

Chapter Fifteen

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Drama

THERE HAS BEEN a decided escalation of black theatre in this country. Theatre groups were moving away from the 'traditional' Shakespeare theatre that has been holding stage all through the years. From theatre that spoke of their ills and tribulations there evolved theatre that spoke to black people about ways and means that could be employed to bring change to their situation. From theatre of hopeless murmurs it became theatre of determination - theatre that taught self-reliance and brought about a new awareness.

Because of the new turn of events some theatre groups broke away completely from white management and patronage. Some groups like TECON even barred whites from attending their shows. On the Reef there was a big storm when *Black and Blue* was shown to white audiences first - the reason for the grumble being that this production was totally irrelevant and misplaced for a white audience. Black drama groups are catching on to the philosophy of Black Consciousness and Black Solidarity. This is the reason for productions like *Requiem for Brother X*, *The Coat* and others in similar vein. Most drama groups are shedding the mantle of being mere entertainment and are now becoming agents of change. It has now become common to refer to black theatre as Theatre of Liberation.

South African Black Theatre Union (SABTU)

Background

The South African Black Theatre Union was formed in Durban on the 9 July, 1972, at the conclusion of the 2nd TECON Drama Festival. Its formation was a culmination of the realisation that black theatre needs to be organised and that black creativity and endeavour must be channelled towards the goals of the Black struggle. One of their aims is to implement workshop projects in the major centres of the country in the near future with a view to a greater involvement with the black community at large.

Structure and Composition

The General Council is the highest decision-making organ of SABTU, and it is made up of two delegates from each theatre group and members of the National Executive. The present executive is:

President	Strini Moodley
Vice President	John Kani
Secretary	Monde Mbikwana
Treasurer	Errol Theron
Director	Saths Cooper
Add. Member	Aubrey Lamour

Affiliated groups at present are:

Dramsoc (Western Cape), Dramsoc (Fort Hare), Theatre Council of Natal, Community of St. Stephens, Sowai, Luyolo, Chatsworth Arts and Theatre Organisation, Shah Theatre, Serpent Players, Oceanview, Nakasa.

Activities and Future Plans

The drama festival in Cape Town from 11-15 December, 1972, was the first under SABTU. Running concurrently with the festival was a planning conference. At this meeting, a programme for 1973 was put forward. In July there will be a conference and festival in Cape Town, the theme of which is 'Black Soul Search'. Again in December another

festival is scheduled for Durban and the theme is 'Theatre to the People'. Several regional workshops and arts weeks are scheduled to take place in the various regions simultaneously.

Problems

SABTU's progress is being checked by lack of finances. According to their officials, certain groups are not meeting their financial obligations and are making things difficult for the organisation. That groups are failing to meet their targets is seen as evidence of the amount of exploitation that they have experienced over the years.

Another problem faced by SABTU is the lack of suitable venues for drama festivals because there are no proper theatres in black circles.

Activities of some SABTU Affiliates

(a) *TECON*

A founder member of SABTU, based in Natal and very instrumental in the formation of SABTU. TECON put on *Requiem for Bro X* during their festival in July and during the national drama festival in Cape Town in December. Around Durban circles they have put up a pre-view of *Black on White* which they hope to show in the new year. Apart from drama, they concern themselves with other shows like a Black Music Disco which ran for two days. TECON is presently contemplating a major thrust in theatre circles around Natal and hope to bring about greater public involvement in theatre development.

(b) *Dramsoc (University of the Western Cape)*

Dramsoc is an amateur group from the University of the Western Cape. They are not students of drama, but are very enthusiastic in their approach. They took part in the Drama Festival organised by SABTU in December. Adam Small was the author of the play titled *Kanna hy kô hystoe*.

(c) *Serpent Players*

A drama group from New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. They took

part in the national festival in Cape Town, with their presentation of *The Coat* Serpent Players are convinced that meaningful theatre can only be based on dialogue between spectators and actors in a subject of immediate concern'. At Fort Hare they presented *The Just*. At present their two leading actors, Winston Ntshona and John Kani, are busy on the presentation *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*.

