

# POPULAR THEATRE AND STRUGGLE



With the present pace of struggle inside South Africa, not excluding the cultural struggle against apartheid, it becomes vital to examine in depth every possible cultural weapon. Popular theatre is such a weapon.

"It is generally in culture that the seed of protest, leading to the emergence and development of the liberation movement is found".

— Amilcar Cabral —

Throughout the entire developing world, including those countries where people are waging popular struggles against repressive regimes, popular organisations and progressive individuals are rediscovering the potential of popular theatre as a weapon and a component of struggle. South Africa with its rich legacy of theatre experience dating from the pre-colonial period, cannot be an exception in this process. To rediscover the potential of popular theatre in the liberation struggle, re-evaluate its function and to re-define its perspective is a burning necessity. It is an imperative that confronts all those theatre activists in our midst who are committed to the cause of liberation.

Perhaps, as theatre activists, we should derive inspiration and take our cue from the final declaration that emerged from the 1982 Culture and Resistance Symposium that was held in Gaborone, Botswana, calling on all cultural workers in South Africa, whether behind the pen, brush, camera, saxophone or holding a chisel, to be as effective as anyone behind the gun in the service of progress. On our part, as theatre workers this call poses a renewed challenge and development of more effective methods of work and theatre techniques in correspondence with the ever developing revolutionary situation currently obtaining in South Africa.

Popular theatre, like any other art form, is a cultural force for social change and societal development. It is a genre which, inherently collective in nature, promotes interpersonal communication. Just as a good axe is one that cuts keenly, good theatre is one

that educates. While popular theatre is effective for heightening political consciousness, it is also a vehicle for galvanising people into action. It is not conceived here as an elitist pursuit, but is viewed as an activity geared at improving the lot of the downtrodden. It cannot afford the luxury of



Cultural workers of the ANC doing an opera of struggle.

neutrality. Popular theatre must be both relevant and functional and should address itself to the needs of society. Pablo Neruda, in one of his poems, exhorts artists and their art to be

useful and usable  
like metal and cereal  
that waits for plowshares  
tools for the land.

Within the context of the South African situation, popular theatre, above all, must articulate our struggle, our hopes and aspirations, thereby enhancing the revolutionary con-

sciousness of the people and mobilising them into active struggle. In order to realise this objective, theatre workers need to re-define certain conventional attitudes and concepts; and break off from the exercise of performing only at established institutions that are usually removed from the masses financially and geographically. They need to climb down their ivory towers, march out of the Market Theatre, Space, Baxter, etc., and go to the people in the streets, factories, single-sex hostels, villages, etc. Popular theatre derives its vitality and sustenance from the communities to be found at these many ordinary, everyday places.

The thesis that theatre should go to the people must not be confused with the cathartic approach where people in a given community are only given a chance to vent their grievances and frustrations in the course of participating in a performance. Nor does it have any kinship with the so-called banking method where people are spoon-fed with externally prescribed solutions that in most cases are ineffective and/or irrelevant to their situation. Going to the people should actually challenge the people themselves to look critically at their own situation and inculcate in them a sense of urgency and commitment to changing that situation. Here, theatre ceases to be a monologue that fosters passivity in the audience. It is transformed into a dialogue in which the people/audience actively participate in a performance based on their collective experience, criticising scenarios and using the analysis discovered in working out political strategies and engaging in active struggle.

Popular theatre rejects the artist who sees theatre as a spaceship that launches one to a life of riches and fame. It abhors cultural prostitution. In our context, an artist exists in a dialectical connexion with his community, charged with the imaginative exploration of

the process of social life (in which he participates), the interpretation of its dynamics, evoking deep responses in his audience and consequently influencing the behavioral patterns and outlook of his community.

