


RE-MEMBERING HISTORY, STAGING HYBRIDITY: Ubu and the Truth Commission

by Marcia Blumberg

South African history is painfully re-membered in the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which have provided a forum to hear testimony about "the causes, nature and extent of gross violations of human rights" committed against all the people of South Africa between 1 March 1960 and 5 December 1993, that is, from the beginning of the armed struggle following the Sharpeville massacre to the installation of the Transitional Executive Council prior to multi-party elections" (quoted in Map-Prater, 51). No matter what egregious acts have been perpetrated the retelling of these injustices renders audible and brings into the public domain the pain and grief previously often borne in relative silence and anonymity by victims and their families. The insertion of Pa and Ma Ubu as肇事者s within the context of this drama of national proportions is a stunning collaborative effort by artist and film maker William Kentridge, writer John Tye, and Handspring Tradition puppeteers Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler. Staging hybridity on many levels, Ubu and the Truth Reconciliation (1997) is a multimedia theatrical production that acknowledges and at the same time radically disrupts generic, cultural, political, artistic, and historical categories to occupy an in-between space during what Hanzi Bishbu terms as "interstitial time" (2001). Employing a team for the post-apartheid Afrikaans Pa Ubu and the black Ma Ubu and a variety of puppeteers that serve as a choral voice, perpetrator accomplice and, most importantly, witnesses, this theatre raises questions, refines solutions, and insists on spectatorial confrontation with a disturbing range of fictional and historical events from the past and present. My paper historicizes this contemporary production in relation to Alfred Jarry's Ubu Rev and places the theatrical event within the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

At the outset I step back from the South African scene to acknowledge the originating source; contemporary celebrations of Jarry's Ubu Rev have occasional productions of the Ubu plays in theatres in France and across the globe. In 1996, Ubu Rev's shocking opening, "Mordred Plus Ubu," initiated the dramatic unfolding of the activities and consequences of the conferences convened around the world with these plays."
head. The play (a parody of Mchath) explores the absurd adventures of Pa Ubu, who ascends to his wife’s gooding and their mutual greed by killing the king, taking control of the country, eliminating officials, and conducting a rampage to conquer other lands. Jerry’s Pa Ubu satirizes conventional structures and deploys wit, exaggeration, ridicule, and satirical overtones to expose excesses, especially the lust for political, financial, and material gain at any price. Barbara Wright encapsulates Jerry’s teachings thus: “Every man is capable of showing his contempt for the cruelty and stupidity of the universe by making his own life a poem of innocence and absurdity” (iv). Pa Ubu’s philosophy of life, “Isn’t it just as good to have wrong on your side as it is to have right?” (i), is illustrative of his outrageous perspective and lack of moral fiber, which offer rich opportunities for satiric and darkly comic scenarios.

How apt when revisiting Ubu in the final decade of this century to consider a recent South African re-visioning, Ubu and the Truth Commission (1997), which addresses the networks of power and political oppression under the brutal apartheid regime, the varying effects of victims and perpetrators, and the indefinite scoring of the social fabric. The theatrical production was devised in a so-called ‘post-apartheid South Africa,’ where the euphoria of the election phase has all but vanished and the gap intensifies between vast juridical reforms and bleak material conditions both economic and in terms of the ever-increasing spiral of violence. Ubu and the Truth Commission received its world premiere at the Kameliya Theatre in June 1997 and immediately transferred to the National Arts Festival at Grahamstown, South Africa, an annual event that is considerably smaller but nevertheless second in size to the Edinburgh International Festival. Taking a highly original approach to the Ubu plays, this theatrical-dramatic production incorporates actors, puppets, and video animation, and places an Afrikaner Pa Ubu and a Black Ma Ubu in the post-election South African period — specifically within the ongoing hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Unlike the drive of Jerry’s Ubu for kingship and land, this Pa is an Afrikaner official in the apartheid regime who tortures and kills to expose and eliminate dissidents and ultimately, in his eyes, to protect his homeland. Here the Ubu actors are placed in juxtaposition with South African witness puppets who poignantly recite words of testimony delivered at the Truth Commission hearings through the voices of the puppets. These powerful moments expose the atrocities they have witnessed and the effects on their loved ones. Monotonous translations of the Xhosa and Sotho narratives position the testimony in an altered time frame and intensify the emotional impact of the roughly carved wooden puppets. Megan Lewis emphasizes this dichotomy: the “tension created between the humanized object, the puppet, and the dehumanized translation by an actor sent shivers through the audience” (105). When the perpetrators take the opportunity to tell their stories in exchange for amnesty, Pa Ubu first denies, then confesses his participation in many brutal activities which he justifies with patriotic verse under the pretext of protecting national security and promoting societal well-being. Keseridge particularly foregrounds the disjunction between the languages of the perpetrators and the victims. He argues that “the perpetrators seem incapable of imagining the effect of their actions on others. Their surprise that their behavior is inappropriate marks a failure of moral imagination” (Lecture, 10 July 1997, National Arts Festival).

