

Theatre taking flight in the Eastern Cape

South Africans of all backgrounds love a good story and the audience that crammed itself into a cosy venue in the heart of Port Elizabeth was not disappointed. Five original dramatic works were performed each night, from 30 July to 2 August 2014, to riotous applause from an appreciative public.

Most theatregoers part with their hard-earned money to see a single play or musical being performed, but supporters of the Performing Arts Network of South Africa's (PANSAs) Eastern Cape Youth Theatre Project got real 'bang for their buck', having purchased the opportunity to see five original theatre productions make their stage debut.

But this was no ordinary production – the Eastern Cape has experienced a significant 'brain-drain' in recent years, losing its experienced, talented theatre professionals to bigger cities, both in South Africa and abroad, and in the process, endangering the future of theatre in the area. This was something that the provincial branch of PANSAs was just not prepared to accept.

Putting their heads together, the new management committee developed an ambitious proposal for a youth theatre project; producing a major theatre production, with young people taking control of all aspects of the process, from start to finish, under the tutelage of experienced mentors.

David Limbert, chair of PANSAs Eastern Cape explains that with the demise of the provincial arts councils, and the consequent loss of trained theatre people, newcomers with a love of theatre and a desire to make a career of it, did not have the opportunity to actually learn the job from their peers.

"Basically, those theatre-making skills have fallen away. So, while we still have some amateur productions, they are really just doing the best they can with the knowledge they have. So, the generation gap is huge."

He adds that the sector has been limping along, but nobody came out and said "let's try and start this from grassroots and get people learning and therefore getting the right way of doing things, and sharing this with other people". And this was the foundation of David's plan, which coincided with the revitalisation of PANSAs in the Eastern Cape. He adds: "at the right time, Africalia put out an announcement saying that they had some funding", and the rest, as they say, is history.

Although the goal was to take training in theatre making back to its most basic level, it was not viewed as a grassroots project. The organisers wanted to offer individuals the opportunity to learn theatre 'from the ground up'; participants were selected based on the fact that they had some knowledge and experience of theatre. There were, however, no racial boundaries and no targets – it was open to everyone, and all that was required was a willingness to learn and commitment to the process.

Fifteen workshops covered all aspects of theatre craft for youth, ranging from scriptwriting to stage management and theatrical make-up. The scriptwriting workshop resulted in the submission of 13 original scripts for consideration – with five finally being selected for performance. The subject matter of the selected pieces is gritty, dealing with issues of gangsterism, rape, unrequited love and inter-racial relationships and the poor state of government hospitals in the Eastern Cape.

The evening opened with "God sees you", a hard-hitting short piece that highlights the gang culture that is prevalent in many of the poorer communities of Port Elizabeth. The story of a mother and son is told through the medium of confession in church – starting with the mother's rape by a university lecturer that resulted in the birth of her son and the tough decisions that she had to make, including putting aside her studies to raise him. Her son, Calvin's story unfolds as he explains that he was bullied in school and the only way that he could see to end the bullying was to join a local gang and receive their protection. But to become a member of the gang, he had to participate in an act of violence – the rape of a woman. As the story unfolds, the audience is horrified to discover the identity of the rape victim ... his own mother.

The audience was left stunned when they realised the enormity of Calvin's revelation – and then burst into wild applause, as the cast and crew lined up to acknowledge the accolades.

The only comedic piece of the evening, "MOPANJI", is set in a hospital in the Eastern Cape, a province known for its inadequate health services. Although a farce, it clearly highlighted the shortcomings in the provincial health system, drawing attention to a significant problem for civil society. It is interesting to note that one of the lead actors in this play was originally the director, Litha Hewitt-Coleman, but due to a sudden death in the family of the lead actress just three days before opening night, he stepped and performed admirably – another reflection of the level of professionalism achieved by the mentoring and support from the PANSA EC team.

The lead in "Michael", a hard-hitting play about a stalker who ultimately kidnaps and kills the object of his desire, Caéla du Toit, staunchly defends the weighty content of the productions. When asked whether she would rather have participated in something a little lighter, and more mainstream, she exclaimed: "No, not at all, because people in Port Elizabeth don't realise how

much talent is in the city. Everyone thinks of Cape Town and we want to show that we are just as good. There's so much local talent, and we don't just do little musicals – we hit it hard! They just need to give us a chance.”

Nicole Silcock, stage manager for “MOPANJI”, adds: “I also feel that the adult themes, that make people feel uncomfortable is right, it *should* make people feel uncomfortable. It is out there and just because we're in high school, it doesn't mean that we aren't aware of it.”

From this intervention, PANSA Eastern Cape intends to develop a toolkit to share with the sector and enable the duplication of this effort in communities across the country – and across the globe.

By Melanie Jackson