‘I’m no Major Barbara’, says ANC cultural chief

SISTER to independent-minded controversial trumpeter Hugh, Barbara Masekela is quick to correct an impression that she is a "commissioner".

People have created this impression, says the former school teacher and a mother of two sons. She is constantly flooded with requests from the press and various cultural organisations for comment on the cultural boycott and the ANC’s position on censorship in the arts.

"The ANC is not a censorship board," she insists.

Masekela says her department has been established to promote the arts and there is still an ongoing battle for recognition of the arts in the ANC and the broader South African society.

"Unless we are organised properly, culture will always be in the background at the back, asked to respond to difficult questions. "We need the various artistic disciplines to be organised and national artists unions to be formed."

Vacuum

She says the DAC serves as a facilitator for artists’ organisations which are operating "in a legal vacuum without appropri- ate understanding of laws of copyright and production."

"It's for this reason that the ANC has been involved in setting up structures which mobilise artists," she explains.

"Once we have state and regional government structures set up properly, then we won’t need to play this kind of role."

Several controversies have arisen over ANC-aligned Sama's handling of exiled musicians returning to South Africa. Musicians like Dollar Brand and Miriam Makeba have been accused of transgressing the cultural boycott by the South African Musicians Alliance, leading to the DAC and the "cultural desk" being labelled as censorship boards.

"We have to take into account the circumstances of repression, She is tough as nails.

Barbara Masekela has been branded the ANC’s commissar of culture, a firebrand responsible for policing artists who defy the cultural boycott. Assertive, sometimes schoolmarmish in her firm handling of issues and impatient with constant demands on her as head of the movement’s Department of Arts and Culture (DAC), there is no "beating about the bush" with Masekela, writes HEATHER ROBERTSON:

"We need to harness the skills of professionals to promote the development of those who need skills."

"Our primary task is to democ- ratically and work towards a national cultural organisa- tion."

"If I were a writer, I wouldn’t like to be a postman where some politician always looks over my shoulder."

"She says the DAC needs to shift from policing the cultural boycott to developing training and educational structures for the disad- vantaged."

"We need to harness the skills of professionals to promote the development of those who need skills," she says.

"She argues that the need for cultural facilities like libraries in the townships is an issue which must be tackled by civic organ- isations. "The problem with pro- gressives is that we want to re- invent the wheel."

"People in local organisations need to start demanding their basic public rights from local municipalities," she says.

According to Masekela, the role of the intellectual is to high- light issues like the right of access to mass media and public radio which is available in the Western world.

"Even the average white person on the p i t t e r n e d does not know about the need for public ra- dio. Do they know that they have the right to decide what they would like to hear on the radio?"

The problem is that people ex- pect political leaders to pay min- imal attention to all these details, she says.

"It’s our task as cultural workers to inform political organis- ations of our demands so that we can help to form relevant pol- icy," she says.

The major task of exiled mem- bers of the DAC is to integrate ourselves into our community," she says.

# Barbara Masekela and an ANC member on their arrival at DF Malan airport in Cape Town