

Theatre of the Imagination:
The theatre of Ellis Pearson and Bheki Mkhwane

By

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I hereby declare that this work is my own, and all sources used are indicated through in-text citations and references.

Signed: _____ Date: _____
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Abstract

Theatre of the Imagination: the theatre of Ellis Pearson and Bheki Mkhwane

Ellis and Bheki, the KwaZulu-Natal theatre duo of Ellis Pearson and Bheki Mkhwane (hereafter Mkhwane and Pearson), define their theatre as 'Theatre of the Imagination,' a hybrid (Hauptfleisch 1997: 49) of African and European performance styles.

The aim of this research dissertation is to chart the development of what Mkhwane and Pearson refer to as Theatre of the Imagination. In Chapter 1, the South African context and the way in which socio-political factors in the country have informed the work of the duo are reviewed. Chapter 2 consists of an examination of the varying influences on Mkhwane and Pearson's respective development as performers and theatre-makers, for example, Mkhwane's use of the physical characterisation common to the township musicals of Gibson Kente and Pearson's Lecoq style of clowning. Their early work with Nicholas Ellenbogen at the Loft Theatre Company and with the Theatre For Africa company which was instrumental in determining their aesthetic, will be included in the chapter, as will some of the characteristics and thematic preoccupations present in the duo's work.

The Sinako sequence of plays, namely *Skadonk*, *Big Udder*, *The Hungry*, *The Hidden* and *The Hungry Heart* are set in a fictional rural village in South Africa that acts as a microcosm for South Africa. Through these five plays, Mkhwane and Pearson not only explore the challenges facing contemporary South Africa, but also suggest ways in which its people could work towards achieving a common goal. In this sense, the Sinako sequence is politically motivated theatre that urges social change in South Africa. Chapter 3 will consist of a synopsis and examination of three of these plays, *Skadonk*, *The Hungry Heart* and *The Hidden* because they best exemplify the aesthetic of Mkhwane and Pearson's brand of theatre.

The final part of the dissertation will involve examining the work of Mkhwane and Pearson through the lens of interculturalism. It will be argued that the theatre of Mkhwane and

Pearson does not suffer from the criticisms levelled against interculturalism by theorists such as Rustom Bharucha (1993). Instead, Mkhwane and Pearson have developed an intercultural collaboration that does not rely on the exploitation of one culture by another.

Apart from the work of Bett Pacey and Marek von Brisinski and some reviews, few secondary sources are available on the work of Mkhwane and Pearson. As a result, this study will be partly empirical and will make use of primary sources comprising interviews with the two performers, documentation of live performances and existing studies on South African and European performance styles.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The South African context

Ellis and Bheki, the KwaZulu-Natal theatre duo of Ellis Pearson and Bheki Mkhwane (hereafter Mkhwane and Pearson), define their theatre as 'Theatre of the Imagination,' a hybrid (Hauptfleisch 1997: 49) of African and European performance styles. This section reviews the South African context and the way in which socio-political factors in the country have informed Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson's work. South Africa has a diverse set of cultural influences, because of its colonial past. This diversity includes Black ethnicities, for example, Zulu, Tsepedi, Xhosa and Venda. In addition, since colonisation by the Dutch and the English, two language and cultural groups emerged in the White population, namely English and Afrikaans. Slaves from Indonesian, Asian and other African countries were brought to the Cape from the time of its earliest European settlement in the seventeenth century. Indian South Africans were first brought into the country under British rule as indentured labourers on sugar cane farms in the nineteenth century and most of their descendants have stayed settled in KwaZulu-Natal.

The social fabric of South African life was further complicated by the apartheid policies of the Nationalist Party government. Racial division were institutionalised under the cultural (and political) ascendancy of the White minority. In 1948, the newly elected National Party began to introduce its apartheid policies, although by this point racist laws were already in place. Apartheid was a form of institutionalised racial segregation which attempted to separate and categorize the various races of South Africa. In essence, it was a form of state-sanctioned racism that disenfranchised the Black majority (Terreblanche 2002: 278), along with any other individuals not considered White or European by the state.

Under apartheid, various laws were passed with the aim of controlling the movements of 'non-white' (to use the racial terminology of the time) South Africans. These laws also aimed to entrench racial segregation, and place the White population in a position of economic and

cultural dominance. The notable laws passed included: the Group Areas Act, which allocated different areas of the country to different racial groups; the Separate Amenities Act, which allocated separate facilities for different racial groups; and the Bantu Education Act, which developed separate education systems for different racial groups. Under Bantu Education, the black population was taught only subjects that would be necessary in menial jobs, often involving manual labour, such as domestic and farm work and mining. Other laws initiated by the apartheid government included those that required all Black South Africans to carry pass-books if they worked in White areas and laws that deemed inter-racial relationships immoral and punishable by prison sentences (Terreblanche 2002: 334).

For the duration of legislative apartheid (1948-1994), a strong resistance movement attempted to bring about its end. This came in the form of violent and non-violent protest, with various ideological movements represented by groups such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). This resistance was at its strongest during the 1970s and 1980s, with political violence becoming a standard feature at the time. It was during this period that the black consciousness movement was formed and that protest theatre was at its most prominent.

With the end of legislated apartheid in the early 1990s and the coming to power of the ANC, South Africa faced a new set of challenges. Although apartheid laws were removed, the long-term effects of social engineering persisted. Literacy levels remain distressingly low, wealth is unfairly distributed, racist views remain deeply entrenched, corruption is rife, basic amenities neglected by the apartheid government are lacking and conflicts between different groups which were cultivated by the previous regime, remain. The change from repressive regime to progressive democracy has been a long and traumatic one and it is this process of change that informs the work of Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson whose theatrical output between the years 2001 and 2007 forms the subjects of this study.

1.2 The Theatre of the Imagination aesthetic

The purpose of this research is to document and evaluate the theatrical output of these two KwaZulu-Natal based performers. The dissertation documents and discusses the development of what Mkhwane and Pearson refer to as "Theatre of the Imagination" (Von Brisinski 2003: 117). The imaginative element that the term suggests is found in many aspects of their work

because they employ a minimal use of props, costume and set, the duo's theatre relies upon the imagination of the audience. Additionally, it is through Mkhwane and Pearson's imagination that audience members are transported into the world they have created. More importantly though, Theatre of the Imagination is concerned with presenting an imagined reality that Mkhwane and Pearson believe could act as an example for South African society to work towards (Greene in Pacey 2003: 154). This imagined community is similar to the "imagined communities" discussed in the book of the same name by Benedict Anderson (1991). Mkhwane and Pearson's narratives often present allegorical situations that mirror current events in South Africa and the world. While the characters in their plays face the same challenges as those of South Africa's present population, unlike us, the performers discover ways to improve the situations they bring to life in their productions. Theatre of the Imagination represents Mkhwane and Pearson's view of how society should and could operate and in this way, their work is instructive. The aesthetic of Theatre of the Imagination can be roughly divided into two aspects: form and content. The form of Theatre of the Imagination includes the devices the performers use in order to suggest an imagined reality including their use of props, costume and space. The manner in which these devices are used requires that the audience members use their imagination to complete the image presented. The content of Theatre of the Imagination is concerned with conjuring a world into being and the manner in which this imagined world mirrors and contrasts our own reality. Based on observations of the duo's work we can surmise that they view the work from an idealist point of view, which is informed by Mkhwane and particularly Pearson's religious beliefs (Mkhwane and Pearson 2005: pers. comm.)

In order to evaluate their theatre, and by extension Theatre of the Imagination, three seminal plays which are part of a series, will be analysed. In the 16 years of their collaboration, Mkhwane and Pearson have developed a group of stories set in a fictional village called Sinako, which acts as a microcosm through which to examine South African concerns. The inhabitants of and visitors to Sinako have featured in the plays *Skadonk*, *Big Udder*, *iLobola*, *The Hidden* and *The Hungry* and *The Hungry Heart* (Pacey 2007). In Chapter 3, synopses will be given of three of these plays, *Skadonk*, *The Hidden* and *The Hungry Heart*. The characteristics of the productions and the thematic elements will be explored, with emphasis placed on the real world applications they reveal.

1.3 South African theatre and its influence on Theatre of the Imagination

In this section, the influences of South African theatre and European theatre on the development of Theatre of the Imagination will be explored. The current aesthetic of Theatre of the Imagination is the end result of a combination of South African and European theatrical influences. Part of this dissertation will involve charting the various theatrical conventions that Mkhwane and Pearson have utilised in the development of their aesthetic. Chapter 2 will document the work of both Mkhwane and Pearson prior to their first meeting, as well as their early work together as members of the Loft Theatre Company and Theatre for Africa.

Because of its influence on South African theatre as a whole and the aesthetics of Theatre of the Imagination, it is important to take into account the research into township theatre, protest theatre and the socially-aware collaborative theatre, the last form exemplified by productions such as *The Island* and *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, and *Woza Albert*. *Woza Albert* is credited as being created by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon. Athol Fugard is often credited with writing both *The Island* and *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* however as both pieces are examples of collaborative theatre it is likely that the scripts came about as a result of the creative collaboration between Fugard and the performers of the piece John Kani and Winston Ntshona. For this reason, it becomes difficult when discussing forms of collaborative theatre, to determine the nature of the individual contributions of those involved. This is true in the case of Mkhwane and Pearson due to their work being a form of collaborative theatre and the duo's tendency to not assign individual credit.

Township, protest and collaborative theatre forms have been studied at great length by Kavanagh (1985), Kruger (1999), Orkin (1991), Hauptfleisch (1997) and Coplan (1985). Kavanagh, Kruger and Orkin offer substantial studies on the development of the township and protest theatre aesthetic, and also the relationship between the devisers of this theatre and the apartheid state. Hauptfleisch's work is useful for his attempt to categorise and examine the various types of performance that exist in South Africa. The categories defined by Hauptfleisch and their application with regards to Mkhwane and Pearson's collaboration will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Bheki Mkhwane cites Gibson Kente as a major influence on his development as a performer, and Kente's musical theatre style informs Mkhwane and Pearson's aesthetic. Kente was responsible for

... developing the synthesis of narrative, mime, movement, vocal dramatics, music and dance found in traditional oral literary performance into a township melodrama using urban experience and cultural resources (Coplan 1985: 210).

It is this drawing together of various performance elements and styles and combining them in order to create vibrant, socially-aware theatre that is evident in the work of Mkhwane and Pearson. Another aspect of Kente's work found in the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson is the use of stock characters. These archetypes are used in order "to capture the popular imagination" (Coplan 1985: 208) and they provide a point of reference for an audience regardless of the audience's diversity.

Mkhwane and Pearson rely on their bodies not only to create character, but also use them as props, sets and special effects. More often than not, the stories on which their theatre is based, feature huge casts of characters, and on many occasions fantastical elements. In the absence of any expansive sets or puppets, the actors create all these elements through the use of their bodies and voices. This is similar to the "poor theatre" (Grotowski 1968) aesthetic of township theatre in which "you are using your body as the only instrument you have, and that body which you have can be anything, can be a piece of sculpture, it can sing, it can be a song, it can be movement, can be sound, can be anything that body" (Mtwala in Balme 1996: 80). This physicality is not unique to Mkhwane and Pearson, but is a major factor of South African theatre in general. Both Mark Fleishman (1997) and David Alcock (1999) explore the inherent physicality of African performance and the special importance allocated to the actor and his or her body in South African theatre.

Today's South African theatre practitioners have recently been faced with the challenge of creating a form of theatre that fills the void left by the collaborative theatre of the 1970s and 1980s. Because of South African theatre's long history of activism and protest, South African theatre has arguably become synonymous, at least beyond our shores, with collaborative theatre. When one thinks of South African theatre generally, the images that often spring immediately to mind, involve protest theatre, whether it be Mbongeni Ngema

and Percy Mtwa shouting “*Woza Albert!*” in the play of the same name or John Kani explaining the pass laws to Winston Ntshona in *Sizwe Banzi is dead*.

South Africa’s association with collaborative theatre is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, this association is responsible for the global recognition of South African theatre, while on the other hand, it has become that against which all theatrical output since has to be judged. Collaborative theatre had its roots in the work of practitioners such as Athol Fugard, John Kani, Winston Ntshona, Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa among many others. The theatrical output of these individuals was modeled, to a degree, on the poor theatre of Jerzy Grotowski (1968) and filtered through the philosophies and beliefs permeated by the struggle movement of the 1970s. This resulted in a form of theatre that celebrated the collective over the individual with the productions devised in a democratic fashion. By working in this manner, the practitioners of collaborative theatre were seeking to bring democracy into being through the workshop process itself with the theatre itself advocating this point of view (Fleischman 1990: 100-101). This collaboration resulted in a form that was often highly confrontational and vibrant, and openly critical of the apartheid government.

The collaborative aesthetic has been a major influence on the South African theatre aesthetic and it informs the collaborative process of Mkhwane and Pearson. It is worth noting that Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre is not necessarily obvious in its social activism, but rather presents a more subtle and subversive form of protest. In this way it resembles the form of protest theatre advocated by Loren Kruger (1996: 150-151): it avoids sloganeering and rather suggests protest that subverts the status quo through more subtle means. In many ways this is typical of the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson. The influence of contemporary South African theatre forms on Theatre of the Imagination will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2

1.4 European theatrical influences on Theatre of the Imagination

Pearson brings into the partnership (with Mkhwane) an awareness and utilisation of certain European performance modes. Pearson studied for two years at The International Theatre School Jacques Lecoq, (hereafter referred to as the Lecoq School) in Paris. The years he spent there provided him with a physical vocabulary that differs from that of Mkhwane. It is Pearson’s work at this school that has defined him as a performer and theatre maker.

Simon Murray, in his book *Jacques Lecoq* (2003), examines in great detail the ideologies, theories and teaching methods of Jacques Lecoq who saw acting as “primarily a corporeal and physical exercise” (Murray 2003: 32) and maintained that “[i]t is the body and its movement through and in space that is the crucial generator of meaning and significance in contemporary theatre” (Murray 2003: 34). This emphasis on the physical presence of the actor and reliance on the body as a communicative tool permeates the work of Mkhwane and Pearson. Their work is highly physical and involves the use of elements of acrobatics, mime and clowning, all of which are taught at the Lecoq School. Another aspect of training at the school involves design, specifically the designing of props and sets and how the performer’s body interacts with them. Jacques Lecoq’s own book *The Moving Body* (2000) provides a clear description of the training process and skills development that occurs at the Lecoq School. Pearson has a fascination with design, and whilst watching a Mkhwane and Pearson production, one becomes aware of how every prop has been, if not designed to the last detail, at least carefully chosen by Pearson.

A year of Pearson’s training at the Lecoq School involved working within the framework of *commedia dell’arte* (Mkhwane and Pearson 2005: pers. comm.). Scott Rudlin (2000) defines the crucial aspects that contribute to any *commedia dell’arte* production, from the various characters to the well-established scenarios. The theatrical elements of *commedia dell’arte* remain relatively unchanged since they were first developed in sixteenth century Italy, modelled on a theatre form originally performed in ancient Rome and called *Atellanæ* which, unlike most pre-scripted theatre at the time, involved performers creating and improvising scenes based on set scenarios (Duchartre 1996: 25). *Atellanæ* was characterised by its reliance on elements of pantomime, with the plot “either explained through singing or simply acted” (Duchartre 1996: 26). It was particularly popular among the poorer sections of the Roman populace and for that reason the performers, in order to create a performance that could be understood by the entire audience, relied to a large extent on the use of gesture.

Commedia dell’arte makes use of various elements that are present in the Theatre of the Imagination aesthetic from the improvisational elements (Rudlin 2000: 51) to the approach to costume, character, physicality, humour and active audience participation. Mkhwane and Pearson’s decision to rehearse and stage all of their plays outdoors was in part inspired by Grotowskian rehearsal methods but this does not detract from the fact that it is also staged in a manner similar to *commedia dell’arte*.

It has been suggested by Christopher Balme (1996: 69) that township theatre is strongly influenced by *commedia dell'arte*. Elements of the latter are present in township theatre's use of stock characters, minimal props and sets, bawdy humour, as well as its improvisational nature and audience interaction. Where township theatre differs, Balme argues, is in its approach to narrative structure (Balme 1996: 69). Whereas a *commedia dell'arte* production is narrated by one character, township theatre usually splits the narration between two performers. The interchange between these two narrators provides a dramatic tension not found in *commedia dell'arte* (Balme 1996: 69). The convention of two narrators is a feature of the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson in which both performers act as narrators.

Chapter 2 will involve a more detailed examination of *commedia dell'arte* and its influence on the Theatre of the Imagination aesthetic.

1.5 Mkhwane and Pearson as KwaZulu-Natal-based performers

KwaZulu-Natal has given birth to and nurtured many prolific theatre and dramatic practitioners, some of whom have been highly influential in the development of South Africa's dramatic and theatrical aesthetic. Despite this, research into the national artistic output often focuses on the economic and cultural hubs, Johannesburg and Cape Town. While this is understandable from a global perspective, nationally it suggests a gap in the focus of theatre scholarship within South Africa. KwaZulu-Natal has a history of violence and conflict which is largely a result of it being one of the more densely-populated yet poorer South African provinces. Conflicts between the White population, the Black Zulu population and the Indian population have erupted in the province at different times since the second half of the nineteenth century. The long-lasting collaboration between Mkhwane and Pearson which began in the early 1990s must be seen as even more of an achievement in the light of the friction that has existed between different groups in the province. Mkhwane and Pearson also offer a form of theatre that differs from what is offered by many Durban-based theatre-makers, whose work is often divided between traditional Zulu performance styles or popular Western forms such as theatrical plays and musicals.

