

INTERVIEW

Comrade Pallo Jordan is one of the younger members of the ANC's National Executive Committee. Below RIXAKA prints excerpts from an interview with him, conducted in the Department of Information and Publicity offices in Lusaka.

On the role of the artist in the liberation struggle

The cultural worker has to fulfil many roles. I think we can best understand his role if we examine societies in our part of Africa before conquest. In those much simpler societies we had poets, various types of graphic artists; we had people engaged in various forms of the performing arts. The artists were expected, in the first place, to be chroniclers who handed down from generation to generation the cultural and historical traditions, usually in the form of tale and epic poetry. They were also expected to be entertainers who provided relief for the people from the humdrum of life. They were supposed to galvanise people into action in the face of crisis, in the face of the larger tasks of the day ...

We feel that the artist and cultural worker now can play more or less the same role. We expect them to transmit to our people in this time the traditions of the struggle, transmit to them the traditions, the achievements and also to project the people's aspirations and expectations. We expect them, at the same time, to be entertainers, to assist in getting over the humdrum of life. The important element of course is the same. In the struggle for liberation, the cultural worker has a place no different essentially from any other activist. But we expect of our cultural worker that he or she will contribute their skill for the purpose of the struggle for liberation.

On the place of popular culture, fashion, film, music, fiction, etc., in a liberated country.

Popular culture: I sometimes have difficulties with that term because the notion of popular culture arises specifically in the 20th Century. But what is usually referred to as popular culture is the culture which one gets in the urban areas, specifically among the lower strata of industrial society. What is referred to as the culture of the music halls, for instance, what you see in the popular press, your comic books and then, later, with the introduction of the electronic media, the gramophone record, film and so on. All that was considered part of popular culture. Now, popular culture as it has evolved in the 20th Century has two dimensions. There is one dimension of it which is accommodative and in a sense can play the role of an opiate, lulling the people into acceptance of their lot as underlings in society, giving people to subscribe and even support not only values but even crimes of the rulers and the dominant class. There is, for instance, the word 'jingoism' which is used in the English language now. (It) derives from a musical song during (the) Korean War. It gives an example of what popular culture can do. This was a song, saying something to the effect:

We don't want to fight
But by Jingo if we do
We've got the ships
We've got the men
We've got the money too!



And this was an expression, in music hall song, of the ordinary poor in Britain (of) support of British imperialism. But there is the other side of popular culture which is a means of giving expression again to the life experience of the ordinary people in urban areas in an industrialised society. In Germany, for instance, you had workers' musical groups, choirs and bands. If one is familiar with the German workers' struggle against fascism, one would know what a very important role these groups, orchestras and bands played in terms of mobilising workers in the struggle and in defending their rights against the onslaught of the Far Right.

////// *And film?*

If you look also at the role that film originally played: you had two great pioneers of film. In the west there is Griffiths, and in the Soviet Union there is Eisenstein. One of Griffiths' early classical films, called the *Birth of a Nation*, is an utterly racist, fascist movie which praises the Ku Klux Klan. Conversely, if you look at Eisenstein's great films of the time — he was a contemporary of Griffiths — *Strike*, *Battleship Potemkin*, *Ten Days that Shook the World* — the message is completely different. You get these two dimensions of popular culture even from its very inception in the case of film.

In the world of popular fiction, much has been written about the PLO, PAIGC, FSLN etc. What do you think about writers in the ANC writing about the movement in fiction, about MK, bearing in mind that they'd have to draw their creative sustenance from experiences of contemporary figures?

People have actually written fiction about the struggle. To take an example of a quite famous short story, *The Bench*, by Richard Rive, about an incident in the Defiance Campaign. I think it had quite an impressive impact not only nationally but internationally as well. If memory serves me well, Rive won some literary prize for that particular short story. We also have something like *In the Fog of the Season's End* by Alex la Guma, which again treats of a phase in the struggle for national liberation in fictional form. You also have Enver Carrim — *The Golden City* — which is, I suppose, a much more flamboyant account of aspects or effects of the liberation struggle.

I think what the fiction writer needs to do is to look at the experiences of the movement, experiences of the people and see which subject he can treat, which aspects he can treat fictionally. One, of course, has to try and observe certain standards in that important secrets — or individuals — are not compromised. But I think it is a legitimate exercise in itself ...

So, that is what the fiction writer who writes about the liberation struggle needs to do. He takes an actual situation and allows his imagination to elaborate upon it and broaden certain ways without going overboard in terms of fictionalisation, that is, like over-romanticising or, in a sense, telling artistic lies, if you like. But within those parameters I think there should be no objection in principle to people writing.

On whether he sees the arts in future South Africa being under state control or whether cultural workers would have a free-for-all, a cultural laissez-faire.

I don't think that cultural work falls under state control in any particular society. I think the role that the state plays in relation to culture, cultural work and cultural workers is largely dependent upon the nature of the state itself. For instance, in many parts of the world you hear people complaining about the state playing an inordinate role with respect to culture. You usually get this complaint, let's say, in the United States where the state is supposed **not** to play any role in respect of cultural work ...

Two years ago I had an occasion to be in the United States and I was travelling on a train between Washington DC and New York and a retired actress who happened to sit next to me provided a conversation. She was talking about a difference she had detected between theatre in the US and theatre in Western Europe. Western



Europe is not the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, GDR. But there is a difference even there. And I said to her one of the reasons why that is so is that you go into the South of France and you find some small town which has a fund set aside for cultural activities. And in the summer, that small little town will sponsor a music festival and will bring musicians — classical, folk, jazz, rock and roll, reggae — all sorts of musicians who live in the vicinity — and pay them and have this wonderful festival where they will perform and get paid, bring many tourists into the town. And that is local government, the state at that local level, which takes a hand in promoting the arts ...

Now, on the other hand, in a country like the USA, what happens is that this role devolves on a few individuals who happen to have money, that is, a handful of wealthy Americans who determine the cultural tastes of everyone else. I think that part of the problem that some of our artists have about state intervention in artistic activity is that they have the experience of the racist and oppressive state and don't recognise that state per se. But I wouldn't go for an artistic free-for-all because what is called an artistic free-for-all is not an artistic or cultural free-for-all. It is a free-for-a-handful, for a few. What creates the possibilities for a free-for-all is when the state does begin to take a hand and make available its resources for cultural and artistic work. That assists and promotes cultural activity, rather than repress it.