

Laying bricks or playing Othello, Kessie is still making the headlines

KESSIE GOVENDER is, in his own words, "very much an ordinary person who works on my skills just like anybody else."

This modest assumption, however, may be somewhat difficult to believe especially for those who have had the opportunity of working with the talented and creative man whom many have hailed as the "doyen of protest theatre in South Africa."

In a career spanning well over 20 years, Kessie has always managed to make the headlines, whether it was for giving a stunning acting performance, writing an acclaimed issue-related play, or getting arrested for doing either of the two.

His first involvement with the arts came when he attended a vernacular school which encouraged concert performances and the singing of traditional religious hymns.

In 1974 Kessie, with no experience or any inkling whatsoever as to the scripting of a play, began writing *Stablexpense*, one of his most acclaimed works.

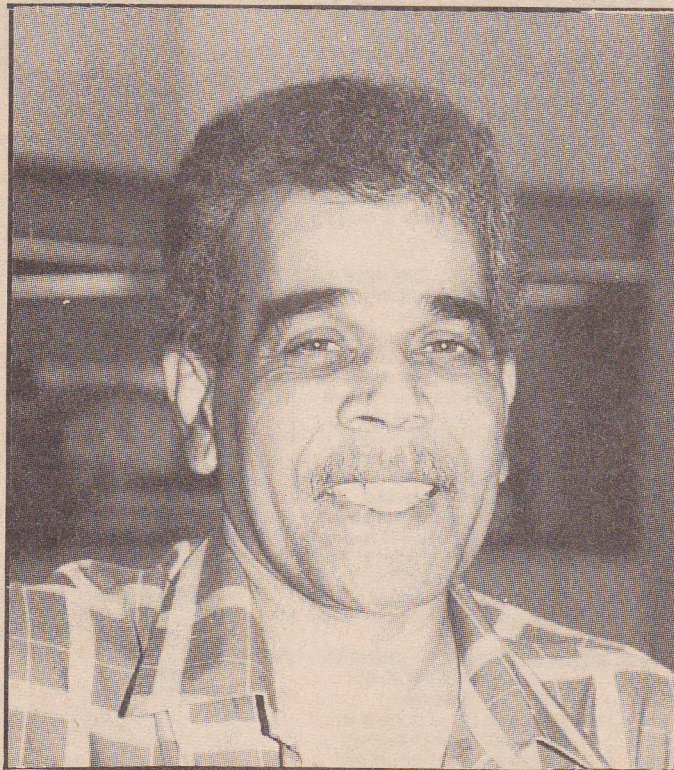
"My motivation was drawn from seeing many of my colleagues becoming conscious of the political arena and taking a stand for what they believed in.

"While many veered off to concentrate solely on the political field I realised that in theatre circles, especially in Durban, artists were keeping away from any subject with political connotations.

"It seemed like no-one wanted to talk about the injustices of apartheid and so I decided that if no-one else was prepared to undertake such a task then I would do

Kessie went on to write the play, a satire on Indian living attitudes, and it played packed houses in its first years.

It's strong anti-apartheid



Kessie Govender

sentiments of *Stablexpense* did not go down too well with the law, however, and so began a long-standing conflict between Kessie and the authorities which would see him and his family constantly harassed.

Kessie was not to be deterred though — he didn't believe that theatre should be moulded by peoples' perceptions.

"Theatre is more than just the concept of playwrighting — it is a living art with a number of parallels to life.

"And the irritants of injustices and the frustrations of daily living can either get you down or prompt you into be-

ing more creative."

In his case it certainly gave him a boost of creativity as well as inspiring him to nurture the talents of other aspiring actors and playwrights.

The result, in 1976, was the launching of the first black-owned theatre, the Stable.

"There was obviously an imperative need for it since laws such as the Separate Amenities Act prevented our productions from being staged at so-called 'whites only' venues."

In spite of numerous setbacks the Stable Theatre is still in operation and has helped bring to the forefront artists such as Sam Marais

and Mbongeni Ngema.

Kessie's next few plays were to be described as brilliant by some and downright rude and degrading by others.

Working Class Hero was an attempt to expose the strong anti-African feelings prevalent among many in the Indian community while *The Shack* dealt with the insensitivity of people towards the squatter problem.

After taking a two-year break and then working as a bricklayer to earn some money, Kessie was back in 1982 with new enthusiasm, new ideas and, of course, a new play.

In 1988 he embarked on a project to integrate traditional Zulu dance sequences with Indian classical dance styles.

Two years later Kessie was appointed to the board of Napac, in a move which he saw as a significant opportunity to bring to an end the boycott of the Playhouse.

Although his being on the board was a time-consuming task, he nevertheless found time to engage in his first love — performing on stage.

"I've played many difficult but fulfilling roles and the cherry on the top was when I was asked to play the lead role in Shakespeare's *Othello* last year.

"It was definitely a challenge since I'd never done a Shakespearean role before and the language, the gestures and emotions which the part required took time to work out.

"The play turned out to be a success and credit must go to director Pieter Scholtz who just seemed to inspire everybody to bring out their best."

Presently Kessie is assisting various schools in their drama projects and hopes the education departments will make efforts to provide proper funding and facilities at all high schools.

Morgan Naidu