KING KONG

a venture in the theatre

by

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Photographs by

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Publisher's Preface

This is the story of an inter-racial venture in South Africa. Many hundreds of white people and Africans in the Union's four largest cities worked selflessly together to give the cast of the musical *King Kong* the opportunity for Africans to make their first major break-through in the world of entertainment. In ten weeks of playing time this jazz opera was seen by 120,000 people of all races—a success achieved in the face of the great difficulties peculiar to the South African scene. This book is thus not only an account of a theatrical success; it is also a social document.

'And, who shall dare to aske then when I am
Dy'd scarlet in the blood of that pure Lambe,
Whether that colour, which is scarlet then,
Were black or white before in eyes of men?'

JOHN DONNE.

1. THE MAN

VRYHEID is the Afrikaans word for freedom. It is the name given to a little town in the north of Natal and to the surrounding district in which are scattered Zulu homesteads. Few of the men there can afford to stay at home to look after their animals and till their fields, for they need more than the land can offer.

Freedom from fear and ignorance is what Europeans claim to have brought to Africa; this they may have done, but they have also brought a fresh kind of dependence, dependence on money: money to pay taxes, money to buy clothes and food, money to marry, money to live. For many a Zulu in the Vryheid district the first step towards freedom was to work in the coal-mines or homes of the Europeans. One of these Zulu was Ezekiel Dhlamini, who was born in the district in 1925, the first of six children. His 32 years of life were spent in a restless search for his own brand of freedom. His intermittent schooling at a Catholic Mission ended completely when, at about the age of 14, he deserted the family fields and went to work as a garden-boy for a white family in Vryheid. He had held this job for only a few months when he disappeared. His mother later received a message that he had gone south to Durban. But Durban was too quiet for the strapping, restless youth and the stories of the fabled *I-Goli*—City of Gold—lured him to the crowded slums of Johannesburg. He didn't look for work but relied on gambling with cards and dice to live. With plenty of time on his hands he hung around the dance-halls and drinking-dives until one day he found himself in the sparring-rooms of the Bantu Men's Social Centre.

The story is told of how he laughed at the sight of people fighting with 'cushions' round their fists, taunted the boxers and challenged them all to fight him 'with or without cushions'. He was ignored and became

insulting and aggressive until the trainer, William 'Baby Batter' Mbatha, tossed him a pair of gloves and motioned him into the ring. After two or three rounds the tall, heavily built would-be champion lay stretched out on the canvas; but his rage and stubbornness did not blind him to Mbatha's superior skill and so he decided to take lessons. He learned quickly and was soon to be seen in his maroon and blue gown at fight after fight.

All the big-name heavies were floored in turn by the unkempt Dhlamini.

'He wasn't the kind of boxer who had polish,' one of his fans recalled, 'but his wild jabbing, his strength, speed and stamina soon brought him to the top.'

Known as the 'Spy Smasher', 'Lightning Marshal', 'King Marshal', 'King Kong', his occasional defeats maddened him and he held a grudge against anyone who showed him up, either in or out of the ring.

'What used to worry this boy was having two champs in one country', explained a friend. 'He always kept an eye open for Nick Wolmarans, the white champ. If he had ever bumped into him in the street he would have challenged him there and then.'

In 1951 he was matched against 'John Sullivan' for the Transvaal heavyweight title. King Kong summed up his opponent and weakened him with battering punches, then he held his hands up high, in much the spirit of a bullfighter turning his back on the (filed down?) horns of a bull, and allowed Sullivan to land punches all over his unprotected body. Then suddenly King Kong let fly with a blow which sent Sullivan to the canvas and brought him the Transvaal heavyweight title.

There were now few opponents for the new champ and it was difficult to get fights. In the ten or so years while King Kong was building up the legend, instilling the idea that he was unbeatable, he had very few official fights, scarcely half a dozen in his whole boxing career. When he beat Joe Mtambo to become the heavyweight champion of black South Africa, he had vanquished the last of the opponents in his division. But fight he must, so King Kong travelled long distances to Reef towns where, on Sunday afternoons, for the price of his fare and a small stake, he would keep up his spirit knocking down as many mine-workers as had the courage to face him in bare-fisted fights.

The crowds love a champion and, despite his uncontrolled temper and the violence with which he would lash out at anyone who crossed him, they responded warmly to his flamboyant antics.

'He was a bully and a braggart', wrote Margot Bryant (publicity agent for *King Kong*), 'and was recognized as such in the townships. Yet they cheered him. He brought colour, vitality and excitement into their lives.'

King Kong was so self-assured that he took little advice from his trainer and manager. His unorthodox training methods included running for miles, with excited fans gathering to watch him and numerous hangers-on trying to keep up with the pace he set, carrying dumb-bells in his hands, shadow-boxing on Johannesburg's busiest street corners and walking about with heavily weighted boots to strengthen his legs. All this strength and energy found no real outlet. There were few who could match him in the ring and the lack of opposition finally prompted one manager to suggest that he reduce his weight so that the ranks of the middleweight division could be opened to him. A fight was arranged against Simon 'Greb' Mthimkulu, who weighed in with a 14-pound disadvantage against King Kong.

Greb was a neat, tough boxer with a slow easy style but few expected him to match the swashbuckling King Kong, least of all Greb himself. After a few exchanges with Greb, King Kong became so sure of himself that he began to prance about and lift his feet in a manner more appropriate to a Zulu war-dance than a boxing match. In the third round Greb landed a left on King Kong's jaw and the champ was laid flat on his back. There was a stunned silence; Greb himself looked down with an expression of amazement on his face. No one believed it! But as the referee counted their idol out there was a wild roar, the crowd went mad. Fans are fickle, and that night they were still cheering Greb when the dazed King Kong was helped away. Greb was beaten in his very next fight by a boxer from King Kong's stable and after that he retired, content to be remembered as the man who beat King Kong.

King Kong was a changed man. The adulation he had come to expect, indeed to exist on, had changed to derision. To him being a boxer meant winning and his concern was not just for being good. He was big, but not big enough to overcome defeat. He became violent and suspicious. A passer-by on the street was in danger of being beaten up if he laughed, for King Kong immediately assumed that the laugh or smile of any stranger was directed against himself. Thrown into gaol one night for being without his pass, he set about beating up all the inmates of his cell—including a future member of the *King Kong* cast who 'had no night pass and no ten

shillings to pay the fine'—who had witnessed his humiliation at being tossed into the cell by a puny gaoler.

The career of the once great king of boxing was ending and after being thrown over the ropes and badly hurt in a secret sparring session with a white South African heavyweight, King Kong became the official bouncer of a gangster-ridden dance-hall. In a struggle with a blade-happy gangster he was removing from the dance-hall one night, King Kong fatally stabbed the knifeman. The plea was self-defence and he was acquitted. But the next time he appeared in court it was to face a charge of murder.

In 1956 he hired the dance-hall of the Polly Street Centre, run by the Johannesburg Council's Social Welfare Department as an Adult Education Centre, and used at the week-ends for social gatherings. King Kong came with Maria Miya, his only known girl friend, and, suspicious that she was not faithful to him, he became maddened at the sight of her talking to other men. There was a quarrel and King Kong stabbed Maria to death. While the shocked dancers muttered around him King Kong's tremendous voice rose above the noise. 'Send for the police', he roared, and when they came he refused their warning to drop the knife which he still held. Three bullets went through his body, but after a short time in hospital he appeared at a preparatory examination into an allegation of murder. He was committed for trial and, eccentric to the end, he pleaded guilty. On 25 February 1957, the judge, finding that there had been extenuating circumstances, sentenced him to twelve years' hard labour.

'No,' he cried out, 'I tell you to sentence me to death!'

The judge rebuked him and repeated, 'Twelve years hard labour'.

He was sent to the Leeuwkop prison farm, a few miles north of Johannesburg, to serve his sentence. He had been there less than two weeks when he threw himself into the bordering Rivonia River. Two days later his body was found.

'He was too sure of himself', said a friend. 'He always thought no one could pick on him. Right down to his death no one picked on him.'

'What the judge wouldn't give him he took for himself', said a washerwoman in the play, and perhaps he found, finally, the only freedom his nature would allow.

This was the story of the real King Kong, of a man torn violently from one society and thrown into another . . . an unbalanced symbol of

those contemporary Africans who have come to believe that might is right.

During his lifetime he acquired fame and notoriety within the confines of his own black society; he became a township legend which was to spread after his death with the co-operation of members of the white society on whose fringes he lived and died.

It was through the Union of Southern African Artists that this co-operation came about and through *King Kong*, the first all-black South African musical, that the life of Ezekiel Dhlamini took on a new dimension.

'Odds life! Must one swear to the truth of a song?'

MATTHEW PRIOR: *A Better Answer.*

II. THE UNION

THE peoples of southern Africa generally acquired their first taste of Western music from missionaries and while this led to the neglect of much fine indigenous music, it also resulted in the emergence of music of a new type—music which suffered many growing pains and which, while often banal, took on a character unmistakably South African—a blending of Western and traditional techniques. This process was accelerated after the First World War with the introduction of the gramophone to African listeners, when the ragtime music of the United States was taken up by a people uprooted from their rural background, people educated in mission schools to the choral music of Germany, England, Switzerland or Scandinavia, depending on the particular mission in their area. Practically no one played a Western instrument. Africans were in the main singers, but in the mid-twenties jazz instruments began to appear. One of the first of the typically African bands, the Japanese Express, introduced a single trombone along with its piano, banjo and drum. Although they played ragtime at concerts and parties, it was ragtime with an African beat. Early jazz trumpeters in Johannesburg, such as Enoch Mantunjwa and Steven Monkoe, learnt to play in the Salvation Army.

The energy and enterprise of an African school-teacher, Griffiths Motsieloa, did much to give African entertainment impetus. In the twenties, during school holidays, he would collect singers and players and arrange tours to the smaller towns of such troupes as the Hiver Hivas, the African Darkies and De Peach Black Follies. Local players were also invited to take part in the concerts and so it was that the country towns took up ragtime and the townsfolk were influenced by tribal rhythms.

Although much urban music in the thirties was imitative, commercial dance music predominating, nevertheless a vital jazz force developed after the Second World War. The idols of the self-taught musicians playing on second-hand instruments included Ellington and Armstrong followed by

Oscar Petersen, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and, more recently, Sonny Rollins, the Modern Jazz Quartet, and Michel Legrand.

Original numbers were also being composed and many had 'hit parade' successes overseas as well as in South Africa. Among these were 'Mbube' written by Solomon Linda, 'Skokiaan' by August Msarurgwa, 'Kilimanjaro' and 'Lovely Lies' by Mackay Davashe—who was to become leader and conductor of the *King Kong* band.

The creators were often unaware of the success of their work and still less often did they share in the financial rewards reaped from it. A group of as many as five artists was paid a total of £2 per side for a recording and even if the records sold many thousands of copies the composers or artists would have no further claim. Money in the hand seemed more real than mere words, such as 'rights' or 'royalties'. Many signed 'contracts' which were sometimes little more than a complete renunciation of any further right to profit from their work, or which gave the recording companies the right to record further numbers if the artists were a 'hit'. This situation began to improve through two seemingly unrelated events.

In 1953 Father Trevor Huddleston, who, as South African Provincial of the Community of the Resurrection, devoted many years to bringing spiritual comfort to countless Africans, wanted to raise funds for a swimming-pool he was building in Orlando Township. A concert seemed the most practical way to raise money and the leading township entertainers offered their services. On the programme was a choral work *Makhalipile* —'the dauntless one'—dedicated to Father Huddleston by an unrecognized composer, Todd Matshikiza, who five years later was to write the music of *King Kong*.

At about the same time a white amateur theatre group was organized by Ian Bernhardt called 'The Dramateers' and they produced M. C. Hutton's *Power without Glory* in aid of the Alexandra anti-TB Association. On receiving the proceeds an African committee member said: 'Thanks very much for the money, but can we see the play?' But the white committee felt that a play dealing with rape and murder (everyday occurrences in the townships) was 'unsuitable for black audiences'. The Dramateers then produced a series of 'suitable' one-act plays which toured the townships. The response of the Africans was so great that it awakened Ian Bernhardt and others to the tremendous latent interest in the theatre. They helped in the formation of the Bareti Players (Bareti—a eulogist, the man who sings the praises of the tribal chief). Their first production was an all-black *Comedy of Errors*.

Father Huddleston encouraged Ian Bernhardt to join others such as Dr. Guy Routh, John Bolon, and Fred Thabedi who were working to promote African music. Over three hundred artists turned up to a meeting which they called and the Union of Southern African Artists was born. Ian Bernhardt later became chairman of the Union and with his flair as an impresario promoted a number of ventures in which many ideals of the Union were to be realized.

At first the Union, struggling with a bank account of £23, painfully accumulated from shilling-a-month subscriptions from members, was regarded by many artists with suspicion.

'We thought it was another money-making project', said a musician 'and that it was yet another way to exploit African artists; another lot of promises that would never materialize.'

'Africans in the Union', said another, 'were thought to be choosing pals for jobs and getting a cut for themselves.'

The Union, with its limited resources, was soon to offer opportunities to African entertainers—and audiences—which before 1953 had barely existed. At first they provided lectures, held members' evenings and offered free legal advice, an urgent need in view of the exploitation to which the artists were often subject.

Father Huddleston was recalled to England and the members got together to give a farewell concert which was called 'The Stars are Weeping'. The carefully arranged programme became somewhat disorganized when a 60-voice choir arrived in the middle to pay tribute to Father Huddleston. Throughout the evening artists who had heard of the concert kept arriving and the programme became longer and longer, finally grinding to a halt at 2 a.m.

The success of the evening provided the Union with funds to rent premises including rehearsal rooms. Isolated concert groups, such as the Manhattan Brothers, the Woody Woodpeckers, Lo Six (which has only five members), The Saints, and many others, travelling about giving one-night stands at dances or weddings, thereafter combined to give large and varied programmes. There followed a tremendously successful series of 'Township Jazz' concerts. Visiting European artists were invited to give lectures and demonstrations, and soon the Union had persuaded many celebrities including Yehudi Menuhin, the Vegh Quartet, Johnny Dankworth, Emlyn Williams, and Tommy Steele to give special performances to non-white audiences.

Africans were hungry for first-class live entertainment and anyone who agreed to play for them reaped a rich reward in the enthusiasm and appreciation of packed houses.

It was in the Township Jazz series that the value of the Union's work became most apparent. Music which is improvised, however imitative, however good or bad, becomes folk-music—an expression of the people. The players and singers in the earlier Township Jazz concerts went for cool and sophisticated music, away from everything which was 'black'. There was little of the straight style, no Peter Yorke, Fats Waller or Harry James imitation, nothing of Dixieland. There was resistance to written orchestrations, to introductions and to formality. The quality was inexact and moods led to tremendous fluctuations. The same number could one evening be played as a slow fox-trot, the next it was a bouncing quick-step. If the players 'got hot' one number could last 25 minutes while a frantic stage manager gesticulated hopelessly from the wings. Soft sentimental numbers associated with white jazz were often chosen. ('I'll walk with God' was a favourite.) Very few of the players were musically sound. Vocal groups in particular seldom understood intricate harmonies. Subservience to a soloist was virtually unknown and a vocalist often had a hard time of it competing, say, with a saxophone. It was the sheer vitality, the ability to explode in a small space that put the music across, and the abandoned enjoyment of singing or playing which communicated itself to the audience.

'every cloud
has its silver
lining but it is
sometimes a little
difficult to get it to
the mint.'

DON MARQUIS—*certain maxims of archie*

III. THE CREATORS

THE musical—which seems to have lost its earlier designation of musical comedy—has developed from the comic opera world of Balkan principalities and Cinderella heroines and now aims at a higher artistic level. Although retaining many of the features of burlesque, vaudeville and comic opera from which it sprang and the elements of song, dance and humour that these media thrived upon, the musical began in the depression years of the early thirties to have a more serious purpose. Nowadays the musical is often an expression of the sociological times, and it seemed the ideal way to present the life story of Ezekiel Dhlamini.

Harry Bloom, an author best known for his novel *Episode* which won the British Authors' Club Award for 1956, describes in the *King Kong* programme the tremendous success of the Township Jazz concerts, and the encouragement they gave to African artists. But, says Harry, the events 'were merely the first step, playing a similar role to the old Coon shows which anticipated the great flowering of Negro music in the United States'. The Township Jazz series had reached a plateau and the need for greater expression became obvious. 'And so the idea of a jazz opera grew. It would not only present the music, but the colour and effervescence—and the poignancy and sadness—that make up the peculiar flavour of township life. When I read of the trial of King Kong I saw that here was the story I had been waiting for. From then on', writes Harry, 'everything has led straight to tonight'.

Indeed everything did lead to the opening night but 'straight' is hardly the word for the endless 'King Kong crises', the obstacles that were over-

come before opening night—some of them of a typically Johannesburg nature, others a reflection of the wider South African scene, yet others of the usual theatrical kind.

In late 1957 Harry Bloom got together with members of what came to be called the creative group. Clive Menell, a young and imaginative business executive, went with Harry to the Union to find subjects for portraits he wished to paint and was introduced to Todd Matshikiza, the composer with whom Harry was working on the King Kong story. Harry's idea at the time was to write a series of vignettes strung together by a calypso-style singer with a guitar. Clive, interested, offered Todd and Harry the use of his studio.

At the home of Clive Menell and his wife Irene, who were to give endless help and encouragement to the project, Harry Bloom and Todd Matshikiza, now joined by architect-painter Arthur Goldreich, would meet. In the romantic atmosphere of a lovely studio-room with its striped woven curtains, easel and paints, records and piano, they would visualize (and act out) many of the separate scenes, characters, sequences and facets of the story they wished to produce, and the aspects of the black man's life they wished to portray. At that time, however, Harry left, having decided to practise law in Cape Town.

The bearded and volatile Arthur Goldreich was the catalyst through whom ideas and inspiration would flow at the story sessions in the studio. He would rush about playing everyone's part. He would arrive on an imaginary bicycle, leap off and be the character who had been waiting for him, return to his bicycle and ride off again only to reappear as a bootlegger, shebeen queen or whatever was called for at that moment.

Todd Matshikiza, born at Queenstown in the Cape Province, was one of a family of ten whose lives were surrounded by music. They all sang or played and Todd grew up with a sure musical instinct which found expression in composition.

There are few composers who are not forced by society to earn a living in other ways and Todd was no exception. In turn he had been bookseller, messenger, waiter and journalist and was currently a salesman for a firm selling razor-blades. All this time, however, he continued to develop his musical talent. Music flowed from within, and his varied experience enabled him to appreciate the struggles of King Kong, and to translate them into melody.

'It grew in those days, ja, just after Harry had left for Cape Town,'

said Todd in an interview, 'just by talking and feeling the story. We'd talk, piling up the ideas, discussing backwards and forwards, and that's how I wrote the music. Gee, it was great.'

Some months later Harry Bloom, passing through Johannesburg, went along to the Menell's home to see how things were developing. Clive had written an outline in which the story of King Kong was related against the background of a township day starting with everyone waking up and going about their activities, and closing with people coming from work, night settling and people going to sleep. Filled with excitement and enthusiasm Harry rushed home and, in the two nights he was in Johannesburg, typed out a 40-page script delineating sequences, situations and characters.

But Harry left again, and the remaining 'creators' asked journalist Pat Williams to take over the script of the show, which was then known in reference to the shebeen of the play as 'Back o' the Moon'. Pat had a full-time job and a home and family to look after, and was reluctant to accept. Finally, however, she was persuaded. During the following months she wrote about four drafts of the play and completed many of the lyrics.

While these developments had been taking place Ian Bernhardt, behind the scenes and in his capacity as kingpin of the promotional body, was committing himself and the Union of Southern African artists to an opening night in February 1959. What was to be the biggest success in South African theatrical history was, at this time, the biggest risk and it was Ian who steam-rollered the project through to its ultimate realization.

The Union had long previously decided to work with the African Medical Scholarships Trust Fund which was conceived in 1949 as a reaction to the withdrawal of Government bursaries for Africans at the University. The appeal of *King Kong* was immediate and the two organizations decided to set up a joint 'King Kong Committee' of representatives of the Fund and of the Union. Together they would take on the production and share the profits.

The only available stage in Johannesburg with sufficient facilities to handle *King Kong* was the Great Hall of the University of the Witwatersrand, an ideal launching place for such a project since it is one of the few venues in the country where, appropriately enough, a mixed audience could enjoy the product of a mixed creative team. The hall was booked for February 1959 and many tentative arrangements made with players and artists.

Leon Gluckman, one of the foremost men of South Africa's developing theatre, was invited to produce the play. Leon had spent much time studying, producing and acting abroad but had always been certain, in the midst even of his successes there—as Assistant Director of the Nottingham Playhouse and in seasons acting with the Old Vic in Australia and England—that he would ultimately work in South Africa. 'To be born in South Africa is a boon', he has said, 'because to work here is to be in a position to express whatever talent you have—however big or small—to the fullest. This is not to say that conditions are ideal, that there is much hope of finding well-equipped stages or a choice of experienced actors or technicians.'

Leon can, and often does, devise his own sets and plot his own lighting script. Theatrical 'business' is at his fingertips and he has been in turn actor, manager and producer. In England his successes would be personal ones; in the South African setting he can create taste and if he has also to create the circumstances in which to realize his aims it is only one more challenge to face.

For Leon the most interesting straight play does not offer the challenge of a work which has a coherent lyric-theatre form; which goes back to the classical Greek synthesis of words, music and movement and which embodies dancing, costumes, setting, lighting. 'In a musical', Leon feels, 'one can go for the big effect. The emphasis is on the visual concept rather than on the interpretation of a single line.' His talents could be fully expressed in a production such as *King Kong* for he has the ability to manipulate large forces and a flair for spectacle, for a wide canvas made richer by attention to the smallest detail, for movement across a broad stage of many people.

The invitation to produce this musical was a step towards the realization of his creative ideals, and he immediately indicated that he would need the assistance of a musical director and a choreographer. He suggested people with whom he had worked before, Stanley 'Spike' Glasser, the South African composer who was in his final year at Cambridge, and Arnold Dover who had been teaching ballet in Johannesburg for many years.

Spike Glasser had spent some years studying composition in Europe and, like Leon, had always felt that South Africa was home and Johannesburg his backyard. His love for the bright, hard quality of the city could find no permanent satisfaction in the gentler English scene and he was excited by the invitation to direct the music of *King Kong*. A few years

previously he had followed up an ever-present interest in the indigenous music of Africa by working with Hugh Tracey at Msaho, the centre of the African Music Society. On a hilltop outside Johannesburg, Msaho nestled among red rocks typical of the Transvaal scenery. Here, during lunch-hour discussions with a colleague, he had decided to return to England to read for the Music Tripos at King's College, Cambridge.

Arnold Dover, who was to be the choreographer, has been connected with the theatre for as long as he can remember. He was born in Sheffield in 1914 and came out from England for the 1936 Empire Exhibition—before that he had been a principal dancer for Espinosa's British Ballet—and decided to remain in South Africa. Arnold established a dancing-school in Johannesburg and before long was one of the leading choreographers and teachers in the country. Over the years he has been connected with more than forty shows, apart from the choreography and direction of about twenty-five ballet seasons. Arnold's stage experience goes beyond choreography and dancing. Lighting, curtains, props, and the endless 'back-stage' complications are within his province. He was also to be the stage director of *King Kong*.

The ever-calm appearance of Arnold, with his curious dancer's walk, belied the vitality and enthusiasm which he brought to any undertaking. Leon Gluckman had worked with Arnold Dover and Spike Glasser before on an intimate revue called *Xmas Box*, the first production of its kind in South Africa, which they had staged in 1949. They knew each other's work and the three felt a warmth in the promise of an association in yet another first production of its kind.

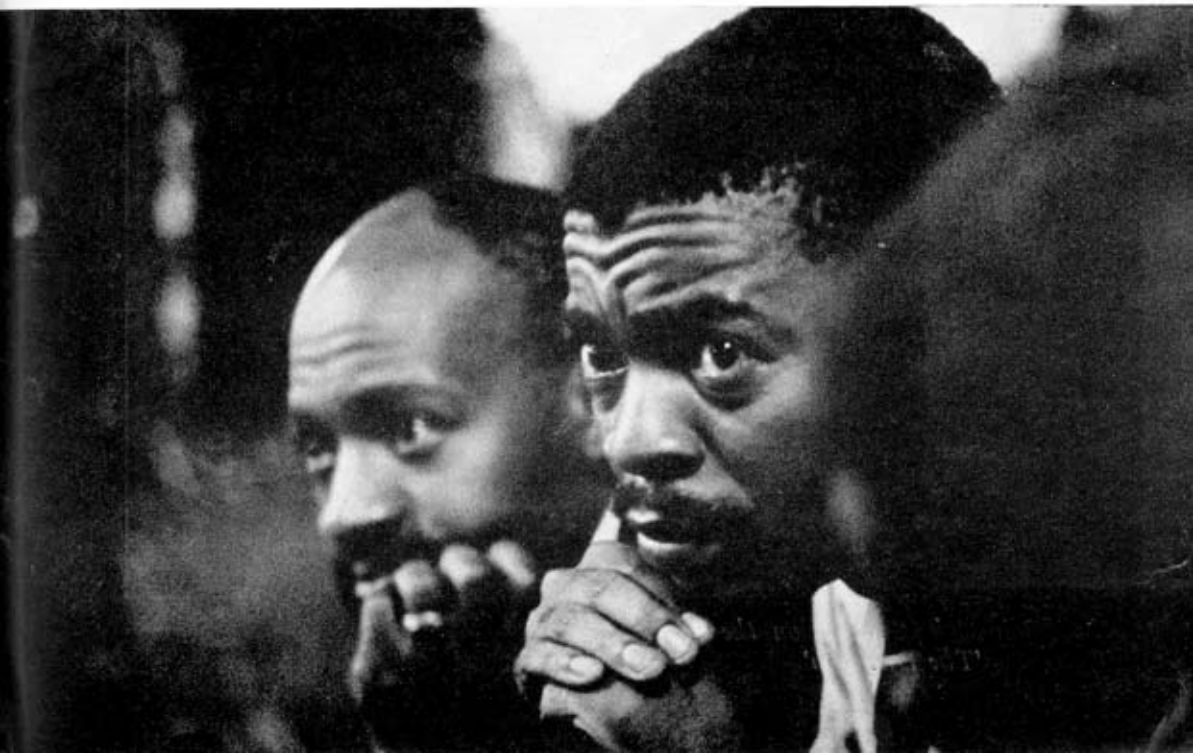
Yet the raw material for the production was nowhere near working shape and it was not until September 1958 when Spike Glasser returned to South Africa that he first heard the music that had been written.

