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## DEVELOPING DRAMA AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE

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### Abstract

*After the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980 the University faced the challenge of becoming a 'people's university'. Practical drama courses were introduced in 1984 in the Faculty of Arts and the policy from the outset was to develop a drama programme in keeping with the process of democratization, Zimbabweanization, Africanization and socialist transformation. This took the form of establishing drama courses in the departments of English and of African Languages and Literature and encouraging extra-curricular cultural activities on campus and in the community as a whole. The Faculty of Arts programme saw theatre as a useful cultural activity and explored ways of involving people from both inside and outside the University in its first production, Mavambo: First Steps, in the introduction of courses in theatre for development and theatre-in-education, the establishment of the theatre group Zambuko/Izibuko and the Film of the Month Club, the development of a visiting productions programme, launching a University Playscripts publishing venture, and in the staging, both on and off campus, of previously published and original plays based on the cultural forms and languages of Zimbabwe and Southern Africa.*

THIS ARTICLE IS an account of the establishment and initial development of a drama programme at the University of Zimbabwe between 1984 and 1988. The short introduction to theatre in Zimbabwe that precedes it is intended only to provide a context for the work being done at the University and is in no way intended to imply that this was the only drama work that was being done at the time. The University worked hand-in-hand with other organizations, especially the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture and the Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with Production (ZIMFEP). The reader is advised to consult other sources for information on the work being done outside the University during this period.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the article concentrates on the first four years of the programme because this was the founding period and because after 1988 internal developments in the University ushered in an altogether more complicated era.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on theatre in Zimbabwe, see M. Banham (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to World Theatre* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 1098-9; R. Zinyemba, *Zimbabwean Drama* (Gweru, Mambo, 1986); *The Journal of Southern African Studies* (1990), XVI, II, special issue: *Performance and Popular Culture*; and University of Zimbabwe, Faculty of Arts Drama, *The Zimbabwe Theatre Report: 1988 Retrospective* (Harare, Univ. of Zimbabwe, Faculty of Arts, 1989).

## THEATRE IN ZIMBABWE

As in other parts of Africa, pre-colonial Zimbabwe had forms of theatre of its own — dance dramas, performance narratives, work and funeral plays, praise performances and many others. However, largely as a result of Christian missionary education and teachings, indigenous theatre forms were to a large extent suppressed or lost during the colonial era and European theatre forms were encouraged. During the struggle for liberation, which culminated in Independence in 1980, indigenous performing arts were revived in the form of songs, dances and plays performed in the camps in Zambia and Mozambique and especially at *pungwes* in the Zimbabwean countryside.<sup>2</sup>

Though the colonial theatre structures remained in place after Independence, the ZANU(PF) government took steps to encourage the development of a new indigenous theatre movement. This division in Zimbabwean theatre was apparent in the opposition between the Zimbabwean Association of Community Theatre (ZACT), founded in 1987, and the much older National Theatre Organization (NTO). Initially the membership of the NTO had consisted of White amateur theatre companies, such as Reps in Harare, who performed British and American musicals, comedies and thrillers. However, Black artists and groups joined the NTO in increasing numbers after Independence. ZACT was to a large extent sponsored by ZIMFEP, a parastatal organization initially established to provide education for ex-combatants. Thus ZACT may be said to have emerged from the dynamics of the liberation struggle. ZACT attempted to encourage, coordinate and represent the new indigenous theatre groups, many of which were full-time, that mushroomed in cities and towns all over Zimbabwe.

## DRAMA STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY

When, in 1984, a lecturer in drama was appointed in the Faculty of Arts as a first step towards establishing drama at the University, the context was characterized not only by the features outlined in the above summary of theatre in Zimbabwe but by factors relating to the development of society in the immediate post-Independence period and the role of the University in this development. In practical terms, a drama programme was called for that would be in keeping with the process of democratization,

<sup>2</sup> *Pungwes* were all-night political meetings held during the liberation struggle, in which speeches and discussions were punctuated with songs, dances and short dramatic presentations. Black Zimbabweans did, of course, engage in dramatic activities in the pre-Independence period which were not part of the liberation struggle. I would contend, however, that in the main these activities did not challenge the forms of theatre inculcated by the colonial education system: it was the liberation struggle that made cultural as well as political liberation possible.

Zimbabweanization, Africanization and socialist transformation. This programme would then play its part in the transformation of the University into a 'people's university' that would participate actively and directly in the development of the nation and would foster a symbiotic relationship with the community, eschewing the élitism of 'ivory tower' isolation and encouraging a productive interaction between the University and the community at large.

As the Vice-Chancellor said when opening the third University Arts Festival in 1984,

The University should not be an Ivory tower of the arts but an arts centre where artists and other people from all over the country come to learn the arts, be trained, receive constructive criticism and at the same time to see the work we are doing and give us the benefit of their opinions and experience. The University should be an open house, a forum, where we make art and culture together.

