

ARTS AND CULTURE

Taking Centre Stage on the Globe

During the struggle, Funda was an oasis of Arts and Culture; how can it be a place for hooligans now, when non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy are being nurtured? The Arts flourish within a cultural context where the human spirit claims freedoms and overruns barriers.

By Mongane Wally Serote

The first fight against colonial rule in South Africa was in 1492, when the Khoi and the San fought against the mighty Portuguese who attempted to settle by force of arms in the South Western shore of our country. The Khoi and the San, armed with bow and arrows, spears and knobkerries, and using cattle trained for warfare as artillery, defeated the mighty Portuguese army, which scuttled back to Portugal. We can claim, in the 21st century, that those Khoi and San warriors were fighting at that time for our sovereignty, independence, democracy and for the African Renaissance. So also did the Amazulu at Isandlwana in 1879. They defeated the mighty British army, which scuttled, tail between its legs, licking its wounds.

We are still in the same trenches as the Khoi and the San, Amazulu, and the various warriors from different language groups throughout the length and breadth of our country, who laid their lives down for the freedom of our country, fighting against European settlers who were determined to colonise our people – a scourge which lasted for over five centuries, when eventually, through the Liberation struggles, the Apartheid system disintegrated at the feet of the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), led by the African National Congress (ANC) together with other liberation movements, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). We have negated tribalism, racialism, apartheid and colonialism relentlessly, with almost unprecedented courage as a people, with unflinching commitment and the conviction that, if we are not free, and if others are not free in this world, no one is free. In 1994, South Africa joined Africa and the countries of the world – as a politically free country. Even so, we are aware that the human spirit is not free.

We can state with certainty that imperialism, which is the scourge of the world in the 21st century, is a crime against humanity. All we need to do is to understand why things are as they are in Libya, Iraq, the Sahel, Syria, Mali, Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Brazil, and in some Asian and Latin

American countries – where what the people there had built for themselves is being or has been torn apart.

As Africans, if we claim our continent and the African Diaspora and state that in the international world, so called the Globe, we belong to the South, we will note that what defines us as such, besides our geographical positions, and the fact of our being endowed by nature with immeasurable resources, is the fact that we bear the deep wounds inflicted upon us by imperialism during the decades of the cold war, as we, supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba, pitted our struggles against imperialist countries. And now we find ourselves in a unipolar globe. The direct result from that system of imperialism is the emergence of terrorism, which has

“ We impacted on Europe, America, the Soviet Union, Asia and Latin America, through musicals, theatre, poetry readings, photography, film, music, plastic arts and dance, to emancipate and liberate the African voice.”

rendered the whole world an unsafe terrain of bloodletting. Which must in our minds translate to: “an injury to one is an injury to all”.

For us as South Africans, we come from a not so long ago past, when apartheid as a system was like a full blown cancer, devouring organs and organism with impunity from the South African national body, disregarding anything which tried to stop it. Then, all of us as cultural workers in our country took centre stage. We were inspired by the spirit of commitment and sacrifice of the masses of our country and of the world which did not only express their outrage against the Apartheid system, but committed to fight against it and to destroy it. We declared our

commitment in Gaborone, Botswana, in 1982, anchoring the arts and culture struggle on the foundations which were there already, in South Africa, on the continent, and in the world, through a programme called “Culture and Resistance” which primed more Arts and Culture events to assert and confirm that Arts and Culture is part and parcel of the liberation struggle. We did not end there.

We impacted on Europe, America, the Soviet Union, Asia and Latin America, through musicals, theatre, poetry readings, photography, film, music, plastic arts and dance, to emancipate and liberate the African voice. As we did so, we formed alliances with ordinary people in the world, and they formed alliances with us, so as to liberate the voices of the oppressed throughout the world also. We could do so because there was the Liberation Movement, the ANC and the Mass Democratic Movement and other liberation organisations like the PAC and BCM, and there was the Anti-Apartheid Movement. We contributed to the emergence of a culture of a people-to-people democracy, which knew no borders. We can claim that those efforts did contribute to the African consciousness, which had been planted on the continent by the African political giants, collaborating with other political giants in the diaspora, and Asia before and after the Bandung conference – all of which unleashed the spirit of Pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance and the call for the freedoms of people of the world; the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) and also the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) emerged.

It is against this backdrop of struggle, nationally and internationally, that the discussions between The Jo'burg Theatres, represented by its Chairperson, some of its board members, some South African theatre and cultural personalities led by Dr Lebogang Nawo and the German theatre and cultural workers and Professor Wolfgang from the University of Hildesheim, were held at The Soweto Theatre in Soweto recently. The partnership which is being explored, gives both sides a perfect opportunity to enter into similar partnerships with

other Cultural workers and groups in Europe and our Continent, and other peoples of the world to mount the Global Centre Stage and regain what is still fresh in the minds of the peoples of the world – a promising time of optimism and hope!

