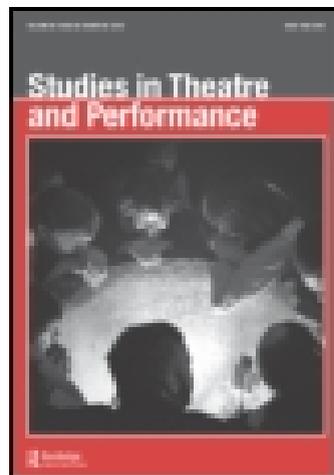


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# 'Umuntu, Ngumuntu, Ngabantu': The story of the African choir

Jane Collins

## Abstract

*This article describes a collaborative practice-as-research project that is being developed by the Market Theatre Laboratory in Johannesburg and Wimbledon College of Art in the United Kingdom. The article seeks to explain some of the ways in which an analysis of the costumes and stage design of performances by a South African choir that toured Britain at the end of the nineteenth century are being used as a starting point for a new work for the stage. The project uses the medium of performance in order to investigate the production and reception of performance, under the colonial gaze, by a group of young, black South Africans. It offers a critical perspective on the way in which this group attempted to construct a 'stage' identity designed to meet the expectations of western audiences, and speculates about the extent to which the failure of the tour may be attributed to the Choir's failure to fulfil these expectations.*

## Keywords

identity  
Africa  
Victorian  
colonial  
costume  
audience

## Performing identities in Victorian Britain

Between 1891 and 1893 a group of young black South Africans toured England, Scotland and Ireland. They were a Christian choir apparently on a mission to raise funds for a technical school in Kimberley [Plate 1]. However, once in England, a more complex set of motives for the trip emerged. On the tour they struggled to come to terms with the realities of late Victorian industrial society, which challenged their notions of progress and made them question their own identity as the black educated elite. The tour failed to make money and as a result they were forced to take radical measures to attract larger audiences. It all ended in disaster with the choir abandoned by their managers and left penniless in a London hotel. One of their members was the young Charlotte Manye, who eventually went on to find the Bantu Women's League and became a prominent activist for women's rights in South Africa. Later in her life she also campaigned vehemently for women to be represented in the newly formed African National Congress. What happened to the Choir, their passage around the United Kingdom and eventually across to America, is well chronicled by Veit Erlmann in *Music Modernity and the Global Imagination*, in which he sets the experiences of this group of young people within the broader context of late 19th century spectacle and imperialist imaginings.

The intention of this article is not to replicate Erlmann's extensive research but to describe the ways in which it has been used as a springboard



Plate 1: *The African Choir in Victorian dress (1891).*

for a new work for the stage. This work, which is still in development, uses the medium of performance to speculate about the way the performances by this group of young black artists at the end of the nineteenth century might have been constructed for their predominantly white middle-class audience. In particular it attempts to understand the reasoning behind a decision that was taken at some point during the tour by these mission-educated, urbanised black South Africans to perform in 'native' dress for the first half of their concert. This decision contributed to their performance being dubbed in one newspaper review as 'Africa Civilised and Africa Uncivilised' (*Irish Times*, 15 March 1892) [Plate 2].

Erlmann proposes the notion of the 'co-authoring of global identities' as part and parcel of imperial practice. He argues that 'the African faith in Western fictions of modernity and progress was worked out through Western assumptions about Africans, as they were in turn enabled by African stagings of something taken for an African past' (Erlmann: 10).

This raises questions as to the extent to which the members of the Choir were complicit in this depiction of themselves. How much was this presentation of self due to the demands of the box-office and how much were they knowingly pandering to the desire of English audiences to have their preconceptions about Africa and the 'African' confirmed? The new work considers these questions in relation to nineteenth-century performance, but also, by implication, raises questions about the production and reception of current work from the continent of Africa and specifically the ways in which live performance is contributing to the construction of identity/identities in the relationships between South Africa and the West.



Plate 2: 'Africa uncivilized'. Photo from *The Review of Reviews*, September 1891.

The Choir was recruited by two British promoters, Balmer and Letty, possibly inspired by the success of the Virginia Jubilee Singers, an African American Minstrel Troupe that toured South Africa in the 1890s led by the charismatic Orpheus McAdoo.<sup>1</sup> The balance between profit and philanthropy in the motivation of the promoters and the performers is difficult to judge at this distance. The Choir ostensibly wanted to raise money for a technical school in Kimberley,<sup>2</sup> to improve the lot of the black labour force who were being drawn in large numbers into the diamond mines, but this charitable tag was denounced by one of the Choir members on his return to South Africa as just a fine rolling phrase (Paul Xinwine, in *South Africa*, September 1892) [Plate 3].

Charlotte Manye certainly presented the tour as a fund-raising expedition when the choir arrived in London. In an interview with London journalist William Stead in September 1891, early in the tour, she said, 'Let us be in Africa even as you are in England . . . Help us to found the schools for which we pray, where our people could learn to labour, to build; to acquire your skill with their hands' (*The Review of Reviews*, September 1891).

