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SPECIAL ISSUE: THE STATE OF THEATRE IN ZIMBAWE

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A critique of Augusto Baol's '*Theater of the Oppressed*' within the context of Post Independent Zimbabwe

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Abstract

During the 1970s, Augusto Baol, a Brazilian scholar laid out theoretical and practical foundation to what he called: 'Theatre of the oppressed' (1979). Rejecting the Aristotelian poetics of despair and bourgeois 'illusionism', Baol evolved and experimented with interrogative theatre that focused on performer-spectator solidarity. This article explores some tenets of the genre of the theatre of the oppressed to tease out philosophical and ideological arguments that underpin the conception and development of theatre practiced by the oppressed in Zimbabwe. It is argued that while the dominant classes in Zimbabwe may wish to narrow and univocalize meaning through their censorship of cultural works of art, symbolic instabilities within the language of theatre has the capacity to subvert preferred readings that work to prevent realisation of alternative histories and memories. The article will exemplify the nature and manifestations of state restrictions on theatre of the oppressed by making special reference to the dialectics of the play 'Workshop Negative' written and produced by Cont Mhlanga in 1987.

Keywords: Augusto Baol, theatre of the oppressed, Zimbabwe,

Introduction: The poetics of the oppressed

Augusto Baol's epistemological understanding of the poetics of the oppressed is rooted in the quest to understand the nature of ideological domination and strategies of resisting it. According to Baol (1979) theatre is a cultural weapon that should be placed at the service of the oppressed by the oppressed so that they can express themselves through language in order to work out

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alternative ways of articulating their values. Theatre of the dominated should present itself as discontinuous, open-ended, internally contradictory, encouraging in the audiences a 'complex seeing' (Eagleton, 1976:65). Unlike the understanding of audiences behaviour in bourgeois theatre who are viewed as passive consumers of finished, unchangeable art object, the poetics of the oppressed focuses on action itself. The spectator, '...assumes the protagonic role, changes dramatic action, tries out solutions and discusses plans for change' (Baol, 1979: 22). The dialectics of questioning social and political phenomena through theatrical performance allows the oppressed to discover 'gaps', 'silences' and 'points of undecidability' (Derrida, 1973:42) often concealed by those with the power to write history. To illustrate the above point one can draw from the fact that in 1976, four Kenyans namely Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Kimani Gecau, Kabiru Kinyanjui and Ngugi Wa Mirii were instrumental in the formation and functioning of Kamiriithu Community Theatre. Wa Thiong'o (1987:43) asserts that Kamiriithu theatre, 'depicted the masses in the only historically correct perspective: positively heroically as the true makers of history'. Making history implied challenging the oppressive policies of Daniel Arap Moi. This did not go down well with the authorities who ordered in 1982 that Kamiriithu Community Theatre be razed to the ground in an attempt to muzzle the alternative 'voices' from the ordinary people. The Kamiriithu experience shows that the subaltern had spoken (Spivak, 1994) and that the power invested in their collective voice sent tremors that reminded the ruling class in Kenya, that the capacity of ordinary people to effect social and political change should not be underestimated. For Baol (1979) change can only come if theatrical spectators are to be encouraged to intervene in the action, abandoning the condition of passivity and assuming fully the role of active subjects. In collaboration, Brecht believes that what underlies theatre of the oppressed is the idea that audiences reflect critically both the mode of representation and the actions that are represented (Eagleton, 1986). In other words, theatre should not be used to reflect on a fixed reality, but to demonstrate how character and action are historically constructed, and that life is knowable and changeable through human acts of struggle.