Prior to their collaboration and the development of the Theatre of the Imagination aesthetic, Mkhwane and Pearson were both members of the Loft Theatre Company and the Theatre for Africa company, both under the direction of Nicholas Ellenbogen. It was during this time that

the duo had their first meeting. The period is characterised by the close collaboration between Pearson and Ellenbogen and many of the characteristics found within the productions that resulted from this collaboration, have found their way into the work of Mkhwane and Pearson. In particular *Horn of Sorrow* and the *Raiders* series of plays¹, both a culmination of Ellenbogen's direction and Pearson's Lecoq training, offer an early example of the Theatre of the Imagination aesthetic. Only one study exists that explores the professional relationship between Ellenbogen and Pearson (Baxter and Aitchison 2006) and this will be referred to in the course of this dissertation.

The theatre of Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson has not been well documented. While Mkhwane and Pearson's work has been extensively reviewed in newspapers, to my knowledge only two scholarly articles have been published on the pair and one unpublished doctoral thesis on street theatre examines the work of these two performers in one of its chapters. One of the journal articles in question, by Von Brisinski (2003), discusses Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson's work in community theatre, but does not discuss the actual aesthetic of the performers' work. Von Brisinski focuses on the manner in which Mkhwane and Pearson train young Black, township-based performers who show promise. Mkhwane and Pearson's work in this field attempts to address the inequities of the past by providing these performers with opportunities that have been denied them by the previous regime. The other article, by David Graver (1997: 57), devotes two paragraphs to a critical synopsis of one of Mkhwane and Pearson's plays, *A Boy Called Rubbish*. Graver draws attention to the social activism evident in the duo's work, and observes the manner in which the duo combines juvenile slapstick with more serious thematic concerns.

The unpublished thesis by Bett Pacey (2004) *Street theatre as a viable option in South Africa's new theatre dispensation* is an attempt to determine whether or not the devising and performing of street theatre is a viable career for South African theatre makers. Pacey explores the origins of street theatre as well as its place within the South African theatrical aesthetic, but her study is primarily concerned with the logistical and financial problems associated with street theatre. An entire chapter within the thesis is devoted to Mkhwane and Pearson. The chapter includes a description of the characteristics of the Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre and details several of the duo's performances at various arts festivals such

¹ In 1989, Nicholas Ellenbogen and Ellis Pearson created *Raiders of the Lost Aardvark*, the success of which spawned an annual Raiders production. See Baxter and Aitchison (2006) for further detail.

as the National Arts Festival and the Klein Karoo Kunstfees. Because of the nature of the thesis, Pacey chooses to focus on the amount of money gathered during each performance, the problems that arose as a result of the performances taking place outdoors and the audience's reactions to the performances. This information is of interest and worthwhile and provides some insight into Mkhwane and Pearson's concept of Theatre of the Imagination as described in section 1.2.

1.6 Theatre of the Imagination as interculturalism and postcolonialism

This research will locate Pearson and Mkhwane's work within the field of intercultural performance (Bharucha 1993; Pavis 1996) and discuss the post-colonial markers present in the duo's work.

The view of post-colonial theatre upheld by Gilbert and Tompkins suggests that the productions resulting from Mkhwane and Pearson's collaboration are a form of social activism. Mkhwane and Pearson's style is indicative of post-colonial theatre in its awareness and incorporation of "post contact forms" (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 11). In addition to self-awareness is a desire within the performance to address the effects of colonialism (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 2) by exploring themes of xenophobia and community. Furthermore, the actors attempt to mirror South Africa's situation while at the same time offering alternatives to its current courses of action. Schechner (2003: 226) also refers to a form of interculturalism described as "hybrid" or "fusion" that "intentionally combines diverse cultural elements" (Schechner 2003: 226) in order to subvert the status quo and parody the structure of the society in question. These aspects of Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson's theatre, along with the practitioners' work with youth in the disadvantaged areas of South Africa (Von Brisinski 2003: 118), are all evidence of their role as social activists. It is this activism that contributes to the distinct nature of their theatre and informs the ultimate purpose of Theatre of the Imagination which is to change the world.

Interculturalism is defined as being "between or among two or more cultures. Intercultural performances may emphasize the similarities or differences between cultures" (Schechner 2002: 226). Therefore, intercultural theatre, or interculturalism, is theatre that explores the relationship between the performance modes of different cultures by combining them. The collaboration between Ellis Pearson, a white middle-class Christian with European origins,

and Bheki Mkhwane, a Zulu working-class man brought up within a traditional African belief system, is an example of interculturalism. The aim of interculturalism can be specific to the performers, for example, Barba and Savarese (1991: 188) argue that the outcome of interculturalism is to find performative elements common between the two cultures. This is an opinion not shared by Rustom Bharucha, who questions the possibility and integrity of interculturalism where an initial sense of commonality between two cultures is not present. Therefore, interculturalism and intercultural theatre practitioners should be concerned with determining the differences that exist between the two cultures and use those differences as a means of challenging and questioning the societies from which the performance styles originate (Bharucha 2005: pers. comm.). These issues will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 4.

In order to define Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson's theatre as intercultural, an examination of the potential dangers of interculturalism and the various criticisms levelled against it becomes necessary. The work of Rustom Bharucha (1993 and 2001) in particular, is a strong reaction against intercultural theatre initiated by Westerners. Bharucha cites the existing hierarchical structures as the root cause behind failed intercultural experiments, an example of this dynamic is found in South Africa with its history of inequality. It is suggested by Bharucha that intercultural exchanges between two people in most cases only benefit one person, in particular the person coming from a culture of historical advantage (Bharucha 1993: 2). In South Africa, this would be a white South African. For the purposes of this thesis it is necessary to determine whether this is true in the case of Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre.

Bharucha (2001: 30-31) argues that two cultures need to be equal in order for intercultural exchange to take place. He argues that we should be careful of assuming that cultures in the same situation are necessarily equal. Xenophobia, territoriality, fear and distrust of the 'other' suggest that communities and cultures will always look down on those different to themselves. Therefore, if one were to assume that Bharucha is correct, the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson is not intercultural exchange, but instead the unequal 'plundering' of an 'exotic' performance style, in this case the African performance styles that Mkhwane brings to the collaboration.

The purpose of Chapter 4 will be to consider where the collaboration of Mkhwane and Pearson stands in relation to the criticisms levelled against interculturalism by Bharucha and others. The nature of the duo's collaboration, the fact that they have worked together consistently for 16 years, their social conscience and the seemingly equal status of both performers suggest that Mkhwane and Pearson have created a form of interculturalism that provides an exception to Bharucha's rule that interculturalism by its nature is exploitative.

As has been established in this introduction (Chapter 1), the purpose of this research dissertation is to chart the development of the Theatre of the Imagination aesthetic (Chapter 2), examine three examples of its usage and manner in which it comments on South African society (Chapter 3) and finally discuss Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre in relation to various criticisms levelled against interculturalism and postcolonial markers of their work (Chapter 4).

Chapter 2

The development of Mkhwane and Pearson's aesthetic

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the theatre of Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson has not been well documented. There is no clear reason for this lack of scholarship. It is particularly troubling when one considers the influence they have had on various KwaZulu-Natal theatre practitioners such as Aldo Brincat, Greig Coetzee and others. The 2006 production *Tokoloshe Come and Go*, by Durban-based performers Liam Magner and Jacobus van Heerden, is an example of Mkhwane and Pearson's influence. It resembles a production by Mkhwane and Pearson in many ways, but with the emphasis placed solely on entertainment with little or no attempt to address socio-political and cultural issues.

Tokoloshe Come and Go, like much of Mkhwane and Pearson's Sinako sequence, focuses on the inhabitants of a South African rural village, yet while Mkhwane and Pearson are concerned with the inner workings of the community and rely on a certain amount of political intrigue in order to create tension, the members of Magner and Van Heerden's community are peripheral to the humour of the piece. It is evident also that Mkhwane and Pearson have a clearer understanding of the structures and traditions of Zulu communities. Magner and Van Heerden's depiction of tribal life is less authentic, often being reminiscent of a Hollywood adventure film. This lurid depiction works within the context of the piece, which places a great deal of emphasis on the fantasy elements.

Despite these differences, *Tokoloshe Come and Go* resembles Mkhwane and Pearson's work primarily through Magner and Van Heerden's understanding and implementation of the principles of traditional storytelling. Like Mkhwane and Pearson, Magner and Van Heerden make use of stock characters and when reduced to its core, the plot is deceptively simplistic. In addition, the use of motifs and repetition in *Tokoloshe Come and Go* and Mkhwane and Pearson's work, is similar. Both duos make a point of breaking character in order to comment, often for comedic effect, on the plot or a specific character. It is worth noting, however, that this convention is common in South African comedy as a whole.

Magner and Van Heerden form a small percentage of the total number of theatre practitioners currently working in South Africa. However, the similarities between their work and that of Mkhwane and Pearson and the generally positive reception I witnessed at the 2006 Grahamstown National Arts Festival towards *Tokoloshe Come and Go*, suggest that we will begin to see more theatre of a similar nature emerge. It also implies that Mkhwane and Pearson's style of theatre is still appreciated by South African audiences.

The nature of Mkhwane and Pearson's work may throw light on the reason why it has not attracted scholarly attention. I feel it has a great deal to do with their work being perceived as primarily for children. Mkhwane and Pearson offer their work to schools, often through the medium of local newspapers, and this could create the perception among the general public that their work is not designed with adults in mind and therefore of little value as far as research is concerned. Bett Pacey draws attention to the public perception of street theatre by recording comments such as "Is this a show?" (Pacey 2004: 161) and "Does one have to pay?" (Pacey 2004: 161). It is the second question in particular that best represents the public's perception of this form of theatre. By offering their work free, Mkhwane and Pearson could be calling its worth into question. An audience member who is offered a free performance would be justified in speculating as to why the performance is free. This is an understandable misconception. Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre also seems tailor-made for children. The plots are simple, characterizations are broad and pratfalls are used in great abundance. Additionally, the audience participation is clearly designed with children in mind with the audience being asked to create sounds and noises similar to those used in storytelling. However, a deeper analysis of Mkhwane and Pearson's work is needed in order to unpack the multiple layers and aesthetic influences present in their productions. Far from being simply children's theatre, Mkhwane and Pearson's plays deal with various themes of great relevance to all South Africans.

In addition to the lack of scholarly research, there exist very few lengthy reviews of Mkhwane and Pearson's work: for the most part those available are cursory. This is the possible result of potential prejudices towards street theatre where no admission fee is charged. Theatre reviews often act as consumer advisors, informing potential theatre-goers as to whether the play they wish to watch is worth their money. Some would argue that reviewing street theatre cannot be justified and is a waste of the reviewing medium. That their theatre is free and takes place out-of-doors, speaks to an aesthetic informed by accessibility

and idealistic notions of freedom. Also important is the fact that though their work remains to a great extent under-researched, Mkhwane and Pearson have become a brand for the 'rainbow nation', used on posters (for example, that advertising the South African National Arts Festival in 2001) and in the press (for example, on the Arts Page of Pietermaritzburg's local paper *The Witness*), to show racial harmony and the ideals of collaboration.

Because Mkhwane and Pearson's productions are often free, there is very little personal investment on the part of the viewers. They are simply required to attend the show and be attentive for its duration (although even the latter is often too much of a commitment for some). This lack of investment means that some would see a review of Mkhwane and Pearson's work as unnecessary, as a viewer who did not enjoy their work, would only have lost time and not money.

The lack of scholarship makes it necessary to discuss the development of Mkhwane and Pearson's aesthetic in detail. This chapter will go some way towards addressing the lack of scholarship by examining Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson's careers and influences prior to the formation of their collaboration and the early work that came out of that partnership. The first section of this chapter will involve a close study of the different influences that shaped the development of Bheki Mkhwane's theatrical method. This will be followed by a similar study of Ellis Pearson, prior to forming the collaboration with Mkhwane. The final section of this chapter will deal with the earlier pieces developed by Mkhwane and Pearson before the Sinako village sequence of plays, to be examined in the next chapter.

2.1 Bheki Mkhwane

Bheki Mkhwane, like Ellis Pearson, was born in KwaZulu-Natal and spent a great deal of his developmental years in the province. Their decision to use KwaZulu-Natal as their base of operations suggests a commitment to the province on the part of the two men. While they perform their work throughout the country, they have chosen to live and rehearse in KwaZulu-Natal.

Bheki Mkhwane's upbringing has had a profound influence not only on his aesthetic, but also acts as the basis for many of the themes he chooses to explore with Ellis Pearson and in his solo work. Like most Zulu children living in the townships of KwaZulu-Natal, Mkhwane's

upbringing was influenced by a mixture of traditional Zulu beliefs, Christian values and contemporary thought (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). The potential for conflict within such a system, where modern viewpoints are expected to fit within a traditional belief structure, is great. This struggle could take an external or internalized form and is a common aspect of Mkhwane and Pearson's work. In fact, it is the overriding theme in one of Bheki Mkhwane's solo theatre pieces, *Born Thru The Nose* in which the lead character, Caiphus Majozi, is in a predicament. His wife is pregnant and two weeks overdue. She insists on having a caesarean section; however, Caiphus's grandmother believes that the delay in birth is a message from the Ancestors, one that Caiphus ignores at his and his wife's peril. Mkhwane, himself a contemporary South African who still maintains his traditional beliefs, exemplifies this struggle. An awareness of and respect for the Ancestors is found in all of Mkhwane and Pearson's Sinako village plays, most overtly in *Skadonk!* which will be dealt with in the next chapter.

In addition to traditional beliefs, Mkhwane has brought into the collaboration with Pearson, an awareness and utilisation of traditional African performance methods that have their origins in pre-colonial South Africa. These performance forms include storytelling, singing, dancing and praise poetry. The forms are used as narrative devices and to create a sense of authenticity, particularly in the plays that involve the people live in the village of Sinako.

The manner in which the narratives devised by Mkhwane and Pearson unfold, suggests an awareness on the part of the performers of the traditions of Southern African storytelling. As in storytelling, or *inganekwane*, Mkhwane and Pearson's narratives act as morality tales, usually extolling a particular virtue over vice. Furthermore, storytelling involves "formulae used by both the narrator and audience for starting and ending folk-tales" (Hutchison 2004: 320). These formulae may take the form of a song or action. Mkhwane and Pearson often begin each performance in much the same way: the performers emerge from behind a bush, creating sounds and eventually lead the audience in a verse. The use of the traditional storytelling template is by no means revolutionary; indeed, Athol Fugard, Barney Simon and Mbongeni Ngema have all made use of traditional storytelling as a narrative framework in devising their early work (Hutchison 2004: 321). A great deal of the collaborative theatre of the 1970s and 1980s and contemporary township theatre follows the basic formulae of traditional storytelling.

Praise-singing, another indigenous performance form, is also employed by Mkhwane and Pearson in devising their theatre. Hutchison defines praise-singing as “poetry charged with emotion possessing a strong rhythm created by phase structure and pauses” (Hutchison 2004: 326). It is used “to praise or extol, a person or thing; the Zulu manner of expressing one’s gratitude being to ‘praise’ the giver or his gift – hence, give thanks ... worship, offer sacrifice to, pray to as to the *amaDhlozi* or ancestral spirits” (Hutchison 2004: 326-7). While praise-singing is a highly formalized performance form, requiring a great deal of practice and skill (Hutchison 2004: 328), in the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson the convention of praise-singing is used either as a means of advancing the story or for comedic effect.

Unlike Ellis Pearson, Bheki Mkhwane received no formalised training, at least in the Western tradition. Instead, he developed his talents during his work with various informal township theatre companies during his youth (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). Unlike Pearson, whose formal training could be described as Euro-centric, Mkhwane’s training was primarily the result of his involvement in various semi-professional Township Theatre groups. As a result, Mkhwane brings to the collaboration with Pearson, the aesthetics of the township theatre of Gibson Kente, the collaborative theatre of Barney Simon and the poor theatre aesthetic. It is this last form that seems to permeate most aspects of South African theatre (Kruger 1999: 154).

The work of Gibson Kente, including the aesthetic of his township musicals, has had a profound affect on Mkhwane’s development as a performer and theatre devisor. This is obvious when one observes the manner in which Mkhwane presents himself on stage and his approach to character.

Kente has been responsible for many of the township musicals that have been a constant presence in South African theatre. Kente’s musicals came about as a result of the success of the musical *King Kong* which premiered in South Africa in 1959. It tells the tragic story of the boxer Ezekiel ‘King Kong’ Dhlamini. The musical was scripted and directed by Whites, Harry Bloom and Leon Gluckman respectively. The performers and musicians on the other hand were Black, while the music was composed by Todd Matshikiza. Although it did depict the hardships of Black South Africans to a certain degree, the musical was primarily an exploitation by Whites of the vibrant musical scene of the Black townships. It was, however, a great success and was a source of inspiration for Kente whose musicals were a “synthesis of

narrative, mime, movement, vocal dramatics, music and dance found in traditional oral literary performance into a township melodrama using urban experience and resources” (Orkin 1991: 121). It is these elements that have found their way into the work of Mkhwane and Pearson. Their work shares similarities with Kente’s work in its use of traditional African performance modes and Western theatrical techniques.

