The “Rehabilitation” of Howard Brenton

Janelle Reinelt

In the past year, playwright Howard Brenton has returned to Britain’s large national stages after almost a decade’s absence. Fall 2005 saw Paul, produced by the National Theatre, followed in winter 2006 by a revival of The Romans in Britain (1980) at the Sheffield Crucible. August brought In Extremis to Shakespeare’s Globe—one of the few new plays produced in that venue—and in September the revival of Pravda (1985), written with David Hare, received a coproduction between the Chichester Festival and Birmingham Repertory Theatre.

The new plays, Paul and In Extremis, focus on the nature and power of religious faith. As Brenton has always created plays that address contemporary sociopolitical concerns, it is not surprising that he turns now toward the fraught relationship between religious belief and human conduct. In the West, the ascendency of the Christian Right on one hand and fears of Islamic fundamentalism on the other have provoked religious intolerance and justified concern with the excesses of fanatic belief. Faith is a vexed issue in our time; sometimes secular artists dismiss it as not worthy of serious consideration or represent it only in broad stereotypes as repressive or simplistic. But we live in a moment when understanding how and why people believe in various spiritual realities is critical if we are to combat the intolerance, violence, and wars of religion that threaten our fledgling century. Brenton’s plays dramatize the contradictions of Christianity, but also implicate the complex relationships between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, and the multifaceted character of belief itself. In this way, Brenton opens up an aesthetic mode of inquiry that juxtaposes historical time and contemporary praxis.

Political writers have had a strong post-WWII presence on British stages, although their fortunes have tended to rise or fall depending on the changing winds of politics and fashion. Catastrophic international events in recent years have once again made their presence welcome, even necessary, and new young artistic directors such as Nick Hytner at the National Theatre and Sam West at the Sheffield Crucible have commissioned seasoned writers, now in or near their 60s, to help their theatres respond through engaging, provocative works.1 Following his appointment in 2003, Hytner began programming for a diverse young audience, offering seats for £10 (less than $20), opening his first season with Stewart Lee and Richard Thomas’s Jerry Springer: The Opera (2003), and following up with the accomplished

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1. This new political theatre energy could be felt by 2003. In his year-end wrap up, Michael Billington wrote: “A year ago I bemoaned British theatre’s detachment from politics. Where were the plays that dealt with the big issues? The heartening thing about 2003 has been theatre’s reconnection with the wider world” (2003).

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black actor Adrian Lester as the icon of the nation in a modern-dress Henry V. Hytner also extended a written invitation to Howard Brenton, David Hare, Caryl Churchill, and David Edgar, mixing this "old guard" with newer voices such as Martin McDonagh, Owen McCafferty, and Kwame Kwei-Armah. The National Theatre under Hytner has become a player in public discourse again after the disappointing conservatism of former artistic director Trevor Nunn.

Brenton responded to Hytner’s invitation with Paul, investigating the historical St. Paul and his treacherous times. It opened to strong critical acclaim and was nominated for the Olivier Award for best new play of 2005, reestablishing Brenton as one of Britain’s foremost political writers whose insights have an important contribution to make to our ongoing efforts to come to terms with the tensions of our own times and the legacy of earlier ages, at a moment when religion is a—perhaps the—political issue.

In the 1970s and ’80s, Brenton became a highly successful playwright as his imaginative and wide-ranging dramas were regularly produced at the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the Royal Court Theatre (Britain’s premier theatre for new writing). In 1976, Weapons of Happiness was commissioned to inaugurate the Lyttleton Theatre in the National’s then-new South Bank complex and won the Evening Standard Best Play award. In 1980, Romans in Britain provoked a right-wing crusader for censorship in the arts, Mary Whitehouse, to pursue a private prosecution against director Michael Bogdanov for the simulated rape of a Druid by a Roman soldier. For Whitehouse it perpetrates gross indecency; for Brenton, “it dramatizes a war crime” (Brenton 2006a). He survived this so-called scandal—the case eventually fell apart—and he continued to write for British theatre’s mainstream venues. However, in the late 1990s, Brenton endured a drubbing in the British press from which he is only now emerging. It seems that taking on the new Labour government early in its first term was considered to be in bad taste, and satire, an ancient genre of dramatic writing that Brenton had earlier successfully mixed in with more “serious” dramas, was now considered terrible writing. Brenton formed a group called Stigma with longtime friends and collaborators Tariq Ali and Andy de la Tour to shake up the British electorate by making them laugh at the expense of the newly triumphant New Labourites. Ugly Rumors (1998), the first of three plays over three years attempted by Stigma, drew savage criticism from the press. Even Michael Billington, the Guardian critic whose left-leaning views and intelligent theatrical judgment usually serve as a reliable bell-weather wrote, “you feel it is still too early to accuse the Government of some kind of grand betrayal” (1998:1444). One wonders if Billington would like to eat his hat now, in light of Blair’s handling of the Iraq War—including his fraudulent assessments of weapons of mass destruction. At the time, however, less even-handed critics were scathing.

If Brenton was hurt by this derision, he didn’t complain: he turned to television. Brenton joined the BBC writing team that launched the award-winning spy thriller series, Spooks, and created 13 episodes for one of his

2. For an indication of the lasting strength of Romans, see Sean Carney’s excellent essay on the play (2004).
3. For example, “Tariq Ali’s and Howard Brenton’s clumsy attack on New Labour looks like the work of a pair of smug, sixth-form socialist wannabes, whose high-minded aims quickly lapse into juvenile name calling” (Curtis 1998:1442).
favorite genres. Producer Andrew Woodhead credits “Howard’s knowledge of the world, his experience and knowledge of politics,” and David Hare has claimed he “can always tell which episodes have been written by Howard because the themes are the ones he has been writing about for 30 years—terrorism, disillusionment, and despair” (in Hoggard 2005).

The British theatre was going through a generational transition during this period as well. Following the collapse of Eastern Europe’s socialist governments, domestic socialists in Britain were rethinking the project of the Left. A new young group of writers such as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Joe Penhall, and Martin Crimp were carving out a style that left the Brechtian epic behind and instead turned inward to an analysis of the emptiness of a violent, commodified culture. Some said there were no more political writers, but that was far from true—still their tone, style, and subject matter were different. With the Left routed and Labour politics making the same sharp declension to the Right that we saw in the U.S. during Bill Clinton’s first term, the cultural climate was less than hospitable for Brenton’s bold theatrical work, and critics rejected his trenchant satires as left-wing sour grapes.

Recently, however, both the world and the theatre have changed: The dangerous and malevolent events of the last few years have provoked a strong new wave of political writing in the theatre and necessitated a space where Brenton’s generation of writers can mingle well on national stages with a younger generation. Since the success of Paul, Hytner has also offered Brenton a commission for the Olivier stage, the largest and most challenging of the National stages.4 5.

Continuing to write for television as well, Brenton is also working on a four-part documentary about China for the BBC (Brenton 2006c). Thus the “rehabilitation” of my title, an ironic allusion to Soviet-era suppression of writers who later were allowed to return from an actual or metaphorical Siberia. Such authors were once again acceptable and appreciated, but the state insisted that they had been through “rehab.”

