

SPACE AS RESISTANCE: THEATRE VENUES AS COUNTER–HEGEMONIC PRACTICE IN POST-COLONIAL ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This article focuses on theatre space as a form of resistance in post-colonial Zimbabwean drama. It proceeds from the basic observation that for a performance to take place, it has to be presented 'somewhere'; that is, in a spatial framework which is deliberately chosen or set aside for that purpose. The article adopts post-colonial theory to interrogate the nature of post-colonial Zimbabwe's newly established theatre venues in terms of location, theatre architecture and audience. These venues are analyzed from the perspective of how theatre space can be used to counter previously hegemonic discursive and representational practices. The principal argument is that in post-colonial theatre practices, forms of resistance are not only reposed in 'voice', theme and discursive styles, but are also to be found in performance space. Post-colonial resistance in Zimbabwean theatre today is therefore also located in theatre space as the crucible for theatre performance in all its manifestations. The nature of spaces co-opted as theatres and the architectural design of such theatres, as well as how these theatres have been, or are often re-configured may be read as a form of post-colonial resistance especially given that site, architecture and spatial configuration are always a key aspect of the construction of narration and meaning.

Key words: Space; theatre performance, resistance, post-coloniality, hegemony

Introduction: The Role of Space in Theatre Performances

Throughout the history of the theatre, performance space or the 'seeing place' has been a primary requirement for performance to take place. In order for a play to be performed, it has to take place 'somewhere'. In other words, a play performance must occur in some real, visible and tangible space, traditionally on a stage which may be either level or raised, or an area deliberately chosen or set aside for the purpose.

This article focuses on theatre space, theatre venues and theatre audiences in post-colonial Zimbabwe. It examines how these spaces have operated to counter previously hegemonic spatial practices inherited from the country's colonial era theatre practices. As Gilbert & Tompkins (1996) rightly observe, the architectural design of theatres and spaces co-opted as theatres has a bearing on performance given that site and architecture are key aspects of narration and meaning.

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Performance Space as Discursive Practice

Throughout its long history, the theatre has always striven to develop theatre spaces that are specially constructed and configured in such a way as to provide appropriate spaces for both the performer and the consumer to get the most out of the theatre experience.

The term 'theatre' has a certain uniqueness in the sense that theatre is arguably the only art form in which the name given to the form not only refers to the physical structure in which it takes place, but also refers to the act of 'seeing' that which is being performed. The dual centrality of the term is fore-grounded in the etymology of the word 'theatre' from the ancient Greek term '*theatron*' which means 'seeing place' or 'place of seeing' (Brockett, 2000). In most theatre practices, special buildings have always been constructed to house the theatre performance. Alternatively, existing buildings are sometimes adapted for the purpose. Because places of performance are specially marked out spaces, the establishment of all theatres, whether open air or enclosed, is done to protect the performance from unnecessary disruption and to provide spaces where the theatre-goer can concentrate on viewing performance without distraction(s). With time, places of performance begin to acquire a specific identity on the basis of the kind of performances that are associated with those spaces. As a result, theatre spaces can incorporate within themselves, indications of the sort of practices that they are designed to accommodate. The arrangement and configurations of stage space and audience space usually reveal a great deal about the nature and type of theatre that goes on within a particular venue. As Gay McAuley (2000) observes:

The nature of the stage and the fragile boundaries between stage and auditorium, and between stage and offstage, reveal a great deal about the processes of representation involved (McAuley, 2000, p. 37).

Performance space may be conceived as any physical configuration where, according to Colin Counsell & Laurie Wolf (2001), space becomes a denotative term that is given to any combination of the three dimensions known to man (that is, length, breath and width). Performance space also incorporates the various configurations that may be created out of any combination of the three dimensions. Michael Issacharoff (1989, p. 55) identifies three aspects that constitute theatre space as:

- (a) Theatre space – Architectural design
- (b) Stage space – Stage and set design
- (c) Dramatic space – Space as circumscribed by the dramatic script

This article focuses on the dynamic relationship between (a) and (b) and how the conflation of the two can occasion counter-discursive practices in post-colonial theatre

spaces. The interplay between architectural design and staging can introduce a dynamic relationship between a given theatre event and its placement in terms of the theatre structure's wider geographical location. This dynamic relationship enables the analysis of theatre space and its location as an aspect of alternative discursive practices in post-colonial theatre.

Marvin Carlson (1989) has observed that theatre spaces and their locations are laden with a number of significations that have to do with the social, political, ideological and economic values and forces of their time and place. Theatre spaces have an effect on how the theatre event, the theatre building and the dramatic repertoire which take place inside are perceived and interpreted by audiences. According to Carlson (1989), interrogating theatre architecture and location enhances our understanding of the theatre event, and one could also add, its meanings and discursive practices; "Not merely as a performed text but as an event embedded in society and culture, involved with meanings on many levels other than those in the text staging themselves" (Carlson, 1989, p. 5).

