Staffrider

ISSN 0258-7211 Vol. 7 No. 1, 1988 R3.95 (excl. GST)

John Kani Combatant from the Stage
Gerard Sekoto A Perspective on his Art
Don Mattera From the Oral Tradition
Martin Trump Socialist Explorations in SA Fiction
Gary Rathbone Contemporary Popular Music
Poetry and Short Stories

Staffrider magazine is published by Ravan Press Pty Ltd
P O Box 31134 Braamfontein 2017 South Africa

Editor Andries Walter Oliphant **Assistant Editor** Ivan Vladislavic. **Editorial Advisors** Njabulo S Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, Kelwyn Sole, Paul Weinberg, David Koloane, Gary Rathbone, Christopher van Wyk. **Designer** Jeff Lok.

Staffrider is published quarterly by Ravan Press 23 O'Reilly Road Berea.

Typeset by Industrial Graphics (Pty) Ltd. **Printed** by Sigma Press (Pty) Ltd.

Contributions and correspondence should be sent to **The Editor, PO Box 31134, Braamfontein 2017.** Manuscripts should be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. A short, two-line biography should accompany all contributions.

NOTES ON SOME CONTRIBUTORS: Don Mattera is a poet and editor of *The Business Magazine.* His autobiography *Memory is the Weapon* was recently published by Ravan Press.
Ingrid de Kok, is attached to the Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies at UCT. Her first collection of poetry *Familiar Ground* is to be published by Ravan Press in May this year.
Abner Nyamende, teaches in the Department of English at the University of Transkei in Umtata.
Mafika Gwala is a poet. His last collection of poems *No more Lullabies* was published in 1984 by Ravan Press.
Martin Trump is a comparative literary scholar who co-edited the issue on SA literature of *Third World Books.* He also edited *Armed Vision*, a collection of Afrikaans short stories translated into English, which was published by Ad Donker in 1987.
Tyrone Appollis is a young artist who lives and works in Mitchell's Plain.
Paul Weinberg is a member of Afrapix, a photographic collective based in Johannesburg.
Gisela Wulfsohn is a photographer and member of Afrapix.
Ivan Vladislavic is an editor at Ravan. His stories have appeared in South African and American Journals.
Jeff Lok is a book designer and graphic artist working at Ravan Press in Johannesburg.
Barbie Schreiner is author of *Talking to Frances Baard* released by the Zimbabwe Publishing House. She is secretary for COSAW, Transvaal.
Gary Rathbone is a student at Wits and an editor of the music magazine *Bits.*
Kelwyn Sole lectures at the University of Cape Town. His first collection of poems *The Blood of our Silence* is soon to be published by Ravan Press.

Contents

Cover: Labourers in Sophiatown
by Gerard Sekoto (oil/board 29,5 x 44,5 cm. Unsigned c.1938-9
Collection: Mr Nimrod Ndebele)

COMMENT

Staffrider Magazine is entering its tenth year of publication. The decade during which it has been in circulation has seen major developments in South African literature. Emerging as it did in the wake of the political and cultural resistance inaugurated by what is widely known as the Soweto Uprisings of 1976, *Staffrider* has, in a fashion unmatched by any other South African literary magazine, contributed directly to the stimulation and dissemination of ideas, experiences and art produced within the communities which revolted against the politics of economic, racial and cultural domination.

While the centre of gravity was located in the cultural forces brought into play by the ethos of self-emancipation and anti-imperialism advocated by the then prevailing strategies of the black experience, the resolute anti-racist orientation of the magazine is amply reflected in the various volumes of *Staffrider*. In fact what immediately strikes one, even at a cursory overview, is the responsiveness of the magazine to the populist movement which began to reassert itself in the political and cultural domains, after the period of dormancy and reorganization that followed the large-scale repression of the sixties.

Thus from the cultural vacuum created by bannings, exile and proscription, and a literary environment which, as Richard Rive has pointed out, was virtually white by decree, writing by black South Africans reemerged in the early seventies under liberal white patronage. However, with the resurgence of political and cultural struggle in the mid-seventies, the ruptures brought about by state repression in the discourse of resistance found a continuation in a radically community oriented movement initiated by Black Consciousness. It was at this historical juncture that *Staffrider* appeared on the cultural scene.

In the decade since 1978 *Staffrider* has been in the forefront of efforts to supplant the coercive manifestations of a racially exclusive and dominant discourse with a mass-based and truly democratic outlook on culture. In addition, the works of previous generations of South African writers like Nat Nakasa, Can Themba, Es'kia Mphahlele and Modikwe Dikobe were revived and reinserted into the new movement of black writing by means of the *Staffrider Series*. Coupled with this, the fiction of writers like Njabulo Ndebele, James Matthews, Mbulelo Mzamane, Achmat Dangor and Mtutuzeli Matshoba, as well as the poetry of Mongane Serote, Mafika Gwala, Jeremy Cronin and Achmat Dangor, attests to the milestone achievement made possible by *Staffrider*.

This responsiveness which *Staffrider* has displayed in relation to broad cultural developments is also evident in its attentiveness to the shift towards articulations rooted in the experience of workers. Lest these developments in *Staffrider* be misread as literature and culture being subordinated to the discourses of politics and history, it should be pointed out that the relationship

between literature in general and politics or history is not conceived of in terms of determinist subordination of the former, but in terms of a complexly mediated dialectic, whereby neither history nor literature is valorized or prioritized. What is at stake here, is the simultaneity of the entire spectrum of determinants and the crystallization of the distinct lines and moments of articulation, which for all their divergences and heterogeneity are in the final analysis interpenetrated by each other. This conception, while being aware of the reductive dichotomies of conflict, refuses to reside within the circuit of contradiction, nor does it propose a premature and illusory transcendence or utopianist interiorization. Instead, while remaining fully cognizant of the prevailing coercive hierarchies, it posits an open non-stratified and co-extensive scenario in which the traces of each are present in all. This is the only means of understanding the over-determined nature of all discourse.

Simplification foisted on this position from the vantage points of historical and political reductionism or idealist transcendentalism, will be tolerated as extremities which essentially resemble each other, in a rather comical fashion. Thus *Staffrider* will continue the fine work it has done in the past by retaining its populist orientation and initiating provocative critical discussion aimed at enhancing the literary production of all those who do not become squeamish or apologetic in the face of the challenges of our times.

Accordingly, the new issue brings to its readers a harvest of contemporary poetry and short fiction which highlights the diversity of lines operative in South African writing today. In addition there is a provocative interview with one of South Africa's most distinguished actors, John Kani, and an essay on the legendary painter, Gérard Sekoto, as well as an in-depth look at South African music. In the ongoing debate about literature and politics there is an article which examines socialist implications in some English and Afrikaans fiction. Furthermore, reports on cultural events and reviews of some recent publications are also included in this issue.

To celebrate the tenth year of the magazine with *Staffrider* readers there are special offers on some titles in the *Staffrider Series*. Also planned for the third quarter of the year is a bumper issue of *Staffrider* which, along with interviews, will bring together some of the best work that has appeared in the magazine over the past decade.

To conclude, I would like to extend an invitation to writers, photographers, painters and cultural workers in general to participate in *Staffrider* by sending in poetry, short stories, essays, interviews and whatever artistic products. *Staffrider* would also like to receive letters from readers on the work appearing in the magazine as well as suggestions on how the magazine can be improved.

Andries Walter Oliphant

A Child Who Survived the Soldiers

We saw the soldiers come
They came from the setting of the sun
They came with armaments.
They came with fury.
They came painted black like the black people.

But soon we got to know.
Soon we got to know who they were.
Soon the whole earth was athunder with bomb blasts,
Soon the whole earth was aflame with furious and frightening.

And with my child's eyes and child's mind
I saw a leg flying from a falling person.
I saw a human head bouncing like a bouncing ball.
With my child's eyes and child's mind
I saw a man fleeing for dear life walking on two legs without a head—
Listen man! A man walking on two legs without a head!

With my child's ear and child's mind
I heard a man painted black
Shouting, Fire! Fire! Bulala zonke! Fire!

With my child's ear and child's mind
I heard a crack, I heard a bang,
I heard a blast, the cracks split and the fire blazed.
The soldiers shelled and shelled and shelled.
They shelled until I was dead.
They shelled until I could no longer hear, see, think or feel.

I don't know how long I was dead, or unconscious, as they saw.
I woke up in a nightmare and opened my eyes.
I saw a pool of blood.
I saw blood flowing like a stream where we drank,
Mixing with the waters of the stream where we drank.

I looked at my mother.
She lay peacefully, quiet, not crying.
I called, I got no answer.
I looked at my mother again.

There were only holes where eyes should have been
And exposed flesh where nostrils should have been.

Photo: Robin Jacobs

I called for my father.
My father was not there and up to this day
I don't know where they buried my father.
I wiped the thick clots of blood
From my face and looked at myself:
What's this?
What's wrong with me? I asked.
What's wrong?
Then I saw there was something wrong:
I could not move because my leg,

My right leg was no longer there.
And when those kind people took me to hospital,
They asked me where I came from,
I told them my mother, father, grandmother,
brother and I
All fled from the country.
To find this life, this death, this horror in
Azania.
These, they told me, were the doings of oppressors,
These, they told me, were the doings of racialists,
These, they told me, were the massacres of
Azania.

Shadrack Pooe

Mr Shabangu

Mark Glaser

Illustration by author.

'A man has many faces,' said Mr Shabangu. He said this to me and some other kids, one day as we sat by the roadside, with nothing to do. My brother asked him what he meant. 'A man has many faces,' he reiterated, 'that he keeps in a box.' My brother, who was very clever, laughed. 'Mr Shabangu,' he said, 'what you say is a silly thing. A man has but one face. He doesn't keep faces in a box.' 'If I can take a face out of a box and put it on, will you believe me?' said Mr Shabangu. 'Yes, then we will believe you,' said my brother. 'But you think me a fool,' said Mr Shabangu, 'so I would like to make a bit of money out of this

deal.' 'Righto,' said my brother, 'as much as you want.' 'Very well,' said Mr Shabangu, 'if I take a face out of a box and wear it, you must pay me R100. Also I will wear two, three faces, to prove I am right. If I cannot do it, then I will pay you R100. Your friends are the witnesses.' My brother thought about this, but he hesitated. Mr Shabangu, sensing his victory, put his proposition again to us. My brother said nothing. Mr Shabangu laughed and then walked off.

We got to discussing this matter between us when he left. 'What a silly old man,' said my brother. 'But R100 is R100,' said a friend. 'What we could do with R100!' said another, in awe. We sat there silent. 'Mr Shabangu is a fool,' said my brother. 'Yes, we should have bet him the R100,' said a friend. My brother was visibly shaken. 'I'm going to find out if he has a face in a box,' said my brother. 'I know he is mad.'

My brother got up and went down the road.

Then we did not see my brother again for three days. Suddenly he sauntered up to where me and my friends were sitting and joined us. 'Well, did you find out about Mr Shabangu?' I said. 'Does he keep faces in a box?' 'Yes, many,' said my brother, and his face was happy, but his voice was different. He sounded like quite an old man. 'Could you lend me R100 to pay Mr Shabangu?' At this we laughed. My brother was very clever and he sometimes made clever jokes. Then he began to tell us sad stories about 'poor' Mr Shabangu who needed the money. His wife was sick. He had ten children. He had to pay rent. My brother went on and on. This was not like my brother at all. But it was very funny. We laughed and laughed. Then my brother got furious. 'I want *my* R100!' he said. And he pulled a long cross face. We laughed and laughed. At this my brother stood up. 'I am Mr Shabangu,' he said. 'I am wearing the face of your brother.' At this we were struck silent. 'Is it not the face of your brother?' he said. We laughed and agreed. 'And is this not the voice of Mr Shabangu?' Well, it certainly sounded like him. 'If I can prove to you that I am Mr Shabangu, will you give me R100?' he asked. 'Yes,' we agreed laughingly. 'Look in this box,' he said.

We looked in the small box that he pulled out from nowhere. In it, it was misted. It was like far away. I saw a figure of a boy running. He was wearing my brother's clothes. My friends agreed that it was him. He turned. He had no face!

We turned to Mr Shabangu in horror. He had a notebook in his hand. 'Let me see,' he said, jotting in the book. 'That's R100 your brother owes me, and R100 you must pay ...'

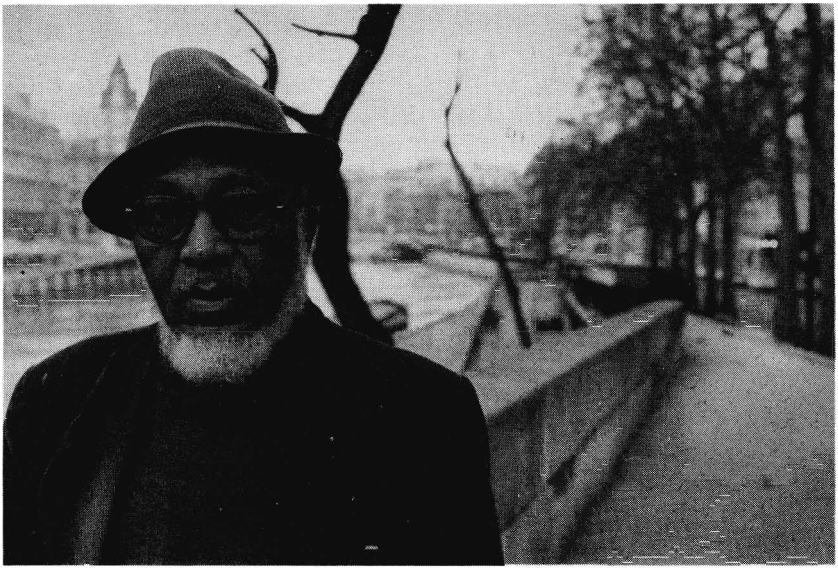


Photo: Cedric Nunn

GÉRARD SEKOTO

A Perspective on his Art

'All that I do, even outside South Africa, is still with the eye, the heart and the soul of the land of my birth. I must hear and listen to the cares, the joys and gaieties which shoulder all the sufferings, injustice, greeds and hatreds ... and yet still look forward into building up a future suitable to the honour of mankind.' Thus Gérard Sekoto spoke of his art on 8 January 1987.

A year later, on Sunday 28 February 1988, an exhibition of his work was opened by Professor Njabulo Ndebele at the Cassirer Fine Art Gallery in Rosebank, Johannesburg. The exhibition comprised drawings and paintings which formed part of the artist's private collection and which, through the generosity of Mr Rheinhold Cassirer, were put on sale entirely for Sekoto's benefit. Mr Cassirer was assisted by Ms Brita Ellis and Mr David Koloane in this venture. Several oil paintings and watercolours, loaned by their owners, were included in the exhibition to allow viewers an insight into Gérard Sekoto's earlier work. This afforded the public some idea of the path Sekoto has travelled since he began painting professionally in 1938.

In 1938 Sekoto left his teaching post at Khaiso Secondary School, Pietersburg, and travelled to Johannesburg with the intention of becoming an artist.

He lived with his cousin in Sophiatown and his first paintings were on brown paper using poster paints. Three examples of this early work, owned by Mr Nimrod Ndebele, were exhibited. 'Labourers in Sophiatown' (oil/board 29,5 x 44,5 cm, unsigned, c. 1938-9, collection: Mr Nimrod Ndebele) depicts a typical South African scene with its concomitant philosophy of the white man overseeing labourers digging, shovelling and pushing laden wheelbarrows. The depiction of trees in the background represents an early version of a theme that became one of fascination for the artist and which was developed into a complex personal language during the Eastwood period which spanned the years 1945-1947.

In his opening address at the exhibition, Njabulo Ndebele referred to the influence 'Labourers in Sophiatown' and other paintings in his parental home, by Sekoto, had on his developing intellect: 'These three paintings have become part and parcel of my life, part and parcel of my understanding of the problems of this country because of the kind of things which Sekoto attempted to depict.'

While Sekoto was living in Sophiatown his nephew, Fred Norman, introduced him to Brother Rogers at St Peter's Secondary School. Brother Rogers encouraged Sekoto and took him to the Gainsborough Gallery, where the artist experienced his first taste of success and was launched on his career. He met Judith Gluckman who taught him the technique of oil painting and of stretching canvases. After a second successful exhibition he moved to District Six, Cape Town, in 1942. Here he joined the New Group and participated in its joint exhibitions. In 1945 he returned to Eastwood in the Transvaal where his mother and stepfather were living. In 1947 the success of two exhibitions enabled him to pay his passage to England on the *Carnarvon Castle,* and from there to France.

The most important works of Sekoto's career belong to the Eastwood period. By this time Sekoto had matured into a self-confident artist, equally proficient in both watercolours and oils. He was painting prolifically and such great compositions as 'Sixpence a Door' (included in the SA Touring Exhibition and admired by the Queen Mother at the Tate Gallery opening) were created in Eastwood.

'The Young Man Reading' (oil/canvas 24,5 x 35 cm, signed, c. 1945-6, private collection) exemplifies this maturity. Sekoto's rich colour usage, the fluid brushwork and harmonious composition, are typical features of this period. The painting highlights the interest Sekoto had in the portrayal of human hands. The elongated fingers and bony structure suggest an animistic quality, where hands inhabit a world of their own.

On his arrival in Paris, Sekoto felt a certain alienation created by barriers which the French seemed to construct around themselves. The fact that he spoke and understood no French increased his loneliness: 'In restaurants, I would try to listen to the sound of words and the rhythm with the hope of using those as stepping-stones into getting acquainted with the language, but all I could hear was just a mystification of sounds! Although at times certain sounds would slightly resemble our vernacular tongue at home. The gestures also somehow could have been made by some of us — yet I understood nothing.'

Sekoto found a job playing the piano every night in a bar and attended drawing classes during the day. He met the owner of a gallery, where his one-man show in 1949 was not a success. He quarrelled with the gallery owner and as a result was bundled off by the French police to St Anne's, an asylum, where he remained for two months.

Fifteen drawings done at St Anne's formed an important part of the exhibition at Cassirer Fine Art in February 1988. Sekoto focused on the inmates, concentrating on their sense of desperation, their introversion and their alienation from their environment. 'The Black Beret' (charcoal drawing/paper 23 x 31 cm, signed 1949, private collection) depicts a man lost in a world of his own private thoughts.

The St Anne's drawings are important in Sekoto's oeuvre because they concentrate for a rare moment on his French environment. An essentially Gallic quality emerges despite the universality of the theme of people suffering, neglected and alone. It is only in his very recent work done at Nogent-sur-Marne (1987-8) that Sekoto once again looks at his French fellow citizens. For the rest of his 40 years in exile, the everyday lives of the French remain alien to him and Sekoto prefers to recreate an African memory.

Njabulo Ndebele's comments enlighten the subject matter of these drawings further: 'These people are dejected but at the same time there is the faint suggestion that people are in these conditions not because they like it, but because they can't help it. We have to understand somehow that they have to get out of these conditions.' Ndebele also discussed the 'ordinariness' of the subject matter, not only of the St Anne's drawings but of all Sekoto's work. The interest of this 'ordinariness' is that it allowed the 'imagining of a certain kind of heroism of people struggling to survive against the greatest odds, in the townships or under deprived conditions. In this was the triumph of the human spirit attempting to survive under these conditions.' Ndebele suggested that the significance of this ordinary subject matter was that the heroic is to be found in the simple things of life. 'Heroism begins there and goes back there.'

Ivor Powell (*Weekly Mail,* 4 March 1988) does not share the perceptions of Prof. Ndebele as to the subtleties of the St Anne's drawings. 'Even the series of portraits from St Anne's Mental Hospital ... lacks any real conviction, any sense of something beyond the superficial appearances of madness or mental disturbances.'

Sekoto's own response, however, is: 'I am also in agreement with Njabulo's philosophy of ''the simple things of life'' — heroism beginning there and going back there .... This shows the wisdom of his humbleness.' Ndebele's speech was important to Sekoto in that 'his optimistic outlook for the culture of our country will be a weapon to overcome our problems and to construct ''uprights'' for our tomorrows. Njabulo continues to look into the future — regarding children as being particularly important as constructors for our tomorrows. I admire also his comparison of the St Anne's drawings to those of life outside. His insight shows that he has the piercing eye and the sensitivity of mind to judge as to what to take or leave out. It is to our pride that he has had that eye to peer into this unknowingness within me. I feel strengthened to keep on, since ''out of the howling of my brush'' he has captured with so much sobriety in the equilibrium of his mind those sounds and sifted them out into clearly stated words so as to sledge them on and on forward to where life is leading us.' (14 March 1988)

Ivor Powell also refers to the later work and the 'tragedy of the artist cut off from his subject matter'. While this might be true, it is unmindful of the distinctive periods which emerge in Sekoto's art in successive decades with recurrent themes being explored at different times in different ways.