Charlotte and her younger sister Katie were living in Kimberley when they were recruited; other members of the Choir came from the progressive and liberal Lovedale Community College on the Eastern Cape,<sup>3</sup> and however mixed the motives for the expedition may have been their concerts certainly represented a new stage role for black performers, at odds with the standard practice described by Ben Shephard: 'By the late nineteenth century, the British had a long history of putting black people on the stage and had evolved stock roles for them to play. Blacks could be freaks, savages, angels, minstrels, slaves and warriors and were variously used to

1. For more information on the Jubilee Singers, see Viet Erlmann, 'A feeling of prejudice: Orpheus M. McAdoo and the Virginia Jubilee Singers in South Africa, 1890–1898', *Journal of South African Studies* 14: 3 (April 1988), pp. 331–50.
2. Diamonds were discovered in the town of Kimberley in the late 1870s, and prospectors from all over the world flooded there. Consequently, by the 1890s, Kimberley was a rapidly expanding city. De Beers Consolidated Mines, owned by Cecil Rhodes, controlled the industry, which was sustained by cheap African labour.
3. Lovedale was the major missionary education centre in South Africa throughout the nineteenth century. Established in 1824, it initially pursued an 'assimilationist' policy creating an educated elite made up of a small minority of Africans. See Saayman W., 'Subversive subservience: Z.K. Matthews and missionary education in South Africa', [www.geocities.com/missionalia/saayman.htm](http://www.geocities.com/missionalia/saayman.htm)

4. Shephard discusses the *Savage South Africa Show* at Earl's Court, London 1899, a spectacular re-enactment of the Matabele Wars of the 1890s. He also charts the love affair between Peter Lobengula, one of the stars of the show who claimed to be the son of the Matabele King Lobengula, and a Cornish woman, Kitty Jewell.



Plate 3: Charlotte Manye, from the *New African Movement* website ([http://www.pitzer.edu/New\\_African\\_Movement/newafrrre/writers/maxeke.shtml](http://www.pitzer.edu/New_African_Movement/newafrrre/writers/maxeke.shtml)).

instil fear, loathing, compassion, wonder or sexual delight' (Shephard: 57).<sup>4</sup> The Choir appeared to want to offer an alternative to these stereotypical representations; at least, that was how the *Christian Express*, a monthly periodical published in South Africa, framed the expedition: 'The choir was organised with the professed object of deepening and extending the widespread interest in Africa and the African and of endeavouring to show the capability of the South African native in a novel direction' (August 1892).

The group of fifteen arrived in England in the summer of 1891 and immediately embarked on an arduous touring schedule often playing one-night stands. They were initially very successful and a performance at London's Crystal Palace led to their being invited down to Osborne on the Isle of Wight to perform for Queen Victoria. Their repertoire seems to have changed as the tour progressed, but basically they performed a combination of traditional songs, Christian hymns and English ballads. They travelled north to the big industrial cities of England, continued into Scotland,

which had strong links with South Africa through the missionary societies, and eventually went across to Ireland. By Christmas 1891, however, underlying divisions with the management and among the Choir themselves were beginning to surface. They had not been paid, or certainly had not been paid what they were promised, since leaving South Africa. The managers claimed this was because the expenses of touring outweighed the profits from the concerts, but Paul Xinwine, one of the senior members of the Choir, challenged this. Xinwine was a prominent intellectual and a successful businessman on the Cape who had invested his own money in the venture. Able and articulate, Xinwine expected to meet the English on equal terms and was furious when he was refused representation on the management committee of the choir. His belief that the managers may have been engaged in 'creative accounting' appears to have been well founded. He employed a solicitor, only to discover that English law was tailored to work for the English and that the Choir was bound by a contract that they could not get out of. On return to the Cape he wrote in the magazine *South Africa*:

I advanced to them £30 or its equivalent of which they only paid me five. In the same way another member of the choir lent them £100 at Kimberley and goodness knows if he will ever recover it. They say they can show their books and accounts in order to prove that they have been losing money. It is a perfectly easy thing to put any figures in books! Why, you have false balance sheets with banks which are supposed to have strict and proper auditors how much easier for a body of men who are their own auditors.

Xinwine also continued to challenge the charitable status of the tour: 'The venture of the choir was a monetary speculation in spite of all the platform declarations' (*South Africa*, September 1892).

The 'platform declarations' were the appeals for funds at the end of each concert to help build the technical school in Kimberley. Xinwine challenged the manager's claims that this was the main motive behind the tour, and refuted Charlotte Manye's remarks in the interview with William Stead in the *Review of Reviews* by suggesting that her real motive was political. She had, he insisted, set out from the very beginning to try to persuade the English to take action against the encroaching power of the emerging settler class in South Africa and the ruthlessness of the Boers.

