

Dramatic placement of HIV/AIDS in Malawian socio-historical relationships: Du Chisiza's "Check it out"

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Introduction

The HIV/AIDS pandemic quietly made its entry into Malawi in the mid-1980s. Since then, nobody has tried to explain how it entered the socio-health scene but organizations that deal with the disease content themselves with the finding that the first patient was diagnosed in 1985 and was taken to South Africa for treatment¹. From 1985 to up until now, HIV AIDS has been responded to both as a social and health problem, apart from being a historical phenomena. Because of the disease's devastating effect, policies in both the private and public sectors have given some attention to it. For example, organizations such as the National Bank of Malawi have been given awards for putting aside money and designing programmes for their employees in dealing with the disease. Furthermore, the Ministry of Agriculture has drawn up a policy which takes into account the pandemic and its effects on agricultural productivity, drumming up the status of women in the interactions. The Malawi government itself, in conjunction with the donor community instituted the National Aids Commission (NAC), with the sole aim of organizing resources to deal with the disease as a national health and social crisis. The Commission has since been the main player on activities surrounding the combating of the disease. As regards the arts and literature, Steve Chimombo has produced a book on how the disease has been reflected in the different art mediums. He included the roles played by paintings, sculpture, literature and drama, among other mediums in his expose. In terms of theatre for development, a Humboldt University scholar and his students who visited Malawi in 2002 to chronicle ways in which theatre was used as a communication intervention for the disease in the Agricultural sector produced the most instructive book, in which they sampled performances from Lilongwe, a district in the Central region of the country. Apart from that, there exist many drama-as-communication documents that Non-Governmental Organisations such as

National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE), Population Services International (PSI) and The Story Workshop etc. churn out as they use the art and evaluate their projects. However, there is silence on the part of popular commercial stage drama. Though the sector has produced plays on HIV and AIDS over time since the 1980s, no studies have been done to follow these up. In this paper, I present my investigation on one such play by Du Chisiza Jr. called *Check it out*, which, according to the Malawian-British theatre academic and practitioner David Kerr, is arguably the first stage play to deal with HIV and AIDS in Malawi². My interest is to assess not only how the play reflected issues about the disease but also how Chisiza Jr. presented young people's lifestyles in the 1980s, real and imagined, especially in the urban centre of Blantyre, making his production a socio-historical text. But before we examine *Check it out*, we probably need to briefly profile Chisiza Jr. on who he was and the work he did.

Dunduzu “Du” Chisiza Jr.

Du Chisiza Jr., the last of the four children born to the prominent Malawian political economist Dunduzu Chisiza, was born in 1963, a few months after his father was killed in a car crash on the Zomba-Blantyre road. Kanyama Chiume, a Cabinet Minister in the Banda government, wrote that Chisiza Sr., who had attained University education in Economics at Birmingham University in the 1950s, had already worked as a civil servant under the British colonial administration, and had written a monograph on African economics, was considered an early victim of Banda, as Banda established a dictatorship in Malawi. Chisiza Jr. attended various primary schools in Blantyre and was admitted to Chichiri Secondary School in 1977. As a member of the Chichiri Secondary School Drama Club, he benefited from the presence of Owen Mbilizi, who was a patron of the club from 1977 to 1981. Though Chisiza's involvement in the club was limited, his enthusiasm for drama grew. After spending two years at Chichiri, he transferred to Henry Henderson Institute (HHI) Secondary School in Blantyre where he obtained the Malawi Certificate of Education in 1983. It was, according to Mwase, while he was at HHI that he staged an extract from Goldoni's farce, *Servant of Two Masters* and wrote *The Deceased Attack*.

For various reasons, *The Deceased Attack*, which was based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, made Du Chisiza Jr. popular. The play's popularity owed much to the topical issues it raised. It made a major political comment through theatre on

Banda's political career. In Mwase's words, 'the play raised the issue of Chisiza Jr.'s father'⁵. The uncle in the play, as also in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, was associated with Banda as the man who kills his brother to marry his sister-in-law. David Kerr, a teacher at the University in Zomba at the time, and a judge at the ATEM Secondary School Festival in Lilongwe in 1983, recalls that 'the play was a provocative statement against Banda's tyranny when Tumbuka songs lyrics for revenging the death loudly bellowed *imwe, imwe, imwe a viyezgu mukuruta imwe!* (you you you Viyezgu, you are going (next))'. To Kerr, such a statement, made straight to the front row of government ministers such as Dick Matenje, who graced the occasion as Guest of Honour, and was assassinated together with others within the year, moving. With the same cast, Chisiza staged the play in secondary school halls and other venues, becoming established as a commercial dramatist. Following the success of the tours, Chisiza and his school friends founded Wakhumbata Workshop Theatre to set a new pattern of commercial theatre in Malawi.

