

**Educational Theatre at the Edge of the Crush.**  
**The Use of Theatre as Entertainment-Education in HIV  
and AIDS Awareness and Prevention in the South  
African Mining Sector – Opportunities for Change.**

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## **Introduction**

This paper will examine the first phase of research into the use of theatre-in-education on HIV and AIDS in the South African Mining Sector. The primary aim is to highlight the challenges that are facing HIV and AIDS theatre-in-education programmes and to explore the benefits of integrating cultural studies and theory into the design and implementation of the programme. It looks at the audience as the primary recipient of information and as the force for change. The importance of the audience as primary informant to the programme is also discussed. The strength of political theatre and theatre-for-development used in South Africa during apartheid is juxtaposed against the new 'oppression' that HIV and AIDS is imposing on its society.

### **South Africa, Democracy, AIDS and Theatre.**

What is the significance of theatre as a form of entertainment-education in a country with one of the highest HIV infection rates in the world? How successful have HIV and AIDS entertainment-education - and in this case, theatre-in-education programmes - been in a country where mortality due to AIDS is now coupled with rising new infection rates? The 'effectiveness' of live theatre as a spectacular conduit for information dissemination, protest, social change and reflection has been even more spectacularly upstaged by HIV and AIDS.

Theatre as a form of political protest in South Africa was impressive in its manifestation of social change in a pre-democratic South Africa. It displayed the ability of South African writers, directors and performers as a force for change in reflecting social inequalities, discrimination and the infringement of basic human rights. Apart from highlighting these pertinent issues, theatre also portrayed a country that could look past the undemocratic state of affairs and illustrate the reality of a nation living as one. This political form of theatre for development capitalised on the passion and anger of the communities it

represented and challenged social and political structures in an aim to mobilise civil society against oppression.

The change that was fought for and the change that seemed inevitable did come. Freedom post-1994, however, created new challenges for a fledgling democracy and catapulted not only a developing country, but also a country with a newly established democracy, into one of the most challenging health crises that a nation at the seams of reconstruction can face. Not only did South Africa need to rectify the inequalities caused by the prior government, but it also had to cope with the growing HIV and AIDS epidemic that was fuelled by the legacy of Apartheid.

At the birth of South Africa's democracy, other African countries were already responding to HIV and AIDS. Western Africa was already in the midst of the HIV and AIDS crisis and the governments of some of these countries, most noticeably Uganda, were reacting to the epidemic with political, religious, cultural and social vigour. Cultural forms of communication; dance, music and drama were already used as supplementary tools in education, creating awareness surrounding the risks of HIV infection and what appears today as a social transformation in re-thinking sexual behaviour in a time of HIV and AIDS. (Sicherman, 1999). The implementation of these artistic-cultural forms were used by International Development agencies with success, using inherently familiar cultural forms to introduce a concept that was foreign and could be deemed as western propaganda, as it is often seen amongst certain groups in South Africa today.

Theatre has inherent strengths as a medium for education. Generic advantages often listed include:

- Theatre's ability to involve direct interaction;
- Theatre's participatory elements that encourage dialogue and thus a better understanding of factual information dissemination;
- Theatre allows audiences the potential to be drawn into the message making process and offers the potential for behaviour change. (Parker, *et al*, 1998).

Considering the benefits of drama and theatre in education, South Africa also reacted - with drama and scandal in the form of *Sarafina II*. A new musical, ideally the sequel to the anti-apartheid-liberation struggle masterpiece of Mbongeni Ngema. It seemed picture perfect in many ways. The artistic-cultural weapon used in pre-democratic South Africa with great effect was now again to be used in the new struggle, the fight against the scourge of HIV and AIDS. The nation, and more specifically the youth, would watch the performance, experience the utmost height of catharsis, and react to the threat of HIV and AIDS. In this act however, history was not to repeat itself. Theatre critics, psychologists, health care workers and the NGO sector vilified the production and it suffered the worst curtain call any play could ever encounter.

In many ways, the implementation of *Sarafina II* personified the South African response to HIV and AIDS at the time. It was re-active rather than pro-active. Apart from the apparent mismanagement of government and international donor funding it illustrated the lack of proper understanding of and research into the implications and complications that HIV and AIDS imposed on South Africa. (Marais, 2000). It marginalized HIV and AIDS into a communicable, sexually transmitted disease that could be stopped in its tracks with messages of prevention and a sense of Ubuntu.<sup>1</sup> This, with hindsight, was and remains unsuccessful.