The tensions between Xinwine, the managers and Charlotte appear to have come to a head in Manchester in December 1891. Xinwine wanted to abandon the tour and return home, Charlotte wanted to continue, and went behind Xinwine's back to the managers claiming that the majority of the members wanted to stay. Xinwine was furious and, supported by his wife Eleanor who was also a choir member, accused Charlotte of splitting the loyalty of the group. Charlotte attacked Eleanor in the restaurant of the Trevelyan Hotel and was hauled up before Manchester Magistrates on

a charge of assault. She pleaded guilty and was bound over to keep the peace for the sum of five pounds and ordered to pay costs. The Xinwines were dispatched back to South Africa, followed a few weeks later by two other members of the Choir.

Diminished in number the Choir soldiered on, but by the summer of 1892 the potentially 'comic' exchange of blows in the Manchester hotel had taken a tragic turn. Before his departure Xinwine had been accused by the managers of having an affair with Sannie Koofman, one of the younger members of the group. Xinwine vigorously denied the allegation, claiming it was put forward as a convenient excuse by the management to get rid of him. However, Sannie Koofman had a stillborn baby boy in Chesterfield in June 1892, and when the tiny body was discovered hidden in a trunk she was charged and imprisoned by Chesterfield magistrates for 'concealment of birth'. Another choir member, a journalist called Josiah Semouse, kept a diary of the tour, but by the end of 1892 his entries dry up. It seems that the Choir limped on until early 1893, failing to make ends meet, until they were finally abandoned by the managers in a cheap London Hotel. Cold and disillusioned, they were eventually rescued by the charitable offices of the Missionary Society who raised the funds to send them home.

It is an extraordinary story situated somewhere between melodrama and the Victorian novel, but the relationships between the main protagonists and the desire to apportion 'blame' in the manner of those genres, is complicated by the fact that two years later Charlotte Manye and a small number of the original Choir set out on another expedition with Balmer and Letty, this time to America.

As a writer and researcher of performance my interest in the story lay in the dramatic potential of the difference between the private and public worlds of the tour; and the human cost to the individual choir members of perpetually being 'on show' as the 'exotic other'. This seems to have been compounded by the decision of the Choir, early in the tour, to fashion themselves in the 'role' of pre-Christianised heathen for the first half of the concert, a decision that, judging by the correspondence between London and the Cape around this issue of sartorial representation, would not have been made without a lot of soul-searching. Underpinning all the above was the wish to exploit the potential of the medium of performance to explore the 'colonial gaze', thus anticipating Erlmann's proposition concerning the 'co-authoring of global identities.'

Whatever the credibility of Paul Xinwine's reservations about her motives, Charlotte Manye's plea for funds in the *Review of Reviews* was timely. It re-asserted the value of education and progress at precisely the point when confidence and belief in the humanitarian and philanthropic purposes of the 'civilizing' mission of Empire were fading among certain sectors of the educated Victorian middle classes. The evidence of blatant exploitation and materialism in the scramble for gold and diamonds on the Cape, coupled with a waning of belief in the concept of 'progress',

was undermining the certainties of the earlier part of the century.<sup>5</sup> If the audience was looking for re-assurance of the centrality of its position in the global world-order and a justification for colonial expansion, then Charlotte's speech provided it. The reader and potential audience sees itself reflected here as the acme of civilization. And this, of course, was further reinforced in the visual encoding of the concerts themselves. As Erlmann argues, the use of dress as a 'metonymic gesture, as a spectacle within a spectacle' was a demonstration of the 'progressive history of the wearers' (Erlmann: 103).

Erlmann goes on to point out that the organisation of the photograph that accompanied the article reads like a trophy hunter's portrait (see Figure 2). The symmetrical positioning of the Choir for the camera, the placing of the two white men, the skins and (rather incongruously) a tiger's skin on the floor all reinforce the notion of 'the other' as chaotic nature, caught organised and ultimately tamed; a reassertion of the epistemology of modernity and progress within which the viewer/audience could assert their own identity.

However, as Erlmann reveals (pp. 103–104), this is a construction of the 'native' tailored to appeal to the Victorian audience and bearing little resemblance to clothes as worn in Africa. Many of the Choir are wearing woollen blankets, European imports to Africa as part of the trade in manufactured goods. They were gradually adopted in South Africa through the nineteenth century and, for the wearers, signified a very complex relationship with modernity, as much a sign of protest as one of acquiescence. A semiotic system is in operation between the members of the Choir themselves, which would not have been read by Europeans. There are other incongruities in this 'generic' African folk costume. The beads worn by some of the women closely resemble Victorian costume jewellery; the woman in the middle appears to be wearing some sort of western gown. Could it be that this 'bricolage of Victorian and African sartorial elements', to use Erlmann's phrase, demonstrates that 'the performers, like many other Africans involved in the emerging international show business', as Annie E. Coombes suggests, 'knowingly exploited a presentation of self and identity which re-appropriated and transformed anticipated western assumptions about the African and Africa and which was calculated to have a particular effect in Britain' (Coombes: 107)?

5. By the latter part of the century, in keeping with the new industrial ethos, the 'assimilationist' policy had changed, and technical education was considered more appropriate for the African population (Saayman p.2).

