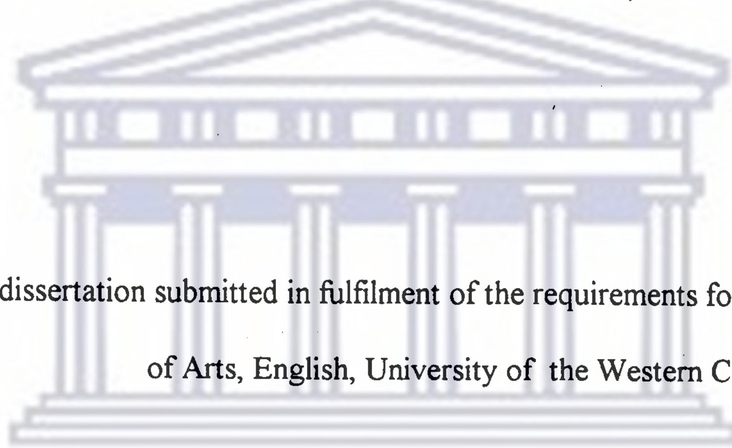
CHANGING RAINS, CHANGING VOICES:

Representations of Black Women Over Five Decades of South African Theatre (1950 - 1996)



(Mini-dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, English, University of the Western Cape)

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ABSTRACT

The general aim of this research paper is to investigate/interrogate, through analyses of four popular musicals, images of ideal womanhood put forward by South African popular theatre at various historical moments. I argue that these images have shifted from decade to decade (1950 - 1996), revealing the constructed and therefore changeable nature of unequal gender roles within society.

My research will consist of textual and contextual analyses of the representation of women in the following popular musicals: *King Kong* (1959), *Too Late* (1975), *Sarafina!* (1987), and *Marabi* (1981/1995). The ideas of womanhood posited by the play texts will be examined vis-à-vis their "struggle narratives" (whose goal is liberation from racial and economic oppression).

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Acknowledgements

I declare that the following dissertation: *Changing Rains, Changing Voices: Representations of Black Women Over Five Decades of South African Theatre*, is my own work and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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INTRODUCTION

This mini-dissertation will focus on four popular musicals which to a lesser or greater degree sought to resist and negotiate[1] the effects of apartheid hegemony. More specifically, the ideas of womanhood posited by the play texts will be interrogated *vis-a-vis* their "struggle narratives", whose primary goal is liberation from racial and economic oppression.

The four popular musicals that will be analysed are: Harry Bloom's ***King Kong*** (1959); Gibson Kente's ***Too Late*** (1975); Mbongeni Ngema's ***Sarafina!*** (1987); and Malcolm Purkey's ***Marabi*** (1981/1995). These four musicals represent important theatrical and political moments in the history of South Africa. Hence, their success has often been measured in terms of how far they went in addressing race and class oppression. However, as the philosophy of apartheid was fundamentally one of "racial capitalism" (Tomaselli et al., 1988), and as capitalism also has its base rooted in the oppression of women, "racial capitalism" cannot be sufficiently critiqued without unmasking the patriarchal discourses embedded in it.

The tendency in the above-mentioned musicals has been to address (with varying success) one form of oppression (apartheid), whilst seemingly turning a blind eye to another (patriarchy). What this study will attempt to show is that these forms of oppression reinforce and contradict each other. Therefore, one form of oppression cannot be successfully eradicated whilst other forms exist.

[1] The phrase "resist and negotiate" is used deliberately as texts rarely do one or the other. A text may negotiate oppression on one level and resist it on another.

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More especially in the case of apartheid, capitalism and patriarchy, these three systems of domination are integral to the marginalisation of the majority of black peoples in South Africa. Hence, the foundation of oppression cannot be thoroughly dismantled without acknowledging and dealing with the complex dialectic between gender, race and class.

Popular Theatre

A clue as to why a seemingly progressive theatrical form such as popular theatre turned a blind eye to apartheid's and society's discrimination against women lies firstly within the contested terrain of what constitutes popular theatre, and secondly within the histories of South Africa's liberation movements in relation to women's rights.

Debates about what constitutes popular theatre in South Africa centre mainly on questions on the functions (or the uses) of popular theatre. Theorists on the subject agree that theatre in general, and popular theatre in particular, does play a role in society; and that it is distinct from "high" or elitist culture (or a culture that serves the interests of a few privileged members of a society). What that role is, and how it is or should be achieved, varies according to each theorist's ideological leanings. One end of the spectrum emphasises the material, transformative role that popular theatre does and should play. Recognising the material basis of social struggle as manifested in and affected by cultural struggle, theorists at this end of the spectrum advocate that popular theatre should appeal to the materially disadvantaged classes.

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That is, it should speak to them through ways that they can relate to; and these ways vary from context to context. Popular culture theorists Robert Kavanagh (1985), Ian Steadman (1990, 1992), Ari Sitas (1986) and David Kerr (1995) emphasise the role that theatre should play in bringing about the transformation of structures that affect the access to economic empowerment of the majority non-privileged classes (or the preferred Gramscian term "subaltern classes"). This view of popular theatre implies a mass popular audience. However, as will be demonstrated in the analyses of the four popular musicals, practical experience problematises the notion of a majority popular audience.

David Coplan (1985) and Martin Orkin (1992) define popular theatre more in terms of its role in mediating and interpreting black urban cultural experience, and illuminating the struggle for cultural autonomy. They see popular theatre's transformative role as affecting individual consciousness; they, however, doubt its capacity to effect change on a wider political or economic level.

In theorising about popular theatre and its role within subaltern classes, these theorists do not rigorously explore the specific role within popular theatre of women as members of the subaltern classes. Theories on popular theatre will inform this paper's exploration of the forces influencing the changing social roles of women through five decades (1950 - 1995) as reflected through and affected by popular theatre.

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For the purposes of this paper, a view of popular theatre encompassing the two above-mentioned theoretical positions is most useful. Also, I will take my cue from Kerr (1995: x) in extending the definition to include what is distinguished as "people's" or sometimes "populist" theatre, that is, theatre that is consumed by non-privileged classes but serves to domesticate them into accepting or not realising their disempowered status (it may be produced by members of elite or non-elite classes). The definition of popular theatre will be "extended" to include "populist" and "people's" theatre because the four plays texts that will be analysed have, to varying degrees, popular and populist elements. That is, on some levels the plays are popular (and by implication progressive), and on other levels they are populist (masking the structures that oppress members of non-privileged classes). A view of popular theatre that is empowering and transformative will be outlined and put forward as part of the general conclusion.

Women's Empowerment

As already stated, this paper will interrogate the images of ideal womanhood put forward by South African popular theatre at various historical moments. It will be argued that these images were shaped by the discourses of struggle as outlined by South Africa's liberation movements. More specifically, the silencing or masking of women's voices within the liberation movements as reflected and manifested culturally through the masking of women's voices in the narratives of liberation in South African popular theatre will be interrogated.

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Rudo Gaidzanwa's analysis (1992) of the history of women's struggles in South Africa reveals that women's movements within black nationalist politics have occupied an uneasy, censored and somewhat secondary role. Within the major liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC), women were not allowed full party membership until the forties. The ANC was initially an organisation for middle-class black men whose primary purpose was negotiating black middle-class male suffrage.

Even after joining the ANC as full members and later forming the ANC Women's League, women activists were expected to emphasise their domestic roles as mothers and approach the traditionally male public field of politics as mothers fighting for the rights of their children. Women were not expected to play a major role as individuals fighting for the equality of all oppressed peoples. Also, issues of gender oppression were not considered pertinent within the organisation. Gaidzanwa explains the marginal position of black women in nationalist politics as follows:

> The participation of most black women in politics in South Africa has taken place in the context of predominantly black organisations such as the ANC, the Pan-Africanist Congress, the Communist Party of South Africa and the Black Consciousness and other movements allied to it. Most of the activities of the ANC dating from 1912 tended to be male-dominated without much theorisation or questioning of the roles that men and women played in households or the colonial economy. This is evidenced by the fact that the class-based enfranchisement of black men of property and the exclusion of black and white women from the franchise were not viewed as problematic by the ANC until the forties when the ANC advocated for universal adult suffrage (Gaidzanwa, 1992: 101).

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Another reason for black women's marginal involvement in politics prior to the fifties is that there were not many women (compared to the numbers of black men) in the cities. I will come back to this point in Chapter One when discussing urbanisation, and the role and portrayal of women during the development of popular theatre. However, women were politically active despite their marginal position in the ANC and nationalist politics.

During the nineteen-fifties, many women around South Africa embarked on peaceful marches to protest against the government extending pass laws to women as a means of keeping them out of the cities. These historic anti-pass women's marches have come to symbolise South African women's activism against inequality in Scuth Africa. It was during the time of the anti-pass marches that an umbrella body, the Women's Federation, was formed to draft a Women's Charter, which emphasised the equal participation of men and women in private and public spheres (Gaidzanwa: 103).

The aims of the Women's Charter have influenced the continued efforts of present-day activists in fighting for a gender-sensitive constitution and state machinery. Due to continued pressure from women's groups, South Africa's present ANC-led, democratically elected government has had to address directly issues of the empowerment of women. Even before being elected into power, the ANC led the way in advocating women's rights by issuing a statement on 2 May 1990 pledging commitment to the implementation of women's rights (Bazilli, 1990: 3).

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However, black women activist's struggles against patriarchy have not been without contradictions and tensions. These tensions have manifested themselves in the reluctance of most black women activists to be associated with the feminist movement. Because feminism originated and developed primarily in western countries, black women have found it difficult to separate feminism from its association with white domination. Despite feminism's commitment to fighting for women's empowerment, the movement is viewed by many South African black men and women as part of the western culture that they have for centuries been struggling to liberate themselves from. As in South Africa, women from elsewhere within the black Diaspora have also associated the feminist movement with western culture. Black peoples of the Diaspora have concentrated their energies on fighting the racial and economic aspects of colonial and neo-colonial oppression. The patriarchal aspect of black people's oppression has for the most part not been directly or adequately addressed. This has raised debates about whether or not race and class oppression should be prioritised over gender oppression.

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Another reason that black women hesitate to associate themselves with feminism is that they view western feminism's primary objective as catering for the needs of western women.

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Chandra Mohanty (1984) details the difficulties that black women experience within western feminism in her article "Under Western Eyes". She interrogates a prevalent attitude in western feminist scholarship whereby the struggles of black women against patriarchy are judged, patronised and othered through "western eyes"/methodologies. Mohanty argues that third world women are treated as a homogenous, inferior and more oppressed group by western feminists:

> ...western feminist discourse, by assuming women as a coherent, already constituted group which is placed in kinship, legal and other structures, defines third world women as subjects outside of social relations, instead of looking at the way women are constituted as women through these structures. Legal, economic, religious and familial structures are treated as phenomenon to be judged by western standards. It is here that ethnocentric universality comes into play. When these structures are defined as "underdeveloped", or "developing" and women are placed within these structures, an implicit image of the "average third-world women" category is produced. (Mohanty, 1988: 80).

Thus, black women have felt a need to distance themselves from the historically western structures of feminism and to redefine women's struggles for non-domination to suite their individual and collective contexts. Some black women have labelled themselves black feminists and others womanists[2] in order to foreground their subjectivities as constituted through particular histories.

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[2] Alice Walker coined the term "womanism" as an attempt to re-define black women's activism against patriarchal oppression. See Walker (1983) In Search of Our Mother's Gardens.

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In South Africa black women activist's ambivalence towards feminism's western roots is heightened by their liberation movements' disregard (and sometimes hostility) towards addressing gender oppression. As a result they are still generally wary of defining themselves in terms that are associated with the feminist movement. They prefer to describe their actions of struggling for the liberation of women in particular and humankind in general, rather than labelling themselves as feminist. However, as bell hooks (1990) states, rather than rejecting the term “feminism” because of its association with western culture, black women “should re-claim the term and re-work it so that it speaks directly to our lives.”