Jane Taylor comments upon the central premise of the South African re-visioning: “to take the Ubu-character out of the bushveld (Jarryesque) context and place him within a domain in which actions do have consequences” (iv). The necessity for truth telling, accountability, and reconciliation, which are non-issues in the Jerry text, shine prominently in the contemporary debate and make it imperative for spectators to acknowledge and respond to the manifold acts of injustice and brutality made audible on stage and rendered concrete in the hearings themselves.

It is instructive to question how this theatrical par de force speaks to the drama surrounding the establishment and enactment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Advocate John de Lange, a TRC commissioner, termed this body a hybrid of two systems that he categorized as a restorative justice model as opposed to a retributive justice system (Lecture in Toronto at Osgoode Law School on Oct. 1, 1997). Russell Brown and Robin Peterson argue that “Reconciliation replaces the culture of revenge, not the culture of justice” (11). From the outset there has been deep division as to the efficacy of granting amnesty to people who have committed heinous crimes and then come forward and supposedly promise to tell the truth to avoid punishment. Those who feel that the commission abets the process of the law such as the widow of the renowned activist, Steve Biko, and brother of civil rights lawyer, Griffiths Mxenge, demand retributive justice. Cyril Moroka, the lawyer acting for these families, argues thus: “In the name of political expediency the commission is papering over the cracks. You cannot legislate forgiveness. That must come from the ground up” (Quoted in Block 11). Others have reacted to the commission with cynicism and derision. The majority of South Africans, however, consider that truth and reconciliation are the most vital and urgent processes in the rebuilding of a democratic nation. Initiated in February 1996 the Commission aims, in the words of its chairman, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “to assist in the healing of a traumatized, divided, wounded, polarized people” (39). Michael Ignatieff challenges these assumptions: “that a nation has one psyche, not many.
that the truth is one, not many; that the truth is certain, not conjectural; and that when it is known by all it has the capacity to heal and reconcile. [in short] the truth is one and if we know it, it will make us free." (1311). Ignatieff argues that it is imperative to "distinguish between factual truth and moral truth, between narratives that tell what happened and narratives that attempt to explain why things happened and who is responsible" (1311). Speaking in socio-political terms of "tribal reconciliation" he brings to mind what the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called "cheap grace": "the acceptance of the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation without any reciprocal owning of responsibility and action" (quoted in Peterson 57). Mahmood Mamdani interrogates another complexity arising out of what he considers a too narrow focus: If reconciliation is to be durable, would it not need to be aimed at society (beneficiaries and victims) and not simply at the fractured political elite (perpetrators and victims)? Understanding that systemic injustice and other horrific events reached during the apartheid years include economic oppression and deprivation with all the deleterious consequences, Mamdani asks for a more complex process of reconciliation than exposing the so-called truth. Who has required the benefits at whose expense and how has that relationship changed or remained inapplicable? In the final analysis, no system can satisfy everyone, no constitution can fully solve the problems or provide compensation for the horrors. Yet the work must go on despite the criticisms, disappointments and, in some instances, a sense of betrayal that the painful re-narrating of personal history has achieved little new information and barely elicited the perpetrators' remorse.