### **Preliminary stages of the African choir project**

Much of the above has come from Erlmann's extensive research. A Small Grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2005 facilitated a programme of my own research in the United Kingdom and South Africa and established a network of contacts in South Africa interested in developing the story of the Choir for the stage. I organised the material I had gathered into a draft script and sent this to the Market Theatre Laboratory in Johannesburg. A positive response led to an invitation to conduct a two-week workshop with the students there.

The Market Laboratory is the training and developmental wing of the Market Theatre in Johannesburg. Vanessa Cooke, the current director of the Lab, traces its history:

When Barney Simon was Artistic Director of the Market Theatre he always wanted a space where directors and actors could explore without having the pressure of producing a finished product, where there would be a right to fail. This dream stemmed from the fact that for years Barney had been doing workshop theatre under huge pressure as there had to be a product for the Market audiences.

Also Community Theatre practitioners were coming to Barney to have their plays at the Market. These practitioners from the townships and rural areas were generally passionate about theatre but largely unskilled. Barney wanted to set up a Fieldwork programme to impart Theatre skills to the groups and to have a space where showcases could take place.

He wanted also to have Drama Classes – initially for professional actors – but later when the pros were not enthusiastic – for young talented people from disadvantaged communities who had no chance of entering a tertiary institution either because of lack of funds or because of their grades at school.

The Lab opened in October 1989 with seed money from the Rockefeller Foundation. (Cooke, personal interview, September 2006)

Currently the Market Lab offers young aspiring performers, from all over South Africa, the opportunity to engage in an intensive two-year course to develop their skills.

The rationale behind the structure of the workshop and subsequent presentation to an invited audience was driven by a number of different imperatives. It was necessary to determine how much was known about these late nineteenth-century pioneers by the current generation of performers in South Africa. The loosely formulated draft script used the narrative of the Choir's adventures as an organising device to explore the complex issues of representation and identity raised by the decision of the Choir to perform in 'traditional' costumes. It speculated about the extent to which the Choir may have constructed this identity specifically to appeal to Victorian audiences and *knowingly exploited* their audiences' expectations. It explored the changes this experience wrought on certain individual members of the group, what this cost them in human terms as they struggled with these conflicting versions of self. The workshop would determine whether or not these issues of representation and identity were of interest and relevant to contemporary South Africans working in the field of performance and other sectors of the cultural industry. As a writer and director I wanted to examine the ways in which the medium of performance itself might be used to explore the act of watching and being watched, both then and now, and be utilised as a means of interrogating the 'past' in the 'present'. The audience and audience response thus became a key

factor in the research process and the workshop experiments, both in terms of form and content. It was these questions and propositions that were offered up for analysis through practice over the course of a two-week intensive workshop in Johannesburg in April 2006. The draft took the narrative up to the point of the Xinwines' departure from the tour in Manchester. The outcomes of the workshop and feedback from the audience in a post-presentation discussion would be used to develop the draft material into a full-length new work.

The collaborative team in South Africa consisted of eighteen second-year students from the Lab, together with Napo Masheane, director, Thembe Khubeka, musical director at the Lab, and Michael Pavelka, designer, from Wimbledon College of Art in the UK.

On the first day of the workshop, research material consisting of documents, books, newspaper articles, letters and photographs was laid out for the group to share. The script was introduced as a series of starting points to be developed through experimentation and play. The designer had brought out copies of the recently recovered Mitchell and Kenyon films of England at the dawn of the last century, slightly later than the Choir's visit in the 1890s but nonetheless evocative of working-class life in the northern industrial cities and towns. We watched some of these and compared the images with early pictures of Cape Town, Johannesburg and Kimberley. It became apparent that the students had little knowledge of urban life in nineteenth-century South Africa and that this world was as remote to them as the chimneys and factory smoke of industrial England.

### **A nation that loses awareness of its past gradually loses itself (Kundera: 235)**

These aspects of the colonial past have quite literally been airbrushed out of South African history by apartheid education. The company had never heard of Charlotte Manye, a powerful advocate of Women's Rights who went on to become the first female Black African graduate of Wilberforce University in the United States. They had no idea about the existence of prominent intellectuals and businessmen like Paul Xinwine. The notion of a black educated middle-class elite at the end of the last century, many of whom had a vision of an autonomous, self-governing Black Nationalist state, was a complete revelation to the students. Indeed, as the discussion after the performance revealed, it was unknown to many of the audience members as well.

The students were all accomplished singers and work began each morning with a vocal warm-up and singing workshop led by Thembe Khubeka. Khubeka, herself a professional singer, has toured in Europe and America with a number of different South African choirs. Her experience as a black African performer on the contemporary world stage was invaluable to the workshop process. The concert repertoire of the African Choir consisted of a combination of hymns, traditional songs, Negro spirituals and English ballads. It was not the intention to reproduce these

performances but to explore the ways in which music might be used as a discursive tool to highlight the tensions in the group as they struggled with the conflicting demands of the 'box office' and their own sense of identity.

