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Author(s): Yvette Hutchison

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# The “Dark Continent” Goes North: An Exploration of Intercultural Theatre Practice through Handspring and Sogolon Puppet Companies’ Production of *Tall Horse*

Yvette Hutchison

Theatre & Performance Studies, University of Warwick

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This article is framed by the acute awareness that we live in a world in which the terms “globalization” and “cosmopolitanism” have become dominant. However, we cannot engage with these concepts without speaking about cultures and intersections between them. There are many complexities to these intersections, not the least is the way that cultures are represented, particularly in relation to the issues of voice, authorship, and hegemony. There has also been a shift from the focus on the nation-state as the center of cultural production to that of transnational corporations and media as playing a major role in defining cultural representation, production, and distribution. Then too there is an increasing movement of people across cultures and borders, usually for economic reasons—either temporarily to conduct business or as tourists, or more permanently to escape oppression and poverty through immigration, often as refugees.

## Interculturalism Debated

Although interculturalism has been simply defined by Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins as “the meeting in the moment of performance of two or more cultural traditions,”<sup>1</sup> in their analysis of various examples they have highlighted the immense complexities of these interactions. From early in the discourse, the term “interculturalism” has been highly contested: Daryl Chin has argued that it is a form of contemporary cultural imperialism,<sup>2</sup> Una Chaudhuri has suggested that it is a form of “cultural rape,”<sup>3</sup> while Peter Brook has argued for it being the means to achieve a “Third culture” of “links.”<sup>4</sup>

The increasingly complex interactions across borders, both real and virtual, since the late twentieth century have brought new challenges for theatre practitioners, particularly in terms of asking what relation the new discourses of “internationalism,” or globalization, have to postcolonial theory. Helen Gilbert has eloquently argued that the taxonomies of these moral, ethical, political, philosophical, and cultural arenas are complex and overlap.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I want to ask whether it is possible to move beyond the binaries and hierarchies that have characterized much of the cultural interactions between the West and formerly colonized countries, as articulated by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). Also, how the practitioner negotiates between Brook’s aspiration to work transculturally to create the “culture of links”

that transcends a specific context; and Rustom Bharucha's insistence that intercultural practitioners remain vigilant regarding "the ethics of representation underlying any cross-cultural exchange, and the social relationships that constitute it," including the dangers of trivialization, appropriation, and economic exploitation.<sup>6</sup> The latter issue is especially significant as we consider how macroeconomics has become increasingly dominant in the determination of cultural production.

I begin by exploring the implications and limitations of Bharucha's suggestion that successful cross-cultural interaction can be achieved "by confronting specificities (of particular cultures)" and accepting that "differences do not necessarily alienate people; if they are truly respected and acknowledged, then they can help us to understand what we have in common."<sup>7</sup> However, if practitioners are to collaborate with one another, to what extent can these differences remain contextualised and specific?

Bharucha also rightly insists that in intercultural practice

the real challenge is to maintain the reciprocity of this dynamic. All too often, the self, or more precisely the ego dominates over the "other" culture, which becomes a mere representation of one's own ethos. In exploring ourselves through another culture, one must ask what that particular culture receives from our intervention. Of what use is it if we alone gain from the encounter?<sup>8</sup>

And yet, one also has to acknowledge performance theorist Richard Schechner's argument that the consequence of intercultural exchange is "[f]or the self to see itself and become involved with that reflection or doubling as if it were another, is a post-modern experience."<sup>9</sup> To what extent is the practitioner, and audience by implication, limited by his or her own perspective or sense of self? How can this limited sense of self be extended to seeing beyond, to bringing into the frame a simultaneous image of another, perhaps creating a palimpsest?

Bharucha has himself provided an extended frame for this investigation in the second and third sections of *Theatre and the World* (1993) and in *The Politics of Cultural Practice* (2000).<sup>10</sup> In this latter work, he describes and analyzes how intracultural projects within India may be seen as models that redress issues of power, particularly in relation to the cultural gaze so prevalent in many intercultural exchanges, because they include "detailed analysis of the social processes determining everyday life in other cultures."<sup>11</sup> It also takes into account gender and class as well as race within the theatrical context, while always keeping in focus what to him is a fundamental question, whether intra- or intercultural: What does the performance event contribute to the lives of the source communities and audiences?

This approach to intercultural interaction, which is both coherent in itself, while remaining respectful of differences, which addresses seemingly opposite theoretical positions, without either denying specific forms nor ossifying them within an apparently immutable form, informs my analysis of the production of *Tall Horse* (2004–05).

### ***Tall Horse: Assessing the Process of Intercultural Collaboration***

The intercultural collaboration between South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company (a mixed-race company) and the Malian Sogolon Puppet Company was first brokered by Alicia Adams, the vice president for international programming and dance at the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in June 1999. Initially, it was envisaged as a massive Broadway spectacular; however, when the funding fell through, the production was reconceptualized to something more local, both in scale and form. AngloGold

Ashanti and Business and Arts South Africa agreed to fund it in 2002. It is significant that from the outset, it was economic concerns that profoundly defined the final production's outcome, as is clear in the analysis of the play's production process.

To fully appreciate the challenge of this project, one must fully appreciate the diversity of the participants: the project originators were Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones, from Handspring Puppet Company, and Yaya Coulibaly, the puppet-maker and director from Bamako, Mali. They were joined by Koffi Kôkô, a celebrated choreographer and high priest from Benin, and scriptwriter Khephra Burns from New York, as well as South Africans Marthinus Basson as director, Jaco Bouwer as media artist, and Warrick Sony, the composer who works with instruments from Africa, Europe, and Asia. The diversity of peoples, cultures, and languages involved in this production raise obvious issues in relation to Bharucha's call for particularity and context; it also raised the specter of Brook's multicultural *Mahabharata*, with all the criticism that that production provoked. From the outset, the question was whether this would be a multicultural production, suggesting a transcultural focus on narrative over contextualized performance, coding, and reception, or would it be a more complex, negotiated process among and across cultures.