As already mentioned, the precarious position of women within black nationalist politics has been reflected in the roles and portrayals of black women in popular theatre; it has also, in part, produced or affected these portrayals. In the first chapter, I will attempt to outline the development of South African popular theatre; emphasising the political role of urbanisation and, through an analysis of *King Kong*, analyse the construction of the ideal woman of fifties popular culture - the "sex goddess". In Chapter Two, the creation of an ideal "earth mother" against a background of the Black Consciousness movement will be interrogated through an analysis of Kente's *Too Late*. In Chapter Three, Ngema's *Sarafina!* merges the image of woman as “sex goddess” and the “earth mother” to construct the “activist” role of woman as "pretty mama". Purkey's *Marabi* (set in the nineteen thirties) reflects the uncertainty of change in a post-election democratic South Africa. Rather than prescribe a particular ideal of womanhood, *Marabi* questions women’s prescribed roles in society.

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Raymond Williams's (1980) model of cultural change will inform the afore-mentioned analysis of historical shifts in popular theatre's representations of black women. Through his conceptualisation of emergent, dominant and residual strains of culture, Williams demonstrates the complex, interconnected nature of cultural shifts. Hence, although a degree of linearity may be suggested through this study's decade to decade causal analysis of cultural representations, Williams' model will problematise[3] any uncomplicated, linear descriptions or explanations of cultural struggle.

My study will involve three levels of analysis. The first level will be a contextual (historical/political) analysis of the play texts. Historical accounts of South African theatre such as David Coplan's *In Township Tonight!* (1985), and Robert Kavanagh's *Theatre and Cultural Struggle* (1985) will assist in placing each text within a specific historical moment. The history of women's struggles within the liberation movements will also provide a useful backdrop to the attitudes of men and women to ideas of "ideal womanhood", demonstrating how images of "ideal womanhood" and manhood have shifted from decade to decade, revealing the constructed and shifting nature of gender roles within society. It is within these shifts that the possibilities of transforming societies lie. The second level of analysis will involve situating the history of struggle narratives located in popular theatre within the debate on gender in the black Diaspora. The third level of analysis will consist of textual analyses of

[3] Williams's model will be explained in Chapter Two in order to demonstrate the complex transformation of the emergent popular theatre discourse loosely begun by *King Kong*. Subsequent analyses of how this emergent discourse develops are informed by Williams' model rather than explicitly shaped by it.

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the representations of women in the four popular play texts. The ways in which the voices (and silences) in the play texts "speak" will be read as testimony to the changing and changeable power relations between men and women.

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CHAPTER I

KING KONG

"WOMEN SHOULD BE DROWNED, ALL BE DROWNED"

Introduction

The fifties hit musical, *King Kong*, stands out in South African theatre history as amongst the first few attempts at creating local theatre that is popular in content as well as appeal. Billed as "The African Jazz Opera", *King Kong* was an extraordinarily big and commercially successful production which consolidated the major elements of what was to become in the seventies and eighties a popular, and often protest, tradition. Through its American musical style, *King Kong* utilised dance and music as popular mediums to appeal to a wide, mostly English audience. Its support by mostly a minority sector of the South African population, however, problematises the notion of a popular theatre that addresses majority sectors of populations.

At the time of its production *King Kong* was considered progressive because it was a collaboration between black actors and musicians and white writers, producers, choreographers and directors at a time when South Africa's nationalist Afrikaner government was determined to implement its policy of separate development. This chapter will focus on the role of urbanisation in the development of popular theatre, particularly the development of black women from being the producers or organisers of popular entertainment during the early part of the twentieth century to being predominantly performers during the fifties (Rorich, 1989: 88). The creation of the fifties icon of ideal black womanhood will be explored through a close look at characterisation in *King Kong*.

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The Emergence of a New Popular Tradition

It is difficult to trace a black popular theatre tradition prior to the creation of *King Kong*. However, aspects which later contributed to the popular tradition can be traced to earlier indigenous forms of African theatre. Some of the indigenous theatre traditions which contributed to the forming of a popular theatre include centuries-old Southern African story telling and praise forms of theatre - *izintsomi* and *umlinganiso* (Kavanagh, 1985: 44). These traditions heavily influenced the mission school black/white collaborations that characterised South African theatre during the early and mid twentieth century. It is these mission school collaborations which are reported to have influenced the first recorded troupe of popular theatre.

Esau Mthethwa and his Lucky Stars from Natal started performing improvised satires about Zulu traditional life in 1929 and continued performing until their troupe disintegrated in the 1930s (Kavanagh, 1985: 45). Their satirical accounts employed a lot of music and dance, and in addition to utilising western-type dramatic interaction, developed the vaudeville township tradition whereby musicians who performed at weddings and other social gatherings performed short satirical skits during breaks in musical performances. Through vaudeville, performers poked fun at township "types" such as "the naive immigrant, the tsotsi (young criminal), the prostitute and the cruel policeman" (Kerr, 1995: 215). This set of stereotypes was developed and expanded by subsequent popular theatre practitioners.

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Another important contribution to the development of popular theatre was the *marabi* culture which developed in the inner city slums during the rapid industrialisation of South African cities at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the end of the nineteenth century the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand by white settlers resulted in large-scale industrial development and a need for cheap labour. To satisfy the need for cheap labour, a series of laws were passed to force black males living in rural areas to earn a living in the developing cities (Rorich,1989: 81). The Land Act of 1913, was one of the more far reaching and effective laws implemented to force black males into working for wages in the cities. Many black land owners were required to pay land taxes or forfeit their land; in one way or another, they ended up forced to work for wages in the cities. However, black men were not meant to stay permanently in the cities; the system was designed in such a way that they would come to the cities to provide labour and then return to the reserves. Thus, laws were put into place to monitor the presence of black men in the cities, the pass system was implemented for the specific purpose of ensuring that black men came to the cities only to work. If their passes did not indicate that they were working, they were endorsed out of the cities to a life of uncertainty in the rural areas.

To ensure that black men did not bring their families to the cities or even start new ones there, the government did not provide formal housing for the new urban labour force. However, many wives followed their husbands to the cities and families were re-established in the cities; and new families were formed through city marriages. Single women also gravitated towards the cities in search of work and/or husbands (Rorich, 1989: 81). The government

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tried to counter the increase of women in the cities by extending the pass to them as well, but it was not until Malan's nationalists came into power in 1948 that pass laws were effectively applied to black women. As the urban black population was steadily increasing, accommodation became a problem, resulting in the mushrooming of slumyards close to the urban industrial centre (Rorich, 1989: 82).

It is in the slumyards that *marabi* culture mushroomed. The word *marabi* is usually associated with a particular type of popular music (mainly a mixture of mbaqanga and American ragtime). However, *marabi* was the whole culture of the inner city slumyards: the resistance to forced removals, the music, the shebeens and generally the survival of working-class slum dwellers (Rorich, 1989: 83). Marabi greatly influenced the development of popular theatre through its music and working-class aesthetic. Marabi culture is described in the Market Theatre programme of the play *Marabi* as follows:

> *Marabi* is the general name given to the culture that grew up in the slumyards. This culture provided people with many ways to defend themselves against the harsh conditions that were imposed on them. *Marabi* is also the name given to the music that developed in the yards at the time. Today it is still used by black South African musicians, and there are many who say it is the national music of this country
> (Junction Avenue Theatre/Market Theatre, 1995).

Rorich states that black women ran the shebeens which were the heart of marabi culture. *Marabi* musicians played at shebeens in order to attract business; it was during such performances that the vaudeville township tradition developed. *Marabi* musicians performed "sketches" or vaudeville during breaks to entertain shebeen patrons (Kerr, 1995: 215).

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As shebeen queens, black women were the main organisers of popular entertainment and culture in the slumyards. They could not sell their labour to whites in town as their presence in the cities was often illegal, hence running shebeens in the slumyards was the more lucrative and available form of income for black women. Rorich suggests the rather idealised reason that black women had "natural nurturing and organisational instincts" which came to the fore in "situations of instability and crisis" (83). The pivotal position held by black women in the production of *marabi* culture is later transformed into that of performer in popular culture (particularly popular theatre).

DRUM Magazine: The Birth of the Sex Siren in Popular Culture

By 1959 when *King Kong* was being made, the number of black women who were becoming prominent in the entertainment industry was increasing. Black women had shifted from their organisational role in marabi culture to being successful performers in the fifties. This development was in part influenced by the advent of radio and big screen movies in South Africa and the consequent exposure to Hollywood's prominent black female superstars such as Billie Holliday, Bessie Smith, Ella Fitsgerald, and Aretha Franklin (Rorich, 1989: 92). Among the more memorable icons of the fifties are the Hollywood-type glamorous *DRUM* girls, some of whom were well known singers and entertainers (Dorothy Masuka, Dolly Rathebe, Thoko Thomo).

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These fifties superstars were closely modelled along the lines of the American stars[4].

DRUM magazine was famous and successful in the fifties for recording black urban culture; but it was even more famous for its use of sexy "DRUM Girls" on the magazines' covers and in feature articles. In the vein of the Hollywood "screen goddesses", DRUM magazine adorned its covers with beautiful black women in a variety of seductive poses. The image projected was that the power of a woman lies in her sex appeal. This type of objectification gave women certain kinds of power, but justified their treatment as dangerous possessions to be monitored closely.

In *King Kong* the representation of women is in keeping with the "DRUM Girls" personae in DRUM magazine. The women are portrayed as having lethal sexual power over the men. This power lies in the women's bodies, which they use sexually to bring about "the fall of man". Kavanagh argues that the failure of *King Kong* is that it did not effectively identify or address black peoples' enemy (apartheid and its mechanisms); it blamed their impoverishment on the gangs (99). A point Kavanagh does not mention is that the play *King Kong* also blames the downfall of the black community on its women - particularly women like the character Joyce (King Kong's girlfriend in the play), who use their bodies (like the DRUM Girls) to control and destroy the men and hence the community. Kavanagh's analysis of the role of gender divisions in *King Kong*'s political message only goes as far as mentioning that

[4]Black women admired the supposed sophistication of black American stars as they seemed to represent progress and an urban consciousness. Another reason why black South African women aspired to American "modernity" was because they wanted to defy apartheid's re-tribalisation policies. See Coplan (1985).

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the roles accorded to men and women in the play are unequal. He aptly points out the passive and active roles accorded women and men respectively by stating that "there is the contrast between King Kong's energy and Pauline's sigh" (1985: 105).However Kavanagh's class-based analysis of oppression is not wide enough to accommodate inter-related systems of domination.

Dorothy Drivers' unpublished collection of DRUM articles, *The Other Drum*, reveals a preoccupation among DRUM writers with describing and commenting on what they perceived to be the two types of women available to men. There was, on the one hand, the lethal, seductive, beautiful, powerful and dangerous bad woman (in many cases this woman was a beauty queen or involved in show business/performance, she cheated on her lovers and was not able to run a home). And then there was the maternal housewife, who was nurturer of the man (and therefore the nation), whose vice was mostly nagging, and being somewhat pathetic and dependent. There were women who were described as having characteristics of both types of women, but mostly women were described as being either one or the other. To describe the powerful, glamorous "bad woman" there were articles and stories such as: "The Faithless Woman" (April 1951); "The Trouble with Women!" (May 1952); "Heart Breaks: Can I Trust Her?" (February 1953); "This Modern AFRICAN Miss" (March 1958); and "Girl About Town" (June 1959). The housewife was chronicled in articles such as: "It's a Farce! Mr Drum tackles housewives" (October 1956); "And She's Only a Housewife - If You Call It Only" (September 1958). The above titles express a desire to fix black women in the two roles of maternal housewife or seductive glamour girl.

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However, another trend in DRUMS' articles about women reveals the cause of the underlying angst which produced the attempt to fix women in controllable, man-made dichotomous images. The following articles in DRUM reveal that women were politically active in the fifties and they were questioning their inferior position *vis-a-vis* men: "Should Women have Equal Rights with Men? DRUM Parliament: The Voice of the People" (May 1954); "Will Our Women Carry Passes?" (January 1956); "Winburg: Target for Women's Passes!" (May 1956); "Zeerust: The Women's Battle, Why Women don't want Passes" (May 1958); "The Battle of the Women" (December 1958).

