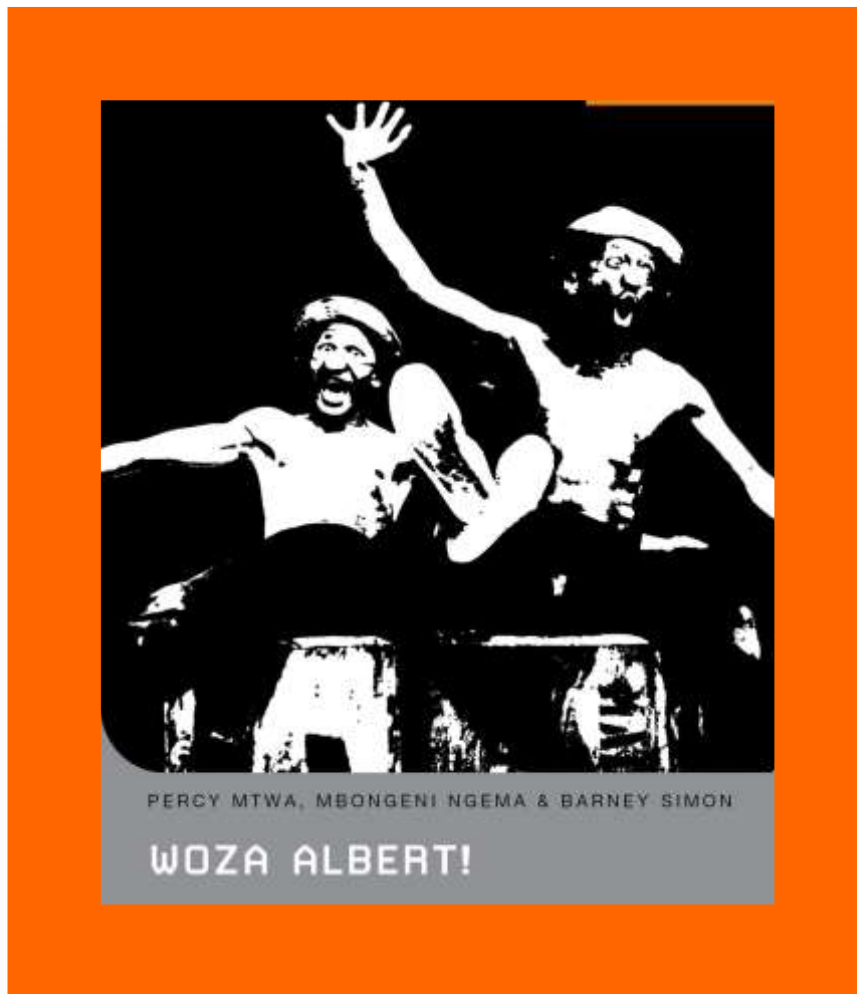

Woza Albert!

By Mbongeni Mgema, Percy Mtwa and Barney Simon



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1. PLAYWRIGHTS

1.1 Mbongeni Ngema

Mbongeni Ngema, (born 1955, Verulam, S.Af.), South African playwright, composer, choreographer, and theatrical director known largely for plays that reflect the spirit of black South Africans under apartheid.



Ngema, an ethnic Zulu, worked as a manual labourer and guitarist before he began acting in local theatre groups in the late 1970s. With actor Percy Mtwa he wrote the satirical play *Woza Albert!* (1981), which imagines that the second coming of Jesus Christ takes place in South Africa. The government first tries to exploit him and then banishes him to a notorious prison for blacks. Ngema's next show, the musical *Asinamali!* (1983), deals with police violence, forced separations from families, and constricting racist laws as experienced by five prisoners. Soon after the play opened, police raided a performance and arrested Ngema's actors. Despite its serious theme, *Asinamali!* is filled with music and comedy.

The success of both productions in the United States paved the way for Ngema's international triumph with the musical *Sarafina!* (1987). The title character is a black teenager who at first wants to become a superstar. Instead, inspired by a teacher, she becomes a revolutionary in the 1976 student uprisings in Soweto. Ngema and Hugh Masekela wrote the score, which features mbaqanga, the fusion of traditional South African music with modern American gospel, jazz, and rock. In 1990 a violent strike by South African railway workers inspired Ngema to write the musical *Township Fever*.

The election of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa in 1994 prompted Ngema to write *Mama! The Musical of Freedom*, in the following year. Based on Ngema's experiences with *Committed Artists*, a theatre troupe he founded in Johannesburg in 1983, *Mama!*—through its joyous songs and exuberant dance—tells the story of the youngsters who joined the troupe. The determined title character was based on Mandela's wife, Winnie, who had helped *Committed Artists*. Among Ngema's other works are a movie adaptation of *Sarafina!* (1992), choir direction for the animated feature *The Lion King* (1994), and the play *The House of Shaka* (2005).

1.2 Percy Mtwa



Mtwa was born and grew up in Wattville, Benoni. He did well at school, with an aptitude for classical novels, poetry and the visual arts, but at the age of 17, he was forced to leave school to find a job as a stores clerk so that he could help his father – a tailor and clothing designer – to support his family.

He initially made a name for himself as a singer and dancer, founding his own group, *Percy and the Maestros*. Then he acted in *Destiny Calls* (1973) a play written by a childhood friend and journalist, Gilroy Dlukula.

In 1979 he joined Gibson Kente's company as actor, with a role as singer/dancer in *Mama and the Load*, which toured South Africa, playing most townships and later also at the Market Theatre and the Baxter Theatre.

In May 1980 he and co-actor Mbongeni Ngema broke away to found the company Earth Players. Their first production was *Woza Albert!*, which they devised in 1981 and showed to the Market Theatre. There Barney Simon joined them as director and the company then took it on tour over a number of years. In 1982 he and Mbongeni Ngema appeared as actors and interviewees in an episode of the BBC series *Everyman devoted to Woza Albert!*.

