

## STYLES AND LEVELS OF ACTING IN ZIMBABWEAN TRADITIONAL PERFORMANCES

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### Abstract

In this paper, I intend to support Schechner's (1988: 197) argument that "to be in trance is not to be out of control," and that in trance or possession the performer does exhibit elements of acting. Schechner mentions that two processes are identifiable in performance: the performer is either "subtracted" in a performance closely resembling the art of the shaman who acts in ecstasy or what Jerzy Grotowski calls the "holy actor," or the performer is "added to" or "doubled", according to Antonin Artaud, in the process of performing. This "doubled" actor is considered to be in trance, something Schechner likens to Constantin Stanislavski's "character actor". In defining these two phenomena and other forms of acting, my intention in this paper is to prove that the whole of Africa is a gold mine of artistic performances. I intend to prove this by analyzing the acting styles and levels in Zimbabwean traditional performances. In traditional Zimbabwean performances acting is realized in different social functions and contexts. In the context of this paper, acting means to feign, to simulate, to represent, to impersonate. (E.T. Kirby 1972 3) Defining acting and its qualities in the scope of this paper will achieve three things. First, I will identify instances where acting is realized. Secondly, I will show how Zimbabwean societies use these defined/identified qualities in different contexts. Thirdly, I will judge the levels of acting regarding their seriousness, commitment and functions. To achieve these aims, I will analyze four categories of performances, storytelling, children's make-believe, rituals and ceremonies.

**Keywords:** acting, drama, performance, possession, trance, Zimbabwe

*Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion  
Be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word  
To the action; with this special observance, that you  
O'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so  
Overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end,  
Both at first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere,  
The mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own  
Feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and  
Body of the time his form and pressure*

(Shakespeare Hamlet 151).

*Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's. His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role.*

(Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" 1933)

The whole of Africa, and indeed Zimbabwe, is a gold mine of artistic performances resplendent with different styles and levels of acting, and I intend to prove in this paper, using selected Zimbabwean traditional performances, that this indeed is true. I will also show that in traditional Zimbabwean performances acting is realized in different social functions and contexts. Defining acting and its qualities in the scope of this paper will achieve three things. First, I will identify instances where acting is realized. Secondly, I will show how Zimbabwean societies use these defined/identified qualities in different contexts. Thirdly, I will judge the levels of acting regarding their seriousness, commitment and functions. To achieve these aims, I will analyze four categories of performances: storytelling, children's make-believe, rituals and ceremonies. But what exactly is acting?

Acting means to feign, to simulate, to represent, to impersonate, to imitate. Imitation in Greek means *mimesis*. The OED defines *mimesis* as "a figure of speech, whereby the words or actions of another are imitated" and "the deliberate imitation of the behavior of one group of people by another as a factor in social change". In the *Republic* Plato describes *mimesis* as something that occurs when the poet/rhapsode "delivers a speech as if he were *someone else*."<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, in *The Poetics*, speaks of *mimesis* as a performance in which the actor ceases to "speak in his own person" and takes on "*another personality*." (21-22) Speaking as "*someone else*" or taking on "*another personality*" is impersonation, and impersonation has three meanings: it is a representation of a person that is exaggerated for comic effect; it is also pretending to be another person; and finally, it means imitating the mannerisms of another person.

Whereas Plato correctly assumes that acting and impersonation occur when the actor pretends to be someone else, Aristotle's assertion that acting occurs in the case of "*another personality*" appearing in the guise of the actor, however, presents some ambiguity that needs clarification. It could either mean that when an actor impersonates someone he/she is creating someone else out of himself/herself. Or it could mean when an actor impersonates he/she brings this someone else forth from his/her own body. This, in essence, is not a case of pretending to be someone else but a matter of becoming this someone else.

