William Kentridge's Woyzeck on the Highveld, this page and page 10. All photos in this article by Ruphin Coudyzer.
Truth and Consequences in Post-Apartheid Theater

Mark Gevisser

In the last week of July, 1994, exactly three months after South Africa's exhilarating passage to democracy, a group of black actors was to be found holed up in a suburban Johannesburg hotel, forced into hiding because of death threats surrounding the broadcast of a fictional TV miniseries called The Line. The series is one of the finest to come out of South Africa and deals, in verité docudrama style, with pre-election political violence. But, at the moment of its broadcast, it found itself at the center of a growing national controversy over how the new democratic South Africa should deal with its conflict-ridden past. The series was slammed, not incorrectly, by Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) for being partisan and pro-ANC. The IFP (the Zulu nationalist party) attempted to have it taken off the air by threatening a resurgence of political conflict, and, for a while, it seemed as if South Africa was on the brink of a whole new era of censorship: the public broadcasting channel which commissioned it, ccv (which stands, exquisitely, for "Contemporary Community Values"), suspended further broadcasts of The Line because it was "not in the interests of national reconciliation."

The ensuing outcry forced a volte-face at the ccv, which decided to put the show back on the air. But then the IFP's wilder elements decided to hold the actors themselves accountable for roles they found offensive. At the very same time that the IFP was protesting that The Line "unfairly" represented it as violent, the IFP-aligned hostel-dwellers' association publicly announced that the actors' lives were in danger. Several actors received specific, personal threats: they would be assassinated, their families were in danger, their houses would be razed to the ground.

Fatwa with a difference. Here, unlike in the cases of Salman Rushdie or Taslima Nasrin, one doesn't need to be the author of a contentious work to put one's life on the line for one's art: so volatile and contested is South Africa's immediate history that even the professional depiction of a troublesome and complicated past becomes a matter of life and death. During the apartheid days, using culture to challenge the state was a dangerous practice; now, it seems, using culture to reflect on the past remains equally so.

When Nelson Mandela gave his inaugural address in May last year, he elicited the loudest applause when he—a man who spent 27 years in jail—said, "Let's forget the past! What's done is done." Appropriately enough, the "cultural event" that immediately followed our new president's call to collective amnesia was entitled Many Cultures, One Nation, an extravaganza, conceived and directed by recently returned exile Welcome Msomi, epic in its multicultural proportions:
hundreds of *sangomas* (traditional healers) pouring onto the huge outdoor stage beneath the Union Buildings in Pretoria, claspinng clay pots of boiling and bubbling substances; a classical ballet company dancing a spirited African interpretation of Ravel’s *Bolero*; seamless fusions of jaunty Afrikaner accordion music and rhythmic township *mbaqanga* riffs; Chinese dragon dances and Shangaan snake dances; classical Indian dancers floating across the stage to Johnny Clegg’s *White Zulu* rhythms; here and there a snatch of Shostakovitch. It was “national reconciliation” in motion: if *The Line* insisted on revisiting difficult truths, then *Many Cultures, One Nation*, a classic patriotic spectacle, smudged the sharp edges of these truths into a parade of superficial cultural styles that gave South Africans—trapped for so long in the fixed apartheid identities to which they were so arbitrarily allocated—a glossy song-and-dance dream of what they could be.

In these post-apartheid days, all South African cultural production seems to be strung between the poles of “truth” and “reconciliation.” And these are not the idle categories of a cultural critic: they are key political principles used to define life in South Africa since its passage to democracy. Nelson Mandela’s ANC-led government believes that equanimity is to be found in the balancing of the two: a Truth and Reconciliation Commission will be set up, with the express intention of reconciling South Africa’s previously warring populations and ideologies through the cathartic exposure of past atrocities.
Can there be reconciliation without truth? Does truth facilitate or impede the project of nationalism? And do those on the right side of history—in this case, those who have fought for and won equality beneath the banner of the ANC—hold the copyright on truth? In Mandela’s cabinet, the Truth Commission is the single issue, in an otherwise remarkable season of consensus, on which Mandela’s ANC and F.W. de Klerk’s National Party have sharply disagreed. Indeed, the closest that South Africa’s Government of National Unity has come to collapse was when it was revealed in January that, just before it relinquished power, De Klerk’s government had quietly preempted the Truth Commission by granting amnesty to 3,500 policemen, including the Police Commissioner and the former ministers of Defense and Law and Order.

