

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of Arts and Africa, and this week we follow up news of a theatrical award that we heard about in a recent programme. Zakes Mda won the Amstel award for his play 'The Hill', the story of migrant mine workers from Lesotho living in Soweto. The Amstel award committee has now selected a new theatre, the People's Space in Cape Town, to produce the play. Maryanne Parry has just returned from Cape Town and has brought us this report on the work of the People's Space.

MARYANNE PARRY

Last year Cape Town saw the closure of the Space Theatre and its re-opening in August under a new administration as the People's Space. The former Space Theatre had, since it opened in 1972, been widely known throughout Southern Africa, and indeed beyond, as a venue for challenging and innovative theatre, as well as for its close association with the playwright Athol Fugard and actress Yvonne Bryceland - both of whom are now living and working in London. Together they formed a creative team which brought the Space to the immediate attention of the South African public. Fugard, you will recall, was the author of many plays which challenged social and political conditions in South Africa - among the best known are "Siswe Banze is Dead", "The Island" and "Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act" which was the first production staged at the Space back in 1972. One of the driving forces behind the establishment of the new project is Rob Amato, who had previously been involved with two theatre groups in the EasternCape, and was also publisher of two magazines - 'Speak', a general arts journal, and 'S'ketch' a magazine on black theatre. What then is the new People's Space? Rob Amato who is now chairperson of the People's Space explained.

ROB AMATO

We are the only theatre, I think, in South Africa, which has a non-racial management and a non-racial board of trustees and obviously we are fully integrated at every possible level, which is important, especially for the issue of management. The most well-intentioned white management in the world is not desirable in this country now or ever - I don't think it ever has been but it's particularly painful now. Well-intentioned people still determine what happens without the sense of what it is to be black in this country. So we are trying to maintain a very even hand in this. We are slowly making people aware

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that we are actually looking at the whole of South African society, representing, serving it and trying to understand its needs. The place arose out of the ashes of the old Space Theatre which was a private company run by Brian Asprey for seven years with, I think, very great success, and which has made a great impact on South African culture because it helped us to get rid of the faint carbon copy of British culture sort of theatre that we used to have. He was responsible, with Hugh Lowden and a number of other people, for doing a great number of original South African pieces, taking risks which commercial theatres don't take, and we wished to continue this.

MARYANNE PARRY

Rob Amato, chairperson of the new People's Space theatre in Cape Town. I also spoke to three members of the People's Space Management Committee - Arthur Benjamin, Nomhle Nkonyeni and Nic Fine - all of whom had, to a greater or lesser extent, been associated with the old Space Theatre. I asked them why the Space had been regarded as such a special theatre in South Africa. Arthur Benjamin had this to say.

ARTHUR BENJAMIN

I think we at the Space had more of a changing programme in the issue of ten and a half years than anywhere else, and by changing I mean to our consciousness here in this country. I think that's the most important aspect of our existence at the Space.

MARYANNE PARRY

That was Arthur Benjamin, theatre manager at the People's Space. Nomhle Nkonyeni is the theatre's Community Manager. She spoke about the opportunities offered at the Space for black South Africans.

NOMHLE NKONYENI

There's no discrimination; this is where we get our jobs, we the blacks, black actors, this is where we get our chances, like the Nico or the Capab, they haven't actually employed blacks, but at the Space, or People's Space as we now call it, is where we all get our chances. You know, like there is no discrimination, you are employed for what you are; regardless.

MARYANNE PARRY

What about employment outside the Space, once you've started here?

NOMHLE NKONYENI

Well it hasn't happened outside. Just fifteen years ago, but it hasn't happened since - only the Space, or the Market that is, ever thought of employing me, never any other.

MARYANNE PARRY

Nomhle Nkonyeni with a black perspective. Nic Fine, Production Manager, added another point of view.

NIC FINE

I think what the Space has offered is something for all communities. I mean as a young white this is the only theatre that has ever allowed me to direct a play in my first year of being employed here. To light a show in another theatre I'd have waited six, seven, eight, nine years till I was actually allowed to run this side of production. So I think this has been the most important contribution. And obviously it's made more contribution to the black community, as much as to say that there's nowhere else for them to go. Also to people in the white community who want some kind of alternative, and to literally walk off the streets into the theatre where they will actually use you if they want to use you is quite a remarkable thing. And also something we haven't actually spoken about is the playwright's perspective. None of us are really actors here, but the fact is that well over 50% of what we put on here is South African local work and giving people their first chance as writers is a major contribution I feel.

MARYANNE PARRY

How does the People's Space now differ from the former Space theatre?

