

The Alexandra Arts Centre: Interviews with Bongiwé Dhlomo-Mautloa, Stephen Maqashela and Gabriel Masike

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by Siphó Gwala

I grew up in Alexandra Township and all my life have had to leave the township in order to learn visual arts, which is why I am so interested in the history of the Alexandra Arts Centre (AAC). As artists and organisers now, getting more insight into the AAC and its cultural work histories is important, as many of the people who knew the centre are passing away, and there is little documentation. Here, I interview Bongiwé Dhlomo-Mautloa, Stephen Maqashela and Gabriel Masike who were all directly linked to the centre, either as students or staff members.

Bongiwé Dhlomo-Mautloa

Dhlomo-Mautloa has played a pivotal role in the development of art in South Africa. As an artist and cultural activist, she was involved throughout the 1980s in setting up and participating in a number of art projects and initiatives. Over the years, she has been involved in many local, national and international art exhibitions, publications and conferences. She studied Art at the Rorke's Drift Art and Craft Centre, graduating with a two-year diploma in 1979.

As a result of the March 2020 lockdown, I dropped a sheet of paper with questions at Bongiwé Dhlomo-Mautloa's home. She sent me her answers in the following essay format:

The year 1986 marked the anniversary of the 1976 Soweto Students Uprisings against the enforcement of the Afrikaans language as a medium of instructions for subjects like Arithmetic (Rekenkunde), History (Gesiedenis), etc. The whole decade from 1976 to 1986 experienced a series of political unrests including many deaths in detention of people opposed to the Apartheid regime. Notably was the death in detention of the Black Consciousness Movement leader, Steven Bantu Biko (Steve Biko) in 1977. There was general turmoil in the black community as many young political activists were either leaving the country (skipping apartheid South Africa) to seek protection in exile or were being incarcerated in overcrowded prisons. Alexandra had a huge number of such exiled South Africans. When any "small" political skirmish occurred in any township,

anger would flare in mostly black urban areas. The introduction of the State of Emergency in 1985 and its related repression was viewed as the most brutal nail in the coffin for black political activism.

The formation of the Alexandra Arts Centre followed a similar pattern. The students were angered by the killing of a young person by the shop owners in the area. This led to what became known as the Alexandra Massacre where young people, mostly students, were killed. A new call of "LIBERATION NOW, EDUCATION LATER" reverberated around Alex and other townships. Many young people boycotted classes and took to the streets.

A concerned group of activists in Alexandra viewed the situation as a huge challenge to the future of the young people and that of the black community. They felt an urgent need to create a 'diversion' away from the streets for interested young people. The idea for the Alexandra Arts Centre developed around March/April 1986. It was launched in June 1986 as a series of art classes held at the Alexandra Clinic and at the adjacent Nokuthula Centre every afternoon. Classes consisted of Visual Arts, Drama, Theatre, Music and Dance. There was interest among the young people and the classes quickly became too big for the two spaces that were hosting these young aspirant artists.

I joined the Alexandra Arts Centre in July/August 1986 taking over the reins from Ms Sue Morrell who had started the process. My own experience in the art arena allowed me to rekindle relationships with international embassies that I had worked with in the past. It was possible to raise funds for classes and teachers' fees/stipends (they were not salaries). It was very heartwarming to see the dedication of the students and the teachers working as they did among casualty patients at the clinic. The community of the Alexandra Clinic under Dr Tim Wilson embraced the project. The patients who would still be at the clinic during our afternoon classes would look into dance sessions as these were less abstract and communicated directly to our "audience."

The teachers were drawn from other existing community art centres (FUBA, Funda, the Johannesburg Art Foundation) as well as other independent arts practitioners. From the onset, it was clear that the Alex Arts Centre was going to draw interest of funders and supporters alike. The crop of teachers were well respected industry practitioners and thus were able to talk about the work they were doing in Alex and thus generate interest in the project.

Kagiso Trust was established as a funding 'arm' of the European Union (EU). Funds for support in education, politics and other spheres were channelled through this organisation. The Alex Arts Centre got funding from Kagiso Trust during the three years I was the Coordinator of the Centre and beyond. The Netherlands Embassy was another major funder for the Arts Centre. In April 1987, I was invited to Sweden to talk about the Alexandra Arts Centre, its programmes and challenges. Following this initial contact, a new relationship was formed with Sweden's Riksställningar (Swedish

Traveling Exhibitions). The organisation funded the Arts Centre's education programmes.