Paul had been anticipated as scandalous in light of Brenton’s radical reputation: Hytner received over 200 letters protesting the play before it opened. Right-wing Christians were afraid that Brenton was going to stage something blasphemous or outrageous. While they probably would object to the play’s secular slant and version of a human Jesus rather than a godly one, the play is not sensationalist, and it thoughtfully represents the historical situation and the figure of Paul, sympathetically portrayed as a charismatic leader who fully believed in his miraculous meeting with Yeshua (Jesus) and who ardently worked to establish his vision of Christianity beyond Judea. In the end no public outcry materialized to obscure serious consideration of the production. “Notoriety is destructive in the arts,” says Brenton reflecting on the flap over Romans in Britain. “The work disappears in the strobe-light barrage of scandal, moral hysteria, and media frenzy” (Brenton 2006a).

Paul (and In Extremis for that matter) posits an audience of secular thinkers who will enjoy efforts to dramatize the relationship between faith and reason. In Paul, Yeshua survives the crucifixion, although badly wounded, and the myth of his resurrection is a kind of happenstance phenomena that resulted from literal misunderstanding and the acute desire of his followers to believe it true. Brenton takes pains to ensure the possibility of these occurrences, adds epilepsy to Paul’s character to help complicate his experiences of the divine, and grounds the events of the play firmly in a rational cause and effect chain that commands plausibility. This possible/plausible premise was important to Brenton in order to pose the open question of the value of Paul’s mission to the Gentiles if the historical underpinnings of his claims are false—if Paul’s great preachment on love and ideas about grace and universal salvation were based on a misunderstanding of the nature of his own experience and of Yeshua’s corporeal status. Is there an explanation of how something like this could come about? Brenton says yes:

The secret is in the situation, the time: the belief in the end of the world, the desperately dangerous time under the Roman occupation, the political
activists—the Hamas parties of their time—becoming more and more active. The pressure-cooker nature of that time made people want to believe it. (Brenton 2006b)

Brenton was therefore interested in dramatizing the extreme complexity of first-century Judea. Under Roman occupation, the populace faced persecution from the Roman overlords, but in addition Judaism and early Christian communities themselves were riven with a great variety of religious beliefs, sects, and “heresies.” Biblical scholar Donald Harman Akenson, one of Brenton’s sources for the play, describes this time before the Roman destruction of the temple and Judea in 70 CE:

Try to conceive of a mental world so rich with ideas, prophets, factions, priests, savants, and god-drunk fanatics that it was the equivalent of a night-sky kept alight by thousands and thousands of fireflies, brief-lived, incandescent, luminous. That’s what Yeshua and Saul witnessed. (2000:15)

Brenton captures this jockeying for position in an early scene that highlights differences between the Sadducees, who did not believe in the life hereafter, and the Pharisees who did. Saul and his First Guard are traveling on the road to Damascus, endeavoring to catch and persecute Christians before Saul’s conversion into “Paul.” They find they are united in their project against Yeshua’s followers, but deeply divided about their own Jewish beliefs. Saul further lays out the relationship of empire to religious struggle in a speech to his men designed to rally their reluctant dedication to their violent task:

SAUL: We Jews have lived under empires over the centuries: Egypt, Babylon, Syria, Greece, now Rome… and we have endured. But under this occupation, under Rome, our religion itself is under attack. But where does the attack come from? Not from pagan, kiddam priests from Rome. From ourselves. Our country is torn apart by fanatics. In the cities different sects at each others throat, in the countryside
whole villages gone heretical, ragged preachers on the roads with their begging bowls; Judea seethes with religious revolt. (Brenton 2005:6)

In addition, Brenton dramatizes the strained relationship between Jews and Arabs in a scene between Paul and an Arab trader who orders a rainproof tent. Around the matter of trade, the Arab and Paul are on common ground, enjoying bargaining over price and exchanging verbal banter. However, when the conversation begins to turn to religious matters, the Arab suddenly retreating: “Let’s keep our relationship strictly commercial. I hear people get killed in Judea because of religious arguments. All I want is a tent, not a new god” (Brenton 2005:21).

Howard Davies’s production of *Paul* connected the play to our current religious antagonisms, not least in the Middle East, but the connections were oblique and the audience was expected to make them. Typical of critics’ reception was Sarah Hemming’s opening paragraph:

Howard Brenton’s earlier plays have always tangled with big concerns, so it is no surprise to find him tackling one of today’s pressing issues: the power of religious faith. His compelling new play is set in the Middle East and features martyrs and fierce infighting among groups of men. But the religion under scrutiny is Christianity. (2006)

The play, then, is epic in design, crafted to reveal the sociopolitical fault lines along which Paul’s life unfolds. This focus culminates in the penultimate scene when Nero comes to visit his prisoners Paul and Peter the night before their execution. In his modern-dress suit, Nero looked and behaved like a CEO. He wore a woman’s mask over his features (an ironic disguise?) but took it off to talk to his captives. Jaded, cynical, and powerful, he spelled out the future possibilities for Christianity after the destruction of Judea, a “well-advanced military plan.” Christianity will have its chance to collaborate with state power:

[B]asically your teaching is fine: it’s quietist, it’s authoritarian, its views on divorce are socially stabilizing, it stresses respectful behavior, particularly amongst women. And when you have priests, […] a good hierarchy of bribable gentlemen in fine robes, like any other religion… Why, then you will do business with the state. A hundred, two hundred years from now, Christianity could be the Empire’s official religion. (Brenton 2005:79)

Although thus far I have been discussing the deliberate sociopolitical contextualization Brenton weaves into his play, at its center is the portrait of a charismatic leader, a true “fundamentalist” who was able to spread Christianity to the Mediterranean basin and shape its chief precepts and tenants. In Paul, Martin Luther found his doctrine of personal salvation by faith alone. The Letter to the Corinthians I that Brenton reworks in the play is part of the bedrock of the ethical values of Western civilization.

At the heart of the first production was the stellar performance of Adam Godley as Paul (an unintentional, but inescapable pun!). Brenton at first thought Godley, best known as a comic actor, was “perhaps too handsome to play Paul.” However, Godley proved a quintessential character actor, working out a detailed physical demeanor for Paul that rendered him tortured, strangely injured, “like a bird saying ‘shoot me in the chest if you dare’” (Brenton 2006b). Charles Spencer wrote that Godley was “blazing with conviction yet also suggest[ed] pain beneath his apparently confident faith” (Spencer 2005:12). These characteristics seem essential to the balance Brenton strikes between Paul as a visionary intellectual and a passionate zealot. He also asks the audience to hold in tension Paul’s less attractive qualities (negative attitudes toward women and sex, for example) alongside his more admirable ones.

Some of this knowledge comes directly from the playwright’s background. Brenton’s father was a policeman who made a midlife career

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6. This is, of course, before the Arabs embraced Islam, so the encounter reflects more ethnic nationalism than religious conflict.

7. Paul Rhys was originally cast as Paul, but when he was unexpectedly hospitalized during previews, Godley stepped into the role.
change to become a Protestant minister. Without employing a psychoanalytic interpretation of Brenton’s interest in Paul, one can still credit his firsthand experience with many aspects of Christian religion (he knows the historical scholarship on Paul as well as the texts of the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Letters to the Corinthians, etc.). His interest in the dialectic between faith and reason and his understanding of the vexed relationship between charismatic leadership and human history combine in Paul and in In Extremis to provoke serious attention to religion’s relationship to state power.

Brenton’s In Extremis was originally written in 1997 and thus predates Paul in Brenton’s creative development. He has commented that the contradictions between faith and reason investigated in In Extremis led him to ask in Paul how they became embedded in Catholicism in the first place, and how the Protestant tenant of salvation through faith alone emerged from early church teaching (Brenton 2006c).