Wakhumbata Workshop Theatre was funded by Chisiza's stepfather and hotshot lawyer during Banda's times, Bazuka Mhango. The first phase, with a number of successfully provocative plays such as *The Eye of Chimuzu*⁷ lasted until 1984 when Mhango sent Chisiza to Philadelphia School for Performing Arts in America where he did a Bachelor in Fine Arts (BFA) degree⁸. While he was away, Mhango's funding for Wakhumbata stopped. Waliko Makhala and Frank Mwase led Wakhumbata and they staged plays including *Mosquito*, *The World Loved Us* and *The Eye of Chimuzu*⁹. On Chisiza's return three years later, he rejoined his friends to transform the School Drama Club approach that had characterised Wakhumbata's production methods. According to Wakhumbata actor, Wongani Munthali, Chisiza's production rehearsal classes included Voice and Speech, Stage Acting, and Stage Management. The training was connected to production of plays which Chisiza wrote¹⁰.

Chisiza began to feel frustrated when *Me Nobody Knows*, a play he intended to stage after his return, was refused permission by the Censorship Board in 1987. Mwase said the production raised issues of a girl who was being abused by her father, and the Censorship Board disapproved of its performance in Malawi. In 1992, Chisiza told dramatist Steve Chimombo that fifteen of his plays had been turned down by the Censorship Board. As a way of dealing with the problem, Chisiza resorted to writing in 'experimental forms' those plays that were likely to

be considered controversial by the Board. *Fragments* for example, was a result of such an undertaking. The play had an episodic structure, mixing dance, song and dialogue, and incorporated scenes from rejected plays including *Me Nobody Knows*. Mwase recalls the integration of a dance extracted from *Me Nobody Knows*. Suggestive of incest between a Reverend and his daughter, it was included as part of the opening scene for *Fragments*¹³.

Chisiza's approach to drama was derived from a combination of his experience from the ATEM Drama Festivals and his American education. He wrote his plays with literary standards in mind, and incorporated elements which he thought would appeal to his audience. He manipulated the English language, to the delight of his audience. For example, he incorporated into the script repetitive rhyming words, experimental phrases, and exaggerated description of characters' actions. Describing these as 'extravagant writing' in 'Developmental Paradigms', I suggested that Chisiza's *The Deceased Attack* would have been better if he had avoided elements that were used out of context and held the advancement of the performance. With hindsight, I can recognize the advantages of Chisiza's approach and I have since put aside my 'prescriptive' response.

In an interview with Chimombo in 1992, Chisiza told him that he had written over seventy plays¹⁵. They included *The Deceased Attack*, *Chitowero*, *Nyamirandu*, *Fragments*, *Check It Out*, *Black Bra Wizo*, *Barefoot in the Heart*, *Democracy Boulevard*, *Truman's Corner*, and *Operation Tidy*. These, amongst others, indicate the range of themes tackled including politics, love, crime, and HIV/AIDS. He self-published fifteen of the plays in four collections, namely, *The Deceased Attack and Other Plays: Du Chisiza Classics*¹⁶, *De Summer Blows and Other Plays*, *Democracy Boulevard and Other Plays*, and *Barefoot in the Heart and Other Plays*¹⁷.

Academic critics have had a few positive words to say about Chisiza. According to David Kerr, efforts were made to attract him into the University after his return from America. However, his popularity and the commercial success he soon enjoyed distracted him. Chimombo¹⁸, however, had mixed reactions about Chisiza. He said 'Chisiza is a good actor but not much of a writer'¹⁹. Joe Chimwenje thought 'Chisiza had established himself as a cult figure who wrote his own plays, played the major roles and never listened to any criticism'²⁰. Ex-Wakhumbata actor, Waliko Makhala, said Chisiza did not want to join the

university because ‘he felt it would not have satisfied his needs of “making theatre” as the university’s emphasis fell on “teaching theatre”²¹. Makhala’s comments show that Chisiza and other popular dramatists paid little attention to the way the University conducted dramatic activities, both as an academic discipline and a profession. For instance, when Chisiza returned from America in 1987, the Department of Fine and Performing Arts and the Travelling Theatre were already in close collaboration. Productions including *Chiwaleso*, *Tears of Blood*, *Genuine Tears*, and *Ulemu Unlimited* were performed, and they involved students including Zangaphee Joshua Chizeze, Watipaso Mkandawire, Ben Wokomaatani Malunga, Ulemu Chilimira, Sylvia Nankwenya, and Catherine Tikiwa²².