However, before beginning the specific analysis of the production and its processes, the companies need contextualization, as access to material published about either of them is limited. The Sogolon troupe performs in the Malian Segou puppet masquerade tradition under the direction of Yaya Coulibaly, a leading exponent and custodian of the Sogo bô puppet theatre. He was initiated into puppetry as an apprentice to his father from the age of ten, and formed his own company in 1980. He has since been recognized as a leading custodian of this puppet tradition, having inherited an extensive family collection of puppets, many of which date back to the nineteenth century.

Mary Jo Arnoldi's research on Segou puppetry outlines a detailed contextualization of the complexities of the form. She emphasizes that it cannot be ethnically defined, as both masks and puppets have originated from Bozo and Sômonò fisherman and Bamana, Marka, and Maninka farmers, who have lived in the area for hundreds of years<sup>12</sup> and who also interact with other ethnic groups in the area. However, the ethnic groups do distinguish themselves from and compete with one another,<sup>13</sup> which suggests a complex intracultural tradition going back to at least the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

The Sogo bô puppet masquerade is a calendula and cyclic theatre tradition performed today in many Bamana<sup>15</sup> communities under the auspices of the *kamalen ton*, the village youth association, and thus distinguishes itself from other ritual uses of puppets and masks in the community. Its name suggests aspects of entertainment and play that simultaneously allow each community to explore relationships between man and animal, youths and elders, and individual action and collective will, and ultimately to explore contemporary identity.<sup>16</sup> It consists of a series of some twenty masquerade sequences, each presenting a single dramatic character, that generally lasts between five and ten minutes. In these sequences, the drummers and women's chorus combine with the voiceless puppets to construct the dramatic world. The puppet performances are punctuated by short intervals of song and dance. The performances include all members of the community, men and women, young and old, and incorporate both religious and secular aspects of the societies, from uninitiated children, ages 7 to 14, to initiated men and women (from about 14 to 45 years of age) and the elders.<sup>17</sup> At these mask and puppet performances, predominantly large rod puppets represent animals ranging in size from two to six feet, although there are miniature rod and rod-and-

string puppets and also sculptural figures that represent human or spirit figures with articulated arms. Within this tradition, the puppeteer is always hidden beneath the stage or within the puppet itself and operates the puppet from below or within.

Engagement with the form is complex, because the performances range from sacred and ritual performances, through the semi-sacred performance, to traditional and popular theatre (for example, the youth associations), all using masks and puppets. However, the rules attending the making and use of these differ.<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that the Sogolon Puppet Company's traveling and collaborative work focuses on popular secular performances. Thus while aspects of tradition and spirituality are inherent in the form, their Sogo bò puppet masquerade extends beyond encoding cultural values and beliefs to enabling the various communities to reinforce their part in Segu's political history and also "assert and renegotiate their [contemporary] identities,"<sup>19</sup> including a generational contestation of established opinion and tradition by the elders. It also reflects cultural shifts in a community that was predominantly animist in belief to becoming increasingly Islamic during the last forty years.<sup>20</sup> This is evidenced in the puppetry, which reflects both traditions simultaneously. For example, Arnoldi remembers finding a reference to a puppet performance during the feast that marked the end of Ramadan,<sup>21</sup> and Rene Bravman analyzes the significance of a small string puppet (*maani*) of a female figure whose attire and talismans are "of the kind long associated with the work of Muslim clerics and Islam" in a way that "suggests a remarkable blending of belief and the artistic imagination."<sup>22</sup> This suggests that to consider the puppetry brought by the Sogolon Puppet Company to South Africa is to engage with a theatre practice that has already had a long and complex history of intracultural negotiation and influence. Its context is deep and complex.

Although the Handspring Puppet Company has performed internationally and is highly regarded, apart from *Ubu and the Truth Commission*<sup>23</sup> and *Tall Horse*,<sup>24</sup> none of its texts have been published, and until December 2009, visual documentation of its work had been limited to some tantalizing thirteen-minute promotional videos.<sup>25</sup> Handspring was founded in Cape Town in 1981 by Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler and initially focused mainly on theatre for young people. It began developing an adult audience from 1985 onward and shifted toward more obviously postcolonial themes in its plays. The company works primarily through a collaborative process of improvising and devising texts, often adaptations of classic European texts, with actors and puppets. Its puppets are an eclectic mix of European marionette tradition, combined with Central- and East-Asian forms, particularly the Japanese Banraku style, where the puppeteers are visible.<sup>26</sup> However, Handspring has extended the role of the puppeteers by allowing them to interact with the puppets by means of facial and physical gesture. Since 1992, the company has been working with the visual artist and filmmaker William Kentridge to create multilayered performances that juxtapose back-projected images with the actors and puppets onstage to explore contemporary issues of the postcolonial African experience in *Woyceck on the Highveld* (1992), *Faustus in Africa!* (1994), and the *Ubu* projects (1998).<sup>27</sup>

It is evident from these brief descriptions that before the collaborative process that became *Tall Horse* began, the two companies' approaches to puppets and puppetry differed in many ways. The Malian puppets are intrinsically linked to complex, culturally situated traditions, with very specific modes both of making and moving the puppets.<sup>28</sup> Shifting such performance into a more diversified cultural context would

be a very ambitious border-crossing, both physical and psychically for all involved, but perhaps more so for Sogolon, who agreed to work in South Africa and shift from a specific tradition of puppetry to work with the more eclectic Handspring Puppet Company, who had shaped its own forms rather than borrowing one from a theatre tradition that was situated within a specific sociohistoric cultural context.