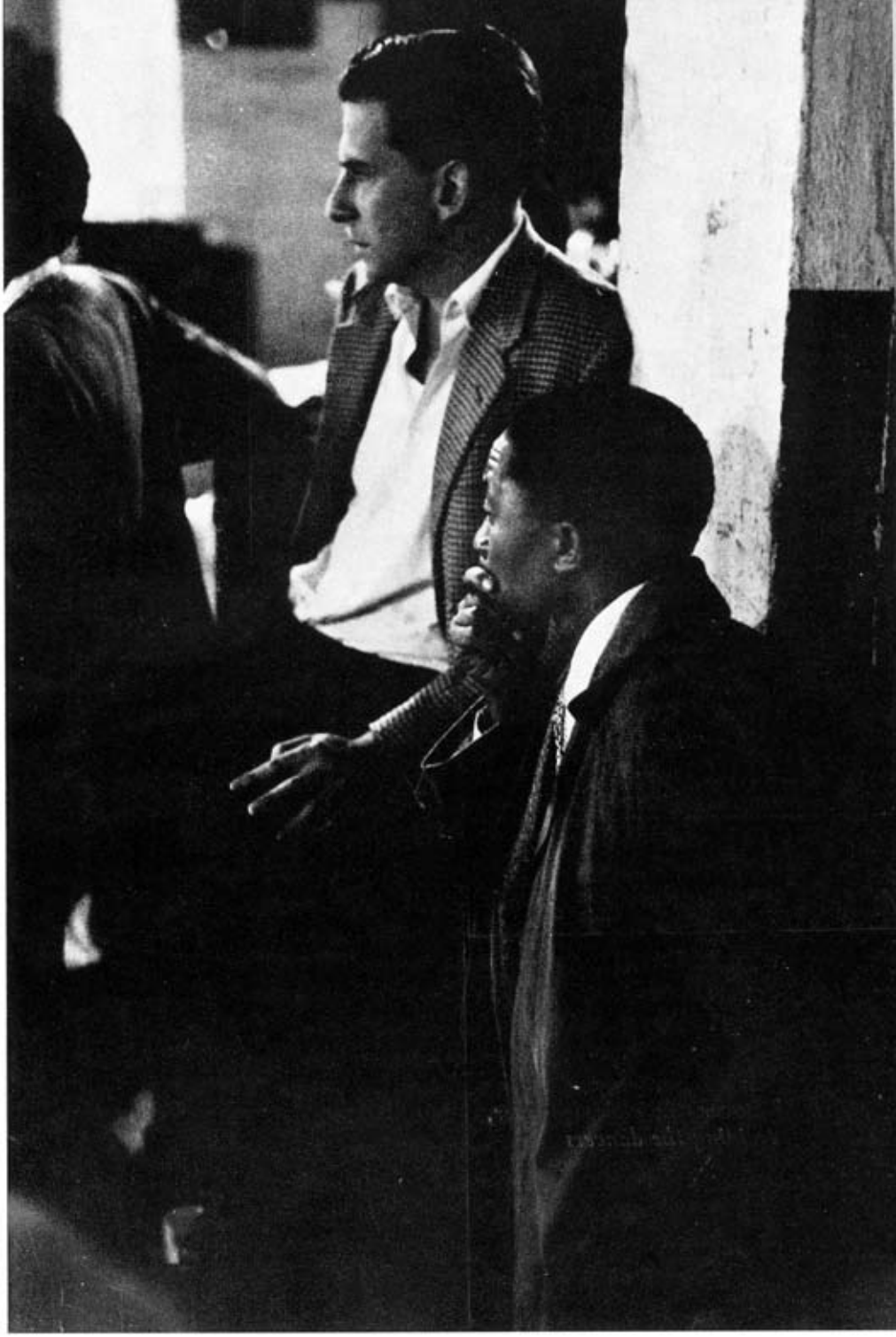
At the home of Clive and Irene Menell he met a small, dapper man with a wonderfully bright smile that wrinkled his entire face. This was the composer Todd Matshikiza and with him was Mackay Davashe whose Newgate fringe framed a large head set on a lithe body. Mackay was leader of the Township Jazz band, the Jazz Dazzlers. His wide-apart eyes were topped by a broad brow which gave him a look of constant expectancy.

Spike was impressed by Todd's music, and thought that the various numbers showed a wide range of musical emotion and imagination. There was a variety of idioms, all of them, however, natural to the South African scene.

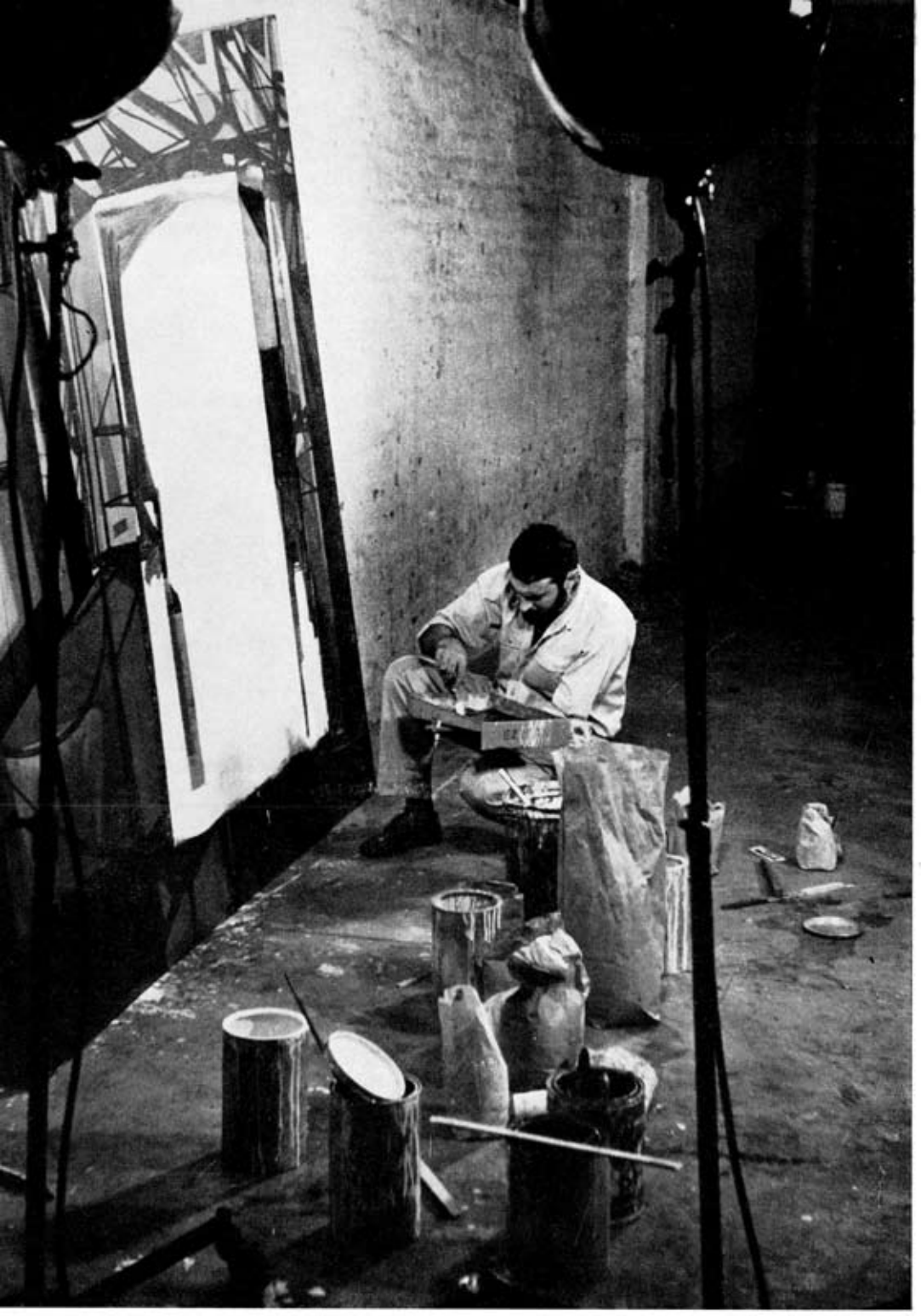
On the way to rehearsals in 'The Dungeon'

Stephen Moloi (Jack) and Dan Pobo (Popcorn) at the first rehearsal





Todd Matshikiza, the composer, with Clive Menell



Arthur Goldreich at work on the set in 'The Dungeon'

Arnold Dover, the choreographer, training the dancers

'The title song *King Kong*', said Spike, 'is an excellent mutation of the African idiom and the American musical song. Very often, as in "The Earth Turns Over", there is a natural and original construction of form. "The Death Song" has proportions of magic opera greatness, while "Back o' the Moon" has undertones of a leading South African urban dance rhythm. "Sad Times, Bad Times" is an instrumental piece of the most sad and serious nature, and could have been written nowhere but in South Africa.'

Spike was given a rather muddled account of the story and saw that there was still a great deal of work to be done on it as well as on the music.

That same evening Spike and I were part of a large audience watching the newest in a series of fund-raising Township Jazz concerts in the Bantu Men's Social Centre at the bottom of Eloff Street. Eloff Street is a synthesis of Johannesburg life, disgorging at one end streams of people from the main station. People who come into the city in trains marked with separate signs for Blacks Only and for Whites Only, descend on to platforms for Blacks Only and Whites Only, and leave through exits for Blacks Only and Whites Only. In the main shopping street of the city with its highly decorative shop-window displays, are goods which gangsters siphon into the flourishing Black Market of the townships—a Black Market in reverse, since numbers of brand-name articles can be obtained for as little as a third of their normal price. The restaurants, hotels and cinemas all 'Reserve the right of admission' which is another way of saying 'for whites only'. But the southern end of Eloff Street descends into 'motor-town' and beyond this are the factories and mine-dumps, and here the black man comes into his own again. Between motor-town and the railway line is the Bantu Men's Social Centre—where Ezekiel Dhlamini had his first taste of fighting with cushions —a dingy brick building which plays a vital part in catering for the social needs of the half-million blacks who live in and around Johannesburg.

On the same side of the street and a few yards up is Dorkay House, a once-smart office building on the top floor of which are the offices of the Union of Southern African Artists. Here, at almost any time, one can meet some of its 600 members. Rehearsing in groups, singing, playing or lounging about, gathering warmth and companionship from having a place where they belong. Through the dingy windows, cracked and stuffed in places with newspaper or cardboard, can be seen the large display windows of a car dealer. Revolving perpetually on a platform is an opulent, gleaming car with a neat tag announcing the price—£4,500.

The concert was Spike Glasser's reintroduction to the world of African

jazz which had in presentation, content and originality evolved amazingly in the four years he had been away. There were more good players, a new freedom of improvisation. The command of style, harmony and tone was greater and the technique of the instrumentalists had benefited from lessons and experience. A hall crowded to capacity with Africans, interspersed with a handful of whites, enjoyed a varied programme. There was a constant interplay between audience and performers. The audience responded not in decorous applause at the end of the items, but by yells of encouragement, 'Go, Go', throughout the number. An eight-piece band, the Jazz Dazzlers, were the mainstay of the programme, whether backing vocalists or giving spirited orchestral versions of their own, or of popular American numbers.

Spike realized that the music for *King Kong* would have to be orchestrated and arranged not only for the instruments available but for a jazz group whose main activity was pure improvisation. A few could barely read music, and the parts would have to be graded to suit the talents of the players. Some of them, like Mackay Davashe (tenor-sax), Kiepie Moeketsi (alto-sax and clarinet) and Sol Klaaste (piano), were accomplished musicians who could hold their own in any jazz ensemble in the world. Others would have much to learn before their home-grown talent could emerge in a professional ensemble such as the *King Kong* band was to become.

In October Leon Gluckman, who was doing a season in Cape Town, received the script and asked Harry Bloom to work on it once more. Time was the most vital factor. Rehearsals were due to begin at the end of November, and in October Harry flew up to Johannesburg to meet Spike. For two nights they sat up deciding the musical layout of the show. Todd's numbers were roughly divided into 'types' and, on paper, a fair balance of slow-to-fast, choral-to-solo or ensemble, orchestral-to-vocal numbers was arranged. The revised plan necessitated additional work for Pat Williams who had already completed many of the lyrics, working in close collaboration with the composer.

Harry left for Cape Town with an almost impossible task to perform in an impossibly short time. All that actually existed of the eventual musical drama *King Kong* were the songs, the lyrics and some dramatic ideas and scenes which, in spite of numerous attempts, had not yet been fused into a theatrically coherent script. The play had now to be written around an established musical framework, the right characters had to

appear at the right time to sing words already set down, and the right action had to lead into predecided musical numbers. In Cape Town Leon and Harry spent hours late at night working together. Leon was in the midst of a season of taxing plays including *Inherit the Wind* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and Harry's legal practice was most demanding.

Leon, knowing theatre and the difficulties of casting, articulation and projection with which he would be faced, emphasized the need for simplicity. Knowing too that in South Africa there are fine actors and fine singers, but very few actors who can sing or singers who can act, it was necessary that the bulk of the story should be told 'extra-musically'. Many of the people were not articulate in the English language and to develop more than a few big speaking parts was impossible. They fell back on the simplest stage convention of all, the reminiscences of a 'narrator', in this instance three washerwomen and an old man, Dan Kuswayo. The singers spoke little but enacted what had already been explained. Again, the limitations imposed by the inexperience of all but a handful of the future cast, recruited from all walks of life, led to an emphasis not so much on the development of a continuous dramatic line, but on the use of a thin line which would reach a number of theatrical 'moments' which Leon knew would work. Thus some of the most moving and exciting moments of the play were those whose basis was simplicity, a minimum of words and a maximum of effect.

Writing in the *New Statesman and Nation* in 1930, Sir Desmond MacCarthy says of modern drama: 'Scenic representation has implanted in us a demand that the people should seem as real as the setting . . . modern self-consciousness has screwed up the standard of consistency in character drawing. . . . But, above all, external life has in modern days become less violent, exciting and picturesque. The drama which stands therefore for reality in our times as the Greek drama stood for Greek life, and the drama of the Renaissance for the life of the Renaissance, is of necessity less demonstrative.' In this the South African dramatist is fortunate, for reality in urban African life is, if not 'violent, exciting and picturesque', violent, vital and highly dramatic. The translation of reality to the stage is the translation of humour, colour, movement, dance and music as well as of violence and vitality. The times are turbulent and, for all their hopelessness, hopeful.

Drama must be founded on living speech and the playwright can be much hampered by the dingy, threadbare speech in which the characters of

realistic drama are made, if they are to be realistic, to express themselves today. To know urban Africans today is to have discovered an idiom in which to express the drama. J. M. Synge, in the preface to his *Playboy of the Western World*, writes:

'All art is a collaboration; and there is little doubt that in the happy ages of literature, striking and beautiful phrases were as ready to the story-teller's or the playwright's hand as the rich cloaks and dresses of his time. It is probable that when the Elizabethan dramatist took his ink-horn and sat down to his work he used many phrases that he had just heard, as he sat at dinner, from his mother or his children. In Ireland, those of us who know the people have the same privilege. When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen* some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen.'

And for Harry Bloom, writing *King Kong*, there are two parallels to be drawn. The device of the washerwomen is, if not 'a chink in the floor', an open window on any South African backyard. The problems of diction are overcome by the opportunity of the audience gradually to attune their ears to the speech. Synge goes on to say: 'In countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form.'

Harry Bloom's knowledge of the township talk, the slang which is the only picturesque talk left today, a living idiom in which to write imaginatively, was the solution to the problem of language.

'Hambani 'Madoda
Siyemse Benzi'
Hambani 'Madoda
Isikhati Asikho.'
(Move on let's get to work
Move on now, time's awasting)

MACKAY DAVASHE
from 'In the Queue'

IV. AUDITIONS

AUDITIONS were yet to be held but the band, including the original group of Jazz Dazzlers, had been augmented and rehearsals begun. Spike Glasser had orchestrated three numbers to present at a 'Backers' Evening' which had been arranged with a view to getting guarantors for the show. The venue was a Johannesburg night-club and a fashionable crowd enjoyed listening to the band which included in their programme the Overture to Act III of *King Kong* and two of the vocal numbers.

The musicians were becoming adapted to tight, disciplined rehearsals, to playing in ensemble rather than as several individuals. This was a different approach from that of the Township Jazz concerts where the band simply got together and backed up a series of soloists who improvised in turn on a given tune.

Arthur Goldreich displayed his very lovely set designs and some of the preliminary sketches for costumes to admiring groups.

The 'Backers' Evening' (understood by many who had not seen the title written down, to be a 'Bacchus Evening') had been only partly successful from a financial point of view, and the promoters had yet to use much persuasion before the sum needed to underwrite the production was obtained. Weeks were to slip by before Leon Gluckman at last returned from Cape Town with the book of *King Kong*.

Many difficulties had yet to be overcome, many scenes had yet to be cut and others written in, but the dramatis personae were listed and auditions at Dorkay House could begin.

This was the story of the play:

After the overture 'Sad Times, Bad Times' the atmosphere of the early morning township, of the people going to work, is realized without a word being spoken. Three washerwomen and an old man Dan Kuswayo, functioning as a sort of Shakespearian chorus stating the situation and commenting on the times, listen to the strains of a penny-whistle and reminisce about King Kong. They recall the time when he was at the top, a great heavyweight champion. Using the 'pictorial-cutting' technique of the film, King Kong is seen at the head of a group in training, surrounded by reporters, photographers and a crowd of admirers. King is preparing for a big fight and his manager, Jack, talks of him going to England. Jack is waiting for his girl friend, Nurse Ngidi, to make up her mind to marry him. The Champion has no girl in his life, although Popcorn, a member of his entourage, is trying to promote a match between King and Petal.

King Kong wins the fight and at the celebration at the 'Back o' the Moon' shebeen, he meets shebeen queen Joyce. Joyce's gangster boy friend Lucky, leader of the Prowlers, is enraged when he sees that Joyce and King are attracted to one another.

One night, Lucky and his gang attack Popcorn and, in the middle of the gangsters' Knife Dance around the terrified Popcorn, King enters and kills one of Lucky's henchmen. Lucky swears revenge.

The washerwomen and Dan make it clear that while King is in gaol for ten months awaiting trial things have not remained static. Joyce has been going out with other men—'Joyce without men isn't Joyce'—Jack has been training a new heavyweight, but his progress with Miriam has been slow although they are in love.

The build-up of movement, singing and dancing of a Sunday in the township is shattered by Lucky and his gang. King Kong comes back to Joyce and renews his association with Jack; the new heavyweight, Caswell, is dropped. Popcorn is philosophical and persuades Caswell that selling ice-cream is 'real cool' and much safer than boxing. Their fun is interrupted by Lucky and the Prowlers who have frightened off all King's potential opponents. Jack is unable to book a fight except against a middleweight, 'a circus' which Lucky allows as it will make a fool of King. King Kong has started to crack; he lays off training and falls out with Joyce who refuses to put up with his new gangster habits. 'If I want a gangster I'll get myself a big one', she says. His friends try to help him and he and Joyce make up but it is too late.

King's downfall has come when he loses the fight to the middleweight and, no longer the hero, becomes the laughing-stock of the township. At his lowest and in front of the early-morning bus-queue, he is taunted by Lucky and his gang, and Joyce, who sees his degradation, walks out on him. At last Jack and Miriam decide to marry, Popcorn has settled for Petal and Joyce has gone back to Lucky. King, arriving at the wedding to find Joyce with Lucky, kills her. The washerwomen describe what happens to Lucky who gets killed smashing his car into a tree, and to King Kong who at the trial begs to be sentenced to death. The judge, however, sentences him to twelve years' imprisonment, but King Kong serves only two weeks of his sentence before committing suicide by drowning himself in the dam of the prison farm.

The play ends in the township which is being demolished as part of a removal scheme. The washerwomen and Dan close the story of King Kong and the same thread of music which started their reminiscing brings them back to the present, and to the Sad Times, Bad Times of today.

Of the many professional groups who were to play their parts in the success of *King Kong*, foremost was the Manhattan Brothers. A talented singing quartet they had got together as schoolboys in the early thirties and stuck together for twenty-five years playing the length and breadth of South Africa on platforms ranging from that of Johannesburg's plushest night-club to the barest location hall. Nathan Mdledle was the leader of the group. A tall rangy man with wonderfully expressive hands and a serious face which would break into a rare smile of great charm, his bass-baritone voice was full of personality and his vitality was tremendous. A comic streak, the more effective for being unexpected, was an essential part of him and was used to great effect in some of the satirical 'mine-boy' or 'worker' songs that the group sang. Nathan was to play King Kong.

Joe Mogotsi played, in a different way, as impressive a part as Nathan in the quartet's activities. For Joe was a mature and serious man with a striking self-command, whose talent might have led to the top sooner had he ever had the chance to study voice production, diction and stagecraft. Joe was possessed of 'star' quality; he was a natural and fitted into the role of Lucky, leader of the Prowlers gang, as comfortably as if he had been acting professionally for many years. So too Rufus Khoza and Ronnie

Majola took to their parts as members of the gang with absolute assurance. Rufus's memorable mime of the wide boys getting the better of the Flying Squad was further evidence of the untapped talent that had been moldering on the variety stage for twenty-five years. Although these men had long since reached the heights in popular music there had been no opportunity for their talent to develop beyond that level.

Dolly Rathebe, perhaps the best known of South Africa's singing stars, was a strong candidate for the part of Joyce, the shebeen queen who wins Kong's love and loses her life at his hands. But Dolly was expecting a baby and so a further search became necessary. Mabel Magada, a star from Port Elizabeth, had to refuse the part when her husband put down a patriarchal foot. Elizabeth Julius had already started rehearsals with the band when she went to Durban on holiday and did not return, later popping up as a member of the Golden City Dixies on the London stage, and then in Sweden. The search ended with Miriam Makeba who had started singing with a little group called the Cuban Brothers, moved into records with the Manhattan Brothers and then with her own group, the Skylarks, had a tremendous success. Miriam now found herself with the Manhattan Brothers again when she was spirited out of other commitments to take the heroine's role in *King Kong*.

Many people had the idea that the Manhattan Brothers were finished as a team. 'We were in a pretty low state just before *King Kong* came up', said Joe. 'We were touring with "Music Indigenous" after two years of lay-off. In every shack in any street of the townships new quartets were forming. They copied the Delta Rhythm Boys, the Hi-los, the Freshmen, and many were good. The Manhattan Brothers were thought to be dead.

'We were getting sick of variety which was failing', Joe said. 'Gangsters prevented people attending our shows. Those blade-happy guys could really mess things up.'

'The pass laws do a lot to make gangsters', explained one man. 'If you haven't got a pass, a permit to seek work, or a stamp to say "Permitted to be in the area of Johannesburg", boy, you might as well be dead. They can get further, these out-of-works, if they get together. If they need money or clothes they just stop you and take what they want. If they come up to you, man, you just have to get your hands up. If you're lucky you won't get hurt. If you struggle you can end up dead. You see a naked corpse lying in the road and if you want to know why, it's because someone wanted to live. And what's to stop them? Fear of gaol? There's

hardly an African who hasn't had a taste of gaol. Often a guy gets there because he didn't have a bit of paper which he couldn't even read if he had it.'

Poverty, pass laws, overcrowding, whatever the reason, there were gangsters, and, said Nathan, 'Gangsters have a soft spot for leading ladies. There was a time, Miriam was new, up and coming, and we got down to the Odin, the cinema in Sophiatown. The boys used to buy drinks and bring them to the ladies backstage.' While the Brothers were out front singing, Joe noticed a struggle behind the scenes. Miriam was trying to run onstage but some men were pulling her back. 'I felt this was a time to disappoint the customers', said Joe, 'so I broke off and the other three were left singing "Amigo" by themselves, while I went to help Miriam. Then the others clicked as to what was happening, the band stopped, and we had a free-for-all. Nathan was stabbed in the struggle.'

'That audience could have stopped the trouble', said Joe. 'They were so many, but no one interferes. No one helps.'

'Sure', drawled Rufus. His American accent was picked up from a Negro who, despite the much envied, if much exaggerated, freedom of the black man in the United States, had decided some twenty years before to return 'home', and of all homes in Africa chose Johannesburg's Sophiatown. 'Sure. A guy goes along to a show in his best clothes with his best girl, and when something crops up all he wants is to keep out.'

The Manhattan Brothers later learnt that the gangsters had been hired by a promoter who, wanting to run all the shows himself, had set out to wreck any opposition. Abducting the leading lady had seemed the easiest way.

In Johannesburg's Sophiatown, oldest (1905) and most colourful of the Reef townships, it was a simple matter to hire a gang. A tumble-down township in those days it has now been totally demolished. As fast as new houses were built and families moved out to Meadowlands, a new township nine miles out, so the bulldozers got to work to wipe out this 'black spot' which white families slowly encroached upon and surrounded. 'Little Chicago' was the name by which the town was known and the murders and the beatings that went on outrivalled those of Chicago in the heyday of Al Capone. It was the happy hunting-ground of film-inspired gangs. 'The Americans' were one of the early groups who ruled the streets with threats and knives. 'Show-biz' girls who sang, danced or won jiving or beauty queen titles at the Odin or the Undermoon Dance Hall were

abducted and kept for as long as it pleased their gangster overlords. A rash of gangs had broken out—The Berlins, Dead End Kids, Tondo, and others. Any of them could be hired for any purpose.

'Show business and gangsters went together', explained Nathan. 'They found a glamour and excitement about our lives and tried to muscle in on us. There was a gang—I don't think they had any name. One chap took a fancy to Miriam. He used to follow our show all around. Wherever we played, Randfontein, Pretoria, Springs, all over the Reef he would appear. Just sat there time and again and watched Miriam. At our 21st anniversary in 1956 at the Bantu Men's Social Centre he came in with friends, one a peg-legged man who looked like John Silver. The rumour got around that they were there and that trouble was brewing. We had it in mind to form a protective wall around Miriam. The band too was ready to defend her. Suddenly we saw that the leader was pointing a .38-er at Miriam and making her move along to his car.' Nathan got in between Miriam and the man.

'It's no good you standing there', he told Nathan. 'I'm going to shoot and bullets can go through you to her.'

'You're wrong, there's no Miriam here . . .', Nathan started saying in desperation. 'The fellow was getting mad and was about to shoot when, like lightning on a clear summer's day, when you least expect it, from the stage in big overcoats, also carrying guns, one with a big .45, a rusty one with the front sawn off, came another bunch of gangsters whose leader pushed me aside and shouted at Miriam's admirer: "You want to be a big guy and shoot. Now shoot me. Come on," he taunted, "do it now."

"Not now," answered the other, "I'll get her some other time." '

The frightened Miriam was helped home by friends and after that 'there was the worst shooting ever seen in Johannesburg'. A lot of people were hurt that night as the two gangs clashed outside. Some were stabbed. Bullets were ricocheting off the brick walls. 'It was women screaming, men groaning, guns firing, knives flashing.' Then police came and everyone filtered off into the darkness. People won't point out culprits for fear of reprisals from other gang members.

It was becoming impossible to play in the Reef townships or at the Centre. In Orlando at the Donaldson Centre there used to be many shows. Yet after a while no shows went on there for fear of gangsters, only afternoon performances now and again.

'We toured all over, and touring brought problems', said Nathan.

'There were still gangsters but they had a soft spot for us. In Grahamstown we arranged with a man to get a bus, and in exchange we'd give him a percentage of the profits. The tour was doing well and we kept extending it. The driver, who was a brother to the owner, started complaining as he was getting homesick. After three weeks he got so tired of the road that he told the police we had stolen the bus. Luckily they didn't believe him, especially when it came out he was the owner's brother. We were going by the coastal route to East London when we were forced to stop on a steep incline near Umtata because of mud. We stayed sleeping in the bus and found next morning that this driver had unscrewed a couple of nuts holding the wheel. In trying to stop the tour that fool driver could have killed the lot of us. We were doing well but that chap was so keen to get home he finally wrote and told his brother the shows were a flop and we wouldn't be able to pay. So the owner hired gangsters to come and get his bus back. They came backstage and started threatening us. "Gangsters, please wait", we would say. "We've got to sing three numbers then we'll be back and settle the argument." The big guy saw that our show was doing well so he couldn't see why he should take the bus, but he'd been hired to get it and it wouldn't suit his prestige to fail on the job. We'd do another few songs and come back. After a few drinks together he sadly told us he'd have to take the bus back. We were left stranded but that driver was happy to be getting home.'

The tours killed off many brilliant groups—Zonk, the Diamond Horseshoes, Rhythm Clouds, Harlem Swingsters—because they killed home life. Life for the musicians was as uncertain as that of the singers. On tour, it was difficult to make enough for food and transport, never mind getting paid. One of the few groups that stuck together were the Jazz Dazzlers.

Emonti (from the Afrikaans 'mond'—mouth) is the Xhosa name for East London, built on the mouth of the Buffalo River. Here Mackay Davashe who came to lead the Jazz Dazzlers was born. His father, a woodcarver, moved to Johannesburg with the family when Mackay was three or four. Mackay grew up and went to school in George Goch township. He doesn't remember when he started playing a 'flute'—the glorified name by which the metal penny-whistles were known—but, 'like all small boys' they would dress up and go around town playing and pennies would fall all around them from the balconies of apartment buildings. By the time his parents moved to Orlando in 1936 he was good enough to join up with

two other penny-whistlers and play at concerts to earn funds for the Orlando Boys' Club. Around 1939 when Mackay was 19 years old a professional concert troupe, The Syncofans, led by the pianist Wilfred Sentso, hired him as a dancer and singer. The troupe was to play on a Saturday night at a concert in Roodepoort. The band which played for the dance after the concert couldn't find a drummer.

