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# **Crafting Dialogue in High School Theatre: Approaches and Implications**

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## **Abstract**

*This article explores approaches in theatre production in the context of Zimbabwean high schools. The study reveals that former Group 'A' schools reflect a Western orientation in theatre practice by focusing mainly on European or American 'classics'. On the other hand, in rural, mission and high density schools the dominant approach is collective, in which students and teachers devise original plays as a team. The implications of these approaches and the processes involved in the construction of dialogue are a central concern in this study. In the first instance, the study reflects how socio-cultural and socio-historical factors have influenced and shaped theatre practices in the major two categories of high schools. Second, an analysis of the approaches in dialogue construction suggests that there is need to strike a delicate balance between on one hand, the socio-educational content of a production, and on the other, its imaginative, sensory or performative appeal. The findings of this research suggest that the part played by dialogue in the art of theatre is crucial as it can determine the emotional, pedagogical, aesthetic, cultural and moral depth of a theatrical experience, particularly in a high school environment.*

## **Introduction**

This article analyses the construction of dramatic dialogue in Zimbabwean former Group 'A' and Group 'B' high schools. The former refers to elite or multiracial schools which were formerly reserved for white pupils, while the later refers to rural, mission and urban township schools for peasant and black working class pupils. The study comes against the background of an apparently rising use of dramatic art forms in attempting to reflect and shape socio-cultural

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<sup>1</sup> I have shortened Fay Chung's categorization of Zimbabwean schools into two broad categories. In general, I concur with Fay Chung (1999:8) on the general observation that the "diversity of school types reflect a diversity of historical experiences as well as the financial and class differences of parents ..." In my view, her categorization of primary schools still applies to the secondary school level.

values and perspectives. In drama, dialogue construction is very critical since dialogue is usually the major expressive form for communicating and exploring thematic issues, character, style, tone, mood and plot (Sally & Cooper, 2001). In this article, focus is on how socio-historical and socio-cultural factors have influenced playmaking approaches which in turn determine how dialogue is constructed in the identified school categories. The paper discusses some conceptual issues in dialogue construction and highlights the importance of giving students the opportunity to be actively involved in devising plays for their socio-cultural, moral, pedagogic and aesthetic benefits. However, the paper will also examine merits and demerits of identified approaches in dialogue construction with a view to exploring possibilities of improving current and future practice. Inevitably, major focus will be on adapted and collectively devised plays in schools where there is room for teachers and students to originate and develop their own dialogue. The article also raises questions and issues on dialogue that will hopefully influence the development of theatre and dramatic art forms, not only in schools, but also in communities and national institutions.

### **Statement of the problem**

Over the years there has been debate as to which approach to take with regards theatrical or dramatic performances in high schools. Two major opposing approaches have emerged out strongly. The first one encourages teachers to emphasise social or educational content with very basic artistic structures which are not meant for performance perfection (Mcslin, 1980; Bolton, 1983; Neelands, 1987). Advocates of this approach seem to emphasise that theatre should be used in the school environment to the extent that it has clear social, moral or educational goals and that students need not be bothered with performance excellence and technicalities.

The other approach advocates the need to practice theatre as an art form in its own right and for its own sake. This means students are expected to enjoy the beauty of theatre in terms of its imaginative and performative qualities. The extreme version of this approach appears to suggest that any 'learning' from a theatre performance should be incidental and not 'imposed'. Implicit in this argument is the fact that

theatre or dramatic performances in high schools should prepare students for professional performance careers (Culp, 1971; Gattenhof & Radvan, 2009; Hornbrook, 1989; Warkeit, 2011). For example, Culp (1971:411) cautions against over emphasis on learning and social or moral commitment at the expense of aesthetic pleasure, lest high school theatre productions are devised to '... sell products, foster creeds or satisfy ulterior motives ...'

### **Research question**

To what extent and with what implications do play-making approaches and their resultant dialogue construction processes in Zimbabwean high school theatre reflect the tension between aesthetic beauty and socio-educational commitment?

The research problem was prompted by the need to explore this debate coupled with the recognition that in Zimbabwe, there is apparently no performance-based research, especially on dialogue construction in high school theatre. Exploring this question can provide insights into socio-cultural and socio-historical factors which inform theatre practices in high schools. In addition, such an investigation can unravel processes, factors and practices which can enhance the function of theatre in high schools.

