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Umabatha

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UMABATHA

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UMABATHA
The Zulu Macbeth

Dramatis Personae

MABATHA, THE KING'S COUSIN (Macbeth)	Buyani Shangase
KA MADONSELA (Lady Macbeth)	Dieketseng Mnisi
DANGANE, the PRINCE (Duncan)	Lawrence Masondo
DONEBANE, the PRINCE (Donalbane)	Buyani Shangase
MAKHIWANE, the PRINCE (Malcolm)	Martin Jwara
MAFUDU, the KING'S COUSIN (Macduff)	Qond'okwakhe mngwengwe
BHANGANE (BANQUO)/ ISIPOKI (Ghost)	Qed'umunyu zungu
FOLOSE, BHANGANE'S SON (Fleance)	Shaun Dugen
ISANGOMA 1	S'Bongile Ngqulunga
ISANGOMA 2	Promise S'Thembile Jali
ISANGOMA 3	Mary-Ann Busie
MCHUNU (Lady Macduff)	Philie Sibiya
INDODANA, MAFUDU'S SON	Thokozani Makhoba
ISIDAKWA (Drunken King's Guard)/	
ISIPOKI (Ghost)	Ndumiso Novukuza
HOSHWENI (Ross)/ ISIPOKI (ghost)/	
INCEKU (King's servant)/ MABATHA Understudy	Richard Hiatswayo

ANGANO (Angus)/ ISIPOKI (ghost)/ INCEKU (King's servant)/	
UMBULALI 3 (3 RD Murderer)	Thokozani Makhoa
LINOLO (Lennox)/ ISIPOKI (ghost)/	
DANCE CAPTAIN	Mduduzi Zwane
IMBONGI (King's praise singer)/ ISIPOKI (Ghost)/	
MAFUDU understudy	Dumisani Mdlalose
INYANGA/DANGANE understudy	Nhlanhla Dladla
ISALUKAZI	Thokozile Gumede
MSIMBITHI	Phlani Radebe
KA MADONSELA understudy 1/ INTOMBI (Maiden)	Sonto Maphumulo
KA MADONSELA understudy 2/ INTOMBI (Maiden)	Mbali Masinga
DRUMMERS	William Lembede
	David Fifi Msimang
	Dumisane Mdlalose
	Mduduzi Zwane
IGOSA (Dance leader)	Mafika Ngwazi
IPHINI 1 (1 st deputy dance leader)	Joseph Mnguni
IPHINI 2 (2 nd deputy dance leader)	Prince Gambushe
UMBULALI 1 (1 ST Murderer)/ IBUTHO (Warrior)	Mbongwa Njilo
UMBULALI 2 (2 ND Murderer)/ IBUTHO (Warrior)	Bhekisisa Mthembu
AMABUTHO (Warriors)	Bhekubuthi Cele
	Frans Duna
	Mazwi Cele
	Sipho Mngadi
	Zwelibanzi Gansa
	Mbokodo Mhlongo

WRITER/DIRECTOR

MUSIC (AND TRADITIONAL)

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR/ VOCAL ARRANGEMENTS

CHOREOGRAPHY

ORIGINAL LIGHTING DESIGNER

LIGHTING INTERPRETATION

COMPANY MANAGER

STAGE MANAGER

Bhekuysie Mnyandu

Xolani Ngubane

Alpheus Ngwazi

Welcome Msomi

Welcome Msomi

Thuli Dumakude

Thuli Dumakude

Mduduzi Zwane

Mafika Ngwazi

Mannie Manim

France Mavana

Alfred Nokwe

Mncedi Dayi

UMABATHA: the Zulu *Macbeth* 18 – 22 April, 2001, Shakespeare's Globe

INTRODUCTION

Umabatha was originally conceived in 1973 and was part of a world tour between 1973-1982, including performances in the UK at the Aldwych Theatre, London. It was also performed at the Globe in 1997, and was brought back in April of this year as part of the 'Globe-to-Globe' initiative, but also London's 'Celebrate South Africa' season.