Mtwa then wrote and directed *Bopha!* as a Market Theatre and Earth Players collaboration (*The Laager*, 1985-1986) and became a resident director at the Market Theatre.***

In 1986 a TV documentary was made of *Bopha!*, narrated by Sidney Poitier, and in 1993 a film version was produced by Arsenio Hall Communications, with a screenplay by Brian Bird and John Wierick, directed by Morgan Freeman, and starring inter alia Danny Glover, Malcolm McDonald, Marius Weyers and Sello Maaake ka Ncube.

Other plays by Mtwa are *The African Dream* (1998) and *The Patriot* (2001).

1.3 Barney Simon

Barney Simon, South African theatre director (born April 13, 1932, Johannesburg, South Africa—died June 30, 1995, Johannesburg), was a long-time force behind the growth of indigenous South African black drama and served as the artistic director of the non-racial Market Theatre in Johannesburg from its founding in 1976 until his death.

In 1976 Barney Simon co-founded Johannesburg's Market Theatre, South Africa's first multiracial cultural centre and a birthplace of the country's indigenous theatre movement. Working under the racial segregation laws of apartheid without state subsidies and under constant threat of arrest for staging controversial contemporary plays performed by multiracial casts in front of multiracial audiences, Simon remained the theatre's artistic director from its opening until he died. He was the first to stage many of Athol Fugard's plays, directed a film for the BBC of Nadine Gordimer's story "*City Lovers*", and worked with screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière on the French translation for the Paris production by Peter Brook of Simon's last play, *The Suit (Le Costume)* (1994).



Simon was known for his method of creating and developing original plays through a workshop process of field research, improvisation and collaborative writing, sometimes with untrained actors or combinations of musicians, professional actors and people entirely new to the theatre.

Simon spent a year (1969-70) in the U.S., where he introduced South African plays to a wider audience and edited the journal *New American Review*. In 1976 Simon and Mannie Manim opened the Market Theatre in a converted fruit market. There he nurtured dramatists such as Fugard, Percy Mtwa, and Mbongeni Ngema--in spite of recurring financial difficulties and the constant threat of arrest for staging controversial contemporary plays performed by multiracial casts in front of multiracial audiences. Simon's own published works include the play *Born in the R.S.A.*

2. CONTEXT: Socio-political and economic background

2.1 The Rise Of Political / Protest Theatre

In the 1970s a more radical political consciousness emerged in Black South African theatre. Especially after the 1976 Soweto protests, the younger generations felt a need for a theatre which reflected their political aspirations. This led to the emergence of South African Protest Theatre.

Zakes Mda claimed that “*protest theatre is theatre which makes a statement of disapproval or disagreement, but does not go beyond that. It addresses itself to the oppressor, with the view of appealing to his conscience. It is a theatre of complaint and sometimes of weeping. It is variously a theatre of self-pity, moralising, mourning and hopelessness. It never offers any solution beyond the depiction of the sad situation in which people find themselves*” (Mda, 1993). In this category, Mda would include Athol Fugard’s early works created with the Serpent Players (John Kani, Winston Ntshona et al.), e.g., *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, *The Island*, *The Blood Knot*, *Boesman and Lena*, *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act*.

Black playgoers felt that despite the high quality of these plays and the strength of their protest against the machinery of apartheid, they were too complex in structure and expression and too unmusical – too Western in form – to be worth seeing more than once. Also they felt that the main characters were not proud enough, or admirable enough, to represent black sufferings, values and aspirations. Thus Protest Theatre is pitted against Theatre of Resistance. There is a marked difference between these two forms of political theatre.

2.2 Black Consciousness Movement

Some theatre practitioners went beyond protest. The movement with the advent of the general struggle for culture identity and political conscientization known as Black Consciousness (a broad-based black political movement aiming to re-affirm black identity and dignity in the face of the onslaught from apartheid legislation and all forms of political and economic discrimination and oppression). (Hardie, 1998)

Black consciousness aimed to create a direct link between cultural and political liberation. With political means denied to them, black people began to use cultural means to express their aspirations. In the face of apartheid, Black Consciousness and the theatre it produced had to unite black people. Much of the theatre was polemical and didactic – Zakes Mda called this theatre, the Theatre of Resistance.

2.3 Theatre Of Resistance

It addressed itself to the oppressed with the overt aim of mobilizing them to explore was a means of fighting against the oppression. It was **agitprop**, for *it attempted to propagate a message and agitate for action on the part of the oppressed to change their situation*. It pulled no punches and at its best, served as a vehicle for sharing perceptions and insights among the oppressed and altering perceptions. At its worst it became a series of slogans denouncing the oppressor and extolling the virtues of the leaders of the liberation struggle.

2.4 Agitprop

The word 'agitprop' is derived from a combination of two words '**agitation**' and '**propaganda**'.

Theatre of Resistance was essentially agitprop – it attempted to propagate a message and agitate for action on the part of the oppressed to change their situation. Agitation	Propaganda
<i>Agitation</i> is the attempt to stir up public opinion for or against something. This is usually connected to a social or political issue. Agitation can take the form of protest marches, demonstrations, speeches or newspaper articles. It is a call for change and its purpose is to awaken awareness of a particular issue and then persuade its intended audience to take some form of action.	<i>Propaganda</i> is information, ideas, statements or rumours that are spread in order to help a cause, political leader or government. In recent times it has acquired a negative connotation as it is generally assumed that propaganda is the exclusive tool of totalitarian regimes spreading false or exaggerated claims. It would be more accurate to say that propaganda focuses on one side of an argument and selects only those facts or rumours that support this argument.



2.5 Protest Theatre

DEFINITION

Protest theatre aims at evoking an emotional response from the audience as the trigger to action – the audience is made to sympathise with the “cause” or the victim and re-evaluate their former opinions and behaviour.

It is a general theatrical/political term which refers to all kinds of theatre utilized to protest political and economic inequities and social ills.

In a more specific and local sense this is widely used as a blanket term to refer to theatre used to protest against and call for defiance of and changes to the Apartheid-state.