A vast range of victims and perpetrators have appeared at the hearings. High profile officials such as General Eugen de Kok, nicknamed "Prime Evil," have told horrific stories of slaughter and decimation. Jeffrey Bernstein vividly reminded the world how method of torture. Wimie Malekana-Mandela answered questions about her involvement in kidnapping and violent deaths by dismissing the conflicting testimony of others in an outright evasion: "Torture and the worst inhuman, inhumane, inhumane; it is not a matter..." (Tertono Star 1993: A2).

While these stories form a coded denial, Malekana-Mandela offered plausible alternatives. The occasion of what I consider a sufficiently artificial and expedient photo-opportunity—a smiling Malekana-Mandela embraced Joyce Seipie whose son's death is at the heart of many highly questionable activities—certainly raised doubts about the validity of the commission and the processes it deploys. It is, however, the lesser known people whose testimony has been so poignant and revealing. Some of these stories have been cited in the play as witness testimony screened through the voices of manipulators on behalf of the puppeters. For example, a parent testifies about his visit to the morgue to identify the body of his son: "I saw my child, I saw the mark on his chin, but I said to them, this is not my child" (13). Another parent sees his son rec lãi ied: "His whole body was burned except his face. He looked up at me, his mouth opened—and closed. Like a bird's, then his eyes changed color." (25). These witness narratives constitute a poetry of pain. How do they fit within the comic structures of an absurd Ubu scenario?

Throughout Ubu and the Truth Commission the puppet characters display kindness and decency — attributes antithetical to the vacuous Ma and Pa Ubu. This opening scenario is played slowly to a backdrop of quick music: a puppet is gently and amusingly stirring a pot of soup. Taking many minutes of stage time, the spectator observes these amusing actions performed by a puppet made of wood. Pa Ubu's howl entrance changes the tone and mood. Kicking the puppet so that soup ingredients and putty fly in different directions across the stage, this wordless scenario anticipates the cruel outing of actions of Pa Ubu. One puppeteer's transformation into Ma Ubu initiates the fraught domestic relationship as verbal sparring and even physical blows often enacted in stylized sequences keep the Ubu's interaction true to their arrogant, fun. Yet the dynamic also marks difference. Conforming to the stereotype of patriarchal structures, the interplay between this South African couple and Pa's direct address to the audience emphasize the division of male-gendered values within the power differential; Pa performs his important secret work while Ma is left in the dark, wracked with jealousy. Pa's nightly affairs enacted in the glass booth/bathroom stall offer spectators an idea of something sinister, especially when images on the video screen incorporate the washing off of blood and bits of body parts after his nightly sessions of torture — clearly evoking resonances for the human audience, multiple histories are re-narrated by South African spectators. The repetition of video representations such as an eye and a tag with camera that transforms into a skeleton, emphasizes the covert nature of his brutal activities. Yet other aspects complicate this apparently simple gender divide. Unlike the bumbled Pa Ubu in the fury production, the Pa's lack of rectitude is noticeable since he is clad throughout the entire production in white coat and underpants. Compared to Ma's lavish pink satin dressing gown his garb spells humiliation, particularly in the eyes of male Africanu spectators, whose sense of shame is exacerbated when Pa frequently engages and hides. The implications of the political overtones of Pa's activities are misunderstood by Ma in the domestic drama but are powerfully played out for the audience in a dinner scene when the empty stage is filled with a long table upon which two interrelated dynamics play out. This table filled at the centre with household cleaning
goods serves as a puppet's workshop, while Pa and Ma sit at each end and mimic their consumption of a dinner consisting of burning materials and even poison leached from the shop with elongated tongues. Screen images reinforce the multiple resonances as spectators watch this grotesque with amusement, laughter, and horror.

Mama continues in the revelation scene where Ma hogs for their previous life of dinner invitations and balls, "These were heroic days, so cosmopolitan" (37), and decides to investigate the material stuffed into Nilo, the crocodile puppet ingeniously constructed so that his body is a carry bag. As she removes incriminating evidence of Pa's activities, screen images and sounds of conflict emphasize the pastoral actions. At the same time Pa appears in the role of perpetrator to tell two narratives: one in Afrikaans about methods of torture in the "witness" mode with English translation, the other a story in English about burning corpses of victims: "the burning of a body to ashes takes about seven hours . . . whilst that happened we were drinking and even having a braai next to the fire" (45).

