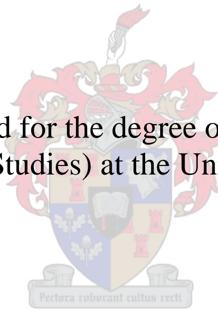
THEATRE IN A NEW DEMOCRACY

Some major trends in South African theatre from 1994 to 2003

Johann van Heerden



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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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Abstract

Following the socio-political change in South Africa after the democratic elections of 1994 the relationship between the state and the arts changed markedly. Whereas, under apartheid, the white population groups benefited greatly from government support for the primarily Eurocentric cultural heritage and the arts, the new South Africa recognised a multi-cultural and multi-lingual population whose every human right was protected under the new Constitution. Under the new government priorities shifted and this resulted in a transformation of the state-subsidised Performing Arts Councils and generally in the financial dynamics of the arts and culture sector. During the first decade of democracy an arts festival circuit emerged which provided opportunities for specific population groups to celebrate their cultural heritage and also for new independent theatre-makers to enter the industry. After the demise of apartheid there was no longer a market for the protest theatre that had become a hallmark of much South African performing arts in the 1970s and 80s and the creative artists had to discover new areas of focus and find alternative creative stimuli. This dissertation identifies and examines a number of major trends that emerged in the professional theatre in post-apartheid South Africa during the first decade of its new democracy.

Opsomming

Ná die sosio-politieke ommeswaai wat in Suid-Afrika gevolg het op die demokratiese verkiesing in 1994 het die verhouding tussen die staat en die kunste aansienlik verander. Terwyl die wit bevolkingsgroepe in die tyd van apartheid grootliks bevoordeel is deur staatsondersteuning, vir hoofsaaklik Eurosentriese kulturele erfenis en kunste, het die nuwe Suid-Afrika ‘n multi-kulturele en veeltalige bevolking erken wie se gelyke menseregte streng deur die nuwe konstitusie beskerm word. Onder die nuwe regering het prioriteite aansienlik verander en een van die gevolge daarvan was ‘n transformasie van die staatsgesubsidieerde Uitvoerende Kunsterade en ‘n algemene verandering in die finansiële dinamiek rondom die kunste en in die kultuursektor. Tydens die eerste dekade van demokrasie het ‘n aantal nuwe kunstefeeste ontstaan en dit het geleenthede gebied vir bepaalde bevolkingsgroepe om hul eie kulturele sake te vier en te beoefen en dit het ook moontlikhede geskep vir nuwe onafhanklike teaterkunstenaars om die veld te betree. Ná die einde van die apartheidsbeleid was daar nie meer ‘n mark vir die protesteater wat so ‘n belangrike rol gespeel het in die Suid-Afrikaanse uitvoerende kunste van die 1970s en 1980s nie en skeppende kunstenaars moes nuwe fokusareas asook alternatiewe skeppende prikkels ontdek. Hierdie verhandeling identifiseer en ondersoek ‘n aantal belangrike stromings wat na vore gekom het in die beroepsteater in post-apartheid Suid-Afrika gedurende die eerste dekade van die nuwe demokratiese bestel.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1. Preamble

South Africa became a democracy after the general elections held on April 27, 1994. This date and the resulting inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president mark the formal termination of legalised apartheid and symbolise the end of the old and the beginning of the new South Africa. The socio-political transformation, called a "peaceful revolution" by many, had an impact on every area of life in the Republic, including arts and culture. Of course this transformation – and the accompanying influences – did not occur magically in 1994, but was the result of a process set in motion much earlier – notably through the series of negotiations that took place after F.W. de Klerk and his new government accepted the inevitability of change and began talking to the various role players.

Towards the end of 1993, on the eve of these first free elections, Ian Steadman, then co-editor of the seminal academic journal *South African Theatre Journal (SATJ)* reflected on the past year and commented, "...the entire social, cultural, economic and political fabric of the society has been analyzed, debated and reshaped - if only in theory. Part of this exercise has included some serious soul-searching on the part of the academic and university community, an attempt to come to terms with the future" (Steadman, 1993: 1). This was shortly before the elections. In May 1994, just after the elections, Temple Hauptfleisch, the other co-editor of *SATJ* at the time, noted, "In the socio-political history of South Africa we are past the multi-media and super-hyped events of 27 April and 10 May[1] and have entered a more quietly expectant (and rather amusing) period of settling in, last minute horse trading, and rather awe-struck confrontation with promises to deliver" (Hauptfleisch, 1994: 1). Clearly the decade selected to be covered in this study was entered into with great expectations on all levels of the South African community – social, political, economic and cultural. Certainly, as the two authors point out, in the theatrical world the expectations of change were extremely high – both eagerly awaited and greatly feared, depending on the individual's perspective and position in the greater arts system.

[1] Inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first state president of the newly democratic South Africa.

Some of the questions that immediately arise are: what has happened to those expectations? To what degree has the theatre managed "to come to terms with the future"? What happened about the "promises to deliver" in the cultural life of the new Rainbow Nation? It was an attempt to obtain answers to questions such as these that initially prompted this study.

1.2. Problem statement and focus

While the majority of developments in South African theatre for the period 1652 to about 1994 have been covered by a whole range of authors, developments over the first decade after the socio-political transition following the first democratic elections in 1994 have hardly been documented in any coherent fashion, though widely, albeit in sporadic fashion, discussed by the various media. A number of specific areas (e.g. the rise of the festival culture, the careers of award-winning authors and forms such as stand-up comedy) have obviously received some attention from individual authors and scholars, but no systematic and overarching analysis of trends, influences and developments in this period has been done to date (beyond a few generalized reviews and articles). Of course it is a very recent history, but it also represents a most crucial period for the arts, since the entire socio-cultural and economic system in the country has been deeply affected by the socio-political changes ushered in by the negotiation process and the 1994 elections. In this time it would appear that virtually all the systems and processes of theatre-making have been affected, with theatre-makers having to adapt as new or altered trends have developed in production, funding and management systems, and as theatrical forms and thematic focus areas developed. Inevitably this has meant the appearance of new companies, new forms, new personalities and the creation of a substantial new canon of theatrical work.

However, this perspective is a result of hindsight, for when the study was first broached, an initial investigation of databases and library resources brought to light that no single (and complete) inventory of theatrical events staged in the various theatres across the country and at the arts festivals existed for the period after 1994. For the relevant decade there are reasonably complete lists available in the records and archives of the various theatres, festivals and commercial booking agencies, but

no consolidated register providing details of plays, venues, casts, directors, etc. (Indeed, there has never really been such a register – except perhaps for F.C.L. Bosman's monumental 1928 documentation of 17th-19th-century Dutch, Afrikaans and English theatre in the country, based – like this one – on newspaper and journal advertisements and reviews.)

When this project commenced in 2004 the only published book-length study available which touched in any substantial way on the post-1994 period was *The Drama of South Africa: Plays, pageants and publics since 1910,* by Loren Kruger (1999). Kruger utilised a thematic approach to the history of 20th-century South African theatre (as did a number of works looking at earlier periods, e.g. Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984; Kavanagh, 1985; Larlham, 1985; Orkin, 1991; Pretorius, 1996; Hauptfleisch, 1997 and Walder, 1998). Kruger's book provides a broad overview of theatrical activity in South Africa from 1910 (Union) to the mid-nineties and then covers the period 1994 to 1997 in its final chapter. However, the author does so rather more superficially than in the rest of the book, and focuses on a number of specific matters (e.g. feminist issues and socio-political developments as reflected in selected theatrical events).

The problem with this situation is that it means that much of the current debate on theatre (including its successes and failures, its problems, its impact, its history and its future development in South Africa) is still (and inevitably) based on the many substantial publications focusing on the dynamic theatre of the 1970s and 1980s, a theatre devised for and operating in a vastly different socio-political and cultural context – purely because there is so little else readily available. Furthermore, this lack of even a basic and period-specific overview of the actual theatrical events which occurred after 1994 inhibits any substantial new research and hence the production of any coherent reference materials for students, professionals and decision/policy makers. So, what is clearly required is some kind of overview of the developments in theatre and performance in South Africa over the past 10-15 years.

This need for a substantial (albeit tentative and initial) overview of theatre in the post-1994 period was therefore the key academic incentive for undertaking the particular project reported upon in this thesis. However, it also has a very specific

origin in my particular case, arising from a personal desire to understand an important decade of South African theatre which I had, to a great degree, missed because of a career move. Having been trained and worked as an actor, stage director and drama lecturer for much of my life, I left the academic world in 1988 to join the hard-core business world as an executive in the subscription television and film industries, and indeed lived and worked in Europe from 1999 to 2003. On my retirement from that industry I returned home, and found that I longed to know what had happened in my old profession during my absence. Hence the idea of finding a way to catch up, even if only in general terms, with the way the theatre industry had evolved in the intervening years, and writing this up as a broad map for future research to build on. Since I had at the time suspended my postgraduate studies, this seemed to me to be an ideal opportunity to combine the research I wished to undertake with my wish to round off that part of my life.

So, given the socio-cultural outline provided above, my own circumstances and background, and the methodological limitations set by both these circumstances, it seemed obvious to utilise the media and public response to the events over the years as the main source of information on what had occurred, and by analysing such responses and reports (in the light of more academic writing and other sources), obtaining some kind of general overview of what had occurred on the stages of the country. Hence the aim of this study may be described as follows: to look at some major trends that manifested themselves specifically in the professional theatre in the first decade after April 27, 1994, the first decade of the new democratic South Africa. How did the theatre, theatre-makers, theatre-goers react to the momentous changes and newly found liberation in this multi-lingual, multi-cultural country that was just emerging from the iniquity of the apartheid era? By compiling and analysing theatrical activity during the ten years following the thoughts expressed above, the intention is to assess to what degree the theatre did manage "to come to terms with the future" and also to look at what happened about the "promises to deliver" in the cultural life of the new Rainbow Nation.

The primary focus of research undertaken in the Department of Drama at the University of Stellenbosch is on performance and the theatrical event, and this study followed the same thrust. To summarise then: the more specific goal of the study was

to produce a basic overview of developments in the professional theatre environment after the socio-political change and an overview of prominent professional theatrical events and performances that occurred and were reported on during the first decade of democracy and to identify some of the key trends and developments in the South African theatrical system in that period.

1.3. Methodology

The aim of this is quite specific: to draw up a selected inventory and documentation of theatrical events and performances in South Africa in the first decade of democracy (1994-2003) and to use that inventory to provide a first, exploratory overview of the period under review. The overview itself would not be chronological, but rather theme based, focusing on a number of key trends emerging from the data, trends which could be isolated, identified, briefly described and evaluated, as a kind of broad exploratory map for further elaboration by future studies.

Given the actual body of evidence available, this project could clearly have entailed a vast undertaking, a complete inventory of all the reportage and all the works produced, something beyond the scope of the project – or indeed a single researcher. Similarly a study of the theatrical system as a whole would have been far too wide a field to cover - see *Theatre and Society in South Africa: Reflections in a Fractured Mirror* by Temple Hauptfleisch (1997) for an analysis of the South African theatrical system. For these reasons the focus of the study had to be set more narrowly and manageably.

To begin, as has been noted, the field of study is largely focused on media response to the events in the given period. Equally important is the limitation of the focus to what may be termed *mainstream* (or *formal*) and *professional* theatre (i.e. productions of plays by professional companies), since they were the events most consistently reported on in the media. Where applicable, the study takes cognisance of, but does not focus on, parallel sub-systems in the broader theatrical system, such as amateur, school and university theatre, much of community theatre, socially committed and educational theatre, theatre for development and industrial theatre, for example.

As a further delimitation of the field, the identified major trends in South African theatre in the new democracy are examined in two distinct areas. The first focus is on the environment within which professional theatre operated, looking at the relationship between the arts and the new South African government, the emergence of an arts festival circuit and adjustments made by the independent commercial theatre companies in reaction to new and evolving financial dynamics. The trends in this area could be identified and analysed from a variety of published sources, including written and electronic media, academic journals, government records and published research results.

The second area of focus is the professional theatre itself and the theatre-makers who functioned within that environment. In researching this area a key challenge was to identify and select productions and theatrical events in the professional theatre that had received sufficient media attention to enable them to be analysed and evaluated with the specific aim of distilling out and illustrating some major trends that appear to have characterised the professional theatre during the first decade of South African democracy.

I am very aware that the personal history described in section 1.2 above inevitably affected and guided the choice of this particular methodological approach and the specific decisions made, and realise that this personal element placed a number of limitations on the process and the choice of available resources. For example, it was obviously too late to try to see the particular works that had been put on, which would have been the ideal. It was also (technically and methodologically) inadvisable to utilise published (or filmed) texts as the core basis for the study, since few play texts have been published and even fewer filmed (or at least made available if filmed). Indeed, this has long been a problematic option anyway, since text-based studies are inevitably biased towards the published (literary) canon, while the focus of this study is the more flexible and comprehensive notion of the theatrical event, rather than the theatrical text alone.

As a result of this approach, it is extremely important to reiterate the following point: the key focus of this study was *media and public response* to the theatrical events of the period 1994-2003, and the methodological tool utilised was primarily content

analysis of reports and articles in the popular and academic media. As pointed out in the previous section, the study was never intended to be an evaluation of the works produced, but rather an overview of events and perceptions of such events in the eyes of the public and the industry. To do this I initially made no value judgements, but simply collated a database of research materials, working through all the sources I could trace to identify, select, read, evaluate and finally list whatever I could find.

Although in a completely fragmented manner, all theatrical activity during the period was widely covered in various media, including newspaper, magazine and television reporting. Arts journals such as *Insig* and *De Kat* had published popular articles relevant to the study and more academic material was contained in the various specialist journals, including the *South African Theatre Journal*, *Journal of African Languages, English Academy Review, Tydskrif vir Letterkunde [Journal for Literature]*, *New Contrast, Shakespeare in Southern Africa* and *Critical Arts*, as well as various international journals such as *African Theatre*, *The Drama Review*, *New Theatre Quarterly* and *Theatre Research International*, containing articles by South African or (South) Africanist theatre scholars. These carried regular articles on theatrical events, trends and analyses, as well as reporting on the regular cultural events and festivals that took place annually across the country.

Since more academic writing often (and inevitably really) tends to lag behind actual events, and the articles tended to be strongly influenced by the writings of the 1970-1990 scholars, the media ultimately became the most valuable source of information and even analytical opinion. By collecting and collating multiple reports, comments and opinions on a given subject, filtering out the unsuitable and through cross-referencing, it became possible to identify, confirm and illustrate clear trends in the activities of theatre-makers and theatre-goers in the area of professional theatre and for the period under examination.

Having worked my way through the relevant material published in journals and other sources, the focus shifted to the daily and weekly newspapers published across the country. Some earlier newspaper articles were initially available on microfiche only, which made the process quite labour-intensive, but fortunately the material from the later period had been incorporated into the electronic database compiled and

maintained by SA Media at the University of the Free State, which made the work easier. This database became the primary source of articles published during the ten years covered by the study. As a resource it proved to be a goldmine – a goldmine that also offered the interesting challenge of identifying and sorting the gravel and the fool's gold from the usable nuggets. Apart from containing valuable factual data and verifiable detail, the articles, particularly those containing critical evaluations and subjective opinions, offered a broad range of insights of widely varying value to the researcher.

I eventually identified, selected, read, evaluated and listed 11,312 individual newspaper articles covering the period 1994 to 2004. Of these 6,755 seemed to be most relevant and valuable on the basis of the four sets of broad criteria that I developed over time:

(a) the frequency with which the issue it focused on appeared in the journals and the media;
(b) the kind of debate it (the article/theme) engendered;
(b) the depth and comprehensiveness of the particular article's discussion of the issue(s);
(d) the extent to which it provided useful critical evaluations and subjective opinions on particular works or trends.

Admittedly these criteria are highly subjective in some ways, and thus no doubt allowed some potentially significant "asides" and "marginal notes" on more fleeting (though possibly intriguing and ultimately influential in the longer term) theatre events to slip by (virtually) unnoticed, but at the same time they did allow for the selection of substantive material which could with some justifiability be included in a database on the major movements and events in the decade under discussion. There will thus, inevitably as is the case with social-cultural studies, be an element of subjectivity, a personal bias in the final selections eventually made (particularly given my own personal demands of the study) – though I have sought to avoid this or at least minimise it as far as possible.

The selected articles were then processed by being downloaded in Portable Document Format (PDF) and catalogued. These articles, together with the other material compiled, were then scrutinised to ascertain whether any coherent patterns emerged. The initial data were sorted into twelve broad, often overlapping "themes" (such as government, festivals, subject focus, culture, theatre-makers, theatrical forms, venues and managements, developmental, productions, opinion formers, awards and trends), with some sub-themes and cross-referencing. A number of spreadsheets were drawn up with relevant fields such as source, subject, type, genre, focus, dramatist, director, date(s) etc. and the data relating to the individual newspaper articles were entered in a manner that facilitated specific detailed searches by individual ID number, subject, field, keyword etc. This made any one of the more than six-and-a-half thousand selected articles identifiable and easily accessible at any time when any specific theme, subject or trend was under examination. Eventually 4,820 newspaper articles which were of a high standard, credible, relevant and valuable to the project were identified. These articles had originally been scanned from the newspaper clippings and captured in PDF format which made them legible, but not accessible for any verbatim quotation, editing, cutting, pasting or other electronic management or manipulation of the content. The articles were then individually scanned through an Optical Character Recognition (OCR) tool and translated into machine-editable text format (Microsoft Office Word). Each of these almost five thousand articles was manually provided with a "one-liner" summarising the essence of the article, an end note, an individual sort number and a cross-reference number. Once in Word format and individually "tagged", the articles were collected in chronological order, with searchable keywords and compiled into a single-spaced line Word document of 3,360 pages. This was a time-consuming process, but by no means a mechanical one. The close handling and manipulation of the material provided the researcher with ongoing exposure to the information that resulted in the development of an intimate and detailed insight into the trends that manifested themselves over the ten years and the three thousand pages of type.

The final selection process, to identify the themes to be discussed in the study, was thus based on an informed and close scrutiny of the final data, and in the light of scholarship to date (including the few somewhat canonised writings from the 1984-1997 period), during working sessions with my supervisor and former colleagues in

the industry. The final themes selected became the framework of the thesis content at the point when I started writing. Naturally the writing up of my findings itself became *another* sifting and evaluating process, as I sought to understand and explain the trends that had emerged, for some trends seem to be time bound, some mere continuations of earlier trends (see below), some fading soon, while others come to the fore much later in the period. The results of this final scrutiny are what will be reported on in the next 10 chapters.

Before we proceed, however, one point that must be made most emphatically is that, while I do set out to try and discuss the period in terms of identified "trends", the intention has never been to evaluate and "rank" any of the trends in some kind of order of importance. It is, I believe, far too early for this – making value judgements about socio-cultural issues when one is still so close to them is virtually impossible – or at least a rather foolhardy endeavour, specifically because of a point made earlier, namely the time-lapse that occurs between the event and the review of it – and the ultimate, critical/academic placing of that event in the ever-changing and treacherous cultural memory. Indeed, much of our available writing on theatre lately has largely been focused on a *re*-writing and a *re*-interpretation of the former ideas and publications on the "history" of theatre and performance in this region, rather than the production of *new* knowledge or insights. So what follows can never be anything else than (very) selective and represents only one suggested configuration of trends among many possibilities. It should thus be seen as a starting point, an incentive to debate,[2] not a final or complete answer to the questions set above.

1.4. A word on the time frame

As noted above, I am well aware of the limitations of the content analysis model I employ and specifically the arbitrary nature of any artificial time-frame imposed on a discussion of such an ephemeral and constantly shifting cultural system. Clearly there may be considerable slippage that may occur between strands identified in the particular period and the simultaneous residue of past initiatives and processes from,

[2] To support such further study and debate I can also make available the (unpublished) electronic databases I have compiled and developed for this project. These may have to be re-formatted into a more accessible and generally user-friendly format, but such details can be addressed.

say the mid- to late eighties. Many of the issues raised in this thesis undoubtedly have their roots in earlier initiatives – such as the changing funding model, emergence of new aesthetic trends, the shift in thematic focus, and so on. All this must be – and has been – borne in mind. So, while the dates proposed are 1994-2003 for practical reasons, the idea is not to suggest that any of these trends and events discussed are necessarily – or solely – the direct results of the socio-political and economic events of the immediate post-1994 period, or that this is in any sense a "self-contained" discrete historical period. Life is not like that, all social, cultural and other trends are complex, often contradictory, and slowly evolving processes.

The fact is, 1994 is not even an important political date, for the inauguration of Nelson Mandela was the culmination of processes which had their roots in the work of the late 1980s and early 1990s. But symbolically it is of enormous importance, of course – and that is why I believe it makes sense to use it in this context. There is a fine ring to the phrase "the first decade of the new South Africa" – and coincidentally, as has been shown, it is also the period which has not yet been documented. Hence the dates that frame this study. But the dates should not be seen as finite borders to the discussion, but simply as highlighted milestones on a much longer continuum of evolution and change in the theatre and performance culture in South Africa.

SECTION I

MAJOR TRENDS IN THE THEATRE ENVIRONMENT

I present my findings in a number of chapters, divided into two distinct sections. This first section, "**Section I: Major Trends in the Theatre Environment**" focuses on trends that emerged in the first decade of democracy specifically in the environment within which professional theatre operated, and not particularly on what took place *on* the professional stage during the period. It looks at the relationship between the arts (specifically the professional theatre) and the new South African government after the 1994 elections. It deals with the Performing Arts Councils and with state funding. This section also focuses on the important role played by the emergence of an arts festival circuit in the evolving environment within which professional theatre functioned in the new South Africa.

The second section below, "**Section II: Major Trends in Theatre Practice**" looks at the practitioners, the theatre-makers who functioned within the new environment that evolved during the first decade of democracy, as examined in this first section.

CHAPTER 2

THE CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STATE AND THE ARTS

From the early 1960s until the 1990s professional theatre activity in South Africa took place mostly in four main arenas, two state-funded and two not: a number of strong independent anti-apartheid (later multi-racial) companies focused mainly on so-called “protest” or “struggle” theatre while a number of other independent theatre managements staged purely commercial, popular entertainment. Amongst the black communities the “township theatre”, run by prominent theatre-makers like Gibson Kente, Mbongeni Ngema and others, functioned as semi-professional and sometimes fully professional theatre. Certain bigger metropolitan areas were served by civic theatres funded by the city and in some cases also by the government, and there were the four generously state-subsidised Performing Arts Councils (PACs), registered in terms of Section 21 of the Companies Act of 1973 (non-profit organisations).

The Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (Pact) was based in the State Theatre in Pretoria, the Cape Performing Arts Board (Capab) in the Nico Malan Theatre Centre in Cape Town, the Performing Arts Council of the Free State (Pacofs) in the Sand du Plessis Theatre in Bloemfontein and the Natal Performing Arts Council (Napac) in the Playhouse Theatre in Durban. The four P+ACs catered almost exclusively to elite, mostly Eurocentric audiences in the white metropolitan areas. After the democratic elections of 1994, under the new ANC-led government, the country was divided into nine provinces instead of the previous four, a structural change which would of course have a substantial impact on arts policy.

The new state policy towards governing and subsidising the performing arts was formalised by 1996 when it was captured in the White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1996) and formally adopted by Cabinet in August of that year. Referring to the four Performing Arts Councils the White Paper noted, “The activities of these institutions, their continued access to State monies, and their putative transformation, has created more controversy than any other issue facing the Ministry” (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1996: 15).

Some of the main principles of the Paper included that the creative production entities within the four Performing Arts Councils should be disbanded, that their facilities and infrastructure should become available for rent, thus effectively changing their function to that of “playhouses” or “receiving houses”, rather than production companies, and that their funding should be reduced over three years in line with their new function.

The PACs could, however, like other theatre managements, also apply for funding to the new National Arts Council (NAC) on an *ad hoc* basis. The NAC was functional from October 1997 and was governed by the National Arts Council Act 56 of 1997. Its formally stated focus was to assist in the funding of “projects of national significance” (National Arts Council website: www.nac.gov.za). The national government was to reduce its investment in this sector and the provincial and local governments were to provide the major funding. The White Paper stated, “The four PACs have been the primary recipients of national public funding for the performing arts, absorbing 46% of the Department's arts and culture budget. Within the new dispensation, this can no longer be the case as there are now nine provinces as opposed to four, so that the same resources now have to be distributed more widely. Moreover in their present form, given that they are urban-based, heavily resource-consuming structures, they will still be unable significantly to assist in realising the RDP's goals of access and redress. ... In 1995/96, the PACs operating income was R160 m, of which box office receipts accounted for 18%. R112 m was granted by the State, which represents a very high level of subsidy” (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1996: 15,16).

In terms of this, a National Arts Council, with representation by the nine provinces, would be formed to function as a statutory body, which would receive a parliamentary grant. The four provincial arts councils would be phased out by 2000. During the remainder of the first decade of democracy this new arts policy was, however, not practically implemented as originally planned. In 2005 the Performing Arts Network of South Africa (PANSA) published a detailed critical analysis of the actual state funding that went into the former PACs subsequent to 1996 and came to the conclusion that the White Paper guidelines had not been followed and the set

objectives not achieved after ten years (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 13-15). PANSA also pointed to the fact that previously unsubsidised theatres, like the Market Theatre in the wealthy province of Gauteng, now received subsidy.

The White Paper stated, “Within an emerging framework of co-operative governance, the national government will no longer take primary responsibility for funding the PACs and their activities. Provinces and the local municipalities in which they are located should play a more active funding role since it is their inhabitants who benefit most from the presence of the PACs. ... It is proposed that the physical infrastructure of these buildings, offices, theatres, etc should be the joint financial responsibility of the central government, municipality/metropolitan area and the Province in which they are located…” (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1996: 15, 16). In fact, in the 2004/5 financial year, the Playhouse Company in Durban received R4,5 million from the Department of Arts and Culture in KwaZulu Natal and just over R1 million from the eThekwini Municipality. Pacofs received R1 million from the Free State Department of Sport, Arts, Culture, Science and Technology and R324 560 from the Mangaung Local Municipality. In the 2003/04 Financial Report of the State Theatre the CEO, Michael Lovegrove writes, “The White Paper thinking still has not been implemented. The theatre receives all its operating and capital funding from the Department of Arts and Culture….”. In the 2004/05 financial year the provincial governments contributed less than 5% of the operating income of the previous PACs (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 15).

The White Paper also stated, “The PACs need to be restructured in such a way that the infrastructure and skills built up over decades are not lost, but are redirected to serving the artistic and cultural priorities established by the NAC” (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1996: 15). In fact, the PACs were restructured in such a way that a number of key companies, like the in-house drama companies, were closed down and their often highly experienced staff retrenched, resulting in the loss of valuable skills.

The ideals for general reconstruction, development and transformation in the new South Africa were clear from the outset, but the results achieved during the first decade were not always in line with these, often optimistic, ideals, neither in the

country at large nor in the performing arts sector. The implementation of the White Paper policy and the transformation in this sector should also be seen against this highly complex general background.

In order to pursue the transformation ideals, including those in the performing arts sector, some of the requirements would be: South Africa's gender and racial distribution should be reflected in the demographics of managements and decision makers; access to resources, skills and infrastructure should be made available to historically disadvantaged communities; the imbalance between well-resourced centres and geographically outlying areas should be addressed; black people should assume greater responsibility in educational institutions to influence training; there should be greater black participation in national debates to reflect African values and aesthetics; audiences should be developed that reflect the demographics of the country as a whole (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 16).

In reality the demographics of leadership and management had largely been transformed in line with the ideal, but infrastructure, resources, facilities and skills remained located primarily in the privileged urban areas.

> In some cases, transformation – applied mainly in terms of changing the demographics of leadership and governance - has become an obstacle to substantial transformation not because black people occupy positions of power and influence, but because there has not been the requisite investment in skills, training and development of experience to ensure that those who occupy authority, can deliver. Too many "transformed" cultural institutions - in the theatre sector too - have been characterized by mismanagement of funds, mal-administration, corruption and poor service delivery. Some of them have become centres of conflict over control of public resources e.g. NAC, Playhouse Company, Windybrow Theatre and/or vehicles to self- and quick enrichment for a few. This has been one of the factors to polarize the arts sector i.e. not simply the advancement of black people to achieve demographic equity that would inevitably have marginalized some, but, more importantly, the pursuit of naked ambition and wealth under the cloak of transformation, and the defence of this in the name of transformation, which has given transformation a bad name (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 16-17).

Also, during the decade a large gap developed between the practising arts community and the administrators of the limited arts funding that was made available by the state. By 2001 theatre analysts at Stellenbosch University's Centre for Theatre and

Performance Studies summarised the situation: "Today, state funding for the arts has dwindled significantly and much of the little money that there is finds itself administered by politicians and bureaucrats who are apparently out of touch with the cultural and artistic aspirations of both theatre practitioners and theatre-goers. ... Today, there is an urgent need to balance the interests of what is an essentially elitist social activity with the need to contribute to the cultural development of the nation as a whole" (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 11).

Working towards the objectives formulated since 1994 and set out in the 1996 White Paper was a slow process over years of uncertainty, while audience loyalties diminished and the image of theatre management and administration was tarnished by scandal and controversy. The objective to change the status of the PACs to that of "playhouses" (receiving houses) is discussed in more detail below.

The relationship between the performing arts and government was further formalised in April 2003, when Parliament passed the Cultural Institutions Act, which wrote off accumulated millions in debt by theatres in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg, while the debt of Pretoria's State Theatre was still not finalised. Selected theatres' administration would be funded in varying amounts by the state in order to allow the theatres to function as viable facilities for rent ("playhouses"), while the actual business of staging their own productions in addition would be dependent on fundraising and *ad hoc* application for funding from the NAC. As one commentator put it cynically, "In other words, administrator's salaries are guaranteed, not artists'" (Greig, 2003b).

It was now a situation that these theatres were essentially state-controlled institutions. The chairperson of the board of each theatre was appointed by the Minister and the bulk of its funding came from the state. Most of its additional funding would come *ad hoc* from a state-funded body, the NAC. The members of management would essentially have to be administrators and business specialists rather than representatives of the arts community. At the time the CEO of the NAC, Doreen Nteta, raised concern in an interview quoted in the *Sunday Independent*, "This change in organisational culture will mean new boards of directors for the theatres, and here Nteta sees a potential problem. The Public Finance Act assigns financial

responsibility and liability to directors. This means, Nteta says, that the financially aware will be competent to serve as directors. But what she does not say but implies is that the financially aware tend not to be artistically sensitive" (Greig, 2003b).

By the end of the decade under discussion, as a result of the strong state control of the major theatres around the country, the limited guaranteed funding, and the responsibility of these theatres to perform according to sound business principles, concerns were being raised in the arts community that productions in these theatres might become "box office safe" or even more ominously, "politically safe".

CHAPTER 3

TRANSFORMATION OF PERFORMING ARTS COUNCILS INTO PLAYHOUSES

3.1. Introduction

Before looking at trends that developed amongst the major theatre-makers and on the post-apartheid stages, let us consider for a moment the background to the trends and developments which evolved amongst major theatre managements, employers and key facilities around the country.

By 1994 the four generously state-subsidised Performing Arts Councils were the biggest employers of theatre workers and they also managed the largest and best-equipped performing arts complexes in each of the four provinces. During the apartheid era the main function of the PACs was to stage, nurture and advance white elitist theatre, typically with a Eurocentric cultural and aesthetic focus. Although some changes in line with anticipated post-apartheid transformation had already started before 1994, notably the racial integration of audiences, the whole approach to these large structures had to change to align them with the new approach to a multi-cultural, open, free and equal society.

With limited funds in the arts and culture budget the challenges were daunting. Large, well-equipped theatre complexes existed, but these were mostly situated in areas that were not easily accessible to the majority of the (historically disadvantaged) population. They were also tainted by their history. In the townships there was an audience but very few practical facilities. In a plea for performing arts venues to be built in the townships Elliot Makhaya of *The Sowetan* described the void that had developed: “There was fun during the times of Phiri Hall, Naledi Hall and Eyethu Cinema in Soweto. These halls were decrepit but people enjoyed going to them. ... These halls were burnt down during the riots...” (Makhaya, 1995). In the townships facilities were limited, mostly to ill-equipped community halls. In the main cities, apart from the arts council complexes, there were theatres like the Market Theatre, the Johannesburg Civic, the Windybrow, the Baxter and others, all of them confronted by

a range of challenges that came with the new South Africa. But a primary area that needed attention was the four Performing Arts Councils.

3.2. Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (Pact) - The State Theatre

Early in 1994, amid uncertainty surrounding the future of the Performing Arts Councils and future state subsidy of the arts, the fear was raised that the State Theatre, although not exclusively white or Eurocentric any longer, would become a white elephant in the middle of Pretoria. Suggestions were even made in the press that a casino should be opened in the loss-making State Theatre building. At the time running the theatre cost about R17 million per annum and a casino could generate about R50 million per year (Fourie, 1994). In 1994 this was an outrageous idea to the traditional patrons of the State Theatre, who still viewed it as a temple of culture on Strijdom Square in the centre of the state capital.

Over a period the management of Pact and the State Theatre was transferred to prominent black personalities in line with the transformation ideals and policies of black empowerment in the new South Africa. In August 1995 the internationally renowned jazz trumpeter Hugh Masekela was appointed Assistant CEO of the State Theatre under CEO Louis Bezuidenhout. Later that month Bezuidenhout resigned after a scrap with the Ministry of Arts and Culture over budgets, but he stayed on temporarily at the request of both Minister Ben Ngubane and Masekela. At the time of his appointment Masekela stated in an interview with *New Nation* that he "plans to transform the place so that it will, in time, become a hotbed of culture similar to that of Sophiatown in the 50's before it was crushed by Verwoerd. ... The culture of theatre among blacks has been severely stifled by apartheid. But to encourage black audiences to come to the theatre there needs to be a thorough planning – which seems not to be in place at present. ... If the State Theatre is serious about wooing blacks, it should provide buses to ferry them to and from the townships Mamelodi and Attridgeville. Ticket prices must also be within reach of township audiences" (Ndebele, 1995c).

In November 1995 actor and director John Kani, then also executive director of the Market Theatre, was appointed chairperson of the Pact council. *City Press* commented

that "his effectiveness will be determined by how accessible previously whites-only facilities and resources will be made to blacks." The playwright and Wits lecturer Maishe Maponya was appointed Kani's deputy chairperson and he shared the position with Sam Moss. "Indeed, Maponya, Masekela and Kani are a significant part of the first wave of important black involvement in arts and culture in that they will help define policies that will take the discipline beyond the year 2000" (Memela, 1995a).

Alan Joseph, previously executive director of the Civic Theatre in Johannesburg and before that GM of the Market Theatre, was appointed CEO of Pact in January 1996. Many regarded this to be the most important job in the performing arts in the country, Pact being the largest of the four Performing Arts Councils, also with the largest budget. It was also challenging because there was great tension within the board. In an interview *The Star* reported, "Joseph has resolved to work with the new Pact board despite the petty infighting that reportedly goes on behind closed doors and the naturally combative nature of its two pillars styled as 'Afrocentric' and 'Eurocentric' factions" (Xaba, 1996). Joseph stated his objectives clearly and in doing so highlighted the challenges facing funding and theatre managements across the country, within the context of the new South Africa: "...it is vital the arts are integrated into the entire society. Forming a South African culture is about diversity, finding what is a South African style" (in Accone, 1996). "The best way to see and know yourself is through your cultural identity. That is also how the world sees and knows you. The culture I am helping to forge must show us as a diverse but one people. It should neither be Afrocentric nor Eurocentric. It should be about us... a fusion of each of us. We must develop an identity." Joseph regards himself as an African rather than an Indian and thinks that the term has a unifying force. "It is a fitting way to nurture this new cultural identity and embrace a sense of one-ness" (Ndebele, 1996).

Apart from the socio-cultural challenges in his new position, Joseph was also confronted with the restructuring of the State Theatre following the adoption of the White Paper on Arts, Heritage and Culture by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology in 1996. As pointed out above, in terms of the White Paper Pact was to become a "playhouse", stripped of its resident performing arts companies and orchestra, with the government no longer primarily responsible for its funding. Its

subsidy would be reduced over a period of time. The changes brought about by the White Paper would result in the Windybrow Centre for the Arts becoming autonomous with its own board of directors and members of Pact's permanent drama company being retrenched.

In May 1999, while the management were coming to terms with their new financial challenges, Spoornet, a division of the Transnet Group, announced a sponsorship of R1,5 million a year to the State Theatre for the next five years. The theatre was renamed the Spoornet State Theatre and Spoornet's assistant general manager, Japan Pohlwana, would serve on the State Theatre Board of Directors. In the same month Jerry Mofokeng, theatre director, was appointed as the State Theatre's new Artistic Director, and *The Sowetan* commented, "In an effort to address cultural barriers, the State Theatre in Pretoria, which notoriously served white, eurocentrically inclined cultural groups during the apartheid era, has appointed Jerry Mofokeng as its artistic director. Mofokeng's appointment coincides with the theatre's new board of directors' vision to launch an exciting new era" (Mokoena, 1999).

While the new management of the Spoornet State Theatre was working towards a new socio-cultural dispensation in the theatre arts, a storm broke loose in May 1999 about financial mismanagement and a secret special reserve fund set up by the previous Pact management ten years earlier, in 1989. It emerged that the Minister Dr Ben Ngubane had been aware of the secret funds since 1994, but the members of the new board of directors only learnt about it towards the end of 1995. A forensic audit was ordered in 1996 and in May 1999 all the facts about the secret funds emerged publicly, followed by heated debate in the media.[3] Meridy Wixley, sitting on the Pact board of directors, and one of two members who later became known as the "Pact whistle-blowers", published a letter in the *Pretoria News* on May 21,1999 outlining the background:

> Allow me to provide a few of the lesser known facts pertaining to the R16 million secret Pact special reserve fund.
>
> The Pact board of directors in 1989 set up the Pact secret fund by diverting funds intended for the promotion of the arts to a secret account, and concealing its existence from the public and the State. At the end of 1994 the (then) Pact board

[3] For a concise overview of the whole history of the secret Pact funds, see the detailed report by Greig and Peel, published in *The Sunday Times* on May 7, 2000, page 10.

> chairman informed Mr FW de Klerk and Dr Ben Ngubane, newly appointed Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, of the existence of the secret fund and offered it to Dr Ngubane for use for his development programme. In his reply Dr Ngubane "expressed his delight" at this opportunity.
>
> However, the secret fund remained a tight secret; and was not used by Pact for development programmes in accordance with the "sunset" clause.
>
> In November 1995 Dr Ngubane inaugurated a "new" board at Pact to take responsibility for Pact's finances and its democratic transformation, but neglected to inform the new directors of the existence of the secret assets under their control. Directors were also not enlightened by the director general of the department, who is its accounting officer, or by the several reappointed "old" directors.
>
> As a new director, I began asking questions about Pact's cash assets and in March 1996 the concealed funds were disclosed to the new board of directors. Six months later after much adverse publicity, the department appointed auditors Deloitte & Touche to perform a forensic investigation of certain aspects of the secret fund, without consulting or informing the board of directors of Pact, or offering the directors input into the investigation.
>
> The Pact forensic report was finally delivered to the department in June 1998 and a key finding was that the 'old' directors who had set up the funds had acted *ultra vires* and 'not in the best interests of Pact or the arts'. This finding has not deterred the Minister or department from reappointing in April 1999 certain of these 'old' directors to prominent positions on the present Pact/State Theatre board.
>
> The same Minister is now pre-empting the findings of the Heath Special Investigation Unit and the report of the Public Protector by suggesting that the same funds, which are under investigation by those bodies, be used 'for arts projects' overseen by a committee comprised of representatives of the National Arts Council, the State Theatre (the new name for Pact) and the department.
>
> In other words, the same funds will again be overseen by many of the same persons involved in the original alleged irregularities.
>
> These facts give new meaning to the adage, the more things change, the more they stay the same. (Wixley, 1999)

For months the furore raged in the media and slowly the details of the secret fund emerged and became public knowledge. Twelve months later the State Theatre was facing closure.

In April 2000, even as this drama around the financial mismanagement at the State Theatre was playing out and the new approach to funding of the Performing Arts Councils was being introduced across the country, Minister Ben Ngubane announced that the Spoornet State Theatre would retrench up to half of its 535 employees, pointing out that hard measures had to be taken to ensure the survival of the arts and theatre in South Africa. As result of the changing approach to subsidisation, all scheduled productions that could only be staged at great loss had to be cancelled and

the focus had to shift strongly to sound business principles. The State Theatre board of directors had been suspended and the theatre was run by Sikkie Kajee and his firm Gobodo Imcor, Corporate Governance Services, in the position of ministerially appointed administrators, and the chief director (and member of the board) Alan Joseph. The minister intended to recover all lost funds over the next two years.

In June 2000 the minister announced that the State Theatre would be closed for the remainder of the 2000/2001 financial year and that 477 staff members were to be retrenched from July 1. Despite a subsidy of R33 million, the theatre would have run at a loss of R29 million for the financial year. By May 2001 it became public knowledge that the State Theatre was in debt to the tune of R55.4 million. Dr Ngubane was quoted by *The Citizen*: "...the cabinet's decision to mothball the theatre came in the light of investigations into the activities of its board and management. ... One of the major issues was that the theatre declined restructuring in 1996. While the transformation of the KwaZulu-Natal Playhouse, for example, has been largely successful, the board and management of the State Theatre did not restructure themselves in line with the principles laid out in the White Paper. A new board of directors made up of people who are committed to turning the State Theatre's problems around will be established" (Hlahla, 2000). What the minister did not mention was that the financial success seen at the Playhouse was mostly a result of the hugely popular imported commercial production *Lord of the Dance*, although the Natal theatre had managed to downsize and get closer to the community.

The theatre community was outraged and the media reacted strongly to the crisis. Darryl Accone summarised the public outcry in *The Star* on June, 21, 2000:

> "So, once again the artists get shafted. They are the biggest victims of arts minister Ben Ngubane's precipitate closure of the State Theatre. Let's not play semantic games and call this, as has the ministry, a 'mothballing'. It is a death knell for the State (Theatre) and the beginning of a long, dark curfew of the arts. Artists at the State today will be gone one fine tomorrow, consigned to the scrap-heap of history - and of the unemployed. The chief architects of that sorry condition will remain living in plush homes (sometimes, in two cities) and continue to drive or be driven in swanky cars. Some will luxuriate in a retirement based on ill-gotten gains that are the result of various State Theatre bureaucracies looking after themselves but never the artists. Performers and practitioners will know, finally and without question, that no matter what the regime, they are

> regarded merely as performing fleas in the gladiatorial spectacle and circus of the ridiculous that is South African arts and culture. The government has failed miserably in cultural reconstruction and development. And, as I have often argued, without that the putative physical and financial rebirth of the country rings hollow." (Darryl Accone, in Accone & MacLiam, 2000)

The State Theatre, which was costing the state R33 million per year simply in building maintenance costs, was absorbing one tenth of the total arts budget (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 12).

It now became very clear that the developments in the performing arts, clearly reflected in the crisis at the State Theatre, would lead to a shift away from large-scale (often Eurocentric) productions and forms like ballet, opera and classical music, and that the vacuum would be filled by lighter entertainment, smaller-scale productions, one-man shows and popular productions with a greater potential for commercial success.

Another question arising from the State Theatre crisis was whether the new state-appointed theatre managements included enough key people with financial management skills, combined with specialists in the field of the arts and entertainment. If the mainstream theatres were to function successfully as commercialised playhouses in the future, it would depend to a greater degree on the financial acumen of the managements than it did in the past in the state-subsidised Performing Arts Councils.

In an effort to take up these challenges, Dr Ngubane announced the new State Theatre board in July 2000. Welcome Msomi, creator of *Umabatha* in the 1980s, was appointed chairman. The other members were Walter Chakela (chief of the Windybrow complex in Johannesburg), Doreen Nteta (CEO of the National Arts Council), Christopher Seabrooke (a board member of Business and Arts South Africa (Basa)), Edmund Radebe (chief of the Playhouse Company in Durban), Bongani Tembe (head of the orchestra at the Playhouse), Mike van Graan (Artscape consultant and well-known arts commentator), Jay Pather (lecturer in the Arts), Mannie Manim (founder member of the Market Theatre), Themba Wakashe (from DACST), Carol Steinberg (advisor to Dr Ngubane) and Sikkie Kajee (administrator of the State

Theatre). This was clearly an effort to be representative and to include a variety of applicable skills.

Although the State Theatre was officially closed or "mothballed" and not operating as before, the new board decided that the facilities would be available for hire to production companies and entrepreneurs until its official re-opening in April 2001. The government would continue funding the maintenance and general upkeep of the building, but would not be subsidising the productions.

This opportunity was immediately taken up by the independent company Maestro Entertainment Holdings, chaired by Chris Lodewyk. He leased the two main theatres at the State for November and December 2000 to stage three shows: *The Nutcracker* ballet, a musical revue titled *It's Not Where You Start*, and the choral show *The Singing Christmas Tree*.

The undertaking ended, however, in failure. The run of *It's Not Where You Start* was closed early and Lodewyk declared that the production was costing Maestro in excess of R80 000 a week to keep on stage - but bookings for the entire run were only R50 000. *The Nutcracker* drew 40% audiences and *The Singing Christmas Tree* sold just over 100 tickets per night for the 1 300-seat Opera Theatre. In the end Maestro claimed to have suffered a loss of almost a million rand. Although Lodewyk denied it, the failure was blamed on high ticket prices and on poor marketing and publicity.

When the Minister appointed the State Theatre Advisory Board, it was given a mandate with three primary focus areas: to develop and present proposals to the minister for submission to cabinet for the re-opening of the State Theatre in April 2001; to advise on an expanded policy and implementation programme at national level for performing arts in South Africa; to recommend transitional arrangements for the 2001/02 financial year.

In February 2001 the Advisory Board submitted their *Recommended Policy and Implementation Programme at National Level for the Performing Arts in South Africa* to the Minister. Their findings began with the need to reaffirm the existing policy of transformation as outlined in the White Paper. It stated that the new dispensation

should be implemented in the 2002/03 financial year with a total subsidy of R138 million to be sourced from DACST and from the lottery. The most ambitious of the board's suggestions were (State Theatre Advisory Board, 2001):

- After a transparent bidding process, every year a city will be declared cultural capital city of SA and should host the National Festival of the Arts;
- A national circuit of 18 theatres, including the four former PACs, be allocated funds by the Department of Arts and Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) on an ongoing basis in partnership with provincial and local governments;
- National government should provide financial support to the circuit of 18 theatres through the National Arts Council (NAC) for procuring performances or co-producing by these theatres with independent performing companies;
- A number of large-scale performing companies, jazz ensembles, theatre, orchestra, dance and youth companies and festivals should be identified through the NAC and receive national funding to support operating budgets through specific allocations approved by DACST and advanced through NAC;
- Existing funding of former PACs be evaluated in detail and savings be redirected to funding of performing arts companies directly.

The State Theatre officially re-opened on April 4, 2001 with a core staff of 80 re-employed people (40 technical staff and 40 administrative staff). The re-opening was marked by a multi-cultural musical evening celebrating diversity, featuring the KZN Provincial Orchestra, traditional dance from Welcome Msomi's musical *Umabatha*, classical ballet from *Giselle,* gospel music of Family Factory, arias from *Cosi fan Tutte* and *Carmen,* the *isicathamiya* from the Soshanguve Tycoons and Victor Masondo's *Mack the Knife.* It was directed by John Kani, at the time chief executive of the Market Theatre in Johannesburg and the National Arts Council, who was also the MC for the evening. The once-off performance for an invited audience cost DACST R740 000. Looking back, some years later, arts commentator Mike van Graan reflected:

> Who will forget the reopening of the State Theatre - mothballed because of its loss of millions of rands in an investment scam and with it, the loss of hundreds of jobs, but then relaunched a year later with an event that cost taxpayers R740 000, of which 10% was allegedly paid to the master of ceremonies John Kani. Theatre and other companies were invited to apply for R10 million 'saved' from the State Theatre budget in that year, and after months of battling Minister of Arts and Culture Ben Ngubane to allocate these funds, no company received annual funding that was anywhere near that spent on the one-night reopening. The point is that there has been public funding available for theatre, but the visionless and

> wasteful manner in which it has been used by those in positions of stewardship has done very little to advance the art form. (Van Graan, 2004)

Upon its re-opening the State Theatre was given special budgetary privileges. This was clearly at the expense of other arts bodies and also given notwithstanding the theatre's terrible financial track record. Initially it was awarded a supplementary grant of R10 million, which had originally been allocated to the NAC for general distribution. After strong protest from within the arts community and in the media, the decision was reversed. The arts community perceived the Minister's later decision as weak backtracking and arts critic Darryl Accone commented:

> "...while this has been trumpeted by DACST as a 'multimillion grant to encourage excellence in the Arts', it is a retreat on how much is available to whom, with many conditions attached that were not there before which impose further burdens on any performing arts companies brave enough to take on the new funding stipulations. The big winner is not the performing arts companies, but the State Theatre, which has these lovely filler clauses inserted on its behalf: 'This grant will address the issue of programming within government funded playhouses, particularly the State Theatre' and 'If requested by the State Theatre, some of the performances must take place at one of the venues of the State Theatre, or the productions must use some of the facilities, such as sets, musical scores and costumes owned by the State Theatre within twelve months of the grant'. The clauses effectively ensure that any bodies that are granted funding by the NAC will be forced to help fill the gaps in the State Theatre's calendar, a move which essentially promotes the interests of a single playhouse above others. Government funding, one detects, is now focused firmly on "sustaining and propping up the State Theatre." (Accone, 12 June 2001, as quoted in Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 22)

Up to the re-opening of the theatre the new policy of PACs functioning as playhouses had not been implemented at Pretoria's State Theatre. The reasons behind this were complex, but in essence could be boiled down to two main issues: the new Constitution prevented the government from obliging the provinces and the cities to support the theatres financially, and there were no no tax incentives for businesses to support the arts. At the time of the re-opening Minister Ben Ngubane announced that the theatre would from then on function as a playhouse, available for rent and supported through private sector partnerships and provincial funding. He also announced that "if the provincial governments don't support the theatres, they will close by the end of this financial year" (Greig, 2001a).

While the investigations into the earlier financial mismanagement of funds, including the investments with Scott Asset Management (SAM), run by Keith Scott of Scott Investments continued, and the arts community kept speculating about the viability of the State Theatre, a new CEO, Michael Lovegrove was appointed in December 2001. He was a former Pact administrator and Sun City producer. Lovegrove immediately declared that what the State Theatre needed was ‘popular’ theatre, musicals and pantomimes and announced that *Cats* would open in the theatre in February. Aubrey Sekhabi, 32-year-old Wits drama graduate, playwright and artistic director of the North West Drama Company for the previous eight years, was appointed the new artistic director.

Under this new management the State Theatre started offering a wide variety of productions which clearly indicated an intention to reflect, and attract, the new South Africa. For the more conventional State Theatre audience *Cats* and *Madame Butterfly* started the year; two operas, Brett Bailey’s African-themed *Macbeth* and a more traditional *Aida*, were imported from Cape Town, and the ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* was staged. For the smaller theatre venues two more Cape productions, *Glass Roots* and *Suip!* were imported and, amongst others, Athol Fugard’s *Sorrows and Rejoicings* (starring Pretoria’s favourite Marius Weyers), Harry Kalmer's double bill of *Briewe aan 'n Rooi Dak [Letters to a Red Roof]* and *The Bitterbek Blues of Ben (Die Breker) Bartman*, Janice Honeyman’s *Vatmaar*, Yael Farber’s *He Left Quietly*, Bongani Linda's *Shaka Ka Zulu (The Gaping Wound)*, Kgafela Oa Magogodi's *Itchy City* and *King Baabu* by Wole Soyinka were put on during the first year.

It became clear, however, that Pretoria’s audiences were still not sure whether they wanted to support their revived Spoornet State Theatre, even when very popular productions were imported from the other provinces. “Safe” productions like *Cats* and *Aida* drew large audiences, but the others were poorly attended.

The management also put a strong focus on developmental work and training at the State Theatre. In August 2002 an initiative called *52 Seasons*, managed by Vuyo Maphela, was launched. This provided the opportunity for new theatre-makers, mostly from township troupes, to stage 52 productions in a professional environment. With an average (minor) production costing upwards of R10 000, the theatre provided

financial assistance in the form of stipends to the cast, including transport money and rehearsal fees. The money generated from ticket sales was split 80/20 in favor of the production company.

The financial mismanagement issue remained complex and unresolved. Its progress was summarised in *The Sunday Independent* in April 2002:

> Five years after financial shenanigans resulted in the closure of the State Theatre, Pretoria, nothing has been done. Despite the involvement of various state investigatory agencies and a report to the president, no money has been recovered and no one has been made accountable. Instead, the only people who suffered directly have been 500 actors and stage people; not politicians, administrators or regulatory agencies. The theatre itself limps on.
>
> The public protector's office, the Scorpions police investigating unit and the Heath investigating unit all apparently probed the loss of R24 million in unauthorised investments in high-risk futures. If they have reached any conclusions, they have not been made public. Neither the ministry ultimately responsible for the theatre's governance; the board members who knew of the investments nor the then chief executive who made them with the chairperson, Sam Moss, have faced any action. ... There are probably reasons for the delay, but there are also possible causes. One is that in the minds of the state's investigating agencies the arts do not matter. Another is that the scandal happened some time ago and they hope it will be forgotten. A third is that two arts ministers have been involved - one the present premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Lionel Mtshali, and the other a former premier, Ngubane - and the agencies are reluctant to finger them. ... All of this is speculative and perhaps unfair. In the absence of anything concrete having been done, however, and in a sustained period of blaming whistleblowers rather than the protagonists, the cynical explanation fills a gap. (Greig, 2002a)

Twenty-three years after the opening of the State Theatre in 1981 and ten years after the dawn of the new South Africa, there were still question marks remaining over the mismanagement of funds shortly before and into the new era. The theatre was, however, under a new style of management, more focused on the greater, multi-cultural population of the capital and on its way to complete the transformation from the Pact-era into the Spoornet State Theatre era.

