

The Arts and Institutional Change in South Africa

Mike van Graan

Mike van Graan reveals here his views of a situation he closely observes : South Africa after Apartheid, caught between a need for reconciliation and a claim for justice. Interwoven with the political process, arts and culture lie at the heart of the tensions and issues at stake in this rebuilding. Openly partial, this contribution begins the series of EJA/E investigations about cultural and artistic situations outside Europe. South Africa will be given more attention in the next issues.

The Rainbow Nation and the Missing Pot of Gold: On Miracles, Myths and the new Millennium

Transformation. Reconstruction. Redress. These are some of the buzzwords of post-apartheid South Africa; buzzwords born of the political imperative to reshape our society into a non-racial, just order; buzzwords which bear hope for many, and bring threat to others; buzzwords which offer new opportunities, and indeed, pose new threats.

After the euphoria of the 1994 elections, the 'miracle people', 'the rainbow nation', has begun the much more complex, much harder work of transforming every sector of our society in terms of the non-racial, non-sexist, democratic mantra of the liberation movement. Babes in democracy, our society has, nevertheless, grown up. No longer the stark 'us' and 'them' of apartheid, of goodies and baddies, of black and white. Now there is complexity, contradiction and in addition to black and white, plenty of grey. On the one hand, for example, are the imperatives of reconciliation, the need to build a nation across apartheid's old divides. On the other hand, are the imperatives of justice, and the concomitant programmes of affirmative action, of redistribution of land and resources. The reconciliation and justice imperatives are often ... irreconcilable.

In the midst of all of this, and more, are individuals and institutions trying to make sense of their new realities, pursuing new identities and meanings, forging different futures for themselves in an atmosphere of uncertainty, of no easy answers, of completely uncharted territory. With these follow the inevitable organisational traumas, the human costs, and not least, the adverse short- and medium-term effects in the areas concerned. New opportunities, significant threats. New threats, significant opportunities.

Arts and culture institutions are, of course, by no means exempt from this process. In fact, quite the contrary. The arts and culture are located within the sphere of hegemonic struggle, the struggle to provide intellectual, moral, aesthetic and ideological leadership within society. While those who control political power have instruments of coercion such as the legislature, the judiciary, the police and defence forces to oblige their subjects to accept their rule, they also exercise significant control over the instruments of socialisation - the educational system, the mass media and cultural institutions - which help to shape the values, the beliefs, and the world views of their citizens, in accordance with their own. Thus do we come to be ruled, not only by coercion, but by our own consent.

Music, dance, theatre, visual arts, literature and film are creative means through which individuals and communities explore, interpret, challenge and celebrate the human condition within particular material realities. In doing so, the arts reflect certain ways of looking at, thinking about, and understanding the world, and the ideas, beliefs and values which shape that world. Precisely because the arts may serve - whether consciously or unconsciously - the hegemonic interests of various social forces and political players, they are themselves the site and subject of ideological contestation.

Apartheid, like colonialism in general, decimated the cultural life of the indigenous people, except where those aspects of traditional culture could be used for the domestication of the locals, and to serve the divide and rule strategies of the minority in power. The cultural practices, rituals and symbols which underpinned indigenous peoples' ways of interpreting and making sense of their world were destroyed, suppressed or ridiculed as inferior. Foreign languages - the bearers of culture - were imposed as the official languages, and the only cultural institutions allowed or actively promoted in the ghettos were churches with their foreign religion, which played a major role in the domestication of the locals.

The dominant art forms of apartheid and colonialism - ballet, opera, classical music and theatre - were imported from Europe to sustain the cultural life of the expatriate white minority. The native majority was excluded from these - by law, by distance, by cost or simply by the irrelevance of these forms to their life experience. No art form is intrinsically elitist; they acquire status and social

esteem in terms of the value placed upon them by society. And so it was that opera, ballet and classical music came to be deemed 'guilty' by association, by virtue of their receiving major subsidies from the apartheid government, which had actively and arrogantly elevated these forms as the arbiters of refinement and civilisation, as the pinnacles and standard bearers of human and social evolution.

Furthermore, the institutions which housed and promoted these forms - the performing arts councils - had their boards appointed by the National Party government, many members of which knew little about the arts, but were rewarded with these positions for their loyalty to the party. They also ensured the hegemony of the ruling party within these institutions, as theatre and other practices which questioned the status quo were quite simply banned by the boards.

