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Theatre and the Struggle for National Liberation

based on a paper prepared by Robert Kavanagh as reconstructed after discussions and submissions by members and institutions represented on the theatre committee

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Theatre, like all other aspects of cultural and social life under apartheid, has always been officially reserved for the privileged few. Facilities are made available or denied on racial grounds.

The people however have refused to take such discrimination lying down and out of the meagre resources available to them have created miracles. Despite all the advantages and privileges of the official theatre, it is the theatre of the impoverished, unaided, embattled people that expresses the best and most life-enhancing traditions of human civilization in our country.

Just as our people have fought against injustice and oppression with political and economic action, so cultural action and, more specifically theatre, - from which we do not separate recited poetry and songs - have been part of the struggle for national liberation since the early days.

We have protest plays such as H.I.E. Dhlomo's The Pass, which opens outside a dance hall or cinema in Johannesburg. A man is trying to kiss his woman:

Girl: Stop it, Stan. It is late. We might get arrested. Take me home. Come.

Man: Late! It is only ten forty-eight.

Girl: Well? Ten thirty is curfew hour. I have no pass.

Man: Passes and woman! What an insult in our own country! We shall get avenged. The white people...

Girl: Cut out politics. It helps neither with love nor time. A few seconds later:

First man: The pick-up!

Second man: Trouble boys! Our passes!

Third man: The brutes!

Enter two European and three African constables, and assail the men unceremoniously.

First white officer: Pass! Quick!

The men are fumbling in their pockets.

Second officer: This one is drunk!

The man: I am not. I understand everything.

The second white officer and a black constable shake the man about, calling him cheeky etc. The two others have produced their documents. The third gets a clap on the face before he produces his. The papers are in order.

Second officer: Passes alright. But this one is drunk and cheeky. Take him to the van!



It is challenging to think that this play was written in the region of forty years ago! It ends with the central character, Edward Sithole, exclaiming after humiliating imprisonment and trial: 'Daily they turn innocent souls like me into defiant and cynical fatalists, reckless criminals, and even bitter and unreasoning enemies...How long, O Lord, how long!'

How long indeed?

Another of his plays entitled The Workers is set in the Nigger-Exploitation Slave Manufacturing Crookpany. At a meeting the workers chant:

Away with the security of fawning and slaving! Let us fight for the security of power, right and justice! We demand living wages...

To which their leader replies:

Fellow workers! Sons of the soil! Have patience. Do not act rashly. Unorganized, precipitate action will bring defeat. We black workers, exploited, suppressed and discriminated against, must thoroughly and effectively be organized before we can make demands, exert influence and hit back successfully.

While the educated Dhlomo was writing such plays, the broad masses were not silent. It is recorded that in the 1950s in every backyard in places like Sophiatown there were musical groups and the songs they sung made reference to and judgments about situations such as bus boycotts, riots, rail disasters and political trials, and such music was performed and sung at celebrations, political rallies and funerals. There were the 'acts' or sketches included in the variety shows of the Fabulous Fifties, full of topical satire and from time to time political comment.

However it was really in the 1970s that a political theatre movement came into existence and ultimately, while influenced by the rising inflation and unemployment of the period, the strikes and the development of Black Consciousness, itself acted on the conditions to motivate and express the growing militancy and defiance that erupted in June 1976.



In 1973 there was Mthuli Shezi's Shanti, performed by the People's Experimental Theatre (PET) and even Gibson Kente came out with How Long, to be followed by I Believe and Too Late. Fugard/Kani/Ntshona's Sizwe Banzi Is Dead and The Island, Workshop '71's Crossroads, uNosilimela, uHlanga and Survival, the now notorious Mzwandile Maqhina's Give Us This Day, Ridgeway Macu's A Matter of Convenience and Mofokeng/Mabaso's The Train came together 'in an impressive and influential denunciation of many aspects of the apartheid system'. (Kavanagh, 1982, p.168)

After 1976 there was Matsemela Manaka's Egoli, which examines the central position of gold and the gold mining industry in the exploitation of the worker, which lies at the heart of the apartheid system. Incorporating members of Workshop '71, Junction Avenue Theatre Company became a non-racial group, performing plays based in the political economy of our history and researching specific periods as in Marabi and now recently Sophiatown. Members of the company worked and still work with the trade unions and both Ilanga Lizophumela Abasebenzi and the Dunlop workers play (see below) can be traced to this development.

Other parts of the country were active as well. In the early 1970s there were the Black Consciousness plays of TECON in Durban and a play by Ronnie Govender, The Lahnee's Pleasure, dealt with the lives of workers in Natal's sugar plantations. This work was continued with musical satires aimed at mobilizing Indian support of the boycott of the notorious tricameral elections and plays on political detainees and in support of the Release Mandela Campaign.

Many other plays, both inside and outside South Africa, of many different forms and functions, making significant contributions to the general struggle for a new democratic South African culture and for national liberation, have been written, devised and performed. What we need to do now is to look at the road behind and try and work out from it the best road ahead for cultural activists and theatre artists to take.



### The road ahead

Often, even when we try to use theatre as a weapon in the cultural struggle, we end up supporting what we want to undermine and undermining what we want to support. This is because we do not all have an adequate theory on which to base our assessment of our own or others' work. We artists all need to have such a theory in order to avoid being used and to make sure our art really does what we want it to do.

