One of the most striking phenomena of the theatrical cultures that we commonly term postcolonial is the rise of syncretic theatrical forms. Although the prevalence of syncretic elements in the theatre and drama of some postcolonial countries has often been remarked upon, it has never been systematically studied; nor has there been any attempt to formulate a coherent theory to account for this phenomenon. Syncretic theatre can be defined as those theatrical products which result from the interplay between the Western theatrico-dramatic tradition and the indigenous performance forms of a postcolonial culture. The term syncretism is borrowed from the discipline of comparative religion and denotes the process whereby elements of one religion are absorbed into another. While this phenomenon has always been a feature of religious change, it has been particularly noticeable and well documented during the period of colonial contact when religious intermingling was accelerated not just by the imposition of Christianity but also by the imported belief systems of slaves or migrant labourers. Religious syncretism is usually an extended process brought about by friction and interchange between cultures. Theatrical syncretism, however, is in most cases a conscious, programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theatre in the light of colonial or postcolonial experience. It is very often written and performed in a Europhone language but almost always manifests varying degrees of bi- or multilin-
gualism. Syncretic theatre in this sense is a widespread phenomenon in Africa, the Caribbean, and is increasing in strength in Fourth World cultures in New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Syncretic theatre is also an effective means of *decolonising the stage*, utilising as it does the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements, without slavish adherence to the one tradition or the other. Postcolonial drama, however, is very much a neglected area in the critical study of New Literatures in English.¹ One of the reasons, I would contend, lies in the very syncretic nature of so much of this drama, which relies so heavily on non-dialogic communicative devices: on dance, music, song, iconography, indigenous languages.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a methodology with which to analyse these works as a theatrical text and to foreground their syncreticity as a central component of their communicative structure. To do so, I wish to take a canonised work of postcolonial drama – Wole Soyinka’s perhaps most famous play, *Death and the King’s Horseman* – and exemplify the way in which these performance forms communicate and discuss the problems they pose for a non-indigenous spectator/reader. The methodology proposed relies on a number of semiotic concepts which need to be introduced briefly.

Syncretic theatre cannot be grasped purely as an aesthetic phenomenon but must be embedded in a concept of cultural interaction and change. Jurij Lotman and his school of Cultural semiotics have proposed the notion of cultural texts as a heuristic category with which to approach phenomena of cultural change and exchange. According to Lotman’s definition a cultural text is “any carrier of integral (‘textual’) meaning” including ceremonies, works of art, as well as “genres” such as “prayer”, “law”, “novel”, etc.² This broad defin-

¹ See, however, the new overview of the field by Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins: *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. (London: Routledge, 1996).

² Jurij Lotman: “Theses on the Semiotic Study of Culture.” *Structure of Texts and Semiotics of Culture*, eds. Jan van der Eng/Mojmir Grygar et al. (Den Haag: Mouton, 1973). In the theses there is no such clear systemisation. For purposes of lucidity I shall follow here the commentary from Irene Portis Winner/Thomas G. Winner: “The Semiotics of Cultural Texts.” *Semiotica* 18:2 (1976), pp. 101-156. (Other criteria include: construction according to definite generative rules; adherence to certain systematic