Some of Chisiza’s ex-colleagues at Wakhumbata expressed worry over his approach. Mwase described one of Chisiza’s weaknesses that he ‘thought he was too educated and successful in a sector in which he had no competitor. He made himself an unapproachable ‘demi-god’, because people such as Edge Kanyongolo and Viphya Harawa, who could have shown him a thing or two, had moved to other careers’²³. Zondwayo Juwa, who worked with Chisiza as an actor from 1992 to 1995, left Wakhumbata because ‘Chisiza shouted and humiliated me and other actors at rehearsal’²⁴. In a biographical play, *Tribute to Du Chisiza Jr.*, Gertrude Kamkwatira wrote about how she persevered humiliation from Chisiza when she said ‘I would be shouted at and sent away from rehearsal for being twenty minutes late’²⁵. In spite of his weaknesses, Chisiza produced thought provoking and entertaining plays, one of which is *Check it Out*, whose analysis follows.

The play

Soon after his arrival in 1987, Chisiza quickly re-organised Wakhumbata and produced plays, one of which was *Check it Out*. The play was based on contemporary urban social issues. This was seen as a move away from traditional metaphorical plays such as *The Deceased Attack*, which he wrote before going to America.

Check It Out is about a young man, Max Vukuza, whose father, Dr. Jim Michael Vukuza, works as a Manager of a firm in Blantyre. The Vukuza family resides in Namiwawa, one of the wealthy suburbs of Blantyre. Max calls himself ‘Doctor’, and girls from all walks of life vie for his attention. His stepmother, Nandi, who grades and approves girls for him, condones Max’s affairs.

Mrs. Vukuza is a health fanatic who regularly drags the whole family to Dr. Mfani's surgery for medical check ups. One such family examination revealed a health problem that would break the family apart. Giving results after tests are carried on the family, Dr. Mfani confirms that all are still enjoying a healthy life except for Max who is diagnosed as being HIV positive. Mrs. Vukuza moves Max to the guest house fearing that the disease might spread to the other members of the family. Max is kept away from the rest and he becomes depressed by the isolation. One day, Max's sister, Blessings, visits and cheers him up with a youthful chant in which Max's charm for girls is praised. Seemingly comforted, Max asks Blessings to accompany him to his favourite spots in Blantyre city. When Blessings leaves to dress up, Max becomes overwhelmed with memories of his past free-wheeling life, now taken away by the isolation. After dressing up in 'dazzling' clothes, he fetches a rope and hangs himself. Hearing the news of the son's death, Jim fails to contain himself and he commits suicide. Though not stated, the death of the father brings to an end the happiness and material wealth enjoyed by the family.

Characterization

Max Vukuza is the main character for the play. Newly out of school and working, he is a spoilt young man who comes from a wealthy family. He is adored by many girls, some of whom are still at school. His friends admire him, and he is ready to pick arguments with other young men over girls. The rivals are usually Indian or Coloured young men whose parents have shops or motor vehicle workshops in the city. Max's favourite spots in the city are big hotels such as Ryalls, cinemas including Apollo Vistarama, and restaurants such as The Lunch Box Take-Away. While seen as well placed in society, Max's weakness is girls, of which he has twenty-seven. Pampered by the affluent environment, his extravagant interaction with girls leads him to his death.

Blessings, Max's youngest stepsister, is fifteen years old and at school. She has no boyfriend, and is very close to him. She likes pampering him out of admiration for his free-wheeling lifestyle, and she wishes to have a lover, just like him. Emotionally attached to Max and very supportive of him, she stays with Max until his untimely death. Salome, Max's middle stepsister, has a boyfriend whose personality is slightly similar to Max's. Salome supports Max when he is healthy, but is advised by the mother not to be too close to him because 'HIV/AIDS is

contagious and has no cure'. Claire, the eldest stepsister, knows how to play 'wealthy' to intimidate Max's girlfriends with the intention of maintaining Max's popularity amongst them. She also supports Max before the revelation that he is HIV positive.

Nandi Vukuza, the stepmother, shows love for Max to please her husband, by whom she has three daughters. She encourages Max to bring pretty girls home and yet when he is diagnosed with HIV, she is the first one to distance him from the family. She sidelines Max out of ignorance about the disease, drives him into a depression which leads him to his death. The father, Jim Michael Vukuza, is not close to the children, and that becomes a thing he pays a high price for when Max kills himself. He ends his own life in grief. Minor characters include Max's girlfriends Cleo, La Shaunze, Abygail, Nutty; friends who include Fraid, John and rival Osman. The community is represented by a Christian born-again preacher referred to as Brother, and Dr. Mfani, the family physician.

