
"South African" Theatre

MAURICE HOMMEL

IF, AS LEADING REPRESENTATIVES of South African theatre claim, the action taken by Equity, the 10,000-strong British actors' union, in forbidding its members to appear before segregated audiences in South Africa is going to leave a gap, the claim can also be made that long before the Equity ban a vast cultural hiatus already existed in the theatre and the arts generally in this country.

And this position obtained precisely because of the tacit and implied approval given by leading representatives of South African theatre to Afrikaner, Coloured, African and English cultural vacuums.

Art must reflect a synthesis of the highest human aspirations, which in such circumstances (segregated audiences and casts) becomes unattainable because it is a denial of fundamental humanism.

South African culture is an integrated composite of diverse cultures drawn from inside and outside the country. And any attempt to build up a South African organisation must reject a caste system which is artificially superimposed on the common roots of our culture. For culture can only sicken and decay and produce tribal cults when it is artificially restricted, isolated and stifled. How preposterous and moribund therefore the pretensions of a Native Affairs Department and a Coloured Affairs Department to subsidise the manufacture of "Bantu" culture, "Malay" culture and "Coloured" culture.

An absolute necessity would be the wholesale onslaught on and rejection of caste barriers by leading representatives of South African culture in the interpretation of their arts. The enrichment and veritable efflorescence of social life must inevitably follow. It will also open conditions which will enable all South Africans to contribute to the fuller development of world culture.

South African theatre has never got beyond being an anaemic little stream diverted to the local shores from the main current of European theatre. Cut off from the life of the nation as a whole, it is deprived of the means of developing an independent South African contribution to world culture.

ABANDONED BY THE BEST of its artists for the vitality of Europe, incapable of combating the flood of vulgarity (threatening to assume Olympic proportions) from Hollywood, "White" theatre maintains a mediocre existence by pandering to such vulgarity and even competing with it. Artificially raised to the false position

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of "South African" theatre, it is a shoddy masquerade upon which the curtain is being rung down.

There is no native drama in South Africa (not in the Native Affairs Department sense of the word, of course) or culture. In the field of drama anything that attains to an acceptable standard of technique, at least, has to be imported.

On the other hand the very nature of the socio-economic structure here deprives the majority of South Africans from even the rudiments of the forms of cultural expression, apart from that offered by the screen which is usually in the form of jazzed-up, glamourised distortions.

However, the abundance of theatrical activity among Non-Whites is a striking, if generally pathetic expression of a burning desire on the part of the aspirant artists, who, without even having considered the basis on which art can develop in South Africa, attempt to express themselves artistically. It is the tragedy of a legitimate human aspiration frustrated at every turn. This desperate band of people, caught up in their "vaulting ambition" often try to scale the sheer cliffs of genuine artistic expression with bare hands.

Indeed, these young enthusiasts, standing on the threshold of a prodigious social change, are presented with a herculean task. They have not only to initiate the creation of a tradition of theatre, where none existed, but also to fashion the tools for this task. They have nowhere to turn for standards to emulate, for none exists in this country. They have to fall back on their own initiative and limited pool of experience and supplement it with much reading.

The fact that they are faced by vast and what may be considered virgin audiences is a factor which is advantageous as the movement is still in its infancy.

It is wrong to assume that the cultural needs of South Africa are best met by a simple attitude of "get on with the job of going into production".

IN THE ABSENCE OF ANY tradition of artistic independence, dignity and fidelity, the tendency to confuse mere technical proficiency with genuine artistic practice is common among artists only too eager "to appear on the boards".

Whites who appear in the midst of Non-Whites are treated as natural superiors and patrons whether they expect such treatment or not, as they are looked upon as the purveyors of the desired commodity, technique.

At best "Non-European" theatre has attempted to break away from "White" patronage by trying to establish independent premises. In doing so it has cut itself off from theatre knowledge and technique, a "White" monopoly. It tends to consolidate inferiority and tries to compete with "Whites" on the common basis of racialism. It is a development least able to make a contribution to world culture in South Africa.

The creative artist must break away from his milieu to be objective. Only by doing so can he give a true reflection "in the speculum of his art" of the whole of life; showing the age its "particular form and pressure".

The Blood Knot has been acclaimed by critics as the "greatest South African play yet written". One of the chief points of comparison is the fact that the play

deals with the phenomenon known as "trying for white". This theme seems to have a peculiar fascination for liberal writers particularly and, like murderers who are reputed to return to the scenes of their crimes, most of them are possessed of a guilt complex about this "problem" which amounts almost to an obsession. It is a pity at all times that writing and acting of merit should be wasted on such psychotic mysticism.

No true artist, since the Renaissance with its concept

of universal man, creates for a particular tribe or so-called "race". The artist cannot restrict himself to sectional interests without detriment to his art: he is only capable of his greatest range when the society he works for is integral and as wide and varied as humanity itself. And in the same way no world artist who respects him or herself will perform to segregated audiences and still be able to feel that they are contributing to world culture. ●

Words Words Words

MANY YEARS AGO, a small meeting was held in the vestry of the Irene Dutch Reformed Church in Johannesburg. The chairman, the Revd. A. M. Meiring introduced one after another, giving name and denomination. He came to a tall smiling clergyman, stopped after giving his name and said: "I don't know which Church Mr. Blaxall belongs to . . ." Recalling this in a 20,000-word essay recently sent to fellow-members of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Dr. Blaxall ended "I treasure this as one of the greatest compliments ever paid to me." No one knows exactly what political views Dr. Blaxall holds, nor to which South African community he feels closer, the white or the black, except that, as the essay says, he believes "We must work towards one undivided South Africa, we must do so without resort to violence, and in a spirit of love towards all men."

