Davis
On CAP and beyond

By Patricia Mahlangu
Southside staff writer.

LIONEL Davis’ first encounter with the Community Arts Project was a chance experience. But that lucky day marked the start of a completely new trend in his life, one which he has never regretted.

Commuting regularly to and from his sister’s house in Woodstock twelve years ago, Lionel remembers passing an inviting-looking building just past the terminus in Mowbray Main Road. It had a big banner in the laneway: “Artists’ Workshop.”

For a while he did little more than wonder about it.

“One day I was standing at the terminus when I saw a young girl with a drawing board, and while she was standing over her arm, I was so sure she was going to that place that I followed her, and even though I lost her I plucked up the courage to spee-spee drama,” he modestly recalls, describing his first stage role as king in “A Fairytale with a Difference” - a nursery rhyme with a sting in its tale.

“I was lampooning the stereotyped good children are taught of the knight in shining armour who rescues the damsel in distress.

“So, the dragon captures the damsel as usual. But in this play she voluntarily associates with the dragon, when the knight comes to rescue her she rebuffs him, because she’s quite happy,” says Lionel.

And in a play by Leonard Khosa about the harassment of migrant workers living in a claustrophobic cell in the cities [called “Theo And Bonzi!”], Lionel played the investigating cop [“al die sneakties role”]. He was also in Derek Joubert’s mime group.

Then, fighting a little battle against ageism, at the end of 1979 Lionel decided to get himself some training and applied to the Fine Arts faculty at Rorkestrat in Natal.

He was 42 years old at the time, but made himself 10 years younger, “because people tend to think you’re decrepit when you see ‘42’ on paper.”

A Lutheran mission station renowned for the production of pottery and tapestries, Rorkesdrift was a training ground for some of the foremost black artists, like Jongwe Dhlomo and Azarnia Mnatha.

Lionel, a veteran at frugal living (“mok net van die tronk a!”) didn’t find difficulty adapting to rural life.

He had come to Rorkesdrift at the tail end, when the bottom was falling out of the project. And he emerged from there with a conception of art quite different to that he holds today.

“Then I didn’t see art as a means of informing people or of using my skills to further political ends,” he says.

“I was more concerned about improving my own capacities. It’s the ego, you know. Once you’re exposed to a little bit of art, you think you’ve arrived - jy dik jy’s daal ou.

“Your mind is only on the first one-man exhibition you’re going to have!”

It was the 1982 Cultural Festival, organised in Gabarone, Botswana, by a group of South African exiles, that helped Lionel to formulate a fresh perspective on art and culture - a consciousness of the need to develop skills for the benefit of the community.

In the process of recruiting players, artists, writers and musicians to form the regional contingent to the festival, people, says Lionel, realised that Cape Town had the potential to become a strong cultural unit in its own right.

In Botswana, an apt term was coined to describe people like himself - “cultural workers”.

So, does Lionel think culture - art, dance, music, writing - is a powerful medium of expression in a repressive climate?

“Yes,” he replies emphatically.

“If it wasn’t for the cultural upsurge since the states of emergency, we would have been in a very bad way.

“During peaks of political activity, the focus is on meeting, protesting, striking - en masse. But when this is suppressed, the only means people have to give vent to their militancy is through plays, writing, artwork, calendars, and dance.

“The cultural events which grace our platforms give us sustenance - such forums are the one place where concerned people can get together without having to look over their shoulders.

“Progressive South African art in the 80s,” Lionel concludes, narrowing the focus a little, “is outspoken.

“It’s not a tokenism - more a wanting to identify with you and your political views,” he says.

“More and more people coming from a ghetto situation are putting their crude experiences on paper. When we go home on Saturday we only come out of that township on the Monday morning to go to work.

“So people’s creative energies express what’s their environment live: police brutality, Casspirs, shebees, confrontation, laughter.

“Such clichés are necessary articulations for the artist,” says Lionel, “but as people grow through contact with other artists and so on, they start drawing their environment in more sophisticated ways, making the work appeal to a broader section of the community”.

Lionel himself enjoys dabbling in pastel-hued watercolours, designing stark and striking line-cuts, and line-drawing. But he has never really indulged in developing his own artistic talent, for and by itself. His time and energy is always radiating outwards.

When he gets the chance though, he plans to do a course in graphic design. At present, he runs the silk-screening unit at CAP.

“I’m glad to be doing what I’m doing, but in order to be of continual assistance to our communities, I have to hone my skills and be better informed,” he says.

Lionel turns 53 this week, and he certainly has enough to celebrate. Not surprising for a person who lives by the dictum: Don’t live for the past, but for the present and the future.