Shortly after Sekoto's arrival in Paris a certain stylization crept into the handling of his subject matter and a heavy outline was introduced, creating a remote quality. 'Head of a Mandebele' (oil/canvas 40 x 32,5 cm, signed, c. 1950, private collection) introduces a halo of light behind the head, a device that Sekoto used frequently during the fifties. At worst this created an atmosphere of sentiment and at best an air of unreality and artificiality. Colour usage altered and the rich resonance and clarity of the earlier works became muted. The thick impasto of the Eastwood period gave way to thinner washes of oil paint, and gouache became the most frequently used medium. This was in a measure due to economic considerations and working conditions.

In correspondence Sekoto confirmed the changes. 'The reason for stylisation came out of a fear of the jungles all around. Varieties of style in the new place made me feel stubborn not to lose my personality. Life was not fluent; I was mentally uneasy — which could explain the distancing.' (14 February 1987) He also comments that 'quality and texture could and do change owing

to the artist's environment, circumstances at various moments, general atmosphere and climatic conditions, contacts and experiences in a new environment, together with facing a new world of art'. (3 April 1987)

In the sixties Sekoto developed his 'Blue Head' series. Prof. Es'kia Mphahlele speaks to his muse, his 'Blue Head' in his autobiography, *Afrika My Music* and has, in so doing, enshrined the series forever.

'Woman's Head' (oil/canvas 63,5 x 48,5 cm, signed 1963, collection Es'kia Mphahlele) is described by the owner: 'Your large painting of an African head hanging on the wall opposite me. A young woman's. The most precious of my art collection .... Yes, this African maid you painted. Tonight, as so often, she seems to take on a different life .... Big eyes, big lips, firm, youthful jaws, a handkerchief casually but elegantly worn, a stylised straight neck, a collarbone pulling with a horizontal tension ... and she continues to stare obliquely out of the wall, now part of the scene, now aloof from it.' (*Afrika My Music* Es'kia Mphahlele: Ravan Press 1984, pp. 60-1)

In 1966 Sekoto travelled to Senegal where he attended the First Festival of Negro Artists in Dakar. For a year he travelled through the country and as he absorbed his new surroundings, his work was imbued with a new energy and vitality. 'Although we were French-speaking foreigners, we could get around much more easily than in those shutters of Paris. We could get close to expressing the feeling of what the eye was seeing. With the sun shining bright, colours were warm. Gestures, facial expressions, tone of speech and the general movement of daily life were not too far apart from what we had been acquainted with from youth.' (4 November 1987) 'Under the Umbrella' (oil/canvas 50 x 65 cm, signed 1967, private collection) emphasizes the elongated proportions of the Senegalese which fascinated Sekoto, a man of short and stocky proportions.

He had to return to Paris for personal reasons and in the seventies he concentrated more and more on his recollections of the townships of South Africa, on Senegalese scenes and on the images of the heads he had painted in the sixties. 'Township Discussion' (mixed media/paper 50 x 32 cm, signed 1974, collection Dr S Andor) is a memory of Eastwood Township near Pretoria. The immediacy of the early work is no longer evident and the attention to infinite detail has waned.

Sekoto is at present full of optimism and determination. He says 'the past is gone, and I look forward to doing better and better ... that's the reason (most of the time) that the past is often almost rubbed off'. (14 February 1987) When asked whether he longs for the country of his birth, he says: 'I am not a political exile. I came on my own to stay here and had never dreamt of gold at

all costs, except of spiritual gold. Therefore I have never suffered from nostalgia or homesickness, although I think always of home happenings and of course have feelings of great concern, as a South African.' (20 February 1987)

Ndebele suggested that the significance of the opening of the exhibition lay in the reminder of why Gérard Sekoto had left for Paris. 'He was looking for a certain kind of freedom that he couldn't find in the land of his birth. His decision to stay away should be a constant reminder to us of the quality of life that should have made it impossible for him to leave: a quality of life that we should have had here. This occasion should remind us of what we should have had all along: Gérard Sekoto should have been developing among us and enriching the quality of perception of all of us, about what we all are.'

In response to 'this most thrilling speech' of Ndebele, Sekoto comments: 'No-one has ever come to me with suggestions which I rejected by saying "I shall not go back as long as apartheid is there". But I have often said that I am no politician yet I hate apartheid because it is against my philosophy of life. This I could repeat even if I happen to one day be at home on a visit.'

If culture can be effective as a catalyst for change towards a post-apartheid society, Gérard Sekoto's contribution is a source of inspiration and vision. A collection of over 200 of his paintings over the years has been photographed and documented. It will be published in book form in August 1988 with text written by Sekoto. All royalties from its sales will go directly to him. It is hoped that this book will stand as a monument to Gérard Sekoto, the father of contemporary black South African art. It will be a permanent record of his contribution to the cultural history of this country.

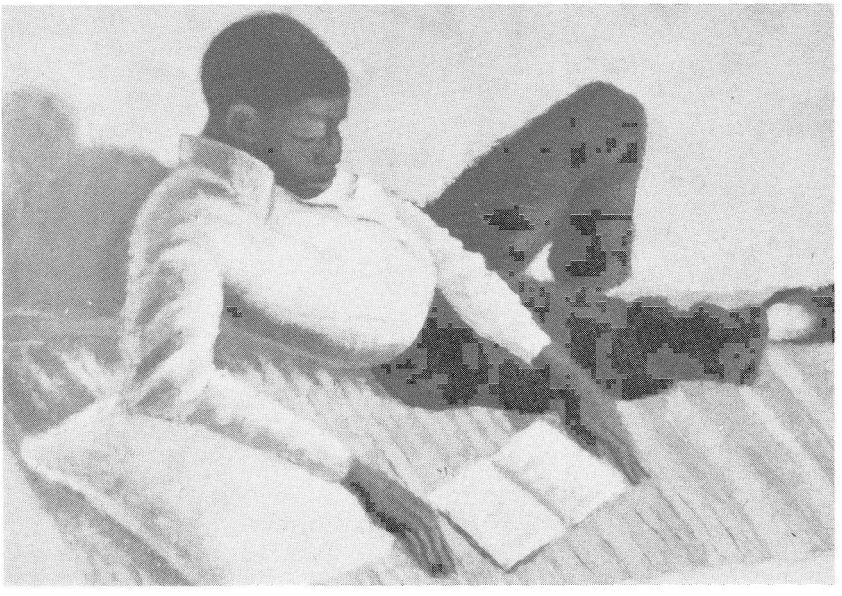
Barbara Lindop

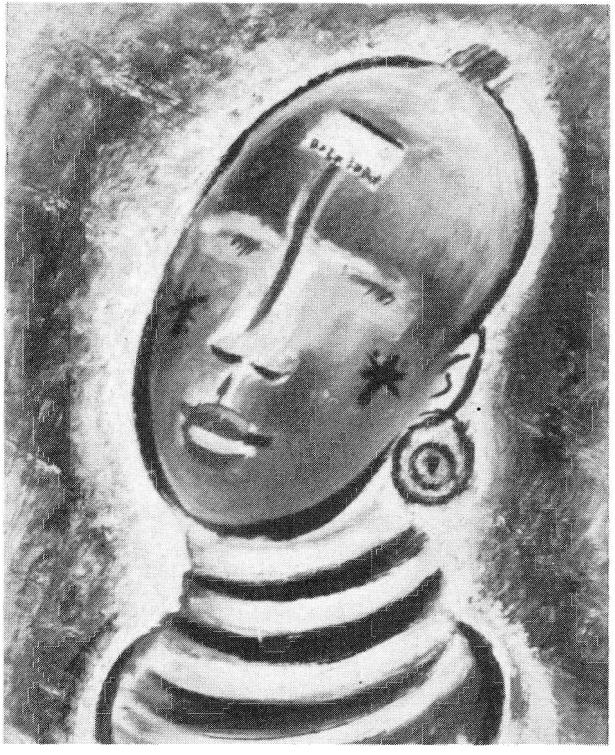
James and Jimi Matthews with Gerard Sekoto in his Paris studio, 1981.

Photo: Graham de Smidt

The Black Beret
(charcoal drawing/paper 23 x 31 cm
Signed 1949 Private collection)

The Young Man Reading
(oil/canvas 24,5 x 35 cm
Signed c.1945-6 Private collection)

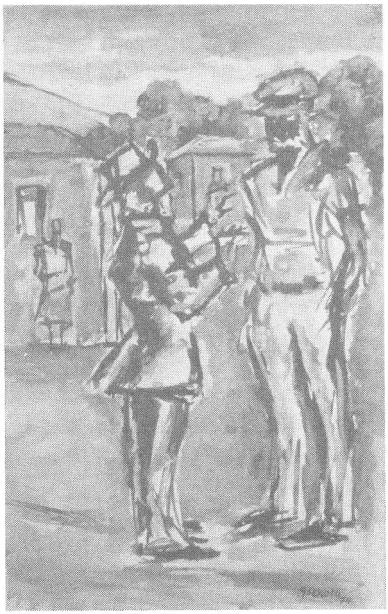




Head of Mandebele
(oil/canvas 40 x 32,5 cm
Signed c.1950 Private collection)

Woman's Head
(oil/canvas 63,5 x 48,5 cm
Signed 1963 Collection: Prof. Es'kia Mphahlele)

Under the Umbrella
(oil/canvas 50 x 65 cm
Signed 1967 Private collection)



Township Discussion
(mixed media/paper 50 x 32 cm
Signed 1974 Collection: Dr S. Andor)

Siyayinyova

Zakhele Charles Ndaba

'Uzuka amakinati! Uzuka amakinati! ... Uzuka amakinati.' The high pitched voice of a slim untidy boy cried persistently as he paced the crowded station platform. He was painfully thin with white probing eyes and unkept bushy hair. He was barefooted and his torn trousers and shirt showed signs of not having been washed for quite some time.

Every now and then a passenger would beckon him and the boy would quickly dash to him with his bulging plastic bag already open. The passenger would take one or more packets of nuts, hand over some coins to the boy and perhaps accept change. Bowing in respect the boy would sling his bag and continue pacing the platform shouting contentedly.

Mzwandile, perched on a wooden bench between a plumpy middle-aged woman and a huge night watchman, looked at the boy with keen interest. Everything about the boy reminded him of his own childhood: the apparent poverty, the untidiness, almost everything. Indeed there had even been time in his boyhood when he had been a fruit vendor at KwaMashu station. Coming home from school each day he had to go and stand near the booking office in rain, wind and sun and would scream at the commuters pleading with them to buy his fruits.

Like all children he had then entertained fantastic illusions and reveries about his future. He would grow up into a rich successful man who would drive slick cars and own posh mansions. He had never bothered to think how he would acquire his fortunes. But years had come and gone bringing him closer to reality. Firstly, he had to leave school because his widowed mother could no longer afford to keep him there. Then he experienced the hardships of life as an unemployed person for a couple of years. When he finally secured employment it was not for long. After working for only eight months he was retrenched. He had never found work since, and with his mother out of work due to illness the situation at home was worsening by the day. All his younger brothers and sisters had had to leave school even long before the 'comrades' boycott started.

He had done all he could to try and get a job, waking up at dawn each morning to walk all the many kilometres to the city and returned by train each afternoon tired, hungry and frustrated. Each time he had entered his cold, sordid house, his mother had jumped

to her feet and asked 'Uhambe kanjani namuhla mntanami — How did you go today my child?' He would simply shrug his shoulders and walk to the bedroom that he shared with his three younger brothers leaving his mother sobbing miserably.

But today he was bringing home good news. He had been offered a job at the very first place he had gone to. He had pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming when the bald-headed white man told him that he had been employed. He learned later that there were several vacancies due to the expulsion of one thousand workers who had gone on strike the previous day. 'Serves them right,' he had thought to himself. 'How can they be thinking of strikes at such bad times when work is so hard to get?'

He was still submerged in his thoughts, the little boy who sold peanuts was now long forgotten, when the station announcer reported the impending arrival of a KwaMashu bound train. There was a stampede as the commuters jostled and pushed, each one making for the edge of the platform so as to secure a space inside the train. Mzwandile, like everyone else, rose from his seat and began pushing his way towards the platform edge. But to everyone's disappointment the train did not come as soon as they expected.

It was only after some time that the electric train rattled and hissed to a standstill. There was yet another stampede as passengers fought for the doors and the seats. Eventually, with the train full to overflowing, it started off with a violent jerk.

At first Mzwandile was too occupied by his thoughts to listen to gossips and conversations that were being exchanged in the train. He was thinking of what he would do for his family now that he was to start working. Their four roomed house needed much renovation. The old, tattered furniture needed to be changed. His mother, his brothers and sisters needed clothing. He himself needed decent clothing. Very soon he would also need to think about getting married. His brothers and sisters would have to return to school even if it meant sending them somewhere far away where the 'comrades' would not disturb them.

He was disturbed in his thoughts by an elderly man who was talking at the top of his voice, criticizing Christianity. 'Basitshela ngoJesu. They tell us about Jesus. What business do we have to do with him? We have our own ancestors who are black like us and who are part of our blood ...'

'Batshele mfowethu — Tell them brother. We are tired of having

our forefathers called Demons,' supported the huge night watchman who had sat next to Mzwandile at the station.

That conversation did not last long. It was disturbed by the angry voice of a stout woman who was hurling abuse at a heavily drunken young man who had trampled on her feet. 'Sorry phela mama. I was trying to go to the toilet,' apologized the young man in a drunken voice. 'I ... hic ... I ...' 'Dlula phela sphukuphuku,' the woman returned angrily. Frightened, the young man staggered onwards to the toilet stopping every now and then to ask for an excuse or to apologize for trampling on someone's foot.

It was after an hour's uncomfortable ride that the train pulled to a standstill at KwaMashu station. There was yet another stampede as passengers fought for the only two open gates. But all the inconveniences of the day did not matter that much to Mzwandile. His spirits were high for he was bringing home good news. Even the long journey home from the station which he had to walk was not a hassle today.

His mother greeted him the usual way, 'Uhambe kanjani namuhla mntanami — How did you go today my child?' He did not answer immediately. His lips parted into a smile and he opened his arms to his mother. His mother, a frail, sullen woman who looked tired of life ran into his arms. 'I knew it my son. I knew God would never forsake us,' she said sobbing in joy. They fell on their knees and prayed for a long time. It was a great day for the old woman and her son. There were ecstatic chants and much singing of religious songs.

'I just hope that your finding a job will bring your brothers and your younger sister to order, Mzwandile,' the old woman said.

'What do you mean mama?' Mzwandile enquired puzzled.

'Since they left school they have been associating with bad elements. They have even joined abo ''siyayinyova''. You need to talk to them my son. You will be surprised at what they say about umntwana waKwaPhindangene. You certainly need to talk to them my son.'

Indeed when his three brothers Thulani, Vusi and Sibusiso together with the younger of his two sisters, Nokuthula came home that evening, Mzwandile thought that he should have a chat with them. So, after having a supper of pap and beans, he summoned them all to the room that he shared with his three brothers.

'Firstly,' he began with a smile, 'I would like to tell you the good news. I found a job today at a chemical industry.' To his disappointment no one seemed impressed by this news. His smile

vanished at once. In a low serious tone he said, 'I hope you are all aware what this means: an end to long years of hunger and poverty. It means you are going back to school to build for yourselves a brighter future. Doesn't all that make you happy?'

There was a momentary silence. Then suddenly Thulani, a handsome, broad-shouldered young man said, 'We appreciate your care for us Bhuti. But I must say that we are not at all impressed by what you have said. Your having got a job will not bring an end to our poverty or our sufferings. Our returning to school will not bring us a brighter future as you so naively envisage. Our poverty, our sufferings, the hard dark times through which we are presently going, are all the result of the system that governs us. They will only come to an end once we have brought about the downfall of that system.'

Mzwandile was so taken aback that he simply stared at his brother, gaping in amazement. 'You don't know what you are talking about Thulani. That is politics,' Mzwandile said after he had recovered from his shock.

His brother laughed sarcastically. 'What is it that is not politics in our lives when even going to the toilet is politics?' Thulani asked with a wry smile. 'Bhuti,' he went on, 'you are free to do what you will with your life. But please do not try to obstruct us from treading the hard but great path that we have decided to take. I must also warn you that time for neutrality has long passed. By taking any step, notwithstanding how neutral you may think it is, you are in fact identifying with one of the two sides: the people's side or that of the oppressor. That unfortunately is the reality of our situation. And for your information there is no going to work tomorrow. Awuphathwa! Azikhwelwa ! People demand rents and fares they can afford.'

Mzwandile's perception of this was mixed. It was clearly depicted by his facial expression which continuously changed, like a chameleon changing its colours from fright to bewilderment and finally to anger. 'Nonsense!' he bawled angrily. He rose from his squeaking bed and paced around the room. 'I know what I am doing and no one will frighten me off. You are just a bunch of misled kids.'

'Is that so Buthi?' Thulani asked sarcastically.

'Shut up you stupid!' Mzwandile bawled angrily. 'I thought I was trying to give you everything in life. But look how you thank me. You mock me. You make me appear like a fool. But we shall see where abo ''siyayinyova'' will get you. You will certainly remember me one day.'

'You will certainly remember us one day Bhuti,' Thulani said.

'Shut up before I lose my temper and skin you alive!' Mzwandile retorted.

There was tension by the time they went to bed. Mzwandile did not have a peaceful night. He turned and squirmed all night. He suddenly found himself recalling his childhood — the many disappointments he had suffered in life, his short spell at school, his many years as a fruit vendor, his many years as a job seeker, the poverty of his family and the many threats of eviction for failing to pay rent. Remembering all this his brother's words came back to him: No brighter future and no end to suffering would be brought about by him finding a job. Indeed at the back of his mind a worrying thought kept on telling him that all this was true. He had worked before, yet his family's miseries had never been brought to an end. He drifted to dreamland still troubled by his conscience and confused mind.

The old woman woke him up at daybreak. She had prepared warm water and a cup of tea on a bonfire outside the house because there was no paraffin for the primus stove. He washed and drank his tea in low spirits, a fact that he did his best to hide from his mother. He had not even told her about the previous night's discussions with his brothers and sister. When he had finished his tea he put on his best trousers and shirt, which were getting worn out, and left for the station.

There was no one else on the way to the station. He was only greeted by defiant posters exclaiming: Azikhelwa! Awuphathwa! Asiyitheli! Then he remembered that it was the day of the big strike when everyone in the township would stay at home. Again he remembered his brother's words.

At the station he bought his ticket and waited all alone for the train. It came half an hour later. He knew that soon the township would be buzzing with the 'comrades' singing and chanting in the streets and that if they found him there he would be doused with petrol and set alight. He had heard too many such stories since 'abo siyayinyova' had come to rule the township.

There were very few people in the train, all of them looking frightened and somewhat guilty, and the long journey to the city seemed endless. To make matters worse, the train delayed at Umgeni station so that it only arrived at Berea station a quarter of an hour later than scheduled. Mzwandile dashed for his new workplace. But no! His employer would have none of him. 'Late, right on the first day?' the boss asked angrily.

'No Sir ... I mean er ... baas. It was the train ...'

'Shut up and beat it right now! You are late today and tomorrow you will be crying: "I want more money" and you will go on strike. That is all that you black lot know.'

Pleading with the angry boss did not help. Eventually Mzwandile had to turn and go home vexed and frustrated. He remembered his brother's words once more and for the first time he wished that he had taken heed of them. Yes, his brother was right. Why had he not realized that earlier? There would be no end to miseries while the system that governed was still in power. Look how that goddamn white man had treated him as if it was his fault that he was late. Yes, he had now made his decision: He would join the 'comrades' and bring an end to all this. Yes he would join the 'comrades'.

The train crawled slowly like a tortoise, stopping several times for no apparent reason, until it reached KwaMashu. The sun was already up, gradually approaching its zenith. He alighted, noticing that the station, like the train, was deserted. Only when he had gone through the gates did he meet a group of youths. 'Impimpi — a sell-out!' the youths shouted.