### **Methodology**

This study is essentially a qualitative one, and it adopts a survey approach. The larger research upon which this article is based used a variety of qualitative data collection methods such as questionnaires, interviews and observation.

Open ended questionnaires to teachers and students were delivered and administered by 30 research assistants. The total number of questionnaires available for analysis was 610, representing a 90% return rate (Appendix 1 and 2). A total of 306 students and teachers from all ten provinces in Zimbabwe were interviewed from about 60 schools. The study employed focused, personal and group interviews with teachers and students who constitute the majority of spectators of high school theatre productions (Appendix 3).

A performance is difficult to analyse because of its ephemeral nature (Etherton, 1987). One cannot exclusively rely on secondary information based on questionnaires and interviews if justice is to be done in analysing performances. There is need for directness. Consequently, the observation technique was employed in this study as the researcher watched about 71 live performances. Of these, 15 productions were from former Group 'A' schools, 25 from urban high density schools and 15 from rural based secondary schools. Some of the productions were accessed at high school festivals such as the Methodist Secondary Schools Theatre Festival held at Waddilove High School on July 28, 2003. The festival attracted about 10 Methodist schools. In addition, secondary level observation was employed by recording some of the performances in order to enjoy multiple and systematic viewing of recorded aspects of the performances.

However, due to space constraints, as well as the need for focus and clarity, this article will only cite examples from three schools, namely: Girls College in Bulawayo, Westridge in Harare and Monte Casino Girls High School in Macheke. These three were selected on three basic criteria. Girls College and Westridge represent former Group 'A' schools. Westridge is discussed as an exception to the general practice of former Group 'A' schools which specialise in Western theatre productions; Girls College's *Animal Farm* typifies adaptations in this category of schools. The production *Zvatapera Todini?* from Monte Casino Girls High School typifies the general trend in former Group 'B' schools. All the three productions were also selected because they manipulated dialogue as one of the dominant expressive form. Some school productions have limited or no dialogue at all. These would not be relevant in this article whose major focus is on dialogue construction. In addition, these productions were also selected on the basis that the researcher had access to their relevant history, including rehearsals, devising schedules and documentation in the form of scripts and video recordings.

The section on audience reception in this article is largely based on the findings of the larger research in order to give a 'global' picture of the importance that high school theatre spectators attach to the dramatic functions of dialogue.

## **Conceptualisation**

Dialogue is verbal conversation or intercommunication of characters in a dramatic or theatrical production which serves many distinct but closely related functions. Its primary function is to '... contain the dramatic action, to be its primary vehicle ...' (Hodge, 1970:24). This means that it is critical to analyse dialogue and language use in order to appreciate both character/thematic development and the given circumstances of a theatrical production. One also realises that in crafting dialogue, it is important to examine the extent to which language use is authentic to both the social and aesthetic contexts in which it occurs (Chivandikwa, 2010; Chivandikwa & Muwonwa, 2011).

Socially, it has been argued that theatre provides an opportunity for the audience to examine aspects of reality such as abstract ideas, emotions and human wishes in a way which aids human experiences or life in general (Prentik & Preston, 2010). In other words, theatre can have an ameliorative social role (Jennings, 2010; Rasmussen, 2010). In the context of this perspective, the major preoccupation in the construction of dialogue is to articulate social messages in order to influence and shape behaviour among the audience. In essence this means that dialogue should primarily 'carry' socially efficacious and intelligible messages. However, there is always tension between this social function of theatre and the need for an aesthetic appeal or quality which pleases and delights the audience through sensory experiences (Brocket, 2000; Wornbrook, 1989). Perhaps more than in any other type of theatre, this tension is most pronounced in high school theatre which

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<sup>1</sup> Part of the material and case studies discussed in this paper are derived from my M.Phil thesis (See Chivandikwa (2004), especially, chapters 2, 4, 5 and 8).



operates in a learning environment where, potentially, every activity could be evaluated on the basis of its 'message'-centredness. At a general level, the findings of this study suggest that in former Group 'B' schools, teachers in charge of theatre emphasise the educational and social value of theatre to the extent that dialogue construction is largely characterised by being 'message'-laden. On the other extreme end, in former Group 'A' schools, dialogue construction is characterised by sensitivity to aesthetic techniques, form, style, and spectacle to the degree that one can argue that its primary function is to provide an aesthetic or sensory appeal.