It usually includes a wide variety of forms and approaches, from rather ambiguous political plays and plays of testimony to highly militant plays of the agit-prop kind, aimed at inciting revolt and action.

In the 1990's Zakes Mda distinguished what he called "protest theatre" (theatre which shows the oppressor the results of his oppression, to tickle his conscience) from "theatre for resistance" (which overtly aims to mobilise the oppressed).

However, the term is normally used interchangeably with terms such as agit-prop, Political theatre, Theatre of defiance, Theatre of determination, Theatre for Resistance, Theatre of testimony (Testimonial theatre), Theatre as weapon, Alternative theatre and more. ([http://esat.sun.ac.za/index.php/Protest_theatre], n.d.).

Much of the drama from the 1960s onwards was concerned with protesting against the status quo. Protesting against the harsh realities of living under apartheid:

- 👉 The restrictive laws
- 👉 The poverty and severe censorship
- 👉 The dehumanisation of people
- 👉 The sense of isolation and the negation of self-worth
- 👉 The loss of identity

2.5.1 The AIMS of Protest Theatre

- 👉 To change and reform society.
- 👉 To educate and to instruct.
- 👉 To highlight topical issues.
- 👉 To point towards new development ; life; existence.
- 👉 Theatre for Change.
- 👉 The Involvement of Trade Unions.

2.5.2 Characteristics of Protest Theatre

- 👉 Contains strong political messages and statements
- 👉 Voices the feelings and frustrations of whomever is represented in the play.
- 👉 Some plays are scripted; others workshopped.
- 👉 The audience is compelled to sympathise and reevaluate their opinions.
- 👉 The focus is not on what should be learnt, but what should be unlearned (apartheid).
- 👉 The emphasis is on awareness.
- 👉 Done by the people for the people.

2.5.3 Protest Theatre Staging

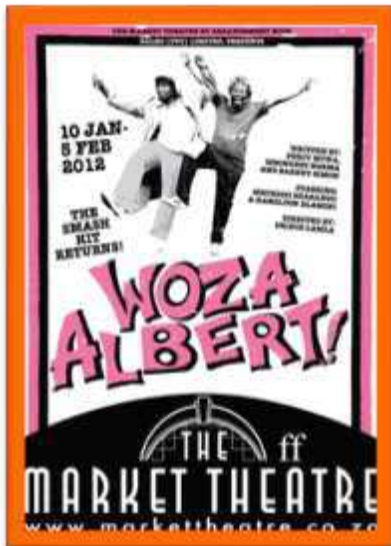
- 👉 Open Staging
- 👉 Any venue: space
- 👉 The use of slogans, posters, placards.
- 👉 Close actor/audience relationship.



2.5.4 Context

Woza Albert! is a satirical play written by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon. It was workshopped and took years of research and input from locals before this masterpiece was performed in The Market Theatre in 1983. The Woza-Albert play was written in the Apartheid era, as a form of Protest Theatre, which was confrontational. It brought up the sensitive subjects of Apartheid such as inequality; it gave the audience insight on the true feelings of black people who were in these tough situations.

The play deals with Morena (Christ) coming to South Africa, and how dubious it was for him to be coming here if he could choose anywhere in the world. They explore beliefs and how people have faith in their Morena, dealing with the religion in the streets of Johannesburg. The main idea of Woza Albert, was however to protest.



The play was written in 1981, four years after a petition was signed to abolish the government legislation which prevented white and black audiences and actors to work together. Grotowski was seen as a huge influence on this play. We see this by the actors only wearing pants allowing the rest of their body to be used as a tool and their own techniques to show that there was no shame but was working against inferiority. All of this was seen as someone taking a stand for what they believed in and trying to get the inequality out of the government system; by allowing for mixed audiences and two black actors working with a white man.

Shortly after the Dutch arrived in the Cape in 1652, the oppression of non-whites emerged. The whites being oppressed angered them which eventually lead to South Africa no longer being a colony (1910), now becoming a

Union. The new south African union faced many challenges while drama wasn't seen as one. The 1930's was an important decade for Drama, holding the births of both Athol Fugard and Barney Simon (in 1932).

In 1948 The National party comes into power, which was followed by the Group Areas Act being passed in 1950 (which separated the black people from the whites.) In 1955 the Sophiatown removals took place while the Boycott Movement was founded in 1959.

Not long after, the Sharpeville Massacre influenced theatre on a huge scale, allowing a new kind of theatre to be born called Protest Theatre. In 1963 the PACT was formed (Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal.) After the boycott other countries weren't proud to be involved with South Africa in any way so South Africa was expelled from the Olympics and it was a shame for the citizens. This actually helped us by forcing South Africans to work through it and attempt to reunite.

Barney Simon, who was firm in his standing on equality and racial segregation, co-founded the Market Theatre in 1976. The government often threatened him as his Market Theatre allowed for multi-racial casts and audiences. He was against Woza-Albert-1the racial segregation laws of apartheid.

Being a well-known 'workshopper' (Which was basically someone who created a play by gathering information and improvising it to eventually form a script), Simon often worked with

big names such as Athol Fugard and BBC's Nadine Gordimer on a story called "City Lovers". He was The Market Theatre's artistic designer until the day he died, leaving a legacy.

Each script has its own theme, which was effectively a group of ideas or emotions, which was carried throughout the story. The themes in this particular play include life being corrupted and disturbed by apartheid. It took people lives away from them and left them in the gutter, hopeless. There is also conflict throughout the play that brings up topics of the time.

Drama allows for people that aren't asked to give an opinion, as quoted "Drama gives voice to the voiceless."



There were three massive events which happened which impacted drama unbelievably; The Sharpeville Massacre, Soweto Uprisings and The Boycott. All three of these events stirred people's hearts and people responded to these brutal events through drama. At this stage Protest Theatre was quite common. The boycott put us into the situation for South Africa to be able to grow and become independent.

2.5.5 Research

The dramatists left the company they were working for, went to Cape Town and questioned people on how they felt about Jesus, if he would come back and if so what would happen. They would sit at a shabees and start talking, often causing fights and arguments. People got emotional, they said he didn't care for black people, he wasn't coming back or he was and will do certain things. They went around the country for 7 months.

