

Mda puts some snap into Cap

Playwright Zakes Mda is coming home to the city he loves — and bringing with him a wealth of knowledge on development theatre and some challenging new ideas for the Community Arts Project in Cape Town.
By GAYE DAVIS

PLAYWRIGHT Zakes Mda has more snap, crackle and pop than the breakfast cereal and he's bringing it to Cape Town to recharge the Community Arts Project as its new director.

Currently head of the English department at the National University of Lesotho at Roma, he will only be able to take up the post in June but was in the mother city this week to touch sides with CAP staff and trustees.

It was a kind of homecoming: three of his plays — *The Hill*, *Dark Voices Ring* and *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* — were produced at the People's Space Theatre in Long Street in 1979 and 1980, and he earned his doctorate in drama through the University of Cape Town in 1990.

Cape Town is his "favourite city in all the world". He likes it because "it's very laid back — it has the communality of a village with all the advantages of a city".

But more importantly, his new appointment will enable him to take further the work that is his passion: theatre for development.

As a movement, theatre for development gained currency in the 1960s, "when theatre practitioners began to explore various ways that could be used in creating a critical awareness among people".

Mda learned about theatre for development while in America. Originally from the eastern Cape, his family went into exile in Lesotho in 1963, when he was just a child. He studied in Switzerland for a fine arts degree and went on to get a masters degree in communication and another in theatre from Ohio University.

While in America he taught and was a visiting lecturer at Harvard University. His interest in theatre for development took him to rural areas of Nicaragua, putting theory into practice.

When he returned to Lesotho, he immediately set up a theatre for development project. Its aim was to create community dialogue on development issues affecting both urban slum and rural dwellers, resulting in marginalised communities developing a critical awareness of their situation and their problems.

He describes one such exercise, when the United Nations Children's Education Fund (Unicef) employed his group to assist in educating people about immunisation.

"We were there working with the people — most of them women, because their men were away working on the mines in South Africa. What happens is that the villagers contribute, a storyline develops and then performances are staged.

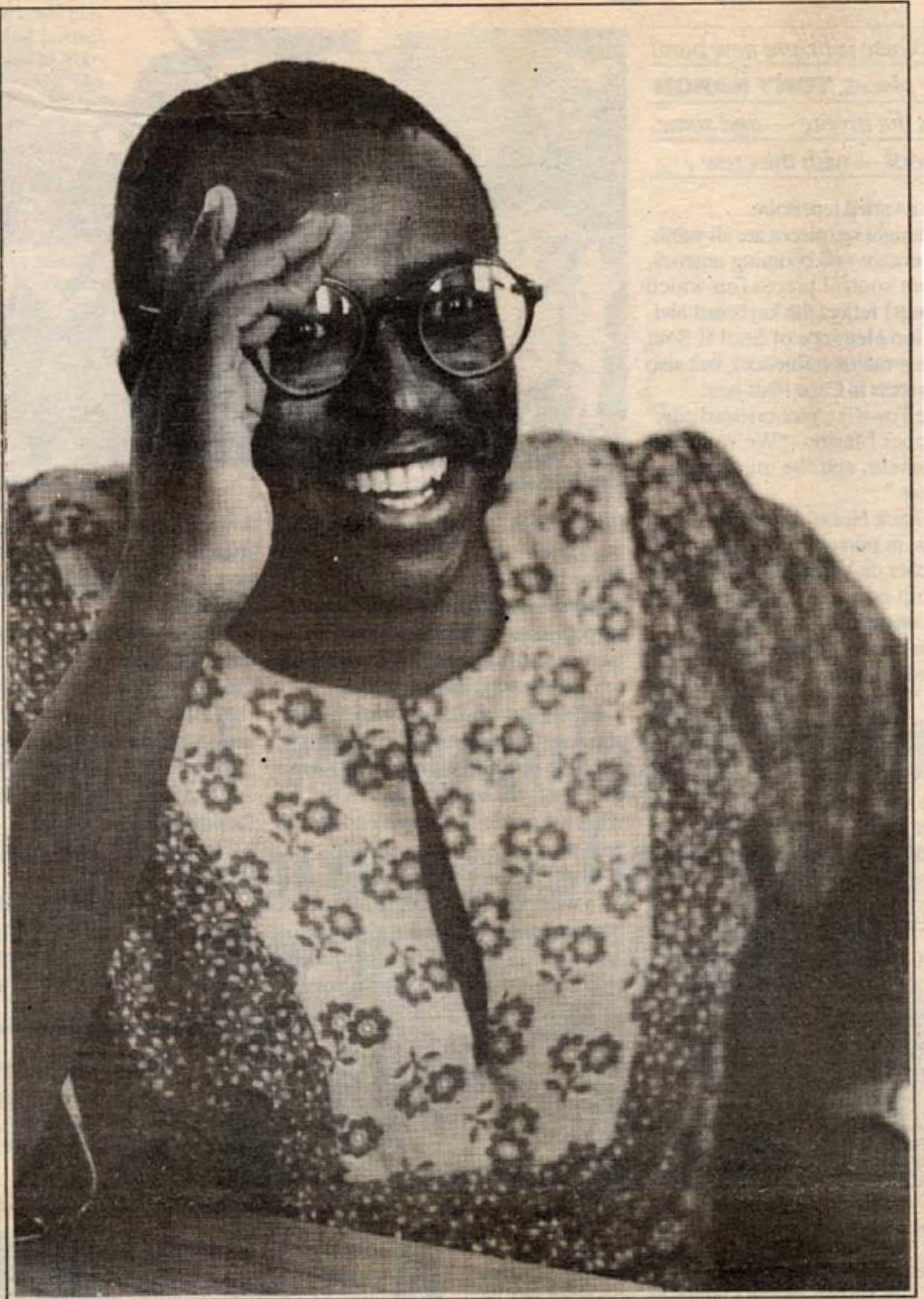
"During the course of this it emerged that the women were very unhappy with the situation on the mines. They had this strong feeling that unions were bad things because they were seen to cause strikes and the men would lose their jobs and come home and the children would then go hungry.