However, having noted these seemingly divergent approaches, the central assumption of this paper is that there is need to balance the social and aesthetic functions of theatre in order to accord high school students the forum to explore both their socio-educational world and the sensory or imaginative experience of theatre. In any case any performance has the potential to yield social and aesthetic outcomes beyond those that are predetermined by teachers and producers (Thomson, 2009). As some scholars contend, didactic (pedagogic) theatre should not necessarily lack entertaining value or the sensory appeal (Gattenhof & Radvan, 2009; Chivandikwa, 2007). Consequently, this implies that it is imperative for teachers and directors in charge of high school theatre productions to be sensitive to the dynamic functions of dramatic dialogue in order to deepen the cultural, pedagogic and aesthetic appeals of theatre performances.

### **Former Group 'A' schools**

In general, former Group 'A' schools include both private and government-controlled multiracial elite schools. However, some government schools which are now dominated by black students do not fit neatly into this category. Schools like Marlborough in Harare, Northlea in Bulawayo, Chaplin in Gweru and Mutare Boys High School in Mutare do not fit neatly into this category.

This study reveals that the practice of theatre in this category of Zimbabwean schools is largely conservative in the light of their historical background, being especially concerned with performing Western 'classics' or adaptations.

Play production in most former Group 'A' schools mainly centres on the teacher. Most of these schools employ full time theatre teachers. In most cases, the approach is that students come to be involved when a play has already been identified or adapted. Since most of these plays are written by Western playwrights, dialogue is basically not created by students. Even in cases where a play has been adapted, the source language still retains a strong influence in the adapted play. This kind of dialogue has its own positive qualities because it was written by experts. Even in cases where teachers adapt novels or plays, interesting dialogue is evident in terms of artistic qualities such as humour, witticism, irony subtext and other relevant qualities of theatrical dialogue. For instance, Girls College in Bulawayo adapted and performed *Animal Farm* in 2002 where very positive qualities of dramatic dialogue were generally manipulated effectively. In Scene (iii) of this play, dramatic functions of dialogue such as revealing given circumstances, and plot development are clearly evident. In Scene (vi) Muriel is quizzed by a donkey over specific rules in the Ten Commandments. The dialogue is as follow:

**Squealer:** How are you Comrade Boxer?

**Boxer:** I will work harder.

**Squealer:** (*turning to other animals*) Boxer is an example to you all.

(*Enter Snowball rushing excitedly*).

**Snowball:** I have done it comrades. The final plan to my windmill will bring you electricity comrades.

**Others:** Yaah!!!

**Snowball:** My windmill comrades will ...

**Squealer:** (*Derisively*) Your windmill is nonsense (*Snowball is attacked by dogs*).

(*Enter Napoleon*)

**Napoleon:** (*Angrily with finality*) From now on meetings will come to an end. They are unnecessary and they waste our time ... We will meet in private and then later on communicate our decision to you ...

(*pause*).

**Squealer:** (*Desperately*) I trust everyone appreciates what comrade Napoleon has done for us ...

**Boxer:** Comrade Napoleon is always right. From now on I will work hard.

The above dialogue has several interrelated functions. It exposes character. The repetition of the phrase 'I will work harder' by Boxer shows that he is hard working, and 'patriotic'. The dialogue communicates relationships. It also furthers the plot. As an adapted play from a novel, there was need for economy of words to quicken the flow of events unlike in the original novel where one could have time to describe scenarios in many words. In this case, the phrase '*Your windmill is nonsense*', communicates the changes of relationships over time. It summarises the struggles between Snowball and Napoleon quite efficiently. Again Squealer's desperate plea, '*I trust everyone appreciates what comrade Napoleon has done for us ...*', summarises the previous action which the audience had not witnessed. The dramatised version of *Animal Farm* by Bulawayo's Girls' College does not really enact the rebellion of the animals. This was done rather efficiently and economically.

In fact, the whole play is full of these qualities of dialogue which were closely linked to other forms of dramatic expression such as movement, gestures, silence and pauses. This is what is referred to as the poly-functional and multidimensional attributes of dramatic dialogue which renders it aesthetically efficient and appealing with a great potential to stimulate and capture the attention of the audience (O'Toole, 1993).

