



Wolfgang Schneider,  
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# THEATRE IN TRANS- FORMATION

Artistic Processes  
and Cultural Policy  
in South Africa

[transcript] Theatre Studies

## From:

*Wolfgang Schneider, Lebogang L. Nawa (eds.)*

### **Theatre in Transformation**

### **Artistic Processes and Cultural Policy in South Africa**

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Are artists seismographs during processes of transformation? Is theatre a mirror of society? And how does it influence society offstage? To address these questions, this collection brings together analyses of cultural policy in post-apartheid South Africa and actors of the performing arts discussing political theatre and cultural activism. Case studies grant inside views of the State Theatre in Pretoria, the Market Theatre in Johannesburg and the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town, followed by a documentation of panel discussions on the Soweto Theatre. The texts collected here bring to the surface new faces and voices who advance the performing arts with their images and lexicons revolving around topics such as patriarchy, femicide and xenophobia.

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# Theatre in Transformation

Foreword of the editors

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*Wolfgang Schneider and Lebogang L. Nawa*

In comparative political science, transformation is called a process of fundamental change in a political system and if necessary also in a social order.

Cultural policy research is also concerned with transformation processes, in particular through observations, analyses and reflections on the social role of art and culture. The publication is based on a research atelier in South Africa which assumes the following hypothesis: The inner and exterior condition of a theatre can be a mirror for the political condition of a whole country; serving as seismographs of a society and as their change agents.

The central questions are: What is the effect of a social transformation for the major arts theatres in South Africa? Where is the process apparent in the theatres, who are its agents, what are the underlying concepts? What does the idea of “transformation” mean for theatre? What were the working structures of the theatres in the 1970s and 80s? How did they change post-1994? What were the short-term and long-term consequences of the social changes for theatre? Which kind of political tendencies or statements emerged from the theatre before and after the liberation struggle against colonialism and apartheid – on stage and beyond the stage? Where could one perceive the transformation of the theatre (both, within the institution and in the exterior image)? In what format? How did the programming change? What changed, what became possible, what is completely ordinary today that was impossible before the liberation struggle? Who were or are – perhaps until today – the cultural political vectors of such a transformation within or exterior to the theatre: Theatre directors? Cultural politicians on the level of municipalities, regions or the state? Workers unions? Theatre staff? Actors’ companies? The theatre scene surrounding the theatre? The media? If yes, which media? Press? Radio? TV? Theatre specialised media? Visitors’ organisations? International organisations? Foundations? Were there or are there any concepts for the transformation of a theatre? If yes: Who is its author and what was it or is it about? What is eventually the stadium of its realisation?

How did the attitude or even the concept for a transformation change during the time – within the board but as well within the theatre staff? Were there clear or even outspoken ideas about the process? How far and how fast did the cultural political requests or demands of the subsidising bodies change? What are the cultural political guidelines today and how do they differ between the theatres? Was the position of the Market Theatre (Johannesburg) or the Baxter Theatre (Cape Town), the State Theatre (Pretoria) or the Soweto Theatre – a better one since it had this history of an anti-apartheid-theatre? What were the expectations of the public after liberation? What are the expectations of the theatre scene? Which coherence do you see between those transformations and the cultural political requirements or guidelines of the Republic of South Africa? Are those transformations its result? Or did those processes influence the development of the local, regional or national cultural policies agenda? What was or is finally and accordingly the understanding the role of theatres in the South African transformation society?

Theatre has always been a key art for South Africans. It was one of the struggle grounds of the oppositions against apartheid in the seventies and eighties. But the theatre has lost most of its old audiences during the last twenty years and the struggle for new audiences is ongoing and is far from being won. That means that today, the leading theatres are friendly “colleagues” and sometimes strategic partners.

