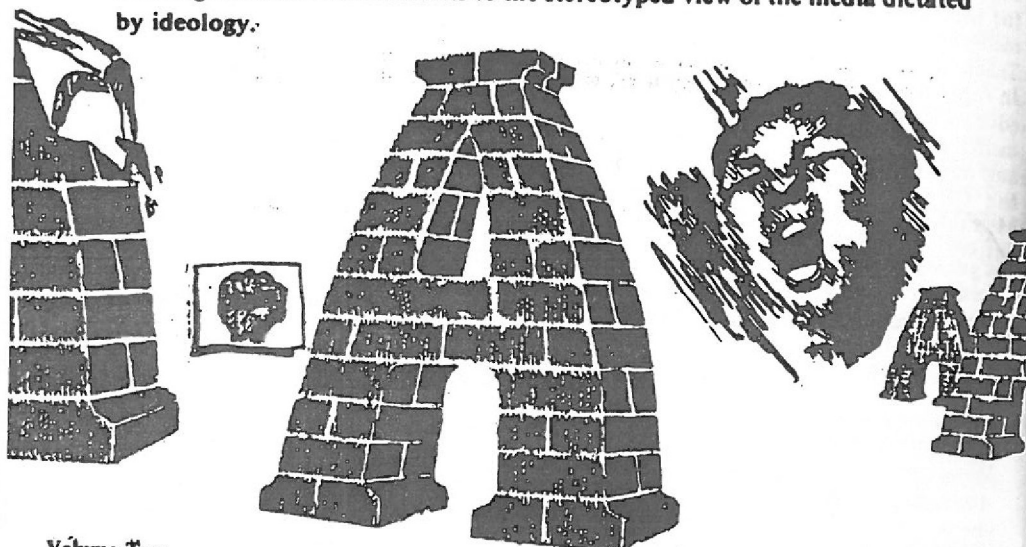


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A Journal for Media Studies

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CRITICAL ARTS

A Journal for Cultural Studies



BLACK PERFORMANCE REVISITED
VOL 4 NO 3 1987

Veronica

The Sun

the Metal and Allied

Example. Beginning as a

vised by a labour lawyer with a

kers who had been dismissed for an al-

illegal strike, and later developed by members of

the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, Ilango was

ed before audiences in such a way as to invite

participation. The actors on stage (some of whom

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A Journal for Cultural Studies

EDITORIAL

by Ian Steadman

ARTICLES

*Dialectics of Tradition in Southern African Black
Popular Theatre*
... David Coplan

Vuka: Sharing the Image
... Myra Davis

*Class, Race and Oppression:
Metaphor and Metonymy in 'Black'
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Planning/Policy and Development Abstracts*.



EDITORIAL

by Ian Steadman

In the context of the current political struggle in South Africa, significant new directions have emerged in the development of theatre as an element in cultural resistance. Tom Lodge, in the Preface to his book *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945*¹, says that while his work is about black political resistance, there is a further story to be told about other kinds of resistance. The theatre in South Africa tells such a story. Work has already been undertaken in this field in relation to music² and in relation to theatre in the 1970s.³ *Critical Arts* deployed a few arguments in the field in 1981.⁴ Those arguments, collected in an issue entitled "Alternative Performance", generated considerable debate about terminology. The present issue seeks to update the discussion.

Central to the debate is the notion of 'black' theatre. It is fashionable in South Africa to accuse social commentators of a class-negating ethnic organicism in the use of the word 'black'. There is, of course, an unacceptable reductionism in the word, and it often inscribes gross ideological prescription. Nevertheless, in the belief that the notion of 'black' theatre incorporates important aspects of the socialist-nationalist dichotomy which lies at the heart of current political struggle and resistance in South Africa, this issue makes deliberate use of the term in order to subpoena some important concepts into the debate.