However, adapting plays in which students play only minor technical roles has its own problems. First, usually the emphasis is on Western and European texts and plays whose language is sometimes far removed from the lives of young people. In many instances, students find that the dialogue is remote and 'uninteresting', especially plays by William Shakespeare. This affects the actors. If they are not comfortable, with the Elizabethan language for instance, it means they cannot effectively characterise and they end up memorising the lines without the right intonation and emotional shifts. Secondly, this also affects the spectators because they might not understand the language when the actors appear to be unconvincing. Consequently, it is important to offer high school students an opportunity to improvise and develop dialogue in plays that they are involved in. At times this is better than making them internalise dialogue, especially if it is far removed from their socio-cultural environment. There are

many advantages of giving students the forum to exercise their imagination and creativity.

Some few former Group 'A' schools have realised this and they are beginning to give students the opportunity to devise plays under the supervision of teachers. For example, Westridge multiracial school in Belvedere, Harare, introduced a theatre festival in 2003 where students devise plays based on contemporary and historical Zimbabwean experiences.

The standard of plays produced at the festival vindicates the above observation. In relation to dialogue, it was clear that students were very imaginative in creating fascinating dialogue with many positive attributes. There was one particular play entitled *The Rhodes between Heaven and Hell*. In the play Cecil John Rhodes finds himself in quite an odd situation when he dies and goes to hell. He does not really accept that he deserves to be there and thus his life is reviewed in an attempt to find out what went wrong.

In relation to dialogue, there is one line which really struck a chord among the audience. This line is found in the first scene of the play at a point when Cecil John Rhodes finds himself in hell. In disgust, he says:

What the hell am I doing in hell? ... (*The Rhodes between Heaven and Hell*)

The audience found the above line to be very exciting, witty and profound. Another line that was memorable from the same play was:

Indians!! .. They never do anything right. (*The Rhodes between Heaven and Hell*)

It must be pointed out that Westridge is a predominantly Hindu School with a high percentage of Indian students. Within this context, the audience found the above line to be very fascinating and hilarious. This is because the dialogue had an aesthetic and socio-cultural appeal. This only goes to show that given the opportunity, students have fertile imaginations to create effective dialogue which can deeply engage the audience.

## Former Group 'B' schools

For purposes of this study, the term former Group 'B' schools refers to rural schools, urban high density, and mission secondary schools. Although each of the above categories of schools could have variations in approaches and processes in specific aspects of theatre practice, they have been classified in one category because they seem to follow one major approach of allowing students to play a prominent role in devising and improvising original plays. This is realised in three closely related forms. However, the most common and most relevant approach for this study involves both students and the teacher coming together to make up a storyline and then collectively developing it until performance day.

Of course the above process of devising high school plays follows many steps which are elaborate and involving. What is particularly important in this study is the aspect of communal involvement in play production. The 'texts' in these schools are not individualised. In Freirean pedagogy, this kind of collective participation enhances *praxis* which is critical to the liberation of learners. In addition, this is consistent with the notion that in Africa, theatre is the most social of all arts (Plastow, 1996; Balme, 1999).

Some of the advantages of allowing students to play a prominent role in play production have already been highlighted in previous sections. This section examines specific aspects of the development of dialogue from Monte Casino Girls High School in Macheke. The intention is not only to explore the cultural, aesthetic and pedagogic benefits of allowing students to craft dialogue, but also to highlight some of the limitations of the approach.

The play *Zvatapera Todini?* resolves around the Dzoro family which is facing many problems because of the behaviour of the father who is involved in extra-marital relationships. Eventually he contracts the HIV virus and infects his wife who eventually dies from AIDS/HIV related complications.

The students combined humour and poetic language in the above play in a very fascinating manner. For example, in Scene (i), Mr Dzoro comes home in the middle of the night and his wife asks where he has been. He answers:

*Ndakaenda kubasa ndikanzwa kuti peturu yakunetsa. Saka chawawana batisisa. Ndikati regai zvangu ndirare kubasa. Sezvo peturu iri kunetsa.* (Translated: I went to work and heard that there is a fuel crisis. So I thought one might preserve what one has. I then decided to sleep at the work place to save fuel.