“During Apartheid, they represented different countries in terms of ideologies, audiences and programming”, said leading South African critic Adrienne Sichel about the two Gauteng theatres. The Market Theatre was founded in Johannesburg in 1976 by a group of idealistic artists. They chose Johannesburg’s old Indian Fruit Market – built in 1913 – to host their venue which was conceived to be accessible by people of all races and skin colour, just as the old market which had provided food for everybody. That was the reason why the area was exempted from the strict access regulations of the era which hardly allowed people to mix with each other. But as soon as the Market started to work properly, it became internationally renowned as South Africa’s leading anti-apartheid theatre with shows like *Woza Albert!*, *Asinamali*, *Sophiatown*, *Born in the RSA* and many of Athol Fugard’s plays.

Similarly, the National State Theatre in Pretoria was built on the site of the former fruit and vegetable market place. But while the Market Theatre used the old historic buildings and refurbished them, the monolithic building of the State Theatre complex was built in 1981 on the old market site after its demolition. It was the former province of Transvaal which funded and constructed the complex with its originally five theatres, rehearsal rooms, workshops and administration offices for its Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (PACT); an umbrella for opera, ballet and the English and Afrikaans drama companies which were working according to central European repertory theatre traditions,

although the international culture boycott at this time prevented South African theatre companies from playing international contemporary plays.

Cape Town's Baxter Theatre was founded in August 1977 as the theatre of the University of Cape Town. From its very first days, it was an alternative to the publicly subsidised Nico Malan Theatre Centre (today called Artscape Theatre Centre). While Nico Malan was under the influence of the government which was able to influence its programme and prevent critical or challenging works, the Baxter was much less under control since it was protected to a certain degree by the university's academic freedom, though it did not have the same challenging profile as the openly oppositional Market Theatre.

Theatres were among the first places to be opened for all the races as far as it was possible in 1977, which means that the State Theatre buildings were since its opening in 1981 accessible for all audiences. In the late eighties, several Black actors, dancers and singers were being employed by the different PACT companies. After the first democratic elections in 1994, the four regional performing arts councils and their companies were dissolved and transformed into 'receiving houses', which continued to be state funded – a matter which is quarried in the book. From 2005 onwards, the Windybrow Theatre in Hillbrow, Johannesburg as well the Market Theatre became state funded. The State Theatre underwent a severe crisis when the whole institution was shut down by the Ministry of Culture after revelations about corruption and budgetary deficits and was only reopened two years later.

In 2002, that the young Aubrey Sekhabi was appointed as new artistic director of the State Theatre. Together with his associated director, Mpu-meleleo Paul Grootboom, they transformed the institution to one of the power-houses of theatre on the African continent. The Market Theatre was led by the charismatic director Malcolm Purkey from 2004 to 2013. He was succeeded by James Ngcobo; actor and director who had already been working for most of the time with the Market Theatre during the Purkey era. He is now the very first Black director of South Africa's legendary "theatre of struggle". Since the Baxter Theatre was founded in a period of a beginning opening of the South African society, the theatre is proud to issue a statement, as it should, in its current website, to the effect that: "Even through the difficult years of racial segregation its doors remained open to everyone and it thrived, drawing on indigenous talent and creating a uniquely South African theatre tradition." (Baxter Theatre Centre)

The research atelier aims to describe – from different perspectives – the transformation process of the leading, publicly funded South African theatres from the time of apartheid until today: From inside the theatre, through the eyes of the theatre directors as well as of the employees, and from outside, through the eyes of political responsible persons, the accompanying observers of the theatre landscape.

The editors are proud to present a collection of different researches and cultural-political positions, which proclaim the diversity of the theatre landscape in South Africa, which mark divergent development and all of them document the relevance of the performing arts in processes of transformation. In this aspect the publication is also a contribution in the discourse on art, art education and their role in the society, South Africa; an example and model for a vibrant cultural policy that is indeed supported and promoted by the artists and the civil society alike. Unless otherwise specifically stated, the views expressed by the authors in the book do not necessarily reflect those of the editors.