3. INFLUENCES

3.1 Political Imprisonment:

The dramatists were detained as undesirable characters in the community and placed in solitary confinement where the policeman would come and pull them out and interview them - being placed in solitary confinement was how they got the idea for the detention scene.

3.2 The Bible & African Christianity

The Bible is a very important influence of the play because, the dramatists in the play are seen to not know much about God as they were not really interested in reading the Bible, yet when they were given the Bible and read it from start to end, the dramatists realized that Jesus was also a **freedom fighter**, and therefore people could **identify and trust** "Morena" more, in a way, because they went through **similar struggles**. The Bible is brought in to show that if He were to come at the time, the way things were being handled were not to be admired. This has to do with apartheid and the government handling apartheid in an inhumane way.

- (i) The hope that Morena (the Saviour) will visit South Africa.
- (ii) The doubt about Morena's arrival in a poverty-stricken country.
- (iii) They question the existence of Morena; if he existed he would have looked after the blacks as well.
- (iv) The emphasis is on their struggle to survive in a hostile environment.
- (v) The determination of their beliefs.
- (vi) An analysis of the Gospels in the streets of Soweto and Johannesburg Biblical references.

"For us, Christianity was clarified, as it was seen and resemble hope to our people in the townships, due to the conflict and struggle that was taking place at the time. For example, some thought that Jerusalem was a place in heaven rather than an actual place of earth"- Mgema

3.3 Politics:

The PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) were rounded up so themselves as well as a lot of their comrades were thrown into jail. There was a man, Hector, who would tell them about the movement and the dramatists didn't know too much about politics, except that the country was inspired to do something because the system was wrong. Politics is an influence, because a lot of people just like them, didn't know any of the facts about politics (Apartheid), they were just told what was right and what was wrong. Due to the socio-political context, they wanted to shed light on how politics affected the lives of all South Africans – black and white.

3.4 Workshop Theatre

The dramatists were highly influenced by Grotowski, the Polish experimental theatre director: namely, a conception of the essence of theatre which involves action, gesture, lighting effects – everything which usually takes second place to the playwright's text, his words – in *The Island* you will see a considerable stress on mime, gesture and light.

The playwrights, like Grotowski, increase the involvement between the actors and audience, and at several occasions in the play, the actors seem directly to confront members of the audience, questioning or addressing them.

The effect of Mtwla and Mgema's conception of the nature of drama was that the creative, as opposed to the illustrative abilities of the actors were released. Now they could try to put their own experiences into their plays, new plays based on these experiences. Now they no longer were just pretending to be characters in someone else's drama.

Therefore, *Woza Albert!* contains material directly from the lives of the actors who first put the play on. This style of theatre-making helped develop trust amongst the group in order to throw around ideas.

The playwrights needed to find characters so they interviewed people on the streets. They used real life experiences, e.g.

- a) Interviewed a woman digging for pies to feed her children. She did the washing in the suburbs every fortnight and made R50, her one daughter was in matric & sometimes also needed to wash (They lived in Soweto). They based a character on her.
- b) A toothless man whose speech & appearance was studied.
- c) People in Albert Street are concerned with immediate needs like finding a job & could be arrested at any time. They took Jesus to Albert Street Pass Office to see how they would react to Him. Jesus would question the doorman if he were there.

- d) After the dramatists gathered the material, they used the New Testament to hang on the material they had. They wanted to challenge the New Testament & translate it into today (Using a Jumbo Jet instead of a donkey as transport for Jesus).

3.5 Urban Experiences

- (i) Steve Biko's death; a forerunner of the Black People's Convention.
- (ii) The Sharpville and Soweto massacres.
- (iii) The conflict at Crossroads.
- (iv) Repression of urban life.

3.6 Grotowski

- 👍 Grotowski never saw the play despite it being overtly Grotowskian.
- 👍 Grotowski, Brooke and Simon realized their theatre styles were very similar despite the difference in past and culture.
- 👍 Brooke worked under Grotowski, he saw Asinamali (written by Mbongeni Ngema) and realized this was what Grotowski trying to achieve- but never quite achieved.
- 👍 Grotowski was interested in Mbongeni Ngema coming in as an African and felt the roots of theatre were in Africa.
- 👍 Grotowski got Brooke and Mbongeni Ngema to teach their actors about story telling.

4. PLAYMAKING PROCESS

This form of theatre emerged in the 1970s in South Africa.

It is essentially participatory and communal in nature and moves the focus away from an individual playwright. Collaborative and democratic process of playmaking. Can use song, mime, dance and political sloganeering. Is often linked in content and issues to the community from which it is formed.

The idea around which the performance is developed is decided on by the members of the group who will stage the play.

