



**Primary Health Care  
Forum Theater in  
Mulangali, Malawi, 1986,  
in a play based on a local  
folk narrative.**

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**David Kerr's** life embodies the transnational character of community cultural development work. As part of our online dialogue, he shared with fellow participants an account of involvements leading up to the projects discussed in his essay:

*I'm a British citizen, but have spent most of my life in Africa working, from a University base in theatre (and to a much lesser extent media) for community renewal purposes. 1969–73 I was in Malawi where I was one of a team which helped found the University Writers Workshop and Traveling Theatre. From 1974 to 1980 I was Artistic Director of Chikwakwa Theatre in Zambia, where I became involved in Traveling Theatre and "Theatre for Development" projects in rural areas, as well as in some TV drama work in Lusaka. 1980–1992 I was in Malawi again (my wife's native country). I helped set up the University's Fine and Performing Arts Department and was coordinator of the Traveling Theatre. I became heavily involved in using theatre for communication purposes in delivery of Primary Health Care in Liwonde District through Village Health Committees. I also did some video and theatre work for Mozambican refugees, and did unofficial research work on human rights for Amnesty International (Amnesty was a*

*banned organisation in Malawi at the time). 1992–2000 I was in Botswana working with a University-based group called UBE423, which created plays mostly around human rights issues for such women's or children's organisations as Emang Basadi, Women & Law in Southern Africa, Methaetsile and Childline. I also worked closely with a community theatre group, Ghetto Artists, on AIDS issues.*

David's essay treats an important question for the community cultural development field: how it is possible for community artists' work to perform its most important work of conscientization—stimulating people to take action in behalf of freedom—when the work is so often supported by governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for its instrumental effects, advancing a particular social goal or policy. He raised a related question in the preconference dialogue:

*Many of us have been closely attached to NGOs, and as I mentioned in my piece on conditions, etc., this can sometimes cause problems. If it's an indigenous*

*NGO like PETA [the Philippines Educational Theater Association] I think it is less problematic. But in Africa there are few, powerful indigenous NGOs. I have worked in partnership with GTZ (Germany), AIDS Action Trust (USA), ZOA Refugee Care (Holland), etc. All of the people I worked with were very idealistic and hard-working. However, there is quite a lot of analysis from political economists which suggests that NGOs in Africa contribute, probably unwittingly, to local dependency on donor funding and to the erosion of national governments—in other words to the recolonisation of Africa. I'm sure all of us have been in situations where we've had conflicts between what WE wanted to do and what the NGO partners funding the project wanted us to do, and we felt frustrated, maybe even guilty about it.*

The observations and analysis in this essay will be useful to anyone wishing to make community cultural development work deeper and more effective.

# The Challenge of Global Perspectives on Community Theater in Malawi and Botswana

by David Kerr

**T**his is a very personal account of my own experiences in Malawi and Botswana facilitating the creation of theater pieces by various groups. To some extent it traces the evolution of my own political and theatrical commitments, concerns and doubts. In particular I try to show some of the difficulties in making cultural representations and mediations of local African society, while satisfying two apparently contradictory demands: the search for a theater sufficiently concrete to be accurate and useful to specific communities, and yet sufficiently complex to capture the communities' links with and responses to the imperatives of a wider global economy.

I start with Malawi. We are in a fairly small village called Mwima in the low-lying swampy district of Liwonde in 1985. My colleague from the University of Malawi, Chris Kamlongera, is playing the part of a village headman in a company-created play in the local language, Chinyanja. Other villagers are played by drama students doing their fieldwork for a course entitled "Theater for Development," who are helped by Mrs. Banda, a community-health nurse from Liwonde. The real village headman is a member of an audience comprising about 40 adults (mostly women) and 20 children. Also in the audience is Dr. Schmidt, the director of the Primary Health Care Unit (PHCU) at Liwonde District Hospital, who along with Mrs. Banda is employed by Gesellschaft für Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), the German development agency funding this program. Our improvised play is about the problems of cementing the surroundings of village wells so they don't become contaminated.

This is a vital issue. Diarrhea and malaria are major problems, and in villages not far away people have recently died from an outbreak of cholera. Chris, in his role as headman, is hearing evidence from the pretend villagers about why the wells are not maintained properly. He throws questions out to audience members, both onstage and real. At first only the audience of actors responds, but soon people from the real audience give answers, explaining how lazy herd boys allow cows and goats to go too close to the well and how some women wash their children's nappies nearby. When the play eventually comes to an inconclusive end, the whole audience (including the until-now silent real headman) joins in the discussion. While praising the accuracy of some of the play's observations, they criticize some inaccuracies. Eventually, a few young villagers agree to do another version of the play showing problems about wells, pit latrines and other key sanitation issues.