'The drums were there', said Mackay, 'so they just shoved me in to keep the tempo. The alto-sax player whom they had picked up wasn't a regular and he couldn't do a thing. The trumpet man, Levy, was annoyed. Everyone was annoyed at the alto-saxophonist.' At interval Mackay asked him: 'How do you blow this thing?' and made a few sounds on the saxophone. 'O.K. Mac', said Levy, 'come and play this sax with us, and the other guy can beat the drums.'

'You can imagine how sour the tone was', said Mackay. 'But there I was playing away, everybody happy and dancing.' The man whose saxophone Mackay had used lent him a clarinet. 'Gee, I struggled. The clarinet had six holes like a penny-whistle so I managed the fingering. But the reed wouldn't vibrate and I didn't know how to do it. I sat there with the beginner's tutor and tried all the next day. It was afternoon before I blew a low G. The minute I got the reed to vibrate I could play "My Bonnie lies over the ocean". When my friends came back from work I entertained them. They thought I was great. The second day I could pick out a tune for myself. It was "Bei mir bist du Schön". It gave me such pleasure', Mackay remembered, 'that I danced round the table playing this thing. So that night I had another surprise for my friends. I was advancing, trying out other keys, turning over the pages of the tutor when the owner of the clarinet came to get it. I pleaded, argued, begged him to leave it but he said he had to take it away.'

Meanwhile, the Syncofan's pianist, Wilfred Sentso, wanted to form a band of his own to be called the Synco Downbeats and Levy, the trumpeter, who joined Sentso, gave Mackay a tenor saxophone. Said Mackay: 'He only asked £7 for it which is why I say he gave it to me. The thing was to pay for it. I went at once and got a job in a sweet factory, but it was slow and I couldn't save much. I had a friend, Gideon Masindi, also learning the sax and he was determined for me to have that instrument. Between us we broke one of the Ten Commandments three times before I was able to pay off the £7.'

'The Synco Downbeats were real up. There we were three friends,

Gideon Masindi, Lazarus Melk and myself, playing together. One had some chap giving him lessons and we would all go over the lessons he'd had. We sat there after work, evenings, the whole day Saturday and Sunday working. It was then we used to arrange songs. Wilfred Sentso was one of the first Africans who had his jazz numbers published and sold in sheet form. "Tintinnabulation" was one. We would learn his songs by ear and and he would write out parts for us, just crotchets on the staff lines without any valuation of the notes because we could hardly read music.'

It was a time for big bands and the Merry Blackbirds (led by Peter Resant) and the Jazz Maniacs were on top. 'As lads', said Mackay, 'we used to hero-worship the Jazz Maniacs, led by "Zulu Boy" Cele. Whenever they came around we used to listen and listen, telling ourselves we wouldn't be satisfied until we reached the standard of the Jazz Maniacs. Playing with the Downbeats we were earning round *7s. 6d.* each per show, and learning a lot.

'Our time with the Downbeats was short though, as four of us decided to pull out and form our own band. We collected together three reeds, a trumpeter and three in the rhythm section, gave ourselves the name of The Merry Mischiefs and got stuck into the tutor. There was no time for dames, movies, anything. Till the late hours we'd be at it, at it, at it. We even got ourselves a manager, Dale Quaker, who is now busy managing girls, putting them in the limelight, organizing them into stage or modelling personalities. He was kept busy because in the early forties there was so much work. We'd play at a concert, then pack up and rush across town to a dance. Dale Quaker even bought a car, an old one but it got us places. Our side man, Wilson Silgee, was the cause of the Merry Mischiefs breaking up, because he told the leader of the Jazz Maniacs, "Zulu Boy", we called him, how good we were. At that time I was working in the millinery department of a wholesaler blocking ladies hats. Zulu Boy worked quite near and he started inviting me to lunch. To be walking along the street with the leader of the Jazz Maniacs . . . I was proud! We went oftentimes to the Mayibuye Café and they were nice lunches he bought me too. One day he came up with the suggestion of augmenting his band and asked me to play second tenor. I was torn in two. There were my friends and the band I led. Our aim was to work up to the standard of the Jazz Maniacs, and here I was asked to join them. I made up my mind that I must take this chance and the evening I told the Mischiefs was bad, really bad. They decided there and then to disband.'

The Jazz Maniacs used to charge about £8 10*s.* 0*d.* a night. In those days £8 10*s.* 0*d.* was big money. They began augmenting, becoming a big band, with four reeds, four trumpets and four rhythm. They gradually incorporated all the players of the Merry Mischiefs having started with Mackay. That era of the Jazz Maniacs being really on top was also short. 'All of a sudden, the leader, the Zulu Boy himself, got killed. No one knows whether by accident or how. He was missing for three or four days, then on the fifth day he was found in the mortuary.' Wilson Silgee was elected the new leader and things were reshuffled. They needed a second tenor saxophone and a bass. Back they went to the Mischiefs again getting Lazarus Melk and Joseph Kiti. They also added a baritone saxophone who was Gideon Masindi, so the friends were together again.

The Jazz Maniacs went on tour to Cape Town and Durban 'combing the whole line' *en route*. When they got back they raised their fees to £15 15*s.* 0*d.* a night, each player earning £1 5*s.* 0*d.* or £1 7*s* 6*d.* 'The promoters grumbled about our price but the band was wanted. We knew we might lose bookings but wanted the time to promote our own shows.' One place in Johannesburg where the bands were always happy to play was the Mai Mai market hall, but there the Jazz Maniacs would demand payment on a 50-50 basis. The Mai Mai had traders who held concessions in the area and no outsiders were permitted to book a show in the hall. Dates there were so valuable people were paying £10 to £20 to get a booking on a Friday or Saturday night. Mackay explained: 'A herbalist from the wastelands of Natal who hasn't been doing well with his herbs gets a booking, hires a band and nets about £100 clean profit in one night. For him that's a fortune. The next day he's on his way home with his pockets full.'

Mackay, after working with various groups, came to lead the Shantytown Sextet which ultimately merged with the Harlem Swingsters to form the Jazz Dazzlers. They were joined by Hugh Masekela (trumpet) and Jonas Gwangwa (trombone) who had received their training in the band which Father Huddleston as Superintendent of St. Peter's School in Rosettenville, Johannesburg, had started. Of the tours that they made with the Huddleston Band to remote villages in the northern Transvaal and Basutoland, Hugh and Jonas best remember hopefully waiting around to see whether any of the audience would pay their admission fees in chickens, eggs, fruit or vegetables. If they were lucky the band could expect a good meal after the concert.

Salisbury 'Sol' Klaaste, who had been taking a degree in music at the University of the Witwatersrand and worked in a recording studio to earn his fees, became the pianist of the Jazz Dazzlers which formed the nucleus of the *King Kong* band, consisting finally of fourteen members.

Of the total cast of *King Kong* only three could claim to have acting experience. The young playwright Athol Fugard had, in late 1958, overcome many practical problems to present a play of township life called *No Good Friday* which created a stir in Johannesburg despite a shoestring production. Athol says of the main actors: 'Obviously their experience of the living stage was nil, but their enthusiasm for the theatre, for plays and the theory of the stage and of acting techniques was considerable. We worked according to Lee Strasberg's 'method' technique used by the New York Actors Studio members such as Marlon Brando and the late James Dean. The actors were never content', says Athol, 'to ape a part or to duplicate what I, as producer, suggested. They had to feel inside themselves the truth of what they were doing.'

The actors often forced Athol to rewrite those sections of his play which were not coming off, to 'translate them into terms which were real for them, terms of which one was perhaps aware but had never externalized. They were dedicated to the job and had tremendous staying power.'

Three actors who played in *No Good Friday* successfully auditioned for *King Kong*. Ken Gampu who had earned a living as a taxi-driver, teacher and salesman, took two parts, that of the preacher and of Jordan who was a particular friend of the shebeen queen Joyce.

Another was Dan Poho who started life in a small Orange Free State village where his father worked in an abattoir and his mother as a washerwoman. 'Despite the fact', said Dan, 'that my father is getting the same wage today as when I was a small boy, they managed, how I can never understand, to keep me in school. I started work in Johannesburg as a messenger eleven years ago. Then the management changed and the new fellow asked if I had gone to school. I showed him my matriculation certificate and was made a clerk for the Industrial Council for the Clothing Industry. In my spare time I ran a small singing group. I sang in Donald Swanson's film *The Magic Garden*. In 1951 I got to know Ian Bernhardt who wanted to form a Union to safeguard the interests of musicians, and I joined in and had an administrative post until the first Township Jazz

concert which I M.C.'d. Then I was in a play by Natalie Faivelsohn—*Dark Daphnis*, a one-acter set in Basutoland in which Stephen Moloi was the leading character. At an American West Coast Jazz concert Steve and I met Athol Fugard who wanted to form a Theatre Workshop. Three weeks later we were rehearsing Athol's play *No Good Friday*.'

A radiographer's assistant by day, Stephen Moloi had taken the leading part in that play. In *King Kong* Stephen's acting experience, excellent speaking voice and stage presence were seen in the part of Jack—trainer, manager and friend of the legendary boxer. Dan Poho, as Popcorn, filled the main comic part to perfection. Dan was an intelligent actor who built up his part with everything he had. His whole bouncy body, from eyebrows to toes, acted the Popcorn role. On stage, and in real life, Dan and Stephen supplement each other, the one practical and decisive, the other moody and introspective; the one able to milk a laugh, the other a jeer.

Helen Gama, a quiet and gentle girl, had applied to a hospital to train as a nurse but postponed her studies when she was chosen to play Nurse Miriam Ngidi, Jack's girl friend. The fresh and irrepressible Ruth Nkonyeni was cast as Petal who, after kneeling at Kong's feet in hopeless adoration, finally settles for Popcorn.

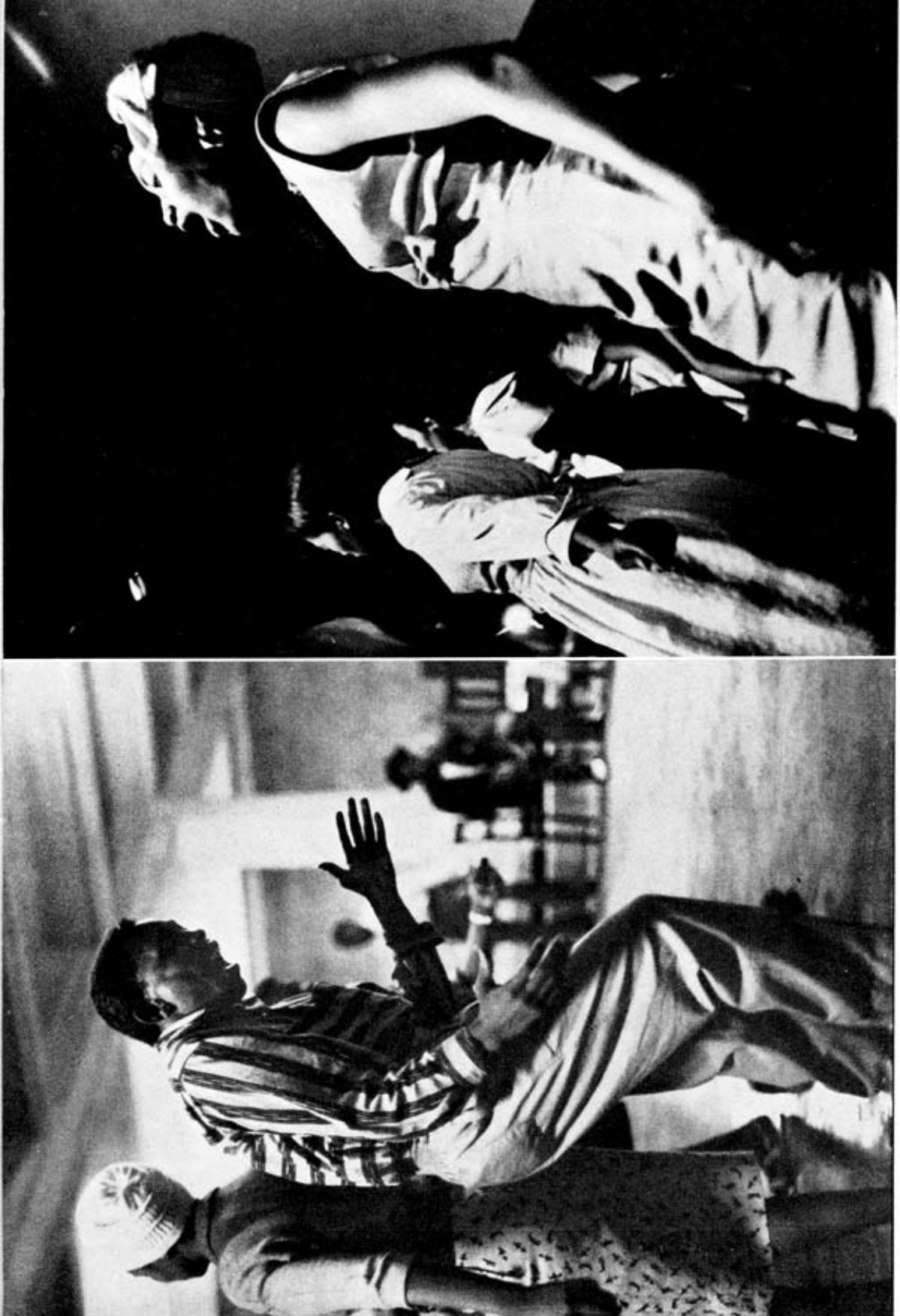
A professional singing group with a name as famous, if not as long-standing, as that of the Manhattan Brothers was the Woody Woodpeckers —Bennett Mhsango, Boy Ngweya, Jerry Tsagane, Victor Ndlazelwane and James Thomson—who took the parts of Sergeant Dhlamini, two gangsters, a journalist and Slim, a member of Kong's entourage.

Other professional groups with colourful names abounded, and Leon Gluckman chose the members of the cast from such groups as the Chord Sisters, the Saints, the Swanky Spots, the Queen's Page Boys, the Katzenjammer Kids and the Crazy Folks. Leon became slightly hysterical one evening trying to make out his varied assortment. 'They remind me', he said, 'of that Christmas song. You know:

"On the 3rd day of Christmas my true love brought to me
One Crazy Folk,
Two Swanky Spots,
Three Queen's Page Boys
And a Chord Sister in a pear tree".'

Gwigwi Mrwebi had been with a concert unit 'up North' from 1942 to 1946. As sergeant-in-charge of the unit which entertained Allied troops all over North Africa, he found himself playing many different parts—he

Joe Mogotsi and Miriam Makeba (Lucky and Joyce) rehearsing the Kwela



Arnold Dover setting up on the stage of the Great Hall of the University of the Witwatersrand

A break during rehearsal

was a member of the band (alto-sax and clarinet), of the chorus, singing and tap-dancing, 'filling up' wherever he was needed, backstage, in the pit or on the stage. Back in South Africa he had a number of jobs—shop assistant in Sophiatown, boys' club secretary, assistant circulation manager of Drum Publications among others. He had a band of his own, the Harlem Swingsters, which included pianist Todd Matshikiza and future members of the *King Kong* band. Gwigwi had many compositions to his credit including a hit song 'Fish and Chips'. He often entertained people at parties with satirical acts about his experiences. He acted out the way African soldiers were drilled, always coming back to the fact that they were permitted only to use wooden guns. Another of Gwi's acts was one in which he showed how King Kong used to fight. The King was a showman, full of ballet antics in the ring which gave full scope to Gwi's antics. Gwi also loved to use the 'Tsotsi' Afrikaans talk of the townships. Common in Sophiatown, Newclare, Western Native Township and others, this language was most effectively used by Harry Bloom in the gangster scenes of *King Kong*.

A foundation member of the Union of Southern African Artists, Gwigwi was appointed secretary, the only full-time member of the executive of the Union, the others holding honorary posts. He was cast with the group of three washerwomen—Phyllis Mqomo, Desirée Mkele and Esmé Roborethi—as the 'retired' Dan Kuswayo, these four forming the 'chorus'.

The people of the township were assigned their parts and the cast of seventy was complete.

'Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six
impossible things before breakfast.'

LEWIS CARROLL—*Alice through the Looking Glass*

V. REHEARSALS

IT was November 1958. It would have been pleasant if at this stage all was ready for rehearsals to begin, but they began long before all was ready.

The search for a place to rehearse ended in the same section of the city as Dorkay House but even further into the factory area. This was a part of town which after nightfall was occupied solely by night-watchmen huddled over their glowing braziers. Leaving the bright main road with its streams of cars, one moved into a world of silence and shadows, with a backdrop of mine-dumps whose shapes could be dimly made out in the orange glow of distant fluorescent street-lights.

The rehearsals took place in the large untenanted ground-floor of a warehouse. It was being renovated and the bare ceiling, supported by unpainted concrete pillars, caused strange echoes and had a distorting effect on the sound. A concrete mixer and scattered piles of bricks and planks constituted the furnishings. A half-dug trench across the width of the room awaited the laying of some sewerage pipes.

General Duze, the guitarist of the band and an excellent crooner, opened wide eyes in a dark face and dubbed the room 'The Dungeon'. Moving in with a piano, some chairs and music stands, the *King Kong* cast got down to rehearsals. Many of them were earning a living as factory workers, teachers and salesmen. They came straight from their work to rehearsals, and it soon became apparent that some sort of refreshments would have to be served. With Clive Menell's help a canteen was started; a borrowed coffee-machine, crates of Coca-Cola bottles, a sack of sugar which someone had donated, and stacks of paper cups were added to the furnishings of The Dungeon.

Rehearsals began daily at 5.30 p.m. Dan Poho remembered the first pep-talk to the cast in which the producer, Leon Gluckman, outlined the 'five main points which we shall have to overcome if the production is to be a success:

Distance (difficulties of transport and punctuality at rehearsals)
Tradition (acting is alien to most of you)
Discipline (subjecting oneself for the good of all)
Illness
The Law.'

'I hadn't realized', said Dan, 'that our main difficulties could be so easily analysed.'

A major problem for Leon Gluckman was to find any one complete part on which to begin. A producer is generally in the position of being able to read a play, reflect on the treatment of it, see its possibilities and be inspired. He then sets out to realize the aims of the dramatist visually and verbally, give the characters colour and substance and interpret the setting he has drawn. For Leon, looking back on the rehearsal days of *King Kong*, the main thought is that what was demanded was sheer instinct and sheer grind. 'There was no time to sit back and seek fine interpretations. What was needed was not creativity but staying power.' Leon, despite his modesty, had plenty of both qualities.

The lack of style, technique and background of African players makes it difficult to demand what one can validly expect from trained actors who use their theatrical experience as a common denominator to underlie different parts ranging from Shakespeare to drawing-room comedy. What one can use is the dynamism, the innate flair of the African artists playing characters with whom they have rubbed shoulders. Where experience is lacking the producer can capitalize on the natural gift for movement, the sheer rhythmic vitality, the talent for mimicry, and the dedicated enjoyment in self-expression, which are sufficient to bring the performances to a professional level. The cast were not acting as people of the township; they were of the township. They had encountered the gangsters and police of real life; they had been in shebeens and joked about their misfortunes; they were expressing the known frustrations and the known saving factors in the life of the South African black man—optimism, music, and an ability to laugh.

In one way it was fortunate that there had been little time for the *King Kong* play to be fully formed or the characters to be fully realized, because it meant that the play could be moulded to suit the individual actors. Thus Popcorn was the expression of Dan Poho's comic gift; Lucky the gangster acquired Joe Mogotsi's star qualities and his hoarse-voiced spleen; Jack, Kong's manager, instead of being the zoot-suited slick

character of popular fancy, became the serious, deep-thinking man who is Stephen Moloi, and Joyce, the shebeen queen, took on the warm personality of Miriam Makeba. Perhaps the only main part which was interpreted rather than created was that of King Kong himself: Nathan Mdledle, who knew the real Champion, moulded his part on him; he saw King Kong as a man who lacked education and the means to canalize his energy, and, hampered by his inability to articulate except through his fists, substituted force for reason.

To return to the problem of story rather than characterization, it was necessary that those parts not directly spoken by the 'narrator' or commented upon by the 'chorus' should be implied visually by action or by singing, rather than verbally. Thus King Kong's interest in Joyce is realized at the shebeen where, instead of being 'A man of stone, who walks alone', the champion allows Joyce to caress him. Her entry when King Kong is to meet her later is wordless, and their love is described by Popcorn and in Petal's one word, 'Nice . . .', as they walk off arm in arm. Again, the joy of their reunion is sung—'Quickly in love'—and the final parting, after King's degradation in the bus-queue scene, is again wordless. King Kong is himself inarticulate and he has barely 200 words to say in the whole play. His feelings, his replies to the journalist's questions, and his struggles as a champion and as a black man in South Africa are expressed either by his stance or his expression, by the 'narrator', or by his trainer and friend Jack. His own expression is through his fists, his story is related by the washerwomen, his problems are handled by his manager and, in the killing of Lucky's henchman and of Joyce, his agony is silent. The champion's most moving self-revelation is in the final Death Song, perhaps Pat Williams's best lyric, and certainly the song best suited to Nathan's range and voice, and it is staged with the utmost simplicity. The technique is similar to that of a vision effect, a nineteenth-century staging device often used to depict the internal state of a character. In this instance the use of editorial cutting, with light focusing first on the washerwomen, and then on King Kong behind gauze curtains, dim, manacled, supported by a chorus of anonymous policemen, surmounts a particular South African problem. It was impossible to stage a court scene, as the white faces of the judge and court officials would not be allowed with black ones on a South African stage. If the result is artificial, it is at least more effective than having the disembodied voice of the judge floating from the wings.

It was argued that it was unnecessary to stage the play as a series of

flashbacks, that the technique is as ancient as it is corny. One seldom makes ghosts of the people within the flashback scenes unless, like Saroyan's derelict actress in *The Cave Dwellers* reliving the prime of her life while she is asleep in a theatre, the quality of the 'flashback voice' has a sepulchral ring. One is brought back to harsh reality. But the flashback characters almost invariably become stronger, more real, than the 'alive' people on the forestage unless there is a strong story-line for them to enact, a real situation in which a word suggests an echo of the past. The past should have a haunting, illusive quality about it; one should never forget that it is an echo.

But here again the author faced a particular problem. *King Kong* is based on the life of a real man, and that man has become a legend in the townships of today. The townships are not, after all, made up of boxers, shebeen queens and gangsters and the washerwomen underline the normal drab, yet warm, life of the people. Through them the life of Ezekiel Dhlamini, a brutish, unsympathetic person, is suffused in a glow of memory; his faults are forgotten and he becomes larger than life. Told as a straight story in its true sequence the problem arises of continuing the musical play, establishing the legend, after the main characters have departed from the scene. It seemed better to start with the legend and show the reasons for its existence. The framework becomes the demolition of the township, and the revival of the ghosts who made it live.

Rehearsals soon developed some sort of rhythm of their own and during the week these went off without too much incident—although the first week proved a nightmare of waiting around to be let into The Dungeon until Ian Bernhardt had a key cut for every person who might need one. Lack of efficient transport is one of the major irritations of African life in Johannesburg, and this was strongly brought home at rehearsals over week-ends and holidays. When rehearsals ended at 11 p.m., a specially hired bus would begin a tour of the Western townships (some of them as far away from the city as twenty miles) taking the members of the cast back to their homes. A roster of volunteers was organized so that three cars would be available each night to take home those people from areas not covered by the bus. On more than one occasion the system broke down and Spike Glasser and Leon Gluckman were carting people home until the early hours of the morning.

When the cast had left and the iron-barred gates of The Dungeon were locked, Leon, Spike and Arnold Dover would meet. For hours they would work on a scene for rehearsal in two or three days' time, depending on how much needed to be done. The first thing Leon would ask was: 'Spike, is there a tune ready for this scene?' If the answer was 'Yes', Spike would play it over on the piano and they would then plot it. If the number was orchestral it was a matter of deciding how long it should last. For the dance numbers Arnold would work out how much time he needed to express his choreographic ideas. For the 'strips' of music it was a matter of deciding how long the background music would take to cover the action on stage. The vocal numbers were the big problem and Spike would play different versions of the tune, now relegating one section to a soloist, now to a chorus, casting it in different forms until the layout and timing were decided.

The pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle had to be put together and often these meetings would end with closely packed time schedules for the next day's activities. Spike would collect the pianist Sol Klaaste; together they would rush to Arnold's studio to put a piano version of a dance number on tape, leaving Arnold to work out his routine in time for dance rehearsals that afternoon. Spike would then rush home to work on the orchestration of the number; by this time he had co-opted the assistance of Sol, Mackay Davashe and Kiepie Moeketsi, and the four of them would do an arrangement of the scheduled number. Two young and highly talented members of the band, Hugh Masekela and Jonas Gwangwa, were the copyists; they would be waiting in another room to copy out the parts page by page as the score rolled off. Then all six of them would bundle into the car and dash to The Dungeon in time for band rehearsals at 2 p.m. Leon meanwhile would have rehearsed some of the principals during the day and he would arrive with them at five-thirty. Arnold would appear with his dancers and a complete sequence could then be rehearsed. The same night the three would meet again and the whole performance would be repeated.

Lyrics were often a problem. It was necessary to turn out lyrics for the changed format and often the changed subject-matter of the new book. Pat Williams had the difficult task of having to write words to existing music. Lyric writers more often have their words set which gives them complete freedom, but here Pat was under pressure of time and restriction and Spike had to find time to explain what was wanted, what words were

best suited to the music and voices. Fortunately Pat worked extremely quickly and she was able to present what was required in record time.

Arnold had worked before with Africans on the choreography for a film and so started the *King Kong* rehearsals with a fair idea of what Africans can and cannot do. 'Their indigenous movement is most virile and rhythmic, and their dance potential is magnificent', he said. 'Unfortunately there is *no* training whatsoever, and this limits a choreographer tremendously. One of the difficulties, of course, is that they are used to *ex tempore* expression. I'm sure', he added, 'that Spike has this problem with the music too.'

To get co-ordination and a standard performance every time needed tremendous patience and careful rehearsing. To add to Arnold's task, he found that some of his original conceptions had to be scrapped entirely. 'After I had painstakingly sorted out the dancing possibles and worked out a whole sequence', he said, 'I would find that none of the best dancers appeared in that scene and the ones that were left just couldn't do what I had written'.

As it turned out the new ideas, cleverly timed entrances and patternings with no real dancing, were most successful and a triumph for what Arnold calls 'architectural choreography'.