A theatre building or a designated place of performance provides a context of interpretation for both spectator and performer alike. The kind of performances that a venue regularly puts on can easily attract a certain kind of spectator, while possibly repelling others. As a result, the act of coming to a theatre and settling down to watch performers who are framed in a specific space or architectural structure plays a key role in meaning-making in that theatre. During Rhodesian colonialism, towns and cities constructed traditional proscenium arch theatres which were designed to replicate the conventions of realist western theatre practices in terms of their proxemic design and associated performance styles almost as of rule.

David Kerr (1995) has observed that nearly every post-independence African country has made an effort to decolonize the theatre or to make the theatre more culturally relevant through the establishment of structures, be they physical, administrative or discursive, which are invariably referred to as 'national' theatres. Some examples of physical structures referred to as 'national' theatres are to be found in contemporary Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda. The fact that nearly all these physical structures are inherited colonial era western style proscenium arch theatres reinforces my argument that in post-colonial discursive practices, any given performance space has the potential to be re-configured in order to suit alternative purposes and convey new meaning.

The above notwithstanding, the desire for the establishment of non-western style theatre spaces in post-colonial Africa is a call which dates as far back as the 1960's when most African countries achieved their political independence from European powers (Kerr, 1995; Soyinka, 1962, 1988; Rotimi, 1974; Ogunbiyi, 1981; Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996; Balme, 1999). The call was made in direct response to the proliferation of western style theatres that were designed to serve white (settler)

populations across major cities in Africa especially in those African countries which were populated by significant European populations. The essence of this call, which was made by luminaries of African theatre such as Wole Soyinka (1962, 1988), Ola Rotimi (1974) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) among others, is that stages and theatre structures which would be appropriate for post-colonial Africa were of a sort that would be radically different from the strictures of the proscenium. They were supposed to take old African forms into account, as well as post-colonial Africa's newer and evolving forms, styles and practices within a hybridized post-colonial experience. The colonial style proscenium arch theatres were perceived to be largely anachronistic to the practice of post-colonial drama, not only because they were deemed to be elitist but also because they fostered performance paradigms that were for the most part foreign to local discursive practices.

Although a few African governments heeded the call for the establishment of more structurally relevant national theatres (such as the Federal Government of Nigeria), in most cases the new structures turned out to be no more than mere replicas of their old style western predecessors (Balme 1999). Commenting on the spatial shortcomings of these structures, Wole Soyinka (1962, 1988) and Michael Etherton (1982) have observed that these structures were African 'national' theatres only in name because of their failure to adopt architectural designs and spatial configurations that were informed by indigenous African performance traditions such as theatre-in-the round, among others.

In the case of post-colonial Zimbabwe, the notion of a 'national' theatre presented as a physical structure built and sponsored by the post-colonial government's emergent state driven counter-cultural strategies did not necessarily take place. Rather, what took place was the promotion of a new kind of theatre orientation which was meant to be different from the so-called voyeuristic traditions of previously white-dominated western style theatres. This was to be achieved through the work of the Zimbabwe Association of Community-based Theatre (ZACT), in close liaison with the post-colonial government's culture ministries. However, the 'failure' to construct a physical building or structure to serve as a 'national' theatre in post-colonial Zimbabwe (as was the case in other former European colonies such as Nigeria) may itself be viewed as a deliberate omission or strategy that was ultimately in line with indigenous spatial practices where theatre spaces were not necessarily 'built' spaces or physical structures.

In post-colonial Zimbabwe however, the desire for a more relevant 'national' theatre taking into account the country's cultural history was evident at two levels. The first was through the production of syncretic plays with a new thematic orientation that was designed to educate rather than to simply entertain. The second was through the performance of plays in new theatre spaces, most of which symbolized a significant departure from western style theatre architecture and the proscenium stage. The movement away from western style theatres emanated from a general perception that

colonial style proscenium arch spaces were no longer relevant for the new forms of theatre evolving in the post-colony. The newly-established theatre spaces were informed by an atavistic recourse to traditional pre-colonial performance spaces where the separation of the viewing subject and the object of his/her gaze was perceived as alien to non-western discursive practices. In instances where proscenium type theatres continued to be used, they were radically altered in such a way as to destabilize the notion of the fourth wall, which was incidentally, the cardinal rule of naturalistic representational theatre.

Alternative Theatre Spaces

One observation that is often made is that the use of space in post-colonial theatre contexts is motivated by experiments which are designed to incorporate indigenous spatial concepts into the requirements of a syncretic dramaturgy (Balme, 1999 and Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996). These experiments are a strategy by which formal western style theatre spaces are rejected in favour of alternative staging. In Zimbabwe, post-colonial theatre seems to have been informed by the recognition that unlike other art forms, one significant asset of the theatre as a 'live' medium was the ability of the actor and the audience to interact. As western style theatre spaces were gradually discarded, so too were they replaced by alternative spaces involving the appropriation and adaptation of existing structures in line with the demands of alternative performance styles and spatial configurations. The adaptation of old theatre spaces proves the extent to which theatres could be reconfigured with a purpose to deploy alternative meanings in ways that allowed actor-audience interaction.

