



SEVENTIES: Some of the Community Arts Project pioneers. From left to right Pam Warne, Debbie Bourne, Jon Berndt, Jill Joubert, Lucien Le Grange, Msokoli Qothole and André Pretorius.



EIGHTIES: Print by David Hlongwane.



NINETIES: The late Simba Pembeyi leading a theatre class.

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□ CAP COMES OF AGE

Community art is changing its face

THE Community Arts Project is 21 years old this year. It has just received the Cultural Development Project Award from the Arts and Culture Trust.

When CAP holds its open day this Saturday, the stones of the old St Phillips Church in its Chapel Street grounds will be quite justified in adding some stories from the 18 years of CAP's residency there.

Decades of different kinds of turbulence have seen the arts project adjust its role to respond to Cape Town's quirky cultural and political changes. CAP cut its teeth in the 1970s, stretched its political tendons in the 1980s and has had to tighten its belt quite sharply in the 1990s.

That pattern might seem familiar to many people, but CAP, it seems, has managed to emerge as a balanced, reasonably wise and streamlined education and training centre for the art needs of the city's unemployed.

Talking to Mario Pizarro, the project's director, one gets the impression that behind him there is a small but imaginative group of people who must be pretty practical in their approach to their work.

It is an eye-opener for anyone who has known the volatile weather of Cape Town's society over the last 20 years. CAP has come through the black consciousness era, the civil rebellions of the 1980s and the funding crises of the 1990s.

Now it has transformed its shape and purpose quite adroitly. The arts project is one of the very few cultural NGOs that have managed to survive the 1990s without losing its head to its stomach, as it were.

The project was started in 1977 by people such as Lindy Wilson, Gavin Younge, Peggy Delpont and Chris Wildman, from Sached and the Michaelis School of Art.

It offered informal art practice to people the city's townships. By the mid-1980s CAP had become a key centre for the hectic surge of "people's culture" that flooded Cape Town.

The old church was host to the famous Arts Festival '86 which was banned by the government soon after it opened. For the next five years CAP hosted many discussions, meetings, workshops and performances, all of which helped to shape a vibrant cultural movement in the country.

In 1989, under the leadership of Mike van Graan, the project started education and training for artists of the various organisations in Cape Town. This was a move toward a more focused vocational direction although CAP kept its strong links with local civic and women's organisations.

The CAP that entered the difficult 1990s had just experienced a peak in funding, with a 1989 budget of R1,8-million, 33 full-time staff and projects in the visual arts, theatre, media and children's art. It had a complex, ambitious programme trying to reach out to people on the city's fringes while still being a training centre at its base.

When international funding died abruptly after 1990, the crisis hit hard. Van Graan returned from fund-raising overseas to find half the staff had lost their jobs. After Van Graan left, there was no leader until 1992 that Zayd Minty was appointed the new director.

"Zayd introduced a culture of reflection," says Pizarro. "In a time of scarcity, strategic planning and re-evaluation was crucial. 1993 and 1994 was a time of rebuilding."

CAP started working with adults who worked with children at pre-schools.

This seemed a good direction because it opened a rich

management and working with others on conflict management. These are adults and they are highly motivated. CAP has already achieved a 71% course completion rate."

On the question of employment for artists, Pizarro points out that the department of transport has commissioned CAP students to paint a series of murals on pedestrian safety. Pizarro speaks about murals in shebeens, local churches and restaurants, the rich possibilities of community tourism.

Some students have found work using theatre in prisons and are using theatre to address community issues such as crime and domestic violence. Then there's TV, film, radio drama, even advertising.

"The state's new national qualifications framework opens up a space for people previously left out of the system to gain a qualification, and there is a gap in the system in the FET (Further Education and Training) band or what we knew as standards eight to 10. Art education was previously under-provided for in these years. The problem is that although the NQF allowed for art education, it was slow to happen."

While CAP and other organisations have been designing "outcomes-based education standards" for the department, is it not possible that CAP might turn into a simple feeder for industry or a mini-bureaucracy? What about all the possibilities of using art for healing and affirming identity? Does art always have to be functional?

field of children's art education "at a time when we were being urged to move from popular political art to engage in 'reconstruction and development'," Pizarro said.

But the response was poor. Some tough decisions had to be made. They were forced to drop evening classes. CAP's media group, so vital in the 1980s, left to form its own company. The dream of the art centre faded.

By 1996 CAP had trimmed its work down to two areas: adults working in pre-schools, and unemployed people, "because these were the people who kept coming to us", says Pizarro.

Surely it's a risky venture to offer art courses to unemployed people? What about earning a living?

Pizarro is unfazed by this question. He energetically explains the careful thinking behind this approach: "We want to create access for those left out by apartheid art education. CAP teaches art and theatre skills, but also micro-enterprise training and things such as financial