

MANIFESTATIONS OF STATE CENSORSHIP IN ZIMBABWEAN-WRITTEN PLAYS AND PERFORMANCES

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the legal banning and prohibition of plays and/or theatre productions, and, in extreme cases, the arrest and harassment of artists in Zimbabwe by a variety of state actors and instruments, which include the Board of Censors, the National Arts Council of Zimbabwe, the police, and, in some cases, local politicians of the ruling party, ZANU PF. Citing concrete historical examples of such cases, the paper illustrates how these state actors and/or instruments have been used to suppress content in both play scripts and/or performances. I argue that although there was play and performance censorship in the 1980s and 1990s, play bans, performance prohibitions, and harassment of artists rapidly increased during the crisis decade (1998–2008) in Zimbabwe and the life of the Government of National Unity (GNU). Using a combination of interviews and carefully selected and documented case studies of eight plays and/or performances, the paper arrives at the conclusion that there is no one narrative that can be deduced from looking at the prohibition of plays and/or performances and the arrest of artists. However, one common feature that was confirmed was that in most of the documented cases it was the performance that was banned and not the play script. In addition, it emerged that even after the Board of Censors had cleared some play scripts, the police, working alone or in association with local politicians, stopped and/or banned some performances.

Keywords: state censorship; censorship board; performance; play script; crisis decade; National Arts Council of Zimbabwe; police

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the legal banning and prohibition of plays and/or theatre productions, and, in extreme cases, the arrest and harassment of artists in Zimbabwe by a variety of state actors and instruments, which include the Board of Censors (hereafter the Censorship Board or Board), national police, and, in some cases, local politicians from the ruling party, ZANU PF.

For the purpose of this paper, it is imperative to make a distinction between a play or a play script on the one hand, and theatre or performance on the other. Many scholars have erroneously collapsed these concepts to mean the same, for although they are related they are in fact different. A play is that which is read and a performance is that which is seen. A play or play script is the literary composition, whereas a theatre production is the actual performance that may or may not emanate from the literary composition (Mda 1993, 46). The suggestion being made here is that a performance may use a literary composition as its raw material in a performance, but that not all performances have written dramas or plays as their raw material—performances may be improvisations (when no scripted plays are involved). Therefore it can be argued that a drama/play/play script and a performance/theatre production are dissimilar but intimately co-related (Mda 1993, 46). This view is supported by Kiebuszinska (1988, 1) who posits that drama, also known as a dramatic work or play, “only lives when seen on stage.” This paper will discuss state censorship as it relates to both the (written) play and the (theatre) performance.

State censorship, according to Dewhirst (2002), includes bans, forfeitures, destruction of subversive material, investigations, interrogations, trials in a court of law, and incarceration. Negash (2003) adds to this list by saying that the state may turn an artist into a praise singer for the state and its institutions, attempting to bring the artist into the political leadership, or asking the artist to delete certain words, phrases, or paragraphs in the play script. In some cases, an artist may be asked to make changes to some characters and/or the plot. Peleg (1993, 4) defines censorship as “the systematic control of content by a government through various means.” The “content” that is targeted for control is the information or ideas that are intended for circulation in a given society. The systematic control of information and ideas is achieved through the examination of play scripts and performances. The targeted material is considered to be offensive or objectionable when it is deemed to be indecent or obscene, blasphemous, seditious, or treasonous. Viewed this way, censorship is justified as it is meant to protect institutions such as the family, church, and, most importantly, the state. However, Peleg (1993) does not mention that artists may also censor themselves without direct government involvement. The suppression of information in this case arises out of fear of losing state patronage through the involvement of patriotic intellectuals (Tendi 2008), and fear of persecution, arrests, interrogation, and harassment. Self-censorship consequently creates a culture of submission, which kills creativity (Zezeza 1996). Self-censorship directly or indirectly results from perceived threats, danger, and sanctions from the law

and authority (state censorship). No family or church is known to be excluded from censorship. What is usually debated is the extent of censorship and whether it can be justified under given circumstances.

Censorship becomes more imperative in today's world that is flooded with sick images of nakedness, sex, and obscene language. As Patel (1997, 51) rightly points out, "The role of the censor in society is an ambivalent one: he must tussle with the simultaneous demands of maintaining public mores and allowing the free movement of ideas and information." Many African countries, Zimbabwe included, have ratified the African Charter on Human and People's Rights which clearly spells out that every individual shall have the right to receive information and that every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his or her opinions within the law. The reference to "within the law" almost immediately cancels the unlimited freedom guaranteed in the preceding statement. Patel (1997) interprets this to mean that an individual's interests and freedom should not infringe or undermine the collective interests of the society. He further argues that, under normal circumstances, balance should not be a problem, but that "difficulty arises where individual and collective interests diverge to such an extent that it becomes impossible to harmonise them" (Patel 1997, 53). In other words, one has to balance one's freedom in respect of information and ideas against the state's interests relating to defence, public safety, public order, economic interests, public morality, or public health. The individual's freedom in respect of information and ideas should also be considered against the desire to respect other people's private lives, hence the enactment of laws such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) in Zimbabwe.