Marvin Carlson (1989) has observed that theatre spaces are not neutral spaces. There is always an interrelationship between space and performance as sites of meaning where "places of performance generate social and cultural meanings of their own which in turn help to structure the meaning of the entire theatre experience" (Carlson, 1989, p. 6). In other words, a given theatre space can be used to construct new meanings through alternative spatial hegemonies. In the case of Zimbabwe, theatre space was used to integrate the performer and the spectator in ways that challenged voyeuristic strategies that were typical of western discursive practices.

Oscar Brockett (2000) makes the point that throughout Western theatre history, theatre production has always celebrated 'bigness' in terms of the size of the theatre structures as well as the size of audiences. In colonial Rhodesia's western style theatres, the combination of size and large audiences had been celebrated as early as the beginning of the 20th Century when performances took place in hotel dining rooms seating up to 500 people and later through the construction of theatre structures seating up to 800 people or more (Taylor, 1968; Cary, 1975). These large performance spaces with proscenium type staging were also replicated in nearly all government

schools, mission stations, private schools as well as in community centres that were built in the high density townships of Rhodesia by the colonial administration.

The situation in post-colonial Zimbabwe has been the opposite. Theatre practices have sought to counter the dominance of large proscenium arch theatre spaces. Being a form of alternative discourse, post-colonial Zimbabwean theatre has celebrated 'smallness' or 'compactness', adopting the use of alternative performance spaces that are much smaller, in what Wilson & Goldfarb (2004) refer to as 'found spaces'. These performance spaces accommodate much smaller audiences where the relationship between performer and audience is much more interactive and/or intimate. These theatres reject the conventional proscenium stage in preference for alternative spaces.

As previously observed, a given theatre structure necessarily reflects a particular set of values in terms of its architecture, construction materials, its decor and its geographical location (McAuley, 2000). Audiences who come to a particular theatre are drawn by a shared set of values and preferences when they choose to come to that theatre. In post-colonial Zimbabwe, there are basically two types of theatre space. These are the colonial style proscenium arch theatres on the one hand and 'Theatre in the New Venues' or 'Found Spaces' (Seda, 2004). The most iconic of these new theatre spaces is Rooftop Promotions Theatre-in-the-Park, which is located in central Harare. Theatre-in-the-Park was originally never meant to be a theatre space, yet today it serves as an iconic example of post-colonial Zimbabwe's desire to move out of conventional western style theatres which were deemed to be no longer appropriate for the new counter discursive theatre practices. Harare's Theatre-in-the-Park has become part of a prevalent post-colonial strategy to counter western discursive practices in terms of theatre space through the use of existing buildings, which were converted to new purposes.

Structurally, the traditional European style theatre structures such as those found at Harare REPS and the provincial 'Little Theatres' were characterized by 'deep' rectangular auditoriums, with parallel rows of seating lined up one behind the other, and a series of longitudinal aisles running along the length of the seating area. These theatres also had flat or raked seating, empty stages with offstage space and (usually) black drapes hanging off the wings. In a number of theatres such as the University of Zimbabwe's Beit Hall and in numerous other Beit Halls found in government schools and community centres in the townships, these auditoriums were built and sponsored by the Beit Trust, itself a colonial era charitable foundation bequeathed with funds from Alfred Beit, an engineer and a close confidante and business partner of Cecil John Rhodes, the 'founding father' of the colonial state of Rhodesia (Gann, 1965).

The new theatre spaces in post-colonial Zimbabwe are diametrically different from western style theatre spaces described above. Balme observes that a characteristic feature of theatre space in post-colonial contexts is that "It is a [new] adaptable space where the actor and audience may liberate their imagination" (Balme, 1999, p. 227).

These new theatre spaces seek to 'liberate' the imagination of the spectator by deliberately distancing themselves architecturally and spatially from western style representational theatres. Theatre audiences are engaged through a non-voyeuristic theatre style which dismantles the invisible fourth wall, arrogating to the theatre its age old role as a forum for education, reflection and socialization. As Balme observes, these post-colonial theatres are alternative spaces which are "Motivated by experiments to incorporate indigenous spatial concepts into the requirements of syncretic dramaturgy" (Balme, 1999, p. 227). In this article however, these practices are read not as mere experiments but rather, as strategic designs used to counter the dominance of western style practices in terms of structural design and the use of theatre space. These strategies involve the identification, the creation and sometimes the radical alteration of certain physical performance conditions to incorporate new spatial concepts. In a number of cases, this involves a conflation of indigenous performance practices with western style proscenium stages. Theatre which is presented in these alternative venues actively adopts heterogeneous spatial concepts and recombines them into hybrid forms which effectively challenge the dominance of the western style proscenium. In situations where plays are performed on proscenium type stages such as the University of Zimbabwe's Beit Hall, a deliberate effort is made to reconfigure the theatre space in alternative ways that constitute a radical departure from the conventional design and use of that space.