Chisiza's choice of names for his characters shows the way he planned *Check It Out* as a play for young people. For example, the name Dr. Mfani would have attracted the attention of policemen in Malawi. 'Mfani' refers to a bundle of dry marijuana, which was illegal. Mentioning a name of the sort, viewed as anti-institutional, in a country trapped in political repression, delighted Chisiza's youthful audience. Nutty, another name, came from Bob Marley's song, *Nutty Dread*, which was very popular in Malawi at the time. The relationship between Bob Marley, Rastafarianism and 'the weed' was completely misunderstood by young people who used the trend as anti-institutional subculture. La Shaunze, with a ring of Spanish in it, brought an exotic feel and appealed to the youthful audience who fantasized about life outside Malawi. 'Vukuza' means 'to shake vigorously'. Taken from a popular streetwise colloquial term of the time, *ndikuvukuza mphwanga*, meaning 'I will beat and shake you up badly young brother small one', the expression provoked loud applause from audience members who identified in it an element of street culture. A splash of these names, amongst others that sounded youthful such as Claire and Abygail, embellished the play for the youthful audience's enjoyment.

Play structure

Act One of *Check It Out* establishes how Max interacts with his family, the girls, and the community. Scene one is created around the chant which praises Max as

an exotic and admirable lover. He performs it with his two sisters, Blessings and Salome. Scene Two is about Cleo, one of Max's girlfriends, who visits the Vukuza family. The way Max proposes to girls and communicates with girlfriends before he is reprimanded by a 'born-again' preacher, who is merely referred to as Brother, in scene three. Max, who does not heed the Brother's advice, contradicts most of what he says about Christianity and good behaviour. On the Brother's exit, John, Salome's boyfriend, who is also a friend to Max, enters and together they celebrate their popularity amongst girls. In scene four, Abygail and La Shaunze fight over Max. Abygail claims that she offers him money and clothes, while La Shaunze maintains that she gives him 'real' love. Scene five, which centres around Blessings' birthday, shows the popularity enjoyed by Max amongst girls and how other boys envy him. Scene six includes reflections that Max makes on life, death and heaven. With Nutty, another girlfriend, Max paints heaven for her as a technologically advanced place with highly sophisticated entertainment equipment. Osman, Nutty's Indian boyfriend, calls at Max's place and is shamefully rejected by her.

Having shown the type of life that Max leads, Act two follows with the after-effects. The first of the ten scenes is about Dr. Mfani and how he breaks the news that Max is HIV positive. When he states the diagnosis, Max's parents wonder whether to send him abroad for medical attention or not. In their discussion, it is revealed that Nandi is Max's stepmother. She suggests to Max that he moves to the guest house in scene two. She then phones Dr. Mfani to advise Max to take an indefinite bed-rest. In scene four, the family starts to disintegrate when an argument between Mr. and Mrs Vukuza exposes two issues. Firstly, Nandi is Mr. Vukuza's second wife. Secondly, they discuss HIV/AIDS and how it is spread. All of them are ignorant about it. Nandi claims that it is contagious, while the children think it is genetic. Scene five is a tense moment between Max and Cleo, the girlfriend. She confronts Max about his state before breaking off the affair. In scene six, Max receives a letter from Nutty, ending their friendship. It is in scene seven, after Blessings visits Max to chant his 'check it out' praise, that he commits suicide. A procession for his funeral passes through the stage in scene eight, while in scene nine, the whole family reminisces about their loved brother Max. Nandi condemns the son's womanizing behaviour, and the father is very upset because of the accusations. The play ends with scene ten in which a Reverend comes to report the death of Mr. Vukuza to the wife, who by this time has lost her sanity.

Social issues

The first issue the play raises is the careless way in which Max leads his life, mistaken by young people as carefree and enviable. With access to money and freedom to engage with different girls in sex, Max's so-called 'good life' results in the contraction of the HIV virus. When he tests HIV positive, the mood of the play changes from happy to sad. Dr. Vukuza accuses his wife of pampering Max because he was 'just' a stepson to her. The open challenge infuriates Nandi who claims that Max's promiscuous behaviour was inherited from the father.