The second version reveals human issues about which the PHCU knew nothing, particularly social problems concerning conflict over the best-located well in the village, close to a village store. The store owner built the well himself, but only allows the villagers to use it if they shop at his store. The university and PHCU teams learn one of their most important lessons, that problems concerning primary health care are rarely confined to the clinical or administrative fields, but involve social relations within the community and between the community and the outside world.

This experiment in Mwima village marked the beginning of a campaign using theater as a communication strategy to support the efforts of the Liwonde PHCU in tackling water-borne diseases. Over the next five years, participatory theater acted as a combination of stimulus, social lubricant and safety net in the sometimes conflicted process of building and maintaining safe, hygienic pit latrines and wells throughout the Liwonde district. Examples of some of the social tensions the plays addressed are: (1) conflicts between indigenous villagers and fish traders in Mphonde; (2) conflicts between government bureaucrats and villagers in Mbela; (3) conflicts between petit bourgeois elites and villagers in Mwima; and (4) conflicts between men and women almost everywhere.

The whole process was powered by a network of Village Health Committees (VHCs) run mostly by women, which provided essential health monitoring and even basic diagnosis and medicines for such ailments as diarrhea and malaria. They were also important communication vehicles for the early AIDS-awareness campaigns. Since Malawi was at that time a one-party dictatorship with no meaningful elections, the whole democratic process of running elections for the VHCs and using them to criticize some aspects of local government health policies was a major innovation.

<sup>1</sup>E. Kalipeni and  
C. Kamlongera, *Popular  
Theatre and Health Care*  
(University of Malawi,  
Zomba, 1987).

According to a survey sponsored by GTZ, the Primary Health Care campaign in Liwonde in the late 1980s was very successful, with various indicators showing improvements in health standards with respect to water-borne diseases and with much improved health-communication systems.<sup>1</sup> In 1990, however, the Malawi government curtailed the GTZ PHC scheme. The reasons for this are not clear, but probably it was owing to its very success, compared with PHC programs in other districts; success created tensions within the Byzantine system of furtive patronage and entitlements dispensed by President Banda's office. The political atmosphere of paranoia that dominated the last years of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) regime in the 1980s, prior to the referendum on multiparty democracy in 1993, had a strongly detrimental effect on the implementation of socioeconomic policies.

This was only one of several factors relating to political economy that gave me misgivings about my Theater for Development work with Liwonde PHCU. Of course, I was well aware of its achievements. Compared with earlier Theater for Development projects in which I'd been involved, the Liwonde PHCU work was much more genuinely participatory. This was not only because the villagers took control of the play-devising process, but also because indigenous cultural forms from the local community—*nyimbo* (songs), *nthano* (stories) and *miyambo* (didactic messages)—were incorporated into the performances. Some of the earlier plays, where we simply sought community participation at any cost, were little more than static role-plays, and thus aesthetically very crude. Some of the later plays, however, especially those created at a major workshop in Mulangali (1987), were much more successful aesthetically because we took pains to research not only the health problems of the community, but also its cultural traditions. These cultural forms became the basis of the plays' structure, thus giving the community a much greater sense of their "ownership." Another major achievement was that the whole Theater for Primary Health Care process was sustained over a long period and integrated into carefully thought-out and well-managed health-communication campaigns linked to democratically elected local institutions. It was not just a one-off workshop, which made token gestures toward "follow-up."

Nevertheless, I couldn't help feeling frustrated at the limitations of the Theater for Primary Health Care process. The main problem was that the one-party MCP dictatorship at the time made honest developmental communication virtually impossible. It's true that in the Forum Theater presentations there was some unexpectedly frank criticism made of local party bureaucrats (for example, of area party officials at a performance in Mwima in 1986), but this always happened when there were non-Malawian witnesses to the occasion. The Village Health Committee actors were much more circumspect when they did not have the protection of outside witnesses. Even when GTZ or university observers were present, there were clear limits to the amount of confrontation that was possible, even though government polices were often major obstacles.

One of the fundamental problems of Theater for Development is that if it is to make any genuine changes in people's lives, it is bound to offend some stakeholders in the status quo. The clearest African example of that is in Kenya in the late 1970s and early '80s with Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre. The issues of teenage pregnancy raised by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii in the play "Ngaahika Ndeenda," created with the Kamiriithu community, were extremely offensive to the ruling Kenya African Nationalist Union Party, especially since these issues were linked to an attack on religious, social and political elites as well as on global capitalism. The play was banned and Ngugi wa Thiong'o was imprisoned for a year without trial. In 1980, after Ngugi's release, another play—"Maitu Njugira"—was also banned, and the open-air theater built by the Kamiriithu community was razed to the ground. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ngugi wa Mirii and most of the other facilitators fled into exile.