Umabatha is one of two productions staged this year as part of the annual 'Globe-to-Globe' season. Every year productions from different areas of the world are invited to perform at the Globe, with the aim of exploring other kinds of theatre and cultures.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was chosen by Welcome Msomi as perfect source material on which to base a Zulu adaptation, as it seemed 'almost a carbon copy of the drama that took place in the early nations of Africa.' The intrigue, plots and counter plots of the play echoed the Zulu history of Shaka, a great warrior king who was also murdered by those closest to him. *Umabatha* draws a parallel between the Scottish clans and Zulu tribes, and was performed in historical Zulu costume. Traditional Zulu dances, storytelling and music were also woven into the performance.

SPATIAL SIGNIFIERS

There was a deliberate use of space employed in this play, achieved through the blocking. Different types of action occurred in specifically allocated areas of the stage. This helped to create imaginary locations in the minds of the audience, aiding them to engage with the story. In the modern theatre, the audience's imagination is often strongly influenced through the use of lighting or set. However, in *Umabatha*, this was achieved through blocking alone. Special significance was attached to certain isolated areas of the stage through the disciplined use of space.

Certain areas of the stage were also used to depict moods of characters, and as a method of signifying the character being addressed. For example, soliloquies were performed at the very front of the stage, the actor usually addressing the audience directly, making eye contact with all areas of the auditorium. The middle section of the stage was used predominantly for action, such as battles, celebrations and dancing or ceremonial activities. This middle area represented an 'internal space' where the audience was not included in the action, instead adopting the role of onlookers, eavesdropping in on the action. Points of interaction between two important characters, for example the meeting between King Danganane's sons outside Zululand, would also take place within this internal space.

The corridors, situated on the outer sides of the pillars, were used to position characters who formed part of the overall picture of the scene, yet were not directly involved in the action. This was representative of the symmetrical blocking employed throughout the entire production. For example, during the burial of King Danganane, the women formed these outer lines as the warriors performed the burial ritual centre stage. Scenes of plotting, between

characters such as Mabatha and Kamadonsela, occurred centre stage. The audience's role as spectator developed into a more inclusive and conspiratorial involvement through the chosen blocking of the scenes. This reinforced the idea of an imaginary Proscenium being created at the point of the pillars, but with an additional possibility allowing the action to spill over the imaginary boundary, into the audience. This idea was displayed through the extensive use of the balcony and yard areas. The balcony area was used to depict more intimate spaces and inner chambers, such as Kamadonsela's bedroom, but also as a platform for the king to formally address his tribe.

There were additional steps coming down from the stage into the yard to stage left and right. The company broke through the groundlings on several occasions, such as during the battle scene and the final curtain call. During the final battle between Mabatha and Mafudu the audience was situated in the middle of the two armies, with one onstage and the other closing in from behind. At the end of the performance the entire ensemble descended through the audience, finishing the performance of the dance at the back of the yard; this was a method used to embrace and include the audience as a part of the ensemble.

The language barrier could have been a potentially alienating factor for the audience; the space, therefore, was used to compensate for this. A spectator's position within the Globe can generate varied experiences depending upon their position in the auditorium. There was a high concentration of energy directed towards the yard audience, who had a close interaction with the performers. Although it was more difficult for the gallery spectators to maintain the same level of interaction as the groundlings, there was still an intense anticipation and level of attention held from both the second and third galleries.

All areas of the stage were used, but the focus of the actors was consistently directed forwards. A number of the dances (during the burial, and Mabatha's coronation feast) were based on an aesthetic which relied on the performers both facing and backing onto the audience. This had repercussions for members of the audience who were not positioned directly in front of the stage. For example, in the seating areas either side of the stage, these dances were viewed in profile. There was a marked difference in watching the dances from the front of the yard rather than towards the back. At the back there was an increased sense of a tableau, a synchronised, communal event where bodies moved in ensemble. At the front of the yard you could not see the patterning of space so clearly, but your attention was drawn more closely to individual performers, and the way in which they each performed the same movements yet marked them in their individual ways.