Another important issue raised is the spread of 'fanatical' Christianity in Malawi in the 1980s. The incorporation of the 'born-again' Brother was topical for the play. Firstly, this theme reflected the presence of charismatic churches in Malawi, especially in the cities of Blantyre and Lilongwe. By the mid 1970s, the Assemblies of God and the Christian Fellowship Centres had taken root in Malawi. The Assemblies of God undertook crusades in the suburbs of the cities, conducting prayers in open places, and distributing leaflets. Fellowship Centres for lunch-time prayer meetings were opened in Limbe and Blantyre. These crusades brought a new approach to the spread of the gospel in comparison to traditional churches such as the Roman Catholic, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Presbyterians. A second issue is raised when Max refuses to listen to the 'born-again' Brother'. It shows the freedom with which the Vukuza family led its life. His act suggested that children from rich families enjoyed freedom of choice. Inversely, children from poor homes were mostly guided by Malawian traditions, which did not permit them to go against their parents and norms of society, including religious matters. The play placed under the spotlight the issue of 'enviable' freedom to choose lifestyles amongst children who come from rich families, and its dire consequences, as a warning to impressionable young people who ignorantly envied such a lifestyle.

Check it out and the 1980s youth

The play starts from the high point of Max's popularity with girls. When it opens, we hear Cyndi Lauper's song, *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*. The choice of the song, judging from the 'Americanised' context Chisiza and the youth operated in, is prompted, firstly, by the wording of the title, which incorporated the word 'wanna'. Secondly, the song encapsulates the theme of the play in which the youth demanded to be free to explore their capabilities as young adults, which includes

being left alone to make their own decisions on sexual matters. When the song finishes, Max Vukuza goes into his own praise drill, in which he leads and his sisters respond with refrains, as the following exchange shows:

Max: Check it out!

Sisters: A guy from Burundi
Takes only brandy,
Wears clothes that are baggy,
Crazy about African beauty.
He walks.
He talks.
He's good.
He's bad
He's cute
He's the best...

Max: Check it out!

Sisters: He's Max ... Max... Max Vukuza

Max: Yeah...

Sisters: Check it out!²⁶

Having warmed up his audience with *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*, the character Max Vukuza is introduced through the rhyming lyrics, praising the way he appears as a commendable ideal lover. Noticeable in the eulogy is the way he dresses, his love for 'African beauty' and his charm. Also striking is the American usage of such words as 'bad', 'good', and 'cute'. Soon after the chant, Max's way of wooing girls is illustrated, as the following exchange shows:

Max: Hey, call Jane up for me, telephone number 631 807, and tell her that the "Doctor" would like to talk to her.

Blessings: What if her Pa answers the phone?

Max: The doctrine remains intact. The Doctor wants to talk to her. My D.O.A. is valid for both parents and their daughters.

Salome: Who is this one now? New on the scene?

Max: The latest...

Salome: Did you make the first move or did she?

Max: In our love federation it's not only abominable but illegal for a dude to make the first move on a chick. We let them crawl²⁷ ...

The appeal to the youthful audience continues in this passage as he talks about love and girlfriends. The use of words such as 'Pa', 'making a move', 'dude', 'chick' is in a manner similar to that of American city youths as presented in Hollywood movies. The creation of sentences such as 'the doctrine remains intact' is also worth noting. Instead of expressing the idea simply, Chisiza uses an unfamiliar construction to demonstrate his ability with the English language. The accolade DOA. would have stood for Doctor Of Amity. As young secondary school students, in letters to lovers in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we used the word 'amity' to mean 'love'. At the same time, the term could have also been used to ridicule the reverence that MCP loyalists accorded President Banda. Banda was a medical doctor, who was dubbed 'Destroyer Of the Federation' (DOF) by his Zambian counterpart, Kenneth Kaunda. Kaunda gave Banda the accolade not only in recognition of Banda's outspokenness about the Federation, but also because it was broken in 1960. My suggestion is that Chisiza created DOA. in line with his reference to love, and at the same time, he could have used it as a parody of D.O.F. Furthermore, his mention of 'love federation' in the quote was a way of creating a new context for the word 'federation', away from how it was known in Malawian politics. Through the new context, Chisiza was able to suggest his theme of love and sex:

Max: We let them crawl...

Sisters: And crawl, and crawl ... until you're ready to draw! Hoo!

Max: And then we catch...

Sisters: And touch and touch until they are ready to hatch. Mhooo!²⁸

There are two things that can be suggested by what is happening in this scene. Firstly, there is a sexual game in the wordplay in which the sisters participate. Secondly, we may recall that Vukuza is a 'Doctor', and has all these women praising him. Could this have been a reference to Banda, whose *mbumba* (Members of the Malawi Congress Party's Women's League) sang praises for him as their only leader? Whatever the implication, Max's interaction with the sisters has similarities with the way Banda related to his dancing party women.