"So we decided to return to the village and explore these issues raised by the women. We also chose a time when we knew the men would be at home and we knew there would be some strong conflicting views.

"We stayed some time in that village, and a play was created with the differing views of all. There were those who supported Basotho labour joining the unions (at the time the Lesotho government was trying to discourage the practice) and those against.

"We were able to do this play which was directly challenging government policy. The upshot was that people were more informed about the issue and quite a few changed their minds, deciding their men should join the unions. One of the reasons for this was that in the play, we enacted scenes from the men's workplace, bringing life on the mines home to the women so they could see for themselves what it was like."

For Mda, this kind of theatre is the antithesis of the protest theatre which rams a political line down the throats of passive audiences. "It's anti-agit prop," he says. "It's based on a critical analysis rather than a line being pushed.



Snap and crackle ... Playwright Zakes Mda

Photo: ERIC MILLER

"It's not top-down, where people come in from outside and say 'this is what is happening' — instead, it enables a dialogue to begin and solutions to emerge. The theatre people are really only catalysts.

"Drama is a very effective medium for helping people learn and develop skills of critical analysis — it's empowering."

After completing his PhD, which examined the use of theatre as a means of development communication, Mda spent most of last year in Britain as writer-in-residence at Durham University. He worked with a theatre for development group active in depressed, marginalised areas in north-east England and spent time working with alternative theatre groups in Germany.

What lends theatre its power as a means of communication is its entertainment value, according to Mda. "People learn and examine issues through entertainment, and theatre for development is a form which essentially requires community involvement."

All this implies that Cap will be taking a different direction with him at the helm.

"Cap already has a constituency and we're not going to neglect it. We're going to expand, rather. Cap has concentrated its efforts within an urban setting, and I intend to change that. It's true we do have marginalised slum dwellers in the city, but rural people are especially isolated: they have been neglected, even by the liberation movement itself.

"I do not see myself as coming here to overhaul the whole organisation but maybe to enhance the positive and maybe transform the negative into a whole of which we can all be proud."

He's impressed with Cap, though he notes that like any other organisation, it is not without its problems. A recent cash crisis has been temporarily overcome and although the situation "is not ideal", he knows Cap "will survive".

But he would like to explore ways in which the Cap can raise its own funds and not have to depend on donors: "I want us to get away from

that culture of dependency," says Mda. "We must devise strategies to achieve self-sufficiency. It is something we must sit down and debate."

He also wants to see more grassroots participation. Cap's trustees, whom he met this week, "are black and white but they're all middle class, and they're making decisions about people out there, and this must change.

"This organisation must stop dishing stuff out, it must provide a service — the community must be represented through all its structures and we must work in a way that we are responding to their needs as articulated by them."

His wife, Adele, a teacher at a Thaba Nchu school, will follow him to Cape Town once she has found a job. Mda has three children from a previous marriage.

"I am definitely looking forward to it," says Mda. "It's a challenge, and I love challenges, they're exciting."

He does have one fear, though: not finding enough time to write. "I would not survive without my writing. It's my lifeblood — I would go crazy."

But during his time in Lesotho, he has not only been engaged in lecturing full-time and running the English department. He has also run a film-production company (now sold), turning out documentaries and dramas for aid agencies and Lesotho and Zambian TV at the same time as producing live theatre productions and "writing on top of it all".

When he gets to Cape Town, he wants to make a film about Aids — an entertainment feature, rather than a dry-as-dust documentary. He also wants to get involved in "mainstream" theatre and stage a play at the Baxter.

The only place he feels comfortable enough to do his own writing is tucked up in bed: somehow, when he tries doing it at a desk, the muse absents herself. But that Mda will find the time and the energy to do it there is no doubt — perhaps after fuelling up on copious quantities of the stuff that goes snap, crackle and pop.