Furthermore, the performers Kente employed and trained developed a particular style that is also evident in Mkhwane’s work. Because Kente’s work was performed predominantly in community halls with rudimentary facilities and large audiences, it was necessary for the actors involved to develop a highly stylised, declamatory method of performance. Actors would often face the audiences with chests thrust forward and deliver their lines with a great deal of volume and enthusiasm. The characters, largely as a result of Kente’s writing style, were simplified and based on stock characters. Finally, character itself was often portrayed through physical means. For example, a limp would be pronounced by the actor in order to suggest aspects of the character. All of these elements are present in Mkhwane and Pearson’s theatre. The style of Kente’s work is a result of the emphasis on the physical that tends to inform most aspects of South African performance (Fleishman 1997). Mark Fleishman argues that “the physical body in South Africa is a source of primary meaning” (Fleishman 1997: 201). In South African theatre the body: “constantly changing and re-inventing itself is a separate stream of text running alongside and interweaving with the words” (Fleishman 1997: 202). It is for this reason that Kente places so much emphasis on the physical body as a means of expression. In South African performance the physical text is never subordinate to the written or spoken text. Therefore the internal turmoil of a character is presented in an elevated physical manner, in contrast to the more Western approach, of expressing emotion on stage through speaking the written word. The physicality present in South African theatre has given rise to a form of theatre that is not only indicative of the nation’s aesthetic sensibilities, but also informs Mkhwane and Pearson’s work.

South African theatre is often associated with protest theatre. There is a tendency, however, to categorize politically-informed plays such as *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* and *Woza Albert*, as examples of protest theatre. This is an incorrect association, for although the plays are constructed around themes of oppression under the apartheid regime, they are not examples of this form of theatre. Protest theatre as it existed in the 1970s and 1980s had very little merit beyond its aggressively anti-apartheid stance. Its content was often determined by the

African National Congress (ANC) culture desk (Sachs 1991: 3). Far from being theatrically rich and detailed, protest theatre had more in common with Agit-prop theatre in that it was simplistic, involved to a large degree the shouting of slogans and offered a simplified view of the struggle for liberation. Theatre pieces such as *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* and *Woza Albert* are examples of collaborative theatre. They were the result of the collaboration between White and Black South African theatre practitioners. While these plays were political and anti-apartheid, they emphasised the theatrical over the political.

The obvious parallel between the collaborative theatre of the 1970s and the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson is the use of the poor theatre aesthetic. With the relative poverty of most Black South Africans at the time, a theatre form that required minimal props and costumes and relied mainly on the versatility of the performer had understandable benefits. Additionally, the reliance poor theatre has on the physical body of the performer lends itself to a country such as South Africa, where practitioners wishing to create theatre that is universal, need to transcend the boundaries resulting from our multitude of languages. The economic benefits of poor theatre in the South African context should be apparent. More importantly, however, the embracing of the principles of poor theatre by Collaborative Theatre makers is in itself an act of defiance. With poor theatre, the written text is less important than the actual performance of the text. While the apartheid government could, and often did, censor written works, a play without a written script and in which the language was physical, could not be so easily suppressed. Therefore the poor theatre aesthetic ensured that theatre critical of the government would be seen. Another aspect of poor theatre that proved attractive to theatre practitioners of the time was the emphasis on the body of the actor as the primary means of expression. Under apartheid the body had become politicized, and with apartheid's categorizing of the population based on appearance, a form of theatre that celebrated the body, regardless of the colour of its skin, had appeal because it provided performers with an opportunity to celebrate the bodies which the apartheid government deemed abhorrent.

2.2 Ellis Pearson

Pearson studied for two years at the International School Theatre School Jacques Lecoq (also called the Jacques Lecoq School or the International Theatre School). The training he received at the school has had a profound influence on the development of the aesthetic of the

Theatre of the Imagination. The work of Lecoq has influenced many South African performers, namely Andrew Buckland, Lionel Newton, Sylvaine Strike and James Cunningham to name but a few. The appeal of the Lecoq approach to performance is largely a result of the manner in which it can be integrated into the poor theatre aesthetic. It is also popular in South Africa due to its compatibility with the inherent physicality found in African performance, which has been discussed earlier with relation to Bheki Mkhwane.

The training Pearson received at the Lecoq School involved many aspects of physical performance, such as juggling, mime, dance, acrobatics and clowning. It is also my belief that his work at the school influenced the collaborative nature of his work with Mkhwane because a substantial percentage of the training received at the school, involves collaboration. For the second year of the two-year course offered at the school, students are placed into groups and instructed to create theatre. The process whereby students are placed in a situation in which teamwork is crucial to its success, has developed in Pearson an ability to work well within the collaborative framework. For this reason Pearson does not write scripts, instead the plays he and Mkhwane develop are created through workshopping.

Clowning plays an important role in the manner in which Pearson approaches performance. Lecoq was interested in training actors to find the clown that is present in all of us (Murray 2003: 62). He believed that by accessing the inner clown, we would “come to terms with the more ridiculous – and therefore vulnerable – dimensions of our personality” (Murray 2003: 62). Furthermore clowns, like the medieval jesters, are allowed to state truths in a subversive manner through the use of humour, in much the same way that Pearson does through his theatre.

Whilst undergoing training in *commedia dell'arte* at the Jacques Lecoq School, Pearson focused on the Arlecchino or Harlequin character. Arlecchino is the fool of *commedia dell'arte*, more often than not found causing mischief, not necessarily through any fault of his own. He acts as the audience's connection between themselves and the story and characters. Arlecchino is often the most identifiable and sympathetic character and acts as the audience's eyes throughout *commedia dell'arte* productions. He is seemingly good-natured and well-intentioned, while at the same time idiotic and for the most part ineffectual. When he tries, he fails and he succeeds only by accident (Rudlin 2000: 78-79). Arlecchino is portrayed as being simple, with moments of genius, “his stupidity was intermittently relieved by flashes of

shrewd wit” (Ducharte 1966: 124). In the portrayal of his leading roles, Pearson often appears to be channelling the character of Arlecchino.

Commedia dell'arte, despite or perhaps as a counterweight to its improvisatory nature, is highly formalised. While performers are encouraged to create their own scenarios, the manner in which they are performed is for the most part set. The characters of *commedia dell'arte* are stock characters often resembling various narrative archetypes, such as young lovers, servants, misers and soldiers (Rudlin 2000: 62). It is performed by troupes with each performer specialising in one character. As mentioned above, *commedia dell'arte* productions are improvised. The improvisations are often based on existing scenarios, although these scenarios may also be created by the troupe (Rudlin 2000: 51). *Commedia dell'arte* is characterised by its vivid and colourful costumes, its use of gymnastics, word-play, puns, broad characters, its audience involvement, its use of gesture and vulgar and low comedy. The training Pearson received in *commedia dell'arte* has contributed to the manner in which humour is used in the plays he creates with Mkhwane.

The Lecoq School also emphasises the importance of universal communication (Murray 2003: 124), particularly through the use of the body. Lecoq teaches that the movement of a human and the emotions and actions that the movement implies are the fundamental languages of theatre. This awareness of the body and its power as a communicative tool is central to Pearson's work as a theatre maker.

2.3 The Loft Theatre Company and Nicholas Ellenbogen

The role Ellis Pearson had in the development of Nicholas Ellenbogen's theatrical aesthetic is explored by Baxter and Aitchison (2006). The purpose of this section, however, is to determine how working with Nicholas Ellenbogen influenced the development of Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson's theatrical aesthetic.

Nicholas Ellenbogen, like Ellis Pearson, studied at the Lecoq School. Although his time at the school was brief (Baxter and Aitchison 2006: 48), it seems to have had a lasting effect when one considers the style of theatre he continues to create. While artistic director of the Loft Theatre Company, Ellenbogen occasionally created environmental plays but it was only after he formed the company called Theatre for Africa that he was able to make

environmental issues his focus. The majority of Ellenbogen's plays, particularly those created under the banner of Theatre for Africa, are exemplified by their strong environmental message and reliance on his performers' convincing physical portrayals of animals.

The first Loft collaboration between Ellenbogen and Pearson was *Kwamanzi*. This production, "a precursor of the current trend towards physical theatre" (Baxter and Aitchison 2006: 51), depicted the various animals that make use of and pass by a waterhole in the African savannah. In the play the animals are presented in as true to life a manner as possible, to the point where the play takes on the form of a wildlife documentary (Baxter and Aitchison 2006: 55). The convincing portrayal of the animals in *Kwamanzi*, and indeed in many of Ellenbogen's environmental plays, is a result of the Lecoq training he and Pearson received. Pearson sums up this training:

The main thing that Lecoq was teaching us was, don't try and act the mountain, be the mountain, don't try and act the eagle, be the eagle, don't try and act a human doctor in a hospital, be a doctor, once again a sangoma takes a person and they become that. You become the snake; you feel what it is like to experience the spirit, the essence, of that creature, that human being, that thing, that rock, that element of nature (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.).

This process of finding the essence of the animal was the focus of early *Kwamanzi* rehearsals where the performers, under the guidance of Pearson, would observe animals and develop the animal characters outdoors.

The series of *Raiders* plays, now in its sixteenth incarnation, began with *Raiders of the Lost Aardvark* which was directed by Ellenbogen. It featured Pearson as the heroic character, Salty Hepburn, with Ellenbogen assuming many supporting roles. The *Raiders* plays are characterised by obvious verbal jokes, fast pace, unique use of props, physical humour, and an action movie aesthetic. On the surface, the *Raiders* series offers nothing more than frivolous entertainment; however, amongst the puns and sight gags there is an environmental message in most of the productions. This could be ascribed to Ellenbogen's role in their creation, although Pearson also has strong feelings about environmentalism.

It is uncertain who is most responsible for the style of *Raiders of the Lost Aardvark*. Whether it is the result of an equal collaboration between Ellenbogen and Pearson or not is impossible to say. Both parties offer little information on this question. Certainly, some characteristics of *Raiders of the Lost Aardvark* have found their way into Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre.

The *Raiders* series is known by its fans for its inventive use of props. In the *Raiders* productions, anything is possible insofar as props are concerned. The role and function of props is never fixed in these productions. An umbrella is not only an umbrella; it can be used by the performers as a wheel on a car, a hot air balloon, a helicopter or sword. The concept of malleable props seems to have carried over into Pearson's subsequent work. Many of the props used in Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre are not used for their original purpose.

Pearson, who is responsible for the selection and manufacture of the props in his work with Mkhwane, uses them in a different way to Ellenbogen. In the *Raiders* series, the props are a crucial part of the experience. Much of the humour is derived from the imaginative manner in which the props are used, to the point where the play becomes about the props. Pearson, on the other hand, uses props primarily as a means of developing a narrative, or to put it another way, the humour that is derived from the absurd prop usage is incidental to the narrative and props are used only when necessary.

It is difficult to determine whether Pearson's imaginative prop usage is a direct result of his previous collaborations with Ellenbogen, or vice versa. Imaginative props use has its origins in certain aspects of clowning, specifically, absurd clowning. In this school of clowning, the humour is derived from the absurdity of the situations and the manner in which the clown reacts to them. These situations and the clown's reactions to them often include using props in an increasingly absurd manner, an example being a clown using a rake to comb his hair (Lecoq 2000: 161). Absurd clowning is taught at the Lecoq School attended by both Pearson and Ellenbogen. The latter has, however, stated that he was introduced to a new way of using props by Pearson (Baxter and Aitchison 2006: 60).

Another staple of the *Raiders* series is its reliance on 'gizmos'. The gizmos that feature in *Raiders* plays are props constructed with a specific function in mind. These props often have a homemade feel and have an element of the spectacular about them. *Raiders 14* featured a plane constructed from a tea trolley and metal pipes with an umbrella as the propeller.

Mkhwane and Pearson also make liberal use of gizmos in their theatre. These gizmos can include anything from an exhaust pipe set to explode at an appropriate moment, to a musical instrument comprised of a violin and a gramophone horn. The presence of these gizmos in the theatre of Ellenbogen and of Mkhwane and Pearson is a result of Pearson's influence. Pearson learnt magic as a child and sees the gizmos as a form of magic and an expression of the subconscious desire for real magic in our lives (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.).

Ellenbogen and Pearson ultimately parted ways, according to Pearson for geographical reasons. From its inception, the Theatre for Africa Company that Ellenbogen created was based in Johannesburg and although Pearson lived in the city during Theatre for Africa's initial years, he felt that his home was in KwaZulu-Natal (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.).

There is debate as to whether or not Ellenbogen is solely responsible for the particular aesthetic of the environmental plays of the Loft and his later work with the *Raiders* series and Theatre for Africa. Because of Pearson's degree of involvement in the development of *Kwamanzi* and *Horn of Sorrow*, not to mention the first *Raiders*, the question arises of who should be given the credit. Neither Pearson nor Ellenbogen willingly claims sole responsibility but neither do they diminish their own contribution. When asked about his level of involvement, Pearson is evasive, choosing instead to discuss the frustrations he faced attempting to inspire a sense of discipline in the cast of *Kwamanzi* (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.).

2.4 Influence of the *Raiders* series on the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson

The *Raiders* series is influenced by action movies (Baxter and Aitchison 2006: 60). This influence can be seen in its stock characters, fast pace, and emphasis on excitement over edification. The use of action movie staples is evident in Mkhwane and Pearson's work, in one instance in particular: in *A Boy Called Rubbish*, the killing of Rubbish by the police seems to suggest the overused slow motion and excessively bloody deaths of Hong Kong action films. Furthermore, Mkhwane and Pearson resort to explosion and fire as a means of grabbing the audience's attention, another action film staple, and seemingly place the audience in harm's way, either by throwing fake bricks or threatening to empty buckets of water into the crowd in a manner reminiscent of clowning.

The *Raiders* series is known for its reliance on audience participation. While the level of audience participation in Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre is found to a lesser degree than in the *Raiders* series, it still follows the same model as the *Raiders* series. In *Raiders*, a female audience member often takes the role of the heroine of the piece. While no audience member has such a large role in Mkhwane and Pearson's plays, audience members are often used as incidental and minor characters. They are used *en masse* in *Raiders*, in one instance as an angry crowd chasing the hero. No such precedent exists in Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre. This may have more to do with the subject matter of the performers' work than anything else. Whereas *Raiders* is entertainment with a message, Mkhwane and Pearson's work is a message that happens to be entertaining.

The *Raiders* series is also known for its element of danger. The audience is often threatened with the possibility of any number of unpleasant events. These can come in the form of water, fireworks or simply from the actors themselves. This element of potential danger is a major contributor to the series' entertainment factor but entertainment for its own sake is common and likely to have a limited appeal. The inclusion of the possibility of danger for the actors and audience, whether fulfilled or not, adds a level of unpredictability not common in mainstream commercial theatre. The aspect of danger also allows the audience to connect on a deeper level with the performers. As the danger is shared, so is the experience. A sense of danger is common in Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre. However the forms it takes can differ from the *Raiders* series. As in *Raiders*, Mkhwane and Pearson will often threaten to douse the audience with a large bucket of water. While the threat is never actualised, the performers do splash water at the audience, providing danger without the consequences, in this case wet clothes and possibly a cold.

2.5 Mkhwane and Pearson at the Loft Theatre Company

Mkhwane and Pearson met whilst both were members of the Loft Theatre Company. Pearson, at this point, was already an established member and Master of Movement for the company. The first production they worked on together during their time at the Loft was *Exodus* (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). Mkhwane and Pearson state that Ellenbogen had a tendency to offer the black performers only the more physical roles and although they were occasionally offered parts in classical productions, these were often as minor characters

(Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). Whether this was as a result of Ellenbogen's own bias or as a result of pressure from moral watchdogs at the time is uncertain.

An element of danger not found in the *Raiders* series but common in Ellenbogen's physical theatre, specifically *Kwamanzi* and *Horn of Sorrow*, is the physical peril the performers place themselves in. Some of the animals depicted in *Kwamanzi* and *Horn of Sorrow* require the performers to form complex moving physical structures that rely solely on the strength of those involved in their creation. This element of danger contributes to the spectacle of the production, and provides the audience with something they might theoretically be unable or unwilling to create themselves. Mkhwane and Pearson also have a tendency to place themselves in physical danger for the edification of the audience. A perfect example of this is *Squawk* (alternatively titled *Amazwi Omoya*): the actors create various birds, such as the ostrich, by placing themselves into physical arrangements that are difficult to maintain and are potentially dangerous.