### **The Narrative of *Tall Horse* as Intercultural Exploration**

The story of the *Tall Horse* is based on a historic account of a giraffe named Sogo Jan<sup>29</sup> who is captured in southern Sudan, taken up the Nile River in a felucca, and shipped across the Mediterranean to France in 1826 as a gift for the king's menagerie. The giraffe, a bribe from Mehmet Ali, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt, was intended to dissuade the French from becoming involved in the Greek war of independence. The animal wintered in Marseilles, and in the spring of 1827 took several months to walk to Paris, creating a sensation along the route and, some say, inspired the design of the Eiffel Tower. The story of this extraordinary journey is told by the giraffe's handler Atir, a freed Sudanese slave who, with wit and irony, interprets his discovery of France in this multimedia production. This story is framed by the contemporary story of Jean-Michel, a student from Paris who has traveled to Bamako, Mali, to research a collection of artifacts from nineteenth-century Egypt in the hope of finding "anything that might relate to a certain slave belonging to a French consul in Egypt in 1926,"<sup>30</sup> who, he admits, is his ancestor.

The interculturalism of the piece occurs on both narrative and performance levels. Director Martinus Basson says that "[t]he starting point was an extraordinary animal going north. Something that people have not seen. So you have the familiar, from our point of view, travelling into the unfamiliar."<sup>31</sup> This starting point was important, because, as Erika Fischer-Lichte and colleagues have argued, successful intercultural exchange begins with the known, the local perspective, rather than that of an exotic Other.<sup>32</sup>

However, in order to communicate beyond the specific and local, *Tall Horse* explored the idea of a journey of both the giraffe and his handler Atir into Europe. At the same time, the play sought to explore Africa's relationship to Europe, particularly France. The links between this relationship and European science, philosophy, and politics are suggested by Dr. Konate in the first scene, where he asks the French student, Jean-Michel, about European Enlightenment:

DR. KONATE (*Grinding the noses [of an old mummy] with a mortar and pestle*): The Enlightenment. Did they find it? Your scientists were convinced they were finally seeing into the true nature of things. Europeans have ordered much of the world we inhabit and fixed everything in its place: plants, animals, men, predators and prey, "Enlightened Europe" and "Darkest Africa." Those who control the naming of things control our perceptions. And perception is reality, n'est-ce pas? But if you know where to look from you will be able to see.<sup>33</sup>

The juxtaposition of these culture perceptions and categories offers an ironic, and at times paradoxical, frame for Sogo Jan's journey from south to north that is not simply counter-hegemonic. For example, Dr. Konate is implicated by his own science and engagement with the "needs" of Europe via the mummies that he sells either ground-up as anti-aging creams<sup>34</sup> or whole to collectors, who use these to validate Europe's superior sense of itself. The paradox is centrally embodied in Sogo Jan herself, since

giraffes do not fit into the neat binary categorizations of the Enlightenment. Giraffes are neither prey nor predator<sup>35</sup>—they are not generally hunted by any predator other than man, nor do they hunt. Sogo Jan also moves above and through both the African and European context, while being bound by them also. This opening speech establishes the central binaries that plague intercultural interaction and suggests that the play hopes to challenge and perhaps move beyond these binaries.

All the interactions in this play are focalized through Atir, a freed African slave who is forced to accompany the giraffe to Europe, since Sogo Jan will trust no one else and refuses to eat. This thematic focus raises several issues about relationships. The first is personal and local, between Atir and Sogo Jan, and explores issues surrounding choice and freedom. Atir is free, but chooses to accompany and stay with the giraffe in her imprisonment, because he learns to care for her personally. This may, by implication, be asking questions about the cross-border movements of people in our own day: How much is choice and where does it leave them regarding relationships, loyalties, and identity? It is interesting that this personal relationship is across species—perhaps suggesting a more radical challenge to the conceptualization of borders and binaries in cross-cultural interchange.

The focalization through Atir and Sogo Jan also raises questions regarding the place of stereotypes in intercultural encounters. Homi Bhabha has argued that stereotypes have been an important means of regulating authority within colonial discourse, because they can simultaneously distance the Other, while suggesting that the Other is something knowable and thus subjectifiable, something that can be studied, finalized, and known.<sup>36</sup> He goes on to suggest that mimicry is an important counter-hegemonic device, because it is “constructed around ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. . . . the sign of a double articulation.”<sup>37</sup> This “slippage,” or doubleness, is important in the context of stereotyping, because it suggests both imitation and mockery. Mimicry reveals both the constructedness of the stereotype and the ambivalence of it in the colonialist discourse; it also suggests that stereotypes are hybridized and historicized constructs rather than simple states of being.

So “darkest Africa” encounters “enlightened Europe” in the meeting between the slave Atir and the exotic beast Sogo Jan and the French aristocrats, who consider themselves “enlightened” in their “*curiosité*” for “marvels and monstrosities.”<sup>38</sup> The French “fawn and flutter over their living curios,”<sup>39</sup> with no real sense of Atir or Sogo Jan as living beings outside of the zoo, natural history museum, or traveling curios exhibit so common in nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>40</sup> This approach to them is important and framed by the larger approach to Africa as exotica. They discuss Atir and Sogo Jan along with references to the “young negro playwright Dumas,” the acquisition of exotic mummies, both Negroid and pigmy, and “a human foot with seven toes alleged to be of Egyptian origin.”<sup>41</sup> The arrival of Atir and Sogo Jan is said to evince an “erotic and highly charged atmosphere,”<sup>42</sup> which alludes to stereotypes about African virility.

