Community Theatre as Political Activism in Early Post-apartheid South Africa and Postliberation Zimbabwe: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Informed by a historical approach rather than traditional notions of applied theatre which have characterised orthodox community theatre scholarship, in this paper I offer a new interpretation of community theatre practice in post-apartheid South Africa and post-independent Zimbabwe. I trace the linkages that exist between the ideological and political struggles of the peoples of South Africa and Zimbabwe and community theatre at independence. I highlight key aesthetic characteristics that emerged from the interface between political activism and experimentation in post-independence Zimbabwe and post-apartheid South Africa.

Key Words: community theatre, South Africa, Zimbabwe, activism, political, struggles

Characterising Community Theatre in Zimbabwean and South African Cultural and Political Struggles.

If the new form catches on, many more artists will then initiate it. What is important is that it should catch on; that is, it should appeal to the audience by corresponding to something in their own experience or desires. (Karin Barber 1987: 39).

The above epigraph opens up possibilities for new forms of politically conscious theatre emerging in and from communities and clearly charts the trajectory that these forms should follow to be relevant. A key idea that can be read from Barber's submission, which I adopt in this research, is that

emergent theatre forms should be understood from the perspective of the communities that sponsor their emergence. The cultural struggle in South Africa and Zimbabwe is strongly rooted in the political ideologies of the nationalist liberation movements. David Kerr (1995) and Robert Kavanagh (1985) allude that the Black Consciousness ideology gave popular theatre an identity in South Africa, while Preben Kaarsholm (1990) and Stephen Chifunyise (1990) posit that popular culture was an integral strategy of mobilising communities during the liberation war in Zimbabwe, simultaneously communicating liberation ideologies and providing entertainment. The liberation nationalist movement's ethnocentric ideological inclination that sought to declare 'Africa for Africans' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008: 62) meant that popular theatre was referred to as black theatre. Black theatre is used here to refer to performance initiatives practised by African theatre practitioners to challenge colonial/ colonial residual hegemony; African relating to geography rather than race (Sibanda 2018). Black theatre derives its inspiration from and emphasizes "religion, familial and cultural virtues and communal strengths" (Steadman 1994: 47) as the ways in which hegemony, colonialism and neo-colonialism were and are challenged. It is this black theatre that I framed as politically committed community theatre. This genre of community theatre addressed itself as part of the projects initiated by radical oppositional movements, to challenge the states' myths about South African and Zimbabwean history and society by presenting alternative historical narratives and aspirations. This placed "oppositional cultural aesthetics and popular performance" (Steadman 1994:11) at the centre of the cultural struggle and development in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Community theatre is used in this account to refer to 'theatre of the people, talking to the people about their own problems, in their own language, on their own terms and using their own artistic forms' (Layiwola 2000, 72). I have argued elsewhere and positioned community theatre in the frames of Peter Larlham's (1985: 62) "committed theatre." Positioned in this manner, community theatre is transformed from utterances and self-conscious literary expressions of black radical theatre performances characterised by performed images of black anger and resistance (Sitas 1996; Steadman 1994) into a sense of crafted history of power and resistance which does not collapse into a forced heroic rendition (Sibanda 2018; Sitas 1996).

Community theatre in Africa, as a key form of black theatre, sits uneasily within the popular theatre paradigm and the mainstream Eurocentric

modelled tradition. Thus, in the context of South Africa's and Zimbabwe's cultural history, community theatre became a site of the struggle for the control of political, social, economic and cultural life of the indigenous people; a vehicle of propaganda, identity creation and political instruction (Sibanda 2017). The fact that community theatre is embedded in the community creates a struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state (Ngugi, 1997:11). In other terms, these enactments of power are a fight to control popular cultural modes of expression and connections that exist between the status quo and community theatre practitioners. The struggle between these two contending spheres of influence observed by Ngugi are about validating and bestowing recognition and prestige (Huggan 1997) on theatre practice within the community. In the context of the foregoing argument, what is of interest to me is the enactment of these powers in post-apartheid/postliberation space and their effect in shaping an emergent community based-performative tradition.

