

**"O, GO PLAY SOMEWHERE - AND STOP BOTHERING US!":
ON THE (IR)RELEVANCE OF THEATRE AND THE PERFORMING ARTS IN
ECONOMIC SOCIETY.**

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The State, Civil Society and Theatre in South Africa

In the run up to the Mandela/De Klerk "new" South Africa of the 1990's one of the strongest lobbies for immediate and radical change in governmental spending was one which sought to get the state to remove (or at least comprehensively change) the 40-year-old state funded structures for the performing arts inherited from the Apartheid regime. The reasoning appeared sound and legitimate at the time: those structures had been set up to benefit and enhance elitist, European style art forms for the white minority. For almost 30 of the 40 years those state interventions were almost *exclusively* intended to benefit the white segment of the population and those art forms imported by the colonial powers! Fundamental to this funding though was the generally held notion that artists and the arts in general are esoteric and delicate creatures needing to be nurtured and supported.

The notion of patronage is an old one of course, already well established in ancient times in all cultures and naturally enough features greatly in all the twentieth century literature on the economics of the arts. Questions such as "how much money is needed for what?", "how to get it?", "from whom?", "in what form?", "by what means?", "with what controls?", etc. are core issues. (See *References* below for some of the standard works in this respect - there are many more.) One of the core themes here is the magic 4% figure - representing the average percentage of people who appear to be *serious theatregoers* in virtually all countries¹. (In their 1983 book Kamermann and Martorella for example have a wide ranging overview on based on a range of European and American surveys over many years. A South Africa survey in 1983 (reported in Hauptfleisch, 1987, 1997) largely confirmed this for the Western-oriented segments of the population.

These ideas have led to large scale adopting of state interventionist funding by governments in most countries - some more than others. South Africa indeed was the first country in the British Commonwealth to achieve this, with the founding of the *National Theatre Organization* in 1948 with a modest subsidy from the old Jan Smuts government (then in its final hours). Later (1962), when this single, rather modest project was replaced by the far more expansive system of four regional *Performing Arts Councils*, one for each province, the funding became much more direct and even quite lavish, as did the new theatre spaces provided for them. What is of course not always noticed is that a very large number of *other* companies thrived and *other* activities took place in those forty years, without such state funding. They either "went commercial" and cross-subsidized "serious" work with more profitable money spinners like drawing room comedies, musicals, or thrillers and detective yarns. Alternatively they got targeted

political or commercial sponsorship for largely activist political work at places like the Market Theatre. The latter in particular were indignant about their exclusion from state funding.

Towards a New Dispensation

So during the run-up to 1994 the lobbyists² fought to change the state system. What they wanted in the place of it was some kind of objective, arms-length funding, represented at the time by the dream of an encompassing *National Arts Council*, which would ensure that *all* the citizens (i.e. all the theatre and performing companies) could have (equal) access state funding. And this they got in the form of the 1996 *White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage* and the *National Arts Council Act* of 1997.

But lo, it appears now that they were not happy. For everyone, to their horror, found that the prize came at an enormous cost. It became clear to performers and artists in particular that the government had its own, very pragmatic, agenda: it primarily wanted to cut expenses in every conceivable field, redistribute the available money, and use it for more strategic and immediate purposes - such as social services, job creation, education, housing and medical services. Their arguments too were sound and legitimate, if you looked at it coldly: the country that the ANC and its affiliates had inherited from the Nationalist party in 1994 was far from solvent (decimated by years of bizarre political ideological priorities, profligate but skewed spending, civil war and sanctions), poverty, joblessness, malnutrition, illness and illiteracy were widespread and of major concern, and there was an urgent political imperative to rapidly redress the socio-political and economic imbalances in the country. An obvious place to cut costs appeared to be in the more frivolous areas of state funding, such as the arts.