The significance of this process, particularly the three-days symposia held from 11 to 13 March 2016 around which this book is compiled, was best captured by Aubrey Sekhabi during his welcome address on Friday 11 March 2016 at the State Theatre. Sekhabi acknowledged that it was seldom that South African Black Theatre practitioners in particular met to exchange views on the State of Theatre in South Africa at certain intervals. Consequently, their views were often misrepresented by their White counterparts who happen to possess the means of production and dissemination of information, including in publications. This statement became a refrain throughout the three days. Thus Sekhabi saw the gathering, and by extension the book, as golden opportunities to reverse the trend.

Indeed, the gathering as well as this book became rare platforms for convergence of intergenerational mix and intersectoral or intersectional pollination of multi-perspectives far broader than the anti-apartheid struggle mainly focused on race dynamics. It brought to the surface, in full measure or force, new faces and voices with images and lexicons different if not disturbing to conservative ears and eyes in themes around patriarchy, femicide, homophobia, xenophobia and other social ills concealed during apartheid and not given prominence as part of the struggle against socio-economic and political injustices. The unfamiliarity of new ethos thus sets apart this book from its recent predecessors as it broadens the scope of the definition of transformation far beyond mere changes in systems and structures. They probe the plausibilities and validities of the philosophies informing them against authentic versatile African cultural grid not wired to prescriptive universal idioms not conducive or relevant to real local conditions. Hence, theatre practitioners across the country have gone out on their own to create alternative theatre spaces than government-commissioned Soweto Theatre, for instance.

Against this backdrop, the occasion also brought to spin with ironic twists or paradox impressions of theatre from perspectives inside and outside the country. For instance, in "The ideal of a Rainbow Nation: What theatre arts and cultural policy in Europe can learn from South Africa?" Julius Heinicke writes that "some of these ideas from South Africa could be taken up in Germany as a way of facing up to some of today's challenges" and that "these innovative

techniques in theatre may give important impulses for the European context". It is curious whether the irony of the article is or is not lost to the fact that some of the innovations reflected in several articles by Heinicke's South African counterparts are inspired by German philosophers like Martin Heidegger of the earlier times of the 1920s and later followed by Bertolt Brecht? In South Africa, Heidegger's tenure represents the transition from colonialism to apartheid while Brecht captures the struggle against the fascist twins of Nazism and apartheid. Indeed, this implies that knowledge generation and dissemination spans across space and time as attested by the selection of panellists as well as article contributors across South Africa's geo-political demographics.

The other theme to emerge throughout the three legs of the research atelier is that 'a one size fits all cultural policy promotes imbalances' in the arts landscape with drastic consequences. Indeed, as if by prophecy or prediction, Sefako Mohlomi cautioned in his article, "Theatre Development and Cultural Policy in Rural Areas: A grassroots perspective from North West Province, South Africa", that cultural policy imposed on people as it is its provisions like infrastructure construction can be met by violent retaliation from the people it is supposed to serve. Indeed, in the month of April 2018 after this article, sustained violent protests in the North West province against political maladministration and lack of service culminated in the iconic Mmabana Arts Centre been vandalised and torched by angry residents. This, in short, is one of the prices to pay for lack or slow pace of transformation in South Africa.

Similarly, "The Art must burn", the title of an article in the "Culture Review" magazine Spring 2016 edition refers. It drew attention to the student protests in South Africa that took place at the same time as the team of the Hildesheim UNESCO-Chair in Cultural Policy for the Arts met South African cultural practitioners at the research atelier in Pretoria and Soweto. Matjamela Motlounge concludes with these remarks shared by the editors:

"It is good that art is burning because art is supposed to provoke a position and for far too long South African artists particularly Black artists have been comfortable with receiving funding and responding to its needs. It's time we bring back the artist that recognises their position in society and probe, and make the art that disturbs the status quo." (Motlounge 2016)

