

Indigenous South African drama is taking on some curious forms. Much of it is still culturally encapsulated in its apartheid background; some of it has abandoned "protest theatre" for wild escapades celebrating some of the more seemingly lunatic aspects of the human spirit. Then there are others, some of the most

effective, that are for excoriating current tions. Even seemingly South Africa is often at all of political grist, TYLER, Sunday Trib What is needed is mo among the var

GRAHAMSTOWN CAL

THERE'S no disputing that drama is a potent form of communicating ideas and emotions, especially in a country where so many people can see and hear but often cannot read or write. This has not been lost on the government. A cabinet minister once warned Parliament of the dangers of "political" plays. They can lead to violence, he said. People leave a performance and immediately start burning cars and smashing buildings. He added fairly typically that this "will not be allowed".

It doesn't seem as if anybody has taken the slightest notice of him; political plays abound. If the audience does not leave immediately afterwards on a violent crusade, people often do at least wave their fists during the performance itself and shout "amandhla" loudly.

There were a fair number of "political" plays at the recent Standard Bank National Arts Festival of various degrees of sophistication. In fact, current local productions without some sort of political implication were rare. There is every reason for this; political issues in South Africa are so immediate, so overwhelmingly involved with everybody's everyday affairs and so potentially viciously dangerous that this is unavoidable if theatre believes itself relevant.

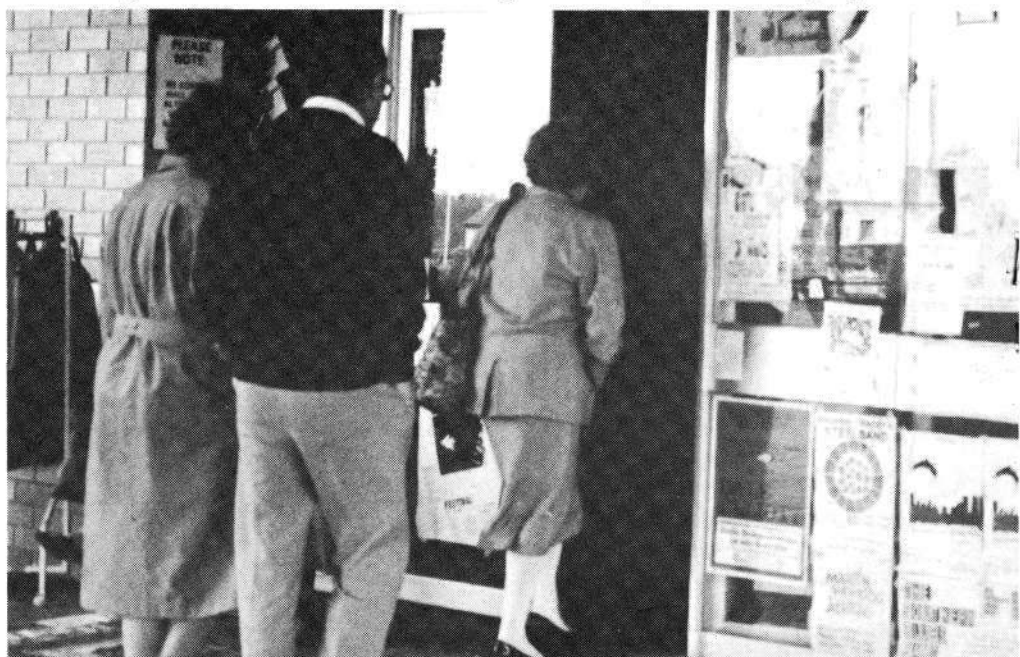
But relevance takes very different forms and can be expressed in very different ways. Almost certainly the most successful drama productions at the Grahamstown festival this year were comic affairs, comically satiric or fairly happily nostalgic. Escapist? Perhaps. But escapism can also be a form of protest. And they were produced with panache, to say the least, and often with the most calculated and profound professionalism. And several of the more directly

politically "relevant" productions were slothful in presentation and often downright boring. They serve a purpose, of course; it is sometimes safer to say things on a stage that you dare not express at a public political meeting where you could be arrested (at least, until recently). But some of the more political plays were uncertain whether they were plays or straightforward politics.

The outstanding light-hearted productions were staged by the Natal-based Theatre for Africa (the company intends moving soon to Johannesburg). The flagship productions of the group were *The Raiders of the Lost Aardvark* and its sequel, *The Son of the Raiders of the Lost Aardvark II*. The first *Raiders* appeared at Grahamstown last year and was immensely successful. It won a Pick of the Fringe award and went on to the

Edinburgh Festival where it helped win a Festival First award for Theatre for Africa. Both plays have been created by Theatre for Africa's director Nicholas Ellenbogen — formerly the drama director for Napac — in cahoots with his ebullient peer, Ellis Pearson. It is very sophisticated Goonish, using the simplest props (a kitchen chair with a plank becomes a Tiger Moth; Ellenbogen transforms himself into the notorious spy Hata Mari by putting on a hideous orange wig, and Ellenbogen and Pearson in tandem become a menacing giant crab with garden clippers for pincers).