As artists we often behave as if the practice of our art is enough. A guitar player is only interested in making his guitar sing, an actor in acting, a director in directing. When we show any interest in theory at all, it is the theory of music, of acting or of directing. In fact the very worst of us behave almost as if we were producing in a vacuum. Not quite however, because money is the umbilical chord which connects us to social reality.

Many artists will not concern themselves with anything beyond their art and 'bread'. But in South Africa, and indeed in any society, the artist has to be much more responsible for his product than this. The society in which we ~~produce~~ create our product is a battleground of forces in conflict. It is socially, almost criminally, irresponsible for an artist, especially a South African artist, to produce in ignorance of these forces. This is where theory comes in - the theory of cultural action and political economy.

Because<sup>s</sup>, comrades, in a highly politicized world, practice without theory is literally dangerous. It can result in your house being burnt down - with you in it if you're unlucky. The marriage of theory and practice is the art of the POSSIBLE. As artists in South Africa we cannot afford not to study the revolutionary theory of aesthetics and political economy. It is not enough to produce a beautiful product. It is not even enough to produce a revolutionary vision or 'message'. We cannot concern ourselves only with the laws of production. Too often we gain satisfaction from what we imagine is our contribution to the struggle. We have written, we have acted, we have directed a play that has a relevant and progressive 'message' - we do not concern ourselves as to who has heard the message<sup>w</sup>, have they heard the message, what message, what are the possibilities of action, what action, is the time, place or even the method of conveying that message appropriate or effective. In other words we concern ourselves with the laws of artistic production but not sufficiently with those



of political function.

Factors involved in the theoretical assessment of our theatre include not only what the play is trying to say. The intention of the writer or the actor is of only secondary importance. We need to examine what our play is actually saying to specific audiences.

It has been questioned how Gibson Kente's plays, even when they have thoroughly reformist messages or are even anti-communist, are still banned by township superintendants.

Marx and Engels on the French writer, Balzac, and Lenin on the Russian writer, Lev Tolstoy, long since explained this. Kente knows the world he is depicting. His depiction is therefore full of realistic detail. The interpretation of the real world of black South Africans that he tries to project is simply rejected by the audience, who can see the truth for themselves. Even when Kente depicts a future South Africa under communism as bad, his audience has a vision that inspires them and it is this the superintendants fear. It <sup>was</sup> pointed out in Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa that Kente's plays, when read by the censors in South Africa, are passed. Those who witness them in performance to a black audience, ban them. It is for the reason outlined above.

The audience and its beliefs are thus a crucial factor in assessing the function of a work of art. In this the images the work transmits are very important and can vary from audience to audience depending on the stereotypes and prejudices that audience holds.

For instance the images projected by a play in South Africa might elicit different reactions from a black and a white audience and yet others from a foreign audience. We have to make an analysis of our audience, just like a journalist or an advertiser, in order to assess how the images we project will be received.

It is historical fact, for instance, that whites have generated and absorbed racist ideology for centuries. According to this racist ideology, often actually reinforced by black writers (see James Baldwin's critique of Richard Wright's Native Son) blacks are seen according to various stereotypes, especially in relation to sexuality, emotionalism and violence. Many whites actually believe that for a black man liberation means making love to white women.

It is important therefore in our work never to project any



of these stereotypes but constantly to undermine and correct them. To take but one example from an otherwise fine play, when the actors in Asinamali openly express sexual arousal at the mere idea of Mrs van Niekerk patting her manservant on the cheek - along with the whole episode of copulating in a pigsty! - the stereotype is confirmed. The audience may be sympathetic to the serious political struggle depicted powerfully elsewhere in the play but may actually have a different attitude to those on whose behalf it is fought.

That there is a direct connection between the image portrayed on stage and political power was very tersely illustrated by a foreign visitor's comment overheard as he left a performance of Ipi Tombi - a notorious musical which we know was full of degrading stereotypes and was as a result opposed by the ANC: 'They're very good,' he said, 'But you can't give them the vote.'

Many of our black groups work with white directors or advisors. This is when we have to be doubly vigilant that they do not impose on us stereotypical images, exemplified by the encouragement of black nudity on stage in some productions. When we depict our lives we should bear in mind the long history of racist ideology and the direct connection between ideology and political economy. The same is true for our worker actors who need to guard against petit-bourgeois depiction of their class as clowns, drunks or idiots, as exemplified by plays ranging from Shakespeare to Ibsen - a trend only decisively arrested and reversed in the plays of socialist writers starting with Maxim Gorky.

While being faithful to reality we should take care not to distort and degrade the people's culture on stage by failing to set our shortcomings, where they do exist, in a context of exposing their origins in the oppressive system and in the context of what Gorky and our own Thami Mnyele called 'revolutionary optimism'. 'We must restore dignity to the visual arts,' he wrote, 'Our people have taken to the streets in the greatest possible expression of hope and anger, of conscious understanding and wholesale commitment. We as cultural workers must join with all our talents and skills in this expression.' (Rixaka, 3/86, p.30)



The struggle as we all know has reached a critical stage. Thousands of young people and workers have shown us with their lives and their jobs that they put the question of national liberation FIRST on the agenda. This is a challenge and a summons to us artists to PUT THE STRUGGLE FIRST - before self-fulfilment, career, fame, praise, and at times personal safety. This means, in practical terms, to join the democratic organizations both as a human being fighting for the eradication of apartheid and as a cultural worker. It means in our cultural work always asking ourselves when we have a choice, what will be best for the struggle. Belonging to a democratic mass organization will help us find the answers to this question. Standing outside will only isolate and confuse our attempts to make a contribution.