The story of the play *King Kong* suppresses the activism of women suggested by these articles on the anti-pass marches. Instead *King Kong* posits the same ideas of what constitutes ideal womanhood as does DRUM magazine. In *King Kong*, the women are portrayed along the lines of the "DRUM cover girl" stereotype. The female protagonist, Joyce, is a glamorous, castrating shebeen queen. And she brings about the fall of the hero, King Kong. Kavanagh's analysis points out that King Kong is a symbol of the triumphs and tribulation of the community of Sophiatown (105), therefore by destroying King Kong, Joyce destroys the community.

The play *King Kong* is based on the life of famous Sophiatown boxer Ezekiel "King Kong" Dhlamini. Dhlamini was heavyweight champion for a large part of the nineteen-fifties, until his suicide by drowning in 1958. Because he was a black South African, Dhlamini (or King Kong as he called himself, and was popularly known) did not receive the same opportunities to succeed that white boxers did.

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King Kong was mainly restricted to the ghetto of "bantu" championships. King Kong's chances of fighting overseas were slim to non-existent. Frustrated, he stopped taking good care of his body and career, and became associated with Sophiatown gang-life. His ultimate fall happened when he lost a fight against Simon Greb Mthimkhulu, who was a stone lighter than King Kong. Greb had himself been beaten by a very weak boxer a few nights prior to his fight with Dhlamini. After losing the fight with Greb, Dhlamini retired in shame only to appear in the news for having killed a man in a gang fight and again for killing his girlfriend, who had left him for a rival gang member. The court sentenced him to life imprisonment for his crimes, but Dhlamini committed suicide a few weeks later by drowning himself in a dam at the Leeukop Farm Jail on 3 April 1957 (Nat Nakasa, February 1959: Story published in *The Drum Decade*, 1987). *King Kong* was produced , by the Union of South African Artists (based at Dorkay House, Johannesburg) two years after the death of Ezekiel Dhlamini, and it follows the real story of Ezekiel Dhlamini closely. There are, however, key differences. In the play, the reasons put forward for King Kong's downfall are his girlfriend (Joyce) and the gangs; the major role played by apartheid in destroying King Kong is not focused on. Hence the story is altered to accommodate this meaning.

In the play, Joyce is initially the girlfriend of Lucky, the gangster. She then dumps Lucky for King Kong, who is at the prime of his boxing career (he has been promised an overseas fight by boxing promoters). Dumped by Joyce, Lucky seeks revenge against King Kong.

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This tension, caused by Joyce, culminates in a fight between King Kong and Lucky's gang; and King Kong ends up killing one of Lucky's men. This lands him in jail awaiting trial for ten months. During that time he loses an opportunity to fight overseas. King Kong comes out of jail disillusioned and demoralised. He trains less and less and joins Sophiatown gang life; on the other hand, Lucky keeps threatening prospective opponents, who pull out of fights with King. Lucky does, however, leave one opponent to fight him - the lightweight Greb Mawisa. As in the real story of Ezekiel Dhlamini, Greb defeats King, making him the laughing stock of Sophiatown. Furthermore, Joyce goes back to being Lucky's girl. In a jealous rage King Kong murders Joyce and is given a life sentence. The court declines his plea for the death penalty as it believes that Joyce "provoked" him (apparently this is the reason that Ezekiel Dhlamini's judge gave him a life sentence instead of death).

Had the Union remained true to the story of Dhlamini, the reasons for the collapse of King Kong and Sophiatown may have been more progressively explored. The debilitating effect of apartheid could have been challenged as well the role it played in perpetuating misogynist attitudes towards women and how those attitudes operated within the community of Sophiatown.

The story of *King Kong* is framed by the narratives of four Sophiatown residents: the old gossip Dan and the washerwomen Lena, Pauline and Trufina. They are sitting in a Sophiatown yard and reminiscing about King Kong the legend. The play cuts from their narrative to the days when King Kong was alive, and vice versa.

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King Kong first appears at the beginning of the second scene. He is out in the street doing his daily training and is immediately portrayed as energetic and active. He is accompanied by his trainer Jack, hangers-on Popcorn and Slim, and a throng of admirers and journalists. King Kong is described as "a towering, powerful figure" who "stands glowering at the audience" (Act I Sc. II). He is a hero in Sophiatown; his glamorous world of boxing (and the money he earns) represent a way out of the squalor and poverty of shanty towns.

In the same scene, Act I Sc. II, the play immediately paints an image of black women as castrating, dangerous, useless and only concerned with looks and money through the saucy call and response song *Marvellous Muscles,* dramatically juxtaposing the contrasting roles of men and women as active and passive respectively. Next to the towering heroic image of King Kong, the women's frivolity is reinforced.

The play text version of the song is edited and much less daring than the performed version (available on audio tape). The performed version starts with the women breathlessly admiring King Kong's body party parts:

GET HIM! LOOK THERE!
GET THAT KING-SIZED CHEST!
GET HIM! LOOK THERE!
WHY DO MEN GET DRESSED?
....
HIS ARMS, HIS LEGS, HIS EYES, HIS CHEST...
AAAAI! AAAI!

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To which King Kong responds:

> WOMEN ARE THE SAME, ALL THE SAME
> HUNTING FOR THE BIGGEST GAME...
> WOMEN SHOULD BE DROWNED,
> ALL BE DROWNED
> OR KEEP AWAY WHILE I'M AROUND. (34)

The male chorus echoes King Kong's response to the chorus of women. The sentiments expressed in *Marvellous Muscles* are emphasised throughout the play: powerful men are big and strong (strong enough drown a woman); and powerful women are beautiful and are out to seduce the powerful men and destroy them. After *Marvellous Muscles* a journalist asks King's trainer, Jack, if King is romantically involved:

> Journalist: [To Jack] No romantic angle yet eh, Jack?

And Jack gives the following response:

> Jack: [Firmly] No, definitely no. Dames is more poison for a boxer than smoke and drink. (35)

However, King's resolve not to be romantically involved for fear of destroying himself and his career is crushed when he meets and falls in love with the extra-ethal shebeen queen Joyce. His love affair with Joyce is the beginning of the end for King Kong. In scene three Dan and Lena reinforce the idea of Joyce as the "poison" that brings about King's fall:

> Dan: So what does he [King Kong] do? Gets caught up with Joyce.
> That Joyce dame was his downfall.
> .....
>
> Lena: No one's arguing about that. But like they said, King Kong din know his own strength, so Joyce din know her own strength - her woman strength. Messing 'round with Lucky, then with King, then with Lucky, and maybe a couple others in between. (45)

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The strength (or "poison") that destroys King Kong is Joyce's sexuality. King, on the other hand, has a macho, masculine physical strength. King Kong and Joyce represent stereotypes of what strong men and women supposedly are. In performance the characters of Joyce and King Kong were played by Miriam Makeba and Nathan Mdledle respectively. Both were well known popular musicians at the time. Makeba's widely admired beauty and talent fitted the stereotype that Joyce embodied (the shebeen queen with deadly good looks); and Nathan Mdledle's tall imposing stature and big baritone voice must have emphasised King Kong's aggressive, energetic power. Together, Makeba and Mdledle's real life images possibly reinforced the play's ideas of female passivity and male active aggression. Also the reputation of female show business personalities as frivolous, promiscuous, daring and dangerous (Rorich, 1989: 92) no doubt added to the effect of Makeba playing the *femme fatale* Joyce. Makeba's real life associations with Sophiatown gangs (Rorich: 98) must have further heightened the tension of art rather closely mirroring life; and served to confirm the "truth" of "powerful" women being indeed glamorous, dangerous and sexy.

King Kong's individualist strength and machismo is captured in the title song, *King Kong*, that he sings in scene two (38). The song praises King Kong's physical strength and compares him to the supposed ideal of manhood, "a white man":

KING:KING KONG - BORN AS A FIGHT MAN
KING KONG - BUILT OUT OF STONE
KING KONG - COULD BE A WHITE MAN

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The chorus supports King Kong's claims with:

MEN: A MAN OF STONE
HE WALKS ALONE
HE NEVER NEEDS A DAME. (38)

When King Kong the "man of stone" kills his girlfriend, Joyce, the community is not outraged by the murder. It is accepted that Joyce's treatment of men caused her death. In the eyes of the community, Joyce provoked both King and Lucky by taunting them with her sexuality, and she is thus responsible for her own tragic fate. The play takes Joyce's "provocation" of the men a step further by suggesting, through the song *Back of the Moon,* that Joyce undermines the authority of black men in the same way that apartheid does.

In *Back of the Moon*, Joyce refers to black men as "boys", a derogatory word often used by white employers to refer to black male workers. In a taunting tone, Joyce sings about the fact that the Back of the Moon is the only place where the men can feel like men and not like "boys":

JOYCE: BACK OF THE MOON, BOYS,
BACK OF THE MOON, BOYS,
NO ONE CARRIES PASSES AT THE BACK OF THE MOON.
BY DAY YOU ARE BOYS, BOYS,
NOW MAKE A NOISE, BOYS,
BE A MAN AT THE BACK OF THE MOON! (42)

Back of the Moon demonstrates Kavanagh's point that *King Kong*'s content does indirectly critique racial and class oppression. But in its critique of apartheid, *King Kong* implicates black women in apartheid's oppression of the black community, justifying patriarchal oppression and reinforcing it through its content and characterisation. Patriarchal oppression,

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however, is also reinforced through the plays content and characterisation. Thus, *King Kong* is popular in that it does address apartheid oppression. However, its reinforcement of negative images of women also qualifies it as "populist". The fact that the Sophiatown community which is the setting of *King Kong* was patriarchal can be used to explain the play's misogynist slant. However, the play could have presented the community's patriarchal system in a critical light, but instead chose to glorify and support patriarchal thinking.

Kavanagh states that the fact that *King Kong* was produced by a capitalist-backed structure, the Union of Southern African Artists, explains (to a point) the capitalist, largely conservative message advocated by the play. However, a wider reading of *King Kong*'s production is vital in opening the text up to a critique that considers gender oppression. The Union was not just a capitalist-backed structure, it also operated within political, historical and cultural contexts which determined the play's function at the time of its production.

Cultural Machinery: The Union of Southern African Artists

Like most cultural activity in the cities of South Africa during the fifties, the Union was backed by English mining capital. British colonialism in Southern Africa had aimed to achieve a level of cultural, political and economic hegemony, and through supporting black arts and culture that espoused the values of English capital, they hoped to retain cultural and political hegemony. They were convinced that in order to create an effective labour force, it had to be integrated to a degree into English culture (Kavanagh, 1985: 90). Mechanisms such as the English mission schools and black cultural centres were an effective weapon for English

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capital to gain hegemony over black labour. Thus when first the liberal Afrikaners formed the elected government in 1910, and later the Nationalist government in 1948, the Afrikaners gained rule, but were a long way from gaining consent from the black population and sectors of the English population.

With the backing of English capital, the Union became an important cultural centre for the production of theatre and music by black artists through most of the fifties and sixties. There are several accounts of how the Union started. Harry Bloom, the author of *King Kong,* explains that it was at an award ceremony for the musician Solomon Linda that a member of the audience suggested that a union be formed for black artists. Bloom, an entertainment lawyer at the time, had been contacted by an American folk group that had been made famous and rich by Linda's composition *Wimoweh*; Linda had only received a small once-off fee; no royalties were paid out to him. The American group wanted Bloom to find Linda so that they could pay him his royalties. Having found Linda, they decided to present him with his cheque at an award ceremony. The idea to form a union was an attempt to prevent the type of exploitation that Linda had fallen victim to. The Union was first headed by economist Guy Routh, then later by impresario, Ian Bernhardt.

