

Not by bread alone

Acting helps Cape Town communities survive emotionally



Mavis Taylor . . . the fruit of seeds sown in 1972.

By THELMA SHIFRIN

UCT's associate professor of drama, Mavis Taylor, maintains an active interest in promoting acting among Cape Town's blacks — in spite of the heavy workload she has shouldered as acting head of the department since the death of Professor Robert Mohr.

The Community Arts Project (CAP, of which Professor Taylor is chairman) is giving disadvantaged people a situation where they can do creative things, which is very important in this area of emotional survival.

"Reinforcement"

"People need positive reinforcement," she says. "They have to survive emotionally, as well as physically."

They are trained in the fields of sculpture, painting, screen-painting, photography, pottery, dance and drama.

"But it is not easy to direct. Physically and emotionally it is very draining. The groups I ran in Guguletu 12 years ago were a heavy task. You have to constantly keep going with your own spirit to believe you can do something worthwhile."

"You can give up very easily. Young people find it hard to deal with amateur dramatic work: the drop-outs, the not-turnings-up, the comings-late. But it is interesting to see that one of my old drop-out members of those groups has joined the profession and is now playing all around.

"It is only today that I can see the fruit of seeds sown in 1972. So one looks at the people from Crossroads and thinks: What is their future? If a few could come out of there and earn money as actors, wouldn't that be wonderful?"

On May 7, a new professional black drama company of eight people, organised by CAP and sponsored by the Ford Foundation, began its training programme.

"I was asked by one of the actors we were auditioning why I was do-

ing this," Professor Taylor says. "I answered: 'Because there are a lot of black people who would like to work in the theatre. And I can help them by sharing the skills, abilities and knowledge which my experience of teaching for over 20 years has given me.'

"When you work in this field, you come up against all sorts of attitudes. Many black people are suspicious of whites, but when they get to the performance, they enjoy it and they see that you are actually saying something positive for them."

Two of Mavis Taylor's students have been involved in drama groups in the townships. Jacqueline Fox, an honours student in UCT's Centre for African Studies, took drama as one of the modules for her degree.

Drama groups

Dumile Magodla, a performer's-diploma student now finishing his BA degree at the university, trains weekly drama groups in Langa, Guguletu and Crossroads.

Jacqueline's improvised production, *Crossroads; How Long?*, had considerable success in the townships, is still going on "in Olympic fashion," and is now led by Dumile, says Professor Taylor.

The play evolved through improvised sessions with the actors, who were encouraged to act out stories from their daily lives. The final plot was chosen democratically. Jacqueline's task was not made easier by the fact that her classes were conducted in English, while the final play was in Xhosa!

Classes

In conjunction with the intensive training programme which the new CAP company will be undergoing for 20 months, the Community Arts Project is organising Saturday classes at its centre in Chapel Street, Woodstock, for actors who have talent but have not yet reached the standard required to enter the company.

It is an interesting reflection, says Professor Taylor, that the teachers who will be involved with the new CAP group are all, with the exception of CAP director Derek Joubert and Rudy Nadler-Nir from Israel, trained at UCT: Peter Kruger, who recently returned to South Africa after 12 years in England, Jenny Reznick, Liz Mills, Mignon Lee-Warden, Phyllis Klotz, Dumile Magodla as well as Mavis Taylor.



● Above: Aspiring actors in the Langa drama group sharpen their skills during an improvisation class.

● left: Dumile Magodla, left, a former student of Mavis Taylor, runs an evening drama-training group in the township.

● These two pictures were provided by the UCT News and Information Bureau.

