

OPINION

Albie Sachs and the art of protest

When ANC lawyer Albie Sachs suggested art was more than a weapon of the struggle, he set off a raging debate among cultural workers. FRANK MEINTJIES, executive member of the Congress of South African Writers, takes up the issue

ALBIE SACHS' paper *Preparing Ourselves For Freedom*, an excerpt of which was printed in the *Weekly Mail* on February 2, comes as South Africa enters a phase of rapid transition, of unstoppable movement to democratic government. New power relations, an end to racially- and undemocratically-designed political structures, more equitable systems for allocation of resources and an end to the culture of conflict and violence are all in sight.

Culture organisations, as well as other community groups, education and resource groups and service organisations will all have to re-examine their roles critically in the light of the swiftly-changing context.

For a long while we have spoken of a culture of resistance (in the same way we used terms such as "alternative", "oppositional" or "anti"). The priority was to rouse and embolden the oppressed. Now we need a new language, one imbued with the promotion of life, a celebration of democracy building on creative grassroot energy.

Cultural workers need to extend the debate brought sharply into focus by Sachs' paper.

In his paper, Sachs debunks the idea that progressive culture is by definition direct, propagandistic and confined to reflex responses to oppression — but warns political organisations will be practising regimentation, Stalinism and the suppression of cultural democracy if they issue rigid instructions to artists.

This does not mean that Sachs believes that art can absolve itself from facing the ugly social realities of South Africa today. We must remember that Sachs' paper was presented at an African National Congress seminar, comprised of people who shared a common political ethos; no doubt it would have been superfluous for Sachs to spell out the inevitable political role of art.

It is anyone's guess what Sachs would say to a completely converse group, one which denied that cultural activity, in transmitting ideas and values, plays a political role. What would he emphasise to artists who see art as a pursuit of private reflection with little place for the community-linked oral poet or protest theatre? Or to the literary critic whose university education has denied him/her an appreciation of the umbilical cord that links the artist to the community in Africa and Latin America? Would the message have been different?

Any critical assessment of an artist, white or black, liberal or radical, does not end with the aesthetic; it necessarily takes account of the specific milieu and how the artist engages with, relates to, is influenced by social circumstances and the issues of the times.

Sachs seems to agree with this: calling for broader parameters, he says "the criterion must be pro- or anti-apartheid". As co-architect of the ANC's Constitutional Guidelines, he acknowledges that free speech is always circumscribed by other democratic interests of the community. Thus the Guidelines place a sanction on the propagation of racism, anti-Semitism, and fascism.

It is impossible simply to throw overboard the age-old debate between those who accept the artist's social responsibility and those who opt for a narrower, more Eurocentric conception of art. Many black artists become writers or artists because they seek to express political ideas.

The classrooms, the workplace, parliament, the broadcast media, daily newspapers and the courts, with their direct or structural censorship, have no place for their aspirations. They are drawn to the cultural arena where they hope to create their own space for political articulation. The Emergency clampdown and vicious media gags have spurred artists to commandeer artistic space for voicing political ideals.

The direct approach in art, addressing topical political issues, cannot be summarily denounced as invalid. Bertold Brecht, Nguigi wa Thiong'o, the Soviet poster-makers and numerous Third World poets have proved beyond question that such work has an important place in the spectrum of cultural expression.

However, Sachs is charging that South Africa has had too much of a good thing — which is doing more harm than good if it is undercutting other forms of art that could be more liberating and revitalising.

There is too little focus on how the ordinary person in an everyday situation is fighting back with laughter and wit and relationships and a refusal to succumb to despair. In addition, clenched fists and militant rhetoric alone do not denote important cultu-

The best exponents of political art are those who strive for mastery of their craft, who exercise utmost artistic discipline and diligence, and who study different forms and techniques. It is these ingredients which demarcate the difference between effective art and works which count as important historical and cultural records or tools for mobilisation.

Far too many young progressive artists are anxious to follow role models but shirk discipline and hard work.

Art is born through experience, through grappling with issues, through working over perceptions and thoughts and feelings.