But even this is not enough. The University, itself should . . . go out to the people — into the city, the towns, the rural areas where most of our people live.

The lecturer's brief was, therefore, not only to establish practical drama courses in the Faculty of Arts but also to initiate cultural activity on the campus and play a part in the development of theatre in the nation as a whole. The development of drama at the University took three forms: the establishment of drama courses in the Departments of English and of African Languages and Literature; encouraging extra-curricular cultural activities on campus; and involvement and interaction with the community.

### MAVAMBO: THE BEGINNINGS

Before Independence there had been an active University Drama Society which had entered its productions in the National Theatre Festival with some success. This Society had lapsed by 1980 but in 1984 a Student Drama Club was in existence which had produced Habbakuk Musengezi's 'I will Be A Socialist When I Want' (published as *The Honourable MP*)<sup>3</sup> and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps*.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this Club was associated with performances of plays written in English and acted, to a large extent, by students who had been at the former Group A schools.<sup>5</sup> This, combined with the domination of Shakespeare in literature courses in secondary schools, and despite the dynamic use of theatre by the

<sup>3</sup> H. Musengezi, *The Honourable MP* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> T. Dangarembga, *She No Longer Weeps* (Harare, College Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Group A schools were those schools that were reserved for Whites during the colonial period and remained relatively 'Anglicized' after Independence although they became predominantly Black.

freedom-fighters during the armed struggle, meant that there was a general feeling, both on campus and in the community, that drama was something foreign, boring, élite, associated with the Reps Theatre and the White minority, and not really of much interest or relevance to the vast majority of Zimbabweans. Consequently there was some scepticism that a drama programme at the University would succeed.

It was, therefore, essential that the first production be a clear statement of intention. It had to signal the orientation of the new programme from the start. It was important that this production should feature the indigenous performing arts — dance, song, drumming, *mbira*-playing, recitation, story-telling, and so on — but also be modern and relevant to present-day Zimbabweans. It was decided that a dramatized version of Wilson Katiyo's novel, *A Son of the Soil*, be staged;<sup>6</sup> it is a Zimbabwean work, by a Zimbabwean about Zimbabwe. The first half of the play is set in the countryside and deals with traditional culture and the second half is set in the city and deals with the problems of urban life. The play came to be called *Mavambo: First Steps*.

Initially many of the students participating in *Mavambo* were either unable or unwilling to perform traditional songs and dances. The colonial and missionary education system had alienated many educated people from the traditional performing arts. The prejudice that dancing or singing traditional dances or songs was unchristian and uncivilized was widespread. However, once the exploratory workshops introduced songs and dances as 'warm-ups' and acting exercises, the students' inhibitions melted. That University students were prepared to perform traditional songs and dances had a considerable impact on those who saw the play and helped to win acceptance in the community for a theatre based on the traditional performing arts.

However, to have stopped there would have implied that theatre at the University was going to confine itself to the past. Instead traditional culture had to be seen as the 'roots of performance', as the basis for an authentic modern Zimbabwean theatre. Scenes set in colonial Salisbury should be able to show that modern Zimbabwean theatre can and must deal with modern issues in a modern way too.

A crucial aspect of the cultural statement of the play was the language in which it was performed. The misconception that drama must necessarily be in English was deeply entrenched. This assumption arises from the convention that it is the English teacher who handles extra-curricular drama. There had been Shona and Ndebele drama in the schools for many years but theatre in these languages were invariably regarded as inferior

<sup>6</sup> W. Katiyo, *A Son of the Soil* (Harlow, Longman, 1976).

to plays in English. Even now, when students or community-based actors act in Shona or Ndebele they frequently explain that they do so because the audience is not educated and would not understand English dialogue.

The first production had to demonstrate two things in this regard. Firstly, that the language of theatre should echo life and embody the national unity of the Zimbabwean people and create a truly Zimbabwean drama by including all three languages in the play, and, secondly, the use of Shona and Ndebele on the Zimbabwean stage should be seen to be desirable because these are the people's languages and worthy of development and expression in people's theatre, besides having their own beauty. In addition, there are certain topics in Zimbabwean history and culture which only Shona and Ndebele can express adequately, the expression of which touches and inspires the audience more deeply than if English were used.