MDALI

Mdali is short for Music, Drama, Arts and Literature Institute and is based in Johannesburg. It was formed on the 11 May, 1972, at the DOCC in Orlando. Present at this meeting were:

The Seapearls Dramatic Society
 Aquarius Drama Group
 Ebony Theatre Effort
 Mihloti Black Theatre
 Soweto Black Ensemble and a host of other interested theatre and art personalities.

At this meeting a few aims were suggested, some of which were:

to promote self-determination, self-realisation and self-support in theatre and the arts;

to create a theatre-going public;

to work towards formation of an actors' union, etc.

Attitude and Relationships with other Organisations

Mdali rejects the concept under which the South African Theatre Organisation (mainly white) was formed. SATO was meant to be multi-racial and multi-representative though, allegedly, no black groups were invited to the inaugural meeting where Dan Poho, an active employee of the white-run Phoenix Players was elected to the Committee.

Relations with SABTU are not clearly defined. Mdali believes in having regional groups first and then a national body. SABTU believes that it is important to have a super-body to co-ordinate and give direction and uniformity in the theatre world. Of multi-racial organisations Mdali is clear that it has nothing to do with them, and will not at any time co-operate with them.

Activities of Mdali Affiliates

(a) *Mihloti*

An influential group in the formation of Mdali and about the most active of all Mdali-affiliates. During 1972, they had two shows around Johannesburg, workshops on poetry, writings and speeches by blacks. A feature of their shows was their mixing with the audience after the performance for an exchange of ideas and views. To encourage literary talent, Mihloti runs a newsletter to which people from all walks of life can submit articles, poems and pieces of drama.

(b) *Soweto Black Ensemble*

They produced *Black and Blue*, and this play raised a storm in theatrical circles in that Mdali feels its principles were violated when the producers of this production got involved with Phoenix Players, a group run on multi-racial lines and under white management. It is understood that because of this breach of Mdali principles a number of actors left the group.

Other drama groups

(a) *Phoenix Players*

Phoenix Players are a group of artists from Johannesburg. Unlike Mihloti they are under white management. They featured in *Phiri* which collapsed a week after starting a tour of the Republic. *Isintu* is another production in which they featured. Their involvement in *Black and Blue* with some people from the Soweto Black Ensemble caused a big row in theatre circles leading to a number of players leaving the SBE. Phoenix Players are affiliated to SATO (South African Theatre Organisation).

(b) *Imita Players*

This group hails from East London. Early in the year they made a countrywide tour with their production of *Oedipus Rex*. This play was highly rated wherever it went. Then they

presented 'The Trials of Bro Jero', which they later took to the Federal Theological Seminary in Alice.

UMabatha

This is a Zulu adaptation of Shakespeare's *MACBETH*. The adaptation and translation was done by Welcome Msomi, but production and direction was handled by the Natal Theatre Workshop Company, a white theatre group. *UMabatha* was a resounding success with local and overseas white audiences, but did not raise as much interest with black audiences. Observers feel that it owed much of its success to the fact that it was a curiosity and also because it had relevance to white audiences.

Music

The field of music is very extensive and an independent survey on each group would entail a whole volume on its own. There have been several happenings in the musical sphere, dissatisfaction from artists and breakthrough in new sounds. What is remarkable is the impact of Afro sounds which reached a new pitch in 1972. Another interesting feature was the rise in popularity of exiles, the likes of Hugh Masekela, Letta Mbuli, Miriam Makeba and Dudu Phukwana and his friends in the 'Brotherhood of Breath'.

(a) Masekela

His musical life dates back to when he was 13. From that time he has never looked back. In 1960 he won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music in London. Whilst in London he was offered another scholarship at the Manhattan School of Music in the U.S. His music began to show a synthesis of Afro and American sounds. Success was mounting and he formed Chisa Records. He achieved his greatest breakthrough with the single 'Grazing in the Grass'. Hugh and Chisa Records encountered some difficulties because they refused to have UNI prostitute their music and ideology. And after about 2 years 'dormancy' he came out with the 'Reconstruction', which set him once again on the popularity trail.

