

Black Theatre an Expression of Black Consciousness

My paper on Black theatre an expression of Black consciousness reflects on the Black Theatre Movement of the 70s. What was it? Where did it begin? How far did it go ? why?

I want to begin by stating that during the mid-sixties I was a part of a group of students at the University College for Indians (Salisbury Island). As students we were beginning to look critically at our lives on the campus and the way we lived in the different communities we had come from. We wanted to express who we were becoming and who it was we wanted to become. As drama students we were spectators to plays written by western playwrights like Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare, Moliere, Wilde. We also played their characters with airs and graces using their speech mannerisms. Everything white and euro-centric became our model. Becoming more aware of the socio-political conditions around us we began to redefine who we were and so began our redefinition of the kind of theatre we wanted to create.

THE RE-DEFINITION

We asked: "What is theatre?" and our answer was that Theatre is a reflection of life and would only be successful if it reflected the lives of the people who were viewing it." This resonated with the definition of the Black Consciousness as a "way of life", but we went further than that as we felt that theatre should not just be a reflection of life but an examination of that reflection.

We also asked: "Do we follow the same course as white theatre which played only to the elite few who could afford it, employ language and techniques that were not understood by the vast majority of black people. We also asked whether we should engage in "arts-for-arts-sake".

Our answers were simple: Black theatre should open its ranks to all black people who were denied access to theatre. It would be meaningless if we played to a select few. If Black Theatre was to reflect the Black consciousness maxim, then Black Theatre must encroach on ideas that had previously not dared to be spoken of. We believed that Black Theatre was to be a forum where black people would realize themselves as beings (not as negative forces –non-whites, non-beings), with the ability to think, analyse, form our own values of life and not to imitate values set for us by others. We wanted to use symbols related to our everyday life, images that we as black persons saw, heard, interpreted and which must have some relation to our own feelings, ideas, thoughts, experiences. We also felt strongly that the stage was the platform that held mirror to the political life of the country and that politics being the branch of moral philosophy had to deal with the state and its social and economic organisms. Therefore we refused to engage in "arts for arts sake".

We felt strongly that Black Theatre had to expose the inequalities, the prejudices, discrimination that existed in society. We had to challenge the existing order, the values, norms. Black Theatre had to speak the language of revolt, of liberation, of revolution. As a Theatre of Revolt and as an expression of Black consciousness it was not very popular for it attacked the very people on whom it fed, the bourgeoisie. It attacked their complacency, their compromise, their hypocrisy, cowardice, greed. Its main aim no

doubt was to affirm the existence of black people who had the right to live, right to speak, criticize and the right to denounce everything that was oppressive or evil. Black theatre in the main was to break a Eurocentric frame of reference and attempt to develop an Afrocentric approach to the Arts. Black Theatre as an expression of Black Consciousness assumed a Negritude by living it and having lived it sought for a deeper meaning of the Arts.

I want to deal now with the Theatre Council of Natal (TECON) as a particular theatre organisation, whose artistic work leaned towards the Black Consciousness philosophy.

TECON –ITS HISTORY

As early as 1966, whilst at the University College for Indians (Salisbury Island), a group of us known as the Café Clan, created a satirical revue called “BLACK ON WHITE”. The revue was a send up of the white world. It exposed the stupidity of racism, apartheid and the euro-centric graces and behaviour as was defined and propagated by white society of the time. Since all of the actors were part of Indian Community we were able to draw much of the comedy from our way of life. We also satirized the SABC, the stupidity of the Special Branch and its obsession with communism. The revue ran for 3 years playing in various venues, in parks, gardens, homes, restaurants, community halls and University theatres.

Since we had no models at that time to emulate we chose to create and interpret plays against the fabric of divided communities and evils of apartheid. In 1969 we took Eurocentric plays (Pinter’s *The Caretaker*, Osborne’s *Look back in Anger*),and highlighted our own conflicts e.g. break up of family life, effects of unemployment, overcrowded living conditions, alienation of self. Black theatre resonated with Theatre of the Absurd and hence we workshopped and improvised around existential ideas that emanated from the works of Ionesco and Sartre. Black Writers had very little of their own work published then.

In 1970 we produced an epic Poem on the life of Mahathma Gandhi in South Thematically the poem highlighted the nature of how the white colonialists employed the divide and rule principle to create the inferiority/superiority complex that became embedded in the psyche of all South Africans.

This was the beginning of the explosion of artistic creativity that was to follow. Of significance was: we saw this as the beginning of Black Theatre because for the first time, the entire administration, technical and artistic direction was in the hand of Black artists.

Our focus was now directed towards situational experiences. Many a play was workshopped and improvised. Thus in 1970 when communities were accepting with resignation the “dumping grounds” of Dimbaza and Limehill we believed that we needed the world to know what was happening. So a choric verse entitled, “The Resurrection”, written by Strini Moodley brought about the awareness of the atrocities dealt by the Nationalist government of the day. It was produced around EASTER so as to spread a message of Hope and to convey to those who felt the pain to rise up against this form of oppression. The Resurrection broke new artistic ground because this was the first time a multi-media production using live music, drama, film, slides, dance was employed.

