

ZABALAZA: the essence of freedom

The struggle for freedom and self-determination by South Africans has always been accompanied by a recognition of the impact of culture on our everyday lives. MANDLA LANGA writes on the festival named ZABALAZA: South Africa Speaks which is planned for July 2 - 15, 1990.

WALLY SEROTE WAS in a reflective mood when he observed that in the days of his childhood, he had never trusted trains. This was during our short sojourn in the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe where a meeting took place between Afrikaner writers and the ANC. We could still hear the roar of the falls as we crossed a railroad track that disappeared on the hazy horizon of Zambia.

When young, Wally saw trains as vehicles of disorder. Parents used to clothe kids in the most uncomfortable garments. And there was always a sense of urgency as if the train was an enemy that needed to be caught by surprise. The kids, understand-

ably, were always on edge because they were being prepared for a journey the way one prepares someone or even oneself – for an appointment with a dentist. If Wally knew on a sultry Zimbabwean afternoon that he'd be spending a considerable chunk of his life in an office near Kentish Town underground, he didn't let on.

Kentish Town Road ends at an underground station on the misaligned London Northern Line. The ticket attendant's cubicle is usually empty. Which might be the reason for the untrammelled swagger or sway of derelicts and deadbeats who see the area as a liberated zone, their hands clutching cans of *Strong Brew* or bottles of *Thunderbird* wine.

The street itself is full of traffic; there are shops, boutiques and flower stalls. Then there is the ubiquitous McDonald's hamburger joint. Housed on the same street, though in the second-floor of a nondescript greystone building, are offices for Zabalaza, the South African African Festival scheduled for this July.

The idea for this festival and conference was a mere grain some ten years ago when South African artists decided to form Arekopaneng. This is a cultural organisation that acts as a unifying body to harness the energies of artists in the United Kingdom. At the beginning, because artists needed the respectability that has been denied them through history, there were plans to have a South African cultural centre.

ANC artists and writers were part of Arekopaneng; it happened, for instance, that during the preparations for CASA – Culture in Another South Africa – musicians and ar-



Bambi Farzerkerley at The Fridg photo by Michael Levy



o had not performed together in decades, found in Arekopaneng forum where this was not only possible but paved way for collaborations. Britain has the highest number of South African artists. Many of whom have a personal axes to grind. The only axes that came out in an unforgettable evening in Brixton were saxophones, trumpets, guitars and trombones. We felt that if, in culinary matters, many cooks spoil the broth, two heads are always better than one in activity.

The idea of Zabalaza can also be traced to the *Culture and Resistance* festival in 1982 in Gaborone. Artists and writers met to discuss the role of

culture in apartheid South Africa. But it was around December 1987 through the unity-in-action of South African cultural workers that the prospect of Zabalaza became less daunting. The ambience at CASA, the spirit of unity that was accompanied by a need to solve some of the more knotty cultural questions, laid ground for an event that would not only rally artists but also offer training and skills to those disadvantaged by the racist ideology of apartheid.

In early 1988, there arose a need to set up committees in Britain which would devote as much time as possible grappling with rendering Zabalaza as functional as possible. Representatives from Arekopaneng

Benjamin Zephaniah, opening 'Beyond the Barricades' photo exhibition, photo by Sandra Cumming

and the ANC's Regional Cultural Committee met to work out strategies for funding and to identify art-forms that needed shoring up.

They met at 1pm every Wednesday – and then, even on Sundays. This was a period of hectic journeying across the country to speak to arts councils officials to persuade them on the righteousness and desirability for Zabalaza to succeed. I remember being bundled into a car and taken to meet formidable representatives of such institutions

as the Greater London Arts (GLA) and the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA).

The festival co-ordinating body which consisted of reps from different art-forms – theater, film, graphic arts, literature, music, dance and photography – found itself besieged when it came to time. The full-time co-ordinators, Linda Bernhardt and Gill Lloyd churned out so many reams of paper that one wondered whether Zabalaza wasn't contributing towards the denuding of the rain forest. But this paperwork and the buttonholing of British and South African culturati invariably paid off. Events such as *Two Dogs and Freedom* had shown that Margaret

Thatcher's hostility to the anti-apartheid cause is not shared by a comfortably large section of the British public.

But why host a festival in Britain? People came out of CASA enthused by the spirit of Amsterdam which, in 1987, was designated the European City of Culture. This mantle falls on Glasgow in 1990. For South Africans, Glasgow is a special city in that it gave a practical demonstration of its opposition to the Pretoria regime by giving Nelson Mandela the freedom of the city. This was long before other cities and their boroughs named streets and buildings after Mandela, and the Wembley Concert celebrating

Mandela's 70th Birthday was still a possible dream.

