

ISSUED BY ARTSCAPE
THE NICO THEATRE CENTRE
P.O. Box 4107
CAPE TOWN, 8000
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



*South Africa National Day — Tues 15th June
4 — 5 pm. Please join us!*



1999 PRAGUE QUADRENNIAL

THE PERFORMING ARTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

VOICES FROM INSIDE



DR BEN NGUBANE

South African Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology

'The department is proud to support the diverse forms of performing arts that give expression to this country's dynamic creative spirit. The period since 1994 has been one of great change in the relationship between government and the arts and it is hoped that the inclusive partnership that has now been established can be strengthened further in the future.

Indeed, it is my feeling that the structures that we have put in place and the institutions that we have established to address the development of The Arts in South Africa will continue to evolve and grow in strength and expertise. In this way government will build on the achievements of the last five years and continue to serve the arts community in an effective manner. The success of the National Arts Council over the last two years and its role in funding thousands of arts projects and bursaries, bodes well for the future of South African art.

It is my belief that strong institutions form the cornerstone of successful democracies. In 1994 the four Performing Arts Councils accounted for 67,7% of The Arts budget and that was the focal point of controversy in The Arts. At that time, the services of these institutions targeted an urban minority. To some, these institutions represented the preservation of excellence and "high art". To others, they were a symbol of cultural dominance and privilege. I am happy to report that the four Performing Arts Councils now account for 32,4% of the arts and culture budget and have been transformed to meet the needs of the majority of the country's people. Indeed, Artscape owes its birth to the transformation of Capab (a Performing Arts Council in the Western Cape), a challenge that was addressed effectively and proactively by the institution.

The reduction in funding of the Performing Arts Councils has meant that hundreds of grants were allocated to arts and culture projects that had social and economic relevance throughout the country. In addition, the NAC was established and provided with funding to support the broad spectrum of The Arts and a diverse range of artists. The Performing Arts Councils have developed in many important ways. This can in part, be attributed to the process of learning to access alternative sources of funding, and supporting projects that have wide appeal and relevancy to all South Africans. South African artists will continue to give expression to South African identity and The Arts in South Africa will go from strength to strength.

MICHAEL MAAS

CEO, Artscape

'The newly formed Artscape Company will develop and facilitate the arts in all their forms, but with an emphasis on the performing arts throughout the Western Cape. It also manages the Nico Malan Theatre Centre and its services as a commercial playhouse. The company operates in a multi-cultural society and in its programming and products aims to reflect the aesthetic tastes and needs of these diverse cultures. While promoting and celebrating contemporary and popular art forms, the company will also encourage the development of multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural art forms.'

PETER CAZALET

Independent Designer

'Because of apartheid and the cultural boycott in the seventies and eighties, South African theatre got cut off and left behind. For nearly two decades audiences lost out on thinking, challenging theatre and they stagnated, losing their curiosity and appetite for innovation.

Post-apartheid we find ourselves in a vacuum. There's a tendency to chuck out everything Eurocentric in favour of a locally relevant 'people's theatre', but it's a thin vein to mine and so a lot of mediocre work is being dredged up. It would be very exciting if we could find a voice that's unique to our country. But we shouldn't lose our critical faculty and we shouldn't pander to political correctness. To produce mediocre work just because it's local is patronising.

We also cannot afford to dismiss all European influences. Every country has to take cognisance of what has happened before.'

VERONICA PAEPER

Artistic Director, Cape Town Ballet

'With our recent production of Cleopatra, we stepped into a whole new genre, exploring and incorporating all aspects of theatre in a much more intense and unified manner. Ballet traditionally concentrates on movement only, but by producing it as a theatrical event we made it infinitely more entertaining to the man in the street.

We've tried Afrocentric approaches, but because ballet is an aerial-bound art as opposed to an African earthbound one, Africanising it can come across as contrived and unconvincing. That doesn't mean ballet is Eurocentric. It's international-centric and its appeal is universal.'

FRED ABRAHAMSE

Independent Theatre Producer and Director

'Everyone keeps saying theatre is dead in South Africa. I say it's not. Like the whole country, it's reinventing itself.

Theatre is moving away from large, unwieldy institutions and its traditional trappings to smaller set-ups like town festivals. In some ways it's going right back to the origins of theatre.

South Africa is going through tough economic times and it's not only theatre that's battling. Yes, we need the arts to celebrate, to explore, enrich and heal us, but you can understand why they're low on the government's priority list. This country needs to meet more urgent needs before it can spend on The Arts, but what the government should be doing already is introducing initiatives, like huge tax incentives to encourage companies to invest in The Arts.

Working within financial constraints does have some advantages. It's forced designers to improvise and become more inventive, to pare down and move away from the lavish and opulent to something more essential and stylised. A lot of designers are now freelancing and doing varied corporate work, which means they're becoming more multi-skilled and flexible.