When Bernhardt took over Routh's position as leader of the Union, it had began transforming itself more and more into a promotional body rather than a union. Housed in an industrial part of Johannesburg at Dorkay House, the Union thrived through mostly producing Township Jazz. It was the success of the Township Jazz performances that culminated in the Union deciding to produce *King Kong*. Kavanagh points out the irony that

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the Union in fact ended up not being much different from the exploiting promoters from which it was supposed to be protecting artists (92). Kavanagh points out that many of the Union's activities were backed by English mining capital, hence its activities were geared towards profit for English capital and it tended to sustain English cultural hegemony - not the black artists it was supposed to be protecting. Kerr makes a similar point:

> The Union, which started in 1953, combined the skills of ambitious black artists with the finance and entrepreneurial drive of white capital. The liberal English group, many of whom had links with industrial giants such as the Anglo-American Company, professed to be protecting black artists from exploitation, but at the same time there was a patronizing desire to protect blacks from 'lapsing' into crime or radical politics (Kerr, 1995: 216).

Despite the fact that the structure that produced *King Kong* did not wholly have the promotion of equality in mind, the play did open up a possibility for theatre that is progressive. *King Kong* played to multi-racial audiences for a period six months at the University of the Witwatersrand's auditorium at a time when D.F. Malan's Afrikaner government was beginning to implement laws segregating mixed audiences (Makeba, 1988: 71). In her autobiography, Miriam Makeba talks about how the producers of *King Kong* evaded apartheid laws and presented anti-apartheid material to mixed audiences:

> The audiences who come to see *King Kong* are integrated. Mr. Gluckman has found a clever way to get around the apartheid laws. The performances are held at the auditorium of the University of Witwatersrand. Since both black and white students attend this university, the authorities cannot tell who are students and faculty in our audiences and who are people from the outside. So people like my mother are seated next to white people who might have been her employers (Makeba, 1988: 71).

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Although the play's critique of apartheid was limited to suit the target English audiences' sensibilities (Kavanagh, 1985: 101), the play did manage to bypass and subvert segregationist laws geared at keeping South African audiences apart. Also the play's American musical and language styles went against apartheid's cultural strategy of promoting black art that re-presented archaic rural culture. When *King Kong* played in London (1960), it was criticized for being too American; however, at that time Americanisms and a staunchly urban sensibility were the weapons for South African blacks to assert their newly acquired urban status and to subvert government attempts to re-tribalise them (Coplan, 1985: 148). In the fifties *King Kong*'s political message was more subversive than it may appear to South African audiences today (*King Kong* may seem more populist than popular to contemporary audiences). Also, the level of anti-apartheid sentiment in *King Kong* was on a par with the peaceful, passive political resistance of the fifties (Malan's government was in its first decade of rule and had not reached the stage of violent crushing of opposition that was to become the norm in its subsequent four decades of power). The 1960 Sharpeville massacre of peaceful demonstrators by the Afrikaner government and subsequent banning of liberation movements put an end to non-violent liberation politics. Although initially silenced and intimidated, the black peoples of South Africa violently challenged apartheid repression in the seventies.

The next chapter will detail how popular culture was affected by the intensification of political tension in South Africa. Forced to reckon with violent repression and counter-struggle, Gibson Kente's initially apolitical popular type of theatre had to change direction, tapping into and catering for the mood of the times.

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Also, the notion of ideal womanhood as a frivolous show business personality or shebeen queen is not sustainable during the political violence of the seventies. The figure of earth mother as idealised in much Black Consciousness literature of the seventies lends itself to a new idea of powerful womanhood in popular theatre. In Kente's *Too Late*, the earth mother protects and nurtures the community, unlike *King Kong*'s Joyce who destroys the community. In Kente's plays women like Joyce no longer take centre stage, but they continue to seduce audiences as peripheral residues of a past era.

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CHAPTER II

TOO LATE

"COURAGE MAMA"

Introduction

In the mid-sixties a combination of government legislation and economic factors resulted in the severe restriction and near-demise of black/white collaborations such as *King Kong* (Kavanagh, 1985: 52). In an attempt to end English cultural hegemony over black South Africans and to implement their policy of separate development, Malan's government intensified their restrictions on black performances in towns and white performances in townships. Artists were required to apply for many complicated permits if they wanted permission to work freely in townships or in town. The government usually found reasons to refuse them permission, making black/white collaborations virtually impossible. The government also rendered illegal the mixed audiences upon which black/white collaboration were so heavily reliant for support through the Publication and Entertainment Act of 1963 (Kerr, 1995: 216). This cultural and political repression resulted in many of South Africa's top talent going into exile, bringing to an end a vibrant era of black/white city theatre collaborations and performances. Directly related to the decline of theatre performed in the cities is the rise of township-based popular theatre and the transfer of cultural control from English capital to black production companies (Kavanagh, 1985: 52).

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The focal figure of this chapter, Gibson Kente, was the undisputed leader of black theatre production in the era following the decline of popular theatre performances in the cities, and Union Artists' monopoly over popular performances. Gibson Kente began his theatrical career as a member of Union Artists (1959 - 1966); unlike most other members, he did not join the exodus into exile. Kente's first production *Manana, the Jazz Prophet* was produced by Union Artists, beginning his journey as legendary producer, playwright, director and musician. However, Kente had problems with the management at Dorkay House, and after a long battle he managed to free himself from Union Artists and formed his own Company (Gibson Kente Productions) in 1967 (Kerr, 1995: 219).

Kente's decision to form his own company which would produce plays for township audiences was, as already mentioned, influenced by the restrictions on black artists operating in the cities. Also, during the mid-sixties South Africa experienced a substantial economic boom, which increased the spending power of Kente's potential township audience, allowing Kente to start his company on fairly stable ground. Kente's years with Union Artists shaped his entry into and later development in popular theatre.

In a DRUM interview (1967) Kente acknowledges that Union Artists' *King Kong* influenced greatly the structure and content of black popular theatre:

> The death of variety concerts made artist and writers look for a new medium and after the spectacular success of *King Kong* everybody in non-white showbiz switched to the musical and this is the climax of the switch over (Quoted in Kavanagh, 1985:115).

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Between the years 1967 and 1973 Gibson Kente's popular musicals monopolised township theatre. There were other artists (Sam Mangwane, Solly Mckgoe, Boikie Mahlamme) as well as other variations of popular theatre competing with Kente (Kerr: 219). However, judging by the numbers of people flocking to his productions, Kente was indeed well on his way to earning the title of "the father of township theatre". Kente created a new style of big expression and gestures and almost rhythmic acting that was suited to the big township halls where Kente's company had to perform. Kente used minimal sets and props as he could not stay in any one hall for too long; the community halls were used for many other functions, so no one group could utilise a particular hall for too long a time. Hence, Kente developed his theatre to be easily transportable, making it available to thousands of black South Africans. In a *Sketch* interview, Kente expresses the difficulties around performance venues in the township, and how those difficulties have shaped his theatre:

> You know, putting audiences in these township halls is always a problem. A theatre is atmospheric. You get the feeling you're in a different world. The different halls we have, haven't got good acoustics. Seating is bad. You get them [audiences] rowdy, some standing at the back, because they want to see what's happening on the stage. So, like I said, I think a theatre would be marvellous. Besides it will enable us to run for a while in one place rather than shifting from Uncle Tom's, D.O.C.C., we can now centralise...But as I say, unless these problems can be eliminated in the venues we have to put our plays at, we'll find ourselves running around in circles. And of course, I find myself confined to certain themes and trends. Should I say sociological trends (*Sketch* Summer 1972: 11).

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In the *Sketch* interview, Kente acknowledges context in the development of the structure of his theatre. In order for the audience members at the very back of the halls to be able to hear the play, the action had to be melodramatic, and the dialogue clear and loud. The fact that the plays were in English, which was not widely understood by township audiences, meant that what was being said on stage was often not understood. Thus, the audience often relied on reading the actors' expressions and motions to understand the action on stage. The popular mediums of music and dance played vital roles in rising above language and spatial problems to communicate the action on stage.

The development of popular theatre from *King Kong* (1950s) to Gibson Kente's plays (1970s) is complex and difficult to follow and explain as it was not as linear a progression from one form to another as the introduction of this chapter may suggest. Raymond Williams's (1980) discussion on the **emergent**, **dominant** and **residual** strains of culture is partly useful in explaining the complex, unpredictable and contradictory nature of cultural production. Williams's model illuminates the interconnectedness of culture and politics, and the threads connecting one cultural era to the next. Using Williams's model makes it easier to trace the shift in the representation of women from *King Kong* to Kente's *Too Late*.

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Williams moves from the Gramscian premise that culture (as shaped by the dynamics between the base and superstructure) is the most effective terrain through which discourses can gain dominance. He goes a step further by providing a model of cultural production. According to Williams, at any one time there are three core discourses in place: the dominant, the residual, and the emergent. The dominant discourse is hegemonic; it mainly exists with the approval and consent of the majority of the subjects under it. "The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the present" (122). The residual discourse can operate within or outside the dominant discourse as oppositional or alternative. Like the residual, the emergent happens in relation to the dominant and consists of "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships" (123). Dominant, residual and emergent discourses are in constant flux; therefore, what is dominant in the present, may not necessary remain dominant in the future.

South African popular theatre (in the vein of *King Kong*) developed from being accessible to the mixed minority audiences in town to being accessible to majority audiences during Gibson Kente's reign in township halls. The analysis of *King Kong* demonstrates that although the play claimed to be in opposition to the oppressive dominant discourses of the white South African government and capital, it served, on certain levels, the interests of capital through a lack of rigour in its criticism of apartheid (particularly apartheid's capitalist and patriarchal levels).

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Hence, using Williams' model, *King Kong* can be interpreted as part of an emergent discourse which on the surface appears to be oppositional, but is ultimately contained within the hegemonic (dominant) white discourse of the fifties[5].

Based on the rough popular theatre structure set by *King Kong*, Gibson Kente's popular theatre continues the emergent popular culture into the mid-sixties, transforming it into an emergent discourse that is an alternative to white hegemony. Kente's theatre was alternative in that it did not conform to the dominant white discourses' (English and Afrikaans) ideas of how black people should be portrayed in theatre. Unlike in *King Kong,* where the focus was predominantly on the negative aspects of black culture, Kente tried to present a more balanced picture of the good and bad in black urban culture (Kavanagh, 1985: 128).

As in *King Kong*, in *Too Late* township stereotypes are present and they are developed. However, Kente's presentation of the stereotypes is more rounded and sympathetic than the presentation in *King Kong*. Kente utilised and developed stock characters and situations to represent the ever changing trials and tribulations of urban black existence..

Before 1973 Kente's plays steered clear of overt criticism of the South African government and its apartheid policies. His sixties plays *Sikhalo*, *Lifa* and *Zwi* did not oppose apartheid directly. Kente addressed human suffering in general terms and appealed to religion and personal strength to overcome life's troubles: "If the plays had a message at all it was 'every cloud has a silver lining'" (Kavanagh, 1981: xxv). Being a shrewd businessman, Kente

[5] Steadman suggests that "the residual" in South African popular theatre is constituted by pre-colonial forms of traditional culture.

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realised that he could not stay in business if his plays were constantly banned by the increasingly repressive state for political content.

However, the political and economic climate of South Africa in the early seventies was such that Kente could not continue to produce uncontentious musicals:

> The Black Consciousness movement had politicised the intellectuals and the youth, and because of rising unemployment, inflation and industrial unrest, the black working class ... was more politically conscious than before (Kavanagh, 1985: 119).

During the seventies, the ANC and PAC were still banned and exiled, thus the rising philosophy of Black Consciousness became one avenue of political expression. BC filtered into high school classrooms, contributing to the students' rejection of apartheid education which culminated in the 1976 students' uprisings. Kente could not remain apolitical in the seventies volatile political climate and still stay in business.

Also, other variations of emergent anti-apartheid culture competed with Kente's theatre and contributed towards its politicisation. There was the multi-racial "town" theatre (popularised by Fugard and the Phoenix Players, Workshop '71), and the Black Consciousness theatre which was produced mainly by University students and drama groups (Kavanagh, 1981: xiv). BC theatre and "town" theatre were vocal in their opposition of apartheid, and their use of popular elements (particularly music and dance) increased their accessibility to township audiences. If Kente had continued to present uncontentious musicals, he would have risked being rejected by the rising militancy of his audiences and his actors who consisted mainly of high school leavers (Kavanagh, 1981: xxiv).

