

# An explosion of worker creativity in Natal: The catalytic role of the Culture and Working Life Project

This text was originally published online by ASAI in 2021 [\[LINK\]](#)

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## Introduction

The Culture and Working Life Project (CWLP) was launched in 1983, to assist union members in giving expression to their experiences of exploitation and oppression, in the form of cultural productions. [1] Initiated by Ari Sitas, and based with him in the Sociology Department at the University of Natal, CWLP worked closely with the trade unions. It:

- helped to establish cultural structures, one with organic links to trade union shop steward structures,
- assisted workers in the making of cultural productions,
- worked to document cultural activity,
- facilitated learning and development in genres such as writing, drama, music and visual art,
- extended opportunities for community and union members to gain exposure to cultural activity in spaces close to or relevant to such audiences.

Overall, and with a primary focus on Natal, the intention was to assert, reclaim and enhance the creative capacities of the working class. [2]

This paper shows that CWLP's existence has generated numerous salient outcomes; it examines some of the contradictions and debates which emerged, and it discusses reasons for the closure.

The CWLP was a very successful initiative. As a relatively small project, it generated achievements out of proportion with its limited capacities. It played a central role in catalysing the emergence of 'worker culture' as part of 'people's culture', which included the idea of culture as a tool for expressing opposition to oppression and worker exploitation, the notion of access to training and facilities to practice art for the marginalised, and the concept of building broad-based working class consciousness. [3]

The CWLP was an integrating space and the focal point in the emergence of worker culture. It represented a coming together of resources and resourcefulness in support of the phenomenon, and was simultaneously the epicentre of emerging shared ideas and frameworks. The emergence of working class culture at the specific point in time was the outcome of the flowing together of diverse streams: trade unions growing stronger, the development of shop stewards in industrial unions linked to the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and brought

together annually in an education summit, the catalytic work of Junction Avenue Theatre Company, and the vision of key shop stewards in building the creative expression of workers. This coming together was fortuitous; but the steps forward were more deliberate. Through the ongoing work of CWLP, the change-makers, animators and facilitators consciously committed to work on the 'project' of supporting creative expression by workers, building fundamentally on workers' own ideas of how such expression should take place. In this regard, CWLP became a space to hold, guide, reflect on, support and develop what was taking place. While CWLP had an office and used several regular physical spaces, it was so much more than this: it was an interconnection of likeminded individuals, all dedicated to moving in the same direction on the basis of shared (spoken and unspoken) principles. This is akin to a community of practice in which individuals or allied entities work together, solving common challenges and developing common practices.

### **Some overarching themes**

Some of the themes that emerge from the CWLP story are indicated below:

The centre's work had important outcomes related to identity. Shop stewards who became involved in related cultural activities saw themselves as practitioners of worker culture. In particular, the worker leaders who became involved viewed themselves as cultural workers within the union movement and cultural workers in a broader sense. Qabula noted in his biography:

*"From then on it was cultural work for me, most of the time. I had started composing izimbongi, which I was totally uncertain about – would the workers approve or not? They did. This influenced many more to emerge from our ranks. Nise Malange, Mi Hlatshwayo and I sat down and discussed our contribution thoroughly. From then on, without us even being able to understand it properly, a cultural movement launched itself all over Natal. I am glad I had a role in stimulating its development..." [4]*



*Mi Hlatswayo, Alfred Qabula, and members of Qabula's family and community, 1986, Photo courtesy of Omar Badsha.*

The CWLP existed within a web of linkages. The stakeholders at the endpoints of these linkages worked together with CWLP, supporting this assertion of worker culture. There were ongoing instances of co-operation within the university, which strengthened the programme, boosting its resource-base and assisting in delivery of parts of the Culture Course. Beyond the university and in the context of community mobilisation, the CWLP forged links with other cultural workers, whose involvement took the form of facilitation, aesthetic production and in some instances, practical help. These linkages, according to Malange, benefitted both sides, allowing for joint engagement of the broader working class audience, assistance on practical matters such as organising May Day rallies, the provision of outlets for publication, and ensuring access to resources (provision of halls and other venues for rehearsal or training). The Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) proved to be one the strongest allies and partners. [5] Critically, the CWLP drew on positive relations with trade unions, including unions in the stable of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and later the Congress of South African Trade Unions, after FOSATU merged into COSATU in November of 1985. When making plays, workers from the metal and textile industries, for example, engaged with CWLP facilitators and at the same time took guidance from their union organisers. [6]

The CWLP, in boldly defining its work as worker culture, brought the concept to the public arena, and opened new areas of analysis, debate, practice and learning. The aesthetic elements associated with worker culture fit within the broader umbrella of people's culture (which is the cultural work that was being undertaken in South Africa as part of the resistance to apartheid). The content was broadly about workers' lives

and experiences, and more specifically, about the issues, hardships and relationships at the point of production. [7] Formally, workers engaged with the oral tradition, [8] the use of acapella music as “*a new function in the play*”, and bringing in “*mythological aspects of portrayal*” in their cultural work. [9] In the production of plays in this context, certain practical, methodological and artistic dilemmas arose. These are discussed in the section titled *Contestation, Contradictions and Framing* below but include differences between ways of story-telling between older and younger workers, the question of whether to show or simply “tell” how big machinery operates and the need to embrace tradition while countering certain conservative aspects of tradition (for example, privileging the male hero over the agency of the collective or populace in storytelling). But according to Sitas, these very dilemmas spurred the creative process. [10]

### **Roots and scope of CWLP work**

Culture and Working Life Project was launched in 1983 at a momentous time in history, a turning point in the fortunes of worker organisation in the country. Those involved had no idea as to the influence their work, particularly at the level of culture, would have, although they were almost certainly aware that, at the level of unionising work, they were plugged into something significant. At this time, trade unions were flexing their muscles and growing into huge federations. [11]



*Food and Allied Workers Union members on way to rally, 1986, Photo courtesy of Ari Sitas.*

CWLP's beginnings were humble enough. The project began with a donation of R2,673, raised by academic and activist Fatima Meer, who was based at the University of Natal with Ari Sitas, initiator of the project. Sitas recalls the founding,

*"It started from myself and others working with Dunlop-workers in producing a play at a time when they were fighting for union recognition. A lot of creative people exploded around, you know, and there was a revival of oral poetry and so on. So we tried to consolidate that activity and that's why we created the Culture and Working Life Project, to give support for the cultural movement that was starting in the trade unions. And at the same time I was involved in the formation of a Durban Workers' Cultural Local. And that became the nucleus for things that were happening in the trade unions, so there was dialogue, between the two."* [12]