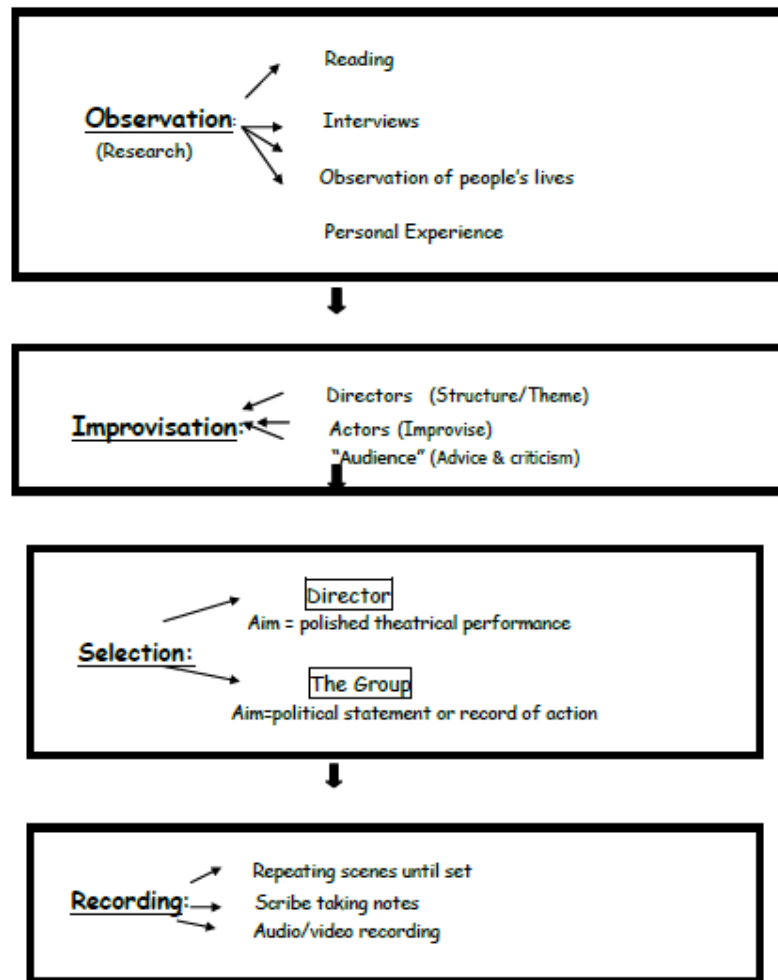
4.1 Background

While working on the play, the two actors were arrested by the Special Branch of the Security Police and held in solitary confinement. There they were able to put their time to use, by reading the Bible (the only reading matter permitted) and they held discussions with other detainees. The religious references and religious ironies seen in *Woza Albert!* came straight from this time!

Once released from prison, the two actors were invited to present their work to a small group at the Market Theatre. It was at this stage that Barney Simon joined Mtwana and Ngema, and the three of them spent six weeks workshoping the 'text' of *Woza Albert!* (See notes on Workshoping).

They workshoped the play, initially bringing together their recent experiences, as well as those experiences voiced by those they had interviewed. The play's highly physical and very energetic form directly correlates to its workshoped roots – staying true to South African theatre style (which is very performance orientated).

4.2 The Process



4.3 Advantages

- 👍 Anyone can create or act in a play even if they could not read or write.
- 👍 No script is needed.
- 👍 It is reasonable to stage as costumes, props, lighting and scenery are kept to a minimum.
- 👍 No special venue is required - arena acting space is used.
- 👍 The audience can surround the actors informally – they do not even need chairs.
- 👍 Special effects are created by the actors themselves using musical, vocal and movement skills.
- 👍 Costs are kept very low.
- 👍 There is not one director.
- 👍 Everyone participating in the play plays a part in the creation process.
- 👍 The play can be about topical issues or something that happened recently.

4.4 Rehearsals

- 👍 Dramatists went to Johannesburg
- 👍 Asked for rehearsal space at FUBA (Federated Union of Black Artists)

- 👉 Ask Mannie Manim at the Market Theatre to give them space to perform
- 👉 Forty people watched the run-through, including Barney Simon
- 👉 Barney Simon worked with them to create the text for 6 weeks
- 👉 Because of their experiences & Grotowski, they developed resonators & could use their bodies to tell stories.

4.5 Production

- (i) Based on the oral tradition.
- (ii) The content is spontaneous and immediate.
- (iii) It is a communal act.
- (iv) It occurs in relation to the audience.
- (v) Not scripted, but a physical making.
- (vi) If scripted, it is done afterwards.
- (vii) Actors observe, improvise and select to form a script.
- (viii) Observations : from newspapers; interviews; magazines; watching people's everyday routines; experiences.
- (ix) **Improvisations** : the act of oral compositions, develops from a skeleton structure or basic theme; actors draw on observations to create characters; spontaneous plot building; issues are drawn from revolutionary periods.
- (x) Selection; improvised scenes are selected or rejected; the framework is formed.

4.6 Barney Simon's Input

- 👉 Simon had a tremendous input, because as a white man during apartheid, he was more politically correct. He ultimately acted as the scribe for the play.
- 👉 As an experienced director he knew what to leave out and what to include.
- 👉 Mgema and Mtwana came to him with lines and scenes and from where he improved them.
- 👉 He showed playwrights to adapt and perform for other audiences, locally and internationally, as they had been limited to black audiences at the time.

4.7 Written Text / Script

- The first script came four months after their 1st production; the written version and script was finalised in 1983
- Each performance was adapted to suit certain audiences. E.g. a joke would be perceived differently depending on location.

5. DRAMATIC ACTION / PLOT

[Follow this link to a scene-by-scene analysis.](#)

6. GENRE

Political and Protest Theatre

Protest Theatre: Theatre that is self-consciously and self-declaredly political in its content and purpose. Uses theatre and drama as a platform to inspire political change.

Its intention is to raise the consciousness of the audience, or to affirm their consciousness, in order to inspire them to struggle in action for social and political change. [Though Mda said it just pricked the conscience of the oppressor and a true Theatre of Resistance is what mobilises political activism.] Has an agenda according to the playwright's intention. *Woza Albert!* makes a strong political statement against apartheid – and its system of white supremacy and oppressive, unjust and exploitative system of racial segregation. Influence of Brecht = Intention: The play rouses the audience to action. The audience has to leave the theatre and fight for change.

* See SECTION 2.5 to explore PROTEST THEATRE as a stylistic element.

7. STYLE

7.1 Satire

Despite the play's serious subject matter, it is comical in nature – this is why we can say that the play serves both to educate and entertain. This kind of fusion is referred to as 'satire', which uses laughter as a weapon to expose the weaknesses of the individuals and social groups.

Beneath the playfulness and the humour lies a strong protest message which critiques the harsh realities of the apartheid regime.

Satire is often used to point out wrongs in order to correct them. Satire is used in *Woza Albert!* to criticise, expose, protest against and make fun of the apartheid system and those who support it. Thus it is the characters in authority who are satirised, like the policeman, prison guards and Baas Kom. The only person NOT mentioned by name is PW Botha.