Apart from the rhythmical pattern which was clearly realised in the performance, the dialogue has a humorous function. The audience laughed uncontrollably. The humour is in two parts. First, it is found in the misuse of the Shona language proverb: *Chawawana batisisa mudzimu haupe kaviri* (preserve and protect what you have because the ancestors will not give you a second chance). The proverb does not apply in this case. Second, the audience knew that this was a clumsy answer to a very serious question. The humour was also enhanced by the context of the play performed in 2001 at the height of a fuel crisis in Zimbabwe. There were many stories from the media of men taking advantage of the fuel crisis to cheat on their wives. The audience was therefore thrilled to hear how a common joke had been relevantly and artistically woven into a fictional narrative.

The other line that had the audience in stitches comes from Mrs Dzoro's old mother. When a nurse rudely tries to rush Mrs Dzoro and her mother; the old lady retorts:

*Tiri kuuya hedu vamukoti. Ko tingabva taita hwebara here?* (Translated: We are coming nurse. Do you think we can have the speed of a bullet?)

The audience was thrilled that the arrogant nurse had found her match. The imagery in the Shona language is so powerful such that it appositely ridicules and exposes the arrogance and unprofessional conduct of the nurse. The delivery of the above line by the actress who played the part also sharpened the humour. She did not raise her voice, but spoke calmly, yet her words were stinging.

It is also evident that *Zvatapera Todini?* is rich in Shona proverbs, idioms and imagery. There are pedagogical advantages of giving students an opportunity to explore the richness of their language in a theatrical context. Through this opportunity, young people can learn their language and enrich it with modern discourses.

However, there are also artistic and organisational problems associated with improvised performance texts. For instance, during rehearsals names of characters and scenarios can keep on changing.

Secondly, some scenarios are difficult to develop collectively and changing them almost endlessly can negatively affect the kind of attention which is required for the development of effective dramatic dialogue. The third problem is that some actors can take advantage of this 'confusion' and looseness of scenarios to target specific members of the audience in an unpleasant or unfavourable manner. Improvised performances usually give room for actors to 'add' some lines which were not necessarily rehearsed. It is in such instances that high school students can 'add' lines which can embarrass some members of the audience. This can result in plays getting unnecessarily long. Young and inexperienced actors tend to get carried away on stage. As a result, some members of the audience in former Group 'B' schools generally complain of watching too long performances (Chivandikwa, 2004:7).

Notwithstanding some of the challenges and problems cited above, it is clear that devised or improvised plays give high school students an opportunity to practise the art of crafting dramatic dialogue in ways which are beneficial in many respects. The next section focuses on audience reception of high school performances in relation to dialogue.

### **Audience reception**

This study reveals that it is important to engage in some form of sustained discourse on theatre audiences in order to get an idea of their artistic tastes, language use and other relevant aspects. It is easy for teachers in charge of theatre to underestimate the cultural competence of high school students who are the main target audience. Theatre expresses ideas and social structures; and it also responds to pressures to cause changes in itself. Thus theatre is both a social and an artistic experience (Cameroon and Giliepie, 1992:25). In any case, it is significant to heed the advice that '... so long as theatre as a discipline meets the needs of the society (audience), it will survive, when it ceases to meet them it will die ...' (Hansen, 1993:271). Consequently, in order to achieve the highest possibility of having an intended objective, a theatre performance should use expressive forms which are authentic, intelligible and appealing to a target audience.

This section presents results of critical and positive statements on dialogue from students who watched theatre performances in their schools as reflected in Tables 1 and 2. As mentioned earlier, rural, high density, and mission schools fall into the former Group 'B' schools category while elite schools belong to the former Group 'A' category. While the questions in the questionnaire (Appendix 1 and 2), did not specifically focus on dialogue, it is interesting to note that many respondents mentioned dialogue as a critical expressive form in making a theatre performance an appealing experience.

