Cultural Boycotts are as South African as overpacked mini-taxis and boerewors. But a new attitude is emerging in the country's cultural landscape. We spoke to Mike van Graan, theatre director of the Community Arts Project based in Cape Town and co-author of a controversial critique of the boycott, about his experiences in progressive art circles and his plans for theatre in the "new South Africa."

Kagenna: You have been quite outspoken about the cultural boycott. Your recent paper comes to mind. What response have you had to it?

Mike: There has been a lot of criticism of it. The person I wrote it with has experienced more of that up in Johannesburg because of his position within the cultural movement, being the organising secretary of Congress of South African Writers (COSAW). Also, I have been outspoken about a range of issues over a number of years and I have been penalised as a bit of a maverick anyway, someone who is not really part of the movement. With the Cultural Workers Congress I was pushing for a non-aligned stance ages ago: that it shouldn't belong to any particular party or organisation and that it must serve the interests of cultural workers. That of course was not a very popular line at one stage and I was considered to be anti the movement. There was also an incredible amount of support. The most important thing about it is that it has created tremendous controversy. People have had to confront the issue, especially as it came from people actively involved within the progressive cultural movement.

Kagenna: Would you say that the controversy has been a good thing?

Mike: Absolutely. I think though that a lot of people asked us why we went to the press with it - why did you cause that kind of stink at that kind of level, you should have taken it to organisations first, the thing is that organisations wouldn't have discussed it because they exist exactly to implement the cultural boycott.

In order to create a debate and challenge those organisations, you need to adopt a different strategy and I think this has caused people to rethink the political line and that is going to become an increasingly important thing - to make people critical. There is too much emphasis on political conformity, I think that raising the debate was a good thing.

Kagenna: Is there a new line emerging?

Mike: Well, the interesting thing after the Albie Sachs intervention was that suddenly a lot of people were very excited by this, but also very intimidated and fearful about it. It was infringing on their way of doing art and being involved in culture, but because it was coming from a very prominent ANC person there began to be a more strategic way of thinking. Their practise as Stalinists, as implementers of the boycotts meant that there was this Albie speak, but Stalin do. They couldn't marry these words of openness that Albie was talking about. There is conflict between the new line and the practise of the last three or four years.

Kagenna: Will the cultural desk survive?

Mike: One of my major concerns is that groups like the Federation of South African Cultural Organisations (FOSACO), because of their political weight and their sugar daddy being the ANC's department of Arts and Culture, they will intimidate people into their particular way of working, which is essentially about adopting strategies to win positions of power, making sure that we spend all our energy and time getting people to go to the Board of Trustees in Grahamstown or setting up committees to monitor and implement the Cultural Boycott.

I don't think the cultural desk exists anymore, but its role is going to be taken over by FOSACO. I think that it is a major problem and it depresses me. It's what we have been fighting for all along, against National Party dominance in a whole range of spheres of our lives. The same thing is beginning to emerge in FOSACO where there are a lot of politicians who have a vague interest in culture but have a limited understanding of the dynamics and role of culture within social transformation.

Kagenna: What would you say the price of the cultural boycott has been?

Mike: There are probably a few different ways of looking at this. In terms of conventional theatre, I am not sure that it has had a negative effect because I think that conventional theatre operates as a commodity, I don't think it has necessarily influenced the development of theatre at that level, except maybe retarded its further growth as a commodity.

Lifting the boycott could have its most benefit in terms of cultural interchange with people who have not had access to theatre in the past. Certainly at this level it has been quite a problem. Even though the boycott became selective in the last few years, theatre practitioners from other parts of the world have been very reluctant to come because it is an emotional issue, no matter how much we said to people "come along anyway", because it can be okayed by the ANC.

A third thing which it has done is elevated certain theatre forms over others. Its also created a kind of dishonesty where we have had international festivals to display people's culture, but very rarely have we taken things that are actually representative of people's culture because they just weren't of sufficient quality to play to a much more sophisticated
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audience. Instead we took things that had had commercial success.