Mkhwane and Pearson continue to rehearse outdoors, using their environment for inspiration. On rehearsing outdoors, Mkhwane says, "sometimes we get stuck and we see something there [he gestures] and straight away that something will inspire us" (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). Pearson elaborates further: "nature has got it all ... if you are looking for rhythm, for stories, for form, for colour, for texture, if you are looking for life, if you are looking for death ... in a deeper sense, nature contains it all" (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). Drawing on nature for inspiration seems a natural continuation of Mkhwane and Pearson's work with Ellenbogen. One could argue that the *commedia dell'arte* training technique of creating a character by ascribing animal attributes to it could have contributed to the use of nature as inspiration. Ellenbogen's emphasis on the plight of animals has carried over into Mkhwane and Pearson's work. Two notable examples are *Squawk* and *Wave*, which focus on the trials of birds and elephants respectively. In the Loft Theatre Company and Theatre for Africa's environmental productions, the animals were, for the most part, lacking in human characteristics. A notable exception is the Vulture character in *Horn of Sorrow*, played by Pearson in the original production, which acts as a narrator, interspersing his narration of the play with comical and graphic descriptions of his eating habits.

2.6 Mkhwane and Pearson: Their early work together and *Wave*

Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson have created a form of theatre that in many ways resembles South African collaborative theatre. While Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre does not address the evils of apartheid (although the legacy of apartheid is addressed, albeit indirectly) it, like collaborative theatre, manages to be both issue-based and entertaining. Mkhwane and Pearson have consistently remained concerned with addressing economic, environmental and social issues in all of their plays. Although the target of their criticism is less focused, the level of confrontation is still comparable to that of collaborative theatre.

As with collaborative theatre, the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson makes strong use of the Poor Theatre aesthetic. The stories Mkhwane and Pearson devise, with multitudes of characters, sweeping imagery and varying settings, are designed for poor theatre.

The South African theatre aesthetic is difficult to determine. While it would be foolish to assume that the many theatrical forms in South Africa could be placed into a unifying category, it is possible to determine certain characteristics common to all forms of South African theatre. The first step towards determining this aesthetic involves deciding exactly what constitutes South African theatre. It has already been stated that South African theatre is post-colonial, therefore let us assume that all forms of pre-colonial South African performance types are not included. By this same reasoning we can assume that direct interpretations of Western texts are also not included as they do not acknowledge an African influence. Eliminating these two performance types leaves three major categories of South African theatre, which Hauptfleisch, defines as "indigenous, Western elite" texts written by South African playwrights, "indigenous, 'alternative' Western" which is Brechtian and Grotowskian theatre that deviates from the mainstream and "indigenous, hybrid" which has already been discussed (Hauptfleisch 1997: 49).

When looking at the theatre found within these three categories, certain trends begin to emerge. Within most South African theatre there exists an awareness and utilization of poor theatre techniques, whether it is a crucial aspect of the performance, as is the case with the physical theatre typified by Andrew Buckland, or less obvious, as in the one-man shows of Greig Coetzee. There are exceptions, such as the work of Paul Slabolepszy, who rarely employs poor theatre techniques, if at all. As has been mentioned, the use of poor theatre in

the South African aesthetic is primarily a result of actors and directors being unable to access the resources available to practitioners in first world countries. However another reason for the wholesale incorporation of the poor theatre aesthetic is the inherent physicality found in African theatre (Fleishman 1997).

While very little actual documented reports of Mkhwane and Pearson's work are available, I have been fortunate enough to have been an audience member in many of the plays in the performers' repertoire, and on one memorable occasion an actual participant. Therefore the descriptions of Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre will be based on my own accounts and some reviews of their work in scholarly journals.

The following section describes Mkhwane and Pearson's aesthetic. During the course of this analysis I shall make reference to some of the early works of Mkhwane and Pearson, namely, *A Boy Called Rubbish* and *Squawk*. These works act as good examples of the manner in which Mkhwane and Pearson have developed their particular style, but also show the evolution of their thematic preoccupations. I will also make reference to *Wave* which is one of Mkhwane and Pearson's more recent works; however, it does not fit thematically within their current theatrical output as it is the only piece of recent years that does not involve the inhabitants of the village of Sinako.

A Boy Called Rubbish tells the story of a young boy called Rubbish who lives with an abusive mother-figure. He decides to run away and the play follows his exploits as he attempts to find a means of staying alive. The play is a comment on the plight of street children in South Africa. In *Squawk*, all the birds of the world meet in order to develop and vote on a song that will bring peace to the world. Unfortunately infighting, double-dealing and distrust among the birds threatens to disrupt the talks. Eventually the birds are able to look past their differences and a song is chosen. *Squawk* acts as an allegory of the events of the CODESA (Convention for a Democratic South Africa) negotiations for the new Constitution of South Africa. *Wave* is Mkhwane and Pearson's response to the horrific consequences of the tsunami that occurred in 2004. The play focuses on the plight of two elephants that survive the disaster. The elephants inform the viewers of their lives prior to the event and it ends with them assisting in the clearing up of the destruction left by the wave.

Any performance of the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson is unmistakable to an initiate. All of the duo's performances take place outside if the weather permits. The decision to perform outside is explained by the performers in an unpublished interview as partly pragmatic, partly creative (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). Whilst performing outside frees the performers from certain financial burdens, it also adds what they describe as a "certain quality" (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). This special quality is elaborated upon further by Pearson: "In nature, to be in the presence of nature brings a special quality that enables the audience to enter into another world more easily" (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). While Mkhwane and Pearson do work in the disadvantaged communities of South Africa, for the most part, based on my observations of the demographics attending their performances, their audiences could be described as middle class. Placing an audience used to theatrical performances taking place on an indoor stage, in the open air, could be the root of that "certain quality" Pearson speaks of. By working outdoors, with the audience seated on the ground in a circle around the actors, Mkhwane and Pearson have created a performance space not bound by the usual restrictions found in traditional Western theatre. By performing their plays outside, Mkhwane and Pearson create an informal atmosphere. In theatre that takes place indoors, the audience and the actors are separated, not only by physical distance, but also by theatrical devices, such as lighting and pre-recorded sound, whereas in Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre the audience has a role in the actual progress of the play. This feeling is expressed by Mkhwane:

When we walk in there we are initiators. We are not there so you can watch Mkhwane and Pearson, no, we are there to solve the problem. As we are telling a story we are telling the story along with the audience. Because if a community was solving a problem there would be a raising of hands and a person would come up with a solution. That's exactly what we're trying to achieve. It's all of us going telling a story and all of us going through a certain experience. And from that the audience member goes away with a deeper meaning, rather than entertainment. Those people who participate, they don't forget (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.).

It is possible for the audience to influence a play's narrative progress. Ultimately, however, for the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson, the narrative of the play is predetermined, and the audience's involvement, insofar as determining the eventual outcome of the story, is minimal

at best. For the most part, the audience participation found in Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre often involves an audience member being used for a small and incidental character. This is the case in *Wave* in which two audience members take on the role of a recently married couple about to take an elephant ride.

Audience members can also be used as stagehands, assisting the actors with the handling or setting up of props and a more general form of audience interaction is found in the various 'shock tactics' the performers resort to in their plays. A good example involves the stealing of an audience member's sock, placing it in a bucket and seemingly, while the sock is not actually burnt, setting it alight. Aside from a genuinely relaxed and open rapport with the audience and the rejection of the fourth wall convention, there is no other form of audience participation found in Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre.

The desire for audience involvement is a natural by-product of the performers' desire to create theatre that instils in the participants a strong sense of community, a sense of community that Mkhwane and Pearson see in the religious and social practices of traditional South African communities. This sense of community is something that Mkhwane and Pearson believe that South Africa as a society is losing and needs to connect with again. This sentiment is confirmed by the performers:

It is a conscious desire to get back to the deeper ways, the ways things used to be. The way people would gather around a piano to sing songs together, or communities would gather to solve a problem. We have lost that because of the modern world (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.).

One of the primary aims of the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson is to reaffirm the importance of community in an audience isolated from itself by modern technology: 'there is a lot of technology that has come in, and you can see our people are swallowed by that, and when they are in there you see them losing themselves' (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). As has been mentioned, the influence for this drive for communal existence is traditional black South African rural life. Examples of this are found in the traditional communities of the Xhosa and the Zulu.

The affirmation of the sense of community is deepened by the additional sense of the performance as ritual. As a sacred space the outdoor performance space is demarcated by a circle of flour. Beyond being merely a cost-effective and temporary means of allocating a performance space, according to the performers, the flour has a special significance: "Theatre is food for the soul, so if you bring in the flour, which is food and it plays a role in creating, it has a sacred meaning" (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). The "sacred meaning" that Mkhwane refers to, could relate to the role of food in ritual and ceremony, particularly the act of taking communion (the eating of bread) in the Christian faith, and the sacrificing of a goat to the ancestors and the subsequent feasting on the animal in traditional African faiths. The idea of the play as ritual is encouraged by Mkhwane and Pearson who, unlike other performers, encourage the audience to watch the actors prepare before a performance, a practice common in street theatre. The performers believe that the watching of the preparations before a play is interesting on a surface level: "If we are late for some reason or people are early we never mind them watching us set up, we feel that the preparing of the space is important and is interesting to watch. So we love it when kids watch us prepare the space" (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.). They also believe that it strengthens the sense of the performance as a ritual: "People who are coming early to our performances are always feeling it. Ellis trying to draw that circle - its part of a ritual as well. But it could easily become part of our show' (Mkhwane and Pearson 2004: pers. comm.).

Certain themes are common in the theatre of Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson, humanity's destructive effect on nature, being an obvious one. Other themes that are explored in their work are those of xenophobia, colonialism, corruption, foreign aid, terrorism, cultural meetings and clashes, and the importance of community.

One example of the manner in which the narrative of a play can change is found in *A Boy Called Rubbish* in which, after the title character is shot and killed by police in a stylised fashion reminiscent of various Hollywood action films, the audience is asked if it wants the play to end in such a downbeat manner. If the audience answers in the negative, the scene is replayed with Rubbish escaping with his life, followed by a suitably happy ending. While the audience could demand the sadder ending, it seems unlikely considering that the majority of Mkhwane and Pearson's plays are performed to audiences predominantly made up of children.

Certain techniques that Mkhwane and Pearson employ for creating a sense of danger, go beyond those common in *Raiders*. A scene from *A Boy Called Rubbish* has the title character helping another character lay some bricks. Initially, Rubbish throws the bricks to the builder; however, in a moment of distraction one of the bricks is thrown into the audience. While the performers are aware that the brick is fake (painted polystyrene), the audience is not. The moment where the brick is thrown into the audience is both horrifying and exhilarating, and is a rare moment of wicked black humour not found anywhere else in Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre. By suggesting the possibility of this level of danger early in the play, the performers are able to hold the audience's attention for its duration.

Certain similarities exist between Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre and *commedia dell'arte*. Mkhwane and Pearson dispense with a built stage altogether, instead choosing to perform on open grass, with the performance space demarcated by a line of dry flour. However, performing outside results in the same benefits the *commedia dell'arte* troupes received, namely, an informal atmosphere and an inviting prospect for passers-by. *Commedia dell'arte* has participative elements that are similar to those used in Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre. Stages specifically designed for *commedia dell'arte* troupes were raised, with ladders on either side. These ladders could be used by the performers as a means of allowing interaction with the audience as "audience address, and even mingling with the audience [was] common" (Trethewey 1993: 71). While mingling with the audience often occurs in Mkhwane and Pearson's work, the performers are at the same level as the audience, and only need to step out of the flour circle to interact.

Traditionally, *commedia dell'arte* would have been performed outdoors. Originally, it was performed by troupes of actors that would travel from town to town. While this offered the actors a better chance of exposure and financial gain, it also meant that the presence of a theatre was not guaranteed. For this reason, the troupe would travel with a portable stage (Duchartre 1996: 17). While being a necessary evil, this form of staging also resulted in unexpected benefits, one being an informal atmosphere and another by performing outside, the actors had the opportunity to entice passers-by into watching the show

Embracing the open-air performance style of *commedia dell'arte* lends itself well to the aims and goals of Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre. Mkhwane and Pearson hope to create theatre that is inclusive of the audience and ideally results in a strong sense of community among the

all the participants. By performing outdoors, often with no cover charge, Mkhwane and Pearson bring themselves closer to achieving this goal.

One type of audience interaction that seems to have carried over from *commedia dell'arte* to Mkhwane and Pearson's work is the "frank, mocking destruction of illusion" (Trethewey 1993: 73) that occurs when "[i]n the middle of performance actors walk into the audience when other actors are speaking to them" (Trethewey 1993: 73). This is a device used often by Mkhwane and Pearson. Its function differs from its usage in *commedia dell'arte* however. In the latter, the device often interrupts the narrative of the piece, whereas in Mkhwane and Pearson's work it is used as a means of pushing the narrative forward. Another *commedia dell'arte* device involves the actors "[s]peaking to spectators, mingling or sitting with them, recognizing them as old friends, taking a dislike to individuals and insulting them" (Trethewey 1993: 72). Each of these aspects of *commedia dell'arte* can be found in the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson. Mkhwane and Pearson often speak with the audience, and in the recent *Wave*, the performers treat the audience as members of the village, often singling out audience members as friends and family. Occasionally, one of the characters, in most cases one played by Mkhwane, will take a dislike to one audience member. This animosity will often be maintained throughout the entire performance.

Pearson's lead characters seem more fools than heroes, and are often far more ineffectual than Mkhwane's character. Alternatively Mkhwane is primarily the 'straight man' to Pearson's fool. This results in Mkhwane becoming the hero of the pieces with Pearson assuming the role of the comic sidekick.

Further parallels with *commedia dell'arte* and Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre exist that reveal the influence of the Arlecchino character on Pearson's roles. Pearson is often the more forthcoming in audience interaction, which is consistent with the Arlecchino character who acts as the bridge between the audience and the action on stage.

It has been mentioned that Mkhwane is often the 'straight man' while Pearson plays the fool, a relationship that has its roots in *commedia dell'arte*. While Pearson's persona on stage is reminiscent of Arlecchino, Mkhwane appears to have based his performance persona on the *Commedia* character Brighella. Mkhwane avoids, or at least mutes, the more negative aspects of Brighella's character who in *commedia dell'arte*, is amoral, deceitful, exploitative and

pitiless (Rudlin 2000: 86). While these characteristics are not present in Mkhwane's on-stage presence, he, like Brighella, acts as a foil for the more foolish Pearson.

The difference between the on-stage personas of Mkhwane and Pearson could also represent the differences between the two performers' respective, inner clowns. While we have established that Pearson's clown persona is friendly and submissive, Mkhwane's inner clown seems to manifest as an aggressive and controlling presence.

The combination and exploration of the various influences and events that have shaped Mkhwane and Pearson's approach to theatre leads us to the unifying concept of their work. Theatre of the Imagination acts as the guiding principle behind the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson and its purpose will be determined in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

The Sinako Village sequence

In order to arrive at a conclusion about the aims of Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson's theatre, it is necessary to highlight certain aspects of their work, in particular, the setting of the plays, the depiction of communal life, the depiction of certain characters and the narrative. These facets of Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson's work offer clues as to their perception of their role within South African society.

Mkhwane and Pearson describe their work as "Theatre of the Imagination" (von Brisinski 2003: 117), and a place "where the imagination of the actor meets the imagination of the audience" (von Brisinski 2003: 117). The term Theatre of the Imagination could be interpreted in a number of ways. Because it uses poor theatre techniques (Grotowski 1968), the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson relies a great deal on the imagination of the audience to flesh out the world that the performers create. Therefore Theatre of the Imagination refers to the audience's perception of the reality that Mkhwane and Pearson depict through their theatre.

The community Mkhwane and Pearson have created with the Sinako Village sequence represents an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991), a society in which various historically dissimilar cultures are placed together. The intention behind the community that Mkhwane and Pearson have developed is to create an ideal for the rest of South Africa to strive towards. The hope and optimism that underpins Mkhwane and Pearson's work is the principal motivation behind the concept of Theatre of the Imagination. Their imagined community, is a microcosm for the one that South Africa is in the process of becoming and as such, it represents an act of resistance against the past injustices of apartheid. Before 1994, under apartheid legislation, South Africans were divided along racial grounds. Communities were separated into racial categories and any community (like District Six or Sophiatown) that mixed the races was forcibly removed, broken down and fragmented.

Also under apartheid, several 'homelands' - areas of the country specifically set aside for the ethnic black population of South Africa - were created. These communities were designed to

be legislatively separate but economically dependent on South Africa. They were dumping grounds for labour pools of people who worked in cities, on the mines and in industry but who were never allowed to settle in South Africa permanently (Lodge 2002: 32-33). The populations of the homelands were often made up of disparate cultural groups that the apartheid government chose to bunch together. What used to be called the Transkei, represented an example of one of these homelands. Its population was a mix of different clans that the National Party government of the time chose to categorise as Xhosa.

Mkhwane and Pearson's creation of the imagined community of Sinako is an act of defiance, actively questioning the memory of apartheid's imagined community which was a community based on the principles of division and control. With Sinako Village, Mkhwane and Pearson have, through the medium of theatre, written a new, imagined community into being. Sinako Village emulates various aspects of the homelands, in the sense that it is a supposedly self-governing, rural community made up of disparate individuals ruled by a chief and his *induna*, a local leader who reports to the chief. Mkhwane and Pearson propose that Sinako Village is a microcosm of South Africa, with all the intricacies, conflicts and ideals that the nation is working towards. Thus the fiction of each of the plays relates to life circumstances of South Africa and its history of colonisation through to post-apartheid times.