Although conceived independently and separated by almost a decade, the recent London productions of the two plays create an opportunity to read them together. While the overarching theme of In Extremis is the romantic love between Abelard and Heloise that turns them into mythical lovers like Tristan and Isolde or Romeo and Juliet, the struggle to define God through reason or revelation is equally at the center of the play. Heloise and Abelard are “intellectual warriors,” fighting against Bernard of Clairvaux, an anti-intellectual, totally committed mystic who believes Abelard is an antichrist who puts reason above revelation, thus denying God.

In both plays, Brenton concentrates on a historical moment when change is afoot and a wide variety of outcomes are possible. In Paul, he dramatizes the pressure-cooker nature of the first century while In Extremis takes place during the 12th, a time when competing philosophical schools of thought and cultish religious movements vied for recognition and legitimacy. Paul, Abelard, Heloise, and Bernard all display passionate convictions, absolute commitment, and charismatic personalities.

The sexual love between Abelard and Heloise is itself somewhat irrational; that is, the lovers are not prudent in their behavior, taking extraordinary risks such as making love in the open air and under the nose of Heloise’s uncle, the canon Fulbert. Abelard does not seem to realize how far he has pushed past the moral codes of his time, and his castration at the hands of Fulbert’s cousins comes to him as an unexpected violence, while the audience views its growing inevitability. As the sexuality on view increases, the cousins’ outrage and desire for vengeance also escalates. Heloise, for her part, refuses the charge of corruption, insists on equality between man and woman in love, and only reluctantly agrees to a secret marriage: “The name of wife may be sacred, but sweeter to me always will be the word ‘mistress’” (Brenton 2006d:53). In a late scene,

8. Brenton originally wrote and workshopped In Extremis during a residency at University of California–Davis when he was the Visiting Granada Artist in the winter of 1997.

9. HELOISE: We’re warriors. Philosophical warriors. We’re fighting in a war of ideas (Brenton 2006d:47).
Brenton imagines Heloise reading Thomas d'Angleterre's *Tristan* and has Abelard admit his monks read it too, explicitly associating the lovers across history and myth:

I used the motifs of the *Tristan* and Iseult story to try to understand their extraordinary love affair: it's recklessness, it's abandon, particularly on Heloise's part [...] The point is that for a few mad years they lived a real life story as heady and overheated as that of the mythical lovers. (Brenton 2006e)

Yet, paradoxically, Abelard is the advocate of Aristotelian logic and dialectical reasoning as the source of all knowledge, including knowledge of God. Heloise, his intellectual equal, can eat “a book by St. Jerome for breakfast” (Brenton 2006d:9). They are passionate rationalists!

Bernard, on the other hand, espouses self-abnegation, revelation, and the silent reception of the holy word of God. Yet he manipulates his own life story, stacks the Council of Sens with drunk judges, and works the political scene around the Vatican to secure the installation of a pope and Abelard's excommunication. This is not so much a question of hypocrisy or double-dealing, however, for Bernard truly believes he is right.10 Indeed, Billington reviewed Bernard as “not only the most gripping figure but also the real revolutionary” (Billington 2006:36). Brenton confronts his audiences with the inevitable contradictions between beliefs and actions, the chimera of consistency, the rich tapestry of human subjectivities immersed in ideological battles. Although Brenton's sympathies are certainly with Abelard and Heloise, he credits Bernard as a worthy adversary. In *Paul*, one finds a positive version of Bernard's negative—the passionate believer in revelation who is also an intellectual giant.

I have argued elsewhere that theatre artists need to “take back” religious matters from the Christian Far Right, that indeed complex and considered dramatizations of religious issues need to find a place on contemporary stages (Reinelt 2005). Brenton's plays not only wrest these issues out of their conservative context, they also ask how the structures of faith and their contradictions appear in other religions. If internal conflict marks Christianity, it also marks Judaism and Islam. When we in the West focus on the fundamentalist Mullahs who fan extremism, we also would do well to remember Muslim moderates and reformers. Powerful personal leadership, committed action, and intellectual acuity build followings and change the course of history—for good or ill. The balance between reason and revelation can be tipped either way, captured by the interaction of context with character.

In the last meeting between Bernard and Heloise, after Abelard has died, Bernard is appalled to discover that Heloise is studying an Arabic grammar and that Abelard “always wanted to read the Koran.” She tells him “Some of the Arabic books they have are translations themselves. From ancient Greek. There is a rumor that they have discovered a new book by Aristotle called...*Ethics*” (Brenton 2006a:89). This reminder that Arabic civilization was a source of knowledge and study for Westerners at this time has a more specific and obvious application to our present global context now than it did when Brenton wrote the lines in 1997. In this moment, it gestures to the necessity for continuous intellectual and artistic inquiry across the borders of governments, religions, and cultures.

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10. Although, in fact, Benedict Nightingale criticized Brenton for villainizing Bernard through this characterization in his otherwise positive review (Nightingale 2006).
The Politics of Failure

Nao Bustamante’s Hero

Joshua Chambers-Letson

I have to celebrate you, baby
I have to praise you, like I should

—Fatboy Slim, “Praise You” (1998)

31 March 2006
(P.S. 1, New York City)

A performance of Nao Bustamante’s Hero at P.S. 1 happens to coincide with my parents’ visit. Reluctant to leave them alone for a night, I take them with me. This is the first time either of them has seen “performance art” and for a fleeting minute, taking our place in line with a hip crowd of downtown youth, I question the wisdom of this adventure. My father is in his 50s, white, lanky, and sometimes shabby in appearance. My mother is around the same age, Black/Japanese American (a Japanese immigrant), short and exhausted from a day of sightseeing. Performance art is not really their thing.

In the dark, we hear the serenely acrobatic, melancholic melody of turn-of-the-century French composer Erik Satie’s piano work, Gymnopedie #1 (1888). Projected on to a screen at the back of the performance space we see lush shots of trees and sweeping scans of the

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timeless forest, just as a small black being jumps into the camera’s view. This figure, Bustamante’s miniature poodle (Fufu) running on the forest floor, cuts the work’s sobriety, releasing the audience’s tension into laughter. My mother bursts into a loud and alarming laugh. The camera cuts to a forlorn young woman in a lacy dress. Her hair is long, flaxen, and wild, like the animalistic figure of Gustave Courbet’s 1866 painting Woman with Parrot. We move between shots of the lost heroine and the running dog as she calls out in a mute cry supplemented by Satie’s lilting, aerial pulse. Satie resisted traditional notions of time, signified by a body of composition that often features a lack of development, clear conclusion, or even time signature. His work is thus characterized by segmentation and repetition: a structural approach that is evoked in the fragmented sections of Hero with its reoccurring motifs and disruptive temporality. Bustamante’s audience can only assume they are listening to one piece, when in fact they hear two in succession as the tone of the film shifts and the darker chords of Gnossienne #1 (1890) heralds the autumnal landscape’s cut to a wintry expanse of white snow—Fufu still running and our heroine still lost.

Bustamante portrays the third character, entering the frame with ominous makeup and melodramatic facial expressions. Her unkempt hair and dress mirror the lost maiden, creating a “wicked” foil for the heroine. The visual contrast of Bustamante’s macabre makeup and Fufu’s black fur against the white snow offer a visual portrait of conventions of 19th-century European and American narrative. Toni Morrison has pointed to a haunting dark presence within this body of literature, indicative of colonial and racial anxieties produced by the dark (“Africanist”) presence of racial difference in the emerging nation (Morrison 1992). The contrast of dark and white, “evil” and “good,” in Bustamante’s film draws into relief the ways in which literary heroes in 19th-century narrative representation are imagined as set upon by dark forces. These encroaching shadows, Morrison argues, are in fact signifiers for the brown and black bodies that these heroes, in actuality, enslaving, colonizing, and subjugating.

