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**Conceptualizing Alternative Theater and Alternative Performance Space in Postindependence Zimbabwe**

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**Abstract**

This article proposes conceptual working definitions for alternative theater and alternative spatiality as they apply to postindependence Zimbabwean theater practice. These conceptual definition proposals identify and delineate the contemporary Zimbabwean spatial appreciation of alternative performance space and esthetic practice. In this article, I implicate alternative performance esthetics and spatiality in how the past, as the people’s cultural frame of reference, can remain compatible with the demands of the present, and possibly the future. As a popular strategy, alternative theater performance spaces are presented as ways of reworking the colonial mapping process leading to the development of a new map, that is, a visible site of deconstructive attack. This remapping process presents a new spatial and esthetic knowledge situated within hybrid/ syncretic alternative performance space.

**Keywords**

alternative, theater, space, practice, esthetics

If I possessed a theatre of my own, I should not convey on to paper the designs which are in my mind, but I should place them directly on the stage. (Craig in Howard, 2002, p. 14)

In contemporary theatre practice, the stage is undergoing a transition and theatre artists are striving for new methods of presentation. This change is more evident in the process of mechanisation and adaptation of staging styles and techniques to fit into existing stages. (Eni, 2013, p. 159)

**Introduction**

This article proposes conceptual definitions for alternative theater and alternative performance space as they apply to postliberation African theater practice. These conceptual definition proposals identify and delineate the contemporary Zimbabwean spatial appreciation of alternative performance space and esthetic practice. In this article, I implicate alterna-tive performance esthetics and spatiality in “how the past, as the people’s cultural frame of reference, can remain compat-ible with the demands of the present, and possibly the future” (Chinyowa, 2009, p. 285). As a popular strategy, alternative theater performance spaces are presented as ways of rework-ing the colonial “mapping process” leading to the develop-ment of a new map that is a “visible site of deconstructive attack” (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996, p. 147). This remapping process presents a new spatial and esthetic knowledge situ-ated within hybrid/ syncretic alternative performance space.



Theoretically, I approach this debate from a syncretic per-spective. Syncretism denotes the combination or alliance of opposing philosophical doctrines often with political under-tones that result in public and private rituals and commonly accepted local practices, which appear to the observer to link orientations that are normally disparate, if not disjunctive (Claus & Mills, 2003). As a theoretical concept, syncretism is deployed to describe the state or condition of alternative performance space in Zimbabwe and the process by which such conditions occur (Claus & Mills, 2003; Leopold & Jensen, 2004; Shalaby, 2013) as well as its influence on esthetic practice. Within a specifically British colonial setup, such as Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, Balme (1999) argues that con-ceptually syncretism enables the development of a “theoreti-cal discourse which questions some of the fundamental principles of British theatrical aesthetics” (pp. 23-24). It is able to do this, Derrida (1994) proposes, through creating “discursive stratifications and ephemeral formations [that] produce a new discourse” (p. 118). This new discourse emerges out of an analysis of the alternative theater practitio-ner’s cultural, political, and economic experience in the post

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colony. Although these conditions are broadly applicable in Africa due to her colonial history, different cultural mixes generate distinctly different aesthetic practices.

Spatially, the colonial Rhodesian Cartesian spatial grid, which had been normalized and became an invisible map-ping strategy suppressing organic cultural paradigms of place development is subverted through artistic means. My argument here is that in the postcolonial Third World, cul-tures begin to infuse themselves, sometimes transforming the normalized developmental process and sometimes disrupt-ing it. Although this developmental process is often met with contestation from those who have become submerged in the colonial ways or desire the colonial benefits, it inspires new (spatial) forms that create the conditions in which the subal-tern groups can liberate themselves (Spivak, 1990).

The theoretical concepts of syncretism such as borrow-ing/appropriation and repurposing are deployed to describe and explain transactions, between indigenous and colonial/ colonial residual paradigms, which led to the emergence of alternative esthetic practice. According to Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2000) appropriation is used to

describe the ways in which post-colonial societies take over those aspects of the imperial culture- language, forms of writing, film, even modes of thought and argument such as rationalism, logic and analysis—that may be of use to them in articulating identities. (p. 15)

The net result of the appropriation of dominant colonial/ colonial residual modes of representation and spatiality, in this example, fundamentally alters the appropriated (spatial-ity and performance practice) and the appropriator (alterna-tive theater practitioner; Claus & Mills, 2003). The postcolonial experience, therefore, is characteristically syn-cretic. Spatial practice and experience are thus explored as a new phenomenon that bridges the continuum between colo-nial/colonial residual and precolonial paradigms into an evolving present.

In addition, syncretism is deployed to challenge alterna-tive theater practitioners to continuously question the ability of British colonial residual models and theoretical positions of representation as adequate representations of their histo-ries and lives (Spivak, 1990; Hooks, 1994). Deployed in this manner, syncretism acquires political value in that it chal-lenges and guards against universal claims of Marxism, national liberation movements, or Liberal feminism to speak for the oppressed (Morton, 2003). The political value-laden concept of syncretism is also particularly useful in under-standing the usage of street dialects (language) as signs which articulate the deconstruction of colonial residual rep-resentative models.