The editors are grateful to the facilitators of the research atelier: Rolf C. Hemke und Daniel Gad from the University of Hildesheim. Thanks to the hosts of the venues where the discourse took place, namely: Aubrey Sekhabi from the State Theatre; Patrick Ebewo from the Tshwane University of Technology; and Mongane W. Serote from the Jo'burg Theatres under which Soweto Theatre falls. Thanks to all the lecturers, panellists, facilitators and the audience who took part of all the colloquiums. Thanks to all artists and academics for their

insightful contributions to the publication through their articles afterwards as postscripts to the gatherings. And lastly, thanks to the publishing house Theater der Zeit in Berlin for allowing us to reprint some texts from the magazine “Down in a land of cages. New Theatre in South Africa” (2009).

Black, White and, Coloured written with a capital letter indicate that it is not a ‘white’, ‘coloured’ or ‘black skin colour’, but a constructed social category for the designation of persons.

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# Prologue: Time to take stock?

## The Role of Theatre in Transformation

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*Rolf C. Hemke*

The South African theatre scene has a unique position on the continent. No other country has so many state-subsidised theatres, such quality and breadth of theatre education, so many large, well-frequented festivals, along with serious theatre critics who are known to the wider public. So South Africa must be in a good position? Not really. Because the theatre scene that has produced internationally renowned artists such as Athol Fugard and William Kentridge, along with a younger generation that includes Brett Bailey and Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom, has found itself in a state of permanent crisis ever since the end of apartheid. However, the economic situation has never been better for most theatre makers who currently shape the Anglophone theatre scene, as those who were already active in 1994 were involved in the anti-apartheid theatre movement. This meant that they never received any public subsidies. But in terms of content, no other theme has been able to replace the one great 'enemy' that was alluded to and protested against at that time, a theme that united audiences and theatre makers alike...

### **Hybrid identities**

Today, the country's eleven official national languages and even more numerous – often hybrid – cultural identities are a key factor. It therefore requires a certain pragmatism and robustness to even attempt to outline some basic categories of theatre. Yet this is probably essential for making such an essay on the transformation of a theatre system easier to comprehend. Hauptfleisch refers to “the lines of categories such as ‘White theatre in English’, ‘White theatre in Afrikaans’, ‘Black theatre in English’, and ‘Black theatre in vernacular’”. (Hauptfleisch 1997: 6). He also points out that such kinds of categories are “symptomatic of the self-consciousness created in all cultural discourse in South Africa by a cultivated and imposed racist ideology”, but at the same time admits that he has no other pragmatic solution other than “working with

the parameters of these cultural classifications.” Of course there are certain projects that now involve actors with different skin colours, but such projects remain very much the exception and can fail miserably, such as in the famous case of Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom’s *Interracial* (cf. Grootboom’s 2010, 199 ff./202 ff.; *ibid.*, Carp, S. 206 ff.).

The general economic crisis that South Africa seems unable to shake off also serves to ensure the persistence of existing social structures; a situation that continues to fuel ethnic divisions throughout society – even without apartheid laws. This is also reflected in the country’s theatre. The partly commercial theatre scene in the Cape is predominantly White, and productions are in Afrikaans. Its financial situation is still different from that of the English-speaking, mainly Black scene, which is concentrated in Gauteng – so Johannesburg and Pretoria. English-speaking theatres in and around Cape Town – such as the famous, university-supported Baxter Theatre under White director Lara Foot – also suffer from lack of funding, but they enjoy worldwide artistic renown. When considering this situation, the key word remains the same: ‘transformation’.