Given these conditions, the new arts dispensation would provide approximately the same funding - but earmarked now for *all* art forms - newly including fine arts, crafts and heritage! In effect, therefore, everyone got far less than before and the existing major theatre centres built by the state had to be rationalized in terms of staffing, facilities, running costs, etc.³

So the lobbyists found themselves at the barricades once more.

Where has it gone wrong?

The original arguments for the state funding and the kind of state expenditure on the arts have - from the very beginning - been based on what was basically a strong but fundamentally *emotive* argument urging that "art" has an enormous cultural and possibly social value for the individual, for communities and for a nation. In the wake of the ostensible success of the "cultural struggle" the very powerful, but constantly debated, educational and developmental potential of theatre and theatre techniques was advanced as an argument for the defense⁴. All these arguments are being trotted out again, but they hardly carry any weight against arguments for priority spending in the areas of employment, housing, health, education, fiscal growth, etc, do they? Can anyone actually

justify looking a starving child or a dying patient in an under-equipped hospital in the eye and saying "I would rather fund a play"?

The counter argument has largely been that humankind cannot live of bread (and antibiotics) alone, but that there is a death of spirit to be guarded against as well. And this is most certainly true, this needs to be argued and fought for certainly. However, the emotive argument alone cannot counter the pragmatism and statistics of the bean-counters who hold the purse-strings. And - I would argue - **it need not.**

What can be done?

The fact is, if all theatre practitioners can come up with are arguments in terms of their own ideological position and own way of perceiving the world, in a language that only they understand, they are always going to struggle to be heard in the sound and fury of the economic battleground. The simple truth is that *if you want someone's money, you must argue in terms that person can understand.* And if you are not going to rob them at gunpoint you need to have arguments that they will understand *and share* - or at the very least *accept*. Every marketing person, every financier and every confidence trickster knows this fundamental rule. So do the more independent theatre companies.

Is there a way one may sell the performing arts to government and other sponsors in this this fashion? Yes, I think there is. And I do not think one need betray one's artistic principles or prostitute your genius to do so.

There are a number of reasons why the government may fund art. Let us consider just two. What I might call "art for art's sake" funding as opposed to "art for the good of the community" funding. The two are not mutually exclusive at all, rather they may be seen as complementary. But they do draw different supporters and make different points about the nature of art. The first approach would be intended to set up facilities and set in motion procedures to create artistic geniuses who would bring renown to the country. (The oft quoted example here is the Australian film industry or our own South African "development programmes" in sport.) And the government has inherited many of these things (a wide-spread, albeit skewed, arts infrastructure, training institutions, complex but flawed funding procedures, etc.). This is of course where the emotive argument is most telling. The very existence of individuals such as Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard, Mbongeni Ngema, Miriam Makeba, Abdullah Ibrahim or William Kentridge *must* suggest that the country has a soul, that it is somehow to be reckoned with. So too the success of the Grahamstown Arts Festival and the Market Theatre. But then, is this kind of argument acceptable from a pragmatist economists point of view, would the activities in question and the gains to be had be considered a socio-economic priority in these times?

The other reason which may be advanced for supporting the arts would be if it could be shown that promoting the arts would bring some kind of "real" return in terms of the government's own long term social, economic and political goals. And this brings me to what has, for too long, been the forgotten or marginalized argument in our battle for

existence. The argument that *the arts industry is far larger, more widely and deeply entrenched in the socio-economic fabric of the country than is commonly admitted*. That it in fact constitutes a vast, dynamic and crucial economic factor in the larger social system in South Africa. To use this argument effectively would of course require that we do our homework and truly determine what the economic real and full impact of the arts industry is. And by this I mean we need to undertake substantial and rigorously scientific impact assessment which can provide us with "hard figures" to back up our more philosophical arguments.