Consequently, the analysis of the growth and development of committed community theatre in the South African landscape should be analysed against a background of repressive legislation and hegemonic co-optation (Steadman 1994), while that of Zimbabwe needs to be analysed against the background of a long-drawn-out liberation struggle (Kerr 1995). This will lay bare the politics and challenges that influenced the development and shaped politically conscious community theatre in post-apartheid South Africa and postliberation Zimbabwe. While access to the media and capital ensured that for decades a dominant colonial residual hegemonic tradition of theatre was established, the activities of theatre practitioners creating work in opposition went largely unrecorded (Kavanagh 1985). This has largely been the justification for the co-optation of 'community theatre' into what has largely been defined as applied theatre. I will return to discuss this later.

The consolidation of committed community theatre in South Africa entailed a continuing struggle against the dominance of an Afrikaner colonial and imperial centre, compounded in the post-apartheid period by the powerful influence of the emergent North American metropolis (Orkin 1991). In Zimbabwe, then Southern Rhodesia, the cultural industry became a site for struggle from the early 1890s, through the liberation war era in the 1960s, to post-independence Zimbabwe and I will add, to today.

Bhekizizwe Peterson (1990) submits that the Rhodesian colonial cosmology (and by extension apartheid South Africa), firmly situated the dramatic and other cultural modes of expression of black Africans outside the boundaries of art and/or culture and relegated them to the dark hinterlands of anthropology. Since indigenous 'cultures' and 'arts' were not regarded as cultural activities, the Dramatic and Opera Societies sought to acculturate the 'uncultured' indigenous blacks through teaching them 'civilized' music, and theatre traditions. The drama-in-education model, consequently, was meant to break down the pre-colonial political and micro-economic systems, and legal and cultural practices which provided the ideological bases of indigenous societies such as those found in South Africa and Zimbabwe (Kerr 1995).

Peterson further points out that the western settlers' colonial approach of dislocating cultural practices from the social struggles of the indigenous people and marketing them instead as universal and trans-historical 'civilising forces' was meant to dismantle the black South African and Zimbabwean struggle for identity, survival and independence. This would force them into practising what Sam Ukala (2001:30) calls a "theatre of surrender", which identifies the first phase through which African theatre responded to colonialism. Ukala (2001:30) submits that in the theatre of surrender "the African surrenders to the aesthetics of his colonial master and is content with abridged translations, adaptations or reproductions of popular European plays, music and dance". This process provides a 'distraction' to the African cultural performer and makes him or her an imitator of European cultural traditions. This "theatre of surrender" had its foundations in colonial missionary education system and resulted in performance versions of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Cesear* in Natal (Orkin 1991) and *Macbeth* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* in Zimbabwe (Kaarsholm 1990). However, educated black elites in South Africa and Zimbabwe responded by crafting their own theatre narrative that challenged this cultural dominance of colonial residual paradigm. The resolve by black African theatre practitioners such as Herbert Dhlomo who argued that the "African dramatist cannot delve into the past unless he has grasped the present. African art must deal with the things that are vital and near the African today." (Orkin 1991:43) As a committed artist, Dhlomo contested the prevailing ruling class indifference to the development of a South African theatre in his plays and even more fiercely the segregationist discourse designed to position black history in positions of savagery and absence, childishness, inferiority and subjugation.

The Zimbabwe liberation war, anchored on "African nationalism and Afro-radicalism" (Gatsheni-Ndlovu 2009: 63), gave rise to its own genres of cultural expression that challenged the supremacy of white pride, on one hand, and mobilized black African people and promoted mental decolonization, on the other (Chifunyise 1990). The nationalist and Afro-radical ideologies created a conducive environment for the creation of cultural performances that made use of indigenous African performing arts. Kerr (1995) identifies three forms of cultural performance styles that were used by Zimbabwean liberation political parties during the struggle: the *Bira*, praise poetry, and agit-prop. The *Bira* was a Shona spirit-possession ritual which was later politicized by the freedom fighters through "linking the power of ancestral spirits to the struggle against white regime" (Kerr 1995: 211). *Bira* songs were transformed and linked to the struggle of the 1970s and legitimized the support for freedom fighters across the length and breadth of Zimbabwe. Through this process of legitimizing the freedom fighters, liberation movements managed to win the support of peasants and spirit mediums.