The control of publications in the former Southern Rhodesia began with the issue of the Obscene Publications Ordinance in 1911, which, by 1912, had been enacted as part of the country's statutory laws. This law was confined to indecent or obscene publications. It covered the importation, production, distribution, possession, and posting of such publications. Next to be enacted was the Entertainments Control and Censorship Act of 1932 which extended the scope of control to cover theatrical performances and other public entertainment. According to Patel (1997), this Act introduced the establishment of the Board of Censors whose functions at the time were confined to the scrutiny of films and film advertisements. In 1967, the diverse pieces of legislation on censorship were collapsed into one Act that gave rise to the now infamous Censorship and Entertainment Control Act. Since its enactment, the Act has remained largely the same. This Act empowers the Home Affairs Minister to override the decisions of the Board if the Minister feels the censors have made the wrong decision. The Act also specifies the following:

- It mandates the Board to determine "desirable or undesirable" publications.
- If the Board determines a work of art to be undesirable, it has to determine the extent of the revisions to be made, and if these are minor adjustments, it may ask the artist

to alter or make changes to his or her script. If the undesirability is extensive, the Board may decide to ban the artistic work in the interest of the public. Once this judgement is passed on a play or other artistic work, then possession or distribution of it is an offence.

After Cont Mhlanga's play, *The Good President*, was banned by the Board, he refused to give the script to anyone as it remains banned in Zimbabwe.

- If the Board makes a decision and the concerned artist feels the decision is unfair, the artist may appeal the decision to the Censorship Appeal Board which may then vary or set aside the judgement appealed against.

When Tafadzwa Muzondo's play, *No Voice, No Choice*, was banned and prohibited from being entered for the Intwasa Festival in August 2012, the artist appealed the decision through the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights. Unfortunately for the artist, the appeal did not succeed.

- The substantive ground for banning plays is spelt out in sections 13 and 33 of the Act. There are three broad categories of control.
 - If the offending publication or play script is deemed to be indecent, or obscene, or harmful to public morals
 - If the publication is likely to be contrary to the interests of defence, public safety, public order, economic interests of the state, or public health
 - If the publication discloses, with reference to any judicial proceedings, matters that fall within the ambit of the first category or have reference to matrimonial proceedings, or particulars that are unnecessarily prejudicial to the parties involved

Referring to the general assumption that sex and politics are what make literature sell, Patel (1997) sums up the functions of the Board by saying that it has its eyes on these two when reviewing plays, films, and other publications for (un)desirability. This state of affairs was captured in *The Zimbabwean* newspaper of November 23, 2011 in an article with the title "Govt Steps up Arts Censorship." The article quotes the response of the then Principal Director in the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, Reverend Damasane, to the continued existence of censorship laws in Zimbabwe. He said:

You cannot wish censorship away, because it is impossible. It will not be achieved that you work without censorship. Every country will censor its citizenry, including Zimbabwe ... where there is a possibility of conflict between an arts product and the state, there shall be control.

The same article refers to a meeting where a number of luminaries in the theatre arts industry, which included Zimbabwe's most outstanding theatre producer, Daves Guzha, and the much celebrated playwright, Stephen Chifunyise, represented artists. Typical of an artist under siege from state authority, Chifunyise is reported to have complained that, "Censorship lies at three levels where the artists submit to authorities, apply for

police clearance and then deal with the individual politicians within communities who are directing the police on the ground. Art must be freed from undue censorship.” Chifunyise’s reaction is typical of a lobbyist as he was representing artists. It is, however, ironic that he was a director in the Ministry of Sport and Culture in the 1980s, yet he never saw anything wrong with the same censorship law that was applied at that time. However, he was right in pointing out that apart from submitting one’s work to the Censorship Board for clearance, one had to deal with other censors in the form of the police and local politicians. He could have added that the police are aided by laws such as AIPPA and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) in censoring an artist even after the same artist has been cleared by the Censorship Board. As will be demonstrated later in this paper, many plays and performances were stopped or banned by local politicians and/or the police even after these had been cleared by the Censorship Board, a government department legally tasked with that responsibility.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on documentary evidence collected and interviews conducted with playwrights and producers. The focus is on eight documented case studies of banned or prohibited play scripts and/or performances between 2007 and 2012. These eight cases are the only known and documented cases of banned or prohibited performances in Zimbabwe during this period. In addition, the paper also makes use of interviews to corroborate the documented cases of censorship. Four playwrights, who are also producers, were interviewed. (Relevant information about the interviews is listed at the end of the article.)

