The Spaces I Traveled: Notes on Theater and the Legacies of Apartheid in South Africa

Beth Cleary

I went to South Africa as a white American feminist woman who teaches, directs, and performs in "political" theater in the American context. I knew I was going to a place where political theater was a *given* more than an anomaly—the reverse of the situation in the United States. And I knew that the important history of the theater in South Africa, particularly the black and multiracial theater,[1] was proudly and defiantly leftist. I certainly went with romantic and reverential concepts of the crucial role of protest theater in the development of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa,[2] and in dramatizing the circumstances of people of color in workplaces, in prison, and under enforced segregation, relocation, and strategic campaigns of terror in the black and coloured townships.[3]

Apartheid (a system that is only nominally over in South Africa) is a system of white supremacism that has accrued the vast majority of capital and land resources to the 10% minority population of white colonists and their descendants. The management of black bodies and the spaces that contain them has been a major preoccupation of the apartheid mind. Where do blacks live? Where do they work? Where can they not move freely? Where is it dangerous to have too many at once? These preoccupations have reached into every aspect of corporeal life in South Africa, it seems, from the very clothing pockets where all men of color had to carry the "dom book" (pass book), to the forced disinfections, immunizations, and sterilizations of black people's bodies,[4] to the strategic disfranchisement of generations of "colonized minds." The preoccupations have reached as well into artistic activity, because the realm of the symbolic and representational is always a

matter of concern to the ruling powers of any country. Indeed, in the early 1960s, the National Party instituted Performing Arts Councils (PACs) in each region of the country, through which allocations of arts funding would flow to white-run artistic institutions and white artists for the presentation of largely classical European-derived art forms to white audiences. Black art, including black performance, was not supported in any official capacity.[5]

Theater makers and writers about theater are preoccupied with space. Where is the venue? Who occupies the stage? How is the audience configured, and who are they? Those of us who view and analyze all theatrical representations through an emotional/intellectual space which we might describe as *political*, and in particular *materialist*, view the issues surrounding access to, and occupation of, performance space as variously reflective of, and often central to, the power and class relations of a place like a school, a city, or even a nation, and their official and resistant narratives of self-creation.

Before going to South Africa, I had a merely intellectual appreciation of the fact of black and protest theater having occurred in untheatrical and even ignominious spaces throughout South Africa, over a period of many decades, originating well before the National Party's rise to power in 1948.[6] Theater scholarship on South Africa, often jointly published by South African and British university presses, has reported for several decades on the relationship between performance, politics, and the realities of under-resourced and/or illegal theater spaces in South Africa:

> The state's suppression of the drama of the oppressed classes and groups worked primarily through its continuing control of and restrictions in the use of township space. In the townships [there was] the almost complete absence of performance space and attendant difficult conditions for rehearsal and performance.… Soweto, for instance, which had a population approaching one million in the early 1970s, still had, towards the end of the decade, only 'one established nightclub, one hotel, one cinema…and a small number of community halls.' The lack of amenities, and often unwillingness to approach the 'Bantu administration' offices, meant . . . performances of unscripted plays in hastily convened venues, little or no rehearsal time, with performances advertised on the day of performance on impromptu banners.[7]

It took seeing how space for living and congregating and working is still highly segregated in South Africa, and to witness the difficult con-

ditions persisting for artists of color there, to grasp the relation of theater-making in the struggle to present circumstances. It took hearing about the continuing role of township community centers and schools as sites of political and theatrical convening among black people, and seeing those spaces and their lack of amenities, to understand more concretely the aesthetic necessity of working through improvisation, with the body and voice as the major exponents of story, metaphor, and message. And it took seeing the officially theatrical spaces of the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, the Natal Playhouse in Durban, and the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town, to appreciate the legacy of the artistic apartheid perpetrated on artists and audiences by the PACs, and the difficulty for artists of color in overcoming that legacy now.

*****

I was fortunate to see two pieces of "official" theater in South Africa: Mbongeni Ngema's *The Zulu* at the Market Theatre and Heinrich Reisenhofer and Oscar Petersen's *Suip!* at the Baxter Theater.[8] Both were fully staged productions at large official theaters with different political histories and relations to their communities; both were written, wholly or in large part, by and about South Africans of color. Although I did not see theater made in traditionally non-theatrical settings (these designations are very Western), I did see a dance contest involving township community center-trained young dancers in Johannesburg, and I talked with people who have been making theater with workers and untrained actors for many years (notably Ari Sitas and Astrid von Kotze, part of the former Junction Avenue Theatre Company in Durban, and Jonathan Grossman who is working with domestic workers near Cape Town). The conversations I had with these people, and many others, gave me a first-hand and clearer sense of the complex and proud history of theater, in its many forms, in the past several decades.

In response to my particular interest in learning about women and theater in South Africa, a theater colleague in the United States[9] had steered me to Gitanjali ("Gita") Pather of the KwaZulu-Natal Playhouse in Durban. Pather's focus on women in theatrical and artistic life in South Africa has had a significant impact on women gaining access to theatrical space and resources. The analyses she shared of the issues confronting women and all artists of color in South Africa have allowed me to appreciate more fully the persistent external and inter-

nalized forces of oppression in South African artistic and social relations.