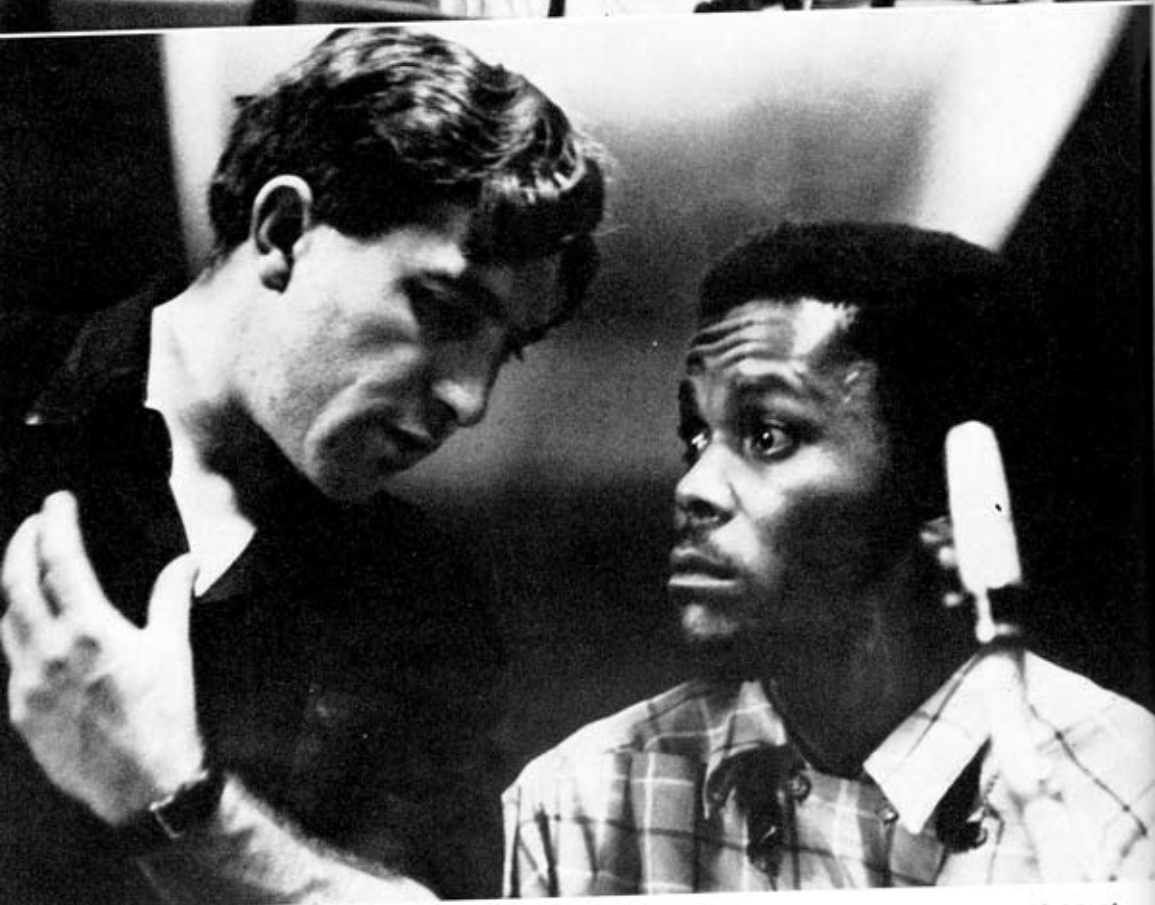
One of his main problems as a choreographer was to harness movements which came naturally, to make them 'theatrically showy', and at the same time teach the dancers a few new things. 'The men, for example have now learnt to do a simple *tour en l'air*. The women are excellent in any jive type of medium and walk very well. They are more conservative though, and would probably take longer to learn. The idea of "daintiness" in women is a bit alien, but with a little training these dancers could be breathtaking.'

Work was now piling up on Leon, Spike and Arnold and they were coping with it in a manner that taxed them enormously. Pamela Gluckman and I became known as the *King Kong* widows, although many others, including Wezie Davashe and Raina Bernhardt, could have laid claim to the title. Spike and Leon were rarely at home unless it was to snatch meals during the long late evening conferences. They started looking more and more haggard from lack of sleep; Leon gradually turned a delicate shade of green and Spike a pasty yellow. Somehow Arnold remained his pink-

Mackay Davashe, leader and conductor of the King Kong *band*

Kiepie Moeketsi (alto-sax and clarinet) and Mackay Davashe

Hugh Masekela, the trumpeter



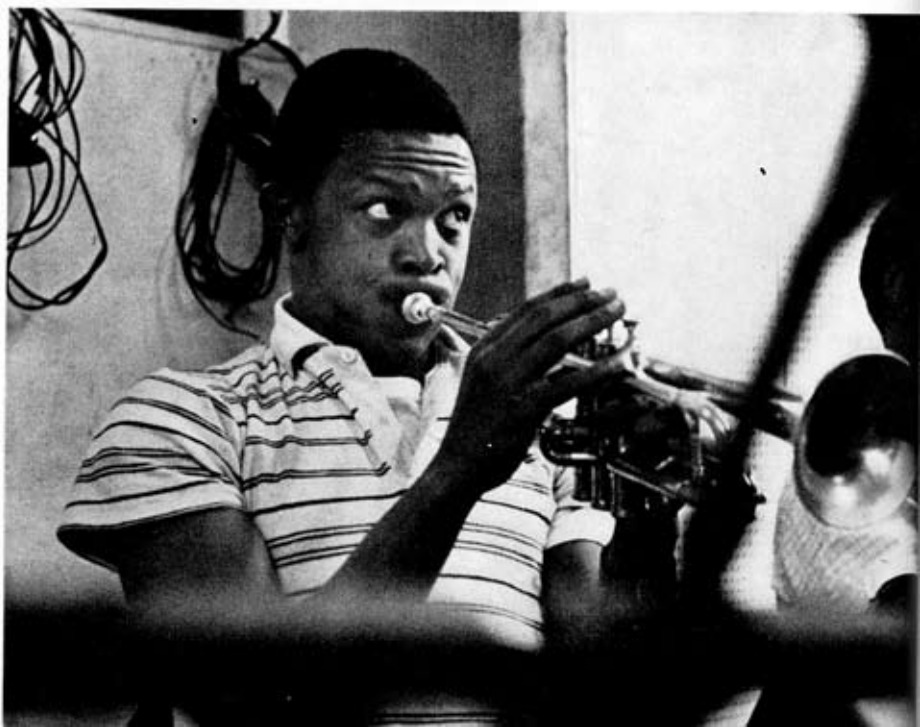
Above: *Members of the band rehearsing*

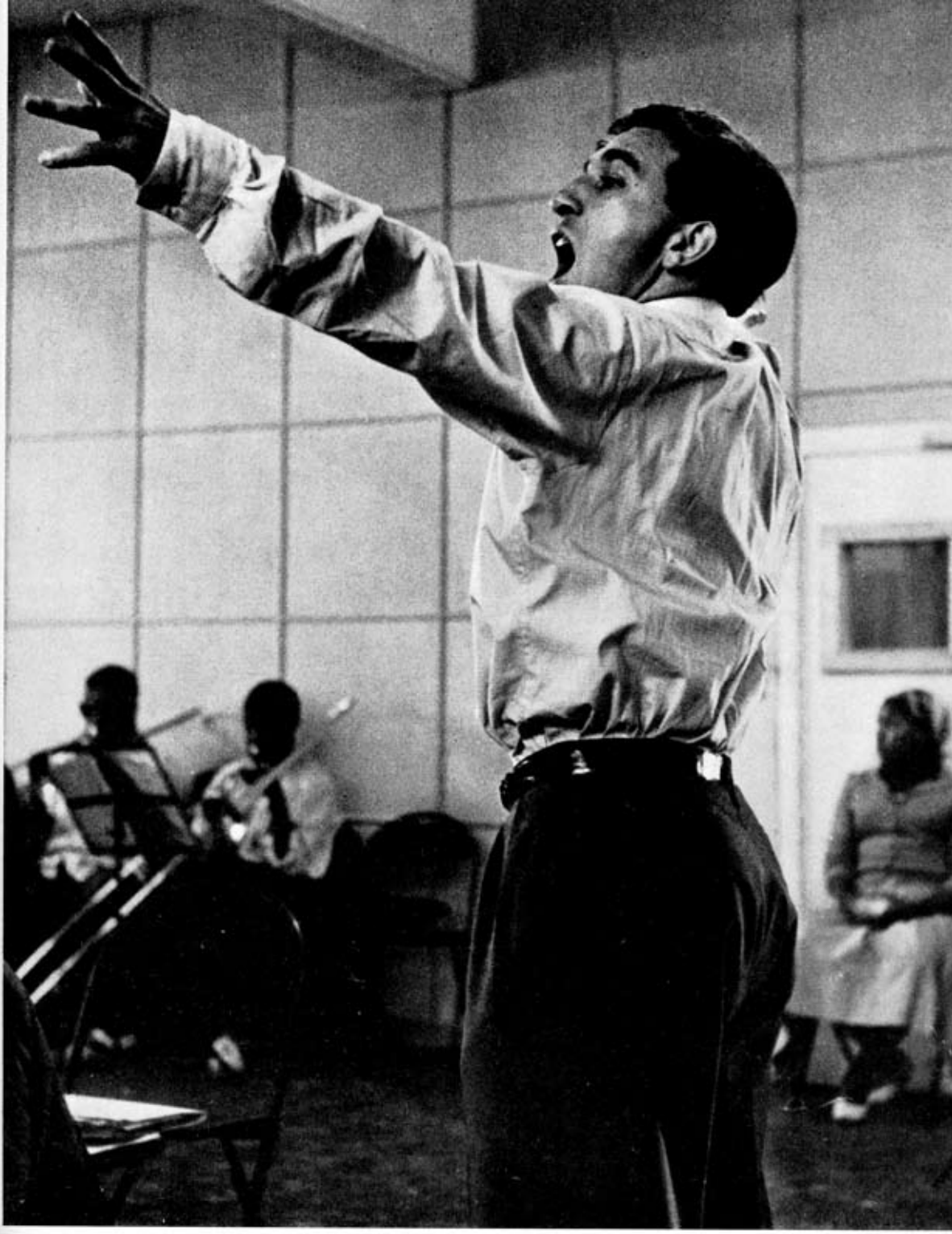
Below: *Stanley Glasser and Mackay Davashe*

Opposite: *Miriam Makeba and Nathan Mdledle (Joyce and King Kong)*

Kiepie Moeketsi (alto-sax and clarinet) and Mackay Davashe

Hugh Masekela, the trumpeter





Stanley Glasser, the musical director, during the recording of the King Kong *record*

Miriam Makeba and Joe Mogotsi (Joyce and Lucky)
in the shebeen scene

The Sergeant, King Kong, and Popcorn—
Bennett Masango, Nathan Mdledle, and Dan Poho

'In case what?'

Instead of answering: 'In case I want a lawyer', a slip of Gwi's led him to say: 'In case I want a woman.'

Everyone went mad. 'Leon nearly fell on his back', recalled Gwigwi later.

Lateness and absence were permanent factors to be coped with. Transport, illness, responsibilities at home and the endless brushes with the law which Africans suffer were often the totally valid excuses. At times rehearsals would be held up while someone was bailed out after being caught without the exemption pass which freed him of the humiliation of having to carry a pass. Each member of the cast and backstage staff was later issued with a special 'King Kong Pass'.

In the words of the song:

'Top shebeen in Jo'burg
Is the Back o' the Moon.'

but at one time the agitated owner of The Dungeon phoned the organizers with news that his building was setting fair to be a strong contender for the title. Ian Bernhardt, on investigating, found a huge pile of empty gin and brandy bottles in an unused corner. He had to reprimand one of the most likeable young members of the cast for seeking to supplement rehearsal pay by bootlegging, but the young man responded and became one of the most reliable members of the company.

Without any concern for sequence, Leon had gradually worked through each vignette, musical number, crowd movement and dance of the three acts of *King Kong*. The songs, individual and choral, had been rehearsed, the cast was word perfect, the dancers knew every step and the band had learned all the music. All this had been done in something of a void. On a Sunday in mid-January, three weeks before the opening night, Leon was to take the cast through the first run of the entire show.

Friends of the producers and cast, Margot Bryant, the publicity agent for the show, the composer Todd Matshikiza and his wife Esme, the lyric-writer Pat Williams, Clive Menell, Ian Bernhardt, the photographer Ian Berry from *Drum*, prop men, prompts, costume-makers, and in fact everyone having the slightest connexion with *King Kong* was dispersed on empty boxes or sitting on the cold floor of The Dungeon. The bare cement of the 'stage' outlined in chalk was set only with two small side rostrums and one large one across the back from which a ramp led down. On the far wall leaned the sets which were being painted by Arthur Goldreich and a

team of helpers in paint-splattered smocks. In the partitioned area Louise Kaye was surreptitiously trying to get on with costume fittings for the players who watched through the windows to see that they did not miss their cues. 'Places please', yelled Leon, and the band began the overture 'Sad Times, Bad Times'. The township atmosphere which surrounded the King Kong story, with its shebeens, gangsters and police, with its washerwomen and children, preachers, penny-whistlers and hawkers, came alive in the bare Dungeon. The polished acting, graceful movements, accomplished singing and the vibrant playing by the band added up to the most exciting afternoon in our experience, and when the final penny-whistle tune faded out there was a hushed silence before wild applause broke out.

Spike and Arnold turned to each other: 'We've made it', they agreed. Leon simply turned his back and walked away—to hide the emotion on his face.

The cast, with the sagging shoulders of utter weariness, queued up for coffee and hot dogs, while someone jokingly played 'In the queue' on the piano. Fortified by the break, excited groups formed and re-formed. Everyone was buoyed up by the warm reception and obvious sincerity of the praises. After a while Leon called everyone together again. 'Congratulations', he said. 'You were wonderful. Now let us start again.'

During the height of the Knife Dance, with music vibrating, the frightened Popcorn crouching on the floor and Lucky and his gangsters laughing their taunts at him, one of the dancers stopped, spun around, clutched himself and fell to the floor. A gasp went up, the music raggedly broke off and a few people rushed towards Rufus. For a horrible moment the spectators thought that he had accidentally been knifed; then they realized that he had put his knee out and had fainted from the pain. 'Get a doctor', said Leon. 'This could be disaster.' Meanwhile some of the girls got together a number of 'prop' blankets with their bright and lovely Basuto designs. They made a rough bed for Rufus to one side of the 'stage'. A half-bottle of brandy was mysteriously produced and poured down Rufus's throat. The play went on.

The other Manhattan Brothers were philosophical. 'He'll be all right', said Nathan. 'We've come through worse than this.' Sympathy would only have made it worse. 'This pity stuff weakens you', explained Rufus later. 'With us you don't give in while you're still alive.' The doctor arrived and gave Rufus an injection—.25 grains of morphine—pushed up his trouser-leg and pulled the knee back while strong hands held Rufus

down. With firm bandage in place, Rufus propped himself against a wall and refused to be taken home until the rehearsal was over. How he remained there, his eyes dark with pain and misery, and how he remained awake with all the brandy and morphine in him until 11 o'clock in the evening, one cannot tell.

Dejection hung over the bleak Dungeon and the cast moved through their parts in a dispirited way as a prompt took Rufus's lines. The remaining gangsters moved on for one of their bigger scenes, in which Rufus took the main part, and Leon suddenly leapt up. He paid Rufus a warm compliment in going through his entire part, word perfect and with every wag of Rufus's tail and every inflection of Rufus's voice as he played Harry the gangster getting away from 'the whole Marshall Square' squad of police.

Within minutes, yells of laughter and shouts of encouragement came from all sides, and then Leon sat quietly down again to watch a revitalized cast finish their long day's work.

'Why
Should every creature drink but I?
Why, man of morals, tell me why.'

ABRAHAM COWLEY. *Drinking*

VI. RECORDING

FOR two months the arrangers and the copyists virtually lived at Spike's home. Shikalela, the Zulu servant who had been with the household for twelve years starting as a lad of 17, catered to their needs. He struck up a bantering relationship with everyone. 'What, you still here?' he would remark as he wound his way past overflowing ashtrays with some early morning tea. To show his brotherhood with the musicians, he would sometimes prepare typical African dishes, and was voted the finest 'putu' porridge maker in the country.

Many stories of their past experiences would enliven the lunch-hour breaks, and in these anecdotes it seemed that whenever the pianist Sol Klaaste was involved in an incident he landed up holding the baby. To earn money the jazz group had frequently accepted engagements at halls in areas known to be very tough. Rival gangsters would often clash and it was a sure bet before the evening was over there would be a free-for-all. Anything could spark off a fight, jealousy over a girl, rival loyalties to different football teams, or simply too much drink.

Being forbidden by law to buy liquor other than that brewed in the municipal beerhalls, Africans resort to concoctions as fanciful and potent as the worst of Prohibition mixtures in the dry days of the United States 'Mqomboti', the corn liquor brewed by the municipal council, is a respectable drink, approved, healthy, and the police fines are not so stiff if one is found brewing one's own. But it can be added to. Perhaps the most potent of home-brewed mixtures are 'Barberton', brewed from yeast and bread (the staler the better), and 'skokiaan' with its yeast and malt basis. There are others, the less flamboyant being made with pineapples, grapes, potato peels, banana skins, and any of these can be had from the shebeens or at dances. But drunks mean fights, and when a fight starts at a dance

all parties insist that the band keeps on playing. If they stop, everyone will turn on them. Gangsters generally have a 'hands-off' attitude to musicians, but sometimes they became exuberant, grab one of the bandsmen and start beating him up. Whether a musician stays or whether he tries to leave he is bound to suffer some damage. He is armed only with his musical instrument (although the wisdom of experience taught Mzala—Jacob Lepere—to tie a chopper to his double bass, and Mac to keep a sturdy stick in his tenor-sax case) and this is too precious to damage. A head wound will heal, but a bashed-in trombone is an expensive loss. On occasions, the necessity to escape would become obvious, and one by one the instrumentalist would sneak out of a back window. Sol at his piano would usually have his back to his disappearing colleagues. When finally he missed their musical support in the bedlam, he would turn round to find himself alone on a deserted platform. He knew if there was no music there would be trouble, whereas while he kept playing there was some chance; there was a chance too that the others could get away. Next morning he would mournfully berate them all.

'After a concert', Kiepie Moeketsi would relate, 'I often walked the ten miles to my house at George Goch township. A pick-up van patrolling the street would stop and a couple of policemen would jump out.'

'Where did you steal that case?' one would ask.

'It's my own, baas. I'm a musician.'

A pair of rough hands would open the case and discover the alto-sax, probably the first the policeman had ever seen.

'And this?'

'It's a fluitjie [flute], baas.'

'Play it.'

The policemen would get two shocks. Firstly the 'fluitjie' would be played the only way a sax could be, held vertically and not horizontally, and secondly they heard a black man blowing out a (carefully chosen) folk-tune that they immediately recognized.

'It was the only way to prove myself', said Kiepie, 'and there in the dark deserted street I'd have to play tune after tune. One cop felt sorry for me after keeping me there till three in the morning, and he actually gave me a lift home in the Black Maria.'

One warm evening, Sol Klaaste and the Manhattan Brothers had been playing in a dance-hall at Springs. 'We managed to get hold of two dozen quarts of beer', Sol said. 'They were in the boot of Nathan's car, when

we were stopped near Sophiatown by a police van. They searched the car and found the beer, and we were promptly removed to the nearest charge office. We didn't have enough money but managed to phone a friend who bailed us out. Once free, we sat round discussing the stupidity of *all* of us getting into trouble when the case came up. It was agreed that one should take the rap. Well, everyone started making excuses why he shouldn't be the one. Nathan said he had to look after his car; Rufus was in trouble at home because he came and went at such odd times, and he couldn't afford more trouble; Ronnie's son was going to leave for school the next week-end and had to be helped with his packing. Well, everyone was finding good reasons and when it came to me', said bachelor Sol, 'I couldn't think of any good excuse why I shouldn't be the one to plead guilty.' He was elected to take the rap and was quite resigned while everyone pooled money to pay for the expected fine.

'The awful thought that I might be sent to gaol and not given the option of a fine', Sol went on, 'didn't strike me till we were all lined up in court.' The pleas all along the line were 'Not guilty', 'Not guilty' until the by now miserable Sol broke in with a shaky 'Guilty'. The others were dismissed and Sol's misgivings were fully brought home to him as he had visions of languishing in gaol for months. 'Luckily we—or rather I—got off with a £25 fine. I paid it with pleasure', said Sol.

Mackay Davashe related another incident which occurred after a small-town dance. Five members of the band were cheerfully singing as they walked down the middle of the road; the inevitable patrol van drew up and they were ordered in to be taken to the charge office for questioning. 'We arrived at the office and noticed for the first time that suddenly there were six of us', Mac said. 'Each put on his most hangdog and stupid expression. Our answers about who we were and what we were doing were full of 'Ja baas' and 'Nee baas' and it looked like being O.K. but you can never tell. When the cop came to the last chap he said he had been simply walking along on the pavement near us and was also hauled in. Well, we were all let off one by one—by this time it was 'Nee Kroon' and 'Ja Kroon' and 'Dankie my Kroon'—but that poor guy was still there trying to explain himself when we left.'

Soon the demands of *King Kong* grew to the pitch where none of the music team ever had the time to go home. Numerous messages were relayed

to Hugh from his family wanting to know whether he was still alive. These came via the grapevine to which the African resorts because of the absence of facilities which the city man can generally take for granted. Far from telephones, a message would change hands three or four times in its progress through the city before reaching its destination. Kiepie Moeketsi once remarked that so many dangers beset the African man in the street that each time he left his home, his mother said good-bye as if it was for ever.

Sol, Kiepie, Spike and Mac no longer worked on the same musical number together, but would work on four different ones. If anyone finished a number to the satisfaction of the others, and they often interrupted one another for criticism and advice, he would then wake one of the copyists, take his bed and grab a few hours' sleep, sometimes between four and seven in the morning. 'At times I'd feel I was giving in,' said Mac, 'but while the others were at it one had to keep going.'

To their already impossible schedule was added yet another task. The Gallo recording company had agreed to make a long-playing record of *King Kong*, and it was decided that this should be made available for sale on the opening night.

A day or two before recording was due to begin one of the trumpeters in the band let them down. At a morning rehearsal Spike was becoming desperate and said to Mackay Davashe: 'Mac, isn't there *anyone* we can get?'

'Well', said Mac, 'there's a guy Simon plays trumpet. He's a packer in a warehouse in town.'

It was 11.30 in the morning when Mackay with Gwigi Mrwebi and one or two others left Dorkay House. By 12.15 Simon was sitting rehearsing with the band on a borrowed trumpet. Mac airily explained that they had gone to Simon's boss and said: 'We are neighbours of your employee, Simon, and we have come to tell him his house is due to be demolished this afternoon. He's got to come and move his belongings.' Simon was very worried about his home and family and it was not until they were well on their way to The Dungeon that he learnt why he had been kidnapped.

The *King Kong* record with its fourteen 'cuts' was made in less than two weeks, quite a rush when one considers that it often takes many top professional artists overseas an average of one week to make a single 'cut'. The 'stars' had no vanities about their superior voices, and in recording the music the Saints, the Manhattan Brothers and Miriam Makeba would

not hesitate to help out by singing in the choruses of numbers in which they had no stage part.

The band was by now a close-knit group with literally a language of its own. They were the last of a hitherto totally unknown tribe called the 'Yugudus'. The chief of the Yugudus was Kiepie and the 'scribe of the tribe', Jonas, constantly added new words to their language. That Kiepie was the only Yugudu unable to speak or understand a single word of this language was quite appropriate. His position was too exalted, and it was only right that his henchmen should express his wishes and commands. Only men were important in the tribe and their Yugudu names were all prefixed by I-. Their wives or girl friends had the same name with Ha- in front and male or female children had pu- or poepie- before the name. Thus the band referred to Joe Mogotsi as I-joskie, his wife was Hajoskie and his children Pujoskie and Poepiejoskie. Gwamba meant good, gwamba gwamba, very good. Anything excellent was, of course, gwamba gwamba gwamba. Situations were either 'tring'—most enjoyable, or 'trang'—really awful. Tring-trang, philosophically enough, described marriage.

There were few moments of relaxation and the recording further taxed the voices and strength of the company. Murmurs began that Leon was killing the show in his drive for perfection. The enthusiasm of the cast was waning, as they had to repeat each little section until they were exhausted.

One Saturday evening a number of people went along to a night-club to hear the Manhattan Brothers and Miriam Makeba give a most successful half-hour's entertainment. Someone mentioned to Leon that many people were beginning to criticize him for working the cast too hard. Leon's answer was this:

'I don't care a damn if the voices are feeble and the cast half-dead. This is the first time the Africans are getting a chance to show what they can do. I want the audience to enjoy an evening of fully professional entertainment. We've had enough patronizing whites saying "How sweet" and "How clever". They are going to forget that they are watching a bunch of black people. They are not going to be given the opportunity to "make allowances". Every cue is going to be right on time, every speech word perfect, every movement self-assured, if it kills them—and me.'

The work at the University was accelerated. By this time the entire cast was being professionally employed, and the principals were being accommodated at the University's residence for non-Europeans so that they

would be readily available for rehearsals. The band had no time for meals between recordings and rehearsals and Spike would often phone home at midday to say, 'Please bring some food for fifteen people. We've only got half an hour between 2 and 2.30.' We would frantically make large pots of soup or stew, or dozens of sandwiches and thermos flasks of coffee and rush to the hall at the precise moment. Meals were secondary, sleep was secondary as the last few relentless days of lighting rehearsals and dress rehearsals crept on.

Arthur Goldreich's set was painted and ready, and carpenters were busily sawing and banging away while Arnold Dover shouted instructions to invisible bodies up on the catwalk and Leon was attempting to keep the cast quiet while they were backstage. 'Please remember to keep quiet in the dressing rooms', cautioned Leon. 'It's all right while the dressing-rooms are closed, but if anyone opens the door . . . Africa emerges.'

During one ghastly dress rehearsal, many of the colour combinations and styles of the costumes which had looked good on paper changed under the lights. The effects were horrible, and Leon scrapped about forty costumes in one afternoon, leaving Arthur Goldreich with the task of selecting new materials and getting Louise Kaye and Miriam Jacobson to remake the costumes or have them dyed. Fortunately Monty Berman, a voluntary helper who had a dry-cleaning business, looked after such matters and the clothes were dyed in record time.

One day Leon surveyed his 'Township Sunday' scene and decided that no township Sunday was complete without a weight-lifter. Spike undertook to get one, as Dugmore, a trombonist in the band, was a keen physical culturist and would surely know a weight-lifter. He agreed to produce one at the University on the following afternoon. Leon, on being introduced to the weight-lifter, momentarily lost his poise; for Peter Radebe stood 4 ft. 6 in. high. Leon regained command and took Peter on stage.

'Right Peter,' he said, 'how much space do you need?'

'Space?'

'Yes, space. Do you need so much?' asked Leon, spreading his arms. 'So much?' spreading wider, as no reply was forthcoming.

'What for?' Peter was puzzled.

'For the weights, man. How much space do you need for the weights?'

'Oh', said Peter blandly. 'No weights. I hurt my back last week. No weights. I just strike poses.'

Leon gave Spike a murderous look and retired to think this out.

'All right', he concluded. 'Take your place here. This is what you must do. . . .'

Two weeks later Peter reported to Leon: 'My back is all right. Now I can lift weights.'

'Wonderful,' said Leon, 'we'll get you some cardboard weights.'

'Cardboard weights! Oh no. If I come here I break my training. How will I keep fit with cardboard weights?'

Leon muttered, 'Spike, I'll murder you. A weight-lifter was all I asked for. . . .' It was decided that the proper equipment should be bought for Peter. On the opening night the 'Township Sunday' was complete with a 4 ft. 6 in. pocket Hercules throwing 150 pounds of real weights about the stage.

VII. KING KONG

HUNDREDS of people had by now been drawn into the orbit of the *King Kong* production. The organizing committee had started with three members of the Union (Ian Bernhardt, John Bolon and Ralph Feinstein) and three representatives of the African Medical Scholarships Trust Fund, (David Abramson, Lawrence Geffen and Ivan Sampson). The committee was strengthened at an early stage by the inclusion of Ruth Hellman, Robert Loder of the Anglo-American Corporation, and Edward Joseph, a stockbroker. It is almost impossible to single out individuals who gave so much of their time and energy to the production, but Edward Joseph's warm personality pervaded the whole work of the committee. His hospitality extended to almost daily lunch-time meetings at his office, and numerous all-night sessions at his home. His wide range of contacts did a lot to rope in the enthusiastic assistance of many people. Edward Joseph was to die a few months later and the Africans of the *King Kong* cast paid tribute to him with a memorial concert.

As the production progressed, Robert Loder evolved into the chief administrator on the committee and devoted hours to the budgets which controlled the show and the documents and contracts which were needed for every phase of the operation. The secretary, Rica Hodgson, was the only person professionally employed on the organizational side, but she put far more into her job than her salary demanded. She developed what Ian Bernhardt described as 'the most colossal scrounging technique. The committee worked on the simple principle that we should pay for nothing unless it was impossible to beg, borrow or steal it.' Rica was strongly supported in her scrounging efforts by Edward Joseph, who was always concerned to see that the charities would benefit to the fullest possible extent from the show's proceeds.