The wearing of the clown noses for all of the white characters has double significance. It is used, practically, to point out to the audience that black actors are playing white characters, but it also further emphasises the ridiculous nature of these characters.

Another example of satire is the use/incorporation of the New Testament that has been used as a parallel for the events of the play. This is ironic when one remembers that the National Party Government considered itself to be Christian, enforced National Christian Education and used the Bible to substantiate several of the apartheid beliefs. In this sense, Christianity is criticised for Christians believe that Christ will not return to the oppressors but to the oppressed and, when He does return, He will not be recognised by them.

The play ends on a note of defiance and celebration, when the satire is laid aside for a vision of a South Africa where the liberation struggle will ultimately triumph. This is seen through the rising up of people like Albert Luthuli and Steve Biko, who were both fighters for the liberation.

7.2 Poor Theatre

Grotowski's "Poor Theatre" can be described as theatre **stripped down** to the essential: **the actor**.

The education of an actor in the Poor Theatre is not a matter of teaching him a collection of skills, but a complete stripping down, by laying bare of one's own intimacy – the actor makes a total gift of himself.

- The actors undergo strenuous physical training to release impulses from the deepest levels of the unconscious.
- Another technique that Grotowski used, to reveal the inner thoughts of a character, is contradiction (between gesture and voice, voice and word, word and thought, will and action, etc.)
- Grotowski and his Poor theatre have resigned from the stage-and-auditorium set-up: for each production, a new space is designed for the actors and spectators.
- Infinite variation of performer-audience relationship is possible:
 - ✓ The actors can play among the spectators, directly contradicting the audience and giving it a passive role in the production (Cain).
 - ✓ The actors may build structures among the spectators and thus include them in the architecture of action, subjecting them to a sense of the pressure and congestion and limitation of space (Akropolis).
 - ✓ The actors may play among the spectators and ignore them, looking through them.
 - ✓ The spectators may be separated from the actors, for example, by a high fence, over which only their heads protrude (The Constant Prince).
- Poor Theatre forsook lighting effects, and this revealed a wide range of possibilities for the actor's use of stationary light-sources by deliberate work with shadows, bright spots, etc.
- Grotowski abandoned make-up, pillow-stuffed bellies – it was consummately theatrical for the actor to transform from type to type, character to character, silhouette to silhouette, while the audience watched, using only his own body and craft.
- A costume with no autonomous value, existing only in connection with a particular character and his activities, can be transformed in front of the audience.
- By his controlled use of gesture the actor transforms the floor into a sea, a table into a confessional, a piece of iron into an animate partner, etc.
- Elimination of music (live and recorded) not produced by the actors enables the performance itself to become music through the orchestration of voices and clashing objects.
- The acceptance of poverty in theatre, stripped of all that is not essential to it, revealed to us not only the backbone of the medium, but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art-form.

Keeping with the skills and techniques of Poor Theatre, the noses also double up as miner's lights – this is an example of how props are used in different ways (Grotowski).



7.3 Oral Tradition

In Western theatre there is a song and a play. But in South African theatre, the two were interwoven because of our culture.

What is oral tradition?

Oral means spoken form, rather than written form.

Tradition includes the history and heritage passed from one generation to another – the body of facts, knowledge, beliefs and values which are passed on and the acceptance of these things by a particular culture as part of their tradition.

DRAMATIC COMPONENTS IN THE ORAL TRADITION

1. **Imitation/roleplay/characterisation.**
e.g. When the narrator or members of the performance imitate an animal, role play the god of Agriculture, or characterize an ancestor who is being praised.

2. **Dance**
e.g. At times language seems inadequate to express a feeling or an action. As a result the importance of the gesture becomes dominant.

Seldom is the dance or movements and gestures meaningless. Often it is either symbolising or representing something, it is a meaningful action.

3. **Songs and the story.**
Text and melody form a harmonious unity. The *songs* are an *essential* element in the narration, NOT an accessory. Often the tune is the "motor" of the narration, the whole text resting on the music. In the songs there is a formulae of repetition of sentences, verses, songs and refrains. These keep being repeated during the narration at alternate moments.

In Modern Theatre the African playwright uses these traditional devices. The ORAL TRADITION, in form as well as theme has constituted a source of inspiration to the modern African dramatist.

This is why traditional poetry, song and dance are so prevalent in African plays and musicals of today.

8. TITLE

There were many titles before Woza Albert (The second coming, Our father who art in heaven) Morena means 'sir' – a sign of respect – Using Jesus could get them banned for blasphemy.

A week before opening it was changed to WOZA ALBERT because Albert (Albert Luthuli) was the president of the ANC.

An urgent political question : *"What if Jesus decided to visit South Africa with its political confusion?"*

Woza : - rise up!

Albert : - Albert Luthuli - the father of the nation.

A sense of urgency.

It symbolises the Second Coming of the Saviour to South Africa.

Morena must visit Albert Street where the pass office is situated and come and see the injustices happening there.

Black labourers also waited in Albert street to be picked up by white bosses.

Albert Street : a place of oppression; endless waiting for 'temporary working permits'.

They want to tell Morena that they have permits, but they cannot find work. (Percy waited 3 weeks for a 6 month 'special').

They want Morena to take them to heaven because South African is a terrible place.

Albert Luthuli - a civil right crusade leading blacks to demonstrate against apartheid.

Here seen as the 'Morena' who is capable of leading his people to freedom.

9. LANGUAGE

The language of the play is a combination of English, Afrikaans and vernacular (language or dialect of a particular country or class) languages. It is multi-lingual. The power of this play lies in the imagery that it provokes – this is why international audiences could still follow, understand and resonate with the play on such a personal level.

The language is sharp, biting, witty and ironic.

There are a great number of colloquial South African expressions such as 'loafer-skap' and 'six month special', which makes the play uniquely South African.

The play also makes use of symbolic and ironic meanings, by naming characters like 'Zuluboy', 'Bobbejaan', 'Baas Kom', 'My president', etc. These contribute to the overall message of the play. There is also incongruous use of language in the play which adds to the comic effects e.g. words like 'cool' referring to heaven.

