

CHAPTER 7

Creating Democratic Spaces Through Theatre: The Case of *Speak Out!*

Cletus Moyo

Drama Lecturer, Lupane State University, Zimbabwe and PhD student, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Abstract: A few years into Zimbabwe's independence, there were disturbances in the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces, resulting in the massacre of about 20,000 unarmed civilians in what has become known as the Gukurahundi. The atrocities ended with the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987. The government has, however, refused any culpability in the matter and has muted dialogue around the issue. To explore ways of speaking about the Gukurahundi issue and of aiding the grieving process for the second-generation sufferers of the Gukurahundi, I worked with a group of young people to devise and stage theatre on this emotive subject. This chapter reports and reflects on the activities involved in devising and staging *Speak Out!* phase one and phase two plays. It also identifies and discusses challenges and opportunities that lie in using theatre to create democratic spaces within silencing and oppressive structures. The chapter is framed within decoloniality theory as envisioned by Walter Dignolo. I argue that devised theatre is rich with potential to create democratic spaces that can give a platform for telling stories of pain and suffering when the mainstream media and channels are closed for such. I observe that techniques such as improvisation, storytelling and use of songs, when deployed during the devising process, assisted in creating a social and aesthetic space to speak about the Gukurahundi issues, creating a potential for helping those who are grieving.

Keywords: devised theatre, grieving, Gukurahundi, *Speak Out!*

Citation of this chapter: Moyo, C. (2021). Creating democratic spaces through theatre: The case of *Speak out!* In P. Janse van Vuuren, B. Rasmussen & A. Khala (Eds.), *Theatre and democracy: Building democracy in post-war and post-democratic contexts* (pp. 143–162). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.135.cho7>
License: CC-BY 4.0.

Introduction

As part of my PhD research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in 2019, I worked with young people from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe to devise and perform theatre on the subject of the Gukurahundi genocide that took place from 1983 to 1987 in Zimbabwe (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace [CCJP], 1997). Devised theatre can be simply defined as an original production, generated by a creative collective working process (Felseghi, 2017; Oddey, 1994; Perry, 2011; Syssoyeva & Proudfit, 2016). Participants were part of the second-generation victims of the Gukurahundi. Phase one consisted of devising and staging the first play, which was staged in Nkulumane, Bulawayo. The second and last phase consisted of reworking the phase one play and then staging it at Hope Centre, Bulawayo Central Business District. Both performances were followed by post-performance discussions.

This paper reports and reflects on the processes that were followed in devising and staging the plays. It identifies and discusses challenges and opportunities that lie in using theatre to create democratic spaces within silencing and oppressive structures. I argue that devised theatre is rich with potential to create democratic spaces that can give a platform for telling stories of pain and suffering when mainstream media and channels are closed for such. The overarching question of this study is to inquire into how devised theatre, through the creation process, staging and post-performance discussions, can provide an alternative democratic space to the second-generation victims of the Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe to process and reflect on their stories of pain and suffering in order to manoeuvre past this pain and face the future positively?

Theatre can offer an alternative space to speak for subalterns (Ravengai, 2011; Spivak, 1988) to raise issues affecting them and to seek to transform their conditions (Boal, 1979; Freire, 1971; Haedicke & Nellhaus, 2001; Young-Jahangeer, 2014; wa Thiong'o, 1986). This resonates with Paulo Freire's (1971) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Augusto Boal's (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed* concepts. The subalterns are those social groups that are marginalised or suppressed, especially within colonial contexts. Freire and Boal argue for the empowerment of the marginalised in order that they may transform their oppressive situation. Boal views theatre

as an important tool in achieving positive social transformation. Both Freire and Boal aim for a democratic society free of oppressive structures.

Background and theoretical framework

After Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain in 1980 there arose suspicion and mistrust between Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front) and Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union) political parties. ZAPU had more support in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe. The Matabeleland provinces have a predominantly Ndebele-speaking population. There also arose a dissident problem in Matabeleland. The government, led by Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, unleashed a Korean-trained 5th Brigade to "crush" dissidents who were operating in Matabeleland and Midlands, and civilians became the biggest casualties (CCJP, 1997). As noted in the CCJP report of 1997, "it is clear that thousands of innocent civilians in Matabeleland were killed or beaten and had their houses burnt during these years, mostly at the hands of Government forces" (1997, p. 15). The genocide resulted in the death of about 20,000 unarmed civilians, destruction of homes (largely through burning) and destruction of infrastructure. The government has, however, denied any culpability in the matter and has muted dialogue and debate around the issue (CCJP, 1997).