A prerequisite for writing about transformation is writing about the process of transformation: “One transforms a piece of clay into a sculpture, transforms noise into something called music, before the eyes of an audience a rather ordinary looking fellow may be transformed into a king,” writes Rob Baum (2013: 19). But when it comes to the transformation process of South African theatre from apartheid through the phase of peaceful revolution to the ‘new’, democratic South Africa of today, it is better to approach the term from a political standpoint: “In South Africa ‘transformation’ is a political term denoting contemporary social and economic reforms.” (*Ibid.*: 18)

But this throws up new questions, as Aubrey Sekhabi, Director of the State Theatre in Pretoria since 2002, highlighted in his introduction to the *Theatre in Transformation* conference that was held in Pretoria on 11 March 2016: “One can’t help but ask a few questions when talking about transformation – what are we talking about? Are we talking about the transformation of the leadership of the institutions, are we talking about the transformation of the media or the transformation of the content. [...] What has really transformed? [...]”.

### **Faltering transformation**

The location of the first day of this 2016 conference, the huge State Theatre, is one of the most symbolic places for such a debate, as was pointed out by Adrienne Sichel, renowned theatre critic for the Johannesburg *Star*. The huge concrete block with its six stages of varying sizes in the centre of Pretoria was inaugurated in 1980 as a demonstration of the power of White colonial culture – at a time when the country’s political system had long since begun to

crumble. In June 2000, the culture minister closed the theatre due to massive budget overruns and corruption. This opened up the possibility of dissolving the theatre, dance and opera companies that were still based there, remnants of the end of apartheid. Since Aubrey Sekhabi reopened the theatre in 2002, the complex has primarily functioned as a receiving house, a guest performance venue that has no artistic budget but receives funding solely for building management and technical staff. Aubrey Sekhabi eloquently explained how this presented a huge problem, as funding for artistic projects had to be applied for on an individual basis, and this applied to all five state theatres, including the Johannesburg Market Theatre.

On the following days, the other two conference venues proved symbolic of the upheavals caused by this faltering transformation. For a long time, the organisers were unsure whether the University Theatre of Tshwane would be available because academic activities were being disrupted by massive student strikes, while the chic Soweto Theatre received them in an atmosphere of protest. Young cultural activists had gathered to urge them: “don’t talk, act”. At the time of the conference, the magnificent, colourful, newly erected building, which was fenced off from its poor surroundings, was at a standstill as the director’s contract had run out the previous year. Despite much toing and froing, a successor had still not been appointed and all the funding had been used up, so the theatre was no longer able to present an artistic programme. It took almost a year, until 2017, before a new director was appointed. When – and the question has something sibylline about it – will it be possible to say that the South African theatre system has completed its transformation?

## **Black Protest Theatre**

During the apartheid era positions were clear – at least as far as South Africa’s Black majority was concerned. On the one side there was ‘White’ theatre – well funded because it was subsidised or commercially successful – and on the other side there was ‘Black’ Protest Theatre. Author and activist Mike van Graan has studied this style of theatre, saying: “‘Protest Theatre’ is not unique to South Africa. [...] ‘Protest Theatre’ is a genre of theatre that manifests itself in many situations of political conflict and social oppression, and unashamedly calls itself by this name.” (Van Graan 2006: 278) White South Africans who opposed apartheid had their own particular reasons for attending such performances, as van Graan states with a touch of irony: “Watching Protest Theatre was like going to confession for their collective sin as beneficiaries of apartheid.” He goes on: “[...] there is a sense that ‘Protest Theatre’ was regarded as inferior theatre, theatre that wouldn’t stand the tests of ‘good theatre’” (ibid.: 279). This may be due to a circumstance that Zakes Mda describes as follows: “Theatre was a mobilisational force, and for many a practitioner, supported

by an audience eager to be rallied to action, it was fulfilment enough that the theatre effectively served that function.” (Mda 2002: 283)

Van Graan then attempts to describe the features and characteristics that distinguished South African Protest Theatre in the anti-apartheid struggle. His criteria can be summed up as follows: the focus was on the message, which was conveyed to the audience in a very straightforward storytelling style, often by addressing the audience directly. Each actor usually played a number of roles, while costumes, props and set design – if they even existed – were kept to a minimum, for budgetary reasons and for the sake of greater mobility. Actors mostly had little or no training, and the characters they played often looked more like caricatures or clichés of types than dramaturgically developed characters. Many performances also involved music and dance. The performances originated and mainly took place in township community centres, and were based on a democratically organised workshop system without any real author or director (cf. van Graan 2006: 278).