DISCUSSION

There have been numerous instances of censorship in Zimbabwe. In this section, I demonstrate the escalation of play and performance bans, arrests, and, in some cases, the imprisonment of dramatists. I focus on the documented cases of Silvanos Mudzvova’s *Final Push* (2007), Raisedon Baya’s and Leonard Matsa’s *Super Patriots and Morons* (2007), Continue-Loving (Cont) Mhlanga’s *Every Day Soldier* (2007), *The Good President* (2007), and *Crisis of Zimbabwe* (2009), Stephen Chifunyise’s *Rituals* (2011), Stanley Makuwe’s *The Coup* (2011), and Tafadzwa Muzondo’s *No Voice, No Choice* (2012). All but one of the seven plays cited above were banned as performances, either as the play was premiering or in most cases after many performances.

Mhlanga’s play, *Every Day Soldier*, is the first to be examined. In the interview with Mhlanga (2014), he recounts how the script was censored:

Only one script, *Every Day Soldier*, was requested by the Officer Commanding. He brought it back full of red ink after he had gone through it and underlined all the dialogue that he considered political. Two days later he called me to his office and said, “In that play I read two days ago,

why did the character disappear in the story? The police are looking for him and he disappears? No, that can't be in the play. Go and remove the character or make him not to disappear. If you don't, we may come to stop that play from playing."

As expected, after the threats from the police, the play was never performed before an audience. The above is an example of a priori censorship by the police. The censors applying this type of state censorship rely on retribution, arrests, persecution, and imprisonment. This type of censorship is mostly applied in the case of play or film distribution. If Mhlanga had gone ahead and distributed the banned play on DVD for marketing, he could have been arrested and imprisoned for marketing and/or distributing a banned play. This also explains why, ever since *The Good President* was banned, Mhlanga has refused to give the play script in whatever form to anyone, including to a researcher for research purposes. Giving out a play script will constitute some form of distribution of the play.

The fate of *Every Day Soldier* confirms the observation of Negash (2003) that the state may ask the artist to delete certain words, phrases, or paragraphs, and, in some cases, ask the artist to make changes to some characters and/or the plot. In the case of this particular script, the police underlined in red ink all the offending words, paragraphs, and characters, and suggested that Mhlanga change the development of the plot. This also happened to a play called *Vagina Monologues* written by Eve Ensler. In 2008, this play was submitted to the Censorship Board for clearance for the 2008 Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA) event. The Board recommended that the word "vagina" be removed from the script.

The application of censorship is not restricted to the Censorship Board, politicians, and the police. The National Arts Council of Zimbabwe (NACZ) and the now defunct Literature Bureau have also been used to censor plays and/or performances. The NACZ is the umbrella controlling board for the visual and performing arts in Zimbabwe. If an organisation is not registered with the NACZ, then it is deemed to be an illegal arts organisation that may not practise in Zimbabwe. In theory, it is supposed to be an impartial board but, as a body created and controlled by the government, it has often been used by the state to censor artists perceived to be part of the anti-hegemonic bloc. In the highly volatile and polarised Zimbabwe of the crisis decade (1998–2008), many artists perceived to be politically belligerent suffered as they were refused registration for one reason or another. In 2007, a theatre organisation called Vhitori Entertainment was denied registration after churning out a series of performances (including *Final Push*) that were thought to be politically highly "incorrect." As a result, when the group wanted to stage *Final Push*, a political satire located in Mutare, the performance was banned on the basis that the group had not registered with the NACZ (Mudzvova 2012).

However, the all-powerful state does not always wield unmatched influence on dramatists and their works. The state's influence is not always unidirectional and predictable. Using Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Hoare and Smith 1971), Zegeye and Vambe (2009) argue that the artist's relationship to power is contradictory as it also

involves resistance, co-operation, and co-option. Among the subalterns, some willing dramatists are implicated as partners to the powerful ruling elite class, and they may have already censored themselves before the state does. Thus, it is also misleading to always insist that all dramatists are part of the oppositional formation. The contradictory relationship between the artist and the powerful ruling elites also applies to the audience, listener, or viewer. Marxist theories simplistically place enormous power on the ability of the communicated message to influence the imagined reader. However, Hall (1980) argues that as much as the sender encodes the message, the receiver also engages in a process of “decoding” which may not be a uniform experience in all those that receive the same message. Thus, one message encoded by one individual may be interpreted differently by different individuals receiving it: reception depends on a number of factors such as age, sex, level of education, and political affiliation. Thus, there is a danger in oversimplifying and generalising the artist-state relationship. It is not always antagonistic. Thus the relationship between the artist and the state is multilayered and variegated.