(b) Letta Mbuli

Letta comes from Soweto and was 'assisted' by Miriam in trying her luck in America. Letta is married to Caiphus Katse

Semenya. In 1972, Letta, the former *King Kong* star, took everybody by storm with her 'down to earth, soulful, raw' and simple presentations. Letta also starred in a film produced by Sydney Poitier, *A Warm December*, in which she plays opposite Harry Belafonte. Back home, her two long plays are raves and her single is in the LM hit parade. She is a mother of one child, Monto, who plays the piano.

MUSIC FESTIVALS

Pina-Culo

This big musical happening lasting 3 days was held at the Umgababa Holiday Resort from the 2-4 September. It was promoted by Algijew Promotions and had groups from all over the country participating. There was a variety of music from soul to gospel and from jazz to mbaqanga.

Jazz Ministers opened the show with an instrumental presentation of 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika'. Guest artists to this occasion were the Minerals, the Ionian Choir and the Jazz Ministers. Dashiki from Pretoria played Malombo-style sound, and were well-received by the crowd. This whole happening was filmed.

Other Festivals and Happenings

Apart from Pina-Culo there have been other festivals and contests all over the country. Hundreds of groups took part in a contest called Groovy Group '72 and the honour went to Malombo's from Pretoria.

The Jazz Ministers won 1st prize (jazz section) in a festival organised by the Traditional and Modern Ingoma Association; Queue sisters won the mbaqanga section and Young Lovers won the soul section.

Philip Tabane and his malombo-drummer, Gabriel Thobejane, left for America early in the year. Whilst in America they have hit the American local scene and have featured in some of the world's leading jazz shows. They appeared at Newport in a concert billed 'Spiritual Concert'. This programme was produced and directed by Ace drummer, Max Roach.

A new show-promoting organisation called 'Mission Impossible' hopes to promote lesser-known groups and put them on the show scene. This group came about when a Pretoria soul group approached the organiser of this group and asked her to manage them. She then caught on to this idea of promoting lesser-known groups.

On the mbaqanga scene about 50 musicians walked out of recording rehearsals. The upheaval is a result of an allegation of 'white interference' in the artists' recording. Included in the squad is Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens. The group belongs to the BaMahotella Entertainment Society and their recording is handled by the Mavuthela Music Company. It is alleged a petition was circulated in 1966 on a similar issue, and the artists are adamant - they align themselves fully with the spirit and provisions of that petition.

Poetry

Because of obvious limitations black poets do not come out in force. Poetry that is published is mostly protest and lament. Poets who write in the more forthright and challenging vein, find hardships because publishing houses are white-controlled. Certain poets have complained that they have had their works changed or have had their works refused because they were not in 'good taste'. Despite these handicaps there is an 'undiscovered' batch of 'revolutionary' poets. At present, they are making attempts to reach the black populace. Magazines like *Ophir*, *Bolt*, *Classic*, to some extent, the SASO newsletter and campus magazines, do carry Black poetry that is more intense and unapologetic.

During the year two books of note came out: *Yakhal' inkomo* by Mongane W. Serote, published by Renoster Books and *Cry Rage!* by James Matthews and Gladys Thomas, published by Spro-cas.

Mongane was born in Sophiatown in 1944, but grew up in Alexandra. He has had his poetry published in several magazines including *Playboy*. Recently his poems were read over the BBC. Apart from writing poetry he writes short stories, and he is co-author of the unsuccessful musical, *Phiri*. His book contains 43 poems.

Cry Rage! is a book of poetry 'dedicated to the children of South Africa who will become one family - brothers and sisters'. It is a book of poetry that speaks 'rage' as James Matthews says:

'It is said
that poets write of beauty
of form, of flowers and of love
but the words I write
are of pain and of rage'.

A look through this book emphasises the difference in tone from other books of poetry that we know. There is no apology, the poetry seeks to

infuse in the people a sense of 'rage' at their own self-inflicted inadequacy.*

Another poet of note is Mafika Pascal Gwala, who, though he has not published a book, is widely read from *Ophir, Classic*, the SASO Newsletter and other publications. His poetry is directed mainly at the blacks and their situation. It seeks to awaken a sense of pride and dignity in them and make them seek to live like human beings apologising to no one for their blackness.