The refugee camps of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) in Lusaka engaged in improvised theatre pieces and Ndebele praise poetry or war chants which had been radically changed to fit the situation of struggle against the Rhodesian military forces (Kerr 1995). Kerr (1995: 213) also acknowledges another kind of analytical theatre genre that had "its aesthetic roots in the *Pungwe* and radical popular theatre emerging in Zimbabwe": agitational-propaganda. Agit-prop dramas, developed from a Marxist ideological perspective, provided a critical analysis of the situation of the refugees in camps and problems arising from the struggle, condemned capitalism, and the 1978 Muzorewa settlement. These plays used episodic plots where realistic scenes with improvised dialogue were interspersed with direct addresses to the audience accompanied by drum or *mbira* music, revolutionary songs or traditional songs (Kerr 1995: 214). I submit that committed community theatre in Zimbabwe and to a lesser extent South Africa, has continued to be influenced by the aesthetics of this theatre genre. In the Zimbabwean context, out of the liberation struggle, two types of theatre emerged: a neo Maoist type of hortatory, authoritarian drama, and a more democratic, critical mode (Kaarsholm 1990: 259). The democratic, critical mode would later develop into modern day committed

community theatre, while the authoritarian Maoist type slowly disappeared soon after independence.

The making of community theatre in post-apartheid South Africa and postliberation Zimbabwe

As the exiles returned to South Africa and the machinery of apartheid dismantled in 1994, the opportunities for strategic community theatre increased enormously. However, it was no longer time for generalized consciousness, but for grappling with a host of complex, localized political, economic, social and psychological problems, and linking to the broader strategic struggle to replace the authoritarian apartheid structures of control with those of democracy (Kavanagh 1985; Kerr 1995). Owen Seda (2004) observes that in the early 1990s, Zimbabwean theatre followed a path of nearly resolute segregation, fragmentation and, at times, confrontation. This segregation and fragmentation resulted in black theatre practitioners setting up their own organizations and adopting public spaces as centres of performance. The productions by black artists articulated both their experience and ideological dynamics in the new-Zimbabwe. The Bulawayo Association of Drama Groups (BADG) emerged in Bulawayo tasked with the sole responsibility of coordinating performances, training programmes and partnerships among committed community-based theatre groups. Out of these new organizations such as BADG, three distinct strains of theatre emerged from independence: the university theatre, a well-endowed white theatre, and grassroots community-based theatre (Seda 2004; Chifunyise 1990; Banham 2004). While in this paper I am concerned with community theatre, it is imperative to briefly sketch-out key characteristics of the first two theatre strands.

The university theatre strand was founded upon indigenous performance idioms and sought to illustrate the use of theatre to develop ideological direction in line with the liberation struggle, the struggle for majority rule, against racism, colonialism and for a socialist Zimbabwe (Chifunyise 1990). Under the guardianship of Robert McLaren, formerly Robert Mshengu Kavanagh, university theatre was concerned with

> articulating [the University community's] ideological orientation, its understandings of the socio-economic and political realities of Zimbabwe and Southern Africa as well as critically examine itself and its relationship with the wider Zimbabwean society. (Chifunyise 1990: 281)

In essence, university theatre packaged itself as community theatre' run by academics. This kind of framing of fell into the western academia trap of the conceptualisation of 'community theatre' as applied theatre (Nicholson 2005; Prentki and Preston 2009; Thompson 2009). I have argued elsewhere and raised the problematics of using this blanket framing largely within the academia where specialist professionals have emerged and coordinated community theatre performances and projects. This is problematic because one of the key fundamentals of committed theatre is the centredness and locatedness of the performers in the host communities to avoid the idea of 'concealed ideologies and intentions' (Prentki and Preston 2009, 10). Communities become sites for the application and testing of theories rather than for fostering collective work towards challenging hegemony and social change, thus, the term 'applied' theatre. As such, I agree with Prentki and Preston (2009) who observe that applied theatre may be alien to communities as it does not resonate with anything linked to them beside the narratives and content of the developed work.