However, in an act that can amount to smothering the revolutionary zeal of theatre of the oppressed, Baol claims that his kind of theatre may not be revolution itself but, 'a rehearsal of the revolution' (1979:155). By this statement, Baol fails to mark out the boundaries that explains the dialectics of theatre as revolution, theatre in a revolution and theatre as a preparatory ground for a revolution. In addition, his claims risks turning popular theatre into an 'ideological catchphrase' (Etherton, 1982:321) that generalize people's response to oppression under repressive conditions. Rohmer (1999) argues that in spite of Baol's somewhat hesitant approach to name the practicalities of revolutionary theatre, people still have to make a gallant step from 'rehearsed' theatre to real action in order to mark out a distinction between stage theatre and theatre as social life. Another grey area is that by constructing an image of the collective 'we' through the nomenclature 'Theatre of the oppressed' (1979) Baol failed to put into account that the distinctive identity of collective struggle is the ontological nature of its 'fractured self' (how, 1993). This implies that a collective voice of the oppressed is not as homogenous as it might want to present itself. The reason being that a collective voice is a result of different perspectives enunciated by different classes, races, gender and ethnic groups that constitute Baol's (1979) definition of the 'oppressed ones'. Moreover, Baol's (1979) dichotomous representation of the oppressor versus the oppressed can fail to imagine the complex ways in which power is exercised. Gramsci (1971) has ably demonstrated how those in through their hegemonic hold

on the people can maintain control over subordinates by relational tendencies to co-opt, emerge, displace, abuse, appropriate and educate. These contradictions of power and its relations with subordinates are dramatized through the human body as the locus of theatrical action.

The human body as a viable physicality

The body of a theatrical performer is a viable physicality within the symbolic order of visual cultures. Characters exploit the shifting nature of verbal and non-verbal cues created through their bodies to disrupt, challenge and revolt against dominant regimes of interpreting social reality. Fuery and Fuery (2003) contend that the body of an actor has the capacity to question the unseen and 'naturalised' aspects of culture. When actors perform stories of the oppressed, their action is the source of internal contradictions of culture that call for multiple readings. In other words, the body as a visual medium can generate images that can contest the body's ideological standing reflecting attitudes of both the oppressor and the oppressed. What this point suggests is that the body as an image – whether in theatre, film, painting or on television, is seen not for what it is, but for what it is to the interpreting subject. Investing power into the body as an image implies designating specific spectating positions from which the body can be read as a liberating force or a regime of regimenting 'preferred' social and political meanings (Foucault in Fuery and Fuery, 2003). Therefore, power relations can operate as bodily expressions of un/official 'truths' that are part of the construction of the image. In the power struggle for dominance, the subject of oppression can resist and oppose a homogenous social positioning that seeks to unify and totalize all individuals into a governed position. Using the term 'governed', in this context, means to be an object of a field of action designed by others. To resist forms of oppression from the actors legitimation of power, and power's 'essentialisms', the audience can imagine the body of actors on their own terms to confirm, negotiate or oppose its seduction (Hall, 1980). That is, power relations can be played out on the threshold of the spectator's gaze and the gaze of the body as a speaking subject during a performance. Each time the body is looked at as an image, it re-asks back, 'Who am I?' in the context(s) of power politics. In asking this kind of question from the position of the oppressor or the oppressed, the body of an actor is determining the position from which it is to be viewed. What this implies is that the body of an actor – whether in its abject condition or as an image reflecting the spectacular in life, has the power to lure the audience towards a specific purpose. These nuanced understanding of how the bodies of the oppressed can negotiate their conditions are not sufficiently theorized in Baol's generalizing term, theatre of the oppressed. In order to support the claim I make above, it is pertinent to critically analyze how in Zimbabwe, censorship is exercised to muffle the 'voice' of actors that dramatize stories of the oppressed people.

'Theater of the Oppressed' and the burden of official censorship in Zimbabwe

Theatre in Zimbabwe thrives on telling ordinary stories some of whom can be viewed by the government officials as 'subversive'. In post independent Zimbabwe, the nationalist

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government enacted a plethora of laws whose statutes are applied to 'police' ordinary people from using theatre from portraying the history of the country in ways that can question the official narratives. Section 13 of Censorship and Entertainments Control Act [Chapter 10: 04], makes it an offence to print, publish, produce, distribute or sell undesirable publication (Feltoe, 2003). From the Act, the terms, '...an offence to...produce...' have impacted negatively on how theatre is produced and distributed in Zimbabwe. According to Ravengai (2010) plays that follow the official version of history are allowed to be performed within the public sphere. Ravengai (2010) goes further to quote David Dzatsunga – the director of Masvingo Siya Cultural Theatre who describes how his group was affected by state censorship:

'Government now wanted to control information because it was not going to be possible to simply write what you think, put it on stage and perform it to an audience without consequences. And it became increasingly important to government to make sure that the content and movement of information was in their control (2010: 164).