The symmetrical style of the blocking echoed, at times, the design of the space itself. The whole play was conducted in a very even way, not only in terms of blocking and dances, but also in terms of structure and the manner in which the story was constructed through the scenes. There was a strong sense of cyclical progression in the play, larger scenes echoing smaller scenes, the entrances and exits used equally and alternately throughout, and the placing of the ensemble scenes in contrast to soliloquies all seemed to cohere to a certain pattern or rhythm. The play seemed to follow a 'design' which combined the blocking with musicality and rhythm, intertwining the individual elements of the play beyond individual recognition.

LANGUAGE / MUSIC

Although the entire play was performed in Zulu, this did not appear to mar the audience's understanding of the play. This was achieved through a combination of aural (vocal/musical), physical (movement) and spatial (set/blocking) language to communicate meaning. This raised interesting questions as to how an audience responds to a play performed in another language, and whether a foreign text forces an audience to become more reliant on theatrical conventions or theatrical signifiers to shape an understanding of the play. Perhaps there are also wider implications for theatre: in the same way that visually impaired people may be more aurally sensitive, it may become easier to observe how the space on the stage functions without the distraction of words.

Considering these thoughts in a space normally devoted to Shakespeare, it becomes interesting when considering, as it is widely believed, that Shakespeare's primary concern was with words. An Elizabethan would go to the theatre to *hear* a play rather than to *see* it, whereas in Umabatha, there is an abundance to hear. The play is understood through the abstract methods of gesture, rhythm and intonation. These dramatic techniques are also applicable in the vernacular, but their effect is magnified in the absence of a familiar language. By the end of the performance, however, the audience began to identify some Zulu words, even after this limited exposure to the language. For example, they responded with '*Yabo*', a Zulu term, during the directors talk at the end of the play.

The audience did not approach the play entirely without guidance; there was a plot synopsis in the programme, and it is likely that the majority of spectators would have been familiar with the original story of Macbeth. During an interview with Arthur (Production Manager) it seemed that the company were relying on an audience knowledge of the original play. He did not consider the language barrier to be a problem, in view of the classic plot. Even if the audience was only able to grasp the basic outline of the play, the physicality and musicality within the performance helped to maintain the subtleties of dialogue in the soliloquies. However, familiarity with the famous speeches, for example: '*out damn spot*' or '*is this a dagger I see before me?*' made it possible, as a spectator, to identify specific gestures with specific phrases. For example, during the performance of Kamadonsela's '*out damn spot*' speech, an audience member said this out loud. It was apparent that people understood the abstract concepts under exploration in these soliloquies. This was partly owing to an awareness of Shakespeare's original, but also because of the exaggerated gestures used, intensity in the tone of voice, and actor/audience eye contact that actively held attention.

Soliloquies tended to be delivered from downstage centre. If characters moved behind the pillars, this signified which character was being addressed; it also indicated whether the content of the dialogue was internal or external. The space in front of the pillars was used to reveal secrets to the audience that are not known by the characters in the play. Therefore, if the audience observed this area of the stage in use, it signified that they were being drawn into confidence, often to discover motives for a character's actions. The stage was used as a way to communicate an abstract concept rather than physical action.

The distinction between the dead and the living was symbolized through the use of masks. This had an interesting and profound effect. The masks created a sense of alienation, and an immediate sense of a different, almost supernatural, dimension and, on occasions, even comical. The ending was one of resolution, following the return to a form of natural order.

The audience appeared to be elated at Mabatha's downfall, rather than identifying with the sentiments of pathos and tragedy. This may have been a result of the language difference. Although non-verbal aspects of communication can be equally strong, it was still only possible for the audience to grasp an impression, rather than a full understanding, of what was taking place on the stage. It was inevitable that a certain amount of simplification would be involved in the production to portray the more complicated characters. However, overall there appeared to be few deviations from the original text in the translation. For example, long speeches, such as the soliloquies remained in full. This did not affect the audience's concentration or enjoyment of the performance.

Music was an integral part of the play, performed on two large drums, combined with the voices of the cast. The majority of scenes involved music in some capacity, and it was an inseparable accompaniment from the character's delivery of their lines. Music was also played a key role in generating atmosphere and establishing the mood of a scene, which could vary from urgency and mourning to the supernatural and carnivalesque. The use of drums off stage added a sense of what lay beyond the physical theatre space, both backstage and outside the auditorium.

