

**"DOING THEIR OWN THANE":
THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF *UMABATHA*,
WELCOME MSOMI'S ZULU *MACBETH*¹**

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Peter Daubeny, founder-director of the World Theatre Season (WTS), selected *Umabatha* to open the ninth season at the Aldwych theatre on 3 April 1972. A prominent South African journalist envisaged the opening as "unquestionably the most dramatic happening in the history of South African theatre" (Reinhardt). The response was, for the WTS, unprecedented: every performance in the three-week run received a standing ovation, and box-office returns broke the record set by Peter Brook's 1970 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ("*Umabatha* a sell-out"). Daubeny described the production as "the greatest hit of all [his] years of bringing exotic theatre to London" (qtd. in Baneshik).

Umabatha, the "*Zulu Macbeth*"—virtually a subtitle intended, probably, to direct English-speakers to its source—was notable, too for being the first foreign production of a play by William Shakespeare to be included in the WTS, reputedly the first Zulu company to perform outside South Africa,² and, in the nine-year existence of the WTS, the first of forty-seven companies from fourteen countries, not to be

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sponsored by the country of origin's government ("She chose Zulu play"). The South African Government only granted approval for the tour on the condition that all financial arrangements, including air fares, accommodation, and maintenance of dependants of the fifty-five cast members, was secured. This amounted to almost R50 000, a sum raised in South Africa in five months, mainly from private subscription. Ironically then, after its successful opening, the company were guests of honour at a reception at South African House, hosted by the South African ambassador Hendrik Luttig, who had refused to assist Daubeny in obtaining sponsorship from the South African Government (cited in Potter); furthermore, the reception closed with the cast singing "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika", the anthem of liberation and peace, which was to become the South African national anthem when *Umabatha* was revived in 1995. And after the tour *South African Panorama*, a magazine published by the Nationalist Government's Department of Information, praised the production for "constitut[ing] a record of continuous generosity, assistance and encouragement from the South African public" (Stuart, Huntley). In November 1972, Dr Piet Koornhof, a Nationalist Cabinet Minister, singled out *Umabatha* as a rare achievement in the "static Bantu tradition of culture"; he added, however, that "the intrigue and murder are easily translated into the Bantu idiom". By then *Umabatha* had been invited to tour America, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Japan and Australia, and film, recording, and publishing companies from five continents applied for rights to the play.

The first performance of *Umabatha* had taken place on 3 July 1970 at the Open Air Theatre at the University of Natal in Durban. The author/adaptor was Welcome Msomi. He was commissioned to write the play by Professor Elizabeth Sneddon, head of the Department of Speech and Drama at the University, and director of the Natal Theatre Workshop Company (NTWC), under the auspices of which *Umabatha* was presented at the WTS'72. Msomi had intended to enrol in Speech

and Drama at that institution, but would have had to apply to the Minister of the Interior for permission to study at a white designated university; instead he worked full time as a market researcher for a pharmaceutical company and after hours pursued his theatre interests by founding the Black Theatre Company in Durban in 1965. The first plays he wrote and produced, *Mntanami Nomhlangano* (My Child Nomhlangano) and *Qondeni*, were concerned with the effects of urbanization on Zulu migrants and violence in the townships. After touring the region, the latter was presented at the University of Natal's Howard College Theatre. As Sneddon regarded *Qondeni* as a "detrimental" depiction of the Zulu people, she "suggested that Mr Msomi prepare a play that presented his people in a more worthy light ... and drew [his] notice to the many parallels existing between Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the tribal history of the Zulu" (Stuart, Eve). In a "Director's Note" in the programme for the revived production, Msomi asserts that Sneddon "suggested [he] write a play about the great African nations, based on known universal epics There was no doubt in my mind that the story of Macbeth would lend itself well to the Zulu idiom". He knew the play as he had performed in *Macbeth* while at St Christopher's School in Swaziland. It appears that the idea was one Sneddon had long wished to realize, and she committed Msomi to a production to be presented at the University Winter School's "Communication in Action" conference. The result was *Umabatha*, directed by Pieter Scholtz, a senior lecturer in her department, with Msomi as Mabatha/Macbeth.

Described in the local press as "inspired.... unique.... a theatrical event of tremendous importance" (Aitchison, "*Umabatha*"), it was seen at a revival later in the same year by Molly Daubeny, whilst visiting her family in Durban, and she recommended to her husband that he secure the production. He was also urged to consider *Umabatha* by Trevor Nunn, artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, who had heard of the production from his wife Janet Suzman, niece of Helen Suzman, the sole member of the opposition Progressive Party in South

Africa's Parliament. On 24 November 1971, Daubeny attended a special performance at the Open Air Theatre and predicted afterwards that *Umabatha* would be the "most exciting production of the 200 plays he had handled" ("London director acclaims Zulu *Macbeth*").