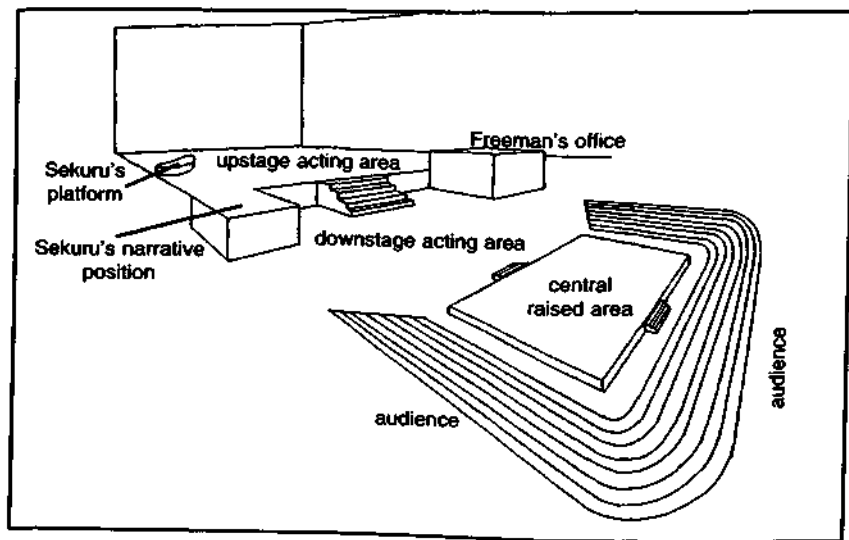
The political orientation of the first play had to unite as much of the University community as was possible under a progressive, Zimbabwean banner. It was thought that, four years after Independence, a play depicting how the colonial system forced a young man (who was by no means militant but was in fact only really interested in furthering his own education) into joining the armed struggle, would do that. It was later discovered that this assumption was not entirely correct.

Our main casting problem was to find White staff and students who would act in the play. A lecturer in the Department of English, who had acted in plays staged by the University Drama Society before Independence and who spoke Shona, participated enthusiastically. But it was difficult to find others. Some refused because they felt Katiyo's presentation of the liberation struggle was biased, others because they were unwilling to play the part of a racist, others because they felt that a play about colonial history and the war opened up fresh wounds at a time when White and Black were struggling to forgive and forget past injuries.

The cast's attitude was that the novel looked at particular events in Zimbabwean history in which Zimbabweans of different races were involved. Reconciliation did not mean simply sweeping history under the carpet. A far more genuine and significant reconciliation, it was felt, would be for White and Black Zimbabweans to demonstrate their commitment to the new Zimbabwe by looking back on these events and re-enacting them — together. Ultimately, sufficient White Zimbabweans who appreciated this point of view were identified and they acted in the play.

In order to accommodate the narrative basis of much African theatre and the relationship of actors and audience, particularly in the songs and dances, a flexible form of staging — closer to African performances than the proscenium-arch staging usually employed in Zimbabwean schools and theatres — had to be used (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: THE STAGING OF MAVAMBO



Three other considerations were important for the total statement of the play, the first being its technical proficiency. If the new Zimbabwean theatre was to demonstrate clearly its difference from established forms of theatre in Zimbabwe it could not concede the technical high ground. If the play was not well-rehearsed and professionally staged, lit and costumed, it would be possible for its detractors to dismiss its aesthetic statements by pointing out its technical limitations. It was also important that the technical aspects, the complicated and difficult lighting for instance, should be capably operated by young Black Zimbabweans in order to challenge the prevalent tendency for these functions to be performed by Whites, even in plays acted by Blacks. For theatre to be good, especially people's theatre, it does not have to be technically elaborate. The performances of the Zambian group, Kanyama Theatre, Zambuko/Izibuko's *Katshaa!* and Amakhosi's *Workshop Negative* clearly demonstrate that. However, the struggle for Independence was fought in order that the majority of Zimbabweans could have access to all Zimbabwe's facilities. Therefore, technically sophisticated Zimbabwean productions, in which the technical as well as the performance functions were performed by young Black Zimbabweans, had to be made in order to facilitate the democratization of the technology of theatre.

The second point was the opening of a University cultural activity to

people from outside the University. This decision set a precedent and ultimately became an important part of all extra-curricular cultural activities organized by the Faculty of Arts Drama in the period. The only element that was missing in the first venture was the inclusion of University non-academic staff. They were included in later productions.

The third consideration was the staging of the play off campus in a popular venue in Harare. This was important in order to indicate that in future University cultural activities would not be confined to the University campus. After two successful runs in the University's Belt Hall, *Mavambo* was taken to Cyril Jennings Hall in Highfield, the high-density suburb in which much of the original novel was set, for five performances, including two for schools. The performances in Highfield were staged in the same way and with the same technical sophistication as at the University.

The policy statements made during the production of *Mavambo* became the guidelines for drama work in the Faculty of Arts until 1988. As expressed in a brochure entitled 'Drama in the Faculty of Arts' they were:<sup>7</sup>

- 1 The determination to base our work in the lives, experiences, thoughts and culture of the Zimbabwean people and their brothers and sisters in other parts of Africa and the progressive world.
- 2 The effort to develop an ideological direction in key with the most progressive elements in Zimbabwean society as represented by the liberation struggle, the struggle for majority rule, the struggle against racism, colonialism and imperialism, and the struggle for a socialist Zimbabwe.

