.” The story was so fundamental to their culture, it had become a cultural assumption. It lives in a way similar to the way the story of Christ lives in Western culture: as a broadly shared, cultural narrative and reference point that does not require retelling. The story of N!ngongiao and how people came into being could be an appropriate starting point by which the !Xuu and Khwe could in a sense return to their mythological origins in order to reaffirm, redefine, and understand who they were today.

Gomez’s telling of the “Two Stones” brought the group to life. Everyone wanted to tell the story as they remembered it. We agreed that “Two Stones” would be the basis of our performance. With a large artist’s pad at the center, the group gathered in a circle. The drawing of the story and the agreement to perform the story suddenly gave our work an objective, structure, and immediacy that was satisfying to the pragmatic Bushmen. The drawing and the narrative also provided us with a medium by which we could directly communicate with one another, without language or a translator. After many drawings and story sessions an agreed upon telling evolved.

In the desert there are two stones. They are by themselves out in the open Surrounded by grass and small bushes. The stones are called ~ (n) Whatsu. ‘That means people come out of here.’ They are like two houses with a path. Both have big holes in them like the entrance to a hut. The tall stone is a man and the short one is a woman. The tall one is square at the top, The other is short and pointed. They are hard, smooth stones. White and black mixed up in color. Today you can find the stones, If you are supposed to. The stones have power, even today.

Trees came out of the stones first and then the animals. Cattle, animals, plants Things all came out of the woman stone.
They were there before people came out.
Then the good doctor and bad doctor came out.
They came from the man stone.
The doctors were there at the beginning
Before the people came out.
The good doctor was the first to see outside the stone.
The first to see the tree.
These doctors could speak to the father.
They said to the father:
We will give the people this medicine
Medicine given us from the bushes to help the people.

Then the father gave them dance and singing to heal.
The doctors saw the father
He looked like a Bushmen.
The good doctor walked on into the desert
The bad doctor stopped at the tree.
The bad doctor used the power from the father
He looked like a lion.
With the tail and mouth like a lion,
Big and black eyes.
With roars like flames and horns to hurt the people.

The first to come out were Bushmen.
And they came out of the stone naked.
These people came out because
The wind was blowing and sounded so nice
These people didn’t exist before.
They just came out of the hole
The father pulling them.
From early in the morning until dark that evening.
Everybody came out in one day.
Everybody that came out could communicate
They talked with the father.
They could hear him and the father would hear them.
But they could not see him.
They said to the father:
‘Father, look at me, you gave me everything.’
Now I am standing here.
You know me.

They sang to the father in the Bushmen language.
And went into the veld still calling his name.
In the veld they found the father had given them
Trees
Water
Food
And animals.
The father gave the Bushmen something
Little pieces of the two stones
Because they had to break things.
And it is where the Bushmen got their arrows.
There was also medicine in the stone.

When the night came, the father gave people firesticks.
For sleeping in the dark and cold,
The tree offered the sticks to keep them warm.
Pulling from the tree the Bushmen got fire sticks.
Fire has helped the Bushmen find their way.

The Bushmen first came to a big river,
But they were too frightened to cross.
They sang the song:
'I saw the water, I saw the water,
We better move otherwise it will come after us.'

But the other people crossed the river.
And when they crossed they became white.
After they crossed the river the white man got books.
Then the Bushmen said:
'Look at that man, he is now a white man, our relative,
Why didn’t we go with him,
Maybe now he will come back to hurt us.'

Then the Bushmen went to a place where there was rain,
Bara, the essence of rain.
They showed the black people the essence of rain,
And the blacks wanted some
So the Bushmen gave them rain.
Everything else the Bushmen gave away, too, or
The blacks took everything.
And the Bushmen got nothing.
The Bushmen did not know the value
So they let it go.
Bushmen did not appreciate the gifts the father gave.
That is why today they have nothing.
And why they are afraid.
And today accept their fate.
And why they are in the desert.
Because they are ashamed they lost everything.
They live in and survive terrible conditions.
And are great hunters and not great fighters,
Because they are afraid.
They are afraid they will die.

Then the Bushmen saw the bad doctor
They were afraid.
And went looking for the good doctor.
And they walked far.
The river was far
So they had to find the water in the bush.
The sand was white and they had to dig very deep.

The stones have power, always.
From the beginning.
People from all over the world,
All nations, came from there,
And people still live inside.
At night you can see light inside.
You can hear people and their activities.
Then in the day the light is gone.
Nothing.
We were at a positive new stage of the work, but there were other problems. A new camp commander who had little understanding or sympathy for the Bushmen’s predicament, decided to put up an elaborate fencing system, making work in the trailer impossible. Our workshop moved to the large community hall, but schedule conflicts kept interrupting our work. Also, the new camp commander frowned on traditional healing ceremonies, because he felt they were disruptive to camp order. His crackdown on healers caused great concern and fear.

Adding to the confluence was a sharp increase of illness. A doctor told me that the condition of the camp’s hygiene had become critical. TB and dysentery were the main problems, but there were others. Nyama, a member of our group, suffering from severe burns on her back, was taken by truck to the hospital seventy miles away. Her drunken son had pushed her into a fire. The group became preoccupied with all of these problems and, soon, the willingness to participate in the workshop and to talk about healing practices diminished. Like the “Major”, the man in charge of the camp, I was a white man and I was associated with his attitude and policies. Catherina also fell away from active participation with the project, becoming more concerned elsewhere. Something had to happen quickly. To avoid further interruptions, schedule conflicts and distractions, I arranged to have the group transported daily to some empty military barracks about fifteen kilometers from the camp. The isolation, promise of lunch, and the specialness of being transported helped to restore the group’s purpose, prestige, and concentration.

To overcome their reluctance to talk about their healing practices and to demonstrate my support, I began, with their permission, the video documentation of their healing ceremonies. Two weeks later, I showed them the videos. The healers watched with stilled attention. After the presentation, I became a welcomed insider and was given a place of honor at subsequent ceremonies. With their agreement, the video and the information it contained would be shared with others so “They will know about the Bushmen ways.” It would also serve as a record for their grandchildren. Copies of all tapes, photos, and transcripts of my work with the Bushmen went to the Cultural Project for the establishment of a cultural library.

The current workshop was under pressure to produce. The white Sergeant Major wondered how the “show” was progressing. Catherina,
too, was becoming increasingly concerned with how the “show” was coming. The Trust and the Northern Cape Tourist Association were looking for a product. But the Bushmen, like other indigenous people, saw themselves as participants in an ongoing process, in something greater than themselves. In the Bushmen world view, control does not come from the assertion of human activity but rather from the interaction and constant adjustment of many things: the environment, the spirits, feelings, and an inherent aspiration for balance. The Bushmen were out of balance and the project was, in reality, about how to restore a balance. It was not about putting on a show.

Given the cultural, social, and personal state of disruption the Bushmen were in, work toward a performance would have been regressive, imposing, and playing to external expectations. It was important for the Bushmen to define themselves on their own terms. The quandary all this put me in was, in retrospect, a necessary catalyst to define the values and purpose of the project and my work with indigenous people in general. The !Xuu and Khwe did not need to perform for others, they needed to perform for themselves so as to understand who they were and what had become of them. The process of taking stock in themselves—recovering who they were and redefining who they are in a modern context—was the project’s primary function.

There could be no show. I convinced Catherina, but I half expected to be on a bus back to Johannesburg within days. Instead the Trust agreed to the new objectives—to develop research materials and train the Bushmen for a future performance.

After three weeks, the project had finally taken on a cohesiveness and structure, and we began discussing and exploring the story of “People Come Out of Here.” The retelling of their original story, told in their own, modern terms, would serve to reaffirm their cultural sense of self as it reflected what they have become. The act of retracing where they came from and who they were would provide living perspective (by way of performance) by which to provoke and engage in a dialog.

Two brown tarp tents, like the ones they all lived in, would represent the two stones of the story. Like the Bushmen of the origin story, the group would all be inside the larger tent, singing as the first Bushmen did. The songs alternated between !Xuu and Khwe songs:
A song about the old time people
KHWE A song about the houses the old people used to make
!XUU An old time lullaby that has a forgotten meaning
KHWE About SWAPO and people dying in the war

Inside the “stone” they would sing, talk and tell jokes. Then they sang an old traditional song about the wind and how the old time people came out of the stone. After the song there is silence. Then George says, “Now we must leave,” and he exits the stone. He squints his eyes and hears, as in the origin story, the pleasant sound of the wind that had called him. He is at first timid and afraid and tries to back into the tent, but others push him out. Inside the tent there is much excitement about exiting into the world.

Our first day of performance development had been encouraging and remarkably fruitful. The working process was simple and efficient. We talked about the beginning of the story, discussed and agreed on how it should be performed, then performed it improvisationally. The day ended with everyone feeling a sense of accomplishment. Fully committed and deeply felt, their work was as emotionally moving as any theatre I had ever been a part of or seen.

The next day we reviewed the work we had done, but now everything was different. It was not just a matter of minor adjustments and less spontaneity, which is usual when an improvisation is repeated. Nearly all the previous day’s work was changed or forgotten. They introduced new songs, deleted or changed others, adjusted movements; some people did not participate, and there was no sense of excitement inside the tent. George exited as he would from his own tent on any ordinary day. It was fascinating and frustrating.

We stopped to talk about how and why things had changed; this puzzled them. I realized that the concept of repetition and rehearsal was not a part of their cultural vernacular. After the initial performance exploration, they did not see the need to express that part of the story again now. They knew the dances and songs and would perform them when necessary. As hunter-gatherers living in a hot climate, they habitually act with efficiency and out of necessity. To the Bushmen, the repeti-
tion of rehearsal was neither efficient nor necessary. And they were right. Everything they had performed was from a well-established cultural reservoir that lived within them and not something external needing to be learned as in Western performance expression.

As we talked further, I realized how many of my fundamental assumptions about performance I took for granted. When I asked them who they were when they were performing the story, they replied with puzzlement: “We were ourselves.” “You were not the old time people?” I asked. “No, how can we be?” I tried to figure out how, indeed whether, to introduce the concept of performance as pretending and imagining to people who have no tradition or concept of such a thing. The subject I had raised had made them curious and they asked about it, so I tried to explain the concept of acting to them. They confused what I was saying with soul possession and the work of a bad doctor. Maybe they were right. As seen from their worldview, in which all things are part of a continuous cycle and totality, to perform one part of the cycle or totality was to perform other parts of it. With everything being included and part of the same system there could be no significant differentiation. Individualization is not a significant factor, nor is the need to define self outside self as in pretending/acting in Western culture.

Our discussion about pretending and acting evolved into a discussion about metaphor. The concept of how something can mean something else, was alien if not absurd to them. The literal-mindedness of the Bushmen did not surprise me. They were pragmatic people, living, until recently, a subsistence life without modern technology. The need for metaphor and to “act” something or someone else is urged by the need to make a connection to another person, event, or thing. By virtue of how they perceived their reality, the Bushmen were already connected. In the Western context, metaphor, like acting, serves to bridge or reveal an idea or feeling so as to identify, emphasize, compare and contrast. The Bushmen have little interest in such things because everything is self-evident. Things are simply what they are. Everything is inherently a reference to that which is simultaneously itself and something greater. Mythology lives within them, not removed or differentiated as something outside self. What in Western perception we term internal and external to self, is for the Bushmen, one and the same.
Was it possible that the need for metaphor and acting in Western and other cultures arose when they became removed from their hunter-gatherer interaction with their part of the earth? Did metaphor then become a device by which to bridge and hence reconnect with a lost wholeness? Did acting, like theatre, arise when once homogenous groups interacted with other groups? Did acting become a means by which to integrate (and thereby expand) a homogenous group’s understanding of others? Acting allows one to become another and in this way understand another. Is the necessity of acting and theatre the attempt to connect with others and is it possibly an attempt to re-establish lost holism?

Ritual is the manifestation and reaffirmation of a greater and often spiritual whole. Its function is to participate in a greater sense of self, meaning, order or being. For ritual to work, a group’s myth and sense of greater self must be alive within. Ritual is simply an outward manifestation of what is within. Theatre, which evolved from ritual, likewise finds its inspiration in the attempt to regain a whole, and like ritual, aspires to transport its audiences to other places, situations, and people. But unlike ritual, theatre does not need a homogenous belief/myth group to address itself to. Indeed, theatre’s design and mark of success, is to speak to people who do not have homogenous belief systems. The function of theatre is to understand other times, places, events, and people, and to assert, question, celebrate, parody, or reassert community values. Theatre, contrary to ritual, often serves to assay the changing values, interactions, and alienating effect of non-homogeneous society; is a mechanism of social and cultural adjustment, whereas ritual is a mechanism of mytho/spiritual reaffirmation. Ritual speaks to inclusion. Theatre speaks to exclusion.

The Bushmen were of a ritual culture. For them singing, dancing, and performing were not about something outside, but about what lives within and is indistinguishable from their identity. But in their present predicament a non-homogenous situation was confronting them, challenging their most fundamental perceptions of reality and conceptions of self. Culturally they are in a state of trauma, forced suddenly into a cultural context without precedence or preparation. During traditional times the land, its elements and animals, had provided the foundation, identity, and homogenous/archetypal referent of which they were a part. The war and its camp aftermath forced them into a state of sudden
disorientation, quick adjustment, and radical reconciliation. Theatre could offer them metaphor, social adjustment, and a stepping outside of self to see self in a larger and new social context. It could serve them in very tangible ways. Cultures unable to project and abstract into a larger context are disadvantaged, and unless they can find a way to adjust, expand, and adapt to the new cultural context, they are often either absorbed or abolished. In a sense, the workshop and theatre were presenting survival tools.

The Bushmen were at ease, fluid, playful, when performing parts of their mythological narrative, but they became stiff and self-conscious when asked to perform what had happened to them. The performance of personal narratives was an unfamiliar concept—it was outside their mythological narrative framework and it asked them to individualize, which meant putting oneself outside the group when group identity was intrinsic to their very being. They had agreed to the idea of performing their personal narratives and understood the necessity of telling their stories, but the reality of stepping out of their mythological/group concept of self was just too frightening for them. To alleviate some of their fear, we developed a process of acting by consensus, involving coaching from the sidelines. When a performer was expressing what had personally happened to him, the others, including myself, would assist the performer with movements, directions, emotion, facial expression, and even giving lines. In a way we were all exploring a leap into a new narrative context by supporting one another. In time the group became more confident in working with its own experiences, integrating traditional performance with individual expressions. Implicitly, they realized their mythological narrative was malleable and participatory.

Maintaining a mythological narrative is important to any culture, lending a culture a sense of place, continuity, and connection. However, though the maintenance of a mythological narrative may be important for continuance of a homogenous group—which links its narrative to place and situation—it can become counterproductive for a group confronted with fundamental social and cultural adaptation. In a similar way, I believe the cultures of the world, holding on to the mythological narratives of their nationhood, need to evolve to a new, global narrative that is both organic to a specific place and aware of being part of a vast system called earth. Such a narrative is urged and congruent with the globalization of politics, economics, and popular culture, and is neces-
sary in response to the realities of technological advance, population explosion and the eco-collapse of the earth. Theatre, the ancient technology of adaptation and adjustment, can serve such a narrative evolution.

With branches they had gathered, they transform into trees. Rhythmically waving the branches and singing softly, they portray the wind “Coming out of the sun and then into the trees.” Moving around the room in a single file, they both portray and pay homage to the wind moving and bringing the trees to life. We had not discussed the events of the scene beforehand, it had evolved naturally out of a focused and shared feeling. When I asked them later if they had been dancing a traditional song, they said no, when they heard the trees branches, the song just came.

*Naka Mbandje*
It made us happy to remember the trees.

*Machai*
When the first people came out of the stones they were happy like we are to see the trees.

*Silenga*
They are friends.

After this scene, the work came to a sudden halt with a disagreement over who would play the Good and Bad Doctors in the next scene. Though roles were previously agreed upon, it suddenly occurred to the group that the assignment of the Good Doctor role was an honor and tacit recognition that whoever played it was the best healer in the group. They all wanted to be the Good Doctor. We settled the issue by having the role rotate amongst them. However, there were no takers for the equally powerful Bad Doctor. The idea of even pretending they were a Bad Doctor was repugnant. We decided to make the Bad Doctor invisible.

When the Bad Doctor enters, there is no dance or song, only silence. The group stands and sees the entrance of the imagined Bad Doctor. They describe how he looks and the badness they see. As the Bad Doctor goes to the tree of life (two branches held by Nyama) to eat,
the Good Doctor, and the others, stood watching intently, still describing each of the witch doctor’s activities.

After humans and the doctors had exited from the stone, the animals exited from the smaller of the two stones. In quick succession, the group improvised animal dances, playing and parodizing the movements of a wide variety of animals. The animal performances were loving and benign, highlighting animal personality traits that brought immediate recognition and delight to the group. That day the word *JaKala*, which means “very good,” became a part of the group’s vernacular.

As a gesture of how close the relations between the groups had become, the Khwe group members learned one another’s songs. The next scene used both Khwe and !Xuu songs. The Bushmen, afraid of the Bad Doctor, leave him and follow single file behind the Good Doctor. “Where do you go?” I asked. “We just walk far like Bushmen do,” was the reply. As they walked, they sang a Khwe song about a hyena who eats meat and then walks far to the river to drink, then goes back to the meat, back and forth until all of the meat is gone. When the Bushmen come to the river, they become afraid and comically resist getting close to it. Then they sing a traditional !Xuu song about getting water from the river. After that Machai sings an old !Xuu song about a little ape going to the river to drink water. Mbto and George assist Machai in the song by adding a very funny Khwe dance of a little ape.

Soon the group came upon the idea of the workshop being a sort of healing ceremony to cure the “community illness.” When George first suggested it, the other healers were adamantly against it. The workshop was one thing, their healing work was another. Silenga, a assistant healer, said. “Only one person at a time can be cured.” George responded. “But there is great illness in the camp and we can work together,” Amongst some others, I felt the resistance to the idea was more about rivalry and professional suspicion. Though the group was willing to share specific methods and ideas with me, an outsider, a white man, some were reluctant to share their ways of working so openly amongst other healers for fear they would be stolen.

The next scene we worked on was “The Crossing of the River.” The river was a tarp laid on the floor. The People from the Stone huddle together as they approach the river. Finally a man steps forward (played by Luis, the only one to volunteer) and crosses the river. The rest of the group is at first fearful for the person crossing but then they become cu-
rious. On the other side of the river, Luis streaks a white chalky substance on his face—he turns into a white man. Luis suddenly seizes the opportunity and berates his fellow Bushmen about their heathen ways. He shakes his finger at the others as he paces like an intolerant teacher up and down his side of the river. The huddled Bushmen on the other side of the river are stunned by his transformation. Some called it magical.

The scene had suddenly become uncomfortably real. With Luis’s performance, the mythological and real unexpectedly fused. The scene focused and shaped the ephemeral and became theatre.

Asked what the white man coming out of the river should wear, their reply was: “Jacket, nice shirt, pants, pen, glasses, hat and carrying a book bag with a book in it. The Bushmen have no books today because the white people took them with them to the other side of the river.” About the crossing of the river, could the river be the ocean? The responses were various: “Yes, it means far away.” “Any water.” “England and America.” “A river separates whites from us.” Why do whites have books and the Bushmen do not? “The Bushmen had books but they were taken by the white people.” “White men keep their lives in books.” “They have taken our lives and put them into books.” “That is why we are in a camp now because we have no book.” Only Luis and Lerrato could read and write. The importance they gave books was a curious blending of respect and fear for the power of the written word they had come to associate with the Bible, medical records, the store’s credit book, their monthly allotment, and my notebook.

Later, when I asked what he had said, Luis replied without irony: “I talked to them like a white man. ‘Yes, yes, I will come back and see you next year,’ is what I said.” Is that how you see me? He laughed, “No! I was the Bushmen white man. The one that lives inside us. Before they crossed the river, the white man was the same as the Bushmen, but when they became white everything changed.” When we discussed the scene with the entire group, they said their fear was for the river, the unknown, the white man, and the power of the book.

After the man crosses the river and turns into a white man, he departs to return sometime in the future. Then a Bushmen runs to tell the blacks to come to the river. The blacks (played by Mohera and his wife Panea Kahale) are unlike the Bushmen because they are not afraid of the river, and they settle on its banks. The Bushmen stand helpless with
fear, but remain because they were curious. The blacks call for their cattle to come to the river. The huddled Bushmen watch the imagined cattle, realizing and commenting on their loss of livestock, chickens, and sheep to the blacks. The blacks then demand that the Bushmen give them rain. The Bushmen, afraid to say no, give the blacks rain. The blacks, having claimed the river, rain, and livestock for their own, then threaten the Bushmen with death and chase them away.

The huddled group of Bushmen walked a solemn winding path in single file, singing a travel song and, then, a food-gathering song as they scratch about for food. In the myth, the Bushmen could not find food or water anywhere, being, forced to look in the hostile bush. Mohera and his wife Munogi say,

We are out of the stone,
The first people out of the stone
Now today we have no place to stay
We just wander with all our things on our back
Now today black people have a place
White people have a place
Where will I go today?

Machai explained, “The stone people were the first ones to look for water in the sand. The sand was white and they had to dig very deep. They had to learn to get water from trees and food from the bushes. That is why we are Bushmen.” Others nodded in agreement. Machai admitted, as if a revelation, that “Bushmen did not accept god’s gifts and that is why we had everything first but did not claim, and so we lost it.”

The group spent two weeks working on the creation of a new story. Meeting daily for four to six hours and working through the story bit by bit, the relevance of theatre and the story’s connection to their own contemporary lives became more apparent. Often discussion of the story, and how it might be expressed, melded with the telling of personal stories. As one would expect from a culture that perceived reality as an interconnected whole, soon what was mythological, historical, personal, and imagined collapsed into one. The story, and just as importantly the performance of it, became a structure for the examination of self, culture, and their predicament. Who the Bushmen are, what
had happened to them, and what their culture had to offer, was laid bare. The revelations provoked the question: “What should be done?”

The mythological Bushmen learned how to live in the bush and in so doing learned (as the contemporary Bushmen re-learned) an appreciation for the gifts they had been given. The performing of this scene provoked them to take stock of their knowledge and ingenuity. The work on the scene inspired sharing and reaffirmation of subsistence knowledge they had taken for granted. Activities included the getting of food from the trees, the cooking of roots, the tapping of certain trees for honey, and how to read the clouds like maps. It was in the bush, because they had so little and had to make the most of what they had, that the Bushmen were able to hear their ancestors talking to them and giving them advice. “It is the ancestors that help us to survive,” proclaimed Silenga. “It is the ancestors that pass on information on how to live and heal,” said George. “They got the information from god.” To demonstrate his point George showed how he sees and talks with the ancestors. Having come from an all night healing ceremony, George was still “cooling down.” He had his medicine bag with him and pulled out an old car mirror and rubbed herbs on it. Several others immediately stood and supported his activity with singing and dancing. When I asked later if he had seen his ancestors he said yes. “Did they give you any advice?” ‘Yes, we must do a healing ceremony.” And with that the others agreed that there should be a healing. The ancestors had become contributing participants of our group.

Machai
The bushmen have been bewitched!

Riccio
How does a bewitching happen?

Naka
The bad doctor bewitches them when he throws a stone in the direction of whom he is bewitching. When he throws a stone, he curses them and bewitches them. Then the person suddenly becomes sick. Then they are bewitched.
Riccio
Is there a curse that has bewitched the !xuu and khwe?

Morhera
Yes, we are sick and hungry and away from our homes, this is great sickness.

Riccio
Is this a part of the new story or is it part of the old story?

Silenga
It is the new story, the story we live now.

Riccio
And when did the new story begin?

George
When the bombs came suddenly one day. It was like a stone from a bad doctor. It is why we are here and so sick.

Performance had provided a fulcrum by which the Bushmen were able to revisit their origin myth. It also provided a form in which they could examine and discuss the issues and situation in which they found themselves. The origin myth, seen as living and viable when performed, became a reasserted perspective. The origin myth had exposed to us not only their history, but the paradigm of their world view and ways of knowing and being. At a time when the !Xuu and Khwe were dislocated from themselves, their traditional lifestyles, challenged and fragmented by war, disease and cultural disintegration, the performance located not only where they had come from, but who they were. They had found themselves in the “old story.”

My time with the Bushmen was coming to a close. There would be no public performance and this is as it should have been. A group had to take stock in itself before it could share itself with others. The group and I decided on a day when they would present the story in full. It
would be a performance for themselves, a sort of family performance, much like the participatory dynamics of a healing ceremony. Everyone would be participant and spectator simultaneously. The story told would be both old and new.

