

Aja Marneweck

Theatre of Difference

My intention of creating a Theatre of Difference formed the strong critical basis from which I constructed Maladamatjuate through an intensive workshop process. This was in an attempt to give critical and creative meaning to a performance of feminine identity deeply interrogative in its own possibilities.

And yet we stick with this cold tradition here in South Africa, and we say, "Nobody comes to the theatre anymore", and lament the dying gasps of the hackneyed old genres that have all the appeal of Calvinistic church services. Let the theatre be rich and thriving and humming like a Hindu Temple...
Brett Bailey, *The Plays of Miracle and Wonder*

"Difference" has played a major role in South African cultural perceptions, not only in terms of the structuring of our political and social systems in the past, but in terms of how we see ourselves today. The creative possibilities and critical problems implicated in the complexity of "difference" are at the forefront of new South African theatre. When I talk of "difference", I am looking specifically at identity as being located in opposition to an imposed dominant ideology. Some of the most exciting contemporary alternative female theatre makers explore staging strategies that critically and creatively re-present women in South Africa.

Influential emerging female artists Berni Searle and The Mothertongue Project Women's Collective deal specifically with redefining the female body. In rethinking representations of the female body, there needs to be an active awareness of the codes and conventions traditionally associated with the staging of the female body and of desire. Difference is something to be celebrated in performance, it has enormous creative and artistic potential.

Cape Town based fine artist Berni Searle's first exploration in video work, *Snow White*, was produced for the Venice Biennale's exhibition of contemporary African conceptual artists:

Snow White is a synced dual screen video projection. Both mural-sized images document the same action but one camera was placed directly in front of Searle and the other camera directly above the artist... kneeling naked in a darkened space, Searle's body is covered by softly falling flour... The flour deposits on her body, especially viewed from the front, transform the kneeling artist into

an utterly sculptural form. Water falling from above, touches parts of her body as it falls onto the pile of flour. Searle then uses the water to mix with the flour into dough.

Rory Bester, *Berni Searle: Floating Free*

The work of South Africa's influential emerging contemporary female artists explores the diversity and complexity of positions of difference through various visual and performative strategies. Drawing on the multiple and contradictory lived experiences of psyche/history, reason/myth, the everyday and the world of the dream, South African artists are finding new ways to perform the female body of difference. The most stimulating of this work offers new methods of representation in which the traditional lines that separate and classify subjectivity and experience are rejected and re-appropriated.

Video artist Berni Searle for example, in her installations of the *Colour Me Series* (2001), uses multiple framing

perspectives to insist on a more complex view of her own body and subject position. Hovering in an unknowable space, her camera both reveals and withholds information in order to speak back to the discourses of colonialism. It delivers stereotypes of coloured women into a series of spaces in which Searle deals with the estrangement of her own personal identity.

Women, specifically black women, are always portrayed as one-dimensional. It is time people saw another perspective now, not just the crying and the wailing.

Gloria Moshoeshoe, *The Sunday Times Magazine*

In the Mothertongue Theatre Project's recent production of *Uhambo: Pieces of a Dream* (2004) we are taken on a taxi ride into the multiple narrative layers that construct the lived experience of women in South Africa today.

Comprising a body of women from



Warona Seame in *Uhambo*. Photo: Kali Van Der Merwe



Uhambo by Mothertongue Theatre Project. Photo: Kali Van Der Merwe

many and different backgrounds, the project is united in its diversity. Here, colour is but one aspect of creative input where the goal is one of mutual possibility, communal catharsis and healing. This occurs through the explorations of the multiple experiences of South African women through the primary medium of storytelling. Here the Mothertongue Theatre Project talks about *Uhambo*:

The production offers an integration of theatre, visual art, and literature in the form of fresh, on-the-spot performances, portraits and installations to celebrate democracy in South Africa... where this has brought us, and the road yet to travel. Special focus will be given to changes in women's social and sexual rights and whether women are benefiting from these changes. It will also incorporate visions for the future...

Mothertongue, 2003

Multiple narratives collect in the body of a single female poet, allowing the many levels

of the narrative process to reside in a space where a story can resonate in so many ways, for many listeners and numerous tellers. Here cultural difference does not separate so much as feed the hybridity of the subject. We are left with a sense of the powerful relationship between the political and the personal in the performance.

Drawing on theoretical, personal and multimedia elements, I explored alternative methods of representation in my own production *Maladamatjuate* (2004). My intention of creating a Theatre of Difference formed the strong critical basis from which I constructed *Maladamatjuate* through an intensive workshop process. This was in an attempt to give critical and creative meaning to a performance of feminine identity deeply interrogative in its own possibilities. My intention was to find a way of presenting a renegotiation of perceptions of difference that, whilst being aware of the problematic

of its involvement in dominant discourses, aims at rethinking itself from more complex and creative perceptions of individual differentiation.

The play follows the true story of an African woman taken to Hamburg in 1885 to perform in the German Volkenschauens as an exotic snake charmer. A chromolithograph taken of the snake charmer found its way back to Africa where it became a key icon of the cultural formation of the sacred African water deity Mami Wata. The image of Maladamatjuate adorns many shrines and places of worship in Mami Wata Africa today.

The layers of symbolisation in the Mami Wata tradition, in themselves a complex system of meaning, were necessary to the critical and creative possibilities of the portrayal of the snake charmer in *Maladamatjuate*. An image which represented prosperity, power and beauty in one culture, began as the site of such fascination and fear for another. In a way the very dynamics of difference surrounding her stereotypes across the continents, denounces the authenticity of perceptions of her difference in the first place. The Mami Wata and Maladamatjuate both encompass such vastly differing icons and stereotypes of a single female of history. In the construction of the image of Maladamatjuate as an idealised vision of whiteness and European wealth, was her iconic status as Goddess not in some way replicating the process of stereotype and rigid interpretation of the body of woman into the desires and reflections of the dominant status quo? The woman in the picture was not European, she was the "other" taken from her homeland, dressed up and paraded as a European version of blackness. Yet in the transformations of those European symbolisations, the image of Maladamatjuate as Goddess is re-appropriated into a transgressive and completely African system of worship.

The production performed, through various devices, its main female character on simultaneous levels that confounded notions of truth and essentialism through layers of image and meaning. These layers were executed through a number of multimedia devices that were used throughout the play. In this way, the playing space was developed to enhance the sense of complexity in the cultural existence of the icon of the snake charmer. I used video, live performance, ritual, dance, soundscape and puppets in order to find a method of expression for her story which lay at the heart of the production.

Contemporary theatre artists are creating an awareness of how all women, past and future, are deeply involved in the continuous production of meanings and possibilities. While "difference" has necessarily played an important role in the shaping of female experience in South Africa, Theatre of Difference requires a shift in perception.

There are many voices of difference and desire that contemporary South African female artists are exploring and developing today. I hope that Theatre of Difference provides a platform in which new theatre makers can begin to celebrate subjectivities that, whilst being aware of the past, are able to look to the future.

AJA MARNEWECK (South Africa) is a visual theatre artist based in Cape Town. The focus of her theatre work is South African women's performance through the dynamic media of puppetry, multimedia and movement. Aja began her work in puppetry five years ago with puppet master Gary Friedman, exploring specifically object manipulation, subsequently training many local performers in this relatively unknown art form in her country.