As cultural semiospheres, the new theatre spaces are laden with meanings that go beyond mere language use, dialogue and theme. Yuri Lotman defines a semiosphere as "The totality of all sign-users, texts and codes of a culture" (1990, p. 125). In post-colonial Zimbabwe, theatre spaces are semiospheres where spaces and their borders have become sites of cultural re-definition. The radical reconfiguration of some of these spaces is designed to reposition previously marginalized spatial practices. This observation is corroborated by Stephen Chifunyise in his preface to the University of Zimbabwe Faculty of Arts Drama's *Mavambo* (1985), when he observes,

The effective transformation of the Beit Hall by the careful reconfiguration of the stage and auditorium using different sizes of flats and ramps succeeded in creating a theatre-in-the-room atmosphere even though the audience did not actually surround the... stage (1986, p. i).

As an alternative discursive practice, this theatre is able to conflate space and staging in ways that locate meaning within the realm of traditional African theatre practices. The staging of *Mavambo* as cited above may be understood against the background of universities located in post-colonial contexts as places of learning and experimentation where a conscious effort is often made to reposition previously marginalized discursive practices. With the staging of *Mavambo*, performance space and the structural design

of the Beit Hall ceased to be neutral concepts. Rather, they acquired a new meaning within a post-colonial context.

Theatre Spaces as Counter–Discursive Sites

Balme (1999) has characterized the post-colonial stage as a fusion of different spatial codes. Following Balme, an easily observable tendency in post-colonial theatre practices is the rejection of the quadratic form typical of the western style proscenium in favour of circular spatial configurations. This renders the traditional binary opposition between the square and the circle as a metaphor for the struggle between colonial and indigenous spatial configurations in post-colonial theatre.

This section focuses on an analysis of The Gallery Delta (Harare), Theatre-in-the-Park (Harare), The Mannenberg (Harare) and the Alliance Francaise (Harare), Amakhosi Theatre’s Township Square Cultural Centre located in central Bulawayo and the University of Zimbabwe’s Beit Hall (Harare). The latter is included in so far as it represents a reconfiguration of the western style proscenium. As a counter–discursive site, the UZ Beit Hall has been largely inspired by a desire to create physical conditions which incorporate indigenous spatial and performance practices on a western style stage. All the venues cited above have been used in innovative ways to recombine the proscenium, the thrust and the arena stage. These theatres also represent an attempt to incorporate what appears to be a new-found realization on the possibilities of re-thinking theatre structure in ways that deconstruct Western spatial practices by repositioning the provenance of pre-colonial spatial configurations.

Theatre spaces such as The Mannenberg, The Gallery Delta, the Alliance Francaise, Theatre-in-the-Park and Amakhosi Township Square Cultural Centre have largely dispensed with quadratic raked seating as is the common practice in western style theatres. They have also dispensed with the use of the curtain and the box set, opting instead for a presentational format approximating traditional African practices where the line of demarcation or separation between stage space and audience space is largely blurred.

The compactness and intimate nature of these spaces is consistent with a theatre practice which deliberately moves away from voyeuristic practices in favour of critical reflection and social engagement on the part of the audience. The seating arrangement tends to ‘wrap around’ the stage(s) with no more than six rows of the audience sitting on all sides. The only exception is the semi open-air theatre at Amakhosi Township Square where the seating capacity is much higher. At The Mannenberg, which is a ‘found’ theatre space located at Harare’s Fife Avenue Shopping Centre, audience seating is highly informal, with members of the audience sitting according to the arrangement of the restaurant tables. In all the theatres cited above, every member of the audience is within close proximity to the stage action.

Ola Rotimi, who has analyzed the discursive significance of traditional African spatial configurations in post-colonial contexts argues that compact spatial configurations approximating arena staging or theatre-in-the-round are “the only formation that approximates [indigenous] theatre arrangement(s), at least in Africa south of the Sahara” (Rotimi, 1974, p. 60). A prime example of the above is to be found at Rooftop Promotions Theatre-in-the Park which is located in central Harare. Theatre-in-the-Park is a small, circular indoor theatre which incorporates the audience in a communal event. This is achieved through a seating plan which allows the audience to surround the action on all sides thereby dispensing with the illusory fourth wall. Harare’s Theatre-in-the-Park adopts the structure of arena staging in the form of theatre-in-the-round, thereby approximating the spatial configuration of presentational African storytelling theatre.

As counter-discursive spaces, these theatres dispense with the illusionism of the picture frame stage and its naturalist and realist influences. In these theatres, there is limited use of set and stage properties, with very little in the way of vertical scenery not least because vertical scenery interferes with visual sightlines, but also because the nature of the practice in these alternative spaces constitutes a radical departure from Western style theatre of overt illusionism. A positive spin-off for most of the plays performed in these venues is that they are able to go on tour with much ease, performing in diverse settings and situations.