Sinako Village offers insight into potential challenges that will be encountered along the journey that South Africa will take if the notion of a 'rainbow nation' is ever to be truly realised. It also offers us examples of the principles and values that must be upheld by society in order for this to happen, such as reconciliation, community and the denial of greed for power.

This chapter will involve a detailed analysis of three plays from the Sinako Village sequence created by Mkhwane and Pearson. There are four plays in the sequence, *Skadonk* (2000), *Big Udder* (2001), *The Hungry* (2002) and *The Hidden* (2003). *The Hungry* has recently been reworked into *The Hungry Heart* (2006). This study will focus on *Skadonk*, *The Hidden* and *The Hungry Heart*. I have excluded *Big Udder* (which was first performed as *Ilobolo*) as its connection to the Sinako Village sequence is tentative at best. *Big Udder* consists of two brothers leading a herd of cows that would serve as *ilobolo* from a member of the brothers' village who wishes to marry a woman from a neighbouring village. It is hoped that this marriage will unite the two villages and bring peace. While neither of these villages is named

Sinako, the play is an early attempt by the duo at developing the archetypal village of Sinako that had already been introduced in *Skadonk*. I have also chosen to analyse *The Hungry Heart* as opposed to *The Hungry*, as it is the most recent production by Mkhwane and Pearson and therefore represents their current aesthetic and thematic preoccupations the best.

3.1 Synopses and examination of the three plays

3.1.1 *Skadonk*

According to Mkhwane and Pearson, *Skadonk* is based on a true story (Mkhwane and Pearson 2005a) that has been expanded upon by the two performers. The protagonist, Big Ben Moeketsi (played by Bheki) owns a bright red taxi that is his pride and joy and the envy of all the other taxi operators. Although his professional life is thriving and he is loved throughout the village of Sinako, he and his wife are incapable of conceiving a child. After begging the Ancestors (who are a constant presence throughout the play) for assistance, a miracle occurs and Ben's wife becomes pregnant. Unfortunately Ben's wife dies during childbirth, and Ben is left to look after the child, with the assistance of the other inhabitants of the village.

The narrative skips a few years at this point, with Ben's child now a young boy. During this time Ben has become embroiled in the taxi wars that have come as a result of disputes over routes. The situation escalates to the point where Ben's taxi is destroyed by a rival taxi operator. His son is trapped inside the taxi but is saved by one of the villagers.

Ben then finds himself without any means of income; he asks the ancestors for help and they inform him that in order to cure the village of the violence that is afflicting it, a supreme sacrifice is needed. Ben climbs the mountain near the village with his son and a goat. It appears at this point that Ben, understanding how great a sacrifice is required, has elected to sacrifice his own son. However, just before his son is sacrificed, a voice from above tells him to stop. He is told that his willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice, has saved the village and so Ben sacrifices the goat instead and order is restored.

Skadonk, according to Mkhwane and Pearson is about transformation, specifically the socio-political transformation of South Africa and its power struggles (Mkhwane and Pearson

2005a) and this can be seen in the violent events that affect Ben's life. The miraculous pregnancy of his wife could be seen as a transformation that represents the miracle of South Africa's peaceful election in 1994 and the birth of the new democracy. In the same way, the destruction of his once beautiful taxi represents the hardships that resulted when many factions struggled for power in a transforming society. The manner in which the community is changed because of the taxi violence, is an example of transformation on a grand scale. Most profoundly however, Ben's actual disposition changes from one of optimism to, by the end of the play, despair. The idea of transformation is of particular relevance to the South African situation. From the massive political and social upheaval of 1994 and the subsequent years to the constant transformation that has come with the dismantling of apartheid, change has become a part of everyday South African life. In *Skadonk*, Mkhwane and Pearson attempt to depict the effect change has upon everyday citizens. While the change is ultimately for the best, as is the case with the birth of Ben's son, the process of change is often painful and comes at a cost, represented by the death of Ben's wife during childbirth.

As can be seen in the synopsis, *Skadonk* features taxi violence as a major part of the story. The effects that the conflicts between taxi operators have on the lives of the Sinako villagers is traumatic, and in many ways, represents the taxi violence that is a common feature in South Africa. Mkhwane and Pearson portray the effect that violence has upon individuals with poignancy and grace, through the character of Ben. The journey of Ben from carefree optimist to a man in the grips of genuine despair is moving. This despair has its roots in Ben's loss of his old way of life, represented by his wife, and his earnings and his loss of hope. This suggests a personal investment on the part Mkhwane and Pearson.

While Mkhwane and Pearson identify the problem facing the protagonists and, to a greater extent, the citizens of South Africa, they seem unable to suggest realistic alternatives or solutions to the taxi wars. This is to be expected as it is arguable as to whether theatre can be a corrective to society. What it generally does is expose the underbelly of the problem and our culpability, with calls to action in reality. *Skadonk* ends when Ben through his willingness to sacrifice his son, appeases God who then ends the taxi violence.

This is a common tendency of Mkhwane and Pearson's as their narratives often rely on an external God-like force to solve the problems facing the inhabitants of Sinako - what Augusto Boal would refer to as magic. This is similar in many ways to the *deus ex machina* device,

which has its origins in Greek tragedy. *Deus ex machina* is a character or event that arrives unexpectedly in a play to solve a problem that according to the logic of the world of the play, is insoluble. This belief that problems will, to a certain degree, solve themselves is confirmed by Pearson:

It's an African way, if something bad happens, sit with the pain, don't fight it, don't take drugs, don't take tranquilisers, don't try everything to stave off ... to make life good again, just sit with it, its for a reason, you'll learn a lesson (Mkhwane and Pearson 2005b: pers. comm.).

Pearson's opinion, which resembles the Buddhist principle that life is pain, and from that pain one can derive lessons, has merit. But when applied in the duo's theatre, results in simplistic, even childish endings. It could be argued that the God-like presence in *Skadonk* is simply a narrative device and in fact Ben's willingness to make a sacrifice for the sake of the community is the primary message that should be delivered by the play. Mkhwane and Pearson could be suggesting that while change is traumatic and requires sacrifice, ultimately the sacrifice is necessary and worthwhile. Ben therefore becomes the instigator of change, and for this reason becomes a driving force in the narrative and not an unwilling participant. Ben becomes a potential martyr because of his willingness to sacrifice all for the wellbeing of his community. This idea of individuals choosing the community's wellbeing over their own, ties into the concept of *ubuntu*: the spirit of giving.

The form of Christianity practised in contemporary South Africa by the black population, plays an important role in many of Mkhwane and Pearson's productions. This is true in the case of *Skadonk* because it is in part, a retelling of the story of Abraham from Chapter 22 of the Book of Genesis in the *Holy Bible*. The story also makes an appearance in the Koran and Talmud. Abraham is told by God to sacrifice his son Isaac in order to prove his faith. At the last minute, God spares Abraham's son. Isaac went on to become the father of the Hebrew nation, while Ishmael, in the Muslim faith is the father of the nation of Islam.

The story of *Skadonk* parallels the biblical story but places it within the setting of a taxi rank. By choosing a biblical story as the basis for their work Mkhwane and Pearson, not only allow the audience a glimpse into their own personal beliefs, but also acknowledge the archetypal power of these stories. Alongside the Christian elements present in *Skadonk*, are the narrators of the piece. These two enigmatic figures are the Ancestors of the people of the village. The

combination of a biblical story with the belief in and reverence for the Ancestors found in traditional Zulu society, in many ways represents the manner in which Christian beliefs have been appropriated by Black South African cultures and combined with the existing primal belief systems.

The performance of *Skadonk* I witnessed took place in an outdoor amphitheatre, a venue dissimilar to the traditional open spaces Mkhwane and Pearson prefer. Although the performance was outdoors, the venue lacked the sense of being close to nature that is such a crucial part of Mkhwane and Pearson's aesthetic. The purpose behind Mkhwane and Pearson's decision to use an outdoor space is about the creation of community participation. The outdoor aspect combined with the circle of attention creates the sense of belonging and participation.

The use of props in *Skadonk*, as is often the case with Mkhwane and Pearson's work, is original and inventive and in one particular case, powerfully symbolic of an atrocious period in our history. The moment I refer to occurs when rival taxi operators set fire to Ben's taxi. At this moment the actors douse a tyre that represents the taxi, set it alight and let it roll off the stage. The image of the burning tyre immediately reminds the audience of 'necklacing' that took place in, and in some cases after, the apartheid era. Set and set alight. The presence of this image is profound and highly effective as it reminds us as the audience of the appalling violence of our past and present. This effectiveness was no doubt amplified during a performance at the Grahamstown Festival in 2001 when the tyre set fire to the lawns outside the Drostdy Arch (Baxter 2006: pers. comm.). This could go some way towards explaining why this particular play is no longer performed.

There are other less distressing, though equally effective uses of props in *Skadonk*. During the funeral for Ben's wife, a straw mat is rolled into a tube and used to represent the casket. This combined with a funeral procession and solemn music, successfully conveys the sadness of the moment.

At the opposite end of the emotional spectrum, chocolate-covered raisins are used to hilarious effect to represent goat droppings. At the climax of the piece when the 'goat' is selected from the audience members, the actors sprinkle chocolate-covered raisins on the stage in a little pile, representing the supposed loss of control of the goat's bowels at the prospect of being

the sacrifice. The droppings are subsequently eaten by the actors, in a moment of vulgar humour that effectively undercuts the serious tone that has been developing.

The taxi itself is created using only a steering wheel, tyre and an exhaust pipe. This exhaust pipe is one of the gizmos that Pearson seems so fond of. At a pre-determined point in the play, while Ben is having his taxi fixed by Pearson's mechanic character, the exhaust pipe sends out a huge explosive bang. This moment, while of little importance to the narrative, is a wonderful moment of comic spectacle that ensures that the attention of the audience is kept.

Skadonk, as is the norm with Mkhwane and Pearson's work, makes very little use of costume, except as a means of suggesting character. Ben is symbolized by a straw hat that Bheki wears. The Ancestors each carry long sticks with feathers appended at their ends that could be interpreted as either spears or standards, but that are flung into flight like javelins, showing the otherworldly quality of the Ancestors.

3.1.2 *The Hungry Heart*

The Hungry Heart is in fact, a re-worked version of *The Hungry* and for the most part, the two plays are very similar. Mkhwane and Pearson's synopsis of *The Hungry* is as follows:

A circle is drawn. People are gathering. Two magic men are present. Something is going to happen There are glances ... sounds ... and the energy is increasing. Slowly, an extraordinary world is conjured in the hears (sic) of everyone there. It is the world of Sinako Village. A stranger appears. Why has Mr Pumpkin Man invited him? The Great Prophet is angry. Nxaloti, the quiet one, goes mad. Ma Gumbi and her friend, Florence, betray the village and things will never be the same again (Mkhwane and Pearson 2005a).

The play once again takes place in the imaginary village of Sinako. It opens with two brothers, the Makhabe brothers, who have just built a wheelbarrow - the first device of its kind to be built in the village. They feel that this invention will be a boon for the people of the village. At this point audience members are recruited to ride in the wheelbarrow. A stranger to the villagers (played by Ellis Pearson) arrives and sets up a farm near Sinako. Because the Chief of Sinako controls all the land and decides how it is allocated, the people

of the village are unaware of the concept of individual land ownership. The Stranger is able to take advantage of this fact and manages to convince one of the village elders called Old Man Pumpkin, to 'sell' his land and cows, along with land allocated to the other villagers. Old Man Pumpkin's decision to part with this land may initially be motivated by *ubuntu*, translated as 'a person is a person because of other people'. This demonstrates the value placed on community, and inviting people into the community by allowing them land is not a difficult stretch of the imagination in this case. The Stranger offers the members of the community work on the farm he establishes but his offer is refused until a drought kills most of the villagers' cattle. They ask The Stranger if he will allow their cows to graze on his fields, but he refuses. Two members of the village, Ma Gumbi and Florence, seek work with The Stranger in exchange for alcohol and food and they are soon followed by other community members. Eventually the community is completely reliant on The Stranger for food and water because they have been tricked into placing all of their grain into two huge granaries that only The Stranger can access. With food and water becoming increasingly scarce, things seem hopeless. Ultimately the anger the community feels towards The Stranger erupts when one of the brothers destroys the granaries, by ramming his wheelbarrow laden with explosives into the towers. The play ends with the much needed rain beginning to fall.

As has already been mentioned earlier in this chapter that *The Hungry Heart* is in fact a reworking of *The Hungry*. While chronologically this play should be discussed last, in terms of the sequence in which the plays themselves were devised *The Hungry Heart* precedes *The Hidden*.

The Hungry Heart is concerned with the mechanics and effects of colonisation on a society and the 'terrorism' that results. Specifically it attempts to determine the causes and motivations behind 'terrorism'. It also challenges the current perceptions, or misconceptions, of those who resort to actions associated with 'terrorism'. The general tone of *The Hungry Heart* differs from other plays by Mkhwane and Pearson. The optimism and lightness present in their previous works is missing, and in its place is a feeling of cynicism and pessimism. This sombre mood is no doubt a reflection of the despair felt after the events of 11th September 2001 - war has become a way of life for many, with the unsanctioned invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by the United States of America, in a sense resembling a new form of colonialism.

Colonialism is personified in *The Hungry Heart* by the character of The Stranger (played by Pearson). The Stranger from the West brings with him various modern agricultural methods and technologies. Although the latter are initially embraced by the villagers, the hidden cost is soon revealed when The Stranger builds a factory compound and begins taking all their food. One can draw parallels between the situation in *The Hungry* and the manner in which colonisation brought with it certain technological and social developments, the adoption of which by the original inhabitants of South Africa resulted in a loss of traditional values, along with their land, power, self-esteem and self-sufficiency. Additionally, The Stranger convinces Old Mr Pumpkin to 'sell' him the land belonging to the village of Sinako. This brings to mind the colonisation of large areas of the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australasia in which the original inhabitants were cheated out of their land or had it seized from them.

The situation is exacerbated when the people led by Florence and Ma Gumbi are forced, through desperation, to work for The Stranger. That Florence and Ma Gumbi are both women is significant as comments on the position of women in patriarchal societies. Florence and Ma Gumbi live in a society where land and power is reserved for men. By choosing to work for The Stranger, Florence and Ma Gumbi are empowering themselves in the only way they know how, by attempting to place themselves in a position of power in relation to the men of the village. The Stranger pays the villagers in alcohol, thereby increasing their dependency on wage earning. This once again harkens back to the idea of exploitation of the indigenous population of South Africa by White farmers and others who used the 'tot' system in which Black workers were given measures of alcohol in part payment of their wages (Clowes 2004: 3). The Stranger pays the workers with alcohol in order to keep them compliant and dependent. It also reminds one of the policies of Bantu education, initiated by the apartheid government. Bantu education involved a set of standards for educating the Black population of South Africa during the apartheid era. Black students were only taught subjects that the government felt were necessary for the development of an effective and more importantly, uninformed menial workforce. The subjects taught were meant to prepare the Black population for a life of servitude

There is a tendency to explain all the evils of contemporary South African society as being a result of Western encroachment. Mkhwane and Pearson attempt to avoid this by showing that the people of Sinako were flawed and had the capacity for greed and evil before The Stranger arrived. The desire for wealth and possessions is personified in Old Man Pumpkin who helps

The Stranger to trick the villagers into working for him. The character of Old Man Pumpkin and his relationship with The Stranger fulfil a dual purpose: he shows that all ideas are damaging if they run alongside, or are motivated by greed and corruption and secondly, his betrayal of his community and his heritage, suggests that it is individuals who are capable of evil and not communities.

A more recent preoccupation in Mkhwane and Pearson's work is the debate about the effectiveness and ethics of foreign aid. One could argue that the jobs and trade offered by The Stranger in *The Hungry Heart* are symbolic of the Western approach to foreign aid in Africa. While The Stranger's offers of work and trade initially seem beneficial to the Sinako villagers, it is in fact a poisoned chalice as ultimately all power and profit goes to The Stranger and the villagers' dependence on The Stranger increases. Therefore, like the African countries which are in debt as a result of corruption and misguided foreign aid, the villagers are forced to fulfil their obligations to The Stranger. Mkhwane and Pearson are criticising both the givers and receivers of foreign aid. By looking at the character of The Stranger who offers the villagers aid in exchange for servitude, Mkhwane and Pearson are criticising the structures inherent in foreign aid that reinforce helplessness among those receiving the aid and increase their dependence. The villagers are never physically forced to accept The Stranger's offer, however, by giving up their land they have given up their means of self-sufficiency. The passing of their land on to The Stranger exemplifies the change from rural culture to urban culture, where they become reliant on others for food and supplies. Despite the decree of their Chief and the advice of the Prophet, they do eventually accept The Stranger's help, and with it the consequences. Therefore it appears that while Mkhwane and Pearson are critical of unethical foreign aid, they are also scathing in their criticism of those who knowingly accept such aid, with the knowledge of the price that will inevitably have to be paid. The following quote from their website goes some way towards confirming this, while at the same time offering the following interpretation of the theme running through *The Hungry* and therefore by extension *The Hungry Heart*.