The initial concern of this paper is the 1972 reviews (and attendant publicity) published in the London press. As Susan Carlson contends, reviews remain one of the few records which preserve the response of the broader audience: an individual writes the review, but the reviewer speaks out of a community and often... models a voice for the community" (268). With a readership of millions, the 1972 reviewers confirmed the construct between 'us' and 'them'; between, to rephrase Kenneth Hurren of the *Spectator*, "their [and our] own thane". *Umabatha* raised questions that confront interculturalism as theatrical practice: Was it a (mis)representation and/or (mis)appropriation of tradition performance forms that perpetuated the exotism of the African Other? Was the production of a canonical text, by subjects from a former colony, an affirmation of the efficacy of the imperial endeavour: 'black skins, white masks'? A comparative analysis of the production's reception in South Africa, in apartheid 1972 and post-apartheid 1995, and London and the United States of America in 1997, poses further questions: Was *Umabatha* compromised by its support by the state, the media and an academic institution, or a valid contribution to national culture? Was it a vindication of the policy of separate development, a fantasy of ethnicity? Why was the production boycotted in New York in 1979, yet endorsed by the African National Congress (ANC) in 1995? From the advance material supplied, the WTS programme stated that *Umabatha*

is not a Zulu version of *Macbeth*; it is a dramatisation of a fierce and momentous epoch in South African history which uses the plotline and conventions of Shakespeare's play to give greater resonance to its fable of authority, assassination

and treachery. The epic story of Msomi's play is rooted in real historical events. (Kustow)

The "historical events" occurred in early nineteenth century on the east coast of Southern Africa : from the beginning of the reign of Shaka (who united various tribes to create the Zulu nation), to his assassination by his half-brother Dingane in 1828, and Dingane's murder, twelve years later, by another of Shaka's half-brothers. Msomi, and the producers, claimed that he had resituated the temporal and spatial setting of *Macbeth* within this framework. His characters were assigned Zulu names to phonetically correspond with those in his source: Mabatha for Macbeth, Dangane for Duncan, Bhangane for Banquo and Makiwane and Donebane for Malcolm and Donalbain, for example. Kamadonsela, Msomi's Lady Macbeth, actually existed and was known as a woman of unscrupulous ambition; she was not, however, married to Shaka or Dingane. Thus, in *Umabatha*, she conceived the plot to kill the king, while her husband hardly opposed her. When he reigned, she ruled. But in following "Shakespeare's plot so closely that you can almost put in the English words at any given moment" (Young), the claims to historical parallels were specious publicity. Was Mabatha, the dramatic character, based on Shaka or Dingane? Shaka did not commit regicide to become chief of the Zulu clan; he was installed as chief in 1816 by Dingiswayo, and the latter was murdered by a rival chief in 1818. Was Duncan, the assassinated monarch, the Shaka-figure? If so, the phonetic association between Duncan and Dingane was confusing. By ignoring the very real differences between thanes and chiefs, clans and tribes, by blurring the actual and the dramatic, *Umabatha* dehistoricized the consolidation of power and the centralization and increased authority of the monarchy. The power of the Shaka-image does not reside "in its openness to manipulation, to invention and to imaginative reworkings," maintains Carolyn Hamilton, "but in their very opposite, the historical limits and constraints

attached to possible depictions of Shaka and Shakan historiography” (qtd. in Brown 117).

In retaining the principal characters and events of the original, *Umabatha* was, in fact, a version of *Macbeth* presented in Zulu by Zulu performers. Nor was it the first version in a South African language: in 1960 *UMacbeth*, a translation into Xhosa by B.B. Mdledle, was published; a more literal—and stilted—Setswana translation, *Macbeth*, by L.B. Raditladi, appeared in 1967. While others have made similar claims to historical equivalence between the two contexts (Shole 53), a further association, and reason for the popularity of *Macbeth* for blacks, is given as the prevalent belief in witchcraft (Butler 8). In Msomi’s Zulu *Macbeth*, the mediation between the two sources and two contexts was supported by transforming the witches into sangomas, the doctor into an inyanga (herbalist), the ghosts into ancestral spirits, armies into impis. Textually, Msomi’s version shifts between a literal and a free translation, as the following extract from the first scene of Act Four, in parallel format, indicates:

<i>Macbeth</i>	<i>Umabatha</i>
First Witch	Sangoma I
Thrice the brinded cat hath mewed.	The jackal howls three times.
Second Witch	Sangoma II
Thrice and once the hedge-pig whined.	Three times the Tokoloshe [evil spirit] screams.
Third Witch	Sangoma III
Harpier cries, 'Tis time, 'tis time...	The evil bird cries three times...
All	All three
Double, double, toil and trouble: Fire burn and cauldron bubble.	It boils and boils here in the pot The fire burns, the juice is hot.

