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SOUTH AFRICA

ARE ARTS FESTIVALS ABLE TO STILL BE ABOUT ART?

Abstract: A brief account of developments in the National Arts Festival from apartheid to democracy illustrating the challenges arts festivals face in the new South Africa. Today there is enormous pressure to demonstrate social legitimacy through black representation, while facing daunting economic challenges to survive economically. In a country with some of the highest levels of inequality in the world, art for art's sake is frowned upon. In response to this situation, festivals have undertaken a number of initiatives. The paper looks at several inspiring solutions proposed by two unique festivals – the Voorkamer Festival and Infecting the City.

As a student at Rhodes University in the 1980s during apartheid, I felt deeply conflicted when it came time for the annual National Arts Festival (NAF), hosted by my university town, Grahamstown, in the rural Eastern Cape. Under the apartheid regime, high culture and art were the preserve of an almost exclusively white bourgeoisie – officially Eurocentric and culturally chauvinist. Black artists functioned on the periphery without state support.

After a ballet matinee, which was usually a classical work with tutus and Rhine castle scenery, one exited the 1820 English Settlers' Monument Theatre facing directly onto the black township sprawled across the opposite hill. You could see the white smoke of teargas and the more ominous black wisps of burning tyres rising in the air. We knew that people were dying over there. Armoured cars, soldiers and police patrolled the streets.

Many of us did not believe in burning anything, certainly not books or culture, so instead a protest artist gagged himself and wrapped in bandages sat on a plinth in the Monument, to protest against the State's draconian censorship laws and symbolise the invisible majority that were shut out from the festival.

In 1990, the year Nelson Mandela was released, Rastafarian artist Zebelon Dread stood on his wooden soap box at street corners and screamed at bemused white festinos that soon they would all be driven back into the sea. People clapped and bought his home-made newspaper.

Post-liberation, festival-goers felt free of the oppressive guilt of the past and the internal conflict that arises from applauding art seemingly so far removed and abstracted from the reality of

oppression and death that surrounded it. The black elite, eager to take advantage of what had been kept from them for so long, for the first time swooped down from Johannesburg to attend the festival. They didn't find many reasons to return. The work was still glaringly white.

The new government soon cut funding to the old performing arts councils who had provided much of the main programme. The future of the NAF seemed precarious. If it was to survive it would have to find massive private company sponsorship.

In the early 1990s, I annually sponsored young artists to the festival. The major obstacle the artists faced at that time was how to get the capital together to pay the necessary deposits, registration fees, accommodation and to physically get to the festival. But once there, they did well. Many performers depended on their yearly Grahamstown stint – the money they made was sufficient to live off for the next six months. This is no longer the case.

By 1997, when our protest culture was still intact, some of us seriously considered barricading the main road and taking our anger to the streets. Here we were, the artists, used to bait the hook. We took all the financial risks and more often than not left out of pocket. We were the ones who brought the crowds to the town. Everyone else was making money – the shops, the petrol stations, the food stalls; the locals gouged ever more greedily, renting out caravans in their backyards at hotel prices; the venues hiked their already prohibitive hire fees.

This has still not been resolved. The implications are critical. Can the festival perform its oft-touted function as a nursery for new work? Given professional risks, are our emerging artists, most of them black, allowed the space in which to learn?

After a long, slow thaw the festival is now transforming at a remarkable pace – a genuine melting pot of culture that reflects a restless society. Black patrons (many still through subsidised audiences) flock to the fringe festival loaded with black professional and community theatre groups reclaiming the historical past from colonial and apartheid depictions. But, 15 years into democracy, the NAF has yet to stage on the main programme a single African language play.

The National Arts Council's funding policy is to support social issue works and has resulted in a plethora of plays about conscientizing the public. A glance through the billing for various productions turns up the following snippets: "strives to put across a safe-sex, non-discriminatory message about HIV/AIDS", "reflects on the importance of education and the danger of child abuse", "crime is morally and legally unacceptable", "about rural men leaving their families behind

and going to the city of gold...they meet vampires who do nothing but suck the very marrow from their bones". And so forth. Some productions are followed by discussion sessions.

With this background sketched, let us summarise then the major challenges that face festivals in South Africa, before looking at the innovative and inspiring solutions that have recently emerged in response.