### **The ‘White side’ of Protest Theatre**

However, we should not ignore the fact that the protagonists of Protest Theatre also included some well-known White theatre makers, such as Barney Simon and Athol Fugard. As part of the Protest Theatre movement, they were among the small band of artists who originally drew attention to the South African Protest Theatre style through their productions, for example at the Market Theatre, and at a time when there was a ‘cultural ban’ on taking South African art and culture abroad, they were able to attract international support for the anti-apartheid movement (cf. van Graan 2006: 281f.).

Against this backdrop, it is also worth mentioning the little-known fact that perhaps the two best-known Protest Theatres in the anti-apartheid struggle, at least among those that were also supported by Whites, had the benefit of at least some indirect financial support from the apartheid government. Although the Market Theatre deliberately rejected any form of direct state aid, it had signed a lease agreement with the City Council of Johannesburg for the theatre premises in the former vegetable market in Johannesburg at a price well below the market price. The Baxter Theatre in Cape Town, on the other hand, was and remains largely supported by the University of Cape Town, which, like all other universities, received government grants during the apartheid era (cf. Hauptfleisch 1997: 166).

## Theatre that goes beyond good and evil

At the heart of the institutionalised 'White' theatre scene of the apartheid era were the four fully subsidised Performing Arts Councils (PAC) in the country's four provinces of that time. They provided a Eurocentric audience in the metropolitan areas with culture (cf. van Herden 2011: 85f.) and – similar to German repertory theatres – worked with their own theatre, opera and dance companies. From the early 1990s, South African society found itself on a path to a change that, as it gradually became clear, would be irreversible. "It was a time of huge conjecture, replete with wildly oscillating emotional responses to the equally tumultuous daily events in what has on occasion rather aptly been referred to as 'pre-post-apartheid' South Africa." (Hauptfleisch 1997: 160) Perhaps the most famous anti-apartheid writer of his time, Athol Fugard, described how deeply shaken he felt: "After the democratic transition, I had a sense that I had outlived my time and become redundant, because I was a voice that plugged into the energy and the conflicts of the old South Africa. [...] Those conflicts [...] were a very energizing factor in my writing." (Mda 2002: 282) Here, Zakes Mda adds that many other, less gifted, authors could not have accompanied the transition from apartheid to democracy in their writings, simply because the South African reality during apartheid was such an absurdity that an accurate, realistic retelling of everyday events on stage would have seemed like a piece of absurd theatre – a recipe that simply did not work after the end of apartheid. The clear narrative of good and evil was at an end: "We are now faced with complexities and ambiguities that we need to interpret." (Ibid.: 282)

During this period, Hauptfleisch identified four categories of artistic reactions, which he describes in detail. While the "return" – as he calls it – to classical material and the increased focus on commercial entertainment theatre are not the subject of this essay, categories one and four deserve closer consideration. This reveals that his first category actually includes two different forms of theatre. He describes the first of these as:

"[...] highly emboldened avantgarde, obscene, politically aggressive and other previously banned forms of theatre. Thematically the topics in this kind of theatre range widely, with continued interest in issues of intolerance, violence, feminism, gay life, euthanasia, aids, religion, Afrikanerdom, and a variety of cultural rituals" (Hauptfleisch 1997: 160).

This brings Hauptfleisch to the possibility of producing theatre that has greater social relevance and developing new forms of applied theatre, which he finally classifies as a development of the Protest Theatre of the anti-apartheid movement: "[...] the concept of 'theatre as a weapon in the struggle' has been

replaced by notions of ‘theatre for healing’ and ‘theatre as bridge builder’ in the public forums of cultural debate and in the companies being set up” (ibid.).

