

# 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 lane which read "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 white smock slung 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

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enter the door."

He was met by a big delapidated hall, with "wat ek nou ken as murals op die mure", and by people like Randy Hartzenberg, and Maggie Oewies who had been given space for the fledgling Domestic Worker's Association in the CAP kitchen after they had been kicked out of their Christian Institute venue when the institute was banned.

"Two people were busy with a half shovel, trying to unstick a piece of lino from the floor. I helped them, and that's how I got involved with CAP. It was as sudden as that!"

Lionel, who, at that time, was drawing UIF and whose house arrest order has just been lifted, volunteered his services as a general handyman-cum-cleaner at CAP.

"I did everything - sweeping, scrubbing, carpentry, learning to paint and a bit of

speel-speel 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.

"It was lampooning the stereotypes our 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 a clandestine life in the cities [called "Thoko And Bonzil"], Lionel played the investigating cop ["al die snaakse roles"].

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 Rorkesdrift in Natal.

He was 42 years old at the time, but made himself 10 years younger, "because people tend to think you're decrepid when they 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 Bongwiwe Dhlomo and Azaria Mbatha.

Lionel, a veteran at frugal living ["mos net van die tronk af"] 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 in-



# Lionel Davis: cultural worker.

forming 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 dink jy's daai 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 that 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 continues, narrowing the focus a little, "is outspoken.

"It's not a tokenism - more a wanting to identify which side you are on politically", he says.

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

"So people's creative energies express what makes their environment live: police brutalities, Casspirs, shebeens, confrontation, laughter.

"Such cliches 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 lino-cuts, and line-drawing. But he has never really indulged in developing his own artistic talent, by and for 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.

PIC BY PATRICIA MAHLANGU