Colonial residual white cultural institutions responded to the new policies of non-racial society and cultural development with extreme caution (Chifunyise 1990). In the early years, Repertory Companies and the NTO maintained their conservative policies of performing British plays for exclusively white audiences (Banham 2004). However, in 1985 when Susan Haines became NTO Chairperson, it opened its doors to black theatre, taking plays written and performed in any language for the WinterFest. In 1986, some white groups pulled out of the NTO in protest against Amakhosi's *Nansi Le Ndoda* (Here is the Man) winning the festival competition (Banham 2004). A number of black theatre artists seized this opportunity and joined the NTO in an endeavour to introduce the kind of theatre that was consistent with the expectations of a new social order into the white theatre establishment. However, white theatre clubs and Repertory Companies totally ignored plays written by black playwrights, although they were administratively affiliated to the NTO. As a result, Chifunyise (1990: 279) argues that "most of the NTO outstanding directors have remained as isolated from the theatre of majority as they were in the pre-independence era. Neither have they been exposed to many exciting experiments in other theatre movements of independent Zimbabwe."

The grassroots community based theatre sought to counter endowed white theatre by developing a specific Zimbabwean theatre style that responded to the socio-economic and political issues faced by the people with technical and financial support from the Department of Arts and Culture, in the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, under the leadership of Stephen Chifunyise, and the Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with Production (ZIMFEP) under the tutelage of Ngugi wa Mirii and Kemani Gecau. The Department of Arts and Culture oversaw the government sponsored theatre and performance programme, and supported community theatre, dance and music groups in the country (Banham 2004), while ZIMFEP sought to use theatre as one of the government's major communication strategies.

In 1986, an umbrella organization of community theatre groups, Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatres (ZACT) under the leadership of Ngugi wa Mirii was founded. ZACT sought to provide overall national co-ordination in organizing workshop training of theatre practitioners and logistical support for the community theatre network (Banham 2004). Seda (2004: 137) adds that ZACT was formed to promote new theatre in the townships that would assist the post-independence state to establish a just and democratic society. The objective of placing the community theatre movement prominently in the struggle against neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism was central in the growth committed community theatre. With government policy blunders and corruption in the late 1990s and change in political conditions leading to the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999, the relationship between ZACT and the NTO seemed to improve. What brought these formerly contending institutions together was the desire to use theatre as a social change vehicle against the despotic Mugabe-led Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government. New experimental theatre productions committed to direct confrontation with status quo emerged in venues such as Gallery Delta, Theatre-in-the-Park, and Alliance Françoise. These productions relied on minimal casts, sets and properties, something symbolic of the material conditions obtaining in the communities.

In the case of South Africa, performance was historically characterised as political action often by the simple fact that it took place at all, thereby breaking racial segregation laws (Marlin-Curiel 2004). However, a new constitution in 1994 meant that cultural production became a constitutional matter, protected and celebrated as a right of the peoples of South Africa by

acknowledging and compensating for the imbalances of the past (Mistry 2001: 3). The celebration of the arts and the commitment of the government of South Africa to developing infrastructure, personnel and providing resources were further elaborated in the *White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage* that would govern and inform cultural policy in post-apartheid South Africa.

Until the 1990s, Marlin-Curiel (2004: 96) posits that what existed in South African theatre was a strong anti-apartheid theatre tradition which included protest and resistance theatre movements that exhibited strong physical and 'poor theatre' techniques, as well as a combination of township theatre and Brechtian techniques. These also characterised post-apartheid community theatre. As part of a decolonising exercise, purpose-built theatre spaces hosted revivals of political plays developed and performed during apartheid, such as Jerry Mofokong's *Nongongo* (Civic Theatre 1994) and Matsemela Manaka's *Egoli* and *Ekhaya* (Playhouse 1995). The Market Theatre, an institution that gained a reputation for turning protest theatre into world class masterpieces (Marlin-Curiel 2004) and the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown provided venues for new plays dealing with the social, cultural, and economic upheavals of transition such as Neil McCarthy's *Rainshark* (Market Theatre, 1991), Fugard's *Playland* (Market Theatre, 1992) and Paul Slabolepszy's *Mooi Street Moves* (National Arts Festival; Market Theatre 1992) [Kruger 1999].