When St-Hilaire’s examines the giraffe from head to toe—he measures her, and even takes samples of her droppings—the probing of the exotic becomes scientific. The Fashion Designer, who measures Sogo Jan, as if she were a model for the catwalk in order to locate “the essence of her being,”<sup>43</sup> is like the scientist. These scientific and cultural explorations exemplify the obvious objectifying of the giraffe for the purpose of knowing and naming, as well as the processes of cultural appropriation, as sug-

gested in her later incarnations in fashion and the Eiffel Tower. The Fashion Designer also says that a “new longer neck-line is on the cutting edge of French fashion,”<sup>44</sup>



suggesting her influence on contemporary culture. However, it also creates an ironic commentary on French society, because the play takes place at the start of the French Revolution. The Fashion Designer's comment parodically echoes earlier references to violence in France, with the guillotine and the Crusades, and children chopping off the head of a cat with a toy guillotine visually reference the political unrest in Lyon. These allusions take the audience back to stereotypes and mimicry and beg the question about our perspective on marvels and monstrosities: Who or what is marvelous, and what is monstrous? It also begins to deconstruct the binary of darkest Africa and enlightened Europe.

Not only France is challenged in relation to its projected stereotypes, however. Atir is seen to fall into the role of African exotic male, with "each day a new lady lay in his arms."<sup>45</sup> Later, he becomes the lover of Lady Clothilde, wife to Count Grandeville de Largemont, prefecture of Marseilles. She convinces Atir to adopt the clothes of a French dandy,<sup>46</sup> although he returns to Sudanese dress when he meets King Charles X. This ambiguous engagement of Atir with France raises the question about how Africa may understand itself when it reads back from a European perspective. It also explores whether identity may be refashioned outside of binaries: whether we can escape the notion that "[a]ntelope exist because lions must eat, and Africa exists for the benefit of Europe."<sup>47</sup> In some ways, it proposes how a practitioner can move between the local / universal binaries offered by Bharucha and Brook, suggesting that in and through the specific context, we can ask larger questions about relationships and the construction of personal and cultural identity.

This co-dependency and interrelatedness of the personal and the broader sociopolitical context are supported by the political debates that occur throughout the play. First, the viceroy's gift is given to ensure that he will maintain control in the Mediterranean and that France is kept out of the conflict in Greece. The queen's first interaction with King Charles is about "the natural order of things," as she insists that "walking does not become you,"<sup>48</sup> thus suggesting how perception and power are interrelated. Later, she asks him why he is hunting instead of "meeting with your generals and fabricating reasons to invade other countries. Why can't you be more pre-emptive, like America?"<sup>49</sup> And when Charles wants to know "why we can't all get along?" she replies: "Because it is not profitable."<sup>50</sup> These references to broader politics and economics and their impact on individuals even two centuries ago indicate the complexities of exploring power and identity, and juxtaposes these to the naivety of Atir and Sogo Jan, who can have no sense of the significance of their part in these complex games. The contemporary extension is signaled by the newspaper reporter's response to the Egyptian viceroy offering to withdraw from Greece if France agrees to ally with him against the Turks: "Who let the dogs out—woof, woof, woof."<sup>51</sup>

### **Performance Form: Negotiating and Presenting Issues of Difference**

Ideas of political interrelatedness and the circulatory nature of history are extended by the performative and visual aspects of the play. One of the images reinforcing this idea throughout is that of dung being rolled about the stage. The discussion between Viceroy Mehmet Ali and the French Consul Drovetti about how to placate the French contextualizes the image:

MEHMET ALI: Do you know why the ancients of this god-forsaken land worshipped the scarab beetle?

DROVETTI: I believe your Highness, that it symbolized the regeneration of life.

*(From Mehmet Ali's massive belly beneath his robes emerges the scarab with a ball of dung, which he [his hands come off the puppet] rolls around the stage.)*

MEHMET ALI: It rolls a ball of dung around, like the sun rolls across the sky. And out of the dung comes new life, the little hatchling beetles. Egypt is a dung heap, Drovetti. But out of that heap of black slaves and the decay of its dead past, we are bringing new life to the present. We are rolling, Drovetti. You and I are the dung beetles of Egypt. And that places us in the company of the gods.<sup>52</sup>

Throughout the play, particularly during political commentary, the hands continue to roll dung around the stage, thus reminding the audience of the role Egypt has played as the gateway between North and South, East and West for centuries of history. It also suggests how difficult it is to separate histories, and perhaps also mythologies, from contemporary local politics.

Similar performative layering is evidenced in the use of back projection and puppets. Projections of highly digitalized images, which include Islamic patterns, images of the Grand Mosque, Greece, and a cross and crescent moon, punctuate the play; at other times, we see a map of the Nile, palm trees, birds, and boats as Atir and Sogo Jan travel; a shadow puppet play comments on Atir and Clothilde's love scene; and, finally, a giraffe walks across the Parisian skyline and turns into the Eiffel Tower. These images juxtapose the local with the global, suggesting contesting contexts and influences on the specific moment; this layers the narrative, offering a contrapuntal, complex response to what seems like a linear journey from Africa to Europe.

The puppets, who provide an important perspective on the debate over perception and representation, break the binary of one group speaking about or representing another. Puppets represent all of the characters, except for the African youths Atir and Jean-Michel and scientists Dr. Konate and Geoffroy St-Hilaire. Atir and Jean-Michel are both naïve men who represent the displaced Dark Continent. They seek a way "home," but get caught up in wider concerns: Atir by the giraffe, and Jean-Michel by his own past. The more sophisticated scientists, Dr. Konate and St-Hilaire, approach both their own culture and the one they are encountering ironically. It is important that the two actors each play both an European and African character, because this creates a balance of perspectives whereby each representation is both constructed and simultaneously critiqued, and we are left with neither an overwhelming sense of naivety nor sophistication for either culture.