While Rica Hodgson was rounding up everything from shoes to timber, many of the office problems were falling into the hands of Ruth Hellman. One of her major tasks was to master the complexities of official red tape, proclaimed areas, passes and permits, influx control, employment regulations, in order to transfer people to the employ of the *King Kong* organization.

This was probably the most expensively mounted local production ever undertaken. About £7,000 had been spent before the opening night, and that by an organization, the Union of Southern African Artists, which six months before had struggled to raise enough to pay the rent. It was the aim of the organizing committee to cover all production costs on the proceeds from advertising and from ticket sales for the opening night. That they did so was a tribute to the zeal of the First Night Committee. There were thirty-five members, with John Rudd as Chairman, whose major contribution to the success of *King Kong* was that they launched it with all the glitter and glamour of a real 'must' on the social calendar.

The First Night Committee meetings had been held in an opulent Johannesburg restaurant which contrasted starkly with the dingy rehearsal rooms. Margot Byrant, as publicity agent, had made extremely good use of these occasions, and for weeks the social pages of the newspapers had featured pictures of the glamorous young people who were working on the committee. It had been a constant source of amusement to the cast to see these pictures of people with whom they had 'no connexion', but on the opening night the 1,100-seat theatre was sold out at prices ranging from one to three guineas. The share of the proceeds to the African Medical Scholarships Trust Fund of a single week's run would be sufficient to train one African doctor.

Arnold Dover's task in the last weeks had grown to vast proportions. In addition to having dance rehearsals and full rehearsals he was, as stage director, responsible for the 'setting-up' at the University. This involved him in endless consultations with Piet van der Paauw who had constructed the sets, with the University technical staff, and with theatrical hire agents. By the opening night Arnold's elaborate control-board with many buttons, little lights blinking and wires going in all directions kept him in touch with every phase of backstage activity.

Ralph Feinstein, an advertising consultant, had taken on what was probably the most thankless of tasks in the whole production, that of assembling the programme. Long after the closing date for receiving copy had been reached, members of the First Night Committee were still bringing in copy and securing new advertisements. However, in a really hectic week-end the 40-page programme was finalized. Acknowledgements 'For services rendered, assistance or donations in kind' listed seventy-seven commercial firms: dry-cleaners, suppliers of timber, tea, ice-cream, flowers, paint, uniforms and overalls, bicycles, trousers and caps, cosmetics, musical

instruments . . . all these names bore witness to the generosity with which hundreds responded to the demands of *King Kong*. Advertising was donated by Drum Publications in *Golden City Post* and by the Bantu Press (Pty.) Ltd. in *The World, Ilanga Lase Natal* and *Imvo Zabantsundu* (Cape). Pages of the programme were filled with expensive advertising and four major sponsors—the Central News Agency, the bottlers of Coca-Cola, President Giant Cigarettes and the Anglo-American Corporation of S.A. Ltd.—stood behind the show in the event of a flop to the extent of £4,000. In addition ten private individuals had guaranteed a considerable sum.

The University had chosen the opening day Monday, 2 February 1959, to pull up half the steps leading to the main building, and so from 7.30 that evening people made their way up to the foyer through a jungle of wooden fences. Johannesburg society is a strange and fickle one and few would have ventured to predict the response—particularly of a first night audience. The First Night Committee had roped in everyone of any consequence in the city. Mining magnates and their families and friends were there, the leading lights of the theatre, artistic and musical worlds had come to see what this much-publicized show was about; all shades of political opinion were represented. Some had merely come along out of curiosity, others were veteran first-nighters to be seen at any opening, others were genuine in their support of a 'good cause'. The Mayor and other city dignitaries, the press and many of the people who were in so many ways instrumental in marshalling the myriad factors needed for this enormous undertaking were there.

In the flower-bedecked foyer among all the jewellery, furs and evening-dress suits were a number of stalls—*à la* township market-place—one with sweets and cigarettes, another with Arthur Goldreich's bright cover designs of the *King Kong* record. Attractive young women, including 'Miss World', were programme sellers and usherettes, and the flash of press photographers' bulbs brightened the scene.

'If you'd shouted "View-Hulloo" in the vestibule', wrote Oliver Walker in the *Star* later, 'half the men would have instinctively tried to leap into the saddle.'

Nervous knots of people included composer Todd and his wife, Harry Bloom, Clive and Irene Menell, Arthur Goldreich, Ian Bernhardt. There was nothing more they could do. Backstage the tension was tremendous. Leon could do no more than wish everyone luck, and in the pit the nervous

members of the band were taking last-minute comfort from Spike. Miriam Makeba was receiving a 'pain-killer' injection for an ankle which she had sprained rather badly at the dress rehearsal the night before. So well did she hide her pain that even those who knew about it forgot that there was anything wrong with her. Rufus had a broad grin of beaming pleasure on his face as the doctor, after examining his knee, told him he could go on without the crutches he had been using for nearly a month. It was decided that Little Joseph, the penny-whistler who had cut his foot on a broken cold-drink bottle, could keep the bandage which he had been wearing for two weeks.

The front of house manager received his cue from the stage director, Arnold Dover, and began to switch off the foyer lights and ring the warning five-minute, three-minute and 'curtain' bells.

Leon's persistence was well rewarded. There was not a single hitch. 'The *King Kong* opening night was an exception', said Leon, 'in that as an opening night it attained what had been best in rehearsal. Nothing had been left to chance and it had all the polish a producer hopes for.' Everyone melted from their 'let's see what they can do' attitude to one of total immersion in the play. The early nervousness of the cast, characterized by the slight stiffness, melted as they felt the warmth of the response of the audience, which grew until at the final curtain there was a wildly enthusiastic ovation. The company took curtain call after curtain call. Leon in a curtain speech called *King Kong* 'the greatest creative thrill of my theatre career'.

The band let loose with an uninhibited version of Kwela Kong. All their pent-up emotion was released and instead of dispersing the crowd gathered to listen. Streams of people converged on the orchestra pit to peer down at a ragged group of musicians, some of them stripped of jackets, shirts and even vests, for the evening was warm, the tension warmer, and the pit had gradually become an oven.

Bloke Modisane, writing in *Drum* (April 1959) said: '*King Kong* . . . is the wonderful fulfilment of a great expectation. Not just because it is a brave experiment or the "first". Nor does its being pure South African necessarily endow it with a "home product" halo. No excuses, partisan or otherwise, are needed to pass it off as good.'

'Ubuhle balomhlaba
Bufana Wentxa Tyambo
Aboyiswa Lukhula
Kwa Nobudenge.'
(The beauty of this world
Is like a blossom.
It cannot be hidden by weeds
Nor destroyed by ignorance.)

TODD MATSHIKIZA. From 'Sad Times, Bad Times', the overture to *King Kong*.

VIII. THE PRESS

KING KONG was a success. How much of a success, though, was not realized until the rave reviews appeared in the newspapers, and until the booking agency 'Show Service' found itself inundated, and Percy Tucker and his staff had to cope with enormous queues forming hourly outside their Eloff Street offices. Queues went right along the arcade, into Eloff Street and around the corner into Jeppe Street. More than five thousand bookings came in by post. Telephone bookings were made from as far as a thousand miles away and from every part of the country. Special buses were hired by groups who travelled from towns within a radius of three hundred miles. Johannesburg cinema managers were phoning Show Service to ask when *King Kong* was to end, as their attendance figures were being affected. The Post Office complained several times about congestion on Show Service telephone lines. *King Kong* opened on 2 February. By 10 February there was not a single seat left for any of the performances and many people waiting to book had to be turned away. Leon, Spike, Arnold, Ian and indeed anyone connected with the show, were constantly receiving phone calls asking for tickets. These often began, 'You won't remember me but . . .', or 'I waited in a queue for six hours but . . .'. King Kong fever had hit Johannesburg. The tunes blared forth from gramophone shops and over the transmission services of the green 'African' buses. They penetrated to every back alley and to the servants' quarters throughout the town. Seeing a friend off at Jan Smuts airport, Spike and I

nudged one another when we heard a porter whistling 'Little Kong' as he hustled about with his load of suitcases. Todd's tunes were everywhere. A *Zonk* reporter wrote: 'Funny, now that King Kong has come back to life via a great new stage show, guys who crossed to the other side of the street if they saw him in real life, are walking around bragging that the late thug was their mate. . . .'

King Kong crept into strange places. Advertisements proclaimed that the stars of *King Kong* 'wear X brand berets', 'smoke X brand cigarettes' or 'drink X brand tea'. The ultimate in absurdity was a correspondence college advertisement in which the prestige of the public relations officer—a one-time boxer—was enhanced by the description 'A contemporary of King Kong'.

Oliver Walker's review in the *Star* (Johannesburg, Tuesday, 3 February 1959) had a headline across three columns, '*King Kong* is greatest thrill in 20 years of South African theatre-going', and went on to say, 'this abounding vitality from the other side of the tracks would have meant nothing without the glitter and polish of Leon Gluckman's direction'.

The *Rand Daily Mail's* full page of pictures was headed: 'Here's the Township Spirit! For the first time African talent has been used in a constructive way—not merely to show Africans doing tricks, but to express African life and experience.'

On the Saturday after opening night, the *Star* came out with an entire page of pictures headlined: 'They call it Jazz Opera—Scintillating King Kong.'

The *Sunday Express* (8 February) said in large type: 'King Kong—You've never seen anything so real on the S.A. stage before.'

'It's King Size!' said the *Sunday Times*, and, proclaimed *Golden City Post*: 'King Kong IS GREAT!'

Drum for March carried four pages of pictures headed: 'Black and White sweat together to make King Kong a SMASH HIT.'

The *Zonk* (March 1959) headline was: 'King Kong—a milestone in African theatre.'

The Afrikaans papers had this to say: *Dagbreek*: 'We ought to send presentations like this to the Paris Drama Festival or the Edinburgh Festival because it is a rare opportunity to show the outside world an essential aspect of South African Bantu culture.'

Die Vaderland, in praising Leon's production, said: 'Impressive use was made of the contrasts inherent in the story to reveal the tremendous

emotional depth of the life-struggle of the Native. In addition this was one of the best mounted and rounded-off productions (imported or local) seen on the Johannesburg stage for a long time.'

All this reaction caught everyone almost totally unawares. It had become obvious that *King Kong* could run for as long as it had a place to play. Ian Bernhardt was frantically trying to find other suitable stages, since the University was reluctant to extend the booking into term-time for other than University purposes. There were obvious disadvantages in moving the venue, and no other available stage in Johannesburg was big enough to cope with the mammoth sets and cast—still less with the complications of the lighting plot. Finally, however, the University made an exception and Ian was able to announce after the last curtain call (on 18 March) that they had been granted another week's run in April. Thirty-seven performances had been given to audiences totalling 40,000 people.

One of Ian's major problems was to fill the break between the March closing and the April reopening. A season had been arranged in Southern Rhodesia but this had to be cancelled because of the flare-up of political troubles in the Federation. The fears of the organizers in letting the cast disperse and then collecting them together again were very real. There was also the obligation to keep them on the payroll while they were not working. Many had been given leave or had given up their jobs entirely when full-time rehearsal pay began.

The obvious step seemed to be to take the show to Pretoria. It was sufficiently near to warrant striking the set and moving everything and everyone for the short free period until the Johannesburg run could be resumed. Ian applied to the Pretoria City Council for permission to use the City Hall, and was refused. Similarly the University of Pretoria did not want to make their auditorium available. In a letter to the *Star* of 20 February, the 'Afrikaanse Kultuurraad' expressed its appreciation of the firm step taken by Pretoria's City Council and University. The 'Board of Culture' added that they did not want in any way to stand in the path of the Bantu in the development of his culture—if (in the instance concerned) it could be called 'culture'. A wide range of opinions was reflected in many newspapers.

Oliver Walker had the last word on the subject in a *Forum* article headed 'Mrs. van der Grundy says it's not culture', in which he asked: 'If *King Kong*, the biggest box-office draw in South African theatrical history, had been called a "folk" opera instead of a jazz opera, would it have been

considered suitable for Pretoria? I ask the question because when the Pretoria City Council refused to give it house-room the Afrikaanse Kultuurraad applauded them on the grounds that they didn't think it was "culture" and because "productions by Natives for White audiences clash with the country's traditional ideas. . . ."'

The Pretoria City Council finally offered to erect a tent in the Agricultural Show Grounds.

Ian gave Pretoria up as a bad job and set about making the arrangements for Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth.

The reaction to *King Kong* from the less sophisticated among the African audiences at times reflected the lack of theatrical tradition, the difficulty of understanding the stage and the concept of a play. Many people knew the Manhattan Brothers, the Woody Woodpeckers, the Saints and others as variety groups.

'What is this King Kong?' they asked.

'I don't understand', one complained. 'We heard the guy was dead. How can he come back?'

Some members of the audience were disappointed. 'Why don't we get the real guy?' they wondered. 'There's not enough music', was a frequent complaint. 'Why does everybody talk all the time?'

Many people had never seen the real King Kong. 'They don't know him', Phyllis Mqomo said, 'and think Nathan is the boxer. Mind you, Nathan came to live that part, even outside the theatre. He was always a natty dresser and a very gentle man. He seemed to become rougher, wore his hair long and instead of his usual neat suit he took to that black lumberjacket like in his part of the King.'

'Nathan knows what it means to be top man and get nowhère', Ian Bernhardt remarked, 'to be top man in his field for years and never enlarge the field, never have scope to grow'.

Some of the boxing associates and friends of the real King Kong were pleased with the show.

'It's something he would have loved', said one, 'seeing his name and his picture all over town.'

'He was a showman, a crowd pleaser', said another. 'He used to walk up and down in front of the Carlton Hotel in Eloff Street in his boxing outfit just to see the reaction on people's faces. Now he's got all the attention he wanted—too late.'

His chief sparring mate was one who felt that he ought to be playing the stage King Kong, and complained to Mackay Davashe that Nathan had no right to the part.

'But you can't sing', Mac told him.

'King Kong wasn't a singer. Why should you want me to be a singer?' was the totally realistic reply.

Others saw it another way.

'One time I was in a shebeen', said Rufus, 'a fellow said: "Look! What's happening to Nathan? That guy is no boxer. How can he play King Kong?" '

'Are you a boxer?'

'Yeah.'

'Why then are you not playing King Kong?'

'I can't sing.'

'Nathan is no boxer but he can sing.'

With a light dawning on his face the man got up and went to shake Nathan's hand. 'If you're an artist every hoodlum thinks you're soft', said Rufus, 'but that man found Nathan was a "squeezer". They saw they got a fair shake from him, so after that they let us alone.'

The players and the play were inextricably mixed and many people found it difficult to understand the Bus Queue scene. In this scene the crowd is in gales of laughter at the news that the great King Kong has been beaten by a middleweight. Kong bursts in and the laughter breaks off as he shouts: 'Anyone want to try me out. . . . You was all laughing so nice. . . . C'mon laugh. Lemme see who's going to laugh.'

Lucky's mocking laughter heralds a passage in which the Prowlers taunt King unmercifully.

'Are the Manhattan Brothers still together?' asked a member of the audience meeting Rufus later.

'Sure', Rufus told him. 'Why do you ask?'

'The way you laugh at Nathan. Are you really laughing? How can you mow your friend down like that?'

Another one-time admirer of the Manhattan Brothers came up to say: 'You guys. I hate you.'

'Do you mean you hate the Brothers?'

'No. I only hate three. How can you laugh at Nathan like that? He's your friend.'

Rufus tried to explain. 'We were hired to do it. We're getting paid to laugh at him and he's getting paid to be laughed at.'

The man wandered away saying: 'What some people will do for money!'

Misinterpretations come not only from the audience. In the same Bus Queue scene, Kong in his rage and bitterness at the taunts attacks a small boy who comes in saying, 'Hiya King. How'd you go in the fight last night? I bet ya murdered him.' Kong gives the small boy a vicious shove and sends him sprawling across the stage. This boy, Mafuta, blamed not Nathan but the other Manhattan Brothers, Joe, Rufus and Ronnie, for making Nathan cross enough to treat him so roughly.

For many of the cast there was a strange contrast in playing to white and non-white audiences. 'When you're playing to white houses you can see faces and feel you're talking to someone, but in the dark of a non-European show it's a void. The blackness is complete', said Stephen Moloi. 'The reaction is totally different too', said Dan Poho, 'especially in the killing of Joyce. With white audiences everyone is still; with our folks it's the beginning of laughter. We've discussed it many times and there are many theories why Africans laugh at the most tense moments. Some think it's an escape from embarrassment, fear, tension.' One man who spoke to Stephen reckons that 'irrelevant laughter is an excellent manifestation of intellectual poverty'. Others feel that the reaction to fear must be the same with all people, but that whites, perhaps more introvert, will gasp where blacks will giggle. 'In real life, in the townships', said Dan, 'the reaction is to run in fear. People there are used to murders carried out daily. Here at the play the laughter may be relief at the unreality and harmlessness of it.'

'Yank: *Sure! Lock me up! Put me in a cage!*
Policeman: *What you been doin'?*
Yank: *Enough to gimme life for! I was born, see!*
Sure dat's de charge. Write it in de blotter.
I was born, get me?'

EUGENE O'NEILL. *The Hairy Ape*

IX. BACKSTAGE

THE husbands, wives, sweethearts, mothers and children of the members of the cast were able at last to appreciate why they had barely seen them all these months. Many who had threatened to walk out if their lives didn't become more normal were now proud to be associated with *King Kong*.

All the heady reaction was however only one side of the picture. Thousands of people being drawn nightly by the magic of *King Kong* were happily unaware of many behind-scenes headaches. None of the 'usual quota of King Kong headaches' harmed the show but they caused much argument backstage. The cast were being well paid and all had earned the bonuses which had been worked out on a basis of the percentage of the house which could be filled. Since the houses were 100 per cent every night everyone was getting the maximum amount. But the band decided that they were at least as important as the actors, and should be paid on a similar scale.

Unpunctuality was an unnerving factor, despite the system of fines administered by the disciplinary committee made up of elected members of the cast and organizing committee. On the recommendation of the disciplinary committee a member of the company was dismissed from the show. The committee took to heart Leon's insistence that under all conditions the show had to go on, and that there was no worse crime in theatre than not to arrive for a performance. 'Even if there is illness at home or a crisis in your family, you must come', he had said in a pep talk to the cast. 'You have taken on a responsibility to others and you must meet it.'

'Excuse me, Mr. Gluckman,' said Mabel Mafuya, 'if my mother is dying I won't come, but I'm glad to say she's not in hospital or even sick.'

Fortunately for Leon, his attempt to reply was drowned in a gale of laughter. At the end of the tour, however, Arnold Dover was able to say that he had been impressed by the wonderful behaviour of the cast, the best company in his long experience.

The task of the wardrobe mistress was a difficult one. On occasions if the cast couldn't find costumes they would simply put on anything that came to hand. This was generally not discernible by an unknowing audience, though they may have been faintly puzzled by the appearance, for example, of one lone pair of bright red pants in a row of blue and khaki ones.

Some members of the company, who had struggled their way along trying to earn livings and cope with their many problems, drank a fair amount. Despite South Africa's stringent liquor laws for black men, they were in fine training and could take prodigious amounts without noticeable effect. A few in the band were like jazzmen the world over, who find release in drugs or drink and can play better after a few warming tots. Two in particular caused some worry, and in the few days before opening night two other bandsmen were detailed not to let them out of sight. The idea was then considered of handing out supplies of a drug which makes anyone who so much as drinks cough-mixture with a trace of alcohol in it become violently ill.

The band had to get used to being stuck away in an orchestra pit. They had always been right on the stage in previous ventures, responding to audience reaction, and being the visible mainstay of any programme. The band moved from The Dungeon to the 'Devil's Pit' and were unhappily excluded from so much as a peep of what was going on above their heads. Only Mackay Davashe, as leader and conductor, had his chair raised so that he could watch the progress on stage and give the band their cues.

Two of the most notorious gangs in Johannesburg at this time were the 'Msomi' and the 'Spoilers'. Members of the latter were supplying drink and causing chaos in the dressing-rooms. 'What the hell must I do with those bums who are bringing liquor to the cast?' asked Ian clapping his hand to his forehead and drawing it down over his face. 'Do I throw them out or try to talk some sense into them?' The simple explanation of their presence was that a member of the backstage staff, a real 'gangster's moll', had become jealous of someone prettier who was interested in the same man and had invited the gangsters along to threaten her and teach

her a lesson. 'If she doesn't lay off I'll fix her up', said the moll. She was asked to take it easy. 'We can't afford scenes in a place like this', she was told. The girl was sent away and was very bitter. 'If we hadn't gone on tour', said one of the members of the chorus, 'there would have been real trouble.'

One Friday night when *King Kong* had been running a week, one of the leading actors was walking along with a friend who had been to see the show and they were picked up by the police. The other man, a drummer, was Coloured and not African and he could have gone free; but he chose to stay with his friend. The actor had forgotten his *King Kong* pass but, as he later explained, 'the worst times are when you're caught without a pass and it's a few yards away in your jacket or in your room and the cops won't let you go and fetch it'. The arrested pair were not charged with anything, but the next morning they were herded with a 'span' of prisoners under guard and taken to work in the garden of a policeman's home. They stayed all day digging and moving stones, saying nothing, but very worried about the show that evening and trying to think of a way to let Ian Bernhardt know their whereabouts. A request to use a telephone would have forced the police to press charges, as once someone outside knew about them, their detention would have had to be explained. Towards 6 o'clock, when thoughts of trying to escape were going round in their heads, the owner of the house came up, patted them on the shoulders and said: 'You've been good boys' ('boys' to a South African boss can be anything from 6 to 60 years old) 'and worked well. You can go now.' They reached the University just in time for the performance.

The unity often felt in a project of this type was shown in endless apt quotations from the show, and there were many occasions when the company raised a knowing laugh with some King Kongese. '"It's coming down fast all around us,' referring to the demolition of the township in the play, was used to describe the rain when the cast were stranded on the steps for nearly an hour one day while a freak cloudburst drenched Johannesburg. 'Quickly in love' became 'Gwigwi's in love' and Gwi Mrwebi, being a responsible married man, threatened them with the words of the play: 'I'm going to see my lawyer about this.'

They were seasoned professionals after their first five weeks' run and 'the show must go on' was the order of the day, regardless of sprained ankles (Miriam and Ruth), bruised bones (Phyllis after being involved in a car smash), and a painful knee (Rufus).

Some of the people who had to deal with the daily crises did so with infinite patience. Others became thoroughly exasperated, claiming that with all the faults and difficulties of catering to so many needs, few of the company appreciated that they had steady jobs and were being adequately paid for their work for the first time, and that they benefited in hundreds of ways by merely being part of a professional company.

One man who had worked for months to help *King Kong* to success finally decided that he had had enough of hard daily work and difficult problems with the show at night. 'I'm going to try living like a human being again', he decided. 'I haven't taken a girl out or seen a movie in weeks, and no one appreciates what we're trying to do. I'm giving this week-end up to ME.' I met him back at the Great Hall on Monday. 'What a week-end!' he cried, 'and do you know something? The only black face I saw the whole of yesterday belonged to my caddie.'

The new academic year was starting, and it was time for Spike Glasser to take up his lectureship in music at the University of Cape Town. Spike left after miserable good-byes from the Yugudus. 'Man, it's so lonely between acts', wrote Hugh Masekela, 'we keep imagining that you'll pop down into the pit and say, "That was great chaps. Now give it stick in the second act." ' Spike had arranged for Hugh and Jonas to receive some additional payment for the months of copying that they had done. 'Thanks for getting us the bonus', said Hugh. 'We feel you ought to have got it for teaching us all that stuff.' A letter from Jonas listed the new additions to the Yugudu language and described the members of the tribe.

'Mackay's head has grown bigger, Kleintjie has grown shorter and fatter, Chris has become quieter, Mzala noisier. Doug has become tougher, "General" darker—and his eyes bigger, Sol has become tinier and naughtier. Everything has been accelerated.'

Leon Gluckman was already deeply involved in other theatre commitments when, before the 'opening night' of the extended run, Miriam Makeba was rushed to hospital for an emergency operation. In hospital she was swamped with letters from sympathetic fans. 'I got letters from schoolboys saying how old they are and how handsome they are, others from far places, from Bechuanaland, asking for pictures and autographs, from women telling me they would pray for me, and some from men containing proposals.'

Leon, faced with the problem of having to replace Miriam, called together over twenty girls in the show. One by one they sang 'Back o' the Moon'. The auditions dragged through a tedious four hours at the end of which Abigail Kubeka was finally chosen from a 'short list' of four girls. 'That day I knew for the first time that I could sing all Miriam's songs', she admitted. There followed rehearsals which went on until two in the morning. The next day costume fittings and dance rehearsals with Arnold occupied the morning. In the afternoon the complete cast was assembled for rehearsals with the new leading lady. The band had to transpose some of the songs for Abigail's deeper voice. Abigail was nervous and uncertain of herself, and says, 'I could hardly eat all day', but by eight that evening —just twenty-five hours after Miriam's collapse—when the curtains opened to a packed house, she came through with a faultless performance. Belatedly understudies were appointed for all the main parts.

<— *Nathan Mdledle, handcuffed, sings King Kong's death song*

'V-notes are something, liberty still more.'
ROBERT BROWING. *The Medium.*

X. TOUR

IT was 15 April when the *King Kong* cast arrived at Cape Town station to be greeted by pressmen and hundreds of fans, including penny-whistlers piping out the 'Little Kong' song.

Miriam Makeba was still in hospital in Johannesburg, but she recovered sufficiently to fly down with Leon Gluckman who came the next week-end to reset and regroup the play for the much smaller stage of the Camps Bay Civic Theatre. Arnold Dover had been down earlier to collect together the props and arrange for extra lighting, curtain tracks and the many details which go to make up the stage director's job. The cast had been cut down by fifteen, mostly small boys being left behind. Leon was faced not only with the problems of resetting but also with an inadequate lighting board and an inexperienced, if willing, additional backstage staff which seemed to be made up of Damon Runyon characters. They moved about—one short, one fat, one thin, one tall, in Indian file, with a fat leader in a diaphanous shirt—full of good will but liable, if they forgot to remove one of the props, to march in during the next scene to rectify their mistake.

The ramp and rostrums had been made smaller, and at 7.45 on the opening night Caswell's ice-cream cart careened off the ramp and buckled a wheel. Ian Bernhardt, undaunted, or perhaps by now immune, set about getting a new wheel for the cart which they busily mended in the wings when the play had already started.

The Camps Bay hall has no orchestra pit, so a curtained partition was erected for the band below the stage. By the end of the Johannesburg run, the band had become so used to the 'Devil's Pit' that the idea of having uniforms (green shirts, black ties and dark pants) and 'not looking like stokers', needed a new adjustment. In the Second Act there is a long break with a lot of talking, and the band had looked forward to this break each night. The drummer, Kleintjie, waited to have 'one of his suppers'. Others brought in yoghourt, fish and chips, sandwiches and cold drinks. At Camps Bay all this changed, as they were in full view of the audience.

There was one consolation, however, as trumpeter Hugh Masekela remarked: 'Up to Cape Town we hadn't seen the show. We just heard words over our heads and would try to imagine what was going on. Suddenly we got to realize how marvellous it was. At first we were so busy watching the lights, costumes, movements and so on, we could hardly concentrate on our scores.' By the second week, though, this novelty wore off and it became a routine job again. 'What we looked forward to were the jam sessions after the show. We were always on the look-out for musicians with whom we could have a blow. To me', said Hugh, 'Cape Town is the best town, the best place for jazz in the whole country. In Cape Town you can have a blow every night.'

But before the now respectable band of Yugudus could get to realizing how marvellous the show was, Leon Gluckman had to spend a tedious two days, up to 7.30 in fact on the opening night, on lighting rehearsals. 'Light', it has been said, 'is the scene-painter of the modern theatre.' The most important technical equipment of a stage is the lighting control, and faced with inadequate and inexperienced staff, Leon was almost tempted to forgo one of the major effects of his production. His lighting fluctuated with the dramatic mood and movement, gave colour and tone to the scene and atmosphere to the setting, and at Camps Bay it was all he could do to have light on the right spot at the right moment.