The economics of the arts industry

If one considers a larger, somewhat expanded interpretation of the concept "arts industry", then there are clearly areas of it which are totally self-sufficient and highly profitable - the marketing and advertising industry to name but one, while there are others that battle constantly (such as the live theatre industry). The fact is the industry as a whole is large and wide-spread, while also being made up of numerous interrelated and interdependent entities. And what makes it particularly unique is the fact that there are many elements in the system which are absolutely essential to the whole, but are always dependent, unable to function independently. To take one specific example: the Breughel Theatre Company in Stellenbosch is an old and established community theatre company which has been leading a struggling existence for more than two decades. It cannot (and has never been able to) function without state, provincial and/or town intervention. So, by all counts it is an "unprofitable" exercise. Yet, every Breughel production employs 8-12 young theatre workers for two to three months. Through its productions numerous young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have gained experience and moved on to profitable and celebrated roles on stage, radio, TV and film, as well as jobs in a variety of other "performance" based disciplines. Again becoming part of the larger industry of which the Breughel is a small but intrinsic part.

The mistake in the past has been to fragment the industry and argue for segments of it rather for the industry as a whole. We need to alter that perspective. One way is to consider the way the marketing and advertising industries - which rely heavily on the arts for its processes, function. They are - as I've said - independent, dynamic and hugely profitable enterprises (particularly when compared to something like the Breughel), with an enormous influence on the economy, job creation, etc. However, a large component of the staff they utilize to achieve this have actually been trained for other artistic endeavours, by formal schools, technikons and universities, amateur and community companies, and other apprenticeships. All of it done with an (inadequate) sponsorship from the state - because the training in the arts is by its very nature *individualized*, hence intensive and viewed as very "expensive" by educational authorities and institutions. (In recent years for example three drama departments have been closed down for being too expensive, while most others have been radically scaled down.)

The thing is drama, music and art departments train "artists" which the government feels are intended for a smallish industry which has to be sponsored to stay alive. But this is false: the training is highly transferable (more so than many other skills in fact) and the

majority of those graduates actually end up in other, labour intensive but very profitable jobs - such as tourism, media, marketing and advertising. So one may well ask: Why are the tourism, media, marketing and advertising industries not paying something towards the training? They in turn may argue that they *do*, through their taxes - but that taxes are not earmarked, but are pooled by the state and then redistributed according to its own priorities of the particular moment. Priorities which do not recognize the central role the arts may play in many of those priorities: *inter alia* in communication, literacy, education, health, job-creation.

Towards an impact study of the arts

So, what we need to do is to undertake a formal audit of the socio-economic *impact* of the arts industry in any country. This has not yet been done in any comprehensive fashion, for a very simple reason. All artists have always bought into the dominant fiction that the arts are economically insignificant, that they are a luxury and elitist activity and hence a burden on any state committed to the weal of all its people. Or alternatively - if a process of creation *is* lucrative or economically viable - it is viewed as being somehow tainted, commercial and thus inferior. Indeed we as artists and arts administrators, critics and academics have helped this along by splitting our forces so horribly, by our own elitist tendencies and the almost fanatic belief in the individualism of the reclusive, difficult and idiosyncratic artist, inherited from the romantic movement. (This of course is rather alien to African arts, but let us leave that for a moment.)

To illustrate the principle I am striving for, let us start by considering a rather obvious example from the fine arts. If we say the state must support our master painters (i.e. our local "Leonardo", "Michaelangelo" or "Picasso"), merely because they *are* geniuses and are therefore contributing significantly to the cultural and spiritual value of the nation and the world, it may sound elitist and excessive (who is to choose?). (Of course there are countries - such as Japan - that actually do this through their system of "Living Treasures", and that is wonderful!). But if you think about it, every Picasso "masterpiece" actually represents the culminating point of a whole series of production processes, of an *industry*, made up of numerous smaller processes, involving many hands, a range of creative insight and physical endeavour, and a measurable quantity of material. Producing one work could have involved the participation of *inter alia* farmers (producing the materials to produce canvasses, brushes, palettes, easels, frames, etc), canvas makers, carpenters making easels, etc, paint and pigment makers, framers, art teachers, art dealers, gallery owners, copiers, cleaners, setters, printers, bookbinders, photographers, critics, arts editors, and so on. Thus every Picasso painting may imply the active (direct and indirect) engagement of a substantial workforce of people - even if only for a fraction of their time - in the production and sale of the final product and the many subsidiary activities that result (prints, books, etc). If one looks at it in this way, then the argument that *art* is irrelevant to society becomes far less persuasive. For the industry does not only maintain *one* Picasso but many, since every Picasso would also inspire a large number of others to paint (from dabblers and rank amateurs, street artists and trainee artists to commercial artists, designers and highly professional master artists, and the odd genius) and would thus further activate and maintain the sustaining the "arts

