

The opening Keynote Address of Intersection V by Ngugi wa Mirii, founder and director of ZACT, the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatres, addressed the history of grassroots political theater in East Africa, and the power of art and critical pedagogy to mobilize mass social movements. We had no idea that his passionate and moving address at Intersection would be his last public speech. What follows is a memoriam by Dale Byam, and highlights of Ngugi wa Mirii's speech, with reflections by Priscilla Page. (Check back soon for a full transcription.)

Remembering Ngugi wa Mirii: Honoring a Visionary Teacher and Artist

By Dale Byam

"I try to build the art without compromising my vision and without the use of oppression." — Ngugi wa Mirii

Dale Byam, a close colleague and personal friend of Ngugi's, teaches dramatic arts. She is the author of *Communities in Motion: Theatre for Development in Africa*, which focuses on post-colonialism, development, and the work of the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre (ZACT), which Ngugi founded.

I arrived in Harare for the first time in 1989. At that time I could best be described as a curious graduate student who had heard about a burgeoning community theater movement in Zimbabwe that had outlasted the formidable grassroots theater movements of Botswana, Kenya and Zambia. Without any confirmed housing arrangements, I had decided to wing it; buy a round-trip New York-Harare ticket, spend a few months tracking down the participants, and hopefully gather enough information for a serious research project.

My first exposure to African Community Theater had actually been in Guelph, Canada, where I had been introduced to ZACT member Simba Pheminai, along with a small group of other ZACT members who had been performing and conducting training sessions at a popular theater conference. Simba and I quickly developed a friendship and often discussed my interest in identifying strategies that Africans were using for their own development. "You really must visit Zimbabwe. You must meet Ngugi," he frequently insisted. That was in May. In June, armed with Ngugi's phone number and a list of other theater artists, I arrived in Harare in the late evening and called Ngugi from a pay phone. His wife, Wairimu, explained that Ngugi was in the neighboring country of Botswana, but that I should find my way to her home and camp there. In the days that followed, Wairimu and I chatted like old friends until Ngugi's return from Botswana. I remember the very first morning, at Wairimu's encouragement, I drove Ngugi's yellow Volkswagen to take his children to school. She didn't drive then and my standard-gear

skills were extremely rusty, but I managed to move the yellow Beetle to the children's school and back. The details differ depending on whether Wairimu or I tells the story, but suffice to say that by the time Ngugi returned, and having examined what was left of his Volkswagen, he was more anxious to meet me than I him. The yellow Volkswagen became our running joke, but it also marked an important symbol in the development of one of the true friendships that I have forged over the years.

Ngugi was born in Limuru, Kenya, in 1952. In fact, it was his work as an adult educator in Kenya that had heightened my interest in Community Theater for Development in Africa. Strongly influenced by the pedagogy of popular participation advocated by Latin American educator Paulo Freire, Ngugi had collaborated with the writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the villagers of Limuru, Kenya, to develop the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Center in the 1970s. The Center's work gained international attention as one hallmark of popular participation in community development in Africa. However, the project was interrupted when the Kenyan government detained Ngugi wa Thiong'o and destroyed the theater. That sequence of incidents led to Ngugi wa Mirii's migration, his self-imposed exile and subsequent position as Executive Director of the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theater, an umbrella organization responsible for the training and development of over 300 theater companies in Zimbabwe. (For further reading on the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, see these works by Ngugi wa Thiong'o: "The Language of African Theater," in *Decolonising the Mind*, and *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*.)

ZACT went through tremendous changes over the years. In its early years, there were national conventions which brought artists from all over the country into Harare for training and performance events. It was not uncommon to find artists performing in schools, hotels and bus stations. ZACT artists also traveled throughout Europe and Canada. I personally had the good fortune to accompany Ngugi, his family and selected ZACT artists when they presented their work in Japan. All the while, Ngugi held steadfastly to the idea that theater is transformative and that peasants and workers are the key to this transformation.

However, as Zimbabwe fell prey to droughts, economic turnarounds and the like, the theater movement as we once knew it began another transformation. Until that time the Association depended heavily on donor funds. As foreign governments began imposing sanctions on Zimbabwe, funds became less and less available and more constrained by ideological

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differences. In the spirit of perseverance, Ngugi put ZACT on hiatus and pursued other strategies for sustaining the arts in Zimbabwe.

