

GLIMPSES INTO SOUTH AFRICA – A PERSPECTIVE THROUGH JULUKA MUSIC

by Nhlanhla Ngcobo

INTRODUCTION

This paper is mainly a critical appreciation of a musical production by Juluka - a South African group. The appreciation is not only intended as aesthetic exercise, it also purports to reveal underlying socio-political issues conveyed by the music. The assertion is that Juluka music is a relevant and apt commentary on the goings-on in South Africa. An incident reported in one S.A.B.C. programme is taken as a concrete example of what is projected in Juluka.

PERCEPTUAL SUPPRESSION – RACE FACTORS

On the 17th August, 1981 the S.A.B.C. programme "Radio Today" reported the case of a black woman who was discharged from a hospital in Johannesburg. The commentator stated that she was still very ill at the time of discharge. She could hardly walk. The hospital had not provided any transport for her. Two men were reported to have been heavily supporting the lady in an effort to help her walk. The person who reported this case was the one who gave these people a lift. In three minutes, he says, he had covered twice the distance these people had struggled to do in three hours. The questions asked by this kind gentleman are:

1. How did it happen that many motorists did not see these people and offer them help? The vicinity where he picked up these people, and the route they had followed from the hospital indicated that they had crossed a street at one stage. Seeing that it was traffic peak hour, it must have been impossible for motorists not to see them.
2. How did it happen that a hospital discharged a person in such a condition and yet provided no transport? (This last question could perhaps be reflected back to this kind gentleman, namely "What kind of a person is he to have responded with sympathy and concern to such an 'insignificant' incident?") The gentleman ends up by questioning what sort of people we are.

This unusual sensitivity by man to other man's plight and suffering as demonstrated by the kind gentleman's act appears to be one of the themes Jonathan Clegg and Sipho



Mchunu grapple with in their musical perception of the South African scene. Because of the South African socio-political fabric, an inclination towards human insensitivity, particularly across racial barriers, is generated. (In South Africa it has not been uncommon for an ambulance to leave a dying person because of loyalty to a political designation of vehicles as "Whites only" or "Non Whites"). In a social situation like this human attributes like sympathy and benevolence are fast becoming attributes nurtured (or at worst determined) along racial lines. For some people this limiting social situation can produce psychological distortions in appropriate human responses, if such responses are called for in different racial context. This is a typical psychological problem which can be conceived differently by different theoretical points of view. For instance Learning theories could see this as a conditioning of certain responses according to racial loadings of person stimuli. By invoking ethical or humanist value judgements, such a conditioning could be seen as negative racial learning experiences, which could lead to serious social-psychological deficits in person-perception and a socio-political dimension of race in a segregationist society. It is probably to such intricacies that the 'kind gentleman' addresses himself when he asks; "What sort of people are we?" Perhaps it is due to the complex operation of these factors that people cannot respond to certain situations.

LOST VIGNETTES

The condition of the woman described above invokes images of "Mama Shabalala", the Weenen county woman graphically painted by Jonathan and Sipho in a musical album — "Juluka African Litany." These two accounts "The Lady from the Hospital" and "Mama Shabalala" are not just incidental isolated cases — they are common vignettes of everyday scenes in the South African drama of life. However the truth is that they are lost vignettes because of the psychological dynamics of race factors in person-perception. It takes the courage of a few men and women to be aware of the position of other men across the race barrier and to do something about their awareness. Among many known for this, this paper deals with Jonathan Clegg and Sipho Mchunu; also the "Kind Gentleman" not known personally to the writer. Their awareness of the South African situation and their willingness to act is dealt with below.

DESCRIPTIONS

The two female characters in this paper are:

1. An imaginary personage of a woman, Mashabalala, as seen through the eyes of artists (Jonathan and Sipho).
2. A real living person i.e. a woman from the Johannesburg Hospital.

In both cases, imaginary and real, the experiences of women are seen, described and evaluated within their context. The descriptions of these women are made at different times by totally different people having no connection with each other — yet their version of description is similar in many ways. In spite of the fact that the levels and the situation of description are different, viz., Mashabalala is an imaginary rural woman and the other is a real living urban woman, the picture still remains basically the same. Can this be evidence strong enough for the argument that, in fact, these are regular experiences of most blacks and a few whites in South Africa? At this stage an analysis of cases involved might substantiate the point made.

MASHABALALA AND THE LADY FROM THE HOSPITAL

Here is an ill woman prematurely discharged from hospital. She is so ill in fact that she can hardly stand or walk on her own. She has morning shoes on her feet and is still wearing a hospital gown and head cloth. In the support of two men she struggles to walk home in spite of her condition. It can be imagined that her home is one of the many houses in the black townships with living conditions too well known to South Africans to need description. The experience of pain as well as thoughts and feelings going on in this woman are similar to those of Mashabalala described by Clegg and Mchunu. Mashabalala is:

"An old lady walking down the dusty farm road looking for a simple home . . . Living from hand to mouth, dodging the wrong arm of the Law. She is old and she is bent, her eyes can hardly see. And she is going home for ever to Weenen county."