3.3. Cape Performing Arts Board (Capab) – Artscape

Before the changes brought about from 1994 onwards, Capab, based at what was then called the Nico Malan Theatre Complex on the foreshore in Cape Town, was generously subsidised by the state and it functioned as a one-stop production house. It

housed its own theatre, opera, ballet, contemporary dance and orchestra companies. "The Nico" opened in May 1971 and was the first purpose-built multi-theatre complex theatre built in the country with state funds. Named after a former Administrator of the Cape, the theatre complex became a symbol of cultural apartheid, for the apartheid ban on blacks from both stage and audience was enforced from its inception. Although integrated audiences were quietly allowed to attend, officially but with little fanfare from February 1975, most non-white theatre-goers and many whites boycotted the complex in protest against the apartheid stigma associated with it.

The theatre complex was the property of the Cape provincial government and Capab was a state-subsidised entity. In line with the new government's policy, as defined in the 1996 White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage, Capab was transformed from a production house into a playhouse and the Nico's facilities became available for rent. The various Capab companies, opera, ballet, the orchestra, Jazzart, the PE Opera House and East London's Guild Theatre, were all to become independent, self-funding entities, each with its own management and governing board. The Capab Drama Department staged its last production in May 1997 with a final performance of David Mowat's *The Guise*, a play which has as its theme the survival of the theatre. The department was disbanded and the artists retrenched. In an interview with *The Sunday Independent* prominent director/designer Marthinus Basson, who had been with the Drama Department for 19 years, stated that "...he believes very few will be able to carry on being 'full-time theatre-makers.' He hears frequently of actors being hired for R200 to R300 a week" (Capab paid up to R1 500 a week). Basson believes the state should fund the theatre, in order to ensure a long-term development of the performing arts" (Jackman, 1997).

In March 1999 Capab was renamed and re-launched as Artscape, a section 21 (non-profit) company subsidised by the national government with the mandate to programme and manage the Nico Malan Theatre Complex as a playhouse. Its subsidy was reduced accordingly. By April 1999 Artscape's staff had been reduced from 410 three years earlier to 164.

It is interesting to note how, at this time, the fact that South Africa was struggling with the process of democratisation and reconstruction on a huge scale was sharply reflected even in a struggle which arose around the renaming of the theatre complex. For years the name Nico Malan, with its associations with the previous regime, had been under discussion. When Capab became Artscape it was suggested that the theatre complex should be renamed the Artscape Centre, a name historically untainted and with obvious geographic and other associations. The province, who owned the complex, preferred to follow a more democratic route and to invite the public to suggest a new name, a name within strict parameters, including that it may not be a person's name and it should be a name easily recognisable in all three of the province's official languages (Xhosa, Afrikaans and English). After receiving 187 suggestions from the public the provincial Minister announced that the complex would be renamed *Kamma Theatre* in April 2000 – a name which means "water" in Khoi, the language of the original inhabitants of the region. Unfortunately the word "kamma" is better known in Afrikaans, where it has negative connotations, meaning "quasi" or "pretence" ("Kammaland" in Afrikaans is "Never Never Land"). After a huge public outcry and extensive ridicule in the media, it was eventually decided a year later to rename the Nico Malan Theatre complex Artscape and in translation ubuGcisa Kapa (Xhosa), Kunstekaap (Afrikaans) and Talen-ti-/Hui!gaeb (Khoi).

3.4. Natal Performing Arts Council (Napac) – The Playhouse

The Natal Performing Arts Council, while in the process of transforming towards functioning as a playhouse (in the sense of a "receiving house") with a decreased state subsidy, officially became The Playhouse Company in February 1995, named after the theatre which opened in Durban in 1935. In 1986 the Playhouse had become a seven-venue complex including the Drama, the Studio and the Loft Theatre, managed by Napac.

The new Playhouse Company experienced friction amongst management from the outset and the transition was not smooth. Controversial musical composer, director and producer Mbongeni Ngema was appointed head of the Musical Theatre Department. After some months his counterpart, Murray McGibbon, director of drama, who had been with the company since 1987, resigned and accepted a position

at Indiana University, giving as a reason for his resignation that Ngema had received unfair preferential treatment in his appointment.

Gitanjali Pather, dynamic founder of the annual South African Women's Arts Festival at the Playhouse, a former director of the theatre, and acting managing director of the Playhouse, also resigned after a tape recording of an executive committee meeting became public in which the chairman, Edmund Radebe and other members made derogatory racial comments about her and her abilities. Pather was subsequently appointed CEO at the Market Theatre. The incident sparked an angry outburst from former President Nelson Mandela, "...who attacked an 'arrogant black elite' who bred insecurity among South Africa's minority groups" (Donaldson, 2001b). The issue of what Mandela labelled "an arrogant black elite" emerging in the country, also in arts and culture circles, whether merely a perception or more substantial, became a clear trend commented on widely and regularly.

Disproportionate state financial support for the Playhouse and the arts generally in Natal, compared to support for other ex-PACs became the subject of serious concern in the arts community and the media: "...there has been a tide of circumstantial evidence indicating extensive bureaucratic and financial back-scratching between the Arts and Culture Minister Ben Ngubane and the chairman of Durban's Playhouse Theatre, Edmund Radebe" (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 23). A *Sunday Times* reporter listed a number of "coincidences", like Radebe demanding R2 000 every time he attended a meeting of the State Theatre board of which he was a member, the KwaZulu-Natal Philharmonic performing at the re-opening of the State Theatre in Pretoria rather than a Gauteng-based orchestra, the KZN Philharmonic receiving a grant of R2.5 million from the minister's department, the Playhouse receiving R358 110 for six projects during the period from 1997 to 1999, while in the same period the State Theatre received R25 000 for one project and Pacofs received R50 000 for one project. The reporter concluded, "…the direction of SA arts and culture is somehow being shaped by a powerful KwaZulu-Natal cabal, an *Inkathabond,* if you will, that appears to have learnt an awful lot from the apartheid era's Performing Arts Councils when it comes to looking after one another" (Donaldson, 2001b).

Two years later, in December 2003 opera singer Linda Bukhosini was appointed artistic director of the Playhouse, paid at the same level as that of the other directors - roughly R400 000 a year. The appointment was highly controversial, also because Bukhosini had a close personal relationship with minister of arts and culture, Ben Ngubane, and her husband, the tenor Bongani Tembe, was the director of the KZN Philharmonic and sat on the board of the Playhouse, raising concerns about a perceived conflict of interest.

Once again there was an uproar in the arts community and the media. The *Sunday Independent* commented, "As for why the Playhouse should require an artistic director if it is only a receiving theatre, Lesoma (Mina Lesoma, chair of the Playhouse board) says all of Bukhosini's duties are functions that are not currently being executed. Which begs the question of what managing director Caesar Ndlovu has been doing for the past three years" (Anonymous, 2003). By the end of the first decade of democracy one of the largest artistic centres in the country was tainted by allegations of racism, mismanagement and nepotism and effectively it was functioning neither as a production centre nor as an efficient receiving house.

3.5. Performing Arts Council of the Free State (Pacofs) – Sand du Plessis

In 1996 Pacofs also became a section 21 (non-profit) company with reduced state subsidy and a management board appointed by the minister of Arts Culture, Science and Technology. In April 1997 Pacofs closed their drama department and over a period reduced their total staff from 300 to 91 and started functioning primarily as a playhouse for productions in the Sand du Plessis, the André Huguenet and the Civic Theatres in Bloemfontein and the Ernest Oppenheimer Theatre in Welkom. In December 1999 Pacofs severed ties with the city council of Welkom, who were the managers of the Oppenheimer Theatre, as result of bad debts of about R1,2 million. The theatre's staff was retrenched and the doors closed.

When Pacofs closed their drama department, in contrast to the professional theatre artists in the other provinces, however, those in the Free State took the initiative and under leadership of Gerben Kamper, artistic director of Pacofs, the Free State

Ensemble, based at the Sterrewag Theatre [Observatory Theatre] in Bloemfontein, was formed in 1997.

Although Afrikaans culture was predominant in Free State performing arts, the Ensemble stated as their main objective to create "...multi-cultural theatre that will help build a unified South African culture" (Swart, 1998). The Sterrewag Theatre would be their base to première their own productions as and when they could raise the necessary funding and it would be available for smaller theatre companies, cabarets, graphic arts exhibitions and even small symphony concerts, and also for conferences, seminars, small parties and even weddings. It was clear that they intended to follow sound business principles to serve the relatively small theatre audience of the Free State together with productions received by Pacofs in their theatres. The Free State Ensemble ran the Sterrewag Theatre for six years and in June 2004 Pacofs again took over the management of the theatre.

With relatively small *ad hoc* subsidy from the NAC, the Free State Ensemble managed to stage popular and successful productions during the remainder of the decade under review, but Pacofs experienced serious financial problems functioning as a playhouse with reduced state subsidy. As had happened at the State Theatre in Pretoria, Pacofs also made bad investments by investing R3 million with Scott Asset Managers and R4 million with Gaius Group of Investments, both companies which subsequently went into liquidation. In order to address their financial dilemma, Pacofs raised the box office tax charged at their theatres from 10% to 12% in July 2000 and from April 2001 the rental prices of their facilities were increased significantly. Daily rental of the Sand du Plessis was increased by 167% from R2 500 to R6 500 and an additional, new fee of R3 250 was added for moving into the theatre. Daily rental of the Civic Theatre was raised by 334% from R900 to R4 000. Some other rental increases were higher than 400% (Smith, 2001). After an uproar in the media, the management of Pacofs announced that they had to increase all prices in order to survive as a playhouse under the White Paper directives, but that there would be a special, lower price structure for local artists.

By the end of the first decade of democracy the four Performing Arts Councils had thus been substantially transformed, but the mechanism for state support of the arts was still not finalised, as indicated in Chapter 4 below.

3.6. Theatre industry representative bodies by the end of the decade

The transformation of the Performing Arts Councils clearly had a large impact on the working environment of theatre professionals and the opportunities available to them, particularly to the creative and performing artists. In the newly democratised South Africa the interests of workers in general, their rights and their representation through unions and other representative organisations became a higher priority than it had been previously.

Before listing some organisations representing the interests of theatre professionals in the new South Africa, it is valuable to take note of the typical average work situation of most of these professionals by the end of the decade under examination. In April 2004 PANSA surveyed a representative sample of one hundred professional theatre-makers based in the three main metropolitan areas of Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban in a dipstick measure of their professional work situation.

The survey indicated that 65% of the theatre professionals in the sample worked in one city only, unsurprisingly with the majority in Johannesburg, where there were also more opportunities for freelance work in film, television and industrial and corporate theatre. 44% of them worked in or were associated with companies and 71% of that group were part of non-permanent companies that came together around specific projects, rather than work on a daily basis. On average the sampled theatre professionals enjoyed just under six months of theatre employment and appeared in three to four productions per annum. 60% of them were responsible for generating their own work on an *ad hoc* basis. About one quarter of them had some kind of pension scheme and less than 20% had some kind of unemployment insurance. Predictably quite a high percentage had medical aid (46%), this being critical for performing artists who work *ad hoc* and freelance.

On average in these three cities the artists surveyed generated about one quarter of their total income from work in the theatre and one quarter from work in film and television – in Johannesburg 43% from film and television (8% from theatre), in Cape Town 29% from theatre (23% from film and television) and in Durban 35% from theatre (42% from teaching). The balance of the artists' income was generated from commercials, corporate theatre, teaching, administrative work in theatre, and between 10% and 14% of their annual income was derived from work done in industries unrelated to their profession.

Almost all indicated a need for a union representing their interests and almost 90% declared that they would join such a union. Summarising the professional theatre worker's situation in April 2004, Kid Sithole, president of the Performing Arts Workers Equity (PAWE) was quoted as saying that there had been few gains in the sector in the last ten years and he noted that "the artist as a fully-fledged worker still has to be defined" (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 56-57). By the end of the first decade of democracy professional theatre practitioners around South Africa continued to make their living from work in the theatre, but in most cases this was supplemented by work in adjacent fields.

In an industry that was relatively low on the agenda for government support and that was only beginning to find its feet as a self-sufficient commercial environment the professional interest of theatre practitioners and artists generally were not strongly represented in unions or representative bodies, but a number of unions, organisations and associations did exist, including:

- PAWE (Performing Arts Workers Equity), a trade union affiliated to COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions – website at http://www.cosatu.org.za/).
- TMSA (Theatre Managements of South Africa), a nationwide umbrella association of theatre producers, promoters, managers, owners and related service providers. In 1994 the old South African Association of Theatre Managements (SAATM) was replaced by the TMSA. (website at http://www.tmsa.org.za/). "TMSA is a member of the Employees Association for the entertainment industry and is registered as the official employer body in the theatre industry" (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 73).

- PANSA (Performing Arts Network of South Africa), a national network of individuals, NGO's, service providers and mainstream institutions that are engaged in the practice or support of the performing arts (website at http://www.pansa.org.za/).

- PMA (Personal Managers' Association), a non profit organisation that functions as an association of actor's agents and personal managers, their main focus being to ensure that actors have proper representation in the entertainment and advertising industries (website at http://www.pmatalent.co.za/).

- SASWA (South African Scriptwriters' Association), an association for working scriptwriters who have common interests (website at http://www.saswa.org.za/).

- TPSA (Technical Production Services Association), an association representing the interests of technicians and related workers in the live entertainment/events industry (website at http://www.tpsa.co.za/).

- SATI (Southern African Theatre Initiative), an NGO focused on the general development of theatre across a number of Southern African countries, specifically through the promotion of African languages and traditions (website at http://www.sati.org.za/).

CHAPTER 4

MORE EQUITABLE STATE FUNDING OF THE ARTS

4.1. Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST)

On the subject of state funding for the arts the White Paper stated that the government accepted that it had a role to play, but that it could only be a limited one. DACST would "explore creative inter-departmental cooperation in seeking to unlock potential public resources and expertise for the arts" (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1996: 22). Addressing the role of provincial and local governments in terms of arts funding, the Paper stated clearly: "The Ministry will devise national funding policy in consultation with the relevant provincial authorities in order to provide a provincially diverse, yet nationally coherent arts policy. This process should resource infrastructure, projects and practitioners. Provincial and local governments should provide funds on an ongoing basis to ensure sustainability as well as, where possible, additional funds for infrastructure" (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1996: 22). However, little evidence of such efforts became evident during the period under discussion, and frustration within the arts community and dissatisfaction with the NAC is a dominant trend throughout the decade under examination.

In the financial years 1994/95 up to 2002/03 state funding for the arts was channelled through the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST). In 2003 the rather cumbersome department was split into two entities and the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC), excluding Science and Technology, was established in the financial year 2003/04, and subsequently received its own annual budget.[4]

Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology annual budget (in R millions)

1994/95	:	329.17
1995/96	:	515.02 (48.8% to Arts and Culture)
1996/97	:	539.56 (46.9% to Arts and Culture)
1997/98	:	607.62 (45.0% to Arts and Culture)

[4] The figures in the tables are from DACST/DAC annual reports as quoted in the PANSA report of 2005 (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005).

1998/99	:	737.85 (42.5% to Arts and Culture)
1999/00	:	804.41 (38.6% to Arts and Culture)
2000/01	:	969.30 (36.1% to Arts and Culture)
2001/02	:	1,120.16 (37.0% to Arts and Culture)
2002/03	:	1,363.70 (41.5% to Arts and Culture)
2003/04	:	955.15 (Department of Arts and Culture as separate entity)

While the total DACST budget was adjusted upwards annually during the period, the Arts and Culture component declined as a percentage of the budget.

In the context of the trends discussed in this study, it is useful to take a closer look at the annual grants made by the Department to the various playhouses during the period. Financial cuts were made to the PACs over the years 1996/97 to 1999/00, as suggested by the White Paper. After the retrenchment of its staff, the subsidy to the State Theatre was significantly reduced in 2001/02 and in the financial year 2002/03 further cuts were made after the mothballing of the theatre. These "savings" were used to fund performing arts companies. In 2003/04 the grant to the Market Theatre was almost doubled from the previous year and this additional funding was "as the result of poor financial management, and the theatre had to be a 'going concern' with no debts before it could be formally declared a cultural institution" (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005).

<u>DACTS grants to playhouses (in R millions)</u>

Theatre	**95/96**	**96/97**	**97/98**	**98/99**	**99/00**	**00/01**	**01/02**	**02/03**	**03/04**
State	42.21	35.30	33.00	33.11	31.11	31.89	17.35	16.44	17.90
Windybrow	-	-	-	-	-	2.05	2.40	2.40	5.31
Market	-	-	-	-	-	8.00	6.00	6.32	12.14
Artscape	33.32	28.34	24.50	26.33	23.39	21.92	23.51	18.76	20,21
Pacofs	15.52	13.86	14.09	14.73	15.38	16.02	17.33	12.78	14.11
Playhouse	22.10	19.79	19.68	19.88	20.08	21.06	22.64	15.71	17.03

The annual budget of the National Arts Council (NAC) more than quadrupled from R10 million to R42 million over the seven financial years from 1997/98 to 2003/04.

Allocations of NAC funding were distributed annually amongst seven arts and culture disciplines (the percentages in brackets indicate the range of allocations to each discipline during the period): theatre and musicals (17-32%), music and opera (15-28%), dance (14-28%), multi-discipline (5-18%), visual art (3-11%), craft (3-9%) and

literature (3-6%). Consistently the annual allocation to theatre and musicals was the highest. Funds were allocated under condition that projects should be deemed to be "of national significance" (National Arts Council website: www.nac.gov.za).

The distribution of NAC funding across the nine provinces clearly reflected the population density and the financial activity in each province: Gauteng (45-51%), Western Cape (12-23%), KwaZulu Natal (13-17%), Eastern Cape (6-8%), Free State (2-5%), Limpopo (1-5%), North West (0-5%), Northern Cape (0-2%) and Mpumalanga (0-1%). Predictably Gauteng received up to half the annual funding allocation. Clearly the money went where money was to be made, but this distribution was often criticised in the light of RDP and transformation ideals. "Historically disadvantaged provinces continue to be marginalized in terms of funding, despite the White Paper's commitment to equity, redress, etc. This also reflects the reactive nature of the NAC and the lack of vision and capacity to develop capacity within historically disadvantaged provinces, and the lack of developing infrastructure within these areas" (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 24).

Funding from the NAC was made available upon application and on an *ad hoc* basis to theatre producers, but even by 2004 effective procedures did not seem to be in place and there was still a gulf in understanding between the administrators of the funds and those theatre practitioners in need of the funding. New NAC council members were appointed every three years and when the appointment of new councillors was delayed in 2003 as result of administrative hitches, it resulted in a delay in the finalisation of funding allocations for productions to be staged at the Grahamstown festival of that year.

The frustration amongst performing artists reached such a climax in June 2003 that fifty members of the United Theatre Practitioners, a blanket body representing 12 Gauteng community theatre groups, occupied the NAC premises in Newtown, Johannesburg to protest the delays and the fact that eventually ten of the twelve productions for which the UTP had applied for funding had been turned down by the NAC. This meant that works in rehearsal and already on the festival programme would have to be cancelled. In the end the protestors had to be removed from the premises by the police. Further evidence of the clumsy way in which the council often

administered funds allocated to the theatre arts is illustrated graphically in two examples from the end of the decade under scrutiny, by which time some greater measure of coherence and experience in arts funding might have been expected:

The first example has to do with funding timelines. Notwithstanding the dissatisfaction and unrest in 2003, described above, the NAC invited theatre-makers to apply for funding of productions to be staged at the 2004 Grahamstown Festival and the Council set the applications deadline for May 14. The successful applicants were to be advised on June 15. This was a totally unrealistic arrangement, for the Grahamstown Festival's own deadline for application to participate in the festival was some eleven weeks earlier, on February 27, and the festival actually started on July 1, two weeks after the date on which the NAC were to announce the successful applicants. This was clearly not a practical situation and could only be interpreted as a serious lack of understanding on the part of the NAC of the industry they were intended to serve.

The second example also serves to illustrate an apparently persistent lack of internal consultation within the NAC, combined with a continuing ambiguity regarding their responsibilities and the areas their funding was supposed to support.

Muslim South Africans, who are a social minority group and who mostly come from historically disadvantaged communities, are clearly candidates for consideration and support in the New South Africa. The one-woman autobiographical play *At Her Feet* by Nadia Davids deals with a young Muslim woman's experience of life in her community, the claustrophobia she senses and the perceived freedom she sees on the other side of the fence in westernised South Africa. The playwright is a Muslim woman who grew up in Cape Town's District Six and her play focuses on a key social group in the Western Cape. The play was voted one of the five best new works at the 2003 Grahamstown festival and it was the only South African work invited to perform at the Afro Vibes festival in Amsterdam in September 2004. Davids received the Rosalie van der Gucht Prize for New Directors for *At Her Feet* and her actress Quanita Adams won the best actress award at the Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards for her performance in the play.

In order to tour their production through South Africa, Davids applied to the NAC for R80,000 in funding. Clearly *At Her Feet* met all the requirements for support and the amount of money was relatively small. But, in reply, Davids received a letter written by Peter Tshabalala, a grant officer at the NAC, on behalf of the board, rejecting her application. She had been turned down because *At Her Feet* “does not represent the races and religions of South Africa”. The NAC advised her to reapply once she had included “other races and religious groups” in her production! (Greig, 2004).

Not only did the NAC seem to miss the social relevance and artistic merit of the piece, but they seemed to imply that the playwright had to recreate her one-woman play about a Muslim woman’s life to include “other races and religious groups” and to be more politically correct, before she could be eligible for NAC funding support.

According to Mike van Graan, chairperson of PANSA, as quoted by Robert Greig in *The Sunday Independent*, a decision to fund *At Her Feet* was apparently made by the drama panel - a group of experts in the field, one of several genre panels that assessed applications. They “apparently” approved the application. The decision went, as is usual, for review by the executive. “In the past, the executive and the board did not actually get into making funding decisions. Their mandate is to oversee broad funding patterns”, and if there is a clear, unwarranted deviation, to step in and make a ruling. The decision to override the panel of experts in this case and to write a letter effectively urging Davids to pen another play, was made by the NAC executive. Van Graan said it represented a disturbing trend of non-experts making funding decisions and executives with an overseeing role getting involved in the details of funding (Greig, 2004).

In an open letter to the NAC and Tshabalala, published in *The Sunday Independent*, Nadia Davids stated that she was troubled by the reasons given for the rejection of her application in Tshabalala’s letter. “I feel that it indicates both a lack of understanding as to the nature and content of the production, as well as suggesting an attitude that at best could be described as ill-informed, and at worst could be construed as bigoted. ... I am puzzled that, in the NAC's quest to find culturally reflective and politically representative work, they did not take the time to seriously investigate the proposals submitted. ... If I had written that the characters pontificate around black and white

people in an unerring meditation on what it means to be African, and specifically, South African, would those debates be considered irrelevant nationally, because they are spoken from a loosely connected Islamic cultural paradigm? ... And had I known that racial demographics were the determining factor, as opposed to artistic integrity, political relevance and public response, I would have worded my proposal differently. ... The point of the production is to engage with the multiplicity of a single faith, interpreted by a variety of cultural, political and socio-economic paradigms. It also narrates an underwritten dimension of South African society which has been present in our country for over 300 years" (Davids, 2004).

When Robert Greig, one of the country's most prominent theatre critics and commentators, approached the NAC for a statement on their refusal to allocate funding to *At Her Feet* and for a reply to David's letter, he was informed that "NAC staff have been instructed by the new chair of the NAC, Gomolemo Mokae, not to talk to the media. He himself refuses to talk to *The Sunday Independent*" (Greig, 2004).

In summary, the trend illustrated in the two examples selected above can be encapsulated in Mike van Graan's words at the time, "If anything has happened over the past decade, it is that there has been a shift from 'struggle theatre' to the struggle to make and disseminate theatre, with the latter often being waged with policy, funding and governance institutions that - ironically - were intended to advance theatre" (Van Graan, 2004).

4.2. Business and Arts South Africa (BASA)

In the absence of fully effectual state funding or financial support for the arts the question arises whether the private sector could have played a role in supporting the development of arts and culture, and in this context the professional theatre, in the fledgling democracy. This question has a complex answer and certain areas, specifically around tax incentives, remained obscure even by the end of the decade under discussion.

The following is an overview of how the state became involved in attempting to stimulate private sector sponsorship of the arts in the absence of attractive tax benefits

to potential business sponsors. The White Paper acknowledged: "In some parts of the world, tax incentives are used to induce the private sector to play a major role in developing and promoting the arts. ... Given the absence of specific arts related tax incentives for the private sector, government has to find other means of encouraging private sector involvement in the arts. Under present circumstances, donations made by the general public for arts and culture do not qualify for tax relief unless it can be shown that the donation is in promotion of sales advertising. ... The Ministry recognises though, that the private sector will become increasingly involved in the arts if they can be convinced that it will impact positively on their profits" (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1996: 23).

With these objectives in mind DACST established Business and Arts South Africa (BASA) in 1997 "as a joint initiative of government and the business sector, to secure the future development of the arts industry in our country, through increased corporate sector involvement." It was set up as a Section 21 (non-profit) company, accountable to both government and BASA's business members, with President Thabo Mbeki as its patron. Underlining the importance of its mission the patron declared at BASA's launch, "The arts are part of the phenomenon of human existence described as culture, which constitutes the barrier that blocks your path and mine towards regress to the ways of the beastly world" (Business and Arts South Africa website: www.basa.co.za).

The objective was to motivate members of the business sector to sponsor arts activities as part of their corporate social investment initiatives, by matching the private sector sponsorships with a grant from funding allocated by DACST to BASA annually. Apart from corporate social investment and image benefits and the strategic opportunity it provided, the business would also benefit in terms of promotion and advertising through the arts project. BASA declared, "The scheme provides an effective sales tool or 'hook' for the arts organisation seeking sponsorship, and an incentive for business to sponsor, and should form an integral part of the negotiations between sponsor and recipient" (Business and Arts South Africa website: www.basa.co.za).

Businesses would, however, not enjoy any direct tax benefits, except if their sponsorship was for a non-profit organisation, which effectively excluded professional theatre activities. Their sole benefit would be in terms of sales advertising and promotion and some tax deduction could be argued for as part of the business's marketing and advertising budget and provided that it did not constitute a donation. By the end of the decade under examination activities recognised as "public benefit activities" for both the purpose of exemption from income tax and for the deduction of donations for tax purposes was under review. In the scheme the main sweetener for the arts industry would be the contribution BASA would make to match the funding received from a business sponsor.

In the first five years after its establishment in 1997 DACST allocated BASA a flat R2 million per annum, in 2002/3 it was increased to R3 million and the next year to R3,5 million. Once again the theatre community reacted negatively towards the level of state support for this new organisation: "This reflects a bureaucratic approach to funding rather than a visionary one i.e. funds are allocated on the basis of amounts funded before, rather than on the basis of what the organisation could possibly achieve" (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 24).

4.3. National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund (NLDTF)

The state lottery, via the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund (NLDTF), was another source of funding for the arts and culture. In the White Paper (1996) it was suggested that 5% of funds distributed through the, at that time, proposed state lottery should be earmarked for this purpose (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1996: 22). Once again, the funding was aimed at non-profit artistic and cultural activities, again effectively excluding the professional theatre. By 1999 it was determined that 6% of the funds distributed by the NLDTF would go towards arts and culture (including "heritage"). Interestingly, sport was allocated 48% of the same trust fund (De Villiers, 1999c).

Theatre-makers had indirect access to lottery funding via the arts festivals which sponsored, in varying degrees, selected productions to be staged at the festival and the festival management could apply for funding from the lottery trust fund. By the end of

the decade under scrutiny the three major arts festivals built allocations from the NLDTF into their income statements and their various sources of funding by 2004 broke down as follows:

Source of Funding	**National Arts Festival**	**KKNK**	**Aardklop**
Lottery	22,0%	2,1%	13,0%
Government	30,0%	2,5%	0,0%
Private Sector	26,5%	27,6%	27,0%
Box Office	19,0%	47,4%	40,0%
Other	2,5%	20,4%	20,0%

(Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 41).

CHAPTER 5

THE EMERGENCE OF AN ARTS FESTIVAL CIRCUIT

5.1. Introduction

The nature, development and impact of arts festivals around the world and their role as "events" influencing specifically drama, theatre and performance has formed the subject of extensive academic research during the last decade. The International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) established a working group of specialist researchers to focus specifically on the "Theatrical Event", including the arts festival and its impact as a particular type of event. This forms a broad and in the context of various cultures and theatre environments around the world, a stimulating study resulting in many publications in specialist books and academic journals, including the *New Theatre Quarterly* and *South African Theatre Journal* with specific reference to South African festivals. But within a framework that concentrates on major trends in South African professional theatre in the first decade of democracy, the focus here will be narrowed to developments originating from the political, social and cultural transformation after the elections of 1994, including the emergence of a South African arts festival circuit and its impact on local drama, theatre and performance.

During the decade under scrutiny arts festivals began to play a crucial and formative role in the evolution of the theatre and performing arts of the new democracy. While the occurrence of cultural festivals in various forms and sizes was common in the old South Africa and even a multi-disciplinary festival fully dedicated to the arts was a regular annual event since 1974, the role and the impact of arts festivals changed markedly after 1994. The transformation of the Performing Arts Councils and the changes in state funding for the arts, discussed above, both played a major role in the subsequent evolution in South African theatre, including the emergence of an arts festival circuit. And another pivotal factor in the proliferation of arts festivals was the change to majority rule after the first democratic elections, the Afrikaners' ensuing loss of political power and the resultant fear amongst many Afrikaners[5] that their cultural identity and even their language was in danger of becoming extinct.

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[5] The social group "Afrikaners" will be discussed in some detail below.

The history of the various types of cultural and other festivals in South Africa has been extensively recorded in a number of publications, most recently in some depth in a doctoral dissertation by Herman van Zijl Kitshoff at the University of Stellenbosch (Kitshoff, 2005), who looked at festivals in general and specifically at the development of the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK) [Little Karoo National Arts Festival]. His analysis of the development of the KKNK during its first decade (1995-2005) provides a background against which the broader effect of an emerging festival circuit around South Africa can be investigated in terms of its social, economic, cultural, tourism, prestige and other impacts.

A large number and a wide variety of festivals take place all around South Africa each year, some large and some on a much smaller scale. Many festivals are regional and often agricultural produce related, like wine or food, and some of these festivals even have a "cultural element" like musicians performing or a concert held in the local school hall. A number of regular annual events, however, are specifically "arts and culture" festivals and the focus here is on the impact such arts festivals in post-apartheid South Africa had on theatre-makers and theatre-goers. The spotlight will be turned specifically on those festivals that provided a platform for professional theatre-makers to present and often to introduce their work.

Apart from a strong focus on "festivity", most arts festivals in South Africa in the first decade of democracy combined a variety of artistic expressions including graphic arts, plastic arts, crafts, dance, mime, cabaret, musical performances and concerts, as well as theatre productions. In identifying the emergence of an arts festival circuit as a trend in post-apartheid South African theatre, the focus here will be on those major festivals that incorporated a large number of theatre productions in their programme and on how the theatre and theatre-making were impacted by the festivals.

5.2. Before 1994: The Grahamstown Festival

The proliferation of arts festivals after 1994 has had a profound effect on theatre-making and theatre-going in the new socio-political environment, but in an interesting way this initiative has its roots in an intriguing cultural movement initiated by the

1820 Settlers' Foundation during the 150th year celebrations of the landing of the British Settlers in the Eastern Cape, when the Foundation found the funds (partly through government support) to build a theatre and, more importantly, initiate what was to become a National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. This initial festival, popularly known as the Grahamstown Festival[6], was to develop into the premier festival in Southern Africa and one of the largest arts festivals in the world by the time the new millenium had rolled around.

As will be discussed in more detail below, the Afrikaans arts festivals that developed after 1994 were established to a great extent in reaction to the diminished control exercised by Afrikaners over arts and culture policies and funding, and their response to a perceived threat to their cultural heritage. In this regard Temple Hauptfleisch refers to "the triple threat of potential Americanization, Anglicization and Africanization" (Hauptfleisch, 2006a:187). Interestingly, the original organisers of the Grahamstown Festival had a similar basic motivation when the festival was launched two decades earlier. In that context Hauptfleisch refers to "the triple threat of Americanization, Afrikanerization and Africanization." At the time when the Grahamstown Festival was launched the country was governed by the Nationalist Party, which invested heavily in Afrikaner culture and the establishment and advancement of the young Afrikaans language, the second official language, alongside English. So some English South Africans perceived "Afrikanerization" as a specific danger to the survival of "pure" English culture in the multi-cultural mix at the Southern tip of the continent.

In 1974 the 1820 Settlers' Foundation inaugurated the 1820 Settlers' Monument in the Eastern Cape university city of Grahamstown to celebrate and maintain the cultural heritage of English-speaking South Africans and specifically those pioneers who came from the UK in the 19th century and settled in the eastern regions of the Cape Colony. Since the Monument building houses a well-equipped theatre, Guy Butler, then Head of the English Department at Grahamstown University organised a Shakespeare Festival of the Arts to mark the opening of the 1820 Settlers' Monument

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[6] Officially the festival was always named after its sponsors, beginning with the Five Roses Festival in 1974 and during the period under discussion, the Standard Bank National Arts Festival.

by celebrating English culture, specifically in its most glorious popular expression as embodied in the works of the Bard.

Subsequently the festival became an annual institution, gradually opening up its original strict focus on classical English culture and widening its scope over the decades to become a multi-disciplinary arts festival that incorporated artistic expression from a much broader cultural spectrum: South African, African and beyond. It remained to a great extent, however, primarily a celebration of English culture, local and international, which gives it its distinctive character as a clearly (English) South African event. In time it also became recognised internationally and by 1994 was seen as one of the major arts festivals on the annual calendar.

5.3. A focus on Afrikaans

English had been in common use in South Africa since the 18th century and became the official language during the period of British rule. As a world language it also became the preferred second tongue for many educated non-English South Africans and it was a compulsory school subject for learners across the nation. In the new South Africa, the ANC-led government gave eleven languages official status, of which nine were indigenous African languages. The other two were Afrikaans, which had developed at the Cape out of 17th-century Dutch, and English.

For obvious reasons the new government expressed a preference for English as a *lingua franca* for the country as a whole. The origin of Afrikaans, the background to its becoming the youngest official language on earth and the history of the battles between Afrikaans and English as languages and cultural weapons during the 19th and early 20th centuries, though extremely relevant to some of the developments described below, have been well documented over the years and will therefore not be repeated here.[7]

[7] Examples: *The Development of Afrikaans* by F.A. Ponelis (1993) and *Tuiste in eie taal [A Home in (your) own Language]* by J.C. Steyn (1980).

In the current context, however, it is nevertheless important to note that a particular segment of the Afrikaans-speaking population, the so-called "Afrikaners" had gradually come to form a distinct cultural group over the centuries since the original Dutch settlement at the Cape in 1652. This history too is covered in many publications, most recently in the authoritative *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* by Hermann Giliomee (Tafelberg Publishers, 2003).

During the 19th and 20th centuries South African politics were dominated by friction between British and Afrikaner whites, while no effective black participation in politics was permitted. After World War II the Nationalist Party, primarily supported by the Afrikaners, gained prominence in the political arena and won control of the government in 1948. The subsequent decades of formal socio-political apartheid, "separate development", forced geographical group areas and cultural apartheid have also been well documented and a key leitmotiv in this context was the establishment of the Afrikaners as a prominent, privileged cultural group, which benefited handsomely from generous state support, also in the fields of education and the arts. Traditionally, and in the broadest strokes, the label "Afrikaner" was used to denote Afrikaans-speaking descendants of the original Dutch settlers. Over centuries the cultural group incorporated, through marriage, European immigrants from other parts like Germany, France, Portugal and elsewhere, but key binding factors remained race, religion and, in time, the Afrikaans language. Although the term "Afrikaner" had earlier also been used in a broader sense to include Afrikaans speakers of all races, it was clearly established since the 1960s that in its narrowest application, the term implied Afrikaans-speaking, white members of the Dutch Reformed Church who were supporters of the Nationalist Party. This narrow definition of the Afrikaner was also key in the formulation of the apartheid policies. The history and the socio-cultural dynamics and developments are complex, but well documented.

In the new democratic South Africa after the elections of 1994, when the Afrikaners lost political control of the country, multifaceted new dynamics started to come into play. In the old apartheid South Africa the term Afrikaner could comfortably exclude Afrikaans-speakers who were not members of the white ruling class and therefore not members of the exclusive Afrikaner political, cultural, and religious society, but in the new South Africa the difference between an "Afrikaner" and an "Afrikaans-speaker"

became problematic as the strict political, racial and social demarcations of the past made way for a more integrated society. It was questioned that a relatively small (white) group of the total South African population would call themselves and their language after the whole continent, but it could not be denied that the Afrikaners had become one of the most influential and economically powerful groups in the country. Many South Africans who spoke Afrikaans as their mother tongue, or as a second language, and who also used it for cultural purposes were, however, never part of this privileged group because they were not legally classified as "white". After 1994 the new democracy and the new political and social liberation brought along challenges to all the users of Afrikaans to create a widely inclusive environment where Afrikaans could be used and celebrated to the full range of its cultural expression if it were to survive in the multi-cultural future South Africa. Since the Afrikaans language was so closely associated with the Afrikaner culture, and the "non-white" Afrikaans-speakers had historically been mostly excluded from Afrikaner cultural activities, the use of Afrikaans in artistic and cultural expression became a highly controversial issue that also played a part in the development of the Afrikaans-language arts festivals, which is the key development under examination in the following section.

The use of the arts, and specifically theatre, as a cultural tool in South Africa (or even as a "weapon" during the apartheid struggle period) has been discussed in a variety of publications. Hauptfleisch mentioned the role of arts festivals in this context in a 2006 article: "In the face of the enormous task of reconstruction, reconciliation and self-realization now facing the country, the arts (in the very broadest sense) have once more been mobilized in a most remarkable fashion, in a new 'cultural struggle' in which not only the theatrical event, but the theatrical system as a whole is once more becoming increasingly important in order to understand and re-interpret the past, to come to grips with the present and to shape the future, and thus to shift perceptions across a wide spectrum and the many chasms that divide people and communities. In this process, the arts and culture festival has come to hold a special place of late" (Hauptfleisch, 2006a).

As indicated above, the Afrikaans-speaking population, and specifically those who were particularly sensitive about their cultural heritage, began to fear the extinction of their culture and their language in this evolving multi-lingual, multi-cultural new

Rainbow Nation. From the early 1990s the once powerful nationwide Afrikaans cultural organizations like the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns [South African Academy for Science and Art], the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings (FAK) [Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations] and the Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging (ATKV) [Afrikaans Language and Culture Association] were all trying to reassert and re-position themselves in the new context and were exploring opportunities to support initiatives which could ensure the survival of Afrikaans culture and the language after the pending political transformation.

Large businesses such as the media conglomerate Naspers with its interests in newspapers, magazines, publishing, television, electronic and other media aimed strongly, although by no means exclusively, at Afrikaans-language consumers, were ready to support projects that would serve their corporate social investment initiatives, and at the same time augment their image as supporters of Afrikaans and the perceived “endangered” Afrikaans culture amongst that section of their target consumers.

It was against this background that the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK) was launched in Oudtshoorn in April 1995, when these two factors converged serendipitously with two other factors in early 1994.

The third factor was the cultural history and image of the town Oudtshoorn in the Klein Karoo area of the Western Cape Province. The large majority of its inhabitants were Afrikaans speakers and Oudtshoorn was famous as the hometown of the iconic early 20th-century Afrikaans writer and language struggle hero CJ Langenhoven - the Langenhoven Centennial Festival in Oudtshoorn (1974) was a celebration of the man and also of the Afrikaans language and its struggle to be recognised. Since the town was already well-known for its association with Afrikaans cultural tradition, it was seen as an ideal venue for an annual Afrikaans-centred cultural festival (vide Kitshoff, 2005: 83).

The fourth factor that sparked the initiative to launch the KKNK was in the person of dynamic Oudtshoorn entrepreneur, Nic Barrow, who had earlier headed up various

projects to stimulate tourism and the local economy of Oudtshoorn and its environment. Barrow met with Andrew Marais, at the time head of Public Relations for the Naspers Group and they discussed the potential of an annual (Afrikaans) arts festival, initially planned to follow directly after the Grahamstown Festival. In February 1994 *Die Burger*, flagship daily newspaper of the Naspers Group, announced that Naspers would be the main sponsor of an annual multi-disciplinary arts festival in Oudtshoorn and it quoted Barrow, chairman of the festival planning committee, "Hopefully it will grow in its own right into a sparkling annual festival. By no means is it intended as an 'antipode' to, for instance, the Grahamstown Festival or any other. There will be space for contributions in English and other indigenous languages, but the emphasis will be on Afrikaans" (Botha, 1994, translated from Afrikaans[8]).

The first KKNK festival was held for one week during the school holidays in April 1995 and about 30,000 tickets were sold. Subsequently it was staged annually and by 2004 almost 200,000 tickets were sold during the nine days of festivities. Originally born out of the concern many Afrikaners had about the future of their language and culture in a newly integrated society, combined with the efforts of an astute local businessman to stimulate the economy of his region and a public relations opportunity recognised by a media conglomerate, a hugely successful annual cultural event developed which contributed strongly to the evolution of the theatre in post-apartheid South Africa. As Athol Fugard commented at the second KKNK, "This festival is one of the fruits of a new future; part of the healing powers currently beginning to work. What lies ahead we do not know yet. But something like this festival is fundamentally positive" (Botha, 1996a, translated from Afrikaans).

In the wake of the KKNK a number of primarily Afrikaans annual regional arts festivals developed across the country during the rest of the decade under scrutiny, including the Aardklop Nasionale Kunstefees ["Throbbing" Earth[9] National Arts Festival] in Potchefstroom, the Afrikaanse Woordfees [Afrikaans Word Festival] in Stellenbosch, the Volksbladfees [Volksblad Festival] in Bloemfontein, the Gariep

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[8] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by me.
[9] Aard(e) = earth, klop = (heart-)beat or throb.

Kunstefees [Gariep Arts Festival] in Kimberley and the Suidoosterfees [South-Easter Festival] in Cape Town.

These new Afrikaans arts festivals, together with the established Grahamstown Festival and a number of other regional arts festivals resulted in an arts festival circuit which changed not only the pattern and habits of theatre-goers, but also the approach, strategy and business of South African theatre-makers during the first decade of democracy.

An interesting side note to the emergence of an arts festival circuit, specifically the Afrikaans festivals, was the initiative taken by some expatriate South Africans abroad, initially in London and later in Canada and New Zealand. In 2001 Maryna Blomerus, a South African living in London, led a team of organisers to stage the first UKkasie Festival in London. The festival was billed “The UKcasion for the Nation in the UK” and its target audience was the roughly 300,000 South Africans (of whom approximately 60% were Afrikaans speaking) living in London. Although it was described as the first ever Afrikaans Arts Festival abroad, UKkasie was strictly speaking not an arts festival, but rather an Afrikaans cultural occasion, a get-together for homesick (mostly Afrikaans-speaking) South Africans living in England. Traditional South African cuisine was on offer and the entertainment provided was almost exclusively by Afrikaans performers. Some small productions were staged, but the main focus was on music, song and poetry readings. The Afrikaans language and culture were joyously celebrated and an attempt was even made to recognise that Afrikaans was not only the mother tongue of white Afrikaners, but of other cultural and ethnic groups as well: an Afrikaans speaking Kalahari Bushman, Dawid Kruiper, was invited as a guest speaker and the ex-premier of Mpumalanga, Mathews Phosa, gave a reading of his Afrikaans poetry. The headline acts, however, were by popular Afrikaans one-person performers like Patrick Mynhardt and Trix Pienaar, and singers like Karin Hougaard, Coenie de Villiers, Lucas Maree and Cutt Glas.

The UKkasie Festival has been staged annually in London since its debut in 2001 and, although it has grown, the original format has not changed much. Since 2002 similar annual Afrikaans cultural festivals, mostly focused on festive celebration and the enjoyment of Afrikaans music, musical performers and culture, have been organised

in Canada (called the KaNasie Festival) and New Zealand (called the KiwiNasie Festival).

5.4. A focus on "indigenous" African culture

Although the emergence of an arts festival circuit after 1994 was a key development in South African professional theatre, most festivals did relatively little to specifically explore or celebrate black (South) African culture, theatre or theatre-makers. Obviously every festival typically had a number of black artists taking part in productions, and audiences included some black theatre-goers, but the participation of the white and Western-oriented theatre-makers, as well as audiences, disproportionately outweighed the contribution from black African and historically disadvantaged artists and festival-goers. Apart from some exceptional cases, English and Afrikaans were used almost exclusively on the festival stages. Throughout the decade efforts were made and intentions were formulated to work towards multi-cultural arts festivals and/or festivals specifically planned and staged to celebrate black African arts and cultural expression, but by the end of the period relatively few meaningful successes had been achieved in that area.

In September 1997 the provincial government of the Free State, supported by the television channel SABC2, launched the Mangaung[10] African Cultural Festival (Macufe) in Bloemfontein. At the announcement of the festival the general manager of SABC2, Thaninga Msimango, declared that "the concept was initiated because there was no cultural festival that expressed the rich culture of indigenous South Africans." And the Free State MEC for sports, arts and culture, M.W. Molefe, added that "most popular and successful festivals in South Africa are focused on Eurocentric culture, paying scant regard to indigenous African culture" (Makhaya, 1997). Officially dubbed an "African cultural festival", rather than an "arts festival", the intention was clear: to stage an event that would recognise and celebrate indigenous African cultural heritage, and specifically as a balance to the other arts festivals which were perceived to do little in that regard.

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[10] The Sesotho name for the capital city of Free State province, Bloemfontein, is Mangaung, meaning "place of cheetahs".

The Macufe festival has been staged annually in the spring since 1997 and by the end of the decade under scrutiny it had made very little contribution to the professional theatre, Afrocentric or other. The main focus was on music, song and dance and other cultural activities, with relatively little focus on theatre. Productions that *were* staged in the first four years were extremely poorly attended. In 1997, for instance, *Bergville Stories* (written and directed by Duma KaNdlovu), *On My Birthday* (written and directed by Aubrey Sekhabi) and *Woza Albert!* (by Mtwa & Ngema and directed by Danny Moleko) were staged and, although tickets cost only R1.00, most performances drew audiences of fewer than twenty people (Swart, 1997). By 2000 the attendance figures for live theatre productions staged at Macufe had not improved much. By the end of the decade under examination, however, there were indications that Macufe was becoming part of the arts festival circuit and a number of productions that had premièred at Grahamstown or KKNK were staged in Bloemfontein. Most of those, however, were "Eurocentric", staged in English or Afrikaans and did little to contribute to the original objective of celebrating "indigenous" African culture.

5.5. The festivals are where the audiences are

As discussed above, the transformation of the Performing Arts Councils resulted in full-time professional employment opportunities for individual theatre artists becoming much more limited. However, the emergence of an arts festival circuit created a platform where a large number of theatre productions could be staged to enthusiastic audiences and this lead to new independent theatre companies starting up and mounting productions specifically to première at one of the annual arts festivals and then to tour the circuit of festivals during the remainder of the year. The more popular productions would be contracted to perform for a season in mainstream urban venues and many others had a lifetime of only one or more arts festivals. Theatre critic and analyst Robert Greig commented on the trend that "...artists are increasingly doing try-outs on the festival circuit outside the cities, making their reputations and an increasing proportion of their incomes there. ... To the doom-laden, the live arts audience seems to be shrinking; in fact, it may be simply moving out of the urban range into the peri-urban and rural" (Greig, 1999b). Prolific playwright/director Deon Opperman was one of the theatre-makers who took ample advantage of this opportunity and he encapsulated the evolving landscape in an interview by stating

simply, “the festivals are where the audiences are” (Farber, 2000). By 2001 the festival circuit became so popular with theatre-makers that Bain and Hauptfleisch commented in the *South African Theatre Journal*, “it is possibly because of this simple promise of box office returns that the festivals are out-performing mainstream city theatres as sites of theatrical creativity and expression” (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001:14).

In a sense the festival circuit became a catalyst for independent professional theatre companies to once again become touring troupes that criss-crossed the country. In South Africa this was not a new phenomenon. From the latter part of the 19th century visiting international theatre companies often toured South Africa, performing in theatres and halls in towns and cities across the country. In the early 20th century these groups were joined by local professional companies and touring repertory theatre groups were commonplace up until the 1960s. The growing popularity of cinema, however, and the introduction of television in 1975 contributed to the ultimate demise of the touring theatre company industry. The social unrest and violence in the latter years of apartheid also contributed to the cocooning of specifically urban households and the introduction of a high-quality subscription television service in 1985 had a powerful negative influence on already dwindling theatre attendance figures, also in the platteland areas where the touring companies used to find their most enthusiastic audiences.

As indicated, however, during the first decade of democracy the opportunity had arisen for independent theatre companies to form and to go on the road once again, and to be guaranteed an audience. But this time they did not tour the cities and towns, playing one- or two-night stands in school halls, church halls and only a limited number of specialised theatre venues, instead they could tour the newly established arts festival circuit and perform for enthusiastic audiences who had gathered in one place for a week or more to enjoy a wide range of entertainments in the heady atmosphere of a dedicated arts festival. In a way, like the theatre-makers, many theatre-goers also went on tour, including a visit to an arts festival in Grahamstown or Potchefstroom or Oudtshoorn or elsewhere, as part of their holidays.

5.6. Evolution of the "festival play"

Most of the annual arts festivals had a wide choice of theatre productions on offer. Typically the theatrical line-up at the festivals would include a relatively small number of large-scale productions, some of them professional stagings of foreign dramas by established playwrights and foreign or local classics, but more often they would be premières of new local plays. These large-scale productions, normally part of the "Main Festival", as opposed to the "Fringe Festival", were typically mounted by professional producers, staged by prominent directors, cast with established artists and presented in fully equipped, sophisticated theatre venues. Some Main Festival productions were specially commissioned for the festival and their budgets usually benefited from festival and/or other funding and sponsorships.

The vast majority, however, of theatre productions and performances on offer, mostly at the Fringe Festival, but also on the Main Festival, would be on a much smaller scale, very often one-person shows or two-handers. These productions were typically staged by independent theatre-makers, often individuals or small companies, and clearly the scale of such productions was primarily dictated by available funding and allocated performance venues. Normally these companies had to survive solely on box office earnings, which at the festivals had to be split, in varying proportions, with the festival organisation. These productions also had to be dressed and staged, not only affordably, but in a manner which made it practical to travel from venue to venue and from festival to festival. Most of the venues available to Fringe productions were not fully equipped theatres, but halls or large converted rooms around the host city or town. Consequently the sets, props and costumes were limited, the size of the cast was limited, the technical equipment was limited and the tight festival schedule even limited the duration of performances. Given all these limitations, most significantly the limited production budget and facilities, the variety of types and genres of suitable plays became severely limited. This resulted in a wide range of artistic quality in the productions staged at the Fringe Festival. Some died an early death at their first festival. Some toured the rest of the festival circuit successfully and a small number graduated to seasons in mainstream venues around the country.

The large number of new plays coming out of the festival circuit each year, specifically those out of the Fringe, led theatre researchers like Temple Hauptfleisch to raise an intriguing question: "Is there something like a 'festival play' which is acceptable in Grahamstown, Oudtshoorn, Potchefstroom, and so on, only during the festival? It would almost seem so" (Hauptfleisch, 2006a:189). I believe this was the case. Clearly the conventions, style and characteristics of these "festival plays" were primarily born out of the limitations (which could also be seen as challenges) discussed above, but another factor that played a role was the typical festival audiences for which these plays were staged. For a number of reasons the usual audience attending performances during an arts festival is dissimilar to an audience at more conventional productions staged in the mainstream, mostly urban, venues around the country.

5.7. An annual cultural fix for some, a party for others

As the arts festivals led to the development of a typical "festival play", they certainly also attracted what could be described as a typical "festival audience". Research into the demographics, profile, behaviour and preferences of festival-goers has been done at various festivals, like those published by the Department of Economics at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. A detailed analysis of the findings would be outside of the scope of this study, but in the context of trends in post-apartheid South African theatre some general comments on the emergence of a "festival audience" has value.

Typically most festival-goers would attend the festival for a number of days, book accommodation and reserve tickets for the more popular productions months in advance. Most often they would come from a much larger pool than a city theatre audience, travelling to the festival from cities, towns, villages and farms across the country and from all walks of life. The festival(s) of their choice would become an event which for most included much more than theatre attendance. Essentially the festival would offer six main activities to the visitor: productions and performances on the Main Festival, productions and performances on the Fringe Festival, arts exhibitions and events, talk shops and lectures, stalls and shopping, partying and socialising.

Festival-goers would range from the most dedicated arts and culture aficionados to boozing, partying, thrill-seeking holiday makers, and everything in between. Roughly the same profile would be reflected in the theatre audiences. They would range all the way from dedicated theatre-lovers visiting the festival for their annual theatre fix and attending five or more carefully selected productions per day, to the thrill-seekers who would opt for only the more controversial or star-studded or risqué shows and spend the rest of the time soaking up the buzz in the streets and the markets, restaurant and pub-crawling, wine-tasting and partying. Michael Dawson, arts consultant and member of British Executive Services Overseas, described the average theatre attending festival-goer in an interview with *Beeld* newspaper: “The multi-arts festivals are for people who are not essentially interested in a specific art form and consequently not set on delving deeper into that particular genre. For these people the bigger festivals are a quick fix where they can attend ten, twenty productions in five days. Often they will not be seen in a theatre for the rest of the year” (Nieuwoudt, 2000, translated from Afrikaans).