ROLE OF RITUAL

...Practised as a rite or rites, a strictly ordered or traditional method of performing an act of worship or other solemn ceremony, any method of doing something in which the details are always faithfully repeated...

The director, Welcome Msomi, was keen to establish the key elements of ritual in order to help identify the role of ritual within *Umabatha*: The definition above describes ritual as a spiritual activity, an 'act of worship.' This implies that the physical actions performed hold a symbolic significance, as well as being based on a system of belief. Therefore the actions gain a resonance and an importance in that they echo or represent something of a spiritual dimension. This dimension could be inhabited by the dead or unborn, and the ritual depicting their relation to the living, such as, for example, to a chieftain / king, or tribe / people. Ritual, therefore, is a means of establishing a link between the seen and the unseen, the physical and the metaphysical, perhaps also between reality and ideals. Rituals are a means of making not only religious transactions, but also those that are economic, political and social. Rituals can also be more than a mere symbol of these transactions. They may be a means of activating the process of exchange (such as at Mabatha's coronation) or strengthening existing ties / feelings through a process of mimesis or performance (such as grieving King Danganane's death: the dance at Danganane's funeral reaffirms and strengthens a pre-existing bond.)

Within the context of the play it is also important to note the significant place for performance within ritual. Ritual cannot exist without performance, it needs to be witnessed and acknowledged in order to exist. Therefore, ritual can be seen as one of the basic forms of drama itself, as performance stems from it, and it is arguably where performance began. In *Umabatha*, the dances used were authentic Zulu rituals that had been translated to a new space and time. The dances, although not actually 'a ritual' in the original sense, remained ritualistic for this reason. The purpose of their performance changed, yet the mimetic action remained the same.

The dance choreography was not the only element that could be identified as ritualistic in *Umabatha*. For example, the battle scene was portrayed using highly stylised movements, with an almost dance-like quality to them. There was a consciousness of the story being told through a ritualistic performance of the battle rather than a realistic representation of it. A conscious decision was made to tell the story of the battles in the form of an imitation. The choreography of the fights affected the view of this scene as an impression or version of reality, comparable to a 'dumb show.' The musical accompaniment reinforced this idea.

Another element identified with ritual is the role of repetition and attention to detail. This implies that there is a rigid structure of rules that should be followed, involving both action and timing. In the play there was a strong sense of this, especially within scenes where actions were repeated in sequence. The beginning of the play, during the initial entrance of the witches, was one moment indicating the importance of ritual in *Umabatha*. Immediately the witches introduced a sense of ceremony, pattern and hierarchy in movements that are repeated and developed throughout the play. The first witch, who acts as a leadership figure, enters centre-stage holding the cauldron above her head with reverence and focus. Her movements are stylised and repetitive which, combined with her vocals, suggest the casting of a spell. The other two witches follow, imitating her movements, creating a symmetrical and rhythmical impression.

The witches' performance was structured in patterns of threes: the three witches, moved simultaneously, chanting in musical phrases of three, a symbolic number in magic and mysticism. Even though the words were unfamiliar to an English-speaking audience, the musical phrasing was obvious and effective. The action was centrestage. The witches remained evenly spaced, with symmetrical entrances and exits. These patterns were recapitulated and expanded upon later.

This short scene served as a foretaste for their second entrance in Scene 4, which developed the earlier patterns. They repeated the same style of entrance, entering one after the other using vocals in a musical canon or 'round.' This time they performed a dance, following the leader around a central point. They moved in unison in a triangular formation with sequences of three movements. This dance was performed with a keen sense of dynamics, both aurally and visually, and was punctuated by movement, vocals and drums, reaching a climax in the entrance of Mabatha.

These simple patterns symbolised the summoning of a spirit. The presence of the cauldron, as well as being a reference to the original Macbeth, also symbolised this. The pattern was repeated again during their third and last appearance in Act 2 Scene 5 (*The Séance*). Their entrance was identical to their first appearance. The three ghosts with their three messages were another group of characters who adhered to the previously established patterns.