He came to a sudden standstill, frightened. 'No, I am now changed. Please listen,' he pleaded. No one seemed to be listening to his pleas. The youths were closing in on him. 'I am Thulani's brother. I want to be one of you.'

His voice became submerged in the deafening noise of the angry youths who were now right on top of him. Suddenly they started stoning him. 'Hold it! I am now one of you!' he pleaded. No one seemed to pity him. They stoned him. They clubbed him with kieries. They kicked him until he fell, bleeding.

'Bring some petrol and the necklace quick!' someone was shouting. He yelled for help and pleaded for mercy as he turned and squirmed in deep pain.

In a minute a tyre was put around his neck and doused with petrol. Then someone struck a match and threw it at him. He caught a glimpse of his brother, Thulani, who was silent, looking at him expressionlessly. 'If only I had listened to you,' Mzwandile shouted. But his brother remained silent. Then he felt the burning pain as the flames licked his body. They kicked him, clubbed him and stoned him till he felt his heart's pace slowing down. Then as his life slipped away in deep agony, he heard his brother's voice shouting: 'Siyayinyova!'


Tyrone Appollis '86

SOCIALIST EXPLORATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICAN FICTION:

The Case of Alex la Guma's 'A Matter of Taste' and Abraham de Vries's 'Die Uur van die Idiote'

Critical practice is as much a product of its times as the works and processes it analyses. It need not, however, share the ideological features and aspirations of the works it analyses. This essay sets out to develop a critical practice and method closely congruent to the ideological dimensions of the texts it examines.

The major South African literary works from at least 1948 have, almost without exception, illustrated and in various ways critically opposed the repressive forces in the country. Barbara Harlow's account of resistance literature offers, in my view, a very suggestive framework and typology for understanding contemporary South African literature. She writes: 'The struggle for national liberation and independence ... has produced a significant corpus of literary writing, both narrative and poetic, as well as a broad spectrum of theoretical analyses of the political, ideological, and cultural parameters of this struggle.'[1] This is true even in the case of works where the precise nature of South African oppression is not described: for example, in certain of the novels of J.M. Coetzee and stories of Njabulo Ndebele.[2] The forbidding presence of South African oppression cannot be banished, whether it is directly alluded to or merely implied.

This is not, of course, to suggest that there is a uniformity of subject-matter and technique in the major South African literary works of the past few decades. Yet there is, as I have suggested, a certain area of shared aspirations within these works: an area loosely shared on the basis of the writers' opposition to the oppressive practices of the State. Recent South African literature of note can fairly be called a literature of resistance.

Opposition to the governing order in a country can take a number of forms: passive resistance, armed opposition, and citizens choosing to leave the country are some of the more obvious practices and directions people follow. Similarly, there are a variety of ideological bases from which opposition to a right-wing State can arise: from liberalism through to radical forms of Marxism.

Since the 1950s there has been a series of shifts in the nature of the opposition to the State within South Africa. The prevailing trend of passive resistance

and civil disobedience during the 1950s is now only one of the forms of opposition being practised in the country. Over the years there has been a marked move towards the adoption of forms of armed and militant resistance which now exist alongside those of passive opposition. Similarly there have been a number of parallel shifts in the contending ideologies of opposition within the country. Liberalism, the prevailing and dominant ideology of opposition to the State in the 1950s, is now only one among a variety of ideologies in favour of change. In fact, I think it is fair to say that liberalism has, to a very large degree, been supplanted by more radical forms of ideology within resistance thinking in South Africa today.[3]

These kinds of shifts are observable in the literary works of this period. Stephen Clingman, for instance, has described these changes within the novels and thought of Nadine Gordimer.[4] What one sees happening in South African writing since the 1950s is a set of changes which correspond closely to the critical questioning and challenges that have been directed at liberal views and practices. These changes are discernible both in terms of the form and content of the works.

The majority of South African literary works from the late 1940s until the mid-1970s deal with oppression almost solely in terms of colour: the black people of South Africa being oppressed by the whites. The modes of social analysis are almost exclusively those based upon liberal models of society. However, by the mid-1970s there is a discernible shift in the way in which certain prominent writers are dealing with the issue of oppression. This shift is in part informed by certain increasingly apparent features within South African society. The nature of oppression requires a more sophisticated understanding of certain of the changing processes within the society. For example, it has become apparent that certain groups of black South Africans have been co-opted into the oppressive organs of the State. To take one obvious example, bantustan chiefs have become figures of enormous power within their 'fiefdoms' and have little compunction in forcing measures quite as harsh and restrictive as those elsewhere in South Africa upon the people under their jurisdiction.

Moreover, from the late 1960s, a vigorous debate has arisen in the field of South African historiography between liberal historians and those holding Marxist views.[5] One of the key points of discussion between the two camps has been whether apartheid inhibits the functioning of the capitalist state or not. Regardless of which of these positions one finds oneself agreeing with, the debate has sharpened awareness that apartheid has an unpalatable relationship with capitalism. There are obvious areas in the South African economy

where apartheid has served capitalist interests very handsomely.

And among an increasing number of prominent writers, there is frank dissatisfaction or at least a sense of uneasiness with liberal ideology and its worldview. Liberalism is simply unable to deal at all adequately with the complexities and nature of the oppression in South Africa. It has certainly proved itself unable to effect the kind of changes that are necessary in South Africa at present. Further, within the context of South African literary history itself there is what Christopher Hope has called 'a sense of exhaustion' with the subject of apartheid: 'the field has been crossed and recrossed so many times,' he observes.[6] There is a need for new approaches.

Writers have become increasingly dissatisfied with portraying the society simply in terms of white oppression of blacks. To a greater or lesser degree, writers such as Nadine Gordimer, Christopher Hope, Mongane Serote, and J.M. Coetzee have shown interest in their works in the way power is deployed in the country and the way power is being sought by oppositional groups. Moreover, there is a certain awareness that what is of key issue in South Africa is not which of these various groups will eventually wrest power from the Afrikaner nationalists, but the nature of the society that is likely and desirable at that point. Without trying to oversimplify the matter, what blend of socialism and capitalism is likely to emerge and should we be prepared to pursue.

In most recent South African literary works these concerns are merely hinted at lightly and not examined in a sustained way. They are, however, of great importance in certain of Nadine Gordimer's, Christopher Hope's and Alex la Guma's recent novels.[7] I shall at present defer critical discussion of these works and confine myself in the remainder of this essay to an examination of two short stories which consciously set up debates about the nature of society. Both of them offer critiques of capitalist society and gesture towards the advantages of socialism. Certain of their ideas and methods also occur in the novels by the authors mentioned above.

'A Matter of Taste' was written by Alex la Guma towards the end of the 1950s at the time when he was appearing in court with 155 others accused of high treason against the State.[8]

La Guma and his family have a long history of involvement with radical political opposition in South Africa.[9] Alex's father, James, joined the Communist Party of South Africa in 1924 and was a member of its central committee when it was outlawed in 1950. Alex joined the Young Communist League in 1947. During the 1950s he was active in the Coloured Peoples Congress. He was a prominent member of the African National Congress until his death in Cuba in 1985. He had served as ANC representative in England

and then in Cuba for over fifteen years at the time of his death.

Against this background it is not surprising to find that La Guma's fiction is richly imbued with qualities and insights about society that are drawn from his commitment to socialism. In this respect, La Guma's fiction anticipates lines of enquiry that have become more apparent in South African fiction from the mid-1970s on.

'A Matter of Taste' describes the brief encounter of two black railway workers and a poor white man. The men get on well with one another; help one another; share their meagre supply of food; swap jokes. This is one of the few pieces of South African writing which describes cooperation between black and white people. And it is not incidental in this story that the people who do this are at the very bottom of the society. In Marxist terms, they are members of the proletariat; people who do not own the means of production. It is interesting to remark how La Guma's story both hints at the possibility of a non-racial working class alliance in South Africa and suggests its limits.

Such an alliance between white and black workers has been a long cherished ideal among certain left-wing thinkers and groups in South Africa since the early part of the century. However, from at least the early 1940s, with the formation of the ANC Youth League, this view has been seriously challenged. Since then, groupings such as the Pan Africanist Congress, the Black Consciousness Movement and the National Forum have continued to hold a critical view of the possibility of creating a non-racial working class alliance in the country.[10] Their goal is the creation of a socialist State built upon the revolutionary aspirations and needs of black workers.

In La Guma's story, cooperation between black and white workers is described; yet the nature of their cooperation is short-lived and occurs in an area far removed from working-class opposition to the State. The story seems to express a wistful longing for a non-racial working class alliance and at the same time realizes the impossibility of its attainment in South Africa. At the time this story was written (in the late 1950s) this realization was becoming more emphatic: the Nationalist Party had gone a long way to ensuring the total severance of white and black working class interests.

At the heart of La Guma's story there is the following exchange. Chinaboy, one of the black workers, muses:

> 'I'd like to sit down in a smart caffy one day and eat my way right out of a load of turkey, roast potatoes, beet-salad and angel's food trifle...'
>
> 'Hell,' said Whitey (the white fellow), 'it's all a matter of taste. Some people like chicken and other's eat sheep's heads and beans!'
>
> 'A matter of taste,' Chinaboy scowled. 'Bull, it's a matter of money,

pal. I worked six months in that caffy and I never heard nobody order sheep's head and beans!' (p.128)

Chinaboy's view suggests that many, if not most, of our decisions are determined by our economic status in society: '... it's a matter of money, pal.' And the story itself suggests that the economic status of the characters — their relationship to the means of production, if you like — offers a powerful determination to the ways in which they interact with one another.

The conversation between Whitey and Chinaboy and, indeed, La Guma's title of the story, suggest that there is, however, another component in social interaction and decision-making: a sphere of private likes and dislikes; 'a matter of taste'. The story then seems to imply that there is a kind of dialectic between the poles of economic determinism and individualistic choice, although, as I suggested earlier, there is little doubt that the story sees the economic or class status of individuals as the primary determinant in social conduct.[11] La Guma nevertheless manages to avoid some of the rather rigid determinisms of Marxist class analysis in this story.

Abraham de Vries's 'Die Uur van die Idiote' ['The Hour of the Idiots'] is the title story of his collection of 1980.[12] De Vries is an Afrikaner who for most of his career has worked as a tertiary level Afrikaans and communications teacher. He is one of the country's most proficient Afrikaans short story writers. It is useful to consider his story against the backdrop of the so-called 'Muldergate' scandal of the late 1970s. This affair involved a massive misappropriation of public funds by leading members of the South African government; the process also came to involve a bungled cover-up attempt by some of the key people caught up in the scandal.

'Die Uur van die Idiote' is an elaborate and brilliantly plotted story. It tells of a wealthy Afrikaner couple who have recently moved to a large house on the coast. The house itself is a replica of the so-called ostrich-palaces that were built at the end of the last century by Afrikaner farmers of the Oudtshoorn district with the wealth they had recently acquired during the ostrich feather boom. We are told of a contemporary murder in the Karoo which has brought to light one of the district's best-kept and most grotesque secrets. A young woman, an orphan, has been murdered at the site where one of the ostrich-palaces used to stand. We learn that at the time of the boom, the farmers, in order to preserve their wealth within a small group of families, married off their children to one another. Idiots were born from these unions.

These idiots were kept in the spacious cellars of the palaces and were tended by poor and orphan girls of the district. The idiots were granted one hour a week in which they could leave their basement prisons: between two and

three o'clock on Sunday afternoons while everyone else slept after lunch. This became known in the Karoo as the hour of the idiots. The final scenes of the story take place during a dinner party of wealthy 'New Afrikaners', at the couple's coastal house. De Vries offers a scathing satire of th emental and spiritual impoverishment of this well-to-do class. In a final sleight-of-hand he links the situation of these 'New Afrikaners,' who are seen sporting about in the newly equipped sauna and gym in the basement of the house, to that of the idiots of the earlier epoch.

La Guma's story describes the cooperative interaction of working class characters. De Vries's story, on the other hand, looks at the capitalist class at the top of the society; the people one assumes would be doing best out of the system. However, these wealthy Afrikaners are wretched.

De Vries appears to be offering some form of censure of capitalism, particularly as his story indicates that the misery of his well-to-do characters — their idiocy — stems directly from their private accumulation of wealth. De Vries is at pains to show at various points in his story the dehumanising power of private accumulation. For instance, he writes of the wealthy Afrikaners: '...each one of you simply has different names and faces, but you are like milk bottles, like tubes of tooth paste, like cars of the same make. Your doubles walk the streets of every city, of every village...' (Trump 1987: 121).[13]

Seen within the context of the 'Muldergate' scandal there certainly is a topical cutting-edge to his treatment of the New Afrikaners in this way. In the simplest of terms he indicates that greed is a vice which ultimately brings misery if not to those who are deprived as a result of it, then at least to the greedy themselves. His position seems similar to that of Dickens's censure of Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol.* And I would add that, as in the case of Dickens's novel, De Vries is offering a useful critique of capitalism, a system which if not exactly validating greed is certainly one marvellously serviceable to the greedy. In this light, I think it is valuable to think of De Vries, like Dickens, as being a proto-socialist writer.[14] Though the socialist character of De Vries's critique of society is not as clearly defined as that in La Guma's work, there is little doubt that De Vries's story is gesturing strongly in this direction and straining at liberal categories of social analysis. And it seems to me particularly interesting that this is taking place in the work of a contemporary Afrikaner writer, and possibly hints at future avenues for Afrikaans writing.

The South African liberation struggle has been conceived of and pursued in two ways: as an effort towards the creation of a democratic, unitary nation, and, in addition to this, the socialist transformation of the country. The second is often considered a goal to be pursued following the success of the former.[15]

The set of works that has characterized South African literature since the 1940s has been remarkably sympathetic to oppositional thinking and practice within the country. It is therefore not surprising to find that certain works have set about exploring the possibilities and parameters of what socialist transformation might entail for people in South Africa. In the case of the two stories examined here this exploration has been pursued in different, yet complementary ways. And it is perhaps worth concluding with the comment that this is the case despite the fact that La Guma and De Vries come from quite different groups within the community.[16] The fact that this is so seems to me to add in a coincidental and yet extremely satisfying way to the force of what they are saying in their stories. It will be interesting over the next period to see the kind of forms socialist writing takes within the South African context. As this article indicates, it certainly won't be building without precedents in the country's writing.

[1]Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, London, Methuen, 1987, p.xvi. For a complementary account of the literature of national liberation movements and with specific reference to the South African context, see Alex la Guma's 'Culture and Liberation' in *World Literature Written in English*, 1979, 18(1): 27-36.

[2]*Waiting for the Barbarians* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980) and *Foe* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986) by J.M. Coetzee; *Fools and Other Stories* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983) by Njabulo Ndebele.

[3]For detailed discussion of these changing patterns see Tom Lodge's *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983) and Janet Robertson's *Liberalism in South Africa 1948 - 1963* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

[4]Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (Johannesburg: Ravan. 1986)

[5]See Shula Marks's 'Towards a People's History of South Africa? Recent developments in the historiography of South Africa' in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

[6]Christopher Hope, 'The Political Novelist in South Africa' in *English in Africa*, 1985, 12(1) : 43.

[7]I am thinking particularly of Gordimer's *A Guest of Honour*, *Burger's Daughter*, and *A Sport of Nature*; Hope's *Kruger's Alp* and to a lesser extend *The Hottentot Room;* La Guma's *At the Fog of the Seasons' End* and *Time of the Butcherbird.*

[8]'A Matter of Taste' appears in Alex la Guma's *A Walk in the Night and Other Stories* (London: Heinemann Educational Books AWS, 1967).

[9]For biographical details about Alex la Guma, see Cecil A Abrahams's *Alex la Guma* (Boston: Twayne, 1985).

[10]For discussion of this topic see Neville Alexander's *Sow the Wind: Contemporary Speeches* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1985).

[11]For a similar fictional 'debate' about this issue, see la Guma's story 'Nocturne' (which appears in *Quartet*, ed. Richard River, London: Heinemann Educational Books AWS, 1965). Here a working class man is inexplicably drawn to classical music: the music of 'high bugs' (p. 115).

[12]Abraham H. de Vries, *Die Uur van die Idiote* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1980). An English translation of the title story appears in *Armed Vision: Afrikaans Writers in English*, ed. Martin Trump (Johannesburg: Donker, 1987).

[13]The Afrikaans original of this reads: '...julle het almal net ander name en ander gesigte, maar julle is soos melkbottels, soos buisies tandepasta, soos motors van dieselfde fabrikaat. Julle duplikate loop rond in elke stad, op elke dorp....' (De Vries, 1980: 15)

[14]This reading has been influenced by Arnold Kettle's 'Dickens and the Popular Tradition' (which appears in *Marxists on Literature: An Anthology*, ed. David Craig, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1975, 214 - 244). Kettle writes: 'Dickens was not a Chartist, but he could not, I think, have been the novelist he was without Chartism, and in the eighteen-fifties and sixties Dickens's novels carry forward the spirit of Chartism and in some ways even deepen it and bring it nearer the spirit of Socialism (217).' With obvious historical modifications to the current South African context I think that this kind of analysis also applies in the case of De Vries.

[15]This, it seems, is the position of the South African Communist Party of South Africa' in *Apartheid: A Collection of Writings on South African Racism by South Africans*, ed. Alex la Guma, E. Berlin: Seven Seas, 1971). To a certian extent it also applies to thinking within the Pan Africanist Congress and within the trade union movement.

[16]It is worth pointing out that both La Guma and De Vries have Afrikaans as their mother tongue. La Guma is designated a coloured in South Africa; De Vries is an Afrikaner.

The March

We march
in swollen silence
touching the sky
with our angry fists

We march
darkening the streets
Another funeral of
one of our best friends
A flood marching in tears

We march
engrossed with
the bitterness
of the moment
This moment of indecision
A moment of thinking
about yesterday's sins
Suffering today's
embittered by tomorrow's

You can see the shit
through your window
The world is laid out
before the fire to burn

Themba Miya

Photo: Robin Jacobs

From the Oral Tradition
Rise Eagle Rise ...

as told by Don Mattera

This is the story of the eagle that was raised among the chickens .... It is an old tale told by many leaders. One of them was an African scholar and preacher popularly known as "Aggrey of Africa," whose real name was James Aggrey. He lived in West Africa but died in America while on a lecturing tour.

Aggrey of Africa was one of the most educated and respected Africans of his day. He held several university degrees and travelled to many parts of the world to speak about Africa and her people. In the early 1920s he visited South Africa where he met and spoke to many people from all the walks of life.

Once upon a time, somewhere in the world, there were two men. One was called Mister Brains. The other was known as the Old Man.

Mister Brains was thirty years younger than his neighbour and much more educated. He had been to university and had read hundreds of books. The man was so full of himself that the villagers hardly ever spoke to him.

'He's vain and pompous like a frog that tells its name to everyone,' they said whenever he passed them on the road.

The Old Man on the other hand was simple, kind, humble and quiet. He could read, write and spell as well as anyone else, but did not go far in school. He knew a lot about life. He said it was his teacher, and that the world was his classroom.

The Old Man encouraged children to go to school. He said education — the right kind of education — was the key to understanding and growth. He always told them that education and status were not worth anything if there was no compassion. And the children loved and often visited his farm.

But grumpy Mister Brains did not fancy the Old Man. He found him too simple, too dull and too traditional, and never greeted him.

One summer day Mister Brains returned from the hills with a baby eagle which he placed among his chickens. For several days he fed it on oats, seeds and corn. The Old Man stared in disbelief and scratched his head.

'Say Mister Brains, but isn't that an eaglet?'

'Any fool can see that it is,' replied the clever man. His tone of voice was cold and abrupt.

'But ... but,' stammered the Old Man, 'what is it doing among those chickens? Why feed it on oats and seeds? That bird belongs

up there in the sky; next to the hills and the clouds and the sun!'

'I know that and I don't need an old fool to remind me. I want this baby eagle to live among these chickens and to behave like one. I want to prove that I can make an eagle believe it is a chicken. Simple,' said Mister Brains.

'But you are wrong; an eagle can never be a chicken. You are fighting against Nature and the order of things. No one can do that no matter how clever they are!'

'Well,' bragged Mister Brains, 'I CAN do it. I didn't go to university for nothing.' He flung more seeds and oats at the eagle. That went on for weeks and months and years. It grew to be an adult bird — huge and black and powerful but unaware of its beauty and its strength; living only the life that Mister Brains had designed for it. And when feeding time came the eagle ran and fed among its foster fowl family.