There were arguably several roots to CWLP. Firstly, the idea grew out of antecedent work: the interfacing of cultural and trade union work happening in the (then) Transvaal. [13] In parallel to this, Sitas and other theatre makers connected to the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, were asked in 1982, to assist with the making of a play about foundry workers' struggles on the East Rand. [14]

Secondly, it grew out of hostels, where workers were using culture as a tool of survival – an energy existent in (then) Natal and elsewhere. It is in relation to this kind of energy from below that one must understand the emergence of phenomena like Ladysmith Black Mambazo. The hostels were focal points for a thriving scene of forms such as mbube, isicathamiya and gumboot dancing. In many hostels, those involved in the performance took their craft seriously, while other hostel dwellers constituted a vibrant audience. [15]

Thirdly, it emerged from the fertile ground constituted by a surge of strikes and the need for worker education around such activities. From the late nineties, as unions began taking root and organising more vigorously, there were strikes over union recognition and workplace grievances. As Nise Malange, who was working for one of the FOSATU unions at the time, recalls: *"...(T)here was a lot going on at that time, the strikes, and we had to educate people about the strikes ... we had to do something for workers during the strikes, do these plays so that they can learn."* [16] As a cultural activist, Malange describes how she understood her role and the need for CWLP:

*"But Culture and Working Life, I am very clear, it was to research. It was to develop the workers that had talents on the shop floor. It was to assist workers who were either retrenched or workers who were on strike. To keep them together because one of the strike's outcomes was that, employers would say we want all the workers to be in one place."* [17]



Nise Malange, March 2017, (BAT Centre, Durban), Photo courtesy of Scott Williams.

Fourth, CWLP emerged in many ways as a sequel to the platforms created by FOSATU for worker cultural expression. The national workshops saw the integration of workers' self-education and workers' cultural expressions on a common platform. FOSATU in turn had links to the forum on popular education, the Wits History Workshop, and worker plays had the opportunity to feature at such events. FOSATU News also published the poems of worker poets in Zulu and English, growing the popularity of these works. [18]

The offices of FOSATU in Gale Street, Durban would become a central place, since they were located close to many factories that were the focus of labour organisation. The Dunlop factory was walking distance away and so was the Dalton hostel. On the one hand, this was a centre of strike action, and on the other, a hub of maskanda, isicathamiya, gumboot dancing and traditional dance.

The key kick-off point for the work of CWLP was the making of a play alongside the labour mobilisation and organisation at Dunlop. The struggles for union recognition and better working conditions had its own years-long twists and turns at this factory. [19] But within this journey, energies and expressions were born that would inform the worker culture project and manifest a small knot of kindred souls that were committed to it. *"The shop stewards we encountered there were serious about what they were doing culturally,"* said Sitas. Key persons coming to the fore at this time were Nise Malange, Mi Hlatswayo and Alfred Qabula. They were involved with the Dunlop play, but also with the idea of the Durban Cultural Workers Local, an inter-union structure focused on the use of culture *"as a tool to mobilize and tell their stories."* [20]

As it turned out, the first organizer to be appointed full time was Alfred Qabula, who, in his biography, described how he made his debut as a worker poet at Dunlop with his poem, *The Wheel is Turning*. [21] In 1984, Qabula declined nomination as a shop steward, since he “...*was busy up and down with my (his) poetry – reciting and encouraging workers to write about their lives and experiences.*” [22] His poetry had already propelled him to engage with workers in the wider Durban area.

Qabula’s rising prominence as a worker poet also attracted unwelcome interest from the political-cum-cultural organisation Inkatha, which at the time saw itself in conflict with broad-based, community empowerment groups (and trade unions in coordination with them) that consciously positioned themselves as separate from ethnicity-based organisations. According to Qabula, in his memoir, and Sitas, Inkatha members had begun to hound and harass Qabula at his workplace and at his home in Amauti in Inanda. At one stage, the shock troops advised Qabula that they did not like his praise poems, demanding to know whether words like, “*the throne you occupy, will become a seat for others*” contained in one of his poems – were meant for Inkatha. [23]

Although it had offices at the University of Natal, the CWLP was not a centre conducting most of its activities at a primary base (like many other community arts centres). Its multiple points of activity included the halls alongside union offices, a space at Natal Technical College for the Culture Course’s Saturday classes and, in partnership with trade unions, a centre where trade union locals held their activities.

“*We started doing rehearsals at Gale Street, in a hall next to the union offices,*” says Malange, who had initially been employed as an administrator at Garment Workers Union (GWU), but then later joined CWLP fulltime. Then, when some trade unions moved from Gale Street to Clairwood, “*we moved to a much bigger space at Clairwood.*” The Clairwood Trade Union and Culture Centre eventually involved joint use arrangements by the shop stewards’ council in the area, Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU), and the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED). The 1985 move to Clairwood coincided with Malange’s employment as a fulltime CWLP staff member. In the same year, the CWLP undertook to pay the wages of a fulltime coordinator and manager of the Durban Workers Culture Local (DCWL). Mi Hlatshwayo resigned from Dunlop and took the position. [24] But Hlatshwayo’s stay would be short-lived: the following year, he was snatched by COSATU national office to work as coordinator of its Culture Desk.

### CWLP Activities

CWLP ran a number of activities. These included mobilisation and support of cultural locals, the organisation of May Day rallies, theatre productions, culture and writing workshops, and the publication of books.

### **Mobilisation and support for the formation of cultural locals**

The integration of worker culture work with union structures was made easier through the role of shop stewards. These shop stewards, apart from their role in

trade union locals, moved to established 'cultural locals'. These were cross-union structures set up to advance worker culture. "*The work began with cultural locals in Durban, Pinetown and Pietermaritzburg in 1984,*" says Sitas. From there it spread to other parts of the Natal province: in 1986, for example, the CWLP extended its work to include areas like Mandini, Empangeni and Ladysmith. [25]

The cultural locals generated plays, poems and other cultural work. For the locals, poetry, music and some forms of dance were much easier to generate, and one could even say, came more naturally than other forms, like making plays. These cultural forms were already thriving among workers, for example, isicathamiya and mbube were alive and thriving in hostels and possibly also through inter-company competitions. [26] Other forms required more support. Here, CWLP facilitators, such as Qabula, Malange and Hlatshwayo, played a key role. In addition to support with generating cultural products, the facilitators helped to stimulate debate and discussion around the role and purpose of worker culture. As part of this role, the DWCL drafted a document on its aims and principles, and the potential role of culture for the liberation struggle. The plan was for Mi Hlatshwayo to deliver it on 14 July 1985, at the FOSATU Education Workshop at Milner Park Showgrounds in Johannesburg, with the hope of recruiting new members. However, in the context of growing resistance to apartheid in the form of protests, marches and rallies, the apartheid government declared a State of Emergency. The FOSATU event was cancelled and Hlatshwayo did not deliver the document. [27]



*Umkumbane*, 1986, (a play by Durban workers cultural local), Photo courtesy of Rafs Mayet.

