

## High School Students Excel in Nhimbe Trust Theatre Programme

The Nhimbe School's Playwright's and Actors Academy (SPAA) programme is perhaps Nhimbe's most successful vehicle in spreading the word about the importance of art in the community. The drama education programme is aimed at high school students and over a four year period, instructs them in the finer points of acting, directing, singing, dancing and all aspects of performance.

The basic premise of SPAA is bringing high school students, from the age of 13 to 18 together every Saturday morning to spend the day immersed in high-energy training in theatre skills. But the impact of the programme on these young kids has been immeasurable. When you speak to the SPAA students, they each have managed to carve out a niche for themselves as individuals through the programme and most of all, have revelled in the freedom to express themselves that comes through their activities in the SPAA programme.

The programme has been a huge success on many levels. The brainchild of Bulawayo arts initiative Nhimbe Trust, SPAA is more than a training ground for young people looking to learn the craft of acting, or looking to improve their theatre skills. Graduates of the four-year programme often end up pursuing acting as a full-time acting career, whether in Zimbabwe or in nearby South Africa, but more often than not, they channel the confidence they learn onstage into careers in the media as journalists, with others venturing into law or commerce. The bottom line is, the skills these youngsters learn through their SPAA training propel them to excel.

SPAA as a programme initiative was begun by Nhimbe in 2008 and selects high school-age kids from Form one to Form six in the city of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city. Nhimbe Administrator and Finance Manager, Sibusisiwe Ndlovu, explains that they recruit the youngsters by doing workshops in schools where the SPAA coordinator and teacher identify talent at the end of the workshops. The selected kids then come in to Nhimbe for auditions. The recruitment process aims for an intake of 30-35 students, with 35 being the maximum number which can be accommodated on the Nhimbe premises. The programme is funded by Africalia which covers administrative costs that allow the programme to operate.

Actor and Lead SPAA Trainer Memory Kumbota says, "What we do is that we headhunt and audition for students. The message is spread through schools and some of the students who are here have been head-hunted from schools, some are from past auditions. We are not really looking for brilliant students, some we just want to develop their potential. At the end of the year -the O' and A' level students -go to university. Every year we start again and recruit a new crop. This is a three-year programme. I teach them and also Raisedon Baya, who does the playwriting and directing of the plays when they put on performances."

When asked about the effect the programme has had on them, the students respond enthusiastically about SPAA, how it has literally changed their lives and how much they look forward to it every Saturday. Some come from schools that do not have a drama programme, others come to improve what they already know. What has become clear is that SPAA has inadvertently created a community where young people come through, form close bonds and learn how to express themselves, through theatre training.

13-year old Naomi Gauti from Mandwandwe High School says, "I like learning drama at SPAA because you get to express your feelings, you get to narrate how you feel, you get to tell people a story by expressing things that happened outside, you get to express your background. I really appreciate coming to SPAA. Sometimes I beg my mother to come here because SPAA has been a great adventure for me. We interact with people from other schools, we don't judge each other, we are one big family. We act as one."

Trainer Kumbota says the training seems to encourage and instil a sense of confidence and discipline in the children, which carries into all aspects of their lives. All of this seems to encourage a sense of confidence that stands them in good stead no matter which direction their lives take, whether in the theatre or otherwise. In fact, the SPAA programme administrators have noticed that students can come through SPAA, often with low academic scores, with parents reluctant to allow their kids to 'waste time' doing drama when they should be at the library working on improving their academic standing. But, after a while with SPAA, student scores almost always improve, and in fact, SPAA administrators have found that SPAA training seems to directly translate into improved academic attitude and grades.

On a larger scale, the work Nhimbe has been doing through SPAA for the past six years has also had an impact on the standard and quality of theatre performance throughout the city of Bulawayo and also regionally in Matebeleland South. Commenting on this, Kumbota says, "We have a very high standard and quality of training and this is what the children are getting at SPAA". Kumbota is a seasoned actor who received theatre training in the USA at the University of California at Los Angeles, in Canada at Canada University Services. He has taught locally at the Amakhosi Performing Arts Academy. He adds that having full-time professional trainers at SPAA gives the kids the edge when they perform in school plays and at local festivals like Intwasa.

Intwasa as one of Bulawayo's biggest arts platforms with a large audience, and performing there last year inspired many kids in the audience to enquire about joining the SPAA programme, especially with no formal theatre training institutions present in Zimbabwe. Information and Communications Officer Ronald Moyo agrees saying, "We have a greater impact on society directly after public performances".

In addition, the children often excel in competition with other high school students who have not taken part in the SPAA programme, causing school administrators in the Matebeleland South region to urge SPAA's expansion into high schools outside of Bulawayo so that other kids can benefit from the training. However, currently there is no capacity to do so.

Students enrolled at SPAA are competitively auditioned across Bulawayo from a pool of about thirty high schools. In 2013, the SPAA class had an enrolment of thirty-five students with a higher ratio of boys and produced two plays. The first, *Jazi* explored and challenged the stigma and discrimination for adolescents in accessing sexual and reproductive health services, especially access to condoms. The second play, *Kolobeja*, is an interactive folk tale consisting of stories culled from a Zimbabwean Childhood. SPAA has performed these plays at selected schools across Bulawayo, at the Bulawayo Theatre and at the prestigious Intwasa Festival - Bulawayo's biggest arts festival.

Although the SPAA programme has been hugely successful, it is not without its challenges. Primarily, the programme would like to train more students, but they are limited by the size of their premises.

The SPAA kids rehearse in the Nhimbe offices, which take up three floors in an office building in downtown Bulawayo. Also, while some of the SPAA graduates filter into diverse careers after their training, there is no pre-existing professional theatre company they can feed into as a group. Kabota says, "There is no feeder group where we can keep them together and create a company. Some have joined professional groups, but it has been difficult to keep them together because they can't absorb everyone."

Another hindrance is working with the kids only once a week on Saturdays. This is problematic for some children who have to attend church on Saturdays, but also is not enough time to teach new concepts and systematically progress. Kabota says ideally, the kids would come into SPAA two or three times a week. He adds, "My biggest wish would be to expand SPAA to do an outreach to reach kids beyond the Bulawayo metropole. We really need to go out and uplift the drama standard further afield". The SPAA programme would not be possible without funding from Africalia, although Nhimbe Trust Executive Director says delays in the distribution of funds sometimes interrupt programme implementation. There is of course also a need to secure additional sponsors to sustain and expand the programme.

Ultimately, SPAA is Nhimbe's flagship programme, which along with their lobbying for change in arts policy work, has done much to propel a greater understanding and appreciation of the arts in Zimbabwe. The expansion of such programmes could only add to this benefit.

*By Tawanda Mudzonga*