As a syncretic model, alternative theater is a “transi-tional concept for describing the relationship between [Zimbabwean] culture and aesthetics” (Balme, 1999, p. 16). The proposed conceptual categories are African

because they are located in the materiality and practice par-adigms of Zimbabwe specifically and Africa generally. The syncretic narrative involves a process of “disruptive retranslation” (Huggan, 2001, p. 21), which locates the postcolonial agent as an “interpellated, already exist[ing] in a state of translation, imagined and reimagined by colonial ways of seeing” (Niranjana, 1992, p. 6). Tejaswini Niranjana (1992, p. 186) advances that the task of the translator (alter-native theater practitioner) is “not to retrace the original— to reproduce the finer lineaments of an unblemished precolonial culture—but rather to intervene as a means of inscribing always-already fissured” cultures. To this end, syncretism in Africa could be viewed as marking the moment in which the Third World moved from an affilia-tive position with the Second and the First Worlds (Young, 1998)—as they existed.

**Postindependence Zimbabwean**

**Historical and Political Theater**

**Context**

At independence in 1980, Zimbabwean theater emerged fragmented. This fragmentation was due to ideological dif-ferences as highlighted by Owen Seda (2004),

At independence [. . . ], the emergence of segregation, polarisation and division in Zimbabwean theatre was part of a residual consciousness of confrontation which had come out of the nationalist struggle on the one hand, and the tenacity of colonialist occupying forces on the other. (p. 137)

This residual consciousness manifested itself in the form of organizations that sought to safeguard and/or fight for their cultural and political space within the cultural industry in postindependence Zimbabwe. On one hand was the National Theatre Organisation (NTO), which controlled and adminis-tered colonial residual purpose-built theaters and indepen-dent funding for aligned theater companies in Zimbabwe. On the other hand, was the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre organisation (ZACT), which sought to mobilize community theater groups and create a counterstructure/ movement to the NTO. Seda (2004) argues that ZACT

was meant to promote new theatre in the townships, which theatre would assist the post-independence state in its quest to establish a just and egalitarian society. This theatre, founded on strong reliance on indigenous performance idioms, was supposed to go beyond mere voyeurism. It was meant to address society’s day-to-day developmental issues. (p. 138)

This township theater paradigm, considered alternative the-ater in this article, demanded its own performance spaces that would allow and enable the use of indigenous idioms, perfor-mance styles, and techniques. As a response to this need, township groups appropriated and repurposed community

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halls, beer gardens, open spaces, and youth centers into alter-native performance spaces. One space that became a major alternative place of performance was Stanley Hall located in the oldest Bulawayo township, Makokoba. These appropri-ated performance spaces are important in developing a new sense of spatiality, appreciation of performance styles and esthetics in postindependence Zimbabwe because of their “locatedness” in the struggle against the domination and straightjacketing of the performance industry by the colonial residual Rhodesian theater tradition.

As Seda (2004) intimates above ZACT quickly aban-doned its foundational principle of developing a new theater identity in Zimbabwe that was distinctly founded upon indig-enous performance idioms. This change of heart was moti-vated by cross-cultural exchange programs initiated and funded by the Dutch-based Humanist Institute for Cooperation (Hivos). Hivos provided financial funding for international artists to work with township groups in Zimbabwe (Seda, 2004). These artists, often with the best intentions of knowledge and skills transfer, nevertheless became agents of Eurocentric cultural imperialism. Through collaborative work, these artists influenced esthetic practice, style of performance, and enforced the use of English as the medium of delivery in community theater performances. Indeed, true cultural collaboration is not always possible when the global systems of advantage (Tatum, 1997) still associate Africa with “primitiveness,” “lack of civilization,” and “underdevelopment.”

On one hand, some alternative theater practitioners were skeptical of supporting these cultural exchange programs and initiatives that trivialized their experiences and perfor-mance traditions. On the other hand, some took the opportu-nity to create sustainable relationships with their overseas partners who enriched their performance practice and esthetic development. One case in point is Amakhosi Theatre Productions who managed to create a working framework, through the NTO, with Christopher Weare, then Rhodes University Lecturer and Christopher Hurst1, a Central School of Speech and Drama graduate. The relationship between Chris Hurst and Amakhosi Theatre Productions resulted in the creation and performance of Workshop Negative (1986), the establishment and strengthening of Amakhosi Performing Arts Workshop2 (APAW).