Ma's response provides one of the moments in the production where contradictory and provocative dynamics remind us of the complex individual perspectives at play in the re-membering South African history.

The old lady jokel. I had no idea Pa was so important. All along, I thought he was bringing us here to get him, to work, protecting me from the Swart Gevaar (Black Danger). [When her eyes momentarily change of mood]. Still, this is my chance. A girl can't be too careful. Who can she turn to once her chances begin to fade? While the overstuffed dummy is out of the way, I will seize this little start of desire and sell them, to secure my old age, which is of course a long way off (45).

Her pride in his activities and her unspoken acceptance of the event, which she justifies in terms of defence and protection also stems from relief since her own fears of Pa's infidelity and the implication that she was lacking in appeal prove unfounded. "The quick decision to betray Pa and sell the incriminating evidence reminds us of the betrayals enacted in Jevy's plays and underlines the question of expediency associated with revelations in the TRC process, the sense of false reconciliation rather than a genuine desire to atone for actions and build a new understanding.

The incorporation of dream and nightmare scenarios of the 'Ubo plays into Ubu and the Truth Commission foregrounds the sense of unreality that occurred daily for ordinary South Africans whether they were deliberately sought out for interrogation or happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Pa's nightmares about incriminating witness testimony enacted by witness puppets on stage and reinforced with images of the tripod figure on the video screen continue when he awakes to find Ma being interviewed on television. Her story of praise for Pa integrates the ridiculous and the downright dangerous:

He was polite and such a good man. We called him the Nijinsky of Nympheas . . . He wasn't a boxer, . . . He was a man's man and also a bit of a ladies' man . . . he spoke Xhosa before he spoke English. He could always communicate with the garden boys . . . he had a fault: I would say he is too loyal. . . . When I discovered what he had been doing all these years, you could have knocked me down with a feather . . . I have maps, and plans, and names, important names . . . And expensive books, and film, and tapes, and so many things . . . No we haven't actually signed any contracts yet but we've got some things in the pipeline (47-53).

The homophobic, racist and sexist remarks reveal how these structures are embedded in some members of South African society notwithstanding a commitment that outlawed all of these discriminatory practices. Pa's fury visited at Ma Ubo on the television screen was from Afrikaans to English but resonates his usual verbal violence."

I know him well - you don't know me. Il aglii you simply want to make trouble for you. You stupid thing - what the fuck are you doing, I will throw you against a wall until your teeth fall out. As he gestures towards the screen his voice changes to one of disbelief but quickly reanimates blame and name-calling:

I know that we should be suspect of phenomena witnessed in the television studio - but Ma - she's named an insult to our dignity - what are you doing! Struck as dumb! Look at this - she is selling our secrets to the highest bidder. You stupid cunt - don't get too full of yourself. Remember the old lady. Ma (53).

These blistering words are displaced by the important events surrounding his decision to reveal, not conceal, his actions and follow a preemptive strike by applying for amnesty. Pa's referred statement to the commission includes the activities of his entire family. Bruno, a puppet whose body in a break-up and whose Cerberus-like three dog-heads represent the warden, the general and the politicians and voice individual approaches to serving their master. The judge's distinct sentences speak to another worrying aspect of the TRC: that people in positions of authority will be treated leniently than ordinary perpetrators.

Pa's testimony delivered in vest and underpants takes place on a podium in the full glare of a spotlight while the rest of the stage is softened. Starting with the personal pronoun, Pa denies any wrong doing. "I am not a monster. I am an honest citizen and would never break the law. . . . Those vile stories taint me. . . . Those things, they were done by those above me, those below me, those beside me, I too have been betrayed" (67).

A shift in performance style marks a significant change from the personal
to the collective; Pa speaks with pride as a good soldier and South African patriot in order to justify their activities in the light of international conspiracies while video fragments quickly appear to represent some of his activities. In another change of tone, Pa reads from a formal acknowledgment remark for all “the corpses that I will have to drag with me to my grave” (60). Breaking out into a hymn, Pa is wheeled off the stage by two attendants as the singing of a, mournful chorus fills the auditorium and video images include documentary footage.

