

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

In the course of 1974 and 1975 there has been a marked increase in the number of black theatre productions. In addition to this, the traditional commercially-oriented black writers who have been dominating the theatre scene for a long time began to show signs of moving with the times and switching to more exclusively black-oriented themes for their plays.

According to a survey done by *S'ketsh* magazine there were, at one time, about half-way through 1974, fourteen black plays doing the rounds in various centres in the country. These included *Mahlomola*, *Unfaithful Woman*, *Blame Yourself*, *The Township Housewife*, *Why Naked? How Long*, *I Believe*, *Shivering Shock*, *Sexy Powerdrunk*, *Ngixolele*, *Who's Child am I?*, *uNosilimela*, *ZZZip!*, *Born to Lose*, *Adultery* and *Confused Mhlaba*.¹

S'ketsh interpreted this as a sign that interest in the theatre was growing by the year, in spite of the fact that some of the plays were of course misguided.

In March 1974, the Soweto based Mdali, which is a black art and theatre group, staged a successful black art and theatre festival in Central Western Jabavu in Soweto. The festival included a display of works of art i.e. painting and sculptures, presentation of plays, and reading of poetry. David Phetoe produced *Marat-Sade* by Petre Weiss which is about the revolution in France depicting the replacement of one type of dictatorship by another ruling class, which still continued to trample upon people. Amongst those that read poetry were, Mihloti Players, Mongane Serote, Oswald Mtshali, Sydney Sepamla, Zinjiwa Nkondo and James Matthews.

Another group which presented a similar arts festival was the Pretoria based Mpando which is similar to Mdali. Mpando is led by people like Mokhene Mathabe, Fay Mokoka and Maroti Mogale. The Mpando Festival was held in Mamelodi in August 1974.

Theatre

Following reports that Credo Mutwa, who is a well known writer, was getting broke towards the end of 1973, Mr Mutwa came out with his first play *uNosilimela*. According to *S'ketsh* magazine, *uNosilimela* is a play whose message is manifold, self understanding in respect of the culture and religion of one's forefathers. The story is a symbolic one. It is based upon ancient African legends and prophecies. The play has already been staged to appreciative audiences and brings a welcome new dimension to black theatre, in that it is not only relevant in material and content but also in form and style.

Following the success of Welcome Msomi's *uMabatha*, there appeared on the scene another musical play under the title *Ipi-Ntombi*. The play is supposed to have been written by Bertha Engos and Gail Lakier. Most of the music and dialogue is in the vernacular—mainly Zulu, Sotho and Xhosa—and there is, in the play, extensive dancing in traditional African patterns. In the first thirty weeks of its run, this play, which was described in the white press as “the greatest all-African musical South Africa has ever seen”, staged over 200 performances and was seen by 110 000 people. However, *Ipi Ntombi* has suffered great criticism from black theatre critics, who regarded it a cheap commercialization and a poor imitation of the real cultural dance and music patterns within black society. The second point of dispute, is the acceptance by the management of *Ipi-Ntombi* of limitation to play before segregated audiences. This led to a debate in *S'ketsh* magazine of the pros and cons of blacks playing before white audiences. Two plays were in focus with respect to this question. On the one hand people wanted to know why *uMabatha* written in Zulu should be performed before Whites who do not understand the language. As one reviewer in *S'ketsh* puts it, critics admired *uMabatha* as a dance and spectacle, not as theatre. On the other hand with respect to *Ipi-Ntombi* it was felt that “the beauty of black dances was at times reduced to a sexy and suggestive forward rotation of the pelvis, called *ukufenda*. This...was the choreographers' favourite movement”. Understandably such a dance was most offensive to Blacks who knew that it was a ridiculous debasement of proper African dancing, yet white audiences were quite enthralled by it all. According to a report in *S'ketsh*, one actor in the musical actually confessed that the blatant sex of the dancing had her and others worried at first but that they have now accepted it as “modern choreography”.

After his two plays, *I Believe* and *How Long*, Gibson Kente came out with a new play *Too Late*. Apart from showing the evils of the pass system and the miseries of influx control, the play parodies education and religion and hits at the inhumanity of white officialdom. Once more the play underlines the fact that Gibson Kente is a first-rate musician.

The play ran into problems when it got banned by the Publications Control Board. However, following some appeals, the ban was removed and *Too Late* was staged in several centres. In a sense the ban was reinforced when several Bantu Affairs authorities in various places, refused to make their halls available for the staging of the play.

Another playwright of note, Mr Sam Mhangwani, returned from the United Kingdom and United States where he had gone to study theatre and immediately set about reorganizing his two plays, *Unfaithful Woman* and *Blame Yourself*. Mr Mhangwana is the head of the Sea Pearls Dramatic Society. In an attempt to improve the grasp of actors on theatre techniques, Mr Mhangwana runs a workshop at the D.O.C.C. in Soweto on Sunday mornings, for about forty to fifty people.

Music

Following hot on the trail of Dashiki, has been a new group called Batsumi who are a mixture of former classical jazz and soul musicians.

Batsumi was a brainchild of Zulu Bidi and Lancelot Mothopeng, who started the group as early as 1972. The group now also includes Abel Maleka, Johnny Mothopeng, Buta Zwane, Themba Koyana and Tom Masemola. The group is led by Johnny Mothopeng, who is blind. Their music is a well blended mixture of pop, jazz and classical music and this blend of music has found favour with Blacks throughout the country. Their first L.P. release came out in the middle of 1974.²

In the middle of 1974, a jazz festival was staged at the Jabulani Amphitheatre, Soweto by the Jazz Appreciation Society under Mr Ray Nkwe. The festival featured groups like Dashiki of Pretoria, Jazz Ministers of Benoni, the Jazz Clan and the Soul Jazzmen of Port Elizabeth and individual contributors like Thandi Klassen and Eaglet Ditse. Mr Ray Nkwe announced that a musicians' union would be established, along the lines of Equity in America, to protect the interest of Black musicians who were being exploited by individual promoters and also finding it very hard to make ends meet in the absence of gainful engagements.

The pop scene continued to be popular in 1974 and 1975. Some of the South African pop groups undertook tours of Southern Africa. A Vereeniging group, the Hurricanes visited Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) twice, once in 1974 and once in 1975 and played to packed audiences in Salisbury, Gwelo, Que Que, Chiredzi and Umtali.³

On the external front, black South African musicians continued to make their mark felt. In February 1975, Dollar Brand, one of the top South African jazz pianists toured Britain, and at Islington Hall in London, "gave one of the most sensational concerts the British scene has ever known". Amongst the top British musicians who were listening

to him were South Africans Chris McGregor, Dudu Phukwana and Ernest Mothile.⁴

General

When the George Foreman—Muhammad Ali fight took place in Zaire in September 1974, an all-black musical festival was organized as a kick-off to the occasion. Amongst those behind the festival was the South African-born Hugh Masekela. Describing it Mr Masekela said, "The festival was a celebration of the beat which keeps black people going". The festival featured leading black musicians from all over the world.

Oswald Mtshali, one of South Africa's best known poets, in 1974, attended an International Writing Programme at the University of Iowa on the cultural exchange programme of United States Programmes.

REFERENCES

¹*S'ketsh* 1974–1975.

²*Drum* 22.3.75.

³*Drum* 8.4.75.

⁴*Rand Daily Mail* 20.2.75.