Meanwhile, within the forces of liberation, the arts and culture were not taken seriously in themselves either, except for their strategic value in serving overt political functions. 'Culture as a weapon of struggle', one of the slogans of the time, pointed to the appropriation of the arts as functionalist instruments in the struggle to eliminate apartheid. Particularly in the mid-eighties, when the internal levels of resistance intensified together with the increase in international pressure such as the sanctions campaign, and the sports, oil, academic, arms and cultural boycotts of South Africa, the apartheid government declared states of emergency in an attempt to quell what they called the 'total communist onslaught'. Organisations were banned, thousands of activists were detained without trial, others were placed under house arrest, and traditional forms of anti-apartheid activity were outlawed.

This period saw the emergence of culture as a shield behind which to organise. Cultural events replaced mass rallies; poetry evenings were used to commemorate important dates in the progressive calendar; musical events were used to boost the morale of activists, to resurrect the profile of organisations decimated by bannings and to celebrate the resistance and human spirit even within the prevailing repressive conditions.

Yet, even this 'people's culture' movement began to threaten the state, and a major arts festival planned in 1986 by the progressive movement was banned as it was deemed to constitute a threat to national security. Ironically, this served to legitimise and lend credibility to culture, to the arts and to the role of artists within the anti-apartheid struggle. Funds from international donors became available, international cultural festivals and conferences focusing on South African arts and culture were held, and progressive cultural organisations mushroomed.

Then in the early nineties, the ANC and other liberation forces were unbanned, and the process of establishing a non-racial democracy began through constitutional negotiations. Anticipating a new government, progressive arts organisations launched a campaign which would unite artists, arts organisations and establishment cultural institutions for the first time in the history of the country, to research and develop cultural policy proposals from their perspectives, and to serve as a powerful lobby in their interests. While they had a common interest with the liberation movement in eliminating apartheid to ensure freedom of creative expression, equity in access to public resources for the arts and the elimination of censorship, progressive arts organisations recognised that their interests, and those of their constituencies, would not necessarily overlap with those of the liberation movement, once the latter became a major partner in government.

The department of arts and culture of the ANC did not take too kindly to this initiative on the part of the arts community. After all, the ANC was the major liberation movement, it represented the majority of the people, and it therefore had a right to provide leadership - with the arts community subject to this leadership - in the transformation of the arts and culture. Fundamentally different points of departure led to useful debate, but also to major tensions between the ANC and its one-time organisational partners, who were intent on pursuing an independent, non-partisan cultural policy agenda. Establishment cultural institutions, having kowtowed to previous political masters, now prostituted themselves to the potentially new political masters, inviting the ANC to make appointments to their boards. The ANC appeared quite happy to maintain establishment cultural institutions provided they simply genuflected in its - the ANC's - direction, with the help of ANC appointed governing boards.

Progressive cultural organisations however, departed from a completely different starting point, which centred around questions such as: What are the cultural needs and aspirations of all our country's inhabitants, as opposed to those who had been privileged under apartheid? What is our vision to meet those needs? What are the best structures and strategies in terms of education, the provision of infrastructure, the distribution of funds, to realise that vision? How should existing cultural institutions be transformed, if at all, and should they in fact continue to exist in the light of the vision, structures and strategies agreed upon? One point of departure then, was to take what existed and to panel-beat it into the new South Africa. The other starting point was a macro-cultural vision, which would then impact on what existed, and this would invariably be determined by the availability of resources.

After the 1994 elections, the most comprehensive, consultative cultural policy formulation process took place, with government appointing a task team of 23 cultural practitioners - out of more than 300 nominations received - to research and solicit policy proposals from the widest possible cross section of interests in the country. Over an eight-month period, submissions were made, regional hearings were held in urban and rural areas, provincial conferences debated recommendations, and finally a national conference of representatives from cultural institutions across the country adopted the task team's report, which was then submitted to government. The White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage derived from this report, and it is this White Paper which now informs the transformation of the cultural sector generally, and of state-subsidised cultural institutions in particular.

What then, are the major challenges facing establishment cultural - particularly performing arts - institutions in our country at the moment?

1. The first challenge is, of course, funding. With the huge legacies of apartheid in the areas of education, housing, unemployment, etc, the arts and culture were always going to face a major uphill battle to secure an increase in funds, beyond what had been allocated to establishment cultural institutions in the past. Current cultural policy then, is based on the reallocation of the limited resources available to institutions in the apartheid era, and serving about 6 million people, now having to serve the cultural needs of 37 million people. Inevitably, the establishment institutions have faced significant budget cuts. Government has committed itself to only funding the physical infrastructure of these institutions, while the performing arts companies attached to them - the orchestras, ballet and opera companies - would receive declining subsidies over three years as they diversified their respective funding bases. The funds cut from these institutions would then be channelled to organisations and artists who had never before had access to such public resources, through the National Arts Council, a new statutory body along the lines of the NEA, Australia Council and British Arts Council.