What is also evident in these counter-discursive theatre spaces is that plays and their places of performance are not autonomous realms which are sealed off from the surrounding cultural space and environment. As a result, space and location come together to underscore meaning and identity. As Balme (1999) observes, “There is in fact a large degree of osmosis between a theatre space and the cultural signs of the semiosphere in which it is located” (1999, p. 231). The Mannenberg, The Gallery Delta, and The Alliance Francaise are all located in the Avenues, a residential area situated in central Harare. The Avenues is a multicultural residential and commercial district bordering downtown Harare. It is dominated by residential apartments, shopping malls, curio shops and low to medium cost budget hotels. The area is mainly populated by young to middle-aged middle class citizens. It also has a considerable number of public and private lodges and ‘backpackers’ catering to a wide range of tourists and other social adventurers. The area also accommodates Harare’s famous Book Café which is popular with book lovers, musicians, art enthusiasts and cultural tourists. The Book Café routinely treats patrons to a regular revue of local and international live music and jazz, as well as readings of prose and poetry. Adjacent to The Book Café is The Mannenberg Restaurant which also hosts play performances on a regular basis. These theatre venues are all located in an alternative cultural semiosphere which serves as an ideal background for experimentation away from normative practices, presenting plays to a diverse cross-cultural audience. There is therefore, a dynamic

relationship between these alternative theatre spaces and their placement within a certain geographical location within the city of Harare. This is in line with McAuley's observation that "The theatre building or designated place of performance provides a context of interpretation for spectators and performers alike. Due to the kinds of performance put on, a venue gains a certain reputation within a cultural community; it attracts a certain kind of spectator, (and) repels others" (2000, p. 41).

The Gallery Delta is located at No. 110 Livingstone Avenue in central Harare. As the name suggests, the theatre at the Gallery Delta is located within an art and sculpture garden. The venue consists of a sculpture garden and art exhibition rooms which are complemented by an open-air theatre space. The open air theatre attracts patrons from the gallery's art lovers, tourists, university students, the expatriate community and local residents. Also located in the vicinity of the Gallery Delta is the Alliance Francaise at No. 328 Herbert Chitepo Avenue in central Harare. The Alliance Francaise houses a small theatre auditorium which provides an alternative space for experimental work. The size of this theatre testifies to the general 'compactness' of these alternative theatre spaces as outlined above. The audience which patronizes these alternative theatre spaces is largely made up of individuals who are in search of a theatre *oeuvre* characterized by experimentation, adventure and newness in terms of style, theme and spatial practice. McAuley identifies this audience as one that is made up of:

Spectators who are intrigued by a certain kind of performance [and] go to places where it is practiced and thereby enter into a tacit contract with the performers not to be outraged by what happens. The space is, of course, not an empty container but an active agent, it shapes what goes on within it, emits signals about it to the community at large, and is itself affected (2000, p. 41).

Rooftop Promotions' Theatre-in-the-Park is the most iconic and most vibrant of post-colonial Zimbabwe's alternative theatre spaces in terms of its architecture, repertoire and discursive practices. More than all the other venues, Theatre-in-the-Park has hosted the greatest number of shows with nearly all of them displaying a wide ranging variety of heterogeneous presentational styles. Located in the city of Harare's centrally situated Harare Gardens, Theatre-in-the-Park is an alternative theatre space which straddles a liminal zone between the historically black townships with their post-independence community-based theatres and the former white suburbs with their well-endowed Western style proscenium arch theatres. Theatre-in-the-Park is a typical example of the 'found space' in post-colonial theatre practices. This venue was not originally designed or meant as a theatre space. For instance during the theatre off-season in winter, it is used for a variety of purposes which includes use as exhibition space for the Harare International Book Fair (HIBF) held in August of each year.

Theatre-in-the-Park is a small, nondescript grass-thatch and open-sided structure set within the Harare Gardens. It is an open plan round hut which Rooftop

Promotions has converted into a small theatre by mounting three tiers of scaffolding to provide seating for arena-type staging or theatre-in-the-round during the theatre season in summer. At full capacity the arena provides seating for no more than 100 people. The scaffolding provides raked seating for spectators with performances taking place in the centre surrounded by the audience on all sides as in traditional African storytelling theatre practices. The little theatre has two entrances, one in front for the audience and another at the back for actors and actresses. However, in many instances actors also use the audience's access as an entrance and exit depending on the demands of a particular performance, thereby demonstrating the way in which these alternative theatre venues break the otherwise sacrosanct line of demarcation between audience and performance spaces. Preferring similar theatre spaces in post-colonial West Africa, Ola Rotimi singles out "A small, round, outdoor theatre that incorporates the audience into a communal event" (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996). As a 'found' theatre space, Theatre-in-the-Park may be classified as an alternative space which, as Rawle Gibons observes, testifies to the ability of post-colonial discursive practices to "create [its] theatre architecture anywhere" (1979, p. 47).