At this point, my mother is the only audience member still laughing, quite inappropriately. The audience’s response has shifted from an uncomfortable silence to embarrassment so thick it weighs deep in the lungs. I’m burning with shame at our failure to perform as the “hip” audience of a sophisticated downtown performance. Against this shame, I simultaneously understand my mother’s laughter as part of a social economy structured by what José Muñoz describes as “brown feelings.” Muñoz argues for conceptions of ethnicity less as a biological fact than as ‘a structure of
feeling,’ as a way of being in the world, a path that does not conform to the conventions of a majoritarian public sphere and the national affect it sponsors” (Muñoz 2000:79; see also Muñoz 2006). The affective excess of Bustamante’s performance and my mother’s response to it are indicative of a certain kind of failing, a lack of emotional restraint that challenges normative forms of affective comportment.

Restraint, for a woman of color in a white world, often translates into accepting subordination whereas the affective expressiveness of women of color (in particular, black and Latina women) is commonly pathologized as “crazy” and “hysterical”—such figures are common to Bustamante’s oeuvre. Bustamante’s and my mother’s affective excess blast apart such narratives by being a means of negotiating the particularity of the self in relation to the limiting modes of self-presentation pressed upon them by an Anglonormative and heteronormative social sphere. The sound of my mother’s “inappropriate” laughter is a cut in the continuum of “appropriate” behaviors and feelings that are often sexually and racially coded so as to inscribe women like Bustamante and my mother as failed subjects.

Minutes into the performance, tears stream down my mother’s face; her laughter is an unsettling second soundtrack. The film unfolds with images of isolation: from the snowfield to the expansive forest, the maiden, an excessively wicked woman, and a lonely dog. When Bustamante finds the dog, instead of fear, Fufu reacts happily, wagging her tail. Inverting narrative conventions that would render this scene as the abduction of an innocent creature by a wicked woman, it becomes a scene of mutual recognition. Spinning with the dog, the “evil” character faces the camera and stares with a crazed glare as if enraged at the audience. The objective fixity of darkness and light, good and evil break down. The audience is overwhelmed with simultaneous embarrassment and admiration for the various players who have failed to comport themselves appropriately: Bustamante’s hyperbolic wicked woman, the tiny poodle that fails to be a “real dog,” and an audience member who can’t control her laughter.

Playfully undoing Manichean schemes that have come to dominate political life, Hero suggests that there might be something more effective than the moralizing narration of heroic triumph and villainous terror. The incorporation of Fufu is more than just a gimmick; it is a portrait of relationality. Giorgio Agamben has argued that the caesura between “man” and “animal” has come to characterize political life by producing hierarchy that occurs through anthropological separations within this caesura (2004). As such, “man” is split into “good” and “evil” (“white” and “Africanist”), a split that justifies mass exclusions and the privileging of certain beings over others.

A return of “man” to the openness of the animal is, for Agamben, a means of challenging such hierarchy.

As Bustamante twirls with Fufu, the strict caesura of “good” and “evil” unravels and both are delivered to a kind of openness to each other. Donna Haraway has suggested that the relationship between the companion species (dogs and humans) is the foundation of an ethics of self-conscious alterity “knit from the silk-strong thread of ongoing alertness to otherness-in-relation” (2003:50). Bringing Fufu into her performance, Bustamante undoes the oppositional binaries of morality, staging the extreme limits and possibilities of ethical relationships based on difference (as human/as animal). In the final shot, Fufu happily traipses behind Bustamante’s “evil” woman as she glides away from the camera, down a long corridor of trees, deeper into the forest and out into the open.

23 August 2005
(The Knitting Factory, New York City)

A crowd of hipsters with fabulously bad hair gather on the ground floor of the Knitting Factory in downtown Manhattan for a performance of Hero that is part of the Howl! Festival of East Village Arts. The film ends and Bustamante emerges from the offstage darkness dressed as the “evil” woman from the film. She breathes laboriously into a voice box hanging from her neck from which short sound clips of Darth Vader emanate. The reference to Vader again undercuts the prevailing hero
narrative. Vader is the quintessentially ambivalent villain (an anti-heroic hero), another ominous “black presence” (voiced by a disembodied James Earl Jones), who is the true hero of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. At the microphone, Bustamante narrates a defamiliarized fairy tale. Her speaking voice is ethereal, maternal, and assuring, but distorted by the voice box, echoing in the scary, scratchy, masculine timbre of Vader. The calming effect of a bedtime narrative is sonically layered with the nightmarish rasp of the threatening, disembodied voice.

The heroine of the fairy tale is an “an ugly duck of a girl,” Greta, with “a very crooked spine,” offered three wishes by a fairy godmother. After narrating two wishes that materialize as a beautiful gown and a giant beanstalk that lifts the girl high into the air, Bustamante wryly observes: “She realized that she had wasted two wishes on temporal desires, and that had no impactful gain on her long-term quality of life.” In an attempt to overcome her failure to achieve “impactful gain,” Greta wishes for a straightened spine. Bustamante stands with rigid posture. Un-used to being straight, Greta topples over as Bustamante loosens her body, swooning gently and swaying slowly, describing Greta’s fatal fall to the forest floor. She surveys her audience with a feigned sense of *apologia*: “And the moral of the story is...well...the moral is, If you try to straighten something that is naturally twisted, it’s going to break.”

Bustamante reappropriates the fairy tale, which has always been deeply coded with queer connotations, to deliver it from the scene of normal heterosexual development. By suggesting that the compulsion to “straighten” something crooked will end up destroying the very thing it sought to cure, *Hero* affirms a need for those who fail to be “straight.” This is to say that it affirms queerness in its fullest political potential, not as an ontological category of privileged white male identity or subjectivity, but rather as a politics of the self-conscious failure to be a proper subject. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes such a politics as a politics of possibility, self-perception and filiation-in-difference, describing “queer” as:

> the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent element of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.

(1993:8)

In this way, I am asserting that my mother (a middle-aged, middle-class heterosexual woman of color) is as queer as Bustamante’s hero, and vice versa. *Hero* is an affirmation of queer failure. It affirms audience members who fail to be appropriate by laughing too loud and too hard; racially mixed people who fail to be “black,” “Asian,” or “white”; women who fail to be appropriately docile; mothers who fail to raise straight sons; national subjects who fail to believe in national narratives of “good” and “evil.” In short: people who fail to “signify monolithically” as proper subjects.

31 March 2006
(P.S. 1, New York City)

A few cheesy chords of synthetic karaoke accompaniment and Bustamante, who has frozen in a depressed slump following the fairy tale, animates herself with the failed seriousness of a bar patron who is sincerely unaware of her limited vocal talents. The audience is plunged into the atmosphere of embarrassment and *schadenfreude* that characterizes karaoke experiences. Karaoke performances are charged with intense emotions. A person onstage can be crying with all the drunken sincerity of the ballad they’re singing while an audience may respond with emotions ranging from pleasure, pride, affiliation, and empathy to dread, embarrassment—or worse—ambivalence. Bustamante does nothing to alleviate the wild affective environment she has inspired, thrusting us deeper into a spectacle of embarrassment as she breaks out into the uniquely uncool classic 1970s art-rock anthem, Styx’s “Come Sail Away.”