So, as opposed to opera, ballet and orchestral companies receiving all the public resources available for the performing arts, these companies would now need to join the queue at the National Arts Council, or simply cease to exist. While this policy is rooted in economic realities, the management - or rather the mismanagement - of the implementation of this policy by national and provincial government departments responsible for arts and culture, has raised the spectre of large, technically sophisticated buildings funded by national government, with empty stages.

These institutions, once the fat cats of apartheid's cultural policy with their large subsidies, simply do not have the experience - as they did not have the need in the past - to raise funds from other sources, or to rely on the box office for their survival.

2. A second major challenge to establishment cultural institutions is the notion and practice of multiculturalism. In the past, it was easy to cater for the tastes of the white minority whose cultural interests they served. Now, the pressure on such institutions is to diversify their artistic programmes, to reflect the broader interests of the black and white taxpayers who foot their bills, and to develop new audiences beyond their traditionally white market. Opera, ballet and classical music are accepted as part of our collective national performing arts heritage, but they no longer occupy the privileged positions as regards public subsidy that they once did, and neither are they deemed any longer - at an official level anyway - to be the highest forms of performing art. They now need to compete for markets, for subsidies, for access to publicly-funded infrastructure with a range of other performing art forms, which will be favoured if only because of being neglected in the past. Within this context, establishment cultural institutions are struggling to maintain their traditional audiences without the resources to cater for their needs, while at the same time having to develop new audiences and arts programming which will not reflect positively on the balance sheet in the short to medium term.

3. The third is the challenge of political correctness. Given our race-based history of injustice, it is inevitable that the correction of past imbalances, will assume a primarily race-based direction. The governing boards of establishment cultural institutions are thus appointed to reflect the racial demographics of the province in which they are located. This is not only as it should be, but, goes the argument, it will ensure that these institutions do indeed reflect a more diverse arts programme, that the management of these institutions will shortly shift from white to black hands, and that these institutions will be more sympathetic to the new government.

Political correctness - the dogmatic, one-dimensional implementation of morally-sound programmes of redress - is placing a huge strain on such institutions, as those appointed to positions of governance generally lack the experience, the skills and the knowledge required to give sound direction to such institutions. Given the other pressures placed on performing arts institutions, what is required at the moment is vision, leadership, creativity and support from the governing boards, but these are simply not

possible because of the individual and collective deficiencies of the boards. So instead, the governing boards themselves resort to political correctness as a means of exercising their power; instead of vision, there is obstruction; instead of decisive leadership, there is muddled procrastination; instead of creativity and problem-solving, there is direction by numbers, i.e. the numbers of blacks, women, physically challenged, gay people in management, on the staff, on the stages.

While the demographic changes on these boards have resulted in some exciting new work, the larger picture for the performing arts is a rather bleak one as those who have the decision-making power and control over resources to make a difference simply do not have the vision, experience, knowledge or skill to do so.

4. The fourth challenge is a related one. It has to do with the government departments of arts and culture who have the responsibility of driving and managing the implementation of policy. Again, the civil service has had to be transformed to reflect the racial composition of society. So skilled, experienced white managers are offered huge payouts to leave the civil service, to make way for black senior managers, who only recently, were generally activists - with varying degrees of competence - in small cultural NGOs. Government had the great advantage of its policy being formulated by the arts community; the arts community has the great disadvantage of this policy being implemented by government.

Contradictions in the implementation of the policy, a remote-control approach to the management of policy with government regarding the boards of cultural institutions as their agents of implementation without providing any support or direction, have left many cultural institutions confused, frustrated and alienated. Ironically, even those boards and managers largely recruited by government to run these institutions are dismayed at the lack of direction coming from government bureaucrats who more than match those they appointed to govern these institutions, in terms of incompetence and inexperience. The mismanagement of policy implementation by government, with its obvious power and control over resources, poses one of the gravest threats to the future of the arts in our country.