The Kamiriithu experience was a heroic inspiration to community theater activists, but it also marked the limits of what was possible in a dictatorship. The Theater for Primary Health Care facilitators in Liwonde had no intention of pushing communities into open confrontation with the Malawi government, not least because the villagers would be the ones who would suffer most. It is never legitimate for a theater facilitator to opt for other people's martyrdom. At that time it was normal practice for agents of the Malawi government to harass perceived opponents by seizing their property, beating them, putting them in detention without trial or even killing them extrajudicially. In that context, Theater for Development campaigns could never push their collaborative analyses too far into the realm of the political. This is probably the main difference between Theater for Development, with its concern for conscientization, and Theater of the Oppressed, with its greater commitment to radical transformation.

I expressed my frustration at these limitations in two ways—one professional, another personal.

At the theatrical level, my duties at the university were not restricted to Theater for Development. I had a third-year course of more mainstream practical drama, and I was coordinator of a student club, the Chancellor College Traveling Theatre. Both had repertoires that mixed English-language and Chinyanja plays, some scripted, some company-created, and performed mostly in urban areas at schools and community halls. The disadvantage of these plays was that it was difficult to avoid the elitism that comes from academic artists taking their prepackaged products to the wider world. The advantage was that the theater was not restricted to the agenda of any nongovernmental organization (NGO), and the students were aware of the dangers involved in pushing criticism of the political regime beyond certain limits. A few plays created in this way did manage, through techniques of

allegory, allusion and association (easily decoded by audiences) to go beyond the stage of proximate social observation; they sometimes achieved complex and devastating criticism of both the Malawian political system and its linkages to global power mechanisms.

This was particularly true of the company-created plays of the third-year Practical Drama course, which were intended to teach students skills in acting, directing, playwriting, design and stagecraft. The 1985 play “Ulemu Unlimited” uses a story of two brothers struggling to improve their economic status as an allegory for recent events in Malawi, including the assassination of four prominent politicians who had run afoul of the president’s inner circle of power. “Willing Spirits” (1987) is set in an imaginary East African country, Ngambika, a very thinly disguised Malawi. The play deals with a psychologically disturbed Ngambikan, Aggrey, who describes in flashback his betrayal of friends in Ngambika, speaking to an almost equally disturbed British psychiatrist. The unofficial drug trade in Malawi/Ngambika is used as a metaphor for Aggrey’s obsession with consumerism and, more widely, for Third World dependency on Western cultural values. “They Call It Africa” (1990) uses the dramatic frame of aliens visiting earth to rescue it from ecological destruction; this allows the play to attack Malawi’s exploitative tobacco estate system and the global tobacco industry with which it is linked.

All of these plays pushed near or beyond the limits of the state’s tolerance. “Ulemu Unlimited” had one scene cut by the Censorship Board. Police questioned some of the actors and myself about “Willing Spirits,” while the Censorship Board banned “They Call It Africa” after one tumultuous performance to an audience of about 1500 people. In the absence of democratic political debate in Malawi, theater of this kind assumed a significant role as a focus for and expression of popular dissent.

The other outlet for my frustration at Malawi’s dictatorship was personal, in the field of human rights. Over the years I had made contacts with Amnesty International (A.I.) concerning human rights abuses involving people I knew, particularly the cases of four students, two of whom were prominent members of the University Traveling Theatre, detained without trial for a year (1983–84). When my close friend and colleague, the internationally renowned poet Jack Mapanje, was detained without trial in 1987, he was eventually able to set up a furtive communication system (through a sympathetic prison guard) with an Irish priest, Patrick O’Malley, and myself. Jack and later some of his fellow prisoners were able to smuggle out very detailed accounts of conditions in the notorious Mikuyu Detention Prison. The Malawi desk officer at Amnesty International asked me to become a volunteer researcher on a clandestine basis (since A.I. was a banned organization in Malawi at the time). My human rights activism blended into the movement for multiparty democracy, especially after the release of Mapanje and most other political prisoners in 1991 came about as a result of international

pressure. The Malawian secret police in turn put pressure on me (through threats to me and my family) to leave the country, which we did in 1992, seeking work and schooling in different countries.