Whenever supporters and funders of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) would come to see the beneficiaries, the Alex Arts Centre would often be on their itineraries. The huge support by funding organisations at this time boosted the centre's funds to a point where we felt we were quickly outgrowing the clinic and the adjacent school. The Alex Arts Centre needed a home.

In 1987, the Alexandra Arts Centre secured rental of a disused factory building on 2nd Street, Marlboro. The building was an easy walking distance from any part of Alexandra. The participants were thus able to access the Centre for classes and later events that took place at the centre. The building was a modest two-storey structure. The Art Centre was thus able to expand classes to include pottery, photography, architectural drafting, creative writing and cookery. The Alex Arts Centre drew participants from older students who became full time students who attended classes for the full day. School-going pupils and students attended classes after their normal school hours. The Alexandra Arts Centre became a hub of activity and creativity. It drew the interest of lots of people. Unfortunately, this included the notorious SAP (South African Police) and the SADF (South African Defense Force) who, at this time of the State of Emergency, were roaming the township streets at will. Due to the nature of class assignments in the visual arts classes, the state forces assumed that drawings showing soldiers with guns was the centre's politicisation of young minds. Assignments would be as mundane as "A street scene" to which young people would respond with drawing of the SADF members on the street with chickens and dogs running away from them. Hilarious, but to the SAP and SADF and other state security apparatus, high treason. It was during this time and due to this attention by the state that the Alex Arts Centre gained notoriety and fame, depending on from which stance the viewer was looking.

The Weekly Mail (now *Mail & Guardian*) staged its first film festival. The Weekly Mail partnered with organisations in the arts sector, and one of them was the Alexandra Arts Centre. One of the venues and the launching pad of the Film Festival was the Alexandra Arts Centre. The event drew into the Centre local and international filmmakers and guests as well as undercover security personnel. A number of films banned in apartheid South Africa, were curated into the menu of the Festival offerings, but were barred for showing during the festival. This brought further spotlight to the Centre. I was summoned to the Police Station in Kew a number of times. The Centre was aware of security branch around the centre at different times. The student body was infiltrated and intimidated by the SAP. It got clear to us that the Centre was in danger of being forced to close. It was in October 1988 when I realised that my life and that of my family was in danger. I tendered my resignation from the Centre, as some in the student body had become hostile towards me and other staff members. We were all aware of the source of the problem. As I live in Alexandra, I had the feeling that there would come a time when the hostility would be seen to have been induced by outside

forces. Fortunately, the impasse did not last very long. I have continued working in the arts sector in Alexandra.

The Alexandra Arts Centre boasts a great number of internationally recognised arts practitioners. As I sat at Heathrow airport waiting for a connecting flight to Germany, I thought I saw familiar faces approaching from one end of the transit area. The group was the African Jazz Pioneers. The famous jazz band had recruited a number of student musicians into the band. They were coming from Copenhagen where they had performed at the EU Cultural City for that year. It was a heart-warming moment. There are Dance and Theatre practitioners that cut their teeth in their art forms at the Alex Arts Centre. Photographers who studied at the Alex Arts Centre photography department are respected and exhibiting artists locally and internationally. Respected filmmakers and sound engineers of note owe their roots to the Alex Arts Centre. The Architectural Drafting department of the Alexandra Arts Centre produced a few graduates who own their businesses in the infrastructure development sector.

Stephen Maqashela

Stephen Maqashela is an artist and former AAC student who was born in 1966 in Motlakeng, Randfontain.

I interviewed Maqashela at his home on 9 June 2020, and again on 22 November 2020.

SG: Do you think that the Alex Arts Centre was the home of Alex Arts?

SM: No, it was not the home of Alex Arts, but it was beyond the home of Alexandra Arts, because the centre was known from all corners of the country. It accommodated all kinds of artists from Alex and from other places. Everyone was in love with the art centre because of the environment, and it offered many skills to the community. The family of artists meeting in one place, which did not happen before the Alex Art Centre, so it made you feel at home. The students produced amazing works from the help of the teachers. We would get paid to go to Wits and have workshop with students from Wits, to show them art techniques and in pottery.

SG: How did you first hear about the Alex Arts Centre?

SM: After matric I wanted to pursue the arts. You know sometimes it helps when you ask people. I wanted to go to Pretoria Technical, but on my way there, I met Gabriel Masike who told me about the art centre.

SG: When was it founded and why?