The way in which they staged some of their songs is more concealed than revealed in the *Times* review of 3 July 1891: 'The wayside song and dance were very characteristic, and the wedding song, with its touches of dramatic effect caused much amusement'. Characteristic of what is difficult to ascertain, because the reviewer goes on to bemoan the fact that another one of the indigenous songs performed by the Choir 'bore so close a resemblance to Rossini's 'Cujus animam' that it is difficult to accept it as a specimen of native music at all'. This review then raises the issue of the sartorial representation of the Choir: 'it was no doubt desirable to qualify the strict accuracy of the native costumes but surely the harmonies need not have been Europeanised also'. The reviewer appears on the one hand to be demanding a more 'authentic' rendition of the African experience while on the other acknowledging that this must be kept within the bounds of the sensibilities of the Victorian audience.

As Erlmann points out, discourses around sartorial representation were, in the minds of Victorian audiences, inextricably linked to their view of the contemporary world, constituting, that is to say, a 'complacent metropolitan discourse about morals, markets, spiritual salvation and social distinctions'. Erlmann goes on to describe the ways in which the European missionaries had made clothing 'one of the most morally charged mediums of their message. By re-styling the outer shell of the 'heathen' they reasoned they would reform and salvage the inner self of the newly converted' (Lindfors: 126). Pavelka had brought to South Africa a number of Victorian-style corsets, made by the costume students at Wimbledon College of Art. In the first few days of the workshop the students explored the constraints and re-shaping of the body by the corset, on both male and female, and its effects on movement and codes of behaviour. Simple exercises involving standing, sitting and picking up objects off the floor evoked the strangeness of Victorian dress as worn by the black middle-class in the nineteenth century and revealed to the workshop performers what Foucault calls 'the political anatomy' or the 'mechanics of power' (Foucault: 138) on the colonial subject. For the workshop presentation these evocations were developed to suggest the ways in which the Victorian Choir might have understood these mechanisms. A scene that depicts the conflicting reactions of the Choir to the proposal that they should present themselves in 'native' dress to attract larger audiences, simultaneously reveals an understanding of the ways in which these codes might be exploited:

Eleanor Xinwine: It's too dangerous. Physically and morally dangerous.

Paul Xinwine: It's only a costume.

Eleanor Xinwine: I'm not wearing animal skins.

Sannie Koofman: Make my flesh creep.

Josiah Semouse: There's some blankets in the hotel, good colours, a bit like the Bantu women wear.

Sannie Koofman: My people wouldn't wear those.

Eleanor Xinwine: Nor would mine.

Paul Xinwine: Your people aren't here. (Author's draft text)

In fact, news of the Choir's presentation of themselves in this fashion did eventually reach the Cape where it provoked outrage in the press, prompting one of the managers to write to the editor of the *Christian Express* on Christmas Day 1891 to refute the allegations of impropriety:

... you sir are labouring under a very great misapprehension for I take it when you say that the costume is physically and morally dangerous you have come to the conclusion that the dress is worn as in Africa. It is not so. Due regard has been paid to the health and comfort of the natives and they simply wear their skins over their ordinary clothing.

There is an element of truth in this explanation, since, as described above, the dress certainly wasn't worn as in Africa; all that mattered was that it passed for what was worn in Africa in the minds of the spectator.

The extent to which the Choir may have been complicit in the construction of the *mise-en-scène* for the photograph that appeared in Stead's *Review of Reviews* (see Figure 2) was also suggested in the draft text:

Paul Xinwine: One of the managers thinks he knows where he can locate a tiger skin.

Eleanor Xinwine: What on earth for?

Paul Xinwine: Create a bit of an atmosphere.

Josiah Semouse: There are no tigers in South Africa.

Paul Xinwine: There's no jungle either, but the English don't know that.

We were mindful that the comic potential of this scenario must not detract from the fact that the extent to which the end justified the means must have caused the Choir considerable anguish. In the workshop, through discussion and improvisation, the company explored a number of different versions of the scenario, with the students adopting different roles and positions for and against. It is interesting to note that the Choir's concert dress for the second half of the performance (one assumes they changed in the interval) consisted of white dresses and gloves for the ladies and tail-coats for the gentlemen, a reassuring assertion through sartorial representation of the values of late Victorian society.

The draft script was constructed around the stories of five members of the Choir. Charlotte Manye [Plate 4] and her younger sister Katie; Paul Xinwine and his wife Eleanor; Josiah Semouse, the young journalist who kept a diary of the tour, and the unfortunate Sannie Koopman who was



Plate 4: Kholosa Tshandana as Charlotte Manye.

described in the *Christian Express* in 1892 as ‘the more sinned against . . . and for whom we are exceeding sorry’. All the other roles, including the English manager Balmer, Queen Victoria, the white pianist Miss Lillian Clark and Baroness Burdett-Coutts of the International Congress of Hygiene and Demography, who, in the Victorian philanthropic tradition, supported the Choir by sending them gifts of warm clothes and woollen stockings, were to be played by members of the company. The company also functioned as a chorus that commented on the action and the way the action was presented, calling on the audience to re-consider what it had just seen.