Mollo Wa Ditshomo rendered a moving performance piece during the partnership discussions, which brought back the memory of the struggle slogan which stated that: “when one comrade falls, other comrades must pick up his or her spear and fight on”. This group is based at one of the Art Centres of our country – the Funda Centre – which was part and parcel of the South African tapestry portraying the cultural expressions of our Nation. About three or four weeks before the partnership discussions at the Soweto Theatre, we had the opportunity to spend time with the creative people who are based there including Mollo and others who were involved in other different art forms under the auspices of the Department of Arts and Culture programme called the Living Legends Legacy Project.

We heard about how Funda has been invaded by a group of hooligans who have occupied the centre to rent it out to churches so that they can make money. These hooligans claim that they were freedom fighters and that because of that, they are entitled to live by any means necessary. The creative people, including Mollo, have resisted that hooliganism and they are seeking to engage the space as it should be – a place where the arts are nurtured. Historically, Funda produced many outstanding cultural workers: writers, actors, dancers, musicians, plastic artists, etc. It was most moving to experience how Mollo and others, led by Dikeledi Molatoli, were determined to reclaim that space, to lift it up almost bare-handed and with the tips of their fingers, to find a way to give it life again. During the struggle, Funda was an oasis of Arts and Culture; how can it be a place for hooligans now, when non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy are being nurtured? The Arts flourish within a cultural context where the human spirit claims freedoms and overruns barriers.

If one knew of Funda during its days

of being part and parcel of the struggle for freedom in our country, looking at it now, one can say Funda is done. It is broken. It is a shameful skeleton of what it was which is now standing. It smells like a deserted toilet and has to be rescued by the people of Soweto, the young, who, in its name and history must be ready to ensure that it reclaims its past. Dikeledi Molatoli and her group have picked up the spear of those people who not so long ago fought against the apartheid system, and built a refuge – Funda – a place from where the arts were nourished to contribute to a culture of resistance, not only in South Africa, but in the wider world.

This does not augur well. When you plant flowers and, instead of them blooming, they rot; when you try to plant vegetables and caterpillars emerge and eat up the plants; when claims about prosperity are pronounced, yet

“The Arts flourish within a cultural context where the human spirit claims freedoms and overruns barriers.”

squatter areas and poverty are glaring; when those who were freedom fighters become hooligans who threaten the population; then it is time to ponder, to introspect and to understand that things have gone wrong, terribly wrong. It is not only what we see which is an expression of things gone wrong, it is also what we hear: when the songs of struggle distort and ridicule the struggle, when instead of the diversity of the nation being the inspiration and strength of individuals and collectives, it is distorted to threaten the being of individuals, and tears collectives apart: indeed, things have gone terribly wrong.

Funda is a small symptom of a very large ailing body. The many Art Centres which had sprouted in rural, urban and suburbs of our country during the struggle, have become derelict. It is not only what we see or hear which expresses the being of the body and the mind, it is when what we cannot

see or hear or even touch, succumbs quietly to render us blind and deaf and unfeeling when we perpetually become weary that we must discover in us, the feel and understanding that, the spirit never gives in, nor does it die – it cannot be broken.

The prolific and renowned German playwright and poet Bertold Brecht and the outstanding African poet, David Mandessi Diop have nurtured and contributed a narrative and discourse in Europe, the African continent and the world, which does not only claim politics as lives of people expressed and determined to make sense of why we are here in the world, but which is also a creative narrative and discourse of the being and the spirit of the human race.

It is our responsibility, those of us who are alive, to remember that a symptom is hazard lights alerting those who are watching that something is not in place for harmony. When a place where people are present releases the stench of a toilet, as the sermon ripples in the space, competing for position with the stench – it is a sign that even the people themselves deny the image they see in the mirror whether they are passing by the mirror or they are face to face with the image on the mirror. When it is like that it is indeed a time for introspection. The arts create moments, to prime introspection; they involve a symbiotic process which must feed the spirit, the mind and the body because, as Brecht has said: “no one can be good for long if goodness is not in demand. We are in that stage in the world when “goodness” must be in demand. This has to be done so that we can make sense of why we are here in the world, which must be complemented by the priming of the spirit and feelings, as Diop asks:

*Africa, tell me Africa
Is this you this back that is unbent
This back that never breaks under
the weight of humiliation*

These are nudges for our spirit to read the writing on the wall.