The production of a major play, which came to be called the Faculty of Arts Major Production, outside coursework once a year became a regular feature of University cultural life. Just as *Mavambo* had been intended to be an explicit statement about the development of theatre in Zimbabwe, so the productions that followed all attempted to suggest possibilities, point ways forward and provide ideas for theatre practitioners in the country.

#### DRAMA IN THE CURRICULUM

When the academic programme started in 1985, there were three Practical Drama I courses: two in the English Department in the BA General and Honours programmes and one in the African Languages and Literature

<sup>7</sup> University of Zimbabwe Faculty of Arts Drama, 'Drama in the Faculty of Arts' (Harare, Univ. of Zimbabwe, Faculty of Arts, 1988).



Department for both General and Honours courses. 'Practical Drama I' was basically a course in play-making. Students started with no idea what they were going to make a play about and then went through the process of choosing a topic, researching it, deciding on a story line and a scenario and then writing, discussing and adapting a script and improvising upon it. The play was then rehearsed and performed. Practical work was interspersed with lectures at the appropriate stage of the process, for example, on acting, play-making, research for the theatre, directing, staging, lighting and performance discipline.

'Practical Drama II' was at first offered only by the English Department. However, owing to the popularity of the first Practical Drama course in the Department of African Languages and Literature 'Practical Drama II' was introduced in their curriculum in 1987. In the English Department 'Practical Drama II' was subtitled 'Popular, Political and Community Theatre'. The 'Practical Drama II' course offered by the African Languages Department included a Theatre-in-Education component. The idea of the 'Practical Drama II' course was to encourage students to use and share the skills and experience they had gained from the first course in and with the wider community by doing community theatre, theatre for development and, for African Languages students, theatre-in-education. This was crucial for the orientation of the students. By doing this course they came to realize that what they learn at university is not intended for their own individual advancement alone but is something that they need to share with their community, something to be applied practically in the development of their society. Their practical efforts to do theatre work in the community with the people gained them valuable experience of theatre in the real world of Zimbabwe. This was an orientation that the students universally appreciated, though, as was to be expected, the going was often quite tough.

The Department of English was keen to carry the development of drama in its curriculum a stage further. 'Drama: Text and Performance' was introduced as a component of the 'Introduction to Literary Modes' course in the first year. A drama and literature/language option was made available to both General and Honours third-year students which consisted of a paper on 'Directing and Theatre in Society' in the General programme, and, in the Honours programme, a further paper on stagecraft and a dissertation on a topic derived from the other drama courses.

With most of these courses producing performances and other forms of practical work, it was possible to plan an integrated strategy. In 1985 and 1986 the aim was to encourage an emphasis on Zimbabwean material, an emphasis established with the staging of *Mavambo* as well as to fulfil the main function of the Practical Drama courses: to complement the study of plays as literature with some experience of plays as performance.

### Productions in 1985

In 1985 two plays were produced, 'The Adamant Eve' and 'Seri Kwesasa/Okusemsamo', in addition to the revival of *Mavambo* as the Faculty of Arts Major Production of that year.

'The Adamant Eve' was based on Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a prescribed text in the English Honours syllabus.<sup>8</sup> It was chosen because the women students in the group were particularly forceful and they wanted to do something about women. The most significant aspect of this production, which was ultimately performed at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, was the material produced by the students' research, in which could be heard the authentic voices of women from all walks of life from all over Zimbabwe. So compelling were their words that the play came to be described by the producers as 'an echoing chamber of voices'. The play was intended to provide an opportunity for these voices to be heard. So disturbing were their words that many men in the audience refused to accept that it was Zimbabwean women who had spoken them.

'Seri Kwesasa/Okusemsamo' was intended to be performed at the time of the Heroes' Day holiday. Heroes' Day is intended to commemorate those who gave their lives in the struggle to liberate Zimbabwe. Students, however, rejected this, saying that the ex-combatants in post-independence Zimbabwe were uneducated and ill-disciplined, and proposed new heroes, such as a doctor who had reached the top of his profession. This attitude adopted by the students posed a problem for the organizers. As one member of staff working on the course pointed out, the ruling party would never allow such a play to be performed. He proposed that a completely different, less controversial topic be chosen. However, working on a play is an educational process and the actors can learn as much as the audience from it. The topic was retained but students were, during the course of discussion and improvisation, helped to come to a different understanding. Ultimately the performed play was critical of society but called upon Zimbabweans to clean up the corruption in their country. The student who had been most contemptuous of ex-combatants played the part of an ex-combatant himself and it was he who ended the play with the words: 'They [i.e. the freedom-fighters] have opened the door. Let us clean up the mess'. 'Seri Kwesasa/Okusemsamo' was also staged in Bulawayo.

### Productions in 1986

In 1986 two short plays by S. J. Chifunyise, 'A Woman of Courage' and 'Not for Sale', a play based on S. Samkange's novel, *The Mourned One*, and the

<sup>8</sup> M. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London, Dent, 1985 [first published London, 1792]).

play, *I Will Marry When I Want*,<sup>9</sup> were performed. The emphasis on Zimbabwean writers continued, but now a play from another African country was introduced, in this way attempting to put into practice the pedagogical principle that the study of literature and the arts should begin with one's immediate environment, Zimbabwe, and then move outwards, to Africa, the Third World and, finally, the rest of the world.