We are creative artists who are driven by the need to explore powerful issues. In *THE HUNGRY* we look at the relationship between Africa and the West. Many people feel that the West is the saviour of Africa. Western civilisation arrived and brought with it its religions, its political systems and its technology and has taken away its people, its culture, its raw materials and its spirit. Is the West saving

Africa? Or, in the end, could Africa help to heal the West? (Mkhwane and Pearson 2005a)

This statement accurately represents the sentiments presented in the play. The climax of the play, in which one of the Makhabe brothers (played by Mkhwane) destroys the two granary towers, represents Mkhwane and Pearson's view a part of the process that will heal Africa and the West.

This loaded image on one level depicts an act of violence against a form of Western colonisation, however beyond this reading it represents an understanding and re-assertion of the traditional values and ways that have been lost as a result of Western expansion and colonialism.

The granary towers in question are represented by two tall metal poles standing parallel to each other. The position of the poles and the manner in which they are destroyed, evoke in the viewers' memories, the attack on the World Trade Centre's twin towers in New York on 11th September 2001. One cannot deny the effectiveness and power of the image and while the act in itself is necessary for the survival of the village and its inhabitants, the decision of Mkhwane and Pearson to use an image associated with 'terrorism', needs to be justified.

The twin towers in New York were the epicentre of Western economic power, symbolic of the banks of global capital. The granaries are symbolic of the coloniser's power; his hoarding of the villagers' grain is similar to a bank economically stockpiling wealth. Through the use of this imagery Mkhwane and Pearson bring into question the very nature of the term 'terrorist' and the manner in which it is applied. An individual labelled a 'terrorist' by a government is frequently regarded as a freedom fighter by those who share the same ideologies. Heroes of the struggle against apartheid were labelled 'terrorists' by the oppressive regime of the time (SADET 2004: 347).

The attacks on the twin towers on 11th September 2001 were an extreme response to the perceived economic and social colonisation of the Middle East by the United States of America (USA), as well as retribution for the first Gulf War and its effects. Additionally, the USA's response to the attacks, an ill-advised protracted war against the sovereign nations of Afghanistan and Iraq, has left the regions devastated and eliminates the possibility of stability

in the Middle East in the near future. Many would regard the USA's actions in this case as an act of 'terrorism' particularly when one recalls how the thousands of Iraqi civilians killed during American military manoeuvres, were coldly referred to by the USA's government as 'collateral damage' (McGirk 2006).

Mkhwane and Pearson are arguing that colonisation (or imperialism and associated activities) is an act of 'terrorism' and that responses to it, while extreme, are an act of desperation. Therefore the destruction of the two granaries by Mkhwane's character is an act of revenge against *The Stranger*, for robbing the community of its land and self-worth.

The mere presence of imagery of this nature has the capacity to offend, and some members of the play's audiences have stated that its use was offensive to them (Baxter 2006: pers. comm.). This in itself is not grounds to avoid the material. If the aim is the exploration of sensitive subject matter, then the play has purpose. The manner in which this imagery is used in *The Hungry Heart* and the way in which it so strongly evokes the events of 9/11 is jarring. One's first impression of the scene involving the destruction leads to the interpretation that Mkhwane and Pearson appear to be moving the audience's sympathies away from the victims of such attacks, and towards the instigators. What we have determined about Mkhwane and Pearson's beliefs and ideologies thus far dispels this notion. It appears that this is one of the only instances where the idealism present in Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre seems either inappropriate or insufficient. The sombre tone and manner in which the events are mirrored without an alternative offered suggests that Mkhwane and Pearson are unable to comprehend how such an event could be avoided.

It must also be said that Mkhwane and Pearson are voicing an opinion that is decidedly unpopular in parts of Western society. While there are occasional attempts in the popular media to question the nature of 'terrorism', the issue is usually considered in terms of absolutes. Therefore in *The Hungry Heart* we have the heroes seemingly engaging in an act of 'terrorism'. Furthermore, after the bombing of the granary towers, *The Stranger* leaves and things return to normal in Sinako village. Therefore, the act of destroying the granary in fact solved the villagers' problems and things initially seem better for the villagers after the act. From these observations one could conclude that Mkhwane and Pearson believe that 'terrorism' can have justification and merit. However certain differences between the circumstances depicted in the play and the actual events they signify, complicate matters. The

granary towers, while echoing the World Trade Centre's towers, only contain grain, and therefore the act of destroying them does not result in a loss of life. Additionally it must be noted that Mkhwane depicts the brother during the destruction of the granaries not as celebratory or vengeful, but as genuinely disturbed by the extremes he has been forced to resort to.

Mkhwane and Pearson prevent further criticisms of their design to depict such an event, by placing the villagers in a position where the only means of survival is the destruction of the granary towers.

Attempts to explore the causes and justifications behind acts of 'terrorism' require a deep understanding of the complicated economic and social factors involved. *The Hungry Heart* opens up the space for discussion, but given the rest of the dynamics operating in Pearson and Mkhwane's work, this discussion cannot go far enough. What is evident is that in *The Hungry Heart*, Mkhwane and Pearson move away from their idealist positioning, and there is bleakness about the realities they portray.

The use of props in *The Hungry Heart* is typical of Mkhwane and Pearson's work, but there seems to be a greater emphasis on props as a means of evocation as opposed to a source of fun. The main prop of the show is undoubtedly the wheelbarrow that the Makhabe brothers build at the start of the show. The wheelbarrow is a marvel of engineering and used throughout the show, not only in the climax, but also as a catalyst for audience interaction. A member of the audience is chosen to play one of the village elders who must be transported through the village in the wheelbarrow by another audience member. The wheelbarrow is also used as a ladder at one point. It has been observed by Bett Pacey (Pacey 2007) in her unpublished paper on the work of Mkhwane and Pearson, that the majority of props in *The Hungry Heart* have a metallic feel. Pacey suggests that the use of galvanised steel and aluminium in the construction of the props "underscore the technological elements in the show" (Pacey 2007). Another ingenious example of prop use occurs when a locust swarm threatens to consume all of the villagers' crops. Throughout the scene, clothes pegs clipped to Pearson's clothes and extremities suggest locusts swarming over his body.

The Hungry Heart also makes use of several musical instruments from the more traditional shakers and rattles, to strange devices that combine a gramophone horn with a violin. This

instrument, which creates a distressing sound, is used in a scene when the cattle, portrayed by Pearson, collapse from thirst and starvation.

Two instances of costume that are of particular interest in *The Hungry Heart* are those used by The Stranger and the Makhabe brother portrayed by Mkhwane. At the climax of *The Hungry Heart* a balaclava is worn by Mkhwane as he pushes the wheelbarrow into the granary towers. This is done in order that Mkhwane's character remains anonymous but also acts as a potent symbol. The balaclava is important as it reminds one of the manner in which 'terrorists' are often depicted in the popular media. In most cases we see a man (almost always dark-skinned), with only his eyes visible through either a balaclava or *keffiyeh*. It also evokes images of the alleged Third Force held responsible for causing violence in South Africa in the past (Ellis 1998).

When The Stranger is first introduced, he is using what appears to be a land surveying device. The device covers Pearson's face for the duration of the scene in much the same way a mask would. Not only does this lend the character of The Stranger a sinister appearance, it also harkens to Pantalone, one of the stock characters found in *commedia dell'arte*. Pantalone almost always takes on the role of the villain (Rudlin 1994: 95). The surveying equipment Pearson uses, suggests a long crooked nose, similar to the mask of Pantalone, which features a large phallic nose. Pantalone does nothing to disguise his amoral objectives and seems perfectly aware, and revels in his own lack of virtues. This is not the case with The Stranger whose actions are motivated by his belief that what he is doing is justified.

Pantalone works "on the assumption that everything can be brought and sold" and has a "long memory and never forgets or forgives the slightest past transgression" (Rudlin 1994: 95). Like The Stranger, Pantalone is motivated by greed and uses money to corrupt others. However the character of Pantalone, in a manner reminiscent of other villains, is ultimately instrumental in his own downfall: "His machinations to encompass another's ruin invariably end in his own discomfiture" (Grantham 2000: 155).

The decision by the performers to have Pearson portray The Stranger is not to be taken lightly. As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, under apartheid, race became politicised and for this reason the race of the actor will always have bearing on the audience's perception of the character (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 210-211). Even if the roles had been

inverted and Mkhwane played the character of The Stranger, within the South African context the idea of a Black performer playing a stranger from the West, would still be interpreted as a comment on colonialism. It is worth noting that even though The Stranger is the main antagonist of the piece, he is not portrayed as purely evil. In fact, once his factory is destroyed and the villagers have reclaimed their land, The Stranger states that he was trying to help the villagers. While this could be interpreted as an after-the-fact rationalisation, Pearson's performance suggests that The Stranger truly believed that he was helping the people of Sinako village. The question is, of course, whether this is enough justification of his actions.

3.1.3 *The Hidden*

The Hidden's description on Mkhwane and Pearson's website is as follows:

People are gathering in Sinako village. It has become the village of secrets. Much has been hidden and the villagers won't talk. Truth is scarce. Food is scarce and when there is scarcity, human dignity is the first thing to be lost. But, there is great excitement among the people: there is to be a big wedding ceremony in Sinako. Florence is the bride and Chief Masaka is expecting everyone to be there. But what about The Stranger? [sic] Is he still around? Why is Majosi so secretive? Why is the Prophet, the Wise One, so up tight? Ellis and Bheki, in their inimitable style of theatre making, invite you to be there. *THE HIDDEN* is set in the same village as *THE HUNGRY*, but it is not a sequel (Mkhwane and Pearson 2005a).

When *The Hidden* begins, things are not right in Sinako village. The effect of The Stranger's presence is still being felt. Food is in short supply and the people have become distrustful of the Chief Masaka. This is largely a result of Majosi, the chief's advisor, who, seeking to seize power, has been spreading rumours and lies about the chief. He has convinced the people that Chief Masaka does not care about their plight, and in turn, Chief Masaka is confused about the people's withdrawal from him.

The Prophet of the village warns the people not to place so much trust in Majosi. The Chief, who is unable to comprehend why the people have lost faith in him, suggests a marriage ceremony as a way of bringing the people together. He intends to marry Florence, and

although she has no choice in the matter, she continually delays the wedding, for various false reasons. Meanwhile the Prophet has been found murdered, and it is revealed that Florence is pregnant by another man. It is revealed that The Stranger is actually the father of Florence's child. He confesses to the villagers and explains that he intended to marry Florence. The Chief decides that the child will be looked after by the people of the village and will be welcomed as one of their own. Majosi is exposed and order is restored to the village.

Mkhwane and Pearson are eager to point out that *The Hidden* is not in fact a sequel to *The Hungry* or *The Hungry Heart*, although many of the events that occur within the play and the themes explored, are a direct continuation of the events and themes presented in *The Hungry Heart*. For example, as *The Hidden* begins, all is not well in Sinako. There is still a food shortage, which could have been caused by the destruction of the granaries in *The Hungry Heart*. Furthermore the people are distrustful of one another and have lost faith in their leadership, represented by Chief Masaka.

The possible readings of the way in which Majosi is able to deceive and divide the Chief and the people, are that Ellis and Bheki are exhorting the leaders of their communities to lead, to be accessible to their communities who look to them. It is evident from the many newspaper reports at the time, that South Africans often complained that the then President of the country, Thabo Mbeki, spent too much time away from South Africa (Lodge 2002: 252).

The themes explored in *The Hidden* are universal; however, they developed a new, unforeseen relevance in 2007 when the events leading up to the Polokwane conference resembled the attempt by Majosi to seize power by discrediting the Chief. The manner in which the integrity of the various candidates for the position of ANC President was constantly questioned by opposition members, the alleged plots to discredit one contender by the other, corruption scandals and favouritism for 'old boys' of the struggle, became obvious (Clayton 2007). The seeds of discontent were sown at grassroots level because of a failure of service deliveries and poor leadership – all of which turned *The Hidden* into a remarkable unintentional allegory.

In *The Hidden*, Mkhwane and Pearson deal with both the traditional system of governance in tribal areas and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that was taking place during the conception of the play. The TRC offered amnesty to those who confessed to crimes

committed during the apartheid era, provided that they omitted nothing and could prove that they were following orders. Questions arise from the play about the degree to which leaders can be depended upon, the extent to which they are accountable for their communities' ills and the sincerity of the leaders hungry for power. It also calls into question what needs forgiveness and who has to forgive, for example, if The Stranger has taken the Chief's intended wife away for himself, how will the Chief respond? That he welcomes the child into the community is an indication of how Mkhwane and Pearson feel South Africans should deal with the past and the descendants of the colonisers.

Although The Stranger is defeated by the end of *The Hungry*, his colonising influence has a lasting effect on the harmony of the village. Although apartheid in principle is a remnant of a previous era in South Africa's history, its effects are still felt in various aspects of South African society, from education, to wealth distribution, to the racial attitudes of South African citizens; therefore, as the modernity and corruption The Stranger imposed on Sinako villagers has a long-lasting effect long after the source is gone, so does apartheid. With this in mind *The Hidden* appears to be, among other things, a metaphor for the after-effects of apartheid. In *The Hidden*, although it seems that The Stranger is no longer a cause for concern, it is revealed towards the end of the play that he is, in fact, one of the causes behind the villagers' recent troubles.

The after-effects of apartheid are not the only challenge to contemporary South African society that Mkhwane and Pearson address in their theatre. Corruption, arguably one of the more topical issues currently, is also dealt with. In *The Hidden*, an individual who is a highly respected and trusted member of the community, in this case, Chief Masaka's advisor, Majosi, is found guilty of corruption. One only has to glance at a current South African newspaper, to find situations remarkably similar to the fictional story of *The Hidden* (Clayton 2007). Mkhwane and Pearson's aim with *The Hidden* is to show how corruption affects even those in the highest levels of society.

The manner in which the events unfold through the course of *The Hidden* suggests that Mkhwane and Pearson believe strongly in the principles and aims of the TRC. The play is replete with examples of the damaging effect lies and mistruths have on the harmony of a community. Majosi convinces the villagers that Chief Masaka is unconcerned with their problems, while the secrets that Florence and The Stranger keep, threaten to tear the

community apart. However, the play also suggests that reconciliation is possible if all parties are willing to accept responsibility.

In *The Hungry Heart*, The Stranger was the antagonist and was portrayed unsympathetically. However in *The Hidden*, he confesses that he is the father of Florence's child and that he intends to marry her. As a result of his confession and acceptance of responsibility, Chief Masaka accepts the child as part of the community, and potentially as his own child. By doing this he prevents the sins of father from being inflicted on the child, while The Stranger is to a certain degree redeemed.

The concept behind *The Hidden* - that of a mixed-race child becoming next in line to the throne of an African community is also dealt with in *The House of Kalumba* (1999) by Sabata Sesi. It tells the story of a white child that is found by a Lesotho woman. She adopts him and through the course of the play he becomes the heir to the throne of Lesotho. However the matter of his race causes strife amongst the citizens and he is murdered before he can become king.

The contrast between on the one hand, Sabata Sesi's play, arguably the more realistic story, and Mkhwane and Pearson's, highlights the idealism that permeates almost all of the duo's work. Based on my encounters with the two performers it is my belief that this idealism has its roots in Pearson's world-view, no doubt influenced by his Christian beliefs.

The idealism present in Mkhwane and Pearson's work does not lessen the effect of their work as social activists. Idealism is in reality the principle behind the duo's social activism, as it links to the notion of imagined communities that was touched on in an earlier chapter. By presenting the audience with a microcosm of a South Africa that solves the problems it faces, Mkhwane and Pearson are suggesting the way forward for the audience, and by extension the rest of the country.

The presence of thematic elements of this nature suggests that Mkhwane and Pearson are creating theatre that has a purpose beyond pure entertainment. They deal with the issues and themes present in their work in a manner that is non-confrontational and accessible. Therefore the entertainment factor of their plays becomes a means whereby the performers can introduce their audience to issues and debates that they might not, in normal circumstances, engage in. By focusing on matters currently challenging South Africans, it is

clear that Mkhwane and Pearson's aim as theatre makers is to change society for the better, by creating awareness in their audience, by depicting a society that faces the same difficulties South Africa faces. However, while South Africa has yet to find lasting solutions to its problems, the people of Sinako village, face and solve theirs.

Chapter 4

Mkhwane and Pearson as interculturalists

This chapter examines the nature of the collaboration between Ellis Pearson and Bheki Mkhwane through the lens of interculturalism (Bharucha 1993, 2001 and 2005) Patrice Pavis (1996), Julie Stone Peters (1995), and Richard Schechner (2002). The discussion revolves around the nature of their creative relationship and the loaded question of whether an equal partnership is possible when one partner comes from a privileged background and has formally studied Western theatre forms while the other comes from historically disadvantaged and economically deprived circumstances with no opportunities for specialised study. The research will discuss whether Pearson and Mkhwane's partnership is one of mutual or symbiotic exchange and opportunity, or an example of exploitation. Resolving this issue is important because the nature of Ellis Pearson and Bheki Mkhwane's collaboration has a strong influence on the aesthetics of their theatre.

