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 that TAG's aim is to enable cultural organisations from political vehicles for artists to that of nurturing and promoting talented people.

Chairperson of TAG, Sipho Mhlongo, says artists themselves must stand up for themselves and work together in 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 link 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 in 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 past, present cultural institutions and progressive structures. While there has been numerous discussions on "engaging" state cultural institutions, no one has quite put out "engagement" in new terms.

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

Said Van Graan: "People from Tag have welcome to participate as individuals but at the moment we are busy mapping out a future relationship with the organisation itself. "We have asked Capetown to fast 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 Capetown to commit itself to a fundamental restructuring of its organisation on every level," he said. "Thirdly they must make 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 Capetown 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 Gugulethu, Athlone, Mitchell's Plain, Khayelitsha, Paarl, Middelburg and Stellenbosch. Indicative 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.

90's Members of TAG PHOTOGRAPH from Mohammad

BY ROB AMATO

Your serving of snippets from South Africa's cultural menu

For us to be able to snap up significantly to help the performing arts, I gathered that a massive campaign to raise funds for Capetown (which retrenched 90 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 loan of a big car manufacturer. I heard of the presence of Capetown's representative, an application for funding from another Provincial Arts Council. "We haven't got any funding for the arts. We fund education, housing and health," said Van Graan.

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