

How Malawian is Nanzikambe Theatre?

Reflections on Nanzikambe's vision, growth and success
by Creative Director, Melissa Eveleigh

Created by 'two white ladies' - that is how one Nation Newspaper reviewer put it. Indeed, the journalist was not wrong: but that's not the whole story. *Nanzikambe* has grown from strength to strength since humble beginnings under trees in Blantyre's Sunnyside, in March 2003. Nearly 3 years later *Nanzikambe* is a fully fledged Arts Development NGO. But can these 'two white ladies' really take the credit for *Nanzikambe's* vision, growth and success?

From the beginning *Nanzikambe* has been responding to the needs of the industry, artists and audience alike: the needs of performance-art training, financial security and improved employment conditions, and with the inspiration of "The Father of Malawian Theatre" Du Chisiza Jnr lost to Malawi, and few groups remaining active, the imperative need of restoring faith and passion for theatre-making and theatre-going. These were the needs expressed to me during my first months here. The idea for *Nanzikambe* was born, not of a romantic colonial dream: but rather of necessity from within the local industry.

It was the passion, vibrancy and sheer thirst to work and grow that struck me in my first meetings with local performance artists. This, combined with our own growing affection for, and understanding of the country, was what encouraged Kate Stafford and I to stay and build a solid Arts Development Organisation. One that is able to offer opportunity and security to artists, and new theatre experiences to audiences. As Baba Twaya Sanudi said to me: 'You're bringing us the opportunity to do what we know and love best, and make it our living.' I remember asking Baba if we could be accepted in our roles as trainers and directors here. He laughed and said, 'My dear, you're not telling us how to express ourselves - you're just giving us a few tools that we can use to do what we want with.'

I believe that far from imposing a western form of theatre and performance on Malawian artists, *Nanzikambe's* work has either been the result of a fusion of cultures, as in *African Macbeth* or about providing a framework for unearthing untold stories in Malawi, as in *Playing with Food*. Baba was right. We were to provide a framework within which Malawian performers could shine and tell their stories in the way they want to. *Playing with Food* was born of a process that was entirely improvised - meaning that the actors themselves created the characters, the script from their own experience and in their own words.

Theatre is a truly collaborative art form - A director is nothing without her cast, an actor is nothing without his script, story or character to play, a playwright has no reason to write unless there is an audience to see the work brought alive. Creating a piece of theatre is realised through a constant process of synthesis; a bringing together of many different talents, to create a special, unique moment in time: the live performance to be experienced by the audience. Each time a play is performed, it is never quite the same as any other, and what is seen on stage can certainly not be attributed to the artistic greatness of one person.

Malawi is a theatre of song, dance, and folklore interwoven within the tapestry of local culture and morality. It is a theatre that has evolved amongst the people from being a weapon of popular mobilisation for political change during the 'Wind of Change' in pre-democratic era - to a tool of community transformation in various areas of social, cultural and economic development.

From its inception, *Nanzikambe* has been working within the development community dynamically using theatre to effect positive change, as well as producing high quality theatre that has toured the country, and internationally, reaching people from the grass roots to the policy making level. With the exception of adaptations of European classics such as *A Flea in her Ear*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* *Nanzikambe's* work has tapped in to key issues affecting the lives of the people here. Some issues include: The difficulties faced by women who participate in politics; the plight of street kids; helping remand prisoners to know and use their legal rights; tackling the dangers of cultural practises that increase the risk of HIV infection; the 'big man syndrome' as hindering democracy; why child labour continues despite mass education programmes; and currently, the intricate story of power imbalance between man and woman – and what this means for *love* in the Malawian home. We don't just send obvious messages: we investigate the roots of cultural, social and political issues, as they are in Malawi. In essence, *Nanzikambe's* thinking is based on a commitment to extracting truth, so that truth breathes through the actors, whether they are professional actors, development practitioners, community members or volunteers.

Making theatre has been my route in to understanding the culture in Malawi. It has also been the way in which I've formed close and lasting relationships with my colleagues and dear friends – and why I now feel so connected here. But because of the cynical view of some, I do sometimes wonder, am I simply a neo-colonialist? Here to reap success and glory by ruling over a group of Africans? If that's what I had wanted, I'd have gone home a long time ago! I would either have been shooed home for my arrogance, or mightily disappointed by the independence, self-belief and motivation of my peers here.