Although Mashabalala might not be experiencing as much physical pain as the lady from the hospital, her age, nostalgia and destitution are objects of profound psychological pain for her. And this psychological pain of Mashabalala is emphatically felt when Juluka projects it in a chorus:

"Uhamba njalo we Mashabalala ukhumbula kuphi wena Uthwala nzima weMashabalala iyaphi indlela Uthwala nzima weMashabalala — Izinto zomhlaba" (You are set for a long journey Mashabalala Where do you remember as you walk. Yours is a heavy burden Mashabalala — where does your journey lead to. Yours is a heavy burden— Your being-in-this-world.)

Jonathan (Juluka) demonstrates an unusual ability to experience Mashabalala's position emphatically with her. The question "Ukhumbula Kuphi wena; iyaphi indlela" and the remark "Izinto zomhlaba" indicate a profound sharing of Mashabalala's nostalgic and desolate world. It is this same ability to empathise with a person's experiences which spurred the Kind Gentleman to act on the situation of the lady from the hospital.

Finally it could be said that in these two women, people who have been ejected from the main stream of life are represented. The impact of rejection on these people seems to have pushed them to a point of almost stoically accepting their position as their fateful lot. Asked what doctors had said about her illness, discharge, transport and treatment, the lady from the hospital simply reported being given no information.

The same for Mashabalala. She lived most of her life as a share-cropper's wife on Crown Land. Then she is old and her husband dies, she is ejected from the farm and "she could cry no more tears".

"So she picks up her walking stick and puts on her car-tyre shoes. And she is walking in a dream . . . Weenen county you took my man she says, you took my home, you took my land, you left me all alone Now I'm coming home".

Helplessness and passive acceptance of the difficult position are self-evident in both these cases. It is contended that the position of these two women is the plight of many more blacks in South Africa. And Jonathan and the Kind Gentleman fall in the category of the few white folks who are getting concerned each day about the position of their fellow-beings. (Here reference can be made to Mrs. Beans of the Cape Peninsula and her dedication to a point of personal risk, in relation to black squatters in the area.)

JULUKA: SOME CRITICISMS:

A comparison of Juluka with the Kind Gentleman and Mrs. Beans may raise certain criticisms about the realism in what Jonathan and Sipho are doing. Can it be said that theirs (Jonathan and Sipho) is perhaps mere idealism coming through purely as a theatrical and musical subject? Instead of concrete action as demonstrated by the other two, is it that Juluka is stressing self-resignation and looking forward to a supposedly happy Jerusalem?

"Koze kube nini ngiphila lempilo. Sofika nini eJerusema" (How long am I going to live like this? When are we getting to Jerusalem?)

Other criticism could perhaps be that Juluka seems to reach the black community through capitalistic structures. However, one needs to be very cautious about this last opinion because promoters and 'show-biz' organisers seem to be instrumental in letting Juluka slip into this pit-fall, that is, if at all they do.

CONCLUSION

In spite of these criticisms it is accepted that Juluka is a strong force within black society at the moment. This is demonstrated by the wide acceptance and popularity it enjoys. It could also be said that in a complex situation like that in South Africa, political intervention can occur at different levels. And any of these is justified in its own way. Just as the Kind Gentleman and Mrs. Beans intervene at a level of practical action, Juluka is intervening at a socio-cultural level. It could also be said that the former are directed at short term goals with immediate results while the latter has long term goals with no expectations of immediate results. Perhaps it is for this reason that they say: "Sofika nini eJerusalema?" Juluka's socio-cultural modality is forceful in dissolving racial stereotypes and prejudice; it attacks the problem of racial stereotype and prejudice at its rock-bottom foundation.

The common error of equating "traditional" with "primitive" and "Western" with "civilised" is challenged and replaced by attitudes of compatibility and equality. Jonathan's profound understanding of and appreciation of black culture and language brings white and black cultures together in South Africa. When Jonathan performed at Umlazi cinema, one black woman said: "Umzulu phela le. Kanti kufunwani?" (Oh, this is a Zulu. What else is wanted?) Jonathan demonstrates this practically by his intimate and truly fraternal co-existence with Sipho. His being a university lecturer and Sipho's being an ordinary labourer offer no problems of relationship. It could be said therefore that Jonathan and Sipho strive for profound social change based on an ideology of cultural coalescence. They select this area of intervention, among others available as their particular target □



Sipho and Jonathan (and Moepya Mamelodi) at Rocky's Record Bar, Yeoville, celebrating the issue of their new record.