The notion of young black South African performers playing a range of white Victorian characters posed a series of interesting questions for the company. How do you represent ‘the other’ without caricature? How do you clearly delineate age and status without resorting to cliché? Simply and directly, how do you make it clear to the audience that at this point you are representing a person of another race on stage? Different solutions were found in relation to the ‘function’ of the different white characters in the drama. In the case of Miss Clark, the pianist, for example, in the workshop and in the presentation the Choir performed the songs unaccompanied: however, they performed them ‘as if’ there was a pianist in the wings. The influence Miss Clark exerted over the real choir on the actual tour, especially the girls, was considerable. In the workshop this influence was revealed through a series of anecdotes told by two of the male actors in the company. With the help of a large floral hat they ‘performed’ Miss Clark for each other while the ‘real’ Miss Clark remained offstage to be constructed in the imagination of the audience [Plate 5].



Plate 5: Thabang Kwebu as Miss Clark.

Balmer, the English manager, was more difficult. He was a key figure in the narrative, requiring a strong ‘presence’ on stage, presented as someone caught between a genuine desire to support the Choir and the more mercenary demands of other members of the management committee. Thabiso Phetla stepped out of the chorus and, donning a cream Panama hat, announced to the audience that he was now playing the English manager Balmer. The ‘hat as Balmer’ was maintained as a presence on the stage even in those moments when Phetla re-joined the chorus. The combination of these Brechtian devices of direct address and the use of the chorus moved the narrative forward and maintained contact between the performers and audience throughout the dramatic action.

An early sequence that we developed in the workshop depicts the Choir on a sightseeing tour of London, taking in all the major places of historical interest. These outings always ended at one of the newly opened and highly fashionable department stores for ‘shopping’. Dramatically, this pattern was built up by the chorus through a number of repetitive physical and vocal motifs, building up tension and expectation only for this to be punctured at the end of the last sequence by Charlotte who directly informs the audience: ‘We didn’t shop. We stood and watched and wondered at the great British public, shopping’ [Plate 6].

Charlotte was a complex figure: Only recently acknowledged publicly for her contribution to human rights in South Africa she has been described as ‘the mother of African freedom’.<sup>6</sup> In the workshop we explored the extent to which her views might have been shaped by her exposure to the radical elements of English society at the end of the nineteenth century. In *The Calling*

6. On 14 September 2006, Ms. N. G. W. Botha, Deputy Minister of Arts and Culture in South Africa, unveiled a commemorative plaque in honour of Mrs. Charlotte Makgomo Maxeke (née Manye) in Soweto.

7. Katie Makanya (née Manye) died in 1955. Before she died, Margaret McCord, who was the daughter of Dr James McCord for whom Katie worked for 35 years, recorded her life story. Katie's oral testimony includes her travels with the African Choir, her marriage on return to South Africa, and continues into the apartheid years.



Plate 6: *The company 'Shopping'.*

of Katie Makanya,<sup>7</sup> Charlotte's younger sister Katie remembers being taken with Charlotte on a visit to Russell Square to meet Emmeline Pankhurst. Katie was shocked by Mrs Pankhurst's behaviour, describing her as someone who 'spoke out her deep thoughts without any pretence of courtesy' (McCord: 54). Mission-educated young black women of the nineteenth century were not encouraged to have deep thoughts, let alone to voice them.

William Stead, the journalist who interviewed Charlotte for the article in the *Review of Reviews* in September 1891, was a close friend of Annie Besant. He was clearly impressed by Charlotte, describing her in the same article as 'an expert linguist speaking no fewer than five or six languages'. It is quite possible that he would have introduced her to his friend Annie and to other English radicals both male and female. To what extent did this highly intelligent strong-willed young woman from the Basotho people find common ground and even common grievance with her English sisters?

Over the two weeks of the workshop the performers researched the lives of the members of the Choir that were of particular interest to them, constructing individual presentations from fragments of letters, newspaper articles and the biographical accounts that the Choir themselves had provided to journalists while on tour. These were presented in a combination of Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho and English, the multilingual nature of the workshop drawing on the diversity of the student group and reflecting the make-up of the original Choir.

The medium of instruction at the Lab is English and all the students spoke it to an excellent standard. In the workshop we played with the degree to which we might use heightened language to reflect the more precise non-Americanised elocution of the Victorian middle classes. In the short time available, however, the students found this restricting both in

terms of establishing relationships between the characters and the ongoing dialogue with the audience. We were not striving for historical reproduction or accuracy, so it was more appropriate that the students were comfortable in their delivery. However, the hegemonic influence of the English language as an instrument of imperial power was demonstrated through the following exchange. Balmer and Xinwine have just introduced the idea of traditional costumes. This is met with a silence of disbelief from the rest of the choir. After a moment Balmer speaks:

Balmer: Would you like me to withdraw so you can talk amongst yourselves?

Paul Xinwine: We can talk amongst ourselves with you in the middle of us.