As artists our art is inspired by the struggle and the struggle, hopefully, is inspired by our art. This is what the great African revolutionary, Amilcar cabral, said about the role of culture in the struggle for national liberation. If this is so then there is really no other way of talking about theatre and the struggle in South Africa than by following the lines along which our national liberation alliance structures the liberation struggle itself i.e. the programme, as contained in the Freedom Charter, the struggle as defined by the concepts of the Four Pillars and the Two-Stage Theory.

### The Four Pillars

Theatre does not occupy an autonomous zone, a no-man's land between the warring camps - as Lewis Nkosi put it in the late fifties. Theatre follows the battle lines. Just as we see the political action and ideology of different classes and sections of races in the society competing for dominance, so we see different theatres contending for the people's hearts and minds.

We have the so-called 'legitimate' theatre i.e. the established theatre of different factions of the bourgeoisie as expressed in the white state theatre and the white commercial theatre. We have the liberal petit-bourgeois theatre, best exemplified by the Market Theatre in Johannesburg and the old Space Theatre in Cape Town, characterized by apparent non-racialism under white patronage but traditionally



supported since the days of King Kong and the Union of Southern African Artists by liberal capital eg. Anglo-American.

Then there is the theatre of that other section of the petit-bourgeoisie, that of Black Consciousness. The contribution of the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s has been repeatedly acknowledged by the democratic forces but its continued existence and antagonism to the broad democratic movement can only be explained in terms of its class character, which in theatre is expressed by its constant oscillation between vehement rejection of the white petit-bourgeoisie and its institutions on racial grounds and co-operation with and being funded by them and liberal capital on class grounds. That is why their main bastions are at the Market Theatre and other funded cultural centres.

The rest of society is in the process of being organized behind the liberation alliance of the ANC, SACTU, the South African Communist Party, the UDF and COSATU and its mandate and programme is the Freedom Charter. The struggle to build another South Africa based on this charter has come to be seen as resting on four pillars - the people's or the mass struggle, the workers' struggle, the armed struggle and international solidarity and support. In the cultural arena the aim of the charter is to throw open 'the doors of learning and culture'.

#### The First Pillar - the People's Struggle

The theatre of the people, the masses, has always been notoriously but for obvious reasons rarely recorded. How bad the situation can be is reflected in a statement by a misinformed academic, Robert Green, on an article on the work of Athol Fugard. He wrote:

This (Fugard's) substantial body of work...was done in a theatrical vacuum (sic). Fugard's talent is at work quite bereft of any sustaining tradition and, furthermore, it must nourish itself in opposition to an illiberal milieu.

Yet<sup>in</sup> the Johannesburg area alone between 1958 and 1976 one researcher was able to record 250 plays performed by black or multiracial companies. So much for 'theatrical vacuum'!

Now in our country there is a theatre in Gugulethu, Sebokeng, Kwa Thema, Lamontville and Soweto that serves to express the aspirations and class interests of the masses of our people along the lines of the inspiring play organized and presented by the women and children of Crossroads as a weapon to mobilize the community in the struggle to resist removal and demolition.



The unbearably moving theatre of Peter Ngwenya's child actors from Soweto is another example- Not only do they dramatize and express in song but they also display in a series of sketches the anguish of police brutality to children in South Africa. With emotion in every limb of their little bodies and tears welling up in their eyes, the sight of them is the most damning indictment of a regime that has abandoned the last links with the shared humanity of mankind. Indeed we can truly say there is no ubuntu/botho in them.

In the people's movement there is a kind of theatre that takes place side by side with the mass protests and demonstrations which have made large parts of our country ungovernable. Peter Makhari's 'guerilla theatre', as reported by A. Osipov of Novost Press Agency, is an example. In a street in Orlando under a tree, an episode in the people's constant confrontation with the police is acted out. The police are forced to retreat. The people sing ANC songs and the return of the political prisoners is acted out, singing 'We are free but what about thousands like us who still languish in racist prisons? What have you done for their liberation, to abolish the shame of the country - apartheid? Power to the people!'

Then dramatically the real police arrive on the scene. Word of the performance has reached the police station. Armoured cars disperse the audience. The actors melt into the passages of Orlando to emerge elsewhere to re-enact the same drama of defiance.

#### The Second Pillar - the Workers' Struggle

Brought into existence by the immense advances of the organized working class in the last decade, this is a theatre wielded as a weapon in labour's struggle against both national oppression and capitalism.

Socialist theatre in South Africa actually dates back quite a long time - to the work of Andre van Gyseghem, the British socialist director who worked for a brief period in the 1930s and to dramatic work created and performed by black and white Trotskyites in Cape Town in the same period. No doubt the story goes back even further but once again the information is scanty.



However it is only in the last decade that we can say that a fully-fledged workers' theatre, founded in the class struggle and ideology of the proletariat, can be said to have come into existence.

Such a theatre was born in the first years after the triumph of the Great October Socialist Revolution, the 70th anniversary of which we are celebrating this year. When the Blue Blouses workers' theatre groups of the Soviet Union toured Germany to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the revolution, their example inspired workers' theatre movements in Germany, Britain and the United States.