While the play drew upon the experiences of people in the Eastern Transvaal it was placed against the background of the prevailing Biafran war and it reflected upon the suffering of an entire continent that was subjected to institutionalized violence. The message led to our popularity and we spread the message far and wide to the most rural town halls of Dalton, Mandini, to the plush theatres of Witwatersrand. Side by side with this production we produced Bertolt Brecht's , The Informer. It impacted on our audiences who were victims of the private eyes of the Special Branch in those days. It echoed the same kind of fascism in Germany that sowed seeds of mistrust, division and fear amongst family members.

1970 ushered in an emergence of an African ethos where we began to unleash an African Message in Theatre. We began to focus on an Afro- Centric approach to Theatre. Through the deliberate use of African garb, African-drums, song and dance we created a production called, "Africa Hurrah" which in 1971 we developed and translated into "Into the Heart of Negritude"-reflecting the different voices across the African continent. We displayed the pride of African culture. Through this production audiences came to realize that they could not be oppressed because of their blackness. It signaled the need to be psychologically liberated. It was a time for black people to redefine themselves in terms of self pride, dignity and self worth.

The emergence of Black Theatre traveled in tandem with Black Consciousness. While the political movement engaged black cultural activities to conscientize communities, TECON saw black consciousness as a means to extend its philosophical understanding of the Arts.

In 1971 we freely adapted Jean Anouilh's version of Antigone into what we called "ANTIGONE in '71". The play reflected the political conditions when people were silenced, arrested, detained, placed in solitary confinement and sentenced to years of imprisonment. The symbolisms of Creon representing a white dictatorial state, Antigone –the freedom fighters, the chorus –the black working class, Hymon and Ismene –the liberal fence sitters impacted on our Audiences throughout South Africa because of the political relevance to their lives.

The turning point of this play for us was to take it to the people who were deprived of theatre in their lives. We started going into townships (altho' forbidden). Places like Hammanskraal, Edenvale, Dududu as far as Nyanga in Cape Town. Our aim was to address their needs, develop skills of Black actors, instill respect, pride, dignity in their lives and eventual liberation of black people by black people themselves. This was in keeping with the philosophy of Black Consciousness.

In 1972 at the 2nd Tecon Drama Festival, when on reflecting on the political killings and concerned by the deaths in detention of Nengeni, Gaga, Hoyo, Imam Haroon, Ahmed Timol we produced "Requiem for Brother X", a play searching for the killers of Malcolm X (A Black Power leader in America). We called for interaction from the audience because we believed that audiences were not just spec-actors but active participants involved in the making of our plays. We needed their immediate responses.

It is at this point we decided that Black Theatre should not only speak of the trials and tribulations of Black people. We moved from a theatre of hopeless murmur to a theatre of determination. Black theatre was poised as a catalyst for change and launched itself as a theatre of Liberation and became known as Revolutionary Theatre.

As Revolutionary Theatre, TECON decided to expose the untruths, to accuse, to attack because we did not want theatre to be a theatre of victims. We moved audiences to look at the strength in their minds and in their bodies. This was encapsulated in 1973 in a musical-poetic dramatic collage called, "Black Images". In "Black Images" we shifted from the cultural description of our Blackness to a position where Blackness related to commitment. It became evident that raising of the fist was becoming a fad and blackness was being sloganised. We felt that the concept of being Black was not an expression of one's physical blackness, but had to be defined by one's commitment to the struggle for liberation. The Play "Black Images" then addressed thugs and thieves who attacked their communities and preyed on their people., gave recognition to women and workers who contributed to the struggle, remembered the messages given by our leaders who were imprisoned, arrested, exiled and who died at the hands of the State, called for the responsibility of action and impressed upon the preservation of the black family. It was unfortunate that in 1973, the entire Black Consciousness Leadership was banned. This meant that our movements were restricted. We lost our jobs. We were unable to engage in theatrical activity. The voices of poets, playwrights, actors were silenced. Nonetheless in 1974 members of TECON still decided to produce a play called, "BECKET 1980" which portrayed our battle for our souls.—a contest within ourselves of whether we were going to uphold our principles or succumb to the forces of oppression. Young artists who still had their convictions continued to hold workshops in their communities. Messages of black pride spread through the country.

Black Theatre as an expression of Black Consciousness influenced the poetry and short story writings of the time, the art, the sculpture, music. We had an impact on actors like John Kani. Winston Tshona, poets like Mafika Gwala, Adam Small, theatre groups like Pett, Cape Flats Theatre, Backstreet Productions, Mhloti Theatre, Mdali(Music, Drama, Arts and Literature Institute) and Was responsible for the formation of the South African Black Theatre Union (SABTU)

In the final analysis we believed that we would not imitate white theatre, white values. We had to stand on our own. We would not respond or react to the whiteman's concept of us. We were not going to portray plays and musicals based on chiefs, maidens and witch doctors, musicals that escaped the realities that we faced. We were not going to be exploited by white directors in the name of work at last for black actors, better and bigger wage packets, offers of tours of America and Europe. Our duty was with the people of South Africa, bringing to them their joy and their pain on stage.

To conclude Black theatre then as an expression of Black Consciousness was concerned with the beauty of a culture that had been ravished by white society. Black theatre was to regain this beauty, a beauty that was to bring out the absolute BE--ING in Black People, a people with pride in their communities and in themselves.