A trend that became very noticeable during productions at the festivals was the change in general behaviour of audience members while the performance was in progress. While audiences normally behaved in a conventional Western manner when attending a theatre production in traditional urban theatre venues, the behaviour and audience reaction shown at festival productions changed and over the years even evolved to a completely different style of conduct. The average festival audience member, not necessarily including the serious theatre aficionado in this context, seemed to become infected by the general high, the buzz in the streets, the festival atmosphere and a laissez-faire feeling of having fun and casual holiday making, while soaking up some “culture” at the same time. And they tended to bring this attitude along into the auditorium. Apart from the general festival spirit, the informal dress and the often relaxed ambience in the performance venues also lead audiences to behave in a manner different to that of regular “formal” theatre-goers.

On the one hand, this resulted in raucous enthusiasm and contagious roaring ovation when a production or an individual performance met with general audience approval and appreciation. Over time a trend developed at festival performances which gradually became almost the rule in South African theatre, eventually also at

performances away from the festivals: as part of the applause a standing ovation at the curtain call became virtually obligatory. This conventionally ultimate compliment to the performing artist became rather devalued as a result. After a performance of *Cry, The Beloved Country* at the 2003 Grahamstown Festival critic Robert Greig noted, “At the end, the audience gives it a standing ovation, which it doesn't deserve. Standing ovations have become an invariable reaction to live productions in South Africa. ... I remain seated, the back of my neck prickling from dagger glances” (Greig, 2003c).

Audience approval was shown loudly and clearly, but on the other hand, audiences were often similarly overt, demonstrative and explicit in their disapproval of a production or a performance. Audible negative reaction and displeasure could often be heard from darkened auditoria and it became quite common for audience members to stand up and walk out of performances they did not enjoy (or possibly simply because they feel they may be late for the next performance at another venue...). Clearly these festival-goers’ approach was that there is lots on the menu and time is precious! By the end of the decade under scrutiny the style of audience behaviour that evolved at festival productions clearly started manifesting itself also in the mainstream theatres outside of the festivals.

5.8. Arts festivals: an “interim phase” or “final convulsions” or sustainable?

By the end of the first decade of democracy it was clear that the emergence of an arts festival circuit had a powerful impact on the professional theatre in South Africa. Exactly what the role and the importance of the festivals would be in future decades was not clear, but that would be determined by the evolution of the “formal” theatre environment outside of the arts festivals.

Much speculation about the impact and the role of an arts festival circuit took place in academic circles and the media towards the end of the period under examination. I quote three opinions: In an interview with *Rapport* newspaper, Karen Meiring, director of the KKNK, commented, “It is true that festivals, which must be seen as informal structures, acted as a kind of catch net when the formal structures collapsed. I regard the blossoming of arts festivals as an interim phase in cultural development

and fluctuation. They can never replace the formal structures of fulltime theatres. Artists cannot survive on festivals alone" (Hough, 2000b, translated from Afrikaans). In 2002 a more cynical interpretation was voiced by Jean Meiring, a South African academic attached to Cambridge University: "It is tragic to say, but arts festivals are undeniably the final, cramped convulsions of a valiant arts community, rather than renaissance and life." This opinion was specifically raised in the context of Afrikaans theatre and festivals, and the author continued, "... Apart from the offerings at the festivals Afrikaans theatre virtually does not exist: in the last three months [March 2002] not a single Afrikaans professional production was staged in Cape Town..." (Meiring, 2002, translated from Afrikaans). Whether it will prove to be an "interim phase", as Karen Meiring suggests, or the "final cramped convulsions", as expatriate Jean Meiring would have it, or whether it might evolve into a more permanent and sustainable part of the theatre landscape (specifically as a "trying out" arena for theatre-makers before they target the mainstream) as Robert Greig suggested in 1999, time will tell.

In summary, the evolving relationship between government and the arts, the diminishing control by the Afrikaners over their own cultural heritage and the changes at the Performing Arts Councils contributed to the emergence of a circuit of annual arts festivals around the country. As a result, professional theatre-makers adjusted to the new challenges and opportunities and over time audience habits and expectations also evolved in reaction to a new theatrical landscape. The result was that a number of identifiable trends manifested themselves on both sides of the footlights and the first decade of democracy clearly saw what could be described as a transitional phase towards a stable, creative theatre environment where professional theatre could serve a regular audience at, as well as outside the annual regional and national arts festivals.

CHAPTER 6

INDEPENDENT COMMERCIAL THEATRES

6.1. Introduction

The general landscape in which theatre was produced, staged and performed in South Africa changed significantly during the first decade of democracy, two key factors being the transformation of the Performing Arts Councils into playhouses and the emergence of the arts festival circuit, as we have seen. As a result, many professional theatre-makers had lost their secure positions at the Arts Councils and new independent theatre companies were formed to either tour the festivals, try the mainstream circuit or perform in the many informal café or quasi-cabaret venues that had sprung up around the country. The managements at the old PACs continued to receive productions in their well-equipped theatre complexes, while the commercial independents who had been established since before 1994 continued to produce and/or to receive productions.

By the end of the first decade of the new South Africa there were about 90 venues that functioned full-time as theatres around the country. These could be grouped into six categories, listed from the largest to the smallest number of theatres in each: privately owned commercial theatres (31); theatres attached to tertiary educational institutions and used for educational as well as commercial purposes (20); privately owned non-profit theatres, e.g. amateur theatre companies (19); state-subsidised (local) theatres, primarily owned by and/or funded by local government (9); state-subsidised (national) theatres, complexes subsidised essentially by national government, i.e. the Department of Arts and Culture (6); state-subsidised (provincial) theatres, primarily funded by provincial government (5) (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 33).

Together with the proliferation of smaller, independent (often touring) theatre companies and a focus on smaller-scale (often quite mobile) productions, there was also a clear trend towards the establishment of privately-owned, normally smaller theatre venues. By the end of the decade just more than half the theatres were

privately owned, of which the majority were run as commercial ventures and the balance as amateur theatre companies. The transformation of the state-subsidised complexes at the former PACs into venues for hire, resulting in the closure of their production entities has been addressed above.

Almost a quarter of the theatre venues around the country were attached to tertiary institutions of education, where the focus during the decade tended to shift strongly towards, or to include, the commercial aspects of the theatre industry in an environment where the relationship between state and arts/culture was evolving and viable theatre was becoming more and more governed by sound business principles. An important opportunity for theatre departments that arose from the emergence of an arts festival circuit was to create original works with or by the students and to stage those at the festivals. This provided a practical environment for students to learn about the challenges of professional commercial theatre and at the same time to develop their creative skills. Although a number of the theatres attached to tertiary institutions were well-equipped and utilised in the dual capacity of training and education on the one hand and as a commercial receiving house (at the universities of Witwatersrand, Cape Town, Durban, Free State and Stellenbosch) on the other, there were no specific trends discernable in the activities within these university theatres, other than an increasing focus on commercialisation and business principles as part of the curriculum for students of performance and theatre arts.

The particular focus here is on discernable trends that emerged in the specific sector of privately owned independent commercial theatres, some functioning as privately owned venues for hire, some as production entities in their own venues, and some as a combination of both. The following section will highlight and discuss the most significant trends that emerged in the sector of independent commercial theatres and is by no means an exhaustive overview of all the theatres, the activities or the productions that took place in this sector.

6.2. The emergence of smaller commercial independents

It was a clear trend that many of the smaller independent commercial theatre venues started up as a result of the type of productions that premièred at the arts festivals and

to create a circuit for those new independent commercial touring companies to stage their plays in between the arts festivals. This could almost be seen as a chicken and egg situation, but the end result was that many smaller theatres, café theatres, dinner theatres and quasi-cabaret venues sprung up around South Africa.

Some of these theatres operated as venues for hire, while others were owned or managed by theatre-makers who also staged their own work in addition to receiving productions. Some examples of prominent, established theatre-makers who opened up their own theatre venues during the period include famous personalities like Nicholas Ellenbogen, Pieter-Dirk Uys, Deon Opperman, Paul Buckby and Clive Rodel, Carel Trichardt and Petru Wessels.

Stage veteran Nicholas Ellenbogen opened three new theatre venues. He first set up a tiny bucket-seat theatre at the Olympia Café in Cape Town, followed by the Kalk Bay Theatre, which he created by transforming an old church building into a two-level restaurant and performance venue. His third venture was to convert the old Muizenberg post office near Cape Town into an 84-seat amphitheatre which he called the Post Box Theatre.

Actors Paul Buckby and Clive Rodel opened the 100-seat Foxwood Theatre in the grounds of a heritage home Burra-Burra in Houghton, Johannesburg. Catering specifically for smaller Afrikaans productions, the popular theatre couple Carel Trichardt and Petru Wessels opened Die Teaterhuisie (The Theatre Cottage) in Pretoria. Deon Opperman started the New Wave Theatre Group with his students and they opened their own venue, the New Wave Theatre in Milpark, Johannesburg. Pieter-Dirk Uys opened his Evita se Perron Theatre (Evita's Platform Theatre) in the disused railway station of the tiny village of Darling near Cape Town.

Small independent theatres opened up all around the country, including the following interesting examples, of which many provided drinks and snacks or full catering, like for instance the Showcase Dinner Theatre in Randburg, Johannesburg: Die Bosflerrie se Bostent-teater (the Bush Flirt's Bush Tent Theatre) was opened by actor Lourens Swanepoel in Randburg, Johannesburg and its target audience was specifically the more conservative, traditional Afrikaners; in Cape Town, Royston Stoffels and

Warrick Grier opened the Cape Town Theatre Laboratory (The Lab); producer/director Themi Venturas launched the 185-seat Catalina Theatre at Wilson's Wharf in the Durban harbour; producer Colin Law revived the dormant Victory Theatre in Johannesburg; in Stellenbosch Gigi Fourie and his actress/director wife Juanita Swanepoel transformed the Libertas Theatre, previously home to an amateur theatre club, into the Klein Libertas Teater (Little Libertas Theatre), where they produce their own shows commercially and also receive professional and semi-professional productions; Charl-Johan Lingenfelder and Fred Abrahamse opened the Comedy Warehouse and the Warehouse Theatres in Greenpoint, Cape Town; Barbara-Anne Puren launched the Stage Door Theatre in Melville, Johannesburg; the Nimble Leap Theatre Company opened their own venue in an old ammunition barracks building in Tamboerskloof, Cape Town; impresario Chris Lodewyk converted the landmark Roxy café bioscope in Longmarket Street, Cape Town into the intimate Theatre Royal, with 6 private balconies and 300 seats.

The above is clearly not a complete list of small independent theatre venues that went into operation during the decade, but merely selected examples to illustrate this very significant trend. Obviously, some of these theatres survived past the end of the first decade of democracy and others did not. I have selected for some further discussion one interesting example that *did* survive: the Barnyard Theatre, launched in Plettenburg Bay in 1996, is particularly interesting in that it did not remain a single newly opened theatre venue, but it gave birth to a complete business enterprise.

The Barnyard Theatre Concession Group was comprised of twelve independent commercial theatres situated around the country by the end of the period under examination, but its origins were humble. Producer Louis Möller and his actress wife Sybil Coetzee were living on a dairy farm near the popular holiday destination, Plettenberg Bay, in the Cape when, in 1996, they opened a small independent commercial theatre venue in a rustic American-style wooden barn on their farm. They converted the barn into an intimate theatre space with a 6 x 10 metre stage and started receiving touring productions that originated at the arts festivals as well as smaller touring productions from the urban mainstream and other venues around the country. Their venture was coincidental with and stimulated by the development of the arts festival circuit.

The first Barnyard Theatre was in a district that had no dedicated performance space and the local theatre-loving community was starved for live entertainment. The Barnyard filled this need. Audiences were seated at wooden tables and bars and some in private boxes. They were invited to bring their own food and beverages and the evening would turn into a social event before and after the performance. This became a popular hallmark of the Barnyard Theatre. In technical terms, the venue simply offered production companies a stage, basic lighting and a good sound system.

The Möllers teamed up with another couple and they opened a second Barnyard Theatre in Mossel Bay, 150 Km away, also on the Southern Cape coast. This was the start of a franchise that mushroomed around the country during the ensuing years, from Haenertsburg near Tzaneen in the far Northern Province to Franschhoek in the Western Cape. Each theatre seated between 300 and 500, the infrastructure was typically rustic and the atmosphere was informal.

Over the years the formula and the choice of productions proved to be a winner with audiences, while the Barnyard business model was simple but sound in financial terms. Franchisees paid an entry fee and a percentage of profits to the group, received training and were managed to set up a theatre in their area according to the formula, principles and style of the chain. The group secured productions to tour the circuit of their theatres. Audiences, individuals or companies, could buy single seats or boxes for a single performance or for a three-year period at a once-off price.

The Barnyard Theatre chain was an example of a successful business venture that grew out of the evolving theatre environment in the new South Africa and that developed and served their local audiences while at the same time creating a sound opportunity for independent touring theatre-makers to stage their work and to get more mileage out of their productions after or in-between the arts festivals. Although this successful franchise was a bit atypical as representative of a trend of mostly single independent theatre venues that opened up during the period, it clearly illustrates how the landscape had changed and had become more receptive for smaller independent commercial ventures than was the case in the days of the PACs and before the emergence of the arts festival circuit.

6.3. Bigger, established commercial independents adjust their business

Apart from these smaller operations primarily catering for independent, touring local productions, the trend to develop independent commercial theatre venues around the country was also illustrated in the adjustments that were made by the small number of bigger, established independent commercial theatre-makers.

After the first democratic elections the international recognition and acceptance of the new South Africa made it easier for these operators to import large commercial hits like *Les Miserables*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats* and *The Lion King*. The bigger, established independents also capitalised on the opportunity to contract directors and actors and other theatre artists with international reputations and to bring them to South African audiences. Eventually South African artists also found the opportunities to work more easily abroad. In addition, the ripple effect of these changes manifested in more young people entering the field and larger numbers of students registering for training at the facilities around the country. Like other theatre-makers, the established commercial operators capitalised on these changes and new opportunities, and adjusted their business accordingly.

A good example to illustrate these adjustments was South Africa's most prominent theatre producer and impresario of the period, Pieter Toerien. His primary focus had always been on importing high-quality theatre entertainment from abroad and this became quite challenging during the later years of apartheid and cultural boycotts. As a young and highly successful theatre entrepreneur Toerien (b. 1945) started bringing to South Africa high-profile entertainers from Europe and the USA in the 1960s, including names like Russ Conway, Cyd Charisse, Maurice Chevalier and Marlene Dietrich. "When he started out at the age of 17 (he was) dubbed the world's youngest impresario by TIME magazine" (De Villiers, 1999b). Since the 1970s he had always owned his own theatres, where he staged imported productions from the West End or Broadway and his own productions of imported plays, unless on the odd occasion when he chose to perform in larger auditoria, in which case he would hire a state-owned theatre venue.

Toerien's choice of plays primarily focused on proven, commercially successful productions staged around the English-speaking world. "He seems to have found the recipe for luring people to the theatre - a dash of brain-food here, a sprinkling of comedy there, and some plays one would have had to go to London or New York for if it hadn't been for him" (De Villiers, 1999b). This always placed his form of popular live entertainment apart from the "high culture" typically offered at the state-subsidised theatres and the politically motivated "struggle" and "protest" productions staged at some other venues towards the end of the apartheid era. Therefore the political changes after 1994 did not impact on the type and core content of Toerien's productions, but the changes at the PACs and particularly the changing habits and preferences of theatre audiences post-94 did, and Toerien once again adjusted his menu successfully.

He had done so before, for instance, in the period of the cultural boycotts he had to adjust, as he described in an interview in 1999, "And just as we began to come up from that awful slump (caused by the arrival of television in 1975), our political problems hit my type of theatre from about 1980 to 1994. That's when the playwrights' boycott took effect. Writers would not let us have their plays and actors wouldn't come here. So the public had to be weaned from visiting stars to local ones. But we didn't have enough local writers. Those we had wrote protest plays, brilliantly, but it wasn't what I produced. That niche belonged to the Market Theatre. We stayed open right through the bad years and have lived to tell the tale. And audiences remained loyal" (Taylor, 1999).

After 1994 his "type of theatre" was once again challenged, but this time by the emergence of the festival circuit which provided an opportunity for theatre-goers to visit a festival for their annual "theatre fix", combined with a holiday and a general cultural experience that often resulted in those, often theatre-loving, people attending less live theatre back in their urban environment. Faced with dwindling audiences Toerien and other long-established commercial independents like Richard Loring with his Sound Stage Theatre in Midrand had to ensure that they offered only the highest quality of popular entertainment and at venues easily accessible to their specific audiences in the evolving urban environment. Since 1989 singer/actor/producer Loring had been running a successful dinner-theatre at the Sound Stage specialising in

imported musical performances. The socio-political changes had little direct impact on his commercial operation, even with shrinking audiences at most other theatres.

In order to make his Cape Town venue more attractive Pieter Toerien virtually rebuilt the Theatre On The Bay in 1999 and created a more appealing theatre experience for his Cape Town audiences, while he continued to offer highly entertaining commercial imports from abroad.

As the population demographic of central Johannesburg changed and the CBD of the city decentralised after 1994, Toerien followed his core (white urban) audience and moved the Johannesburg operation from his old Alhambra theatre complex in the centre of town to his two new Montecasino Theatres at Fourways in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg in 2000.

As result of a black middle-class starting to emerge during the first decade in post-apartheid South Africa and the gradual migration of upwardly mobile blacks to the historically middle-class white suburbs of Johannesburg, the racial profile of Toerien's audiences also started changing gradually. In 1999 he stated, "Perhaps 10 percent of (my) audiences are black or coloured. This has been changing slowly over the past few years and will continue to alter. Transformation is a process, not an act, and, as time passes, our past will fade" (Taylor, 1999). He did not adjust the offering in his theatres in response to the changing socio-political environment, but he continued to provide high-quality, non-political, commercial entertainment and his audience profile started transforming naturally towards the end of the decade, as the population demographic of his target area of operation gradually transformed.

In 1996 another successful independent commercial theatre, The Theatre On The Square, run by Daphne Kuhn, relocated from Rosebank in Johannesburg to upmarket Sandton in the Northern suburbs. Clearly these commercial operations found benefit in following their, mostly white middle-class, audiences. When Kuhn was questioned about the move, her reaction was described in a leading newspaper: "(She) gently refuses to be branded a snob or an elitist. Yet she is – with Jane Austen – fully aware that 'one half of the world does not understand the pleasures of the other', and leaves

it at that" (Jordan, 1996b). Sandton Square, where the new Theatre On The Square was located, was later renamed Mandela Square.

6.4. Evolution from protest theatre to cultural institution

Whereas independent commercial operators like Pieter Toerien and Richard Loring offered purely commercial non-political entertainment and they imported commercially proven material (sometimes also artists) from abroad, South Africa's most famous independent theatre had a very specific political agenda in the old South Africa. Toerien and Loring survived the political changes and by the end of the first post-apartheid decade their operations were flourishing, but at the legendary Market Theatre in downtown Johannesburg, however, the picture was different.

The Market was created primarily as a dynamic theatre-makers' workshop and indigenous theatre development undertaking and its productions most often reflected and commented on the socio-political and human situation in apartheid South Africa. At the height of its fame in the final decades of the apartheid era the Market Theatre became internationally celebrated for anti-apartheid "protest" and "struggle" theatre. The contribution of its main players and the productions staged during that period has been well documented and has also been recognised internationally. Clearly the Market was not the only theatre known for its socio-political "struggle" contribution. Amongst others the Space Theatre and the Baxter (see more detail below) in Cape Town also staged protest plays, but the Market is selected for discussion here because of its prominence and because its post-apartheid evolution represents an interesting trend.

For a number of reasons the Market Theatre appeared to lose its creativity, its momentum and its stature during the first decade after 1994. During the apartheid period the Market had received no government funding. It did benefit, however, from a special lease arrangement with the city, which owned the theatre building that had previously housed a municipal market. But the Market Theatre survived on box office income combined with sizeable donations and funding from local and international organisations and individuals sympathetic to its anti-apartheid, pro-liberation stance. Much of this funding started drying up after the demise of apartheid and the

supportive, often politically-motivated audiences started dwindling as the Rainbow Nation started emerging.

In 1994, after almost two decades of operation, the Market Theatre was in debt by a relatively small amount of about R1 million and in September of that year the Johannesburg City Council granted the theatre a million rand to meet its obligations.

During the ensuing decade it became clear that the Market Theatre could not manage to continue as a viable commercial theatre complex and the annual financial support from the state was gradually increased. By mid-2000 the theatre ran on an annual operating budget of R15 million of which R6 million came from government funding and some donations, but its financial situation had deteriorated to the point where it had to retrench half of its 63 permanent employees.

A year later the Market Theatre's name was changed to the *African Bank Market Theatre* when African Bank (Abil) undertook a three-year sponsorship of R2 million per annum in exchange for naming rights. Financially the theatre could just survive, but artistically and creatively it was not delivering at the levels associated with its glory days during the apartheid era. In 2001 Bain and Hauptfleisch noted, "[The Market Theatre] might have been expected to lead the way with respect to rejuvenating the theatre industry, [but] has instead been in a state of decline along with other theatres funded by the current government" (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 13).

In 2003 the Market Theatre was converted into a state-legislated "cultural institution" and so it became another state-funded playhouse like the former Performing Arts Councils had become. The Department of Arts and Culture granted the Market R8,1 million for the 2003/2004 financial year as core funding to run the complex as a receiving house, a venue for hire for productions originating outside the Market, with the undertaking that it would have to source additional funding and sponsorships for any works initiated and staged from inside the Market. At the time Mannie Manim, co-founder with Barney Simon of the Market Theatre, and member of the Board of Trustees commented, "If the Market Theatre is true to its history, it has to find a way

to create a production arm. If it's (only) a receiving house, its not the Market that we've known over the years as the creator of so much work" (Sichel, 2003b).

In a general overview of theatre during the first decade of democracy, analyst Mike van Graan chose the Market Theatre, amongst others, as a metaphor to reflect the state of South African theatre in the first ten years of democracy: "Perhaps another appropriate metaphor would be the Market Theatre that once - along with Athol Fugard - was the primary brand associated with South African theatre internationally, but which has declined in output, stature and quality almost in direct proportion to its increased government funding and its 'most favoured performing arts institution' status after 1994. For this would reflect not only the struggle of theatre-makers and institutions to come to terms with their roles in a post-apartheid order, but would also make the point that even when funding and political acceptability are available, they are meaningless if there is no artistic vision and integrity" (Van Graan, 2004).

Clearly the challenge to the Market Theatre by the end of the decade under scrutiny was financial viability as a state-funded playhouse, while at the same time not losing its original *raison d'être* as a melting pot and creative centre for original, challenging and relevant indigenous playwrighting and theatre production.

6.5. Adjusting to the new South Africa while developing and cultivating the arts

An example of a commercial theatre that did not fit exactly into any one of the categories examined above, but that also followed the trend of adjusting its financial business model to the realities of the evolving environment, was the Baxter Theatre, an independent theatre complex that had as its objective the "development and cultivation of the arts" through live entertainment within its community and geographic area of impact.

During the decade under examination the biggest independent theatre complex in Cape Town was the Baxter Theatre Centre housed on the campus of the University of Cape Town. Founded as a centre for the performing arts, the Baxter offered popular

entertainment as well as more serious works locally created or imported, classical or contemporary.

The centre was established as the result of a bequest from the late Dr W. Duncan Baxter who, in his will, bequeathed an amount of money to the University of Cape Town for the purpose of establishing a theatre which would, in the words of Dr Baxter, "develop and cultivate the arts in Cape Town and the adjacent districts" (http://www.baxter.co.za). The complex was erected on the campus of UCT and functioned as an independent commercial theatre centre from 1977 onwards.

Over the decades the Baxter managed to maintain a balance in the professional productions it presented and the focus was always on culture and entertainment generally rather than any specific socio-political comment or "struggle' theatre, without purposely avoiding the latter as was the case in commercial operations like those of Toerien and Loring. The Baxter continued receiving professional productions and also staging its own plays in the regular Baxter Seasons.

During the apartheid era the Baxter never asked for or received any government funding, but a couple of months after the ANC-led government was voted into power, the Baxter changed this policy and applied for "a modest and appropriate share of funds from the central and/or regional government, so the theatre can fulfil its mission properly" (Chisholm, 1994). The chairman of the Baxter Board, Gerhard Krone, made this announcement and Baxter Director John Slemon motivated in a public statement, "We haven't enough staff - we have only 25 full-time people and we need about 40. Then we could initiate a proper artistic programme and, in the medium term, engage an artistic director and a group of *ad hoc* performers. We last had a similar situation in about 1979 when we were able to mount regular Baxter Seasons. But since 1990 the number of productions we have staged ourselves has been more than halved. We'd also like to fulfil our role in the education sense in providing a range of original South African works, classical, modern and experimental, and to encourage new writing. State funding would enable us to do that. This year we don't even have the resources to take any productions to [the] Grahamstown [Festival]" (Chisholm, 1994).

In June 1994 it was not yet clear how and to what degree the new government was going to support arts and culture in the new South Africa and an independent commercial theatre like the Baxter made sure to stake an early claim. In 1996 they received their first government subsidy, an amount of R500,000 (Verdal, 1996).

In line with other independent commercial theatres the Baxter Theatre Centre had to adjust its financial model in the new South Africa and the evolving socio-political landscape, but since the Baxter had a unique model it serves as a good example to illustrate another permutation of the trend. When the complex was built in 1977, the remainder of Dr Baxter's bequest was placed in an endowment which had grown to some R20 million by 1998 and the interest generated was used to offset some operating costs. Since donors to UCT could enjoy the normal tax benefits available for donations to academic institutions, while direct donations to commercial theatres were not tax deductible, the university received donations earmarked for cultural development and a portion was allocated to the Baxter Centre for the maintenance of the building. After the start of government subsidy to the Baxter in 1996, however, the university cut its contribution to the Baxter by 42% the next year (Klein, 1998).

By the end of the first decade of democracy the complex was functioning as a viable independent commercial theatre and its then Director, Mannie Manim, declared a negligible R28,000 shortfall on an operating budget of R6 million. The annual budget was made up of R500,000 from the National Arts Council, R450,000 from UCT, sponsorships from the National Lottery, the Western Cape Cultural Commission and Business and Arts South Africa (BASA), together with the interest from the Baxter's endowment fund. Referring to the latter, Manim declared in an interview, "I hope to assemble a gigantic fund over a period of time and to run the theatre on the interest it will generate" (Boekkooi, 2003, translated from Afrikaans).

6.6. Moving from the arts and culture industry to the entertainment industry

Amongst the independent commercial theatres operating around South Africa by the end of the period under examination, a very prominent example was the Johannesburg Civic Theatre. What made the post-apartheid evolution of this theatre complex particularly interesting was the way its primary focus shifted from being a cultural

service to the people of Johannesburg to becoming a fully commercial theatre operation, like to others examined in this chapter.

During the early post-apartheid years the Johannesburg Civic Theatre continued functioning as a city theatre, subsidised by the city and running at an annual financial loss. In July 1993 established stage director Janice Honeyman was appointed Artistic Director and Deputy Executive Director of the Civic, working with Executive Director Alan Joseph. Her main contribution was the development and staging of original productions at the complex. In June 1994 Tale Motsepe was appointed as Development Manager with the specific brief to concentrate on the broadening of the Civic's audience to include more of the black majority, whereas the complex's traditional audience was predominantly drawn from the white urban population. Playwright/director Jerry Mofokeng was appointed Assistant Artistic Director in February 1995 to support Honeyman.

Mofokeng's appointment underlined the focus of serving a wider audience and he declared in an interview, "My position entails the restructuring of the Civic Theatre and giving it a new image. People in the townships and elsewhere would know that there is a room for them as well. ... We are contemplating taking our productions to the townships. But, in practical terms, we face insurmountable problems. Facilities in the townships are nearly non-existent" (Mfundo, 1995). Since the Civic was subsidised by the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, its focus in the new South Africa had become to serve all the cultural groups resident in the metropolitan area. In 1998 actor/playwright Pat Pillai was appointed General Manager of Marketing and New Business Development of the Civic Theatre complex. The Civic had become a hive of activity and 28 productions were staged in the complex in the first half of 1998.

In the mid-1990s strong focus was also placed on developmental work at the Johannesburg Civic, developing audiences, specifically from the historically disadvantaged communities, while at the same time developing emerging theatre-makers through the annual New Stages project. Beginner playwrights, directors and actors were invited to take part in the project and to present their work. Dramatised

play readings were facilitated and the most promising talent was selected and developed and their productions were staged at the Civic.

In June 1998 the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council announced that it would cut the Civic Theatre's artistic budget of R26 million by 40%. The Johannesburg Civic Theatre was the only complex of its size that received no government subsidy and was totally reliant on funding by the local metropolitan government. The Civic suddenly found itself in a serious financial dilemma, which was exacerbated considerably by the more than R100 million debt incurred by the previous management for extensive rebuilding and renovations during the late 1980s, prior to the reopening of the complex in 1992.

Janice Honeyman reacted optimistically to the new financial challenges and in an interview outlined "...plans to attract corporate use of [the Civic's] facilities, including the modification of one theatre, and the focus on a 'big bang' approach to productions: staging popular musicals and spectaculars to cross-subsidise less popular work. 'Harnessing whatever skills, expertise and experience we have, we can become less dependent on public subsidy.'" An equally great challenge would be to continue with the Civic's developmental work, while at the same time shifting the business approach to a more commercial objective, "The Civic's new business focus will also apply to its training and education programmes, which, Honeyman says, remain the theatre's most important long-term work" (in Greig, 1998d).

Pat Pillai saw these challenges as insurmountable, and the recently appointed GM of Marketing and New Business Development resigned his position, stating "Money makes money and without the budget I cannot do the job" (Coetzee, 1998). A year later, by mid-1999, commentators, the media and the theatre community were speculating that the Civic Theatre might be closing its doors by the end of the year.

In August 1999 the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council announced that, as part of its iGoli 2002 strategy, a number of its units would be "corporatised"[11] to

[11] "Corporatisation" entailed the turning of an existing council function into a business unit with a separate legal identity.

make them more viable as individual business units. These included the Johannesburg Zoo, the Fresh Produce Market, the ailing metropolitan bus company and the Civic Theatre. The Civic's Section 21 company (not for gain) would continue to exist and a new (Pty) Limited company (a company for profit) would be formed with the objective to turn the theatre into a viable, independent business unit. The Metropolitan Council would be the sole shareholders of the newly formed company. In March 2000 it was announced that Janice Honeyman, by this time CEO, would relinquish that position and concentrate on her core strengths as Artistic Director. The position of CEO would be advertised. Two months later Honeyman resigned as Artistic Director and became a freelancer.

In July 2000 the Johannesburg Civic Theatre (Pty) Ltd was formed and Bernard Jay was appointed as its first CEO. The existing Section 21 company was renamed "Friends of the Civic Theatre", with the brief to concentrate on community and educational theatre, and Cas Coovadia was appointed its chairman.

Bernard Jay was a highly experienced commercial theatre administrator and producer, and a strong candidate to tackle the challenge of turning the Johannesburg Civic into a profitable commercial business, in line with the trend of independent commercial theatres emerging around the country in the new South African theatrical landscape. Born and educated in Britain, he was appointed in 1970, at the age of 24, as the General Manager of the City of London's famous Mermaid Theatre. In 1973 he started his career in commercial theatre production when he became General Manager of Triumph Theatre Productions, based in London. In 1977 Bernard immigrated to the USA where he formed his own, very successful personal management and theatre production company, based in Manhattan. He relocated to South Africa in 1993 and was appointed Entertainment Director of the ticketing company Computicket and in 1997 he became deputy MD of Big Concerts, where he oversaw a number of hit commercial productions, such as Michael Flatley's *Lord of the Dance*, before accepting the position as Chief Executive Officer of the Johannesburg Civic Theatre (Pty) Ltd in 2000.

Immediately after his appointment Jay made his commercial approach to theatre and entertainment very clear when he declared emphatically in an interview, "...everything

we present in the future must have a clearly identifiable target audience that we believe can fill the theatre if successfully enticed. We can't just put on a show for the sake of it" (Walker, 2000). His first priority, he stated in another interview a month later, was "to fix what has gone wrong as result of the fact that creative people had been in control previously, rather than business people" (Naudé, 2000, translated from Afrikaans). His strategy, from the outset, was to change the Civic Theatre from primarily functioning as a production house, into a theatre for rent, a receiving house for popular commercial productions.

Jay supported the ideal of incorporating the black community into the audiences at his theatre, but never at the cost of sound, commercial business principles. In January 2001 he told *The Sowetan* newspaper, "I agree that I would be fooling myself if I believed I could develop new theatre audiences without looking at the potential of theatre audiences among black people. The audience has to be recruited from the ranks of the upwardly mobile blacks. Let's face the facts. While I am not trying to run a theatre exclusively for the elite, theatre is the most expensive form of entertainment and only people with a certain income level can afford it. You cannot run into the middle of Soweto and try to convince people clinging to their last cent to buy a theatre ticket instead of food. My contention is that the starting point is to have a marketing strategy that targets the black middle class with disposable income. That is where the money is in the black community..." (Tsumele, 2001).

The new CEO positioned his theatre clearly, "The Civic is not in the arts and culture industry, it is in the entertainment industry" (Gordon-Brown, 2003). In the selection of productions to be staged at the Civic Theatre complex Jay focused strongly on popular, commercial appeal and he placed an equally strong emphasis on the publicity and marketing of the company's offerings in its three venues, the Main Civic Theatre (1,069 seats), the Tesson Theatre (251 seats) and the People's Theatre (176 seats). In August 2001 he pulled off a brilliant marketing coup when the Main Civic Theatre was rechristened the Nelson Mandela Theatre. The unequivocally commercial approach to popular entertainment theatre was also underlined in naming the Johannesburg Civic complex "Times Square at the Civic". In an official media release the Civic motivated the decision as follows:

> Why Times Square? Because Manhattan's hub of its theatrical empire is - arguably - the world's most famous melting pot of cultures and communities worshipping Live Theatre. Times Square - whether tawdry and excitingly decadent as it was in the 1970s and 1980s, or cleaned-up and 'Disneyfied' as it is now - has for decades served as a magnet for theatregoers. The streets just off New York's Times Square offer the very best of commercial theatre. The Johannesburg Civic Theatre is South Africa's largest commercial theatre enterprise. *Times Square at The Civic* will, hopefully, provide the magnet for theatre-goers in Gauteng. And in keeping with the Times Square theme, we have proudly named our new leisure and retail facilities with our eyes defiantly on The Big Apple!

Bernard Jay had completely shifted the Civic's earlier emphasis on the creation of original indigenous theatre and the development of black theatre-makers and audiences to a purely business-oriented commercial theatre facility, serving audiences from all cultural and ethnic groups, who could afford the price of a ticket for popular, high-end theatrical entertainment. By the beginning of 2002 the Civic's stages were booked for more than 90 percent of the 365-day year, the company boasted a pre-tax surplus of R3,5 million in its first year of operation and the line-up for 2002 included two world premières of musicals and visits by three leading international ballet companies. The Nelson Mandela Theatre was booked for 95 percent of the year (Accone, 2002).

When he was appointed, and given his professional background, many expected that Bernard Jay would fill the Civic's stages with imported pot-boilers and sure hit productions from Broadway and the West End and provide little opportunity for local theatre-makers. In the first two financial years of the new Civic Theatre company 130 productions were staged in the two main venues, the Nelson Mandela and Tesson Theatres. Of the 130 productions, 18 featured artists from overseas and the remaining 112 were staged and performed by South Africa theatre-makers. Although the main objective and the business strategy of the Civic was dictated by hard financial principles, the South African theatre industry were provided a well-run professional venue which was building a large and loyal audience. The main focus during the first few years was on audience development rather than talent development, and Jay stated in a 2003 interview, "If we concentrate on giving the audience a good time and they keep coming back, the direct result will be that there will be money for artist development" (Cox, 2003). Indeed, as the Civic became commercially more stable,

the CEO showed the promised support for the development of local theatre art by facilitating (rent free) the newly-formed Johannesburg Actors' Centre in the Civic complex. The Centre was based on similar ones in New York and London and provided a facility for professional actors to meet and to practise and develop their art and their skills. The space provided to the Actors' Centre consisted of a small theatre, offices, a bar foyer and a lounge.

In late 2003, by the end of the period under examination, and after its first three years of operation, the Johannesburg Civic Theatre (Pty) Ltd was running at a profit and had an annual turnover of R30 million. The Nelson Mandela Theatre was booked until the end of 2005 and the theatres were running at 80% capacity (compared to 20% before the company had gone commercial), selling in excess of 300,000 tickets per year (Lawrence, 2003). In 2005 PANSA commented in their report, "It is noteworthy that the box office income of R18,4m of the Johannesburg Civic Theatre, a receiving house in Johannesburg, exceeded the combined box office income of the four former performing arts councils, now all having similar 'receiving house' mandates" (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 38). Bernard Jay and his team had managed admirably to move their operation out of the arts and culture industry and solidly into the commercial entertainment industry.

6.7. Conclusion

Those theatres that continued operating as financially successful independent commercial theatre operations by the end of the first decade of democracy were the ones that kept offering popular entertainment, local or imported, aimed at predominantly white middle-class audiences. Theatre analysts at the Centre for Theatre and Performance Studies at Stellenbosch University went further and commented in 2001: "The theatres that have continued to draw audiences and make money even after the advent of democracy are those run as businesses that cater unashamedly for the financially well-off. Theatre impresario Pieter Toerien, for example, having made himself a wealthy man on a formula of expensive Broadway-style hits, popular light entertainment including cabaret and farce, and a fair dose of sex comedies and fairly sexy dramas, continues to teach the theatre community valuable lessons in marketing and in establishing and sustaining a loyal audience.

However, while businessmen like Toerien are concerned primarily with quality entertainment and satisfying the tastes of a particular breed of theatre-goer, the issue of dramatically significant indigenous theatre is one which needs to be addressed in terms other than pure business (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 14).

The creation of "dramatically significant indigenous theatre" clearly fell outside the focus area of those independent commercial theatre-makers who survived the first decade of independence and the trend continued throughout the period, of pursuing financial stability and profit by focusing on theatrical entertainment for audiences with money available for leisure activities and not on cultural development in this newly democratised and overwhelmingly multi-cultural environment.

SECTION II

MAJOR TRENDS IN THEATRE PRACTICE

The above section, "**Section I: Major Trends in the Theatre Environment**" focused on trends that emerged in the first decade of democracy specifically in the environment within which professional theatre operated, and not in the theatre itself. Against that background the following section, "**Section II: Major Trends in Theatre Practice**" looks at the practitioners, the professional theatre-makers, and how they adjusted to and functioned within that new theatre environment.

Firstly, this section identifies the major themes that emerged on the professional stages after the demise of apartheid. It examines what creative theatre-makers[12] focused on after the period of "protest" or "struggle" theatre – a thematic trend I labelled "post-anti-apartheid theatre". It investigates the adjustments professional theatre-makers had to make in response to the changing financial dynamics in the arts and specifically in the theatre environment. It also looks at trends that became clear in some specific areas like township theatre and community theatre. Finally Section II examines in some detail a number of specific trends discernable in the ways in which a selection of prominent individual theatre-makers sought to adjust to the new realities within their industry and within the society they sought to address and reflect in the new South Africa.

[12] In this study I prefer to use the term "theatre-maker", rather than "playwright" as a generic label for the original creator(s) of a piece, except in the specific context of "dramatist": In South African theatre a large proportion of (mostly English-language) productions do not result from the staging of a previously scripted play, but rather out of improvised creative sessions, popularly known as "workshops" with a variety of theatre artists pooling their input and contribution, and many of our playwrights are not only writers, but also directors, designers, actors, musicians and other. These workshops combine the talents of often multi-skilled artists from across the spectrum and most often result in a staged performance rather than or sometimes in addition to a play script. Interestingly, Afrikaans-language productions are mostly not "workshopped" creations, but staged scripts.

CHAPTER 7

POST-ANTI-APARTHEID THEATRE

7.1. Introduction

When looking back over the first decade of professional theatre in the new South African democracy since 1994, the first question that usually springs to mind is what did the theatre-makers have to talk about and focus upon when apartheid eventually became an issue only of historical interest? As may be seen from the many books and articles written on the period over the past few decades, South African playwrights and other creative artists had for many years had a clearly focused objective in their work, a cause which was supported worldwide. Their protest against a universally condemned social evil provided them with a source of dramatic and emotional material, while their cause provided a powerful source of creative inspiration. Of course there were creative theatre artists before 1994 not focusing primarily on the effects and the evils of apartheid while working within the apartheid framework, mostly at the state-subsidised arts councils or for the apolitical commercial managements. But looking back, the productions of "the struggle" or the "protest theatre" were the ones perceived to be politically and socially more relevant and the ones which were remembered and, often exaggeratedly, valued after the demise of apartheid. The value and quality of those productions and the impact of the era of protest theatre forms the central theme of most of the academic and other writing about "South African Theatre" produced from the mid-1970s till late in the 1990s.

The question to be confronted in this study, however, is what happened to creative artists after 1994 once they suddenly found themselves like a boxer in the ring without an opponent? In an interview with *TIME Magazine* in March 1994 South Africa's most prominent playwright of the period, Athol Fugard, asked, "Am I about to become the new South Africa's first redundancy?" (Henry, 1994). Two years later theatre-maker and academic Malcolm Purkey said: "As South Africa celebrates the real possibility of the death of apartheid, the South African theatre movement faces a crisis. It is in danger of losing its central dynamo. ... How do we move beyond the reactive apart-

heid critique? How do we transcend the stock response and the slogan, and begin formulating a comprehensive cultural response to the times?” (Purkey, 1996: 155).

In order to survive and to remain relevant, the theatre practitioners were challenged to focus on a new set of issues and to make theatre in a new social and political environment. Scholar, philosopher, novelist and playwright Zakes Mda looked back in 2002 and noted, “In the post-apartheid era South Africa is no longer just black and white. There are shades of grey. We are now faced with complexities and ambiguities that we need to interpret. We have become normal and ordinary” (Mda, 2002: 282).

Author and playwright André P. Brink, in an article in *Insig* in 1996, pointed to the ancient historical origins of theatrical production which developed in more or less homogeneous societies where typically the whole community could be brought into focus in a staged performance. Should such a large communality go into decline, as became inevitable in splintered modern societies, that dynamic would also decline. The quest for themes or causes illustrated that: instead of unified resistance against a common and easily identifiable enemy like apartheid, South African theatre in the 1990s tended to fragment into a multitude of individual issues, ranging from gay liberation to the conscience of the Afrikaner. Rather than it being a loss, Brink argued that it could be seen as a potential gain since the spectrum became so much more extensive and multicoloured. He concluded that “in the final analysis it is not a ‘cause’ that makes theatre ‘vibrate’ (although it could contribute), but the immediate, even physical interaction that ties the private experience of the I to the existence and recognition and sympathy with the Other” (Brink, 1996, translated from Afrikaans).

The spectrum might have become more “extensive and multicoloured”, but the issues certainly also became more complex and challenging. “Today, it might be argued that South Africa's social and political problems are more complicated and involve a range of issues that – because of their estimable relationship with the past – are difficult to categorise and, perhaps, even more difficult to successfully write about” (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 17). On the one hand, the theatre-makers were challenged to deal with a range of difficult issues, some old and some new, but on the other hand, they were making theatre for a new audience, in a dramatically transformed society, with

new interests and new expectations and also on a playing field where the rules had changed dramatically, virtually overnight.

A comparative analysis of the many hundreds of original productions (workshopped and/or scripted) that were mounted on the professional stage in South Africa during the first ten post-apartheid years indicates a number of clear tendencies in focus and theme. Discussed below, and each illustrated through selected notable and contextually relevant productions, are the most prominent general thematic trends that evolved amongst professional theatre-makers during the period under discussion.

7.2. Reconciliation in a newly desegregated but still divided society

Reconciliation in an historically bitterly divided society was a top item on the political agenda during the presidency of the first post-apartheid national leader, Nelson Mandela. It was a topic that had been explored earlier by some theatre-makers, such as Athol Fugard in his *Playland* (1992), and it became a prominent theme after the 1994 elections. As will be demonstrated below, it was the focus of a number of professional productions at arts festivals and in mainstream theatres. In many township projects community groups also focused on the challenges of reconciliation in a new socio-political reality. Significantly, Fugard's first play during the decade under examination, *My Life*, dealt with the same theme, and prominent theatre-makers returned to it throughout the decade under examination.

For his first production in the new South Africa Athol Fugard went back to the workshop method he had used decades earlier with the Serpent Players in Port Elizabeth, which resulted in milestone productions such as *The Island* (1973), developed with John Kani and Winston Ntshona. Fugard again used inexperienced actors to develop *My Life* (1994), bringing together five young South African women from across the racial spectrum, ages ranging from 15 to 21, and facilitating the documentation of each one's personal experiences during the final days of apartheid and the first days of democracy. With director Rebecca Waddell, he then developed their "journals" into a stage presentation with each of the five girls narrating her own story.

In an interview with *The Star* Fugard described the aim of the project in simple and direct terms: "...to reflect and celebrate the cultural diversity and contrasts of our South African reality" (Sichel, 1994). *My Life*, sub-titled "An allegory for reconciliation", premièred at the Grahamstown Festival in July 1994. It played to capacity houses and received mixed reviews. The *New Nation's* reviewer noted, "The masterly hand of Fugard shows through in the gripping narratives and extraordinary theatrical prowess of the actresses. …refreshing and thought-provoking" (Ndebele, 1994), while the *Business Day* reviewer commented, "One senses that Fugard, in his own writing is bogged down in a Slough of Despond. Now he is seeking inspiration and enlightenment and a literal interpretation of our salvation in trauma therapy. ... None of the five can act. ... And so the audience is subjected to an adolescent journey that is like the worst sort of school play – workshopped Enid Blyton" (Jordan, 1994).

At this time the grand master of South African theatre was clearly feeling his way into the new South Africa and some years later he told an interviewer, "After the democratic transition, I had a sense that I had outlived my time and become redundant, because I was a voice that plugged into the energy and the conflicts of the old South Africa. I can't deny that. Those conflicts - those rights and wrongs, do's and don'ts - were a very energising factor in my writing" (Van der Walt, 2001). Although *My Life* was not of the same theatrical and dramatic excellence as many other Fugard plays and productions, it was representative of a movement focusing on reconciliation and a stepping stone towards the playwright's later, often autobiographical work.

Even though apartheid was officially something of the past and the new South Africa was optimistically known as the "Rainbow Nation",[13] some theatre-makers did feel the need to put the horrors of the past on stage, sometimes intended as a contribution to an understanding and reconciliation of historical divisions; reconciliation through looking from a new perspective at events in the past. In 1995 Duma kaNdlovu staged his *Bergville Stories* to an enthusiastic but mixed reception. It dealt with an incident that took place in 1956 when a group of policemen clashed with men in a rural black community in Natal. The policemen went to some dagga [marijuana] plantations near

[13] Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously referred to the multi-cultural, multi-racial South African population as "the rainbow children of God" and this led to the concept of a "Rainbow Nation", to encapsulate the ideal of unity within diversity.

the village of Bergville to burn the crops, a source of (illegal) income for the villagers. A violent skirmish resulted in the death of five policemen and a number of the villagers. More than twenty men from the community were arrested, tried and hanged in Pretoria Central Prison. In his production KaNdlovu linked these historical events theatrically as a narrative device to the plight of hostel dwellers in Gauteng four decades later, the time of the production, and he staged it through riveting narrative, combined with stirring songs and vigorous dance routines.

The production emotionally moved certain audience members and outraged others, but the playwright contended that the piece had a cathartic motive and that his intention with the play was an effort to contribute to reconciliation in the new South Africa and "...to extend a healing hand to the entire community, let us forget the past and move forward into the future" (Van der Walt, 1995). "I am urging my countrymen to forget their past and join hands in rebuilding our country. The play is meant to cleanse the individual's conscience and make him or her work for peace. ... The play is not meant to open old wounds but to show the need for people to reach out and build together a foundation for peace" (Ndebele, 1995d).

Predictably audience members from the different cultural groups received the play in very different ways. The playwright intended to "extend a healing hand to the entire community", but in the 1990s there was no such thing as a single "entire" community in South Africa, and theatre audiences, although legally integrated and representative of all the various cultural groupings, still reacted according to their conditioning during generations of racial, cultural and artistic segregation.

Theatre critic Robert Greig, in a review of *Bergville Stories* written in the form of a personal letter to the playwright, his friend Duma kaNdlovu, respectfully pointed out that the play had problems reaching all members of so diverse an audience. He took the position of a white South African being confronted with a play presented in such a style and dealing with highly emotional issues in such a manner that made it difficult for him to access the material in the way the playwright/director had intended; "There's a cultural issue here. A Western background tends to make one inherently distrustful of group sentiment and its polluted, abstract language and blindness to the particular or unique. I associate it with the lies of politicians, public murderers and

tele-salespeople. This is a knee-jerk reaction which probably has to be unlearned - to an extent. Your art does and can and wants to speak for and to the collective: your play was partly created as a communal act of healing so it inevitably uses language I distrust" (Greig, 1995b).

Audience members with a Western conditioning not only received productions of this type with an element of distrust, but their immediate experience in the theatre and their physical interaction across the footlights was typically very different from that of audience members with what one might broadly term an African conditioning.[14] While the protest theatre of the 1980s often managed to unify all the individuals in an audience, regardless of their cultural background or conditioning, together in an emotional, righteous, outraged feeling, this no longer appeared to be the case. While many whites in a post-apartheid society appeared to become critical and objective in their reaction to a play like *Bergville Stories*, the black audience seemed to receive it more readily as the playwright intended.

As Greig observed in his letter to the playwright, "...treating plays literally, rather than as made things, is also a relic of the past struggle when audiences were encouraged to see art as communiqués from the trenches. That also seems to be a way many black people see theatre, as sermons on which they may comment '*Yebo'*, *'Hayi kona'*, *['yes', 'no']* even warning the hero, or contradicting the sentiments of a character loudly. They participate in theatres in ways which whites usually only experience at pantomimes, Irish sing-alongs in pubs and in the TV-lit privacy of a detached suburban home" (Greig, 1995b).

Cultural differences, entrenched during so many years of forced segregation, remained a sensitive issue during the early years after 1994, but as the first decade progressed, audiences often started to show a more homogeneous reaction to stage productions. In a sense, this could also be seen as a symptom of nationwide reconciliation.

[14] To distinguish between a "Western conditioning" and an "African conditioning" in terms of the different race groups in early post-apartheid South Africa is certainly not intended as a value judgement on any level and should simply be seen as an attempt to realistically and objectively recognise that differences, also in the way that audiences received racially sensitive theatre productions, inevitably still existed along racial lines after so many years of legalised segregation.

While some theatre-makers were addressing the challenges of reconciliation in the time immediately after the first democratic elections, the politicians and social engineers were working towards another project that would deal with it in a most spectacular way.

Arguably the most important dramatic production dealing with the theme of South Africans' reconciliation with their past to be staged in the first decade of the new South Africa did not take place in a theatre nor was it done by theatre practitioners (except if the media were to be accepted as "theatre practitioners" of sorts...). Nevertheless it mesmerised audiences around the country and it echoed around the globe. Within a year after the elections of April 1994 legislation was drafted to form a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Its mandate was to look into the apartheid years, specifically from March 1960 to December 1993, and to establish as complete a picture as possible of the human rights violations committed during that period. In broad terms, its ambitious and challenging objective was to seek the truth, record it and make it public knowledge; to restore the moral order of South African society; to help create an environment which valued human dignity and respected the law; and to prevent the brutalities of the past from ever being repeated.

The TRC held its first hearings in April 1996 and was scheduled to complete its work by December 1997, but in effect continued late into 1998. For more than two years the people of South Africa were an audience to the emotional, harrowing and traumatic drama that unfolded at the hearings around the country, enacted by protagonists and antagonists from across the spectrum of the painful recent past and broadcast via television, radio and the print media into every home. "The Truth Commission function(ed) as a sharply focused microcosm of the broader South African society in transition" (Krog, 1998: vii). The public nature of the proceedings allowed the nation to identify with the individuals appearing before the commission and the theatrical nature of the drama was clear.

An incident, suitably described in theatrical terms by Mark Gevisser in *The Sunday Independent*, illustrates the depth of emotions experienced at the TRC: "The commission's model of confession and redemption might be Christian, but the notion that we

will attain self-knowledge through the public performance of our inner conflicts is straight out of Greek tragedy. When Fort Calata's widow, Nomonde, let out a piercing wail on remembering her husband's murder; the entire East London hall, led by Bishop Desmond Tutu, stood up and began singing *Senzenina? [What have we done?]* - a Greek chorus to her agony, taking on the trauma collectively" (Gevisser, 1997). Apart from being a dramatic event dealing with raw social tragedy, the TRC also became a model tool for social reconciliation around the world. But the true catharsis brought by this drama and its final impact will only become clear after a new generation or two or more.

At the time that the Truth Commission was pursuing its painful mission, many theatre-makers from the 1990s seemed hesitant to focus on the recent past. Some years later Zakes Mda reflected, "The TRC emasculated many storytellers. Their fiction could never compete effectively with the real-life theatre that was unfolding every night to millions of viewers" (Mda, 2002: 279). That might have been accurate for the majority of theatre-makers, but a number of powerful productions staged at the time actually complemented the drama of the TRC and these could be described as the first true examples of politically engaged drama of the post-apartheid era.

