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Mindelact (review)

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poems, plays, and novels, and were the voices of the disenfranchised. But they then left the nation. After the fall of apartheid, they returned and were hailed as heroes—but the “little people” who stayed, who lived through the struggle, who lost family, friends, and even their own lives by virtue of staying are also heroes. “A struggle is not just heroes,” reminds Siphon. “Those who stayed behind are the reason why the heroes have a nation to return to.” Siphon states he will call President Tambo Mbeki and demand the librarian’s job. After all, with his vote Siphon helped give Mbeki his job.

Apart from the political cost of the personal and the personal cost of the political presented in this play, there are also other significant differences from *Exits and Entrances*. The Mark Taper forum is a huge space compared to the Fountain; the detailed, naturalistic set by Sarah Roberts, featuring a packed house in the townships, stands in opposition to David Pott’s overly simple but wonderfully evocative set for the two dressing rooms of the Fugard piece. The greatest difference, however, is surely the presence of Kani himself in the lead role of his play.

Along with Winston Ntshona, Kani co-wrote *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* with Fugard, and has performed in numerous Fugard plays over the years, most notably the award-winning *My Children! My Africa!* and *Playland*. Kani has also succeeded Barney Simon as the Artistic Director of the Market Theatre. *Nothing But the Truth* premiered in South Africa in 2002 and was performed at Lincoln Center in New York in 2003, both times with Kani in the lead. In watching him, one gets the sense of watching modern South African theatre history on stage. This can be to the detriment of the production at times. While the two other actors give solid and competent performances, they simply are not on his level and his absence is felt when he is not on stage.

Similarly, the play can come across at times as preachy. It is certainly overly talkative. It is a tribute to the strength of the performances that one realizes there is almost no action in the play—it is a series of conversations that slowly reveal information, but not a huge amount actually happens. Given that, the play does engage many if not all of the major issues facing postapartheid South Africa, and perhaps even post-TRC South Africa.

The issue of the South African diaspora is also explored through the character of Mandisa, the daughter of Temba, who has been told her entire life that England is merely a place to live, South Africa is home. Yet it is a home she has never been to and knows little about. Interestingly, *Exits and*

Entrances also has an extended debate about the word “home” and its relevance in South Africa and the theatre. André states that his home is the theatre and informs The Playwright that his home is a blank piece of paper. Siphon tells Mandisa South Africa is not her home, but while it is “home” for him, it is not one he can claim either—his betrayals by family, nation, and people have made him effectively homeless.

Perhaps the ultimate point behind new South African theatre is not to be solely artistic or to continually re-engage the political. Perhaps the purpose of the theatre is both to redefine the purpose of theatre in a postapartheid era and to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the notion of home. In this sense, postapartheid theatre continues addressing the concerns of South African theatre for the past half century—given the problems of past and present, what and where is home, and how we can we all live there together.

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MINDELACT. The Tenth Annual International Theatre Festival of Mindelo. The Republic of Cape Verde. 3 September to 19 September, 2004.

Cape Verde, an archipelago of ten islands located off the West African coast, is a beautiful country of contradictions. The history and politics of this former Portuguese colony and its geographical separateness gave rise to a distinct creole culture. Santiago, the first island to be inhabited and colonized, is characteristically more African in its demographics, language, and culture. The island of São Vicente, on the other hand, appears noticeably more European, influenced by the commercial port city of Mindelo, a factor that led to its boast as the cultural center of the islands. Thirty years after independence, the postcolonial tension of the creole or *crioulo* culture of Cape Verde remains evident throughout the islands, and the Mindelact Theatre Festival is no exception.

In celebration of its tenth anniversary, director João Branco expanded the festival by one week, offering a workshop series, children’s programs, and thirty-two productions, half of which were by Cape Verdean theatre groups. Fifteen international theatre groups, solo artists, and workshop leaders from Portugal, Brazil, Italy, and France joined the Cape Verdean producers. Promising a “cultural



Peasant worker Bitá (Edimilson Sousa) recounts a life of hunger and labor under colonial powers in *Tchom di Morgado* (Morgado's Land) by OTACA and Raiz dos Engenhos at MINDELACT International Theatre Festival, Cape Verde Islands. Photo: João Barbosa, courtesy of the Mindelact Association.

invasion," Branco scheduled performances in the two-hundred-fifty-seat Mindelo Cultural Center, the courtyard, town square, town hall, village community centers, and a moving city bus. The cancellation of Mozambique's Grupo Galagalazul unfortunately left the anniversary festival (unlike past programs) with no representation from any other lusophone or francophone African country. However, a number of productions directly addressed the politics of language.