These issues are not only to be found in political discourse. The dialectic between truth and reconciliation is played out in the furor over language and programming on the state-owned television; in debates over what will happen to apartheid monuments; in the opening of a grand new museum in Johannesburg. Not surprisingly, theater, too, has become an arena for the acting out of this dialectic—for performances of the past and rehearsals for the future.

Is Many Cultures, One Nation to be a model for post-apartheid theater? In neo-colonial society, the state often employs culture to affirm national identity: grand theaters are erected amidst the squalor, and in them the new elite sups on images of the harmony and unity that independence has wrought. But South African culture, and specifically its world-renowned theater, has a particular history that confounds such easy—and pyrrhic—solutions. In the past, it found its voice and fashioned its style as a vehicle for protest against apartheid, and the staging of this resistance was, in and of itself, liberatory. Now, at the putative moment of liberation, South African theater finds itself confronted with some immense dilemmas.

Sarafina!, thankfully, is dead; but its legacy lives on. Its pastiche of political anger and Broadway-style musical fused into a form of struggle-minstrelsy that has proven to be immensely lucrative and has become the almost inescapable model for how black South African theater should be made. At last year’s annual Community Theatre Showcase, hosted in May by the Market Theatre Laboratory in Johannesburg, there was even a production that consisted solely of a group of young township actors lip-synching their way through the Sarafina! soundtrack. This might be an extreme example, but it is a graphic indicator of how the imperatives of protest theater, which were initially creative responses to apartheid, have been commodified into formulaic conventions: the intense physicality; the burlesque comedy; the mug-faced, presentational delivery; the revue-style form of songs held together by a thin plot; the direct address of the audience; the enthaklement-to-freedom narrative. Now the question must be asked: can South African theater practitioners discover new strategies for dealing with the post-apartheid reality—strategies that do more than buy into easy visual metaphors and facile allegories of reconciliation? And if South African theater is forced, for both economic and political reasons, to celebrate a multicultural and democratic future, what on earth is it to do with the past?

Which brings us back to The Line. One of the actors, Jerry Mofokeng, is also a prominent South African theater director. That weekend in late July when he went into hiding, his revival of Athol Fugard’s 1959 play, Nongogo, had just opened at Johannesburg’s Civic Theatre, a vast state-subsidized edifice that is attempting to reconceive itself as a people’s theater. Mofokeng finds tragic resonance in the fact that he missed the production because he was in mortal danger for having represented a troublesome character from the past (he plays an Inkatha warlord in The Line); he had chosen to direct Nongogo precisely because of what it says about dealing with history.

In Nongogo, one of Fugard’s first works, Queeny, a black former-prostitute-turned-taverner, tries to escape her past by falling in love with a squeaky-clean salesman. But, notes Mofokeng, “the
other men in her life, her pimps and her customers, cannot afford to let her be a new person. Change is threatening, especially when it gives those under your power a breakthrough, the possibility of a new world.” And so they destroy her chance for a new life by telling the salesman about her past, at which point he flees. It is a dark, claustrophobic drama, for there seems to be no way out for Queeny, who returns, embittered, to making a living by feeding the addictions of desperate township drunks.

While Mofokeng is using one of Fugard’s earliest plays to provide South Africans with an allegory about how we deal with the past, Fugard himself is attempting to deal with post-apartheid reality in a radically different way. Also playing at the Civic Theatre, at the very same time, was his latest work, My Life. Here, in a radical break from his well-wrought allegories of racial conflict, Fugard has returned to the workshop-style theater of The Island and Sizwe Banzi is Dead, but with uncharacteristic beatitude: he has brought to the stage five teenage girls—all from different races, all filled with adolescent hope and naiveté—and allowed them, simply, to tell their stories.