The Choir members then attempt to have a conversation in their own voice as a means of re-asserting their African identity on their own terms. They reach into their past to argue whether or not their past should be represented. But communication breaks down as there are too many different languages among the group and because some of the younger members, for whom English has almost become a first language, can't find the words to express themselves in their mother tongue. The missionaries have done a good job; en masse the group can only communicate in the language of the coloniser. Balmer is asked to leave and the discussion continues in English.

Each evening, after discussions with Khubeka, Masheane and Pavelka, I re-shaped the draft, incorporating the material discovered through the workshop during the day and as a result of ideas presented by the students. As a rule, however, the experience of each day's workshop would result in long sections of text being expunged as the discourse inherent in the material asserted itself through dramatic action rather than words.

To control symbolic space is effectively to control the audience's reading of the event, and hence the meanings that may be discerned there.

### ***Counsell and Wolfe: 156***

The Laboratory Theatre is a black box with fixed end-on tiered seating. This spatial configuration re-creates the relationship of the Victorian spectator to the stage. Pavelka created a 'white' space within the box, in which the playing area was defined by a set of light bulbs that acted as footlights, a trunk and eighteen chairs. The workshop presentation was intended to be both illusionistic and counter-illusionistic, setting up a framework of production and reception that exploited the voyeuristic performance conventions of the proscenium arch only to undermine them.

London, August 1891, seated in the Royal Albert Hall are eighteen<sup>8</sup> young black South Africans. They are dressed in fashionable Victorian attire, the women straight backed and tight laced, the men in black jackets and waistcoats sit bolt upright listening to a performance of a work by Elgar. It is one of the hottest English summers in living memory. As the evening wears on a thousand gaslights are illuminated. Between movements there is a gentle

8. Eighteen students, in their final year at the Lab, participated in the workshop. We therefore expanded the number of choir members from the fifteen in the original African Choir.



Plate 7: Opening Scene: The Royal Albert Hall.

flutter of fans, a polite clearing of throats, a discreet dab of the handkerchief to arrest the flow of perspiration on the forehead and down the back of the neck before the next glissando on piano and strings sweeps and swirls around the glass dome and up and out to the heavens beyond.

The stage directions above describe the opening sequence of the workshop presentation, *The Story of the African Choir*, performed at the Market Theatre Laboratory in Johannesburg on Friday, 7 April 2006, to an invited audience. The Choir in their everyday Victorian clothes listen to Elgar in the Albert Hall [Plate 7]. Architecturally, the interior of the Albert Hall means that everybody is on display, the audience watches itself. The Choir thus watches the audience watching them. The violins of Elgar are superseded by 'Ulo Tixo Omkulu' or the Great Hymn. Written by Ntsikana Gaba, considered to be one of the earliest Xhosa Christian converts, this hymn was sung by the Choir in their original performances. For a few moments the voices of the Choir and Elgar's violins co-mingle and then gradually the Elgar fades and the 'unitary voice' of the Choir takes over. The performers look directly at the contemporary audience across the footlights and construct them as a nineteenth-century audience. They play on the assumptions and preconceptions of this 'constructed' nineteenth-century audience, taking their gloves off in public, loosening their collars while simultaneously revealing current perceptions and prejudices – thus the past and the present coalesce in the theatrical moment. The performers control and direct the gaze of the audience back on itself, and in so doing they assert their own subject position as the audience becomes the object of their gaze and scrutiny. How will they read us? How do we read them? [Plate 8].



Plate 8: Looking at the audience.

As the action progresses this unitary voice fragments under the social and financial pressures of the tour, and individual voices emerge with their different agendas. The strain of a heavy touring schedule took its toll on the health of the group. Conflicting objectives as to the purpose of the tour and the way in which they should present themselves opened up rifts between the Choir's members on issues of politics, ethics, gender and identity. These disputes highlight the paradoxical position of many performers from the continent of Africa on the world stage at the height of the colonial regime, who were required to construct themselves as the 'primitive' and the 'exotic other' to appeal to Victorian audiences. David Miller, in *The Myth of Primitivism* (pp. 50–71), describes the ways in which people can very quickly change the nature of what they produce in response to the presence of a ready market. Miller is describing the trade in cultural artefacts in the nineteenth century at the height of colonialism, and the resulting *primitivism* constructed jointly by colonised and coloniser to satisfy popular fantasies of imperial power. One cultural artefact not treated by Miller is performance. However, the tour was presented as a charitable venture, and the Choir were not strictly performers in the sense of music-hall entertainers or a travelling troupe trying to 'cash in' on popular fantasies. They saw themselves as representative of the black educated elite, epitomising the benefits of Christianity and modernity on the African continent. The English organizers, whose accounting was less than transparent, claimed over the course of the tour to have lost over one thousand pounds. To what extent can these losses be attributed to the Choir's failure to fulfil the preconceived notion of the 'African' in the mind of the Victorian audience?