Before the political change of 1994, revealing the atrocities of apartheid theatrically on stage was challenging and even dangerous, but had been done bravely in many well-documented productions by prominent theatre-makers like Athol Fugard, Barney Simon and others, less prominent. While the TRC was holding its hearings across the country three important productions relating very closely to the drama of the Commission premièred in 1997: *The Story I am about to tell – indaba engizoyixoxa*, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* and *The Dead Wait*.

The Story I am About to Tell – indaba engizoyixoxa premièred in the Market Theatre Laboratory in September 1997 as a workshopped production. The project was conceived and produced by human rights activist Bobby Rodwell of the Khulumani [Speak Out] Support Group, which was formed in 1995 by families and survivors of human rights abuses, and the production was funded by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. It was originally conceived as a relatively small, low-budget Lab production, but it ended up playing for more than three years at arts

festivals, in mainstream theatres, community halls, schools and churches throughout South Africa and also at festivals in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and England.

Three members of Khulumani, (non-actors), Catherine Mlangeni, Thandi Shezi and Duma Kumalo, all three victims of horrific human rights abuses under apartheid, had testified at the TRC and their shocking true stories formed the core of the play. In line with the TRC's and Khulumani's therapeutic strategy of "speaking out", the production aspired to heal mental wounds through the therapy of storytelling. The three appeared as themselves telling their life stories from the fictionalised context of a taxi journey, interacting with seasoned professional actors Ramolao Makhene, Dan Robbertse and Mncedisi Kenneth Nkosi, the latter three as fictional characters. The choice of a taxi-minibus as the setting was inspired by the TRC's slogan "Journey to Peace". Under the direction of Robert Colman and Makhene the company staged a remarkable blend of reality, play acting, agitprop and participatory theatre. The script was written by the cast with Rodwell, Colman and Lesego Rampolokeng. Adrienne Sichel commented in a review, "The participation of real life people recounting their experiences without being filtered through a playwright's sensibilities gives *The Story I am About to Tell* an authentic jolt" (Sichel, 1997b).

In 1997 the TRC was on the front pages every day and *The Story I am About to Tell* had a huge impact in the context of truth, reconciliation and reparation, the optimism of the Rainbow Nation and "Madiba magic". By mid-2000, however, the same production of *The Story I am About to Tell* was still running, but it came to be experienced in a completely different context. By then many were criticising the eventual outcome of the TRC process, the way the new elite was governing the country and the slow pace at which real change, reconstruction and reparation seemed to be happening. I quote two prominent journalists who verbalised this frustration in the context of the production.

In a newspaper article about *The Story I am About to Tell* Sandile Memela quoted the plight of Catherine Mlangeni, central character in the play and mother of Bheki Mlangeni, the human-rights lawyer who was assassinated by agents of the old government in 1991, in a scathing attack on the new government. He now perceived the elderly widow's harrowing account of her story on stage in a completely new

light, “She is bringing the tragedy of being abandoned by the liberation movement into the spotlight on stage. ... (Bheki’s) comrades are nowhere in the audience because they are too busy enjoying their new positions. ... Eight years later Bheki’s comrades, many of whom hold high-profile positions in the new government, seem to have forgotten about an African mother whose son paid the ultimate price in the fight against oppression and exploitation. ... *The Story I am About to Tell* embarrasses those who believe that Archbishop Tutu’s African dream of a rainbow nation is a reality. ... It leads the audience into understanding how successive ANC governments have betrayed those who were in the forefront of the struggle” (Memela, 2000b).

Stan Winer echoed in *The Sunday Independent* in an article headlined *Play gives an outlet to collective betrayal*, “The theme of betrayal is no stranger to theatre: Othello, Lear, Hamlet - all betrayed. What makes *The Story I am About to Tell* different is no less tragic, because it deals not with individual but with collective betrayal - the betrayal experienced today by South Africa's survivors of torture and human rights violations. ... Although Bheki received the funeral of a national hero in 1991, none of his ‘comrades’ have set foot in (his mother’s) Soweto house since then. And nine years later Mlangeni is still waiting for final reparation from the ministry of justice. She is one of 16 500 people whom the TRC two years ago named as victims of gross human rights violations” (Winer, 2000).

In 1997 the TRC had inspired this production which was staged with the objective to heal mental wounds through the therapy of storytelling and by the turn of the century the same production had become a vehicle of political commentary. This clearly reflected the general move from euphoria directly after the 1994 elections to an element of disillusionment surfacing towards the end of the first decade of democracy. It was also a move from often unrealistic expectations to a realisation of the realities facing the country in a new democracy.

The second 1997 production which drew directly upon the TRC for reference and dramatic content was *Ubu and the Truth Commission* by Jane Taylor, a powerful Handspring Puppet Company production directed by William Kentridge. Loosely combining the outrageous Ubu character from French surrealist poet Alfred Jarry’s anarchic puppet-play *Ubu Roi* (1896) with actual testimonies heard at the TRC, the

play examined some relevant central questions about guilt, remorse, exoneration, justice and injustice.

Ubu and the Truth Commission focused on both phases of the TRC hearings, progressing from human rights violations hearings through the amnesty applications. In her programme note to the production the playwright wrote that the TRC had become a place where "individual narratives come to stand for the larger national narrative. The stories of personal grief, loss, triumph, violation, now stand in for an account of South Africa's recent past. History and autobiography merge. This marks a significant shift, because in the past decades of popular resistance, personal suffering was eclipsed, subordinated to a larger project of mass liberation. Now, we hear in individual testimony the very private patterns of language and thought that structure memory and mourning" (in Gevisser, 1997).

Typically Kentridge used multimedia techniques on stage, employing animation, charcoal, white chalk and paper cut-out montages, historical film footage, puppets, an atmospheric original musical score and a strong cast of live actors to put on a vigorously stirring production. "The resulting satire," commented *Star Tonight* critic Garalt MacLiam, "throws one's emotions hither and thither, inducing, first, laughter, then rage and, later, cynical disbelief at the self-righteous claims of political criminals" (MacLiam, 1997).

Two story lines were presented through two different media; the fictitious story of Pa Ubu, the outrageously violent megalomaniac and his wife Ma Ubu were played by live actors, while the true-life stories of individuals testifying at the TRC were presented through puppets. Both productions, *The Story I am About to Tell* and *Ubu and the Truth Commission* told the actual stories of real victims who had recently testified before the TRC, but in neither production were those victims portrayed by actors playing the parts. As if the pain and suffering of those victims were too real and too immediate at that time to be presented by performers, the former production used the real victims on stage and the latter used puppets.

The complex and multi-layered style in which Kentridge staged *Ubu* created a richness which incorporated not only a variety of narrative techniques, but also a wide

spectrum of emotional impact ranging from chilling horror and excruciating sorrow to outrageous satire, absurdity and comic relief. Robert Greig noted in a review, “Kentridge is doing something here that few others have done, which is to make one aware of the variety of sensations associated with the politics of this country. It's not all sombre gloom and doom: we have a fine tradition of gallows humour and irony as well. *Ubu* strains for a realism that would capture this variety while avoiding neat narratives and the self-applauding virtuousness of protest theatre” (Greig, 1997a)

At the time various analysts commented on the inherent dangers of theatre-makers directly incorporating into their work the real-life drama playing out at the TRC at that very time. The drama in the TRC chamber was generated through the pain and raw emotion of real-life victims, while the drama on a stage could easily run the risk of cheaply aestheticising grief. There was also the danger that theatre-makers might assume that they could produce riveting material on stage, simply by using the riveting material that was emerging from the TRC through the daily media. Furthermore it was possible that the work done by the TRC could be glorified unrealistically, ignoring the fact that ultimately the Commission was a political instrument, created by politicians and with political intentions and outcomes.

The third selected example of a 1997 production tapping into the TRC hearings is *The Dead Wait* by Paul Herzberg, in which the protagonist ends up applying to the Truth Commission to confess the guilt he had been carrying with him for twenty years, like the actual load he was forced to carry all those years earlier. As a young white conscript during the Angola War in the 70s, he was ordered to carry a wounded black enemy soldier on his back for 60 kilometres through the bush to the base where the “terrorist” could be interrogated. Eventually his commanding officer ordered the young man to execute the ANC operative. He did, and guilt-ridden went into exile abroad and now returns two decades later to appear before the Commission.

The production, directed by Clare Stopford, played to mixed response at arts festivals and in the mainstream theatres in 1997. It was, however, a provocative examination of the guilt feelings about their role in apartheid South Africa and the border war, experienced by a group of white South Africans not automatically associated with the “Afrikaner racist regime”, namely the English-speaking baby-boomers, born at the

end of the 1940s. This was the first generation to live only under the Nationalist regime, until its demise in 1994. White men born into this generation would become the conscripted soldiers who fought the Nationalists' military war against the ANC and SWAPO. *The Dead Wait* formed part of a genre of dramas known as "border plays", a sub-section of the so-called "border literature" ["grensliteratuur"], written mostly in Afrikaans, but also in English, and dealing with the war on South Africa's borders in the 1970s and 1980s. Another English-speaking baby-boomer, Anthony Akerman, contributed to that genre a decade earlier with his *Somewhere on the Border*, as did the slightly younger, Afrikaans-speaking playwright Deon Opperman with his *Môre is 'n Lang Dag [Tomorrow is a Long Day]* and others like Paul Slabolepszy and Greig Coetzee.

The Dead Wait was distinctive, however, in that it came *after* democratisation and it linked directly with the TRC at the time of the hearings. A *Mail & Guardian* reviewer commented, "Inevitable cries of 'protest theatre' rang out after the opening of Paul Herzberg's *The Dead Wait*. The smutty Angolan war returns to the stage as a bedfellow of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in a re-examination of past horrors and future dreams in a production that is, in fact, not so much protest theatre as it is a theatre grasping for hope. The play debates morality, war and politics against the backdrop of sensibilities eroded by the confusion of ideologies and varying definitions of patriotism. Like the TRC, it attempts to shed light on the past by examining not only consequence, but the very nature of reconciliation" (Wilson, 1997). Like the other two examples above, *The Dead Wait* posed important questions and it stimulated public debate around the issues put on the public agenda by the TRC, each production from a markedly different perspective and through very different dramatic styles and technique.

Staging plays which focused on social reconciliation in the new South Africa did not stop when the TRC completed its work. The theme continued to be explored as a more or less central theme in a number of subsequent productions. Another baby-boomer, like Herzberg and Akerman, the popular and prolific playwright Paul Slabolepszy's 22nd play *Fordsburg's Finest*, a three-hander directed by Lara Foot-Newton and featuring star actor Marius Weyers, African-American actress Dorcas M

Johnson and the author, premièred to mixed reviews in February 1998 at the Market Theatre.

The play is about reconciliation: the daughter of a black South African musician was taken by her parents to New York as an infant in the fifties. She lost them both at a young age, grew up to become a single, self-assured African-American and returns four decades later on a pilgrimage to her birthplace in Fordsburg, Johannesburg to find her roots. She finds the site of the house where she was born and it is now a rundown used car sales lot owned and occupied by a 50-year old Afrikaner ex-policeman whose son died in the border war, whose wife left him, and who has learnt to hide his pain behind the mask of a used car salesman.

The encounter between these two damaged individuals provides the situation for painful self-discovery, for an exploration of the tensions existing in the new South African condition, and ultimately it leads to a kind of reconciliation brought about by a mutual recognition of suffering. "The play is about two people who, having long walked on firm ground, now find that they cannot take its firmness for granted. The old blacks and whites won't do anymore. The old baggage and clutter have to go" (Greig, 1998c).

The third character, the man's racist and outspoken brother, played by Slabolepszy, was criticised by prominent reviewers as one-dimensional and even superfluous, but the playwright defended his creation in an outraged letter to the press, "Rocco is the bird with the broken wing - the dead White Man Walking - the Spectre of South Africa Past... ! Without him in the play, Thandi has no picture of what life may have been like for her parents living in the Old South Africa. ... Rocco is like a human asteroid - zooming in and zooming out - but fast burning out...!" (Slabolepszy, 1998). Apart from employing the character as a device for ironic comic relief, the playwright intended Rocco to be a catalyst and at the same time representative of the destructive racism, intolerance and bigotry that existed in the old South Africa. The complexity of the pain and anguish of the two main characters, she robbed of her heritage and he bearing the guilt of oppression, representing two main groupings in the new South African society, was contrasted by the crude bombast of this "Spectre of South Africa Past".

Essentially the lively media debate about the Rocco character in *Fordsburg's Finest* spoke to the heart of the national reconciliation issue. On the one side of the debate were those who wanted the old South African order to be buried in history and on the other were those, like Slabolepszy, who insisted that it was still reverberating in the reality of the new South African society, even after the democratic election of a new government and after the TRC had closed its doors.

While the debate was raging in the media, the production played to enthusiastic capacity houses and, although criticised by some reviewers, it was praised by most: "*Fordsburg's Finest* is one of those rare theatrical phenomena that strip a person, explore him to his deepest essence and expose his dreams, desires and fears" (Hough, 1998, translated from Afrikaans). "Paul Slabolepszy's new play has a searching, somewhat tentative-at-first, quality which, coupled with its almost miraculous progression of plot through dialogue, often painfully revealing explorations of the past, and dynamic development of character, is reminiscent of Athol Fugard at his best. It is nevertheless also startlingly original and, in its unexpectedly cataclysmic fusing of two worlds, emerges as arguably the most significant theatrical statement yet pertaining to the new dispensation in South Africa" (Daniel, 1998). Slabolepszy managed to create a successful popular entertainment while dealing with painful and most relevant subject matter; not only reflecting the search for reconciliation in the new South Africa, his play stimulated thought and public dialogue far outside the confines of the theatre, very reminiscent of Fugard at his best.

Inspired by the TRC and in contrast with the prolific Slabolepszy, another mature wordsmith wrote her first play at the same time as Slabolepszy produced *Fordsburg's Finest.* Award-winning poet and journalist Antjie Krog published *Country of my Skull*, her haunting account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1998, on which André P. Brink commented, "Trying to understand the new South Africa without the TRC would be futile; trying to understand the Commission without this book would be irresponsible."[15] Krog subsequently workshopped a play exploring reconciliation in the new South Africa with prominent director Marthinus Basson and

[15] Quoted on the back cover of Antjie Krog's *Country of my skull*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999).

actresses Tess van Staden and Nomsa Xaba. *Waarom is dié wat vóór toyi-toyi altyd so vet? [Why are those toyi-toying in the vanguard always so fat?]*[16] premièred at the Aardklop Festival in 1999 and was more successful as a contribution to the reconciliation debate than as a theatrical piece.

In *Waarom is dié wat vóór toyi-toyi altyd so vet?* two mothers, one Afrikaans and white, the other black, are painting a mural for the primary school their two sons attend. While creating this visual image of the new South Africa, they talk, in three languages, about themselves and their experiences and touch on a range of issues relevant to culturally divided South Africans trying to understand themselves and their place in the Rainbow Nation. It emerges that the black woman's husband, an ex-guerrilla fighter, is now the white woman's husband's boss. They discuss their differences, but also discover their similarities and common fears and challenges. The women's dialogue is often light and amusing, but also becomes serious and heavy, even leading to a violent physical confrontation, but eventually to mutual acceptance and a deeper understanding.

Playwright Anthony Akerman noted, "This is clearly a dramatic response to the author's experiences while covering the truth and reconciliation hearings, an attempt to make sense of the horrors of the past and to chart a course towards a reconciliation beyond guilt and reproach" (Akerman, 1999). Another established Afrikaans artist Breyten Breytenbach,[17] accused Krog of moralistic politics and of positioning herself too close to the new rulers (Rossouw, 2001). He even created a character based on Krog in his *Die Toneelstuk [The Play]* (2001), discussed in some detail below. Asked in an interview whether she was optimistic that reconciliation was possible in South Africa, Krog replied prophetically, "It may be necessary to look at reconciliation as something practical. People reconcile while they need each other. Black and white currently need each other desperately, although it is not mentioned aloud. The problem will arise in ten or fifteen years – when impoverished blacks look up and say:

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[16] The "toyi-toyi" (verb: "to toyi-toyi") is a celebratory and often quite stirring and provocative dance. It was quintessentially a metaphor of the struggle.

[17] Breytenbach (b.1939) is primarily known as an Afrikaans poet and as a painter in France, his adopted country of residence. He wrote his first full-length drama in 1998.

I've restrained myself, I've reconciled myself, but my life has not changed at all" (Booyens & Nieuwoudt, 2000).

Even though entertaining and thought provoking, the weakness of this debut drama, despite the workshop contribution of master theatre-maker Basson, was not in its theme or focus or even aesthetic, but in its characterisation. Notwithstanding strong performances, the two women became stereotypical representatives of the conflict and search for reconciliation. Once again, the critical reaction was mixed. The *Business Day* reviewer was positive: "What makes the stereotypes live is the way in which they turn our everyday predicaments into laughter and use a light-hearted approach to dispense with old paranoia and bitterness. Here is the alchemy of satire, of jokes which take a refreshing and uplifting look at the difficulties in integration that puzzle us all" (Jordan, 2000). But the *Sunday Independent* reviewer was not: "The work is not really concerned about people. It's concerned with things like national destiny and historical consciousness, those great brutal abstractions that get in the way of authentic behaviour. And theatre. To that extent it deifies the inhumane. It's *katharavousa* drama, a masking of real feelings, real individuals, actual situations. A staged cartoon. ... Krog, on the evidence of this work, and of parts of *Country of my Skull,* does not care much for individuals - her own psyche apart - except as representatives of a class or group" (Greig, 2000a).

In his scathing criticism of *Waarom is dié wat vóór toyi-toyi altyd so vet?* Robert Greig touched upon the enormous challenges involved when emotional and fundamental issues of national importance become the inspiration for theatre-makers. Audiences are often driven into opposing camps, public debate often ensues and emotions often run high. And controversy is good – also for the box office. But, as too often happened in the earlier anti-apartheid protest theatre, the quality and integrity of theatrical art suffered in the heat of the moment. And that had become less acceptable and less forgivable in the theatre of the new South Africa.

A main focus of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was on the reconciliation between black and white South Africans and, as illustrated above, this focus was also reflected in some prominent theatre productions at that time. During the latter years of the decade under examination, the years following the TRC, another area of

reconciliation came to the foreground and also became the theme of a number of productions: the need for reconciliation amongst blacks themselves and the social relationships between the historically divided groupings of black, “Coloured” and people of Asiatic extraction in South Africa became issues to be put in the spotlight.

After 1994 there was also a significant influx of foreign Africans, legal and illegal immigrants and refugees across South Africa’s northern borders and by the late 1990s this resulted in serious xenophobia, mostly among working class and unemployed black urban South Africans. Foreigners were blamed, often emotionally and irrationally, for street crime, the theft of jobs and wives, and even for bringing the AIDS epidemic to this country.

As early as 1995 xenophobia was hinted at in a small, satirical play, *Hold Up The Sun* written and directed by Julian Seleke Mokoto of the Abangani Community Arts in Soweto and shown at the Grahamstown Festival and in the Windybrow Theatre. It focused on illegal African immigrants working as street hawkers in Johannesburg and competing with the locals.

In 1998 the theme of xenophobia was brilliantly explored in a community theatre project that became a hit production at the 1998 Market Theatre Laboratory Community Theatre festival and in 2004 the piece was converted to a mainstream production and revived for a 10th Year of Democracy season in the Laager at the Market Theatre: *Ga-Mchangani*, by Obed Baloyi and directed by Arthur Molepo was essentially about xenophobia and also dealt with a number of other social issues like gang violence, rape, child abuse and criminality. As a brilliant comic actor taking the central part in his play, Baloyi addressed these extremely serious issues with fine humour and virtuoso physical comic skill. The reviewer of *The Sowetan* noted, “While the country is firmly gripped by politically correct customs and notions about the Rainbow Nation, *Ga-Mchangani* exposes the tribalism still prevalent in black communities. ... The play deals with stereotypes and people who tend to regard certain ethnic groups as outcasts” (Mokoena, 1998). The production was very successful as a multilingual piece presented primarily to (black) community audiences, and converting it some years later to a mainstream production illustrated some of the challenges of making theatre for the new multi-cultural mainstream audience in South

Africa. The highly experienced director of the piece, Arthur Molepo noted, "It's not that easy to convert a community theatre piece to mainstream theatre. Along the way one risks losing wonderful cultural textures and jokes during the transposition. The lingo, the current vibes of the township, the black humour and often bitter humour... they risk being sanitised when translated to accommodate people of other cultures. There is the need to refresh, while acknowledging that tradition is fundamental and must stay dominant" (Sichel, 2004).

Two years later the Market Laboratory produced another powerful play focusing on xenophobia and staged at the Grahamstown Festival and in mainstream theatres: *Fong Kong* (2000), workshopped and directed by Richard Manamela and facilitated by Dan Robbertse, addressed the plight of African refugees and immigrants, often collectively known by derogatory names like the "Makwerekwere" or the "Girigambas", ostracised, victimised and treated with suspicion, condescension and hostility by native South Africans. The term "Fong Kong" (popularised by a Kwaito hit song) refers to the counterfeit big-brand merchandise, often produced in China and sold by immigrant hawkers on South Africa's city sidewalks. By extension "Fong Kong" means anything that is not genuine or original, like the foreigners (specifically Africans) living in South Africa. A *Citizen* reviewer commented on the issue of xenophobia explored in *Fong Kong* by referring to "...disturbing realities: the fear of foreigners; the open hatred and clear oppression reminiscent of the apartheid era but now applicable to black-on-black clashes" (Chikanga, 2000).

The theme was further explored in *The Cracked Mirror*, written and directed by Buntu Mahola which premièred on the main programme of the 2002 Grahamstown Festival. A group of five black mineworkers debate the issues of racism, intolerance and xenophobia, while doing back-breaking underground work and performing energetic dance routines, about a newly democratic South Africa, a place "Where men have to compete for women, jobs and their next meal, scapegoats will be found and you best not have a strange accent, a slightly darker skin or hopes for a new life in a foreign country" (Hollands, 2002).

The Voice from Kilimanjaro (1999) was a musical created and directed by Vusi Mhlongo, winner of the 2002 Xenophobia Fighter Award, and it also focused on the

complexity of black-against-black hatred and specifically xenophobia in the new South Africa.

In a discussion of *Hallelujah* (2000) by Xoli Norman, Zakes Mda commented on this trend of black theatre productions critically dealing with black-against-black hatred and violence, black-on-black clashes and xenophobia: "It *[Hallelujah]* is variously an angry and a celebratory play. Its anger is directed at black people who are full of self-hate, manifested through the way they rape and kill each other, and the way they mistreat other black people from foreign countries. Black people's merciless self-examination and self-criticism caused quite a stir when this play was performed at the Market Theatre. A minority of black opinion leaders objected to it, claiming that it was 'exposing' blacks to those white compatriots who are of a racist orientation, who would seize at the message to reinforce their racist agenda. The majority view of the play was very positive. Hence it performed to full houses throughout its six-week season and received rave reviews, especially in all the media that are run by blacks, and are targeted primarily at black consumers" (Mda, 2002: 285).

To summarise, the theme of reconciliation proved to be a powerful one in a number of prominent productions during the decade under examination and, as time passed, it was noticeable how the focus shifted from reconciliation between black and white during the Mandela era to a reconciliation between other racial groups and specifically between black South Africans and immigrants from north of the border, as South Africa became a major player in the drive towards continental development and the "African Renaissance"[18] under President Thabo Mbeki, Mandela's successor.

7.3. Dealing with the present, while looking at the past

After the 1994 elections theatre-makers suddenly found themselves referring to the apartheid era in the past tense. During the first decade of democracy it was certainly too early to have any true objectivity or historical perspective on the transgressions, the anger, the pain and the horrors of that era. The country was taking its first careful steps in exploring democracy and many theatre-makers were exploring life as they

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[18] President Mbeki expressed the Pan-Africanist ideal of an "African Renaissance" in the 21st century with the newly democratic Republic of South Africa as a leading player.

experienced it in this new environment, but inevitably their work grew out of the legacy of apartheid and remained contextualised by it. A wide range of major productions dealt with the old South Africa in the context of issues socially relevant to the new South Africa. As illustrated above, some dealt specifically with reconciliation on various levels, while others tried to come to terms with the past by focusing on guilt and blame and shame, but also on the mistakes and the misunderstandings of the apartheid era.

Another prominent production that opened during the time of the TRC hearings in 1997 also dealt with the guilt of the past. The first play in twenty years from award-winning novelist, academic and playwright André P. Brink appeared three months after his article quoted earlier. *Die Jogger [The Jogger]*, directed by Ilse van Hemert premièred at the 1997 KKNK after a preliminary run in Cape Town, and subsequently won the playwright the prestigious Hertzog Prize for drama in 2000.

As a novelist Brink was internationally acclaimed as a chronicler of the misdeeds committed during the apartheid era, but his writing generally moved away from that focus after 1994. In *Die Jogger*, however, he dealt head-on with the guilt of the Afrikaner during the Nationalist Party days. The protagonist, Killian, is an elderly man who was a decorated colonel in the South African Police Force under the apartheid regime. He now finds himself in the mid-1990s confined in an asylum where he is vividly confronted with the atrocities he had personally committed or was responsible for earlier. He had spent his life fervently, if blindly, fighting for a cause which had now suddenly become invalidated by history. In this character Brink created almost a cliché of what an Afrikaner man was often perceived to be; a family and rugby-loving Christian, passionately and frequently misguidedly patriotic, and often with a darker side. As a father this one was caring and loving, but as a senior police officer he was brutally cruel and inhuman. "*Die Jogger* asks, 'What kind of man is capable of torturing and murdering, then going home to cuddle his children? Are we all capable of being that man?'" (Bristow-Bovey, 1997a). And the central question, what becomes of a monster? Progressively Killian becomes isolated from family, friends and the community and is eventually driven to insanity; his greatest frustration that he experiences an inability to make himself heard.

Brink managed to create a character that dramatically and brilliantly epitomised the feelings of guilt experienced by many Afrikaners, but his play was widely perceived as being rather obscure and academic in the glaring light of the actual TRC drama reflected daily though the media. “Not only is the artistic impulse to bear historical testimony no longer the moral imperative that it was in the bad old days, it has been supplanted by the popular media's constant revelations of actual horrors. Put bluntly, who wants to watch a play about something that Max du Preez covers on TV every Sunday night?” (Bristow-Bovey, 1997a). Somehow the fictitious police colonel or the soldier carrying a wounded enemy on his back, however strongly representative, symbolic and brilliantly drawn, could not achieve the same dramatic impact as the real people appearing before the TRC or the real-life victims narrating personally on stage or in the shape of puppets mouthing their words and weeping their tears.

A different dimension of Afrikaner guilt was explored in the docudrama *Boetman is die bliksem in! [Laddie is the hell in!]*, developed by dramatist Pieter Fourie with director Marthinus Basson, premièred at the Aardklop National Arts Festival in 2000 and later staged at the KKNK and Grahamstown Festival and in mainstream theatres.

The project’s point of departure was an angry open letter sent by journalist Chris Louw to prominent academic Willem de Klerk in response to a book de Klerk had written about the Afrikaners. Louw attacked de Klerk and the older generation of Afrikaner rulers for lying and deceiving the younger Afrikaners and this led to a vigorous debate in the Afrikaans media. Louw’s letter and subsequent book on the subject, together with transcripts of radio and TV interviews, newspaper articles and other documentation of the debate were used as the basis of the stage play. Here were Afrikaner baby-boomers addressing the recent past and attacking the patronising manner in which the apartheid rulers had treated even their own offspring and left them to face the music after the demise of the regime, and to deal with the legacy of the leaders’ racist actions while they could go into comfortable retirement.

In an interview the dramatist argued that the younger generation of Afrikaners had no Truth Commission and that they also needed to voice their frustrations and search for their own closure (Griebenow, 2000). A *Citizen* reviewer added in 2001, when the play was staged in the State Theatre, that “(T)he *(Boetman)* debate was central to the

current state of the Afrikaner in many ways, and has been a painful but cathartic experience - as the trauma of the Border War, the hypocrisy of leaders and the mental claustrophobia of Christian nationalism have been brought to the surface and purged. Other victims of the apartheid system had the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to which they could pour out their suffering - but what about the less obvious victims? This debate goes a long way towards being an informal TRC for the Afrikaner" (Goddard, 2001). A *Sunday Times* reviewer described it as an angst-ridden exploration of the "...diatribe railed against Afrikanerdom's previous generation of rulers for their lies in maintaining apartheid and their betrayal in abandoning it. ...a strange production whose impact as theatre fails to match its impact as journalism" (Schoonakker, 2001).

The main focus in *Boetman is die bliksem in!* was on the immediate offspring of the previous privileged ruling class and the position in the new South Africa of white Afrikaners, specifically men in their forties and fifties who were often perceived to be almost an "endangered species" having lost their privileged position in the face of affirmative action and other changes. This production exemplified strongly the specific trend in theatre to examine issues from the immediate past in order to try and make sense of the challenges of the new present and a new reality.

While *Boetman is die bliksem in!* dealt with the dilemma and frustrations of white men in their thirties and forties at the time when democracy arrived in South Africa in 1994, it did not mention the next generation of white Afrikaner men, those born in the 1970s and early 1980s and who also perceived themselves to be an "endangered species" in the new South Africa. In the 1990s and by the turn of the millennium they were only just entering the job market and, to do so successfully, they had to compete against affirmative action that favoured blacks and women. They were not really experiencing the same frustrations as Chris Louw and his contemporaries, the remains of the patriarchal apartheid era, but they also found themselves having to play on a playing field they did not experience to be level.

The young dramatist Saartjie Botha astutely noticed this anxiety amongst her male contemporaries and was inspired to write a clever comic play *Spanner* to première at Aardklop 2001, a year after *Boetman* opened at the same festival. *Spanner* was

described as the next chapter in the *Boetman* saga and it approached the subject with a humorous tone and, heightening the comedy, from a woman's perspective. Botha claimed tongue-in-cheek to be "exploring the landscape of the male psyche" (Britz, 2002). The characters in *Spanner* are young working-class Afrikaner men and Botha called her lead character Boet ["Brother" or "Lad"] to emphasize the link with the earlier play (subtly the name also alludes to a very famous and long-running television commercial for motor oil – "Ja Boet…"). This Boet and his mates are not middle-class, middle-aged white men who have lost their privileged positions after the 1994 elections, they are merely young white working-class men who are asking for a fair chance.

Die Burger's critic described *Spanner* as "a depiction of a number of white blue-collar workers who have landed on the scrapheap of the period" (Smith, 2002, translated from Afrikaans). *Spanner* portrays another white man who has lost his job because he is white and male. He has a baby boy and has to pay the instalments on his car. But he is not bitter or angry and he does not write outraged letters to the press, like Boetman did. He can use his hands and he can make a plan. Not denying the hard realities and the challenges of the new South Africa, *Spanner* portrayed the new generation who preferred to look forward and not back.

With the strength of youthful optimism Saartjie Botha described the other side of the *Boetman* coin and did so with dramatic skill and humour. As an emerging theatre-maker she even used the opportunity to comment on the challenging environment in which theatre had to survive in the new South Africa by creating a cameo role for pre-eminent theatre director Marthinus Basson in the character of a client who, while waiting for his car to be repaired, tells the sorry tale of the scarcity of funding for the arts in the new democracy. A hit, *Spanner* was performed at all the main Afrikaans arts festivals and won a number of theatre awards.

Another issue that *Boetman is die bliksem in!* critically questioned was the way young white South Africans were misled and indoctrinated during the apartheid period and the role young men had to play as conscripts in the military. While *The Dead Wait* dealt with military conscripts in the context of guilt and expiation from a new perspective, where yesterday's "terrorists" had become today's national heroes and

political and business leaders, a powerful one-man play *White Men With Weapons*, used the device of satire to look back at the role young white conscripts had played in the previous regime's military operations. *White Men With Weapons*, written and performed by Greig Coetzee, was first staged in Durban in January 1996 as a 35-minute playlet, went to the KKNK and Grahamstown festivals of that year and became hugely successful. Coetzee extended the piece into a full 90-minute one-man *tour de force*, received 17 local theatre awards over the next number of years, toured around South Africa and also performed *White Men With Weapons* in New York, Belgium, Holland, Australia and Singapore.

The play focuses on various stock characters in the defence force at the point in South Africa's history, at the beginning of the 1990s, when its huge military machine was becoming obsolete as result of the unbanning of the ANC and other liberation movements. The playwright declared, "Living dinosaurs are what we have become, us white men in Africa. Some of us relieved, some of us confused, some of us bitter. All of us trained to kill. The misfit conscripts of a war that vanished overnight. I speak to you as an archaeologist; these white men are my fossils" (Anstey, 1996).

On the one hand, the play was satirically amusing to audiences across the spectrum, mostly because of the fine characterisation, sharp dialogue and excellent interpretation by the playwright/performer. On the other, it provided a cathartic experience to many, including not least, those white men who had to do the two years of military service under the Nationalist government, as Coetzee himself did in 1990, and who were quite uncertain in the mid-1990s what the future had in store for them in a new socio-political environment. Reviewer Laura Twiggs observed, "Importantly, *White Men With Weapons* does not appeal only to the ex-soldier, in spite of being set in the SADF and featuring only military characters. Nor does it appeal only to whites. The catharsis it offers is the vast relief or collective sigh that a period of insanity is over. And it is very healthy finally to be able to recognise that insanity for what it was, and to be able to laugh at it and to know that your laughter is permissible now" (Twiggs, 1999a). This review was written some years after the play's première, at a point where its focus was almost becoming anachronistic and the "collective sigh" had much to do with the drama of the TRC that was taking place concurrently to the run of *White Men With Weapons*.

A few years later Coetzee premièred his *Seeing Red* (2001), a semi-autobiographical play that dealt with the generation of English-speaking white South Africans born in the 1960s and who finished high school in the 1980s. His specific focus was on the middle-class, liberal anti-apartheid students at the University of Natal in the turbulent mid-1980s, just before the end of the apartheid era, a time when revolution was in the air. *Seeing Red* tells the story of a group of friends coming to the end of their university days in Pietermaritzburg in 1986 and it is about “their hopes and fears, their lusts and loves, the things they make, the things they break and the things they smoke” (Coetzee quoted in Shevlin, 2001). The violent anti-apartheid protest and the social unrest of the mid-1980s is the background against which the play looks at young white South Africans who went to the English-medium, generally more liberal institutions of higher learning and who distanced themselves from their Afrikaner counterparts who were often perceived to be politically more conservative and supportive of the ruling Nationalist Party. The play sets out to capture the spirit and the socio-political zeitgeist of the last days of apartheid South Africa and specifically the minority social group with which the playwright associated his own formative years, in order to identify their place and role in the new reality of 21st-century South Africa.

In a further example of plays illustrating the trend I have labelled “Dealing with the present, while looking at the past”, three women try to come to terms with the present and the future through having a hard look at the past in Athol Fugard’s *Sorrows and Rejoicings* (2001). The central character is an Afrikaner poet who rejected apartheid South Africa and went into exile in the 1980s. Now, sixteen years later, he returns to die in his Karoo home town and the action takes place after his funeral with the three women in his life talking about the past, the present and the future – the dead poet appears in flashbacks. The women are his Johannesburg-born English-speaking wife, the coloured servant who was also his mistress and mother of his child, and the daughter, who stands for South Africa’s disaffected younger generation and who shares her anger with that of *Boetman* in the Pieter Fourie play. In their dialogue and through the flashbacks they explore the past and try to understand the present.

A South African reviewer who saw the world première in Princeton, USA was generally negative about the production, claiming that "(it) has more to say about the playwright's ego than about contemporary South Africa," and that "(it) is nearly a decade out of date" (Scott, 2001), missing the point that, although exiles had been returning to South Africa for years, the exploration and search for understanding of the present contemporary South Africa while wrestling with the past, was certainly not over yet and would not be for some time. This play was part of a whole movement through the first decade of democracy which dealt with the immediate as well as the more distant past as a catalyst to start dealing with the challenges of a new present and the future.

Interestingly Fugard departed from his often more conventional realistic narrative style and the play also became a poetic celebration of language. In a review Robert Greig described it as "the internal drama of poetic reminiscence, not the visible drama of theatre", and concluded, "Through mists of memory and a miasma of stereotype they rhapsodise and orate, making verbal music. What, ultimately, is the play about, if it is a play? What stayed with me was a sense of a play about personal treacheries and shames in the context of South Africa's political violence. This is the theme that links Fugard's best works and it resurfaces here" (Greig, 2002b).

Thematically it also follows the same approach as *Fordsburg's Finest*, discussed above, in that it brings an exile back to a South Africa that had changed dramatically during the period that s/he had been out of the country. Apart from form and aesthetic, *Sorrows and Rejoicings* was representative of a search in the theatre for ways of dealing with a new socio-political reality through critically looking at the past.

A powerful and most controversial contribution to this search came from Afrikaans anti-apartheid writer Breyten Breytenbach, who had spent most of his life in exile in France and also, during the 1970s, some time as a political prisoner in apartheid South Africa. Renowned in South Africa mostly for his Afrikaans poetry and short prose and in Europe for his work as a graphic artist, Breytenbach wrote his first full-length drama *Boklied [Goat Song]* in 1998 and this was followed by *The Life and Times of Johnny Cockroach* (1999) and *Die Toneelstuk [The Play]* (2001). All three plays were brilliantly staged by director/designer Marthinus Basson, who transformed

Breytenbach's obscure, often rather untheatrical writings into visually dazzling and physically remarkable theatre. "The combination of Breytenbach's searing vision and Basson's inimitable stagecraft - seething, orgiastic, visually compelling - was electric. ... The Basson/Breytenbach collaboration represents a teasing cultural moment - the coming together of an artist reared within the previous state-subsidised paradigm, and one who has moved from ostracism to mainstream acceptance and cult status. Somehow, these two have arrived at the same place from different places, and the result is memorable, upsetting, magical theatre. As Basson observes: 'He was in jail while we were playing'" (Willoughby, 2000).

Each of the three productions led to extended deliberation and analysis in the theatre community and the media. Interestingly the debate was primarily about the form and aesthetic of the productions and the technical theatrical ability of the poet-turned-dramatist, rather than the tantalising social, socio-political and personal issues raised by the plays. The question is whether these highly cerebral and rather obscure dramas might have spoken more clearly to the European, specifically Parisian, intellectuals amongst whom Breytenbach had made his home some decades earlier, than the South African festival audiences to whom they were presented – and who often came out of performances, if not outraged, then at least totally perplexed.

The first, *Boklied*, premièred as the top-billed production on the main programme of the KKNK in 1998. The predominantly Afrikaans audiences were immediately mystified and alienated by the unfamiliar style and form, the confusing and obscure text, the highly intellectual and classical references and, most of all, the full-frontal nudity and simulated sex – they walked out of the three-hour marathon in droves. Soon, however, *Boklied* became the sensation of the festival and sought-after tickets were sold at huge profits on the black market – it became a must-see production at the KKNK and later on a tour to some mainstream venues around the country.

According to a programme note at the première production, *Boklied* is "...a surrealistic fantasy driven by Breytenbach's experiences as political prisoner in the dark days of the old regime, reflecting his inner conflict as politically aware artist and poet in self-imposed exile, but still a true son of Africa" (Horn, 1998, translated from Afrikaans).

Even though he remained one of the most brilliant wordsmiths in the Afrikaans language, after decades of exile in France Breytenbach was perceived by many to have become a European, writing from a European perspective. “And that is why this is such an important piece, since it leaves one with the question: has Afrikaans, have white people, has white culture, any permanent place on this adopted continent?” (Cilliers, 1998, translated from Afrikaans).

Although the stage production was experienced by critics and audiences alike as stimulating but often rather perplexing, the published play script became the subject of much analysis in academic circles and even in the popular media. In the old South Africa Breytenbach’s role as anti-apartheid “struggle” artist was clear, but his new role in the new South Africa and in a new medium was less clearly understood through this play, which evidently contained subtle autobiographical references and where the poet abstractly focused on himself, his personal demons, and the beloved country of his birth.

In an interview director Marthinus Basson defined his point of departure in staging *Boklied*: “I find it a terribly emotional piece that deals with a poet in conversation with himself, with his poetic art, with his peers, with his political situation. For me it is almost more like a debate with the facets of a person who feels very strongly about his country, his faith, his social context and his art-form, and who then questions himself” (Burger, 1998, translated from Afrikaans).

The playwright’s strongest public contribution to the debate was plainly to advise the audiences to stop their frantic efforts to “understand” the play and to simply allow the piece to flow over them, “like music”. In an article he wrote for a prominent Afrikaans newspaper, *Die Burger*, at the time of the controversy Breytenbach alluded to his own responsibility as an artist and linked it to that of all Afrikaners, who after having lost their political privilege and protection, now had the potential to become powerful agents for transformation. And he intended his art to play a role in that transformation (Breytenbach, 1998).

The next year Breytenbach wrote and Basson directed *The Life and Times of Johnny Cockroach* (variously subtitled by the playwright as “A Lament for our Times” and

"A Mortality Play"). *Boklied* was written in Afrikaans, *Johnny Cockroach* in English and the latter premièred at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in a large, expensive production, sponsored by the Standard Bank, the National Arts Council, Cape Town's Artscape and the Flemish Community. Staged at the turn of the millennium, in the last days of the century, *Johnny Cockroach* looked at the history of humanity in the 20th century, the wars, the holocausts, the bloodbaths, the ethnic cleansing, the ideologies, the technologies, ranging from the Boer War at the start of the century, through Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Vietnam to the atrocities and mass murders in Rwanda and Bosnia a 100 years later.

Two hundred minutes of part drama, part performance art and part contemporary African miracle play, *Johnny Cockroach* was a surrealist multimedia production incorporating singers, dancers, musicians, spirits, gods and actors speaking complexly rich, dense, poetic language and making music that ranged from operatic and orchestral to Afrikaner rock. The various representative characters recall the principles, passions and dreams that led to upheavals, wars and revolutions during the century. They testify before three women seated on a judicial bench and who represent the mothers, sisters, wives and lovers of those who reshaped the world. The bisexual, immortal Johnny Cockroach, the oldest life form, that will also survive the rest (played by a man and a woman as one character), is doomed to eternal life and also to witness these testimonies and make sense of all the horrors of the past 100 years. Eventually Johnny Cockroach pleads with the goddess to let him/her become human so that s/he can die and stop witnessing human behaviour century after century.

The theme may seem simplistic, but through Breytenbach's pen it became a profound philosophical-poetical game with numerous, often obscure references, allusions and symbolic mythological subtexts. In *Boklied* the personal creative link was with Breytenbach the creative artist, at home, in exile, in prison, while in *Johnny Cockroach* that link was more with Breytenbach the political artist/activist. Director Basson observed in an interview, "*Johnny Cockroach* is about Breytenbach the political animal, the post-apartheid writer who - like all of us - is trying to revise ideologies at the end-of-century. The great theme of *Johnny Cockroach* is freedom, debated across time and place by a bewildering variety of speakers for the elucidation

of a cockroach-witness who has watched eons of human squalor and travail" (Willoughby, 2000). At the beginning of a new century and also a new South Africa the poet looks back at the old era and eventually shakes his head in despair over the past and uncertainty about the future.

The third piece *Die Toneelstuk [The Play],* subtitled *'n Belydenis in Twee Bedrywe [A Confession in Two Acts]* also looked at the present through a mirror reflecting the past. While he was in solitary confinement serving a prison sentence for high treason during the apartheid era, Breytenbach had a dream one night which decades later became the stimulus for writing *Die Toneelstuk*. In his dream another political prisoner, the great Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky, appeared in the door of Breytenbach's cell surrounded by a bright light and he asked the poet to complete the unfinished poem mentioned in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (Basson, 2001). This was the inspiration for another richly worded, overwhelming spectacle full of subtle, often obscure references and outrageous images.

This, the third Breytenbach/Basson production, premièred at the 2001 KKNK and this time the audiences did not walk out because of the sex and nudity, although it was present, but because of perceived blasphemy. The play was very critical in its depiction of white guilt and the holiest of Afrikaner cows, the Protestant Christian religion, but on the other hand, it was equally outspoken about the predicament of white Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa and also about the excesses of erstwhile political exiles who now ran the country from the comfort of the gravy train.

From a personal perspective director Marthinus Basson noted in an article in the literary magazine *Insig*, "These days, when all-of-us-who-are-white-and-who-are-under-suspicion and where it is expected of us (guilty and not guilty) to be held accountable for our complicity and implied complicity within the framework of our Christian-Nationalist past, it is quite understandable why *Die Toneelstuk* should be steeped in an existentialist angst, an uncertainty about values and a loss of status and belief in the future" (Basson, 2001, translated from Afrikaans).

The central characters are clearly the playwright's alter egos and the main focus of the play is on Breytenbach and his suffering under the old regime versus his dilemma of

coming to terms with and becoming part of the new South Africa. Ultimately the central Breytenbach character, Dawid, confesses that his own hope of art as a form of salvation, as symbolised by the return of Dostoyevsky, has been shattered (Rossouw, 2001). When the Dostoyevsky/Saviour character does appear, it is in the shape of a naked black man who only speaks in Xhosa.

Once again the play and the production led to much confusion, indignation, analysis and commentary. One commentator noted, “This was clearly not your run of the mill ‘popular play’ and, given the track records of both writer and director as *agents provocateurs* in the arts, everyone surely knew what they were letting themselves in for, which was an evening of shocked incomprehension and confrontation, intermingled with visual and verbal magic. Yet the houses were packed and every night people got up and walked out during the course of the show” (Hauptfleisch, 2006a).

Although Breyten Breytenbach’s theatrical contribution was often highly personal and autobiographical, it provided a provocative, erudite and controversial, although for many obscure and even bewildering, look at the new South Africa with reference to the old. By drawing on his European influences and his skill as a graphic artist Breytenbach also introduced an unusual and innovative stylistic approach to a certain type of South African drama and provided the opportunity for a most creative director/designer, in the person of Marthinus Basson, to break new ground in the original staging of these three plays.

The selection of plays discussed above illustrates a clear trend of theatre-makers trying to come to terms with a new reality, while they still struggled with the burden of the baggage of the past.

Another type of (subtly different) narrative play became noticeable in the period under discussion, noticeable to the extent that it came to represent a clear trend in early post-apartheid theatre. Firmly part of an old African tradition, these were plays that say, “Let me tell you my story”.

7.4. Let me tell you my story...

The art of storytelling has been an important part of African culture and social tradition for millennia and in the theatre of the 20th century it culminated in plays workshopped by prominent theatre-makers like Barney Simon, Mbongeni Ngema and others, who often built a play around a group of individual actors, each finding and developing a character and his/her story from the everyday environment surrounding them. This movement and the plays that grew out of it have been discussed in numerous studies, some listed in the Bibliography.

Immediately after the peaceful revolution of 1994 every South African individual and group of individuals was confronted with a new, as yet undefined socio-political environment in which s/he or they had to find themselves anew and also find a place and a role. Interestingly, many theatre-makers initially tackled this challenge by simply telling their story or the story of the group they were a member of: "This is who I am and this is my story", or "This is who we are, and this is our story". In a way this was almost reminiscent of a group of shipwreck survivors finding each other on the beach of a desert island and introducing themselves – they are a disparate group thrown together, they are starting with a clean slate, and they need to survive.

Some of these productions were factually biographical or autobiographical, others were fictional narratives closely based on fact and then there were purely fictional plays simply utilising the technique. Like the TRC plays dealt with above, these productions also had a clear cathartic intent, but on the other hand, they often seemed to be a clear statement of introduction and self-identification (like the shipwreck survivors in the metaphor used above). As will be illustrated in the plays discussed below, these productions also contained an element of self-exploration in the context of a new socio-political environment, i.e. the new Rainbow Nation. Finally, the "Let me tell you my story" approach often also had an element of self-determination and confirmation built into it. Whatever the specific theme of individual productions following this trend, the general theme was clearly one of identity and identification, as Zakes Mda confirmed in 2002, towards the end of the decade under examination, "Issues of identity are emerging very strongly in South African discourse today" (Mda, 2002: 287).

Although over many years Athol Fugard had often created characters that were clearly drawn from an autobiographical source, they were always set in a context that served the broader thrust of the play. In *The Captain's Tiger - A Memoir for the Stage* (1997) for example, the 65-year-old playwright takes a close look at the 20-year-old Fugard, the young writer who dropped out of the University of Cape Town, hitch-hiked through Africa, found a job on a tramp steamer in Port Sudan, made friends with a black man for the first time and wrestled with the creative process while starting to write his first novel, inspired by his mother. A few years later, at 71, Fugard wrote another autobiographical play about his youth; *Exits and Entrances* dealt with the young Fugard's relationship with the well-known South African thespian André Huguenet, the latter's exit from South African theatre and the former's entrance. These plays were different to, for example, *Master Harold and the Boys* (1982) and the other earlier pieces that, although containing strong biographical elements, essentially protested against the apartheid system, rather than told Fugard's story. Obviously these earlier plays were also autobiographical artistic expressions, but the specific incidents and circumstances were clearly selected to make a strong political statement. The later plays explored the playwright's life and his experiences without specifically contextualising it within the apartheid frame. At the time of the opening of *The Captain's Tiger*, the playwright commented, "The change in this country has now given me the freedom to look back and to tell those stories which earlier would have been too personal or too self-indulgent. Previously there was a much more urgent agenda that determined my writing. Now I can return to personal experiences" (Boekkooi, 1997, translated from Afrikaans).

Like Fugard, Anthony Akerman in his *Old Boys* (1996) also found the freedom to return to personal experiences without seeming too personal or too self-indulgent. An English-speaking South African baby-boomer, Akerman had contributed to the genre of dramas known as "border plays" mentioned above, with his *Somewhere on the Border* in the 1980s. As a member of this group of white South Africans benefiting from, but not automatically associated with, the "Afrikaner racist regime", he chose to address an area of privilege enjoyed during the apartheid era mostly by South African boys who had some roots in Britain, namely the elitist English-medium private boarding school for boys (based on the "public schools" in the UK). The situation and

the characters in *Old Boys* were based on personal memories of Akerman's days at the exclusive Michaelhouse school in Natal in the mid-1960s. One critic described the play as trying to make sense of "an experience exclusive to a few, virtually impenetrable to others, yet which played an important part in creating the fabric of our variegated national psyche" (Bristow-Bovey, 1997b). This kind of personal portrait of a life of extraordinary privilege had a totally different impact in the new South Africa to what it would have done in the pre-1994 days of protest theatre. After its première in the Playhouse in Durban in 1996, *Old Boys*, directed by the playwright, played successfully at festivals and mainstream theatres over the following two years.

Another prominent theatre personality from KwaZulu-Natal also chose to relate her most personal experiences on stage, but from a totally different perspective. In *A Woman in Waiting*, a one-hander directed by Yael Farber, Thembi Mtshali tells her own story in three parts, first as a child in rural KZN, then as a servant in a white household in Durban and eventually as a successful actress (four years in *Ipi Tombi* in New York, London and Johannesburg and many other roles on stage and television). *A Woman in Waiting* first played as a work-in-progress at the Grahamstown Festival in 1999 and premièred at the Market Theatre in 2000. Amongst many accolades Mtshali received the best actress award at the Carthage Festival in Tunisia for this powerful autobiographical portrait and the production was generally received very positively.

Some reviewers, however, started questioning the theatrical value of all this personal story-telling on theatre stages: "Between stories and drama falls a shadow, and this shadow reduces the brilliance of Thembi Mtshali's and Yael Farber's piece. 'Telling our stories' - always said now unctuously - is not the same as making theatre. Everyone can tell stories and far too many. Few can make theatre and few do. The challenges are different. One is immediacy, a rule of thumb: stories happen then and there, drama happens here and now, as you watch. The current fad for narrative is deadly to theatre" (Greig, 2000b).

While most were emotionally moved by Farber and Mtshali's contribution to the let-me-tell-you-my-story genre and applauded another play celebrating the triumph of the individual spirit, some were suspicious of its dramatic value and others reacted

negatively to a positive story emerging from the universally condemned horrors of apartheid. Sandile Memela of *The Sowetan* verbalised the latter reaction strongly in his review entitled “Memoir glosses over apartheid: production fails to capture realities of the past”: “The veteran actress Thembi Mtshali's one-woman play *A Woman in Waiting* is one of the most dangerous stage productions around. ... Mtshali's play is solidly grounded in an ‘apartheid-was-not-so-bad’ philosophy. ... There is something uncharacteristically nice about the apartheid which unfolds along with the story. ... Unfortunately, its rather naive handling of the apartheid past spoils the message of the play, which is the triumph of the individual spirit” (Memela, 2000a). While a seasoned anti-apartheid dramatist like Athol Fugard had reached a point in the late 1990s where he could look at neutral personal reminiscences as an acceptable theatrical subject in place of the earlier “much more urgent agenda”, some South Africans were clearly not ready to listen to stories from the past without the anger and the pain that accompanied the black experience under apartheid.

In *Amajuba - Like Doves We Rise* five actors each tells his/her own story about growing up as a black youth in apartheid South Africa. The production was workshopped and directed by Yael Farber with actors from the Mmabana Arts, Culture and Sport Foundation in Mafikeng and premièred at the Grahamstown Festival in 2001, after which it played in mainstream theatres in South Africa and abroad. Through narrative, performance, song and dance the actors relive their youth memories of township life in the eighties and ultimately the piece becomes “a celebration of the survival of the spirit in the exceptionally harsh environment of South Africa. ... What emerges in the telling and sharing of these stories is the resilience and personal power the average young black South African used in order to survive. ... *Amajuba* seeks to acknowledge and celebrate the extraordinary ability of the human spirit to rise above adversity” (Sibiya, 2003). The focus of this play was neither on reconciliation nor on dwelling on the horrors of the apartheid era, but rather on coming to terms with the past on a most personal and individual level in an attempt to start moving forward.