Two other 'unknown' poets, Eugene Skeef and Mandlenkosi Langa, are contemplating a book of poetry. Mandla has had some of his poetry published by *Ophir*. There is also another poet, little known because of lack of right opportunities, Mathe Diseko, who has had his poetry appearing in the SASO Newsletter. These are all poets in the new mould, and not protest poets. But their material cannot easily reach the 'grass-roots' because of lack of publishing houses that can accept some of their works.

Art

For a long time black art has been in the hands of whites who have arranged exhibitions, sales and even determined the type of art to be exhibited. This led to black artists gradually finding themselves in a conflict because in actual fact they were not being 'allowed' to be original. 'Free' expression was controlled and the themes were narrowed to landscapes, portraits and similar 'non-involved' fields. It is only recently that blacks have taken an interest in their own art and this is the reason for the birth of organisations like Black Art Studios and Culcom. Other artists have had to leave the country to study overseas because of the limited chances that exist in this country. To some artists, it has dawned that art could be a vehicle of societal and environmental change, and the best way to achieve this is to hold art exhibitions in townships and ghettos, and not place a prohibitive price on the articles.

Black Art Studios (BAS)

The idea to have a central place for art was conceived when Revelation Centre was opened in Durban. Then on the 14 October, 1972, Black Art Studios came into operation. Black Art Studios is an organisation without a rigid structure. Their main objective is to organise black artists into some form of body wherein they shall have a say in their destiny.

To date BAS has organised an exhibition by black artists featuring work from artists like Omar Badsha, Paul Sibisi, R.M. Govender, Mohamed Timol, Percy Marimuthu, Tembe Cele, Welcome Koboka and a host of others who have been languishing on the brink of frustration and total obscurity. Another exhibition is planned for 1973 where there

will be people like Thami Mnyele, who made the cover picture for *Yakhal'inkomo*, Serote's book of poetry.

Black Art Studios also organised a music festival to try and raise funds for the running of the organisation. At that festival they had groups like Malombo, Dashiki, The Vampires, Purple Haze and a lot of others.

Culcom

This was formed at the SASO Conference at Hammanskraal in July 1972. The realisation that 'culture is tied-up with the aspirations of a people' prompted students to commit themselves to forming a committee that would deal specifically with the awakening and heightening of cultural awareness and the involvement of the black people in their struggle for identity, self-respect and liberation.

It pledged itself to try and found:

A writers club;

Film, Music and Art Studios;

Theatre Council to cater for poetry, music, drama, fine arts and films.

At present they have not come up with any real results but have made contacts with music groups who have expressed dissatisfaction in the running of their affairs, and had complained of blatant exploitation. Many projects are lined up for 1973 in which period many of their envisioned ideals are expected to reach fruition.

Dashiki Art Museum

This is a brainchild of the Dashiki, an indigenous sound jazz group based in Ga-Rankua, near Pretoria. They live together and their house is an art centre where they rehearse and create. Lefifi Tladi says 'I want to preserve my art for the development of black youth. They know about Michaelangelo but not about their own artists'.

The centre is managed and manned by:

Rankobeng Mokou

vibes - artist

Lefifi Tladi

Afro Drums - artist - poet

Gilbert Mabale

flute and soprano sax

Lawrence Moloisi

guitar

Their name 'Dashiki' comes from the 20-century old African dress worn all over independent Africa.

Film

It cannot really be said that there is black film-making in this country. What really happens is that black artists are asked to play 'non-white' roles in white films, and are usually cast in inferior or meaningless roles. At present there is a film comprising an all-black cast that has been shot. It boasts of people like Ken Gampu, of *Dingaka* fame, Cocky Thlothlalemajoe, Abigail Kubheka, Dan Poho, Soul Fingers and Joe Lopez.

Apart from this there is a film that was shot at the 3-day Music Festival, Pina-Culo at Umgababa in September.

**Cry Rage! was banned by the Publications Control Board on 9 March 1973, after the first edition of 4 500 copies had been almost sold out.*