### **Challenging AIDS, Challenging Theatre.**

Over twenty years into the epidemic, South African theatre-in-education organisations still does not seem to be challenging the status quo. HIV and AIDS is not purely a bio-medical issue and it is simply not *just* a prevention issue anymore. We are merely accepting that the spread of HIV and AIDS can be stopped through generalised messages of change regarding sexual behaviour with the common ABC-scripts (Abstinence, Be Faithful and

Condomise) prevalent in awareness and prevention campaigns and communicated through theatre as its vehicle of dissemination.

Relying too heavily on its artistic and creative abilities to educate, theatre-in-education in South Africa seems to be content with its position as a vehicle for information dissemination and does not consider its ability to utterly involve itself as a powerful medium for change that political theatre and theatre-for-development achieved in pre-democratic South Africa.

In South Africa many organisations have been using theatre to educate about HIV and AIDS, yet we still have rising rates of infection, rising prevalence rates and rising HIV and AIDS related mortality.<sup>2</sup> We now need to understand how theatre and specifically theatre-in-education will benefit and survive in a country and in a society living in the epicentre of an epidemic. What is *this* theatre's role in such a society and what is the role of the key stakeholders; writers, producers, directors and actors within this dynamic? Can we create a new theatre of responsibility that engages with a society living through an epidemic?

If theatre-in-education in the newly democratic South Africa – a country in the midst of an epidemic of complicated and challenging social, economic, political and cultural repercussions – wants to contribute to meaningfully educating audiences about HIV and AIDS, it needs to place itself in the realm of cultural studies where: "...it attempts to challenge and surpass the various crises of modern day life without assembling the same patterns and structures as those originally interrogated and dismantled" (Berry, 2000).

When we reflect on South African research and academic papers on the subject we are offered a variety of examples on how theatre and the arts have been utilised in HIV and AIDS education.<sup>3</sup> Veronica Baxter (2000) calls for: "*more research into the methodology... of participatory theatre and the development of cogent research tools to demonstrate the effectiveness*" of this method. Baxter also mentions that it is very difficult to '*satisfy everybody all the time*' since there is a wide range of stakeholders participating in the

design of the theatre-in-education programmes. However, since the audience (as the main 'recipient' of information) is the key implementer of change, should they not become the ultimate focus of these programmes?

When we know that theatre has an advantage over other educational forms in effectively disseminating information, why are we still searching for research tools to demonstrate its effectiveness? When we measure knowledge and attitudes before a performance and we measure the same after a performance, we will gain data on knowledge retention and an indication of the intention to change behaviour. We do not, however, have concrete evidence of behaviour change. We need to move beyond trying to prove theatre-in-education's effectiveness in knowledge retention and explore its ability to mobilise communities to change by challenging existing practises and norms that fuel the multi-dimensional spread and impact of HIV and AIDS, such as gender, poverty, nutrition and human rights to name a few.

Why are we still seeking buy-in and a justification of theatre-in-education, when HIV and AIDS is offering theatre-in-education practitioners a fascinating challenge and opportunity to explore how audiences are reacting to and perceiving our programmes?

Once we explore these dynamics we will have a better understanding of how we can change theatre to address the needs of society or a specific community, and thus contribute to the knowledge generation and to more effective implementation. Theatre-in-education has as much to learn from its audiences, as its audiences have to learn from it. Even so, theatre-in-education in South Africa may not be as successful as it was in Uganda in the fight against HIV and AIDS, since South Africa is not a homogenous cultural society and here the need to integrate theatre-in-education into a form of cultural studies becomes apparent.

The 2002 Nelson Mandela/Human Sciences Research Council Report on the prevalence of HIV and AIDS in South Africa mentioned that:

*With regard to behavioural interventions, there is concern about generalising of assumptions of risk, and homogenising of target audiences. Behaviour change approaches driven by high intensity mass media interventions that involve homogenising target audiences, seldom take into account differences in language, culture and socio-economic contexts. In addition, such approaches tend to be strongly oriented towards persuasive communication messaging, often under the banner of 'behaviour change', and make little allowance for the endorsement of already appropriate behaviours and practices. Messaging may also only resonate with a small sub-section of the intended target audience. (HSRC, 2002).*

A growing number of social scientists also believe that this approach is far more effective in HIV and AIDS prevention programmes. Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala, head of the Anthropology Programme at the University of Natal, also mentions that unless these prevention programmes target the micro and macro environments in which risky sexual behaviour takes place, prevention programmes of the highest standards will be rendered ineffective (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002).

