

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

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Afrikaans writers struggle with transformation



Vernon February



Willie Kgositsile and Jan Rabie.



Antjie Krog and Njabulo Ndebele.

Signs of change . . . but WHERE is the action?

By Ronel Scheffer

AT THE recent writers' indaba hosted by Idasa and the Afrikaanse Skrywersgilde, a speaker predicted that, in a few years' time, we will be able to scour the length and breadth of this country and not find anyone who ever believed in or supported apartheid.

Glimpses of what Tim Couzens of Wits alluded to on the first evening of the conference could be seen among the writers and literary academics themselves at Langebaan. No one had ever supported apartheid and a dull inertia dominated proceedings. It was as if in the new South Africa, ushered in by FW's masterful strokes, "the issues" and "the struggle" were over. What confrontation, what debate, what action - if any - were needed in a society which has all the signs of change?

The question, however, was how much real transformation had taken place? Certainly the dividing lines between "inside" and "outside" in South African literature were there for all to see at the conference. Several speakers in fact noted the pervading illusion that apartheid

was dead and buried, along with the mindset that had sustained it for decades.

Differences aside though, it was Albie Sachs, ANC constitutional expert and writer, who reminded delegates during one of the most vigorous discussions that they had all fought hard to be together. "We should honour this occa-

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sion with our diversity. What's important is that we do speak together, without rancour," he said.

With no serious enemies present, and in the absence of a clear direction on programmes of action, it required "vasbyt" from the 120 delegates to go the full distance of three days - even in the simulated Grecian air of Club Mykonos.

Coinciding as it did with the 15th anniversary of the Skrywersgilde, the majority of delegates at the conference were white Afrikaans writers, critics and publishers - a politically disparate group, more divided than the delegation who met with the ANC and exiled writers at the Victoria Falls in July last year. Other dele-

gates were black writers and academics, including a handful of returnees and exiles, many of them members of the Congress of South African Writers.

The programme covered a range of topics related to writing in a new South Africa and fostering a broad inclusive South African literary culture. Although much of the discussion was of an exploratory nature and speakers often talked past each other, a measure of common understanding had been forged by the end of the conference. To many of the delegates it was their first meeting with people from the

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"opposite" political culture, which in itself almost always produces positive results.

The most conciliatory noises came from the left of the spectrum – at least one black poet expressed interest in joining the Gilde.

But the Cosaw delegates also demanded more self-examination and action from guild members, who were later castigated by poet Antjie Krog for their excessive inward focus and their inability to escape from their apartheid "hokkies". While the "outsiders" arrived at the conference eager to engage and armed with poetry and stories to share, the Afrikaner writers clung to a fallacious notion of independence, she said. They could not break out of their mental laager to link up with a broader South Africa.

Asked oral poet Sandile Dikeni, of Cosaw: "I am an Afrikaans writer. What is the Gilde doing to enable and enhance the writing of Afrikaans?"

THE keynote speaker was exiled literary academic Vernon February of the Africa Institute in Leiden, Holland. He was back in South Africa for the first time in 27 years, bubbling over in a mixture of Dutch and Afrikaans with a dash of Xhosa.

Speaking on moves towards a broad South African culture, February highlighted three areas that required urgent attention: the need to abandon slogans and define freedom, the need to embrace the diversity of cultures in the country and strengthen the languages that have been neglected, and the need to develop critical thinking at all levels in society. These issues, he said, could not stand over until the national question had been settled.

He said although the concept of a national identity was viewed with suspicion and it often created confusion, writers should endeavour to redefine it in a positive way.

Responding from the floor, Hein Willemse of the University of the Western Cape, cautioned against a narrow interpretation of the concept "national". He said there was much evidence of intolerance and authoritarianism in current politicking. "We must make tolerance a demand and make sure that the national concept will not incarcerate us."

But when poet Marlene van Niekerk wanted to know from Willemse what the ideology of the new national culture would be and who would be setting the standards, he replied that he did not want to enter that debate at present.

The simmering controversy about the relationship between individual writers and political/cultural structures flared into the open again when Sestiger Jan Rabie spoke of "black bureaucrats" on "cultural thrones" who wanted to dictate to writers. He charged that Barbara Masekela, head of culture in the ANC, wanted to prescribe to authors. "You want to organise books, I want to dream books."

Rushdie Sears, founder member of Cosaw, indicated that Rabie's charge reflected an

unfortunate paranoia that still bedevilled relations.

Wilhelm Liebenberg, a former member of the Cultural Desk of the UDF, claimed that the popular perception of prescriptiveness was inaccurate and based on a lack of understanding.

Dikeni argued that "one could organise and dream at the same time". The general secretary of Cosaw, Junaid Ahmed, added that organisation would never be a substitute for literary activity, but it was important to create conditions supportive of writers' efforts.

Willie Kgositsile – poet, professor of English in Zambia and deputy head of culture in the ANC – seemed to concede that prescriptiveness may have existed in the past. He said there was no need for paranoia though, but negative past practices must be destroyed.

TAKING this debate a step further in a later session, Kelwyn Sole of the University of Cape Town, said it was an illusion to think that it would be possible at some point in the future to separate the arts and politics. A new approach to the usefulness of both was needed for a more meaningful relationship to come about.