In the second instance, the impersonation is a metamorphosis approximating spiritual possession – but not quite. So, while Plato and Aristotle's definitions suit

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<sup>1</sup> In Benjamin's *On the Mimetic Faculty*, he postulates that the mimetic faculty is evident in all human "higher functions" and that its history can be defined both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. Children's behavior is a prime example of the manner in which mimetic behavior is not restricted to man imitating man - in which the "child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train" (Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. 333)

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Republic*, iii, 393c. The first detailed discussion of *mimesis* in the *Republic* focuses on the complex interaction between truth and falsehood that characterizes the stories (*muthoi/logoi*) children are told as part of their education into the normative paradigms and patterns of their polity. For treatments of *mimesis* that focus on the discussion of allegory, myth, and fictions in *Republic 2* see Ferrari (1989); Halliwell (2002); Janaway (1995); Naddaff (2002). The specific connection Plato wants to draw between *mimesis* and these *pseudai* (fictions/falsehoods) is not made until the end of *Republic 2* where Socrates argues that such *pseudai* can be a *mimēna* of the affection in the soul (*Rep.* 2.382b8).

some performances analyzed in this paper, they are however, not all encompassing enough to define some traditional performances like rituals, which entail possession and/or spirit/trance mediumship.

Though much controversy surrounds trance/spirit mediumship or possession as a form of acting, (Eli Rozik 2003; Richard Schechner 1988; Victor Turner 1982) it is one of the acting levels and styles analyzed in this paper, because it is intrinsic to most Zimbabwean ritual performances. Also, if stage acting is seen as analytical, interpretative, presentational, projectable, repeatable, and representational, the same can be said for possession.<sup>3</sup> A close look at the rituals examined in this paper will prove that the performance of the medium contains most, if not all, of these elements. At this stage we need to have working definitions of mediumship and possession.

Possession entails the possessed entering an altered state of consciousness and being taken over by a spirit, power, deity, or other person who assumes control over his/her mind and body. According to Clarke Garrett, when people were acting "not like themselves," it was assumed that their soul had been expelled and that their body is now possessed or owned by some other spiritual being. (1987 6) In other words, possession yields mediumship. In an article entitled '*What is Mediumship/Channelling?*' the First Spiritual Temple (FSP) defines mediumship as the process whereby a human instrument, known as a *medium* or *channel*, is used by one or more discarnate, spirit personalities for the purpose of presenting information, verifiable or otherwise from a spirit being that causes paranormal activities to occur. This in turn channels forth certain types of energies from the spirit beings that manifest themselves for objective examination and/or identification. In other words, mediumship both involves cooperation between a living person (the Earth-plane medium or channel) and a Spirit being (the spirit communicator or operator), and also involves several objectives in its manifestation.

In distinguishing between a spirit communicator (who uses a medium for the purpose of communication, either verbally or visually) and a spirit operator (who uses a medium for the intent of working with and/or manipulating energies or energy systems), I have drawn attention to two distinct types of phenomena that can occur through mediums: communication, and manipulation of energies and energy systems.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Margaret Thompson Drewal, *The State of Research on Performance in Africa*, where she notes that "even in possession trance, performers I have witnessed in West Africa and the diaspora exhibit control of their actions and hyper-self-awareness without selfconsciousness." (3).

<sup>4</sup> Mediumship can be distinguished as two basic types: Mental Mediumship which involves the relating of information, through communication, via the varied aspects of thought transference, or mental telepathy. Mental mediumship takes place within the consciousness of the medium. The results are expressed verbally and must pass through the medium's mouth. For it is the medium who hears, sees, and feels what the spirit communicators are relating. Furthermore, it is the medium's duty to relate the information without personal influence and prejudice to the recipient of the message. The medium receives this information under various states of control. Physical Mediumship involves the manipulation and transformation of physical systems and energies. The spirit operators, in this case, are causing something to happen upon the Earth plane. What it is that actually happens varies with the style of mediumship involved, but the results can be seen and heard by others.

Summarily, trance mediumship entails a spirit taking over the body of the medium, sometimes to such a degree that the medium is unconscious but conscious enough to relate the received information to those present.

### **The Paradox of Acting**

Denis Diderot's in *The Paradox on Acting* is the first to significantly develop a theoretical understanding of acting by postulating two approaches to it: "Play from the heart", an emotion based orientation that prioritizes the actor's attachment to nature, and "Play from thought", a more intellectually based approach that demonstrates detachment from what would appear to be our seamless unity with nature.