In South Africa we are seeing the growth of a similar movement. Ilanga Lizophumela Abasebenzi, created and performed by workers involved in a dismissal dispute in an East Rand metal foundry, depicted the 'dispute in the factory, showing its history and causes and analysing the conflict by making the underlying structures visible. Active audience participation was inculcated into the play - the play in fact had different endings, depending on suggestions from the audience' (SALB, 9,9, 1984). In Durban there was the Dunlop Play, made by workers at the Dunlop works and first performed at the MAWU AGM in 1983. The fame of these two plays and others and the videos circulated throughout the country led to many unions establishing theatre and cultural groups, examples being the COSATU group in Durban which produced the play QONDA and in Johannesburg the Living Wage cultural group.

COSATU is presently ensuring that such cultural units are duly established in local and regional branches and in affiliates. The cultural desk at COSATU is yet young and strategy not yet developed but there is immense scope here for expansion and the setting up of alternative cultural structures based in the main organizations of the democratic masses. Artists who genuinely wish to contribute to the total liberation of South Africa will seriously consider placing the emphasis on participating in such essential democratic cultural action in the country.



### The Third Pillar - the Armed Struggle

Also in the wake of the Great October Socialist Revolution we have seen both socialist and national liberation struggles all over the world using theatre as an important weapon. Without going into details, we know that this was true of the Russian Revolution and the Civil War that followed it and the Chinese Revolution. Coming closer to home the authors of the Kenyan play, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo, discovered that Dedan Kimathi and others had employed theatre as an instrument of struggle against the British in the years prededing and during Mau Mau. Even in Nigeria the popular playwright, Hubert Ogunde, wrote and performed a series of plays attacking British rule with titles such as Worse Than Crime, Tiger's Empire, Towards Liberty, Strike and Hunger (about the general strike in Nigeria) and the most famous, Bread and Bullet (on the miners' strike at Ehugu where the British gunned down 18 miners).

During the chimurenga struggle in Zimbabwe, theatre was used both in the camps in Mozambique and in the all night pungwes, when the peasant masses were motivated to support the war of liberation and educated as to its objectives. This revolutionary theatre tradition in Zimbabwe is now the basis for the cultural revolution which is being bitterly contested and subtly sabotaged in the post-independence period.

In our own armed struggle, the fighters of Umkhonto we Sizwe use song, dance, poetry and drama not only to mobilize the international community but also for the education and enrichment of the political life of our fighters in the camps and various educational centres. The great achievements of Amandla, the ANC's cultural ambassadors, are well-known.

Our combattants urge cultural workers inside the country to participate more actively in the politico-military arena of the struggle, 'utilizing their skills for the benefit of the people's army'. 'The presence of our People's Army amongst the masses must be kept alive by our singers and poets and our writers should document the exploits of MK both in performance and visual art.' Our theatre should reflect that other great inspiration of our struggle, Nelson Mandela's words: 'Between the anvil of united mass action and the hammer of the armed struggle, we will crush apartheid.'



### The Fourth Pillar - International Solidarity

Theatre can play a crucial role in this area. The main tasks in the external mission are information, support, solidarity and specific campaigns such as the sports and cultural boycotts, disinvestment and sanctions.

Groups inside the country have the potential to contribute to this aspect of the struggle. A play like Bopha and the video film made of it no doubt become potent windows on the South Africa reality for thousands of people outside the country.

There are many dangers along this road which we shall need to discuss later. Suffice it to note at this point that our groups could produce material more specifically directed to have maximum impact outside the country. The depiction of Ford's involvement in South Africa in Sizwe Banzi could be followed up with the exposure to outside audiences of the role of their governments and companies in supporting South Africa's military machine, supplying its industry with technology, investment and resources such as fuel etc.

Outside the country we can reinforce the chances of our success by making scripts or relevant materials available to foreign theatre groups that are sympathetic to our struggle. We ourselves can organize theatre groups wherever we may be in order to fulfil the tasks of informing, raising consciousness, gaining solidarity and eliciting positive supportive action.

In Zimbabwe in 1985 certain comrades noticed the general apathy prevailing in the country about our struggle. Fortunately by no means all Zimbabweans shared this apathy so they came together to form a small theatre group and began work on a play which they hoped would wake Zimbabweans up to the situation in South Africa and the whole region.

The play, which came to be called Katshaa! (the sound of the AK), begins as a pungwe - to remind Zimbabweans of their own liberation struggle. As the actors and the audience are celebrating independence with revolutionary songs, the narrator calls for the floor with a slogan. He speaks: 'Here in Zimbabwe, we are celebrating. We fought! We won!' The celebration starts up again. 'But in South Africa,' he continues, 'the beast is murdering us...How can we say we are free when our brothers and sisters in South Africa are not yet free?' The play then proceeds constantly to drive home this message.



In 1985 when they began work they faced a hostile environment. After they performed an extract at a local school, white parents and teachers wrote a letter of complaint to the government and this resulted in serious problems for them. Even so-called comrades accused them of being provocateurs, of attracting South Africa's anger, of being a threat to security. They were accused of being sectarian. They had made an ANC play, <sup>it was</sup> ~~they~~ alleged.

While they were still struggling, South African agents bombed the ANC offices and an ANC house in Harare. The climate changed overnight. The bombing had made the point they were trying to make in the play far more dramatically than they could. The Prime Minister made his historic speech at Rufaro Stadium committing Zimbabwe to the total support of the struggle in South Africa. Their play, Katshaa!, was approved by a panel of ZANU-PF and government officials. Now Katshaa! has been seen all over the country and at important national and international events such as the NAM Summit. Other groups in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Ethiopia have taken it up and are carrying the message to more and more people, in more and more countries.