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Between 1973 and 1976, he produced three political plays (*How Long*, *I Believe* and *Too Late*)[6]. As a theatre producer, Kente had to negotiate his opposition to apartheid, and his survival as a businessman; *Too Late* testifies to the resultant contradictions of Kente's attempt to negotiate two complex discourses (Kavanagh, 1981: xxvii).

The story of *Too Late* centres on Saduva, a teenage boy who has suffered the loss of his parents and home in Hammanskraal because of apartheid. He then moves to Johannesburg, Soweto, to live with his aunt, Madinto, and cousin, Ntanana. Madinto is a shebeen queen who works hard to keep her disabled daughter Ntanana at school. The action develops through the tension between the township residents and the authorities caused by the many pass raids. First Madinto is arrested by the government stooge, police man Pelepele, for selling liquor illegally. And then Saduva is also arrested because his pass does not authorise him to stay in Johannesburg. Ntanana gets killed by Pelepele whilst trying to prevent Saduva's arrest. Madinto is released from jail and is told by Totozi (Ntanana's friend and Saduva's girlfriend) that Pelepele killed her only child, Ntanana. When Saduva is released, he seeks revenge against Pelepele, but is stopped by Mfundisi (the local priest) and Doctor Phuza (the local alcoholic GP).

[6] In a phone conversation (1995) Kente explained that all his scripts were destroyed in a fire, *Too Late* being his only surviving script. He has enlisted the help of actors who have worked with him in the past and interested theatre practitioners to reconstruct and re-stage some of his old hits.

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As already mentioned, *Too Late* is part of the emergent discourse of popular theatre that was initiated by *King Kong* in the fifties. "Like *King Kong*, it was a musical set in the culture of the black urban areas and it highlighted the same 'sensational' areas such as gangsters, shebeens and jazz" (Kavanagh, 1985: 122). It consisted of the township stereotypes and stock situations which were present in *King Kong* and it developed new ones. There is the shebeen queen, Madinto; the evil policeman, Pelepele; the hobo, Offside; the schoolgirl, Ntanana; the tsotsis or Majitas; and patriarchs Mfundisi and Dr Phuza. Unlike *King Kong*, however, *Too Late* was produced by a black company, aiming to please an increasingly politicised black township audience. Thus the treatment of the stock situations and characters in *Too Late* are suited to its audience and historical context.

As in *King Kong*, the female protagonist in *Too Late* is a shebeen queen (Madinto). Kente's shebeen queen deviates from the usual "type". In keeping with the intense political mood of the seventies Kente's Madinto is not the frivolous, glamorous, philanderer that Joyce is. Madinto is a strong, humble mother who has to sell liquor illegally in order to support her family during hard economic times. Madinto is the antithesis of Joyce, who causes the community to disintegrate. Madinto builds and nurtures her extended family (which is representative of the community at large). She takes her nephew Saduva in even though she hardly has enough for herself and her daughter. Madinto faces her trials and tribulations with resilience, strength and dignity. She is described as "aggressive" and "can't beg" in the play (89).

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The shift in the representation of powerful women being temptresses to their being strong mother figures was influenced by the escalating and intensifying political tension. The frivolity of a heroine such as Joyce may not have been entirely in keeping with the sense of danger and political urgency caused by the nationalist government's escalating repression.

As already mentioned, with the ANC and PAC in exile, the Black Consciousness Movement was the most influential liberation movement in the seventies. The BC's conception of female involvement in the struggle was as strong mother figures, who would nurture and protect the African continent. This "mother Africa" figure is the subject of much BC literature, and seems to have influenced the portrayal of strong woman figures in Kente's plays, as is evident in the character of Madinto.

The figure of the strong African mother who is devoted to her children and extended family is certainly a better portrayal of strong womanhood than the disposable vamp of the fifties. However, it does restrict the description of strong womanhood to motherhood only and perpetrates the relegation of women to the private sphere of the home and not the more rewarded and respected sphere of public political life.

In *Too Late* Kente accentuates the figure of the strong mother, Madinto, by portraying the male characters as powerless and pathetic. *Too Late* has only three principal female characters and ten male principals. With the exception of Saduva and Mfundisi all the male characters are useless in the face of apartheid repression. Doctor Phuza, although a medical doctor, drinks his life away; Offside is the local "gossip and hobo" (*Too Late*, 1981: 89); Pelepele is a sell-out policeman; Shunqu is Pelepele's corrupt bribe-taking colleague; Matric,

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Sguqa, and Diza (the Majitas - streetwise thieves) are "drop-outs in their early twenties" (*Too Late*, 1981: 89) who make a living out of stealing from the community.

In an unpublished audio interview (1995) Professor of Music, Khabi Mngoma, validates the notion that, historically, black women have coped better with the pressures of apartheid than black men. Mngoma argues that because traditional African culture had more rules and regulations for black women, they were better equipped to deal with colonial repression and the resultant psychic displacement. The men, who traditionally have had more freedom, could not cope with colonialism's disregard for their freedoms and human rights. Many turned to self-destructive behaviour - drinking, stealing, violence. Also, because the men were forced to provide labour for white capital, they felt the wrath of colonialism more directly and more intensely. In *Too Late* the men self-destruct, as well as refuse direct contact with the apartheid system. None of them is engaged in any labour for white capital; they are all unemployed except for the self-employed Mfundisi and Dr Phuza. In contrast, Madinto resourcefully runs her own business; and Totozi continuously seeks employment to support herself and help Madinto's family. The fact that Madinto's business of selling liquor is used by many people (especially men, as in *Too Late*) in townships to self-destruct is not highlighted. Instead, Kente portrays Madinto in a sentimental light as the pillar of her home and community. The characters in *Too Late* refer to Madinto in a variety of affectionate and sentimental names and phrases: "auntie", "Dinto", "Auntie Madinto" (93) and most frequently, "Mama" (94).

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The community still accords Madinto respect even though her trade perpetrates one of the township's worst maladies, alcoholism[7]. Kavanagh (1981: xxv) mentions that Madinto's home is also described as befitting a person of Madinto's courage and dignity, unlike Joyce's glamorous, rowdy shebeen *Back of the Moon*. In keeping with her sentimental, sensible image, Madinto's shebeen is described as follows:

> *Madinto's home. Warm, very tidy, nice yet not expensive furniture. Two chairs, a bench, a table, a bed and a small armchair for Ntanana. There are two small cooking pots and one huge one. This very big one is never used for cooking but as camouflage to hide drinks. It has a big hole underneath (Too Late: 97).*

Everything in Madinto's home is functional and practical, reflecting her serious, concerned mother image (unlike Joyce, who is childless and can therefore afford to have a rowdy shebeen where fights and extreme drunkenness are the norm).

Although "mother Africa" is the icon for powerful womanhood in the seventies, representations of women as sex objects do not entirely disappear. Kente's choice of comic business involves a fair amount of lewd allusions to and treatment of women's bodies. In the opening scene, Pelepele sneaks up to Madinto and starts to paw her body:

> *Pelepele, the policeman, has entered meanwhile and is busy admiring Madinto, lightly caressing her around the waist and thighs, though Madinto has kept on unconsciously brushing those touched parts. He now pulls her by the dress. (94)*
>
> Madinto: What are you doing? Wenzani? Pulling my dress!
>
> Pelepele:[making the love sign]: We two talk love.
>
> Madinto: Voetsek! Uyini Wena? Sishumane lesi! (advancing on him

---

[7]The sentimental portrayal of negative or destructive stereotypes in *Too Late* constitutes a populist element in Kente's popular theatre.

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> aggressively) [Voetsek! What are you? You sishumane!].
>
> Pelepele: Voetsek kimi! Isifebe lesi! [Voetsek to me! You whore!] Madinto, I'll show you are nutting. (94)

Unlike in *King Kong* where the figure who is representative of patriarchy is the hero (King Kong), in *Too Late*, it is the worst character in the play (Pelepele). Because Madinto will not accommodate his crude behaviour, Pelepele seeks revenge by arresting her for selling liquor illegally. This paints Pelepele in an even more villainous light. Although at first it seems Kente is condoning the lewd treatment of Madinto's body by presenting it as comedy, the consequences of the incident (Madinto ending up in jail) negate the initial message that it is funny to paw women's bodies.

Judging from photographs of Kente productions (S'ketch, Summer 1972), it seems that the sexualised representation of women was still retained in peripheral women characters. For example, it is suggested in the play text that the Majita's girlfriends are sexualised characters, whose role is to hang around the Majitas and cater for their needs (103). To represent their sexual object status, the girlfriends would probably dress in revealing clothing to express the kind of daring sexuality that Joyce expresses in *King Kong*. In contrast, Madinto the maternal heroine would probably wear long non-revealing clothes and a head cloth.

The sexual use of women's bodies on stage continues into the next decade of popular theatre. Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina!*, which leads the way in eighties popular theatre, turns women's bodies into big business.

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CHAPTER III

SARAFINA!

"THEY CALL YOU PRETTY MAMA"

Black popular theatre as represented by Gibson Kente peaked during the early to mid-seventies. However, from 1976 through to the eighties various factors combined to bring an end to popular theatre thriving in townships, resulting in its transformation and move to city theatres. The Soweto student uprisings of 1976 in particular had a radical impact on the direction theatre was to take at the end of the seventies through to the eighties.

As explained in the previous chapter, the political tension that ultimately erupted in 1976 forced Kente to reconsider his uncontentious style of popular theatre and start to confront overtly political issues. This led to his arrest by the government whilst making a film of his political musical, *How Long* (1976). Although Kente returned to making uncontentious musicals upon his release, the increased political tension and rise in political consciousness of the majority of South African audiences resulted in the growth and ultimate dominance of popular protest theatre in the eighties. Audiences were clearly more interested in plays that addressed their lives and the political conditions affecting them.

The burning of many government-controlled community halls and the silencing by government of political township plays and playwrights in 1976 severely curtailed the production and performance of theatre in townships. Also, the founding of the Market Theatre by theatre practitioners Barney Simon and Mannie Manim in an industrial part of

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Johannesburg (Newtown) in 1976 contributed significantly to the shift in the performance of popular theatre from the township to city theatres. The Market Theatre became a major theatrical space for alternative and anti-apartheid theatre (particularly popular protest theatre) during the eighties (Coplan, 1985: 221).

Gibson Kente continued to produce plays until the end of seventies (*Can You Take It?* - 1977, *La Duma* - 1978, *Mama and the Load* - 1979); however, his reign over popular theatre had ended. Through his musical style, big acting gestures and notoriously vigorous training programmes, Kente not only produced some of South Africa's greatest talents, he also influenced heavily the popular theatre and entertainment of the eighties.

The subject of this chapter, the versatile and controversial producer/playwright, Mbongeni Ngema, was part of Kente's *Mama and the Load* (Ngema 1995: iv), and he acknowledges adopting and adapting Kente's manner and style of theatre production. More than any other eighties popular play, Ngema's Broadway sensation *Sarafina!* replicates and develops Kente's big production, big band brand of popular musical.

At various points in his theatre career Ngema has reached back into the history of South African popular theatre and utilised with great success its various structures and content. His first two collaborative plays *Woza Albert!* (1981) and *Asinamali!* (1984) employ the minimalist, didactic style of seventies black consciousness drama. The plays were performed before multi-racial audiences at the Market Theatre; in this regard they could fit Kavanagh's description of "town theatre" (Kavanagh, 1981: xiv). Ngema's use of mime and exaggerated gestures were of course borrowed from Kente. The phrase "protest theatre" came

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to be given to subsequent plays which replicated the structure of *Woza Albert!* and *Asinamali!* Ngema also acknowledges the influence of Peter Brook and Grotowski's theories on his works (Ngema, 1995: vii).

In *Sarafina!* (1987) Ngema moves away from "protest theatre" and employs more the flamboyant style of Kente. Although *Sarafina!* is loosely based on the 1976 student uprisings and uses in part the didactic, direct audience address of BC theatre, its fundamental structure is that of American show business musicals (in the vein of *King Kong*). *Sarafina!*'s musical structure is also comparable to that of *King Kong*, which was based on American musicals. However, unlike *King Kong* which was defying state policy to re-tribalise blacks by adopting parts of American culture, Ngema's Americanisms were targeting success with American audiences. Although the production was a big local success (opening at the Market Theatre in June 1987), Ngema's main aim in producing *Sarafina!* was to reach overseas (especially American) audiences. This he managed to do with great success; *Sarafina!* ran on Broadway for several months.