The extract is from Msomi’s re-translation of *Umabatha* into English, published by Via Afrika/Skotaville. According to the WTS

programme, the English translation was by Pieter Scholtz. In 1972, a simultaneous interpretation rather than translation was delivered by Huntley Stuart, a Zulu linguist, via earphone. The 1997 British and American revival used supertitles above the stage; those supertitles correspond, from reviews, with the extract quoted. Whilst utilizing effective Zulu equivalents for the agents of the witches, the rhythmic repetitions and use of the rhyming couplet pattern the original. What the 1972 audience heard in the simultaneous interpretation was "prosaic dialogue [that] jettison[ed] the poetry" (Shulman), but "who is to say how it sound[ed] in Zulu?" ("*Zulu Macbeth*"). The Zulu version, to a 1995 South African reviewer, however, "tap[ped] into a particularly creative level of the Zulu language, which demand[ed] the audience do more than listen. It demand[ed] a total engagement with the text" (Khumalo). Certain idiomatic expressions and conventions from the source culture were effectively integrated, including the use of an *imbongi* (praise singer) to introduce Dangané and relate the achievements and prowess of the successive rulers, and the reproduction of the metaphoric base of the *izibongo* (praise poem); the use of drum beats to convey Mabatha's 'letter' to Kamadonsela; Mabatha's use of snuff to sneeze, a method of achieving second sight, brought on the vision of the *assegai* (dagger).

Although the extract above approximated the original in length, Msomi's text was, principally, a paraphrase: the first thirty-six lines of Shakespeare's scene were reduced to eighteen in *Umabatha*. Overall, this verbal reduction emphasized the ritual ceremonies and celebrations and the supernatural manifestations, the "very elements we find difficulty in accepting in English performances of *Macbeth*," wrote Frank Marcus. Perhaps that is the reason for Peter Ustinov's comment that that was the first time he "ever understood what *Macbeth* [was] all about" (qtd. in Trew). But, complained John Mortimer, "Any Shakespeare play *is* the poetry.... And so we are left with a European vacuum surrounded by superb native dances." The majority of reviewers were unaware of the lack of distinctions between expressive

forms in indigenous performance traditions: “the flow of meaning, translation of images, and co-ordination of expression between various visual, aural and tactile media including dance, song, mime, poetry, narrative, costume, and ceremonial enactment” are based on the principle of synesthetic interconnection (Coplan 9). Mimetic movement, sung lamentation and vocal sounds were incorporated in Kamadonsela’s evocation of her haunted nightmare existence: London critics were mystified by the “sleep-dancing scene” (Lewis). The ngoma dances they equated with the “precisions of European ballet” (Merryn), more specifically, the “first act of *Giselle*” (Blake); instead of being seen as integral to *Umabatha* and the lives of the Zulu, the dances were “frequent choreographic interruptions” (Barber).

Without an appropriate evaluative paradigm for non-Western performance modes, the reviewers responded by denigrating the production as inferior in Western terms, or questioning their own positions as spectators, or resorting to notions which reinforced the manichean allegory of Africa as the heart of darkness.

If “acting and content [were] secondary to movement and spectacle” (Hibbin), then supposedly, “audiences in Natal [could] make do with much less exploration of character” (Kingston). The acting, consequently, was “lacking [in] subtlety” (Shulman), and appropriate for the presentation of, not “a tragedy, but a black comedy” (Mahon). In insultingly patronising and essentialist terminology, BA Young proposed a reason: “Africans are natural actors; their emotions lie near the surface and they gesture as readily as they talk. It’s this instantaneous sublimation of thought into movement that gives their acting its touchingly childlike element.” To an anonymous reviewer, *Umabatha* was “no place for the Shakespeare purist, but an evening of innocent excitement” in which acting, singing and dancing were purely “instinctive” (“Zulu dance and song”). Oral performance is primarily visual, its heightening tends, in a South African assessment of *Umabatha*, to the comedic rather than the tragic, to be declarative rather than contemplative, presentational rather than naturalistic; situating

such conventions as soliloquies in this performance tradition made them appear to be ribald confessions rather than agonized introspections, as emotions in traditional performance are distilled into metaphoric gestures and expressions (Gevisser). The power of this performance aesthetic is derived not from the energy admired by critics, but rather from a sophisticated distancing effect arising from the disjunction between subjective identification and a meta-dramatic 'commentary' on the artifice of impersonation.