Towards the end of the eighties, cultural developments inside South Africa warranted new thinking. The brutality of the regime increased in direct proportion to the mushrooming of cultural bodies in all communities. Perhaps more representative of a future reality were Umkhonto we Sizwe uniforms and plastic or wooden replicas of the AK47 in public life.

One apocryphal story is that Adriaan Vlok, the most discredited figure in South African politics, spent sleepless nights devising ways and means of banning the *toyitoyi*. So much for Vlok whose name is a swearword, 'n vloekwoord, as Breyten would say.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation started speaking of possibilities of negotiations and the people unbanned the Movement. Many more publications and newspapers were more vocal in advocating their support for the liberation struggle. Even if the armed police had declared an open season on black flesh, there were rumblings in the political horizon about a new dispensation.

Lindiwe Mthembu was seconded to Zabalaza by COSATU. Debbie Serrant also came in to handle administration. Wally Serote was released from his other duties in the ANC to be the chief-co-ordinator of Zabalaza. This team is of course small, but that is the way it is. It is guided by political motivations, to see to the finish, as it were, that South African arts and culture are performed, exhibited and made known to the British and South African public in this country.

When looking at the professionally laid-out brochure, the scope of the festival seems vast. There is an



Moss Ngoasheng celebrating the release of ANC leaders, London, 28 October, 1989, photo from IDAF



intention to bring four theater productions that 'celebrate the diversity of South African talent, some of which wouldn't normally be included on the international touring circuit.' The particular areas of concern will be a professional theater piece, a dance/performance work, community theater and a children's show.

With music, it has always been recognised that there is an 'extraordinary diversity of South African music styles, from the *mbube* groups... and the percussive rhythmic traditions of drums and *marimbas* ... to the jazz and *mbaqanga* sounds of urban townships.' Zabalaza intends to bring out all these forms to be exhibited and enjoyed in British venues.

Film and Photography have played an invaluable role in showing

the world at large just how much South Africa despises her darker children. There is an 'exciting emergent film culture in South Africa. The Festival will provide a platform for these productions.' A wide range of films 'of the calibre of *Mapantsula* and *A World Apart*' will be shown. There will be video facilities to screen less mainstream cinematic work which will include experimental films and documentary work which might be banned in South Africa.

Posters have always played their role in conscientising our people; this is an art form which announces other events but is an event in itself. At the height of the State of Emergency, in 1985, posters proved very effective in alerting all people to the fact that a struggle was being

Mandla Maseko and Skin Sipoko at the poster exhibition organised by Arekopianeng and the ANC, photo by Sandra Cumming

waged. One remembers that even when the SADF raided on Gaborone in June 1985, Captain Craig Williamson of Pretoria's gestapo brandished the posters for a press conference, calling them 'captured weapons of war'. Zabalaza aims at showing a vast selection of posters, paintings and photographs as an indicator of what our people have been doing in all these hungry decades.