The implication of what Dzatsunga observed is that if performance from the ordinary people is not 'politically correct', the government officials does not hesitate to invoke censorship laws to restrict, prohibit or even ban that kind of performance. For example, in 1992, Cont Mhlanga was harassed by police for challenging the government policy of reconciliation through his play 'Workshop Negative'. The play depicts two ex-combatants Zulu and Mkhize who take turns to deny the white co-worker Ray the space to articulate his versions and visions regarding the state of post independent Zimbabwe. In the play, Zulu tells Ray that he is outsider:

'You white guys cannot say anything in this country because you lost the war. If you speak, you will be reminded eleven times of that, and you will quickly be reminded of what your ancestors did to our ancestors'.

The paradox in the above statement is that once an oppressed subject of the Smith regime, Zulu has become an oppressor himself. In other words, Zulu has failed to shake off the 'ghosts of the pasts' and rise above the oppressive ideology that informed and sustained the government of Rhodesia. The performance of 'Workshop Negative' in the public domain was largely discouraged because some government officials believed that the play was an artistic attack on the government's policy of reconciliation in post independent Zimbabwe. In a veiled tone, the play questions why it took long for ZANU and ZAPU to reconcile while it appeared easy to reconcile black and whites who had lived separate lives for over hundred years. Therefore, Baol is correct to suggest that theatre of the oppressed must always be active in discerning censorship laws that monitor theatre and other entertainment activities. Muza (2005) asserts that on 9 September 2004 officials in the nationalist government snubbed a discussion on how to reform censorship laws that had negative impact on theatre. The Censorship Board is alleged to have taken a year without responding to a legal petition written by Rooftop Promotions lawyers in response to the banning of 'Super Patriots and Morons' – a play considered to be critical of government policies (Muza, 2005). This evidence of suppression of information and divergent views from the people appear as a 'master' plan that officials use to frustrate theatre of the oppressed by wearing down the patience and the financial resources of the poor artists who may not possibly afford to wait for such a long time within the context of the need to survive.

In Zimbabwe the restrictive nature of the terms of Censorship and Entertainments Control Act [Chapter 10:04] were strengthened by the introduction of the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) enacted in 2001. Moyo (2010) states that through POSA it has become fashionable for Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) to arbitrary arrest or inflict violence on performing artists viewed as 'subversive' (Moyo, 2010). Baol concept of theatre of the oppressed sometimes fail to acknowledge how the powerful are ever evolving new strategies of controlling those that they rule. The concept can suggest a certain populism associated with revolutionary idealism that often underestimates the power of the ruling class to appropriate and create its own theatre that can also be described as 'theatre of the oppressed', even when this theatre serves the material interests of the rich in society.

'Hit and run' strategies: The language of 'Theater of the Oppressed' in Zimbabwe

Despite the fact that the concept of theatre of the oppressed limits the audiences' understanding of the dynamics within a theatre of the people and by the people, Baol's concept also suggest that people can subvert restrictions imposed by officials. This, people and theatre producers can do by adopting 'hit and run' (Zenenga, 2008:67) guerrilla tactics involving a secretive distribution of DVDs with 'subversive' messages. Theatre can also used subversively when it exaggerates praises of government policies so as to create doubt in the minds of the people. Vambe and Vambe (2006) argue that when a performing artist is reassured, he alienates, when he is disturbing, he destroys and when he speaks aloud, power silences him. The ambiguities cited by Vambe & Vambe (2006) applies to theatre that seemingly presents unarmful or pristine images, and yet behind those images are rhetorical questions that can have the capacity to smear the public reputation of the government. For example, performance that expressed 'bread and butter' issues during 2007 and 2008 – considered by some as the most difficult years in post independent Zimbabwe, indirectly criticised government's failure to stabilize the social, political and economic conditions. In a nutshell, the various strategies and strands of action adopted by theatre practised by ordinary people to depict their condition of oppression undermine official restrictions and prohibitions.