It's also led to new performance venues - in smaller spaces or in the outdoors - which challenges the creativity of designers and directors far more than the proscenium arch and very tired box set.'



ANGELO GOBBATO

Artistic Director, Cape Town Opera

'Opera in South Africa has the potential to go extremely upwards! We could become a strong force to be reckoned with in the international market, both in terms of choral and solo singing. Not only is there immense local talent, but a new generation of students is responding to this art form with great passion.

Given the opportunity to continue their training, we could well make the sort of contribution the Russian and Eastern European singers have been making. Our singers have an equally strong emotional response to opera and they are spurred on by a similar hunger for cultural self-expression and recognition.

There's also the exciting possibility that with the development of their voices a totally new form of opera could arise. An African concept of musical theatre - perhaps evolving from the choral component.

There are many provisos, of course, and the main problem is financial. We need international capital, we need private business funding and we need national arts funding. But I believe where there's a will there's a way. And the will - which is the primary thing - is certainly there.'

MICHAEL WILLIAMS

Staff Director, Cape Town Opera

'There's a great future for opera in South Africa because essentially we're a singing nation. Vocal artistry is one of the main talents of South African people and opera, with its huge repertoire - from the esoteric to the popular - is the ideal art form in which to cultivate these singing talents.

A lot of operas are being produced and a lot of educational programs conducted. We tour schools and townships constantly. South Africa's singing culture is becoming stronger and stronger, and there's a huge and growing interest in opera in the communities. There's movement in the composition field as well and in the past five years three South African operas have been written and successfully staged.

We also have a lot of contacts with the global village of opera, with many international directors and singers visiting us and sharing their knowledge and experience with us, which has enabled us to keep up with standards and trends abroad quite easily.'

PHYLLIS KLOTZ

Artistic Director, Sibikwa Players and Sibikwa Community Theatre Project, Benoni

'We're at the beginning of an exciting new era in theatre. Unlike the arts councils, which have always been subsidised, small organisations such as ours have never had government funding before. Now for the first time we are able to approach the government for money. It's also a very exciting time for us because we've moved from agitprop and are looking at new forms of theatre, ways of integrating an African sensibility with Western theatre and also modern technology.

A large part of our work involves training young performers in all the arts - acting, singing, dancing - and all the pieces we do combine music, dance, drama and spectacle. Spectacle has become very important and our company believes high-tech multimedia is the way to go. It's very expensive, it's very hard, but it's the way ahead.

In townships, theatre is seen mainly as a means of educating people on social issues such as Aids, child abuse, women abuse and so on, but among more sophisticated groups there is also an emergence of new stories and new ways of telling them. And the time will come, I believe, when bigger post-apartheid issues will be creatively explored.'

DAVID KRAMER

Independent Producer/Director

'What needs to be done is for writers, actors and producers to create work that resonates with South African audiences, to give them something they can't get from overseas productions.

But at the moment, because of the lack of funds, the future of the performing arts in this country looks very bleak. Large commercial theatrical productions and small community theatre will probably survive, but there will be a big gap between them that can't be filled without funds.'

MARTHINUS BASSON

Independent Artistic Director

'Without proper funding there is simply no future for the performing arts. The government's policy of providing only limited backing of the main structures and big business's lack of investment in the arts (due to the absence of tax hikes and incentives) means the performing arts in South Africa are undergoing a grand-style diminishing of possibilities.

Severe financial constraints force us to narrow our vision. There's already tremendous self-censorship in terms of what we can do, when what we should be doing is blossoming, tapping into the wonderful potential of the South African mindset and turning South Africa into a nation of thinkers and feelers. Soon, only those at university will be exposed to the world of plays and ideas; the public won't be and that's limiting for everyone.'

PROFESSOR ROY SARGEANT

Former Professor of Speech and Drama, Rhodes University; Film and Play Director, Artistic Consultant, Baxter Theatre, Cape Town

'With the democratization of arts funding in South Africa there came a desire to provide money as broadly as possible on a project-only basis. The old days had seen arts funding centralised in the four white-dominated provincial Performing Arts Councils, who built up a formidable store of arts expertise. The spreading of the money is a good thing, but in the case of Drama it has led to a fracturing of theatrical endeavor, with pockets of activity here, there and everywhere. It has led to an almost hysterical neurosis to 'encourage' the young, the inexperienced and the new at the expense of excellence and experience.

The most damaging aspect of the new arts funding policies is that while everyone is beaver away at play-making in their insulated, isolated pockets of activity, the great and powerful idea of the ensemble company of actors, directors and playwrights is eyed with deep suspicion. Arts funders need to understand that for the dramatic arts to be performed at their best, this country needs at least three strong, thrilling, challenging ensemble companies. Companies which refresh themselves on a regular basis and which supply the ultimate goal of excellence for the young, the inexperienced and the new.'



