



Photos by Elphy Sibeko

Using song and dance to reflect the current violence in South Africa

COMMUNITY THEATRE WITHOUT WOMEN?

Why are there so few women in community-based theatre groups? Bobby Rodwell attended a conference on Theatre for Development where this topic was discussed

In countries where many people do not know how to read and write, theatre is an important way of educating people and raising debates. Issues like health, housing, education, teenage pregnancy, AIDS and literacy are

dealt with through dance, music, puppetry and drama in this kind of "development" theatre.

In South Africa, there are many theatre groups that put on plays for different communities. About 50 of these groups from

all over the Transvaal met in Venda in March this year at a conference on *Theatre for Development*. One of the issues discussed at the conference was that there are so few women in the theatre groups.

Bachaki Theatre Group from Soweto, which participated in the conference, is one example of a group with no women members. As *Bachaki's* Thulani Sifeni admits: "This is a big problem. Our play, *Golden Gloves* is about unemployment and how to deal with it. Lack of jobs affects more women than men, yet there are no women in our group. It is not because we choose to have only male members. It is part of the larger problem of the exploitation of women in theatre."

Women were also under-represented at the conference. Only 20 percent of all the delegates from the PWV area were women even though the organisers, aware of

the problem, asked all groups to give consideration to gender representation. Of the participants from the Northern and Eastern Transvaal, women made up 60 percent. However, because the biggest delegation was from the PWV, women were outnumbered.

There was much debate about how to change this situation. Some people said that 50 percent of the participants at conferences should be women and 50 percent men. But others felt it was no good

sending women to a conference just because they are women. The real change has to take place in theatre groups where more women begin to take an active role.

Other people felt a way forward is to have a women's conference. It can be argued this would just separate women from men. It would not change the fact that women are still under-represented in theatre groups and at conferences. Also, there are some men who are

ship roles.

The problem of the way in which women and men interact was also raised. When a woman got up to speak, some men made noises and reacted differently compared to when men were speaking. The women at the conference felt very angry about this and challenged the male participants.

It is important that debates of this kind are raised. The role of women in theatre has not been debated very much. What



Puppets make their point

gender-sensitive. Is it right to exclude them?

It was agreed women's groups should be contacted. However, there are very few women's theatre groups. Also, simply inviting women's groups will not ensure that the real issue of men dominating in theatre groups will be addressed.

The conference also suggested that women's participation in conferences should be strengthened. Women should begin to take on more leader-

often happens is that one of a few "strong" women in theatre is asked to read a poem or perform at an event and everyone leaves feeling that women have been represented.

This conference highlights a problem common to many democratic organisations. Urgently needed development in communities can never succeed if women do not take part. The challenge is for theatre groups and other organisations involved in development to find ways to ensure women take part fully. ☛