'Kiep! Kiep! Kiep!' shouted the clever man as he threw the seeds at the eagle year in and year out.

'See,' he pointed to the Old Man. 'I told you I could control the destiny of this dumb bird. It has been several years now and it has not even stretched its wings, let alone fly.' He was full of boast. When the Old Man said he could make the eagle fly, Mister Brains laughed mockingly. The neighbours came closer and listened with great interest.

'Listen Mister Brains, you may be cleverer and more educated than me — than everyone in this simple village — but you cannot change or control the destiny of any man let alone this eagle. Give it a chance; give me a chance and I will make it fly.'

'Then put your money where your mouth is! I've studied long and I know that people's minds are affected and influenced by the conditions under which they live. Make people believe they belong in the mud and slime and they will become part of that mud and slime. Simple. Some people, like this eagle, are destined to be losers and to feed among the chickens,' boasted Mister Brains.

The Old Man accepted the challenge and wagered his farm and all that was on it. 'You are wrong about people as you are about the eagle. In three days I will prove it.'

'And in three days I will own your farm,' teased the clever man. Some of the neighbours enjoyed his mockery and also laughed.

On the first attempt the Old Man took the eagle to a high ridge above the village. The wind blew hard and ruffled the bird's feathers. He flung it in the air but it plunged into a dam without opening its wings. The eagle waded through the water and returned to feed among the chickens.

Mister Brains was beside himself with glee. 'Silly old stupid man, I told you once an eagle, now a lame chicken. I'm so clever that I can even make an Arab believe he is an Eskimo. I can make you believe your thumb is a big toe,' he said as more people shared his laughter. He felt good that the simple villagers were beginning to see things his way.

A second try failed dismally. The bird again plummeted into the tall grass. The people shook their heads and the Old Man's admirers — the village children — walked away in disappointment.

'Mister Brains is correct,' said a dairy farmer. 'Perhaps he CAN change Arabs into Eskimos and thumbs into big toes. The Old Man has twice lost and a third try will surely fail. Some of us are born to be losers.'

Many heads nodded in agreement.

'No! You are wrong. Mister Brains is wrong. We must not let failure dampen our spirits. We must help each other to believe in ourselves no matter how many times we fail or fall by the wayside. Mark my words, tomorrow I will not fail; the mighty eagle shall yet fly!'

But the jeering and mockery worsened when Mister Brains, imitating a bird, flapped his arms up and down and ran towards the chickens. He went down on his knees and pecked as a chicken would. Up and down; up and down. And the simple villagers laughed long and loudly.

And when the majestic sun stepped down from its throne of gold to survey and fill the earth with its benevolent gift of warmth, it found the Old Man waiting on the highest peak of the hill. The climb had been hard and he felt weary. But he could not let age stand in the way of so great a challenge. He wanted to prove that men and the creations of God had a right to aspire to fulfilment and dignity.

There was no way that he could allow people like Mister Brains to keep life in the pit of degradation and stagnation. Of all the challenges in his seventy years on God's earth, none was so important. Hundreds of curious folk, among them children from the neighbouring towns and villages, watched from below.

The Old Man laid the eagle on its back, stretched out its massive wings and pinned them down with two huge branches.

The rays of the sun became stronger as it climbed its unseen ladder.

He held the eagle's head towards the heat. Its talons moved as did its tail feathers. The two main feathers, the pinions, stretched full length and quivered in the wind.

The beak opened and closed several times. Its eyes widened and it gazed into the mighty sun and drank the golden liquid. Deep and full.

When the sun was at its zenith the Old Man removed the branches with his feet. He lifted the bird above his head and shouted: 'Rise Eagle, Rise! You were born to rule and conquer the skies! Feel the sun's fire rekindle your blood as it surges through your veins and pumps into your ebony plumes. Go, great bird, go, go!'

The eagle stretched its wings. The huge talons moved slowly at first and then more swiftly. The beak opened and it screeched several times, each time louder than the other. Its cries stirred other eagles on the hills and mountaintops.

The hour had come.

The moment of glory had beckoned.

The Old Man threw the eagle into the air. Its wings stretched out and it soared into the blue; higher and higher and higher until it was only a speck. Then with one fell swoop it pointed its beak towards the earth and cut through the air. As it neared the ground the eagle's awful talons opened up.

Strong and ready.

Many villagers including Mister Brains scattered in fear as the great bird dived into the fleeing, cackling chickens, and crushed their fragile bones. The eagle soared up again clutching its bleeding prey and headed towards the mountains where it shrieked in triumph.

A mighty bird.

Several other eagles joined its flight of conquest; proud in the knowledge that one of their kingly kind had been restored to his rightful place in the heavens.

No more to feed among the chickens.

No more to scratch and scrape in shame.

A king in the sky.

For that was the Law.

The Student Who Never Returned

for B. Ndondo

There was quiet in the afternoon:
Grave silence that seems
    to lull the pockets and passages
Like the sigh of a last breath
        to all tormented souls.
Subdued voices murmur ...
            somewhere inside ...
Are dead.
And now a door bangs, now,
        retreating footsteps ...
Vanishing in the air.

The lone pi-i-i pi-i-i of a telephone
            down the silent doors
Wails unnatural in the air;
Like the familiar bustle of an infant,
        his own return from sleep,
Yet too late, too late now,
        to reconstruct the catastrophe,
Or too dumb in his fury to read
The story in his mother's dislocated eyes,
Who lies in frozen motion at his feet.

The squatting structures of the campus,
            solemn as a morgue,
Pause in the cold caress of the air at dusk,
A dark, brooding monster,
Its pointing filaments painting black shapes
        against the illuminated sky,
Sinister in the silent dusk,
    as a stranded ship after the storm.

The leafy little strangers in brown pots
        stand like startled twin-birds,
High on the cabinet, pressed, as if by my presence,
            in a corner,
Cuddled together like lost little ones
        in a stranger's sanctuary.

Seated at a desk in my own pocket, my cell,
A chair without wheels to support
my numbed limbs.
That day I had seen actions fleeting by,
Like they do, pinned down in a cinema.

For thinking

A dwarfed fool it is when action defies the mind:
Knowledge, experience, the wisdom of old age,
Waddle idiot-like, hideous as a hairy mole
on a bare plane in the naked daylight,
While youthful ecstasy darts, nimble-footed
on frenzied grounds.
Alone in my study I squirm under the burden
Of my laden head on my starved ligaments —
A malformed, grotesque creature in a land of body-lovers,
Where muscle spells success, brains slavery,
And the agile robber is king.
Yet the quiet worker, still blind to his power,
Salutes the school people.

Hours have passed but very few
Since muscle governed us.
Blinding flashes of irate statements
have pierced our fluttering hearts,
As the mystery of inspiration became
a horror in reality.
The rugged air, now haunted by the lingering voices,
Was torn by frenzied shouts, a mock salute
to the hated march in uniform;
Hurried steps ran everywhere, urgent instructions
bellowed above the murmured appeals,
While staff, trapped like rats, flew about,
stranded, in offices, on platforms and car-parks,
As power played its deadly hide-and-seek with resistance.
Here was a rain of song over our subdued heads:
Most sorrowful notes telling of golden freedom, mirage-like,
Too glittering for our simple souls to behold —

We, that have gazed at the dull clod of earth
that bruises our mortal feet.
While others we know busy themselves with a game —
To capture the sun in the dainty faces of diamonds
and be happy.

Green, as when with care their master groomed and fed them
With pot-manure, water, plant-food, and chalk-dust.
Chased by the furies he has dropped them in,
Entrusted them to the care of a worm, a book worm,
With hands that may have been green,
But are now tarnished by the marking ink
to a dirty red.

Let me tend them, while the owner
runs double-bent
Under a rain of baton blows.
Who knows if he might return
To fetch them after the storm?

And these green-leafed little twinnies
Remind me of the happy valley, the twiggy jungle
and the mountains and plains:
Their parentage.
Imagine the story of it all:
The open valley, permissive even to the bare little
caressing feet,
Waiting in ritual pose,
As the giants of passion rear their great whited heads,
Shoving away the blue sheet, the sky,
Dimming the generous lamp of day,
And lowering their darkened bottoms —
For rain must fall so the green can grow.
Then numerous ugly-headed little monsters are born
To gnaw away at the green sweetness;
Creatures with no faces, but a display of tools and eyes,
And juicy rounded bottoms, that may sting.
While the general peace, like of my study,
Belies the turmoil.

Sting indeed, like sweet bottoms sometimes do the heart,
With pain to produce that a wasp would envy.
The open countryside belies what our hearts will suffer,
But lives long enough to see it all.

Will he ever return ...
Shall we ever be the same again,
In moments of calm,
When, like a meek lamb,
He sits with the rest, a sea of heads
And the furious note-taking:
The nimble movements of dainty pens creeping
like insects' feet on leaves in a summer garden.
Pretending, nothing ever happened? —
Sinister silence, that belies the turmoil
In their minds!
Will he ever return?

Gunshot, shivered the distant village
Where he ran double-bent from the furies
His head straining his muscles like a laden bus
on a muddy road.
... and blood,
Like the red remarks my hand made on his papers,
Streams scarlet to colour the innocent soil.
Yet, though ideas change like fashions,
And the lambs of rule may befriend the lions,
What the bloody finger wrote stays indelible.

So, here still,
Where fresh leaves are now a crown of green on soiled pots:
Evergreen they still remain — evergreen my memory of him.
Two tender plants drawn from the wild
While millions of their kind sometimes struggle, sometimes die.
Like facts and memories trapped in the mind,
While many still remain undiscovered.
But we need answers when we ask
Why
We have a worthy friend no more.

Abner Nyamende

Total Strategy

the Monument notches its murals
on tank flanks
in a frontier frieze.
the land-leathered ox thong
cracks up Kunene.
hippos stampede the shallows
as steam rings hiss
and snorting horses
unlaagered at dawn
carry the Kommando
across bordering
bloodrivered waters.
a noon-strike
whip of light
powder-burn bright, lashes
the sarcophagus carcase
of this trek taut, casspired,
bleeding fiefdom.

Dorian Haarhoff

take and go

take your gun and go
where jackals roast children
in camps of smoke

take your gun and go
where eastern ravens gather
to scavenge riddled soft flesh

take your gun and hurry
where jackals are still eating
flesh in camps of smoke

Titus Moetsabi

A Burnt Man

A burnt man
stares out of the paper
his skin hanging off.

He used to be white.

He sat in the puddle
he had rolled in
to put himself out.

A pressman stood in front of him
the Photographer of the Year.
When he said, 'Smile'

the poor man couldn't see the joke.
He'd come as far south
as he'd dared.

He died the next day.
I spilt some tea
looking at this iconograph —

it was that shocking.

* *

In 1976, the Flats
went like Steve Biko's head
without a single martyr

to put a name to.
There were the familiar articles
of law and order:

teargas, dogs, shotguns,
R1 rifles. They hadn't turned
to rubber bullets yet.

At night I heard the guns firing.
I wrote a poem about it.
That was the nearest I got

thank Christ.

Ken Barris

**Frederick Jansen, a refugee from Smith's Rhodesia, was fatally burnt when his pickup was overturned and set alight during a riot in the Modderfontein Road area, Cape Town. The photograph appeared in* The Cape Times, *12 August 1980.*

If I Shut My Eyes

'We are a new generation.
We are not afraid to die.'
Township youth.

Often enough, I've imagined my own funeral,
All heaps
Of creamy magnolias smothering
The coffin —
Itself a magnificent
Piece of furniture —
And the smell
Beginning,
And a single blundering
Fly,
Who despises everything but funerals,
Alighting
On my bony forehead. Then, too,
The tannies
In their special church hats,
Crying
(The dried-up sanctimonious cows)
Or peeping through their fingers
In suffering, and
Trying to figure the costs.
The minister's pronouncements
Full
Of anguish as he tries to calm
The congregation down
With promises deader even
Than I am
From his pulpit in the suburbs.
And the hot red earth
Where they lay me,
Finally, to boil
In the dark.

So much for me.

Sunday. Today, in KwaThema, New Brighton,
Tembisa, Winterveld, Alexandra, KTC,
They are burying the dead. I know.
But can think of it only
With disbelief. And dread.
I could smash my head

Against the wall and cry out to God,
If the only answer weren't this ringing
Emptiness. Stupor. Placidity
Of my neighbour, watering her lawn.

I see the parched scuffed grass
And dustbowl
Of a stadium like Orlando,
Where red, or black, green and gold
Flags lie draped across the cheap
And blatant coffins. No flowers,
Except one plastic 'everlasting' wreath,
And girls like bridesmaids

In little veils and elbow-length gloves
Who stand at intervals
Along the rows of the dead.
The grandstand is choked to capacity.
'VIVA!' The crowd surges.
Banners unfurl. While through
The echoing ricochet
Of loudspeakers,
Orators affirm
That the people *shall* govern.
And even the sweating priests
Lead the masses in hymns
To freedom. As, gaunt, the swollen-faced
Comrades shoulder and carry the coffins,
And strike at the sky with their fists:

I think. I imagine.

Here in my room,
The bed stiff and comfortless with its spread of newspapers.
If I shut my eyes,
I'm stifled.

A child's kite
Cut out of newspaper,
Hovers over a rutted
Township street somewhere,
Capsizes,
Loops head over heels
And dives
Right under the wheels
Of a Casspir
As the killers roll in.

I know, if I could see
My own coffin
In the middle of a stadium
And the thousands outnumbering death,
Surging for life: 'Viva!'
I would scrabble for stones, too,
As the children do.

But since I am who I am,
All I really see is this ragged nameless body
Crushed and lying huddled in the street,
With a few sheets of newspaper
Half over it. And a face
Already gathering flies.

Peter Anderson

untitled

Hostility
is the distance of life
Horror
is the distance of love
but
agony is the hope
for DEATH
Docility
is the distance between
life and death
if not the process
We'll start
to live and love
after bullets strike us

Moritso Makhunga

My Chief

to J. Clegg

There is a certain madness
in this shrieking hot night
where gathered in soul
friends greet.
I sit amongst the fuchsias.
Information trickles erratically like the drought
in copious newspapers.
(Do you still line your homes with this rubbish?)
The glamour girls are nicer. More bottom!
It makes pain oblivious.
I have never been to Khayelitsha. My home
is close to where they fire the guns
clashing with quiet
eating into the sky.
The thorn of another day,
where you tramp and count the beating dirge
of the sun
in your muscles
gives birth here
to blind years of faith:
dying incompleted deaths
and weakly accepting
the filthy segments of trust
that clip at it unmercifully
in a very ordinary, depleted,
imaginary but lethal way
and I, white, weak
with wretchedness
    deathless like Christ
am enthralled, and nervously mouth
the first sentences I've learned in your language.

'The snake moves in these hills,
it likes it when it is still ...'

My chief is alive. He dances.
I can see his shadow
    loom triumphant in the fire-
        light.

Nicolette Thesen

Highway Blues

Haita, Joe let's hit the road
let's take the highway
out of the battle zones.
In smoke filled halls
the fighting talk is syncopation.

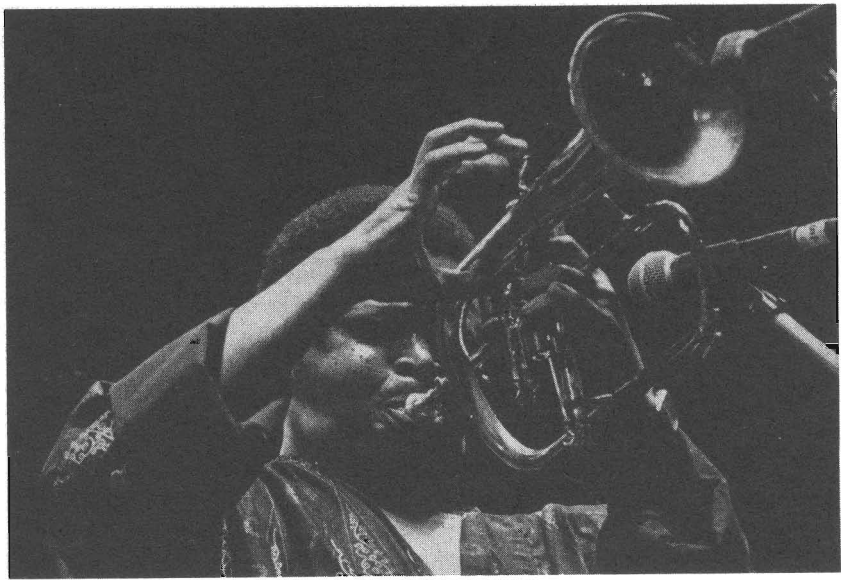
This is Afro-Jazz and blues man
all mixed in our heads.
The man behind the trumpet
heaves like a blacksmith's bellows
one would reckon he suffers
from a bad case of stage fright.

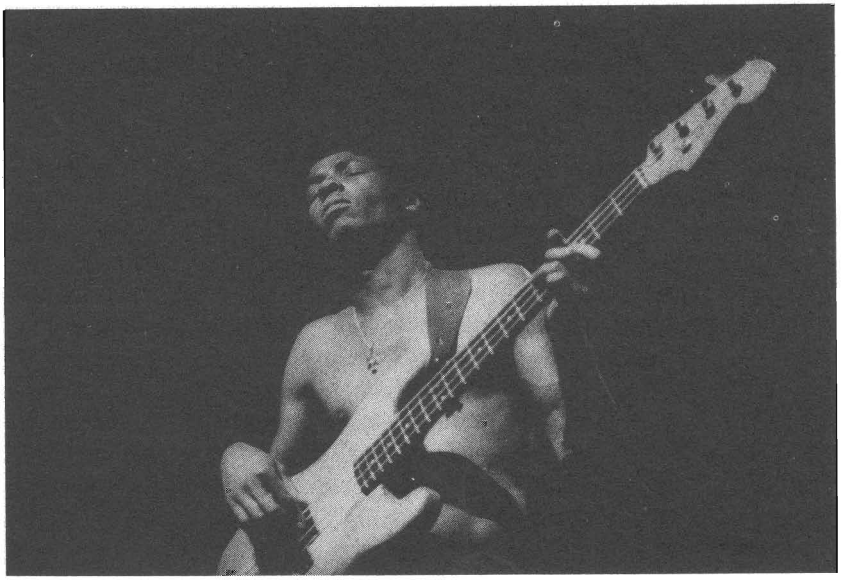
Haita, Thandi it's time to hit the road
all the way back
to the battle zones.
Listen to the dustbin lids
and the rat-tat-tat of the automatic rifles.
The shakers insinuate
a rattle snake.
It's time to go ek sê my sizza

Kom my bra, ek sê moenie skrik nie mamma
the road will rise to meet us:
the music is a road
which will not let us go without it.

Wally Mondlane

Photos: Paul Weinberg





Top: ***Hugh Masekela in London. June 1986.***

Mac McKenzie of The Genuines ***at the CASA festival in Amsterdam. Dec 1987.***

CONTEMPORARY POPULAR MUSIC IN SOUTH AFRICA:
The State of Things

South African popular music is currently receiving considerable attention locally and internationally. This has been accompanied by acclaim as well as controversy. In this introductory essay *Gary Rathbone* marks out some areas of discussion which *Staffrider* aims to explore further in forthcoming issues.

When *LADYSMITH BLACK MAMBAZO* stood in line to collect their prestigious Grammy award last year, it seemed that South African music had finally arrived in the eyes of the rest of the world. These days it appears that recognition, accolades and enthusiastic audiences for local bands have become the order of the day within the international sphere. Apart from BLACK MAMBAZO'S recent Grammy, SIPHO MABUSE'S locally made 'Shikisha' video collected an award at the International Film and T.V. festival in New York last year, while JOHNNY CLEGG and his outfit SAVUKA have spent the last year performing to capacity crowds all over Europe.

Another rising South African star, reggae artist LUCKY DUBE will soon be heading overseas to record a new album for the French label Celluloid Records, as will SIPHO MABUSE for British music industry giant, Virgin Records. On top of all this the South African musical contingent in exile continues to keep the flag flying as both MIRIAM MAKEBA and HUGH MASEKELA keep on with their recording and touring schedules. MAKEBA herself has recently been the object of extensive media attention centred around the publication of her book, *Makeba: My Story*.