Also, Gay Morris illustrates how a reluctance to identify the needs of particular audiences in theatre in education may render educational theatre ineffective. She illustrates how environmental issues (littering and pollution), generically applied to a certain age group, were inappropriate to specific groups targeted (Morris, 2002).

### **Steps towards a New Theatre: Theatre-in-education in the South African Mining Sector.**

The use of theatre-in-education in the South African mining sector offers prime examples of how the classic understanding and perception of theatre can be changed to suit the environment it will be utilised in. It also illustrates

the potential educational theatre has in incorporating cultural beliefs and traditions into the programme to challenge the patterns and structures that increase vulnerability to HIV and AIDS. It has the opportunity to become the new theatre-for-development that was used so successfully in a pre-democratic South Africa.

The South African mining sector has experienced the brunt of HIV and AIDS more than any other commercial sector. There is increasing recognition of the predisposed vulnerability of mobile populations to HIV and AIDS. Mineworkers, predominantly a migrant labour force in Southern Africa, are more at risk of being infected with HIV and AIDS. This is due to the fact that workers are usually young men (and increasingly also young women) from rural areas who find themselves in stressful and dangerous working conditions, and they usually live in same-sex hostels with easy access to transactional sex and alcohol (International Organisation for Migration, 2003).

The risk of these men becoming infected with HIV ranks as a very low priority in their social life, considering the fact that mineworkers face a one-in-forty chance of being killed on the job and that one-in-three stand a chance of suffering a reportable injury during a 20-year mining career (HEARD, [S.a]). The International Organisation for Migration has highlighted how these working and living conditions contribute to the workers' perceived lack of control over their own health and well-being. The legacy of apartheid also plays a significant role when evaluating the risk of these workers. Men were forced to leave their families to work on the mines, leaving behind single parent households, upsetting the notion of the traditional family. This disruption significantly contributed to the spread of HIV and AIDS.

On one typical South African mine you will find a hybrid of nationalities, cultures, languages and traditions – typical of what today is called 'the Rainbow Nation'. What many do not seem to take into consideration, or conveniently seem to forget is that under the banner of this Rainbow Nation are indeed social identities of culture (that cannot be oversimplified into a discourse of Rainbow Nationalism) that would not find generalised prevention

messages of HIV and AIDS effective and acceptable, regardless of how spectacular the vehicle of dissemination. In this case, one size definitely does not fit all.

Within this predicament lies the opportunity for theatre-in-education to change, to place cultural studies firmly within the design and implementation of such programmes and to learn how cultural strengths and traditions can be incorporated in change. Prentki (2001) illustrates such a process when discussing the power of theatre-for-development used as a voice for marginalized and closed communities in a pre-democratic South Africa.

Instead of merely handing out information on safer sexual practises and 'reflecting' on condom use, the challenge for theatre-in-education lies in unpacking restrictive cultural and environmental practises that are preventing change.

Through current research into the use of theatre-in-education in the South African mining cector, which attempts to gain a better understanding on how theatre is perceived by these audiences and by the educator-actors, interesting cultural and social restraints were highlighted. For instance, what the theatre programme should address, but also how theatre is being adapted to suit the socio-economic and cultural context of the mineworker.

In focus group discussions with peer-educators (that double as actors) in the Industrial Theatre programme of the Tau-Tona Mine in the North-West province of South Africa, it is clear that according to these educator-actors, theatre is effectively distributing information, but that the messages often become trapped in the cultural perceptions of the audience members. One respondent mentioned:

*Most of them, here in the mining industry, Africans, they do feel that a woman can't stand in front of them and speak about these things. After listening to them, they think these ladies are unrespectable. How can a lady, young as they are*

*come and stand in front of them and speak to them about HIV/AIDS?*

Not only does the above statement demonstrate how cultural beliefs can be oppressive in accepting information on HIV and AIDS, but it also illustrates how issues relating to gender need to be considered when designing and implementing an educational theatre programme. The educational theatre programme potentially alienated the audience with a woman showing men how to use a condom, instead of addressing and challenging gender inequalities and power relations in a constructive manner.

Another respondent also commented how the mineworkers generally perceive HIV and AIDS campaigns:

*If you can go now and go to the compound and maybe ask an old man, what do you think about AIDS, he is going to say AIDS is for the youth, we don't get AIDS. Because the people who were chosen to go to the front were youth, now it is like AIDS is for the youth, not us.*

HIV and AIDS prevention messages have been overwhelmingly focussed on the youth, disregarding the vulnerability of older persons to the extent that youth are suffering of "AIDS fatigue" and the older generation are not accepting their risk of being infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. In this instance theatre-in-education has seemingly contributed to this belief, by mainly targeting the younger generation and not reflecting on the voice of the older generation in the community.