Since the first version in 1987 *Sarafina!* has since been re-packaged three times with two casts (1987 - 1992), and has toured widely in America and Europe. In 1992 Anant Singh and Darrell Roodt made a movie of the musical, starring local actress Leleti Khumalo and mega-star Whoopi Goldberg.

More recently Ngema tried to re-adapt/re-package *Sarafina!* into an AIDS play (*Sarafina II)*, with disastrous results made worse by scandals concerning money.
Ngema's blatant commercialisation of oppression for overseas export in *Sarafina!* and

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subsequent musicals, is a far cry from the Ngema who utilised Grotowskian concepts of minimalist, actor-centred "poor theatre" in *Woza Albert!* and *Asinamali!* to subvert oppression. After the success of *Woza Albert!*, Ngema started his own company, Committed Artists (1983) "with the sole aim of training young, disadvantaged South Africans" (Ngema, 1995: vii). However, another part of his aim, one which has since occupied the greater part of Ngema's career, is the commercialisation of popular protest theatre for export. In TRIBUTE (1990) Ngema speaks clearly about his method and motive of selling protest:

> You see, when people pay $70 for a ticket, they do not want to hear about the sufferings of black people from a strange country in Africa, they want to be entertained. They are not gonna be bored by you telling them about your struggle in South Africa. They don't care about South Africa. Those people want to go and see a good theatre piece. Finished. Whether it's a South African piece, a Jamaican piece, a British piece, they just want to see good theatre. In fact, they are a harder audience to entertain. Most of the time they do not see political theatre anyway; they refuse to go to fringe theatre in New York City. They do not go off-Broadway or off-off Broadway because they don't want to hear politics. Those are the ladies with fur coats (TRIBUTE excerpt quoted in Lindfors, Unpublished paper, 1996:8).

The use of women's bodies to market popular protest theatre to the seventy-dollars-a-ticket audience described by Ngema will be the focus of this chapter. The advantage of having seen the play in performance will influence the analysis of Ngema's representations. The effects of costume, body language, music and staging are integral to the spectacular representation in *Sarafina!*.

Ngema's declaration that his aim is to entertain the overseas elite who do not want to be bogged down with politics negates his claim that *Sarafina!* is an acknowledgement and a celebration of women's contributions to the anti-apartheid struggle. The women portrayed in

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Sarafina!, in their micro school dresses, are more seductresses than activists. They are there for the visual pleasure of Ngema's American audience and not for any reasons of raising political awareness.

Sarafina, who is the female protagonist/heroine, is admired by all for her beauty; her very first appearance on stage portrays her as a sex symbol. She enters (61) being pursued and admired by the school's macho-man Crocodile. Her activism is suggested (rather than dramatised) through accounts of her arrests and through her portrayal of Nelson Mandela at the end of year school play. Sarafina rarely speaks or acts as a young black woman activist. The only activism celebrated in the play is that of male heroes in the struggle against apartheid.

In the words of Ngema, *Sarafina!* is "centred around a young militant girl called Sarafina and was a salute to all the heroines of the struggle such as Lilian Ngoye, Fatima Meer, Winnie Mandela and all the women of South Africa who had committed their lives to the fight for freedom" (Ngema, 1995: viii). The action takes place in a Soweto high school, Morris Isaacson, where the 1976 student riots first took place. It is sometime in the mid-eighties at the height of the Botha regime's repression of school children. Police patrol the school and listen in on what the children are being taught. Even though the setting is eighties, the students complain about learning in Afrikaans. The play touches on issues affecting the children's lives: detention without trial, police presence in schools, the government-controlled syllabus. Framing these issues is Mbaqanga music and dynamic dance sequences which culminate in the school concert at the end of the school year. In keeping with the political theme, the end of year concert includes a play on the life of then liberation leader Nelson

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Mandela. Being the most popular (with peers and teacher - Mistress-It's-A-Pity) and supposedly the most political student, Sarafina is chosen to play the part of Mandela. The play is partly structured through the narrative of Colgate (he is one of the students). Colgate introduces us to the various characters in the play, and he fills the audience and cast in on events as the play progresses.

Sarafina! was unanimously appraised nationally and internationally for the strength of Ngema and Hugh Masekela's musical compositions, as well as the brilliant dance sequences executed energetically and precisely by the cast. However, the production was widely criticised for its lack of substance; many critics felt that *Sarafina!* merely decorated itself with political slogans and freedom songs:

> Mean-spirited though it may seem to mention it, some cynicism is evident. Gather together a group of talented, bright-eyed children and put them through a song and dance routine that illuminates the many hardships they have suffered - particularly those 13 years ago. Include the names of such brutally wasted martyrs as Victoria Mxenge, and how can you fail to win (Robert Pritchard, *Financial Mail* 1989/01/06, p.60).

Ngema has since tried to replicate the *Sarafina!* formulae in *Township Fever!*, *Magic at 4am!* and *Sarafina II!*; but he had exhausted the novelty of dancing and singing youth in *Sarafina!*, and his subsequent musicals flopped. Ngema's supposed celebration of women's contributions to the struggle through *Sarafina!* is as transparent and unsubstantial as the play's display of freedom songs and slogans. The women are part of the display for western eyes; they are neither accorded respect nor are they celebrated. The portrayal of women in *Sarafina!* includes the two female stereotypes so far discussed in this paper: the sex-kitten of the fifties, and the all nurturing, earth mother glorified in the seventies.

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Ngema's use of these female stereotypes is centred on his notions of what is inherently male and female behaviour. Ngema portrays the male students as inherently strong, aggressive, active and they fit into the role of activist, whilst the female students are somewhat passive, have domestic concerns and are good looking. According to Ngema's divisions of male and female roles/behaviour, there is no place for female activism[8]. At the end of the play, when Sarafina is most vocal about the struggle for liberation, she speaks as a male liberation leader, Nelson Mandela. In portraying Sarafina as an activist, Ngema simply inserts her into the role of male activist - thus a male perspective of struggle prevails.

Amongst the students, the four characters who play instrumental roles in the play are the two narrators Colgate and Teaspoon, and the two would-be lovers Sarafina and Crocodile. These four characters embody the roles of male and female student as portrayed by Ngema. Colgate is the play's authoritive narrator. As mentioned, his narrative opens and frames the events of the play. Teaspoon's role of narrator is that of school gossip. Like Colgate, teaspoon relays missing bits in the story. But she is not imbued with Colgate's male authority to tell stories, she is just a gossip.

Crocodile is the aggressive pursuer of Sarafina. Initially played by the very good looking Dumisani Dhlamini, Crocodile fits the role of dashing macho male hero. In one-lunch time scene, Crocodile mesmerises and entertains the male students with heroic tales about victims of his violent temper, he is clearly admired for his machismo (77).

[8] See Steinberg, C. "Now is the Time for Feminist Criticism: A Review of Asinamali" SATJ 5.2 for an analysis of Ngema's portrayal of exclusive male activism.

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In this scene, like in many others, the male students occupy one section of the stage whilst the female students occupy another. Contrasting Crocodile's macho presentation, the female students play a game about putting together vegetables and making a stew. Thus Ngema reinforces stereotypical gender divisions visually and through male/female preoccupations in the play. Males, like Crocodile should be active, aggressive, vocal; while women should have domestic concerns and cook stew.

Contrasting Crocodile's macho male power is Sarafina's sexualised, vampish female power. Sarafina is also portrayed as a mother figure to her classmates, as they look to her for guidance. The narrator Colgate describes her as the "...kind of a person everybody would go to..." (62). Just before the theme song in praise of Sarafina, the students rush towards Sarafina and "kneel down beside her" (62) chanting "Pretty mama. Pretty mama. Pretty mama". In Sarafina the fifties glamour girl and the seventies earth mother merge.

The theme song in the play, "Sarafina", praises Sarafina's beauty and motherly nature; it does not mention anything about her activism:

BOYS: THEY CALL YOU PRETTY MAMA
GIRLS: CALL YOU PRETTY MAMA
BOYS: THEY CALL YOU PRETTY BABY
GIRLS: CALL YOU PRETTY BABY... (62)

Like Joyce in *King Kong* Sarafina's looks and flirtatious behaviour causes the men pain:

BOYS: THEY TREAT YOU LIKE A LADY
YOU SMILE FOR ANOTHER GENTLEMAN
BUT WHEN I SEND YOU CHOCOLATE AND FLOWERS
YOU SAY I MAKE YOU VEX
...

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YOU TROW OUT ME PRETTY FLOWERS FOR
YOUR WINDOW
YOU BREAK MY HEART IN PIECES
YOU MAKE I WANNA CRY
YOU MAKE PALAVER SARAFINA (62)

Sarafina! does not go as far as implicating Sarafina the "pretty mama" in the downfall of the hero or the community (as in Joyce's case). But, as the song suggests, Sarafina, like Joyce, causes men pain with her powerful beauty. Another character who is portrayed as having lethal powerful beauty and maternal qualities is Mistress-It's-a-Pity. Mistress-It's-a-Pity is the sexy teacher who emphasises her points by kicking up a bare leg high in the air and exclaiming: "Mmh!...It's a pity". Mistress-It's-a-Pity is nameless, she is defined through her trademark phrase and high-kick. Her role is that of musical conductor and the phrase "pretty mama" easily applies to her as well. She is the sexy maternal guide and educator of the students.

Loren Kruger (1995) suggests that rather than being a true leader of student activist, Sarafina is merely "an icon of the struggle and a means of translating politics into (mostly male) pleasure" (48). The role of translating politics into male pleasure is fulfilled by all the female students in the play. When not toyi-toying in their mini-gym slips, they are gyrating seductively barely covered in African print cloths. They fit Kruger's description of the "Ipintombification" of African women who "appear en masse as an exotic and alluring spectacle" (47); in the case of *Sarafina!* they represent not only "Africa incarnate, Africa commodified" but also the struggle commodified and sexualised.

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The one scene (82) where the female students display a measure of political agency is more a caricature of activism than actual political action. When the policeman barges into the classroom pointing his gun threateningly at the students; the boys cower behind the girls in exaggerated melodramatic fear, whilst the girls with equal melodrama advance towards the policeman in mock bravado. Thus the idea of women confronting and challenging the system is not treated in a serious light.

As already stated Sarafina's activism is suggested through her various accounts rather than through actual events. In one scene Sarafina explains her political consciousness through informing the audience and classmates of her earlier association with veteran woman activist and lawyer, Victoria Mxenge, who was apparently a close friend of her mother's:

> SARAFINA:...I've lived with mothers who produce our army, the army of the townships, the real mothers of our land. (pause) Before I went to Morris Isaacson High School, Victoria Mxenge took me to Durban to educate me. I was seven. She and my mother were very, very good friends. They would always talk about the people's movement and I would be listening and I enjoyed it. (she laughs) You see, Victoria Mxenge was a lawyer... (100).

Thus Mxenge (who is evoked as the earth mother in the play through the song *Mama*) lends credibility to Sarafina's supposed activism; and she serves as a maternal role-model for the female students. The struggle (as signified by Mxenge) does indeed, lend "its aura but not its substance to the body of the young woman" (Kruger, 1995: 48).

Ultimately, Ngema's portrayal of the female students suggests that they will in future inhabit the role of "pretty mamas". As in *King Kong*, the women in *Sarafina!* are portrayed as having power because of their good looks and sexual appeal. However, to lend credibility to Ngema's political project, the women are also glorified as seventies-type mother figures.

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However, any position the women in *Sarafina!* could occupy as activists is negated by their foregrounded role as exotic "pretty" spectacles.