A great deal is also reflected about the times through the use of language e.g. P W Botha's speech expressing happiness that Morena has chosen South Africa is typical of the propaganda speeches the government would make about the situation in the country.

10. CHARACTERS

The actors do not try to create three-dimensional characters the same way they would in Sophiatown, for example. They do not use Stanislavskian techniques. Rather, they assume presentational, stereotypical characters and roles.

Characters such as the policeman, the president, the poverty-stricken and desperate people ALL REPRESENT various perspectives and people in order to inform and educate society about the system.

To perform the various roles in the play, the actors need to be extremely versatile in terms of the use of mind, body and voice (see Grotowski).

The standard roles and relationships that people have and continue to play in society, are explored through the stereotypical characters in the play (all of whom are loosely based on real people the actors interviewed).

10.1 Off-Stage Characters

Off-stage characters

- (i) The invisible television interviewer who keeps the audience informed about Morena's arrival.
- (ii) The white bosses passing in cars to pick up casual labourers : a farmer; a businessman.
- (iii) Baas Piet; the white man issuing working permits.
- (iv) Baas Kom; the white boss from Coronation brickyard.

Narrative : telling a story; the oral tradition.

11. ACTING STYLE

Like every aspect of this play, the performance style is made up of a conglomeration of theatre styles. **The performance style is primarily loud, energetic, larger than life, exaggerated and very physical.**

The actors make use of transformation, meaning that they play various characters and transform from one character into the next, even into animals (pigeons), inanimate objects (slot machines) and events in nature (the big explosion).

Their ability to do this creates much of the magic that is aroused for the audience. Not only do the transformations allow for many different perspectives to be explored, but they also allow for the smooth and fluid transition from one scene into the next without massive changes in costume or scenery.

11.1 Physical Theatre

The play is extremely physical due to the influences of POOR THEATRE and ORAL TRADITION.

a) Characteristics of Physical Theatre

- i) The use of the attributes of drama and dance in a search for a language somewhere between gesture and thought.
- ii) It breaks away from conventional approaches to theatre and performance in search for fresh and novel theatre alternatives.
- iii) It explores thematic content and ideologies, but also form and structure, using the body as the basis of enquiry.
- iv) The body is mobilised as a source of power, integrating the physical, vocal, mental and emotional resources of the performer.
- v) It includes fact, fiction, movement, mime, text, song, dance and design.
- vi) It is a holistic theatre experience.

- vii) It is collaborative theatre, involving creative thinking and the performance of many artists. Both, the educators and learners are involved.
- viii) It is not superficial and is based on continued interaction between learners and educators.
- ix) It is dependent on negotiation, criticism and argument.
- x) It is based on the social, cultural and artistic backgrounds of the performers.
- xi) It relies on interaction with source material and the devising of appropriate and provocative imagery.
- xii) The participant becomes a *performer* rather than an *actor, dancer or mime artist*.
- xiii) It provides a creative environment in which the performers are challenged with personal, social, political, cultural and gender issues.
- xiv) It is experimental theatre where ideas are discussed and workshopped. Valuable Poor Theatre.
- xv) The performer must be willing to risk – as the risk factor is central to the learning experience. These risks will involve physical, mental, emotional and spiritual risks.
- xvi) A theatre of ideas and a theatre of action.

12. STRUCTURE

Structure

- a) A play in 26 scenes.
- b) Episodic; no chronological order.
- c) Rapid pace.
- d) Transitions from one scene to the next is smooth and clearly devised : a scream becomes a siren which develops into train sounds; Auntie Dudu's shawl becomes the barber's sheet.
- e) Through song and dance they bring across their message : the freedom song (scene 26).

☛ The play has an episodic structure = it is made up of a series of images and each scene can "stand on its own" i.e. each scene has a beginning, middle and end and is complete in itself. The actors play more than one role in the play, and repetition is used to link the episodes e.g. when the actors make the sound of the police siren to link scenes 4 and 5.

The play is made up of a montage of scenes, each of which has its own story and scenario, but together tell one story linked to the central question: 'what would happen if Morena (Jesus) came to South Africa?'

The pace of the play is quick – actors move from one scene to another rapidly and with great energy!

The actors transition from one scene to the next – hardly noticed by the audience because the actors make use of choreographed team work.

The structure of the play (which is performance-oriented) is



Hillcrest

13. STAGING

Woza Albert! borrows from Jerzy Grotowski's Poor Theatre. Since financial and special resources were denied to non-white people under apartheid, stages in protest theatre were usually bare and minimalistic.

Ngema and Mtwa also specifically studied poor theatre techniques; and Woza Albert! is a very good example of Grotowski's ideas in practice.

The set is made up of two chests which serve multiple purposes e.g. a train, the meat vendor's table and lorry, etc.

The props used are all versatile e.g. the sheet becomes Auntie Dudu's shawl, and the Barber's shawl. The actors used no make-up and used basic costumes to signify characters (e.g. clown noses) and lighting is kept to a minimum. The actors created and defined the space themselves through the use of aestheticism, all of which is in keeping with Grotowski's poor theatre.

Staging

- a) No fixed theatres for venues.
- b) Few lights; no luxuries; informal.
- c) Actors are loud; energetic and fend for themselves.
- d) Actors deal with the audience noise.
- e) Open staging; a few basic properties; a clothing rail.
- f) Contemporary style/dress.
- g) Noisy atmosphere with audience members who would walk out or return.
- h) Representational properties.
- i) Small cast; versatile.
- j) Direct contact with the audience; intimate audience/actor relationship.
- k) Actors portray many roles.
- l) The use of ideophones and vocal instrumental sound effects.
- m) Clown noses to imitate the white bosses.
- n) The end of the one episode would introduce the beginning of the next one.
- o) Grotowski's techniques are incorporated : their bodies tell the story.



13.1 Poor Theatre / Grotowskian Influence on STAGING

Experimental use of performance space and staging:

The auditorium became an intimate space divided in varying ways to allow the utmost contact of exchange between actor and audience.