Notwithstanding the role played by ZACT in challenging the imposition of an imported realist colonial esthetic style, Ngugi wa Mirii and Kimani Gecau’s failure to contextualize and localize their Kenyan community theater experience and practice into the Zimbabwean theater landscape led to the organization’s (ZACT) demise. In contrast to the Kamiriithu Community Project (wa Mirii, 1979), Mirii’s ZACT was cre-ated and developed as a para-governmental project. As a result, most of ZACT’s programs were centralized in the Harare head office although there were provincial offices. Due to ZACT’s over reliance on government funding, the organization folded when the government cut off funding in

1986 (Byam, 1999). The disintegration of ZACT had a spi-raling effect on the development of alternative theater prac-tice within alternative performance spaces. Alternative theater groups lost focus as there was no centralized coordi-nation of programs. Although the disintegration of ZACT resulted in the increase of the number of performances in communities as theater groups used every space available as a place of performance, they begun to misappropriate perfor-mance theories such as Grotowski’s (1968/1981) “poor the-ater” and “minimalism.”

ZACT’s failure to relate to other contending organizations such as the NTO resulted in a confrontational approach and frosty relations between the members of the two organiza-tions. This meant that it was difficult for members of ZACT to work with NTO members thus hampering cross-pollina-tion of ideas, skills, and paradigmatic practices. Cross-pollination mainly took place within NTO-affiliated theater groups such as Amakhosi Theatre Productions and Rooftop Promotions. When ZACT folded, member theater groups transformed into nongovernmental organizations (NGO), arts trusts, or switched to producing commissioned applied theater3 projects. However, without proper financial admin-istration training, these theater groups found themselves fac-ing more challenges than opportunities.

The continued practice of theater along the NTO/ZACT divide in postindependence Zimbabwe led to the develop-ment of esthetic conventions associated with specific perfor-mance spaces. These conventions became the acceptable standards for performance and esthetic practice in postinde-pendence Zimbabwe. Alternative performance spaces such as the Stanley Hall4 and Theatre-in-the-Park5 emerged within this setting and had to contest this cultural space. I argue that within this frame of contestation, the new performance prac-tice that continues to develop within alternative performance spaces is a result of the confrontational relationship between the residual and dominant/emergent categories (Williams, 1977) on one hand and the reframing of spatial experience through performance in post-independence in Zimbabwe on the other.

**Alternative Theater in Postcolonial Africa**

There has been little consensus regarding the proper content, scope, and significance of alternative theater in Africa. Alternative theater has been defined in varying scopes and forms (Chikonzo, 2015; Kamlongera, 1989; Kerr, 1995; Leach, 2008; Mda, 1993; Nicholson, 2005; Ravengai, 2011a; Seda, 2004).6 The common tenets identified by all these the-orists include the “locatedness” of performances in the mate-riality of the people and/or community, syncretic and functional performances. Alternative theater is thus commit-ted to telling the stories of its respective communities through contextually relevant cultural performative frames that chal-lenge domination and exclusion. The performance styles and

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esthetic choices become a reflection of the influences of the larger community on the material; play development pro-cess, scenography, and presentation styles.

Alternative theater refers to the coalescence of all the var-ied theater-on-the-margins strands conceptualized by Peter Larlham (1985, p. 63) as committed theater. According to Larlham (1985), committed theater is concerned with social and political change; transformation and development of the people and communities where these theater groups come from and operate from. This commitment manifests itself in a multidisciplinary approach that allows a fluid relationship between professional conventional theater, other forms of social-based theater and indigenous traditional forms. The commitment of alternative theater practitioners transforms theater performances from utterances and self-conscious lit-erary expressions to radical performed images of Black anger and resistance (Sitas, 1996;Steadman, 1994). The per-formative interactions in alternative theater refuse to imitate tribal performances, which were encouraged among migrant workers in the mines by the (colonial) government (Kruger, 1999), but present a sense of crafted history of power, of resistance, which does not collapse into a forced heroic ren-dition (Sitas, 1996). This reliance on the material conditions of the community and the strong commitment to social change hold solid linkages to Freire’s (1970/1993) model of praxis and social change identifiable with popular theater. I will now examine this idea of the “popular” and locate it within the frames of alternative theater.

**Popular Theater as Alternative Theater**

Theorists and practitioners have defined popular theater in various ways (Barber, 1997; Coplan, 1986; Fabian, 1978; Kamlongera, 1989; Kidd & Colletta, 1982; Steadman, 1986). It is a contemporary expression of “the people” that some-how sits between traditional and elite cultural manifestations (Barber, 1997). In attempting to answer the question, “what is African popular culture?”—and by extension theater— Johannes Fabian clarifies that it

1. [it] suggest[s] contemporary cultural expressions carried by the masses in contrast to both modern elitist and traditional “tribal” culture; [b] it evokes historical conditions characterized by mass communication, mass production, and mass participation; [c] it implies a challenge to accepted beliefs in the superiority of “pure” or “high” culture, but also to the notion of folklore, a categorization we have come to suspect as being equally elitist and tied to certain conditions in western society [and] [d] it signifies, potentially at least, processes occurring behind the back of established powers and accepted interpretations and, thus, offers a better conceptual approach to decolonization of which it is undoubtedly an important element. (1978, p. 315)

Popular culture is, thus, a hybrid cultural form that seeks to create a new world order in-between the “pure” and “high”

cultures by challenging the status quo (Dolby, 2006); the ful-crum of the (African) people’s struggles. As performance, popular theater emerges as a syncretized paradigm of “low” and “high” cultural characteristics, which enhances the peo-ple’s sociopolitical, religious, and economic lives by chal-lenging hegemony, domination, and prejudice (Dolby, 2006; Fabian, 1978; Young, 1998).