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CHAPTER IV

MARABI

"A PROPER WIFE, A PROPER MOTHER"

The end of official apartheid during the early nineteen nineties impacted directly on popular theatre. Popular theatre about the struggle against white hegemony which first emerged in the fifties and culminated in the popular protest of the eighties could no longer adequately address the issues of a radically transforming South Africa. Also, the eighties trend, led by Mbongeni Ngema, of commercialising anti-apartheid plays for overseas consumption drastically diminished the appeal of popular protest theatre as aesthetic anti-oppression art[9]. As apartheid has ceased to be an immediate and direct point of reference for South African theatre practitioners, the identity of popular theatre as it has existed since the fifties is uncertain; the freedom songs, activists, shebeen queens and treacherous police who were stock images in anti-apartheid popular theatre no longer necessarily provoke the same depth of response in a democratic post-election South Africa. Theatre practitioners are searching for new ways to adapt the stock characters and situations of apartheid South Africa for a democratic South Africa.

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[9] See Steadman (1990) "Towards Popular Theatre in South Africa" *Journal of Southern African Studies 16.2*

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The de-centring of South African popular theatre identity is manifested in the lack of major successful trends in popular theatre production in the nineties. This has resulted in the re-staging of old South African theatre successes (*The Island*, *Sarafina!*, *The Bloodknot*, etc.); it has also encouraged a search for new South African stories. There is a shift from representations of predominantly black stories to exploring diverse South African stories. There is also a diversification of issues; protest no longer centres on apartheid only; rather issues are anti-discrimination, in whatever form (e.g. gay rights issues, women's rights, AIDS education, etc.). The diversification of issues in S.A. theatre has made the idea of popular theatre as reliant on majority audiences even more uncertain, as there is no tangible commonality within South African audiences (as in the case of anti-apartheid audiences).

The subject of this chapter, *Marabi,* falls into the category of nineties revivals. Based on the 1973 novel by Modikwe Dikobe, *The Marabi Dance*, *Marabi* was first workshopped and performed at the Market Theatre in 1981 by Junction Avenue Theatre. Theatre producer and academic Malcolm Purkey has recently re-worked the play with a mostly new cast, staging the play at the Grahamstown Festival (1995), the Market Theatre (1995/1996) and touring the U.K. (1996). Although the recent production of *Marabi* has had local and international recognition, due to the uncertainty in the identity and direction of South African theatre, its impact has not been as widespread or as forceful as the other three plays analysed so far.

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In terms of the topicality necessary for popular theatre, *Marabi*'s subject matter may appear dated. However, even though it is set in the thirties, *Marabi* explores two issues which have come to the fore in post-apartheid South Africa - class and gender. The play, like Dikobe's novel, explores the marabi culture of the Doornfontein slumyards of the nineteen thirties, especially "the home and family life of lower class black people, where women predominate" (K. Sole & E. Koch, 1990: 214). Through the tensions in young Martha's life, the play explores the choices (or lack thereof) available to a young black working-class woman during the nineteen thirties; an issue which affects not only black working-class women today but all women to a lesser or greater degree. What sets *Marabi* apart from the plays analysed so far (apart from its backward glance into history) is that it does not hold up or prescribe ideas of womanhood. What it does is to explore and to question the choices that women have vis-a-vis their immediate and external environments. *Marabi* questions the roles women play in their societies and the boundaries constraining women's progress, boundaries set up by tradition, economic and political factors.

In addition to encouraging questions on the position of women in society, Modikwe Dikobe's novel portrays in a most vivid, humorous and perceptive manner the central role women played as the producers of marabi culture. Dikobe's approach does not merely show women as victims of restrictions, it also shows instances where

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Purkey's production falls short in its portrayal of women's centrality and power within marabi culture; its focus is more on young Martha and the restrictions around her growing up within marabi culture than on the powerful role played by women like Martha's mother, Mamabongo. Also, Purkey alters Martha's story, restricting the possibilities of escape/empowerment that Dikobe suggests.

Marabi is set in a nineteen-thirties Doornfontein slumyard - the Molefe yard. Martha is a teenager growing up in the Molefe yard; she is drawn into the world of marabi music through her deep love of music and by her gigolo boyfriend, George, who is a marabi piano player. Martha's parents Mabongo and Mamabongo forbid Martha to sing at marabi parties because they consider marabi to be a culture for lower-class people; they want Martha to lift herself out of the slums through acquiring an education. When they discover that Martha has been secretly performing at marabi parties and that she is no longer a virgin, her father, Mabongo, withdraws her from school. Martha is banned from singing and has to help her mother take in washing from the neighbouring white suburbs. As Martha is out of school and thus no longer a child, Mabongo wishes that Martha becomes a "true woman" by marrying his cousin Ndala's son, Sephai. It seems Mabongo angered his elders and ancestors in his youth when he did not marry Ndala's sister, Sarai, and he hopes to appease them through getting Martha and Sephai to marry. Soon after being taken out of school, Martha discovers that she is pregnant with George's child.

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When she informs George, he runs away to work as a bus clerk in Durban. Because of her pregnancy, Martha refuses to marry Sephai, and her father, Mabongo, throws her out of the house. Mabongo then goes away with his employer, dairy owner Tereplasky, to fight in the Second World War. In Mabongo's absence his wife Mamabongo falls ill and dies; the people of Doornfontein are forcefully removed and resettled ten miles away from town and their places of employment in Orlando township. Martha gives birth to her son, Sonny Boy, and she gets a house in Orlando. George disappears from her life, save for a letter he writes her informing her that he is in Durban. Mabongo comes back from the war and presumably lives with Martha in Orlando.

Because *Marabi* was first workshopped and performed in 1981, it resembles the musical structure of *King Kong, Too Late* and *Sarafina!*. The stock characters are also there: the shebeen queen (Mamabongo), the drunkard/jester (Ntebejane). Perhaps because its subject matter is far back in history and it is not overtly oppositional, *Marabi* is distant enough from popular protest theatre to be mildly successful in the nineties. As mentioned, the topicality of its two main issues - gender and class (as well as its use of movement and music) - ensures its popular status in the nineties.

The script of *Marabi* has not been published, hence the one analysed here is a copy of a rough personal script belonging to the play's director, Malcolm Purkey . The analysis of the play text will be informed and supplemented by a discussion of the Market Theatre performance (1995/96).

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Purkey's adaptation differs in a number of key ways from Dikobe's novel, altering the manner in which women are represented. In *The Marabi Dance*, the role played by women in the production of marabi culture is foregrounded. Dikobe devotes a fair amount of space in his novel to describing how Ma-Ndlovu, the marabi queen, and other women negotiate and transcend economic oppression. The reader learns how Ma-Ndlovu, destitute and deserted by her husband, not only finds herself a new lover (Alberto), but becomes the richest marabi queen in Prospect Township: "Alberto and Ma-Ndlovu became popular through selling beer and running Marabi Dances and Fah-fee games. They were respected by many as wealthy and peaceful people" (Dikobe, 1973: 5)[10].

In Purkey's production, it is the performers at marabi parties that are emphasised. The women who run the parties, the marabi queens like Ma-Ndlovu, are mentioned only briefly; their central role in the culture is not conveyed. Martha's mother is a representative of marabi queens in the play, but her derogatory attitude towards marabi and her half-hearted, lack-lustre participation in marabi culture makes her come across as a pitiful victim of marabi rather than its producer and centre. Her decision to participate in marabi comes when the marabi pianist Ntebejane comes to live in the Molefe yard; Mamabongo decides that he should play marabi in order to attract customers to buy her home made beer. Mamabongo shies away from describing Ntebejane's entertainment as a marabi party, because she associates marabi with the dregs of society.

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[10] The figure of marabi queen re-gains the position of power lost in fifties portrayals of shebeen queens.

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Mamabongo is a rather dry character played rather blandly by actor Thembi Mtshali. She is overshadowed by her staunchly patriarchal husband, Mabongo. Mabongo commands attention on stage, his role is executed with vigour and conviction by Ramolao Makhene. He is every bit the male figure-head in control.

The character of Martha in the play more than makes up for Mamabongo's lack of character. Martha is vibrant, good looking and daring (a role enhanced by Nkhensani Manganyi's dynamism and charisma). She boldly defies her parents by indulging her passion for singing; she performs with George at marabi parties. However, tradition and social factors combine to limit Martha's chances of escaping from a life of poverty. When Mabongo discovers that Martha has been singing at marabi parties, he orders that she have a virginity test, because women who associate with marabi in whatever way are suspected of being promiscuous. When it is confirmed that Martha is not a virgin, Mabongo feels that he cannot waste his money paying to educate Martha when he will not be able to charge as high a lobola price as he could have, had Martha remained a virgin:

> MABONGO: I tried. I tried to have my daughter become a somebody. I've been for twenty years in the tenka tenka place, in that Tereplasky dairy, and look at me now. This Johannesburg! It makes you go on your hands and knees and polish floors. It makes you lick boots to get a job. I wanted to see Martha become a teacher or a nurse. A somebody. And now? Who is to refund me for that? Who is going to pay bogadi for a woman who is already used. Second hand! (32)

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Mabongo does not see value in educating Martha if she will not fetch a high lobola price. Her worth is ultimately measured by the man she will marry; if he is economically empowered enough to pay the required price, Mabongo will get his money and Martha will be considered successful. The notion that Martha can finish school and become empowered enough to support herself, is inconceivable. The purpose of her education is to attract an able spouse, not for her self improvement and survival. Martha is viewed as an object ("second hand") by her father, to be groomed and sold to the highest bidder.

The Mabongos' preoccupation with looking out for economically able spouses to marry Martha is demonstrated in their change of attitude towards George as soon as they find out that he makes a lot of money playing the piano at marabi parties. As soon as George's monetary value is established, Mabongo and Mamabongo seize to see him as less than human, and begin grudgingly to tolerate his presence in their home and around their daughter (Act 1, Scene 4). Sephai, however, is much richer and more stable than George so he is naturally the Mabongo's number one choice of son-in-law. Even though Mamabongo is initially not pleased about Mabongo drudging out his ancient history about his would-be-love Sarai, she accepts the planned match between Martha and Sephai, in the hope that she will receive a portion of the lobola payment. This shrewd aspect of Mamabongo is much more explicit in *The Marabi Dance*.

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Mamabongo is whole-heartedly behind the plan that Martha marry Sephai, even though Martha is not very keen on the plan because Sephai is a country-bumpkin:

> I don't want a country man to marry me,' answered Martha.
> 'Mehlolo! Do you think I have given birth to you for nothing? If you don't listen to what your father and mother tell you, you must get out of our house.' Mrs Mabongo bent low down towards the floor, clutched the grass broom and swept the floor as vigorously as she could, spitting where Martha had been standing. 'sis bana ba kajeno - children of today! They don't listen to their parents...' (*The Marabi Dance*: 28)

Mamabongo is passionately interested in the issue of Martha's lobola and how it will be divided up. She knows that according to custom, Sephai should pay the cattle to Mabongo's father (as Mabongo had disobeyed his elders and ancestors in his youth, whatever share of the lobola he will get will be decided by his father); but Mamabongo has her eye firmly on somehow getting a share of the loot:

> [Mamabongo:]...I am going to call my brother to take the cattle. You have not paid anything for me and you have no right to receive the bogadi. You must first pay mine.' (*The Marabi Dance*: 54).

Mamabongo is willing to go as far as blackmailing Mabongo with the fact that he did not pay lobola for her and thus somehow he owes her and her family. Mamabongo the shrewd business woman is masked in the play. Her interest in Martha's lobola money is rather tame compared to Mamabongo in Dikobe's novel.

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In *Marabi* Mamabongo expresses her views in the lobola money only briefly (unlike Dikobe's Mamabongo who keeps enquiring about it):

> Mamabongo: Do you think I carried you nine months before birth, and suffered terrible pains to bring you to this earth, and stayed awake all night to give you away free? A man must pay properly for a wife! (*Marabi* Act 1 Scene 10)

In *Marabi* the audience is more exposed to the maternal Mamabongo, who grooms Martha and teaches her to be "a good woman" to her planned future husband Sephai:

> Mamabongo: Today, Martha, you are a woman. You must behave like a woman. Women do not hang about on the street corners at night. You must get married and make meals for your husband... (Act 1, Scene 10)
> ...
> Mamabongo: A girl who does not behave like a woman never gets married (Act 1, Scene 10: 37).