Zulu culture is rich in ritual. Each key event in the play was given ritualistic emphasis, which also served to overcome the language barrier. For example, during the Burial ceremony the warriors performed a warlike dance around the body of Duncan as the women wailed. Ritualistic patterns were, throughout, used to underline the idea of the existence of a natural order of things which Mabatha is subverting by his ambitions; although he achieves this for a short time it cannot be sustained as the powers that govern the world will not allow it. Ironically it is also these powers that drive him in his ambition to become King. Without the prophecies Mabatha may have remained a loyal subject to Dangane, and therein lies his

tragedy. He is subject to the whim of fate. In Mabatha this is reflected in the way the story seems inevitable – in Zulu culture listening to women is regarded as foolish and dangerous and therefore Mabatha's downfall is not so much the overcoming of evil but a triumphant regaining of the natural balance of things.

17 April, 2001: Rehearsal on stage

The warm up began with the beating of the drums and the full company engaging in a series of vigorous movements led by one actor. There was a sense of continuity and ensemble as the company moved in unison to the drumbeat, stamping their feet to the music in between their physical exercises. The performers sang in a range of harmonies, such as parallel fifths, against a main motif, whilst groups of women sang ululating over the top. This improvisation was built up around the central thread of the drum beat and a simple musical refrain. Exercises with volume and tone were carried out experimenting with loud dynamics, then contrasted with quiet humming, producing a range of intensity and emotions. Despite the overall feeling of spontaneity, there was also a strong sense that their warm up process followed an underlying structure of rules.

The company built up a remarkable energy as they moved in cycles together: first subtly, using small movements, and gradually developing to a climax before diminishing again. There was a nurtured sense of unity and support between the company. This observation was supported during an interview with Kamadonsela (Lady Mabatha), as she discussed how the strength in her character was sustained by the support of the company, as well as through audience response.

17 April, 2001: Dress Rehearsal

This run through was completed without any major interruptions. The actors were paused, periodically, by Welcome Msomi (Director) for brief notes, but no significant changes were made. The director's notes were given in Zulu, making comments impossible to decipher but, through observation, no apparent re-blocking was done.

Four groups entering and exiting the auditorium during the rehearsal did not seem to affect the company's focus. The actors seemed unconscious of their "accidental audience", Kamadonsela's speeches often being played to the empty galleries rather than the lower ones full of spectators.

17 April, 2001: Afternoon rehearsal on stage

The afternoon rehearsal did not take place in dress as the actors were finding it difficult to acclimatize to the British weather. The ensemble scenes were run through (Duncan's burial and the witches' 2nd séance scene) and the curtain call was rehearsed four or five times. The majority of time was spent on the séance. The entrances of the ghosts needed exact timing, and so these were worked on in detail.

Wednesday 18th April Performance #1:

The first night opened to a full house with a predominantly white audience. After a restrained and quiet beginning, the audience soon lost their reserve as they became increasingly involved and drawn in to the action. The witches provoked much laughter, as did the two-faced Kamadonsela (Lady Macbeth) at the beginning of the show. The audience appeared to identify and respond to the contrast of Kamadonsela's public appearance, of sweetness and light, and her private personality of evil ambition. There was applause between scenes from the engrossed audience, especially after the ensemble scenes. There was a consistent level of laughter throughout the performance, at some predictable moments, such as the cries of the murdered Dange (Duncan) which came from offstage and the drunken porter, but also at some other unexpected moments such as during Kamadonsela's soliloquy describing how she could dash her only child from her breast:

'...Khondo, I tell you,
Even if my only child was feeding at my breast
I would hurl him on to the rocks
And shatter his skull
Before I became as weak as you are now.' (Act 1, Scene 2 - translated script)

INTERACTION:

The adaptation was staged in a way that naturally encourages audience interaction, inviting the audience to become part of the tribe. The chieftain addressed the auditorium with the warriors positioned behind. Dangané's (Duncan) position on the balcony was suggestive of the chief's control over the whole space, not just that of the stage. The first night displayed a remarkable contrast to the energy levels apparent during the Dress. The company had clearly 'moved up a gear' and the performance held even more energy than before. The presence of the audience had finely tuned the company's concentration as they clearly committed maximum energy levels to this physically taxing style of performance.

