The Nation.

Within South Africa, Mapfumo has no counterpart. Through a deliberate muddling of the lines between black pride and compliance with apartheid, through a propaganda machine so deft it makes Rhodesia’s seem crude by comparison, South Africa has so confused the most basic issues of identity that, with liberation a long way off, pop artists are damned whichever way they turn. For now, at least, the choices seem to be submission, prison or exile.

Township Theater

ROB NIXON

Woza Afrika!: A Festival of South African Theater

By anybody’s standards, the participants in this fall’s Woza Afrika! festival at Lincoln Center have had to survive the most punishing of theatrical circumstances. Of the playwrights, Percy Mtwa (Bhopal) has been detained for thirty days in the Transkei Bantustan; Matsemela Manaka (Children of Asazi) and Maishe Maponya (Gangsters) have had their work banned; and, when vigilantes from Gatsha Buthelezi’s Inkatha movement stormed a performance of Asinamali! seeking the blood of the absent playwright, Mbongeni Ngema, they murdered the show’s promoter in his stead. Moreover, one member of the original cast of Asinamali! was sentenced to eight years in prison for his role in the Lamontville rent strike, the very strike which touched off the play itself.

The daily conditions facing black directors, playwrights and actors in South Africa compound the effects of such naked state violence. There is still not one permanent theater or professional theater company in Soweto or in any of the other townships. The atmosphere at performances is often tense because of the presence of informers. State support has been denied to black directors who, in any case, regard such funding as compromising. Black township theater is far worse off than the multiracial theater at venues such as the Market Theatre, which, situated in the heart of Johannesburg, can tap a wealthier audience. While a small number of blacks may travel the prohibitive distance to the Market over weekends, it is rare for whites to attend theater in the townships. It is not so surprising then that, according to Maponya, talented but destitute actors have on occasion been lured away from amateur township productions by the state-run South African Broadcasting Corporation, the long arm of apartheid propaganda.

All the festival’s plays have had runs at the Market, which has helped to sustain them financially, but most of them were devised specifically for the townships, where a broad renaissance in the performing arts has been developing since the late 1970s. In addition to community and trade-union theater, a te­nacious tradition of poetic performance has arisen at mass funerals and rallies. The resistance movement nourishes those cultural forms, which often serve as political catalysts. For that reason, popular performances are particularly threatening to the regime; they can reach where printed material cannot: they require neither literacy nor the money to buy books.

In the townships, it is a short step from the street to the stage and back. The enacted violence, rage, fear and defiance reflect the experience of the communities from which the theater has emerged. In Manaka’s words, “Black theater . . . should not be imported from town, but must be produced and found where black people live. The squatters, slums and ghettos should be its stage. Mampara bricks, corrugated zinc, the mud and stench in the streets should be its costume.”

Manaka raises, implicitly, the central dilemma for participants in the Woza Afrika! festival. What happens to the plays when they are exported to the Lincoln Center’s Mitzi E. Newhouse Thea­
ter? There are two dimensions to this dilemma: funding and staging conditions. The financing of the festival has been criticized by those who fear cultural co-optation by companies eager to shore up influence in the arts, education and the unions. Organizations rendered financially vulnerable by apartheid are seeking to benefit from this funding yet simultaneously to preserve their integrity. Accepting funds often requires treading the fine line between much needed support and the kind of manipulative intervention that could ultimately jeopardize organizational autonomy.

The festival's funding dilemma is more easily stated than resolved, particularly as the plays have served the valuable function of giving Americans a wider perspective on South Africa's culture of resistance. For, in their political content, tradition of song and movement and relationship to their communities, they are quite different from the more self-consciously metropolitan theater of Athol Fugard, which, until now, has largely monopolized New York and London theatergoers' image of South African drama.

Theater audiences, no less than plays themselves, have their own traditions. The shift to Lincoln Center quite naturally had the effect of transforming the original relationship between these plays and their audiences. For theater that acknowledges a debt to California's El Teatro Campesino and Jerzy Grotowski's poor theater, for the fierce directness of plays like *Gangsters* and *Bophal*, which assume the participation of township audiences, the plush ambience and emotional restraint of Lincoln Center seemed inappropriate. It is a pity—for both the festival's and the New York community's sake—that an alternative location wasn't arranged. I did see *Asinamali!* at the Roger Furman Theater in Harlem last year, where its power was intensified by a more intimate atmosphere and a more responsive audience.

The awkwardness of the festival's venue was, if anything, exceeded by the incongruous responses of most of the New York critics. The political tone of the plays insured that sooner or later someone would ask, "But is it Art?" "Bophal, Gangsters, Children of Asazi and on occasion even *Asinamali!* were variously described as "agitprop," "melodrama," "insufficiently "universal," and called to task for failing "to illuminate the human condition." In an article dripping with romanticism, *The New Yorker*...
**SOWETO**

**THE FRUIT OF FEAR**

**PETER MAGUBANE**

*Foreword by Desmond Tutu*

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In 1976, Bishop Desmond Tutu warned the South African government that black people were growing increasingly restive under the oppressive yoke of apartheid and that he feared an eruption of violence if some minimum conditions were not met. Tutu's warnings were ignored, and on June 16, 1976 school children in the sprawling township of Soweto took to the streets in protest. They were met with brute force—tear gas and bullets. Approximately 700 people were killed and hundreds more were wounded in unrest which soon spread to the rest of the country. There has been no real peace or stability in South Africa since that day.