5. Given their association with apartheid in the past, and desperate to prove their credentials in the New South Africa, establishment cultural institutions are faced with the further challenge of proving their commitment to redressing past injustices, by instituting education and development programmes to provide skills to formerly disadvantaged individuals. Besides being physically unequipped to do this effectively - the buildings were designed as performing arts venues - and besides not having the staff expertise to do this - this in any case should be the function of educational institutions - establishment institutions simply do not have the cash resources to offer such programmes, which themselves consume, rather than generate funds. On the one hand, there is the pressure on these institutions to repent of their apartheid past by committing themselves to development. By virtue of their still receiving large state subsidies, there are completely unrealistic community expectations that these institutions should cure all the ills of apartheid in the performing arts sphere, overnight. On the other hand, there is the naive hope within these institutions that by proving their commitment to development and training, they will maintain or increase their subsidies from government.

6. Our constitution, one of the most progressive in the world as we have been in the fortunate position of being able to extract the best clauses from the world's democracies, guarantees freedom of creative expression. The policy of government - advocated by the arts community and accepted by the government - is to establish arm's length structures to distribute public funds to the arts community and to govern publicly-funded cultural institutions, to ensure that there is no political interference in the decision-making processes, which would undermine the principle of freedom of creative expression.

The reality though, and this is the sixth challenge facing cultural institutions, is that government is reluctant to hand over power to institutions over which it has no control, and is extremely sensitive towards criticism - that is, the exercise of freedom of expression. This was hinted at by the first draft of the National Arts Council Act which gave a senior government bureaucrat the right, in the event of an appeal, to amend, uphold or overturn any decision taken by the supposedly arm's length, independent Council. The same government bureaucrat approached the funder of a publication - critical of the department and its management of policy - to place pressure on it to stop funding the publication. Recently, members of a board appointed by the department to oversee one of the performing arts institutions, raised numerous issues which implicated the department, and the board was summarily dissolved by the Minister.

Freedom of expression may, in other words, be guaranteed in our constitution, but in practice, there are numerous disturbing signs that government will act against criticism and independent thought where it regards this as threatening to itself. Quite simply then, post-apartheid South Africa is not the haven for freedom of expression which artists had been lobbying for. It can never be

assumed to have been won; we constantly have to fight for, monitor and push back the barriers against freedom of expression.

7. Finally, as if these internal and external challenges of transformation within the arts and culture were not sufficiently difficult, arts and culture have to deal – as do other sectors of our society – with the all-pervasive presence and threat of violent crime. While we have always had unacceptably high rates of crime, especially in the townships during apartheid, the last few years have seen a dramatic increase in crimes ranging from cash-in-transit heists, car hijackings, murder and robbery, rape and child abuse.

Crime has succeeded where even apartheid failed. We now have suburbs surrounded by high walls, electric fences, with the only entrances being through turnstiles and gates for the domestic workers and gardeners who earn their living there. Crime knows no colour – it affects black and white, except that a recent survey showed that if you were black, you were at least twice as likely to be a victim of crime as your white counterparts. The complete disregard for life, the utter brutality of the violence accompanying many of these crimes, may be understood in terms of our apartheid, violent past, but its presence in contemporary South Africa is playing havoc with the promise of freedom and security, with the tourism industry, the economy, the capacity and credibility of the police force, and not least, the morale of ordinary citizens.

As to how the arts are affected, most people are too scared to go out at night. The theatres are empty. Once it was necessary to ensure that the parking lot close to the theatre was secure, so that patrons' cars would not be stolen. Now, it is necessary to ensure that the drive from the front gates of the suburbs to downtown and back is free of car hijackers and other criminal threats, a task that theatres obviously lack the capacity to deal with. Even the world-renowned Market Theatre, which internationalised anti-apartheid theatre, faces the threat of closure due to a lack of audiences. Were it not for a government subsidy in the last few years, the Market Theatre might in fact have already closed – not because it no longer does exciting, new South African theatre – but because audiences, besides the international tourists who have heard of the Market, are too scared to make the trip.

I would imagine that while many of these issues are in sharp focus for us, due to the nature of a society in transformation, they are not too dissimilar to issues faced in other parts of the world – perhaps for different reasons, and with slightly different symptoms, but nevertheless, similar in their effects.