This is what Amilcar Cabral meant when he said the struggle acts on culture and culture on the struggle. Katshaa! might not have got off the ground if the struggle had not exploded in Harare itself but now Katshaa! is pushing forward the struggle in Zimbabwe too.

Though our own struggle in South Africa and Namibia is at the centre of our attention as we move into the final stages, we should appreciate that we are not alone in that struggle. The people of Angola, Mozambique and, possibly more and more in future, Zimbabwe are involved too. Thus we can bring our theatre efforts to bear not only on winning support for the struggle in South Africa but also for that in the Frontline as a whole.

The same evil system that maims and kills our people in South Africa is that which brought down Samora and daily commits through its surrogates Unita and the so-called MNR the most unspeakable atrocities. All this too needs to be exposed and fought against. Wherever we are we should never let people rest but bring them face to face with these facts by exposing them on stage.



And we should never underestimate theatre's ability to do this. At the NAM Summit in Harare recently there were many speeches condemning imperialism. Then the involvement of imperialism in the oppression and exploitation of the South African masses was actually put before them on stage. Britain, the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany were depicted riding in on the backs of three fellow actors. After some dialogue they drew in deep breaths and with a sucking sound inflated themselves like balloons. In unison they chanted:

Together we are bloated with the blood of the blacks  
We multiply and swell like ticks on cows' backs.

While the fact of imperialism's parasitic banqueting on the blood of our people remained an abstract idea, no-one really felt it. When it was actually made physical and visible before the eyes of the representatives of Imperialism, they walked out and wrote official protests to the Zimbabwean government.

Not only can we contribute to the struggle in this vital area through our creative work as such. A revolutionary artist should also be a political activist. Cde Barbara Masikela, secretary of the ANC's department of Arts and Culture, speaking of the cultural boycott, said: 'The cultural boycott of South Africa is integral to our campaign for the imposition of mandatory and comprehensive sanctions against the apartheid regime.' At Arusha recently a distinction was made between boycotting apartheid South African culture and supporting that of the people:

Apartheid South Africa must be completely isolated through the imposition of comprehensive and mandatory sanctions, including the reinforcement of the academic and cultural boycott. Democratic South Africa must be supported and encouraged further to escalate its offensive for the destruction of the apartheid system and the birth of a united, democratic and non-racial South Africa.

We can do ~~the~~<sup>our</sup> utmost wherever we are to support and enforce this boycott, especially in the field of theatre. A case in point is the recent visit of the once progressive theatre director, Peter Brook. Did we as artists in the theatre take appropriate steps to point out to him and other visiting artists their violation of the boycott and its significance for our struggle?

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The four thrusts of revolutionary theatre activity need to be co-ordinated, guided and assisted. This cannot be solely or even effectively done from outside. There is therefore an URGENT



NEED for a cultural body inside South Africa, based in the popular democratic movement, to be established and for FUNDING to secure and expand our cultural gains. It is through their financial muscle that the state and capital are able to hold many of our artists, especially professionals, to ransom.

This body should administer such funding as is forthcoming, impose some measure of control on artists who seek to exploit or betray the people's creativity, oversee the enforcement of the cultural boycott, organize opportunities for professional, popular and trade union cultural workers to meet and work together, to bring artists in the armed struggle and in exile together with those at work in the count and to supervise the training of our cadres in theatre skills and in art administration.

#### The Two-Stage Theory - from national liberation to socialism

##### The first stage - the National Democratic Revolution

Theatre is thus an important component of the four pillars of our struggle but what does the two-stage theory mean for our theatre activity? Does it not mean that during the first stage of the struggle we embrace all those forces that identify with and are prepared to participate in the struggle to weaken and topple the apartheid citadel and bring about national liberation? Let me refer you to an article by 'Mahlekelathini' entitled 'We must win over the Middle Class' (AC 100, 1985) where he quotes Lenin:

The party of the proletariat must learn to catch every liberal just at the moment when he is prepared to move forward an inch, and make him move forward a yard. If he is obdurate, we will march forward without him or over him.

- 'Political Agitation and the Class Point of View'

If we go back to our analysis of the forces at work in our society and their theatre activity, this means we find ourselves opposing, exposing and undermining as much as possible the theatre of the established capitalist alliance - the state and commercial theatre. Where the theatre of the petit-bourgeoisie shows signs of moving an inch, we must try to push it a yard. In other words where it contributes to the condemnation of or resistance to the apartheid system, we welcome and support it, while all the time striving to bring those involved to a greater consciousness of the tasks of the revolution.



Let us as an example some of the plays produced under the aegis of the Market Theatre in Johannesburg. Many of them expose very powerfully aspects of the oppression and exploitation of the South African masses. The Market Theatre also provides many short-term benefits for certain theatre groups - professional technical assistance, rehearsal space, access to white audiences etc.

However the weakness of the Market Theatre and other similar cultural organizations is that they tend to function to syphon the creativity and talent of the masses out of the community into products, which brilliant as they may be, even at times quite hard-hitting in their political content and presentation, are then marketed for the consumption of petit-bourgeois audiences in South Africa and in various Western countries.

In a sense, especially when these plays are performed abroad or televised in these countries, such plays perform an important role in this period of the struggle when we need to mobilize as many audiences as we can to support or at least not to oppose our struggle. However the real audience for some of these plays, the most politically effective performance, is an audience not to be found at the Market Theatre.