Popular theater has also been defined and distinguished from other forms of theater using “language and theatrical aesthetics” (Desai, 1990, p. 65). The distinction of popular theater based on language follows Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s (1986) relativist approach that a truly (African) popular the-ater should be presented and conducted in indigenous African languages. wa Thiong’o (1986) argued that any theater per-formance in foreign languages cater for an elite audience and therefore is “unAfrican.” In postcolonial Africa, syncretic dialects, which combined local languages with English/ Portuguese and/or French, emerged as a counter to this indig-enous relativism and metropolis-inspired elitism.

The theatrical esthetics argument largely surrounded spa-tial configuration, design, and space use. The space/place conceptualization continuum between the colonial/colonial residual and indigenous spatial paradigms due to the differ-ent philosophies and authorities meant that space and perfor-mance were imagined and understood differently. The imposition of the colonial spatial understanding on Third World7 colonies motivated the development of a new spatial esthetic that was cognizant of the cultural, political, and phil-osophical perspectives. This new syncretic spatial under-standing transformed and introduced new esthetic styles, approaches, and processes within the popular theater para-digm. The flexibility of popular theater practitioners to adapt and respond to the contemporary spatial and esthetic chal-lenges positions this theater as a suitable strategy for social and human development. Furthermore, its adaptability enables it to respond contextually to creative needs of the “fluctuating conglomeration(s) of ethnic, regional, religious, and class groups” (Barber, 1987, p. 7). It is this malleability of popular theater that positions it as an alternative theatrical paradigm to the colonial/colonial residual and indigenous theater practice in Africa. According to Tony Bennett in Desai (1990, p. 66), popular theatre, as it is practized in Africa, ought to be thought of in relational and abstract terms, “as a site, always changing and variable in its consti-tution and organization.” This is due to the fact that alterna-tive theater is always an elusive, ever-changing, and discursive practice susceptible to sociopolitical and eco-nomic influence (Desai, 1990).

As popular theater in Africa is typically socially engaged and responsive, applied theater genres such as theater for development (Mda, 1993) would also be described as popu-lar. Thus, while other theaters may be popular, not all popular theater is the same. In Williams’s (1977) social culture frame-work, alternative theater belongs to the emergent cultural cat-egory. It is important to note that the transformations and

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changes that create alternative theater must take place within conventional performance practice models. Accordingly, in the African context, the functional and normative dimensions of performance are fundamental characteristics that should be used to define alternative theater performances.

Tim Prentki, and Jan Selman (2000) define popular theater

as a process of theatre which deeply involves specific communities in identifying issues of concern, analysing current conditions and causes of a situation, identifying points of change and analysing how change could happen and/or contributing to the actions implied. (p. 8)

In other words, alternative theater can be best thought of as a normative discursive practice that engages in dialogues through theatrical practices. As Desai (1990) observes, alter-native theater is never in an exclusively advantaged position, rather constantly negotiates and renegotiates its own articu-lations in the larger societal context as it challenges hege-mony, domination, and the status quo. These negotiations, which are moderated by the materiality of the community, influence the esthetic approaches and processes as well as content development. The net outcome of this negotiation is an embodied and collaborative esthetic development processes.

Theater enterprise operates within conventions (Coplan, 1986; Kamlongera, 1989). This means that alternative the-ater in postindependence Zimbabwe needed to create and develop conventions that would moderate the reception of the cultural products performed in alternative theater spaces. As a “counter-culture” to the mainstream residual paradigm, the alternative theater basic convention followed an endoge-nous or bottom-up approach, which recognized the

creative potentials of the people, their worldview, cultural background, and experiences, and the necessity to engage them in active participation [through spectatorship and member checking] to chart the course of their collective destiny. (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2012, p. 692)

These characteristics of the alternative culture define the relationship between performance style and alternative places of performance. I use Chukwu-Okoronkwo’s (2012) observation to distinguish alternative spaces of perfor-mance such as Stanley Hall and Theatre-in-the-Park as alternative culture to the colonial residual tradition in Zimbabwe and the new nationalist theater, which was propped up by the ZANU-PF regime at the onset of inde-pendence. The importance of Stanley Hall in the history of the political and cultural struggles of Bulawayo strengthens the argument above as it invokes the spirit of uncorrupted liberation struggle. Therefore, I argue that alternative per-formance spaces hold a fundamental position in the devel-opment and growth of theater practice in postindependence Zimbabwe.