The censorship, banning, and/or prohibition of play scripts and performances by legal state authorities and other “informal” censorship agencies in Zimbabwe peaked during the period 2007–2012, a period that covered part of the crisis decade (1998–2008) and part of the time the Government of National Unity (GNU) was in power (2009–2013). Before this escalation, there were few isolated cases of literary censorship that resulted in outright bans. The first such case in independent Zimbabwe was that of Dambudzo Marechera’s *Black Sunlight* in 1981. Marechera earned the “honour” of being the first artist in Zimbabwe to experience the brunt of the Censorship Board’s venom. According to Veit-Wild (1992), the Board banned the novel on August 7, 1981, and it was gazetted as an “undesirable publication” on August 23, 1981. She goes on to say that *Black Sunlight* was only unbanned when Musayemura Zimunya and Anthony Chennells, then lecturers in the English Department at the University of Zimbabwe, appealed to the Board on Marechera’s behalf. This was not to be the end of Marechera’s brush with the Censorship Board. In 1984, with the publication of *Mindblast*, a collection of satirical poems and plays, Marechera was arrested and held for six days under the Emergency Powers Act. He was arrested on the day *Mindblast* was published, and the offence was that the collection was insulting to the revolution (Veit-Wild 1992). Later, after his release from prison, an unknown man assaulted him verbally and physically in a toilet at the Holiday Inn, Harare for publishing “filthy writings which deformed his country and his government” (Veit-Wild 1992, 335). Thus, in addition to the regulations of the Censorship Board and the Emergency Powers Act, other informal censors were used to “silence” Marechera. Not only did the state use the law, it also used coercion where the law fell short, as in this case. This kind of “informal” censorship was resuscitated and replayed later during the crisis decade and the life of the GNU.

Marechera’s case was not an isolated one so soon after independence. The Censorship and Entertainment Control Act of 1967 was evoked to deal with Gonzo Musengezi’s play,

The Honourable MP, when it was about to be performed at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair in 1983. By that time it had not been published. Musengezi was deemed to be too critical of the new government, and, as such a performance could not be shown to an international audience at this book fair, the performance was banned. The same fate almost befell Mhlanga's play, *Workshop Negative*. Although Mhlanga was not physically abused as Marechera was, he was berated for the scathing attack he had made on the new socialist government. The controversy surrounding *Workshop Negative* is captured in the *Zimbabwe Theatre Report 1* of 1988 (Chifunye and Kavanagh 1988), which details the debates that were generated by the play, with the official response being that Mhlanga's play misrepresented the new Zimbabwean reality. Subsequently, it was "prevented" from touring neighbouring countries following its run at the University of Zimbabwe's Beit Hall. It is also important to note that the play, *Workshop Negative*, had not been published at that time. So, it was the performance that was censored from touring. The play script was never prohibited and that could explain why it was later published. What generated controversy and led to its ban in 1987 was the performance—the repertoire as opposed to the archive, the play script. The Censorship Board had given Mhlanga clearance to perform the play within Zimbabwe but it appeared the politicians represented by the Ministry of Sport and Culture were not happy at all.

The arrest of the actors and ban of Mudzvova's *Final Push* comes under the spotlight next. The performance was stopped by police during its premiere at the Theatre in the Park, Harare in 2007. The two actors, Silvanos Mudzvova and Anthony Tongani, were arrested for staging the performance and were taken to Harare Central Police Station for questioning. The plot of the play revolves around the chairperson of a building (Liberty House) and his political opponent and challenger. One day, the two are trapped together in an elevator during a power failure and they start fighting. The chairperson is overpowered by his political opponent. In the play, there is no direct reference to living persons but authorities may have taken the chairperson to be President Robert Mugabe and the challenger to be Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). At that time, Tsvangirai was very popular and was the ruling party's biggest political threat since independence. The police were not happy with that kind of performance and detained the two actors for two days at the Harare Central Police Station. During their detention, they were asked to perform *Final Push* 12 times in front of a group of 20 police officers and members of the Central Intelligence Organisation. During these performances, the group tried to decide what to charge the actors with. Interestingly, clearance had been given previously by the Censorship Board; therefore the same Act could not be used to incriminate the two. According to an article by Dixon (in the *Los Angeles Times* of November 29, 2007) titled "In Zimbabwe, Dissent Wears the Mask of Theatre," it is reported that the police finally charged the two under POSA, a 2002 Act that outlaws meetings of more than two people without police clearance. The same Act outlaws statements that incite public disorder and insult the President. As it turned out, this was more a question of intimidation than a desire to prosecute the two.