Fugard talks of My Life as “a hugely liberating rebirth,” and links himself, very self-consciously, to the bigger renaissance taking place in South Africa: “My 40 years as writer have coincided perfectly with the 40 years of official apartheid, and I’ve ended up like a conditioned rat with a series of responses to bells and sounds, to uniforms and to government; and these conditioned

“An allegory for reconciliation”: Athol Fugard’s My Life.
reflexes are of no use to me in the future. Political and social reality in this country has changed totally, so if I want to go on functioning as a truly living writer, I’ve got to start again, in the same way this country is starting again.” He is frequently asked by unwitting foreigners, he says, what he is going to do as a writer now that apartheid is dead. “It’s a question that drives me crazy. As if I’ve lost my capital, as if I’ve lost my subject, my material. I’m a storyteller about desperate people, and God knows there are going to be enough desperate people in South Africa to keep me in business for a long time to come.”

But My Life, in stark contrast to Nongogo, is anything but desperate. His teenage subjects function as a fountain of youth from which he, the aging, jaded man who represents old ways of seeing, can drink. The voices of the young women are theirs and theirs alone: not even Fugard could capture so perfectly that querulous adolescent mix of bravado and timidity, of awakening and romance. If these were Fugard’s own words, he would have excised the banality that makes them so charming and replaced them with his own acute and elegant poetic formulations. But Fugard, South Africa’s great allegorist, must be up to something. No Fugard work is without meaning. And, indeed, he has fashioned from their stories an allegory for reconciliation—one that is to be found not in the narrative of the drama, but in making. Onstage, the girls self-consciously talk about how they were initially suspicious of each other, and about how the process of getting to know each other by making a play has changed their preconceptions and brought them together. Miraculously, it’s not corny. Because of his skillful and sensitive dramatization, and because of the sheer integrity of the young performers’ voices, My Life does not fall into the trap, so present in South African theater at the moment, of melting-pot mythologization.

My Life had its premiere, in early July of 1994, at the annual National Festival for the Arts in the Eastern Cape city of Grahamstown—an event that serves to sum up trends in the South African performing arts. Many of the productions fell into the Many Cultures, One Nation trap; the reconciliation impulse, it seems, has dulled even the sharpest South African sensibilities. Paul Slabolepszy, a poet of the white working class famous for his searing, on-the-ground elegies to white entrapment and nihilism, presented Victoria Almost Falls, a play which turned reconciliation into vapid comic farce: in the name of celebrating South Africa’s many different ethnicities, Slabolepszy offered a taxonomy of one-dimensional ethnic stereotypes. And in the much-lauded first indigenous South African opera, The Orphans of Qumbu, librettist and composer Michael Williams fused African choral and western operatic styles to fashion yet another crude allegory for reconciliation: black children, orphaned by decedent white petits bourgeois, make amends with their oppressors, and everyone happily sings “Peace is Coming,” à la Sarafina!, in the finale.

There was, however, another, more promising impulse to be found in Grahamstown: that of
reclamation, of finding models from the past that provide guidance for the future. The stage for the process was set, perhaps, by The Market Theatre's decision, earlier this year, to revive its eight-year-old smash hit, Sophiatown, specifically to coincide with the April election. First produced by the innovative, mixed-race Junction Avenue Theatre Company, it is set in Sophiatown in the 1950s, a much-mythologized time and place of racial harmony, the cradle of the black intelligentsia, and one of South Africa's few cultural melting pots. In 1955, the authorities destroyed Sophiatown and forcibly removed all its black residents to Soweto. In the play, a Jewish girl moves to the neighborhood in the early 50s: through her eyes we see first the vibrancy and potential of a non-racial South Africa, and then the brutal shattering of these possibilities.