The physical nurture of theater practice especially emerg-ing in Bulawayo’s townships is largely attributable to Stanley Hall as a space. Stanley Hall was used a space for Karate training and practice by Dragons Karate Club in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Dragons Karate Club was a collec-tive of young people coming from Makokoba, Nguboyenja, and Mzilikazi under the tutelage of Cont Mhlanga. When Cont Mhlanga and crew decided to form a theater company in 1981, Stanely Hall became the center of performance for Amakhosi Theatre Productions and other emerging Bulawayo groups. Because this space had been inscribed with physical performances linked inspired by Karate and kung-fu disci-plines, theater performances thus adopted the same. This physical approach to theater performance characterized Amakhosi Theatre Productions’ plays such as Diamond Warrior I (1980) and II (1981), Nansi Lendoda [Here is the man] (1985) and Workshop Negative (1986) among others. Although the physicality of Amakhosi Theatre Productions’ performances could be attributed to their Karate background, it is important also to attribute the inscribed influences of Stanley Hall as these are important in determining the hori-zon of expectation.

Christopher Kamlongera (1989) provides valuable insights into the understanding of alternative theater in Africa. He conceives alternative theater as African theater with two central tenets,

1. The practitioner is re-educating himself into understanding theatre language and material relevant for the community, [b] the theatre practitioner is opening up dialogue with the community in order for them to join hands in creating a true African theatre. (Kamlongera, 1989, p. 83)

What Kamlongera is advocating here is an “unlearning” that is necessary for African theater practitioners who have undergone colonial education. An education that not only privileges Western knowledge and Western theatrical para-digms, but also relegates indigenous performance to primi-tive ritual. What Kamlongera is advocating is a syncretic theater that is relevant and responsive to the African popu-lace both materially and conceptually. Consequently, alter-native performance provides the space for a new theater language to emerge defining a relevant contemporary African esthetic interpretive model. Just as *tsotsitaal* emerged in Soweto (Coplan, 1983) and pidgin/creole in Nigeria (Soyinka, 1988), in Bulawayo *Ndenglish*8 and *isila-palapa* developed while *Shonglish* emerged in Harare.Interestingly part of the material, conceptual, and political theatrical shift involved the application of these “new” lan-guage dialects into the theater, thus a new theater language also involved a new language of the theater. Kamlongera understood African performance to be simultaneously enter-taining and purposeful. It is this overlap that distinguishes African performance from performance that evolved from ancient Greek theater that we will call broadly “western.”

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African performance—and popular performance specifi-cally—critically engages the material conditions of the pop-ulace in conversation with the audience. This dialogue can be literal—as with theater for development—or through the inclusion of the “audience” as part of the performance vision.

The fact that alternative theater is embedded in the com-munity creates a struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state (wa Thiongo, 1997, p. 11). In other terms, these enactments of power are a fight to control popular cultural modes of expression and connections that exist between the status quo and alternative theater practitioners. The struggle between these two contending spheres of influence observed by wa Thiongo are about validating and bestowing recognition and prestige (Huggan, 2001) on alternative theater practice and performance spaces in postindependence Zimbabwe. Alternative performances (and by extension alternative spaces of performance) are thus, a strategy of exposing material struggle, symbolic power and resistance against and between disciplines of authorship, authenticity, and legitimacy discharged in the interconnected levels of media-tion within the political Zimbabwean state. Furthermore, the attachment of symbolic power to alternative performance space makes the performances hosted in these places of per-formance political. The alternative practitioner’s adoption of everyday street language, clothes as costumes and house-hold utensils as properties demonstrates a counterhege-monic popular resistance and radically alters the residual colonial semiotic appreciation of costumes, sets, and prop-erties. This new semiotic value in alternative performances forms the foundation of—and legitimates—an African the-ory of scenography.

**Alternative Performance Space**

Within the post-independence Zimbabwean theater industry, dominant and emergent places of performance include revo-lutionary spaces constructed within the mythologies of the dominant. These spaces developed as part of the revolution against the exclusionary policies that frustrated the African performance narrative by what Samuel Ravengai (2006) calls the “second generation” practitioners. Within the dis-course of performance studies, debates and arguments have emerged as to what the term “theater” refers to. In the Western theater paradigm, the term “theater” was used to denote the architectural structure in which theatrical perfor-mances were watched (Brocket & Hildy, 1999); the theatri-cal performance presented and the profession itself (Crow, 1983). This demonstrates how the space, the activity, and the industry within the Western trajectory of theater are inextri-cably intertwined. Although there is now consensus on the definition of a theatrical performance from an African per-spective (Banham, 2004; Kamlongera989), the debate around what constitutes a “theater” structure within the cul-tural industry continues.