NIC FINE

I think we're going into a new era in South Africa now. The Space was part of the early 70's and different things were happening politically in the country. I think it was following its own ways just by opening its doors, by allowing people of other racial groups on the stage which had never appeared on the stage before, and we've passed that stage now. A lot of other theatres are only entering that stage now, they're not even there now. But we're at a different stage where we've got to go out and reach the communities of the future. The laws haven't changed even though the enterprise has changed, has gone forward. Basically, one of the differences between the old Space and the People's Space is that the old Space was run by a sort of dictatorship, sometimes it was a benevolent dictatorship and then the dictator was Brian, and there was one man basically making decisions for the whole building and the whole project. Now we've recently ventured into a thing, which we call our Management Committee, where there are six members in the building, everyone in their specific jobs, and what we try to work towards is a total shared responsibility and a shared decision-making, where it's not just made by the boss, where people get together and decide for themselves what they're going to do. Now this Management Committee has got varied powers, they've got powers of planning, powers of hiring and firing that are quite extensive, and it's quite a difficult thing to achieve.

MARYANNE PARRY

How do you become a member of the Committee?

NIC FINE

The whole staff appoints you, and the staff can actually ask us to resign our position on the Committee, we can be replaced by people from within or outside if things aren't running well.

MARYANNE

When funds were being raised for the People's Space, an impressive looking pamphlet was produced, outlining the policy and aims of the project. One of these aims was to acquire a bus. Chairperson Rob Amato explained why a bus was needed, and went on to talk about the theatre itself and the type of work that is done there.

ROB AMATO

The idea is to provide transport by bus from the townships, from the various black ghettos into the centre of the city where the theatre is located, and also to take a number of productions out. For this we're hoping to get a big bus which will act as a sort of pied piper we hope coming in every night from areas which are very badly served by bus, if at all and then very expensive fares are charged. The theatre as you see is an old ramshackle 1886-built YMCA. It's not exactly luxurious, it's a bit more comfortable than it was, we've livened it up a bit, but it's always been a building which doesn't have the charms of the great big, expensive organisations. But those charms are, I think, very questionable and, in fact, I don't believe in spending money on buildings, I believe in spending it on people and I think that theatres which are based in old buildings have a great advantage in that they don't have to continuously maintain a facade of sleekness which has actually nothing to do with the art that goes on on stage. We also try not to have plays which are based on sets and expensive effects. We do get very spectacular effects, but mostly with light and sound; on the bare boards so much can be done with just the body and light and sound - the voice. We tend to have plays with small casts for three reasons. The first is that our actors work on a percentage basis, so that with vast casts the percentage is a dribble and people can't live on it. The second reason is that our physical theatres don't allow very much cast-work, and the third reason is that in fact there's a great need for the kind of small intensive work that we can do. There's a lot of black South African/white South African theatre which is spectacular, based on big music and dancing casts, sort of choreography etc. We are not really equipped to do that, we're not skilled in that direction, although some of us might be good at that, but essentially the people here are still on intensive, small cast, not necessarily serious - we've done a lot of comedy and a lot of music - but intensive, not based on spectacular effects. Representatives of all the communities are invited to suggest plays, to solicit groups, to stimulate amateur groups - you see we're not very strong on the borderline between amateur and professional work. That's one of the important aspects of the Space, although we don't want to have an amateur reputation, we also believe that it's very important that people should have the right to try in a professional venue that which they wouldn't dare to do anywhere else. The right to fail if that's how you'd like to put it.

MARRANNE PARRY

And what of future developments for the People's Space? Management Committee members Nic Fine and Arthur Benjamin expressed their views.

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Nic Fine

I see the most important part of our project as a training centre. At the moment we aren't that, at the moment we are basically a professional theatre which can provide a hell of a lot of problems; it means you've got to provide constant work and fill our theatres all the time with the best work available. And when you do that you actually haven't got time to let them train, because training means time, it needs workshops, it needs a few months. And I think we should be far more interested in training.

Arthur Benjamin

What I would like to say too is that the training that we hope for, the training of people from the townships, will not just take place in our building, but that we go out there - none of the ghettos have theatres, or permanent venues always running plays, and I think that's what we should try to set up - regular venues there.

Marvanne Parry

What does chairperson Rob Amato think? I asked him how he saw the People's Space in two years time.

Rob Amato

Totally bust and closed, or we'll be struggling on with a few marvellous things. I don't think we'll ever be comfortable.

Alex Tetteh-Lartey

Maryanne Parry with news of the People's Space theatre in Cape Town. I've been looking through their brochure which sets out their aims, and I came across this quote:
"You ask me why I think a People's Space could be so important. Because theatre, like sex, is social, physical, spiritual and magical, and solicits the tongues of men and of angels. With love, power and justice it humanizes a society whose ignorance and forgetfulness border on madness. Like poetry and song, theatre is the very stuff of humanity, and humanity is all of us together".
Noble sentiments. And on that inspiring note we'll bring to an end Arts and Africa for this week. From me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.