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1. Dominic Johnson has also written elegantly on the queer performances of failure in the work of Jack Smith and film icon Maria Montez. Johnson has argued that such performances exemplify failure as a critique of the way in which minoritarian bodies are failed by the dominant culture (see Johnson 2007).
It is a truism that a truly skilled performer often has a difficult time accurately performing amateurism. Bustamante's performance of failure is nearly virtuosic. There is loneliness to a character that believes so sincerely in what she is singing and in her ability to sing it, despite all evidence to the contrary. A broad smile stretches across her face as she sings in a keenly off-pitch and cheerfully committed fashion: “And I'll try / Oh, Lord, I'll try / To carry on...”

During a passionate instrumental interlude, Bustamante spins her body around the stage in an effluent dance reminiscent of the stylings of the Torrance Community Dance Group, a bizarre, fictional dance collective made famous in Spike Jonze's 1998 music video for Fatboy Slim's “Praise You.” The video, shot guerrilla-style in front of a busy Westwood, Los Angeles movie theatre with neither permit nor announcement, documents this group's sublimely bad performance. A large crowd of weekend moviegoers gather to watch the unlikely troupe of spandex-clad misfits as they present a badly executed but fully committed (and extensively overchoreographed) dance. Slim's song accompanies them on a boom box, praising the dancers as they go. “Richard Koufey” (Jonze), the prime soloist at the center of their spastic circle, attempts moves (mostly twitching around on the ground with his legs in the air) that he later identifies as part of the group's hip-hop aesthetic, promising the gathered crowd, “we've got b-boy moves!” (Jonze 2003).

Bustamante, like the T.C.G.D., is employing a strategic aesthetics of failure that features the artist's body as it fails to achieve the seriousness of the professional performer. A similar spectacle occurs in the short film Portrait of Wrongness: A Folkloric Triptych by art collective Coco Frio, with whom Bustamante has been associated. In one frame of this film, a queer young man dances wildly, with embarrassing yet beautiful abandon. His rag-doll gestures become sublimely absurd as an English bulldog jumps onto him from off camera. The unlikely pair dance together in an exquisitely ridiculous display. Both videos document what Hero stages: the magnetism of a performance of amateurish proportions in which the performers have a sense of belief in their performance that is unmatched by grace or talent; performances where the body fails to match the performer's obvious commitment. What makes spectacles like those captured in the videos and in Hero compelling is not merely that the performers fail, but that they have an openness to their failure that can be more beautiful than the most refined and rehearsed artist could hope to achieve.

Failure characterizes daily life, especially for those who consistently fail to be proper subjects. The draw to this type of performance is less an indulgence in someone else's failure than the fact that gathering to watch the performer's body fail affirms the exquisite pain of the audience's own failures. This is not to say that this “affirmation” removes from failure the social/historical specificity (e.g., racism, sexism, or homophobia) that makes it hurt. Rather, this type of performance provides a space in which the spectator may consider new ways of understanding his or her singular failure as connected to a community constituted through the shared experience of watching the artist's body fail in performance.

Fragments of the lyrics are projected karaoke style behind Bustamante, who enthusiastically invites the audience to join the singing to “Come sail away with me,” jogging in place and remarking, “feels good doesn't it?” My mother agrees and is the first to join with an awkward duet (my mother and Bustamante) to a reckless karaoke choir that includes the majority of the audience. As a form, karaoke

2. Performance art traditions have long complicated the relationship of skilled performance to amateurism, challenging this truism by embracing the ineptitudes of the performer. This has been evidenced in what some receive as a queer archive of work by artists like Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, Karen Finley. (Queer, again, being understood as a form of resisting the cultural imperative to “signify monolithically.”) Warhol once argued for the value of “bad performance.” He suggested that it was, as opposed to virtuosic performance, one of the only forms of genuine performance: “I can only understand really amateur performers or really bad performers, because whatever they do never really comes off, so therefore it can't be phony” (1975:82). More recently, sincere failure has been utilized in the performance work of artists like Dynasty Handbag and Haruko Tanaka.

3. “Community,” in this sense is invoked in relation to Giorgio Agamben’s notion of the “coming community,” a subjectless community of people emerging with a new politics of being in relation to each other (see Agamben 1993).
is a blueprint for failure as people take the stage to sing someone else’s song, with someone else’s accompaniment. Bustamante has aptly summarized karaoke’s ability to undermine hierarchical stratification, commenting, “Karaoke is the great equalizer.”4 The democratic protocols of karaoke are such that anyone can join and, more importantly, all are invited to fail. Karen Shimakawa (2005) has suggested that karaoke provides an opportunity for bodies that have been marginalized by race to engage in an affective performance of self through which they can inhabit other possibilities (spatial and temporal) by performing someone else’s song and moving through different temporalities. In this sense, karaoke has the potential to be a utopian project, calling on the past to critique the present and imagine a different future.5

_Hero_ is loaded with the uncomfortable affective excess central to karaoke performance. Singing “Come Sail Away,” a sad and lonely character somehow comes alive as she embodies a song that promises to take the body someplace else, someplace different, someplace rife with a possibility generated from her hyperbolically enacted failure. _Hero_’s employment of a karaoke aesthetic, and the choice of a song that has a deeply utopian kernel, stages the centrality of failure to the politics of hope. This is a performance of hope that resists the counter-revolutionary escapism of mere aestheticism. Rather, it is predicated on the fecundity of disappointment and failure as necessary to the relentless project of transforming this social reality into a better one.6

4 May 2006
(New York University, New York City)

In a small studio at New York University, Bustamante surveys a cramped but singing audience and quips, “Now when I think about evil, I think about audience participation. Can you think of anything more evil than that?” She ventures into the crowd and draws three “volunteers,” in actuality people—usually friends of the artist—who have been asked to assist in advance. She dresses them in silly, tiny white button-up shirts and draws them to a corner where she gathers them into a huddle and quietly whispers instructions (too quiet for the audience to hear):

OK, I want you to wrap me in this toilet paper from my feet to my head, and then I want you to spit all over me. And you’re going to feel weird and embarrassed doing this in front of all these people, but that’s OK because they’re just going to be thinking they’re happy it’s not them.7

These instructions reflect the artist’s keen understanding of the affective atmosphere of embarrassment characterizing the performance. Her indulgence in and promotion of embarrassed feelings encourages her audience to enter into the kind of openness to failure that is filtered through the artist’s body. What begins as a ridiculously awkward scene—three volunteers wrapping Bustamante in toilet paper—becomes a visually striking statement of queer relationality. Although she subjects herself to a kind of violence familiar to bodies marked by social difference, by offering her body up in this way, what could be read as an act of constraining (the wrapping) and degrading (the spitting) the body...
of an immobilized queer Latina, is transformed into three queer bodies caring for a fourth. Hero stages the ambivalence of ethical relationality (that cannot be conceived in the terms of “good” and “bad”), as the volunteers (friends of the artist) are asked by the artist to spit on someone they love and care about in order to bring her vision of the work into fruition.