Marlene van Niekerk hinted that, in a democratic South Africa, writers should perhaps have a third choice, moving away from the complete freedom advocated by liberals, on the one hand, and the organised commitment preached by the struggle on the other hand.

Sachs said Afrikaans writers should foster and develop their own language and help lead those who are frightened of the future.

Much concern was expressed about the content of South African writing: the narrow and elite focus of Afrikaans writing; the violent overtones of the literary products of black writers; the elevation of certain writers to the status of "chief narrators" of the South African story; the increasingly alienated reading public.

Poet Don Mattera said the flow of the "guava juice" (fuel in petrol bombs) that was eulogised in the toyi-toyi poetry would have to



Karen Press

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From left: Welma Odendaal, Tim Couzens, Pet

stop at some stage. "When we feed our children on poems that feed only on retribution and death, they will perpetrate it."

Dikeni, writer of "Guava Juice", countered by quoting from another poem. "When the sorrow disappears, then we will start singing."

There appeared to be consensus that the future of Afrikaans was secure but that it would not necessarily continue to enjoy its current privileged status. One speaker noted that Afrikaans had never really developed beyond the "sterilised" version approved by the ATKV (Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging) and the FAK (Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings).

Krog said Afrikaans had "failed this country", it would need to reflect a broader reality to survive.

A number of fundamental problems emerged spontaneously in the final session of the conference. First the organisers were taken to task by exiled writer and academic Njabulo

Ghostly dance of bloodless categories

South African literary criticism needs an injection of humour and fun – the natural enemies of nationalism and authoritarianism – says Tim Couzens, of the Institute for African Studies at Wits University. This is an edited version of his address at the writers' conference at Langebaan.



and Ernst Lindenberg.

Ndebele (University of Lesotho) for inviting him into a situation where he could not follow much of the discussion, which was conducted mainly in Afrikaans.

"The aim is to communicate – that is the fundamental objective," he said. "We should not adopt a smugness that will have the effect of closing down communication."

Then Karen Press of Buchu Books expressed dismay that a writers' conference was being dominated by critics. While the academics indulged in abstract topics, writers' concerns – that could potentially have a profound impact on the country – were treated as less important, she said, appealing also to writers to start supporting each other.

FINALLY Cape Town poet Gladys Thomas spoke of how she felt snubbed by other writers when she arrived for the conference. She had thought that the "new South Africa" implied changed attitudes but was dis-



Writer Jeanne Goosen.

appointed when no one greeted her on arrival.

Ndebele said the experience of Thomas illustrated that South Africans would have to start at a grassroots level by acknowledging each other as human beings.

He said the central question was how to reverse the 40 years of isolation and lack of contact produced by the "madness" of apartheid.

Addressing the issue of the "representativeness" of South African literature, Ndebele said there did not appear to be a mainstream literature at present. He was also not sure that it would develop overnight – it would depend on literacy, awareness and availability.

He cautioned that writers should not submit to a "tyranny of representativeness" as the real need was for "a much deeper appreciation of the wealth of art before us".

Creative growth would flow from a preparedness to absorb this diversity of experience, said Ndebele. □

LOOKING back over the last 20 years I am saddened by what we have missed, the opportunities lost in research in South African literature. I shall dwell on the past in the hope that it will teach us something about the present and future. I shall deal with a few aspects of what I regret.

Last Post for the Lost Past

Fairly recently, I took a straw poll of students doing fairly advanced work in South African literature so that one can assume that they are amongst the better informed on such matters in our society. I asked them if they knew who Pixley Seme was, and whether they knew anything about him. Not one of them had ever heard of him.

Perhaps it is because the Dark Continent is so dark that we tend to lose things – little things – like our own history. Many people do complain that so much of our literary and other history has been kept from us. Why have we not been told? There are three sets of people to blame.

- The ruling class with its whole apparatus of repression, censorship and intimidation, especially in the field of broadcasting.

- The literary establishment who have, for a variety of reasons, failed to come to grips with and disseminate this knowledge.

- The very people who complain that they are deprived of the knowledge. Through a combination of anti-intellectualism, complacency, stupidity and, quite often, straight laziness, they have not sought out the sources which are available to them. The charge of laziness applies equally to black and white South Africans.

To all intents and purposes Pixley Seme was the founder of the ANC. He was born, of fairly humble origins, it seems, in Zululand in 1881. He made his way to North America and, through a combination of missionary help and his own efforts, he was educated at a school in Northern Massachusetts and at Columbia University and Oxford University. He returned to South Africa in 1910 to practise law, and the following year began the moves which culminated in the formation of the ANC in Bloemfontein in January 1912.

Cultural and Intellectual History

THERE is another glaring gap in the present state of our literary criticism. This is the almost complete lack of knowledge of the cultural and intellectual history of Africa. Let me take one example – that of Pan-Africanism.

At the independence celebrations of Ghana in 1957 – an event crucial in itself for the culmination of the ideas of Pan-Africanism, as well as their spread – was the Jamaican historian C L James who had published in 1938 that great book *The Black Jacobins*. At the celebration James met "some Pan-African young men from South Africa". They told him that his book "had been of great service to them". When James asked how, they said that a copy of it was in the library of the "black university" (Fort Hare) in South Africa. They said they didn't know anything about it until a white professor there told them: "I suggest that you read 'The Black Jacobins' in the library; you may find it useful."

'The Black Jacobins' is about the great slave revolution in the Caribbean island of San