Scholtz and Msomi had considerably altered the 1970 version for the London season, in part to suit the confines of a proscenium stage, and "by the addition of much more tribal dancing" (Aitchison, "Triumphant opener"). The latter was motivated by Msomi's desire to bring the world into Africa through the process of transverbalization into a local language, history and tradition, and, to use Ali Mazrui's terminology, by the process of transvaluation, that of asserting the values of Africa's language, history and tradition and Africa's cultural self-reliance (118-120); *Umabatha*, wrote Msomi, would fulfil his desire "to show the world our culture" and provide the "opportunity to take pride in the richness of our culture" ("Director's Note"). Nevertheless, by consciously placing specific performance traditions in a Western dramatic and theatrical frame, Msomi ignored an equally fundamental principle of interconnection: "the continuity between expressive and instrumental action, which effectuates identity and social structure" (Coplan 9). The producers took great care to accurately reproduce the dances, songs and music; furthermore skins, beads and properties were obtained from throughout Natal to support an "authentic scenario of African tribal life [and] the traditional styles" (Aitchison, "All Hail, Mabatha"). But, no matter how authentic the reproduction, what was presented in performance was content as spectacle, not cultural tradition as lived process. Nor, as David Coplan indicates, are traditional forms frozen or archaic: in Southern Africa they have adapted in theme and performance mode in response to specific historic contingencies (13); in reviving traditions from the past, Msomi encouraged reviewers to regard them as timeless, eternal, above political concerns.

The emphasis on spectacle, the supposed lack of literary value, and 'simple' performance aesthetic led some reviewers to question their status as spectators: Was *Umabatha*, wondered Frank Marcus, "a display of native antics presented for the delectation of Western sophisticates"? Had they "watched like ... package tourists and received no statement about Zulu history or modern African aspirations" (Mortimer)? Michael Billington had felt "vague liberal misgivings" when he attended the production. Harold Hobson warned those who expected "to show a patronising approval of the well-meaning but primitive work of an underprivileged people", that they were "in for a considerable surprise". Derek Mahon concluded that *Umabatha* was "*Macbeth* in skins and feathers ... had it been anything else, one suspects, passports for the company to visit Britain might not have been forthcoming." Such questioning was rare; most reviewers presented their readers with the pervasive myth construct of Africa.

Roland Barthes's formulation of the ideological construction and perpetuation of the mythical signification of the exotic Other is a valuable means to interrogate the production and reception of *Umabatha*. Myth-making is never arbitrary: its function is to distort (121), its principle to transform history into nature. By eliminating determinism and the complexity of human acts, myth endows its subject with the simplicity of essences (143). The Other's rites are removed from their particular historic, economic and social context (95), so that the Other is reduced to a pure object, a spectacle (152). By bestowing some signs which can be read as 'native' and by superficial 'situating', the myth-perpetuators are excused from in-depth analysis of the situation (96). The myth-process above serves the model that illustrates—and reinforced—the power/interest-relations in all colonial societies: the "manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native" (JanMohamed 63). That opposition is served and illustrated by manichean polarities: white/black, good/evil, reason/instinct, self/other; binaries that valorize, in reviews of *Umabatha*, the values and

superiority of English cultural traditions. Review after review supported such binaries: "The Bard's basic stories have qualities that can be shared by the most cultivated and most primitive of peoples," wrote Milton Sulman, and in the next sentence of his review, he linked those primitive people with Zulu audiences.

The manichean allegory is sustained by the myth of Africa as the heart of darkness. Although the concept is exemplified in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), the phrase was coined by Rider Haggard (Chapman 130), who had, significantly, arrived in Natal in 1875 and lived in Southern Africa for six years. Many reviewers responded to *Umabatha* with descriptions they could have plagiarized from *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) or *Allan Quatermain* (1887) or *She* (1887). Thus one reads of the theatre being "invaded by a horde of dusky warriors" (Johns), who, "splendid in warrior dress of cowhide, fur and feathers ... do battle" (Kingston), until they became "a single, indomitable animal, bent on celebration, joy, or killing" (Wardle). The quest romances of Haggard—and R M Ballantyne, Bertram Mitford, G A Henty, John Buchan—and the writings of Victorian explorers, missionaries and scientists "combined to give the British public a widely shared view of Africa that demanded imperialization on moral, religious, and scientific grounds" (Brantlinger 167-168). Twentieth-century reviewers appeared to continue such thinking by encouraging and appreciating the efforts of the enlightened native, Msomi; at the same time, the eternal savagery of his fellow native performers and their rites were stereotypically described in the emotive language employed by their Victorian forebears: "primitive", "warlike", "childlike", "instinctive", "exotic".

Umabatha was a metonym for 'Africa', the individual performers homogenized into a generic Other, 'them' and 'theirs', as opposed to 'us' and 'ours'. If such divisions were fixed, distinctions within Africa were relative and vague: with their "magnificent ebony bodies" and "jungle drums" (Barker), their "jungle witchdoctors" (Hurren) performing "jungle magic" ("*Zulu Macbeth*"), Natal's Zulus were

relocated in equatorial Africa, possibly the former Congo (the heart of darkness?). So alien were the performers to John Barber, that they were "like a picture in the *Children's Encyclopaedia*". Dissimilarities were not simply cultural and geographical, they were metaphysical, as the performers were reduced to essences, evocations of nature. To Frantz Fanon, the logical conclusion of manichaeism is the dehumanization of the native by turning him into an animal (*The Wretched of the Earth* 32): the performer-dancers of *Umabatha* were metamorphosed into elephants (Wardle), a crocodile (Young), birds (Mahon) and even caterpillars (Marcus).