Notwithstanding these developments, his writing continued. Writing was an essential part of Ngugi wa Mirii's life, and it was not unusual for him to write into the late hours and then rise exceptionally early to begin his community work. His wife, Wairimu, once confided that he often slept for only four hours a night. It seemed that he never tired. He wrote and directed over thirty plays, produced several articles on the role of the arts in the southern region of Africa, and went on to direct and to produce issue-based films. In 2002, he won the NAMA Award for Best Screenplay for his film *Secrets*. He also produced *Children of the Highlands*, a documentary that focused on orphaned children in Eastern Zimbabwe. Additionally, he was responsible for the formation of several other arts-based agencies, including the International African Dance Ensemble in 1996, KenZim Cultural Center in 1997, the Southern Africa Theater Initiative in 1999, Visions of Africa in 2001, and the Kimaathi Publishing House in 2002.

I last saw him in April 2008. His passion for the arts seemed stronger. We talked about his appointment to the Media Commission in Zimbabwe in 2007, during a time of growing resentment of the government. Still, he remained himself—always optimistic, always hopeful for Africa. At one point during a serious discussion, I commented that he had mastered the art of multi-tasking. But for Ngugi, this was all part of being an African artist. For twenty years he had straddled a divide by embracing both his Kenyan roots and his adopted home in Zimbabwe—uniting both with his commitment to the arts.

As I sat during the funeral, I recalled one of our recent conversations. We talked about the transformative nature of art in times of hardship. I remember expressing my concerns about the diminishing role of the performing arts during harsh economic times. Ngugi optimistically saw theater as an invocation for inventiveness. And he saw how theater's ingenuity could be applied to other disciplines. He pointed out that many of the ZACT artists had gone on to spearhead a wide variety of community-based agencies, and that it was important to see the influence of art in society in the broadest sense. It dawned on me that he was a man who broadened an ideal to incorporate so many disciplines, that I am encouraged to see the art in virtually all that I do. Clearly, his commitment was always for the betterment of society. "The struggle is not for one particular segment of the society," he often reminded me. "It's the collective of all the people."

Sitting in the church in Ngugi's hometown of Ngaraiya, Kenya, listening to the accolades from his friends and colleagues, I reminisced on those wonderful experiences—in Zimbabwe, in Kenya, in the United States. It was the songs of the people for whom he worked his whole life that lifted me back to the solemnity of the occasion. No sooner had the priest laid his last blessings, than swarms of villagers approached, lifted Ngugi's coffin above their heads and dutifully commenced to return him to the village where he was born. Wairimu stood by. "Look, those people who he labored for, they've taken him back." We looked toward the church's entrance to see his coffin atop the shoulders of hundreds of villagers, caught up in their own reverie and proudly singing African songs.

***Intersection* keynote address: Ngugi wa Mirii**

Notes by Priscilla Page, Program Curator, New WORLD Theater

On Friday, April 4, 2008, the acclaimed artist and activist Ngugi wa Mirii delivered the opening keynote at *Intersection V: Creative Uprising(s)*. We had no idea that this passionate and moving address would be his last public speech before his untimely death one month later.

His inspiring talk moved seamlessly from anecdote to song to heartening words about making one's life as an artist. When asked about his approach to theater, he simply stated: "I try to build the art without compromising my vision and without the use of oppression." He truly embodied the ideals of community-based performance, training, and pedagogy. Through his stories, we heard over and over again how the student, the worker, and the actor each comes to the process of learning with a robust body of knowledge. The best teacher understands that this knowledge exists and is able to participate in an exchange, a sharing of information, with the student.

On teaching literacy, he said, "The art of teaching peasants [to read] is by letting them tell you what they need. Do not boss them around. With this method you will also learn from them. These peasants do not need you. They have survived all these years without reading and writing skills. It was easier for me to teach them through something they already knew, singing and dancing."

Ngugi highlighted the importance of popular education and the connections between communities and institutions of higher learning:

It is important to understand the linking of theory and practice. All disciplines should rethink why they exist. Education would be more meaningful and would give their graduates a purpose if educators understood the people they serve. Why do we ask the artist, "In how many plays have you acted in before? Why not give them the job and allow them to learn from practice? I say this because I have worked with the people who have not had any theatrical training and yet have made me what I am. Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote the play *I Will Marry When I Want* in Kenya. He had written plays before, but his

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writing had a different impact once he wrote for the people he so loved. When we are researching for our master's and doctorate degrees, where do we go to find the knowledge? We go to the community. Why do we hold on to our theories and think we are superior with our intellect? It is important for the universities to link the theories with the people they will eventually serve, the society.

We are saddened by Ngugi's passing and honored that he was able to be with us during *Intersection*.