The play itself had not remained static. When King Kong returns to the township unrecognized after his ten months' absence, one couple is supposed to walk past him muttering a crowd-scene mumble, but they had evolved the following noticeably audible dialogue for themselves:

He: 'How about a date tonight honey?'

She: (with loving arms around him) 'Oh, go jump in a lake!'

'I am sure', said Leon, 'that Harry Bloom would be most grateful to you for the improvement on his dialogue, but perhaps in this instance you could keep it to yourselves.'

One of the track-suited members of Kong's 'stable' had, in a heated argument with his girl friend, been hit on the head with a high-heeled shoe and had shaved his hair to allow the cut to heal. The resultant poodle-cut was badly enough misplaced but another member of the 'stable' had a similar hair-cut in sympathy. Gwigwi Mrwebi, despite the scene in which one washerwoman cuts Dan Kuswayo's hair, had for some reason decided to shave his head completely and his baldness was as inappropriate to the scene as, say, Mary Martin's 'I'm going to wash that man right out of my hair' being sung by Yul Brynner.

If the show lost something in dimension on the smaller stage and rather dreary theatre, it gained in impact and power from the necessity to 'mike' the stage. The Cape Town critics, while not as enthusiastic as those of Johannesburg, saw *King Kong* as an 'Exciting exhibition of the producer's art' (*Cape Times*, 21 April 1959) and as 'splendid entertainment and a remarkable achievement by indigenous standards' (*Cape Argus*, 21 April 1959).

The Afrikaans-language newspaper *Die Burger* came out with a review praising *King Kong* from one angle—as brilliant entertainment and a triumph for the producer. It was great, the critic felt, but he found it a scandal to have misused the natural talents of the players, to have taken their wonderful indigenous music and distorted it into stereotyped jazz, to have twisted the real tragedies of the African people for the making of 'show business'.

In assessing Harry Bloom's treatment of the King Kong story, an essential factor to understand is his attitude to his art, or to creative art in South Africa, which he describes in an article (*Contact*, 8 August 1959) on the South African novel: 'This term', he writes, 'has become the trade name for a special kind of literary product—a kind of Pilgrim's Progress in race relations, presented usually, in the form of a black man's brutal awakening in the white man's city. The tone is tragic, poignant, often hopeless, the hero carries a cross, or rather like a ragged street-corner prophet, a placard—"I am a lost child. Lead me to Salvation." Inevitably in this framework, the story becomes a parable or sermon, sometimes told in a kind of mock poetic biblical prose. Squalor, crime, poverty, are the background for saintly suffering with occasionally a rainbow at the end—of philosophical acceptance, political understanding or religious consolation. . . .' These old pilgrim's tales, says Harry, are pervaded by an air of gloom and despondency which today is simply not the mood of the African. He does not consider himself defeated. Something tells him that the future is coming his way, and he therefore buoys himself up against the miseries of the present day with a healthy, raw stubborn spirit.

To use the 'real tragedies' of the African people for the making of show business was to affirm the optimism of the African people, the vitality despite debilitating conditions, and the humour in the face of situations which have to be satirized to be believed.

If tragedy, real or 'distorted', is not a valid subject of the entertainer's art there is not much left of stage literature which is not 'scandalous'. *Die*

Burger was not alone in finding the music a distortion of the 'real' music of the African. The music was composed by a real African, orchestrated by a team of four, three of whom are real Africans, and the fourth has shown a lifelong interest in African music. This should go a long way in proving that the music is as African as that of any herd-boy. Jazz, however much it is influenced by America, is today's township music. The critics happily accept the vast influence of hymns on indigenous music, although the church has had as foreign an influence on the 'real' music as any American jazz which at least has its roots in Africa.

It was *Die Burger* again (22 April 1959) which caused some amusement to the producers by finding a Morse sign in the drum-beat after King Kong has killed Joyce. '. . .—, . . .—. Dot-dot-dot-dash. The letter V. The V for Victory.' It was with a shock that the *Die Burger* writer recognized this as the sign of the wartime underground movements 'from the fjords of Norway to the caves of Sicily', a sign which in *King Kong* seemed to him to be the message which 'sounds through the strike of midnight, like a voice which calls for the red of a new morning. And red is the colour of blood.'

The political implications—imminent revolution, and the hidden call to partisans to rise and join forces—were lost on Spike, who had written out a drum-beat when asked by Leon to fill in a blank spot to cover the dispersal of the actors from the stage. On reading this article about V's for Victory, he exclaimed: 'Good heavens. So it is. I meant it as a sort of death-knell.'

The actors were being lodged and fed; they were receiving good pay and were ready to share their good fortune. At a lunch-hour concert of songs and orchestral numbers from the show at the University of Cape Town's Jameson Hall, 'Kampus Kong' yielded £60 for the Cape Peninsula Non-European School-Feeding Scheme, which had been taken over by private charity when this vital service was stopped in the interests of 'economy'.

The *King Kong* cast loved Cape Town even though some of their sightseeing jaunts were not without their wry moments. Stephen Moloi dressed in a suit and Homburg for the occasion thought it was free for anyone to visit the public gallery of the Houses of Parliament. He was about to go through the gates when a white man called to him, 'Hey boy. My car is stuck.

Give me a push.' Stephen stood in amazement for a moment and laughed inwardly, for the words were almost his own lines as Jack in the play. Jack is explaining to his girl friend how things are for King Kong, 'Champ or no champ, in South Africa it's: "Hey boy, gimme a push. Car run outa juice" '. The Homburg and the suit made little difference.

For those wanting to 'blow' there were musicians such as George Kussell (double bass), 'Dollar' Brand and Christopher MacGregor (pianists) and Morris Goldberg (alto-sax) ready to play with them. Kiepie Moeketsi was always 'at war' with good rival players, and after hearing Morris Goldberg he sat for days in his room at the Tafelberg practising his alto-sax. 'Man', said Kiepie, 'that chap blows. He beats me on points.' Spike Glasser was lecturing at the Faculty of Music of the University of Cape Town, and he was given Professor Chisholm's permission to invite the band to attend lectures. Harry Bloom arranged many outings for the cast, drives along some of Cape Town's lovely coastal routes (particularly appreciated by Stephen Moloi and many others who had never seen the sea), a boat trip to Seal Island where the stench unfortunately resulted in some cases of seasicknesses, a picnic and a swim at Muizenberg's famous beach, and a party on the last night where the guests turned hosts by entertaining everyone. Many people had entertained members of the cast, and by the end of the run they had made numerous friends. Their sadness at having to leave was reflected in the dreary weather of the final day.

A huge pantechnicon left a few hours after the final performance and made a breakneck journey on the 1,100-mile route from Cape Town to Durban with the sets, props and costumes, while the cast set off by train for their third opening night. 'We used to enjoy the long train journeys', said a member of the band, 'and had a lovely time, pulled out our instruments and played for hours. Another thing about the train—you're free. You can forget the terrible joke of life of taxes and passes. You can stack your passes away until you start getting back to the Rand. And the relationship between black and white is more natural and easy away from home. In Johannesburg you always feel jumpy and can expect trouble any time.'

The Durban first night committee ensured the social success of the new opening, and this time two of the 'King Kong widows', Pamela Gluckman and Raina Bernhardt, joined their husbands. The acoustics of Durban's 1,700-seater City Hall caused some trouble and the stage had to be 'miked'. Arnold Dover was relieved to find that the Durban City Hall had a per-

manent staff used to the foibles of the stage and that Jock Duff, the city entertainments manager, had everything well organized. 'With only three days to set up', said Arnold, 'luck was with us in the person of Doug Dorrsfield, the electrician, and a brand-new 52-way dimmer board being used for the first time, because with their old board it would have been impossible to approach our lighting. Lucas Dikoba and Les Martin, our own stage-hands, were by now so efficient that things went off very smoothly.'

Once again the press and public response was magnificent. 'Jazz Opera wins Durban's acclaim', said the critic of the *Natal Mercury*. 'Few could have left the hall unaware of being touched by an expression of the irresistible aspirations of a race emerging from the melting-pot of civilization.' Other reviewers found much to praise. 'King Kong takes Durban by storm', said the *Natal Witness*. 'King Kong is a Wonder show', was the headline in the *Sunday Tribune*, whose critic said: 'Here for the first time the talent that exists in the African people has been brilliantly used and presented in a vital show that breathed the spirit of the townships, which belongs to urban South Africa and nowhere else.'

The cast arrived at a time of unprecedented floods in Durban and the Yugudus, always ready to tease one of their number, would bounce their knees silently while seated in the orchestra pit. The whole floor would begin to shake, and they persuaded their Chief, Kiepie Moeketsi, that the foundations had been weakened in the floods and the building was in danger of falling down. Night after night Kiepie would express his concern for everyone's safety. 'Chaps', he would say, 'I'm worried about this building. It looks like it will fall down.' If Kiepie reads this, he will know for the first time that the cause of the unsteadiness of the Durban City Hall was less elemental than he supposed.

Letters from trumpeter Hugh Masekela and trombonist Jonas Gwangwa describe some of the 'things that can happen when you're on the road'.

Himalaya Hotel, Durban.
15.5.59.

Dear Spike,

The show is slaying Durban to pieces. Mac is fine and so are all the Yugudus, except for the fact that most of them (me included) are suffering from the 'flu they picked up in Cape Town. But here it's warm all the time and I'm safely of the opinion that I won't need my overcoat at all during our Durban run.

The hotel we are staying at is really fabulous. We even have our shoes polished which is a thing we're totally unaccustomed to. The first day the fellow asked for my shoes I thought he was trying a dirty trick, so I told him I had no time for nonsense and that I was going to clean the shoes myself, only to realize later that he was genuine. He must have thought I'm a loony. . . . Hugh.

Alabama Hotel, Port Elizabeth.
6.6.59.

Dear Spike,

The journey was pleasant. Actually I should say both journeys—as you will see from the address I am in P.E. now.

I would like to tell you about a certain trombonist I met in Durban. This guy, a fabulous—if not fantabulous, player and a real Yugudu, is tall and crazy. His name is Dave. I went to his place one time and discovered that this man played not only the trombone but a number of other instruments too. A bassoon, a French horn, a Japanese harp, a tenor-sax, bass clarinet, a baritone-sax, an alto-clarinet and a penny whistle. He owns a van with five different hooters. I met him at a club called the Lotus. He was amongst the audience listening. After a time he came to me, told me he was impressed by my playing, and asked whether he could bring his trombone along. Well, he fetched it and by that time most of the musicians were tired. I was tired myself but when he started blowing. Man! I was refreshed. We started with a song called 'It's alright with me' a Jay and Kai arrangement. The session continued till 6 a.m.

Then we had another day of events. We were enjoying our session at the Goodwill Lounge this time. The session was suddenly stopped by another mad character who had something to announce. This man called 'Alfredo' had come to me a few minutes before the sudden stop to inquire about the price of my trombone. 'Well you know, it's quite old', I said. 'It's about £25.' He then announced that £25 had been offered me to buy myself a new trombone. The person who offered the money wouldn't let his name be announced. He was introduced to me privately and said he was very much in love with a trombone because it reminded him of the time he was in the Navy.

Now 'Alfredo' went to the mike for a second announcement. 'Ladies and gentlemen. As you know that these things are very costly, we feel that the money already given here is not enough to buy a good trombone, so is there anybody who is kind enough to donate the difference which would be about £40.' He somehow managed to raise £30 from a group of Indian business men. By then I had decided to buy myself a valve trombone which I had seen in town for £52. Two days later the money was collected, the trombone bought, slide and valve trombone tutors, and two books on elementary harmony at 10*s*. 6*d*. each. So that's how I was lucky in Durban.

I have a lot to do now. Most of my time I will spend on the slide and harmony. I'm sorry my letter looks like an account 'cause of all the figures.—Jonas.

The Alabama Hotel in Port Elizabeth was the next stop. The Feather Market Hall, where they were to perform, was a source of further headaches for the organizing committee. It had taken weeks of negotiation before the committee and the Mayor's School-Feeding Fund, which was to benefit from the show, reached agreement and before the necessary sponsorship in case of loss was obtained from local clubs and business men. Seventy-five per cent of the takings were to go to the School-Feeding Fund.

Port Elizabeth's Feather Market Hall had never been designed to house theatrical performances. 'Here we started from scratch', said Arnold Dover; 'a platform and nothing else, and the platform was not even big enough. The shell of the hall seemed a thousand feet high and reminded me of Victoria Railway station.' The City Council approved the expenditure of £1,122 for alterations for the production, which would remain as much needed permanent improvements. The stage was squared off and enlarged, the heavy existing curtains were removed, and provision was made for the hanging of four extra sets of curtains. Dressing-rooms for the large cast and an orchestra pit for the band were provided, and circuits were rigged capable of handling the complicated lighting plot of over 130 cues, and needing 52 spotlights.

The reaction to the production was again magnificent, and the newspapers hailed the 'Rich King Kong entertainment'. One critic wrote:

> 'King Kong is proclaiming the strength and vitality of the teeming life of our cities' perimeter townships at the very moment of the birth of the Bantustan anachronism which these people have already outgrown.'

The 'kids' in the cast were, throughout the tour, given regular school lessons by two of the washerwomen, Desirée Mkele and Phyllis Mqomo, who were teachers in real life. 'They thought I was their grandmother', said Phyllis, 'and used to quickly hide their cigarettes if I passed by.' Some had never been to school and were given their first taste of formal education on tour. Any who dodged lessons were threatened by fines. They received a fairly liberal education in other directions too, and having accumulated their pay, Little Joe and Moses bought themselves suits, and one Saturday were all excited putting them on. That evening, when members of the cast 'were tracking in with dames', these two also arrived with little girls, aged 10 and 11, on their arms.

On 14 June 1959, after two months of touring, the cast arrived back in Johannesburg. The Johannesburg City Hall was booked for another ten performances of *King Kong* from 1 July to the 11th. Whereas the Port Elizabeth stage had needed 'additions', the City Hall in Johannesburg has no stage house at all. Scaffolding for the stage house, for the cyclorama, sets, curtains and lighting were constructed at a cost of over £1,000. The organizers did not hope to do more than cover their costs, but another opportunity to see *King Kong* resulted in excellent houses at every performance. Everyone was delighted to be home again, although they had spent the miles approaching Johannesburg dolefully checking up on the whereabouts of their passes and tax receipts.

'It's good to be on home ground again', said one of the men, 'but before the tour I never used to eat breakfast. Now I've become used to it and my wife says I'm spoilt.'

The cast had no sooner arrived in Johannesburg than they were rushed off for anti-typhoid inoculations, for in May and June an epidemic had scared Johannesburg. It started amongst African prisoners held in Johannesburg's gaol, The Fort. Inoculation often made cast members ill, but the shows went on.

After months of being together, they still moved along surmounting one crisis after another. With only four more nights to run, the estranged husband of a woman in the cast came along after hearing that his wife was very friendly with one of the backstage staff. In a reconciliation scene he made her swear never to talk to the man again.

'Please put these towels on the rack', asked one of the washerwomen of the backstage man.

'Can't,' he answered, 'I have to see to these props.'

'Besides,' remarked the wife, 'there should be clean towels.'

'I told you never to talk to him again', cried the outraged husband, marching her off.

The girl, who had been understudying the part for the last eight months, played it finally for four performances.

'Nice while it lasted, an' now it
is over—
Tear out your 'eart an'
good-bye to your lover!'
KIPLING. *Mary, Pity Women*

XI. THE FUTURE

THE last days of *King Kong* drew on, and the members of the cast were reminiscing about the good and bad times they had had. Eight months of steady work and good pay were almost over, and many were very worried about the future. In Durban one man in the cast had said: 'I'm having three square meals today, then I'll do my work, then I'm going to sleep comfortably, and tomorrow it will be the same. For the first time in my career I've had this. So no guy in the cast ought to be allowed to make any mistake in the show, or to grumble.'

'In the early days', said Nathan, thinking of the Manhattan Brothers' twenty-five years of touring, 'we used to sleep on slabs, on grass. One time in Bechuanaland there were thirty of us to one room, sleeping on a mud floor. We four can go back to the old life because we know how things are. We are used to three weeks of hard work and good pay, and then nothing for six months. The beginners don't believe us about those days. Many think all shows are run the way *King Kong* was. We have been happy to sing for 4*s*. 6*d*. each or a bottle of cold drink.'

The *King Kong* record had been sent overseas and Miriam Makeba's voice aroused the interest of an English recording company, which offered her a contract to record for them. The Union of Southern African Artists sponsored her trip, as they had done for her husband, the singer Sonny Pillay, whom she had married during the run.

'At the Tafelberg Hotel', said Miriam before she left, 'there were four or five in a room, at the Himalaya two, at the Alabama three, and some of the girls grumbled about comfort and food. I remembered the times when we slept on the very stage on which we had performed. There was no place to wash except a cold tap outside in an alley somewhere. It's not so bad for me now as I have the chance to go to London, but it will be hard

for many of them to go back to old jobs. It's meant a lot to me', she went on. 'I've never had singing lessons before. I read tonic solfa, but not those other things, those little golf-sticks. Up to *King Kong* we just walked on the stage and started singing. When I first started I never thought I'd be able to do any acting; I was so shy. But slowly Leon got things out of me and I found myself getting free. So with the movement, Arnold gave us a feeling of ease. Spike helped a lot with diction and singing. There were crazy times and people can say crazy things, but we have made many friends since *King Kong*.'

Firm personal friendships were struck up; one by a man who specifically invited a member of the cast to meet his 5-year-old daughter who had never spoken to Africans except as servants. Hovering in the doorway of the lounge she would not at first come in. 'I'm scared. They'll eat me', she insisted. Laughing at this, the African wished that some of her later warmth and friendship to people of a different colour could be taught to his children.

'Unfortunately', he said, 'the only white man who enters my house with any regularity is a policeman. And the only white man who has access to my children with any regularity is a doctor with his needle. It gives me little hope of convincing my children that a white man could be a friend.'

Stephen Moloi said that one thing he had learnt from *King Kong* was that 'up to then I hadn't been observant enough. Travelling from home in Orlando to work in a darkroom developing X-rays in Hillbrow, I never really knew about anything. I used to keep to myself a lot. A travelling theatre is a new experience, and I hated touring. I missed my home and children terribly. But if this is a way for avenues in life to open one has to forget the bad angles.' At first Stephen didn't mingle with the crowd, either backstage or front. Now he was getting into groups for listening to records. The greatest thing for Stephen was meeting people. 'In Johannesburg I've spent all those years living and working, going occasionally to the farm near Heilbron where I was born, never realizing how people thought of our problems. It was inspiring to find how many are willing to understand.'

Another said: 'Many of us had always had a contact with the show world. This time it was different. It was a real step forward. It meant a lot to all of us. The need for co-ordination, what it would do to enhance the standard of entertainment, the emergence of a good crop of artists that could equal white; these were the valuable things.'

'For everybody', said one of the women, 'this has been the best money we have known, and now to go back. . . . It came out of thin air', she added, 'and will vanish into thin air.'

Lord Derby, a partner of the London theatrical promoter, Jack Hylton, saw the first Johannesburg production and a few weeks later came the news that the Hylton organization was interested in taking *King Kong* to London. Hugh Charles, general manager of the organization, flew to Johannesburg to see *King Kong*. While he was there he also saw Basil Warner's play *Try for White*, which had been successfully produced by Leonard Schach. *Try for White* was an eloquent story of those borderline cases, who, because their mixed black and white ancestry has given them sufficiently light skins, are able to cross South Africa's apartheid barriers.

Some wag, having been impressed by the *King Kong* talent, decided he might 'Try for Black'.

Hugh Charles acquired an option on *King Kong*, and some weeks later Harry Bloom received a cable from London saying that Hylton wished to exercise the option.

'I'm known as a drunkard, and I'm respected as a drunkard', said one of the Yugudus. 'But what are these sober-minded people doing? We had aims about being artists. By writing that book Todd and Harry encouraged us to be and do something great. Now it's sold out to others. They made a hell of a blunder to sell that play.'

He did not understand that only the notes and the words on paper had been sold. No one could sell what they themselves had put into it. 'A building can't stand without foundations', he said. 'Are we tools to them? I was aiming to do things, but now I'm discouraged.' 'Mark you,' he said, recovering his spirits again, 'work is the thing. If I'm lazy I get nothing, whether in England or America or here. Now I feel it's high time to study. It's not enough to make money. We must do things for the up and coming fellows.'

'What happened to *King Kong* was something none of us anticipated', said Leon Gluckman. 'The play became a staggering success. None of us ever believed it was a *magnum opus*, but we believed that it would take the people a little further along the road to developing their particular talents. Africans were presented as human beings with a capacity for giving pleasure. The theatre, with its universal values, is a good way of showing the truth. The truth in *King Kong* is a basic humanity.'

The play was seen in the four main cities of South Africa by an estimated 120,000 people. It grossed £65,000 in just over one hundred performances—approximately ten weeks of playing time. The moral victory of the players is inestimable.

A formula had been discovered which produced the greatest success in South African theatre history. *King Kong* sharpened the expectation of a public who would no longer be satisfied with the old format.

It was inevitable that the success would be followed up. '*King Kong* has pupped' wrote one journalist. Before 1959 was out three new 'musicals' had been mounted by different producers. 'African Jazz and Variety', which had for seven years been a variety show, blossomed into *Shebeen*, a musical which opened in Cape Town in July. Port Elizabeth, for long one of the liveliest jazz centres in South Africa, starred Mabel Magada in *Shantytown*. In October, Wilfred Sentso and his Synco-fans, the variety group in which Mackay Davashe was first employed as a young man of 19 in 1939, produced *Washerwoman* in Johannesburg.

In January 1960 the Union of Southern African Artists presented Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* produced by Leon Gluckman with music by Spike Glasser and starring Joe Mogotsi. In March a musical play *Mkhumbane*, based on life in Cato Manor was presented in Durban. The music was by Todd Matshikiza and the play was written by Alan Paton who has won an international reputation for his book *Cry, The Beloved Country*.

The future turned out to be not nearly so bleak as it had seemed to the *King Kong* cast after their final Johannesburg performance in July 1959. Miriam Makeba has found fame in America. The trumpeter Hugh Masekela is studying music in New York thanks to a scholarship from singer Harry Belafonte and actor Sidney Poitier.

As a result of the success of *King Kong*, a music and drama training scheme has been established in the now transformed Union Artists' offices at Dorkay House. After only a short time 124 Union members are already actively engaged on the musical side, receiving instrumental, singing, harmony and counterpoint lessons on either a full or part-time basis. A drama section, devoted to voice production, speech, movement, etc., has also been added.

After the play had been 'sold to London' there followed months of

anxious waiting for a decision as to whether it would be cast anew for the overseas production or whether the South African company would be used.

The Hylton Organization had asked Leon Gluckman to direct the production in the West End. When Leon returned from discussions in London in early 1960, it was with the news that they had decided it would be impossible to capture the essentially South African quality of the musical with an alien cast.

'The presentation could be much slicker', said Leon, 'but we would have no Bus Queue, no Township Sunday, no Kwela dance.'

The decision to use South African artists was received almost in an atmosphere of disbelief. No one in the cast had really imagined that they would ever see London. Said one: '*King Kong* has already been the greatest experience in my life. It's hard to believe that it's going to mean still more.'

A point of laughter in the play needed little clarification for South African audiences:

JACK (*the manager*): Well, after the fight with Apeman, we expect to hear from this promoter who's so keen. . . .

POPCORN: . . . to put the Champ on a bill in . . . what's that place again Jack?

JACK: White City Stadium, London.

POPCORN: WHITE CITY STADIUM, LONDON!

SLIM: white city stadium, london. . . .

The word 'passports' became for several months 'PASSPORTS?'

The Union Office was involved in the hectic business of collecting all the necessary papers for passport applications, the character references and the birth and marriage certificates of sixty people; people who generally were not concerned to keep tabs on such records.

In September 1960, fourteen months after they had dispersed, the cast of *King Kong* was called together for a meeting which was half reunion, half ecstatic celebration. The passports for the cast had been granted.

The immediate elation soon wore off and fears of the unknown came to the fore. 'How long?' 'How cold is London?' 'Does the sun ever shine?' 'Where will we stay?' 'How will we live?' they asked.

A series of lectures on the United Kingdom, intensified training at the school, plans for new rehearsals and a new production were under way. Although it remained essentially the same there was a lot of rethinking and

rewriting of the book. Harry Bloom reshaped it into two acts instead of three to conform with the normal Broadway format for musicals. There was much tightening of dialogue and lyrics, and many new arrangements of the music and choreography. Much of the atmosphere of three years before was recaptured.

Instead of rehearsing in England and having an out-of-town opening in the Provinces it was decided to rehearse and play in Johannesburg. Once again Ian Bernhardt was running all over town with estate agents in search of another 'Dungeon'. Once again Leon Gluckman, Arnold Dover and Spike Glasser were holding midnight conferences. Once again the Great Hall of the University was the venue for the *King Kong* opening. Once again all the excited preparations were made for a tour, but this time not for a three and a half thousand mile trip around the Union of South Africa, but on an especially chartered plane for London, and an opening at the Princes Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, on 20 February 1961.

The work in South Africa, while sixty of its best artists are away continues as new people with a better chance are trained by the African Music and Drama Association. And for the sixty, the dream of London, which to Ezekiel Dhlamini was a tormenting and in the end destructive dream, becomes reality.

VII. KING KONG

HUNDREDS of people had by now been drawn into the orbit of the *King Kong* production. The organizing committee had started with three members of the Union (Ian Bernhardt, John Bolon and Ralph Feinstein) and three representatives of the African Medical Scholarships Trust Fund, (David Abramson, Lawrence Geffen and Ivan Sampson). The committee was strengthened at an early stage by the inclusion of Ruth Hellman, Robert Loder of the Anglo-American Corporation, and Edward Joseph, a stockbroker. It is almost impossible to single out individuals who gave so much of their time and energy to the production, but Edward Joseph's warm personality pervaded the whole work of the committee. His hospitality extended to almost daily lunch-time meetings at his office, and numerous all-night sessions at his home. His wide range of contacts did a lot to rope in the enthusiastic assistance of many people. Edward Joseph was to die a few months later and the Africans of the *King Kong* cast paid tribute to him with a memorial concert.

As the production progressed, Robert Loder evolved into the chief administrator on the committee and devoted hours to the budgets which controlled the show and the documents and contracts which were needed for every phase of the operation. The secretary, Rica Hodgson, was the only person professionally employed on the organizational side, but she put far more into her job than her salary demanded. She developed what Ian Bernhardt described as 'the most colossal scrounging technique. The committee worked on the simple principle that we should pay for nothing unless it was impossible to beg, borrow or steal it.' Rica was strongly supported in her scrounging efforts by Edward Joseph, who was always concerned to see that the charities would benefit to the fullest possible extent from the show's proceeds.

While Rica Hodgson was rounding up everything from shoes to timber, many of the office problems were falling into the hands of Ruth Hellman. One of her major tasks was to master the complexities of official red tape, proclaimed areas, passes and permits, influx control, employment regulations, in order to transfer people to the employ of the *King Kong* organization.

This was probably the most expensively mounted local production ever undertaken. About £7,000 had been spent before the opening night, and that by an organization, the Union of Southern African Artists, which six months before had struggled to raise enough to pay the rent. It was the aim of the organizing committee to cover all production costs on the proceeds from advertising and from ticket sales for the opening night. That they did so was a tribute to the zeal of the First Night Committee. There were thirty-five members, with John Rudd as Chairman, whose major contribution to the success of *King Kong* was that they launched it with all the glitter and glamour of a real 'must' on the social calendar.

The First Night Committee meetings had been held in an opulent Johannesburg restaurant which contrasted starkly with the dingy rehearsal rooms. Margot Byrant, as publicity agent, had made extremely good use of these occasions, and for weeks the social pages of the newspapers had featured pictures of the glamorous young people who were working on the committee. It had been a constant source of amusement to the cast to see these pictures of people with whom they had 'no connexion', but on the opening night the 1,100-seat theatre was sold out at prices ranging from one to three guineas. The share of the proceeds to the African Medical Scholarships Trust Fund of a single week's run would be sufficient to train one African doctor.