This debate revolves around the spatial configurations of this space called a “theatre.” In the Zimbabwean context, the term “theatre” is used to refer to the residual British colonial purpose-built performance spaces. Thus, in this article, a “theatre” identifies with well-resourced colonial purpose-built spaces that seek to perpetuate the colonial Rhodesian theater tradition concerned with “wanting-to-be-like-the-West” (Mda, 1993, p. 39). Consequently, to understand places of performance used by alternative the-ater practitioners, I adopt the term performance space rather than theater.

The conceptualization of performance spaces in this manner enables me, as a researcher and Zimbabwean sce-nographer, to consider any place used for performance rang-ing from open spaces, street corners, disused buildings, galleries, markets, and cultural centers as sites of perfor-mance. Furthermore, positioning performance spaces in this manner dismantles the colonial/colonial residual-indigenous spatial continuum. The colonial/colonial residual conceptu-alization of performance space in rigid physical three-dimensional terms (height, depth, and width) that distinctly separate the stage and auditorium created challenges for indigenous performance styles. In the same way, the fluid and dynamic expression of spatial experience hinged on time/history (wa Thiongo, 1997) was problematic for the mechanical European expression of the political, social, and ideological perspectives through space. Although this con-ceptual position of (alternative) performance space disman-tles the African/unAfrican binary, it also challenges the prevailing hegemonies around performance, space, and the-ater production, which were part of the colonial project and continue to be exported through cultural imperialism. What distinguishes different paradigmatic approaches to perfor-mance, space, theater and how alternative theater dismantles colonial constructs remains fundamental in the characteriza-tion of spatiality in Africa.

Alternative performance spaces, thus, refer to found spaces (Mackintosh, 1999), empty spaces (Brook 1968/1996), industrial spaces (Wilke, 2004), and open spaces/yards (Balme, 1999; Gibbons, 1979; wa Thiongo, 1997). Found spaces include unconventional spaces where (alternative) theater performances take place. Alternative performance spaces are thus, framed as spaces that are repurposed and temporarily transformed into places of performance. They may be newly built multipurpose hybrid places of perfor-mance that borrow architectural design, spatial arrangement, and usage from both the indigenous and residual colonial Rhodesian performance paradigm. They also include open spaces such as streets, bus terminals and village centers, with dormitory entrances and exits.

The industrial/empty space/yard and/or open space allow alternative theater practitioners to reconfigure and create a spatial synthesis of diverse influences of types of theater-in-the-round reflecting elements of a number of Third World cultural texts (Balme 1999). According to Balme (1999, p. 233) the streets are the arena where carnival and other

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ceremonial processions and festivals unfold; “they form therefore almost the quintessential place of encounter and performance,” which reflects the idea of the storyteller with his or her audience gathered around. The yard refers to the back yards of urban slums (and high-density townships), which form a gathering place for the local people (Balme, 1999). These alternative spatialities, therefore, transform the interaction taking place to a level of theatricality absent from purpose-built colonial/colonial residual spaces.

In addition, I consider these performance spaces alternative because they are multipurpose. They can be used for a variety of performances ranging from music, dance, theater, and book exhibitions providing an inner and outer performance space that permits a flexible spatial arrangement incorporating rather than separating the audience (Balme, 1999; Gibbons, 1979). The incorporation of the spectators into the performance event is an attempt by alternative practitioners to “get rid of the look, gaze, dissolving perception into performance” (Blau, 1990, p. 281). This dissolution of the gaze results in a carnivalesque atmosphere characteristic of Zimbabwean indigenous perfor-mance traditions. At this point, the performance becomes a “social event” (Schechner, 1994, p. 40) and transgresses the Aristotelian self-contained and autonomous artistic structure made of beginning-middle and an end. Esthetically, interpre-tive methods and approaches change as the performance is transformed into a social engagement and its living personal-ity comes to life (Howard, 2002).

It is important to note that the “colonial residual theatre tradition” is used here to refer to the realist performance style imported from England by white settler Rhodesians (Ravengai, 2011b), who resisted to culturally and socially assimilate their Rhodesian culture with indigenous perfor-mance forms. Although “Rhodesian theatre” may bear simi-larities to British theater, its context makes it colonial—a nostalgic imitation (Ravengai, 2011b; Steadman, 1994). This Rhodesian theater tradition facilitated the building of pur-pose-built proscenium arch spaces such the Harare Repertory Theatre, Bulawayo Theatre, Charles Austin Theatre, and Courtauld Theatre to cement its performance conventions.

In postindependence Zimbabwe, alternative perfor-mance spaces emerged out of the demand for places of per-formance by the increasing number of community-based performing groups. Theater groups motivated by the gov-ernment’s push for an African centered performative narra-tive cognizant of the cultural life of “new” Zimbabwe (Chifunyise, 1997) moved into civic, cultural, and open spaces in their communities. Thus, during the first two decades of political independence, the Bulawayo City Council’s (BCC) Stanley Hall and Rooftop Promotion’s Theatre-in-the-Park emerged as major alternative perfor-mance spaces for the growing list of township groups. These alternative performance spaces became “sites of physical, social and psychic forces” (wa Thiongo, 1997, p.