Yet, the production of new work and new ways of creating theatre for new audiences in the 1990s happened mostly on the festival circuit or in non-theatre spaces rather than on the main stages of government subsidised theatres. Festivals enabled committed community theatre groups to collaborate and draw on the experience of practitioners trained in fine art, professional theatre, and agitational propaganda productions to combine classic texts of European drama and South African themes, and experiment with puppetry, animation and live performance, to explore historical and contemporary interpretations of their stories (Kruger 1999). The pre-eminence of festivals was mainly due to high production costs on the main stages, which community theatre groups could not afford, as well as limited local audience interest for the subtle, allusive productions (Kruger 1999: 187). Thus, community theatre groups with limited resources were able to contribute to the growth and development of new forms of theatre

in the new South Africa.

Kruger (1999:191) submits that community theatre groups used

> topical scripts written for performance by people with multiple skills, using functional, portable sets and props, for audiences whose engagement with the subject and occasion of the performance plays at least as great a role in the production of the event's meaning as the text.

The continued growth of the committed community theatre tradition placed it on a collision course with 'professional' theatre companies and provincial arts councils. Marlin-Curiel (2004:100) notes that post-apartheid South African theatre remains geographically divided largely along lines of class and race; as such, the perception is that "anything worth seeing will come to the Market Theatre". Similarly, in Zimbabwe, when ZACT was formed and at its peak, a cold war ensued with NTO and its affiliates. The Market Theatre has come to be regarded as representative of the mainstream 'professional' theatre institutions, adopting a professional business outlook. This meant that any work of the community theatre groups presented in alternative theatre spaces was therefore not considered worth watching by the mainstream theatre institutions. The reluctance of Market Theatre's white audiences to see theatre from a community perspective was made clear during John Hunt's 1999 production *Stand in the Sun*. Marlin-Curiel (2004) maintains that the play was staged at venues in Alexandra and Sandton with the intention of bussing audience members from Alexandra to the Sandton venue and vice versa. As a result, the Alexandra performances were discontinued for lack of patronage as the white audience felt 'unsafe' in Alexandra, watching a social critique that put them in the spotlight (Marlin-Curiel 2004:102).

I adopt and extend Leon Kruger (1999) characterisation of community theatre to highlight its commitment, political consciousness and centredness on the people beyond the concept of resistance as utility. Kruger submits that politically conscious community theatre practitioners contested the

> privilege habitually accorded the tastes of 'professional spectators', those schooled in the viewing and polite applause of Western decorum, arguing that the active (but often subtle) responses of audiences not beholden to this decorum reflect a serious engagement with the occasion and effect of the

performed action (1999: 191-92)

In this context, community theatre practitioners proffered a theatre committed to engagement and participation of audiences to address economic, political and socio-cultural issues. These kinds of performances further politicised its materials directly engaging with hegemonic and residual colonial/ apartheid consciousness creating challenges for 'professional spectatorship' largely characterized by passivity and gaze, which they felt did not support social redress.

Kruger (1999:195) adopts a fluid conceptual framework of community theatre that brings

> together apparently incompatible places, occasions and practices - performances for the Market's "professional audience" alongside those in community halls in Soweto or Lenasia for the people directly engaged by the action; drama that focuses primarily on the appreciation for character alongside more explicitly issue-oriented plays that allow participants to face hidden problems in community - but it is also this very fluidity that makes possible the revision of the axioms of anti-apartheid theatre and the re-negotiation of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, form and function, subjunctive enactment in the theatre and indicative action in streets and houses.

Aesthetically, committed community theatre as a genre, crosses and re-crosses the border between experimental theatre, culture-for-development and 'mainstream' professional theatre. This community theatre tradition in postliberation Zimbabwe and post-apartheid South Africa became an alternative performance platform that sought to explore the socio-cultural, economic and political situations within the respective countries in direct engagement or confrontation with the status quo. Community theatre thus, is a vehicle for challenging hegemonic institutions, initiating debate and a platform for experimentation by both young and established practitioners.