Forever Is a Long Time
4 May 2006/ 31 March 2006/ 23 August 2005

The volunteers set up a camera and fan at the front of the stage creating fake flames, carefully guiding the bound and blind Bustamante to the microphone. The camera’s image is projected onto a massive screen behind the white cocoon and the mediated image of the cheap fabric flames take on the effect of a dramatic fire burning in front of the shrouded figure. Karaoke chords break the silence and Bustamante breaks through the bonds of her cocoon to reveal herself, restored as failure’s hero. On the screen behind her, the camera catches the image as a burst of white, through which Bustamante emerges, approaching the mike with dramatic flames burning in front of her, reminiscent of a televised concert on Univision. Immediately, most of the audience recognizes the song as Enrique Iglesias’s sentimental ballad “Hero,” with knowing laughter.

As she sings, the character self-consciously attempts to “fluff” the flames, emphasizing their artificiality, while at the same time performing a sincere reaction to them as flames by murmuring, “ow! ow!” when she touches them. She continuously fails to adequately bring the flame to life, but there is little question that she is in the moment, clinging to the lyrics with an admirably pathetic vulnerability: “I can be your hero, baby / I can kiss away the pain / I will stand by you forever. / You can take my breath away.” Bustamante’s promise is less one of romantic love, than an embrace of the community of misfits that she has brought out into the open. Her promise is par excellence the promise that cannot be kept as we know all to well that a lover’s performative is always predicated on its potential failure (see Felman 2003).

The song seems to come to an end. Bustamante walks to the back of the stage in retirement and pauses. Picking up on the failed conclusion, the syrupy piano revs up again and Bustamante runs to the front of the stage with relentless enthusiasm:

Forever is a very long time. Think about it. Think about it. Now. Yesterday. Now. Tomorrow. Now, the day before yesterday, now, the day after yesterday, forever. It’s a very long time. And I’m gonna be there for you, whether you like it or not.

Foregrounding the temporality of forever (rather than the time of the victorious present), Bustamante returns to the song, volunteering her own verse, in a kind of atonal sprechgesang:

Can you hear them? One by one? Here they come. The bombs. Ooh, they’re dropping all around us. And there goes my arm. And there goes my leg. And I’m gonna loose my mind over you.

Instantly, a war a continent away invades the karaoke opus, reminding the audience of the ways in which narratives of heroes are used to justify the violent and unconscionable exercise of U.S. state power, as in the Iraq war. The song continues with a litany of questions that accompany the daily life of the social failure: “Am I in too deep? / Have I lost my mind? / I don’t care; you’re here with me.” Shifted out of the single-dimensional terrain of pop music, Bustamante’s Hero is less about the “madness of love” than the madness of negotiating our inability to achieve proper subjecthood due to our affective particularity, social distinctiveness and difference—and the comfort of engaging this project collectively.

Heroes can’t do much for us. Bustamante’s heroic failure, on the other hand, is a nexus for a potential ethical politics of communal openness and difference staged during the performance. Capitalism and other normalizing social structures tell us a story in which failure is only acceptable as part of a teleological progress narrative that ends in success—Hero offers a politics of failure that understands failure not as a means to an end, but as a “means without end” (Agamben 2000).

8. Univision is a U.S.-based Spanish language network with the largest Latino audience in the country. Primarily featuring telenovelas, the concert-based variety show is a common staple of the network.
Bustamante’s disruptive temporality dissolves the possibility of an end. It is a performance of pure means reaching deep into the future. Failure is the point. Openness to our failure may be awkward, but it carries with it the promise of an ethical politics that is rife with potential. Forever failure is not to say that we will fail at the same things in perpetuity, but that we will be continuously open to our failure in the collective journey towards discovering the new in our committed project of transforming the world for the better.

Hero has no interest in identities or proper subjects, only in the pure means of collectively gathering to experience the glorious political interruption of people failing to be proper subjects, en masse. A politics of failure challenges the normalizing impulse of the dominant culture to imagine different modes of comportment and relationality. This politics seeks new ways of being (together) in an openness that challenges and changes the caesuras that are constitutive of social hierarchy and state power. The lights dim. One final image: Fufu onscreen, running towards us through a green field, out into the open.

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Transforming Geographies and Reconfigured Spaces

South Africa’s National Arts Festival

Daniel Larlham

South Africa is a nation in the midst of radical sociocultural, demographic, political, economic, infrastructural, and even cartographic transformations. Since the democratic elections of 1994, urban and provincial borders have been redrawn, cities and provinces have been renamed, new communities have sprung up following the removal of apartheid’s geographic demarcations, and the boundaries of many of the nation’s public and private spaces, once racialized enclaves, are now gratifyingly porous. Of course, national transformations, whether of attitudes, belief systems, or material structures, are seldom total or instantaneous and almost never erase all traces of the old order. South Africa’s new geographies are mapped on to the geographies of the past (including the “mental maps” individuals use to orient themselves in the world), and its new structures (again, including structures of thought) are built up within the evacuated or reconfigured spaces of a former era.

South Africa’s artistic landscape is also transforming, and the nation’s spatial reconfigurations include theatrical space—the imaginative, discursive, and affective space opened up by the performance event. Last year’s National Arts Festival, held in Grahamstown, the Eastern Cape, from 29 June through 8 July 2006, offered up a panoramic view of the country’s performance practices (620 events over 10 days) and thus represented a unique vantage point from which to consider the place of South African theatre— itself undergoing dramatic change as institutions evolve, artistic priorities and practices shift, and new themes and concerns present themselves—in the nation’s transformations.

The National Arts Festival began in 1974 as a celebration of the nation’s British heritage and English-language culture and over the last three decades has grown into the largest annual arts festival on the African continent, now professing “to reflect the richness of South Africa’s cultural tapestry” (National Arts Festival 2006a). The festival also provides a provisional center for South Africa’s geographically decentralized national theatre scene, setting in motion an annual pilgrimage by theatrical practitioners and audiences from around the country. Residents of communities surrounding Grahamstown also come seeking temporary employment or busking opportunities. The influx of visitors transforms the sleepy, rather isolated Eastern Cape town: ordinary flow patterns of human bodies in the town are temporarily redirected as new centers of interest and activity (artistic venues, markets, and eateries) are established for visiting festivalgoers who lack the ingrained mental maps and movement habits of the town’s permanent residents—many of whom have rented out their homes for the duration of the festival.

Many of Grahamstown’s buildings (churches, school auditoriums and gymnasiums, community halls, and the like) are cleared of their contents, fitted with risers, seating, stage flooring, lighting instruments, blacking, and flats, and co-opted as performance spaces. Remarkable juxtapositions of event and venue often arise: for example, this year’s festival saw *The Call* (2006), an exuberant “township musical” with a live band and actor-dancers costumed in fluorescent hues, taking place in the drab assembly hall of Graeme College, a boys’ high school founded in 1873, amid

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plagues, sporting trophies, and displays of school uniforms from the apartheid era and earlier.

Of course, the new geographies—both on the ground and in the mind—and spatial configurations established for the duration of the festival do not dispel at a stroke all divisions and asymmetries of race, ethnicity, and class. In today’s South Africa, a de facto economic segregation has replaced the race-based system of apartheid, and this is no different in Grahamstown and Joza, the neighboring township: the inhabitants of the town are mostly middle-class whites; township residents are overwhelmingly black and poor. Each year, the festival brings a restructuring rather than an abolition of divisions: In general, people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds mix in the town’s outdoor, public areas, but racialized spaces can often be found nearby, behind the closed doors of eateries and performance venues.

