



IT is probably a long time since Botswana's dusty capital has known such a sense of exhilaration. Over 600 people – most of them South Africans – descended on the university for the five day Culture and Resistance Festival.

People who had not seen each other for years embraced fiercely. Over and over again you could hear the poignant phrase that crops up in the conversation of all exiles, sooner or later, as they ask about things 'at home'. It gives you a start to realize that even after two decades of exile South Africa has not stopped being home.

The festival was arranged to examine and propose suggestions for the role of artists in the creation of a democratic South Africa.

This was done through various seminars on particular aspects of the Arts, including dance, fine art, photography, poetry, novels and drama, in conjunction with exhibitions, film shows and dramatic presentations. Each seminar was led by a panel of artists who have achieved recognition in their own field: Robin Orlin, Malcolm Purkey, James Matthews, Chris van Wyk, Nadine Gordimer, Charles Mungoshi and so on.

The special status that is accorded to the artist in western society was severely criticised. The term 'cultural worker' was offered as an alternative to the more prestigious 'artist'.

Many of the cultural workers themselves were eager to shed the mystical cloak of artistry. James Matthews denies emphatically that he writes poetry, insisting that he merely 'expresses feelings'. If you tempt him to 'express his feelings' on those who do call themselves poets, you will be treated to the unique Matthews brand of abuse.

Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand) corrects anyone who calls him a musician or a pianist. He defines himself as 'the messenger boy' and recalls a saying of his that has become famous: 'I regard myself as a worker . . . my function is no less or more important than a street sweeper's or a doctor's.'

At the end of his concerts he solemnly joins the audience in their applause to show that all praise is due to Allah alone.

The seminars gave rise to some stimulating debates which were not always followed through. For example, the seminar on theatre suffered from people's unwillingness to analyse the alternative theatre that has been produced in South Africa since the 1950's. Important issues such as whether or not artists should be supported by their communities were raised but then fell flat.

Similarly in the poetry seminar when someone asked why there were so few women involved in poetry, the chairperson thought that this question should be reserved for a separate session at some later date.

The novel seminar was, in some ways, the most challenging. The novel was attacked and defended with equal vigour. Some of the questions raised were: Do workers have the necessary educational background and do they have the time to plough through 300 pages or so? The novel is historically a product of the middle class, can it be made to serve the workers and, – most insistent of all – does the novel tell the truth?

It was unfortunate that not many people, besides Ms Gordimer, appeared to know much about the post '76 renaissance which has given birth to novels like Miriam Tlali's *Amandla* and Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood*.

It was easier to resolve the position and function of poetry, despite some of the audience's unhappy school recollections. Poetry is more easily composed on the evening trian than some other forms of literature. It is read at meetings and at the gravesides of martyrs.

The dominance that European poetry has enjoyed for so long in our schools and in the minds of our poets, was angrily denounced. People had it in for daffodils especially, probably justly so. What could be more foreign to African experience than a wild host of them waiting to inspire the solitary poet?

There was some sense of loss though. It was reminiscent of a poem by James Matthews in which he recalls his original poetic intentions to describe natural wonders. But after having seen the dark images of oppression he writes:

'i will never be able to write

a poem about dawn, a bird or a bee.'

One of the exiles spoke about the feelings awoken in him by the glorious sunset he had witnessed on his landing in Botswana – the closest he had come to his home for twenty years. The point that emerged from this was that subjects of natural beauty should not be denied to poets. They will inevitably be imbued with a certain consciousness whether it is Wordsworthian wonder or the longing, bitterness and hope of the exile.

When Abdullah Ibrahim found himself trapped in a press conference he refused to clarify the political 'message' of his music. The spectacle of the journalists, each jostling in his or her own 'groove', as he put it, amused him. He would not be drawn into any of the 'grooves'.

'The human spirit recognises the quality that is injected through the music,' he said. He suggested that this contributes to the *jidha* (holy war) that is waged with the self. It is necessary for each individual to re-orientate himself before society as a whole can be transformed. 'After all', he maintained, 'it's no good shooting if you shoot in the wrong direction.'

It seems he does not have to be consciously aware of his duty to the people. 'I am the people,' he asserted.

The journalists continued to refer to the theme of the festival. Ibrahim said: 'After all the killings and everything . . . It's 1982 and we still have to tell the culture to resist!' Nevertheless, he added that he thought the Festival was a 'useful exercise'.

He seemed to be suggesting that the conscientised cultural worker may be sensitive to the troubles and hopes of the people without having to analyse them scientifically in the way that a sociologist might. If the cultural worker presents his or her perceptions effectively the individuals in the audience instinctively recognise and respond to them on different levels.

Certainly this was what happened in most of the practical demonstrations. There were some outstanding posters on display, as well as a collection of photographs (particularly those of Goldblatt) which captured some of the funny-cruel ironies of South Africa superbly.

The Fulani poets gave a passionate dramatic rendering of Don Mattera's *Azanian Love Song* – a powerful expression of despair and re-affirmation. Several dramas were produced by the Cape Community Arts Project, of which the most remarkable was a compelling mime which demonstrated the perversions of unlimited power.

The Junction Avenue Theatre Company staged their version of Modikwe Dikobe's *Marabi Dance*, a highly enter-

taining, but probing portrayal of Doornfontein slum life in the 1940's.

And there were the concerts of course:

Barry Gilder's rich satire; the Mpondo's burning rhythms; Abdullah Ibrahim's anguished relationship with his piano from which he draws such sweet, raw beauty; Hugh Masekela's jubilant trumpeting which made way, now and then, for the rest of the band, including old King Force Silgee's saxophone which won as much applause then as it did fifty years ago.

As we were leaving the concert hall I heard one of the audience, overcome by the experience, exclaim: 'Now, that was art!' ●