Pather is the Director of Operations at the KwaZulu-Natal Playhouse, and we met in their lobby coffee shop for an extended interview on January 12, 2000. The Natal Playhouse was a recipient of KZN "PAC" money in the period before 1994, and the programming in the space was by whites, for whites. Pather and her colleagues have been slowly reorganizing the Natal Playhouse since 1994 (when the former PAC system was dismantled) into a space that is vital for black performance. "Black" for Pather, as for many South African persons of color I met, includes people of Asian Indian descent, the so-called "coloured" people, and others designated as non-white under the apartheid system. Pather and her colleagues are attempting to reprogram the Natal Playhouse without any increased resources from the national government, and under constant threat of funding cutbacks from a national budget facing multiple social emergencies. "There is a lot of book knowledge in government," she declared, "but no practical knowledge about what it really takes to make a cultural arts center work."

"We have been learning from the Australian example about how to run and support minority theater and theater for women; we know theater is a vital tool in developing countries." In fact, the Natal Playhouse has restructured its mission to address the programs and ideals of the ANC coalition government. On several levels, Pather reported, the Natal Playhouse's new mission is not working. One reason is resources. Another is what I would call a crisis of representation for playwrights and artists in South Africa. "For black playwrights now, what do we talk about?" she exclaimed.

I asked Pather about the role of women in South African theater, knowing that she had mentored several young women playwrights of color. "The feminist movement," she explained, "was intrinsically tied to the struggle. And the struggle for equality is the same as the struggle for liberation." Indeed, I heard from other women who consider themselves feminist activists (particularly Lliane Loots of Flatfoot Dance Company and Pat Horn of the Self-Employed Women's Union in Durban, both of whom were active in the underground ANC Women's League in the 1980s) that women's analyses of sexism(s) *within* the various political liberation movements had been utterly dismissed by their male counterparts as irrelevant to the "first" issue of gaining liberation for all black people—as if feminists' concerns would naturally follow. "It was always 'wait your turn,' " Lliane Loots said,

"but our 'turn' of course never came." Pather explained that the formulation of women's equality as "the same" as the struggle for wholesale liberation "was part of the revolutionary rhetoric. And it was *just that*, rhetoric." I realized by talking to these women that identifying a "women's movement" or feminist voice in playwriting is a somewhat fruitless and ahistorical search. According to Pather, women's artistic work now needs to be nurtured one playwright at a time, with a commitment of mentorship for many years. Also, such mentorship has to happen in a climate of multiple social and domestic emergencies affecting many black women's lives. "Now, women are so busy dealing with basic issues of safety and human rights, in environments that are inherently hostile to women."

Pather cited the long history of male domination of all the theater spaces in South Africa, and she reported that this tradition has continued throughout the country since 1994 as well. "Every single theater in South Africa, except the Natal Playhouse and the Baxter, is run by men," she declared gravely. In addition, there is "a lack of knowledgeable, critical arts press in South Africa," she said. She lamented the lack of exposure and experience in arts reviewing. "Reviewers talk about 'cross-cultural pollination,' things like that, without any real analysis of what that *is*." When asked about the comprehensiveness of this problem, she opined "yes — there is no respect for the printed word here. This is a longstanding reaction to the National Party and the way they controlled the newspapers."

Despite these structural difficulties, Pather has been a strong force in the conscientization of some key South African people of color to the role and potential of the arts in the "new" South Africa. She is the founder of the South African Women's Arts Festival, now in its fifth year, through which she has steadily promoted the growth of black women's artistic production and networks. The annual SAWA Festival includes a wide variety of art forms made by women, from theater and dance to spoken word to traditional glass working and bead working. "The first year, inevitably, 90% of the participants were white. They were organized enough to make their own productions, they 'got it' politically about the importance of a women's festival. By now, that 10% of work by women of color has become 50%. But that's happened only because I've *commissioned* work. It's been important to take risks, encourage unknown artists to do things. I've tried to get black women to see models of women of color in other countries who are doing artistic work *for a living*." According to Pather, there is no incentive or

model for women of color to *choose* art making as a way of life. "We can only dismantle this stuff if women have *time*," she said. I was reminded by her comment of how closely linked the "resources" of space and time are for theater people, for all artists; and how these resources have been crucial points of activism and theorization among feminist scholars in the United States and elsewhere. In South Africa, explained Pather, the art that many women currently make—the beadwork and clothing and crochet work that rural Zulu women sell on the beachfront in Durban, for example—is not seen by them as *art*, and their labor is not felt to be artistic labor but piecework, "valuable" only if the items sell.[10]

*****

Issues of form and representational strategy in playwriting are central to Pather's interest in promoting new work. Encouraging women writers to write beyond caricature, to write more "realistic" characters based on their own experience, is Pather's goal. In the United States and elsewhere in the so-called West, realistic narratives have been charged with perpetuating bourgeois ideals of individualism and hero-worship. But in the context of a dominant black theatrical aesthetic that has been about collective action and subsumption of the individual to the greater cause (echoes of "wait your turn" resound), Pather's urge to uphold the particular, the mundane, the interior in women's theatrical self-representation makes sense, political sense. "The arts scene in South Africa needs a theater identity that is not Fugard, stereotypes, caricatures, satires. It needs plays about ordinary people and situations," she declared. "Song and dance can no longer be the common denominator."