industry" - which in its turn would generate much revenue and job opportunities. In an ideal world this could already assure a more healthy economy and ultimately a satisfied government.

Thus far we have only looked at painters in the formal "art" world. But there is far more to art than that: There are a range of other, related industries that utilize the skills of trained painters and designers. Illustration, industrial design, architecture, photography, publication, marketing, television, film, the internet, etc. are all heavily dependent on visual design and communication for what they do: hence the need for the trained artist as worker. And these are highly profitable enterprises, unthinkable without the input of the "useless" master artist. Thus the artist has a specific and significant and measurable economic impact, besides his/her artistic function in the particular industry. But it has not, to my knowledge, actually been measured yet.

When we move back to my field of expertise and do the above exercise for the production of a play⁵ or a theatrical event of some kind, we find ourselves confronting and even more complex and interesting phenomenon. The art form itself is already eclectic, complex and widespread, utilizing far bigger range of basic products and processes as it creates its own "product": the "performance" or "event"⁷. Itself a mix of so many "arts" - of the word, the voice, the body-in-motion, design, sound, light, etc, all the skills utilized by the theatre practitioner⁶ - theatre also comes in a number of forms and applications in contemporary society, depending on the aims of the project, the space and "technology" utilized, and the nature of the society and audience. Theatre (or theatre style techniques) are found in the street, on stage, radio, film, TV, and in the classroom, lecture room or sales hall, and people with theatrical skills make up the workforce of virtually any industry one can think of . The possible permutations are enormous.

Now in an earlier publication (Hauptfleisch 1997) I used a transactional communications model in devising a diagram to illustrate the creative and other processes involved in making theatre (other have often done so too, often for purposes of semiotic analysis etc. - Keir Elam, Patrice Pavis, JL Styan etc. come to mind). However, here I want to assume we all know the processes of making a text and putting it on stage/film or radio. What I want to consider are the linked industries brought into play to produce the products and equipment necessary to make a play happen, and the processes and activities require to activate it in the public mind.

I would like to do this by means of a simple diagram, which I hope will at least illustrate some of the implications of this argument.

Figure 1: DIAGRAM OF INDUSTRIES INVOLVED IN A THEATRICAL EVENT

← MEDIUM →

Tools, equipment, companies utilized ↓	Stage play	Television	Industrial theatre	Radio
1. Paper	X	X	X	X
2. Copying	X	X	X	X
3. Paint	X	X	O	O
4. Sound equipment etc	X	X	X	X
5. Lighting	X	X	X	O
6. Computers	X	X	X	X
7. Textiles	X	X	X	
8. Legal services	X	X	X	X
9. Electricity	X	X	X?	X

If we let the horizontal axis represent all the fields in which one may be said to be creating a single, one-off (theatrical) event and the vertical axis all the products of significant production processes / industries involved in making just one event occur in each case, one might just get some idea of the range of human involvement in "making theatre" on one day. In the sample diagram above I have only taken four fields on the horizontal axis, and nine examples on the vertical axis, for there are myriads, of course.