*I Will Marry When I Want* was the Faculty of Arts Major Production for 1986. The play was translated into Shona by the cast and became one of the most popular productions of the period, playing at the University for two weeks and then going on tour to Gweru and Masvingo.

### Productions in 1987

In the next year it was thought that, having concentrated heavily on Zimbabwean material in the previous two years, it was time to examine the usefulness of theatre from other parts of the world for theatre practitioners in Zimbabwe. Thus, plays by Brecht, Shakespeare and the Soviet dramatist, Nikita Pogodin, were performed. This turned out to be a mistake. Had, perhaps, one non-African play been introduced that year instead of three, the aim might have been achieved without diminishing the popularity of theatre on campus. As it happened three foreign plays in one year were too many.

The Brecht play was adapted from his *The Good Person of Szechuan*. The adaption was called 'The Good Person of Gondokoro' and was set in a fictional African country, loosely based on Uganda.<sup>10</sup>

The Shakespeare play, *Macbeth*, was basically a revival of a powerful professionally acted production in Addis Ababa. The aim was to demonstrate that Shakespeare need not be too difficult for ordinary people to understand nor be boring nor an agent of cultural oppression — which is what the abuse of Shakespeare's plays in colonial Africa has tended to make them. The production also set out to stage the play in the idiom of modern theatre, an idiom that has been revolutionized since Shakespeare's time.

The intention in producing Pogodin's *Kremlin Chimes*<sup>11</sup> was to examine a piece of Soviet socialist theatre. In Zimbabwe a great deal was being spoken about socialism but, except for the occasional film or photographic

<sup>9</sup> S. Samkange, *The Mourned One* (London, Heinemann, 1975); Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, *I Will Marry When I Want* (London, Heinemann, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> See R. McLaren, 'The Good Person of Gondokoro: Brecht in Zimbabwe', *Forum Modernes Theater* (1993), VIII, 1, 75-87.

<sup>11</sup> N. Pogodin, *Kremlin Chimes*, in A. Mikhailova (comp.), *Classic Soviet Plays* (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1979), 359-434. For a detailed account of the *Kremlin Chimes* experience, see R. Kavanagh [R. McLaren], 'Simukai means arise: Soviet drama and a Zimbabwean Co-operative', *The African Communist* (1993), in press.

or poster exhibition, very little socialist art was ever seen. In the Western-dominated education system and media socialist art, especially Soviet socialist realist art, was regarded as dogmatic, stereotypical and full of sentimental or heroic glorifications of workers, peasants and the communist pantheon of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. It was important that Zimbabweans saw and judged this art for themselves.

### Productions in 1988

In 1988 there were productions of 'Watch Me Fly', 'Chokwadi Ndechipi/lqiniso Yiliphi', and *The Contest* by Mukotani Ruyendo.<sup>12</sup> The first production was an original play created by the students dealing with the problem of unemployment. The title refers to the feeling of hope and confidence graduates have when they leave the University and go out into the world seeking employment. Disillusion follows as many students are unable to find the kind of jobs they hope for and take up teaching because there is no other option. The realities of a teacher's life in rural Zimbabwe are a rude contrast to their initial expectations.

In 1987 and again at the beginning of 1988 there were demonstrations in which riot police and students fought running battles. 'Chokwadi Ndechipi/lqiniso Yiliphi' ('Which is the truth?') developed from the students' desire to use their playmaking project as an opportunity to investigate their own university. With the permission of the Dean of Students a performance of the play was organized for representatives of the Students' Representative Council, the Administration and the Faculties in the hope that the students' thoroughly entertaining and informative explanation of their viewpoint — which included as much self-criticism as castigations of the government, the university administration and the lecturing staff — would be taken seriously and would form the basis of genuine communication and constructive dialogue. 'Chokwadi Ndechipi/lqiniso Yiliphi' became one of the most popular plays of the period and was revived, suitably brought up to date, in student productions every year until 1992.

*The Contest* was the 1988 Faculty of Arts Major Production. It is a play in which two suitors (representing socialism and dependent capitalism) compete, through rhetoric, poetry and dance, for the hand of the most beautiful girl in the village, Maendeleo (progress). *The Contest* was directed by two students, Munashe Mashiri and Godfree Muyambo, who had acted together the previous year in the 'The Good Person' and who were taking a course in directing in which they were directing extracts of Dukuza kaMacu's *Night of the Long Wake* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *This Time*

<sup>12</sup> M. Ruyendo, *The Contest*, in his *The Barbed Wire and Other Plays* (London, Heinemann, 1977).