In this pictorial essay, Peter Magubane relates the events surrounding June 16 through his camera lens, giving a poignant eyewitness account in tribute to the fallen, and commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Soweto uprising.

*York Times*'s William H. Honan lectured the playwrights on the need to delve “into the unfathomable mysteries of the human soul”; then, disclosing his political colors, he added that “in a revolutionary society, true art comes to be regarded as conservative, if not reactionary.” And so the wild goose of pure Art was chased clear across the theater pages of *The Times, The Village Voice* and *The New York Times*.

The *Newsweek* piece on the festival struck me as symptomatic of the difficulties black South African playwrights have in getting their work understood. The article was attentive to remarks by Maponya, Manaka and festival executive director, Duma Ndlovu, on the need to escape from under the shadow of Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and Athol Fugard, who have become South Africa's dominant literary voices of dissent here. That monopoly, the black playwrights were quoted as saying, is undeserved. Yet *Newsweek* chose to drape those remarks with the headline: “Cry the Beloved Country.” The main coverage in *The Times* was entitled “South African Dramas Echo Cries of the Beloved Country.” Back to Alan Paton.

Instead of acknowledging that what is powerful in one context may be less so in another and instead of trying to understand the origins and ambitions of this theater, most reviewers treated the plays as if they had come to New York in search of artistic certification. Writing on *Children of Asazi* and *Gangsters in the Voice*, Gordon Rogoff made this extraordinary remark: “It’s frustrating and infuriating that these plays are more threatening to the hideous Botha than flies to wanton boys.” Does one detect here not only bewilderment and rage but also a hint of envy? In its desire to escape from under the shadow of the episodic narrative of Robert Patrick’s *Kennedy’s Children* spring to mind. So, too, with the multimedia effects, particularly the use of newsreel footage to help bridge the gap between South Africa and the U.S. experience of South Africa.

Maponya's *Gangsters* can best be viewed as reflexive commentary on the power of South Africa's popular-opposition culture. The central figure, the poet Masechaba, is detained, persecuted, and ultimately murdered by a white police officer and his black quisling, primarily because of her thundering poetic performances at one of the sacred sites of resistance, Regina Mundi. Although the published version of *Gangsters* calls for a male lead, Maponya rescripted the role for a woman. Nomathemba Nomvume Mdini brought her considerable energy to the part of the uninhibited, resilient captive poet. Moreover, by that point in the festival—after the solidly male productions of *Asinamali* and *Bophal*—the lack of any female stage presence was becoming a matter for criticism. According to Maponya, township plays sometimes have to be rescripted for men as there are so many obstacles in the way of women actors. The working-class nature of this theater makes evenings crucial for rehearsal—the very time when women return home to their “second job.” The difficulties for women are also compounded by their husbands' reluctance to countenance their independent activities.

Although the plays are all marked by the binding laughter of satire and mimicry, *Asinamali* is especially effective at the kind of humor that blends easily into anger. Much of the wit and rage in *Asinamali* derives from the migrant workers' resourcefulness in their quest for permits in a society choked by a racist bureaucracy. At one point the mechanized society is figured forth by a five-man synchronized mime of an entire industrial complex, complete with mechanical hissing, whirs, rotations and grindings; at the other end of the emotional spectrum is the closing roll call of “wasted people,” a list that includes Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Steve Biko, Albert Luthuli and Bram Fischer.

If there is one word that speaks the
mood of the entire festival, it is Bopha!, the punning title of Mtwa's play. The word means both "arrest" and "unite" or "strap together." It for this theater stages not only the binding of wrists with handcuffs but the binding of people through collective acts of resistance. Mtwa portrays the tension between the two senses of bopha most lucidly in a scene where a spineless black policeman tries to dissuade his failed son from his activism. If he desists, the father will arrange his release. With a carefully paced gesture that is determined but not facile, the youth tearfully lowers his head, shakes it and pushes a clenched fist through the air. In that simple, iconic moment, Mtwa delivers a reminder—echoes of Mandela here—that release is not to be confused with liberation.

BOOK NOTES.

What follows is a selection from the vast number of books recently published on South Africa.

THE STRUGGLE FOR SOUTH AFRICA: A Reference Guide to Movements, Organizations and Institutions. By Rob Davies, Dan O'Meara and Sipho Dlamini. Zed Books (distributed by Biblio Distribution Center, 81 Adams Drive, Totowa, NJ 07512). Two volumes. 440 pp. $29.50 per volume. Paper $10.75 per volume. An authoritative reference guide, Struggle provides a historical overview of apartheid, including discussions of the basic laws, political organizations and military structures, followed by detailed descriptions of antiapartheid groups and coalitions, including the unions, community groups and political parties. The listing does not claim to be exhaustive, and yet it describes more than 200 organizations. The sheer number of opposition groups attests to the resilience of the struggle.