Comrades who act in such plays are no doubt aware of this so that while they may perform for their economic survival and other valid reasons at the Market, they are also performing free to the youth in the ghetto and to the workers - and not monopolizing the script but encouraging others to perform it too so that the message reaches the most appropriate audiences in the widest areas and greatest numbers. Some of these plays are powerful political weapons as well as polished and moving works of art. They need to be wielded as a guerilla wields his bazooka - in the right place, at the right time and at the right target.

Then perhaps we should also ask ourselves, when our actors do tour abroad, are they making enough effort to make contact with our natural allies in the black and progressive movements and particularly among the working class and the new proletarian and student audiences that the socialist theatre groups in Britain and the United States have created for us? In fact, how much control do we have over these



tours - are are we prepared to accept them on virtually any terms so long as the perks and prestige of a foreign tour comes our way? How much of the conscious motivation for touring abroad has in fact got anything at all to do with the political struggle?

Whatever the intention, motives or sincerity of individuals involved, a structure backed by mining capital in South Africa is bound to function fundamentally in the interests of capital and not the people. The question of the government's interests in this is also pertinent. In many circles people ask how come the government allows apparently anti-apartheid plays to perform outside the country.

The fact is our plays are sent invariably to the established theatres in western countries - the very ones, in fact, that uphold and support the apartheid regime in our country. While we may influence our audiences with the anti-apartheid material of our plays, the commercial theatres and their personnel influence us with their methods, their money and their ideology. It is no accident that many of our actors who started in community-based theatre in South Africa, change after such foreign exposure. The people no longer see them. They abandon principled political action for the exploitation of politics for money.

It becomes more and more difficult for our actors who have played on Broadway or in the West End to combine both work in the community and overseas commitments. Also having got used to the better working conditions and the easier praise of the foreign theatre they find it more and more difficult to endure the slow, laborious, often frustrating struggle of the democratic theatre movement within the country. When the people try to tell them this, they react negatively and we discover that they have become swollen-headed and sensitive to criticism.

Perhaps the function of foreign touring would become clearer if we compare it to scholarships. We all know that especially of late the United States has rushed forward with a lot of scholarships for our people to study in the States. We also know that the United States has not suddenly become philanthropic towards us. After all their government calls our liberation movement 'terrorists'. South Africa does not forbid these scholarships just as it does not forbid our theatre tours. The analogy between invitations to take our plays to the West and U.S. scholarships is quite close, including their function.



Thus while we should co-operate with the Market Theatre, especially in the light of recent negotiations and an agreement between the cultural desk of the UDF and the theatre, we should attempt to push them into greater and greater support for our struggle and be extremely vigilant concerning the dangers involved. The long-term answer is to establish alternative structures fully under the control of the popular democratic organizations.

The problem of being co-opted out of the mainstream of revolutionary cultural activity is not faced by those inside the country alone. Many of us who live in exile are professionals who have to survive in capitalist societies where the rules of the theatre game are commercial and dog eats dog. It is difficult to combine our determination to contribute to the struggle for national liberation with our need to survive. Some of us develop a show business mentality. We participate in completely reactionary, antiAfrican movies. We might even be guilty at times of actually 'cashing in' on the sacrifices of our people in South Africa.

We all know that capitalism transforms human misery into big business. I read the other day of how AIDS is already very big business. So is our struggle in South Africa. Once we are sucked into show business, it is almost inevitable that we will make show business out of the struggle.

Survival is a harsh reality for most of us but can we not constantly attempt to counteract the corrupting commercial tendencies professional theatre work in a capitalist society generates by studying and finding out about other ways of doing theatre - democratic, co-operative and progressive - or by trying to work as much as possible with progressive theatre groups in the country in which we live? Because in both the struggle and the reconstruction such are the ways we will have to adopt if our theatre is to be truly liberatory.

In this context I think ~~we~~ we in the theatre could learn a lot from the Kamiriithu experience in Kenya where Ngugi wa Thiong'o and a handful of intellectuals worked with the peasant and worker masses to create that masterpiece of socialist realism in the African theatre, I'll Marry When I Want. The message from Kamiriithu to all revolutionary artists is: WORK WITH THE PEASANT AND WORKER MASSES.



What we are saying therefore in our theatre work is let us put POLITICS IN COMMAND. And by the political, one should re-emphasize CDE Mzala's point in his article, 'Culture, the Artist and Liberation' (AC ): 'A work of art, unlike a speech, can express ideas, values and policies in an implicit and concealed way.' Or as I wrote in Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa:

The ability of revolutionary theatre ~~to operate~~ in a repressive state such as South Africa to operate is almost as severely restricted as that of a revolutionary political organization. Majority theatre's prime political task would, then, seem to be to assist in the inculcation of a revolutionary majority consciousness and concentrate its attention in the area of cultural and ideological struggle... (p.209)

For a play to have a genuine revolutionary function it does not need to be overtly or blatantly political. The fascists maintain their power through both naked force and through what Gramsci calls social hegemony i.e. the control and manipulation of ideas, in the media, education, religion, literature and the arts. Theatre can probably more successfully challenge the foundation of the hegemony of the ruling class in ideological as opposed to military war. Having said this we should not however underestimate theatre's capacity in revolutionary situations actually to mobilize and inspire the masses to fight. It can drive people to arms, fill them with the spirit of combat.