There was no known full trial involving an artist before 2011. The arrest and imprisonment of the actors in Chifunyise's play, *Rituals*, led to the first fully contested trial involving actors in Zimbabwe. The ten-member team of *Rituals* was arrested in Chimanimani for public nuisance and the beating of drums, and the case came to trial in a Mutare court in 2011.

Rituals is a play written by Stephen Chifunyise that looks at the issue of violence, which had become a cancer in Zimbabwe during both the crisis decade and the life of the GNU. It is about an inspirational journey through a community-driven healing process following the trauma and violence that characterised the crisis decade. The arrest of the actors was covered in both the local and international press. In one such article, "Actors Arrested in Chimanimani during a Performance of Their Political Play," published in *Voice of the People* on January 7, 2011, one of the arrested actors later told a reporter what had happened. He recounted, "We were performing for about 200 people before a mob singing ZANU PF revolutionary songs swooped on us and the police had us in handcuffs before we realised what was happening." This was a classic case of local politicians getting involved in the censorship of a performance that had been cleared by the Censorship Board, a body legally tasked with the vetting and clearing of plays. As reported in the *NewsDay* newspaper of January 9, 2011, in an article titled "Rooftop's Nasty Brush with the Law," the play had been cleared by the Censorship Board and had already been performed 16 times before it was stopped and the actors were arrested in rural Chimanimani. It had even been performed at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation Indaba which had brought together stakeholders from Zimbabwe's political parties, including the Organ on National Healing and Reconciliation. As stated earlier, this was the first fully contested case in court, and when it was heard, both the defence and the state prosecutor concurred that the actors should be acquitted of all charges. The "drama" in the Mutare court was reported by the *Zimeye* online newspaper of March 22, 2011. In an article titled "*Rituals* Team Acquitted—Prosecution and Defence in Rare Consensus," the paper reports that:

After hearing evidence by all state witnesses and after listening to submissions by defence counsel, I agree with both the state and defence that there is no evidence that this reasonable court can convict the accused persons. Even a court not acting carefully cannot convict the accused in this case so the court is left with no option but to find you, the accused, not guilty. You are free to go.

Clearly this was a thoughtless charge that the police used to intimidate the cast of *Rituals*. The ten-member team was charged under section 46 of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) for creating a public nuisance by "intentionally and unlawfully making noise or ... beating drums." As in the case of *Final Push*, the play had been cleared by the Censorship Board only to be stopped by the police and the "mob" that accompanied them. This kind of harassment became the norm rather than the exception during the crisis decade and the life of the GNU.

In a related case following the banning of the then unpublished play, *Super Patriots and Morons*, in 2007, Daves Guzha, the producer of the performance, sought to confront the Censorship Board about the “unfair and outdated” Censorship and Entertainment Control Act. Guzha branded the Act as having become ancient and irrelevant in Zimbabwe. He complained that the legislation was very ancient and that it had no relevance in today’s environment. *Super Patriots and Morons* was later published with the help of the Culture Fund and SIDA in 2009. The play is a scathing attack on a corrupt president of an unnamed country who calls himself the super patriot. He blames everyone, especially the West, and not himself for the problems that bedevil his nation. It was banned after it had been showcased at HIFA in 2003. It had also toured South Africa. The play was only banned when it was about to be taken on a national tour in the city of Bulawayo. As in the case of *Final Push*, the play was banned for violating sections of POSA which prohibit “public statements or behaviour causing people to hate, ridicule, be hostile to or be contemptuous of the office of the state president.” Like many of the other performances, the performance went ahead in Harare’s Theatre in the Park but could not be performed outside Harare.