There was an excitement amongst the group, as if they were doing a special ceremony. The healers brought beaded belts and headpieces they used in healing ceremonies. Their assistants brought drums and other instruments. Progressively they went through the story as we had worked and rehearsed it, but this time it was different, it seemed charged. It had a depth of feeling and meaning I had not seen before. Within the outline of the story they added improvisational flourishes of song and emotion that were spontaneous and playful. And as the performance progressed, there were things they had never done. As before, they watch Luis cross the river and transform into a white man and then depart. The blacks come and lay claim to the river, chasing the Bushmen away into the bush. There they look for food and sing sad songs. Mohera and Mbto venture to the river again and, to my surprise, they enact the falling of bombs, running about shielding their heads. Then George comes to the river, is shot, and falls to the ground quivering. The cloth on the ground representing a river had become a road. Bushmen were shot and killed on roads, and it was on roads that they traveled in slavery to far distant places. It was roads that brought the bombs, war, and misery. The performance was the re-enactment of their mythological and contemporary selves, melded and interactive.

The wounded, along with the rest of the group, re-enter the stone and sit inside for some time in silence. Then slowly they sing of “Just sitting inside the stone and dying of hunger.” Machai exits the stone by himself and, with a wire and wood instrument, slowly begins a dance and song, calling the healing spirits from the four directions. After some time the others begin to emerge from the stone as they did the first time—coming into the world again. Soon the group begins singing and dancing healing songs. The assistants go to their drums as some healers begin clapping their hands while others begin shaking their hips and shoulders to generate a heat for healing. Their telling of the story had led them to where they presently lived and in the telling provoked an evocation of myth, history, and their place within an ancient culture. In so doing they had made visible the invisible that lived in and in be-
tween them and it had become a healing ceremony. They had found themselves in their own story and they knew what to do.
Tanzanian Theatre
From Marx to the Marketplace

The scene is the National Museum of Tanzania in Dar es Salaam on a hot and humid late November day, 1999. The event was a celebration to mark the 150 years since the first publication of the Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*. Sponsored by the Finnish embassy, the occasion included displays, cocktails, finger food and pastries, a Finnish folk-rock band, and speeches. The Finnish ambassador spoke about cooperation, a scholar talked about a recent translation of the epic into Kiswahili, and the Tanzanian Minister of Culture spoke about how the *Kalevala*, written and published in Finnish, was the spark igniting Finnish nationalism. He went further to say how the fragments of folklore were turned into an epic work and became a shared point of reference, validating a people, language, and national identity. The Minister saw that Tanzania was at a similar point in history. Like the Finns of the 1830s, the culturally nascent nation of Tanzania was identifying and recording its rich and disparate folk traditions. Like Finland, Tanzania had suffered under colonial rule, which feared folk customs and indigenous language as subversive. Finland, too, had thrown off its colonial rulers and unified its various folk traditions into a national culture.

The *Kalevala* celebration then moved outdoors under the shade of a large mango tree. There, two well-known (if not the best known) Tanzanian troupes, the Parapanda Arts Company and the Mandela Theatre, performed. Both groups were commissioned by the Finnish embassy to give presentations celebrating the *Kalevala*. The Parapanda Theatre, wearing matching, batik shirts and pants, presented a heroic recitation—styled a poem with musical accompaniment, augmented with a variety of dance movements culled from traditional Tanzanian dances. Interspersed throughout their Kiswahili text, they shouted in emphasis the word “Kalevala” several times. The Mandela Theatre was less concerned with including the *Kalevala* in its presentation, instead giving an entertaining and action-packed sampler presentation of Tanzanian tribal dances. The Mandela performances were a collage stitching several tribal performance traditions together for no other purpose than to en-
tertain. Some dances were ersatz adaptations, fusions, or remixes of the most accessible traditional dances into a new form. Unlike the self-conscious Parapanda, the Mandela Theatre presentation was rough and ready and in stark contrast to the posh event attended mostly by the embassy, international foundation, and business crowds and their families.

The bodies of the performers moved with the drum rhythms of Africa as the audience sat in neat rows as passive observers, served wine and beer by well-groomed African waiters. Sitting there I could not help but wonder how such a context and presentation evolved. I have seen hundreds of performance presentations throughout sub-Saharan Africa, but none compared to what I saw and felt that day. Intrigued by the combinations, interplay, and adapted manifestations of performance styles and forms, I was also unsettled by what was driving the event, namely commerce. If performance is a reflection of a culture’s self-identity, then what I saw was a nervous face revealing the confluence of politics, tribalism, socialism, and a market economy.

These performances were a coded map revealing the journey of Tanzania, from its tribal origins, through colonial adaptations to Marxist socialism, to capitalism, and on to the periphery of an emerging global culture. The unique, highly compressed, often forced, dynamic transformation of Tanzanian performance was effected variously by nationalism, government-initiated programs, funding, tourism, and the increased, pervasive influence of Western culture. In searching for its own perspective, Tanzanian performance responded to these interactions. Drawing from its frayed memory, its adaptations reflected a search for a center, a form, an identity, a purpose, and most importantly, relevance.

A study of Tanzanian performance and its journey is instructive not only in terms of understanding Tanzania, but also as a way to reflect upon many if not all world performance traditions that have gone through similar transformations. Every performance tradition, each in its own way, developed from locally integrated indigenous expressions that responded to and were conditioned by external cultural, political, and economic currents.
Tanzania
Tanzania is seven times the size of Great Britain and essentially an agrarian society. Its geography includes Mount Kilimanjaro, Lake Tanganyika, Lake Victoria, Zanzibar, and one of the largest and most diverse game reserves in the world, the Serengeti. It borders Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, Zambia, Mozambique, Malawi, and Burundi. In addition to its 130 ethnic groups, of which 85 percent are rural, Tanzania is also host to thousands of political, ethnic, and economic refugees from Rwanda and the Congo.

Tanzania's industrial base is nearly nonexistent. Its economy is heavily dependent upon agricultural products and processing; also, a source of foreign capital, are textiles, spices, tourism, and raw materials. It is a major recipient of foreign aid, grants, and loans from such organizations as the United Nations, and the World Bank, and International Monetary Fund; 51% of its population lives below the poverty line. Like its neighbors Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia, Tanzania has a high incidence of HIV and AIDS. Its healthcare system is severely deficient; its infant mortality rate is high, as is its death rate from TB, dysentery, and malaria. It is estimated that nearly seventy thousand children die annually from malaria in Tanzania. The cost for treatment is $3.00, yet even that is too expensive for many. Despite its low per capita annual income ($730 U.S. in 1998) basic prices and inflation are high, making daily survival for the average person and family a struggle (Central Intelligence Agency, 1999). Its currency, the shilling (which is festooned with the photo of the current president, Benjamin Mkapa) is not convertible and is essentially worthless outside of Tanzania.

Despite a government-initiated campaign against widespread corruption, Transparency International, an international, nongovernmental organization, listed Tanzania as one of most corrupt countries in the world in 1999 (Gicheru 1999). However, corruption is on the decline and public awareness on the rise; citizens and newspapers alike are vehemently outspoken against the “culture of corruption” that has gripped and stagnated the nation. ²

Colonial Tanzania won its independence (as Tanganyika) from Great Britain in 1961. In 1964, Tanganyika united with Zanzibar to become Tanzania. Before British rule, Tanzania was a German colony known as Deutsche Ost Afrika. Before Germany, coastal Tanzania was controlled by a variety of Arabic Sultans and, along with the island of
Zanzibar, was for centuries a hub for the East African slave trade. Islam is predominant, especially along coastal Tanzania; various forms of Christianity also have an influence, a legacy of the colonial era. In the rural and inland areas, traditional beliefs are still widely practiced, either separately or in conjunction with other non-indigenous beliefs.

Although English is widely spoken (especially in the urban areas), Kiswahili is the national language. Kiswahili is an argot language, its origins primarily Bantu but drawing heavily from Arabic, English, and other tribal languages. Tanzania’s founder, first president, and pan-Africanist, Julius K. Nyerere was a champion of this non-ethnic African language and was responsible for Kiswahili becoming the national language. Kiswahili has gone far to unify Tanzania, giving it a sense of a nationhood with little of the ethnic clashes and infighting characteristic of many of its neighbors. Today Kiswahili is the fastest growing language in Africa, spoken throughout East Africa and growing in popularity in central Africa.

**Arusha Declaration and Ujamma**

In response to political and economic unrest, Nyerere announced mono-party rule for Tanzania in 1965. Once his political party, Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), was firmly in power, the former teacher made his Arusha Declaration, named after a northern Tanzanian city, in 1967. The Declaration had far-reaching ramifications for Tanzania and a profound influence on an Africa struggling toward postcolonial identity and stability. The Declaration in effect transformed Tanzania into a Marxist state, instituting a broad range of social, economic, and political changes, the effects of which are still apparent. The Declaration was fashioned after Mao’s teachings of revolutionary reform and, to a degree, supported by Communist China and the Soviet Union, which in turn used Tanzania as a proxy state during the cold war era. Tanzania’s revolutionary transformation, including fundamental agrarian and economic policy adjustments, was inspired by the teachings of Mao. Culture, and in particular the performing arts, played a central role in conveying the new socialist doctrine to the people. In Tanzania—a poor nation with high illiteracy, unpaved roads, sporadic modern communications, and a history of tribal conflict—the arts were a way to achieve political, educational, and cultural ends. Bringing
the Declaration’s message to the people was how performing artists “contributed” to the socialist state.

A central component of Nyerere’s socialist policy was his idealistic notion of *Ujamma* (familyhood). The Kiswahili word *Ujamma* is derived from a set of related words involving collectivity, assembly, family, and association. Nyerere’s *Ujamma* program sought social-economic collectivism, national unity through non-tribal egalitarianism, and the eradication of poverty, illiteracy, and disease. *Ujamma* rallied postcolonial Tanzania into peaceful nationhood and remains a living philosophy and testament to the courage and vision of “Teacher” Nyerere. Despite all of the potential for turmoil and conflict, Tanzania has, since independence, remarkably avoided ethnic clashes and war. For a postcolonial African country the size and ethnic diversity of Tanzania, this fact is astonishing. The idealism of *Ujamma*, imbedded within its concept of nationhood, was made manifest in Tanzania’s war against Uganda and Idi Amin’s reign of terror in the 1970s and the country’s unhesitant willingness to provide camps for fleeing war refugees of the Rwanda and Burundi tribal conflicts of the mid 1990s. The spirit of Nyerere’s *Ujamma* cast Tanzania as an anchor of political stability in East Africa.

Soon after the Arusha Declaration, Nyerere established the National Arts Group (NAG). NAG’s mission was to invigorate the arts by establishing community and school-based theatre and performance groups. NAG was laden with a political agenda. In Nyerere’s own words: “I have set up this new ministry to help us regain our pride in our own culture. I want it to seek the best of the traditions and customs of all our tribes and make them part of our national culture” (Lange 1995:32). To this end several theatre and performance troupes were established. These locally based groups were to keep cultural voices and heritages alive as well as provide a mouthpiece for Nyerere’s social, economic, and political reforms. Funding these local groups was the first step towards remaking a tribally based culture into a “Tanzanian” culture.

In the low-tech, communication and transportation-challenged Tanzania of the 1960s and ‘70s (which is still much how it is today) arts activism was an important medium for the explanation of government programs. In 1972, to augment the local community groups, the National Drama Troupe was formed (there was also a National Dance and a National Music Troupe). This troupe was an urban-based touring
group, and despite the idealism of establishing a national performance identity, faced the formidable obstacle of an inefficient road and rail system.

Unlike government-supported community groups, the National Drama Troupe adopted Western dramaturgical models. Haji Ahmad Malda—actor, mime, and traditional dancer—describes the sentiment of the time: “The belief was that theatre did not exist before colonialism. We were in search for African theatre and didn’t know where to begin. So we looked at those places that already had theatre traditions” (1999). Western artists were brought in from Britain and the Soviet Union to train Tanzanians in acting, playwriting, and directing. Tanzanians also went abroad for training, mainly in Britain and the Soviet Union.

Tanzania’s international debt crisis of 1979, coupled with its expensive war with Uganda made for difficult economic times. In 1979, the National Drama, Music, and Dance Troupes were disbanded. However, the National Drama Troupe experience was instructive, clarifying values, objectives, and future direction. The contradiction between the National Drama Troupe’s Westernized basis and the values of Ujamma had not gone unnoticed. Tanzanians recognized that their indigenous performances were a totality of elements—story telling, dance, and music. As Malda put it, “We recognized we had to create a Tanzania theatre form through experiments. We needed to have a laboratory to put together the traditions to create a new tradition. It took us a while to appreciate what we had and what we had to do” (Malda 1999). The philosophy of Ujamma, along with rising pan-African awareness, was a catalyst for the transformation of Tanzanian theatre. However, as in any nation building, there were growing pains, contradictions, fits and starts. Tanzania’s performance was both a mirror of and participant in the nation’s growth and development.

**Villagization**

Nyerere’s idealistic vision for Tanzania included a program called “Villagization.” Inspired by socialist doctrine and responding to the need for bold initiatives, the Villagization program nationalized land and forced 13 million rural people in 1977 to relocate to villages near main roads. The Soviet-styled, centrally planned consolidation of villages was supposed to facilitate efficiency in communications, roads, schools, clinics, and in getting crops to market. The objective of this compulsory re-
location was to make organized villages with uniform characteristics. But for the most part roads, schools, and clinics were not built. Where they were built, it was done poorly and communications lines were not laid due to inefficiency, lack of expertise, and corruption. Villagization was planned and administered from the top down without respect to land rights of indigenous people. No effort was made to consult the traditional owners of the land or those being moved. Disputes and antagonisms were inevitable. Villagization ultimately proved ruinous for the Tanzania economy, its scars still apparent today.

Tanzania’s numerous traditional performance expressions also suffered. There are numerous instances of village drummers being sent to one village, while the dancers were sent to another. The people thought Villagization was temporary and saw themselves as temporary immigrants who would someday go back home. So they postponed cultural practices—rituals, initiations, first fruit ceremonies, etc.—thinking they would return to their land of origin. But this seldom happened. As a consequence many transplanted groups forgot a substantial number of their cultural practices, or adopted and incorporated performance and ritual practices from their new locations.

**Traditional Performance**

Prior to Villagization, relative isolation helped preserve traditional societies and their performances. Villagization set into motion the irreversible transformation of traditional performance, changing where, how, and why traditional performance was performed.

Traditional performance essentially relates to Life Events such as birth, initiation rites, marriage, first fruits, funerals, catastrophes of nature, and exceptional community events, and Occupational Events such as hunting, farming, and healing. Everything, every life and every occupational event, birth, sickness, and death relates to an ancestral or spiritual belief system. Spiritual and ancestral context provides the basis for indigenous culture and its performances (Nyoni 1999). Traditional performance is also its language of expression. Dance steps, drumming rhythms, songs, and sounds, and the performance structures themselves, along with accoutrements and regalia are directly related to and reflective of place. Geography, climate, seasons, and the local animal life shape the imagery, rhythms, and calendar of indigenous performances. The confluence of the spiritual/ancestral and the human realities pro-
vide the text. Some of the text is structured and carried on from previous times, and some flexible, improvised to suit a given situation.

The meaning of traditional performances is not derived only from what is spoken or sung, but by a combination of all related conventions that come into play before, during, and after the performance. For example, when Makonde masked dancers represent the spirits and express the solidarity of the ancestors with the initiated, they are bringing together the living and dead. When traditional performers dance, they become the spirit/ancestors.

Françoise Grund-Khaznader explains how the Wamakonde of southern Tanzania transpose human and spiritual realities during the Midimu initiation ceremony:

During the Midimu, the micro-society gives itself over completely to the dramatic play. However, although this ritual exercises epidemics and other disasters, its primary focus is on the coming together of the world of the living with the world of the dead. The masked dancers represent spirits and express the solidarity of the ancestors with the initiated. The spirits join with them at the joyful time of their entrance into adult life and, therefore, into society. (1981:26)

When traditional performances were adopted by outsiders (a process abetted by the formation of the National Drama Troupe and Villagization) inevitable adjustments, abbreviations, and dilutions of meaning took place. Taking traditional dance and performance out of its original context alters its function and objectives. Unfettered from their places of origin, traditional performances in Tanzania were aesthetized at the expense of specific, local meanings. The government-initiated altering of traditional performances was well intended, motivated by national unity. The government was successful in creating a stable Tanzanian culture, as opposed to an uneasy collage of competing tribal identities.

Traditional Adaptations
Villagization required a practical way of communicating issues across tribal cultures and performance was the obvious and most efficient medium. Theatre (because radio was limited and television nonexistent) became an essential expression of the nation’s political, social, and cultural aspirations. Villagization, coupled with the idealism of Ujamma, sought to create a national culture bereft of tribalism. However, this resulted in the homogenizing of existing performance expressions.
Traditional performance genres such as *ngonjera* and *vichekesho* were adapted to serve the goals of the new socialist reality. A new form of dance and drama was evolved to serve educational and propaganda needs. Introduced during the latter part of the 1960s and, popular throughout the 1970s, these reworked traditional styles were also offered as a replacement for the colonial (i.e., Western) theatre. *Ngonjera* became a politicized syncretic popular theatre. *Ngonjera*’s poetic recitation, usually in verse and arranged in dialogue with opposing parts to create a debate, was adapted into a question-and-answer patter to disseminate political and social knowledge. As in its traditional forms, one character was wiser. This protagonist became the politically correct disputant. A misinformed or foolish character provided the counterpoint. A narrator was also introduced and positioned as a joker or trickster character. The joker participated in the action, providing humor and commenting on the issues.

The following dialogue gives some idea of how the genre functioned. This extract from Mnyampala’s *Ngonjera-Chama Cha TANU*, (a theatre group of Nyerere’s ruling party) performance in which a wise political cadre explains TANU’s policy to a conveniently curious citizen:

Citizen  
I am asking so that you give me wisdom  
Give me the meaning to console my heart.  
I want to hear the truth about party policy  
Tell me TANU’s policy, whose Party is it?

Politician  
Listen to me and keep what I tell you  
Keep everything that I will tell you  
Then use what I tell you to avoid blame  
It is the farmers’ Party  
And also that of the workers.  
(Kerr 1995:188)

The tradition of praise songs flourished and was likewise adapted to propaganda purposes. The following is by the Makongero group, a professional troupe attached to the Chama Cha Mapinduzi headquarters. Note the exhortatory praise of President Nyerere, which is applied
much like it would be in traditional times, invoking an ancestor or spirit:

The second Five Year Plan
Tells us that we should eat chicken, eggs,
Vegetables, fish, and also drink milk.
It tells us that we should eat bodybuilding foods,
It tells us that we should build better houses.
The party has lit the torch. Praise to Nyerere.
(Kerr 1995:188)

An additional feature of ngonjera was its ability to assimilate non-theatrical media. Visual aids like charts, photographs, maps, and posters were included for demonstration purposes. Such pedagogic flexibility was useful in assisting an adult education system keen on finding indigenous forms of communication outside the formal education framework (Kerr 1995:188–89).

Another adapted and politicized entertainment was vichekesho, a satirical form that developed at the beginning of the 20th century in Zanzibar, where it was known as tarabu na vichekesho. The form evolved from street vendors selling water and peanuts during colonial times. These people were usually from rural areas and illiterate; and in order to attract customers, they exaggerated their dress and behavior. In its origin, vichekesho was a syncretic Kiswahili-language musical farce, which used a combination of improvised sketches and tarabu, the Arab-influenced, neo-traditional, Swahili music. Vichekesho applied satirical dialog and slapstick action derived from current social and political issues. Its major themes were greed, ignorance, envy, and jealousy.

Laughter was the original and main objective of vichekesho, but the socialist government shaped the form to serve educational and anti-capitalist propaganda. In its original form, vichekesho included stock characters that may have developed out of earlier colonial attempts (in the 1920s and ‘30s) to provide schools with accessible entertainment. The British used the popular plays of Shakespeare and Moliere, reducing the characters to stock characters, which further influenced the evolution of the satirical form. Vichenkesho’s stock characters bore a similarity to commedia del’arte and like Moliere’s served as social commentators. The stock characters evolved by the socialist government in-
cluded the “capitalist,” replete with big belly and buttocks, and the “socialist,” a poorly dressed lean figure. Vichekesho was presented as fifteen-minute playlets interspersed with and including acrobatics, drumming, dance, singing, and praise singing. When the government later pulled its support, performances developed a nonpolitical sensibility with the day-to-day concerns of love, family, and money becoming predominant. Today Vichenkesho is performed in bars, where people gather not for the performance, but primarily for drinking and socializing. In addition to satire, these days groups provide eight to ten variety show acts, such as singing, traditional dancing, pop music, and acrobatics. Women cast members are also a part of a group’s attraction.

The process of Villagization changed traditional performance in the rural areas in different ways. The June to October dry season in subequatorial Africa is the time for performance. With traditional performance adaptations, socialist interventions, and the growth of Popular Theatre, which I describe below, many village groups adjusted and abbreviated traditional rites and ritual performances to suit modern rather than indigenous timetables. Out of necessity, troupes began performing during nontraditional times of year, providing entertainment and charging a fee for individual celebrations such as baptisms, marriages, anniversaries, and other personal auspicious occasions. However, for community-based activities, such as initiation and funerals, they did not charge (Nyoni 1999).

In rural areas poverty also played a role. Mama Molide, leader of Mheme Dancers describes her troupe’s predicament: “In the past we could perform together, but now, due to famine we cannot. We only perform together when the village leadership wants us to perform for visitors” (Nyoni 1999). As the nature of the events, dances, and objectives changed, new values, contexts, and audiences emerged. The pressure of economic survival has handicapped severely the generational transference of traditional performance and the meaning it encodes, redefining the relationship of performance and its community.

Up through the colonial era, performance served as a tradition bearer, a community signifier, and a way of passing values from generation to generation. Formerly, mentors and elders were drawn from the entire community to conduct traditional initiations. Pubescent boys were taught stories, dances, and songs that encoded their culture and their responsibility to it. The young men were sequestered, ate, and par-
participated in a series of rites for the entire initiation period of a few months. Today, rather than traditional seclusion, an enclosure is erected near the village, in full sight of the village and only a few meters from the initiate’s home. The initiation, rather than a few months, takes a few weeks with the boys returning home at night. Family mentors, rather than community mentors or elders, carry out the initiation rites with everything shortened, including the performances of “coming out.” During a recent ceremony, the initiates were as young as six years old because it was not known when or if another initiation ceremony would take place (Nyoni 1999).

Popular Theatre
Pan-ethnic African theatre forms evolved, out of necessity, from traditional performance forms because of the need to communicate social, political, and economic reform in familiar terms. With the development of Popular Theatre, indigenous traditional performance moved definitively from its local contexts into an expanded context and identity defined by national politics and economics.

Opiyo Mumma, a practitioner and scholar of African theatre at the University of Nairobi, best describes the differences between “Community” (i.e., traditional and indigenous) and “Popular Theatre”:

Community Theatre involves actors working in and performing to a particular community. The work is normally performance based [...] and community members often perform for themselves for entertainment and learning purposes. The product is normally folk culture through song, myth, or dance. Community Theatre has no individual author, and is presented in oral, aural or visual modes. [...] Community Theatres do not tour much, but perform very much in their area of residence.

Popular Theatre as currently practiced in Africa involves the participation of amateur players and the whole community and what are seen to be their problems. Problems are analyzed in individual and group discussions and are then made into concrete theatrical performances using artistic forms popular or familiar to the community. Public performances for the community are staged to present discussion by the performers and audience then chart out what action is to be taken by the community. Popular Theatre is unique in that it uses popular traditional art forms. It transcends Community Theatre by the very nature of its process (Mumma 1997:10).

The evolution of Community to Popular Theatre took place throughout sub-Saharan Africa at around the same time. The catalyst was the struggle for a post-colonial identity and nationhood: Using popular theatre is therefore not an attempt to look for new content in old forms, but new content in current popular forms, some of which have evolved or have been syncretized from old forms. These cultural vehicles are the most effective carriers of political and social messages sim-
As a component of the National Arts Group’s Cultural Program, cultural officers were sent to all of Tanzania’s regions to organize competitions at the village, district, regional, and national levels. Most NAG artist-workers were traditional groups specializing in one of two predominant genres: ngoma, which is essentially traditional song and dance; and kwaya, modern, popular music popularized by and named after the Kwaysa people near the Congo border. However, the Cultural Program initiative did not provide troupes with the skills necessary to sustain them and make them relevant to their own communities. Instead, their politically motivated methods mimicked NAG teachings. Tanzania was under one party rule and, though censorship was not imposed, self-censorship, produced in response to political expediency, influenced artistic expression.