We are experiencing protracted moments of assault by acts which contradict and negate the science and spirit of our revolution; we even feel ourselves regress as if into the past where powers of tyranny hold

reigns. All of us are wanting a way out so that we must not lose the gains of the revolution. At the same time, the moment demands from us that we must understand what it is we must do and we must be to absolutely commit, and as we do so, to act for a future which must ensure quality of life for all and for a liveable world for us in the present and for coming generations.

Are these not moments of the arts, the inspiration of the mind and the heart, which after expression must commit us to action where the goodness of the human-spirit resides? Both of us, South Africans and Germans, have been in pasts which were interspaced by the most horrible deeds by human beings – the brutal system of Apartheid and the inhuman ideology of Fascism respectively. Both our nations have inherited those pasts, as also we know that they came to pass through great effort, sacrifice, commitment and conviction which our people pitted against those systems.

I recall that there was – there is still – an internationally famed and influential theatre group in Germany, which commemorates Brecht's political or dialectical theatre, called the Bertold Brecht Ensemble: "no one can be good for long if goodness is not in demand". This giant of theatre and poetry was taught by life and the life of political struggle, not only in Germany, but also by the struggles of the peoples of the world. He was so taught and he taught the life of the arts to be a myriad of voices which become lullabies which must say to those who are in slumber, that even in deep slumber dreams must know and be informed by actions.

Brecht has also said that: "Intelligence is not to make no mistakes, but quickly to see how to make them good." This the German poet reminds us South Africans and his country men and women of an old time which came and went, that we, in a new time with its swift speed, which is becoming one county – the Globe – must not forget that the arts are pregnant with life experiences, will outlive the human race and politics and become a "... culture which determines history... which is positive or negative..." (Amilcar Cabral). What must we do when that history is negative?

We can do a simple thing. We can hold hands and create a song because we know that Brecht said: "no one can be good for long if goodness is not in demand." We can hold hands as we march and sing, inspired by and anchoring on the souls of the old, the poor...as Diop through words says:

Africa, tell me Africa

Is this your back that is unbent

This back that never breaks under the weight of humiliation

This back trembling with red scars

And saying no to the whip under the midday sun

The poor of the world who have faced canons and automatic rifles, choosing to live than exist in death, gave us a culture of holding hands together and singing. So did the June 16th students who instinctively knew that, as Bertold said: "No-one will improve your lot if you do not yourself". This says there is a vision,

“It is time to ponder, to introspect and to understand that things have gone wrong, terribly wrong.”

which appears, as if it were mist or in the mist, which portrays the history of our country and ties us together with the history of Germany as if we walk hand in hand in song marching. It is not a coincidence that The Jo'burg Theatre and the people who come from the Bertold Brecht Ensemble country sit and negotiate to find ways of working together in theatre and the arts. It is time to go home, to seek peace. I hope that when Professor Wolfgang from the University of Hildesheim, who led his colleagues, when he is back in Germany he will remember that the partnership is a holding of hands.

I am not only reminding him but I am also informing us here in South Africa that we convened this way. We come from a history of theatre which was on stage earlier than the '40s, '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s, a span of over seven decades, going far back even before Diphala, Scathamiya, Mohobelo, and

many other Indigenous theatres and art forms which not only entertained but educated and pondered over the drastic changes which were taking place in the lives of black people in our country. We go back to the time of praise poetry and story-telling, to the time of rituals and dances for the ancestors, before the theatre of the church.

Theatre in South Africa has been an extremely important art form. The night songs in the dark under the stars and the moon; the dances and the praise poetry moments and sessions; the ululations whether for joy or sadness; the men and women, young and old in the different languages of the people of this country, in their wisdom and education, created consciousness, awareness of different forms of life, understanding that consciousness must be expressed in order that it must become action which shapes and develops people. Theatre, or the arts in general as those rural masses understood, and as Bertold has expressed, cannot be for its sake only. Our ancestors understood that.

One of the legends of our country, "the father of South African theatre" in the townships, is Gibson Kente, a person who the actor, Kid Sithole, talks about, making him become part of the myriad drama to which one is exposed, during the tour of the heritage sites of Soweto. Most South Africans, and one must add, because of the apartheid system – especially black people in the townships, know the many theatre productions which Gibson Kente produced in this country. But also we must note that the many black people he mentored as actors, producers, directors and so on have occupied the centre stage of this dramatic art and have incubated fresh ideas by being innovative with this art form. They have been most creative in laying bare the beauty, the beasts, the contradictions, the pain and the joy – the collective being of the South African nation. Kente and his peers, Barney Simon, Athol Fugard, Sam Mahangwane and others, have not only been prolific drama creators, but they have also, many times, caught the unique but so tragic life experiences of South Africans and weaved in the South African consciousness, as also they have never

hesitated to ask through theatre: is this what we came here for, is this what we were created for as human beings?