## May Day

According to CWLP staff interviewed, a central annual activity was organising the May Day event at Curries Fountain in Durban, as well as involvement in other May Day rallies. Locals prepared their items to present at May Day: oral poetry, cultural dance, choirs and theatrical performance. In addition, organisers sometimes received requests from community groups to present cultural items. The broad range of CWLP staff and voluntary organisers were all involved in preparations for the May Day rally, initially in conjunction with FOSATU, and later with COSATU. In time, CWLP resolved to extend May Day celebrations in Durban, from being confined to the main rally, into several days of programming. *“We saw the need to have four days, with the stadium event the highlight of the programme. Over those days, we held workshops and seminars,”* Malange said. On the Durban May Day event, lead by CWLP in 1985, the programme included a youth group, the DC Matiwane Group, the Dunlop Play, and poets such as Mi Hlatshwayo, Qabula and Jabu Ndlovu. [28] The Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) also participated in later May Day programmes.

## Culture Course

The CWLP received some funds from the South African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC) that allowed it to establish the Culture Course. The course ran for two years – 1990 and 1991. The course involved music, visual art, theatre and writing components. *“This was an in-depth course – very different from an occasional workshop,”* course co-ordinator Zaide Harneker explained. [29] Some of the learners became initiators in their own right, for example, Beauty Mahlaba went on to set up a pottery-making activity at home, [30] and Majorie Njeje went on to start a drama group in her community at Port Shepstone. [31] Vusi Bhengu, another student on the course, published a poem and a short story, and wrote a play while taking the course. Bhengu’s play was performed at the National Women’s Day event in Durban in 1990. [32] The course targeted workers from Durban and surrounding areas. Sitas was the trainer-facilitator for theatre, jazz maestro Zim Ngqawana and guitarist Sazi Dlamini taught music, Avi Soofal taught visual art, and academic Astrid von Kotze ran the writing module. *“The course was incredibly successful. The course, run on Saturdays at Natal Technikon, closed after one cohort received training – that was because funding dried up,”* Harneker said, referring to the discontinuation of funds from SACBC.

pay R2 500, part-time students pay R800.  
 FUBA does not grant bursaries.  
**WHERE:** FUBA, PO Box 4202, Johannesburg 2000 or 66 Wolhuter Street, Newtown (in the Market Theatre complex). ☎ 011-8347125. Fax: 011-8347139.

**FUNDA CENTRE**

**WHAT:** Funda has three independent training units. Madimba Institute of Music offers a three year music course that includes courses such as applied theory, composing and arranging, history of music, communication theory and music education.

**WHEN:** Full-time students, Monday to Friday from 8.30 am - 4.00pm. Part-time students, Saturdays from 9.00 am - 1.00 pm.

**HOW MUCH:** R250 a month. Part-time students pay R500 for the year. Those who register for music courses get an automatic subsidy of 75%, which serves as a bursary.

**WHERE:** Funda, PO Box 859, Orlando, Soweto 7804. ☎ 011-9381463/1485/1487.

**KATLEHONG ART CENTRE (KAC)**

**WHAT:** Drama and art lessons for all members of the community. It also provides space and guidance for artists who work there.

**WHEN:** Drama classes run from Monday to Friday, from 2.00 pm - 4.00 pm. Art lessons are from Monday to Saturday, from 8.30 am - 4.00 pm.

**HOW MUCH:** Free

**WHERE:** KAC, 203 Maphiko Street, Phooko Section, Katlehong 1832. ☎ 011-9054501.

**OPEN SCHOOL (OS)**

**WHAT:** English, maths, drama, arts, dance, computer, library science, video production and music.

**WHEN:** Full-time classes are for children only. Part-time classes

take place from Tuesday to Saturday from 3.30 pm - 5.00 pm. This programme covers all the school standards - from Sub A to matric.

**HOW MUCH:** Part-time courses are R150 a year. The school does not offer bursaries.

**WHERE:** Montrose House, 4th floor, 36 Pritchard Street, Johannesburg 2000. ☎ 011-8331927. Fax: 011-8381732. 1-6339022.

**NATAL**

**CULTURE AND WORKING LIFE PROJECT (CWLP)**

**WHAT:** A two year course in drama, music, silkscreening and creative writing. Only those workers who have been seconded by their unions can do the course.

**WHEN:** Saturdays from 9.00 am - 3.30 pm.

**HOW MUCH:** Contact CWLP for information.

**WHERE:** CWLP, Sociology Department, University of Natal, King George V Ave, Durban 4001. ☎ 031-8162494/5.

**DURBAN AFRICAN ART CENTRE (DAAC)**

**WHAT:** The centre has a gallery, an arts and crafts shop and an advice office. Through the Azaria Mbatha Scholarship Fund, the centre also offers bursaries to university and technikon students studying fine art and graphic design. It buys art works from artists and sells them to people interested in African art and holds art exhibitions.

**WHERE:** DAAC, 8 Guildhall Arcade, 35 Gardiner Street, Durban 4001. ☎ 031-3047915.

**UPSTAIRS COMMUNITY WORKSHOP**

**WHAT:** Speech and drama, playwriting, directing and acting.

**WHEN:** Saturdays from 9.00 am - 12.00 noon.

**HOW MUCH:** Adults,

R50 a term. The project organises bursaries for needy students.

**WHERE:** 14 Alice Street, Durban 4001. ☎ 031-3093986. Fax: 031-3092872.

**BOPHUTATSWANA**

**MMABANA CULTURAL CENTRE**

**WHAT:** Art, drama, dance, music and quilting classes. The Art Unit offers classes in painting, sculpture, photography, pottery, graphics, weaving, crocheting, knitting and dress-making.

**HOW MUCH:** Fees are calculated on a quarterly basis and they differ from course to course. Contact the centre for more information.

