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## **The Zulu (review)**

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Performance Review

*The Zulu*

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**The Zulu. By Mbongeni Ngema.** Co-produced by The World African Network and Mayibuy'iAfrika in association with the Market Theatre, Market Theatre, Johannesburg, South Africa. 6 January 2000.

The international tours of *Woza, Albert!* (first produced 1981) *Asinamali!* (1985) and *Sarafina!* (1986) brought Mbongeni Ngema's work outside South Africa and helped educate non-African audiences about the rich traditions of black South African performance and the dire political and economic conditions which the majority of South Africans lived under during apartheid. Since his early collaboration with Percy Mtwa and Barney Simon on *Woza, Albert!*, Ngema has been the main director, choreographer, composer and playwright/librettist for the theatre he has conceived and produced. Since *Asinamali!*, he has worked with large casts and large bands. His scores are rich performative syntheses of township jazz, choral traditions, African American and American musical theatre influences. His choreography combines the regional or topical movement of the piece's theme with other traditional and contemporary South African dance forms. Ngema's plays themselves are specific to a region or township in black South Africa, though the narrative and representational strategies in the pieces extend the local to the national if not global, and the specific to the general and often symbolic.

Ngema's most recent work, *The Zulu*, played at Johannesburg's Market Theatre, Ngema's early theatrical home, over the six weeks surrounding Christmas and the millennial New Year celebrations. The millennial turn in South Africa was a huge national event, with performances everywhere from Robben Island to the piers of Durban and Cape Town. Ngema's *The Zulu* was a celebratory, yet textually complex, contribution to the twin projects of nation-building and pan-African solidarity that Thabo Mbeki's government ubiquitously proclaimed "the African Renaissance."

*The Zulu* was a three-hour musical epic about the 1879 Battle of Isandlwana between British and Zulu soldiers—a battle which the Zulus, by dint of geography and strategy, won. It was their only clear military victory in the otherwise ineluctable British and Dutch colonial sweep through South Africa. As told by Ngema and his 11-piece band and 21-performer ensemble, the Battle of Isandlwana was not only a marvelous, if tragically solitary, stand against a colonial Goliath, but an instance of the indefatigable "African state of mind," flowering fully in the millennial post-apartheid South African state. In the opening lyrics of *The Zulu*, amidst competition between drums and trumpets to blow out the sound system of the small, hallowed space of the Market Theatre, Ngema invoked the revolutionary, anti-colonial movements of Africa in the past half-century. He also acknowledged the uneasy co-existence with post-colonial nationalizing projects of regional "kingdoms." What did it mean that the colonised body and the decolonised mind, the Pan-African and the isolationist, the revolution of the ANC and the counter-revolution of the IFP, were all linked together in the opening moments of *The Zulu*? Were the contradictions important to the story, nearly indiscernible as they were in a thrilling, blasting score that dreamed bigger than its eleven musicians and four walls? Three hours later, the contradictions and "politics" of the piece were if anything more complex, made so by thematic developments about the multiple religions and languages and conflicting gender roles in contemporary, and 1879, South Africa.

*The Zulu* is both a vision quest and dream play. Its central character is the ghost of a young girl, Monguqo, whose Zulu name means "the kneeling one." Her journey in the play is about learning submission: kneeling before her father, King Cetshwayo Ka Mpande who led the Zulu army in the Isandlwana Battle, and before Jesus, whose followers gave her the Christian name "Paulina." It is through Monguqo's verbal sparring with a contemporary Zulu woman that we learn about Monguqo's resistance to her destiny as a "kneeler." Her individual strength was writ large in the 1879 Battle, the piece infers, and has been reborn continuously in acts of resistance to colonization.

Ngema's choice to tell the...

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Ngema's choice to tell the story of the 1879 Battle through the character of Monguqo upsets both the historical and contemporary image of the Zulu male as chief of home and field. The long-held official positions of the ANC of non-racialism and



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