The internationally-renowned Market is the dynamo of indigenous South African theater, the nurturing field of Fugard, Mbongeni Ngema, and the protest genre. That so proven an old chestnut as Sophiatown was revived as the theater's "election special" says much about a longing, among progressive South Africans, for earlier, more hopeful times. How ironic that, at the moment of liberation, we should be moved by the story of a Jewish girl living with black men in the bad days of early apartheid; that we should find comfort, not in possibilities of tomorrow, but in the struggles of yesterday. But at what point does reclamation become nostalgia? Sophiatown was to be seen everywhere at Grahamstown this year: as a trope for reconciliation in Victoria Almost Falls, in the popular musical-revue Kveka Bafana, and as the setting for two of the more successful straight dramas, Mofokeng's Nongogo (which premiered at Grahamstown before coming to Johannesburg), and The Suit, an adaptation of a famous story by Can Themba, one of Sophiatown's Damon Runyon-esque bards.

The Suit was directed by Barney Simon, the man who "discovered" Sarafina! Mbongeni Ngema and one of the founders of the South African workshop-style protest theater genre. It opens with a eulogy to Sophiatown, written by Simon specifically for this production: "A long time ago, way to the west of Jo'burg, was a wonderland called Sophiatown. It wasn't pretty and pink and gleaming with glass. In fact, most of the windows didn't have any glass. It was the people..." Simon thus doffs his cap to nostalgia before immersing the audience in a beautiful, taut little drama about marital infidelity—a drama to which Sophiatown, really, is quite incidental. So why place it in Sophiatown at all? Why not contemporize it? Simon responds that "Sophiatown was a rich part of our history. It's not just that it was full of glamour, but that it was a time with attitude. When you look at the famous photographs of the era, there's an attitude that says, 'We are here! Take notice of us!' Sophiatown offered black people so many choices, so many possibilities. And that's something we need to reclaim."

What The Suit reclaims, in fact, is something quite different: it brings to the theater the private, domestic space of black South Africans—a space reduced to inhuman proportions and set off-limits by the project of apartheid. Like another recent Simon production, So What's New? (a sitcom by black playwright Fatima Dike about township women and their obsessions with American soap operas), The Suit reclaims the living room, the kitchen table, the kitchen sink. Though presented in a detached, story-telling style, with the characters switching between first and third person, The Suit, like Nongogo, heralds a new interest in naturalism in black South African theater. If the grand public project of apartheid, and the grand public response of resistance, collectivized identity and devalued individual experience, then surely "truth and reconciliation" is primarily a matter of relocating individual and private experiences within the rubric of an epic liberation struggle and its socioeconomic consequences. There are, after all, histories other than public ones that need to be reclaimed.

Carol Steinberg once wrote that "the South African performance tradition is theatrical, rather than naturalistic. It's as though we've fallen into the Waiting for Godot stream of radical
theater and completely missed the Look Back in Anger one. Our theater has dealt with public and political issues in expressionistic, didactic, and highly theatrical ways. In both its style and its ideology, it's all about presentation rather than representation.” Steinberg believes that “we've never really been into the living room, the kitchen, of black working-class consciousness. We've been too busy out on the streets, fighting for freedom.” Most important for her is the potential for such theater to deal with gender relations, through an exploration of the politics of domesticity, in a way that the machismo of protest theater never could.

Sarafina! lip-synching notwithstanding, people who work with community theater are beginning to see the birth of this impulse at a grassroots level, too. Vanessa Cooke, who runs The Market Laboratory, notes that “at our showcase last year, almost every single play ended with a rendition of Nkosi Sikelela i Afrika [the liberation anthem]. At this year's showcase, though, there was a wonderful calmness, a reflectivity, in the work.” The Laboratory's field work coordinator is Mampe Tsedi; providing assistance to the legion of township-based community theater projects that exist around Johannesburg, she has found, in the past few months, “an astonishing change in the work that is being done at a grassroots level. Now that there's an ANC government that the people themselves voted for, we can no longer simply cry out that the system's oppressing us. We have to begin looking for the oppressors among ourselves.”