### Development of Theatre in South Africa

South Africa boasts of a rich theatre history traceable to the period before colonial subjugation. Then people evolved indigenous dramatic forms that found their expression in the religious rituals, the traditional song, dance and story-telling exercises. The distinguishing feature of all cultural forms was their participatory nature with performances becoming, in the final analysis, festivals for all: Dancing would be open to all: a man or woman getting into the dance pitch, showing his or her expertise there — certainly not with an aim of out-shining anyone — then going out to give a chance to another. Audiences would respond by stamping their feet, for instance, and clapping their hands when witnessing a particularly spectacular dance.

Praise singers always found themselves reciting to the chant of ululating women, or men thundering assent. No storyteller would finish his narrative without someone from the audience supplementing the story by his own version of the truth. Most of these traditional forms still exist in an almost pure form: some have been commercially packaged and sent out for export by the Bertha Egnoses of the world in the inane form of *Umabatha*, *Ipi Tombi*, *Meropa*, and so on. From the traditional forms itemised above, modern South African theatre has emerged — finding its maximum creative sustenance from the trials and tribulations of black urban life, the rhythm of poverty, death and struggle — embracing in this process of European dramatic forms.

Competent theatre talent left South Africa with the migration to the bright lights of the western world with the theatre spectaculars of the early 60's: *King Kong*, *Sponono*, etc., creating a certain void. This cultural vacuum was filled in a way by the plethora of plays that inundated the townships informed by the Jim Comes to Joburg and Crime Does Not Pay formula. Common stereotypes in these plays were a church or funeral scene dominated by a highly spirited and lecherous *umfundisi* (priest), a jail scene depicting a *ja bass*, servile African policeman who brutalised the convicts and, for laughs presumably, the inevitable shebeen with the shebeen "queen" involved in gossip and *tsotsitaal* sequences with her hipster patrons.

The object of these plays was entertainment for commercial purposes with little or no political comment except by mere coincidence. The last because there is no realistic way one could write anything on South Africa without touching on political reality. In the main, this theatre was for amusement and the success of the performance would be measured in terms of laughter evoked in the audience. The crown prince of this movement is Gibson Kente, a shrewd businessman-cum-playwright who is able to cash in on this genre, milking unsuspecting patrons to the point of overtly identifying with the status quo, as demonstrated in his play *Laduma* which denounces the people's revolution.

During this period, township theatre was also influenced by works done by white liberal writers, notably Athol Fugard of the *Sizwe Banzi* and *The Island* fame. His two-man play technique, as against the large cast plays that were hitherto the norm, rapidly became popular among theatre practitioners. However, like any literary work penned by white liberals based on the experiences of the op-

pressed majority, Fugard's work falls short of the true reflection of the day to day experiences of the people who constitute his subjects. He also fails to penetrate the experiences of his subjects and bring to the fore the underlying causes of their destitution. He could not, moreover, advance any solutions to the problems that he so half-heartedly unveils. The resultant effect is that such theatre is tailored to hit the Broadway scene and catapult its protagonists into the world of stardom.

The advent of black consciousness in the late 1960's gave a renewed impetus to theatre, adding to it a radical fervour. For the first time ever, theatre directly addressed itself to the realities of South African life. Radical theatre groups, fired and inspired by black consciousness, itself a largely cultural impulse, sprouted in all the major centres of the country, formed by and around student circles. Most prominent amongst these groups were MDALI (Music, Drama, Art and Literature Institute), a union of black artists charged with the task of organising black arts festivals with the aim of promoting its affiliates; Dashiki, an Afrojazz group which combined African rhythms with poetry recitals. They backed TECON (Theatre Council of Natal), a black theatre group based in Durban in their production "Black Images". PET (People's Experimental Theatre) came around, put up a few performances of *Shanti* (a militant play that called for black solidarity and espoused armed struggle) before the cast was dispersed by police harassment. Mihloti Black Theatre excelled in militant black poetry recitals. However, black consciousness had inherent ideological and organisational shortcomings. In a real sense, it was intellectually removed from the masses from whom the theatre workers would have gleaned experience with the result that it ended in the same pitfall of elitism. This theatre

suffered immensely from state action against cultural resistance. A host of repressive legislation was brought into play resulting in detentions, bannings and exiling of many cultural activists. Mthuli ka Shezi, the writer of *Shanti*, was murdered by a railway policeman.