No, the great reward of being here is not superiority; it is working collaboratively in an environment I have come to understand. Not to train, lead or be in charge of people. I might have thought at the beginning that I had something to teach... that the development of artists was my purpose here. But now I see it very differently. We are simply here, together, telling stories, about issues that touch us, move us, shake us.

Despite this, much of *Nanzikambe's* success is attributed to its 'white' directors. If the success is down to 'skin tone' what about the Malawian performers who bring their talent to the stage? What about the Malawian audiences who watch the shows, who laughed uproariously during *A Flea in her Ear* who cried alongside the suffering depicted in *Playing with Food*? What about the national papers who acclaim the work? What about the organisations who safeguard and promote Malawi's national development priorities that support *Nanzikambe*? What about the human rights committee who awarded *Nanzikambe* for its achievement in advancing the human rights situation in Malawi? And most importantly, what about the very people who are in fact the backbone of the organisation: the talented, progressive, compassionate hearts and minds of Muthi Nhlema, Thoko Kapiri, Basimenye Mwalwanda, Hussein Gopole and Jafali Amadu? It is true, that Kate and I have been able to share our practise and experience from a country that produces some of the best theatre in the world. It is true that we have been able to provide a professional framework for productions and projects that is only matched by one or two other theatre groups. It is true that we have been able to provide training in an industry that is unable to offer much training or opportunity to budding talent. But how patronising and demoralising it is to attribute the success of this organisation to its white directors! If *Nanzikambe* is successful for anything, it is innovation, professionalism and talent. If critics think that such success is only possible with a 'white' in charge, then they do a great dis-service to their fellow Malawians.

Being white and working in Malawi is a brutal double edged sword. On the one hand, our western education and experience is desired and our input appreciated. On the other we can be accused of

forcing a 'western way' or a 'culturally insensitive' approach. We can be accused of being superior, of bulldozing our ideas forward... but what we do at *Nanzikambe* is balance cultural differences. My responsibility, as a 'white, western, woman' is to ignore those labels, and consider myself as a fellow theatre maker. Myself and the people I work with share a common aim: to express facets of human nature and human stories that reflect truth in society, to tap in to injustices and expose them, to delight in the mystery of existence and create experiences that produce joy, laughter and reflection.

***“Theatre is transformational;
its power cannot be underrated.
From emotional engagement comes critical thought,
from critical thought comes direct action,
from direct action comes transformation and empowerment” Augusto Boal***

What has inspired me to be here is that in Africa, theatre is significant: it matters. It is entertainment yes, but it is often politically, socially or spiritually dedicated, a powerful tool for change. Local performance traditions are born from cultural rituals, that serve crucial importance in the lives of people. At its best it is a total experience of mind, body and soul which nourishes and feeds off, a highly responsive and vocal audience. And it is creating this experience that gives me and my fellow artists a purpose, a reason to exist here. Considering this, it is the work which should be considered first and foremost – all other issues are of secondary importance – the *STORY* always comes first.

And this brings me to my final thoughts on our current venture which I hope answers the question posed at the beginning of this piece. We are in rehearsal for an adaptation of the Norwegian play *A Doll's House*. This has been re-written to be planted firmly in the contemporary Malawian context, through the collaborative efforts of Norwegian Playwright, Karl Hoff and Malawian writers, Thoko Kapiri and Alfred Msadala. The creative process has also engaged Malawi's actors and foremost creative thinkers such as Dr James Ngombe, Marvin Hanke, Benedicto Wokomaatani Malunga, Stanley Kenani and DD Phiri. The play, which has the working title *A Man's House*, depicts the reality between husband and wife, and cries for a change in the balance of power. It is the product of Malawian minds critically thinking about the root problems in society that affect the harmony between man and woman. It is a heartbreaking story of a woman's quest for liberation. When the finished production is captivates the Malawian audience at the French Cultural Centre on Easter Monday of this year, I hope it will barely be noticed that a 'white western woman' was even involved.