What this means is that more and more community theater projects are beginning to deal with local issues, rather than with the grand national project of anti-apartheid resistance, in plays about sexual harassment, child abuse, housing, unemployment, AIDS. One production from Soweto at the May Showcase, Ikhaya Elifudumele (Warm House), dealt with the effects of alcoholism on a family: it took the stock township theater character of the wise-cracking drunk—savant out of the tavern and put him in the home, exploring the effects that his addiction had on domesticity and family life. At the community level there is still, however, a strong bias towards issue-based theater; the style remains didactic and there is always a moral punchline. Tale Motsepe, development manager at the Civic Theatre, offers two reasons for this: “Firstly, we come from a culture of being responsible artists. That’s what we did during apartheid years, and that’s what is expected of us now. If community theater groups are not seen to be contributing towards Reconstruction and Development [Truth and Reconciliation’s sibling state ideology], then they’ll lose the sympathy of their audiences. In African society, there just isn’t that barrier between art and life. A play is a continuous extension of life.” The second reason, like the first, has its roots as much in economics as in ideology: “There is precious little funding for community theater, particularly now that the international anti-apartheid movement has collapsed. So, if you want to make theater, what do you do? You find an issue that will get you some funding. Once you’re dealing with a social issue, once you are doing educational theater, you’re more likely to find space, to find sponsors, and to be presented with ready-made audiences.”

Economics is an issue to which professional theater also must address itself. What little state subsidy there is for the arts has been poured, traditionally, into lavish operas mounted by the government-funded Performing Arts Councils, which are desperately trying to write themselves into the future by Africanizing both their productions and their audiences. Mbongeni Ngema was made resident director of the Natal Performing Arts Council and, particularly in the field of dance, the Arts Councils are making adventurous, and often successful, attempts at fusing African and Western traditions. But with all the demands on housing, education, and health care that a post-apartheid South Africa presents, there is going to be even less state funding for arts that do not prove themselves to be part of “reconciliation,” “nation-building,” or “reconstruction and development.”
Reclaiming "the private, domestic space of black South Africans": Stella Khumalo in The Suit, directed by Barney Simon for the Market Theatre Company.
Meanwhile, the legendary Market Theatre, having exhausted the protest genre, and located in the increasingly black (and increasingly dangerous) inner city, cannot draw in paying audiences, which are still largely white. It is on the verge of bankruptcy and collapse, having never had the benefit of significant state subsidy. In a better part of town, the subsidized Civic Theatre celebrated South Africa's first democratic Christmas with an extravagant musical revue called *Jukebox Jol*. Costing over $300,000 (a vast sum for a South African production), it strung together almost every popular South African hit ever recorded—from schmaltzy pop and white-trash rock to shebeen jive and Afrikaner folk-music—in a glitzy, high-tech, cultural fusion pantomime. It was as if *Many Cultures, One Nation* had moved inside: cotton-candy multiculturalism masquerading as reconciliation. While a production such as *Jukebox Jol* makes an important pitch for local talent against the worst depredations of American junk-culture imperialism, and puts royalty fees into local pockets rather than into those of Webber, Rice, and Mackintosh, such patriotic spectacle sets out to draw people into the theater by reaffirming, rather than challenging or developing, their notions of themselves. Was *Jukebox Jol* a “nation-building” experience? Certainly. Was it theater? No way: in art, as in politics, reconciliation has to be earned by an excavation for truths; it cannot be achieved by the mere juxtaposition of cultural forms.

But at least *Jukebox Jol* entertained, as it laid claim to some social value. Its major competition over the Christmas season was *Crazy for You* (also playing at a state-subsidized theater) and *Nunsense II*. Now that the cultural boycott has ended, local producers can buy such lukewarm international properties that “sophisticated” white audiences prefer to indigenous theater. The truly hot, serious theater (like a perfectly competent, if soulless, production of *Millenium Approaches*) bombs, while the truly hot musicals are simply too costly to produce here. Perhaps it’s a blessing for the future of indigenous theater that we do not have houses big enough or brash enough to hold a *Les Mis* or a *Phantom*.

