

By Denise Fouche.

Challenges facing theatre in the 90s

AS South Africa continues to move ahead with the change and adaptation that current government thinking has created, it is becoming increasingly important for all art mediums to live up to the range of challenges this poses.

As an art medium that reflects the nature of society in direct forms, theatre in South Africa has to face the many debates the 90s will present.

Among these are the issues of state subsidisation, the incorporation of state and community theatre structures, the lack of training, the effects of the cultural boycott and the change in both content and form.

Although community and state theatre may have to respond to different problems, there seems to be a common attitude of reconciliation.

Mike van Graan of the Community Arts Project (CAP) says CAP will host a theatre festival in September to address the development of theatre in South Africa.

"We saw a need to invite groups from across the spectrum — from CAPAB and the Stellenbosch Drama School to CAP and Action Workshop — to present pieces of theatre which reflect their vision of where theatre should be."

Those who were rivals in the past have accepted the need to come together to develop a new understanding of where theatre should situate itself. Hopefully this will lead to a common view of what the South African aesthetic will entail.

But the position of community theatre is a particularly challenging one. The debate surrounding the forms it selects to carry a socially "relevant" message is still unresolved.

In the process of "nation building", CAP believes we are entering a reconstruction phase which forces theatre to play a different role.

Because community theatre has been largely determined by "us-and-them" politics, it has to re-think one of its fundamental determining characteristics — that of challenging both government and society.

To transform state theatre, it must be taken into account that not all state-subsidised theatre represents the interests of the government.

Relevant

But community theatre should not deny the role it has created for itself. The emphasis is now on developing theatre as an area of struggle in its own right. Rather than serving the short-term interests of the liberation movement, it needs to be used to help people understand issues.

This should be done by developing aesthetic aspirations to enhance its own standards.



"A Place with the Pigs"

Charlton George of Action Workshop finds that state theatre tends to maintain standards without understanding that South Africans have differing standards relevant to their own culture.

"Does opera and ballet fulfill the cultural needs of the majority?", he asks. "What about more accessible, new forms? The problem is that the state theatre maintains Eurocentric standards that take away your own background."

Standards

"It is important to remember that what is different is not necessarily of a lower standard," he comments.

Instead of viewing aesthetics as an external standard imposed by those working in theatre, community drama groups pay attention to the functions of theatre. These functions in turn, are determined by the context out of which theatre arises.

Yet Charlton views the 90s as

exciting times that will create interesting subject matter and force community theatre to face questions which may be difficult to answer.

For Keith Grenville of the Nico Malan Drama Department, the issue of standard is a serious one. He believes that standards — which he believes have suffered because of the cultural boycott — have to be maintained by all the performing arts.

The move beyond agit prop art is seen as the manifestation of government attitudes, which is responsible for "encouraging a change of ideas".

Gay Morris of the UCT Drama Department believes the first challenge for the 90s is to continue investing in South African theatre and film.

With the opening of Africa to this country, she maintains, will come a greater sense of "Africanness" to enhance our own

aesthetic.

Commenting on state funding she finds the main problem is the centralisation of money in state theatre and would like to see subsidies for all mediums, ranging from puppet shows to opera, to community theatre.

"I would like to see people investing time, talent and energy to upgrade and get under the skin of what South African theatre is," she emphasises.

The issue of state subsidisation of the arts needs to be accounted for, since it is part of state responsibility both to provide and implement it in a non-elitist manner.

Detracting

While one can understand why community organisations boycott state theatres, there is a feeling that the community is detracting from its ability to change the content of the work that these structures produce.

We cannot deny that Art councils have an infra-structure and functionality that needs to be established in alternative mediums. But this cannot occur without a fair distribution of state funding and greater government responsibility to enhance theatre generally.

It seems that the 90s will provide exciting subject matter for theatre. But without its adaptation of form and style, without improving its artistic abilities and without pushing for fair subsidisation, South African theatre may find that its social impact will fall by the wayside of the standards the new decade must demand.



"District 6 — the musical"



"The House of Bernarda Alba"



"You Can't Stop the Revolution"



"Othello"