I took up a post teaching drama and English at the University of Botswana. Botswana had a totally different political history from Malawi's. It was relatively wealthy, owing to its prudent stewardship of revenue derived from the diamond-mining industry. It had a vibrant and well-resourced educational system and a healthy multiparty democracy with a strong tradition of civil liberties, including free cultural expression.

As in Malawi, I became involved in two different types of theater. My duties with regard to a drama course (called E423) led me into a tradition of devising company-created plays with my students in a mixture of English and Setswana. During vacations, I worked with some students on a voluntary basis in support of government- and NGO-sponsored Theater for Development HIV/AIDS-awareness campaigns.

My hope was that Botswana's cultural freedom would provide a context in which Forum Theater would be able to push beyond domestic relations, family breakdown, promiscuity and the need for condoms to larger issues. But in Botswana, too, I did not feel that the Theater for Development work in which I was involved progressed much beyond the parochially instrumental.

The project was part of a partnership between volunteer students and myself from the university and two organizations, the Ministry of Health's AIDS/STD Unit and a fairly small NGO, AIDS Action Trust (ACT). In the first campaign, I trained the student volunteers in Forum Theater techniques related to AIDS awareness, then helped them train a theater troupe in Mochudi, a large village (almost a small town) 35 kilometers from the capital, Gaborone. The theater group consisted of unemployed young men and women, most of whom had dropped out of school. First the university group members created their own play, using the Mochudi group as an audience and teaching them Forum techniques. Then the Mochudi group did their own participatory research into attitudes about sexuality and HIV infection in the village. On this basis they created their own play, with cut-off points for opening up the discussion to the audience. This play was performed at the village *kgotla* (assembly), in schools and in the main street outside the post office.

The strategy of the government and NGO facilitators, working in close cooperation with each other and with the university group, was to use Theater for Development as a tool both for community awareness and for research into attitudes about sexuality and AIDS, especially among young people. The AIDS facilitators had their own system of monitoring the impact of the campaign through psychometric tests on participants and audience samples. Testing during the 1993 campaign in Mochudi showed that the main



attitude change—accepting the link between unprotected promiscuous sex and HIV infection—was found not in the audiences but in the group of young men and women who formed the drama group.

At the evaluation session the communication officers at the AIDS/STD Unit and ACT felt the best way to capitalize on their findings was to try to establish AIDS-awareness drama groups in secondary schools, so that they could form the nucleus of a peer-education process. In the following year, during the long vacation, the university drama team, after further intensive training, undertook the much larger task of training interested secondary-school students in AIDS-awareness drama techniques in Gaborone and the nearby villages of Lobatse, Ramotswa and Molepolole. Although the campaign seemed successful according to follow-up research conducted by the sponsors, it was difficult to sustain once the university leaders had returned to college, owing to lack of interest and support shown by teachers at the school.

I had some of my own doubts about the effectiveness of both the 1993 and '94 campaigns, despite their obvious achievement. One point related to the Forum technique. I was expecting the freedom that existed in Botswana to make Forum Theater an even more useful tool of conscientization than in Malawi. Certainly, audiences were quicker to participate in discussions during performances, no matter who was present, sometimes almost destroying the whole frame of the play in the process. The biggest problem, however, was that the large size of the audiences (rarely below 200) made opening-up techniques counterproductive, since peer pressure often encouraged the participants to reproduce social prejudices toward sexuality rather than to challenge them. More productive and franker discussions took place within smaller groups after performances.

I also became aware of a broader set of misgivings that paralleled my earlier doubts about the political boundaries placed on the Primary Health Care work in Malawi. I became increasingly aware of audience cynicism toward AIDS messages. One reason was that the almost missionary zeal of the facilitators sometimes made the audience feel they were being preached at, no matter how assiduous the participation techniques were. This was compounded by audiences' perception that the whole AIDS-awareness campaign, even when conducted by Botswana, was being orchestrated by shadowy agencies from industrialized countries with dubious agendas. This impression was in turn reinforced by the unremitting instrumentality of the plays, particularly when condom-wielding members of Population Services International, an American NGO that promotes contraception, accompanied the performances.

I felt that the plays did not push the inquiry into the causes of AIDS far enough beyond the proximate issues of marital infidelity and prostitution. I wanted to address the wider issues of poverty, urban anomie and cultural imperialism which come into play as the fabric of Botswana's society becomes enmeshed, through its recent industrialization into global markets, with the forces of global capitalism.

I would like to illustrate my doubts about both the Malawian and Botswana Theater for Development programs by showing in graphic form the possible problems NGOs have tried to address through theater, and the series of analyses which the theater process did make, as well as the more complex ones it failed to make.