SM: I am not sure exactly when because I did not start with the art centre. The centre was founded after the 1976 students' protest that happened around the country because of Afrikaans Must Fall and Bantu Education. The African National Congress

decided that townships and rural areas needed a place where children can go and learn arts and culture.

SG: *Why did you want to be a student/teacher at the Centre?*

SM: I was from the North West. When I first came to Alexandra, I knew that I want to be an art student. The centre was free, and there were good artists. I went there to make research about the space. The aim was not to register, but the environment made me register at the same time, because I met different artists with different disciplines. I mean, holy people, very, very holy place.

SG: *When did you become a student/teacher, and do you still remember what the requirements were?*

SM: Registration was not like, come back tomorrow. Instead, anytime. If I remember correctly, it was 1987–1989. Nothing was required. It was a peoples' place. Even if you didn't know how to write or speak English, there was a class of literature taught by Bobby for a few hours every morning.

SG: *Which courses did you study?*

SM: I studied Fine Arts, Ceramics and part time Drama student. My favourite was fine arts, and I remember performing at the City Hall a show called *Scrap Yard*. Our movie was also played on CCV TV. I played a character that chased a priest that was busy with my wife.

SG: *How was the environment on campus?*

SM: When I started at the centre, great artists, musicians and poets had finished their studies but still came to the centre to practise, as they had space to work, and held workshops with students. After school, we stayed on campus after the teachers left. You could do your homework, sculpture and even commissioned work any time. It was the home of the arts. Some played music, and the security himself was a musician. I still miss that environment. People from those centres were multi-talented, because you would find me at the ceramics department doing something there, and you would feel welcomed by the teacher. 'Each one, teach one' was a philosophy there.

SG: *Do you still remember some of your classmates or collaborators and teachers?*

SM: I remember this guy from Zimbabwe. He painted Bushmen with ostrich eggs. He was good at it already when he came to be a student, and he would trace his composition first, adding the tones later. Not forgetting legends like Ishmael Madihlaba, a smooth sculptor and painter like Michelangelo; Martin Mutshalatsi, a painter also good in pastel drawing. Many students completed their studies and stayed at the centre as they had space to work. I found Cedric Sibisi there. Mandla Mashinini was an administrator.

SG: *What happened to lead to the shutdown of the Centre?*

SM: This happened because the education was free, paid for by international donors before the new democratic dispensation. As many investors had no idea what will happen in the country, they pulled off their funding and, as a result, the centre had to close down. The other thing is that students and former students would also eat there.

SG: *Do you think that places like the arts centre are relevant in our communities and must be there?*

SM: Yes, they are relevant to the community, and they must be there, but I don't know how. The way things are, the younger generation will not see the things that life starts at forty but ends at forty.

Gabriel Masike

Gabriel Masike is an artist who was born in 1966 in Moletsane, Soweto. Mr Masike has lived in Alex for 35 years. He studied at the Federated Union of Black Arts (FUBA), under the late Sipho Sepamla's directorship, after being told about the school by his late uncle, Sinkali Masike. Masike was inspired by his uncle's life drawings, which lead him to eventually pursue art. Mr Masike had worked as a spray painter at the National Cash Register, but he quit his job when his race horse ticket won him R 80,000 which helped to pay for his own and fellow students' art schooling.

The interview took place on afternoon of 22 June 2020 in Mr Masike's yard in Alex.

SG: *Do you think that the Alex Arts Centre was the home of Alex Arts?*

GM: No. It was supposed to be the home of Alexandra Arts and beyond, but it did not, because students came from Mabopane, Carltonville, Soweto, Randfontain and around the country to study at the centre because we had a structure. People that did not have the interests of Alex residents and artists at heart were part of the centre, which led to the close of the space. The secret that it becomes a success is that, if you want an art centre, run it yourself, learn the administration, so that whomever you place there is answerable to you, the creator. If you lose focus and not submit annual reports, in other words, go through hell first. The same happened with FUBA and other similar institutions. When you have a centre, run the operation and don't lose focus, as many people think of themselves and forget about the bigger picture.