Cape Town-based playwright Lueen Conning's award-winning solo play *A Colored Place* (1996)[11] is the product of Gita Pather's sponsorship and mentorship. Lueen Conning now has a career underway as a theater artist. In addition to running the Playhouse and mentoring women artists like Lueen into the annual festival, Pather's new project in KwaZulu-Natal is the establishment of what were called in the States at the height of the feminist movement "consciousness-raising groups." She intends to bring women together informally, around Durban at first, in each others' houses, to talk about their lives and to help each other analyze the ways that racism, sexism, and classism intersect and impede their self-determination. "The government is not

creating leadership for letting people *see themselves* in new ways," she explains. In the absence of that leadership, and drawing on her experiences as a political artist and activist, she is providing the space for her sisters to do it for themselves.

Dr. Bernard Magubane declared that black people in South Africa during the years 1910 to 1990 learned "the meaning of being administered."[12] It was, of course, out of this injustice that the long struggle against apartheid began, as early as 1912 and the formation of the first African National Congress. The questions of the "apartheid mind" that I pondered early in this essay—"Where do blacks live? Where do they work? Where can they not move freely? Where is it dangerous to have too many at once?"—persist in South Africa, and not only among intransigent National Party loyalists. Theater making is an activity that breaks rules and activates people's needs for play and *action*. Theater making allows people to occupy space—even a humble community center room or sidewalk—in ways that defy convention and inspire new ideas about relations among people in space and time. The people I met in South Africa who are working for the reorganization of "space" throughout the country—theatrical, domestic, political—have much to contribute to the official discourses of transformation in the time ahead. ◉

Notes

1. I use the term "Black" as an inclusive term for Black Africans, Indians, and the so-called Coloureds, as many persons of color do in South Africa, preserving the practice of cross-racial solidarity among people of color in defiance of the identity "determinations" made by officials of the white government from the mid-'20s on. There were a few "multi-racial" theaters that functioned actively before 1994, in open defiance of the segregation laws of apartheid, the Market Theatre in Johannesburg being the most famous.

2. See, for instance, Ian Steadman's "Race Matters in South African Theatre," in Boon and Plastow, eds., *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 55–75.

3. See Duma Ndlovu, *Woza Africa!* (George Braziller, 1986); Zakes Mda, *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses: Four Works* (Witwatersrand University Press, 1993); Phyllis Klotz et.al. *You Strike the Woman, You Strike the Rock: More Market Plays*, edited by John Kani (A.D. Donker, Ltd., 1994); Martin Orkin, ed., *At the Junction: Four Plays by the Junction Avenue Theatre Company* (Witwatersrand University Press, 1995); and Kathy A. Perkins, *Black South African Women: An Anthology of Plays* (Routledge, 1999). Together they provide an excellent overview of contemporary and recent black South African playwriting; several contain further bibliographies.

4. I learned about these practices at the KwaMuhle museum in Durban, an excellent museum about the history of black workers in South Africa.

5. See, for instance, Anne Fuchs's discussion of the Performing Arts Councils (PACs) in her *Playing the Market: the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, 1976–1986* (Harwood, 1990). See also, Orkin 1991.

6. For an introductory discussion of the long and complex and largely unwritten history of township theater in South Africa, see Duma Ndlovu's introduction to his *Woza Afrika!* (George Braziller Press, 1986), xix–xxviii. See also, Orkin 1991.

7. Orkin, Martin, *Drama and the South African State* (Manchester University Press/University of Witwatersrand, 1991), 150.

8. See Fuchs 1990 for a complete critical history of the Market Theatre. The Baxter Theater in Cape Town has long been dedicated to staging plays by and for the coloured people in Cape Town; *Suip!*, which means loosely "Drink!," was a play about the community of homeless coloured people living on the streets of Cape Town.

9. I am very grateful to Kathy A. Perkins, Associate Professor at the University of Illinois, for her generosity with suggestions and contacts before I went to South Africa.

10. Kathy A. Perkins's 1999 anthology, *Black South African Women: an Anthology of Plays*, is the first anthology of its kind featuring interviews with and plays by *and about* South African women. Perkins includes several plays written by South African male playwrights whose representations of women were anthologized because they "break the mould" of what Lorelle Royeppen of the KwaMuhle Museum called, in an interview with me, the "maids or madames" stereotype of black women. Perkins's anthology collects contemporary plays; the interviews comment on the contemporary scene (post-1994), and echo many of Gita Pather's analyses of the complex circumstances facing black women artists in South Africa.

11. See Perkins, 6–23.

12. From notes I took on Dr. Magubane's address to the Macalester seminar group, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, January 6, 2000.