1. as they were used to spatially express the state of being in postindependence Zimbabwe.

Alternative production houses such as Amakhosi Theatre Productions found themselves cut out of purpose built spaces because their presentational esthetics and approaches did not match the stringent straightjacketed and mechanical colo-nial/residual style coordinated by National Theatre Association (Seda, 2004). As a result any other theater per-formance outside the formal purpose-built space was framed as informal or “village” theater performance (Interview John Bonney February 2, 2015). This was a continuation of the positioning of performance space as private spaces for the enjoyment of cultural performances. In colonial Zimbabwe, it was this “theater” performed in purpose-built spaces that became a yard stick for qualifying a performance as “profes-sional” or village theater. It is in this context where Amakhosi Theatre Productions and Rooftop Promotions challenge the spatial performance narrative through borrowing “authentic images of African reality [. . .] derive[d] from [African] sym-bols and values of mythology” (Soyinka in Balme, 1999, p.

1. to create a syncretic alternative performance spaces that inform practice.

The conceptualization of alternative performance spaces as found spaces finds resonance with a number of African theater theorists who challenged the building of national the-aters in Africa along “international” (read as Western) style over and above indigenous spatial concepts (Etherton & Magyer, 1981;Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996; Kerr, 1995; wa Thiongo, 1997). Christopher Balme (1999) argues that the “very act of constructing a building for the performance of theatre is questionable in light of [African] indigenous spatial practices” (p. 228). This call was motivated by the realization that the spatial and architectural configurations of the colonial residual purpose-built performance spaces are radically divorced from the carnival indigenous performances that con-tributed a larger number of performances in post-indepen-dence Zimbabwe (Ravengai, 2011a). The desire by alternative theater practitioners to use performance spaces that are spa-tially and esthetically relevant to their work and sociocultural context resulted in the appropriation and repurposing of colo-nial relic spaces into hybrid places of performance. These syncretic performance spaces had a combination of colonial and indigenous spatial characteristics.

Commenting on the newly built national theater in Uganda, Soyinka (1988) records,

We heard of the existence of a National Theatre and ran to it full of joy and anticipation. We discovered that there was no theatre, there was nothing beyond a precious, attractive building in the town centre [. . .] it was discomforting to find a miniature replica of a British provincial theatre. (p. 4)

Soyinka’s disappointment is reflective of the challenges cre-ated by the nationalist liberation ideology that characterized independent African countries at that time. Although Africa sought to chart a new path away from the traditional Western model, she did not have the resources, technical know-how,

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and possibly confidence to do so on her own. The net result was a situation where colonial metropolis continued to design, finance and build performance spaces that alienated alternative practitioners’ resident in postindependence Africa. As the new national theaters and colonial residual spaces were inappropriate for the new dramaturgical ideas in Africa, alternative theater practitioners searched for adapt-able spaces where the spectator–performer interaction was liberated (Balme, 1999; Komlongera, 1989; wa Thiongo, 1997). These adaptable spaces are what I call alternative per-formance spaces.

From this foregoing discussion, it is clear that the spatial debate between the First World and Third World countries is centered on the quadratic-circular spatial dichotomy (Ambe, 2007; Balme, 1999; Gibbons, 1979; Soyinka,988). The qua-dratic frame manifests itself as a proscenium arch within the Anglo centric paradigm, whereas the circular emerges as a theater-in-the-round within the Third World theater practice. It is here that Soyinka’s (1988) frustration and this paper’s engagement of the politics of space lies. Although within the broadly Western concept of theater9, a purpose-built perfor-mance space is specifically set aside for dramatic and theatri-cal performances, in the African set-up, performance spaces occupy the liminal space between ritual (imagined) and modern theater (physical) performance (Balme, 1999).

Returning to Mackintosh’s (1999) conceptualization of found spaces in Britain as alternative performances spaces, it is important to note that the architectural reorganization and restructuring of these disused spaces into alternative perfor-mance spaces is left in the hands of whoever is using them, scenographers included. In the African/Zimbabwean con-text, this restructuring and reconfiguration is done by repur-posing and appropriating indigenous and colonial/colonial residual spatial designs. The syncretic spaces that emerge navigate performance practice and institute new esthetic conventions. As Seda (2011, p. 173) observes, a performance space provides a context of interpretation for spectators and performers, in postindependence Zimbabwe the hybrid alter-native places of performance introduced new ways of appre-ciating and interpreting esthetic designs.