Perhaps too, we also deal with these issues in similar ways, responding to these challenges with a mixture of enthusiasm and doubt. For we have been around long enough to know that with regard to the arts and culture, we should hope for the best, but expect the worst. We dwell within that Gramscian paradox: the optimism of the will, and the pessimism of the intellect. With our hearts, and because we are human, we strive for the best, we lobby, we act, we push, we shove in the hope that things will get better. With our minds, our ability to reflect, to analyse, we conclude that there is little value – in real terms – in spending so much energy and time trying to convince society's decision-makers that the arts have value, that they are not a luxury, that they are integral to the democratic project. The cyclical nature of society, of history means that we will swing like a pendulum between our optimism and pessimism, but generally we are located within this tension, and it would be best for us to become comfortable dwelling there, for this is our lot.

The optimist within us sends us off with our begging bowls to the private sector, to offer a range of marketing opportunities in exchange for a few dollars to support our book, our play, our dance, our exhibition. The pessimist wonders about compromising the integrity of our art, about making it commercially acceptable, about how soon we will have to carry our sponsors' logos engraved on our foreheads.

But this is the real world, the world of declining public support for the arts, the post-cold-war world where the market rules, the world of bottom lines.

So, the optimist within us does fancy economic impact studies, to prove the contribution of the arts to the economy, to job creation, to the generation of tax revenue, to wealth creation. And the pessimist wonders if artists are ever going to be paid a living wage, if they will ever be able to afford a house, or medical aid, or pension schemes.

Then the optimist decides that maybe we should become more responsible, more respectable, that we should move from the margins to the mainstream, that perhaps if we did not threaten the establishment so much, perhaps we could ensure our survival, if not our wealth. So we join the cocktail circuit, we get in with the ministers, the officials, the businesspeople, we dress as they dress, we talk as they talk, we are not rude or obnoxious or frank any more. And the pessimist wonders about losing our edge, about becoming safe, boring, co-opted, part of the system.

The optimists host conferences, write papers, talk, debate, pass resolutions, make theoretical interventions. And the pessimist wonders whether anyone will actually read them, except when they become the basis for some postgraduate thesis.

We are trapped between a revolutionary zeal to change the world, and a pragmatic need to conform, to be respectable, to steady rather than shake the boat. Ours is a complex calling. Only a few years ago, we - the South African arts community - were on a high, having seen the effects of our advocacy in the form of official government policy. Now there is talk of going back to the trenches, to launch a 1% Campaign to demand more public resources for the arts, to challenge our former comrades who now occupy senior government positions about mismanagement, corruption and a lack of vision, to once more face ostracism and marginalisation, but this time by a new, non-racial elite.

Suffice it to say then - euphemistically - that the new South Africa has been a bit of a letdown for artists, particularly for those who actively participated in the anti-apartheid struggle, not only because it was right to do so, but because of a commitment to building a democratic, humane society in which the arts and culture would flourish, not least because of the role of artists in the struggle against apartheid. It seems like the only difference now though, is that whereas many of our artists died broke, in exile, they now die broke, at home. I suppose it saves on body transport costs.

Similarly - and maybe that is why we are gathered here this week - we somehow hope that the new millennium will usher in a new dispensation for the arts, that a magic wand will be waved and that everyone will enjoy the right - proclaimed in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - '...freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, and to enjoy the arts'.

Before the pessimist takes hold, let the optimist take charge with three suggestions as to how this might be brought about.

First, what about an Art Olympics every four years, on the same scale as the sport Olympics, held every four years in different cities which bid for the event? The best works of different countries are entered into various categories, with the years leading up to the four-yearly event being taken up with national, regional and then continental festivals? The prestige of winning events at the Festival, the benefits of cultural tourism to the winning cities which host the Festival, the need for countries to nurture and support participants in the event, could all enhance the status and importance of the arts and culture nationally and internationally.

Secondly, what about establishing a group of 5-10 eminent persons on an annual or two-yearly basis, linked to the United Nations - perhaps retired statespersons with a commitment to the arts, recent Nobel literary laureates, major movie stars, etc. Their role would be to visit various countries to persuade them to follow UN resolutions on the arts and artists, to intervene where major arts institutions are under threat, in other words to act as a high-powered international diplomatic team, concentrating on the arts.

Finally, what about an 'international peacekeeping force' of artists, arts administrators and cultural activists? Wherever there was a threat to freedom of expression or to major cultural institutions, this force would be activated to create a presence and to draw international attention to the problem, which would at the very least embarrass the respective government into a different course of action. This international force would be supplemented by supporters who would protest daily outside the embassy of the country concerned, in their own countries.

The new millennium beckons. The future of the arts in the new millennium will depend as much on our optimistic vision as on its being informed by our pessimistic intellects. Let us not be too hopeful. But let us hope. And act.