The Gukurahundi was a two-pronged conflict. The first conflict featured the state security forces versus the dissidents, whilst the second conflict featured the 5th Brigade soldiers versus ZAPU members and unarmed Ndebele-speaking civilians (see CCJP, 1997). A few years into independence, the Ndebele people (who were mostly affiliated to ZAPU) suddenly found themselves on the receiving end of a brutal onslaught by the ZANU-PF-led government (largely made up of Shona people) in what became known as the Gukurahundi (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2004). Because of the Gukurahundi issue and other forms of marginalisation that have continued long after independence, the Ndebele people see themselves as the subaltern other, the marginalised in the context of Zimbabwean political, social and economic strata.

Silence around the Gukurahundi issue has meant that the victims of the Gukurahundi have been hindered in voicing their pain, in reflecting on their painful past and in dealing with their emotional wounds. As a result, there are many who feel that their stories of pain and hurt remain unheard and that they have not been given a space to reflect on their suffering, and thus to be in a better position to face the future positively. Those of us who have observed this injustice by the government are obliged to act (against it) in order to build a just society. Freire (1971), in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, invites us to take this responsibility, and Boal (1979) shows us that one of the ways of doing this is through theatre.

The Gukurahundi episode was ended by the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987 between Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF and Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU. The Unity Day celebrations are held annually in Zimbabwe on 22 December. However, to many people of Matabeleland, these celebrations carry no meaning, and this creates a dilemma since one would expect this day to hold more meaning for people in this region, as the Gukurahundi happened there. More than thirty years after the Gukurahundi episode and the signing of the Unity Accord, wounds should have at least begun to heal; however the anger and pain induced by the Gukurahundi are still evident, both among the first-generation and the second-generation victims of the Gukurahundi.

This research is implemented within the conceptual framework of decoloniality, particularly the concepts of "decolonial aesthetics and aesthesis" as envisioned by Walter D. Mignolo. Speaking in an interview about art that is aimed at decolonization, Mignolo (quoted in Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2014, p. 201) argues that "what decolonial artists want is not to create beautiful objects, installations, music, multimedia or whatever the possibilities are, but to create in order to decolonise sensibilities, to transform colonial aesthetics into decolonial aesthesis". Decoloniality is interested in addressing coloniality. Coloniality, meaning effects of colonization, continues to linger, even long after colonization has ended. In Zimbabwe, I argue that the effects of the Gukurahundi have continued to linger long after the Gukurahundi period ended with the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987. What we are witnessing is "gukurahundiality" – the continuing effects of the Gukurahundi. The Unity Accord was

not followed by corresponding efforts to address gukurahundiality. Instead, the ZANU-PF government concentrated on silencing any voice that spoke about the Gukurahundi. The resultant environment arguably did more harm than good, exacerbating the continuance of gukurahundiality.

Mignolo argues that decolonial aesthetics are artistic creations that seek to challenge domination that colonises. He advocates for “decolonial aesthesis” which is concerned about art which awakens our sensibilities to see colonial injustices so that we can change our circumstances. He is of the view that the Western concepts of art are dominant and continue to colonise, forcing others into positions of weakness, inferiority and of lesser value. To change this scenario, decolonial art exposes coloniality and its injustices and contradictions, and is determined to cause change. This concept is important to my research and my interest in devised theatre, which seek to expose the injustices of the Gukurahundi and change things for the future by using art to create a democratic space in which to challenge such injustice, and create a space for the second-generation victims of the Gukurahundi to process their pain and move on, without feeling inferior in the Zimbabwean socio-political context. Decolonisation, as envisioned by Mignolo, is concerned with dismantling colonial power and healing colonial wounds (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2014). Similarly, this research seeks to heal the Gukurahundi wounds.

This study locates itself within the broader category of subaltern theatre, seeking to create democratic spaces to voice concerns for people who find themselves shut out of the mainstream channels and platforms (Ravengai, 2011; Spivak, 1988). Young-Jahangeer (2014) in her work in participatory theatre with inmates at Westville Correctional Centre demonstrates theatre’s potential to create democratic spaces in oppressive structures. She deployed popular participatory theatre to create a space for prison inmates to explore sexual issues and other issues affecting them as female inmates. Georgina Schmukler (2013) reflects on her project that addresses xenophobia in the new South Africa. The script was based on interviews of the victims of xenophobia and it thus testifies to theatre’s potential to create a space for expression and dialogue for those in conditions that deny them such a space. In Kenya, *I will marry when I want* stands as one