The puppets themselves are important. There were sixty puppets of fourteen different types in the show, ranging from full-body *casteleets* to rod puppets.<sup>53</sup> The Malian tradition is nonrealistic and uses color to suggest status; for example, the queen Marie-Therese is reminiscent of the Malian divinity Farrow who is blue, with a prominent bust to indicate her fecundity. She is also meters tall. The king is "worn" strapped in front of the body of his operator. These are strange representations of French royalty and thus distance the audience from the figures twice: first, because they are puppets; and second, because of the unfamiliar aesthetic. This use of a nonrealistic form serves to highlight that the characters are clearly not real, but representations of an idea. This in itself evidences compromise as an important *modus operandi* in intercultural exchange, as it involved the Malian puppeteers agreeing to work visibly and give voice to the puppets—two divergences from traditional Sogo *bò* masquerade puppetry where the puppeteers are hidden and the puppets silent. It was an important innovation insofar as it allowed the puppets to draw attention to their own artifice, because the puppeteers visibly speak for and manipulate them.<sup>54</sup> This provides a self-reflexive trope, suggesting how representation and interaction may be manipulated, while exploring the place, use, and construction of cultural stereotypes and forms of Otherness.

The significance of this for exploring intercultural interactions is suggested by Bill Ashcroft's argument that major keys to resistance of the constructed colonial stereotype include the control of textual representation, the appropriation of language, and the interpolation into dominant systems of cultural production.<sup>55</sup> I would argue, however, that the use of puppets here goes beyond resisting constructed stereotypes to challenge the binary that underpins them, thus achieving Ashcroft's concept of interpolation, which, he argues "gestures to the capacity to interpose, to intervene, to interject a wide range of counter-discursive tactics into the dominant discourse without asserting a unified anti-imperial intention, or a separate oppositional purity."<sup>56</sup> The use of nonrealist forms of puppets, manipulators, back-projection, and music combine to present not only a narrative of cultural interaction, but also make visible the complexities of the elements that effect such interaction, and the constructed nature of the representations, that are also interdependent on one another and their context for their meaning. In this way, the performance itself challenges notions of authenticity; it also blurs binaries to create the necessary distance, self-criticality, and self-reflexivity to enable movement beyond the specific and local toward the new and hybrid. They are neither so broadly universal as to have no real meaning, nor so specific and local as to be irrelevant in the wider context. So much for the representation and narrative of the production, but what of the process itself? Often intercultural work is critiqued for its hegemonies of production.

### **Hegemonies of Production**

This project faced many challenges. The first was a very truncated production process, with a week-long development workshop (February 2004) during which the key participants met one another, explored, and negotiated the hundred-page bi-lingual English-French script, which had been written in New York City by a writer experienced in television and film though not theatre generally nor puppet theatre in particular.

They experimented with the puppets created by Yaya Coulibaly in Mali and those created by the Handspring team; they also had to develop and present a reasonably convincing work-in-progress to their main funder, AngloGold Ashanti. The rehearsal process that followed was only seven weeks long.

The first issue inherent in intercultural practice is that of language and translation. In the first instance, it is a literal problem. Of the twelve performers, four were Malians who spoke French and Bamana; the other eight performers, the director, and the video animator were South Africans who spoke fluent English, but their mother tongues were Xhosa, Afrikaans, or Zulu. The director is very articulate and thus his preferred mode of directing is to give fast instructions in English, which not all the Malians understood. Because the project could not fund a full-time translator, local university students had volunteered to act as translators, but their attendance was erratic and their language skills uneven. Thus linguistics and the processes of understanding fundamentally challenged all participants in this project. Indirectly, issues of language raised issues of power, insofar as those who did not fully understand what was being said were at a disadvantage in terms of responding and participating, which lessened their ability to advocate a position in the project.

A further issue was the need to translate the languages of performance. The performers had to master completely new skills, ranging from puppetry to stilt-walking, dancing, drumming, and particular kinds of rhythmic singing in Bamana. Another cultural frame was introduced by the West African choreographer Koffi Kôkô, whose

particular approach to the performer's use of energy and presence in the body onstage is based on his work as an animist priest in Benin. This approach was difficult for the South African performers, who found the demand simply to trust the process and direction, without explanation, very challenging, since they are used to understanding first and then moving into a role or performance mode.<sup>57</sup> In his workshop presented at the drama department of the University of Stellenbosch (South Africa) on 20 August 2004, Kôkô stated that his work is always created from a religious context. This shifted his work with the cast from creating iconic representation to symbolic and metaphysical referencing in the way they found the energies in their bodies to the signification of their gestures or movements. This suggests that both the performers and audience could only engage with the choreography and methods through which it was created to the extent that they understood the forms and references. Ultimately, this aspect of the choreography was abandoned, as the production shifted from workshops to rehearsals and the performances, which highlights limitations in how far cultures can interact and integrate frames when they have strongly predetermined meanings.

Simultaneously, the cast was learning to manipulate the fourteen different types of puppets. This meant having to relearn puppetry skills, perhaps also having to unlearn entrenched styles. For the Sogolon puppeteers, it meant appearing visibly before an audience and vocalizing text; for Handspring, it meant working with masks and puppets that, for example, did not have articulated limbs, or were solid and sculptural and very large. These considerations highlight the degree of openness and depth of commitment and trust required in an intercultural venture; it also raises questions regarding the degree to which performers can grasp a new form when they're given a very limited time for training and rehearsal.

