

CULTURE AND RESISTANCE

by Marie Dyer (Pictures in this and the following article by Joe Alferts)

South Africa is a country in which the police attack and shoot school children, communities have their houses bulldozed and wrecked and are dumped on the veld, thousands of migrant workers live out their lives in almost total isolation from their families, hundreds of people are imprisoned without trial, many of them die What are painters, musicians, photographers, theatrical workers, writers, to make of all this? What are their roles? How can they engage with these conditions through their art, relate to the communities in which they occur, and prepare for a future without them? These were the questions that the festival and symposium 'Culture and Resistance' and the exhibition 'Art towards Social Development' sought to respond to.



Wilson "King Force" Silgee

Many months ago some South African artists, musicians and writers in Gaborone had conceived the idea of bringing together into the town first a collection of socially-directed South African fine art and photography, then, as the project expanded, the artists themselves as well, and then, even more ambitiously, workers in other cultural fields, for a major series of displays and discussions. In the final achievement of these aims the exhibition was on display from June until August 1982 with the symposium and festival taking over the University campus — and much of the town — from the 5th to the 9th of July. No single institution arranged it all: the organisers emphasised the collective nature of all decisions. Seven international donor and volunteer agencies had provided financial assistance.

Hundreds of participants and observers streamed into the town in early July, most of them accommodated in the economically — even austere — designed but pleasant and comfortable environment of the University. The campus is a spreading complex of low concrete-and-whitewash buildings covering many acres and joined by colonnaded covered ways. The symposium discussions were held in the students, union - a large light hall with small gaps in the high louvred windows through which creepers dropped inside the walls and little birds occasionally flew in and out. Outside the hall one of the campus's many courtyards containing benches and alcoves covered with shade cloths and sheltered with creepers was continually busy with meetings, registrations, book sales, lunch-hour performances and heated discussions. The capacious university refectory, opening off the same courtyard, dealt efficiently and good-humouredly with the fluctuating hundreds who attended. It was an atmosphere very appropriately conducive to free and open contact and discussion.

The festival took place both in the University and all over town. Films were shown every afternoon in lecture theatres; and every evening concerts, musical shows and plays were offered at four or five venues on the campus and in the town. The scale and scope of all this were very impressive indeed.

The symposium consisted of papers, panel discussions and open debates in sessions devoted to separate media - Fine Arts, Photography, Film, Music, Dance, Writing and the Novel, Poetry, and Theatre. The panels were large and varied: nearly all members were South Africans, many living in South Africa but many exiles, all practitioners concerned with culture and resistance, relevance and commitment.

Discussions in all sessions were wide-ranging. There was continuing effort to define the significance of cultural work in the larger struggle; continuing consciousness of the temptations to believe on the one hand that the walls of Apartheid would fall, as it were, to the sound of the



Junction Avenue Theatre Company in "Marabi"

trumpet or the poem, and on the other that nothing but aggressive political action could have any substantial effect on events. Lines from Arthur Nortje quoted in the opening speech opened this theme:

some of us must storm the castles
some define the happening.

And speakers also reverted continually to the recognition that the major victims of Apartheid were the people 'out there' — the migrant workers, the squatters, the re-settlement-camp dwellers, the prisoners — in comparison with whose sufferings the difficulties and distresses of artists were inconsiderable. (The recent deaths of striking mineworkers in whose memory the meeting on one occasion stood in silence, were mournful reminders of this truth.)

Although discussions were usually respectful and even cordial, there were many evidences of differences and dissensions, sometimes partly or wholly submerged, between both panellists and participants, speakers and audiences. In her paper Nadine Gordimer suggested the inevitability of both the discord and its submergence in her description of the pass laws as 'grim unifiers.' The point that she developed from this — that the post-apartheid culture would have to be one which both blacks and whites actively chose and wanted to be a part of — was perhaps not given enough consideration in the symposium as a whole. There was a greater concentration on the present culture of the emergency — a concern rather with the ways of saying 'no' than with the description of what we were preparing to say 'yes' to.

The most insistently repeated theme, however, was that art must not be elitist; that artists in all media must come to think of themselves as 'cultural workers'. Thus, for instance, photographers and filmmakers were urged to share their skills with people in nearby communities — not so

much to move into a neighbourhood and record its life, however impressively, as to give the people in the neighbourhood themselves opportunities and access to skills and equipment so that those with talent and interest could take their own pictures and record and interpret their own lives. (As an immediate result of these suggestions a photographic workshop was held on one of the symposium days in which photographers exchanged ideas, and more experienced exponents offered technical advice; and lists were made, for subsequent circulation, of all institutions, groups or individuals who could offer facilities to aspirant film-makers.)

There were queries and challenges posed about the cultural use and function of the big formal painting selling at a high price, as opposed to informal posters and prints with a more direct and accessible content for cheap exhibition and distribution among poor people.