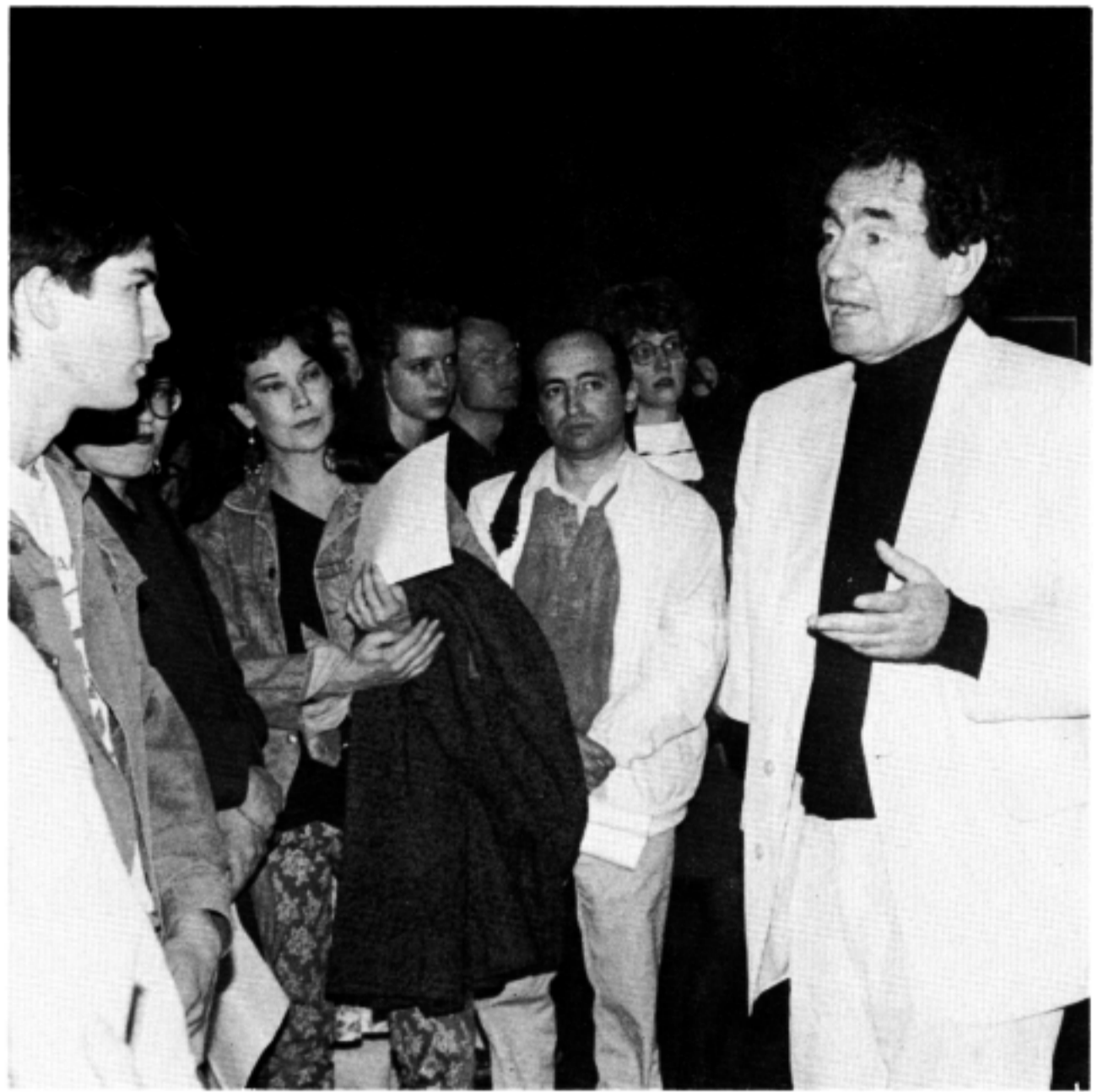
Incidentally as a run-up to Zabalaza, on April 1, Arekopianeng and ANC collaborated in a poster exhibition which was held at the Brixton Recreation Centre. While

people were sweating and groaning as they played squash, Albie Sachs was taking the visitors on a guided tour of the exhibition, commenting on the strength or weakness of the posters. It was a very illuminating afternoon in that, here again, people were being asked to learn to look at artwork as critically and honestly as possible.

Other events related to Zabalaza have been the successful mini-festivals where our people performed in venues such as *The Fridge* on March 25, the *Mambo Inn* on March 11 and 16, and other smaller venues. These mini-festivals have helped create a climate favourable for the staging of Zabalaza. Many more artists have found that they have acted as a dress rehearsal for the real thing to come in July. But they have also activated people who might have felt left out of mainstream cultural events.

The literature component of the Festival will consist of poets, novelists and storytellers giving live readings, facilitating discussion and conducting workshops. Writers such as poet and novelist Don Mattera, performance poet Mzwakhe Mbuli, writer Achmat Dangor, novelist Nadine Gordimer will most likely be invited to attend together with prominent South African writers living abroad such as Arthur Maimane, Mary Benson and Wally Serote.

The conference will form an important part of Zabalaza, where there will be sessions on music, literature, art, film, photography, theater and shaping policy for the future. This will mean specialists in the different fields being invited to submit papers and speaking at the sessions. Some of the more important issues will be the role of the artist in a changing South Africa, how to grapple with the challenges that lie ahead.



The policy of the cultural boycott will be discussed at length, to see how it fits as a strategy in present-day South Africa. There are of course, guidelines and recommendations made at CASA, the issue of Language, etc – all these will be subjected to the scalpel of honest but critical appraisal.

Zabalaza differs from other festivals in that the emphasis here will be on training and workshops. During the two weeks of Zabalaza, there is an aim to present practical training sessions. Forty-eight half-day sessions over 12 days are planned. The major objective of these sessions would be to address the inter-cultural isolation created by apartheid South Africa and to find means of communication across cultural barriers.

The intention of the festival is that the South African participants in these workshops should learn skills which they will be able to pass on to others in their communities when they return home. Another task is to facilitate an exchange of skills between artists from South Africa and from community groups within

Albie Sachs addressing the opening of the poster exhibition, photo by Sandra Cumming

the United Kingdom.

When the concert in Wembley was being organised, there arose a greater need for South African artists to respond as rapidly as possible to the challenge that faced them insofar as participation is concerned. There is no doubting the fact that Zabalaza will go a long way in analysing such events and strive to create an unsailable corner for our artists, musicians and writers so that, when the time comes for us to make an impact within the international arena, we do this with the confidence and effectiveness that guarantee people taking us seriously.

There are many, many young people with talent who have never had the chance to show the world that they are worth their weight in gold, the same gold that will have a different meaning in world markets when our country is finally free.