On the night before the Earl of Essex launched his rebellion in the time of Queen Elizabeth Shakespeare's King Richard II was specially commissioned for performance. The performance of a nationalist opera in Belgium sparked off a revolt in the 19th century and in ancient Egypt a Greek play in which the word 'liberty' was ~~repeatedly~~ used became a threat to Roman occupation. The audience in neo-colonial Kenya streamed out of the National Theatre into the streets singing nationalist songs at the end of the first performance of The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, <sup>and</sup> when the Ethiopian masses heeded 'ye innat hagr tiree' (the call of the motherland) to rally and expell the invading Somalis after the revolution, it was the renowned Tilahun Gesesse



whose impassioned and dramatic songs inspired them. And in the traditional society in Africa it was often the poetry of a man's izibongo/diboko that determined him to do or die.

In the First World War when so many of Europe's workers and peasants were sent over the top of their swampy trenches to plod blindly into a hail of machine-gun fire, the men of the Scottish clan of Cameron had gone over the top too often and now they lay stubbornly in the mud refusing to obey orders. Their officer, also a Cameron - of a different class, of course - well knew how to exploit the tribal emotions of the ordinary people and called up the piper, who played their clan song, 'The March of the Cameron Men', on the bagpipes. Over the top they went - to die yet again in even greater numbers.

No, theatre - and this includes recited poetry and song - can drive men and women to risk virtually any danger, But in a fascist state like South Africa though such theatre is wanted - and is being practised - this is not the only theatre we need. Cde Mzala talks of a realism which 'while being faithful to real conditions, does not bind the artistxxx to offer obvious and direct solutions of the problem involved' nor indulge in empty revolutionary rhetoric. We also need a theatre that opposes 'false consciousness', that challenges the social hegemony of the oppressor and instead legitimates in the people's minds a new set of ideas, not oppressive nor demeaning but liberating and inspiring, in short that inculcates the ideology of the revolutionary classes.

We should not forget either that as Comrade Nadine Gordimer reminded us in the plenary, in a state where the media are as tightly controlled by the government and big capital as they are in South Africa, where the television, radio, publishing, news agencies and the press are against us and film and video beyond our reach, theatre is our most potent medium for disseminating alternative news, information and opinion.

But, comrades, we are not only fighting the first stage but preparing the ground for the second stage of our struggle. While we fight a national struggle we define ever more sharply the ground for the class struggle, the struggle for socialism.



### The Second Stage - the Socialist Revolution

It is understandable that we should be concentrating all our thoughts and energies at the moment on liberation, not having perhaps enough time to spare to consider in any detail what happens after. But liberation - for the masses at least - can only have real meaning if the victory in the national struggle opens up the ground for the advance to socialism.

Those who have had the experience of observing and/or participating in theatre development in post-revolutionary societies, will appreciate more than many how the gains of the popular struggle in the cultural arena can be subverted and even reversed by petit-bourgeois at times feudo-bourgeois, artists and intellectuals, into whose hands the practice and administration of culture is given owing to the lack of revolutionary cadres with a sufficient understanding of how the political and economic tasks of transformation translate themselves into the cultural.

To avoid this debilitating situation in which the political and economic programmes of the revolution are undermined instead of supported by the cultural, we need cultural cadres, trained to shoulder the responsibilities of guiding the cultural revolution in a liberated South Africa so that the people's gains are not eroded or obstructed by those whose experience and class instincts give them no stomach for the genuine democratization of culture as called for in the Freedom Charter.

We also need new plays, plays that call for national liberation but do so with a socialist consciousness and perspective. In addition we should as far as possible bring to both artists and our people examples of socialist theatre so that as we learn from reading the writings of Marx, Lenin, Mao, Dimitrov, Castro, Cabral and Machel, we also learn from the theatre of Gorky, Pogodin, Shatrov, Brecht, John McGrath, Micere Mugo and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Performance alone is not enough. We need to counteract the critical barrage of bourgeois aesthetics which through the media, institutions of higher learning and the <sup>human</sup> mouthpieces of these institutions, subvert the people's theatre by trumpeting such worn-out maxims as art and politics don't mix. We were recently subjected to the painful spectacle of a South African critic in exile who according to the press stated that we have no great writers in South Africa because we are all too involved in politics!



One can only cite the brilliant example of the great Soviet novelist, Sholokov, who replying to western allegations that Soviet writers do not write what is in their hearts but what the party tells them to, replied: 'I write with my heart - but my heart belongs to the party. Or our own Willie Kgotsitsile who has often - 'with acid on the tongue', as one comrade put it - to explain how he can be a writer and a member of the ANC. Or refer this critic to Cde Mzala's previously quoted article, written as a tribute to the late Cde Alex la Guma. Or refer to the Kenyan revolutionary writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o or...the list is endless.

I am reminded too of a 'celebrated South African authoress' who, it is reported, found the Dunlop workers' play 'boring' - she speaks no Zulu, apparently. Aesthetics is a question of VIEWPOINT. The beautiful, the 'excellent', the good - and the boring - in art depend on the angle from which the art is being viewed. For some a slogan is empty noise - for others at certain moments in history, that slogan can sum up in a phrase the dear hopes of millions of people, say more to them than hundreds of lines of well-crafted, 'excellent' prose. 'All power to the Soviets!' in 1917. 'Amandla ngawethu - maatla ke arona!' now.