Another relatively unknown South African exile, JONAS GWANGWA, trombonist and bandleader of the ANC's cultural group, AMANDLA, has now been nominated for one of the west's most famous entertainment awards, the Oscar, for his work on the soundtrack of the DAVID ATTENBOROUGH film, *Cry Freedom*.

Undoubtedly the facts look impressive, particularly if one takes into account the negative stance taken by the rest of this planet towards the country's political bandleader P.W. BOTHA and his soulless and discriminatory orchestra-

tion of life in South Africa. Fortunately, it seems that the rest of the world does possess a sense of discernment in its taste, for while BOTHA and his band have been systematically denied any chance of releasing their one-track policy in the international realm, JOHNNY CLEGG, LADYSMITH BLACK MAMBAZO and the rest of our musical talent seem to have been welcomed by the world with an undeniable fervour.

If South African music has certainly gained an undisputed foothold in the international scene, what can one say about the musical state of affairs back here? Is it a flourishing one, studded with an impressively shiny array of newly unearthed artistic gems? Importantly, are the organizational structures within our musical industry taking advantage of this current wave of interest and gearing themselves up for the development of new and existing talents? Many felt that after the momentum generated by the whole PAUL SIMON 'Graceland' extravaganza, neither local musicians nor companies were quick enough off the starting block with a bid to keep the stone rolling along, and that the initiative had been irretrievably lost.

Fortunately, as CLEGG, MAMBAZO and MABUSE have proved, the situation is not quite as dire as the more pessimistic among us imagine it to be. However, the initial question still remains. Just what are the industry and local artists doing to make the most of the attention South African music has been gathering lately? More directly, how will this current attention affect the development of new talent here at home?

Prior to recent events, record companies had done very little for local music as a whole. Content at being nothing more than glorified distribution outlets for overseas acts, the industry centred its local activities around cheaply produced music for instantly marketable areas. In 1980, MUFF ANDERSON noted that a STEVE KEKANA album (at that point KEKANA was a hugely successful artist in terms of record sales), cost a total of R2 000 to produce, including studio time and packaging. Comparing this to the amounts of up to R100 000 spent per year by any particular company on acquiring and maintaining an overseas artist along with his or her respective label, it is easy to see just where South African music fitted into the industry's scheme of things.

BLACK MAMBAZO themselves are a good case in point. If it hadn't been for SIMON'S collaboration and exposure of them, the industry would have been quite content to let them continue with the process of shifting huge quantities of low budget albums indefinitely. As it is, the band can now command top producers in expensive studios overseas. This is the case in spite of the originally disinterested attitude adopted by their company in preparing them for international exposure. It took a pint-sized songwriter from New York to

point out to the world (and the record companies here) just exactly what sort of talent lay hidden in South Africa.

Interestingly enough though, it has been Gallo Records, the company which MAMBAZO, MABUSE and STIMELA are all involved with, that seems to have taken the lead in establishing the necessary links between local artists and the international music scene. Under company director, PETER GALLO, a new company called SHISA INTERNATIONAL has just been established. In the words of the company's press release, Shisa will 'be a specialist organization which will actively seek marketing opportunities in the rest of the world for the local (Gallo) group of artists' (including artists on the RPM, TEAL/TRUTONE and GRC labels). So far Shisa has established links with a fairly wide range of overseas record labels, including Celluloid in France, Serengeti and Earthworks in the UK, and Sanachie in the USA. Although this seems like a positive step in the right direction for many local acts, it still remains to be seen just how effective Shisa will be in the long run, particularly if one takes into account the issue of the cultural boycott.

The cultural boycott, certainly one of the major issues in the eyes of the foreign media as well as the leaders in the struggle against apartheid, is something every person operating in the arenas of entertainment, creativity and expression has had to take into serious account. Although practically every artist I have interviewed or spoken to has felt disturbed by the implications of the boycott, no-one can really disagree with it in principle. Undoubtedly the motivation behind this action is just and well-intended. Solving the inevitable paradox the boycott has raised, though, of the subsequent strangulation of great local talent that is either in essence, position or attitude opposed to the apartheid regime and its attendant structures, certainly does pose something of a problem.

Sensitive to this issue, activists were quick to realize that a modification of the original call for a blanket boycott was necessary and that a degree of flexibility was needed. The result was that both the ANC and the UDF decided to set up cultural desks with this specific problem in mind. Despite the obvious limitations of these structures, in that decisions could be influenced to some degree by the personal tastes and subjective preferences of the individuals charged with the responsibility of running these structures, it definitely appears to be moving the issue in the appropriate direction.

Essentially it will mean two things: firstly, that a level of exposure can be granted overseas to artists prepared to take a stand against apartheid; and secondly, that artists in South Africa will have to take a long and serious look at the situation here before they can even begin to consider their future as na-

tional and international contenders on the music scene. No longer will the musician be able to hide from the realities of the South African situation behind the comfortable wall of creative seclusion.

With a developing flexibility to the boycott, organizations such as Shisa, who help local talent overseas, an increasingly positive role being played by independent labels such as Shifty Records (a small, politically progressive label operating from Johannesburg), and a greater awareness among bands and companies of both possibilities and realities, the South African music world does seem to be exuding a fair amount of positive vibrations these days.

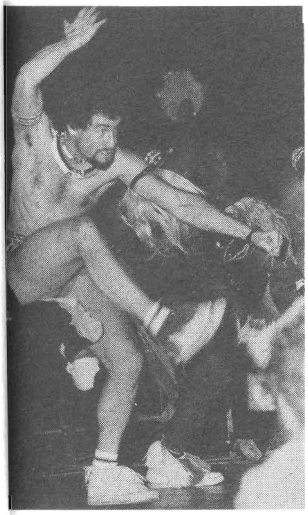


Photo: Gisela Wulfsohn

JOHNNY CLEGG, leader of the group SAVUKA and one of the more successful musicians in the business, certainly thinks so. 'Things,' he says, 'are certainly a lot better than they were before. An important factor is that record companies have started to manoeuvre themselves into a better position for promoting local acts and are certainly taking local music more seriously these days.'

As far as the future in general is concerned, a little optimism seems difficult to avoid. Although most of this optimism rests upon a change of both attitude and the system in this country, a fair amount of it does certainly rest with the exciting talent that seems to exist in an almost endless abundance within the South African musical context. As far as further exposure on the international scene is concerned, only time and circumstance will reveal the full extent of South African inroads into worlds foreign. CLEGG points out that although the level of success in Europe for local artists has been overwhelming, exposure in the USA has been comparatively limited. 'Perhaps,' he adds, 'one can attribute this to European involvement in Africa's colonial past. Perhaps this has created a kind of empathy which the Americans don't seem to share right now? It is difficult to judge at this stage whether MAMBAZO'S Grammy is really the beginning of a new awareness in African music in the USA, or merely an acknowledgement by the American industry of African music's recent achievements.'

In difficult times such as these, the future is certainly as unstable as the present, and therefore prediction becomes a rather dicey business. As mentioned before, only time will show just how things will turn out as far as music in this country is concerned. Fortunately, the only real certainty we can still cling to these days, is the knowledge that time is emphatically on our side.

JOHN KANI
Combatant from the Stage

Photo: Market Theatre

John Kani is one of South Africa's most accomplished actors and has been acclaimed at home and abroad. He was recently appointed Associate Director of the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, where* Staffrider's *editor, Andries Walter Oliphant, spoke to him about his role in South African theatre and society.

STAFFRIDER: John, in a recent interview you referred to yourself as a 'combatant'. This, of course, is a very provocative notion. Could you elaborate and clarify what you meant by this?

KANI: Certainly. It derives from the basic premise: if you love your country, you are a patriot, and every patriot is a combatant. You cannot claim to love your country and be unwilling to fight for it. So I am a combatant for I live in a country which has been occupied for more than three hundred years now, and the war to liberate the country in order to get the land back has never stopped.

First, the struggle was against the Dutch settlers, then against the British, and today it is against the white nationalist state and its allies, internally and externally. Although the forms of domination have changed, have been modified and modernized, the fundamentally illegitimate and undemocratic nature of the South African state has remained unaltered. In fact, we are currently dealing with a situation of such extreme repression that talk about reforms and change can only be understood in terms of an intensified onslaught against the national democratic struggle and the fighting people of South Africa.

So, as an oppressed black man, and father of five children, I have a responsibility to participate in the war for reclaiming our right to the land and everything that accompanies it, whatever happens.

STAFFRIDER: Right. However, turning to your area of excellence, your distinctive role as an actor, how do you see the convergence of your deeply felt commitment to the broad struggle for liberation with your role in the theatre?

KANI: Thank you for anticipating the line of my thoughts. I was heading in precisely that direction. Now, I see my role as similar to that of a worker who wakes up in the morning and goes to a factory or a departmental store to earn a living and to fight whatever injustices he or she encounters. The only difference is that I wake up and go to the theatre where I become an actor. I do this to keep my family going and I focus my efforts on exposing the horrors of apartheid through my work.

I'm extremely selective in what I do. I take great care to ensure that, as the responsible artist I believe myself to be, I can direct the content and the implications of my work. This is to ensure that my work complements the imperatives of our unfolding political struggle. This precludes involvement in any project which might lend credibility to the ruling group and its institutions.

STAFFRIDER: Is it correct for me to conclude from what you have just said that you are completely disaffiliated from the argument that art and politics are two distinct spheres which should always be kept apart?

KANI: Absolutely. I reject this tendency to separate art from society as nothing but a convenient fallacy. It is, of course, also a wonderful excuse for being irrelevant or excessively commercial. The point of the matter is, that although being an actor is different from being a father, it is the continuities between society, politics and art which I find compelling, above whatever discontinuities some people might conceivably argue for. Look, when my brother was shot and killed, I wept with my mother. I was working on a play when it happened. The pain and anger which I felt could never be confined to my family circle. I carried it with me onto the stage where it fused with the emotions of the role I had to play.

Similarly, the hardships endured by blacks, be they exploited rentpayers or striking miners dismissed for demanding a living wage and decent working conditions, are not remote abstract things to me. No, I am an organic and indivisible part of my community. And in this country, where apartheid politics is all-pervasive, is literally the very condition of social, economic, psychological and artistic life, I cannot see how anyone can separate politics from his life.

Furthermore, apartheid is a system which kills and maims. It cannot be tolerated and conveniently lived with. It has to be opposed and abolished. I see it as my responsibility to fight it from my vantage point in the theatre. Anyone who views my position as extremistic or overtly political, and argues for the separation of art from politics, has either made peace with this evil system of oppression, or is directly supportive of it, while feigning to be politically innocent.

STAFFRIDER: Would you agree that it is in the interest of repressive states not only to encourage the kind of fallacious separations which you have just exposed, but also to effect a separation between the state and the people over which it governs?

KANI: That is completely true. In South Africa politics and politicians are seen as things which are not part and parcel of everyday life. It's by a very complex process of compartmentalization that this is made possible. The irony, of course, is that this very state of affairs is through and through political.

STAFFRIDER: Do you think this gulf between art and society, and that between certain artists and the community, affects the communicative relationship between the actors and their audiences?

KANI: Oh yes, it does. The stagnation which many of the officially supported theatres find themselves in, is the direct result of pursuing work which has no relationship with the everyday experiences of theatregoers. A theatre which separates itself from its audience and by implication, the community, is bound to wither and die. The link between audience and actor is, in my opinion, a continuation of the link between the artist and his community.

Let me put it this way, when I chose to become a member of the Serpent Players, of which Athol Fugard was a member, and not the owner or director as is often claimed, we had to find a way of creating a type of theatre which drew on our experiences as South Africans. If we tried to do anything else I am sure our enterprise would have come to nothing at all. From then onwards, I have consistently refused to separate the intensity and depth of my commitment, and the pain that goes with it, from my work. It is a burning thing in me.

STAFFRIDER: Talking about the Serpent Players. I wonder, could you elaborate on the genesis of those two landmark plays *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* and *The Island?*

KANI: Right. As you know, these plays which we created in conjunction with Athol Fugard, grew directly out of our experiences. As members of the Serpent Players we all held jobs during the day and rehearsed at night. This meant that our best time was spent on energy-draining activities. So, to concentrate

on our plays we decided to tackle it full-time. We embarked on what we called 'experiments in playmaking'.

In 1965, from the experiences of one of our members, we created a play which we called *The Coat*. It grew from an incident involving Norman Tshinga who was charged for allegedly being a member of the African National Congress. At his trial in Cradock there were two other, rather old men, who were tried before him. These elderly men, aged between sixty-five and seventy, were both given fifteen-year prison sentences. One of the old men, before being led away, took off his heavy overcoat and handed it to Norman's wife and requested that it be given to his wife with the message that he was to serve fifteen years.

Mabel, this is Norman's wife, took the coat to an address in New Brighton and gave it to an elderly woman of about sixty-nine, and told her that her husband received fifteen years. The old woman removed a piece of brown paper, which contained some muti, from the coat. She held it up and said: 'It worked. My husband received fifteen years while others got life sentences.' This served as the basis of *The Coat* and it was also the beginning of our new method of playmaking.

Prior to this, we performed works by Brecht, Euripides, Sophocles and many other classical and contemporary western plays. Then we realized that our own experiences and our own forms of dance and music had a power which plays from elsewhere seemed to lack. We had worked on interpreting foreign plays as metaphors of our situation, but somehow, they failed to provide me with the sense of inner satisfaction which I derived from performing our own plays. Whenever we performed these, I knew without a shadow of doubt that we had struck the right nerve.

Sizwe Banzi is Dead and *The Island* were the sixth and seventh of such homegrown, experiencially based plays. This is the school from which Winston Ntshona and I come. This is the school we helped to establish. It gives me great satisfaction to see how much theatre today is based on the experiences of people in this country. I delight in the way theatre serves as a means to shatter the prevailing conspiracy of silence in South Africa.

STAFFRIDER: Comparatively speaking, those early workshop plays seem to be a reference point, and even a source of inspiration, for many of the plays which have been produced recently, while the latter, however, often reflect a more strident militancy. Do you concur?

KANI: You are absolutely right. Every play I see, be it in theatres or halls in the townships, I always recognize a little bit of *Sizwe* or a little bit of *The*

Island in them. Those plays were the first departures from the norm. They were the first steps along the road into the dangerous land.

After every show we used to sit back-stage expecting to be arrested. We were in constant danger then. Our performances were stopped. People were warned not to attend our performances. We would book a hall, a church hall, and secure permission to use it, then the clergyman would be put under pressure and we would be denied access to the venue. As a result we had to perform in garages, and in some cases, in living rooms.

This type of theatre, which has developed in militancy, in direct relation to the growing urgency of our situation, is sometimes incorrectly referred to as 'protest theatre' or even 'black theatre' but it is a truly South African theatre, made by people who care and who are aware of the urgency of our situation. And what a hell of a situation do we have here!

STAFFRIDER: John, you have also worked on a number of films. Tell me, do you find this medium just as conducive to your aims of effecting social change as in the case of theatre?

KANI: No. Theatre provides greater choices, is less expensive and there is an abundance of material which suits my purpose. Film, on the other hand, is a medium which is almost entirely concerned with making huge profits. Most of the people involved in the production of movies have no concern for you and your problems. They are exclusively concerned with profit-making. If your brother's death is a selling commodity, they will buy and sell it without concern for your cause or regard for your suffering.

A case in point is the Biko film, *Cry Freedom.* A painful issue for us is turned into a film about Donald Woods crossing the 'crocodile infested' Caledon River, which has been bone dry since before my birth. Take the Mandela film as yet another instance of profit-mongering. The man is still behind bars and they go and make a love story about his life. The South African struggle has become so topical that it could be selling in supermarkets today. My responsibility is to resist involvement in such stories which often amount to just another way of exploiting us.

It is also extremely difficult to exert your influence over the production of a film. There are many aspects over which you, as an actor, have no control whatsoever. For instance, I was offered a role in a film which is currently in progress. I was told that I am to play the role of a wonderful young guerilla fighting for the freedom of his country. It sounded right to me and the money was unbelievably good. After much effort, I managed to get hold of the script. After reading it, I phoned the producers and told them I cannot play the role of someone who is fighting a legitimate government in Southern Africa, sim-

ply because it is socialist and Cuban-backed. I refuse to play Savimbi, I informed them.

I take every precaution before I involve myself with any film since there are many things which you cannot control. Even when the script meets with one's approval and the director is acceptable, it is still possible to end up on the editor's floor.

STAFFRIDER: To resist the constant attempt to involve you in projects which lend credibility to the present government and its institutions one requires a great deal of vigilance and resolve. This struggle in the cultural domain which you have sustained for decades now, while others have been drawn into institutions and projects which serve the ruling group's claims of 'reform', is exemplary.

KANI: Thank you. I always say, when you fight an enemy you should never underestimate its intelligence, and you must always know, that from the enemy's point of view, you are the enemy. So, in the context of our struggle, some think, quite optimistically, that history is on our side, that the forces are tilted in our favour. They seem to forget that the struggle implies at least two large movements. That is, the struggle by the majority of oppressed blacks and progressive elements from certain quarters, for liberation, on the one hand, and the struggle for survival by the white minority and its dependants, on the other hand. Invariably, the struggle for survival is more vicious, the more cunning of the two, and it cannot be effectively countered by mere optimism. It requires immense commitment, resolve and sacrifice.

So, there was a time when certain institutions conspired to silence us. They didn't want us near their theatres. Today they contrive all sorts of devious means to involve us in their projects. Why? Basically, because internal and external pressures which bear upon the South African state have forced them into a situation where they will do everything in their power to make themselves acceptable to the outside world without having to forfeit their power and privileges inside the country. They are concerned about their image abroad and will even try to use committed artists for this purpose.

There are many offers coming from strange quarters, quarters from which offers never issued before. So one has to be vigilant, one has to guard against compromising principles which are much bigger and more important than false promises and financial rewards.

STAFFRIDER: You have mentioned the state's concern about its image abroad while maintaining apartheid at home. Related to this is the upsurge of interest abroad in South African theatre, music, literature and art while attempts are simultaneously being made to isolate the culture of apartheid. What are your

views on these matters and how could it be managed in such a way that it contributes to the national democratic movement?

KANI: We are now talking of the cultural boycott.

STAFFRIDER: Exactly.

KANI: I support it completely. The cultural struggle cannot be separated from the mainstream of the struggle for democracy and justice in South Africa. I see the totality of the struggle as a circle with many interrelated segments, with each segment representing a specific aspect of the struggle as well as reflecting the whole. There are, for example, the workers and the industrialists, students, teachers and theologians, as well as the armed struggle in the field. Among these we have to insert actors, writers, musicians, painters, artists and cultural workers of whatever kind. In this regard, there is a call on all participants in the cultural field to contribute to the struggle for a new South Africa.

Concerned artists abroad have arrived at a point where they are no longer prepared to associate with apartheid. Internally, committed artists have for long been waging a struggle against domination by apartheid culture. Unfortunately, but as can be expected, there have been those, black and white, who have gone abroad to spread lies about the actual state of affairs in this country in order to make it acceptable to the outside world. At home, however, the government does everything in its power to silence its opponents. Why, then, should the state and its supporters be given free access to the world when its policies have been declared a crime against humanity?

It is therefore urgent that ways and means be devised to isolate apartheid culture while simultaneously ensuring that the emerging people's culture gets all the support it deserves.

STAFFRIDER: I believe appropriate strategies are currently being devised to ensure this. Turning to your appointment as associate director at the Market Theatre. Tell me, has this enhanced your strategy of utilizing your considerable talents in the theatre to oppose the present social order?

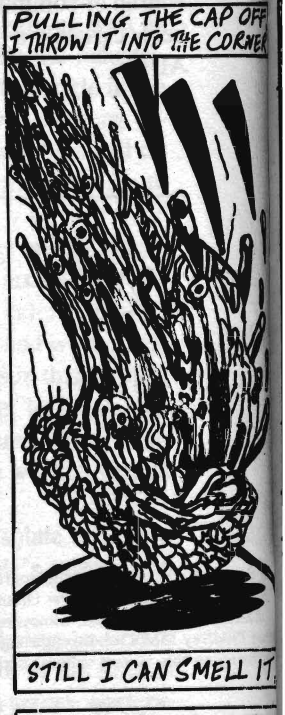
KANI: My position at the Market Theatre, I say, has been long overdue. The Market was established in 1976 as a platform for all artists, but because we live in an unequal society, it has also concentrated on providing venues for artists from the oppressed communities. This has resulted in a situation where detractors like to think of the Market as a place which privileges black artists regardless of merit. This is not so. The Market works towards correcting the imbalances of South African culture. It aims to serve as a means of countering the unjustified domination of officially sanctioned and supported culture.