The Soweto Theatre – the first of its kind which is not an improvised derelict apology for theatre, but which was built during the democratic dispensation, in Soweto for a population of 4 million people and hopefully for humanity, is now part of the widely sprawled Soweto landscape, literally and figuratively. It is a colourful building, and therefore very present among the houses and building structures which do not shy at all to express the social contradictions of the community of this place; it cannot just be a black theatre, yet also, it cannot not emerge as a metaphor of life not lived, building, a colourful life. The history which Sithole tells in tours unravels a tapestry of the lives of this place called Soweto. It is a history full of dramatic episodes of tragedy, comedy, bravery, great human optimism, resilience, unrelenting hope and the unbreakable human spirit. There is a great past to that; there is the great present too to that and there will be a great future which, in dramatic fashion, the past will stare into its yes# or no#: in other words to say history and the present are related, must be interlinked and related...

History has from a long time past, made it clear that the drama of the young, in their being reckless, in their being deaf, and blind at times, in their being restless – but more important, in their sense of rage about the present and the past too which they find difficult to live with and in, signify a necessary future which must rupture what must be discarded so that a present to live in and a future to be lived in will stare us in the eye and ask: what must be done now!

History has never forgotten to demand knowledge about the past from us; nor has it ever forgotten to remind us to anticipate the future as the present will either be both interesting and/or dangerous to live in. In short – it is a dangerous drama when a people, any people, forget their own history. That is why I will ask Kid Sithole whether he remembers the voice of the poets as a dramatist himself, who were produced by Soweto and those who together with them took the National stage by the scruff, during the struggle, giving

the poor and the down trodden their spirituality, their thoughts, their being, and their voice.

I am really saying four things here, which I am also putting on the National agenda:

Firstly, I would like to pay tribute to the legends of the arts in Soweto, especially in the context of the liberation struggle in South Africa. These are the people who lived the arts when there was no government to pay anything for them, to put a play together, to put together a band, to do this or that in the arts. It required sheer blood and sweat, including the fact that all of us understood at the time that what we were doing could put us in jail. I am not being romantic or sentimental when I say that, I am merely

“ Theatre in South Africa has been an extremely important art form. The night songs in the dark under the stars and the moon; the dances and the praise poetry moments and sessions; the ululations whether for joy or sadness.”

stating facts. I am saying this: young people who are in the frontline of the arts and culture now must not neglect to understand the history of arts and heritage in this country. But we should also say it can be identified through people – let me dare a dangerous thing and name some of them, knowing that I can never name all of them: Motsumi Makhene, Lebogang Nawa, Bobby Rodwell, Michael Muendane, Kid Sithole, Ishmael Mkhabela, Maishe Maponya – all of whom participated at the Soweto Theatre events, as contributors and participants. The first realisation needed, is that for young people, if you don't know your Parent's story, and if your Parents do not know their parents' parents'

stories and if mothers and fathers hide their stories from their children, those stories will express themselves through the children's madness. A history of a people is forever the identity of the future generations.

Secondly, it is extremely important that the African story must be told on the African continent – that must not mean that we must not also commit to tell other stories too – but the African voice must be emancipated, liberated and be loud and clear from the African mouths in the world. The records of that history are the feel of the lives lived as expressed by the arts. What we are inside and outside of us must say about us that we come from that time, from that place and history!

The third thing I want to say is that it is very true, it is a harmonious condition of life, in the world that arts, culture and heritage have a role to play in the lives of the people and in the being of other forms of life and the universe. Arts, Culture, and living, tangible and intangible Heritage, are there as a collective in intricate, sensitive systems and relations, which for ever demand to be known, lived, understood and forever discovered for the sake of life. Arts and culture do not only build a nation, but can also sustain that Nation against the greatest odds so that that nation/ nations not only discover meanings but also find the profound expression between science and spirituality, both of which attest to the fact that plans exist not coincidences. Of course spirituality is elusive, that is if you do not understand joy, sadness, knowing, and feelings and you live without knowing how you know or do not know – these are eternal experiments and tests which happen every second, even at times when we are not aware that they are happening. What this must mean is that expression and reality forever relate and are related forever in infinite manners and measure... .

The last thing which I want to say is that the arts do forever ask us: do you remember that feelings are important and that feeling is part of love? The arts forever ask that we must not forget to still search for that chip, the chip in our brain which says: you must remember that men and women are human. ■