Although Wonderful Bere (1999) considers the notion of found spaces as oppositional to that of purpose-built sites in postindependence Zimbabwe, the positioning of noncon-ventional spaces, framed as alternative performance spaces, in a binary stance to conventional purpose-built spaces, foregrounds the colonial residual position of identifying performance spaces through distinct architectures and physical buildings. I argue that this approach essentializes alternative performance spaces as the “Other” (Said, 1978), rather than the alternate, the periphery rather than part of the center (hooks, 1994). This reflects the difficulty that practitioners and theoreticians face when attempting to describe or categorize “African” performance space in a globalized world. Open spaces used in ceremonial (theatri-cal) performances such as *Inxwala* (Ndebele) and

*kurovaguva* (Shona) ceremonies, for example, become dif-ficult to explain scenographically. Conceptualized in this manner, alternative places of performance are spaces for the majority that emphasize “religion, familial and cultural virtues and communal strengths” (Steadman, 1994, p. 47) as strategies of challenging hegemony, domination and neo-colonialism. As places that represent the majority, the practice of “oppositional cultural esthetics and popular per-formance” (Steadman, 1994, p. 11) within these spaces is central in understanding the politics of cultural struggle and development in Zimbabwe.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I characterized alternative theater and alterna-tive performance space as fundamental concepts, in practice and theory, in understanding postcolonial theater practice especially in Zimbabwe. The syncretic nurture of alternative theater practice necessitates a transformation of the colonial relic spaces into alternative performance spaces providing the desired spatiality for the performance and audience engagement. This syncretism expressed through alternative performances and the transformation of colonial relics into alternative places of performances is a result of the postcolo-nial condition of being Zimbabwean.

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**Notes**

1. Christopher Hurst is now known as Christopher John. However, I will refer to him as Christopher Hurst. Although Christopher Hurst is a Zimbabwean-born theater practitioner, his training at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, 11 years of work on the Broadway and in the Royal Shakespeare Company in England as well as Reps Theatre in Harare posi-tions him within the colonial Western Theater strand. He was influential in Amakhosi’s development in terms of practice and development (C. Hurst, personal interview, October 10, 2015).
2. Amakhosi Performing Arts Workshop was a theater train-ing school run by Sihlangu Dlodlo who specifically targeted young performers from the township schools. The coming of Christopher Hurst led to the introduction of acting, directing, and stunt fighting master classes for school leavers under the Performing Arts Department. The other departments were Technical Arts and Management Arts (S. Dlodlo, personal interview, November 17, 2015).
3. Applied theater is bound by context and its commitment to social change. The processes of working are embodied and involved rather than passive and detached, as participants are invited to engage physically and emotionally with the work by

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professional practitioners with special expertise in developing community-based practice (Chivandikwa, 2014; Mda, 1993; Nicholson, 2005; Prentki & Preston, 2000).

1. Stanley Hall is a colonial relic of community recreational spaces created to contain the political activity of Black town-ship populace. Initially built as a community center for the Black male labor force staying in Makokoba, Stanley Hall was used to regulate Black working class’ cultural practice. The demarcation of Stanley Hall into a separate stage and auditorium space meant that a dominant performance struc-ture, albeit foreign, was being imposed on the urban African style. Thus, the Stanley Hall architectural design was used by the colonial regime as an ideological tool, which imposed its mode of performance—its culture and social formations onto the urban African in Bulawayo.
2. Theatre-in-the-Park is a repurposed roof-thatched gazebo where scaffold has been rigged to create a theater-in-the-round. Theatre-in-the-Park is located on the western outskirts of Harare’s Central Business District (CBD) within the Harare Green Gardens. Seda (2011) characterizes Theatre-in-the-Park as a small, nondescript grass thatch and open-sided structure transformed by Rooftop promotions into a theater-in-the-round by mounting three tiers of scaffolding to provide seating for the audience located in the Harare Green Gardens.
3. Alternative theater has been conceptualized as community-based theater (CBT) groupings such as the socialist/revolution-ary theater, workers’ theater, protest theater, women’s theater, people’s theater, popular theater, African theater, intercultural theater, theater beyond boundaries, theater of the fringes, and majority theater (Chikonzo, 2015; Chivandikwa, 2014; Fabian, 1978; Ravengai, 2011a; Seda, 2011; Young-Jahangeer, 2009). Alternative theater is conceptualized in the same speci-fications of committed popular theater. I will discuss popular theater as alternative theater in the African context.
4. I use this term consciously and politically despite associations of “backwardness” my usage is conceptually aligned with the article’s argument of appropriation and transformation. It is also preferential to the term “developing,” which places Western conceptions of development as the benchmark of evolution.
5. *Ndenglish* and *Shonglish* refer to the syncretic dialect thatarises when indigenous languages (Ndebele or Shona) are mixed with English (Chivandikwa, 2014). The contamination of the English language breaks and subverts all the morpho-logical, phonetical, and morphosyntaxical rules.
6. As Bertolt Brecht developed his epic theater in Berlin in the 1960s, some theater makers in the Global North have chal-lenged dominant theater paradigms and expectations. Most notable people like American Herbert Blau who famously criticized conventional Western theater as being an aesthetic artifact “a stronghold of non-ideas” (1969, p. 7). He felt that theater is a public art that should operate “at the dead center of a community” (Blau, 1969, p. 309). Nevertheless, in the global understandings of theater, these individuals remain “outsiders.”

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