**WHERE:** Mmabana Cultural Centre, Private Bag X2170, Mmabathao 8661. ☎ 0140-24100/9.

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## Writing Workshop: An Overspill

Numerous ad hoc writing workshops were undertaken, principally by two staff members. These are characterised here as 'overspill' because, by all accounts, they were seldom formally planned for, or validated. Both the co-ordinator of the centre, Malange, and the Culture Course co-ordinator (who reported to her), conducted writing workshops beyond the Culture Course, often involving black working class youth, including school students. A visitor to Durban in late 1993, O'Brein describes traipsing along to participate in a writing workshop involving a dozen fourteen-year-olds in KwaMashu. Malange, assisted by a young graduate Nicholas Phakathi, had an intensive workshop schedule, and would have been involved in conducting workshops in the run-up to the May Day rallies as well. [33] Steve Kromberg, a staff member at the CWLP at some stage, talks about participation in poetry workshops in Durban, Pinetown. Similarly, Harneker tells a story of undertaking an after-school writing workshop in Umlazi. In her case, at the end of the workshop, she almost drove straight into a group of spear-wielding members of Inkatha. Terrified, because such groups typically assumed an outsider in the township was a member of the rival political force, the ANC, she took evasive action – made a turn and sped off in another direction. [34]

## Theatre production

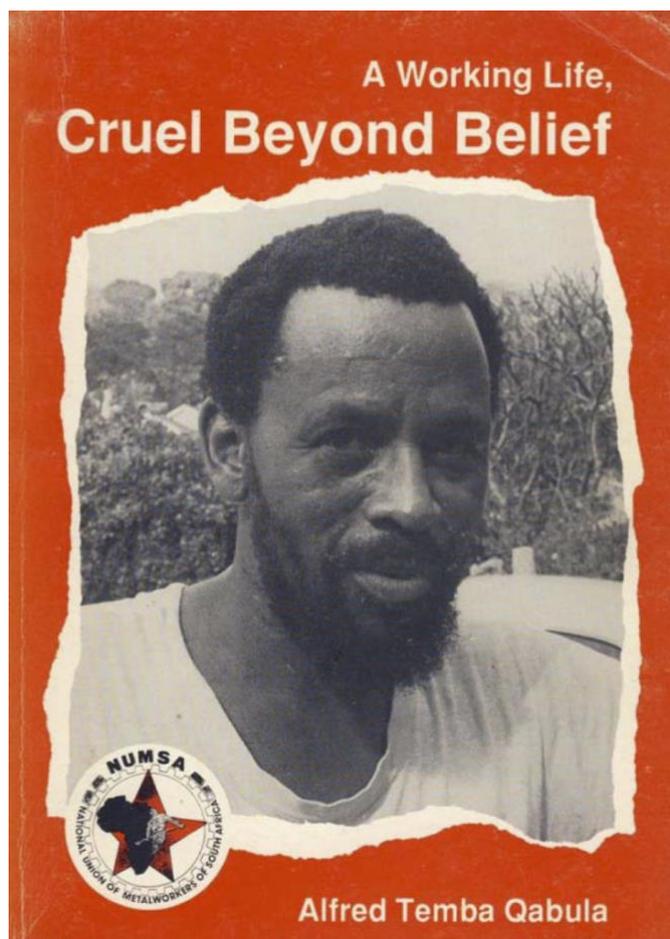


*Qonda*, 1986, (a play by Dunlop workers in Clarewood), Photo courtesy of Rafs Mayet.

CWLP's work on supporting and facilitating worker theatre was, by all accounts, a primary deliverable of the centre. The CWLP project, with the help of old Junction Avenue members like Ramolao Makhene and Patti Henderson, produced over thirteen worker plays. It was estimated that the period saw the production of over forty such plays in Natal's trade union movement. Many plays were produced in the context of strikes, and those participating as actors and in the workshop process, were often workers from the affected factories. The plays including *The Dunlop Play*, *Usuku*, *The Long March*, *Bambata's Children* and *Why Lord*. *The Dunlop Play* and *The Long March* are said to be the cornerstones around which the workers theatre movement was built. [35] A key role-player in the theatre-making was the DWCL: Following on its 1984 play, *Why Lord*, the DWCL went on to create six new plays in 1985. [36] The making of plays involved a great deal of learning. For example, the first staging of worker plays at Curries Fountain Stadium in Durban was unsuccessful and thus, in subsequent May Day events, dramatic performances were better adapted for the stadium environment. The plays have also become the subject of academic engagement, [37] and received detailed attention in a book commissioned by the centre. [38]

## **Publishing**

The CWLP both produced books and facilitated book production. Some of the publications were a compilation of the creative writing produced in workshops. One of the most significant books produced was *A Working Life: Cruel Beyond Belief*, a memoir of and by Alfred Qabula. In it, he demonstrates how his life trajectory helped forge a political understanding and brought him face-to-face with labour issues and harsh working conditions in South Africa. Another influential text was *Black Mamba Rising*, released in 1986, the Zulu version of which was edited by Mi Hlatshwayo and the English by Sitas. [39] It contained the work of Hlatshwayo, Malange, Qabula and Sitas. The CWLP team members were hands-on in the production of the books. At different stages, staff members such as Harold Nxasana, Blade Nzimande, Zith Mahaye and Gladman Ngubo assisted with translations. Malange got the hang of permissions and ISBN numbering, and Steve Kromberg assisted with editing. [40] As important as the making of the books, was the distribution system. "*We used networks. People were buying books on a significant scale,*" said Malange. "*Although people were struggling, they were always willing to buy books. When they came to events, they had their R20 ready to buy a book or some music.*"



Alfred Themba Qabula, *A Working Life: Cruel Beyond Belief*, (Durban: National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, 1989).

Insofar as publication interfaced with research, CWLP benefitted from being at the university. *"The university helped with some publications,"* Sitas says. *"There was some help with doing videos. Through the research work of Astrid (von Kotze), we also undertook some documentation of the plays."* According to Malange, Jurgen Brauninger helped with recording and archiving of music. *"On the research side, COSATU requested us to undertake some research. This was research into the cultural habits of workers – what media they watched, what radio stations they listened to."* [41] The work by von Kotze, covering the period of 1983 to 1987, and highlighting thirteen plays, resulted in the book *Organise and Act*, which constitutes a substantive documentation of worker theatre. According to Gready, referring to the book:

*There is also a feeling within this theatre movement that 'outsider' coverage has tended to largely overlook, trivialise, or misrepresent its achievements. This is the most comprehensive attempt yet of the movement to tell its own story.... (T)he scope of the task undertaken is impressive and breaks new ground.* [42]