SG: *How did you first hear about the Alex Arts Centre?*

GM: I was an active planner and founder of the Alex Art Centre. I was practising Fine Arts in a studio in CAMDOR opposite the Alex Clinic, funded by a Patron Mr Tsoenyane and sponsored by the South African Breweries, with R 8,000 every month. I invited Noel Sithole, a fellow artist, to come and work with me in the space, as the space was big. We had a permanent exhibition space and studios to create works. Jingles Makgoti, a poet, approached me and told me about the formation of a formal structure. Bongi

Dhlomo and Sue Morel came to our studio for a visit. That's when they told me about the idea of an arts centre in Alex. I regret not having a written agreement, because I was going to teach at the centre and when Sue left for Cape Town and Bongzi Dhlomo became the administrator, I worked independently as an artist and student.

SG: When was it founded and why?

GM: FUBA was in town, and we needed something with the similar structure like that in our community. The centre started classes in a hall at the clinic, and Noel and I would go there and help by teaching, since it was next to their studio, before the space was found in Marlboro. Funding came from Joint Enrichment Project, by Eric Molobi. Bill Anslie was another patron for the centre, and many young people went into exile with his help. When the centre was initially started, it was about self-respect, self-pride, black pride and black direction. A place like FUBA was needed in our community, and Alexandra artists came together.

SG: Why did you want to be a student/teacher at the centre?

GM: I was going to teach, but three months into the project, white people were introduced to the structure and got paid for teaching without paying us. We became students and started the SRC to structure the resistance, to disrupt anything white like abstract art because we could not go back to the township but fight inside the structure. We also wanted accountability on how funds were used.

SG: When did you become a student/teacher and do you still remember what the requirements were?

GM: I was both teacher and student. The requirements were simple: just to be there.

SG: Which courses did you study?

GM: I didn't want to be taught by whites. I was working independently within the centre. I studied Fine Arts at FUBA. As an artist, there is no favourite subject; one has to love them all.

SG: How was the environment on campus?

GM: It was a vibrant environment, because one was surrounded by great artists and the fact that we had freedom of speech, to think and tap in the reserve. I remember a six-week workshop with the students from the Johannesburg Art Foundation, founded by Mr Ainslie. As the hosts, we played our music, and one student from the foundation wanted me to stop playing a song *Young black and gifted*, and I said no. That is how I got to meet Ainslie and offered a job to teach at the foundation.

SG: Do you still remember some of your classmates or collaborators and teachers?

GM: I remember the late Ntemi Piliso and many more, but unfortunately many are passing away. We were in Soweto for a burial of a member of Ntemi's band in Diepkloof, Soweto. We were supposed to play before African Jazz Pioneers, after

Mzwakhe Mbuli, but he approached me and said that he would love to play with us, since his members did not bring their instruments. Ntemi told me that he is not worried anymore because he can see that, even if he is gone, there will be a jazz band from Alexandra. African Jazz Hounds was born, and I play with third generation players.

SG: *What happened to lead to the shutdown of the Centre?*

GM: This was due to the mismanagement of funds and compliance issues. When Bill died, the South African black art scene died too. He was on his way back from the Thupelo Workshops from Zimbabwe, and the security forces trapped him, therefore his car was in a head-on collision and he died on impact. Luckily, Helen Sibidi broke her hand and David Koloane broke a leg and ribs.

SG: *Do you think that places like the arts centre are relevant in our communities and must be there?*

GM: Yes, and we need more. Think of the taxi industry for example. They started with small cars, but now they have taxi ranks everywhere in the country and run that industry themselves. A township or place that does not have an arts centre has no soul. I have registered Our Kind Of Jazz as a music school. I have not got any funding as of yet, but I have been trying, and you know how things are in our country, you must be connect with so and so. I truly believe in empowering and enlightening the youth, as the future of every country relies with the youth. If those youth are not empowered, they are not given the light and not told the truth, they will not know who they are if they don't know where they come from. I teach jazz music, art and graphic design, and it is simply for free not for money, but for continuity, because what I have in brains, if I die with it, it's a loss to the heritage of this township and this country.

As a young artist from Alex, it was important for me to do these interviews, because people sacrificed their lives for the centre, but today, the area does not have even have an operational art centre, gallery or theatre. The responses clearly show that places like the Alex Arts Centre are important, not only for the artists, but for the community at large. In the words of Mr Masike, "A township or a place without an art centre has no soul."

Sipho Gwala is part of a collective 'Gom.art Core-llective,' which operated once as an NPO in former AAC student, the late Cedric Sibisi's house, and later in a building right next to where the centre used to be. 'Gom.art' continues now as an art club, which hosts art tours around Alexandra Township. He is also part of 'Alex Arts Kollektive,' which was founded in 2019, and runs the Alex Carnival and the Arts Development Programme.