Some years after *A Woman in Waiting* Farber staged another autobiographical narrative, this time the traumatic story of Duma Kumalo who was sentenced to death in 1984 for his alleged participation in the mob killing of a town councillor in

Sharpeville, and who was granted a stay of execution just 15 hours before he was due to be hanged. *He Left Quietly* was commissioned by the House of World Cultures in Berlin, Germany, where it was first presented in June at the InTransit Festival 2002 and it had its local première at the 2002 Grahamstown Festival.

Kumalo had previously told his story on stage in *The Story I am About to Tell – indaba engizoyixoxa* (1997) at the time of the TRC hearings, and this time Farber created a three-hander with Kumalo himself and two actors on stage. Asked why she chose to stage Duma's story, Farber explained, "Bra Duma has a mission, some people would call it survivor guilt, some would call it survivor responsibility. He feels he is responsible for speaking for all of those who died" (Sichel, 2002a).

Once again Farber was attacked by a reviewer of *The Sowetan*. This time Luvuyo Kakaza strongly criticised her as a white theatre-maker staging the stories of the suffering of blacks during the apartheid era, "It is a pity that we lose Kumalo's unique voice... The play is more about Farber's collaboration with Kumalo to write his story. This is no new trend in theatre and it has its roots in playwrights such as Athol Fugard, who rode on the back of protest theatre in the 70s. Fugard wrote about the black experience and black actors were only credited for their acting skills. One hopes black theatre practitioners will finally find their unique voices" (Kakaza, 2002). This might have been a rather sweeping attack, but it nevertheless exemplified a frustration that existed at the time amongst black analysts about the strong contribution made by theatre-makers like Yael Farber, Brett Bailey, Malcolm Purkey and others who often chose to focus on staging black stories with black performers.

Not all autobiographical one-person shows done at this time were wrestling with the darker side of the South African experience. A fine example of a lighter touch in dealing with a different set of challenges, that of a minority within a minority group, was comedienne Irene Stephanou sharing her experience of growing up in an immigrant Greek home in Roodepoort, Johannesburg. At one point in her *Meze, Mira and Make-up* (1996) she asks, "Isn't poverty, illness and death worse than waiting for a boy to ask you to dance? The answer is NO!" With a strong script and a sparkling performance she portrayed the dilemma of a South African Greek girl/woman trying

to come to terms with her cultural identity, not only in South African society, but in the society of the new South Africa.

Another successful autobiographical one-woman play, *At Her Feet* (2003) by Nadia Davids – discussed in a different context above – tells the story of a young South African Muslim woman, a member of another group marginalised in the old South Africa, who now has to find a place in the new democracy, but also in a post-9/11 world. In telling her story Davids, like Stephanou, also explored how the traditional and the modern clashed within her own cultural group. She represented another minority community who had been part of the South African landscape for a long time and who were now claiming a place in the new democracy.

The selection above illustrates a trend for autobiographical narratives telling the story in the first person singular, but other theatre-makers following the trend of “Let me tell you my story” put the spotlight on more or less prominent historical figures, some dead, some alive, in the context of an individual representing a group. These biographical plays were clearly staged primarily for their entertainment value, but on another level they were also contributing to the trend that became very clear in the first decade of democracy, a trend for self-identification and self-determination through focus on well-known actual individuals from the past, each personifying a specific social or cultural group.

The following is merely a list of prominent productions created during the period and illustrating the point, with little further comment. Some are discussed in more detail elsewhere and others are simply mentioned here to confirm the trend identified above: *Bloke* (1994) was a musical play directed by Walter Chakela, based on *Drum* writer William ‘Bloke’ Modisane's autobiography *Blame Me on History* and scripted by Mothobi Mutloatse. Bloke Modisane was one of South Africa’s leading black intellectuals of the 1950s and this musical was a celebration of his genius. Playwright/director Deon Opperman created a vehicle for actress Wilna Snyman to deliver a *tour de force* one-woman performance in *Dear Mrs Steyn* (1999), a biographical portrait of Emily Hobhouse, the feisty English woman who fought the case of maltreated Afrikaans women and children in British concentration camps during the Boer War, a conflict she described as a “war of elimination”. Here was a

play that highlighted a most emotional and painful chapter in Afrikaner history. The Boer War (the South African War, 1899-1902) was the focus of a number of productions and art exhibitions in the centenary year of the war at KKNK 2000, including *Skroot [Grapeshot]* (2000) by Nico Luwes, a cabaret *Liefde en Oorlog [Love and War]* (2000) and another one-hander written by Deon Opperman, *Kommando [Commando]* (2000) based on the war diaries of Denys Reitz. Another one-person bio-play staged at the time was *A Touch of Madness* (1999), the story of poet, essayist, short story writer, playwright, novelist, teacher and journalist Herman Charles Bosman, scripted and directed by Nicky Rebelo, with David Butler as Bosman, a writer who brilliantly reflected the South Africa of the first half of the 20th century through his work. Anthony Akerman wrote and directed *Dark Outsider* (1995), a large, award-winning production exploring a decade (1925/35) in the tortured life of another literary master, the Durban-born poet Roy Campbell (1902-75). *Die Goue Seun [The Golden Son]* (2002) by Saartjie Botha told the story of Afrikaans poet Uys Krige, who also featured in *Dark Outsider* as a contemporary of Campbell. The biographical one-man show *Stander* (2000) by Charles J Fourie told the story of André Stander the charismatic ex-policeman turned bank robber and *Tsafendas: Living in Strange Lands* (2001) was a one-man play performed by Renos Nicos Spanoudes and written by Anton Robert Krueger, exploring the confused mind of Dimitri Tsafendas the parliamentary messenger who stabbed Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd - the architect of apartheid - to death in 1966. *Your Loving Simon* (2003) was a biographical portrait of Tseko Simon Nkoli (1957-1998), freedom fighter, political prisoner, human rights and gay activist (see below), workshopped and directed by Robert Colman. These selected productions showed a trend of painting portraits on stage of prominent individuals, portraits that all contributed to a mosaic of the past, a past that was now being replaced by a new present to be experienced as the “Rainbow Nation”.

The trend illustrated above was for self-identification and self-determination through a focus on famous individuals from the past – apart from the fact that these characters provided fascinating material for theatrical treatment. At the same time a number of prominent productions focused on the stories of social groups or specific cultural segments of society, rather than individual protagonists, as their subject matter. Dramas with a similar theme had obviously been created in South Africa before 1994,

but after democratisation the impact of plays dealing with a specific cultural group had a different dimension, and that is the focus of the productions selected below. Inevitably, in the new South Africa many of these productions dealt with minority groups - it seemed to indicate a need to secure an equal claim for such groups in a new landscape of democracy, equality and majority rule.

As a member of the Afrikaner minority, the predominant section of the earlier minority ruling class of white South Africans, controversial playwright/director Deon Opperman chose to tell their story as he saw it, when he premièred his *Donkerland [Dark Country]* at the KKNK in 1996, performed subsequently at the Grahamstown Festival and in mainstream theatres. "This is my attempt at singing the song of a nation. A nation which is a mixture of nobility and monstrosity, which slaughtered, but also was slaughtered" (Opperman quoted in Anonymous, 1995a, translated from Afrikaans).

Donkerland was an epic drama of five hours duration, in two parts and consisting of 10 short plays of 20-45 minutes each, with 11 actors playing 68 characters and telling the story of seven generations of an Afrikaner family living on the farm *Donkerland* in Natal, a saga spanning a century and a half from 1838 to 1996. It told the story of the Afrikaner from the Great Trek to the present, as it was intertwined with the stories of the other cultures and peoples inhabiting the land. Opperman presented the saga as if holding up a mirror for the Afrikaners to see what brought them to this current reality, to question their place in it and their future.

Ultimately Opperman's mirror reflected the socio-political pessimism experienced by many Afrikaners immediately after the 1994 elections; all that will remain of the Afrikaner in this dark country, the play suggests, will be as fleeting as a snail's trail across a rock on the farm Donkerland, a mere footnote in the annals of history.

Even while dealing with a vast theme like Afrikaner nationalism, *Donkerland* was comparable in its characterisation and episodic structure to a television serial and consequently its narrative tended to become rather one-dimensional and even simplified. Scholar and critic Johann Botha noted, "Rightly or wrongly one 'reads' [the production] against the background of a young dramatist who, given the wisdom

of current experience, wants to even the score with what he evidently despises about his own history. An additional hazard for *any* dramatist driven to self-examination by contemporary history is to yield to the temptation to connect his retaliation to current politically correct attitudes" (Botha, 1996b, translated from Afrikaans). Botha added that he was one of those viewers who did not experience the dark ending of *Donkerland* as a judgment, but as a challenge.

This well-attended production and the resulting analyses and polemics clearly reflected the uncertainty experienced by many Afrikaners directly after the socio-political revolution of 1994, Afrikaners who tended to see a "dark country" rather than the potential of a "rainbow nation". It was also a prime example of the trend to self-analysis and self-determination by theatre-makers representing minority groups in the new dispensation. *Business Day's* critic commented wryly, "*Donkerland*, Deon Opperman's five-hour long opus, hopefully finally rids him of all the agony of his Afrikaner angst" (Jordan, 1996a).

Since racial classification and separation have dominated life in apartheid South Africa, issues surrounding social and cultural groupings and identities continued echoing throughout the period under discussion, also in the theatre. Theatre-makers from minority groups, who often felt threatened by a new kind of marginalisation in a new socio-political order, brought their stories to the stage and insisted to be seen and heard. Together with *Donkerland*, some prominent examples included *Out of Bounds* (1999), *The Coolie Odyssey* (2002), *Salaam Stories* (2001), *A Coloured Place* (1998), *No Room for Squares* (2000) and *Vatmaar* (2002).

An historically marginalised minority group who had a long tradition of theatrical activity in South Africa and who continued to make themselves visible on stage after democratisation were the South Africans of Indian descent, mainly living in KwaZulu-Natal, but also in the other major centres across the country. These people are mostly the descendents of indentured labourers who came from Madras in south India to South Africa, specifically the agricultural areas of Natal, during the latter half of the 19th century and remained after their five- or seven-year contract had terminated. Since then they have formed a community and developed a distinct

culture and identity, also expressed and celebrated through cultural activities like performance and drama.

Amongst South African academics the term "Indic Theatre" is often used "...to distinguish cultural forms that have their roots in South African Indian experience as distinct from those practised in the motherland [India] uninfluenced by factors encountered in the diaspora" (Dennis Schauffer, quoted in Hauptfleisch, 2006b). The development and contribution of South African "Indic" theatre-makers is described in some detail in the Indic Theatre Monogram Series published by Asoka Theatre Publications, Drama Department, University of Durban-Westville. Classified in apartheid South Africa as a "non-white" group the context and theatrical expression of "Indic" theatre-makers also changed in the new South Africa after democratisation. The following are examples of prominent post-1994 Indic Theatre productions in the current context of "Let me tell you my story...".

Playwright/performer Rajesh Gopie and director Tina Johnson staged two powerful plays focusing specifically on the South Africans of Indian descent, but intended to communicate across the cultural spectrum. On the first level the one-man play *Out of Bounds* (1999) told the story of a young Indian South African and his extended family in the shape of an 1980s coming-of-age narrative that probably contained some autobiographical elements. His subject was firmly the Indian community, but Gopie contrived to tell their story in a manner that made it accessible to audiences from all the cultural groups. "He may be sketching life from an Indian viewpoint, but there is so much to identify with, so much that makes one laugh with recognition. The characters may come from a specific cultural milieu, but we find these types everywhere. In this sense each of Gopie's characters captures a fragment of the South African Everyman. The situations he describes overlap cultures" (De Villiers, 1999a). The play touched on issues of race and apartheid, including commentary on Indo-African relations and tensions in KwaZulu-Natal, but this merely formed part of the portrait it painted of a minority community and was not the main focus. "On one level, the play is simply about growing up in an extended Indian family. On another, *Out of Bounds* is a commentary on political space, sexuality, filial relations, identity and being uprooted. These issues are examined with an attention to detail and an unashamed

specificity that ensures that the play has remarkable universal appeal" (Moodley, 1999).

Gopie was doing more than telling the story of his people and looking for a place in the new South Africa. He satirised and simultaneously celebrated his people. Although his play contained much humour and satire, he made a critical evaluation of the Indian community and their expectations in the new socio-political reality. In an interview he declared, "I think the Indian political space has become pretty much the same as the middle-class white political space. It's where we don't want to know anything about apartheid - as if it didn't affect our lives. It's an incredible, rapid assimilation into white middle-class values. The general mass of the Indian population is politically anaesthetised, and this must change" (Moodley, 1999). *Out of Bounds* made a strong contribution to the social debate of the 1990s and, as a side note, it generated so much interest that Nelson Mandela himself requested a private performance.

The second collaboration between Gopie and Johnson, *The Coolie Odyssey*,[19] premièred at the 2002 Grahamstown Festival and was a production on a much larger scale than *Out of Bounds*. Inspired by the novel *Red Earth Pouring Rain* by Vikrah Chandrah, *The Coolie Odyssey* is a many-layered epic drama that covers various highlights in the history of South African Indians from 1890 to 2002, looking at Indian life, religious ideals and local politics. It tells the stories of a group of men, women and children who initially sign up for seven years indentured labour in what was colonial Natal in 1890 and then become part of the population. The story is recorded by a typing monkey - a reincarnation - in the yard behind the house of a descendant living in modern day Durban and the narrative moves back and forth in time and location, from India, to Durban, to a sugar-cane plantation on the Natal north coast. The production cast a light on a very influential minority group that was part of the social fabric, but uncertain about their future in the new South Africa.

[19] The pejorative label "Coolie" was commonly used in the old South Africa (as it was all around the British Empire in earlier times), to refer to indentured labourers from India and their descendants. It probably originated with reference to the Koli tribe from west India.

The Constitution of this new South Africa recognised the wide variety of cultural groups in the country and protected their rights, inter alia, of cultural expression. In the early years of the new democracy, however, it was quite understandable that a relatively small population segment, like the South African Indians, would be uncertain about their cultural future. On the subject Zakes Mda made the following observation: "...the respect (in the Constitution) of multi-cultural identities does not necessarily imply a guarantee of the survival of any culture, even though political rhetoric may suggest the government is out to preserve cultures that are perceived to be endangered. This would be an impossible task" (Mda, 2002: 285). Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the socio-political problems the government might have been struggling with, the theatre-makers continued to tell their stories and to celebrate their particular cultures, whether they were guaranteed survival or not.

Another minority group whose rich culture was celebrated on stage during the decade under discussion and in this context of "Let me tell you my story..." was the so-called "Cape Coloureds"[20] of the Western Cape in particular. Amongst many unique cultural characteristics, although sometimes stereotypically ascribed to them, this group is celebrated for their colourful history, their natural musicality (famously expressed annually in the Cape Coon carnival), their vibrant use of language (both English and Afrikaans) and particularly their celebrated sense of humour. These attributes made them a brilliantly rich subject for dramatisation and resulted in successful plays by dramatists like Stephen Black, Uys Krige, Eitemal, André P. Brink, Adam Small and many others during the period of apartheid.

These dramatic qualities of the Cape Coloureds was also the source of inspiration for the popular musicals created by David Kramer and Taliep Petersen, working together since the 1980s, who later adapted their approach to inter-personal relationships and the social context of their creations in line with the socio-political changes after 1994.

[20] The label "Coloureds" indicates South Africans of mixed blood, specifically the result of racial mixture that has taken place over generations between Europeans and the indigenous Khoi, San, the various Bantu tribes, Indians and Malays. This political classification was created in the service of the segregation laws during the time of apartheid. Towards the end of the apartheid era the label obviously gained a strongly pejorative quality and in post-apartheid South Africa it has become quite unacceptable as a formal social classification. In the current context and for the purpose of this section I use it simply because it accurately identifies this specific social and cultural group and, to my knowledge, no precise alternative has been coined to date. Clearly no bias or disrespect is intended.

For example, in 1995 they staged a complete re-working of their 1992 musical *Poison*, based on Shakespeare's *Othello*. They staged it in the Brechtian style and adapted the characters to the Coloured community of Cape Town's colourful District Six, from which the population had been forcefully removed and relocated to the Cape Flats under the infamous Group Areas Act during the apartheid rule.

The community of District Six and their lives in the heart of Cape Town before the removals was also the subject of *District Six – The Musical* created by Kramer and Petersen in the 1980s, which successfully toured South Africa and was also staged at the Edinburgh Festival in 1988. A decade later they used the same setting and colourful community in another musical *Kat and the Kings* (1998) and took it to London's West End, capitalising on the assumption that "the old South Africa is the most saleable export of the new South Africa" (Seale, 1998). This proved true in the early years of democracy - *Kat* played to capacity houses and received two Laurence Olivier Awards in London, the Best Actor award going to "the entire cast". Subsequently it was staged to standing ovations in mainstream theatres around South Africa.

Apart from these professional productions, it should be mentioned that a number of smaller productions used the narrative, humorous and natural, often untrained musical talents of many Coloureds drawing upon the collective experience of individuals and communities. For example, at the 2001 KKNK André-Jacques van der Merwe, an established director/performer staged a musical, *Struisvogelstories [Ostrich Bird Stories]*, with a group of Coloured ostrich farm labourers from the Oudtshoorn district, telling the story of their industry.

At the same festival David Kramer premièred *Karoo Kitaar Blues*, not a structured full-scale musical, but a musical performance featuring a number of completely untrained musicians playing their instruments and performing their own songs. A popular singer/songwriter himself, Kramer surrounded himself in this performance with these talented amateurs he had discovered in disadvantaged Coloured communities around the Cape Province and provided them the opportunity to perform on a public stage in celebration of their own music and their own culture. In a way, they were also "telling their story".

The award-winning play *Salaam Stories* (2001) by actor/playwright Ashraf Johaardien, like Nadia Davids's *At Her Feet*, focused specifically on the large Muslim section of the Coloured community. These people were the descendants of Malay slaves shipped to the Cape in the early days of European settlement in the 17th century. *Salaam Stories* sketched characters and situations and related historical and contemporary stories and legends in an engaging and highly entertaining exploration, celebration and confirmation of a social group that had been part of Cape society for centuries. They were now claiming their stake in the new democracy. In a post-9/11 world Johaardien suggested an even wider framework, "It's a portrait of Cape Muslims but within an historical context, locating them globally within Muslim culture" (Tromp, 2004). After its première in 2001, directed with a strong cast by Neville Engelbrecht, *Salaam Stories* played a series of seasons to large audiences in Cape Town's Baxter Theatre over the next number of years.

The following section highlights an interesting selection of prominent productions that dealt not specifically with the celebrated Cape Coloureds who formed part of the multi-cultural population of the Western Cape, but with Coloureds from minority groups in other parts of South Africa. Plays featuring and focusing on the Cape Coloureds have long been part of the theatrical landscape, specifically the work of playwrights like Adam Small and Peter Snyders and others, but what distinguished, for example, *A Coloured Place* (1998) was the fact that it dealt with an historically marginalised minority that was not often in the spotlight, the Coloured population of Durban.

Written by Lueen Conning (aka Malika Lueen Ndlovu) and directed by Tina Johnson, *A Coloured Place* highlighted the dilemma of a segment within a minority group who could align neither with the black majority nor the white minority in the new South Africa, and also not comfortably with the predominantly Afrikaans-speaking Cape Coloureds. The playwright explored the idiosyncrasies of this minority group by focusing on stereotypical individuals and situations and then purposefully contradicting the stereotypes. Even though the production could, in another socio-political climate, have been appreciated simply for its humour, incisive characterisation and pure theatrical entertainment, the main focus of published

reviews and analyses were, almost as if inevitably, on the socio-political implications evoked by a play about a minority group in post-apartheid South Africa, "With or without the added problematic signifier of ambiguous racial polarising (to be more 'white' or to be more 'black'), the crux of *A Coloured Place* is universal, and is made more so by the nexus which the Coloureds represented here experience and articulate so well. ... It is a fresh, vibrant way of voicing issues that did not go away when we all marked our ballot sheets" (Twiggs, 1999b).

While *A Coloured Place* was still running, another hugely successful production started telling the story of a Coloured community living far from the Cape, away from the celebrated Cape Coloureds. *No Room for Squares* (2000), a one-man show by Coco Merckel, supported by a band of family musicians and directed by Robert Colman, told the story of the Coloureds who lived in Sophiatown, Johannesburg.

Through narrative, song, dance and music the playwright/performer energetically portrayed more than 30 diverse characters representing the people in the townships of Westbury and Newclare in Gauteng. The account started with Merckel's youth before the forced removals from Sophiatown under the Group Areas Act and told the story of the people, the gangs, the lore, the music, the nightlife. A number of popular productions had previously dealt with the colourful history of Sophiatown, but never before was the focus completely on its Coloured population. This production, like *A Coloured Place*, was very successful and played to large audiences and popular acclaim, and theatre-goers were powerfully reminded of the minorities who formed part of the multi-cultural canvas of the new South Africa.

The third production selected for discussion here celebrated a sub-group of the Coloured minority that hailed from the far Northern Cape. *Vatmaar ["Just Take It"* or *"Just Help Yourself"* in Afrikaans*]* (2002) was a stage adaptation of AHM Scholtz's award-winning novel *A Place Called Vatmaar* (1995), adapted and directed by Janice Honeyman. With a large cast playing numerous characters, the production presented a collage of moving tales from the Northern Cape village of Vatmaar, whose inhabitants, a group of marginalised and often forgotten people, were brilliantly portrayed through simple stories told by simple folk. On another level these were stories of a remarkable place told by remarkable people.

Vatmaar premièred in the Libertas Amphitheatre in Stellenbosch and subsequently played to packed houses at the KKNK and in various mainstream theatres. The critical reaction was enthusiastic and the production managed to support strongly the trend to examine the diverse and multi-cultural socio-political landscape simply through highlighting and telling the stories, and thereby contributing to reconstruction in a newly formed democracy. One reviewer stated, "*Vatmaar* is political theatre at its best, with any overt reference to politics absent, and the message is the medium itself, in the form of a theatrical catharsis that leaves politicians and their simplicities far behind" (Pienaar, 2002), while another noted, "Two year's ago Nelson Mandela urged the coloured people to reclaim their history. That is exactly what *Vatmaar* does" (De Beer, 2002). Director Janice Honeyman said in an interview, "We have such a rich heritage and a unique past. It is up to us to tell our stories and to make peace with ourselves and with one another so that we can truly find that wholeness of identity, just like the people in Vatmaar" (Mammon, 2003a). And the interviewer summarised in his review: "The stories are also testimonies of a past that needed to be preserved and documented for telling in later years. These are those later years. And we are the privileged ones to have access to them. For, if we are serious about reconciliation (with one another and the past) we need these and other stories like them to remind and to enlighten us so that we can find that common ground" (Mammon, 2003b).

The people were telling their stories, and by doing so insisting that they were an integral part of the new landscape and were vying for a seat at least on the bandwagon, if not on the gravy train.

7.5. History through new eyes

Given the dramatic change in the socio-political situation in South Africa after the 1994 elections some theatre-makers took up the challenge to look critically at the recorded history of the country's peoples. While scholars and historians were challenged to rewrite or at least to reinterpret the recorded history in line with new perspectives, some prominent theatre productions explored historical subjects on the stage from the perspective of a new reality. Deon Opperman's *Donkerland* was an obvious example, already examined in a different context above.

When the award-winning Anglo-Boer War novel *Op soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz [In search of General Mannetjies Mentz]* (1998) by Christoffel Coetzee was published just before the centenary of the start of the 1899-1902 war (also known as the South African War), it unleashed an energetic academic polemic mostly concerned with its historical credibility and perceived negative portrayal of the Boer warriors.

The debate was particularly focused on the monstrous protagonist Mentz and his presumably fictitious "wraakkommando" ["revenge commando"], that searched out Boers who had laid down their arms, and persuaded them to continue fighting the war. As the flagship production of the second Aardklop Festival (1999) the cream of Afrikaans theatre practitioners were employed to mount a high-budget, large-scale, heavily sponsored stage production based on the book. Ilse van Hemert and Chris Vorster developed the script for *Generaal Mannetjies Mentz*, van Hemert directed, Marthinus Basson designed the multimedia staging and the large star-studded cast included Sandra Prinsloo, Marius Weyers, Anna-Mart van der Merwe and other big names of South African stage and screen.

The stage version remained true to the novel's destruction of stereotypes and demythologising of the accepted version of the history of the Anglo-Boer War. It also redefined the roles played in the conflict by Boer, Brit and Black (Hough, 1999). On a wide canvas the production dealt with the horrors of war, gender and racial stereotyping, the conflict between Western and African thought and religion, and a philosophical examination of the darker undercurrents that determine human behaviour.

In essence the novel, like the stage version, was concerned with the Anglo-Boer War mostly as a dramatic backdrop against which issues could be examined that were relevant to the new South Africa and the challenges faced by the new leaders and key role players. Wium van Zyl of the Afrikaans Department of the University of the Western Cape commented that "An historical novel always relates more strongly to the present than to the past. A sentence like the following could be applicable equally to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: 'It is by no means certain that there had

been such a command at all, in which case General Mentz had acted under his own initiative.' Essentially the author transplants a problematic modern question to the shadowy corners of history" (Van Zyl, 1999, translated from Afrikaans).

Another example of a play looking at history through new eyes was Ngema's *The Zulu* (1999). Controversial musical writer and director Mbongeni Ngema, who had commercial success internationally with his earlier musical dramas such as the Tony Award-winning *Asinamali! [We have no money!]* (1984) and *Sarafina* (1987), *Township Fever* (1990), *Magic at 4AM* (1993) and *Sarafina 2* (1995) premièred his *The Zulu* at the Market Theatre in 1999. The colourful, energetic musical tells the story of the Zulu warriors' victory over British soldiers at the battle of Isandlwana in 1879 during the Zulu War in Natal. Ngema had chosen this historical incident because it was "the first time that Africans, anywhere on the continent, had defeated whites" (Ngema, quoted in Molakeng, 1999). He found it appropriate to celebrate that victory in the aftermath of the ANC's election victory of 1994; "...this is an opportune time for blacks to savour this victorious spirit over whites, who had beaten us badly over many years". With *The Zulu* Mbongeni Ngema selected an isolated historical event, one with great dramatic impact, and retold the story in support of the ideal of an "African Renaissance", rather than in the spirit of reconciliation in the new Rainbow Nation.

7.6. Dancing to a true African beat

During the second half of the 20th century so-called "Black musicals" were produced from time to time and some of these became hugely popular locally and also abroad. Three prime examples were *King Kong* (1959), *Ipi Tombi* (1974) and *Sarafina!* (1987). All three of these musicals were highly entertaining and popular. At the same time, however, they all contained elements of protest against contemporary socio-political conditions. *King Kong* (billed at the time as a jazz opera) by Todd Matshikiza, Pat Williams and Harry Bloom tells the story of a black South African heavyweight boxer and his life that degenerated into drunkenness, gang violence, murder and eventually suicide. The social comment on the conditions under which many urban black people lived in apartheid South Africa was clear. One popular song "Sad Times, Bad Times" was even a direct reference to the infamous "treason trial" of

1956. *Ipi Tombi* by Bertha Egnos Godfrey and Gail Lakier deals with the plight of South African migrant labourers and relates the story of a young black man who has to leave his village and young wife to go and work in the gold mines of Johannesburg. Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina* portrays young students involved in the violent, anti-apartheid Soweto Riots of 1976.

During the decade under examination here a general trend emerged where the thematic focus in productions featuring black song and dance seemed to shift away from contemporary socio-political comment and protest to an exploration of traditional black culture, history and ritual. I labelled this trend "Dancing to a true African beat" in an attempt to link it to President Mbeki's ideal of an African Renaissance. Whereas the earlier black musicals, including the examples above, obviously featured African music and dance, their thematic focus was more on the social issues of the day than on exploring African tradition and culture in a non-political way, as was the case in productions of new plays featuring African music and dance in the early years of the new South Africa.

An important forerunner of this trend was Matsemela Manaka's musical *Goree*. It premièred in 1989 in a production by the Soyikwa group, directed by John Kani, and was revived after the playwright's death (in 1998) in a production directed by Jerry Mofokeng at the Market Theatre in 2004. Mofokeng used many of the members of the original cast, including Manaka's widow Nomsa Kupi Manaka in the lead role. *Goree* set the tone for what later became a clear trend in black musical plays in the new South Africa. The musical tells the story of a young South African dancer who goes in search of the wonders of African dance. Her search becomes a spiritual journey that eventually leads to her own self-discovery. Her travels take her as far as an island off Dakar in Senegal, West Africa. The island is Goree, steeped in history and notorious for its role in the slave trade. There she meets a wise old African woman who teaches her all about African culture, art, music and dance. This musical, in its central theme, explored the route along which the plays discussed below followed some years later.

Theatre-makers like Andrew and Janet Buckland, Ellis Pearson and Bheki Mkhwane, Mark Fleishman and Jenny Reznek, Brett Bailey and others started to explore the powerful theatrical elements of Black (South) African cultures, history, mythology,

symbolism, performance traditions and even (often sacred) rituals on stage. Exploring Black African culture and ritual led to some powerful productions during the period. Interestingly, though, the most significant of these projects were driven not by black theatre-makers, but by a handful of white ones, and in 2002 Zakes Mda observed, "...generally white playwrights are the only ones who have ventured into using African ritual on the theatrical stage. Blacks still hold these rituals in awe" (Mda, 2002: 286). Although white entrepreneurs had been exploiting the "African" element in performance, particularly in musical performance, song and dance, for many years, the examination of African culture and ritual on stage became an important part of the trend under discussion here.

I selected six productions to illustrate the trend, starting with Brett Bailey's trilogy, followed by two of Andrew and Janet Buckland's productions and ending with a production by Smal Ndaba and Phyllis Klotz. I reiterate that this is not an attempt to record every theatre-maker's work and every production staged during the period under examination. The intention is to identify some major trends and to illustrate those trends with some selected productions and the theatre-makers responsible for them.

The first example is the work done by Brett Bailey, described as a "white, polite boy from Cape Town's prim southern suburbs (who) took South Africa's staid theatre scene by the throat in the mid-90s, giving it a sharp injection of Africa's potent magic" (Willoughby, 2004). After graduating in drama from the University of Cape Town in 1993 and after some early stage experiments Bailey found himself fascinated by the theatrical potential of Xhosa ritual, myth and culture. With his troupe, Third World Bunfight company, he created a trilogy of powerful, provocative stage productions that explored and mined that potential and celebrated the culture of the amaXhosa.

In his book *The Plays of Miracle and Wonder: Ipi Zombie, iMumbo Jumbo, The Prophet* (2003) Bailey describes in detail his work with a large cast of non-professional actors and musicians, township dwellers, real-life sangomas [traditional healers] and school children in the creation of the trilogy. His company of performers were drawn mostly from the inhabitants of the Rini township outside Grahamstown

and he premièred the three plays at consecutive Grahamstown Festivals from 1997 through 1999.

His work was original, innovative, brave and intriguing. Robert Greig, one of the most influential theatre critics of the time, and not known for hyperbole, described Brett Bailey simply as "...the best thing in South African theatre today" (Greig, 1999a) and claimed later that "Brett Bailey is undoubtedly the most exciting, provocative stage director in South Africa" (Greig, 2001c).

Submerging himself in Xhosa culture, ritual, history, mythology and symbolism Bailey developed these productions as gritty, energetic, interactive happenings. With great respect for the culture of the members of his company, he shaped the theatrical productions while allowing himself to be led by their traditions, sensitivities, customs and beliefs. In a 1998 interview Bailey related, "We take the 41-member cast, which includes some working sangomas, into a trance every morning of rehearsal, which runs its course for 10 to 15 minutes, before we get started on the day's business" (O'Hara, 1998). While crafting his theatrical happenings to be accessible to audience members from all cultures, he developed a working and workshopping method which allowed the complexities of his subject matter to surface in a way that could echo in the new South Africa.

The first production in the trilogy, *iMumbo Jumbo*, subtitled *The Intrepid Tale of Nicholas Tilana Gcaleka*, premièred on the main programme of the 1997 Grahamstown Festival. The audience was seated on bales of straw, served sorghum beer and fruit and invited to experience the ritual. The narrative developed from the actual quest by a contemporary Xhosa chief, Nicholas Gcaleka for the skull of his ancestor, Paramount Chief Hintsa kaPhalo, who was beheaded in 1835 by a Scot, a member of the colonial police force. The skull was taken to Scotland as a trophy. The fact that Chief Hintsa's spirit could not find rest for his head in that foreign land was ostensibly the reason why South Africa today suffered so much crime, violence and corruption. Led by the forefather spirits Gcaleka went to Inverness in Scotland and found the skull. The fact that scientists pronounced the skull to be that of a 17th century Scots nanny was irrelevant in the context of African ritual and mystery as dealt with in the play. "Xhosa chiefs denigrated the find. However, the gulf between

belief and fact, myth and reality, dream and event is brushed aside by the chief. He simply denounces the chiefs as hirelings of civil society; the scientists as white ignoramuses. ... *iMumbo Jumbo* has the seductiveness of the sensual, simple truth. It's a rich reminder of volatile forces that cannot be reasoned away. It eschews such niceties as debate, brushes aside unlikelinesses, demands that the audience sing, dance and pray in the theatre and reminds us that the society of the waBenzi[21] is not the whole truth of the new South Africa" (Greig, 1997b). Whatever the facts, the stolen skull provided a trigger and a theme for a most entertaining and original theatrical experience that pulsated with the heartbeat of Africa; "Mischievous satire mixes with magical storytelling anchored in symbolism and myth. (*iMumbo Jumbo*) is the ultimate metaphor for placating the historical past and resolving the tortured present" (Sichel, 1997a).

The second production, *Ipi Zombi?* was developed from a play Bailey called *Zombie*, which he had staged earlier in Cape Town with a group called Abanyabantu ["the other people"]. *Ipi Zombi?* premièred at the 1998 Grahamstown Festival and used as its point of departure the actual events surrounding a witch hunt that happened in 1995 near Kokstad. Witnesses reported that they saw fifty naked old women ("witches") bleeding the bodies of 12 schoolboys directly after they had been killed in a minibus accident, imprisoning the souls of the boys as zombie slaves. Subsequently a witch hunt engulfed the town and three women were killed by mobs.

The production explored the material through narrative, song, dance and sangoma chanting and the playwright summarised, "*Ipi Zombi?* is about the clash between traditional African beliefs and those of Christianity. It is all about the West and Africa colliding. ... Few African events are done on stage and it shows a white audience that zombies do exist and that they play a real part in African life" (quoted by Gallet, 1998). Inevitably this unfamiliar style of theatre concerned certain critics, like a *Mail & Guardian* reviewer: "Despite its witty political post-modernity, the play also comes dangerously close to feeding into European stereotypes about dark, wild, mysterious

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[21] A derogatory term that refers to the nouveau riche in the new South Africa, people who, sometimes as result of affirmative action or black empowerment, have become owners of luxury status symbols, such as Mercedes Benz vehicles. "Wa" means "people" in some Bantu languages.

and savage natives. Its exoticisation of aspects of rural African culture are discomforting at times" (Dodd, 1998).

The overwhelming response, however, was positive and commentators were enthusiastic, with one of the most respected amongst them, Zakes Mda, observing, "[*Ipi Zombi?*] is a work of genius that maps out a path to a new South African theatre that is highly innovative in its use of indigenous performance modes" (Snyman, 1998).

The third piece, *The Prophet* premièred at the 1999 Grahamstown Festival and this time Bailey used an historical incident to explore the clash between amaXhosa culture and Western-style thinking. Combining the historical account as recorded in the history books with the oral version as recounted by the tribal elders, the production tells of the self sacrifice, the suicide of the Xhosa nation in the mid 19th century, at the time of the European colonisation of the eastern areas of Southern Africa. In 1856 Nongqawuse, an 11-(15?)-year old prophetess had a vision that if the Xhosa people were to sacrifice and destroy all their cattle, their crops and their water wells, their departed heroes would arise from the dead, would drive herds of immortal livestock before them and would lead the nation into a new, utopian existence, liberated from the foreign colonisers. The people did what Nongqawuse's vision demanded and the consequences were catastrophic, resulting not only in the deaths of many thousands, but also in the eventual subjugation of the Xhosa as a nation.

The fascinating story of Nongqawuse had interested researchers and writers for a long time and has been the subject of dramas and other literary works before. Brett Bailey declared in an interview with John Matzhikiza, "What really fascinates me is the fact that so many of the Xhosa were mesmerised by the visions and prophecies of a small girl." And the interviewer commented, "Nongqawuse's is the ultimate tale of African self-delusion in the face of European colonial aggression. ... Bailey stresses that rather than opening an old wound, his interest is in helping to heal it. He believes that his style of ritualistic theatre, where the performers themselves achieve something of a state of mesmerisation, and the audience is drawn in as an active participant, complete with the aura of incense and medicinal herbs, is part of this healing process"(Matzhi-kiza, 1999).

Brett Bailey, working with some actual descendants of the survivors of the Nongqawuse disaster, and through his brand of ritual-in-theatre was combining so many theatrical styles and elements while experimenting with indigenous ones that his work was breaking down many traditional barriers of genre, while at the same time exploring the multi-cultural tensions in the new South Africa. He and the members of his Third World Bunfight company were striking a new beat and inviting other South African theatre-makers to also dance to it.

At the Grahamstown Festival 2001 Andrew and Janet Buckland incorporated Xhosa traditions and rituals into their powerful production of *Makana*. In typical physical Buckland style, using mime, dance and song, four actors playing many roles told the story of Makana, the charismatic amaXhosa chief, visionary, prophet, warrior and orator. Makana was brought up by Christian missionaries, converted to Christianity and later became disillusioned with the religion of the colonisers who oppressed his people and took their land. In 1819 he led about 10,000 amaXhosa warriors in an attack on a British garrison of about 350 soldiers in Grahamstown, at a place called Egazini ["the place of blood"]. Makana's prophecy that the British bullets would turn to water failed to come true and many of his warriors died. So Makana became the first political prisoner on Robben Island, from where he later escaped by boat but never made it to the mainland - he drowned en route.

Using this dramatic history as their narrative, the Bucklands staged a multi-media production that combined their own style of physical theatre with the use of song, dance, Xhosa praise poetry and African ritual. The initiation rites that include the circumcision of young boys and the slaughter of a cow as a sacrifice to the ancestors are examples of sacred rituals that formed part of the action. The production dealt with sensitive material and portrayed a fascinating historical figure in a brilliantly theatrical way that was entertaining and at the same time thought-provoking. "*Makana* is polemical, at a time when South Africans are turning over the coinage of history in their hands and looking at the other side" (Greig, 2001d).

Earlier, Janet Buckland had directed *Thuthula, Heart of the Labyrinth* by Chris Zithulele Mann as a student production in 1980. For the Grahamstown Festival of

2003 she staged it again, this time as a large-scale production with a professional cast of Xhosa performers and in the exciting New South Africa context of “dancing to a true African beat”. It was to be another celebration of Xhosa culture and at the same time an exploration of cross-cultural sensitivities.

Inspired by the poem *Thuthula* by JJR Jolobe, a well-known Xhosa writer of the 1920s, the play told the tragic romantic story, set in the early 19th century, of a beautiful young woman, Thuthula, with whom both the acting Xhosa monarch King Ndlambe and his nephew Prince Ngqika fell in love at the same time. When she married them both it divided the Xhosa nation, led to conflict between the two clans and resulted in the bloody Battle of Amalinde in 1818. From a Western perspective Buckland believed “the legend of Thuthula and Ngqika could and should become as famous as Romeo and Juliet, linked to Verona in Italy and Helen of Troy, linked to the ruins of Troy in Greece” (Kumbaca, 2003).

But, when the production was publicised, even before its first public performance, the announcement resulted in a furious response from the Xhosa traditional leaders. Their outrage was based on two issues. On the one hand, they believed that the historical incident was a humiliating embarrassment. AmaXhosa King Xolilizwe Sigcawu called it “a disgrace” and the chairperson of the Eastern Cape House of Traditional Leaders Chief Ngangomhlaba Matanzima declared, “The Story of Thuthula does not make us proud, because she misbehaved by falling in love with both Chief Ndlambe and his nephew Chief Ngqika, just like in *The Bold and the Beautiful*. How can we be proud of that?” (Kumbaca, 2003). On the other hand, the traditional leaders were “adamant they would never allow the writing and interpretation of Xhosa history to be usurped by ‘whites who were out to make money and were not concerned about the restoration of the dignity of the Xhosa people’” (Jack, 2003a). Some leaders even claimed that the play would revive the hatred that existed between the followers of Ndlambe and Ngqika amongst the descendents of the AmaNdlambe and AmaNgqika clans two centuries later.

This led to a vigorous debate amongst the traditional leaders, theatre-makers and Xhosa academics. The spokesperson of the production’s sponsors, the Eastern Cape Arts and Culture Department, contradicted the traditional leaders, even claiming the

story brings dignity and respect to Xhosa chieftaincy. “It will create a greater awareness of the rich traditional heritage and culture of the Eastern Cape. We wish to invite all chiefs and kings to watch the story themselves” (Kumbaca, 2003).

Eventually the production went ahead with the producers and their supporters claiming that the play was essentially about love, about a beautiful young girl who decided to follow her heart and that it was a celebration of Xhosa history and culture. Professor Buyile Mkonto of Vista University eventually convinced the traditional leaders that “the play is a love issue, the love that Thuthula had for King Ngqika, and is not aimed at damaging or degrading the Xhosa monarchy” (Jack, 2003b).

In the end the theatrical grace of the performance, the poetic beauty of the dialogue and the timelessness of the legend triumphed, and *Thuthula, Heart of the Labyrinth* went on to become a successful production. The controversy surrounding its first performance, however, underlined the challenges faced by artists in a new, democratic, but multi-cultural society. These challenges were particularly daunting at a time when white theatre-makers working with the powerful theatrical material mined from African history, themes, traditions and rituals were often treated with a suspicion that was clearly a remnant of the old days.

A deep respect for the tribal values, culture, traditions and rituals formed a key ingredient of the work done by Smal Ndaba and his colleague Phyllis Klotz at their Sibikwa Community Theatre Project. Social upliftment was high on the new government’s agenda after 1994 and a number of theatre initiatives contributed to this drive. Apart from an obvious educational objective, such productions were often of a high aesthetic, theatrical and entertainment standard and while reaching their primary target audiences at grass roots level in the townships, they were often staged in mainstream venues and at arts festival as well. Productions staged by the Sibikwa Project are examples.

The Project was founded in 1988 on the East Rand “to fill the void in the performing arts deliberately created by the old government through Bantu Education. ... Sibikwa aims at mending and healing the broken social fabric of black communities. Child and woman abuse, juvenile delinquency and crime are some of the issues the courses

address", according to its director and co-founder Smal Ndaba (Ndebele, 1997). While also training students for a career in the performing arts and serving the community through educational and awareness projects, Sibikwa staged and toured, locally and internationally, a number of high-quality productions, mostly devised and directed by Ndaba and Klotz, the centre's co-founder, theatre director and educationalist.

As an example, their *Ubuntu Bomhlaba – The Humaneness of the World* premièred on the main festival at the 1993 National Arts Festival in Grahamstown and subsequently performed on the mainstream circuit and around the country. With a large cast, including Smal Ndaba, the play explores the tribulations experienced by the inhabitants of an African village when they fail to respect the traditions and rituals of their culture. Reviewer Raeford Daniel stated: "Not since the epic-scaled tribal sagas of Credo Mutwa have we seen anything like this. And *Ubuntu Bomhlaba* is unique in that it uses music – and what a novel blend of Afro-ethnic and almost liturgical "Eurocentric" themes – in an almost operatic *sturm und drang* style (even much of the dialogue is sung a la recitative) and that much of the action is dominated by an insistent drum beat. … Even the dancing, so obligatory these days in any African dramatic presentation, has a particular relevance and an almost balletic quality. ... There is an almost Grecian inevitability in the way things turn out" (Daniel, 1994).

Ubuntu Bomhlaba was an example of a project which had community service and social upliftment as its primary objective, but which also became a theatrical production that played to critical acclaim and to large audiences, not only in their target communities, but also on the festival and mainstream circuits. It was an example of a blend of community, educational, and commercial mainstream theatre reaching a wide social spectrum of audiences and accomplishing all three objectives while joyfully dancing to the African beat and contributing to the African Renaissance.

7.7. Life in a new democracy

Art in general and the theatre in particular has often been described as a mirror – the theatre as a mirror reflecting the society it invites to fill the auditorium and to observe

images of itself reflected in the glare of the footlights. In *Theatre and Society in South Africa* Temple Hauptfleisch uses the mirror image and notes in the context of the complexity of democratic South African society and the mirror that reflects it, “For not only is our society fragmented – and it will be so for some while still I fear – but the mirror itself is a fractured instrument, reflecting skewed and partial images, from odd angles at times – or bleary and obscure ones, if any at all” (Hauptfleisch, 1997: 21).

All performing art can be interpreted as a reflection, consciously or unconsciously, of the society that gave birth to it. The following, however, is a selection of a sub-set of prominent productions staged during the decade under discussion that very *consciously* and *intentionally* attempted to hold up the mirror and to reflect selected images from the new South African landscape to their audiences. The productions are discussed in chronological order, also illustrating how the focus tended to shift during the period. The theatre-makers each had their own objective with each project, but what brings these selected productions together in an attempt to illustrate a specific trend, is the fact that they deliberately revealed a mirrored image, however “skewed” or “partial”, of life in this new democracy.

In early 1994 the most frequently asked and most obvious question in South Africa was not who was going to win the elections, but how democracy was going to change the country. Playwright John Ledwaba was amongst the first to ask this question in the post-democracy South African theatre. His *Jozi Jozi Guide* (1994) premièred at the Windybrow Arts Festival in March 1993 and opened for a run at the Market Theatre to coincide with the first democratic elections in 1994. The play held up an image of life in the most populous metropolis in the country and focused on the transformation, the “Africanisation” that was already taking place in the city of Johannesburg. The playwright summarised his intention in an interview with *City Press*: “things have changed (but) I feel that at this crucial time we need to pause and ask if this is genuine change that will see this city transformed into an African city, or whether it will just continue to be a satellite of white values, lifestyles and culture. The presence of whites is still very pervasive” (Anonymous, 1994a). Clearly this was a fundamental question relating to the city of “Jozi” only as a representative symbol of the much wider question relating to the country as a whole and all its people; for

"an African city", read "an African country". And this was asked at the very dawn of the new era.

A few months later the same question of Africanisation was addressed in a light-hearted manner by Paul Slabolepszy when he premièred *Victoria Almost Falls*, directed by Lara Foot-Newton at the 1994 Grahamstown Festival. An Italian restaurant that was part of the romantic quasi-Mediterranean scene of old Hillbrow is dying in the new Johannesburg. The characters represent a cross-section of European immigrant South Africans who live in the rapidly changing Hillbrow and who fear that they will have no future in the new South Africa. The black head waiter believes that it is time for the restaurant to take Pasta Alfredo off the menu and to replace it with a dish of pap and chicken feet.

The old versus the new and the challenges brought along by a rapidly changing socio-political reality was also the subject of *Valley Song* by Athol Fugard, which opened at the Market Theatre in 1995 and played at various festivals and mainstream theatres locally and abroad. On one level the play was autobiographical about an elderly man finding himself more comfortable in the familiar and secure, if confined reality of the past, while on another it dealt with the challenges and opportunities facing a new generation in an entirely new environment. An old Coloured man in the rural Eastern Cape has lovingly brought up his teenage granddaughter in the values, the fears and the limited expectations of the old South Africa, but she has aspirations to be more. Life has given her one thing, a lovely singing voice, and she wants to sing her own song. More, she wants to become a famous singing star in Johannesburg, the City of Gold. Hers is a dream of freedom. The metaphor is apparent; the old must find the wisdom to let go of the past and the new must find the courage to take the first steps into the future. In an interview at the time of the première the playwright commented, also in the narrower context of the arts, "I believe that we are going to get it (the new South Africa) right. I believe there is an exciting time ahead for us in the arts as our new reality emerges and as our artists focus on the new reality. Maybe we lack focus at the moment and maybe that's because our reality isn't defined" (MacLiam, 1995a). This was the optimistic voice of post-apartheid Fugard, comfortable with the present and truly optimistic about the future, and his *Valley Song* was meant to hold up an image reflecting one of the core challenges to life in the new South Africa.

Both Fugard and Slabolepszy often used the technique of focusing on two characters drawn from a particular section of society and examining their social situation and personal interaction.[22] Writer/director Itumeleng Wa-Lehulere did the same with his *Down Adderley Street*, which opened at the Market Theatre later in 1995. The play focused on one of the very lowest levels of society and portrayed the predicament and dreadful living conditions of two children barely surviving in the streets of Cape Town. The piece provided an often amusing, but at the same time grittily realistic vehicle for two young actors. On one level the barely teenaged boys could be seen "as likeable rascals, in an unfortunate, dreadful situation, instead of seeing them as amoral young thugs in an unfortunate, dreadful situation, with the likelihood being that it is not of their own making" (MacLiam, 1995b). On another level the play offered, "a vignetted peek into the gutter society of Cape Town, posing some very hard questions. The lives of street children are its immediate concern, but in their voices, if we listen carefully, we can hear those of a million others, of people without land, vested interests, or union representation, out on the fringes of society. These voices offer no eulogies to the Reconstruction and Development Programme, no obeisances to the 'rainbow nation'" (Le Page, 1995b). In certain critical circles *Down Adderley Street* was seen as representative of a trend in new black theatre to be less than appreciative of the new government's efforts, often in the shape of political satire. Even as early as 1995 there was a perception amongst some that social change and upliftment was happening more slowly than expected and such concerns were often raised, also in the theatre, but not always universally appreciated.

In an analysis of *Down Adderley Street* critic Bongani Madondo noted, "The trend seems to be, in the absence of a white scapegoat to scalp, the new black elite are sitting ducks for us to comically harass. ... This play continues in the hilarious analogy of 'how bad' the country is today" (Madondo, 1996). This reaction from a black reviewer to the work of a respected black theatre-maker might have been undeservedly harsh, but quite understandable in a country still suffering from racial

[22] Although it was by no means exclusive to his work, Athol Fugard explored and developed this technique in his early ("poor theatre") days and he never really abandoned it. It is possibly one of his most admired and enduring contributions to modern theatre, locally and internationally. It can also be noted that Paul Slabolepszy is Fugard's true successor in this regard.

stereotyping and where the first black government had only been in power for a couple of years. Whatever its intentions, the production contributed a vivid portrait of a section of South African society who had not yet seen the benefits of the new democracy – at the same time it was proof of a freedom of expression that was refreshing on the South African stage.

Dinner Talk by Mike van Graan also used the two-hander format in a powerful trilogy of short satirical plays that premièred at the Grahamstown Festival and subsequently toured the mainstream theatres around the country in 1997. Providing an insight into inevitable polarisations in politicised South African society, the three playlets explored three typical situations of political (in)correctness and interracial tension in post-apartheid South Africa. A white writer clashes with his black friend who is now comfortably riding the gravy train in government, while previously they were comrades involved in "the struggle" (*Happily Ever After).* A middle-class white woman has a post-coitus conversation with an Indian man she had picked up for a one-night stand experimenting with the new South Africa freedom of sexual association (*Respect Me in the Morning*). A white human rights lawyer is jailed for killing his pregnant wife's black hijackers/murderers and his friend and colleague, a black lawyer who is indebted to him, has a problem understanding his actions (*Thabo for Thabo*). These three representations of typical conflicts of the period took three regular subjects of post-apartheid dinner party conversations and dressed them as entertaining, stimulating, comic satirical theatre. "*Dinner Talk* comprises images of confusion in the wake of momentous political transformation. It depicts formerly clear roles that are now shattered and chaotic... Van Graan's vision is neither bleak nor optimistic. It's realistic and it captures emotional complexities. 'To understand is to forgive,' seems to be the credo" (Greig, 1998).

Given his long history of activism in the arts and as a respected arts policy adviser part of Van Graan's agenda with these short plays was also to address political correctness in the new South African theatre and some of the frustrations in the evolving relationship between theatre practitioners and the government department of arts and culture – issues that took up much of his energy and which he could not resist building into the subtext and even the dialogue of these plays. At the same time *Dinner Talk* was also a celebration of the liberation of South African theatre. Van

Graan stated: “Writers no longer have to sup with the apartheid whore. Audiences no longer have to be spat at. Critics have to find new labels. Gone are the simplistic days of us and them. Goodies and baddies, Black and White. Our society has grown up, but still has complexes, contradictions” (Bell, 1997). But the main value of these plays in the current context was their contribution to a trend of exploring and mirroring new South Africa life, and its often amusing side.

Also focusing on the funny side, in another snapshot of new South Africa life, Lara Foot-Newton, resident director of the Market Theatre at the time, workshopped and directed another remarkable production, *Ma-Gents* (1997), this time concentrating on the male of the species, while the pieces discussed above looked at both sexes. In a physical theatre style, including mime, song and dance and using four languages in the dialogue, the play explored perceptions of masculinity in the new South Africa through three male actors performing brilliantly in an energetic ensemble piece. Avoiding stereotype and cliché and through humour and empathy the piece transformed the commonplace into a sparkling experience in exploring communication and inter-cultural interaction in the new Rainbow Nation.

Similar themes were explored in a popular commercial production that opened at the Grahamstown Festival in 1998 and went on to play to capacity houses in the Market Theatre. In a conventional realistic staging of his *Not With My Gun*, co-written with Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom, Aubrey Sekhabi focused on the new South African urban black middle-class experience: A successful black filmmaker throws a party for his three life-long friends to celebrate on the evening before one of them is to get married, and they catch a white burglar red-handed in the house. How do these four middle-class black men treat the terrified white criminal they have apprehended? How do they manage their intuitive desire for revenge?