Given Cape Verde's recent colonial history, the choice to perform in Portuguese or Creole seems to be a significant factor in audience reception as artists grapple with issues of national and cultural identity. Although the official language remains Portuguese, most Cape Verdeans speak Creole, which draws upon Portuguese and West African languages. Writer and director Narciso Freire of OTACA passionately refers to Creole as the "mother tongue" and is committed to producing historically-based Creole plays. In collaboration with Raiz dos Engenhos, the two groups from Santiago's rural interior region co-presented *Tchom di Morgado* (Morgado's Land). Based on 1910–1920 worker revolts, the play portrays racial and social injus-

tices through the murder of a fieldworker who defies the authority of landowner Morgado. All the characters speak Creole, except for the Portuguese authority figures and those wishing to align themselves with colonial powers. Santiago Creole, with stronger African linguistic roots, is sometimes difficult for other islanders to understand. Thus, language in this production not only delineates class and hierarchal order but also serves to remind audiences of the racial, linguistic, and cultural remnants of Cape Verde's history of slavery and oppression. Visually, the awkward division of the stage into three downstage areas led to stagnant staging. Nevertheless, haunting images created through exaggerated gestures, slow-motion fight choreography, and a chorus of lamenting women conveyed the group's mission to relay stories of Cape Verde's complex colonial past and postcolonial present.

In contrast to this focus on Creole language and culture, the two most influential and respected



Billed as a transgressor and lunatic, Italian actor Leo Bassi covered with 9/11 ashes, asks, "Did Americans deserve it?" in *12 de Setembro* at MINDELACT International Theatre Festival, Cape Verde Islands. Photo: João Barbosa, courtesy of the Mindelact Association.



Actresses in *Hysteria* by Brazil's Grupo XIX de Teatro await the arrival of new patients (female audience members) in a nineteenth-century Brazilian asylum for women at MINDELACT International Theatre Festival, Cape Verde Islands. Photo: João Barbosa, courtesy of the Mindelact Association.

national theatre groups, Juventude em Marcha and the Grupo de Teatro do Central Cultural Português (CCP), experimented with Portuguese language and subject matter in *Preto no Branco* (White in Black) and *Três Irmãs*, an adaptation of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*.

Preto no Branco, by founding director and playwright Jorge Martins, addresses the crisis of diasporic identity and racial reconciliation. Martins sets the action in Portugal and centers the story on two brothers from the island of Fogo who find themselves homeless on the streets of Lisbon. Unaware of their kinship, the fairer brother, with pretensions of being Portuguese, abuses his darker-skinned brother who comically turns the tables before the final reconciliation. The sold-out audience's disappointment and confusion began with the eleventh-hour replacement of the announced production *Coruja*. Although Martins poses relevant questions of identity politics, the audience expected Santantonense popular theatre. The immense appeal of the twenty-year-old theatre group has been rooted in their depiction of daily life on the island of Santo Antão, mostly through the Santantonense dialect and the everyman characters of comic actor César Lélis. As this group explores

new performance approaches they may face further challenges of negotiating long-held audience expectations with their own desires to investigate new artistic paths.

In its sold-out production of *Três Irmãs*, CCP took an adaptive approach to address personal and cultural anxieties. Under Branco's artistic direction, CCP has presented several "creolizations" of Western playwrights, including Shakespeare, Molière, and Beckett. Guest director João Paulo Brito set the ninety-minute adaptation of Chekhov's play in 1940s Mindelo, during a time of strong Portuguese military presence. He replaced longings for Moscow with dreams of Lisbon, echoing emigrant desires for better prospects. In addition to streamlining the cast and text, Brito supplanted Russian references with Cape Verdean cultural markers, substituting the island rum *grogó* for vodka and replacing Masha's song with a soulful *morna*, a traditional musical genre.

Brito's first coup in creolizing the text lies in the conception of Natalya and the casting of Zenaida Alfama, an expressive, comic actress who embodies *crioulidade* on stage. By having Natalya alternate between Portuguese, Creole, and smatterings of

French, Brito presents a character that understands the efficacy of language to strengthen one's social position in Cape Verde. Secondly, Brito enlarged the minor role of the old nurse played by Maria Auxilia Cruz. Conveying a sense of Old World superstition, Cruz began the play by slowly walking through the home with lantern in hand while haunting music underscored her movements. As the old Creole woman, she embodied the memory and history of the household, guiding major transitions and scene changes. Brito also reassigned the play's last lines to Cruz who, in the Santantonense dialect, forebodingly commented on the sisters' future. In a pool of downstage light, the three sisters clung to one another as the final blast of a horn in the Mindelo port announced the ship's departure to Lisbon without them. Audience members questioned the efficacy of Portuguese in the adaptation and expressed a visceral disconnect with the language in both the actors' portrayal and audience reception. Perhaps those who recalled the previous year's adaptation of an all-Creole *King Lear* hoped that CCP would similarly "Creolize" Chekhov.