The English pianist Miss Clark, in what was probably a well-intentioned attempt to defend Charlotte Manye's attack on Eleanor Xinwine, unfortunately only succeeded in re-affirming a tried and tested colonial strategy for writing off the behaviour of the colonised as infantile and illogical. She suggested to Manchester magistrates that the divisions that had blighted the progress of the Choir were the result of jealousy and tribal differences. Petty rivalries are common in all touring companies, but in this instance the arguments over who got the solos, who received the most gifts from the audience each night, living accommodation and food were the surface manifestations of far greater insecurities. The pressure of perpetually being expected to 'perform' a version of themselves that was the antithesis of everything they had been brought up to believe they were took its toll psychologically and emotionally on the group. The ways in which they negotiated that alienation and found their way out of it were very different for each member of the Choir and will form the basis for the next stage of the research.

Xinwine was in his mid-twenties at the start of the tour, but the average age of most of the Choir was around nineteen. Charlotte's sister Katie was only seventeen when she arrived in England. This group of young anglophile South Africans started out with such great expectations but gradually their faith in the fiction of modernity and progress had to confront the harsh realities of late Victorian society, manifested in the slums of the metropolis and the poverty of the rural communities they passed through on their travels. With diminishing funds and the pressure mounting on them to fulfil the expectations of the managers and their western audiences, while not offending the sensibilities of the mission-educated European and African elite back home in the Cape who had put their faith in them, is it any wonder that the group started to fragment under the strain, fight among themselves and eventually break up? It is no accident that years later, when the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe gave a voice to the colonial subject, he chose a quotation from Yeats as the title of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*.

Our investigation through performance of these hidden aspects of the colonial period speculates about the extent to which the black educated middle class in the late nineteenth century exercised agency and self-determination in terms of the ways in which they 'fashioned' their identity. In the post-colonial era the question remains as to the extent to which the mutual reinforcement of 'false' identities described by Erlmann has simply been re-configured as part and parcel of the traffic in global cultural commodities. This also resonates with current debates about identity in the new democracy of South Africa.

Sharon Cort, a documentary film maker based in South Africa, attended the workshop presentation of *The Story of the African Choir* and has included footage from it in her series 'New Conversations', which was broadcast on SABC in July 2006. In one of the programmes in the series, entitled 'Beyond the Rainbow', Steve Kwena Mokwena, a cultural activist, suggests that the problems facing the current generation of young South Africans as they attempt to assert/re-assert their identity are not so much the

legacy of the white racist past but of finding ways of responding to 'the global deluge of ideas about what you are in a world that has reduced you to nothing but a consumer'. As a producer as well as a consumer, Gregory Maqoma, Director of the Vuyani Dance Theatre Project in Johannesburg,<sup>9</sup> in an unpublished paper delivered in South Africa in 2002 states, 'as a black African dancer, I am constantly expected to conform to stereotypical perceptions of the western world and of African traditionalists'.

The proliferation of image in a mediatised culture is one of the means by which narratives of power are maintained. In the face of these unitary and homogenised 'representations', live performance can either reinforce this hegemonic discourse or offer up alternative perspectives. *The Story of the African Choir* offers up the experiences of a past generation as they struggled to come to terms with the demands of 'the market' at the same time as retaining a sense of self. Strategically, while acknowledging it cannot step outside the politics of representation, the work attempts to use the medium of performance to offer up a critique of performance by exposing the complicit nature of the act of watching and being watched both under the colonial gaze and in the post-colonial world of global capitalism. At the time of writing, funds are being sought to develop the work in South Africa into a full-length performance that will include a programme of workshops for schools. Given the inter-cultural and collaborative nature of the research process, both on a theoretical level and in the practice-led workshop, it is to be hoped that the work will also eventually be seen in the West. It will then of course become part and parcel of the trade in cultural commodities, and the performers, like Gregory Maqoma, run the risk of being trapped in the same discourse as their nineteenth-century counterparts. However, the South African audience who attended the workshop presentation of *The Story of the African Choir* in Johannesburg affirmed its value as an important part of the process of re-claiming a hidden past and holding it up to scrutiny. If it is eventually seen by western audiences, it will offer them the opportunity to re-consider the colonial gaze and to reflect on the extent to which in the current world market, as the Zulu phrase puts it, Umuntu, Ngumuntu, Ngabantu. A person is a person through other persons or I am what I am because of you.

9. Vuyani Dance Theatre Project.  
www.vuyani.co.za

### **The Market Theatre Lab student ensemble**

Thabo Flo Mokale, Nonhlanhla Kubheka, Paul Noko, Bongani Msibi, Kholosa Tshandana, Xolisa Mkafulo, Lehlohonolo Styx Mokejane, Thabang Kwebu, Thabiso Phetla, Onkaetse Vincent Maclean, Lebogang Inno, Pulane Jantjies, Kekeletso Matlabe, Millicent Makhado, Thobile Brenda Masemula, Thunyelwa Thambe, Nompilo Shazi, Tiny Kgamanyane.

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from Margaret McCord, *The Calling of Katie Makanya*, by kind permission of New Africa Books. Plate 3 is reproduced from the Website of the New African Movement, by kind permission of Ntongela Masilela. Plates 4–6 are reproduced by kind permission of Michael Pavelka.

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