The financial self-interest of performing groups, along with political and community pressures, still shape the nature of Tanzanian performance. Frowin Nyoni, Professor of Theatre at the University of Dar es Salaam, in his book Conformity and Change, cites a recent example of self-censorship:

“Pressure from the village council or local political chief forced groups to avoid singing subversive songs. By subversive I mean songs that criticized the government or made a complaint about corruption and how bad things are. I have personally seen village political chiefs warn dance groups to ‘behave themselves’” (1999).

The Cultural Program imposed the condition that each of the participating NAG groups must include in its repertory a variety of performance expressions from another ethnic group. As a result many groups throughout the country performed audience pleasing traditional dances that were from outside their own group. However, because groups were learning dances at a remove and without an understanding of their tradition, significance, or detail, the aesthetic quality of these performances was generally very low and mostly irrelevant to the local communities for whom they were performed. Governmental agencies and organizations like the National Bank of Commerce, National Insurance Company, the police and armed forces, Urafick Textiles, and Bora Shoe Company also formed popular theatre troupes. These troupes were used to entertain and praise the leader of each organiza-
tion, as well as, to propagate the party line and government policies. Performances took place at political, social, and cultural events, and at places of work. The government-supported NAG groups were also used to campaign for the government (the only political party) during elections.

With the economic crisis of the late 1970s, precipitated by a world debt crisis, Tanzania introduced the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) mandated by the World Bank. These programs were market oriented and incompatible with Villagization and the government’s socialism. With the implementation of the World Bank debt restructuring, came the forced issue of democratization. Subsequently, international aid organizations—which funded theatre with their own social, political, health, and developmental agenda’s in mind—came to supplant government. With this shift, theatre went from governmental propaganda to analysis and criticism. What was formerly ideological, became critical introspection and satire. It was at this time that the grassroots Popular Theatre movement came into maturity, sweeping through Tanzania, Zambia, and Kenya, and firmly establishing itself as a viable, community-based medium of empowerment and change. Popular Theatre was seen as a mechanism grounded in the past yet, malleable, enabling a community to address issues on its own terms.

With the advent of a multiparty system in 1992, an amendment to the Tanzanian constitution forbade politics in the workplace. Popular Theatre troupes lost support, several dissolved, and a few continued activities commercially.

Cultural Remix
Tanzania’s policy shift to a market-influenced economy had a profound impact on its theatre and performance. Urban and rural-based theatre artists, no longer able to rely solely on government funding, began to form their own, independent troupes. Forced to produce paying performances outside their community, many rural performers and troupes came to Dar es Salaam to seek their fortunes. Because these rural performers were familiar with traditional forms, they were able to find work with urban troupes hungry for new dances and novelties.

An example of how rural performances became urban-based and consumer-driven. is found in the small village of Luwaita, where the people responded when a coffee cooperative failed to pay them. In need
of money, the community’s dancers and musicians contacted a group in Dar es Salaam and made joint performances by creating new combinations of dances and songs. They were able to shape their shows to suit the taste of a wider, multiethnic urban audience. Other rural groups likewise developed multiethnic styles and repertories. These performance pastiches were ideally suited for ethnically mixed, urban audiences, serving up accessible entertainment with a big helping of nostalgia.

The performance vocabularies of theatre troupes expanded to include eclectic styles of music and instruments including electric guitars and drum kits. One group, Mganda WaKinkachi, evolved by absorbing and imitating many forms of indigenous dance along with heavy doses of colonial marching bands—replete with uniforms, skins, and colorful feathers. Subject matter, use of language, and style of presentations also evolved to include themes from popular culture. Several groups, such as Nyati (from Nzali) and Nyota (from Nyota), developed into productive and dynamic groups, successfully transforming structure, content, and production processes from traditional into modern performance expressions. Some groups were so complete in their transformation, they achieved a level of professionalism and organization that enabled them to tour regionally and internationally (Nyoni 1999).

**Theatre For Development**

In the early 1980s, Popular Theatre in Tanzania evolved into what became known as Theatre for Development (TDF). The evolution of Theatre for Development was in part a response to the overwhelming social, economic, and environmental issues confronting the nation. Popular Theatre had proved itself effective as a communicative, educational, and propagandistic medium; however, by the early 1980s in Tanzania, times were changing.

For Tanzania, and nations like Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Malawi, Ghana, and Zambia, the development into nationhood was turbulent, often filled with violence, dictators, cronyism, coups, and monumental miss-steps. Independence, self-rule, capitalism, and democracy were things Tanzania and other African nations had never known or participated in. Tanzania, along with other African nations, went from being a resource for the West—with their riches carted away, their people enslaved and exploited—to nationhood. The West, China, and the USSR responded by giving aid with many strings attached. Tanzania and other
African nations became pawns. The idealism of nationhood was shaped by either socialist ideology or capitalism. Greed and corruption became part of the system.

The Theatre for Development built on Popular Theatre, but was different in two fundamental ways: (1) it was facilitated and guided by outsiders (i.e., theatre professionals) who activated community members; (2) it was more analytical with a direct focus on problem solving. Opiyo Mumma gives a succinct description of the form:

Theatre For Development (TFD): This movement, like Popular Theatre, recognizes the characteristics of indigenous African performances. Where TFD exists, it is facilitated by a team of theatre experts who work with various types of development and extension agencies, helping them create theatre that will carry a message on such themes as nutrition, literacy, health, environment, sanitation, and agriculture around the communities. This kind of theatre varies from straight drama to song and dance. The songs are usually simple, catchy tunes with a clear message, composed and sung by the extension workers together with the audience. TFD workers fall into groups: government agents and autonomous practitioners. They are sometimes animators or facilitators (1997:10–11).

In Tanzania today, Theater for Development is pervasive. In outline, the ideal TFD practice requires a catalyst group of theatre professionals to conduct a one- to three-week residency in a village. The objectives are, in the words of Mgunga Mwa Mnyenyelwa, a TFD practitioner and director of Parapanda Arts in Dar es Salaam.

To address in a theatrical way the issues necessary for development of community issues. These issues have included AIDS prevention, enhancement of sanitation, nutrition standards, eradication of illiteracy and poverty, corruption, leadership irresponsibility, communication, and environmental education” (1999).

In addition to theatre professionals trained in TFD, a village project might include educators, community members, school children, nurses, health officers, and development workers. The professionals see their role as helping a community deal with its own problems. They are also political activists promoting grassroots, practical involvement of rural people. Funding for such projects comes from international NGOs, the government, universities, and development organizations. The introduction of issues from the outside is not strictly a top-down initiative. The community is empowered and activated to address very real local issues. However, the TFD does not go so far as to raise issues challeng-
ing institutionalized governmental exploitation and corruption (Kerr 1995:159-60).

Frowin Nyoni, notes how in the mid-1990s a TFD project in the village Ukombozi was censored locally by village leadership. The song they developed during the project was never sung in performance. The implication of corrupt, incompetent local and national government was not what the leadership wanted the public to hear:

People from all regions in Tanzania
Especially those belonging to parties
We are saying that we pay tax
Our children do not have desks in school

We pay tax but we do not get medicines
We pay tax
But our roads are in a dilapidated condition

Now a big task to the third phase government
Is to build school in villages
Education is essential to us Tanzanians

To build roads in villages
Transport is essential to us Tanzanians
To build dispensaries in villages
Health is essential to us Tanzanians (1998)

David Kerr claims the beginnings of TFD in Tanzania were noble in intention. TFD began in Tanzania when a team from the University of Dar es Salaam—Penian Mlama, Eberhard Chambulikazi, and Amadina Lihamba—created a theatre campaign capable of sustaining community participation and critical analysis. Oxfam International funded the campaign, entitled Theatre for Social Development, and centered it at Malya, a large Ujamma village in Mwanza Region.

Malya was chosen because of its mix of peasants and workers, totaling about five thousand. Its dynamic twenty-five person Ujamma executive committee was lead by a village chairman and secretary. It had a vigorous performing tradition, which had already achieved local fame under the guidance of the village cultural subcommittee.
Over a period of about 18 months in 1982-83, the theatre team from the University of Dar es Salaam, known as the catalyst group, made five visits—some for two weeks, others for over a month. The advantage of the extended and frequent visits was that the university team was able to build a closer relationship with the core team in Malya, and become a part of the social life of village.

The first play was about older men impregnating young girls. Their success allowed the catalyst group to become so well accepted that they were able to influence a Malya Christian sect, the African Inland Church, to stop its hostility to theatre performances. In general, the campaign led to a revitalization of cultural life, and paved the way for economic projects to alleviate problems such as unemployment and vagrancy. (Kerr 1995:158)

Ideally, Theatre for Development is empowering and educational. The TDF professionals impart a methodology of how to identify, investigate, ask questions, collect data, and analyze. Interviewing techniques are taught, as is an awareness of how to identify, for instance, local health hazards. Then, with the TFD professionals as teachers and moderators, a local chairperson is elected to facilitate the group’s brainstorming. Democratic and participatory ideals are central to the TFD process and after the central issues are identified, analyzed, and discussed, a solution evolves. A storyline, situations, and themes develop and the group discusses how to approach and organize its work. After a strategy is mapped out the TFD group (consisting of 1 to 6 professionals and 10 to 20 locals) test the material through improvisation, using a mix of traditional, modern, and other styles of popular dance, as well as poetry, drumming, mask, and role-playing drama. One project lead by Bakari K. Mbelemba of the Mandela group of Dar es Salaam, combined several disparate traditional dances.

Often the group’s research will be presented in front of the gathered community who are then asked to lead the group in dramatizing and illustrating the issues, offering suggestions and commentary to the TFD group. Essentially, the community provides the source material and the TFD troupe leads select locals in the development of the performance. However, a TDF troupe may simply conduct the research, then, develop the material with community input, but evolve and present the performance themselves. In any event, the entire community is invited to attend the finished performance and continue being part of the process.
Mwa Mnyenyelwa told of a TFD project he worked with in 1998 that took him to villages to address serious health hazards involving sanitation and drinking water. Part of the community performance included a skit about how people get sick when they do not wash their hands before eating. For that and other TFD projects, Mwa Mnyenyelwa assigns each community issue a different art form—drama, poetry, chorus, heroic singing, and dancing. After the performance comes an often-heated community discussion with a Joker character as facilitator.6

Kerr sees a problem in TFD being generally supported by NGOs and development agencies from the developed, and predominantly the Western, world. For Kerr, TFD is an insidiously sophisticated form of propaganda.

The jargon used by popular theatre workers to describe Theatre for Development (“participatory,” “bottom-up,” “concretization,” “liberation,” and so on) derived from the combative Freirian language of popular resistance. But the actual practice had to conform to the paternalistic (or, in some cases, regressive) realities of government hegemony. Most of the nations in which the workshops took place had a history of collaboration between political and economic elites. As long as the government was closely monitoring these theater experiments, there was no likelihood of drama being used for creating genuine solidarity of peasants and workers against oppression. Instead, theatre was used to legitimate existing power structures by providing a semblance of government participation in grass-roots cultural movement (1995:159–60).

Theatre for Development remains the most widely used performance form throughout Tanzania. The three groups noted below, The Bagamoyo College of Art, Parapanda Arts Company, and the Mandela Theatre Group, all use TFD in their work. Kerr’s critique aside, it is a form that reflects the needs and ambitions of Tanzania.

**Bagamoyo College Of Arts**
The government-sponsored national companies of dance, acrobatics, drama, and music were also victims of Tanzania’s 1979 economic crisis and programs mandated by the World Bank and IMF. The Tanzanian government, strapped by austerity programs, severely curtailed their arts support asking the nation’s leading artists to develop alternatives in re-
response to the dissolution of the national companies. Their answer was to create a centralized school to train cultural workers.

The town of Bagamoyo was chosen in 1981 for the Bagamoyo College of Arts. The former colonial capital of German East Africa was chosen for its historical significance and seventy mile proximity to Dar es Salaam. For hundreds of years Bagamoyo was also the termination port of several slave and trade routes that ran deep into the interior of East and Central Africa. Bagamoyo—which means, “Lay down my weeping heart”—is where countless enslaved East Africans said goodbye to Africa (Ng’Hangasamala 1999).

The beautiful campus of the Arts College is located on the white sand beaches of the Indian Ocean providing an ideal relaxed working atmosphere. At first there were three groups—two dance and one drama in residence providing instruction. Classes took place under two very large, old mango trees in keeping with many Tanzanian teaching traditions. Classrooms, dormitories, offices, and a large thatched-roof building that houses an indoor and outdoor stage were built over a period of several years. Initially, the college was fully subsidized by the government with students receiving a full tuition waiver and a living stipend. Today, students must pay full tuition: TSH 85,000 per year, about $110 (Malda 1999). As government funding dwindled, the mission of training cultural workers for the preservation and propagation of local traditions fell to the wayside. Today many students aspire to form groups and become independent artists rather than return to their regions as cultural workers. According to performer Haji Ahmed Malda, “Many go to Dar es Salaam to make money” (1999).

Competition for entrance to Bagamoyo is intense. Each year college instructors go into the countryside to audition hundreds of applicants (in 1999 there were over 500 applications), from which fifty or more are asked to Bagamoyo for a weeklong audition. Fifteen students are admitted for study in the areas of drama, fine arts, music, dance, stage technology and acrobatics (Malda 1999).

The audition requires excellent written and oral English and Kiswahili, and a high school diploma. Although English was de-emphasized during Ujamma in favor of Kiswahili, it is widely spoken among the educated. Bagamoyo’s inclusion of English reflects how the language has grown into the lingua franca of commerce, communications, education, and tourism.
A rigorous practical audition requires each applicant to audition in each area. The popularity of acrobatics at Bagamoyo, and throughout Tanzania and Kenya, dates back to 1964 through 1968, when many Tanzanians trained in China. Acrobatic groups composed of Africans subsequently formed and became crowd pleasers, evolving their own unique style by incorporating traditional and modern song and dance, including hip-hop and break dancing. Many Tanzanian acrobats can be found in Kenya, where the tourist trade is more lucrative.

In the school’s final selection process, because so few women audition due to the limits imposed by traditional cultures and women’s resultant inhibitions gender is taken into account. The selection process also considers tribal and geographic distribution. Applicants are not required to identify their tribal or ethnic affiliation, but traditional knowledge is a plus.

Nkwabi ng’Hangasamala, dancer, performing artist and instructor at Bagamoyo, studied mime in Sweden. Other exchanges have involved Chinese performing artists, American choreographers, Japanese drummers, and Russian musicians. During the fall of 1999, Bagamoyo was engaged in a collaborative project with the British Welfare State Theatre. In January 2000, Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) sponsored a performance exchange with a Swedish theatre group. Since 1985, Bagamoyo has participated in a number of exchanges and tours, primarily to Europe.

Despite being under-funded, Bagamoyo has become an important center for the exchange of traditional knowledge in Tanzania and the region, hosting artists from other East and Central African countries. The college is one of the few arts training institutions in Africa devoted to exploring and propagating an African aesthetic. Students from other African nations and the occasional student from developed nations, come for “short courses” and individual study. One and two-month courses in music, drumming, dance, and mime are offered to non-Africans at a rate of $5.00 per hour. Hard currency from private lessons is an important source of revenue for the college. Instructors at the college are provided with housing and paid about TSH 90,000 per month (about $120). The government also provides support for productions. Operating and maintenance expenses must be borne by the college (ng’Hangasamala 1999).
Graduates from the college have employment opportunities. Tanzania has no national theatre, so many graduates either join existing dance groups or are employed by national or international NGO’s as cultural workers. Some graduates formulate their own groups and a small number go into television, which is still in its infancy and pays poorly. Many graduates work in radio drama, which is more highly developed, widespread, and relatively lucrative.

In 1987, the college established the Bagamoyo Players, composed of faculty and staff with the objective of keeping themselves artistically alive, challenged, and experimental. Nkwabi ng’Hangasamala comments on the function and process of the Bagamoyo Players:

We don’t want to lose our practical abilities and we need a laboratory for an alternative view so students can learn by example. Often we include students in the work. Each year we create a performance. We come together and pick a theme to explore in our performance. Last year [September 1999] the theme was ‘AIDS: Art and Health.’ In 2000 the theme will be corruption. We consider our work original.

We usually start with a dance tradition and dramatize the dance according to the tradition. We do research and do much discussing to “open it up” and find a narrative connection by working with the dances from different traditions. We put them together to explain a narrative story line. We illuminate the dance so each traditional dance tells another part of the narrative. Its important to illustrate the story clearly because the performance must tour and have broad audience appeal for all the people in Tanzania and even foreigners when we tour to Europe. That’s why we include pantomime and teach it here (1999).

The Bagamoyo Players’ 1999 production of *Kifo Cha Mnazi* (Death of a Coconut Tree) by Bagamoyo instructor Rashid Masimbi, included dances drawn and reworked from several traditions. The production included dances of initiation, hunting, finding a fiancée, and “warrior-ship.” In Western terms the production was a narrative-based collage that included dance theatre, realistic dialogue interludes, occasional songs, and musical instrument accompaniment. In the fall of 1999, the production toured to Jordan and, though performed in Swahili, was enthusiastically received.

When I asked about reactions to the reworking of traditional dances, ng’Hangasamala responded:
We enlarge traditional dance, we don’t take it. In Tanzania traditional dance is considered the property of all. The people who originated the dances are happy to see them performed by others. What is important is the feeling of the dancers and not the exact dance. Our performances always provoke audience participation when we perform in the regions (1999).

The Bagamoyo Players will also take commissions from a NGO. Recent commissions included a performance on family planning funded by Oxfam. Most independent groups (comprised of Bagamoyo graduates) work solely from commissions, developing plays or dance-music performances addressing a specific issue or event. Once a commission payment is received, a budget is developed, which determines how much time will be spent developing the performance. Often performances pull from a group’s known materials, which are reworked to suit the commission. Between commissions, in order to make ends meet, groups often perform in bars, presenting a wild mix of traditional and popular songs and dance. In response to this, Ng’Hangasamala remarks, “There are many talented people performing in bars. But when they are playing to drunks they are not developing our Tanzanian theatre style. They are a step removed from go-go girls” (1999). But such is the state of Tanzanian performance. The dilemma is debated by every theatre and performance person I spoke to. In Tanzania, says ng’Hangasamala, “It is a time of tough choices” (ng’Hangasamala 1999).

Parapanda Arts Company
“Parapanda will not perform in bars!” declared Mgunga Mwa Mnyenyewa, the troupe’s director. He is part of a new breed of young Tanzanian theatre artists, savvy to the new market economy, yet cognizant of their role and responsibility in shaping the nation’s future. Mwa Mnyenyewa is a man on a mission, constantly in motion. He is a director, performer, administrator, poet, teacher, and an advocate of Kiswahili. I spent some time with him in dalla-dallas (crowded public passenger vans) shuttling between rehearsals and, to and from, his offices. Parapanda’s small office is on the grounds of a large secondary school near Dar es Salaam’s bustling Buguruni market. Mwa Mnyenyewa’s office at the Tanzania Theatre Center, where he serves as program director, is near the infamous Kariakoo Market in central Dar es Salaam. Both market areas are microcosms of Tanzania, crowded with people, cars, and pollution, bustling with market activities. The five-
story poured-concrete building that houses the Tanzania Theatre Center is only half completed but is inhabited nonetheless. On the same floor is the East African Theatre Institute, which works regionally. Both recently formed organizations are dedicated to communication, advocacy, and development of theatre arts and artists.

Explaining how Tanzanian theatre is in the throes of evolution, Mwa Mnyenyewa says,

The theatre industry is young in Tanzania. Before Tanzania theatre was protected, but also a political tool. Now with the market economy, it will have to find its way. This is a time of great opportunity and importance. For me, the way for theatre is not through performing in bars. Parapanda will never perform in bars (1999).

“Parapanda” is a Kiswahili word for the horn trumpet used to call people in Mwa Mnyenyewa’s home region of Langa, a mountainous area in south central Tanzania. Mwa Mnyenyewa and other students at the University of Dar es Salaam started the dance company, Parapanda, in 1993:

I dreamed of being a theatre artist ever since I was very young. I was an education student but I wanted to do theatre too; it is a strong tool for education in Tanzania. The theatre department at the university was dull, with nothing going on. There were no performances, no acting, and just the studying of theatre with little practical experience. My friends would say, “So you are studying Ngoma? What are you doing, studying something you can get in your home village?” I got tired of trying to explain what theatre can do and what I study. This inspired me to start a group. I needed to start a theatre company because the department was dead. Only a few had any theatre training. Most of us, including myself, had no practical training, but the ones with no training were more aggressive. We came to it without preconceived notions of what theatre should do and how it should do it.

At first many people supported the idea, but when the commitment increased many made excuses. It was very frustrating. It is very difficult to start and maintain a theatre company. The National Arts Council has several theatre groups on the official register, but where are they? Many are dead before they are born. I made up my mind. Theatre can be done even with one person. I figured I had to start a theatre and that others would follow (1999).

Parapanda’s first production was The Witch (1994), an original, company-developed script concerning rent and land problems from the perspective of traditional spiritual beliefs. They began with an ensemble of eight, but the student actors could not commit to a rehearsal schedule. To much praise, Mwa Mnyenyewa and another actor played all eight characters themselves.
Parapanda’s next production was a youth theatre piece, *Our Cry* (1995). For this production Mwa Mnyenyewa went around collecting children not attending school, those working as vendors in nearby markets, dropouts, and university staff children (staff and faculty housing is located on campus). Using school facilities, he hired a drummer and dancers to teach and train the twenty children. He bought cokes, milk, and oranges to keep the children coming. The challenge and excitement of theatre drew more children and momentum. *Our Cry* was primarily a dance performance developed from stories about children and AIDS. The production’s success prodded the university to becoming Parapanda’s official sponsor. Other sponsors included international foundations and medical NGOs. Over the years, Parapanda has received sponsorship or direct commissions from several European embassies and the European Economic Community, the Tanzanian National AIDS Control Program, the Roman Catholic Church, the World Health Organization, and Oxfam. Funding has gone to support street and market performances, workshops, and seminars. In addition to HIV/AIDS, performances have dealt with family planning, reproductive health, prenatal care, and trachoma.

In 1998, the Institute of Resource Assessment commissioned Parapanda to develop a Popular Theatre performance dealing with the conflicts between Western and Tanzanian environmentalists and people living off the land. For the project, Parapanda worked in four regions, dealing with issues such as soil erosion, the use of chemical fertilizers, sewage treatment, and deforestation. Parapanda developed performances rooted in local traditions, using stories to educate locals about long-term implications of environmental degradation and its health and farming consequences. The environmentalists’ concerns were articulated and re-contextualized from a local point of view. In this way, those characterized as “outsiders” became familiar, their issues understood. Often, these performances incorporated practical advice about hygiene and disease prevention, linking the personal with larger environmental issues. All of the performances used animal characters representing the concerned, yet unbiased wisdom of nature.

Parapanda’s performances evolve improvisationally from scenarios, dancing, movement, and musical drama. A mix of recitation and singing is characteristic. All of the performers have musical and dance abilities in traditional and/or popular forms. Performance prologues are
tribal dance presentations choreographed by Mwa Mnyenyewa. Parapanda rehearses five hours a day, six days a week. A month is the normal period to develop a major performance; two weeks for a small performance such as the Kalevala commissioned by the Finnish embassy. A small project, such as the Kalevala celebration, pays about 150,000 TSH ($190).

A large part of Parapanda’s work concerns training. The World Health Organization sponsored a health project to focus on disadvantaged urban areas. Parapanda trained health drama groups in organization and management skills, theatrical techniques, heroic recitation, dancing, and instrumental music in traditional styles. These training programs must fill in the blanks left by poor education, urbanization, and the break with traditional village knowledge formerly passed down by village elders.

Mwa Mnyenyewa is trained not only in the theatre, but also as a councilor. He often conducts workshops using Theatre for Development practices to deal with health issues, sexual molestation, death, and grieving. He is a sought-after teacher and trainer in his own right. Beginning in 1998, though 2000, he trained children and orphans in refugee camps in former war areas for Plan International, a Danish educational NGO. In December 1999, Mwa Mnyenyewa was in Rwanda conducting a theatre workshop with girls orphaned and traumatized by the Hutu-Tutsi war.