REZA DE WET

Playwright and Drama Lecturer, Rhodes University, Grahamstown

'There's so much dynamic creative vitality in this country that although the theatre as we've known it seems to be disintegrating, this art form will find its own new organic form here.

Real opportunities exist for something significant to evolve. The whole country is in an in-between place. It's both a painful and exhilarating place to be - and it's where synthesis happens. Out of friction and passion something may come which will revitalise theatre: not the binary opposite of what has gone before, but a convergence that is completely unknown and unpredictable. To preconceive it would be to undermine the process, because the openness is all.

Theatre is terminally ill worldwide and we could become a powerful force in drawing back audiences by giving them something so incandescent they cannot resist it. It's amazing how sophisticated we are in relation to the rest of the world in terms of dance and physical theatre. And there's a complexity - a creative, psychic complexity - that is quite astonishing.

We should move away from psychological dramas - 'peeping Tom theatre' - which is generally better done on screen. Psychological, social and political realism in theatre should all die and theatre should return to its roots in religious and magical rites. Theatre must enrapture audiences once again.'

JANICE HONEYMAN

Executive Director, Civic Theatre, Johannesburg

'If the powers-that-be get it into perspective how important The Arts are and how much they can change lives (as theatre did during the Apartheid era) and if they could give The Arts proper sponsorship then The Arts could do its duty to the country. Otherwise The Arts will die. They simply cannot survive on what's being given to them at the moment.

It's a gloomy picture. As productions become less and less able to meet audiences' expectations, audiences will dwindle and a downward spiral will develop.

There's enormous talent in this country and my heart breaks for all the immensely gifted performers who have so much to give South Africa but who can't do it without financial backing.'

ALFRED HINKEL

Artistic Director, Jazzart

'Contemporary dance in South Africa has never been as healthy as it is now. We've never had as much money and we've never enjoyed such a high profile before. We're funded by government, supported by the private sector as well as audiences nationwide, and we're receiving international recognition for our long track record of creativity.

Contemporary dance is thriving because Africa loves to dance. South Africa especially is a country where people are still so connected to dance as a way of expressing themselves that people dance even when they're striking. And how many countries have a President who dances? South African contemporary dance is closely integrated with other art forms like singing and poetry, and it offers the world something new. As the new generation of contemporary dance choreographers start blossoming, the sky's the limit. The prospects are very, very exciting.'



ANTOINETTE KELLERMAN

Freelance Actress

'Theatre in South Africa is going down the drain. Without proper funding, only one-person storytelling shows and plays with small, affordable casts will be produced. Standards will drop. Yes, we have inventive directors and designers who can do wonders on a shoestring, but we'll be denied the magic of those grand, larger-than-life productions as everything, even Shakespeare, gets scaled down.

Now more than ever, theatre has to sell itself and make money. Which is why there's been a swing to purely entertaining theatre. Laughing is important of course, but we need the catharsis of crying too. There's also pressure on drama to focus only on local work. But if we cut ourselves off from Europe and the rest of the world again, that will really kill the performing arts.

The festivals are amazing and wonderful - a real window to the country - but South Africa isn't large enough to sustain many of them a year and stage performers can't survive on them.'

GAY MORRIS

Head, Department of Drama, University of Cape Town

'In this time of tumultuous change in South Africa, South Africans are much taken up with creating or recreating themselves, with performing their transformed identities or replaying old roles in revisionist revivals.

This is happening every day, everywhere - on the streets, in offices, in homes all over South Africa. In this context the formal theatre sometimes struggles to attract audiences from a population preoccupied with learning new roles. (No serious theatrical production, for instance, could compete with the theatre of the TRC!) Nonetheless, the revolution in South African values and constitution is already triggering transformed responses from the arts and cultural sector as a whole and theatre in particular. This is both gratifying and essential. Now there is even more need for theatre to 'hold a mirror as 'twere up to nature' so that South Africans can become familiar and fond of their 'new looks'.

Festivals are growing and evolving into a new and unique brand of South African theatre. A lot of alternative theatre at intimate venues is happening and our theatre makers are on the cusp of making a very different kind of theatre. Work that is much more pertinent to South Africa and grounded in our realities.

Theatre is no longer centralized, no longer hegemonic, but true ad hocery must also be prevented. Resilient and pliable arts infrastructures, institutions and centres, such as my own university and organisations like Artscape, are essential to set qualitative standards and sustain professional, technical and educational skill throughout this fascinating time of transformation.'

ARTSCAPE



COMPILED BY MARIANNE VAN KUIK