## Significance of CWLP work

Although points of significance emerge more generally throughout this article, we may draw out specific points here. The CWLP's work is unique: no other community arts centre adopted single-minded focus on worker culture in order to mobilise and communicate about the lives and experiences of workers. Other centres did give immense space to expression emerging from working class. But what sets CWLP apart is the way in which it explored the relationship between culture and production, including within this, a sustained focus on the clash of interests between workers and bosses in the workplace. Furthermore, its activities *"involve(d) predominantly members of the black working class integrated within trade union movements such as COSATU."* [43]

More than other centres, CWLP immersed its work in the local indigenous language (in its case, Zulu) giving it greater priority than the lingua franca of English. This gave CWLP's work a particular mass power and strength, and has lent it significance in terms of later debates on decolonisation. *"We were fortunate to be in a province which was, outside of English, substantially monolingual – Zulu,"* Sitas noted. *"By comparison, Johannesburg was a babel. And black consciousness seemed preoccupied with English."* [44]

The depth of engagement with the language in turn opened the way for linkage to older traditions – traditions of the izimbongo and oral poetry. Many of the products, for example, those staged at May Day rallies at Curries Fountain at the time, and at other worker gatherings, showed a creative interplay between the modern and the traditional. An example of this is the poem – rich in symbolic and metaphoric qualities – by Jeffrey Vilane, a praise-poet from then Northern Natal.

*"And they wondered whether it was a snake  
or whether a mole  
digging, digging away by the ocean  
near Thekwini. It resurfaced again further north in the lands of the Zulu  
the oppressors did not see it at first  
but when the men saw it they lost their iminceto (traditional 'underpants')  
panic-struck they chased around asking  
what species of snake is this?  
And at night all the men lay awake from fear  
and during the day they would spot the Ndundulu mountains  
covered by dust storms from the din of all this digging."* [45]

The worker plays adopted innovative approaches, inserting themselves into popular theatre and popular culture in specific ways. Sitas discusses these distinct features as contradictions, and asserts that these contradictions boosted creativity. On the one hand, there was the need for practical and functional modalities. For instance, for under-resourced workers making a play in a warehouse for presentation in non-theatre spaces, there was no scope for elaborate scene changes, for thinking about curtains that came down, or for use of professional lighting. Making theatre in such circumstances required innovation.

Secondly, the making of plays had to grapple with the depiction of labour processes. One challenge was having to either portray realities of the industrial workplace setting, with all its hardness and danger, otherwise ending up with monologues that “tell” some of the horrors, like workers losing limbs in workplaces where their health and safety was neglected. Other challenges were was to portray the scale of mechanisation: the speeding up of wheels and cogs as management demanded more, and the alienating force of the assembly line. The workers had to figure out how to execute such portrayals, without introducing gigantic structures that could weaken the play. Thirdly, the playmaking process had to grapple with different forms of storytelling, to find ways of matching traditional approaches with conventions of the theatre.



*Performance by Sarmcol workers, circa 1985 – 1986, Photo courtesy of Ari Sitas.*

Theatre design and performances drew on the ways in which workers experienced *umdlalo*. [46] This *umdlalo* is drama, but not in the sense of theatre, but rather a broader range of performance, spectacle, and re-enactment as well as “*rituals and indigenous forms of expression (that) have much that is mimetic and include re-enactment qualities*”. [47]

An important aspect of CWLP as a centre was how it functioned within a university, and within a sociology department. Sitas explained that CWLP “*arose out of a concern that we were not doing sociology with the people. We took the view that should be stuck with the people.*” The programme had informal links to the Industrial Health Unit, Natal Workers History Project, Trade Union Research Project [48] and a youth initiative, the Youth Unemployment Project. [49] The cluster of projects were in

the Department of Sociology, and constituted the Industrial Organisation and Labour Studies, made of a significant core of socially-engaged project staff. One survey of the staff notes that, of twenty-one individuals tracked down, *“eight had a trade union background, two had been involved in the feminist movement, one had been imprisoned on Robben Island, one came from the church and one was a former journalist”*. [50] On the one hand, there was no direct control from the academics who were very busy with their own work and did not view initiatives such as CWLP as part of the academic project. On the other hand, the CWLP was able to draw on a university insights, skills and expertise. Thus for example, von Kotze and music lecturer Zim Ngqawana participated as teachers on the Culture Course and Jean Fairburn of the Natal Workers History Project participated in the CWLP steering committee. [51] The Music Department’s Jurgen Brauning, assisted with archiving some of the music from the plays, [52] and various students, including at some stage Debbie Bonnin, provided volunteer support to the programme. [53] Being at the university opened the door to many resources. Malange recalls:

*“We used the university as an entity, because it had all the resources. Like we would go to the drama department to get theatre resources, go to the music department to get the music recorded, get the films through the Centre for Communication, Media and Society, and so on.”* [54]

### **Contestation, contradiction and framing**

CWLP and the advent of worker culture existed within a broader phenomenon: the blossoming of popular culture or “people’s culture” in South Africa. The emergence of a coordinated movement of worker expression through culture gave rise to *“new tensions in cultural spaces of the working class communities”*. [55] It created new possibilities for cultural struggle and was stretching popular culture in new and positive ways. When he was writing in 1986, Sitas noted that, with the worker plays being seen around the country, *“theatrical happenings are becoming important events in popular culture.”* [56]

Against this backdrop however, aesthetic theorists pounced on the work, with a mixture of rejection, patronising approval [57] and trivialisation. [58] Focusing on the most prominent cultural product, worker plays, [59] they raised the question of whether the work was didactic, little more than educational, agitprop, the poorer form of realist art, or something that could be likened to the *“crude attempts of socialist cultural militants”*. [60] While this was generally their position, they also agreed the work should be smiled upon and appreciated for its class perspective, for helping to raise class consciousness. [61] Of course, the protagonists of worker culture themselves would agree with this educative role of this particular art from below. For example, in *Organise and Act*, von Kotze categorises the plays into those which *“educate”* and those which *“mobilise”*. [62] At the same time, argued Sitas, *“as an event in an unfolding popular culture, it demands a different aesthetic measurement.”* [63]

Indeed, the sceptics missed the significance and cultural contribution of the works in broader terms. Firstly, the sceptical view fails to situate the theatre work of the CWLP in the context of a re-engagement with certain forms of dance rooted in

tradition, imbube and isicathamiya as practices in hostels, the styles of the izimbongi, and the conscious transformation of these for expression in a modern context.