of the examples of community theatre's potential to address post colonial challenges, specifically the suffering endured as a result of failed nationalism and neo-colonisation (wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Among the few available plays that address the issue of the Gukurahundi, I am not aware of any that does so from the perspective of devised theatre. Notable plays from Matabeleland that have spoken out on this issue include *Talitha Koum! Someone Lied* (2018) by Victory Siyanqoba, written and directed by Desire Moyo/Moyoxide, *1983: Years Before and After* (aka *1983: Dark Years*) (2018) written by Bhukumusa Moyo and directed by Adrian Musa, and *The Good President* (2007) written and directed by Cont Mhlanga, which was banned by the Zimbabwean government. There has also been a Gukurahundi documentary by Zenzele Ndebele (2018) entitled *Gukurahundi Genocide: 36 Years Later* which was showcased at Rainbow Hotel in Bulawayo on 29 September 2018 as part of Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo. The visual arts category has also made its footprint. Owen Maseko's exhibition entitled *Sibathontisele* (Let's Drip on Them) opened at the National Art Gallery in Bulawayo for a few hours, before the exhibition was shut down and Maseko arrested for allegedly undermining the government (Mpofu, 2019).

Whilst the period of the protracted liberation struggle that led to Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 has generated a lot of research, the Gukurahundi genocide of the 1980s has remained less researched and less documented. The current research, in part, seeks to contribute towards filling the gap in literature on the issue of the Gukurahundi and documenting the Gukurahundi experiences. Recently, the current Zimbabwean government has said people can speak out on their experiences regarding the Gukurahundi. However, many still fear to do this, and there are many who doubt (reasonably so) the genuineness of the government in this regard. As a result, a lot still remains unchanged. Silence and fear are still there.

Research methodology

This research is qualitative in nature and deploys devised theatre as a methodology. Devised theatre can be simply defined as a production which is generated by a creative working process (Oddey, 1994). The

central characteristic of devised theatre is innovation and experimentation. It affords an opportunity to its creators to question the issues or topic or ideology under exploration and it also offers new ways of thinking and of building new forms and structures. These qualities of devised theatre were well-suited to the issue of the Gukurahundi. According to Jess Thorpe (2014, p. 13) devising theatre “is essentially the process of creating something new from scratch. Its power is in its infinite possibility and the opportunity it offers individuals to experiment with ideas of content, form, structure, staging and new styles in order to ‘make’ a brand new piece of work”. Devised theatre offers democracy and freedom in the working process, a kind of democracy and freedom that may not be available in a conventional play written by one author (Oddey, 1994).

The focus was on the process of collectively devising and staging theatre works that resist enforced silence and encourage voicing out/speaking out on the Gukurahundi experiences. In devising this performance, collective experiences of dealing with the Gukurahundi stories were central, together with the documented experiences such as those contained in the CCJP report of 1997. The CCJP (1997, p. 3) report notes that:

One of the most painful aspects of the 1980s conflict for its victims is their perception that their plight is unacknowledged. Officially, the State continues to deny any serious culpability for events during those years, and refuses to allow open dialogue on the issue. In fact, there is a significant chunk of Zimbabwean history which is largely unknown, except to those who experienced it at first hand. All Zimbabweans, both present and future, should be allowed access to this history. Only by fully exploring how the 1980s crisis developed, can future Zimbabweans hope to avoid a repetition of such violence.

Being cognizant of the above, we set out to devise theatre that creates a space for second-generation victims of the Gukurahundi to reflect on the stories passed down to them and to also dialogue with members of the community in search of ways of manoeuvring past the Gukurahundi pain. Between six and ten members of the Ndebele-speaking community in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe participated in this research. The number of participants is recorded as a range, as opposed to being a fixed figure, so as to cater for those who left the group and those who joined the group during the

process. We were guided by Willis Sutton and T. Munson's (1976) definition of "community" that included a "specific population" as its elements. Participants were selected from young men and women aged between 18 and 35. This is the age group that fits well into the category of second-generation victims of the Gukurahundi. Participation in the project was voluntary but the participants were purposively sampled so that Ndebele people from Matabeleland and/or Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe were included.

My analysis examined data generated from play production processes and its staging, as well as the reflections of the cast and audience after the performance. Multiple rehearsals and two final performances were held. I facilitated the process of devising theatre. This involved the holding of workshops that incorporated theatre games and exercises to build trust (Boal, 1979), the sharing of experiences, and improvisations. Workshops/rehearsals ran for a month followed by the staging of the plays. After the first performance we reworked the play and staged a second performance. During the research I documented the proceedings and my observations through journaling, video recording and audio recording.