Besides Mwa Mnyenyewa, the Parapanda Company includes ten adult performers who are paid 30,000 Tanzanian shillings per month (less than $40 US). Like Mwa Mnyenyewa, many of the company members have other jobs. The company, though successful in Tanzanian terms, still lacks management continuity and stability; it also risks losing its small, shack-like office on the grounds of the sprawling Buguruni School (a primary school with an enrollment of nearly 1,200). Parapanda often does children’s theatre projects with the school, but their office and storage sites will be threatened if the new head master decides not to continue with a drama program.

During the late 1990s, Parapanda experimented with several poetic works based on praise singing. Mwa Mnyenyewa hopes to popularize Kiswahili poetry. In October 1999, when President (“Teacher”) Nyerere died, Mwa Mnyenyewa wrote a poem in memoriam, which he performed at the burial, and, subsequently recorded with Parapanda. The
poem became a hit, receiving constant radio play throughout the month-long mourning period. This made Mwa Mnyenyewa a national celebrity and raised the profile of Parapanda. Parapanda has also experimented and adapted an Afro-Muslim Tarabou, a recited poetry tradition (originally Arabic) popularized on Zanzibar.

Mwa Mnyenyewa places Parapanda’s ambition and predicament in the context of an emerging market driven Tanzania:

Now we want to experiment and develop a Tanzanian style. But there is no government support and we cannot afford what we really want artistically because we must serve the commissions. The only government support is for the police and army theatre groups who used to be for propaganda and educational purposes. Today they are more for entertainment, dance, and drumming. Tanzanian One Theatre is well funded by the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi [CCM] party, but all they do is chorus and party politics drama.

The times in Tanzania are difficult and people need to laugh. Besides there is no such thing as a theatre tradition in Tanzania; we are starting from zero. There is no tradition of people going to the theatre. There are no theatre buildings; there is no tradition of people paying for theatre. So we look now for short-term solutions and projects for survival. That is why we are looking more at radio, poetry, and heroic recitation (1999).

Mwa Mnyenyewa’s charismatic and motivated leadership holds Parapanda together. His energy, vision, and sense of mission bespeak the transformation of a Tanzanian theatre and performance. His near heroic ambition is to create performance that speaks from and for the people. This is no simple task in multiracial, postcolonial, post-monoparty, and now market-driven Tanzania. Compounding the difficulty is the lack of financial support from a country burdened by the nation’s foreign debt, poverty, corruption, and an HIV/AIDS time bomb already imploding. Despite the odds, Mwa Mnyenyewa believes performance to be central to Tanzania’s rehabilitation and survival.

Mandela Theatre
The best-known company in Tanzania is the audience pleasing Mandela Theatre. Founded in 1989 by Bakari K. Mbelemba and named in honor of Nelson Mandela, the Mandela Theatre is less burdened with philosophical aspirations than Parapanda and, is, essentially commercially driven. Mbelemba is an affectionate, gregarious man who has done theatre since 1972, when he was an actor in the National Theatre Troupe. In 1980 he was among the founding faculty of Bagamoyo Col-
le. Forty-nine years old in 1999, a fit and energetic ex-boxer, Mbelemba identified himself as: “a dramaturg, director, actor, author, and well-known radio actor. The people all over Tanzania and many parts of East Africa know me as ‘Mzee Jangala,’ my radio name” (1999).

From the very start, Mandela has offered well-known nygoma (traditional dance), which remains its bread and butter. The troupe includes 31 members (19 men, 12 women) from many different tribes. Mbelemba describes their work:

They teach dances to one another from their tribes or from dances that they know but not particularly from their tribe. Many go home to their village to learn or invite dancers from villages to town to teach us. We perform only those dances that are high in entertainment value and attractive. The famous ones. The ones people want to see. Each full member of the group can act in plays, play music, and dance. It is the requirement. Everybody knows 50 dances from about 20 tribes (1999).

I interviewed Mbelemba at his rehearsal space, which is located a kilometer from Parapanda’s offices. The rehearsal space is a large, open-air, and walled compound, a “social club” (i.e., beer garden) owned by Mbelemba’s brother, who lets the group rehearse for free. I was there on a late December afternoon. The troupe’s band practiced Afro-pop songs. In another area, performers taught and worked on a traditional dance. At a table nearby, two performers worked on a skit for an upcoming commission. The troupe rehearses five days a week, 8:00 to 5:00, Monday through Friday, but during Ramadan they do not perform because Mbelemba and many members of the troupe, are Muslim. True to Mandela’s socialist origins, each company member must, to a greater or lesser degree, do everything. Drum, play a musical instrument, sing, act, recite poetry, and participate in management and publicity. Performers are paid 30,000 to 38,000 TSH per month (approximately $38 to $47 US), according to experience and time with company. They are paid every month, however, if they are not paid, “They will understand that it will come” (1999).

Performers often come from all over Tanzania to work with Mandela. Some are trained and some are not, but if the group deems they have talent, they are brought into the company. Experienced performers are integrated into the company, while novices apprentice. “Some performers come to learn and are willing to undergo theatrical and practical training and are not paid until they are ready. Then they become a member of the company, like Shakespeare”(1999). The Mandela group,
like Parapanda, also conducts Popular Theatre training workshops in the regions.

The company supports itself primarily by performing dance, music, acrobatics, and farcical sketches in social clubs. They have a regular schedule of social club appearances, with Mbelemba’s brother’s club being their Thursday and Saturday venue. When I asked how he reconciled being Muslim (which forbids drinking) with performing in social clubs, Mbelemba remarked, “Because it is work, not pleasure. Allah will not keep a man from making his living. Work is not a sin” (1999).

Like Parapanda and Bagamoyo, the Mandela Theatre also works on commissions from local and international NGOs. They often travel to the regions with a group of 15 to 20 performers. However, because commissions are drying up, Mbelemba was struggling with how to sustain his company. One plan was to reduce the company to 15. Mbelemba describes the problems:

The major problem is musical instruments. Electric instruments are costly. We need money for videocassettes because people need to see our work on television, because the business of theatre has become important. But the biggest problem is transport. We have no bus to travel and have to hire a bus or truck for tours, which cuts into our earnings. We will fail to reach our goals because of lack of transport. If we cannot do our work, we will itch with pain (1999).

Plays are usually company developed, addressing various problems in Tanzanian society, such as AIDS and education. “Our plays come from a social consciousness, not from politics or religion” (1999). Mbelemba writes for the company. His play about the Tanzanian-Ugandan war was controversial, but well received. A recent Mandela production dealt with forgiving children for bad behavior and was a metaphor for Tanzanian society. Other Mandela plays include Mafuriko (1994), a play about AIDS; Kichugaa Cha Moto (Fire Hill, 1996), about corruption; Niachieni Mwenyewe (Leave Me Alone, 1997), about social consciousness and responsibility; and Nani Mwamba? (Who Is More Stronger? 1990, 91, 95, 98), their best known and most often performed production. The play portrays a young Witch Doctor coming into his own with spiritual powers. With his new powers he gives people what they want—power, wealth, sex, and immortality. This makes the people insane and the society goes crazy. The young Witch Doctor sets out to heal them, but the wishes of the people are too strong. The situation worsens until everyone is mad. When the young Witch Doctor en-
lists the old Witch Doctor to assist in the cure, he, too, becomes insane. Finally, the young Witch Doctor cures everyone. The question he asks is, “Then who is to blame?” The play ends with the moral, “It is the community that brings problems onto themselves” (Mbelemba 1999).

Mbelemba is one of the stalwarts of Tanzanian theatre. When I asked him about the prospects of Tanzanian theatre, this normally ebullient man was pessimistic:

I am very much afraid about it. Before there was a direction, under socialism. Now everyone is in danger—danger of each having his or her own direction. One cannot say where we are aiming. They are not sure, it is all new. We don’t know what to expect. I smell a danger somewhere as a society.

Many troupes are dependent on performance for money. Now we do things not of our customs. And that is a danger, too. If we are only going to look after money and not for the good of the customs and the nation, we do nothing for the development of the nation and society.

In Tanzania theatre can be important. In this poor country theatre can make a difference and have an influence. Theatre has a good chance to educate the people to be more self-reliant and educate them about important issues. Education is the most important thing now because we are faced with three major enemies in Tanzania: lack of education, disease, and poverty.

Theatre in Tanzania must help to solve these problems. It can be the spark. We can lead. We are saying we need not be political, but to educate on various problems. This is not ideological. Just basic sense (1999).

The last time I saw Mbelemba was when we stood waiting for transport at Buguruni Market. I was the only white man in a sea of black faces. Streams of traffic jockeyed frantically as the surrounding mosques sang out in celebration, marking the end of the day’s fast. The humidity was stifling, faces sweating and fatigued as the diesel exhaust tinted the sunset. Mbelemba was going home to his wife and two children for his fast-breaking Ramadan meal. We shook hands and in parting he said, “You should worry for Tanzanian theatre and you should worry for all theatre, too. But somehow we will all survive” (1999).
Being African, Acting French

I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out.

I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkeys.

Aimé Césaire
from Discourse on Colonialism (2000 [1955]: 43)

It was late October 2000, a hot, dusty morning on the outskirts of Ouagadougou, the capital of West Africa’s Burkina Faso. Street sounds blended with the clicking of overhead fans inside a conference room where actors from Mali, Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Togo, Congo, and Ghana were in a line, trying to imitate the movements of a young modern dancer from Paris. The twenty actors expressed a variety of expressions ranging from grimace to befuddlement. They looked like puppets as their bodies contorted with the sharp abstract modern dance and Martha Graham technique movement exercises required by my erstwhile French assistant.

As the instructor of the workshop, I had, and just that morning been given the French dancer to “warm-up” the actors; her trip was funded by a French Cultural organization for that purpose. As I watched and wondered at the rationale of such a warm-up, the sound of applause from the next room filtered into the room. Peering through a connecting door, I saw two French mime artist leading another group of West African theatre artists. In a nearby courtyard a French mask performer was explaining LeCoq neutral masks to a group of Africans. Workshops in clown, marionette, and acting technique took place in other parts of the building—which was also a dormitory for visiting artists. All the workshops, except for that of a Togoan playwright and my own, were taught by French or French-Swiss artists. The workshops were part of the weeklong festival that included performances, symposiums, lectures, meetings, demonstrations, and workshops. The Festival International de Theatre et de Marionettes de Ouagadougou, popularly
known as FITMO 2000, was the largest theatre gathering of its kind in francophone Africa.

Not surprisingly, all organizations sponsoring the event were steeped, in a greater to lesser degree, in French culture or language. FITMO 2000 was presented under the auspices of Alliance France and UNESCO, a Paris-based UN organization with other major funding from UNESCO, UNICEF L’Agence de la Francophonie (ACT), La Coopération Française, Communauté Française de Belgique, Jeunesse du Monde, and the International Theatre Institute (ITI). The cast-strapped government of Burkina Faso supported the festival nominally (UNESCO 2000: 2). From the opening night ceremony and performances, and continuing throughout the week, nearly every lecture, workshop, meeting, and performance, of the festival was in French. This fact was not so striking in the post-colonial context of francophone Africa, where the only language uniting the region was, and is, French.

The questions provoked by the dancer’s warm-up nagged me throughout my weeklong workshop, interviews, and interactions at FITMO 2000. Was the festival and its various workshops, panels, and performances, propped up by French money and influence, an insidious continuation of colonialism? Was FITMO a willing pawn in a larger picture blurring political gamesmanship, neocolonialism, corruption, economic necessity, and French cultural egotism? Or was FITMO simply the expression of an emerging form of African theatre?

The French Cultural-Political-Economic Matrix
Not too far from downtown Ouagadougou’s famous Grand Marché—a closely packed, multi-story labyrinth of shops—was the French Cultural Center, one of the three FITMO performance sites. The center was a well-maintained brick building with a fully air-conditioned 200 seat Theatre (for live performances and film), offices, public library, classrooms, art gallery, and a Café serving French fare and wines worthy of a Paris café. The imposing Center compound, which was the de facto cultural center of Ouagadougou, also contained a walled off 400 seat outdoor proscenium arch theatre, fully equipped with lights, sound, and a limited fly space.

The French Cultural Center in Ouagadougou hosted several French-language cultural events throughout the year. Though several events were presentations from francophone Africa, the overwhelming
number of events featured imports from France: films, art exhibits, lectures, various performances, concerts, and theatre. The French Cultural Center (CCF) was part of a network of centers in francophone found throughout francophone Africa, facilitating and propagating French culture in the region (Edebi 1984: 178). The Centers also sponsored regional play competitions, exhibitions in addition to language, art, and theatre classes; the Centers were the conspicuous and influential hearts of French cultural influence. All CCF sponsored events, either from France or elsewhere in francophone Africa, were presented in French, the official language of all la francophonie nations despite the fact French was (and remains) overwhelmingly the second language for the majority of West Africa. The French, who consider their language and culture as essentially one in the same, have a stated preference for supporting French language and culture initiatives in their former colonies. Although events at CCF are sometimes presented in African languages, they are in the extreme minority.

Since the colonial era, French policy makers have promoted the rayonnement (spread) of French culture, language and intellectual traditions, deeming it integral to their political and economic interests (Schrader 2000: 396). In keeping with rayonnement policy, the French Cultural Centers and other French cultural institutions have continued to directly or indirectly fund a wide variety of theatre programs supporting actor training, technical support, productions, contests, festivals, and exchanges.

It would be naive to think that their interest in theatre development is purely and solely artistic.... Nor are French-speaking African countries purely artistic or altruistic. For France, the promotion of French-speaking African theater is a means of maintaining the ascendency of the French language. France’s interest in theatre development in French-speaking African countries stems also from a desire to fulfill an obligation to help improve the cultural life of thousands of her citizens who are resident in Africa. (Edebi 1984: 179).

However, despite the funding for French oriented theatre activity in francophone Africa, general audiences have not developed, and French style theatre (spoken in French) has remained, essentially, an acquired taste for a French-speaking African educated elite and expatriates. The conception of theatre, propagated by the French and transplanted in African soil during the colonial, has its origins in the French neoclassical “Age of Reason.” Needless to say, its function, presentation,
and objective, is alien to Africans not educated to the French tradition of theatre.

In spite of the appeal of drama to a broad audience, these plays have unfortunately remained a means of entertainment and education for very few African audiences, because they are written in a foreign language. As a result, they have, for the most part, been staged in French cultural centres, and capital cities of former French colonies, where, besides having an audience educated in the French language and history, some people can afford the luxury of paying to watch the plays (Yewah 2002: 219-220).

The influence of radio, television, and especially the cinema (also derived from the same origin), has further engrained French dramaturgy and narrative expressions, colonizing the African mind and challenging the development of performance expressions based upon African perspectives and tradition. That a vast majority of theatre productions are presented in French, rather than local languages, further hinders the development of African based theatrical forms and narrative expressions. An engrained and entrenched theatre milieu has stifled the growth of potential audiences who find the form and language alien. “Even in the mid-1990s, more than 70 per cent of people who were called francophone Africans were still not proficient in the language” (Diakhaté 1997: 23). African languages are seldom taught in schools. Literature and plays, written in African languages, which might serve as alternative examples and inspiration for an African-based theatre culture, are sorely lacking.

The traditional French language theatre propagated in francophone West Africa today, tends to be rooted (i.e., stuck) in the dramaturgy of 19th century. At first glance, this seems curious considering the dramaturgical, stylistic, and multi-cultural innovations occurring in contemporary France itself. However, when examined closely, this phenomenon reveals less a choice, and more the persistence, of the systematic acculturation of African history and perception of self by the French. Concomitant with this acculturation was an institutionalized cultural inferiority, which the African’s themselves have perpetuated out of economic and political necessity.

During French colonial rule, African performance was deemed “savage and primitive,” while French culture—and its manifestations such as theatre—were elevated as models to emulated and taught in schools. At the moment of French colonial imposition, the shape of African performance was planted and its future course determined.
By the eve of WWI, French and Belgian influence was clearly felt in Africa throughout the region and its cultural destiny became clearly linked to French colonial policies. In the domain of theatre, colonization created a double cultural life: a literary theatre written in French and performed in accordance with European models and a theatre drawn from those traditional forms (Diakhaté 1997: 21).

Culture Wars And Spheres Of Influence
Today, the decline of France as a world power partially explains its need to assert cultural influence over its former colonies, in order to retain some of its “great power” status. It is this central preoccupation that has motivated and has wrought France’s political, cultural, and economic relationship with its former African colonies (Schraeder 2000: 396). France’s relationship with its former colonies, in a sense, never ended, it just became more nuanced. Though France lost direct control over its former colonies after the African independence movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, France’s current, post-colonial relationship can be seen more as an adjustment of strategy, perception, and responsibility, rather than loss of influence. Much of la francophonie’s governmental and administrative structures, legal, and economic systems were inherited or fashioned after French models.

Francophone African nations are among the poorest in the world and, although “independent,” none could survive, nor feed themselves today, without France. All la francophonie nations are young democracies struggling with institutionalized corruption (which was modeled after its former colonial overlords), and ethnic power plays, as they try to deal with profound social, political, economic, environmental, population, and health problems; AIDS is only one of many monumental challenges they face. Furthering their “culture of dependence,” all are heavily in debt (to France and the IMF), have pre-industrial economies, (80 to 90% of the labor force works in agriculture), with an estimated average per-capita income of $1000 per annum, and are faced with the developing issues of desertification and reoccurring drought (CIA: 2002).

Many West African nations are rich in natural resources (including petroleum), which explains France’s strong economic and investment interest. France remains la francophonie’s largest foreign aid benefactor and trading partner. Francophone West Africa is also France’s second largest market after Europe. In 1998 Africa absorbed $15.9 billion of French exports, accounting for 40 percent of France’s trade surplus. The francophone African currency, the Communauté Financière Afri-
caine (CFA), which is used by France’s former West African colonies, was tied directly to the French franc, managed by the French central bank and guaranteed by the French treasury. When France, in its own self-interest, devalued the CFA in 1994, cutting its value by 50%, it shook francophone West Africa (Schraeder 2000: 398). The devaluation was a sharp reminder of how France still controlled the fate of its former colonies, its economic concerns remaining primary.

French policymakers consistently have claimed that historical links and geographical proximity justify placing francophone Africa within France’s sphere of influence. The implicit assumptions of what has been described as the French version of the Monroe Doctrine is that francophone Africa constitutes France’s domaine reserve (natural preserve), and is therefore ‘off limits’ to other great powers (Schraeder 1997: 206).

Internationally, France has often been criticized for its selective intervention and support of non-democratic governments in the region. In the early 1990s, France took the international lead in a series of military interventions in Rwanda, with the long-term goal of integrating the former French-speaking Belgian colony into its French speaking sphere of influence. The Mitterrand administration provided the authoritarian Rwandan regime with over “$160 million in economic aid and an untold amount of military aid from 1990 to 1994—in essence contributing to the genocide that unfolded in 1994” (Schraeder 1997: 208).

A more recent example of France’s attitude towards la francophonie was vividly apparent in its response to the 1999 coup in Cote d’Ivoire. The New York Times reported on France’s relationship to the ethnic unrest and eventual coup in Cote d’Ivoire.

France, without whose help the former colony’s economy cannot run, has remained largely silent, providing support and justification even as their abuses have grown more flagrant […] France, the only former colonial power to have maintained strong ties to its expossessions, worried that the end of personalized power under longruling dictators would open the region up to influence from others, notably the United States, and upset its interests in everything from oil fields to military bases […] With the implicit backing of the French President Jacques Chirac, who had already said that Africa was “not ready for democracy” (French 2000: 44).

Today France maintains defense accords with their former colonial African counterparts, generously providing arms and military advisors for training, and authorized interventions by French military. Such military support has generally benefited an entrenched and undemo-
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cratic French speaking elite and a corrupt status quo (Schraeder 1997: 207). However, the emergence of democracy and the end of single-party dictatorships in la francophonie in the late 1980s and 1990s, has begun to erode French influence, forcing the next generation of West African leaders to welcome the expending influence of Japan, Germany, and the United States. This trend has pushed France to redouble its influence in the region, appealing in no small way to their “shared cultural heritage.” In this way theatre and other cultural initiatives like FITMO, have become mediums serving political agendas.

Colonial Echoes

The countries of former French West Africa, Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF) were created in 1885 and formed a kind of federal territory with its capital in Saint Louis and later in Dakar. French colonial policy was aimed at cultural assimilation, attempting to make Africans into proper French citizens, reshaping the culture for the African world along French lines.

Europeans despised everything about Africa, and in France people spoke of a civilized world and a barbarian world. The barbarian world was Africa, and the civilized world was Europe. Therefore the best thing one could do with an African was to assimilate him: the ideal was to turn him into a Frenchman with black skin (Cesaire 2000 [1955]: 88).

Colonial Governor General Brevie was credited for establishing the concept of Franco-African culture. He portrayed Franco-African culture as “Drawing its inspiration from the purest French traditions while plunging its roots in native life. Our African education should look towards France to received its light and towards it to draw its energy for action [...] we must develop an African culture which will reveal to the native his country and his soul in order to make him accede gradually to the ideal of Franco-African culture” (in Warner 1984: 181).

To achieve their colonial policy of acculturation, the French created a colony-wide system of French missionary schools for education and evangelization. French language, history, culture and Christian values, were taught to develop obedient servants for the colonial system. The William Ponty Normal School near Dakar was at the pinnacle of a hierarchal system of schools; students were admitted by competitive examination and were recruited from among the brightest in the West African colonies. “The major purpose of the Ponty Normal School was
to provide a basic European education for future African civil servants. Most of the black francophone colonial elite were trained there” (Diakhaté 1997: 21).

In 1913, Georges Hardy, himself a playwright, became Director of Education of French Africa. Under Hardy, theatre gained popularity and an important place in the schools (Diakhaté 1997: 21). Theatre at the Ponty School, however, was not a continuator or developer of traditional African theatre and performance but rather a satellite of European theatre which condemned everything belonging to the “savage past” with the African educated elite becoming nothing more than “home-grown and neo-colonial oppressors” (Yewah, 2002: 218). The locally educated elite were no more than pawns that, in the words of Emmanuel Yewah, perpetuated “authoritarian structure embedded not only in slavery but also in materialism and the cycle of dependency on foreign aid handouts and imported ideas which have contributed immeasurably to Africa’s stagnation and underdevelopment” (Yewah 2002: 218).

The influence of the Ponty School was far reaching, profoundly shaping post-colonial francophone Africa through its political and intellectual elite who framed their new nations. The theatre work at the Ponty School played a seminal role through the later activities of its graduates, several of whom on their return to their respective counties, were in a position to influence the development of national theatres, write, direct, and act in plays, and in turn assert a French cultural influence once removed (Diakhaté 1997: 22).

With nationhood in the late 1950s and 60s, came the need for Africa to identify and celebrate the past. Writing in French, francophone African playwrights responded by harkening back to great historical figures, myths, as to unify and inspire the citizens of a new nation. Rather than devise a dramaturgical model based on traditional African performance models, playwrights instead adopted French neo-Classicism.

Their emphasis is on plot, form and character depiction, the exploration of ideas as well as on the construction (reflecting in this regard a French Classical drama influence) of rousing speeches in the style of Corneille, persuasive and built on rhetorical devices. The aim of these plays is rational intellectual communication (Conteh-Morgan 1994: 34).
The French neo-Classicism of Racine and Corneille was an easy fit for francophone Africans who were indoctrinated to perceive the western worldview as an ideal, and themselves as inferior. French neo-Classical dramaturgy was a ready and familiar form into which francophone African playwrights could re-invent a grander, heroic, and romanticized history. There were also more practical attributes that linked French neo-Classical theatre with traditional West African cultures, namely the parallels between the poetic, declamatory African griot and the poetic declamation of neo-classical France.

The great majority of French-Language African history plays have one thing in common: a celebratory and commemorative nature. They are like canticles intoned to the memory of illustrious ancestors like Chaka (1787-1828), empire-builder and king of the Zulus who is among the many rulers of the African past whose names have provided the titles of many historical plays. In noble and poetic accents, their patriotism, real or imagined, is sung and their courage extolled. Through a dramatic recreation of their heroic struggle to defend, or sometimes to expand, their territories, and of the elaborate court splendor and ceremonial that attended their lives, is conveyed a living sense of pre-colonial African societies at their most glorious (Coneth-Morgan 1994: 62).