Reviewers fixated on the female performers as "a hip-swinging chorus line, in grass mini-skirts" (Lewis), "girls [whose] bare breasts [shook] hypnotically to the music" (Thirkell), to "put, one might say, a different complexion on *Macbeth*" (Shulman). (In the South African production, the female performers wore singlets - prevailing censorship laws would not have allowed otherwise, particularly before segregated audiences enforced by the Group Areas Amendment Act (1965). The London season offered the opportunity for 'rural authenticity'.) Jürgen Lieskounig, in a critique of the depiction of Africa in *National Geographic Magazine*, finds that "a rich source for myth production is the emphasis on so-called tradition and the traditional ways of the people they not only provide a titillating and sufficiently exotic commodity that can be exploited ... but they also perpetuate the myth of timelessly exotic and primitive Black Africans" (32). Everything about the company was foreign, different, Other: the press obsessively reported on the six crates of "traditional goods" air-freighted for the cast: beans, mealies and "300 kilos of Tswala [sic] - the Zulu beer made from millet - in powdered form" ("Parched"). The myth of the 'good native' - an ideologically distorted and simplistic version of Rousseau's myth of the 'noble savage' (Lieskounig 33) - was exemplified in the *Daily News* London Bureau report that "[e]ven the least sophisticated of them behaved like natural-born gentleman" ("Zulu celebrities"). Many reviewers commented on the innocent, smiling faces of the black

cast: Western-style acting appeared beyond their capabilities, so they were "happiest ... when going, as the phrase is, native" (Hurren).

The company's return to South Africa, on 19 April 1972, signified the political ironies existing in the country: the South African Broadcasting Corporation interviewed Msomi on his arrival at Louis Botha Airport in Durban (a rare accolade, as 'non-white' voices were seldom heard live on the state-controlled media); yet, one month later, he was ordered to leave Durban's Addington Hospital while visiting a friend (this was a whites-only hospital, and he had not applied for the necessary permission to enter). *Umabatha's* success received unprecedented media coverage, the cast praised as ambassadors of good will, Msomi received a number of theatrical commissions and offers; yet he had to resume his full-time employment and write by candle-light in his non-electrified home in Umlazi, one of Durban's townships. *Umabatha* was again presented at the University of Natal's Open Air Theatre in July (the opening night's proceeds were donated to the *Daily News* LEARN (Let Every African Read Now) fund, but this Zulu play could not play to Zulu audiences, as there were no theatres in the townships (not only in Durban, but in the whole country). International accolades and interest continued. Daubeny invited *Umabatha* to return in 1973 for the tenth anniversary WTS, a retrospective of the best play from each of the nine years. For health reasons, this was to be his last, and *Umabatha* was to be the finale of the season. Thereafter, the company was to perform at the Spoleto Festival in Italy; a six-month tour of the United States of America, Canada and Australia, sponsored to the cost of R250 000 by the South African Sugar Association, was planned for 1974.

On 3 April 1973, Sneddon advised the Liaison Officer of WTS that the directors of the NTWC had cancelled the tour, in part because of demands, by fifteen cast members, for remuneration in excess of that stipulated by British Actors' Equity, and because the company had disintegrated owing to differences. In the press it was reported that both reasons were provoked by a "London-based anti-South African

or anti-apartheid organization" (Meijer). During the 1972 run, the management had refused to divulge the contractual salaries to the press (Potter), allegations were made that the subsistence allowance was insufficient (Rudden), and that the cast had not received payment for their appearance on British Broadcasting Corporation's "Review" programme, televised on 7 April 1972. (Faced with a bill of more than £1 000 for the cast of fifty-five, the BBC had made an "embarrassing" counter-offer; Equity insisted, however, on the rate of £21 for television appearance by temporary/visiting members ("Zulu celebrities").)

Daubeny made personal appeals to the British Ambassador and to KwaZulu's Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi to intercede, blamed Sneddon and Scholtz for "despotic leadership and management" ("World Theatre"), and warned that the Royal Shakespeare Company would sue for breach of contract (McElligott). Sneddon returned the cast's passports to the Department of the Interior, the cast agreed to the stipulated salary of R65 per week, and Daubeny arrived in Durban to salvage the tour, claiming that both Governments were anxious for the tour to proceed ("Zulu play will go"). When all attempts failed, he revised his opinion of *Umabatha*: the dances were "absolutely staggering [not the] bloody old acting and skeletal story" ("SA hurt"), and he suggested that the dance troupe be sent as a compromise. This, stated Sneddon and Scholtz, would be "merely to pander to the desire for spectacle" (Sneddon).