In the scene above Mamabongo is fitting Martha for the outfit she will be wearing as "a woman", visually reinforcing Martha's transformation. She is in the process of making Martha a very long dress that covers her knees, a matching *doek* and stiffened apron because Martha "must dress properly so you can get a man who is wealthy. With cattle." (37). Mamabongo is an accomplice in moulding her daughter into what patriarchal tradition considers to be an ideal woman. She has no real interest in her daughter's strength and empowerment. Mamabongo does not object when Mabongo reduces Martha's chances of economic success by withdrawing her from school. Even though Mamabongo is aware of the inequality between men and women's chances of success, she still colludes with the system that perpetrates these inequalities.

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She informs Martha that "Men want to be treated like children. They are selfish. They know only one thing! Food, food, food, sleep. Cook, cook, cook, eat, sleep!" (37). It seems Mamabongo is quite willing to train her daughter to cater for these "selfish" needs that men have.

As Mamabongo is busy making Martha's dress and teaching her to be a woman, Mabongo returns from work. He feels that Mamabongo is not doing a good enough job turning Martha into "a proper wife, a proper mother" (39). Mabongo proceeds to "teach" Martha how to kneel when she serves her husband food, how to wash his feet, and to warm the blankets before he goes to sleep, and to always be ready to make love in case her husband demands it:

> MABONGO [to Martha]: Come! I must tell you how a man is treated at my home. Give me my scale of beer. Properly!
>
> (MARTHA is unclear for a moment MAMABONGO signals. MARTHA goes down on her knees and places the measure in front of her father having wiped the rim.)
>
> MABONGO: I cannot show you how to attend to a man in bed, but let me tell you this. When you have finished giving your husband water before and after meals and you notice him wanting to gc to bed, you go and arrange the blankets for him. Then you go and goitisa with the other women until such time as you think he needs you (Act 1 Scene 10: 40).

It is ironic that Mabongo himself went against tradition and refused to marry a woman that his elders approved of. Instead he married Mamabongo in "vat and sit" without having paid lobola for her.

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Martha points out that she has never seen her mother doing any of the things they are now trying to teach her and voices her discomfort about the whole situation:

MARTHA: I have never seen ma doing such things.

MABONGO: Thula Wena!

MARTHA: I think I shall have a lot of trouble if this boy marries me.
(Act 1 Scene 10: 40)

Mabongo's explanation for defying tradition in his youth is that the environment of the city and their new lifestyle does not allow for the unadapted replication of traditions that were necessary and important in rural settings. The Doornfontein slums require new coping methods and the old traditions have to change radically with the times. But in Martha's case, Mabongo is not prepared to admit to the shortcomings of a stagnant, inflexible application of tradition because he stands to benefit. Martha's lobola will make Mabongo a rich man.

Martha's chances of escape from Mabongo and the traditions he represents are limited in *Marabi* compared to *The Marabi Dance*. In *The Marabi Dance*, Mabongo withdraws Martha from school, but allows her to attend singing lessons. In Marabi, she is given no chance, her parents refuse Mr Elocution's request that Martha be trained as a professional singer (Act 1 Scene 6). The different endings in *Marabi* and *The Marabi Dance* signify different levels of empowerment for Martha. In *Marabi*, Mabongo returns from fighting in the war, to live with Martha and probably continue his patriarchal role (Act 2 Scene 9).

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In *The Marabi Dance*, Mabongo returns from the war and is transferred to the East London branch of Tereplasky's dairy to be "boss-boy" (114); and George returns from Durban to marry Martha. The reader is left with the hope that because George and Martha are close in age and once respected each other as equals through their music, power relations between them will not be as disproportionate as they are between Martha and her father Mabongo. It is suggested also that George leaves his youthful irresponsibility and selfishness in Durban and he comes back to Martha a better and more considerate person.

In an audio-visual interview (1995), actors Nkhensani Manganyi and Moshidi Motsegwa ("Martha" and "Tiny" (Martha's little cousin/sister)) discuss how the cast had an argument about the extent of Martha's strength and courage despite limits placed on her abilities. Some members of the cast felt that an outspoken character like Martha could not possibly have existed in the thirties because empowered black women are a recent eurocentric invention. The cast then undertook to interview Modikwe Dikobe who promptly settled the matter by confirming that he knew many Marthas during his stay in the Doornfontein slums; and he knows many Marthas today. *Marabi*, however, does not do justice to Dikobe's Martha.

In both *The Marabi Dance* and *Marabi*, the female characters' strengths are enhanced by the male characters' comparative weaknesses and irresponsibilities (as in Kente's *Too Late*). Their collusion in patriarchal oppression is aptly represented, and their self-centred, selfish attitudes are exposed.

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For all his manly bravado, Mabongo runs off to Europe with his boss Tereplasky instead of tending to his family, leaving his wife to help the family survive. Mamabongo ultimately dies from exhaustion and heartbreak. George opts to disappear to Durban rather than raise his child. And the marabi king Ntebejane is an alcoholic who destroys his gift of wisdom by self-destructing. Like the women in *Too Late*, the women in *Marabi* carry the weight of the men's weaknesses.

Of the four plays explored in this paper, *Marabi* provokes pertinent questions about the empowerment of women; bringing to the fore issues of class and gender. *Marabi* unmasks the contradictions inherent in patriarchal discourse and shatters the myth that women's empowerment is a post-apartheid western malady that black women are suffering from.

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CONCLUSION

CHANGING RAINS, CHANGING VOICES

This paper has focused on popular theatre as an arena of cultural struggle and as a possible instrument of social transformation. The role played by popular theatre in the struggle against apartheid has been explored through historical analyses of four popular South African musicals, interrogating the representations of black women within the anti-apartheid narratives of the musicals.

In the introduction various theorists' definitions of what constitutes popular theatre were outlined. Although differing on the role popular theatre should play and how that role should be carried out, the theorists agreed on certain fundamentals in terms of the constitution of a popular play. The first fundamental aspect agreed upon by the theorists is that popular theatre is distinct from "high" theatre or theatre that expresses the concerns of elite or privileged members of any society. A second related condition is that popular theatre should be accessible to as many people as possible, it should not set out to address a few members of society and exclude the rest. Related to the accessibility of popular theatre is structure and content. The structure and content of a play are very important in establishing its accessibility to a wide audience. For instance, the use of music and dance can increase the accessibility of a play to a wider audience. The mediums of music and dance are generally more accessible or understandable than the medium of spoken language.

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Music and dance can often cut across many boundaries (ethnic, class, gender, generation etc.), therefore, a play making wide use of them is more likely to be understood by a wider audience. *King Kong*, *Too Late*, *Sarafina!* and *Marabi* are all framed by popular music and dance; thus on one level of structure they can be defined as popular.

Apart from the issue of mass (or popular) accessibility (actual or intended) popular theorists have varying notions about the role of popular theatre in society and how that role should be accomplished. As mentioned in the introduction, Robert Kavanagh, Ian Steadman, Ari Sitas and David Kerr believe the popular theatre should play a transformative role. They believe that popular theatre can intervene in transforming the structures that produce economic disparities between sectors of society. They reason that the accessibility of popular theatre can be useful in raising the consciousness of a mass audience and encouraging it to resist the structures that produce economic disparities. David Coplan and Martin Orkin believe that popular theatre interprets and mediates transformation rather than effect it. They also argue that the range of issues addressed by popular theatre should not necessarily be restricted.

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The popular plays analysed in this paper complicate any definition of a seamless "popular theatre". Rather, the plays are popular on certain levels to varying degrees. Hence in the introduction, the definition of the term popular was extended to include the terms "people's" and "populist", because the four popular musicals also have elements of "people's" or "populist" theatre.

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It was demonstrated in the analyses of the musicals that although they operated on popular and progressive levels, they also had domesticating and regressive elements on some levels; thus the term popular is difficult to apply entirely to any one play. Ultimately, the plays analysed in this paper were defined as popular because they had more popular elements than "populist" or "people's" elements.

An understanding of the term popular as used by theorists on both sides of the debate was used in the analysis of the four popular musicals representation of black women. With the exception of *Marabi*, none of the plays addresses or interrogates patriarchy. Also, none of the popular theorists focused on adequately interrogated the role of popular theatre plays in addressing women as members of the subaltern classes. Thus, this paper has attempted to situate and interrogate the role and representations of women within popular theatre. As the popular theorists agree that popular theatre should transform or mediate/interpret society, it is also vital that it transform, mediate and interpret unequal gender roles.

Part of the reason why anti-apartheid narratives as reflected in popular plays have focused on race and class to the exclusion of patriarchy and other forms of oppression is that race and class have been considered more pertinent by anti-apartheid structures. That this is so is not without reason; apartheid foregrounded race and class as categories of oppression. However, it is important to recognise the gender oppression that was inherent in apartheid discourse, as the same patriarchal structures operated within anti-apartheid discourse.

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Stuart Hall's point that politics can be subjective without being exclusive (1990) illuminates a way out of a counter-politics that privileges certain narratives at the exclusion of others. Hall proposes that we begin to look at "politics as a hegemonic project", i.e. we must confront the intricate and inter-linked discourses of discrimination/domination with the aim of systematically eradicating all forms oppression. Through engaging in a "politics of articulation", we will at all times be aware that there are other forms of oppression which exist with the form that is affecting us the most and is thus most noticeable. In the same way popular theatre that is progressive can be subjective, yet it should not be exclusive. Popular plays that privilege race and class struggles should not do so to the exclusion of other struggles or whilst perpetrating other forms of oppression; this undermines their own transformative thrust. Hall's suggestion of a subjective yet inclusive politics will liberate black men and women from the dichotomous deadlock of either fighting for race (and class) equality first, or fighting for race, class and gender equality simultaneously. The object of struggle should be to eradicate all oppression and not only certain kinds of oppression.

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One reason that gender inequality in politics and in theatre has occurred is that the anti-apartheid political structures and theatre structures have excluded women from positions of power. In audio and audio-visual interviews conducted with women theatre practitioners[11], they made the same point that women are excluded from positions which may give them the power to control representation and have voices as women. Black women have little access to arenas that will allow them to control representation, arenas such as scriptwriting, directing and producing. Thus far, the only black women scriptwriters who are published are Fatima Dike and Gcina Mhlophe. Women are not given a chance to write themselves into history and to represent themselves in ways that are progressive, or at the very least, diverse. In terms of black female director/producers, Mhlophe and Dike are again the two that come readily to mind. As directors and producers, black women would have the power to shape representation. Most of the women interviewed stated that theatre structures do not accommodate the heavy duties that society expects women to cope with, and society's non-supportive attitude towards women who choose the traditionally male and public domain of acting and theatre production intimidates some women from taking up careers in theatre. Women are expected by society to administer the home, as well as help to supplement family income by engaging in paid employment.

[11] Between 1994 and 1996 I was involved, individually and collectively, in interviewing theatre practitioners about the role of women in South African theatre.

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A woman who has chosen a career in theatre often has to be away from home day and night. This may cause tensions with a husband or boyfriend who expects her to stay at home (at least in the evenings) to administer the home. Significantly, at the time of the interviews with Mhlophe and Dike, they were unmarried and Mhlophe was childless. Both women felt that being single gave them the freedom to be involved in theatre. They had no families to administer and no husbands to answer to. Mhlophe had the following to say about family life and her role in theatre:

> MHLOPHE: When you are not married you can make those choices [to be involved in theatre], but it also depends on how strongly you feel about your art....if you love me you must love the whole package (1994).

The "package" that Mhlophe is referring to is her involvement as a woman in the male-dominated arena of theatre. Mhlophe puts the responsibility on women practitioners to change the structures of their homes to accommodate their art. Responsibility should also be placed on the structures producing theatre to provide support for women actors, writers and producers.

The focus of this paper has been to suggest that popular theatre in South Africa would be more progressive if it were more open to the inclusion of women's voices. However, it should not end with the inclusion of women; the diverse sectors of South Africa's peoples should be included in the production of a popular theatre that is progressive and inclusive. No one sector should be privileged over another, as this may result in biased representation. Popular theatre should, in addition to interpreting the changes in society, work towards creating an anti-domination, anti-discrimination society.

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