Data was generated from the rehearsal process, the process of staging the theatre pieces, post-performance discussions and from reflections during and after these processes. Of particular interest was to see how devised theatre was able, or not able, to create a democratic space for the second-generation sufferers of the Gukurahundi to tell inherited and personal stories, and start to explore ways of manoeuvring past the pain associated with this period. Observations (of the creation process, staging and post-performance discussions), interviews with participants and group discussions were used to generate data for the research. In data analysis I referred to my videos, audio recordings, journals and notes to reflect on the processes of the research. Data analysis and interpretation was carried out in order to arrive at valid conclusions.

Creating democratic spaces through theatre - *Speak Out!*

Harnessing the possibilities offered by devised theatre, we created our stage play entitled *Speak Out!* Whilst a scripted play would have limited

us to the script, devising theatre gave us a democratic process in the creation of the script, empowering each participant and giving them agency. At the centre of the creative process was improvisation. We devised the first play and staged it. We then reworked it and staged it again, creating *Speak Out!* Phase 1, and *Speak Out!* Phase 2. The plays were not written by a single person but were a product of collective improvisation. During the rehearsals, I encouraged all members of the group to be free to contribute and I emphasised that they would not be censored for their views. Putting improvisation in the centre of the creative process resonates with Ian Watson's (1993, p. 94) observation that improvisation:

places the actor at the center of the creative process. This is particularly obvious in the initial stages of creating a new *mise-en-scene*, because it is the actor who bears the greatest responsibility for providing the raw material for the production. It is the actor who develops the initial improvisations, and it is the actor who adapts them.

We started the creative process by coming together to discuss the Gukurahundi. This discussion was aimed at affording the participants an opportunity to share what they understood had taken place during the Gukurahundi. Some participants said they did not know much about what had happened while others knew a lot. With participants drawn from an age group that at the time of the Gukurahundi were young or not yet born, some said they did not know whether the stories they heard about the Gukurahundi were true or not. The words that the participants used to describe the Gukurahundi atrocities were telling. One participant talked of "*babetshisana*", meaning "they were burning each other". This description is an infamous metaphor of the Gukurahundi, capturing the gruesome atrocities of the period that included, among other things, people being shut up in thatched huts and burnt alive.

On the other hand, the term "*babetshisana*" shows how the so-called "official" narrative of the Gukurahundi has distorted the facts of this period. The official description implies that the "burning of each other" was a type of atrocity carried out by both sides, creating the impression that the other side was also returning fire for fire, yet it was the armed 5th Brigade versus unarmed civilians. The government has actually created

the distorted narrative by referring to the Gukurahundi as a civil war (see CCJP, 1997).

The CCJP (1997) report was very useful as a foundational text of reference. We referred to it a lot to get a broad view and exact details of what transpired during this period. We also collectively watched a 2018 Gukurahundi documentary film by Zenzele Ndebele. I then tasked the participants to go and do their own research about the Gukurahundi. We agreed that they were going to ask their parents, guardians or relatives. They came back with varying results. For some, relatives shared with them what they know about the Gukurahundi whilst some were not given any information except that talking about the Gukurahundi *kuyatshayisa* (it can get you beaten) or *kuyanyamalalisa* (it can make you disappear). Despite the mixed outcomes, the exercise of asking parents and relatives about the Gukurahundi started a process of talking about the issue. Even for those who preferred not to speak about it, the information that talking about the Gukurahundi can get you beaten or can make you disappear is still vital. It speaks volumes. We captured these sentiments in the phase one play monologues and in poems that were recited by the performers in the plays.

The phase one play was centred on the story of a young woman who narrates the story of her aunt, who was killed during the Gukurahundi by 5th Brigade soldiers who found her pregnant and ripped her stomach open with a bayonet, claiming that they want to remove a “son” of a “dissident” she was carrying in her stomach. The young girl was told this gruesome account by her mother. In narrating the account, the young lady says, “I believe – this is how my aunt would have told her story if she had had a chance to, but she never had one, she died on the spot” (*Speak Out!* 2019). Accounts of pregnant women who were bayoneted are a common theme of the Gukurahundi atrocities. CCJP (1997, p. 10) reports that “there are four accounts among CCJP records of two pregnant girls being bayoneted to death by 5th Brigade in Tsholotsho in February 1983”. Participants picked up this account as one of the most depressing accounts that have been shared to them through stories.