Secondly, it also sometimes failed to properly understand cultural expression as a key response to alienation. Sitas argues in *The Flight of the Gwala-gwala Bird*, “*in so far as alienation is an irreducible pressure of modern life, so are responses to it.*” [64] In the cities, workers respond to the experience of exploitation and alienation by trying “*to control their conditions of life through defensive combinations, through normative communities and through cultural formations*”, which according to Sitas includes “*unique local forms*”.

Thirdly, dismissing the rise of worker culture may obscure the (creative) tension around popular culture and workers’ engagement with it. It may miss the ways in which worker cultural activists, working individually or collaboratively, interact with cultural practices, forms, languages, issues of race, issues of class, and how they mix these different elements. In appreciating this ‘mix’, account should also be taken of the ways in which they combine rural and urban influences, their understanding of space and how they wish to use it for performance, and their understanding of their cultural rights as workers.

Fourth, the sceptical viewpoint misses its contribution to audience development and audience inclusion, related to genres such as theatre, literature and fine art. At the time of the CWLP’s existence, workers experience of theatre revolved around experience of Gibson Kente. Sitas reports that although people in Alexandra township had “*remarkable*” experience of theatre from *King Kong* to a Kente play, many migrant workers had never seen a play and had “*no prior experience of theatre*”. [65] The worker theatre movement introduced that experience, very consciously operating, distributing and propagating theatre within working class cultural spaces, and doing so in ways that validated workers’ experience at the site of production. [66]

Fifth, the minimising of worker theatre fails to see how in its own substantive way, it added to what may be termed development theatre in Africa. Laws specifically includes ‘worker theatre’ in South Africa in her discussion of development theatre in Africa. She further notes that development of this theatre “*may be orally based*”, “*may use music and a distinctive acting style*” and “*may be ephemeral,*” but makes important contributions to more enduring shifts and changes, both artistically and socially. [67]

Sitas outlined certain challenges of making worker theatre, which he defined as ‘tensions’. These included the ambiguities presented when utilising tradition, the tensions between old and young, the difficulty of portraying factory processes on stage, matching audience needs – in terms of time available to watch a play – with storytellers’ styles, as well as the challenge of sticking to older shop stewards’ preference for staid characters, in contrast to the off-beat, flamboyant characters steeped in the Gibson Kente approach, so liked by audiences. He sets these out in *The Flight of the Gwala-gwala Bird*, taking the view that such contradictions were a spur for creative output. [68]

## Postscript: The final closing



*Madliginyoka Nhlamzi (imbongi)*, 1986, May Day rally, Curries Fountain, Photo courtesy of Jeeva Rajgopaul.

The first shifts felt by Culture and Working Life Project took place a few years after the launch of COSATU in the mid-eighties. The first casualty was the Culture Course, which closed after one run of the two-year course.

The CWLP continued its work, for example, it was involved in activities such as the rally for Nelson Mandela in Durban, in February 1990. Persons such as Sitas, Malange and indeed the rest of the CWLP team, were centrally engaged on the culture side of such events. But somehow culture got washed aside in the hurly-burly of preparations for the first democratic elections. Natal Indian Congress leader Mewa Ramgobin was appointed as a chair of a committee, under the banner of the congress movement, focusing on culture in Natal. However, no meeting of this committee was ever called. Somewhere in all of this was the expectation that better times would come for culture, and that, for example the apartheid-era provincially-based cultural institutions would re-orientate to serve the people. *“There was the expectation that the performing arts councils would become institutions of the people,”* said Shamim Meer. [69] *“There was also the feeling that the new government would make funding available, or would itself directly manage multi-purpose centres for culture”.* [70] By and large, this did not happen. In the case of the KwaZulu-Natal government, the more progressive forces lost out in a highly disputed election result, when the Inkatha Freedom Party was declared winner. *“When the change happened, the public service took active steps to shrink worker culture and working class cultural activity. Inkatha did not like it,”* said Sitas. [71]

Giving a sense of the turbulence of the time, Sitas describes the mood that prevailed:

*“The cultural energy was diffuse. We gave the apparatus to Inkatha. In the unions, at the same time, there was the idea of strategic unionism. This meant much of the working class creativity was put outside the unions. At this time, we co-created with organizations like COSAW. Then COSAW disappeared. One of our publications at the time was The Writers Notebook. Most of the contributions came from the black working class.”* [72]

As the trade unions became more focused, and political organisations prepared to get into government, the close relationship between cultural activists began to dissipate. New cultural organisations and institutions, generally coordinative national bodies protecting elite interests (rather than arts centres or local structures) began to compete *“to establish who will control state resources allocated to culture”*. [73] In this context, argues Kromberg, cultural activists’ struggles for space in official institutions (‘the new’) replaced what had been their struggle for spaces within political organisations and the unions. Referring to the funding realities at the time, he noted: *“The performing arts councils and the SABC – which receive significant sums of state funding – are under increasing pressure to reconstitute themselves in more open and accessible ways.”* [74] With this opening-up of existing institutions of the arts, the elite within the anti-apartheid cultural movement inserted themselves into the new spaces, and worker culture, along with more community arts centres, were left on the sidelines.

For CWLP, there remained the practical side to closing down. With the entity in its final throes, in 1998, Malange was the last person on deck, and handled the last staff retrenchment, and the necessary administrative wrapping up. She coordinated the handover of material to the Killie Campbell Collection at the University of Natal. In the present, she worries about the preservation and accessibility of those resources: *“I have some concerns. I went there in early 2000. The stuff was not catalogued. A year later, there was a change of guard. There weren’t many of the same people left after six or seven years.”* It may well be that some of the archived material is missing. In a twist, several years after the closure, Malange was approached by a potential benefactor seeking to provide funding for a re-opening of CWLP. *“We were once approached by Ms Kadalie from the university who wanted to revive it,”* Malange recalls. Malange saw the immense value in a revival – as she still does in the present – but there were too many obstacles. [75] COSATU stipulated that if any such initiative was to go ahead, funding for it should be channelled through the federation. The benefactor refused to go that route, dashing hopes of a revival.

## **Conclusion**

The CWLP existed at a time of heightened activism and vibrancy, in both the political and cultural realm. It injected a worker perspective into the broader upsurge of people’s culture, even as shop stewards sought to use culture to assist in trade union mobilisation and raise worker consciousness. Hit by huge shifts and changes

that occurred at so many levels in the mid-1990s, it couldn't survive. As with many other target groups served by progressive arts centres serving the marginalised in the eighties, the needs addressed by CWLP's constituency – support, training and resources for cultural expression – continue to exist. The consolation is that, through its work, CWLP has achieved much and has left significant traces, and its products, outputs and ideas continue to inform teaching and discourse in academia, in fields such as performing arts and literature.