The most striking change in the festival’s theatrical dimension in recent years has been the arrival on the festival fringe of a number of mostly black, community-based theatre groups funded by South Africa’s National Arts Council. The work of these groups in 2006 was overwhelmingly socially themed, often dealing with crime, domestic abuse, or the HIV/AIDS epidemic, reflecting, in the words of critic Brent Meersman, either “the state of the national conscience, or a bias in funding criteria” (Meersman 2006:F17)—or perhaps an element of both. Jay Pather, writing for the Natal Mercury, expressed the view that many NAC-funded productions “were neither particularly good nor getting audiences” and the hope that “more rigorous policies geared toward developing these theatremakers so they do not present until they are ready to do so will surface and replace these quick-fix, blind stabs at redress and empowerment” (Pather 2006:G3). Pather and likeminded commentators overlook the possibility that the arrival of the NAC-funded groups on the Grahamstown scene might represent the emergence of a new set of theatrical voices more concerned with social engagement than with subjective, institutionally sanctioned standards of “good art” (G3).

The planners behind the 2006 festival cast it as a milestone artistic event celebrating the history of the struggle for racial equality in South Africa—specifically, the 30th anniversary of the June 1976 Soweto students’ uprising and the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Women’s March to Pretoria in protest against the exten-

1. Under apartheid, “townships” were the residential areas designated for “nonwhite” workers, adjacent to “whites only” communities.

2. Although the terms “black” and “white” by no means accommodate the cultural diversity within South Africa’s population, I will employ these terms, used in the 2005 South African census, rather than alternatives (such as “African” or “Caucasian”) in order to describe the realities of a society still deeply marked by its apartheid past.

3. It is believed that South Africa has the greatest number of citizens living with HIV/AIDS of any country in the world (an estimated 5.3 million out of a population of approximately 45 million at the close of 2003), with only an estimated 97,000 to 138,000 receiving antiretroviral therapy as of June 2005 (UNAIDS 2004).

4. The message of greeting in the festival program from Noxolo Abraham-Ntantiso, Eastern Cape Minister for Sport, Recreation, Arts, and Culture, encouraged attendees to view the 2006 festival against the “backdrop” of these two events and to regard it as “the culmination of the struggle by the people of this country, particularly women, for all of us to celebrate and enjoy our rich and diverse cultural heritage” (National Arts Festival 2006b:2).
sion of the apartheid pass laws to women. As a generation of “born frees” (children who have grown up solely under the democratic dispensation) enters adolescence, notes of concern over the transmission of history—especially the history of the “freedom struggle”—have sprung up in various national discourses. Two high-profile revivals on this year’s main festival, *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* (2006) and *Wathint’ Abafazi, Wathint’ Imbokodo* (You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock; 2006), fell under the rubric of what might be termed “theatre of commemoration” (in the word’s literal sense of “remembering together”)—a theatre that explicitly calls attention to its participation in the creation or reshaping of historical consciousness.

The revival of *Sizwe Banzi*, the influential apartheid-era play coauthored by John Kani, Winston Ntshona, and Athol Fugard in 1972, was billed as the marquee event of this year’s festival. The 2006 production, transferring from the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town under the direction of Aubrey Sekhabi, saw Kani and Ntshona, now both in their 60s, reprising their original roles: Kani doubled as the township photographer Styles and the good-hearted Buntu, and Ntshona played the eponymous Banzi, who exchanges his identity for that of a dead man in order to circumvent the apartheid government’s restrictive pass laws.

Commemoration was the production’s stated purpose. Kani called the play “a vivid portrayal of what it was like to have been black in South Africa” in the 1970s, and Ntshona added: “Audiences will experience life in what is regarded as that dark period in this country’s history” (National Arts Festival 2006b:48). Memory figures as a central theme in *Sizwe Banzi*, as evidenced in Styles’s direct-address explanation of his life-mission:

> **STYLES:** When you look at this [room], what do you see? Just another photographic studio? [...] No, friend. It’s more than just that. This is a strong-room of dreams. The dreamers? My people. The simple people, who you never find mentioned in the history books, who never get statues erected to them, or monuments commemorating their great deeds. People who would be forgotten, and their dreams with them, if it wasn’t for Styles. (Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona 1976:12–13)

During the 1 July 2006 performance at Grahamstown’s Rhodes Theatre, in a sequence of stage business not contained in *Sizwe Banzi*’s published text, Kani led several young audience members onstage by the hand to examine a display board covered with apartheid-era photographs—an embodied act of reconnection with past generations. The audience at *Sizwe Banzi* was “watching history” in a double sense, as they witnessed the representation of a set of past societal conditions but also the reenactment—by its original performers—of a political engagement (the performance itself) with that set of conditions.

Later in the play, Kani as Buntu refutes Ntshona/Banzi’s protestation that, by assuming a dead man’s national identity number, he will have to “live as another man’s ghost” (Fugard et al. 1976:38), arguing that blacks under apartheid are already reduced to a “ghostly” status through their everyday interactions with whites. If apartheid’s racist purview did indeed have this effect, John Kani and Winston Ntshona have since undergone a quite opposite form of...
transubstantiation: they are now flesh-and-blood icons of both South African theatre history and the anti-apartheid movement; their achievement of celebrity status stands as the virtual antithesis of the erasure of identity Sizwe Banzi dramatizes.

The phenomenon of iconic actors portraying iconic characters—moreover, characters created by those actors out of their own life experiences—resulted in a highly unusual audience-performer dynamic on the night of 1 July. Joining in with Kani’s infectious laughter in the solo opening section, applauding appreciatively at Ntshona’s entrance, and vocalizing in sympathy and agreement with Styles’s and Buntu’s more pointedly philosophical statements, the audience made clear its communal endorsement of both the performers and the historical vision being presented.

A similar dynamic of affirmation governed the auditorium of the Rhodes Box theatre on 4 July 2006 as another protest-era revival, Wathint’ Abafazi, Wathint’ Imbokodo, featuring original actress Poppy Tsira and director Phyllis Klotz, held the stage. The play’s central metaphor, “the juice of the orange,” which “opens the eyes” of the orange eater, describes the insight leading to political awareness and activism. Today, however, Wathint’ Abafazi, as a dramatic work infused with “the juice of the orange,” opens eyes in a different manner: not by revealing injustice and galvanizing political commitment, but by countering historical myopia.

Several NAC-funded fringe productions took as their subject the impact of HIV/AIDS on individual lives as well as the health of society in general. One such production was The Call, a “township musical” presented on the festival fringe by G. Kente and Sons Productions. Gibson Kente, the most successful of South Africa’s township theatre impresarios, publicly declared his HIV-positive status in 2003, earning praise for his openness from retired president Nelson Mandela. Kente wrote and began original direction of The Call before passing away in 2004, and the 2006 production was marked by his signature performance aesthetic, a unique fusion of Western musical theatre and indigenous South African performance modes employing a presentational acting style, a mix of serious and broadly comic characterizations, and an episodic narrative punctuated by song and dance. Kente’s classic choreographic technique, based in recurring alternation between bursts of high-energy movement and rigidly held poses, was clearly in evidence.

The Call follows the efforts of a young theatre troupe, the Friends of HIV, formed to combat the societal stigma attached to infection with the disease. When Mantsi-Mantsi, a member of the troupe, discovers that her lover Smudza has infected her, she is cast out of her home by her mother (who wails: “Those invisible devils with long tails and horns have got you!”) but eventually finds solace in her Christianity. She proclaims that she has received sanctuary at “the temple of the Lord,” who has “redeemed [her] soul from fear.” Supported by the Friends of HIV, Mantsi-Mantsi confronts Smudza, who initially denies his HIV-positive status, but changes his

5. Ntshona has been designated a “Living Treasure” of arts and culture by South Africa’s National Arts Council.
Thinking when a reporter enters, shouting, “Great news in the headlines: Gibson Kente has revealed that he is HIV-positive, and he is making a call for openness.” Smudza reflects: “If Bra [brother] Gibs does not shun the stigma, who am I?”