Arnold Dover's task in the last weeks had grown to vast proportions. In addition to having dance rehearsals and full rehearsals he was, as stage director, responsible for the 'setting-up' at the University. This involved him in endless consultations with Piet van der Paauw who had constructed the sets, with the University technical staff, and with theatrical hire agents. By the opening night Arnold's elaborate control-board with many buttons, little lights blinking and wires going in all directions kept him in touch with every phase of backstage activity.

Ralph Feinstein, an advertising consultant, had taken on what was probably the most thankless of tasks in the whole production, that of assembling the programme. Long after the closing date for receiving copy had been reached, members of the First Night Committee were still bringing in copy and securing new advertisements. However, in a really hectic week-end the 40-page programme was finalized. Acknowledgements 'For services rendered, assistance or donations in kind' listed seventy-seven commercial firms: dry-cleaners, suppliers of timber, tea, ice-cream, flowers, paint, uniforms and overalls, bicycles, trousers and caps, cosmetics, musical

instruments . . . all these names bore witness to the generosity with which hundreds responded to the demands of *King Kong*. Advertising was donated by Drum Publications in *Golden City Post* and by the Bantu Press (Pty.) Ltd. in *The World, Ilanga Lase Natal* and *Imvo Zabantsundu* (Cape). Pages of the programme were filled with expensive advertising and four major sponsors—the Central News Agency, the bottlers of Coca-Cola, President Giant Cigarettes and the Anglo-American Corporation of S.A. Ltd.—stood behind the show in the event of a flop to the extent of £4,000. In addition ten private individuals had guaranteed a considerable sum.

The University had chosen the opening day Monday, 2 February 1959, to pull up half the steps leading to the main building, and so from 7.30 that evening people made their way up to the foyer through a jungle of wooden fences. Johannesburg society is a strange and fickle one and few would have ventured to predict the response—particularly of a first night audience. The First Night Committee had roped in everyone of any consequence in the city. Mining magnates and their families and friends were there, the leading lights of the theatre, artistic and musical worlds had come to see what this much-publicized show was about; all shades of political opinion were represented. Some had merely come along out of curiosity, others were veteran first-nighters to be seen at any opening, others were genuine in their support of a 'good cause'. The Mayor and other city dignitaries, the press and many of the people who were in so many ways instrumental in marshalling the myriad factors needed for this enormous undertaking were there.

In the flower-bedecked foyer among all the jewellery, furs and evening-dress suits were a number of stalls—*à la* township market-place—one with sweets and cigarettes, another with Arthur Goldreich's bright cover designs of the *King Kong* record. Attractive young women, including 'Miss World', were programme sellers and usherettes, and the flash of press photographers' bulbs brightened the scene.

'If you'd shouted "View-Hulloo" in the vestibule', wrote Oliver Walker in the *Star* later, 'half the men would have instinctively tried to leap into the saddle.'

Nervous knots of people included composer Todd and his wife, Harry Bloom, Clive and Irene Menell, Arthur Goldreich, Ian Bernhardt. There was nothing more they could do. Backstage the tension was tremendous. Leon could do no more than wish everyone luck, and in the pit the nervous

members of the band were taking last-minute comfort from Spike. Miriam Makeba was receiving a 'pain-killer' injection for an ankle which she had sprained rather badly at the dress rehearsal the night before. So well did she hide her pain that even those who knew about it forgot that there was anything wrong with her. Rufus had a broad grin of beaming pleasure on his face as the doctor, after examining his knee, told him he could go on without the crutches he had been using for nearly a month. It was decided that Little Joseph, the penny-whistler who had cut his foot on a broken cold-drink bottle, could keep the bandage which he had been wearing for two weeks.

The front of house manager received his cue from the stage director, Arnold Dover, and began to switch off the foyer lights and ring the warning five-minute, three-minute and 'curtain' bells.

Leon's persistence was well rewarded. There was not a single hitch. 'The *King Kong* opening night was an exception', said Leon, 'in that as an opening night it attained what had been best in rehearsal. Nothing had been left to chance and it had all the polish a producer hopes for.' Everyone melted from their 'let's see what they can do' attitude to one of total immersion in the play. The early nervousness of the cast, characterized by the slight stiffness, melted as they felt the warmth of the response of the audience, which grew until at the final curtain there was a wildly enthusiastic ovation. The company took curtain call after curtain call. Leon in a curtain speech called *King Kong* 'the greatest creative thrill of my theatre career'.

The band let loose with an uninhibited version of Kwela Kong. All their pent-up emotion was released and instead of dispersing the crowd gathered to listen. Streams of people converged on the orchestra pit to peer down at a ragged group of musicians, some of them stripped of jackets, shirts and even vests, for the evening was warm, the tension warmer, and the pit had gradually become an oven.

Bloke Modisane, writing in *Drum* (April 1959) said: '*King Kong* . . . is the wonderful fulfilment of a great expectation. Not just because it is a brave experiment or the "first". Nor does its being pure South African necessarily endow it with a "home product" halo. No excuses, partisan or otherwise, are needed to pass it off as good.'

'Ubuhle balomhlaba
Bufana Wentxa Tyambo
Aboyiswa Lukhula
Kwa Nobudenge.'
(The beauty of this world
Is like a blossom.
It cannot be hidden by weeds
Nor destroyed by ignorance.)

TODD MATSHIKIZA. From 'Sad Times, Bad Times', the overture to *King Kong*.

VIII. THE PRESS

KING KONG was a success. How much of a success, though, was not realized until the rave reviews appeared in the newspapers, and until the booking agency 'Show Service' found itself inundated, and Percy Tucker and his staff had to cope with enormous queues forming hourly outside their Eloff Street offices. Queues went right along the arcade, into Eloff Street and around the corner into Jeppe Street. More than five thousand bookings came in by post. Telephone bookings were made from as far as a thousand miles away and from every part of the country. Special buses were hired by groups who travelled from towns within a radius of three hundred miles. Johannesburg cinema managers were phoning Show Service to ask when *King Kong* was to end, as their attendance figures were being affected. The Post Office complained several times about congestion on Show Service telephone lines. *King Kong* opened on 2 February. By 10 February there was not a single seat left for any of the performances and many people waiting to book had to be turned away. Leon, Spike, Arnold, Ian and indeed anyone connected with the show, were constantly receiving phone calls asking for tickets. These often began, 'You won't remember me but . . .', or 'I waited in a queue for six hours but . . .'. King Kong fever had hit Johannesburg. The tunes blared forth from gramophone shops and over the transmission services of the green 'African' buses. They penetrated to every back alley and to the servants' quarters throughout the town. Seeing a friend off at Jan Smuts airport, Spike and I

nudged one another when we heard a porter whistling 'Little Kong' as he hustled about with his load of suitcases. Todd's tunes were everywhere. A *Zonk* reporter wrote: 'Funny, now that King Kong has come back to life via a great new stage show, guys who crossed to the other side of the street if they saw him in real life, are walking around bragging that the late thug was their mate. . . .'

King Kong crept into strange places. Advertisements proclaimed that the stars of *King Kong* 'wear X brand berets', 'smoke X brand cigarettes' or 'drink X brand tea'. The ultimate in absurdity was a correspondence college advertisement in which the prestige of the public relations officer—a one-time boxer—was enhanced by the description 'A contemporary of King Kong'.

Oliver Walker's review in the *Star* (Johannesburg, Tuesday, 3 February 1959) had a headline across three columns, '*King Kong* is greatest thrill in 20 years of South African theatre-going', and went on to say, 'this abounding vitality from the other side of the tracks would have meant nothing without the glitter and polish of Leon Gluckman's direction'.

The *Rand Daily Mail's* full page of pictures was headed: 'Here's the Township Spirit! For the first time African talent has been used in a constructive way—not merely to show Africans doing tricks, but to express African life and experience.'

On the Saturday after opening night, the *Star* came out with an entire page of pictures headlined: 'They call it Jazz Opera—Scintillating King Kong.'

The *Sunday Express* (8 February) said in large type: 'King Kong—You've never seen anything so real on the S.A. stage before.'

'It's King Size!' said the *Sunday Times*, and, proclaimed *Golden City Post*: 'King Kong IS GREAT!'

Drum for March carried four pages of pictures headed: 'Black and White sweat together to make King Kong a SMASH HIT.'

The *Zonk* (March 1959) headline was: 'King Kong—a milestone in African theatre.'

The Afrikaans papers had this to say: *Dagbreek*: 'We ought to send presentations like this to the Paris Drama Festival or the Edinburgh Festival because it is a rare opportunity to show the outside world an essential aspect of South African Bantu culture.'

Die Vaderland, in praising Leon's production, said: 'Impressive use was made of the contrasts inherent in the story to reveal the tremendous

emotional depth of the life-struggle of the Native. In addition this was one of the best mounted and rounded-off productions (imported or local) seen on the Johannesburg stage for a long time.'

All this reaction caught everyone almost totally unawares. It had become obvious that *King Kong* could run for as long as it had a place to play. Ian Bernhardt was frantically trying to find other suitable stages, since the University was reluctant to extend the booking into term-time for other than University purposes. There were obvious disadvantages in moving the venue, and no other available stage in Johannesburg was big enough to cope with the mammoth sets and cast—still less with the complications of the lighting plot. Finally, however, the University made an exception and Ian was able to announce after the last curtain call (on 18 March) that they had been granted another week's run in April. Thirty-seven performances had been given to audiences totalling 40,000 people.

One of Ian's major problems was to fill the break between the March closing and the April reopening. A season had been arranged in Southern Rhodesia but this had to be cancelled because of the flare-up of political troubles in the Federation. The fears of the organizers in letting the cast disperse and then collecting them together again were very real. There was also the obligation to keep them on the payroll while they were not working. Many had been given leave or had given up their jobs entirely when full-time rehearsal pay began.

The obvious step seemed to be to take the show to Pretoria. It was sufficiently near to warrant striking the set and moving everything and everyone for the short free period until the Johannesburg run could be resumed. Ian applied to the Pretoria City Council for permission to use the City Hall, and was refused. Similarly the University of Pretoria did not want to make their auditorium available. In a letter to the *Star* of 20 February, the 'Afrikaanse Kultuurraad' expressed its appreciation of the firm step taken by Pretoria's City Council and University. The 'Board of Culture' added that they did not want in any way to stand in the path of the Bantu in the development of his culture—if (in the instance concerned) it could be called 'culture'. A wide range of opinions was reflected in many newspapers.

Oliver Walker had the last word on the subject in a *Forum* article headed 'Mrs. van der Grundy says it's not culture', in which he asked: 'If *King Kong*, the biggest box-office draw in South African theatrical history, had been called a "folk" opera instead of a jazz opera, would it have been

considered suitable for Pretoria? I ask the question because when the Pretoria City Council refused to give it house-room the Afrikaanse Kultuurraad applauded them on the grounds that they didn't think it was "culture" and because "productions by Natives for White audiences clash with the country's traditional ideas. . . ."'

The Pretoria City Council finally offered to erect a tent in the Agricultural Show Grounds.

Ian gave Pretoria up as a bad job and set about making the arrangements for Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth.

The reaction to *King Kong* from the less sophisticated among the African audiences at times reflected the lack of theatrical tradition, the difficulty of understanding the stage and the concept of a play. Many people knew the Manhattan Brothers, the Woody Woodpeckers, the Saints and others as variety groups.

'What is this King Kong?' they asked.

'I don't understand', one complained. 'We heard the guy was dead. How can he come back?'

Some members of the audience were disappointed. 'Why don't we get the real guy?' they wondered. 'There's not enough music', was a frequent complaint. 'Why does everybody talk all the time?'

Many people had never seen the real King Kong. 'They don't know him', Phyllis Mqomo said, 'and think Nathan is the boxer. Mind you, Nathan came to live that part, even outside the theatre. He was always a natty dresser and a very gentle man. He seemed to become rougher, wore his hair long and instead of his usual neat suit he took to that black lumberjacket like in his part of the King.'

'Nathan knows what it means to be top man and get nowhère', Ian Bernhardt remarked, 'to be top man in his field for years and never enlarge the field, never have scope to grow'.

Some of the boxing associates and friends of the real King Kong were pleased with the show.

'It's something he would have loved', said one, 'seeing his name and his picture all over town.'

'He was a showman, a crowd pleaser', said another. 'He used to walk up and down in front of the Carlton Hotel in Eloff Street in his boxing outfit just to see the reaction on people's faces. Now he's got all the attention he wanted—too late.'

His chief sparring mate was one who felt that he ought to be playing the stage King Kong, and complained to Mackay Davashe that Nathan had no right to the part.

'But you can't sing', Mac told him.

'King Kong wasn't a singer. Why should you want me to be a singer?' was the totally realistic reply.

Others saw it another way.

'One time I was in a shebeen', said Rufus, 'a fellow said: "Look! What's happening to Nathan? That guy is no boxer. How can he play King Kong?" '

'Are you a boxer?'

'Yeah.'

'Why then are you not playing King Kong?'

'I can't sing.'

'Nathan is no boxer but he can sing.'

With a light dawning on his face the man got up and went to shake Nathan's hand. 'If you're an artist every hoodlum thinks you're soft', said Rufus, 'but that man found Nathan was a "squeezer". They saw they got a fair shake from him, so after that they let us alone.'

The players and the play were inextricably mixed and many people found it difficult to understand the Bus Queue scene. In this scene the crowd is in gales of laughter at the news that the great King Kong has been beaten by a middleweight. Kong bursts in and the laughter breaks off as he shouts: 'Anyone want to try me out. . . . You was all laughing so nice. . . . C'mon laugh. Lemme see who's going to laugh.'

Lucky's mocking laughter heralds a passage in which the Prowlers taunt King unmercifully.

'Are the Manhattan Brothers still together?' asked a member of the audience meeting Rufus later.

'Sure', Rufus told him. 'Why do you ask?'

'The way you laugh at Nathan. Are you really laughing? How can you mow your friend down like that?'

Another one-time admirer of the Manhattan Brothers came up to say: 'You guys. I hate you.'

'Do you mean you hate the Brothers?'

'No. I only hate three. How can you laugh at Nathan like that? He's your friend.'

Rufus tried to explain. 'We were hired to do it. We're getting paid to laugh at him and he's getting paid to be laughed at.'

The man wandered away saying: 'What some people will do for money!'

Misinterpretations come not only from the audience. In the same Bus Queue scene, Kong in his rage and bitterness at the taunts attacks a small boy who comes in saying, 'Hiya King. How'd you go in the fight last night? I bet ya murdered him.' Kong gives the small boy a vicious shove and sends him sprawling across the stage. This boy, Mafuta, blamed not Nathan but the other Manhattan Brothers, Joe, Rufus and Ronnie, for making Nathan cross enough to treat him so roughly.

For many of the cast there was a strange contrast in playing to white and non-white audiences. 'When you're playing to white houses you can see faces and feel you're talking to someone, but in the dark of a non-European show it's a void. The blackness is complete', said Stephen Moloi. 'The reaction is totally different too', said Dan Poho, 'especially in the killing of Joyce. With white audiences everyone is still; with our folks it's the beginning of laughter. We've discussed it many times and there are many theories why Africans laugh at the most tense moments. Some think it's an escape from embarrassment, fear, tension.' One man who spoke to Stephen reckons that 'irrelevant laughter is an excellent manifestation of intellectual poverty'. Others feel that the reaction to fear must be the same with all people, but that whites, perhaps more introvert, will gasp where blacks will giggle. 'In real life, in the townships', said Dan, 'the reaction is to run in fear. People there are used to murders carried out daily. Here at the play the laughter may be relief at the unreality and harmlessness of it.'

'Yank: *Sure! Lock me up! Put me in a cage!*
Policeman: *What you been doin'?*
Yank: *Enough to gimme life for! I was born, see!*
Sure dat's de charge. Write it in de blotter.
I was born, get me?'

EUGENE O'NEILL. *The Hairy Ape*

IX. BACKSTAGE

THE husbands, wives, sweethearts, mothers and children of the members of the cast were able at last to appreciate why they had barely seen them all these months. Many who had threatened to walk out if their lives didn't become more normal were now proud to be associated with *King Kong*.

All the heady reaction was however only one side of the picture. Thousands of people being drawn nightly by the magic of *King Kong* were happily unaware of many behind-scenes headaches. None of the 'usual quota of King Kong headaches' harmed the show but they caused much argument backstage. The cast were being well paid and all had earned the bonuses which had been worked out on a basis of the percentage of the house which could be filled. Since the houses were 100 per cent every night everyone was getting the maximum amount. But the band decided that they were at least as important as the actors, and should be paid on a similar scale.

Unpunctuality was an unnerving factor, despite the system of fines administered by the disciplinary committee made up of elected members of the cast and organizing committee. On the recommendation of the disciplinary committee a member of the company was dismissed from the show. The committee took to heart Leon's insistence that under all conditions the show had to go on, and that there was no worse crime in theatre than not to arrive for a performance. 'Even if there is illness at home or a crisis in your family, you must come', he had said in a pep talk to the cast. 'You have taken on a responsibility to others and you must meet it.'

'Excuse me, Mr. Gluckman,' said Mabel Mafuya, 'if my mother is dying I won't come, but I'm glad to say she's not in hospital or even sick.'

Fortunately for Leon, his attempt to reply was drowned in a gale of laughter. At the end of the tour, however, Arnold Dover was able to say that he had been impressed by the wonderful behaviour of the cast, the best company in his long experience.

The task of the wardrobe mistress was a difficult one. On occasions if the cast couldn't find costumes they would simply put on anything that came to hand. This was generally not discernible by an unknowing audience, though they may have been faintly puzzled by the appearance, for example, of one lone pair of bright red pants in a row of blue and khaki ones.

Some members of the company, who had struggled their way along trying to earn livings and cope with their many problems, drank a fair amount. Despite South Africa's stringent liquor laws for black men, they were in fine training and could take prodigious amounts without noticeable effect. A few in the band were like jazzmen the world over, who find release in drugs or drink and can play better after a few warming tots. Two in particular caused some worry, and in the few days before opening night two other bandsmen were detailed not to let them out of sight. The idea was then considered of handing out supplies of a drug which makes anyone who so much as drinks cough-mixture with a trace of alcohol in it become violently ill.

The band had to get used to being stuck away in an orchestra pit. They had always been right on the stage in previous ventures, responding to audience reaction, and being the visible mainstay of any programme. The band moved from The Dungeon to the 'Devil's Pit' and were unhappily excluded from so much as a peep of what was going on above their heads. Only Mackay Davashe, as leader and conductor, had his chair raised so that he could watch the progress on stage and give the band their cues.

Two of the most notorious gangs in Johannesburg at this time were the 'Msomi' and the 'Spoilers'. Members of the latter were supplying drink and causing chaos in the dressing-rooms. 'What the hell must I do with those bums who are bringing liquor to the cast?' asked Ian clapping his hand to his forehead and drawing it down over his face. 'Do I throw them out or try to talk some sense into them?' The simple explanation of their presence was that a member of the backstage staff, a real 'gangster's moll', had become jealous of someone prettier who was interested in the same man and had invited the gangsters along to threaten her and teach

her a lesson. 'If she doesn't lay off I'll fix her up', said the moll. She was asked to take it easy. 'We can't afford scenes in a place like this', she was told. The girl was sent away and was very bitter. 'If we hadn't gone on tour', said one of the members of the chorus, 'there would have been real trouble.'

One Friday night when *King Kong* had been running a week, one of the leading actors was walking along with a friend who had been to see the show and they were picked up by the police. The other man, a drummer, was Coloured and not African and he could have gone free; but he chose to stay with his friend. The actor had forgotten his *King Kong* pass but, as he later explained, 'the worst times are when you're caught without a pass and it's a few yards away in your jacket or in your room and the cops won't let you go and fetch it'. The arrested pair were not charged with anything, but the next morning they were herded with a 'span' of prisoners under guard and taken to work in the garden of a policeman's home. They stayed all day digging and moving stones, saying nothing, but very worried about the show that evening and trying to think of a way to let Ian Bernhardt know their whereabouts. A request to use a telephone would have forced the police to press charges, as once someone outside knew about them, their detention would have had to be explained. Towards 6 o'clock, when thoughts of trying to escape were going round in their heads, the owner of the house came up, patted them on the shoulders and said: 'You've been good boys' ('boys' to a South African boss can be anything from 6 to 60 years old) 'and worked well. You can go now.' They reached the University just in time for the performance.

The unity often felt in a project of this type was shown in endless apt quotations from the show, and there were many occasions when the company raised a knowing laugh with some King Kongese. '"It's coming down fast all around us,' referring to the demolition of the township in the play, was used to describe the rain when the cast were stranded on the steps for nearly an hour one day while a freak cloudburst drenched Johannesburg. 'Quickly in love' became 'Gwigwi's in love' and Gwi Mrwebi, being a responsible married man, threatened them with the words of the play: 'I'm going to see my lawyer about this.'

They were seasoned professionals after their first five weeks' run and 'the show must go on' was the order of the day, regardless of sprained ankles (Miriam and Ruth), bruised bones (Phyllis after being involved in a car smash), and a painful knee (Rufus).

Some of the people who had to deal with the daily crises did so with infinite patience. Others became thoroughly exasperated, claiming that with all the faults and difficulties of catering to so many needs, few of the company appreciated that they had steady jobs and were being adequately paid for their work for the first time, and that they benefited in hundreds of ways by merely being part of a professional company.

One man who had worked for months to help *King Kong* to success finally decided that he had had enough of hard daily work and difficult problems with the show at night. 'I'm going to try living like a human being again', he decided. 'I haven't taken a girl out or seen a movie in weeks, and no one appreciates what we're trying to do. I'm giving this week-end up to ME.' I met him back at the Great Hall on Monday. 'What a week-end!' he cried, 'and do you know something? The only black face I saw the whole of yesterday belonged to my caddie.'

The new academic year was starting, and it was time for Spike Glasser to take up his lectureship in music at the University of Cape Town. Spike left after miserable good-byes from the Yugudus. 'Man, it's so lonely between acts', wrote Hugh Masekela, 'we keep imagining that you'll pop down into the pit and say, "That was great chaps. Now give it stick in the second act." ' Spike had arranged for Hugh and Jonas to receive some additional payment for the months of copying that they had done. 'Thanks for getting us the bonus', said Hugh. 'We feel you ought to have got it for teaching us all that stuff.' A letter from Jonas listed the new additions to the Yugudu language and described the members of the tribe.

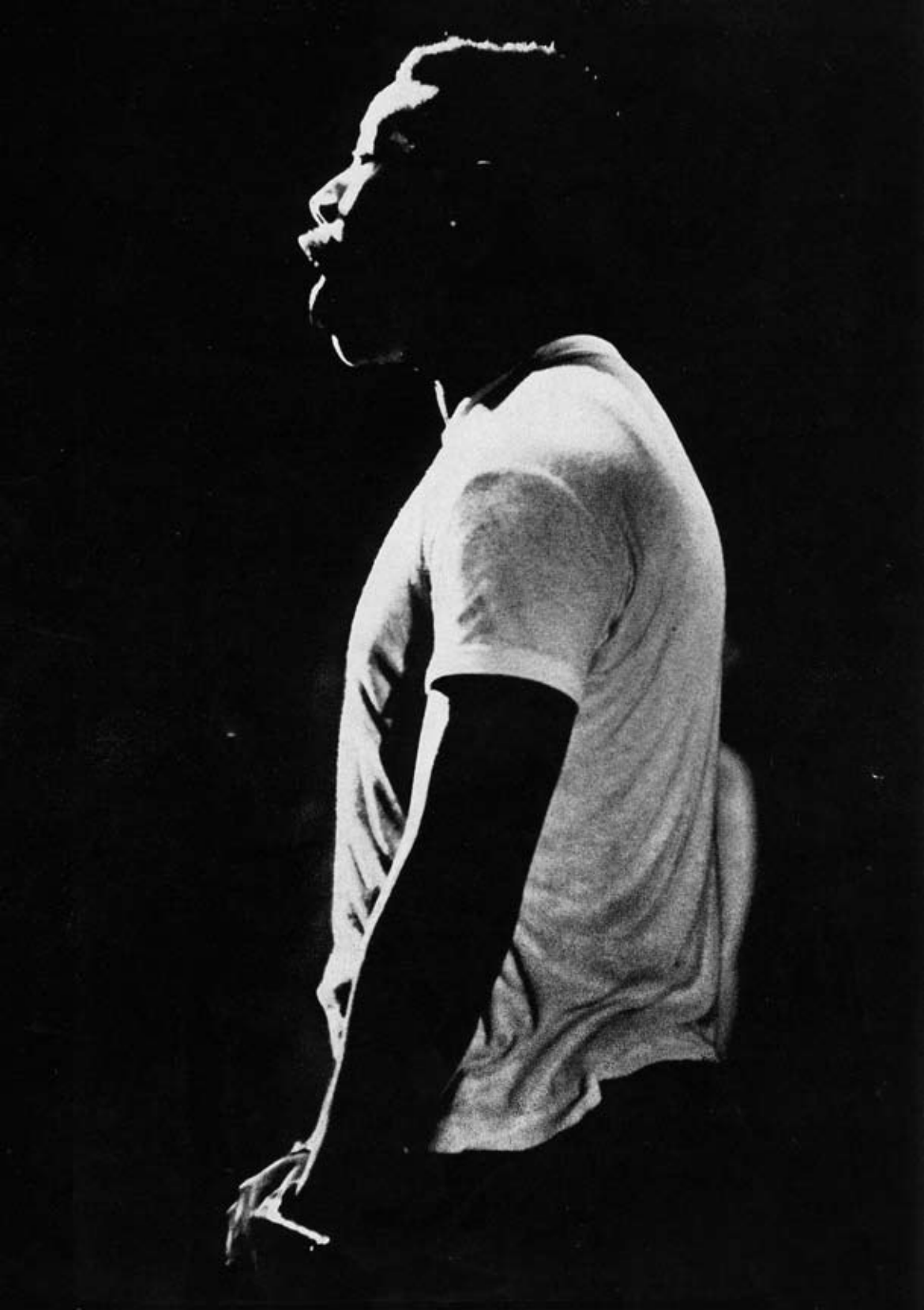
'Mackay's head has grown bigger, Kleintjie has grown shorter and fatter, Chris has become quieter, Mzala noisier. Doug has become tougher, "General" darker—and his eyes bigger, Sol has become tinier and naughtier. Everything has been accelerated.'

Leon Gluckman was already deeply involved in other theatre commitments when, before the 'opening night' of the extended run, Miriam Makeba was rushed to hospital for an emergency operation. In hospital she was swamped with letters from sympathetic fans. 'I got letters from schoolboys saying how old they are and how handsome they are, others from far places, from Bechuanaland, asking for pictures and autographs, from women telling me they would pray for me, and some from men containing proposals.'

The stage at the University of the Witwatersrand

Nathan Mdledle (King Kong) leads the chorus

Part of the crowd scene in the Township Ballet



Leon, faced with the problem of having to replace Miriam, called together over twenty girls in the show. One by one they sang 'Back o' the Moon'. The auditions dragged through a tedious four hours at the end of which Abigail Kubeka was finally chosen from a 'short list' of four girls. 'That day I knew for the first time that I could sing all Miriam's songs', she admitted. There followed rehearsals which went on until two in the morning. The next day costume fittings and dance rehearsals with Arnold occupied the morning. In the afternoon the complete cast was assembled for rehearsals with the new leading lady. The band had to transpose some of the songs for Abigail's deeper voice. Abigail was nervous and uncertain of herself, and says, 'I could hardly eat all day', but by eight that evening —just twenty-five hours after Miriam's collapse—when the curtains opened to a packed house, she came through with a faultless performance. Belatedly understudies were appointed for all the main parts.

<— *Nathan Mdledle, handcuffed, sings King Kong's death song*

'V-notes are something, liberty still more.'
ROBERT BROWING. *The Medium.*

X. TOUR

IT was 15 April when the *King Kong* cast arrived at Cape Town station to be greeted by pressmen and hundreds of fans, including penny-whistlers piping out the 'Little Kong' song.

