**WORLD THEATRE DAY: HONOURING ATHOL FUGARD**

Today is World Theatre Day. Since 1962, 27 March has been celebrated as World Theatre Day when the International Theatre Institute – a rather ineffective network but with some vibrant national chapters – issues a World Theatre Day message from an international theatre icon to be read and/or distributed in theatres around the world.

South Africa recently took leave of its leading theatre icon, Athol Fugard, and I’m not sure whether he had ever been invited to deliver a World Theatre Day message. (As far as I can tell, Brett Bailey is the one South African who has had this honour in 2014 and Gregory Maqoma was similarly invited to write the World Dance Day message on 29 April 2020).

There have been social media calls to honour Athol Fugard by naming a local theatre after him, in the way that the Market Theatre has the Barney Simon and Mannie Manim theatres named after their founders and the former HB Thom theatre at the University of Stellenbosch is now the Adam Small Theatre.

One obvious theatre that would be the most likely candidate for this honour would be the former Fugard Theatre which is now the District Six Museum Homecoming Centre, with its two theatre spaces, the Star and the Avalon, named for ‘bioscopes’ in the former District Six. Another would be the current Wave Theatre in 44 Long Street which is on the site of the former Space Theatre that hosted some of Fugard’s earlier works. However, both these spaces would require significant investment in financial, infrastructural and human resources if Athol Fugard’s legacy is to be truly honoured. We have too much history in this country where streets, buildings and even monuments are named after struggle heroes, only for these to suffer such neglect that it dishonours the names of these heroes.

Or perhaps the Arena Theatre at Artscape can be renamed the Athol Fugard Theatre and it be dedicated to new and classic South African theatre work? At least with a national government subsidy, the theatre will have the requisite funding to be cared for, and to stage work. (The budget estimates for 2025/26 for Artscape include a subsidy of R70, 918m plus R7,687 for capital expenditure for a total of R78,605m).

If the City of Cape Town were to honour Fugard, it would be more than appropriate to name a significant street after him. Like Long Street where the former Space Theatre was based or Buitenkant Street that runs along the Homecoming Centre. There may be objections from residents, businesses and a generation of young people who hang out in Long Street and who may not know who Athol Fugard was, but this would be a way both to honour our theatre legend and to educate people about his contribution to the country which would be at least as worthy as the contribution of any other individual honoured with a similar name in the city.

We have a footbridge named after Taliep Petersen, but I’m not sure that Cape Town has a street named after any creative? (Johannesburg, for example, has Miriam Makeba Street).

Three years after the doldrums of the COVID pandemic, theatre is having a boom in the city and dare I say nationally. In the last few months, I’ve seen full houses at numerous shows featuring the truly worldclass theatre talent that we have in this country.

Much of this is being done and achieved – as Athol Fugard and his collaborators did – despite, not because of government support.

Imagine if there were an alignment between the country’s talent and the hard work and commitment of theatre-makers on the one hand and government policy and funding on the other? We would be a theatre powerhouse on the global stage, BUT we would also make theatre far more accessible to everyone around the country.

A memorial for Athol Fugard was hosted last week at the Adam Small Theatre on Human Rights Day, 21 March. The first post-apartheid White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage was premised on the Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ‘everyone shall have the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community (and) to enjoy the arts.’ Yet, for all the talk about transformation over the last thirty years, we have essentially kept the same theatre structure that we inherited from apartheid and have continued to privilege urban communities who have private transport and disposable income i.e. less than 20% of the population, perpetuating theatre as a largely elitist practice.

It is not that there is no public funding for theatre indeed to provide access to all. In addition to Artscape’s funding, the State Theatre receives R80,133m plus R6,855 in capital, the Playhouse R54, 893, plus R13,00m, PACOFS R52, 523m plus R9,270m, the Market Theatre R55,198 plus 8,789 and the Mandela Bay Theatre Complex R34,480m. The six theatres will receive a total of R393,747m this financial year.

Is this REALLY still the best way to allocate this vast sum of money for theatre? Do we need all of this infrastructure? Is this the best kind of infrastructure to serve the country’s needs right now?

Three years ago, I was part of a team that was invited to draft a new post-COVID policy for theatre and dance. The vision underpinning that document is completely different to the one that continues to inform the theatre structure that continues to serve a minority – albeit now a more inclusive, non-racial minority.

The proposals in *Breathing New Vision into Theatre and Dance* call for a review of existing infrastructure, the development and funding of more appropriate infrastructure in all nine provinces to facilitate national tours and to decentralise access to theatre. For all the talk of ‘transformation’ after thirty years, it is the country’s poorer provinces – like Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West - that still do not have nationally subsidised theatre infrastructure.

More importantly though, the proposals call for a shift from funding infrastructure primarily to funding theatre and dance companies, with these distributed in each province relative to the population of these provinces, but with every province having at least one full-time theatre and one full-time dance company, with 3-4 year subsidies to provide security and facilitate planning. The mandate of these companies would be produce new and classic works of high quality and to tour them to schools and other community spaces, while also playing at formal theatres and festivals. Through decentralised subsidised companies, more South Africans will be able to exercise their right to enjoy theatre and dance than is currently the case where our theatre system is structurally skewed in favour of a minority.

Despite going through multiple layers of consultation with the sector and being adapted and approved within these processes, the policy sits and gathers dust while the new minister sets up yet another process to arrive a theatre and dance vision.

Meanwhile, those with passion, vision, expertise and access to resources, get on with it, continue to create and thrill the audiences to whom they have access, and who can afford to see them.

World Theatre Day is supposedly a day dedicated to promote the understanding of the worth of theatre not only as a form of entertainment, but also as a means of education, social transformation and individual development.

We would honour Athol Fugard not only by having something of significance named after him, but by ensuring that as many people as possible around the country have access to, and to enjoy his works. For this to happen, we need a fundamental shift in policy and funding vision, and it will have lasting benefits not only for theatre-makers who will have a better chance of sustainable livelihoods as their works have a longer life, but also for most of the country’s citizens who still exist on the periphery.

If we recognise their humanity, then we would recognise that these, our fellow citizens, not only have physical needs, as clear as these may be; they also have the right to realise their full human potential with their emotional, psychological, intellectual and spiritual dimensions catered and cared by enabling access to the power, beauty and catharsis of theatre.