*Based in Johannesburg, Frank Meintjies works in the field of social development and is Research Fellow at Wits University's School of Governance. Frank was co-editor of the multi-disciplinary book, reviewing ten years of democracy, 'Voices of the Transition'. With Mi Hlatshwayo, he edited a special 'Staffrider' edition focused on Worker Culture. In his position as COSATU Information Officer, he worked closely with the federation's culture desk coordinator Mi Hlatshwayo, to promote and expand worker culture. Frank remains active in cultural work: he is currently interim President of the National Writers of South Africa.*

## Notes

- [1] Thembi Lockett, Shirley Walters, Astrid von Kotze, 'Re-membering practices of popular education in the struggle for an alternative South Africa', *Interface* 9:1 (2017), 256 – 280.
- [2] Lockett, Walters, von Kotze, *Re-membering practices of popular education*, 256 – 280.
- [3] Mike van Graan, 'Community-Based Education in the Nineties: Problems and Possibilities', *Staffrider* 9:4 (1991), 103 – 112.
- [4] Alfred Qabula, *A Working Life: Cruel Beyond Belief*, (Durban: National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, 1989), 98.
- [5] Frank Meintjies with Nise Malange, *Interview*, 3 June 2020.
- [6] Bhekizizwe Peterson, "'A rain a fall but the dirt it tough': scholarship on African theatre in South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21:4 (1995), 573 – 584.
- [7] Kelwyn Sole, 'Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions', *English in Africa* 10:1 (1983), 37 – 84. Furthermore, should not be taken as a questioning of an approach that "*privileges class as the primary determinant in society*" and where such privileging comes to the fore in the analysis of culture. Peterson notes: "*Whatever its shortcomings, the unease in the BCM with the privileging of class as the primary determinant in society was important. It gestured towards the need to unbundle our understanding of creative processes, racism, sexism and ethnocentrism from the analytical impasse inherent in the base/superstructure metaphor and its functionalist explanations. It also raised the important possibility of organising political action along lines of racial, or for that matter 'gendered', identities and solidarity without it being, principle, a negation of the importance of class struggles – the difficult rider being, of course, the need to maintain vigilance against the ease with which such initiatives can change into parochial 'nationalist' or 'women's' movements.*" Peterson, 'The Rain a Fall But the Dirt it Tough,' 579.
- [8] Paul Gready, 'Books Reviewed: Organise and Act – The Natal Workers Theatre Movement, 1983-1987 by A. von Kotze', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16:2 (1990), 363 – 366.
- [9] Ari Sitas, 'Culture and production: the contradictions of working class theatre in

South Africa', *Africa Perspective* 1-2 (1986), 26.

[10] Ari Sitas, *The Flight of the Gwala-Gwala bird: A collection of Essays by Ari Sitas*, (Cape Town: South African History Online, 2016).

[11] In *Black Mamba Rising*, Mi Hlatshwayo and Alfred Qabula alluded to the rise of worker organisation in their poems, often depicting the trade union movement as a force whose growth could not be stopped. Alfred Qabula, Mi Hlatshwayo and Nise Malange, *Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle*, (Durban: Congress of South African Trade Unions, 1986).

[12] Sitas quoted in Keim, *Universally Comprehensible*, 102.

[13] "1980: Striking workers from the Rely Precision Foundry on the East Rand are dismissed, and the union's lawyer requests the Junction Avenue Theatre Company activists to make a new play about the workers' struggle. After three months of nightly meetings, workers and activists together create *Ilanga Lizophumela Abasebenzi* (*The sun rises for the workers*)..." (South African History Online (SAHO), *The Natal Workers Theatre Movement Timeline*,

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/natal-workers-theatre-movement-timeline/>). [14]

The Junction Avenue Theatre Company (JATC) was formed in 1976 by a group of white students based at Wits University. Key actors in its formation were Malcolm Purkey, William Kentridge and Ari Sitas. The company became more inclusive and more dynamic after Black members from Theatre Workshop 71 joined them. Workshop 71, which launched with the play *Crossroads* in 1972 and which has been formed under the aegis of the South African Institute of Race Relations, was banned in June 1976. JATC sought to create historically-informed plays and specialised in workshop processes, experimental theatre, minimalist staging and – in its depiction of issues of the day – a bias towards voices from the disadvantaged community. Its aim was to reclaim and popularise the hidden history of struggle in South Africa. The company's plays included *The Fantastical History of a Useless Man* (1976), *Randlords and Rotgut* (1978), *Will of a Rebel* (1979), *Security* (1979), *Ilanga Lizophumela Abasebenzi* (1980), *Sophiatown* (1985), and *Love, Crime and Johannesburg* (1997). These are some of the actors who developed within Junction Avenue but went on to make their mark in the theatre world and beyond: Patrick Shai, Arthur Molepo, Doreen Mazibuko, Gladys Mothlane, Madidi Maphoto, Siphiwe Khumalo and Ramolao Makhene. Athina Copteros, *Workshop Theatre in Post Apartheid South Africa: A Case Study*, (Grahamstown: Rhodes University, 2002); SAHO, *Workshop '71*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/workshop-71>; SAHO, *Junction Avenue Theatre*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/place/junction-avenue-theatre>.

[15] According to Erlmann, "...(*T*)hrough the expressive medium of *isicathamiya* performance, migrant workers have been able to express at the same time pan ethnic African nationalist ideology and Zulu nationalism, pride in status as permanent urban citizens as well as rural nostalgia and horror at the evils of the city, and finally, working-class consciousness and resistance to proletarianization." V Erlmann, "'Singing brings joy to the distressed': the social history of Zulu migrant workers' choral competitions", (Presented at *Wits History Workshop*: Johannesburg, 1987).

[16] Mario Pissarra, Tazneem Wentzel, and Scott Williams with Nise Malange, *Owning your Liberation History: Nise Malange on the work and lessons of the Culture and Working Life Project* (ASAI, 2017).

[17] Frank Meintjies with Nise Malange, *Interview*.

[18] Ari Sitas, 'Traditions of Poetry in Natal', *Journal of Southern African*

*Studies*, 16:2 (1990), 307 – 326.

[19] Qabula, *A Working Life*.

[20] Frank Meintjies with Zaide Harneker, *Interview*, 5 June 2020.

[21] Qabula, *A Working Life*, 98 – 108.

[22] Qabula, *A Working Life*, 94.