He describes the fourth category as the “creation of an ‘African’ or South African theatre, taking the classical forms and styles of the pre-colonial era, blending them with the best of the ‘struggle period’, in a new hybrid. This ‘crossover’ movement is extremely far developed in the music arena [...]” (ibid.: 162). These words strongly remind me of what *Sarafina* composer Mbogeni Ngema said to me in an interview during a guest performance of one of his productions at the Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen in spring 1998: “We must all pay allegiance to Africa, know that we are African whether we are Black or white [...] that is the job that we need to work on in South Africa as artists, together, collectively, to produce African work.” (Hemke 2000: 27) According to Hauptfleisch, readers of the theatre magazine *Scenaria* during the apartheid era were faced with a different view of these developments in theatre: “[...] they fear that it will become totally ‘Africanized’ (i.e. gum-boot dancing, naked girls, drums and incoherent shouts, replacing the epic poetry of Shakespeare) [...]. It is a paranoia graphically expressed in virtually every issue of journals such as *Scenaria* for the past five years.” (Hauptfleisch 1997: 164)

### **Transformation processes through theatre festivals**

However, changes to the traditional structures began immediately with the first free elections in 1994, when the new ANC government redivided the country into nine provinces. In 1996, the *White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage* was adopted, which became the basis for a structural reform of public subsidies for the arts. The PACs’ budgets were slashed and subsequently converted into venues for co-productions and guest performances, without resident companies. From then on, the PACs and independent theatre producers and groups had to apply to the newly formed National Arts Council (NAC) for funding for artistic productions (cf. van Herden 2011: 86). The PACs were dissolved in 2000 and the building complexes were gradually placed under new – mostly Black – management. Indeed, the State Theatre in Pretoria only reopened after two years (cf. Sichel 2010: 170; 172). Many (predominantly White) artists whose livelihoods were previously secure suddenly found themselves economically marginalised and in need of new sources of income (cf. van Herden 2011: 93f.).

As a result, over the years that followed a kind of festival scene developed in South Africa. This particularly served to exploit smaller, but artistically more or less advanced productions (which could not be commercially exploited in the urban centres for runs of several weeks) and repositioned the role and importance of such events in South Africa. A key role in this new wave was played by the concerted efforts of numerous arts organisations to uphold and support the Boer language, Afrikaans. Therefore, in the second half of the 1990s there

were two factors that came together and led to the establishment of a number of festivals (cf. *ibid.*: 90f.). The movement gained particular momentum with the founding of the Stigtingvir Afrikaans, the Foundation for the Afrikaans Language, which was tasked with generating funding and spending it on the promotion of Afrikaans (cf. Hauptfleisch 1997: 165). This led to the foundation of the KKNK, the Little Karoo National Arts Festival, in Oudtshoorn in 1995, followed by the Aardklop Nasionale Kunstefees (Earth-Beat National Arts Festival) in Potchefstroom, the Afrikaanse Woordfees (Afrikaans Word Festival) in Stellenbosch and many more. However, these festivals tended to attract mainly White South Africans, and particularly Afrikaans-speaking Boers. This was noted by Mokong Simon Mapadimeng in 2013, when he wrote: “Arts festivals too still occur largely on racial lines which in turn limits opportunities for interracial dialogue. They remain largely racially divided and less integrated as the predominantly white Afrikaans festivals [...]; the predominantly Black African festivals [...]” (Mapadimeng 2013: 69; 79) He mentions the traditional National Arts Festival of Grahamstown and the Cape Town International Jazz Festival as being some of the few festivals that attract mixed audiences. “These festivals are elite in nature as they are not easily accessible to economically marginalised ordinary South Africans.” (*Ibid.*) But he fails to explain why these particular ‘elite festivals’ tend to attract a more mixed audience.