4.1 Definitions of interculturalism

Interculturalism shares a common purpose with the theatre anthropology of Eugenio Barba (1995) and Barba and Savarese (1991), as both are concerned with the study of culturally-specific performance styles and their relation to one another. The ultimate goals of interculturalism and theatre anthropology differ however. The aim of theatre anthropology is to reveal the pre-expressivity of the performers and the unifying concepts found within the two cultures. Pre-expressivity is the "basic level of organisation common to all performers" (Barba and Savarese 1991: 188). Therefore theatre anthropology is concerned with finding the essential similarities inherent in all theatre forms. Interculturalism on the other hand is concerned with highlighting and exploring the difference revealed when two or more cultures meet.

Richard Schechner defines interculturalism as a response to the "increasing interconnection and interdependency of economic, social, cultural, technical and ideological systems"

(Schechner 2002: 226) that comes as a result of globalisation and its effect on the world. While the merits of globalisation are questionable, it is not the purpose of this research to determine such matters. Globalisation has resulted in interactions between nations and cultures on an unprecedented scale. Interculturalism therefore is the outcome of these interactions and acts as a forum in which to “emphasize the integrative or the disjunctive” (Schechner 2003: 226). Intercultural theatre, or interculturalism, is theatre that combines performative elements from different cultures, in an attempt to highlight either the similarities or differences between the cultures in question.

Integrative interculturalism attempts to identify the differences between the performative elements found in cultures, and then to combine them in order to create a new type of performance. Integrative interculturalism attempts to treat different performance styles with equal reverence in the creation of a form of theatre that is constantly evolving and open to new additions and interpretations. Schechner equates this to the way that the traditional belief systems of pre-colonial South Africa were integrated into the forms of Christianity that were brought with Western expansion (Schechner 2002: 251).

Disjunctive interculturalism, on the other hand, attempts to “expose the difficulties and explore the possibilities of playing across national, cultural, artistic and personal borders” (Schechner 2002: 257). Disjunctive interculturalism offers a more critical perspective on the nature of intercultural exchange by exposing the conflicts that arise from the meeting of different cultures. Therefore as responses to the rise of globalisation, integrative interculturalism embraces the potential for unification that could result from globalisation. Disjunctive interculturalism, in contrast, recognises the potential dangers inherent in the globalisation agenda and the conflicts that result from the meeting of cultures.

Patrice Pavis agrees in principle with Schechner’s definition of interculturalism and defines examples of intercultural theatre as:

... hybrid forms drawing upon a more or less conscious and voluntary mixing of performance traditions traceable to distinct cultural areas. The hybridisation is very often such that the original forms can no longer be distinguished (Pavis 1996: 8-10).

The above is particularly true in the case of Mkhwane and Pearson's theatre. Rustom Bharucha defines interculturalism as a process whereby theatre practitioners should concern themselves with determining the differences that exist between the cultures and use those differences as a means of challenging and questioning the societies from which the performance styles originate (Bharucha 2005: pers. comm.). Bharucha is in fact highly critical of most forms of interculturalism as they fail "to acknowledge a country's historical, political and cultural specificity" (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 10). It is his criticisms of interculturalism, along with those of Julie Stone Peters (1995), against which the work of Mkhwane and Pearson will be judged.

4.2 Criticisms of interculturalism

Rustom Bharucha (1993) argues that interculturalism is impossible without an initial sense of commonality between the two cultures. This commonality could take the form of shared economic circumstance, or a similar position within the cultures' respective social hierarchies. It would be foolish to attempt to define Ellis Pearson and Bheki Mkhwane's theatre as intercultural without acknowledging the potential dangers of interculturalism and the various criticisms levelled against it. Rustom Bharucha (1993) in particular has reacted very strongly against intercultural theatre initiated by Westerners. Bharucha argues that intercultural exchange between a Western theatre practitioner and a theatre practitioner from a third world country is bound to fail if the cultures have until recently related to one another in a hierarchical sense, or in other words, if the one culture has been in a position of dominance over the other (Bharucha 1993: 1).

It is suggested by Bharucha that intercultural exchanges between two people, in most cases only benefit one person, in particular the person coming from a culture of historical advantage (Bharucha 1993: 2). Therefore Bharucha is suggesting that intercultural theatre is merely a means for typically European and American cultural imperialists to plunder an 'exotic' performance heritage for their own benefit. Often in these situations the plunderer benefits from the exchange while the plundered are left worse off or receive no benefits from the exchange. Also, the aesthetic characteristics of the plundered will often bear little or no resemblance to their source, and not take into account their social context. Bharucha offers Peter Brook's staging of the *Mahabharata* as an example of interculturalism in which traditional Indian heritage is taken out of its context and used indiscriminately for the purpose

of entertainment. The *Mahabharata*, an epic poem, is one of the most important Hindu texts. The 1985 stage play that Peter Brook created based on the *Mahabharata* was supported and financed by the Indian government of the time. It toured the world for several years and was ultimately developed into a film. Bharucha argues that Brook's *Mahabharata* takes a text of great historical and spiritual importance to the Indian people and strips it of all cultural meaning in order to make it accessible to a Western audience (Bharucha 1993: 68). The production consisted of a predominantly Western cast, was written with minimal input from Indian scholars and was performed to mostly Western audiences. These factors, according to Bharucha, are indicative of the manner in which intercultural theatre exploits cultural property.

Julie Stone Peters is similarly critical of Peter Brook's intercultural experiments, describing them as examples of Western imperialism (Peters 1995: 202). Brook's imposing of his own Western perspective onto a traditional Indian text is robbing the text of its "indigenous character" (Peters 1995: 202).

Peters also mentions two other forms of interculturalism that are examples of exploitation on the part of the Western practitioners. 'Orientalism' is the appropriation of performative elements with little regard to their meaning and symbolism while in 'ethnographic voyeurism', a culture becomes objectified by the Western practitioner (Peters 1995: 202).

Bharucha is not arguing against interculturalism, instead he is alerting those working across cultures about the ethical requirements of interculturalism, namely: acknowledgement, remuneration, transparency and an aim beyond mere entertainment (Bharucha 2001). These sentiments are echoed, albeit in less aggressive tones by Richard Schechner, when he states "[s]ome sinister forces are present in interculturalism First off it is the people from the economically advantaged places that are able to travel and import. Areas are culturally advantaged because of extensive and long-term exploitation of other areas [sic]" (Schechner 1991: 313).

Intercultural exchanges are typically short term processes. Often, as was the case with Peter Brook, a director or group of performers (most usually from a Western country) will spend a set amount of time with performers from the culture that is to be studied. After a period the visiting performers, having gained the skills they deem necessary, return home and perform

to a predominantly white middle class audience. In most cases the society that has provided access to this indigenous knowledge receives no benefits from experiments of this nature. This is the form of interculturalism that Bharucha finds so abhorrent, and he cites the work of Peter Brook, such as *The Birds* and the *Mahabharata* as examples of this form of cultural theft (Bharucha 1993: 75-82).

There is also an element of tokenism present in interculturalism, which is evident in Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* which featured only one Indian performer in its cast. Another example, a version of *The Tempest* developed in 1987, featured a cast comprised of White Australian students and traditional Balinese dancers. The purpose of the play was to highlight aspects of Balinese culture. However, the Australian students performed the main roles while the Balinese dancers were used as chorus members (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 27). In a 2007 production of *The Tempest* at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus, the American devisers made free use of indigenous talent and skills, whilst offering very little in return. Often local performers were given only small roles in order to lend a sense of authenticity to a predominantly American cast (Baxter 2007: pers. comm.).

4.3 Ellis and Bheki as interculturalists

Mkhwane and Pearson seem to align themselves with Schechner and Pavis' views on integrative interculturalism as a means of exploring the differences inherent in their two cultures. Furthermore, in keeping with the principles of integrative interculturalism, their theatre makes use of both Mkhwane and Pearson's performative modes equally and in such a way as to create a theatrical style that is new and constantly developing. The manner in which the meeting of cultures is explored, not only through the duo's collaboration, but also the themes they choose to explore, suggests that they also unconsciously subscribe to Bharucha's view on intercultural theatre as a means to question society (Bharucha 2005: pers. comm.).

Unfortunately Mkhwane and Pearson are unfamiliar with the concept of interculturalism, except at an intuitive level. Their unfamiliarity with academic debate surrounding the merits and dangers of interculturalism makes discussion with regards to their methods difficult. One cannot criticise them for willingly disregarding the concerns around interculturalism raised

by Bharucha and others, but only for being unaware of them. Also during our interview they were unable, or unwilling, to answer questions I raised around the problems facing those working within interculturalism. It is my belief that Mkhwane and Pearson, largely as a result of their collaborative process, have developed a form of ethical interculturalism in contrast to the more unsavoury examples criticised by Bharucha and Peters. Mkhwane and Pearson's working relationship differs from these examples because their collaboration is not temporary. The performers have worked together, almost exclusively, for sixteen years. Also, neither Pearson nor Mkhwane benefits more than the other financially or in terms of prestige and reputation. This commitment to their collaboration from both performers lends their work a level of authenticity lacking in the more vulgar examples of cultural tourism masquerading as interculturalism.

Often intercultural practitioners will take Eastern or African performance styles and use them to tell Western stories. An intercultural production can often seem to be a Western play in an African setting, for example. However Mkhwane and Pearson are notable for having created a unique style that combines African storytelling style with its songs and dances with elements from the Western tradition of *commedia dell'arte* and South African collaborative theatre. Through this fusion of elements, Mkhwane and Pearson have created characteristic elements only possible as a result of their collaboration.

The effects of the social hierarchy based on race and class that came as a result of the apartheid regime, still remain in South Africa. At the time of the formation of his collaboration with Mkhwane, Pearson would have been in a significantly higher position in the hierarchy than Mkhwane. However Pearson's position of power in relation to Mkhwane would only be relevant should he make use of it. Pearson historically may be the more influential member of the collaboration by benefit of the privileges affording him as a result of his race and class. However, due to the idealistic manner in which Mkhwane and Pearson approach their collaboration, this is unlikely to occur. That the duo has been working together consistently for 16 years suggest that it is not the case. Furthermore Mkhwane's role within the collaboration is not to provide a token African element but rather an integral aspect of Mkhwane and Pearson's exploration of the South African microcosm.

There is an ethical responsibility required of all performers working within the field of interculturalism, in post-apartheid South Africa. The history of oppression and cultural

intolerance are potent reminders of the manner in which issues of diversity have been dealt with in the past. With the end of apartheid, the possibility of exploring the cultural heritage and diversity present within South Africa has become feasible and attractive. However such explorations must be situated within an ethically defensible position which is true in the case of the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

By embracing the concept of Theatre of the Imagination, Mkhwane and Pearson present a type of theatre that is concerned primarily with the aesthetic of hope. Despite the darkness present in some of Mkhwane and Pearson's work, the possibility of a happy ending is never far away. Some would argue that this suggests idealism on the part of the duo, that not all problems can be solved easily. However Mkhwane and Pearson's fierce commitment to hope is an act of defiance in an increasingly cynical world. By embracing the principles of hope and reconciliation, Mkhwane and Pearson offer a viewpoint that is needed if South Africa is to solve the problems facing the young democracy.

The process that led to the development of Mkhwane and Pearson's theatrical aesthetic can be seen in the training they received and influences of Jacques Lecoq, Gibson Kente, Nicholas Ellenbogen and the various devisors of South African collaborative theatre. The combination of these training methodologies combined with the duo's idealism has resulted in a form of theatre that exposes the frailties and flaws of our society, without judgment.

Although it has changed over the years, the initial aim of this research dissertation was to address the lack of scholarly inquiry and critical review of the collaboration between Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson. In attempting to address this shortage, I was forced to question whether the work of Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson was important enough to warrant such enquiry. Through the course of this research I believe I have confirmed that Mkhwane and Pearson's work is important, that the duo's work has specific relevance to us as South Africans but could also be used to question other societies. The influence Mkhwane and Pearson have had on the work of other practitioners has been discussed. It has also been established that Mkhwane and Pearson through their consistent collaboration have become beacons of cultural tolerance and co-operation for South African practitioners.

The community of Sinako village is the imagined representation of Bheki Mkhwane and Ellis Pearson's hopes and expectations. Through the imaginations of the two performers and

ourselves as audience members, we are presented with a road map (with the potholes clearly marked) designed to lead us to reconciliation and reconstruction.

Through the course of this dissertation, the characteristics and thematic elements that constitute the theatre of Mkhwane and Pearson have been examined. The stylistic elements present in their work such as: their approach to characterization, use of props and costume are the end result of the training they received, combined with their own existing preoccupations. These stylistic elements are chosen in order to invoke and stimulate the imagination of the audience.

The importance of and reverence for nature is a central theme in Mkhwane and Pearson's work. Instilled into the performers during their early training at the Loft Theatre Company and Theatre for Africa, it forms the basis for many of their narratives.

Mkhwane and Pearson have chosen to delve into the issues and challenges that stand in the way of South Africa's development. By presenting these issues within the framework of an imagined community Mkhwane and Pearson suggest how these matters affect us. Mkhwane and Pearson also hint at the possibility that these problems, when faced and dealt with in a humane manner could be solved.

This idealism is crucial to the Theatre of the Imagination aesthetic, as it informs every aspect of Mkhwane and Pearson's work, as it suggests the possibility of reconciliation and hope.

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Appendix

The following is an unpublished interview with Ellis Pearson and Bheki Mkhwane, conducted and transcribed by James Aitchison in 2005. Please note that this interview has been transcribed verbatim.

B: Why did Mandela go to jail for life sentence and suddenly became president? How would an African explain that? If you start explaining that, you start saying there was a man who prophesised that there would be a man who would come up. But the Western world is always trying to put things in boxes and I have problem with that, because I don't remember sitting and thinking I would like to meet a white guy and make theatre.

B: This last Sunday I was invited by these boys because I moved into a new area and these boys said: "What are you doing?" And I said "Nah, I'm at home." And they said "Come over, we're having a braai" and they were young guys. And when I arrived there, they were struggling about relationships and marriage, do they want to get married? And I found myself saying to them that family is one thing, but you cannot desire destiny, if you follow along having a thing that really drives you, I mean I don't want to say a religion or whatever but one has to bring their own individual belief where anything that happens now you say its meant for, whether you base it on Christianity or whatever religion but it helps you to have a certain pillar that you believe in. So that's why for me to respond to that it's very sad because I don't remember planning that I meet a white guy, it just happened and we followed along. Whether it's the right thing or the wrong thing, I don't remember because the interest was in this talent and seeing the combination of it and working and exciting and inspiring each other.

E: That's an interesting area and I want to talk more about that because what we have done in our work is continuously contrast a Western way of thinking and African way of thinking and I guess I have been lucky in that I have become aware of the African way of thinking through meeting Bheki through doing our work. You can still become aware of it through books and studying and writing a thesis on it, but we have had a chance to practically – practically - but that question specifically, what I want to say. Remember Hansie Cronje said "The Devil made me do it". Then we can say why did he do that? "Oh God told me to do that" so you (*gesturing to Bheki*) saying something close to that but not quite the same thing it's a God's

call or the Devil's call. So if one lives one's life in that way, where does your choice-making come in if you say "It wasn't me, it was God" or else "It wasn't me, it was the Devil", where do you come in? Westerners tend to look at the psychological - Western psychological minds ...

B: You don't wait like the rest of us and say you have to make choices. You still follow 'cause it's a call isn't it? Even if something bad happens, you think it's for a reason - and like: it's for a reason; it's what shapes you in a specific direction. For a good example, in our work we write a show, where only after a year we realise that show didn't work. But later two years down the line, we find us ourselves going back to that, show and saying if we improved this, that show would have worked. We learn from those failures. So if it happens you can't say "oh I have to make a choice" because it is happening for a reason. You have to be fair enough and humble enough to take that situation in you; either it's a bad situation or an evil situation and move forward.

E: As the Buddhist would say, you need to sit with something, and hold those feelings. That is an African way, or universal way, say indigenous, not Western so much. The San People were a powerful example of indigenous awareness and we often talk about that. So what you are saying there Bheki is: It's an African way. If something bad happens, sit with the pain, don't fight it, don't take drugs, don't take tranquilisers, don't try everything to stave off ... to make life good again, just sit with it, it's for a reason, you'll learn a lesson. I can relate to that. We as Westerners are astounded at how patient African people are. And we are blessed as White people in this country because if they weren't so patient, if it were Italian or Irish, they would have killed us all a long time ago, because maybe their world view is different, Whereas African people still are fed by an indigenous way of seeing things, although one of the tragedies, with urban life is they are losing this and are becoming Western. It's like how Westerners try and understand Nelson Mandela from a Western perspective - he was so patient to wait in that prison - whereas an African would have the perspective of - no, he wasn't patient, and he didn't know what the future held, but must wait and see.

B: I working relationship came from that.

J: What was your first show?

B: We were doing *Amazwe Moya*.

J: Was that a *Loft* production?

B: No, that's way after *Loft*. After even *Theatre for Africa*.

J: But you were in *Horn of Sorrow*.

B: Yah. But the first thing we did only the two of us ...

E: Basically 'cause *Theatre for Africa* - Nicholas had moved up to Jo'burg, and we both moved up there, and I remember living in his house for a while, but it wasn't going to work, 'cause my home is here.

B: But I was freer.

E: And you chose not to work with Nicholas out of choice?