The little plays sound as if they could be just silly; in fact they are presented with consummate professionalism and absolutely exact timing; a mixture of the fantastic, the barely possible, and clowning at a circus. (There is also a peripheral



There were record crowds and record box-office takings. Centre of the action was the bustling entrance which was plastered with advertisements for

forms of docu-drama, political presumption, domestic drama in not totally innocent, says HUMPHREY, Theatre Critic. More cross-pollination in various forms.

LING!

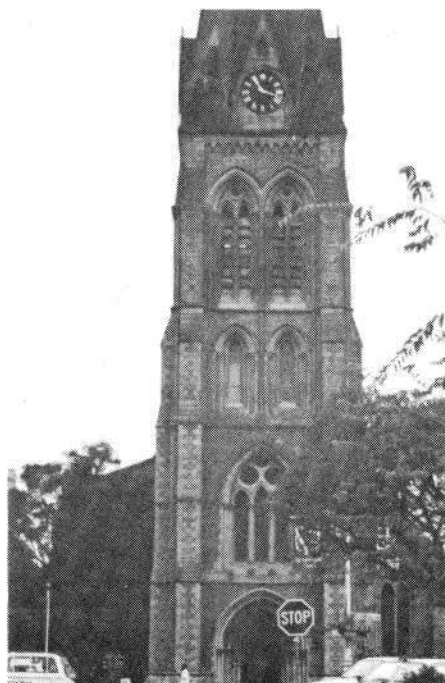
ecological "message" which is no less effective for being presented with a hoot.)

This is a viable and entertaining form of current theatre. Its value should not be underestimated. Its emphasis on inventiveness, exuberance and being wildly funny is a reaffirmation of human values that need to be encouraged. We would not, for example, have come as a country to our present gloomy, dour, dumb and glumly inhuman, humourless situation if the place were run with more delight and less stoic, dreary platitudinous and dogmatic intensity. Ellenbogen and Pearson would not kill Biko.

Then there was a new play by Robert Kirby, *Panics*. It was on the "main programme" of the festival which meant you sat in delicious comfort in chairs instead of on planks on thin cushions provided for R2 from a firm appropriate-



Bank of the Settlers Monument. Chilly crowds more than 200 "Fringe" shows.



More black groups than ever before went to the Grahamstown festival this year to try to put across their political and human point of view.

ly called B.U.M. Technology.

Kirby considers himself a satirist and has been remarkably successful in this genre. *Panics* is designed to castigate the dumb bureaucracy and pretensions of a major (unnamed) university. Before it reached the boards in Grahamstown there were some spicy real-life legal exchanges between Kirby and the University of Cape Town which lent the piece some additional fizz.

It boils down to an effective exercise in lancing pomposity, applicable not only to protective bureaucratic intrigues you might find at a university but, with variations, to the hierarchy of many large corporations (or government departments). Its salient characteristics were its wit, the relative professionalism of its presentation and the overwhelming fact that it was not boring; the audience enjoyed itself and returned after interval with expectations of more entertainment. If some of the other shows at Grahams-town had had intervals, many halls in the second half would have been rather empty.

An overtly political play featured at the festival was *Where is my Son?* by Peter Ngwenya, the winner of the Young Artist Award for Drama. It is acted with sophistication by four women who play many parts (including policemen attacking with sjamboks) and is in praise of courage and ultimately preaches the need to defy unjust authority.

It is an overtly "political" play, but it does escape many of the dangers inherent in this form. It does not politicise too

long. It does present on stage much of the action that is at the centre of the play. But like many productions of this genre, it lapses rather often into non-dramatic interludes and political exhortations. In many ways it is constructed rather like a comic strip. For a while there is plenty of action; you see and experience what is going on. Superman puts on his uniform and flies out of the window. Then suddenly everything stops and the central figure (this time the mother) "muses" in a way that is used in a comic strip to link segments of action. You know the sort of thing; there is panel showing a figure and there is a little heading labelled: "SHE THINKS . . ." and words in a bubble coming out of her mouth tell you what's going on, like: "I waited for three months, going to the police station every day, all in vain." Soliloquy is a dangerous tool.

It was interesting to compare the more static construction of this play with the energetic presentation at the festival of Woza Albert, as political as anything, still around after many years, and still very much to the point. There are no diatribes here, no static moments and the action takes place in front of your very eyes, as it should, even including various characters' discussions with Jesus (come to visit by jumbo jet). "Forgive people seventy times seven, Morena? No, Morena. This is South Africa, Morena. In South Africa we fight!" And, an aside full of blistering insinuations: "Morena doesn't understand Afrikaans, my boy."

Two plays that have been hits in South Africa but that were not at Grahams-town also indicate different attacks on the problems of being relevant but also being engaging drama.

The first is *My Second Wife* by Essop Khan and Mahomed Alli; the second *The James Commission* by Saira Essa and Charles Pillai. *My Second Wife* is the third play in a series about the impact of change on traditional Indian domestic life. Possibly, the earlier plays in the series, *The Jamal Syndrome* and *Jamal II* are even more piquant. Instead of a meal out of trauma, the play deals hilariously with what happens to a traditional Muslim family in Durban when the son returns home with a new wife — who is white.