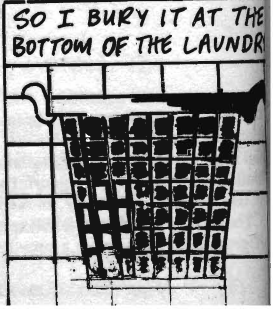
My appointment as associate director is, of course, an acknowledgement of my contribution to the development of theatre in South Africa. My role is to assist the senior management in selecting plays, ensuring standards and directing the theatre in such a way that it serves the purposes of truth and enlightenment in an environment of darkness and repression.

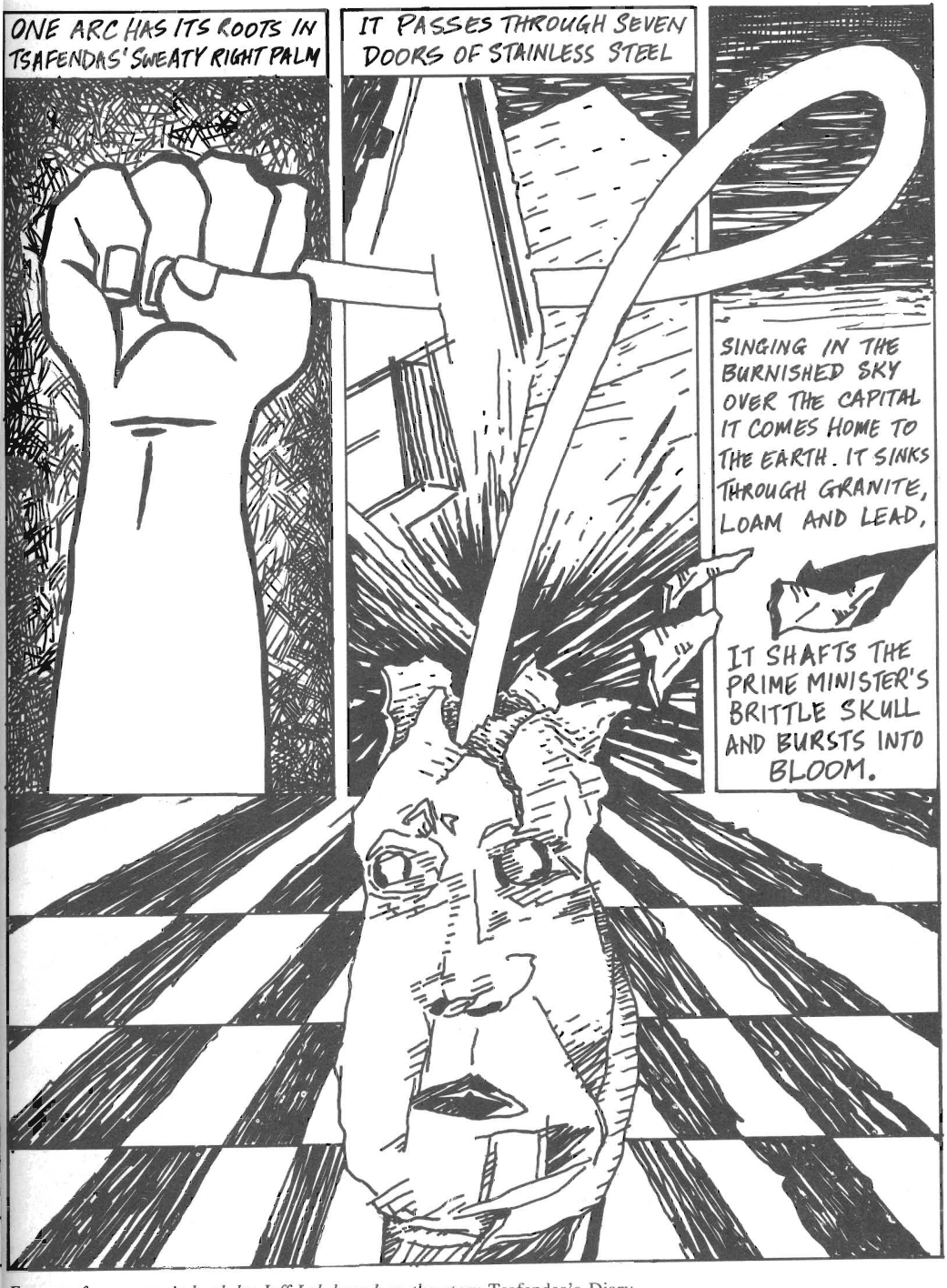
Let me add, the Market is the only theatre I will work in on a permanent basis. If there was no Market Theatre, I would be working in every available church or community hall in the country. With this I want to say that the Market is certainly a theatre which enables me to pursue meaningful work in South Africa.


PARLIAMENT
HE GOES OUT INTO THE STREET!


I WAKE UP CHOKING. THE THINKING CAP HAS FALLEN DOWN OVER MY FACE. MY MOUTH IS FULL OF WARM FUR. MY NOSE IS FULL OF ITS STENCH — MEAT STEW.


PULLING THE CAP OFF I THROW IT INTO THE CORNER
STILL I CAN SMELL IT.


SO I BURY IT AT THE BOTTOM OF THE LAUNDRY



Excerpts from a comic-book by Jeff Lok based on the story Tsafendas's Diary.

Tsafendas's Diary

Ivan Vladislavić

1 Granny is knitting me a thinking cap, in pink and blue. It is shaped like a turnip, with a long, curling tail. I'll be able to pull it down over my ears, I'll be able to pull it down right over my face, and look out through the two eye-holes Granny has thoughtfully provided.

'You need to do some thinking,' Granny says, 'and it is always better to do your thinking incommunicado.'

2 Granny in her wicker rocking chair.

In the twilight Granny's moonface comes and goes, comes and goes, while her crochet-hook knots the giddy momentum of the planet into little coloured squares.

Granny is off her rocker.

3 Granny rocks and rocks. The wicker squeals. Her shadow comes and goes on the wall behind her.

'We must have Tsafendas's Diary,' Granny says. 'We are its rightful owners. It's a shame to keep it locked up somewhere, away from the world.'

I agree.

'Do you know what it is, child?'

I do not answer.

Granny laughs and the shadow laughs with her. 'I shouldn't have asked.'

4 Granny gives me the thinking cap. It fits me well. She seems pleased, plumping the cap up on my head and tugging the tail so that it hangs down at a jaunty angle.

'Now you are ready to do some thinking,' she says. 'The first thing you must think about is Tsafendas's Diary.'

I pull the cap down over my face and look out through the eye-holes.

Granny smiles. 'You must fetch it for us,' she says. 'Tsafendas's Diary is the key to all mysteries. The mysteries of meat and the imagination.'

5 In the mean time, Granny keeps me busy feeding the hole in the backyard.

'Food for the earth,' Granny says. 'Excellent stuff. Full of goodness.'

I carry the buckets of food out from the kitchen and empty them on the edge of the hole.

'Don't just stand there, you impossible child. Down to business. Feed it. It cannot help itself. You must be willing to get your hands dirty.'

I climb into the hole. The bottom is marshy, it sucks at my feet. Granny rocks closer to the edge so that she can look down on me. Her eyes are as pale as the sky behind her. Her face comes and goes on the horizon. With the flat edge of my spade I scrape the piles of food along the rim into the hole. Potato peelings, bones, bread-crusts, meat. I dig it in. The mixture bubbles and steams.

6 Granny has the meat-hook. She tacks the meat together. She pulls the meat-blanket up to my ears and tucks it in. By morning it will be rotting.

7 In the coldest winter in living memory I wear my thinking cap to bed. I notice a distinct improvement in the quality of my dreams.

I dream I am the curator at the Houses of Parliament.

I lead a party of tourists across a desert of pale grey carpet to a square of stainless-steel pillars and chains, which marks the spot where Tsafendas slaughtered the Prime Minister. The tourists dam up around the chains. I step into the empty space. I stoop and lift a square of plastic, and there they are: the historic bloodstains.

8 Granny says Tsafendas's Diary is kept in the Police Museum in Pretoria. She won't tell me why. But she takes from her wooden basket a rambling, lopsided blanket. It is a breeding colony of tassels, pom-poms, fringes and frills.

'What on earth is it?' I ask.

'It is a map of the Police Museum,' Granny says. 'When you set out to find Tsafendas's Diary you shall take it with you.'

9 My dreams continue to improve.

Granny and I set out on the motorized rocking chair. We are going to Pretoria to recover Tsafendas's Diary. Granny drives. I sit on her lap. On the Ben Schoeman highway, snug under the meat-blanket which Granny has thoughtfully provided, with my thinking cap pulled right down to my chin, I am happy, I think. We narrowly avoid a collision with a Mercedes Benz. We arrive in Pretoria.

Granny pulls over in front of the Prison.

'He's there,' Granny says, pointing with her crochet-hook. 'He's been there all these years. Sitting on his secrets, hatching them out, feeding them from his filthy mouth, caring for them until they are dark and ugly enough to be sent out into the world. He's there all right. I can smell him.'

'Who?' I ask.

'You haven't learnt a thing,' she says, pinching me. 'It goes in one ear and out the other.'

10 Granny is knitting a long black ribbon. Its fanged head is buried in the fleshy folds of her hands. The throat curves to the floor, where the blade of the rocker pins it, lets it go, pins it, lets it go. The body is fat and bloated, heaped coil upon coil. The narrow tail flicks in a corner of the room.

'What is it?'

Her fingers twist, easing the ribbon from her skin.

'What do you think it is, child?'

11 I see the killer. He crosses the pale grey carpet and comes to a door. I smell the fearful sweat on his palm as he reaches for the doorknob. He opens the door. He looks from side to side. He goes out into the street.

He goes out into the street!

I wake up choking. The thinking cap has fallen down over my face, my mouth is full of warm fur, my nose is full of its stench. Meat stew.

I pull the cap off and throw it in a corner. Still I can smell it. I retrieve it and bury it at the bottom of the laundry basket.

In the morning, Granny: 'Where's your thinking cap?'

12 Granny is angry with me. It's back to the hole. I pile the scraps up on the rim. Granny sits on her rocker. I bring her the hose-pipe and she soaks the stew down.

'Dig it in. The earth is hungry.'

I climb into the hole. I sink into the stew, up to my knees, it is hot down there, the steam rises, I think my feet are cooking.

13 Granny parks the rocking chair in the street outside the Police Museum. She sets me down on the kerb, takes off my thinking cap.

'The time for thinking is over,' she says. 'It's time to act. Go in and get it. Do not be afraid: no one will suspect a child.

Remember, we are its rightful owners.'

She hands me the map. I go up the stairs, between the tall, fluted columns, into a tiled lobby.

Behind me I hear the rocker squeaking. Granny is a pendulum. She keeps time.

A pom-pom marks the spot where Tsafendas's Diary should be. I make my way there (past Dangerous Weapons, Forgery, Terrorism and Ritual Murders). I find myself in an empty room.

14 'Have you got it, child?' Granny asks, looking at my empty hands.

I shake my head.

'It doesn't matter,' she says. 'Perhaps I already have it. Perhaps I've had it all along.' She taps the lid of her wooden basket with fingernails like beaks.

15 In a dark corner of the Police Museum, behind musty black curtains, in a glass cabinet, lies a miniature landscape. In the west a hill, in the east a suburb, between the two an expanse of open veld. It is midnight, but lights still burn in a few of the houses.

A man stands on the hill. He points a rifle at the sky, his finger has just squeezed the trigger. In one of the houses, in a bed, a child has just stopped breathing, but her blood still runs, slowly, her hair and her fingernails are growing.

Between the barrel of the rifle and the roof of the house stretches a perfect fluorescent arc. It is violet, it hums in the stale air. It indicates the path the bullet took between the barrel of the rifle and the brain of the child.

In a separate glass cabinet is a piece of corrugated iron with a hole in it and a bullet dangling on a length of string.

16 Tsafendas's Diary comes to me in my sleep, word by word, drifting down from the dim ceiling of my head.

In the morning, before breakfast, a fried egg leaking like a sunrise on my white plate, I am composing Tsafendas's Diary, dredging it up from my dreams, bringing it back in a bottle. I line the words up one behind the other.

Tsafendas's Diary has a grey cover, like weathered wood, and more than enough pages on which to carve the relentless passing of the days and nights.

17 My thinking cap outdoes itself.

I find myself in a forest of fluorescent arcs. They burn violet and

green and electric blue in the pale air, and each one has a beginning and an end.

One arc has its roots in the sweaty palm of Tsafendas's right hand. It passes through seven doors of stainless steel, it sings in the burnished sky over the capital, it comes home to the earth, it sinks through granite, loam and lead, it shafts the Prime Minister's brittle skull, and bursts into bloom.

Another arc begins in an empty socket of that same skull, loops through the tangled canopy overhead and skewers Granny to her rocking chair.

I move among the stems.

Everything goes dark. I hear the rhythmic squeaking of Granny's chair. Then a blister bursts in the darkness and a needle of light, red as blood, springs from Granny's forefinger. It scribbles on the air, it hums like a mosquito around Granny's head, it ricochets off the walls — the room grows hot and bright — it knits and purls the air into a thick, bristling blanket, and then it comes for me. I am its end.

18 I give Granny Tsafendas's Diary, wrapped in brown paper and tied up with string.

'What is it, child?' she says, turning on me her pale eyes. Her fingernails peck at the wrapping.

I look down at my feet, and the tail of the thinking cap hangs over my face.

Granny slits the package with her crochet-hook. She pulls out the Diary and rests it on her knees. Her hands circle over the copperplate script on the grey cover. Then the beaks rattle on the pages, the hands begin to fly, past calendars, a map of the world, a map of South Africa, lists of public holidays, members of parliament, embassies, the capitals of the world, the currencies, timetables for buses and trains, the hands come to 1 January and settle.

Granny reads in silence. The hands lie panting on the open page.

I am suddenly ashamed. I pull the thinking cap down to my chin. I cannot look up, not even when the leaves begin to fall around me one by one, blown into drifts around my ankles by a furious wind from the rocker.

Granny plucks the thinking cap from my head and stuffs it up her sleeve. She rummages in the wooden basket. 'Here it is,' she says. She draws out the long black ribbon. 'I've had it all along.

Why are your eyes so wide, you useless child. It cannot harm us anymore.'

Rocking, rocking.

Her hands peck at the threads. The ribbon unravels. A pile of crinkled wool grows next to the chair, larger and larger, looms over Granny, ingests her. From the writhing heap her voice, muffled, shrinking: 'Here it is. Here it is. Here it is ...'

19 I am lost without my thinking cap. All day I carry my naked head from room to room, but cannot find a thought large enough to fill it.

When I get into bed I find my thinking cap under my pillow. Granny has added a large D in silver sequins.

20 I dream I am Death in my thinking cap with the spangled D, I dream I am Death, coming with my crochet-hook and my wooden basket, which is dusted with talcum powder, which smells of death, lined with brass, which tastes of death, I am coming with my fluorescent thread and my iron hook to knot the world into my blanket.

21 Granny, her body swathed in the meat-blanket, her feet sticking out like boiled hams, rocking, rocking, to the mouth of the grave. She comes and goes on the precipice. She rocks herself over the edge.

I hear her cooking, bubbling and squeaking, in the meaty broth at the centre of the earth.

22 I'm digging it in. I have to feed the insatiable earth. I put in bones, leaf-mulch from the gutters, vegetable peelings, blankets, papers. I soak it all down. The ink begins to run. I take up my spade and I dig it in.

Our Sharpeville

I was playing hopscotch on the slate
when miners roared past in lorries,
their arms raised, signals at a crossing,
their chanting foreign and familiar,
like the call and answer of road gangs
across the veld, building hot arteries
from the heart of the Transvaal mine.

I ran to the gate to watch them pass.
And it seemed like a great caravan
moving across the desert to an oasis
I remembered from my Sunday school book:
olive trees, a deep jade pool,
men resting in clusters after a long journey,
the danger of the mission still around them,
and night falling, its silver stars just like the ones
you got for remembering your Bible texts.

Then my grandmother called from behind the front door,
her voice a stiff broom over the steps:
'Come inside; they do things to little girls.'

For it was noon, and there was no jade pool.
Instead, a pool of blood that already had a living name
and grew like a shadow as the day lengthened.
The dead, buried in voices that reached even my gate,
the chanting men on the ambushed trucks,
these were not heroes in my town,
but maulers of children,
doing things that had to remain nameless.
And our Sharpeville was this fearful thing
that might tempt us across the wellswept streets.

If I had turned I would have seen
brocade curtains drawn tightly across sheer net ones,
known there were eyes behind both,
heard the dogs pacing in the locked yard next door.
But, walking backwards, all I felt was shame,
at being a girl, at having been found at the gate,
at having heard my grandmother lie
and at my fear her lie might be true.
Walking backwards, called back,
I returned to the closed rooms, home.

Ingrid de Kok

This poem is taken from *Familiar Ground* a collection of poems by Ingrid de Kok soon to be published by Ravan Press.

The Blood of Our Silence

Everyone
uses words these days
as a flag to stuff inside
the abscess of their skin,
a medal.

Without seeds to scatter,
without love,
lips gape apart as overripe fruit
cavernous:
        still air
of mouths opening and shutting,
opening and shutting.

Then bullets speak like wind.

In the hatred of us
between us in a history
made malignant in the heart,
where I seek you
seeking a lost harmony of tongues
avoiding my eyes
our bones creak
        towards
the choir of their massacre —
it is surely time
to throw away the icons
of memory, to paint
the flags red again
not with blood
but with the laughter
of a new surreal dawn

throw away
the crayons of rhetoric
in this country where I die
alone with everyone
a voice still comes to me,
whispering a world
of riotous, mingling colours
I can no longer imagine,
the murmur in your veins,
the weight between my legs,
the brave, dumb, despairing
uttered polychrome of our people

the blood of our silence.

This poem is taken from *The Blood of Our Silence* a collection of poems by Kelwyn Sole soon to be published by Ravan Press.

Kelwyn Sole

Colour Blindness

The blackman is not poor because he is black
Nor is he, for that reason, oppressed
(Such is the thinking of apartheid)

The blackman is not oppressed
because the whiteman is oppressor
(By this thinking the blackman oppresses himself)
Nor is he poor because the white is rich
(Each, by definition, presupposes the other)

(Neither EXPLAINS anything — in that way
false consciousness repeats itself —
changing nothing)

Wealth comes not from 'whiteness'
Nor poverty from 'blackness'
White is white because it is wealthy
Black is black because its labour produces wealth
(With which the State can finance oppression)

Capital comes from Europe
Profit comes from Africa
Wealth comes from Africa
Poverty comes from Europe

Anonymous Namibian Poet
From Namso News 3, August 1977

Against Individualism

If I am there where I think I am,
And if my thoughts take place
inside my head or brain,
(the Myth of free-thinking individualism clings fast to these 'obvious truths')
Then it follows that I must be inside my head.

These are the impossible conclusions to which the 'herd mentality' (Nietzsche) leads one.

I am not there where I think I am
Nor is thinking there where I am,
I am there where (my) thinking is.

I am only *when* I think
Only inso*far* as I think;
When thinking occurs ...

When Thinking, — having (been)
Thought with me, (it is)
by me only when it reaches me.

When Thinking thinks (it is) me.

For I *have* to *think* where I am,
Even THAT I am,
In order to *know* that ...
I am not there ...

I am there when I awake;
When I find myself already
Already having been there ... asleep.

Sleep comes not when I am tired;
I am tired when sleep comes.
Sleep does not leave me when I awake
(I) awake ...

Anonymous Namibian Poet
From Namso News 3, August 1977

People Forget (Even in a four roomed house)

I knocked faintly on her window
She signalled that I use the kitchen entrance
I eased the kitchen door open
My three stars Okapi knife open.

In the kitchen
I jumped over her unemployed drunken older brother
I feared him so I took care
I stepped over one of the children
Sleeping on the mat — she cried.

On my way to her bedroom
I saw lights on in the lounge
Her older sister who knew me
Slept on the floor with her twin ugly kids
From inside her parents' bedroom
I heard a movement that
Made me move a little fast
My blood rushing to my brain
For her mother called her father
In a soft moaning voice
I realized what they were doing.