Firstly, how to spread the economic benefits. The contrasts in South Africa remain as stark as ever. The disparity that exists between rich and poor is thrown into ever sharper contrast by events such as festivals. The poverty is appalling, a reflection of the national scourge of 40% unemployment the result of an advanced, highly skilled, first-world service economy in an underdeveloped country. At festival time, the pavements are lined with begging, ragged children pretending to be statues, their faces masked white with crumbled stone; you will find a man who for five Eurocents will play a game of chess with you; there are also hawkers selling beautiful, traditional craft work (some of it clearly an artistic celebration in its own right) but they are crowded out by a brisk, seemingly uncontrolled trade in cheap grey goods from Asia. These are the bottom-feeder to whom the festival filters some money down. The economic spin-offs from the Festival include temporary jobs. The NAF injects R50 million into the Grahamstown economy, but most of this stays in the pockets of the establishment.

The cash injections festivals bring to local economies means many communities want a chance to dance on the bandwagon. In the past decade, a plethora of performing arts festivals have sprung up. Whereas the country had one major festival, it now has almost 20. These tend to focus on a single art form (the Out the Box festival of puppetry, the FNB Dance Umbrella), a language (the Afrikaans Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees), a specific identity (the gay Pink Loerie Carnival in Knysna) or a regional character (Die Suid-Ooster Fees, which draws largely on the coloured community in the Cape). Surprisingly, there is currently no significant festival that primarily articulates the work of contemporary black artists or for that matter African heritage. There is also hardly any presence from elsewhere in Africa at the national festivals.

Secondly, to gain social legitimacy festivals must show that they are agents of transformation both in terms of the work and artists they present and their audience demographics. Strategies must be developed to bring art to the man in the street, the poor and those who only participate indirectly in the festival, those who have either little or no interest, or are economically excluded from participating in the national cultural life. There is a tendency to blame festivals for the failings of

the country. Audiences are largely white, but it's not the festival's fault that the economic divide in South Africa still runs roughly along racial demographics.

Thirdly, how will festivals, given these pressures, still serve the artists when the emphasis on their economic survival, funding and political legitimacy is based on non-artistic criteria?

In answering this last point first, there is some scope for something of a reversal in programming at the NAF. Over the years, the Fringe has steadily lost its appeal for commercial producers. The risks are high and the financial rewards far from lucrative for the big names. The Main has therefore tried to balance reliable draw-cards and artistic quality, since these properties often conflict. But a robust Fringe that could support commercial work with broad appeal would allow the Main to concentrate on artistic merit first, satisfying its core constituencies of artists and patrons of the arts. This would bring the Festival more in line with European festivals, where the emphasis is on creating a highly subsidised and supportive space for artists to grow and develop. This appears to be the new management's strategy at the NAF.

Two festivals that have recently evolved, the Voorkamer Festival and Infecting the City, address the three challenges outlined above in highly successful ways. Both, however, it should be noted, have been afforded the luxury of being able to do this through private South African and significant foreign, institutional sponsorship.

Infecting the City (ITC) is in its second year as a new incarnation of the former Spier Performing Arts Festival, run annually in February. The Spier Festival used to be held in a traditional amphitheatre on the Spier wine farm 25 kilometres from Cape Town, featuring opera, drama and music. A decision was taken in 2007 to move the festival into the heart of the city, turning the Cape Town central business district into a platform for site specific work.

Most performances are free and held in public spaces during the daytime within walking distance of each other, scheduled to allow patrons to go from one performance to the next. When the works are performed curious bystanders gather, bemused office workers crowd against the windows of their tower blocks and traffic nearly grinds to a halt.

The site specific nature of the works draws inspiration from the ghosts of yesteryear and invites Capetownians to rediscover their city. The memory of spectacular performances still echo in the minds of the city's populace when they pass certain landmarks, in the way that one might still think of Christo's wrapping when one sees the Reichstag in Berlin. This year the artists in researching their performance sites were intrigued to discover that the Camissa River still runs from Table

Mountain to the sea and fish swim in it right under pedestrians beneath the asphalt. Hippopotami snorted in a vlei now covered by Church Square, and Thibault Square was once a fishing harbour before the city's massive land reclamation projects.

The festival is curated by theatre director and playwright Brett Bailey who insists that participating artists push aesthetic boundaries. He also chooses a theme each year that deals with a volatile social issue. In 2009 it was "home affairs", investigating the violence characterised by xenophobia that spread like wild fire through the country last May. Thousands of African refugees, who had come to seek shelter and safety in South Africa, were displaced, fleeing in fear of their lives.

Bailey says, "The arts have transformative power, the ability to widen our perceptions, open our imagination, and show us the world from different perspectives: they belong in the centre of society. Confined in galleries and theatres they are often beyond the bounds of most people in our unequal society. ITC is a festival of groundbreaking works accessible to people from all walks of life."