Umabatha was criticized in South Africa for the same reasons: Mshengu maintained that London reviewers admired the production for the spectacle, not as legitimate theatre, and that in promoting that aspect, the management conveyed the impression that "Blacks... can only sing and dance" (15). The emphasis on tribal tradition was viewed as regressive and demeaning. In colonial and apartheid South Africa such traditions had been ideologically associated with black backwardness and ethnic separation (Coplan 9). In 1972, the same year that *Umabatha* performed in London, the Black People's Convention began to co-ordinate Black Consciousness (BC) activities

and MDALI (Music, Drama, Arts and Literature Institute) was formed as a BC cultural initiative. "Black Art" would no longer be "prostituted" by being performed to whites and for money, by travel abroad and seeking international fame, wrote Mango Tshabangu in overt criticism of Msomi; instead Art must fulfil "its duty as an instrument of awareness and the development of our culture and sense of self" (19). The works of Fanon, and Amilcar Cabral, were adopted as manifestoes for the liberation struggle: suppressed indigenous forms would be used for conscientization, not entertainment; adherence to Eurocentric aesthetics and cultural forms would be rejected as political betrayal. As long as the "black man [was] still in chains" artists could not indulge in art for art's sake, instead they were exhorted to "pee, spit and shit on literary convention" (Mutloatse 5-6). Black would be re-defined, would reject the negative association of being the Other within a European sign system (Chapman 328). English, being non-ethnic, would be appropriated as the "weapon of protest and a means of extending Caliban's nationalism towards political independence" (Mphahlele 90), but an English "stripped of its cultural pretensions", so that "[v]alue was attached not to skill with words but to the idea, the action, the life" (Chapman 334-335).³

Umabatha did not fit the paradigm; Msomi was ideologically compromised. His aim to promote pride in African culture could be negated as a romanticist form of negritude, given his source, the commission to produce the work, and his relocation of an idealized Africa within and for a European frame. He combined, in Fanon's three-phase teleological model of the colonial project in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the assimilated native who seeks the 'universal standpoint' of Western culture (with Shakespeare as an exemplar) (176), and the native who aims to create a national culture by reinterpreting past traditions "in the light of a borrowed aestheticism" but, instead, reinforces exoticism (179-180). He was not the writer of Fanon's third phase, the "awakener of the people [who produces] a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature" (179).

Umabatha, wrote Ian Christie in 1972, was proof “that the insight of our greatest playwright is universal in scope”. Shakespeare was, and remains, the model, “not of an age, but for all time” (in Jonson’s dedication in the first Folio edition of Shakespeare’s works in 1623); his works transcend the specificities of history, language and race. He was also appropriated as a pervasive hegemonic force, as Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins contend, throughout the history of the British empire, a force that continues to operate in the theatrical practices and educational systems in the former colonies: India, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the West Indies, and South Africa. Claims to his worth as ‘self-evident’ and his application as ‘universal’ both naturalises Eurocentric standards and inhibits the development of an incipient canon and theatrical tradition (19-20). (One example from the early years of British colonization of South Africa: at the instigation of the Governor, Sir George Yonge, the first permanent theatre in South Africa opened in Cape Town in September 1801. Ironically, the so-called African Theatre was inaugurated with a production of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*).

Ideologically, and pedagogically, Shakespeare became a site of resistance throughout post-colonial Africa (Wright 33). If he had been appropriated, with Jesus Christ, to bring “light to darkest Africa” (Ngugi 91), he would also be appropriated, through reinterpretation, to interrogate the legacy of imperialism, a means of “canonical counter-discourse” (Tiffin 22), as in Aimé Césaire’s *Une tempête*, his 1969 post-colonial rewriting of *The Tempest*. In South Africa, Shakespeare’s plays are prescribed for study in all secondary school for first- and second-language English speakers. Writing of the apartheid years, Martin Orkin asserts that Shakespeare’s texts were selected and taught to legitimate and uphold the prevailing order:

the traditional approach to the tragedies... involved a more or less exclusive focus upon the hero in the plays, the identification of certain moral truths about ‘human nature’

and... recognition of an 'order' or 'harmony' which, despite possible breakdown, manifests recovery through 'insight' and the defeat of 'evil'.