Sloganeering soon becomes a barrier to depth and genuine expression. It stifles creativity and reflection, replacing it with a mechanical incantatory approach which severs the organic link between the work and the artist and community he is trying to serve. And when the drum-beating drowns out the needs and interests and doubts of ordinary people, it becomes an obstacle to the building of a democratic ethos.

It would be wrong to condemn politically orientated work altogether. It would be a stultifying action, indulging in the same dictatorial prescriptiveness that Sachs labels "our own internal States of Emergency".

But it is an inadequate response merely to highlight the problem of poor quality and the dominance of overt political messages in art. Cultural organisations need to expose young artists to different forms of writing and painting and theatre, and to encourage greater attention to craft. Perhaps it is time to give space and recognition to the quieter, more reflective voices on our festival platforms, instead of only the more strident voices that usually come forward.

Sachs' paper has been hailed as a breakthrough. Perhaps what he says is unique because it is from the pen of a political leader, or because he addresses himself so frankly to political organisations. However, much of what he says echoes what several leading cultural workers have been advocating for some time.

Novelist Nadine Gordimer, Congress of South African Writers president Njabulo Ndebele and poet Chris van Wyk have all been crusading for an art that goes beyond the knee-jerk responses to the hurt caused by apartheid.

Ndebele has deplored the "overly political nature and journalistic reportage of some black South African fiction" as far back as 1984.

Van Wyk, reflecting on the "inadequacy" of post-1976 poetry, has lamented that political writing has been weakened where "writing was not sustained by a rich human and cultural dimension".

Even the performer/poet Mzwakhe Mbuli, the king of agit-prop, has denounced the tendency among younger poets — many of whom unsuccessfully try to emulate his artistry — of thinking it's as easy as knocking out a few "instant" lines for every political occasion.

Mi Hlatswayo, cultural co-ordinator of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, has appealed for an "upgrading" of the cultural output of workers: "It needs to be of such a quality that it can challenge commercial cultural productions on merit, not on the basis that it's coming from progressive cultural organisations and thus has to be popular."

On the theatre front, many voices have called for a break with clichés and the hackneyed approach found in so much protest drama. Last year actor/director John Kani complained that imposters "jumping on the bandwagon" had lowered the quality of protest theatre: "No one wants to sit back and be told that we are black and we are suffering. We know that."

Ari Sitas, director of worker-culture programmes, has slammed theatre practitioners who produce work according to a set "formula", work that is lacking in depth and abounding in stereotypes, aimed more at overseas audiences than at the community at home.

The *New Nation's* former arts editor, Tyrone August, has been one of the most consistent and outspoken voices in calling for new ideas in theatre. As far back as 1987 he told his politicised readership: "Stop the Revolution, I want to get off! That's what I feel like after seeing what passes for protest theatre at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown."

Although his newspaper was explicitly the voice of the oppressed, August ensured that the arts pages covered cultural events more broadly. Coverage included reviews from the Alhambra, Alexander, Andre Huegenot and Windybrow, even though few black people patronised these palaces of mainstream theatre.

This approach endorses the position that the construction of a new culture cannot take root without absorbing certain elements of the old.

Why did all these voices urging a new direction not coalesce into a beacon to mark the way forward for progressive artists?

Perhaps the time was not right — the state's mailed fist hung over the townships and thousands were experiencing detention. Perhaps it required members of the political leadership to give the cue.

Whichever way we look at it, now is the time to break with a culture in which, as Sachs puts it, "our rulers stalk every page and haunt every picture"; in which "everything is obsessed with the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed".

Now is the time to take up Njabulo Ndebele's challenge (uttered by a character in *Fools and Other Stories*): "... every aspect of life, if creatively indulged in, is the weapon of life itself against the greatest tyranny."

Sachs' paper has generated excitement within the broad artists' community, raising the possibility of new alignments. Cultural organisations should answer this perhaps by carving out a new profile, one that is more inclusive and more forward-looking, one that invites open debate and co-operation in broad ventures aimed at building "one nation one country".

Implementation of the cultural boycott — a vital strategy to isolate apartheid — has in the past put us at odds with many artists who, although not part of our organisation, were also not part of apartheid formations and structures.