Myths and misconceptions surrounding HIV infection are also rife in the mining community, as one male respondent mentioned when asked about the practise of men having sex with men in the mine hostels:

*Men having sex with another man, it is too difficult, because men will say to me, we get AIDS from women and not from*

*men. They've got that belief already. If you have sex with men inside (the hostel) you don't have a problem, but if you go outside, then you can get HIV and AIDS.*

Instead of engaging in this debate and showing the risk involved in such an activity and how precautions could be taken, the issue was merely discarded and not addressed as one of the realities that the community is grappling with.

These responses already identify negative cultural beliefs in the form of gender and perceived vulnerability that generalised HIV and AIDS theatre-in-education programmes will fail to address. The fact that there are also a significant number of mineworkers that are already HIV+ further confirms the need for theatre-in-education programmes to be more diverse in their messaging.

AngloGold was one of the first corporate companies to offer Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) services and Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy (HAART) to infected employees. Employees have, however, been reluctant to make use of these services due to the fear of stigma and discrimination. As one respondent explained:

*You know here in the mining industry, there is something, you know, they can see me doing something, maybe in town, once, but I can tell you, the following day the whole of Tau-Tona will know. That is why some people don't go there. So even if they see him going there, they'll think, oh he has AIDS. That's why maybe they don't go there. And the other one think, oh I don't know my status so I am fine, because if I know maybe I am HIV+, I am going to die and that thing of knowing that I am HIV, they already think I am going to die.*

And another responded:

*Some think they don't want to be tormented when they arrive. So they think, when I go there, I'm just going to be tormented and I am going to be depressed, how are my friends going to accept me, what about my family, what about the relatives, so they think if I can just keep quiet, if I don't test I won't know. So, it is better not to know.*

So powerful are these socio-cultural beliefs and manifestations around HIV and AIDS that people who are at risk of dying without treatment are not willing to access these treatments - even when they are presented free of charge in an environment considered to be free from discriminatory labour practises. Herein lies the possible strength of educational theatre to become a proactive agent for change when it is informed by cultural studies.

Berry (2000) explains the benefits of cultural studies to theatre as follows:

*They offer agency for variations on taken-for-granted cultural constructions that are marginalizing and exclusive of different voices, experiences and histories that do not fit with the dominant, powerful, colonial structures (such as institutions, representations, discourses) of everyday life.*

In an evaluation conducted to probe the effectiveness of a theatre-in-education programme in another Southern African mining company, the results were disappointing and reflected how theatre-in-education can impact negatively when it does not consider the cultural criteria and specific concerns of a community.<sup>4</sup> This once again raises serious doubts regarding the effectiveness of generalised HIV and AIDS prevention programmes using theatre.

The theatre-in-education programme mentioned above, addressed issues surrounding occupational safety and HIV and AIDS. Analysis of the results of the impact assessment showed that the programme actually reinforced or affirmed negative behaviour, such as: *"If I have HIV/AIDS I do not have to*

*wear a condom anymore*” and *“You only have to wear a condom when sleeping with prostitutes”* The biggest concern, however, was an increase in the belief that sleeping with a virgin would cure HIV and AIDS. Analysts directly linked this to the script where a character that slept with one partner without using a condom, did not get AIDS. This character’s girlfriend was continuously referred to as a *‘woman of virtue’*, and it is believed that the audience misinterpreted this expression.

Apart from the above-mentioned example, there are many other instances in which educational theatre programmes on HIV and AIDS did not consider the immediate reality of the environment and community they were performing in. Messages of doom and gloom related to HIV infection were the order of the day at two recent playmaking festivals in Gauteng, South Africa.<sup>5</sup> Plays about HIV and AIDS placed HIV infection in the paradigm of sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, blame and rejection. These plays certainly contained all the features of traditional morality plays, where vices and virtues were discarded by characters who suffered the utmost disgrace due to their immoral behaviour while the *‘pure’* were left to have pity on them.

In this instance, these plays re-affirmed stigma and discrimination and certainly did not consider South African statistics which indicate that one in every nine of the audience was possibly already living with HIV or AIDS. Such programmes build on the restrictions and beliefs that HIV and AIDS impose on South African society. Where theatre could act as a power vehicle for change and challenge it becomes a theatre of irresponsibility and loses its credibility.