Amakhosi Theatre's Township Square Cultural Centre located in Bulawayo is another iconic example of post-colonial Zimbabwe's alternative theatre spaces. The theatre at Amakhosi was built in 1992. It is located in Makokoba Township at the edge of Bulawayo city centre, metaphorically straddling the meeting point between the historically black townships and the formerly white residential areas. Like Harare Gardens's Theatre-in-the-Park, the theatre space at Amakhosi Township Square Cultural Centre also negates the quadratic form which typifies the Western style proscenium in favour of the elliptical form, adopting a shape that easily approximates open-air arena staging.

Seda (2004) has written on the binary opposition between the curvilinear form and the square as manifest in various aspects of Western and African material culture. This binary opposition is also manifest in alternative theatre spaces in post-colonial Zimbabwe. The elliptical or curvilinear form is much in evidence in terms of theatre architecture and staging conventions at Theatre-in-the-Park, Alliance Francaise, the Gallery Delta and Amakhosi Township Square Cultural Centre. As a post-colonial discursive strategy, the elliptical form synchronizes with the spatial form and pedagogical practices of traditional African storytelling theatre through its use of a non-illusionistic presentational style designed to integrate the storyteller/performer with his/her audiences in order to educate and to socialize. It is in line with this influence that nearly all performances at Theatre-in-the-Park are followed by post-performance discussions during which actors and spectators unpack issues to do with identity, representation, theme, and performance style. The post-performance discussions are conducted within the framework of a pedagogical spirit of learning and critical reflection (Interview with Daves Guzha, 2001). Milly Barranger (1995) captures

the topicality of theme and the nature of discursive practices displayed in these theatres when she describes it as an intercultural form which has a purpose to make;

New theatre pieces that speak with universal voices on global issues common to all humankind in the late twentieth century...To speak to all cultures about good and evil, war and peace, and the common ground of human desires and needs (Barranger, 1995, 323-4).

As counter-discursive sites, these theatre spaces have come to represent an alternative theatre practice which is decidedly non-voeyeuristic and non-illusionistic, with a primary purpose to deal with topical issues which have to do with contemporary Zimbabwe's post-colonial experience. Eugene Ulman describes Harare's Theatre-in-the-Park as a space where

The most progressive theatre can be seen...[in] a modest looking thatched construction in Harare Gardens, the downtown park next door to the landmark Monomotapa Hotel. *The most controversial and discussed plays* at this venue are usually presented by Rooftop Promotions, under the leadership of its irrepressible producer Daves Guzha, who can often be seen performing in the plays himself (www.http://Worldnomads.com accessed 10/11/08) {Emphasis Added}.

The post-performance discussions may be viewed as part and parcel of a spatial practice which integrates performer and spectator, promoting post-performance deliberations and analysis of issues that would have been presented before an audience. Eugene Ulman's characterization of Rooftop Promotions' Theatre-in-the-Park as a 'progressive theatre' no doubt refers to the convergence between the experimental use of space, social topicality and theme in this theatre practice. These theatre venues therefore use space to dispense with illusionism in aid of the production of post-colonial plays which adopt presentational styles in order to conscientize audiences and animate post-performance discussion. The theatre spaces identified above have come to represent an alternative socio-political forum in post-colonial Zimbabwean theatre. Due to the ever present threat of political repression and the restricted access to alternative media in contemporary Zimbabwe, these theatre spaces have also come to serve as counter-discursive sites at two levels. First, they challenge the dominance of Western discursive practices in terms of spatial configuration and secondly, they address topical issues dealing with questions of economic decline, (mis)governance and repression within the post-colony.

Some Case Studies

One of the most enduring transfigurations of Western type theatre space in post-colonial Zimbabwe is to be found in the work of the University of Zimbabwe's Faculty of Arts Drama. Plays by the Faculty of Arts Drama were performed in the University of Zimbabwe's Beit Hall which is a colonial era quadratic theatre structure with a Western style proscenium arch stage. The UZ Faculty of Arts Drama's numerous transfigurations of the Beit Hall approximate similar post-colonial efforts elsewhere in Africa in which dramatists have refused to be constrained by spatial hierarchies or stylistic norms of the proscenium (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996; Balme, 1999).