[23] Inkatha attacks were commonplace. In 1986, vigilantes accompanied by men in Kwa-Zulu police uniform abducted and murdered Simon Ngubane, the leader of the Sarmcol Players and worker leaders Phineas Sibiya and Flomin Mnikathi.

[24] SAHO, *Natal Workers Theatre Movement Timeline*.

[25] Frank Meintjies with Ari Sitas, *Interview*, 8 June 2020.

[26] In his book, Qabula refers to an old practice at Dunlop “to recruit people who knew how to dance the Zulu dance”. This was done because the company sought to perform well in dance competitions against firms like Hulets, Hart, Clover and Lever Brothers. Qabula, *A Working Life*, 94.

[27] SAHO, *Natal Workers Theatre Movement Timeline*, see ‘1985’.

[28] Meintjies and Sitas, *Interview*.

[29] Meintjies and Harneker, *Interview*.

[30] The Culture Course didn’t provide pottery or training in any other crafts, however, as a beginner, it is easier for an artist to earn an income from crafts than visual arts pieces. Thus some students later learnt ceramics and started ceramics projects.

[31] Meintjies and Harneker, *Interview*.

[32] South African Workers’ Culture Unit, *The Worker*, (place: publisher, year?), 6.

[33] Sitas also mentions that at one stage, CWLP were in conversation with the DC Mathiwane group, “an explosive ANC/Congress group of militant poets”, but that they did not pitch at the 1984 rally. Steve Kromberg, *The problem of audience: a study of Durban worker poetry*, thesis, (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 1993).

[34] Meintjies and Harneker, *Interview*.

[35] Gready, *Books Reviewed*, 363.

[36] SAHO, *Natal Workers Theatre Movement Timeline*.

[37] Sitas, *The Flight of the Gwala-gwala Bird*; Peterson, ‘*The Rain a Fall but the Dirt it Tough*’; Page Laws, ‘Didactic Showmen: Theatre for Development in Contemporary South Africa’, In *African Theatre for Development: Art for Self-Determination*, edited by Kamal Salhi (Bristol, Intellect Books, 1998), 43 – 68.

[38] Astrid von Kotze, *Organise and Act – The Natal Workers Theatre Movement, 1983-1987*, (Durban, Culture and Working Life Project, 1988).

[39] Qabula, Hlatswayo, Malange, *Black Mamba Rising*.

[40] Nzimande had a long history with CWLP and the Sociology Department of the University of Natal. He went on to become (and in 2020, still is) a Minister in the South African government and General–secretary of the Community Part of South Africa.

[41] Meintjies and Sitas, *Interview*.

[42] Gready, *Books Reviewed*, 363.

[43] Gready, *Books Reviewed*.

[44] Gready, *Books Reviewed*.

[45] Jeffrey Vilane, quoted in Sitas, *Traditions of Poetry in Natal*, 320.

[46] This only drew to a lesser extent on workers’ experience of, or exposure to, the work of Gibson Kente.

[47] Sitas, *The Flight of the Gwala-gwala Bird*, 83.

- [48] Wiebke Keim, *Universally Comprehensible, Arrogantly Local: South African Labour Studies from the Apartheid Era into the New Millennium*, (Paris, éditions des archives contemporaines, 2015), 109.
- [49] Meintjies and Sitas, *Interview*; Keim, *Universally Comprehensible*. According to Keim, the Youth Unemployment Project was created by Moss Ngoasheng.
- [50] Keim, *Universally Comprehensible*, 108.
- [51] Meintjies and Harneker, *Interview*.
- [52] Meintjies and Malange, *Interview*.
- [53] Frank Meintjies with Shamim Meer, *Interview*, 14 July.
- [54] Pissarra, Malange et al, *Owning Your Liberation*.
- [55] Sitas, *The Flight of the Gwala-gwala Bird*, 79.
- [56] Sitas, *The Flight of the Gwala-gwala Bird*, 79.
- [57] Sitas noted: “Save for one instance when we were told we were pissing in the wind, the support of the community of radical aesthetic scribes has been at worst patronizing, but still enormous, usually for the wrong reasons.” Sitas, *Culture and Production*.
- [58] Gready states, referring to the work of CWLP, that “There is also a feeling within this theatre movement that ‘outsider’ coverage has tended to largely overlook, trivialise, oor misrepresent its achievements.” (Gready, *Books Reviewed*, 363.)
- [59] This article focuses on the critiques related to worker theatre. Related to this, there were also debates on aesthetic quality targeting the work of worker poets. (Kromberg, *The Problem of Audience*.)
- [60] Sitas, *Culture and Production*, 2.
- [61] Sitas, *Culture and Production*, 2.
- [62] Sitas also concedes that trade union organisers encouraged cultural activities for education purposes, using them as “a small union propaganda machine”, but at the same time this cultural activity represented spaces of workers’ self expression and grassroots creativity (Sitas, *Flight of the Gwala Gwala Bird*, 144; Sitas, *Culture and Production*.)
- [63] Sitas, *Culture and Production*, 2.
- [64] Sitas, *Flight of the Gwala Gwala Bird*, 81.
- [65] Sitas, *Culture and Production*, 5.
- [66] Worker theatre was not the only phenomenon that sought to address this, that sought to bring theatre, other than exposure to Gibson-Kente work, to spaces that were mainly working class in composition. Here, some organised youth, under the banner of black consciousness, sought to bring township theatre to township spaces. However, these radical plays lacked what Sitas termed a grassroots feel, and did not give attention to “production relations as a real site of oppression” (Sitas, *Flight of the Gwala-gwala Bird*, 85).
- [67] Laws, *Didactic Showmen*.
- [68] Sitas, *Flight of the Gwala-gwala Bird*, 86.
- [69] Meintjies and Meer, *Interview*.
- [70] Meintjies and Meer, *Interview*.
- [71] Meintjies and Sitas, *Interview*.
- [72] Meintjies and Sitas, *Interview*.
- [73] Kromberg, *The Problem of Audience*, 247.
- [74] Kromberg, *The Problem of Audience*, 247. [75] Ari Sitas gave some detail regarding the context of attempted revivals: In 2004, there was a failed attempt by Willies Mchunu, Mi Hlatshwayo, Gladman Ngubo, Don Gumede and Sitas to start *Udondolo*, to revive cultural activities like those of the CWLP. In 2006, Lex

Futshane, Paul Sibisi, Jeeva Rajgopaul, Gladman Ngubo, Astrid Von Kotze and Sitas tried to initiate *Injula*, a cultural coop which would link up with worker creativity. It also did not get off the ground. Ari Sitas, *email correspondence*, 20-02-2021.