He came from England forty years ago, brought light and meaning to the lives of the African and Coloured blind and deaf, for whom almost no provision was made until he started the Athlone School for the Blind in 1927. With a Wits honorary doctorate, he still serves on the S.A. National Council for the Blind and other national social welfare bodies. At Ezenzeleni blind school near Johannesburg he employed many young clerks, who became his friends, and when he travels he visits them—Zeko Mphahlele in Paris, Nana Mahomo in London and others, like the stormy petrel of Bechuanaland politics, Motsamai Mpho, elsewhere in Africa. Arthur, as they call him, is the confidant of Congressmen, Africanists, Liberals, of Lutuli, Sobukwe, Paton. (He visited Mandela three times in the Johannesburg Fort, between his arrest and trial.) He is also the friend of Rotarians, Afrikaner officials, social workers, gaolbirds and clubmen. Recently, aged seventy, he whizzed around Dar es Salaam by night, on the back of a motor-scooter, looking up South African political refugee friends. A few months later he was on

the mail-boat heading from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth to take the chair at the annual general meeting of the South African National Council for the Deaf. While he and Mrs. Blaxall are still actively working for the blind, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist group with branches in thirty countries of the East and West, is a major interest of his today.

He knows two dark sides of South Africa best: that of the blind and deaf, described in his *Ten Cameos from Darkest Africa* (Lovedale, 1937) and the world of apartheid, of passes, prisons, strikers, police raids. And in the latter not just as an observer: on 17 October 1962, his IFOR office in the Trades Hall, Johannesburg was raided by Security policemen, who, say the Press, "took samples of the Fellowship's publications". They will find dangerous stuff in them, as they will in *Ten Cameos* if that is photostated and filed in The Greys too—stuff about peace, love and unity, which are in direct conflict with "Government policy" regarding internal military security, white supremacy, and race separation. ●

"FLEET STREET [WRITES Myrna Blumberg, London] would be surprised to learn, as the *Cape Argus* suggested, (3.9.62), that it is "bored" with South African problems. In my experience, there is very robust concern for South Africa among Fleet Street journalists—but rather than repeat what I have already written in *The New African*, perhaps I could discuss the week of news examined by the *Argus*, 13 August to 19 August.

The *Argus* seems to feel that the poor coverage of that full week "gives every appearance" that the popular press has "written South Africa off, at least for the present, as of no interest", although it adds that the "serious papers put up much more of a show in keeping their readers informed".

Let's begin with the Fleet Street coverage of Nelson Mandela's arrest. I don't like to quarrel with another colleague's news sense, but the *Argus* correspondent is the first journalist who has not felt that Mr. Mandela's arrest received very full coverage indeed. Perhaps the *Argus* London office does not see all the editions of the Fleet Street papers. The evening papers prominently reported the arrest of the South African "Black Pimpernel", a phrase that almost every paper seized upon, including the "serious" papers. The following morning even the popular *Daily Mirror* had a profile by

their African specialist, Donald Wise, on Pimpernel Mandela; *The Guardian* had a long piece by their Commonwealth Correspondent, Patrick Keatley, on what African exiles from South Africa thought about Mandela's arrest, and the following morning they followed this up with another profile of Mandela by Mary Benson (not forgetting that during last year's March strike *The Guardian* had yet another profile of Mandela on the leader page); *The Times* gave Mr. Mandela their usual full, sober news treatment, but no editorial comment—their last blistering leader comment on South Africa was only a few weeks back, attacking the Sabotage Act.

As for the conference of African exiles in Dar es Salaam: there are, as all newspapers know, conferences of exiles in many places most of the time, and yet *The Observer* managed to do a news piece on this conference (which the *Argus* seems to have missed) and the following day *The Guardian* did yet another piece on the same conference (which again the *Argus* seems to have missed). The Umtata trial of Peter Hjul and Randolph Vigne was very well covered by *The Guardian* and *The Times*, and major Fleet Street journalists sent a message of support to Hjul and Vigne for their fight for a free Press.

Now the *Argus* must have a very odd sense of world news if it thinks that one bomb at Evaton Post Office is world front-page stuff; yet I did read about it briefly in a couple of London papers (the earlier explosions had wider coverage) as well as the arrest of George Peake. ●

"AND SO I MIGHT GO ON. I know, unquestionably, from personal experience that most Fleet Street foreign editors are keeping a very lively eye on South Africa. The so-called popular papers, which print little straight news from anywhere, always prefer the "human stories"; the straightforward, generalised harangue about South Africa doesn't excite them, and never did. The London *Daily Mail* gave an example of this a few weeks ago by publishing a large and beautifully illustrated article on a couple of Immorality Act refugees: there wasn't a scrap of news in this, but it showed that the *Mail* and papers like it are always on the look-out for stories of how the apartheid net affects the lives of ordinary people. I would agree with the *Argus* on this: that a weakening of the Verwoerd Government or any new crisis in South Africa would get speedy, full-blooded Fleet Street treatment." ●