Another challenge was the very different styles of teaching and working of the director, the choreographer, and the puppet masters. Each key player demanded something particular and often something new from the performers. These demands had to be reconciled with one another and the performers in order to create a coherent and powerful narrative for the production. Basil Jones summarized the complexities of the process:

We've been through very hard times with this project. And very dark times when it seemed totally impossible. I feel that it's much more within the bounds of possibility. Now, it's much more . . . you know, it's easier to control. But it's still terribly difficult. We've got fourteen different types of puppet, and people that are not used to them. And a director that likes [stage] business. . . . It seems like a thousand layers.<sup>58</sup>

The key to creating coherence in a production lies with its director. Marthinus Basson is renowned in South African as a director with thirty years of innovative and exciting work ranging from dance and musicals to drama and opera. Thus the issue of dominance in a collaborative process was significant, because, as Marvin Carlson suggests, it is the reputations of Brook and Mnouchkine as "two of the world's best-known European directors"<sup>59</sup> that limit real intercultural negotiation in their productions:

The influence and the reputation of the producing organizations is of such great power that even had they wished to preserve the authentic Otherness of the Indian experience, Brook and Mnouchkine would have found it extremely difficult to do so. The contest would have been too unbalanced from the beginning.<sup>60</sup>

It was thus important that this was not the inevitable outcome of this production, that Basson's reputation and vision would not overshadow the possibilities of real collaboration. While it is true that general oversight and a unifying concept are important, if they are too dominant, real innovations can be compromised. In the production of *Tall*

*Horse*, all of the key participants have significant reputations in their cultures, but no single individual seemed to dominate the process of defining the project.

Basson's skills as a director were, however, crucial to the realization of this production. They are exemplified in the way he negotiated conflicts that arose from the need to cut the hundred-page script, which originally ran for two hours, as well as conflicts between the script and the puppet form. The playwright, Khephra Burns, had little theatre- and no puppet-writing experience before this production. He had created a complex, witty text, which was to be spoken in English and French, depending on the speaker. However, the strengths of the script as a sophisticated exploration of complex ideas were often at odds with the needs of puppet theatre, which demands a simple script based on character types and clear lines of conflict. As Marie Kruger points out, changes of emotion are signaled through the moving parts of the face and limbs of the puppets,<sup>61</sup> which makes extended dialogue and complex emotional shifts potentially deadly in puppet theatre. Thus scenes like the *soirée* and presentation of the giraffe to the king were far too long and subtle, as seen by their diminished role in the 2005 production and final script. It is also clear, however, that the text was exploring important discourses on cultural interaction, and thus the scene had to remain in the production.

Basson, who created strong and spectacular images and used them to tell the story, overcame many of these problems. He utilized not only the puppets, but other visual aspects as well to build the architecture of the production; for example, each time the full-size giraffe appeared onstage, silhouetted against the back of the stage, it provoked an audible response from the audience. The computerized back projections were used to smooth transitions, as well as to layer sections of potentially static dialogue like that between Drovetti and the Viceroy, where the background offers images of colonial Africa and other very obviously computerized images of green grids that morph into pyramids, filled with giraffe patterns, suggesting how identity and cultural interaction is constructed and may change. The background also juxtaposes the technologized modern world with the idea of ancient Egypt.

That there were problems was clear; however, the difficulties experienced highlight issues related to intercultural productions. This was not a dry attempt to document or rehearse some timeless African tradition that is venerable and distant; rather, the production is of interest, because it attempted to translate various ideas and traditions into something new and accessible. All aspects of the performance were alive, fluid, and needed negotiation, from the language negotiation between the English spoken in South Africa and the French of Mali and the text provided by a writer in New York. The companies had to negotiate cultures, languages, traditions, and performance techniques in workshops,<sup>62</sup> rehearsals, and through an international tour to Europe and the United States. These negotiations resulted in innovations, such as, for example, Kohler allowing his puppets to be painted, whereas previously he had worked only in natural wood, and the Sogolon Company creating hollowed-out puppets to facilitate the work of the South African artists, who found the solid puppets too heavy. Coulibaly suggests that this compromise gave them a "freedom, we don't have this constraint" of not allowing the puppet to break and thus exposing its animating spirit, as defined in the Malian context.<sup>63</sup> The titular figure of the giraffe embodies innovation through collaborative compromise, as the Malian *castelet* formed the basic design of the giraffe, which was combined with the Handspring Company's use of rods and contemporary materials for the neck to create the magnificent five-meter-tall giraffe puppet in which two actors performed. Additionally, the formal theatre venue, with its decor, lighting, and

sound system, and back projections further removed the production from the context of Bamana Sogo bò performances. However, this collaboration provoked Handspring to work responsively, with more improvisation in performance. Thus all participants had to learn, adapt, and share their knowledge and experience.

One of the most negative aspects of the project concerns language: the Malians did not have an equal say in the production, predominantly because of language (and because the project was developed in South Africa). This underlines the significance of context and the impact that economy and resources have, consciously or not, on intercultural interaction. The key seems to be compromise. Petrus du Preez, a researcher on the project who included an in-depth analysis of the process in his doctoral dissertation on African puppets, felt that "Basson's vision of the production was not the most important vision. Too many concessions had to be made in order to satisfy the different artists and this led to a wooden first performance."<sup>64</sup> Basson agreed that there were "too many cooks," and this added a lot of stress.<sup>65</sup> However, he also says that "[w]hat was however a magnificent experience was to get to know 2 different puppet traditions, the mastercarvers of the 2 styles of puppets." Coulibaly also insisted that "*Tall Horse* is not the project of one individual. It belongs to all of us. No-one can say 'It's mine.' This is an encounter between people with the same desire: to make a piece of work."<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps the ultimate test is Bharucha's insistence that a central aspect of exchange has to be what each culture gains from the interaction. It is clear that despite frustrations, much was gained from this interaction. Ultimately, the willingness to make the work, even at the expense of initial conceptions, knowledge, or traditions, seems to be one of the most important features of intercultural exchange. Although, as Patrice Pavis argues, the exchange is never completely balanced, the importance of *negotiating* voice, power, authorship, and ownership is crucial. Related to this is the process of developing the trust and understanding of the other persons and cultures throughout the process.