While there is no innovation in the articulation of the first position - Plutarch gives the example of the Greek actor Polus, who upon playing Electra's mourning, repeatedly brought the ashes of his dead son onto the stage so as to create real sorrow and sadness as opposed to the simple image of such emotions - the second approach, the detachment stance, is relatively new. In this view, Diderot asserts that uncontrolled emotion and rational control are mutually exclusive. For Diderot the actor is someone "who, having learnt the words set down for him by the author, fools you thoroughly" (37) into believing that these emotions are in fact being undergone by someone onstage. In essence, the actor engages in an impersonation by pretending to be someone else, pretending to emotions which he/she is not undergoing at the moment. Or, to put it differently, the actor's performance is similar to what children (and adults) do when they impersonate someone. Like them, the actor uses his/her body to refer the spectator to someone else. The exception is that in the case of the actor it is done with preparation, care and consummate skill to achieve a metamorphosis. This metamorphosis is what lies at the heart of Constantin Stanislavski's obsessive search for a "method" that would enable the actor to partake of such a metamorphosis during the performance. Stanislavski exploited the difference between ritual and trance and the actor's performance. Whereas in ritual and trance, the "actor" is unaware of the "other personality," in the case of theatre, the actor would be aware of this someone else. This explains the possibility of a process he called a "science" whose outcome was belief.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, Stanislavski (1936: 18) agrees that the actor trained in Diderot's method "also lives his part" but he does so "as a preparation for perfecting an external form. Once that is determined to his satisfaction (during rehearsal) he reproduces that form through the aid of mechanically trained muscles." Stanislavski believes that the metamorphosis which comes under the guise of inspiration is not something which the actor can control but admits that if the inspiration fails to come, the actor who has prepared in accordance with Diderot's directives can be relied on to give a good performance.

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<sup>5</sup> See Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York, 1944) Stanislavski remarks that "such occurrences often act as a kind of tuning fork, they strike a living note and oblige us to turn from falseness and artificiality back to truth. Just one such moment can give direction to all the rest of the role." (270)

The fault Stanislavski found with such a method of acting therefore lay in the fact that it fails to recognize that the actor's calling requires him to remain open to inspiration. Diderot's actor "steps out of his part, disposes of the accidental intrusion, and then goes back to the convention of the theatre and takes up his interrupted action." Stanislavski's actor, on the other hand, "includes such accidental moments of reality ... fitting them into the pattern of his part." (270) After all, a theatrical performance is a *live* performance and this must lie at the core of what the actor does on stage.

Essentially for Stanislavski, the actor should immerse himself/herself in the role so as to feel these emotions. This of course requires a primary concern with the character's psychology. This approach also attempts to engage the actor's subconscious that is believed to store that idiosyncratic quality which can bring inspiration to a particular portrayal. This is especially true for Lee Strasberg, who formulated Stanislavski's ideas into *The Method*, and whose thinking was steeped in psychoanalytic theory.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, Stanislavski also gave extensive attention to a need for external control. In *Building a Character* he focuses considerable attention on external techniques: body, movement, diction, and expression. Stanislavski (1989) says of this duality, "The result is a predicament; we are supposed to create under inspiration; only our subconscious gives us inspiration; yet we can apparently use this subconscious only through our consciousness, which kills it" (11).

Bertolt Brecht, on the other hand, favors the detachment approach which culminated in his Epic. Brecht scholar Willett (1967) explains the meaning of epic as formulated "not only to exclude all idea of entertainment but to rule out the traditional conceptions of catharsis and empathy as well ... the Aristotelian theory of catharsis, or purging of emotion by self-identification (empathy) with those of actors, was an essential part of the hypnotic anti-critical which Brecht so loathed; it meant 'carrying the audience with one', 'losing oneself in the play" (172). Willett's description captures both the detachment that Brecht was inviting into the distinction between him and Stanislavski. Here the actor's self-identification with character, which Stanislavski considered quintessential, is examined with suspicion and trepidation not to be pursued but to be handled with caution. Because Brecht does not wish his audience to be swept away in a torrent of emotion, but to participate in a thought provoking experience which prioritizes intellectual engagement, the actor is required to engage his or her character in a detached manner.