Transformation of empty/bare spaces. No proscenium arch, the production determined the actor-audience relationship. A large room used, re-arranged for each production. Theatre designers were architects working on creating an integrated relationship between actor and audience. A Poor Theatre auditorium becomes an intimate space that allows the utmost contact and exchange between performers and audience.

Use of unconventional theatre spaces with each production determining its own physical staging/actor-audience relationship. (Kordian = set as if in a mental asylum, the audience become the patients; Dr Faustus, the audience with the actors as guests at the supper; The Constant Prince, the audience watched from above, like voyeurs.)

Avoided scenery and minimised spectacle. No scenery in the traditional sense.

The actors are the essential ingredient/actor-centred theatre; actor uses physicality, is a total performer, no use of make-up, uses face as a mobile mask, the actor a priest, a holy performer. The performer's body and voice modulation play a central role in the production of Poor Theatre. 'Music' produced by the actors themselves. Vocal effects replaced instrumental music and sound off.

Flood lighting. Minimal lighting source. Only stationary lighting sources were used.

Anonymous costume. Costume changes in full view of the audience. Costume was non-descript.

Minimal props transform into symbolic objects and actors used as props. Actors could use functional props in many ways.

14. ACTOR TRAINING

14.1 Poor Theatre

Influenced by Poor Theatre; the African theatre tradition = actor-centred, versatile and energetic performance, physical, dance, mime, music;

Township Theatre = exaggerated characterization;

African oral tradition of animated storytelling.

Grotowskian style of acting appropriate for playing

Jazz-band miming the action at beginning, really sweating, physical reflection and manifestation of their situation

- ☐ small and intimate playing space
- ☐ holistic training for vocal, physical and emotional training of actor.
- ☐ Theatre becomes a confrontation
- ☐ The actor must work, the actors push themselves very far
- ☐ Exercise plastiques and exercises corporeal – the physical mobility of the actor like plasticine working together with other actor.

14.2 Physical Theatre

The training for physical theatre requires a vigorous programme – including:

- i) improvisation
- ii) contact improvisation
- iii) verbal dynamics
- iv) contemporary dance techniques
- v) partnering
- vi) mime
- vii) release techniques
- viii) relaxation
- ix) centering
- x) communication skills
- xi) acting skills

15. ACTOR-AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP

South African audiences understand because it is their history, they lived through it. The first performance took place in Soweto. It was in a cinema in front of 1 800 people, by the end it was so full, there was no standing space. It is normally 1 hour and 20 minutes but the audience-participation in Soweto made it 2 hours long, the dramatists had to stop for the audience to laugh.

In NYC and London, overseas, it was slick and although the technique, storytelling and expertise was admired, a lot went over their heads as they didn't understand the conditions and context of the time.

Even though audience members will not relate to the action on stage (like that of Realism) due to the style of the play, pathos will ultimately be evoked by the truthful way he uses real-life stories and creates characters that earn our sympathy. The dramatists encourage the purging of catharsis so that (unlike Brecht), the audience, through their emotional response, will become aware of the suffering around them and ultimately strive to create a world of equality.

Grotowski asked: What does/can theatre do that film cannot?

There is an immediate actor/audience relationship in theatre because both are physically present in the same space.

He worked for an intimate actor/audience relationship. The audience is placed in near proximity to the actors. Actor and audience are together in an intimate experience = Theatre is a communion.

(Para-theatrical/ 'active culture' processes = training exercises and forms of activities located somewhere between rehearsals and workshops : overcoming the division between participants and spectators; working towards suspending social roles and instead finding the human dimension of one's existence in action and experiment; encounters involving other people and nature, gradually leading towards fundamental transformations in culture.)

16. COSTUME

The costumes used in the play were presentational and functional. Actors would change in front of the audience, from the wooden rail that hung upstage.

17. THEMES & SYMBOLS

Themes : Society is analysed and reflected upon

Personal morals

- (i) The emphasis is on the immoral behaviour of black and white : (scene 9) the mother of the meat-vendor is invited to a hostel compared to the white's immoral behaviour at Sun City.
- (ii) Through racial chauvinism white supremacist colonialism is exposed.

Human Rights

- (i) Scene 9 : The meat-vendor boy wants to go to school.
- (ii) Scene 10 : Auntie Dudu will find lots of nice food in the garbage bin.
- (iii) Scene 11 : The barber will have a shop with tiles and mirrors in Johannesburg.
- (iv) A sense of hope is created.
- (v) An illusionary world of happiness and success.
- (vi) There will be no discrimination.
- (vii) Scene 18 : Bobbejaan and Zuluboy are called " terrorists" by Baas Kom.
- (viii) Scene 16 : Like dogs they have to wait outside the pass office for a working permit.
- (ix) Independence; scene 18 : Mbongeni warns Baas Kom to listen when people speak.

Injustice

- (i) The Soweto riots of 1976.
- (ii) The barber's shop which was flattened by bulldozers.
- (iii) Having to work only if you had a pass book with a stamped working permit.
- (iv) Having no identities or names; merely numbers.

Politics; Militancy; Oppression

- (i) Apartheid causes strikes; scene 18 – people were expected to work with no lunch times; no increases; if they refused the police will fetch them and send them back to their homelands.
- (ii) The police attacking Soweto at night with stray bullets killing people 'by accident'; road blocks; the Regina Mundi Church full of tear-gas and smoke.

18. DIRECTING

- ☐ Stay true to playwright's intentions & style of the play.
- ☐ Acting techniques
- ☐ Voice and body questions – create a warm-up
- ☐ What are the physical, vocal and emotional demands on the actor performing one of the characters in the play you have studied?
- ☐ Blocking question – block the movements of the actors

□ Design a set

Students need to be made fully aware of the historical background and generally in the theatre, as many of them were not around when the laws were implemented, so they have to gain a general knowledge of the laws so they can implement it accordingly in the context of the play

So, they need to be taught about how the workshop techniques operates to fully understand the making of this play and thinking around it.