During the 1970s the notion of 'black' theatre invoked the cultural platform of Black Consciousness in its formative phase. Despite paying insufficient attention to class and ideological factors in its analysis of white domination and exploitation, despite its origins as an elitist movement, and despite an inadequate assessment of the role of black workers in resistance, the Black Consciousness movement posited a cultural alternative to white hegemony. Within this alternative, black, consciousness, black theatre practitioners were able to create works which radically affected the notion of theatre's function in resistance. Dramatic sketches, plays and performed poetry proliferated in the years leading up to Soweto 1976. Symbolizing the role of black theatre during this period, the 1974 Treason Trial boasted two black theatre groups amongst the five organizations brought to trial for subversive activities.⁵

These developments took place during an era when political and cultural

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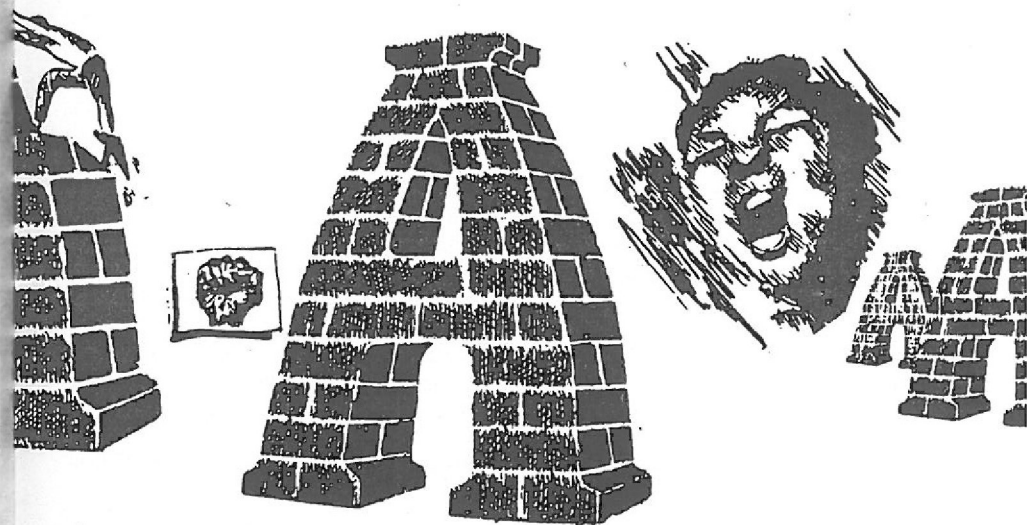
CRITICAL ARTS : CHANGE OF NAME

Since its first edition in May 1980, *Critical Arts* has been served by the sub-title "A Journal for Media Studies". This was the title of sixteen issues in the series and two monographs (the latter discontinued in 1984), most of which covered directly media-related topics like cinema, drama and performance, press, censorship, literature, visual anthropology, broadcasting and so on.

As the *Journal* developed, however, it moved away from purely textual discussion and opened up a space for contextual analysis, the social, economic and political conditions out of which media, media institutions and texts arise. This shift brought the *Journal* into contact with disciplines which study contexts, namely sociology, anthropology, politics and, of course, cultural studies.

Critical Arts has for some time been concerned with the relationship between texts and contexts. It is this emphasis that has resulted in the examination of a much wider area of analysis extending into education, class struggle, political economy, ideology and applications of social theory in general. For this reason, catalysed by the acceptance by English-language universities in South Africa and elsewhere of cultural studies, we have decided to change the name of the journal to *Critical Arts: A Journal for Cultural Studies*. This change in title signals the continuation of a theoretical trend that has become dominant since our early issues seven years ago.

The Editors



liberation were conceived in populist form. By the end of the 1970s such a conception was already being overtaken by more sophisticated political analyses. The obvious merit in such a change should not, however, blind us to an element of loss: to what extent has the effectiveness of black theatre been diluted by a shift in emphasis away from an ideological base of race and nationalism?

