

CREATING THEATRE SPACE

When a group of dramatists met in September last year, little did they know the gathering sowed the seed for an innovative approach to take theatre to the community. MUSA NDWANDWE reports



THE FORMATION OF THE Theatre Action Group (TAG) could mark a new era in cultural organisations in South Africa. Among other things, TAG aims to change the role of cultural organisations from political vehicles for artists to that of nurturing and promoting talented people. Chairperson Mike Van Graan says: "This is a whole different way of organising culture. In the past, cultural organisations have emerged out of the need to fight a political battle. Our main purpose here is to develop theatre in the Western Cape, especially in the communities where theatre has been an inaccessible art form," he said.

However, cultural workers are agreed the line between their terrain and politics remains blurred. According to Van Graan, TAG was started during a monthly debate series under the topic "Community Theatre Aesthetics".

Subsequent discussions led to the implementation of ideas raised at these discussions.

People from a wide spectrum of local cultural organisations form the 13-member coordinating committee. From progressive cultural organisations to community theatre groups, like Cape Flats Players, to academic institutions like the universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch drama departments, wide representation in TAG's structures is ensured. In all, more than 15 organisations form the Group.

TAG also hopes to define the relationship between parastatal cultural institutions and progressive structures. While there has been numerous discussions on "engaging" state cultural institutions, no one has spelled out what "engagement" means.

In the past, the question of cooperation with organisations like Capab have been treated with caution, if not contempt.

Said Van Graan: "People from Capab are welcome to participate as individuals but at the moment we are busy mapping out a future relationship with the organisation itself. "We have asked Capab to first make a public statement, acknowledging the past and the role they have played in promoting the culture of apartheid," said Van Graan.

"As a second step we expect Capab to commit itself to a fundamental restructuring of its organisation on every level," he said. "Thirdly they must take immediate and practical steps to implement these changes. It is then that we will consider jointly planning the different areas of activity."

According to Van Graan, there is a degree of "willingness" by Capab to heed this advice.

"They have expressed a willingness to appoint at least five people from progressive organisations to their management structures." TAG has elected a committee to facilitate the process of "engagement".

On the relationship with other existing progressive organisations, TAG "thinks it is important that there be links with a broad range of progressive organisations. The committee has been mandated to get in touch with these bodies and to formulate a policy", said Van Graan. More definite is the group's programme of action for the year. Apart from the establishment of training

centres in six identified areas, TAG has named September a "month of theatre" in the Western Cape.

It will mark the culmination of activities from the beginning of the year. They include the opening of "theatre creative spaces" in Guguletu, Athlone, Mitchells Plain, Khayelitsha, Paarl/Mbekweni and Stellenbosch. In these centres, plays will be workshopped and intensive training of budding actors will take place.

"Our programme needs to be exciting to generate enthusiasm and participation," said Van Graan. □

ABOVE: Members of TAG PHOTOGRAPH: Yunus Mohamed

HERE'S A STORY about where we're at. Well known cultural activist Jonathan De Vries went to collect his passport on the morning that De Klerk announced the end of legal apartheid.

In front of him in the queue was a woman protesting that the last digit on her child's ID number indicated that he was coloured. "He's not coloured! He's white! You must change this!"

Jonathan was next in line. They told him that he couldn't have his passport as promised. It had to be cleared by security. He laughed. "You must be joking. I've got meetings in New York on Monday". Those meetings which were delayed by a week are part of the preparation of a major international concert in South Africa.

Eventually, on Thursday, Jonathan received his passport. But this is a nice moment. The government bureaucracy hampers the departure of a man who is organising a concert to mark the end of the cultural boycott.

I've heard a lot about funding, and the lack of it, recently. The head of Capab, George Loopuyt, is of the opinion that the private sector will not be brought to cough up significantly to help the performing arts. I gathered that a massive campaign to raise funds for Capab (which retrenched 80 workers at year-end because of government cuts) resulted in little more than the gift by a shipping company of free transport of a set to Taiwan.

No actual money was given, just a no-charge invoice. A director of a big car manufacturer tore up, in the presence of Capab's representative, an application for funding from another Provincial Arts Council. "We haven't got any funding for arts. We fund education, housing and health."

Finished. That's it. The performing arts are not part of education, or so at least the funders have,



Your serving of snippets from South Africa's cultural menu

BY ROB AMATO

it seems, decided. It is, of course, indisputable that we need houses, better health and education. But where they draw the line and how they choose to conceive of education, health and housing is the question. Funders (and government agencies) must be made to believe that current art is part of education. And that artists' employment and housing is just like other people's employment. The problem faced by artists is that on the one hand they must have time to work and food to eat while they work. On the other hand (unless they have capital), they always have to prove their validity before they are financed. It's an age-old chicken and egg question which we might have hoped people would solve, but then age-old questions tend to go on getting older.

But there are movements in more cheerful directions. TAG (Theatre Action Group) are coordinating local performance artists in several ways.

And Makeshift Moon, the small new group that successfully produced "Cowboy Mouth" over December, is now working on getting together a batch of pieces by different artists to take to the Grahamstown Festival and to tour locally. They are going to support recent drama graduates and assorted non-established but talented people.

One hopes that funders will get out from under and support the likes of TAG and Makeshift Moon. But even if funders don't cough up, things can be done.

"Cowboy Mouth" happened because the Playground gave the venue free, the newspapers supported the project, the word got around, and the artists worked on spec. Nobody lost money. □



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