Often, early francophone African plays were about ruling families detailing the exploits and victories of African heroes such as Chaka Zulu, rather than dealing (as Anglophone Africa did) with current issues during the critical time of nation building. It was not until the second generation of post-colonial playwrights that a modern francophone African voice emerged. These playwrights and theatre artists were educated and came of age in post-colonial times, their consciousness shaped by the struggles of nationhood and need to find an African identity separate from its colonial masters.

Sociopolitical conditions imposed a new orientation, both thematically and esthetically, upon various indigenous and expatriate playwrights. The theatrical season of the years 1966-70 witnessed the predominance of a sociopolitical theater whose esthetic was in general based upon the norms of classical French dramaturgy. But beginning in 1972, artists made a conscious resolution to create a new dramatic language for the stage (Sidibé 1999: 127).
(Re) Inventing West African Theatre
The generation after independence, searched for an African authenticity and identity separate from France. The pursuit of an African identity, aesthetic, and theatre free of French cultural influences was, in part, what provoked the formation of national theatre companies throughout francophone Africa in the 1960s and 70s. Though inspired by nationalistic fervor, these national theatres were ironically firmly rooted in the French cultural context and used the models and class distinctions of their French colonizers to serve their nascent nation’s polity and cultural aspirations, perpetuating a more insidious form of colonization.

French involvement in the training of theatre people in French-speaking West Africa antedated, and has survived, the establishment of institutions of drama in the region. In fact, it was in the early sixties that France embarked upon a series of programs aimed at training African actors. The French government, through its agencies, sponsored French professional companies to put up exhibition performances mainly in the capitals of French-speaking African countries; and a fair number of them went around French-speaking West Africa...However, since the tickets were prohibitive for the African masses and since they stage only European plays, their performance turned out to be the exclusive prerogative for the African intelligentsia and the French national resident in Africa (Edeibiri 1984: 172-3).

National theatres and their attendant schools were dependent on ongoing state support, which meant they conserved the status quo and Franco-African values. Often times national theatres produced plays from the world repertory or African plays modeled on western dramaturgical models, applying western acting, directing, and production values on proscenium arch stages. Training programs were fashioned after western theatrical programs with nods to African dance, oration, and drumming (many National Theatres included Dance Company components). To assist the development of national theatres in francophone Africa, the French often sent (and still send) guest artist, teachers, and management advisors who organized the theatres after French aesthetics and models, making artists into civil servants, and establishing French-styled bureaucracies (Kotchy, Sidibé, Touré 1997: 100).

To support their efforts France sponsored, and still sponsors, a variety of contests (with Frenchmen and African elites as judges) festivals, tours, and training opportunities for African artist in France. Many new plays were created in the context of the Concours Théatral Africain, an annual drama contest organized by Radio France International (Yewah
PERFORMING AFRICA

The French also funded several cultural NGOs with the sole purpose of supporting French culture in its former colonies. Funding for these initiatives continue today.

Early French support, however, also seeded a fertile period in francophone West Africa theatre, giving the means and developing the voices of many important playwrights and going far to establish an African style and perspective. Bernard Dadié’s “Béatrice du Congo” (1970), a biting satire of post-independence society, was a fine example of how francophone West African dramaturgy evolved from historical to contemporary preoccupations in style and content. The events in the play span almost three centuries and,

Conjures up the ambiguous role of technical assistance which operates as a parallel government, the false symbols of independence such as the flag, the predilection for high-sounding titles, the maintenance of a beautiful capital which is an ‘island of prosperity’, the institutions which are a copy of European models, the presence of a metropolitan army ostensibly to protect the regime in power (Warner 1984: 191).

The success of plays like Dadié’s and the emergence of an African perspective, however, was double-edged. Though such plays went far to establish a unique African theatre, they were generally satirical and critical of the political and cultural status quo. Freedom of expression was and is not the hallmark of African governments. After the first blush of nationhood, national theaters, which were initially seen as a source of pride and identity, were subsequently starved in order to control, censor, or silence mounting criticism against the government. French support followed suit. A series of political and financial crisis, along with corruption and reassessment of funding priorities, has essentially finished off state supported theatre. What remains of national theatres in West Africa (and in other parts of Africa), is support for tourist and “cultural ambassador” oriented dance-theatre, song, and drumming presentations more concerned with perpetuating an ersatz nostalgia of African culture than contributing to its development.

Today, most national theatres in francophone Africa are decrepit husks of what they once aspired. Morale is low, development and innovation are non-existent, artist and administrators are paid infrequently, theatre buildings are in disrepair, and the audience for theatre is overwhelmed with far more pressing social, economic, health, and political concerns. Abandoned by their national governments, the theater of
francophone Africa had no option but to turn once again to France for survival. “In the absence, then, of serious and sustained national government assistance, Francophone theatre has continued to rely on outside help and the French, claiming a traditional love of the arts with a keen recognition of the importance of those of African to the spread of their language, have not failed to give it” (Conteh-Morgan 1994: 59).

**Out Of The Theatres And Into The Streets**

It wasn’t until the late 1970s that Community Development Theatre reached francophone West Africa. The movement evolved almost simultaneously in Kenya, Zambia, and Tanzania in the early 1970 and quickly spread, becoming the preferred method of communicating directly and effectively to communities about issues important to them. Community Theatre applied an admixture of expressions and included traditional dance, story telling, and self taught acting, lecture, and oratory styles.

Young African nations in the 1970 were faced with high illiteracy, and profound social-economic adjustments caused massive urbanization and the introduction of a market economy. Combined with poor transportation infrastructures and limited communication systems (few radios and no television), the most effective way to communicate was by using theatre. Community Development Theatre (later known as Theater for Development) had a profound effect on communication and development, but just as significantly, it marked a profound shift in how theatre was viewed and presented in Africa.

Struggling governments and international funding organizations soon recognized the form as a viable medium to convey issues as varied as family planning, vaccination, child abuse, farming methods, soil erosion and political and administrative corruption. The form has also been used for government (and political party) propaganda, and for promotions of products like Coka Cola.

The National Theatres and their attendant schools were founded on European models, formal, literary, and meant for the elite, educated class. In contrast, Community Development Theatre was grassroots in origin, created in response to immediate and practical needs and, like traditional performance, offered immediate, visceral, and communal satisfaction. The language of Community Theatre was local rather than colonial French; its performance vocabulary was derived from local tra-
ditional culture and presented in an informal setting, applying familiar on site format of a traditional performance with easily grasped and entertaining singing, drumming, dancing, and audience interaction.

Its objectives are to impart specific information, to criticize and discourage behavior patterns deemed incompatible with desired social values and objectives and to elicit popular participation in the realization of the latter (Conteh-Morgan 1994: 81).

The form, however, which found its inspiration in grassroots necessity, was quickly co-opted by governmental and non-governmental organizations. International donor agencies like UNICEF and Oxfam, rightly saw Community Development Theatre as an ideal way of assisting in their development agendas. The interest and financing by governmental ministries and International donor agencies, provoked the evolution of Community Development Theatre into a viable profession. University educated “theatre activist” and “cultural workers” evolved, their training and salaries funded by government ministries, international donors, and the foreign government aid programs. University programs developed to train theatre activist and cultural workers; international government aid agencies conducted workshops, training programs, and exchanges.

The development of independent companies was a welcomed evolution and bodes well for a diversity of voices and experimentation of theatrical form. However, because African audiences are not used to paying for theatre, independent la francophonie groups must often times depend on international (i.e., French) donor organizations, for their sole support. Patronage by commission, however, does not come without an artistic price—namely, supervision of content and the propagation of social, political, environmental, economic, and health agendas. Issues of sustainability, dependency, and appropriateness of outside funding of local groups raises several serious issues.

Do NGOs encourage theatres companies and the communities they serve to become self-reliant and independent of external support? [...] One cannot help feeling however, that they are merely putting bandages on wounds, which should never have been made in the first place. At present, since almost all arts for development is sponsored by NGOs with specific amelioration goals, it tends to be directed towards ‘bandaging’ strategies—namely play, songs, dances, posters, radio jingles or soap opera advising people how to improve their lives within fairly narrow sectoral domains (Kerr 1999: 85-86).
FITMO
The l’Espace Culturel Gambidi, a walled compound located on a deeply rutted road a few miles from downtown Ouagadougou, was the host site of The Festival International de Theatre et de Marionettes de Ouagadougou, FITMO 2000 festival. The land was granted to Jean-Pierre Guingane, director of the center, and professor of theatre at the University of Ouagadougou. The compound included an outdoor theatre, dormitories, offices, a business center for email and faxes, a canteen, and classrooms and workshops. The theatre in residence, and the main occupant of the center, was Theatre La Fraternatie, which performed year-round and was also under the direction of omnipresent Guingane.

The politically savvy Guingane who founded Theatre La Fraternatie in 1995, solicited the Burkina Faso government for the land and, with the help of volunteers and French funding, built the theatre step-by-step. Theatre La Fraternatie survives by accepting commissions from internationally funded Theatre for Development (TDF) projects, in addition to, supporting a theatre-training program. In a politically corrupt nation with little economic, cultural or educational support, the achievements of Guingane and Theatre La Fraternatie’s are remarkable. However, like most places in the world, funding for theatre is a struggle, and if it were not for commissions garnered for TDF programs, the company would not survive. The company’s narrow focus brings in international agency funding, but their hand-to-mouth existence severely limits efforts to develop new plays or encourage experimentation. Instead, presented and supported, are what amounts to addendums to TDF formulas, essentially tweaking of the dominant French dramaturgical forms.

Theatre La Fraternatie is only one company and, because it is difficult to find money, it is not working as it should. In the mind of the people and the government theatre, “Is a hobby for children and not a serious pursuit.” We cannot offer scholarships, and it is difficult for students to travel to school and for tours. It is difficult to explore the potential of what we can do if we are always concerned about money (Guingane 2000).

The Gambini District, the area in which the cultural center was located, was originally conceived as a tourist area. Across the road from the center was a large, empty walled area (a government initiative long since sidetracked by mismanagement and corruption) meant to be the
site of the Ouagadougou Zoo. Not far from the district were the Exhibition Grounds, where an internationally noted arts and crafts fair, SIAO, the continent’s largest, took place. With government prodding FITMO was rescheduled to coincide with SIAO in the attempt to shape an international tourism event. The change reflects the Burkina Faso government’s savvy in recognizing an increasingly important source of foreign currency. “The Burkina Faso government is beginning to see the advantage of having strong a culture. They are realizing that it can bring in tourist and that it is necessary to develop music, cinema, traditional arts, and theatre. So the government is giving more support and there is more sensitivity for the arts” (Ousmane 2000). In many ways Burkina Faso has led the way in the renaissance of African arts and culture and French initiatives should be credited, in no small way, with the positive growth, organization, and development of SIAO, FITMO and the FESPACO Film Festival. The latter had a humble beginning in 1969 and has since become a chic, West African version of Hollywood’s independent cinema scene.

According to Boundaone Ousmane, Assistant Director of FITMO (who was trained in arts management in France), in 1989 six Burkinabe theatre companies decided to do a theatre festival. “They wanted to do it for themselves and the public. It was not for money. At first it was only a festival for and between themselves” (Ousmane 2000). What was a nominally budget and volunteer based regional festival, has since evolved into the largest theatre festivals in the region and, one of the largest, on the continent. “The French Embassies in West Africa saw that it was good and supported it and francophone organizations have helped to make it international” (Ousmane 2000). Today major support for the festival, which has been called FITMO since 1994, has come from the French or Paris based UN organizations compared to other Festivals in the region, FITMO remains an organizational wonder. In contrast, the 2001 Festival des Réalités in Bamako, Mali, was cancelled because it was unable to secure sponsorship or secure a space (Traoré 2001).

When I interviewed Guingane in his busy office at the end of the festival, he struck me as more a weary politician than a theatre artist.

Many Theatres are operating in countries without democracy. This makes it difficult for theatre. But that is the role theatre—to be madman. This festival is a network where the best from each country come and share and find strength in what they do.
It is unfortunate that we have boundaries known as countries when we are all the same people. People beyond politics, economics, culture. We are all African. That is what this festival is also about, about breaking down the boundaries. Boundaries created by colonialism, by politics. 'Theatre La Fraternatie' (Guingane, 2000).

When I asked him how he saw the French cultural influence in francophone African he responded, “We are part of the French tradition. The question is how to reconcile the colonial language with our interest in establishing an African identity” (Guingane 2000).

“What Concerns Them And What Their Life Is Like”
Theatre artists in francophone West Africa do as their brethren elsewhere in the world, they do what they can to survive, which for many means learning as much as they can, making connections, hustling commissions, and making theatre that sells. As in colonial times, those in power, the educated elite, whether French or a local, are those who control the purse strings and in turn, shape its theatre.

Patrice Kabore was one of the participants in the workshop I presented at FITMO. A tall, thin man from northern Burkina Faso, his face and bearing were infused with a pride befitting his Mossi, royal family lineage. Like other la francophonie theatre artists he migrated to the capital city to seek out a livelihood and, compared to others, has had relative success. He came to Ouagadougou in 1992 and worked with several theater and dance groups to learn what he could from a variety of different artists. He had read several western acting books and was particularly inspired by Robert Benedetti’s The Actor At Work, which he pulled out of his knapsack to show me.

Kabore uses comedy, poetry, dances and participatory singing and dancing in his performance. Developing his performance style, “From television and movies, traditional dance and song, and especially French theatre, mime, and comedy techniques I have learned in workshops like the ones given at FITMO or by the French Cultural Center“ (Kabore 2000).

Issues dealt with in his performances were either self-generated (based on observed need) or commissioned by international organizations, the Ministry of Culture, schools, or Burkina Faso television. Several of his performances have dealt with street children and the problems they face, “What concerns them and what their life is like, how they live and what they think” (2000).
A recent commission required travel to a Mossi village to understand about the “old days and learn the old style of telling stories” (Kabore, 2000). The resulting performance, “Kunduni” (Cry Only Me), was a ceremony/performance dealing with white and black conflict and how blacks consider themselves inferior to whites. Kabore has increasingly integrated traditional styles of storytelling and movement into his style in performance. “I have included call-response with my audience”, says Kabore, “Something I learned directly from Mossi old people” (Kabore, 2000).

“There Is No Going Back”

Jacobin Yarro was the director and founder of the Atelier Cocrad in Douala, Cameroon, a group organized as a collective of “drama creators.” Yarro started doing theatre 30 years ago as an actor doing sketches at secondary school and went on to receive a university degree in French Language and literature as he continued to do theatre, even though there exists no formal theatre training in Cameroon. Yarro was forced to learn by doing. “It is difficult to find mentors, even today” (Yarro 2000).

Yarro depends on the French Cultural Center in Douala for space and funding, so much so he considers the Center the “major sponsor” of his group. The French Cultural Center and other French organizations frequently assist Yarro’s Atelier Cocrad with technical assistance, advisors and visiting artists—choreographers, directors or technicians—to Cameroon to create collaborative projects. “The Cameron government gives very little and has no proper policy designed for funding the arts. Theatre is not a priority for policy makers. The French are the only ones that support us in a continuing way” (Yarro 2000). Yarro and several members of his group have received some training in France—playwrighting, acting, directing, design, mime, marionettes, and mask—all of it in French theatrical expressions. Yarro spent a year in Montreal in 1988 studying directing, acting, playwrighting and theatre pedagogy. All of his performances and classes are conducted in French.

Like other African theatres, Yarro’s Atelier Cocrad’s bread and butter comes from Theatre for Development, working on commissions from international aid and educational organizations such as UNICEF, Alliance France, Save the Children, Family Planning International, and the
French Cultural Center. The French, however, administer the funding and “Have the ability to collect money, from private sources, NGOs and the French Government. Once they have the money we have a collaboration and there is a project” (2000). The group often creates performances addressing a specific issue such as drug abuse, violence against women, family planning, children’s rights, AIDS, and sexual assault. Their performances are often presented on television, but more typically they tour rural areas, schools, festivals, and tour the “Francophone Network,” the seven regional French Cultural Centers. Payment for each performance varies from $125 to $200. In addition to their Theatre for Development performances, Atelier Cocrad will also produce plays from the French, world, and African repertory—these plays are always underwritten by the French Cultural Centers or other French organizations.

Atelier Cocrad company consisted of 20 to 22 actors, all of whom had been trained to a varying degree by Yarro, who characterizes his style of actor training as strongly influenced by “French and African traditions.”

“I am influenced by all styles of acting and training” says Yarro. “It all comes together and I have to pick out—according to my need and dreams for the performance. I use what they can understand and what is suitable to a performance” (Yarro 2000).

Yarro’s predicament—living in and drawing from two cultures—was a typical refrain throughout the interviews I conducted during the festival. “There is no going back,” he once expressed, “We must work with what we have. To create African theatre and say it is traditional, is only nostalgia. There is no going back. Going back to what?” (Yarro 2000).

Yarro’s collaborative methodology creating performance and text development continues to be strongly based on traditional ways of creating performance—namely, blending Theatre for Development techniques, French dramaturgy, and traditional African performance. The company generally allows two months for rehearsals, rehearsing five days a week for three to four hours a day. In addition to their Theatre Development work, Atelier Cocrad had produced several Ionesco plays, including Exit the King, and several plays by Moliere and Soyinka.

They presented a philosophical text based play, “Negerrrances” at FITMO. The comedy-drama followed the travails of a Nicolas, a self-imposed African exile in France. Nicolas, a “Pure and hard Cartesian,”
explores the boundaries of the rational and superstition. He was rejected and humiliated, and after suffering indifference and unbearable solitude in France, he realizes he doesn’t “fit in” so he makes a spectacle of himself as a way of saying “I exist,” which forces the question of returning home. After FITMO, Yarro was to begin work on adapting a French novel for the stage.

“The Angel Of Death Comes”
Moumouni Touré, an actor with Ymako Teatri in Abidjan, Cote D’Ivoire, was at FITMO to present their play “Les Paléos.” Graduates of the National Institute of Dramatic Arts in Abidjan, formed the Yamako Teatri in 1998 with their explicit focus being the AIDS epidemic. The play they presented at FITMO, was about a mime artist that became rich and decided to help everyone through generous acts. But when he became sick, no one wanted anything to do with him. “Dying, the angel of death comes, but the man refuses to die because he is an artist and is needed. The angel kills him and takes him to god because of his good deeds, but because he dies before he should, he opens the eyes of the people” (Touré 2000).

Ymako Teatri was a private, for profit group that received no funding from its government. All of the group’s funding came from French cultural initiatives or international health and education organizations. They did not have a permanent home. For rehearsals, they “scrambled to secure permission to use various city owned buildings or a University classroom in Abidjan” (Touré, 2000). The group had two plays in its repertory and began creating a new piece when they returned to the Cote D’Ivoire, which was, at the time of my interview, in the throes of a civil war.

“It Must Be In French”
Troupe Douga from Bamako, Republic of Mali, was formed just six months prior to FITMO. Massa Coupipapy, director, musician, and actor with the group, supported himself by playing jazz saxophone in local bands and fixing air conditioners. He also presented one man educational shows, heavily laced with comedy, dealing with topics that included AIDS and female circumcision. Catherine Kone, Troupe Douga’s artistic director, taught and acted at the Mali National Theatre, but be-
cause funding had been erratic, she was forced to develop her own company and seek Theatre for Development monies (Kone 2000).

We have had many of the very best teachers from France, teachers in playwrighting, acting, and directing. But now we must rehearse and perform in a school because the National Theatre is so poor. Funding is the biggest problem; but even though we invite ministers to come to our rehearsals and performances, but they don’t understand why they should fund theatre (Kone 2000).

Their play, *La fin d’un serment* was the company’s premiere performance and was commissioned by FITMO because “Now, not even the national theatre has money to put on productions” (Kone 2000). The play’s story line—the death of a father, the search for the murderer and the test of friendship and kinship, and ultimately revenge—was a cross between a French neo-classical tragedy and an African historical drama. The plot line followed classical western dramaturgy. Its performance style was an odd mix of stiff, almost reverential formality mixed in with some heroic chest thumping and formal stage combat. Its language was performed in a formal declamatory style and included several long speeches. The play also incorporated ritual-like processional moments, which led to the heroic triumph of the king and restoration of the family and public order.

The play’s costuming, set, and props were suggestive of an idealized, if not nostalgic African past, and included the appearance of a witch doctor and a theatricalized séance. The quality of acting was a mixed bag of histrionic grand gestures and poses, physical acting, caricature, and melodrama. The performance was presented twice during the festival and had a total attendance of about thirty-five; as far as I could determine, however, no locals were present, even though the festival posters and advertising were plastered all over Ouagadougou.

“The inspiration for the play was to open the people’s eyes to the issues of justice because there are many African countries killing each other—we need understanding and have reconciliation. Here there are problems between many people” (Kone 2000). After the FITMO commission, Audiences CCF (the French Cultural Center) contributed 700,000 CAF (Central African Francs) for the production.

If it were not for the French and other international organizations, there would be no theatre in Mali. Now there are five groups in Mali trying to get money for Theatre for Development to fund performances
presenting the fight against sickness. We do not know what production we will do next, but it will have to be something the French and NGOs are interested in funding (Kone, 2000).

When I asked Kone if their performances must be in French to be supported she replied emphatically, “It must be in French” (2000).

When I asked her what the biggest problem was after funding, Kone took no time to respond, “Only a few educated people know what theatre is. At the National Theatre we made theatre for people who know what theatre is. Now we must do theatre for people who do not know what it is: The common people who think it is a big ceremony and they do not know how to react” (Kone 2000).

“The French Have Been Very Kind”

Audience Awareness Theatre, based in Accra, was one of two Ghanaian groups at the festival. When asked why an English-speaking group was invited to FITMO, Evan Oma Hunter, the group’s entrepreneurial and charismatic founder and director replied, “We are here because we have received money from many different French NGOs recently. The Alliance France has been very generous” (Hunter 2000).

The mainstay for Audience Awareness is Theatre for Development; however, they also performed theatre offerings from the world repertoire, one of which was their premiere of Antigone at FITMO. Their performance was primarily in English, with sections in French. The production, sponsored by the Alliance France, included funds for the mounting of the production, transportation, publicity, and a subsequent tour to communities, schools, and work places in Burkina Faso and Ghana. During my interview with Hunter, I asked why Alliance France was sponsoring the production: “Ghana is surrounded by French language countries, so Alliance France has, over the last few years, given us money for company members to study French. This production is the first step in the direction of presenting French language performance. They have given us a strong incentive” (Hunter 2000).

The Ghana National Theatre’s Abibigromma Players also presented a performance at FITMO. Their presentation of “The Bride of the Gods” was entirely in French. Like Audience Awareness Theater, their production was fully sponsored by the Alliance France, which had also sponsored French language lessons for the company. The company itself was formed by members of the Ghana National Theatre which had, like
other national theatres in the region, fallen on hard times due to lack of funding. Those employed by the Ghana National Theatre were civil servants, however, funding, and the sporadic payment of salaries had become problematic for the artist, forcing them to formulate groups such as the Abibigromma Players to develop opportunities. Because of a long relationship the first president of Ghana had with Chairman Mao, the Chinese built the Ghana National Theatre in 1992. The building has two performing spaces, a 1500-seat proscenium arch (with fly space), and a 400-seat black box. The National Theatre had formerly produced three to four productions a year; recent titles included Derek Walcott’s *Playboy of the West Indies* and August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*.

*Abibigromma Theatre* also developed pieces, which they called “African Theatre.” Edinam Atatsi & Osabutey-Aguedze, leaders of the group, adapted Ghanaian myths for the stage, using elements of traditional regalia, dance and music. However, worsening economics, and the recent and increasing availability of videos and television, has relegated the once highly regarded Ghana National Theatre as elitist, making its cultural and political viability inconsequential.

The audience cross-section used to be elites, and many came because of individual actors, not because of plays. Now they will only come if it is something special. The government gives us less and less every year, really, just enough for salaries but not for production, so we must get production money from elsewhere. And if we do not get production money from elsewhere, then we must try to do theatre elsewhere. We consider ourselves performers first. That is why we formed the Abibigromma Players, because Theatre in Ghana is not encouraging now (Atatsi 2000).

When they returned to Ghana the *Abibigromma Players* continued their “Literature Books” series, a program that adapts literary classics for presentation in the schools. Like other groups in the West Africa, *Abibigromma Players* has adapted their production content to satisfy the educational, environmental, and health issue objectives of international NGOs such as UNICEF, UNESCO, The World Health Organization, British Council, and the now defunct United State Information Service (USIS), which funded the production of American plays (generally with American participation) at the National Theatre. The commission by the Alliance France, and the funding of French language lessons for the company, was viewed by Edinam Atatsi & Osabutey-Aguedze as a neces-
sity of survival in an era of diminishing funding. “The French have been very kind and are offering us an opportunity to have a larger audience in the region. We look forward to working with foreign directors and the possibility of going to France” (Atatsi, 2000). To make ends meet many company members taught at The University of Ghana, which has similarly shifted its programming to prepare its students for careers in Theatre for Development, film, television, and the ever popular, radio drama.