The fate of *Super Patriots and Morons* also befell Mhlanga’s *The Good President*. Again, after a successful run at the Theatre in the Park in Harare, it was banned when it was about to be performed in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe’s second-biggest city. The play is about a rural grandmother who commits suicide in protest after her grandson has refused to give her bus fare so that she can go back to her rural village in time to vote a dictator back into power. The city grandson is opposed to voting back the ruling party president into power, hence the impasse between the two. The president in the play detains and beats up political opponents and refuses to leave office. As Mhlanga (2014) says, the play is based on a historical incident in March 2007. On that day, police beat up political opponents, which included MDC Morgan Tsvangirai and professors Arthur Mutambara and Lovemore Madhuku, who were attending a prayer meeting. The President later went on national television to warn opponents that they would be beaten if they tried to fight ZANU PF. In Zimbabwe, rural folk are the bulwark of the ruling party, ZANU PF, and the play might have been interpreted as a jab at President Mugabe and his ruling party. The result was that the play was banned and Cont Mhlanga briefly detained under POSA when the play was about to be premiered at the Bulawayo Theatre in Bulawayo. Mhlanga was accused of undermining the authority of the President. Because of the controversy that the ban generated, Mhlanga won the inaugural freedom-to-create prize and was given a whopping US\$50,000 in prize money. An article in the weekly *The Zimbabwe Independent* of June 22–28, 2007 titled “Cont Mhlanga on the Banning of *The Good President*” captured the combative mood of the dramatist at the time of the play’s ban:

In my belief and conviction, *The Good President* is protest theatre and I want it to remain like that. I don’t want to turn it into some flowery poetic theatre. In my opinion, there is nothing flowery and poetic about the current situation the country is facing. There is nothing flowery

and poetic about corrupt political leadership that celebrates violence. There is nothing flowery and poetic about millions of people in the country who cannot afford to put a single decent meal on the table for their families on a daily basis. There is nothing poetic and flowery about an economy whose inflation is at 500%. There is nothing poetic and flowery about living in a country whose governing leaders are under travel sanctions. There is nothing flowery and poetic about living in a country where you send your child to school to find the Head of a school with half of staff having left to work in another country.

Cont Mhlanga's play, *Crisis of Zimbabwe*, is the other play (apart from Stanley Makuwe's *Overthrown*, which Mhlanga produced) that was banned before it could be performed. The play, *Crisis of Zimbabwe*, revolves around the 2005 demolition of urban slums (Operation Murambatsvina) that the government carried out in all the major cities in Zimbabwe. The exercise was condemned by the UN envoy, Tibaijuka, who was asked to carry out investigations following an unprecedented outcry from ordinary citizens and civic organisations. According to the online newspaper, *Newzimbabwe.com*, of December 11, 2009, in an article titled "Amakhosi Director Mhlanga arrested," Mhlanga was arrested for producing "subversive theatre" before he could submit the copy of the play to the Censorship Board. The play had been commissioned by a non-government organisation to highlight the plight of those whose dwellings had been demolished without the government finding alternative accommodation for them. The examples of *Crisis of Zimbabwe* and *Overthrown* show that even the secret services organisation, the Central Intelligence Organisation, is heavily involved in the surveillance of dramatists and their art.

Stanley Makuwe's *The Coup* is an example of a play that was banned during the tenure of the Inclusive Government between 2009 and 2012. The period was characterised by polarisation, and artists were perceived to be either for or against the two main political parties in Zimbabwe. The play had been performed at the Theatre in the Park in Harare before it was prohibited from performances in Bindura and Gweru. *The Coup* is about dead human bodies in a public hospital mortuary who decide to liberate themselves from being food for rats, flies, and maggots. The corpses are suffering even in death; they are overcrowded, decomposing, and denied the basic right of a dead person—a decent burial. The plot develops when the corpses, led by the body of a dead teacher, rebel and break down the doors of the mortuary, go to the state house, and stage a bloody coup that leaves the president dead. According to an article, "A Coup in the Devil's Kingdom," that appeared in the *NewsDay* newspaper of July 19, 2011, Makuwe outlines the motivation behind the play as follows: "In writing this story I was inspired by the events of 1996 when I was a nursing student at Harare Hospital. There was a massive strike that left the health system paralysed." Makuwe said he saw death and pain all around him as he and other students took charge of business at the hospital in the absence of the striking qualified nurses and medical doctors. They literally "dumped" bodies in the mortuary as people were dying in large numbers—there was no space to accommodate all the bodies. One day, he asked himself, "What if all these dead bodies

could talk? What could they say? Who would they hold responsible for the loss of lives?" This motivated him to write the play, which had initially been conceived as a short story. The play was cleared by the Censorship Board and ran at the Theatre in the Park from February 21 to March 11, 2012. It was not disrupted by police or political functionaries while being performed there. However, when it was taken to Gweru, it was stopped by the police. The producer of the play, Daves Guzha, complained to the *Daily News* reporter, Sharon Maguwu, about the play being censored and banned. In an article titled "Police Knock back *The Coup*, Again," Guzha says, "When we got to Gweru an officer identified as Maregere told us that if we went ahead we could be arrested" (*Daily News* December 13, 2012).