For some a novel that supports the confiscation of private property, no matter how well-written, is obscene - 'the worst novel I ever read', according to one Southern African academic. To others, those with nothing, the robbed, the exploited, Sholokov's account of the dispossession of the kulaks and the collectivization of Soviet agriculture is that masterpiece of socialist realism, Virgin Soil Upturned.

For some the mere mention of the phrase 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' is 'the usual Red propaganda' (the British writer in Pogodin's Kremlin Chimes). For others it is the essence of what makes Pogodin's depiction of the Bolsheviks in Kremlin Chimes both historically accurate and thrilling, faced as we are in Africa today by a bewildering variety of petit-bourgeois socialisms that exclude class struggle and proletarian power.

We must adopt a revolutionary viewpoint on aesthetics and have the confidence to tell erudite critics who attack our theatre with



the old bourgeois formulae aimed at emasculating its political function that that may be the way it looks from their angle but we see it from a different one, that of the classes that hold the future in their hands: the revolutionary classes in society - and from this angle it looks quite different.

This does not mean that we reject bourgeois art and aesthetic: in its entirety but only those aspects of it that hold back the march of history, for as Lenin wrote in his rejection of the Proletkult movement's call for a brand new working class culture to replace the old.

Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more that two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.

- On Proletarian Culture (October 8th, 1920)

Finally and above all we need to learn from the experiences of the socialist countries and in particular African countries that have attempted to pursue a two-stage strategy i.e. socialism via the national democratic revolution, particularly in terms of how we handle existing and dominant theatre organizations, structures and artists during the national democratic transitional period. Whereas we need to utilize to the full all the talents and experience that is available to us in the process of national reconstruction, we need to do this on our terms.

As far as possible we need to persuade and re-educate, encourage in these artists a rededication to work this time with the masses -

as being the best educator in democratic theatre practice. But in the final analysis these goals - the democratic programme - must be protected and achieved.

#### Theatre in another South Africa

In practical terms what does our national democratic revolution mean for theatre - after liberation?

If we put into practice the people's demand on learning and culture contained in the Freedom Charter, we will open all theatres to all - audiences, actors, directors, managers, technicians will now be drawn from all sections of our population. All drama departments at our universities and drama schools will be opened to all and state grants made available to eligible students to ensure that theatre training becomes a right not a privilege.

There will be a fundamental shift in state policy towards the theatre arts. A new body, controlled by the people's state, will



be set up to fund the democritization of the arts and culture. Whereas now there are only a few, large, expensive institutions, serving a privileged minority in the cities, democritization will mean many, smaller, cheaper centres serving the majority in both urban and rural areas. The great 'White Elephants' will be taken over and their cultural orientation completely revolutionized so that they become palaces of people's art to which ordinary people and workers will come through the agency of the trade unions and mass organizations. For the first time too funding will go to the arts and theatre of the struggling masses.

We have a whole history to unlock and set free. Our people will at last be introduced through cultural exchanges, study scholarships and local creative work to - for the first time - the riches of the theatre of other African countries, the progressive theatre in the West and the great unknown works of the socialist countries of the world.

#### Immediate action agenda

But these are dreams. Many revolutionaries have assured us that we are entitled to dream, that without dreams we cannot fight. It is good to dream but our dreams need to be rooted in solid, political activity in the here and now. What needs to be done now? The following is our draft action agenda:

#### 1. POLITICS IN COMMAND! THE STRUGGLE FIRST!

All artists should before all other considerations consider the political function of their work first and how it pushes forward the struggle for national liberation.

#### 2. A UNITED BODY!

We should form a united body to co-ordinate the development of a democratic South African theatre and culture. Artists should join the mass organizations and these organizations should set up the relevant bodies and determine in the most democratic way their nature, structures and functions.

#### 3. FUNDING!

The opposition controls the arts through its financial resources. Our struggle to build a new democratic culture needs funding. Both internal and external forces should address themselves to this problem.



#### 4. ALTERNATIVE STRUCTURES!

While using existing structures, the democratic alliance should seek to set up independent cultural structures based in the struggles of the people and founded in their interests.

#### 5. WORK TOGETHER!

We should constantly strive to support and combine with other artists in the struggle. Professional, popular and trade union cultural workers should unite. We should do our utmost to bring artists in the armed struggle and in exile together with those that work inside the country.

#### 6. CADRES FOR ANOTHER SOUTH AFRICA!

Cultural workers and arts administrators should be trained NOW in the theory and practice of revolutionary transformation so that in the new South Africa this vital area is not allowed to fall into the hands of those with no sympathy for nor experience of the people's culture and its goals.

#### 7. ENFORCE THE CULTURAL BOYCOTT!

All artists inside and outside the country should do all they can to support and enforce the boycott of apartheid culture and support and participate in co-operation and solidarity between progressive artists and our own democratic cultural movement.

#### 8. CHALLENGE THE INFORMATION MONOPOLY!

With the television, radio, publishing, distribution and press against us and film and video beyond our pockets, let us use theatre as an alternative medium for news, information and analysis among the masses.

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x

x

To sum up: theatre for national liberation involves, like the four pillars of our struggle, a programme of revolutionary cultural action among the masses, in the working class movement, among the armed fighters and in countries all over the world to mobilize, conscientize and win support for our struggle. We should put the two-stage theory into practice in our theatre work so that while writing and acting material relevant to the struggle for national liberation, we should be reflecting a socialist consciousness and more and more demonstrating that only economic liberation in the form of socialism can make the struggle for national liberation truly meaningful for the broad majority of our people.