One of the first plays to be produced in the Beit Hall by the University of Zimbabwe Faculty of Arts Drama was an adaptation of Wilson Katiyo's *A Son of the Soil* which was translated and performed as *Mavambo* (1985). The staging of *Mavambo* offers a fascinating example of how post-colonial theatre practices have been used to challenge Western style representational spaces. *Mavambo* is an example of the way counter-discursive practices can resist spatial and stylistic norms associated with the proscenium stage. *Mavambo* displays a strong influence of African oral storytelling practices. The play adopts the presentational style of an oral narrative led by *Sekuru* (Grandfather) and his great grandson Alexio as the main storytellers. To achieve this, the faculty deliberately breaks the representational configuration of the Beit Hall's proscenium stage so much so that the entire auditorium becomes both audience and performance space. The reconfiguration of the western style proscenium is in part made possible by the UZ Beit Hall's open plan auditorium with flat seating for the audience. For *Mavambo*, the entire auditorium and its raised proscenium are reconfigured to accommodate an alternative non-illusionistic presentational style. The play opens with *Sekuru* (grandfather) in the role of the main storyteller making an entrance upstage as he settles down on a movable staircase that is used to bridge the raised proscenium and the main auditorium. *Sekuru's* entrance takes place simultaneously with that of another group of actors and actresses who enter from the sides and from the back of the auditorium, taking random seats among the audience as they too settle down to listen to *Sekuru's* narrative. Using a highly episodic narrative structure, the play's numerous events take place on the proscenium, on the movable staircase bridging the proscenium and the auditorium, and on a raised platform placed right in the centre of the auditorium, with some of the play's action taking place in and among the audience. As a result, the audience is literally surrounded by the action on all sides. By using a highly presentational style which breaks the line of separation between actors' space and audience space, the play adopts an alternative spatial structure which destabilizes the conventional Western style proscenium and its illusionistic discursive practices, conflating it with indigenous African styles of theatre-in-the-round in which the audience becomes actively involved in the performance. This is further enhanced by the actors' entrances and exits from nearly all sides of the

auditorium. Commenting on the play's conflation of Western and indigenous spatial configurations, Chifunyise (1986, p. i) explains that;

The effective transformation of the Beit Hall by the careful re-arrangement of the stage and auditorium using different sizes of flats and ramps succeeded in creating a theatre-in-the-room atmosphere.

The staging of *Mavambo* thus serves as an example of some of the ways by which counter-hegemonic discursive practices in post-colonial theatre can deliberately confront the conventions of the proscenium style of representational theatre which tend to negate the communal and integrative orientation of some forms of African theatre. The play's numerous entrances and exits through the wings, the sides, and the back of the auditorium, including the numerous crowd scenes incorporating members of the audience in a participatory role further defies the normative representational laws governing the line of separation between the actor and the performer.

Spatial configurations similar to the staging conventions used in *Mavambo* were continued in 1986 when the faculty produced a local adaptation and translation of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want* (translated to Shona as *Ndicharoorwa Kana Ndoda*). For this production the faculty abandoned the main proscenium altogether and used instead, the rest of the Beit Hall auditorium as a traverse stage. In this spatial configuration, the play used the longitudinal ends of the Beit Hall auditorium (excluding the main proscenium altogether), placing the protagonist Kiguunda's poor slum homestead just below the proscenium and the opulent interior of Ahab Kioi's mansion at the opposite end of the hall right next to the main entrance. The audience sat on opposite sides of the traverse, leaving an open aisle in-between that linked the two sets on the opposite ends of the auditorium. All flashback scenes took place in this open aisle. As in *Mavambo*, this spatial configuration allowed for the integration of the audience with the action, once again marking a significant departure from the common line of separation between actor and audience which is common in Western representational practices of illusionistic theatre as presented on proscenium stages. As McAuley observes, these spatial configurations are part and parcel of post-colonial attempts "to find alternatives to the traditional organization of the audience space and are part of a critique of the dominant bourgeois theatre that strongly marked the theatre in the 1970's" (2000, p. 58). This is because Western style discursive practices that were imported into the colonies *mutatis mutandis* ('as is') were predominantly based on the twin styles of realism and naturalism. As discursive influences, the two styles were realized on proscenium stages in the colony's 'Little Theatres', allowing for the production of a predominantly illusionistic art theatre of entertainment.

Michael Issacharoff (1981) distinguishes between two types of theatre spaces, namely 'mimetic' space and 'diegetic' space,

There are two major forms of dramatic space, mimetic and diegetic. This distinction parallels what narratologists have been inclined to call showing and telling. In the theatre, mimetic space is that which is made visible to an audience and represented on stage. Diegetic space, on the other hand, is *described*, that is, referred to by the characters. In other words, mimetic space is transmitted directly, while diegetic space is mediated through the discourse of the characters, and thus communicated verbally and not visually...In modern theatre however, where no representational restrictions apply, dramatic tension and interest can arise from the interplay between mimetic and diegetic space (1981, p. 215).

As a theatre space with its roots in realism and naturalism, the proscenium stage has a tendency to create the illusion of real life by maintaining close fidelity with mimetic space. The illusion of real life and the realistic representation of mimetic space is achieved through the use of modern technologies such as lighting, sound and set design.

In post-colonial Zimbabwe's alternative theatre spaces the deliberate conflation of Western and indigenous spatial configurations represents a counter-discursive spatial practice which negates the preponderance of illusionistic Western practices in terms of the staging and the representation of mimetic space. The new theatres do not accommodate elaborate set construction and staging. As observed earlier, Rooftop Promotions' Theatre-in-the-Park expressly prohibits the use of elaborate sets. Dispensing with elaborate scenographic designs leads to a reliance on the evocation of atmosphere through the actors' description of both mimetic and diegetic space. This may be viewed as a spatial counter-model to the restrictive requirements of Western realist and naturalist drama where every scenographic detail must be reproduced with utmost fidelity to create the sense of illusion that is prevalent in Western theatre practices. As part of this spatial counter-model, a standing rule at Rooftop Promotions' Theatre-in-the-Park is that plays can only have a cast of no more than five actors. In addition, the use of vertical and horizontal stage properties is highly restricted. In that event, the audience has to rely on stage action, stage business and verbal references to both mimetic and diegetic space in order to complete the picture rather than depend exclusively on realistic reproductions of mimetic space or the *mise-en-scene*.