The Call’s emphasis on acceptance, positive thinking, and religious faith over medical treatment is understandable in a nation where antiretroviral treatment is unavailable for the vast majority of those who are HIV-positive, and the production’s primary intent—to defuse the societal stigma associated with the disease—is an unquestionably admirable one. However, the production’s unqualified praise for the government and overemphasis on the therapeutic benefits of diet and nutrition (“You’ll get the edge: Eat your fruits and your veg.”) are reminiscent of certain disingenuously palliative statements made by South Africa’s controversial Minister of Health Manto Tshabalala-Msimang.

HIV: My Status, My Friend (2006), written and directed by Macks Papo, relied on a predominantly choric structure rather than a morally didactic narrative (like that of The Call) to address issues surrounding HIV/AIDS. The play opens as the cast-chorus, dressed in black T-shirts with red AIDS ribbons affixed, stagers onto the stage; trembling and clutching themselves, they recite AIDS-related statistics for South Africa and the world, finally bursting into wails and cries of “Help us, Lord!” as they arrange themselves in a semicircle with hands held up in prayer. Drums strike up and a dance sequence follows in which a man accosts two women; they cover their genitals and shout, “Voetsek!” (Piss off!), driving him from the stage. A narrative section follows, in which an HIV-positive young woman, supported by her female friends, rejects the lover who has infected her. The play concludes with a choric address, the cast exhorting the audience to “learn, teach, and promote the culture of acceptance and tolerance” and to spread “unconflicting messages of truth about the scourge of HIV and AIDS.”

Many naturalistically styled domestic dramas on the fringe centered on incidents of abuse, typically involving a domineering and violent patriarchal figure. Ha-Mokoena (2006), presented by Soweto Youth Drama Society, followed the attempts by Mokoena, an...
ex-convict now ordained as a priest, to conceal his repeated sexual abuse of his adopted daughter, Mbali. When his wife surprises Mokoena masturbating to pictures of Mbali in a family photo album, he beats her mercilessly; but when Mbali finally reveals the series of rapes to her adoptive mother, she accuses the girl of lying. In a fit of uncontrolled despair, Mbali (portrayed with shockingly intense emotional commitment by Nthabiseng Molonyama) swallows a handful of pills, finally laying bare the full truth: she is pregnant and HIV-positive; Mokoena has raped her in an attempt to cure his disease. During the play’s final moments, Mokoena approaches Mbali and Vusi, his son, in a wordless appeal for sympathy; in succession, both cross the stage to align themselves with their mother. These twin, silent acts of defiance end the play, and the restructuring of power dynamics within Ha-Mokoena’s fictional family unit takes place within a contemporary societal context of large-scale shifts in gender roles and attitudes toward sexuality.

**Coal Yard** (2006), a physical theatre piece presented by Masutsa Dance Theatre Company and performed at a breakneck pace by Seabata Lepele, Mbovu Malinga, Tshidisho Mofali, and Diphapang Mokoena, dramatized teenage protagonist Tshepo’s escape from the influence of his sexually abusive father, at the same time vibranty bringing to life the play’s setting, the QwaQwa region of the Free State. Employing a stylized gestural vocabulary, the performers transformed into multiple characters and environmental forms (doors, furniture, a donkey and cart) and produced a vocal soundscore of theme music and sound effects (door knocks, automobile noises, recurrent melodies covering transitions). Tshepo, haunted by memories of anal rape triggered by any mention of Vaseline Blue Seal, his father’s lubricant of choice, runs away from home and finds backbreaking employment in the coal yard of the exploitative Mr. Naidoo. Eventually, Naidoo’s workers revolt, driving out their boss and “reconstructing” the coal yard as a communally run operation. Tshepo confronts his father, now under arrest, en route to prison and presents him with a half-gallon tub of Vaseline Blue Seal, declaring “You will need it!” The lights fade as Tshepo laughs gloatingly at his father, who trembles in anticipation of the rough treatment he can expect behind bars.

In contrast with the tonal mix of comedy and earnestness in much of the socially themed NAC-funded work, *The Secret Letters of Jan van Riebeek* (2006), a pseudohistorical fantasy of life in the Dutch settlement at the Cape of Good Hope during the second half of the 17th century, promised satirical audacity, its advertisement in the festival brochure proclaiming: “Health warning: politically correct patrons are advised to avoid this show like the plague!” (National Arts Festival 2006b:136). Author-director Robert Kirby skillfully embedded a scathing critique of Dutch colonial rapacity, corruption, and hypocrisy within the play’s monologic structure, but, judging by the hearty laughter of many in the predominantly white audience at the performance I attended on 5 July, it seemed that some spectators may have identified uncritically with the antiquated racist attitudes toward the Cape’s black peoples expressed by the protagonist van Riebeek, creating a spectatorial dynamic that perverted satire’s basic function: to depict “the descent of humanity below itself” in order to effect its vigorous reform (Connery and Combe 1995:2).

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6. The perniciously pervasive myth that sexual intercourse with a virgin can cure HIV/AIDS has contributed to what Human Rights Watch has called “a virtually unprecedented epidemic of child rape” (Human Rights Watch 2004).

7. Tensions between some members of South Africa’s black and Indian communities still exist today, stemming largely from economic asymmetries and the legacy of apartheid policies that allowed Indians limited rights denied to black South Africans.
Hoot (2006), a solo performance piece presented by Matthew Ribnick, told the story of a white suburbanite, Harold, who rescues himself from financial ruin by becoming the driver of a minibus “taxi.” Forced out of his suburban enclave and into contact with a more diverse urban culture, Harold unconsciously sheds his ingrained racist attitudes, the play thus promulgating an essentially optimistic view that prejudices can be dissolved simply through intercultural contact over time—an artistic message with somewhat ironic implications in light of the at least 95 percent white demographic composition of Hoot’s audience at the performance I attended on 2 July.

Much of the audience clearly delighted in Ribnick’s exaggerated mimicry as he portrayed a series of characters of varied ethnicities, perhaps experiencing a version of what Anne Ubersfeld has termed “the pleasure of memory”: the spectator’s recognition of the traces of the referential universe (in this case, the characteristic modes of speech, gesture, and thought of various social types) within the play’s fictional world (see Ubersfeld 1982:131). But while watching Hoot, especially during the play’s early moments, I had the uncomfortable feeling that a more insidious type of spectatorial pleasure might have been at work: Ribnick’s characterizations, perhaps taken for mocking stereotypes, may have triggered a form of automated, derisive laughter. Even if a space for regressive, racist laughter was collapsed by the play’s “feel-good” conclusion, the experience of communal laughter directed at a series of “other”-figures may have refreshed and reingrained mental structures now (hopefully) falling into disuse, or at least momentarily bypassed the self-controls associated with consciously maintained attitudes of interracial respect. The questions arise: What responsibility do South African artists bear in guarding against the reopening of the mental spaces of racist thinking? Ought these mental spaces to be aggressively razed, boarded up, or simply left to collapse in on themselves over time, and what role ought theatrical performances to have in such processes?

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