### **Acting in Zimbabwean Performances**

There are several factors that may suggest that there is no acting in Zimbabwean rituals, such as M. Kirby (1972) noting that rituals are "firmly rooted in reality and according to Aristotle, a play is an imitation of action and not the action itself" (13). However, in *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski/Tortsov tell us that "The very best thing

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<sup>6</sup> See Strasberg, Lee. (1987). *A dream of passion: The development of the method*. Boston: Little Brown.

that can happen," he tells us, "is to have the actor completely carried away by the play. Then regardless of his own will he lives the part, not noticing *how* he feels, not thinking about *what* he does, and it all moves of its own accord, subconsciously and intuitively" (13). When this happens, the theatrical performance ceases to be a pretentious impersonation. The performance has become an enactment of life. Feelings are no longer the object of the actor's consciousness; they are now genuine and spontaneous. As such, they belong to the *live* performance that constitutes the life of a person: the person onstage being, of course, the character. Possession, a key factor in African (and indeed Zimbabwean) rituals, is not considered serious acting because it does not demand any effort on the actor's part. Because the actor may largely be in an unconscious state and as such, is not responsible for his/her actions while in trance, and is not acting. But in being "completely carried away" and "transported beyond himself," the actor has not fallen into a state of senselessness. According to Sheila Walker (1972), there are many similarities between possession and the hypnotic state. She observes that possession, much like hypnosis, might be a state of consciousness different from the ordinary one (29) in that possession, like hypnosis, can be amenable to analysis as an altered state of consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

### Rituals and Ceremonies

In the 40s, 50s and 60s many anthropologists (Herskovits 1948: 66-67) began to examine 'voluntary' possession as a form of theatre or performance - that it was merely a form of sacred drama in which trained actors performed the roles of the gods. This is, after all, how drama began in the West - with the Egyptians acting out the death and resurrection of their god Osiris, which would in turn inspire the sacred dramas of the Greeks, and the passion and mystery plays of Christianity. Metraux (1958: 210) assumed that if possessed people were behaving in a bizarre or irrational state, it was merely a form of "acting out" some role for the benefit of others, or a form of role-playing which served personal advancement. Lewis (1971: 64) supports the latter by noting the cases of women who pretend to be possessed by spirits to increase their authority or social position. However, this explanation did not apply to *involuntary* possession, because *involuntary* possession sometimes results in antisocial behavior and social disturbance, and may greatly

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<sup>7</sup> To further the point of consciousness, Cohen and Barrett in *When Minds Travel* note that a senior member clearly described possession as the joining of the body of the medium with the spirit of the entity. These two parts, he claimed, make up the new (possessed) person. Another senior ranking member described possession as the moment in which one's own spirit withdraws "and another spirit comes and throws him/herself into your body". Drawing a clear demarcation between medium and spirit, another member describes her possession episodes as follows: "I don't know where my spirit goes. I don't know. I only know that I switch off. I don't remain in me." Another person stated, "Possession for me is a state of unconsciousness... in which we are not answerable for our actions, our bodily movements ... we don't have control of our bodies anymore. It's the total loss of control of the body and the mind. Something else controls - it is the spiritual being". When possessed, one's own spirit is said to "lie down", "journey to the other world", "dream", "sleep", or "remain watching". The entities are said to "take control", "dominate the mind", or "command the body and the mind". (11-12) see also Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe's *Consciousness and the Actor: A Reassessment of Western and Indian Approaches to the Actor's Emotional Involvement from the Perspective of Vedic Psychology* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996) which explores the question of consciousness and the theatre in the light of Vedic psychology's model of consciousness.

jeopardize the possessed's social position. On the other hand, involuntary possession might just be a way of releasing violent resentments on people without taking responsibility for them. Whatever the case, some anthropologists began to suggest that two different phenomena may be at work. Perhaps voluntary possession was a form of role-playing, whereas involuntary possession was a form of mental illness, or at least a person choosing a role which was seen as destructive and inappropriate. Frazer (1958: 108) in *The golden bough* sums up the varied views on possession as follows:

The belief in temporary incarnation or inspiration is world-wide. Certain persons are supposed to be possessed from time to time by a spirit or deity; while the possession lasts, their own personality lies in abeyance; the presence of the spirit is revealed by convulsive shiverings and shakings of the man's whole body, by wild gestures and excited looks, all of which are referred, not to the man himself, but to the spirit which has entered into him; and in this abnormal state all his utterances are accepted as the voice of the god or spirit dwelling in him or speaking through him.