Tafadzwa Muzondo's play, *No Voice, No Choice*, became the second victim during the tenure of the Inclusive Government in 2012. With elections coming up in 2013, arts activities in 2012 proved to be a difficult and delicate business even when artists focused on current themes such as national healing and reconciliation. *The Coup* might have been a political satire that could have easily ruffled the feathers of the ruling political elite, but *Rituals* and *No Voice, No Choice* focused on a subject that was topical at that time, namely that of national healing and reconciliation. Nevertheless, the plays were still banned. *No Voice, No Choice* was banned after it had been performed in several places, chief among them the Theatre in the Park in Harare. In an article, with the title "Censorship Board Bans Play Promoting Peace in the Country" that appeared as an online version of *Radio Dialogue* on August 31, 2012, Muzondo said the play was banned because it was said to be against the spirit of national healing and that it incited religious animosity. In a letter that the Censorship Board wrote to Muzondo on August 21, 2012, it gave the following reasons for banning the play:

Please be advised that the Board of Censors read your play script and observed that the play is about discouraging the Youths participating in political violence in particular and against political violence in general. The play is too direct and people can easily read into it the insinuation of words and messages and associate them with certain individuals and institutions, and the vulgar and obscene language used.

The recommendation was that the play be banned and prohibited. The play was supposed to be performed in Bulawayo at a regional festival called Intwasa. Earlier, it had been performed in Harare, Masvingo and Manicaland, but this time, permission was sought specifically for the Intwasa festival. The state-owned weekly newspaper, *The Sunday Mail* of September 7, 2012, picked up the story of the ban and described it as "shocking." This newspaper also described the play as one "about political reconciliation." The article went further to express shock about the ban because the same Censorship Board had cleared the play on July 23, 2012, only afterwards deciding to ban the play and write a letter to this effect to Muzondo on August 21, 2012.

RESULTS

Patterns have emerged from the prohibition of plays and performances and the arrest of dramatists and actors. A few of the banned plays went on to be published, and these were *The Honourable MP*, *Workshop Negative* and *Super Patriots and Morons*. To date, the rest have remained unpublished as manuscripts. Only *Super Patriots and Morons* was performed, censored and banned during the crisis decade. The other two were banned in the 1980s. Therefore, the bans of performances did not necessarily result in permanent bans that prohibited later publication and distribution. It has to be noted that it was the performance that was banned and not the play script. Related to this observation is the fact that the plays that were banned as performances were banned even after the Censorship Board had given clearance to the submitted plays to be performed. One explanation could be the overzealous policemen acting under pressure from local politicians, especially in the case of performance bans in Bulawayo, Gweru, Bindura, and Chimanimani.

However, the banning could also be ascribed to the fact that the play script that was submitted to the Board was not necessarily the same script that the actors followed on the day of the performance. Unlike a scripted play (which is an archive), a performance—which Taylor (2003) classifies as the repertoire—is ephemeral and can easily be changed on the day of the performance. Many directors and actors use the play script as the starting point to a performance, and dialogue and other script specifications are subject to change on the day of the performance depending on the venue and audience, among other factors. This can be interpreted as part of the hit-and-run strategies that artists use in a volatile political situation like that of Zimbabwe during this period. Having two scripts, one for the Censorship Board and another for the performance, is a way of subverting surveillance and censorship from state actors. Perhaps this has prompted local politicians to deploy their own men to monitor the performances after the Board has cleared plays. Such a case happened in 2008 with the play called *Vagina Monologues*. The Board recommended that all references to the word vagina be removed from the play for it to be cleared for the performance. The director agreed to this recommendation but on the day of the performance the word vagina was restored, much to the amusement of the audience. This could be one of the reasons why play scripts are cleared but the performance banned by the same Board.

The other contentious issue is that although POSA, in its schedule, lists any bona fide theatrical and cinematographic or musical entertainment for any circus or fireworks display as a class of public gathering allowed by law, in practice (as has been demonstrated), plays of a political nature have been dealt with using this very Act. Another visible trend to emerge from the performance bans is that the venue and in some cases the audience representation play a role. A good number of the banned plays were performed in Harare's Theatre in the Park without stoppages, prohibition, or arrests of artists. However, the same performances were only banned and prohibited when they were being staged outside Harare. According to Ravengai (2008), performances at the