### **Rainbow audiences?**

My own observations during repeated visits over several days to Grahamstown suggest that the audience structure of the individual events depends very much on what is on offer. The audience at the huge Fringe and Community Theatre Festival, which takes place in Grahamstown alongside the actual, interdisciplinary main programme, is usually not mixed. This festival runs along the same lines as the Edinburgh Fringe. In principle, anyone can rent a venue and perform whatever they want. So the programme is anything but elitist, and the audience acts in a strictly affirmative way along racial lines.

The situation is different with the relatively limited selection of events on offer in the official programme of the National Arts Festival. Here, too, it can be seen that a Black director and author’s theatre performance with a company of this kind tends to be more popular with a coloured audience than a ballet performance by the Cape Town City Ballet, for example. Nevertheless, the proportion of people with a ‘different’ skin colour is significantly higher, which may actually be due to the fact that these are hand-picked, prominent artists or companies that are perceived as relevant by an educated White, Coloured and Black audience that can afford the ticket prices.

The reasons for this audience behaviour have little to do with the theatre, but more with the overall social context. Mapadimeng also mentions this, citing

general legislation such as the Employment Equity Act and the Skills Development Act, which, however, have had limited results. He goes on to explain that: “[...] the economy still remains by and large white owned and controlled. [...] [R]ace remains not only the aspect of identity but also the key marker of socio-economic and political inequality” (Mapadimeng 2013: 69 f.).

The fact that the composition of the audience is also affected by this comes down to economic reasons, as Mapadimeng explains. Since the end of apartheid, residential areas have remained divided along racial lines, particularly because many Blacks cannot afford to move away from their traditional residential districts. Mapadimeng adds: “In places where black Africans reside, the infrastructure for cultural and artistic activities such as community theatres, dance studios and company arts centres are underdeveloped” (ibid.: 69; 75) – apart from a few rare exceptions. This concerns both the infrastructure for professional or semi-professional artistic activities and the access of large sections of the Black population to art. The change in the balance of power in theatre management and in the management of the major theatres is also progressing so slowly (even to this day) that at the prestigious Naledi Awards ceremony in 2008 (South Africa’s ‘theatre Oscars’), *Lion King* composer Lebo M. Morake went on the attack, calling the theatre industry “untransformed” and dominated by Whites (cf. ibid.: 69; 77). This stirred up a great deal of controversy, but little changed.

### Changing the system

If theatres are to attract audiences, they have to respond to their needs – this is one of the guiding principles of the State Theatre in Pretoria. Its long-time director Aubrey Sekhabi cites the example of how the theatre regularly schedules matinée performances (not only for school classes), because for many Black residents of distant townships, access to culture is limited to the city centres. Poor or non-existent local public transport connections in the evenings and high crime rates mean that it is important for many Black audience members to be able to travel home in daylight, as their journeys often take two hours or more.

“What has really changed?” asked Aubrey Sekhabi in his aforementioned opening speech at the *Theatre in Transformation* conference: “A lot has changed. Today you come to the theatre and you can see that from 10 o’clock there has been activity.” He went on to mention four shows being held at the State Theatre at different times for different target audiences on that day, Friday 11th March 2016, including two school performances for some 1,200 schoolchildren. “That is the theatre that is really working. [...] How many people are writing about it? And why has nothing been written about it?” Here, Sekhabi highlights the need to take stock of a slow process that may be taken for granted by those

who work within these structures. This is precisely the starting point for this discourse – taking a step back and taking stock, almost 25 years after the first free, secret and equal elections in South Africa. What has changed in South African theatre since then? How have its structures developed? Have things actually moved on more than many people realise? Or is the South African theatre scene still lagging behind the development of society as a whole, as some commentators suggested after the controversy stirred up at the Naledi Awards in June 2008?

*Translated into English by Gill McKay.*

Unless otherwise referenced, quotes are taken from panel discussions at the *Theatre in Transformation* conference held in Pretoria from 11 – 13 March 2016.

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