The aesthetics of community theatre performance narrative

The realization that conquest and colonization, together with Christian proselytization, had distorted the history and culture of the indigenous

peoples inspired the BCM, NDP and its successors ZAPU and ZANU to initiate a process of reconstituting the crushed and dominated personality of the black person. In particular, the BCM encouraged blacks to

> organize their own lives, struggle together to solve their own problems themselves and in so doing recover their confidence, their faith in their ability to organize, to be responsible, to lead, to take decisions [and] cope with freedom. (Kavanagh 1985: 155)

One of the characteristic of the emergent strands of politically conscious community theatre at independence in Zimbabwe and to lesser extent in South Africa was the rejection of a role for whites in black liberation and cultural work and the severing of links with the multi-racial accommodationist ideologies (Steadman 1994). For Francis Rangoajane (2011), the debate around alienation of white South African writers from blacks was mainly due to the fact that white liberals did not fully represent the black situation, as they had limited knowledge about blacks, and their attempts were negated by avoiding offending their fellow white nationals in power. In the perspective of the BCM, this process of totally withdrawing from all the association with white theatre practitioners was the essential initial step towards rebuilding morale and producing a creative confident personality. Interestingly, white liberals such as Robert McLaren changed their names and moved to stay in the townships so that they could identify and be part of an emerging history and culture. McLaren operated under the moniker Robert Mshengu Kavanagh in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The second step was to develop and evolve "alternative cultural values and concepts" (Kavanagh 1985: 155) upon which a future South African theatre practice might be built. This was a process of self-re-identification through critically analysing the situation and locating one's traditional roots in light of Kavanagh's (1985: 156) reflection that the "acceptance of one's people's history necessitates the acceptance of traditional culture". However, this process needed to be politically revalued, re-evaluated and liberated from the misconceptions and degradations propagated by the colonial master. The revived culture, which manifested as politically and openly radical committed community theatre productions often drawing material from the interface between the subaltern and elite politicians, became an inspiration as well as a cultural critique of the oppressive society through providing and defining characteristics of the new South African and

Zimbabwean socio-cultural order.

Drawing from the ideological perspectives of the BCM, community theatre became direct, militant and radical, "proclaiming a new, assertive cultural renaissance and rejecting the aesthetics of humility" (Sitas 1996:84). This performance structure transformed interactive and participative carnival atmospheres, serious and epic theatre, and the transcendental and prefiguring of the return of Africa (Kavanagh 1985) which initially characterised native/ indigenous performances. This community theatre was and/ is also characterised by formal innovations such as episodic structures, quick shifts of scenes and tempo, oral narrative, music and street rhythms, jazz and factory work-rhythms (Steadman 1994). Within the postliberation Zimbabwe and post-apartheid South Africa, this kind of community theatre politicised native/ indigenous performances, migrant theatre in the mines presenting a new sense of belonging and resistance which expressed a desire to self-govern and liberation.

While some black artists such as Kente avoided dramatizing the "wider political issues underlying the suffering and frustrations of urban Africans, [and instead] concentrated on personal morality and social responsibility based on African Christianity as the foundation of community life", community theatre as a political praxis demanded the submersion of the artist in the materiality of the community. Yet, of aesthetic fundamental importance to committed community theatre practice was Kente's simplified and politically charged scenography which emerged after he realised that the "costly sets, crew, and equipment required by white theatre were not necessary in the townships and would only serve to reduce mobility" (Coplan 1985: 209). Kente made use of "young, newly trained actors, simple costumes and a few crudely painted flats and backdrops" (Coplan 1985: 209), performing under house lights to standing room only audiences in the township halls. By rejecting heavy and colourful designs of the Afrikaner and English theatre tradition for an archetypal minimalist design approach, Kente introduced a new performance style and rejuvenated black commercial performance in the township.