<b>Problem</b>	Unhygienic Wells	HIV Infection
<b>1st why?</b>	Villages lack information and communal activism	Promiscuity Nonuse of condoms
<b>2nd why?</b>	Insufficient schools Lack of local democracy Private ownership of wells	Marriage breakups "Skin" sex preferred Teenage affairs Ignorance about HIV Prostitution Rape
<b>3rd why?</b>	Rural underdevelopment Dictatorship and corruption Capitalism attacks communalism Patronage replaces self-help	Migrant labor and adoption of urban values Poverty, urbanization, social anomie Male distortion of tradition— machismo Peer pressure and lack of sex education
<b>4th why?</b>	Malawi's conservatism supported by industrial- nation powers Poverty and dependency syndrome	Global capitalism and cultural imperialism Scapegoat syndrome and machismo

I have stopped after four iterations, but obviously it is possible to go much further.

The process of using Theater of the Oppressed requires constantly asking the question "Why?" to reveal the causes of social problems that sometimes lie quite far in the past. The analysis starts with proximate personal issues, but



**The arrest of Robert Sobukwe is portrayed in "The Death and Life of Bessie Head" in Gaborone, Botswana, 1996. This E423 play about the South African/Botswana writer Bessie Head examines the political and psychological roots of racism in Southern Africa.**

keeps pushing participants to probe more deeply until fundamental structural causes are revealed. In this way, apparently disparate local issues connect to each other through their common linkages to more complex, global problems, for example, the last two "Why's" in the above chart. In Theater for Development, it is rare for the analysis to go beyond the first two "Why's."

The reasons for this are not difficult to find. The main sponsors for Theater for Development projects are NGOs with specific missions of their own. They are part of a global aid industry, which is subject to some of the same disciplines of accountability as global corporations. The project directors can only guarantee continued budgets from their donors if they provide fairly concrete indicators of success, normally within a system of annual audits. In such a system, success can only be easily audited through concrete achievements—wells surrounded by cement protective guards, or condoms distributed, and so on. Attitudes are notoriously difficult to measure, and there is no managerial incentive to engage with complex, global relationships underlying the development problems of different sectors. Nor is there any incentive to analyze historical causes of problems; the "developmentalist present" proves just as restrictive as the rightly maligned "ethnographic present."

It is this neglect of deeper global imperatives that caused my misgivings about Theater for Development in both Malawi and Botswana, so I don't wish to neglect them here.

A simple way of looking at globalization is to see it as an extension of imperialism. Multinational corporations, global currency markets and the

domination of developing economies by the G8 countries<sup>2</sup> through organizations like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) perform in the early 21st century a similar role of surplus extraction, market manipulation and political control that the imperialist European nations played in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the cultural level, the glamour of commercial mass media (especially from the United States)—popular music, film, television and advertising, backed up by the prestige of the English language—provides a lubricant for the industrialized world's economic hegemony.

<sup>2</sup>Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union.

Such an analysis might suggest it would be easy to recognize the injustice of the system of global economic and communication networks, leading cultural workers simply to identify with nations outside the G8 block, particularly those in the Southern Hemisphere. Unfortunately, the struggle against global domination is more complicated than that. Although global capitalism has its heartland in the United States and the other G8 countries of the Northern Hemisphere, it manifests in every nation and continent, either directly through multinational corporations or indirectly through trade, finance and communications arrangements which articulate Third World economies with those of the Northern powers. A network of economic and political treaties, understandings, influences and pressures create allies, partners, accomplices or sympathizers in Third World nations, whether in governments, the private sector or aid agencies.

The struggle, therefore, although global in scale, is not purely geographical; it is between a richly endowed, subtle, evanescent, multipenetrative system of domination and commodification on one side and on the other, a variegated, sometimes confused set of social, industrial, cultural, ecological and gender alliances emerging from the ruins of communism's collapse and the failure of modernization schemes in the Third World. The diversity and scope of this struggle is therefore very complex and constantly shifting. Agencies within nation-states frequently clothe themselves in the language of liberation to disguise their fundamentally oppressive nature, while others may fight globalization with one limb while supporting it with another. Cultural workers' main task, therefore, is to unmask false images and map the shifting maze of options and strategies.