In *Not With My Gun* a clichéd old South African situation is turned around and the play shrewdly and chillingly looks at the way new South Africans deal with it. “A potent drama with emotional and intellectual twists and turns, it questions individual choice and responsibility in the context of shedding political baggage. ... [the dilemma of the white criminal] perfectly captures the humiliation and battering experienced by white Afrikanerdom” (Anonymous, 1998). “Although it seems to be very much a

white-black thing as seen in the context of the action, the focus is an entirely human one in the end. The story becomes tellingly universal" (De Villiers, 1998). While providing quality mainstream entertainment, *Not With My Gun* took a close look at the extent to which some things had changed in the new South Africa and how citizens were handling that change.

Talented young playwright/director Aubrey Sekhabi, the 1998 winner of the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for drama and artistic director of the North West Arts Council, was clearly emerging from what he called our theatre's "laboratory phase" with its focus on workshopping, and was exploring the discipline of playwriting in its conventional form. One critic commented that "Aubrey Sekhabi can disguise an overarching and un-naff moral polemic within a fairly predictable plot's inevitable clichés and then twist the pop formula to compel his audience is one of the most exciting developments on the local stage in many moons" (Blignaut, 1998).

While *Not With My Gun* dealt with dilemmas confronting members of the emerging black middle-class, the spotlight was turned onto dilemmas confronting members of the threatened ex-ruling white middle-class in Paul Slabolepszy's *Planet Perth* (1998). Here was another play about change. Three privileged middle-aged individuals have to deal with change on multiple levels, from midlife crisis to socio-political transformation. While the married couple are packing to escape the new South Africa by emigrating to Australia, their best friend is coming to terms with his recent divorce and resultant middle-age bachelorship. In describing his play as "an adult escapist comedy" Slabolepszy alluded to the perceived threat experienced by middle-aged, typically middle-class white South Africans, generally in terms of mid-life disillusionment, but more specifically in terms of social insecurity and even physical risk in mid-1990s South Africa. The focus was on the impulse to escape problematic situations rather than dealing with them and the subject was the privileged white middle-class.

In the context of examining life in a new democracy, the next production also dealt with the impulse to escape, like Slabolepszy's play. But this time the focus was on the lives led by a marginalised sub-group of social outcasts, true outsiders, and their means of escape - booze. Under "let me tell you my story" a number of productions

were discussed that saw minority groups, including those historically classified as Coloured, tell their tale. The perspicacious and highly entertaining production of *Suip! [(to) Booze!]*, written by Cape theatre-makers Heinrich Reisenhofer and Oscar Peterson and directed by Reisenhofer, focused on the life led by the "bergies", homeless Coloured people who live in the open ("sleep rough") on the slopes of the "berg" (Table Mountain) and beg in the streets of Cape Town. *Suip!* was first staged as a student production in 1993 and later became a hit in a professional staging at the Grahamstown Festival of 1999, subsequently touring the festival circuit and mainstream theatres around the country and eventually shown at the 6-week *Celebrate South Africa* festival in London in 2001.

As indicated earlier, a stereotypical image of the Cape Coloureds has always been of spontaneous, natural performers, folksy singers and dancers, storytellers with a witty, colourful vernacular and a quick, wry sense of humour. In *Suip* these qualities are exploited theatrically as a group of bergies stage an impromptu "performance" for local passers-by and tourists on a street corner in St Georges Mall in Cape Town. They recount the story of their Khoi ancestors who lost their identity as a distinct cultural group through intermarriage in early colonial days, their place later in apartheid South Africa and ultimately the life they are now leading in the new South Africa, illustrating that they are not only victims of the past, but also of the present.

Through musical performance and colourful narrative the historical account serves as a framing device for an exploration of the current reality these people have to deal with. "This is not a show intended to reinforce stereotypes or to ridicule its subjects. Instead, it sensitively blends comedy, song, dance and drama to drive home the stark reality that faces this unwanted, reviled and displaced people" (Kennedy, 2001). The way they deal with that reality is through humour and by escaping through alcohol, their boozing having become "a way of life, a language, a philosophy". For the price of a bottle of "bakleiwyn"[23] they are ready to play out their performance for the passers-by. The "bakleiwyn" notwithstanding, they are peace-loving people who exist on the margins of society. One character claims "loitering, stinking and drinking is our only crime." Ultimately their story can be described as a message of survival

[23] Afrikaans, meaning "fight wine" - the cheapest brand, and the overindulgence in which inevitably leads to a fight.

against the most brutal of odds in the "Cape of No Hope". The element of hopelessness, however, is inescapable and illustrated in the chillingly shocking final scene where one of them is drenched in gasoline and set alight. The plight of the (too often inebriated) homeless is not unique to Cape Town and its "bergies", but *Suip!* effectively reflected this dilemma as a residue of the old social order and an urgent challenge to the new.

Survival in crime-ridden Johannesburg was one of the themes also in the popular musical *Love, Crime and Johannesburg*, co-written by Malcolm Purkey and Carol Steinberg and directed by Purkey. It was staged by the Junction Avenue Theatre Company and premièred at the Grahamstown Festival of 1999. Once again life in Jozi was the subject, but the musical struck much more widely with incisive, satirical commentary on life in the new South Africa after five years of democracy, highlighting specific areas like corruption, nepotism, the gravy train and the increase in crime.

Apart from a fascination with the multi-cultural masses and sub-cultures of the metropolis, the original inspiration for the play came from two sources: three sensational criminal cases that dominated the headlines at the time, and Bertolt Brecht's question in *The Threepenny Opera*, "Why bother to rob a bank when you can own it?" The three media stories dealt with: a people's poet who had robbed a bank and ended up in jail; a former political activist and soldier of a liberation army who was masterminding cash-in-transit heists; his former comrade who was jailed in a neighbouring country for alleged gunrunning. In an interview Michael Purkey noted, "The question everyone is going to ask is: 'Is it about Mzwakhe Mbuli, or Colin Chauke or Robert McBride?' And the answer is: We are using very significant events relating to high-profile people and daily events from the newspapers to construct a completely fictional account. Crucial issues facing post-apartheid are used in a very popular way. I believe this is the first 'real' post-apartheid SA work. It's Johannesburg at the turn of the century - this time 1999, not 1899. ... In this project I'm fascinated by changes in South Africa post the first democratic elections. It fascinates me how some comrades from the struggle are worth R40-million, others are busy doing bank robberies and others are working for the secret, secret service" (Purkey, quoted in Sichel, 1999).

Using a variety of musical styles ranging from contemporary African jazz and marabi through American Rhythm and Blues to adaptations of Brecht and Kurt Weill, *Love, Crime and Johannesburg* tells the story of Jimmy ‘Long Legs’ Mangane, people’s poet and hero of the struggle, who is jailed for robbing a bank. He has to deal with the fact that his former struggle comrades who now shun him, have become powerful and wealthy members of the new elite. Other characters include his two girlfriends, the sassy young operator Bibi Khuswayo and the liberal young middle-class activist Lulu Levin – images of liberated, multi-cultural new South Africa. Another, the aging streetwise former gang leader Bones Shibambo, is disillusioned by the lack of discrimination, finesse, style, honour and integrity amongst modern-day criminals. He comments, “In the old days, we were proper gangsters. We had a set of rules, a code of conduct. There were certain ways and means we did things. We knew who we were robbing and why. ... The *nzvegoes* [today's criminals] are bloody vampires. ... We used reason. Everybody's too greedy now. Our motto was small amounts, pride and cleanliness in our work. And a full amount of honour. Now, they're just mad. ... We went to the church schools. We learnt respect. ... Them, no school. Motto: gun, fast car, easy money and lots of poes [cunt]. No god! No family! They don't know who they are” (Makoe, 1999). This speech illustrates the general tone of the piece, satirically, humorously dealing with extremely serious issues and through song and dance and the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* examining some of the realities of life and a search for a new identity in the new South Africa.

By the turn of the century it had become commonplace for theatre-makers, often the same ones who were prominent in the anti-apartheid protest theatre, to question and even condemn the actions of the new South African political leaders and the new princes of industry and commerce – in this case the blow was softened by the choice of genre, a multi-lingual musical satire with a multi-cultural cast and lots of song and dance.

Another prominent musical that premièred at the 1999 Grahamstown Festival (later at the State Theatre), shifted the focus from the metropolis to issues concerning more traditional rural communities, but also not without critical commentary on the new South Africa. *Milestones* combined the talents of a group of highly regarded theatre-

makers in writer Mandla Langa, director Jerry Mofokeng, composers Motsumi Makhene and Mokale Koapeng, trumpeter Hugh Masekela, performers Sibongile Khumalo, Owen Sejake and Gloria Bosman in the leads, choreographer Nomsa Manaka and producer Mannie Manim.

In *Milestones* the new South Africa is the focus, and the conflict is between urban modern and rural traditional cultures. The theme is the recovery of their ancestral land by a community who had lost it in the 1960s under the apartheid Group Areas Act, and the opportunity for them to regain their pride based in their traditional values (the post-democracy symbolism is clear); after working on the mines for thirty years an old patriarch hears that his family's land has been returned to him and he moves back to the place of his birth, where the challenge is for a community to rebuild and to redefine itself. His only son had been shot as a spy by comrades during the anti-apartheid struggle and when the patriarch dies his surviving heir, his daughter, has to take over the leadership from him. The modern young woman is confronted by the choice between a life of relative poverty as traditional leader of her people, or a career as an urban lawyer in the big city with the bright opportunities available to her in the new South Africa. Her third option, the play suggests satirically, is to join the government and earn a fabulous salary with the perk of a big Mercedes or a BMW... In a strong production with a top cast *Milestones* provided another good example of a late-1990s play reflecting life in the new South Africa, addressing specific socio-political issues and commenting on life in the new democracy.

Stand in the Sun by John Hunt looked at a meeting between three characters in the new South Africa in a rather conventional play staged to mixed critical reaction. Two men from Alexandra township represent the general difference between the old-South Africa township dweller, on the one hand, and the new South Africa flashy, get-rich-quick township yuppie, on the other. The third character is a working-class white Afrikaner male. They meet by chance at a crossroads in Alex and the ensuing interaction explores their experience of the new South Africa, their place in it and the fact that the differences that separated groups in the old South Africa have not all disappeared in the new.

The play was quite ordinary, but what made the production extraordinary, given its central focus on separate social groups that existed in the old and persisted in the new South Africa, was its staging. John Hunt, playwright, but primarily known as an innovative creative adman and co-founder of TBWA Hunt Lascaris (a very high-profile South African advertising agency), built the concept into the production of staging the piece in two very specifically selected venues at the same time. This resulted in more than a traditional production, but an original kind of happening. In April 1999 *Stand in the Sun*, directed by Barbara Rubin, opened with two different casts simultaneously in two different theatres, the Alexan Kopano Community Theatre in Alexandra and the Agfa Theatre on The Square in Sandton. Audience members attending either venue were given the opportunity to be bussed to the other. Theatre-goers could be transported from the low-income all-black Alexandra township to join the audience in the traditionally upper-income white Theatre on The Square, while Sandton theatre-goers could be bussed (under police escort) into the heart of Alexandra to join the audience there. This arrangement continued for the duration of the play's run. A critic who attended both venues noted, "*Stand In The Sun* takes audience participation to a new level, as it challenges the attitudes of theatre-goers and subtly invites them to check out the reactions of their neighbours in the auditorium" (Moerdyk, 1999). The project managed to explore an element of life in the new South Africa by providing theatre-goers from opposite socio-economic poles an opportunity to develop a sense of awareness for those areas of similarity between people who live very different lives in extremely different circumstances – yet all in the same Rainbow Nation.

Coming to terms with life in the new South Africa and the rules that governed it, was also a theme in the brilliant *The Great Outdoors* by actor/playwright Neil McCarthy. Prominent theatre critic Robert Greig described this play as "A mountain of South African theatre - one of the most complex and mature plays written in this country in the past two decades, it makes others look infantile" (Greig, 2001b).

The Great Outdoors, a four-hander in which the playwright took the lead, premièred at the Grahamstown Festival in 2000, directed by Barbara Rubin, and subsequently played in mainstream theatres. The primary focus of the play is on ordinary South Africans facing their own fallibility and living with guilt and fear in the new South

Africa. The central character is a car salesman who, driving home, runs over and kills a drunk man from a squatter camp. With the help of a former army colleague, now an officer in the police force, they cover it up. But the price is a Faustian arrangement requiring the salesman to allow the police major to sleep with his wife.

The brilliance of the play was principally in the strength and subtlety of the dialogue crafted by McCarthy, an actor/playwright – the same hallmark that distinguished the work of contemporary actor/playwrights like Fugard and Slabolepszy. The subtlety with which the main themes were explored and specifically through the sparse, but accurate and understated dialogue, made *The Great Outdoors* a powerful work about which Robert Greig noted “its assumptions that a playwright does not have to explain everything, can take being South African for granted and looks hard at the fundamental questions of quality of life. In that sense, it is probably South Africa's first post-apartheid play” (Greig, 2000c). Another critic commented, “This is a tremendous modern tragedy of guilt and conscience. [McCarthy] has written a script which reveals the demons and doubts that beset a complicated man struggling with what is meant by honesty” (Jordan, 2001). Certainly being South African was taken for granted and thus the central themes became universal, but the dynamics driving the conflict and the elements of fear and guilt were explored in a very specific New South Africa context - a context where the villains of the past had become the heroes of the day and where truth often had a ring of relativity to it. The small man was caught up in this and battled to find truth and the significance of his own existence.

The challenges of living in the new South Africa were approached from a completely different angle in Anthony Akerman's *Comrades Arms,* which also played at mainstream theatres around the country after opening at the Grahamstown Festival in 2000. Akerman wrote a clever, mischievous farce about predominantly middle-class white liberals, many of whom went into exile during the apartheid years, and their place upon their return to the new South African reality.

The playwright himself went abroad as a student in 1973, became involved in anti-apartheid activities and remained in voluntary exile until 1987, when he applied for and was refused entry to the Republic by the Nationalist government. He consequently found himself in involuntary exile in Europe until the dawn of the new

South Africa, to which he returned to become an award-winning playwright. The central character in *Comrades Arms* is a former "struggle poet", a dyed-in-the-wool Communist, who returns from exile abroad to work for a reconstruction and redistribution organisation called the Foundation for Upliftment, Culture and Knowledge. But when the CEO of FUCK "redistributes all their income into his own pocket", the returned exile is destitute and is forced to start his own business. He opens a B&B called Comrades Arms, with a cast of characters that include the poet's highly-strung wife, the strange guest with a secret, the sexy receptionist and the affirmative action trainee from an historically disadvantaged background.

An obvious source of inspiration for *Comrades Arms* was the British television sitcom series *Fawlty Towers* and the playwright divulged another in an interview that he "got the idea of the capitalist-Communist after chatting to fellow exile and Constitutional Court judge Albie Sachs, who related an anecdote about an SACP [South African Communist Party] stalwart who had returned to SA and opened a B&B" (Kennedy, 2000). This quite ironic premise provided the comical situation for a light, farcical look at a group of South Africans who typically took themselves rather seriously in their situation of former "comrades" and who often found themselves rather sidelined in the power-dynamics of the new South Africa.

One of the objectives of the new democratic South Africa was the peaceful redistribution of wealth through affirmative action and other forms of social engineering, and the satirical reference to "redistribution into his own pocket" in *Comrades Arms* was an example of careful, humorous comment on certain elements amongst the new authorities. Similar examples are mentioned above of a certain cautious political correctness and even self-censorship that prevented many theatre-makers, even if they were inclined to do so, from "raining on the parade" of the new Rainbow Nation.

On the other hand, there were those who dealt bravely and head-on with such issues, and this had an added impact where those critics of the new establishment were from the ranks of the anti-apartheid struggle comrades. Lesego Rampolokeng was a prominent, internationally recognised anti-apartheid poet associated with the members of the Congress of South African Writers, the cultural wing of the struggle politics in

the 1980s. His first play *Fanon's Children* (2001) took so critical a look at the new South Africa at the start of the new millennium that Peter Machen of *The Sunday Independent* attributed a new role to him as "the chief whip of the nation's conscience".

As implied by the title of his play Rampolokeng was heavily influenced by the writings of Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), psychoanalyst and social philosopher from the Caribbean island of Martinique, who was working in Algeria as a clinical psychologist during the Algerian revolution in the 1950s. Fanon's two seminal publications *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) focused on racism, colonial oppression and the internalised feelings of inferiority amongst colonised peoples. Rampolokeng reflected on the new South Africa against the background of Fanon's writings in his *Fanon's Children*, a poetic multimedia play where two black men in the new South Africa find themselves about to be evicted from their shack, their home, as it is scheduled to be demolished. Planning to resist the eviction they discuss Africa's seemingly never-ending problems, the perceived complacency and indifference of the new leaders and the fact that not questioning the decisions of those in power will inevitably be taken as consent. The older man claims that he had been forcibly removed too many times during apartheid to simply allow his home to once again be destroyed as part of so-called post-liberation progress.

The dilemma demonstrated in the piece was that of the common people, the majority in the new South Africa who had experienced no tangible improvement in their day-to-day lives, even after the peaceful revolution that led to liberation and democracy in their country. "[*Fanon's Children*] indicates how far struggle leaders in the post-liberation era have allowed themselves to be removed from the people and communities that put them into positions of power and privilege," claimed critic Sandile Memela in an article entitled "Taking stock of SA's new rulers: A new play explores the gap that exists between what leaders of the struggle preached before 1994 and what they now practise." And the playwright added, "what needs to be understood is that this is not your predictable protest theatre as I am not lying on the ground writhing in self-pity. This is about taking the scissors to the power structure. In fact, my biggest ambition is to get President Mbeki and his cohorts in power to watch this production. ... Unfortunately, there is a complete death of debate in the new society as

everybody seems to suffer from the grab-and-run syndrome that has taken over. What we see happening before our eyes is that people who brought down the vile structures are the ones who are occupying them now" (Memela, 2001). Rampolokeng used as his point of departure Fanon's argument that true liberation is not possible without violence - and South Africa had managed to achieve the first non-violent revolution in history. Yet, ironically, the new democracy, the Rainbow Nation remained one of the most violent, dangerous and crime-ridden countries on earth, inhabited by a nation of whom the vast majority remained deprived and disenfranchised, they remained a nation of Fanon's Children.

In his first drama, *Nothing but the Truth* (2002), John Kani, predominantly famous as an actor and not as a dramatist, also chose to focus on the realities of life in post-apartheid South Africa as a central theme. The play was in a more conventional theatrical form than *Fanon's Children*, and followed the realistic style, rich with metaphor, of the internationally acclaimed works Kani had workshopped with Athol Fugard and Winston Ntshona decades earlier.

The protagonist (played by Kani in the première production) in *Nothing but the Truth* was the small, insignificant Everyman who had been waiting all his life for recognition, emancipation and the simple dignity of living as an equal citizen in the new South Africa. Sipho Makhaya was no struggle activist. He was only one of the anonymous thousands who took part in the countless protest marches and who formed the invisible foundation on which the struggle was built. His younger brother, who never had an actual job, but whose education Sipho had paid for, became an activist and a celebrated struggle hero who fled into exile in the 1980s.

The action of the piece revolves around the return of the younger brother's remains to be buried. Sipho plans a traditional burial amongst their ancestors to honour his brother, but what his Anglicised niece (an "exile brat" who had changed her name from Mandisa Makhaya to Mandy Mackay) brings back from London is not her father's body, but a small urn full of ashes. The elderly Sipho is faced with the challenge of dealing with these modern realities, so totally different from the humble expectations he always had for life.

Sipho’s own personal post-liberation dream was simply to become chief librarian in the Port Elizabeth City Library where he had been assistant chief for 30 years. Now, in the year 2000, at the age of 63 he sees his dream position being filled by a bright young graduate from Gauteng. After waiting in the shadows all those years he has been passed over once again. Life in the 21st century and in the new South Africa is not what he always dreamt it would be, but he is challenged to put his demons to rest and to deal with it.

Asked about his inspiration for writing *Nothing but the Truth*, John Kani related in an interview, “My brother Xolile was shot in 1985. He was a poet. He used to recite poems at funerals, political rallies, special occasions. And then he died. We never went to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: my mother said there was no point. I've always wanted to put that part of my pain away and move on and remember my brother with fondness. This play began to evolve as a tribute to him. And I moved totally away from that, and I came to the story of this man Sipho. I created a very humble, small man, of small stature, but a very wise and deeply hurt man, who has something to say but is never given the opportunity to say his piece. And through this work, I thought I would give Sipho the opportunity to say: ‘Hello, I’m here’” (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2002). *Nothing but the Truth*, directed by Janice Honeyman, premièred at the Grahamstown Festival in 2001, won a number of awards, played the mainstream circuit around the country and had a successful season with Kani in the lead at the Lincoln Centre in New York in 2003.

As an example of plays that focused on life in the new South Africa Kani’s piece used the apartheid past not to dwell on, but merely as the background against which the insignificant Everyman also had to come to terms with the realities that confronted him in the new democracy.

In the first play he wrote as an individual creator, John Kani managed to create not only a brilliant vehicle for his own acting skills, but also a well-crafted play that accurately reflected the realities of the time. The production played to capacity houses and the critics were virtually unanimous in their praise. Prominent critic Adrienne Sichel enthused, “A great play rattles your consciousness, fully engages your emotions and fine tunes your intellect as it profoundly moves you into another

cognitive realm. John Kani's *Nothing but the Truth* falls into this rarefied category" (Sichel, 2002b). And a critic for the *New York Times*, referring to Kani's play as "a deep felt portrait of the emotional limbo of post-apartheid South Africa", commented, "Kani's voice here has the controlled, rhythmic softness of someone who has willed himself into passivity and patience because he has no other choice. In this performance, Milton's often-quoted line takes on newly abject echoes: 'They also serve who only stand and wait.' But you sense a frayed quality in Sipho's carefully modulated speech. *Nothing but the Truth* captures that moment when the waiting is almost over" (Brantley, 2003). John Kani had created a moving portrait of life in the new democracy, and at the same time made a powerful contribution to South African theatre.

The truth about life in the new democracy was also the theme of *Happy Natives* (2002), a powerful satirical play by Greig Coetzee that premièred at the Edinburgh Festival, followed by a London run and then the South African festival and mainstream circuits before returning abroad. Where Kani's play strove to present nothing but the truth, Coetzee's was inspired by the commercial value of presenting the new South Africa in sensational warm-and-fuzzy terms that came close to anything but the truth. His play became a scorching send-up of South African stereotypes and preconceptions and an exposé of hypocrisy. Coetzee recalled, "*Happy Natives* began as a facetious comment during the Edinburgh Fringe 2000 - a response to my growing concern that theatre from Africa presented outside of Africa seemed to follow one or more of three themes: 'wretchedness', 'triumph over adversity' or 'happy dancing natives'. While I do not dispute the validity and relevance of these stories (my own piece *White Men With Weapons* is a tale of wretchedness), it is unfortunate that they appear to overwhelm the many other stories to be told about a very complex continent" (Coetzee, quoted in Kennedy, 2003).

In reaction to the misconceptions and half-truths about the new South Africa that resulted from the commercial projects he alluded to, Coetzee wrote a powerful satirical two-hander in which he appeared opposite the formidable Sello Sebotsane, each portraying a range of new South Africa characters in Coetzee's signature stripped-down, physical performance style. The two main characters are friends, actors-between-jobs who have the opportunity to pitch for a lucrative government

commission to stage a play that will sell South Africa to foreign investors. For maximum impact the production has to feature as many as possible of the powerful, uniquely African images of wild animals, tribal dancing, ethnic costumes, animal skins and feathers. In addition, what the sponsor, the cultural ministry, requires is images of the powerfully emerging African Renaissance which will show the outside world that this continent is the place to invest in. Ideally the actors should represent different racial groups showing the face of the Rainbow Nation.

In a cleverly scripted and powerfully acted production *Happy Natives* dealt satirically with many of the stereotypes surrounding the young upwardly mobile black professional (son of a freedom fighter) who moves into a previously white neighbourhood and the young, not so upwardly mobile, white professional. And eventually it explored ways for peaceful and productive co-existence going forward. One critic summarised, “This clever comedy admits to hostility, denial and social stereotyping and then, using laughter, demolishes all three states of mind” (Jordan, 2003).

Happy Natives, like McCarthy’s *The Great Outdoors* and Kani’s *Nothing but the Truth*, turned the spotlight critically on the experience of life in the new democracy. All three were also scripted dramas, about which Robert Greig commented, “These plays are written, not workshopped, so they are reflective; and they are the strongest argument around for conserving the rare species of writers. The plays are arguments, too, for literacy and rationality: in a society swept by Dionysian arts, they represent the rational and Apollonian. The three plays explore the experience of change in individuals. Individuals are cast as people struggling to be authors of their experience, not just bit players or onlookers in the scripts of history, governments or commerce. In that sense, these are the resistance plays of the new millennium, mainly from the point of view of an emerging middle class” (Greig, 2003d). In the context of critically questioning the actions and interactions of new South Africans these plays could be described as “resistance plays”, but their primary contribution here is the fact that they provided reflections of the realities of life in the new democracy.

Happy Natives exploded the stereotypes that inspired the playwright, Coetzee, in the first place and searched for the truth of new South African realities. When the

promoter reacts to Mto's (the Sebotsane character) idea for their investment-generating play, she comments stereotypically, "Mother Africa planting the seeds of the African Renaissance." In his contradicting reply Mto sums up the thrust of the play, "No, she's not Mother Africa. She's an old black woman. ... No gumboot dancers. No happy natives dancing up and down. ... It begins with an old black woman planting a seed. And ends with a squatter camp covered in pumpkins." Coetzee created a highly entertaining satirical play in which he shrewdly managed to use stereotypes, stereotypical interactions and situations because they were so familiar and rang so true, but then he broke them down to expose the inaccuracies and contradictions embedded in them, eventually to create a picture of life in the new South Africa as he truly experienced it and chose to project it to anybody who saw his *Happy Natives*.

Greig Coetzee took the role of director for another popular two-hander that provided a portrait of South African life in 2002. In fact, *Green Mamba*, written and performed by John van de Ruit and Ben Voss, provided more of a photo album than a portrait, in that it consisted of a series of irreverent, satirical and highly politically incorrect sketches of familiar stereotypes and situations chosen from the South African landscape. At the time, for obvious reasons, a relatively low-budget, small-cast and highly mobile production like this was not exceptional, but what made *Green Mamba* exceptional was the strong, precise performances, meticulous direction and the irreverent originality and accuracy of the script that parodied a range of characters and aspects of New South Africa life. A prominent critic noted with reference to *Green Mamba*, "A fundamental rule of good comedy is that the descent into hilarity happens only if it starts from a base of realistic credibility - and the decidedly black satire in this running debate about South Africa today is as realistic as it can get" (Herbst, 2003). While the theatre's mirror often reflected "bleary and obscure images, if any at all", the mirror held up in *Green Mamba* was so clear and so sharply focused that the audience could distinctly recognise themselves and their fellows, and in reaction they were sometimes hilariously amused, sometimes shocked, sometimes insulted, sometimes outraged, but always engaged and stimulated.

A huge number of new productions, big and small, were staged during the period, mostly as result of the platform and growing audience provided by the expanding

festival circuit, and a large proportion of these held up a mirror (sometimes more fractured than others) to life. The trend, although obviously not new in the theatre, was clear. For the purpose of discussion here the challenge was to select only a cross-section of prominent productions that had the added quality of reflecting specifically the realities, the qualities and the challenges of “Life in a new democracy”. The selection of examples above, although by no means exhaustive, share that focus and were also mostly prominent productions with an extended run, often locally and abroad, which drew audiences and entertained them, stimulated reflection, inspired lively critical response and contributed significantly to the theatre of this new democracy.

7.8. Sexually explicit and proudly gay

Apart from the predominant issues of racial and gender equality, life in the new democracy was governed by a number of new perspectives reflected in and protected by the new Constitution. These obviously put a strong focus on individual human rights and human liberties, in clear contrast to the values and laws that governed life in the old South Africa, and included a relaxed approach to freedom of expression and freedom of association, also sexual association. The entertainment media in the new democracy, including cinema, television and the theatre, enjoyed a relaxed environment in terms of control and formal censorship. Explicit nudity and sex, including interracial and same-sex relationships, became commonplace as central or peripheral themes in theatre productions. At festivals, particularly on the fringe, but also in mainstream productions, nudity on stage featured routinely.

At first theatre-goers and the media commented on nudity, particularly full frontal male nudity, and explicit simulated sex, but as the decade progressed it became a non-issue. It tended to become a subject for comment and discussion only around prominent, big-budget mainstream productions and then specifically in aesthetic and artistic contexts. For example, Marthinus Basson chose to stage Breyten Breytenbach’s three dramas *Boklied [Goat Song]* (1998), *The Life and Times of Johnny Cockroach* (1999) and *Die Toneelstuk [The Play]* (2001) with fully visible frontal nudity and explicit scenes of simulated copulation where required. The artistic

integrity, the theatrical brilliance and the challenging, stimulating subject matter of the productions, however, far overshadowed the sex and nudity.

Inevitably some theatre-makers capitalised on the relaxed approach to sex and nudity to pursue box-office success with titillating spectacle on the live stage. Even some prominent, highly regarded dramatists could not resist the temptation to commercially exploit an area that was not unknown, but somewhat taboo in the rather conservative old South Africa. For example, apart from his *Playboys* (2000), a comedy with the same theme as the film *The Full Monty*, where four ordinary guys do a striptease to make some money in order to cover their debts by uncovering their assets, Deon Opperman created a sexually explicit one-woman show for a physically striking young actress displaying her talents as a stripper/prostitute on stage (also on the laps of men in the first row of the auditorium) and he called it *Whore*.

Being a serious playwright Opperman obviously built some respectable and intellectually stimulating elements into *Whore* as well: the heroine sex worker holds a masters degree in philosophy and lectures on the subject during the day, while stripping and sex working at night. Her monologue in *Whore* explores philosophically the world of prostitution and the taboos and realities surrounding provider and client. A key theme in Opperman's thesis is that women use their sexual powers to objectify men and not the other way around as is popularly assumed. Pre-eminent theatre critic Robert Greig reacted: "It's a test, viewing an actress thrusting her bare fanny in the face of a member of the audience: he showed grace under pressure. So did she. It was the pivot of the gaudily titled *Whore*, probably the most explicit play I've seen. It is meant to be realistic: the monologue of a sex dancer and prostitute and her challenge to conventional morality" (Greig, 2000d). Acknowledging the prestige of the author, the gravity of the subject and the indubitable theatricality of the presentation, critics took the piece seriously and gave it a polite evaluation. Paul Boekkooi summarised this: "*Whore* is a merciless tarnishing of a typical male pastime: the demythologizing or the unmasking of the secret aura surrounding woman as a sexual being" (Boekkooi, 2000, translated from Afrikaans).

Whore premièred at the Grahamstown Festival in 2000, subsequently played to capacity houses in mainstream theatres and was revived successfully with a different

actress at the 2003 Grahamstown Festival. For the Aardklop 2003 Festival Opperman cast a *Penthouse* Pet of the Year finalist called Gigi in the role, reworked the script, called it *Nipple Caps & G-strings* and played to sold-out houses.

Apart from a general relaxation towards sex and nudity on stage, a clear trend in new South African theatre, in line with the relaxed approach to sexual preference in the Constitution of the new democracy, was an easy focus on same-sex relationships, lesbian and gay pride. Obviously the subject was not new on South African stages. In fact, Marthinus Basson (before he became one of South Africa's most prominent stage designers and directors) and Johann van Heerden (this writer) played homosexual lovers on stage in the early 1970s, and performed what may have been the first prolonged man-on-man French kiss on a local stage - it was in the première production of Pieter-Dirk Uys's *Selle Ou Storie [Same Ol' Story]* at The Space Theatre in Cape Town. At the time audiences were shocked and the company expected the (sold out) season to be closed down by the authorities. That did not happen and two decades later, after the new government had been voted in, the theatre was free to openly explore homosexual themes and to make them part of the reality of life reflected on the stage. The following selection of prominent productions is determined by the fact that the plays took same-sex relationships, homoerotic subjects and the newly sanctioned freedom of sexual preference as a central and not a peripheral theme.

A sensation at the first National Arts Festival in Grahamstown after the 1994 elections was *Get Hard*, a one-man show written and performed by Peter Hayes, based on Tim Miller's *My Queer Body*. It became one of the most written and talked about shows amongst the 344 Fringe productions (1,488 performances) that year. The protagonist in *Get Hard* is a gay man who opens up his most private world to the audience, strips naked, attempts an erection of his penis and graphically discusses aspects of homoerotic experiences like fellatio and male copulation from the stage and also while moving amongst and interacting directly with the people in the auditorium. Darryl Accone described *Get Hard* as "an inoculation against homophobia" (Accone, 1994). Although certain audience members were shocked by the explicit honesty of the play, the production was a courageous exploration of gay issues and, in a way, a celebration of the general feeling of liberation and equality in the new South Africa.

As far as possible the focus in this study is primarily and deliberately on original South African work to illustrate the trends identified in the theatre of the new democracy, but in certain areas the most prominent productions include the local staging of successful plays by non-South African dramatists. An example is another gay pride one-man show that drew large audiences and made a strong impact. In 1995 renowned theatre-maker Yael Farber directed Robert Finlayson, normally a romantic lead, as the gay man in *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* by the American playwright David Drake. The play follows the rite-of-passage formula and its sole focus is gay pride. The protagonist's militant monologue on the contemporary gay condition deals explicitly with homoerotic issues and the performance again showed full-frontal male nudity. One critic described the character as "a prancing, gesticulating demonstrator spewing hatred at the 'oppressor straights'" (Le Page, 1995a). Even though set in New York, the play's message echoed strongly in mid-1990s South Africa, where civil rights and freedom from prejudice were issues high on the social agenda. It was reminiscent of the anti-apartheid protest theatre, but this time the issue was not race, it was gay rights.

Another imported gay pride play was Terrence McNally's excellent *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, which premièred on the Main Festival at Grahamstown in 1996 in a large-scale production from PACT, with a top cast of actors directed by Mark Graham. *Love! Valour! Compassion!* was awarded the 1995 New York Drama Critic's Award for Best Play. A brilliantly crafted comedy with fine characterisation, narrative, and witty dialogue, the play portrays seven gay men, close friends who meet for three separate house parties in a remote holiday cottage at a lake during a long hot USA summer. Again the production casually contained explicit homosexuality and full-frontal male nudity. A further dimension explored in this play was the issue of HIV/AIDS, long associated with the gay community, but the main focus was close friendship and love in an often misunderstood section of society.

In another large-scale production Marthinus Basson directed the gay musical *Boy Meets Boy* for Capab in 1994 and it played to critical acclaim and enthusiastic audiences in the mainstream and at festivals. Interestingly the two biggest Performing Arts Councils both staged productions with the gay pride theme during the early years

of the new democracy. To première at the 2002 KKNK Henry Mylne, a prominent South African television drama director, adapted and staged the award-winning gay play *My Night With Reg* (1994) by British dramatist Kevin Elyot. Mylne adjusted the gay jargon and certain insider references to better suit the South African gay community and shrewdly cast six highly visible and popular male actors as the six gay friends. Four of them were playing romantic leads in local television soap operas at the time and were household names as TV-stars. All six were local celebrity actors.

Once again, in *My Night With Reg*, full-frontal male nudity featured on stage. The play revolves around six gay friends who eventually each confesses that he had had an unforgettable night of sex with the title character - a man who recently died of AIDS. The Afrikaans version, originally titled *My Aand Met Arnie (My Evening with Arnie)* opened at the KKNK in 2002 and subsequently played to sell-out houses in mainstream theatres. In 2004 Mylne revived the production in English under the original title and alternated performances with the Afrikaans version, then renamed *My Nag saam met Reg (My Night With Reg).* The brilliance of the original play, the commercial skill of the director and mostly the prominence of the actors made the production very successful and, although it was obviously aimed primarily at the gay community, it proved popular amongst the broader theatre-going public as well.

Gay and lesbian pride was not a subject explicitly explored by black theatre-makers or focused on in productions aimed at predominantly black audiences during the time of the racially segregated theatre of apartheid South Africa. In 1997 the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) were established to provide a permanent home for the wide range of historical and archival material relating to the homosexual experience covering the full racial spectrum in South Africa. Inspired by archived documentation recounting the experiences specifically of black gays and lesbians since the early decades of the 20th century, theatre-maker Robert Colman workshopped, wrote and directed the jazzy gay musical *After Nines* in 1997, with musical arrangement and direction by Xoli Norman and choreography by Somizi Mhlongo.

The production of *After Nines* was jointly supported by the Civic Theatre Development Programme, the National Arts Council and GALA. Against the background of the constitutionally protected right to sexual preference in the new democracy, the

musical documented, in song-and dance style, black gay history in South Africa. It was a history full of secrecy, pain, shame and often brutality. *After Nines* took its title from the concept in the black townships of the 1930s that a person could only be gay or lesbian after nine o'clock in the evening, mentioned in a song:

Even when it was a crime,
Everybody did it all the time,
But only After Nine!

"The portrait of black gays (in *After Nines*) corrects historical amnesia and ... goes some way to correcting the imbalanced view of gays in South Africa" (Greig, 1998e). "It heralds the arrival of the new protest play, a demand for freedom of expression, a celebration of freedom of choice" (Barker, 1998).

The celebration of freedom of choice in terms of sexual preference in the case of specifically black gay pride was not common enough to be described as a trend in the first decade of democracy, but a play like *After Nines* certainly contributed to the strong theme in the theatre of celebrating liberation and equality in general under the new Constitution. It also paved the way for Colman's *Your Loving Simon* (2003), a powerful factual account of the life of gay rights activist and political prisoner Tseko Simon Nkoli (1957-1998), who died of an AIDS-related illness at the age of just forty.

Inspired by the GALA collection of letters Nkoli had written from prison to his lover "Roy", Robert Colman workshopped, wrote and directed the two-hander. *Your Loving Simon* explores Nkoli's life, first as an oft-imprisoned student activist, then as one of the famous 22 Delmas treason trialists (the notorious trial that lasted from 1985 to 1988) and also as co-founder of GLOW (Gays & Lesbians of the Witwatersrand) in 1988.

The main focus of the play is on the tension between Nkoli's dual roles as an anti-apartheid political activist, on the one hand, and as a black gay man who found out in prison that he was HIV positive, on the other. The playwright explained the seminal moment of the piece in an interview: "While he (Nkoli) was in prison as a treason trialist, a scandal emerged that one of the political prisoners had sex with another prisoner and that incident led Simon to come out to all his comrades. That is the story

of the play. ... He was an icon in his lifetime. And if he was an icon for me, he was a thousand times that for gays and lesbians from the townships" (Sichel, 2003a).

Your Loving Simon celebrated the life first of a freedom fighter, but also the life of a gay man subsequently standing for his right to liberty and freedom of choice and association. In passionately focusing on one aspect of life in the new democracy and specifically the place of black homosexual men and women, the play powerfully illustrated the diverse multi-faceted themes explored in new South Africa theatre that replaced the anti-apartheid struggle as a prominent central theme. Lauding the trend, Robert Greig commented in a review of *Your Loving Simon*, "It is implied that the central, monolithic struggle has in fact shattered into as many different campaigns and quests as there are people and groups: the environment, economic imbalances, gender inequality... In other words democracy is working" (Greig, 2003a).

7.9. A focus on social challenges in a new social order

Robert Greig's observation echoed what André P. Brink suggested in 1996, quoted earlier: "South African theatre in the nineties tended to fragment into a multitude of individual issues, ranging from gay liberation to the conscience of the Afrikaner". The examples discussed so far start to indicate a range of thematic trends that emerged from that multitude of individual issues. As illustrated above, many theatre-makers were telling their stories and many others were reflecting the realities of life in the new South Africa. But, whereas in pre-1994 theatre the most critical social and socio-political focal point was apartheid, the new South Africa offered a range of social challenges that were addressed by theatre-makers on the stage, ranging from domestic violence like woman and child abuse, to general crime and violence, to corruption, rape and the AIDS pandemic. An issue like domestic violence was not being overshadowed by a globally recognised atrocity like apartheid any more and in an environment where social problems could be addressed in line with the government's strong focus on the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), it became very relevant to bring these social challenges to the table, and the stage.

Sometimes the lines became blurred between community theatre, educational theatre and commercial mainstream theatre where these productions were concerned and

often a production might start as a community theatre project and develop, frequently via the arts festival circuit, to become a success in the mainstream and even abroad. But there was a clear trend to address the social challenges (read "problems"), many of them remnants of apartheid's social manipulation, that faced a people who were striving towards normalising their society along the lines of other successful democracies.

For example, the Positive Arts Society staged *Hola Majita!*, first at the 1993 Grahamstown Festival and regularly over the next number of years in mainstream theatres, township school halls and community centres. Written by Kere Nyawo and directed by Thulani Didi, the theme was simply "crime does not pay" and most of the actors were ex-prisoners who workshopped their own experiences into the piece, resulting in a sometimes rather naive and even crude, but nevertheless very striking and powerful production.

In a 1995 review Sandile Memela of *City Press* commented: "Like some of today's pupils, the cast of *Hola Majita!* was misled to believe at a very tender age that crime pays because the 'ama-gents' [criminal gangsters] drive posh cars, put on fancy airs and have money in their pockets. This is in stark contrast to graduates and other professionals who still flag down a mini-bus taxi because of meagre salaries, despite their education and diplomas that bedeck the walls of their homes" (Memela, 1995). The play focused strongly on the violence surrounding the ama-gents and the horrors of prison life experienced by millions of male black criminals in South Africa. Some years after its first performance reviewer Robert Greig, highlighting the other side of the coin, noted, "*Hola Majita!* should be required viewing by politicians and criminologists cluttering the ether with talk about the niceties of prison reform" (Greig, 1998b).

Clearly a production like this, attempting to demystify criminal life glorified by the quite vulnerable and misled youth, while portraying the horrors of imprisonment, was struggling with the same kind of multi-faceted challenges that faced the budding new democracy recovering from its apartheid legacy. While earlier plays like Barney Simon's *Born in the RSA*, workshopped at the Market Theatre in 1985, which dealt graphically with women in detention, intended to expose the horrors and atrocities of

life in prison during the apartheid era, the focus in *Hola Majita!* was on social reform in everyday post-apartheid life, specifically of the youth, outside the jails. While the old message was that the apartheid government was treating imprisoned people inhumanely, even those often unfairly incarcerated and ostensibly with an eye to rehabilitation, the new message was that there was hope and that the new government promised a good life for all who were willing to be law-abiding citizens.

Another powerful prison drama staged in the mid-1990s was *The Game* (1996) workshopped and directed by Duma kaNdlovu with a cast of nine prominent actresses. The musical drama looked at the experiences and interactions of nine black women imprisoned long-term at the Maximum Security Prison in Middelburg for a variety of criminal transgressions, often driven to desperate acts by male chauvinism. With a broad focus on crime and punishment, the play deals specifically with situations in a male-dominated society that can drive its women to acts of criminal violence. A *Mail & Guardian* reviewer noted, “Most of us in this country, black kids and white, were carried on the backs of black women. What was brought home to me is what happens when their lot is made even heavier by men” (Makanube, 1997). The characters all seem to be victims of circumstances. Whereas *Hola Majita!* focused on the male criminals who broke the law for status and to enrich themselves, *The Game* dealt with women victims and addressed a social system rather than individual criminal activity. Nevertheless, the horrors of prison life and the effects of crime were the main messages of plays like *Hola Majita!* and *The Game* that focused on social challenges in a new social order.

Indeed, life in prison has been a subject in literature worldwide for as long as people have been imprisoned and earlier South African works include memorable plays like Fugard’s *The Island* (1973) and Stephen Gray’s *Cold Stone Jug* (1982), the latter based on the autobiographical sketches by Herman Charles Bosman.

At the turn of the millenium Frans J. van Rensburg, academic and performance arts specialist, compiled a bilingual collection from the writings of prominent South African (mostly political) prisoners including Nelson Mandela, Breyten Breytenbach, Dennis Brutus, Herman Charles Bosman, Tokyo Sexwale, Eugene Terre'Blanche, Mzwake Mbuli and Jeremy Cronin, describing their personal experiences of life in

prison. He developed the material into a production including dramatised poetry and prose reading with choral song and speech. As part of a rehabilitation programme, Van Rensburg managed to get 40 actual inmates from Potchefstroom Prison to present the text onstage with him, and to form part of the performance. The performers wore their orange prison uniforms and performed behind wire screens and under guard. *Sellelied [Song from the Cells]* premièred at the Aardklop Festival in 2002 and played at the KKNK in 2003. While the text was compiled from the writings of mostly political prisoners, the men on stage were common criminals and represented prison life and the results of breaking the law for whatever reason. More performance art than conventional theatre and with the actors being performing props and dressing, rather than players in the usual way, the production nevertheless made a powerful impact and deserved a place as an example of productions that dealt with crime and punishment and rehabilitation as part of the trend to focus on the social challenges facing the new South Africa.

Crime and criminal behaviour on a petty and large scale remained much too prevalent a part of life in the new South Africa throughout the first decade of democracy. The psychological, sociological or historical factors behind the phenomenon are not the subject of this study, but the fact that this problem found a place on the stages is.

A number of productions, as illustrated above, portrayed crime and punishment and a strong example of addressing crime in a specific socio-cultural context was *Shaka Zulu (Ushaka Ka Zulu) - The Gaping Wound* (2000). Playwright/director Bongani Linda formed the Victory Songqoba Theatre Company in 1993 with township residents and hostel dwellers in Alexandra township, many of them victims or perpetrators of violence. In creating training opportunities and offering professional employment the Company became part of the professional theatre community, and at the same time strove to improve the living conditions in Alex. Linda stated his objective in an interview, “This [the creation of the Company] was to encourage a culture of mutual respect and appreciation by providing an opportunity for members of my community to pursue the performing arts as an outlet for misdirected rage and anger” (Memela, 2000c).

Linda was specifically concerned with the serious level of crime and violence in the KwaZulu-Natal province and amongst the Zulu people - most members of his theatre company were descendants of Zulu migrant workers in Johannesburg. In musical form, *Shaka Zulu* looked at the horrific levels of crime and violence amongst the Zulu against the background of "Shaka's curse".[24] The question was asked how the new generation, in a newly liberated country, could break this curse and end the crime and bloodshed. Linda declared that "something needs to be done to stop the carnage and self-destruction of one of the greatest nations on the African continent" (Memela, 2000c). Although Linda's focus was primarily on KZN and the Zulu people, the issue of criminal violence as one of the most significant social challenges in the new South Africa was brought to the mainstream, festival and community stages.

Through the RDP and affirmative action, and apart from some unpopular and sometimes under qualified appointments, some very talented young black theatre-makers, like Bongani Linda, a graduate of Wits School of Drama, were given the opportunity to practise their creative skills in the mainstream environment. Another talented playwright/director, also after graduating from Wits University, 23-year old Aubrey Sekhabi, was appointed artistic director of the Northwest region arts council in 1993. His innovative production of his own musical play *Roadhouse* was staged to critical approval at the Civic Theatre in Johannesburg in 1994 after its première at the Grahamstown Festival. *Roadhouse* represented an attempt at cross-cultural popular entertainment in the new social environment:

Through song and dance the play focused on the lives of the staff in a busy city roadhouse run by a black owner. An uncredited *Sunday Times* reviewer described the production as "a cut above the usual standard of work being produced by independent workshop companies focusing on new black talent" and put the project into context by adding; "The political changes we've just been through in the country are going to have strong implications for the arts. The special niche that has been created by shows like *Roadhouse*, offering mainly white audiences a window on mainly black experiences is not going to be there for much longer as communal barriers dissolve. We need a transitional theatre as much as we need a transitional government and

[24] According to legend, when King Shaka was killed by his brothers in 1828, his last words were, "You shall never rule in peace. Your rule shall be painted in blood."

*Roadhouse***,** good as it is, is going to have to make way for more complex works" (Anonymous, 1994b).

Sekhabi's very next play was a prime example of the trend amongst emerging black theatre-makers to focus strongly on controversial problematic social issues in the community and to bring such questions out into the open as a contribution to the social reform efforts in the new South Africa. Against the general background of violent crime in the country, he sharpened the focus to look specifically at domestic violence in his next play.

Sekhabi's *On My Birthday* (1995) was conceived to be a hard-hitting, kitchen-sink realistic drama about domestic violence and specifically wife abuse, described by one critic as "not just a graphic depiction of a battered marriage but a battered, brutalised society where taxi, political and domestic violence flow in the same current" (Sichel, 1996). Whereas the musical *Roadhouse* was intended as light entertainment and perceived to be "offering mainly white audiences a window on mainly black experiences", *On My Birthday*, because of its clear social upliftment objective, was less clear on the question of target audience. Since domestic violence and spouse abuse were not exclusive to any social or cultural group, this play could evidently not be described as another opportunity for white audiences to witness black experiences. The five characters were drawn from the black community and, although the spoken language was South African English, the individuals and the relationships were openly representative of a black section of society, inhabitants of Soshanguve township where the playwright grew up.

As mentioned, domestic violence was obviously not a phenomenon exclusive to black families, but in South Africa it would take more than the first decade of democracy to progress past "them" and "us". It was inevitable that social issues were examined differently and, in the theatre also received differently, by different racial groups that had been forcibly kept socially segregated for generations. This resulted, in 1996, in an interestingly diverse, if predictable reaction to the production of *On My Birthday*, a reaction that clearly reflected the multi-cultural diversity of South African society in the mid-nineties.

City Press reviewer Sandile Memela gave it a rave review and enthused, "*On My Birthday*, which is an eloquent cry against the abuse of women, draws wild applause from emotionally-aroused audiences. ... compelling, chilling and emotionally-charged ... a vivid portrayal of the self-destruction syndrome that plagues many families, especially in the townships ... performed by a passionate cast of talented stars who understand this cycle ... *On My Birthday* is an extraordinary tale of the cycle of violence in abusive relationships and speaks of the self-hatred and unspeakable degradation that many men, especially black, have sunk into" (Memela, 1996).

This enthusiastically emotional response was starkly contrasted by that of reviewer Raeford Daniel in *The Citizen*, "I find *On My Birthday*, purportedly a serious study of domestic violence and wife abuse, a clumsily structured melodrama that is not always logically motivated. All the dynamics are wrong. ... I looked in vain for some really intelligent, illuminating appraisal of the problem in the text. For the author's real intention, we have to consult a programme note. Here Sekhabi makes a plea for purpose and direction, suggesting that we look into ourselves and appreciate our being; look around us and appreciate others. Then, he says, we will have, not hate, despair, greed, betrayal or madness, but humanity" (Daniel, 1996). This reaction from one respected white theatre commentator was echoed by another, *Mail & Guardian's* Hazel Friedman, "If there's one conclusion to be drawn from *On My Birthday*, it is this: while noble causes and educational initiatives may go together like a horse and carriage, they can also make for pretty dodgy theatre. ... All too often, the well-intentioned playwright-cum-sociologist reduces life's twists and turns - the stuff that makes for convincing theatre - into a single-lane highway leading to a predictable destination. Which is fine if you're into theatre as didactic sermon, morality play or Aesopian fable. But deeply irritating if you aren't. ... Social realism – as depicted so horrifyingly in the fight scene - is soon replaced by facile social judgment. Progressively, *On My Birthday* takes on the trappings of a D-grade soap opera whose message is slammed home with the subtlety of a sledgehammer" (Friedman, 1996). In his review of the production Robert Greig also noted, "If only the playwright had not stooped to amateur sociology. ... Usually, playwrights doing sociologists' work present the obvious as blinding truth and take too long about it. It's not their area of competence or that of the medium of theatre" (Greig, 1996).

Although Sekhabi was highly regarded and generally recognised as a fine theatre craftsman, creator of strong characters and writer of compelling dialogue, he was heavily criticised for his choices of dramatic situation and action in *On My Birthday*. And he was glibly classified as a "well-intentioned playwright-cum-sociologist", obviously a danger that faced any theatre-maker who tried to make a contribution to the upliftment of sections of the society recovering from the apartheid past. Nevertheless, this play, in its main focus and theme, was a strong example of the trend under discussion here, "A focus on social challenges in a new social order".[25]

Another example: in 1998 the Alexandra-based NGO Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT) commissioned high-profile film, TV and stage actor Sello Maake kaNcube to workshop an educational production with a group of township men to address the critical social issue of domestic violence and woman abuse. The result was a four-hander, *Koma* [Sesotho for *Initiation School*], performed at the Alexandra Clinic in Alexandra township. This project inspired Maake kaNcube to write and direct a full-scale drama *Komeng* [Sepedi for *Initiation School*], which premièred at the 2000 Grahamstown Festival with a professional cast and subsequently played the mainstream circuit.

In *Komeng*, a perceptive, haunting, emotional drama, four childhood friends who grew up to live in different urban environments in the new South Africa meet again and are forced to face their demons and the skeletons in their cupboards. In a cathartic encounter the four black men are each confronted with his prejudices, his male chauvinism and the shame of having abused his women emotionally, psychologically and physically. As they progressively lose their macho facades they become vulnerable again and are reminded of their vulnerability during the initiation rituals of their youth, rituals during which a solid value system was meant to be instilled in the young men. Now, as mature men shamed through their behaviour, they experience an intense psychological initiation from which they find the motivation to amend their ways going forward.

[25] In 2002 Aubrey Sekhabi was appointed artistic director and deputy CEO of the State Theatre in Pretoria. He re-staged *On My Birthday* with a star-studded cast in the State Theatre, made some adjustments to the script and played to enthusiastic packed houses, then seven years further into the new South Africa. Domestic violence was still a key social issue.