In her bedroom a sixteen year old girl
Was sleeping on the floor
Her younger sister eighteen
Was sharing her bed with some guy
I was soon with my girl with her child
Like these people in that four roomed house
I forgot everything and did what they were doing.

R. Skhumbuzo Makhaya

A Celebration of Flames by Farouk Asvat

Published by Ad Donker 1987
Price R9.95 excluding tax.

A Celebration of Flames won the AA Life/Ad Donker Literary Award for best poetry collection submitted in 1986, and the publication of this volume is consequent on that achievement. The award brought to media attention a poet who had previously been a constant, if undervalued, voice in alternative literary circles since the early 1970s.

Farouk Asvat was one of the cultural activists who took part in the first upsurge of a revived black literature nearly two decades ago. As a student he was drawn to the Black Consciousness movement, and was a founder member of the Black Thoughts poetry and drama group which toured the townships in the seventies. He was also involved in the work of the New Dawn Ensemble, and was for a while a regional cultural co-ordinator of the Black People's Convention. As a result of his political work, he was banned for five years in 1973: he now sees that period as ironically useful to him in that it forced him to give more attention to his writing.

In the 1980s he has continued to be productive. His first volume, *The Time of Our Lives*, was published in 1982. In line with his belief in the need for unity among anti-apartheid forces, Asvat was a founder member of the Writers' Forum in 1983, a group aimed at bringing together writers of various ideological persuasions and racial categories who had the common goal of ending apartheid. This was seen as especially important at the time because of growing divisions between writers who were supporters of black consciousness and those who were supporters of the non-racial movement.

A doctor by profession, he has also involved himself with the Institute for Black Research and the Alexandra Art Centre. He does not see his job as a doctor at the Alexandra Health Clinic as separate from his practice as a poet. 'Essentially,' he told a *Weekly Mail* reporter, 'I am a poet. Medicine keeps me firmly on the ground, in touch with people's everyday problems. But my writing has come to be an even greater responsibility than medical work'; and notes that both writers and doctors listen to what the patient says the problem is and, using this knowledge, diagnose a treatment.[1]

During the last few years Asvat has published poetry of increasing distinction in a number of local and overseas magazines, books and journals; but the role in which he has gained a great deal of attention and stirred some controversy has been as a critic. Since 1980 he has published a number of

articles and newspaper pieces commenting on literature and the role and responsibility of the committed South African writer. This is not all. Another subject he has dealt with has been the need he perceives for writers to forge a third world perspective in their writing: to break away from Western and colonial modes of thought and to help build a new indigenous consciousness.[2]

The creative writer, according to Asvat, is the conscience of his or her people and an interpreter of society. The writer cannot simply reflect on society, but must experience what he or she writes about.[3] He sees the role of the poet as a community role: he notes that *A Celebration of Flames* 'portrays the anguish and trauma our people have been through in the past few years ... I belong among my people and to continue to speak their tongue I have to be among them.' The writer has a responsibility to the community, and should not get absorbed in narrower interests — such as articulating the views of urban people at the expense of rural concerns, or the views of the academic and political strata at the expense of the majority.[4]

Moreover, he believes that the writer must be a questioning voice. The writer needs to be both part of the liberation struggle and sufficiently distanced to be able to analyse and criticize, and so to articulate an independent standpoint. The political process demands creative thinking: and 'the writer must question: for questions are creative; and creativity leads to the development of the community'.[5] 'It is not a matter of being critical for the sake of being critical; it is a very necessary input for political organisations.'[6]

Asvat has shown unease recently at what he sees as the tendency for some black South African writers to think they can show political commitment simply through sloganizing. 'We are going through an unfortunate phase,' he claims, 'where unless you mouth specific slogans, people consider you part of the opposition.'[7] He is also critical of a tendency for writers at the moment to confuse merely supporting a political party with commitment. It is not enough, he believes. 'Whereas the early seventies saw, with the advent of Black Consciousness, a resurgence of creativity and exploration, the early eighties seem to be caught in the inertia of dogma, by the constraints of petty ideological warfare: narrow-minded nationalists pitted against straight-jacketed Stalinists .... In the last five or six years, many writers have become secondary to politicians and are pandering to their need to prove themselves politically relevant. But your commitment should come through in your writing: in every poem, in every line. It was like that in the 70s, when writers were at the forefront of liberation thinking.'[8]

In conjunction with real commitment, he feels that writers need to master their craft, and take writing seriously as an exacting profession. Writing should be 'the artifice of transforming old realities into new ones, writers and artists must create a new reality, not merely mirror it'. He has consequently criticized much recent black South African writing as simply autobiographical or journalistic, befogged by staid ideologies, exhibiting in an unfortunate manner the fragmentation of South African political life and an ignorance of literary techniques other than mimetic realism. Black writers are far too often content with easy publication, rather than attending to the discipline of their calling. He believes that writing is by nature a lonely and solitary affair, which demands great perceptiveness and technical control: 'It is not enough to say because I am black, because I am a worker, because I am oppressed, I can write these things. Sure, a worker has the experience and can write these things better than someone who has never been a worker; but he must also develop his skill to be able to write it. If writers are emerging and still learning their craft, one has to encourage and criticise them, but to praise them just because they come from the townships is doing them a disservice .... It is essential that our creative writers understand, that to be genuinely committed to the development of our people in a political sense, means an equally genuine commitment to the demands of their art.' Asvat therefore distinguishes between what he calls 'political slogan' poems (which are meant to have an immediate and predictable response) and poetry with a 'more subtle identification, which offers a profounder and longer-lasting effect'.[9]

It is necessary to understand Asvat's critical thinking because many of these opinions emerge in his poetry in obvious, or transformed, ways. Assuming the role of a self-conscious and questioning writer, he has spoken out against the recent political and ideological splits among the black community. He will admit to a greater political affinity still with Black Consciousness, but is not a member of any political organization at present because of his desire to maintain a certain amount of independence as a writer. His wish to work for a broader unity in the liberation struggle is reflected in the dedication of *A Celebration of Flames* to Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe and Steve Biko, whom he presumably perceives as having a basic unity of purpose despite their differing methods and interpretations.

Most reviewers have implied or stated openly that it is to the second section of this collection ('A Collection of Flames') that their attention is chiefly drawn. These poems were written in the period between September 1984 and the end of 1986, 'a

traumatic and tragic period of our lives' in Asvat's words. The poems in this section are mainly written in the first person, and are focussed through the anguished consciousness of the poet. Due to his identification with the black community at large, here he has taken into himself much of the loves, hopes and torment of an oppressed people.

It is therefore a mistake to try and completely separate the personal from the political in these poems. They are not two dichotomous halves of the poet's experience, but (in a country which politicizes black people's personal lives with its laws and racist stereotypes) are crucially interwoven in ways which cannot be undone:

> Anger swells
> Like an explosion
> In the chest
>
> But it is too late
> To change lives now.
> Love is a strange feeling
> I left behind
> In the disturbances of youth;
>
> ... Oh how the years wasted our lives
> How our tongues could not speak
> The language of our hearts
> How we barricaded
> Behind the myths of our upbringings.
>
> 'After All These Years'

Asvat often attempts within the same poem to express the intensely personal *and* incorporate wider social and political concerns. The political is felt as a need which impinges enormously on the individual: no black person can feel psychologically at ease while deprived of political rights and human dignity within a racist system. Especially in the poems which use the first person, Asvat's political viewpoint comes out not only in what he says but also in the emotional intensity and passion of his language. The presence of destruction and a hoped-for rebirth in the streets of the township are echoed even in the most personal moments we encounter in these poems: the reader reaches a state of perception where even an innocent backyard fire in a friend's house cannot remain innocent of connotations of the larger, more grisly bonfires being lit in the streets ('The Dark Sea'). Even the love poems are pregnant with a sense of sadness, a knowledge of the final lack of concern of human beings for each other. At times one can go

so far as to read the beloved in such poems as a metaphor for the poet's country, receding ever further from him as his desire increases:

> ... But from your silent grave
> Comes your tender song
> Lamenting
> Calling me
> Deep, deep within your soul:
>
> Knowing there is nothing to expect
> But what others offer
> I accept.
> And you bring a gift of the wind
> A handful of water
> A heart that brings bouquets
> To the massacre of my soul
>
> 'A Night Full of Thunder'

At times the passionate desire for liberation in South Africa seems, paradoxically, to have spawned its opposite — the horror of internecine strife and the necklace — and the poet struggles to understand and come to terms with this ('A nation stirring from sleep/Once again/Entering into a pledge of darkness/Burnt by the fires of their own desires' ('Do You Know')). In 'These Dusty Years', the poet acknowledges that the destructiveness in the townships is due to the brutality of the State of Emergency and the militarization of the townships ('We burn ourselves/In dancing effigies/Of our own desires/In the shadow of a soldier'), but still points out that all the oppressed bear some responsibility for this loss of unity:

> In a celebration of yellow carnations
> And red flames
> We devour souls
> In one cold swoop
> Of determined rhetoric
> As we live on dreams
> Poltergeists
> In the guise of revolutionaries ...

Here, Asvat's distaste at the results of facile sloganeering and divisive party dogma is given powerful poetic form.

The critics who see this poetry as merely a terrain of contest between the 'personal' and the 'political' in a vague, universal sense are mistaken in another aspect as well. The sense of

ambivalence one gets on reading many of these poems can also, in my opinion, be usefully traced back to a political origin. Asvat's greater sense of allegiance to black consciousness and the 'good old days' of the 1970s comes through often in the poems. Indeed, both in his poetry and in his public pronouncements Asvat tends to see rhetoric and dogma far too much as purely a creation of the 1980s (and the non-racial movement?), whereas on the contrary it could be claimed that black consciousness did and does have its own forms of facile dogma and posturing as well. The doubt the poet feels about the 1980s is surely connected, not only to the sundering of black anti-state political energies into at least two opposing camps during that period, but also the fact that black consciousness in its organizational form has steadily lost ground to other forces, such as the ANC and COSATU. The absent centre of these poems is the ideal of a unity and sameness of purpose that Asvat, from his position, believes to have disappeared. Asvat laments the internecine conflict that has followed the sundering of black goals in many communities around South Africa.

The poem that most obviously escapes the sense of ambiguity present in the second section of the book is the one that employs a fairly straightforward black consciousness perspective. In the poem 'The Contrast Strikes', the lines of division in the country become, for once, unambiguously between white and black: this poem describes a 16 June celebration at Regina Mundi in 1985, where the ritual battle with the police occasions a complete unity and sense of solidarity among township residents ('We run/To safety again/Every house a refuge/Welcoming strangers'); a solidarity which can be contrasted with the dilettantism and uncaring attitude of whites on the same day ('All over the city/Mlungus gather/In their happy best;/A Father's day picnic/To watch implosions/Of cooling towers;/The concern for monuments/...Etched on their bland faces/Sipping champagne/On mayoral balconies'). Here, the dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed becomes entirely a racial one: and the sense of doubt and anguish one feels in so many of the other poems disappears. The enemy is most obviously the enemy as defined in the 1970s.

At times Asvat slips into an uncritical black consciousness discourse elsewhere as well. Poems in the first section of the book 'King of the Guerillas' such as 'Township Guitar' and 'Die Meit!' seem to me uncritical in Asvat's own terms as spelt out in his critical articles, as they remain content with displaying unexamined race and class prejudices about white women and domestic servants respectively: moreover, the

unfortunate attempt at humour in the first of these poems will be particularly offensive to feminists. At times, too, the poet seems to want to present the conflicts taking place in the townships as simply a conflict of age and responsibility:

> Come little children
> Burning your fathers
> In jubilation of nothing
> Go bury yourselves in shame
> Cremate your adolescent bravado
> In a prison of a thousand white curtains
> Fluttering in the breeze.
>
> 'The Poetry of Love'

> ... the mobs with molotovs
> Fired by the emotions of their adolescent adventure
> Mixed up somewhere
> In the desire for freedom ...
>
> 'On the Periphery'

Occasionally, too, the references to African symbols seem a trifle forced ('The tiger will not let me off/And the hyena cannot stop laughing/As the hippo rides the streets') ('After All These Years').

When Asvat *does* attempt to deal with divisions within black society in a straightforward manner he from time to time is unconvincing as well. For instance:

> ... Ghoosein!
> Gaan ons nog Sonester toe vi' die weekend!
> Lekke' braai en piekniek hou
> Ek sê vi' djou
> Djy kan vi' djouself *enjoy!*
> Daa's mos nie gam daa'
> Oek nie kaffers.
>
> 'Die Gujhajie'

This poem does not seem to me to work, as it merely presents the speaker's remarks out of context, simply as a 'slice of life' from the black suburbs. The situation is put forward without a sense of historical process or social underpinning, and therefore seems to merely hang in the air. Thus, while I am sure Asvat is actually condemning racism and elitism among a small group of people, an unsympathetic reader could easily take it that he was referring to *all* Muslims.

In both his successes and his failures, then, the poet brings to our attention the need for all writers in this country to

follow his example and pay more attention to the form and content of their work. Neither are the above remarks meant to be dismissive: when all is said and done, this is a fine collection of poetry. The strength of the poetry in 'A Collection of Flames' is, finally, the very ambiguities and ambivalences of voice and feeling. Here is a poetry which in its very contradictions explores accurately the emotional terrain and tensions of life in the townships today. Contemporary black poetry in South Africa has its praise singers in plenty — Mzwakhe, Hlatshwayo and others — and it must be realized that Asvat's poetry is of a different nature. The poet is trying to explore his own emotions and political questions in a moving and significant way, and in this he is generally successful. His poems depict a wider resistance to oppression, which includes the complex nuances of psychological and everyday life. (He says: 'The lives of the oppressed are more complex than merely that they are oppressed. To deny the complexity is to deny people's humanity .... Some of my love poems have engaged large audiences just as well as direct political statements.'[10]) His use of different regional forms of *mensetaal* also points to his understanding that the use of English must be extended in South Africa to embrace a wider reading and listening public, as well as his realization that some thoughts and feelings are often better expressed in familiar dialect.

Asvat has been seen by some as a literary purist more concerned with literary standards than the 'spontaneous and vibrant expositions of an entire people's agonies and joys'.[11] However, despite an occasional nostalgia for what is past, this poet does seem to me to be subverting old cliches to effect, and pointing the way towards forging a new critical consciousness and concern for the demands of poetic craft. In these jagged, emotional, doubting poems, he often throws the onus of thought and interpretation onto the reader: and it seems to me that it is here that Asvat *does* indeed serve the cause he seeks, that of getting people to confront the uncertainties and divisions of the present, and think long and hard how to build a new country out of the problems of the old. For certainly a writer's task is 'to keep track of the history of the nation: its past; its present needs; its future possibilities'.[12]

How do buildings crumble so easily
Lakes dry so suddenly

But the pain of the past
Is only the beginning of the pain
Of the future ...

'The Wind'

Kelwyn Sole

Footnotes

1. A Harber 'Out of an angry silence, a polished poet is born' *Weekly Mail* 14-20/7/87.
2. F Asvat 'The writer must question' *Sowetan* 4/9/87.
3. ibid.
4. Harber.
5. Asvat 'Weapons of Words' *Wietie* 1, 1980.
6. Harber.
7. ibid.
8. F Faller 'The doctor prescribes poetry' *Tribute* October 1987 p.123; Asvat 'Our anguish and quest' *Sowetan* 6/5/87.
9. Harber; Faller; Asvat 'Artist's function is to master his craft' *Sowetan* 13/5/87; see also Asvat 'A critical look at black S.A. writing' *Sowetan* June 81.
10. Faller.
11. M Gwala/A Dangor/O Mtshali 'Black writers are just as committed' *Sowetan* 3/6/87.
12. Faller.

Report on Congress of South African Writers Workshop

'The purpose of fiction is to educate through the means of entertainment. The information that is provided through fiction is different from that which is provided through other forms of writing, such as journalism.'

So said Prof. Njabulo Ndebele, President of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), in his address to fifty aspirant writers at a workshop in February. The workshop was the first in a series planned by COSAW and writers attended from as far afield as Soweto, Alexandra, Johannesburg, Sebokeng, and Newcastle. One group from Vryburg even had to detour around the floods to get to the workshop.

'What is a writer?' Prof. Ndebele asked, and there were smiles of acknowledgement and dismay as he went on, 'a writer is someone who writes every day. Or at least on a regular programme. It must become a habit.'

Ndebele, author of several books, was providing broad guidelines on how to write short stories. Earlier in the workshop, Achmat Dangor, chairperson of COSAW Transvaal, and Gcina Mhlophe, internationally known actress and writer, had run workshops on poetry and theatre respectively.

During the poetry workshop, participants read their poetry aloud for the group to listen to and discuss. The poetry read ranged from material strongly influenced by the traditions and rhythms of Zulu oral poetry, to poetry written within the traditions and rhythms of 'English' poetry. When poetry written in colloquial Afrikaans was read, questions were raised whether writers should use universally understood language.

South African slang varies from area to area, and is certainly not an international language, and yet many felt that if the poetry is powerful enough the meaning will come through even if individual words are not necessarily understood. It was agreed that poets should write in the language or dialect that came to them most easily, and that expressed most accurately what they wanted to say. The traditions and conventions of British and American poetry are not necessarily those that should be harnessed by local poets. Achmat Dangor read from the works of some of South Africa's well-known poets such as Mafika Gwala and Mongane Serote to show how South African phrases and speech patterns have been used to create powerful poetry.

Gcina Mhlophe introduced the session on writing for the theatre, describing how origins of theatre in South Africa were located in story-telling, praise poetry, social rituals and song. She went on to discuss contemporary theatre, and her use of the phrase 'relevant theatre' sparked a heated debate about the politics of theatre. Unfortunately, the technical side of how to write a play got swept aside in this debate but some of the discussion was very pertinent, and related directly to the experience of most people in the workshop.

One person raised the point that song and dance had been co-opted by the regime and their puppet allies, in a manner which was best encapsulated by the colonial cliche 'well, all blacks have rhythm'. This was the way the government used mine dancing and musicals to promote its image of the 'happy black in South Africa'. However, it was argued that this should not mean music and dance should be shunned. Several good reasons for maintaining music and dance in theatre existed: the audience responds well to it; music is a universal medium which crosses language boundaries and often expresses emotion better than words.

However, it was felt that if music and dance were to be used, they must be reclaimed from commercial theatre managements and parastatal organizations. Music, dance and theatre should express the true feelings of the people of South Africa.

It was strongly felt that for a play to be relevant it does not have to express only the pain and suffering of the oppressed people of South Africa, but that theatre should express the strength of spirit and the celebration of life that is also a part of the experience of oppressed people.

A common theme that emerged out of the two-day workshop was the need for writing to be accessible to the readers that one is writing for. Prof. Ndebele said writers can make personal interventions through their choice of language and style which would make their writing more accessible. This tied up closely with the discussion in the poetry workshop on the use of colloquial language as a medium for poetry. He said it was necessary for writers to constantly subject their writing to criticism and analysis to be able to communicate as fully and accurately as possible. It is also important for writers to intervene through organizations like COSAW to work towards increasing literacy and the desire to read in our communities.

Concluding his workshop, Ndebele said that writers have to develop their personal resources to cope with the difficulties of writing. 'There is something unnatural about writing', he said, and writers will have to combat distractions and fears in order to reach 'take-off point'. Writers need discipline; they should

love language and perfect the use of the written word; they should have a pressing concern for people and for the society around them; but above all, writers must love to tell a good story.

Barbie Schreiner

Autobiographical Readings by the AFRICAN WRITERS' ASSOCIATION on 23 January 1988.

Taking the title of Don Mattera's recently published autobiography, *Memory is the Weapon,* as a reference point, the African Writers' Association successfully organized a programme of readings from some autobiographies by certain South African authors. The event took place on 23 January 1988 at the Funda Art Centre.

Featured in the reading were Don Mattera, who read from his autobiography mentioned above, and Es'kia Mphahlele who read from his classic *Down Second Avenue* and its sequel *Afrika My Music* which was written after his return to South Africa. Mphahlele also read from Alfred Hutchinson's *The Road to Ghana,* and from Todd Matshikiza's *Chocolates for my Wife.* Maano Tuwani and Mothobi Mutloatse read from Richard Rive's *Writing Black* and Bloke Modisane's *Blame me on History.*

It is hardly incidental that the genre of autobiography occupies a unique place in South African literature. Falling, as it does, between fictional and historical narration, it enables the autobiographer to inscribe his life history within the context of his social and historical environment. In addition, it makes possible the elaboration of the interrelation between the individual's most private experiences and broader social determinants. In South Africa, the individual's experience, particularly when the individual is black, will invariably be informed by the humiliations, hardships and sacrifices brought about by the oppressive social dynamics of apartheid and the need to struggle against it.