It can be argued that in the 1970s Black Consciousness sponsored a truly emergent theatre. Radically debunking tendencies in cultural expression which were associated with white norms and standards, black artists responded to the Black Consciousness programme of creating works which were innovative expressions of 'black experience'. Despite the idealism of such a project, and despite an inherent elitism in most of the works presented under the guise of 'popular' entertainment, black theatre during this period helped to mould the ideals of Black Consciousness. After 1976 much of the work in black theatre occurred in non-racial collaborations.⁶ The pre-1976 phase of work was then subjected to rigorous critique and shown to have been the product of a deficient social analysis based on race to the exclusion of class. Academic commentary in the 1980s has been based prominently on such a critique.

It is too easy for social scientists, in demystifying the relations of exploitation which were for so long obfuscated by the race issue, to promote another kind of mystification by trivialising the race issue: the history of capitalist penetration in South Africa occurred in such a way as to preserve 'blackness' as a source of commonality even in the face of proletarianisation. Biko satirised the tendency to trivialise the race issue in favour of more progressive analyses thus:

'... it is still other whites who want to tell us how to deal with that problem. They do so by dragging all sorts of red herrings across our paths. They tell us that the situation is a class struggle rather than a racial one. Let them go to van Tonder in the Free State and tell him this.'⁷

It is not the intention to sanction, in this argument, the historical division of the working class in South Africa by what might appear to be a retrogressive emphasis on race. Nevertheless, it is a fact that adequate cultural analysis must take cognisance of the crucial relationship between race and class in South African theatre. While I am conscious that the title of the present collection of essays might be seen in some way to perpetuate old arguments, I believe that there is much to be gained by a critical study of black theatre precisely because such a study will reveal what one commentator has called "the crucial conjunctures of race, class and nationalism" in South African culture.⁸

As scholars in the social sciences begin to understand the motive forces in South

African society, it becomes increasingly necessary to understand the ways in which different groups in the country developed cultural responses and how these cultural responses fertilised race- and class-consciousness. While the title of this issue could attract criticism because it emphasises divisions rather than relations, it can be argued that it is precisely because we have known so little about black cultural history that we need to emphasise in the way this volume sets out to do. In 1981 *Critical Arts*'s special issue on "Alternative Performance" focused on different aspects of 'black' theatre. The Editor pointed to the paucity of work in the field and suggested that the gaps in the recorded history of South African theatre necessitated work not only empirically but theoretically as well. The issue therefore contained two essays to that end. VeVe Clark's essay on "The Archaeology of Black Theatre" and Keyan Tomaselli's essay on "The Semiotics of Alternative Theatre" complemented both Stephen Gray's carefully researched essay on Stephen Black's drama and a selected bibliography of Performance Research. In this issue, Myra Davis and David Coplan present two views from beyond our borders. Davis presents a case history of one 'black' South African play in performance in Britain. Coplan offers a perspective on the dialectics of tradition in contemporary black theatre in South Africa. The two essays introduce the reader not only to specific texts and personalities, but to aspects of the current debate about form and function in South African theatre. Kenyan Tomaselli and Joe Muller, in a joint essay, grapple with salient features of a debate which exemplifies the attempt of *Critical Arts* to offer a radical critique not only of South African culture, but also of studies of that culture. Their essay is likely to prompt further critique.

If the notion of 'black' theatre is seen, finally, to have been a product of the way in which South African society has been structured, it will be possible to argue that it played an important role in cultural resistance and struggle. If we can say nothing more about the concept than what Maishe Maponya says, we will still be describing its role with some accuracy. He says:

"... as long as blacks do not have equal rights there'll always be black theatre ..."⁹

NOTES

1. Lodge, T. *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983.
2. Coplan, D. *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985.
3. Kavanagh, R. *Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa*. London: Verso, 1985.
4. Steadman, I. (ed) "Alternative Performance", *Critical Arts* 2 (1) 1981, Johannesburg.
5. See Attorney-General's Report and Charge Sheet, 1975, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.
6. Some groups, of course — and notably Workshop '71 — had worked collaboratively throughout the 1970s.
7. Biko, S. *I Write What I Like*, ed. A Stubbs. London: Heinemann, pp89-90.
8. Kavanagh, *op cit*, preface.
9. Maishe Maponya, Interview in *The Sunday Post*, 4th July 1980.