This provokes a shattering cultural upheaval which provides the opportunity for Khan and Alli to lampoon outmoded attitudes and racial and social prejudices and taboos. Both these plays were presen-



Rueful reactions, not funny ha ha . . .

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ted at "community halls" in Durban and around the country at literally hundreds of performances, but few whites caught a glimpse of them, which was a considerable shame because they missed some cutting inter-community comment. My Second Wife has been playing to packed houses at the Natal Playhouse in Durban and at the Baxter in Cape Town, and more whites have seen it as a result.

Then The James Commission. Saira Essa is one of the most skilled directors in the country, apart from being an outstanding actress. The James Commission was a docu-drama based on the hearing by Judge James into allegations of corruption in the House of Delegates. Mr James subsequently advised that the central figure, Amichand Rajbansi, should be barred from public office. (He remains, however, a member of Parliament.)

While two South African flags hung forlornly at each side of the stage, actors presented a damning indictment of corruption in the South African system that allows the most atrocious manipulations. It was a singular dramatic and financial success. (Ms Essa and Charles Pillai wrote and produced successfully also another docu-drama based on the Biko inquest evidence.)

What is the overall impression of the dramatic scene in South Africa? This investigation of some manifestations is hardly even a beginning. But because of apartheid, writers and actors are still very often limited in their inquiries and expression to the problems that affect their own encapsulated societies. Plays by Africans reflect often (and naturally) the bitterness of oppression and the brutality of their lives. Often the protagonists seek to explore political options and find political solutions, even something just straightforward like deciding: "You must go back to school." The leavening is often (in spite of everything) humour, and song and dance.

As perceptions and skills become more sophisticated (Napac's community outreach programme, Kwasa, is one organisation contributing to this) the plays are likely to become less deliberately and overtly didactic and more "entertaining", though there's no need for them to lose their "message".

Kirby's Panics is also very much based on group perceptions and prejudices and limited, for this reason, in its appeal. It's Wasp but very funny at times.

The lunacies of Ellenbogen and Pearson are much more universal and would find a response (as they have already) in just about any community.

Where next? Khan and Alli are experimenting with the frisson of introducing strangers with alien experiences into conservative Indian situations, and also with the impact of immense social changes on ordinary, very recognisable people. The result is that the laughter at their performances is often rueful and not just funny ha ha.

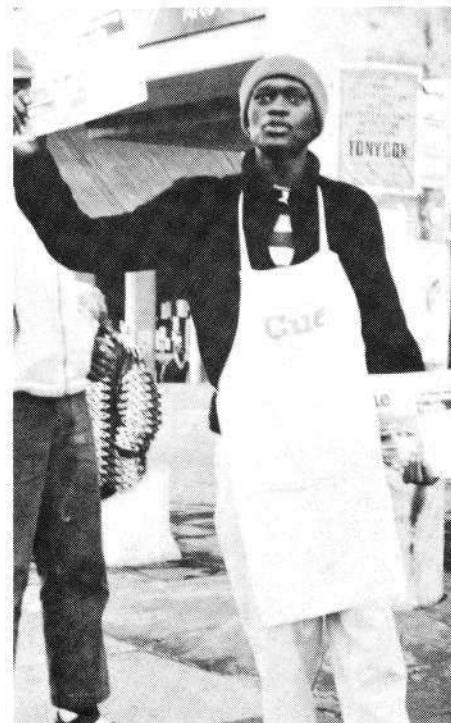
Ms Essa and Charles Pillai have used docu-drama like a scalpel to dissect and expose some of society's worst ills.

And this is not even to mention a writer of monumental potential, Ian Fraser, and his black tributes to the Savage God, whose features, though, at Grahamstown were not the success this year that they have been before.

Several years ago the University of the Western Cape (one of the most interesting and adventurous in the country) considered presenting a course on "creative writing". Perhaps it is possible to teach "creative writing", perhaps not. But certainly, with the stimulating diverse strands running so vigorously through our culture (and that goes equally and perhaps even more chaotically among people who are specifically Afrikaans), a school that examines the present cultural scene, dissects its trends and gives prota-



Traditional culinary culture hardly extended beyond (thousands of) boerewors rolls with mustard.



Hot seller was the Grahamstown festival paper, Cue, which carried reviews of the shows.

gonists more chance to understand what they are about, could be very valuable.

Meanwhile, with fascination, one goes to Grahamstown to examine an increasingly abundant flowering of talent and enthusiasm and remains fascinated by a plethora of offerings. But presently, which is only to be expected in a young country so confused and trying to understand itself, it is left mainly to overseas classics to provide real sophistication. Last year it was the most moving presentation of Kafka's Report to an Academy. This year, Fernando Arrabal's The Grand Ceremonial deserves much applause. The credit goes to the perception of the local producers and performers for seeking out and presenting such material. ●



Newcomer was Hoosen Farouk Sayed from Durban, one of several companies exploring interracial tensions.