The play Alliance France commissioned the Abibigromma Players to present at FITMO “Had to be in French” (Atatsi 2000). The play itself was a pastiche Atatsi termed, “Total Theatre,” which included fragments of storytelling, traditional music, drumming, and dancing; its structure, oddly enough, was that of a musical review cabaret. Atatsi said the company developed its own theater form and was inspired by the “Concert Play,” a style first introduced to Anglophone West Africa in the 1920s when American music hall performers visited the region. “We realized what we did was based on Western theatre, but also from our own culture. We use trial and error and many sources and see what works best. We like to experiment, and performing in French is part of our experimenting” (Atatsi 2000).

“We Are Doing What We Feel We Must”
Compaore Kassoum and his group, Association Songr-Manegre, were not invited to FITMO in 2000. The Association Songr-Manegre is the administrative umbrella for two dance-theatre groups, Be-n-Neere and Compagnie Zems-Taaba. I met Campaore in the Grand Marché (Grand Market) in downtown Ouagadougou where he operated a textile stand, which also employed other members of his group. Compaore, a Rastafarian, developed his group after recognizing the ignorance of Burkina Faso’s traditional culture among his own children and the children living in his Ouagadougou neighborhood. Compaore himself left his rural village at a young age; forming the group was also a way for him to personally regain his Bambara and Jodeou traditional culture. Burkina Faso, like most of Africa, has experienced unprecedented urbanization over the last two decades as people from the rural areas sought jobs and a better life in the city.
Our organization is a Children’s theatre with a focus on development. We are using culture so we can grow and develop our self and regain the wisdom of our ancestors. We are not political. The focus is instead on self-empowerment. For us theatre, dance, and music are the same, they hold our culture. There are several cultures in Burkina Faso, but the children don’t know this. All they know is the culture of the city. And if the children do not understand their culture, then our traditions will be lost. In the city everyone wants to be a white person and speak French. We are not white and we are not French. Talking French and not talking about the values of culture means we are losing our culture. Our group is here to help the children realize they have a different culture and that, culture, is important for their lives (Compapre 2000).

Over the past few years, Compapre developed an outdoor rehearsal and performance space behind a grocery and shoe repair shop in his outlying neighborhood of Ouagadougou. It was there I watched an exciting and heartfelt dance theatre presentation one Sunday evening. The performance, in terms of theatricality, physicality, quality of dance, mask, and musical expression, had a vitality that far exceeded anything I had seen at FITMO. Unlike FITMO presentations, Be-N-Neere’s performance was informal; the compound crowded with children and adults alike, was a festive community event. As with all of their performances, Be-N-Neere charges no admission, audience members instead pay what they can afford. The company presented several dance-dramas dealing with a wide range of subjects such as, prostitution, relationships between a man and woman (how difficult it is when you are poor), government corruption, and poverty. All of the dance-dramas were choreographed; applying and adapting traditional dance vocabulary.

I found their absence from FITMO odd, given the quality of performance, was local and used African traditional expressions. When I asked Compapre why his group was not participating in FITMO, he was circumspect, citing his “lack of connections.” Further conversations with others in Ouagadougou revealed the politics and fierce competition for funding. Theatre for Development, because of its ability to address and disseminate timely issues dealing with development, education, and health was in great demand, and as a consequence, could be (in relative African terms) financially lucrative. In Ouagadougou two large groups, Guingane’s Theatre La Fraternatie and Compagnie Theatrale le Roseau, led by Alram Ngonndingamlemgoto (who was also employed by the national government), captured the lion’s share of the international and French funded Theatre for Development work.

Although Be-N-Neere considers itself a community grassroots organization, they have toured and performed at European dance festivals and
are often funded, in a more limited way, by international aid and education organizations. Unlike the groups invited to FITMO, the sixteen-member Be-N-Neere was dedicated to the preservation and application of African traditional music, dancing, and story telling. Compaore steadfastly refused to perform in French and did not subscribe to what might best be described as European or text-based dramaturgy, the predominant expression of the FITMO presentations.

When I asked Compaore about how he developed dance and theatre based on traditional expression, he explained their process.

We go to the villages and ask the elders and traditional doctors, ‘What should we do?’ And they say ‘Discover and heal people.’ Our Choreographer talks and works with them in detail and they are helpful and willing to tell us the meanings and stories. They are happy to tell us. They say the old ways are going fast and the want their traditions remembered. We would like to bring the healers to Ouaga, but it is expensive. We pay them what we can afford because they know we are poor and we are trying to do good for the people. Traditional Doctors use dances to heal and they know that dance and stories can heal. We stay with them and they explain and show us dances, ways of singing, drumming and performing masks. We do the same thing and we learn the same way at other villages. That is how we have learned many traditions. When we come back to Ouaga we show the group what we have learned and we mix traditional elements with modern to create something general for the urban community who would not understand the tradition clearly if we just did the tradition (Compaore 2000).

Once back in Ouagadougou, the group works with the choreographer on the traditional song, dance, music, and mask and then, through discussion and experimentation, they transform it into a new expression. After working on a project intensely for a week, they refine and then integrate it into their large repertory and performance program. The new dance, song or mask becomes an element, which they then use as a “stand alone” presentation or as part of a larger creation. When I inquired about his role in transforming tradition, Compaore was direct.

We are doing what we feel we must do. We are not doing traditional dance. What we are doing is for the people in the city who come from many groups. It is a new tradition, but it is a continuation. The dancing and music mix to call the spirits because the rhythm is sacred. We perform to move the spirit, to invite and please the spirits but we do not go any further. We want to do artistic things—we do the movement and vibration of the body with dance—but not the healing ceremony. We can only do minor healing with our performances, but even that is something (Compaore 2000).
Community Health Awareness Puppets in Kenya

Shoeless children in tattered clothes scattered, helter-skelter, running down compact, unpaved and garbage-strewn streets lined with rickety shacks. Their screaming was a blend of fear and excitement, their faces going from shock to beaming smiles as they turned, their runs alternating between flight and leaps of playfulness. Infants wailed with spasms of tears, adults stood curious, amazed, and bemused; all of the action on the street stopped as an eight-foot tall man wearing an enormous cartoon-like head shocked the grim reality of the slum into the surreal with a perfect equatorial blue sky as backdrop.

The “mobilization” puppet stooped to shake hands with shop owners selling everything from live chickens to herbal medicines to used clothing. The puppet performer hugged grandmas, chased children, greeted unsuspecting shoppers, pushed carts, and directed traffic. The puppet was doing what it was supposed to do, namely, cause a stir and draw attention, mobilizing an audience to see a puppet performance by the Community Health Awareness Puppeteers, commonly known as CHAPS.

The Nairobi-based puppet company has pioneered the application of puppets to convey vital information to the semi-literate and uninformed masses of Kenya. Their March 2002 performance dealing with HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention was their third at the notorious Korogocho slum outside of Nairobi. The 20-year old Korogocho slum—one of many illegal slums occupying outlying Nairobi City Council land—was occupied primarily by refugees fleeing the ongoing Sudanese civil war. Although the residents of the slum were considered “Kenyans,” the slum was essentially a self-governed world onto itself. Because of the Sudanese connection, the slum was known for its availability for black market guns and criminal activity. “The police don’t come here,” CHAPS puppeteer Simon Musau informed me as we drove down Korogocho’s maze of streets.

The tall, gray puppet was instantly recognizable as being associated with CHAPS and its “Puppets Against AIDS” program. The puppet
head, Styrofoam covered with paper mache, was created by and for Kenyans with the assistance of Gary Friedman, a South African puppeteer who originally applied the use of puppets during the apartheid era in his hometown of Cape Town. Friedman has since expanded puppetry use to serve education and social change throughout sub-Saharan Africa. “Large gray puppets can be seen by huge crowds on a busy street and are a sure way to gather people to watch the show. Their gray skin tones rid the performance of any racial and cultural stigmas and taboos associated with AIDS being transmitted from one particular group of people to another” (Friedman 2002).

In addition to the large, community mobilization puppets, Friedman introduced and trained Kenyan puppeteers in the use of Muppets, glove, and rod puppets. Although he introduced puppets with origins in a Euro-American tradition, the Kenyans quickly adopted and transformed the form to suit local aesthetics. “Kenyans puppeteers are not simply passive and accepting of puppetry models and modes of performance. Because of their applications and unique circumstances, they must consider local conditions, traditions, and audiences; they are evolving the art form of puppetry. Puppeteers in Kenya adopt and transform ideas quickly. Originally, we used the giant puppets and rod puppets, but once they saw Muppets, they adopted them to great effect. That’s why there are so many Muppet-inspired puppets now. Because the performers know how effective they are,” Friedman said (Friedman 2002). “The glove puppet was used much at first, but Kenyans like more expression because almost always we must perform outside. We do not use the glove so much anymore because it is not interesting for Kenyans, so it is out of style,” stated Samuel Othino (Othino 2002), a puppeteer from the coastal city of Mombassa.

Puppetry in Kenya has flourished because it is non-threatening, and has an uncanny ability to entertain and communicate simply and directly. Curiously, puppetry, or the animation of figures within a narrative context, was never developed into a performance tradition in Africa. A puppetry per se is not indigenous to Africa, except for a few West African traditions, most notably the thousand year old “kotëbe“ from the Niger River area of Mali (Diawara 1997: 187-88). The absence of puppetry from the otherwise vibrant and rich African performance traditions is most likely due to Africa’s use of totemic, fetish, and mnemonic figures. “The use of puppetry as a form of theatre is not wide-
performing Africa

spread since puppetry has been associated with witchcraft in a number of ethnic groups” (Mwansa 1997: 351). Puppetry was originally introduced to Africa during the colonial era and then used sporadically, in combination with Theatre for Development activities, since the 1980s. The fact puppets have no history or tradition in Africa is, in no small way, a part of its success. Because there are no preconceived notions, expectations, taboos or traditional contexts attached with puppet performance in Africa, puppets are a novelty, neutral and free to define their own place, expression, and function.

In Nairobi, which has seen massive urban migrations from Kenya’s rural areas, puppetry, freed of traditional associations, has become an ideal way to communicate across potentially contentious ethnic identities. In the rural areas, which have experienced economic, cultural, health, and political disruptions (such as AIDS and refugee migrations) puppetry has similarly found its role as a cultural and communicative bridge between people and groups. With the long-term demise of traditional societies and cultural practices imminent, both in the rural and urban areas, puppetry has become a viable and acceptable communicator of issues of vital importance. Puppetry has been interpolated into the Kenya’s performance tradition and is becoming a viable, if not necessary, art form. The role of puppetry has grown to such an extent in a nation undergoing medical, cultural, and economic flux, that Simon Karaija, the lead puppeteer from a Riff Valley group, saw puppetry as “A way to preserve tradition and our stories.” (Karaija 2002)

Globalization and technological modernization has made its presence felt in Nairobi. In a country dependent on international commerce and tourism, the cell phone is ubiquitous and satellite television (from CNN to wrestling programs) increasingly available to a larger part of the population. The unreliability of the phone system and government controlled television has provoked the use of cell phones and interest in satellite television. However, it also bespeaks Kenya’s urging to become a part of the world community and free itself from the spiral of corruption, poverty, and an impending AIDS catastrophe. Kenya was once the shining example of Africa’s future and potential, it was the most stable, prosperous, and well-educated country in the sub-Saharan region and that pride and sense of nationalism still burns in the heart of Kenyans. In this way, puppetry is seen as a means by which Kenyans can do something. “It is grassroots and the puppeteers feel they have a
say and they can do something about the situation Kenya is in. The community feels their neighbors are talking to them, helping them figure out things that are new and confusing to them. Puppetry offers hope and is something positive which is very important now,” said Lawrence Keboga, coordinator of CHAPS (Keboga 2002).

Except for animal puppets, each one of the dozens of puppets built by CHAPS were decidedly African with recognizable features depicting, for example, a Massai, an old man, a young women, and sad children. Likewise, play content, language, narrative structure, and use of traditional and popular music was also shaped by local tastes. “They know us in the slums, they know we are like them and understand their problems. We are almost like relatives,” remarked Michael Mutali (Mutali 2002), a diminutive and proudly forthright CHAPS puppeteer I accompanied to the Korogocho slum.

CHAPS was sponsored by Family Planning Private Sector (FPPS), a local NGO founded in 1984 on the principles of community-based and participatory development, organizing, and self-help. The CHAPS program was a part of their folk media initiative program, which has included a neighborhood mural and educational calendar program to raise community awareness of issues. Similarly, their mural program also included a cultural development component, which provided the training and support of local visual artist. In addition to its folk media programs, FPPS has also sponsored community clinics and planned parenthood programs dealing with issues such as diabetes education, living with AIDS, HIV/AIDS testing and counseling, sanitation, social-economic empowerment, and a human rights awareness.

Each of the CHAPS puppet plays were created from interviews and the personal experience of the puppeteers, many of whom came from or still lived in one of the many slums surrounding Nairobi. “Each show is different and I adjust what I say and do according to the location, the crowd and atmosphere,” said Peter Mutie (Mutie 2002), the performance’s Narrator. “The last time we have worked in this slum before was with a different story. The story today is about married life. The last time it was an AIDS awareness story about a boyfriend and girlfriend with multiple sexual partners.”

“We have also presented performances on sanitation in this slum,” added CHAPS puppeteer Fidelity Wanjirm, “because they have a problem with ‘flying toilets’ here.” She went on to explain ‘flying toilet’.
“Since this is an illegal slum, the people have no toilets, only a few holes here and there. At night they use a plastic bag and then send them flying. They don’t care where it lands as long as they get rid of it. That is a flying toilet and that is why it smells like that here. But I have heard the city, along with the Swedish people are beginning to develop a sanitation plan (Wanjirm 2002).” The Korogocho slum is estimated to have 2,300 people per hectare with one toilet block and few water outlets. The narrow passages between shacks, where people walk and children play, were essentially open sewers.

The play begins with the appearance of two “Edu-puppets“, Muppet-inspired puppets (named Edu-puppets) celebrating a traditional wedding. A well-known traditional song, accompanied by drumming, made it easy for the cast to encourage the audience to join in the celebration. The wife, Sofia and husband, Tom, were carved Styrofoam heads atop diminutive clothing looking similar to what the audience was wearing. One hand of the puppet was a stuffed glove, the other the hand of the operator, which would be used expressively throughout the performance. Sofia is wearing a veil, and Tom a tie when they are “married” by the narrator/story-teller, who stands in front of the draped puppet booth. Because of street noise, the narrator used a microphone plugged into a public address system powered by an automobile battery.

In 1993, before AIDS pandemic had manifested itself in Kenya, Eric Krystal, the director of FPPS, traveled to South Africa to investigate HIV/AIDS education/prevention programs. It was there that he was introduced to Friedman’s successful African Research and Educational Puppetry Program (AREPP). Friedman, along with the late creator of “The Muppets,” Jim Henson, had the idea of making a documentary film on the researching of indigenous puppetry and mask theatre in Sub-Saharan Africa. “At that time AIDS was not being taken seriously, by both governments and people alike, in the region,” states Friedman (Friedman 2002), a diminutive man with a shaved head and fire in his eyes. However, once in the field and seeing the specter of AIDS first hand, Friedman redirected the efforts of AREPP forming an educational touring puppet company conceived with the purpose of entertaining, educating and conducting research simultaneously. “Puppets
Against AIDS” was the group’s first long-term educational program. The official launch of the program took place in the streets of Johannesburg on “World AIDS Day,” December 1, 1988.

The organization subsequently became a non-profit educational trust and a pioneer, taking the AIDS message to underserved and disadvantaged communities. “It is the ideal way to administer AIDS education. Puppetry is a universal medium. You can get through to any culture, cut across any barrier—be it religious, linguistic, social or racial. They are simple, direct, effective,” stated Friedman (Friedman 2002).

After their first performances in Johannesburg, the AREPP toured for some months with nine performers and two buses full of equipment. But such tour became too cumbersome and expensive, so Friedman re-designed the show for mobility and simplicity with smaller glove puppets performed by a single puppeteer in a walking puppet booth, accompanied by a narrator and live music. The “Puppets Against AIDS” program subsequently toured throughout Southern Africa—South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Namibia—and to the Canadian Arctic, Australia, Britain, France, and the US.

When Krystal met Friedman in 1993, he immediately realized the viability of puppets in getting out the AIDS message to disadvantaged communities with poor educational opportunities, limited access media, and little, if any, information on AIDS awareness and prevention. Krystal invited Friedman to Kenya to establish a puppetry program under the auspices of FPPS. Friedman trained a core group of puppeteers who, in turn, became trainers in what would become a nationwide program of puppets against AIDS. The program was, and remains, a community-based training program, which has resulted in the training of over 400 puppeteers and the establishment of forty puppetry troupes performing throughout Kenya.

“Sustainability is the key to our success. Many programs are started but are unable to sustain themselves,” stated Krystal, a life-long social activist forced to leave his homeland, South Africa, for his anti-apartheid activism in the 1960s. He went on to teach at Howard University, later settling in Kenya to develop FPPS in a successful and innovative local NGO. Krystal, a gentle, soft-spoken man in his seventies, attributes the sustainability of CHAPS to a strong and intergraded infrastructure of support. “FPPS,” he says, “provides the infrastructure essential to support CHAPS activities, things like administration, funding
procurement, ongoing support of activities such as re-training, stipends, although small, and motivation for CHAPS troupes so they can do what they need to do, puppetry and activism." Although the FPPS office was in Nairobi, the goal continues to be decentralization of CHAPS by establishing several regional offices throughout Kenya to be more responsive and responsible for the training, monitoring and evaluation and ongoing support of regional troupes. Krystal continued,

We are in an interesting position now. The question is how do we remain community-based, small, mobile and locally responsive yet sustain infrastructure, growth, and support from international funding organizations? The regional troupes are small and ill prepared to seek funding on their own. That’s how we can be useful, but that takes a constant balancing and responsiveness to their real needs on our part. Otherwise it is easy to lose contact with the reality they are facing day-to-day" (Krystal 2002).

To assure the sustainability and circumvent the possibility of the organization becoming dominated and controlled by any one group or personalities (a tendency in cash-strapped Africa that invariably lead to corruption and exploitation), Krystal, in his wisdom, has established a technical advisory council enlisting the heads of both government agencies and private sector NGOs alike, creating a credible and knowledgeable resource for program approval and direction. This strategy has also helped avoid divisiveness as well as helping to build a stronger network of agencies able to collaborate using limited resources. CHAPS has received ongoing support from the Ford Foundation, the Finnish and Royal Netherlands Embassies, International Center for Research and Development, the World Bank, and the DFIA, a British Aid organization.

Other organizations such as Family Planning Organization of Kenya, the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the Lutheran Foundation, and Action AID have all used the regional CHAPS groups to promote their particular message to a target community. “Puppets have become an important part of their extension work, showing we are having an affect and it is recognized. Our CHAPS groups are flexible enough to pick up other themes as they arise,” Krystal said. FPPS has also acted as a re-granting agent for PLAN International and UNICEF; both groups are more interested in general development issues. USAID, one of the original supporters of the initiative, withdrew funding once FPPS became strong enough to act as an independent, local NGO. Local funding support of groups has remained sporadic with some corporate
assistance coming from the Coca Cola Corporation, local textile companies, and a hotel chain.

The key issues for the CHAPS groups has remained HIV/AIDS and reproductive health, particularly adolescent fertility issues, contraception, violence against young girls and women, drug addiction. Other performance topics have included sanitation, conservation, and most recently, a campaign against governmental corruption.

CHAPS also facilitates ongoing workshops and training of regional puppeteers. “Edupuppets: International Puppetry Festival,” held in February, 2002, was FPPS’ largest undertaking to date, bringing to Nairobi over three hundred puppeteers from Kenya and East Africa to participate in workshops with puppeteers from Japan, Indonesia, England, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, south Africa, Israel and the United States. Workshops were conducted on subjects such as marionette manipulation, scriptwriting, message development, puppet construction, and puppetry as an educational tool for children, and mobilization and facilitation skills. The international puppeteers gave performances in a wide range of styles and traditions, from Javanese Wayang Kulit, to participatory puppet theatre, to Punch and Judy, to finger puppets. Performances were presented in a variety of venues and included hospitals, clinics, hotel conference rooms, city parks, and the dilapidated National Theatre of Kenya. I was in attendance at the conference and presented a series of workshops on “The story of AIDS” and “Performance Creation” at the festival and, later, for the National Theatre of Kenya.

For Brenda Togo from Kisuma, the festival was and overwhelming experience, “The festival was very good for me and my company,” she said. We have learned much and we have so many ideas that it was hard to sleep at night. In Kenya we do not normally have such opportunities to work with professionals from around the world.” Marina Boci-Stanisic, a Croatian and producer for the festival, put the lasting effect of the festival in a larger context, “It has been very good to make Kenyan puppeteers feel connected to the larger world. They understand more now, practical things, but also they feel they are part of something bigger.” Lawrence Keboga echoed her comments, “The Kenyan puppeteers know now that they are a part of an ongoing puppetry tradition that is international. We have a place and we are not only participating in this art form but also contributing to it. Now, when they go back to
their home areas and work. they will not feel so lonely when they return home. The effect of this festival will be felt for many years to come.”

In scene two the happily married couple portray domestic bliss, settling into their life in Nairobi and making plans for the future. The couple, Tom and Sofia, talked about making house repairs, saving for a new house, having several children, and living happily together.

In the next scene, however, which takes place sometime later, things begin to change. The first blush of the marriage has vanished and in the scene the husband is shown meeting one of his old friends, Kombo, who convinces the married man to join him at a bar. The husband’s hesitation brings about Kombo’s diatribe on married life.

Kombo tells Tom, “A man should do as he likes and not go home early because the wife says so. It is the wife’s job to do the work, the washing and cooking, and the man must remain the boss. Kombo leaves and Tom has a moment of indecision, should he be a man or should his wife run him and be nothing more than a boy. He decides and begins to leave.

The Narrator asks Tom, “Where are you going?” Tom responds, “I am going to the bar to be a man!”

In no time Kombo exerts his bad influence on Tom who stays out late, gets drunk and seeks other women to “be a man.” The Narrator tries to talk to Tom, but he will have none of it and stagers off.

The Narrator asks the audience if what Tom is doing is the correct behavior? The responses are invariably, “No.”

Additional responses from the audience are varied, “He has a good wife and should not treat her so badly,” says one woman.

“If he plays with other women he will get STDs,” says another.

The drunken Tom, calling for his wife, interrupts the Narrator’s dialog with the audience. Sofia appears in her nightgown worried because her husband is so late. Sofia asks where he has been and why is drunk, but Tom is in no mood for discussion and beats her.

Tom leaves and is soon heard snoring.
The Narrator consoles the weeping Sofia, who complains that
Tom is losing interest in her, and goes drinking with other women.
“What can I do to make myself more appealing?” she weeps.
The PA, powered by a car battery, screeched and interrupted
the play momentarily. As a few puppeteers scrambled to fix the
problem, discovering somebody stepped on the wires, the narrator,
Peter Mutie, simply raised his voice and continued.

Superstition, poor education, denial, socialized machismo, and cul-
tural stigmas have all contributed to the necessity of large-scale
HIV/AIDS education programs in sub-Saharan Africa. Though
HIV/AIDS pandemic has spread throughout southern Africa, infecting
rural and urban Kenyans alike, its cause and prevention has remained a
mystery to many. “Many are not aware of how it is caused or the symp-
toms and how to recognize it,” Lawrence Keboga said as we walked on
the downtown streets of Nairobi. “Many, still think it is witchcraft that
causes it. Others will not even talk about it for fear of evoking the dis-
ease. That is why it is important for us to speak about it in the streets
without embarrassment.”