When examining the AngloGold educational theatre programme at the Tau-Tona mine, it also offers hints of how theatre as we know it, or feel comfortable with, has changed or been adapted to better suit the community it functions within. Peer educators that have been trained in HIV and AIDS education and facilitation with no previous acting experience become actors through minimal guidance and training in formal acting principles and disciplines. It builds on the concept of actor-educators. Through this, the

actor-educators become role-models and quasi-celebrities in their working communities.

This interesting development moves away from the traditional actor-as-educator and moves towards an educator-as-actor transformation about which the peer educators at the Tau-Tona mine felt very comfortable and passionate. The respondents indicated that co-workers felt comfortable in approaching them after shows and discussing HIV and AIDS related issues. One female respondent felt that she was not comfortable as a peer educator talking to men about condom use because of negative perceptions about women talking to men about this issue, she somehow felt that it was less threatening to do it through theatre:

*So if I am going to act, acting, that person is going to see my face every time, if he hears about HIV, he is going to think and that picture is going to come back, and when times goes on, and maybe someday, or maybe somebody from his family is affected like that, then that person is going to change because that thing is in the mind. They are going to visualise that.*

Another female respondent referred to her newfound 'celebrity-status' on the mine:

*...They call you aside, and ask you, can you give me those female condoms you were presenting, and you can so, 'Oh I don't have them, they are very expensive, but you can find them in the pharmacy', something like that, others we educate them even in the taxi, while we are going home, we even just talk about it, and you show them.*

She also jokingly referred to her new 'title' as a result from the plays:

*Whenever they see me they can call me, 'Hey where are the condoms now, hey Miss AIDS?' always, cause they are used to our faces.*

Some of the female respondents did, however, feel uncomfortable about the response of some of the men who were thinking that they are disrespectful for talking about sex and condom use in front of men. This is another cultural belief regarding gender dynamics that can be addressed through the theatre-in-education programme and that should not be left unchallenged. Here the audience is again offering the actor-educators a new channel for discussion and topics that can be scripted to further the audience/community's beliefs and understanding around HIV and AIDS.

### **New Stages and New Opportunities.**

Theatre-in-education in the South African mining sector may be considered a "poor" theatre. It is not implemented with all the traditional spectacular costumes, sets and stage decorations as is customary with western theatre. It is a poor theatre, rich in creativity and commitment from the educators that implement it. New stages are created for performance, the most novel being the 'crush', which is the area where the miners assemble before descending the mineshaft to work in the underground tunnels. A new generation of 'actors' are developed, those not skilled in the formal disciplines of acting but as one respondent said:

*Some people are actors, you know by nature... by birth. They don't have to be trained; they can take something that is boring and make it [fun].*

It is a theatre where dramatic costume and scenography, elaborate make-up, lighting and music become redundant and the actor-audience relationship becomes the powerful shared-collective in the possibility of change. It is a theatre presented to a predominantly low-literate audience where cultural

beliefs and traditions enforce vulnerability towards HIV and AIDS. Nevertheless, it is a rich tradition and culture that can be utilised for change as the political theatre of the pre-democratic South Africa showcased.

It is the challenge for theatre-in-education and its practitioners to learn from the audiences and for audiences to react, debate the epidemic, and create a new understanding and a new theatre of responsibility.

The use of educational theatre in the South African mining sector offers us an opportunity to explore its functioning in a micro environment and a social system reflective of South African society. It is a theatre we can use to teach and a theatre that we can learn from. It is an exciting time for theatre to develop and to contribute to a multi-cultural society grappling to come to terms with an epidemic. It is theatre at the edge of a crush. Let the learning begin.

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<sup>1</sup>**Ubuntu** is a South African ethic or ideology focusing on people's allegiances and relations with each other. The word comes from the Zulu and Xhosa languages. Ubuntu is seen as a traditional African concept. A rough translation in English could be "humanity towards others." Another translation would be: "The belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity."

<sup>2</sup>A peer-educator-actor in the AngloGold Industrial Theatre Programme also highlighted this concern: "but the thing is, the attitude doesn't change, my worry is that the number is not going down, it's going up."

<sup>3</sup>In "Staging AIDS, Activating Theatre's" (1997), Marcia Bloomberg, explores a wide range of HIV and AIDS Interventions utilizing the arts as its vehicle of information dissemination.

<sup>4</sup>For reasons of confidentiality the name of the Company may not be disclosed. GlueMetric on behalf of Business Enterprise, University of Pretoria, did the evaluation.

<sup>5</sup>This included plays performed for school children at the BASHA Festival in the State Theatre, Pretoria, 2002 and at the Sibikwa/TOTAL Playmaking Festival in Benoni, 2002.

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