Domestic violence was the subject of many educational community theatre projects, but what made *Komeng* exceptional was its impact and success on the professional circuit. It played to capacity houses and enjoyed wide critical acclaim. A prominent critic noted after the opening in the Market Theatre, “In reference to Sello Maake kaNcube’s *Komeng*, a drama about the identity of black men in contemporary urban South Africa, one dares mention something as weighty as a *renaissance* in South African theatre” (Hough, 2000a, translated from Afrikaans). This comment was in response to the high quality of the play and the production and specifically to the perceptive and brave honesty with which the sensitive material was approached.

On the other hand, the merciless self-examination and the exposure of the weaknesses in the black male protagonists drew a peculiarly vitriolic response from the influential theatre critic Sandile Memela, who had enthused about *On My Birthday*, a play with a similar theme, in 1996.[26] Four years later the same influential critic condemned *Komeng* as “portraying black men as brutes ... it comes across as a cocky and defiant production that murders the public image of the black man. Strangely, the crowds seem to enjoy every minute of this assassination. ... It would be difficult to deny that violence against women exists in our society and has reached endemic proportions, but are the perpetrators only black men? ... All four characters portray black men as ugly, stupid, criminal, unreliable and irresponsible liars who are hell-bent on terrorising black women” (Memela, 2000d).

The sensitivities surrounding social problems and challenges exposed on the stages, and specifically embarrassing issues like mindless domestic violence and woman abuse, led to lively public debate, but managed to produce some good new South African theatre at the same time.

One of the gravest forms of criminal violence that came under the spotlight in productions covered under this trend, was the unbelievably high incidence of rape in the new South Africa. A number of productions, in focusing on the social challenges

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[26] Memela had described *On My Birthday* as “a compelling and extraordinary look at the cycle of violence in abusive relationships, that speaks of the self-hatred and unspeakable degradation that many men, especially black, have sunk into” (quoted above).

in a new social order, looked at this most extreme form of woman and child abuse. In 1999 Phyllis Klotz wrote and directed *Behind Closed Doors*, a powerful play featuring six black female characters, victims of abuse and rape. It was staged by the professional theatre group The Sibikwa Players, part of the Sibikwa Community Theatre Project established in 1988 by Klotz and Smal Ndaba, which regularly staged productions primarily with a social community focus, but at the same time of a theatrical and aesthetic standard that made them successful in mainstream theatres, on the local festival circuit and also at festivals in Europe, Singapore, Canada and the USA. *Behind Closed Doors* explored the incredibly common occurrence of rape in South African society and the various types, like date rape and rape within the family context, in a striking and engaging theatrical production.

A uniquely South African, and particularly horrifying, phenomenon was child and often infant rape perpetrated in the belief that sexual intercourse with a virgin was a cure for HIV/AIDS. Inspired by an horrific incident of infant rape that took place in the Northern Cape in 2001, Lara Foot-Newton wrote and directed *Tshepang - The Third Testament* (2003). It started with the story of nine-month old infant Sissie, who was renamed “Tshepang”[27] by the community because she had survived the rape and was not infected by the HI virus. Six suspects were arrested and the event was sensationally covered by local and international media. However, after it turned out that it was not a gang rape and that the rape was not HIV motivated, the media lost interest; it was now just another rape, albeit an infant rape – one of 20 000 child rape cases reported in South Africa each year (these were just the *reported* cases...). Foot-Newton subtitled her play “based on 20 000 true stories”.

Previously using the workshopping method, this was her first work as dramatist and *Tshepang* was a powerful, poetically written two-hander, well-acted and brilliantly staged, borrowing strongly from traditional African storytelling conventions and techniques. It premièred in Amsterdam before successfully playing the festival circuit, mainstream and community theatres in South Africa. Top critic Adrienne Sichel advised, “If you only see one play this year, *Tshepang* demands to be that one. It's the harrowing honesty, the conceptual brilliance of this superbly written and hauntingly

[27] “Tshepang” means “Hope”.

performed theatre piece that merits all the attention. Not only does *Tshepang* rub symbolic salt into the wounds left by a violent society, it also unleashes articulate artistic voices" (Sichel, 2003d).

Horrors like virgin rape to cure AIDS and infant rape formed the primary point of departure for the play, but the central focus moved on to the kind of society in which such aberrations could become so prevalent. It asked what kind of society South Africa had become? It touched upon social problems like poverty, lack of education and motivation, unemployment and boredom, alcoholism and drugs, sexual violence and other issues that formed part of the everyday lives of those sections of New South Africa society in which these crimes most commonly occurred.

A case of child (virgin) rape was also the point of departure for *Auditioning Angels* (2003) the first play by Pieter-Dirk Uys in eleven years. Foremost socio-political satirist and one-man performer Uys had shifted his primary focus after 1994 from anti-apartheid political commentary to social issues and specifically the AIDS pandemic ("since AIDS has replaced apartheid as public enemy number one"). Through his one-man performances he made a considerable contribution to AIDS awareness and safe sex education on grass roots level and he also used his razor-sharp and hugely popular political satire to expose the ineffective role that the new government was playing in the war against the disease. "After having had an apartheid government that killed people, we now have a democratic government that just lets them die" (Uys, 2004). Together with sell-out performances at arts festivals and successful seasons in mainstream theatres Uys adapted his hugely popular AIDS awareness one-man shows *For Fact's Sake* (2000) and *Foreign AIDS* (2001) for youth audiences and played the sharply satirical, hilariously entertaining, but highly informative and educational solo performances to more than half a million school learners around the country, for free.

Uys's first scripted play since 1991, *Auditioning Angels*, directed by Blaise Koch, premièred with a top cast at the Grahamstown Festival in 2003 and subsequently played in mainstream theatres in major centres. Although a child rape incident was the catalyst for the action, the play did not focus primarily on rape, but directly and metaphorically on the social challenges facing the country towards the end of the first

decade of democracy. While the dialogue was rich in typically sharp satirical Uys witticisms and humour, the setting and action of the drama was realistic, gritty and disturbing: when a liberal white middle-class single mother's eight-year old daughter is raped by their gardener who is HIV positive, she takes the child to hospital to be treated and tested. She believes so passionately in the promise of the new South Africa that she takes her daughter to a government hospital rather than a private one. She is joined there by her father, an ANC struggle veteran who now lives comfortably in Britain and her brother who fought for the apartheid regime in Angola and is now planning to emigrate to Australia. The vast hospital is chaotic, dysfunctional, poorly equipped, understocked and understaffed, but the family are reassured by a pragmatic, saintly black nurse whose matronly calling it is to nurture, comfort and care for a ward full of abandoned and mostly dying AIDS babies.

The metaphor and the indictment in *Auditioning Angels* are both apparent. The *Cape Times* theatre critic commented, "In a play peppered with urban legends about AIDS and one-liners that pithily convey the enormity of the challenges that face our society, Uys leaves the audience with few illusions and often fires for effect: There is no time for naive luxuries such as notions of rainbow nations and political point scoring. People are dying and it is not anti-retrovirals that are toxic, but the politicians, the play tells us, as the AIDS debate has become tragically confused with fuzzy notions of loyalty to Africanism" (Snyman, 2003). In a critical look at life in the new democracy the drama explores personal relationships and reconciliation within a fractured South African family, who also feel abandoned and betrayed, like the AIDS babies lying in the ward next door. Uys suggests that those feelings may be shared by others who fought and struggled for the ideal of democracy and freedom and now have become disillusioned in a violent society where men rape babies in the belief that the act will cure the rapist of AIDS.

Apart from prominent theatre-makers like Pieter-Dirk Uys's contribution, a number of smaller industrial theatre productions presented in the workplace, and educational theatre shows presented in schools, made a strong contribution to general AIDS awareness and safe sex education, but their work falls outside the scope of this study. An AIDS awareness play that does not, however, is Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina 2*, which premièred in Durban on World AIDS Day, December 1, 1995. This production

led to the most infamous scandal that hit South African theatre in the first decade of democracy.

World-renowned musical writer/composer/director Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina* had opened at the Market Theatre a decade earlier, in 1986, and became hugely successful, toured the world, was nominated on Broadway for five Tony Awards and was made into a film starring African-American legend Whoopi Goldberg. Set in the 1976 Soweto uprisings when black high school students revolted against Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, *Sarafina* rode the wave of anti-apartheid sentiment and became a theatrical phenomenon. While appointed as Director of Musical Drama at the Playhouse Company in Durban under a lucrative 3-year contract (a minimum of 70 hours work per year for a remuneration of R70 000 p/a) and on the strength of his international success, Ngema was commissioned by the Minister of Health, Dr Nkosazana Zuma in 1995 to create and stage an AIDS-awareness musical play. He was awarded a contract for R14 247 600 and his company Committed Artists opened with *Sarafina 2* on World AIDS Day, scheduled for a run of 52 weeks.

In an extravagant Broadway-style production featuring the trademark dancing girls in gymslips, energetic song and dance sequences and lavish staging of *Sarafina*, the production was meant to ride on the popularity of its famous forerunner, but it was immediately criticised by members of the health community for its failure to communicate a proper AIDS awareness and educational message - specifically since it was funded by the Department of Health. It was slated by theatre critics and AIDS activists as not being effective in conveying the realities of HIV/AIDS, the extent of the pandemic and the importance of safe sex. Zakes Mda described *Sarafina 2* as "an agitprop combined with township music play that fails as development theatre. Its only message seems to be that if you have AIDS only God can help you!" (in Jacobsen, 1996).

Because of logistics the large production was also not suitable to tour to most community centres and rural audiences where the message was most needed. All the dialogue was in English, generally not accessible to the core target audience. The play addressed the AIDS problem through an all-black cast, while health workers had been battling for years against the perception that AIDS was a gay or black disease. The

business plan was based unrealistically on 1,4 million tickets to be sold at R10 each, while most of the target audience could scarcely afford the R1 to R1.50 entrance fee typically charged, if any, by smaller AIDS-awareness productions staged in schools and community centres at the time. The theatre community was outraged by a state subsidy of R14 million to a single production and the healthcare community was stunned that well over one third of the Health Department's total annual AIDS awareness budget of R35-million had been spent on a musical play that did not even address the issues of AIDS and safe sex effectively.

Within days of its first performance in December 1995 the healthcare community and the media started questioning the value of *Sarafina 2*, the size of its budget and the process through which the Department of Health had allocated the funding. In January health workers from all nine provinces lodged a formal complaint to Parliament. Head of the AIDS Directorate, Quarraisha Abdul Kareem, declared that a tender process had been followed and that the funds had come from a European Union donation and not from the tax payer. In February Parliament's select Committee on Health launched a top-level inquiry and Health Minister Zuma was summonsed by Manto Tshabalala, the chairperson, to appear before the Committee. Zuma's office declared that the tender procedures had been "relaxed", since the money did not come from the tax payer, but from a donor, the European Union, but she denied that Ngema's name had been "pencilled in" even before the tenders were made public. Prominent members of the theatre industry declared that none of them was aware of a tender process at all.

In March the European Union officially denied that it had approved the *Sarafina 2* sponsorship out of its AIDS-awareness donation. Then Zuma declared that there was an anonymous donor who was willing to cover the funding – the "mystery donor" later withdrew when the media spotlight became too bright.

After an inquiry by the Public Protector's office Zuma was forced to annul the contract with Ngema. The eventual outcome of the whole debacle was that *Sarafina 2* was cancelled and eventually, in March 1998, Mbongeni Ngema was declared bankrupt.

At the time of the debacle the playwright was quoted in an interview with *Saturday Independent*, "South African politics is crooked. We were caught up in the middle of a big fight between the ANC and the DP, basically a fight between blacks and whites. We were the ping-pong balls in the whole issue. Whites are not ready for blacks to get such big production moneys. If there was a creative white man like myself, if only they could invent a white Mbongeni Ngema, then perhaps things would be different" (Mpofu, 1996). Playing the race card had helped Ngema to become an eminent theatre-maker and financially very successful during the apartheid era, but in the new South Africa and in the case of the *Sarafina 2* fiasco he was out of step with most of his colleagues in the industry and certainly in a new democracy where the drive was towards reconstruction, reconciliation, affirmative action and black empowerment.

In the current context *Sarafina 2*, as an AIDS-awareness project, made little or no contribution to the theatre's focus on social challenges in a new social order. But, given the reputation of its creator and the project's financial impact on the state's AIDS awareness budget, it did contribute by leading to a healthy debate and reassessment of how state funding could best be utilised to support the theatre industry in its contribution to address important issues in the social reconstruction of the new South Africa.

Since HIV/AIDS was fast developing into a lethal scourge across the continent, and South Africa was suffering from a particularly high incidence of the disease, the issue of AIDS awareness was very high on the agenda of social challenges, also as a subject for the theatre. Somewhat lower on the agenda, particularly in the heady days after the first free and fair elections, was another threat to the new social order, the threat of mismanagement and corruption, and specifically corruption in the corridors of power. By no means exclusive to African politicians (past or present), but given the precedents in a number of other African countries, including democracies, it was generally hoped that the Rainbow Nation might prove to become an example of honourable practice and trustworthy governance on the continent. Nevertheless, in a new democracy it was inevitably a subject under discussion in political and academic circles and in the media.

At the various arts festivals, specifically on the fringe, many smaller, short-lived productions addressed the challenges of New South Africa politics as one of the constantly recurring themes, but only a handful of prominent productions did, always at the risk of being perceived to be politically incorrect, or "un-pc". Never overly concerned about political correctness, Pieter-Dirk Uys in a succession of popular one-man socio-political satires including *One Man, One Volt* (1994), staged at the time of the elections, *Bambi Sings The FAK Songs* (1995), *Truth Ommissions* (1996), *You ANC Nothing Yet* (1996), *Tannie Evita Praat Kaktus! [Aunt Evita (is) Talking Cactus![28]]* (1996) and *Ouma Ossewania Praat Vuil! [Grandma Ossewania (is) Talking Dirty!]* (1996) addressed a wide range of social challenges, including the threat of corruption. He irreverently targeted high-profile figures and new South African political leaders from across the spectrum, as he did in the apartheid days, when he used to claim that he never had to script his own dialogue since the politicians did it for him in Parliament.

At the 1994 Grahamstown Festival Andrew Buckland premièred another one-man show, *Feedback*, directed by Janet Buckland. It was an energetic combination of dialogue, song, onomatopoeia, mime and dazzlingly executed physical theatre, that sounded a warning about corruption and greed through a skilfully developed comic allegory of food, food suppliers and monopolies. As with the Uys satires, the stature of the creator, the virtuoso performance ability, the humorous tone and the light theatrical format served as a shield against attack for being unreasonably critical of the fledgling new regime. *Feedback* won the FNB Vita Award for Best Playwright in 1994 and the Fringe First Award at the 1995 Edinburgh Festival, was expanded to a two-person play and, with Lionel Newton, Buckland performed it to capacity houses around the country throughout the remainder of the decade under discussion. The touch was light, but the concern about potential corruption was clear.

Another prominent and extremely talented theatre-maker who also voiced his concern with (the danger of) corruption in the new South Africa, did so by choosing a very specific everyday example as the subject of his play: in *Blackage* (1995) playwright Selaelo Maredi focused on corrupt officials specifically in the Department of Pensions

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[28] "Kaktus" is a play on the Afrikaans word "kak", meaning "crap".

and Welfare and the resultant exploitation and humiliation of indigent black pensioners. Clearly the Pensions Department was to be seen as an example of a potentially much wider problem. Once again the playwright elected to use comedy and music to soften the harsh criticism expressed in the piece, "coating the bitter pill of its message with the sugar of song and dance" (Memela, 1997). Through the device of a courtroom drama Maredi exposed the corruption of many state pension officials who abused their position to benefit personally by taking advantage of the helpless and vulnerable elderly blacks who had to travel physically to the pension office every week to collect their meagre and only income.

Theatre critic Mfundo Ndebele of *New Nation* described the character of the government official under cross-examination in the play: "His pompous air, suave dress, luxurious and flamboyant lifestyle are recognisable qualities associated with those who thrive on corruption at the expense of the oppressed and underprivileged. He brings to the fore the callousness of highly-placed black officials who brazenly prey on their fellow blacks. His portrayal evokes a chilling sense of familiarity", and one of the pensioners, the star witness, who testifies about the abuse of the old people and at the same time attacks "the official spiritual poverty gnawing at the nation's moral fibre" (Ndebele, 1995a).

Selaelo Maredi was a co-founder of the Experimental Theatre Workshop in the early 1970s, went to the USA in 1977 to work off-Broadway, later became artistic director of the Julian Theatre in San Francisco and received a number of awards and citations in the USA. On his return he premièred *Blackage* with an amateur cast at the annual Windybrow community arts festival in 1995, followed by a run in the Windybrow Theatre. Appointed Resident Director of the Market Theatre the following year, he staged it there with a top professional cast in 1997.

In reaction to this bravely honest production and labelling it a "milestone" *The Citizen's* critic observed, "Fears that the overthrow of apartheid, making redundant the protest material that for many years had been the mainstay of the burgeoning Black theatre, would rob creative playwrighting in South Africa of impetus and motivation, are proving groundless *[sic]* by the day. The past year has seen some enterprising essays in a variety of subjects, many of them strong indictments of what

is wrong with even the ostensibly Utopian new dispensation of freedom, equality and emancipation" (Daniel, 1997)

Maredi was struck by the plight of the black elderly two decades earlier before he went into exile and now, having returned to the new South Africa and having found no improvement in their situation, the playwright felt compelled to warn against corrupt government officials, specifically where their targets were the same vulnerable elderly black people. The victims in *Blackage* were aged black pensioners and the corruption was practised by black state pension officers, but the wider message of the play and the implicit caveat were clear, particularly from a high-profile, recently returned exile comrade.

Another example of such an "essay" dealing with the "ostensibly Utopian new dispensation of freedom", was *You Fool, How Can The Sky Fall?* by Zakes Mda. A *Sunday Times* reviewer described the play accurately as "a cutting political satire on the antics of a post-revolutionary government that is intentionally close to home. …full of sly reference to the new elite and their round table manners" (Anstey, 1995). As mentioned in a different context above, this theme was picked up some years later by Lesego Rampolokeng in his *Fanon's Children* (2001) where, through the eyes of the simple man he, looked at the new administration and the always present danger of corruption in the corridors of power.

In *You Fool, How Can The Sky Fall?* Mda put his complete focus on those individuals walking the corridors of power.[29] After many years in exile in Lesotho and abroad, the renowned scholar, philosopher, novelist and playwright Zakes Mda made an impressive comeback to the South African stage after the elections of 1994. Within a few weeks in 1995 four of his plays opened in Johannesburg: *You Fool, How Can The Sky Fall?* (Windybrow), *The Nun's Romantic Story* (Johannesburg Civic), *The Dying Screams of the Moon* (Windybrow) and *The Hill* (Market Theatre).

[29] Mda, as theorist and commentator, has been quoted extensively above, but here is a footnote, in the current context, on Mda the dramatist: Zakes Mda (b. 1948) is a veteran who started his playwrighting career in the late 1970s with powerful works like *We shall sing for the Fatherland* (1979), *The Dead End* (1979), *Dark Voices Ring* (1979), *The Hill* (1980) and others. He had superbly attacked exactly this kind of corruption by power in Africa as early as 1979 in *We shall sing for the Fatherland* and other plays.

You Fool, How Can The Sky Fall?, directed by Peter SePuma in February 1995, dealt head-on with the political challenges facing a new democracy and did so in a subtle and sophisticated manner. Like the examples discussed above, it utilised humour and here also the device of bizarre hyperbole to entertainingly communicate a serious warning. Located in a fictional, newly-independent country somewhere in Africa, the play's main themes are corruption, nepotism, excess, the preoccupation with power and the moral and ethical problems facing those who rule – specifically in a newly-liberated democracy.

Interestingly the playwright chose to make all the politicians black, except the military general, the symbol of discipline and power, whom he made a white man. The general, puppet and instrument of the previous regime, is now the puppet enforcing the power of a new band of despots.

By situating the action in a fictitious new democracy and by employing satire and a kind of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* Mda managed to reach and engage audiences from across the multi-cultural spectrum of society. Theatre critic Bafana Khumalo commented, "The most serious and disturbing aspect is the suspicion that Mda is commenting on our own society, albeit without hitting one over the head as did the 1980s struggle plays. This is where the genius of the play lies: it is not a didactic lecture on the dangers of new incumbents coming into power and taking on the habits of their former oppressors. It is a subtly crafted presentation in which one is thrust into constant combat with the playwright in trying to gain a better understanding of the material" (Khumalo, 1995). And Mary Jordan of *Business Day* concurred: "The dramaturgy consistently supports the impression that a fable or parable is unfolding, rather than a chapter of life. Mda is attempting to grasp and convey the inadequacy of human beings when set the enormous task of healing in a dislocated, problematic society" (Jordan, 1995).

The productions selected for discussion above illustrate a predictable trend also to focus on social problems and challenges in a new social order. As a logical extension of looking at life in this new democracy and holding up the theatrical mirror to reflect the exhilarating new reality of being part of the Rainbow Nation it was inevitable that

theatre-makers would identify and dramatise problematic social areas and challenges as well. In a post-apartheid reality, where the biggest struggle had been won, the focus tended to narrow in on social reconstruction and development – “the enormous task of healing in a dislocated, problematic society.” As indicated, problematic social areas that immediately became subjects for theatrical treatment included obvious (and dramatic) issues like petty and violent crime, domestic violence, rape and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. To analyse the sociological background and environment that led to such challenging social problems would fall outside the scope of this study - suffice it to say that some were clearly part of the heritage of the apartheid era, while others were inherent in the dynamics of the new social and political order. Whereas the ruling government and the social impact of its policies was a prime subject for theatrical treatment before 1994, the new government, its policies and the performance of those in authority was treated with proverbial kid gloves virtually throughout the first decade of democracy. Like the rest of the world South Africa was waiting to see what this new democracy would bring. To be too critical too early might have been deemed not only politically incorrect, but even unpatriotic. As illustrated above, some brave theatre-makers did tackle subjects like corruption and nepotism, but generally there was a clear trend towards self-censorship amongst many socio-politically minded theatre-makers.

7.10. A trend towards self-censorship

As the first years of democracy passed, the new decision-makers and administrators also struggled with the huge challenges brought about by the political change. Many newly liberated and newly empowered citizens perceived social and economic improvement to be happening too slowly. High expectations, often unrealistically high, did not seem to be met. The way the new government managed the change was often criticised, and not only from the opposition benches.

Debates raged in many circles, as illustrated in a range of perspectives collected in a 2004 issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly* under the title “After the Thrill is Gone: A Decade of Post-Apartheid South Africa”. It included, for example, an essay by Zine

Magubane,[30] "The Revolution Betrayed?", where the writer examined the suggestion that "the transition to democracy led by the ANC was trumped by neo-liberalism" and discussed the disappointments suffered by poor and working-class people in the new South Africa (Magubane, 2004). Another example: Lawrence Schlemmer, director of the Helen Suzman Foundation, as quoted in *Die Burger* in April 2004, expressed concern that the inequality experienced in the old South Africa simply exchanged ownership after democracy, that it was deepening and that a new political elite was developing (Brits, 2004).

These debates were taking place mostly in political, academic and philosophical circles, but, as has been pointed out above, practitioners of the arts generally seemed to be uncharacteristically reluctant to show disapproval and, for a number of reasons, the theatre also seemed reluctant to be openly critical. In a sense it was almost as if the arts community was not ready for a true democracy and its characteristic challenges and problems, as if they still had to learn about empowerment and grow out of their earlier feelings of insecurity and inferiority, which had constantly been reinforced by the previous regime, particularly in the circles of historically disadvantaged artists and theatre-makers.

Playwright/producer Matsemela Manaka commented in an interview in 1998: "We have more freedom of expression in some ways but less freedom now to challenge the government. If you write about the Ministers you are called a reactionary. Look at all the corruption, look at what happens to the pensioners ... it was easy when it was a white government, we would be quick to write about that. Today you don't really see any piece that really challenges the guys in power today" (Schauffer, 2003). In a 2004 article looking back over the first decade of democracy, playwright Pieter-Dirk Uys addressed the same issue: "Self-censorship, a frightening virus during the apartheid era, is back as political correctness. Criticism of government is deemed unpatriotic. The young black stand-up comics will avoid politics so that they will get a television special. The old anti-apartheid struggle was so much simpler: Black versus white, good against evil. Today's new targets are in many ways worse than the old ones" (Uys, 2004).

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[30] Associate professor of sociology and African studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Commentator, analyst and playwright Mike van Graan linked the trend towards self-censorship to government support of mainstream theatres: “The dependence on public funding by the country's major theatres - with boards that owe their positions to a politician - and managements that were appointed by these boards, have resulted in politically conservative theatres. Principles that were celebrated after the demise of apartheid - such as arm's-length governance, transparency and participatory democracy to promote and defend freedom of creative expression - have all but been replaced (at least in publicly-funded theatres) by self-censorship, political compromise and accommodation with the status quo, which, in turn, has led to politically safe ‘condom theatre’” (Van Graan, 2004). Van Graan had identified this trend some years earlier when he stated that very little original work of high quality was being written in the new South Africa and that self-censorship was a key reason for this: “[theatre-makers] have exchanged the tyranny of apartheid for the tyranny of political correctness.” There was an unwillingness amongst artists, sponsors and audiences to explore and expose the contradictions in the new South African society. Reluctance to criticise the excesses of the new government or corruption in the new elite went together with a fear of being labelled a racist or a supporter of the old regime (Van Graan, 1996).

During the decade under scrutiny a few prominent productions nevertheless touched upon the issue of political correctness and resultant self-censorship, and *Play@Risk* (2002), written and directed by Megan Willson, dealt head-on with the danger of artistic expression being stifled by the fear of being politically incorrect (or “un-PC”) in the new Rainbow Nation. The first ten years of democracy, however, turned out to be not long enough for such a trend of self-censorship to fully develop and be counteracted in clear, identifiable terms by the theatre-makers.

7.11. Post-anti-apartheid theatre

The productions selected above, and this *is*, as motivated in the introduction, only a selection out of many that did the same, are intended to illustrate the main trends in focus and theme that developed in the professional theatre during the first decade of

democracy. The strongest impression is a wide diversity of issues that reached the stage in the aftermath of the singular political struggle that dominated the most prominent theatre of the immediately prior period. The changes in the political landscape, the first steps towards social upliftment, the celebration of liberation and equality and many other elements and challenges that accompanied the birth of the Rainbow Nation formed a wide socio-political backdrop against which theatre-makers were challenged to practise their art. As discussed in some detail above, the theatre landscape changed dramatically during the period, commercial dynamics and mechanisms of funding changed, the proliferation of arts festivals had a huge impact on the demographics of audiences and consequently on the nature and scale of original local productions. All of these factors worked together in shaping the theatre of the early post-apartheid period. Also emerging clearly is the fact that the distance between the various cultural, social and particularly racial groupings that resulted from a long period of forced separation proved too wide to be successfully bridged in both everyday life and in the theatre, on stage as well as in the auditorium – the first ten years of integration were not long enough, but clearly the groundwork was being done.

The reality in the new South Africa by 2004 was that apartheid was officially dead, but its legacy was still strongly present. The scope of this study does not allow for a detailed analysis of the socio-political and economic realities and challenges of the infant democracy by the age of ten - suffice it to note that the new social and political realities were in many ways much more complex, much less black and white. As witnesses of and commentators on the new realities around them, the theatre-makers were challenged not only by a theatre industry that had changed dramatically, new economic realities, and an audience that had new habits, needs and expectations, they were also challenged with a quest for subject matter that could be perceived as relevant, interesting, entertaining and above all, financially viable when translated into live theatre productions.

CHAPTER 8

DEALING WITH NEW FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

8.1. A trend towards commercialisation

As indicated in Chapter 4, the changing financial dynamics of the theatre industry, specifically in terms of adjustments in state subsidy and politically motivated local and international sponsorships, resulted in all professional theatre-makers being challenged with the realities of sound business principles in the theatre of the new South Africa. The adjustments in the style and type of productions staged by some individuals and independent companies have been addressed in other contexts, but it is useful to note that a general trend towards the commercialisation of professional theatre became clearly noticeable as the first decade of democracy progressed.

Two trends were very clearly identifiable in the efforts by theatre-makers to make productions financially less risky; in order to keep the financial exposure to an absolute minimum the selected plays had a small cast, often one or two actors, and the physical productions were often staged as simply and cheaply as possible. As suggested above, this was most often the case for independent productions staged at the arts festivals, more specifically on the fringe, but also for those productions intended to tour the smaller independent venues around the country between arts festivals.

The choice of subject matter and dramatic style also tended to shift towards the lowest, popular common denominator. Easily digestible light comedy and even attempts at broad farce became very common. One-person stand-up comedy was cheap to stage and grew to be very popular in the wake of the project *It's a Funny Country* launched by the subscription television network M-Net in the mid-1990s. As part of a strategy to develop locally produced comedy series for broadcast on the M-Net channel, particularly to be scheduled in its "Open Time" window, the broadcaster staged a series of country-wide stand-up comedy competitions at a time when very few stand-up comics could make a living out of the art form. M-Net sponsored the establishment of intimate comedy venues around the country and provided wide

publicity for emerging stand-up comedians in the popular television programmes they compiled, marketed and broadcast. They even sponsored the most promising new comedians to appear at the world-renowned annual *Just For Laughs* comedy festival in Montreal, Canada. The *It's a Funny Country* project resulted in a number of specialist comedians being established as working professionals and the arts festivals provided an ideal opportunity for these performers to stage their acts in a most receptive environment.

All of these highly commercially oriented projects resulted, however, in the general level and standard of theatrical offerings being lowered and the focus shifting primarily to the commercial viability of the productions rather than their artistic standard. As early as 1996 theatre critic and arts commentator Adrienne Sichel remarked that the Fringe at the Grahamstown Festival of that year "is suffering from an overload of box-office sure bets or wonky, hastily slapped together new works. ...a quick-mix, quick-buck mentality has taken its grip" (Sichel, 1996). And Pieter-Dirk Uys, South Africa's foremost comedian who had achieved fame and established a reputation all around the English-speaking world as a one-person performer, commented in typically succinct, dry manner, "You can't just put four ideas in a kombi [minibus] and think you have a show" (Uys, quoted in Sichel, 1996). It became very clear that South African theatre was in danger of becoming an industry in which commercial considerations were placed higher on the scale of priorities than originality, creativity, artistic integrity, quality and the other attributes that had made theatre the enduring art form that it is.

By the end of the decade under examination the trend towards the popularisation and commercialisation of the theatre had become so strong that the major theatre venues around the country, those originally built for the Performing Arts Councils by the apartheid government and subsequently changed into playhouses, were struggling to remain commercially viable. They still tended to be associated with "high culture", while audiences, also when away from the arts festivals, were being enticed increasingly towards lighter, more popular culture. Bain and Hauptfleisch noted in 2001 that this trend "indicates a degree of 'dumbing down' or social disaffection with regards to the tastes and interests of theatregoers" and commented as follows:

> ...the commercial theatres which have always been independently owned and managed, are thriving along with numerous 'theatre cafes' and similar 'live entertainment' venues which combine food, alcohol and performance. These theatres stage primarily a combination of cabaret entertainment, farce and excellent Broadway-style dramas (the costly rights for which might not have been available during the apartheid era). It is with specific respect to the decline in serious indigenous work, that there is some perception in South African theatre circles that apartheid was, ultimately, good for theatre. Of course, this is a somewhat cynical position and ignores the fact that a great deal of creativity was lost or suppressed altogether by the radical racist climate that prevailed until the late-1980s. (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 16)

The observation that post-apartheid theatre during the first decade of democracy generally tended towards lighter entertainment was, of course, accurate, but the other side of the coin, which showed that there was a "decline in serious indigenous work", could certainly not be ascribed only to the demise of apartheid and such a claim should be seen as highly simplistic, as implied by Bain and Hauptfleisch. A number of rather complex factors, as outlined in some detail above, contributed to this shift.

Although there was indeed a decline in serious indigenous work, some "serious" local playwrights managed to survive, and sometimes to thrive, in the new environment (see the examples of Deon Opperman and Paul Slabolepszy, selected for discussion below, as well as Reza de Wet, Charles Fourie and others), while some, although talented and accomplished in their craft, did not. One example was playwright Anthony Akerman, who after returning to South Africa in 1994 from almost 20 years in exile, wrote and staged a number of serious plays, including *Dark Outsider* (1995) and *Old Boys* (1996), often under challenging circumstances but with a measure of popular and critical success. In reaction to the clear trend towards more commercial, popular theatre Akerman wrote and staged his first farce *Comrades Arms* (2000) in an attempt to satisfy the perceived need for lighter, more commercial entertainment in the new South Africa. Asked in a 2003 interview why he attempted this form, he replied, "Farce is a very exacting form. Another motive that dovetailed conveniently was that the received wisdom was that South African audiences only wanted to go to the theatre to laugh. So if you wanted to survive as a playwright or actor, 'make 'em laff.' Well, that wasn't so easy. Comedies, farces, and musicals are really the only forms of theatre that are commercially viable at the moment." This production did not achieve the commercial success Akerman had aimed for, so the playwright stopped

writing for the theatre altogether and turned to commercial television as a team writer on sitcoms like *Scoop Schoombie* and daily serials like *Isidingo – the Need* (Salter, 2004: 272). He was by no means alone in this decision and many other playwrights, including dramatists like Chris Vorster, Malan Steyn, Neil McCarthy, Abduragman Adams, Shirley Johnstone and others, followed the same route.

At the end of the first decade it was clear that successful theatre-makers had to adjust much more strongly to commercial forces than in earlier decades. Although this resulted in an initial lowering of artistic standards, the professional theatre remained active and the festivals had become regular and popular events on the arts calendar. The groundwork had been laid for a viable theatre of improving standards and quality to develop in an environment where enthusiastic audiences had been cultivated at the festivals, in smaller independent venues and in the larger independent commercial theatres.

8.2. An increase in the number of independent theatre managements

In line with the new financial dynamics of professional South African theatre dictating a more commercial approach, another clear trend discernable in the industry was the development of an increasing number of independent producers and production companies of varying sizes and levels of activity. As the function of the Performing Arts Councils shifted away from production towards working primarily as playhouses, a vacuum resulted in the area of the developing and staging of new original productions. The growth in the arts festival circuit and the establishment of more commercial theatre venues provided increasing opportunities for independent producers to première and kick-start new productions in order to establish and build their companies. "The system has over the last seven years been radically decentralised, resulting in a proliferation of independent companies and the widespread development of 'informal' commercial venues, performance events and festival activity" (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 11).

These new production entities entering the industry had to develop a wide range of skills and expertise in order to function successfully in an increasingly competitive commercial environment, starting with basics like the identification and rights

acquisition of viable projects. These new producers had to employ or contract the appropriate creative theatre-makers, designers, technicians and managers for each project, raise or invest the funding, manage the administration and logistics, provide the necessary research and development, manage the promotion and marketing, and develop opportunities for each production to survive for as long as commercially viable.

As discussed, a handful of bigger commercial independent producers and impresarios like Pieter Toerien and Richard Loring had successfully been staging productions and building their companies since long before 1994. Others produced on a smaller scale, but were equally important in their contribution, like the productions staged by the duo of David Kramer and Taliep Petersen and the work done in his Theatre for Africa by Nicholas Ellenbogen. Other, smaller production entities and individuals had also been producing over the years, but now an increasing number of institutions, companies and individuals started establishing themselves as production entities, often using the festival circuit as a springboard to launch productions, which subsequently toured to other venues around the country and also internationally.

Often a group of creative theatre-makers would create a company specifically to develop and stage a single production for the festival circuit. In some cases the company would dissolve after the production, but in others it would result in a production entity that continued producing past the original project. Also, a company might dissolve and more or less the same group would reform at a later date, as another company, in order to develop and stage some new project.

The results of the 2005 PANSA survey (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005) indicated that by the end of the decade under discussion approximately 20% of new productions opening annually were staged in more than one city countrywide and about 10% travelled overseas. For most producers, particularly independents not based in or attached to theatres, touring their productions would mean performing at the main festivals in addition to staging their shows in their home city. Overseas destinations were primarily in Europe, mostly the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. A smaller number of productions were taken to the USA, France, some other European countries and Australia. The survey results also showed that most of these

productions had a relatively short commercial life, with on average only one season of three to five weeks.

A challenge for the emerging theatre managements was to tour their productions. An initial run at a festival or in the home city was often not enough to make the books balance, let alone show a profit. But touring was challenging. The scale of the production was critical and this led inevitably to the selection or writing of plays with smaller casts – one-man shows or two-handers in an easily wrapped set became almost the norm for the emerging managements.

Obviously employing high-profile, established freelance actors was a strategy that made a successful tour of the country more viable, but their services were often unaffordable for the smaller companies and many of these artists were also reluctant to commit to a tour at the risk of losing more lucrative, short-term employment in television, film or commercials. In many cases established actors would accept work with a smaller company and then, on receiving a better offer, they would simply withdraw from the production – safe in the knowledge that few of these companies had the money to take legal action against them.

In addition to this, for financial reasons the theatre operators were disinclined to experiment, and usually preferred to accommodate touring managements who employed writers, directors and actors with proven track records. For the emerging managements this clearly created a classic Catch-22 situation.

8.3. Training for a career in a more commercial arts environment

A detailed look at the evolution of tertiary education and vocational training facilities in drama and theatre would fall outside the scope of an examination of trends in the professional theatre, but in the current context developments in the industry after 1994 do demand some notes on and identification of some relevant trends in education that impacted on the new professional theatre environment.

Prior to 1994 most institutions of learning that housed drama and theatre departments focused their programmes in varying proportions on academic study and on

vocational training for the industry. Generally speaking, in addition to academic theory, students were typically also trained, educated and developed in performance, artistic and creative skills as well as technical and to a lesser degree managerial competence. After qualifying, most technicians, designers and theatre managers who did find permanent, as opposed to *ad hoc* freelance, employment, did so mostly at the Performing Arts Councils, the bigger commercial production companies or in the film and television industries. Here they would typically continue their development through on-the-job training and mentor instruction and often move into highly specialised areas within the specific environment. Entry-level creative artists, like playwrights, had limited opportunity for formal employment in the theatre industry and often followed an *ad hoc* or freelance path to practise their art, frequently in film, television, radio and even copywriting, but also in drama projects which they would typically initiate on spec, rather than through commissions. The Performing Arts Councils housed drama companies and these offered, normally through auditions, the only real opportunity for entry-level performers and directors to secure contracted medium- to longer-term employment. The film, television and radio industries mostly offered *ad hoc* opportunities for performers on a freelance, contract basis.

As result of the evolving theatre environment during the first decade after 1994 the challenge for entry into all sectors of the industry changed, but most markedly in the sector of the performing arts and theatre. Developments like the shift at the Performing Arts Councils from also being employers of performers and directors, to primarily functioning as playhouses, the growth of the festival circuit and the increase in the number of theatre venues across the country resulted in a new and evolving landscape in the labour market which indicated adjustments in focus at the relevant institutions of learning as well. In addition to training and educating performing and creative artists there was a clear evolving need to equip future theatre practitioners for the specialised entrepreneurial challenges in the industry, whether as a producer or as a performing artist. Specialised courses had to be designed to introduce drama students to basic business management skills. Focus had also to be placed on related skills such as playwrighting, which could equip graduates to generate their own work as individuals once they entered the new landscape of professional South African theatre.

General business management courses offered outside the theatre and drama departments at institutions of learning did not necessarily focus on the highly specialised skills needed for theatre management in the new environment. Apart from general and financial management skills, these included fundraising, production, touring, marketing and publicity, administration and a range of other areas. Given the very competitive and financially challenging environment for an independent theatre producer or production entity, it was unlikely that outsourcing of certain specialist functions would be viable and multi-tasking was clearly indicated. Other skills areas ranged widely, from a knowledge of and sensitivity to the complicated political, cultural and funding environment, all the way to basic computer literacy.

During the decade under discussion the various institutes of learning adjusted and added to their curricula in varying degrees in reaction to the changing environment. In 2003 CREATE SA conducted a research project, a "National Skills and Resources Audit" to sample and analyse "the state of the labour market needs and shortages in training and education for the creative industries in South Africa" and some of the relevant findings were summarised in the 2005 PANSA report. In the sector most of the production entities (53%) were classified as "micro enterprises" employing between 0 and 9 people, a significant number were classified as "small enterprises" employing 10 to 49 people and there were only a few companies with more than 49 employees. These included a majority of commercial (for profit) enterprises, but also a significant number of non-profit entities, including some focused on social development and education. The report indicated that revenue generated within the creative industries was relatively low, with 46% of the enterprises and organisations sampled generating less than R50 000 per annum and only 12% with an annual income in excess of R1 million.

Towards the end of the decade it had become clear that students had to be prepared for a professional working environment that was dramatically different from the one that existed in the old South Africa. In addition, the industry was still evolving and it would take more than a decade, if ever, for a stable performing arts environment to develop in which highly specialised theatre practitioners could easily find a niche. By the end of the first decade of democracy it was no longer sufficient only to be good theatre-makers and actors. The landscape had changed. There were no longer

subsidised employers with guaranteed funding that could contract and employ entry-level theatre-makers on an annual basis after auditions. Certain companies had been receiving funding from the National Arts Council, but only on an *ad hoc* basis and with no future guarantees of security – mostly because the NAC's policy had been unclear and seemed to change regularly. There was little security to theatre work, since there were no longer annually guaranteed production budgets. Available performance venues and opportunities were no longer primarily in the main centres, but the festival circuit had changed the whole approach to premièring a production with an eye to touring afterwards. Basically, aspirant theatre-makers were to be trained for a totally new ballgame. Apart from developing their skill and talent, honing their craft, they had to learn new rules, skills and strategies. And the institutions of learning had to adjust accordingly.

CHAPTER 9

CULTURAL INTEGRATION, TOWNSHIP AND COMMUNITY THEATRE

9.1. Too soon for cultural integration or to "celebrate our diversity"

For more than three centuries up to 1994 the various racial groups in South Africa were kept separate, initially according to social class divisions and later by law and by force, physically, socially and also culturally, first by the colonial powers and later by the Nationalist Party government. Once apartheid was formally removed from the statute book and every citizen became an equal member of the population, with everyone's individual human rights protected under the new Constitution of the Republic, work started towards creating a fully integrated society. The first decade of democracy would prove to be barely enough time to make a start in that direction and clearly that impacted on developments in the context of social behaviour and, in this context, in the professional theatre and its audience.

South Africa has a highly diverse, multi-cultural society as was illustrated, *inter alia*, in the new democratic government declaring eleven languages to be "official languages" of the new South Africa.[31] Within the various racial groupings, previously strictly defined by law, there had also always been a variety of cultural groupings in the population. In this regard the challenge to the new administration was to recognise and respect that rich cultural diversity and to give governmental support in an even-handed way to each group. This proved to be particularly challenging in fields like education, culture and the arts. Government involvement in the arts is covered elsewhere in this document, but there were other questions. For instance, how would the populace, getting to grips with all new kinds of freedom and racial integration, react to the opportunity of "cultural integration"? To what degree would social and educational integration lead to a transformation in the ranks of the theatre-makers and the theatre-going public? Was there at least the possibility or a call for cultural cross-pollination?

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[31] Even the new national flag of the Republic had more colours than that of any other nation on earth.

Towards the end of the decade under examination, in 2002, Zakes Mda registered a concern on the one hand, and identified possibilities and challenges on the other:

> A new collective identity at the expense of memory is, in my view, not feasible. Memory is vital to identity. Memory loss leads to loss of identity, because who we are is fundamentally linked to memory. In any event, South Africa is currently pursuing policies that recognise and respect diverse cultural identities. The beauty of South Africa lies in its many cultures, each with its own history. Then there is, of course, our collective history that emanates from the interactions of those cultures. The memory of each peculiar past can only enrich our present. We should rejoice in our multiple identities – among which is a national identity – instead of trying to achieve an impossible state of affairs, which would not have been desirable even if it were achievable. After apartheid, which expropriated the reality of multiple identities for the purposes of oppression, segregation and exploitation, it is understandable that we should feel threatened by the very thought of giving due recognition to multiple identities. (Mda, 2002: 280)

After attending the 2003 Grahamstown Festival, Bishop Thabo Makgoba, Anglican Bishop of Grahamstown, articulated the high ideals for the unifying role that the arts could play in the new South Africa, "The arts can help us highlight moral dilemmas that we face in our varied contexts. Through the arts we can articulate our uniqueness, celebrate our diversity and enjoy our commonality as South Africans. The arts can aid us to find ways of living together and claiming our space in this beautiful country without guilt or unreasonable entitlement" (Makgoba, 2003). By the end of the first decade of democracy such ideals, for a variety of historical, social, cultural, practical and financial reasons proved to be still largely that, ideals.

By 2004, although theatres had been legally open to all for some time, audiences were to a great degree still separated into cultural and often racial groupings, what Mike van Graan called "the ongoing ghettoisation of South African theatre."

> Generally, white audiences see plays by white artists; black audiences watch plays featuring black actors, with little crossover between white and black - and even little crossover between white Afrikaans and English audiences. While the North Sea Jazz Festival has few problems in attracting an audience across the language and racial spectrum, and while contemporary dance generally manages to do the same, their wordy, vocal sibling - except for notable exceptions like revivals of *Woza Albert!* - struggles to cross apartheid divides, whereas it was able to do this more regularly at the People's Space and the Market Theatre of the apartheid era. (Van Graan, 2004).

The social, cultural and racial groupings were underpinned also by the media throughout the decade, catering clearly for their target consumers, readers, listeners, viewers. In July 2003 the Southern African Theatre Initiative (Sati) held a six-day *Journalists in Theatre Criticism* workshop, attended by arts editors, cultural writers and reporters from twelve Southern African countries and facilitated by Sandile Memela, associate editor of *Sowetan Sunday World*. Apart from journalists, it was also attended by a number of leading intellectuals and theatre professionals. While the main focus was on the role of theatre journalism, the continuing cultural divide in South Africa often became the subject of discussion. South African speakers would put questions on the table like "Should white writer-directors be allowed to tell black stories?" Veteran theatre journalist Adrienne Sichel commented, "Throughout the six days, the gloves were off between South Africans obsessed with race, and who is or isn't an African. This issue puzzled many of the regional delegates who couldn't see what the fuss was about as they viewed us all as Africans, as South Africans. Something we still fail to do ourselves" (Sichel, 2003c). The separateness of cultural and social groups in South Africa after the first decade of legal integration was continuing in the communities, amongst the arts practitioners, the arts consumers and also amongst the arts journalists and commentators.

After the first ten years of this new democracy at least one of the bishop's ideals seemed still to remain just an ideal: "...to celebrate our diversity."

9.2. Support for township theatre dwindles

In South Africa the term "township" acquired a very specific meaning after the forced physical segregation of residential areas along racial lines under the Group Areas Act (Act no. 41 of 1950) came into force. The term township in that context usually refers to an urban residential area allocated to the non-white segments of the population. Soweto in Gauteng, the largest and best known, is actually a whole group of separate townships, the South Western Townships [SoWeTo] of Johannesburg. The term "suburb" is more commonly used for urban areas inhabited by whites. Typically large parts of the black townships are sprawling areas of sub-economic housing and shacks and they were originally developed as sources of labour for the white cities and larger towns. During the apartheid years very few amenities were developed in the

townships, apart from some sports stadiums. In the 1970s for instance, Soweto's population was more than a million and it had one hotel, one nightclub, one cinema and two outdoor arenas (www.southafrica.info).

Notwithstanding the social conditions and the lack of suitable facilities theatre was performed in the townships virtually from the earliest days of their existence. During the 1920s and 1930s live theatre became very popular as a form of working-class entertainment and in 1929 the Methethwe Lucky Stars was formed, a theatre group that based their popular productions on familiar themes, often nostalgically, relating stories of rural life and customs. The first South African playwright to challenge the role of the colonial powers openly was township teacher, journalist, musician and dramatist Herbert (H.I.E.) Dhlomo, who staged a series of township productions in the 1930s and 1940s. His 1936 play *The Girl Who Killed To Save: Nongqause the Liberator* was the first drama by a black South African author to be published in English.

During the 1950s and 1960s, although the country was now governed under the oppressive apartheid system of the Nationalist Party, a vibrant township theatre movement began to evolve. Gibson Kente (1932-2004) has often been called the Father of Black Theatre in South Africa and his powerful contribution to township theatre and theatre in general during a career spanning almost 50 years has been well recognised. He grew up in the black township Duncan Village outside East London in the Eastern Cape and moved to Soweto in 1956 where he immediately became active in the performing arts and specifically in musical performance. He formed his own gospel jazz group, the Kente Choristers, and joined the theatre group called Union Artists. He started writing his own plays and musicals and the first, *Manana, the Jazz Prophet,* premièred in 1963. It was followed by 23 more productions staged by Gibson Kente, including *Sikalo, Can You Take It?, Laduma* and *Mama and the Load*.

The genre of South African "Township Musicals" grew from the works created by pioneers like Kente and became an important form of popular entertainment, culminating in huge international successes like Ngema's *Sarafina!*, Matsemela Manaka's *Goree* (1989) and others. Township theatre had a powerful influence on much of the theatre that developed in the mainstream in the 1970s, 1980s and into the

1990s. Out of it developed influential productions like the two-hander *Woza Albert!* (1981), conceived by two young actors, Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema, while they were on tour with Kente's production of *Mama and the Load* in the late 1970s. Together with the Market Theatre's artistic director at the time, Barney Simon, they created one of the most successful productions in South African theatre history. *Woza Albert!* played for 23 seasons around the world and won more than 20 prestigious awards worldwide.

Matsemela Manaka (1956-1998) was another example of a talented theatre-maker who played an important part in the development of the township theatre movement, particularly, in his case, after the anti-apartheid Soweto Riots of 1976. He was the founder of the Soyikwa African Theatre group, that staged workshopped productions of plays that often contained satirical comment on the political situation in the 1980s. Manaka's work was specifically aimed at instilling black consciousness and pride amongst township audiences, but they were also very successful at international theatre festivals. His plays include *Egoli: City of Gold* (1979), *Blues Afrika Cafe* (1980), *Vuka* (1981), *Mbumba* (1984) and the musical *Goree* (1989)

The above are but a few selected examples to illustrate the important influence the lively, dynamic township theatre had on the professional theatre in general. Within the socio-political context during the later decades of apartheid the theatre produced in South Africa's townships grew into a powerful social and aesthetic movement which has been well documented (see Bibliography) and analysed. A trend that was manifested, however, during the first decade of democracy was a strong decline in support for township theatre and much of its activity came to an end, roughly coinciding with the end of apartheid. Clearly this was not only an enormous loss for the people of South Africa, specifically the communities in the various townships, but for the theatre and the performing arts in general.

During the final years of apartheid and following the political changes of 1994, various initiatives like the policy of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and affirmative action in the workplace contributed towards a general redistribution of wealth in South Africa, which obviously had an impact also on the townships, where some relatively wealthy, middle-income areas emerged. Theatrical activity, however,

and specifically professional commercial theatre, did not blossom. On the contrary, what there was declined to the point where, in 2001 leading journalist and commentator Edward Tsumele noted, “Commercial theatre in Soweto and other townships across the country does not exist despite the fact that an estimated 50 community theatre groups are known to be active in Soweto alone. Makeshift, backyard theatres and halls that could be used to stage productions remain empty and neglected” (Tsumele, 2001b).

On the one hand, the theatre-makers no longer had the stirring, stimulating and emotive dramatic material provided by the old socio-political situation, but on the other, potential audiences with disposable income seemed to prefer spending their leisure money on other activities, including electronic entertainment either at home or in the pub, where live sports and other popular programming were on offer on state or subscription television. Tsumele reported a very dark situation after interviewing some township theatre-makers in 2001: “Township-based theatre practitioners painted a gloomy picture of the state of theatre in Soweto and other townships in the new South Africa. Naming popular television soapies such as *The Bold and the Beautiful, Days of Our Lives, Generations* and *Isidingo* and the plethora of taverns found in almost every street in the sprawling township as enough reasons to keep people away from theatres, well-known township theatre practitioners have expressed the fear that if nothing is done, and soon, the spectre of a total demise of theatre in Soweto and other townships is fast becoming a reality” (Tsumele, 2001b).

Commenting on this clear trend of a dwindling interest in live theatre developing amongst township dwellers after 94, Soweto playwright Peter Ngwenya was quoted as saying, “Even at schools parents are not prepared to pay for their children to watch a production as there is a tendency among township people to think that art should be free. To put it politely, people in the townships are not educated enough about the value of live theatre. Whereas in the old days of apartheid people were attracted to theatres because at the time theatre was used as a political weapon, this is no longer the case” (in Tsumele, 2001b).

Not only was this trend clear amongst the general township population, but even the new black elite, those with disposable income and an interest in live theatre, seemed

to prefer an outing to the city and an occasional visit to the Market or the Civic or other mainstream theatres, rather than supporting the local township theatres where an average ticket cost as little as R5 in 2001. A visit to a mainstream theatre, as opposed to a production staged in the township, was also perceived as a kind of *nouveau riche* status symbol, as summarised by Bain and Hauptfleisch: “There is an overwhelming perception that township theatre is inferior and consequently, theatregoers would rather travel into the towns where more white-orientated, and therefore supposedly ‘superior’ productions can be enjoyed” (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 16).

In the townships the community halls and other makeshift theatres were standing empty most of the time. According the Ngwenya, these venues, such as Mofolo, Uncle Tom's and Eyethu in Soweto, and others in other townships, where world-renowned playwrights like Mbongeni Ngema and Gibson Kente staged their plays to auditoria packed with black theatre audiences in the apartheid days, “are today neglected and are almost white elephants. If one went to Mofolo on a Saturday one would be most likely to find a funeral service, a church service or a wedding in progress” (in Tsumele, 2001b).

By the end of the decade under examination no dedicated professional theatre venues had been developed in the townships, professional commercial theatrical activity had dwindled to virtually nothing and potential audiences had found alternative forms of entertainment.

