



## African Abstract

*Excerpts from the 1976 International Symposium of the South African Institute of Theatre Technology (SAITT) held at the Civic Theatre Johannesburg last August.*

### Mannine Manim

Theatre of any country has been described as a mirror of the people and their culture, and it is in this area that our theatre is still an infant: an energetic, mewling and sometimes puking infant. But each passing day it is gaining strength and momentum. I am referring, of course, to our own playwrights, actors, designers, directors and technicians. The last 10 years has been an exciting time for our theatre, with proof being shown that South African playwrights can write commercially viable plays, particularly Blacks and Afrikaners.

### Anthony Farmer

All managements, particularly commercial ones because of the cost, seem to be completely ignorant of the importance of stage staff. The question is always "Do you really need that many?" when you've just asked for the minimum. I think it is because they are never seen by the paying customers and always are asking for more time to use the stage. Time—that is another problem. Actors are given weeks to sort themselves out and stop bumping into the furniture, but a stage crew is expected to get a mammoth show set, lit and running virtually overnight and woe betide any stage hand who accidentally runs a piece of scenery into an artist.

It really seems to me that the majority of people who control the destiny of the theatre do not, or will not, face up to the fact that it is an industry like any other and must run as such. It is easy to say, "You can't get good people to work in the theatre". Of course not, when there is no hope of reward. There will always be the few theatre-mad hippie types who sleep in odd corners of the auditorium, eat hamburgers continually, and then press the wrong button at the wrong time and ruin everything; but this is not good enough. Until the time comes when a *show does not go on* because the technicians have finally decided they've had enough and refuse to work under the rotten conditions given them, I cannot see managements changing.

The theme song of the theatre is surely "Promises, Promises" because that's exactly

what it lives on—*promises*. Promises that the sets will be ready on time. Promises that time will be allowed for technical rehearsals and Promises that a full staff will be provided.

### Dennis Schaffer

In a sense, of course, all new forms of theatre are *experimental* and in this particular sense the history of the theatre is a history of successful experiments. Of all the countless productions there have ever been, many have been well written, well acted, well directed, financially successful, socially popular—and forgotten within a few years. On the other hand there have been productions which, in their day, were rejected by all but the very few—and still found their way, in time, into the pages of theatrical history. Theatrical history focuses upon experiments that have been significant by the virtue of the fact that they have led the theatre beyond the narrower confines of what it was at the time. In common with all artists, theatre artists have very often been rejected because their attempts to lead an appreciation beyond the known have been seen as dangerous, pretentious, or subversive challenges to the *status quo*.

### Dorothy Tenham

Teaching where I do, I often hear sweeping statements made about the value of formal teaching for actors. "Acting can't be taught." "Actors are born, not made." There is a half-truth in these statements which also applies to good staff. Actors *can* be taught the technique of their craft; stage management, property makers, wardrobe staff, lighting designers, electricians, and carpenters can all be taught the technicalities of theatre work. If none of these craftsmen have the personality and gifts necessary to bridge the gap between the hard facts of their trade and the much softer compromises of working in a *people industry*, then they will remain for ever more "good technicians" rather than "good theatre craftsmen". To help the trainee towards bridging the gap requires the facilities of a theatre environ-

ment. The trainee should not be taught in splendid isolation during his entire training period. Ideally, he requires a full working theatre which has frequent changes of programmes playing to a paying public. The more varied the programme, the more comprehensive the training will be.

... there is no substitute for learning—and the practical application of the knowledge—in a realistic situation. There is no substitute for taking down intelligibly a fast moving and complicated piece of blocking with actors and director and then having to refer to it moments later when the scene is re-run on the rehearsal room floor and actors have lost their way. There is no substitute for a director sitting next to you, making noises like a dawn chorus and never mentioning it again until he wonders why you left it off the sound tape! There is no substitute for learning how actors pause, need prompting, need calling. All this must be done with actors present and in a true situation if the theory is to become a craft.

... Over the years I have found that the main problem in planning a training course for theatre staff is not what to teach, but what may be safely left out. Isolated in a purely training environment, it would be easy to go on teaching for ever. I think it is as important to teach students how to go on learning from a normal theatre environment as it is important to teach them the theory in a classroom.

### Jan Nel

So much time and money is wasted by chasing architects through overseas countries on a rat race from theatre to theatre—sometimes at a rate of up to six theatres a day—in order to make notes on how to build a theatre. It must be very confusing and frustrating trying to combine all the outstanding bits and pieces of different theatres into one new marvellous theatre.

### Mannie Manim

To spend one's life behind the safe contracts and the aesthetic values of state-run subsidised theatre; to be anaesthetised to small or empty houses by your pay packet at the end of the month; to be battered and bashed by bureaucracies attempting to run theatre companies, is to deny oneself if you are a theatre person of a great deal of the thrills of the profession which makes it really worthwhile.

### Helmut Grösser

Theatres being planned now must be planned for the future. Most of those theatres now existing in Europe, which were not destroyed in the last war, have been operating for about 60 or 80 years. To ensure that the theatres presently planned will be workable in the year 2050, they must be planned with that period of time in mind.