B: No I didn't, you gave me a call and said: "Hey I've got this thing to do."

E: So that would be about 93, 94 - before the first elections?

B: It was 92.

J: Was *Horn of Sorrow* your first time working together?

E: No, we had done many shows; one of the very first shows would have been *Exodus*.

J: So you worked together a lot during the *Loft* era?

E and B: Yah!

B: What was interesting in the Loft was the way Nicholas grouped us, where the company was divided it was clearly seen, with the arrival of Ellis that these guys, we were clearly seen as doing physical theatre. And we were grouped like, that.

J: So you didn't do the classical roles?

B: No we did but middle roles. But *Exodus* for the first time we were told "Go away with Ellis Pearson for three months and come up with a show". That's how *Exodus* was born.

J: You didn't train formally?

B: No we would do plays in the township where there was no set, just one chair and a table! So everything was physical theatre.

J: Could you talk about your process?

B: Something is more powerful if it is created by you. So that is something that has become so close to us. We don't work with a writer or director and that has shaped us to find process and ways of how to judge our work

E: so much of the world is driven not by vision, not by calling, not by deep feeling for... it comes out of its your job to do. It's like a journalist, that's why the news can be contrived, or boring or wanky, 'cause the poor journalist don't want to lose their job. Our process, we don't normally make a show, because we have to, we're aware that we have to make a living. It usually comes out of discussions, things that we feel strongly about, that are happening in the world. And we just happen to be people who express themselves through theatre, so we make a theatre piece and not a sculpture, or write an essay.

B: What we are trying to say is we are always driven by a certain vision, for a certain show, its not just to say lets write another one. And it's hard work, to create a play from scratch, but you go through that process only if you have vision. And there are disadvantages were you have close friends watch the play and its dealing with issues that they don't want to discuss.

E: That's an important part of our process waiting for the vision, having the vision, and it often revolves around those kinds of issues: Indigenous verses Western, modern world.

J: Could you elaborate on that - specifically with regards to your work?

B: There is a lot of technology that has come in, and you can see our people are swallowed by that, and when they are in there you see them losing themselves, and if you look at the latest technology, twenty years ago here, you would have seen people with their briefcases. Instead you see people just hiding behind this machine (*gestures to cell phone*). So for us we start questioning. Here is James, a human being who was lost humanity and is stuck behind this machine. So we look at what technology has done to humanity and what was there before. So we try to find a balance in the modern day situation. So we are not saying it's wrong, we are saying maybe an individual has to find a balance.

E: And there are lots of things in the news that will talk about, like drug companies. Like the majority of breast cancer operations are unnecessary. Something's wrong! And indigenous ways offer other ways of approaching those things, even if it's to fucking die, it's okay. You carry anyway in another form. Indigenous ways would say: "If they are meant to (die) they will. If they have a job to do, they will be healed".

B: We don't say they die, they have been called.

E: So we all know the indigenous ways, they are indigenous to all of us, it's just to what extent we have lost them, or forgotten it. And that's a big inspiration in our work.

B: A ritual if not a ceremony to these people that are gathering there and let them either celebrate with you or grow with you, you know what I'm saying?

J: Yeah

B So that's an approach of bringing together - if you want to celebrate something, so you become an initiator in that situation, in an African situation you be the speaker of the village or *induna* or herdsman for this ceremony to happen or whether you want them to know of this thing that is taking place in this village. It's very interesting, you become an initiator for that

situation, so because you are an initiator, you have to stay truthful to the importance, to the issue, so in other styles of theatre you can pretend, so then it's like entertainment.

J: So do you see your theatre as more than just entertainment?

B: Jah, defiantly we do, Its more than entertainment 'cause there are other situations like today if we were asked if we would like to perform in a casino we would say no - it's not the right place, you know what I'm saying? - the venue becomes special.

J: You perform outside for the most part, any particular reason?

E: There is no particular reason, there is choice: in nature, to be in the presence of nature brings a special quality that enables the audience to enter into another world more easily. Grotowski particularly spoke about, rehearsing in the presence of nature, and we tried to do that, when we were doing *Exodus*, trying to use some of Grotowski's principles.

B: But all of our shows have always been created outside.

E: Yeah.

B: Since we started with our collaboration, we've never rehearsed in a room.

E: We always rehearse in someone's garden, so we save money, we don't have to rent a space, rent an office rent a church hall, we don't have to do that. And it works for us; it brings a certain quality, being out there.

B: It's very interesting, 'cause sometimes we get stuck and we see something there (*gestures*) and straight away that something will inspire us.

J: So how does nature influence you?

E: Again it gets back to indigenous ways, nature has got it all, if you are looking for rhythm, for stories, for form, for colour, for texture, if you are looking for life, if you're looking for death, if you're looking for - in a deeper sense, nature contains it all. If you want to watch an

ant build, its nest and you - its got all the stories: praying mantis, trying to catch an insect - stalking him; or a lion – it's just full of real stories,

B: You sit there and you see an eagle up high, and you suddenly think it feels like to catch the air and just flow, and then you have story right there and you think: I wonder how it feels to fly? - and you start telling a story then. Of course there are a lot of challenges, but it's quite an achievement, if you touch human beings, about their interest in flight of the eagle, and trying to imagine being that eagle and flying right in front of them, but its enhanced by the real situation, and that's the start. That's what nature provides.

E: That's the key thing there: it's Theatre of the Imagination. Its key thing for us is what it feels like to be - an eagle.

B: To soar, soaring up there - not walking but soaring up there, in a different space.

E: Or what does it feel like to be a chief, a person of authority, what does it feel like? And that comes from shaman, shamanic practice, *sangomas*, you put on the mask of an eagle, and you dance long enough, you get a rhythm going, and you become an eagle.

B: You take their spirit.

E: The main thing that Lecoq was teaching us was, don't try and act the mountain, be the mountain, don't try and act the eagle, be the eagle, don't try and act a human doctor in a hospital, be a doctor, once again a *sangoma* takes a person and they become that. You become the snake; you feel what it is like to experience the spirit, the essence, of that creature, that human being, that thing, that rock, that element of nature

B: And there's great stories about that, if you go - I mean it doesn't really relate, but Sbu, my friend, last week he went to the farm, there was a big function, a gathering, and they were given a small house cause it was his brother was doing his exams and they prophesised, they said there is someone, has arrived but he is not needed, and they had slaughtered two cows. Now maybe, Sbu thought that it was him and his friend 'cause they had come from the township, and they drive this new 4X4. Then later Sbu was lying down and he saw something in the roof, and he thinks: "It's a bird", and he used the cell phone light and it was a snake, a

black mamba. That was the unwanted guest.

E: 'Cause that would be a person, the snake would be a person, and that aspect of indigenous lore is very interesting, and we dispute it.

B: And now I get stories from these people, now say we looked at two snakes now, say there was one snake that wanted to come and give them an assurance, that this function is welcome by the ancestors, it would have been a green snake and it would have gone into that room where there is meat and food, and it would have been seen by one person. And as soon as that person would say: "Hey, there is a green snake there!" it would be gone and no one would see it again. And they would know that some had visited to bless their function.

E: There are so many stories I know from Zululand and so on about snakes falling from the roof and killing the mother.

B: So that's part of the influence, what does it feel like to be a snake? There's stories about human beings dying and then coming back as a snake, which explains why. And with theatre you're thinking how can you do that on stage, what choices do you make, how do you perform the transition from being a human being at the start of the story, to becoming a human being in the form of a snake, in the end of the story?

E: Just thinking about what Bheki was saying. "It's a calling" and we can lose touch of that in a Western world, the whole thing of calling. I continually wrestle with that, but I know I have been called, almost unwillingly, because it's hard to do, there is such a part of me that would love to be a monk, or some sort of quiet person, involved with the life of spirit. But I wasn't born to do that so it's taken its character in another way which is to make theatre. And that's what keeps me making theatre, the calling. People ask: "How can you still be doing theatre fifteen years on?" It's because we've been called there, we almost have no option

B: And you don't even think about it because it's a call.

E: You don't even think about it.

B: As another mind would think. You just feel I settle here 'cause I'm supposed to be here. You don't feel you need to question it.

(Discussion about a lion reserve worth noting purely as a source of inspiration:

Summed up, Bheki tells a story about a group of men in the savannah who, after their car breaks down, get surrounded by lions. They are certain that they will soon be attacked, however a woman carrying a baby comes out of nowhere and walks through the pack of lions, and asks the men to hold her hand and she leads them away from the lions and leads them to their camp in the night - turns out she was a *sangoma* and was initiated by a lion shaman.)

E: In transferring that into theatre work, where those stories work, influences me and influence us. We have started doing workshops, I take the person doing the workshop into the experience and it's not a cheat but it's a detour watered-down version of that where you take the person through the rhythm, through the breathing of the animal, you're going to be a lion now so you let people feel the spirit of the lion, like a *sangoma*, they experienced it in a much deeper way. But in the theatre you get the person to feel the heat (*during this Ellis is taking on aspects of a lion*) feel the flies, find the breathing, then hear something, and through a process of rhythm, space and breathing, get them to experience the movements. Grotowski was wonderful he said that if you're creating a lion, it must come from the smallest inner movement, and then it comes to the outside. So in small way you and the people in your workshop experience what it is to be a lion. Not in the deeper way but in a small way. And that to me is wonderful, 'cause in the Western world if you can find this kinship all the better for us 'cause the environment needs it. We are destroying the environment, we are fucking up the planet because we don't have a kinship brother, mother, sister system. Like in Native American and St Francis of Assisi, he felt this kinship. So in a way for me its very important that through that workshop you feel what it is to be a tree or a lion or something like that, if you feel what is to be a lion your attitude to them must change, you can't just go out and shoot them, you can't just go and cut down a forest and decimate the dolphins. Not because it's not good to, or cause I told you not to, but because there's a deeper reason why not to.

B: Or there's a deeper reason why they are there.

Both: We need that connection.

B: It's like in that book

E: Maybe our next piece is about lions!

(More description of lion book)

J: Do you see theatre as a way of reflecting society or as a means of changing or benefiting it?

E: Benefiting, more than just holding up a mirror. It must do more than that; it must change it as well. It deeper than that.

B: For us if you do a piece of theatre, if it doesn't move or change the audience then there is no reason for it. So we invite them (the audience) to come and mould a certain issue. Then when they go away, they have dealt with that. I met a woman in G-town and was really touched. She saw *Born through the nose*, and walked out with no tears, but then at 11 at night she cried and cried. That's the real meaning of theatre. When it's not just a place to go out to. But when you hit a note that makes people say "I want to deal with that (issue)". That's the aim of theatre.

J: Do you have a specific aim?

B: We do, 'cause if you look at this piece we have done, I remember both of us wanted to point the fingers at human beings - with the elephants looking at the "two-legged ones" They look at their mistakes.

J: Audience participation seems to be a constant in your work, could you elaborate on this?

B: To describe that is to touch on indigenous ways, the old ways where we approach our work as bringing the community together. So when we walk in there we are initiators. We are not there so you can watch Ellis and Bheki - no, we are there to solve the problem. As we are telling a story we are telling the story along with the audience. Because if a community was

solving a problem there would be a raising of hands and a person would come up with a solution, that's exactly what were trying to achieve. It's all of us going telling a story and all of us going through a certain experience. And from that the audience member goes away with a deeper meaning, rather than entertainment. Those people who participate, they don't forget.

E: Like in *The Hungry*, I love that we treat the audience as the villagers, it's our community and they know us.

B: We are not special. You all know that this has happened, now how do we solve it?

E: It is a conscious desire to get back to the deeper ways, the ways things used to be. The way people would gather around a piano to sing songs together, or communities would gather to solve a problem. We have lost that because of the modern world.

B: But there is a powerful thing that comes out of that where audience members come to you and say, "You know guys I wasn't watching you but I was watching people right across me". So it's not Ellis and Bheki, it's everyone.

J: Your shock tactics - brick in audience - does it have a specific purpose? Such as the water you throw on the audience?

E: I guess in a way - well the water/ baptism, 'cause, I'm a fucking frustrated priest! But shaman is a better word, and people have said to us that we are like shamans. We feel more like shamans than actors or entertainers. There is often a chicken in the show; cause in Lecoq the cock crow is a call to consciousness - out of the formless unconsciousness. A day is dawning, wake up and be part of the world. It's a call to wake up, it's also an African image as well. Water/baptism - and we have it in almost every show. It also works on an entertainment level.

B: It can also be explained in simple ways, in that theatre has to have surprises and danger.

J: Your theatre has gizmos, or special effects and inventions. Where do they come from? Does it have its roots in clowning?

E: We've used sticks a lot – it's simple but its still a gizmo. It's such a powerful symbol, as a staff, warrior, magic wand, circus master, its universal. Everything is a derivation of stick. I learnt magic as a young boy, but my magic is sleight of hand, but for both of us there is a desire for real magic, which the community owns. And it is done for and on behalf of the community but the stick is the basic gizmo from which everything arises. `

J: Does the spread of globalisation have an influence in your work.

E: We don't really understand globalisation so we can't really relate to it. It's part of the modern world and it will pass.

B: We are very much aware when we are pulled into that world, and we question things. Say someone asks us to do "What About Me" - we have a corporate thing. Straight away we say: "Why do you think it right for that?" We would rather make a completely different thing for a corporate function.

E: We do have a problem of things being packaged and marketed

B: Unless it's done right.

J: I guess I ask because, you both, seem to have defied marketing you have a successful formula and yet you have not mass produced it.

E: It's because we're lazy (*laughs*).

B: I think it because we are not business men, we are theatre creators. It's hard to think in a business manner.

E: It is hard. We could make more money that way though. I just struggle to get there, it's probably to our detriment, but we have got Sue.

B: It's also timing. If someone comes and asks to do a book, we would do it but only if it felt right, if the time was right.

E: It's not so much saying no,

B: So long as the call is there. I don't want to be famous; I want to be - to know the work, not me.

J: So you're saying the product is more important than the creator?

B: Yes. I want to be a human being around people, not an actor.

(Tape Change)

E: (Describing his orange hair) It's more like a *sangoma* or shaman, wearing feathers. And I forget about it. In a way it does make me separate, or sets me aside. It's closer to an indigenous thing.

J: How long did you study at the Lecoq School?

E: Two years

J: Do you find you draw on that training in your work?

E: Very much, they do have a different way to look at the world and theatre.

J: Did you study *commedia dell'arte* while you were there?

E: Yes, in the second year.

J: I read that you focused on the Arlecchino character. Is this correct?

E: Yeah, a cross between a monkey a donkey and a cat, he is one of the fools. *Commedia's* influence is enormous in theatre. And something you find with us that you would find then is the actor/writer/director (*garbled*).

E: In the clown section of Lecoq, we studied the essence of the clown, which is the essence of the child, the most vulnerable part of yourself, if you bring that into any part you play it's inevitably going to be richer, if you bring your own humanity, your wounds, the lessons you've learnt, it will inevitably be much richer, and Lecoq taught me that. So you're aware you're playing Hamlet, but it's James's Hamlet or Ellis's Hamlet. It's coming out of my humanity, as opposed to losing yourself in the role where you are only interested in the character that Shakespeare created. But there will always be James there or Ellis there in that character. So the idea is to bring it out and make it more - richer and more true.

J: To what extent do you feel responsible for the physical style of *Kwamanzi* and *Horn of Sorrow*, and *Raiders* - the first one?

E: I had come back from Lecoq, and I was interested in physical theatre. I think to be fair Nicholas asked me to come and work for the Loft and he had a strong idea, a vision for physical theatre as well. I perhaps had more know-how, more training. So I can't remember what he brought, and what I brought. I remember one of my utter disappointments in life, before you came (*points at Bheki*) was when the Loft first started, I had this vision, and Nicholas felt it strongly, and we would arrive every morning set up your mat, come and sit in a circle and slowly you would start your physical warm up and prepare for the day's work. And these were young students, who had just come out of varsity. And they just couldn't do it, and I was in utter despair, that people didn't share this desire of mine to treat this as something sacred, as a calling. It's still like that. So I was influenced by Lecoq and Grotowski. The quote by Grotowski - the actor was a priest who offers his life and her body, so you have to train that body.

B: But it's also about trying to find a physical language, which simple becomes a body language - and how to train that body to become an instrument - and tuning that instrument to sound interesting.

E: Something I learnt in Lecoq and something Bheki brought from the natural township theatre, sort of Gibson Kente, was using the body to be expressive. People in a Western culture still find it difficult to be friends with their body. It's still something that you have to drug and medicate, subvert, bring it under your control - we are control freaks in the West - as opposed to something you listen to, talk with, have a relationship with.

B: If you take it into the extreme you find that you discover a very special language, in your performance, where the words becomes minimal, and you speak more with your body and the theatre becomes more interesting.

J: Why flour?

B: You've heard the expression; theatre is the food for the soul. So if you bring in the flour, which is food and it plays a role in creating, it has a sacred meaning, but it's a universal thing. But something we have wanted, people who are coming early to our performances are always feeling it, Ellis trying to draw that circle, it's part of a ritual as well. But it could easily become part of our show.

E: If we are late for some reason or people are early, we never mind them watching us set up, we feel that the preparing of the space is important and is interesting to watch. So we love it when kids watch us prepare the space.