One might assume that the international groups had to overcome the largest language barriers; in fact, they seemed to confront less resistance than



Dancer Elisabete Fernandes of Raiz di Polon recreates the life and labor of a Cape Verdean woman from the rural interior of Santiago in *Duas sem Três*, with music and text by Mário Lúcio Sousa, at MINDELACT International Theatre Festival, Cape Verde Islands. Photo: João Barbosa, courtesy of the Mindelact Association.



Dancers Elisabete Fernandes and Rosy Timas (*R to L*) of Raiz di Polon recreate the lives of rural and urban Cape Verdean women in *Duas sem Três*, with music and text by Mário Lúcio Sousa, at MINDELACT International Theatre Festival, Cape Verde Islands. Photo: João Barbosa, courtesy of the Mindelact.

national groups whose choices carry different emotional and political implications. Francophone artists (Compagnie TC Spectacles, Bernard Massuir) relied on nonverbal clowning musical performances, while artists from Portugal (Grupo 3 em Pipa, ACERT, Companhia Chapiro) and Brazil (Priscila Camargo, Junior Sampaio, Companhia Livre, Grupo XIX and Brazilian soap opera star Leonardo Brício) performed in Portuguese.

Brazil's most unique entry was Grupo XIX de Teatro's *Hysteria*, an interactive piece recreating a nineteenth-century women's asylum. Staged off-site in Mindelo's town hall, an actress detained female patrons while ushering the men into a sparse, long room with a high ceiling, wooden benches, and natural illumination from imposing balcony windows. Five actresses in white dresses assumed various postures while the maternal, authoritative patient greeted us as if we also were patients, reviewing hospital rules, stroking our hair, and chastising us as needed. Their stories intimately unfolded, revealing the sexual fears and societal forces of male oppression that led to their inhumane confinement.

The most anticipated international offering was *12 de Setembro*, a solo performance by Leo Bassi, scheduled for 11 September and promising to be an assault on "the American way of life." Wandering in a state of loss and confusion, Bassi entered through the audience dressed as a New York executive, his suit, face, and spectacles completely encrusted in ash. Conveying a ghostly appearance, he sat in front of a large oil barrel and opened his

briefcase to discover that everything was filled with dust, including his burger and Coke can. At this point Bassi picked up a microphone and transitioned from character/victim to actor/commentator. Speaking slowly and clearly in Spanish, the Italian Bassi began to recount the moment he learned that the towers were hit. He then presented the controversial thoughts and feelings that plagued him and informed the central question of his piece, "Did Americans deserve it?"

A descendant of six generations of circus performers, Bassi boldly claimed a fool's license to speak his mind. Audience members seemed comfortable until Bassi threatened to spray them with multiple cans of Coke strapped to his chest like a terrorist's explosive vest. As Bassi roamed through the audience, scissors in hand in search of Nike and Reebok labels, the audience felt a palpable sense of fear that the Italian clown might find traces of Western merchandise. He further shocked the audience by stripping down to his boxers and coating his body with dark island honey. Calling upon a metaphor of flight, Bassi stepped under a brightly illuminated plastic cylinder. As an overhead fan whirled above the descending tube, Bassi released a bag of feathers and slowly moved his arms, recalling both the courage and hubris of Icarus. In closing, the feathered actor invited us to accompany him to the beach to celebrate his first trip to an African country by washing off in the Atlantic Ocean. Unfortunately, Bassi's social and political criticism shed little light on 9/11, Westernization, or American foreign policy. The most compelling aspects were the evocative stage images and the fearless tenacity of an older, slightly overweight actor who performed with the recklessness and passion usually reserved for twenty-year-old performance artists.

In fact, youthful energy infused the entire festival. One of the youngest and most adventurous groups, Companhia de Teatro Solaris, hosted an outrageous bus ride through the streets of Mindelo and Cape Verdean society, in *Autocarro dos Loucos—Viajando sobre um ninho de cucos* (The Mad Bus—Flying over a Cuckoo's Nest). Directed by eighteen-year-old Herlandson Duarte and billed as "insanity on wheels," the four sold-out performances thrived on actor-spectator exchange. Each bus stop along the route introduced Cape Verdean types and scenarios with revealing social commentaries on the new tax system, class, race, promiscuity, terrorism, xenophobia, missionaries, and medical emergency delays—made evident when our bus "accidentally" struck a pedestrian.



Dancers Rosy Timas and Elisabete Fernandes (L to R) of Raiz di Polon, shown here as brides, recreate the lives of rural and urban Cape Verdean women in *Duas sem Três*, with music and text by Mário Lúcio Sousa, at MINDELACT International Theatre Festival, Cape Verde Islands. Photo: João Barbosa, courtesy of the Mindelact Association.