Frazer mentions the personality of the possessed lying in abeyance, and despite the tome of ethnographic data that has accrued on possession beliefs and practices around the world since Frazer's writing, there is one in particular that appears significantly more frequently than any other - the complete displacement of a single agency by another, such that a bodiless agent effectively acquires the body - but not the mind - of a physical being.<sup>8</sup> In a more recent writing, Bourguignon (2004: 572) makes the connection between displacement-of-control and responsibility and culpability noting that "when the spirits take over, women can do unconsciously what they do not permit themselves to do consciously. The demands that are made, the orders that are given, are those of the spirits' doings and sayings. They are neither responsible for nor aware of what is going on and do not remember it after the fact. They have ultimate deniability."

Though these phenomena vary along many different dimensions and the behaviours, contexts, interpretations, representations, and practices associated with possession are exceedingly more complex and diverse. Frazer's definition of temporary possession has three key features: the spirit enters into the person; the person's own personality lies in abeyance during the episode, and all utterances are attributed to the spirit.

Rozik (2003: 122) argues that this is not acting because the medium is definitely not enacting the character of a spirit, but constitutes a means for its revelation in the human world. That is, the spirit is not conceived as a fictional entity, but as a real one. He is not describing a spirit, but becomes inhabited by the

<sup>8</sup> See also Michael Lambek (1981) who, writing on possession in Mayotte notes that spirits are believed to "Enter the bodies of human beings and rise to their heads, taking temporary control of all bodily and mental functions" (40). Stoller (1989) notes that the Songhay of Niger believe that "when the deity's double is firmly established in the dancer's body, the shaking becomes less violent. The deity screams and dances. The medium's body has become a deity" (31) Kenneth Lum (2000) who notes that "the displaced spirit only returns when the orisha had left" (156).

spirit itself. The problem for Rozik resides in conceiving ecstasy as a condition of theatre acting.

Among the Mashona and the Mandebele there are rituals in which mediums are possessed by spirits called *mashave* (Shona) or *amadlozi* (Ndebele), each of whom is characterized by a particular costume or behavior. Kirby (1974) gives the example of a *varungu* (white people) *shave* represented by a shirt, hat, a belt and a walking stick. The possessed person uses white utensils and eats with fork and knife. During possession, the medium 'becomes' a white person. The medium does not consciously or calculatingly limit the behavior of the spirit that would be clear impersonation. He/she is for a time being the spirit, or so the medium and other participants believe, and this is clearly role-playing.

If we consider the *Kurova Guva*, a death ritual to 'cleanse the grave', we begin to understand the acting in possession. The possession of the medium does not just happen, the medium puts in an effort to arrive at this most electrifying, albeit complex state of acting (possession). The medium is usually 'prepared' for possession by songs and special traditional drumming. This confirms the belief that the decision to reach an act of impersonation is conscious, and requires some kind of physical and psychological preparation. Possession during ritualization also may not entirely be true-to-life, "for ritual epitomizes the reality principle, the agreement to obey rules that are given" (Schechner 1988: 14). By this, evidently, there is the element of imitation of the actions of people and things long dead or still living.

A common feature of *Kurova Guva* ceremony is that the spirit of a departed relative is expected to possess the medium and speak through him/her. At some stage during the ritual, elders, while dancing in a circle, sprinkle beer on a goat tied to a stake. When the goat shivers and shakes off the beer, it is assumed by all present the spirit of the dead is about to manifest itself. The spirit of the dead then leaves the goat and possesses one of the relatives present, who then begins to behave as the deceased. While possessed by the spirit of the deceased, he/she communicates with the elders present speaking in the voice of the deceased. The belief is that in order to reveal itself within the human world the spirit is in need of the material body of the medium. In this sense, he/she is a medium of this spiritual power. This quality is essential to Kirby's theory of acting, because the medium is supposed to "enact" an entity other than himself, a denizen of another world; and this is assumed to establish him as the prototype of the theatre actor. This communication with the elders is what interests me in this ritual. Is the spirit really speaking through the possessed relative? Or, having been aware of what went on in the life of the deceased, is this relative now using this knowledge to field questions the other elders ask him? At this point I should note that this moment of possession is, however, believed by Pa Venge to be due largely to the drumming that takes place and has nothing to do with the spirit coming through the goat. He does, however, acknowledge that possession does take place.