Thus the autobiography and its structural as well as thematic relationship to historiography implies a narrative which actualizes the fact that the life of the individual also contains the life of a society. This makes it an exceedingly powerful means of resisting the human, social and historical erasures which apartheid, the grotesque abomination of racial capitalism, has pursued with unparalleled brutality against the majority of South Africans.

This is most effectively captured by Don Mattera's metaphorized recollection of the destruction of Sophiatown and his family home: 'The machines began their destruction. My eyes were fixed on my grand-parents' house. One of the killers attacked the kitchen, leaving a gaping wound in its side. Beaten and battered the kitchen collapsed and died.' Here we see how the destruction of a home is rendered in such a manner that it equals the destruction of a human life. And lest we retreat to the scepticism or apologetics which would receive the description above as dramatic excess, let us be mindful of the fact that apartheid has never recoiled from methodical human torture or convulsive mass-murder.

Mattera's reading, underscored by the sureness of experience and conviction, brought to life the riveting eloquence of his text as well as the varied life which was possible within the cosmopolitan community of Sophiatown. Despite the grimness of the narrative involving the destruction of Sophiatown, the insult of racial classification and a descent into the horrors of gang warfare, it is also an account of personal rehabilitation through political education. It is permeated by social criticism, humour, as well as a faith in the ability of humans to overcome the destructive dynamics of oppression. All this was convincingly accentuated by Mattera's reading.

Es'kia Mphahlele's reading from *Down Second Avenue* brought to life the experiences of his childhood in Marabastad and drew attention to the close relationship between the social conditions of the time and the sharp, concrete stylistics of the writing which sought to capture personal experiences within the context of overcrowded ghetto life. By transposing the listeners to the precise location of his childhood, by defining the space and texture of his exterior physical surroundings, including the neighbourhood and the squalid house, Mphahlele delved into the brooding interior of his restless state of mind then.

Ravan/SACHED will soon be publishing a comic-book adaptation of Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*.

Reading from *Afrika My Music*, the sequel to *Down Second Avenue*, which chronicles Mphahlele's wanderings across Africa, Europe and America, before returning to South Africa at the time of the 1976 uprisings, he chose to focus on the complex psychology which accompanies the exile. Relationships with South Africans and the land from which he was removed, against the background of the larger world through which he moved, gave the listeners an acute insight into Mphahlele's relationship with the land of his birth.

The reading by Maano Tuwani from Rive's *Writing Black* focused on the writer's childhood in District Six, which, like Sophiatown and so many other places in South Africa has been demolished and the inhabitants forcibly removed. In this key passage from the text, the false reasoning of the white government and its brutal indifference to the rights of black people are put into perspective: 'It is notoriously easy to romanticize about slum life and sentimentalize it. In truth the slum was damp, dirty and dank ... I endured a harrowing childhood in District Six, where drunkenness, debauchery and police raids were the order of the day. I cannot find any reasonable objection to slum clearance, especially for the purpose of constructing decent homes to replace the former tenements. But when District Six was razed it was done so by official decree to make room for those who already have too much ... No White authority had ever bothered to ask me whether they could take my past away. They simply brought in their bulldozers.'

These readings, attended by a large and clearly appreciative audience, succeeded in bringing back to life layers of the past as well as affirming the abiding power of personal narratives inscribed with social history.

Staffrider

The Oral Poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli and the COSATU Workers

The once unified, exclusive and privileged white culture of domination is facing disintegration. This is due to contradictions, of economic and ideological import, within the white community as well as the powerful initiative launched by the movement of cultural liberation. While the oppressive

minority culture is in disarray, blacks are not only becoming increasingly aware of this, but are also participating in ever-growing numbers in the liberation movement.

Under such circumstances, the emergence of new forms of cultural expression, synthesized with older or more traditional forms, becomes almost unavoidable. In the light of this, the adaptations and new applications of oral poetry must be seen as stemming directly from the process of mass involvement in the struggle for liberation and democracy.

Nevertheless, one might still ask: why oral poetry now? And, why oral poetry in English? The answer to these questions could be found in the fact that, as an international language, English is no longer the sole property of its native speakers. This is so, despite the fact that the spread of English is inseparable from the spread of British and American imperialisms. However, in the hands of non-native speakers, the adaptation and reapplication of English cannot be controlled or regulated by those who regard English as their mother tongue. Once this is understood, the possibility of English assuming new dimensions becomes an actuality.

In this regard, Mzwakhe Mbuli is one of those poets, aware of British and American imperialism, who has developed his own style of oral poetry through the medium of English. In order to extend his audience, and therefore ensure the popular reception of his poetry, he has also made a recording of him performing his poetry. The recording is a clear confirmation of the axiom which is steadily gaining support: the South African artist is faced with the historical choice of consciously and actively participating in the creation of a non-racial South African society, or fleeing from this historical challenge into the realms of escapist oblivion.

Whether one attends Mzwakhe's live performances or listens to his recording, one is immediately struck by the fact that his lines are rendered like an eructation. In his own mode of outburst, accompanied by vibrant music, the poet expresses his feelings and thoughts of what it is like to be black and to be participating in the national struggle for freedom. The sincerity of the poet's thoughts and feelings is so compelling that the listener is persuaded to share in these thoughts and feelings.

This is further strengthened by the fact that, as a form of radical art, it is an ideal expression which impeaches the existing social set-up. Thus we find that social necessity dispels fear in Mzwakhe and in his audience. He brings closer to us all the truth that expression cannot be free where people are deprived of the most fundamental human rights. Hence the seemingly aggressive tone whereby he puts the mockers on racial and economic oppression. This is done by consistently

questioning the nature of power and the structures through which it is exercised.

Yet, the political content of the poems varies. At times they expose the false consciousness which sustains the Bantustans among certain blacks as in the poem 'I am Ignorant'. In other poems, such as 'Many Years Ago', a historical dimension is explored by means of citing the deeds of heroes like Patrice Lumumba and Dedan Kemati. Civil wars in Katanga and Biafra are juxtaposed with the genocide of Hiroshima. 'Now is the time', with its reference to a poem by Mao Tsetung, is an urgent call to dismantle apartheid.

Mzwakhe's message is clear: anyone who remains unperturbed by the present repression, either fails to perceive the reality of oppression or has opted for a soft line and even acceptance of injustice. Like the poet Ingoapele Madingoane, Mzwakhe has succeeded in finding a dynamic content for black poetry at the populist level. For him, the direct relationship of his poetry to what is happening is more important than abstract speculation.

This, however, does not mean that Mzwakhe's poetry is a series of dry social comments. While it denounces the existing order, it also articulates visions of the future. It is radical testimony of things still to come.

Likewise, the oral poetry recited by COSATU workers is a clear testimony of workers increasingly becoming aware of themselves as members of a class locked in a struggle against a racist capitalist class. Conscious of the nature of their exploitation and organized to secure their demands, these workers utilize poetry to free themselves and other workers from anything that might bar them from acting in accordance with the struggle for liberation.

The recitals of the COSATU workers are characterized by the same minimalism and directness of what I would like to call target poetry. Now, it is known that explicitness in poetry is not always welcomed by literary scholars and critics, but a survey of writing created under conditions similar to those which black workers in South Africa are facing, will reveal that this is indeed the writing of a militant class engaged in a momentous struggle. While the privileged and oppressive class will hide their complicity or indifference behind polished words, the workers prefer to strip the horrors of oppression naked for all to see. Thus Nise Malange writes:

> 'Here, living in thinning light
> Here
> Freedom is nailed to a tree
> To die.

Here I am living: in a match box
I am here dying of hunger.'

Nise Malange's themes of death and resurrection are not just rooted in religion but in the cycles of nature and visions of historical defeat to be followed by triumph. This inspiration drawn from nature extends to affection and admiration for the land as a geo-physical entity. As Qabula extols in a poem from the collection *Black Mamba Rising:*

'Youth—
Echo the sounds, the songs
And dances
Of the plants, the birds, the bees
You can make Africa flourish in its pride.'

Alfred Qabula's poetry covers a wide range of themes and succeeds in applying the rhetorical strategies of eulogy used in the traditional praise poem to the workers' organized participation in the national democratic struggle. This is most effectively articulated in his monumental 'Praise Poem to Fosatu':

'You are the metal locomotive that moves on top
Of other metals
The metal that doesn't bend that was sent to the
Engineers but they couldn't bend it.'

The depth and irreversibility of worker solidarity and resistance is equally present in the work of Mi Hlatshwayo. In 'The Black Mamba Rises' the lethal black mamba becomes a metaphor for the strategic astuteness of the organized workers' movement:

'The victors of war
But then retreat
The builders of nests,
But then like an ant-eater
You then desert.
Heavy are your blows,
They leave the employers
Unnerved.'

These poets have all contributed to making poetry a mass-based and collective medium. By infusing social issues with their personal experiences they have resurrected oral poetry from the tombs of the past and given it a new life. This is but the first manifestation of what is still to come in the wake of the unstoppable movement for political and cultural liberation.

Mafika Gwala

Echoes of African Art

Compiled and Introduced by **Matsemela Manaka**

Published by Skotaville 1987
Price R39.95 excluding tax

South African visual and plastic arts, like all other forms of culture, are generated within a social environment characterized by hierarchical and conflictual codes. While some artists have striven to expose, challenge and undo the prevailing hierarchies in an effort to establish a democratic social and cultural environment, there have been those, aided by an assortment of art critics and scholars, who have worked towards upholding the coercive differentiations of the current social order.

Within this context, which has seen the marginalization of indigenous aesthetic traditions and the privileging of Eurocentric conventions, the recent Skotaville publication *Echoes of African Art* situates itself firmly in opposition to tendencies which valorize European conventions at the expense of African traditions. This assertive publication contains a compilation of a wide range of works by black South African artists, including the early rock art of the Khoisan, traditional African art, the first contemporary African figurative painters and sculptors, as well as graphics and paintings of the present generation of African artists.

The text itself consists of a preface by the author and academic, Es'kia Mphahlele, and introductory essays by Manaka on traditional art, sculpture and contemporary paintings and graphics by black South African artists. This is followed by a series of reproductions which display the complex variety of indigenous art.

What emerges from this book, therefore, is a general outline of the development of African art within the historical context of geo-political and cultural colonization. The cumulative impression the text leaves one with is the fact that African art, in this part of the continent, has invariably been shaped by the historical and material conditions as well as the aesthetic modes rooted in precolonial and traditional forms of social life, which have persisted to this day, either as a result of resistance to acculturation or as the products of ethnic preservation favoured by the South African state.

In his discussion of traditional South African art, Manaka juxtaposes the communalistic imperatives of traditional society with the individualism of industrialized society. The utopianist valorization of the former has by now become such a

commonplace, that Manaka's reiteration of it does not constitute a radical insight. It leans on the oppositional mythology which has proven so indispensable for the mobilization of social groups whose oppression involved the systematic denigration of their mode of existence and cultural values, prior to their being forcibly subordinated to serve the interests of an unacceptable, oppressive formation. In this regard, the artists who subscribe to the notion of community are simply affirming their social and, therefore, political alignment against the apparently individualistic but ultimately class-based strategies of social fragmentation or atomization. Thus the rock paintings and engravings of the Khoisan people are interpreted as exemplifications of social and environmental integration. While emphasizing the stylized and ritualistic importance of the widely distributed rock paintings of the Khoisan people, Manaka posits these as harbingers of urban forms of mural art. This assertion, based as it is on apparent resemblances, is striking, but the under-analysis of Khoisan painting and the corresponding unsubstantiated claim of its continuity in mural art, is productive only insofar as it raises questions about the protest nature of certain murals and the officially commissioned work of domesticated artists.

Ironically, Manaka chose to illustrate his text with specimens of Khoisan rock paintings which are housed in the cabinets of the Johannesburg Art Museum. The specimens are not furnished with details of their original location. Must one, in this context, deny irony and assume that the Johannesburg museum is the environment of their genesis? This, obviously, points at the generalized nature of some of Manaka's claims.

More convincing, however, is Manaka's challenge of the rigid demarcation which Eurocentric aestheticians draw between utilitarian objects and so-called pure aesthetic artifacts. This immediately restores the immense productivity of African women in the field of aesthetics to a level which is profoundly unsettling to the patriarchal inscriptions which have come to dominate the evaluation as well as the narrative of indigenous art. The decisive force with which Manaka argues against the denigration of the artistic productivity of African women is worth citing: 'The claim that there are few African women in Fine Arts, ignores African women artists involved in mural paintings, body paintings, the art of weaving and pottery, beadwork, women makers of dolls, clayworks of animals; women involved in some form of collage — the creative patchwork on blankets and clothes; the geometric design on gourds and other utilitarian objects' (p.10). This is indeed an impressive range of artistic activities which could only be severed from the conventional modes or forms of art by means

of artistic reification and the concomitant differentiated commodification of art.

The importance of the link which Manaka discerns between the aesthetics of utilitarian artifacts and gender, on the one hand, and exclusively aesthetic commodities, on the other hand, becomes apparent when developments in modern western art and some recent manifestations, such as 'transitional art' in South Africa, are considered. The painted sculptures of Noira Mabasa come to mind here. Within the South African context it opens up the question of how, along with socio-economic changes, gender differentiations and the corollary of division of labour coincided with or resulted in the separation of utilitarian artifacts from what is valorized as pure art. Unfortunately, Manaka's introductory text points towards these matters without making any attempt at a more rigorous analysis of what he clearly identifies as a problem.

Turning to contemporary South African art, Manaka stresses the underlying eclecticism reflected in sculpture, painting and graphic work. This is inevitable, given the fact of colonization, and the mutuality of the colonizer and the colonized, as pointed out by Albert Memmi. In the process of acculturation, by both the colonizer and the colonized, forces of assimilation as well as resistance come into play. On the level of artistic production this generates a series of aesthetic hybrids which, when they succeed, embody a synthesis of the two main traditions and their off-shoots. This process, although not inherently negative, has historically always been characterized by domination. And as can be expected, indigenous movements of cultural resistance, be they coherent or dispersed, will reject it and make attempts at redressing the stratified aesthetic order imposed by an intrusive culture.

The oldest and probably most powerful form of African art is sculpture, and like utilitarian artifacts, sculptures formed an integral part of community life. Although the two terracotta heads which date back to 520 AD point towards a tradition of sculpture in South Africa similar to those of Central and West Africa, scant evidence exists to sustain this. Nevertheless, as Manaka points out, the best work of contemporary African sculptors, like Lucus Sithole, Sidney Kumalo and the deceased Nelson Makuba, manifests traces of the human-animal fusions and religous symbolism characteristic of traditional sculptures.

A more unfortunate aspect of African sculpture, according to Manaka, is the static repetition which excessive commercialization has brought about in certain forms of wood sculpture. The trivialization which results from this not only reduces the aesthetic expressiveness of these works but is also obstructive to the reception of African sculpture as a whole. In

contra-distinction to this, the growth of metal sculpture by artists such as Vincent Baloi and Durant Shalai, under the sponsorship of art schools like the Funda Art Centre and the Federated Union of Black Artists, must be seen as a positive development in African sculpture.

As can be anticipated, painting and graphic art by black South Africans have largely been shaped by the educational institutions established for blacks. The emphasis placed on naturalism, which runs contrary to the stylized geometric conventions of traditional art, has resulted in tensions which are clearly visible in both the early contemporary painters such as John Koenakeefe Mohl and the legendary Gérard Sekoto, on the one hand, and later generations such as Ephraim Ngatane and Lucky Sibiya, on the other.

Interestingly, Manaka sees Sekoto's gradual movement towards human expressionism within an urban context, as precursory of what has come to be problematically termed 'Township Art'. This genre which encodes the environment, experiences and events associated with the townships, has its definite beginning in the work of Ephraim Ngatane. In an argument of equal importance to that of the unquestioned acceptance of the division between utilitarian and other art, Manaka challenges the categorization of this body of work in terms of the locality of its origin and reference: 'Because the artists lived in the townships and their art was a portrayal of the joys and agonies of township life, they were labelled "township artists". This is a reflection of the racist arrogance of the white South African experience. The art which expresses the white experiences of white people in town, city or suburbs is not called "town art" or "city art" or "suburban art".' Granted the validity of this criticism one might expect Manaka to advance an alternative rubric for the identification of this genre of paintings.

In addition, Manaka raises a whole series of crucial issues around the understandability or accessibility of the work of African artists to their communities. Since many black artists often find themselves in positions where large parts of their communities either do not have the means to patronize their art or do not find their work immediately accessible, this has led to a situation where many black artists are forced to seek patronage outside their communities. The resulting alienation between the artist and his or her community is articulated by Pemba: 'At this stage, my people may not be in a position to buy our art, but it is even more rewarding to find your own people appreciating your work. My dream is to see my people appreciate my work while I am still alive. Please don't bring me flowers to my grave. Give them to me while I am still alive.' (p.14)

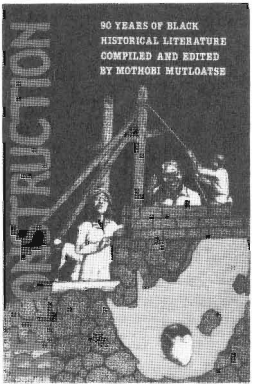
With reference to the African identity of black art and its relation to political movements, Manaka recognizes the role of the Black Consciousness Movement in sensitizing and shaping the attitudes of black artists to both their communities and the heritage of indigenous aesthetic traditions. In this context a less pleasing aspect of the book is the exclusion of reproductions of work by artists such as Walter Battiss, Cecil Skotnes, Wopko Jensma, Caroline Cullinan and Norman Catherine, to name just a few. The works of all these artists have, in one way or another, been determined by indigenous aesthetics and surely merit inclusion in a work presented as 'Echoes of African Art'.

In spite of problems such as the poorly reproduced specimens of traditional art, and a tendency to appropriate material which was first published elsewhere without clear acknowledgement, this publication is a definite advancement on the anthropological *Contemporary African Art* by J. de Jager and other tendencies to marginalize African art in South Africa. This book, therefore, should be valuable to all interested in South African art.

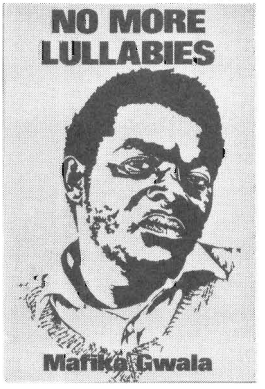
Andries Walter Oliphant

STAFFRIDER TENTH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OFFER

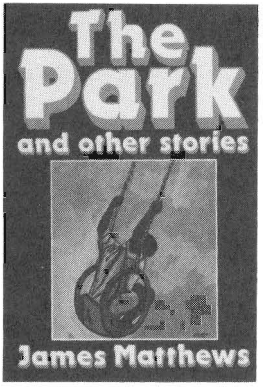
Four selected 'Staffrider Series' books for half the price during May, June and July:



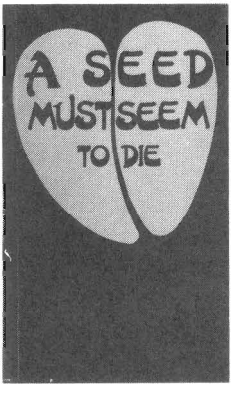
Staffrider Series No 8
RECONSTRUCTION
90 Years of Black Historical Literature
Compiled and edited by
Mothobi Mutloatse
Price R5.50 now R2.75



Staffrider Series No 14
NO MORE LULLABIES
A collection of poems
by **Mafika Gwala**
Price R5.50 now R2.75



Staffrider Series No 20
THE PARK AND OTHER STORIES
A collection of short stories
by **James Matthews**
Price R7.95 now R3.95



Staffrider Series No 11
A SEED MUST SEEM TO DIE
A collection of poems
by **Daniel P. Kunene**
Price R4.50 now R2.25

TO ORDER Send your remittance to:
STAFFRIDER TENTH ANNIVERSARY
P O Box 31134
2017 BRAAMFONTEIN SOUTH AFRICA

Add R1.50 for postage and packing.
Add GST where applicable.