'Theater of the Oppressed': Placing barriers upon itself

Through performance, ordinary people have the capacity to appropriate the language and images of the dominant powers to imitate and construct their own realities. Some of those realities are rooted in traditional values that fail to go beyond normative interpretations on gender relations. For example, if performance uncritically support gender stereotypes that view women as the underdogs, that performing act would have placed a barrier for alternative ways of understanding the diverse roles that women play in society and culture. In Zimbabwe, performing arts can be criticised for creating a binary by socializing boys/men as conquerors, adventurous, intelligent while girls/women are expected to obedient, malleable, timid, emotional

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and traditional preservers of nature (Tamale and Oloka-Onyango, 2000:14). By adopting the language of the oppressor, theatre practised by the ordinary people shows that it can be internally 'fractured', 'ruptured' and 'conflicted' by the nature of its own construction and representation. When government took the initiative of promoting land re-settlement that benefits formerly oppressed black in Zimbabwe, the exercise is/was viewed as a propaganda stunt in which the government's focus is/was to garner support from ordinary people. Perhaps what theatre from the disadvantaged can do is to criticise the anomalies of land re-distribution than to suggest that the exercise should not have been started in first place. More so, revolutionary theatre from the ordinary people cannot afford to 'bask in comfort' by not supporting the grand project of land re-settlement that has the potential of benefiting ordinary Zimbabweans. The logic is that acquiring land signifies change, and is a success in itself.

Wither 'Theater of the Oppressed' in Zimbabwe?

From the discussions of Baol's concept of theatre of the oppressed, theatre practised by people under oppression in Zimbabwe can engage in constructive criticism by suggesting alternative means of solving, political and economic problems being faced by Zimbabweans. The theatre production houses should adopt methodologies that involve community participation in identifying and evolving strategies to solve problems faced by people in their daily activities. Theatre directors should use local characters to interrogate as well as challenge state restrictions that have the potential to undermine cultural progress. The theatre should be sustainable by generating income, and thereby avoid the patronising culture and politics of donor-funding. Theatre of the people must contribute to nation-building by supporting those government initiatives that benefit the majority of people. Theatre of the oppressed should be used as weapon to challenge traditional tendencies and attitudes that can be manipulated to oppress women, children and the old people. This way, the people are not oppressed by the theatre that they created.

Conclusion

This article explored the characteristics that underlie theatre practised by people under oppression. Comparing theatre of the oppressed with bourgeois theatre that creates passive audiences, Baol (1979) asserts that theatre of the oppressed generates a spectator that assumes protagonic roles, changes dramatic action, tries out solutions and discusses plans for change.

It was argued, however, that Baol's claims that his type of theatre is not revolution itself but a 'rehearsal of the revolution' (1979: 155) fails to mark out boundaries of theatre as a preparatory ground for a revolution, theatre as revolution and theatre operating in a revolution. The article went further to reflect that the dynamics and ambiguities of cultural change that the human body assumes as an image can confirm as well as question power's oppressive tendencies. This was practically demonstrated by making reference to Zimbabwe's censorship laws that can be manipulated by the government to limit or even block theatrical performance that has the potential to 'unsettle' official versions of narrating the nation. It was argued that

despite government attempts to impose restrictions on critical performance by ordinary people, theatre artists in Zimbabwe have learnt to escape state control by adopting clandestine ways of producing and distributing information. Last but not least, this article suggested an ideological path that can be taken by revolutionary theatre for positive change in Zimbabwe. Theatre of the oppressed becomes dangerous when the oppressed people begun to use it to oppress other vulnerable groups of people in society. This point is important because the condition of being oppressed does not necessarily guarantee that the oppressed knows how to be freedom from this oppression. This observation made in the critique of the concept of 'theatre of the oppressed' does not totally take away the fact that this kind of theatre can scaffold revolutionary action among the people with positive results.

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