With discussions on music we reached a medium which seemed to have the potential to unite the fragmented people of South Africa in a common experience; (but further complexities were revealed in the mention of a community whose own culture of resistance consists in a deliberate and calculated rejection of all Western influences and a strict adherence to traditional modes.) There was some debate about whether music — as distinct from its lyrics or its associations — could carry any intelligible message, and whether it could be used most valuably in combination with poetry and drama. There was discussion about the paralysing domination of the big recording and distributing companies (not to mention the SABC) who avoided any polemical material and thus effectively silenced progressive or radical composers or musicians. A practical suggestion was made by a worker from a radio station in Swaziland, who recommended that tapes instead of commercially produced discs be sent to the independent broadcasting stations who would play them if they were good. A determination to take cultural boycotts seriously

was evinced by all participants (and a resolution to this effect was passed in the final session of the symposium.) Practical strategies discussed were first urging overseas artists not to come and local groups not to back them up if they did come, and then in the last resort arranging concerts with the most popular local bands available in competition with the overseas artists on the same dates.

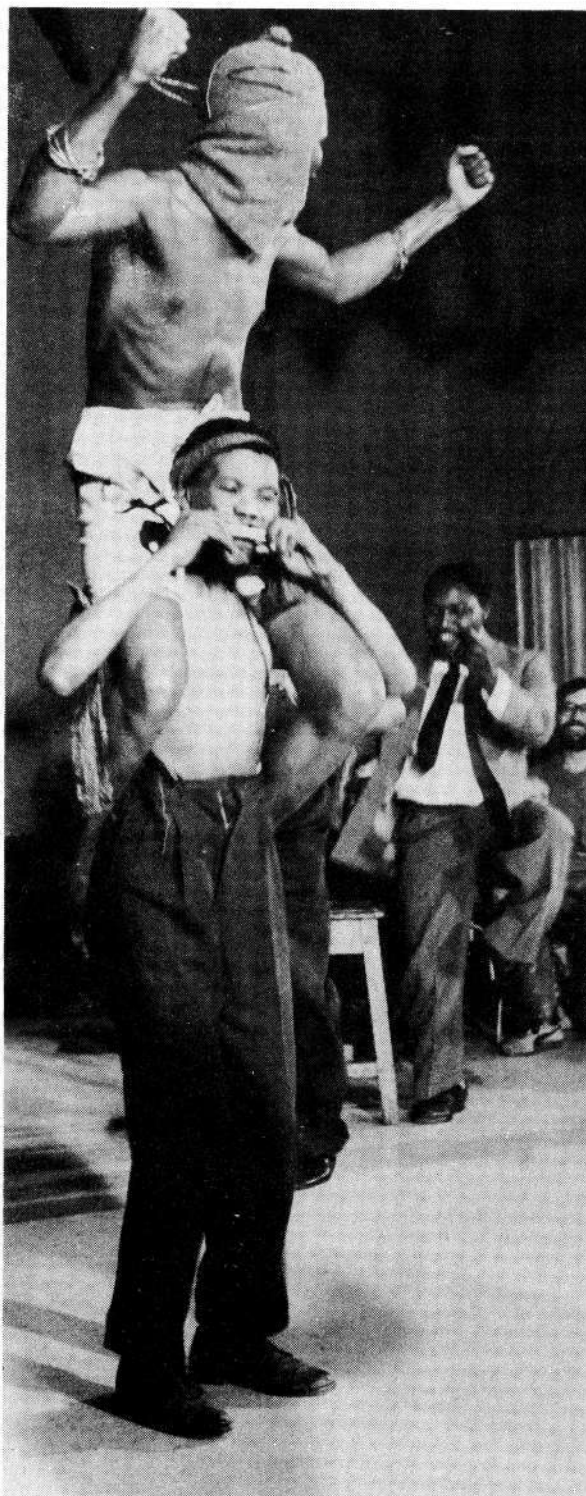
There was some criticism of the novel as itself an elitist form; but a panellist from Zimbabwe recalled that when writing had been censored in the previous regime 'subversive' novels read aloud from the back of vans had been very popular with audiences (and had created quite a reading public after liberation.) In the poetry discussions several poets made very humble literary claims for their own works and those of many fellow writers, suggesting that since they were directed at a very specific situation of crisis, few would survive; and asserting that after liberation poets would be proud first of having contributed to the struggle and only second of perhaps having written some pieces with enough eloquence and power to be memorable beyond the present. But the implicit suggestion in this assertion of the existence of absolute or universal literary standards was vehemently contested from the floor.

These exchanges perhaps revealed something of a pattern in the symposium. The emphasis in all discussions was placed heavily on the value of the social and political contents of the cultural works as opposed to their artistic forms. But the panellists themselves still seemed to accept as a major part of their task — perhaps even a definition of their activities — the effort to integrate these aspects. Uncompromising exhortations to neglect or abandon attention to form came usually from the audience.