Max used his sisters to make telephone calls to girlfriends. At times, this method

was confronted with problems, as shown in the following exchange:

Blessings: Is that 631 807? May I talk to Jane please? The Doctor would like to talk to her. No, not Dr. Jacob, Dr. Max... Max Vukuza... Check it out! (Phone is hung up on the other end).

Max: What happened?

Blessings: He just hung up on me...

Max: What did you say?

Blessings: I asked if I could talk to Jane.

Max: Yes, and he asked who was calling and you said, "The Doctor."

Blessings: Doctor Max Vukuza...

Max: Yes, then what did he say?

Blessings: He just said "stupid", and hung up...

Max: You must have said something else...

Blessings: Nothing, I swear, apart from just "Check It Out!"

Max: "Check it out"? To old folk?... Christ baby! We don't say "Check it out!" to people of another generation... It's hazardous to their health. Might have been better to say, "Check it in!" Check it out? ... But all the same ... (it) doesn't give him the right to be rude... Give me the phone... (Dials) Hello? Listen big guy... I want you to meet me down town... Ryalls Hotel, pool side. I have to talk to you 'cause I don't like your jive'. 2.30 sharp! or you're a dead man.²⁹

The idea of phoning a girl and being shouted at by the girl's parents was a 'scandal' that appealed to the youthful audience. It was a familiar encounter between young people and their lovers' parents in their 'development' to adulthood. The repetition of 'Check It Out', and the way Max addresses the person at the other end as 'big guy', are a continuation of the use of American mannerisms, as evidenced in some Hollywood movies. In addition, the mention of a high class meeting place such as Ryalls Hotel in Blantyre pleased his secondary school audience. They imagined Max Vukuza as a man who frequented places where only those with money went. Chisiza's plays such as *Misidi Burning*, which is about police and criminals, and *Papa's Empire*, on the Mafia, suggest that

in a place such as Malawi where American movies were adored, Chisiza included the references to the mannerisms and fancy places such as hotels to appeal to the audience. Observations I made in the earlier paper condemned such arbitrary inclusion, especially of language, which I said confused characterization. For example, *Misidi Burning* is set in a rural area in Malawi, and has Malawian policemen talking in a similar manner to the way characters in American police television series do. In this paper, however, closer investigation reveals that Chisiza's inclusion of the mannerisms was a strategy to achieve popular appeal amongst members of his youthful audience. An exploration of how the family reacted to Max's behaviour follows.

When Cleopatra, one of Max's girlfriends, comes to visit, the following conversation takes place between her, Max, and the family, as Lionel Richie's romantic song, *Penny Lover plays* in the background:

Blessings: Hi! My name's Blessings.

Cleo: Nice to meet you, Blessings.

Claire: I'm Claire. How do you like my brother?

Salome: And I am Salome – my friends call me Lome.

Cleo: Hi, Salome!

Salome: That's what my enemies call me...

Max: Hi, everybody, this is Cleo. Egyptians call her Patra – I call her my Inamorata – I give her 85%, how much do you give her?

Sisters: Seventy-four.

Blessings: His bedroom is ... comfortable but that will be when you hit 87%.

Cleo: Thank you – I'll aim for it...

Claire: What are you gonna drink – Night Music, Teachers, Seven Up – that's imported from South Africa. Of course Ginger Ale, Brandy, Fanta, that's not imported.

Cleo: I'll take some California Wine Cooler, thank you³⁰...

The atmosphere of a comfortable, rich home, whose inhabitants behave like 'azungu' (white people) is being established in this scenario. It is noticeable that the children's lovers freely come to the family house. This is not the case with other homes, which are considered less 'civilised' for not behaving like 'white people', restricting their children from bringing their lovers. Chisiza is offering a vision of the freedom many members of his audience wished to have. The involvement of the sisters to comment on the beauty of their brother's lover is an extension of the fantasy of 'behaving like white people'. It is not normal amongst Malawians for sisters to openly discuss a brother's love life to the point of suggesting to the girlfriend that 'his bed is more comfortable'. Furthermore, Claire's reference to 'South African' and 'imported drinks' is not only a suggestion of class, but also puts forward the values of the family, which Cleo 'beats' by mentioning a drink with an American name.

There is a lot of competition between Max's sisters and Cleo to show how wealthy and civilized they are. Max's introduction of the girl as Cleo and later as Patra extends the fantasy game, while calling her 'my Inamorata' is an attempt to create mystique around her. Few of the audience members could have known what 'Inamorata' meant. Firstly, 'inamorata' is Latin for 'loved one'. Additionally, amongst the Tswana and Sotho, 'ke a morata', means 'I love her'. 'Mrati waka' means 'my loved one'. In an effort to highlight class, which in Malawi is always associated with foreign and Western orientated mannerisms, Chisiza included 'inamorata' to add 'foreign' colour to the play. All this becomes part of the amusement, which reaches its climax when the mother enters, as indicated in the following exchange:

Max: Where is Mom?