One major source of contradiction is fundamentalism, whether based on religion, ethnicity or culture. A very natural reaction to Northern cultural domination of indigenous Southern cultures is an almost knee-jerk recoil into essentialism—a desire to affirm one's individual and group identity by participating in an emotionally supportive meta-community that posits an ersatz ethnic, religious or cultural purity as an escape from the confusing morass of multinational, postmodern commercial images and sounds with which capitalism floods local communities. Fundamentalism and essentialism

nearly always have their roots in appeals to history or to a sense of community tradition arising from ancient practices. Very often these “histories” and “traditions” are actually myths, supporting elites with a stake in a specific cultural ideology.

One problem is that such fundamentalism may give rise to new inequalities with powers based on aggressive nationalist or religious influences or a cultural atavism that scapegoats such marginalized groups as women, teenagers, gays or those suffering from disabilities (including HIV infection). At certain historical periods, a tactical resort to essentialism might support a progressive resistance to global forces; but more often fundamentalism masks local oppression, undermining the cultural and institutional alliances necessary to combat Northern global hegemony.

In short, compared with the anti-colonial struggle of the 1950s or the anti-apartheid struggle of the 1970s and '80s, there are no easily identified barricades in the early 21st century behind which African cultural combatants can muster their weapons. The constantly shifting battle lines created by a massively resourceful, fluid, global communications industry require flexible, well-informed and vigilant local cultural workers, able to adapt their practices to new strategies. Also required is play making which is not restricted to the accessibly concrete and local, even though that would normally be the drama's starting point.

It is within this context of a search for a theater methodology capable of linking local problems to global issues that I began to put most of my energy into the E423 practical drama course I taught. E423 was rather similar to the third-year course I taught in Malawi, except that these students had even less experience of drama. They hoped that the course would provide them with basic skills in playwriting, direction, acting and design, so that they could become patrons of drama as teachers in Botswana's rapidly expanding secondary-school system. The course was built around the creation of a company-created production centering on controversial and usually topical issues in Botswana society.

Although the structure of E423 was very similar to the third-year course I taught in Malawi, I tried to base the Botswana group more on student-led research into the problems raised by the play. This research element gave the process some similarities to Theater for Development, but the play was created over a period of about 10 weeks rather than a few days. Even more importantly, NGOs did not give the topics to E423. Instead the students chose the topics of the plays, and then sought out appropriate NGOs or institutions for research and sometimes for cooperation in development campaigns. As the course attracted more women than men, there was a tendency to deal with women's issues and human rights. I shall summarize a few of these plays and explain one in a little more detail.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>For further information on some of the E423 plays, see David Kerr, “Drama as a Form of Action Research: The Experience of UBE423 at the University of Botswana,” *Southern African Theatre Journal*, 11/1 and 2, 1997, pp. 133–153; and Kerr, “Sexual Abuse and Gender Conflict: The Experience of a Play Creation Process at the University of Botswana,” *Journal of Dramatic Criticism*, 15/1, 2000, pp. 121–136.

In 1992–93 the students created a play eventually entitled “You Are Not Dead” with assistance from two women’s support groups, Women in Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) and Emang Basadi (Women Stand Up). The starting point was to look at the problem of women abandoned by their husbands or partners and receiving no maintenance for the upkeep of their children. This was an issue on which WLSA and Emang Basadi were vigorously lobbying the Botswana government, and also one faced personally by more than one woman enrolled in the course. Through research with the two women’s organizations and their own primary research, the students started pushing the issues beyond the immediate problem of broken marriages to broader questions of sexism in society in general and in Botswana’s legal system. The protagonist, Mmabontle, is abandoned with three children, and her sister, Daisy, with one child. When they take their men to court, the male-dominated legal system is unsympathetic, dismissing one case and providing a risible maintenance charge in the other. The title of the play is a line spoken by the ghost of Mmabontle’s grandmother during a possession ritual. In her possessed state, Mmabontle has a vision of a utopian future where the courts are dominated by women rather than by men.

E423 created another play about women’s issues in 1994–95, working in partnership with women’s rights NGOs, Emang Basadi and Metlaetsile. The executive director of the latter organization, human rights lawyer Unity Dow, gave considerable help to the students in researching the play and in the final script-writing. Even the title of the play—“I Love My Country But...”—was based on a bumper sticker adorning her car (I Love My Country But I Fear My Government). The project started when a young female student (who at the time had a relationship with an American) proposed the topic of intercultural marriages for the group’s play. When the students started their research, with Unity’s help, they became very concerned with a topic currently causing great controversy: Botswana’s Citizenship Act. This act discriminated against Botswana women who married foreigners, effectively making their children stateless. Unity, a victim of the law, took the Botswana government to the High Court and won her case, but still the government refused to change the law. “I Love My Country But...” took up this cause. The play used flashbacks into Botswana’s history to show some of the events that contributed to the cultural fundamentalism fueling the sexism at the basis of the law. It also drew upon transcripts of Unity Dow’s case as dialogue in the play. The total campaign, of which the play was a small part, was successful: a few months later, the government changed the discriminatory clauses in the Immigration Act.