As we walked, a group of rag tag street children approached us, their
dirty hands outstretched for coins. As I reached into my pocket, Keboga
stopped me, “Don’t give them money, they will only fight and buy glue
with it.” The unfocused eyes of the street children were swimming in a
yellow murk, their movements languid, disoriented, and erratic. At
their mouths were plastic bottles partially filled with tan colored indus-
trial glue. The street children lived in the nearby city park; by day they
begged, waited for handouts, sifted through garbage, sometimes stealing
in order to survive. The street children, numbering in the thousands,
were the direct result of the AIDS epidemic. Most were AIDS orphans,
their parents gone and their extended family, a grandparent or other
hard-pressed relative, unable to support them or themselves AIDS vic-
tims. Some were the orphaned children of prostitutes, others from once
normal families. The street children were a familiar sight, forming erst-
while families of children aged five to late teens. Several young girls
were nursing children they had given birth to while living on the streets.
Many do not make it into adulthood for being born HIV positive or
contracting AIDS while living on the streets; others fall victim to the
harsh reality of living on the streets. Since my last visit to Nairobi in
1999, the number of street children had grown considerably, becoming a daily reminder of how HIV/AIDS has affected Kenya medically, socially, and spiritually. During my recent visit, after coming from a puppet performance for the street children presented by CHAPS in the city park, I saw two policemen put the body of a small boy into a plastic garbage bag. Other street children stood by looking lost, afraid, and stoned, their plastic bottles of glue held at their nose, dulling the pain of hunger and emotion.

Kenya has forty-two major ethnic groups; most are patriarchal traditions with their cultural-social origins in hunter-gathering and warrior identities. Although many groups shifted to a horticulturalist and herding lifestyle over a hundred or more years ago, culturally inscribed identity and roles still provide the touchstone for many Kenyan men, whether they have remained in the rural area or migrated to the cities. This cultural ingrained, social codified machismo identity is at the core of Kenya HIV/AIDS epidemic and the major obstacle in awareness programs. “We are fighting a deep tradition in Kenya. Traditionally, men can have many women but women cannot have only one man. This was and is expected. Many men have several wives and men screw around, the woman has no right to complain about a man’s behavior, because even today a woman is not allowed to question. This is why we have so many people infected in Kenya,” Lawrence Keboga, a short, intense man of thirty asserted.

FPPS recognized long ago that it must direct its efforts to Kenyan men in order to develop awareness and facilitate changes on issues such as family planning. “For Africans, sex is for men. The man’s job is to dominate and the woman’s job is to bring forth children.” Keboga went on in his cramped office located in a busy market district outside of central Nairobi, “CHAPS speaks for the silent majority and appeals to the sensibility of men who have the power to change in a more significant way. We address the men, because their behavior is critical for the transformation of the issues. We are not afraid to speak to men about the difficult issues like vasectomy, abstinence, same partner sex, and safe sex.”

Manhood and wealth in a traditional Kenyan context was linked to the number of wives and children a man had. It doesn’t take much to see the connections between male identity and HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. Following in turn are the issues of over-
population, poverty, environmental degradation, family planning, violence against women and children, corruption, and drug and alcohol abuse. Almost all of the major social, political, and economic issues confronting Kenya today can be linked to traditional male roles and the reluctance to adjust in the face of emerging situations and modernity. Kenyan males, like the males in other traditional and non-traditional societies, are reluctant to change for fear of the unknown. Traditions are by their nature conservative, meaning they conserve and hold on to an essentially patriarchal social-cultural matrix. They do so at the risk of self-annihilation.

Even the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) can be linked to the traditional, institutionalized behavior of men. In the Kisu region of Kenya, FGM is still widely practiced, though it has been declared illegal by the national government. Keboga, a Kisu born and raised in a rural area where his family still resides, explained the relationship between FGM, African machismo, and HIV/AIDS.

The reason it is still practiced in a clandestine way in homes is because of social pressure perpetuated and enforced by the men. The influence of the fathers, brothers, uncles, and the girl’s eventual husband is strong. So ingrained is the tradition of ‘female circumcision’ and myths that surround it, the girls themselves want it to signify their transformation into a woman. The men believe when the woman’s clitoris is removed she will be less sexually active. They think removal ‘tames’ the girl so the father or husband can control their sexuality (Keboga 2002).

Fidelity Wanjirm, a CHAPS puppeteer spoke of her experiences with the practice.

They think, because the woman cannot gain satisfaction from sex, she will be more devoted and controlled by the man. Maybe this was true in traditional times when people only lived in one village area, but today with transportation, magazines, television, and education it often has the opposite effect on girls. The girls are twelve to fourteen years old and know nothing about sex or AIDS, but they are willing because they want to become a woman (Wanjirm 2002).

Kebonga concluded, “Then they drop out of school to screw around because they feel they have the license to behave like ‘women’. It is another case of how we are victimized by tradition. Things must change or there will be no Kenya as we know it (Kebonga 2002).

With alarming increases in HIV infection rates among young girls, CHAPS has developed several FGM awareness education performances.
Though dealing with a highly sensitive and often contentious issue, their puppetry programs have been able to publicly broach the subject, talking about the primitive practice openly, creating a forum to express consequences and alternatives, something never before attempted or achieved.

In Kenya, where there is more than 60% unemployment and limited possibilities for education or skills training, puppetry has had a small but significant social, cultural, educational, and economic impact. To date CHAPS has trained over 400 puppeteers nationwide, many of whom are employed either part or full-time in puppetry. For many the practical education gained from the workshops (which includes travel, exposure to new people, reading, writing, craft, performance, social, and interpersonal skills) has had a very positive effect on the puppeteer’s self-esteem and sense of purpose. “I feel I am doing something and can be proud of myself. I am learning many things about the troubles facing our nation and now I can do a little something about it,” remarked puppeteer Samuel Othino (Othino 2002).

In Kenya, a country faced with a corrupt government, monumental health, environmental, and economic issues, the positive effect of CHAPS resonates loudly. Many of the young puppeteers I worked with were bright and eager to learn as much as they could, wanting to advance their skills, some wanting to eventually establish their own puppet companies. My after dinner conversations with regional and Nairobi puppeteers at the festival were indicative of the frustration, inquisitiveness, and ambition of Kenyans. Dr. David Silver, a medical doctor from Colorado at the festival to investigate the effectiveness of puppetry for Healthcare Worldwide, and myself were faced with probing, informed, far reaching, and sometimes, uncomfortable questions.

Conversation topics ranged from America’s view on Africa, the IMF, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the reason for the unquestioning support of Israel by the US, the condition of HIV/AIDS in the US, and about every detail of our daily lives. Kenya is very much a part of the world and the young puppeteers wanted change, recognizing they were a part their nation’s future. “The suffering is long and hard, but we know it will change and it is us that must do it, nobody else,” puppeteer Joshua Annuka declared (Annuka 2002). The practical effect of CHAPS has been significant, indeed it has become a model in the way it combines educational, social, and economic objectives to achieve its
health awareness and education goals. There is no other program its size and with its success in the world. Dr. Silver was one of many enthusiastic observers at the festival, gathering information for application elsewhere in the world. “It’s an incredible program. There is a program in Bolivia but very basic in comparison. CHAPS is like nothing I know. I’m looking for a possible model to apply in our work in Vietnam,” commented Silver (Silver 2002).

The name of the Ziwajah Puppetry Team in Kisuma, a city of 500,000, located on the shores of Lake Victoria, was named to reflect its location and participants. “Ziwa” means lake in Luo and “Jah” means god, reflecting the Rastafarian membership of the group. The group of ten applies puppetry, acting, and mask performance to deal with issues such as HIV/AIDS, health, and the environment, all of which are plaguing the lake region. The group also deals to a lesser extent with corruption, self-governance, drug and child abuse, violence against women, gender issues, family planning, poverty eradication, and equal opportunity in the workplace. Special performances were developed for “making use of idle land, dry land and wetland, and a program to “encourage small-scale business.”

Depending on the subject matter, many of Ziwajah’s performances conclude with demonstrations, the distribution of pamphlets or condoms. Funding for their performances come from a variety of NGOs or from international funding. “Panbperi,” a Kenyan NGO, funds HIV/AIDS programs. Kare Kenya, the International Red Cross, and Community Initiatives Support Services (CISS) fund other performances in schools, universities, polytechnics, public places, and markets. Because Ziwajah was a small group, funding, bookings, and administration were coordinated by Western Association of Puppeteers, a regional network, which was in turn supported administratively by FPPS in Nairobi, which contributes 10,000 ks (approximately $125) per quarter. Official recognition and registration with FPPS and with Kenya Government is necessary for seeking funding from NGOs. The regional association also helps in regional training, conducting, for example, workshops on construction and manipulation. The Ziwajah Puppetry Troupe has three trainers who have achieved an “advanced level,” which is determined by experience and the number of workshops they have participated in on both the regional and national level.
George Wambaya, a Ziwajah trainer in puppet making and manipulation, was “certified” by FPPS and was one of nearly 100 puppet trainers from throughout Kenya invited to participate in the “Edupuppet International Puppetry Festival” in Nairobi. The FPPS sponsored Festival provided transport, housing, and a subsistence allowance. Wambaya told me that FPPS has set the fees for their puppet performances at 3000ks ($37.50) for a 15-30 minute show. From the fee 20% is deducted and goes to the group account, the rest divided among those that perform. Depending on how often the group performs, a group member can earn $40 to $80 per month. “It is not enough, but you can survive. The money is motivation and there are many who want to learn puppetry because there are few jobs in Kenya. Sometimes we perform for birthday parties for children and events for banks and other businesses during the holidays. We have even done performances to advertise a casino business and a dance contest. We mostly use glove and Eudupuppets. Muppets are used for entertainment,” Wambaya added (Wambaya 2002).

The organizational diagram, fee schedules, and accountability mandated by FPPS have gone far to instill good business practices, cooperation, social responsibility, and entrepreneurial innovation (all of which have helped to counteract the corrupt models exampled by the government). Several groups have purchased bicycles with the money they have earned. The bicycles are in turn rented out locally for 50ks ($0.75) per day to local merchants who cannot afford to buy a bicycle. The rental provides an income for the groups as it encourages the development of local commerce. In addition to his work with Ziwajah, Wamgaya is also a youth officer for the Kenya Red Cross, receiving 200ks ($2.50) a day for a 40-hour week.

When I asked Daniel Otieno, also from the Lake Victoria region, why puppets were so effective, he replied, “Puppets are the best way to deal with sensitive issues. They are soft and do not threaten the people. It is like children or like magic so they can say many difficult things” (Otieno 2002).

However, problems often arise with the police, “Especially when we are talking about corruption. They harass us and charge us with “disturbance,” related Wamgaya. “They ask for your ID and they always find something wrong with it so they can take you to jail and hold you for a while just to intimidate you,” Otieno cited a recent experience.
“You must always ask permission from assistant chief, he is in charge of public performance. You must tell them what you are doing, where you want to do it and why you are doing it. Sometimes they want money, but we never give it to them, because then they will want more,” Wambaya collaborated. “We will not be a part of corruption, it must stop with us, the young generation,” Otieno declared. “But sometimes they stop the show. Our group was recently jailed over-night for doing a show about corruption, “Inciting the public against the law and police,” Wambaya spat with disgust (Wambaya 2002).

Simon Karanja, leader of the group Noriva, from the region north of Nairobi, was also attending the Edupuppet International Puppet Festival. Karanja, a large jovial man was a full-time employee and puppeteer for a Coca Cola Bottling Company. The local bottling company quickly recognized the effectiveness of the puppetry in communicating to rural residents and thus began supporting a group of six men to use puppetry as advertising. Monday through Friday the group travels the region performing fifteen-minute narrative puppet plays that extol the benefits of drinking Coca Cola. Afterwards the group hands out samples from their beverage line. Simon, a father of three, receives 300 KS per day (approximately $3.75) as a supervisor. Others in the group receive 250 or 200 per day, which is about average; all of the group are men. “It is difficult for women to work with men—especially married women, because their husbands get suspicious,” Karanja added. “This limits the kind of stories we can tell.” On the weekends the group presents, without compensation, puppet performances dealing with issues pervasive in his area: AIDS, FGM, and violence against women. While in Nairobi, Karanja was registering his group with the government for official recognition in order to seek funding.

As the performance progressed, about two hundred spectators—men, women and children, including mothers with babes in arms, children in their school uniforms, and an occasional deranged person, congegated. Some gathered close around the puppet booth, while others watched intently from the shade of tin awnings from across the road; umbrellas opened for protection from the scorching mid-day, equatorial heat. The draped puppet booth was situated at the side of the slum’s main road next to a makeshift Catholic missionary, the only open space available in the crowded area. As the performance unfolded, however, the beehive-like life of the slum continued around it. Cars beeped their
horns for passage, and medieval looking wooden pushcarts and bicycles preposterously laden with goods crept through the audience. The curious stopped momentarily to take in the show as others, like women in burkas, paid it no heed whatsoever. Throughout the performance a nearby tinsmith continued to pound out a metal footlocker, paying no attention to the performance; and the performers were unfazed by his constant hammering. The smoke from charcoal fires blended with the smells of urine and rotten garbage.

The Narrator asks the audience for a solution to Sofia and Tom’s problem. But before he can field all the responses Tom again comes home drunk. The Narrator talks to Tom who complains about his wife always wanting to beat him because he is drunk. He claims that the woman’s group Sofia belongs to is teaching the wives karate in order to beat up their husbands. Then Sofia enters and an argument ensues. The Narrator quells them, asking them to talk it out, they agree. With the Narrator as moderator/councilor, Sofia is given the first chance to list her complaints but soon realizes that her husband has fallen asleep and has begun to snore.

“I want to go back to my parent’s house! Married life is not for me!”

Taking the microphone from the Narrator she asks the women in the audience for their advice,

“What should I do?”

One woman suggests: “Be patient and stay with your husband, he will realize what a good woman you are.”

Another woman tells her: “Because of AIDS you should not run away. It is not safe.”

A woman in the back yells out, suggesting they seek counseling and sort out their problems because: “Your problems are not so big.”

Sofia’s dialog with the women in the audience is cut short by the entrance of Oman, a clothing peddler. In Kenya as in other parts of Africa, door-to-door clothing (new and used) peddlers are common. Sofia, a regular customer, confides to Oman that she is lonely. Soon she is promising money and the purchase of more clothes if he will have sex with her. Oman agrees and they disappear behind the booth, their voices and comic lovemaking, heard via the PA, sending the audience into fits of laughter.
With the love making sounds as a backdrop, the Narrator asks the audience, “If you have so many sexual partner’s what can be the result?”

The audience is quick to respond, “She will get AIDS,” “She will get STD,” “It will lead to the family breaking up.”

The Narrator asks the women, “Are any of you women here willing to go with Tom?” “No, he drinks.” “You might catch disease from him.”

The Narrator asks the men, “Are any men here willing to go with Sofia?” “Yes, she is an easy woman.”

The Narrator responds, “But how about disease? How about your own wife and family? Do you not love your wife and family?” The men in the audience fall silent as the narrator asks, “Why was she dishonest with her husband?”

A man in the audience responds, “Tom has been dishonest and that has forced Sofia to be dishonest.” To which the Narrator responds, “So, if Tom was faithful and a good husband, Sofia would have been more likely to be faithful?”

The response from the audience was a resounding “Yes!”

Tom enters drunk, calls for Sofia and realizes she has betrayed him with Omán.

“But you have betrayed me with so many women!” Sofia cries.

“But I am a man!” Tom proceeds to beat her.

The Narrator intercedes and Tom and Sofia agree to be interviewed with the audience assisting. The subject is “Taking responsibility for one’s own actions and the situation.”

The discussion gets around to the traditionally accepted behavior of men.

“A man is not a man unless he has many women!” A man yells out with others shaking their heads and disagreeing.

“What is wrong with this way of thinking?” the Narrator is quick to counter.

“There are too many diseases.”

“That is old fashioned!”

“Things are different now,” come the replies.

The Narrator concurrs, “In traditional times it was important for a man to have several women to produce many children because so many children died and many children were needed for planting
and herding. In traditional times a man’s wealth was the size of his family, but today, in the city, how many cows does a man have? Where are your fields to tend? The times have changed and now we have terrible diseases and most people live in cities, but men still think they live on the farm. A man’s thinking must change because the way we live has changed. Do you understand?”

The audience let out an unanimous, “Yes!”

Then Tom, feeling contrite, has a confession to make. He tells Sofia that he has a STD and recommends she go to the local Clinic for a test.

Tom and Sofia leave for the Korogocho Health Clinic, a nearby Clinic. The Narrator asks if everyone knows where the clinic is located. Directions are given and clinic’s services are denoted as are the processes of testing and counseling demystified. A nurse from the clinic is in attendance and identifies herself to the audience.

The Narrator then recounts what happened when Tom and Sofia went to the clinic and discovered they both tested positive with HIV. “But HIV does not mean that they will die! Many people live long and natural lives with HIV. Living with someone with HIV does not mean you will catch the disease by living with them. Because they have HIV does not make them strangers, they are still your bothers and sisters, your uncles and aunts, mothers and fathers.”

The Narrator goes on quizzing the audience about how people catch HIV/AIDS and how people live with it and how families can deal with someone living with it. In the process of question and answer he demystifies many misconceptions about the disease. The reconciled Sofia and Tom enter, vowing to be faithful and take care of one another. “We still have each other’s love,” Sofia says.

Sofia and Tom sing,

I you want to have sex, you should use a condom
Life is too short
When you are making love use a condom or abstain
It’s better to be alone
But we should not neglect those HIV positive
You should give them support
Someone with HIV can be infected and still alive for a very long time.

Daudi Nturibi, Interim Director FPPS has been with the organization since 1985. A sagacious and worldly man in his late fifties, he attended Bowling Green University and Cornell University, and has taught at the University of Nairobi but left because, in his words, “I feel I am doing useful work here” (Nturibi 2002).

Nturibi explains how the post-show discussion evolved: “The methodology of community interaction is strongly based on the ideology of Paolo Freire. The puppetry performances themselves primarily serve as catalysts for discussion.” Nturibi elaborated further:

Emphasis is placed on the type of follow-up questioning and discussion facilitated by the CHAPS puppetry group following each performance. The real goal of the performances is to raise issues and educate, which does not mean the show cannot entertain. Questions are raised like ‘Does this situation accurately reflect what’s happening? If not, what’s different? Why is this occurring in our community and country? What can we do about it?’ (Nturibi 2002).

When Friedman initially presented his “Puppets Against AIDS” program he took his troupe village-to-village in Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa. Nturibi continued,

But after the performance, the troupe would simply move on to the next village, leaving nothing more than a health message without ‘planting seeds’ by providing local training. There was no presence left in the village. The FPPS strategy has been ‘to leave seeds’ everywhere we touched. We enlist a core group of local dancers, musicians, and dramatists who are also educators, informed and aware of the issues (Nturibi 2002).

The Narrator gives the audience the “ABC: A: Abstain. B: Be faithful. C: Use a Condom. You should maintain one sexual partner. If not, you should always use a condom. I know many people complain about the condom because it does not feel good or it is not manly. It is not manly to be dead!”

The Narrator asks for the adults to come closer and create a tight circle around him for the final part of the presentation. The children are asked to leave because, “This last part is for adults only.”
The adults crowd closely around the puppet booth with the Narrator encouraging them. Curious children trying to squeeze through for a look, are shooed away. The Narrator, sans microphone, holds up a condom package and begins his demonstration, identifying the expiration or ‘Use by’ date. “A condom is only good for five years. If you use an old condom you run the risk of it breaking or small holes developing. It is latex and has a limited life.” He names the different brand name of condoms and the different textures, and tells the women about, “The feminine condom which the women in the group will demonstrate for you.” He then holds the condom package above his head to demonstrate how to properly open and remove the condom.

The Narrator then displays a model of a penis, which he holds up to the crowd. Initially there was much giddiness and the Narrator encouraged them to get all of their laughter out before “I begin to talk about serious things. Things that might mean life or death.”

“You must put on the condom only when the penis is erect,” brought more embarrassed laughter from the audience. He blew into the condom to demonstrate the reservoir. “When you put the condom on, you must do so carefully, otherwise it will break.” He then demonstrated putting it on the model.

“Then turn off the light if you are uncomfortable. Do you understand? Any questions?”

Just then a man in the audience yelled out challenging the Narrator, “A man does not use a condom. You cannot have sex with a condom!”

“We know better than that. Should I go on?” The crowd agreed with the Narrator who then demonstrated how to remove the condom. “Use a new one for each time and do not wash them out. You must never reuse a condom.”

One hundred count boxes of condoms were handed out to men and women. The condoms were donated through the joint effort of the National Council of Kenya and British High Commission AIDS program. Some asked for more boxes, but were only given one for fear they are more interested in selling the condoms than using them.

It was about that time that the vocal man became a little rowdy because of my presence. The man who had tried on several occasions to
disrupt the presentation with his provoking remarks had focused on me, a white man, the symbol of wealth and privilege, an object of envy and spite. “Why is the mzungu only bringing us condoms, not food? They do not want Africans to have children!” The CHAPS puppeteers advised me to lock myself in the vehicle as they dismantled the booth and equipment. The man and others started pounding on the window, motioning me to roll down the window to talk to them. CHAPS puppeteer, Pastor Wamoi, knew that admonishing the men would only provoke them, so he put a cassette into the vehicle’s player and turned up the volume on a festive dance song. “Don’t worry, they will go away. They are just hungry. This happens many times because people are hungry and they want food” (Wamoi 2002).

When I returned to Daudi Nturibi’s office at FPPS later that hot afternoon, I was greeted with a warm handshake and knowing smile.

You have seen it work now, at least as a crowd puller you can say there is something there. The message is there, so is the feeling—now the question is the behavior change. It is subtle, but that is how a big change starts. First we must get the people involved. That is the tradition of Africa, to involve people; that why we have so much song and dance, because we like to be a part of things. You see, now the puppets are a new kind of African tradition, but just like the old (Nturibi 2002).

With the Edupuppets Festival over the cramped FFPS offices were back to normal, which meant bustling, busy with the organization’s many ongoing programs. In the conference room several CHAPS puppeteers and administrators were meeting to review videotapes from the Festival in order to determine how best to create a resource library. In the downstairs shop new puppets and props were being built and repaired. In the parking area behind the offices the group I had accompanied to Korogocho was rehearsing for a performance occurring the next day—their day off. The performance was for disabled children and the group would volunteer their efforts. The towering oversized heads were dancing, smiling and bobbing together under large shade trees.
Trickster by Trade

Thomas Riccio on Indigenous Theatre

An interview by Dale E. Seeds

The scene is one of great incongruity. A white man, wearing a plastic Roman helmet and sporting huge white foam hands, bounds into a group of black children in a squalid township in Natal, South Africa. He is a pied piper, leading them to an open space where a group of Zulu actors begins a performance that both recalls their cultural traditions and confronts their troubled present-day reality. Variations of this scene repeat in Zambia, and with the !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert.

Previously, Thomas Riccio had traveled to Yakutsk in the Sakha Republic, formerly part of Soviet Siberia. There he encountered the Sakha Nation Theatre, a recently emancipated national theatre with few traditions of its own, only generations of Soviet-trained actors and Soviet-induced culture. He proposed the adaptation of a children’s story about an old woman and five cows. The actors were skeptical.

The scene shifts, moving forward in time once again, this time retuning in Alaska, where Riccio sits quietly, listening to the age-old oral traditions of the Yup’ik and Inupiat peoples. Later, their stories will find their way into imaginative performances created by both native and non-native students at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks.

Riccio’s career in theatre embarked along the traditional route, including the completion of a graduate degree from Boston University; employment at the Cleveland Play House as a dramaturg; a position as artistic director with Chicago’s avant-garde Organic Theatre Company. And a teaching position at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. Here, however, the detour begins:

I entered into the bloodstream of American theatre, only to find I was an industry worker selling a consumer product. I was having the same feelings I had when I was a teenage window clerk for McDonald’s. In my heart I knew theatre had to be more than subscription
series, grant hustles, good reviews, and cocktail parties with corporate sponsors.

In 1988, Riccio was asked to work with Tuma Theatre, an Alaskan Native student group at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. Tuma, which means “the path” or “the way” in Yup’ik, did indeed become his path to the world of indigenous peoples’ theatre, leading to residencies with such diverse groups as the Natal Performing Arts Council and the Kwasa group of South Africa the Sakha Nation Theatre of Siberia; Metamorphosis Theatre of St. Petersburg, Russia, a group of dedicated pre-Christian Slavic rituals; and Tùkak’ Theatre of Denmark, a Greenlandic Inuit group.

Like the trickster character of various indigenous traditions, Riccio’s work with native peoples treads the dangerous line between mischief and benevolence. More specifically, it balances between white exploitation and native empowerment; between introducing a structure and allowing an indigenous structure to develop; between adopting the native voice and clearing the way for native voices to be heard. The performance texts of the groups he works with create a non-Aristotelian dramaturgy that could be viewed as a kind of heretical poetics, which challenges Western dramaturgical thought. It is a dangerous business crossing geographical, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries.