Claire: You can wait, then, sweetheart for another hour or two.

Blessings: She's in the bedroom.

Max: Is she looking hot enough to meet a guest or is she looking droopy-droopy?

Mom: I ain't sweetheart – maybe your girl is. By the way, I give her 55% - you better work on your hair, sweetheart, you need a hairdo³¹.

Nandi joins in the children's game of 'youth love', adding enjoyment for the audience, which might have wished to have a mother similar to her. She grades the girl's beauty at 55%, rating her as possessing average looks, and therefore not commendable; uses American manner of speech, and criticises Cleo for not having a proper 'hairdo', to earn herself a commendation as a 'cool mom'. However, while the introductions are taking place, Max's other girlfriend calls on the phone, as the following conversations and exchanges confirm:

Blessings: Hello – Dr. Vukuza's residence. May I help you? ... What's your percentage? Ninety – five? Career? ... Hold on! Max... Leticia's on the phone ... Ninety five percent, very pretty. Her father's a GM. She's a qualified secretary – 140 words shorthand. ...

Max: Excuse me, sweetheart. Priority ... you're good, but someone else is better. Hang tight ... Yah... Check it out! Sorry honey, I can't fit you in today... Say what! 200 – 200 bucks? Where? What time? I'll be there in ten minutes. Bye Cleo.

Cleo: Can I use your phone, please?

Mom: Sure, you're most welcome to it.

Cleo: (Dials) Hello? May I talk to Collins? ... Can you pick me up somewhere ... Well, I'm in a dilapidated neighbourhood somewhere in Namiwawa to see a cheap friend whose car's broken down... How long should I wait or should I call someone else?

Sisters: Uuuuuh!

Claire: I give you 95 %, baby, for character. You are really something else...

Max: Oh! Cleo, I gotta find you here, don't go anywhere...

Cleo: Can I use your phone again, please?

Sisters: Please ... No!³²

Notwithstanding the fact that Cleo is present, Max is further shown as someone who is in much demand by girls. He does not know who to hold on to, and runs to the other leaving Cleo at home. Cleo herself is almost similar to Max as regards

behaviour. Seeing Max openly double-crossing her, she called another boyfriend to pick her up from ‘a dilapidated neighbourhood in Namiwawa’ she refers to as ‘cheap’. The downgrading of Namiwawa as ‘dilapidated’ ran contrary to the knowledge that members of the audience had about it, so did the ‘cheapness’ of Max Vukuza. It was the delight that came from situations and dialogues such as these that Chisiza’s audience looked for, especially when Cleo boasted and placed herself a class higher above the ‘affluent Vukuza family’.

Mrs. Vukuza, a health fanatic, makes the amusement short-lived. Dr. Mfani visits the family and reveals that Max is HIV positive. Threatened by the incurable condition Max is in, the mother suggests that he stays alone ‘so that we can save the others’³³. She does not realize the amount of pressure she exerts on Max’s mind. Before long, Max devises a plan out of the depression, as shown in the following exchange and stage directions:

Max: Get yourself ready, Sis, ‘cause you and me, we’re going out on a date’. We’re gonna paint the town red ‘Cause Max is back on the scene’. I want you to wear my favourite clothes and I am going to wear the ones you picked – your favourite, I assume.

Blessings: That’s right ... Let’s see who’s first.

Max: You’ve got three minutes.

Blessings: Four and a half...

Max: Four only. (Max puts on loud music. Dresses in the clothes Blessings chose. He is dazzling. Pausing for a moment, he fetches a rope, and in tears, ties it around his neck, killing himself. Lights fade to a ghostly dark blue.)

Blessings: Max, I’m ready. I’ve taken three minutes. (Comes back in. Notices Max. Screams and runs out)³⁴.

The seclusion depresses young Max to the point that he commits suicide. What starts off as fun ends up in a tragedy. The isolation, contrasted to the attention he receives from his girlfriends and sisters at the start of the play, intensifies the ending. When the play opens, a group of three sisters perform with him the ‘Check it out’ drill. In the end, the presence of only one praise singer emphasizes

the feeling of loneliness in the psyche of Max, made worse by his removal from the main house. The ‘dazzling’ clothes he wears before hanging himself, and the playwright’s request for ‘a ghostly dark blue’ light for the time after the suicide is meant to add to the shock on the impressionable young audience.