(*Shakespeare Against Apartheid* 14)

Given that approach, *Macbeth* would be one the most frequently prescribed texts, for black pupils in particular. On a simplistic level of interpretation, the play perpetuates the manichean binaries of white/black, light/darkness, heaven/hell, good/evil, binaries frequently invoked in *Macbeth*. In the soliloquies of the Macbeths in Act One, scene 4, and Act Three, scene 2, the portents of evil, "night's black agents", are the raven, crow, rook, bat and beetle, the witches are "secret black and midnight hags" (Butler 7-8). A 1986 edition, published to coincide with its prescription for black matriculants, contains detailed notes on the importance of order and hierarchy, with illustrations of the concept of submission to 'superior' powers (Orkin, *Drama and the South African state* 238). In the productions of *Umabatha* in the 1970s and 1990s, the Danganane (Duncan) figure dominated the action, physically and regally, reinforcing notions of his imperial 'goodness', highlighting the 'evil' of the regicide, the consequent 'disharmony', and the restoration of 'order'. The extended finale was a jubilant celebration of purgation: "When Mabatha dies," said Msomi, "the young prince says, 'The spear has spoken, because evil has been buried.' And so the celebration" (qtd. in Clay).

The choice of play and the directorial concept could be seen as unwitting affirmations of the status quo; allowed abroad by the South African Government, cautioned Benedict Nightingale in 1972, as an indication of its "tolerance... and to show the health of 'native' culture under separate development" (quoted in "*Umabatha* a sell-out"). In his review of Betha Egnos's *Ipi Tombi* (a corruption for 'where are the girls?'), which opened in Johannesburg in 1974, played in London for six years and, with three companies, toured Israel, Nigeria, Taiwan, Australia and the United States, Russell Vandenbroucke used the term

“blacksploitation”. In ‘Theatre of Exploitation’, as it came to be known, white managements mounted productions for predominantly white audiences, locally and internationally. These ‘black tribal musicals’ emphasized spectacle rather than in-depth characterization, presented romanticized images of happy natives, with naked breasts and stamping feet, performing authentic songs and dances in an idyllic rural society, in contrast to the evils of corrupting urban existence. Although *Umabatha* did not depict the last quality, it was listed with a number of productions, including *Ipi Tombi* and Clarence Wilson’s *Meropa* (1975) (retitled *KwaZulu* for its London season), as glamourized fantasies of ethnicity, legitimations for the Bantustan policy and relocation under separate development (Walder 8, 44; Kavanagh 29, 54; Horn 213-214; Kerr 217). These officially acceptable and commercially successful cultural appropriations “confirmed white attitudes and prejudices, [were] blatantly paternalistic in the long colonial tradition, and sugar-coat[ed] the bitter realities of contemporary South Africa” (Vandenbroucke 68).

After the official separation between Sneddon and Msomi in 1973, *Umabatha*, now under Msomi’s management, was presented in a township, at the Jabulani Amphitheatre in Soweto, and toured to Scotland, Italy, Israel and the United States. It closed in New York in 1979, after boycotts by anti-apartheid supporters. The man responsible, according to Msomi, was Siphon Mzimela; when *Umabatha* was revived in South Africa in 1995 he was “a cabinet minister from a party [Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP)] that built itself through Zulu chauvinism” (Gevisser). *Ipi Tombi* was similarly picketed abroad as supporting and perpetuating racist ideologies.

In 1992 Msomi returned to South Africa from New York. A year before, while working on Ted Koppel’s television programme, he had met Mandela who asked him when he was “coming home to stage *Umabatha* for a whole new audience” (quoted in Coleman). *Umabatha* opened at the Civic Theatre in Johannesburg on 18 May 1995 to ecstatic praise from reviewers. The first night was attended by Mandela, now

President, who subsequently wrote Msomi that during his incarceration he had heard of *Umabatha* and

thought then that there was no better way to highlight both the problems of, and the vast opportunity for, change from so many years of apartheid.... It illustrates vividly the universality of ambition, greed and fear. Moreover, the similarities between Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and our own Shaka became a glaring reminder that the world is philosophically a very small space. (3)

The emphasis on 'universals' and of historical equivalence would be perpetuated. However, the masterpiece from the English canon, relocated to link eleventh century Scotland and nineteenth century Zululand, was now also linked to contemporary South Africa and the globe. This was not because Msomi had updated or altered the 1970s version: to him, "human nature never moves with the times. Greed, control, power, conflict. All... were there during Shakespeare's time. They are here today. And they will be here tomorrow" (quoted in Clay). Within a post-apartheid, newly democratic South Africa, *Umabatha's* stress on the restoration of order gained a new significance. And it was to be regarded as relevant to present-day Zulu history: in relation to the black violence in KwaZulu-Natal, the play could be interpreted as a criticism of the ethno-nationalism of Buthelezi and the IFP. To Msomi, "[t]here is a lesson to be learned for people who are after power and are not supposed to have that power" (quoted in Gevisser). The praise poem of Shaka had been recontextualized by IFP officials as support for Zulu separation (Brown 25-26); had a stage version of Shaka been claimed by the ANC? Msomi, criticized by members of the ANC in the late 1970s, was publicly linked to the same party in the 1990s: he directed Mandela's 75th Birthday Celebration in 1993, stage-managed many events in the ANC's 1994 election campaign, and was commissioned

to mount the 'Many Cultures, One Nation' celebration at Mandela's inauguration on 10 May 1994.