The performers engaged in a great deal of eye contact with the groundlings, especially during the delivery of soliloquies. Kamadonsela displayed particular focus, drawing in the audience through eye contact with all areas of the auditorium. She created a sense of intimacy in the Globe's vast playing space by singling out individual spectators.

The Witches' focus of attention was much more disjointed, creating the desired sense of chaos and unpredictability. They received a high level of audience response as they drew them into their conspiracy to ridicule Mabatha at the opening of the play.

At the end of the play there was a sense of elation at Mabatha's downfall, and laughter at the moment of recognition as he realises Mafudu (Macduff) is not born of woman. His cowardice retained a strong comic element rather than a feeling of tragedy or pathos, and at his death there was a sentiment close to exultation amongst the audience.

After the Directors talk there was an remarkable atmosphere in the auditorium as the company descended into the yard. There was a strong feeling of ensemble which seemed to be enhanced by the shape of the Globe itself. The company circled the audience, seemingly entirely fused and integrated with the audience. The atmosphere was carnivalesque as the audience erupted into rapturous applause.

Thursday 19th April Performance #2:

The audience was slightly thinner on the ground in the yard and more spread out around the auditorium. The upper galleries were full, creating a different effect, as the response of the audience seemed to have a 'stereo' effect. The crowd was very restless at the beginning. They were, however, a much livelier audience, responding well throughout. This transformed the performance of Mabatha, who really played to the laughs, resulting in, at points, an almost slapstick comedy. He acted out an exaggerated exasperation towards his wife, to great comic effect. There was an increased level of disruption from the audience as they talked amongst themselves, but also much applause between all the scenes, and also at individual performances such as the drunken servant. The audience clearly entered into the spirit of the performance, some of the groundlings even moving and dancing along to the drum beat.

It is possible for details to be overlooked in such a visual performance. At points the dancing and movement was in danger of drawing the focus away from the main action as it was positioned centrestage. For example, at one point the dancing distracted the audience's focus away from an argument that was taking place between Mabatha and Kamadonsela downstage right. Each spectator in the Globe focuses on different pieces of the action due to a number of factors: firstly, there is no lighting in this theatre space to draw your attention to a particular area of the stage, therefore the audience has no directed focus. Secondly, it is not possible to see every single part of the stage from any one seat in the auditorium; therefore, if a spectator cannot see the actors at the centre of the action then they will look to the surrounding actors for their reactions to it. The audience attention during soliloquies remained focused and intense. The company seemed to respond to this with heightened energy during the feasting and mourning scenes.

In contrast to the previous evening, this audience did not find Bhangane's ghost as comical and they seemed to have more of an appreciation of the sinister events. The drums were almost drowned out before the curtain call by the audience with their applause, shouting and stamping in the galleries.

INTERACTION:

There was a more intimate contact between Mabatha and the groundlings, and also by some of the men in chorus who were pointing, nodding and staring into the front of the yard. The chieftain and leader of music also seemed to be making more contact with audience, spurred on by a receptive audience.

Friday 20th April Performance 3:

Although this was a quieter audience on the whole, there was a group of Zulu audience members who understood the language and responded with 'Yabo' and other native expressions during the performance. This signaled the possible extent of the cultural differences, indicating that the response of a Zulu audience would have been a lot more interactive. The wider audience may have been more passive in order to observe this Zulu response.

There were a number of laughs throughout the performance, at some unexpected moments such as Bhangane's murder, Kamadonsela's madness, and the ghosts.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This fresh interpretation of *Macbeth* complemented the Globe theatre space very effectively. As an interactive piece, it suited a space where the boundaries normally set between performer and spectator could be crossed, preventing the audience from taking a passive role. The Globe has a unique and lively atmosphere that encourages the audience to become involved with the action, without the need to be a Shakespearean scholar, placing Shakespeare's plays within the common reach.