We used a flashback technique to transport this story to the stage. The flashback happens during a scene where young people are seated on

different parts of the stage. One after the other, they tell their stories – the stories of the Gukurahundi that they have heard. The last to tell her story is a young woman who, at the beginning of her narration, transforms to play the character of her aunt during a day she and her family were rounded up by the 5th Brigade soldiers. The transformation marks the beginning of the flashback, and the other actors on stage freeze. The “aunt” narrates how the 5th Brigade soldiers arrived in her rural village in Tsholotsho armed with guns. Many people were shot dead and some were wounded as the 5th Brigade soldiers ruthlessly attacked the unarmed civilians. She was 8 months pregnant. She tried to run away. However, because of her advanced pregnancy, she could not run fast. The soldiers caught up with her. As the actor playing the role of the aunt reaches this point in the narration, two male actors who had frozen on the stage come alive and transform into soldiers and start intimidating the pregnant aunt and eventually rip open her stomach with a bayonet.

The transformation into the soldiers’ roles was aided by the putting on of red berets, a technique that uses minimal props for the transformation into another character – and resonating with Jerzy Grotowski’s (1968) poor theatre concept. The 5th Brigade soldiers that massacred civilians during the Gukurahundi wore red berets, and these became their infamous trademark. After the bayoneting, the flashback ends and the events of the play return to the present time. One of the young people who, all along, had been listening to the narration exclaims “*ngamanga lawo!*” (that is a lie!). Others defend the young lady who narrated the story. The young lady declares that the story she has told is the story of her aunt, which was told to her by her mother. The character who is disputing the account should, it was suggested during the devising stage, represent those who have sought to trivialise, to distort, and to dispute the Gukurahundi experiences as shared by the victims and survivors. By reacting to this character, the participants not only voiced their pain and frustration stemming from the attempt to silence their Gukurahundi narratives, but also protested against any attempts to silence them.

Whilst this was the central theme of the play, other issues were also taken up: For example, the account of a man who was burnt alive in a

thatched hut. His only crime was that of being a former ZIPRA¹ member and being a member of ZAPU. Arguably, the ZANU-PF government used the Gukurahundi as an opportunity to crush ZAPU, the main opposition party in the country. One of the participants shared this account as a true story that happened to his maternal grandfather. It is an individual account that also embodies the accounts of many who suffered the same predicament. Using a storytelling technique that draws heavily from the Ndebele storytelling culture, this account was narrated as a monologue at the beginning of the phase one play. Physical abuse in the form of beatings and torture were also captured in the play through dramatised re-enactments that sought to mirror the atrocities of the Gukurahundi events. Theatrical re-enactments not only mirror what happened, they also provide an opportunity to comment on the events (Katherine, 2015).

In *Speak Out!* Phase 2, the issues of identity and of failure to get birth certificates for victims and children of victims of the Gukurahundi were introduced. One of the participants had a first-hand experience of this as his family has experienced a related crisis. As we incorporated his real life experience into the play and recorded accounts of similar experiences, our play shifted to a story of two people planning to marry, who are haunted by their history to the extent that their wedding is threatened. The young man's father was killed by 5th Brigade soldiers during the Gukurahundi. Authorities refused to process a death certificate for him because Gukurahundi was not acceptable as a "cause of death". As a result the young man failed to get a birth certificate bearing his father's names. He had to get a birth certificate using his mother's surname. As the young man approaches marriage, he is worried that even his children will use the "wrong" surname and may never get to know their true lineage, something which also speaks of their identity. His fiancée is also trying to come to terms with the death of her aunt, who was bayoneted during the Gukurahundi. These past experiences not only threaten the couple as individuals, but the future of their

¹ ZIPRA was the name of the ZAPU armed wing during the war for Zimbabwe's independence.

marriage and children. The issue of identity documents for the victims and children of victims of the Gukurahundi is a deep-seated crisis that has existed since the Gukurahundi days. According to CCJP (1997, p. 6):

Possibly hundreds of murder victims have never been officially declared dead. The lack of death certificates has resulted in a multitude of practical problems for their children, who battle to receive birth certificates, and for their spouses who, for example, cannot legally inherit savings accounts.