In 1996–97, E423 took up another topical issue, the outbreak of cattle lung disease in Ngamiland, the home district of some of the students in the group. Although the students began by researching the disease and its social impact on affected farmers, they eventually realized that those issues could

only be understood by analyzing events in Botswana's past and linking the cattle problem to broader issues of land ownership, ethnic tensions, class exploitation, politics and global ecology. The story deals with three Ngami farmers who consult a San spirit medium after an outbreak of cattle lung disease and are induced to perform a trance dance. In their visions (hence the play's title, "Vision in a Dance") they see the roots of Botswana's land and cattle problems in the history of colonialism and neocolonialism, which has led to the gradual privatization of land in Botswana.

The 1998–99 production "Murdering the Soul" returned to more domestic issues as its starting point. The play's main topic was the sexual abuse of children, and the students' research efforts received considerable help from the university's Social Work Department and from Botswana's human rights NGO, Ditshwanelo. However, the main partner in the creation of the play was the children's rights NGO, Childline, especially its local executive director, Malecha Monthe, who helped ensure that the information about referral of abused children for psychiatric help was accurate. The play, based on real case histories, dealt with two 13-year-old girls, one sexually abused by her stepfather, the other by both her teacher and a pedophile tourist. The play links these case histories with broader issues of poverty, religion and machismo in Botswana society, the international tourism industry, prostitution and the psychosocial causes of pathological violence.

The play I want to deal with in a little more detail is the 1999–2000 production of "The Ghosts Return." That year there were two conflicting lobbies in the very large student group. One wanted to create a play that commemorated the 15th anniversary of the 1985 raid by apartheid commandos on various targets in Gaborone, killing 11 people, injuring others and destroying much property. Another group wanted a play on the topic of Botswana Television (BTV), which was to be launched within two months of E423's target date for the first performance. In the end we satisfied both lobbies by creating a play about a Botswana TV crew making a documentary on the 1985 raids.

Information gathering for the play had to be extensive. There was archival research into the raids, especially old newspaper accounts, fleshed out by interviews with witnesses and survivors. On the television side, some of the newly trained recruits to BTV, including one very enthusiastic graduate of the 1997–98 E423 course, gave considerable information about the structure, atmosphere, issues and working practices at the new station. This was supported by readings in the theory and practice of African media.

The main issue to emerge was that of media freedom. Botswana has a very good reputation for tolerance, with a lively independent press that is usually successful in resisting government attempts to muzzle it. Even the government-backed station Radio Botswana attempts to cover opposition politics

as well as those of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party. However, we found that the newly trained BTV technicians, journalists and artists were concerned that television's much stronger emotional appeal, owing to its use of visuals, might tempt government into trying to control it. The whole issue was made more complicated by the fact that white expatriates held the senior managerial and technical positions in the new station.

"The Ghosts Return" centers on the conflict between a young Motswana documentary producer, Refilwe, and her boss, Bernard. Refilwe is an idealistic woman who wants to make a documentary that not only shows the atrocity of the commando raids on Gaborone, but also draws attention to the danger of allowing the Botswana Defense Force (BDF) to use the excuse of the 1985 raid to expand its powers in the year 2000. Bernard, concerned for his own job, is worried that the topic is too sensitive. The following dialogue gives some feeling of the clash of interests:

*Bernard:* This documentary as it stands will cause havoc. How many times do I have to remind you that this is a government TV station?

*Refilwe:* Correction. It's a *public* TV station.

*Bernard:* A public TV station almost fully funded by government.

*Refilwe:* There's a difference.

*Bernard:* You cannot criticize the government and its departments on its own TV station. That's a simple fact of life.

*Refilwe:* Why not, if it's in the public interest?

*Bernard:* Because I run this TV station, not you.

At a later stage, in a more conciliatory mood, Bernard explains how the media in Europe and America are also controlled, not necessarily directly but by what he calls "an unwritten rule... an understanding between so-called gentlemen." This media system, governed by global corporations, is inherently racist because it values Western lives far more than African lives. As he puts it to Refilwe, "The political and commercial lobbies, the advertisers, the invisible strings. This is the new imperialism. Indirectly the Turners and Murdochs will tell you what to think. At least your government claims to have the interests of the Botswana people at heart. Do you think private enterprise has any interests? It's just the bottom line, and don't rock the boat for them."