Miriam Makeba was still in hospital in Johannesburg, but she recovered sufficiently to fly down with Leon Gluckman who came the next week-end to reset and regroup the play for the much smaller stage of the Camps Bay Civic Theatre. Arnold Dover had been down earlier to collect together the props and arrange for extra lighting, curtain tracks and the many details which go to make up the stage director's job. The cast had been cut down by fifteen, mostly small boys being left behind. Leon was faced not only with the problems of resetting but also with an inadequate lighting board and an inexperienced, if willing, additional backstage staff which seemed to be made up of Damon Runyon characters. They moved about—one short, one fat, one thin, one tall, in Indian file, with a fat leader in a diaphanous shirt—full of good will but liable, if they forgot to remove one of the props, to march in during the next scene to rectify their mistake.

The ramp and rostrums had been made smaller, and at 7.45 on the opening night Caswell's ice-cream cart careened off the ramp and buckled a wheel. Ian Bernhardt, undaunted, or perhaps by now immune, set about getting a new wheel for the cart which they busily mended in the wings when the play had already started.

The Camps Bay hall has no orchestra pit, so a curtained partition was erected for the band below the stage. By the end of the Johannesburg run, the band had become so used to the 'Devil's Pit' that the idea of having uniforms (green shirts, black ties and dark pants) and 'not looking like stokers', needed a new adjustment. In the Second Act there is a long break with a lot of talking, and the band had looked forward to this break each night. The drummer, Kleintjie, waited to have 'one of his suppers'. Others brought in yoghourt, fish and chips, sandwiches and cold drinks. At Camps Bay all this changed, as they were in full view of the audience.

There was one consolation, however, as trumpeter Hugh Masekela remarked: 'Up to Cape Town we hadn't seen the show. We just heard words over our heads and would try to imagine what was going on. Suddenly we got to realize how marvellous it was. At first we were so busy watching the lights, costumes, movements and so on, we could hardly concentrate on our scores.' By the second week, though, this novelty wore off and it became a routine job again. 'What we looked forward to were the jam sessions after the show. We were always on the look-out for musicians with whom we could have a blow. To me', said Hugh, 'Cape Town is the best town, the best place for jazz in the whole country. In Cape Town you can have a blow every night.'

But before the now respectable band of Yugudus could get to realizing how marvellous the show was, Leon Gluckman had to spend a tedious two days, up to 7.30 in fact on the opening night, on lighting rehearsals. 'Light', it has been said, 'is the scene-painter of the modern theatre.' The most important technical equipment of a stage is the lighting control, and faced with inadequate and inexperienced staff, Leon was almost tempted to forgo one of the major effects of his production. His lighting fluctuated with the dramatic mood and movement, gave colour and tone to the scene and atmosphere to the setting, and at Camps Bay it was all he could do to have light on the right spot at the right moment.

The play itself had not remained static. When King Kong returns to the township unrecognized after his ten months' absence, one couple is supposed to walk past him muttering a crowd-scene mumble, but they had evolved the following noticeably audible dialogue for themselves:

He: 'How about a date tonight honey?'

She: (with loving arms around him) 'Oh, go jump in a lake!'

'I am sure', said Leon, 'that Harry Bloom would be most grateful to you for the improvement on his dialogue, but perhaps in this instance you could keep it to yourselves.'

One of the track-suited members of Kong's 'stable' had, in a heated argument with his girl friend, been hit on the head with a high-heeled shoe and had shaved his hair to allow the cut to heal. The resultant poodle-cut was badly enough misplaced but another member of the 'stable' had a similar hair-cut in sympathy. Gwigwi Mrwebi, despite the scene in which one washerwoman cuts Dan Kuswayo's hair, had for some reason decided to shave his head completely and his baldness was as inappropriate to the scene as, say, Mary Martin's 'I'm going to wash that man right out of my hair' being sung by Yul Brynner.

If the show lost something in dimension on the smaller stage and rather dreary theatre, it gained in impact and power from the necessity to 'mike' the stage. The Cape Town critics, while not as enthusiastic as those of Johannesburg, saw *King Kong* as an 'Exciting exhibition of the producer's art' (*Cape Times*, 21 April 1959) and as 'splendid entertainment and a remarkable achievement by indigenous standards' (*Cape Argus*, 21 April 1959).

The Afrikaans-language newspaper *Die Burger* came out with a review praising *King Kong* from one angle—as brilliant entertainment and a triumph for the producer. It was great, the critic felt, but he found it a scandal to have misused the natural talents of the players, to have taken their wonderful indigenous music and distorted it into stereotyped jazz, to have twisted the real tragedies of the African people for the making of 'show business'.

In assessing Harry Bloom's treatment of the King Kong story, an essential factor to understand is his attitude to his art, or to creative art in South Africa, which he describes in an article (*Contact*, 8 August 1959) on the South African novel: 'This term', he writes, 'has become the trade name for a special kind of literary product—a kind of Pilgrim's Progress in race relations, presented usually, in the form of a black man's brutal awakening in the white man's city. The tone is tragic, poignant, often hopeless, the hero carries a cross, or rather like a ragged street-corner prophet, a placard—"I am a lost child. Lead me to Salvation." Inevitably in this framework, the story becomes a parable or sermon, sometimes told in a kind of mock poetic biblical prose. Squalor, crime, poverty, are the background for saintly suffering with occasionally a rainbow at the end—of philosophical acceptance, political understanding or religious consolation. . . .' These old pilgrim's tales, says Harry, are pervaded by an air of gloom and despondency which today is simply not the mood of the African. He does not consider himself defeated. Something tells him that the future is coming his way, and he therefore buoys himself up against the miseries of the present day with a healthy, raw stubborn spirit.

To use the 'real tragedies' of the African people for the making of show business was to affirm the optimism of the African people, the vitality despite debilitating conditions, and the humour in the face of situations which have to be satirized to be believed.

If tragedy, real or 'distorted', is not a valid subject of the entertainer's art there is not much left of stage literature which is not 'scandalous'. *Die*

Burger was not alone in finding the music a distortion of the 'real' music of the African. The music was composed by a real African, orchestrated by a team of four, three of whom are real Africans, and the fourth has shown a lifelong interest in African music. This should go a long way in proving that the music is as African as that of any herd-boy. Jazz, however much it is influenced by America, is today's township music. The critics happily accept the vast influence of hymns on indigenous music, although the church has had as foreign an influence on the 'real' music as any American jazz which at least has its roots in Africa.

It was *Die Burger* again (22 April 1959) which caused some amusement to the producers by finding a Morse sign in the drum-beat after King Kong has killed Joyce. '. . .—, . . .—. Dot-dot-dot-dash. The letter V. The V for Victory.' It was with a shock that the *Die Burger* writer recognized this as the sign of the wartime underground movements 'from the fjords of Norway to the caves of Sicily', a sign which in *King Kong* seemed to him to be the message which 'sounds through the strike of midnight, like a voice which calls for the red of a new morning. And red is the colour of blood.'

The political implications—imminent revolution, and the hidden call to partisans to rise and join forces—were lost on Spike, who had written out a drum-beat when asked by Leon to fill in a blank spot to cover the dispersal of the actors from the stage. On reading this article about V's for Victory, he exclaimed: 'Good heavens. So it is. I meant it as a sort of death-knell.'

The actors were being lodged and fed; they were receiving good pay and were ready to share their good fortune. At a lunch-hour concert of songs and orchestral numbers from the show at the University of Cape Town's Jameson Hall, 'Kampus Kong' yielded £60 for the Cape Peninsula Non-European School-Feeding Scheme, which had been taken over by private charity when this vital service was stopped in the interests of 'economy'.

The *King Kong* cast loved Cape Town even though some of their sightseeing jaunts were not without their wry moments. Stephen Moloi dressed in a suit and Homburg for the occasion thought it was free for anyone to visit the public gallery of the Houses of Parliament. He was about to go through the gates when a white man called to him, 'Hey boy. My car is stuck.

Give me a push.' Stephen stood in amazement for a moment and laughed inwardly, for the words were almost his own lines as Jack in the play. Jack is explaining to his girl friend how things are for King Kong, 'Champ or no champ, in South Africa it's: "Hey boy, gimme a push. Car run outa juice" '. The Homburg and the suit made little difference.

For those wanting to 'blow' there were musicians such as George Kussell (double bass), 'Dollar' Brand and Christopher MacGregor (pianists) and Morris Goldberg (alto-sax) ready to play with them. Kiepie Moeketsi was always 'at war' with good rival players, and after hearing Morris Goldberg he sat for days in his room at the Tafelberg practising his alto-sax. 'Man', said Kiepie, 'that chap blows. He beats me on points.' Spike Glasser was lecturing at the Faculty of Music of the University of Cape Town, and he was given Professor Chisholm's permission to invite the band to attend lectures. Harry Bloom arranged many outings for the cast, drives along some of Cape Town's lovely coastal routes (particularly appreciated by Stephen Moloi and many others who had never seen the sea), a boat trip to Seal Island where the stench unfortunately resulted in some cases of seasicknesses, a picnic and a swim at Muizenberg's famous beach, and a party on the last night where the guests turned hosts by entertaining everyone. Many people had entertained members of the cast, and by the end of the run they had made numerous friends. Their sadness at having to leave was reflected in the dreary weather of the final day.

A huge pantechnicon left a few hours after the final performance and made a breakneck journey on the 1,100-mile route from Cape Town to Durban with the sets, props and costumes, while the cast set off by train for their third opening night. 'We used to enjoy the long train journeys', said a member of the band, 'and had a lovely time, pulled out our instruments and played for hours. Another thing about the train—you're free. You can forget the terrible joke of life of taxes and passes. You can stack your passes away until you start getting back to the Rand. And the relationship between black and white is more natural and easy away from home. In Johannesburg you always feel jumpy and can expect trouble any time.'

The Durban first night committee ensured the social success of the new opening, and this time two of the 'King Kong widows', Pamela Gluckman and Raina Bernhardt, joined their husbands. The acoustics of Durban's 1,700-seater City Hall caused some trouble and the stage had to be 'miked'. Arnold Dover was relieved to find that the Durban City Hall had a per-

manent staff used to the foibles of the stage and that Jock Duff, the city entertainments manager, had everything well organized. 'With only three days to set up', said Arnold, 'luck was with us in the person of Doug Dorrsfield, the electrician, and a brand-new 52-way dimmer board being used for the first time, because with their old board it would have been impossible to approach our lighting. Lucas Dikoba and Les Martin, our own stage-hands, were by now so efficient that things went off very smoothly.'

Once again the press and public response was magnificent. 'Jazz Opera wins Durban's acclaim', said the critic of the *Natal Mercury*. 'Few could have left the hall unaware of being touched by an expression of the irresistible aspirations of a race emerging from the melting-pot of civilization.' Other reviewers found much to praise. 'King Kong takes Durban by storm', said the *Natal Witness*. 'King Kong is a Wonder show', was the headline in the *Sunday Tribune*, whose critic said: 'Here for the first time the talent that exists in the African people has been brilliantly used and presented in a vital show that breathed the spirit of the townships, which belongs to urban South Africa and nowhere else.'

The cast arrived at a time of unprecedented floods in Durban and the Yugudus, always ready to tease one of their number, would bounce their knees silently while seated in the orchestra pit. The whole floor would begin to shake, and they persuaded their Chief, Kiepie Moeketsi, that the foundations had been weakened in the floods and the building was in danger of falling down. Night after night Kiepie would express his concern for everyone's safety. 'Chaps', he would say, 'I'm worried about this building. It looks like it will fall down.' If Kiepie reads this, he will know for the first time that the cause of the unsteadiness of the Durban City Hall was less elemental than he supposed.

Letters from trumpeter Hugh Masekela and trombonist Jonas Gwangwa describe some of the 'things that can happen when you're on the road'.

Himalaya Hotel, Durban.
15.5.59.

Dear Spike,

The show is slaying Durban to pieces. Mac is fine and so are all the Yugudus, except for the fact that most of them (me included) are suffering from the 'flu they picked up in Cape Town. But here it's warm all the time and I'm safely of the opinion that I won't need my overcoat at all during our Durban run.

The hotel we are staying at is really fabulous. We even have our shoes polished which is a thing we're totally unaccustomed to. The first day the fellow asked for my shoes I thought he was trying a dirty trick, so I told him I had no time for nonsense and that I was going to clean the shoes myself, only to realize later that he was genuine. He must have thought I'm a loony. . . . Hugh.

Alabama Hotel, Port Elizabeth.
6.6.59.

Dear Spike,

The journey was pleasant. Actually I should say both journeys—as you will see from the address I am in P.E. now.

I would like to tell you about a certain trombonist I met in Durban. This guy, a fabulous—if not fantabulous, player and a real Yugudu, is tall and crazy. His name is Dave. I went to his place one time and discovered that this man played not only the trombone but a number of other instruments too. A bassoon, a French horn, a Japanese harp, a tenor-sax, bass clarinet, a baritone-sax, an alto-clarinet and a penny whistle. He owns a van with five different hooters. I met him at a club called the Lotus. He was amongst the audience listening. After a time he came to me, told me he was impressed by my playing, and asked whether he could bring his trombone along. Well, he fetched it and by that time most of the musicians were tired. I was tired myself but when he started blowing. Man! I was refreshed. We started with a song called 'It's alright with me' a Jay and Kai arrangement. The session continued till 6 a.m.

Then we had another day of events. We were enjoying our session at the Goodwill Lounge this time. The session was suddenly stopped by another mad character who had something to announce. This man called 'Alfredo' had come to me a few minutes before the sudden stop to inquire about the price of my trombone. 'Well you know, it's quite old', I said. 'It's about £25.' He then announced that £25 had been offered me to buy myself a new trombone. The person who offered the money wouldn't let his name be announced. He was introduced to me privately and said he was very much in love with a trombone because it reminded him of the time he was in the Navy.

Now 'Alfredo' went to the mike for a second announcement. 'Ladies and gentlemen. As you know that these things are very costly, we feel that the money already given here is not enough to buy a good trombone, so is there anybody who is kind enough to donate the difference which would be about £40.' He somehow managed to raise £30 from a group of Indian business men. By then I had decided to buy myself a valve trombone which I had seen in town for £52. Two days later the money was collected, the trombone bought, slide and valve trombone tutors, and two books on elementary harmony at 10*s*. 6*d*. each. So that's how I was lucky in Durban.

I have a lot to do now. Most of my time I will spend on the slide and harmony. I'm sorry my letter looks like an account 'cause of all the figures.—Jonas.

The Alabama Hotel in Port Elizabeth was the next stop. The Feather Market Hall, where they were to perform, was a source of further headaches for the organizing committee. It had taken weeks of negotiation before the committee and the Mayor's School-Feeding Fund, which was to benefit from the show, reached agreement and before the necessary sponsorship in case of loss was obtained from local clubs and business men. Seventy-five per cent of the takings were to go to the School-Feeding Fund.

Port Elizabeth's Feather Market Hall had never been designed to house theatrical performances. 'Here we started from scratch', said Arnold Dover; 'a platform and nothing else, and the platform was not even big enough. The shell of the hall seemed a thousand feet high and reminded me of Victoria Railway station.' The City Council approved the expenditure of £1,122 for alterations for the production, which would remain as much needed permanent improvements. The stage was squared off and enlarged, the heavy existing curtains were removed, and provision was made for the hanging of four extra sets of curtains. Dressing-rooms for the large cast and an orchestra pit for the band were provided, and circuits were rigged capable of handling the complicated lighting plot of over 130 cues, and needing 52 spotlights.

The reaction to the production was again magnificent, and the newspapers hailed the 'Rich King Kong entertainment'. One critic wrote:

> 'King Kong is proclaiming the strength and vitality of the teeming life of our cities' perimeter townships at the very moment of the birth of the Bantustan anachronism which these people have already outgrown.'

The 'kids' in the cast were, throughout the tour, given regular school lessons by two of the washerwomen, Desirée Mkele and Phyllis Mqomo, who were teachers in real life. 'They thought I was their grandmother', said Phyllis, 'and used to quickly hide their cigarettes if I passed by.' Some had never been to school and were given their first taste of formal education on tour. Any who dodged lessons were threatened by fines. They received a fairly liberal education in other directions too, and having accumulated their pay, Little Joe and Moses bought themselves suits, and one Saturday were all excited putting them on. That evening, when members of the cast 'were tracking in with dames', these two also arrived with little girls, aged 10 and 11, on their arms.

On 14 June 1959, after two months of touring, the cast arrived back in Johannesburg. The Johannesburg City Hall was booked for another ten performances of *King Kong* from 1 July to the 11th. Whereas the Port Elizabeth stage had needed 'additions', the City Hall in Johannesburg has no stage house at all. Scaffolding for the stage house, for the cyclorama, sets, curtains and lighting were constructed at a cost of over £1,000. The organizers did not hope to do more than cover their costs, but another opportunity to see *King Kong* resulted in excellent houses at every performance. Everyone was delighted to be home again, although they had spent the miles approaching Johannesburg dolefully checking up on the whereabouts of their passes and tax receipts.

'It's good to be on home ground again', said one of the men, 'but before the tour I never used to eat breakfast. Now I've become used to it and my wife says I'm spoilt.'

The cast had no sooner arrived in Johannesburg than they were rushed off for anti-typhoid inoculations, for in May and June an epidemic had scared Johannesburg. It started amongst African prisoners held in Johannesburg's gaol, The Fort. Inoculation often made cast members ill, but the shows went on.

After months of being together, they still moved along surmounting one crisis after another. With only four more nights to run, the estranged husband of a woman in the cast came along after hearing that his wife was very friendly with one of the backstage staff. In a reconciliation scene he made her swear never to talk to the man again.

'Please put these towels on the rack', asked one of the washerwomen of the backstage man.

'Can't,' he answered, 'I have to see to these props.'

'Besides,' remarked the wife, 'there should be clean towels.'

'I told you never to talk to him again', cried the outraged husband, marching her off.

The girl, who had been understudying the part for the last eight months, played it finally for four performances.

'Nice while it lasted, an' now it
is over—
Tear out your 'eart an'
good-bye to your lover!'
KIPLING. *Mary, Pity Women*

XI. THE FUTURE

THE last days of *King Kong* drew on, and the members of the cast were reminiscing about the good and bad times they had had. Eight months of steady work and good pay were almost over, and many were very worried about the future. In Durban one man in the cast had said: 'I'm having three square meals today, then I'll do my work, then I'm going to sleep comfortably, and tomorrow it will be the same. For the first time in my career I've had this. So no guy in the cast ought to be allowed to make any mistake in the show, or to grumble.'

'In the early days', said Nathan, thinking of the Manhattan Brothers' twenty-five years of touring, 'we used to sleep on slabs, on grass. One time in Bechuanaland there were thirty of us to one room, sleeping on a mud floor. We four can go back to the old life because we know how things are. We are used to three weeks of hard work and good pay, and then nothing for six months. The beginners don't believe us about those days. Many think all shows are run the way *King Kong* was. We have been happy to sing for 4*s*. 6*d*. each or a bottle of cold drink.'

The *King Kong* record had been sent overseas and Miriam Makeba's voice aroused the interest of an English recording company, which offered her a contract to record for them. The Union of Southern African Artists sponsored her trip, as they had done for her husband, the singer Sonny Pillay, whom she had married during the run.

'At the Tafelberg Hotel', said Miriam before she left, 'there were four or five in a room, at the Himalaya two, at the Alabama three, and some of the girls grumbled about comfort and food. I remembered the times when we slept on the very stage on which we had performed. There was no place to wash except a cold tap outside in an alley somewhere. It's not so bad for me now as I have the chance to go to London, but it will be hard

for many of them to go back to old jobs. It's meant a lot to me', she went on. 'I've never had singing lessons before. I read tonic solfa, but not those other things, those little golf-sticks. Up to *King Kong* we just walked on the stage and started singing. When I first started I never thought I'd be able to do any acting; I was so shy. But slowly Leon got things out of me and I found myself getting free. So with the movement, Arnold gave us a feeling of ease. Spike helped a lot with diction and singing. There were crazy times and people can say crazy things, but we have made many friends since *King Kong*.'

Firm personal friendships were struck up; one by a man who specifically invited a member of the cast to meet his 5-year-old daughter who had never spoken to Africans except as servants. Hovering in the doorway of the lounge she would not at first come in. 'I'm scared. They'll eat me', she insisted. Laughing at this, the African wished that some of her later warmth and friendship to people of a different colour could be taught to his children.

'Unfortunately', he said, 'the only white man who enters my house with any regularity is a policeman. And the only white man who has access to my children with any regularity is a doctor with his needle. It gives me little hope of convincing my children that a white man could be a friend.'

Stephen Moloi said that one thing he had learnt from *King Kong* was that 'up to then I hadn't been observant enough. Travelling from home in Orlando to work in a darkroom developing X-rays in Hillbrow, I never really knew about anything. I used to keep to myself a lot. A travelling theatre is a new experience, and I hated touring. I missed my home and children terribly. But if this is a way for avenues in life to open one has to forget the bad angles.' At first Stephen didn't mingle with the crowd, either backstage or front. Now he was getting into groups for listening to records. The greatest thing for Stephen was meeting people. 'In Johannesburg I've spent all those years living and working, going occasionally to the farm near Heilbron where I was born, never realizing how people thought of our problems. It was inspiring to find how many are willing to understand.'

Another said: 'Many of us had always had a contact with the show world. This time it was different. It was a real step forward. It meant a lot to all of us. The need for co-ordination, what it would do to enhance the standard of entertainment, the emergence of a good crop of artists that could equal white; these were the valuable things.'

'For everybody', said one of the women, 'this has been the best money we have known, and now to go back. . . . It came out of thin air', she added, 'and will vanish into thin air.'

Lord Derby, a partner of the London theatrical promoter, Jack Hylton, saw the first Johannesburg production and a few weeks later came the news that the Hylton organization was interested in taking *King Kong* to London. Hugh Charles, general manager of the organization, flew to Johannesburg to see *King Kong*. While he was there he also saw Basil Warner's play *Try for White*, which had been successfully produced by Leonard Schach. *Try for White* was an eloquent story of those borderline cases, who, because their mixed black and white ancestry has given them sufficiently light skins, are able to cross South Africa's apartheid barriers.

Some wag, having been impressed by the *King Kong* talent, decided he might 'Try for Black'.

Hugh Charles acquired an option on *King Kong*, and some weeks later Harry Bloom received a cable from London saying that Hylton wished to exercise the option.

'I'm known as a drunkard, and I'm respected as a drunkard', said one of the Yugudus. 'But what are these sober-minded people doing? We had aims about being artists. By writing that book Todd and Harry encouraged us to be and do something great. Now it's sold out to others. They made a hell of a blunder to sell that play.'

He did not understand that only the notes and the words on paper had been sold. No one could sell what they themselves had put into it. 'A building can't stand without foundations', he said. 'Are we tools to them? I was aiming to do things, but now I'm discouraged.' 'Mark you,' he said, recovering his spirits again, 'work is the thing. If I'm lazy I get nothing, whether in England or America or here. Now I feel it's high time to study. It's not enough to make money. We must do things for the up and coming fellows.'

'What happened to *King Kong* was something none of us anticipated', said Leon Gluckman. 'The play became a staggering success. None of us ever believed it was a *magnum opus*, but we believed that it would take the people a little further along the road to developing their particular talents. Africans were presented as human beings with a capacity for giving pleasure. The theatre, with its universal values, is a good way of showing the truth. The truth in *King Kong* is a basic humanity.'

The play was seen in the four main cities of South Africa by an estimated 120,000 people. It grossed £65,000 in just over one hundred performances—approximately ten weeks of playing time. The moral victory of the players is inestimable.

A formula had been discovered which produced the greatest success in South African theatre history. *King Kong* sharpened the expectation of a public who would no longer be satisfied with the old format.

It was inevitable that the success would be followed up. '*King Kong* has pupped' wrote one journalist. Before 1959 was out three new 'musicals' had been mounted by different producers. 'African Jazz and Variety', which had for seven years been a variety show, blossomed into *Shebeen*, a musical which opened in Cape Town in July. Port Elizabeth, for long one of the liveliest jazz centres in South Africa, starred Mabel Magada in *Shantytown*. In October, Wilfred Sentso and his Synco-fans, the variety group in which Mackay Davashe was first employed as a young man of 19 in 1939, produced *Washerwoman* in Johannesburg.

In January 1960 the Union of Southern African Artists presented Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* produced by Leon Gluckman with music by Spike Glasser and starring Joe Mogotsi. In March a musical play *Mkhumbane*, based on life in Cato Manor was presented in Durban. The music was by Todd Matshikiza and the play was written by Alan Paton who has won an international reputation for his book *Cry, The Beloved Country*.

The future turned out to be not nearly so bleak as it had seemed to the *King Kong* cast after their final Johannesburg performance in July 1959. Miriam Makeba has found fame in America. The trumpeter Hugh Masekela is studying music in New York thanks to a scholarship from singer Harry Belafonte and actor Sidney Poitier.

As a result of the success of *King Kong*, a music and drama training scheme has been established in the now transformed Union Artists' offices at Dorkay House. After only a short time 124 Union members are already actively engaged on the musical side, receiving instrumental, singing, harmony and counterpoint lessons on either a full or part-time basis. A drama section, devoted to voice production, speech, movement, etc., has also been added.

After the play had been 'sold to London' there followed months of

anxious waiting for a decision as to whether it would be cast anew for the overseas production or whether the South African company would be used.

The Hylton Organization had asked Leon Gluckman to direct the production in the West End. When Leon returned from discussions in London in early 1960, it was with the news that they had decided it would be impossible to capture the essentially South African quality of the musical with an alien cast.

'The presentation could be much slicker', said Leon, 'but we would have no Bus Queue, no Township Sunday, no Kwela dance.'

The decision to use South African artists was received almost in an atmosphere of disbelief. No one in the cast had really imagined that they would ever see London. Said one: '*King Kong* has already been the greatest experience in my life. It's hard to believe that it's going to mean still more.'

A point of laughter in the play needed little clarification for South African audiences:

JACK (*the manager*): Well, after the fight with Apeman, we expect to hear from this promoter who's so keen. . . .

POPCORN: . . . to put the Champ on a bill in . . . what's that place again Jack?

JACK: White City Stadium, London.

POPCORN: WHITE CITY STADIUM, LONDON!

SLIM: white city stadium, london. . . .

The word 'passports' became for several months 'PASSPORTS?'

The Union Office was involved in the hectic business of collecting all the necessary papers for passport applications, the character references and the birth and marriage certificates of sixty people; people who generally were not concerned to keep tabs on such records.

In September 1960, fourteen months after they had dispersed, the cast of *King Kong* was called together for a meeting which was half reunion, half ecstatic celebration. The passports for the cast had been granted.

The immediate elation soon wore off and fears of the unknown came to the fore. 'How long?' 'How cold is London?' 'Does the sun ever shine?' 'Where will we stay?' 'How will we live?' they asked.

A series of lectures on the United Kingdom, intensified training at the school, plans for new rehearsals and a new production were under way. Although it remained essentially the same there was a lot of rethinking and

rewriting of the book. Harry Bloom reshaped it into two acts instead of three to conform with the normal Broadway format for musicals. There was much tightening of dialogue and lyrics, and many new arrangements of the music and choreography. Much of the atmosphere of three years before was recaptured.

Instead of rehearsing in England and having an out-of-town opening in the Provinces it was decided to rehearse and play in Johannesburg. Once again Ian Bernhardt was running all over town with estate agents in search of another 'Dungeon'. Once again Leon Gluckman, Arnold Dover and Spike Glasser were holding midnight conferences. Once again the Great Hall of the University was the venue for the *King Kong* opening. Once again all the excited preparations were made for a tour, but this time not for a three and a half thousand mile trip around the Union of South Africa, but on an especially chartered plane for London, and an opening at the Princes Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, on 20 February 1961.

The work in South Africa, while sixty of its best artists are away continues as new people with a better chance are trained by the African Music and Drama Association. And for the sixty, the dream of London, which to Ezekiel Dhlamini was a tormenting and in the end destructive dream, becomes reality.