Those who were not harassed by the system retreated to the relative safety of liberal centres in the cities like the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, the Baxter and Space in Cape Town. They found refuge in the white liberal universities where the radical theatre tradition was carried on into the turbulent era after the 1976 bloodletting in Soweto and elsewhere. The gulf between radical theatre and the oppressed was further widened. These venues were situated far from the people who really mattered; they were, moreover, prohibitively expensive to the average black theatre-goer. The paid voyeurs of the regime conveniently turned a blind eye.

### Towards a People's Theatre

The 80's ushered in a period where struggle took a qualitatively marked upward swing. There is no day when the anger of the people doesn't manifest itself in some popular action by the people. Mass student and labour upsurges go hand in hand — in fact, one would dare say, accompany — the kind of theatre that finds its inspiration in the struggle of the people. It is informed by this struggle and it taps its resources from it. Theatre is performed in the funerals that are so much a part of our life in the besieged concentration camps euphemistically called locations. Everything that happens which brings black people together becomes a political statement: Matsemela Manaka's *Egoli* has been performed several times at weddings. In all the areas where our people are fighting raging battles against the teeth of the regime, our people are treated to plays; Zakes Mda's *Dark Voices Ring* was performed

at the Crossroads squatter camps.

Theatre finds its way into the labour sector such as the Junction Avenue Theatre Company's organising of lunch-hour workshops on industrial disputes. This trend, particularly the JATC, in which the audience are also participants, will have far-reaching effects in enhancing the workers' — if not the community's — consciousness and the need for unity in action to be consolidated. *Ilanga Lizophumel'abasebenzi* — *The Sun Will Rise for the Workers* — is a workshop play that was co-ordinated by JATC together with industrial workers dismissed from their jobs after several labour disputes around the Reef. The content of the play is based on a factory dispute, its historical causes and its analysis seen from the viewpoint of the participants who form the audience. It was performed to an ecstatic working class audience in its leisure time, that rare commodity. It has since been video-taped to be shown to larger and broader audiences.

Junction Avenue has also produced plays such as *Dikhitshining* (Kitchens), based on the experiences of the super-exploited African women employed as domestic servants in white households. The direction and pace set by JATC needs to be emulated and expanded so as to cover the various sections of the oppressed majority in their different occupations throughout the country.

It must be borne in mind that popular theatre does not serve as an end in itself. It is not the consummation of active struggle, but serves the purpose of bolstering those creative energies and skills of the masses that have to be harnessed towards a revolutionary effort. This is our perspective. Rehearsing and role acting the struggle does build up the confidence of the participant audience but does not substitute actual struggle. This, therefore, means that popular theatre activists must be part and parcel of democratic formations inside the country. They



Pure joy on FRAME worker's face on a May Day performance.

must find themselves in women's, civic, community, workers', students', teachers', medical, religious organisations and formations, where the collective experience of the people can be used as a weapon of struggle.

Detractors of popular theatre complain that revolutionaries have robbed this art form of its aesthetic content; that we have denuded the art of its beauty and crudely use it for agit-prop at the expense of artistic harmony and humaneness. Social progress and the ultimate seizure of power immediately grind this argument underfoot. The aesthetics and beauty and harmony that our detractors are screaming about are indivisible from the forms of our creation; bourgeois art concepts are aimed at disarming the artist and divest the masses of a very effective weapon of struggle. The aesthetics, the beauty and harmony of popular theatre lie precisely in its ability to animate the people and rally them into active struggle. The skillful combination of theatre and method, art and skill, content and message, ensures the artistic purity, relevance and commitment of popular theatre — a component of our struggle.

— Bob Mooki —