A fourth and pretty major thing has been that the boycott has created a style of cultural practise and style of cultural organisation which has had very little to do with culture and the development of the arts, and everything to do with power within the cultural movement. It has been about saying who is or who isn't OK in terms of the cultural boycott. It has been about having power, authority and political weight and being able to intimidate and coerce people into a particular political strategy.

Kagenna: What is your bigger vision?

Mike: It is obviously related to the needs that do exist. You cannot deny the legacy of apartheid, it is going to be around us for a long time. It is going to take some time to empower people, who have been denied access to the arts, with the necessary and critical skills to be able to compete on equal terms.

First of all, the establishment of say 10 very good training schools in all the disciplines - film, video, dance, visual arts, drama - throughout the country. One to every 3 million people. Then the development of neighbourhood cultural centres for every 300 000 people where the community can go and practise its social or aesthetic life or whatever. Almost like the role of the church in the past - the centre of community life through using the arts. The point about development at the moment is that people are seeing it entirely in material terms - better housing, clothing etc, but development of human beings is a lot more than that. The arts and creative education have significant roles to play.

Kagenna: Tell us about the Theatre Action Group (TAG)?

Mike: TAG is an initiative to develop theatre in a very different way to what we have been used to before. It is quite a cheeky thing for us to have done because we don't really have all that many resources or people with broad vision and skills. What we have done is simply facilitated a coming together of people across ideological barriers into a structure where we can pool human, technical and material resources for the development of theatre.

The difference between what this initiative is trying to do and cultural organisations of the past is that if we are going to have debates, we're saying, lets have them in the context of practical work and not set up a structure just for the sake of having debates, or exercising political authority and power within the cultural sphere. Let us rather agree that it is in the interests of both conventional theatre and progressive theatre to develop new audiences.

We have identified 6 venues in 6 areas - Khayelitsha, Guguletu, Mitchell's Plain, Athlone, Stellenbosch and Mbekweni, and will take plays around to each one. In so doing we hope to develop a tradition of people coming along to a place to see a piece of theatre and to pay a particular price towards supporting the people who are doing theLe. We are taking theatre to where the people are, making it become more and more part of people's life experience. If our material is not what the people want then we won't have an audience.

Mike van Graan

Kagenna: It's a different form of accountability if the audience can throw cabbages and tomatoes at you.

Mike: Absolutely, the lessons of eastern Europe are there. Ultimately, unless you have people with you through the quality of your leadership and what you offer them, you don't deserve to be in a position of power and people will eventually throw you out.

You also have to recognise that you are competing with much more popular media, like television. Theatre practitioners have come to realise that they actually need each other. Conventional institutions realise that they need new audiences - they are not going to survive into the future with subsidy cuts and similarly, progressive organisations realise that the political patronage that they have enjoyed up until this point in ensuring that there are audiences as well as funding, is also not going to be there.

Kagenna: Has TAG been successful so far?

Mike: It is quite a new thing. What it has been successful in so far is that it has managed to draw so many different people. This is also its potential weakness, because there is such a diverse range of people with different aesthetic practices the potential for conflict is very great. The responsibility then is to provide outlets for that through practical work.

There has been a feeling of enthusiasm that frightens me a little because of the expectations that they have of something like TAG - that TAG is going to be the answer to a whole range of things.

Kagenna: Isn't there a certain contradiction between the artist who is always seen as quite an individualist and then the notion of organising the artists?

Mike: I think that there isn't necessarily a contradiction. It becomes a contradiction when we see the two as being poles apart. People can be individual artists though they must have the right to not belong to organisations, but then there must also be organisations for people who think that it is within their mutual interest to band together. Individual artists who make it are usually people who have had access to extensive resources initially.

Kagenna: Do you think theatre and culture in this country has been damaged beyond repair?

Mike: I'd hate to say that. I think that if somehow there can be a facilitation of the mushrooming of the things that happened despite the political organisations, despite the performing arts councils, then I think that things will happen organically and hopefully they will change the nature of those organisations. As cultural organisations stand, I don't trust their vision, their style of practise. I just don't trust them to do anything that is in the interest of culture. I can see them doing things in the interest of a political party and personal power.