Now the important thing to remember is that if this were one event in each category happening once, we already have NINE industries involved in four fields. Consider the amount of money and labour involved? The work in the nine fields happens *because of the needs of the four fields*. Now multiply this by the number of hours some of these fields operate. In the case of radio and TV we may think of 24 hours **per day**, 365 days per year per radio or TV station. In the case of South African theatre for instance, there are 30 odd festivals in the country, plus hundreds of venues in all the cities and towns of the country. In the case of industrial theatre the calculation becomes almost imponderable. In all thus we have a vast field of potentially empowering industries involved in the production of a theatrical event, all implying hours of labour earning money!

Conclusion:

What I have sought to show was quite simply that the arts industry in general, and even the theatre industry (in its broader sense) is being totally short-changed by government

and the economic planners who determine subsidies, support systems etc. And it is something that needs to be addressed, by breaking out of our meek acceptance of our "inferior" role, and accepting the status of the arts as (part of) a significant industry, as something which has *not only* immense cultural and spiritual value, but *also* has very real economic muscle - muscle which is quite simply not flexed often enough. A thorough audit of the potential impact of the arts would, I believe, be a very good beginning.

NOTES:

- 1 Of course most of this is highly questionable, often based on varying questions and a variety of self-assessment measures to determine the meaning of "regular theatregoer". Also, the percentages actually range between everything from as low as 2% to about 11 % in one or two cases. However, on average, with most countries in the world it tends to settle nearer the 4-6% mark. An interesting exception occurred in South Africa which tends to demonstrate the care with which such statistics have to be read and also links into the point being made in this essay. In this case the survey (like almost everything in the country at the time) was undertaken separately for the various "population groups". For the "white", "coloured" and "asian" groups the average was the standard 3-4% . For the "black" (urban) population though it was an astronomical 20%! The answer eventually seemed to be partly the result of the language (formal English) used in the questionnaire: the term *theatre* was apparently interpreted as *any* kind of performance - from formal theatre to street dancing, jazz music, or storytelling. Also, the notion of "regular theatre goer" is always open to interpretation.
- 2 There was a strong movement in the late 1980's, led by people like Mike van Graan, which culminated in a national initiative dubbed *Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG)*, which was to do most of the real running and advised and assisted the government in drawing up its White Paper for the Arts in 1996.
- 3 I shall not go into the problems of implementation that arose afterwards, and the enormous dissatisfaction there. That is an issue for another article. For some hugely entertaining and valuable information on this, read the ongoing commentaries of PANSAs chair Mike van Graan in his provocative agit-sheet/e-journal *The Cultural Weapon*. A recent debate, sponsored by PANSAs at Spier (22-24 February, 2002), had the new director for Arts and Culture in the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology on the panel. His presence highlighted the problems, gave a clear idea of the decimation of the structural resources of the state through an uninformed policy, reiterated the need for rethinking the way we think about and argue for the role of the arts, and demonstrated the need for an ongoing forum for debate and negotiation.

- 4 A strong argument for this has been the enormous growth in the Industrial Theatre field, i.e. the acceptance of the value of theatre by hard-nosed businessmen and bureaucrats. However, while government departments and businesses seem to be very fond of using such companies and their skills at present, the real impact and efficacy of this form of theatre has not yet been effectively tested and documented. At least not in South Africa. In terms of the central argument of this article, I believe it ought to be.
- 5 When I talk of a "play" here, I refer to any kind of theatrical event or staged performance, not necessarily a traditional European style performance on a stage in a formal theatre. However, explaining the nature of performance and the theatrical event in its broader application to economists and/or bureaucrats is another ceiling of incomprehension yet to be breached. So let us talk of a play for the moment.
- 6 Theatre practitioner: I use this word to refer to anyone involved in the making of a performance or event, to avoid having to name the range of people involved every time. What is said here more often than not would be true whether the person spoken about were a writer, director, choreographer, voice coach, performer, dancer, musician, designer, technician, stage manager, or anything else.

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