Theatre in the Park enjoy relative freedom of expression due to the park's strategic location—the central business district of Harare. Because of this location, performances there are under the constant gaze of local and international journalists and embassies. The government would not want to attract unnecessary attention by censoring and stopping performances, and/or arresting theatre practitioners in Harare. *The Good President* (2007), *Super Patriots and Morons* (2007), *No Voice, No Choice* (2012), *Rituals* (2011), and *The Coup* (2011) were all successfully performed in Harare's Theatre in the Park venue but banned when the producers took the performances to other outlying districts and towns such as Bindura and Bulawayo. Ravengai (2008) suggests that the government is not comfortable when performances are taken to the “unconverted,” so a backlash can be expected from the police and/or local politicians. Harare is controlled by the opposition party, the MDC, and when performances are staged at the Theatre in the Park, they are being showcased to those who are already “converted” politically. The ruling party considers Harare a constituency “lost” to the MDC. However, the same cannot be said about places like Bindura and Chimanimani. Bindura is a well-known ZANU PF stronghold, and any performances perceived to be anti-hegemonic will not be allowed. The ten-member team performing *Rituals* to rural dwellers at Nhedziwa in Chimanimani could not be allowed to “pollute” the rural folk just like that. Thus, even if *Rituals* is about national healing and reconciliation, the local police and the politicians did not want to take chances by allowing the performance to go ahead. The reason given by the police for banning plays that focused on national healing was that the government, through the Organ on National Healing and Reconciliation, was already addressing issues of national healing and reconciliation (interview with Tafadzwa Muzondo, 2012). The only exception was *Final Push*, which was stopped at the Theatre in the Park, with the two actors being subsequently arrested and taken to the Harare Central Police Station. Theatre in the Park is a small venue that usually accommodates a small paying audience that consists mostly of the working middle class in Harare. It is yet to be seen whether state authorities will tolerate performances to non-paying ordinary people in Harare's high-density suburbs.

Another trend that emerged was that all the plays allowed to be performed at the Harare venue were banned specifically in Bulawayo. Bulawayo boasts a population that is largely anti-ZANU PF, according to election results since 2000. The question that arises is why the performances were banned in Zimbabwe's second-biggest city if the performers were going to stage performances for the already “converted”? The answer could be the overzealousness of the police in the city. In Bulawayo, all the plays and performances were stopped and banned by the police and not by the Censorship Board. In some cases, plays were prohibited from being performed before an international audience. *No Voice, No Choice* could not be showcased to a regional audience at the Intwasa festival in Bulawayo.

What also emerged from looking at the banning of the plays is that plays that were written for Theatre for Development projects were not censored and banned. Such plays

are largely funded by non-government organisations and, in some cases, the government. These plays focus on development-related issues such as HIV and AIDS and the use of family-planning methods and good farming methods, among other topics. This category of plays and performances were not banned or prohibited during the period under review. Similarly, plays that were confined to the domestic space of the home and family were not censored. In the early 1980s, Sibenke's *My Uncle Grey Bhonzo* was not censored, whereas Marechera's *Black Sunlight* was censored because Marechera's play focused on the contestation of the state.

Thus, as demonstrated above, the plays that emerged as the biggest victims of censorship are those that are largely political in nature. This observation confirms Patel's (1997) assertion that the Censorship Board has its eyes wide open concerning plays and performances that focus on sex and politics. Thus, it can be argued that there are a number of censors at play in Zimbabwe that range from the Censorship Board, the police, the local politicians, and, interestingly, laws such as POSA that ordinarily should not be used to censor plays and performances. Plays such as *Super Patriots and Morons* and *All Systems Out of Order* were stopped under POSA for engendering feelings of hostility towards or causing hatred, contempt or ridicule of the president or an acting president, whether in person or in respect of his office.

CONCLUSION

The paper focused on state censorship in Zimbabwe and argued that censorship existed at various levels. The legal instrument used in Zimbabwe to censor literary works was the Censorship and Entertainment Control Act of 1967. This law has largely remained the same since its proclamation, and artists feel it has overstayed its usefulness in democratic society. It was demonstrated that apart from applying this Act to censor performances, the police and/or local politicians in many instances stopped or banned performances, even when the Censorship Board had cleared them. In some cases, the same Board reversed its own decisions, as was the case with Muzondo's *No Voice, No Choice*. It was suggested that the reversal of a decision might have arisen in situations where the script that had been submitted to the Censorship Board was different from the script that the actors followed on the day of the performance. Although the author concluded that state censorship existed in Zimbabwe, he found that censorship was largely confined to the performances of plays and that a play script, which is a literary artefact, might not be affected. Examples were given of plays that were banned as performances but were later published, such as *Super Patriots and Morons*. Thus, it appeared there was little censorship of play scripts, although instances of script bans were documented as well, for example those of *Every Day Soldier*, *Overthrown* and *Crisis of Zimbabwe*. These play scripts were banned before they were even performed.

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