*Tomorrow*, respectively. Chifunyise was the choreographer. The dancing and drumming in the production continued the process, begun in *Mavambo* and developed further in *I Will Marry When I Want*, of developing skills in the traditional performing arts. Some of the best performances in the play were by members of community-based theatre groups, who had played important roles in *Kremlin Chimes* and were continuing their association with the University.

By 1988 there were signs that students were about to play a far more central role in Faculty of Arts Drama activities. An excellent independent production of *Egoli*,<sup>13</sup> written by the South African playwright Matsemela Manaka, was staged by drama students. This production was the result of a particularly positive aspect of classes in the 'Drama: Text and Performance' course. In this course students were able to perform an extract from one of the plays in the syllabus instead of a written assignment. By 1988 over a hundred students were presenting extracts from a wide variety of African and European plays which they had rehearsed and directed entirely themselves. The *Egoli* extract was exceptionally good and the students expressed the desire to stage the entire play. This they did, both on campus and at other venues in Harare and Bulawayo in the following year. One of these performances was staged in Mbare to raise funds for the Matapi women's Budiro sadza co-operative.

### THEATRE IN THE COMMUNITY: 'PRACTICAL DRAMA II'

As mentioned above, the idea of the second-year course in practical drama was to continue the training of the students in acting, directing and playmaking and — in addition to the study of cultural theory, the methodology and practice of theatre for development, and theatre-in-education — to extend this process into the community. In this way students learned the reason for their training, its practical application and its value in society.

In the first years after the introduction of the course students were divided into groups and sent out into the community. It was up to them to locate a suitable group and come up with a viable project. In this way the students initiated community theatre work with the Zimbabwe National Army at King George VI Barracks, with prisoners at the Central Prison, with the police, with nurses at Parirenyatwa Hospital, with women's groups and with unemployed young people.

To set up these programmes required an immense amount of time and energy. For instance, it took months of meetings and letters to persuade the prison authorities to permit the play to be rehearsed and staged and even then prison regulations were rigid and restrictive. Students were

<sup>13</sup> M. Manaka, *Egoli: City of Gold* (Johannesburg, Soyikwa-Ravan, n.d.).

allowed to work only with those convicts taking adult education classes. They were not permitted to do exercises with the convicts nor to act with them and the final presentation had to be made to an audience composed solely of other convicts taking adult education courses. They were forbidden to perform before the rest of the prisoners.

As all this work amounted to no more than one half of a question in one exam paper, it was obviously unreasonable to expect students to continue with it. Valuable as the exercise had been for the students, the initial tasks of identifying and setting up the projects were taken over by the lecturer in charge of the course in conjunction with various organizations such as the Zimbabwean Council for the Welfare of Children and the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe.<sup>14</sup>

The aim of the work in Matapi was to try and bring the residents of the hostels and the authorities together to discuss the living conditions and the problems facing income-generating projects initiated by the residents. The material that the women developed with the help of the students was subsequently taken up by one of the English Honours students in 1988 as a project on which he would base his dissertation. The result was a play called 'Chero Tiri muHarare'. It was acted by the Honours students, volunteers from the 'Practical Drama II' course and children from a nearby primary school. The idea was to take the women's 'acting-out', which had formed the basis for discussion in a theatre-for-development process, and develop it into an artistic work which would use all the resources theatre has at its disposal, such as a strong script, rehearsed acting, lighting, costumes and set, in order to communicate to audiences the reality of the women's lives in a moving and challenging way.

In the theatre-in-education (TIE) component in the African Languages and Literature 'Practical Drama II' course, students undertook projects on Urban Migration (Geography) at Mount Pleasant High School, Land and Resettlement (Geography) at Harare Secondary School, *Macbeth* and Ngugi's *The River Between* (English Literature) at Mount Pleasant High School and the Scramble for Africa (History) at Highfield Secondary School. Though the use of theatre in academic disciplines is common in Britain and other Western countries, in Zimbabwe there had been virtually no work of this kind. Schools tend to view drama as an extra-curricular activity and, although theatre groups perform plays at schools and some teachers use drama as a teaching method in class, no theatre groups, except for the University students, have embarked on TIE programmes. The work done by the students indicates that there is a great deal of scope for this use of theatre in Zimbabwe.

<sup>14</sup> See R. M. Kavanagh [R. McLaren], 'Theatre for development in Zimbabwe: An urban project', *Journal of Southern African Studies* (1990), XVI, 340-51.

### **The actors' auditing programme**

Participation by actors from grassroots theatre groups was not confined to Faculty of Arts Major Productions. In addition to their involvement in *Zambuko/Izibuko* (discussed below), many actors also audited courses on an unofficial basis and helped those students directing projects. The idea behind this involvement was that not only would the community-based theatre artists develop their theatre skills and knowledge but at the same time they would assist University students in their various courses and productions so that at the end of their attachment they would be in a position to generate income. Actors in the 1988 auditing programme staged a very successful production of *Mavambo*. They were able to perform it in the schools for some time after finishing their auditing at the University as Katiyo's *A Son of the Soil* had become an 'O'-level set work. Later on the *Zambuko/Izibuko* co-operative, a direct successor of the auditing group, also performed *Mavambo*, and other actors who had participated in the programme went on to act together on a full-time basis.