### Critical statements on dialogue

Table 1 shows critical statements on plays that the selected students had watched. The critical statements have been classified into four segments as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1  
*Critical statements on dialogue*

	Indecent Language	Poor Projection	Difficult Language	Inauthentic Language	Total
Rural schools	25	38	6	27	96
Mission Schools	10	29	31	37	107
High Density Schools	44	10	11	28	93
Elite Schools	0	39	36	2	75

Critical statements from selected members of the audience indicate what they thought was not good in performances they had seen. For instance, the table suggests that in urban high density schools, there is a high incident of 'indecent' language. There were 44 critical statements on this kind of language which is more than 43% of the total critical statements in that category of schools. Perhaps the creators of plays are tempted to reflect life 'as it is' in the environment, i.e. the ghetto, in which these plays function. The use of cheap humour or 'indecent' language is also a product of the



influence of community theatre groups which seem to have the same tendency (Kavanagh, 1997:4; Chiwanza, 2003:50).

Whatever the cause, it seems there is need in such instances to assist those responsible for theatre to appreciate the fact that art in general and theatre in particular, is not a 'photocopy' of real life. In this regard, Wilson (2000:32) advises that '... Theatre is not life, but resembles life, it has both the obligation and opportunity to be more than mere reproduction ...'. This is an important caution against 'reproducing' everyday language in dialogue construction. There is need in most cases for selection, efficiency, imagination and focus. For instance, it is important for high school students to learn that verbal humour is not synonymous with sensationalism, bluntness, crudity or vulgarity. Reproducing such language on stage, particularly high school theatre stages, has neither moral nor aesthetic justification. The emphasis at the level of high school theatre could be on training students in creating among other attributes; witty: subtle, humorous, ironic and efficient dialogue which is also sensitive to cultural mores.

No respondent in elite or former Group 'A' schools complained about the use of indecent language, perhaps because it is rare for such schools to devise original plays. What comes out as a major concern in this category of schools relates to the performative aspects of dialogue where as the Table shows there were thirty-nine critical statements on poor projection. For example, Nicolla Dawson a Form 3 pupil remarked that she could not hear properly what Muriel was saying and queried why the actress did not really attempt to use animal 'voices' in her dialogue-delivery (Group interview, 17 August 2001).

Some of the critical comments on the performance in general, and dialogue in particular should be situated within the general context of audience expectations. For instance, Mrs Higgins, the director of this production, thought that the audience was not as enthusiastic as they normally would, because; '... *Animal Farm* is serious drama. Most of them prefer musicals and comedy ...' (Interview, August 118, 2001). This is an interesting confirmation of how group tastes and expectations of the audience affect the general reception of a performance. However, if this 'serious drama' manipulates dialogue

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3 Except for some teachers who gave me permission to use their real names in this research, all other names for students are pseudonyms to protect their identities

which resonates with contemporary socio-cultural realities of the students, as well as being sensitive to their aesthetic tastes, it is most likely to have a significantly favourable reception with the potential to engender profound social, moral and educational impacts on the young audiences.

### Positive statements on dialogue

Table 2 is a summary of favourable comments on dialogue relating to humour, flexibility of language, authenticity and the pedagogical functions of dialogue. Statements on the pedagogical significance of dialogue refers to comments from respondents which concede that dialogue from high schools has the capacity to enrich vocabulary and assist in the mastery of relevant language skills and other educational needs. Flexibility of language refers to statements from respondents which celebrated high school theatre which used more than one language including slang and other common clichés popular among the youths. These and other details are reflected in Table 2 below.

Table 2  
*Positive statements on dialogue*

	Humour	Language Flexibility	Authenticity	Pedagogical Significance	Total
Rural schools	34	19	30	38	121
Mission schools	35	29	31	36	131
High density schools	24	32	19	28	103
Elite schools	30	6	2	26	64

In general the above table suggests that dialogue in high school theatre has significant moral, social and educational functions. The audience is apparently sensitive to these functions. This reinforces the thesis that performance is a transaction between performers and

the auditorium and that the image of a passive audience is '.... a figment of the imagination, a practical impossibility' (Kershaw, 1993:17).