There are, of course, clear benefits to the end of the boycott: the thin-membraned bubble of insulation has burst and, in serious theater, cross-fertilization is taking place. William Kentridge, one of South Africa’s most famed visual artists and animators, has recently moved into theater, taking European classics and rooting them—through a multimedia mix of performance, puppetry, and animation—firmly in the South African soil. His exquisite *Wayzuck on the Highveld*, which recast Büchner’s everyman as an alienated black migrant worker battling apartheid capitalism, played at the international puppet festival in New York last year, and his next project will be a South African *Faust*. Similarly, Anthony Sher was back in his native land in March, along with British National Theatre director Gregory Doran, to do a South African *Titus Andronicus*.

In dance, too, there is much innovative new work, and many companies are exploring the Pina Bausch-influenced form of *Tanztheater*. At Grahamstown, Robyn Orlin premiered her *the explosion of the stars is not only reserved for ticket-holders...*. With a highly sophisticated visual language and a resolute anti-dance style, Orlin and her multiracial company expressed a nihilism familiar to many South Africans: raincoat-clad dancers destroyed books; a neurotic stage manager in a pith helmet frantically and purposelessly moved mobile floodlights about. The stage became a cultural battleground, with the dancers stripping down to tiger skin underwear and playing out the clash between colonialism and liberation, sending up cultural and racial stereotypes in a jagged narrative that climaxd with a hilarious spoof of exoticization done to a lip-synch of Pete Seeger’s *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*.

If the Grahamstown festival is anything to go by, dance theater, rather than pure theater, has become South Africa’s cultural innovator. Because dance, unlike theater, has a heritage in indige-
nous southern African cultures, it offers greater possibilities for fusing African and Western styles. But as was seen in the Many Cultures, One Nation extravaganza or in Jukebox Jol, such fusions can become facile visual metaphors for national reconciliation. Nevertheless, because dance plays abstract expressionism to theater’s static figurativeness—because it doesn’t pin ideas down to linear stories the way theater does—it offers a solution to the deep-rooted didacticism of South African theater, and ruptures both the formal and the conceptual fixed spaces in which South African theater is currently caught.

Perhaps what happened after The Line shows us that South Africa is not yet ready for theatrical verisimilitude. That whole experience has taught Jerry Mofokeng a lesson: he will not, in the foreseeable future, direct a local play that cuts too close to the bone. Rather than finding indigenous works that deal directly with South African conflicts, he will find foreign plays that engage them obliquely, metaphorically. There is, of course, immense creative potential in the necessity for such invention. In the slave days, both in South Africa and in the United States, this was seen in the “signifyin’ monkey” tradition—in finding a language that could communicate a message to the people while confounding the authorities. Perhaps post-apartheid South Africa, still raw from its wounds, needs to find a new way ofsignifying.

A particularly bleak reading can be given to Athol Fugard’s Nongogo: that by telling the truth about Queeny’s past, the men in her life destroy any possibility for her future. This idea also lies at the crux of the debate surrounding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Those who argue for it maintain, with missionary passion, that by hauling the perpetrators of past crimes before such a body and broadcasting their confessions, we will cleanse ourselves, and thereby clear the decks for a conflict-free future. Those who argue against the Commission maintain, with equal passion, that nothing but further divisiveness is to be gained from such an exercise, that opening old wounds will do nothing but rekindle old animosities and spark fresh conflicts. Both of these points of view, however, present a fundamental problem: following diametrically opposed routes, each seeks to divorce us from our past. A more sophisticated, one could say Freudian, understanding of the dialectic of truth and reconciliation—in theater as in politics—would have it that we live forever with our past, and that rather than trying to abandon it, we should learn to understand it and integrate it into our present-day lives. There is some space in Nongogo for hope: if Queeny tries to make sense of her past rather than fleeing it, she might, indeed, lose her squeaky-clean salesman, but she may well attain a self-knowledge that leads to freedom. Therein lies the task of post-apartheid theater.