Aesthetically, committed community theatre productions inspired imitational performances transferring the resistive agency from the stage

and bodies of performers to the streets. Sitas (1996: 87-88) notes that

> [b]y the time of *Sarafina* [Ngema] found himself developing a musical style which launched hundreds of imitation effects into the townships. Sarafina, the part, became the archetype of emancipated, political young-black-womanhood.

The same effect of imitational performances is observed in Bulawayo from Amakhosi Theatre Productions' *Stitsha* (1992). Young people from Makokoba and Mzilikazi Townships replayed *Stitsha* through street rehearsals and performances under street lights in the evenings. *Stitsha* and other productions were easily imitated because they were rooted in the tangible material life of ordinary person, such as unemployment, alcoholism and alienation. The shift to the role played by performance and presentation styles which were developed out of the community's everyday life experiences helped dismantle the conceptions of the elitist theatre discourse. These were expressed through storytelling, street rhythms and music creating a close relation and engagement with the audience. Second, the use of archetypical characters and ordinary performers emerging from the townships, like Leleti Khumalo in *Sarafina* and Beater Mangethe in *Stitsha*, transposed these productions from the imagined world of performance to the real. *Sarafina* and *Stitsha* became township emblems just like what Shakespearian plays were to the English.

Community theatre as political activism is thus a strategy of exposing material struggle, symbolic power and resistance against and/between disciplines of authorship, authenticity and legitimacy discharged in the interconnected levels of mediation with the political post-apartheid South African and postliberation Zimbabwean state. The community theatre practitioner's adoption of everyday street language, clothes as costumes and household utensils as properties demonstrates a counter-hegemonic popular resistance and radically alters the residual colonial semiotic appreciation of costumes, sets and properties. This new semiotic value in community theatre performances forms the foundation of differentiation – and legitimates it as a theatre for the people.

In other words, committed community theatre can be best thought of as a normative discursive practice that engages in dialogues through theatrical practices/performances. As Desai (1990) observes, community theatre is never in an exclusively advantaged position, rather constantly negotiates and renegotiates its own articulations in the larger societal context as it

challenges hegemony, domination and the status quo. These negotiations, which are moderated by the materiality of the community, influence the aesthetic approaches and processes as well as themes and content development. The net outcome of this negotiation is an embodied and collaborative theatrical aesthetic process. The committed community theatre paradigm demands its own performance spaces that would allow and enable the use of indigenous idioms, performance styles and techniques. As a response to this need, community based groups appropriated and repurposed community halls, beer gardens, open spaces and youth centres into alternative performance spaces. These appropriated performance spaces were – and are still – important in developing a new sense of spatiality because of their 'locatedness' in the struggle against the domination and straight jacketing of the performance industry by the colonial residual and neo-colonialist theatre tradition.

Community theatre can also be defined and distinguished from other forms of theatre using "language and theatrical aesthetics" (Desai 1990: 65). The distinction of community theatre based on language follows Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1986) relativist approach that a truly popular theatre should be presented and conducted in indigenous African languages. Ngugi (1986) argued that any theatre performance in foreign languages plays to an elite audience and therefore is 'unAfrican'. In postcolonial Africa, syncretic dialects, which combined local languages with English/Portuguese and/or French, emerged as a counter to this indigenous relativism and metropolis inspired elitism. In South Africa an urban patois referred to as *tsotsitaal* emerged in Soweto (Coplan 1985), while *isilapalapa* in Zimbabwe. Interestingly, part of the material, conceptual and political theatrical shift involved the application of these 'new' language dialects into the theatre – thus a new theatre language also involved a new language of the theatre.

Conclusion

This article traced the linkages that exist between the political struggles of the peoples of South Africa and Zimbabwe and the aesthetic characteristics of community theatre at independence. In re-defining community theatre through juxtaposing different narratives that have been proffered by various theorists, applied theatre practitioners and theatre historians, I presented community theatre in post-colonial Zimbabwe and post-

apartheid South Africa as an alternative performance platform that sought and continually seeks to explore the socio-cultural, economic and political situations within the respective countries. As a consequence, I positioned the historicity latent in community theatre as a key ingredient of the resistance movement driven by experimenting community-based practitioners in both post-apartheid South Africa and postliberation Zimbabwe.

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