The opinions expressed by the audiences in relation to dialogue in this study are quite interesting. They are contrary to what some critics of Zimbabwean theatre seem to emphasise. For instance, Martin Rohmer (1996) commenting on the use of song, dance and drumming in community theatre contends that theatre is a multimedia art as it is able to communicate with the audiences through signs that appeal to its senses. His argument that theatre as 'merely' verbal performance is rare in Zimbabwean theatre, is shared by many critics including Plastow (1996). In fact, to buttress this point, Rohmer quotes Ngugi waMirii who comments that Zimbabwean and African theatre should include music, dance and drumming:

It (theatre) must involve the use of dance, music, song and drumming and gestures which are so powerful that colonialism failed to destroy them. Any theatre that ignores these characteristics is abstract and irrelevant to the aspirations of Zimbabwean masses (Rohmer, 1996:55).

Interestingly, this study reveals that Ngugi waMirii conducted many drama workshops particularly in Zimbabwe's Mashonaland East and Central schools where his views seemed to inform high school theatre productions. For example, at a high school theatre festival at Monte Casino High School on 18 October 2002, all 17 productions by the 17 participating schools used song, dance and drumming extensively. However, not all productions used these songs, dances and drumming effectively and relevantly. There were some schools, particularly Waddilove, Macheke, Monte Casino and Rakodzi High Schools, whose productions were enriched by the effective manipulation of song, dance and drumming.

The impression, however, is that there is too much emphasis on these particular expressive forms at the expense of others such as dialogue that are also critical in theatrical communication. Secondly, the insinuation that without song, dance and drumming, Zimbabwean

theatre becomes 'irrelevant' and 'abstract' is both reductionist and prescriptive. This study reveals that the effective manipulation and construction of dialogue in given contexts positively affects performance reception.

In short, there is need for sensitivity when developing theatrical dialogue. At times it is also easy to ignore the context in high school theatre performances. Perhaps unlike other forms of theatre such as commercial theatre, for instance, high school theatre should function to meet the emotional, psychological, moral, pedagogic and aesthetic needs of the young people.

In this way theatre together with other strategies can effectively assist in shaping both its creators and spectators into very enlightened and creative citizens of the world. Appropriate and effective dialogue is a fundamental need in this respect. And perhaps the first step towards achieving effective dialogue is an appreciation of the taste, strengths and limitations of target audiences.

## **Recommendations**

Ultimately, observations made in the study are generally applicable to all forms of theatre. The following recommendations are in light of the above findings and submissions:

- 1) Former Group 'A' schools are encouraged to devise original plays where students are given the opportunity to construct original dialogue as an artistic expression which resonates with their immediate social, emotional and pedagogic realities.
- 2) In Former Group 'B' schools, it might be beneficial to employ full-time theatre teachers with a strong technical training in theatre. Such teachers would be expected to impart basic, but critical aesthetic skills and principles. For example, the truism that '... Good dialogue is everyday talk with dull bits cut out ...' (Hatcher, 1996:134) is basic, but it has potentially profound impacts on the aesthetic beauty and efficacy of dramatic dialogue.
- 3) It is critical to give as much creative autonomy as possible to students to enable them to craft their own dialogue as a way of enhancing their artistic expression (See Gattenhof & Radvan, 2009).

- 4) Both categories of secondary schools are encouraged to organise and attend as many workshops as possible where experienced playwrights and directors are invited to impart dialogue construction skills in theatre. What emerges from this study is that dialogue is a fundamental element in theatrical expression not only in high school theatre, but also in all forms of theatre in which it functions. The paucity of critical or academic works on dialogue in Zimbabwean theatre is therefore a surprising gap in the light of these findings. In the case of theatre in an educational context, the study of theatrical dialogue promises to offer many pedagogic, socio-cultural, aesthetic, moral and ideological insights relating to its functions, strengths and limitations.
- 5) Furthermore, performance based research is encouraged not only in dialogue construction, but also in other dramatic expressive forms such as sound, visual elements, gestures and movement. The findings of this study suggest that devised and adapted plays in high schools are worth of academic enquiry (Anderson & Donelan, 2010). They deserve to be treated as valuable educational, aesthetic and cultural resources.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there are two main approaches of play production in Zimbabwean high schools. The first approach, which is common in elite or former Group 'A' schools, is the selection of written plays mostly from Europe or America in which the major role of the students in the whole process is acting. A variation of this approach which is more relevant for purposes of this paper is the adaptation of plays and novels. In this process, however, the teachers usually play a prominent role in the writing and editing of dialogue. The advantages of this approach is that chances of having aesthetically efficient and effective dramatic dialogue are high, since it is devised and written by experienced and usually competent teachers. However, there are two major disadvantages of this approach. Firstly, usually such plays use language which is far removed from the lives of the students and this negatively affects both the performers and the spectators. Second, selecting or adapting plays for students denies them the opportunity to exercise their fertile imaginations and to develop their artistic potential.