These artists perceived us as "censors", while we disliked the idea of being used as a political rubber stamp for the cultural passports of artists who avoided our communities, our organisation and our activities.

Now that Sachs is calling on culture organisations to work with "broader parameters rather than narrow ones", this entails greater scope for dialogue and engagement with such artists. I'm sure Sachs does not mean that critical debate should cease, but rather that we see all artists who reject apartheid as friends more than enemies, to encourage "all forces for change".

In this regard, we should be asserting our influence in the cultural sphere through "better poems, better films and better music", in the words of Sachs, and through stimulation, co-ordination and effective organisation which advances the rights of artists.

Culture IS struggle's weapon - Desk

The Interim Cultural Desk has replied — with some caution — to Albie Sachs' recent paper on culture, which, by implication, rejected the very notion of the Cultural Desk. PHIL MOLEFE reports.

THE Interim Cultural Desk this week said that as much as it agreed cultural organisations should only provide leadership and not control or prescribe to artists the way they should contribute to the struggle, the desk maintained that culture must be used as a weapon for struggle.

Responding to the paper entitled *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom*, delivered at an African National Congress leadership seminar earlier this year by ANC constitutional advisor Albie Sachs, the cultural desk said it did not think seeing culture as a weapon of struggle is "wrong", "banal" or "devoid of real content".

Sachs, in his paper, had called — tongue-in-cheek — for a five-year ban on ANC members "saying that culture is a weapon of the struggle".

The desk said building an alternative, truly non-racial culture is one of the best ways to fight apartheid.

"Culture should give expression to the whole range of human emotions and experience, it should capture the fullness and contribute to the richness of the type of existence with which we wish to replace apartheid and enhance the quality of our life.

"Though we do not wish to prescribe how, it is our right and duty to challenge all cultural workers to contribute towards the struggle against apartheid in whatever way they may be best equipped."

Sachs, one of the ANC's most influential intellectuals and co-author of the organisation's Constitutional Guidelines, argued in his paper that seeing culture as an instrument of the struggle is wrong and "potentially harmful".

"Instead of getting real criticism, we get solidarity criticism. Our artists are not pushed to improve the quality of their work; it is enough that it be politically correct," Sachs wrote.

The desk, however, reiterated the view of the 1984 Gaborone arts conference and the Culture for Another South Africa (Casa) conference in Amsterdam in 1987 that "one is first part of the struggle and then a cultural worker.

"We challenge cultural workers to root themselves in the democratic movement so that their creative responses to life will be informed by an understanding and experience of the struggle.

"We also challenge cultural workers to contribute to the discussion and theory of culture that could help us understand what a non-racial culture could be, and how to address the imbalances to cultural expression brought about by apartheid," said a statement from the desk.

"We pose these challenges mindful of the fact that creativity does not follow rules, that each cultural worker must find a way of contributing that is true to him/herself, and that different and varied creative responses are to be valued as contributing to the richness of the culture that we wish to create."

The desk said it does not demand that all art should be "political" in a very narrow sense of the word but should "express all aspects of humanity that will make up a non-racial way of life".

It re-affirmed its position that it is not only through art that cultural workers can contribute to the struggle.

Saam sal ons, die mense, in een stem sing

DONDERDAG 22 Februarie is 'n warm dag in Johannesburg. Dit is selfs warmer in Orlando-Wes.

By 'n gewone township-huis, swart, groen en geel geverf, is daar geen flambojante veiligheidsteenwoordigheid- of maatreëls nie, net 'n klein groepie fotografe en ondersteuners. Die atmosfeer is vrolik, positief, maar met 'n ondertoon van, nie spanning nie, maar eerder gereedheid. Ek, van alle mense, is ingesluit in 'n afvaardiging van die South African Musicians Alliance (Sama) om die wêreld se bekendste pasvrygelate gevangene, Nelson Mandela, te ontmoet.

Jabu Ngwenya van Sama wys ons die pad deur die hek na 'n klein tuintjie waar twee groot en onbenspelik geklede mans vra dat ons 'n rukkie sit, want "Oom Nelson is bietjie agter sy skedule weens 'n onderhoud". Dit het my 'n rukkie geneem om agter te kom dat dié twee mans Zwelakhe Sisulu en Murphy Marobe is.

