

Sizwe Banzi Is Dead ★★★★★

Barbican Pit, 11 May 2007

Reviewed by **Malcolm Rock**

ENTRAPMENT, oppression and injustice take a back seat in Peter Brook's new staging of *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*, which proves a deceptively light and delicate show of guilty optimism during South African apartheid.

Written 35 years ago by John Kani and Athol Fugard as a protest play against the perverse apartheid regime, *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* introduces us first to cheeky and exuberant Styles (Habib Dembele), a man who has escaped seven ugly years as a Ford factory groundling to become his own boss as a studio photographer.

In a monologue that comprises half the play Styles gives us a detailed and buoyant account of his experiences under the thumb of fat-cats at Ford and the new pleasure he gains from recording on film the lives of ordinary black South Africans.

With an amicability non-existent in present-day London retail, Styles pulls out all the stops for his first customer of the day - the broad and proudly poised Robert (Pitcho Womba Konga). Their instant and amusing rapport leads to Robert confiding in Styles how he was until recently known as Sizwe Banzi.

As it turns out Sizwe, who had been denied the right to work under laws that prevent black freedom of movement, took the passbook and name of a dead man he literally stumbled over one evening.

This unexpected deathly stroke of luck on the part of Sizwe is comically, sensitively and, at moments, edifyingly played out before us for the remainder of the evening as the charming pair grapple with the moral repercussions of adopting a dead man's identity when "we own nothing except ourselves (and) there is nothing we can leave behind when we die except the memory of ourselves."

Brook's direction is invisible and puts the weight of apartheid's heinous ramifications behind a tatty torn

cardboard set, emphasising the small triumphs of freedom found in friendship and self.

This Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord production of *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* follows hot on the heels of the National's staging earlier this year and is performed in French with a resilience that is a pleasure behold.

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One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

★★★

New Wimbledon, 11 April 2007

Reviewed by **Malcolm Rock**

DIRECTOR Tamara Harvey hits the comic nerve but maladministers the shock with her lively yet surface staging of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

This production, which was first seen in Edinburgh in 2004, has energy and humour in spades but side-steps the more affecting scenes of Dale Wasserman's 1960s drama celebrating the enduring rebellious spirit within conformist society.

When livewire and self-proclaimed con Randle Patrick McMurphy (Shane Richie, taking over from Christian Slater who appeared in two West End seasons) checks into a Pacific Northwest mental institution governed by matronly "ball-cutter" Nurse Ratched (Sophie Ward) the scene is charged for a clash of policy, pride and gender.

Richie proves a defiantly present McMurphy to Ward's suitably sadistic Ratched, and the explosively opposed pair are joined by an amiable supporting cast that brings ample bedlam and reticent revolt to the daily proceedings of Wasserman's mental hospital on the brink of revolution.

Brendan Dempsey cuts a menacing figure as the despondent Chief Bromden, and Kate-Lynn Hocking's full-bodied and affectionate Candy Starr is a welcome, if extreme, alternative to the hard-nosed female presence within the all-male ward. Elsewhere, Harvey's ensemble serves the script well when it demands an excess of physical gags and sympathetic comradeship; however, vital dramatic scenes, including the withheld apology and final mercy-killing, are without spark.

Designer Katy Tuxford's static set of switches and LED lights benefits from animated pyrotechnics – projections of water, lightning and electricity – that crash and batter the upper proscenium during scene changes.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is an entertaining nostalgia that stops short of realising the play's more unsettling qualities and sharply critical opinions about therapeutic institutions and the tyranny of policy-makers.

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