Eli Rozik disagrees with Kirby when he observes that even if we prefer a skeptical scientific approach, the principles of representation do not change. For example, from a psychoanalytical viewpoint, the thesis is that in a situation of



trance the medium reflects potential entities and voices suppressed in his unconscious. As such, he does not enact an "other", but expresses the "other" suppressed in his soul; he enacts nothing, because this "other" enjoys real existence. Thus trance is assumed to only reflect the non-I of the medium himself.

True, possession cannot be a necessary condition for theatre acting, but this type of identification can be conceived as a quality of a particular acting style. It recalls the naturalistic style, in the vein of Stanislavski, which presupposes that the actor has to get under the skin of his character, as if he were possessed by it. True also that possession entails an over-commitment of emotion and an attachment to character, and this can be dangerous. Stanislavski (1952: 172) encountered this difficulty while acting in *"Bitter Fate"* by Alexey Pisemsky: "No matter how much I strained to control my gestures, in the end my temperament mastered me and my consciousness, and I lost all control of myself to such a degree that after the performance was over I could not remember what I had done on the stage". What Stanislavski's loss of control demonstrates is that though emotion is prioritized, it is insufficient as the actor cannot function effectively without some semblance of conscious detachment from his/her emotions. However, according to de Graft (2002), this loss of control is acting at "its most electrifying" because the actor "dares to go as close as possible to the psychological safety point," (de Graft 2002: 6) of becoming another being. Possession and trance by their nature are complex phenomena, as such, the acting style here is complex.

### **Masquerades**

Kirby argues that the basic enactments of masquerades are totally abstract because they are not representations of persons or beings. Therefore, they are liable to be termed demonstrations employing masks and various other objects. In Zimbabwean cosmology, when an actor dons the mask (representative of a god) and he/she is possessed, he/she enters into a spiritual realm, because masks and costumes are typical accessories. And many groups believe that a spirit is attracted by and enters into its likeness. Masks and costumes therefore are means of attracting and embodying the spirit to be controlled, consulted, or propitiated because, according to Brockett (2003: 4) they "are often used to represent supernatural powers in the belief that a spirit is attracted by and enters into its likeness". Simply put, masquerades do represent beings and the virtues of masquerading are the same as those in spirit mediumship and, most importantly, involve role playing and impersonation. This level of acting is serious in process and commitment.

True, we see an element of abstract participation of the spirit world. True, there are dimensions that make ritualistic and cultic performances different from a 'regular' dramatic performance. The songs, for instance, assume a specific function, that of evoking the spirit; the dialogues are specifically for the ritual; certain sacred objects, including the costumes, assume symbolic dimensions. In other words, the components of drama, which, in their usual manifestations, are "ordinary", assume symbolic proportions. The aspect of creativity, as in achieving aesthetics, becomes

subordinated to elements that are representational of certain phenomena. In spite of all this, the common elements of acting like role-playing, imitation, dialogue, mime and song are however, still present, although the variations displayed are complex.

Gule Wamkulu is both a secret cult and ritual dance practiced among the Chewa people living in Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and parts of Zimbabwe. It is performed by members of the *Nyau* brotherhood, which is a sort of secret society of initiated Chewa men. Gule Wamkulu is performed in the season following the harvest in July, accompanying initiation ceremonies but also weddings, funerals, and the installation or the death of a chief.

In reality, the *Nyau* is more than a dance. It is a way of life. It has rules that go beyond dancing to cover how people belonging to the Chewa tribe relate to it, to each other and to life around them. On this occasion, the *Nyau* dancers wear costumes and masks made of wood and straw, representing a great variety of characters, such as wild animals, spirits of the dead, slave traders as well as more recent figures such as the *Honda* or the *helicopter*. Each of these figures plays a particular, often evil, character representing certain forms of misbehaviour in order to teach moral and social values to the audience. These dancers are referred to as *Zirombo* (Animals). For the *Chewa*, animals belong to the world of the irrational and spirits. When a dancer wears such a mask, he becomes the irrational animal his mask depicts. In this state, much as the songs the dancer sings might have significant messages for those who come to witness the dance-drama, the songs and antics of the dancer are understood by all as coming from an animal within its irrational world. In other words, all present on the occasion "suspend disbelief" only during the performance of the dance.<sup>9</sup>

Banda (quoted in McCaffrey 1981) states that each role was chosen with great care. The Strong Man, *cadzunda*, was selected for his very strong physical features. His *cadzunda* mask was painted red or yellow. He wore very long black feathers for hair. A fibre skirt was tied on his strong, glistening bare body. He wears the *chacha* bangles up his legs and on his upper arms. A muscular boy was the notorious *kang'wing'wi*. The *kang'wing'wi* wore feathers in his hair. His lips were drawn, and then twisted; a rubber-band holding them in place. Ladies in the audience thrilled to his naked muscular body covered only with a fibre skirt and the *chacha* bangles on his arms and legs.

