

Great Gaberone get-together



THE lunch time mime put on by the Cape Arts Project group kept hungry crowds rivetted for an hour.

Photograph by Bruce Gordon

ARTISTS should work together for an alternative society in South Africa and not leave decisions for South Africa's future in the hands of politicians. This was the basis for the recent festival/symposium on Culture and Resistance in Botswana.

More than 500 artists from Africa and overseas met in Gaborone to discuss their role in resisting oppression and exploitation.

Throughout the symposium artists were referred to as cultural workers, rejecting the 19th and early 20th century idea of artists as detached observers, alienated individuals, suffering a superior insight and misunderstood by their communities.

Morning and afternoon seminars on literature, drama, dance, photography, film and fine art called on artists to work closely with their communities and use their typewriters, brushes and cameras as tools in the struggle for liberation.

For too long the culture of the black people had been dominated and suppressed by that of the whites and a new order could only operate on mutual respect.

"We are fighting against a culture that dominates, and denies a united South Africa," said a professor of literature from the University of Nairobi.

Panelist Nadine Gordimer admitted that as a child she had not known that the sound of beating drums, stamping and singing coming from the mineworkers' compound was music. She had thought it was the painful little piece she played for her music teacher each week.

Representing black female writers in the discussions on novels and poetry, exile Lindiwe Mabuza, said: "We should be prepared to die as a tribe and be born as a nation. We want change, but often without wanting ourselves to change." Part of the problem, she said, was seeing the writer as outside of the people.

A photographer involved in theatre in Durban said the relationship between the cultural worker and the community he is working with should be emphasised. "We should emphasise the process rather than the final product." He also said that theatre format should be changed.

"On stage you have the plight of the people but still in the format of a Broadway musical."

Dollar Brand (his new Muslim name is Abdullah Ibrahim) saw the performance in Gaborone of Marabi, by the Junction Avenue Theatre Group from Johannesburg and said: "This is what our national theatre should look like."

The musical/play evolved in weekly workshops over a year and a half. It is set in a poor, crowded, homely "yard" where people, like everywhere else, have developed intricate relationships to support themselves and each other. A trade union man is returning to a room kept for him by Mama Bongo. On the train he meets the legendary player of marabi music, invited to the same house, to entice customers to their shebeen. The subplot involves the daughter of the house and George, her cavalier lover.

But the inhabitants have to pack up and leave. The area is cleared under the name of Group Areas. The singing which punctuates the storyline is strong and soaring.

Another piece of drama which kept the crowds both laughing at the characters and shaking their heads at the content was a mime by the Cape Arts Project group directed by Derek Joubert. With thickly painted faces, funny clothes and exaggerated movements, the characters enacted a story of tyranny and rebellion resolving into democratic order. The play was described by a member of the film crew recording the festival, as raw, gritty and powerful.

In another spine-tingling event, Dollar Brand appeared unaccompanied on stage, hand over one ear, eyes closed, and lifted his sharp, sweet, echoing voice in a tribute to Solomon Mahlangu, executed member of the ANC.

The nights were full, events being staged at about six different places. Heady concerts and jams at the town hall filled with the rousing brass of Hugh Masekela's quirky trumpet, old man Wilson "King Force" Silgee swanning it on sax, smiling and bowing at the audience going berserk, the sudden appearance of a mysterious saxophonist wearing bright pink and sunglasses who played with presence and power.

Short films and videos shown at the science block of the university, historically enlightening, sharp and factual.

But perhaps the most exciting were the events on the fringe. The lunch-times talking to the film crew, the academics, painters, teachers. The democratic discussions after papers were read, the brightly-coloured knots of people mingling, arguing and discussing in the sun. The freedom of expression.

The night Muff Anderson, author of Music in the Mix, and Barry Gilder, exiled folk-singer, came late to listen to the traditional African music of the Amampondo group from Cape Town. The group later played on the same bill as Dollar Brand and Hugh Masekela.

The evening Pedro Espi-Sanchis, pupil and colleague of Andrew Tracey, the world-renowned specialist in African music, went to the Amampondo's room and showed them interlocking rhythms to try out on the mbira (traditional African thumb piano) he had made. "Can you feel it? The hairs rising on your spine?" he said, verbalising the energy and excitement generated in their music.

"The easiest way to suppress a people is to take away their culture," the professor from Nairobi had said. Here was the interface, the mutual discovering. A white Spaniard, totally at home in the rhythms of African music sharing with a group of black musicians in a spirit of great excitement.

"The conference has failed," said someone at the last seminar. "We have not come to any conclusions."

Resolutions were made, however, for artists to work as regional groups, names and addresses had been exchanged, contacts made country-wide.

In his paper summing up the conference, Graham Hayman, journalism lecturer at Rhodes University, said that although he had been deeply moved by the calls for unity and solidarity he had found a reluctance to assess things academically. He felt there was a need to go beyond anecdotes and personal attacks towards a critical analysis of the problems facing South African artists. He also found that the role of the traditional black artist in rural areas had been neglected.

"Our goal should not be for a cross-over," said a Cape Town participant, "but first for a restoration of the rich indigenous African heritage, which is totally separate from Western culture, to its former stature."

And in the words of a Pretoria art student tra-



PEDRO Espi Sanchis with rattles and Dixu Plaatjies playing the acoustic mbira — made by Pedro with a calabash enclosing various lengths of metal prongs which are plucked by the thumbs.

Photograph by Liz Mackenzie

velling in a car towards Johannesburg, words was amazing, and some of which show how little of that heritage most whites amazing to see the wealth of the black culture right here and how much of has been denied us.

Liz MacKenzie