The problem of practical distribution of writers' works (a problem endemic to South African artists in all media since the money and the big institutions are controlled by the other side) was confronted again in the literature discussions. Although the sympathetic attitudes of several South African publishers were referred to (and mention was made particularly of Ravan Press) there were proposals and recommendations for informal co-operative ventures into publishing, with economical standards of printing and binding, to reach a larger local market.

This brief and perhaps arbitrary overview of some trends in the discussions doesn't attempt to do any justice to the quality of the formal papers presented to the symposium, by among others — Keorapetse Kgositsile, Gavin Jantjes, Barry Gilder, Muff Anderson, Dikobe Martins, Keyan Tomaselli, Peter McKenzie, Nadine Gordimer, Richard Rive, Chris van Wyk, James Matthews; and of the informal contributions made by among others, Mongane Serote, George Hallett, David Goldblatt, Bill Ainslie, Paul Weinberg, Lindiwe Mabuza. The organisers hope to produce a book about the occasion; we hope we will be able to read it.

After the symposium sessions every evening the festival began. Several films were screened every day. A highly professional BBC documentary 'To the last drop of blood' presented the background to, and accounts of, the military determination and preparedness of both sides in the South African conflict, containing interviews with Nationalist politicians and Defence Force officers and some with carefully anonymous commanders and soldiers from guerilla camps in the bush. In contrast to this, a very moving record of Neil Aggett's funeral had apparently been shot (largely



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from the back of a motor-bike) by one cameraman with a Super-8. 'You have struck a rock' — an impressively well-researched film on protests against women's passes — included interviews and comments from surviving participants and an extraordinary amount of contemporary film illustrating and documenting almost every meeting, march and police charge mentioned in the commentary. There were films — one couldn't possibly see them all — on the Freedom Charter, the destruction of Pageview, Student protests of the 70's, the SACC, South African musical groups, the life and achievements of Sol Plaatjie, and a version of Nadine Gordimer's short story 'Six Feet of the Country'.

The "live shows" were presented later in the evenings. There was a short formal mime on the subject of oppression and rebellion (equally effective on a stage and in the courtyard.) In contrast there were several 'workshop' plays, expansively constructed with superbly realistic character acting: it was positively alarming to sit across the breakfast table from a spruce young man whom one had actually witnessed in the last stages of meths addiction the previous night. In most plays there was the characteristic 'township' blend of comedy, tragedy and satire, so that, for example, a trade unionist whose single-mindedness and assiduity had been the subjects of jokes and ironic mockery through several scenes ended the play arrested, assaulted and hanging from his handcuffs. In another hall expressionist modern ballet shared a programme with perhaps rather too much South-African-Ethnic but splendidly performed traditional dances. We heard the Fulani poets, who, either in specific performances or spontaneously in a crowd, called out their lines sometimes individually, sometimes antiphonally, perhaps narrating some event of 1976 or expressing the loneliness of a worker in a hostel: 'Think of me when you are with your lover.....'

The high point for musical aficionados was the presence of Abdullah Ibrahim (formerly Dollar Brand). He appeared twice, opening his first programme with a poignant vocal lament for Solomon Mahlangu. A thousand people, including President Masire, attended his second concert; and distinguished South African musicians (including Hugh Masekela) from Johannesburg, Gaborone, and Europe played for them to dance all night. King Force, the leader of the Alexandra-based Jazz Maniacs in the 1940's, with his saxophone and benign white beard, was one of the favourite personalities of both festival and symposium.

The art exhibition was a sort of background to the whole: again enormous in scope, with the works of sixty artists and thirty photographers spread over two halls. (To visit

it properly one had to miss at least one full symposium session.) The themes of resistance, social development, social protest were common to all works; but for the rest the range of approach, styles and techniques was immense: sculpture in several media, oils and water colours, collages, graphics, prints, posters, portraits, caricatures, urban scenes, expressionist designs, — and more. The experience of the exhibition was large, complex and disturbing.

For observers this was a mind-stretching week. To be free of the colour-bar was exhilarating for a start; to be in a country whose government has obvious care and concern for its poor rural people was another bonus; to be in a community with some of the best talents South Africa has produced, and to see and hear them in action, and in contact rare enough to be historic, was a perpetual pleasure and excitement. I can't speak for the participants; I would guess that the suggestions made and contact established for day-to-day practical action were immensely valuable. (Another resolution in the final session called for the division of South Africa into cultural regions in which artists could maintain contact with communities and with each other). More generally Abdullah Ibrahim's characteristically forceful description on the function of festival, symposium and exhibition may have found a response: "a de-programming centre intended to get rid of the century of junk with which imperialist culture has filled your mind."

Every pleasure had its obverse in its relationship to the abominable South African systems which we were temporarily free from or permanently proposing to resist, but for artists this temporary freedom must surely have been revitalising. Those who usually live within the horrors and constraints of Apartheid stayed for a little time with those who usually lived within the agonies and constraints of exile, and for both it must have been a tiny mutual glimpse of liberation. □



Jazz concert with Hugh Masekela