An experienced dancer plays the part of the Big Man, *makanja*. The *makanja* head was coated in a mask of red dye. He walks on tall stilts, hidden by a long fibre skirt and shirt. Maria was a young man trained to behave, dance and wriggle like a woman. His costume and mask impersonate a female. Old Man Fall in the Field of Com, *Nkhalamba-qwela-mumapila*, is a young man disguised and trained to dance like an old man. The style of acting here involves a mixture of

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<sup>9</sup> To suspend one's disbelief is to move oneself outside of the observational mode and to "return" to a more primitive mode. In other words, the advice often given to actors that they "reach down inside themselves," is something that the audience in its own way must do.

elements of possession, impersonation, and imitation, and the level of acting is quite serious.

### **Ceremonies and Festivals**

Like masquerading, ceremonies and festivals have songs, mime, warrior and hunting dances as their components. Among the Ndebele people each year during the *Inxwala* (first fruits) festival, the warriors would leave the ranks of participants to act out of their experiences in raids of the past years. As expected of festivals of this nature, the warriors employ self-praises, war antics-dances, songs and mimes executed in solo performances, in which each warrior also acts out other characters in his tale. This clearly underlies the elements of imitation and impersonation. The acting style is more complex as it involves multiple characterizations. But the level of acting is not as serious as in rituals.

One other ceremony in which these same elements of imitation and impersonation are prominent is the “*Nzveura*”, among the Shona people. This ceremony entails a dramatization of the deceased’s life by the *varoora* (daughters-in-law). The *varoora* have the freedom to dramatize anything that was peculiar to or outstanding about the deceased’s way of life. One cannot, however, judge or evaluate the *Nzveura* ceremony without first analyzing its social functions. Firstly, it is aimed at entrenching societal morals. Secondly, it is a way of financially sustaining the ceremonies, since anybody approached by the *varoora* has to pay some amount. Thirdly, it serves to lighten the sad and somber atmosphere usually associated with death. On the issue of the level of acting in the *Nzveura*, it is apparent that it is a lighthearted dramatization that is not meant to replay minute details of the deceased’s life or portray the ones dramatized in graphic, scenic, technical and artistic beauty. Indubitably there is, in the dramatizations in the *Nzveura* the element of role-playing, impersonation and mime. The level of acting lies in the interstice between the serious (ritual) and the lighthearted and consequently the style, not so complex.

### **Storytelling**

If we look at storytelling as realized in the *Ngano*, the storyteller not only narrates his story but also performs it by acting out most of the characters (human and nonhuman), and most of the actions in the tale. As a result he needs to be a bit of every thing; singer, dancer, mimmer, acrobat, tragedian, comedian, and must have at his command a good physique, a retentive memory, an alert brain, a clear resonant voice with good articulation and controlled breathing. The storyteller needs all these qualities because “believable” impersonation is an important and expected role, for the *Ngano* being a free improvisatory art calls for dexterity and creativity on the part of the storyteller.

Employing music, dance, mime and idiophones in the story, the storyteller might alter the tale, but they would make sure the theme is not lost or misunderstood. The storyteller, while teaching and entertaining the child audience, is also allowed to move outside the story to comment on and explain the moral

issues raised in the story. And even though there is the need for great dexterity and versatility on the part of the storyteller, the acting style and levels employed and achieved respectively are, however, simple. This style matches the imagination of the child audience and their ability to perceive simple themes and lessons.

This simplicity is called for because storytelling, being one of the most widespread of traditional Zimbabwean cultures, is one method of educating young people by introducing them to their culture, customs and philosophies of their own people (Warren 1975: 9). Complexity in the mode of teaching (acting) would be abstruse, especially for the child-audience.