As he explains in the following interview, which took place 28 February 1995 in his home outside of Fairbanks, Alaska, he is ever mindful of this discontinuity and tension.

SEEDS: Doesn’t the type of work you do open you up to a variety of ethical criticisms? For example, how do you respond to the suggestion that you may be perpetuating a type of white colonialism; or, who pays for your services, and does that payment fit into the colonial/indigenous paradigm?

RICCIO: Sure there are those who raise questions of ethics and white colonialism. Those questions should be raised! But generally I find those who raise the issues are those who can afford to. Usually it is white American academics, far removed from the reality of practical application, who have recently positioned themselves on the moral high ground. The funny thing is, if those issues are ever raised in the context of a project I am involved in, it is me who raises them. A sensitivity to those issues is indelible to what I do, yes, but I can’t let it paralyze me and lead the work. I am aware of the profound cultural and social trauma Western culture, my culture, has caused historically, but at the same time it comes down to “There is work to be done!” People and cultures are initiated and perpetuated an eco-collapse of the earth. I have to do something!
My interaction is ultimately, at its core, a human-to-human interaction, and the success of a project rises or falls on that. I give a project my full attention—emotional, physical, and mental effort. And that’s exhausting, fulfilling, and rewarding. That is exactly what is lacking, what humanity is losing, what is being taken from us by technology, consumerism, materialism, urbanization. People sharing with other people. Very simple, and in that lies beauty and hope; Conversing, sharing, caring, and working together to create something. Sure, when I first start working with a group they are wondering, what the hell is this white guy doing here? There is a lot of skepticism and questioning eyes, which is good. I must prove myself by revealing that I am human like them, that I am willing to give my feelings and efforts to them. It doesn’t matter if an exercise worked well or not, I am white or say the wrong things; what matters is being there. Joining them and them joining me—how do you explain that? But people know when it is real, when it is there. In the West and particularly the way we do theatre, we are task-organized—and that is how we communicate, we refer to things, events, ideas outside of self. The West is guided by time—that is its rhythm—which is external and artificial. With indigenous people, and the projects we do together the “task” is sharing what is inside with one another. That includes embracing their “time,” their rhythm reality, which is a pathway to their relationship to their part of the earth, their history, their ancestors, and their eternal present, which is the wellspring of their performance. If the sharing is successful, then the performance is simply a natural outgrowth. It is a mystery to me how it all happens. I let my faith, my instinct, my spirits, whatever, lead me. It is wonderful and is what keeps me going and makes me a very happy and lucky guy.

You asked about money. If the University of Alaska didn’t pay me a decent wage I doubt I could have done very much, I estimate I have spent $15,000 to $20,000 of my own money, so I guess I am my own foundation. However, I do receive payments for my projects. It is important they give something as a gesture of respect and value. But the amount has never been an issue and is always relative. In Sakha they paid me about $150 (in 100-ruble notes) for about three months work, gave me an apartment, and gave me transportation to visits various festival sand shamans. The big expense was air travel, which my university and I picked up. With the Zulu, the Natal Performing Arts Council [a state run theatre] hired me much like a freelance director, with air travel provided by the Alaska State Council on the Arts grants and my own funds. In Zambia, the project was the largest ever art event in the country’s history. Funding came from Finland, Norway, the USIS [the United States Information Service], and the Zambian government. It employed, fed, and housed 20-some Zambians, in addition to producing a national tour of the show. Again, I was paid, but ultimately lost money. Some workshops, like what I have done in Sweden with the Greenlanders in Denmark, pay decently,
but that much is pretty much sucked up by office expenses—long distance telephone, mailing, equipment, and weird medicines I have to buy for travel. It is a good thing I am not in business, or I would be out of business. But I am rewarded in other ways. The universe provides.

SEEDS: Let’s set the ethics issues aside for a minute. You often describe your work with indigenous peoples’ theatre as being one of a resource, a catalyst, an observer, even a “pathfinder.” How does this differ from the role that Western theatre practitioners have taken in the past in regard to their work with indigenous peoples? Does it reposition the white theatre artist in cross-cultural performance process?

RICCIO: I’m not that familiar with how other people work, or have worked. I don’t know if many directors have worked with indigenous peoples. I do know being part of the dominant culture, which is reasserted by movies and TV, reinforces the Western method of producing theatre. Western dramaturgical notions such as cause-and-effect, linear progression, individual versus community, and psychological and sociological sensibilities are implicit in the widespread dispersion of TV and film. This affects the mental processes of indigenous peoples in the process of perceiving the self. I try to go the other way and ask them to look back within themselves to make this discovery. That’s the predicament I think a lot of these people find themselves in. They know who they are, but to portray the selves they adopt a Western voice—a voice conditioned by another narrative model, or myth, or DNA. This removes them from the process of talking about themselves. I’m saying “talk to yourself, among yourselves, within your own groups, on your own terms. Define your cultural narrative model. Myth is central to what you are, what you value, how you see yourself, and how you exist in the world.”

What I offer is a way or a guide to those terms, although I don’t know what that is. I don’t come in and say “I know;” I say, “we’re going to do this and we’re going to find a way to do it. We may not succeed totally, but we’re going to take a strong step in that direction.” I’m very much an activist—very strong-headed about achieving those goals. I don’t care what it is; we have to find something that is truthful to them. Once I tuned them into that, the performance, becomes taken away from me. I go to organize, wanting to leave. In fact the greatest tribute to my work is to see it continue on their terms. In Durban, I went back to visit people I had worked with in 1992. Some of them had formed theatre groups, and the exercises, methods, and structures that they were using were based on what I had introduced to them, which were transformed into their own methods. That’s my mission, my payback. That makes me deeply happy.
Now I feel obliged to write it down so we can have something they can refer to. Those groups that I don’t have the opportunity to work with can have a resource that is an alternative to Western books on theatre. The image that really supports the need for this came from the lack of available materials on indigenous or native performance. Except for maybe a few plays, Tomson Highway’s for example, that’s it! Everything implies Western theatrical and dramaturgical structure—look in any bookstore. Another example: I saw this Zulu man, one whom I had been working with, who had a book under his arm. *How to Make Theatre*, an old dog-eared Western book. He wanted to do theatre, he was motivated, he got it out of the library, but it was Western theatre. There was no other model, nowhere else to go. In another occurrence, I was doing a workshop in a township and this man, who was a poet, a published poet, came to me and said, “Can I, in a performance, include poetry, music, and dance all together?” I said, “Yeah, why don’t you think so?” “I don’t know, I thought you couldn’t do that,” he replied. He actually thought he couldn’t do it because he had never seen anything quite like it. He was asking me if it was OK. What he was really asking was if it was OK to essentially do Zulu performance, mixing praise singing with dance and music. There was no external resource that he could refer to or identify with. This is another part of the project that I’m now realizing has to be done: to offer this work as a resource.

SEEDS: What types of research do you do before you begin work with a new indigenous theatre group? Could you give some specific examples?

RICCIO: It depends on the group, but essentially I try to absorb as much as possible as far as written scholarship, oral history, and audio and video research. I try to learn as much about the culture’s cosmology, as well as locate them in anthropological terms. I do that on one level, but just as significant are the stories—their major myths. It’s very important that I understand their central stories, mythologies, and legends—who and what the figures and characters are within these mythologies. It’s also very important to understand their music and rhythms. I try to understand all these in discrete terms: I don’t try to make sense of it, I just try to absorb and visualize.

Then there are the visual arts—I try to look at patterns. With the Sakha for instance, I could see a pattern emerging from the design work in their jewelry and costuming, with hunter-gatherer fur combing with Turkish floral patterns. It’s a very interesting interaction that told me a lot about who they were as a people and what journey they had gone through culturally, from a Turkish Eastern sensibility—which is where their language came from—meeting a north central Siberian hunter-gatherer culture, I stayed looking at those patterns as a revelation in terms that suggested movement—how and why they moved in
their dances. I deliberately tried not to make something of the patterns, except to absorb, to be aware of them, to return them, so that when I’m on my feet with the group, I have this reference. I also use my actors as my research.

Essentially, my first two to three weeks with the groups is a research process. I’m basically researching what’s in their bodies, their minds, and their culture at this moment. We’re talking about anthropological research, historical research, musical research, design research and myths and legends research. The big research however, maybe 50 percent, is in their bodies, and the ways in which all of these elements intermix. This then gives me some idea as to hot to direct the work. I’ll see a variety of manifestations, then realize that, culturally, for this time and space, this one particular element is stronger than the others.

In the case of the Zulu, the strength of their militaristic tendencies is seen in their dances, derived from Chaka of course [the 10th-century Zulu warrior and leader]. I got this sense from ethnomusicological sources. Once I saw it being performed, however, I had a much better idea of the reason for their mind-set. This regimentation was expressed in an unwillingness to adjust the dance, and it became a psychological mind-set that we had to begin dealing with right away in order to create theatre.

This “Chaka mind-set” was a way for them to maintain themselves and their identity during apartheid. I felt this was no longer appropriate in dealing with new issues and realities, which were “soft issues,” not militaristic ones. They had to reinvent, reimagine who they were.

SEEDS: Have you found the information available in the United States on these cultures to be somewhat limited?

RICCIO: Actually, in the U.S., the information is pretty good. In Africa, researching information on Africa is very difficult. A lot of times, what I find is that anthropologists and ethnographers have gone in and basically raided [for material], and the information never gets back to Africa, Siberia, or wherever. This information is presented from a very Western point of view, of course, so look at it in those terms. It’s conditioned by its context.

SEEDS: If you started today on a new Tuma production, what sort of processes would you go through?

RICCIO: We start by identifying the stories or ideas. In the fall semester, we use the time to chitchat about what we want to do, and the scripts develop from this exploration. Sometimes we work on our feet, sometimes not. The people think about it and what they need to talk about, and bring it to the group, where collectively we discuss it. I try to serve as a guide; I have ideas
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too—what I’d like to work on, what I think is significant—which I throw into the hopper, and everyone works on that. Then, slowly, an outline starts evolving. If it’s a story, like our last production of Inua (1995), which is really a collection of stories, the literature was already in print. But all of the stories in the North are so spread out, that the stories are known by many of the peoples within their own cultures—differently told, but essentially the same story.

What we do during the research and discussion is to learn of the variations and discuss what they mean and how to perform them. Slowly the outline evolves, and basically we don’t look at the story again. The story becomes a jumping off point. I call it “hallucinating the text.” Basically, it’s a group hallucination because the text exists among us and between us, it’s something we see and feel, but does not exist [as a formalized text]. We don’t refer to a permanent record; we adjust and discover things. If there’s a moment where the outline we create says do this, and it doesn’t work...; if it doesn’t make sense to us, we adjust it. We take great liberties to evolve it to fit our needs. We make another discovery, or we say this will tie into something that will happen later. The atmosphere, the tone, [in the group] is created so that anyone can stop at anytime and chime in and give us something. That’s the strength, the fact that everyone has a prerogative. Everyone, in a sense, is like a director. Everyone is actualized or realized as a creator. That’s the tone we set.

SEEDS: Do the native students bring in stories that have been told to them?

RICCIO: Oh, always. All the time.

SEEDS: Is that considered on an equal basis with a source that has been documented.

RICCIO: It’s the same—we look at them the same way. Let’s say we’re working on a fox dance, like in Inua. Matthew [Berlin] knew of a fox dance, but then Theresa [Theresa John, Tuma co-director and Alaska Native Studies faculty] knew of another type of fox dance, and I had seen yet another fox dance, so we shared and he [Matthew] came up with his own fox dance. We didn’t tell him how to act it; it’s just that this is what we had seen and done. We work together. If we don’t know what to do, and we know we have to do a certain scene, we open the floor and the cast is required to think about it [laughter] and come up with something! If we can’t then we continue to explore. What’s interesting, too, is that when we create like this we actually forget the sequence. Someone will often jump the sequence or do something they shouldn’t have done if they were following the script. We don’t say “That’s wrong”; we look at it as, that’s how it should be because it wasn’t connected and didn’t make sense. If it made sense in the progression or sequence it was
in, then that’s what the person would have done. Since they didn’t, it’s actually telling us that maybe it should be done another way.

SEEDS: What kinds of things do you do to legitimize the “texts” of your performance? Do you consult elders to make certain it’s true, authentic, or appropriate?

RICCIO: It depends on the story. Sometimes, if we’re doing a certain song or dance, we’ll ask permission. The Yup’ik are pretty liberal about it, but we’ll call back to the village, where Theresa [John] or Melanie [Brown] or Wilma [Brown] heard the story, and ask them. They’ve never said no. There are also certain songs we use that are Athabaskan, so we’ll ask Athabaskan people if we can use them. The Haida and Tlingit [of Southeast Alaska] seem to be stricter about it, and since we’re so far north [of their traditional lands] we usually don’t deal with those stories that much, and we’re not that familiar with their traditions. The Inupiat, Yup’ik and Athabaskan peoples are pretty open, generous, and sharing.

SEEDS: You often speak of the indigenous actors as developing their roles through transformational processes, rather than the more cognitive approaches employed by Western actors. What kind of process do you employ to prepare the actor for his/her role?

RICCIO: First and foremost, it’s a parallel line. On one level, we want them to become more comfortable with themselves—self-expressive. These are exercises that I would think any young actor would do. I’ve done that with a variety of cultures. This is especially important since many traditional cultures are very strict in the codes of behavior and how the access their own creativity, sense of identity, and gender. Sometimes this strictness is politically reinforced, such as with the Zulu, in terms of the way they perceive the self, and what their behavior can be. We address these issues on one level. On the second level, we explore their culture in such a way that they discover it’s not something they blindly maintain verbatim, but something that’s living and interactive—and they’re a part of. We do that through a series of exercises, the most significant of which I find is the ritual preparation.

The ritual preparation is basically defining a warm-up based on traditional movements, orchestrated and created by the group, into a 20-30 minute activity. This includes the rhythms, the songs, the vocalizations, and the movements that are specific to that culture. So, rather than warming up with just a Western, technical, neutral set of physical exercise—a mechanics of the body sort of thing—we do the warm-up as a window or doorway to the culture. When we warm up that way, we are prepared to start creating by accessing the
“cultural language.” It’s like repeating the alphabet, and then using the alphabet to make words—new words—using the same language. That’s the most significant approach—warming up the culture and imagination as well as the body.

The next step is to create within the group, the ability to jump their [cultural] context. I find that a lot of traditional cultures hang on to traditions as a way of preserving the self because historically they were so threatened and challenged. You must remember we’re talking about small, fragile cultures. There are only 35 thousand Sakha, 75-90 thousand Alaskan natives. Compared to Western culture, wouldn’t you be threatened and intimidated? What we need to do is to show that the culture is alive and growing. There is so much they have to offer; some of it ancient knowledge that is going to be lost. That knowledge needs to be a part of the emerging global dialog.

SEEDS: Is this more difficult with an actor who has been trained in Western methods?

RICCIO: Sure. Actually, with the Sakha, it was the most difficult. Some of them were Moscow or Vladivostok-trained professional actors, in their fifties, even their seventies. They had received a very Western, a very Soviet-realism style of training. Even though they were native people, it was very difficult for them. They were torn, they wanted to learn about their culture, and now [with the breakup of the Soviet Union], they were allowed to express their native sense of self—but they were viewing themselves through a Western lens. This was an issue that I would mention throughout the rehearsal process—about how they were thinking and about how I perceived they were thinking. For instance, I would do an improv, the same one I would do with American native or non-native actors, which would be a prelude to free-play—a starting-off point. These people would do the prerequisites of the improv and then basically stop dead. They just stopped! They did everything I said they should do, and that was it. They had obeyed orders! That’s how they were trained and educated. The same thing happened with the Zulu. It was like a kind of mental engineering for control and obedience.

Part of the process of creative performance was to reveal to them their way of thinking. In South Africa, this applied not only to the blacks, but also to the whites. How else could they endure such atrocities around them and justify it? They were trained to justify it, rationalize it—to accept, but not see. It’s interesting how the imagination can be controlled, led, censored.

SEEDS: How do you determine the boundary that maintains the cultural integrity of the performance and at the same time addresses current social concerns of the culture? I’m thinking of your production of Sndaana (1993) in
Yakutsk, Sakha Republic, *Emandulo* (1992) in Natal, South Africa, or with Tuma. How do you know when you’ve gone too far in politicizing the story?

RICCIO: The actors, if they’re of the culture, will tell me. It isn’t me making the decision; they tell me if it’s gone too far. I’ll suggest things, and if they react negatively, well then that’s fine. I don’t take it personally. It’s basically a group dynamic consensus, which is the model that we maintain. Consensus is the organizational model—it’s slower, and more complicated, but ultimately more satisfying. It’s evolved from traditional Yup’ik and Inupiat ways.

SEEDS: Do they ever push it politically farther than you would have?

RICCIO: No. They make the discoveries. Once they get into the flow of it, they get confident, then they will push it. The big issue I find, when working with indigenous peoples, is their confidence level. They are less likely to be confident about what they’re expressing or about themselves than maybe non-native people are. This is because I, we, are from the dominant culture, and whether we want it or not, we have this attitude that we know more, that we do it right, and that we are the caretakers of the general welfare. This seems to be implicit with who we are—our cultural psyche. I try to let them see their value, to provoke them to assume that level of confidence. Then they will push it.

When I read *Sardaana*, which is essentially a well-known children’s story, the political metaphor was not apparent to the cast. When I first proposed *Sardaana*, they were skeptical. Then I suggested “How about Sardaana goes on the road, but the bear she meets is the Russian bear?” They all went “A-ha” and smiled! It hit a nerve. Then I knew the right direction to go. That one spice, that one idea, conditioned all our work. It opened up the vocabulary as to how we could mix and match. For them to do another *Sardaana* would not be very innovative. In fact the producer said, “I expected more from you” [laughter]. He actually told me this at a meeting, and here I was concerned with this very issue of going too far politically. He said, “I want you to do something that I don’t understand. I go to these international festivals, I see things I don’t understand and I want to do this at my theatre.” He wanted me to be deliberately experimental, and to push his group because he felt the group was getting stagnant, but he didn’t know what to do because he was on the inside. He empowered me to “rough things up.” Then, as things started getting more unusual, I could see he was getting a bit concerned. It was like he was gulping for air. At one rehearsal I sensed that felt he had set me loose and shouldn’t have. But at that point, the actors were already so excited that I had opened a chink in the wall, and they flowed through it, knocking it down.
SEEDS: Do these cross-cultural performances create a bridge for indigenous people to move back to more traditional performance practices? How does it help them gain a sense of their own culture?

RICCIO: Sure, but it’s a bridge forward as well as back. I think for a lot of the peoples I work with, the traditional, rigid culture is looked at as useless, especially for a lot of the young people. It doesn’t speak to them anymore. It talks to them of another world, the world of their elders. Because of that, it’s dying, it’s not living anymore. My objective is to identify, from traditional culture, a pattern—I call it the “DNA” of their cultural performance—and that is what we bring forward, using whatever is applicable from the traditional mentality, but then letting it intermix freely with their contemporary voices and images. What’s important is that this shift is deeply rooted in the patterns of the culture itself, its worldview, and its cosmology. They have an important point of view that needs to be heard. We’re bringing it forward, revitalized it. I assist them in reimagining their own culture and its own worth. I think, as an outsider, maybe that’s something I can do, maybe with more potency that an insider can. Perhaps I can appreciate something that they, as insiders, can’t see themselves. That’s my advantage.

SEEDS: In many of the situations in which you have worked, there appears to have been a preexisting arts administrative organizing structure. How does this affect your work?

RICCIO: I have to deal with them too. For example, with the Natal Playhouse and the Sakha National Theatre, this was both good and bad. You have to adapt to what the organizational structure is and identify firmly how you operate, and be well organized yourself. So, in a way, I become a microcosmic producer within their context, working with them but also have a very specific way of organizing my own project. The projects I do are invariably organized differently from how they operate. The government-funded Natal Playhouse, for example, works in a very regional theatre sensibility, therefore I have to educate the administrators that we work differently, that creating a Zulu performance is not like doing Winnie the Pooh.

Likewise in Sakha. Tükak’ not so much because the structure that was already there was compatible. At the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, it was understood that we worked differently. This included our production schedules, how we work with designers, even how we come up with a script or a title for the piece.

Often, I don’t know what I’m going to do till I get there, whether is in Zambia or the Kalahari. This still bothers administrators—they don’t know
how to schedule, to budget, or to sell it. I have to be able to indicate to them how best to do that.

In Zambia I had to create a structure because there was nothing within their Center for the Arts for us to work with. We created an ad hoc, one-time only project that has since taken seed. The ideas were presented then are being continued by others. Likewise with the !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen; there was no organizing structure in place for the workshop—no space, no designers, no script, poor transportation, and few translators. On the first day, seven healers and their assistants agreed to work with me and I knew something special could happen!

I have to be a producer as well. The more specific I am, the better the administration can relate to me. It’s like anything else—when they [an administration] see what you do, and that the project is clearly defined and under control, they tend to allow it to continue, even though they may not agree with what you’re doing. This is especially true if you are willing to interact with the administration. If you allow for a “synapse” between you and the major organization, they respect you. If you come in wishy-washy and try to fit into their mold, their way of operating, you’re not going to happy and you’re not going to serve the project. For me the organizational structure is just as important as the artistic structure or the cultural context. The organizational structure reflects the culture as well—it evolves from the culture and conditions of the moment. It’s organic.

SEEDS: In terms of contrast, what does indigenous performance offer the Western viewer?

RICCIO: What I try to do is to get people to be more available, as a totality, to a performance, rather than as a thinking viewer. I try to get them to be participants, not to the extent of being pulled onstage, but to be involved physically, emotionally, sensually, and spiritually. This may be the big difference—to extend the “hallucination” to include the audience. In contrast, the text in a Western show basically engages through the mind, then through the body. This, in a sense, is the total opposite of indigenous performance. Since we don’t know the language, we have to abandon that method of deciphering the play, because it isn’t offered. Once you slip into it, it’s the wonderful world we lost, which is primary and innate in all of us. I think the Western world has forgotten this. It implies that we are a part of a vast undifferentiated whole, something that is always transforming, something that is mysterious and can only offer brief glimpses of understanding through indigenous performance explorations. I have come to know something deep inside that can never be expressed by words. Performance is a revisiting, a reaffirmation of this deep,
and ephemeral, unknowable knowledge. It feels good and tells me that we are all indigenous to the earth.

SEEDS: This leads me to one final question. In your work, you mention your desire to see the creation of an indigenous peoples’ theatre center. Ideally, how would you envision such a center functioning?

RICCIO: There aren’t any existing structures or organizations for indigenous theatre that I know of. I think that would be an evolution of the work, one that has to come about because there is an increased level of interest in the work I do, and it’s already getting bigger than me. What I need is to find others who are like-minded to help facilitate such a thing.

Rather than being a company, such a center might be a training ground or a clearinghouse for information. One idea would be to have a center where a group of people could work together on a project. This would be an international group: one could be Finnish, another Zulu, another could be myself, and the three of us could go somewhere, like India, to do a project. One could be a designer, one a director, one a musician, and we would spend four months there developing a project. It’s a free-floating group of people. We gather in India, not anywhere else. We’re citizens of the world, going to another part of our terrain. That’s one option. Another option would be to have people come from various parts of the world to work on a project, maybe to work together on an investigation of our global similarities. Who knows what would come of that? The idea is to reveal the methods and processes through experience, and for those people to go back to their own cultures, and adapt and adjust the processes to their specific needs. So these are models that may evolve.

Now it’s gotten to the point that people are calling me and asking me for a videotape, which is fine, but I don’t have a lot of time to be duplicating videotapes and information and mailing them out. I need other people to do things. It’s important that if, for example, a Navajo guy wants to do theatre, he knows that there is a place where he can learn something he can take back to his people. That’s what’s needed, because there are alternative resources! We take resources from the earth, but we give back garbage. That’s how we’ve come to think. A resource, for me, is something that is replenished, reaffirming, renewable, and reusable. Those that take also give back. It’s cyclical—and the way we must come to look at the world. This is the type of theatre I aspire to. Theatre is an ancient technology, and yet it can play a vital role in the shaping of the future that will be demanded of us.
Note
According to Riccio, both the !Xuu and the Khwe accept the term “Bushmen” when referring to them collectively. The term is not seen as derogatory, and for them best describes their lifestyle, race, and culture as distinct from blacks, their historical adversaries.

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