The documentary made by Refilwe raises some of the issues of racism, neo-colonialism, struggle and commitment that she faces in her conflict with Bernard. Some of the victims, like the young Christian Batswana women, Eugenia and Gladys in the play, had no interest in politics and were killed by the South African commandos in error. Others were exiled members of the African National Congress, though not necessarily serving any military function. The most famous of these was Thami Mnyele, a renowned artist;



the commandos not only killed him, but also shot round after round of bullets into his paintings and posters.

While Refilwe is trying to make up her mind whether to resist Bernard or not, the ghosts of Eugenia and Thami appear on the studio monitor to haunt her. Eugenia urges submission to Bernard, while Thami urges continued resistance, saying that it is a continuation of his own struggle. At the end of the play the ghosts present two endings for the audience to choose: Eugenia's ending, in which Refilwe hands over the master tape of the contentious documentary to Bernard; and Thami's ending, in which Refilwe organizes a demonstration of workers against Bernard.

"The Ghosts Return" was performed several times in Gaborone, including a major performance at the Maitisong Festival. It received considerable attention in newspaper articles and gave rise to some public debate about the new TV station, which sent a camera crew to film one performance and interviewed members of the cast about the issues. The production was very timely in that it coincided with major debates about the BDF and about media freedom. A year later, an expatriate senior news editor whose opinions were obviously closer to Refilwe's than to Bernard's resigned because of what he perceived as government interference into BTV's news and documentary practices. At about the same time, two newspapers, *The Guardian* and the *Midweek Sun*, were in legal conflict with the government over attempts to muzzle their criticism of BDF.

I have described "The Ghosts Return" in detail because it well illustrates some of the qualities of a committed theater which I was able to explore in most of the E423 plays, but found missing in my Theater for Development work. The E423 plays were able to show how current problems facing society have deep historical roots that are connected to wider social and political forces affecting the region, the continent and even the whole world. Of course, they were not able to address immediately accessible problems; no cement bags or condoms were distributed at the end of performances. Instead, the plays challenged audiences on major issues facing the nation of Botswana and allowed them to make links with progressive institutions that were struggling to solve those problems.

Since E423 was university-based, I may have given the impression that only well-educated theater groups are capable of this type of analytical, research-based theater. That is certainly not my contention. University groups have the advantage of access to research channels, but they have the disadvantage of tight academic calendars. Several institutions (Emang Basadi with "I Love My Country But..." and Childline with "Murdering the Soul") wanted E423 to

travel around the country with the plays as part of specific campaigns concerning women's and children's rights. The university group could not fulfill these requests, owing to their commitments to exams and other academic programs. I am quite convinced it is possible for theater groups which are not based at an educational institution—and the bulk of whose members may not be well-educated—to create the kind of theater I am advocating. Some southern African groups such as the Sibikwa Players in South Africa and Zambuko/Izibuko in Zimbabwe have already achieved it.

I may have also given the impression that I am opposed to Theater for Development and to NGO promotion of that theater mode. This too is not true. NGO's promotion of theater can be extremely useful as a communication tool. Most NGOs are committed to progressive change; their problem is that the constraints of project-oriented funding policies, their lack of long-term planning and the high turnover of field officers make it difficult for them to address the fundamental problems that lie beneath the obvious obstacles to development. My main concern is that in southern Africa at present, NGO-funded Theater for Development has become so dominant as a form of patronage for small-scale, resource-poor theater troupes that it is difficult for artists to explore the full range of issues facing Africa, particularly those with roots in the past or those which cast light on global issues.

The solution is for African theater workers to build strong local institutions and networks that reflect indigenous concerns, rather than agendas chosen for them by NGOs or government agencies. One model for such a southern African institution is Amakhosi, a theater group from Zimbabwe. Through a shrewd mixture of NGO funding and private enterprise, it has built its own cultural center in Makokoba, a high-density location in Bulawayo, where it attracts considerable support from local residents. Likewise, the Southern African Theatre Initiative (SATI), operating from the Market Theatre Laboratory in Johannesburg, South Africa, may provide the basis for regional networking. If such institutions could be developed, it might be possible to negotiate with funding agencies from a position of greater strength, so that drama can be created that genuinely reflects local interests in the struggle to understand the rapid transformations society faces from globalization. It might also be possible to begin the process of making the grassroots linkages and alliances necessary to combat globalization's worst excesses. These alternative channels of communication would be able to contribute to the growing counter-globalization movement, which uses global media not to destroy but to sustain and strengthen local cultures.