### **Children's Make-Believe**

When we consider children's make-believe, (*mahumbwe/matakanana*) "playing-house", we again see another level of simple acting. It is important to note that this acting level is slightly more "advanced" than that found in story telling. Because the children have progressed from occasional participants (in story telling) to become the main actors in the improvisations they create themselves. When children instinctively employ this form of theatrical imitation by playing at being adults - putting themselves in adult situations - this experience prepares them for coping with adult roles. This training through theatrical play is a necessary inoculation against the emotional vaccines of evil, danger and disruption of balance, comparable to the physical vaccines against diseases.

It is no wonder then that the children involved in this form of theatre approach it "seriously": Girls impersonate mothers, and use calabashes and cans to prepare "food" for their "families", while the boys, the "fathers", go hunting and bring their "kills" to their "wives" and "children". The children improvise scenarios, using mime, role-playing, dialogue and imitation. They imitate the voices of their fathers and mothers, play themselves (as children), imitate the crowing of a cock, the mooing of cows and barking of dogs. This, with its strong element of imitation, is a socializing process that teaches children to be observant and responsible, and in doing this, display the acting elements of the role playing, imitation and mime. Even though the level of acting here is not serious, the style is very complex in consideration of the variety of characters represented, and of course the ages of the performers.

### **Conclusion**

Before concluding one must note that, styles in acting are among the most difficult to describe, style being the manner of doing, especially as opposed to the matter to be expressed or thing done, and in part because the same adjectives tend to be used in all ages but with divergent meaning. In most periods, the aim has been "to hold the mirror up to nature", but what is natural to one period may seem unnatural to others (Brockett 2003: 225).

Consistent with his own approach, Schechner (1988) suggests, instead of mimetic acting, which is closer in nature to the ritual pole of the continuum, the possibility of "transformational" acting; modern western theatre is mimetic.

Traditional theatre is transformational, creating and incarnating in a theatre place what cannot take place anywhere else. Transformations in theatre occur in three different places, and at three different levels: in the drama, that is, in the story; in the performers whose special task it is to undergo a temporary rearrangement of their body/mind – a form of 'transportation'; and in the audience where changes may either be temporary (entertainment) or permanent (ritual).

Rozik (2003) suggests that if the principle of theatre representation is involved, the so-called "transformational acting" cannot count as a kind of acting. An actor performs a description of a character, mainly by means of iconic (and conventional) signs, which he imprints on his own body, in the capacity of material that enables communication of mental images. Without the actor's body, as a medium, the spectators could not perceive these images because of their immaterial nature. Moreover, this descriptive text, imprinted on the actor's body, refers to a character, a fictional entity. In the absence of a system of representation, a performer in front of an audience refers only to himself; i.e., he is self referential; he is only an actual. In contrast, an actor refers both to a character and to himself (as a producer of a theatre text, as a person whose profession is being an actor); i.e., he refers also to himself. This duality characterizes "aesthetic theatre" in general and is never overlooked by the audience. Applause at the end of a theatre performance offers clear evidence to this: the audience (unless naïve) does not applaud the characters, but the quality of the actors' performance.

Here is a portion of a description of the excellent actor, attributed to Webster (1615; quoted by Brockett2003: 226):

By his action he fortifies morall precepts with example; for what we see him personate, we think truly done before us; a man in deep thought might apprehend the Ghosts of our ancient Heroes walked again, and take him (at several times) for many of them.

In consideration of these two assertions one can now conclude that it is very difficult to judge traditional performances in societies such as Zimbabwe (using, western precepts) on their seriousness. Especially if we attached seriousness to technical, artistic, thematic aspects while directing attention to performances that are part of daily life. However, since every performance is judged according to its social needs, Zimbabwe could be said to possess, therefore, a variety of performances with each situation taken with seriousness, since there is the need for every performance to fulfill, maintain and satisfy the needs of the society. Also, since there is no clear demarcation in most of the performances analyzed in this paper, between actors and audiences, it becomes somewhat difficult to define the acting levels inherent in them. However, there exist two broad categories (levels), the serious, incorporating possession, and the simple, incorporating imitation and impersonation. On style, it could be said that, most performances in Zimbabwe, as in all African performances, employ a multiplicity of acting elements in any given performance. Almost any performance involves mime, role-playing, singing, dancing, imitation, and that vexed word, possession. The complexity and style of

acting in each of these performances therefore, depends on the number of these acting elements employed in a particular performance.

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