Three site specific works arise from collaborations co-ordinated by the festival. Each group has four artists: two South Africans, one from a Southern African Development Community (SADC) country, and one from abroad (Europe, South America, India). The collaborative process is through a five week residency during which the artists are immersed in an intensive course on the social theme. This year for instance, the artists saw conditions for themselves – queuing as foreign nationals at the Nyanga Home Affairs office from 5am and visiting the refugee camps for internally displaced people. They were also 'arrested' and thrown into the back of a police van, an event organised by the festival but without the knowledge beforehand of the artists. Each group was accompanied throughout the creative process by members of the Joint Refugee Leadership Committee from Congo Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe. In Masiphumelele township, the only community to publicly apologise to its foreign residents for the violence, the documentary *Baraka* was screened for locals who saw it for the first time. It centres on Abdi Sirej, an amicable Ethiopian shopkeeper, who was shot dead. A local pastor facilitated a lively discussion between the artists, local matriarchs, youths and refugee leaders afterwards.

The teams are multidisciplinary – selected from a broad definition of the arts: choreographers, film makers, fine artists, fashion designers, not only theatre-makers. The collaborating teams are pushed emotionally to their limits, and by the very nature of collaboration are forced to take artistic risks and to make themselves vulnerable as creators. What Bailey is doing is forcing high artistic expertise to confront immediate social issues that are current in the public discourse and relate them through a space shared with the broader community.

Participants in the festival this year included French aerial performers Retouramont and German, avant-garde theatre group Rimini-Protokoll. In Fleet of Art, 12 artists transformed the backs of pick-up trucks into ‘invisible’ performance installations and roamed the streets of the CBD displaying their “poignant and idiosyncratic loads”. Another unusual event is Talking Heads, where members of the public have the opportunity to sit and talk to 4 out of 50 experts, randomly selected by ticket draw. The participants are drawn from range of specialisations – architects, politicians, Jungian psychologists, physicists, biologists, writers, *agents provocateurs* and so forth.

Another initiative to grow audiences is the “Take a Child to Art” campaign based on the highly successful “Take a Girl Child to Work”. The festival organisers provide a sponsorship platform for corporations and individuals. The funds are used to bus school children to the city to see the performances. They are given lunch, a trained cultural tour guide, an arts education workshop facilitator who summarises the day’s experiences and disposable cameras to capture what they see. The idea of site specific work is a completely new concept to nearly all these children.

The Voorkamer Festival is held annually in September in the village of Darling in the Western Cape. Over thirty years ago, when Dutch impresario, Wim Visser, was working at the Stadsschouwburg in Arnhem, Netherlands, he heard about the local repertory company staging performances in the houses of a new neighbourhood. He could hardly have imagined then that one day he’d be instrumental in launching this idea as a groundbreaking blueprint for festivals for the performing arts in far away South Africa and bringing into life what may well be a new cultural force to facilitate social change.

The charming village of Darling, 70 kilometres north of Cape Town, has a population of only 8000, a quarter of which are under the age of eighteen years. It has very high rates of unemployment and the other co-habitants of poverty – crime, alcoholism, HIV/AIDS and domestic violence, especially the rape of women. Labourers have been displaced from the farms surrounding Darling, due to corporatisation and the collapse of the old apartheid semi-feudal system. Many unprofitable factories in the industrial townships nearby – built on cheap labour with few employee rights, and located well outside the major cities through huge tax incentives from the apartheid government in an attempt to exploit and keep black labour far away from the white suburbs – have also been pushed into bankruptcy as the new South Africa became part of the global market.

A terrible place you might imagine. But this is also home to picturesque streets, with numerous smiling children and hard working mothers, who welcome strangers and wave at visitors, especially

during the spectacular wild flower season along the West Coast. And it is during this spring period that the annual Voorkamer Festival is held.

In South Africa the word “voorkamer” still conjures up images of dour lifeless front rooms found in the homes of traditional fun-shirking Calvinist Afrikaners, where a grandfather clock ticked solemnly and the picture rail was hung with black and white photographs of bearded pioneer ancestors frowning down from mahogany frames. But today, the “voorkamers” are lounges and living rooms drawn from across the community – from the white South African middle-class neighbourhood “above the railway tracks” with its Victorian homes with bay-windows and wrought iron fencework, to coloured homes built by the Mandela government under the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) – tiny six by six meter houses with zinc roofs and dirt roads, situated above the officially named Evita Bezuidenhout Boulevard (named, incredibly, after a fictional woman character created by South African satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys).