The second approach which is dominant in mission, rural and urban high density schools involves students and teachers coming together and collectively devising plays. In this approach, students play a prominent role in constructing dialogue. This approach is the most collective; it also gives a sense of ensemble and ownership. Above all, it has many cultural, aesthetic and pedagogic benefits. However, its major disadvantage is that collectively devised plays are usually made of loose scenarios which can be 'abused' by inexperienced young actors. In addition, without adequate coaching and guidance, young people can construct long, dull un-dramatic and at times culturally or morally offensive dialogue.

Essentially what the approaches in dialogue construction discussed in this paper reveal is the challenge of dealing with the delicate balance/tension between aesthetic beauty and the socio-educational functions of high school theatrical performances. The central argument in this study is that there is need to balance the two functions. It seems dialogue construction in high school theatrical productions should avoid, on the one hand extremes of emphasising self indulging creativity as an idealised form of production, that is isolated and decontextualised from any socio-educational and pedagogic commitment, (Honbrook, 1989); and on the other, dialogue that is 'overloaded' with 'dry' moral, pedagogic and socio-cultural content at the expense of theatrical excellence/expertise or imagination.

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**Unpublished Plays** (Based on video recordings. Year indicates the time of performance.)

Bulawayo Girls College, Bulawayo	(1998)	<i>Animal Farm</i>
	(2000)	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
Monte Casino High School, Macheke	(2000)	<i>Dzakaendepi Tsika?</i>
Westridge High School, Harare	(2003)	<i>X = o</i>
		<i>The Rhodes between Heaven and Hell Deceived</i>

## APPENDIX 1

### Questionnaire to students and teachers who watched theatre performances in selected schools

This questionnaire seeks to find out your views on High School Drama/Theatre especially from your current school. You are kindly requested to answer questions as freely as you can. The findings from the questionnaire will be used in research project.

Name:.....

Student/Teacher.....

Region.....

School.....

1) How many theatre plays/productions have you watched since you came to this school?

.....

2) List down the titles of the most recent two plays that you have seen at your school

.....

3) Explain what interests and excites you in these plays

.....

- 4) Describe the things that you think a play should have in order to be interesting to teachers and high school students.  
.....
- 5) Explain the things that you think make some play uninteresting and unappealing to students and teachers.  
.....
- 6) Describe how you have reacted and felt when you watched the most recent play that was performed at your school.  
.....
- 7) What in your opinion is the importance of Drama/Theatre in your schools? (NB Explain giving specific examples).  
.....

*End of Questionnaire*

**APPENDIX 2**

**Questionnaire to teachers-in-charge of Theatre at schools**

Name .....

Region .....

School .....

Number of years: teaching .....

Number of years as a drama/theatre teacher.....

- 1) Where and when did you develop your interest in drama/theatre?  
.....
- 2) How many theatre/drama productions have you been involved in since you came to this school?  
.....

- 3) How many high school theatre/drama productions have been involved in before you came to this school?
- .....

### APPENDIX 3

#### List of select interviews

- |                      |   |   |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Chipadze High School | - | Chipadze, Bindura, (Group Interview), 07/06/2001.                             |
| Gateway High School  | - | Harare, (Group Interview), 19/10/2001.  |
| Huggins, M. (Mrs)    | - | Teacher and Theatre Director, Bulawayo, 31/07/2001.                           |
| Lee, H.              | - | Teacher, Music Teacher and Theatre Director, Plumtree High School, 06/08/2001 |
| Makwarimba, E. (Mrs) | - | Teacher and Theatre Director, Christian College, Chiredzi, 16/07/2001.        |
| Makulaga, Z.         | - | Teacher actor and Theatre Director, Bindura, 07/06/2001.                      |
| Muyambo, Z. (Mrs)    | - | Teacher and Theatre Director, Tekwane High School Plumtree, 06/08/2001.       |
| Tumble, M.           | - | Teacher, Theatre Director and Actor, St Georges, Harare, 16/03/2001.          |



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