Music and dance were incorporated as the storyline revolved around the groomsmen and bridesmaids preparing the wedding dances for the anticipated wedding. The participants collectively participated in the choreography of the dances and in selecting the songs for dances. One of the participants, an experienced professional wedding dance coach, was given the responsibility of being the overall coordinator for the wedding dances. In the rehearsal room, dancers would take turns to propose dance moves and then the rest of the members would be taught the moves once they had been adopted by the group. At times, other members would suggest changes. Just as it was the case for the roles being “acted”, in perfecting the dances during rehearsals one individual or one section would perform whilst the rest would watch and then make suggestions for improvement or comment on the issues at the centre of the performance. We thus used Boal’s (1979) concept of the Spec-Actor to provide feedback to each other and comment on the content of our work, and to collectively participate in shaping the theatre work. One of the greatest challenges perfecting the dances during the rehearsal was that dancers would learn the dance moves at a different pace. Those members who had previously been bridesmaids or groomsmen relied on their experiences whilst others struggled.

Songs were used as commentary in the plays – for example, “*Senzeni na?*” (What have we done?) by Albert Nyathi, and another version from South Africa that speaks to the Apartheid era issues. Some participants also composed their own poems to capture their experiences and to protest against being silenced. These were incorporated into the plays. One of the poems by one of the participants goes like this:

Now that they say we may speak and we are speaking – *hatshi ukuvinjwa, hatshi ukwethuselwa* (no to silencing and gagging of our voices, no intimidation). We may forgive and forget but without answers *eish ngiyasola* (eish² I have doubts) ...

The use of art this way is in line with Magwaza (2001) and Barber's (1997) writings on African popular culture. Magwaza argues that cultural forms and artefacts (like beadwork) are used in African culture to communicate, and often as a form of protest. Zondi (2008) echoes the same sentiments as she sees songs which emanate from people's experiences as a form of negotiating and commenting on these experiences. Barber (1997, p. 5) observes that songs from the Mozambican plantations were "generated by people's suffering, giving collective voice to memories of pain to make them serve as a 'map of experience'". The plays that we created fit this mould of art as they reflected on and commented on the participants' Gukurahundi experiences.

***Langalezo* - exploring theatre as grieving**

The climax of both plays came as a *langalezo* experience. Through theatricality a *langalezo* space was created. A *langalezo* space is a space provided for in the Ndebele culture for showing solidarity and offering support to each other during times of bereavement or extreme difficulty. Among the Ndebele people, when a beloved passes on people gather to express condolences in support of the bereaved (Moyo, 2018; Ndlovu et al., 1995). The same applies to other difficult experiences such as loss of property and injury. In the context of death, this solidarity and sharing of condolence messages is manifested not only immediately, but also after a long period of time. The *langalezo* remains pending as long as the bereaved and the person offering comfort have not met or spoken to each other. Another critical element of *langalezo* is the narration (by the bereaved or affected) of how the painful experience happened. This sharing of distressing experiences is part of the necessary healing process after a painful event.

2 In this context "eish" means "I have doubts".

The listener empathises with the affected and offers hope through words and deeds.

Among the Ndebele people, the person coming to show solidarity greets the bereaved or affected by saying “*langalezo*”. The Ndebele word *langalezo* means “you have seen it” or “it has been seen”. It is both an acknowledgement that the painful event has happened and also an encouragement to manoeuvre past the pain and face the future positively. A *langalezo* space is a space for the sharing of painful experiences, the witnessing and validation of stories of pain, loss and suffering, and the mapping of the way forward in order to face the future positively. I argue that devising and staging theatre created a *langalezo* space for the participants and the audience members.

In the phase one play, after the young lady has narrated the story of her aunt who was bayoneted, other actors gather around her, embrace her and, true to the Ndebele cultural tradition that has just been described, say “*langalezo*”. In the phase two play, after the narration of their painful accounts, the future bride and groom embrace each other comfortingly whilst other actors gather around them and say “*langalezo*”. This moment is followed by a popular song of lament “*Hamba nhliziyo yakhe uye ezulwini*” (*May her soul find peace in heaven*). The post-performance discussions also form part of the *langalezo* experience, for, in a *langalezo* space, value is placed on problem narration, problem discussion and seeking ways of moving forward.

Both the process of devising theatre and that of staging theatre created democratic spaces for participants and audiences to speak about their Gukurahundi experiences, something that is “forbidden ground” and a taboo in everyday circles. Felseghi (2017, p. 68) observes that in devised theatre in “creating a performance, the authors always start from human resources and their personal biographies, from a pre-existent theme, from society, politics – or all of these combined, creating unlimited possibilities”. In our project, this was done through encouraging participants to share their personal experiences and then incorporating those into the devised play. One participant, for example, shared the story of his relative who was burnt alive inside a thatched hut – a type of atrocity already mentioned in this paper – and this was incorporated into the play.