It seemed likely that funding could have been secured and the auditing programme developed into an official University programme but, unfortunately, the whole project was overtaken by events and abandoned. The idea remains, however, and it is hoped that the programme will be reactivated in the not too distant future.

### **The visiting productions programme**

In tandem with productions staged by the Faculty of Arts Drama, numerous visiting drama groups were encouraged to perform on campus. In 1987, as reported in the University Newsletter, 'it was possible for staff, students, workers, schools and the public to see seventeen different plays on campus — ten by visiting groups from Bulawayo, Gweru, Harare and Cardiff and the other seven by University of Zimbabwe-based groups.'<sup>15</sup>

### **Zambuko/Izibuko**

In 1985 the ministerial committee charged with planning the first Independence Cultural Gala asked the University together with the National Theatre Organization to stage a short dramatization of poetry. As it happened, the National Theatre Organization fell by the wayside but the University carried on. Almost all those involved had been involved in the production of *Mavambo*, including, among others, Chivaura, Tsodzo, Tungwarara, Dangarembga, Zanza, Chirikure, Moetsabi and Louise Colvin.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> University of Zimbabwe Newsletter, Feb. 1988, 10.

<sup>16</sup> V. Chivaura was then and still is a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Zimbabwe. T. K. Tsodzo was then already well known as a writer of school textbooks and plays, many of which have been serialized on television. O. Tungwarara became national chairperson of ZACT and a leading member of the Taako theatre group, as did Ellen Zanza.

The University's presentation featured poems by the late J. C. Kumbirayi, and by Chenjerai Hove and Musaemura Zimunya. The poems were acted out with songs and dances, both on stage and in the audience. This style of performance came to characterize Zambuko/Izibuko's later presentations.

Meanwhile the situation in South Africa had become extremely critical. A number of those involved in the Independence Day presentation came together and decided that as artists in Zimbabwe they could not remain silent and they started work on the play *Katshaa! The Sound of the AK*.<sup>17</sup> This group of actors came to call themselves Zambuko/Izibuko. This group was founded as part of the Faculty of Arts Drama's efforts to develop theatre on campus and in the community, and until 1988 it was regarded as the University drama group. From the start, however, Zambuko/Izibuko included people from outside the University.

Zambuko/Izibuko went on to perform two more full-length plays, 'Samora Continua' and 'Mandela, the Spirit of No Surrender', and numerous short pieces called *ngonjera*, a Tanzanian term for performance poetry recited at political occasions. Notable *ngonjera* were those for Mandela and Nyerere, performed at a graduation ceremony at the University at which they received their Honorary Degrees; the *ngonjera* for Unity performed on the occasion of the investiture of President Mugabe as Chancellor of the University; and the *ngonjera* for the Non-Aligned Movement, performed in the Cultural Gala for Heads of State at the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Harare in 1986. Countless others were performed at many different venues on a wide range of occasions and were often organized by the Film of the Month Club, the activities of which are discussed below.

Not only did Zambuko/Izibuko provide an opportunity for many students and members of the community to act — Zambuko/Izibuko was a founder member of the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre (ZACT) — but it also carried the name of the University into the community and to many different places in Zimbabwe. The Mozambique Solidarity Week in Gweru in 1988 was a typical example. 'Samora Continua' was performed in seven different venues in the town of Gweru over four days,

whom he married. Tsitsi Dangarembga not only saw her play, 'She No Longer Weeps', published (see fn. 4) but became a founder member of Zambuko/Izibuko and author of the celebrated novel, *Nervous Conditions* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1988). Chirikure Chirikure became a well-known performance poet, whose poems have been published under the title *Rukuohute* (Harare, College Press, 1989). T. Moetsabi was for a long time chairperson of Zambuko/Izibuko and vice-chairperson of ZACT. He also became an established performance poet and the founder of Aicyti Dub Poets and the theatre group Savanna Arts. He is now chairperson of the Zimbabwe Association of Theatre for Children and Young People. Louise Colvin, a teacher at the time, left Zambuko/Izibuko to work full-time for the African National Congress in the cultural sphere.

<sup>17</sup> University of Zimbabwe Faculty of Arts Drama, *Katshaa! The Sound of the AK* (Harare, Univ. of Zimbabwe, Faculty of Arts Drama, University Playscripts Series, 1988).



including schools, colleges, the Gweru Theatre, the canteen of a shoe factory and a supermarket car park. Zambuko/Izibuko was invited to Lusaka, Zambia, by the African National Congress to perform *Katshaa!* to an audience which included its president, O. R. Tambo, on the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the founding of the ANC.<sup>18</sup>

### FILM OF THE MONTH, UNIVERSITY PLAYSSCRIPTS AND THE ZIMBABWE THEATRE REPORT

The Faculty Lecturer in Drama was expected to do more than teach. He was seen as something of a University cultural officer and was expected to assist the University to play a role in the cultural life of the new society. The new Zimbabwe, especially one that was talking of a transition to socialism, could not be built on a diet of Hollywood films, in which the most degraded aspects of human behaviour are frequently exploited for profit.