Assistant director Mervyn Millar says that the central figure of the giraffe provides a dramatic metaphor for the importance of the negotiation process:

The progress of *Tall Horse* has been challenged constantly, by miscommunication, by difficulties to do with place, distance and language, by contrasting styles struggling to find a common rhythm. Like the two puppeteers in the giraffe, strapped together in a cage, the collaborators in *Tall Horse* have sometimes pulled against one another and come close to falling. They've needed to find an instinctive connection to walk on stilts successfully. But in 2005 it began to feel as if the companies were walking in step. Each time a run of *Tall Horse* is set up, the collaboration is renewed, these artists trust each other a little more, and the connection between the groups, on and off stage, becomes stronger.<sup>67</sup>

### **Audience Reception**

Reception is another controversial aspect of intercultural performance practice. Often a production receives varied and often highly emotive responses, because the form is inaccessible or misunderstood in the new context. Pavis argues that "human culture is a system of signification [codes] which allows a society or group to understand itself in relation to the world."<sup>68</sup> One implication of "borrowing" from one culture to

another may be that where the host culture understands the codified form, the new or wider audience does not.

One of the strengths of *Tall Horse* is that the production did not depend on a priori knowledge of Malian puppetry or of the Handspring Puppet Company's eclectic forms. As a popular performance form, puppetry perhaps allows an audience more freedom to respond to the narrative than do more realistic forms. This nonrealism may also facilitate the audience's engagement with challenging ideas without requiring a resolved perspective on cultural interaction. Perhaps, then, the layering of the narrative with multimedia and puppets that interact with actors created juxtapositions that allowed for a complexity of response that no single one of these forms could have achieved alone.

Consequently, as the audience follows this extraordinary animal's journey from South to North, it experiences a number of dislocations of cultural perspective about both Africa and Europe and their relationship to each other, which challenges both how we believe we see ourselves and others and how we remember and influence one another. Who would imagine that a giraffe could be the inspiration for both new fashions in dress<sup>69</sup> and the Eiffel Tower, the quintessential icon of France?

The final word of the play concerns cultural exchange and migration. Jean-Michel asks whether Atir ever returned to Africa, and Dr. Konate replies: "You're here. A seed blown far from the tree can still become a forest."<sup>70</sup> This again emphasizes the cyclical nature of history and interactions and demonstrates that cultural exchanges, both physical and psychic, are not linear and that borders are crossed, that new peoples and worlds can be negotiated.

Finally, it seems that two things are essential for any kind of real intercultural exchange, apart from sensitivity and respect for one another. The first is sufficient resources. As Basson says, "If one wants to do this work it takes time and lots of money.

Both luxuries here [in Africa]."<sup>71</sup> The implication of this assertion is that the North, here represented by Europe, will inevitably initiate, define, and dominate intercultural interactions, unless South-South interaction can somehow be facilitated economically. The second issue involves cultural perspective. This is difficult to attain when artists and audience are too close to a particular culture and the issues represented in the performance to have perspective, or when they don't pause to step back, learn, and consider difference, the possibilities of something new. Once again, both time and money are needed to truly engage with another culture in and through a theatrical production process. Both of these issues are significant and cannot be overcome or dismissed easily.

However, the final word must be positive and is best given by Coulibaly, who insisted on the centrality of the giraffe in this exploration of North-South cultural interaction, because she offers a metaphor for engaging across cultures and gaining perspective on history and identity:

I have a wish; that Africa doesn't stay like the Kalahari. I wish for fraternity, for balance, equality. That is the grandeur I see in the giraffe. The giraffe has the height to look. We can look back on the first world war [*sic*], on the second world war [*sic*], on all the wars. . . . If we can agree to shake hands, then we can achieve the grandeur of the giraffe.<sup>72</sup>

And so we are invited to step back, to see ourselves as an / Other and thus see differ-

ence differently and the local in relation to the global, the self in relation to the Other with some degree of ironic distance.

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### Endnotes

1. Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins, *Women's Intercultural Performance* (London: Routledge, 2000), 7.
2. Daryl Chin, "Interculturalism, Postmodernism, Pluralism," in *Interculturalism and Performance: Writings from PAJ* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1991), 83–95.
3. Una Chaudhuri, "Working Out of Place," in *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theatre*, ed. Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 193.
4. Peter Brook, "The Culture of Links," in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis (London: Routledge, 1996), 63–66.
5. Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, *Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-cultural Transactions in Australasia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
6. Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993), 4.
7. *Ibid.*, 92.
8. *Ibid.*, 155.
9. Richard Schechner, *The End of Humanism: Writings on Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 99.
10. Rustom Bharucha, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (London: Athlone, 2000).
11. Bharucha, *Theatre and the World*, 5.
12. Mary Jo Arnoldi, "The Sogow – Imagining a Moral Universe through Sogo bò masquerade," in *Bamana: The Art of Existence*, ed. Jean-Paul Colleyn (New York: Museum for African Art, 2001), 93n1. I draw heavily on Arnoldi's work to contextualize the Sogolon Puppet Company, as she has written the seminal research on Sogo bò puppet masquerade.



<sup>13</sup> Mary Jo Arnoldi, "Performance, Style, and the Assertion of identity in Malian Puppet Drama," *Journal of Folklore Research* 25, nos. 1–2 (1988): 87–100, esp. 87–89.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Jo Arnoldi, *Playing with Time* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 24–35.

<sup>15</sup> I use the term "Bamana," as opposed to "Bamara," which was a French ethnological term adopted from Fula, Arab, and Berber informants, who used the term "Bambara" to refer to those "who refuse to pray"; see Rene A. Bravman, "Islamic Ritual and Practice in Bamana Ségou—the 19th Century 'Citadel of Paganism,'" in *Bamana*, 36.

<sup>16</sup> Arnoldi, "Performance, Style," and "The Sogow," 77.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Jo Arnoldi, "Bamana and Bozo Puppetry of the Segou Region Youth Societies," in the collection of Joan and Charles Bird, Department of Creative Arts, Purdue University (c.1976), 2.