The 1990s, in South Africa, are a decade of national reconstruction, reclamation and remembrance: a time to revive cultural artefacts, a time to confront sins of the past, a time to confess those sins in public, in novels, poetry, painting and in the theatre. *Umabatha* was 'reclaimed' as an appropriate example of cross-cultural fertilization. Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Nshona's 1973 *The Island* was, likewise, revived in 1995; like *Umabatha*, *The Island* resituated the temporal-spatial context of a canonical text (Sophocles' *Antigone*) in the local context. The revival was acclaimed as an allegory of the liberation struggle and an injunction against forgetting. With a more accurate title, *Ipi Ntombi* could now be praised for "project[ing] an image of the kind of social harmony... South Africans long for" (Maseti).

Umabatha opened in London on 4 August 1997, as part of the celebrations of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, the first visiting company in its international festival. "Shakespeare is African," Msomi informed the first-night audience (quoted in Nightingale). In their concerns and attitudes, many of the reviews could have been written in 1972, not 1997, celebrating the "exotic... appeal of traditional African rhythm" (Gardner) and "tribal rituals" (Curtis); the acting was "never particularly subtle" (Gardner); the emphasis on "spectacle" (Butler); "the tragedy played like a comedy" (Curtis); the Scottish-Zulu parallels were "successful" (Hanks); the "happiness" of the cast was remarked on (by Nightingale, who made no mention of his 1972 criticism of *Umabatha* as an apology for apartheid). Nick Curtis cautioned, and the capitals are his, that *Umabatha* was "a thrilling showcase for Zulu culture and a salutary example of the way other national perceptions can refresh the work of the playwright we so slavishly protect and revere as OURS".

An eight-centre tour of the United States followed the week-long London run, and included seasons in New York, Washington, Boston and Los Angeles, with a single performance in Binghamton

University's theme semester, "Africa, Shakespeare and Global Perspective". According to Al Tricomi, vice provost of undergraduate studies, *Umabatha* was appropriate to the theme of global interaction and demonstrated "how Shakespeare was experienced in Africa" (quoted in "Zulu *Macbeth* performance"). In the United States of America, a feature of the reviews was the exploration of the present through the past, not the parallels with a Scottish past. *Umabatha* depicted not merely such "universals" as "the untimely losses that can change the course of history" (Brantley), but provided a means to "make sense of the old South Africa", and hence begin to grapple with the complexities of the 'new South Africa', where "the story of blacks versus whites is not the only one South Africa must come to terms with today" (Waters). Marcia Siegel dismissed the claims to associations between the fictional and real characters, preferring instead to discern the "larger political issues: the preservation of the tribe and by inference, the nation".

In 1998 interactions between Africa and the West, the canon and the paradigm, the past and the present, fusion and transculturation, our and others' stories, are being interrogated and reformulated. "The challenge," Bharucha believes, in his description of his own intracultural experience with a European text in India, a description that has relevance to the South African context, "is not to abandon one for the other, or to set one against the other in a false kind of cultural hierarchy, but to negotiate different selves, cultures, histories, and languages through the labyrinth of multiple others" (129).

Notes

- 1 The financial assistance of the University of Natal Research Fund, to attend the Southwest Theatre Association Conference in Fort Worth, Texas, 13-16 November 1998, is gratefully acknowledged. I am indebted to two colleagues : Duncan Brown for assistance with research on performances by Zulus in London, and Jürgen Lieskounig, who furthered my understanding of the meta-myth of Africa.

- 2 *Umabatha* was not the first Zulu performance in London : a troupe of thirteen Zulus enacted scenes from Zulu life at St George's Gallery in May 1853. Charles Dickens attended a performance and wrote an essay, "The Noble Savage", for *Household Words*. It is a remarkably offensive document which aimed to denigrate the Romantic myth by depicting the Zulus as amoral savages (Lindfors). Furthermore, *Mameena*, a dramatisation by Oscar Asche of Rider Haggard's *Child of Storm*, with authentic Zulu dances and costumes, was presented in 1914 (Baneshik).
- 3 A radical critique of the dominant practices of English Studies in white universities emerged in the 1970s. Academics questioned both the exclusion of African literature and the transmission of a heritage that, based on Arnoldian and Leavisite notions of culture, reinforced positions of superiority and inferiority. Inevitably, such criticism was also levelled at related disciplines, and Sneddon, despite her considerable achievements in establishing Drama as a subject in universities, was criticized for her espousal of ultimate and universal values.

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