During reflection sessions after devising and staging the plays, one of the participants said:

As for me, as a young person from Matabeleland, Bulawayo in particular, participating in the *Speak Out!* project gave me an opportunity to express my views and feelings concerning the Gukurahundi accounts that I have heard. So I think I was empowered to be able to express myself and to voice my feelings on the Gukurahundi issue ... the theatre project empowered me because my fellow participants came with things that I was previously unaware of and as we shared stories and experiences I developed a broader understanding of the Gukurahundi issue ... the project also made me aware that we can speak about issues of Gukurahundi using all these channels even if other platforms are closed.

The sharing of stories during the devising process was enhanced by improvisation which empowered participants to break silencing and oppressive boundaries and to “rediscover” their silenced voices through playfulness that we created through the playing of games, particularly at the start of sessions. Some of these games were also played in the middle of the devising sessions. One of the games we used to play is a concentration game whereby participants stand in a circle. Each person is assigned a unique number. All participants then start making a rhythmic sound by tapping above their knees while saying numbers. The first person chants his or her unique number along the tapping rhythm and ends by adding someone else’s number. The person whose number is added is supposed to be the next to do the chanting of numbers and so it goes on, with new people being brought in. The trick is to maintain the rhythm and also not to miss your chance when your number is mentioned. The first person would go like “ah 1, ah 1 1 4”. The person assigned number 4 would have to pick up the chanting, like “ah 4, ah 4 4 2”. Number 2 would have to be next, and so on. The games set the stage for improvisation. Boal (1979, p. xiv) argues that “improvisation is life”. That is what improvisation brought to our devising process – life.

Staging the play marked one of the milestones of the process, as participants claimed their democratic spaces – where they could speak. The act of performing in front of an audience is important in that participants tell their stories and have them validated by the empathic audience. Life

experiences are given added validity by depicting them dramatically with, and in front of, others (Jones, 1996). This is not always the case though – there can be conflicts and negotiations during the devising process.

The rehearsal for action concept was important in this research. Boal (1979), borrowing from the avant-garde, particularly Moreno's expressionist psychodrama, describes his aesthetics of the oppressed as a rehearsal for action. He argues that participation in the theatre gives participants an opportunity to rehearse what they would do in real life if faced with similar circumstances. During the reflection sessions participants testified that after the project they had felt emboldened and empowered to go out and speak to their families, friends and community members about the Gukurahundi, something that they had been reluctant or afraid to do before embarking on the project. One participant said, "the support that we got from the audience when we did the play is encouraging me to speak about this thing [the Gukurahundi]".

Post-performance discussions provided a democratic space for audiences to express their views on the Gukurahundi experiences. One audience member revealed that he and his drama group were being harassed by members of the security sector for participating in theatre works that speak of the Gukurahundi, labelling this as unfair treatment. Mignolo (2014) argues that decolonial art exposes injustice, challenges domination that colonises and is determined to bring about change. Through *Speak Out!* we challenged oppressive structures that refuse to people the chance of speaking about their Gukurahundi experiences. The silencing of the Gukurahundi victims was definitely challenged through devising and staging theatre. The theatre space on the margin became a democratic space to create works that can shift consciousness (hooks, 1990). In line with hooks's observation the place at the margin became a place of radical openness (hooks, 1990). *Speak Out!* is an attempt to deliberately place oneself at the margins so as to be better able to speak truth to power, and by doing so to challenge oppressive, silencing structures and to create democratic spaces for speaking out on the issues of the Gukurahundi.

The attempt to create a democratic social and aesthetic space for addressing the Gukurahundi had its own challenges. At the beginning of the project some participants were very uncomfortable speaking

about the Gukurahundi, citing fear of state repression. At one point I was asked about the backup plan in the event of their being arrested. I did not have a solid backup plan that could meet their expectations. Another major challenge was that most of the participants were new to devising. They were used to acting in plays where they would be given a script. As a result, at many points when they felt frustrated by the process of devising, they would request that I just write the script and give them ready copies. Through negotiations, we managed to steer the ship to the intended destination. Despite the challenges, the overall outcome was encouraging.