Hoe op aarde het ek hier gekom? Wat het ek gedoen om dié eer te hê om Suid-Afrika se grootste lewende legende te ontmoet?

Party mense sou sê: Nie genoeg nie. Ander sou sê: Reeds te veel! So is die lewe maar in die politieke wêreld.

My betrokkenheid by Sama is algemeen bekend. Toe Jabu Ngwenya my Woensdagaand skakel, het ek gedink hy wou my herinner aan die volgende vergadering wat sou handel oor die komende **Sama en NRC** se anti-sensuurkonsert. "Goeie nuus... ons het 'n vergadering met die Ou Man... Kan jy teen 9:30 vm by die kantoor wees, dan kan ons saam ry?"

Die formaliteit om weer na dagboeke te kyk, is nie eens oorweeg nie. Dit sou bloot simpel wees om nee te sê vir 'n geleentheid waar 'n mens die Suid-Afrikaanse ikoon - die ware jakob - kan ontmoet.

Die Sama-afvaardiging het bestaan uit Abigail Kubeka, Ray Phiri, Siphon Mabuse, Alan Lazaar, Mango Groove, Bra N'Thembi van die African Jazz Pioneers, Thembi Mtshali, Jennifer Ferguson, Rashid Lani, Jabu en Charles van Sama en die uwe.

Die vorige nag, en op pad na sy huis toe, was ek baie senuweeagtig. Hoekom ek? Wat gaan ek sê? Waar? Wat? Wie?



Alex Jay

Ek het gevoel ek verdien glad nie dié geleentheid nie. As Johnny Clegg maar net in die land was - hy sou sy oogtande vir dié geleentheid gee. So ook die helfte van die wêreld se joernaliste.

Hoewel ek 'n liberale ondersteuner van die vryheid en gelykheid vir almal is, kan ek nie enige aanspraak maak op die glans of pyn van 'n "stryder" nie.

Vyf jaar gelede is 'n visa na Lusaka aan my geweier.

Vandag, as 'n aankondiger op 'n radiostasie van die SAUK, kry ek die geleentheid om die geestelike leier van die sterkste teenstander van apartheid, die ANC, te ontmoet.

Wat 'n ironie! Wat 'n drama! Wat 'n land!

Ek was besig om met Ray Phiri te gesels en het met my rug na die huis gesit toe ek, en ek bedoel dit, sy teenwoordigheid aangevoel het. Dit was werklik ongelooflik.

Nelson Mandela is die verpersoonliking van charisma. Sy teenwoordigheid is byna tasbaar. Ons groep het soos skape op ons voete gekom en wit en swart, oud en jonk, rock en jazz het soos 'n klomp skoolkinders voor die onderwyser gevoel.

Mandela is lank en skraal, maar dra die gewig van 'n bejaarde staatsman. Sy statigheid is werklik, sy verstand byna super-akker.

Hoewel hy die grootste gedeelte van die afgelope drie dekades in die tronk deurgebring het, is hy nie net goed ingelig oor die politieke situasie in die land nie, maar ook oor musiek, die radio, televisie en media in die moderne Suid-Afrika.

Sy hande lyk soos dié van 'n klavierspeler.

Ons was almal stralend. Jabu het almal voorgestel. Rashid kry 'n warm handdruk. Jennifer 'n vaderlike drukbeide word op hul name aangespreek.

Hy beweeg na Bra N'thembi van die African Jazz Pioneers en wou 'n formele handdruk aan hom gee toe hy hom herken: "Liewe hemel, dit is jy Ntembi-!" roep hy.

"Jy het op my troue gespeel!" Hulle lag baie en omhels mekaar. Hy groet vir Abigail soos mens 'n ou vriend groet, groet vir Thembi soos sy jong gunsteling - en erken dat hy een van haar "fans" is en beweeg toe na Ray Phiri.