Edgar Langeveldt's one-man comedy series, *Stand Up Chameleon* (2000), *Stand Up Chameleon II* (2003) and *State of the Nation* (2007) provides other manifest examples of the evocation of atmosphere through reliance on verbal descriptions of both mimetic and diegetic space in post-colonial theatre practices. Jacques Copeau (1974) draws the critic's attention to the power reposed in post-

colonial discursive practices for the evocation of atmosphere through verbal descriptions of mimetic and diegetic space rather than through physical representations of mimetic space when he observes that:

The more the stage is kept bare, the more powerful the effects that can be created through the action. The more austere and rigid the stage, the more freedom there will be for the imagination to play ...On a bare stage the actor is obliged to create everything from his own being (Copeau, 1974, 220).

Stephen Chifunyise's *Strange Bedfellows* (1998), is another play that uses performance space in order to dispense with the illusion of the fourth wall. Presented by Rooftop Promotions and directed by the Swedish director Helge Skoog at the Alliance Francaise in central Harare, *Strange Bedfellows* was performed by a multiracial cast comprising Daves Guzha and Georgina Godwin. *Strange Bedfellows* combines the use of space with a minimalist set and a minimalist cast in order to dispense with the illusionism of the Western style proscenium stage. Chifunyise's play also comes across as a form of canonical counter-discourse in that it is a reworking of August Strindberg's naturalist classic *Miss Julie*. The author invests Strindberg's old classic with a more local and contemporary relevance. He presents *Strange Bedfellows* as a play-within-a-play that is based on a rehearsal (and not an actual performance) of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. The playwright uses this basic scenario as a springboard from which to tackle race relations within Zimbabwe's post-colonial setting. *Strange Bedfellows* functions as a play-within-a-play where two actors, one white and the other black, arrive at a rehearsal room to rehearse Strindberg's *Miss Julie* under the direction of a white theatre director. At some point the director does mention that he has chosen to direct Strindberg's play with a multi-racial cast in Zimbabwe because he feels there are certain parallels between the play's theme of love across social classes and post-colonial Zimbabwe's racial and cultural divide.

Chifunyise's play revolves around a discursive strategy which is typical of spatial practices in post-colonial theatre. This is a discursive strategy which Erving Goffman (1974) refers to as 'frame breaking'. In Western theatre practices, there are strict rules and conventions which govern the behaviour of performers and spectators. For instance, direct physical or verbal contact between performer and audience is avoided in order to maintain the illusion of real life. When such contact occurs in post-colonial theatre contexts, it is referred to as 'frame breaking'. Frame breaking involves 'breaking' the illusory frame of real life which is supposedly playing out behind an imaginary fourth wall. The frame is broken through direct contact between performer and audience. In *Strange Bedfellows* frame breaking occurs when, as the "rehearsal" progresses, the director encourages Miss Julie (played by Georgina Godwin) to address the audience as a means of breaking the illusion of the fourth wall. The spatial configuration of the performance space at the Alliance Francaise is particularly suited

to frame breaking because of the compactness of the performance space which allows close proximity between actor and audience. In addition, the small theatre at the Alliance Francaise has a sitting plan which approximates thrust staging in that the audience surrounds the action on three sides thereby blurring the assumed line of separation between actor and spectator.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate the reconfiguration of theatre space and theatre venues in post-colonial Zimbabwe. The spatial practices realized in these spaces have been analyzed as being constitutive of post-colonial attempts at finding alternatives to Western discursive styles. These are discursive styles which are rooted in the proscenium arch stage and the theatre of illusion and the fourth wall that often goes with it.

It has been argued that these alternative spatial practices represent a radical departure from the square and the rectangle which is typical of canonical Western practices. The new spatial practices tend towards the circle or the elliptical form typical of indigenous African spatial configurations. The article has also attempted to demonstrate that in those instances where rectangular spaces have been used, there is often a conflation of the rectangle and the circle in such a way as to break the dominance of the proscenium and its discursive conventions. This allows post-colonial theatre practices to resist inherited colonial spatial practices as it repositions traditional African spatial configurations and styles in order to speak to new values and new identities.

Post-colonial theatre in Zimbabwe reflects discursive practices that reject orthodox Western spatial arrangements as it resorts to the establishment of alternative venues and theatre spaces. This is a practice which is in line with Counsell & Wolf's (2001) observation that in these theatre spaces, "To control symbolic space is effectively to control the audience's reading of the event, and hence the meanings that may be discerned there" (2001, p. 156).

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