<sup>18</sup> In 2004, there was an exhibition of Yaya Coulibaly's collection of Malian puppets in Cape Town; Janni Donald interviewed Coulibaly for the catalog, which includes outlines of these different contexts and approaches to the Bamana masks and puppets.

<sup>19</sup> Arnoldi, "Performance, Style," 96.

<sup>20</sup> See Jean-Paul Colleyn's opening acknowledgments in *Bamana*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Arnoldi, "Bamana and Bozo Puppetry," 9.

<sup>22</sup> Arnoldi, "The Sogow," 37, 40–42.

<sup>23</sup> Jane Taylor and the Handspring Puppet Company, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> The text for *Tall Horse* was written by Khephra Burns, and the 2005 version for the stage has been published in Mervyn Millar, *Journey of the Tall Horse: A Story of African Theatre* (London: Oberon Books, 2006). All future references to the play come from this copy of the text.

<sup>25</sup> Jane Taylor has since edited a conceptually and visually rich overview of the company, with six essays that explore many aspects of its work: namely, the trajectory of its aesthetics and the significance of this company's work for puppetry as a form. The book is titled *Handspring Puppet Company* (Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2009). Prior to this, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's book *William Kentridge* (Société des expositions du Palais Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles / Vereniging voor Tentoonstellingen van het Paleis voor Schone Kunsten Brussel, 1998) covered exhibitions of his work in Munich (October 1998) and at the Serpentine, London (1999). These exhibitions included his collaborative work with the Handspring Puppet Company.

<sup>26</sup> Kohler outlined the development of Handspring's puppetry in a documentary made to contextualize *Tall Horse* for SABC-TV 2 titled *Our Nation*

in *Colour: Sticks and Strings* (produced by Simon Damast and directed by Jemima Spring, broadcast 30 December 2004). Adrian Kohler outlines his approach to puppetry in his chapter titled "Thinking through Puppets," in *Handspring Puppet Company*, 42–147.

<sup>27</sup> See Christov-Bakargiev's overview of Kentridge's work in *William Kentridge*, including some of his line drawings and stills for these plays; see also <http://www.handspringpuppet.co.za/html/frameind.html> for images of the various Handspring productions.

<sup>28</sup> For details, see Arnoldi, *Playing with Time*.

<sup>29</sup> *Sogo* in Bamana means "animal" or "horse"; it is also the name used for puppets and masks that represent animals. *Jan* means "tall."

<sup>30</sup> Burns, *Tall Horse*, 242.

<sup>31</sup> Millar, *Journey of the Tall Horse*, 120.

<sup>32</sup> Erica Fischer-Lichte, J. Riley, and M. Gissenwehrer, eds., *The Dramatic Touch of Difference: Theatre, Own and Foreign* (Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag, 1990), 283.

<sup>33</sup> Burns, *Tall Horse*, 241.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>36</sup> Homi Bhabha, "Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Politics of Theory*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Colchester, UK: University of Essex Press, 1983), 202.

<sup>37</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1996), 122.

<sup>38</sup> Burns, *Tall Horse*, 253.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Much has been written about exotic exhibitions of animals and humans, but take, for example, the comment on references to lions in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* that suggests that "animals in captivity became symbols of British exploration and power"; see Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 22. See also Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Guillermo Gómez-Peña, with Elaine Peña, *Ethno-techno: Writings on Performance, Activism, and Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Robert J. Hoage and William A. Deiss, eds., *New Worlds, New Animals: From Menagerie to Zoological Park in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>41</sup> Burns, *the Tall Horse*, 254–55.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>53</sup> For visual images of the range of puppets for the production, see <http://www.handspringpuppet.co.za/html/frameind.html> (accessed 14 January 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>54</sup> Yvette Coetzee, "Visibly Invisible—How Shifting the Conventions of the Traditionally Invisible Puppeteer Allows for More Dimensions in Both the Puppeteer–Puppet Relationship and the Creation of Theatrical Meaning in *Ubu and the Truth Commission*," *South African Theatre Journal* 12 (1998): 35–51.

<sup>55</sup> Bill Ashcroft, "Interpolation and Post-colonial Agency," *New Literatures Review*, nos. 28–29 (1994–95): 176–89.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 183.

Millar, *Journey of the Tall Horse*, 61; and Petrus du Preez, "Ikoon en Medium: Die Toneelpop, Masker en Akteurmanipuleerder in Afrika-performance" (Ph.D. diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2007), 209–10, 225–26 (unpublished).

<sup>58</sup> Millar, *Journey of the Tall Horse*, 51.

<sup>59</sup> Marvin Carlson, "Brook and Mnouchkine Passages to India?" in *Intercultural Performance Reader*, 79–92, quote on 81.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>61</sup> Marie Kruger, "Poppespel: 'n Ondersoek na die Historiese Ontwikkeling, die Spelbeginsels, Karakter en Gebruiksmoontlikhede van die Toneelpop" (M.A. thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1987), 81–83 (unpublished).

<sup>62</sup> For example, the extended hunting scene was originally improvised in the traditional Sogo bò tradition; voiceless, with puppets and lasting twenty minutes, it was cut to a much shorter final version, also silent, with music, and with the small giraffe being represented by hand-carved giraffe in the hands of the large embodied puppet—a compromised mixture of the difference performers' styles.

<sup>63</sup> Yaya Coulibaly, interview with Petrus du Preez, 18 August 2004, Department of Drama, University of Stellenbosch.

<sup>64</sup> Du Preez, "Ikoon en Medium," 215, quotation translated by Yvette Hutchison.

<sup>65</sup> Marthinus Basson, personal communication with author, 28 April 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Millar, *Journey of the Tall Horse*, 167.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>68</sup> Pavis, *Intercultural Performance Reader*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Burns, *Tall Horse*, 259–69.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>71</sup> Basson, personal communication.

<sup>72</sup> Yaya Coulibaly, quoted in Millar, *Journey of the Tall Horse*, 233.