The final scene depicts Jerry’s ending since the Ubuses sail into the sunset. Here the long table serves as a boat for Pa and Ma as they move at “inhuman speed” away from the disturbing events and contemplate their future. Ma’s regrets turn to thoughts of the future, “I’m going to miss all the old friends. Still, enough of the past. What we need is a fresh start... A new beginning” (73). In a moment of uncharacteristic harmony, Pa agrees: “A bright future” (73). If the actual events of the TRC have engendered ambivalent responses and disappointment, the process enacted in this production incorporates the absurd and the familiar real and renders problematic many issues while concurrently raising further questions. Spectators will neither receive solutions nor be given comfort by this complex theatrical event. Performances in South African venues have been marked by regular walkouts despite outstanding critical reviews. Perhaps these spectators have reacted to the hybridity of the event: both to the satiric depiction of Jerry and the multimedia production values that bombard and perhaps overwhelm individuals in certain instances. Since the performances have taken place in South Africa during the mandate of the TRC the production is also much closer to the bone and far more disturbing that for audiences in international venues. In extensive tours through Europe the production has received high acclaim and has also been booked at Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Kennedy Centre, and in Los Angeles for September 1998 prior to a return visit to Europe.

Emphasizing the difference between the theatrical production and the commission, DarylAccessor considers: “And a burning absolute of the evil of the apartheid state. It does what the real-life TRC explicitly does not: condemn these murderous and expedient amnesty seekers” (1997). It also demands engagement with sometimes painfully difficult issues and new and often threatening awareness. Comedians on Trial argues insightfully that we “deal with the past from a situation where we suffer the consequences of the past”:

[B] does not necessarily mean that just and precise ways of rectifying wrongs from the past exist or that it is simply a matter of deciding to restructure our identity, wipe our memory, and redefine our character... It is an act of desperation—trying to understand and explain ourselves... Dealing with the past is a historical act of interpretation... we remember history in order to change history. What we have become should not haunt us as if we were confronted by an unchangeable fate... To face the past means to face the person whom you have injured. We must stop speaking about one another and start speaking to each other by jointly discussing our experiences and feelings of hate, anger, guilt, sorrow... It is not only what we remember, but also how we remember, how we interact with memory that re-determines our identity (138-139).

In staging hybridity Ubu and the Truth Commission offers a rich and disturbing vehicle for re-memorizing history. While the TRC will shortly end its hearings, this production refuses to allow amnesty and demands engagement. It speaks powerfully to the potential for theatre to play a significant role in re-constructing structures and dynamics of national importance.

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WORKS CITED


Joël Matlou's Life at Home: IRONIZING OF FORM

by Johan Geertsema

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the work of Joël Matlou, in particular his collection Life at Home and Other Stories (1994). In his groundbreaking essay "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa," Njabulo Ndebele (55) states, in the course of a discussion of new township writing, that the significance of Matlou's stories "is that they pose the way in which South African literature might possibly develop." Apart from Ndebele, other critics have also celebrated Matlou's work as a significant departure in South African fiction. So, for instance, Dorothy Driver (1992:118) asserts that his volume "opens up a mythic space that seems to me to be quite unfamiliar to and unacceptable to South African literature as it is currently known," while Andel Binka (1998:27) recognizes Matlou's work, among that of others, "the regenerative powers of South African literature" also apprehend.

My purpose in this paper is to consider Matlou's work, as the new departure that it doubtless is, from the vantage point of what I have chosen to call "the ironizing of form." The "form" I intend to examine in terms of "ironizing" is the so-called "farm novel." In particular, the farm novel in the guise of the short story cycle interests me here. My postulate is that Matlou's work may be understood as a revised farm novel and/ or short story cycle, but then as an ironic subversion of that form.

The major premise I intend following in this paper will be to provide a brief summary of Life at Home; to situate it in terms of South African writing in general by concentrating on Ndebele's response to the collection; to consider briefly the farm novel and in particular Pauline Smith's collection of stories The Little Kawos (1925) and novel The homestead (1926), both of which may be said to articulate the genesis of the farm novel and short story cycle; and, finally, to place Life at Home in relation to the farm novel and indicate that such a relation may be defined in terms of irony. Irony in Matlou's stories can be linked to questions of identity involving self and other, questions which are imbricated with issues of