Ek is mal oor Ray Phiri! In 'n industrie waar mense se ego's groter is as planete, is Ray werklik 'n mens. Nederigheid en grasia moes sy voorname gewees het. "Uncle Nelson", soos hy gevra het ons hom moet noem, beweeg na Ray, neem sy hand en sê: "Ray, niemand hoef jou voor te stel nie. Ek is baie trots op jou en jou mede-kunstenars."

Ray staan vasgenaef, emosioneel so geraak dat hy nie vir Mandela kan kyk nie, hy kon skaars praat.

Hier was 'n man wat veel meer was as 'n simbool van die stryd. Hier was 'n ware man met ware oortuigings en ware trots in sy mense se oorwinninge.

En tog het ek só mislik gevoel omdat ek geweet het dat Hugh Masakela eerder hier moes wees as ek. Of Bright Blue, of Dollar Brand, of Miriam Makeba, of enige ander jazz-pionier van die vyftigerjare.

En tog, hier is hy en hy praat eers met Siphon "Hotstix" en toe met Alan Lazaar wat vir hom 'n kopie van die Mango Groove-langspeler gee.

Eindelik, voor ek kon "uit chicken" of flou val, staan hy voor my.

Ek stel myself voor en sê: "Dit is 'n groot voorreg om jou te ontmoet, maar ek verdien dit nie."

Hy gaan sit en ons almal gaan sit. Die tuin is sonnig en warm. Die tyd is nou en die droom is waarheid.

Hy praat met ons oor musiek en sy liefde daarvoor.

Hy praat nostalgies oor die musiek van die vyftigerjare. Hy praat met trots oor Suid-Afrikaanse musiek. Hy praat oor Brenda en Yvonne, van Johnny en Letta. Hy onthou die King Kong-musiek. Hy onthou die pioniers. Hy vertel van sy trots op die Suid-Afrikaanse musikante wat die belangrikheid van verandering en versoening en liefde raaksien. Hy vertel van sy hoop dat die verwagte ondehandelings 'n einde sal bring aan die geweld en hartseer wat so deel van ons alledaagse lewe geword het.

Hy maak ook 'n baie duidelike beleidsverklaring. "Jy hoef nie aan enige politieke organisasie te behoort om deel te neem aan 'n veranderde Suid-Afrika nie. Jy moet eerlik en opreg wees in jou pogings om vrede en voorspoed na dié land te bring. Hoewel julle geskryf en gesing het van blydskap en hartseer, liefde en moedeloosheid, het die tyd aangebreek om met een stem te sing van die verenigde Suid-Afrika. Vertel aan alle musikante en kunstenaars van die land om met een stem te sing en sing met trots."

Ons dertig minute is verby.

Zwelakhe Sisulu kom uit en neem hom na binne vir sy volgende onderhoud. "Wel," sê Nelson, "my baas het gekom en nou moet ek gaan."

Die afskeid is kort en hartlik. Hy verseker ons dat ons weer sal ontmoet. Dit is tyd om te gaan. Die spul joernaliste buite die hek neem 'n foto. Daar is geen nodigheid vir vuiste en slagspreuke nie. Die glimlagte sê genoeg.

Ons het nie gepraat op pad terug nie. Ons het eers later besef hoe bevoorreg ons was. Dit was 'n rare geleentheid, nie net om die man te ontmoet nie, maar ook om menings te wissel. Dit was 'n waardige, dog informele ontmoeting en daar was niemand om ons te pla nie.

Vandag is ek vervul met hoop en positiewe energie. Wat ook al sy toekomstige rol binne die ANC, Nelson Mandela saam met die Staatspresident kan die bal aan die rol sit. Daardie ontwykende bron van welwillendheid kan en moet ontslae raak van die vrese en onkunde van diegene wat nie aan die transformasie van ons samelewing wil deelneem nie. "Liefde, vrede en begrip" is miskien 'n mantra uit die sestigerjare, maar was nog nooit meer relevant in ons geskiedenis as nou nie.

Dit is die wil van die mense dat Suid-Afrika vry moet wees, vry om vooruit te gaan. Saam sal ons, die mense, in een stem sing.

(Alex Jay is 'n platejoggie by Radio 5)