The Film of the Month Club was established to counter this trend. As explained in a brochure:

The University of Zimbabwe and The Film of the Month Club promote films designed to contribute to the understanding of our role in history. These are films that show ordinary people such as ourselves — students, workers and peasants — smashing the structures of exploitation in our economies, cultures and minds and getting down to the task of recreating OUR lives, and defending them. This is cinema whose purpose is not to tell fantastic stories. It is cinema that shows US making history and each one of us becoming what he or she can possibly and capably become. It is cinema that fights confusion and creates a consciousness for OUR liberation!

In practice, this meant showing African films, films from socialist countries or 'progressive' films from Western countries and more artistically serious films. In the early period it was run by an inter-Faculty committee which attempted to include, as far as possible, representatives of the University students and workers. Initially, the chief activity was to screen a film on the last Sunday of every month. However Film of the Month Club soon became aware of other gaps in the University's cultural and intellectual life. Unlike at other universities, important political events in Zimbabwe, the region and in the world were not being celebrated or commemorated. Film of the Month Club began to organize festivals and cultural events to mark some of these dates: Heroes' Day, Independence

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed account of the work of Zambuko/Izibuko see R. M. McLaren, 'Theatre on the frontlines: The political theatre of Zambuko/Izibuko', *Tulane Drama Review* (1992), XXXVI, 90-115.

Day, May Day, June 16th (Sharpeville Day), the anniversary of the Che Guevara's death and the Great October Socialist Revolution, the national days of Palestine, Nicaragua and Cuba, and so on. The programmes for these occasions included speakers, panel discussions, films, short drama presentations (often by Zambuko/Izibuko), dances and recitations of student poetry. Many campus poets gained a platform through the efforts of the Film of the Month Club.

Another gap was the lack of any effort to involve the University workers in University activities. The Faculty of Arts Drama tried to organize lunch-time performances of their plays and Film of the Month Club ran a workers' lunchtime programme of films and plays by community theatre groups.

The University Playscripts Series, launched during this period, was intended to fill a gap in Zimbabwean and, indeed, worldwide publishing. As the publishers' note in the first title *Mavambo: First Steps*, put it: 'There is a need in Zimbabwe and throughout Africa for cheap acting editions of African plays. Publishers traditionally do not like handling plays and if they do, they tend to be expensive and literary, i.e. good for reading.'<sup>19</sup>

It was originally intended to publish original acting scripts of plays produced at the University, then other Zimbabwean plays that were being successfully performed by community-based theatre groups, and finally plays that have had a seminal influence on the development of theatre in various African countries but have never been published, for example, Chifunyise's 'Mr Polera', as performed by the Zambian Theatre group, Kanyama, Masautso Phiri's 'Soweto' (Zambia), or 'Ha-Hu Be Siddist Wer' ('The ABC in Six Months') by Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin (Ethiopia). Two scripts were published, *Mavambo* and Zambuko/Izibuko's *Katshaa!*. In 1988 the venture was suspended but it is obviously a project that needs to be revived.

*The Zimbabwe Theatre Report* was a venture similar in some respects to the University Playscripts Series. In a number of countries national theatre reports are published in which feature articles, reviews, news and debates published in a variety of newspapers and journals are grouped together in one volume. In this way a comprehensive briefing of what is going on in the theatre of that particular country becomes conveniently available. The first issue of the *Zimbabwe Theatre Report* came out in an experimental limited edition. The response and the obvious usefulness of such a publication make it obvious that the *Zimbabwe Theatre Report* should be established and published regularly by the University as part of its service to theatre in the country.

<sup>19</sup> University of Zimbabwe Faculty of Arts Drama, *Mavambo: First Steps* (Harare, Univ. of Zimbabwe, Faculty of Arts Drama, University Playscripts Series, 1988).

## CONCLUSION

A number of recommendations may be made arising from the experiences gained in the first four years of drama at the University of Zimbabwe which other programmes might find useful. Firstly, the programme should be grounded in the national performing arts heritage and in the history and social development of one's own country. Secondly, the emphasis should be placed on African theatre performance in all its aspects. Thirdly, all sections of the University community should be involved, and, fourthly, a dynamic interaction between the University and the wider community should be established. Emphasis should be placed on theatre as an applied, socially-engaged and useful cultural activity, on theatre in the context of the other arts and cultural and political activism, on democratic relations of artistic production, and on developing the students' own creativity and independent involvement in drama.