The most memorable and highly charged festival evening, however, was a celebration of dance and community that lasted until the early morning hours. The night began with *De Côr* (By Heart), an interactive autobiographical dance piece choreographed and performed by Brazil's Denise Stutz. As the public entered the auditorium, Stutz distributed cards and began short dance dialogues between body and spoken word, an improvisational technique that informs her choreography. The second half of the program featured Raiz di Polon, a Cape Verdean dance company that promotes a fusion of traditional and contemporary dance through international tours. *Duas sem três*, based on a text by Mário Lúcio Sousa, celebrates the lives of Cape Verdean women. Elisabete Fernandes and Rosy Timas choreographed and performed the roles of country and city women as they labor and dream in their respective daily lives. Balancing bundles of sticks on their heads, the women transformed the mundane chore of carrying firewood into a symbol of grace and beauty, and expressed humor and joy in a battle of household instruments. Fernandes armed herself with familiar objects of her rural domain—a broom, a grain sifter, and a washbucket. Timas accessorized with a silk scarf, high heels, modern dress, and an electric

vacuum cleaner. The final image erased divisive social markers as they wound themselves up in yards of white tulle as two awaiting brides. An infectious spirit of dance then spilled out from the mainstage into the courtyard, where members of OTACA led the crowd in *batuko*, an improvised music and dance form. Women seated in a semi-circle maintained the strong percussive beat by striking rolled towels in plastic bags held between their legs while actor Claudio Moreira led an improvised call and response. Tying the traditional pano cloth around their hips, national actors taught their international guests how to gyrate to the traditional beat. This joyous communal event truly expressed the Cape Verdean notion of *convívio*.

This same spirit galvanized the artists, volunteers, and artistic director João Branco, who managed to produce a seventeen-day festival on a shoestring budget. Newly articulated relationships with municipal organizations, along with the support of patrons such as Cape Verde Airlines (TACV) and Instituto Camões, made it possible for more artists to attend. Many national groups acknowledge that Mindelact is one of their primary motivators, marking Branco's place as a significant figure in Cape Verdean theatre.

But what role will the festival play in the future of Cape Verdean and Luso-African theatre? After gaining independence from Portugal in 1975, artists made efforts to decolonize theatrical expression by articulating an African performance aesthetic. The cultural roots of Cape Verde, however, are undeniably African and European, a distinction that emerges from more than five centuries of co-influence, albeit not always equal or desirable. Does the growing international nature of the Mindelo theatre festival suggest that interculturalism has replaced African aesthetics and anti-colonial sentiment? What is certain is that the question of Cape Verdean identity—racial, cultural, national, and international—continues to take center stage in all fields of Cape Verdean scholarship as well as in the daily lives of Cape Verdeans on the islands and throughout the diaspora.

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OPERETTA. By Witold Gombrowicz. Directed by Jerzy Grzegorzewski. Teatr Narodowy, Scena Przy Wierzbowej, Warsaw. 4 October 2004.

THE MARRIAGE. By Witold Gombrowicz. Directed by Jerzy Grzegorzewski. Teatr Narodowy, Scena Przy Wierzbowej, Warsaw. 5 October 2004.

Two thousand four was the centennial year of the Polish playwright/novelist Witold Gombrowicz's birth. Poland celebrated this event by producing a series of Gombrowicz's plays at the National Theatre. Gombrowicz may be little known in the United States, but he has been celebrated for some forty years in Europe. His plays are darkly funny and usually involve a youth who turns the world upside down, often because of his/her unsocialized behavior. If there is anything in American cultural history that is analog to the work of Gombrowicz, it is the madcap world of the Marx Brothers, in particular *Duck Soup*, where the political machine in the hands of human anarchy leads to absurdity and where form furthers chaos. However, Gombrowicz's plays are darker, tending toward the tragic.

Gombrowicz's stories focus on the power of the unformed, and his plays on the unraveling of the establishment when confronted with the undefined. As chaos reigns, characters become subject to sudden solipsistic spasms of quickly recanted self-revelation. His work is highly theatrical and concerned with form—anarchy battles form, only to give itself over to structure as soon as it has triumphed, since we cannot maintain ourselves without form. Therefore, he catches his protagonists bouncing between form and chaos, between the accepted and the unaccepted, between freedom and allegiance.

Visiting Poland, I was struck by the struggle between form and anarchy inherent in its history. Besieged by Germany on one side and Russia on the other, Poland has been a nation of mutating borders and changing governments, switching back and forth between experiments in enlightened democracy, anarchy, and oppressive military dictatorships. One has only to visit the Old Town of Warsaw to witness form confronting chaos or, more specifically, form masking chaos. The Old Town is a highly detailed reconstruction of the original nineteenth-century Old Town, which was almost totally destroyed during World War II; an artifice, which