Conclusion

At the time Chisiza staged the play in 1988, HIV/AIDS was not well known in Malawi. One Malawian patient had been reported in 1985, and subsequently treated in South Africa in 1987. In conversation, David Kerr reports that the World Health Organisation (WHO) held an HIV/AIDS awareness Workshop for media practitioners in 1987. He remembers Charles Severe and other theatre artists to have attended. Additionally, Kerr suggests that *Check it out* could have been the first Malawian play about HIV/AIDS³⁵. Additionally, Chisiza’s stay in America, where HIV/AIDS was being discussed in the media, especially when *Ebony Magazine* carried articles that Magic Johnson, one of the top black basketball players was infected, could have inspired him to warn the Malawian youth about it. It is clear from Chisiza’s treatment of the play that he incorporated a warning to the youth through their favourite subjects: affluence, lovers, and American mannerisms. In addition to that, by setting the play in Namiwawa, he responded to their fantasy of life led by so-called rich families.

The structure of *Check It Out* is easy to follow. Chisiza based it on an ordinary story about young people growing up in Malawi and the phenomenon of HIV/AIDS. By creating two acts which complemented each other, using the cause-effect baseline, he took along the audience from the behaviour of Max to what its effects were. Added to structure was characterization. Though parents were involved in the story, the emphasis was on the young people. The names he gave his characters and their behaviour reflected the fantasy about names, beauty, and exoticness amongst Malawian youths. Characterisation was complemented by use of language. Having identified the popularity of American movies and the lifestyle portrayed in them, Chisiza incorporated the elements to achieve popular appeal. Most importantly, *Check it out* raised the issue of HIV/AIDS which was not commonly discussed in Malawi at the time. He tackled the myths that were circulating about the disease, and how misinformation could have affected communities. But the discussion about affluence, American mannerisms, and love affairs was how Chisiza charmed his audience in *Check It out*, to document not

only the entrance of HIV/AIDS on the Malawian health scene, but also on the popular commercial drama stage. Most importantly, he brought in the lifestyle of young people in the 1980s, as they imagined affluence and the high status that money gave people in this society where the Namiwawa suburb of Blantyre city, a place for highly educated Malawians in management positions resided in the 1970s and 80s, becoming a standard for urban social mobility to aspire for.

Notes

1. See National Aids Commission's preamble to the National policy on HIV/AIDS
2. Interview with David Kerr, August 2003, Chancellor College, Zomba.
3. See Kanyama Chiume's autobiography, *Kanyama Chiume*, 1982.
4. Interview with Malawian veteran dramatist Frank Mwase, August, 2003, Limbe, Malawi
5. Ibid.
6. Kerr, interview, Chancellor college, Zomba, 2003
7. *The Eye of Chimuzu* could be seen as provocative because of the usage of the root word muzu – root, also present in Banda's first name, Kamuzu
8. Interview with Chisiza's longtime drama companion from the HHI secondary days, Waliko Makhala at French Cultural Centre, Blantyre Malawi, March 2003.
9. Mwase, interview, Market point offices, Limbe, 2003.
10. Munthali, interview, French cultural Centre, Blantyre, 2003.
11. Mwase, interview
12. Chimombo interviewing Chisiza, *WASI Writer* 2002.
13. Mwase, interview, Market point office, Limbe, 2003.
14. see Magalasi (2001), "Malawian theatre at the crossroads", p. 35
15. see Chimombo interview with Chisiza.
16. Published by Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre in 1992.
17. Published by Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre in 1998.
18. Kerr, interview, Chancellor College, Zomba, 2003

19. The present writer in conversation with Steve Chimombo, Hotel Chisakalime, 1992.
20. Chimwenje, interview
21. Makhala, interview
22. see *The Muse*, 1987
23. Mwase, interview, Market point office, Limbe, 2003.
24. Interview with Zondwayo Juwa, 2003
25. Kamkwatira, "Tribute to Du Chisiza Jr." unpublished play script written in 1999 soon after Chisiza's death.
26. Du. Chisiza Jr. (1998 a), "Check it out" in *Democracy Boulevard and other plays*, Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre, p. 69.
27. *Check it out*, pp. 69 - 70
28. *Check it out*, p. 70
29. *Check it out*, p. 70 -71
30. *Check it out*, p. 74
31. *Check it out*, p. 73
32. *Check it out*, p. 74
33. *Check it out*, p. 92
34. *Check it out*, p. 106
35. Kerr, interview, Chancellor College, Zomba, 2003

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