One such home is that of the colourful Maggie Blauw. She has never herself been in a real theatre, but she is for her part now a confident theatre manager, having for the several years converted her RDP house into a makeshift theatre. She opens every show with a speech, welcomes the visitors, sees that all the front of house arrangements are in order and extends her hospitality to the international artists. Each year more and more such homes are opened to the public in this impoverished community. The money goes on home improvements and school fees. It’s a process which has been dependent on the generosity and vision of theatres in South Africa and Europe, under which houses are paired and sponsored by such establishments as the Royal Carré in Amsterdam, the Nieuwe Luxor in Rotterdam, the Tricycle in London, the Baxter in Cape Town.

The producers were well aware that their concept was completely new and would at first be confusing to the general public. But they took the risk and hoped for the best. Now five years later, the festival sells out weeks before and is in danger of becoming too big and unmanageable.

Part of the success can also be ascribed to the fact that the ice was broken and some of the groundwork and infrastructure (such as ticketing facilities) were already in place thanks to satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys, who opened his theatre and cultural centre called Evita se Perron ten years earlier. The town’s people are already acquainted with the eccentricities of artists and familiar with the concept of performance.

The local community is heavily involved in the planning of the festival, not only through casual jobs and services contracted – such as, accommodation, the hire of the local taxis, the concomitant food and craft stalls.

The audience does not know beforehand who or what they will get to see. They purchase a route ticket with a colour code, taking them by township taxi to three shows, carefully balanced and chosen by the producers. This forces people to experiment and see things they might otherwise not have considered. Not all the artists are announced and a few mystery guests turn up as pleasant surprises. Unlike the usual solitary interval experience of the formal theatre, here audience members and complete strangers find it easy to chat among themselves between shows in the minicab taxis, sharing their perceptions and enjoying a cultural debate.

The punters experience in safe conditions unfamiliar places. Doors are opened figuratively and literally. They meet not only strangers from their own community, but from communities they are normally unlikely to enter. The different aesthetics fascinate and many white South Africans and tourists see first hand how the “other nine tenths” of the population live. But this is far more than a township tour, as the Darling hosts are themselves exposed to what are for most for them untried art forms – poetry recitals, mime, modern classical music, Japanese butoh, cabaret, puppets – all performed by professionals, many of them international artists, right there in their living rooms.

This process goes further than other arts’ outreach programmes, as the residents have more control, introducing the shows and welcoming the audience, even sharing their accommodation with the artists. The festival engages with its community participants as sentient beings on a cultural level.

The artists work hard – performing their thirty-minute pieces twelve times over the three days to audiences not always familiar with the nature of their craft. It is noticeable that the international artists bring a special kind of energy to the festival. For them the whole event is kind of awakening, not least to the power of their own art. It’s the honesty and freshness of the response they get – so different they say from Europe – together with the intimacy (the average audience size is 20 and sometimes patrons interject and converse with the performer during the show!) which seems to invigorate the performers, and in some cases has turned out to be a life-changing experience.

Many artists also do workshops at the three local schools the week before the festival. These include activities such as making puppets, writing a script – then filming and editing it, and producing a daily newspaper. One year remarkable results were achieved surpassing all expectations with a documentary made by a fourteen-year-old girl on drug abuse and another on gang warfare. The children were given digital video cameras and sent into the field with sensational results.

Theatre works have also been based on stories told by Darling women and then reworked by professional actresses. Directors have used the actual format of the festival as the structure for a

show. En route to the venue patrons were given the social geography of the town and its problems, setting a context for the dramatic work they were about to see. Arriving at the “theatre” they were greeted as unexpected guests, and slowly the story emerged when a neighbour (played by a local actress) came to ‘visit’.

Naturally, the choice of work is restricted to what can be performed in a makeshift theatre. Stripped of complicated sets, sound and light effects – pure dramatic styles are encouraged. It’s not possible to stage a classical ballet or a full opera, but the Voorkamer Festival is doing something quite different. It’s high in concept, and as such easily replicated and versatile.

There are seven routes, twenty-one shows, forty-eight performers. In addition to local artists from across the South Africa, performers have come from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Portugal, Surinaam, India, Zimbabwe, Algeria, Canada and Switzerland.

The community’s spirit is bolstered; the residents are extremely proud of their town’s accomplishment. Last year, sixteen local artists clubbed together to establish an additional studio exhibition route showing their paintings, ceramics, woodturning, beaded jewellery and sculptures.

If any town is contemplating an arts festival, this is surely the best way to do it. Economically it spreads the benefits widely and fairly; it builds community spirit and dialogue; it encourages creativity and diversity. The greatest ambition of course is that this one-of-a-kind festival experience will be replicated in small towns throughout South Africa, spreading art, good will and prosperity.

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