9.3. **Community theatre groups shift focus to skills training**

An analysis of developments and trends within non-profit theatrical activities like student theatre, amateur theatre and community theatre strictly falls outside the scope of this study according to the parameters defined earlier. Although not commercial undertakings for gain, however, many of the community theatre projects were run as professional and semi-professional initiatives, often privately or state funded and they provided steady work opportunities, particularly for theatre arts graduates just entering the professional work market.

To a degree these projects contributed to the development and growth of a theatregoing audience, particularly amongst the younger generation, and specifically from the historically disadvantaged communities. The community theatre projects, apart from their social and educational value, also played a role in providing training opportunities for developing artists and theatre-makers who did not have the opportunity of being trained at the mainstream institutions or as junior professionals at the Performing Arts Councils after their transformation to playhouses. Together with the theatre arts graduates, these projects often employed completely untrained artists and provided them a learning opportunity while working together with experienced theatre-makers and trained actors. Individual artists often graduated from the community theatre environment to the mainstream professional theatre.

In order to attract as wide an audience as possible from within their target communities, community theatre, as a non-profit activity, normally did not charge an entrance fee. Their private funding came mainly from corporate social investment budgets and donations. Whatever marketing or self-promotion was done, or branding of their company and the individuals involved, was mostly with an eye on potential sponsors and donors. In the community theatre environment productions were very commonly workshopped as part of the project, rather than the conventional staging of scripted plays. Most often the actors had no formal training and they developed their natural talent through the workshop process. On the other hand certain companies, like the Sibikwa Community Theatre Project, led by Smal Ndaba and Phyllis Klotz, had been putting great emphasis on vocational training since their formation in 1988.

As opposed to a strong anti-apartheid, protest theatre interest before 1994, the main focus of post-apartheid community theatre activities fell in varying degrees on "social and developmental issues", on the one hand, and vocational training combined with social upliftment on the other. Marek Spitczok Von Brisinski of Bayreuth University confirmed in a study on post-apartheid South African community theatre published in 2003 that "Today the focus of community arts is on further education and skills training." Finding that the term "community theatre groups" suffers from a degree of historical contamination, Von Brisinski even preferred to talk about "performing arts communities" with a new focus and a new function in society (Von Brisinski, 2003: 115-117).

PANSA's 2005 research indicated that in the post-apartheid environment non-profit community theatre projects attracted participants for a number of diverse reasons, including: available funding from corporate social investment budgets and other donors to community arts; unemployment, which obliged individuals to create their own employment in theatre; some opportunity to work in mainstream theatre venues; a passion for the subject matter dealt with in community theatre projects. "However, many community theatre activists and actors do not necessarily wish to remain within a community theatre paradigm for all their lives, and aspire to bring their stories to the mainstream stages of theatres and festivals, and, as individuals to operate as theatre-makers within mainstream theatre" (Performing Arts Network of South Africa, 2005: 12).

In the current context this discernable shift of primary focus in the activities of many community theatre initiatives is an interesting trend with reference to the professional theatre. As smaller production companies came into existence, either for a short-term project linked to one or more arts festivals, or for a longer-term production, the talent discovered and developed through community theatre initiatives became a source for recruitment and often led to graduation into the professional ranks.

CHAPTER 10

ADJUSTING TO THE THEATRE OF A NEW DEMOCRACY – TRENDS ILLUSTRATED BY SOME PROMINENT THEATRE-MAKERS

10.1. Introduction

Against the background of the many changes we have identified in South African professional theatre after 1994, I would like to conclude this study by looking at some of the ways in which a selection of prominent theatre-makers sought to adjust to the new realities within their industry and within the society they addressed and reflected. As the study has shown so far, the working environment, the economic dynamics and audiences changed radically after 1994, and during the decade under investigation a relatively large number of new playwrights, producers and production companies entered the industry without problems. However, in practical terms, the older and more experienced theatre-makers also had to fit in with these new circumstances and for them it was possibly more challenging in some ways. In creative terms, for example, they were challenged to focus their attention on, and to reflect, the transformed and daily transforming post-apartheid social reality if their output were to remain relevant and/or commercially viable. Even if they chose not to mine their subject matter directly from the new social realities and multi-cultural environment surrounding them, they were still challenged to create theatre that would interest and entertain an audience drawn from that new environment with its new realities and expectations.

So, let us turn to a few prominent, influential, individual theatre-makers and the way(s) they reacted and adjusted to the theatrical environment of the new South Africa. Clearly, within the limitations of this project, only a selected number of theatre-makers can be discussed in some depth. In the process, obviously, some very important and influential individuals were not chosen for discussion, but the selection was determined by the fact that each one discussed here provided an illustration of a very specific trend, as the study set out to do in the first place.

10.2. The more things change, the more they stay the same...

Obviously the first ten years of democracy was too short a period for any significant measure of cultural integration to take place amongst the widely diverse peoples of South Africa after such an extended period of enforced segregation under the apartheid laws. Most population groups continued to live in the physical areas and communities in which they had been living before 1994, areas determined along strict racial lines under the Group Areas Act (Act 41 of 1950). The official Constitution of the Republic of South Africa was adopted in May 1996 and this provided complete freedom of movement and choice of living area, with no restrictions according to racial criteria.

One result of this new dispensation was urbanisation on a large scale and a sizeable influx of mostly black South Africans into the urban areas. Some of the emerging new black middle class migrated to historically privileged white areas, but the majority of blacks who moved into the urban environment settled in so-called “informal settlements”, mostly on the outskirts of towns and cities. As a result of the racial integration of schools and other institutions of learning a large measure of social integration started to develop amongst the younger generation, but generally one decade was too short to see any clear cultural integration amongst the population in general.

This brief, and quite superficial, overview is simply to provide some background against which cultural activity, the arts and specifically the professional theatre can be examined in the present context.

The complex process of economic change and the changing financial position of individual South Africans certainly played a major role in the demographics of potential theatre audiences, although a relatively small role during the first ten years of democracy and integration. Any improvement in the financial position of historically disadvantaged individuals, families and communities tended to be invested in the upgrading of basic infrastructure and needs rather than investment in arts, culture and leisure activity. Financial priorities, also pertaining to individuals and

families, i.e. potential theatre-goers, generally tended to be aimed at the improvement of living conditions and standards. In the first decade of democracy, in terms of "culture", many of these historically disadvantaged people tended to invest their improved income in home entertainment like television or even pay-TV, and video or DVD rental and generally their investment did not yet stretch to regular attendance of live theatre. The racial profile of audiences for the mainstream and urban theatres, as well as the audiences attending the arts festivals, did change gradually over the period, but remained predominantly white. Some theatrical activity continued in the townships and historically black communities, but the extent tended to diminish over the period under examination and specifically professional theatre took place on a comparatively small scale in that environment.

10.3. English and Afrikaans continue to dominate the professional stage

Apart from limited social and cultural integration and a relatively slow "redistribution of wealth" generally, and in this context pertaining to potential theatre audiences, a major factor that played a role in the general trends seen in the professional theatre in post-apartheid South Africa was the issue of language. As noted, South Africa is a richly multi-cultural and multi-lingual society. The languages used by most white South Africans are English and Afrikaans, and these were also the languages used most commonly in professional theatres in the old South Africa and almost exclusively on stages in the mainstream, independent commercial and Performing Arts Council theatres. This practice continued throughout the decade under examination.

As indicated above the new government expressed a preference for English as a *lingua franca* for the country as a whole. Speakers of Afrikaans, more specifically amongst the white Afrikaners, perceived their language to be under threat and with it their cultural heritage, and this resulted in the development of the Afrikaans arts festivals and a platform for new Afrikaans drama. So, English and Afrikaans continued to be the languages spoken almost exclusively on professional stages across the country. Zakes Mda summarised this in 2002: "The Constitution of the new South Africa recognises eleven official languages. Yet almost all our theatre is created in English, and to a lesser extent in Afrikaans. This becomes the case even in the most

marginalised areas, where English is in fact a foreign language. There is an unwritten law that theatre is only theatre if it is in English or at least in Afrikaans. The theatre practitioner takes his cue from the politician. Our political leaders address the masses in English deep in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape. Ordinary villagers never really understand what these politicians - born and bred in local communities and quite fluent in the languages of those communities - are trying to convey to them. All the villagers can say is, '*Hey, uyakhumsha lomfor!*' (*Hey, this man can really speak English!*). In Parliament the members use the indigenous languages apologetically, and only to greet the Speaker of Parliament and to introduce the subject, and then the rest of the speech is in English" (Mda, 2002: 288).

It should be noted that in a multi-lingual society such as in South Africa, it is inevitable that a mixing of languages should take place, also on the stage. This was the case before 1994 and it continued through the decade under examination. Typically either English or Afrikaans would dominate in productions, but there would often be some easy and comfortable mix of languages, depending on the situation. Particularly in multicultural plays, other South African languages would also be heard, depending on the situation and the characters, but typically the most commonly used languages in most productions would be English and Afrikaans. Obviously the language heard in the street would often also be heard on the stage, and this included mixed usage, such as "Engfrikaans", where lots of English words or expressions would be used in spoken Afrikaans and "Tsotsitaal", a mixture of some African languages, English and Afrikaans.

In summary, apart from some changes at the arts festivals, very little changed in terms of the demography or racial and cultural profile of theatre audiences or the languages used successfully on the professional theatre stages in post-apartheid South Africa during the first decade of democracy.

10.4. Indigenous cultural treasures remain largely unmined

During the period relatively few black theatre-makers came to real prominence with a sustained output of dramas or significant professional theatre productions that made a substantial impact either on the mainstream, the commercial circuit, the arts festival

circuit or elsewhere. Given the situation outlined above and the racial demographic of audiences (chicken or egg?) most black playwrights who did create new works during the period chose to do so in English and predominantly in the conventional style of 20th century European and American drama, consequently perpetuating the vicious circle.

In 1995, five years after returning to South Africa from 15 years in exile, playwright Duma kaNdlovu declared in an interview with *City Press*, under the heading "He forges art from anger": "For me the challenge that faces black artists is to develop a tradition and culture of festivals in our own communities. … It is important that we establish our own standards to measure superiority and excellence in talent - as without this we continue to be subjected to the mercy of whites. Our African government is in power but change is not going to trickle down until we take the bull by the horns and do things for ourselves as a historically disadvantaged people. … It is obvious to anyone with eyes to see that theatre still remains in lily-white hands - and these people are not about to relinquish their position of dictating the cultural agenda. Black artists need to go back to their own communities to seek the approval of the majority instead of letting their works be approved by a minority audience" (kaNdlovu quoted by Anonymous, 1995b).

During the remainder of the decade under discussion there was little evidence of this ideal coming to fruition. KaNdlovu's *Bergville Stories* (1995) is discussed in some detail above and the production seemed to underline the problems experienced in the early days of democracy around representatives of the different cultural groups attempting to communicate through the medium of the theatre about issues of common importance, but in a way that eventually divided the audience into its cultural components, rather than unite them in a shared experience. *Bergville Stories* was staged at the Grahamstown Festival and in some mainstream theatres. KaNdlovu's personal contribution by the end of the first decade did not demonstrate any progress in taking up the challenge he had formulated in the interview quoted above.

In 1997 the prominent and established stage, film and television actor Sello Maake kaNcube workshopped his first full-length stage play *Koze Kuse Bash* with a large

cast including prominent actors like Leleti Khumalo and Kere Nyawo. The lively, energetic piece portrays the inhabitants of Johannesburg's black suburbs and explores their interaction and culture. It opened in the Market Theatre and moved on to the 1998 Grahamstown Festival.

The principal language used in *Koze Kuse Bash* is *Iscamtho*, an urban spoken language that developed in the 1980s from "Tsotsitaal", a combination primarily of isiZulu, Sesotho, English and Afrikaans. The language endowed the play and the characters with a realism and authenticity that made it comfortably accessible to black audiences, but the predominantly white audiences in mainstream theatres and at the arts festival, while enjoying the spectacle, experienced problems with the language, as expressed by one prominent critic at the Grahamstown Festival, clearly damning with faint praise, "Set in a township street party, this fast-moving, if over-long, study of passions and relationships finds a great deal of social accuracy in the new South Africa. But, despite brimming with good comic observations, and having a fully committed company to interpret it, one has to ask whether this work - mostly played out in a black language by an obviously talented company - has a place in a festival established 24 years ago as a tribute to the English language. As someone to whom black language is foreign, I found the raucous, frenetically energetic, production difficult to follow, particularly as the company, although proficient in English, are not always able to offer lucid speech. Having to cope unsuccessfully with more than half of a script spoken in a remote tongue and the rest in an often incomprehensible accent, is not my idea of theatrical entertainment" (Herbst, 1998). No better illustration can be given of the cultural divide that still existed in the new South Africa and the challenges facing black, as well as white, theatre-makers to either bridge that divide or focus on audiences comprised primarily of members of their own cultural group and thus perpetuating the long established cultural apartheid. At the dawn of the new millennium cultural integration still seemed to be far on the horizon, if at all achievable in the Rainbow Nation.

In May 1994, in the early days of democratic South Africa, kaNcube declared optimistically in an interview with *City Press*, "I hold the contention that we need to haul the black urban experience from the side lines and put it on the centre stage so we can begin to untap the potential that lies in our heritage... My soul will only be

rested as an actor when I see the life and culture of our people being reflected in a manner that represents how they see things" (Anonymous, 1994c). The irony of this latter statement will become clear after a brief examination of kaNcube's career in subsequent years and particularly the position he found himself in, as an actor, exactly ten years later.

KaNcube's first contribution to his stated mission as a playwright was *Koze Kuse Bash*. His personal approach during the workshopping of the piece was described in an interview in 1997: "he selected a cast determined to work from a place with which they were familiar and walking in rhythms they would recognise instantly. It is these personal references that Sello feels black actors have mostly denied. 'We work through the eyes of others and mostly white ones,' he explains. But even when they emulate a hero like Denzel Washington, they are acting from his life experience, not their own. 'We just don't allow the rhythm of our soul to speak,' is how he explains the frustration he has been feeling for many years. Apart from *Woza Albert!*, which was the play that began it all professionally for Sello, he has always been working from someone else's point of view. And while he advocates a fusion of cultures in this country, he first wants to reclaim their own and with a voice that is his own, tell their stories" (De Beer, 1997). When asked in 1998 what the challenges were for South African playwrights, kaNcube replied, "They must map out a new direction. ... Now that we have power, what are we to do with it? What is black empowerment and what are its implications? What do these mean for the weak and poor - the black fat cat capitalists? Answers to these questions must be captured on stage to inform the public and provoke debates on the burning issues of the day" (Mfundo, 1998).

During the remainder of the decade under examination kaNcube went on to workshop, write and direct two more plays, *Koma* (1998) and *Komeng* (2000), both discussed above, while acting to great acclaim in many roles on stage and screen. In June 1999 he was appointed in the prestigious position of resident director at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg. He was the winner of the 2002 Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Drama, which included sponsorship to create and stage a new work for the Grahamstown Arts Festival of 2002. But before he could do so, in February 2002 Sello Maake kaNcube was offered and accepted a year's contract in a leading part in *The Lion King*, a world-class production in London's West End. He remained in the

UK and his next prominent appearance was in the role of Othello, opposite Sir Anthony Sher's Iago, in Gregory Doran's production with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in the Swan Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon, celebrating the play's 400th anniversary. That is where this important South African theatre-maker found himself at the end of the first decade of South African democracy.

During the early post-apartheid years, after returning from decades in exile in neighbouring Lesotho and abroad, multi-award winning novelist, prolific playwright, painter and scholar Zakes Mda made a powerful contribution to South African theatre as a playwright (some productions discussed above), analyst, commentator and also as Visiting Professor for one year at the School of Dramatic Art at Witwatersrand University. By the end of the decade under scrutiny, however, Mda was back in the USA, employed as Professor of Creative Writing at Ohio University and his primary focus had shifted to the writing of novels.

Although some of the most talented black theatre-makers joined the brain drain that was a general trend in South Africa during the decade under examination, it did not become a trend amongst theatre practitioners from either side of the cultural spectrum. What was a clear trend during the period, however, was that black theatre-makers came to prominence on the professional stages only sporadically, and none emerged with a sustained output of dramas or theatrical productions that influenced the flow and development of professional South African theatre significantly. Some of the more prominent productions included: *Jozi Jozi Guide* (1994) and *Moja Moja* (1995) by John Ledwaba; *Blackage (1995), Beautiful Things - A Love Story (2001)* and *Locking Horns (2003)* by Selaelo Maredi; *Hallelujah* (2000) and *Our Father, Ma's Got The Blues, Amen* (2002) by Xoli Norman; *Nothing but the Truth* (2002) by John Kani. These plays were staged at arts festivals and in mainstream theatres as professional productions and they were written or workshopped predominantly in English.

Promising young playwright Aubrey Sekhabi also chose to write and/or workshop his plays in English and in a realistic Western tradition when he created productions like *Roadhouse* (1994), *Enkonyeni High* (1995), *On My Birthday* (1996), *Homegirls* (1997), *Not With My Gun* (1998) and his plays were staged at the Grahamstown

Festival, the Market and the State Theatres. He populated the dramas with contemporary black South African characters who were experiencing the realities of life in the new South Africa, but lacking a truly original approach or the ability to make some innovative creative contribution to new South African theatre, the actual impact of these works was limited.

These black South African theatre-makers and playwrights tended to focus on current social realities and to work within Western theatrical conventions. An obvious question was why they seemed to avoid the rich African culture, history, mythology, traditions and rituals in the creation of their theatrical statements. Part of the answer would lie in the formal training and practical experience that these theatre-makers had received, the expectations of established theatre audiences and the conventions of the professional theatre in which they found themselves working at the dawn of democratic South Africa.

Some white theatre-makers and playwrights, however, did work together with black performing artists to start exploring the potential and theatrical richness of African culture and ritual. As quoted above, Zakes Mda suggested in 2002 that blacks still held their traditional rituals in awe and that it was generally only the white playwrights who felt free to experiment with African rituals on the theatrical stage (Mda, 2002: 286). A prime example was the pioneering and brave work done by Brett Bailey and his Third World Bunfight company that resulted in the three powerful productions of *Ipi Zombi?, iMumbo Jumbo,* and *The Prophet* and that led a leading critic to describe Bailey as “undoubtedly the most exciting, provocative stage director in South Africa” (Greig, 2001c).

Bailey, himself from a conventional white middle-class background and only having graduated from drama school in 1993, submerged himself in black culture, history, mythology, symbolism and ritual and, working with black performers, created these remarkable, innovative productions. His exploration of the rich African culture, the incorporation of dramatic elements drawn from that culture and the impact of his work on South African theatre led analysts Bain and Hauptfleisch to comment, “Bailey's trademark has been established through productions that are charged with an almost spiritual energy capable of drawing spectators into a spectacle of theatrical

ritual and magic. His shows have attempted to bring to life mystical tales that involve the audience through visual shocks and visceral thrills" (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 20).

Predictably Bailey also drew some criticism for being presumptuous enough to "dabble" in precious cultural areas where he was perceived not to belong. Author and journalist John Matshikiza summed up this reaction and quoted some detractors who claimed that "...he [Bailey] should lay off stuff that wasn't part of 'his' culture", and then Matshikiza stated his own opinion: "But then again, no one else was doing this kind of brave, extravagantly theatrical stuff. Why shouldn't he?" (Matshikiza, 2002).

Clearly there were other white theatre-makers who explored elements of black African culture in their works and many, including Yael Farber, Andrew and Janet Buckland, Ellis Pearson, Phyllis Klotz, Nicholas Ellenbogen and others, who worked and workshopped creatively with black performers. It has to be reiterated, though, that the intention of this section is to highlight and discuss only a selection of prominent individual theatre-makers whose work, personal evolution and the way they adjusted to the new realities during the period under discussion could illustrate some discernible trends in the theatre of the new South Africa.

The expectation in the new democracy might have been that the focus of newly created home-grown works would shift from the previous fixation on socio-political issues as expressed most commonly in the anti-apartheid protest theatre, to the exploration of the richness of indigenous culture. As illustrated above, this happened only to a relatively limited degree. Generally, prominent, established playwrights and theatre-makers tended to continue along the creative lines they had been working before, but individually there were clear adjustments in their work in keeping with the transformed and transforming reality in which they were producing.

10.5. Liberation brings an inward focus

The first democratic elections in South Africa brought socio-political liberation for many, and for those theatre-makers whose compulsion, focus and source of creative

inspiration had previously been the social injustices under the old regime, it brought liberation on another level.

A prime example was the creative genius who has been described by TIME magazine as "'the greatest living playwright in the English language' and whose works, according to a recent study [2004], are staged in more productions in the USA than that of any other playwright, except Shakespeare" (Hauptfleisch, 2004, translated from Afrikaans). That is, of course, Athol Fugard. In a March 1994 interview with TIME magazine, Fugard expressed the concern that he might find himself obsolete in the new South Africa and that his work as a playwright might become superfluous in the theatrical reality that would unfold in the new society. Seven years after that interview he recalled his first reaction to the dawn of a new South Africa: "I felt I had become South Africa's first literary redundancy. It took me a while to realise that was a load of bullshit, that there are stories that need to be told just as urgently as before - and new ways to tell them" (Willoughby, 2001).

In another 2001 interview Fugard stated, "One of the greatest blessings to fall into the lap of any storyteller is to be born in South Africa. You trip over the stories when you step out of your front door, they walk past you as you stand on the street corner. Just keep your eyes, your ears and your soul open. And off you go" (Robinson, 2001, translated from Afrikaans).

Fugard had always seen himself primarily as a storyteller, one who had chosen the theatre as his medium. During the apartheid era his stories focused mainly on the circumstances and lives of the victims of the oppressive political system. "My real identity as a writer was to tell stories about desperate people. And in the old South Africa a desperate person was nine times out of ten the victim of apartheid" (Raghavan, 1995). But he never saw himself as one of the "protest" theatre-makers. "Most of the protest theatre bored me immensely. I mean, if you want to make a political statement or message, get yourself a soapbox. Theatre is powerful enough on its own, you don't need to write political pamphlets for theatre. Tell the story and forget about the message" (Fourie, 1997). During the final decades of apartheid Fugard told his stories through several masterful productions and, although *he* might have "forgotten about the message" while doing so, his message was always loud and

clear to audiences locally and abroad and "his plays were crucial to the world's grasp of the realities of the apartheid-era" (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001:8).

Even though Fugard felt uncertain at first about his role in the theatre of this new democracy and about the prospect that there was "no villian out there I can square up against any more" (Bauer, 1994), his focus on simply "telling the story" initially led him to explore the realities of the new in contrast to those of the old. His first play in the new South Africa was the workshopped *My Life*, discussed above, which premièred at the Grahamstown Festival in July 1994. While stepping carefully over the threshold into a new social reality the play, like the playwright, explored that reality through the innocent wide eyes of a new generation. Fugard peopled his first play in this new, very young, democracy with characters aged between 15 and 21 years. In his next play, *Valley Song* (see above), he also had a young woman, a central protagonist, representing the new South Africa, but now he introduced an elderly man, reluctant to let go of the past, representing the old. To anybody who saw *Valley Song* with Athol Fugard himself in the dual role of the playwright/narrator/Fugard and the grandfather Abraam (Buks) Jonkers, it was immediately clear that the playwright was inside the old man searching for the wisdom to let go of the past and to help his granddaughter to find the courage to embrace the future.

In an interview with *New Nation* Fugard declared at the time of the première of *Valley Song*, "Behind this play is a message of hope and courage to step into the future. ... This play is my response to the new challenges of post-apartheid South Africa. ... During apartheid there was pain and clarity. A writer knew who to speak for and who to fight. In contrast, the new order is somewhat undefined and fraught with anxiety and uncertainty" (Ndebele, 1995b). His initial, and very obvious, focus on the youth in his first two post-apartheid plays was explained by the playwright: "The only way that somebody in my age group [b. 1932] can club into [the adventure and challenges of the new South Africa] is by connecting with the kind of young people I've been able to touch, feel, understand and respond to. They're the reality of our new nation. Left to my own devices, I would turn into something of a fossil. I'm embedded deep in the mud strata of those apartheid years" (Krouse, 1995).

Although Fugard was never overtly and solely a political playwright; his keen awareness of and insight into the socio-political realities surrounding him had always been key to his creative work, and in his reply to the question as to what challenges were facing playwrights in the new South Africa (in 1995), his first reaction concerned politics and politicians: “We don’t want to suddenly turn our art into the propaganda machine of the RDP of the ANC and to be thumping a message of good will. One of our ongoing responsibilities is to maintain our vigilance on behalf of the people, because the temptations facing politicians in the new South Africa are as great as – if not greater than – the temptations that faced the politicians in the old South Africa. ... What one begins to realise now is that for the majority of South Africans, black South Africans particularly, the new South Africa is going to look and feel exactly like the old South Africa for many, many years to come. There’s no way we can sort out the imbalances, the injustices, the deprivations that we have inherited from the old South Africa overnight” (Raghavan, 1995). Shrewdly the old master was sounding a warning about the new democracy, its new leaders and the realities facing its people, while at the same time he was alerting fellow theatre-makers to an abundance of new South African stories to be told on stage, including looking at the dangers and challenges facing a new democracy and particularly after such a peaceful transition – the dramatic potential was evident.

His own work, however, did not follow the route Fugard hinted at in that 1995 statement. Some months later, while he was performing in *Valley Song* in the Royal Court Theatre in London he told an interviewer from *The Telegraph*, “I’m no longer blinkered by my obsession with the apartheid years. I have 180-degree vision now. And I have a feeling that one of the consequences of that might be that I address myself to a broader canvas” (Spencer, 1996). That canvas was not the evolving socio-political landscape in his homeland - it turned out to be a highly personal look at himself and his own life as a creative artist. The autobiographical plays *The Captain’s Tiger - A Memoir for the Stage* (1997) and *Exits and Entrances* (2003) are discussed above, as is the feeling of liberation that Fugard experienced in the new South Africa, when he stated a year after the Spencer interview that the changes in the country had given him the freedom to tell the highly introspective stories he could not tell before, because in the old South Africa they would have sounded too personal or too self-

indulgent. Then there was "a more urgent agenda", but now he could return to his own life and his own personal experiences in the subjects he explored.

In 1998 *The Daily News* published an interview with Fugard that was distributed by Reuters from Washington in which the playwright explained the shift to personal introspection in his post-apartheid work; "The new South Africa has given me a great sense of freedom as a writer, to go into areas of my personal life and tell stories I could not have told in the past - certainly not during the apartheid years - as they would have smacked of an indulgence as far as I was concerned. ... To tell a story of how I became a writer when people were being shot down during peaceful funeral processions just wasn't on. Now I feel absolutely entitled to explore my own life and come to terms with my past" (Reuters, 1998). Fugard felt free to go on his own personal journey of self-discovery as a writer, a story-teller, an artist.

At the time of the première of *The Captain's Tiger* the *Mail & Guardian* published an interview Fugard gave playwright Charles Fourie. The following short extract clearly illustrates the frame of mind within which Athol Fugard was working some years after the first democratic elections:

> CF: South African theatre is dangerously moving into a sphere of guilt and over-compensation, trying to come to terms with a national identity rather than a personalised one. Phrases like 'socio-political responsibilities' are thrown around.
>
> AF: Oh Jesus. Oh Jesus. Please Charles. What is that? The death of theatre is when academics, philosophers, critics and politicians try to create agendas for art. If you want to look after art, then just let the artist do his thing. Don't threaten him with agendas. What is that phrase again?
>
> CF: Socio-political responsibilities.
>
> AF: *(Bursting into laughter for the first time during the interview)* Oh my God. Will you buy a ticket for that? Write from your heart man, just tell your stories. That is what has come to settle with me in my old age. The sense of storytelling, and I'm doing it now again in *Captain's Tiger*. I stand in front of the audience and I almost say: Once upon a time there was... I tell the story. The beautiful Barney Simon used to say, and I quote him: 'There will always be theatre because God likes to watch stories.' Tell stories about people, not ideas.
>
> (Fourie, 1997)

Following the trend of dealing with the present while looking at the past, Fugard premièred *Sorrows and Rejoicings* in 2001. Again it was a work of personal introspection within the context of his liberation as an artist in the post-apartheid reality. Fugard: “There [in Valley Song], I begin to play with myself as myself and as a character in the drama. I took that further in *The Captain's Tiger* - talking to the audience and to myself at age 20 on board ship. *Sorrows and Rejoicings* is much concerned with memory: the story moves backwards in time and resolves itself in the past” (Willoughby, 2001). Poignantly, but powerfully, the central character in *Sorrows and Rejoicings*, which Fugard himself portrayed in the première production, is a dead poet who appears only in flashbacks.

10.6. Theatre becomes show *Business!* The artist becomes a brand

Whereas each new play from Athol Fugard was clearly the result of a storyteller telling a carefully thought-out story, peopled by a small cast of carefully selected characters and wrought into a finely constructed theatre piece that would inevitably become another building block in the playwright’s world-renowned oeuvre, the contribution of Deon Opperman seemed to represent a different trend altogether – a trend that was developing amongst energetic young theatre-makers during the decade under examination. His primary focus as a theatre-maker was much wider than just that of a playwright, but also on making a leading contribution to the evolving new South African theatre landscape and entertainment industry. Seemingly inexhaustible as a playwright, director, producer, actor, drama teacher and businessman, Opperman was in his thirties during the first post-apartheid decade. By 2003, at age 41, he had already penned 40 theatre works (starting in 1984) and produced more than fifty. With colleagues Garth Holmes and Bata Passchier he had co-founded SAFTDA (South African School of Film, Television and Dramatic Art) in 1994, which subsequently developed into AFDA (The South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance - website at http://www.filmdramaschool.co.za/). Opperman played a prominent role at the arts festivals by staging numerous productions of his own original plays and also works from other playwrights, on the main and the fringe festivals, using his students as well as established professional actors. In 1998 he established the New Wave Theatre Group (NWTG), an independent theatre company and a home for SAFTDA alumni to stage their first professional productions in their

own theatre in Milpark, Johannesburg before doing the circuit of the arts festivals and graduating into the arena of professional theatre.

Opperman's own wide-ranging post-94 plays included monumental epics like *Donkerland* (the five-hour marathon discussed above), finely-crafted, smaller one-person vehicles to showcase the talents of selected well-established actors, like *Goya* for Marius Weyers (premièred with Dick Reineke in 1994), *Sweet Sorrows* (1994) and *Dear Mrs Steyn* (1999) for Wilna Snyman and *Tell Me the Truth* (2002) for Eric Nobbs, as well as plays ranging from *Magspel* (1999), a large play examining the power struggle between the De Medici family and Machiavelli, to the titillating one-woman commercial potboilers *Whore* (2000) and *Nipple caps and G-Strings* (2003).

Asked when he found time to write so many successful dramas while at the same time producing, directing, staging, touring productions and training young theatre-makers, Opperman replied energetically, "At bloody night! I brood on a play for quite a while before I start writing. And when I cannot put it off any more I jump on it and turn it out. *Magspel* runs for two hours and I wrote it in seven nights. When (we) started the school we decided not to do what happens at the universities, where lecturers sometimes do not work practically in the industry for twenty years. When I teach my students how to write and direct and act, and they see my work next to their own at the festivals, then they know that I practise what I preach" (Retief, 2000, translated from Afrikaans).

In addition to setting an example as a hard-working, prolific theatre-maker, Opperman concentrated strongly, in his teaching as well as his practical activities, on following the general trend of commercialisation and a focus on sound business principles in South African professional theatre. In the post-PAC landscape, where the arts festivals provided audiences and opportunities and where many small independent theatre venues were being established around the country, a competitive commercial environment was developing within which independent professional theatre-makers had the opportunity to stage and also tour productions, even if often on a smaller, more intimate scale than had previously been the norm in the established state-subsidised theatre venues. Opperman enthusiastically wrote and staged marketable productions for that evolving commercial environment and guided his students to

develop the skills to follow his example. In doing so, he represented a clear trend that eventually led to a paradigm shift pertaining to the financial dynamics of professional theatre in post-apartheid South Africa.

Asked in an interview in 2003 about his approach to the theatre of the new South Africa Deon Opperman replied, “Life is about power. Money provides power. All of us (theatre-makers) simply fight to survive. We are driven by the pursuit of survival. Let me say this slowly: *I am in show business – show business*. It is a business. Arts festivals should be run like a business. And the artist is a brand” (Beyers, 2003, translated from Afrikaans).

While teaching his students to develop artistic expression also as a business and to promote the artist as a marketable, commercial brand, he was doing the same with his own creative work and building himself as a commercial brand in South African theatre. In typically histrionic manner, but quite succinctly, he added to the reply quoted above, “Never again will I fill in another application form to appear at a festival. I’ve paid my fucking dues. I’ve done my bit. They can fucking phone me and ask if I’m available. I will not plead any more. My brand is now strong enough that I can appear where and when I bloody well please.” Deon Opperman was clearly in the vanguard of serious South African theatre-makers who were growing past the arts-for-arts’-sake approach, made possible in the old South Africa by state funding and support, to a commercialised theatre industry strongly focused on art as a business opportunity.

On this trend Bain & Hauptfleisch noted, “there is some danger of theatre becoming an area in which commercial considerations are prioritised ahead of creativity, inventiveness, quality and, most importantly, the role of theatre as a tool for effective communication,” and they quoted Opperman: “Considering whether or not his role as an artist has changed in the new South Africa, Deon Opperman argues that while theatre is not to be confused with propaganda, it is also not solely concerned with success and therefore theatre practitioners should ‘reserve the right to test the waters and possibly fail...’. The alternative, he warns, would be to ‘just do farce all the time and make money out of it’ (Opperman in Farber, 2000:16)” (Bain & Hauptfleisch, 2001: 21).

Opperman's approach represented a trend amongst serious professional theatre-makers to explore the evolving South African theatrical landscape and to pursue the objective of producing quality works in productions that were commercially sustainable and preferably profitable, while avoiding the trap of purely commercially motivated superficiality. The wide range of plays Deon Opperman delivered during the decade under examination demonstrated this trend and served as an illustration of the tightrope the serious creative theatre-maker had to walk in coming to terms with the realities of the professional theatre in a new democracy.

10.7. The box office subsidises "real writing"

Another example of a prominent and most prolific theatre-maker who had to adjust to the realities of the theatre in the new South Africa was multiple award-winning playwright and actor Paul Slabolepszy. His work as a playwright during the last years of apartheid South Africa, starting with *Renovations* (1979), *The Defloration of Miles Koekemoer* (1980) and the hugely successful *Saturday Night at the Palace* (1982), followed by many more, is well-documented and suffice it to say in this context that, like Athol Fugard, Slabolepszy succeeded in reflecting the realities of life in the old South Africa as he personally saw and experienced it. He produced structurally rather conventional plays in a Eurocentric text-based tradition that resulted in well-crafted pieces, socially aware and with finely-observed local characters and strong dialogue that struck a note with audiences. After the demise of the PACs, the subsequent development of the arts festival circuit and the changing dynamic in South African theatre from the mid-1990s onwards Slabolepszy was also challenged to survive as a practising professional theatre-maker and to continue a playwrighting career that remained financially viable.

Given the background of his early professional theatre experience at the Space Theatre in Cape Town and with Barney Simon at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg Slabolepszy was never primarily, or at least obviously, motivated by commercial objectives in the creation of his plays and characters. In the new South African theatre scene, however, he was compelled to become more aware of the box office. And then Slabolepszy, a life-long sports enthusiast, saw a commercial opportunity presented by

the Rugby World Cup competition that was scheduled to be hosted in South Africa in the winter of 1995. So he wrote *Heel Against the Head*, a commercial farce about totally obsessive rugby fans.

Clearly the play was designed to reach a very enthusiastic and wide potential audience and to exploit the predictable rugby fever that was bound to surround the competition. In an interview with *The Sunday Independent* the playwright spoke to Robert Greig about the huge challenge of adapting his writing to a completely commercial, popular approach with an eye to attracting the rugby fans into joining the live theatre audiences, and Greig noted: “Commercial farce was not Slabolepszy's forte, so what he did was call on the help and advice of Tim Plewman, a sussed-out actor with commercial theatre expertise. Says Slabolepszy: ‘He showed us how to push situations in the play further - to discover the farce potential’” (Greig, 1995a). Shrewdly, their objective was to blend South Africa’s most dominant popular culture, sport, with the ostensibly “high culture” of the theatre.

After a slow start in the Baxter in Cape Town in March 1995, where they played some nights for audiences of 20 people, and having borrowed R50 000 to stage the play, Slabolepszy and his co-producer, Bill Flynn, feared they might have to sell their houses to repay the loans. But when they moved the production to the Civic Theatre in Johannesburg in May and as the rugby fever picked up, *Heel Against the Head* took off properly. “Its success defied the wisdom of the sages who were predicting commercial success for Welcome Msomi's *Umabatha*, [revival of the hugely popular Zulu Macbeth musical of the eighties] which had also opened at the Civic Theatre complex [at the same time]. The rugby play was in tune with the rugby-mad public mood, filling a 260-seater theatre nightly; *Umabatha* was attracting 70 people a night to a 1,200-seat theatre” (Greig, 1995a).

A comparison of the box office performance of these two productions, apart from illustrating the success of Paul Slabolepszy’s first blatantly commercial venture, also indicate clearly the shift in taste and preference amongst audiences even as early as 1995. The rising rugby fever drove fans to go and see *Heel Against the Head* and when South Africa won the World Cup on June, 24 1995 and the new State President Nelson Mandela, famously wearing a Springbok rugby jersey, presented the William

Webb Ellis Cup to Springbok captain Francois Pienaar, the commercial success of Slabolepszy's play was ensured. It toured to capacity houses for two and a half years and was made into a feature film for which he also wrote the screenplay.

Slabolepszy declared that his real objective in blatantly pursuing commercial success with *Heel Against the Head* was to buy him time to sit down and do his "real writing". At the time he even declared that this would be his last farce (Greig, 1995a). During the remainder of the decade under examination sports lover Paul Slabolepszy did, however, periodically employ the genre of the sports comedy or even farce to keep the pot boiling and to buy himself time for "real writing". These plays included the cricket comedies *Tickle to Fine Leg* (1994) and *Life is a Pitch* (1998), also *Once a Pirate* (1996), a one-man show about a (black) soccer lover, *Running Riot* (2001), a play about male bonding during the annual Comrades Marathon, *It's Just Not Cricket* (2002), a piece to coincide with the 2003 Cricket World Cup competition and a play about two white golfers and their black caddy trying to come to terms with the realities of the new South Africa in *Whole in One* (2003).

Not all of these plays were superficial commercial farce and Slabolepszy kept repeating that his "sports plays" are not about sports, but about people! A hallmark of his work was that his characters were always acutely observed and sketched and the dialogue an extremely accurate reflection of the South Africans, often stereotypes, he chose to explore. In all his work, from the most serious dramas to the most fluffy farces, Paul Slabolepszy always managed to pursue his clear objective: to capture the spirit and essence of South African life, first in the old and later in the new South Africa.

True to his undertaking, when the commercial success of *Heel Against the Head* did buy him the time to sit down and do his "real writing", Slabolepszy sat down after the extended run of the play and wrote the highly acclaimed *Fordsburg's Finest* (discussed above), his 22nd full-length play. It premièred at the Market Theatre in February 1998 to coincide with the playwright's 50th birthday and was described by one prominent critic as "arguably the most significant theatrical statement yet pertaining to the new dispensation in South Africa" (Daniel, 1998). Paul Slabolepszy served as another example of the inevitable trend towards commercialisation amongst

some of the foremost established professional theatre-makers, but also as a playwright who managed to keep creating the kind of socially responsible theatre that originally motivated him, even after the socio-political revolution post-94 and after being compelled to spend a relatively large portion of his creative energy on deliberately commercial theatre. By 2003, by the end of the first decade of democracy, Paul Slabolepszy was one of the few established playwrights in South Africa with a solid body of work behind them who was still working consistently for the stage.

10.8. There is life after the Performing Arts Councils

After the changes at the Performing Arts Councils many established theatre practitioners and particularly actors and performing artists found themselves retrenched and often unemployed. Some survived by means of freelance work, mostly in television, film, commercials, educational and industrial theatre, with intermittent opportunities for work in the professional theatre on the mainstream or at the arts festivals. Many left the theatre altogether. A handful of the established theatre directors who had previously enjoyed employment in the secure state-funded environment of the PACs managed to establish themselves as freelance directors, often combining intermittent work in the professional theatre with industrial theatre projects and more lucrative television opportunities.

Director Ilse van Hemert, for example, previously resident director at Pact, directed a number of prominent productions like the première of Andrè P. Brink's *Die Jogger* at the 1997 KKNK, *Mallemeulwals (La Ronde* by Arthur Schnitzler) in 1998 and *Generaal Mannetjies Mentz* in 1999 with a star-studded cast of top South African stage talent and as the flagship production of the second Aardklop Festival. At the beginning of the next year, however, she accepted a fulltime position on the production team of the popular television soap opera *Isidingo – The Need* (SABC) and in 2002 she was appointed in the senior position of creative producer of the programme. Other established directors, like Janice Honeyman and Maralin Vanrenen, survived the changes and continued to direct productions for the professional theatre, but with the number of large-scale, large-budget productions diminishing, obviously the opportunities for the established freelance theatre directors also diminished.

One prominent example of a survivor who proved that there was life in live theatre after the PACs, specifically as a theatre-maker, was multi-award winning director/designer Marthinus Basson. After starting a theatrical career in the 1970s as an actor and stage manager at the Space Theatre in Cape Town, Basson moved on to the Cape Performing Arts Board where he designed and directed many productions in various theatrical genres over the years. During the first three years of democracy he staged, amongst others, Reza de Wet's *Mirakel* and *Drif*, and a revival of her 1980s "classic" *Diepe Grond*, as well as large-scale productions of George Bizet's opera *Carmen*, the 1966 Broadway musical *Cabaret* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In that period the policy regarding the PACs changed and Marthinus Basson was retrenched from the senior position of artistic director at Capab in 1997.

Already established as a highly original and creative stage director, Basson's services remained in demand after his retrenchment and he continued working as a freelance director/designer, but he found adjusting to the realities of the new South African theatrical landscape, particularly after the end of the generous state-subsidisation of the arts, frustrating. In 1999 he declared in an interview, "I'm bored with theatre in South Africa. ... We are caught up in feeble patterns. We are constantly thinking cheaper and cheaper and how to kiss the arses of the audience. Now, that is the purest form of censorship. I cannot see us tackling a production of *Titus Andronicus* today, or *The Park* by Botho Strauss, one of the greatest texts of the 20th century and one that says more to South African audiences than many a text created locally" (Burger, 1999, translated from Afrikaans).

With the development of the arts festivals Basson was regularly invited to direct showcase productions, usually with sponsorships and budgets that allowed him to design and stage the plays on a relatively large scale, like he was accustomed to doing at Capab. These productions premièred on the main festival and generally continued with popular runs in mainstream theatres, but most were not stagings of the imported masterpieces that Basson believed should be a central part of the South Africa theatrical diet. Although in the Eurocentric tradition, these were mostly newly commissioned works by prominent Afrikaans playwrights, like *Drie Susters 2 [Three Sisters 2]* (1997) by Reza de Wet, the three Breyten Breytenbach plays *Boklied [Goat*

Song] (1998), *The Life and Times of Johnny Cockroach* (1999) and *Die Toneelstuk [The Play]* (2001), *Waarom is dié wat vóór toyi-toyi altyd so vet? [Why are those toyi-toying in the vanguard always so fat?]* (1999) by Antjie Krog and *Boetman is die bliksem in! [Laddie is the hell in!]* (2000), *Gert Garries* (2002) and *Koggelmanderman* (2003), three plays by Pieter Fourie.

From time to time during the decade under examination, however, Basson also had the opportunity to design and direct imported works like *AARS!* (2001) by Peter Verhelst and *Mamma Medea* (2002) by Tom Lanoye, both from Belgium, Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (2003) and *Maria de Buenos Aires* (2004), an Argentinian tango "operita" by Astor Piazzolla and Horacio Ferrer.

In 2001, together with two emerging young theatre-makers, playwright Saartjie Botha and director Jaco Bouwer, Basson co-founded Vleis, Rys & Aartappels [Meat, Rice & Potatoes][32], an independent theatre venture focusing on new playwrighting, the staging of contemporary international works and community theatre. Part of his time and energy was spent on working with emerging and developing talent, like his productions of Botha's *Die Goue Seun [The Golden Son]* (2002) and *Raaiselkind [Puzzle Child]* (2003) and he also entered into a contract to teach acting and directing at the drama department of Stellenbosch University.

Basson is discussed in the present framework as a theatre-maker who represented a trend in the decade under examination where the type, style and even, to a degree, scale of theatre that had been developed at the state-subsidised Performing Arts Councils was kept alive after the PACs had been transformed into receiving houses. Strongly influenced and inspired by contemporary continental European theatre, Basson developed a personalised style in which he designed and staged the original works written by leading South African playwrights like Reza de Wet, Pieter Fourie and Breyten Breytenbach, who also worked in Eurocentric traditions. Not only did these productions find a ready, enthusiastic audience at arts festivals and subsequently in mainstream venues, but they unashamedly acknowledged the cultural origins of a

[32] The "Meat" being mainstream productions, the "Rice" being smaller and more experimental works, and the "Potatoes" being community theatre projects.

large segment of the population and an even larger segment of the theatregoing population.

In the days of the Performing Arts Councils the vast majority of professional theatre productions celebrated or grew out of white South Africa's cultural roots in Western Europe and also the popular culture imported from the USA. Although the organisational and economic dynamics of professional theatre changed after the transformation of the PACs and the emergence of an arts festival circuit, there was still a large audience for "PAC-type" productions. Where, for obvious practical reasons, the general trends were towards smaller-scale productions of mostly home-grown plays with smaller casts, directors like Marthinus Basson produced the headline, often sponsored, main festival productions, which usually premièred at the arts festivals before moving on to the mainstream. Typically these productions had high aesthetic, artistic and entertainment value, prominent actors in the cast, enjoyed high-quality pre-publicity, created a buzz in the media, and often the arts festival run would be completely sold out.

This brief overview of Basson's contribution, together with those of the other prominent theatre-makers selected for discussion in this chapter, has served to identify some of the many possible reactions of artists to the transformed reality of professional theatre and audiences in the new South Africa. The trends highlighted here, however, as illustrated and represented by these selected individuals, are not exclusive to the individual, but are shared by many and the individual theatre-makers highlighted, serve merely as examples to illustrate some major trends in the way the creative artists in the theatre community adapted to the emerging realities of professional theatre in a new democracy.

These realities, dealt with in some detail above and manifested in the major trends analysed, included the fact that the decade examined here was too short a period to show any real cultural integration in theatre audiences. Most leading theatre-makers continued to create and produce for audiences representing the same demographics as before the socio-political changes of 1994, and most offerings of professional theatre continued to be attended by predominantly, although by no means exclusively, white audiences. As indicated, the languages used most commonly on professional stages

and in most dramas written in the new South Africa, continued to be English and Afrikaans and the nine other official languages were relatively infrequently used. The most prevalent style of the more prominent professional theatre offerings, and newly created indigenous plays, continued to be cast in the mode of and influenced by Western European and American models. And the incorporation of African traditions or the exploration of African culture, mythology and ritual did not enjoy any strong focus for expression on professional stages during the first decade of democracy. Some playwrights and theatre-makers who had felt compelled to focus predominantly on the socio-political injustices under the old regime, experienced a sense of liberation under the new, which allowed them to focus more specifically on autobiographical or inwardly directed subjects in their creative work. And, as a result of the changes in the financing and subsidisation of the arts, a predominant trend in new South African professional theatre was a commercial focus and a general trend towards smaller, less elaborate, and more popularly styled productions. At the same time, however, a relatively small number of professional theatre-makers continued to be given the opportunity to develop and stage large-scale, often privately funded productions in the typical theatrical tradition of the major productions offered by the Performing Arts Councils before the socio-political changes that followed the elections of 1994. As the new South Africa and its new theatre landscape were emerging, the theatre-makers were adjusting.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION

In 1994, with the arrival of democracy and the birth of the new South Africa, spirits were generally optimistic and expectations high. The newly elected democratic government enjoyed universal support and promised reconstruction and development on every level, including the arts. For the first time every individual South African, all cultural groups and all language groups were recognised as being equal and having the same rights under the law, as covered in the new Constitution. Official government policies indicated the intentions to support the cultural and artistic expression of all segments of the multi-cultural population. Regarding the arts, the expectation was that facilities and opportunities in the historically disadvantaged and culturally marginalised communities would be developed and also that these large segments of the population would be given the opportunity to celebrate their cultural heritage and to enjoy and be enriched by arts and culture.

The first ten years of democracy proved not only too short for many of the expectations to be fulfilled, but in fact, as exemplified in the specific area of the professional theatre which is the subject of this study, very little progress was made towards developing opportunities for arts and culture to flourish or even grow in the historically disadvantaged communities. After the first ten years under the first democratically elected government it was clear that the areas of arts and culture were a lower priority than the many other pressing issues that needed attention during this early period of reconstruction and development after the end of the apartheid era. The professional theatre that had existed against terrible odds in these marginalised communities under the previous regime declined in the early years of the new South Africa and was virtually non-existent by the end of the first decade.

When the Performing Arts Councils were transformed into “playhouses” or “receiving houses”, the intention was to redirect government funds away from these historically Eurocentric, white-oriented institutions towards a more equitable distribution which could also benefit the historically disadvantaged artists and communities. Funding distribution via the National Arts Council did not truly succeed in achieving its

primary objectives, mostly as result of bureaucratic and administrative (teething?) problems. And the goal that provincial and local governments would considerably increase their contribution to the arts was not yet achieved, primarily because it was not legislated and there were no clear guidelines formulated. By the end of the decade it was clear that these issues had to be revisited.

When the PACs closed their drama departments and retrenched a large number of professional theatre workers, the whole professional workplace in South African theatre changed dramatically. Those theatre-makers had to either create their own independent theatre or they had to find alternative opportunities in the broader entertainment industry, and many of them left the theatre altogether. In terms of productions and theatrical events the focus predictably shifted from, albeit often Eurocentric, “high culture” at the previously state-subsidised PACs to popular commercial theatre in the existing and newly formed independent production companies. Funds and opportunities were simply not available to stage productions that were not guaranteed a reasonably good chance at box-office success, self-funding and, realistically, some profit on the bottom line. As the professional theatre became more focused on lower cultural common denominators and higher popular box-office appeal, fewer classical plays were performed, production values often tended to drop and the general trend in professional theatre inclined towards what could be perceived as a “dumbing down”.

During the first decade of democracy there was very little change in the demographics of audiences attending professional theatre productions. A new audience was developed in the form of the arts festival-goer and this also resulted in the development of a new form broadly described as the “festival play”. But in general terms, and maybe surprisingly, given the context of a newly liberated multi-lingual, multi-cultural society, the vast majority of theatre-going audiences remained white and middle class, representing a relatively small minority of the total population. The bulk of the theatre they consumed remained in the tradition of European and American drama and the languages used on stage remained almost exclusively English and Afrikaans.

In conclusion, the first ten years of democracy in South Africa saw relatively little development in terms of indigenous artistic expression on the professional stage, except for a continuation of works produced by predominantly Eurocentric local theatre-makers for predominantly white audiences. During these ten years more basic social challenges than the development of arts and culture enjoyed priority treatment and attention from the state. The diminishing state support and subsidy of the arts resulted in a general commercialisation of professional theatre and consequently a lowering of the cultural-artistic level of productions and newly created plays and performances. The first decade of democracy brought no cultural revolution or civilizing renaissance in South Africa. The primary focus was on social and economic reconstruction and development, on providing basic education and literacy to the masses, on fighting crime and corruption.

My findings and conclusions, as outlined above, should not be seen as completely negative or pessimistic – on the contrary. I do believe, apart from what I see as rather slow initial progress during the first decade of democracy, that the potential exists amongst South Africa’s theatre-makers of all cultural groups to develop a strong theatre industry that can serve the local population and also make an impact beyond our shores. As discussed in some detail in earlier chapters, there were a large number of successful individual theatre-makers and creative theatre artists who continued to work or that emerged during the decade and started to establish themselves and their work in the theatre.

Interestingly, the numbers of theatre training facilities increased during the decade and at all facilities the student numbers also increased, in most cases by as much as 200%. On the one hand, this might have been as result of the promise of glamour, star status and financial success achieved by many individuals in local television series such as *Egoli*, *Isidingo – the Need* and *7de Laan [7th Avenue]* and South African films like *Tsotsi* (winner of the Academy Award for Foreign Language Film in 2006) and by role models like Oscar-winning South African actress Charlize Theron. On the other hand, it might have been another indication that the industry was poised to take off after the end of the first decade of democracy, after the initial adjustments to a new theatrical landscape had been made. It is possible that there was an expectation of bigger and better things to come.

Some clear signs of that potential had already become visible during the first decade of the New South Africa, such as the emergence of the arts festival circuit and the proliferation of small independent commercial theatre companies. This was a powerful sign that South Africa's professional theatre-makers seemed to be intent on surviving the changes. They used their creativity and artistic ability to function independently and often successfully within an alternative structure, such as an arts festival, once the state-subsidised Performing Arts Councils were no longer comfortable and safe havens for them to work in. This seemed to indicate a developing ability to survive in an environment which was closer to the American model of minimal or no state support, than the typical European model of very strong financial state, regional or city support for the arts and culture. Seemingly almost against the odds, the decade did produce, as indicated in earlier chapters, some plays of enduring standard and productions of very high quality. And the South African professional theatre-makers did gain a certain momentum, although slow at first, to face the challenges of a new theatrical environment.

Although there were successes and clear signs of strong potential for future decades, in the professional theatre the first decade proved to be a period of initial adjustment to the new realities and the challenges faced in a new socio-political environment and also, to a degree, the reflection of those new realities and challenges in the mirror that is the theatre of this new democracy.

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