Conclusion

Theatricality in the form of devised theatre offers potential in creating a social and aesthetic space to speak to and about the issue of the Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe. Techniques such as improvisation, storytelling, the use of the Spec-Actor concept in rehearsal, use of songs as commentary and using personal experiences as material for creation of the play help in achieving this. The nature of devised theatre, which requires people to discuss and work together in creating a play, makes a *langalezo* space possible. The post-performance discussions enhance the creation of a *langalezo* space which, within the Ndebele culture, is a grieving space. Participating in both devising and performing theatre created a platform for young people of Matabeleland to voice their frustrations, concerns, pain and suffering from the Gukurahundi experiences. Most of these experiences were passed down to the young generation through stories told by their parents and other relatives, or by community members. In a repressive environment like that which has prevailed in Zimbabwe for many years, devised theatre offers an alternative platform to build democracy by providing alternative spaces for the subaltern to speak.

References

- Barber, K. (Ed.). (1997). *Readings in African popular culture*. James Currey.
 Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the oppressed*. Routledge.

- Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace & Legal Resources Foundation. (1997). *Breaking the silence, building true peace: A report on the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980–1989*. CCJP & LRF.
- Felseghi, A. (2017). Devised theatre – a short introduction. *Studia Ubb Dramatica*, 62(1), 61–68. <https://doi.org/10.24193/subbdrama.2017.1.05>
- Freire, P. (1971). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.
- Gaztambide-Fernandez, R. (2014). Decolonial options and artistic/aesthetic entanglements: An interview with Walter Mignolo. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, 3(1), 196–212.
- Grotowski, J. (1968). *Towards a poor theatre*. Simon & Schuster.
- Haedicke, S. & Nellhaus, T. (Eds.). (2001). *Performing democracy: International perspectives on urban community based performance*. University of Michigan Press.
- hooks, b. (1990). *Yearnings: Race, gender and cultural politics*. South End Press.
- Jones P. (1996). *Drama as therapy: Theatre as living*. Routledge.
- Katherine, J. (2015). Performing pasts for present purposes: Re-enactment as embodied, performative history. In D. Dean, Y. Merzon & K. Prince (Eds.), *History, memory, performance. Studies in International Performance* (pp. 36–52). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Magwaza, T. (2001). Private transgressions: The visual voice of Zulu women. *Agenda*, 16(49), 25–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2001.9675969>
- Mhlanga, C. (2007). *The good president* [Unpublished play].
- Moyo, B. (2011). *1983: Years before and after* [Unpublished play].
- Moyo, C. (2018). Dance and song as grieving: Examining the role of (Pentecostal?) Christianity in shifting Ndebele people's perceptions on grieving. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 99(1), 1–10.
- Mpofu, S. (2019). Art as journalism in Zimbabwe. *Journalism Studies*, 20(1), 60–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1358652>
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2004). *The dynamics of democracy and human rights among the Ndebele of Zimbabwe. 1818–193* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Zimbabwe]. UZeScholar Institutional Repository. <http://hdl.handle.net/10646/893>
- Ndlovu, T. M., Ndlovu D. & Ncube B. S. (1995). *Imikhuba Lamasiko AmaNdebele*. Mambo Press.
- Oddey, A. (1994). *Devising theatre: A practical and theoretical handbook*. Routledge.
- Perry, M. (2011). Theatre and knowing: Considering the pedagogical spaces in devised theatre. *Youth Theatre Journal*, 25(1), 63–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2011.569461>
- Ravengai, S. (2011). *Subalternity and the negotiation of a theatre identity: Performing the postcolony in alternative Zimbabwean theatre* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Cape Town.

- Shmuckler, G. (2013). *Trauma on stage: Making theatre about xenophobia in South Africa using the “structures” of trauma* [Unpublished master’s dissertation]. Wits University.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 67–111). Macmillan.
- Sutton, W. & Munson, T. (1976). *Definitions of community, 1954–1973*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, August, 1976.
- Sysoyeva, M. K. & Proudfit, S. (Eds.). (2016). *Women, collective creation, and devised performance: The rise of women theatre artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thorpe, J. (2014). Every person, every voice: An exploration into the making of devised theatre in prison. In S. Armstrong & K. Sams (Eds.), *Scottish justice matters*. Special Issue on Arts and Justice.
- wa Thiong’o, N. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. James Currey.
- Watson, I. (1993). *Towards a third theatre: Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret*. Routledge.
- Young-Jahangeer, M. (2014). Panoptic spaces, democratic places? Unlocking culture and sexuality through popular performance in Westville Female Correctional Centre. In H. Barnes & M. Coetzee (Eds.), *Applied drama/theatre as social intervention in conflict and post-conflict contexts*. Cambridge Scholars.
- Zondi, N. B. (2008). *Bahlabelelani: Why do they sing? Gender and power in contemporary women’s songs* [Doctoral dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal]. ResearchSpace. <http://hdl.handle.net/10413/656>